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INTRODUCTION

Toward a Postpopulist Criticism

As even a casual scholar of Montana writing will note, the production of fine writing far outstrips the critical inquiry into the state's extraordinary literary corpus. If a handful of Montana writers such as Richard Hugo, A. B. Guthrie Jr., D'Arcy McNickle, Wallace Stegner, and especially James Welch have received considerable and diverse critical attention, there remain sizable gaps in the analysis of the state's ever-growing and ever-evolving canon. *All Our Stories Are Here: Critical Perspectives on Montana Literature* seeks, therefore, not only to build on the exemplary, foundational work of William Bevis, Ken Egan Jr., Sue Hart, Rick Newby, Julia Watson, and others, but also to open further interpretative and critical conversations. Building on the critical paradigms of the past and bringing to bear some of the latest developments in literary and cultural studies, the contributors raise questions and foreground issues that have not been widely addressed in the study of Montana literature, explore the work of writers who have not received their critical due, take new looks at old friends, and offer some of the first explorations of recent works by well-established artists. However, before turning to a brief analysis of what has been perhaps the dominant paradigm in Montana scholarship—call it the “populist tradition”—and the contributors' particular celebrations of and challenges to this tradition via their analyses of gender and genre; desire, masculinity, and queerness; history (and the unreliability of history) and identity; region and desire; place and poetry; and much more, a brief overview of the Big Sky's literary tradition will help stake the territory.

As the bookshelf of Montana writing reveals, the state possesses not only a vibrant contemporary literary scene (reaching from the Yaak to Yellowstone, from the Bitterroot to the High Line), but also a rich and diverse tradition reaching back, as Welch puts it, to “a long time ago” (3). If the publishing of Montana writing began in the 1860s, the poet-novelist reminds us that Native American stories and myths come to us from a far deeper past, from the memories and oral traditions of the Assiniboine, Blackfeet, Cheyenne, Crow, Flathead, Gros Ventre, Kutenai, and Pend d'Oreille of Montana: “How far back

do these stories go? All the way to creation—of the heavens, earth, the birds and animals, the mountains and streams, the humans” (3). Stories and storytelling seem as much a part of Montana as its mountains, forests, rivers, and sweeping plains, and the voices have been many: Indian and Euro-American, female and male, gay and straight, poor and wealthy, civilian and military, truth-teller and scoundrel. Moreover, Montana writers have excelled in about every genre: epistle, diary, journal, screenplay, poem, short story, novel, western, adventure, mystery, memoir, column, essay, article, history, polemic, jeremiad, screed, bald-faced lie, and still others. In fact, Montana boasts such a long and diverse literary tradition that the bookshelf looks, the closer one investigates, more and more like a well-stocked library.

From Blackfeet and Salish creation stories to the poetry and novels of Welch and Debra Magpie Earling, from the journals of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to the memoirs of Mary Clearman Blew and Judy Blunt, and from the semifictions of Thomas J. Dimsdale and Yellowstone Kelly to the stories, novellas, and masterworks of Mildred Walker, Norman Maclean, and Richard Ford, the canon of Montana writing includes some of the best-known and most celebrated works about the American West. Some of the most famous—and infamous—chroniclers of westward expansion and the conflicts between Indians and whites, for example, were born and raised in Montana or wrote about their experiences as explorers, sojourners, trappers, settlers, or soldiers in the territory. The oral narratives and tales of George Bird Grinnell, Mourning Dove, Plenty-coups, Pretty-shield, and Two-Leggings, among others, provide insight into diverse Indian experiences and beliefs, and while some eloquently describe tribal cultures, histories, and cosmologies, others angrily recount the encroachment and violence of Euro-Americans. On the other hand, E. C. “Teddy Blue” Abbott, Nannie T. Alderson, Andrew Garcia, Luther S. “Yellowstone” Kelly, and Frank B. Linderman offer detailed accounts of their adventures and lives among Indians, fur traders, farmers, and ranchers. Indian or white, their works remain some of the most widely read and studied accounts of life in the West in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Since the days of loss, broken treaties, tough trips, cowpunchers, and brides going west, Montana has enjoyed several generations of regionally, nationally, and even internationally recognized writers. In the 1920s and 1930s novelists such as Myron Brinig, Dashiell Hammett, and Clyde Murphy put Butte on the literary map; in 1926 D’Arcy McNickle published *The Surrounded*, one of the seminal texts of Native American literature and a masterpiece of late naturalism; in the 1940s and 1950s A. B. Guthrie Jr., Dorothy M. Johnson, Wallace Stegner,

