Emerging Voices

Settler Alienation in the American West: Alienation, Loneliness And Colonial Masculinity Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*

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Introduction

Cowboy characters in popular media have historically been portrayed as uber masculine, violent, and anarchic; and while the cowboy-like protagonists of Cormac McCarthy's epic *Blood Meridian* (1985) and Ang Lee's film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) certainly possess these themes, they also problematize traditional and sensationalist representations of the cowboy persona by showing it through a much starker lens, that of loneliness. Both McCarthy's and Lee's texts explore how ideas of manifest destiny and American exceptionalism that lie latent in the worldviews of the settlers in the American West prompt its male inhabitants to adopt masculine ideals of the laconic, impassive, and violent cowboy persona, and how those very expressions of masculinity serve to make these characters lonely. *Blood Meridian* promotes loneliness through the character of the kid, whose brusque and pithy nature, capacity for violence, along with his capacity for caring, make his identity incongruous with that of the stereotypical American cowboy, and precludes him from fitting in with the other hardnosed lone rangers of the Glanton gang. In *Brokeback Mountain*, the character of Ennis Del Mar similarly falls into many popular stereotypes of the lone and laconic cowboy, but in his case, his lonesomeness is also deeply tied to his identity as a closeted homosexual. Living in the deeply homophobic and conservative society of a rural town in the American West in the mid-twentieth century, Ennis can only express his true self when he is removed from society with his lover, Jack Twist, in the natural freedom that is provided by Brokeback Mountain. While *Brokeback Mountain* presents the Western wilderness as a site of reprieve from the lonely and repressed life Ennis leads in society, in *Blood Meridian*, the Western wilderness is seen as a site of loneliness, a place where almost nothing lives and where life itself becomes purposeless. In both *Brokeback Mountain* and *Blood Meridian,* the West is a social and political

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space that encourages its settlers to be lonely due to its history rooted in manifest destiny. In the former, this is done by contrasting the melancholic freedom of the West against the restraints of society, and in the latter, the West is itself represented as a harbinger of loneliness. For each cowboy character, the colonial language of violence supersedes verbal communication, and for each character, their propensity for violence directly serves to alienate them from others. In both texts, the protagonists' masculine identities are intrinsically tied to popular representations of the Western cowboy, an identity that directly contributes to their loneliness. In this paper, I look at representations of the American cowboy, which are very different than the actual historical group of cowboys who were rarely deadeye gunslingers but instead merely tended cattle in America in the 1800s. I argue that representations of the Western cowboy are shown as lonely because the very masculine identities they seek to perform are rooted in individualist settler colonial ideologies which serve to alienate them from the respective societies and the land in which they live; it is this alienation, rooted in the cowboy's settler colonial history, that serves to make the cowboy-like characters in each text condemned to lives of loneliness.

The Lonely Cowboy

Representations of the American cowboy show it to be both an intrinsically masculine and lonely identity. I argue that this specific representation of masculinity is a particularly fraught one because of its roots in settler colonialism and its historical relationship to American exceptionalism and manifest destiny. Representations of the cowboy typically present the cowboy figure as a lone gunslinger who is particularly adept in wilderness survival and prefers inwardness and reticence above sociality. Will Wright sees as an integral precept of the cowboy persona, that they "are solitary and taciturn, a quiet loner" (2001, 10).Vahit Yaşayanargues in his article "Manifestations of Toxic Masculinity in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*" that "cowboy masculinity is a toxic, monolithic power structure held by men that dominates the lives of all who do not have access to privilege and protection" (2021, 73).Yasayan's interpretation is an incisive one specifically in its mention that cowboy masculinity is performed through domination of those "who do not have access to privilege and protection." It is the very privilege of American militarily supported westward expansion and the displacement of Indigenous peoples, conducted through this campaign, that allows for the cowboys to perform their ostensible stoic individualism.

The cowboy, in its proclivity for solitude, is represented fundamentally as a figure of disconnection: disconnected from land; law; and other people — whereas the inverse is true in North American Indigenous cultures. Ojibwe-nêhiyaw writer and scholar Joshua Whitehead writes that "Connection is a

technology indigeneity perfected" (2022, 37), and it appears that inversely, disconnection is a technology perfected by colonialism. And this identity founded through disconnection, rather than connection, is one borne through its colonial masculinity. "Colonial masculinity" is a term first coined by Mrinalini Sinha in her book *Colonial Masculinity* (1995), and in the context of representations of the American cowboy, it is very helpfully built upon by Rick A. Smith who describes "*colonial masculinity* as a [distinct,] historically contingent, and ongoing gender formation that is intimately linked to the violent creation and maintenance of colonial states" (2021, 156). Colonial masculinity is an intrinsically colonial gender formation that Smith argues was originally borne through the colonization of the American West and the romanticized and imagined ideal—which is far different from the actual historical reality—of the white Anglo-American cowboy:

> The western frontier 'served as a laboratory of gender,' spaces that provided for the reproduction of colonial masculinity through the performance of violence against Indigenous people, women, queers, and people of color, tied again to the endless hunger for Indigenous lands. Out of this laboratory emerged the Anglo cowboy, imagined as a potent antidote to waning Victorian manhood in an age of immigration and women's political action, an icon of ideal masculinity that asserted its naturalness by mapping itself onto the wilderness and as that which stood in opposition to the polluted masculinities of the urban and domestic spheres. (Smith 2021, 160)

Here Smith argues that the identity formation of the cowboy was unique to western American settlers' formations of masculinity, a masculinity that arose notably "through the performance of violence against Indigenous people, women, queers, and people of color," the former of whom often troubled white heteropatriarchal normativity through their acceptance of many non-binary gender identities and their common practicing of many sexualities deemed aberrant Christian white settlers.

Queer Cowboys

The idealized heteropatriarchal masculine identity of the American cowboy becomes troubled by representations of queer cowboys, such as Ennis Del Mar. The fact that Ennis fits the cowboy identity while also being a homosexual is no accident. Cowboys and homosexuals are identities that have historically overlapped in popular media. The openly gay, contemporary country singer and self-proclaimed cowboy Orville Peck speaks proudly of his cowboy persona, saying in an interview, "This is actually the amalgamation

of everything that is the dearest and nearest to me … [It's] truly the sort of best version of how I can open up my chest and show people who I am" ("Orville Peck on feeling like an outsider," 2024). Peck directly addresses the relationship between homosexuality and being cowboy, with the help of Willie Nelson, in his duet cover of Ned Sublette's song "Cowboys Are Frequently, Secretly Fond of Each Other," a song whose chorus sings:

> Cowboys are frequently secretly fond of each other
>
> Say, what do you think all them saddles and boots was about?
>
> And there's many a cowboy who don't understand the way that he feels for his brother
>
> And inside every cowboy there's a lady that'd love to slip out.
>
> (Nelson and Peck, 1981)

I saw Orville Peck perform this song at the Winnipeg Folk Festival in the summer of 2024, and while it was evidently written as a satire, performed by Peck, its words carry a certain truth and poignancy that he clearly embraces and welcomes. Rather than adopting diffidence or embarrassment at the explicit nature of the song, Peck sings it with pride and gusto to show that being a gay cowboy is not only not a joke, but a natural duality that aligns masculine notions of the cowboy with femininity and queerness, and likewise combines inwardness of the cowboy persona with the outwardness of the rockstar performer. But while Peck, a contemporary artist, is able to display and reconcile his respective queer and cowboy identities through performing this song, the protagonist in *Brokeback*, Ennis Del Mar, is someone who appears to hide behind the identity of the cowboy in order to mask his dual identity as a homosexual. Ennis's closetedness is vitally necessary being that he lives in 1960s Wyoming, a setting which is particularly hostile to queer identities. This hostility is first shown in a scene in which Jack Twist, Ennis' lover, asks their former employer if he has any more work on the Brokeback Mountain. Unbeknownst to Jack, the employer had seen Jack and Ennis being intimate on Brokeback Mountain, so when Jack asks him for work, the man looks at him with evident disgust and says, "I ain't got no work for *you*," emphasizing *you* to indicate he finds his sexual disposition abhorrent (45:55–46:00, 2005). The fact of Jack's homosexuality is enough to make him unemployable to that employer and likely most employers in his town, a fact of the mid-twentieth century United States that resonates strongly with the intro of Sublette's song:

> Well, there's many a strange impulse out on the plains of West Texas
>
> There's many a young boy who feels things he can't comprehend
>
> And a small town don't like it when somebody falls between sexes
>
> No, a small town don't like it when a cowboy has feelings for men. (Nelson and Peck, 1981)

Cowboys & Manifest Destiny

Representations of the American cowboy have historically been borne out of their ties to American exceptionalism and the conception of manifest destiny. Manifest destiny was the belief among many white Christian settlers in the mid-nineteenth century United States that it was their divine duty to colonize the entirety of North America, and at that time that included the American West. While Terry Corps defines the Jacksonian Era and Manifest Destiny Age as being defined between the two decades spanning 1829 to 1849, its influences are long-lasting and can even be seen today in the rhetoric of United States President-elect Donald Trump's recent "jest "that Canada should become the 51stUS state (Tasker 2024). Beginning with Andrew Jackson's election in 1829, manifest destiny became essentially an official policy of the Jackson Administration. Manifest destiny was inspired by protestant fervour to convert the West and save it from the Catholic influence of Mexico, as well as by nationalist ideals supported by American exceptionalism, and of course, the economic gains that would be derived from colonizing these lands (Corps 15–22). It is also evident that manifest destiny was a driving force behind the Mexican American-War, a war which saw significant war crimes against the Mexican people and resulted in the annexation of present-day California, Nevada, Utah, most of Arizona and New Mexico, and parts of Colorado, Wyoming, Kansas, and Oklahoma (Foos 88; Corps 25). This war and its violent legacy are vital to Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* both in Captain White's campaign to colonize Mexico, early in the book, and in the violent campaign of the Glanton gang. Corps about the violent displacement that animated manifest destiny:

> The federal government's support for rural expansion brought with it perhaps the most concerted efforts the nation had yet made to remove Native Americans from eastern districts in the face of Euro-American settlement … Violence, while to a degree a reaction to aspects of social change in the era, to some seemed to be symptomatic of that change itself. (Corps 2009, 19)

This propensity for violence is uncoincidentally also shown in popular representations of the cowboy which shows the cowboy as "[emerging] from the wilderness with a special skill at violence" (Wright 15). It is the wilderness that is the enemy of American expansionism, and the cowboy, through their special skills at violence, is shown as being able to tame that unforgiving and "uncivilized" wilderness. But it is this notion of taming, the wilderness which also embodies so much of the "civilizing" mission of American expansionism. Randal Gann argues in relation to popular representations of the cowboy in cinema that "by returning to the epoch of continental expansion and the myth of America's exceptional frontier experience, the archive of film history repeats manifest destiny while masking the work of empire" (Gann 217). In this way, the structures of settler colonialism are the very same that support popular representations of the cowboy, a cowboy mythos that was borne out of these very notions of American exceptionalism and manifest destiny. The intervention this paper contributes to current discourses on representations of the American cowboy poses these figures as intrinsically lonely because of their intimate relation to settler colonialism. And it is this very conflation of individualist and inhumane Western expansionism and masculinity that condemns the figure of the cowboy to an intrinsically lonely life, because their moral and epistemological framework favours disconnection rather than connection, and that proclivity to disconnection and alienation drives them towards lives of isolation, antisociality, and loneliness.

Alienation & Loneliness

It is prudent to first define the terms and frameworks with which I will be working, namely "alienation" and "loneliness." I will be using alienation in terms of its relevance to humanist Marxism and in its relation to loneliness. Humanist Marxist Bertell Ollman describes "alienation" as a "break" between humankind and three distinct sectors of life:

> Man is spoken of as being separated from his work (he plays no part in deciding what to do or how to do it)—a break between the individual and his life activity. Man is said to be separated from his own products (he has no control over what he makes or what becomes of it afterwards) —a break between the individual and the material world. He is also said to be separated from his fellow men (competition and class hostility has rendered most forms of cooperation impossible) —a break between man and man. (Ollman 1976, 133–34)

In this passage Ollman describes Marxian alienation as ultimately a position of separation between humanity and its connection to the natural world:

through separating the person from themselves, their products, and others, they lose the very qualities of life that make them unique, a position which causes them to become abstract. Ollman writes, "Alienated man is an abstraction because he has lost touch with all human specificity" (134). Henri Lefebvre, in his book, *A Critique of Everyday Life* (1991), complicates this understanding of alienation by arguing that, "Alienation is [also] the form taken by dialectical necessity in human becoming" (70). By this Lefebvre indicates that a person subject to "alienation" in the contexts laid out by Ollman, signifies they have an existential problem that remains to be solved; I argue that that problem is expressed in the form of loneliness. In this paper, I use the term "alienation" to refer to the social and political estrangement of people from their physical, political, and social environments, and the term "loneliness" to describe the affective experience of alienation, that is the distinctive feeling of their being alienated from their social, political, and physical environment. I use "loneliness" both in its commonsensical understanding as "dejection arising from want of companionship or society," (Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "loneliness") and at times utilize Jill Stauffer's notion of ethical loneliness to describe the distinct loneliness felt by marginalized peoples.

Settler Alienation & Loneliness

Ann Cvetkovich, in her article titled "Billy-Ray Belcourt's loneliness as the affective life of settler colonialism," (2022) uses the intrinsically lonely works of Driftpile Cree Canadian author Billy-Ray Belcourt, to suggest that "loneliness is the affective condition or structure of feeling of settler colonialism" (2022, 94). She also acknowledges that "[loneliness is] central to both white and Indigenous experience, albeit differently" (2022, 92). The simple fact that the colonizers and colonized, both living in countries historied with colonialism, now similarly experience acute loneliness is no accident. Cvetkovich illuminates the fact that, although colonizers and colonized possess a significant power imbalance, their lives are both still characterized by loneliness:

> categories such as depression, feeling bad, and loneliness … [are important to describing] the experience of race as an affective one – and that both indigeneity and whiteness (and white supremacy in the form of settler colonialism) can be experienced as loneliness, depression, and other 'bad feelings' … The pervasive experience of loneliness across racial differences seems particularly relevant to accounting for the way that racial capital produces experiences of separation, especially segregation, and isolation. It can explain the increasing epidemic of mental health

