

CROSSING THE MEDICINE LINE:
THE COWBOY IN CANADIAN PRAIRIE FICTION

by

Reginald G D Wiebe

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of
The University of Manitoba
in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

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ABSTRACT

Following Jane Tompkins' proposal in *West of Everything* that the cowboy generates his sense of self by opposing eastern centres as well as migrating across prairie landscape, and Dick Harrison's suggestion in *Unnamed Country* that Canadian prairie writing has developed no such figure, I choose to examine the impact of the (predominantly) American cowboy on Canadian prairie fiction. The conflicting dynamics of Harold Innis' Laurentian Thesis, which states that Canadian culture and identity were imported from the east, and Frederick Turner's Frontier Thesis, arguing that American identity is generated on the new frontier, provide means to interrogate the ways in which the cowboy represents and reveals different aspects of Canadian identity than can be found through the comparable law-making figure of the Mountie. The cowboy opposes the Laurentian Thesis, but, I argue, does not simply translate the Frontier Thesis to Canada. I track the ways the cowboy inflects Canadian prairie life – through the lenses of gender, of national selfhood, and of First Nations identity – by examining the writing of Sinclair Ross, Guy Vanderhaeghe, and Thomas King.

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Crossing the Medicine Line:
The Cowboy in Canadian Prairie Fiction

CHAPTER ONE
Introduction

Starspangled cowboy

sauntering out of the almost-

silly West, on your face

a porcelain grin,

tugging a papier-mâché cactus

on wheels behind you with a string – Margaret Atwood, “Backdrop Addresses Cowboy”

The mythical Wests of Canada and the United States exert dramatic force on Canadian writers, and are of enormous imaginative importance in Canadian fiction. In *Wolf Willow*, Wallace Stegner shows something of that force when he describes an ordinary road map of the United States that, for courtesy's sake, includes the first hundred miles of the Canadian side of the line. Such a map, he explains, denies the commonality of landscape; men and women on both sides of the border experience the same physical prairie, “notable primarily for its weather, which is violent and prolonged; its emptiness, which is almost frighteningly total; and its wind, which blows all the time in a way to stiffen your hair and rattle the eyes in your head” (3). It is in this shared space, which is marked off by borders and frontiers, that struggles of national identity are often at their most potent. To properly discuss how writers of the prairie depict such struggles between sometimes competing claims of identity, it is helpful to establish the influential explanations by which each nation has conceived of “the West.”

The medicine line that divides Canada and the United States also divides the countries' mythical histories – in the words of Donald Worster, the “Wild West” of America and the “Mild West” of Canada (24). Though, as Dick Harrison explains in *Unnamed Country*, the means of land dispersal in Canada were modeled on those of the US – dividing “the West into townships six miles square containing thirty-six sections of 640 acres, each in turn divided into 160 acre quarter-sections” (19) – the narrative and mythological development of the two countries were remarkably different.

Harrison argues that for several decades Canada did not develop its own literature of the West. When Canadian authors did come to represent their West, Harrison contends, they most often addressed the encounter between an old culture and a new land. Eastern eyes saw the prairies inadequately – with the eyes of men and women who had a pre-existing national affiliation, an antecedent identity. Although Canadian novelists in the late nineteenth century produced frontier romances after the manner of Walter Scott or James Fenimore Cooper, Harrison further explains, even sensational works akin to the dime novels of the American West, “the real prairie was virtually ignored” (26). Though Robert Stead may have written about cowboys in *The Cow-Puncher*, for instance, it remains a novel that finds a divine natural order, represented by an Edenic landscape, at odds with the corrupt human order. Even Stead, a writer “whose aim was to record the settlement of the Prairie Provinces” (Stich 76), virtually ignored the prairie itself.

