
Larry Watson's *Montana 1948* and Euroamerican Representation of Native/Euroamerican History

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“The relation between history and representation . . . is the most crucial subject for critics of the American West to engage.”
(Handley and Lewis 3)

Evidenced by the success of films such as *Dances with Wolves* and literature such as Barbara Kingsolver's *Pigs in Heaven*, the early '90s saw a rekindling of interest in the Euroamerican popular imagination in the frontier and West, particularly in respect to the U.S.'s colonial relationship with Native Americans. But just what was rekindled remains, at its root, deeply problematic. Works such as *Dances with Wolves* and *Pigs in Heaven* make an overt attempt to redress historical and representational wrongs committed against Native peoples, yet in differing degrees they fall radically short of accomplishing what they set out to do. In fact, despite their efforts, these narratives unwittingly reinscribe what they seek to challenge, which is to say they reinforce white colonial hegemony, either through their method of telling of frontier “history” or representation of Natives or both. One Euroamerican Western novel of this era, *Montana 1948*, by Larry Watson, published in 1993, does not make the mistakes of *Dances with Wolves* and *Pigs in Heaven* in its effort to redress frontier history and represent Native Americans. Like other contemporary films and texts, Watson's *Montana 1948* is preoccupied with the legacy of the U.S. conquest of Native America and the ongoing colonial relationship between the U.S. and Natives. But *Montana 1948* is unique in Euroamerican film and literature of this time period in that it self-consciously calls attention to the problems endemic to Euroamerican efforts to “revision” Euroamerican/Native history. Watson suggests that at best most Euroamericans engage in shallow, self-congratulatory pieties to relieve themselves of guilt in regard to Native America, and that when it comes to telling stories about Euroamerican interaction with Indians, these stories are mired in tired Indian representations that mystify material history and the ongoing colonial status of Natives in the United States. Through his depiction of his flawed narrator,

Watson underscores that while the Euroamerican retelling of history and ongoing U.S. colonial relationship with Natives is a morally necessary task, Euroamericans must be more rigorously self-critical as they engage questions of representation and their own deeply held colonial desires when telling that history.

Historically, Euroamerican narratives that address the Euroamerican colonial relationship with Natives have been deeply problematic, even when well-intended. Early 19th-century frontier novels, for instance, which attempt to write Indians into the national story sympathetically, wind up stereotyping Indians, excuse colonization, and rationalize the extermination of Indians, however “tragic” this extermination may be.¹ The legacy of these novels was reflected in popular literature and Hollywood films throughout the 20th century. To some extent the national story was reworked in the ’70s with films such as *Soldier Blue* (1970) and *Little Big Man* (1970), both of which challenge a triumphant U.S. national narrative; but even in these films Natives are Othered as exotic, ultimately tragic characters who existed in the past, and their “plight” also serves as an allegory for the liberal political agenda of protesting the Vietnam War.²

More recently a cultural resurgence of interest in Natives in the early ’90s aimed at “rewriting” the national story of the frontier. For instance, films such as *Dances with Wolves* (1991), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992), and *Geronimo: An American Legend* (1993), reengaged the myth of the frontier in an attempt to show sympathy for Natives; but they all still engage in tired stereotypes and mythologize Indians as not-so-complex heroes, implicitly suggesting that Indians died out long ago and thus exist only in the past. Moreover, the point of view of these films is decidedly white, with Indians acting as foils for the shaping of white heroic identity. As Armando Jose Prats points out, the vanishing Indians in these films “validate—and by validating uncontested and foreordained—the Edenic inheritance of the white hero” (197).³ A byproduct of Hollywood’s efforts is that they helped to foster an increased output of popular literature about Indians and the creation of television shows such as *Doctor Quinn, Medicine Woman*, but this literature and TV fare simply reinforces these tropes as well (Cook-Lynn 113). Even if sympathetic, these representations of Natives have pernicious effects:

consigned to the mythical realm [Indians] constitute no threat to the established order either figuratively (as matters of guilt and conscience) or literally (in terms of concrete opposition). That which is mythic in nature cannot be or has been murdered, expropriated and colonized in the ‘real world.’ The potential problem is solved through intellectual sleight of hand, aesthetic gimmickry and polemical discourse with specters. (Churchill 38)

This is not to say, however, that there have not been recent attempts by more serious Euroamerican authors to challenge mythic representations of Natives and to bring the history and ongoing colonial relationship between Euroamericans, the United States government, and Natives to the forefront of public consciousness.