> issues among the privileged, who seem to have everything they could need materially and yet are miserable affectively. They have their own forms of loneliness that stem from isolation within middle-class families, a deep rootlessness that is generations old. (Cvetkovich 2022, 96)

This deep rootlessness felt by colonizers is likewise seen in the intrinsically rootless, and colonially generated upbringings of Ennis and the kid, a fact which tremendously influences their propensities for loneliness, because, while they may materially have more than their Indigenous counterparts, they do not share their ancient and intimate connections to the land, nor with community and ancestors who also share this connection with the land. The affective experience of colonialism is not a zero-sum game, while colonists have gained capital so too have they engendered a rootlessness which leaves them epistemologically decentred on the land in which they inhabit. Winona LaDuke describes how "Native American teachings describe the relations all around—animals, fish, trees, and rocks—as our brothers, sisters, uncles, and grandpas" (1999, 2), and it is this very lack of relation between colonizers and colonial descendants and their environment which causes their alienation from it.

Cvetkovich is also touching on an idea similarly broached by Aimé Césaire, who has written extensively on the dehumanizing effects of colonization for both parties involved: the colonized; and the colonizer. He writes, "Colonization … dehumanizes even the most civilized man …[and] that the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform himself into an animal." (1972, 41). This animalism is important to representations of the cowboy, who are represented as animal-like figures, adept at violence and survival, in the harsh physical conditions of the American West, rather than human figures in communication and relation with their environments and other people. It is this way that settler colonialism produces a unique kind of "settler alienation" in both the colonizer and colonized, and through alienating peoples from each other, often through means of violence, disconnects them and consequently affects loneliness.

Settler Alienation from Land in *Brokeback* and *Blood Meridian*

The connection between *Blood Meridian* and *Brokeback Mountain* may not at first appear an obvious one, the former a dark Western epic and the latter a queer Western Romance, but, through their respective focuses on masculinity in the American West, each text provides important insight into the far-reaching representational patterns of the Western cowboy in American media. *Blood Meridian* is an American Western which takes place across the

American West and northern Mexico in the late 1840s, following the Mexican-American War. The story follows a protagonist referred to only as the kid, whose wayward proclivities lead him to fall in with the Glanton gang, a group of bounty hunters, or as they call themselves, "Indian hunters." The Glanton gang is almost solely composed of members driven by self-interest and greed alone, and who pursue these interests through acts of abject violence. The kid represents the sole—if inevitably flawed—voice of quiet morality in this otherwise utterly rapacious band of violent mercenaries. Ang Lee's film *Brokeback Mountain* takes place in Wyoming in the early 1960s to the early 1980s, following protagonists Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist, who fall in love one summer when working together as sheepherders in the remote wilderness of the fictional locale, "Brokeback Mountain" in the Wyoming mountains. The story follows their clandestine and turbulent love affair, as in their public life each affects heterosexuality by marrying women and having children, while privately maintaining their romantic relationship through their many "fishing trip" trysts at Brokeback Mountain.

Both *Brokeback Mountain* and *Blood Meridian* follow protagonists who are either themselves white settler colonial peoples or descendants of them. In historical terms, they are foreigners to a land that had been occupied by non-white Indigenous peoples for the previous 12,000 years. The geographical interruption between these settlers' ancestors and themselves, causes them to find themselves lacking a cohesive identity; they do not feel at home in this new land nor a connection with their fellow settlers. Moreover, they have no knowledge of nor regard for—in the case of *Blood Meridian* violently stamp out—Indigenous cultures 'values such as notions of reciprocity with the natural world. These factors all contribute to a life of disconnect for each protagonist, both from the land on which they settle and their fellow settlers. In contrast, the lives of the Indigenous people living on the land before them had been characterized by intimately close-knit communities and kinship directly due to those peoples' close connection to the land. As Shawn Wilson says in his book *Research Is Ceremony:*

> Indigenous has to be understood … in its original Latin it means, "born of the land" or "springs from the land" … when you create something from an Indigenous perspective, you are creating it from that environment, from that land that it sits in. Indigenous peoples … are shaped by the environment, the land, their relationship; their spiritual, emotional and physical relationship to that land. (Wilson 2008, 88)