Harrison invokes Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House* as typical of what Canadian writers did when they finally engaged the land they inhabited rather than the land they imagined: they turned inward and stiffened their “meager cultural defenses against the natural environment” (40). The primary reason for this, Harrison argues, is that for quite

some time Canadian prairie writers carried an excess of cultural baggage. These writers experienced, as Stegner articulates the circumstances, an historical education fixed in the east: “the closest it came was Frontenac, Montcalm and Wolfe, and the Plains of Abraham” (28). Among prairie inhabitants of immigrant stock there was no engagement with the real west, excepting – for Stegner, as for many of us growing up on the prairies – a highly compromised version of the *Métis* nation and the Riel Rebellion. “The one relic of the local past that we were all aware of, the line of half-tumbled chimneys where the *Métis* village had once stood on the edge of Chimney Coulee, had in our mouths a half-dozen interpretations, all of them wrong” (28).

Throughout *Wolf Willow* Stegner distills what characterizes much study of the west: contested historical frontiers. According to CL Higham, some Canadian historians have understood their cultural past as informed by the Laurentian Thesis, or “hinterlands theory” (*One West I* xiii). Drawing on the work of Harold Adams Innis, this theory sees the metropolises in Europe and eastern Canada as arbiters of Canadian artistic, economic, and political development. JMS Careless formulates the model thusly in “Frontierism, Metropolitanism, and Canadian History”:

Briefly, this implies the emergence of a city of outstanding size to dominate not only its surrounding countryside but other cities and their countrysides, the whole area being organized by the metropolis, through control of communication, trade, and finance, into one economic and social unit that is focused on the metropolitan ‘centre of dominance’ and through it trades with the world. (*One West II* 205)

As R. Douglas Francis explains, “this interpretation of history argues that the most creative and major developments in the history of Canada occurred *not* on the frontier nor in the West, but in the metropolitan centres of central Canada, most notably Montreal and Toronto and in the Laurentian lowlands” (*One West II* 18). In this interpretation, metropolitan centres are more important than their surrounding territories, creating two types of regions: heartlands, or regions of dominance, and hinterlands, their regions of subservience. In the Laurentian model, North American civilization is an extension of European civilization.

On the other hand, American cultural expression has often been understood through the lens of Frederick Jackson Turner’s “Frontier Thesis,” which came to attention in his 1893 lecture, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” Turner emphasized a progressive development of American society as it moved west. He asserted that, due to the availability of “free land,” the frontier was of utmost significance in American history and the settlement of that land was a mythical process that transformed the settlers into Americans. For him, the qualities that define the American character – individualism, democracy, egalitarianism, idealism, inventiveness – were either formed or revealed by the settling of the West. To the frontier, he claimed,

the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom

– these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier. (*One West II* 189)

Because of a return to primitive conditions, American settlers were freed from the influence of their European history; this geographical isolation meant that those people growing up in frontier settlements had a capacity and aptitude for the kind of strong individualism that was a source of (re)generation for the American spirit. Whereas, for the Laurentian Thesis, Canadian cultural definition came from the east, on the other hand the United States, according to a Turnerian understanding, became “the West writ large” (*One West II* 17) because, for Turner, character and culture were created *on* the frontier, not brought to it. The West, then, became the region that defined American national mythology. The American western landscape became metaphorized, the frontier a process in itself, in a way that contrasts strongly with certain views of the Canadian western landscape.

If we are to accept these contrasting major national theories of history, it would seem to follow that Canadians and Americans tell western stories differently. Those possibilities probably remain even though there has been a growing critique of Innis’ and Turner’s theses, about their imperial impulses, and how they construct imagined places that erase varied lived histories. Whatever the validity of Innis’ theories, it would seem to be the case that, despite Canada’s understood attachment to England and France, its early European immigrants formed new societies, encountered and defined frontiers, and emerged as a unique nation.

