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Frontiers of Modern Ethnic American Fiction:
Exploring the Popular West in the Writings of
Mike Gold, Nathanael West, Américo Paredes, and John Fante

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by

Daniel Gregory Gardner

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Daniel Gregory Gardner

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Professor Blake Allmendinger, Co-chair

Professor Stephen Cooper, Co-chair

Destabilizing the authentic notions of nationhood and manhood disseminated in dominant narratives about the American West, “Frontiers of Modern Ethnic American Fiction: Exploring the Popular West in the Writings of Mike Gold, Nathanael West, John Fante, and Américo Paredes” contemplates representations of the popular West in early-twentieth-century ethnic-American fiction. The project surveys novels, short stories, and articles composed by modern ethnic-American-male writers. I argue that the ethnic writers of this study broadened the predominant definition of American culture by adopting and adapting cowboy masculinity and motifs of the popular West to the ends of their literary narratives of ethnic masculinity. Writing during a period of immigration restriction and rampant xenophobia, the authors examined here—

Mike Gold, Nathanael West, Américo Paredes, and John Fante—deploy figures of cowboy masculinity, celebrated by the popular West, to interrogate and resist the dominant Americanist conception of what constituted the authentic national body. The popular West consists of texts about the American West popularly consumed and circulating in mass culture. Consistent among the popular West's many iterations is a national narrative crafted from a peculiarly Anglo-American historiography that articulated the settlement of the frontier as evidence of American racial superiority. Often motivated by a nativism and pride in Anglo origins, the architects of such dominant narratives fashioned histories and stories of the frontier, where national success was contingent upon the triumph of Anglo-Saxon manhood. These stories experienced tremendous popularity from the late-nineteenth to the early-twentieth century, appearing in a variety of forms including the dime novel, pulp fiction, stage show, and film. Modern ethnic authors respond to the popular West in different ways, yet all are preoccupied with how popular cultural narratives of the West under the pretext of historical truth convey what it means to be an authentic American and to what extent ethnic groups can stake a real claim to belong in the United States. Examining the responses of modern ethnic American writers to the popular West, my project merges critical subjects—ethnic American literature, popular culture, and the American West—yet to be examined by literary scholarship.

The dissertation of Daniel Gregory Gardner is approved.

Rafael Pérez-Torres

Richard A. Yarborough

Blake Allmendinger, Committee Co-chair

Stephen Cooper, Committee Co-chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2014

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VITA

EDUCATION

Master of Arts, English Literature, University of California, Los Angeles, 2008

Bachelor of Arts, English Literature, University of California, Los Angeles, 2004

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Part-Time Faculty (Fall 2013-present)

Department of English

Cerritos College, Norwalk, CA

Courses: English 52- Introduction to College Composition (Spring 2014)

English 100- Freshman Composition (Fall 2013)

English 103- Critical and Argumentative Writing (Fall 2013, Spring 2014)

Associate Faculty (Fall 2012-present)

Department of English

Saddleback College, Mission Viejo, CA

Courses: English 200- Fundamentals of Composition (Fall 2012; Online, Spring 2013)

English 1A- Principles of Composition I (Fall 2013)

English 1B- Principles of Composition II (Spring 2013; Fall 2013; Spring 2014, Summer 2014)

Teaching Associate (Fall 2010-Spring 2011)

Writing Programs

University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA

Courses: English 3- Composition, Rhetoric, and Language (Fall 2010, Winter 2011, Spring 2011)

Teaching Assistant (Fall 2006-Spring 2010)

Department of English

University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA

Courses: English 150A- Shakespeare: Poems and Early Plays (Fall 2006, Spring 2008)

English 10C- English Literature, 1832-Present (Winter 2007)

English 10B- English Literature, 1660-1832 (Spring 2007)

English 10A- English Literature to 1660 (Fall 2007)

English 167B- American Fiction to 1900 (Winter 2008)

English 4W- Critical Reading and Writing (Fall 2008, Fall-Spring 2009, Winter-Spring 2010)

NON-TEACHING ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE

College Academic Mentor (Fall 2012- present)

College Academic Counseling

University of California, Los Angeles

Exhibit Co-Curator, “John Fante: A Life in the Works” (2010-2011)

Department of Special Collections

University of California, Los Angeles

Archival Processor, John Fante Papers (2009-2010)

Center for Primary Research and Training
University of California, Los Angeles

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

“The Odyssey of a WOP: John Fante’s Los Angeles Journey”

Hidden Voices: A Celebration of Italian American History in Southern California
IAMLA Inaugural Conference, June 2013

“Wait Until Google, Bandini”

Fante at 100: Readings and Proposals
American Italian Historical Association, 42nd Annual Conference, October 2009

HONORS/AWARDS

Dissertation-Year Fellowship (2011-2012)

Department of English
University of California, Los Angeles, CA

Summer Language Study Stipend (2010)

Department of English
University of California, Los Angeles, CA

Travel Subsidy (2009)

The American Italian Historical Association

Research Fellowship (2009)

Graduate Summer Research Mentorship Program
University of California, Los Angeles, CA

Research Fellowship (2005-2006)

University of California, Los Angeles, CA

Summa Cum Laude (2004)

University of California, Los Angeles, CA

College Honors (2004)

University of California, Los Angeles, CA

Department Highest Honors (2004)

University of California, Los Angeles, CA

Introduction

Authenticity, Masculinity, and the Popular West in Early Twentieth-Century Ethnic American Fiction

The opening of a John Fante short story titled “A Kidnapping in the Family” begins with Jimmy Toscana, a young boy, finding the hidden key to an old family trunk that his mother permitted no one to open. At the bottom of the trunk, beneath unused wedding linens, ornaments, and birth certificates, Jimmy discovers a picture of his mother taken one week before her wedding “wearing a white dress spilling down to her toes.” After seeing the picture, Jimmy professes his love: “I made up my mind that if I ever saw my mother as beautiful as she was in the picture I would immediately ask for her to marry me” (Fante, “A Kidnapping in the Family” 12). When seeing his mother tired and weary from domestic toil, Jimmy looks at the photograph with passionate devotion and remembers the beauty she exuded before marrying his father. From the brief biographical portrait Jimmy provides we learn that her name was Maria Scarpi. Maria was the daughter of two Italian peasants from the city of Naples who immigrated to Denver where she was born. Though she intended to become a nun, she met her future husband Guido Toscana on the feast day of Saint Rocco, “the powerful patron saint of all Italians.” An oedipal conflict ensues between Jimmy and his father that leaves the boy viewing the photo as just another picture. Jimmy returns it to the bottom of the trunk never to burrow for it again.

Soon after, he hears from his mother how his father courted her at the feast of day parade of Saint Rocco. As the story of her courtship ends, Maria’s memory seems to fail her: “It’s been so long—I’ve forgotten.” However, Jimmy insists she knows and cajoles her into relating a different story:

“Yes!” she said. “He did kidnap me! He came one night when I was asleep and took me

away.”

“Yes!” I said. “Yes!”

“He took me to an outlaw cabin in the mountains!”

“Sure! And he was carrying a gun, wasn’t he?”

“Yes! A big gun! With a pearl handle.”

“And he was riding a black horse.”

“Oh,” she said, “I shall never forget that horse. He was a beauty!”

“And you were scared to death, weren’t you?”

“Petrified,” she said. “Simply petrified.”

“You screamed for help, didn’t you?”

“I screamed and screamed.”

“But he got away, didn’t he?”

“Yes, he got away.”

“He took you to the outlaw cabin.”

“Yes, that’s where he took me.”

“You were scared, but you liked it, didn’t you?”

“I loved it.”

“He kept you a prisoner, didn’t he?”

“Yes, but he was good to me.”

“Were you wearing that white dress? The one in the picture?”

“I certainly was. Why?”

“I just wanted to know,” I said. “How long did he keep you prisoner?” (19-20)

Jimmy sensationalizes the conclusion by shaping the courtship story into a bandit-kidnapping fantasy with his father as the outlaw. His mother protests a few times, but then concedes. She admits that after three days' captivity in the outlaw's cabin, she yielded and married him. His refusal to accept the ethnic portrait of his conception signified by the picture of Maria and elaborated by the account of her courtship at the feast day parade leads him to refashion her ethnographic account into a sensational outlaw story not unlike those found in a dime novel or pulp Western. According to Richard Collins, Jimmy's Western revision signals a lack of interest in his ethnic origins (55-56).

While traces of the Western seemingly take over his story, Jimmy does not cast aside all elements of his ethnic origins. At the beginning of the story Jimmy engages in a search for his personal history. Burrowing through his mother's trunk, which contains birth certificates and is described as a belly, suggests a return to the womb. This search for an account of his conception leads him to a picture of his mother. Viewed as an image of beauty by the narrator, the photograph of Catholic devotee Maria Scarpi dressed in white portrays her Italian ethnic identity as pure and desirable. In searching for a story of his own origins Jimmy comes to admire ethnic identity. Later, as he unpacks and directs the bandit fantasy, he asks his mother if she was wearing that white dress from the picture. His question recalls his oath to marry her had he seen her as she was in that picture. Because she agrees to wear that dress in his bandit fantasy, the bandit outlaw must not be Jimmy's father but a projected image of Jimmy himself, so the story of her abduction and captivity by the bandit outlaw is the story of courtship between Maria, a sign of ethnography, and Jimmy, a sign of the popular Western narrative. Thus, "A Kidnapping in the Family" intimates the marriage of two narrative forms seemingly distinct in subject, style, and ideology.

More than a rare instance, the interpolation of elements from popular stories of the American West and early twentieth-century ethnic narrative gestures to a pattern in works by Mike Gold, Nathanael West, John Fante, and Americo Paredes that indicate a larger phenomenon observable in ethnic writing to the present. As a representative and provocative case, Jimmy's preference for the outlaw story reflects a broader ethnic desire to merge a popular Anglo-American national narrative with stories of ethnic identity not only to express disapproval for the history and values of that national narrative but also to consider the impact of the national imaginary it constructed. Due to the pervasive and authentic appeal of its images, tropes, and myths, the popular West exerts a certain cultural influence and thus should not be overlooked as a significant context for the conceptualization of ethnic identity. Not just popular entertainment or a xenophobic and patriarchal narrative of Anglo-American expansion, the popular West, a term I use to refer to writings about the American West popularly consumed and circulating in mass culture, serves as a cultural resource significant to the literary articulation of modern ethnic American experiences.

In considering the significance of the popular West as a context for examining early-twentieth-century-ethnic American literature, this study aims to prove that ethnic writers of that period deploy figures of cowboy masculinity to interrogate and resist the dominant Americanist conception of what constituted the authentic national body. To achieve this end, my approach draws upon various complementary methodologies including Baudrillard's notion of simulacra and simulation, the Postwestern conception of the hyperreal West, contemporary gender studies' models of masculinity, and postcolonial critiques of the racial relations between manhood and nationhood. These methods enrich my readings of the popular western context for the modern ethnic narratives examined in this study. Ethnic literature in the first half of the twentieth century

confronted widespread forces of Americanization, including those present in the popular segment of the cultural apparatus. Werner Sollors claims:

In an age of racial definitions of U.S. citizenship, racist immigration restrictions, and eugenicist thought, ethnic writers often invoked America as an ideal, while the real United States was not yet claiming diversity in the spirit of multicultural pride that was to prevail only later [after World War II]. . . . The cultural work of recasting the United States as a multiethnic country was undertaken by American ethnic writers in the period.
(13)

Through literary play with the conventional Western hero and the discourse of authenticity typical of western writing, the ethnic narratives that make up the subject of this study do exhibit the ethnic modernist tendency to recast America as a multiethnic country. However, these narratives generally resist a utopian vision; instead, they tend to express a sense of disruption and fragmentation that result from the popular West's vision of America. Still, as Sollors states, "American ethnic writers were increasingly drawn to ethnic pluralism or at least to a broader definition of the American 'host culture' to which immigrants and minorities were to be 'assimilated'" (13). By adopting and adapting cowboy masculinity and motifs of the popular West to the ends of their literary narratives of ethnic masculinity, the ethnic writers of this study broadened the predominant definition of American culture.

The burgeoning movement of ethnic writing that occurred in the first few decades of the twentieth century arrived as the children of immigrants reached maturity. Born in the United States, educated in American schools, and shaped into active and regular consumers of popular culture, many ethnics experienced the formal and informal processes of Americanization as they came of age during the Progressive Era's move to reform the foreign-born and their progeny. To

some degree, a foreign world existed in the ethnic family home where old-world customs were practiced and other tongues were spoken. John Fante, for example, confessed in his autobiographically-inspired story “Odyssey of a Wop” that visits from school friends to his family home—where pictures of the Pope and the last king of Italy, Victor Emmanuel, hung on the wall and his grandmother spoke Italian—were occasions filled with shame. Despite its seeming insularity, the ethnic home could not keep American popular culture from making its way in. Nathanael West’s parents went so far as to make the Horatio Algers stories required reading. A hallmark of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American values, the rags-to-riches Algers tales conveying the promise of opportunity for the hardworking gave hope in the American Dream to ethnic groups struggling to move upwards.

To be sure, other forms of mass fiction were read too. Writing about how the class politics of dime novels might have influenced ethnic writing in the 1930s, Michael Denning invites scholarly attention to the interplay between popular culture and ethnic literature. Denning declares:

Virtually all of the young plebian writers of the Depression had grown up reading dime novels, and their desire to write fiction was instilled by the cheap stories of detectives, working girls, and western outlaws. Richard Wright recalled them as “part of the dreams of my youth.” . . . The heroes, plots and language of the cheap stories haunted the fiction of these writers. Mike Gold’s Mikey thinks that the Messiah will look like Buffalo Bill in “the gaudy little paper books,” and James T. Farrell’s Studs Lonigan imagines Satan as “just like Deadwood Dick.” Dime novels were part of the literary education of a generation of plebian writers who would reshape American literature in the twentieth

century. Fred Whittaker's 1884 prophecy that the "regeneration of American literature" would depend on the "cheap stories, which you call dime novels" was fulfilled. (264-265)

In various ways over the past twenty years, critics have followed Denning's lead. The message of Juan J. Alonso in his recent critical study of representations of Mexican identity as badmen and bandits in popular culture applies here: "Our identities come to be formed through our participation in the production and consumption of popular cultural forms. . . for we must be ever watchful of the ways in which dominant cultural products can both imprison us and set us free" (17). Keeping these calls to be critical of dominant culture in mind, my study considers how popular cultural texts influenced the ways in which ethnic writers articulated their narratives of American experience.

This study focuses on ethnic texts responding to popular stories about the West that appeared in a variety of forms including the dime novel, pulp fiction, stage show, and film. Though the class politics of mass consumption does enter into my discussion, early-twentieth-century ethnic writers' concerns with ethnicity in the context of the Americanism expressed by the popular West occupy the central interest of my investigation. To be certain, my analysis takes into account how notions of class and gender worked upon and were reworked by the ethnic writings under examination. The ethnic texts surveyed cover several different genres including the short story, the novel, autobiographical fiction and the satirical pastiche. Moreover, these writings express various literary styles from modernist to postmodernist, and experiences from the proletarian to the border. And while the writers gathered here do offer a range of views, they are not meant to be representative, but provocative and suggestive. As the following chapters make clear, each writer responds to the popular West in a different way. Yet all are preoccupied with one question: If popular cultural narratives of the West under the pretext of historical truth

convey what it means to be an authentic American, to what extent can ethnic groups stake a real claim to belong in a United States whose archetypal mythos celebrates the triumph of Anglo identity over non-Anglo identity? In other words, how can ethnic groups imagine themselves to be American when the popular imaginary insists they are not?

Given the ideological underpinnings of the popular West, it seems curious that ethnic writers would interpolate its myth, motifs, characters and other elements in their work. Richard Abel argues that early twentieth-century film Westerns “functioned within a rejuvenated discourse of Americanisation . . . an overtly racist discourse which sought to privilege the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ (and the masculine) as dominant in any conception of American national identity” (78). Abel’s contention is revealing in that it discovers a function of the Western within the Progressive Era, a period that concerned itself greatly with reforming ethnic immigrants according to the precepts of true Americanism. Mike Gold, Nathanael West, John Fante, and Americo Paredes were all born within a decade of the turn of the twentieth century and so were well acquainted with the massive efforts to reform. A not insignificant portion of these efforts concentrated on Americanizing the foreign-born. Progressives viewed immigrants as passive absorbers of American culture to be molded to American society.

The movement to consolidate American national identity was so pervasive as to be ineluctable. In the United States, the Americanization efforts of the federal government involved the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization and the Bureau of Education (Lauret 17). Acting in accord with the state were local offices and interests such as “Chambers of Commerce, labor unions, business, and social organizations such as women’s clubs, the YMCA, and churches.” “It stretched,” Lauret writes, “from North to South, from sea to shining sea, and it reached urban and rural, male and female, young and old, and immigrants and native-born Americans” (Lauret 17).

If to Americanize means to convey and to shape according to American ideals, then mass culture communicating Americanism could be conceived as a vehicle, albeit an unofficial one, of the Americanization campaign.¹ Some scholarly dispute exists over the definition of Americanization. Conventionally, Americanization refers to acculturation, a "gradual and quotidian" process whereby social and ideological forces produce an American identity based on the transmission of American ways and values through formal means such as school and immigration restriction policies, and informal means such as mass consumption and popular culture (8). Taking issue with the conventional characterization of the process, Maria Lauret proposes that Americanization was coercive by nature (8). "A Kidnapping in the Family" reifies the coercive power of the Western to Americanize its consumers. As Jimmy Toscana forcing his mother to retell her courtship as a bandit story suggests, the Western not only conveys American values, but provokes its audience to conform to them.

Influenced by eugenics and scientific racism, the Americanization movement of the early twentieth century proved a trying crucible of daily life for immigrants and ethnic Americans alike (Lauret 16). Native-born advocates of Americanization held that an Anglo-Saxon stock exemplified white American identity (Higham 156). According to Matthew Frye Jacobsen, the first naturalization law in 1790 stipulated that "free white persons" from Europe could become citizens of the United States because of their presumed capability for self-government. In the post-Civil War era an industrial need for cheap labor arose. Though immigrants met this need, it became popularly held that immigrants did not meet the white standard of political fitness. Nativists saw these immigrants "as a political threat to the smooth functioning of the republic."

¹ For more information on the Americanization efforts that targeted the foreign- and native-born Americans, see Lauret 17.

As a result of this growing nativist concern alongside “scientific doctrines of race, the monolith of whiteness fragmented” (Jacobsen 41). Jacobsen elaborates, “But the massive influx borne of this ‘liberal’ immigration policy, in its turn, generated a new perception of some Europeans’ unfitness for self-government, now rendered racially in a series of subcategorical white groupings—Celt, Slav, Hebrew, Iberic, Mediterranean, and so on—white Others of a supreme Anglo-Saxondom” (42). No longer did a “unified white race” exist; instead, a distinction was made among “white races.” The emerging racial reclassification of whiteness was hierarchically ordered and based on political “fitness” (43). The hierarchy was “reflected in literature, visual arts, caricature, political oratory, penny journalism, and myriad other venues of popular culture” (41).

Though classified as white upon arrival, immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe did not meet the Northern European standard; yet being white ethnics made naturalization a possibility, an option closed off to immigrants from Asia and Africa.² To Anglos, the term “Anglo” did not include Mexican identity, and, since “Anglo” was synonymous with American identity, they did not consider Mexicans American in the early part of the century (Kropp 9).³

² The Johnson-Reed Act on May 26, 1924 drastically restricted immigration from people of Southern and Eastern Europe, countries with primarily Catholic and Jewish populations. The act called for a reduced admissions rate of 2% of each nationality present in the U.S. population as of the 1890 census. The act also prohibited immigration from Asia and Africa because such peoples could not be naturalized, so they were not eligible for citizenship. For an account of the act, see Schacher 569.

³ For more information on the emergence and usage of the term during period of the 1840s to the 1920s, see Jacobsen 39-90.

With immigrant parents from Bessarabia, Lithuania, Italy, and Mexico, Gold, West, Fante, and Paredes routinely experienced discrimination from the Americanization campaign. The belief in the inherent racial superiority of the Anglo-American demonstrates how nativism came to suffuse Americanization.⁴ Initially, Progressives conceived Americanization as an alternative to the restrictive immigration policies advanced by nativism (Lauret 19). In light of Theodore Roosevelt's 1915 address titled "True Americanism," the Americanization campaign appears almost indistinguishable from the nativism it had once countered as it absorbs Roosevelt's intolerance for hyphenated identities.⁵ Roosevelt declares, "There is no such thing as a hyphenated American who is a good American. The only man who is a good American is the man who is an American and nothing else." The "nation of immigrants" ethos that motivated the early Americanization movement was exchanged for an exclusionary vision of America for Americans.

Roosevelt himself had espoused a historical view of the nation that claimed that American identity was forged on the frontier out of racial conflict. In *The Winning of the West* (1889-96), Roosevelt found the violence of the frontier a necessary component to the determination of national character. The so-called "race-history" documents the emergence of Anglo-American national character from the conflict with the Indians. Bill Brown writes, "In the logic of Roosevelt's epic, the confrontation enabled the settlers to understand themselves

⁴ Nativism can be defined as a longstanding movement to oppose an internal minority on the basis of its foreign connections; for a definition of the term and a full-length study on the subject, see Higham 4.

⁵ For a consideration of the infusion of "100% Americanism" in the Americanization campaign from World War 1 onward, see Lauret 20.

racially” (31). It is through this race war that the diverse Americans “fused into one people” (31). This formation of national character has come to be associated with frontier masculinity and this conception of masculinity exhibits a destructive violence in the name of nation building. To Roosevelt, frontier masculinity signifies a history of the consolidation of American character based on the violent exclusion of non-Anglos by Anglo America. In the “Strenuous Life” (1899), frontier masculinity functions as an imperialist provocation to settle Filipino rebel activity following the Spanish American War. Urging Americans to experience the “strenuous life” of western living to improve their health, Roosevelt embraces the salubrious quality of frontier masculinity as a means of invigorating the national body, a necessary step to protecting the nation from war and for extending its frontier abroad through imperial ventures.⁶ In “The Strenuous Life,” Roosevelt sees the appeal of frontier masculinity as way of constructing a potent nation based on the strength of individuals. Thus, the racist, violent, patriarchal, imperial, and individualist conception of national identity contextualizes the kind of nativist Americanism he would later endorse.

In addition to the Western historiography of Roosevelt and Frederick Jackson Turner, literary naturalism did much to propagate the scientific race theories circulating at the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth.⁷ Thomas Gossett claims, “No American writers have done more to publicize race theories and to glorify the Anglo-Saxons than have Frank Norris, Jack London, and Owen Wister” (qtd. in Jacobsen 89). “Literary naturalism,” Jacobsen remarks,

⁶ Kimmel 121-123 and Bederman 192-196.

⁷ Noted for his frontier thesis addressed to the historical congress at the 1893 Columbian

Exposition, Frederick Jackson Turner identified westward expansion as the definitive process by which American character was formed.

“was in large part defined by the very notions of race that drove the immigration debate” (89). Frank Norris writes, “[S]omewhere deep down in the heart of every Anglo-Saxon lies the predatory instinct of his Viking ancestors—an instinct that a thousand years of respectability and taxpaying have not quite succeeded in eliminating” (qtd. in Kaplan 223-224). Amy Kaplan interprets this comment as a sign of nostalgia for the primitive male body where a “fundamental Anglo-Saxon heritage” could be found. Thus, Anglo-Saxonism, what Kaplan refers to as “the New White American manhood,” was invented as a tradition, a “recoverable past” (Kaplan 226). Such a tradition was perceived to be in need of recovering due to the influx of non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants. Nativists viewed immigrants as a threat to the purity of national identity and political stability of the United States. Furthermore, Turner announced the end of the frontier in 1893, thus closing the former proving ground of Anglo-American manhood. Consequently, imperialism became a justifiable pursuit. Like the Western frontier, expansion abroad served as a means for American masculinity “to recuperate its Anglo-Saxon origins” (Kaplan 236). Kaplan argues that the escapist fantasies of the 1890s historical romance reproduce contemporaneous imperialist political discourse: “In the decade before the Spanish-American War, a politics of regulated escape was propounded by advocates of U.S. expansion, who believed that social and psychic pressures attendant upon the close of the frontier and the 1893 depression could be relieved by opening new frontiers abroad” (226). Thus, the escapism of historical narratives about Anglo heroics conveys the politics of expansionism.

This 1890s historical romance is a precursor to the modern Western created by Owen Wister. “By imagining contemporary American imperialism as the return to an original virile past,” Kaplan maintains, “the historical romance reopens the closed frontier and reinvents the West as a space for fictional representation” (238). The figure of the Western cowboy realizes

the full “recuperative potential” that the historical romance means to offer in its nostalgia for primitive Anglo-Saxon origins. As Kaplan’s reading of Wister makes apparent, Western literature complemented the Americanist historiography of the West. Roosevelt’s classmate and beloved fellow writer Owen Wister sought to elevate the Western genre by returning it to the national romance of James Fenimore Cooper, which relied on an historical scheme that elevated local events to national significance.⁸ In making the Western into a novelistic endeavor, Wister tapped into a class politics reified in the plot of *The Virginian* (1902). *The Virginian* turned the West into the site where a “new aristocracy” emerged: “Less concerned with killing Indians than with managing property and defending the interests of corporate capital from ruffians deemed socially and racially unfit” (Rydell and Kroes 36). Wister envisioned the “new aristocracy” that the Virginian represents as Anglo-Saxon. In 1895 Wister claimed the cowboy would champion the Anglo-Saxon cause by battling the “encroaching alien vermin, that turn our cities to Babels and our citizenship to a hybrid farce, who degrade our commonwealth from a nation into something half-pawn shop, half broker’s office” (“The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher” 80). At the turn of the twentieth century and the dawn of the Progressive Era’s Americanization campaign, the Western in the hands of Wister could function as a source of nativism, a response to the late-nineteenth-century wave of immigration. If Wister conceived the cowboy out of nativist fears, and his influence can be identified in many a Hollywood production, then a legacy of xenophobic Americanism suffuses the body of popular Westerns through the early twentieth

⁸ Dime novelists like Edward Wheeler did away with Cooper’s scheme in order to “get to the action and sustain it . . . [thus,] in the absence of such a scheme, the [dime Western] narrative no longer seems national, as it always does in Cooper, but local, just as the forces shaping the plot are not social, but personal” (Brown 5).

century. When historical romances and other cultural texts popularly embody nationhood in the masculinity of the cowboy, they exclude non-Anglos from the American imaginary.⁹

By linking imperialism to the masculinity of the cowboy, Kaplan reproduces the conventional association between masculinity and power that recent gender theory has challenged. Judith Butler maintains that masculinity is performative, not essential. Essential notions of masculinity join it to social dominance. The dominance that is associated with masculinity seems authentic because of reiteration, its pervasive repetition. However, masculinity is historical, so it is subject to change over time. If performed and historical, then masculinity can be viewed as fluid and heterogenous. Given this fluidity that emerges from its performativity, masculinity becomes unstable; thus, the readings of masculinity that insist on the stability of its power require reconsideration. The destabilization of masculinity because of the revelation of its performance allows for multiple identities traditionally disassociated from power to be refashioned as masculine; masculinity, therefore, embodies neither a single identity nor an ideology; rather, because of its performativity, masculinity is multiple and so can express diverse ideologies.¹⁰

Working from Butler's theory of gender performativity, Daniel Worden in *Masculine Style: The American West and Literary Modernism* (2011) argues that masculinity contains "the possibility to critique social conventions and produce alternative modes of social belonging" (3). Masculinity's performativity holds the promise of "individual freedom to refashion the self and live as an equal among others" (5). Being sites for the reworking of social reality, literary texts

⁹ For an elaborate explanation of the relationship between manhood, nationhood, and its "quintessential twentieth-century symbol . . . the self-reliant cowboy," see Kaplan 222 and 239.

¹⁰ For an elaboration of gender performativity, see Butler 163-180.

effectively exhibit the self-fashioning possibilities that masculinity contains. The modernist play with cowboy masculinity as individualist, rugged, and violent demonstrates literature's resistance to a simple representation of any object as truth. Rather, Worden asserts that cowboy masculinity surfaces in American modernism precisely because it could be remade into a subversive heterogeneity. Tracing cowboy masculinity from its dime novel origins, Worden argues, "Through figures such as Seth Jones and Deadwood Dick, dime novels produce a masculinity that thrives on crossing social boundaries rather than policing them. Through their representation of masculine self-fashioning, dime novels critique patriarchal dominance and industrial oppression" (33). Despite the heterogenous politics of cowboy masculinity in dime novels, Worden admits it "relies on a racist construction of white, frontier masculinity" (14). He continues, "Popular Western stories like those in dime novels are inextricably bound to the racial and national consolidation inherent to manifest destiny" (33).

If an understanding of twentieth-century Americanism benefits from considering the patriarchal, racial elitism of Roosevelt and Wister as influences, then to comprehend their writing also requires an understanding of the dime Western to which they responded. Like Roosevelt's Western history and Wister's historical romance, the dime novel dramatizes racial conflict but in a popular print form Frank Norris deemed too vulgar to properly commemorate the history of the American West. Wister returned the Western to Cooper's national romance in response to the dime novel that supposedly diminished the significance of the genre. Along with Frank Norris and Zane Grey, Wister reprised the national romance of the Western genre that the dime novel ruptured, and so claimed to rescue it from mass culture for the twentieth century.¹¹

¹¹ For a discussion of how Wister's *The Virginian* (1902) returned representations of the West to "serious" fiction, see Brown 40.

Wister's appeal to aristocratic values through an Anglo cowboy hero who preserves the capitalist interests of the managerial class exhibits a dramatic shift away from the egalitarian values of the dime novel.¹²

Despite the contrasting class politics, the dime Western like the Western romance exhibits nationalism and idealizes Anglo-American identity. Dime novels ascended in popularity in the 1860s in large part due to the House of Beadle and Adams. Facilitated by new printing technology and mail-order distribution, the publishing house sold over 250 million copies in its thirty-eight year run (35).¹³ Believing they were answering the call for a distinctly American story, Beadle and Adams produced cheap stories "for the millions." Bill Brown writes, "By repeatedly emphasizing that theirs was a series of 'National and American Romances,' of 'Purely American Novels' written by Americans about America, the Beadles both differentiated their work from the republication of European fiction and coded their enterprise as a patriotic project, responding to the ongoing call for a national literature" (21). The dime Western participates in this "patriotic project," albeit, as Brown points out, with ambivalence. The frontier-adventure narratives of dime-novel westerns often centered on racial conflict between Anglo Americans and Native Americans. While these stories trumpeted the moral and civil superiority of their Anglo heroes, Brown suggests that the dime-novel western's graphic representation of violence could be read as subversive to Anglo hegemonic frontier narratives: "In contrast [to Roosevelt's historical logic of the West], the dime novel makes visible the ways in which the narration of the

¹² For a reading of how working class readers would have interpreted the West as an imaginative site representative of democratic rather than aristocratic values, see Denning 165.

¹³ Dime westerns continued to be printed in story papers and early twentieth-century magazines, (Brown 21).

West aestheticizes the genocidal foundation of the nation, turning conquest into a literary enterprise that screens out other violent episodes in the nation's history" (Brown 31).

In addition to catalyzing the return to the Western historical romance, the dime Western set in motion a series of events that lead to the production of the Wild West Show. Buffalo Bill became a national celebrity as a result of the success of the dime Westerns that portrayed his exploits. Writing under the penname of Ned Buntline, Edward Z. C. Judson met William "Buffalo Bill" Cody in 1869 and used his scouting experiences as the basis for a mass-produced adventure story entitled *Buffalo Bill, King of the Border Men*. Of the influence of the dime novel western on the Wild West Show, Robert Rydell and Rob Kroes claim, "[The Wild West narratives] took form in the pageantry of the Wild West—pageantry that reproduced the essential ideological messages of western dime novels, making those messages visible and therefore more powerful" (31). In essence, providing the script for the Wild West, dime-novel westerns were already sensationalizing the story of America, disseminating a certain set of values about nation, race, and empire. Rydell and Kroes trace the development of a number of mass cultural forms including dime novels, traveling shows, and movies from their domestic production and consumption during the nineteenth century to their ultimate export at the turn of the twentieth century. Rich with ideological meaning, these mass cultural forms, "played a pivotal role in the process of reconstructing the American national identity after the Civil War" (Rydell 4). The export of American mass culture, particularly entertainment forms such as Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, were tantamount to the "Americanization of the world."

The invention of Buffalo Bill and the Wild West Show demonstrates how the story of the West in mass cultural form functions as a formidable vehicle of Americanization. Along with several associates, Cody, the celebrated former army scout and subject of dime novel adventure

stories, formed The Wild West Show in the early 1880s. Garnering interest through successful marketing, the show connected the audience to an authentic representation of the West, dramatized a Turnerian vision of advancement to civilization through its five-epoch structure, and celebrated the Anglo-American triumph over Indian savagery. The show began in the United States with its first production in 1883. It participated in the American Exhibition for Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887 and continued to appear in Europe regularly until 1906 before returning to the United States for a final tour that concluded in 1916. Once abroad, the show made adjustments, incorporating African Zulu men and women, Arab acrobats, an "Indian from Africa" (an African or African-American riding an elk), and Filipinos; thus, the retitled "Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World" became a veritable "imperial pageant" (32). And though images of the American West produced by Americans and Europeans alike were already familiar to European audiences, the impact of the Wild West show was great.¹⁴ Buffalo Bill's show offered the "real thing" to foreign audiences, presenting itself as an authentic representation of American history: "The 'Wild West fever' caused by Buffalo Bill's show in Europe had centrally to do with the show's claim to represent 'the real thing' that people in Europe had read about and dreamed about for years . . . but offered something the circuses did not: authenticity. . . . Wild West productions fueled interest in Europe in 'authentic' visual representations of the United States" (Rydell and Kroes 116-117).

Yet the very construction of such a West—and thus, such an America—that invariably claims authenticity resulted in the production of counter narratives. One immensely popular

¹⁴ For more information surveying the numerous representations of the American West in Europe prior to the Wild West Show as well as the various European responses to it, refer to Rydell and Kroes 111-117.

example is Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona* (1884). Jackson wrote the novel in defense of indigenous rights. In the wake of the 1876 Sioux massacre at Wounded Knee, widespread contempt and fear were directed at Native Americans. From the massacre emerged the popular legend of Buffalo Bill Cody who famously avenged Custer's defeat with an Indian scalp. The popularity of Buffalo Bill, his famous revenge, and the dramatization of his Indian-fighting persona in dime Westerns added to the already deeply entrenched perception of Native American villainy encouraged previously by national romances from the early republic and captivity narratives from the colonial period. In its sympathetic portrayal of the Indian's plight at the hands of ignorant squatters, lascivious settlers, callous government agents, and reckless cowboys—all Anglo—*Ramona* turns the table on the Western. A feminist response to hegemonic masculinity typical of the genre, the sentimentalism of the novel suggests an alternative vision of the West that attempts to validate the diverse claims of the various people who inhabit it. This alternative vision was experienced on a massive level too. The novel exerted a mass appeal, selling hundreds of thousands of copies, going through several editions, inspiring film versions, and generating a tourist industry in Southern California from the time of its publication through the early part of the twentieth century. Not unlike the Western, alternative popular Wests like the Spanish Past romanticized in *Ramona* come with their own problematic representations.¹⁵

¹⁵ Other writings that evoke the Spanish Past and provoked its popularity into and during the twentieth century include *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murrieta* (1854) by John Rollin Ridge, *California Pastoral* (1888) by Hubert Howe Bancroft, *The Squatter and the Don* (1885) by Maria Amparo Ruiz De Burton, and *Zorro* (1919) by Johnston McCulley. Though an elaborate discussion exists outside the scope of this current study, another example of a non-

As a way of expanding the limits of my critical investigation, I consider both the Western and the Spanish Past as parts of a complex of images of the American West that circulated in twentieth-century popular culture. Being a culture of goods, mass culture refers to those cultural forms of entertainment that, according to the Frankfurt School, serve as an intoxicating drug for the masses, thereby making them subject to manipulation. In opposition to such a view, John Fiske claims audiences are capable of active responses to popular culture from which they can make their own meanings. People do not select all goods produced by mass culture as cultural resources. As a way of emphasizing the principle of selection and the utility of the commodity not as a good but as a cultural resource for negotiating the terms of social experience, I use Fiske's conception of popular culture. In this sense, popular culture stresses how ethnic writers make their own meanings out of popularly circulated images of the West rather than accepting the Americanist and Americanizing logic that often is incorporated into or accompanies those images. More than passive receptacles of hegemonic propaganda, as my readings in the following chapters will demonstrate, audiences can mindfully respond to such messages, picking and choosing what they will. Consequently, when referring to the cultural resource from which the writers of this study drew to articulate in literary terms their own critical conception of ethnic American and American identity, I elect the term *popular West*. The popular West includes narrative forms and visions of the West circulating in popular culture, which exist outside of the generic confines of the Western.

When audience response is given serious consideration, the imaginary space of the West becomes a site where meaning and power can be contested, reflecting a much more diverse

Western popular West is the "as told to" genre that certifies the American Indian experience to a mass reading public.

America than its mass-culture version presents. It has been well documented that the Western could bolster an embattled male audience. Near the close of the nineteenth century, various forces were believed to threaten the potency of Anglo masculinity. The modernization of America involved immigrants serving the needs of industrial labor and women entering the workplace; thus, these changes formed what was widely perceived to be an assault on a formerly Anglo-American male sanctum. The comforts of urban living furthermore jeopardized manly vigor. Imaginative engagements such as reading dime Westerns or seeing performances such as Wild Bill's traveling show provided cultural resources to experience vicariously and, therefore, imitate an admired hardy masculinity.¹⁶ Studies by Michael Kimmel and Gail Bederman have focused on middle-class, white masculinity and its responses to cultural developments. But how did ethnic groups respond to the Western, the popular American story? Given its conviction that national identity was formed out of racial conflict and needed to be guarded against ethnic swarms, the Western would seem to deem non-Anglos unfit for Americanization. The same racial conception of nationhood the Western narrates runs through the early twentieth century Americanism that refused to conceive of immigrants and hyphenated identities within its "imagined community" as legitimate members, so it would seem productive to consider the ways in which ethnic writers adopt and co-opt the cowboy to interrogate this quintessential masculine embodiment of nationhood (Anderson 35, 37). As Daniel Worden proposes, the Western could also offer a cultural resource for the resistance to the hegemonic powers with which it has traditionally come to be associated (2-6).

Therefore, it is worth exploring how ethnic writers respond to the claim of the popular West that authentic American identity and history is Anglo. Recent work by Ethnic Studies

¹⁶ Kimmel, 121-123 and Bederman 192-196.

scholars has expanded the focus upon the dominant white male version of American manhood that Kimmel's study typifies to consider the implications of racial masculinity in the United States. In the introduction to a recent collection of essays on racial masculinities titled *Men in Color* (2011), Josep M. Armengol claims that the current scholarship analyzes the different ways race inflects gender and thus is "concerned with analyzing masculinities in the plural, the ways in which different men construct different models of masculinity" (Armengol 1). Most of these studies focus on one specific racialized masculinity, but, like *Men in Color*, this dissertation provides a collection of perspectives on different ethnic masculinities including analyses that differentiate whiteness as opposed to the undifferentiated model of white masculinity upon which Kimmel's and Bederman's studies have been based.¹⁷ This study of ethnic masculinity in early-twentieth-century ethnic writings traces some common threads regarding social marginalization. Armengol remarks, "even as gender is inflected by race, certain aspects remain unchanged across the ethnic board" (7). Furthermore this study deals only with male authors, so it investigates male masculinity. Performing such an all-male study does not reinforce the

¹⁷ As examples of current studies focusing on a single model of racial masculinity, Armengol lists *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* (1996) by Phillip Brian Harper, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (2001) by David Eng and *Hombres y Machos: Masculinity in Latino Culture* (1997) by Alfredo Mirande. I differentiate the white masculinity that Kimmel and Bederman claim is dominant in order to expose how the fragmentation of whiteness in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century reveals the ways in which different white racial identities, such as Italian and Jewish, were detached from dominance and power. For more on the fragmentation of whiteness, consult Jacobsen 39-52.

patriarchal exclusion of women, nor does it diminish the significance of a study of female masculinity. Such critical views seem to reinforce a reductive gender binary where masculinity is contingent to femininity. Worden explains, “valuation of masculinity in a work of literature does not necessarily entail denigration of femininity. The persistence of the masculine/feminine binary often obfuscates masculinity itself” (7). Indeed, an examination of ethnic male masculinities can be a deserving and enriching pursuit in its own right. Building upon Worden’s recognition of the self-fashioning possibilities of cowboy masculinity in American modernism and adding to recent studies of racial masculinities in U.S. literature, I propose that early twentieth-century ethnic writers remake cowboy masculinity as a means to explore alternative, if not subversive, visions of manhood and so nationhood.

The ethnic writers of this study consumed and dialogued with popular images of the West as a way of interrogating what are supposed to be authentic experiences of belonging in the United States. They deployed the popular West to emphasize how those supposedly real images of America and Americans in mass circulation are simulations of reality, rather than the realistic and historical representations they claim to be. Taking its cue from Native American literary scholars, this study extends their critical models to non-American Indian ethnic literature. Native American literary scholarship has examined how authenticity has become a problem central to the determination of “real” Native American literature and culture.¹⁸ Distinguishing “real” American Indian narratives from fake ones is a product of simulations from popular culture and literature.¹⁹ The scholarship of Philip Deloria and Shari Huhndorf has examined how “playing Indian” and “going native,” behaviors represented in and practiced by popular culture, have

¹⁸ For an apt summary of the critical field, see Bernardin 160.

¹⁹ For a discussion of the invented Indian’s presence in popular culture, see Bernardin 155.

resulted in the co-optation of American Indian history, culture, and spiritual traditions. Even when such practices and representations are celebratory, they betray a sense of cultural superiority through their lament for the “vanishing Indian,” an instance of what Renato Rosaldo has called imperialist nostalgia. The cultural appropriation of the image of the Indian often occurs in the service of authenticating dominant cultural values. “From the nation’s founding moments,” claims Susan Bernadin, “writers consciously turned to Native American subjects as a means of forging a distinctively American literature. At the same time, the desire to possess Native Americans as narrative subjects fueled the pursuit of Indian autobiographies” (157). Consequently, in order for them to enter the dominant print culture to articulate their cultural narrative and accomplish their political goal, Native Americans had to capitulate to the hegemonic notion of the “real Indian” in order to satisfy the editorial and public demand for authenticity that has continued to this day.

It has been the task of American Indian literary scholarship to apply critical pressure on the relationship between these discursive notions of authentic Indianness circulating in popular culture and the narratives of American Indians. From Mourning Dove’s *Cogewea, the Half-Blood* (1927) to Sherman Alexie’s *Tonto and the Lone Ranger Fist-Fight in Heaven* (1993), twentieth-century American Indian writings demonstrate a significant and sustained engagement with the image of the Indian in popular culture; in response to the popular cultural appropriation of the Indian, these texts often work to wrest that monolithic conception of Indianness back from the singular control of dominant culture and explore what it means to be an American Indian in an American culture where that monolith prevails (Bernardin 156-157, 165, 169).

The critical literature on the problem of authenticity and Native American literature critiques the complex interrelationship between the popular West and ethnic literature. The critical

absence to be addressed is how non-Native American ethnic writers who encountered the popular West responded to the authentication, and thus normalization, of American identity and history as unimpeachably Anglo. Recently, Postwestern and Ethnic studies have begun to investigate the dialogue between the popular West and ethnic American literature. Scholarship has recognized how ethnic writers resist or, in some cases, co-opt the discourse of authenticity typical of the popular West. To this point, works by Jewish American writers have garnered some critical attention. Recent studies by Peter Antelyes and Rachel Rubinstein have concentrated on the ways Jewish writers and performers drew upon popular performance traditions and figurations of Indians to conceptualize and nuance their Americanness.²⁰ Writing from a New Western Studies perspective, Steven Rosendale claims that *Jews Without Money* debunks the frontier myth at the same time that it reprises the environmental concerns of westering for the Eastside.²¹ While I do examine Mike Gold's writings in this dissertation, I expand the critical concerns of Jewish American studies to encompass other ethnic groups; in addition to looking at the ways in which these writers appropriated the popular image of the

²⁰ Antelyes suggests the representation of the Indian as both figure of identification and repudiation in *Jews Without Money* has an antecedent in "Jewish redface" performance, while Rubinstein analyzes how Jewish American writers used the imaginary Indian to negotiate their own Americanness.

²¹ According to Rosendale, the novel's protagonist Mikey ultimately repudiates Buffalo Bill though he originally desired him to be the Messiah; thus, Mikey rejects "the immature and narrow notion of freedom implied in the frontier myth" (141); Rosendale applies an eco-critical approach that recognizes the environmental politics of the frontier imagery Gold imposes upon his representation of the Lower Eastside. .

Indian, I examine the racial politics of appropriating other popular Western identities, both Anglo and non-Anglo, such as the cowboy, the sidekick, and the bandit outlaw. In doing so, this dissertation extends the trail left by recent Native American and Jewish American literary studies to ethnic American literature at large.

The scholarship of Postwestern Studies has shaped my understanding of the ways in which the ethnic writers of this study engaged with the hyperreal West. Postwestern scholarship aims to explore “the multifaceted meanings, uses and critiques of ‘the authentic’ in western American literary and cultural history” (Handley and Lewis 1). Consequently, by interrogating the construction of authenticity, Postwestern Studies unsettles the meaning and stability of past studies of literary and cultural accounts of the West.²² In the past, literary scholars of the American West, attempting to distance their subject from the popular formula Westerns of the time, declared the high culture and serious merit of western American literature, defending its historical value. “Thus, Western American literary study,” Nina Baym writes, “fell between two schools, being too devoted to the principle of the real for literary academics and not devoted enough for historians” (815).²³ The move by Postwestern Studies, however, to incorporate postmodern theory into its critical mode has made studies of western writing contemporary. Moreover, it has complicated the otherwise simplistic and problematic defense of authenticity that canonical western texts have claimed. Premised upon Baudrillard’s notion of simulacra and simulation, Postwestern Studies interrogates all texts that claim to be authentic, interpreting them as cultural constructions designed to simulate “the real.”

Postwestern scholar Nathaniel Lewis enumerates several significant characteristics of authenticity that should be kept in mind when examining the popular West. Because of its

²² For a brief history of Postwestern Studies, see Kollin xii.

²³ For an elaborate discussion of western American literature’s emergence, see Baym, 814.

elusive nature, authenticity cannot be determined definitively or effectively, always demanding a means to guarantee the certificate of originality or reality. To claim that something is authentic means to also claim inauthentic copies exist: “Common sense suggests that the inauthentic is secondary: something copied, constructed, often commodified, as opposed to the authentic, which is original, natural, priceless” (Lewis 6). Yet the copy exhibits power too because, in the words of Umberto Eco, “the fact that it seems real is real, and the thing is real even if, like Alice in Wonderland, it never existed.” And while the copy is designed to appear authentic, the authentic may also be a construction designed to simulate the real. Lewis concludes, “But postmodern theory argues that these terms are themselves self-validating cultural markers, promoting not the true, the self, the real, or the natural, but, rather, ideologically infused discourses and delusions. What we take to be authentic is a ‘simulacrum,’ a copy without an original.” The West, he declares, is authentic.

Traditionally, the architects of the popular West have insisted that what they offer is history, not art. A chief characteristic of its productions is the claim to represent people, places, and events as they really were. Lewis claims, “Western writers present themselves as accurate and reliable recorders of real places, histories, and cultures—but not as stylists or inventors. Furthermore, to a surprising degree readers have accepted the claim of authenticity and read western literature primarily in relation to historical record” (3). The insistence has the potential effect of negating the credibility of previous writers in the tradition. In other words, as writers assert the authenticity of their West they negate the authenticity of previous ones. An effect of the serial claim to real representation is that the many authentic accounts of the West unsettle any one claim to “authenticity” because all are “authentic.” Jefferson Slagle summarizes aptly the process of determining authenticity within the popular West: “Authenticity is . . . the perception

of correspondence between a western individual or story and popular narratives of western history. In other words, it is a measure of how well a western or westerner fits notions of what westerns and westerners should be, based on previous westerns and westerners that have been judged authentic” (121). By popular demand, readers have selected, through their consuming power, accounts that appear similar to other “real” accounts of the West. In this way, a popular discourse of the authentic West has been created by authorial imitation and validated by reader recognition of the “real thing” because of its resemblance to other simulations deemed “authentic.” The popular West as simulacrum of the West dissimulates its textual status, therefore hiding its artistic nature behind a veil of historical representation. It must assert itself as authentic, otherwise the history it presents is in danger of being perceived as fiction (Lewis 16). Conceivably, a threat to the authenticity of a Western jeopardizes all Westerns because of the chain of simulations that binds them into a real West.²⁴

Western writing claims authenticity for a variety of reasons that range from “genuine regional affection to commercial advantage to marketplace expectation to the burden of tradition. But we might start by recognizing that writers want to record a stunning western reality.” This reality exists beyond representation (Lewis 8). Therefore, by asserting its representation of reality, the West reveals itself to be a simulation, a hyperreality. When the West is viewed as a hyperreality, several truths result. The history it claims to be real, true, and original instead becomes contingent and, more specifically as it relates to my study, ethnocentric. The discourse of authenticity that suffuses western literary and cultural texts disguises certain racial ideologies. Consequently, other narratives of the West emerge. “And for popular interpreters of American experience in the West, the West has often been the legitimating source and sanctifying ground

²⁴ For extended consideration, see Lewis 1-17 and Slagle 121-122.

of American authenticity. . . . ‘westerling’ in the vast spaces of the American West came to stand in for white American’s notion about what essentially defined their authentic difference” (Handley and Lewis 6). If traditional narratives of the West have been about how American identity originated out of the struggle with the frontier, its savage land and racially different people, then when popular western texts are revealed to be a hyperreality, so too then do claims about the Anglo race being authentically American become simulations of reality. Thus, American character’s racial superiority typically on display in the popular West appears less an accurate historical representation of reality and more a construct of a certain racial ideology.

This project contributes to ongoing efforts in the field of Postwestern Studies by examining the problem of authenticity in western writing and culture. Postwestern critics have dislodged traditional conceptions of the literary and cultural West as a particular place, space, and identity. Various scholarly contributions examine regional imagery in ethnic and even transnational contexts. In addition to the work done by American Indian studies previously mentioned, these contributions analyze the deployment of popular imagery of the West in Asian American narratives about Japanese internment camps and transnational adoption, and in global contexts of its reproduction, circulation, and experience, what Susan Kollin refers to as “transnational rearticulations.”²⁵ Of these contributions by postwestern scholars, Susan Kollin writes, “[they] aim to realize a postwestern critical sensibility that opens up potential lines of inquiry and expands the western archive to include new voices and experiences that have not received adequate scholarly attention” (xviii). One of the aims of my work is to add to this

²⁵ For a reading of popular West imagery in Khaled Hosseini’s 2003 novel *The Kite Runner* as an example of transnational rearticulation, see Kollin xvii.

“western archive” of unheard voices, extending its historical reach to account for early-twentieth-century ethnic writing.

Just as much as studies of the West would do well to investigate the embodiment of nationhood in ethnic literature, so can ethnic literary studies benefit from a formal investigation of the West. The dissertation proposes that the popular West offers a new and significant context to the study of ethnic writing. According to Maria Lauret, because ethnic studies scholars “have (almost by definition) moved away from the study of that unwieldy and nebulous concept *assimilation*, it is all too easy to forget that the drive to Americanize the ‘foreign-born’ dominated the public sphere in the early twentieth century” (Lauret 9). It would seem appropriate then that analyzing early-twentieth-century ethnic writing should consider the popular West, given its function as a vehicle of Americanism and Americanization.²⁶ Moreover, in recent years, ethnic literary studies has pushed for analysis of the mediation and creation of ethnicity in mediums other than print media. According to Martha Cutter, “It behooves us, then, to think through how different forms of media inflect and mediate different messages about ethnic identity. In the same way that print texts have been enriched by the proliferation of other media, we may find that various media forms . . . ultimately enable the developments of ethnicity into more complex and generative formations and formulations” (8). A study of the ways ethnic writers deploy the popular West contributes to this cause because it explores how the popular mediation of ethnicity in Westerns and the like spurred ethnic writers to generate literary responses critical of the way it embodied nationhood in Anglo masculinity. As a result of their literary refashioning of the masculine norms celebrated in the popular West, these ethnic writers

²⁶ For another supporting perspective on the need to study how U S Pop Culture Americanized immigrants, see Lauret 21Fn10.

deconstruct authentic notions of ethnic and American identity concretized and normalized through massive reiteration.

Claiming that the writers of this study who articulate their ethnic American experience in literary narratives should be read in the context of popular narratives of the American West may seem tenuous given the obvious disparity of their geographical backgrounds, narrative settings, and various genres, none of which are Westerns. However, all deal with images of the West familiar to the popular mind as evident by the circulation of icons such as Buffalo Bill, Ramona, the Texas Rangers, or even coonskin caps, among many other motifs. Though John Fante and Americo Paredes fit the conventional geographic space of the American West, with Fante writing about his Colorado and Los Angeles homes and Paredes about his youth on the Texas-Mexico border, it might seem that the New York-born-and-raised writers Mike Gold and Nathanael West are misfits. Recognizing the latter as such overlooks the history of the Eastern establishment's imagining of the American West, thereby making Gold and West less alien to this creative undertaking than would seem appropriate at first blush. West and Gold, like Fante and Paredes, wrote about characters living in or moving to the West. Nathanael West, like John Fante, eventually moved to Los Angeles, while Gold imaginatively transposed the West to the East. It is not the material terrain of the West that makes their narratives postwestern, but rather the preponderance of the idea of the West in their literary works. New West historians have not reached a consensus as to defining the West: "Whether defined by climate and terrain, culture and ethnicity, or proximity to either the Pacific Rim or Mexico, the West proves a contradictory and unstable place." I take William Handley's definition of the West for my study:

It is therefore helpful—and not a way to cloud things—to approach the West as a literary site or process, as that which is in the process of being written and rewritten, in

order to understand its cultural significance as a vast set of experiences that individuals and cultures alternately erase from or re-inscribe into that imaginary field called America. The literary West is an allegory of that process of imagining and reconstituting the past. (*Marriage, Violence, and Nation* 34-35)

By confronting the popular West in their fiction and through their literary refashioning of cowboy masculinity, the writers I examine participate in this process of reimagining the authenticity of dominant claims to belong in America. To complicate matters further, as the writers in this study do, the masculinity of the popular West necessarily complicates that imagined community called America which it embodied, a community that historically could not imagine ethnic peoples; thus, in refashioning the cowboy, narratives of ethnic masculinity remake the national imaginary.