Representations of the American cowboy tend to present these as white settler colonial men,[1] who hold no ancestral ties nor deep kinship with the land on

which they live. In each of the texts this paper analyzes, the protagonists show far more disconnections than connections to the land they inhabit. Whereas in an Indigenous context, relationships to the land are intimate, vibrant, and deeply personal, representations of the cowboy show the land to be a challenge to overcome and a source of obtaining capital. I argue that, rather counter intuitively, these representations of cowboys emphasize the notion that, while their jobs bring them in close physical connection to the land, they are ultimately alienated from it, and all intimacy with it is lost because of their relationship to the land as both property and a basis for their labour. In the context of McCarthy's protagonist, the kid, his origins are characterized by disconnect rather than relation. The opening page of the novel describes his loveless childhood in Tennessee: "The mother dead these fourteen years ... The father never speaks her name; the child does not know it. He has a sister in this world that he will not see again. … in him broods already a taste for mindless violence. All history present in that visage, the child the father of the man. At fourteen he runs away" (2001, 1). The kid is ultimately disconnected from his ancestry to such a degree that he does not know his mother's name, and this disconnection leads him to separate from his family entirely and wander into society with "already a taste for mindless violence." In this taste for violence, he has been passed down a colonial rather than familial heritage. In Ennis' case, he similarly describes a disconnect from his family. When Jack asks him "You from ranching people?" Ennis replies, "I was." "Folks run you off?" "No. They run themselves off. One curve in the road in 43 miles, and they miss it. Killed 'em both. Bank took the ranch. Brother and sister raised me, mostly." (Lee, 2006, 7:45–8:10). Ennis later relates that without parents to support them he and his brother had to immediately join the workforce as ranch hands for most of their youth to support themselves. The fact that he is forced into the workforce so early, and removed from society inculcates in him early on an alienation from himself and his life activities, the fruits of his labour, and from others, a fate that also befalls the kid, who is raised to be "to be separated from his fellow men" (Ollman 1967, 134).

The protagonists in each text occupy variable social and political statuses in that they both, albeit to varying degrees, occupy a dual position as being at once colonizers and marginalized peoples within their respective colonial state apparatuses. Due to the latter quality, for both the kid and Ennis, Jill Stauffer's notion of ethical loneliness becomes pertinent. Stauffer describes ethical loneliness as, "the isolation one feels when one, as a violated person or as a member of a persecuted group, has been abandoned by humanity, or by those who have power over one's life's possibilities" (2015, 1). While this definition of loneliness is more immediately apparent in reference to *Brokeback Mountain*, which focuses on two homosexual men living in the intensely homophobic American West in the 1960s, it is also relevant to the character

of the kid in McCarthy's story. The kid, like Ennis, is very much a victim of circumstance, something that aligns with Ollman's configuration of alienation: "Man is spoken of as being separated from his work (he plays no part in deciding what to do or how to do it" (134). The kid's life is almost entirely obliged to forces out of his control: his broken family; the tumultuous geographical environment in which he lives; and the malevolent omnipotence of the Glanton gang led by Judge Holden. 'The judge,' *Blood Meridian's* enigmatic antagonist, makes frequent and explicit suggestions that life is inherently deterministic—notion vehemently contested by humanist Marxists—, such as in how he compares war to a game of cards and argues that the result, in a fair game, is ultimately a matter of fate (McCarthy 2001, 249).To support the judge's worldview, it does appear that, much like a game of cards, the kid's life is largely, if not entirely, beholden to predetermined circumstances. This fatalistic reality is a product of the harsh preconditions set by colonialism and consequent colonial ideologies, which prioritize conquest, domination, and capital, and leave no ideological room for the weak or disenfranchised. If the conditions of the kid's life are to be understood as truly fatalistic, then this means he is alienated from nearly all characteristics of his life, namely his ability to make independent decisions. However, when the kid's life is soon swept up into the fatalistic tide of war orchestrated by the judge, his refusal to "empty his heart" fully into the purpose of war presents a challenge to the judge's fatalistic worldview (McCarthy 2001, 307). But while this act demonstrates agency from the kid it also makes him even more of an outsider and loner, even among the intensely standoffish, taciturn, and solitary men that comprise the Glanton gang. So, while living with the amoral and depraved men who comprise the Glanton gang, the kid appears completely "abandoned by humanity" (2015, 1), fitting Stauffer's definition of ethical loneliness, but curiously, it also appears that he has enough personal freedom and willpower to abstain from the wanton violence in which almost all others participate. In this sense, the kid is in some command of his labour in that he does not perform all tasks—namely wanton violence—required of him by his gang, but he is alienated from it in the fact that he reaps none of the rewards nor comradery with his fellow gang members due to his lack of participation, a fact which causes him acute loneliness among them.

"The Speech Act of Silence" in *Brokeback* and *Blood Meridian*

While at the outset the kid's exterior may appear gruff, cold, and apathetic, it can also be read as representing the anxious reticence of a boy performing masculinity in front of a group of imposing men; almost all of whom fear one another, and likewise fear that speaking unnecessarily may reveal this concealed anxiety. The kid represents the sole source of morality in an otherwise utterly amoral group of bandits. He knows he does not belong there,

