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Annie Proulx's Wyoming: Subversive Storytelling from the Bunchgrass Edge of the World

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**ANNIE PROULX'S WYOMING:
SUBVERSIVE STORYTELLING FROM THE BUNCHGRASS EDGE OF THE
WORLD**

By

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
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**PROFESSOR WALKER
PROFESSOR GREENE**

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INTRODUCTION:

Why Proulx? Why Wyoming?

Writing articles for *Gray's Sporting Journal* and How-To books before DIY was hipster-chic is an unusual start to a writing career, but it exhibits Annie Proulx's lifelong interest in American folk lifestyles. When her fiction career began in earnest, the locations she chose to write about reflected that interest; she is a regional writer in the broadest application of the term. The settings of her novels and short stories are 'region' itself, marginal spaces spanning North America from a fishing village in Newfoundland to the loathed Texas panhandle.

Her name is not evocative of one single space as Faulkner or O'Connor is of his or her version of the American South. Many critics have looked at her entire body of work for overlapping similarities, comparing works from different regions to understand what Proulx has to say about the essence of regional life exclusive of particular location. Yet looking at the one area in particular where her focus has hovered yields its own discoveries. Of all the marginal spaces Proulx has chosen to write about, Wyoming stands alone in terms of the depth of the author's productive interest in a regional place. She wrote three separate Wyoming Stories collections spanning nine years (*Close Range* [1999], *Bad Dirt* [2004], *Fine Just the Way It Is* [2008]). She also moved to the least populated of the lower 48 and wrote a memoir about the process of building her own house there (*Bird Cloud: A Memoir* [2011]). A specific focus on Proulx's Wyoming allows for the investigation of how regional life in Wyoming is influenced by the region itself; in this case the literary and cultural stereotypes that surround the Western United States. It is also the relationship—between

region (both real and fantasied) and regional narrative—that draws out the most interesting aspects of Proulx’s style; her caustic wit and her gut-wrenching descriptions of place.

The West has been mythologized to an extent that even the word itself is enough to instantly evoke thought-images of formulaic Western narratives, landscapes, and character tropes. The mythologizing of the region into a single story that erases alternative narratives was achieved through the efforts of powerful Eastern men who used the newly lucrative mass-publishing industry to influence national opinion in favor of their exploitative business and hunting interests in the West. The popular beliefs produced by the formula Westerns they produced continue to influence the American public. American Exceptionalism shapes reactionary political decisions and the idea of the frontier as a place with never ending resources is one source of America’s unbalanced appetite for resources at home and abroad. What is of Western concern has always been both unique to the region and intimately connected with national identity; understanding and deconstructing the influence of the West-as-Myth is a regional, national, and now global concern.

Thankfully we live in an era when our secondary associations with the West and Westerns are likely influenced by writers like John Steinbeck or Leslie Silko—authors from modern and contemporary eras whose work has carved a space for the alternative voices previously silenced by or marginalized by Myth.¹ These writers have opened spaces for

¹ I do not want to fall into the trap of perpetuating the very ills I see Proulx’s work challenging. Though I write that the formula Western is a myth that excludes alternative narratives, I do not mean to claim that those other narratives disappeared or were non-existent. The formula Western purposefully edged out dime novels with more diverse characters in them, and classism, sexism, and racism hindered many alternative narratives from reaching the same level of popularity as ones that fit the mold. Yet alternative narratives—by women, Native Americans, even black cowboys--were being written from the time of Western expansion all the way until contemporary times. In fact, Proulx’s style draws from a form of alternative narrative—the folktale—that existed long before Wister

more people to consider, as Haslam would say, Wests instead of The West, and, in turn, Western literature as a dynamic genre rather than something limited to the antiquated formula Western. This thesis will examine how Annie Proulx's Wyoming Stories interact dynamically with the mythological West in order to create a West inclusive of a myriad of perspectives that destabilizes the set parameters of what lived experiences are authentically Western.

In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Proulx said that *Close Range* was “a backhand swipe at the mythology of the West—the old beliefs” (LA Times). That metaphor cheekily describes the way in which all of her collections engage with the myth of the American West; like a backhand, her stories are a critique, a reaction, an alternative narrative that goes against preconceived notions of what stories of the West deserve being told. Yet a backhand slap is also personal, intimate, and passionate; Proulx's work closely engages with myth's influence in the lives of her characters and in her narrative. Her work shows how altering a myth is, in a way, an acknowledgement of its power.

This thesis strives to explore how Proulx's Wyoming Stories open up when viewed as Western regional texts. This introductory section is split into two main parts: 1) the Myth of the West's characteristics are defined and they are linked to the creation of the formula Western, and 2) the definitions of regional (specifically Western) texts, Naturalism, and folk narratives are related to Proulx's challenge to West-as-Myth. After that the thesis is comprised of four main sections, each of which refers to a specific Western theme in her

picked up a pen. The persistence of these narratives even though they do not conform to myth could be testament to the inherent flaws in myth's power, a testament to the power of lived experience to push against erasure—the impossibility of complete erasure even after the tools of genocide, territorial conquest, and manipulation of the publishing industry are utilized.

works and how her reworking of the theme pushes against Myth in a playful way. The first two sections are Place and Time; the others are Totem and Folk Humor. The first pairing compares and contrasts Proulx's created temporal and physical Wyoming to the time-space of the mythical West. The second pairing deals with the ways in which Proulx's utilization of folk devices critiques the imposed, faux-folk narrative of the formula Western.

What is Myth?

The terms 'myth' and 'symbol' occur so often in the following pages that the reader deserves some warning about them.

--Henry Nash Smith

Virgin Land

Smith began the first thorough exploration of what he called "The American West as Symbol and Myth" with those words, and nearly 60 years later I feel the same need to brace my reader. Perhaps she is already annoyed and thinking angrily at me: 'Define your terms!' I will do my best in the following section to explain to the reader what 'myth' will mean within the context of the paper and why it is an essential component of my argument about Proulx's short story collections.

The definition Nash gives is sound: he describes myth as "collective representations" "exist(ing) on a different plane" from "empirical fact," a "construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image" (Nash, v). He identifies the 'collective' nature of myths; they gain their power because the 'construction' or 'representation' is communal. Narratives only reach the level of myth when a group of people believes that that 'construction' as the true narrative—when the representation's importance supersedes reality.

I'm interested in Nash placing myth on "a different plane" from "fact." Myths draw their power from a phenomenon not unlike collective delusion, which does not rely on any objective, real foundation. It was the examinations of myths through the lens of post-

modernism that spawned the theory that post-modern existence was a simulacrum—that simulation *has become* reality.² Myths are separate in some ways from fact but they, through their influence on our collective beliefs, actually affect how we live in a real, felt, day-to-day way. For example, though Ennis' very existence as a gay man challenges the trope of the straight cowboy as the definition of Western masculinity, beliefs surrounding the trope nevertheless limit the possibilities he can see for his own life, and cause physical harm to befall his neighbor and his partner. The theory of simulacrum identifies something Proulx acknowledges in her work; myth is inescapable. One cannot live outside of the influence of myth. Proulx's critique of myth comes from within, a disruption rather than (what would be a failed attempt at) a complete deconstruction or elimination.

Myths are exclusionary in essence; they gain influence by being *the* accepted imagining of something, which directly or indirectly means that alternative narratives must be denied, ignored, or erased in order to make way for the single narrative. A myth is as much an act of imagination and creation as it is of conscious or unconscious suppression of other stories. Belief in the post-modern idea of the simulacrum is dangerous in the sense that equating simulation with reality is not a neutral designation. It brushes over how myths actively suppress alternative narratives and how lived experiences can challenge the collective delusion. Perhaps most important to keep in mind is that since the communal imagination controls the myth, control of the imagination is control of the myth. From that perspective, a writer does have a form of power against myth, and stories that have been hidden have a chance to worm their way to the light. Extending the post-modern condition

² These ideas (and the specific meanings of simulacra) are those of Jean Baudrillard, who in his essay "Simulacra and Simulations" argues that postmodern existence is "hyperreal," in which simulated reality proceeds reality itself. (Baudrillard, 365, 366)

to the entire world is still an impossible feat even of the imagination; racial, class, and gendered differences have a way of engendering communities that, in very existence, challenge myth's supremacy and singularity. As Alex Hunt wrote:

[Proulx's] readers are forcefully reminded that regions and places remain real, distinct, different---and ultimately, that the distinctions and differences are worth fighting for. In Proulx's fiction, weather, landscape, history, and local economy remain vital, factual signposts within a fictional representation. As such, her writing is also a critique of postmodern culture. (Hunt, 1)

The simulacrum of postmodern culture is undermined by Proulx's narratives that not only show but also 'forcefully remind' us that the regional exists, that the marginal communities blanketed over by the simulation of West-as-Myth exist in spite of it.

A writer writing at the same time as Nash but approaching literature from a different angle offers a more clinical understanding of myth. Roland Barthes explained in his *Mythologies* how linguistics helps us understand the idea of myth. A myth as Barthes explains it is the ultimate "sign" (sign as defined in linguistic terms as being a combination of signifier and signified) in a "second-order semiological system" (Barthes, 81). Hundreds upon thousands of signs become signifiers of other signs leading up to the ultimate sign (and simultaneous signification) of the myth. So in myth, things that used to be signs in themselves actually signify the myth. Barthes' understanding of myth will help us understand how myths, unlike other concepts, not only have connotations and associations, but also *baggage*. The signifiers of the myth include everything that signifies the myth (e.g. Cowboy signifies the West). So, studying an aspect of the myth helps one understand the entire concept.

Going forward we must agree on our own understanding of myth:

A myth is a communal imagining that supersedes reality and yet influences it. By being communal and imagined, the myth dictates what does and does not belong in a story—thereby excluding alternative narratives. Understanding the signifiers of the myth will help us understand the myth as a whole.

Proulx's tactics that challenge myth include 1) voicing alternative narratives, 2) exploring the places where society is negatively affected by myth and also where it organically challenges it, and 3) playfully reconstituting or mocking signifiers of the myth. Her approach recognizes the undeniable influence of myth on narratives and lives while also acknowledging the ways in which an insider's perspective can actually begin to unravel the foundation of the myth.

In "The Novelist and His Background" Vardis Fisher wrote the following to redeem Faulkner and Wolfe as challengers of Myth: "All myth is a product of the folk mind...but an effort to perceive in what way myth shapes and determines life today is quite different from creating myth itself" (Fisher, 60). This quote relates in some ways to Proulx. Myth does rely on the folk mind—that communal imagination—in order to be effective. An interest in the West-as-Myth is an interest in the predisposition every American brings (even the writer herself) to a book that holds a Western tale. We might want our expectations filled or dashed, but nevertheless we have expectations. Fisher claims that the author is not a mythmaker because he/she is trying to understand the effects of myth—by extension of that statement, awareness of myth's influence and mechanisms is somehow automatically a challenge in itself. Revealing myth as an entity (as a simulation) reveals it to be a delusion, a construction—perhaps the first step in undermining a myth's claim as the sole true narrative.

However, Proulx pushes beyond perception. The way she utilizes myth, inverts it, and plays with it shows a deep understanding of ‘myth’ that goes beyond perception into the arena of creation—creation of her own Wyoming, a disruption in its existence to the Wyoming and West of myth. Her stories also reveal a deeper understanding of the folk mind than Fisher seems to understand. She intimately draws on the folk—on its storytelling techniques, its humor, characters recognizable as folk everymen and ‘characters’-- to challenge myth. As much as the folk mind is needed for Myth to exist, in the case of West-as-Myth, the folk community (like the one she builds in Elk Tooth)—rural, impoverished, people finding humor in the everyday violence of a harsh life—stands as a natural resource of storytelling techniques that challenge the formula Western’s dominance. Where the formula Western feigns popular roots, Proulx’s utilization of folk techniques reveal the faux-populist nature of the formula Western.

What is West/Western?

Annie Proulx begins the first of her three Wyoming short story collections *Close Range* with the following epigraph:

“Reality’s never been of much use out here.”
--Retired Wyoming rancher

The Wyoming she creates pulls at the reader, sucking her into a stark creation. The tensions between fiction and reality are heightened in these regional stories where representation of a specific place adds essential meaning to a work. What is reality to Wyoming, the least populated state, a state in the heart of the mythologized American West and also isolated from spaces that set the standard for American culture—the urban, the high-tech, the post-modern? What is reality when the people living in the space must contend with how their lives do not fit within either level of simulated American myth—that of the West, or that of

what America is as a whole? What do you call the experiences of ‘real’ people in harsh environments if they do not fit an agreed-upon master narrative for the region? Where is the reality, there; what is authenticity? Does one simply chuck the idea of reality out the window because, in the life of a workingman, its usefulness is negligible? These questions raised by this provocative, ominous, and somewhat cheeky quotation will be explored in the examination of Proulx’s works as a whole. Reality becomes hazy when it is affected by simulacra/myth and yet her stories stand in defiance of myth’s limitations and prescriptions. Essentially, Proulx destabilizes the concept of myth producing reality by acknowledging the power of myth and the power of lived experiences to push back against it. It is a complex dance, and she does it laughing.

To whom the quote is attributed is also a point of interest; using a retired rancher is a claim that her piece is tied to lived experiences, a rejection of the canned myth of the West that might have been evoked by quoting a movie, another author, or a Western celebrity. Yet the rancher remains nameless, in a way what he *is* is all that needs to be said, reminiscent of what myth has done to the cowboy. Proulx’s writing is slippery like this; it navigates multiple levels of critique that must be acknowledged if meaning is to be taken from her work. To say she is making statements against the mythologizing of the Western United States would be over-simplifying the tantalizing way she reveals the dual power and weakness of myth in her own stories, and how relevant those paradoxes of meaning are to the space she has created.

The following section endeavors to outline the essential elements of the myth of the American West and the normalizing forces behind those elements. The formula Western was essential to the creation of the West-as-Myth, and will serve as the primary basis of that

which it is comprised—for a myth is at its foundation a narrative, and this thesis' interest lies in how a group of stories engages that master narrative. The components of the formula Western will be outlined, as will their imbedded mythical connotations. That move, in turn, will begin to reveal how Proulx's style (in messing with those tropes) disrupts those problematic connotations.

We must now define myth in the specific context of the West. What is the mythological Western US? Why is the myth so pervasive and embedded in American culture? And, of course, what does this myth have to do with Proulx, and how does she play with its particular configuration?