For instance, Barbara Kingsolver's *Pigs in Heaven* (1993) tackles the illegality of white adoption of Native children and recounts the history of Cherokee removal. Although well-intentioned, Kingsolver's novel runs into representational problems in regard to her portrayal of Natives, despite her efforts to challenge these very representations overtly. Granted, the novel takes great pains to frame the Cherokee removal within the context of genocide, and it highlights the continued injustices faced by contemporary Native peoples—particularly illegal adoptions of Native children by non-Native parents—but in the end it still romanticizes and idealizes Natives, reinscribing the cultural hegemony of Euroamerican imaginings of Native peoples.⁴ Moreover, Kingsolver unselfconsciously offers a “feel-good” ending to the novel as her Euroamerican protagonist Alice, who has illegally adopted a Native girl and thus might have to return her to the Cherokees, discovers her own Cherokee heritage. Although Alice herself was raised in the dominant culture and feels self-conscious about the notion that she is “Indian,” a Cherokee character states to Alice, “it’s not like some country club or something. It’s just family. It’s kindly like joining the church. If you get around to deciding you’re Cherokee, Alice, then that’s what you are” (271). This sentimentalized solution to the protagonist’s crisis smacks of long-held white colonialist fantasy: that of whites “playing Indian,” which is little more than an imperialist gesture in and of itself as “Indian” identity is appropriated to serve white desires and needs.⁵

Given the track record of Euroamerican narratives, one has to question whether or any non-Native author should even attempt to represent Natives, which is potentially even more problematic given that Natives are more than capable of telling their own histories and representing themselves. Native critic Elizabeth Cook-Lynn laments, “It is unfortunate that, in spite of the burgeoning body of work by Native writers, the greatest body of acceptable telling of the Indian story is still in the hands of non-Natives” (112). But if, as Cook-Lynn writes, “it seems to anyone who has been in bookstores lately, at the movies, or privy to the agonized discussions going on in academia about the ‘American Canon’ that the question of telling Indian stories is still at the heart of what [Euro]America believes to be its narrative of self” (112), one can argue that it is still very much necessary that Euroamericans represent Natives in their stories. To do so, however, Euroamericans must interrogate their “narrative of self,” provided they produce narratives that do not mystify the reality

that this “self” has traditionally been predicated on representational fantasies that mystify the reality of colonialism.

Watson takes definitive and effective steps in this process of demystification. Watson believes Euroamericans must continue to tell this history—a history in which whites and Natives have a stake—but his depiction of his narrator underscores that Euroamericans must be more critically rigorous in their interrogation of that history. As Watson’s novel suggests, if Euroamericans eschew any attempt to (re)tell their narrative of self they risk potentially erasing the reality of U.S. colonial history from the map, at least in respect to Euroamerican imaginings of America. In other words, rather than a story of a North America that was peopled by Natives prior to the arrival of Europeans, the U.S. national narrative would instead resemble Frederick Jackson Turner’s now infamous address to the American Historical Association at the Columbian Exposition of 1893, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” a mythic story of the U.S.’s innocent journey from East to West played out on a supposedly unpeopled “free land,” a place where Euroamericans could innocently be reborn in the purity of the frontier wilderness.⁶

The novel is told from the perspective of a middle-aged high school history teacher, David Hayden, who recalls the summer of 1948, when he was twelve. The effect of this narrative point of view suggests that David’s adult imagination is frozen in place, and that his ideas about “Indians” are still framed by his adolescent perceptions. In his recounting of the summer of 1948, David explains that his father Wesley, the locally elected Sheriff, arrested his own brother Frank, a local Doctor and war hero, who murdered the family’s Hunkpapa Sioux housemaid, Marie Little Soldier. Marie was ill, and Frank, her doctor, molested her. To protect himself from Marie’s accusations, Frank poisoned her. In light of the accusations against him—accusations not brought forward to the public—Uncle Frank committed suicide in the family’s basement. His case was never brought to trial, nor was it made openly public. As a result of the crisis, the family’s life was shattered, and the Haydens moved away from Bentrack to settle in Minnesota.