Chapter one, “The Wild West on the East Side: Mike Gold’s Radical Simulation of the Frontier Myth,” explores the relationship between the popular cultural West and Mike Gold’s writings, specifically his autobiographical novel *Jews Without Money* (1930) and selected writings between 1917 and 1941 printed in radical journals such as *New Masses*. The chapter seeks to demonstrate that Gold does not believe his writing appropriates the popular West; rather, his fiction and non-fiction suggest that he re-appropriates it. Positing the interrelationship between the popular West and proletarian experience, Gold sets out to reclaim the lost tradition of radical thinking submerged in American culture. Whether in his novel or on the pages of radical journals, Gold deployed frontier tropes in these writings. My analysis of his tropes suggests that he elides ethnic difference when mobilizing the working classes to social revolution in order to affirm not only that true solidarity resides in the proletarian experience but also that that experience is authentically American. In re-appropriating the class politics of the popular

West through his adoption of its models of masculinity and various motifs, Gold reorients nationality from an issue of race to one of class. Interpolations of the popular cultural West within his writings demand critical attention because they express the radical potential of the frontier myth. Gold's use of the frontier myth and symbol system most often deployed by the mainstream capitalist order, which opposed the Left and marginalized immigrants and ethnics with its nativist conception of the nation, counters the conventional class and racial politics associated with the myth. Moreover, applying the frontier myth to the narratives of and exhortations to the Left renders its political cause, conventionally perceived as un-American, within a familiar American tradition. The chapter demonstrates how Gold authenticates the Americanness of the Left, weaving narratives of class revolution presented in his novel and other selected writings with the threads of the frontier myth. By drawing on the frontier myth in popular culture, Gold positions class revolution within an archetypal American hyperreality. In doing so, he makes class revolution "authentically" American, an episode of "real" American history.

In the second chapter, "'A Barefaced Lie': the Problem of Authenticity and Nationalism in Nathanael West's Satirical Pastiche of the Popular West," I consider how Nathanael West collects a pastiche of references to the frontier myth in popular culture in order to compose satires that undermine the coherence and monolithic notion of a national narrative implied by the popular West. I begin the chapter with a study of a relatively obscure short story West wrote for the *Overland Monthly* in 1929 titled "A Barefaced Lie." By drawing upon the spectatorial dynamics of corporeal authenticity that the dime Western deployed to assert its frontier history as real, West uses the short story to undermine western writing's claim to represent national history.

In conclusion, “A Barefaced Lie” offers a mock sketch of frontier masculinity revealing the western hero to be less an “authentic” representation and more a fabulous simulation.

In *A Cool Million* (1934) West further develops the critique of frontier masculinity that he started in “A Barefaced Lie.” A novel-length parody of native fascism’s mobilization under the emblem of frontier masculinity, Nathanael West ridicules the claims of radical conservatism to authentic nationality. With radical nationalism as the object of ridicule, West unpacks the capitalist links to the rise of native fascism in narrating the picaresque journey of Algeresque-hero Lemuel Pitken, who sets out to recover his home threatened by foreigners. In doing so, West posits that the claims to a supposedly authentic national identity are concretized in commodities simulating frontier masculinity and tailor-made by and for native fascism. The iconic coonskin cap worn by Lem and the members of the fascist-like National Revolution Party expresses the mass popularity of frontier masculinity and its association with native fascism. As the satirical narrative concludes, the deconstruction of Lem, the all-American boy in a coonskin cap, implies that the frontier myth can serve as a cultural resource for modern-day native fascism, mobilizing the spirit of a nativist nostalgia conjured by frontier commodities.

The chapter concludes with *The Day of the Locust* (1939), a postmodern critique of Hollywood simulations of cowboy masculinity. The novel takes aim at the cinematic pose of the cowboy as American innocent puncturing the morality of the history that the movie Western cowboy represents. West reveals the violent racism endemic to the popular entertainment traditions reproduced by the Western. In leveling the racial hierarchy posited by Westerns, he undermines the fantasy of authenticity erected by the popular West. In the context of its Depression Era setting, the novel forecasts popular disillusionment with Hollywood fantasies of success, especially the “authentic” American story told by the Western. The novel suggests these

Hollywood dreams will lead to violent social agitation rather than achieve the social cohesion that the Western's nationalism promised to engender.

The third chapter of the dissertation, “‘Remember the Alamo’: The Popular West, Machismo, and ‘Authentic’ Mexican-American Identity in Americo Paredes’ *George Washington Gomez*,” offers an analysis of how in *George Washington Gomez* Americo Paredes deploys “authenticity” in ways that counter and simultaneously resemble its hegemonic deployments. Paredes’ border narrative imagines a West where opposing identities struggle for dominance in the mind of Gualinto, the novel’s Mexican-American protagonist. The heroic fatalism of the *corrido* style that characterizes *George Washington Gomez* elegizes the loss of “authentic” Mexican-Tejano identity to popular Anglo-American history. Various forms of the popular West, such as print and film Westerns, offered such representations of history, circulating Mexican stereotypes. *George Washington Gomez* demonstrates how the popular West problematically consolidates Mexican masculinity into vilified stereotypes that are fixed into the role of the Other within putatively authentic representations of American history. As a result of popular simulations of Mexican masculinity, Mexican-Tejano folk identity, particularly its anticolonial forms of resistance such as the *corrido*, cannot withstand the “authentic” Mexican identities circulating in American popular culture. Indeed, the popular West educates the protagonist Gualinto, redirecting the formation of his subjectivity from the Mexican-Tejano identity of his uncle Feliciano, the masculine embodiment of the *corrido*’s patriarchal anticolonialism, to the Anglo-Texan identity of his former Texas Ranger father-in-law Frank Dell, the embodiment of cowboy masculinity and thus American nationality. Gualinto’s capitulation to Anglo-Texan culture exemplifies the passing of Mexican-Tejano cultural identity, and thus its anticolonial resistance. As the representation of “authentic” Mexican-Tejano

machismo, Feliciano fading from significance to Gaulinto conveys Paredes' nostalgia for the increasing displacement of border culture due in no small part to the popular West.

The final chapter, "'A *Ramona* in Reverse': Writing the Madness of the Spanish Past in Fante's *Ask the Dust*," considers the ways in which the popular West influences the production of ethnic literature by studying John Fante's 1939 novel *Ask the Dust*. By characterizing his book as "a *Ramona* in reverse" in the Prologue, Fante clearly announces his intention to engage the Spanish past, a form of the popular West that dominated the cultural landscape of Southern California beginning with its commercial exploitation by the region's boosters in the late nineteenth-century. To reverse *Ramona*, Fante adapts various elements from Helen Hunt Jackson's 1888 social protest novel including themes, plot structures, and characters. Through the literary reversal, *Ask the Dust* conveys a critique of *Ramona* implying a flaw in the romantic utopianism with which Jackson concludes her social protest. At the center of Fante's novel is a struggle to claim authentic belonging in modern Los Angeles that, as he narrates through the tragic romance of Arturo and Camilla, the racial politics of the Spanish past problematizes with its bifurcation of the Mexican sign. As reminders of the bygone days of Spanish colonialism, Mexicans could be tolerated, but as residents in modern Los Angeles, they were outcasts. The bifurcated Mexican sign suffuses *Ask the Dust* rendering the novel a socially-conscious literary effort to undo the cultural legacy of *Ramona*. By reversing *Ramona*, Fante disabuses the putative "true" history of Southern California as popularized in the Spanish past, its discourse of civilization, imperialist nostalgia, and exclusionary racial politics. In closing, the chapter considers how the tragic disappearance of Camilla signifies an emerging political presence of Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles and Arturo's departure from Sammy in the conclusion of the

novel anticipates the decline of the Americanist mythologies of the popular West and the rise of modern ethnic narratives.

Chapter One

The Wild West on the East Side:

Mike Gold's Radical Simulation of the Frontier Myth

Our wild west was won that way: a few hardy settlers fought off the Indians, cleared the virgin forest, built their shanties and tilled the earth. Towns and cities formed about them. Some of the pioneers then moved on to other virgin soil; others were swallowed up in the new civilization. Many were crowded out, and even forgotten. But still, they had planted something; it was enough of a reward for a pioneer. The Communist pioneer felt sufficiently rewarded when toward the end of this decade of the Thirties he saw that democracy had conquered in our literature, he saw hundreds of theaters, books, dance recitals, concerts, moving pictures, appear each few months, bearing, however faintly, grotesquely, even opportunistically, the shape of proletarian ideas.

—Mike Gold, Speech to Fourth American Writers' Congress, 1941

To any member of the audience at the American Writers' Congress with mainstream sympathies, Mike Gold's retrospective superimposition of the American frontier on to the Left-directed cultural revolution must have seemed radical. Following the Bolshevik Revolution, the Red Scare of 1919 gripped the American mainstream with fears of a menace growing within the nation. The concern that the spread of Bolshevism would threaten the stability of United States society led to intense scrutiny of Communist activities, in effect branding them un-American. Yet in the same year Gold spoke before the Writers' Congress, fellow radical writer Earl Browder, in light of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, coined the Communist Party slogan "Communism is the twentieth-century Americanism." Indeed, the slogan reflects how World

War II had forged a strange alliance between the United States and Soviet Union. In no uncertain terms, Browder's slogan attempts to revise the negative association with Communism created by the Red Scare twenty years earlier. Yet far from any reactionary gesture to the recent consolidation of anti-Fascist international forces that could have motivated Browder's radical reinterpretation of Americanism, Gold's speech indicates he had been crafting the Communist cultural revolution in the archetypal terms of the frontier myth for some time. When disseminated in popular culture, the myth as grand narrative of national development conveyed Americanism that has been linked to nativist fears about immigrants and the political threat they represented. After a thorough review of Mike Gold's writing, the concept behind Browder's slogan appears not so new. Gold's writing had been making a compelling case for the Americanism of Communism twenty years before, nuancing his perception of the proletarian struggle with the popular and distinctly American imagery of the frontier. As Gold saw it, the cultural revolution heralded by labor activism was nothing short of a Wild West where the movement to expand labor rights conflicted with the savagery of capitalist interests. Cultural productions of the frontier myth, such as literary and film Westerns, often claim a certain authentic national history.¹ When Gold characterizes the burgeoning proletarian cultural movement in the terms of westward pioneering, he inserts it into what's popularly viewed as the

¹ Traditionally, the architects of the popular West have insisted that what they offer is history, not art. A chief characteristic of its productions is the claim to represent people, places, and events as they really were. Yet when this discourse of authenticity is exposed, the West no longer functions as a representation, but rather a simulation. For an elaborate explanation of the American West as hyperreality, see Lewis 1-17 and Slagle 119-138.

“real” history of the United States. Gold’s use of the popular cultural West in his writings seems to revise Browder’s slogan to say “Communism is authentic Americanism.”

Recognizing the relationship between the popular cultural West and Mike Gold’s writings—specifically his autobiographical novel *Jews Without Money* (1930) and selected writings printed in radical magazines between 1917 and 1941—participates in a collective effort scholars have taken up recently to analyze interpolations of popular culture, especially the popular cultural West, in working-class and ethnic writings. In *Mechanic Accents*, Michael Denning concludes that dime novels influenced a generation of writers from the working classes, such as Mike Gold: “Virtually all of the young plebeian writers of the Depression had grown up reading dime novels, and their desire to write fiction was instilled by the cheap stories of detectives, working girls, and western outlaws” (264). The influence becomes significant for a study of Mike Gold when we consider Denning’s reorientation of the trajectory of the Western hero. As Denning suggests, a proletarian politics emerges from a popular Western tradition once we recognize that Deadwood Dick may be a descendant of the labor activist Molly Maguires rather than the genteel self-made man of Cooper’s frontier romances (163). In the context of the “Labor and Capital” stories of the Wild West discovered by Denning, the Buffalo Bill stories that the protagonist of *Jews Without Money* reads signify a specifically American popular culture implicated in working class interests. Through the dime Westerns of his youth, Gold could see the labor politics of the frontier myth, and thus the radical potential of the imaginary American West.

This chapter begins with an exploration of signs of the popular cultural West in Gold’s *Jews Without Money*. Prior to publishing the novel in 1930, Gold submitted sections of it, the earliest of which dates to 1917, to the proletarian-minded magazine *Masses* and its successor

New Masses. For more than a decade Gold worked on the memoir publishing it in parts that would ultimately combine with other previously unpublished sections to form the novel. Some sections that appear in the novel, such as “Buffalo Bill and the Messiah,” bear looking into because they present significant differences from versions printed previously. While writing the novel, Gold served as editor of *New Masses* and contributed to it on a regular basis. Various contributions un-related to *Jews Without Money* also make use of popular frontier tropes. The chapter transitions from the critically well-received novel to readings of lesser known and little studied writings. Critically neglected until now, these writings offer a significant context for reading the novel since the frontier tropes that appear in these writings precede those of the novel and, in some cases, explicitly elaborate western themes outside those used in the quasi-fictional world of the memoir-like novel. These writings that coincide with the memoir selections printed in *New Masses*, among others, and later in the novel demonstrate Gold’s sustained interest in the American West. As evidenced by its tropes and themes deployed in the memoirs and non-autobiographical writings, whether short story or biting polemic, the West provided a critical lens through which Gold could reflect on the politically formative experiences of his youth and read the labor revolution of the present.²

The popular tropes of the American West that Gold deployed in the aforementioned speech appear in his various submissions to radical papers throughout the 1920s and his 1930 fictional autobiography *Jews Without Money*. Whether published in a radical magazine or the

² For many articles and editorial statements by Mike Gold, I have consulted Michael Folsom’s anthology, *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology* (New York: International Publishers, 1972), and for the novel, I have used the 2009 PublicAffairs edition, Michael Gold, *Jews Without Money* 1930 (New York: PublicAffairs, 2009); all future citations will be taken from these sources.

novel, Gold's writings of growing up on Chrystie Street contain allusions to the Old West, thereby transforming the Lower East Side into the mythic frontier. Born to Jewish immigrants, Mikey, Gold's fictional persona, narrates formative events of his youth spent in the poor, working-class neighborhood with a "gang of little Yids" terrorizing the tenement residents and waging war with neighboring gangs of Italian and Irish kids. When a series of tragic accidents prevents his parents from working, Mikey must forgo entering high school to help the family eke out a living. After much existential searching during his hunt for jobs, Mikey finds messianic fulfillment in the worker's revolution, thus bringing the collection of vignettes that constitute the novel to an abrupt close. From the gritty account of everyday life in the seedy tenements emerges a picture of the East Side that resembles with ironic ambivalence the fantastically ennobled violence of the Wild West. Mikey and his gang see the Delancey Street lots, a valuable spot in an area with limited space, as a "vast western plain." The battle for those lots is romanticized as a "historic battle" (48) with the savage enemy, the Forsythe gang who "[whoop] down like a band of Indians" (47). At the same time, Mikey perceives his own gang, the "Young Avengers of Chrystie Street," to be an Indian tribe who take blood oaths, have pow-wows, and are led by a Jewish kid named Nigger, "the chieftain of our brave savage tribe." Other Jewish residents like Louis One Eye bear Indian features and stories of Jews encountering Indians and cowboys in the West are local legend. Even Mikey's Judaism bears the romantic tint of the popular cultural West. He envisions the Messiah to be Buffalo Bill, a frontier hero who could "annihilate our enemies" just as he imagined Buffalo Bill did with him on his adventure through Mulberry Street. In that fanciful flight Mikey pretends to ride alongside Bill through the Italian enclave shooting buffalo and saving a white maiden from savage Indians. A part of Mikey's daily

routine, his reading of Buffalo Bill stories explains his penchant for imagining the Lower East Side as the untamed West.

A study of interpolations of the popular cultural West within Mike Gold's writings contributes to developing understandings of radicalism, the American West, popular culture, and ethnic literature in the United States. By popular cultural West, I mean textual representations of the American West in popular culture that deploy the frontier myth alongside claims that the text makes to portray the "real" history of the United States in a way that disguises the artistic conditions of the text's production. Indeed, Gold's use of a myth and symbol system commonly deployed by the mainstream, which opposed the Left and marginalized immigrants and ethnics with its nativist conception of the nation, successfully counters the conventional class and racial politics associated with the myth in that Gold reclaims the West for the masses. The emergence of the cowboy as a popular cultural icon in the 1880s during the wave of immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe suggests that, at least in part, the white hero of the popular West originated from and is invested with nativism. For example, the Anglophile writer of *The Virginian* (1902) Owen Wister insisted on the cowpuncher's whiteness as an essential national trait; Wister's cowboy exemplifies a nativist response to the wave of immigration—what he called the "immigrant hordes" (Antelyes 18, 23). Indeed, the cowboy was an Anglo hero whose racial portrayal conveys the monomania of the late nineteenth century for recovering a primitive Anglo-Saxon tradition. As the central hero of the Western, the successor to the historical romance that enjoyed popularity during the 1890s, the Anglo cowboy expresses the

preoccupation of the period with a model of manhood that was widely associated with nationhood. Thus cowboy masculinity embodied national identity.³

Popular Western writing was not alone in combating perceived alien influences infiltrating the United States. Prior to the Second World War, Hollywood produced film Westerns charged with Americanism to counter the spread of propaganda from alien politics such as Communism (Stanfield, *Hollywood, Westerns, and the 1930s*, 152). Applying the frontier myth to the narratives and exhortations of the Left renders its political cause, conventionally perceived as un-American, within a familiar American tradition. By drawing on the frontier myth in popular culture, Gold positions class revolution within an archetypal American hyperreality. In doing so, he makes class revolution “authentically” American, an episode of “real” American history. Motifs of the popular American West that surface in *Jews Without Money* suggest that Gold adopts them to critique the destructive fantasies promoting mainstream Americanism that they have popularly come to signify. By Americanism I mean an ethnic and racial nationalism that supports the status-quo capitalist order. Yet as I will demonstrate in my analysis of selected writings from his contributions to radical papers, Gold authenticates the Americanness of the Left by weaving a narrative of class revolution with the threads of the frontier myth.

Attending to the ways in which Gold assimilated the popular West participates in an expanding conversation about his work that extends beyond conventional scholarly concentration

³ For an elaboration of the relationship between the recovery of an Anglo-Saxon tradition, imperialism, and the embodiment of nationhood, see Kaplan; for a discussion of cowboy masculinity and its potential for refashioning the self through its performativity, see Daniel Worden.

on his Leftist politics and its degrading impact on the proletarian fiction that he fathered. His novel *Jews Without Money* is an exemplary piece of proletarian realism through which Gold conveys in no uncertain terms a Communist polemic. Written in the first person, the novel unfolds through the perspective of Mikey, the literary persona of Mike Gold. While the novel is not an autobiography, the common name between narrator and author implies the events of the story are real. Contributing to this authentic effect was the book's initial billing by publisher Liveright as an autobiography. Given that Gold admitted that 85% of the novel was true (Wald 45), *Jews Without Money* is now widely considered to be a piece of autobiographical fiction. Presenting the novel as a true personal account of the Eastside tenements credits the problematic social conditions Gold needed his readers to accept in order to motivate the kind of change for which he advocated. In the estimation of Werner Sollors, Gold "effectively merges the immigrant/ethnic with the proletarian tendency in literature" (Sollors 117). Tendency is an understatement. At the conclusion of the novel, Gold unapologetically endorses a cultural revolution directed by the principles of Communism. In various writings for *New Masses* Gold espouses his theory of proletarian literature, which as Folsom points out "owe[s] as much to Walt Whitman as to [Karl] Marx." Folsom continues, "Unlike many literary radicals, he believed that a viable literature might be created, not just from the presumed point of view of industrial workers, but also actually by them. Gold's most important theoretical statements on this subject are "Towards Proletarian Art" (*Liberator*, February 1921), "America Needs a Critic" (review of Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution*, *New Masses*, October 1926), and "Proletarian Realism" (*New Masses*, October 1930)" (Folsom, "Irving Granich").

Without a doubt, Mike Gold has been considered foremost among early twentieth-century American proletarian writers. Alan Wald declares, "Simply put, no single individual contributed

more to forging the tradition of proletarian literature as a genre in the United States after the 1920s. All who came after Gold would stand on the shoulders of his legacy,” hence he is “the Gold standard,” (Wald 39). Yet proletarian literature has been long regarded as bereft of literary value. The major criticism aimed at proletarian fiction targeted its supposed dogged obedience to Communism at the expense of literary creativity. Wald attributes scholarly confusion regarding the practices and politics of the Communist Literary Left to Mike Gold’s construction of the revolutionary artist “whose commitment to the working class was total and dependable.” In other words, Gold may have created the belief that Moscow gave orders as to how American Party members should suffuse their work with propaganda (Wald 40). Apologists such as Richard Tuerk and Mark Shoening have come to Gold’s defense. Both make a case for the underappreciated value of his novel’s artistic merits.⁴ Recent studies of Mike Gold’s writing, which are often limited to *Jews Without Money*, have considered his style within the context of ethnic literature.⁵ It is my aim then to demonstrate how attention to the motifs of the popular West contribute to the growing appreciation for the inventiveness of Gold’s proletarian novel as well as inform an understanding of his experience growing up as an impoverished working-class

⁴ For more details on the artistic merits of Gold’s novel, see Tuerk; Scholarship has sought to recast Gold’s novel in the light of an ethnic tradition it has traditionally been excluded from. For a discussion of how Gold’s story fathers a tradition of the ethnic Jewish novel that repudiates assimilation from which Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep* (1935) emerges, see Mark Shoening.

⁵ Despite the tendency of proletarian fiction to subsume ethnicity in class identity, Lee Bernstein reads otherwise overlooked racial issues in *Jews Without Money*; for doubts as to whether Jewishness can serve as an opposition to white mainstream America, see Rottenberg.

Jewish youth in an American culture saturated with images and narratives vaunting the heroism of Anglo masculinity.

Recognizing a certain disempowered class tradition in the popular American West nuances the mainstream conception of American identity that Gold's writing would seem to claim when he adopts frontier tropes. There is a precedent of ethnic artists using figures of the popular cultural West to stake a claim to American identity. Recent studies by Peter Antelyes and Rachel Rubinstein have concentrated on the ways Jewish writers and performers drew upon popular performance traditions and figurations of Indians to conceptualize and nuance their Americanness. Peter Antelyes suggests that, though only briefly, the representation of the Indian as both figure of identification and repudiation in *Jews Without Money* has an antecedent in Jewish redface performance. Also, permitting much room for elaboration, Rubinstein observes how Gold's writing adopts the "vanishing Indian" trope.⁶ My reading expands the aforementioned scholarly discussions by featuring an analysis, hitherto absent, of the interrelations of ethnicity, the popular cultural West, and the proletarian commitment characteristic of Gold's writing. Furthermore, my analysis adds to the work of Rubinstein and Antelyes by looking at representations of the cowboy as well as the Indian. The analysis of both imaginary figures will be considered in the context of the frontier myth, a basic structure to popular stories and histories of settling the American West. Consisting of a set of ideas about the

⁶ Jewish redface provided performers a means of presenting racial difference between Jews and whites as an illusion; at the same time the performance maintained an ethnic difference that distinguished their whiteness, thus creating an American Jewish identity; for more on this subject, see Antelyes; for analysis of how Jewish American writers used the imaginary Indian to negotiate their own Americanness, see Rubinstein "West's Indian Commodities" 102-103.

interrelationship of racial perfection, gender specialization, and Darwinian millennialism, the discourse of civilization has been observed to pervade significant popular texts guided by the frontier myth.⁷ The study concludes with considerations of how Gold risks reproducing the myth's patriarchal and racist discourse as he reorients the focus of the myth's central revelation of national character from Anglo-American to proletarian masculinity.

While it is not uncommon to detect millennialism in Gold's writing, the combination of popular western tropes with Judaism to create a new millennial symbol stands out. As a springboard for exploring the Western motifs of Gold's Jewish version of millennialism, I turn to Steven Rosendale's analysis of Buffalo Bill as Messiah in *Jews Without Money*. Originally desiring him to be the Messiah, ultimately Mikey repudiates that image of Buffalo Bill; thus, he rejects "the immature and narrow notion of freedom implied in the frontier myth" (141). In this way, Rosendale claims, "Gold's point in representing the lure of the frontier myth is ultimately to debunk the heroism of the pioneering past." I seek to complicate Rosendale's claim, which overlooks the popular-cultural implications and class politics of the Buffalo Bill Mikey imagines, takes for granted Gold's critique of the lure of the frontier myth, and ignores Gold's use of frontier heroism as a propaganda vehicle. Gold neither debunks the frontier myth nor rejects the significance of its popular-cultural appeal. As Denning's work demonstrates, the Buffalo Bill stories that Mikey reads signify a specific type of American popular cultural form implicated in working-class interests. Through the dime Westerns of his youth, Gold could see the labor politics of the frontier myth, and thus the radical potential of the imaginary American West. Indeed, Mike Gold adopts the tropes of the frontier myth in his writings for Left periodicals to describe the new terrain that the pioneers of labor writing would settle, portraying the struggle

⁷ For an elaborate discussion of the discourse of civilization, see Gail Bederman.

for workers' rights and a proletarian aesthetic as a Wild West. Mike Gold's writing repudiates two potential effects of the popular West: the romanticizing of capitalist dreams based upon individual transformation through upward mobility and the fracturing of class solidarity by the inculcation of the belief that American character emerged and emerges out of racial conflict. Furthermore, Rosendale overlooks the significance of a tradition of frontier thinking to Gold's proletarian millennialism. Certain articles Gold wrote for *New Masses* reprise the agrarian idea of the frontier as a "safety valve." When read in the context of these articles, the garden imagery of Mikey's final exhortation continues a strand of radical thinking about the American West that gives pause to any thought of Gold repudiating the mythic freedom it offers.

Ostensibly, rejecting the frontier myth in *Jews Without Money* would suggest Mikey's repudiation of popular American culture. Yet recent critical work by Lee Bernstein and Catherine Rottenberg has emphasized the ways mainstream America penetrated the Jewish subculture of Gold's Lower East Side, thereby revealing its increasing proximity to whiteness. My reading of the popular cultural West in *Jews Without Money* also suggests the presence of whiteness in Gold's East Side. When Mikey imagines himself and his "gang of little Yids" to be Indians whooping and crying, Mikey performs a popular cultural return to the masculine primitive by "going native." Back-to-nature narratives and practices were characteristic of white middle-class men at the turn of the century concerned with the effeminizing influence of civilization.⁸ In effect, Mikey acts white, thus American, when he plays Indian and most certainly when he fantasizes about Indian-killing adventures with Buffalo Bill. Yet I consider the ethnic implications of reproducing the frontier myth in the radical papers for which Gold wrote as well. Gold's adoption of frontier tropes in his contributions to *Liberator*, *Daily Worker*, and

⁸ For more on back to nature narratives, see Bederman 22-23 and Rotundo 227-8, 232.

New Masses suggests that he elides ethnic difference when mobilizing the working classes to social revolution on the pages of these radical journals in order to affirm that true solidarity resides in proletarian experience and that that experience is authentically American. Whether playing cowboy or Indian, performing and reprising tropes of the frontier myth imply an act of whiteness. Consequently, Gold appears to reproduce the racial discourse of the mainstream America that his working-class revolution means to undermine by reinscribing, even if unconsciously, the authenticity of the Anglo American asserted in the frontier myth. Further entrenching the myth of Anglo America's making perpetuates a popular story of marginalization with which many non-white rank-and-file Americans, to whom Gold's radical message was largely directed, were quite familiar and likely experienced personally.⁹ Alternatively, I argue that Gold's deployment of the frontier myth whitens his working-class audience. The whitening of the working class Americanizes those otherwise deemed un-American because non-white. Though reprising the frontier myth risks reproducing the white standard of American identity, it

⁹ Whiteness studies have recognized the ways certain ethnic groups have come to use whiteness to claim an American identity; I use the term Anglo to differentiate between those white identities commonly considered American from other socially marginalized subcategories of whiteness; For a book-length study of whiteness in United States history, especially for commentary on the fragmentation of whiteness, see Matthew Frye Jacobsen; for a discusses the ways ethnicity emerged out of racial discourse after World War II and how whiteness becomes a way for ethnics to claim U.S. identity, see Rottenberg, "Race and Ethnicity," 307-321; regarding the term Anglo, its designation of American identity, and its distinction from Mexican and Mexican-American identity, see Kropp 9.

democratically recodes nationality by making whiteness applicable to any one in the struggle for the working class. Thus, Gold reorients nationality from an issue of race to one of class.

Popular cultural representations of the frontier myth in *Jews Without Money* constitute a fantasy world of Americanism that ideologically conflicts with the interests of the working-class ethnics residing on the East Side. Yet the power of the fantasy remains strong enough to enthrall Mikey and his father Herman until the last page of the novel. Even then, only Mikey forgoes pursuing the American Dream for the workers' revolution. My investigation of the novel surveys the tropes of the popular American West that, I argue, provide a lens of Americanism through which Herman and Mikey see America from the East Side. Indeed, popular images of the frontier inform significant moments in the novel related to immigration, acculturation, subsistence, and existence. Evident from the failures of these characters' frontier fantasies—fantasies of capitalist and manly success associated with popular heroes evocative of imperial conquest by white America such as Theodore Roosevelt and Buffalo Bill—the novel takes a critical stance on mainstream American culture. Ostensibly, the novel's association of Jews with Indians would seem to imply that Jews could identify their own marginalization in modern capitalist America with Indian victimization of the past, thereby turning the East Side into something of an unofficial, institutionally-created reservation for working-class ethnics. Yet even in instances when Jewish characters identify with victims of conquest, the novel betrays, as intimated above, an imperialist nostalgia common to white middle-class America that suggests a certain complicity with the very mainstream it seeks to undermine.

Elements of the frontier myth that appear within Herman's immigration narrative suggest Gold's belief in the significance of the popular cultural appeal of the frontier myth to the inception of the American Dream in the mind of the immigrant. Unwilling to abide by the

predetermined orthodoxies of provincial Jewish life in Romania, Herman rebels against his arranged marriage. Prior to his birth, Herman's mother promised that her son would marry the daughter of another woman she had met while seeing a mystical Rabbi. Years later at the time of the wedding, Herman refuses to marry the woman's daughter Miriam, a name that, ironically, means "rebellion."¹⁰ In a figurative sense, Herman consummates the marriage to Miriam by rebelling against it. However, while he may have repudiated the Jewish order that he would have perpetuated had he wed Miriam, the novel suggests his failure to realize that his position in America, as long as he seeks the American Dream according to the capitalist order, has limited options just like his arranged marriage. From one professional failure to the next, Herman remains incapable of attaining his American Dream, what the book conveys to be a petty bourgeois life. Despite Herman's eschewing of the old Jewish order, his admiration of capitalist America marries him to the same determined social condition against which he intended to rebel in Romania. In other words, Herman rejects revolution. In his American story Herman casts himself as something of an outlaw. That he narrates the events of his wild youth to his children as a bedtime story contextualizes his rejection of Romanian Judaism in the American tradition of the rugged individualist. On one occasion, after being given money to buy goods for his family while in Romania, Herman spends it all in a few weeks and disappears for a year, returning to the village in rags; one year later he "was caught at the tobacco smuggling and put in a prison on the frontier," (90). In a novel where vacant lots resemble "a vast western plain" and inner-city streets can be a site for hunting buffalo and fighting Indians, the reference to the frontier is significant.

¹⁰ In addition to "rebellion," referring to Miriam's role as one of the leaders of the Hebrew exodus from Egypt, scholarship suggests the name also means "bitter"; for further information, see Enid Dame.

While the former motifs alone may fall short of demonstrating the significance of the frontier myth to Herman's immigration narrative, when read in conjunction with the cowboy and Indian picture—the first of America he sees—the previous allusions to the frontier become more emphatic. Indeed, the idea of America first entralls Herman when presented in the frontier myth. In the store window of a shop that sells Singer Sewing Machines, Herman sees two pictures of America:

One picture had in it the tallest building I had ever seen. It was called a skyscraper. At the bottom of it walked the proud Americans. The men wore derby hats and had fine mustaches and gold watch chains. The women wore silk and satins, and had proud faces like queens. Not a single poor man or woman was there; every one was rich. . . . The other picture was of Niagara Falls. You have seen the pictures on postcards; with Indians and cowboys on horses, who look at a rainbow shining over the water. (*Jews* 102)

From these two pictures originate what Herman calls “Baba stories” about America where even the “poorest ragpicker lived better than a Roumanian millionaire.” Later, Herman bemoans his youthful preconception of America as a “land of fun.” That the two pictures are juxtaposed and both contribute to a fantasy of upward mobility capable of enticing Herman to emigrate indicates that the pictures when taken together form a common narrative of America. The pictures provide temporal cues that suggest that this national narrative is historical: cowboys and Indians represent the frontier past and the skyscraper around which city-dwellers strut represents the modern present. According to this narrative, the frontier from which western American history commences bespeaks a past characterized by racial harmony; the frontier develops into a city, whose dominant characteristic is its glamorous commodity culture. The urbanization of America captured in this diptych reproduces the frontier myth's interpretation of America's economic

development from outpost to metropolis. The culmination of that economic development into a commodity culture full of derby hats, gold watch chains, silk, and satin signifies a capitalist fantasy.

Yet the capitalist fantasy that American history has arrived at appears premised upon a false representation of racial relations. The picture of Niagara Falls romanticizes American history into a portrait of nature that appears to embrace racial difference. A Judeo-Christian archetype of covenant renewal, the rainbow symbolizes harmony between the Indians and cowboys. The harmony extends to the natural landscape they behold, thus suggesting cowboy and Indian share the same view of the natural world and an agreement on how to live peacefully in that world. That both appear on horseback indicates that the cowboy and Indian hold the same position. With the capitalist success of the present having its mythic origins in an idyllic frontier past, America seems to promise racial equality. The natural and racial harmony imagined in the image of Niagara Falls provides the pre-modern context for modern America. Modernity yields a utopian world produced by the capital that constructed the building, a building that also generates capital for the “proud Americans” walking the streets at the bottom of the picture. It’s a utopian image familiar to the natural world of the former picture in that all people presented have equal status, and that status is elevated: “Not a single poor man or woman was there; every one was rich.” The racial harmony emblematic of natural America has progressed into a colorless society where there exist only “proud Americans.” Gender difference replaces racial difference in the representation of modern American society.¹¹

¹¹ Bederman notes that gender distinction functioned as a significant index of civilization. Thus, the gender distinction emphasized in the skyscraper picture signifies the completion of civilized development that began on the frontier.

Lost in the skyscraper picture is the story of racial co-existence so prevalent in the cowboy-Indian picture. The Indian vanishes along with the representation of the Other. Also lost in the romanticized transition from frontier to city is the brutal means of violent conquest. The graphic narrative of national development imitates some popular cultural texts that romanticized the savage encounter as peaceful coexistence or attributed the decline of the Indians to racial inferiority. Other popular cultural texts, such as dime novels like the “gaudy little paper books” about Indian-fighter Buffalo Bill that Mikey consumes, bring to imaginative life the violence occluded by such romantic interpretations.¹² Given the various violent simulations of the frontier myth that surface in *Jews Without Money*, Gold positions the reader to be skeptical of the fantasy of racial equality. As context to Herman’s account of his cousin’s betrayal, the fantasy of racial harmony contrasts with his story of intra-racial conflict. In juxtaposing a picture of interracial harmony with an occasion of intra-racial conflict, Gold diminishes the role race plays in social conflict. Instead, self-interested economic preservation between owner and laborer functions as the source of conflict.¹³

Despite Herman’s enthrallment with the financial fantasy of America represented in the picture, Gold’s proletarian critique emerges from the description of the bourgeois people and the skyscraper. Just as the people appear to benefit from the commodity culture generated by the

¹² For a discussion of how Theodore Roosevelt romanticizes the Indian encounter in *The Winning of the West* as one proving the racial superiority of Anglo Americans, see Brown 31.

¹³ In “The Gun is Loaded Dreiser,” Gold provides a concise summary of his critique of race and social conflict: “The simplest and most basic discovery made by Marx is that there are no indivisible races or nations, but that all the races and nations are split sharply by the war of two classes, the war of owners against workers,” Folsom, 225.

skyscraper, Herman notes the position of the men and women “at the bottom of it” as if to intimate the subjection of the people to the capitalist order that towers over them. Furthermore, in addition to the absence of poor men and women, the picture of modernity obscures the labor and manufacturing processes performed by the poor, working classes not represented in the fantasy of modern America that provide the “proud Americans” with derby hats, gold watch chains, silks, and satins. These processes are the everyday realities for the tenement dwellers on the East Side such as Nigger’s family who tailor “the finest suits for the fashionable Fifth Avenue shops” (*Jews Without Money* 261). The absence of poverty Herman observes only highlights the disparity between the modern America he saw pictured before immigrating and the one he experiences after the initial period of his arrival. Believing the pictures of America to be authentic, Herman engages fantasies of both modern and pre-modern America. Shortly after arriving, Herman and an immigrant he befriended on the journey named Yossel buy derby hats and walk around the “land of fun.” The fantasy of modern America fails them when the money runs out. Seeking work, Herman humbles himself before his cousin Sam Kravitz, whose correspondence about having “made it” in America partially motivated Herman to emigrate. Sam’s American story turns out to be a fantasy too. His suspender shop struggles, but Herman’s social talents turns the shop into a financial success. When Sam makes him a partner, Herman marries Katie and they honeymoon at Niagara Falls:

Always I had wanted to see that big water with the rainbow and Indians called Niagara Falls. So I took your momma there when we married. I spent a month’s wages on the trip. I showed America to your momma. We enjoyed ourselves. In a week we came back. I went to the shop the next morning to work again. I could not find the shop. It had vanished. I could not find Sam. He had stolen the shop. (*Jews*, 108-9)

Herman's story rereads the frontier myth presented by the two pictures of America on the shop window. Indeed, when placed together, the two pictures provide a narrative of America's development from a natural land of the cowboy and Indian into an economically sophisticated civilization. Contrary to the promise of success implied in the economic narrative of civilized development under the auspices of modern capitalism, Herman finds only failure. Indeed, Herman's belief in and search for the romantic pre-modern American frontier enables Sam Kravitz to seize the shop and thus Herman's American Dream. Herman's desire to see the Indians resembles other instances in the novel of Jews desiring to see and to be seen as Indians, which I will discuss in greater detail later. In his desire to see the Indian in the modern capitalist world, Herman connects his fate to the Indian's. As with the Indian that vanishes from the skyscraper picture of modern America, so does the immigrant worker who, like Herman, imaginatively invests in a narrative of prosperous economic development. Both appear invisible in a picture of modern capitalist success. While the story of Herman's youth has the beginnings of an immigrant narrative of upward mobility-cum-rugged individualism, for Gold it remains a fantasy attesting to the fragmenting power of capitalism. At the conclusion of the novel, Herman's American story ends as it began: he remains an impoverished greenhorn. Through Herman's anti-American Dream story, Gold recognizes popular cultural uses of the frontier myth to promote capitalist fantasies and admonishes against subscribing to them.

The alluring fantasy of financial success that captivates Herman and convinces him to emigrate appears so pernicious to Gold that he presents immigrant acculturation in pathological terms, specifically instances of Jewish immigrants accommodating Americanism to their enclaves or domiciles. Gold supports assimilation as a means of ending race hatred, but expresses concern about assimilation to "pure Americanism" because he viewed the latter as a

step towards fascism.¹⁴ The scene in *Jews Without Money* where Herman takes Mikey to Moscovitz's wine cellar, a tavern popular among Romanian immigrants, conveys Gold's perspective on Americanism. Adorning the wine cellar where Jewish immigrants gather to smoke, debate, and sing, signs of Americanism confront vestiges of Jewish pride: "At one end of the room, under a big American flag, hung a chromo showing Roosevelt charging up San Juan Hill. At the other end hung a Jewish Zionist flag—blue and white bars and star of David. It draped a crayon portrait of Dr. Theodore Herzl, the Zionist leader, with his pale, proud face, black beard and burning eyes" (115). The positional dynamic of the two pictures reifies the distinct nationalist ideologies of Zionism and Americanism. Herzl's Zionism promoted Jewish nationalism as a defense against anti-Semitism. In the context of Herzl's picture, the chromo portraying Roosevelt's charge on San Juan Hill in 1898, an iconic moment symbolizing a triumph of American imperialism, arranges a tension between a protective Jewish culture and an aggressive American one. Roosevelt set limits on assimilation that precluded hyphenated identities. In "True Americanism," Roosevelt declares, "The mighty tide of immigration to our shores has brought in its train much of good and much of evil; and whether the good or the evil shall predominate depends mainly on whether these newcomers do or do not throw themselves

¹⁴ Gold explained his doubts about assimilation to Americanism years later in a *New Masses* article entitled "The Gun is Loaded Dreiser" (1935). Gold wrote the article in response to an Anti-Semitic taunt Dreiser had made. To rebut Dreiser's presumption that Jewish capitalists take advantage of gentiles, Gold observes the exploitation of Jewish workers by Jewish capitalists in the garment industry; then he compares it to the capitalist exploitation of Anglo-Saxon miners by Anglo-Saxon mine owners in Kentucky.

heartily into our national life, cease to be Europeans, and become Americans like the rest of us” (qtd. from Taubenfeld 474).¹⁵

Despite the specter of Roosevelt’s “True Americanism,” a scene of cultural assimilation embracing an exchange between the immigrant past of the first generation and the American present of the second unfolds. Herman waxes philosophical with recollections of Talmudic wisdom, and Mikey recites a poem about George Washington he learned in school. Indeed, even the chromo of Roosevelt seems to approve of the scene as a description of the Rough Rider’s face “with bared teeth, frightened the Spaniards” is included in the catalogue of lively activity (116).

The scene at Moscowitz’s reveals Herman’s perception of Mikey’s nationality. When he cannot recognize a Romanian peasant ballad, Herman remarks, “Mechel, you have really become an American” (118). Despite Herman’s quick confirmation of Mikey’s American identity, Mikey appears reluctant to be a part of the display of American nationalism that his father is eager to embrace. He performs the George Washington poem only because “[his] father made [him] stand on a table, to recite the poem” (120). Mikey’s recital expresses Herman’s vicarious desire to be American. Disturbing Herman’s hope for a process of vicarious acculturation is Sam Kravitz, whose presence recalls the traumatic loss of his American Dream. The reappearance of Kravitz

¹⁵ Of Theodore Roosevelt’s views on immigration, Aviva Taubenfeld writes, “Responding to mass immigration from eastern and southern Europe, and all but denying immigration from elsewhere, Roosevelt expressed the dominant attitude toward foreigners in the Progressive Era, suggested in part by [Emma] Lazarus’s sonnet: Europeans are welcome so long as they erase all prior national, political, and cultural identities and ‘learn to talk and think and be United States’” (474).

sobers the revelry in acculturation that occurs in Moscovitz's wine cellar. Later that night, Herman suffers from an intense fit of nerves and indigestion. The story attributes his three-day illness to having seen Sam Kravitz, thereby linking his fixation upon Americanization and subsequent, seemingly inevitable, frustrations with becoming American with mental and physical debilitation.

The chromo depicting Roosevelt's charge on San Juan Hill also appears in the home of Nigger's family. Nigger's home—"this place where were manufactured so many expensive suits for American judges, bankers and captains of industry"—is oppressive. The dingy room where Mikey finds Nigger's father, a journeyman tailor who works from his home for very little money, is littered with cloth and on one of the "poisonous green" walls hangs the same chromo that appears in Moscovitz's wine cellar. The toxic environment that oppresses Mikey and makes him desire to escape contrasts with the scene of revelry in ethnic assimilation at the wine cellar. Along with the Roosevelt chromo hangs a picture of Nigger's father and mother:

The photograph had been taken during their first year in America. The faces were young, naïve, European peasant faces . . . The face Nigger's father turned upon me was fifteen years older. It was a skull with sharp cheek bones and nose from which the flesh had rotted as in a mummy. His eyes were large and strange. They reminded me of the eyes of a dog I had seen dying in the street. (*Jews*, 263)

The physical deterioration of Nigger's father, who we learn has cancer, parallels the mental sickness in his mother (*Jews*, 265). The decline from young and naïve immigrants to sickly laborers suggests that assimilation into American life has caused the deterioration. Juxtaposing the sequence of deterioration to the chromo of Theodore Roosevelt leading the Rough Riders yields an ironic subversion of Roosevelt's imperialist rhetoric. Roosevelt linked national imperial

power with the virility of the nation's individuals. In two famous speeches—"The Strenuous Life" (1899) and "The Pioneer Spirit and American Problems (1900)"—Theodore Roosevelt deployed a formulation that equated individual manliness with national strength and thus imperial power. In Roosevelt's estimation, imperial conquest extended westward continental expansion, thereby making his call to imperialism, and the prescription for vigorous living that made it possible, an appeal to continuing frontier history.¹⁶ As a popular tribute to United States imperial power, the chromo of Roosevelt's charge in the home of hardworking immigrants laboring in the service of "captains of industry" proves to be anything but conducive to individual virility or to national strength; rather, the juxtaposition portrays what the novel sees as the debilitating abuses of capitalist power over the rights of laborers. Though Nigger's father "sewed by hand the finest suits for the fashionable Fifth Avenue shops," he earns little pay due to the specialty of his craft: "The craftsman had no trade union. [Nigger's family] were poor isolated immigrants working at home" (262). If immigrant narratives of upward mobility convey a naïve belief in the Americanist value that suggests that hard work equates to upward mobility, then Gold critiques the Americanism of such immigrant narratives through the grotesque portrait of Nigger's industrious family. Despite the efforts of these immigrants to accommodate Americanism to their social, personal, and professional lives, insufficient organized support for their labor restricts their ability to achieve the capitalist fantasies of moving up in American society.

As exemplified by various characters in the novel, the drive to become American, signaled by financial success, compromises the immigrant body and mind. In effect, Gold reverses Roosevelt's racially motivated and masculinist health discourse by insisting that

¹⁶ See Kimmel 121-123 and Bederman 192-196.

Americanism, when it infects immigrants with the disease of capitalism, debilitates them. The Roosevelt chromo reflects the discursiveness of Americanism. It infiltrates even the most insular ethnic enclaves as evidenced by its presence in the Zionist wine cellar and Nigger's Jewish family home. Described as "the most popular art work of the period," the chromo's discursive power can be partially attributed to its dissemination through popular culture, but also to its allusion to the frontier myth conjured by the figure of Roosevelt. After all, Roosevelt's own story of personal transformation testified to the transformative power of the American West. Indeed, Herman is captivated by the same promise of personal transformation packaged in the frontier myth. These instances demonstrate Gold's conviction that the frontier myth in popular culture operated as a potent vehicle for assimilating foreigners to Americanism.

Nigger's name elaborates the paradoxes of his immigrant family's attempt to accommodate Americanism to their proletarian existence. Gold aligns Nigger with the sign of the Indian: "He worried about them [the family] behind his grim mask of a little Indian" (261). In the alignment with the American Indian and the adoption of the racist slur referring to black people as a nickname, Gold clusters American subaltern experiences around a Jewish identity. However, this alignment of Jewish identity with the American Other opposes alternative associations of Nigger with Anglo-American and Jewish patriarchy. In wars with neighboring gangs, Mikey imagines Nigger as "George Washington when our army annihilated the redcoats" or a Western hero who "rode mustangs, and shot the most buffalo among the tenements. He scalped Indians, and was our stern General in war" (37). On the one hand as Washington or a Western hero Nigger signifies personas expressive of Americanism; more specifically, Gold seems to reproduce the 1890s historical romance that embodied imperialism in Anglo-Saxon masculinity. The historical romance reveals a tension that the United States experienced upon entering the

imperial arena between the competition for empire with Europe and the anti-colonialist struggles in Latin America, the Pacific, and China. Kaplan observes, “The revival of the romance registers this complex historical moment by culminating in a proliferation of novels about the American Revolution, which revive the notion of the anticolonial origins of the republic as the birth of future empire” (237). While the American Revolution has been used as a rhetorical figure to stir domestic support for the Cuban uprising against Spain prior to the war, during and after the war the analogy between the American Revolution and the Cuba Libre movement, or any anti-colonial uprising for that matter, was dismissed. Difference based on unfitness for self-government, the same nativist charge brought against non-Anglos such as Jewish immigrants, became the focus of the discourse. Anti-colonial revolutionaries such as Maximo Gomez of Cuba and Aguinaldo of the Philippines drew comparisons to George Washington. Kaplan points out, “While politicians ridiculed the notion of a black or brown George Washington, the novel whitewashed the Revolution as an indisputably Anglo-Saxon heritage” (237). The attempts on the part of politicians and writers to arbitrate the accessibility of the Revolution as a usable past was racially determined. So when Mikey refashions Nigger as the masculine embodiment of Revolution or frontier expansion, Gold adopts a recuperative trope of Anglo masculinity characteristic of the 1890s historical romance and its successor the Western; thus, in finding a non-Anglo masculinity within the usable past of the Revolution and the frontier and situating it within the a novel devoted to the proletarian revolution, Gold remakes a working-class ethnic masculinity into the embodiment of American nationhood.

At the same time, his family name “Abby” recalls Abraham of the Old Testament, thereby evoking pride in Jewish ancestry. Yet Nigger contains the recollection of his patriarchal Jewish namesake in the family home, a place he is ashamed of and allows none of his friends to

visit (262). As the son of Jewish immigrants himself and a member of the same gang, Mikey signifies an emerging Jewish-American identity. That he fashions Nigger with celebrated Anglo-American manhood signals how ethnic writers could rely upon the performativity of masculinity to imagine assimilation. One could become American through masculine self-fashioning. However, the Americanism that the second-generation gang of little yids appears to embody must be considered in the context of the racial slur the name of their leader references. Critics have debated the extent to which Jewish identity could perform opposition due to its whiteness. While Lee Bernstein claims white working-class Jewish identity could perform opposition, Catharine Rottenberg doubts opposition could occur because of the proximity between Jewish identity and white America. Despite Jewish identity being classified as “white,” Gold would seem to suggest through Nigger that Jewish identity occupied an embattled if not degraded racial status during the early twentieth century in the United States, thereby hinting at the fragmentation of whiteness, particularly the subcategory of racial whiteness—deemed lower than the Anglo-Saxon—imposed upon Jewish immigrants and Americans. Bernstein writes the “childhood play with racial categories,” such as the nickname “Nigger,” highlights Gold’s awareness of the term’s pejorative implications, but for Mikey to associate the local exploits of Nigger with the frontier motifs of the popular West attributes national significance and admiration for his identity. One could argue that Gold reverses the tendency of the late nineteenth-century historical romance to deploy imperialist discourse as a means of recuperating Anglo-Saxon origins. Given that historical romances evoked the Revolution and the frontier, Nigger’s embodiment of this tradition through his simulation of the historical hero subverts the recovery of Anglo-Saxon origins. In the logic of Gold’s resignification, American masculinity is embodied in non-Anglo racial masculinity. Thus Mike Gold resignifies the racial slur, and so its

accompanying signification of Jewish identity by elevating its status to the popularly accepted terms of national heroism. By embodying Americanism in racial masculinity, Gold imagines these marginalized groups as part of the national body.

Furthermore, Nigger's gangsterism joins the subaltern American identity with criminality. Occupying a complex of identities that range from mainstream to marginal or American to ethnic, Nigger embodies the conflicts of assimilating to an Americanism that insists on marginalizing those seeking assimilation. The accommodation of paradoxical American identities that he represents problematizes ethnic performances of pure Americanism. Indeed, one wonders if Mikey's recital represents a patriotic commitment to the United States. After all, he learned this performance of Americanism in the same school where a teacher called him "a Little Kike." Nigger punches the teacher in defense of Mikey. As Rachel Rubin has observed, George Washington may also be a reference to Mikey's estimation of Nigger. Then, Mikey's performance of patriotism may be read as a coded commitment to the leader of his "Gang of Little Yids." Far from a performance of "pure Americanism," Mikey's recital performs the ambivalence of assimilation.

Critical of how the myth of the frontier disseminated in popular culture could implant capitalist fantasies in the minds of foreigners abroad and in the United States leading to emigration and acculturation, *Jews Without Money* also critiques how the Americanism of the popular cultural West inculcates a racist view of American identity. Roosevelt's vision of American history made racial conflict central to the formation of the nation and nationality.¹⁷ His

¹⁷ Brown writes, "In the logic of Roosevelt's epic, the confrontation [with the Indians] enabled the settlers to understand themselves racially," and, to quote Roosevelt, "fused into one people" (qtd. in "Reading the West" 31).

celebration of whiteness vis-à-vis Indian fighting appears in the Buffalo Bill stories that Mikey reads daily (147). While Bill Brown claims that the dime novel contrasts Roosevelt's historical logic that "aestheticizes the genocidal foundation of the nation, turning conquest into a literary enterprise that screens out other violent episodes in the nation's history," he notes that Buffalo Bill stories "centralize the encounter with violent Indians," ("Reading the West," 31, 34). With regard to early twentieth-century Buffalo Bill stories, Christine Bold declares, "Buffalo Bill believes the only good Indian is a dead one" (17). Despite instances when dime Westerns recuperate the violence of westward conquest or even express remorse for land acquisition in stories of outlaws restoring property to Indians, narratives of Buffalo Bill stand as popular accounts of Indian aggression threatening white settlement.¹⁸

Mikey's routine reading of dime novels appears to Gold more than simple boyhood leisure. Reading fantasy operates as a mode of assimilation to American culture. However, Gold renders the mode questionable when he connects fantasy reading with prostitution. Mikey claims Harry the Pimp is "[the neighborhood's] pattern of American success" (29). Having assimilated by learning English, Harry recommends that Mikey and Esther become American by reading a book of fairy-tales. Though the advice seems inane, it was common knowledge in the neighborhood that pimps got young "romantic factory girls" to become their whores by being "smooth story-tellers": "They seduced girls the way a child is helped to fall asleep, with tales of magic happiness" (33). The sordid world of prostitution that Gold links to American culture in

¹⁸ Speaking to the potential of the dime novel to vindicate itself, Brown points to a moment in a Deadwood Dick story when "the outlaw hero fights in the name of granting a Crow Indian his land rights." To Brown, this moment reflects the readiness of the Western "to compensate for the damage done in the history, and in the literary history, of the frontier's extension" (34).