so he all but refuses to speak so that his alterity is not known. The kid embodies what Will Wright sees as an integral precept of the cowboy persona, this being that "the cowboy must be solitary and taciturn, a quiet loner" (10). His reluctance to speak compounds his alienation from others in the gang, to whom he exists in opposition: "separated from his fellow men (competition and class hostility has rendered most forms of cooperation impossible)" (Ollman 133). The one person with whom he does speak at any length is Tobin, the ex-priest, but even Tobin does not seem to relate to the kid's morality and chastises him when he helps an injured member of the gang, David Brown (McCarthy 2001, 162–63). The moment when the kid helps David Brown shows both his capacity for compassion and his reluctance for others to know the extent of it. When helping Brown remove an arrow from his leg, the kid utters almost no words, and when he finishes, says nothing until Brown frenziedly asks, "Is it through?" To which the Kid simply responds, "It is." Which prompts Brown to ask again, "The point? Is it the point? Speak up, man" (McCarthy 2001, 162). In response the kid wordlessly cuts away the point with a knife and hands it to him. This whole interaction, from the kid offering to help Brown, and then proceeding to push the arrow all the way through his leg and then cut it off, occurs with only five words being uttered byte kid: "I'll try her" and "It is" (2001, 162). It is evident that while the kid wishes to help Brown, he does not wish to be seen as "soft" or "kind-hearted." Smith argues that "The eastern colonies of the United States were increasingly defined by their urban spaces and the mannered sensibilities of the Victorian gentleman," an identity which "had ostensibly vanished" in the American frontier in favour of colonial violence (160). For fear of the kid revealing his "mannered sensibilities," as opposed to the colonial violence of the rest of his gang, he says almost nothing to reassure Brown while he removes the arrow. The kid's capacity for compassion makes him an outlier in a gang that is otherwise filled with heinous and immoral men, so he keeps quiet because he has no real friends whom he can trust and level. He is so averse to speaking that most of his interactions with other people are communicated through spitting, looking, and nodding. For the kid, as it appears to be for almost all members of the Glanton gang, verbosity, and perhaps even speech itself, especially in its relation to compassion and urbanity, is seen as fundamentally unmasculine behaviour.

The character in *Brokeback Mountain* who most wholly embodies the stoic individualist cowboy is that of Ennis Del Mar. Ennis is characterized by most all things that make a cowboy a cowboy: he works with the land; has a short temper; is a man of few words; and to top it off wears a cowboy hat. In an early scene in the film, Jack Twist, Ennis' soon-to-be lover, teases Ennis about his reticence. He does so after Ennis gives a summary of his tragic upbringing and family history. After which, Jack smiles and says, "Friend, that's more

words than you've spoke in the past two weeks." To which Ennis smiles and responds, "Two weeks? Hell, it's the most I've spoke in a year." (2005, 22:00–22:15). This dialogue, while lighthearted and flirtatious, shows that Ennis is conscious that others perceive him as taciturn and antisocial, and he resigns himself to this perception. But Ennis' position as the quiet cowboy who lacks the ability to express himself also proves to be one of the primary causes of his loneliness, because his adversity to speaking is also directly connected to his inability to express himself, an inability which contributes to his violent outbursts throughout the film.

Ethical loneliness is all but an inescapable fact of life for Ennis, who can never openly express his sexuality for fear that he, and his lover Jack, like previous homosexuals in the community, may be murdered because of it. Gary Needham, in his critical book on the film *Brokeback Mountain*, sees Ennis' penchant for silence as being deeply rooted in the fact that he cannot express his desires and feelings because he lives in a world in which he may be killed for openly being himself. Needham writes:

> Ennis becomes the latest addition to a long list of screen cowboys whose 'silence symbolizes a massive suppression of inner life' with a 'determined shutting down of emotions.' This often leads to the cowboy's undoing and eventual loneliness. In *Brokeback Mountain* the silence of Ennis is more than just a trait of his Western masculinity and lowly social status; it is more importantly the silence of the closet, the quelling of desire and the feeling that homosexuality is not something that can be properly expressed either to himself or even to those closest to him. Sedgwick writes that 'closeted-ness, itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of silence.' (Needham 2010, 54)

The fact that Ennis is a homosexual, let alone a closeted one, makes him all but predisposed to a life of loneliness, especially societal pressures that confine him to "the speech act of silence." In this silence also lies the violence of colonial masculinity, which labels homosexuality a perverse and primitive act, and because those same paternalistic colonizers "saw themselves as vulnerable to the very sex acts that they sought to destroy," homosexuality has always been viewed with intense anxiety and fear, a fear which uses threats of violence to pre-empt such sexual "perversions" (161; 159). Staffer says that "ethical loneliness is the experience of being abandoned by humanity compounded by the experience of not being heard" (9). Ennis' inability to speak to anyone except Jack is due to the fact he knows that he will not be heard, and so his life is consigned to a position of silence and as such, loneliness.