To David, the question of justice in regard to Marie and the larger question of justice for Natives are not remotely his concerns as he recounts his past, much in the way that most Euroamericans have historically refused and continue to refuse addressing questions of justice. And the fact that he and his family hide their past is emblematic of how the U.S.’s past is repressed in the national psyche. He explains,

I did not—do not—believe in the purity and certainty of the study of history over law. Not at all. Quite the opposite. I find history endlessly amusing, knowing, as I do, that the record of any human community might omit stories of sexual abuse, murder, suicide.... Who knows—perhaps the region’s most dramatic, most sen-

sational stories were not played out in the public view but were confined to small, private places. A doctor's office, say. A white frame house on a quiet street.... These musings, of course, are for my private enjoyment. For my students I keep a straight face and pretend that the text tells the truth, whole and unembellished. (170)

David wants to imagine that the story remains his and his family's "private" affair, a small, relatively inconsequential history tangential to the grand narrative of history. In his silence about his past, he behaves as if Marie's murder and the events of 1948 in Bentrock never happened, except as they exist in David's private historical memory. As Watson indicates, David's version of the events of 1948 represents a central problem in how the U.S. historical narrative is perpetuated in much of the Euroamerican imagination, particularly with respect to its beliefs regarding the history of U.S. relations with Native peoples. This story has generally been and continues to be a private story in this version of history, relatively hidden or repressed in the Euroamerican subconscious. David's distinction between history and law obscures the need to link the truthful telling of history and the enactment of justice in respect to the U.S. and its colonial relationship with Native peoples. Ironically, in truth the history of Native America is not an inconsequential history, but has been a major story of conquest and genocide, the reverberations of which resonate throughout Native America today.

Wesley's anxieties about and strategies to cope with the past reflect a long-held Euroamerican anxiety. As Susan Scheckel has written,

the dispossession of the American Indians has been one of the most troubling episodes in U.S. history. From the beginning, settlement and expansion depended on it, and up to the present it is an act of violence that Americans seem unable to forget. Despite innumerable attempts to rewrite the Indian as the subject of "family" history, the ghost of the Indian as the object of genocidal violence has returned inevitably to haunt the nation and its narratives. (3)

While Marie's murder itself is not an act of genocide, her story is deeply entwined with this history. David's anxieties about the cover-up of Marie's sexual abuse and murder represents the U.S.'s own anxieties about its violent dispossession of and genocide committed against Natives. Marie's subordinate status as a maid is literally predicated on the dispossession of Natives, who became second-class citizens following their conquest, a subordinate reality even today. Yet, David attempts to integrate her into a family history, much in the way the U.S. has historically attempted to integrate Natives into the national family through the distorted lens of myth. He is, however, like the nation, haunted by a violent reality.

On the surface, the story seems to be about the tribulations of the family, and this is certainly how Wesley perceives it as he unravels his past. David explains that

at first, following the revelation of Frank's actions, Wesley told his wife Gail, "I think the problem's been taken care of. Frank said he's going to cut it out." Gail responded, "What about what's already been done? What about that, that...*damage*?" His father claimed, "That's passed. That's over and done." David's mother replied, "That's not the way it works. You know that. Sins—crimes—are not supposed to go unpunished" (85). Afterwards, Wesley tried to address the accusations privately. However, his brother's suspected murder of Marie gave him no choice but to arrest Frank. As he told his son, "David, I believe that in this world people must pay for their crimes. It doesn't matter who you are or who your relations are; if you do wrong, you pay. I believe that. I have to" (156). Here, Wesley suggests that he has been able to put justice ahead of family loyalty, but his conflicted state is evidenced by the fact that rather than incarcerate his brother in the local jail, he locked him in the Hayden's basement root cellar. Although he told David that the next day he would put Frank in the local jail, his action was preempted by Frank's suicide. The suicide relieved Wesley of the burden of shaming his family. As David explains, "it was decided not to reveal any of Frank's crimes. What purpose would it serve?...[T]here was no sense clouding the air with accusations" (166).

