"Young America" and the Anti-Emersonian Western: John Williams's *Butcher's Crossing*

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In October 1870 Bret Harte published a review of Ralph Waldo Emerson's latest essay collection *Society and Solitude* in *Overland Monthly*, the lively new San Francisco-based literary magazine already being lauded in the East for its "Far Western flavor" and "Pacific freshness" (qtd. in Tarnoff 159). Overall, Harte was content to defer to the celebrated "Sage of Concord," effectively using the occasion to endorse the idea of Emerson as an authentically national figure wholly worthy of the cultural esteem bestowed upon him by his fellow American citizens. "There remains to Mr. Emerson, we think," the piece concludes, "the praise of doing more than any other American thinker to voice the best philosophic conclusions of American life and experience" (387).

Harte's forerunning judgement nonetheless sounded a few more equivocal notes. Notably, given his own relatively recent success producing fiction depicting the pioneer mining communities of California, Harte took issue with Emerson's portrayal of the American West.[1] This was presented in the "Civilization" chapter of *Society and Solitude* where the region is interpreted as a benign domain in which powerful forces of culture and intellect fuse spectacularly with equally formidable currents associated with nature and will. It is in the crucible of this dynamic, Emerson proposes, in typically unrestrained fashion, that a new and substantive national character will be forged:

> 'Tis wonderful how soon a piano gets into a log-hut on the frontier. You would think they found it under a pine-stump. With it comes a Latin grammar, and one of those tow-head boys has written a hymn on Sunday. Now let colleges, now let senates take heed! for here is one, who, opening these fine tastes on the basis of the pioneer's iron constitution, will gather all their laurels in his strong hands. (10)

As admiring as he was of Emerson, such Eastern exuberance proved too much for the adopted Westerner Harte.[2] This was not the West of hard, empirical observation, he lamented, but a fantasy abstracted from the "moral consciousness" of the philosopher. Any extended experience with the region, Harte wrote, would reveal that "the piano appears first in the saloon and gambling-house . . . [and] . . . that the elegancies and refinements of civilization are brought into barbarism with the first

civilized idlers, who are generally vicious" (386). The young frontiersman Emerson invests with such potential is far more likely to "be found holding out against pianos and Latin grammars until he is obliged to emigrate" (386). Harte concludes with the claim that there is something deeply resistant to such idealist modes of projection within the culture of the West. The nature-civilization dialectic posited by the Transcendentalist is almost comically misconceived in its detachment from the lived experience of the region:

> Romance like this would undoubtedly provoke the applause of lyceum-halls in the wild fastnesses of Roxbury (Mass.), or on the savage frontiers of Brooklyn (N.Y.), but a philosopher ought to know that, usually, only civilization begets civilization, and that the pioneer is apt to be always the pioneer. (386)

As Kris Fresonke has detailed, the bearing of Emerson's projections goes beyond conventional scholarly understandings of American Transcendentalism that geographically limit its conception of Nature to long settled, tranquil New England locales. Emerson should be read, rather, more attentively as a seer-poet of the Louisiana Purchase and US-Mexican War annexations. His thought is inspired by exploration narratives as well as both infused and critically engaged with the secular-political expression given to the idea of "design" in Nature transmitted via "manifest destiny" ideology. Fresonke notes that the nineteenth-century West, not least in the incipient federal state's and cultural producers' relentless efforts to map, navigate, and reconfigure its contours, presented an "epistemological problem" to which thinkers such as Emerson sought to provide a metaphysical solution. Once "idealized into a matter of spirit," however, they found that "nature itself, especially in the American West, didn't so easily renounce its materiality" (126).

Harte's barbed rebuttal to Emerson's post-Puritan, providential image of a West in harmony with the forces of "civilization"--theologically and politically mediated via concepts of "design" and "destiny"--foreshadows Fresonke's revisionist literary history.[3] From the journals of Lewis and Clark to Emerson's western image-making and on to other self-consciously nature and nation-defining texts such as Mark Twain's *Roughing It* (1872) and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), it is during what Fresonke terms "the mysterious jaunt eastwards" that the "West" leaves its impress on "Eastern" authors (155). It does so by arming them with fresh metaphors and frames of reference that help define and re-define the latter as much as the former domain. The intensely eastward bearing of Governor Nye's railroad survey vision described by Twain alongside the respective

transatlantic and East Egg gazes of the mid-westerners Nick Carraway and Jay Gatsby are signal points in this "secret theme in American literature" (155). Each of these figures couldn't help but dilute the "spirit" of the West with a heavy dose of its materiality in the form of emphatically non-natural phenomena--time-collapsing travel and a maniacal ethos of consumption--that serve to erase geographical distinctions altogether.