Jews Without Money is not limited to the novel. Elsewhere Gold referred to magazines pushing American culture such as the *Saturday Evening Post* as a “diamonded duenna.”¹⁹

Indeed, Buffalo Bill stories pose the threat of assimilating Mikey to an Americanism rooted in racial supremacy. They also inform his experience of non-Jewish enclaves on the East Side. On one trip to Chinatown, Mikey takes Mulberry Street, the domain of the Italians:

I walked down Hester Street toward Mulberry. Yes, it was like the Wild West. Under the fierce sky Buffalo Bill and I chased buffalo over the vast plains. We shot them down in hundreds. Then a secret message was sent us from a beautiful white maiden. She was a prisoner in the camp of the Indians. The cruel redskins were about to torture her. Buffalo Bill and I rode and rode. In the nick of time we saved her. Two hundred cruel redskins bit the dust before our trusty rifles. We escaped with the white girl, and rode and rode and rode.

(*Jews*, 187)

Mikey’s fantasy of riding alongside Buffalo Bill intimates a desire for and identification with white American identity cultured by the “gaudy little paper books” about his hero. Imbibing the desire to be an American hero like Buffalo Bill encourages Mikey to view other ethnic groups as non-white, and so un-American. Encounters with these groups, such as the Italian boys of Mulberry Street who “whoop like Indians,” become moments for Mikey to establish his own American identity through masculinist and racialist acts of conflict that implicate the assumption

¹⁹ Regarding prostitution as an analogy to American consumerism, Rita Barnard writes, “[The association between consumerism and prostitution] was by no means a Depression coinage . . . , but almost any issue of the *New Masses* during the late twenties and early thirties offers evidence of its currency” (147); for Gold’s comments about the *Saturday Evening Post*, see Michael Gold, “Thoughts of a Great Thinker,” *Liberator* 5 (March 1922): 24.

of white identity. Yet when they learn he is from Chrystie Street, thereby identifying him as a Jew, the Italian mob shouts “Christ-killer!” as they chase him back into his “own Jewish land.” The anti-Semitic attack that prompts Mikey to flee destroys his fantasy of being “as brave as Buffalo Bill” and, thus American too. The anti-Semitism reminds Mikey of his Jewish difference, a point the novel distinguishes from Americanism as evidenced by the two opposing nationalisms in Moscovitz’s wine cellar. Seemingly, Mikey attempts to resolve the distinction when he says, “I needed a Messiah who would look like Buffalo Bill, and who could annihilate our enemies,” demonstrating his wish to assimilate the Otherness of his Jewish culture into the popular American mainstream.

In the July 1927 issue of *New Masses*, a version of the “Buffalo Bill and the Messiah” chapter appears with some significant adjustments to the Buffalo Bill passage mentioned above. A subsection of the *New Masses* version titled “Eviction” emphasizes how the popular cultural West functions as a resource for coping with the cruelties of working-class poverty; by contrast, the version that appears in the 1930 novel considers Western fantasy as recourse for ethnics to imagine their American identity. Mikey and Buffalo Bill still ride through the East Side streets shooting buffalo and rescuing white maidens from Indians and Buffalo Bill remains “the bright and secret Messiah of [Mikey’s] heart” (7). The section retains the East Side’s characteristic suffusion of popular frontier tropes. However, landlords evicting families of workers replaces the mob of Italian boys. The evicted families signify the displaced worker in a national home where capitalist interests outweigh those of the laborer. Mikey attempts to escape the pain of winter, the financial panic and the ensuing evictions by dreaming of the Wild West: “Life was gray. So I dreamed of the Wild West, for I was reading those gaudy-covered little books for American boys; I was living with cowboys and Indians.” Just as in the novel version, the literary escape

provides an avenue for Americanization where the little Jewish boy Mikey can be an American boy vicariously. Forced to beg in the cold winter streets, the families wait for the Messiah to change their lives. For Mikey the Wild West signifies a place “where men were free. Buffalo Bill had never been evicted from his tenement. He slew Indians and landlords.” The reversal of the Western imaginary that Mikey fancies, where Buffalo Bill inhabits Mikey’s world instead of Mikey Buffalo Bill’s, transforms Buffalo Bill from an American hero fighting the race war for white civilization into a hero fighting for the working-class poor. The analogy of “Indians and landlords” racializes the landlord, the opposition of the workers, into the Other, the enemy in the savage war for the frontier; by the same token, the Othering of the landlord whitens the Jewish workers put into the streets. In this story, Mikey’s messianic vision of Buffalo Bill expresses the desire for a popular American defense of proletarian interests.

However, the conclusions to the *New Masses* “Buffalo Bill and the Messiah” and *Jews Without Money* indicate Gold’s skepticism with regards to the social freedom that the American West signifies in the popular imagination. Following the story of a nearly evicted family is a brief vignette wherein Mikey wanders the city streets. The narrator reflects,

Often I dreamed of running away to the Wild West. I thought it was somewhere on the West Side, where I saw a tall tower loom above our tenements. I went exploring one day, and walked through miles of mysterious streets until I reached the magic tower. But it was only an office building. Then I was lost, and it took me until midnight to find my tenement again. (Gold, “Buffalo Bill and the Messiah,” 7)

The search for freedom from the constraints of poverty and racism that this version of “Buffalo Bill and the Messiah” associates with labor displacement only displaces Mikey further. He discovers the Wild West to be a false sign of hope for the proletarian future. Like Herman, who

had seen the picture of the skyscraper next to the picture of the cowboys and Indians, Mikey allows his faith in the popular frontier myth to lead him to the office building, an oppressive corporate force that looms above the proletarian community residing in the East Side tenements. Though in the *New Masses* version of “Buffalo Bill and the Messiah” Mikey insists on trying again in another year, at the close of *Jews Without Money*, several years removed from the age at which he imagined his exploits with Buffalo Bill on Mulberry Street and searched for the Wild West on the West Side, Mikey contemplates going West: “At times I seriously thought of cutting my throat. At other times I dreamed of running away to the far west” (*Jews*, 309). Mikey never does. Instead, he embraces the voice calling him to join the Communist Party. His longing for the West appears to be just one among several aborted attempts to escape the pains of poverty. The aborted dream of going west signals the failure of the frontier myth to deliver on its promise of individual freedom in a capitalist order. By associating a move west with suicide, Gold negates the regenerative power of western violence aestheticized in the history written by Roosevelt and sensationalized in the dime novels about Buffalo Bill. The link he establishes between it and the capitalist order demonstrates only the destructive power of its violence to the non-white working class.

Mikey’s identification with the Indian-fighting Buffalo Bill appears ironic when compared to his fantasy throughout most of the novel wherein he imagines himself, his gang, neighboring gangs whether Jewish or not, and other Jews on the Eastside to be Indians. Ostensibly, Mikey’s identification with the Indian signifies the alignment of working-class Jews and other ethnic groups with the Indian, a trope exemplifying victimization to a normative white American society ordered by capitalist interests. Gold makes repeated comparisons between the East Side Jews and Indians: some act like Indians, such as Mikey’s gang who “take the Indian

oath of fire and blood” and hold pow-pows, and others bear Indians traits, such as Louis One Eye who has “Indian hair and proud Jewish features.” The comparison recalls a tradition of Europeans and Americans perceiving Jews to be racially tied to Indians.²⁰ As if to reject the entrenched comparison, Gold also inserts distinctions and moments of conflict. Jake Wolf the saloonkeeper claims Jews are superior to Indians: “One Jew could kill a hundred Indians” (53). Jake Wolf’s statement of Jewish superiority parallels Mikey’s identification with Buffalo Bill, whose storied victories over violent Indians demonstrate white superiority. The imaginary Indians of Gold’s Eastside run the gamut of popular representations from the bloodthirsty to the noble savage. Mikey describes the Forsythe Street boys as follows: “our enemies whooped down like a band of Indians” (47). The aforementioned Italian gang of Mulberry Street act in the same way; Mikey even describes his own Indian-like gang in savage terms: “But the five of us fell upon him with whoops and cries, punching and clawing in a pinwheel of gory excitement” (261). He describes the leader of the gang, Nigger, as “the bravest of the brave, the chieftain of our brave savage tribe,” (43) and one who “worried about [his family] behind his grim mask of a little Indian,” (261) in terms that recall the popular motif of the noble savage. The imaginative appropriation of the Indian in *Jews Without Money* as a figure of both identification and repudiation participates in a tradition of Jewish redface. This performance tradition whereby Jewish performers and writers seize upon Indian tropes to stake a claim to American identity clarifies the ambivalent relationship between Indians and Jews represented in the novel. The novel distinguishes the Eastside Jews from Indians through imagined acts of violence against Indians that bespeak white identification and racial superiority, such as Mikey’s imagined Indian hunting or Jake Wolf’s boast of supposedly killing an Indian; yet the white identity that emerges

²⁰ For a detailed discussion of this comparison, see Rubinstein 99-100.

from the representation of East Side Jews in the novel is ethnically nuanced as in, for example, the “gang of little Yids” who brand their forearms with “the mystic star” (261); thus, as a Jewish performance of whiteness, Mikey’s imaginary Indian rituals and warpaths can be read as acts of becoming American.

Despite intimations of whiteness that align Gold’s frontier symbols with the mainstream that marginalized the impoverished ethnic enclaves of the East Side, popular cultural symbols of cowboys and Indians can provide a source of resistance to the capitalist order as well. The Buffalo Bill stories that Mikey reads were dime Westerns published by Street and Smith in 1901.²¹ As Michael Denning has argued, dime Westerns were stories of “Labor and Capital.” The heroes of dime Westerns were less in the vein of the genteel, self-made man and more in the popular milieu of the highwayman or outlaw.²² Mikey and his gang resemble outlaws in their activities and opposition to the mainstream. Whether it be graft and intimidation performed by a local cop against the neighborhood kids or the misguided prosecution and sentencing of a youth

²¹ Written by William Wallace Cook, *Buffalo Bill Stories* were the second sequence of dime Westerns that contributed to the making of the life of William F. Cody into a popular legend; in 1869, Street and Smith published *Buffalo Bill, King of the Border Men* written by Ned Buntline (also known as E. C. Judson) in *New York Weekly*, Brown, “Chronology,” 44.

²² Denning elaborates, “Indeed, the frontier myths and stories of the nineteenth century have a more direct relation to those class conflicts than is usually thought . . . This suggests that working-class readers may well have read the dime novel westerns as stories of labor and capital, taking the west as an allegorical republic of outlaws, forming a cooperative commonwealth where ‘we divide up ekal wi’ ther boys’, but threatened by the social structures of the east [e.g. eastern capitalist and corporations]” (165).

that created a gangster, various acts signal the failure of the mainstream institutional authority to protect the residents on the East Side. Out of this failure emerges the “young avengers of Chrystie Street,” a gang Mikey, Nigger, and others form for the protection of each other and the neighborhood from such menaces as corrupt cops, rival gangs, bullies, gangsters, and local government. Members of the “young avengers” trounce an Irish bully who terrorizes Mikey; stand up to Murph the Cop, a notorious grafter (44-45); avenge Lily, Nigger’s sister, who has been turned into a prostitute by the gangster Louis One Eye (267-268); and defeat the Forsythe Streeters to regain their playground—an empty plot of land—only to lose it to the local government’s construction of Schiff Parkway (45,48). Enemies of the “young avengers” resemble enemies of dime Western outlaws such as the police, courts, and other official establishments. That Mikey can imagine Buffalo Bill, even if not an outlaw per se, slaying “Indians and landlords” suggests the dime Westerns he reads can serve as an anti-capitalist resource; so the popular cultural West that Gold deploys can be read as resisting the mainstream at the same time it appears to perpetuate its Anglo-American supremacist racial politics.

Using Indian ways to describe his gang’s outlaw activity, Mikey continues the popular association of savagery with the proletariat characteristic of nineteenth-century print capitalism. The popular press described the Molly Maguires, from which Deadwood Dick and the dime Western outlaw tradition originate, as savage Indians (Denning, *Mechanic Accents* 120, 158, qtd from Slotkin *Fatal Environment*, 369, 442, 463, 468). Richard Slotkin claims that commercial newspapers used the Indian war to interpret the class war between managers and laborers; by representing the acts of the predominantly immigrant working classes in terms “white savagery,” commercial newspapers imposed the race-war of the frontier onto the struggle for labor rights in a growing industrial and capitalist order “to suit the polemical needs of the managerial ideology

which the editors supported.”²³ While the Indian’s savagery could be invoked to describe the seemingly uncivilized labor protests in the last half of the nineteenth century, according to David Spurr, the Indian’s authenticity, when idealized by industrial capitalist society, expresses anti-capitalist nostalgia: “primitivism is symbolically the precise reverse of American capitalism and therefore constitutes an object to be admired in the abstract—the dream of its own opposite that lives at the very heart of the capitalist imagination” (qtd. from Huhndorf 104). Indeed, the figure of the Indian, the western outlaw, and labor activist have been aligned in popular culture; thus, while Mikey might be associating himself with the mainstream by performing whiteness when emulating Buffalo Bill or “going native” with his gang, an alternative tension exists. The same motifs of the popular cultural West reveal a labor politics that cannot be dismissed. Advocating support for the masses regardless of color, Gold found the labor politics of the popular cultural West to be a critical resource to oppose the racial elitism of the mainstream.

The popular frontier imaginary through which Mikey perceives his masculine, ethnic, and political maturation on the East Side in the novel first appeared in magazines to which Mike Gold contributed during the previous decade. Beginning in 1919, Gold wrote for the *Liberator*, *Daily Worker*, and *New Masses*. All offer writing samples wherein Gold interweaves popular images of the frontier with short stories, biographical sketches, and historical reflections. In similar fashion to its use in the novel, the image of the frontier in the magazine contributions

²³ Richard Slotkin writes, “The Indian war was at once a current event and a symbol of the primal and genetic strife from which the nation was born. The events of the Sioux War of 1876, culminating in Custer’s Last Stand, were treated as a paradigm of the disaster that might overtake ‘civilization as we know it’ if moral authority and political power were conceded to a class of people whose natural gifts were like those of ‘redskin savages’” (*Gunfighter Nation* 19-20).

authenticates the Americanism of the Left. Gold synthesizes communism and Americanism in writings that feature conventional western landscapes such as a ranch in Old Mexico, praise for the frontier masculinity of a communist trailblazer in America, a Hollywood production of a western epic, or calls from Horace Greeley to “Go West.” A survey of several stories from these magazines and certain accompanying illustrations during this time suggests that Gold did not adhere to a formulaic scheme when comparing the formation of an American proletkult to the Wild West in his fiction. Archetypal frontier adversaries can represent the same proletarian interests or switch political registers. Primitivism can be associated with communist and capitalist politics; cowboys stand for communist leaders, but also strikebreakers; the rank-and-file may be compared to cowboy and Indian with equal praise. The significations that shift from one piece to the next all have a common purpose: make Communism appear to be authentically American. Its problematic racial politics notwithstanding, the discourse of civilization characteristic of popular productions of the frontier myth directs Gold’s master metaphor: the Wild West is born again in the proletarian struggle. By recuperating the radicalism of American history and appropriating the frontier myth in order to narrate in selected magazine contributions the ongoing formation of a proletarian culture deemed alien by the mainstream, Gold attempts to Americanize Communism.

The ambivalent deployment of the sign of the Indian in the short story “Two Mexicos” exhibits Gold’s commitment to reversing the popular perception of the proletarian cultural revolution. Published in the *Liberator* in 1920 under the name Irwin Granich,²⁴ “Two Mexicos”

²⁴ Gold wrote under the name Irwin Granich, an Anglicization of his birth name Itzoch Granich, until 1921 when Gold took the name of a friend’s father, a Civil War veteran whom he admired,

is a short story that Gold wrote while dodging the draft from 1918-1919 in Mexico (Folsom, “Introduction,” 13), a country in turmoil nearing the end of its own revolution (1910-1920). His efforts to spread the message of the workers’ revolution, which included collecting funds to translate the Soviet Constitution to Spanish, seem appropriate for a country that, only two years previously, had drafted the Constitution of 1917 with radical land and labor reforms.²⁵ Some twenty years later, in the aforementioned 1941 speech to the Writer’s Congress, Gold read the Mexican Revolution as an instance of plebian struggle for reform giving birth to an aesthetic, in particular “the finest school of mural painters in the modern world.” By comparing the Mexican Revolution to the democratic art burgeoning in America in the last decade, Gold provides support for his long-held vision of how a proletarian revolution could enable artistic production.²⁶

In summary, the short story arranges the Mexican conflict into a family war between the managerial interests of the *ancien régime* represented by the brutal landlord Don Felipe and the labor interests of the peasant revolution embodied by his brother Enrique. The narrative follows Don Felipe riding back to his ranch through the Mexican countryside along with the Americans he met recently. The American narrator observes Felipe’s change in dress from the “neat

to protect himself during the Red Scare; for details on the name change, see Tuerk “Granich,” Folsom “Introduction” 10, and Wald 45.

²⁵ Gold received a \$10 contribution from famous boxer Jack Johnson; for more information on Gold’s time in Mexico, see Wald 51.

²⁶ At the 1941 Writers Congress Gold declared, “The Mexican Revolution began as a peasant movement for land, but before many years it had also created the finest school of mural painters in the modern world” (qtd. in Folsom 246).

Chicago business suit” he wore at their café introduction to the “*charro* costume” he dons for the return trip to the ranch (50). The observation forms an equation of American capitalism to the Mexican aristocracy inhabiting one body of common interests represented by Don Felipe. The journey back reveals Felipe’s savagery: he recounts the story of a peon he kills for not showing his “betters” the proper respect (52-53); lassoes and rides a black bull in rodeo fashion (55); and intimidates a peon judge into withdrawing a requisition for his horses to be used to fight the revolutionaries (57). When the brutality is read in the context of his “whooping like an Indian” (50) or drinking “Mexican firewater” (51), Felipe resembles the popular image of bloodthirsty savage:

In Felipe, on his glossy, splendid horse, in his flamboyant leather costume with its silver buttons and rich decorative cordings, we seemed to see riding the incarnation of that brutal, primitive aristocracy that had weighed the Mexican worker to the dust, and that we had found still dominant wherever we had been in the Republic. It was the incarnation of all the thoughtless evil of the Latin and Indian nature, sanguinary, haughty, passionate, and lust-loving, with no mercy for the animal or man in its power. It was too proud to be hypocritical about its vices or virtues; it was the pure primitive. “Two Mexicos,” 54

It seems uncertain whether Gold was responding directly to commercial media accounts of the past that associated labor unrest with savagery; yet his portrayal of the aristocracy’s violent primitivism in the figure of Don Felipe inverts those popular print accounts.

To complete the inversion, Gold substitutes the savagery of the laborer for noble primitivism. Indeed, the egalitarian sensibility that motivates Enrique’s sympathy for the peon’s plight contrasts with Felipe’s barbarous mongering for the old social elitism and its new form of capitalism. Evidenced by his attempt to transform the ranch into a commune (52), the efforts of

Enrique to improve the working and living conditions for the peons render his “dark, stern Indian features” with the civilized admiration common to conventional portrayals of the noble savage (61). Enrique appears a mold of celebrated masculine primitivism from which Gold casts some representations of laborers in later writings.²⁷ The image of a laborer on strike sharing a jail cell with an Indian chief in “Worker’s Correspondence,” a poem that appeared in a 1930s issue of *Daily Worker*, has provoked Rita Barnard and Rachel Rubinstein to acknowledge that Gold found the Indian relevant to his message of proletarian revolution. Despite what might appear to be minor instances, these critics agree that the Indian offered Gold an image full of “critical potency” and useful to his “commitment to radical protest and interethnic working-class brotherhood” (Barnard, 158, and Rubinstein, *Members*, 89). In the popular American imaginary, the Indian as noble savage functioned as a symbol of an authentically natural America. Such idyllic memorialization indicated an absence from the present; in other words, the noble savage existed as a reminder that the materialism of the present has removed the natural world. Thus, a tension emerges from Gold’s association. Just as Gold aligns the noble primitive with the proletarian revolution so as to make that revolution appear to be a desirable return to a natural way of being, the same symbol registers that the revolution has no place in the present world. Gold overcomes the absence of a place for the proletarian revolution suggested in the Indian sign by redirecting the tension of the noble savage’s absence located in the past to the future: “They stood facing each other in the vast, silent moonlight, the brothers who were the poetry and

²⁷ In various other writings, Gold represents Indians as laborers such as the Crow Indian James Cherry in “Love on a Garbage Dump” (1928) and the Mohawk bridge worker in “A Jewish Childhood in the New York Slums,” (1959); both short stories appear in Folsom, *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology* (1972).

wisdom of Mexico, her good and evil, her barbarism and civilization battle each other and assuring her no peace till the younger [Enrique] shall have forever slain the elder” (Folsom, “Two Mexicos,” 61). Reorienting the temporal perspective of the Indian sign from looking backwards at what has been lost to looking forward, a millennialism explicitly present in other writings, impregnates the absence of the revolution with hope and expectation.

I recommend viewing “Two Mexicos” as a critical starting point for Gold’s use of American frontier tropes to authenticate the Americanism of Communism. By positioning the workers’ revolution in Mexico in the early short story, Gold continues to make the Communist project foreign, thereby rehearsing and reinforcing popular assessments of Communism as alien. After “Two Mexicos,” Gold plots the message of proletarian revolution in writings tapping into a popular West imaginary within America. These writings that feature proletarian subjects in recognizably American frontier contexts figuratively reposition the workers’ revolution onto a mythological landscape peculiar to the United States. The repositioning allows Gold to provide a simulation of United States history that authenticates and makes familiar a political commitment popularly viewed as foreign; in effect, Gold attempts to create a proletarian Wild West, a hyperreality that binds Communism to Americanism. With the ultimate goal of demonstrating how radical and popular Western histories are interwoven, Gold deploys this hyperreality in the writings that follow “Two Mexicos” in several ways. “Faster, America, Faster: A Movie in Ten Reels” (1926) debunks the moral politics of nationalism that the Western reified in the figure of the cowboy as American innocent by revealing how the capitalist interests that drive the movie industry require the corruption and exploitation of naïve Americanism. In “John Reed and the Real Thing” (1927) Gold reverses the process. He appropriates the familiar conventions of the cowboy as the “real” American hero to laud the work and legacy of the C.P.U.S.A. icon in a

biographical sketch. Finally, in “Go Left, Young Writer” (1929) and “The Second American Renaissance” (1941), Gold unearths a tradition of radicalism from thinkers conventionally considered to be in the mainstream American grain.

For Gold, the film Western operates as a vehicle of Americanism that glamorizes the doomed industrial capitalist order. A close look at “Faster, America, Faster: A Movie in Ten Reels” (1926) reveals as much. The short story has two plot lines. The first consists of a sequence of movie reel intertitles. Intertitles such as “Morning on The Ranch” and “A Mysterious Stranger Wanders In” suggest the movie is a silent Western. Each intertitle introduces segments of the second plot line: a story about movie-types on a private train headed for Hollywood that finishes with a catastrophic wreck, bringing the fast life of its travelers to a gruesome end. With Western intertitles organizing the story of movie-producer Erwin Schmidt’s private train to Hollywood, the narrative structure implies that Schmidt produces Westerns. In the 1920s major studio-produced Westerns experienced great popularity before dropping shortly after the onset of the Depression (Stanfield, Slotkin). Published during this period of popularity, Gold’s short story confronts the mainstream Americanism of the film Western. The set of Western reel intertitles that narrate the events of America, “a private train crashing over the slippery rails of History” (141), ironizes the popular use of the frontier myth on which the Western is based as an historical narrative of successful economic expansion (Slotkin).

The story, however, makes a concerted effort to arrange a comparison of capitalist America to czarist Russia. Traces of the fallen Russian nobility can be detected in the accoutrement of the private train to Hollywood. The private train consists of a locomotive and two luxury cars. Movie-millionaire Erwin Schmidt entertains his youngest star in the first luxury car described as a “Czarist stateroom” (141); the second car appears the same: “In the next car, a

long room decorated in gilt like the Czar's palace," actresses, press agents, scenario writers, movie executives, and a British novelist revel (142). As the tension reaches its climax, La Svelte, the previous favorite of Schmidt, sick with the fast life on the private train, "vomit[s] on the Czarist floor" (146). The private train of American movie producer Erwin Schmidt figuratively expresses the capitalist machine that is the Hollywood industry. Recognizing the fallen czarist political system in Schmidt's private train alienates the Americanism of the Western, thus suggesting that the democratic United States under a capitalist order resembles Russia under autocratic monarchy, an alignment of ideologies popularly held as fundamentally opposite and antagonistic. Furthermore, the alignment with the recently fallen Romanov dynasty predicts the violent end of capitalist America.

A significant feature of the Western hero, the putative innocence of the American cowboy as portrayed in films, loaded Americanism with the weight of moral authority. Film representations of cowboys presented a figure of pre-modern America innocent of the corrupting power of the industrial capitalist city. Emerging from without the city, the cowboy appears a figure of purity whose natural authenticity derives from a bygone time free from materialist wants of the urban present (Stanfield 2, 140-1). Given the nationalist implications of the Western, the purity of its hero renders the patriotism he stands for a moral issue; yet "Faster, America, Faster" seems to counter this very formulation. In the short story, Gold subverts the moralistic patriotism of the Western by detecting the social corruptions of capitalism implicated in the production of the film Western. Intertitles in the short story portray the cowboy as a humble, chaste American hero: "I love you! May I, Miss Smith? I know I'm Just a Poor Cowboy, But—"; but this image of the chaste cowboy contrasts with the immorality of Schmidt's pedophilic designs and the debauchery of the luxury cars. The paternalism of

Schmidt's nickname, "Pops," belies his sinister intentions to corrupt the innocence of his next young star, a minor named Dot; thus, the hip Jazz Age sobriquet that feigns a familial bond bespeaking popular moral values masks the exploitative machinations of industrial capitalism with the allures of pop culture. However, that Dot is a flapper, a sign of the urban, public sexuality and independence of modern women, suggests that Gold casts doubt upon the putative innocence of the America she symbolizes. By exposing the social decadence implicated in the film production, but, more generally, popular productions of the national story—the frontier myth— from a perspective of moral innocence, Gold reverses the moral politics of Americanism and touts the social good of Communism. Indeed, the story concludes with a prophetic intertitle: "And a child shall lead them." The partial quotation from Isaiah 11:6 expresses anticipation for the coming of the Messiah who will usher in a new millennium of peace. The millennial tone of the intertitle introduces a final vignette where local farmers, rushing to the scene to clear the wreckage, carry the hammer and sickle, thereby signaling a new age of communism to supplant capitalism. "Faster, America, Faster" questions the moral authority claimed by mainstream Americanism and redirects the charges it laid against Communism as a social evil back onto itself.

In an about-face, Gold moved from blasting the authentic Americanism of the cowboy in "Faster, America, Faster" to hailing it in "John Reed and The Real Thing." Published in the November 1927 issue of *New Masses* commemorating the tenth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, Gold adopts the conventional image of the Western cowboy to lionize the legacy of John Reed.²⁸ Reed documented his first-hand experience of the Bolshevik Revolution in *Ten*

²⁸ This character sketch is coupled with an extract from John Reed's diary entitled "November 7th, 1917"; it gives an account of a day in the revolution (Gold "November" *New Masses* 8).

Days that Shook the World (1919), his best-remembered work, and became legendary among the American Left. Associated with the cultural aspect of the Communist movement in the United States, the name of the activist, journalist, and poet was attached to literary and art clubs and announced their unique commitment to an explicitly proletarian aesthetic. Beginning in 1929, *New Masses* founded the John Reed Clubs to support the creative efforts of artists and writers on the Left. Yet in the parlance of the popular cultural American West, Gold makes Reed seem to appear out of authentic American myth: “John Reed was a cowboy out of the west, six feet high, steady eyes, boyish face; a brave, gay, open-handed young giant; you meet thousands of him on the road, in lumber camps, on the ranges, fo’csls, in the mines” (Folsom 152). By making Reed a cowboy everyman, Gold eschews the aristocratic Anglo American cowboy Wister connected with Arthurian chivalry and racial supremacy. Furthermore, the cowboy no longer appears to be a figure whose romanticized existence contributed to the formation of the nation. By writing the cowboy into a common experience of modern-day America, Gold repositions nation formation from the past into the present. In making this cowboy essence visible in the faces of present-day workers, regardless of race, Gold casts the proletarian cultural revolution in the mold of national development during the frontier era, thereby accommodating a champion of radicalism to popular myth.

Furthermore, “John Reed and the Real Thing” crystallizes how Gold deployed masculinity to vaunt proletarian interests and castigate oppositional forces and their representatives. Those figures with proletarian sympathies exude admirable masculinity that is often associated with the discourse of authenticity, perhaps most apparent when Gold compares John Reed, the touchstone of Communist writing, to the archetypal symbol of American manhood, the cowboy, and links him to “the real thing.” As a working-class cowboy Reed embodies a kind of authentically

American masculinity appealing to the workers' revolution in the United States. Thus Gold hails Reed as a model for America: "And the revolution will grow in America, and there will be a new youth and Jack Reed will teach them how to live greatly again. This depression, this cowardice, this callousness and spiritual death will not last forever among the youth of America" ("John Reed and the Real Thing," 154). For Gold, an attractive element of the John Reed story was the class conversion. Reed overcame his bourgeois Harvard education to fight for the people's revolution in Russia. The Revolution was an adventure to him. He was a manly journalist, though Gold makes a point that Americans and members of the Left believe the two are mutually exclusive, "But most Americans, even revolutionists, believe it unworthy for the man of action to be also a man of thought" (154). In his symbolic alchemy, the frontier masculinity embodied in the cowboy allows Gold to transform the conventionally un-American Communist and the unmanly artist into a virile model of national progress.

Yet Gold has drawn criticism for his celebration of masculinity. Rita Barnard identifies a sexism and machismo in *New Masses* and Mike Gold, "who made a point of scoffing at pansies, wearing sombreros, and spitting on the floor" (33). As evidence of Gold's homophobia, Barnard cites his essay "Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ" (226Fn69). To Barnard, Gold's machismo "expresses a certain nostalgia for an age when things were plain and useful—and men, of course, were men, regardless of what car they drove" (33). For Barnard, the "manly proletarian" appears in "America Needs a Critic"; Gold calls for America to be sent a fitting critic: "Send a joker in overalls . . . Send us a man" ("America Needs a Critic," 139). Indeed, Gold would seem to perpetuate a conventional gender model that links strength with masculinity and weakness with femininity. Those with bourgeois sentiments or anti-labor interests are characterized as unmanly, such as Thornton Wilder and Herman, or as performing an excessive masculinity that bears the

potential for destructive violence such as the capitalist savage of “Two Mexicos,” Don Felipe. Yet I would argue that Gold complicates masculinity further by separating it from the male body, thus demonstrating its performativity and plurality according to the conception of gender articulated by Judith Butler.²⁹ Mikey’s mother Katie of *Jews Without Money* complicates Barnard’s assessment of Gold’s sexist indulgence in masculinity. Katie exhibits female masculinity in the authority she displays at home and in the tenement. For example, she mobilizes her neighbors in a rent strike against the tenement landlord who unfairly raises prices though failing to provide adequate heating during the frigid winter months. In addition to subverting an abusive institutional masculine authority represented by the landlord, Katie unseats the patriarchal order at the home. She works to support the family when Herman, her afflicted husband, cannot. Mikey reflects, “It hurt my father’s masculine pride to see his wife working for wages. But my mother liked it all” (246). To some extent, Gold separates masculinity from its conventional association with dominant politics and patriarchal culture, which is quite radical. Whether a frontiersman, primitive, or mother, figures of masculinity in his writing require only a commitment to the proletarian cause; thus, for Gold, proletarianism embodies masculinity.

²⁹ Butler maintains that masculinity is performative, not essential. Essential notions of masculinity join it to social dominance. The dominance that is associated with masculinity seems authentic because of reiteration, its pervasive repetition. However, masculinity is historical, so it is subject to change over time. If performed and historical, then masculinity can be viewed as fluid and heterogenous. Given this fluidity that emerges from its performativity, masculinity becomes unstable; thus the readings of masculinity that insist on the stability of its power require reconsideration; for an elaboration of the gender theory, see Butler 163-180.

Gold's accommodation of proletarian culture to mainstream Americanism is not limited to the widely celebrated frontier masculinity embodied in the cowboy. An editor's note reporting the events of the 1929 Gastonia strike in a later issue of *New Masses* expresses Gold's tendency to view the present as the frontier era of the proletarian cultural revolution. In "As We Go To Press," the editor, likely Gold, compares the rough-and-tumble events of the famous labor strike to the Wild West: "Guns are blazing in Gastonia. The right of workers to organize in the South is being won at a terrific cost of evictions, kidnapping, flogging, dynamiting and murder" (4). The image of the menacing cowboy in the accompanying illustration transposes the violence of frontier days onto current events. Regular *New Masses* illustrator William Gropper portrays a Western bad man with bullet belt, pistol, and noose in hand, casting a shadow onto a fence and mill in background right. His menacing presence illustrates the editor's account of violence done to the workers on strike. This illustration and note demonstrate the variety of images and associations within the popular cultural repository of the frontier from which Gold drew. Just as he could deploy the popular West to instill pride in the workers revolution by infusing a sense of authentic Americanism, Gold could use the same symbol system to convey the suffering such class conflict brings.

Whether it be the promise of unexplored terrain or violence of the savage war, the frontier presented a rich bonanza of popular significations that Gold appropriated to translate the proletarian revolution into the language of mainstream Americanism. As Gold concludes "John Reed and the Real Thing," his lament—"It is difficult to be a pioneer revolutionary writer" (154)—takes up a theme he announced in "Let It Be Really New" (1926) and reprised in "Go Left Young Writers" (1929) and "The Second American Renaissance" (1941). Rosendale writes, "Gold, for example, frequently used pioneering as simply another metaphor for revitalizing

contact with nature” or to impose “the left-right spectrum of political ideology directly on the national map” (Rosendale 141). The revitalizing contact with nature which Rosendale regards as a “simple” metaphor in Gold’s writing must be considered in the context of the agrarian politics embedded in the discourse of westward expansion. In the title of a *New Masses* editorial “Go Left Young Writers,” Gold echoes Horace Greeley’s famous imperative “Go West Young Man, go forth into the Country” (ca. 1837). Coming from an agrarian tradition that viewed the West as a safety valve where Eastern laborers could go to work the land, thereby resolving the Eastern problems of poverty and unemployment, Greeley became a major exponent of George Henry Evans’ National Reform Movement (Smith 204) and Albert Brisbane’s anti-individualist associationism (Tuchinsky 475-477). Greeley delivered the imperative in his New York *Tribune*. Scholars credit the *Tribune* with introducing Marxism to America through the correspondences of Margaret Fuller and Karl Marx. Horace Greeley’s backing of the Homestead Act and the Socialist Impulse of his New York *Tribune* form a significant early chapter in a history of radicalism in the United States, of which John Reed is a part.

Gold recognized Greeley as a forerunner to the contemporary proletarian revolution. His slight adjustment of Greeley’s slogan decodes the labor politics embedded within it. “Go Left, Young Writers!” (1929) recuperates the radicalism of Greeley and his Western imperative. Little more than a decade later, in his speech to the Fourth American Writers’ Congress (at a later date titled “the Second American Renaissance”), Gold unearths those nineteenth-century luminaries on the Left buried by the mainstream and other detractors to prove that the flourishing of radical thought and the proletarian aesthetic of the 1930s had deeper roots in American history: “And the fact that there was present a living core of Marxist thought in America, ready to shape the thought of the intellectuals, is due to the presence of a mature and firm Communist movement—

itself no Moscow plot, but the legitimate child of American parents and grandparents such as Horace [sic] Greeley, Albert Brisbane, Eugene V. Debs, Bill Haywood, Jack London and Walt Whitman” (249).³⁰

With an understanding of the way Greeley’s agrarian politics synthesizes signs of the natural world and the American West, the aforementioned allusions to him proffer a useful context for reading garden imagery in Gold’s writings.³¹ Gold’s fictional persona cries, “O worker’s Revolution, you brought hope to me, a lonely, suicidal boy. You are the true Messiah. You will destroy the East Side when you come, and build there a garden for the human spirit”

³⁰ Historical occlusion of American radicalism was not limited to the mainstream, but existed within the Left as well. Earl Browder negatively affected the diffusion of Marxist literature in the United States according to Gold: “During the Browder dictatorship the great structure of Marxist-Leninist philosophy was submerged. Our party’s entire publishing apparatus was turned into a giant promotion scheme for an author named Earl Browder—a man infinitely smaller than those he had supplanted” (Folsom, 290); Whitman’s influence on Gold, his mystical conceptions of proletarian realism and his poetry, extends beyond the scope of this chapter; for a developed consideration of Whitman’s influence on Gold’s writing, see Tuerk "Irving Granich."

³¹ It should be noted that Rosendale also observes the significance of natural contact to Gold; yet whereas Rosendale reads Gold as rejecting the frontier myth, I read his engagement with signs of revitalizing contact with nature as an embrace of the agrarian political tradition invested in the opportunity the American West signified; in effect, Gold may be rejecting certain mainstream aspects of the frontier myth, but the signs of nature, when read in the context of Horace Greeley, suggest Gold viewed the frontier as a way to acknowledge the radical side of mainstream Americanism.

(*Jews*, 309). In this light, the conclusion to *Jews Without Money* must be read as more than a negation of the imaginary power of the West. Mikey's search for the revolution, the one true Messiah that will raze the East Side and cause a garden to grow, appears to be one among many garden tropes Gold associates with the terrain that pioneers of proletarian writing must settle: "We have a wonderful virgin field to explore" (qtd. from "Go Left, Young Writers!" in Folsom, 187) The garden is a part of the system of frontier signs Gold has deployed, thus making the Messiah and the Revolution that Mikey ultimately finds fulfilling signposts for westward migration. If not a positive assertion about the power of the popular cultural West, then at least the ambivalence it presents must be acknowledged in the conclusion to the novel, a conclusion that also marks the end to Gold's most significant period of writing.

All the while Mike Gold was attempting to Americanize the radicalism of the Left, he was also radicalizing Americanism. If Americanism was the next step to fascism as Gold had written, then it needed modification in order to accommodate the egalitarian racial politics of his Communist message. To counter the racial exclusion and elitism of Americanism, Gold refashioned the cowboy from a champion of white America to a champion of workers' rights in America. This racially inclusive radicalization of the frontier myth that appears in his novel and writings for radical magazines seems to intimate a modified Americanism where going West is going Left.

Chapter Two

“A Barefaced Lie”: the Problem of Authenticity and Nationalism in Nathanael West’s Satirical Pastiche of the Popular West

“Horace Greeley said, ‘Go West, young man.’ So I did.”

--Nathanael West

When asked by friend and *Contact* co-editor William Carlos Williams why he changed his name, Nathanael West playfully offered the above response. In fact, an older cousin had already used “West” as a pseudonym while working on Wall Street, but this was not the reason West gave when asked about the name change. He had been born Nathan Wallenstein Weinstein in 1903. In an effort to sublimate his Jewish ancestry into a name befitting his parents’ efforts to Americanize him, the author rewrote his ethnic past into an American identity. As immigrants from the Germanic town of Kovno, Lithuania, West’s parents gave young Nathan Horatio Alger novels to acculturate him to American ways (Martin 24). The transformation of the surname to “West” appears especially appropriate for the son of immigrants who held fast to myths of American success and opportunity. The first official document bearing the new name was a passport issued in 1926. Wishing to write, West declined a career in his father’s construction business to immerse himself in the bohemian life of Paris where he moved, if only briefly, his time cut short by the family business struggles. He returned without having penned any significant work; yet he had already created the fiction of his American persona before leaving. But he needed not go to Europe to create the persona. Rather, he went West.

Nathanael West’s name change foregrounds several issues explored in this chapter. His desire to pursue the bohemian life in Paris engaged him in an aesthetic debate critical of mass culture. Though the French Surrealists that ultimately influenced him mocked the aesthetic

elitism of the art that West originally intended to pursue, he gained from them a sardonic critique of commodity culture evident in his writing.¹ Alger's vision supplied West with an understanding of the nationalist ideology and mythology that romanticized business ventures into the world of American commodity culture. Yet West's response to Williams must be read as an ironic rejection of the nationalism informing Horace Greeley's nineteenth-century exhortation. Indeed, West's name change seems to embrace the transformative potential of the American West as a means to craft an authentic American identity that he could use to become an author. Certain writings of his, however, demonstrate an outright rejection of the American character embodied in the masculinity of the cowboy that the frontier myth claimed to be an authentic example of nationality.² This exemplar was an Anglo hero whose frontier masculinity reifies a nationalist discourse of racial supremacy. West adopted and adapted references to the frontier myth and man that range through genres from dime novels and Western romances to pulps, magazines, and films. In Depression Era America popular culture invested these genres with patriotic nostalgia.

The assorted references to the frontier myth in popular culture that West appropriates for his satires form a pastiche that undermines the notion of a national narrative in general. Put simply, a narrative consists of a chain of events organized by cause-and-effect that cohere to form a complete story for a given set of characters. The frontier myth supplied the dominant Anglo-American culture with a coherent narrative of sequential development from the savage

¹ For more on the parallels between the French avant-garde's critique of bourgeois art and West's of bourgeois commerce see Barnard 143.

² For an elaboration on the cowboy as exemplum of the relationship between Anglo-Saxon manhood and nationhood, see Kaplan 226-239.

environment to modern civilization popularized by the historiography of Frederick Jackson Turner and Theodore Roosevelt. National narratives became accepted as authentic as they simulated one another. Such narratives became American history through popular culture, thereby forming a coherent narrative of America. By assembling a pastiche of various popular cultural references from distinct narrative forms related by their patriotic nostalgia for the frontier, West's satires—especially “A Barefaced Lie,” *A Cool Million*, and *The Day of the Locust*—interrupt the coherent narrative of national history presumed by such popular cultural texts as Westerns. Subverting the authenticity of such narratives reveals them to be art, not history.³ In doing so, West not only critiques the nationalism of narratives that enshrine racism and imperialism, he also destabilizes the premise of an objective, coherent national history on which such conceptions of nation are based. This chapter focuses on representations of frontier masculinity as they relate to commodity and popular culture in “A Barefaced Lie” (1929), *A Cool Million* (1934), and *The Day of the Locust* (1939). In these three texts, I examine how Nathanael West implicated a commodity and popular culture that fetishized the frontier myth in the construction of “authentic” American identity and mediation of racial relations.

Speaking to an all-male audience at a saloon, the protagonist of “A Barefaced Lie” (1929) Boulder Bill shares his story of a strange encounter:

Why, last fall I was at the upper camp and was packing out the trail to the post. You know, I am a rustler, pardner, and away before breakfast I was out in the corral putting on the packsaddles and fixing the tie ropes so that after we got our feed we could go right

³ For more on the discourse of authenticity that suffuses Western writings and the resulting chain of copies without an original that constructs a hyperreal West, see Lewis 1-17 and Slagle 121-122.

out and start lashing the packs on . . . Big Pete and I had nine mules, and I would ketch a mule and cinch on the packsaddle and then turn him loose and get another. It was away before daylight, and I kept on until I had used up my nine packsaddles. When I started to go out of the corral I run against a mule what didn't have a packsaddle on. That was darned funny, pardner, for when I cinch a mule he stays cinched, and I knowed I didn't put no two packsaddles on the same mule. I was looking around to see what was up when I see a mule near me climbing the fence like a dog does! . . . Now, Stranger, anybody can tell you that a mule is a curious critter, but climbing a fence like a dog does is too much. I just aimed to amble over and grab that mule by the tail and pull him back and kick the stuffing out of him. I made a swipe at his tail, but Stranger, you can burn me for a dead sinner if there was any tail there. Before I could get on my balance again he gave a little flip and slapped me in the face with his hind leg as he went over. . . And, pardner, what do you think it was? A darned fool bear!

Through Boulder Bill's story, "A Barefaced Lie" arranges a tension between the report that the rustler expects his audience to believe as fact and the popular Western genre of fiction prone to myth and sensation. On the one hand, Boulder Bill offers a seemingly authentic account of a frontier incident coincidentally interrupted by a strange occurrence. Indeed, Boulder Bill rises early and works in the great outdoors with a fellow rustler, "Big Pete," whose name also represents his robust frontier masculinity. On the other hand, the conclusion appears incredible enough to discredit the entire sketch. Among the small audience gathered at the saloon weighing Boulder Bill's account, one young gentleman, to whom Bill later refers to with the Indian slur "siwash liar," follows with a report of the same bear utilizing the packsaddle in a well-organized fishing operation. The second story, which is told by the young gentleman, parodies the ideology

behind Bill's frontier masculinity. By parodying the manliness of Boulder Bill, West undermines the claims to authentic nationalism that the Western popularized in mass-produced publications suffused with the discourse of civilization.⁴ The nativist politics of the discourse positions Anglo manliness as the standard for nationality. Exposing how the Western's notion of supposedly authentic American character is in fact a nativist product of mass culture, the parody disables the coherence of the frontier hero as narrative agent. "A Barefaced Lie" subverts the authenticity of popular cultural productions of frontier history, revealing them to be fiction. In doing so, the story anticipates a theme common to West's later satirical pastiches *A Cool Million* (1934) and *The Day of the Locust* (1939). As a mock Western, "A Barefaced Lie" exhibits the power of parody to lampoon the Western's proffered racial truth as little more than mass-produced frontier myth.

While the specific generic conventions parodied by West are peculiar to the dime Western, the ideological attack applies to Western romances as well. To be certain, the distinction between the two subgenres—dime novel and historical romance—is necessary to make as each involves a distinct class politics tied to its respective aesthetics, production, and market presentation. The aristocratic traits of Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902) can be traced back to the romances of James Fenimore Cooper. In this genealogy, the Western conveys the interests of a ruling or managerial class. Yet between Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* and Wister's *The Virginian* emerged a mass-produced fiction marketed by the House of Beadle and Adams "for the millions." The birth of the dime novel in the publishing house of Beadle gave the

⁴ Dime Westerns were also printed in story papers and early twentieth-century magazines (Brown 21); West drew from story papers and magazines to create "A Barefaced Lie" (Martin 108-109).

producing classes a formula plot with standard characters whose interests aligned with theirs. In effect, the break with genteel interests signifies a new representation of manhood peculiar to each subgenre. The romance celebrated the self-made man of the West as a captain of industry and champion for the social elite. For the dime Western, it was the outlaw, a hero of the people.⁵ Despite these significant differences, the thread of nationalism knits the two subgenres together. Common to both subgenres is the Anglo-male frontier hero. Even in instances where the dime Western betrays discomfort with the racial politics of nationalism, it remains wedded to the dominant ideology through its representation of the racial Other in a mode intimating imperialist nostalgia.⁶ Western romances circulated in a burgeoning mass culture as literary commodities just as the dime Westerns did. Though their popularity in print diminished with the rise of the film industry's production of its cinematic counterpart at the turn of the century, Westerns continued to appear as novels, dime novels, and in story papers and magazines.⁷

Resembling the heroes of popular Westerns, Boulder Bill embodies frontier masculinity with his rugged stature and commanding presence. His robust body appears adept in and adapted to the natural environment: "He was a huge, thick-set, active-appearing man. His face was tanned, his mouth completely covered by a heavy, sandy moustache." The hardiness of his

⁵ For an elaboration of the Western's lineage beginning with Cooper, see Smith; Michael Denning disputes Smith's dismissal of dime Westerns and proposes that the dime Western's genteel break leads to a new outlaw hero representative of the laboring classes; for an outline of this break with gentility, see Denning 163.

⁶ For an interpretation of such instances, see Brown 34; for readings of celebratory portraits of Indians within nationalist productions as indicative of imperialist nostalgia, see Huhndorf 1-18.

⁷ For a detailed publication record of Western writing, see Bold 1-18.

physique, manner, and outdoor life resonates with the “strenuous life,” a complex of behaviors and values that typified a kind of socially admired manliness.⁸ Popularized by the Western in print, performance, and history, frontier masculinity is a form of Anglo manhood that promoted an individualistic ideology and was most popularly embodied in the cowboy or outlaw. A hallmark of the American spirit in the frontier’s popular imaginary, this conception of masculinity has been linked to dominant politics and implies the recuperation of an “authentic” form of Anglo-Saxon manhood.

The frontier masculinity that emerges through the rugged individual’s struggle, sometimes violent, to overcome excesses of civilization and the wilderness for the sake of the nation originates from a popular idea of the West obsessed with authenticity. Roosevelt and Turner both celebrated the authentic American born out of the frontier and lamented the passing of that frontier, in particular its supposed authentic way of life. But histories were not alone in claiming an authentic representation of the West. Indeed, as Bill Brown notes, dime novels had already been doing the business of creating an authentic West: “Reading examples of the dime Western, then, is a matter of witnessing not just how fact becomes fiction but also how popular culture becomes mass culture, how legend becomes mass-mediated memory” (30). Nathaniel Lewis adds, “The dime novel’s depictions of the West settled into cultural memory as either historically reliable or laughably inaccurate—and in both cases the test of the text was authenticity, real history, the Real West” (118). Thus Boulder Bill’s staunch insistence on the plausibility of his story is a defense of not only his account, but all accounts of the West according to the constructed reality his story simulates. The paradox of the Western—its

⁸ For an elaborate discussion of how the “strenuous life” affected average middle-class Anglo-American men, see Kimmel 121-3 and Bederman 192-196.

destabilizing self-fashioning as authentic—discredits the authenticity of other Westerns that are contingent to its own conception of a real West. The parody of Boulder Bill’s story reveals this unsettling paradox.

The frontier masculinity evoked by the description of Boulder Bill’s body imitates the spectatorial devices of authentication conventional to the dime Western. According to Bill Brown, reading the body appears an “adequate mode of reading character” in the dime Western (37). Jefferson Slagle elaborates:

The dime western compulsively describes the bodies of its characters to establish their social meanings within both particular dime stories and larger narratives of frontier history. . . . the dime western renders visible the authentic body, and each body is invariably rewarded or punished according to its ideological role in promoting or impeding popular notions of frontier history. (119)

Indeed, just as dime-Western bodies indicate the moral position of characters in the story, so do they indicate the position of the group reified by those particular bodies within the dominant historical script. Slagle argues that the body became a source of authentication in post-bellum America when stage performances of the Western, such as the Wild West show, rose to prominence. Prior to the stage Western, the landscape served as an authenticating agent in western romances. Yet, once the exhibition of real bodies portraying “authentic” frontier history became popular, dime Western authors were compelled to present the body as a visual index for authentication. Slagle claims, “The dime western’s attention to the bodies of its characters, ‘radiant with fascination,’ seems to stem from the desire to make the body authenticate the story, or to enforce the body’s capacity to stand in for an authentic history while concealing the hyperreality of the frontier that both body and text represent.” In other words, a desired effect of

the corporeal authenticity of dime-Western bodies is the authentication of the story being told as true while disguising its exhibition of a simulated reality (Slagle 123-5).

That the mock Western's protagonist Boulder Bill echoes the name of Buffalo Bill, the quintessential dime-Western hero and producer of the Wild West show, suggests the connection West makes between his character and the spectatorial devices of corporeal authenticity deployed in the dime Western and adapted from the stage Western. In addition to the familiar-sounding name, Boulder Bill's manner and actions indicate his figurative reference to Buffalo Bill. Like the original Buffalo Bill, who for a time rode for the Pony Express, Boulder Bill drives a stagecoach carrying mail for the *Post*. Boulder Bill's rugged appearance, moustache, and oratorical manner also resonate with the description of the famed performer of frontier history. An allusion to Buffalo Bill, Boulder Bill recalls the gender anxiety and racial tension suffusing the Wild West's performance of frontier history.⁹ Despite its pretension to reality, the Wild West drew inspiration from popular Western printed materials. Dime novels and James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstockings Tales* provided imaginative sources for the show's landscape, characters, and events. Evoking a celebrated promoter of putatively authentic frontier history,

⁹ Cultural critics regard the Wild West show as staging United States imperial power and expressing concern for Anglo masculinity threatened by the increase of immigrants and freed blacks. The show presented a series of frontier epochs as episodes; in such episodes as Custer's Last Stand or the Settler's Cabin, the Wild West show performed racial anxieties about Indian aggression against whites; for a detailed description and evaluation of the show, see Warren 50 and Slotkin 66-69.

Boulder Bill functions as a critique of the Western as popular culture vehicle for certifying the legitimacy of the frontier hero and his narrative.¹⁰

Indeed, Boulder Bill signifies the authentication of that imperial frontier history presented in popular print and stage productions of the Western. In a reading of Prentiss Ingraham's dime novel *Buffalo Bill in Disguise* (1897), Slagle claims, "Cody's body thus renders visible to viewers the popular history of the west and the role of that authentic body in the performance of that history" (134). In much the same way that Buffalo Bill's dime-Western body indicated an authentic frontier history, Boulder Bill directs the narrator's attention to his horses to display his authenticity: "'Just look at that team of horses,' his voice sank to a whisper that was audible a block away. 'See the one on the near side, that's a Circle H horse, and anybody'll tell you that when you see a Circle H horse you're looking at a horse.'" When Boulder Bill boasts about his team of horses, he exhibits his natural power. Louis Warren has observed the significance of the horse motif to the display of manliness: "In the [Wild West] show, as in American culture, to be unhorsed was to be unmanned."¹¹ The quantity of Boulder Bill's horses signifies his amplified masculinity. That he directs the horses and secures the reins around the brake while speaking with the narrator demonstrates control of his manhood.

Establishing the authentic appeal of his frontier masculinity implicates Boulder Bill in the commodification of the frontier. Boulder Bill attempts to inspire confidence in his character by testifying to the kind of horses of which his team consists. In addition to visual perception, verbal testaments were standard means of expressing authenticity in the dime Western. "Visual

¹⁰ For a reading of the discourse of authenticity in the Wild West show program, see Slotkin 68-69.

¹¹ For an elaboration of the connection between the horse and masculine power, see Warren 58.

perception and verbal truth-telling,” Slagle writes, “are the stock in trade of the western, because to undermine their reliability would be to render assessments of authenticity arbitrary and therefore meaningless” (127). Identifying the brand of his horse as “Circle H” certifies its standard of authenticity emphasized in the self-evident appeal “anybody’ll tell you that when you see a Circle H horse you’re looking at a horse.” In light of the horse’s brand identification, his “whisper that was audible a block away” advertises the certification of his own authenticity. Bill’s attempt to assert his masculine authenticity through the horse exhibition amounts to a rhetorical maneuver to establish credibility and so bolster his authority in light of the parody that means to discredit the validity of his narrative. Yet the certification of his authenticity via brand advertisement implicates the establishment of his frontier persona and the accompanying narrative in commodity culture. Conversely, West recognizes that the admired manliness of the Western’s frontier hero served as a selling point for the genre because of consumer demand.