Watson sets the story in 1948 to call attention to 1948 legislation under Title 18 of the United States Code: "Crimes and Criminal Procedures." Chapter 53 of that code applies to Indians: for legal purposes "Indian Country" was defined in order to decide Federal or State jurisdiction over crimes committed by Indians or non-Indians in "Indian Country."⁷ While tribal courts have a degree of control over minor crimes in "Indian Country," since 1885 with the passage of the "Major Crimes Act," a major blow to Indian sovereignty, Natives have had no jurisdiction on their lands over "murder, manslaughter, rape, assault with intent to kill, arson burglary and larceny" (Prucha 166). While Congress passed this Act in order to address Indian-on-Indian crime, Natives also have no power to prosecute and try non-Natives who have committed crimes in Indian Country, even if the crime is committed against Natives themselves.

The double-standard of these laws is clear and attests to the legacy of *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* (1831), in which Justice John Marshall defined Indian tribes as "domestic dependent nations"—a vexed and oxymoronic statement, to say the least. Whites have full right to mediate justice in Indian country, but Indians have no power to mediate justice in Euroamerican country. In fact, traditional Native forms of justice, which historically have differed considerably from Euroamerican notions of justice, are rendered moot by this law. Watson has this double-standard in mind in regard to questions of justice toward Natives. Granted, no Native character in David's past made a serious attempt to investigate Marie's murder, but since Wes-

ley, a representative of the U.S. justice system, did not pursue it, Natives had little recourse to pursue it themselves. Wesley's inaction underscores that laws governing U.S./Native relations serve U.S. interests.

Watson makes it abundantly clear that the "history" of the American West is in fact a constructed story told from the dominant culture's perspective in order to repress the truth and perpetuate Euroamerican fantasies about the West and national identity. For instance, David recalls having to repaint the Hayden house, and as he worked Wesley explained to him, "Paint. Fresh paint. That's how you find life and civilization. Women come and they want fresh paint" (113). David recollects, "Then he rapped sharply on the wall, three quick knocks to warn it that Wesley Hayden and his son were coming with scrapers, sandpaper, paintbrushes, and white paint, paint whiter than any bones bleaching out there on the Montana prairie" (113). The fresh white paint represents the insistent reapplication of the triumphant white story of progress and redemption in the West, a story of seeming purity and innocence. Frank's incarceration in the Hayden basement metaphorically underscores that the true history of Euroamerican relations with Natives is hidden from public consciousness. Like the basement supporting the house, but also hidden beneath that structure, Frank's dark personal history metaphorically reveals the "true" foundation of Western history and U.S. national identity.

Implicitly, the foundation of Frank's identity is intimately tied to his family's legacy and its triumph in the context of the story of the West. A war hero, Frank was the favored child of the Hayden family, the quintessential American boy and scion of *the* established family of the community. Frank and Wesley's family lived on the outskirts of town, their house a reflection of the wealth their father acquired as a rancher and power broker. Frank's actions and mores, it is suggested, are a direct legacy of his family history and Western history. At least on the surface, in the vein of the classic literary or filmic Western hero—emblemized by the likes of Cooper's Natty Bumppo, or Wister's Virginian—Frank was brave and courageous, an emblem of the ideal Anglo-America male. Before he went to war, he had a reputation for sexual forays with Native women. David's grandfather recounts to Wesley, "You know Frank's always been partial to red meat. He couldn't have been any older than Davy when Bud caught him down in the stable with that little Indian girl. Bud said to me, 'Mr. Hayden, you better have a talk with that boy. He had that little squaw down on her hands and knees. He's been learnin' from watching the dogs and the horses and the bulls'" (72). The callously described and derogatory image of a Native woman suggests that she was, as the grandfather indicates, little more than "red meat" to Frank, an object to be controlled and dominated by him. Central to Frank's identity, then, are his exploitative relationships with Native women—he is

not what he seems to be. Metaphorically, Frank's perversion mirrors the perversion at the root of national history.

