its aim as "to develop in the South a literary spirit and to secure a medium through which there may be an honest and free discussion of serious questions. . . ." The articles in both the fiftieth and seventy-fifth anniversary collections reflect this intent, but along with continuity there has been change. The belief of Kilgo and the first editors that the Quarterly should emphasize issues of particular concern to the South has gradually given way to a broader conception. For some time now, the name "South Atlantic Quarterly" has been a geographical designation for the journal, not a description of its orientation. Under Frank Lentricchia's direction, there will be further changes. The present issue consists exclusively of articles reflecting work in progress by members of the Duke community and the new editorial board; and though the approach will continue to be multidisciplinary, there will be more issues devoted to a single topic than previously.

In turning the editorship of the journal over to Mr. Lentricchia, I should like to thank him for this opportunity to say hail and farewell. I should like also to express my deep gratitude to the Duke University Press, to the various board members, and to my editorial assistant Dorothy Sapp, who provided significant aid and comfort for so many years; and I am glad to have this occasion to make my special obligation to Richard Watson a matter of public record. Finally, by way of welcome to the new editor and his board, I should like to repeat the sentiment that my predecessor inscribed in my copy of the fiftieth anniversary volume: "The South Atlantic Quarterly is not without some pride of ancestry or hope of posterity." Given the Quarterly's heritage of continuity and change, surely the hope for a hundredth anniversary issue is not unreasonable.

Jane Tompkins

West of Everything

This essay is part of a longer work on Westerns which is just beginning to take shape. It offers an explanation of why Westerns (novels and movies) arose when they did, taking other explanations to task in the process. My account departs from a single question and pushes its way forward, asking the questions implied by the answers it arrives at, until it comes to a major depot, rather like the trains that make their way across the plains in Western films, moving on from one forsaken little station to the next. Unlike the trains that chug harmlessly into the desert, and more like the gun battles with which Westerns normally conclude, the essay is polemical. But the conclusions it offers—the results of a first foray into unfamiliar territory—are meant to provoke discussion rather than to close it off.

Near the beginning of Hondo (1953), one of Louis L'Amour's best-known novels, the hero

discovers the remains of a fight between a band of Apaches and a company of United States cavalrymen.

Atop the hill he drew up, looking around. He saw all that remained of Company C, the naked bodies of the dead, fallen in their blood and their glory as fighting men should.1

Hondo muses on the scene of battle, reconstructing what must have happened, noting those whom the Indians had left unmutilated as a mark of respect for their courage, admiring old Pete Britton, the scout "who had held out at least an hour longer than the others. On his hard old face... a taunting, wolfish grin. He had defeated his ancient fears of loneliness, sickness and poverty."2

Hondo continues on his way, taking shelter from a storm in a dugout on the side of a hill. He settles down for the night, thinking of the woman he has just begun to love, and then L’Amour writes this paragraph:

Somewhere along the tangled train of his thoughts he dropped off and slept, and while he slept the rain roared on, tracks were washed out, and the bodies of the silent men of Company C lay wide-eyed to the rain and bare-chested to the wind, but the blood and the dust washed away, and the stark features of Lieutenant Creyton C. Davis, graduate of West Point, veteran of the Civil Wars and the Indian wars, darling of Richmond dance floors, hero of a Washington romance, dead now in the long grass on a lonely hill, west of everything.3

This passage makes explicit a movement toward death which marks the Western and sets it off from other genres. Death is portrayed here as transfiguration and fulfillment—"the silent men of Company C lay wide-eyed to the rain and bare-chested to wind," purified and made beautiful by death—as the apotheosis of personal achievement—Pete Britton has defeated his ancient fears, the others have fallen "in their blood and their glory as fighting men should"—and as a comradely condition—Lieutenant Davis lies next to Clanahan, the drunkard ("Hondo could picture the scene... the Lieutenant giving the bottle to the man he had several times sent to the guardhouse for drunken brawling, but a man who had died well beside an officer he under-

stood").4 And, faintly shadowed in the preceding passage but more explicit later on, death is figured as the fulfillment of sexual desire. As Hondo falls asleep, thinking of the woman he will eventually marry, L’Amour cuts to Lieutenant Davis, darling of Richmond dance floors and hero of a Washington romance, who “in the long grass on a lonely hill, west of everything” has already met and embraced his bride.