John Williams's novel *Butcher's Crossing* (1960) brings these conventionally subtextual Emersonian elements closer to the surface. Even more unusually, its basic spatial-temporal parameters conform to the Western genre proper, its occasion, setting, and moment being a buffalo hunt that follows the Smoky Hill Trail through the Western Kansas stretches of the Great Plains to an isolated Rocky Mountains valley in the early 1870s. *Butcher's Crossing*, as will be demonstrated, offers a sophisticated philosophical rebuke to Emersonian idealism in this context that is rooted in ~~both~~ a materialist analysis of socio-economic conditions.[4] Yet Williams, while highly responsive to the class dynamics of the novel's time and place, refuses to settle on any easily discernible political prescriptions; instead, the novel's steady focus on various geographies of the West as best defined by, in Wallace Stegner's terms, "aridity, and aridity alone" (8), ultimately results in the kind of nihilism Stephanie LeMenager has identified in the nineteenth-century literature of the Great Plains. "The Great Plains," LeManager writes, "by their arid and treeless nature undermined rhetorics of Manifest Destiny and unique 'racial gifts,' raising the possibility that what looked like inevitable national progress across the continent might, in fact, end nowhere, in a landscape that resisted both agrarian settlement and white bodies" (16).

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The central figure of *Butcher's Crossing* is Will Andrews, a Bostonian in his early twenties who, inspired by the anti-institutional impulses that underpin Emerson's philosophy, is "driven from Harvard College . . . and thrust . . . into this strange world where he felt unaccountably at home" (45). Like his intellectual hero, Andrews seeks, and initially at least, would seem to find, a self immediately authenticated in Nature. Andrews's reflections on his own motives prompt him to recall earlier flights from Boston's King's Chapel and Harvard classrooms in a way that demonstrates the symbiotic character of "Eastern" and "Western" conceptions of Nature:

> Sometimes after listening to the droning voices in the chapel and in the classrooms, he had fled the confines of Cambridge to the fields and woods that lay southwestward to it. There in some small solitude, standing on bare ground, he felt his head bathed by the clean air and uplifted into infinite space; the meanness and the constriction he had felt were

> dissipated in the wildness about him. A phrase from a lecture by Mr. Emerson that he had attended came to him: I become a transparent eyeball. Gathered in by field and wood, he was nothing; he saw all; the current of some nameless force circulated through him . . . he was a part and parcel of God, free and uncontained. Through the trees and across the rolling landscape, he had been able to see a hint of the distant horizon to the west; and there, for an instant, he had beheld somewhat as beautiful as his own undiscovered nature.(45-46)

On arriving in Butcher's Crossing, a tiny frontier settlement built around the emerging market for buffalo hides, the young Bostonian is dispirited by the religious rantings of old-timer Charley Hoge in the town's sole saloon. In the degree of alienation it generates, at least, Hoge's evangelicalism only serves to remind him of dull Unitarian sermons. Andrews soon finds himself seeking communion elsewhere, away from more conventional sites of congregation, as he begins traversing the "flat prairie . . . as if seeking a chapel more to his liking than King's or Jackson's Saloon" (46). Andrews's capacity for Emersonian projection of the type lampooned by Harte is also clearly a philosophical target within Williams's sights. In a 1985 interview the author would reflect on his motivations for writing the novel, noting that on arriving back at Denver University in 1954, after receiving a PhD from the University of Missouri, he had become more interested in the West and its history.[5] This interest grew in part out of conversations with the publisher-academic Alan Swallow whose tiny, one-man publishing house had previously issued Williams's first novel *Nothing but the Night* (1948). As Williams recollected:

> We used to talk a lot. We used to talk about some of the differences between the West and the East and the Far West. And we talked a lot about special problems of the West--literary as well as social, economic, whatever. Somewhere along the line, I became interested in the *relationship* between the East and the West. Because before Easterners came here, the West wasn't anything. Eastern influences trickled into the West and changed the character of the region. And the novel developed from my notions of what would happen if the Emersonian ideas that were in vogue in the East in the late nineteenth century were put to some kind of test in the *real* kind of nature that the Easterners were so romantic about. (Woolley 16)

Williams's desire to critique the Emersonian impulse in this way was, however, more complex and multi-layered than these casual remarks suggest. On one level Williams offers a familiar empirically oriented rejection of a

cosseted, over-valorised intellectual tradition devoted to a misguided, Idealist conceptualisation of nature: "I wanted to show," he claims, "the relationship between the Eastern *idea* of nature and the Western *experience* of nature" (16). Furthermore, reacting to the interviewer's observation that "nature" in Thoreau's Concord was a "pretty tame thing," Williams's response recalls that of Harte's caustic account of the "wild fastnesses" of Massachusetts: "God, it was tame! You look at Walden Pond. Within a mile or two, there was a railroad. And Thoreau used to go into town nearly every weekend to get a home-cooked meal" (16).[6]

Matters might be said to have been complicated for Williams nonetheless by the limitations imposed upon him by the formal conventions of the Western. How might a novelistic critique be formulated given the considerable extent to which, as Jane Tompkins has noted, the genre's profoundly masculinised moral-cultural codes betray an intrinsic "distrust [of] language" (49). It should be recalled that Tompkins, nonetheless, is more inclined to see this as a consequence of frontier conditions that reproduce cultural deprivation and class antagonism in conjunction with patriarchal structures:

> For the men who are the Western's heroes don't have the large vocabularies an expensive education can buy. They don't have time to read that many books. Westerns distrust language in part because language tends to be wielded most skilfully by people who possess a certain kind of power: class privilege, political clout, financial strength. (50-51)