For David, the problem with Frank's actions is not Marie's death, but the loss of David's ability to sustain his utopian fantasies about his own relationship with Marie, a fantasy that mimics long-held Euroamerican fantasies about Indians. Marie's labeling as an "Indian," at least on the surface, seems largely irrelevant to how David perceived her in the past and how he continues to perceive her as he tells the story. As the Hayden's housemaid, she was ostensibly part of the family. After Marie's murder, Wesley says, "I tried to tell Mrs. Little Soldier that this was Marie's home also and that we thought of her as a member of the family" (105). David's sentiments are reinforced later in his narrative. His "happiest memory" of Marie "takes place the autumn before she died" (172). He remembers playing a game of football with Marie and Ronnie (Marie's boyfriend), a game without any rules: "It was a game, yet it had no object and no borders of space or time or regulation." David remarks, "I felt that what we played, more accurately *how* we played, had its origin in Ronnie and Marie's Indian heritage, but I had no way of knowing that with any certainty. All I could be sure of was that I never had more fun playing ball, any kind of ball, in my life" (173). Afterward they share cider, and David believes that "I remembered that incident so fondly not only because I was with Marie and Ronnie, both of whom I loved in my way, but also because I felt, for that brief span, as though I was part of a family, a family that accepted me for myself and not my blood or birthright" (173). David's fantasy of being accepted by Indians outside the confines of space and time, of imagining his interaction with Indians as one of familial harmony and acceptance, reflects a wider Euroamerican desire in regard to Indians.

As Watson suggests, by imagining Indians as "family"—best exemplified by the holiday of Thanksgiving—Euroamericans mystify the material reality of Anglo/ Native history, preserving a peaceful utopian image of white/Indian interaction in the national story. Marie's place as a supposed family member masked the material conditions of her existence—in fact, David knew and still knows little about her. David was and is still much more interested in imagining Marie as a member of *his* family than as someone who has her own desires and history. He does not reflect on the reasons why Marie "chose" to be the Hayden's housemaid. David, in fact, never even hints at the conditions on the reservation that caused Marie to need the job. Moreover, David's ideas about Marie and Ronnie's culture are decidedly trite. Despite Marie and Ronnie's physical proximity to him, David's cultural distance from them is underscored by the fact that he imagines that their ball-game "had its origin in...Indian heritage," but that he could not know with "certainty." The

ambiguity of his sentiment reflects Watson's awareness of the gap between Euroamerican perception and fantasy about Natives and the reality of their cultures. David's pathetic reflection on his boyhood fantasies of familial harmony between himself and Marie—a fantasy he clearly still cherishes as an adult—represents his frustration with the fact that Frank destroyed his “innocence,” an innocence that he wants to restore through the telling of his past.

David's sexual fantasies about Marie are also part of his desire to recuperate his—and for Watson, metaphorically, the nation's—supposed innocence, and echo long-held Euroamerican male erotic fantasies central to the imagining of America which configures Native women as “Markers of Empire” (McClintock 24). Perhaps the most (in)famous example of this Native woman is Pocohantas. In the Pocohantas myth, not only does the white colonial male desire the Indian woman, but Pocohantas also very much desires the white male, evidenced by the fact that she saves John Smith from being beheaded by her father Powhatan.⁸ The implication of this imagery is intimately tied to the process and rationalization of colonialism itself; the myth of Pocahontas helps to reinforce a notion that Native women—and by extension the continent—willingly gave themselves over to white males. As a result of this trope, colonial conquest was elided by an innocuous romantic image of an innocent reciprocation of desire. In regard to Marie in particular, David explains that she

was close to six feet tall and though she wasn't exactly fat she had a fleshy amplitude about her that made her seem simultaneously soft and strong, as if all that body could be ready, at a moment's notice, for sex.... She had a wide pretty face and cheekbones so high, full, and glossy I often wondered if they were naturally like that or if they were puffy and swollen. Her hair was black and long and straight, and she was always pulling strands of it from the corner of her mouth or parting it to clear her vision.

And I loved her.