To go west, to go as far west as you can go, west of everything, is to die. And death in the Western is double: glory, transfiguration, fulfillment, and at the same time, annihilation. For the Western rejects the notion of an afterlife and announces itself as determinately secular, valuing the strength and skill required to stay alive above the glory of sacrificial defeat. The hero, who always defeats death by killing his adversaries, plays a game in which survival is everything. And this means that we ourselves do not have to face death as we watch the movie or read the novel, but continually escape it, along with the protagonist. Thus, death is repressed in the Western because figured only as what happens to someone else.

At the same time, death is continually courted, flirted with, risked, and finally imposed—on others: Indians, villains, “Company C.” cowards, the protagonist’s relatives and friends. In fact, death is everywhere in this genre. Not just in the scores of bodies that pile up toward the narrative’s close, but, even more compellingly, in the desert landscape with which the bodies of the gunned down eventually merge. The classical Western landscape is barren and hostile, a tableau of towering rock and stretching sand where nothing lives. Its aura of death, both parodied and insisted on in place names like Deadwood and Tombstone, exerts a strong attraction. For although to die is to lose the game—Lieutenant Davis’s apotheosis is only a small landmark along the trail of Hondo’s victorious struggle to live—there is a strange play of irony in this. All the Lieutenant’s dreams and expectations have ended on a lonely hill, suggesting faintly that there was something unrealistic about them, turning the joke on him. And yet, the pure glory of his death makes Hondo’s survival look momentarily banal. The sense of consummation L’Amour’s description of Company C conveys, their transfiguration in death, while it puts them out of play, also seals their perfection.
The ubiquity of death—it hangs over everything and everybody—and its doubleness, both glory and annihilation, are among the genre's most salient features, features which we tend to take for granted, as if there had always been stories about men who shoot each other down in the dusty main streets of desert towns. But these stories came into being only shortly after the towns themselves did, and although the shooting stopped a few years later, American culture has been obsessed by that particular scene of violence ever since. In trying to understand the Western as a narrative type that was speaking to and for the culture as a whole, one has to ask why, at a certain moment in history, a genre should arise in which death, both as a condition and as an event, should command so much attention.5

In a pithy article called "Origins of the Western," drawing on the work of several other scholars, Richard Etulain has argued that Westerns came to prominence because of the circumstances surrounding the year 1900, which he summarizes roughly as follows:

(1) revival of interest in the historical novel, signaling a need to recapture the past;
(2) increased interest in the West;
(3) the ethos of "the strenuous age" characterized by the virile, out-of-doors fiction of Jack London and Harold Bell Wright, coinciding with the Spanish-American War, Teddy Roosevelt and militant Anglo-Saxonism;
(4) the disappearance of the dime novel;
(5) the strength of the melodramatic tradition as a feature associated with western literature;
(6) the mentality of the Progressive Era which precipitated conflict between the New Nationalists—optimistic reformers led by Teddy Roosevelt—and those nostalgic for a pre-industrial America who wanted to break up the power of the large corporations, represented by Woodrow Wilson.6

Etulain concludes that "the conflict between industrial and agricultural America and the resultant nostalgia for the past" were crucial to the rise of the Western and reminds us that "the origins of a new popular idea or genre are usually tied to specific occurrences in the mind and experience of the era that produces them."7 This is certainly true. But I believe that the occurrences Etulain and the scholars he relies on use to account for the Western's popularity, while convincing as long as they are considered from a certain point of view, function less as explanations of the mentality the Western represents than as extensions of it. Located within the mind and experience formed by the Western, Etulain has been able to discuss the genre only in terms which the genre itself has made available.