In *Butcher's Crossing* Williams moves the genre towards a much more direct and robust engagement with Tompkins's theory of frontier language as socio-economically structured. Will Andrews is depicted as quickly internalising the masculine code of verbal restraint in order to smooth and expedite his entry into the hunter fraternity. Williams also foregrounds the links between low literacy levels, taciturnity, and class tensions identified by Tompkins in the first exchange between Andrews and Miller. The latter, perhaps fancifully, claims to have learned to read over the course of a winter, having been "snowed in a trapper's shack in Colorado" (31). After claiming that he can write his name on paper, Miller then caustically asks: "What do you think you can learn from me?" Andrews's response, notwithstanding his efforts to "suppress . . . a tone of annoyance," is too elaborate for Miller: "You sure talk easy, son. You do, for a fact. That what you learn to do at Harvard College?" (31)

Lengthy periods of silence broken by snatches of dialogue oriented towards the instrumental demands of the enterprise are key tonal signifiers of the buffalo hunt depicted in *Butcher's Crossing*. Far from evidencing

communion with nature, the hunters are shown to be wholly at its mercy. A mood of disquiet steadily intensifies as Miller struggles to locate a water source and, subsequently, to rediscover the trail that once led him to the discovery of herds of buffalo, unknown to other hunters, hidden away in a paradisiacal valley deep in the Colorado Rockies. Fred Schneider, a sceptical skinner hired for a pre-arranged fee, is the only member of the party prepared to openly challenge Miller's competence but he only does so infrequently. Verbal uncommunicativeness, more generally, characterises the relationships between the men: they break camp "silently" (110); ride in "silence" (108); and commonly respond to comments from each other with puzzled or amused looks but "say nothing" (207). Nature here is the quiet, impassive source of the menace that fuels this reticence. The characters' "unspeakable" experience of frontier hubris--as "tiny chips blown upon the frozen surface of a great sea" (77)--serves as a stark counterpoint to the vision of nature, prolix and transcendent by comparison, that Emerson delivers in the lyceum hall.

Comment [M1]: Au: I'm only seeing "silently" on p. 108?

Comment [AH2]: Change to "they ride 'silently' (108)"?

That nature's silence can provoke as much as pacify and that the imperatives of an industrial market economy have fundamentally transformed nature's relationship with civilization, is rendered most vividly in the description of the party once the valley is reached and the slaughter commences: "And during the day, as they sweated and hacked and pulled in a desperate effort to keep up with Miller, they could hear the sound of his rifle steadily and monotonously and insistently pounding at the silence, and pounding at their nerves until they were raw and bruised" (159). It is at this point that the novel's chief themes tighten and the Emersonian ideas posited at the outset begin to come under sustained pressure. Williams is unrelenting in his depiction of the slaughter, its environmental implications and its relationship to an expanding, national post-bellum capitalist economy.

Williams consulted a range of sources in order to properly support and contextualize his story: from the images produced by the late nineteenth-century Great Plains photographer L.T. Huffmann to the Rocky Mountain surveys of mid-nineteenth century geologist F.V. Hayden to the historical studies such as Everett Dick's *Vanguards of the Frontier* (1941) and Mari Sandoz's *The Buffalo Hunters: The Story of the Hide Men* (1954).[7] An early section of *Butcher's Crossing*, for example, speaks subtly but tellingly to the devastating impact of commercial buffalo hunting on the Native American tribes of the region. Chancing upon a few scattered bones and a single carcass that point to a "small kill" undertaken within the last two years, Miller, in a rare moment of articulated reflection, contrasts the scene with the abundance of only a few years earlier: "There

was a time, in the days of the big kills, when you could look a mile in any direction and see the bones piled up. Five, six years ago, we'd have been riding through bones from Pawnee Fork clean to the end of the Smoky Hill. This is what the Kansas hunt has come to" (81). He then goes on to explain to Andrews the immense resourcefulness of Indian hunters, describing how they could transform the single hind leg bone he holds not only into knives, combs, bows and arrowheads, but also into non-utilitarian items of cultural significance such as necklaces and toys.

Miller is then described as swinging the bone "as if it were a club"--a symbolic reference to the subjugation of the plains Indians alluded to more directly in an episode that follows soon after. In a fleeting encounter with a small cluster of Indians the party finds a cowed and environmentally bereft people. Silent and unresponsive to a gesture of acknowledgement from Miller, they inhabit "crude dugouts" on "flat hard earth," the men appearing "old and wizened," the women "shapeless in the blankets they held about them despite the heat," the children "look[ing] . . . with dark, liquid eyes" (85). The episode constitutes the first and final appearance of Native peoples in the novel and closes as follows: "'River Indians,' Miller said contemptuously. 'They live on catfish and jack rabbits. They ain't worth shooting anymore'" (85).[8]

On the party's arrival in the valley, Miller's belief in the existence of vast herds of buffalo with winter skins primed for Eastern states' robe markets is vindicated. The team soon embark upon a relentless process of butchery with Miller shooting buffalo faster than Andrews and Schneider can skin them. Miller's relentlessness, furthermore, defies logic, economic or otherwise, and instead, in what is surely a gesture to the auto-destructive cast of mind famously embodied in Melville's Ahab, speaks to the primal and ineffable:

> During the last hour of the stand he came to see Miller as a mechanism, an automaton, moved by the moving herd; and he came to see Miller's destruction of the buffalo, not as a lust for blood or a lust for the hides or a lust for what the hides would bring, or even at last the blind lust of fury that toiled darkly within him--he came to see the destruction as a cold, mindless response to the life in which Miller had immersed himself. (137)