The violence of Boulder Bill’s physical gesture coupled with the oratorical forcefulness of his speech conveys a sense of the coercive power the Western wields in mass culture. As if to simultaneously punctuate and insist on his message, Boulder Bill gives the narrator’s arm a “violent squeeze.” The squeeze that arrests the narrator’s attention metaphorically bespeaks the coercive force with which the Western delivers its message to an audience in the grip of mass culture. The admonition Red Patterson delivers to the narrator earlier to “listen politely to all [Boulder Bill] had to say” positions the narrator in the audience and so aligns him with the reader as captive to Bill’s oration (210). With a diatribe against liars and an account of his story, the parody, and his humiliating retreat, Boulder Bill dominates speech in the narrative. As Red Patterson’s caution anticipates, no other direct speech occurs. Aside from Bill’s, all other speech is reported, including the narrator’s. The narrative never positions the narrator in dialogue with

Bill. Instead, the narrator reports his own speech. The dynamic is such that the narrative asserts Boulder Bill's speech as dominant, thereby illustrating the unilateral monologue that is the Western. Boulder Bill projects his voice with the command of a performer so much so he knocks the narrator a step back. Boulder Bill's stagecoach cannot be discounted; indeed, Boulder Bill, like his counterpart Buffalo Bill, recounts his story on a traveling stage. The two storytellers are complicit in the presentation of a monolithic narrative, but in West's pastiche the fabulous quality of the Western is exposed as a mass cultural product.

The standard for manliness set by Boulder Bill correlates to social inclusion, echoing late nineteenth-century deployments of the frontier in political rhetoric and creative works that espoused the manhood-nationhood analogy.¹² The appearance of the young gentleman provokes Bill to snort and treat him with a manner that mystifies the narrator. Bill disregards the young gentleman's "pleasant good-bye" then he rants about different kinds of liars. Bill goes on to call the young gentleman a "low-down ornery skunk," "Yahoo," and "siwash liar." By refusing to engage the young gentleman, Boulder Bill rejects him socially. That Boulder Bill characterizes him as a "barefaced liar" posits the young gentleman's unmanliness on account of his supposed dishonesty. In calling him a "liar," Boulder Bill challenges the veracity of the young gentleman's story, an authenticating device that attests to frontier masculinity, thereby challenging his manliness.

The pejorative "siwash" nuances the racial implications of unmanliness. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term generally as a name of opprobrium and specifically as a

¹² For an elaboration of this analogy's uses and development, refer to Lewis 115 and Kaplan 222-225.

pejorative reference to an Indian.¹³ As formulated by Boulder Bill, unmanliness is joined to racial Otherness, which he classifies as savage. That Otherness is positioned along a continuum of civilization, with Anglo manliness occupying the privileged position at the center of social inclusion and non-white savagery existing on the margin. To be sure, Boulder Bill recognizes race as well when he arranges the seating of the two passengers: “He turned and motioned to [the narrator] with his thumb to take the front seat, and said: ‘Set up there, Stranger, anybody can see you are a white man’” (210). Whiteness and manliness equate to privilege, whereas non-whiteness and unmanliness do not. The destination of the two passengers figures the correlation between race and social position: the “white man” goes to the upper camp and the non-white to the lower. Through his authorization of social positioning based upon a nativist and imperialist standard of manliness, Boulder Bill’s arbitration of social position exhibits the functional power of the frontier myth and so reveals the myth in mass culture to be an ideological vehicle that could popularize social configurations of nationality according to the discourse of civilization.¹⁴

As the saloon audience to Bill’s story and the young gentleman’s parody demonstrates, popularity correlates to authenticity. In the context of his narrative, Boulder Bill authenticates his manliness, the manliness of the Stranger, and the unmanliness of the young gentleman. Yet in the

¹³ "Siwash, n.". OED Online. December 2011. Oxford University Press. 13 January 2012
<<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/180551?rskey=abr6NW&result=1&isAdvanced=false>>.

¹⁴ The discourse of civilization revolves around three factors: race, gender, and millennial assumptions about human evolutionary progress. Human races were assumed to develop from savagery to barbarism to civilization. Gender was clearly defined in the most advanced stage and less so in the earlier stages. The discourse connected male dominance and white supremacy to a Darwinist version of Protestant millennialism; for elaboration, see Bederman 25.

context of the parody of his story that the young gentleman tells at the saloon, Bill's manliness and, necessarily, social inclusion, are threatened: "After we had quieted down some of the boys began to look at me in a funny way and snicker. And of course, I went home to my cabin and I ain't been back since" (219). The public space of the saloon signifies the power of popular culture to determine authenticity. In the initial telling of the bear story, Josh Speaks credits Bill's account because it resembles another story he had heard previously. The parody, however, reverses the popular response. Upon hearing the young gentleman's story, "[Josh Speaks] snorted [the whiskey] right out and got choked. And everybody began to pound each other on the back, and just gave him the horse laugh." The whiskey Josh Speaks expels bears metonymic significance because it had been served after Boulder Bill told his story. By failing to consume the whiskey, Josh Speaks refuses to drink in Boulder Bill's story once spiked by the sharp wit of parody. Rejected by the men gathered at the masculine sanctum that is the saloon, Boulder Bill retires to his cabin, a retreat home that in the heteronormative gender paradigm framing the conception of frontier masculinity, implies his unmanliness. Thus, the parody successfully turns the logic of the frontier against its Anglo hero as it discredits the popular story.

"A Barefaced Lie" deploys the spectatorial dynamics of the dime Western in order to reverse the authenticating gaze so as to undermine the credibility of the dominant narrative of frontier history. Just as the narrative in conventional dime Western fashion invites the narrator (and reader) to look over Boulder Bill's body to authenticate his story, so does Boulder Bill extend his own penetrating stare to the narrator: "As he advanced he fixed me with a steady stare from his keen gray eyes." He repeats the act before discussing the nature and kinds of liars and does so again before the climax of his story when he reveals the mule to be a bear. In the logic of the dime Western's visual mechanisms, the stare Bill administers in both situations indicates his

probing of the narrator's character. Yet Bill's authenticating stare appears effective only in retrospect. Bill's stare-down identifies the "liar" as such only after Bill has experienced the humiliation of the parody, or "lie." Consequently, the authenticating effect of the stare appears in question because of its inability to identify the liar beforehand. At the same time, "A Barefaced Lie" maintains the authenticating power of the gaze when the liar's parody reverses the trajectory of the stare: "the boys began to look at me [Boulder Bill] in a funny way and snicker." In effect the reversal exposes Boulder Bill's dissimulation. The parody reveals to the saloon, i.e., popular culture, the hyperreality that Bill's "true" story attempted to create.

The parody renders Boulder Bill incoherent and precipitates his retreat from the saloon, that is, from the popular imaginary. Regarding "stable, iconic western bodies" of the post-bellum dime Western, Slagle claims, "That body's demonstrable physical existence would validate and organize the history it performed; its unimaginable absence would leave American frontier history unintelligible and the American character undefined," (135). West figuratively anticipates this claim in the flustered speech Boulder Bill falls into when discussing his absence from the saloon. After confessing the retreat to his cabin, "Boulder Bill's face got redder and redder, and his voice rose to a mighty roar: 'Of all the low-down, bare, bare,' His [*sic*] voice broke, and ended in a faint whisper, 'bare-faced bear lies, pardner—bear-faced bear lies . . .'" ("Barefaced Lie" 219). The parody reveals that Boulder Bill's story was a "bare-faced bear lie." The substitution of "bear" for "bare" causes Bill to realize that he sounds like the liar. This homophone highlights the audience's role in distinguishing what is manly, the "bear," from what is unmanly, the "bare-face," or what is determined as authentic from what is false. In the moment Bill utters the homophone he realizes his own bear story must be a bare-faced lie. In the confused substitution of "bear," Boulder Bill's speech falters, obfuscating clear expression. He stumbles

over word repetition, transitions from “a roar to a whisper,” breaks, lapses into the homophonic substitution, then fades. As seen in Boulder Bill’s waning coherence, the parody undermines the force of the Western’s rhetoric and thus its putative reality.

“A Barefaced Lie” explains West’s reasoning for parody. The parodic simulation of Buffalo Bill reflects how narratives of Anglo manliness, most readily observed in the Western, popularized nationalist ideology as frontier history or, in Bill Brown’s words, “mass-cultural memory.” By providing an alternative, subversive account, the parody makes the hegemonic narrative incapable of articulating a monolithic account intelligibly. In light of an alternative account that subverts the logic of the monolith (i.e., the coherence of its value system), the monolith becomes incoherent as figured by Boulder Bill’s rhetorical blunders. The intended audience can no longer consent to the message because it cannot understand it as authentic. The parody empowers the popular imagination (the men at the saloon, the narrator, the reader) to reassess the putative authenticity of accounts, and the underlying ideologies, once received as categorically true. The use of parody in “A Barefaced Lie” also anticipates the destabilization of the frontier myth’s mass cultural form, the Western, and the idealization of American character through the reification of various models of masculinity in *A Cool Million*.

The standardized plots and characters of the Western created a coherent—i.e., recognizable and familiar, thus “authentic” and prone to popularization—simulacrum of national history. Like “A Barefaced Lie,” which parodies the Western’s hyperreality, *A Cool Million* continues to test its coherence, but also iterates its potentially sinister deployments. In particular, West demonstrates concern with twentieth-century popular cultural uses of the frontier myth in encouraging or even espousing a nationalism tending toward fascism. Yet *A Cool Million* juxtaposes the frontier myth to the self-made man myth, a related but distinct nationalist

mythology. *A Cool Million* satirizes the nationalist ideology of both mythologies by appropriating, combining, and juxtaposing their narrative trajectories and generic conventions in the journey of Lemuel Pitken. While scholars have recognized specific references to specific Horatio Alger novels in *A Cool Million*, the novel's references to the frontier myth are generic. For instance, the western iconography of Whipple's speech, various Indian characters, and the coonskin hats worn by the storm troopers in Whipple's National Revolutionary Party claim no specific Western antecedent, but broadly allude to the frontier myth in popular culture. Even the "Western bad man" that Lem meets near a California gold mine is a generic Western figure taken from Alger's novel *Joe's Luck* wherein the "bad man" simulates the conventional outlaw of nineteenth-century dime Westerns. The nuances of each appropriation—West's from Alger and Alger's from the dime Western—I will discuss later. West adapts conventions standard to these similar but distinct popular genres into a series of violent episodes, forming a pastiche that defamiliarizes stock conventions of nationalist narratives. In doing so, his satirical pastiche renders the authentic history and accompanying portrait of American character an incoherent collection of Americanisms, resulting in the revelation of the nationalist narratives' hyperreality.

As dime-novel publishing houses popularized the frontier myth in the nineteenth century, so too did they the self-made man myth in Horatio Alger's many rags-to-riches stories. Alger's narratives explicitly celebrate the entrepreneurial spirit, portray America as a land of prosperity where fair play and determination produce capital success for the industrious individual, and feature the self-made man. For the self-made man, the workplace—whether factory or office—was the site where masculinity could be tested and proved (Kimmel 19). This form of Victorian masculinity, most commonly referred to during the period as "manliness," relied on an "inner

strength” that entailed virtues of moral character as an index of masculinity.¹⁵ In Alger, success in the workplace made the man. Within the historical development of the conception of the self-made man, the Western operated as a cultural resource for retrieving masculinity when the workplace, an unquestioned homosocial proving ground for masculinity in the early part of the nineteenth century, could no longer serve that function by the late nineteenth century. Both dime Westerns (the frontier) and Alger novels (the workplace) provided fantasy sites of masculinity “that signified earlier forms of power and excitement.”¹⁶ While it may have operated as a viable alternative for men to imagine themselves as self-made when traditional sites were no longer available, the Western’s particular version of masculinity needs to be distinguished from the Victorian masculinity of Horatio Alger. Given the civilizing mission of the frontier myth that directs the Western’s narrative, the Western implies imperialism whereas the self-made man myth of the Alger stories implies capitalism. The frontier man is a step removed from the noble savage: too primal for the city, but too civil for the savage environment. The Western takes the conflicted development of Anglo-American civilization for its subject. The development appears conflicted because the Western hero uses violence to impose order on the savage environment;

¹⁵ Pendergast 56-57; Bederman 18; Kimmel 82.

¹⁶ In order to retrieve the spirit of national virility endangered by the entrance of women, freed blacks, and immigrants into the workplace, white men had two options; according to Kimmel, they could either regain the workplace by removing the feminizing forces that had just entered it or they could resort to fantasy: “If manhood could no longer be directly experienced, then perhaps it could be vicariously enjoyed by appropriating symbols and props that signified earlier forms of power and excitement” (81).

but once order is imposed, civilization cannot be home for the Western hero because of his near savage ways.

Though distinct in narrative trajectory and generic conventions, both mythologies share elements and popular receptions that signify common ideological ground. Indeed, the American West, like the workplace, opens imaginative possibilities for the process of self-making. In the genteel tradition of the Western romance, one that differs significantly in its class politics from the dime Western, the hero appears to be a self-made man.¹⁷ Owen Wister's *Virginian* manages to combine the mythic renewal of the West with the capital success of Alger when he quits cowboy life at story's end to become a ranch owner. The *Virginian* as cowboy who later benefits from climbing the ladder of the cattle industry resembles Horatio Alger's rags-to-riches heroes in that his self-making is a capitalist process. Neither was Alger oblivious to the capitalist implications of the West and the self-made man. In *Ragged Dick*, passages from which *A Cool Million* appropriates, the titular character continually references his friend Horace Greeley whose famous imperative "Go West, Young Man!" encapsulates the profitable implications of the frontier myth that Nathanael West spoofs in the myth of his own self-making into an American author. Both mythologies in popular culture imply a nostalgic nationalism for twentieth-century audiences. Michael Denning observes, "Together, the revaluation of the dime novel western and the promotion of Alger as the typical dime novelist allowed an ideological appropriation of the dime novel as the wholesome reading of American boys, telling tales of western expansion and inculcating the values of self-made success" (203-204). The Americanism of the Alger story,

¹⁷ For a discussion of the self-made man and the genteel tradition from Cooper to Wister, see Smith.

dime Western, or Western romance represented a significant vehicle for circulating nationalist ideology in popular culture.

A Cool Million plots the fatal journey of its protagonist, Lemuel Pitkin. Along the path from all-American boy from small-town Vermont to martyr of the fascist National Revolutionary Party (NRP), Lem suffers physical violation at every turn in American commodity culture. He contracts pneumonia, loses his teeth, eye, thumb, and leg, has his head scalped, and, finally, is fatally shot through the heart. The violations occur in the following scams that exploit the innocence of Lem's manliness and wounded constitution: Wellington Mape's "a cool million" story, Wu Fong's brothel, Sylvaneus Snodgrasse's "Chamber of American Horrors," Riley and Robbins' comedy routine, and Shagpoke's NRP campaign. Because Asa Goldstein, an interior decorator in the business of reproducing "authentic" Americana for sale, decides to acquire Lem's family home for display in his New York store, Lem embarks on the journey to save the home and, in the process, become a self-made man. Other non-Anglo characters endanger Lem's home-recovery mission, symbolizing the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century nativism that blamed foreigners for threatening the economic and social integrity of the nation: Italian immigrants engage Betty in the white-slave trade; Wu Fong enlists her services in his "House of All Nations"; Chief Satinpenney scalps Lem in an Indian uprising; and a Communist operative assassinates Lem. Though he fails to save his home and loses his life, Lem lives on as Whipple's NRP memorializes his martyrdom as the quintessential story of the American boy.

A Cool Million attends to the nationalist ideology implied in the masculine commodities of the frontier myth. Commodities evoked in the novel, including Horatio Alger novels, Indian goods, frontier apparel, and Westerns, reproduce the gender and racial politics of the nationalist ideology that suffused the frontier myth. With the frontier myth functioning as an archetype for

nationalist narratives, the novel explores how its discursive presence in commodity culture made the nationalist ideology available for mass consumption. The figures of masculinity present in popular cultural productions of the frontier myth—the self-made man, masculine primitive, and frontiersman—express nostalgia for recuperating Anglo manhood in narratives of rescuing the nation, in effect promoting a nativist mentality susceptible to the rise of American fascism. Consumption of these nostalgic frontier commodities fetishized the myth’s articulation of nationality with each valorizing a particular mode of manhood that reified American character. *A Cool Million* speculates that the popular commodity fetishism of the frontier myth—in particular its embodiment of nationhood in Anglo-Saxon manhood—could be used as a cultural resource to mobilize the masses agitated by the financial disappointments of the Depression into a fascist state. As West conceives it, native fascism derives its energy from wholesale consumption of a nationalist ideology reified as commodities representing the frontier myth’s model of national character and history as authentically American. By satirizing the reification of nationalist politics into frontier commodities, West could undermine the putatively authentic racial limitations of American character.

A Cool Million foregrounds the frontier myth’s presence in Lem’s journey to become a self-made man. Shagpoke Whipple romanticizes America as the land of opportunity to encourage Lem:

America is still a young country . . . and like all young countries, it is rough and unsettled . . . Despite the Communists and their vile propaganda against individualism, this is still the golden land of opportunity. Oil wells are still found in people’s back yards. There are still gold mines hidden away in our mountain fastnesses. (*A Cool Million* 160-1)

Whipple enchants Lem with his portrayal of America in the terms of the frontier myth. The “rough and unsettled” quality recalls the untapped potential of the frontier. Stories of abundant natural resources such as oil and gold infuse the landscape with mythic prosperity waiting to be discovered by industrious individuals. Whipple’s folksy idiom recalls the lionization of westward expansion in nationalist discourses. Indeed, later in the narrative Lem, Shagpoke, Betty, and Jake Raven pursue the romantic myth of success by taking a rapid train West in a search of gold that leads them to a lone, ornery yarn-spinning cattle rustler. The westward movement of the action enters Lem’s self-made man narrative into the mythic space of the frontier foretold by Whipple.

West fashioned the narrative of Lem’s self-made-man journey in the style of the immensely popular Horatio Alger’s novels. Alger novels espoused the myth of success, a central tenet of nationalist ideology. The fact that in 1934 West could parody the success myth as promulgated by novels published in the nineteenth century speaks to the longstanding mass appeal of that myth. Mass media transformed Alger’s novels from texts considered didactic at the end of the nineteenth century to success myths in the 1920s, and, finally, political ideologues associated with conservatism in the 1930s.¹⁸ Indeed, the rags-to-riches plots served as viable cultural resources for the preservation of the status quo. At one time West conferred upon Alger the distinction of the American Homer (Hoeller ix). When writing *A Cool Million*, West lifted entire passages from several Horatio Alger novels. Scharnhorst has argued that by lifting the passages without crediting the source and placing them in the context of a political parody, West allowed Alger to parody himself (“From Rags to Patches”).

¹⁸ For consideration of how Alger became associated with traditional American values, see Scharnhorst 192, 197.

The political conservatism that aligned itself with the Alger hero prescribed a Victorian conception of masculinity that Tom Pendergast has claimed became outmoded in the 1920s and 1930s. The Victorian masculinity valued “‘character,’ inner-direction, honor, loyalty, independence, self-control, a sense of duty, and patriarchy” and was linked to an older economic model of proprietary capitalism that gradually gave way in an emergent corporate capitalist system to a new model that emphasized personality and youth. The proprietary capitalist economy “promised men that if they practiced self-control, assertiveness, and virtue they could achieve the dream of independence that lay at the core of the Victorian masculine ideal” (Pendergast 56-57). *A Cool Million* presents Lem as the reification of the Victorian masculine ideal as he works to achieve financial success. He is a dutiful son, committed student, and strong athlete (133, 205). Others admire him for his honest face, pluck, and resilience (136, 207). Guided by Whipple’s advice, Lem follows the path of enterprising individuals such as Ford and Rockefeller: “Like them by honesty and industry you cannot fail to succeed” (137). Yet Lem does fail. His character is exploited repeatedly by a series of enterprising capitalists whom the narrative does little to distance from the ones Whipple suggests he emulate. His naïve subscription to Whipple’s advice continually causes him injury until he is completely dismantled.¹⁹ One schemer after another uses Lem. Whether a one-eyed ambassador, a relic of the old West, or an exhibit of victimization in “The Chamber of American Horrors,” he serves as the manly Victorian front of American innocence to the schemers’ moneymaking plots. Shagpoke Whipple, however, exploits Lem’s image for his political ends. As an ideological machine that has his body parts assembled into a narrative about the tragic deconstruction of the

¹⁹ For a reading of the mechanistic implications of Lem’s “dismantling” as West’s critique of dehumanizing social conditions, see Martin 238.

authentic American boy in a changing capitalist world, Lem's image proves to be a valuable commodity for popular consumption by which the leader of the fascist NRP can disseminate his propaganda. In attributing a mechanical quality to Lem, the satire contests the authenticity he supposedly exemplifies. That Shagpoke's authentication of Lem's American boyhood occurs at his pulpit before the masses of NRP youth storm troopers implicates popular authority in the determination of authenticity. In effect, authenticity is subject to the mechanisms of popular construction. The assertion by Whipple at the conclusion of the novel that Lem's is "the story of the American boy" parallels the mass-media transformation of Alger novels into nationalist myth-making machines.

The motifs of frontier masculinity that surface in the Horatio Alger parody demonstrate not only the relationship of the two mythologies, but also their amenability to engendering a homegrown fascism within commodity culture. As mentioned above, the myth of the self-made man and the frontier myth shared an individualist ideology of personal and national transformation figured in the industrious laborer in the workplace and the cowboy on the open range; moreover, twentieth-century popular culture invested both myths with patriotic nostalgia.²⁰ The uniform that Lem wears when he joins the ranks of Whipple's NRP storm troopers exhibits the relationship of the nationalist myths:

EZRA SILVERBLATT

Official Tailor

to the

NATIONAL REVOLUTIONARY PARTY

²⁰ For an account of how Theodore Roosevelt combined the frontier myth with the individualism of the self-made man, see Kimmel 120.

Coonskin hats with extra long tails,
deerskin shirts with or without fringes
blue jeans, moccasins, squirrel rifles,
everything for the American Fascist at
rock bottom prices. 30% off for Cash. (175)

Dressed in coonskin hat, deerskin shirt, blue jeans, and moccasins, Lem demonstrates that frontier masculinity is the self-made man in disguise. As frontiersman, Lem embodies West's combination of the two distinct but related nationalist myths and their models of manhood. Positioned in the context of the Horatio Alger parody, Lem's uniform, which reappears at story's end when the youthful masses of NRP scouts wear it in his honor, suggests West's parody of Alger implicates a parody of the frontier myth's popular appeal as well. Yet the presentation of the NRP uniform in the form of a commodity to be purchased from a manufacturer suggests that native fascism unifies behind the cause of commodity culture. Indeed, the uniform as commodity signifies the frontier myth as a good with commercial value.

In a sense, the uniform suggests the nationalism of commodity culture. Conversely, it also suggests the commodification of nationalist ideology. But West complicates the racial politics of the interrelationship between commodity culture and nationalist ideology. Though nationalism in its extreme form as nativism reduces the nation to Anglo-America, the manufacture of American goods is the product of "un-Americans" signified in this passage by the Jewish identity of the official tailor to the NRP—Ezra Silverblatt.²¹ The brothel keeper Wu Fong reinforces this point.

²¹ Veitch claims West appropriated an advertisement for a Jewish tailor used by William Dudley Pelley's Silver Shirts; the advertisement appeared in an article in the *New Masses* where John Spivak interviewed a lieutenant of the Silver Shirts who openly admitted the official tailor of the fascist organization was Jewish (104).

His shifting business model from “House of All Nations” to “one hundred percentum American” because of the Hearst papers’ “Buy American” campaign reflects the racial contradictions inherent to nationalist discourse encouraging an authentically American capitalism (*A Cool Million* 188). West indicates that even the most American of Americans could neither make himself into the mythological national archetype nor revere national history without the industry of so-called un-Americans.

To be sure, studies of *A Cool Million* have documented the parallels between Shagpoke Whipple’s Leather Skins and William Dudley Pelley’s native fascist organization, the Silver Shirts.²² From the American Civil Liberties Union, to journalists, to writers, Americans expressed concern over the growth of native fascism. Follansbee suggests that 1930s America believed “the fingerprints of fascism” were everywhere (68). Given the rise of fascism internationally, reasonable fear of it spawning in the United States arose. Anti-fascist organizations in America made known their resistance to its racist and imperial policies. In Hollywood, Carey McWilliams formed an Anti-Fascist League, of which Nathanael West was a member. Periodicals such as the *New Masses*, *The Crisis*, and *The New Republic* ran articles recording the creeping growth of fascism. Sinclair Lewis, among other writers, fictionalized an account of America subject to a fascist dictatorship in his novel *It Can’t Happen Here* (1935). In effect, by treating the rise of fascism in the nation, West joined an aggregate effort to make known the mass cultural conditions fertilizing its growth.

The “Western bad man” casts the masculinity evoked by Whipple’s fascist NRP frontier uniforms in the context of the racial politics of the popular nationalist mythologies he reifies. The

²² Martin 233; for an elaborate report on the presence of fascistic groups in the United States during the 1930s, see Schonbach 223-264.

uniforms indicate how the lionization of the myth in popular culture signified by their commodity value fosters an environment amenable to the growth of native fascism.²³ Fascism's cult of war and danger transformed violence from a destructive act into a socially regenerative one similar to how violence within Theodore Roosevelt's conception of the frontier myth provided a source of national regeneration.²⁴ Appeals to virility bolstered the administrative sway and discursive influence of fascism. George L. Mosse writes, "Wherever the manly ideal rose above ordinary life, it was co-opted by the fascist movements. Fascism used manliness both as an ideal and in a practical manner in order to strengthen its political structure, but devotion to a higher cause was at the center of its concept of masculinity" (155). The manliness lionized by fascism opposed the sophistication of traditional European humanism. Instead, it idealized the barbarian's primitive instincts and primal emotions (Sternhall 341). From fear of a civilization weakened by refinement and intellectualism came an emphasis on discipline and fitness. Mass demonstrations reflected the orderliness and power of the physical body. A youth culture fostered these imperatives and provided a bridge to adult activism (Mosse 160-166). Indeed, the young boys marching en masse before Whipple at the conclusion of the novel resemble the mass demonstrations of fascist youth culture. The young boys' frontier uniforms complete with

²³ The virility common to fascism and the frontier myth portrayed in West's novel has also been observed in a comparative analysis of Roosevelt's "Strenuous Life" and Mussolini's fascist Italy; for more on this comparison, see Forth 198.

²⁴ Virility was not foreclosed to women, but its exemplification was reserved for men. For a study of various uses of the gendered discourse of fascism by women, see Spackman; for more information on the fascist conception of regenerative violence, see Sternhall 341 and Falasca-Zamponi 33.

coonskin hat, moccasins and squirrel rifle suggest a militaristic exaggeration of the primal frontier virility honored by the Boy Scouts of America. The mass demonstration fulfills the fascist youth culture anticipated by the Boy Scout saluting the flag outside of Whipple's house. The transition from Boy Scout to NRP storm trooper implies the violent evolution nationalism promotes when consumers fetishize frontier masculinity as a commodity emblematic of "authentic" Americanness.

West undermines the popular consumption of frontier masculinity as exemplified by the Boy Scouts when the Missourian, the embodiment of that commodity fetish, demonstrates the socially destructive, rather than regenerative, effects of nationalism's violent racial politics. By using the Missourian to undermine the appeal of the Western hero in popular culture, West's parody exposes the racial violence hidden in romantic accounts of Western expansion. The introduction to the Missourian suggests that he embodies not only frontier masculinity, but also the mass cultural reproductions of the frontier myth: "One evening, after a hard day's work at the mine, the four friends were sitting around a fire drinking coffee, when a man appeared who might have sat for the photograph of a Western bad man without any alteration in his countenance or apparel." The "photograph" points to the technological reproduction of the Western. Stories structured by the nationalist ideology of the frontier myth romanticized the conflict between cowboy and Indian. Mass cultural productions diffused the myth as romance in the form of dime novels, romances, pulps, and films.

Yet West was not original in identifying the diffusion of the Western as a problematic image of American history through the aid of technological reproduction. Indeed, West lifted the passage and most others about the Missourian with few changes from *Joe's Luck*.²⁵ In Alger's

²⁵ For a detailed comparison of *A Cool Million* and *Joe's Luck*, see Shepard 13-28 and Lhamon

story Joe meets a version of the Western bad man who later changes his ways to live a more decent life as a hard-working janitor: “a reformed roarer . . . remarkably industrious” (qtd. in Lhamon 16). The professional change from rustler to janitor reflects a moral conversion that suggests the immorality of the dime Western outlaw and the morality of the Alger capitalist hero who ascends the professional ladder.²⁶ Given that Alger imitated the dime-novel format in order to reform popular culture, he likely appropriated and converted the Western bad man as a part of this effort. While many lines are taken word for word from *Joe’s Luck*, West invented the epithet “the Missourian.” “The Missourian” recalls the titular hero of Owen Wister’s famous western romance *The Virginian* (1902). During the nineteenth century, the dime novel was split from the genteel romance until century’s end when the genteel tradition came under attack for being a “product of effeminate sentimentality.” Popular culture reevaluated dime novels with patriotic nostalgia, resulting in the effacement of the split from the genteel tradition. Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* provides an example of the revaluation of the dime novel Western that would influence future popular culture productions of Westerns in print and film.

As the combined reification of distinct popular culture Western subgenres, the Missourian represents the frontier masculine ideal’s ambivalence. Not only does the rustler’s violent anti-Indian policy signal the integration of twentieth-century Buffalo Bill stories into the mix of popular Westerns symbolized by the Missourian, it also recalls the conquest of native

16.

²⁶ Alger imitated the dime novel format in order to “reform working class reading and culture”; For more on United States Post Office’s moral crusade to ban dime novels, see Denning 51, 160, and 203, and Bold 6-7.

peoples lionized in romantic constructions of the history of the West: “It’s my policy always to shoot an Injun on sight. The only good Injun is a dead one, is what I alluz say” (*A Cool Million* 210). He exposes the violence behind the nationalist romance of the frontier myth with his “bloodthirsty declarations”: “But you’d better not rile me, stranger, for I’m powerful bad. You don’t know me, you don’t. I’m a rip-tail roarer and a ring-tail squealer, I am. I always kills the man what riles me.” West seems to be following the dime Western’s example when he presents a Western figure unconflicted about violence and racially indiscriminate in his targets. The stories told by the Missourian feature him shooting in defense of his manhood. The antagonists he dispatches, who do not physically threaten him, include a “school teacher,” “his best friend,” and a harmless stranger. West’s version of the “Western bad man” inverts the received discourse of civilization that structured the romantic mythopoeisis of frontier narratives. Rather than being an emissary of advanced civilization, the Missourian in all his atavistic brutality portends the potentially increasing savagery of an expanding modernity.

A mixture of popular print Western sources such as dime novels, romances, and pulps, the Missourian appears at first blush to embody a conflict of class politics between the genteel hero of the romance tradition and the outlaw people’s hero of the dime novel tradition that presents an unsettling combination of subgenres into a unified category of the Western. However, the combination simulates the popular cultural effacement of the subgeneric traditions at the turn of the century. The Missourian reifies the popular revaluation of the Western that celebrated the dominant Anglo-American culture’s nationalist simulacrum of history. Alger’s stories, inspired by and espousing capitalist mythology, constitute a significant part of that reification of popular culture’s patriotic nostalgia. As evidenced by his adaptation of the fate of Alger’s Pike County man, West found this nostalgia problematic. Whereas the conversion of the

outlaw to an industrious law-abiding worker in *Joe's Luck* reflects the leisure reform of working-class tastes and the reinforcement of the upper-class and managerial interests in a capitalist order, the Missourian of *A Cool Million* rapes Betty Prail and absconds with her to Mexico. Indeed, Betty's questions and expressions demonstrate naïve intrigue with the Missourian's frontier stories. Her rape recodes popular culture's affinity for the nationalism of the Western and Alger novels as a dangerous enthrallment. Though the Missourian shoots Jake Raven, causing a bloody nationwide Indian revolt that reproduces the frontier conflict supposedly responsible for distinguishing American character, the rape of a white woman, a figure conventionally positioned as a recuperative assistant or admirer to the Western hero, undermines the popular belief in the Anglo frontiersman's racial superiority. In the frontier's racial logic, the Missourian's indiscriminate attacks reveals the "authentic American" to be a savage brute, and thus racially backwards.²⁷

Even as the consumption of frontier masculinity fetishizes Anglo-Saxon identity as American, popular and high culture could fetishize the Indian as the authentic American. Though practices that embodied a return to primitivism proved a source of anxiety because of their atavistic potential, these practices performed a desirable virility called the "masculine primitive." The masculine primitive embodied "authentic" and "natural" qualities that would resist the unmanly qualities civilization cultured.²⁸ Nostalgia for Indian ways implicated practices of manhood imbued with nationalism. According to Shari Huhndorf, this popular cultural

²⁷ For more on the significance of frontier violence to Anglo superiority, see Bederman 178-184, 192-196.

²⁸ For more on the phenomenon of middle-class white men in the later part of the nineteenth century upholding primal virility as integral to manhood, see Rotundo 227-232.

phenomenon, whereby European America retreats into primitive life, implies redemption from imperialism through that celebration of Indianness (1-18). Nonetheless, the celebration of the masculine primitive in the Native American during the later part of the nineteenth century presents the gendered aspect of a greater cultural nostalgia for Indian ways that continued into the twentieth century. To modernists, the Indian evoked the natural state of pre-modern life. Efforts to preserve the authenticity of native American culture manifested politically too. The same year West published *A Cool Million*, the government mandated the Indian New Deal in order to preserve native American culture.²⁹ While modernity jeopardized authentic being and expression, the Indian offered a figurative recuperation of what was real.

The popular cultural perception of the masculine primitive explains how Jake Raven can be admitted to Whipple's fascist organization. The organization's uniforms that allude to the Boy Scouts of America manifest a paradoxical racial politics by vaunting both a frontier masculinity associated with Anglo-America and a masculine primitive conventionally aligned with the Other.³⁰ In Whipple's first meeting with Jake Raven during a start-up rally for the National Revolutionary Party, West confronts the tension created by the conflict between the racial politics of native fascism's ideology and the commodity fetishism that it wishes to represent as authentically American:

Here Shagpoke paused to let the cheers die down, then called for volunteers to join his 'Storm Battalions.' A number of men came forward. In their lead was a very dark individual,

²⁹ For details regarding the political implications of the Indian New Deal, see Sherry L. Smith 4, 16-18.

³⁰ For a discussion of the imperialist origins of the Boy Scouts and the conflicted racial paradigm embedded in its reverence for the Indian, see Huhndorf 67-77 and Kimmel 112-113, 210.

who had extra-long black hair of an extremely coarse quality, and on whose head was a derby hat many sizes too small for him. ‘Me American mans,’ he announced proudly. ‘Me got heep coon hat, two maybe six. Bye, bye catchum plenty more coon maybe.’ With this he grinned from ear to ear. But Shagpoke was a little suspicious of his complexion, and looked at him with disfavor. In the South, where he expected to get considerable support for his movement, they would not stand for Negroes. The good-natured stranger seemed to sense what was wrong, for he said, ‘Me Injun, mister, me chief along my people. Gotum gold mine, oil well. Name of Jake Raven. Ugh! Shagpoke grew cordial at once. ‘Chief Jake Raven,’ he said, holding out his hand, ‘I am happy to welcome you into our organization. We ‘Leather Shirts’ can learn much from your people, fortitude, courage and relentless purpose among other things. (*A Cool Million* 175)

Claiming common ground with Whipple on account of his “heep coon hat,” Raven attempts to claim an authentic American identity through the nationalist conception of that identity in the commodity form of frontier masculinity. Raven’s claim, however, reveals the nationalist conception of American authenticity to be a reproduction of Native American identity. Rachel Rubinstein claims that the coonskin hat completes the “‘American’ costume that is an appropriation of Indian garb” (113). Ironically, Raven uses a commodity cathected for its evocation of Anglo-American history to justify his inclusion within the nation. Through the juxtaposition of a Native American seeking to certify his authenticity with a commodity that fetishizes a nationalist history of settler colonialism even as it commemorates the colonized subject, West ridicules, but also admits the power of the mediation of cultural authenticity in commodity culture. Whipple demonstrates the mediation of Native American identity into Indian commodity in his exploitation of Jake Raven for the financial benefit of the NRP. Jake Raven’s

party invitation is coded in the noble virtues of the masculine primitive: “fortitude, courage, and relentless purpose.” Exploiting Jake Raven’s natural resources—“gold mine, oil well”—Whipple reproduces the cathection of the Indian as authentic American in commodity culture. A byproduct of the mediation of authenticity by commodity culture, Whipple’s racial confusion parallels the case of Buffalo Child Long Lance, a black actor who in the 1930s made a Hollywood career exploiting popular tropes of Indian identity.³¹ The confusion over Jake Raven’s racial identity and his transformation into an Indian commodity relate to his lynching at the NRP rally in the South where “the crowd put a rope around [his] neck because of his dark complexion” (*A Cool Million* 229). Indeed, in the racial politics of modern commodity fetishism, West could see a national past of racial violence that dehumanized people, transforming them into consumer goods.

Jake Raven’s lynching bespeaks West’s well-known sympathy for the Native American. According to friend S.J. Perelman, “West was much impressed with the Indian and the bad deal he had received” (qtd. in Martin 281). In two of his works, West evoked the popular cultural and modernist representation of the Indian as the embodiment of authenticity and nature. In “The Adventurer,” written between 1930-1933, West explores the power of the masculine primitive to preserve imagination amid the aesthetically corrupt reproductions of mass culture. In more explicit terms than “The Adventurer,” West celebrated the nobility of the Indian in a 17-page screen treatment entitled “Osceola” (ca. 1935). In the words of the treatment, Osceola “is a story of one of the greatest heroes in American frontier history.” Though the treatment was never

³¹ For an account of Indian actor Buffalo Child Long Lance, see Micah Treuer 640; for extended consideration of authenticity and the representation of the American Indian, see Deloria and Francis

produced, Rachel Rubinstein has speculated that West portrayed Indian innocence to exploit popular interest (109-110). Indeed, the heroism of Osceola's story seems an attempt to reap capital rewards from a culture that ennobled the Indian.

West's writing records a shift in viewing the Indian from a masculine primitive of the natural world, as demonstrated in "The Adventurer," to an imaginative product available for consumption in commodity culture through Hollywood, as reflected in "Osceola." This shift occurs in *A Cool Million* as well. Before leading the nationwide Indian revolt, Chief Israel Satinpenny indicts mass culture's corruption of America's natural innocence:

In our father's memory this was a fair, sweet land, where a man could hear his heart beat without wondering if what he heard wasn't an alarm clock, where a man could fill his nose with pleasant flower odors without finding that they came from a bottle . . . In return for the loss of these things, we accepted the white man's civilization, syphilis and the radio, tuberculosis and the cinema (West, *A Cool Million* 216).

Modernity encroaches upon the social innocence of Indians in the story to the extent that all connections with the natural world disappear. Chief Israel Satinpenny bemoans the corrupting influences of technological commodities, but spreads his revolutionary message via telegraph. An Indian boy embodies the corruption of which Satinpenny speaks when he fails to set fire to Lem and a cabin without matches (West *A Cool Million* 218). Recuperated from being shot by the Missourian, Jake Raven peddles the elixir that saved his life, the contents of which consist of "certain medicaments secret to the squaws of his tribe" (West 223). The elixir is sold at the "Chamber of American Horrors" where Raven is on display. At the same time West represents Indian innocence in the novel, he also positions Indians as agents in commodity culture.

One of Wu Fong's girls, Princess Roan Fawn ironically exhibits the erotics of commodity fetishism that Jake Raven's prostitution of Indian culture figuratively implies.³² A new addition to Wu Fong's "House of All Nations" recently transformed by the Hearst papers' "Buy American" campaign, Princess Roan Fawn serves baked dog and firewater and does "business on the floor." In Wu Fong's 100 percentum American brothel, the Indian girl's "walls [papered] with birch bark to make it look like a wigwam" and her semi-nude dress in a necklace made of wolf's teeth and a bull's-eye blanket signify the naturalness and pre-modern authenticity essential to the sign of the Indian (189). Still, her placement in the brothel suggests her availability to consumers. That the market is sex-based implies the compromise of her authenticity through the prostitution of her body as a commodity. Yet, the authentic American boy Lem works in the brothel too. Wu Fong prostitutes the ignorant Lem to the Maharajah:

When our hero realized what was expected of him, he turned pale with horror. He looked again at the Maharajah and what he saw of lust in that man's eyes made him almost swoon. Fortunately for Lem, however, instead of swooning, he opened his mouth to scream. This was the only thing that could have saved him, for he spread his jaws too wide and his store teeth fell clattering to the carpet. The Maharajah jumped away in disgust. Then another lucky accident occurred. When Lem bent awkwardly to pick up his teeth, the glass eye that Mr. Hainey had given him popped from his head and smashed to smithereens on the floor. This last was much too much for the Maharajah of Kanurani. He became enraged. Wu Fong had cheated him! What kind of a pretty boy was this that came apart so horribly? (193)

³² For a reading of West's brothel as related to the radical critiques of writers on the Left who compared American commodity culture to prostitution, see Barnard 147.

Wu Fong's prostitution of Lem for a homoerotic act that would occur outside the prescribed norms of "authentic" manliness inverts the nationalist discourse that suffused his journey to become a self-made man. The unmanly display that results where Lem "turns pale," almost swoons, but instead screams, subverts the fetish for the nationalist models of masculinity that he represents as a commodity. Lem's encounter with the Maharaja exemplifies the foreign corruption of the American spirit of individualism and "fair play" that Whipple castigates in his final speech where he commemorates the death of "the American boy" (238). Contrary to Whipple's claims that foreigners have violated Lem, Americans are complicit too. Indeed, his teeth are pulled by the disciplinary state that wrongly imprisons him and he loses his eye in an attempt to save a runaway carriage owned by a bank president, an act that ironically recalls the fortunate turn of events for the boy hero of Horatio Alger's novels.³³ Prostituting Lem at the brothel appears to differ little from Whipple's exploitation of his wounds after the Yuba River massacre (220) and in memory on his fascist platform. Occurring before thousands of young storm troopers dressed in the frontier garb worn by Lem the night he is assassinated, Whipple's memorial attempts to re-assemble the nationalist ideology figuratively dismantled in Lem's undoing by foreigners. Yet in that memorial West ironically deconstructs the authenticity of Lem's American identity through Whipple's prostitution of his memory and the mass production

³³ Lem's teeth are pulled by Ezekiel Purdy, the warden of the state prison (152-153); the parody of the success myth transforms the Alger-rescue scenario into an unfortunate event for Lem wherein the president of Underdown National Bank and Trust Company, Mr. Underdown, mistakes Lem for a groom who mishandled the team; instead of being rewarded for his masculine heroics, he is chastised for mishandling the horses (157); Peter Conn notes West took the run-away horse passage from Alger's *Ragged Dick* and *Tattered Tom* (93).

of that memory figured by “the youth of America . . . parading down Fifth Avenue in his honor” all wearing “a coonskin hat complete with jaunty tail” and squirrel rifle (237). The National Revolutionary Party’s honoring of Lem signifies what West believed to be the power of the nationalism that suffused commodity culture and could have driven commodity fetishism for the frontier myth to mobilize American fascism.

If in *A Cool Million* West attacks the nationalism of the frontier myth through an exploration of its xenophobic implications in commodity culture, then in *The Day of the Locust* he comments on the nostalgic nationalist politics of the frontier myth’s mass cultural reproduction during the 1930s. In the novel a film Western actor manifests the frontier myth. Rather than a stagecoach driver or a cattle rustler, the cowboy of the story is a Horse Opera actor. The Western actor signifies the process of his own mythic reproduction. The doubled condition of his being a real and performed cowboy, wherein the real cowboy does not match the image of the cowboy projected onto the silver screen, lays bare the construction of a projected reality. The constructed reality revealed by the cowboy’s doubled condition thereby exposes the politics of representations presented by film Westerns as historical reality.

In 1939, the same year Nathanael West published *The Day of the Locust*, the mainstream production of Westerns experienced a renaissance in Hollywood. From 1930-1938, major Hollywood studios decreased their production of frontier epics. Scholarship maintains that the Depression cast doubt on popular faith in the myth’s historical narrative; therefore, moviegoers could find little value in a film genre that claimed a successful national history in a time of widespread failure (Slotkin). With the decline of major studio production, the Western’s significance seemed to have diminished. This thinking, however, dismisses the value of the series Westerns—commonly known as B-Westerns—that were produced with success during the

decline of the major studio Western. Peter Stanfield's research demonstrates that the film Western never diminished in significance, but rather changed in the means of its production, with series Westerns being produced widely and independently. Though series Westerns existed outside major studio production, their initial marquee booking was not B-level.³⁴ These Westerns included the singing cowboy films—also known as Horse Operas—that were made famous by Gene Autry. Horse Operas often spoke to the class, gender, and race issues of their primarily working-class audience. The singing cowboy descended from the dime novels that had entertained working-class audiences in the nineteenth century; in Stanfield's words, Horse Opera, "reclaimed the cowboy for the mob" (*Horse Opera* 7). Then in 1939, heralded by John Ford's *Stagecoach*, the major studio Western returned. Two reasons for the rebirth stand out. First, Stanfield cites a consumer demand for outdoor dramas as the cause for the renaissance. Second, responding to the impending confrontations with Europe and Asia, Hollywood made a push for "Americanism" in films to combat the propaganda of alien politics, namely Nazism and Communism. Reborn, the Western overtly celebrated "American" values and used the past to discuss internal and global conflicts of the present (Stanfield, *Hollywood, Westerns, and the 1930s* 152). In light of Benedict Anderson's scholarship, Stanfield claims that the anachronism of Hollywood Westerns created an imagined community based in a shared national history.

To this Depression-Era Hollywood the novel's protagonist, Tod Hackett, finds himself lured from New Haven by a talent scout to be a set designer. In this same wild and woolly Hollywood where whispers of Gary Cooper's name incite fanatic mob violence, Tod hears

³⁴ To paraphrase Stanfield, B-Westerns were not referred to as such by contemporaries; they were simply called Westerns; similarly, major studio Westerns were not referred to as Westerns, but as major motion pictures, (*Hollywood, Westerns, and the 1930s* 1-13).

cowboys chat while awaiting spot calls for Westerns; meets an Indian in front of a saddlery store on Sunset Boulevard; works in a studio lot that makes such frontier epics as *Manifest Destiny* and *The Great Divide*; and contemplates the “dream dump” that is Hollywood in The Last Chance Saloon.³⁵ The renaissance of the Western occurring the same year *The Day of the Locust* went to print and the widespread production of Horse Operas during the book’s Depression-Era setting contextualize the significance of the plot’s antagonist cowboy, among the other signs of the Western, in West’s Hollywood novel.

Studies of mass culture in *The Day of the Locust* have overlooked the film Western, one of the most significant mass cultural productions of the era in which West writes and whose signs in the novel appear prominently, as a significant context for West’s social critique. Rita Barnard and Nathan Veitch recognize the novel’s postmodernist critique of mass culture. Citing the integration of mass cultural elements in his writings, both agree that West’s work exemplifies the effaced distinction between high and mass culture. Barnard first claimed West broke with the modernist idea that high culture served as a panacea to social ills caused by mass culture. Rather than leading to a critique of art as panacea, West’s surrealist approach attacks commodity culture. Extending Barnard’s claim about the intermingling of high and mass culture, Veitch argues that commodity culture texts and styles constitute what he calls West’s “comic strip fiction” as a way to explore “the ideological grid through which representations of American society are created, accepted, and codified” (xx). The reproductive technologies of mass culture,

³⁵ All allusions to Hollywood Western productions named appear in the book; The Last Chance Saloon that serves as Tod’s gateway to the dream dump was a common name for a Western saloon, but may be a reference to *Destry Rides Again* produced the same year *The Day of the Locust* was published.

the demands of commodity culture, and the mechanisms of the capitalist apparatus problematize the representation of authenticity by introducing further mediations between text and context.³⁶ While an understanding of mass culture informs the politics of representation at work in *The Day of the Locust*, an analysis of the nationalist politics of mass culture West critiques in the novel remains to be completed.

The Day of the Locust takes care to consider the gender and racial discourses implied in the nationalist politics of mass cultural reproductions of the frontier myth. Reflecting on the apocalyptic prophesy of his painting “The Burning of Los Angeles,” Tod Hackett admits that while Los Angeles may seem exceptional, the city is representative of the catastrophic fate awaiting the nation.³⁷ The “burning” of Los Angeles, or rather Hollywood, marks the destructive force latent in mass culture’s discursiveness. Given the social violence and disruption that trail cowboy actor Earle Schoop, the self-destructive force must be seen as the nationalist construction of nation apparent in the Western, the film genre par excellence of Hollywood’s myth-making machine. The nationalism central to the Western implies the idealization of an

³⁶ For a detailed analysis of the dehumanizing chains of signification present in *A Cool Million*, see Veitch 102-3.

³⁷ “The Angelenos would be first, but their comrades all over the country would follow. There would be civil war,” (*The Day of the Locust* 309); Indeed, Geneva Gano’s analysis supports this assertion: “But Tod’s insistence that Angelenos are the ‘cream’ and not the ‘pick’ of America’s madmen supports the other general belief about regional spaces, which proposes that the local region functions as a synecdoche for the nation. Seen from this angle, Los Angeles is composed of the richest concentration of a larger national concoction, a heady sample of those whose trends and lifestyles will soon become national standards” (43).

Anglo and masculine settler-colonialism as national history. This history of westward national expansion linked national success with the virility of the Anglo male body. Yet the Depression wrote a different narrative of American manhood. Scholars have claimed that widespread unemployment caused a crisis of masculinity.³⁸ In film, this patriarchal crisis played out in stories featuring a young woman as an independent wage earner supporting an ailing father or weak brother. West's novel foregrounds conflicts of masculinity with the intersection of a pro-masculine genre, the Western, and a setting betokening the instability of masculinity, the Depression Era; however, that intersection appears especially significant given the novel's publication amid the renewed nationalist confidence conveyed by the Western's renaissance.

Earle's masculinity is affirmed and contested by his relationships with other characters in the novel. The conflicts that emerge from Earle's relationship with Faye Greener, Tod, Homer Simpson, and Miguel serve to explore the gender and racial discourses of the Western's nationalism. Miguel is both friend and rival to Earle; their constant pairing and mimicry effect a symbolically conjoined condition despite the sometimes antagonistic nature of their relationship. As an idiomatically racial symbol of Los Angeles, Miguel, in the logic of Tod's oil-on-canvas jeremiad, becomes representative of the racial tensions of the nation. At first blush, Earle and Miguel seem peripheral. While not central characters, they are central to the conflicts involving the novel's two main characters, Tod and Homer. Indeed, Earle and Miguel succeed in attracting the Hollywood starlet Faye that Tod and Homer pursue; both become unwanted guests in Homer's garage, but Faye leverages Homer's attraction to her to keep them on. The conflicts that

³⁸ Michael Kimmel discusses this patriarchal crisis, but Bederman refutes the point; in her critical model, masculinity is always in crisis because it occupies an unstable socially-defined terrain, always being shaped and reformed.

emerge from Faye's double-crossing Earle with Miguel are significantly related to the collapse of Tod's and Homer's world—a collapse paralleled by the mob violence outside the movie premiere that concludes the novel. The collapse Tod portrays in “The Burning of Los Angeles” heralds the mass cultural chaos he expects to engulf the nation and calls into question the overdetermined nationalist historicism exhibited in Westerns. Rather than find the nationalist politics of the Western a stabilizing solution to the fragmenting effects of the Depression and impending international conflict, as some scholars see them, *The Day of the Locust* links the social collapse of the present era to the nationalist fantasies of the frontier past reproduced by mass culture.

As both a real cowboy from Arizona and one “work[ing] occasionally in horse-operas” (West, *The Day of the Locust* 298), Earle exposes the construction of nationalist myth through his double condition. His work in Hollywood Westerns links him to the series Western made popular during the Depression, but also, as a cowboy actor, to the renaissance of major studio Westerns. The cowboy of these films was chaste, honorable, and manly. Earle dresses in a way that symbolically alludes to his larger-than-life image. Earle stands over six feet, but his frontier apparel augments his size: “The big Stetson he wore added five inches more to his height and the heels of his boots still another three” (298). Earle, however, fails to meet the expectations suggested by his self-fashioned representation. Lacking any girth, Earle's height gives him a “polelike appearance further exaggerated by the narrowness of his shoulders and by his lack of either hips or buttocks. The years he had spent in the saddle had not made him bowlegged. In fact, his legs were so straight that his dungarees, bleached a very light blue by the sun and much washing, hung down without a wrinkle, as though they were empty.” Though Earle's clothing gives him the appearance of being a cowboy, the “empty” appearance negates his being and

renders him a mere representation. The effect of Earle's apparent absence operates as an extended metaphor for the Westerns in which Earle works; they appear to be representations of myths, not the authentic historical realities they claimed to be. In effect, the historical truth on which the Western is based appears so thin as to not fill the excesses of its representations.

In the parlance of the Hollywood trade magazines that Faye imitates, Earle the cowboy is "criminally handsome." Yet the suggestion of criminality expresses a moral paradox that questions the representation of the cowboy. Homer fails to understand Earle's appeal. In conference with Tod, Homer states that in the hotel business "they used to watch out for fellows like that and never gave them credit because they would jump their bills" (369). Homer and Tod doubt Earle, thinking him more criminal than handsome. Faye's use of the trade magazine's jargon to describe Earle suggests that her assessment of his handsomeness is not merely based on personal attraction, but rather commercial worth. Faye sleeps only with men who either have money or looks; in the logic of the trade papers, looks presumably translate to money. Yet Earle frustrates Faye's standard of manliness: "Earle was always broke and whenever Tod went with them [to dinner] he was the one who paid" (299). Despite being broke, Earle and Faye stay together. On one occasion while visiting Earle's camp outside of town, Faye kisses Earle with Tod looking on:

He took his hat off ceremoniously and placed it on the hood of the car, then wrapped his long arms around her. They paid no attention to Tod, who was standing off to one side watching them. He saw Earle close his eyes and pucker up his lips like a little boy. But there was nothing boyish about what he did to her. (302)

Contrary to the conservative moral politics of the Horse Opera that featured an upstanding cowboy,³⁹ the deadbeat, bill-jumping Earle treats honor and morality as mere performance. When coupled with his “boyish” pose—closing his eyes and puckering his lips—Earle’s act of honor—“ceremoniously” removing his hat—performs the morality popularly expected of the cowboy hero. Yet the manner of the kiss subverts the nostalgic innocence that the singing cowboy persona attempted to evoke. The contrast between the performance and the character of Earle parallels his performance and existence as a cowboy. In Earle, West undermines the presumed innocence of that mass-produced image by exposing it as a representation rather than a reality.

