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Discourses of Frontier Violence and the Trauma of National Emergence: Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove* Quartet

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One of the most difficult aspects of reading Larry McMurtry's otherwise eminently readable *Lonesome Dove* novels is his depiction of acts of extreme violence. In fact, the details of the torture to which the character of Lorena is subject during her captivity by a band of renegades are so disturbing that a full account of her ordeal is spread across two novels: *Lonesome Dove* (1986), which describes her abduction, and *Streets of Laredo* (1993) when, after a lapse of some years, she is able to speak in retrospect about the violence she experienced, both as victim and as witness. In the first novel, the narrator reports the rapings and beatings of Lorena's ordeal; she herself is so filled with terror that even though she is threatened with murder unless she speaks, still her speech deserts her. Only in the later novel does Lorena tell some of her own story. One of the renegades who tortured her, Mox Mox, "the man-burner," whom very few have seen and survived, is on a killing spree and Lorena is required to give a description of him. And so she speaks of that which she has not been able to articulate before: the days of her captivity that have eluded speech until now:

For a second she had felt a scream starting in her head, or had heard, inside herself, the piercing echo of many screams from the past. She felt cold and clammy, so heavy with fear that, for a second, she didn't know if she could move. During the hours when she had been a captive of Mox Mox and his boss, Blue Duck, she hadn't been able to move, and the terror that she felt during those hours was a thing that would never leave her. The name alone brought it all back (SL, 233).

The screaming she relives inside herself is a memory so traumatic that she struggles to find words with which to represent it. It concerns not so much the ordeal of being tortured with the threat of being burned alive but the memory of witnessing the death of the young boy who was burned in her place. The narrative preserves the horror of this image by displacing the description into recollection. Lorena is talking with Charles Goodnight, the man who will pursue Mox Mox and also the man who, in the past, discovered and buried the young boy's burned remains. So Lorena's secret is also his. He has never spoken of his grim discovery and so it is in the context of this mutual revelation of secret, traumatic knowledge, that Lorena is able to tell how, in her words,

"Mox Mox did the same things to that child that he said he would do to me. He whipped him and he poured whiskey on him, and he rubbed grease in his eyes. Then he piled brush on him and burned him. ... He whipped that boy until there wasn't an inch of skin on

his body. Then he burned him. ... I still hear that boy screaming, Mr. Goodnight," she said. "I'll always hear that child screaming" (SL, 237). Later in the narrative the Texas Ranger, Woodrow Call, saves another young boy who is held captive by Mox Mox. He rescues the child before he is burned but not before he is flayed by his captor. For the reader, then, the violence of this renegade Mox Mox becomes a present reality that haunts the reader for the horror of the violence they have read, just as the experience haunts those characters who have witnessed such extreme cruelty.

THE RHETORIC OF VIOLENCE

One is led, inevitably, to ask why McMurtry should choose to create such deeply disturbing scenes of violence in his fiction? I want to approach McMurtry's typological representation of violence, as symbolic of relations between ethnic groups and whites or colonizers; so, between Anglo Americans on the one hand and Natives and Mexicans on the other. That is, I want to treat violence as a symbolic economy, in terms of which specific forms of physical and sexual and psychological violence articulate a set of colonial and/or post-colonial relationships. I have focussed upon McMurtry's use of the captivity motif to represent the violent encounter between cultures which is distinctive of the frontier experience.

The relation between representations of captivity, violence, and a rhetoric of national emergence (known since as American Exceptionalism) begins with the early colonial captivity narratives of Mary Rowlandson, Hannah Dustin and others. In the twentieth century, these captivity narratives formed a key influence upon the emerging genre of the western. The violence depicted in the western genre, and specifically the violence of captivity, is the violence of national emergence, as I hope to show. The traditional significance of captivity in Native American culture derived from the taking of captives in war. Once taken, the captive could be adopted by a grieving family and take the place of a lost relative; the captive could, alternatively, provide the family with an object for vengeance so sometimes captives were taken for torture and death. Captives could also be sold into the slave market as part of the spoils of war. And of course the threat represented by the violent fate of those taken captive was used to prevent incursions by neighboring Native tribes on to traditional tribal lands. In 19thC representations of captivity, the first motive (adoption) is oblique and in 20thC westerns only the latter motives (enslavement, torture and death) are represented.