As winter closes in and the party are threatened with entrapment in the valley once the snows begin to fall, Miller refuses to leave until the buffalo are exterminated to the very last animal. Consequently, the men are forced to entomb themselves in makeshift hide shelters for three nights in order to survive a storm. They then must wait for the snow that blocks the

mountain pass to thaw, estranged, like Ahab in the presence of Moby Dick, by a malign, inscrutable whiteness "which bore no mark of anything save itself"; the formerly familiar valley to Andrews has now become "suddenly strange . . . so strange that he could hardly believe that he had looked upon it before" (184).[9] The silence refuses to lift within the party even when, months later, they are eventually able to make their way back East, leaving behind them hundreds of "wasting corpses" (210). Towards the end of the long mountain descent a mishap during a river crossing leads to the death of Schneider and the loss of numerous hides. The section closes with Andrews sighting Schneider's hat on the opposite bank of the traversed river. "We ought not to leave it there," he says, in a flicker of sentiment, before Miller reminds him that the approaching night demands that no time be wasted (226).

By this stage it is all too apparent that Western "experience" has trumped Emersonian "idea," Williams unremittingly exposing the limits of Andrews's Transcendentalist fantasy of the West. Yet this element of Williams's critique is less sophisticated in the end than a substratum of *Butcher's Crossing* that would seem to engage with Emersonian ideas on an altogether deeper, structural and, more conspicuously materialist level. It's important to bear in mind the fact that Emerson's pre-Civil war philosophy was both complexly symptomatic of and appropriated by the sweeping romantic nationalism of the era of the Texas and Mexican war annexations. At an ideological level this was most evident in the "Young America" movement of the 1840s and 1850s. Headed by a youthful cohort of energetic politicians and opinion-formers, the "Young America" movement effectively sought to modernize the Democratic Party by making it more responsive to the market revolution and, especially, the roles of transport and communications technology, free trade, immigration, mass democracy and western expansion in its furtherance. Emerson's 1844 lecture "The Young American" can be interpreted as tentatively harnessing a broader philosophical vision to this political agenda. Delivering his address before a young audience of the Mercantile Library Association in Boston, Emerson spoke positively of Irish immigrants in New England working on railroads that facilitated "increased acquaintance [to] . . . the American people with the boundless resources of their own soil" (225-26). In addition, the speech bore similar ideological freight to that carried along the railroads in the form of "manifest destiny," or what Emerson described with reference to the impact of a "nervous, rocky West . . . intruding a new and continental element into the national mind" (229). Before the young American, he claimed, stands a "great continent" that serves to bring both

its new and its established citizen-inhabitants more readily "into just relations with men and things" (226).

Emerson was a decade older than most of the adherents of Young America and, partly for this reason but also as a result of some of his own more conservative political reservations about "modernization," he was not drawn into open alliance with the movement. After visiting New York City in 1843, and meeting Young America acolyte and ideologue-in-chief of "manifest destiny" John L. O'Sullivan, he would write: "Since I have been here in N.Y. I have grown less diffident in my political opinions. I supposed once the Democracy might be right. I see that they are aimless[.] Whigs have the best men, Democrats the best cause. But the last are destructive, not constructive. What hope, what end have they?" (*Journals* 314).[10] There is no little irony in the troubled nature of these private reflections given the intellectual influence of Emersonian thought on Young America. As historian of the movement Yonatan Eyal has written with respect to Emerson's essay "The Young American": "The most nationalistic piece of writing in Emerson's repertoire . . . inaugurated the career of a political group that moved far from the sage's intentions" (5). Edward Widmer, in a similar fashion, concludes that while there is no evidence of direct influence "in effect [Emerson and the Young Americans] were soldiers in the same nationalistic campaign" (28).

The heedlessness that Emerson identified--personified in the later career of Young America Democrat Stephen A. Douglas, arguably the most significant politician of the 1850s--would be much in evidence when the movement catastrophically ran aground on the question of slavery's status in the western territories.[11] What would later become the state of Kansas was also the very territorial sphere in which the moral basis of this expansion, with much attendant violence, would come into question in the years immediately following the Douglas-sponsored Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854).[12] This did not mean, however, that the Civil War resulted in the dissolution of these ideas. Reunion and the abolition of slavery in 1865 would only accelerate the process of western settlement of which commercial buffalo hunting can be seen as both symptom and cause. On the cusp of the war itself Abraham Lincoln would speak, in as much a spirit of tribute as of caution, of Young America as "the *current* youth of the age" before asking: "Is he not the inventor and owner of the *present*," and, most revealingly, "sole hope of the *future*?" (3). Lincoln went on to distinguish the "apparel" of this dynamic figure as comprising the manufactured bounty of national and international trade and industry: "cotton fabrics from Manchester and Lowell; flax-linen from Ireland; wool-cloth from Spain; silk from France; furs from the Arctic regions, with a buffalo-robe from the

Rocky Mountains" (3). Such affirmative rhetoric, and the more local significance of the list's final item, was indicative of the post-bellum political and economic order that would emerge under the new party Lincoln would lead into the election of 1860. As Eyal also notes, there was, without question, "consonance between the outlook of the early Republican Party (particularly its emphasis on economic nationalism) and the late antebellum Democracy" (233).