When portrayed in films, the “cowboy as innocent” could serve as a representation of pre-modern American morality uncorrupted by the capitalist pursuits consuming city-dwellers. Instead of innocent, Earle plays the fool cowboy, a stock character that appeared in major productions playing to metropolitan audience’s presumptions about country folk (Stanfield *Hollywood, Westerns, and the 1930s* 140-1). Indeed, Tod thinks Earle a “dull fool”; Faye grows frustrated with his speech, demanding, “Listen, you big, strong, silent dope, . . . either make sense, or God damn it, get out of the car” (West, *The Day of the Locust* 302). In a failed attempt at humor before heading to camp, Earle tells Faye they’ll be eating rats for supper. Faye erupts because she misunderstands Earle’s joke. As Hollywood reified, Faye does not desire the cowboy’s innocence, only the capital gain the cowboy’s discursive appeal yields. In fact, she attacks Homer, the representative of American innocence, for being a hick (343). Throughout the story, Faye abuses him, exploiting his innocence to finance her start in Hollywood; in exchange, by “playing house,” she offers Homer a fantasy of manly domestic success that she never intends

³⁹ For more on the singing cowboy and morality, see Stanfield 2.

to fulfill to his expectations. She lives with him, but refuses to love him. Abused and betrayed, Homer as American innocent turns violent in the mob riot outside the movie premiere. He destroys his innocence, and by extension American innocence, when he stomps child-actor Adore Loomis. Despite his suspicions, Homer allows Earle and his sidekick Miguel to live in the garage: "They're nice enough young fellows, just down on their luck, like a lot of people these days, you know. There's an awful lot of unemployment going around" (345). Homer willfully acknowledges Earle's duality. In the context of widespread social deprivations, Homer's belief in Earle expresses the popular return to frontier archetypes during the Depression and the impending international conflict (Conn 61). Yet Homer believes in Earle because his cohabitation with Faye depends on it. In order for Homer to hold on to Faye, and thereby his belief in the American success story, he must believe in Earle, the "cowboy as innocent." The Western's existence is contingent on the preservation of belief in the American success story. West demonstrates the problematically conditional relationship between the naïve belief in the story of American success and the Western.

The saddle as a commodity in Hodge's store on Sunset Boulevard indicates that the violent history of conflict, conquest, and settlement it represents are for sale in the modern world of Hollywood. As part of his daily routine, Earle poses in front of Hodge's saddlery along Sunset Boulevard in a way that makes him appear to be one of the commodities for sale. Looking ahead, Earle fixes his gaze upon a sign for malted milks across the street. Behind him, stands Hodge's saddlery:

In the window of this store was an enormous Mexican saddle covered with carved silver, and around it was arranged a large collection of torture instruments. Among other things there were fancy, braided quirts, spurs with great spiked wheels and double bits that

looked as though they could break a horse's jaw without trouble. Across the back of the window ran a low shelf on which was a row of boots, some black, some red and some a pale yellow. All of the boots had scalloped tops and very high heels. (298)

As in West's other fiction, commodities in *The Day of the Locust* display texts removed from their original contexts wherein they had properly functioned. The original context is substituted for a commodity context resulting in the loss of the original meaning of the text. In the case of Hodge's saddlery, it retails a riding saddle not for its function, but for its nostalgia. This nostalgia hides the violent context from which the Mexican saddle originated. The riding equipment in the window frame behind Earle evokes the taming of the wild Southwest. The saddle figuratively recalls the historical Mexican influence over the region. Yet at the commercial disposal of Hodge's store, the Mexican saddle indicates the capitalist appropriation of the region by Anglo-America. Moreover, positioned behind Earle, it arranges a sequence wherein the sign of Mexican influence appears a relic of the Old West, existing in the past and giving way to the Anglo present. The Mexican saddle becomes a sign of conquest as it joins a sign of restraint or containment with a sign of the Other conventionally attributed in nationalist narratives as antagonistic to Anglo-America. Indeed, the modern reprisal of this historical tension is replayed in the conflict among Miguel, Earle, and Homer. The Mexican saddle thus figures the racial discourse of conflict between savagery and civilization central to the frontier myth. The "torture instruments" that frame the saddle nuance the violence of this history. Whips, spurs, and bits implement restraint and direction with brutality. In front of this same saddlery store later stands an Indian with a sandwich-board advertisement for Tuttle's Trading Post, another store selling curios of the Old West. Hodge's does not merely sell Southwestern-themed saddlery, but a particular Western history. As it is positioned behind Earle, the Mexican saddle

and “torture instruments” symbolic of the racial discourse embedded in the conflict central to the frontier myth re-contextualize Western films as reprisals of this history that hide its violence in the representation of the “cowboy as innocent.” While a literal backdrop to Earle, the orientation of the Mexican saddle figuratively foregrounds a context of frontier history otherwise obscured by the nationalist commodity fetishism exemplified in Westerns.

In his role as Earle’s sidekick, Miguel ironically contests the racist performance tradition of the Other in the Western’s nationalist presentation of American history.⁴⁰ Indeed, dating from the dime novels through the series and major studio productions of the 1930s, Westerns featured cowboy heroes with sidekicks who, as a result of their laziness and incompetence, provided comic relief from the central tensions of the story.⁴¹ Series Westerns borrowed from traditions of popular entertainment such as vaudeville and minstrel shows (Stanfield, *Horse Opera* 129). The sidekick reprised the buffoon roles of blackface minstrelsy, in particular Sambo and Zip Coon. These characters engaged in slapstick antics that held popular appeal for audiences of series Westerns, but were racially debasing.⁴² The Mexican substituted for the black-faced clown as the

⁴⁰ Geneva M. Gano claims his stereotypical Mexican traits represent his inability to be assimilated. Miguel as the Mexican represents how un-American the region of the West is and so “In Miguel, West rehabilitates the antinationalist potential of the modern West” (63); though I dispute Gano’s unironic reading of Miguel because he is a representation of stereotypical representations of the Western’s sidekick, I concur that critical attention to this character reveals West’s critique of nationalist ideology.

⁴¹ For an elaboration on the function of the sidekick, see Stanfield 109-110.

⁴² For more information on slapstick and racial debasement in the Western sidekick, See Stanfield, *Hollywood, Westerns and the 1930s*, 109, and *Horse Opera*, 4 and 100; In her analysis

significant racial Other. Used in some films to distinguish his racial Otherness from his Anglo counterparts, the sidekick's facial make-up reflects his descent from the minstrel buffoon's blackface performance. The Otherness of such characters as the "lazy peon" or the "knife-wielding, back-stabbing Mexican" entailed a "brutish persona and at first unrepressed sexual [desire] for the Anglo heroine, which he later learns to keep under check."⁴³ Considering the racist tradition of popular entertainment from which the cowboy-sidekick relationship derives, the racial politics of that relationship's representation in *The Day of the Locust* deserve critical attention.

The violence Earle perpetrates against his Mexican sidekick overpowers the comic effect of the slapstick tradition it draws upon. In a passage where two cowboys, Calvin and Hink, jest with Earle, slapstick common to vaudeville surfaces in relationship to the reification of the Western. A jab about a piebald vest is followed by another cryptic remark about Earle getting caught wearing rubber boots in a sheep car. Watching the show like a spectator at a performance,

Tod could see that they were waiting for something else. Earle suddenly, without even shifting his weight, shot his foot out and kicked Calvin solidly in the rump. This was the

of black-audience Westerns during the 1930s, Julia Leyda notes how black audiences received the zip-coon slapstick bits from mainstream Westerns as "racist humiliation"; In a black-audience Western, however, there was no shame in laughing at the coon character's antics because the overt racism between white cowboy and racial Other sidekick was averted by casting a black cowboy; for the complete reading, see Leyda.

⁴³ Stanfield claims Mexicans began to substitute for the minstrel buffoon as a way of repressing the Southern narrative of the Western; for more information on the Mexican sidekick role as it relates to blackface minstrelsy, see *Hollywood, Westerns and the 1930s*, 108-109.

real point of the joke. They were delighted by Earle's fury. The way Earle had gone from apathy to action without the usual transition was funny. The seriousness of his violence was even funnier. (301)

The comedy apparent in Earle's violence is altogether absent from a passage with Miguel that replays similar slapstick conventions where the seriousness of Earle's violence is more horrifying than humorous. At camp later that same day, Miguel's "toffee-colored skin," curls, "large Armenian eyes," and "pouting black lips" attract Faye (303). The sexual appeal of Miguel's features underscoring the desirability of his racial exoticism reaffirms the racism of blackface by distinguishing his non-Anglo traits in romantic terms. The long-haired sweater he wears called a "gorilla" that exaggerates his Otherness substitutes for the conventional make-up of the blackface minstrel tradition. While the gorilla costume reproduces the Western's discourse of civilization that rendered the Other a savage, Earle's "crude hoe-down" and "whooping," which he performs in order to disrupt the synchronicity of Faye and Miguel's dance rhythm, presents him, Turner's archetypal emissary of civilization, with manners conventionally attributed to the savage. Positioned as a spectator once again, "Tod saw the blow before it fell. He saw Earle raise his stick and bring it down on the Mexican's head. He heard the crack and saw the Mexican go to his knees still dancing, his body unwilling or unable to acknowledge the interruption" (307). Miguel's amorous advances mimic the comical unrepressed sexual desire the racial Other sidekick conventionally displayed in Westerns. In the context of the series Western, Earle's violence serves as a comical corrective that safeguards the color-line, preventing any act of miscegenation that would not have been a laughing matter to mainstream audiences.⁴⁴ Yet in

⁴⁴ For more about the proscription against on-screen interracial staging, see Stanfield,

Hollywood, Westerns and the 1930s 106.

the context of Tod's spectatorship, the abrupt tempo and "seriousness of [Earle's] violence" that had yielded laughs in front of Hodge's saddlery provokes terror in Tod and Faye. The interracial nature of the violence between Earle and Miguel, lacking humor, contrasts with the humorous intra-racial violence between Earle, Calvin, and Hink. West thus represents the racial politics of the slapstick tropes used in Westerns as a problem given the racist popular entertainment tradition they perpetuate. The cowardly bushwhacking repositions the frontier manliness that Earle's type embodies. His savage attack indicates that the racist representations of the Other betray the savagery of cultural productions motivated by the discourse of civilization. Thus, West inverts the discourse of civilization in Westerns by representing the slapstick humor that conventionally reinforced the superiority of the cowboy over his racially inferior sidekick as a problematic exhibition whereby the cowboy reverts to atavistic behavior and therefore becomes like the racial inferior his violence is meant to subjugate.

The cockfight in Homer's garage exhibits the vilification of the Other mediated in the Western's nationalist discourse. Foreshadowing the novel's final scene outside of Kahn's Persian Palace Theatre, Homer's garage resembles a major entertainment venue. Faye's Ford coupe "headlights [that] flooded the arena [garage]" (347) parallels the searchlights of the movie premiere in the final chapter that sweep across the evening sky (378). Set against the blues, lavenders, and purples that seem "to have been blown over . . . with an air brush," the background recalls the violet hues of Los Angeles first described in chapter one, the searchlights displaying the movie premiere, and Tod's masterpiece "The Burning of Los Angeles" that he composes in his mind amid the mob violence outside the theater. The spectacular cockfight plays before an audience including a movie producer, set designer, Horse Opera cowboy, and his sidekick. The truculent dwarf Abe Kusich continually degrades the Hollywood presence

represented by Earle: “For two cents, I’d knock you out of them prop boots” and “you fugitive from the Western Costume Company, you . . . you louse in a fright-wig, you.” His jabs at Earle continually assert Earle’s failure to be authentic and, in doing so, recall how his cowboy costume reflects the excesses of the Western’s simulacrum of American history. In financing the cockfight, Claude Estee parallels Hollywood capitalist production. The cockfight between the “ordinary barnyard fowl”—one whose description evokes rustic Americana (“fat red barn, old stone wall or sturdy Nantucket fisherman”) that Tod has left behind in New England—and Jujutla, Miguel’s prize fighter, symbolizes a nationalist conflict staged by Hollywood. Serving as referee, Earle implies the Western’s influence in this nationalist staging of the “American” versus the Other. Like Earle, the Western mediates nationalist representations of history and the Other as violent savage in that history. Indeed, in this Hollywood-produced spectacle Jujutla fulfills Miguel’s role of savage Other when he destroys the “ordinary barnyard fowl” backed by Tod and Abe.

The spectacle of the cockfight in the garage situates the nationalist perception of the Other mediated by the Western in the context of the Depression. Symbolizing the economic failures of the Depression, the garage houses those who, in the words of Homer, are “just down on their luck” (345). Homer, however, is repulsed by the “dirty black hen” that Earle and Miguel have brought with them: “He kept referring to the hen again and again, as though it were the one thing he couldn’t stand about Earle and the Mexican.” As Homer speaks about the hen and Miguel, he begins to identify one with the other: “He’s almost as bad as his hen” (343). Homer’s pairing of Miguel and the hen as unwanted burdens represents nativist complaints about Mexicans as social burdens to Los Angeles, a view popularized in the press and city health

department reports.⁴⁵ Indeed, Tod's suggestion that Homer report the chickens to the Board of Health because it will rid him of Miguel reproduces charges of Mexicans as disease carriers. Associated with Miguel, the dirty black hen and Jujutla represent racist discourses reflective of regional tensions that held racial groups responsible for the failures of the Great Depression. Geneva M. Gano has suggested that given the exemplariness of the West, the regional racial conflicts represent national conflicts between the "American" and the Other.

Yet the conflict between Homer and Miguel also involves Earle and, thus implicates the Western in the vilification of the Other. As if to fulfill the interracial violence of the cockfight staged in the garage, Miguel and Earle fight over Faye. Their conflict leads to all three disappearing from Homer's house. In search of Faye and looking for answers to the violence of the previous night, Tod seeks Earle at Hodge's, but finds instead Calvin, a cowboy, and the Chief, an Indian. Tod's questions about Earle sparks a debate between Calvin and the Chief:

He and Calvin got into a long argument about Mexicans. The Indian said that they were all bad. Calvin claimed he had known quite a few good ones in his time. When the Indian cited the case of the Hermanos brothers who had killed a lonely prospector for half a dollar, Calvin countered with a long tale about a man called Tomas Lopez who shared his last pint of water with a stranger when they both were lost in the desert.

Tod tried to get the conversation back to what interested him.

'Mexicans are very good with women,' he said.

'Better with horses,' said the Indian. 'I remember one time along the Brazos, I . . .

Tod tried again.

⁴⁵ For more about the discourse of health and race in early twentieth-century Los Angeles, see Molina and Deverell.

‘They fought over Earle’s girl, didn’t they?’

‘Not to hear him tell of it,’ Calvin said. ‘He claims it was dough—claims the Mex robbed him while he was sleeping.’

‘The dirty, thievin’ rat,’ said the Indian, spitting.

‘He claims he’s all washed up with that bitch,’ Calvin went on. ‘Yes, siree, that’s his story, to hear him tell it.’

Tod had enough.

‘So long,’ he said.

‘Glad to meet you,’ said the Indian.

‘Don’t take any wooden nickels,’ Calvin shouted after him.’ (375)

This debate between Calvin and the Chief represents two figures conventionally on conflicting sides of the nationalist paradigm arranged by the Western. The perception of Miguel discussed in the context of Earle yields an assortment of images related to racial inferiority as presented by the nationalist discourse of the Western: “greaser,” “thief,” “rat,” and “good with women.” Despite the variety of images of inferiority, immorality, disease, and threatening sexuality, all are summarily reduced in the terms of the debate to a moral dualism: good or bad. In the context of the Western, the debate about Mexican morality becomes a nationalistic debate about the Mexican’s position as American (good) or un-American (bad). Revising the previous night’s events, Earle claims he fought with Miguel over “dough,” not Faye. This version of the story conflicts with the version Homer relays to Tod. In Homer’s version, the two fought when Earle learned from Homer that Miguel was sleeping with Faye. Indeed, if Homer’s version can be counted as the accurate story, then the fight over “dough” covers Earle’s cuckoldry. Miguel sleeping with “Earle’s girl” undermines Earle’s masculinity. This failure can be coupled with

Earle's previous failure to take Faye out because he is "always broke." West retains the ideological formula of frontier masculinity equating individual virility with national virility: Earle's masculine failure parallels the failures of the Depression, a time of masculine crisis due to the patriarchal notion of the male breadwinner colliding with widespread unemployment. The failure of Earle's manhood results in the "barefaced lie" he tells at Hodge's saddlery. The barefaced lie reprises West's theme of the Western as a nationalist sham that misrepresents the Other in its account of history. Earle's story reinforces and perpetuates racist stereotypes of the double-crossing Mexican that the Chief echoes with his prejudiced remark: "That's what comes of palling up with a dirty greaser" (374). By turning Earle's report into nothing more than a barefaced lie, West exposes the indictments against foreigners and racial others by Anglo-American society as a myth that protects the image of American superiority.

The irony of the debate is that the archetypal Other of the frontier myth, the Indian, vilifies Miguel, and the archetypal cowboy, Calvin, takes up his defense. In commodity culture Calvin and the Chief revise the oppositional relationship in which their conventional roles function. The Chief wears a sandwich board sign for Tuttle's Trading Post, a boutique that sells curios of the Old West.⁴⁶ Indeed, the Chief, when rationalizing his self-prostituting performance of the West, claims, "You gotta live" (374). Calvin echoes the sentiment earlier when he justifies performing in the Azusa rodeo: "I gotta eat" (300). When read in the context of the Western as a commodity, the ironies of racial conflict that appear in the passage render the racial conflict artificially-produced and unreal. The archetypal conflict of the Western narrative simulated in the story Calvin reproduces about Earle versus Miguel emphasizes racial differences emerging

⁴⁶ As Barnard has suggested, the sandwich board removes the authenticity from the Chief, rendering him into a commodity for consumer society (160).

from a conflict over capital. Yet Calvin and the Chief as reifications of American history of the West as cultural commodity disregard the conflicts of racial difference. Commodity culture emerges as a factor to some extent determining racial relations.

The Chief and Calvin talk about Mexicans in the same idiom of the “barefaced lie.” The folksy authority of the social gathering authorizes perspectives of those included. West, however, has already ridiculed the gathering. Seen through the filter of Boulder Bill at the saloon and the Missourian at the campfire, the debate about Mexicans that leaves Tod dissatisfied appears a parody of the Western’s representation of the Other. Indeed, Tod’s search for the truth of Faye’s whereabouts leads him to the reification of the frontier myth in commodity culture. As evidenced by Calvin’s retelling of Earle’s story, which conflicts in turn with Homer’s version, the Western as a cultural commodity appears to be a dissatisfying nationalist cover-up and racist narrative. Learning that the frontier myth in commodity culture will not help him find the vanishing American Dream, Tod leaves, but not before Calvin offers some advice: “Don’t take any wooden nickels.” The curious idiom alerts Tod to counterfeits passing for the genuine article. Coming from a cowboy and an Indian who have shamelessly passed themselves off as authentic figures of the West in commodity culture makes the idiom an ironic warning of any epistemological search for the fantasy of American success in nostalgic frontier commodities.

Indeed, “The Burning of Los Angeles” that emerges during Tod’s experience of the mob portrays the discontented masses pursuing Faye, the reification of the Hollywood fantasy production of success narratives. Faye eludes the mob’s violent pursuit just as she eludes Homer. That Faye’s desertion of Homer causes him to return to Wayneville, Ohio indicates the widespread disappointment of the nationalist narrative of westward movement. In representing the violent failure of the nationalist narrative, “The Burning of Los Angeles” finds complete

composition only after the collapse of Homer's home initiated by the unwanted presence of Earle and Miguel. Their conflict over Faye dissolves the home, leading to Homer's bitter decision to reverse the trajectory of the nationalist narrative.

Despite the significance of Earle and Miguel's contribution to the destruction of Homer's American Dream, Tod portrays neither character in "The Burning of Los Angeles." The absence of Earle and Miguel belies the obscure, but significant, trace elements of the Western amid Tod's surrealist rendition of the American nightmare. Tod's decision "to show the city burning at high noon" (308) positions the mass violence on the streets of Los Angeles in the temporal setting of the conventional Western showdown. Indeed, the conventional dualism of the showdown holds fast with the portrayal of Faye against the mob. The real mob moves in capricious spurts and rushes. In trying to understand what started the mad rush, Tod overhears a voice from the crowd say, "Yeah. Somebody hollered, 'Here comes Gary Cooper,' and then wham!" (386). The reported sighting of the famous Western actor, known for his starring role in *The Virginian*, spurs the fanatic violence of the mob. Yet another voice disputes the Gary Cooper report, followed by another supporting voice who claimed the mob rush started because "A pervert attacked a child." The pervert in question is Homer. Indeed, the mob rushes him after he stomps Adore Loomis. However, the mistaken reason for the rush arranges a comparison between Cooper, a famous Hollywood cowboy, and Homer, an average American. The correlation links the Western to disillusionment resulting in violent discontent. The mistake of the mob is the belief that seeing Gary Cooper did not cause the rush. Indeed, Homer's experience of loss resulting from trusting in Faye, who sees in Earle the commodity fetishism of the "American as innocent," confirms not just the correlation, but the causation. Violent discontent occurs when the nationalist fantasies of Hollywood fail. Through his work in Hollywood, Tod has witnessed

the mechanisms behind the nationalist fantasies presented by major studios to audiences, especially in 1939, as true history in order to restore American confidence. Yet Tod finds only a “dream dump” where the parts of movies are heaped into a dismantled mass of fantasies. In a previous pursuit of Faye, Tod passes through the sets of various historical epics before arriving at the dream dump. Yet his epistemological search for meaning in a commodity cultural world of industrial fantasy production begins with the commodity fetishism of the frontier myth as early in his search he passes through the swinging doors of *The Last Chance Saloon* (324). Indeed, *The Day of the Locust* illustrates the Western’s presentation of “authentic” history as a disruptive nationalist fantasy, an ideological problem, not solution, to the social ills of the 1930s.

Chapter Three

“Remember the Alamo”: The Popular West, Machismo, and “Authentic” Mexican-American Identity in Américo Paredes’ *George Washington Gomez*

. . . and for fifteen cents you went in and watched the cowboys. They had sound now. These Gringos! They could do anything. Yes, they had sound now, and you could hear the shots and the smacks when the cowboy hit the badman. It was nice going to the picture show. And when you came out you walked the aisle to the door with a cowboyish swagger you couldn’t control, though you felt ashamed and tried to break your step.

(Paredes, *George Washington Gomez* 181)

At a Jonestown bar, the narrator surveys the scene of patrons and settles on one man, Don Pancho the woodcutter and neighbor to the title character in the predominantly Mexican and poor part of town called the *Dos Veintidós*. A “hard worker,” Don Pancho sits in the pool hall regularly, not participating in any of the drinking or gaming, but just staring as if in a trance. The narrator’s free indirect discourse with Don Pancho’s mind reveals his wish to go to the above mentioned “picture show” on this Saturday, his day of rest. When seeing the racial politics of the cowboy “picture show,” Don Pancho experiences the formula Western with a sense of ambivalence. On the one hand, Don Pancho celebrates “These Gringos!” for their technological innovation, which has enhanced his experience of the cowboy’s heroic acts involving the sounds of gun shots and fist smacks. Indeed, the ecstasy of the Western is such that Don Pancho walks out of the theater with “cowboyish swagger,” imitating the movements of the movie hero. The shame, however, that leads Don Pancho to disrupt his cowboy walk bespeaks the conflict of his position as a Mexican-Tejano spectator to a performance of Anglo-American nationalism, if not imperialism. Though Indians were popularly portrayed as the conventional villain, the very

“badman” that gets shot at and smacked may have been Mexican as was common to early twentieth-century Westerns. Whether a white cowboy, a Mexican badman, or savage Indian, Don Pancho can relate to each, thus expressing the complex ways in which subjects cross-identify. Don Pancho is split by his desire to be the cowboy, the white hero, and his ethnic identification with the “badman,” the Other. The Western has the power to create Americanist texts alluring enough to be imitated by the subjects its narrative marginalizes, a power exemplified when Don Pancho “couldn’t control” his “cowboyish swagger.”

Though ignored, seated immediately beside Don Pancho during this Western daydream are two country youths: “The pair were cowboys, the working not the movie kind” (181). The distinction between “working” and “movie” cowboys brings to the fore how the logic of the novel complicates the relationship between representation and authenticity. In distinguishing the movie cowboy from the working kind, the novel critiques the Western as simulation, not representation. In so doing, *George Washington Gomez* claims the “working” kind represents a reality that does not correspond to the mass-mediated image. Within this discourse of authenticity intimated in the narrator’s commentary is a critique of the simulated image of the real cowboy purveyed by the Western. Given that the movie Western cowboy Don Pancho admires is almost certainly the Anglo hero conventional to the genre, the comment implies a deconstruction of the cowboy as an originally Anglo figure. Within Americanist discourse, the cowboy as original American historically figured the standard of manhood and nationhood.¹ Thus, issues of race and nation are implicated in the juxtaposition of the real and unreal cowboy. In light of the juxtaposition between his ecstatic fixation on the Western fantasy produced by the

¹ For more on how the cowboy reifies the relationship between manhood and nationhood and its imperialist politics, see Kaplan.

film industry and the unnoticed presence of real “working” cowboys, Don Pancho’s trance suggests the power of the popular cultural mediation of the frontier myth to disconnect the modern Mexican subject from the context on which his or her marginalization in the present is based. Aware of the popular West’s disconnecting power, Americo Paredes’s *George Washington Gomez* (ca. 1936, p.1990) contests the taken-for-granted “authenticity” of the popular Western’s vision of history throughout the story in an attempt to explore the social pressures the cultural apparatus exerts upon the formation of early twentieth century Mexican-American subjectivity.

The narrative centers on the bifurcated cultural development of Mexican-American George Washington Gomez, commonly referred to as Gualinto, as he progresses through his education from the border town’s local elementary school to his return from the nation’s capitol as a college-educated and legally-trained government agent. Paralleling the official education that imparts its Anglo-centric vision of United States history is the informal education of Gualinto’s Mexican-Tejano folk heritage. He receives this informal education at home from his maternal uncle Feliciano, who has taken over the role of father-figure due to the untimely death of Gualinto’s father Gumersindo. As he dies from gunshot wounds inflicted by Texas Rangers, Gumersindo requests Feliciano keep the circumstances of his murder hidden from Gualinto so that he may not seek revenge. Reluctant to grant the request because of his past affiliation with the Rangers’ adversary *los sediciosos*, Feliciano ultimately consents to hide the truth. Despite the culturally harmonious intention of the last request, the Anglo-American state, its agents and purveyors of culture, and cultural productions denigrate Gualinto for his Mexican-Tejano identity. The support of his mother Maria and Feliciano notwithstanding, Gualinto suffers the indignities of discrimination whether at school from both teachers and students or at a local

nightclub called La Casa Mexicana. Even within the insular Mexican-Tejano environment of his family home, racial tensions with Anglo-Texans manifest in his sister's pregnancy. Embarking on a quest to regain the family honor Gualinto ultimately but unknowingly confronts a secret of his family's past when he accidentally kills his Uncle Lupe, the notorious leader of the seditionist movement. The revelation strains his relationship with Feliciano, but in the end prompts him to continue his education at college. Though the details of his time at the University of Texas and after are not recounted, they occur between the fourth and fifth part of the five-part novel. It is during this unaccounted for time that Gualinto completes his assimilation to Anglo-American culture figured by his degree, marriage to an Anglo woman he met while at the university, and final return as a spy for the U.S. government.

In *George Washington Gomez*, Americo Paredes considers the threat represented by the "formal" history of the American West in popular culture to the memory of "a complete and legitimate Mexican-American persona."² That official history enjoys a discursive presence due to its mass mediation through mechanisms of the cultural apparatus such as public education and consumer entertainment in the form of print and film productions. These productions that circulated in popular culture parade as unqualified historical truth. The "formal" history of the American West conveys an ideological discourse characterized by a racially exclusionary Anglo politics. The story of Gualinto's education, both academic and personal, demonstrates how the discursiveness and racial politics of "formal" history affects the formation of Mexican-American subjectivity. In an attempt to undermine its influence, Paredes contests the conventionally accepted "formal" history of Texas' conquest by Anglo-America, in particular that history's

² For more on the relationship between the corrido and Paredes's historical perspective, see Morin, "The Life and Early Works of Americo Paredes" 7 and Saldivar, *The Borderlands* 35-38.

positioning of the Alamo as a formative moment of Texan independence from foreign (i.e. Mexican) oppression.

Through the story of Gualinto's education, Paredes explores how the popular cultural treatment of this history as "officially" American produces "authentic" identities for persons of Mexican descent. Of specific concern to Paredes are the implications of a Mexican-American subjectivity formed in a mainstream popular culture. This popular culture validates Anglo nationalism as authentically American. Generally, Anglo-American nationalism is reified in the frontier heroes of popular culture.³ Through my reading of *George Washington Gomez*, I argue Paredes maintains that for the emerging Mexican-American subjectivity, identification with a Mexican-Tejano culture, figured in the novel by a particular kind of machismo characteristic of the folk ballads from the border, is impossible to sustain despite the appeal and function of that folk culture.⁴ The untenable appeal of a singular Mexican folk culture occurs in part because the cultural apparatus of the Anglo-American mainstream has the power to generalize Mexican subjectivity and so deny the social legitimacy, or, in other words, authenticity, of the place of Mexican-Tejanos, and more broadly, "legitimate" identities of Mexican-Americans in United States society. A result of the de-legitimization of a Mexican identity as an American identity is

³ Among other values the Western embraces, Deborah Madsen includes national identity and white racial superiority. For an elaboration of how the Western hero is the vehicle for these values refer to Madsen 124.

⁴ Hector Perez writes, "The philosophical depth evinced in the novel is Paredes's lifelong insistence that Mexican-American folklore is rooted in the clash of cultures" (33). Though Paredes sees the clash as Mexican and Anglo-American in general, I propose that the relations of folk to popular culture constitute a particular and crucial aspect of that clash.

the historical denial of Mexican folk cultural experience in the West. Paredes implicates the popular cultural dissemination of Anglo-Americanist stereotypes in the de-legitimization of Mexican identity in U.S. society. The stereotypes emerge from and circulate within the Western history exhibited in print and film media, a cultural construct widely presumed to be authentic. Consequently, these stereotypes promote the formation of a Mexican-American subjectivity through the disavowal of its folk cultural legacy. Moreover, the figuration of Mexican-Tejano identity primarily through the experience of Gualinto that the novel offers as representative of modern border subjectivity requires complication given its almost exclusively masculine bent. Indeed, while recognizing the seminal contributions he has provided to the field of Chicano/a and Cultural Studies, contemporary scholarship acknowledges the gender limitations of the patriarchal anticolonialism figured in the logic of *George Washington Gomez*.⁵

Working from an Ethnic Studies approach, the majority of the critical literature about *George Washington Gomez* interprets the formation of the title character in the context of the Mexican-Tejano folk culture. Critics agree with Ramon Saldivar's recognition of the novel's "critical theme": "the struggle between English and Spanish for mastery inside one individual" (*The Borderlands* 166). For George Lipsitz and Russel Rodriguez, the border vernacular and folk culture expressed in the novel's stylistic homage to the *corrido*—the border ballads that emerged from the conflict between Mexico and the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century—contextualize this struggle for mastery. In his 1998 study of the novel, Hector Perez captures the gist of the critical literature on *George Washington Gomez*: "this novel's overall vision . . . seems to be that major, significant social change is unaccomplishable" (44)." Jose

⁵ For a discussion of the gender limitations of the patriarchal anticolonialism present in Americo Paredes's literary and critical works, see Gonzalez 127-156.

Limon elaborates, “For Chicanos, then, there is no way out of this labyrinthine social construction according to this novel’s naturalistic scheme of things” (165).

The labyrinthine social construction to date has been generally conceived as Anglo-American. An objective of this chapter is to nuance the social construction of an Anglo-American environment as depicted in the novel that problematized the formation of Mexican-American identity and rendered its performance untenable in U. S. society. The ideological shaping of Anglo America can be credited, at least in large part, to the narrative scheme and associating symbol system of the frontier myth. Frederick Jackson Turner first laid claim that westward movement was the distinguishing feature of American character. New Western Historians such as Richard Slotkin and Patricia Limerick have exposed the presumed Anglo identity of American character featured in the historiography implicated in the Turner thesis and the Othering of non-Anglo ethnic experiences of the West. In the introduction to the first critical anthology in the Postwestern Studies series *True West: Authenticity and the American West*, Matthew Handley and Nathaniel Lewis elaborate:

And for popular interpreters of American experience in the West, the West has often been the legitimating source and sanctifying ground of American authenticity. With the grandeur of its landscapes seeming to point for man in the nineteenth century to providential design, and with the ‘rugged individualism’ and democratic strength of character needed, according to Turner, to settle the wilderness, “westerling” in the vast spaces of the American West came to stand in for white Americans’ notion about what essentially defined their authentic difference. Such images were as rhetorically and politically useful to Ronald Reagan as they continue to be for the selling of tobacco and automobiles. (6)

Paredes's book, however, challenges the conventional claims to "American authenticity" propagated by popular Western texts. Indeed, the novel seems to reconsider the notion of "authentic difference" on which assumptions about American character were made. If American character within the frontier myth was perceived to be white, more specifically Anglo, then the act of westering became an act of definition by negation as the white settlers confronted that which was not American, the Other. Conventional to the Western, the Other has been figured as the Indian, but Juan J. Alonzo reminds us that the Mexican has been commonly positioned as the Other to American identity as well. In his study of the ambivalence of Mexican stereotypes in literature and film, Alonzo declares:

The Myth of the Frontier . . . serves as a flexible, explanatory narrative for the ideological assessment of a historically diverse set of national circumstances, especially American identity during times of crisis or change. And the Western's ability to concretely express national concerns enables a reading of American identity in relation to its most persistent Other, Mexican identity. (55)

Alonzo considers the discursiveness of the Mexican persona in various media from the nineteenth through late twentieth century, thereby making a convincing case for examining popular deployments of repulsive and attractive Mexican stereotypes. As texts, these stereotypes are significant to critical conversations about the ideological discourse built into cultural identity formation. *George Washington Gomez* meditates on "formal" history from the perspective of the Mexican as the Other and does so by reconsidering the racial dynamics between Anglo and Mexican personas represented in the popular West. Paredes revises the "formal" history with irony: the fiction that is Gualinto's story reports the real horrors of the true West and does so

with techniques the narratives of the “fake West” deployed to assure its audience of its authenticity.

George Washington Gomez is set in a traditional Western landscape, features characters typical of traditional Westerns, and deploys formal elements of the Western, specifically the rhetoric of authenticity.⁶ Paredes interweaves various historical accounts that provide a history alternate to the one purveyed by mainstream Anglo-America’s joint apparatus of the state and popular culture. Preceding the description of Jonesville provided below is an historical vignette that firmly entrenches a proto-Mexican presence in the Lower Rio Grande Valley prior to what appears to be Anglo-American settler colonialism. The Spanish colonists had founded the location as Morelos, “[t]hen came the Comanches and the *yanquis* [Yankees]” (35). Implicated in this history is a Hispanic claim to the land, albeit one based on colonialism, not aboriginality. Though in a Lockean sense that parallels the logic of frontier expansion, Paredes seems to attribute primary ownership to the Spanish settlers who worked the land to develop “the little colonial town” into a “prosperous city” prior to the arrival of the Anglo-American settlers and even the indigenous population.

For more than half a century Jonesville remained a Mexican town, though officially part of the United States. A few English-speaking adventurers moved in, married into Mexican landowning families, and became a ruling elite allied with their Mexican in-laws. But Spanish remained the language of culture and politics, and Mexican money was legal tender in local commerce. Then came the railroad early in the 20th century, and with it arrived the first real-estate men and the land-and-title companies,

⁶ For a developed understanding of the rhetoric of authenticity in the print Western, see Lewis 7 and Slagle 121.

and a Chamber of Commerce, of course, which renamed the little town “Jonesville-on-the-Grande” and advertised it to suckers from up north as a paradise on earth: California and Florida rolled up into one. Mexicans labored with axe and spade to clear away the brush where the cattle of their ancestors once had roamed. To make room for truck farming and citrus groves. [sic] And the settlers poured in from the U.S. heartland, while Mexicans were pushed out of cattle raising into hard manual labor. It was then also that Jonesville-on-the-Grande came to have a Mexican section of town, and it was this section of Mexican barrios that Feliciano Garcia sought once he reached the limits of “Honesbil” [Jonesville]. (Paredes 36)

The “adventurers,” installation of the railroad, and boosterism of the real-estate men are all conventions of western narratives typically signifying the westward advancement of Anglo-American civilization. Additionally, the historical style of the passage, which is typical of others prevalent in the novel, suggests the authenticity of the narrative. Ironically, this style mimics the practices of popular Western texts, many of which also attempted to claim a measure of legitimacy by appealing to historical accuracy. Postwestern scholar Nathaniel Lewis writes, “we need to recognize that western literature is frequently, perhaps fundamentally, about authenticity. The history of western literature (authors, texts, and readers) is the history of ‘the production of the real,’ to borrow a phrase from Jean Baudrillard. And no feature of western writing is more prominent, celebrated, or misleading than its realism” (Lewis, *Unsettling* 7). The repeated distinctions between the real and the fake made by Feliciano along with historical notes prefacing chapters and matter-of-fact asides breaking up the narrative action can be read as an effort on the part of Paredes to present *George Washington Gomez* as an authentic story of

segregation and unjust oppression of Mexicans in the Southwest, a counter-narrative to the master-narrative of Anglo-American civilization for which the Western stands.

While it reproduces the rhetoric of authenticity characteristic of Anglo narratives of the West, the novel refutes the traditional Western's hyperreality, particularly the racial logic of its Anglo-Americanist historiography. While some have footnoted the influences of Hollywood Westerns on the popular imagination contributing to the "formal history" that Paredes openly contested and abjured, there remains room for elaboration on the significance of the popular West as a context for ethnic identity to Paredes' work.⁷ The novel contests assumed notions of the "True West" (or in Limerick's terms the "oft-romanticized Fake West") held in the popular imagination and thereby performs the task of contesting its authenticity, a practice characteristic of Postwestern Studies. For this reason, the novel should be of interest to scholars of Western Literature. This Postwestern method acknowledges stylistic riches of the novel yet to be appreciated and in a way that offers a useful context to the discussion of ethnic subjectivity. My approach, which I see as a union of Postwestern and Ethnic Studies, illuminates how vexed Paredes envisioned the relationship between the popular West and the formation of ethnic subjectivity.

Contemporary to the chronological setting of *George Washington Gomez* (1914-1940s) and during the time Paredes was writing the novel in the middle to late 1930s, popular culture circulated stereotypes of Mexicans. The stereotypes gained widespread cultural currency and authenticity through the discursive means of reproduction offered by the mass media. Through discursive reproduction, an image gains the dubious credit of "truth" (Handley and Lewis, *True West*). Over time and with repetitive distribution, depictions of Mexican stereotypes that ranged

⁷ For more on Rangers and Cinema see Jose Saldivar, 169-170.

from the romantic to the criminal became popularly accepted identities for people of Mexican descent. The images were by no means born out of the mechanisms of the modern mass media. Rather, they originated in various nineteenth century settlers' accounts of the frontier such as Zebulon Pike's. From these accounts, the stereotypes then made their way into popular adventure Western fiction of the late nineteenth century, in particular Beadle's Library, and then into the film Westerns and other mass media of the early twentieth century.⁸

As a popular cultural commentary, Alonzo's work on the representation of the Mexican in film Westerns between 1910 and 1941 contextualizes Americo Paredes' folklore research that intended to overturn legendary stereotypes about Mexicans and Anglo Texans too often taken as historical truth. Alonzo states:

[The Western] is not a genre of monolithic vocality, as its creators and admirers would like to think. The Western's wavering quality, in fact, is evidenced by its very overt attempt to declare the moral preeminence of its hero, the white Anglo male. The greater the effort to declare the unassailability of this subject position is a measure of its anxiety. The Western, then, must grapple with an anxiety over its origins or influences. The genre's logic ultimately depends upon a set of values and iconography that are isomorphous with one of its principle Others, the Mexican male, who is often depicted as a "greaser" or "badman." (64)

⁸ While some "positive" stereotypes, such as the Latin Lover, are common, the "negative" images of the Mexican greaser abound in the Western adventure fiction, films, and newspaper accounts of the Revolution; for a discussion of these stereotypes and the problem of the positive-negative stereotype spectrum, see Alonzo 6-7.

Indeed, *George Washington Gomez* subverts the regime of truth ordering the Western and its associated history. Paredes contends popular fiction and cinema made the legend of the Anglo-American cowboy into a received historical reality of the United States. To summarize Paredes, the Anglo Texan historian stereotyped the Mexican as cruel, cowardly, treacherous, thieving, and racially inferior due to his mixed-blood; conversely, Anglo Texans saw themselves as a superior breed of American and the Ranger as the culminating expression of that superiority (Paredes, *With His Pistol* 16). The admiration of such men as Theodore Roosevelt, “devotee par excellence of novelistic machismo,” gave authoritative credence to the cowboy’s legend (Paredes, “The United States, Mexico, and Machismo” 28).

With good reason, it has long been assumed by scholars that the work of Americo Paredes has sought to overturn the unquestioned credibility of the Anglo mainstream’s history of the American West. Non-fiction and fiction alike have proved for Paredes to be platforms for contesting the official history of Anglo-American hegemony. His 1958 critical masterwork *With His Pistol in His Hand* offered extensive analysis of the *corrido* of Gregorio Cortez, a mid-nineteenth century border ballad born out of the territorial conflict between Mexico and the United States. From that *corrido*, Paredes expanded on the political and cultural significance of Gregorio Cortez’s resistance to the Texas Rangers. Among other things, the death of Cortez demonstrates, according to Paredes, the brutality of the Rangers obscured by “formal” history; thus, *With His Pistol in His Hand* debunks the legendary heroism of the state-sanctioned unit. Of the Rangers, Paredes writes, “Their basic techniques of ambush, surprise, and shooting first—with the resultant ‘mistake’ killings of innocent bystanders—made them operate at times in ways that the average city policeman would be ashamed to imitate,” (Paredes, *With His Pistol in his Hands* 28). Because traditional readers perceived *With His Pistol* as an affront to the truth of the

Texas Rangers, Paredes experienced hostile backlash. So deeply entrenched was the presumed authentic heroism of the Texas Rangers, that one disgruntled reader threatened to pistol-whip the author.⁹ Central to Paredes' critique of the Texas Rangers was esteemed historian Walter Prescott Webb. Paredes writes:

In *The Texas Rangers* Professor Webb notes that on the Border after 1848 the Mexican was 'victimized by the law,' that 'the old landholding families found their titles in jeopardy and if they did not lose in the courts they lost to their American lawyers,' and again that 'the Mexicans suffered not only in their persons but in their property.' What he fails to note is that this lawless law was enforced principally by the Texas Rangers. It was the Rangers who could and did furnish the fortune-making adventurer with services not rendered by the United States Army or local sheriffs. And that is why from the point of view of the makers of fortunes the Rangers were so important to the 'pacification' of the Border. (*With His Pistol in his Hands* 31-32)

The revelation of the Rangers' indiscriminate violence subverts the moral feature of the Anglo hero, thereby questioning the ideological discourse of the popular legend. By undermining the morality of the Anglo hero, Paredes' work questions the validity of stereotypes of the popular Western, particularly its racialization of the dualistic struggle between good and evil, white and dark, cowboy and Indian, ranger and bandit greaser.

As a variant, the ranger shares in the cowboy's popular appeal and both figures of frontier masculinity, according to scholars, reify American exceptionalism, but Paredes undermined the established belief that the figure foundational to American character in the Turnerian model was an "original;" rather, the cowboy is an Anglo knockoff of the Mexican *vaquero*. Academic

⁹ For an account of this episode, see Morin, "The Life and Early Works" 25.

authority verified and augmented the legend of the Texas Rangers: “In more recent years it has often been the writer of history textbooks and the author of scholarly works who have lent their prestige to the legend” (Paredes, *With His Pistol* 17). In one article published in 1963, Paredes demonstrates how John Lomax in *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (1910) deployed a folk appeal to create the image of the cowboy minstrel as peculiarly Anglo-American. In Paredes’ estimation, Lomax thus helped perpetuate the myth of the cowboy as originating in an Anglo-American tradition. Lomax offered a collection of “folk” artifacts to authenticate the Anglo-American genesis of the cowboy, thereby meeting a widespread market demand for something uniquely American in a high time of xenophobia at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁰ Lomax’s “folk” study provides an example of how academic sources can be put in the service of legitimizing the “truth” of the cowboy legend, a legend that shares its origins with popular culture. To counter the history books, Paredes deconstructed the presumed objectivity of the historical record and so the authority of the historian, thereby revealing the biased racial politics of such accounts. Revising views of the Texas Rangers taken for granted in the Lower Rio Grande region turned the facts of “history” into the fictions of popular legend.

Yet, it is clear from reading *With His Pistol* that such history appeared outside of textbooks as well. Paredes points to other print sources responsible for promoting the Texas Ranger legend, though less “formal” no less significant in their claim to be authentic. Part of the power of academic historians like Lomax and Webb rested in their claims that the legend of the

¹⁰ As the original article was published in an Argentinean journal in 1963, I rely on the authority of Stoeltje’s interpretation and source of translation: “Paredes credits Lomax’s volume with providing the romantic hero called for by nationalism, thus explaining the contribution of folklore to the transformation of the cowboy” (51).

Texas Rangers was based in a folk culture and so authentically American. Paredes, however, disputes the authenticity of the legend of Texas Rangers by juxtaposing the inauthentic with popular print media. Regarding the beliefs and attitudes of the Anglo-Texan, Paredes writes, “This legend is not found in the cowboy ballads, the play-party songs, or the folk tales of the people of Texas. Orally one finds it in the anecdote and in some sentimental verse of non-folk origin: it is in print—in newspapers, magazines, and books—that it has been circulated most” (*With His Pistol* 16).

Print sources were not alone in perpetuating the Texas Rangers legend. Paredes does not overlook the popular power of film as well. Regarding the aforementioned brutality of the Rangers, Paredes found that approach to be glamorized in theaters: “The ‘shoot first and ask questions later’ method of the Rangers has been romanticized into something dashing and daring, in Technicolor, on a wide screen, and with Gary Cooper in the title role” (*With His Pistol* 28).¹¹ After analyzing a nineteenth-century historical account of the “shoot first” method, Paredes concludes that the representation of the Ranger in the popular imaginary is a false one: “But this picture of seven Texas Rangers, feeling so defenseless in the face of two Mexicans that they must fire at them on sight, because the Mexicans might be mean and shoot at them first, is

¹¹ Indeed, Gary Cooper did play a Texas Ranger in his first Technicolor picture titled *Northwest Mounted Police* (1940). In pursuit of a murderer, Cooper as ranger Dusty Rivers finds himself in western Canada in the middle of the 1885 Northwest Rebellion, a battle to form a separate nation desired by both the mixed-blood Métis (a people of French and Native heritage) and the Natives; the Northwest Rebellion of the Cooper film and the seditionist movement of the Paredes novel present a provocative parallel.

somewhat disillusioning to those of us who have grown up with the tradition of the lone Ranger getting off the train and telling the station hangers-on, 'Of course they sent one Ranger. There's just one riot, isn't there?'" (*With His Pistol* 29).

Through the *corrido*, Paredes found a folk form of resistance to Anglo-American hegemony and its historiography peculiar to the culture of the border region. An area whose racial politics were dramatically shaped by the Mexican-American War, the Lower Rio Grande has been a site of violent conflict between the United States and Mexico from the mid-nineteenth century through the early part of the twentieth century. Prior to the Treaty of 1848, the Anglo-Texans had been encouraged by the Mexican government to move into north Texas in order to push back the indigenous Indian population. As time passed, the Mexican government could not effectively enforce its policies for integrating the growing Anglo-Texan population with the Mexican regime. The storied Texas revolts at the Alamo and Goliad in the 1830s and the triumph of the United States over Santa Anna's forces at San Jacinto resulted in the extension of Anglo-American control in the area. Under dispute was how far that control extended. Despite the Mexican government's protests, Anglo-America expanded beyond the Nueces River to the Lower Rio Grande valley, the site officially established as the border by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848.¹²

While the treaty may have settled the question of who owned the land, it unsettled the political identity of the border people of Mexican descent in the region between the Nueces and the Rio Grande. Cultural conflicts between Anglo-Texan settlers and Mexicans were common in the decades prior to the treaty. As a result of these conflicts, the Texas Rangers were formed in

¹² For an overview of U.S. Expansionism and the border region's transition from a ranching economy to U. S. capitalist economy, see Morin, *The Legacy of Americo Paredes* 10-20.

the 1830s to preserve the capitalist interests of the Anglo settlers; in 1915, the Rangers halted the efforts of the *Sediciosos*, Mexican revolutionaries attempting to form the border region into a republic independent of Texas. The *Sediciosos* mobilized in response to the modernizing factors that transformed the region from a ranching economy to a capitalist agricultural industry to the detriment of the Mexicotexan population. The development of the railroad in 1904 facilitated commerce with the United States. Irrigation pulled water from Mexico to Texas, thereby enabling the agricultural business to flourish. Finally, the Mexican Revolution caused migrants to seek refuge in the region.¹³ Serving the interests of the capitalist agri-business machine, these refugees provided a cheap source of labor (Morin, *The Legacy* 17). These factors created a tension along this border region that erupted into the seditionist conflict with the Texas Rangers between 1915 and 1917: “Texas’ new elite created an economic system that was designed to protect their interests as farmers and to exclude the border folk. As more and more rancheros began to lose their land, and vaqueros, tenants, and artisans were displaced from their jobs, many

¹³ Commonly characterized by historians as a crisis of modernity, the Mexican Revolution occurred as a result of Porfirio Diaz’s regime (1876-1911). Devoted to the modernization of the state, the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz instituted policies intended to industrialize Mexico and extend opportunities for capitalist enterprise to the United States and Europe. Diaz meant for Mexico to become a player on the world economic stage, to be both a competitor and trade partner with the United States. A consequence of ushering in modernity through his dictatorship was the unfair allocation of wealth to the landed elite. The resulting peasant revolution sought a redistribution of wealth and a return to the pre-modern ways of the hacienda system.

Mexico-Tejanos felt that they had no other choice but to fight, thus transforming the Lower Rio Grande valley into a virtual war zone between 1915-1917” (Morin, *The Legacy* 19).

Such conflicts with the Rangers effectively convey the border peoples’ sense of dislocation made official in the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. For historian Josefina Saldana-Portillo, the language of the treaty leaves behind a legacy of political dislocation for people of Mexican descent living in the United States. The treaty separated the Texas-Mexicans from the Mexican government, invalidating their status as citizens of Mexico. Yet, it did not guarantee enfranchisement for all in the territory newly acquired by the United States. Upon signing the 1848 treaty, the Mexican colonists believed the *gente de razon* would be enfranchised; this meant only “savages” would be excluded, a term that referred to certain Indians who did not accept Spanish rule (Saldana-Portillo 145-6). From the perspective of the United States, however, only white Mexican males could be enfranchised. According to the treaty, citizenship would be authorized by the new state of Texas and the newly acquired territories, and determined via a process of racial identification. Government agents probed annexed Mexicans for traces of Indian or black traits that would disqualify their enfranchisement. This process of racial probing led to Mexicans disavowing their Indian and black cultural heritage in order to claim a white identity so as to gain the political and civic rights of U.S. citizenship (Saldana-Portillo 148). Saldana-Portillo claims that this practice and the legacy of state determination of whiteness as the basis for enfranchisement apply to the Southwest United States and so should be considered as a significant context for any critical evaluation of *George Washington Gomez*:

A native of Texas himself, Paredes wrote *GWG* while living in his hometown of Brownsville, in the heart of the segregated Rio Grande valley. Thus he would have been personally acquainted with this requirement for identification and disavowal that had become an integral

part of racial formation among Mexican Americans in the Southwest. Indeed, the novel documents the life of a man fatefully named George Washington Gomez who comes from the Rio Grande valley and who is trapped in just such a psychic structure of identification with and disavowal of Indian difference. (Saldana-Portillo 149)

Indeed, the title character is enrolled in the Jonesville public educational system that is, to some degree, segregated. Gualinto begins his academic training in a classroom with only children of Mexican descent until one day he advances into the upper academic track that is pre-dominantly white. He is one of four Mexican-Americans to graduate from the Jonesville senior class. The story of Gualinto is a border *bildungsroman* wherein his loyalties to his indigenous Mexican roots conflict with the official Anglo-American institutions of power that determine his social position and mobility. Despite ultimately disavowing his Mexican identity, Gualinto is haunted by dreams that evoke the history of the conflicts leading up to the Treaty of Guadalupe and its articulation of whiteness as an essential condition of Mexican enfranchisement.¹⁴

The dreams of Gualinto's Mexican past haunting his whiteness in the present convey the problem of ethnic subject formation. The narrative goes to great lengths to explore Gualinto's struggle to form an authentic Mexican, then American identity that is troubled and complicated by stereotypical representations of Mexicans as immoral backstabbers or bloodthirsty bandit

¹⁴ Of a dream Gualinto has in his adulthood as an almost fully assimilated Mexican-American, Ramon Saldivar writes, "On the verge of quite self-consciously losing himself as a twentieth century premovement *mexicano* into the American melting pot, Gualinto's political unconscious returns in the form of a collective memory from the nineteenth century—instantiated by the sense of self offered by his father's, his uncle's, and his mother's lives—to offer an alternative ideology and different self-formation" (*The Borderlands of Culture* 173).

revolutionaries who threaten United States society. In order to examine the story of the formation of Gualinto's ethnic identity as a narrative capable of subverting the authenticity of the popular West and its ideological discourse, I take my critical cue from Juan J. Alonzo's application of ethnic subject formation in his study of the ambivalence of Mexican stereotypes: I too will consider how "[s]tereotypical subversion is made possible by the psychic process of subjective 'splitting,'" (9). The story of Gualinto appears an ironic disarticulation of colonial authority that subverts the power of the colonizer while admitting to the tragedy of conquest. Subversion occurs as the narrative exposes the violence of ethnic subject formation facilitated by the ideological discourse of popular cultural stereotypes of "authentic" Mexican and American identities.