In McMurtry's contemporary westerns, however, a new motive enters: the taking of captives by sadistic psychopaths who want *only* to torture and kill them. These psychopathic characters, like Blue Duck, Joey Garza and Ahumado, who is known as the Black Vaquero, are significantly mixed-bloods who are alienated from their cultural heritages. In *Comanche Moon* (1997) the renegade Blue Duck is told dismissively by the chief of a neighbouring band, Slow Tree: "You are not a Comanche, you are a *mexicano*" (CM, 413). When Blue Duck is banished from his father's camp it is because he fails to understand and obey what the narrator, reporting Buffalo Hump's thoughts, calls "the Comanche way" (CM 464). Buffalo Hump is slow to send his son into exile, though he knows that Blue Duck is a psychopath (as do we from his earlier appearance in the novels *Lonesome Dove* and *Streets of Laredo*). Buffalo Hump wonders, "Perhaps Blue Duck did have evil in him, an evil

that prompted his sudden killings; but the evil might be there for a purpose. Blue Duck might be so bad that he would be the leader who drove back the whites" (CM 13). However, Blue Duck does not take captives in order to terrorize settlers and drive them off the Comanche lands; he takes captives to sell into slavery or to torture. He has no interest beyond his self-interest.

Blue Duck, like most of the psychopathic killers McMurtry creates, is a mixed-blood. His father, the old chief Buffalo Hump, takes captives for traditional purposes: to sell as slaves; as the spoils of war; to torture for the same reason; or to adopt into the tribe, as in the case of his Mexican wife who was Blue Duck's mother. Blue Duck resents his mixed-blood status and attributes his father's hostility towards him, not to his own disobedience and failure to observe traditional tribal ways, but to his Mexican blood. He reflects:

Several young men in the tribe had been born of white captives, or brown captives, and the old men didn't like it. The half-breeds were sometimes driven out. ... He often thought of leaving the tribe himself, but hadn't, because he was not ready and not equipped. ... When he was ready he meant to leave of his own accord -- one morning his father would just discover that he was gone. He would shame the old ones, though, by killing more whites than any of the young men who were pure blood, of the tribe (CM, 69).

Blue Duck's violence, in this way, is attributed to his mixed-blood status, to his own liminal status, which means that he belongs to neither Native nor Mexican culture. He is a product of colonial contact and as such he is an outcast. He belongs to neither Native nor Mexican society but his violence is directed toward both: he captures and tortures Mexicans, Natives and whites equally, and is feared equally in return. Mixed-bloods like Blue Duck can never leave racial conflict behind them, they cannot retreat into Native or Mexican communities. As mixed-bloods, they have nowhere to go.

Perhaps McMurtry's most chilling portrait of the outlaw-as-psychopath is Joey Garza, the anti-hero of *Streets of Laredo*, who kills out of curiosity, boredom and private vendetta. He is of mixed Apache and Mexican descent, and has grown up in both cultures. As a young boy, he is sold by his Mexican stepfather to the Apaches from whom he escapes but not before learning from them their techniques of thieving and of torture. His mother, Maria, recollects:

Joey was six when Juan Castro sold him to the Apaches. He was gone two years. Maria began to give up before her son came back, and once he did return, she found she had to give up again, though in a different way. Juan Castro had traded away a good boy, a child she loved, but the boy who came back was not even a child she knew" (CM, 144).

Joey is characterized by his cold calculation. He dislikes the way his second stepfather touches his mother but he awaits an opportunity and when it comes he ambushes Benito, ties him and chops off his hands and feet with a machete before leaving him to bleed to death. He shoots cowboys on the plain in order to discover from what distance he can kill with his powerful rifle and sight. From one of the cowboys killed in this way he takes a cupful of brains and the cowboy's false teeth, which he leaves in the jail of the local sheriff in order to express his contempt for

Texan law. There is reason behind Joey's violent crimes: for example, this Texan sheriff was infamous for terrorizing the Mexican villages across the border. At one point Maria worries for her son:

The hard sheriff, Doniphan, liked nothing better than to beat Mexicans who stole things. The river meant nothing to Doniphan. The notion that Mexico was a nation with rights, like other nations, and with a border that needed to be respected, made [Doniphan] laugh. Mexico was a nation of whores, lazy men, Indians, and bandits, in Doniphan's view. He crossed the border when it suited him, taking any prisoners he wanted to take (CM, 106).