In this respect it is crucial to bear in mind that Williams does not send Will Andrews on his unforgiving journey across the Great Plains bearing rudimentary Transcendentalist ideas unaided. Andrews also wields enough money to fund the undertaking alongside social capital in the form of a contact, J.D. McDonald, a former congregant of his father's Unitarian church in Boston turned hide trader. A "querulous, distracted" figure based on the edge of the settlement, McDonald claims to have attended Benjamin Andrews's sermons only "to meet somebody who would give [him] a better job" (17-18). McDonald, like many others of his ilk, has moved west in stages. Despite climbing to a higher rung on the buffalo industry ladder than Miller, he represents only a slightly more genteel and self-deluding variant of the restless, destructive character Williams ties to the market-driven and imperial nature of western expansion. McDonald, who does his own "curing and tanning" on the site and who alone has bought and treated nearly a hundred thousand hides over the course of a single year, initially offers Andrews "paper work" (19). He is subsequently astonished to learn of the youngster's intentions to join a hunting party, warning him, in a clear act of class interpellation, against identifying with the morality, methods and mores of buffalo hunters. Only civilised Eastern men such as themselves, he proclaims, can provide the necessary disciplinary economic and social counterweight to such "trash" (22): "'Hunters,' McDonald said. His dry thin lips went loose and open as if he had tasted something rotten. 'All hunters and hard cases. That's what this country would be if it wasn't for men like us. People just living off the land, not knowing what to do with it'" (20). McDonald's image of hunters as savages from a pre-industrial age also clearly echoes the disdainful account of the region's dispossessed Native Americans as nomadic foragers proffered earlier by Miller.

McDonald's contempt for the "hard case" masses is shown, furthermore, to be intimately tied to his commitment to speculative capital investment in land premised on future railroad construction. While the rhetoric is redolent of dynamic Young America futurism--"men with vision" (20) generating wealth from the continent's natural resources--Williams is equally keen to expose underlying forces that demonstrate the full effects

of McDonald's class hatred. The economics of westward development, as represented by McDonald, is underwritten by established capital investors of Eastern origin. The opaque, elite-oriented basis of such transactions, moreover, would appear to be at odds with popular political as well as economic understandings of American democracy. Confiding to Andrews in the way that he does, McDonald makes it all too clear that, far from being generated via the arduous business of securing and treating buffalo hides, serious wealth accrues from parasitical and often clandestine forms of economic activity among and within elite networks:

> "Keep this to yourself--but this town's going to be something two, three years from now. I've got a half dozen lots staked out already, and the next time I get to Kansas City, I'm going to stake out that many more. It's wide open!" He shook Andrews's arm as if it were a stick; he lowered his voice, which had grown strident. "Look boy. It's the railroad. Don't go talking this around; but when the railroad comes through here, this is going to be a *town*. You come in with me; I'll steer you right. Anybody can stake out a claim for the land around here; all you have to do is sign your name to a piece of paper at the State Land Office. Then you sit back and wait. That's all." (20)

"Anybody can stake out a claim," that is, if they can render intelligible the document that validates that claim and are privy to the kinds of information that make for sound investment. Yet, by the end of the novel, it becomes clear that it would be a mistake to perceive Williams's intent as showcasing tough-minded, materialistic Eastern interests putting under-educated frontier dupes alongside its own tender-minded idealists to the sword. As we have seen, as much as anything else, the tangle of Emersonian individualism in the ideological thicket of the era precludes such assertions. Instead, in the final sections of the novel Williams shows how the volatility of financial markets in the early post-Civil War period makes victims of all the characters in the novel--McDonald very much included. When the three remaining members of the party return to Butcher's Crossing they are confronted with a socio-economic landscape that has been utterly transformed by the collapse of prices in the buffalo robe market. Williams may seem to be drawing here on the panic of 1873 caused, in no small part, by a "bubble" in railroad investment that led to a full-scale economic Depression. The ramifications extended to every sector of the economy, buffalo hides included, though, interestingly, the text makes no direct allusion to this specific crisis with its origins in banking and finance. Rather, when McDonald explains the collapse in prices to Miller he

does so with reference to "endemic" factors, that is, the built-in periodic tendency of capitalism towards "overproduction" famously anatomised by Karl Marx. Capitalist "crisis," in this schema, is more rule than exception.

The tendency towards overproduction is a product of the limited consumer power of the working class--a dimension which is obviously more pronounced in markets for fashionable premium commodities such as buffalo robes. Initial demand for such products produces high profit-margins which invite over-investment. Williams ironically points to the erratic dimension in these market sectors whilst, at the same time, providing a potent, overarching metaphor for the novel as a whole. In typically crisp fashion, the hide business is conveyed as "rotten" to its core (product):

> "You remember what happened to beaver?" McDonald asked. "You trapped beaver once, didn't you? When they stopped wearing beaver hats you couldn't give the skins away. Well, it looks like everybody that wants one has a buffalo robe; and nobody wants any more. Why they wanted them in the first place, I don't know; you never can really get the stink out of them." (247)

A mid-level investor such as McDonald then, turns out to be just as vulnerable to the whims of commodity markets as the hunters he contracts and condescends to. Indeed, McDonald is more deeply embroiled in developments as a result of a misplaced belief in his own superior investment expertise. As an "Easterner" transplanted to the fringes of the expanding nation-state, McDonald now realizes that he himself can now be considered as an exploited "Westerner," cut adrift from the new channels of economic power operating at increasingly abstract national and international levels via complex banking and financial mechanisms. When Miller marvels at the speed of the collapse over the course of a single year, the response he receives is instructive, being both rueful in relation to such channels yet couched in the colloquial language of the frontier everyman: "McDonald shrugged. 'It was coming. If I'd been back east, I would have knowed it'" (247).