Revealing how the state via compulsory education institutionalizes the racist logic of Anglo-American historiography, the general class response to Gualinto's oral report demonstrates the widespread, official inculcation of this "formal" history, popular approval of it, and hostile resistance to its detractors. In his oral report to Miss Barton's United States history class, Gualinto criticizes the history book's version of the Franco-Mexican War: "Our history book, . . . Our story book says it was the United States that made the French get out. That is not true. . . . It was the Germans, who were getting ready to whack the tar out of the French. So Napoleon III pulled out his troops and left Maximilian holding the bag . . . That's all folks" (159). The initial re-categorization of the history book to "story book" unveils what Gualinto believes to be fiction parading as historical fact, that being the story of beneficent American intervention in the liberation of Mexico from foreign influence. To further deconstruct the factual presentation of fiction, Gualinto's oral report assumes an informal vernacular; thus he subverts the reverence for formal history that implies its presumed truth. In response to Gualinto's report,

Ed Garloc claims, “But there can be only one side that is right, can it? I think that’s our side. We [the United States] have always been juster and more truthful than any other country” (160).

Another student labels Gualinto a Bolshevik. Both statements reveal how Gualinto’s revision upsets not only “formal” history’s favorable portrayal of United States intervention, but also the popularly presumed moral justness of the U.S. government’s actions.

When Gualinto compares German war crimes to those of the Texas Rangers, Ed Garloc, in his defense of the Rangers, cites mass media-based accounts of Mexican criminality. Ed Garloc retorts, “Look in the court records, or in the newspapers even. Who gets arrested all the time? Mexicans,” (Paredes, *George Washington Gomez* 161). Perhaps more telling still is Gualinto’s inability to counter Garloc’s claim and proof: “‘It’s not true! It’s not true!’ shouted Gualinto, raising his voice because he knew it was true but could think of no argument to refute it.” The repetition of the childish denial with which Gualinto refutes Garloc’s indictment of Mexican character betrays a lurking belief that Mexicans are criminal if the authoritative credibility of the mass media is granted. Gualinto’s assumption that newspapers present a fair representation of Mexicans goes unchallenged, thus demonstrating the novel’s awareness of the power of the mass media to shape images in the popular mind.

The predominantly Anglo student population of Miss Barton’s United States history class reflects the mainstream approval of the Texas Ranger, while the group of Mexican students represent the negative perspective of the “rinches” held by the border culture. The mass-media perception of Mexican criminality that Ed Garloc cites is part of his defense of traditional history, a defense that Gualinto provokes with the oral report. Indeed, stereotypes about Mexican criminality circulated by modern newspapers that originated in the popular Western imaginary confront Gualinto in high school. Stereotypes of Mexicans appearing in early twentieth-century

newspapers serve as the popular standard against which Gaulinto struggles to form his ethnic identity.¹⁵

The very issue of Mexican criminality in the mass media emerges out of Gualinto's oral report of the Franco-Mexican War revealing that, for Paredes, the modern mediation of the "bad" Mexican involves wrestling with an Anglo-American historiography of the West. One of the four Mexican students in the class reveals Garloc's reason for defending the Texas Rangers: "His father's a *rinche*" (161). Ed Garloc clarifies, "My father's a deputy sheriff . . . and I'm proud of it." As mentioned previously, Garloc represents the mainstream support of Americanism, its patriotic fervor for the beneficence of American action in the political world and the defense of the representation of that moral probity through "formal" historiography. An essential belief of this Americanist position on morality is its racial politics that presumes Anglo-American probity and non-Anglo immorality, evidenced in this case by the mass mediation of Mexican criminality. The revelation of Garloc's "rinche" father suggests not only the regional expression of that Americanism, but also its historicity, or, in other words, how that stereotype of the Mexican "badman" is a legacy of the Anglo-American patriarchy. Furthermore, the occurrence of that revelation in the border idiom, reflective of a counter ideology, casts doubt on the unimpeachable

¹⁵ William Randolph Hearst used his media conglomerate to denounce the Mexican Revolution that broke out in 1910. Revolutionaries threatened the land he owned in Mexico and thus Hearst launched a media campaign that operated on the stereotypes of the greaser bandit common to the popular dime novels of the middle to late nineteenth century. For more on how the Hearst syndicate rendered the Mexican and the Revolution a threat to United States society, see Alonzo 48-49.

morality of the manifestation of Garloc's Americanism given the indiscriminate violence of the Texas Rangers known among the Mexican-Tejano people. Through Garloc, Paredes links the legacy of the Texas Rangers, particularly their prejudiced law enforcement, to the "formal" history disseminated by the educational apparatus of the state; the historical culturing of these Americanist views as evidenced by the student majority clinging to the mainstream history of the class textbook contextualizes the criminalization of Mexicans in the mass media. In this passage that demonstrates the inter-relational dynamic between "formal" history and popular "fact," Paredes reveals how the mass media, if nothing else print journalism, can acquire the spurious ethos of dispassionate academic inquiry and thus historical truth; and, conversely, how the discursive authority of "formal" history rests not on the integrity of its intellectual investigation, but on its appeal to popular sensationalism.

With the Texas Ranger functioning as a pop cultural icon of the Anglo-American student body in "formal" history and popular culture, the popular image of the Indian serves in much the same way for Gualinto during his earliest days at Jonesville Elementary. On the first day of school, Gualinto finds the boys in the schoolyard playing "cowboys and Indians" (111), not an unfamiliar game to Gualinto, who plays Indian in the banana tree jungle of his backyard (50). On the day Feliciano brings Gualinto to school to be registered, Miss Cornelia, the lower first-grade teacher, directs Gualinto to bring a tablet and pencil to class. She does so just after asking Feliciano if Gualinto's "strange name" is an Indian one. To school he brings a "brand-new Red Indian pencil tablet" that he clutches tightly under his arm (111). The tablet marks the ambivalence of Gualinto's native identity that is both kitsch and authentic, Indian and indigenous. The mass-produced image of the "feathered Indianhead" (114) exemplifies the Indian of popular culture, a reduction of the Indian into the archetypal savage antagonist to the

cowboy of the frontier myth, a myth practiced at school by the children at play. Simultaneously, Gualinto is ordered to purchase that tablet on registration day, a day wherein Miss Cornelia suspects Gualinto is of Indian ancestry. Yet, the conclusion she draws from her investigation is tenuous because she relies on Feliciano's statement, one that meets the expectations of her preconceived notions about Indian traits. Drawing upon these preconceived notions, Feliciano falsely attaches indigenous meaning to Gualinto's name in order to disassociate him from the Anglo-American patriarchy the name is meant to recall, but also because he believes the name "Gualinto" will be more easily claimed in public by his nephew as an indigenous rather than Anglo-American reference.¹⁶

Though well-meaning in his intent to identify Gualinto with an indigenous legacy that bespeaks his own affiliation to a political rebellion against Anglo-American imperialism, Feliciano alienates Gualinto socially by asserting his indigenous identity to Ms. Cornelia. A public school teacher with the administrative power to register students on behalf of the school, Cornelia operates as an agent of the state, in a manner reminiscent of the post-Treaty government agents, probing for traces of Indian identity as a means of determining the appropriate class assignment symbolic of social integration. Indeed, the consequences for Gualinto are grave. Cornelia assigns him to lower-first grade, a class of Mexican students that she subjects to constant abuse. Being assigned to lower-first grade symbolizes his disenfranchisement and epitomizes the system of segregation status quo for Jonesville Elementary, an exemplum of

¹⁶ Though I read the Indian origins of Gualinto's name as a positive assertion of indigenous identity, a move rife with anticolonial implications, Ramon Saldivar chooses to read the move negatively, as a way to avoid strategically the subject of Gualinto's Anglo-American name. For more see Ramon Saldivar 159-160.

institutional education along the Texas border not only in the early part of the twentieth century but also of a large part of the history of Mexican-American relations in the Rio Grande region. Through Cornelia probing for and Feliciano identifying Gualinto's Indianness, Paredes consolidates divergent experiences of indigeneity—one based on an historically racist policy sponsored by the United States government and the other on political resistance to it—into the pop cultural sign of the Indian and so disarticulates the monolithic power of the stereotype by loading it with ambivalence.

When Gualinto's Indian identity is read in the context of Miss Cornelia's abuses it becomes clear that Paredes means to indict the educational wing of the state apparatus for the indigenous experience of oppression. His experience in the Jonesville lower-first grade is made painful by Miss Cornelia, who berates, humiliates, and abuses the lower-first students, all of whom are Mexican. On one occasion, Gualinto writes a love letter to Maria Osuna, a fellow classmate from a well-to-do Mexican family with Spanish pretensions. When Miss Cornelia discovers the letter, she makes Gualinto read it aloud to Maria Osuna's class and then beats him. In a brief history that serves as pretext to the humiliation of the love letter, the narrator introduces the reader to Maria Osuna's family. Her grandfather initiated the family's assimilation into American society by way of claiming a Spanish identity: "When the 'cattle barons' came down like a plague on the Mexican ranchers of south Texas, Grandfather Osuna had not opposed them. He joined them. And he prospered. . . . Grandfather Osuna himself was no longer a Mexican. He was now a Spaniard" (138). To recall Saladino-Portillo's reading of *George Washington Gomez* as it relates to the racial logic of the 1848 Treaty, identifying oneself as Spanish equates to claiming a white identity so as to enable enfranchisement into United States society. If Maria Osuna is Spanish and so has a white identity, then, through his affection for her,

one that will continue to his senior year of high school, Gualinto expresses his desire for whiteness. Yet Gualinto articulates the expression of that white desire on a sheet of paper from the Indian tablet, an ambivalent sign of his indigenous identity (140). Having been written on the Indian tablet, the letter suggests that Gualinto publicly claims and denies an Indian identity at the same time, a profession that both asserts and questions the relationship of modern Mexican American identity to its indigenous past. The Indian tablet, being a pop cultural representation of indigenous identity and thus an interpretation of that identity through an Anglo-American mass cultural lens, seems an appropriate tool to articulate his desire to assimilate.

However, the popular cultural sign of the Indian, as much as it could be an instrument of Anglo-American mass culture, could also provide an opportunity for articulating likeness through difference. A boy at school whom Gualinto befriends named Orestes Sierra has a variation of Gualinto's Indian tablet—Orestes's tablet shows an Indian on horseback: "Orestes took the tablet [from Gualinto] and looked at the feathered Indian head on the red cover. 'Mine has an Indian on a horse,' he said (114). Orestes's recognition of the Indian image common to their book tablets signifies his acknowledgment of a shared indigenous identity. The recognition occurs through a popular culture sign, a commodity purchased for the sake of education. While the tablets reflect the mass cultural appeal of indigenous identity in such popular trends as "playing Indian" or "going native," an issue illuminated by such scholars as Philip Deloria and Shari Huhndorf, the Indians on the tablet covers reflect Gualinto and Orestes' juvenile interpretation of their own Otherness, if not indigenous identity, mediated through the lens of popular culture.¹⁷ Yet this pop cultural understanding of indigenous identity is based on an

¹⁷ "Playing Indian" and "Going Native" imply a set of popular cultural texts, practices, and common interest groups that resorted to an escapist fantasy of returning to the masculine

Anglo-Americanist politics. Over time, as both rise through the ranks of education, their understanding of their indigenous identity shifts to a position that is explicitly anti-Americanist and ethnically nationalistic. Orestes, Gualinto, and two others will make up the Mexican faction of the class in high school called “*El Cuatro*.”

Given that the indigenous association with their Mexican identity couples with a vocal resistance to Anglo-American historiography (i.e. Gualinto’s oral report) and, therefore, institutional assimilation, *El Cuatro* signifies a proto-Chicano movement. Gualinto’s allegiance to *El Cuatro* signifies his embrace of an indigenous-Mexican identity and his rejection of the Anglo-American logic that predicates enfranchisement on whiteness. Despite Gualinto’s desire to be Mexican and white, social circumstances render the two identities mutually exclusive: *El Cuatro* insists Gualinto stop allowing Maria Osuna to exploit his book knowledge to improve her own grades even as she urges Gualinto to cut ties with them in order to be more socially acceptable. An event organized by Miss Barton at a tourist stop in nearby Harlanburg called La Casa Mexicana stages Gualinto’s racial dilemma:

But the tourists still went through Harlanburg to Jonesville. So Harlanburg’s answer was nightclubs like La Casa Mexicana, which was a fancy stucco building made to resemble a Mexican jacal. Inside, Gualinto had heard, the walls were plastered with paintings of Mexican Indian scenes imitating the murals of Diego Rivera. You reached the dining room through a curio shop filled with pottery, stone heads, sarapes, steer horns, and other

primitive. Back-to-nature narratives and practices were characteristic of white middle-class men at the turn of the century concerned with the effeminizing influence of civilization; for more on the masculine primitive cultural phenomenon, see Bederman, 22-23, Rotundo, 227-8, 232; the Deloria and Huhndorf.

such stuff. Beyond, people said, there was a small jazz orchestra dressed in silver-studded charro suits, and all the women patrons thought the orchestra leader was too cute for words in his black charro suit and his shining-pink bald head. He couldn't stand the heavy sombrero more than fifteen minutes at a time. The waiters at La Casa Mexicana were all dressed in white cotton drawers like Mexican peons. All in all, La Casa Mexicana was as Mexican as it could be without having any Mexicans around. Or so people said. (Paredes, *George Washington Gomez* 171)

La Casa Mexicana is less a tourist trap on the way to Jonesville and more an adventure in hyperreality. La Casa exploits the Spanish Fantasy Past to attract American tourists. This fantasy of imperialist nostalgia romances the era of Spanish conquest as a happy bygone time that is viewed from the vantage of an Anglo-American civilization whose superiority supplants the inferior Spanish civilization.¹⁸ From its position of modern superiority, Anglo-America can remember the Spanish colonial era in a mode tinged with ambivalence: at once Anglo-America honors the Spanish past, but at the same time celebrates its own imperial power. The tourist admiration for the “cute” orchestra leader in his *charro* suit represents the Spanish Fantasy Past. Yet, the *charro* suit remains the sole signifier of the ruling Spanish Dons. The Mexican *jacal*, the Diego Rivera-like scenes of Mexican Indians, and the waiters in Mexican peon garb fill the scene with artifacts of the population under Spanish rule. As the new patrons, and figurative *patrons*, of Mexican servitude, the American tourists replace the Spanish Dons

¹⁸ Renato Rosaldo developed the concept of imperialist nostalgia, an ennobled tribute to the memory of a colonized subject by the colonizer that implicitly glorifies the colonial act and the superiority of the colonizer's civilization; for an elaboration, see Rosaldo 107-122; for a more developed explanation of the Spanish Fantasy Past, see Kropp, *California Vieja*.

and thus La Casa restages the local history of Spanish imperialism through Anglo-American commodity fetishism. That La Casa packages the Spanish Fantasy Past into a commercial establishment, especially one that caters to tourists, alienates and objectifies Mexican identity by rendering it an exotic commodity to be sampled occasionally.

With La Casa being as “Mexican as it could be without having any Mexicans around,” Paredes demonstrates how popular cultural representations of Mexicans problematize the authenticity of Mexican identity. While Gualinto can gain access to La Casa undetected due to his fair skin color, thereby recalling prior instances when he and his father evaded the discriminating gaze of the Texas Rangers, the other members of *El Cuatro* are not permitted to enter. The refusal to admit *El Cuatro* to La Casa bifurcates Mexican identity into a desirable American popular cultural version of Mexican identity based on the Spanish Fantasy Past and an undesirable Mexican version based on lived experience of marginalization and associated with an indigenous experience. The bifurcation presents a conflict for Gualinto that splits his Mexican-American subjectivity into an indigenous Mexican and kitsch American version. Ultimately, he forgoes admission to La Casa and leaves Maria Osuna. That the split occurs at La Casa, a place in the design of a Mexican *jacal* like the one Gualinto was born in, signifies his second birth into a resistant experience that embraces the ethnically self-authorized version of Mexican-American character.

This second birth marks the beginning of Gualinto’s temporary acceptance of indigenous Mexican identity, an acceptance that has been embattled due to the prevalence of the popular West in his juvenile development. Since Gualinto was a child, the popular West has been conveyed to him through the state and popular cultural apparatus. Though the classroom has been devoted to his Americanization (147-150), Gualinto and other Mexican classmates have

resisted explicit attempts to absorb the Americanist ideology of the popular West in the vehicle of formal history. While he may have recited stories of American frontier heroes like Davey Crockett and patriarchs like his namesake George Washington (135), he gradually learns to reform those Anglo-American ideological performances into moments to declare pride in his Mexican identity: “So in assembly, while others were singing, ‘We’re proud of our forefathers who fought at the Alamo,’ Gualinto and his friends would mutter, ‘We’re proud of our forefathers who killed Gringos at the Alamo’” (148).

However, the popular West as mediated in movies and other popular texts also manages to exert an influence on Gualinto from his most naïve days of childhood to even his more skeptical moments of young adulthood. When Feliciano bemoans the past loss of his family’s land and cattle to the *ranches*, Gualinto looks to scenes from film Westerns to resolve the wrong: “‘But we could’ve gone inside the house,’ persisted Gualinto. ‘And we could have shot them down as they came riding up, just like this: Ping! Ping! . . . Feliciano waited patiently until Gualinto got all the pings out of his system. ‘That’s the way it happens in the movies. But it just didn’t happen like that,’” (102). The cinematic solution young Gualinto offers reflects his early belief in the Western as a viable resource for imagining solutions to ethnic problems. In imaginatively righting the family’s wrong, Gualinto presumes he and his uncle are the heroes of this Western shoot-out fantasy. To be the heroes protecting the homestead, Gualinto must realign the racial positions of the conventional Western so that the Mexican “bad men” act the role of heroes traditionally reserved for white characters. When Feliciano warns Gualinto that such gunfight scenes are more fantasy than reality, the admonition might also be understood as a caution against fantasizing about the legitimacy of Mexican heroism in early twentieth century

border towns, given the available ethnic stereotypes circulating in the mainstream American popular imaginary that influenced, not insignificantly, social reality.

Yet, Gualinto can just as easily imagine himself as a *rinche* in a juvenile fantasy of revenge. To imagine himself as a figure of villainy in the cultural record of the border folk implies the multi-layered, ambivalent, and malleable nature of the relationship between racial identity, performance, and contextual perspective that Gualinto's border identity has come to exemplify. On one occasion, his mother applies shortening to his hair, the smell of which draws jeers from boys sitting nearby. After experiencing this humiliation, Gualinto fantasizes about revenge on his family:

They would be sorry, all of them. He would go away and become a big bandit. Or a *rinche* maybe. And then he would come back and kill people. He would kill that sissy, but not his sister. And he would kill the chief of police who kicked Meno Menchaca after he was dead. He'd kill everybody and burn houses down and his mother would come out crying and asking him not to kill her too. Then he'd sneer coldly and ride away on his big black horse all covered with shiny silver things. Yes, that sissy's sister would notice him then, all dressed up like a *charro* in black and gold and silver. And Uncle Feliciano . . . No. He couldn't be a *rinche*, after all. Uncle Feliciano hated the *rinches* and he'd have to kill him too. Gualinto did not want to do that, so he couldn't be a *rinche*. But he could fight against the *rinches* and get killed. . . . Then everybody would be sad and they would cry. And his mother would be sorry for putting shortening in his hair. (62-63)

Given that representations of bandits in mainstream American popular culture at the time were primarily associated with Mexican identity, Gualinto's choice of the *rinche* over the bandit to execute his vengeance upon his family overdetermines the fantasy with racial ambivalence.

Choosing the “bandit” is akin to choosing an Anglo-American popular cultural version of a Mexican identity, while eschewing that “bandit” identity could be taken as a rejection of that mainstream vision. On the other hand, opting for the *rinche* may seem like Gualinto is choosing an Anglo-American identity over a border identity; yet, the adoption of that identity in the Mexican-Tejano idiom (“*rinche*” instead of “ranger”) suggests, at the very least, a conflicted preference for a white identity, if not an identification with his border heritage by claiming its version of Anglo-American identity that is antithetical to the conventionally white frontier hero omnipresent in dime novels, pulp, film and other contemporary popular media. After all, the story, written from a border cultural perspective, has identified the *rinche* with a white figure of Mexican persecution. The ostensible choice of “bandit” or “*rinche*” itself reflects how Gualinto’s white-or-brown dilemma reflects the intercourse between an Anglo-American popular culture and Mexican-Tejano folk culture that reveals, instead, a white-and-brown duality.

The very vision of the *rinche* Gualinto imagines, despite the peculiarity of the term to the border culture, appears less like the white adversary of the folk *corrido* and more like the Mexican “badman” of the silver screen. The costume seems cinematic in its “shiny” finery when compared to the gritty appearance of the real *rinches* introduced at the beginning of the novel.¹⁹

¹⁹ For the purpose of comparison, consider the dust-sodden description of the *rinches* at the opening of the novel: “Their horses’ hooves stirred the flour-fine dust, and it rose and covered their beards, penetrated down their shirt collars despite the blue bandanas around their necks, lay in a thin film on their rifle-stocks and the big handles of their revolvers. One was a middle-aged man with a John Brown beard; two were sour-looking hardcases in their thirties; the fourth was a boy in his teens, with more dust than beard upon his face. At first sight one might have taken them for cutthroats. And one might have not been wrong” (9).

Furthermore, the *rinche* costume he wears (“all dressed up like a *charro* in black and gold and silver”) recalls the *charro* band at Harlanburg that contributes to La Casa Mexicana’s artificial, romantic performance of Southwest history; thus, the *charro-rinche* costume positions Gualinto’s self-fashioning within a mainstream pop cultural fantasy of Mexican identity. Gualinto’s dramatic turn from his mother gestures to the drama of Westerns, while his black horse, a sign that extends the immorality of the villain typically casted as a racial Other, marks him in the role that he adopts within that narrative as the villain. Yet this *charro* costume and villainous character combine to form the *rinche* that is typically the Anglo hero of popular Western narratives. Gualinto’s fantasy then still originates from a Mexican perspective well aware of the abuses perpetrated by the Anglo-American *rinches*. However, Gualinto’s fantasy aggregates Anglo-American signs of the popular West and Mexican-Tejano folk elements into a composite sign that reifies the conflicts of forming a modern Mexican-American subjectivity from within a richly diverse cultural system.

In Gualinto, the mainstream Western and border folk cultures merge in a developing Mexican-American subjectivity; Feliciano, however, perceives the popular West at odds with his Mexican-Tejano heritage as evidenced by his willingness to dismiss Gualinto’s gunfight scenarios, and it is this aversion to the popular West that ends Gualinto’s *rinche*-revenge fantasy. Gualinto admires Feliciano’s ways. As a young boy, “Gualinto loved to imitate his uncle’s walk. He dreamed of a day when he would be able to wear cowboy boots and long pants and ride horses” (66). Imitating his uncle would suggest Gualinto’s certain absorption into the border culture of the Rio Grande valley, that he too would adopt his uncle’s hatred for the *rinches* and devotion to the cause of establishing a Mexican republic in Texas. Yet, embedded in Gualinto’s expressed desire to imitate his uncle are not the practices of Mexican nationalism, but,

ostensibly, a nascent commodity fetishism for the popular trappings of the West. Consider that his longing for a day to wear cowboy boots and long pants, and ride horses, when taken alongside his imitation of movie gun battles, and *rinches* indicates that Gualinto sees his uncle through the romantic lens of the popular West.

In light of his vaquero days, the experience of which conflicts with Gualinto's juvenile understanding of the historical Southwest portrayed by Hollywood Westerns, Feliciano represents a model of Mexican-Tejano manliness, the kind of *machismo* celebrated in the *corrido* and that Paredes seemed to be aware was under assault by the modernity of American popular culture, a subject he gestures to in his critical writings. Charles L. Briggs notes Paredes' attention to the communicability of folk and popular culture, in particular the misrepresentation of folk culture by popular culture: "Paredes points to the complexity, heterogeneity, and contested nature of the pragmatics of the circulation of cultural forms, the practices that move folklore across scales, genres, and borders of various sorts, placing it in dialogue with cultural forms that *purport* to refer to the same objects (such as Gregorio Cortez) that circulate in newspapers, popular culture, legal and political discourses, and literature, and so forth," (Briggs 97, italics mine). In his essay "The United States, Mexico, and Machismo," (1967) Paredes deploys a comparative analysis of machismo, nuancing its representations in folk and popular culture across Mexico and the United States and discussing at length the shifts in macho identities according to media politics. Of special interest, Paredes tracks the development of the Mexican macho, its popular cultural recasting in opposition to its American parallel the cowboy, and the function of the pistol as a chief symbol in the cultural mythology of machismo. Paredes concludes that the common factor leading to the appearance of the macho, whether Mexican or American, regardless of time, is the presence and passing of a nationalistic movement wherein

the fragility of a forming Republic is fueled by an intense xenophobia that reifies the hegemonic values of that nationalism into a masculine figure of heroism. *George Washington Gomez* anticipates the critical framework of machismo Paredes lays out in the essay that would appear more than thirty years after the novel was written. Indeed, as part of the narrative of his *bildungs*, Gualinto encounters Anglo-American popular cultural stereotypes of Mexican machismo, disarticulating each after the encounter. Yet, his *bildungs*, one facilitated by the Anglo-American cultural and state apparatuses, leads him to embrace the articulation of United States machismo, a choice that necessarily requires discarding Mexican-Tejano machismo. Given the nationalistic construction of machismo, the story of Gualinto becoming a man is the story of his attempts to become American, thus white, as he grows from a Mexican-Tejano youth at Jonesville Elementary to fully assimilated Mexican American young adult. The story of Gualinto's assimilation occurs only through the disavowal of his Mexican culture, a process of competing nationalisms that Paredes suggests is a function of the intercourse and ultimate transition of folk culture to popular culture.

Though Feliciano has acted as the arbiter of Southwestern experience debunking the stuff of movies as fantasy and imbuing his vaquero experience with the authority of reality, one memory he recalls to Gualinto reflects the interpolation of the popular West with the real West. Upon alluding cryptically to the story of Pete Severski and a Ranger standoff, Feliciano captivates Gualinto's imagination, which initially comprehends Feliciano's personal story of the West by relating it to the movie Western:

“There must have been some big gun battles,” Gualinto said.

“Gun battles? It wasn't a picture show. You'd better get it out of your head, all that trash about standing in the middle of the street and shooting it out. I've seen a lot of men shot,

and if any of them were killed in what you might call a gun battle, it was because somebody's plans didn't work out right. That happened in Pete Severski's case, but it was rare. I've seen more men shot in the back than died with their guns in their hands. (233)

Feliciano elaborates his argument against the false mass mediation of the West with its Anglo slant by revealing how Sheriff Boyer, hailed by the newspapers now, was a coward then who attempted to shoot Pete Severski in the back: "Pete saw him in the mirror and shot first. In haste and pretty low. He hit Boyer in his private parts. Boyer must have been quite a sight running down the street with both hands on his fly! . . . And that's why I [Feliciano] laugh now when the papers carry stories about how brave Boyer was in the old days" (234). Indeed, the story of Pete Severski anticipates Paredes' critique of the Ranger legends. In *With His Pistol in His Hand*, Paredes had debunked the inflated praise of Rangers by TV shows, newspaper reports, and scholarship. The story undermines the masculinity of the fake West deemed "true" by mass mediation. Feliciano highlights how Pete Severski shot Sheriff Boyer in the "private parts," thus making his narrative into a subversive revision of the mass mediated West; the subversion appears apt in that the Sheriff, a conventional Western hero vaunted by contemporary mass media as a celebrated figure of manly bravery from "the old days," is emasculated. In this way, Paredes recognizes the gendered implications of authenticity in mass mediated accounts of the "true" West.

The standoff that ensues between Pete and the Rangers occurs because the Mexican police force in Jonesville-on the Grande were required to hand in their badges, a result of their affiliation with the Red Party who recently lost power in the city's elections. A deputy refusing to budge, Pete first unmans Sheriff Boyer in a way that befits Paredes' critical narrative of popular cultural legend; then he confronts the Texas Rangers, waiting outside the saloon, El

Danubio Azul. In the same vein of the Old Western milieu set by the picture of Custer's Last Stand that hangs in the saloon (73), Pete takes a regular patron named Martin Goodnam hostage to keep the Rangers at bay and so creates something even Feliciano admits resembles a "picture show" standoff. Keeping bar in the back, Feliciano intervenes, standing between the Rangers' pointed guns and Martin Goodnam. Feliciano guides the pair out the back door leaving just enough cover for Pete to make his escape. Feliciano claims the Rangers didn't shoot at him because he was a member of the Blue Party and though "The *rinches* wanted to kill [him] then, . . . the deputies took [his] side saying [he] was just saving the life of another Blue [Martin Goodnam]" (234). Yet, Feliciano reveals "I thought I might get Severski out of there alive," which he does because Pete "was a good friend of [his], even though [Pete] was a Red" (233).

In this story that debunks the dramatization of honorable manhood performed in the gun battles of film Westerns, Feliciano restages the drama of the Old West rather than disavows it. However, rather than perpetuate the lionization of Anglo-American frontier masculinity or even reverse it by vaunting Mexican masculinity, in the standoff Paredes reveals a complex narrative of the West where racial conflict and boundaries intertwine with government politics in ambivalent ways that disarticulate the reductive racial stereotyping deployed by mass entertainment in popular culture. Feliciano's West is populated with Mexicans like Pete "Pedro" Severski and Joe Dashielle, a Chief of Police whose murder provides the backdrop to Pete's story, and whites like Martin Goodnam, later referred to as Don Martín by the Mexican community, whom he panders to for political power, a practice Feliciano suggests he was indulging in prior to the stand off. These border identities merge in Feliciano's experience of the West as if to suggest that despite cinematic portrayals of the Old West pitting white cowboys against savage and spineless Others, border subjectivities, multiple and conflicting, existed.

Furthermore, the conflict between the Mexicans and the Rangers cannot be reduced to a racial binary of Mexican Other against Anglo-American since the Mexicans appeared to have white surnames, a point Feliciano seems to dismiss with nonchalance, but Gualinto cannot quite overcome. Regarding Joe Dashielle, Feliciano states, “The chief of police. He was a Mexican, see?” “With a name like that?” [Gualinto responds]. “Yes. The police were almost all Mexicans,” says Feliciano (233).

Indeed, from the moment of Gualinto’s conception the novel applies pressure to the reductive notion that race corresponds to nation, specifically white to American and brown to Mexican. On their way to the birth, Gumersindo and Doc Berry encounter the Texas Rangers in search of the *Sediciosos*. In the tradition of United States racial surveillance stemming from the 1848 Treaty, Rangers probe Gumersindo for physiological signs of affiliation with the seditionist movement. Surprised that Gumersindo is Mexican because of his white skin, red hair, and freckles, ranger MacDougal admits to Doc Berry, “But it’s getting kinda hard these days to tell the good ones from the bad ones. Can’t take any chances these days,” (12). His problematic association of race with morality notwithstanding, the Ranger remains perplexed when faced with a white Mexican; thus, from the beginning of Gualinto’s story the novel continues to explore the tensions between the rigid application of a monolithic racial order of nationhood by the dominant Anglo-American culture and the border subject whose cultural complexity continually resists reductive categorization.

Moreover, the racial surveillance performed by the Rangers prefigures Gualinto’s role as a secret agent for the United States government spying on the political activities of his Mexican-Tejano friends, an act of racial betrayal that parallels the cultural treachery his sister Maruca performs when she sleeps with Buddy Goodnam, the son of local Anglo-Texan patriarch Martin

Goodnam. Having been a *Sedicioso* and serving as the surrogate father and acting head of the Gomez household, Feliciano represents patriarchal anticolonialism. In order for the patriarchal resistance Paredes envisioned to be effective, its heteronormative gender prescriptions require coherence. If the surrogate-father Feliciano signifies the patriarch, then Maria functions as the traditional mother within this gender paradigm. John Moran Gonzalez claims, “Paredes’s representation of Maria as the standard bearer of traditional Texas-Mexican culture reflects the role assigned to women within anticolonial nationalisms” (152). The relegation of the woman to the domestic rather than the public sphere is common to both imperialism and anticolonialism. In directing the domestic sphere, Maria acquiesces to the gender dynamics of patriarchal anticolonialism thereby supporting masculine agency within the public sphere, a sphere from which women are absent. Yet, transgressions of these normative prescriptions can destabilize and ultimately undermine patriarchal resistance. Being pregnant with the child of the son of an Anglo-Texan, Marucca commits an act expressing the inability of Texas-Mexican patriarchal anticolonialism to regulate Tejana sexuality, thus weakening its resistance and strengthening colonial authority. Her act appears “outside the parameters of [Chicana/o] nationalism [and so] betray[s] the nation in the refusal to subsume female existence to national imperatives” (152). Consequently, the family in the novel represents the “gendered limit of Texas-Mexican anticolonialism.”²⁰

The standoff with Severski and the Rangers demonstrates the admired masculinity of Feliciano, who intervenes on behalf of a Mexican friend to thwart the representatives of Anglo-Texan imperialism. The masculinity on display in this scene conveys an anticolonialism through

²⁰ For an elaboration of how the absence of women from the public sphere supports Paredes’s notion of patriarchal anticolonialism, see Moran Gonzalez 130-131, 150-153.

machismo, a proto-Chicana/o nationalism featured in the *corrido* that suffuses the traditional resistance to Anglo-Texan imperialism. In regaling Gualinto with this story, Feliciano justifies his patriarchal authority through the memory of his bravery in conflict with the *rinches*. Furthermore, the scene arranges the conflict between two patriarchal orders represented by Feliciano and the Rangers, anticipating the present day conflict between Feliciano and Don Martin. Indeed, if Feliciano's recounting of the Pete Severski incidents involving Sheriff Boyer and the Rangers are about the emasculation of Anglo-American nationalism through Mexican-Texan resistance, then the occasion of Maruca's pregnancy is about the emasculation of that patriarchal anticolonial machismo. Maruca subverts the patriarchal order for which Feliciano stands by carrying the baby of the enemy, a shame upon the family honor which he is powerless to avenge, as his friend and lawyer Lopez-Anguera reminds him (Paredes, *George Washington Gomez* 236-237). Thus, despite the logic of the novel that holds anticolonialism in the public sphere to be a masculine affair, the story narrates with tragic regret the loss of this Mexican-Texan patriarchal authority in the modern era.

A dramatic standoff between the "Old West" of popular culture and the "true" western experience of life on the border, the story of Pete Severski contextualizes the problem of Maruca's unexpected pregnancy by the son of Don Martín. Thinking that he can solve the problem of Maruca being an unwed mother, Feliciano confronts Don Martín calling upon the aforementioned rescue from the Pete Severski standoff to gain a conference with him (Paredes, *George Washington Gomez* 229). Don Martín resists the idea of marrying Buddy to Maruca, forcing Feliciano to expose his political persona: "What you mean is that you don't want your son to marry a Mexican. You lying, two-bit politician! You whore-mongering pillar of virtue! The friend of the worker! The Mexican's loyal helper! You low-down *sanavabiche!*" (231). In

the identifiably Anglo-American tradition of Protestantism, Don Martín cites the Bible to protest the union: “Thou shalt not let thy cattle gender with a diverse kind. Thou shalt not sow thy field with mingled seed.” Yet Don Martín capitulates once Feliciano threatens to jeopardize his next election. Feliciano’s plan to expose Don Martín as a disingenuous politician guilty of pandering to his Mexican constituency reveals that Mexican political identity, dependent upon utility to local governance, does not guarantee social inclusion due to racial difference perceived by the Anglo-American hegemonic order. Don Martín’s unwillingness to allow his son to marry the daughter of a Mexican family would reveal his appeal to a Mexican constituency as little more than political pandering. Indeed, Don Martín’s decision to have Buddy marry Maria Osuna, the descendent of a “Spanish” family, secures his political persona and adheres to his Anglo-Protestant tenet. Alternatively, for Maria Osuna to choose Buddy instead of Gualinto, is to intimate her preference for an Anglo identity over a Mexican one. While Maria Osuna’s decision carries on the legacy of her family’s choice to identify as Spanish and so white, Maruca’s union with Buddy also reflects a desire to be white on the part of a modern Mexican-Tejana. Indeed, Maruca does marry a white man from California and does not return to visit her Mexican family at story’s end. The confirmation of Maria Osuna’s marriage to Buddy by the local newspapers (238) implicates popular media in reinforcing the privilege of white identity and the denigration Mexican identity. Not insignificantly, on the day the family learns of Maruca’s pregnancy Carmen entertains herself reading a column from her favorite periodical, one of the Hearst papers (222). The Hearst papers published rampantly xenophobic content, in particular articles that condemned the revolution with prejudiced portraits of Mexican character.

While Gualinto has already voiced his resistance in the classroom to Americanist historiography, an historiography that Paredes suggests indicts the mass media, Gualinto begins

to combat popular cultural reifications of Mexican machismo not unlike the widely regarded figure of the Mexican criminal that his classmates, on the basis of newspaper reports, cite as true. These popular cultural reifications include the knife- and pistol-wielding macho common to a variety of media from nineteenth-century dime novels to twentieth-century newspaper accounts that evolved into the Mexican revolutionary villain of early twentieth century film and was vilified by William Randolph Hearst in his media syndicate (Paredes, "Unites States, Mexico, and Machismo" 230-234). On the journey to the formation of his Mexican-American subjectivity, Gualinto encounters each of the aforementioned reifications of pop cultural machismo in the forms of Chucho and Lupe. Recalling his youthful imitation of Feliciano and so his practice of Mexican-Tejano culture, Gualinto begins the journey by following Feliciano's attempts to defend the family's honor and continues in the defense of his family's honor from the American stereotypes of Mexican culture represented in popular culture as "machismo." Chucho and Lupe are American versions of Mexican machismo that Gualinto faces along his journey to self-revelation. The journey ends when at the novel's conclusion Gualinto confronts both the United States version of machismo, his father-in-law the retired Texas Ranger, and Feliciano, the Mexican-Tejano version of Mexican machismo. For Paredes, Gualinto's journey to defend the family honor, a response to the problem of Maruca's pregnancy, reflects the conflicted birth of modern Mexican-American subjectivity.

Gualinto represents the bifurcation of the first order of Mexican Machismo brought about by Anglo-American popular culture. The people at the *baile* function as a source of authentic Mexican-Tejano culture. In defense of the family's honor, Gualinto engages Chucho, a barrio thug who had been mocking Maruca, in a knife fight. Chucho is a Mexican-Tejano from the same neighborhood as Gualinto. Yet, Chucho appears to be a grotesque display of machismo

reminiscent of the knife-wielding greaser common to popular cultural representations of Mexicans in dime novels and movies. Indeed, Chucho as the Mexican Macho should be considered in the context of Paredes' analysis of the two images of the knife-wielding Mexican Macho. The Mexican folk tradition celebrates the nobility of fighting with a knife; however, from the mainstream American perspective, as indicated by "formal" history and popular culture, the Mexican with the knife was a dishonorable renegade or coward.²¹ In "The United States, Mexico, and Machismo" Paredes writes, "[In the North American tradition] the knife was made the weapon of the renegade, of the coward; the pistol became the weapon of the macho, the brave man. A paradox? It is, in truth, but it agrees with the tendency to change an unpleasant reality by inverting it, the very thing that is at the base of machismo" (230). Paredes characterizes the knife-coward association as a "paradox" due to that strain of American folklore that lionizes knife-wielding heroes like Davy Crocket or James Bowie (229). Paredes goes on to note how "[i]n much of Mexican folklore the steel blade retained its character as a suitable instrument for admirable deeds, and it was considered a very Mexican weapon as well." [even as late as the example he cites from 1930] (230).

As an "authentic" act of resistance to American mass culture, Gualinto's machismo is validated, receiving the approval of the guests at the *baile*. The narrator observes, "Everyone

²¹ In an example that combines formal history with a popular Western figure, Paredes cites the following passage about Billy the Kid from "a so-called history book": "The Kid examined the knives, lying on the ground beside the fire. They were of the finest steel and workmanship. He admired the knives and had an impulse to keep them, but he gave another order. 'Throw these on the coals. Only renegades use knives'" (qtd in Paredes, "The United States, Mexico, and Machismo" 32).

was laughing at a man who had just said that now the *baile* was a success, because no *baile* was a success without at least one cutting” (245). Hector Perez elaborates: “As telling is the fact that the people at the party encourage the violence. In their eyes, Gualinto is a hero precisely for his violence, very much in keeping with the *corrido* thematics; only in this case, the opponent is not a *rinche*, but one of their own” (44). Furthermore, a man observes Gualinto’s indigenous identity: “‘It’s an Indian name’ . . . ‘Aztec’ said a man in spectacles. ‘Like Guatemoc. Am I right?’ ‘Yes,’ Gualinto said eagerly, ‘you’re right.’ ‘Well, come back Gualinto. You are always welcome here. My house is your house’” (Paredes, *George Washington Gomez* 246). The spectacles of the observer bespeak and belie his probing vision that detects the indigenous identity within Gualinto. The revelation of his indigenous origins occurs as a result of the knife fight with Chucho and contrasts with the popular-cultural Indian identity that Gualinto assumed as a child. While his identification with that image of the Indian correlates to his victimization at Jonesville Elementary, Gualinto’s young adult identification with his indigenous heritage correlates to the triumph over a popular cultural stereotype. The determination of indigenous identity is associated with his triumph over Chucho, a popular perversion of Mexican machismo, indicating that the knife-fight operates as an act of anticolonial resistance, wherein imperialism is figured in the dominant mass cultural criminalization of Mexican masculinity signified by the *pachuco*. Furthermore, his act of violence receives approval from the *baile* host, a father. In this macho act of anticolonialism, Gualinto attempts to recuperate the patriarchal virility that the now-impotent Feliciano has lost.

While he proudly acknowledges his “Indian” name in the moment, Gualinto fails to embrace and practice this indigenous Mexican heritage afterwards. Gualinto seemingly conquers a popular stereotype of the knife-wielding greaser, and does so, ironically, wielding a knife of his

own that revises the figure of the cowardly criminal stereotype Chucho reifies. Yet, despite his sincere intentions, Gualinto's unwillingness to return to embrace Mercedes and the Mexican-Tejano culture that she and the *baile* represent reveals the ambivalence of his identity. The inner turmoil embodied in the Chucho knife fight betrays the split in Gualinto's subjectivity caused by the racial politics of popular cultural representation.

In a reference that dramatizes how popular culture creates psychic wounds, Paredes connects the Chucho knife fight to the scene of Gualinto's childhood fantasy, a place and state of mind deeply influenced by the popular West. The blood on Gualinto's shirt reminds him of the "sap from a banana bush" that stained his clothes from a knife fight he imagined having with a *rinche* (247). As a child Gualinto imagined fighting a figure of Anglo-American machismo while as a young adult he fights a figure of Mexican machismo popularized in Anglo-American popular culture. Reality mingles with fantasy as Gualinto's real blood conjures memories of the stain of an imagined injury incurred from the battle with the popular West; thus, Paredes offers perspective on, the very real internal conflicts caused by the ones imagined in popular culture. In both episodes, Gualinto uses a knife to fight the *rinche* (an imagined battle with popular U.S. machismo) and Chucho (a real battle with an American pop cultural figure of Mexican machismo). Though Hector Perez claims Chucho "is a convenient substitute for the *rinche* figure," he fails to elaborate the common machismo and the contrasting nationalisms that both figures represent (44). The banana bush suggests that the two figures—the knife-wielding Mexican and the *rinche*—are united not only because both are popular cultural reifications of nationalistic masculinity, each opposing the other, but also because Gualinto attempts in his own psychic battle to reconcile each with the other. Despite his victory over Chucho and the ensuing welcome to the *baile*, Gualinto feels as if he has transgressed the law: "It's--. It's—oh, well. The

law knows about me. I've been in trouble before. If they come snooping around and find me here . . .” (246). Gualinto's powers of articulating an indigenous and thus authentic Mexican-Tejano identity fail him at the moment he disarticulates the pop cultural Mexican stereotype. Becoming a fugitive in his own mind since he never has perpetrated any crime reflects the perception of his own social illegitimacy that persists in his psyche even when he embraces an authentic Mexican-Tejano identity.²² Defeating the stereotype of Mexican criminality represented by Chucho reveals to Gualinto that even embracing an authentic (indigenous) Mexican-Tejano identity, one averse to the threat the popular cultural stereotype of the knife-wielding greaser means to their group identity, cannot shake the stigma of Mexican criminality within Anglo-American society.

Being haunted by the stereotype of Mexican criminality drives Gualinto to confront the reification of the Mexican revolutionary, his estranged Uncle Lupe. Unlike Gualinto, Lupe is an actual fugitive from the law, pursued because he gunned down a ranger. Gualinto inadvertently kills Lupe when he mistakes him for Chucho. Filled with anxiety about Chucho stalking him, Gualinto becomes paranoid. In an escapist attempt to divert his mind, he goes to the movies. Thoughts about the women he sees in the film consume his attention for a time afterwards until

²² Indeed, this is a perception that has been apparent throughout the novel. Most relevantly, Gualinto capitulates to Ed Garloc's mass media-supported charge of Mexican criminality; his sense of illegitimacy is also reinforced by the stories he's heard of his family's historical abuse suffered at the hands of the law evidenced in Feliciano's story about the family's cattle ranch taken by the *rinches*: “The *rinches* took it, then. . . . There were too many of them. And they had the law on their side. Gringo law” (102); also, Gualinto witnessed the law's irreverent treatment of Meno Menchaca's body after his murder and the its failure to pursue the murderers who were just down the street.

his eye catches the movement of a shadowy figure and “a pistol barrel gleam[ing] in the half light” (257). Though Lupe holds the pistol, Gualinto immediately assumes the shadow is Chucho; the fatal mistake connects the identities of the two characters. The change in weapons from Chucho’s knife to Lupe’s pistol is significant given Paredes’ interpretation of the macho. Paredes noted the progression of the Mexican macho from a knife-wielding greaser to a figure “with a pistol in his hand.” As Paredes observes, both figures became more common first in the folk ballads of the border people during the mid-nineteenth century and then in popular culture of the 1930s. The macho implies the defense of nationalism that is threatened because of its passing or by the incursion of a foreign culture. Given that the pistol-wielding macho became more present by 1930 in popular cultural media circulating in both the United States and Mexico, Lupe appears to be the second order of macho. That Gualinto uses a brick to defend himself from Lupe rather than a knife or a gun signifies his unwillingness to inhabit any form of the macho identity, whether it is a celebrated folk identity or a vilified popular cultural identity.

Furthermore, Paredes reveals the changing conflicts that Mexican-Tejanos face in this confrontation between Gualinto and Chucho as Lupe. Gualinto staring down the barrel of the pistol recalls Feliciano’s encounter with a deputized ranger over fifteen years prior. Upon entrance into Jonesville with his sister Maria and her children, Feliciano is harassed by a group of *rinches*. When Feliciano makes a remark one *rinche* interprets as an offense, he sees the *rinche* draw his pistol: “The world narrowed down to focus on that slow-moving hand. Naked, helpless he waited for the rinche to draw and fire. Finally the rinche drew and aimed at Feliciano, who stared at the end of the barrel. Must be a forty-four, he thought, but the muzzle looks huge” (Paredes, *George Washington Gomez* 33). Feliciano’s entrance into Jonesville with his sister’s family signals his new role as family caretaker. In this moment, Paredes depicts a milestone

confrontation between the *rinche*, a variant of the cowboy (the American macho), and Feliciano, the former *vaquero* (the Mexican macho); moreover, Feliciano facing down a *rinche* with a pistol, a sign of technological innovation attributed by mainstream scholars such as Walter Prescott Webb to the Anglo-American winning of the West, Paredes recites the oft-told historical lesson of Anglo-American civilization's superiority marked by technological innovation (Paredes, "The United States, Mexico, and Machismo" 31). Indeed, an almost fully assimilated Gualinto in his adulthood has a dream that revises this technological history wherein he, not Samuel Colt, invents the revolver (Paredes, *George Washington Gomez* 281-282). The encounter complicates the notion that Feliciano forgoes the nationalist struggle to become the patriarch of the family. The fact that ranger violence is not limited to revolutionaries, but also intersects with the world of the Mexican-Texan family, and that Feliciano enacts resistance when he stands up to him intimates the potential for anticolonial resistance within the Mexican-Texan family, though channeled through the patriarch. By choosing to care for Gumersindo's family, Feliciano, yet a rebel to Anglo-Texan authority, exhibits a belief that anticolonial resistance is not limited to military combat, but can also be enacted in folk practices typical of family relations as exemplified through his talks with Gualinto. Processes of cultural transmission to which family dynamics lend themselves include the passing on of oral histories. As evidenced by the corrido, such acts of cultural transmission can reinforce nationalism and inculcate anticolonialism through their performative resistance.

Whereas Feliciano's encounter represents the struggle of the Mexican-Tejano with the Anglo-American to make a domestic life in America, Gualinto's face-off expresses the struggle with modern Mexican-American masculinity as it has transitioned from Mexican folk to American popular culture. Within Mexican-Tejano folk culture, Lupe as the macho revolutionary

is a hero, but, to American popular culture, as evidenced by both the mass mediated representation of the macho revolutionary in newspapers and films, in particular those of the Hearst media syndicate, he is a villainous figure of scorn embodying opposition to Anglo-American ideals. The circumstances of the mistaken identity suggest that identifying with a nationalistic Mexican identity for modern Mexican-Americans such as Gualinto has been complicated by popular culture.

At the high school graduation, Paredes connects Gualinto's fear of embracing an authentic Mexican-Tejano identity to a reluctant desire to accept Anglo-American society. In Paredes' mind, assimilation to Anglo-American society does not guarantee social acceptance, but involves acceptance from the assimilating subject to the cultural terms of the hegemonic order. At Jonesville-on-the-Grande Public School Auditorium, in front of an audience of primarily Mexican families Gualinto receives an honor for his role in apprehending his uncle whom the public refers to by his pseudonym, Arnulfo Miranda. The superintendent Mr. Baggley asks Gualinto to stand before the audience to be honored: "And this boy . . . unmindful of personal danger captured a dangerous criminal so that justice would be done. Ladies and gentleman, we have before us a genuine hero!" (273). The narrator goes on to note that "Mr. Baggley came down from the stage and put into his hand a medal with a ribbon, which he said had been awarded to him for heroism in capturing Arnulfo Miranda." In drawing attention to "genuine" heroism that conflicts with the guilt Gualinto feels for killing the uncle he admires, Paredes questions the authenticity of such displays of popular heroism. Moreover, the kind of heroism Gualinto practiced appears in the service of the Anglo-American state that in the previous paragraph he bemoans for oppressing his family and one that is directly associated with the heroism embodied by the Texas Rangers whom Lupe battled literally and ideologically. In

bringing Lupe to justice, Gualinto completes the unfulfilled mission of the Texas Rangers that sets in motion the events of the *bildungsroman*. In accepting praise for the murder of his own Uncle, the reification of revolutionary Mexican nationalism, Gualinto performs the Anglo-American ideological mission of assimilation before an audience of Mexican-Tejano families, each with its children enrolled in the Anglo-American state's educational system wherein Gualinto learned to accept the historical narratives and so the cultural values of Anglo-America. Despite his apparent resistance, evidenced by his hiding of the medal of honor Mr. Baggley awards him, Gualinto still accepts the commendation from the Anglo-American state, thus becoming an exemplum of assimilation from the Mexican to American cultures.

On the evening Feliciano reveals to Gualinto that Arnulfo Miranda was his Uncle Lupe, the leader of the *Sediciosos*, Gualinto begins to resent Feliciano. Gualinto broods:

[He] looked at his uncle. His uncle, who sat there, an old good-for-nothing without courage, without pride. Who had run away to Monterrey when his father was killed, who had not been man enough to demand an accounting of Martin Goodnam for Maruca's shame. How he hated him! Why wasn't he raised by a man like his Uncle Lupe, a man who really was a man. He would have been proud of such an uncle, just as he had once been proud of the man now sitting in front of him, when he was a little kid and didn't know any better. (263)

Gualinto's hate for Feliciano and admiration for Lupe underscores the problematic search for "authentic" machismo. In his search, he confronts an artificial American version of Mexican machismo—represented by Chucho—that haunts and confuses him, ultimately leading him to destroy what he later perceives to be an authentic figure of Mexican machismo: Lupe. The barrage of popular culture, whether in newspapers or "picture shows," has distorted the image of

machismo to Gualinto so much that, at this moment after Lupe's death, he is blind to the Mexican-Tejano machismo Feliciano embodies and repeats the rejection of this machismo with permanence at the end of the novel.

The two names for Lupe symbolically project divergent perspectives on Mexican machismo, and thus Mexican nationalism, from the Mexican-Tejano folk and Anglo-American popular cultures. On the one hand the name Arnulfo Miranda evokes the folk macho. In "The United States, Mexico, and Machismo," Paredes refers to the name Arnulfo Miranda when speaking of a *corrido* from Coahuila, dated "as late as the 1930s." This *corrido* features a hero of the same name who gets into a gun battle with a policeman. Regarding the singer's enthusiasm for the manliness exhibited in the fatal shootout, Paredes states, "Something remains of the *corridos* on the clash-of-cultures theme, but this also sounds like machismo—presented in a situation like that of a Wild West movie. And there is good reason for the resemblance, since there is a very close relationship between Hollywood and the gun-toting macho, the pistolero" (34). On the other hand, the stories of Lupe Garcia evoke associations with popular culture. When Gualinto first learns that "Arnulfo Miranda" is his Uncle Lupe, he hears Feliciano attest to his shooting prowess: "'He was the best shot in the state of Texas, Lupe was. He could shoot a deer straight through the heart while holding his rifle in the crook of his arm.' Gualinto looked interested for an instant and then began to weep. 'Oh, why did I ever go to that show last night!'" (*George Washington Gomez* 261). Feliciano's memory of Lupe's marksmanship evokes the popular motif of the hawkeye typical of the frontier masculinity celebrated in movie Westerns.²³ From the police, local newspaper, and school, Anglo-American institutions of power that constitute the

²³ Marksmanship is a central and common quality of the Western Hero. For more on traits of the Western hero and the problem of manhood on display in Westerns, see Mitchell.

cultural apparatus, Gualinto receives praise for his apprehension of a “dangerous criminal” and feared member of De La Pena’s *Los Sediciosos* (259, 262, 273). The school superintendent Mr. Baggley publicly confirms Gualinto’s heroism at graduation: “And this boy . . . unmindful of personal danger captured a dangerous criminal so that justice would be done. Ladies and gentlemen, we have before us a genuine hero!” (273). Given this spectacle of heroism and keeping in mind the popular cultural image of the Mexican Revolutionary as “badman,” the praise heaped upon Gualinto by institutions representative of the cultural apparatus renders him into the Anglo hero of the Western.²⁴ Indeed, when he responds to Felciaino’s boast about Lupe’s shooting prowess, Gualinto implies that going “to that [picture] show last night” caused him to kill his uncle Lupe. Yet, in linking the “picture show” to his capture of Lupe, Gualinto laments the act, questioning his purpose. Gualinto’s visible regret exemplifies a lamentable outcome of the intercourse between folk and popular culture, which Paredes seemingly reads as the destruction of folk cultural identity and the popular cultural construction of an Anglicized Mexican-American identity.