and Mildred Walker wrote some of the most memorable—and filmable—works of Montana and western fiction.¹ In 1960 Leslie Fiedler, one of the first great wildmen of American literary criticism, put the University of Montana (then called Montana State University) on the nation's intellectual map with the publication of *Love and Death in the American Novel*.

In the 1970s Montana—and particularly Missoula and the University of Montana—experienced what some have called the “Montana Renaissance”: in 1973 Richard Hugo published his fourth, and perhaps greatest, collection of poetry, *The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir*; a year later, his friend and former student, James Welch, brought out his surrealist masterpiece, *Winter in the Blood*, and two years later published, to critical acclaim, a revised edition of his first book, *Riding the Earthboy 40*; in the same year, at the age of seventy-three, Norman Maclean published *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories*; 1977 saw the release of Hugo's brilliant *31 Letters and 13 Dreams*; and Welch capped off the '70s with *The Death of Jim Loney*. At the university in some of the same years were William Bevis, Madeline DeFrees, and William Kittredge; coming and going through town or the state were James Crumley, Ivan Doig, Jim Harrison, and many, many others. The writers in Montana in the 1970s shared ideas, read one another's works, and shaped the writing not only of their own time but of the future as well.

If a jury on the contemporary scene cannot yet be convened, the evidence suggests a strong, albeit somewhat conservative continuation of Montana's rich legacy. Although Montana writers and readers, as Rick Newby argues, seem to “expect Montana writers to be conservative in their aesthetic approach” and therefore seem unwilling “to acknowledge the contributions of those whose works are ribald, experimental, rigorously modernist (discontinuous, constructed of fragments, rich in visual as well as verbal play), and bookish” (316–17), the realist and naturalist traditions remain vibrant. Writers such as Kevin Canty, Rick DeMarinis, David Long, and Deirdre McNamer continue to explore the dark, often bleak undercurrents of middle- and working-class lives. If Hugo yet looms large on Montana's poetic landscape, the state's history, the vastness of the West, and the individual's relationship to nature and the environment remain powerful themes in the work of Sandra Alcosser, Roger Dunsmore, Newby, and others. Most vital of all, perhaps, continues to be the Montana tradition of the memoir, where writers such as Mary Clearman Blew, Judy Blunt, Ivan Doig, and William Kittredge have seen deeply into matters of cultural history, gender, family, and property—intellectual and material—in the West. For good measure, we can also add that Montana writers have excelled

in the writing of mysteries and thrillers (see, for example, the work of James Lee Burke, James Crumley, Jenny Siler, and others), natural history, popular science, and ecology (Rick Bass, Janine Benyus, Phil Condon, David Quammen, Kim Todd, and more), outdoor and adventure writing (Tim Cahill and Peter Stark, among others), and Montana and western history (Harry Fritz, Joseph Kinsey Howard, Michael Malone, K. Ross Toole, and many more).