In McMurtry's representation, then, the border, the frontier, is a porous barrier between nations and an ambiguous cultural space peopled by alienated mixedbloods and half-breeds. In these terms, McMurtry's frontier conforms less to Frederick Jackson Turner's idea of the frontier as a moving line and more to Mary Louise Pratt's concept of "contact zones" which she defines as: "social spaces where highly disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (Pratt, 1992, 4). She goes on to describe how she uses the term to refer to "the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (Pratt, 1992, 6). In other words, and in McMurtry's case, a contact zone is a war zone where Native and European warriors battle for domination. Of course it is an uneven power struggle, conducted upon very different conceptual bases.

THE FRONTIER AS LIMINAL SPACE

It is this idea of cross-cultural conflict and its consequences that offer at least a partial answer to my question about why McMurtry should be concerned with the recreation of frontier violence in his work. There is an interesting historical complication at work in McMurtry's western writing. He recreates in his fiction the conditions of the twentieth-century western novel, a genre that engages directly the racial concerns of its nineteenth-century subject matter. So what we have in his work is in some respects a post-modern pastiche of a modern fictional genre (the western) which itself is expressive of a nostalgic desire to return to the conditions of the mid-nineteenth century. What these three historical moments share in common is a concern with the increasingly multi-racial character of the United States. The western is the conservative expression of a deep pessimism in relation to the historical possibility of a truly multicultural America. The confrontation between Anglos, Mexicans, and Native Americans on the western frontier is, in the western novel and certainly in McMurtry's recreation of the genre, set within a context of colonial power structures that allow only for violence as the means of communication across the racial and geographical frontier.

As if to emphasise this cultural dissonance, characteristic of the colonial contact zone, as a conflict of power structures McMurtry represents the southwest frontier as a liminal space, an in-between space, where all principles of normality are in suspension. Early in the novel *Dead Man's Walk* (1995), a troop of Texas Rangers

experience complete disorientation during a whiteout on the plains. The sky and the ground become indistinguishable so they have the eerie impression that they are riding across the sky. In this place, normal laws of nature and culture are suspended. This is a “liminal space,” which functions as a space of transformation and, particularly, as a transcultural space. The frontier, in McMurtry's westerns, is a place where world views meet and collide. It is a frightening place even for the Texas Rangers who undertake to bring law and order to this chaos because here they may encounter at any moment a totally foreign world view. In Indian country, the principles and practices of Native culture still govern the conditions of everyday life. In *Dead Man's Walk*, the narrator describes how, on the plains, Captain Call “had a sense of trespass, as he rode. He felt that he was in a country that wasn't his. He didn't know where Texas stopped and New Mexico began, but it wasn't the Texans or the New Mexicans whose country he was riding through: it was the Comanches he trespassed on” (DMW, 261). McMurtry's frontier then is more than a transcultural space where Native and European cultures meet and clash. It is a war zone.

Leslie Feidler suggests as much when, in *The Return of the Vanishing American* (1968), he asks: “... where, geographically, is the elusive West? We know that first of all it was Virginia itself, the Old Dominion, then New England, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Louisiana, Ohio, Missouri, Texas, the Oregon Territory, etc., etc. – always a bloody ground just over the horizon, or just this side of it, where we confronted *in their own territory* the original possessors of the continent” (Feidler, 1968, 26, original emphasis). The power struggle between colonizer and the colonized is played out, in westerns and in popular narratives before them, by the representation of captivity and particularly feminine captivity. June Namias, in *White Captives* (1993), argues that in the course of the nineteenth century the representation of Indian captors changed, with an increasing emphasis upon brutality and sexual violence:

In the early 1830s, the overland journey narratives ... continued to depict the Indian as a sexual beast. Much iconography of the period presented suffering, battered, and mutilated (tattooed) women as victims of Indian lust and mistreatment (Namias, 1993, 109).

The reason for this shift, she suggests, may lie with the small but increasing number of cases of female captives who chose to remain with their Native captors rather than return to their white families. As Namias explains:

Once the sexual boundary was crossed [by women who took and remained with Indian husbands], a political boundary was crossed as well. The fate of the next American generation, in fact the fate of America's mission on the frontier was at risk (ibid, 112).