Being the figure of the *corrido* that also connotes certain traits typical of formidable characters in popular Westerns, Arnulfo Miranda indicates the modern problem of determining

²⁴ Of the relationship between the villainous Mexican and heroic Anglo cowboy, Alonzo writes, “During this period [1910-1920], the emergence of the Western hero in film required the creation of a character against whom this hero could fight, and the Mexican revolutionary became the Western hero’s nemesis. The period of the Mexican Revolution thus sees the melding of greasers, bandits, and revolutionaries to create the ultimate villain in the American Western,” (18). Alonzo refers to this consolidation of nuanced Mexican stereotypes into one as “the hardening of the Mexican’s representation.”

authenticity, cultural or other. Due to the interpolation of folk and popular culture, Gualinto cannot distinguish the version of Mexican machismo before him, whether it be the macho of Mexican-Tejano folk culture, Feliciano, or the hybrid macho of folk and mainstream American popular culture, Lupe. Paredes offers a bilateral vision of the pop-folk cultural dynamic. Just as he sees the elements of folk culture transition into pop culture, he acknowledges how pop culture could influence his reading of folk culture. For Paredes, the relationship between popular culture and folk culture is reciprocal, not a unilaterally prejudiced misrepresentation, as Feliciano claims, or an authentic representation of history, as Gualinto initially believes the Western “picture shows” to be. While Paredes would make this keen observation decades after writing *George Washington Gomez*, the revelation that Arnulfo Miranda is Lupe Garcia bears out this reciprocal folk-popular cultural relationship. Through the eyes of Gualinto, the reciprocity further problematizes his ontological struggle. The act of murder is multivalent: Gualinto murders Chucho, Arnulfo, and Lupe. Symbolically, he destroys not only the pop cultural first- and second-order macho of the American mainstream, but also at the same time, the folk macho of Mexican-Tejano culture. Despite his proto-Chicano resistance to the mainstream cultural apparatus that embraces indigenous and folk cultural roots, Gualinto as the modern Mexican-American must confront, even if violently, not only how the pop cultural macho is related inextricably to the folk culture that he values dearly, but also how the discursive popularization of folk culture simultaneously destroys it. Thus, the quest for a Mexican-American model of masculinity as an effective mode of resistance eludes Gualinto because that machismo is a construct. As its simulations circulating in popular culture texts that claim authenticity attest, the macho cannot make authentic, as in the sole legitimate claim, claims to anticolonialism in the first place.

Conversely, the *corrido* as indicative of border folk culture problematically celebrates machismo as the ideal expression of anticolonial resistance that discounts the potential for other gendered models of anticolonialism, an expression that Paredes perpetuates and current scholarship has taken him to task for so doing (Gonzalez 130). However, John Moran Gonzalez observes the presence, albeit marginal, of a postcolonial, feminist anticolonialism. As the only high-school-educated *tejana* and director of business operations at “La casita mexicana,” Elodia represents a threat to the Anglo patriarchy that Gualinto has come to defend as a secret agent for the United States government. Functioning as border security, Gualinto monitors the potentially subversive political activities of Elodia and her company who meet regularly at La Casita. Gonzalez writes, “Although marginalized, Elodia’s appearance as a Texas-Mexican civil rights leader in the novel mirrors the historical emergence into prominent leadership roles of tejanas such as Alice Dickerson Montemayor of LULAC and the radical labor organizer Emma Tenayuca. Speaking truth to power, as these feminist foremothers did, Elodia figures the repressed utopian possibilities for anticolonial resistance by Texas-Mexican women not otherwise acknowledged by the narrative” (155).

In the first part of the graduation, when Mr. Baggley rewards him for his act of genuine heroism, Gualinto appears before the audience of Mexican and Anglo families as the exceptional individual who actualizes his father’s wish to be a “leader of his people,” albeit with an ambivalence reflective of his pretension to the Anglo-American ideals that he resists on the grounds of loyalty to his oppressed Mexican-Tejano identity. In the second part of the ceremony, K. Hank Harvey presides over Gualinto’s symbolic commencement into Anglo-American culture. In addition to his scholarship on Texas folklore, K. Hank Harvey is a cowboy; thus, he embodies the Anglo-American mythology, making him an appropriate agent to confirm

publicly this culminating moment in the process of Gualinto's indoctrination into Anglo-American culture. The biographical sketch of K. Hank Harvey plays on the traditional self-made man motif of the frontier myth:

The turning point in his career came when, as a cowboy on a West Texas Ranch, he spent five years of his spare time in research to settle the controversy then raging in the Lone Star State as to what the Mexicans at the Battle of San Jacinto had said as they were cut down by Sam Houston and his buddies. Hank Harvey took no active part in the argument In it [his book entitled *San Jacinto Guncotton*] he definitely established that the Mexicans had said, 'Me no Alamo! Me no Goliad!' before receiving the quietus. A grateful populace acclaimed him, and the University conferred on him an honorary doctor's degree and invited him to teach there. (271)

Through the sketch of Harvey's rise to established manhood originating out of rugged frontier individualism, Paredes probes the admiration for such American myths by popular culture and the educational apparatus, implying a significant correlation between the appreciation of the "grateful populace" and the university. Yet, the racial politics of Harvey's historical method becomes quite clear when the narrator reveals the following: "There was a slight hitch, it is true. Most early Texas history books were written in Spanish, and K. Hank didn't know the language. However, nobody mentioned this, and it didn't detract from Harvey's glory," (271). Casting doubt upon the Anglo-American historiography that Harvey represents, a point underscored by the narrator's ironic note of Harvey's reputation as "the foremost of authorities on the Mexicans of Texas" (270), *George Washington Gomez* anticipates Paredes' extended critique of this scholarship in *With His Pistol*, but it also questions the authenticity of the historical appeals so common to Western texts motivated by Anglo-American politics.

Even as Paredes contests a monolingual historiography, he makes sure to enrich the story of Gualinto with the Spanish idioms, the folk ballad themes and structural elements as narrative characteristics that authenticate the historically marginalized perspective of the border peoples.²⁵ In this way, the Spanish idiom of *George Washington Gomez* functions as a touchstone by which to judge K. Hank Harvey's clumsy, artificial, and disingenuous use of Spanish words. Touches of Spanish that Harvey intersperses in his graduation speech appear superficial stylistic flourishes thereby revealing the purpose he serves as luminary of Texas-Mexican relations:

For K. Hank Harvey filled a very urgent need; men like him were badly in demand in Texas. They were needed to point out the local color, and in the process make the general public see that starving Mexicans were not an ugly pitiful sight but something very picturesque and quaint, something tourists from the North would pay money to come and see. By the same process bloody murders became charming adventure stories, and men one would have considered uncouth and ignorant became true originals. (271-272)

With the authority of academic scholarship behind its Spanish fantasy motif, places of local commerce like La Casa can exploit the memory of local Mexican-Tejano culture to commercial ends with the help of mythopoetic agents like K. Hank Harvey. The mythopoeisis at work in romanticizing the Texas Mexican for the purposes of consumer culture functions in the same way to transform state-sanctioned violence against Mexicans into the legends of the Texas Rangers. The recognition that "by the same process" that Mexicans were rendered picturesque to tourists "murders became charming adventure stories" implies a history of ethnic violence in the

²⁵ The specific stylistic traits of the *corrido* that *George Washington Gomez* evokes include the subject of the Mexican-Texas border conflict, recording for historical purposes, landscape descriptions, and appeals to machismo; for a study of the *corrido* traits in the novel, see Perez.

commodification of Mexican-Tejano folk culture, and perhaps Mexican culture at large. In part, the process occurs because a frontier mythopoetics deployed in the commercial and folk sectors of popular culture disguises the violation of the Other. Through this juxtaposition, Paredes implicates popular culture in the colonial process. The convenient correlation between popular culture and academic scholarship becomes more apparent with the understanding that Harvey's historical counterpart, the noted folklorist J. Frank Dobey, contributed a column regularly to a local newspaper and that Harvey himself was a figure celebrated by the papers. Given his background as a scholar peddling his intellectual wares for the local media organ, thereby weaving a fantasy of Mexican culture amenable to consumer culture, K. Hank Harvey embodies the nexus that is academic scholarship, folk culture, and popular culture.

Yet, psychic complications bespeaking unresolved conflicts in the splitting of his subjectivity due to the colonizing power of the popular West make Gualinto's commencement into a life of Anglo-American society anything but seamless. In addition to the violent disavowal of Mexican-Tejano folk culture symbolized by the award conferred upon Gualinto for the apprehension of Arnulfo Miranda, the moment of Anglo-American initiation that Harvey signifies also involves the embrace of an Americanist historiography exemplified by the Alamo. Harvey builds his reputation as the foremost expert on the Mexicans of Texas on his revelation of Mexican denial at the Alamo. The parody of English "Me no Alamo . . . Me no Goliad" that Harvey cites articulates the denial of Mexican identity located in those two sites of Mexican military victories over the Anglo-Texan revolutionaries in the 1830s. The revisionist practice of Anglo-American historiography perpetrated by Harvey's scholarship memorializes the negation of Mexican being in its historical record. The quote implies the negation of being with the absence of the verb "to be" from the parody of Anglophonic speech. Indeed, Harvey recalls this history of Mexican

denial at the commencement when he invokes the spirit of the Alamo dwelling within the graduates. The Anglo-American monolith relayed to the bi-cultural audience unabashedly glorifies the memory of colonialism at the podium and certifies its formal power through a state education that makes reliving the memory of colonial subjectification an official credential for entering into Anglo-American society.

When invoking the memory of the Alamo, K. Hank Harvey places the burden of the colonial past upon Gualinto. The narrator conveys the pain that the memory of the Alamo evokes in the Mexicotexan: “The Mexicotexan knows about the Alamo, he is reminded of it often enough. Texas history is a cross that he must bear. In written tests, if he expects to pass the course, he must put down in writing what he violently misbelieves. And often certain passages in the history textbook become subjects of discussion” (150). Gualinto’s evident resistance to the Americanism of Harvey’s invocation to the graduates to remember the Alamo and its patriarchs like Sam Houston, James Bowie, and Davey Crockett is the product of this painful memory instantiated through state education. This resistance notwithstanding, Gualinto accepts the diploma certifying an education that has proven to be decidedly Anglo-American in its historiographic politics thus warranting assimilation, and meets the approval of the Mexican populace as evidenced by the predominantly Mexican audience that imbue the moment of graduation with cultural significance (272).

The historical memory of the Alamo causes such pain that Gualinto has a nightmare. His nightmare exemplifies the psychic effects that the “formal” history of the American West has on the formation of ethnic subjectivity. After the fiasco of La Casa Mexicana’s Spanish fantasy past, Mexican hyperreality, and its racial policing, Gualinto returns home:

Gualinto went straight to bed and tossed restlessly for most of the night. Toward morning he fell asleep and into a nightmare in which he was running, running through the chaparral, bleeding and with his clothes torn to tatters. Finally he emerged into a moonlit plain and kept running, running, pursued by a mob of people, all of them slavering like mad dogs and howling, ‘Alamo! Alamo! Alamo!’ He woke to a gray December dawn, the howls still ringing in his ears. (175)

Gualinto’s nightmare recalls the story Feliciano shares from his cowboy days about a rabid madman running through the chaparral (88-89). While on a cattle ride with some cowboys, Feliciano and the group settle camp for the evening when he hears the sound of wailing coming from the direction of the chaparral:

The last of us had barely mounted when it broke out of the chaparral and came directly toward us. It was running on two legs. It looked like a man, a tall heavy man with long hairy arms. He waved them aimlessly about as he ran with his legs half-bent at the knees. He had no clothes on except for pieces of rags that hung like ribbons from his shirt collar and his belt. One of ours tried to draw his pistol, but another one stopped him. Another man started to pray. The thing passed a few yards in front of us and I don’t think it ever saw us. It was looking up toward the sky. A man, no doubt of it. In the moonlight we saw his face for just a moment. . . . As he ran past us he screamed again, a scream like a soul that cannot find peace. (90)

The nightmare of the Alamo occurs as a result of the racial politics of *La Casa Mexicana* and further demonstrates the ties between the “formal” history of the frontier and popular cultural representations of Mexican identity. The incident at *La Casa* reveals to Gualinto that he, unlike the other members of *El Quattro*, can pass as a non-Mexican, if not white. Because Gualinto does

not fit the popular representation of “authentic” Mexican identity, he can engage in the privilege of inclusion in that Anglo-American hyperreality. However, to be included implies accepting the Alamo mythology and the racial politics of its Americanist ideology. Indeed, Gualinto has been haunted by the choice: to pass and be included, or to abstain and be marginalized. While he may have elected to abstain that night at La Casa, the choice haunts Gualinto in his sleep. The mob “slavering like mad dogs and howling ‘Alamo’” chasing Gualinto reverses the roles of the reasonable and concerned group of Spanish-speaking “relatives and friends” pursuing the rabid mad man. Moreover, Gualinto in his nightmare, though running through the chaparral like the mad man of the story, has not been bitten yet as he does not foam at the mouth. The “slavering” mob that represents Anglo-American culture functions as the rabid animal. Were he to be bitten, Gualinto would become infected with the disease that makes him desire whiteness; the bite from the rabid beast that is the dominant Anglo-American culture manifests in the form of “formal” history transmitted through the cultural apparatus, primarily through the state education he receives from Jonesville-on-the-Grande Public School system, and popular cultural media such as his beloved “picture shows.” If Gualinto were to become the madman that terrorizes Feliciano’s camp full of authentic cowboys, working Mexican *vaqueros*, then Gualinto as a Mexican-American, the cursed bearer of “authentic” Anglo-American frontier history, presents a threat to the memory of a non-mainstream folk history of Mexicans in the West that Feliciano’s recollection of the old vaquero days signifies.

Indeed, at issue with Feliciano’s story of the vaquero camp is the intra-ethnic generational conflict between the old and the new. Prior to the appearance of the rabid madman, Feliciano, his father the old *vaquero*, and several other cowboys dismount in a clearing near the chaparral lit by the full moon. Feliciano recalls his

father, being the oldest, offered some advice. “Don’t unsaddle. Just take the bridle off your horse so he can graze and stake him out. And keep your hand close to the stake rope while you sleep. This is bad country.”

The leader was a young man and he laughed. “Indian times are over,” he said. “Besides, we are armed. Let’s be comfortable while we sleep.” (88)

The young leader of the group dismisses the relevance of “Indian times” and the “bad country” to the present moment. Yet, the howling mad man that emerges from the chaparral proves the present value of remembering the words of the old vaquero. Moreover, the old vaquero’s lesson is passed down by his son Feliciano, another vaquero, who relays that lesson through the story he tells, thereby signifying the continuing relevance of the oral history peculiar to the Mexican-Tejano culture. While Gualinto’s experience in school and at the movies has presented the hegemonic threats to the preservation of a cultural memory of the Mexican-Tejano people, Feliciano’s story demonstrates how threats to that memory occur from within the culture too. To put the story in context, Feliciano begins the story by stating it as an experience of unparalleled fear: “It was a night like this in which I was the most scared I had ever been.” What might Feliciano fear more than the next generation of Mexican-Americans not only discarding the import of *vaquero* history like the young leader, but participating in that Anglo-American history of racial policing and surveillance in the present as does Gualinto, when, as a college-educated and established professional, he returns to Jonesville as an undercover United States government agent. By spying on behalf of the Anglo-American state that has oppressed them, Gualinto threatens the future political agency of the Mexican-Tejano community, an expression of anticolonial resistance that appears more communal than patriarchal and feminist rather than masculinist. The mad-man nightmare and the nightmare that revises the history of the Colt

Revolver in the Mexican-American conflict anticipate and reflect Gualinto's troubled Americanization. Both also psychically project the overwhelming pressure to assimilate due to the discursive influence of the Anglo cultural apparatus that remembers the Alamo with reverence and, in doing so, express the madness that such a monolithic imposition of cultural memory causes to the Mexican-Tejano people.

Gualinto actualizes Feliciano's fear when he marries into the family of Frank Dell, a former Texas Ranger. Upon meeting Gualinto, Frank Dell declares, "You look white but you're a goddam Meskin. And what does you're your mother do but give you a nigger name. George Washington Go-maize." Yet Ellen clarifies that the name was given to him by his father, to which the former Ranger replies, "Anyway . . . it don't sound right." Then the narrator notes, Gualinto "decided to legally change his name to George G. Gomez, the middle G for Garcia, his mother's maiden name" (284). In looking over Gualinto, Frank Dell reproduces the imperial gaze performed by the rangers who scan Gumersindo for signs of Mexicaness at the beginning of the novel. Moreover, Dell's gaze parallels the racial surveillance Gualinto performs when he spies on Elodia's political meeting. From the gaze Dell detects that multiple racial codes operate within Gualinto, thus reflecting the multi-racial "checkerboard" consciousness of border subjectivity. The racial complexity of border subjectivity defies the simplistic racial order Anglo-America means to impose institutionally through government action and mediates through popular cultural productions such as the Westerns that enthrall Gualinto, which link Anglo-whiteness to moral good and America and non-white hyphenated identities to what is bad and un-American. That a former Texas Ranger makes the racist announcement indicates the American macho, the cowboy, figures this racial logic. Thus Gualinto capitulates to the nationalism of the United States macho when he changes his name to "George G. Gomez," an

Anglicized Mexican-American identity. Given that “George Washington” was the name given to him by his father, the name change signifies the subversion of Mexican-Tejano patriarchal authority implicated in his assimilation. By appealing to what “sounds right” according to Ellen’s father, Gualinto accepts the imperialist Anglo-American patriarchal order that the cowboy popularly embodies.

Chapter Four

“A *Ramona* in Reverse”:

Writing the Madness of the Spanish Past

in John Fante’s *Ask the Dust*

In 1946 Carey McWilliams wrote his well-known *Southern California Country: An Island on the Land*, a study of the region excavating the social and political forces that shaped the local culture to the present. When reflecting on a set of books that captured the region accurately, McWilliams recommended *Ask the Dust* (1939) by John Fante among a select few “that suggest what Southern California is really like” (364). Undoubtedly Fante held a special place for McWilliams, who was a life-long friend, but McWilliams was a well-respected social critic who did not dole out support lightly. The endorsement alludes to McWilliams’ critical treatment of the various misleading fantasies about Southern California deployed by nineteenth-century boosters attempting to draw in tourists and investors. One fantasy that McWilliams took particular issue with was the Spanish past, what he referred to as the “Spanish heritage past.” This fantasy envisioned modern Los Angeles as the inheritor of the Spanish colonial and post-colonial *Californio* period when the region was loosely under the rule of the Mexican government. For McWilliams, the Spanish past became a profitable and discursive fantasy as a result of the immense popularity of Helen Hunt Jackson’s *Ramona* (1884). Indeed, in acknowledgement of the significant influence of *Ramona* on California historiography, McWilliams borrowed the phrase “An Island on the Land” from Jackson for the subtitle of his own historical treatment of the region. Beyond crediting Fante with an exceptional literary work or a realistic portrait of Depression Era Los Angeles, McWilliams draws attention to the competition for truth between booster fantasies and myth busters. To claim Fante portrayed Los

Angeles as “it really was” is to credit Fante, and at the same time express support for his original literary work and its authentic vision; more particularly, I would claim McWilliams praises him for his exposition of the ersatz Spanish past. As Postwestern scholars William Handley and Nathaniel Lewis explain, “authenticity so often refers to the capacity of any author, whether novelist or historian, and any artifact, whether artistic or archeological, to bespeak originality. And originality has little authority or meaning without being copied” (*True West 2*). In taking on the oft-copied Spanish past, McWilliams asserted Fante became an original debunker of booster fantasy, just as his novel *Ask the Dust* became an artifact of the authentic Los Angeles experience.

Taking McWilliams at his word, namely, that Fante tells a story of Los Angeles as it “really” is, implies an exchange of one Southern California monolith for another. Fante’s *Ask the Dust* debunks the late nineteenth-century booster fantasy that portrayed Los Angeles as a modern link to a utopian Spanish past. To do as McWilliams proposes, to find only truth in Fante’s 1930s dystopian L.A. novel, repeats past claims to authenticity that entrenched Helen Hunt Jackson’s *Ramona*, with its romantic view of Spanish colonialism, in the regional culture and made it the master narrative that captivated the local as well as national imaginary. “The most continuous story of the West,” Handley and Lewis write, “then, is neither the (Old) clash of civilization and savagery nor the (New) legacy of conquest, but competing claims of cultural authenticity, even of belonging” (*True West 2*). Indeed, McWilliams and Fante carry on this story of the West. At the center of Fante’s novel is this very struggle for an authentic claim to belonging in modern Los Angeles that, as he narrates through the tragic romance of Arturo and Camilla, the racial politics of the Spanish past problematizes. Claiming authenticity ignores the construction of

originality as well as the tenuous nature of its authority being based in the reproduction of the claim to authenticity rather than the validity or accuracy of its logic.

Fante, however, claims that *Ask the Dust* is a deconstruction of authenticity when in his Prologue he offers the following summary of his 1939 novel: “A *Ramona* in reverse.”¹ By reversing *Ramona*, Fante disabuses the putative “true” history of Southern California as popularized in the Spanish past, its discourse of civilization, imperialist nostalgia, and exclusionary racial politics. A regional manifestation of the national myth of the American West, the Spanish past entails a set of cultural behaviors and beliefs that treat with reverence and pride the Spanish colonial history of California and its cultural legacy that Southern California boosters presumed Anglo-America had inherited in the present. In taking on the mass appeal of the Spanish past and, more broadly, popular notions of the West, *Ask the Dust* (1939) voices an alternate, non-Anglo narrative of American experience in order to resist the imposition of mainstream Americanist texts, whether popular literature such as *Ramona* and pulp Westerns or public spaces such as the Los Angeles Plaza and Olvera Street, that, historically, normalize Anglo-American authority, modernity, and belonging, while at the same time alienating ethnic identity as “exotic,” premodern, or illegitimate. While *Ask the Dust* seems resigned, problematically so, to the inevitable victimization of ethnic Mexican and, in general, non-Anglo voices in Depression Era Los Angeles, the conclusion of the novel predicts the decline of the

¹ Serving as a synopsis, the Prologue outlines the story of *Ask the Dust*, though some minor details, such as the name of Camilla’s dog, were changed; Though I have consulted the original typescript from The John Fante Papers, a print version of the Prologue with etchings by John Register was released by Black Sparrow Press in 1990.

Americanist mythologies of the popular West and anticipates, with ambivalence, the rise of modern ethnic narratives.

The subject of assimilation to American culture exemplified in Arturo's pursuit of the American Dream in Los Angeles figures prominently in scholarly interpretations of *Ask the Dust*. Often working from the critical narrative wherein the author reveals the dark side of the "sunny" utopia that is twentieth century L.A., scholars resort to casting *Ask the Dust* in the same mold as other 1930s dystopian L.A. novels such as Nathanael West's apocalyptic postmodern vision of the city succumbing to its own mass-produced artifice in *The Day of the Locust*.² While Fante's vision of Los Angeles does seek to undo the boosterism that promoted the city to the nation using an assortment of appeals to health and wealth, Stephen Cooper claims *Ask the Dust* does pay some tribute to the "eternal city." "True, Fante's work skewers the polished surface of pretense and illusion endemic to the city," says Cooper "but it also celebrates, even exalts the rough substance of life as he finds it in the rented rooms and sooty streets of old L.A" ("Eternal City" 84). Indeed, it is with ambivalence that Fante critiques the popular appeal of the city, at once deconstructing its celebratory myths while portraying a romantic portrait of the down-and-out artist struggling to make it in Depression Era Los Angeles. In recasting the myth of the American Dream through the act of writing, this *kunsterroman* makes assimilation possible through creative labor.³ To reinvent himself as an American, Arturo heads to Los Angeles from

² For a discussion of the millennialist visions of Los Angeles from a perspective that emphasizes its apocalypse rather than its revelation as the city of the future, see Davis and Fine; regarding currents of boosterism and anti-boosterism in *Ask the Dust*, see Laurila.

³ For a perspective on Arturo's use of writing to translate the geographical move to Los Angeles into an American story of social mobility, see Maucione.

Colorado; in going West, he thus migrates toward an approved identity in the Americanist tradition of the frontier myth. Yet to be recognized by scholarly readings of *Ask the Dust* is how Fante uses tropes of the popular West—references to the Western and the Spanish past—to portray Arturo’s assimilation to American identity and the Southern California landscape that Arturo explores on foot, through public transit, and by car. In hopes of addressing this gap in the scholarship, the present chapter will elaborate a critical consideration of *Ask the Dust*’s suggestion that Helen Hunt Jackson’s *Ramona* had, not insignificantly, influenced the racial culture of the 1930s Depression Era Los Angeles through which Arturo wanders.

To execute the literary reversal he alludes to in the Prologue, Fante parallels the themes, plot structures, and characters of Helen Hunt Jackson’s novel. Through the literary reversal, *Ask the Dust* conveys a critique of *Ramona* implying a flaw in the romanticism with which Jackson delivered her social protest. Thematically, *Ask the Dust* shares much with *Ramona*: both novels depict protagonists involved in an interracial romance that leads to confrontations with Anglo villains. The romantic narrative features tropes of racial passing, “noble savages,” and “vanishing Indians.” A sentimental romance about a mixed-race heroine caught between the *Californio* society that raised her and the Saboba Indian community that accepts her, the “half-breed” Scots-Indian Ramona is the literary antecedent to aspiring white ethnic Arturo Bandini, the Italian-American story writer-hero straddling the worlds of the white mainstream and non-white margins of Los Angeles. Both protagonists find themselves in love with characters that exemplify the noble and exotic Other: Ramona with a Saboba Indian named Alessandro Aziz, and Arturo with a Mexican-American waitress named Camilla Lopez. But competing affections complicate matters, creating love triangles that structure the conflict of both narratives. A *Californio* heir to the Moreno estate where Ramona grew up, Felipe transitions from pining half-

brother at the beginning of the novel to heroic lover by the end. Like Felipe, Sammy Wiggins, who tends bar at the café where Camilla works, gradually moves from the background of the story to the foreground as Camilla's love for him, and not Arturo, is revealed.

Yet the resolution of the romance plots contrast significantly. Ramona loves and is loved by Alessandro, then Felipe, and she enters into romantic relationships with both characters. Arturo's affection for Camilla is not reciprocated fully because she loves Sammy even though he cares nothing for her. Whereas Ramona finds mutual affection, Arturo experiences unrequited love. Unfulfilled romance turns to tragedy in *Ask the Dust* when the novel concludes with Camilla disappearing into the desert after Sammy spurns her one final time. Though tragedy strikes Ramona when Alessandro suffers a fit of madness that leads to his end, Jackson deploys romance to triumph over tragedy when Felipe comes to her rescue and the two escape from the encroaching ethno-centric imperialism of Anglo-America to the more culturally accepting Mexico.⁴ Exemplary of its sentimentalism, *Ramona* concludes with the romantic success of its protagonist rather than the tragic and wrongful murder of Alessandro. For some critics, the sentimentalism that imbued *Ramona* with charm is at the heart of the book's failed social protest.⁵

⁴ In "Nuestra America," Jose Marti, a Cuban artist of the late nineteenth century, used *Ramona*'s utopian vision of Mexico to support his resistance to mounting U.S. imperialism; thus, his deployment of the novel provides an example of how sentimentalism could motivate political action; for a challenge to Marti's anticolonial deployment of *Ramona*, see McKee Irwin.

⁵ For critiques of the ways *Ramona*'s sentimental scheme undermines its social protest and romanticizes colonialism, see Harvard and Venegas; other scholars are less dismissive of the

With the intention of provoking a nation to join her cause, Helen Hunt Jackson originally wrote her romance as an advocate of Native American rights. Drawing from her government research and reports, Jackson crafted a story intended to overturn popular, negative stereotypes about natives. As told by Standing Bear and Bright Eyes, the plight of the Ponca tribe's removal motivated Jackson to investigate the Indian problem leading to her first work, entitled *A Century of Dishonor* (1881). Michael Dorris notes that while as a history the book is unimpressive, its significance rests in the sympathetic portrayal it lent to Indians—a stark contrast from the popular antipathy associated with the recent defeat of the 7th Cavalry by the Sioux and Cheyennes in 1876. A product of her research at the Astor Library in New York City, the controversial book criticized United States policy towards various Indian tribes, and while she circulated it among members of Congress, it yielded little effect.⁶ In time she became a commissioner of Indian Affairs assigned to report on the conditions of California Mission Indians with co-commissioner Abbot Kinney. As a result of their research, the two produced the *Report on the Condition and Needs of the Mission Indians of California* (1883), which indicted government policy for wrongs committed against Indians. Finding her official work as a lobbyist against Indian mistreatment insufficient and motivated to improve social conditions and popular perception of native Americans, Jackson decided to write a sentimental novel with the hope that it would do for the Indian problem what Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) had done for the issue of slavery.

novel's sentimentalism; for a discussion of the merits of the novel's sentimentalism, see Luis-Brown.

⁶ For details about Jackson's political work and government report, see Dorris.

Despite her intention to write a social protest novel about the United States government's mistreatment and removal of Indians, Helen Hunt Jackson wrote a sentimental romance that provoked a popular response more from fans and tourists than political advocates. Though it generated some political momentum, the novel is better known for the popular phenomenon it sparked than for the policy reform it yielded. Certainly, the combined efforts of her government work and sentimental novel achieved some political effect: her Indian advocacy led to the passage of an anti-removal bill. In the 56-page government report that she completed with Abbot Kinney, Helen Hunt Jackson recommended extensive relief be awarded the Mission Indians, including the purchase of more land for reservations and the provision of more schools. Her recommendations were made into a bill that passed in the U.S. Senate, but failed in the House of Representatives. After Jackson's death, Electa S. Dawes, the wife of Senator Dawes, along with the Women's National Indian Association, the Indian Rights Association, and members of the Lake Mohonk Conference resumed the effort to pass the bill, also started by Jackson, and to fight the case against the removal of the Saboba Indians from their village. Eventually the bill was passed and the case won. Some activists and critics praised Jackson for the social protest the novel voiced. Novelist Albion Tourge, in the *North American Review*, recognized the merits of the novel's protest: "A strain of angry, tender, hopeless protest against wrong pervades" the story (qtd. in Mathes). He goes on, "*Ramona* pictures [California] as the Indian's lost inheritance and the Spaniard's desolated home" (qtd. in Kropp 23).

The phenomenal tourist response experienced in the region, largely caused by the novel's publication, demonstrates how any political triumphs the book won for Indian rights were overshadowed by the popular attention it received. Following publication of the novel, thousands of upper and middle class Anglo tourists from the East Coast and Midwest flocked to California

to pay homage to the heroine. 650,000 tourists visited Southern California in 1928, the first year when tourist data in the region was recorded. Technological innovation and market competition made such domestic tourism possible, and so domestic tourism rose nationally. As a result of rail competition in Southern California between the Sante Fe and California Southern lines, rail fares dropped, “making tourism . . . an established leisure pursuit for both the upper and middle classes” (Delyser 31). In addition to the increasing affordability of rail travel, the automobile came on the scene as a new touring toy of the elite. Once tourism provided a leisurely means of revering Anglo-American progress, tourism became a patriotic duty. Tours included “pilgrimages” to the Home of Ramona and Ramona’s Marriage Place. Widely touted as having the most respected claim to being “the Home of Ramona,” Rancho Camulos became such a popular attraction that a rail stop was constructed to meet tourist demand and it was “a featured stop, for example, on the Wheelmen’s 1914 Studebaker automobile tour” (53). The tour would have included in addition to the home of Ramona, her Marriage Place at Estudillo House in Old Town San Diego (founded in 1910). There were also those who claimed to be the “real” Ramona.⁷ Tourists could collect Ramona memorabilia from various gift stores at each of these stops or even accommodate themselves at Ramona-themed lodges. The Hotel Ramona that was built in 1890 in San Luis Obispo provides a not-so subtle example (36). As a result of this tourism, attention to the region increased: “Beginning with the wealthy rail-spiced tourists of the

⁷ Yet, most guidebooks forewarned Ramona enthusiasts that the Indians one might see would present a very different picture from those depicted in the novel: “One travel writer,” notes Kropp, “claiming that he had located the legendary Ramona, lamented in 1900 that ‘she is now like all the other Indian women become as they grow older, greasy and slovenly, . . . She is just as haggard looking and lazy as the other squaws’ (38).

late nineteenth century [then the middle-class rail tourists, then the twentieth century motorist], visitors to the region spread words and images of southern California's splendor by postcard, letter, photograph, travel article, travel book, and word of mouth" (Delyser 48). Whether it was her place of birth or marriage, the Moreno ranch, or the real Ramona herself, tourists sought the real experience of Jackson's romance.⁸

Instead of moving a nation to remedy the Anglo-American-induced plight of Indians, Jackson moved a popular response to remember the vanishing *Californio* families. Phoebe Kropp contends, "The couple's retreat to Mexico can be read as a final defeat, but it signals the loss of the Californio culture rather than the grievances of mission Indians . . . By choosing to drench her novel in nostalgia, Jackson not only smothered her own critique but also led the effort to package Californios' memories for Anglo consumption" (32). The popular response missed Jackson's critique of Indian abuse at the hands of not only Anglo-America, but also *Californio* society. Indeed, the close-knit families that formed the society of Mexican rancheros relied upon Indian laborers (peons) to operate their cattle ranches successfully. Moreover, *Californios*, in their memoirs and the histories they shared with Anglo recorders, primarily Hubert Howe Bancroft, made certain to distinguish themselves from the racially inferior Indians. Distinguishing themselves in this way to someone like Bancroft, whose great tome the *California Pastoral* (1888) would be widely circulated, occurred as part of what scholars have recognized as a rhetorical strategy to oppose the intrusion of Anglo-America. Not long after Mexico won its independence from Spain in 1821 and the government granted the *Californios* generous plots of land, Anglos from the East Coast integrated, often times through marriages that were financial

⁸ For a detailed account of the tourist boom *Ramona* caused in Southern California, see Delyser 31-53.

relationships, into the rancharo society. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 and the Gold Rush of 1849 facilitated Anglo-American expansion to California. The 1876 installation of the railroad quickened the flow of Anglo-Americans into Southern California. In addition to the historical events changing the demography of the state, popular culture disparaged *Californios* as lazy and inferior.⁹ The strategic construction of *Californio* history by *Californios* reflects an attempt to oppose the literal and figurative displacement from Southern California by Anglo-Americans. Indians offered a racial foil against which *Californios* could assert their dominance within the racial hierarchy that Anglos had destabilized. Though the *Californios* could not declare an Anglo identity, they could stake a claim to a common European ancestry. Anglo memories of *Californios* reproduced some of the laments characteristic of *Californio* records but without the “oppositional impulse”: “The emphasis on gentility, even aristocratic privilege; the split view on women as honorably pure or dangerously sensual; and the denigration of Indian people all carried over into the *Ramona*-inspired picture of the region’s past” (Kropp 30).

Searching for a regional identity to attract tourists and residents, late nineteenth-century boosters capitalized on the continued success of Jackson’s novel by selling Southern California as the home of *Ramona*, a fantasy of the Spanish past. *Ramona* has been awarded much credit for popularizing the romance of the Spanish past.¹⁰ Since its original publication in 1884, the novel

⁹ Richard Henry Dana famously bemoaned the indolence of *Californios* in his writing; for more information on these early and representative prejudiced portraits of *Californios* in popular culture, see Kropp 26, 30, and 41.

¹⁰ For a perspective on how the credit given to *Ramona* for popularizing the Spanish past has been overstated, see Kropp 45-46. While Fante and McWilliams may be attributing too much responsibility to Jackson as the sole mythologizer of the Spanish past that would come to

has been reissued multiple times and that success has transferred to other cultural productions including plays, festivals, and films. Four films were made prior to 1946, including one version that was released in 1928 starring Dolores Del Rio, a starlet whom Arturo admires much. From the late nineteenth century well into the twentieth, boosters capitalized on and nurtured the fanaticism that would ensure the continued success of Jackson's novel. During the economic boom that struck Southern California in the 1880s, promotional literature made explicit references to *Ramona* as part of the local appeal (Delyser 43). In 1888, print capitalist Colonel Harrison Gray Otis, foremost among the early boosters, motioned to establish the L.A. Chamber of Commerce. With Midwesterners as its target audience, the motion organized boosterism around images of "days of the dons" and the mission myth described in *Ramona*. For decades Otis used his *Los Angeles Times* to exploit the romance of *Ramona* in order to lure investors and home buyers to Southern California with such headlines as "Ramona: The Greatest Attraction Yet Offered in the Way of Desirable Real Estate Investment" and "Camulos: The Real Home of Ramona" (Delyser 44).

Another significant figure in the booster movement was Charles Fletcher Lummis, a prolific writer who began working for Otis and the *Times* in the 1890s. During that time, he published many articles on *Ramona*, linking its pastoral appeal to the Southern California landscape (Delyser 46). Lummis would play a critical role in making the seemingly foreign heritage of the Spanish past a familiar part of American history through his advocacy of the revitalization of El Camino Real in the early part of the twentieth century. Lummis appointed himself as the spokesman of the group in support of reconstructing the road, producing much

influence the environmental design and popular appeal of Los Angeles and Southern California, *Ramona*, at the least, can be said to have "catalyzed" its phenomenal romanticization.

promotional literature to garner favor for the project. While not quite adhering to its original layout, the road was reconstructed with certain missions being reached through outlets from the main highway and other points not originally along the road, such as the Plaza Church in downtown Los Angeles, being added on. Changes to the original notwithstanding, Lummis and other sentimentalists spun the plan for the new road as accommodating the conventionally conflicting interests between historical enthusiasts and drivers. Kropp argues, “Connecting the padres and the people would be the automobile, a symbol of the modern era. By placing this triumphalist spin on a vexing practical dilemma, the association helped claim the Spanish past for California’s new Anglo inhabitants” (Kropp 65). In 1916, the same year the road opened to automobiles, Lummis would declare that the foundation of the later-day El Camino Real signified a broader American interest in the Spanish past: “A generation ago only a few people cared anything about the Missions. Now everybody cares about them” (qtd. in Kropp 102).¹¹

Spanish past boosters continued to exert their influence upon Los Angeles well into the 1930s. The 1930 opening of Olvera Street exemplifies how the Spanish past was constructed to market modern Los Angeles. Through the efforts of modern-day booster Christine Sterling, Olvera Street offered tourists a Spanish-themed retreat only months after the Stock Market crash that sent the nation into the Depression. The street became a place where Anglo tourists could forget modern-day cares, travel into the local past, and “go Spanish” for a time in period garb if they pleased. Also wearing costumes, Mexican vendors pushing mobile stands called *puesteros* peddled hand-made pottery among other artisanal goods crafted from skills supposedly natural to their people. The Spanish-past ambience that Olvera Street evoked was scrupulously regulated

¹¹ Kropp details the role Lummis played in the effort to reconstruct El Camino Real, 62-63, 65, 101-102.

by Sterling. She required the *puesteros* wear costumes; violating the requirement resulted in some form of professional penalty, if not employee termination. When lobbying for the creation of Olvera Street, Sterling cited labor skills peculiar to Mexican workers that produced the crafts unique to Olvera Street as a socially productive solution to the widely perceived problem of unemployed Mexicans draining public relief programs, thereby burdening the local economy during the Depression. Thus, Olvera Street could solve a modern problem by employing Mexicans through racial stereotypes that cemented their social position and value in the romanticized Spanish past.

Through the popular imaginary and under the direction of these Anglo boosters and members of City Hall, the Spanish Colonial era became associated with the Mexican people of 1930s Southern California. Prior to Olvera Street, Kropp observes, Anglo representations of the Spanish past “had made a point of withholding their admiration for the Spanish era from present-day Mexicans” (227). Yet, Sterling persisted in making what some wanted as a “Spanish village” into a “Mexican Market.” While Sterling may have pushed for the street to be Mexican, ultimately she conformed the presentation of that Mexican culture to a romantic version typical of popular representations of the Spanish past. A byproduct of this association between Mexicans and the past was the perpetuation of longstanding stereotypes about Mexican inferiority because they aligned so closely with a pre-modern indigenous, peasant, or bygone colonial identity. The temporal divisions created by the fantasy of the Spanish past resulted in the bifurcation of the Mexican sign: a romantic image of the past whether noble savage, docile peon, or genteel Californio, and a burden on modern society as a threat to public relief.¹²

¹² For more information on how these categories of time came to define regional citizenship for Mexicans and Mexican Americans, see Kropp 5.

As reminders of the bygone days of Spanish colonialism, Mexicans could be tolerated, but as residents in modern Los Angeles, they were outcasts. Created by Anglo productions of the Spanish past, this ambivalence towards Mexicans that suffuses *Ask the Dust* renders the novel a socially-conscious literary effort to reverse the cultural legacy of *Ramona*. Fante believed its legacy haunted the streets of Depression-Era Los Angeles, shaping the contentious racial relations between its Anglo and Mexican residents. Popular culture distorted Anglo views of the Mexican people, bifurcating their social sign into positive and negative meanings. On the one hand, “Spanish” referred to the romanticized Spanish colonial past, an era rather than a people. On the other hand, “Mexican” in the local parlance designated with extreme prejudice an immigrant people. To Mexicans, the reductive term simplified and obscured intra-cultural differences such as national loyalties (United States citizen or Mexican national), regional identities, and generational views. To Anglos, the term “Mexican” essentially referred to non-Anglos. While “Anglo” itself is too reductive to represent accurately the white population of Los Angeles that consisted of those Americans of English extraction and who immigrated from continental Europe, the term was commonly used in this broad way. Moreover, whereas Anglo indicated American, Mexican did not (Kropp 9). The two terms demonstrate how, according to the regional discourse, race and nationalism intersect within ethnic labels; consequently, those labels determine the boundaries of social inclusion and exclusion. Such a regional view of Anglo identity explains how in *Ask the Dust* Arturo can claim a fully-assimilated American identity in Los Angeles while at the same time he is labeled an outsider in his Colorado hometown.¹³ Out of

¹³ Kropp elaborates such references to Anglo and Mexican as well as Indian identity in Southern California. Moreover, Kropp prefaces her elaboration of Southern California racial identities

such an ethnically diverse albeit conflicted environment, *Ask the Dust* emerges as a creative attempt to protest the maddening racial paradoxes that Fante blames Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona* for popularizing.

Contrary to the pastoral Mediterranean landscape of *Ramona*, Arturo Bandini enters a Los Angeles environment whose modernity has exposed the artifice of its past garden mythology. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, various portraits of California as a tropical or Mediterranean garden circulated in travel literature, shaping popular beliefs about the salubrious nature of the environment. In 1872 Charles Nordhoff wrote *California for Health Pleasure and Residence*, a book that portrayed the region as being tropical in order to push its healthy effects. Just two years later, Truman wrote *Semi-Tropical Southern California* articulating the same message, yet midway through the work his healthy tropical Southern California gives way to a Mediterranean climate. Years later Charles Dudley would make a more direct comparison of California to the Mediterranean in *Our Italy* (1892). Arcadian backdrops and orderly orange groves adorned early promotions of the region distributed across the country by the *Los Angeles Times*.¹⁴ While the image of California as a well-ordered, healthy, and exotic garden preceded the novel, Jackson deployed those myths in her story of *Ramona* to form an enticing fantasy of the Spanish past. This fantasy takes shape in the idyllic descriptions of Señora Moreno's estate:

Between the veranda and the river meadows, out on which it [the estate] looked, all was

with an acknowledgment of how such views were subject to variation according to region; for more information on the matter of racial terminology, identity, and region, see Kropp 9.

¹⁴ For the various garden mythologies, see Starr, *Americans* 365-414 and *Inventing* 44-63, Sackman 47-49, and McClung 54-56, 198-230.

garden, orange grove, and almond orchard; the orange grove always green, never without snowy bloom or golden fruit; the garden never without flowers, summer or winter; and the almond orchard, in early spring, a fluttering canopy of pink and white petals, which, seen from the hills on the opposite side of the river, looked as if rosy sunrise clouds had fallen, and become tangled in the treetops. On either hand stretched away other orchards,-peach, apricot, apple, pomegranate; and beyond these vineyards. Nothing was to be seen but verdure or blossom or fruit, at whatever time of year you sat on the Señora's south veranda. (Jackson 17-18)

Such images from *Ramona* contributed to the Arcadian myth of Los Angeles that coincided, if not conflicted, with the modernity of the city. On the one hand, its planners envisioned an Arcadia recalling a past associated with the aforementioned garden imagery. On the other, Los Angeles was a Utopia, a city of invention designed for the future. Boosters could promote Los Angeles as the city of tomorrow for a new race of people because it had a glorious past, a noble history.

Vestiges of the garden tropes linger along the streets of Los Angeles Arturo explores. He finds the “new Californians” from the Midwest soaking in the sun as promised by the *Times*. A bunch of oranges he purchased from a Japanese vendor provides Arturo with cheaply gotten food during the “lean days” of the Depression. Palm trees dot the modern streets providing an escapist fantasy. Yet, the intermixture between the garden myth and the modern features of Los Angeles apparent in the observations of Arturo intimates a problematic conflict within this hybrid temporal fantasy where the past and the future coincide. The “new Californians” languish in the streets where they “die in the sun” (*Ask the Dust* 45); Arturo becomes sick from eating too many oranges (27, 31), and the palm trees in the city sadden him when he looks at them and smells the

fumes from passing cars (12). This underlying conflict between the garden past and modern present appears to be the focus of Arturo's gaze from his hotel window. Unlike the panoramic view of the orderly and bucolic Spanish past offered by the Señora's veranda, the view from Arturo's room at the Alta Loma frames the conflict between the past and present myths of the city:

Through that window I saw my first palm tree, not six feet away, and sure enough I thought of Palm Sunday and Egypt and Cleopatra, but the palm was blackish at its branches, stained by carbon monoxide coming out of the Third Street Tunnel, its crusted trunk choked with dust and sand that blew in from the Mojave and Santa Ana deserts.

(Ask the Dust 16)

Foreign to the local ecology, palm trees were implanted during the turn-of-the-twentieth-century gardening craze, turning Los Angeles into an Egypt of the West. In *The Frontier of Leisure*, Lawrence Culver claims the orientalization of the Southwest had occurred in travel narratives that rendered it an American Egypt (30). Yet, the exhaust fumes from daily traffic stifles the exotic appeal of the palm tree. While the automobile was a key vehicle to the growing tourist industry, from Arturo's perspective, the machine corrupts the health and vitality the garden fantasy meant to evoke.

Perversions of California icons such as sunshine, oranges, and palm trees characteristic of the environmental myths propagated by Anglo travel narratives and Los Angeles boosters call into question Arturo's pursuit of the California Dream at the hotel Alta Loma. Though Arturo has come to California to escape the ethnic prejudice of his Colorado home and inspired to write the next great American novel, the garden fantasy that the palm tree outside his window recalls inspires a combative relationship that leads to writer's block rather than creative genius: "only

two words written over and over across the page, up and down, the same words: palm tree, palm tree, palm tree, a battle to the death between the palm tree and me, and the palm tree won” (*Ask the Dust* 17). In the nineteenth century, boosters had created the garden fantasy to lure Anglo-Americans to Southern California, not the immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe that were populating the urban centers on the Eastern seaboard. Anglo boosters deployed the Arcadian myth to shape Los Angeles for Anglo-Americans. In the late nineteenth century, promoter Joseph Pomeroy Widney had envisioned Los Angeles to be an Anglo Heliopolis.¹⁵

The California Dream whose promises of health and wealth were in large part built upon the garden fantasy, one that Jackson coalesced with her Spanish past novel, is a fantasy of Anglo desire, both in terms of its creators and its intended consumers. Coming to California to write a novel so he’ll become rich and accepted, Arturo thus pursues an Anglo fantasy: “rambling the gutters of Los Angeles because you are poor, hoping to write a book to get rich, because those who hated you back there in Colorado will not hate you if you write a book” (*Ask the Dust* 20). The hatred he experienced in Colorado is based on ethnic identity, which he associates with poverty. In this calculus where ethnicity equals poverty, assimilation to Anglo culture promises upward mobility: “I was passing the doorman of the Biltmore, and I hated him at once, with his yellow braids and six feet of height and all that dignity” (13). His jealousy of the doorman appears instructive with regards to race and social position for two reasons: regardless of occupation, whether providing hospitality as a service or receiving it as a guest, Anglo identity grants a socially desirable and superior position to the ethnic subject living on the margins; second, the doorman at the Biltmore signifies Anglo identity as the gatekeeper to the benefits of

¹⁵ According to Joseph Pomeroy Widney, Southern California was the destined site of Anglo-Saxon civilization. For an account of Widney’s Heliopolis, see Starr, *Inventing* 91.

modern society represented by the rows of automobiles lining the entrance to the luxurious hotel. While writing in Arturo's mind literally offers him his best chance of becoming rich, it also offers an opportunity to create a new racial identity. Indeed, his repeated typing of the word "palm tree" signifies his fixation on creating an Anglo identity. As his inability to write beyond that word indicates, the fixation upon Anglo identity arrests rather than promotes social progress for the ethnic subject.

Furthermore, Arturo experiences this fixation upon an Anglo identity signaled by the palm tree and the racial politics of the garden myths it evokes from the position of his room at the Alta Loma. In critical juxtaposition to the modernity of the Biltmore that he cannot afford, Arturo lodges in the seedy Bunker Hill district at the Alta Loma, a construction representative of the city's other temporal side, the fantasy of the Spanish past:

The hotel was called the Alta Loma. It was built on a hillside in reverse, there on the crest of Bunker Hill, built against the decline of the hill, so that the main floor was on the level with the street but the tenth floor was downstairs ten levels. If you had room 862, you got in the elevator and went down eight floors, and if you wanted to go down in the truck room, you didn't go down but up to the attic, one floor above the main floor. (*Ask the Dust* 15)

The disordered design of the hotel counters the well-ordered Arcadian appeal associated with the Spanish past. Its position against the hill recalls the rolling hills and pastures of the Moreno estate, but the negative modifiers suggest this Spanish revival structure lacks the cultivated order characteristic of the *Californio* way of life described in *Ramona*. "Against" and "decline" imply discord and regression rather than the harmony and bounty of the groomed-orchards and vineyards viewed from the Señora's veranda. The Alta Loma as a hotel serving customers from

the Midwest continues the booster legacy that began to draw Anglo-American tourists to Southern California with the fantasy of the Spanish past that Helen Hunt Jackson popularized. If the Spanish past served as a profitable history for marketing Southern California to tourists and potential investors through its orderly Anglo design, then when Fante represents a modern reification of that Spanish past in the form of the disorderly upside-down Alta Loma, he critiques the booster fantasy for inverting the critique of Anglo-American culture Helen Hunt Jackson intended *Ramona* to be.

The palm tree outside Arturo's room signifies the Anglo tendency to render the region exotic both spatially and temporally through various garden myths that evoked not only remote places such as the Orient and the Mediterranean but their histories too. Through the success of *Ramona*, the Spanish past became the most popular synthesis of this tendency to transplant the bygone time and place onto the region because it made the romance of the remote familiar to an Anglo consumer base. Such fantasies of the past used by Anglo boosters who designed the "city of the future" for Anglos suggest an act of division and classification of time according to racial lines. The modernity of the present and the future was for Anglos. The exotic past was identifiably non-Anglo: the imposition of a romantic non-Anglo past upon Los Angeles served to justify the superiority of the Anglo that could thrive in the modern present. Thus the racial hierarchy of Los Angeles as represented in historical motifs expresses a discourse of civilization with the pre-modern non-Anglo past leading up to a modern Anglo present and future. The racial politics of this discourse is reified in the spatial organization of the city as can be seen through Arturo's exploration of Los Angeles, from the Plaza to the Biltmore. From the vantage point of Arturo in his room at the Alta Loma, he observes the conflict between these temporal modes. The soiled palm tree caused by the constant traffic figures the racial dynamics of the city where

non-Anglos are exoticized signs of the romantic past and Anglos signs of the modern world. Furthermore, these signs suggest the relative positions of each: just like the palm tree, non-Anglos are fixed in this immobile position of exoticism incapable of avoiding the negative effects caused by Anglo consumers whose modernity and social mobility is figured by the freedom to move about the city unencumbered. This environmental vignette figures the racial dynamics of these temporal motifs that pervade the city and can be seen through the window of Arturo's room at the Alta Loma, suggesting that through Arturo as the social observer one can see how the Spanish past frames the relations of race in modern Los Angeles.

In positioning his critical perspective on the Spanish past through Arturo Bandini, Fante parallels the romantic representations of a *Californio* past to Italian-Americans in the present. As an Italian-American, Arturo's experience is one of an "in-between people," not accepted by mainstream Anglo-American society, but still experiencing the benefits of being declared "white on arrival." Indeed, the Italian-American experience demonstrates the complicated identity politics at work in understanding whiteness as a process of becoming rather than being. When Arturo claims that baseball star "Joe DiMaggio was still a credit to the Italian people" and takes a playful swing of an imagined bat, he performs an archetypal mode of assimilation to American identity, often synonymous with whiteness, through participation in cultural practices with nationalistic overtones such as sports, especially the national past time (*Ask the Dust* 11).¹⁶ While World War II signaled a turning point in national perception of Italians and Italian Americans,

¹⁶ Kimmel notes the relationship between the baseball field and the bygone American past it recalls going so far as to suggest its frontier implications (95); for a complimentary interpretation of baseball and Americanization, see Baldassaro, "Dashing Dagoes and Walloping Wops" 98-106 and *The American Game* 3, 111.

before the war they embodied a conflicted image. Despite the social prejudices Italians and Italian-Americans faced, the state classified them as white, thus presumably conferring upon them the official benefits of first-class citizenship.¹⁷ Toeing the line between inclusion and exclusion, Arturo exemplifies the “in-between” condition of Italian-American identity. A fictional projection of his author John Fante, who experienced anti-Catholic and ethnic prejudice growing up in Boulder, Colorado, Arturo remembers the pain of his past exclusion in his Colorado hometown.¹⁸ Yet, in Los Angeles, he finds he is accepted and escapes prejudice from racist policies such as the Alta Loma’s prohibition of Mexican and Jewish guests and people such as the white bigot Sammy Wiggins who repeatedly beats and berates Camilla Lopez.