What complicates attempts to distinguish the Canadian prairie from the American plains is the reality that the Wests of Canada and the United States are culturally diverse within themselves, yet each of them, on either side of the 49th parallel, is bound together

geographically with the other. Though there are many similarities between the historical Wests – both nations have displaced Aboriginal populations, forced to the margins; both nations have witnessed “a diverse immigration of Chinese railroad workers, Russian peasant farmers, French or Spanish missionaries in black robes, and millions of English-speaking poor people” (Worster 24) – divergent national viewpoints endure, and continue to shape actions and fictions.

Nevertheless, the differing historical perspectives provide fertile ground for imaginative resistance to the traditional interpretations of history. In at least some explanations, the Mountie – the pre-eminent symbol of Canadian nationalism (Dawson 3) – has defined the Canadian prairie, while the cowboy, qualified by a geographical and historical setting, and moving over or near a frontier that evokes Turner’s thesis, has informed the American plains. The recognizable “myth of the West” exists for America in the form of the cowboy, “the mythic descendent of American frontiersman” (Mitchell 141), the man who has been celebrated in popular culture for his capacity to confront the very landscape that informed his nation. However, I contend that it is also possible to interrogate myths of Canadian national identity through the figure of the cowboy.

The cowboy is actually an ideal figure for the kind of border crossing work that challenges the view of Canadian history traditionally supported by Innis’ theory. The cowboy, in Turnerian fashion, typifies the mythic dialectic between an untamed West and a civilized East – a dynamic in direct contrast to the model proposed by the Laurentian Thesis. Historically, the cowboy is situated in a time when the United States craved redefinition as more than a European hinterland. Between the American Revolution and the emergence of the Western as a recognizable genre, a number of American demands for cultural

emancipation from England came to a head. Seeking an independent literature, Noah Webster wrote, “we shall always be in leading strings till we resort to original writers and original principles instead of taking upon trust what English writers please to give us” (Barnett 21). Though there was no consensus on what these “original principles” might be, or even on what elements constituted “American life,” what mattered was the call to action. Louise Barnett notes Charles Brockden Brown’s assertion in the preface to *Edgar Huntly* that “puerile superstition and exploded manners, Gothic castles and chimeras, are the materials usually employed” in the works of previous, British authors when, for Americans, “the incidents of Indian Hostility, and the perils of the Western wilderness, are far more suitable” (22). For Brown and many other writers, the mythic possibilities of the wild American west matched for cultural definition any imaginative landscape in Europe.

The very themes that Brown so enthusiastically endorsed did indeed take on momentum, memorably so, in what generically was to become the Western. Even more striking, perhaps, is the fact that the period of history that the Western genre contains spans only a short period of time. Will Wright explains that “the crucial period of settlement in which most Westerns take place lasted only about thirty years, from 1860 to 1890” (5). Between the beginning of the “Indian wars” in 1861, when the Cheyenne found their lands invaded by gold miners and felt the effect of the Homestead Act of 1862, to the opening of the Oklahoma territory in 1889 to homesteaders, the great cattle drives lasted only for around twenty years (1866-1885) and in that same stretch virtually all of the American Indians had been either exterminated or placed on reservations. Wright states that “the historical reality of the West provided fertile soil for the growth and development of myth” (4) even though the entire period of western settlement lasted less than fifty years, and the

life of the cowboy not much more than half of that time. Clearly, the history of the era alone, in its brevity of duration, cannot explain the pervasive cultural influence of the cowboy material. What the cowboy draws his imaginative power from, most fully, is myth.

History and fiction, like fact and fiction, have often been presented as binary opposites, argues Herb Wylie. History, he explains, in its recent and professional formulation, “has been seen as a scientific, factual, objective representation of the past, governed by assumptions about historical causality, progression, and continuity” (“Opposite of History” 21). Myth, on the other hand, “has been largely associated with a poetic, prehistorical consciousness and seen as a symbolic discourse which stands in a figurative rather than representational or mimetic relationship to reality” (21). History, in many formulations of how best to understand our human situation, has often been the privileged term, supposedly offering superior access to the truth and so in a better position to arbitrate the sufficiency of various narratives.