Because she talked to me, cared for me.... Because she was not as quiet and conventional as every other adult I knew.... Because she was sexy, though my love for her was, as a twelve-year-old's love often is, chaste. (25-26)

Later, David recounts accidentally seeing Marie after she showers in the house: “I saw just enough to embarrass us both. Dark nipples that shocked me in the way they stood out like fingertips. A black triangle of pubic hair below a thick waist and gently rounded belly” (29). David's erotic perception that Marie is “ready for sex,” in one sense, seems to reflect the erotic desires typical of any twelve-year-old boy—there was nothing inherent to Marie that caused his arousal. But Watson undermines David's supposed innocence, suggesting that David's desire reflects the classic white male

fantasy of the exotic Native woman. By recounting his childhood fantasies about Marie, David hopes to mask his own colonial relationship with Marie. However, much to David's (and metaphorically Euroamerican) dismay, Frank's violence against Marie upends the Pocohantas myth of reciprocal desire, exposing the Pocohantas story for what it is: a myth that masks the reality of Euroamerican/Native history as a violent act of patriarchal power and domination on the part of Euroamerican males (see McClintock 24-28).

Watson does suggest that there is some hope for David and Euroamericans like him to see history for what it was and is. While David uncritically recalls his fantasies about Marie, he does have a limited capacity to critique his father's prejudices. He explains that when Marie became ill, Wesley mocked Marie for requesting the services of a medicine man, referring to her desires as "Indian superstition" (34). David also explains, "My father did not like Indians.... He was not a hate-filled bigot—he probably thought he was free of prejudice!—and he could treat Indians with generosity, kindness, and respect (as he could treat every human being). Nevertheless, he believed Indians, with only a few exceptions, were ignorant, lazy, superstitious, and irresponsible" (34). David recounts that earlier in his life, he received a pair of moccasins for his birthday, to which his father responded, "He wears those and soon he'll be as flat-footed and lazy as an Indian" (34). Wesley's prejudice toward Natives perpetuates the notion that they are primitive and backwards, reinforcing his feeling of superiority over them, and reflecting the progressive ideology of the conquest and colonization of the United States (see Berkhofer 44-49).

While David's critique of his father, evidenced by his remark, "he probably thought he was free of prejudice," suggests a critical awareness on his part, Watson suggests that David's sentiments are little more than a self-congratulatory piety. David completely misses the irony that his own fantasies about Marie reflect his own prejudices. Moreover, the limit of his statement is underscored by his parenthetical comment that "(Today I put on a pair of moccasins as soon as I come home from work, an obedient son's belated, small act of defiance)" (34). As Watson suggests, David's "rebellion" has less to do with a respect for Natives—a genuine recognition of prejudices against them—than a symbol of how he "thinks differently" from his father. His "small act of defiance" is a safe, selfishly motivated gesture with absolutely no consequences outside of assuaging David's guilt over his complicity in hiding his personal family history.

David's shallow liberalism is underscored in his limited critique of Ollie Young Bear, a local assimilated Native. Ollie is a product of the legacy of the Dawes Act, the goal of which was to "kill the Indian to save the man" by completely assimilating Natives to the dominant culture, with the ultimate goal of destruction of all the

tribes. From David's father's perspective, Ollie Young Bear is someone who apparently has benefited enormously from the "civilizing" process. Wesley once stated, "Ollie Young Bear was... a graduate of Montana State University in Bozeman, a deacon at First Lutheran Church, an executive with Montana-Dakota Utilities Company, the star pitcher on the Elks' fast pitch softball team.... He married Doris Strickland, a white woman whose family owned a prosperous ranch south of Bentrock" (58). As David remarks, "All of these accomplishments made Ollie the perfect choice for white people to point to as an example of what Indians *could* be. My father liked to say of Ollie Young Bear, 'He's a testimony to what hard work will get you'" (58). In Wesley's eyes, Ollie is "the 'final promise' of assimilation... the ultimate realization of the Euro-American belief in the unilinear progress of peoples from savagism to civility" (Lewis 213). In this progressive paradigm, Euroamericans were able to rationalize that their presence on North American soil was (and is) in the best interests of so-called primitive Native peoples because it gave them the opportunity to become "civilized."

Unlike his father, David is not completely comfortable with Ollie, remarking, "Because my father obviously liked and respected him—held him up, in fact, as a model—I tried to feel the same way about him. But it was difficult" (59). David also notes that Marie did not respect Ollie: "I once heard Marie say of Ollie, 'He won't be happy until he's white'" (60). David's claim that as an adolescent he had "difficulty" in perceiving Ollie as a model was no doubt influenced by Marie's perception of Ollie. But it is clear that even though he is now an adult, David has little capacity to understand just what her comment might have meant. Though a historian, David seems blissfully unaware of the larger historical and political context of Marie's statement, and his remark appears to be little more than a fashionable piety to show his awareness of identity politics. He seems completely unaware that Marie's remark was one of cultural resistance, and that her sentiment reflects the reality that Natives were not bowled over by "progressive" ideologies.