That the word 'Western' has come to signify both a region and the literature from that region (as is the case no other region in the United States) is a fun fact in the context of this thesis. Myth is above all else a narrative; the Myth of the West cannot be understood outside of a discussion of the formula Western genre—because the formula Western shaped (and continues to shape) the preconceptions Americans have about what the West is, what can and cannot be in its story. The obvious reason that the Myth of the West is such a powerful force is because its undertones of male, white, patriarchal dominance over new land were foundational to the conquest of America, were essential to the formation of a nationalistic American identity, and because they continue to justify imperial war and global resource exploitation. To refer back to the discussion of Barthes, to be communally invested in the 'baggage' of the West-as-Myth is to be content with archaic forms of racialized, gendered, environmental domination. The political and social benefits of that complacency serve those in power and are conveniently supported by the versions of Western history that

cast white colonization as progress or simply erase non-white, non-masculine versions of history from the records.³

After touching on the signs of the Western myth as they are demonstrated in Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis," I will show how the creators of the formula Western deliberately manipulated narrative form and the mass-publishing market to disguise those elitist signs under the guise of rural, popular/ist narratives. The first step in destabilizing a myth is to dispel the idea that it arose naturally. The creation of the frontier as something to be exploited served certain powerful American interests, but the conversion of those interests into national, popular ones under the guise of 'everyman' mass-marketed fiction was a deliberate act of political, social manipulation that engendered a myth. Elite eastern businessmen passed off their concerns as universal ones, disguised a homogenous narrative as a popular one—in other words, the formula Western was the perfect myth because its exclusionary aspects were hidden from view.

Perhaps the most famous text across disciplines that reveals the West-as-Myth's shape came from a scholar whose rhetoric reveals him to lack a critical eye: Frederick Jackson Turner. His "Frontier Thesis" still stands as exemplary of the mythological connections between frontier and American identity (and their connections to racism and imperialism). Turner was of his time, a voice that is able to describe the elements of myth through genuine belief. In his "Frontier Thesis," Turner praises Westward expansion because he sees it as driving the development of a national American character: "This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion Westward with its new

³ *The American West: A Concise History* is an excellent example of a historical text that is revisionist in nature. In order to rectify the erasures of the past, the history book takes a specifically de-colonized perspective.

opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character” (Turner, 6). His thesis has been criticized along with other texts of the time for defending and glorifying imperialism under the guise of manifest destiny; he sees white interactions with native populations as a “touch,” looking only at how those exchanges benefited those he saw as American. Looking at his thesis it is easy to see how the romanticization of conquest and genocide came about through the promotion of the master narrative that colonizing a tough land was the duty of real Americans because it created a rugged, democratic, national character independent of decadent Europe. Western expansion was fated because the land was there and the myth did not give the people who lived on it protagonist status—showing how myth’s exclusion of alternative narratives influenced (and at the very least justified) the forcible erasure and exclusion of the same people from Western spaces.

Turner’s thesis shows that though the frontier is a Western phenomenon, the ideals associated with it are integral to an understanding of America. To Turner, the frontier offered “new opportunities;” it was a place of constant regeneration in which American identity (a ruggedly masculine, dominant identity) reached fruition. Though writing in 1894, Turner claims, “the frontier is gone” (Turner, 10). He views his thesis as a retrospective of the effects of a frontier on the formative years of America. The power of the Myth of the frontier, however, with its insidious underbelly of racism and exploitation of resources, lived long after the California coast was colonized by white Americans. In fact, rhetoric of a threatened or endangered frontier/Western lifestyle is essential to the fabric of the Myth. A frontier is in its essence a transient thing, created through cyclical rhetoric of conquest and preservation in the face of threats. Nostalgia is what drove colonization of the

continent—and the globe. The West is imagined as it is because it must always either be out of reach, in the past, or slipping away—an instability of time that encourages acts of imposing violence that supported Eastern elite capitalist interests. Proulx toys with the mythical time of the West in her creation of a temporally (nauseatingly) cyclical Wyoming.

As useful as texts like the “Frontier Thesis” or *Virgin Land* are at cataloging what shapes West-as-Myth, Christine Bond’s book *The Frontier Club* gives an inside look into the deliberate creation of the tropes (signs) that comprise the West-as-Myth, therefore providing explicit information about the purpose behind the fetishization of the frontier, the cowboy, and mano-a-mano violence.

Her book reveals the strategizing between an in-group of Eastern, privileged men to use their political and social connections—and most importantly, the new mass-publishing industry—to support their hunting and cattle interests in the West. These men belonged to elite clubs (The Boone and Crockett Club and the Cheyenne Club), and they brought their ideas about exclusivity based on race, gender, and class into the formula Western they created to sell their exclusive interests to the American public. Their beliefs in specific hunting laws, the need to preserve lands, species, and certain types of appropriate businesses, and the character building, masculine paradise the West entailed came from their conviction in their superiority. Inferior forms of hunting and living such as Native American Hunting practices, or any manner of living that did not compare to their chivalric, proper code of living was considered a danger to the ideal West they wanted to preserve. The paradox of the West as paradise and zone-of-constant-threat came from their in-crowd need to claim a space for themselves and to (in narrative as in life) exclude those who were unlike them.

This construction of the formula Western involved revising dime novel and leatherstocking tropes already in existence, as well as historical accounts. These revisions were most notoriously the exclusions of diverse voices, limiting of female voices, and the imposition of upper class values and manners into the Western environment. Under the guise of creating popular, folk American literature: “These men popularized a version of the West which furthered their own cultural, political, and financial interests while violently excluding less powerful groups. This power play happened in print” (Bold, xvii). This ‘power play’ lies in its disguise; the tone “effect(s) homogeneity,” “a cultural elite violently protecting its privilege in the name of democracy” (Bold, 236). The guise of “democracy” and “homogeneity” makes their stories become a myth and it intentionally disguises their more sinister purposes. Though formula Westerns appear ‘popular,’ at their very origins they served elite, capitalist, imperialist, patriarchal goals. As the formula Western became the dominant representation of the West, the cowboy, with upper class manners and a hidden interest in supporting big cattle interests disguised as honor or the code of the West became the symbol of American masculinity. He replaced characters from dime novels and leatherstocking novels who were true representatives of the lower class in terms of manners, who used dark or raunchy humor and meted out violence directly without the veil of honor, even admitting when economics had something to do with their problems. Proulx’s work can be seen as challenging the formula Western because it draws on the truly more organic forms of the Western that came before that drew inspiration from the way the actual people who lived there communicated and responded to threats and economic suffering.

Bold’s exposé of the clubman’s influence on the formula Western reveals how stories like Proulx’s that actually draw from folk perspectives and styles of expression

automatically challenge the faux-populist Western genre. Bold describes how the clubmen created a Myth by creating a single narrative that actively excluded alternatives:

They developed a remarkably consistent voice, and they crystallized the western's fundamental feature: the [Eastern] tenderfoot narrator, the laconic hero, the stylized violence, the exclusive right of white [straight] men to carry the gun, and the vast, beautiful landscapes that become enclaves of whiteness, emptied out of women and threatened by savage forces. [my additions] (Bold, 3)

Dime novels and leatherstocking tales included more women and people of color and their protagonists were also more 'folk.' In clubmen revisions, people of color were blatantly erased or villainized, and women's voices were erased because they always conceded to the opinions of the hero in the end. Interestingly, another component of these formula Westerns is the Eastern tenderfoot narrator, an outsider who translates the Western culture for the audience—a move that suggests the audience and the narrator are looking in on the West, rather than being part of it. Proulx's narrative voice often draws on colloquial speech patterns of her characters and uses oral storytelling techniques, placing her narrator far from the tenderfoot of the formula Western and in a more truly 'regional,' equal-to-the-characters position.

The most blatant example of how the formula Western excludes and revises in order to create an exclusionary master narrative is arguably the first formula Western: Owen Wister's *The Virginian*. It was written about the Johnson County War in 1892 (in Wyoming! Isn't it fitting that the first example of the mythical narrative Proulx is combatting is inspired by events in the state she writes about?). The war was one of many at the time between big cattle companies and small homesteaders or squatters. But this war is a shockingly hilarious example of how power can write even the most embarrassing event to suit their needs. The war pitted fifty vigilantes hired by the big cattle company against two

men. Laughably, the men held off the veritable army of men for two entire days—but the comedy ends on a dark note when the vigilantes mete out their justice in the form of lynching. Yet instead of a comedy about unsuccessful overkill, the Owen Wister manipulated the players in the war, their motivations, and the action, endearing the nation to the big Eastern cattle companies, justifying their inept display of force against the now-demonized small-scale ‘cattle rustlers.’

When Wister wrote *The Virginian* about the war, the fifty vigilantes became a single cowboy, ruled by a sense of honor that both the town judge and his pacifistic girlfriend eventually buy into. The two squatters becomes Trampas, a foul-mouthed Mexican. The black troops that fought in the war were erased. The connection between hunting and cattle interests are made in the infamous showdown shootout that became canon in the formula Western—reminiscent of the proper hunting style the clubmen wanted to preserve that they felt was threatened by native and subsistence hunters who used different tactics. Above all *The Virginian* shows how the formula Western turned violence into a sign that signified valor disguising its motives: “the cowboy’s heroism is proven through one violent act of exclusion after another, presented sometimes as comical, at other times tragic, but always necessary” (Bold, 9). What motivates masculine violence and exclusion in the West is changed through Myth; cattle interests and capitalism become honor and necessity. The act of mythologizing disguises Eastern oppression in the Western sphere, lynch-mob justice, and exploitative capitalism, and the cowboy serves as just that symbol of conflated disguise—a lynch mob becomes the lone icon of justice in a threatening world. Bold says, and the success of the formula shows, that the clubmen “knew better than anyone else in the publishing business was how to wield books as lobbying tools” (Bold, 38). The Western

myth (with the help of the clubmen's political connections) eventually seeped into laws that restricted immigration and land rights for Native Americans—exclusion and self-promotion at the mythical level now affecting lived reality. The effects of the myth in creating a collective mind about what the West should be were felt in their life time: “The cumulative rhetoric of Boone and Crockett Club books recreated, first, the American West, second, the nation, and third, an international group of nations as a network of enclaves designed to protect animal and human hierarchies” (Bold, 48). The “clubmen strategized over how best to constitute and persuade ‘the people’ and ‘the public’ to support their elitist causes,” and their genius was in utilizing myth to do so, then enforcing it through political and social connections (Bold, 236).

The trope of the lone, honorable, chivalric cowboy fighting a (racialized, anti-capitalist) enemy came with the stylistic tropes of one-on-one showdown shootout, an Eastern tenderfoot interpreter-narrator, and the purposeful erasure of people of color and the minimizing of white women's voices. When Annie Proulx's collections are examined, her of-the-region narrator, gratuitous violence, dark and inappropriate humor, and stories of man v. place/economic downturn struggles disrupt the nature of the formula Western and the exclusive, hierarchal signs that signify the myth.⁴

⁴ In this section I focused on *The Virginian* because it serves as an ideal stand in for the body of work produced by the men of the frontier club, men that included Theodore Roosevelt and George Grinnell. This is not to say that the works published directly by those men or promoted by them are the only examples of formula Westerns. Tropes from the genre they created spawned a film industry cash cow that kept on giving. For example, the showdown shootout between two men popularized by the formula Western (as seen between Trampas and the Virginian) is a staple in Western film (as seen in *Once Upon a Time in the West* and *High Noon*, for example) and American action films (as in the scene between Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker in *The Empire Strikes Back*). As seen in the second example, these tropes, once established and glorified, have always been ripe for creative re-imagining. For example, the cowboy and his right to wield the gun became a source of laughter for

What is regional, anyway?

Proulx's "Man Crawling Out of Trees" is the story of a couple who moves to Wyoming after reading an article "that named Wyoming as a state with low property taxes and no income tax at all. It seemed a safe haven as well—an unlikely target as the state's entire population could fit in a phone booth" (Bad, 106). The pair's disillusionment with the Wyoming they imagined and the one they find serves as the main conflict of the story. The cultural disconnect between their East Coast upbringing and the Wyoming small town culture eventually causes the pair to split, the wife returning home, the husband sticking it out. This story illustrates in a very simple way the need for regional stories, the need for depictions that reveal the basic lived reality of marginal spaces to those who could have been content with illusion. As seen in the case of the Fair's, they learned that learning about the regional meant learning an entire new code of living, in which fences signified a disruption to migration patterns, and a man creeping in your backyard should spurn you to his aid rather than to call the police. Telling regional stories reveals both the big and the small of the profound differences in experiences in this country, alternative narratives on the national scale.

Before we delve into the four chapters that examine Annie Proulx's specific challenges to the formula Western, I will touch on how my categorization of her as a regionalist writer whose work includes elements of Naturalism serves as a challenge to the

American children in the Yosemite Sam character of Warner Bros. cartoons fame (Bugs Bunny an insertion of the Native American/African folk hero of the trickster). Proulx's work exists in a lineage not only of the formula Western's influence, but also of media that has played with or challenged the formula since its inception. This paper focuses specifically on Proulx's work in comparison to the formula Western; an entirely separate paper could be written about how her strategies depart from or relate to the plethora of critical responses to the formula Western over time.

formula Western in a broad sense. In defining regionalism, I will distinguish being a Western regional writer from writing (formula) Westerns. Bold's book revealed quite shockingly that formula Westerns are not (at their origin) the regional works they pass themselves off as; Eastern interests, writers, and narrators drove the creation of that genre. Nevertheless, formula Westerns, through shaping West-as-Myth, have indelibly marked the imagined space of the West, and therefore regional literature about the space must now contend with the legacy of that narrative.

In order to open up the Myth, one must allow alternative narratives to receive the label of Western. *The Ox-Bow Incident*, though highly regarded in the literary community, was not considered Western because it did not support myth: "If a story doesn't conform to the fantasy, it can't be Western" (Haslam, 2). This is the main problem that will be confronted here; regionalism—in this case, Western regionalism--as an approach can (and essentially must) challenge that fantasy. A Western text must engage the formula, but to truly engage 'the regional,' elements of the folk that push against the signs of the formula Western will be engaged as well.

When critics appraise Proulx's work, the tendency to categorize is astounding for the contradictory opinions surrounding which label is correct. Within the critical debate about what type of Western writer she is, Proulx has been called regional, post-regional, neo-regional, trans-regional, anti-western, an eco-fiction writer, a modernist, a post-modernist, and a local color writer.

In declaring her to be a regional writer, I must define what I mean by regional. My definition of regional encompasses both more and less subject matter than some may believe regional writers deserve. That, alas, is the crisis of categorization. Proulx's writing

generates such varying classifications from critics precisely because it resists a singular reading and, consequently, classification. The discomfort the reader feels in saying 'region' is 'now' is the destabilization that runs parallel to the destabilization Proulx causes to the other simulacra/myth of the West.

When looking into how Proulx has been categorized, it is beneficial to read the differing classification structures arranged by Richard Etulain, a classic western critic, and David M. Wrobel. Etulain wrote the book *Reimagining the American West: A Century of Fiction, History, and Art* because he recognized a gap in serious Western scholarship. His idea of classifying periods of literature is an attempt to legitimize an area of scholarship set aside because it was seen as too popular (read: vulgar). The idea of Western art as popular can be tied directly to the mythologizing of the West; popular culture is the communal imagination. In the part of his book focused on fiction, Etulain takes a chronological approach at categorization. He identifies three periods into which fiction as it followed cultural shifts changed over time: the frontier, region, and post-region periods. In the frontier era (if read from the colonizer's perspective) everything was new. The irony lay in that as the beloved frontier was pursued, it was destroyed. The region period was a time when the region was seen as having a distinct, exceptional identity. Following World War II and the movements of the 1960s, the post-region era was ushered in. From history to literature, changes were being demanded; ethnic and female voices and perspectives were included in the cannon. Debates over whether Annie Proulx's Western literature is 'regional' or 'post-regional' abound, but Etulain's categories are limited.