I would add here that the eugenics and allied racial movements of the nineteenth century placed a premium upon the purity of white womanhood, which was put into question by sexual association with Indians. In *Comanche Moon*, one of the Texas Rangers kills himself some weeks after his wife is sexually assaulted by raiding Comanches because he cannot live with the image that haunts him of the seven braves who raped his wife. Earlier in the narrative, he is one of the Rangers who rescues a young pioneer wife, Maudy Clark, and her two surviving children from Indian captivity. However, her rescue is hardly a liberation. She is terrified that her husband will reject her once he discovers that, instead of committing suicide in the face of

imminent capture as he instructed, she has been taken and sexually assaulted by her captors. Consequently, she tries repeatedly to run off into the wilderness. In fact, her fears are well founded. Her husband comes to Austin to collect his surviving children and leaves his wife, never even giving her a glance before he leaves, treating her as if she were dead. Maudy has by this stage mostly lost her mind as well as her place in respectable frontier society. Miscegenation, sexual contact across the barrier of racial difference, threatened the whiteness of the expanding American nation and with it the colonizing power of American whiteness. That the fear of racial mixing was sexual rather than cultural is evidenced by the fact that although children were subject to the same kind of violent treatment in depictions of the Indian as a savage and merciless captor, children were accepted back into white society when their mothers were not.

The significance of the theme of captivity and miscegenation is underlined in *Comanche Moon* by the sinister yet comical sub-plot concerning Inez Scull, the sexually voracious wife of Captain Inish Scull, leader of the Rangers. At various points in the narrative there are voiced suspicions that Inez, a decadent southern aristocrat, has tainted blood, a suspicion intensified by her assumed Mexican name, and the rumour that Inish was warned by his Beacon Hill neighbours against marrying her or any southern woman because of the danger of tainted blood. Whether of mixed-blood or not, Inez is an interesting character who offers a slapstick counterpart to the episodes of serious violence in the narrative. Like the renegade Natives, she takes captives: she locks men in cupboards if they fail to satisfy her insatiable sexual appetite, she whips and beats them, and although she is ostensibly of pure breeding she is denounced by her husband as a "black bitch." Inez assumes the power or authority to behave in ways that no woman can legitimately behave and it is this concept of legitimacy that her character engages in a comic by-play to the real interest of the narrative.

LEGITIMATION THROUGH SUFFERING

In this narrative and in westerns as a genre, sexual violence towards women is related to the idea of legitimacy and specifically of what constitutes a legitimate claim to property. The transfer of Indian and Mexican lands to the United States is legitimized in western narratives by the story of how the land comes into the possession of a legitimate American landholder. And this issue of who should possess the land is intimately related to who should possess the women. For women are the icons of civilization, of the American society that is being brought into existence on the frontier. Of course, there is the corollary that suffering endows value upon that which is suffered *for* (in this case the land) but this suffering is not pure and ennobling for women.

In *Comanche Moon*, the Texas Rangers find themselves cleaning up in the wake of a historic Comanche raid, which Buffalo Hump has led all the way from the plains to the "Great Water" (the Gulf of Mexico). As they pause in the burial of yet another settler family, the Rangers wonder what brings people to such a dangerous place? Call reflects:

Over and over, he and Augustus had come upon little families, far out beyond the settlements, attempting to farm country that had never felt the plow. Often such pioneers didn't even *have* a plow. ... Mainly what they had, as far as Call could tell, was their energies

and their hopes. At least they had what most of them never had before: land they could call their own (CM, 336).

But, of course, the land is claimed also by the Native inhabitants. This is territory that the Comanches, too, call their own. The incursion by settlers upon traditional Comanche land is described by the chief Buffalo Hump early in the narrative when he refers to "the whites, who were squirming like maggots up the rivers and onto the *comanchería*" (CM, 13). These incursions motivate the great raid that he leads, "A great raid [that] would remind the Texans that the Comanches were a people still; they could not be turned into farmers just because the whites wanted their lands" (CM, 195). Buffalo Hump follows the traditional ways, he uses traditional weapons – and insists upon their use during the Great Raid into Austin and San Antonio and Houston – to underline his purpose. He wants to recreate the great raids of the past which protected the borders of the *comanchería* against incursions from Mexico and had brought about treaty negotiations with whites. Not that he is interested in making treaties: he wants to recreate the terror that brought the whites to the negotiating table. The question of land ownership and rights to the land is also related to the rights of ownership to the livestock that is to be found on the land. In the story of the monumental cattle-drive from Texas to Montana, *Lonesome Dove*, McMurtry describes how Call and McCrae round up their herd in Mexico and drive them across the Rio Grande at the same time that a band of vaqueros are driving a herd gathered in Texas in the opposite direction, into Mexico. In *Comanche Moon* the Rangers witness branding season in south Texas and quickly realize that the ownership of cattle depends only on who is able to get their brand on the animals first. The animals are there for the taking by the very pioneers who have taken the land. Natives may be unable to take back this land; however, they can take the women and children who will provide the next American generation who will live on it and transform it by right of occupation from Comanche to American territory. This is why the rescue and return of captives is so crucial in these narratives.