While he is Italian American, Arturo shares a surname with one of the grand title holding *Californio* families of the nineteenth century. Their legacy and wealth is well-documented in the

¹⁷ For a consideration of the bifurcated image of Italians in American culture, see Cosco; for an account of the social and political influences on the Italian American experience including discussion of white identification, see Mangione and Morreale, and Guglielmo. Matthew Frye Jacobsen’s observation about the centrality of race to the history of European immigration informs my reading of Arturo’s initial understanding of America as a melting pot: “the civic story of assimilation (the process by which the Irish, Russian Jews, Poles, and Greeks became Americans) is inseparable from the cultural story of racial alchemy (the process by which Celts, Hebrews, Slavs, and Mediterraneans became Caucasians)” (8).

¹⁸ Memories of prejudice provided the inspiration for his writing and emerge in other stories too. Consider the title “The Odyssey of a Wop” (1933) where the speaker, a proto-Arturo Bandini, reflects on the meaning of the racial slur and how it contributed to his identity formation growing up in Boulder.

historical archive of California thanks to Bancroft's *California Pastoral*. Stephen Cooper first proposed that Arturo's name refers to Don Arturo Bandini, a retiring scholar (*Full of Life* 77-78). Married to fellow writer and Southern California muse Helen Elliott, Don Arturo supported the United States in the Mexican-American War (Baym 267). Tempting as it may be to see Don Arturo Bandini siding with the Americans as simply an anti-Mexican stance, self-preservation motivated many *Californios*. As mentioned previously, *Californios* used personal memoirs and Anglo histories and romances to lay claim to a white identity and to distinguish themselves racially from the Indian peons who worked their land. Historical recorders such as Bancroft and writers such as Jackson relayed stories about *Californios* that became fodder for booster romanticism. Furthermore, the Bandini name can be directly linked to the production of *Ramona* and its tourist phenomenon. According to legend, Jackson stayed at Rancho Gaujome which was owned by the Bandini-Couts family; in all likelihood, she used the ranch to "gather evidence for descriptions of the ranchos' faded romantic atmosphere." Later, Ysidora Bandini-Couts, out of exasperation with either the invasive actions of tourists or the novel's critical portrait of Señora Moreno, filed a defamation suit against Jackson (Kropp 33, 39). When Jackson meant to rebuke *Californios* for their racial elitism and Indian abuse, popular memory placed them on a pedestal. Then as a referent to a representative *Californio* family name, "Arturo Bandini" recalls the problem of popular memory in Southern California. Being the beneficiary of romantic representations, intentional or not, whether they be modern sports stars such as Joe DiMaggio or historical figures such as an old rancho gentleman, Arturo Bandini exemplifies the ways popular culture through its discursive proliferation of stereotypes can shape the social perception of ethnic identity, and thus the terms of social inclusion and exclusion.

By staying at the Alta Loma, Arturo patronizes the Spanish past. Such patronage comes with certain racist conditions involving the explicit exclusion of non-whites, particularly Mexicans and Jews. As a place evoking an Anglo-constructed Spanish past, the Alta Loma evokes a nostalgia that indirectly celebrates the modern Anglo residents of Los Angeles. Guests who lodge at the Alta Loma must resemble the successors since to admit Mexicans as guests, and so identify them residing in the present rather than the fantasy of the past, would mean to disrupt the temporal position upon which claims to racial superiority are based. Thus, the hotel constructs the identity of its guests as American, and strictly reinforces the proscriptions of modernity, excluding non-whites from the image of modern America.

Presiding over admission to the Alta Loma is Mrs. Hargraves, the arbiter of authentic Americanism. As can be seen by studying her interrogation of Arturo, Mrs. Hargraves deploys the archetypal Americanist narrative of westward migration and thus exemplifies how the frontier myth relates to the Spanish past. A widow from the Midwest who moved to California years before, Mrs. Hargraves screens all potential guests at the front desk. When she asks Arturo, “Are you a Mexican?” (49), Mrs. Hargraves embodies the racial politics of the Spanish past over which she presides as the racial police for the Alta Loma. Her interrogation of Arturo at check-in to the Alta Loma signifies the racial limits of the Spanish past and the interests of its de facto gatekeepers of the Anglo hegemony. In response to her question Arturo replies he comes from Boulder, Colorado but Mrs. Hargraves disputes this fact of his identity since, as she claims, Boulder is in Nebraska. She makes this claim based upon the distant memory of her westward migration from Connecticut with her husband. Having moved from New England to California, Mrs. Hargraves views transcontinental migration from a distinctly Anglo-American perspective. Moreover, she keeps alive the memory of this move West with her devoted attention to the

artifacts of her deceased husband signifying her continued marriage to this view of westward movement.

With nostalgia for an Anglo-centric perspective motivating the defense of her conception of going West, Mrs. Hargraves uses her authority over hotel admission, a sign of inclusion into modern American society, to leverage Arturo into capitulating to her monolithic view of the American West. The trajectory of her western story leading to her control of the fantasy of the Spanish past as figured in her management of the Alta Loma implies the frontier myth functions as the basis for the Spanish past, its regional variation. To further support the frontier myth as a regular element of the Spanish past, consider how Mrs. Hargraves hosts several tenants who read Western pulp: a man from West Virginia, the elevator operator, and Mr. Hellfrick. As a reproduction of the frontier myth in popular culture, Western pulp reinforces the supremacy of Anglo-American identity through its stories of cowboy heroism in modern print and film media. Mrs. Hargraves and her Western-pulp-reading guests demonstrate the reciprocal relationship between the frontier myth and the Spanish past: while the racial politics of the traditional story of westward migration directs and maintains the Spanish past, the fantasy of the Spanish past accommodates and so sustains the frontier myth's historical narrative of Anglo triumph and its implied racial politics in regional and contemporary forms. In short, the Spanish past appears to be a regional and modern version of the traditional frontier story.

Resigning himself to the racist identity politics of the Spanish Past leads Arturo to perceiving himself, a bonafide Los Angelino, as consumer of Mexican culture; thus he acts upon his consent to the racist terms of the Spanish past by reifying all things Mexican, rendering the people into commodities evocative of a romantic history. From the beginning of the story, Arturo

sings his passion for the Mexican girls who haunt the Plaza, the original center of Old Los Angeles:

Oh for a Mexican girl! I used to think of her all the time, my Mexican girl. I didn't have one, but the streets were full of them, the Plaza and Chinatown were afire with them, and in my fashion they were mine, this one and that one, and some day when another check came it would be a fact. Meanwhile it was free and they were Aztec princesses and Mayan princesses, the peon girls in the Grand Central Market, in the Church of Our Lady, and I even went to Mass to look at them. (15)

The Plaza where Arturo walks as a prospective consumer, window-shopping for various personas of Mexican girls, be they evocative of an indigenous or Spanish colonial history, figures the commercialization of the Spanish past. In line with his masculine coming-of-age narrative, Arturo feminizes the Plaza. Moreover, the feminine representation is celebrated precisely for its Mexican appeal. The appeal that Fante conjures is a *mélange* of images evoking regionally obsolete social orders. These social orders exercise a range of cultural and class associations, from indigenous royalty to the peonage of the hacienda system. The *mélange* ignores the class position of the Mexican girl within the hierarchy of the specified history since the Mexican girl can be either a princess or a peon; what emerges as significant is only that the Mexican girl exists in history, that is to say, she is a figure of the distant past. Furthermore, Mexican girls function as signs of romantic desire when represented in urban spaces that evoke a pre-modern Spanish history. Through Arturo's search for a Mexican girl Fante aligns the city spaces emblematic of the Spanish past, the Plaza and the church, to spaces with explicit consumer purposes. Like Chinatown and the Grand Central Market, vestiges of pre-modern *California* Los Angeles such as the Church of Our Lady and the Plaza operate, though implicitly,

as spaces where Mexican culture is transformed into a popular object of the romanticized past and consumed imaginatively, if not materially. The Grand Central Market elaborates the sign of the Mexican Girl in modern Los Angeles: she is not just pre-modern, but a commodity too. Indeed, Arturo appears to be a consumer of Mexican culture walking through old town, shopping in the Market for “this one and that one” that he can eventually purchase when he gets “another check.” In a way that bespeaks the cultural trends of “going Spanish” or purchasing curios of Old California, Arturo mimics the commodity fetishism for the Spanish past characteristic of early twentieth century Los Angeles and best exemplified in Christine Sterling’s 1930 “Mexican Market.”

For a time at the beginning of the novel, Arturo becomes an agent of the Spanish past, contesting activities or pronouncements that do not conform to the treatment of Mexicans as objects of the past. Such moments when Mexican characters engage in modern activities, especially when participating in consumerism, transgress popularly constructed racial identities and relations. The masculine-gender politics of Arturo’s aesthetic quest lead him to the seedy Plaza where he meets a prostitute. Of the Plaza, Kropp notes, “When the multiethnic immigrant neighborhood surrounding the Plaza found mention in the *Los Angeles Times*, it did so typically as a vice or health problem” (211). After spotting a Mexican man walking with the prostitute into the Plaza, Arturo launches into a racist diatribe expressive of the state of contemporary race relations in Los Angeles: “My God, a Mexican! Women like that should draw the color line. I hated him, the Spick, the Greaser” (*Ask the Dust* 23). He continues to brood with racist vitriol after the man emerges from the rooming house: “Go ahead and smile. You stinking Greaser—what have you got to smile about? You come from a bashed and busted race, and just because you went to the room with one of our white girls, you smile” (24). The comments make explicit

the code of racial relations in Los Angeles: white is desirable whereas Mexican is not. While conflict exists between the two groups in social situations, as when Arturo competes with the Mexican man for attention from the prostitute, the otherwise tense relationship between the races becomes amicable when the whites stand to benefit financially from the Mexicans, as evidenced by the white prostitute accepting the Mexican man as her client. Given the opposing social value of white and Mexican identities, the act of interracial intercourse resignifies the relationship from one of conflict to mutual exchange, thereby making it an act subverting the popular conception of Anglo-Mexican racial relations that Arturo announces. Furthermore, by acting as a consumer, the Mexican man performs a modern identity typically associated with Anglo identity, thus reversing the popular order that designated Mexicans as cultural objects to be consumed. The double transgression of popularly prescribed racial roles occurs in the Plaza, a site of old Los Angeles within the modern downtown district that, along with adjacent Olvera Street, authenticates Mexican identity as a thing of the past. Just like the Anglo-American tourists visiting the Plaza and Olvera Street to “go Spanish” or purchase some “authentic” artifact of Mexican culture, the Mexican man treats the white prostitute as an object of Anglo-American culture he can consume.

Like Sterling’s “Mexican Market,” the Plaza prostitute sells the fantasy of authentic Anglo identity. Upon closer examination, Arturo detects that the blonde prostitute was a fake: “She was not a real blonde. Black hair grew at the roots” (*Ask the Dust* 25). The prostitute offers the fantasy of whiteness not only through her body, but through the commercial transaction that enables the experience of that fantasy. Thus, becoming white entails becoming a modern consumer. To further support the reality of this point, consider how the local dancehalls Arturo

passes on his way to the Plaza sold such fantasies to ethnic groups regularly.¹⁹ Yet, not only does the example of the prostitute teach that whiteness appears to be a tradable commodity, thus figuring the social value of that identity, but by aligning the fantasy of Anglo-American identity with prostitution, Fante also critiques the process of becoming white through modern consumerism. Fante parodies the fantasy of “authentic” Mexican culture that Sterling created at nearby Olvera Street by reversing the trajectory of Anglo-Mexican relations, making Anglo identity the object of consumption. In using a prostitute, Fante compares the commodification of culture directed by Sterling and other boosters to an act of cultural prostitution.

The gender politics of assimilation figured in the Mexican man becoming American by paying for sex with the seemingly white prostitute makes Americanization into a heteronormative masculine act.²⁰ The significance of this point cannot be overstated given that representations of the Spanish past in 1930s Los Angeles circulated images of a “dark señorita.” Phoebe Kropp notes the pervasiveness of this Southern California castanet-playing dark lady: “In image after image, the city was personified by an alluring young Mexican woman, whose traditional dress included a lace mantilla and tall comb upon which was printed ‘Los Angeles.’” As one local writer explained the allusion, ‘Los Angeles is symbolized by a dark señorita with a

¹⁹ For an examination of the ambivalent perceptions of taxi dance halls as they relate to the assimilation of Filipinos, see I-Fen Cheng; for more on the prostitute as a sign of American consumerism in the work of Nathanael West and writers on the Left, see Barnard 147n34.

²⁰ In his reading of Fante’s first published novel *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, Rocco Marinaccio claims “Making America” testifies to the immigrant’s masculinity, thus assimilation becomes a test of manhood; failing the test means failing as a man; for more on Italian masculinity and Fante’s work, see Marinaccio,

high comb, this is the second largest Mexican city in the world, [and] our advertising promises the prospective visitor Spanish atmosphere” (207-208). Thus, Los Angeles boosters feminized the Spanish past and consequently masculinized the Anglo present that consumed it. Then, by demonstrating his manhood through the sexual performance with the white prostitute, Fante’s Mexican man reverses the popular feminization of Mexican culture and in so doing undermines its Anglo-produced representation as a feminine, foreign, and historical commodity by becoming a masculine, American, and modern consumer. Conversely, Arturo meets with the prostitute and cannot bring himself to intercourse, thereby failing to prove his own claim to manhood and whiteness.

Through his perception of Camilla, Arturo reproduces the gender and racial politics of the “dark señorita” persona. To see Camilla as the feminized representation of the Spanish past is a means for him to stake a claim to American identity. This view of the Mexican as an object of the past whose consumption reinforces the modernity and thus whiteness of the consumer manifests in Arturo’s relationship with Camilla when he regards her as a racial exotic to be conquered. Arturo encounters Camilla in explicitly colonial terms. Upon first seeing her Arturo observes, “Her nose was Mayan, flat, with large nostrils. Her lips were heavily rouged, with the thickness of a negress’ lips. She was a racial type, and as such she was beautiful, but she was too strange for me” (35). Seemingly performing the colonial gaze, Arturo observes Camilla as a racial Other, one that is pre-modern and indigenous. Furthermore, attributing “Mayan” and “negress” features to her positions Camilla’s racial identity along a national and historical spectrum of white-black racial conflict, thus associating the marginalization and abuse of Indians and Mexicans to that of blacks in American culture. As a “racial type” Camilla presents an exoticism that makes her an object of desire. Indeed, Arturo’s objectifying gaze upon Camilla’s

racial exoticism occurs in a café called the Columbia Buffet, a name that invokes the patriarch of American Indian conquest. Arturo goes on to ridicule her *huaraches*, a metonym for her Mexican and thus non-white and un-American identity. To Arturo, Camilla evokes the memory of the Spanish past: “To me you’ll always be a sweet little peon. A flower girl from Old Mexico” (61). In a comment that reveals much about her social status in then-contemporary Los Angeles, the attack on her Mexican identity marks Camilla in the lowly position of indentured servant within the hacienda system, a position that makes her subject to the *Californio* authority Arturo represents. Moreover, the peon identity he imposes on her recalls the *Californio* practice of using Indian labor, thus nuancing her Mexican identity as one of indigenous origin rather than of European ancestry and thereby negating any claims to whiteness and thus American identity that she might make. If the image of the “dark señorita” that circulated in Los Angeles promotion during the 1930s was meant to sell the “second largest Mexican city in the world” as a “Spanish atmosphere” to tourists, the image did not even justly represent the racist popular perception of Mexican residents that, as indicated in Arturo’s view of Camilla, would have been more accurately represented with an Indian peasant indentured to serve the city.

In the sexual fantasy of Camilla he performs with Vera Rivken, Arturo imaginatively consummates the relations of colonial power evoked in the Spanish past. As director of this performance, Arturo sets the scene for Vera, who plays the part of Camilla:

“All of this land and this sea belongs to you. All of California . . . This is your beautiful land with the desert and the mountains and the sea . . . I’m a conqueror,” [Arturo] said. “I’m like Cortez, only I’m an Italian” . . . There were no scars, and no desiccated place. She was Camilla, complete and lovely. She belonged to me, and so did the world. And I was glad for her tears, they thrilled me and lifted me, and I possessed her. (94)

In the fantasy Arturo conceives of Camilla not as she is in the present but as the embodiment of a noble savage evocative of the pre-modern natural world.²¹ Arturo plays the role of colonizer. The sexual performance of colonization romanticizes the colonial narrative and so figures what Yolanda Venegas refers to as the “erotics of colonization,” a process whereby colonial narratives are rendered romantic, as in *Ramona*. Arturo’s descriptions of Camilla in pre-Columbian terms that evoke the imperialist nostalgia typical of *Ramona*, the phenomenon that followed, and the Spanish past serve as the foundation for the affirmation of his whiteness. By identifying himself as “Cortez but Italian” Arturo grants himself the Spanish and thus white identity he denies Camilla. Furthermore, as an Italian identifying himself as white and consequently at the top of the racial hierarchy in America, Arturo fantasizes about reversing the degrading ethnic prejudice he experienced from the “Smiths, Parkers, and Jones” of Colorado. The fantasy clarifies his attraction to Camilla that occurs in part because the prospect of the sexual conquest reinforces his manliness and whiteness. Furthermore, the fantasy fulfills the process of assimilation he could not consummate with the Plaza prostitute; thus, the erotic colonial fantasy secures his hegemonic position. Though the sexual conquest of Camilla may only be a fantasy of his social power within the Spanish past, he does consummate the whiteness of his identity through the sexual objectification of his actual partner, Vera Rivken.

²¹ Shari Huhndorf reads the celebration of Indians as “noble savages” within nationalist productions as reinforcing the racial power of the colonizer who has continued in place of the colonized subject who vanishes precisely because of presumed racial inferiority; this reading of the vanishing Indian as nostalgia that expresses colonial relations stems from Renato Rosaldo’s conception of “imperialist nostalgia”; See Huhndorf, 1-18 and Rosaldo.

As a Jewish woman who performs the conquest fantasy with Arturo, Vera Rivken demonstrates how the racial logic of the Spanish past that reinforced notions of Anglo supremacy extended to groups in Los Angeles beyond the Mexican population. At the time of the publication of *Ask the Dust* in 1939, anti-Semitism was raging on a global level with the rise of Nazi Germany. Threats of a homegrown fascism, however, that operated on anti-Semitic beliefs had been present prior to the escalation of World War II. During the Great Depression, the figure of the International Jewish Banker became the scapegoat for the nation's financial failures as seen in Nathanael West's parody of fascism *A Cool Million* (1934) and James T. Farrell's study of Depression Era Chicago *Studs Lonigan* trilogy (1932-1935). Such anti-Semitic claims that blamed Jews for the downturn were commonly trumpeted widely in nationally syndicated newspapers and by prominent figures preaching the virtues of Americanism such as Henry Ford (Higham, Sollors.). Carey McWilliams found evidence of this homegrown fascism in Los Angeles. There was enough of a concern for him to launch an investigation that yielded an informative pamphlet testifying to the threatening current of anti-Semitism lurking in Los Angeles. The prejudice against the Jewish population at the time was significant enough for Carey McWilliams to publish it in 1936 entitled *It Can Happen Here*.²²

²² The title recalls Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here*, a fiction about the rise of a dictatorship in the United States. By associating his work against anti-Semitism with Lewis' fiction, McWilliams intended his pamphlet to forewarn readers of the growing presence of fascism in L.A. His investigation makes a public declamation against Ingram Hughes, a lawyer and author of various anti-Semitic publications from books to broadsides, some of which were circulated within a month of a meeting by the local Anti-Nazi League.

Fante, however, links that anti-Semitism to the Spanish past in Arturo's conquistador fantasy. The anti-Semitic link to the Spanish past is implied in the Alta Loma's racist proscription against Mexicans and Jews. Furthermore, Arturo callously exploits Vera's desire to be accepted and received. Having fled Pennsylvania to escape the abuse and philandering of her husband, Vera moves West in search of acceptance. As with the other new Californians that have moved to Los Angeles from the Midwest, Vera has a disfiguring scar that she fears makes her undesirable. Her scar and fragile psyche signify the fear of the era's Americanism, the very kind of homegrown fascism characterized by rampant anti-Semitism, ethnic prejudice, and xenophobia. As she sobs through her performance of Camilla, Arturo grows glad, increasing the pleasure of his sexual conquest. The condition of their intercourse is her willingness to perform the role of the exotic Other, a condition she willingly accepts in order to be accepted by him. The performance of the exotic role involves the Other capitulating to a fantasy of Anglo racial domination not unlike Arturo's capitulation when signing in to the Alta Loma. Thus, the racial politics of the colonial fantasy speaks to the power of Anglo-constructed identities to subjugate non-Anglo groups through the Spanish past. Through Vera, Fante intimates a truth about Olvera Street and the Spanish past: in playing the part of the racial exotic, an ethnic subject knowingly participates in his or her own objectification in order to be accepted by Anglo-American society.

Despite the romantic Mexican identity Arturo imposes upon Camilla, she denies it and attempts to claim an American identity. Camilla too shows signs of attempting to be white in order to belong in modern Los Angeles. After Arturo insults her *huaraches*, Camilla puts on a pair of brand new white pumps (61). Like the Mexican man at the Plaza, Camilla stakes a claim to an American identity by acting as a consumer. The exchange of *huaraches* for white pumps indicates the substitution of a white identity for a Mexican one; moreover, the purchase of the

white pumps suggestively links white identity with consumerism. Likewise, the owner's certificate of Camilla's 1929 Ford Roadster reads "Camille Lombard," intimating her interest in having a white identity. Though she claims to use the name "for fun" and "sometimes professionally," the question she puts to Arturo makes explicit her desire for white identity suggested by the pumps and the owner's certificate: "Do you like your name? . . . Don't you wish it was Johnson, or Williams, or something?" Camilla has Anglicized her name in order to disguise her ethnic difference and non-white identity signaled by the last name Lopez. The Anglo name on the license to the Ford ties Anglo identity directly to American identity. As a sign of American identity, the car suggests social freedom and independence but as the owner's certificate makes clear, the condition of possessing such qualities is an Anglo identity; furthermore, the Ford Roadster joins the signs of American identity to modernity. Thus, Camilla driving a car, speeding through Los Angeles to Santa Monica, performs a modern American identity. Though Camilla may undermine Arturo's representation of her as a pre-modern peon of the Spanish past, by asserting her claim to be a modern American on the basis of an imagined white identity—one that her discomfort with the shoes and careless driving suggests she does not fit—she seems to accept the popular pronouncement of Mexican identity as an artifact of the past.

Yet, characterized with a pervasive, ominous cast of whiteness, elements of the environment portend hostility to Camilla's fantasy of a modern, white identity. Just as the Plaza serves as a site for defining, albeit with ambivalence, the sign of the Mexican in modern-day Los Angeles, it simultaneously declares the contemporary predominance of Anglo identity. While the Plaza is the old center of Los Angeles that evokes the Spanish past, Fante blankets it in an overwhelming fog: "the fog like a huge white animal everywhere, the Plaza like our courthouse

back home, snowbound in white silence” (22). The pervasive white fog of the Plaza prompts Arturo to recall his Colorado hometown, a place where hatred and shame followed his impoverished Italian identity. Xenophobia characterized the nation in the early part of the century, exemplified nationally with the passing of the anti-immigration 1924 Johnson-Reed Act and more locally in Colorado with the founding of a chapter of the KKK (Cooper, *Full of Life* 23-26). Fante’s fiction attests to the difficulty of being Catholic and Italian when it was popularly held that immigrants from historically Catholic Southern and Eastern Europe threatened the Anglo-Saxon Protestant values of America. Fante fictionalized his very real experience of prejudice as a youth in Colorado in various short stories included in *Dago Red* (1940) and his novel *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* (1938). The Colorado snow in many of these stories presents an appropriate metaphor for the racial pressure exerted upon Arturo and his Italian family to assimilate to Anglo-American culture. Indeed, Alessandra Senzani corroborates my interpretation as she reads the snow in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* as a sign of the overwhelming power of whiteness.²³ As if to further recall his Colorado fiction about the pressures to assimilate, Arturo in *Ask the Dust* continually refers to his first published story about a blizzard in his Colorado town (*Ask the Dust* 52). Whether rolling fog or a snowstorm, Fante often figures the trope of whiteness as a destructive force endemic to the environment. By seeing traces of his Boulder hometown in the Plaza, Arturo transfers the experience of overwhelming white prejudice to Los Angeles.

²³ “Odyssey of a Wop” and other short stories from the collection *Dago Red* (1940), most written prior to *Ask the Dust* and following a character similar to Arturo Bandini named Jimmy Toscana, associate nativist prejudices with the Colorado of Fante’s youth.

Even the natural environment that surrounds Los Angeles evokes the same racial politics of the Spanish-past-inspired city space. Descriptions of the Los Angeles landscape are suffused with threatening white characterizations. Various environmental conditions common to the city, such as “the fog like a huge white animal everywhere” (22) in the Plaza, follow Arturo and Camilla as they move outside the city limits to the beach, “From below rose the roar of the sea. Far out fog banks crept toward the land, an army of ghosts crawling on their bellies. Below us the breakers flayed the land with white fists” (65). To the east of the city, lies the desert: “the desert was always there, a patient white animal, waiting for men to die, for civilizations to flicker and pass into the darkness” (120). At times the atmospheric conditions merge in a disorienting experience that expresses a confusion as to the origin of their influence: “Over the city spread a white murkiness like fog. But it was not the fog: it was the desert heat, the great blasts from the Mojave and Santa Ana, the pale white fingers of the wasteland, ever reaching out to claim its captured child” (151). Surrounded on either side, whether coastal fog or desert heat, Los Angeles is the site where this looming and foreboding white atmosphere settles. The descriptions of the white atmosphere shift from human to animal though in all cases metaphors of “the white animal everywhere” lying in wait for death or with fists flaying or pale fingers grasping evoke an environment of conflict, or the threat of it, that is omnipresent, violent, and predatory. The metaphors repeatedly emphasize that the chief characteristic of this environment of conflict is its whiteness. That the fog seems “an army of ghosts” and the desert seems to be stalking passing civilizations associates the whiteness of both environments with a history that haunts the present.

Indeed, the attributing to Los Angeles and its surroundings an unresolved historically pervasive whiteness conveys the potential for conflict. The threat of whiteness embedded in the Los Angeles landscape signifies how the boosters’ environmental mythopoetics implied that the

passing rule (or even existence) of Indian and Mexican races was a natural progression toward the superior Anglo civilization. Fante represents these natural features—crashing waves and craggy hills—so as to underscore the danger of allowing myths that naturalize whiteness to determine the formation of a city supposedly heralding the future of the United States. Moreover, by rendering the white landscape savage, Fante ironically reverses the “civilized” appeal of the orderly garden and genteel *Californio* mythologies at the heart of the nostalgic Spanish-past constructions of modern Los Angeles.

While the car provides a technologically modern way for Camilla to assert her American identity, she also uses leisurely fantasies of popular western history as a cultural resource for imagining her social inclusion. At a shooting gallery, Camilla says to the proprietor, ““He’s a sissy, Tim . . . All he can do is write poetry,”” provoking Arturo to pick up a Winchester rifle to try for the target again (126). Widely regarded as “the Gun that Won the West,” the Winchester rifle is an archetype of the American frontier and its history of conquest. Within Americanist uses of the frontier myth, the rifle indicates the superiority of Anglo-Americans whose modern technology ensured westward expansion, the spread of civilization, and the conquest of the savage Other. As Camilla’s taunt indicates, the weapon in this scene signifies manhood, more properly frontier manliness. Arturo ineptly handles the gun, missing the target despite his best efforts and carelessly pointing it at the proprietor. As a result, Camilla declares him unmanly by frontier standards. Skilled with the gun herself, Camilla hits her marks. Her accuracy along with her denial of Arturo’s manliness exemplify her admiration for this kind of cowboy masculinity while showing how popular culture could enable her to exceed the gendered limits of such

conceptions of frontier history.²⁴ Throughout the novel Camilla has been identified by Arturo with the very figure of the pre-modern Other that the rifle, which she handles so well and with care, was employed to conquer. When Camilla holds the rifle she attempts to escape the racial categories imposed on her by Arturo and presumably 1930s Los Angeles society at large. She demonstrates her modernity with her skillful handling of the weapon. Figuratively, she takes aim at her own racial identity and its stereotyped history as a Mexican peon or an Indian princess. With Winchester in hand, Camilla can become white. The shooting gallery offers Camilla the fantasy of performing the identity of the conquering Anglo-American frontiersman. As a form of consumer entertainment and leisure, the shooting gallery exemplifies the popular cultural West. As the central feature of the shooting gallery, the Winchester rifle arranges a fantasy for the patron to participate as an agent in settling the frontier. As such, it functions as a hyperreality of the American West that deploys, through its adept firing, a means of authenticating national identity. Because a part of popular culture, it represents an image of the West that is massively experienced. The crowd that gathers to watch Arturo misfire the Winchester signifies the imagined community created and perpetuated by popular culture; furthermore, this crowd, as evidenced by the fact that “they all shared Camilla’s disgust,” collectively agrees upon the meaning of Arturo missing the mark: he fails to measure up to the popular standard of American identity.

²⁴ It should be noted that there is no monolithic Western hero, though certain traits—Anglo identity and masculine performance—are more common than others; for a discussion of the Western hero and his traits, see Mitchell, *Westerns*, 83; For a reading of the Western hero that disassociates masculinity from dominant culture and politics by looking at the self-fashioning possibilities that such heroes offer, see Worden.

Yet, the fantasy can exist only within the confines of the gallery, hence her desire for Arturo to be a good shot and thus white. Indeed, at the beach in Santa Monica, Camilla sees Arturo's white body and expresses her approval and desire for it. That desire implies her recognition his white identity: "She looked at the whiteness, at my loins and legs, and smiled" (65). Readily understanding the racial and romantic stakes of his failure at the shooting gallery, Arturo admits, "She did not hate Arturo Bandini, not really. She hated the fact that he did not meet her standard. She wanted to love him, but she couldn't. She wanted him like Sammy: quiet, taciturn, grim, a good shot with a rifle, a good bartender who accepted her as a waitress and nothing else. I got out of the car, grinning, because I knew that would hurt her" (128). As indicated by her love for the aspiring pulp Western writer Sammy Wiggins, Camilla desires to possess a popularly approved white identity. Her attraction to Sammy illustrates the mass appeal of the popular West even to groups its discourse excludes, a point his disinterest in and abuse of her reinforce. Arturo interprets Camilla's desire for Sammy as one based on him embodying the frontier manliness signified by the Winchester rifle. Her proficiency with the rifle is an extension of her desire for Sammy, thereby signifying her desire to possess a white identity. Arturo's mishandling of the rifle represents his discomfort with the Anglo-American identity. Yet, this Anglo identity is one that, at the beginning of the novel, Arturo expresses much ambivalence about. On the one hand he identifies as white when he defends the prostitute or declares himself an American to Camilla; on the other, he expresses envy for Anglo features that he does not have and bemoans the prejudiced responses to his Italian identity when a youth in Colorado. The events at the shooting gallery lead Arturo to conclude "Arturo Bandini was not good for Camilla Lopez." More significantly, that conclusion together with his pleasure at getting out of the car

after deducing that he does not meet Camilla's standard of Anglo frontier manliness, indicates Arturo's willingness to disregard the ethnic desire for Anglo identity that Camilla embodies.

As the racial politics of the Western would suggest, Sammy rejects Camilla as anything other than an object of sexual gratification. In doing so, Fante renders vulgar the romantic representation of Mexican culture characteristic of the Spanish past. While Arturo denies Camilla's claim to be an American, Sammy Wiggins denies her humanity by treating her as an object of his pleasure and a subject to his authority. Sammy offers Arturo some tips on courting Camilla: "How was [Arturo] getting along with the Little Spick? She wasn't a bad dame, not bad at all when the lights were out, but the trouble with you, Mr. Bandini, is that you don't know how to handle her. You're too nice to that girl. You don't understand Mexican women. They don't like to be treated like human beings. If you're nice to them, they walk all over you" (121). The advice from Sammy suggests he treated her as something other than human, just as the fact that he can commend Camilla only in sexual terms indicates that he treated her as an object of sex alone. Sammy's claim that Arturo is "too nice to that girl," intimating that he treats her as a person, belies the objectifying erotic fantasy Arturo directs Vera to perform.

To sexually objectify Camilla as Sammy does parallels Arturo's objectification of Camilla (and Vera) in the erotic conquest fantasy, thereby suggesting a connection between the romance of the Spanish past and Western fantasies. Fante recognizes how the Western, like the Spanish past, relies upon romanticism to popularize narratives of colonization. However, the respective representations of non-Anglo identity, whether Indian or Mexican, differ markedly. Through its fictional embodiment Arturo Bandini, the Spanish past appears to celebrate the exotic and pre-modern indigenous Mexican identity and thus distinguishes it from the crude characterizations and vilification of Indians and Mexicans that previously served to make

obvious the racial superiority of the Anglo-American cowboy hero typical of Westerns. However, the juxtaposition of Arturo to Sammy suggests the two genres ultimately objectify the Other to the same end—to lionize Anglo-American racial superiority. While the Western explicitly narrates a story of Anglo triumph, the Spanish past appears to critique it; however, through its romanticism, the Spanish past produces an imperialist nostalgia that celebrates Anglo-America implicitly.

Thus Fante suggests the Spanish past, despite its celebratory portraits of Indians and Mexicans, reproduces the ethnic prejudices of the Western, not an insignificant charge considering that Helen Hunt Jackson wrote *Ramona*, the text most often credited with giving the Spanish past its immense popularity, to critique the racial stereotyping of Indians and Mexicans typical of popular frontier texts. In calling her a “spick” and “greaser” and threatening to kick her teeth in (136), Sammy’s treatment of Camilla reproduces the virulent racism with which Westerns represented Indians and Mexicans. The Mexican “bad man” was a common moral foil to the Anglo hero in Westerns. As the Other, Mexicans and Indians, among other non-Anglos, reified the ideological opposition to the cowboy, ranger, or other white heroic figure of frontier masculinity (Alonzo 46). From personal experience, Fante could attest to the power of the Western to influence his perception of Mexican people. In one of Fante’s unpublished short stories titled “Fish Cannery,” the narrator blames his prejudices against Mexicans on his reading of the prolific Western writer Zane Grey.²⁵ Such disparaging views of Mexicans emerged out of

²⁵ Fante writes, “The Mexicans are dark, their faces consumed by pimples, especially on the foreheads; all the teeth [holograph annotation: “I see”] are pretty rotten and brown. The Mexicans speak unimpeded American-English, and I am surprised, for I am a new Californian, fresh by ten days from a small Colorado town. In the Colorado town my concept of the Mexican

nineteenth-century travel writings and then they appeared in the predecessor to Western pulp, the dime novel. Running counter to such popular stereotypes aimed at Mexicans and Indians, Jackson portrayed motivated *Californios*, trustworthy Mexicans, and noble Indians in her social protest novel. Indeed, Jackson's *Ramona* attempts to revise the discourse of civilization behind the California Garden myth that drew upon stereotypes of lazy Mexicans and savage Indians who left the California landscape in a state of disrepair in order to justify Anglo-American expansion. With Anglo characters playing the roles of squatters, rapists, and violent drunkards, Jackson reversed the racial position of moral sympathy. Yet, to achieve this sympathy and critique Anglo-American expansionism, Jackson relies on the "noble savage" Alessandro Assiz, a reification of the pre-modern, natural world that opposes the physical and moral corruption of the land brought on by the modern, industrial advances of civilization. The "noble savage" trope offers a representation of indigenous identity troubled by imperialist nostalgia. Imperialist nostalgia functions as a means of negative praise, celebrating the triumph of Anglo civilization by lamenting the loss of the simpler, innocent, and pre-civilized life of the savage, an image that Arturo links directly to Camilla in his erotic conquistador fantasy.

is the one soaked into my brain by the greedy gobbling of Zane Grey fiction. I am jealous because they speak smoother than than my father, who was once an Italian peasant"; Coincidentally, Fante worked at a fish cannery in Wilmington, California, which inspired Fante's first novel *The Road to Los Angeles*, at the same time Grey holidayed across the bay on Catalina Island. While working at the Soyo Fish Cannery, Arturo wistfully looks to the island; later he creates a novel about Arthur Banning whose travels around the world in his yacht bear resemblance to Grey's famed fishing adventures; for more details, see Cooper, *Full of Life* 58.

As a result of Sammy rejecting her, Camilla resorts to substance abuse that ultimately leads to her madness and subsequent disappearance, like her literary forerunner Alessandro Assiz. Marijuana provides Camilla with an escape from Sammy's physical and emotional abuse. Arturo's account of his first experience smoking with Camilla demonstrates the psychotropic effects of the drug: "it began to come, the floating, the wafting away from the earth, the joy and triumph of a man over space, the extraordinary sense of power. I laughed and inhaled again" (143). Though for Camilla the drug offers an escape from racial abuse, marijuana for Arturo suggests less of an escape from white desire and more an expression of it. To obtain the drug, Camilla drives with Arturo to the Los Angeles Black Belt: "Central Avenue, night clubs, abandoned apartment houses, broken-down business houses, the forlorn street of poverty for the Negro and swank for the whites" (140). The purchase of marijuana involves slumming, an act of urban tourism reinforcing the class and racial superiority of the typically white participants who can temporarily explore exotic racial and class identities.²⁶ To engage in "swank for the white" through the purchase of marijuana indicates that the drug provides Camilla, and on one occasion Arturo, with a fantasy of whiteness.

While both are high, Arturo observes Camilla acting as she did at Sammy's: "I remembered having seen that face of hers before, that obedience and fear, and I remembered a hut and Sammy telling her to go out and get some wood. It was as I knew it was bound to be sooner or later. She crept into my arms and I laughed at her tears," (144). By becoming submissive and acting as she did with Sammy, Camilla expresses her perception of Arturo as having a dominant white identity and so Arturo consummates the sexual fantasy asserting his hegemonic authority as he dress-rehearsed it with Vera. That the psychotropic effects of

²⁶ For a detailed account of slumming, see Heap and Stokes.

marijuana enable Camilla to see Arturo as Sammy and Arturo to assume his role suggests marijuana signifies the fantasy of white desire. In joining Arturo's identity to Sammy's, Fante makes explicit the commonality between the racial politics of the Spanish past and the Western, both of which figuratively objectify Mexican identity as a means to asserting Anglo hegemonic dominance. Thus, rather than escape her desire for Sammy, who signifies her desire for white identity, her marijuana dependency only exacerbates her fixation upon it. Despite Arturo's best efforts to dispose of her marijuana, Camilla relapses. She returns to Sammy; he rejects her one final time, and then she disappears completely.

By making Sammy responsible for Camilla's madness and disappearance, Fante echoes the murder of Alessandro Assiz in *Ramona*. The Western-reading and-writing, hawk-eye bartender Sammy Wiggins is a modern parallel to the malcontent cowboy Jim Farrar, the drunkard who guns down Alessandro for stealing his horse by mistake. Alessandro mistakes Jim Farrar's horse for his own as a result of his fits of madness. The madness that Alessandro suffers from occurs because he cannot cope with the sequence of tragedies that have befallen him and Ramona. These tragedies recall the harsh realities of genocide, removal, and land loss suffered by Native Americans at the hands of Anglo-American expansionism. If Sammy recalls the role of Jim Farrar, then in Camilla's disappearance Fante compares the contemporary modern Los Angeles conflict between Anglos and Mexicans to the frontier conflict between Anglos and Indians. In referencing Alessandro through Camilla, Fante intimates that not only did Jackson's literary protest fail to correct the Indian problem by moving readers with sympathetic portraits of natives to counter the seemingly authoritative representations of savagery popularized in Westerns and like cultural texts, but it also promoted a problematic relationship between Anglos and Mexicans due to her representation of the Spanish past. Thus, Camilla as the modern

Alessandro signifies the legacy of madness caused by Jackson's romantic representation of the Other.

Camilla is a victim of whiteness and her disappearance, like Alessandro's, evokes the vanishing-Indian trope. The destructive madness Camilla succumbs to results from what McWilliams later described as "a schizophrenic condition" of the Spanish past fantasy wherein the Mexican sign is bifurcated into a desirable figure of romance existing in the past and an undesirable burden upon public health and relief in the present. This bifurcated sign can be seen through the love triangle with Arturo and Sammy. To Arturo in the first half of the novel, Camilla signifies the popularly romanticized images of Indian and Mexican identity typical of the Spanish past. To Sammy, Camilla appears the unwanted, sub-human side of the Mexican sign. As a result, she becomes a disorderly "hophead" and is arrested and detained. Indeed, as a patient committed to a mental asylum, Camilla embodies the "schizophrenic condition" of the Mexican sign in a Southern California culture shaped by the fantasy of the Spanish past. The tension between desired and undesired figures the paradox of the Spanish past, calling into question the logic of its racial politics. Elaborating this paradox, Kropp states, "Indian and Mexican residents became marginal citizens despite their central roles in Anglos' imagined regional past" (Kropp 9). On the one hand, by portraying the paradoxical bifurcation of the Mexican sign as a senseless tragedy, Fante critiques the racist ideology of the Spanish past and the Western. For Fante to end on a tragic note corrects the romantic conclusion to Helen Hunt Jackson's social protest novel. On the other hand, in recalling the "vanishing Indian" through Camilla's disappearance, Fante presents the Mexican people as passive victims of popular Anglo mythologies of the American West. In this light, the tragic portrait of Camilla seems less resistant to the racial politics of the Spanish past than it may appear at first blush. While Fante is

quick to criticize *Ramona* as a failed social protest responsible for the “ideological fallacy” (Kropp 7) of the Spanish past, he capitulates, even if unconsciously, to the imperialist nostalgia of booster promotions by using the “vanishing” Other trope. Moreover, representing the Mexican population as desiring to be American as Camilla does ignores segments of the community that rejected the Anglo terms of American identity or demonstrated disillusionment or even indifference to citizenship.

Yet, to claim that Camilla’s disappearance amounts only to victimization would be to ignore the 1930s Mexican repatriation programs to which her removal alludes; thus, the disappearance of Camilla that some may read as silencing the voice of her struggle ironically refers to a de-radicalizing strategy deployed against an increasingly vocal Mexican community in Los Angeles.²⁷ Through the combined efforts of immigration agents and uniformed police officers, the city during the 1930s implemented a policy of repatriation that resulted in Mexicans and Mexican-Americans being rounded up and put on trains to Mexico, if unable to prove citizenship. From 1930 to 1939, over 75,000 Mexican nationals were repatriated from Los Angeles and thousands more from American towns across the country (Kropp 231). The belief that Mexicans were burdening social relief programs designed for Americans contributed to the repatriation efforts. Yet the media portrait misrepresented the allocation of public relief. Grants for Mexican families were \$20 each month while \$30 per month were allocated to Anglo families. Moreover, the large population of Mexicans in Southern California was the product of employers’ political activities. During the financial boom of the 1920s, agricultural and other

²⁷ David Wyatt hints that the disappearance of Camilla alludes to the 1930s repatriation policy (40); while in accord with Wyatt’s suggestive comparison, I elaborate the political implications of Camilla’s allusion to repatriation.

major industries needed inexpensive labor; these employers petitioned the United States government to exempt Mexico from the stringent immigration quotas that applied to groups from Southern and Eastern Europe. The economic hardships of the Depression decreased the need for Mexican labor. Consequently, many migrant laborers found themselves unwelcomed once the boom had dissipated and scorned as public relief problem or employment competition.

While the city was motivated to unburden itself of Mexicans on relief, it was far more concerned with another problem that unemployed Mexicans represented—the threat of radicalism. The 1930s saw a period of vocal Mexican resistance to labor abuse and social mistreatment more than any other previous decade. Mexicans organized labor strikes in the factories and the fields; bringing such radical labor organization to Los Angeles would have threatened the continuity of its “open shop” practice. Thus, repatriation, as Carey McWilliams saw it, represented at its core an attempt de-radicalize Mexicans who might organize to improve labor conditions or wages (Kropp 241). Indeed, employers used repatriation as a strike-breaking strategy. To the contrary, others have argued that repatriation contributed to the rise of Mexican political activism in the 1930s. While older Mexican generations were being deported, younger generations educated in the United States were rising to positions of influence within their communities more quickly (Kropp 258).

Being such close friends with Carey McWilliams, Fante was probably aware of the anti-Mexican policy of repatriation, which must have seemed to him a worthy subject to portray, even if in the veiled terms of literary allusion. Together the two co-wrote a treatment entitled “Home is the Hunter” (ca. early 1940s), a comedy dealing with the conflict between the forces of modernity in Los Angeles that exploit the Spanish past coming up against a resistant Mexican population. In order to accomplish the modern modifications to the city’s freeway system dubbed

the Arroyo Serra in honor of Junipero Serra, the mayor drums up familiar charges against Mexicans as public burdens and proposes repatriation. Ultimately, the marginalized Mexican community overcomes their removal and demonstrates their utility to not only the city, but also the war effort.²⁸ Individually, Fante portrayed the labor scene of Mexicans and Filipinos at the Wilmington Docks in the ironically proletarian novel *The Road to Los Angeles* (ca. 1936)—the first of the Arturo Bandini cycle—and his other works reflect sensitivity to the physical, mental, and financial stresses of working-class ethnic families. In one poignant scene from *The Road to Los Angeles*, a motivated Arturo attempts to agitate a fellow Mexican laborer into striking until he learns that the strike would jeopardize his fellow laborers' only means of supporting their families. The scene exemplifies Fante's awareness of conflicts between workplace politics and personal needs. The scene expresses a critique of the kind of proletarian idealism—best represented by Mike Gold whom he lampoons in the novel and in personal correspondence with H.L. Mencken—that in its enthusiastic but ultimately impractical call for solidarity, ignores a significant motivation for labor to satisfy basic needs such as food and shelter. While the scene reflects his critique of proletarian idealism, it also demonstrates Fante's awareness of the

²⁸ In "Home is the Hunter," the mayor of Los Angeles, who is of Mexican ancestry, and his staff deploy charges against Mexicans as drains on public relief to justify the construction of the new Arroyo Serra speedway; they resort to repatriation as a solution. After enforced removal from the Meyer Brickyard due to construction of the new speedway, the Mexican community that has squatted at the abandoned location for years returns to their old home ready to contribute as mechanics to the wartime effort. The contribution to the war effort is ironic because Anglo characters stereotype Mexicans as being pre-modern people of the land, thus mechanically disinclined.

political struggles of ethnic laborers. Despite his sympathy with labor politics, Fante himself declaimed open allegiance to any political cause and *The Road to Los Angeles* attests to his dismissal of explicitly political writing. His sensitivity to the labor conditions of the Mexican working-class and his personal reservations about labor organization may explain the veiled reference to repatriation. Camilla signifies repatriation and repatriation had explicitly political ramifications. On the one hand, repatriation served the cause of the city and employers to solve financial problems and to de-radicalize the Mexican population. Yet, on the other, it became a springboard for second- generation Mexican-Americans like Camilla Lopez to come of age politically. Camilla's disappearance as an allusion to repatriation then appears at the least to question outright claims of Fante perpetuating racial stereotypes of Mexican dependence and passive victimization. In her disappearance, Camilla voices the political resistance of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in 1930s Los Angeles.

Despite the social mobility and understanding he believes ethnic writing can provide to counteract the socially degrading effects of prejudice, Fante ultimately dismisses romantic ethnic stories of upward mobility as evident in Arturo discarding the story of Vera Rivken where Camilla was last seen. In the context of the final passage, certain ethnic writing seems a fiction that can neither effectively recuperate the ethnic subject from the pain of its experience nor can the writing move an Anglo readership steeped in the Americanism of the Western to read, understand, and effect social change. Camilla's physical decline and disappearance bear an inverse relationship to the increasing success of Arturo as a professional writer: the publication of his first novel coincides with her ultimate disappearance. Arturo believes the financial success he achieves from the novel can provide Camilla with the means to bring her back to health, suggesting the recuperative social powers of ethnic stories. Indeed, he tries. Using the money

he's earned from his novel contract, Arturo attempts to nurse Camilla; however, his methods of treatment reinforce the power of whiteness to sustain the ethnic social body: he forces her to drink milk (which she regurgitates), he buys her a white collie that she wants to name "Snow White," and he entices her into a suburban retreat from Los Angeles to the white sands of a Laguna beach house—an act smacking of the post-War "white flight" phenomenon (*Ask the Dust* 156). Though the novel that affords Arturo the financial means to help Camilla recuperate undoubtedly features an ethnic subject, and though his description of the novel as "a slice out of life" is intended to portray authentically the real struggles of ethnic marginalization in the literary monograph of Jewish American Vera Rivken, figuratively the novel only reinforces the power of white identity and fails to keep Camilla alive. By hurling the story of Vera into the wasteland, Arturo consummates what he realizes when he confronts Camilla at the peak of her addiction: "Who cares about a novel, another goddamn novel?" (146). Early in *Ask the Dust*, Arturo hails novel writing as a means to fame and fortune and thus a way for him to improve upon his impoverished ethnic experience; yet, by the time he publishes the sentimental tragedy about Vera Rivken, the novel loses its social significance in the context of Camilla's real suffering. Upon seeing Camilla, Arturo remarks: "Her face was the face of an old rose pressed and dried in a book, yellowish, with only the eyes to prove there was life in it . . . That sting in my eyes, it was for her, it was my eyes remembering a wild lean girl running in the moonlight on the beach, a beautiful girl who danced with a beer tray in her round arms" (146). His persistent romantic treatment of Camilla, one that suggests his literary treatment of Vera, reproduces the kind of ethnic stereotyping and nostalgia evident in the Spanish past. The "old rose pressed and dried in a book" symbolically recalls Arturo's perception of Camilla as "a flower from Old Mexico" but

rather than reproducing the romanticism of the Spanish past intimated in his initial perception, the image of decay conveys the deleterious effects of romantic representations of ethnicity.

Indeed, Arturo writes his first novel about Vera in order to promote sympathy and understanding of her abused ethnic experience. Yet the idea originates in the destructive aftermath of his sexually exploitative fantasy. After Arturo uses Vera's body to enact his erotic colonial fantasy, she abruptly disappears; subsequently, the idea for his book comes. The publication of his book precipitates the disappearance of Camilla. At moments of creative conception and publication of supposedly authentic ethnic stories, the subject disappears from reality. Thus, Fante problematizes narratives of ethnic experience even if tragic: while such narratives attempt to represent the real struggles of ethnics in the hopes of promoting action against such abuses, the representation of ethnic marginalization runs the risk of becoming a fiction. For Fante, *Ramona* provides a representative case of the problem of authentically narrating ethnic experience. Though Helen Hunt Jackson treated the plight of the Saboba Indians to move millions to improve conditions for Indians by correcting popular representations of Indians as savages, while attempting to make real Native American struggles, Jackson's romantic mode of representation distracted from the social protest. Of this inconsistency between romance and reality, McWilliams writes, "The region accepted the charming Ramona, as a folk figure, but completely rejected the Indians still living in the area" (qtd. in Kropp 38). From the outset, Fante's expressed intention in the Preface of *Ask the Dust* to reverse the romantic stereotyping of Mexican culture perpetuated by boosters of the Spanish past intimates his conviction in the social significance of literary work. The reversal seems to be achieved through the novel's tragic conclusion that focuses on the silencing of the marginalized non-Anglo voice. However, Arturo's dismissal of the significance of his book's publication and his hurling of it into the wasteland

suggest that Fante's ideas about the potential for the social impact of ethnic narratives changed by the time he concluded the novel.

Reluctant as *Ask the Dust* may be to claim the ability of narratives of modern ethnic experience to improve social conditions, the book does propose that those abusive conditions on which ethnic fiction centers, and so the body of ethnic texts, originate but depart from the popular body of Western works. *Ask the Dust* figures the trajectory of ethnic modernism from the Western in the final moment of the novel when Arturo leaves behind Sammy Wiggins to return to Los Angeles. Early in his Los Angeles experience, Arturo fancies himself a "wanderer" when imagining a big money idea for a book (21). The "wanderer" evokes the restlessness of the archetypal American character traditionally represented in the rugged individualism exemplified by cowboy masculinity. Westerns, both print and film, reify this kind of restless individualism in their Anglo-cowboy heroes; thus, the wanderer hero celebrates the Anglo-Saxon pride of Americanism. Sammy as a consumer and aspiring writer of Western pulp reproduces the Anglo fantasy of the wanderer hero. However, as a writer of narratives of ethnic American experience, Arturo embodies the ideological antithesis to the racial politics of the Americanism that the Western popularly conveys and for which Sammy stands. Yet, the imminent demise of Sammy, guaranteed by his tubercular condition, intimates that the Anglo vision of American culture proffered by the Western is in a state of decline. Moreover, that the Anglo-American Sammy Wiggins suffers from consumption reverses the health discourse that popular culture deployed to promote Southern California and later to stigmatize and so marginalize Mexicans; making Sammy the figure of disease subverts the Anglo-American racial hierarchy upon which the terms of social inclusion were constructed. Furthermore, Arturo returning to Los Angeles in the Ford

reverses the racialized temporal scheme that figured non-whites as pre-modern; Arturo driving the Ford asserts ethnic identity and ethnic writing as signs of American modernism.

Whereas the Western hailed the triumphant emergence of Anglo American identity through romances of imperial conquest, ethnic narratives recount the emergence of ethnic American identity out of the tragedy of that Anglo-American conquest and its popular romantic accounts. In Arturo's departure from Sammy, Fante suggests modern ethnic literature emerges out of the popular West and its legacy of romances, be they the national story in the Western or a regional variation, the Spanish past. Fante's *Ask the Dust* itself uses *Ramona* as a cultural resource to reverse the romantic stereotyping of Mexican identity perpetuated in contemporary deployments of the Spanish past in Los Angeles that fail to acknowledge the modern and American identity of the Mexican people. Moreover, *Ramona* itself was, in large part, a response to popular Western representations of Indians and Mexicans as un-American savages. As a "Ramona in reverse," *Ask the Dust* would seem to imply that narratives of ethnic American experience are in some ways post-Western.

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