Proulx could be said to be a post-regionalist writer because she is one of the alternative voices actively trying to create a new type of story about the West; lower class characters,

failed cattlemen, gay shearers, and female ranch hands are just a few of the narratives she voices that run against the grain of the formula Western. At the same time, there are elements in her books that show deference to the psychological power of the ideas of the frontier and of regional exceptionalism that cannot be denied, even though she adds her own twists to them. For example, in “Half-Skinned Steer” Mero’s sexual desires towards a woman are described as bestial—the importance of the horse to the cowboy in myth perverting his own perception of his sexuality. Proulx is an interloper among these categories, exposing the lack of distinction between them. For example, the creation of the ‘post-region’ category ignores the prevalence of myth, the existence of alternative voices before they were ‘allowed’ to be heard, and that these new perspectives on place also claimed a strong sense of region, even if it was divergent from the dominant formula Western perspective.

David Wrobel tries to offer a less prescriptive framework that at first appears have a space for Proulx’s work in the Western canon. Wrobel finds issues with chronological approaches that draw too distinct (and therefore exclusive) lines between ‘periods’ of writing in his essay “The Literary West and the Twentieth Century.” Indeed Wrobel can be seen as one of the many people who has fought to reverse the exclusionary effects of myth that are unintentionally furthered by categories that draw on its exclusions and definitions. He disagrees with critics (like Etulain) who draw a line between “to the West” (frontier) literature and “in the West” (regional) literature. He breaks away from that chronological framework and instead argues for categorizing writing based on themes, because, “movement to places have played a vital role in shaping people’s sense of places. Frontier process-centered and place-centered regional realities are fundamentally intertwined through

the weight of collective memory from earlier times” (Wrobel, 466). He sees the historical influences on Western literature as overlapping and fluid rather than ending when their times ended. His approach is more in line with Proulx’s style; Proulx’s work actively engages West-as-Myth as it messes with it.

Wrobel remarks that ideally all categorizations of the West should be eliminated, explaining that his framework is only a lesser evil to the older, chronological approaches. That idea, while intriguing, actually contradicts Proulx’s methods. To do away with the concepts of the frontier, region, or the mythological West would take away powerful storytelling tools in Proulx’s arsenal, and it would deny a real part of what the West has been in narrative form. Understanding Ennis and Jack’s struggles as homosexual men in cowboy-esque occupations would be impossible without understanding the legacy of the mythological signifier of the (straight) cowboy. The categories (signs) of West, region, and frontier all have a power that can be challenged, but not through erasure.

Proulx does not fit entirely into either framework about what constitutes ‘regional’ work of Western fiction. This is because her work resists a single classification because it draws from West-as-Myth in order to create a counter narrative. However, her work represents regional literature in its broader definition and contain elements of its offspring, Naturalism.

The essence of what it means to be a regionalist writer runs through every story she writes, in the sense that setting is essential to the meaning of every story—being in Wyoming, being in the West, being in rural, small towns affects everything from the characters’ fate to the imagery of every story. For example, in an interview she jokingly defended her use of outlandish names because they represented the norm for the region. When the interviewer commented that they were absurd, she responded with, “Well, it

depends on where you hang. You've been going around with the wrong people. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if there were four or five Ribeye Clukes from your state." (Paris Review). Proulx makes the non-mainstream important without whitewashing what makes the regional unique—one might even say she emphasizes the peculiarities of the region and the characters in it. Dobie says of regional writing, "Nothing is too trivial for art, but good art treats nothing in a trivial way. Nothing is too provincial for the regional writer, but he cannot be provincial-minded toward it" (Dobie, 19). Proulx follows his framework; finding the profound in the provincial. Barrish describes regional writing as follows: "A reader is always aware of the setting: it becomes an inextricable part of the story's texture, influencing such elements as plot, theme, atmosphere, characterization, and character's speech. Local color settings, moreover, are usually depicted as someplace outside the mainstream, at a distance from national centers of financial, political, or cultural power" (Barrish, 74). To be a regional writer is to be interested in the marginal, the rural, the local, the folk, the modes of communication that are out of the cultural norm but are the characters' day and night reality. To be a regional writer is to be interested in how the simulacra or the Western myth injects its way into the lives of the people it supposedly represents, and how their lifestyles actually start to pick at the edges of that myth.

To be labeled a regional writer is often to be pushed to the outskirts of the American canon of literature—and to be labeled a 'Western' writer was to be pushed further by the way-side. Perhaps the most troubling problem is that in those critics who are interested in the Western genre, there are those who glorify the problematic formula Western and push out other regional texts, declaring them non-Western for deviating from the mold. In response there are other critics who claim that contemporary writers whose texts are set in

the West have somehow moved beyond region (the 'post-region' category). I argue for a middle ground, that regional Western fiction is everything that essentializes the importance of place.

Her work also engages with elements of the Naturalist movement. Interestingly, just as regionalism in its nature actually challenges the construction of the formula Western, Proulx's use of Naturalism can also be read as a structural response to the narrative and cultural influence of West-as-Myth.

Naturalism involved a shift to scientific depictions of crass, lower class industrial life, a response of sorts to the realization of the ways class and economics shaped human existence. Characters in Naturalist fiction have little power to exert their will, and are insect or animal-like in the face of capitalistic or fateful forces that control their lives. Barrish describes this powerlessness trope as follows: "characters...lives are controlled or 'determined' by immense impersonal forces that the characters themselves can barely understand, let alone effectively resist" (Barrish, 116). Capitalism, industrialization, primitive urges, and fate merge to form unconquerable forces that plague humans, ruling them and molding them. These forces "blur together the natural and social orders," and the (white, masculine, privileged) view that life was yours to rule was undercut (Barrish, 116).

Proulx is a Naturalist in the sense that her work contains the theme of forces dominating people's lives, yet the forces in Proulx's stories are specific to her space and her perspective. The forces have some of the same elements to them—poverty, broken gender/sexual relationships, and yet the economic and social causes of these do not derive from the economic powerhouse of the almighty industrial complex, but rather of a collapsed rural economy, and the strangling vestiges of a regional myth that denies certain essential

expressions and fails the people it pretends to represent. Naturalism serves as the anti-manifest destiny; men are conquered by the land, by the cattle industry, by themselves and each other. American righteous Individualism, symbolized so aptly in the cowboy holding the gun, is completely undone in these tales of struggling communities and families at the mercy of the landscape.

Invisible Woman:

In the following section I will use Annie Proulx's own words to show that her approach to literature is regional, and how she sees personal circumstances in a naturalistic way:

Place and history are central to the fiction I write, both in the broad, general sense and in detailed particulars. Rural North America, regional cultures in critical economic flux, the images of an ideal and seemingly attainable world the characters cherish in their long views despite the rigid and difficult circumstances of their place and time. Those things interest me and are what I write about. I watch for the historical skew between what people have hoped for and who they thought they were and what befell them. (Missouri Review)

Annie Proulx's stories are regional; they draw on folk storytelling techniques. The way she researches her collections shows that she is interested on getting an insider's perspective that opposes the Eastern, male, tenderfoot narrator of the formula Western. In an interview with the *New York Times* she described how her anonymity as an older woman helped her blend into the background, and observe the regional culture without affecting it: "I'm at an age where I can be invisible," she said. "Nobody notices older women. It's assumed that they're just there" (New York Times). In response to the interviewer asking if this invisibility was a nuisance, she further expounded on its usefulness to her as an observer of the human condition:

This is great, this is great! Especially when your main desire in life is to find out things and overhear. I can sit in a diner or a cruddy little restaurant halfway across the country, and there will be people in the booth next to me, and because I'm a woman of a certain age they'll say anything as if no one were there. People will say absolutely outrageous, incredible things. I once overheard people talking about killing someone. (New York Times)

Overhearing as a technique demonstrates how she brings a unique regional perspective that disrupts the formula Western. She is listening for the voices of the people in the region, the day-to-day conversation, the turns of speech. She is not imposing her own interests and passing them off as theirs, or taking the perspective of an outsider judging and translating their speech. She is doing all she can to literally seep into the place, to experience it without altering it.

Also, the variety of sources she researches show her to be interested in understanding the region through its own culture, history, and lifestyle—especially the mundane permutations of those:

I read manuals of work and repair, books of manners, dictionaries of slang, city directories, lists of occupational titles, geology, regional weather, botanists' plant guides, local histories, newspapers. I visit graveyards, collapsing cotton gins, photograph barns and houses, roadways. I listen to ordinary people speaking with one another in bars and stores, in laundromats. I read bulletin boards, scraps of paper I pick up from the ground. I paint landscapes because staring very hard at a place for twenty to thirty minutes and putting it on paper burns detail into the mind as no amount of scribbling can do. (Missouri Review)

Her sources are the recordings of everyday life, the scraps and remnants that record marginal experiences in regional places, everyday tragedies, celebrations, and occurrences.

While this research strategy helps localize her perspective, she also comments on how she brings specific storytelling techniques from the community into her stories:

That's a nice thing about writing about Wyoming. It is a place with dark humor, and dark humor fits here even though Wyoming people like to think that they're jolly and happy and living the perfect life. There are plenty of real-life ironies and twists of fate that just knock your socks off. So every day is kind of a revelation of putting up

with untenable situations and making a joke out of it. And I think that might be why people laugh so much here. If you go down to the post office and just stand there for a few minutes, you'll hear people greeting each other with bursts of laughter and mentioning the weather and laughing so hard. Getting their mail and laughing and laughing. No joke is being told! It's conversation. Laughter is part of the conversation. (Paris Review)

This style of conversational humor even against 'untenable situations,' ironies of fate, or plain old monotony is how people communicate, how information is shared, how communities are solidified. The formula Western relies on chivalric manners and calculated humor to create a model of masculinity that reflected upper class norms. When Annie Proulx's narrator, plot, and characters draw on this crass, dark, and casual humor it serves as a link to a regional form of storytelling and also challenges the communication style of the formula cowboy and the tenderfoot narrator.

That is not to say that her style has actually gained the popularity one would expect, given that it mimics regional communication styles. Annie Proulx explains how many people are uncomfortable with the subject material she writes about (particularly homosexuality as dealt with in "Brokeback Mountain"):

Oh, yeah. In Wyoming they won't read it. A large section of the population is still outraged. But that's not where the problem was. I'm used to that response from people here, who generally do not like the way I write. But the problem has come since the film. So many people have completely misunderstood the story. I think it's important to leave spaces in a story for readers to fill in from their own experience, but unfortunately the audience that "Brokeback" reached most strongly have powerful fantasy lives. And one of the reasons we keep the gates locked here is that a lot of men have decided that the story should have had a happy ending. They can't bear the way it ends—they just can't stand it. So they rewrite the story, including all kinds of boyfriends and new lovers and so forth after Jack is killed. And it just drives me wild. They can't understand that the story isn't about Jack and Ennis. It's about homophobia; it's about a social situation; it's about a place and a particular mindset and morality. They just don't get it. (Paris Review)

Once one gets over how cute it is that Proulx is shocked by the now almost universal phenomenon of fanfiction, one can identify her critique that people are unwilling to

acknowledge that her story is not about two men, it is about West-as-Myth-- about homophobia that comes along with the hyper-masculine, heterosexual cowboy created by the formula Western. People in Wyoming (and America) have a hard time accepting her stories because the Myth, the formula Western, has been passed off as their story, and revealing its shortcomings is a critique more bitter to swallow than witnessing the painful loss of a troubled relationship.

Finally, her interviews reveal that she likes to think about how forces shape characters' lives—referencing the elements of Naturalism in her work:

Geography, geology, climate, weather, the deep past, immediate events, shape the characters and partly determine what happens to them, although the random event counts for much, as it does in life. I long ago fell into the habit of seeing the world in terms of shifting circumstances overlaid upon natural surroundings. I try to define periods when regional society and culture, rooted in location and natural resources, start to experience the erosion of traditional ways, and attempt to master contemporary, large-world values. The characters in my novels pick their way through the chaos of change. The present is always pasted on layers of the past. (Missouri Review)

The following chapters will explore how place (geography), time (shifting circumstances, history), and the Myth (traditional ways, large-world values) influence her characters.

These forces are distinguished from more traditional Naturalist works not only because of their regional locations but because they focus on how failed industry shapes individual and communal experience:

The failure of the limited economic base for a region, often the very thing that gave the region its distinctive character and social ways, is interesting to me. I frequently focus on the period when everything—the traditional economic base, the culture, the family and the clan links—begins to unravel. (Missouri Review)

Rather than the influence of an overpowering economic system, it is a failed industry and an antiquated narrative that drives the lives of the proletariat, the families, and the individuals in her stories.

Subversive Storytelling: Alternative Narratives

Myths are master narratives that gain power from collective belief in their version of the story as *the* story, thereby necessitating exclusion of narratives that contradict or lie outside the master narrative. The powerful men Bold calls the frontier clubmen created the West-as-Myth through promoting their version of the West; the righteous story of how the West was won. This was done through the manipulation of alternative narratives, most blatantly the silencing of women (converting them into tools of validation for the male) and the marginalization of people of color (through erasing them from the narrative or converting them into the threat that justified white, male, policing violence).

Responses to the way West-as-Myth has excluded a myriad of people and experiences has included representation and revision—creation of new canons that include diverse voices and re-workings of history that tell the story from a perspective outside of the oppressor's. Proulx's approach draws on both (including narrative techniques drawn from folk sources and characters that break through formula Western boundaries in interesting ways).

Annie Proulx's collections, *Close Range*, *Bad Dirt*, and *Fine Just the Way it Is*, utilize a hybrid of mythic and folk storytelling techniques to create a critical dialogue with West-as-Myth. This approach acknowledges Myth's power while undermining it—its hybrid product automatically challenging the single narrative of Myth. Reading the titles of the collections can serve as an example of this hybridization of folk/regional and mythic elements. The

simple power of the three phrases originates from their ties to Western colloquial speech—an element of folk storytelling she utilizes throughout her stories. And yet, the titles are all sinister. Together they remind the reader of the violence of the Western frontier, the danger that must be faced in order to become American and reap the benefits of the new territory, that necessitated violent intervention and preservation.