McDonald's "exposure" to these impersonal economic elements can be said to mirror that experienced by Miller's hunting party at the hands of natural elements over the course of their snowed-in winter. Far from the new circuits of economic power, McDonald has also discovered his land purchases to have become grossly de-valued as a result of remotely taken decisions that result in railroad tracks being laid fifty miles north of the settlement. Again, the chronology of Williams's novel corresponds with socio-economic developments of the period, the Kansas-Pacific railroad being constructed through the western part of the state at this time.

McDonald goes on to add, in a sardonic twist that sharply conveys the cruelly unforeseeable reach and consequences of the new economy: "You want to hear a funny thing? The hunters are selling buffalo meat to the railroad company--and they're letting the hides lay where they skin them, to rot in the sun" (248). It is the evacuation of *these* plains of abstraction, that bring material forces to bear on "nature," from Emerson's thought that *Butcher's Crossing* is, finally, most keen to take issue with.

Unsurprisingly, this news enrages Miller who, notwithstanding his own connected fate as the owner of thousands of worthless hides, takes a certain grim satisfaction in McDonald's ruin. At this stage Williams's novel intensifies these thematic aspects with "ruination" assuming the role of dominant metaphor before being supplanted by even stronger tropes. Miller angrily denounces McDonald as a parasite who "sit[s] back" while men like him "work [their] guts out" only to "ruin" everyone (248). McDonald's riposte takes aim at his accuser's headstrong brand of frontier individualism, claiming it to be just as parasitical and "ruinous":

> "Me ruin you?" McDonald laughed. "You ruin yourself, you and your kind. Every day of your life, everything you do. Nobody can tell *you* what to do. No. You go your own way, stinking the land up with what you kill. You flood the market with hides and ruin the market, and then you come crying to me that I've ruined you." (248-49)

The subjection of natural resources and the environment to industry-related processes of degradation and waste emerges as a stronger theme as the novel progresses. *Butcher's Crossing* makes reference to the gathering of buffalo bones for industrial processing as fertilizer as a kind of last-gasp option for the desperate "dirt farmer" (81) and nods towards future applications "in four or five years . . . [when] prime hides will be just about as good as easy summer skins" (247). Indeed, as a developed and patently prioritised theme, it might be said to find expression here to an extent matched by the type of environmentally oriented historiography that would only appear much later.[13] The novel's dramatization of destruction on the plains on an industrial scale may also have struck a chord with Williams's agent, Marie Rodell, who counted the environmentalist writer Rachel Carson among her clients. Carson was consulting regularly with Rodell in the late 1950s on the project that would materialize as *Silent Spring* (1962), a ground-breaking exposé of a later phase of ecological defilement caused by the mid-twentieth century pesticide industry.[14]

If *Butcher's Crossing* can be said to explore the tension between (Emersonian) idealist and materialist understandings of nature it does so via mediating ideas that come close to being expressions of "nihilism."

Foregrounding the immensely destructive potential of such "ideologies of nature" in the context of a modern industrial capitalist economy, these mediating ideas would also seem to suggest an authorial position of sorts.[15] It is J.D. McDonald who acts a kind of despairing Dostoyevskyan mouthpiece for this position. He takes exception not only to Andrews's Transcendentalist Idealism but, perhaps more surprisingly, also to empirical truth-claims, that is, the view that "experience" offers any kind of meaningful alternative. Experience, like the owl of Minerva in Hegel's philosophy of history, takes flight at dusk, long after we are in a position to apply any insight or wisdom we might derive from it. Instead, what remains is the self in a "naked world"[16] stripped of the "lies"--whether premised on ideas or experience--we fabricate to give it meaning:

> "Young people," McDonald said contemptuously. "You always think there's something to find out."
>
> "Yes, sir," Andrews said.
>
> "Well, there's nothing," McDonald said. "You get born, and you nurse on lies, and you get weaned on lies, and you learn fancier lies in school. You live all your life on lies, and then maybe when you're ready to die, it comes to you--that there's nothing, nothing but yourself and what you could have done. Only you ain't done it, because the lies told you there was something else. Then you know you could of had the world, because you're the only one that knows the secret; only then it's too late. You're too old." (250)

The theme of environmental catastrophe reaches its peak in a powerful, culminating episode during which Miller sets fire to McDonald's surplus product in a "holocaust of the hides" (272). Witnessed by the townspeople and the novel's main protagonists, Miller's conflagration symbolises not merely moral but also--given Williams's thematic concerns and choice of vocabulary--civilizational collapse. Miller cuts a dark, diabolical figure as he puts McDonald's business to the torch, his "face . . . streaked with soot" and a "long red welt . . . beginning to form into a blister . . . across his forehead" (268-69). The pathos of McDonald's response when Andrews reminds him that the hides are worthless reveals the rudderless quality of a mindlessly acquisitive culture: "'It's not that,' McDonald said quietly. 'It's not that they were worth anything. But they were mine'" (268). Developing this line further Williams goes on to make clear the tragic nature of the men's predicament. While they may sense the inter-connected nature of their plights the insularity engendered by their environment leaves them ill-equipped to articulate the meaning of events:

"We have something to say to each other, Andrews thought dimly, but we don't know what it is; we have something we ought to say" (269).