In radical reassessment of such views of history, Hayden White argues in “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality” that narrative is a mode through which historians naturalize historiographical discourse as a presentation of the real, “out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary” (White 27). Wylie argues that questioning the mimetic viability of historiography, in effect revealing that historians’ narratives are anything but “natural” or neutral, shows that standard oppositions between fact and fiction are grounded in a problematic “metaphysics of realism” (21), one which “both contemporary theory and contemporary fiction have profoundly troubled” (21). While it would unduly privilege the Western to equate it with the scholarly, if flawed, historiography of Innis, the

model provided by the Laurentian thesis remains, nevertheless, a way of organizing an historical narrative – not unlike the myth of the cowboy.

The cowboy's narrative can, indeed, provide us with additional tools to examine the writing of the Canadian prairie. Although the pulp Westerns that once so thoroughly pervaded the American popular consciousness¹ were not renowned for their literary accomplishments, they were powerful mythmakers and the cowboy was central to their mythmaking. These novels were concerned with western space, specifically the grand expanse of the frontier. Novels of the frontier evoked epic conflicts between settling men and women and a vast, wild, and inhospitable land, populated by threatening savages. The early-mid nineteenth century novels of James Fenimore Cooper (beginning with *The Pioneers* in 1823) established the popular formula for the Western. Their settings, heroes, villains, and primary conflicts follow a similar pattern of action (as do their thousands of successors), whether or not the protagonist is a rancher, a marshal, or an outlaw.

So do other narrative forms. According to John G. Cawelti in *The Six-Gun Mystique*, the historical popularity of autobiographical narratives of Western experience and popular biographies of Western heroes like Daniel Boone, Kit Carson, Buffalo Bill Cody and General Custer, increasingly reflected the main elements of the formula that was finally enshrined in the spectacle of the Cody's Wild West Show. Gradually, the cowboy replaced the frontier scout as the archetypal Western hero. The usurpation was entirely fitting, and it was enthusiastically supported, for the cowboy summed up many qualities that Americans admired, and because, too, cowboy stories embodied better than most Turner's frontier thesis of Manifest Destiny that had so early and so unshakably seized the American imagination. As Jeffrey Wallmann explains, the cowboy's basic function was to promote the

Turnerian narrative that individuals could “reinvent themselves and so become whatever they wished to be – the very essence of the American Dream” (136).

Befitting the mythology of a nation set to define itself as what it was not – effete, European – the cowboy narrative is one of definitions and of oppositions. The conflicts at the heart of most cowboy stories are basic, which is not to say that they are easily resolvable. In them, a set of moral injunctions is placed against an alternate code or series of codes. The thematic core of the cowboy story comes from the resolution of this conflict (Mitchell 39). The plot offered by the cowboy’s struggle is appealing, argues Jane Tompkins in her book *West of Everything*, because “it seems to offer escape from the conditions of life in modern industrial society: from a mechanized existence, economic dead ends, social entanglements, unhappy personal relations, political injustice” (4). The fantasy of the American West is a dream of a time and space where men and women suffered and toiled valiantly, creating a nation out of a wilderness. The Western, certainly, is appealing as escapist entertainment but it can serve, has served, and continues to serve, also, as a national mythology. By demonstrating a code of ethics as the basis for his actions, and performing his trials in a recognizable but exotic past, the cowboy is well suited to symbolize a romanticized version of nation.

The cowboy, however, does not have the same mythological traction in Canada as he does in the United States. His myth, though powerful in Canada, is one absorbed and diffused by osmosis across the 49th parallel. The American cowboy draws meaning from the frontier landscape, and early Canadian writers did not engage in this kind imaginative work. Dick Harrison cites Henry Kreisel’s notion that those novelists who did, in fact, describe the prairie landscape were primarily concerned with “the impact of the landscape upon the

mind” (7). For Harrison, however, the claim does not provide a clear resolution about prairie literature but an acknowledgment that the question of how landscape affects the mind is one that remains unanswered and must be contended with. Far more frequent in early prairie writing were models that conceived of the prairie exclusively as usable space, a common theme in variations of the Laurentian Thesis. The journals of explorers and fur traders, like Henry Kelsey and Anthony Henday, described mainly “the means of survival and resources useful to the fur trade” (4).