Close Range evokes a folk reading—the ‘range’ brought ‘close’ to (connected to) readers through Proulx’s prose. But it also has a double meaning: something is in someone’s metaphorical or real crosshairs, and the shot is not going to miss, reminiscent of the final shootout showdown made famous in *The Virginian*. *Bad Dirt*, taken from a short story by the same title, has a mythical reading of a tough country that tests masculinity and forms American endurance. Its possible folk reading is that ‘bad dirt’ is a colloquial name for frontier, a name that at once could be said in jest or could (supported by the deadly landscape in all three collections) signify that the land is inherently evil. Finally, *Fine Just the Way It Is*, her most recent collection, is a country maxim. The title is ambiguous. Is she defending the stasis of the West against the corrective eye of the outsider? Or is she calling into question the stubbornness of tropes and Myth of the region that do not allow for more diverse realities? Perhaps she is doing both. Her titles are like the stories within them—they resist single readings. Most of all they resist being read as catering to the tropes of the West-as-Myth. Whenever she introduces something evocative of that Myth, it always comes with a twist (and usually some humor) that allows her to critique the master narrative and to make room for her own.

CHAPTER 1:

Place: Reframing the Frontier as the Bunchgrass Edge of the World

An obvious starting point in the investigation of how Proulx plays with West-as-Myth is an investigation of her characterization of place. How *her* West--her imagined Wyoming--challenges signs of the Myth about what the West is will be explored in the following chapter.

First, let us solidify what the West as a place signifies in West-as-Myth. In the formula Western, the clubmen framed the frontier as 1) a land of resources that would enrich the American public, 2) a place that formed America and is representative of America and 3) a threatened, vanishing place requiring constant (even violent) conservation and protection in order to preserve its bounty. The stock image of Indians streaming over a hill was the psychic reversal needed to make natives the invaders and corruptors of their own land. At a more meta-textual level, the narrative of West-as-Myth created a story of what happened in Western spaces and what did not.

Proulx's imagined Wyoming plays with West-as-Myth because it draws from a regional, naturalistic perspective. The West signifies what it does because its creators came from a privileged, outsider perspective. Writing from within the region the Myth claims to represent is to also write from a perspective that cannot fit in the mythical West; a regional, marginal, lower class perspective that runs counter to the Eastern tenderfoot narrator's.

Proulx's Wyoming is not threatened; it is the threat. It is one of the naturalistic forces that dominate her character's lives, turning a narrative of colonization on its head. Interestingly, her characters are just as dominated by the restraints of West-as-Myth as they

are by Proulx's imagined Wyoming, a dual narrative that pushes against both the rejection and acceptance of West-as-Myth.

"Brokeback Mountain" is an excellent introduction to how Proulx's imagined Wyoming shows the negative outcome of those who cannot fit into the narrative of Myth and yet are still under its influence. Once Jack and Ennis realize their homosexual relationship cannot be stopped, Ennis expresses disbelief that anyone else could be going through the same experience they are. Jack responds, "It don't happen in Wyomin and if it does I don't know what they do, maybe go to Denver" (Close, 271). Place limits possible narratives because of West-as-Myth; homosexual romance doesn't happen in Wyoming as a place. Yet, the two men's love and its 'runaway,' unstoppable nature pushes against the erasure of Jack's statement. Homosexual relationships do happen; they are the alternative narrative. Yet they feel the absence of a narrative like theirs in the popular imagination limits their lives—what happens to them, the possibilities they can imagine, and the actions they take. Their own self-policing, and the two tragic examples of the community violently murdering gay men, shows how the exclusionary narrative of West-as-Myth is translated into harmful, physical eliminations of the 'abnormal.' This is an example of a dual reading that Proulx's stories provide—her characters are ruled by Myth, and yet the story itself serves as an alternative narrative that pushes back against the Myth.

Another level of commentary comes in how the men themselves turn Brokeback Mountain into a sort of myth. Jack's wife says after he died that she just assumed Brokeback Mountain "might be some pretend place where bluebirds sing and there's a whiskey spring" referring, of course, to the song "Big Rock Candy Mountain," a folk classic about heaven being full of simple pleasures (Close, 280). Ennis and Jack create a mini-myth

together, the mountain becomes a symbol, a totem invested with all they hoped their lives would be. But their myth-making process is regional, is personal, is queer, is lower-class—in many ways completely different than how West-as-Myth was created.

Finally, this version of mythmaking connects with the larger struggles of dealing with being excluded from West-as-Myth. In the final scene, Ennis is alone, looking at a postcard version of Brokeback Mountain to remember his murdered lover. The postcard is a simulacra of place, but the mountain is also a totem has come to represent so much more—love, unfulfilled desire, loss, the past. The final words of the story reveal the cognitive dissonance caused by myth: “There was some open space between what he knew and what he tried to believe but nothing could be done about it, and if you can’t fix it you’ve got to stand it” (Close, 285). It is not a triumphant ending, but in acknowledging that he cannot “fix” things, Ennis makes the mental decision to “stand” them. Fixing things is the response to land warranted by West-as-Myth; the idea that one must interfere and protect the land to save it. Yet Ennis occupies an alternative perspective—the “space” between ‘believe’ and ‘know.’ His response to land (and its emotional associations) is to ‘stand it.’ The land still has the power to shape him, and yet he can ‘stand,’ he has a place in Wyoming.

The formula Western became canonical at during the rise of the mass-publishing industry, and during the beginning of the popular film industry. The West as an imagined place has been affected irrevocably by the ‘Western’ genre of film, an extension of the formula Western whose visual qualities helped solidify the single image of a place in the American consciousness. Film critic Gary J. Hausladen wrote “Where the Cowboy Rides Away: Mythic Places for Western Film,” a survey of Western film. In it he notes how the landscapes were especially staged and narrowly selected in Western films, helping through

popular media to reinforce the West-as-Myth. Hausladen argues that the frontier is a crucial part of the American national identity and that the movie industry responded to that need and helped reinforce it. Westerns would have resurgence in production whenever Americans needed reassurance that our imperial, exceptional status was justified—during war times and the Cold War (Hausladen, 298). The frontier narrative casting white, male imperialism as good-guys saving the day inspired hope during unstable times, and provided the justification narrative for acts of imperialism and violence throughout history. That unified visual representation of the West served as a touchstone; American national identity is grounded in a particular space, and its narrative can be returned to when its antiquated (though ever-powerful) ties to elite, patriarchal, imperial aims are in peril.

Hausladen noticed how few settings have been chosen for Westerns, even as the genre opened up to include more diverse casts: “The myths and legends have changed, but the setting for the mythogenesis remains the same” (Hausladen, 313). Though I debate that the great Myth has significantly changed, his findings that the places myths are made remain the same makes sense. The psychological permanence of the West as a mythical place was made possible by diminishing the variety of settings in which Western things could happen. The permanence and singularity of the images of the West in Westerns reads like a stock character in a genre. The characteristics remain the same so the viewers can make instant, consistent associations: wild but tamable, exceptionally Western/American, the land of opportunity where the men are separated from the boys. Those instant associations are what comprise the ‘communal imagination’ I cited as being needed to make a Myth.

West is a sign of West-as-Myth, a place that, in a miniature version of the entire narrative, gains power from the limited depiction of it, the streamlining of what can exist in

it, what it is and what it is not. Proulx creates her own Wyoming; place in her stories is a force that shapes, maims, controls. Its power can be read as both similar and different from the power of ‘West’ as sign of West-as-Myth; place is essential to these stories, but the place occupies a different level in the hierarchy—above man. It is not a Wyoming that must be protected, or that is under threat. The people living in it are in some ways anti-cowboys, powerless to have any sort of control over the land. Yet there is also another layer; her Wyoming is not simply a metaphor about the West, her characters are affected by West-as-Myth even if their narratives and the reality they live in contradict the master narrative, as we have already seen with Ennis and Jack. It is in this melee of tension between West-as-sign and Proulx’s Wyoming that meaningful disruption of Myth occurs.

The power of the landscape in Proulx’s short stories cannot be denied. “Bunchgrass Edge of the World” tells the story of an obese daughter isolated on the sparsely populated Wyoming ranchlands. Isolation solidifies into a tangible, active being in the story that is not just a manifestation of her depression (à la pathetic fallacy); it *causes* it. The landscape shapes Ottaline’s emotional state; a sort of reverse, psychological colonization. Proulx describes her Wyoming character in active language: “The wind isolated them from the world. One step into that reeling torrent of air was to be forced back. The ranch was adrift on the high plain” (Close, 122). The wind is the agent, and the humans respond, being “forced back.” Reminiscent of Naturalism, the ranch and the people on it have their agency taken away. They are at the land’s mercy like a ship “adrift” on the sea. Proulx has harnessed the power used in West-as-Myth through elevating the importance of place in a story. Yet in her stories, settings have the ability to drive the plot and affect the characters

like main characters (or maybe God) would, a naturalistic element that challenges the frontier narrative in which white men must preserve the land.

The omnipotence of the land can be seen in the following quote from “Half-Skinned Steer”:

They called it a ranch and it had been, but one day the old man said it was impossible to run cows in such tough country where they fell off cliffs, disappeared into sinkholes, gave up large numbers of calves to marauding lions, where hay couldn't grow but leafy spurge and Canada Thistle thrived, and the wind packed enough sand to scour the window opaque. (Close, 21)

The dominance of the land is taken to the extreme in this passage where sinkholes and lions manifest its unfeeling supremacy over those that live on it. This is Proulx's mythmaking; descriptions of the land elevate it above reality and yet that move is grounded in the lived experience of impoverished people, in rural areas, trying to live in a collapsed economy. The elevation of land's importance reflects a folk struggle with the environment, as opposed to man's natural dominance over it that served the elite interests of the clubmen who visited the West occasionally and ran businesses from afar. The Wyoming described here is wild like the frontier trope, but it is untamable. It is “tough country,” but not the character building kind. Proulx's Wyoming makes it “impossible” to make a living; it eats away at machines as well as living things. Conquering is not possible here; abundance is nowhere to be seen, only prickly weeds. Proulx adds her twist by inflating her place with power but divorcing that power from any romantic notions. The power is frightening, not beautiful. The ‘hope’ Turner saw in the frontier is not to be found in Proulx's Wyoming.

In “People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water,” Proulx writes the most compelling description of land in all of her collections. Revering the West as a physical place goes

hand-in-hand with romanticizing it. In the opening description of the story, Proulx toys with the mythologizing tool of reverence towards nature:

You stand there, braced. Cloud shadows race over the buff rock stacks as a projected film, casting a queasy, mottled ground rash. The air hisses and it is no local breeze but the great harsh sweep of wind from the turning of the earth. The wild country...provokes a spiritual shudder. It is a deep note that cannot be heard but felt, it is a claw in the gut. Dangerous and indifferent ground: against its fixed mass the tragedies of people count for nothing although the signs of misadventure are everywhere... Only earth and sky matter. (Proulx, 99)

Deeming a space worthy of spiritual reverence is a myth-generating device that Proulx steals from the West-as-Myth to craft a truly awe-inspiring passage. But the awe expressed in the passage does not originate from romantic notions of the bounty the space will provide men if they cultivate it in the proper way. It is a “shudder” and “a claw in the gut,” a primal, spiritual reaction to the god-like power of nature over man. This quotation shows how she uses the power of place to undermine the romantic notions usually associated with place in the West-as-Myth. In her Wyoming, to revere the land is to be “braced,” is to realize and expect the pain the landscape brings. Her word choice also undoes romantic portrayals of the western landscape; the air “hisses,” the clouds cast a “queasy, mottled ground rash.” It is not a cinemascope masterpiece, an Eden or a virgin land that must be protected from savage forces; it is a hellscape all on its own.

Some read that quotation too simply, taking the lines “tragedies of people count for nothing...only earth and sky matter” as indicating that Proulx herself prioritizes nature over the people in her stories. That is an oversimplification of the purpose of geographical determinism (an aspect of Naturalism) in her work. The power of her imagined Wyoming to affect the lives of her characters (rather than vice versa) does not mean her characters “count for nothing” in her narratives. The concept of geographical determinism--the idea

that where you live will determine how you live--is crucial to Proulx's narrative. In her imagined Wyoming, the master narrative of man as protective colonizer of the frontier is reversed; nature is the conqueror. Critic O. A. Weltzein makes the leap that the geographical determinism evident in Proulx's stories means that her characters are underdeveloped and weak. Weltzein writes that in her stories "Wyoming itself emerges as the protagonist" (Weltzein, 100). Weltzein means 'protagonist' in a basic way; since the land wins against the other characters in the story, Weltzein identifies it as the protagonist. In that designation Weltzein shows himself to be a (possibly unknowing) supporter of West-as-Myth; to him, the dominant is the protagonist. The power of Proulx's Wyoming is undeniable, as is her character's inability to master it. Weltzein writes that her "elevation of landscape imagery to a dominant, inhuman force" correlates to "corresponding reduction of character to caricature" (100). Weltzein's belief that characters must be 'caricatures' in order to be dominated by nature shows him to believe the Myth of the West. Following his logic, *real* western characters would be able to dominate the land, or, at least, would occupy the dominant narrative space. His logic is unable to see a reality in which man can be at the mercy of nature and still be a human being; that idea that man must be superior to nature to *be* man springs from the formula Western. It is the American imperative to not only benefit from the bounty of the frontier (and later, the world), but also to protect it from dangerous forces. In that narrative, man's will over nature must be exerted in order for the story to exist. Such a stance is inherently patriarchal, elite, white, and upper class. Proulx focuses on the regional reality of Wyoming, one decidedly less able to manipulate the world, one much more at mercy to nature, fate, and economic struggles. To claim that Proulx's work has elements of determinism is true, but to claim that the lack of ability to control one's life

demotes characters is simply further marginalizing the stories of the people Annie Proulx writes about. Stories of men and women struggling to survive rather than struggling to conquer are uncomfortable to read primarily because Myth has lead us to believe that those stories are not correct.

To conclude this chapter, I will address a categorization of Proulx as an eco-fiction writer. To call this an over-simplification is an understatement. It is a reading that bends the books to fit a contemporary need yet denies the antagonism of nature prevalent in many of her stories and her focus on the temerity and needs of ranchers over the (relative) evils of ranching itself. She has a reverence for nature, but it is the kind of reverence that says, ‘know how to build your own house, and find any way to stay afloat, or you will end up dead—and you still might.’ In some of her stories she does explicitly touch on how the ranching industry has had a negative impact on the health of the environment. In “Man Crawling Out of Trees,” the husband mourns how fences and roads have disrupted pronghorn migration patterns. In “Governors of Wyoming” an activist outlines how drastically the beef industry has changed the ecosystem in the area. But in the second case, in which those listening to the activist are angry that he cannot see that ranching is how people survive, Proulx reveals that she is more interested in the people than the land. In the Interview by Christopher Cox, “Annie Proulx, The Art of Fiction No. 199” in *The Paris Review*, Proulx said, “I don't write to inspire social change, but I do like situations of massive economic or cultural change as background. We think of change as benign, but it chews some people up and spits them out” (Paris Review). The moments of particular economic or natural hardship are moments in which the golden image of the frontier as promise land and of Americans as its keeper are most unstable. Elizabeth Abele, in her

article “Westward Proulx: The Resistant Landscape of *Close Range: Wyoming Stories* and *That Old Ace in the Hole*,” writes that she also sees Proulx as showing a reverence for landscape through its destructive power. She connects “romanticizing” with “underestimating” (Abele, 123). Like Abele, I too believe that Proulx’s characterization of the land serves a larger purpose than to call people to protect it: “As moved as Annie Proulx is by the geography of the West, it is unlikely she would place the restoration of the land over its people” (Abele, 123). The crucial elements of her stories are the twists she puts onto the West-as-Myth. Though eliminating the frontier narrative has environmental applications, its destruction ultimately works to free the people within the place from a limiting narrative.