John Williams's own personal experience during World War II as a USAF radio operator stationed in Sookerating, India near the Tibetan border in the China-Burma-India theatre meant that the conflict impressed on his own artistic consciousness a strong sense of moral ruination and civilizational collapse.[17] "The values of the whole civilized world," he claimed when appraising the enormity of the conflict, "have somehow been put askew by World War II" (Woolley 25). The final pages of *Butcher's Crossing* give voice to this sense of fragility and emptiness. Andrews, heading out of the settlement, observes to either side of him the sad residue of the settlement he arrived at less than a year earlier:

> Soon there would be nothing here; the timbered buildings would be torn down for what material could be salvaged, the sod huts would wash away in the weather, and the prairie grass would slowly creep up on the roadway. Even now, in the light of the early sun, the town was like a small ruin; the light caught upon the edges of the buildings and intensified a bareness that was already there. (273)

The above passage would appear to portend defeat and perhaps a chastened return East for Andrews who has also just left money for Francine, a prostitute whom he takes up with at either end of the expedition though the relationship is sexually consummated only on his return. Before leaving he steals a final look at her "young, aging" face (273). Williams would also seem to be organizing these closing set-pieces to signal a familiar "end of innocence" coda, the Emerson-inspired youth expelled from the territories with his philosophical tail between his legs. Yet this is not quite the case as the novel's concluding passages make clear. After heading out of Butcher's Crossing, Williams has Andrews ride past the "still smoldering ruins of McDonald's shack" and re-trace the first stages of the hunting party's outward journey. He turns around to "see . . . a thin edge of sun flame . . . above the eastern horizon" (273), establishing conclusively that his protagonist is heading in a westerly direction. The clear implication would seem to be that just as Eastern "ideas" failed Andrews so has Western "experience." Indeed, Emerson himself prefigured this sentiment when he stepped back a little from the rhetoric of "The Young American" that derived special meaning and modes of destiny in westward expansion, the birth, perhaps, of a new singular form of American "genius." Between 1844 and 1853, as Edwin Fussell notes, "Emerson's gaze wandered, and when he looked again, his visionary powers were gone" (23). As LeMenager claims, landscapes such as "the 'sub-humid'

region of the Great Plains and the truer deserts of . . . the Rocky Mountain region," conversely, "inspired crises of imagination" (24).

The West experienced can no longer be imagined. Yet the re-conceptualisation of the West wrought by material forces dispenses illusions of another type. Nothing appears to be learned once Andrews is disabused of his Emersonian faith at the end of *Butcher's Crossing*. He now merely represents a more hard-headed, nihilistic materialism, disenthralled by the landscape though not by what, in theory, can be abstracted from it in material terms. Andrews ends the novel as a symbol of the restless, post-bellum afterlife of "Young America," moving on to the next heedless adventure in primitive accumulation: the scramble for land, exchangeable commodities, and, ultimately, whatever capital can be accrued from either. Another Miller or McDonald, no doubt, in the making.

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Notes

1. The publication of his short story "The Luck of Roaring Camp" (1868) in the second issue of *Overland Monthly* had done much to raise Harte's own national profile by this time. Interestingly, the most positive reviews, including one from Mark Twain in the *Buffalo Morning Express*, emerged from the East, prompting some revision of earlier, more indifferent notices in the local press. Harte would later wryly reflect: "Since Boston endorsed the story, San Francisco was properly proud of it." Cited in Tarnoff, 160.
2. Harte was himself born in Albany, New York in 1836. He moved to California in 1854 where he would establish his literary reputation before leaving for the East coast and Europe in 1871--never to return. For an account of this early phase of Harte's career see Scharnhorst, 3-32.
3. Harte and Fresonke can be seen as chronological bookends of western or western-oriented criticism of Emersonian philosophy. The western naturalist and philosopher John Muir would also be disappointed when Emerson visited him in the Yosemite Valley in 1871. Muir complained that Emerson and his party were practitioners of "indoor philosophy" who refused to sleep rough or trek beyond the standard points of tourist reference (qtd. in Worster 211). Scepticism toward Transcendentalist philosophy more generally has, of course, a provenance that goes back to its origins in mid-nineteenth century New England where, as F.O. Matthiessen famously documented in *American Renaissance* (1941), the writings of Melville and Hawthorne

provided a critical "counterstatement" to "transcendental affirmation" by means of a "reaffirmation of tragedy" (179).

[4] Another, example of a literary Western engaged with Emersonian ideas is Glendon Swarthout's *The Homesman* (1988), the chief female protagonist of which, Mary Bee Cuddy, is depicted as inspired in part by Transcendetalist ideas to re-settle from upstate New York to the Nebraska territories in the 1850s. Though less extensively critical of Emerson-inspired western settlement than Williams, Swarthout nonetheless would seem to share his scepticism and sense of irony. He writes of a demoralized Cuddy, for example, in the midst of a tortuous wagon journey back east escorting three women driven insane by frontier scarcity and isolation: "If only she had Mr Emerson to read" (117).