In the context of the western genre, just as there can be no legitimate Native or Mexican claim to captive white women and children, so there can be no legitimate Native or Mexican claim to the land. A legitimate marriage between a white woman and an Indian or a Mexican is not possible within the ideological confines of the western and such intermarriage as there is has disastrous consequences. The offspring of Buffalo Hump and the Mexican captive Rosa is the renegade Blue Duck; the result of interbreeding between Apaches and Mexicans is the psychopath Joey Garza. And there are no specific examples of Native-white or Mexican-white mixedbloods in McMurtry's westerns. The idea that racial cross-breeding leads to disaster is the attitude that underlines ideas about the legitimate white claim to the land as well. Only whites know how to use the land profitably; Native and Mexican control of the land leads only to poverty and starvation. Kim Newman suggests that the ability to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate claims to such things as power, land, water, and women is the single most powerful ideological aspect of movie westerns:

While couched in terms of the coming of civilisation, the rise of law and order or the establishment of community values, the Western is essentially about conquest. Cavalries conquer the Indians, pioneers conquer the wilderness, lawmen conquer outlaws and individuals conquer their circumstances. But with each conquest, another stretch of territory, whether geographical or

philosophical, comes under the hegemony of the United States of America (Newman, 1990, 1).

This pattern of conquest is enacted through the violent taking of captive women and children and their equally violent rescue and return “home” in Anglo-America. In this way, the taking of whites into Native territory or Mexico is represented as illegitimate, a crime, while their return to land that was once Native or Mexican is articulated in terms of salvation. The narratives of conquest represented in westerns therefore legitimize the territorial expansion of the United States, which in terms of the national mythology is an exceptional or “exceptionalist” destiny, through the advance of the frontier and the contact zones in which Anglo-American cultural values prevail.

In McMurtry’s westerns the idea of America is represented in oblique terms. The characters think of themselves largely in terms of regional identifications, as Texans primarily, and then secondarily as occupants of the “American” side of the frontier. The issue of national identification only arises in *Comanche Moon* and then in relation to the declaration of Civil War. Before this, the Texas Rangers have known themselves to be Americans only in contrast with Mexicans and Natives. The prospect that they might cease to fight such “foreigners” and turn their hostilities instead against fellow Americans is profoundly disturbing to them. And they are unsure on which side they would fight. Unthinkingly, one Ranger asks his partner whether he is ready to go fight Yankees and remembers too late that his partner is in fact from Pennsylvania. Call breaks up this potential conflict: “‘We’ve still got the Comanches to fight, here in Texas,’ Call reminded them. ‘I suppose they’re Yankee enough for me’” (CM, 560). America, in Call’s estimation, is “not-Mexico” and “not-Indian Country.”

The Civil War is not uncommonly referred to as a national trauma in the development of the American nation. What is not common is the idea that the violent conflict that characterized frontier experience is also in the nature of a national trauma. The historian Peter Loewenberg suggests in his book *Decoding the Past* (1983) that we study both “critical personal traumas” and “social traumas” that can shape the life of a nation much as childhood traumas shape the life of an adult. He argues that groups that live through “a common historical situation” might “possess common features or patterns of response that can be identified decades later.” Frontier violence of the kind depicted by McMurtry is a trauma experienced on both the individual and national levels. Of course, just how cultural trauma is related to individual suffering, and how one can represent the other, is a very difficult issue. In *Comanche Moon*, McMurtry suggests that such a connection between personal and social suffering does exist. As the Texas Rangers, Woodrow Call and Augustus McCrae, grieve the loss of one of their group – the man who has committed suicide because he cannot deal with the consequences of the violent sexual assault suffered by his wife during a Comanche raid – Call wonders about the nature of their loss: “He had known several men who had lost limbs in battle; the men all claimed that they still felt things in the place where the limb had been. It was natural enough, then, that with Bill suddenly gone he and Gus would continue to have some of the feelings that went with friendship, even though the friend was gone” (CM, 437). Similarly, when news of the Civil War reaches Austin it is at the moment when Gus McCrae is sitting with his dying wife and he is led to think “Nellie was in a war, too, at the moment, and was losing it. Thought of a larger war, one that could split the nation, seemed remote when set beside Nellie’s ragged breathing” (CM, 555).