If this catalog of Montana writers is to go on, we should perhaps pause and ask a necessary question: who qualifies as a “Montana” writer? A vexed question, indeed. For example, Hugo—a writer as closely identified with the state as any other—was born in White Center, Washington, in 1923, and after serving in the air force in World War II, returned to Seattle to study at the University of Washington and to work for Boeing as a technical writer from 1951 to 1963. Only then, nearing age forty, did he move to Montana. Kittredge, to take another example, was born in Portland in 1932, grew up on his family’s vast ranch in Oregon, and earned an MFA from the Iowa Writers Workshop in 1969. Like Hugo, Kittredge was in his late thirties when he came to Montana, and one could easily claim him as an Oregon or, better, western writer. We could also consider short story writer and novelist Melanie Rae Thon: originally from Montana, she was educated at the University of Michigan and Boston College and has taught creative writing at Emerson College, Syracuse University, the University of Massachusetts, Ohio State University, and the University of Utah. Thon writes about Montana—see, for example, her extraordinary novel, *Sweet Hearts* (2000)—but doesn’t live full-time in the state. Maclean, though born and raised in Missoula, spent most of his professional life in Chicago, yet he wrote what must be one of the most Montanan of all tales. As these examples suggest, the question of who “counts” as a Montana writer quickly becomes difficult to answer: no litmus test, genealogy, badge, or residency card can settle the matter. Yet for those readers dissatisfied with such a deferral, we always have recourse to common sense: a Montana writer is somebody who self-identifies as a Montana writer or who has lived, at least for part of her or his life, in Montana, who sets at least some of her or his work in Montana, and who engages one or more of the hallmark Montana themes: fighting the invaders, trapping the beaver, staking the homestead, facing the fire, wrestling the bear, pulling the calf, catching the fish, working the ranch, returning to the reserve, leaving the middle of nowhere, driving the gumbo, building the trophy home, and more. Could someone who never set foot in the state be a Montana writer? Maybe.

While the curious question of who counts will lead us, a few pages hence, to

CHAPTER ONE

Burning Montana: Richard Ford's
Wildlife and Regional Crisis

TAMAS DOBOZY

CRITICAL REGIONS

Richard Ford's position on regionalism is well known to his scholars. In an interview with Gregory L. Morris, Ford denies region an essentialist impact on character and community; instead, he prefers to articulate human behavior in spite of geographic determinants:

I shouldn't say I have *no* relationship with landscape. But . . . saying I miss Montana is just expressing a feeling of need of mine in terms of place, likewise saying Mississippi is my home. I could express that need differently, but for some reason, something like instinct, I express it in terms of place, landscape.

This is [why] I so strongly resist the notion of regionalism—in literature, in defining culture. My life has simply shown me that we're more in the same boat wherever we are, and that recognizing that fact might enable us to adapt to our situations more successfully. (Morris 109)

Here, Ford raises a number of key points for understanding landscape in his writing in general and in his novel *Wildlife* (1990) in particular. He does not deny a "relationship" with landscape, but qualifies this by disengaging the terms of region—"Montana," "Mississippi"—from the need that expresses them. Region becomes an "instinctual" expression, verging on the arbitrary, since the need from which it originates could as easily find a different outlet. Region, rather than determining literature or culture—rather than forming the basis of the need that in turn articulates it—becomes, instead, not antecedent but ancillary to need. Region is simply one of the many options for voicing desire. At the same time, Ford complicates his notion of region by suggesting that our "situations," their variable signification notwithstanding, require "adaptation,"

though the key to adaptation comes not with attachment to regional specifics but with the recognition that the universal character of human need is often obscured—and thus limited—by geographic reference.

It is this “universal condition” (material need), as far as *Wildlife* and Ford’s depiction of Montana are concerned, that determines how region is signified in the discourse that enables our individual and communal existence. While Ford counters any notion of regionalism as “definitive,” *Wildlife* nonetheless enacts a drama of regionalism by commenting on the ways in which various “needs” find articulation via a landscape that is not exactly commensurable with either need or articulation, and which therefore continually exceeds, or burns away, the categories that structure it in communal myths and beliefs.

By “burns away,” I am referring to the forest fire that consumes much of Montana in *Wildlife*, but which, by supposedly threatening to overcome Ford’s protagonist (48), also demonstrates how our categories of knowing are insufficient for containing the volatility of the real: “[The fire] takes you outside yourself. . . . You see everything from outside. You’re up against so big a thing out there. . . . Everything seems arbitrary. . . . It’s probably hard to understand” (138). Outside our understanding is the fire, which is external to, and too vast to account for within, a system of ordering. The fire instantiates the arbitrary as an external condition we try to regulate with conceptual categories and systems.