Violence as the Inherited Language of Settler Colonialism in *Brokeback*

Another feature of the West that contributes to both Ennis's and the kid's loneliness is the setting's historical relationship to violence. Frantz Fanon in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* (2021), evinces that the colonial "government's agent uses a language of pure violence … [and] with the clear conscience of the law enforcer … brings violence into the homes and minds of the colonized subject" (2021, 4). And I argue that this language of violence has likewise become internalized in the minds of Ennis and the kid. Violence is something which Jacqueline Moore argues to be essential to the masculine cowboy persona. She says, "to the working-class cowboy, violence could preserve social harmony, both through defending personal honor and through regulating social behavior of women and minorities. Its use was a clear marker of masculinity, as it allowed him both to show his equal worth with the men around him and to maintain social hierarchies that gave him an advantage over other people" (2014, 29). Ennis uses violence repeatedly throughout the film to assert his masculinity and dominance over other men. For Ennis, violence serves as a powerful component of his cowboy masculinity, but it also serves to detach himself from the people he is closest to. This can be seen in the scene in which, early in their romantic relationship, he and Jack are play fighting, and then very soon start actually fighting. In this scene, after Jack humorously lassoes and then reels in Ennis, they begin wrestling affectionately, but when Jack rolls on top, it appears Ennis believes his masculinity is being challenged. So, he suddenly begins fighting back with a newfound intensity and does not relent until Jack knees him in the face hard enough to bloody his nose. After this, Jack then attempts to embrace and console Ennis, but Ennis, unable to reconcile his emotions through a language of compassion, shakes him off and then sucker punches him (2005, 38:49–40:00). This scene shows the difficulties Ennis experiences in reconciling his cowboy persona with his intimate relationships, and how he is unable to speak through a language other than that of violence, which is inherent to the cowboy's settler-colonial history. Dwyer and Nettelbeck note that "violence is a fundamentally ambiguous concept, whose meanings had a different cast across different practices and settings of colonialism" (2018, 2). And this assertion is supported in Belcourt's memoir when he writes from a Canadian Indigenous perspective, "state violence commonly manifests as a short-circuited life, one marked by illness, sadness, and other negative effects" (2017, 2). In the case of Ennis in this scene, he is at once a victim of less conspicuous colonial violence, such as the sadness inherent to his marginalized social and political position as a homosexual, and an inheritor of colonialism through his adoption of the cowboy persona, so he resorts to communicating through the language

colonialism has inured him to, as both a victim and perpetrator, that of violence.

Violence as the Inherited Language of Settler Colonialism in *Blood Meridian*

Violence is also an integral facet of the kid's cowboy identity, whose capacity for violence earns him membership in the Glanton gang in the first place. As *Blood Meridian's* narrator says about the United States near the end of the novel, "This country was filled with violent children orphaned by war" (McCarthy 2001, 322)—orphans who are born victims of colonial violence and also borne to inherit the very language which has alienated them from their parentage—and the kid is one of these very such children who, condemned to illiteracy, motherlessness, and an absentee father, is raised into the colonial language of violence (McCarthy 2001, 1). In the opening page of the novel, the narrator states, at only fourteen years old, "[the kid] can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence" (2001, 3). This penchant for mindless violence is borne from his loveless upbringing and nurtured even further by the cowboy masculinity of the Glanton gang. Vahit Yaşayanargues that "cowboy masculinity is a toxic, monolithic power structure held by men that dominates the lives of all who do not have access to privilege and protection" (2021, 73). The kid lives a life ruled by cowboy masculinity, and he must perform it himself in order to survive among the other men in the Glanton gang for whom the performance of cowboy masculinity has become a reality. The kid's performance of cowboy masculinity is a prerequisite for survival, but it is a performance all the same, something which allows him to act like, but not really be like the rest of the gang. As Yaşayan points out, "although he takes part in the violence of the Glanton gang, the kid ultimately abandons them, trying to develop an alternative masculine identity beyond the judge" (2021, 90). But it is this very inability to adhere to a common code which precludes the kid from ever forming close relationships. Near the end of the novel, in the final meeting between the two, the judge claims that the kid's loneliness remains, even into his now adulthood, because he did not take up arms against loneliness like the rest of the Glanton gang. The judge says:

> A ritual includes the letting of blood. Rituals which fail in this requirement are but mock rituals. Here every man knows the false at once. Never doubt it. That feeling in the breast that evokes a child's memory of loneliness such as when the others have gone and only the game is left with its solitary participant … You of all men are no stranger to that feeling, the emptiness

> and the despair. It is that which we take arms against, is it not? (2001, 329)

So, while the kid's "taste for mindless violence, "inculcated by the colonial politics in which he is brought up, is ultimately what earns him membership in the Glanton gang in the first place, his disinclination towards wanton violence precludes him from attaining full status in the Glanton gang, and, as the judge argues, his staunch refusal to "empty his heart" (McCarthy. 2001, 307), like the rest of the Glanton gang, for the purpose of war, is ultimately what alienates him from the colonial society in which he is situated and condemns him to a life of loneliness.