This important question of how to relate experiences of national importance to the experience of the individual was broached back in 1950 by Henry Nash Smith in his preface to *Virgin Land*, when he defines his key terms, “myth” and “symbol” as words that “designate larger or smaller units of the same kind of thing, namely an intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image.” He goes on, “The myths and symbols with which I deal have the further characteristic of being collective representations rather than the work of a single mind” (Nash Smith, 1950, xi). The myth of the frontier is the idea with which he begins his classic study. He argues that St Jean de Crèvecoeur’s question, “what is an American?” can be answered by what Nash Smith calls “the pull of a vacant continent drawing population westward ...” (Nash Smith, 1950, 3). It is the impact of the United States as a continental nation, indeed “a continental empire”, upon the “consciousness of Americans” or “the American mind” (Nash Smith, 1950, 4), as he puts it, that Nash Smith studies through the literary myths and symbols of successive generations. I want to ask much the same question but to approach an answer by focussing upon the language of American imperial mythmaking and the notion of shared trauma: trauma that impacts upon the individual and the nation both. I want to suggest that exceptionalism, as a rhetorical form that inscribes the individual within a national cultural frame of reference, plays a crucial role in the representation and normalization of the trauma of frontier violence.

THE FRONTIER AS THE SITE OF TRAUMA

There is a strong suggestion in McMurtry’s representation of captivity (and we could find examples also in earlier captivity narratives) that the trauma experienced by the victim resides not so much in the extreme violence to which the victim is exposed but more in the sudden removal of accustomed structures of meaning. For example, when Lorena is captured by Blue Duck, death quickly ceases to be something she fears, as has been the case, and becomes something she embraces, because she has discovered a form of suffering much worse than death. Meanings become detached from their accustomed referents and the process of generating meaning itself becomes impossible. When Gus McCrae storms Blue Duck’s camp to rescue her, Lorena is so alienated from language that she is unable to understand the significance of the actions taking place around her. The trauma of her captivity has deprived her of speech and even of the means to construct meaning. It is this dimension of trauma, the alienation of meaning, that has caused some theorists, such as Shoshana Felman and Cathy Caruth, to claim that trauma lies somehow “beyond representation.” However, Lorena’s experience suggests that trauma resides in the encounter with the limits of familiar systems of representation. So the captive, who is suddenly removed from a familiar world and placed in a world where language and representation operate according to unknown principles, crosses a frontier that is less geographical and racial than it is epistemological. The captive is placed in a world where meaning and knowledge are in suspension. As Linda Belau remarks in her essay, “Trauma and the Material Signifier” (2001), “Perhaps the most mysterious and the most devastating dimension of trauma is its apparent power to confound ordinary forms of understanding. Trauma seems to belong to another world, beyond the limits of our understanding” (n.p.). For “Americans” living in the contact zone that is the southwestern frontier, one of the most important systems of self-understanding or self-representation is the racial distinction between white and non-white or Native or

Mexican. The captive who is taken into Native or Mexican cultures and, through sexual association, becomes a part of the non-white world experiences the dissolution of this most important means of self-representation. The American becomes non-American and, upon rescue, American once more. As McMurtry observes more than once, adults subjected to this kind of alienation never recover. Indeed, when the Rangers discover an adopted white captive living with a band of Comanches, they are placed in a dilemma. They cannot leave her because she is white; they cannot shoot her despite the fact that she tries to kill herself; they are compelled to “rescue” her, although Call reflects, “If the captivity had lasted more than a month or two, the person the families got back was never the person they had lost. The change was too violent, the gap opened between new life and old too wide to be closed. ... He knew they were saving her merely to kill her by tortures different from those the Indians practiced” (CM, p. 667).