Etulain and the historians he cites emphasize wars as important turning points in human history (the Spanish-American War), reflecting a preoccupation with death and conflict in the public space; omit women from the historical record entirely (none of them imagines that women's roles in this period could have anything to do with the rise of the Western), demonstrating an unconscious antifeminism; deny the relevance of religious or spiritual experience to understanding human events (none of them notes Christianity's striking absence from the genre in an era of religious revival) and so betray their secular, positivist mentality; and, in focusing on "great men" (Teddy Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson) and in assuming that both fiction and history naturally are about men, show the phallocentric bias of their thought. Rather than providing a perspective on the Western, these historians simply act it out.

For the Western is secular, positivist, and antifeminist; it focuses on conflict in the public space, is obsessed by death, and worships the phallus. Etulain and company do not question the Western's exhibition of these characteristics because they were formed by a culture that exhibits them as well. Thus in explaining why the Western arose when it did Etulain does not ask why it is a narrative of male violence, for that is what he already takes for granted, but focuses instead on something his assumptions have not already naturalized, the narrative setting. The question his account of the Western's origin is always implicitly answering is, why does the Western take place in the West? This question cannot be answered by referring to "increased interest in the West" and the popularity of "virile, out-of-doors fiction," answers which only repeat the question, but it can be dealt with by returning to the question I have already posed: what accounts, at the beginning of the twentieth century, for the rise of
a genre pervaded by death and the threat of death? If you hold this question in mind while examining the popular fiction that immediately preceded the Western’s rise to prominence, its preoccupation with death begins to make sense.

In 1896, Charles M. Sheldon, minister of the Central Congregational Church in Topeka, Kansas, began reading a story out loud to his young people on Sunday evenings. It was about a minister who, while preparing his sermon one morning, was disturbed by a ringing doorbell. He finds on his doorstep a young man in shabby clothes, hat between his hands, an air of dejection about him. The man says he has been out of work for a long time and wonders if the minister could help him find a job. The minister says he is very sorry, that he knows of no jobs, that he is very busy, and wishes the man luck. After closing the door he catches a glimpse of this homeless, forsaken figure making his way down the walk, heaves a sigh, and returns to his sermon on following the teachings and example of Christ.

This sermon, delivered the following Sunday, is a great success, but just before the service ends, the figure of the shabbily dressed man appears in the back of the church. He makes his way forward and asks to speak, assuring the congregation that he is neither drunk nor crazy. He tells them that he has been out of work for ten months and has been tramping the country looking for a job. His wife has been dead for four months and their little girl is staying with friends. There are a great many other people like him who are out of work because machines are now doing the jobs men were trained for, and though he doesn’t expect people to go out of their way to find jobs for others, he wonders what the minister’s sermon about “following the teachings and example of Christ” means to them. He quotes the hymns they’ve been singing: “Jesus, I my cross have taken, all to leave and follow Thee,” “All for Jesus, all for Jesus,” and “I’ll go with him, with him all the way.” He suggests in a quiet, reasonable voice that if the people who sang those hymns went out and lived them, the world might be a different place. What would Jesus do, he asks, about the men and women who die in tenements in drunkenness and misery?

At this point, the man keels over, faint from hunger. The minister takes him home, but the man dies during the course of the week.

The next Sunday the minister arrives in church a changed person. He tells the congregation that he has taken a vow for the next year to ask before he does anything “What would Jesus do?” and to try to act as he believes Jesus would in that situation. He invites members of his congregation who feel moved to take a similar vow to meet with him after the service. The rest of the story, which Sheldon called In His Steps, concerns what happens to these people as a result.9

There is no way to know, even within several hundred thousand, how many copies In His Steps sold because, through a publisher’s error, it was never copyrighted. As soon as it appeared, it was pirated by sixteen publishers in this country and fifty in Europe and Australia (it was translated into twenty-one languages). Sheldon reports in a 1936 foreword to the novel that according to Publisher’s Weekly it had sold more copies than any other book except the Bible.10 Exactly how many copies In His Steps sold doesn’t matter. It was stupendously popular. And, as a type, it resembled the other most popular novels of the end of the nineteenth century: Lew Wallace’s Ben-Hur (1880), Mrs. Humphry Ward’s Robert Ellesmere (1888), and Hendryk Sienkiewicz’s Quo Vadis? (1896), novels which not only share its Christian frame of reference, but make Christian heroism their explicit theme.11