CHAPTER 2:

Time: “Caught in My Own Loop”

The formula Western has been adapted to fit a new era and the new name the narrative takes still disguises the same elite ideological impositions: American Exceptionalism justifies neo-imperialist invasions across the globe and high rates of resource consumption. In this way the West-as-Myth has become eternal, finding endless frontiers in which to form the American character, to draw resources from, and to protect from ‘savage’ forces. The idea of protection—the formula Western’s obsession with a threatened frontier—creates a unique temporal space within the Myth and therefore within the collective perception of the West. The space was characterized as threatened in order to justify the hunting laws and white intervention desired by the clubmen lobbyists. Yet this instability created a nostalgic temporal space, one in which one had to constantly battle against invasion, in which one was trying to preserve, to turn back the clock, looking back to the never-realized or ever-to-be-realized moment of untouched, bounteous perfection.

Of all the forces at work upon men and upon landscapes, time is the most universally felt. Its influence is unavoidable. Understanding how we experience time is essential to understanding life and the development or fracturing of identity (whether on an individual, familial, regional, or national level). To define Naturalism as a unique movement evolving out of (and in response to) Realism, Barrish wrote that in naturalist texts, “characters...lives are controlled or ‘determined’ by immense impersonal forces that the characters themselves can barely understand, let alone effectively resist” (Barrish, 116). Viewing time as one of these ‘determining forces’ in a character’s life outside of his individual control may seem obvious. But then Barrish goes on to emphasize how Naturalism works to “blur together the

natural and social orders” (Barrish, 116); the determining forces at work walk the line between natural phenomena and socially constructed influences. From this perspective looking at ‘time’ as a force in Proulx’s work becomes a complex endeavor. One must acknowledge time both as a natural phenomenon and a social construct. At first it may seem odd to think of time as a social/cultural construct, but perhaps it is a more comfortable association after the explanation of how Myth created a collective sense of nostalgia surrounding the West. The nostalgia of the West-as-Myth is a pre-emptive nostalgia, arising from the way in which the land is characterized as being threatened and needing to be preserved (a time-is-slipping-away factor that inspires acts of intervention). It also comes from the fact that the myth is so long lasting. The West has become inextricably tied to a narrative created in the late 1800s-- ideas about what belongs in a Western narrative are stuck in the past, readers of Western fiction expect elements originating in the time of territorial expansion and the cattle boom. As a social construct, the perception of time changes depending on context. In this chapter I will investigate how Proulx uses time as a concept to push against the nostalgia of West-as-Myth. Her sense of time is both universal (change, aging, etc.) and specific (the particular way the passing of time is experienced in the imagined context of Proulx’s Wyoming). The cyclical form Proulx’s time takes is a structural representation of nostalgia, the influence of the past, and the inability of characters to move forward.

Proulx’s temporal West challenges this nostalgia in a dynamic way. It does not challenge it as the futuristic time of the postmodern would. Her time is cyclical, her characters are stuck in repeating loops sometimes generations long that are suffocating.

These loops reveal the unfulfilling nature of nostalgia, of being trapped in memory or romantic notions about the past.

In the essay “The Novelist and His Background,” Vardis Fisher uses Faulkner as an example of the way regional writers are interested in two layers of historical influence--that of time upon the place/the community, and that of memory upon the individual. Regional writers bridge the gap between historical and psychological writing through emphasizing the connection between the passage of time’s influence on groups and the individual: “Understanding what is necessary to say about the part of today that yesterday is is exactly the novelist’s task. And it is a task that still defeats us” (Fisher, 63). Faulkner’s South could not be understood without an investigation into time--specifically how memory, both collective and individual, influences the present. Fisher believes this endeavor to investigate the influence of the past on the present is a self-defeating ‘task;’ necessary but ultimately impossible for anyone to fully complete. Fisher’s phrasing ties back to what it means to live in a nostalgic temporal zone. A part of yesterday is in today; the past is inextricably linked to the present. The present must reconcile that part of itself in order to fully understand its full self. This will be seen most clearly in Proulx’s multi-generational stories in which consequences of the first generation’s actions are just as real for the last generation. In a parallel way, individual’s current state of being is influenced by their memory. The Southern United States, because of its violent, oppressive past that was never fully dealt with, can be seen as another example of a nostalgic temporal zone. Mero from “Half-Skinned Steer” is a perfect example of this, his own unresolved relationship to his childhood the anchor to his past that pulls him back into it. The West-as-Myth is nostalgic for its own reasons, but it shares this backwards-looking temporal

experience that a regional author must investigate in order to try to portray the place and the people in it.

The formula Western popularized a mythic version of the region during the rise of big cattle empires. They made the now antiquated West easily accessible to the public, and helped engender the belief that looking at the West was looking into the nation's past. Haslam, in the introduction to his collection *Western Writing: Famous Western Authors Explain Their Crafts*, writes about trends in Western literature and their effects: "It was immensely easier to project and accept a simple West that never was than to deal with the complex reality, especially when popular literature reinforced fantasy" (Haslam, 3). The term 'Western' is still emblematic of that 'reinforcing' popular literature of myth that does not look beyond the simple, and in particular, only gives voice to past imaginings. Interestingly, just as the formula Western created the image of the frontier as something that was slipping away, that must be protected, people often view the values of the Western as American values threatened by the liberal leanings of contemporary times.

Haslam's entire collection serves the purpose of showing that regionalism is a complex genre that is not about glorifying a region but rather about the belief that the regional *is* important and that true regional literature engages with the problems of the region. He writes of western literature: "We are faced with a semantic dilemma: we say West, and consequently search for common characteristics, when in fact we must deal with Wests. We have assigned the West a permanent ossified past without a present. When western books are set in the present, critics seldom call them Western: the national myth allows the West only a past" (Haslam 4). 'A permanent ossified past without a present' is the Western Myth, the single 'West' of a by-gone time he says is connoted whenever the

word is seen or heard. Yet he rallies for an acceptance of the 'Wests' of alternative narratives, importantly more contemporary narratives. To allow Annie Proulx's collections to be called a 'Western' is to allow the 'West' and Western literature a present. To acknowledge the power of nostalgia in the imagined West and the circular time warp in Annie Proulx's stories is not to say that Proulx's fiction does not bring a radical, contemporary, alternative perspective to the Myth. Time as it is portrayed in Proulx's work shows the stifling nature of being denied a present, in the present.

Brokeback Mountain as a symbol embodies the links between place, totem, and time. All of these themes intersect in her work; understanding each gives deeper meaning to the others, and, of course, shows the layers of her engagement with West-as-Myth. Brokeback Mountain is a totem, a thing that is imbued with meaning--in the story it evokes freedom, love, and hope for the two men. Yet it cannot be understood without viewing it as specifically a place-totem (as it was last chapter), and also as a totem that takes on meaning only through nostalgia. The totem's power is linked to Proulx's formation of time. Ennis and Jack's relationship takes the form it does because of the inability to recreate the experience of Brokeback Mountain later in their lives, through an unfulfilled desire to recreate that snapshot of gratification.

By the end of the story the totem of the mountain is reduced to a postcard representation and two shirts, and all Ennis can express about its meaning to him is half a sentence and choked-back tears. Looking specifically at the nostalgic lives of these two men--- palpable in the form of a place-memory--Proulx has given a new perspective to the backwards-looking time as experienced in West-as-Myth. The nostalgia of Ennis and Jack does not look like West-as-Myth's nostalgia. Their nostalgia is not justified by the impetus

to protect the memory from further damage as the image of the frontier is. Throughout the story the reader must contemplate the uselessness and injustice of the two protagonists' nostalgia. Ennis describes the conversations and thoughts they have about their secret affair as feeling like he is "caught in my own loop" (Close, 278). Ennis' words evoke two images-- strangling on his own lasso and running endlessly in a circle he created himself. Either way the consequences are dire: death or never-ending struggle. The narrator uses repetition to stress the unfulfilling nature of this cyclical life in which the sheep hands can only thrive in their memories: "nothing ended, nothing begun, nothing resolved" (Close, 278). Nothingness echoes in this quote; in a cycle of returning to the past, not only is no future begun, nothing is ever left behind--the total realization of stagnation. The short story itself may be groundbreaking in its subject, but those within it remain very much trapped, only able to 'stand it' (or be destroyed). There is no hope for preservation inspired by nostalgia; it is a nostalgia bred of desperate circumstances in which West-as-Myth forces the men to lead lives full of desires that never-can-be.

"Family Man" is in some ways more obvious in its connection to nostalgia for the antiquated West. Aging Mr. Forkenbrock longs for his days as a cowboy, good old days he prioritizes over his present state and the state of contemporary Wyoming:

'Get me the hell out a here,' he said.
 'Get me a horse,' he said.
 'Get me seventy years back a ways.' (Fine, 4)

Yet the story goes on to show the loneliness of his nostalgia; he is an old man unable to communicate his feelings to anyone around him. When his nursing home gets a new patient who happens to be the first girl he ever slept with, he thinks (through Free Indirect Discourse): "That was the trouble with Wyoming; everything you ever did or said kept pace

with you right to the end. The regional family again” (Fine, 19). His connections to his past are not a relief to him; his memories are not a balm--they are like an annoying relative whom he cannot escape. They are ‘trouble.’ This ‘trouble’ he sees as a regional and personal plague, a past tied to him as if the whole of Wyoming were his kin. This is an excellent example of a Fisher-ian meld between the psychological and the communal/historical. Through the character of Ray Forkenbrock, Proulx shows how pining after the golden era (at the personal level, that of his youth, at the communal level, the occupation of a cowboy) actually keeps one from being content.

The tragedy of the story comes in the final scene, when after trying to explain to his daughter what his life was like, leading up to the reveal of their family’s shameful secret, she does not understand the shame, and therefore he cannot experience catharsis: “Unbidden, as wind shear hurls a plane down, the memory of the old betrayal broke the prison of his rage and he damned them all” (Fine, 32). The power of the past is omnipotent; he cannot resist it. But it is not simply that the past has power over him that gives the bleak, unfulfilling tone to the ending of the story. It is that that past is in its nature isolating. His daughter does not and cannot understand him or the power of his past: “‘It’s ridiculous,’ Beth said to Kevin. ‘He got all worked up about his father who died back in the 1930s. You’d think there would have been closure by now’” (Fine, 32). This nostalgia is unfulfilling because it cannot be applied to the next generation, the future; in the heart-breaking inability to connect with his daughter, he shows the connection between unresolved personal issues, living in the past, and the inability to thrive in the present. The title points to the irony: he, like his father before him, cannot be a ‘Family Man,’ though in a way it is

the connection to a type of family (his unresolved feelings about his dad and the regional family) that keeps him from his nuclear one.

“Half-Skinned Steer” posits nostalgia--the inability to move forward of “Brokeback Mountain,” the lack of resolution of “Family Man”--as unfinished business. The half-skinned steer a more obviously sinister totem than Brokeback Mountain; the gory descriptions of its semi-butchered body are haunting. Yet what it symbolizes as a totem is the link between unfinished business and doom; since Tin Head left the butchering part of the way through, he and his entire family line were cursed. Mero’s life story reflects the idea that leaving something undone is a damning act. Interestingly, Mero’s case actually brings up the harm inherent in believing you can escape the past; suggesting that this nostalgia (or return to the past, in this case) is just as destructive as trying to avoid it. The way Mero left home is written in terms of psychological repression: “Mero had kicked down thoughts of the place where he began” (Close, 21). The image of kicking negative thoughts down is an excellent visual for the energy needed to repress, and it also goes to show that Mero could not simply leave the place behind--the ‘thoughts’ (read: memories) travelled with him. Yet, he “never circled back” to his past like Forkenbrock or Ennis and Jack were doomed to do (Close, 21).

Though he was not caught in the same cyclical pattern as seen in previous stories, Mero’s interaction with his past can be read as a more dramatic version of that. He believed he could escape, but in the end the unfinished business catches up to him: “That event would jerk him back; the dazzled rope of lightning against the cloud is not the downward bolt, but the compelled upstroke through the heated ether” (23). The imagery in this quote about the act of getting jerked back into the past is violent. His brother’s death is like a lightning bolt

strike returning him to his source. Comparing his life at that moment to this strike of lightning shows Mero to be at once out of control of the direction of his life--he is compelled to return--as the events are to be intense, dangerous, cosmic. In a line that echoes the 'nothing' passage from "Brokeback Mountain," Mero is disappointed by this cosmic reunion with the past he had fled: "Nothing had changed, not a goddamn thing, the empty place and its roaring wind...landforms true to the past. He felt himself slip back, the calm of eighty-three years sheeted off him like water, replaced by a young man's scalding anger at a fool world and the fools in it" (Close, 31). Because the land is eternal, he himself reverts to his old self--but it is not a transformation, it is a 'slip,' a mistake, and he projects his anger outside of himself, at everyone, everything. In the story, Mero also gets caught up in his past through the mechanism of a memory of a story told to him. In the end the story comes to life, the half-skinned steer of unfinished business comes for him, reminding him that he left unfinished business and must pay for leaving a task undone. He is jerked into the past because he could not escape it forever, and it took its pound of flesh for his betrayal.

Proulx's construction of cyclical temporal experience takes unique form in family sagas. The idea of inheritance is a new way to look at nostalgia; in these sagas inherited baggage generates the unfulfilling cycles that perpetuate themselves over generations.

In "The Bunchgrass Edge of the World," those in authority over the ranch cycle through. The story follows three generations, Old Red as the patriarch supplanted by his son, eventually supplanted by Ottaline, the protagonist. Old Red is a sinister character, watching from the sidelines and planning his eventual return to power on the ranch. Though aged, he thinks, "I ain't finished my circle yet" (Close, 145). His use of 'circle' harkens back to Ennis metaphor. Red's loop is sinister, however, because its destructive power is

projected outward, at his own kin. The idea that all the power may return to him is frightening because it shows how this family cycle can reverse itself. Ottaline's victory in taking control of the ranch serves as a bright point in the entire collection; her capitulation to Old Red would ruin the only positive power grab. But the concluding words of the story are given to Old Red: "the main thing in life was staying power. That was it: stand around long enough you'd get to sit down" (Close, 148). The idea that everything will cycle back is given a spooky tint due to the character of Old Red, himself unwilling to face the fact that generations have moved past him.

In "People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water," inheritance in the form of children resembling their parents sets the stage for the tragic conclusion. The Dunmires are cowboys in the most rough-and-tumble way imaginable: "they ran that country because there were eight of them and Ice and they were of one mind...There was a somber arrogance about them, a rigidity of attitude that said theirs was the only way" (Close, 103). They are not individuals; they are a pack. Their rigid restraints on masculinity play into their belief that Ras must be castrated, like an out-of-control bull, after he flashes a young girl. They police his masculinity in the most primitive, violent way imaginable. The inheritance of grit without empathy combined with a rigidity of mind creates a pack mentality that turns on the mentally handicapped Ras.