At the same time, the fire permits a realization of agency. The inability of Ford’s characters to sustain region as a fixed category—and thus a fixed sense of themselves *within* region—enables them to realize that any sense of ourselves is subject to alteration, not only by conditions in the real but by ourselves, in the way we discourse on those conditions. Because knowing occurs in relation to the real, we understand, as Joe Brinson does, that there are “no final answers” (171), only a set of provisional, shifting, and contingent “answers” whose source is not the real *itself* but our *disposition* to the displacements—such as wildfires—eventuated by it. The arbitrariness of such displacements demonstrates the inadequacy, over the long term, of any single definitive cultural or political (or regionalist) framework. There are answers, but no *final* ones, since alternating social relations are themselves *determined by* as well as *determinants of* the real. It is within this radical, two-way contingency that I situate Ford’s discourse on region.

I am, of course, not the first critic to tackle Ford’s complex view of regionalism. Huey Guagliardo sees in Ford’s writing the “breakdown of such cultural institutions as marriage, family, and community, the very institutions which give purpose and meaning to one’s life” (“Introduction” xiv). We can include

regionalism in this list, since regionalism is itself a cultural institution that arises out of community, one no less important in giving purpose and meaning to one's life. Guagliardo also examines how Mexico, in Ford's novel, *The Ultimate Good Luck*, "serves as a metaphor" ("Marginal" 12), suggesting a symbolic rather than essentialist function for landscape. Robert N. Funk likewise argues that *The Ultimate Good Luck* "incorporates the regional concern with the influences of the larger popular culture" (53). Region is thus a "concern" derived from "larger popular culture," suggesting that regionalism is a consensus, at the service of communal need. It is not an outgrowth of geospatial essence. Importantly, Funk sees Ford exploring the tension "between meaning (the anticipated revelation of a coherent narrative pattern) and meaninglessness (the fear that no such pattern exists)" (57). This tension also appears in *Wildlife*, where Joe confronts the disorder of his family life. Here, going further than Funk and borrowing from Maurice Blanchot, I argue that the development of meaning is inevitable: "People categorize other people. . . . But you shouldn't do that. They should teach you that in school" (30). As Joe's father says, awareness—even awareness of awareness—always ends in instruction. The knowledge of the impossibility of devising adequate metaphors ends in the devising of "adequate" metaphors: thus "wildfire" comes to serve as a metaphor for the inadequacy of metaphor.

Yet, in Ford, the mediating subject's recognition of the inevitability of metaphor does not mean a loss of agency. While metaphor may be inevitable, our choice of metaphors is not necessarily so. The inevitable displacement of the real by metaphors—i.e., language and meaning—does not mean that metaphors cannot serve individuals and communities. In reminding us, as Joe's father does, of the need to exceed categories, or interrogate the categorical impulse, Ford is not advocating nihilism but rather an awareness that meaning is never fixed, and can thus be changed.

Joanna Price, in "Richard Ford: The Postmodern Exile and the Vanishing South," and Fred Hobson, in "Richard Ford and Josephine Humphreys: Walker Percy in New Jersey and Charleston,"¹ argue that Ford's regionalism refers less to a locale than the discourse (Hobson 42) attending a specific populace in a specific place: "Ford's two novels [*The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*] are largely concerned with exploring how an individual . . . can accommodate himself to the way in which such concepts are changing as they have ceased to be defined by regionally specific traditions and are increasingly being reshaped by the cultural and economic formations of postmodernity" (Price 261). In other words, Price views the "specific traditions" of region as already provisional, distinct from the landscape from which they purportedly emerge, since they

are shaped here not by transformations in the landscape but in the American cultural milieu. Price contends that regionalism, in the form of “regionally specific traditions,” is, to begin with, a set of social practices formed in relation to geography rather than granted by it. This is exactly the universalism that Ford’s interview suggests: that regionalism, no matter where it forms, is a matter of adapting what we bring to what is present, of what we are running *from* to what we are running *to*, of the ways that we make the world conform to expectation and desire, as Ford indicates in the same interview:

Well I suppose [landscape contributes to human action] in one way or another. If it’s cold where you live, then you tend to stay in a lot and get cabin fever. If it’s hot, then maybe you wear fewer clothes and have more sexual adventures. But I think, more commonly, that *we* say it contributes in our attempts to explain our lives to ourselves: why this happened, why we feel this way, why we’re having this problem. The drama is in us, not the mountain range to the west of here. I think landscape is inert, and that we attribute to it qualities, strengths that we say affect our lives. If the explanations persuade us and others, then the relationship to landscape which we’ve advanced becomes true. (109)

Ford does not deny the significance of region but is quick to point out that its attributes, or “truths,” say more about the community that voices them, and the forms necessitated by that voicing, than about the landscape itself. Regionalism is thus important in defining a community, but only as it allows us to regard, in the form of its signifiers and myths, the way a community embodies its sense of itself by projecting its “dramas” onto the landscape, in attributing to the landscape those metaphors whose persuasive force links community.

The opening paragraph of *Wildlife* addresses the negotiations involved in regional affiliation: “This was in Great Falls, Montana, at the time of the Gypsy Basin oil boom, and my father had brought us there in the spring that year from Lewiston, Idaho, in the belief that people—small people like him—were making money in Montana or soon would be, and he wanted a piece of that good luck before all of it collapsed and was gone in the wind” (1). This quote suggests that—like Ford’s representation of the South, at least according to the criticism of Price and Hobson—Montana is essentially an economic prospect. Montana is a place where “small people” have managed to derive financial gain. It is a place, at best, defined by provisionality (i.e., by “luck”). However, the relationship to landscape changes immediately, as the fires burning in the hills to

the west of Great Falls cause Joe to reflect: “Such a fire could not help changing things, and there was a feeling in Great Falls, some attitude in general, that was like discouragement. There were stories in the paper, wild stories. Indians were said to have set fires to get the jobs putting them out” (6). Though the fire is too far from Great Falls to affect the townspeople, its “reading” suggests that, far from the fire “changing things,” it is rather the townspeople who change their views on a landscape beset by “too much bad luck falling one way” (6). The reappearance of fire—though it is not a threat—provides for “wild stories” that expose *other* regional concerns, for instance racial anxieties, here represented in the rumors of “Indian” arsonists. In other cases, the “wild stories” reveal a fear of lawlessness and vandalism or poachers (6). The fire is thus a metaphor for anxiety over social disorder, on the lapse of a discourse that all abide by, or on the fact that the discourse is not adequate to reality. At the same time, these “wild stories” indicate just who does and doesn’t—which “small people” do and don’t—profit from the “good luck” of Montana. The fire reveals the biases and assumptions that force their way to the surface in the form of a variable “reading” of landscape. This is not to deny that fire is burning in the mountains of Montana, but to show that the fire is never merely an annual aspect of region, but that its occurrence is inscribed with regional stories that have little to do with the fire itself. The drama is never in the landscape, but always in “us.”

With regard to the stories of regionalism, Jeffrey J. Folks’s essay, “Richard Ford: Postmodern Cowboys,” argues—as elsewhere Price (260) and Ford do (“Percy” 562)—that environment is an “economic” rather than geographic “force” (214), and that Montana, in particular, is a place of “deterritorialization.” By this, Folks means a place stripped of natural resources and “abandoned” (214), where characters are unable to reterritorialize themselves through “amassing of local myths, legends and folktales,” instead turning to possibilities offered by “exploring the gaps and incongruities of language” (216). The characters are cut off from any definitive discourse of region. Folks’s critique is important because it zeroes in on exactly what Joe comes to appreciate in *Wildlife*: that “territory” is both created and effaced via language, that territory turns oppressive not so much because of what threatens it—such as the wildfire—but because of what a community *thinks* threatens it: namely the “wild stories” that turn upon a metaphoric treatment of geography. As Folks suggests, Joe’s survival depends not on an “amassing” of regional myths (Indians, lawlessness, vandals, poachers), but on recognizing those places in the discourse that are incongruous, paradoxical, open to appropriation. By seeing regionalism

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