I have spent some time sketching the opening of Sheldon’s novel because I want you to understand the kind of book it is and the nature of its appeal. Even today, without a supporting context, you can sense the enormous power it must have had. My point is that only six years after In His Steps came out and sold like wildfire, Owen Wister’s The Virginian initiated a narrative tradition so different from the one to which Sheldon’s novel belonged that the two seem to have virtually nothing in common. The juxtaposition, I think, helps to explain a great deal about the purpose and meaning of Westerns, and, among other things, begins to explain the Western’s preoccupation with death.

Death in late-nineteenth-century religious novels is neither a problem nor a focus. Whereas in The Virginian five characters die and
the hero almost does more than once, in Sheldon's novel no one even comes close. The main problem for his characters is not facing death but facing themselves, for, if you believe in the immortality of the soul, what you fear most is not death but sin. Avoiding sin means, for Sheldon and other advocates of the social gospel, following Christ's example by reforming the evils of the world. His characters strive for the moral and social courage necessary to defy convention, and so, instead of risking death, risk losing their friends, the affection of their families, their money, their jobs, and their social position. In these stories, facing death is never the challenge or the problem; it's what you do with your life before you die that counts. In Westerns, the two become conflated; facing death and doing something with your life become one and the same thing. For once you no longer believe you are eternal spirit, risking death becomes the supreme form of heroism. The newly secular hero must pursue death in order to show what he is made of because risking death is the bravest thing he can do.

The Western plot therefore turns not on struggles to conquer sin but on external conflicts in which men prove their courage to themselves and to the world by facing their own annihilation, a form of heroism that has consequences for the kind of world the Western hero inhabits. When life itself is at stake, everything else seems trivial by comparison. Events that would normally loom large—birth, marriage, embarking on a career—become peripheral, and the activities and preoccupations of everyday life seem almost absurd. The Western's concentration on death puts life on hold, empties the canvas of its details, while placing unnatural emphasis on a few extraordinary moments—the hold-up, the jail-break, the shoot-out. The story that results, stripped down, ritualistic, suspenseful, seems to be telling a universal truth about the human condition. But the picture of the human condition from which its truth is drawn leaves nearly everything out of account.

If focusing on death is a consequence of the Western's rejection of Christianity, this raises the question of how and why the rejection came about. Given the tremendous vogue of novels like Sheldon's, it is clear that two thousand years of custom and belief didn't just naturally fade from the cultural consciousness. The Western shows us, among other things, that Christianity had to be forcibly ejected.

When the genre first appears on the national scene, one might say it defines itself by struggling to get rid of Christianity's enormous cultural weight.

You can see that struggle dramatized fully and explicitly in Riders of the Purple Sage (1912), whose opening scene enacts the passage from a sacred to a secular dispensation. The heroine, Jane Withersteen, a young Mormon woman who owns a large ranch the Mormon power structure covets, is about to watch her best rider, Bern Venters, be whipped by the Mormon elders because he is a Gentile.

Once more her strained gaze sought the sage-slopes. Jane Withersteen loved that wild and purple wilderness. In times of sorrow it had been her strength, in happiness its beauty was her continual delight. In her extremity she found herself murmuring, "Whence cometh my help?" It was a prayer, as if forth from those lonely purple reaches and walls so red and clefts of blue might ride a fearless man, neither creed-bound nor creed-mad, who would hold up a restraining hand in the faces of her ruthless people.

The next thing we know, someone is pointing to the west,

"Look" said one... "A rider!" Jane Withersteen wheeled and saw a horseman, silhouetted against the western sky, come riding out of the sage.... An answer to her prayer.

He wears black leather, a black sombrero, and packs "two black-buttoed guns—low down."

"A gun-man," whispered another.