As for the Tinsleys, the parents' general failure seems to forecast Ras' downfall. Of Mr. Tinsley the narrator says, "Every change of season took him by surprise," revealing a lack of preparedness in blatant opposition to the Dunmires (Close, 104). His obliviousness also forecasts Ras' eventual death through gangrene poisoning. Mrs. Tinsley, after drowning her child La Llorona-style, "developed an intense anxiety for the safety of the

surviving children” (Close, 104). It is almost as if this over-protectiveness doomed Ras from the start. When the son is first injured, “Mrs. Tinsley looked away. Her fault through the osmosis of guilt” (Close, 108). In a way, the sons of both families play out the characteristics of their parents in the conclusion. But Mrs. Tinsley also shows how parents are in turn affected by their children--seeing Ras’ faults as her own. Blame for this tragedy is distributed in this back and forth swirl of influences.

Proulx extends the unfulfilling cycle of inherited guilt to her reader in “People in Hell Just Want A Drink of Water.” Barrish describes how in regional texts (as with the tenderfoot of *The Virginian*) the narrative voice is usually an outsider, serving as an distanced, evaluating perspective of the region: “the visitor from the outside world acts, in effect, as a textual representation for the reader” (Barrish, 80). This outsider then ‘represents’ the reader (presumably Eastern, educated) as opposed to the people portrayed in the book. In “People in Hell...” that idea is tweaked for an interesting effect.

The reader is addressed at the beginning of the story, told how to interpret the scene in a very naturalistic way: “You stand there braced...Dangerous and indifferent ground: against the fixed mass the tragedies of people count for nothing...Only earth and sky matter....You begin to see God does not owe us more than that” (Close, 99). This direct address takes on a new form at the end when it combines with instructional humor that sounds spoken: “That was all sixty years ago and more. Those hard days are finished...We are a new millennium and such desperate things no longer happen. If you believe that you’ll believe anything” (Close, 117). The line is colloquial in nature; the narrator uses a voice that evokes a regional voice in order to connect the reader to the subject matter. It does not let the reader get away with believing that the story (though set in the past) is ‘past’ the

consideration of the reader. It causes the reader to pull the fictional past into her present in a serious way (because otherwise, she is a fool). This line does not ask the reader to reminisce--rather the gesture to connect with the past is connected to common sense and responsibility. Terrible events cannot be ignored because they happened in the past (for the past is cyclical, and it cannot be escaped).

I want to briefly touch on Proulx's deep-time story "Deep-Blood-Greasy-Bowl" and the contemporary "The Indian Wars Refought." These stories bring to the forefront how time has specifically shaped the way Native narratives were told (and side-lined) in the West-as-Myth. When looking at the effects of West-as-Myth, the absence of Native Americans in America due to mass genocide serves as the cruelest outcome of how Myth's exclusionary aspects affect real lives. In a paradox only able to be realized within the context of the mythologized frontier, native people were imagined as tied to the threatened, vanishing land—a culture that must be preserved and catalogued in the face of civilized expansion. And yet they were also characterized as *the* threat: the lifestyle, the form of hunting, the invaders of the land that must be supplanted in order for America to establish itself and feast off the bounty of the West. The characterization of Native Americans in West-as-Myth combines both the threat and the protection associated with the physical space of the West and applies it to a people, casting them in a role as either a vanishing culture or destroyers of progress. There is no contemporary Native American life narrative in the West-as-Myth; they are delegated to disappearing into the past or trying to savagely pull Americans back into a primal era. Indeed, the attitude of seeing Native Americans as a 'past' culture contributed to the mass genocide of native people, and continuing to do so denies the validity of contemporary Native American lived experience. "Deep-Blood-

Greasy-Bowl” reframes native history as an inheritance rather than a cultural back-slide to be snuffed out. “The Indian Wars Refought” pulls Native American stories into contemporary times, providing alternative narratives about race, ancestry, and what a Native American can and cannot be.

“Deep-Blood-Greasy-Bowl” uses deep time as a testament to endurance in the face of West-as-Myth’s attempted erasure. Introducing the story, Proulx writes that it was inspired during the construction of her home when “other fire pits, nearby tipi rings, projectile points and a chert quarry attest to a long Indian presence on the land, “before the time of Jesus, before the time “Indians had horses or bows and arrows” (Fine, 123). This “long presence” and the story she produces of ancient people attests to the eternal nature of native presence in Wyoming, through her “imagining” and the buried remains that one day must be uncovered (Fine, 123). Proulx’s stories in general—for all their lower class characters and all the represented sexual and gender identities—are overwhelmingly white. Native absence is an indication of centuries old physical removal. But “Deep-Blood-Greasy-Bowl” shows that that erasure is never complete, that native presences—like memory—only stay buried so long, and with them lies the place-memory of deep-time, the only time period in which Myth becomes obsolete. The story tells of a group of people, the land, and the animals on it feeling the emotions of the upcoming bison kill, emotions recorded through tribal memory and geographical, physical blueprints of the cliff. Time itself becomes this cosmic, shared awareness of impending slaughter and food: “Now time began to mass together in the shape and color of bison. Nothing else had importance” (Fine, 129). The story’s ending echoes this shared sense of time, and shows how it is eternal: “No one doubted that the birds remembered the last drive and would aid them in the next one”

(Fine, 131). Memory is the chain that connects this deep past to Proulx's present, showing the fingerprint of Native presence that stands in the face of the consequences of colonization.

"The Indian Wars Refought" is brilliant in that Proulx gives narrative space to contemporary, non-Mythic Native characters. Linny's recent discovery of her native ancestry has left her in a strange place, unsure of how to be 'Indian' other than to mimic the racist, simplistic tropes she has seen in the media. This idea of performing racial/cultural identity comes into play when Linny discovers the lost tapes of Buffalo Bill's recreation of the Indian Wars, tapes so real many thought war had come again when acting in them and viewing them. Yet when Linny reads Yellow Robe's disgusted response to the tapes, for a moment he speaks through her (Bad, 42). In the end, she destroys the tapes; no one can profit off of them again. The last scene is poignant in her father patting "her still unwounded knee" (Bad, 45). She still has a lot to learn about actually embodying what it is to be a Native American in America. Acting—a shift in which people in the story embody other Indians, both real and stereotypical—is a way in which Proulx is able to shape an alternative narrative—how contemporary Indians are living in the moment, adapting, changing, and how they are unique from past-time stereotypes because they must act in order to be them.

To conclude, here are Proulx's own words on the importance of time in her narratives:

Most of my writing focuses on a life or lives set against a particular time and place. This is the nature of things, and, though it sounds simplistic, this is what shapes my view of the past and present, both as related to my personal life and the lives of characters. One is born, one lives *in one's time*, one dies. I try to understand place and time through the events in a character's life, and the end is the end. (Missouri Review)

Time is a formative force. Characters are who they are because they exist in a particular time, particular temporal boundaries. Yet in other interviews Proulx has expressed how her research into the history of a space runs counter to the master narrative of history, drawing from the French Annales school⁵ methodology she studied that looks at the day-to-day to form historical narratives more intimate (and inclusive) than the ones found in K-12 textbooks. As much as time in her stories is a commentary on West-as-Myth's sign of nostalgia, looking at how a character is situated in time is not "simplistic," because it shows the influence of memory and history (collective and personal) on an individual.

⁵ Duran's essay discusses how Proulx's background studying this methodology of approaching history influenced her work; the approach finds historical value in the documents of our everyday lives over documentation of extraordinary events.

CHAPTER 3:

Totem

To return to Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* for a moment: Myths are the grand total/signification of hundreds of signs that themselves have signs, a chain of meaning pouring into the baggage attached to the imagined idea of the American West. A cowboy is a sign, the symbol that represents white, male privilege in the region; his gun another sign—that of his sole responsibility and ability to preserve the land through violence.

Totems are folk versions of signs. They are objects that have been imbued with supernatural or spiritual significance. Proulx's stories are full of totems—objects that are more than objects; talking tractors, magical spurs, a carnivorous bush. Criticism of Annie Proulx's work shies away from these totemic objects, ignoring their strange presence and how they add surreal and supernatural tones to her otherwise starkly realistic work. The formula Western's signs are abstract, collective projections. In regional folklore, "big fish" stories, and oral histories, symbols are overt. Exaggeration and aggrandizement (both myth-making elements) are brought to the forefront, used for entertainment's sake, even to ridicule, rather than to promote a cause as in the case of West-as-Myth. One critic, Margaret Johnson, classifies Proulx's exaggerated totemic objects under the umbrella of the postmodern hyperreal. It may be easy to jump to the conclusion that the exaggeration is symptomatic of the simulacra—the surreal objects the simulation. Totems—and the humorous effects they bring to a story—do not originate from the relatively new literary movement of postmodernism. Totemic objects are as old as oral tradition.

It is worthwhile to examine Proulx's inclusion of totemic objects in her work because they are a folk tool through which she is able to critique Myth. Totemic objects are

objects imbued with supernatural powers that have great cultural significance. In West-as-Myth, signs serve a similar purpose, signifying the myth as a whole. For example, the (oversized) pistol is eroticized as a symbol of male power and sexuality. Cowboy hats are a cultural symbol of un-decadent, working-class power, and once again, American, rugged, masculinity. The totems in Proulx's work reveal their regional origins in their overt humor and exaggeration. The way Proulx uses totems reveals the ridiculous nature of fetishizing objects and in turn the pretense behind the serious signs of West-as-Myth.

Humor is an inherent part of storytelling forms, like folklore. By using humor, storytelling formats, and totemic objects to her advantage, Proulx is able to recreate the signs of West-as-Myth to serve her own purposes.

This section follows the Place and Time chapters because in both chapters totem is touched on; the way in which Brokeback Mountain is turned into a touchstone is an act of totemization dealing with attaching significance to a space and a by-gone time. The stories this chapter will explore Proulx's more literal examples of totemic objects: a man-eating shrub, a hellhole, a magic teakettle, a telekinetic tractor, and a reanimated steer—a few examples of her many totems. The first two address totemization of the land through objects associated with it, and the second two address the totemization of Western culture in general.

One story influenced by folklore deals with the issues of imbuing land with meaning in a literal way—the land is given life. In the form of a campfire tale, Proulx condenses the impact of the critique I outline in the previous chapter into an easily digestible, darkly comical bundle.

“The Sagebrush Kid” is a story that critiques the West-as-Myth for imbuing place with sentimental power. ‘Sentimental’ is an important qualifier. Earlier, I described how

Proulx empowered the land in order to critique sentimental portrayals of the West. “The Sagebrush Kid” uses comedic scare tactics to achieve the same ends. It is the literal enactment of investing a landscape with sentimental meaning and its dire consequences.

The story reads like a scary story spoken around a campfire, meant to teach people a lesson through fear. The story begins with an exposition that gives the reader a sense of dread, much like a fireside ghost story:

Those who think the Bermuda Triangle disappearances of planes, boats, long-distances swimmers and floating beach balls a unique phenomenon do not know of the inexplicable vanishings along the Red Desert section of Ben Holladay’s stage-coach route in the days when Wyoming was a territory. (Bad, 81)

Proulx takes an image people universally find frightening (the Bermuda Triangle) and transfers that fear onto a place which her audience feels is closer to home—in the universe of her collection, Wyoming is home. Telling the audience that the events happened right there, not long ago, is a tactic used in scary folklore. Folklore utilizes scare tactics to instruct: monsters, devils, and outlaws teach moral lessons as well entertain. In the case of “The Sagebrush Kid,” the perversity of romanticizing the harsh landscape is dramatized.

An infertile couple wants a child so badly that after a failed attempt to raise a chicken as one of their own (it was carried off by a hawk), they eventually begin to parent a bush in their back yard: “Mizpah Fur, heartbroken and suffering from loneliness, next fixed her attention on an inanimate clump of sagebrush that at twilight took on the appearance of a child reaching upwards as if piteously begging to be lifted from the ground” (Bad, 83). This passage illustrates the projection of sentimental need onto the landscape—the Furs wanted a child so they saw it in the sagebrush behind their house. It is not this projection that activates the dangerous potential of that landscape; the projection is simply the enticement to

act. Rather, it is when the couple actively invests in that fantasy that things begin to go awry. Mizpah begins including human food with the water she gives the plant—gravy and eventually meat scraps. This turns a needy child of a bush into the image of the feared outlaw of the West: “at twilight it looked like a big man hoisting his hands into the air at the command to stick ‘em up” (Bad, 84). The bush’s name, as the title shows, is the Sagebrush Kid—a name like the outlaw, Billy the Kid.⁶ The negative outcome of the emotional investment in the landscape is only fully realized when the Kid lives up to its namesake and begins killing people, disappearing anyone who gets too close to its meaty branches.

Through this entertaining, humorous, and terrifying story the reader learns that sentimentality does not engender a pleasant reality, but rather a gruesome spectacle. The humor of having her folklore outlaw be a common *shrub* allows Proulx to simultaneously associate romanticizing the land with evil and to castrate the untarnished image of the powerful, rugged (yet tamable) beauty of the West. Turning that beauty into an outlaw sagebrush plant is a hilariously unromantic image, a totem that serves as the anti-cowboy in the sense that even as a villain it fails to uphold ideals of male domination of the land. Proulx even pokes fun at herself as she does Myth; her infamously cruel landscape finds its mascot in the Sagebrush Kid totem.

The story ends like a campfire horror story as well: “The Sagebrush Kid stands out there still...no road leads to it...anyone looking in the right direction can see it” (91). The author does not let the reader feel relief because the Sagebrush Kid is no longer near people.

⁶ In Bruce A. Rosenberg’s *Code of the West*, the chapter “The Outlaw” describes how historical male aggressors like Colonel Custer and Billy the Kid have turned into stock characters through biased storytelling. Custer narratives cast him as an entirely ‘good’ character; therefore the people he kills are bad, their deaths justified. With Billy the Kid we can see how perspectives (Mexican vs. white big business) can weave completely different accounts of an ‘outlaw’ figure, as fitting the villain model or a Robin-Hood-esque character fighting oppressors. In the case of the Sagebrush Kid, it is the difference between ignorant parents who find love in his growth and equally ignorant passers-by who meet their doom.

Instead she universalizes its evil presence: it is permanent, it is nowhere, it is everywhere. I am reminded of the endings to every scary story I have heard, that goes something along the lines of: “It is still out there today. If you listen closely, you can still hear their screams.” The author is calling on the listener/reader to participate, to connect with the story in the conclusion. This is a decided push against the signs of Myth; Proulx is recruiting communal participation in the belief in her totems. There is also a very funny reading of the last line—of course the Sagebrush Kid is out there ‘if you look in the right direction.’ Sage bush is everywhere in Wyoming. Literally it *is* out there; if you look hard enough no matter where you are you will see it. Her totems are supernatural and playful, drawing on folk storytelling elements. They easily connect to formula Western signs but once the connection is made, the humor in her totems serves to mock the sanctity of those signs. In “Pair A Spurs,” for example, the special spurs (with their cosmic comet connection) turn people mad with sexual energy, many of them ending up dead. This over-the-top exaggeration of how cowboy accessories have become the ultimate icons of masculine virility is mockery at its most bizarre.