Despite the lack of Eastern attention, the history of prairie space and place is a central reality behind the writing of the Canadian prairies. The writers who conceived of the Canadian prairie as hinterland were often left drawing a blank: the emptiness bothered them. Though the lack of a unique verbal tradition for the Canadian prairie mirrored the American situation, Canada’s status as a British colony influenced the development of its prairie writing differently. The paradigms used to engage with the Canadian landscape were drawn from predominantly European models; when explorers looked at the place and described it, they did not pay attention to the prairie in and of itself and often compared it to the sea – their imaginations, Harrison explains, “always more at home with what has already been rendered imaginatively” (7). When the prairie did incite the imagination, it was presented as a nearly supernatural force that disquieted its eastern witnesses. Harrison points to the words of George Monro Grant, in his book *Picturesque Canada*, where he describes this haunting quiet: “silence as of the grave reigns supreme from morning to night. The spirits of the most buoyant traveler sink as he rides deeper and deeper into this terrible silence, unless he has learned to commune with the Eternal” (9). In Grant’s report puts into question the superior

position of a human in relation to nature, all progress reduced within an engulfing and unanswering silence “an apparently interminable expanse” (10).

Canadian fiction focuses particularly on the play between a frontier that offers freedom and one that provokes fear. While American writers developed the cowboy to mitigate the tension, Canadian writers did not. However, through early Canadian writing was not, like its southern neighbour, dominated by the heroic scout figures of Buffalo Bill or soldiers like General Custer, there were settler-heroes in early Canadian fiction. The hunter-settler figure – like Daniel Boone, Cooper’s Leatherstocking and their literary descendents – took the form of the *voyageur* in French Canadian literature. Jack Warwick argues that the *voyageur* in French Canadian literature was similarly “torn between the lure of anarchic freedom in the *pays d’en haut* and the commitments and attractions of ordered social existence in the settlements” (Harrison 10). The *voyageur* and the hunter-settler typify an instinct to be both excited by the promise of the frontier, to indulge in the freedom it provides, and to impose their human order upon it.

Harrison makes a compelling argument for the lack of a similar figure in English writing of the Canadian prairie. In place of a hunter-settler who adapts to the landscape, characters like Frederick Philip Grove’s Abe Spaulding and Robert Stead’s John Harris are torn “between the desire to work harmoniously with the land and the temptation to exploit it” (10). Harrison contends that Canadian prairie writing “may be weaker dramatically” because it has developed no hunter-settler character, “but then it describes a very different western culture, one with very little time for anarchy” (10). Whereas the American frontier hero struggles between taming the wilderness and embracing the freedom it provides, the Canadian prairie hero, being more domestic, must decide how to cultivate the land. In

Harrison's formulation, the Canadian protagonist, then, exists in contrast to the American hero because they confront differing ethical dilemmas.

The disparity between the ethical dilemmas that motivate the writing of the Wests becomes clear in the choice of protagonists. The competing figures of the cowboy and the Mountie, it has been argued, embody the difference between the Canadian and American mythologies. The Canadian West was, according to Harrison, rarely a frontier, if we take Turner's definition – that place where civilization advances to confront wild(er)ness: “Central Canada was not looking to an advancing frontier to provide its identity or mature its character. There was little demand for a frontier myth in the Canadian consciousness of the time” (74). Further, Canadian cattlemen and ranchers did not have to fight for possession of their land, with the Mounties there to maintain peace and order. Canada was a part of the British Empire, “part of one imperial organism, whose people enjoyed the British institutions of their forefathers” (Careless 195), not an entirely new nation trying to establish its own identity. The Canadian West was important space, to be sure, but it was not a liminal space within which the nation would define itself in rugged self-sufficiency. It was, rather, less dramatically, less forcefully, a land from which to draw raw materials. Canadian settlers lived on what is usually described as its own kind of plain, patrolled by the North West Mounted Police Living in a land that was already tied to the East in communications and commerce, and policed by its officers; they did not need the cowboy or the scout to embody their national identity. Theirs was an already organized world and one that was answerable to a distant power.