In her hour of need, the heroine, a Christian woman who dresses in white, loves children, and preaches against violence, turns her eyes to the hills: Grey deliberately invokes the biblical reference, and just as deliberately rejects it. Instead of help coming from the Lord who made heaven and earth, as in the psalm, it arrives in the form of "a horseman, silhouetted against the Western sky, come riding out of the sage." An emanation of the desert, this redeemer is not from heaven but from earth, connected to the natural world by his horse, and to the world of men by his black dress and black-buttoed guns. He is
Lassiter, a famous gunman whom everyone fears, a death-dealer—the savior as anti-Christ.

The person whom he arrives in time to save—Bern Venters—represents an emasculated common man who has given in to the enfeebling doctrines of Christianity. Afraid that Bern would kill one of the Mormon elders, Jane Withersteen had taken his guns away, but after Lassiter saves him, Venters asks for them back in an exchange that advertises the phallic nature of the regime Lassiter represents:

"Jane, I must be off soon," said Venters. "Give me my guns. If I'd had my guns—"

"Either my friend or the Elder of my church would be lying dead. . . . Oh, you fierce-blooded, savage youth! Can't I teach you forbearance, mercy? Bern, it's divine to forgive your enemies. 'Let not the sun go down upon the wrath.'"

"Hush! talk to me no more of mercy or religion—after to-day. To-day this strange coming of Lassiter left me still a man, and now I'll die a man! . . . Give me my guns."  

In Venters, American men are taking their manhood back from the Christian women who have been holding it in thrall. Mercy and religion, as preached by women and the clergy, have stood in manhood's way too long, and now men are finally rebelling. But "manhood," in this scenario, does not express itself sexually. Even though the gun is obviously a symbol for the penis, sexual activity is not what ensues when men get guns. What breaks out is violence. "Now I'll die a man" says Venters, when he gets his pistols back. Which is to say, now that I can risk death in a gunfight, I can be a man.

When Christianity is no longer the frame of reference—that is, when Lassiter arrives—manhood can prove itself only through risking death. At the moment this shift occurs, the gospel of peace and charity becomes manhood's nemesis, depriving men of the chance to demonstrate their courage in the face of mortal danger. In place of the gospel of forgiveness, Lassiter installs the reign of an eye for an eye. "Mercy and goodness," he says to Jane at the end,

such as is in you, though they're the grand things in human nature, can't be lived up to on this Utah border. Life's hell out here. Jane, you think—or you used to think—that your religion made this life heaven. Mobbe them scales on your eyes has dropped now.  

The speech reads like an answer to In His Steps. Where Sheldon told people that if they lived like Christians they'd see it could transform their lives, this book insists that you can't live by Christian love because if you do you'll be destroyed. The truth the novel asserts is that Jane Withersteen's goodness and mercy and the 121st Psalm from which the phrase comes, and the whole Judeo-Christian tradition it represents won't work when the chips are down. Only brute force will, because "life is hell out here" and all the religion in the world isn't going to change it.

Lassiter's doctrine and the actions that support it signal a major shift in cultural orientation. When he comes riding out of the purple hills in place of the Lord, Lassiter prepares the way not only for a long line of Western heroes played by Gary Cooper and Jimmy Stewart, but for Hemingway's Jake Barnes and Albert Camus' Stranger as well. The transfer of power from Jane Withersteen to Lassiter entails a shift from a reliance on unseen spiritual entities ("My help cometh from the Lord") to faith in the ultimate reality of matter ("Give me my guns"), a shift which will manifest itself in the twentieth century's overwhelming commitment to science and technology and a decline in the prestige of religious and humanistic discourse. In Lassiter, godless, armed, and invincible, "man," through his domination of nature, truly becomes the measure of all things, and scientific knowledge replaces religion as the doxa that will save us.

Although Westerns do not follow the course of modern history by setting technology and science in the place of Christian dogma, the genre does embrace matter, physical facts and physical force, especially deadly force, as the ultimate truth of human existence. As late as 1976, in the opening scene of The Outlaw Josey Wales, the Western film is still carrying on the fight against Christianity. When Clint Eastwood sees the homemade cross he has put on the grave of his son fall over, he picks up a gun from the charred ruins of his house (which has just been burnt down by the people who killed his wife and children) and starts shooting manically at a tree, one two three
four five six seven eight nine ten times, every shot ramming home his rejection of Christian forgiveness as a way of dealing with injury, and promising the audience more violence to come.