If “The Sagebrush Kid” had not been told in the way it was, the readers would not have gotten the full comedic impact of the construction of the totemic object of the Murderous Sagebrush. Through the use of scary story storytelling techniques Proulx involves her reader in expecting a monstrosity. When the totem is actually a hilarious, deflated version of the golden totems of the West, the reader is able to make the connection that this is a satire of the role symbols usually play in West-as-Myth. In this story, every attempt to convince the reader that the Sagebrush is a murderer is tempered by the humorous fact that it is a bush. This story is a way to bring readers to their senses that all totems are

creations of narratives that simply disguise the ridiculous elements--that there are no golden signs of West-as-Myth.

In “The Hellhole,” the land possesses supernatural abilities; it can transport the unworthy to Hell. “The Hellhole” utilizes supernatural elements in folklore to emphasize the ability of the genre to connect reality with fantasy.

In “The Hellhole,” Game Warden Creel Zmundzinski’s life is narrated in realistic detail. On a day like any other he discovers what appears to be a flue to Hell that will swallow up those who violate Park code. Creel discovers the hellhole when a poaching, foul-mouthed, preacher impersonator makes a fuss about being fined:

“You fucking hear me? You shithead warden, you’re going to burn in *Hell!*” shouted the excited man... tendrils of smoke rose in a circle around him. “What?” he said as the gravel sagged beneath his feet. There was a sound like someone tearing a head of lettuce apart. The gravel heaved and abruptly gaped open. The hunter dropped down into a fiery red tube about three feet across that resembled an enormous blow-torch heated pipe. (Bad, 9)

The event in which the dubious preacher is sucked to Hell is told in an empirical way that offsets the supernatural aspects of the phenomenon. The sounds, dimensions, and appearance of a Hellhole are compared to commonplace objects—a splitting head of lettuce, a heated pipe—images that are quickly recognized by the reader because they are so un-supernatural. In a masterful way, Proulx uses the humor to keep the totems fresh. In “the Sagebrush Kid” totemization is humorous because a commonplace object is being inflated; in “Hellhole,” the humor lies in taking away the totemization, in describing what would be a supernatural object/space in mundane terms.

This secular description of the hole continues as others discover it—in the moments when it would gain communal significance as a revered object. The other game wardens begin to use the hole as a way to dispose of violators. Instead of the narrative focusing on

the righteous acts of these men, or even commenting on the dubious morals of shoving low-grade offenders directly into Hell, it focuses on the ordinary. The line to dump bodies causes traffic to build up in the middle of nowhere; the wardens are happy they have less paperwork to fill out. A development company catches wind of the line of rangers waiting to use the hole and decides to build a road there, thinking it would meet the demand. Ironically, the construction process obscures the entrance to the hole and the demand is lost. A story that could have been about Good and Evil spends time discussing supply and demand. Creel's friend Plato draws on his limited psychoanalytic knowledge to classify a naughty poacher as a "deviant bestial necrophilia(c)" (Bad, 13). Good and Evil become overshadowed by the commonplace—in this case, clinical definitions of bad behavior that classify rather than condemn. Many Western folktales involve beating the Devil at his own game⁷ after a regular man and the devil make a wager. Proulx's stories take grand narratives of Good, Evil, and the destination of one's soul, and bring it to a very mundane level. This humorous technique deflates the signification of values.

The story loosely follows a 'tricking the devil at his own game' form from folklore. Those stories are referenced when Plato offers a toast that Creel "pulled the devil's tail all last year and want(s) to do it again" (Bad, 14). Creel outsmarted the devil. But the Devil is notably absent from this story; Creel is his helper without risking his immortal soul. The supernatural implications of Evil and punishment triggered by the presence of a Hellhole are all but ignored because of everyday, human realities. Proulx also wants to beat the Myth at

⁷ For example see "The Devil and Major Stobo" in which an old man bargains with the devil for health and is able to save his soul by messing with the contract (Erodes, 5-9) Or "The Cheater Cheated" in which an Indian tricks a white man who tricked him the year before (Erodes, 9-11). This story format is reminiscent of Native American trickster stories.

its own game, and part of that is erasing the ‘devil’ (the stand-in for Myth in this metaphor) just as Myths are designed to erase alternative narratives like hers.

“Dump Junk” westernizes the fantasy totem of the magic lamp. A cast iron teakettle that grants wishes is discovered as two siblings sift through the hoarded piles of their deceased Depression-era parents. Instead of revering and romanticizing the totem for what it can do, the narrative is more cautionary. The kettle gives what is asked for, but in a discerning (and grotesquely comic) way. Whenever anyone makes an extravagant request it backfires; a desired car kills the drivers and a vengeful wish strikes an unknown, bastard brother dead instead of the true target (Bad, 205).

The object has taught two successive generations the moral ‘be careful what you wish for.’ But Proulx’s magic lamp goes further; it requires its participants to edit their wishes into the most reasonable, least flamboyant requests in order to receive the desired result. The mother of the family uses the lamp to provide fully cooked meals for her family, but only asks for less-than-gourmet recipes that use leftovers, memorable for their magazine-generated names like “‘Pigs in Potatoes’ (leftover sausages and cold mashed potatoes), ‘Roman Holiday’ (leftover spaghetti with chopped string beans), ‘Salmon loaf’ (canned salmon, more leftover spaghetti)” (Bad, 204, 193). Mrs. Stifle leaves the instructions “less is more” to be used with the teakettle. In a way, the teakettle’s powers come to represent the lessons learned during the Depression: be practical, be frugal. The West-as-Myth dramatizes the hardship of the West through the adventures by single men. A magic lamp usually grants outlandish wishes, but the humor of “Dump Junk” is that the cast iron teakettle only correctly fulfills minimal requests. “Dump Junk” harnesses the power of a totemic object to focus on the unspoken lessons of frugality learned in the West passed

down through families. By transposing simple, common values onto a formula usually only dealing with the extraordinary, Proulx reclaims the fantasy to her own purposes: transferring power from the Myth to more down-to-earth stories of hardship.

“The Bunchgrass Edge of the World” features the totemic object of a telepathic tractor. An isolated, obese girl named Ottaline feels trapped in her life on her father’s ranch. She sees no way out of her predicament until one day she stumbles upon a rusting tractor. It speaks to her, trying to seduce her, calling her “lady-girl” and other ‘sweet nothings,’ sharing stories of farmers who fell in love with their tractors all over the West (“there’s girls fell in love with tractors all over this country” (Close, 138)).

The tractor explains the reason why he is more connected to people than other things: “Tractors don’t care nothin about tractors. Tractors and people, that’s how it is. Every tractor craves some human person, usually ends up with some big old farmer” (Close, 138). He is explaining exactly what being a totem is—the objects have more significance to people than simple function or existence. In many contemporary re-workings of formula Westerns, cars take the place of a loyal steed as the symbol of a cowboy’s ability to travel, to cover the land, to colonize. A tractor is the rancher’s version of a horse, the same symbol of the device that signifies a man’s ability to conquer the Western landscape. But this tractor is a folk totem, and through the laws of folk storytelling, he is appropriated to suit the needs of his particular storyteller. This tractor expresses the desire to break free from the mold of tractors as symbols of rancher dominance over land by craving a female companion, a female controller. Proulx plays with Myth-as-West by giving her totems a voice that expresses a desire that challenges their signification as a sign of Western Myth, in this case a desire to be an object of female lust rather than a tool of male domination, ‘tilling the fields.’

He further pushes what a tractor can signify by wanting to be both her magic pumpkin carriage and her prince charming. He claims to have saved her by killing a sleazy neighbor, and in the end he promotes her to head of the ranch, killing her father by crashing his plane. But the tractor's suit is rebuffed. He disgusts Ottaline: "Oh please...not a tractor or nothin like it" (Close, 138). Throughout the novel she desires a man who will communicate with her and desire her the way the tractor does, but he cannot fulfill those needs for her. She does not think the tractor is sexy. The tractor as a totemic object of West-as Myth is an obvious one; the cowboy has his horse, and the rancher has his tractor, the symbol of his ability to conquer the land. But the tractor in "Bunchgrass" pushes against assumptions about that object. Instead of being a tool with which to conquer the land, the tractor is a failed suitor. In fact, Ottaline turns some of the oppressive sexual language used by a farm hand towards the tractor: "I was you I'd sit back and enjoy it" (Close, 141). Proulx harnesses the wonderment of an object that is more than an object, but she uses that trope to turn an icon of the West into something completely different—a symbol that wanted to be something more. Ottaline's rejection of the magic of the tractor in favor of a real human man and actual self-confidence shows that that magic can be undesirable.

The story "Half-Skinned Steer" begins Proulx's first short story collection. It is drawn from folklore.⁸ The totemic object in this story is of sinister significance; but the interesting part of this story is that she calls direct attention to the fact that it came from storytelling. The story is told in two different time periods—one in the youth of the

⁸ In the acknowledgements Proulx states that "The Blood Bay" was inspired by a folktale, "The Calf That Ate The Traveller," and "The Half-Skinned Steer" was based on of "an old Icelandic Folktale, 'Porgier's Bull'" (Close, 10). I could find no more 'original' versions of those folktales, besides mention of an Icelandic bogey that occasionally takes the form of a mutilated animal.

protagonist, Mero, and the other in his old age when he returns to the ranch he grew up on after his brother's death. In the part of his story in which he explores the memories of the time he spent on the ranch, he remembers a story one of his father's girlfriend told the family. She was "a teller of tales of hard deeds and mayhem" that "played them all like a deck of cards" (Close, 24). She is a master storyteller who uses her voice to conjure up the images of what she is describing—mainly stories of death and destruction in the West: "it was her voice that drew you in, that low, twangy voice, wouldn't matter if she was saying the alphabet, what you heard was the rustle of hay. She could make you smell the smoke of an unlit fire" (Close, 35). The West-as-Myth serves a similar function—it causes people to 'smell hay' and an 'unlit fire' from the mere use of words. However the fact that she is a *storyteller* here is an explicit part of her identity; folklore and oral histories passed from person to person differ greatly from West-as-Myth because they are not imposed from above, they are told from within the context of the thing which their stories dramatize. This is made extremely evident by the fact that the girlfriend is made into a totem by Mero's narrative skills. While storytelling gives the ability to frame or reframe a narrative, it is a more vulnerable position than West-as-Myth. This explains why Proulx's stories are so calculated; speaking to power is a vulnerable position, but also a flexible one.

In Mero's telling of the past, the girlfriend morphs into a grotesque, bestial sex object that triggers a Oedipal sense of sexual jealousy of his father, prompting his flight from the ranch. Through limited third person she is described as follows: "If you admired horses you'd go for her with her arched neck and horsy buttocks" (Close, 24). Her other features are also associated with horses like "her bulged mustang eyes" (Close, 24). The exact connection between male sexual attraction to women and horses becomes clear when

Mero's tumultuous sex dreams about the girlfriend involve "throw(ing) a saddle on her" (Close, 25). The horse is the ideal totemic object that demonstrates the frontier desire to tame the wild, to bend its will to your own. Connecting that desire to a female goes to show how connected imperialism and patriarchal values are in the West-as-Myth; they even influence sexual desires. It is a sexuality based on dominance and, in turn, the dehumanizing of women—relating to the dominating the land. In the moments when Mero describes the woman as a horse in a sexual manner, power is taken from her, but it is not given to Mero. He is terrified of what he feels and he flees the ranch.

The totemic object the girlfriend creates through storytelling is a half-skinned steer. It comes back from the dead and puts a curse on the family of the man who left his body half- taken care of. The power of the curse in the story is told in ominous tones:

He knows he is done for and all of his kids and their kids is done for, and that his wife is done for and that every one of her blue dishes has got to break, and the dog that licked the blood is done for, and the house where they lived has to blow away or burn up and every fly or mouse in it. (Close, 37)

The chilling tone of this description reveals the girlfriend's strong storytelling technique that used a repetitive sentence structure to create a sense of inevitable doom. But the true power of the bull is not revealed until he appears as a harbinger of death for Mero as an old man (Close, 40). Cows in general are the basis of the strongest male trope in West-as-Myth, the cowboy. Turning the totem of the cow into a grotesque creature of the night is a way to also reveal the dark side of the original sign ("Tin Head can see the raw meat of the head and the shoulder muscles and the empty mouth without no tongue open wide and its red eyes glaring at him" (Close, 37)). The humor of Proulx's other stories is lacking in this one; it is replaced by, if anything besides a chill down the spine or a sense of dread, a shade of irony.

The story is as inescapable in Mero's real life as the curse of the half-skinned steer is in the story.

Proulx's totems draw from folk narrative tools—humor, exaggeration, changing pre-existing tropes to fit her narrative. These totems stand as moments of disruption in her collections and in *West-as-Myth*. They introduce the supernatural and critique *West-as-Myth* through parallelism with the myth's creation of signs. The ability to poke fun at the *Myth* and one's own painful life is an aspect of folk humor introduced in these totems. The next and final chapter will focus on Proulx's use of folk humor in particular.

CHAPTER 4:

Dark Humor, or Ending on a Light Note

The bleak tone that Annie Proulx uses in her stories settled in my soul, the hopeless residue left there was a reason I kept needing to reread; I needed to understand what caused that feeling, why it was so long-lasting. But in revisiting the collections, an aspect of the stories that at first glance seemed to stand apart from Proulx's harsh landscape began to show itself to be integral to the collections as a whole: humor. The humor was dark and absurd, and reinforced the folk storyteller persona of the narrator.

The comedic moments pepper the collection though the tragic elements set the tone. This 'peppering' exists on two levels: the humorous, interjected one-liners in the darker stories, and the occasional lighter stories that occur throughout the collections, with their absurd plots or zany characters. So, I had to ask myself, why had this humor been less apparent on first inspection, though ultimately so important to the tone of the collections?

To answer how humor functions in the stories one must look at its origins. The humor Proulx uses draws from and enforces the narrator's folk voice. Folklore and oral history traditions use humor to entertain, educate, and express culture. Proulx's use of a narrator that shares the linguistic pattern of her characters (including the way they laugh at the grotesque, the absurd, and importantly, each other) shows that her narrator has broken from the more traditional role of a the Eastern tenderfoot narrator trope. Proulx's narrator can be seen as writing from within instead of without, utilizing the modes of storytelling (including irreverent humor) of the folk. Dark humor is a storytelling tactic used in both comedic and tragic stories. Since it is formulated according to folktale styles of storytelling,

the humor can either blend in with a darker tale, emphasizing its darkness through the sadistic pleasure of laughter, or it can convey absurdity in a more lighthearted tale.