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5. Williams had taken bachelor's and master's degrees at DU between 1947 and 1951.

6. While the general point in relation to Emersonian accounts of "nature" stands up here, Williams perhaps does a disservice to the experiment that underpins Thoreau's *Walden* which, after all, was more invested in ideas of attentiveness to specific natural environments than it was in ideas of nature as something "untamed" by definition. Thoreau's response to western expansion too, and particularly its role in igniting the Mexican-American War, sets him apart from Emerson and complicates understandings of the politics of Transcendentalism.

7. Other works included on a list to be found among Williams's papers are pictorial histories such as James D. Horan and Paul Sann's *Pictorial History of the Wild West* (1956), William Foster-Harris's *The Look of the Old West* (1955) and Alfred Powers's (ed.) *Buffalo Adventures on the Western Plains* (1945); James B. Marsh's biographical account of the experience of hunter Isaac Rose, *Four Years in the Rockies* (1884); autobiographical works such as W.E. Webb's *Buffalo Land* (1872) and John Wesley Powell's *Exploration of the Colorado River of the West 1869-72* (1874); and Carl Coke Rister's history *Southern Plainsmen* (1938). John Edward Williams Papers, Box 9, File 7.

8. Several of the sources Williams consulted make clear, though with differing degrees of approbation, the ways commercial buffalo hunting was supported and encouraged by the federal government in order to deprive Native peoples of their staple source of food, clothing, and shelter. Such deprivation, of course, hastened the removal of Indians to managed reservations thereby clearing vast swaths of territory for white settlement.

9. Again, passages such as this, focusing on snow as a source of terror and bewilderment, would seem to allude to the "transcendent horrors" (164) so memorably depicted in "The Whiteness of the Whale" chapter in Melville's *Moby Dick*.

10. For an account of this and other contact between Emerson, Thoreau, and O'Sullivan see Widmer, 68-69.

11. Widmer draws a distinction, in this respect, between what he describes as the "eloquent rhetoric" of a "Young America I (ca. 1845)" cultural cohort and the "flummery" of a "Young America II (ca. 1852)" political cohort (20). Yet the distinction collapses somewhat when we consider, as Widmer acknowledges, that O'Sullivan, the key representative figure associated with the movement, was connected to each group, both of which, as Widmer also notes, remained simultaneously "ambivalent about the Mexican War they helped bring about" and "blind to slavery" (20).

12. The relationship of Emerson's thought to the militant anti-slavery violence of New England's most famous internal émigré partisan in the Kansas-Nebraska wars, John Brown, is explored in Russell Banks's epic novel *Cloudsplitter* (1998). Banks depicts Brown's son, Owen, along similar lines to Williams's Andrews, as an explicitly Emerson-inspired figure disabused of a youthful philosophical doctrine as a consequence of the influence of a "Napoleonic" figure or "representative man" who personifies more powerful ideological forces. For a discussion of Banks's novel in these intellectual-historical contexts see Hutchison, pp. 30-60.

13. Notwithstanding the decline in prices in the wake of the Panic of 1873, the use of chemically treated buffalo hides as a cheaper source of leather than cowhide for the manufacturing of machinery belts was even more economically and environmentally consequential than buffalo bone-based fertilizer production. Such belts, as Andrew Isenberg notes, were the "sinews of nineteenth-century industrial production: mills relied on heavy leather belting to animate their machinery" (130). The tanning of buffalo hides for belt manufacturing required intensive chemical processing that resulted in many negative "externalities." By the 1880s the use of hemlock tree bark alongside lime to transform rough buffalo hides into smooth leather was widespread. "Late nineteenth-century tanneries were thus," according to Isenberg, "an environmental malignancy that destroyed bison, razed forests, and fouled rivers" (132).

14. Williams's emphasis in *Butcher's Crossing* on "silence" as a source of menace within the natural world may have had wider cultural repercussions. It was Rodell who, in 1961, perhaps recalling the under-stated metaphorical resonance exploited by Williams in an earlier context of "industrialized" nature, would suggest the eventual title for Carson's book. *The War Against Nature* had been Carson's own working title (Lytle 156).

15. For an examination of Williams novel in this "ideological" context that is also alert to issues of patriarchy and nature as a "feminized" entity see Morton.

16. *The Naked World* was one of several working titles for Williams's novel. The phrase is taken from Yvor Winters's poem "The Journey" (1931), a troubled and complex treatment of the wild "Snake River Country" of the Idaho-Montana region that influenced the depiction of the West in *Butcher's Crossing*. An early draft of Williams's novel also carried the final stanza of the poem (that contains the term "naked world") as an epigraph. See John Edward Williams Papers, Box 10, File 1.

17. Williams took part in numerous missions that involved "flying the hump," the term used by Allied pilots for airlift missions over the eastern Himalayas undertaken to supply the Chinese military in their resistance to the Japanese (See Woolley 12, 25). The period between May 1943 and May 1944--when Williams was on active service--has been described by one historian as "the most dangerous time to fly the Hump; routes were still undefined, weather reporting was accomplished pilot-to-pilot, ground-based navigation aids were still only an idea, and enemy fighters began their own 'anti-Hump' effort, deliberately targeting transports in flight and on the ground" (Plating 12)

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