The character of Ennis Del Mar in Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* is an exquisitely lonely one due to his doubly lonely status as both closeted homosexual and cowboy. It is only when Ennis begins to relent his colonial masculinity and cowboy bravado, that he and Jack can finally connect. This occurs near the end of the film, during Jack and Ennis' final tryst at Brokeback Mountain, when Jack expresses his displeasure with their arrangement, and the regrets he has about the life they could have lived; he says, "We could have had a good life together … had us a place of our own, but you didn't want it Ennis, so what we got now is Brokeback Mountain! It's all we got, boy, fuckin' all, so I hope you know that if you don't never know the rest!" (2005, 1:46:46–1:46:59). In this scene, Jack continues to pour his heart out to Ennis, and suddenly Ennis begins to look disconsolate, but when Jack attempts to console him, Ennis shakes him off. In this scene it seems, like the last time Jack had tried to console Ennis, that Ennis is going to respond violently, but in this case, he relents; Ennis allows Jack to hug him, and fiercely hugs him back in return. In this moment Ennis surrenders his language of violence and allows himself to be loved by Jack. However, this tenderness between them is short-lived, as this is the last time the two ever see each other.

Conclusion

While loneliness may not be a theme commonly attributed to *Blood Meridian* because themes of violence and landscape are presented far more prominently, it remains, like perhaps all of McCarthy's novels, an intrinsically lonely story. The Glanton gang represents a horde of masculine loneliness: alienated from society, themselves,

The Glanton gang represents a microcosm of the feelings that suffused the colonization of the American West: individualists seeking personal gain, and fearful of all who are unlike them. This insecurity is completely natural seeing as the aim of the Glanton gang—just as it was of the American colonial campaign—is to eradicate the previous population and accumulate wealth at the cost of all others. This agenda is certainly not one conducive to friendship,

compassion, or community, and as such the kid's aberrant proclivities for solicitousness and care do not fit in with the masculine identities emerging from American colonization, and as a consequence of this the boy is condemned to a life of loneliness. Like Ennis, he is a victim of circumstance, he is a compassionate person, does not cohere with the individualism and avariciousness inherent to American colonialism.

The settler colonial history of America is an intrinsically lonely one, and this can be seen through looking at the colonization of the American West, and the newfound masculine identity which arose from it: the cowboy. In both *Blood Meridian* and *Brokeback Mountain* loneliness is a truth intrinsic to leading a life of colonial masculinity in the American West. For both Ennis and the kid, speech is seen as emasculating, and as such, each character utilizes words sparingly, so as not to evince their underlying emotionality should it be misconstrued as femininity. In both texts, the West itself is seen as a setting conducive to loneliness. In *Brokeback Mountain* loneliness is confined to the oppressive social constricts of Western society, and in *Blood Meridian* the Western wilderness is a source and harbinger of loneliness. In both texts, a capacity for violence is also directly related to each protagonist's cowboy masculinity. In *Brokeback Mountain* violence is used as a defense mechanism which protects Ennis from showing his true and deeply emotional self. In *Blood Meridian*, violence is tantamount to the masculine language of the West, and while the kid's capacity for it allows him membership in the Glanton gang, his disdain for wanton violence ultimately never allows him to feel at home in the hyper-violent world in which he lives. For both Ennis and the kid, the West is a place whose physical landscape and deeply fraught traditions of colonial masculinity make their lives all but inevitably characterized by loneliness.

These popular representations of the American cowboy serve as microcosms that show how the colonial language of violence and repression becomes deeply imbricated in identity formations such as masculinity. It is perhaps telling that the only times in either text that a protagonist feels at home is when Ennis and Jack are living within the natural freedom provided by Brokeback Mountain: at first when working there; and then later in their many subsequent sojourns there together. Unlike the kid, who, along with the Glanton gang, is living off the land in order to strip it of its peoples and resources, Ennis and Jack live off the land for the simple purpose of love. Because it is only in the pursuit of love, removed from the extraneous and perverse mandates of American society, that they can finally feel held by one another and the land they inhabit. As Belcourt says in his book *A History of My Brief Body* "a long tradition of brutality and negligence is what constitutes kinship for the citizens of a nation sat atop the lands of older, more storied ones" (2021, 11).[2] It seems that love existing outside of any kind of nationalist kinship, such as that seen

in the natural haven of Brokeback Mountain, seems to allow for a feeling of peace, homeliness, and companionship that cannot be found in the colonial world.

Notes

1. In reality as many as 20–25% of settlers (many of which were "cow-boys" and girls) in the American West were black people. See Maria C. Hunt's "'A history that's been suppressed': the Black cowboy story is 200 years old *The Guardian*, May 19, 2024, accessed August 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/ng-interactive/2024/may/19/black-cowboys-cowgirls-rodeos.
2. Belcourt is speaking about Canada, but Canada shares many similarities in its colonial history to that of the United States.

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