Watson also underscores the limitations of David's imagination though his depiction of David's recollection of dreams he had in the aftermath of Marie's murder. David states,

Half-asleep and half-awake, I lay in bed and thought about Indians. In my daily life in Montana, I saw Indians every day. There were Indian children in school, their mothers at the grocery store, their fathers at the filling station. Objects of the most patronizing and debilitating prejudice, the Indians in and around our community were nonetheless a largely passive and benign presence.... But that night Marie's death and too many cowboy and Indian movies combined to bring me a strange half-dreaming, half-waking vision.... (101)

In his recollection of his dream-like state David suggests that he is partly able to perceive Natives beyond Hollywood stereotypes, to potentially perceive Indians as living, breathing, human beings. As David recounts that he imagined the local Indian population taking vengeance on Marie's death, he reflects, "But in my vision, the Indians were not lined up in battle formation as they always were in the movies, that is, mounted on war ponies, streaked with war paint, bristling with feathers, and brandishing bows and arrows, lances, and tomahawks. Instead, just as I did in my daily life I saw them dressed in their jeans and cowboy boots, their cotton print dresses, or their flannel shirts" (101-102). As this passage suggests, David's perceptions of Indians have the potential to move beyond the stock Hollywood image of painted and feather-adorned Indians who exist in a 19th-century time-warp.

Watson illustrates the limits of David's imagination, however, when he depicts him wondering, "Would they ever come down from Circle Hill, rampage the streets of Bentrock, looking for her killer, taking revenge wherever they could find it?" (102). Despite his contact with "real" Indians in his everyday adolescent life, David could not quite escape the popular image of Indians as bloodthirsty, irrational killers. While they might not be decked out in full war regalia, "they" were still more than capable of reverting to their supposed primitive, sub-human, savage instincts—instincts that historically justified their extermination. Although now an adult recounting this dream, David makes no attempt to critique his dream, which suggests that he is still very much locked in his adolescent mindset. His comment that Indians were "Objects of the most patronizing and debilitating prejudice" is yet another self-congratulatory and meaningless statement, one shared to illustrate his supposedly enlightened liberalism. Moreover, his sentiments about Natives, however sympathetic, still effectively marks them as "Indian" Others.

Ironically, in the aftermath of Frank's death, David wondered, "how it could be that those two people who only wanted to do right, whose only error lay in trying to be loyal to both family and justice, were now dispossessed, the ones forced to leave Bentrock and build new lives" (169), a sentiment that once again is not critically engaged by David as an adult as he reflects on his past. That *David* feels his family was dispossessed in a story about American Indians underscores that his concern is not with Marie, per se, but with what the violence toward her has done to his life: in other words, David exonerates himself from any complicity with history and colonization by presenting himself as a victim of familial and national history. Given this self-pitying, self-absorbed statement, David ends up trivializing his care and concern for Marie or all Natives.

It is fitting that the end of the novel takes place during Thanksgiving. As Elizabeth Bird argues, “at a mythic level, [Thanksgiving] explain[s] to Whites their right to be here [in the U.S.] and help[s] deal with lingering guilt about the displacement of the Native inhabitants—after all, the ‘good’ Indians helped us out and recognized the inevitability of white conquest” (2). Moreover, the Thanksgiving myth is the U.S.’s first frontier story, a story in which the Pilgrim fathers were supposedly innocently reborn when they landed on the continent. The Thanksgiving myth of rebirth helps to gird the U.S. frontier myth, in which Euroamerica was continually reborn as it marched from East to West across the continent. During Thanksgiving dinner, David’s wife remarks to Wesley, “David told me all about what happened when you lived in Montana” (175). Wesley’s reaction is to slam “his hand down on the table” and exclaim, “Don’t blame Montana!” after which he walks out of the room (175). Through this episode, Watson ties the history of the West to the origin story of America, suggesting that the very roots of U.S. identity, the “First West” on the Eastern seaboard, and its continual rebirth as the country moved Westward, are little more than a romantic pretense. Wesley’s adamant refusal to acknowledge and confront his family’s past is emblematic of Euroamerican denial of its past, its unwillingness to relinquish its comforting myth of U.S. origins and the powerful myth of America as its “destiny” neatly unfolded from the shores of Massachusetts to be reborn again and again as the U.S. moved West.