The most extensive captivity sub-plot in the *Lonesome Dove* series concerns the capture of Captain Inish Scull by Ahumado, the Black Vaquero, in the mountains of northern Mexico. The conflict between these two men is a contest between a gentleman of New England and a hybrid Indian-Mexican. Ahumado symbolises the conjunction of the two not-American racial identities that confirm the “Americanness” of the New Englander, Inish Scull. The eventual triumph of Scull over Ahumado is, significantly, a victory by psychological rather than physical means. The conditions of Scull’s captivity are traumatic in the same way that all the captivities represented by McMurtry are traumatic. The individual is subjected to the abrupt dissolution of accustomed systems of knowledge as they enter a world where expectations are no longer reliable and existing expertise seems to be no longer of value. Scull is able to survive this traumatic experience by recognizing that the violence Ahumado wishes to do him is psychological and epistemological rather than physical. Not that Ahumado does not practice extreme physical violence. Among his entourage is old Goyeto who specializes in skinning Ahumado’s captives. When Inish, suspended in a small cage from a cliff several hundred feet above Ahumado’s camp, shows little sign of succumbing to despair, Ahumado has Goyeto remove the captive’s eyelids so that the relentless sunshine might make him lose his sanity.

Inish realizes early in his captivity, when he spots Ahumado below looking up at him through binoculars, that his best chance of survival lies in trying to provoke his captor into some extreme action either by enraging him, or by mystifying him. In either case, Inish knows, he needs to exercise his mind as well as his limbs that are cramped in the small cage. So Inish sings *Italian* arias to the camp far below and he scratches *Greek* hexameters into the rock of the cliff, reminding himself every day of what he knows and how he knows it, as an American who is part of a global European civilization. Eventually, he triumphs over his captor by surviving. When Ahumado abandons his camp, he abandons Inish with it but Captain Scull is there and alive when Call and McCrae come to find him. Ahumado dies, poisoned by a spider’s bite, but Inish Scull lives and by living, on his own terms, he prevails. He prevails over the cruelties of his captor, over the harshness of the landscape, and he prevails as an Anglo-American. At one point in his ordeal he anticipates the telling of his story to his friends back at Harvard and wonders at what a fine story it will make. Inish triumphs and lives to lead men in the great conflict of his time, the Civil War. Again, he fights as a New Englander against renegades who would destroy America’s unity and unity of purpose, though McMurtry represents the Civil War as a distraction from the real conflict at hand: the struggle to maintain and extend the borders of the United States against Mexico and the undefeated Native tribes.

The system of meaning that saves Inish Scull, then, is a language of American empire informed by a conception of American national identity that is grounded in the assumption of American exceptionalism. Scull identifies as an American with a mythology of conquest that will not permit his defeat by Ahumado. He believes that the nation has a glorious destiny awaiting and he knows that he is a part of the realization of that destiny. And an important component of that knowledge is his self-identity as an American and not as a non-American: Native or Mexican. Scull experiences himself as a part of a signifying system grounded in a transcendent, exceptionalist, America.

Only a part of this is articulated by Inish Scull himself, of course. It is McMurtry's narrator who tells this story of frontier trauma. But what is the status of a narrator who tells of but has not been subject to the trauma of captivity? Scull's story, like Lorena's and Maudy Clark's and the stories of all the victims of frontier violence are retold within the context of McMurtry's western fiction. In this way, they are mythologized; the traumatic event is reduced to a formula story derived from the western genre. In her study of the literature of trauma, *Worlds of Hurt* (1996), Kali Tal describes the "cultural codification of trauma" which is the result of mythologization strategies that serve to remove the terror and pain from traumatic events and render these events speakable: "Traumatic events are written and rewritten until they become codified and narrative form gradually replaces content as the focus for attention. ... Once codified, the traumatic experience becomes a weapon in another battle, the struggle for political power" (Tal, 1996, 6). The retelling of stories of frontier trauma serves, in this way, to normalise the conditions under which the struggle for domination on the frontier took place. McMurtry renders "speakable" the violence of the frontier by mythologizing this violence within the context of the western and captivity narrative genres.

CONCLUSION

In McMurtry's fiction and in westerns as a genre, the rhetoric of American exceptionalism, of America's special destiny in the world, serves to mythologize frontier violence and the trauma experienced by the victims of this physical, sexual and psychological violence, in order to sustain a conservative racial politics. McMurtry's westerns present us with a late twentieth-century repetition of the rewriting of traumatic frontier stories in order to reinforce inherited concepts of American and non-American identities. These narratives continue to preserve the image of the frontier as a contact zone where a primitive multiculturalism gave rise to pathological mixed-blood individuals who, neither Mexican, Native, nor Anglo, are doomed to inhabit a liminal space that is nowhere and everywhere.

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