The Mountie frequently, and most powerfully, represented the remote authority of the East. The frontier values of the American Western – individualism, egalitarianism,

inventiveness, coarseness – were, in Canada, tempered by “a faith in a higher, intangible order” (Harrison 75). This higher order finds its apotheosis in the Mountie. Like the cowboy, he is a figure who illustrates the opposition between right and wrong. But the Mountie is not an outlaw; unlike the cowboy, who exercises extra-legal powers, the Mountie represents “the constituted law of the territory” (78). He symbolizes the superiority of Canadian order over American frontier chaos and “a central authority that tamed the west and in doing so provided the nation with a tradition for decency and paternalism that Canada’s neighbour could not match” (Dawson 25).

And yet, the Mountie, as a vital symbol for one tradition of the Canadian West, fails to provide an image of western self-definition. On the contrary, his role as emissary from civilized metropolises in the East (in Canada and Great Britain) makes him an apt figurehead in a Laurentian analysis. The cowboy draws his power and identity from the dynamics of his relationship to the land in the West, while the Mountie does not – the Mountie’s authority, represented by his rank and standing amongst other officers, is bequeathed to him by an outside power. This is one of the defining characteristics of the Mountie: he is Eastern, linked to a paternal past, aligned with the dominance of the old guard, and reassured in faithful allegiance to a group of fellows. His costume, as if to mark off his basic difference, was as distinct as the cowboy’s, but even less changeable. It remains a visible reminder of the invisible hierarchical order that the Mountie maintains and promotes.

It is perhaps not so surprising, then, that Michael Dawson contends that the Mountie has more in common with Victorian romances than with Westerns. Whereas the Western represents a break from the European narrative tradition, Mountie narratives most closely

parallel British stories of colonial adventure and Maritime sea stories in which young protagonists achieved manhood through devotion to authority and by overcoming physical trials (36). The Mountie's righteousness drew more from conduct than from brute strength; his refinement was what differentiated him from the lawbreakers he was policing, and his refusal to fully conform to the wildness of his territory marked him as superior to any other gentleman in the West. As Harrison points out, the Mountie's strength, almost directly personifying Innis' thesis, "lies in his total acceptance of an authority emanating from a remote centre of empire" while the cowboy represents a new order that "is generated from the immediate particulars of experience" (79).

Though the Canadian prairie may not have been the Western's Turnerian frontier, the cowboy allows for a greater imaginative engagement with the land itself than does the Mountie. When Tompkins identifies the physical nature of the Western, rather than psychological underpinnings, as central to that narrative, she provides a clue about how the Western can illuminate our view of the Canadian prairie. Sensation underlies the cowboy's every experience, and his physical existence on the grasslands is primary. In the introduction to *West of Everything* Tompkins cites as emblematic the opening paragraphs of Louis L'Amour's novel *Heller with a Gun*.

He was two days out of Deadwood and riding for Cheyenne, and the nearest shelter was at Hat Creek Station, probably fifty miles along.

Wind knifed at his cheek. He drew deeply on his cigarette. Whoever followed him had the same problem. Find shelter or die. The wind was a moving wall of snow and the evening was filled with vast sound (11).