Though the folk voice of the narrator can be read in many of the stories, a few in particular have obvious ties to folklore and storytelling. “Half-Skinned Steer” is inspired by Icelandic folklore and features a prominent storyteller in the form of Mero’s father’s girlfriend. As discussed in the Totem chapter, the girlfriend’s story is as much the totem as the totem itself—the memory of her words is a powerful touchstone to Mero’s past just as the half-butchered steer symbolizes that unfinished business that is catching up with him. The story’s doomed ending and eerie subject matter place it in the category of stories whose bleak tones suck the reader in, while the humor is both a respite from and a reinforcement of the dark tone.

The narrator shows her folksy side when describing Mero in his old age: “Mero wound up sixty years later as an octogenarian vegetarian widower pumping an exercycle in the living room of a colonial house in Woolfort, Massachusetts” (Close, 22). The verbal pleasure of ‘octogenarian vegetarian’ combined with the mental image of Mero on an exercycle instead of a horse—an image that exposes how far he has removed himself from his Wyoming past on the ranch—reveal how this folk narrator draws on storytelling humor to tell her tale. I can almost hear her emphasizing ‘exercycle’ and Massachusetts’ to get a laugh from the audience—the absurdity of the image, combined with how much Mero has changed are sure to elicit at least a smile. What could be more un-Western than exercise equipment and vegetarianism?

The moments of truly laugh-out-loud humor are more sinister and sadistic. When the narrator shares the doomed history of ‘Down Under Wyoming,’ the ultimate example of

fate claiming its prize is a girl scout being dragged off by a lion (Close, 22). It is a poignant scene demonstrating utter helplessness at the hands of a fierce land, and yet one cannot help but laugh at it. In these moments the narrator is drawing on folk humor's use of exaggeration to entertain and convey truth. The narrator mimics the humor used by the characters to cope with and understand the situation they are in. Mero's brother's wife uses a colloquial expression to describe the carnage at her ranch: she tells Mero of her husband's death that an emu "laid him open belly to breakfast" (Close, 23). The image is colloquial, humorous, but also extremely evocative. A dead man's wife uses this one-liner that is almost a punch line to break the news of a horrific death; it can be read as a defense mechanism (laughing instead of crying) but also simply a method of understanding—a way of distancing the observation yet still making it incredibly informative. Over the phone Mero had a clear image of his brother's end; the humor allowed for the objective viewing of a painful event—a filter of sorts.

"The Blood Bay" is another story in which Proulx acknowledges drawing her inspiration from folk tradition and oral histories. In the Acknowledgements, Proulx writes about how "The Blood Bay" is her take on a folktale "The Calf That Ate The Traveller." She dedicates it to Buzzy Malli, a man who requested a story specifically set in his town. So "Blood Bay"'s origins are folk in the sense that it is adapted from another folktale, changed to serve the timely needs of a specific community.

The story reads like it is meant to be read out loud. The opening line draws the reader in because it sounds like a wizened voice trying to pass on the remembered history to you: "The Winter of 1886-87 was terrible. Every goddamn history of the high plains says so" (Close, 93). At this point it is ambiguous whether this story's tone will be overwhelmingly

comedic or tragic, and the reader feels the need for the human voice narrating—inflection would cue the reader whether ‘goddamn’ is overly dramatic (therefore indicating a more comedic tone) or serious (indicating a more tragic story to follow). In describing the Powder River, the narrator calls it “an inch deep, a mile wide and she flows uphill from Texas” (Close, 93). The grammatically incorrect ‘and she flows’ once again reveals the folk, verbal voice of the narrator. The hilarity of the plot hinges on a silly yet deadly mistake—a green cowboy puts all his money into boots instead of warm clothes and freezes to death. Then “savvy and salty” Dirt Sheets (without an ounce of disgust) saws the cowboy out of his boots (Close, 93). The physical comedy brings out the humor, as does the opposition of the characters. The flashy cowboy is laughed at for his fatal flaw of vanity, and Dirt Sheets is a character in himself-- the ‘savvy’ comes with the ‘salty,’ and the matching grungy moniker ‘Dirt Sheets.’

In “The Blood Bay” can be seen how the folk narrator with his humorous tone challenges Myth. Folk is in its nature an inclusive, flexible method of conveying knowledge—because of the oral tradition stories are always changing and morphing based on the tellers and their communities. One can see the influence of West-as-Myth on the portrayal of the green cowboy—myth’s focus on the symbolic masculinity of the cowboy transmitted through his boots could be partially faulted for the boy’s fatal error of prioritizing them over his own safety. But the story told in “Blood Bay” is not a reproduction or rejection of Myth, it engages and challenges it. Both cowboys are characters whose entertainment value lies in their ridiculousness, but only the one without common sense dies from his outlandish behavior.

Many of her other comedic stories have unacknowledged ties to storytelling and folklore. For example, “55 Miles to the Nearest Gas Pump” draws on the idea of folktales in playing with a classic fairytale of ‘Blue Beard.’ The wife discovers her husband’s secret attic of rotting women after his suicide. In playing with the fairytale (and adding more comedic elements) Proulx changes the moral into a punch line. Instead of being a cautionary tale about female chastity and obedience, Proulx’s ‘Blue Beard’ ends with “when you live a long way out you make your own fun” (Close, 252). The situational irony of that line is very humorous; instead of being horrified at the husband or condemning his act, the narrator (and possibly the wife) simply conclude that he just did what he needed to do to entertain himself. This is an example of how oral traditions adapt stories to the needs of their communities in the moment; in that isolated household, Blue Beard loses his horror and instead becomes an expected outcome rather than a surprising one. Another short story that reveals itself to be drawing upon oral traditions is “The Old Badger Game.” It is told from the perspective of three badgers, the most handsome sharing his attempts to seduce the farmer’s wife. The story is silly and absurd, and the narrator notes that it is ““The kind of thing you might hear on a sluggish afternoon in Pee Wee’s” (Bad, 89). The infamous bar of Elk Tooth (the re-occurring town and community in her final two collections) is the site of the local oral tradition—stories are shared over beer to pass the time.

The totem in “Bunchgrass Edge of the World” owes a lot of its impact to its humorous qualities. Ottaline is so lonely that humans having a conversation over the radio make her mad with desire. That the answer to these needs is a telepathic tractor. Proulx’s take on the a fairy godmother and pumpkin carriage all in one is hilarious (in a pathetic way). Ottaline asks the tractor, “Are you like an enchanted thing? A damn story where some girl

lets a warty old toad sleep in her shoe and in the mornin the toad's a good-lookin dude makin omelets?'(Close, 138). The humor's dual purpose in this story is to reinforce the folk tone/perspective (Cinderella has been appropriated to middle-o'-nowhere Wyoming) and also to show the absurdity of a totem (imbuing an object with such power is absurd—a is a talking tractor).

“Family Man” is bleak, and the humor in this story mainly comes in the form of Forrie. Her many names contribute to her strange character, but mainly her weirdness comes from the fact that, in Ray's old age, he is reunited with her, the first woman he ever slept with. This seemingly fated encounter that Ray dislikes is never fully fleshed out because Forrie suffers a strange, darkly humorous death. In an attempt to mime reverence for the land, she falls prey to it: “She took of her hat and turned, shading her eyes with her hand, and pretending to be peering into the depths like a stage character of yore. She clowned, pretending she was unsteady and losing her balance. There was a stifled ‘Oh!’ and she disappeared” (Close, 20). Forrie's two mock poses come from West-as-Myth. Her first gaze mimes the conquest of the frontier. Pretending to fall is funny only if one feels they are in control. The situational irony comes in the land taking its revenge; the photo-spread will reveal a cruel progression of supposed conquest and control followed by the land asserting its dominance. This scene is the place chapter summed up in a humorous snapshot; man's power over land is reversed.

“The Hellhole” is one of the most hilarious stories in any of the collections because it continuously surprises one's expectations. For example, the opening scene is full of laughs over the deceptive, cursing preacher. When asked for a hunting license, the man instead gives an apparently false business card declaring himself to be a preacher. When his

supposed profession does not get him off the hook, he explodes into a slew of foul language. Creel calls him “Reverend Pottymouth,” to which he replies, “My name is *Pecker!*” (Fine,8). Creel’s cool response “You bet” is the best punch line; the man is a dick (Fine, 8). When the fake pastor says, “I hope you burn in hell!” before himself being swallowed by a flue to hell, it is a complete reversal of expectations yet is in a way viciously moral—of course the fake preacher would get sucked to hell.

The humor gets even more complex when our expectations are surprised by being downgraded. For example, instead of having an internal crisis about inadvertently killing people, Creel thinks, “He didn’t know what had happened, but it saved a lot of paperwork” (Fine, 10). As discussed in the totem chapter, the hellhole is strangely divested of its supernatural significance; the humor in the story is that the spiritual is treated as the mundane—a time saving mechanism to streamline bureaucracy.

The town of Elk Tooth and its reoccurring characters (like Creel) are a representation of a community that participates in a storytelling culture. The towns’ people actually try to be ‘characters’: “In Elk Tooth everyone tries to be a character with some success. There is little more to it than being broke, proud, ingenious and setting your heels against civilized society’s pull” (Bad, 179). They foster the ‘folk,’ that which is particular to where they live. They revel in their quirkiness to the point of caricature. That is the fun of Elk Tooth.

The need for entertainment during the winter is raised in “The Contest”: “Elk Tooth residents can take no more of reality. They embrace fads and fantasies, and fortunes ride on rash wages” (Bad, 127). Relying on the community for entertainment shows how Elk Tooth serves as a creation within Proulx’s collections of a folk community that produces folktales and circulates them.

Pee Wee's, Elk Tooth's main bar, serves as the scene for the prime example of how folk knowledge has its own basis for what constitutes 'knowing.' Erwin Hungate is the town's most highly educated member. His knowledge base comes second to a more local, personal knowledge. Speaking of a man botching his way through reading multiple languages:

“Jesus,’ said Erwin Hungate, the reader, ‘lay off will you? Sounds like Umberto Eco.”
 “Who?” said Vic.
 “I know him,’ said Old Man De Bock. ‘Bert Eckle, used to work for Bob Utely. He’s out in Nevada now in a home. Home for old cowboys.” (Bad, 34)

Edwin knows it is useless to try to explain himself. Bert Eckle is the name to know in this setting; knowledge of Bert Eckle is the knowledge that matters in that conversation. The power in folk narratives resides in the fact that they can create these separate realms where their knowledge base becomes the one with the important significance.

Another example of a Pee Wee story is “The Trickle Down Effect,” the economics theory reappropriated to describe how patrons move between the three bars in Elk Tooth. In it the town's laziest member Deb offers to deliver much needed hay for Fiesta Punch, one of the sole woman ranchers, suffering from the drought like everyone. Deb's obliviousness causes a fire that decimates the hay Fiesta so desperately needed. Amanda Gribb, the barkeep at Pee Wee's, delivers the punch line of the story. “I guess they're even,” she says (Bad, 57). The final line makes the reader realize that she has been listening to a bar folk tale, a story that shares the folly of two local residents, entertains customers, shares the hardship of drought season while still being able to laugh about it. Amanda Gribb has been the narrator all along, a folk weaver of tales taken from her community, meant to serve her community—the true test of folk origins.

Two stories that stand out for their silliness are “I’ve Always Loved This Place” and “Swamp Mischief.” Both stories literalize the Good and Evil of “The Hellhole”; in them the Devil tries to upgrade his services in modern times. Looking at the stories through a lens of folklore helps place the humor in these absurd stories. A common trope in folktales is outsmarting the devil; wit and ingenuity seem to be the best defense for your soul instead of old fashioned, religious morality. In both stories the Devil is recast as a practical man, looking to innovate and upgrade his ‘services.’ For example, the first story begins with him trying to lure sinners through global-warming inducing garden design:

He had just come back from the Whole World Design & Garden show in Milan, where he posed as an avant-garden-furniture designer who worked in crushed white paper. ‘If it gets rain-spotted and grimy, who cares? Just kick it into the barbeque and burn it up,’ he advised. (Fine, 35)

He even dreams of starting his own catalogue called “Dwell in Hell” (Fine, 35). These passages are humorous, evoking images of a satanic Martha Stewart; the devil is upgrading by tapping into the housewife consumer market. In “Swamp Mischief,” the Devil comments on how he had been behind every painful or embarrassing fashion trend throughout time, even cowboy boots: “The Devil had felt himself a westerner ever since he noticed vain cowboys cramming their feet into tiny, high-heeled boots. Here was a fashion that suited the Hoofed One very well (Fine, 135). Along with claiming a Western identity, the Devil tries to upgrade for the modern era, imagining a theme park version of hell as ‘Stalin World,’ and being depressed that his email account only received spam (Fine, 135, 137). Though Stalin World is not the happiest place on earth, it is the mash-up of sinister and common that make the story laugh-out-loud hilarious. A theme park version of hell, the Devil lamenting that no

one wants to network with him—these images are hilarious. Once the devil steals the soul of a bird enthusiast, the man “grappled with the searing truth when he understood in the marrow of his bones that demons were sprinkled throughout the world like croutons in a salad” (Fine, 147). That is the comparison: demons plague the earth like...croutons. Her devil stories are by far her most playful and bizarre, the farthest flung from Wyoming. But they share the folk elements of irreverent humor that adds a depth to the bleak tone of her collections.

CONCLUSION:

The End

The power of laughter to take back power cannot be underestimated. Proulx's folk narrative strategies not only ground her in an insider's perspective of the region, they allow her to tease the master narrative.

Proulx deconstructs the signs that signify West-as-Myth through recreation; the totems in her stories are folk versions of signs. They are ridiculous instead of romantic, they are playful instead of serious, and as seen in "Half-Skinned Steer," they can build upon and undermine each other, offering an alternative to the imposing nature of mythical narrative.

Proulx's imagined Wyoming is both physical and temporal. Her time pushes against the time/space of West-as-Myth by showing the negative side effects of nostalgia. Her space challenges the idea of the frontier by making the West the conqueror, and the Westerner the conquered.

The epigraph introducing Proulx's last short story collection, *Fine Just The Way It Is*, is attributed to a rancher who wrote his memoirs before *The Virginian* was published. John Clay was a Scot turned Wyoming man, and following the theme of all the epigraphs of her stories, his quote discusses the strangeness under the sheen of Myth:

On the surface, everything was lovely, but when you got into the inside circle you soon found out that the lines of demarcation were plainly marked. (Fine, 1)

The dark underbelly of Myth is evoked by this passage for me. Christine Bold revealed the sinister motivations behind the construction of a story that tried to pass itself off as Western, that cast itself as the story of the glorious foundation of America and the American spirit, that lovely shiny surface concealing colonialism and an external claim to a regional genre—the simulacrum. Proulx's work draws on folk narrative and is truly of the region, it follows

that her style includes humor, grotesque violence, a land and economy that control men's lives. Her stories have no lovely surface and their inner circle is not exclusive, they continue to yield levels of meaning the deeper one goes, a colloquial voice sometimes addressing, beckoning, even taunting the reader into participation.

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