As an historian who fails to tell his history openly and to understand fully its implications, David embodies much of how Euroamerica imagines U.S. national identity. Watson suggests that like David’s unwillingness to openly confront history and the reality of the U.S.’s ongoing colonial relationship with Natives, many Euroamericans are reluctant to confront this colonial reality. To confront this reality, at least in most Euroamerican eyes, would be too painful, too messy, too uncomfortable. As the deputy-sheriff Len told Wesley, if Frank’s actions were to become public, “This county is going to get split three ways by this. Some will stand by you. Not many. There’s the reservation. The Indians in town. Your pa. And he’ll call in every marker he can. This county is going to get torn up over this. This will make Mercer County look like the Indian wars and the range wars combined. We’ll be a long time coming back from this” (145). But as the very existence of Watson novel attests, the story must continue to be told by Euroamericans if they are going to unmask their false narrative of self and morally face the past and present in regard to their relationship with Native peoples. While any Euroamerican retelling of this history risks (mis)representating Native peoples, Watson underscores that Euroamerican storytellers must continue to find ways to re-represent Natives in order to re-represent

themselves and reveal their own historical and contemporary colonial relationship to Natives. Certainly Watson's novel—unlike other contemporary works—is a testament to the ability of Anglo writers to critique Euroamerican/Native history without falling into the trap of mystifying this history or (mis)representing Natives. ✱

Notes

¹Two classic examples are Child's *Hobomok* and Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, both of which sentimentalize the Indian, turning "him" into the tragic, vanishing Indian, and both novels rationalize the disappearance of Natives either culturally or materially, or both.

²Richard Slotkin writes, "Indians are still cast as the cultural/racial 'Other,' the antithesis of modern civilization; and their cultures are still represented as doomed to destruction by the inexorable advance of modernity which Indians could never have achieved by their own efforts and to which they were incapable of adjusting" (631-632).

³In addition to Prats' analysis of all three movies, see Edgarton on *Last of the Mohicans* (esp. 7-16). On *Dances with Wolves*, see the "Introduction" to Huhndorf's *Going Native* (esp. 1-5).

⁴In her article "Barbara Kingsolver's Cherokee Nation: Problems of Representation in *Pigs in Heaven*," Kathleen Godfrey acknowledges that while Kingsolver's 1993 novel evidences "sympathy for Native Americans and even outrage at the continuing difficulties they face," it makes the inadvertent mistake of engaging in "authorial and rhetorical practices which commodify, ritualize, and idealize the Cherokee" (259). As a result, "the novel unintentionally demonstrates how entrenched oppressive practices are in the U.S. psyche and in its power structures" (259).

⁵See for instance Deloria's *Playing Indian* and Bird's *Dressing in Feathers*.

⁶Mark Eifler has pointed out that as a Western novel, *Montana 1948* echoes the work of New West historians by challenging the conventions of Turner's classic frontier thesis and the mythic West, instead suggesting a dark underside to the West. While Eifler recognizes that the novel suggests the "legacy of conquest...is still very much alive" (9).

⁷Specifically, "The term 'Indian Country,' as used in this chapter [of the legal code], means (a) all land within the limits of any Indian reservation under the jurisdiction of the United States Government, notwithstanding the issuance of any patent and, including rights-of-way running through the reservation, (b) all dependent Indian communities within the borders of the United States whether within the original or subsequently acquired territory thereof, and whether within or without the limits of a state, and (c) all Indian allotments, the Indian titles to which have not been extinguished, including rights-of-way running through the same" (Prucha 233).

⁸Historically, Pocohantas married John Rolfe, which served only to further colonial ambitions in its symbolic import. See in particular Richter's *Facing East from Indian Country* for an overview of the Pocahantas myth verse historical reality (69-78). See also Faery for an overview of the myth as rationalization for conquest (87-130).

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