L'Amour is not solely concerned with the clash between man and nature, but he does stress the struggle between a man's endurance to hold fast to his unrelenting purpose and his temptation to succumb. The landscape the cowboy traverses defines his heroism – it, not a force from elsewhere, informs his identity. In the Western, the grasslands are not simply a storehouse for natural resources, but become a vital imaginative landscape. The cowboy can provide inventive openings onto the Canadian landscape because he reveals a narrative investment in a version of life from the local region rather than from the metropolis.

As a matter of fact, the immediate facts of nature, not the influence of the East, are most frequently the source of whatever introspection may appear in the cowboy narrative. The particulars of the local landscape generate his identity, not forces from elsewhere. Take for instance the protagonist of L'Amour's *Heller with a Gun*, in those opening paragraphs, where L'Amour articulates the relationship between man and nature in the Western: "it was a hard land, and it bred hard men to hard ways" (15). The cowboy narrative appeals to a belief that identity, as Turner suggested, is formed in the encounter with the land.

And yet Turner's conception of a frontier landscape – a place where one can find a vision of (American) men renegotiating the boundaries between civilization and nature – is no less a mirage than is Innis' view of Canadian history. As unofficial delegate of Turner's thesis, the cowboy represents an artifice that "vindicates conflict, violence, and vengeance, and the social and political hierarchy it creates, putting adult white males on top with everyone else in descending order underneath" (Tompkins 73). That the Western myth does not reflect traditional readings of Canadian history does not mean that its narratives do not point toward our history or our fiction – conflict, violence, and social and political hierarchy did not suddenly stop upon reaching the 49th parallel. The narrative of the cowboy provides

an alternative lens with which to read Canadian prairie fiction. I am arguing therefore that the cowboy's narrative, even in its artifice – especially in its artifice – affords a reading of Canadian literature that interrogates the cultural construction of historical metanarratives and enables new presentations of the prairie.

However, imagining the Canadian cowboy does not offer a new mythology so much as an exploration of the limitations of the old mythologies. He challenges the constructions of Canadian history and interrogates the myths that the Canadian frontier was a place of peace, order, and good government. The Mountie, I am arguing, is a Canadian symbol that denies the commonalities of life on either side of the border, an ambassador of the Laurentian Thesis who presents what British historian Raphael Samuel would characterize as the tight, orderly story of a nation, presented through “a unified subject matter, consecutive narrative, familiar landmarks, well-marked periods and a sequence of cause and effect” (10) – one that speaks only to the experiences of a very limited number of Canadian citizens. To be sure, the prairie wilderness in Canadian fiction does not conform fully to Turnerian paradigms any more than it does to Innis' theories; it is less a site of conflicts exposing heroic courage, or a site at which the highest ideals from elsewhere are realized, than a landscape of constant re-definitions. An examination of the myth of the cowboy's interaction with the prairie permits an examination of the artifice of the Canadian national mythologies.

As engaged by Canadian writers, the cowboy is often a stand-in for the reckless bravado of American cultural forces. Many Canadian writers, in their critique, distance themselves from the American myth. Margaret Atwood, in her poem “Backdrop Addresses

Cowboy” for example, does not engage the cowboy as a realistic character so much as a symbol of American imperialist culture:

what about the I
confronting you on that border,
you are always trying to cross?

I am the horizon
you ride towards, the thing you can never lasso

I am also what surrounds you:
my brain
scattered with your
tincans, bones, empty shells,
the litter of your invasions.

I am the space you desecrate
as you pass through. (71)

Atwood’s Canadian backdrop resists both its classification as scenery to an American mythology and the encroachment of the American invasion that the cowboy so violently signifies. Al Purdy’s “At the Movies” offers a similar cultural critique, casting Canadian “Eskimos and whites” as the viewers “jammed into a Nissan hut to / watch Gary Cooper and Burt Lancaster / in a Technicolor western shootemup” (77). Both Purdy and Atwood create a highly self-conscious distance between themselves and the mythology they wish to critique². The Western motifs they explore are decidedly artificial, infiltrating as filmic exports. Yet neither poem, though interrogating the ways that American mythology informs