Exchanging the cross for the gun is a theme replayed countless times in Western films as part of an ongoing guerilla war against the church as an institution. Church congregations often appear, literally, on the margins of the screen, or just off-camera, in the form of small revival meetings whose only trace is the sound of a hymn—always “Shall We Gather at the River?” to which the answer is always implicitly: no. Sometimes a church building (or the thought of one) is present as the backdrop to a wedding celebration. In Warlock, the music we hear wafting our way from a wedding is not even a hymn but “Beautiful Dreamer,” and all we see of the wedding is a reception where Henry Fonda, playing the new marshal, meets the church organist (Dolores Michaels), who, though she opposes the violence he stands for, ends up by falling in love with him. Thus the church is peripheral even to the matters over which it presides, and these, in turn, are peripheral to the hero’s business—in the example cited, Wyatt Earp’s vendetta against the Clanton gang. In High Noon, which begins in church, the movement of the entire film—as if to compensate—is away from the sacramental moment of the protagonist’s marriage and toward the apocalyptic moment of his shoot-out: the sacrament the Western substitutes for matrimony. But in ridding itself of the authority of organized religion and the belief structure it represents, the Western elaborates its own set of counterrituals and beliefs.

The need to dispose of the corpses which the genre’s love affair with death generates affords opportunities for some of its more laconic putdowns of Christianity, incidents which seem innocent enough, but are riddled with metaphysical intent. In Red River, as the tyrannical leader of a cattle drive (John Wayne) mutters, with obvious disrelish, an ever more perfunctory “the Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away” over the bodies of men he has killed on the trail, we are supposed to perceive the ridiculousness of believing in a divine Providence which has obviously had no part in deciding the fate of these poor chumps, and to recognize instead the power of one strong-willed, almost superhuman man. This message about the bootlessness of belief in “the Lord” becomes even more succinct in Cowboy, where Glenn Ford, another cattle-drive leader, about to bury a man who has been killed accidentally, asks “Does anybody know the proper words?”—and no one replies.

These casual graveside episodes aren’t just burying Christianity, they are putting something else in its place. When Glenn Ford speaks over the grave of the fallen cowhand, he makes no reference to a deity or an afterlife or to religious notions of any kind. His speech is deliberately prosaic and uninspired: he says he doesn’t know why the man died when he did—it could have come in some other way, a Comanche, or his horse stepping in a prairie dog hole at night. “But” he concludes, “he was a good man with cattle and he always did the best job he could. I hope they can say as much for me some day.”

As a substitute for Christian burial, these words convey a straightforward meaning: there is no such thing as God (or if there is, we don’t know anything about him). What is real are objects in the physical world (cattle) and what counts is how good one is at dealing with them (“he was a good man with cattle”)—not just in any situation, but in the workplace, which is the place for doing one’s best (“and he always did the best job he could”). In the movie’s crucial scene, Jack Lemmon, a tenderfoot who wants to become a cowboy, proves himself by going alone into a cattle-car where the cattle are trampling each other and risks his life to pull them upright again. He is joined by Glenn Ford (the cowboy), who proves his loyalty to his comrade in doing so. A gloss on the burial episode, the incident shows both characters being good men with cattle and doing the best job they can, but it adds something more: the idea of comradeship. As a wise old codger has said earlier in the film: “A man has to have somethin’ besides a gun and a saddle. You just can’t make it all by yourself.” The ethic which the graveside and cattle-car scenes represent would take a long time to unfold; they are laconic—Westerns don’t trust language—but they speak volumes. Cowboy posits a world without God, without ideas, without institutions, without what is commonly recognized as culture, a world of men and things, where male adults in the prime of life find ultimate meaning in doing their best together on the job.

By this point it is clear that in getting rid of Christianity the West-
ern was ridding itself of a great deal else as well. If we recall the opening of *In His Steps*, the minister in his third floor study, the shabbily dressed man looking for work, the congregation of rich, important people, the main characters' inner struggles, it all contrasts as sharply as possible with the scenes I have been discussing: Company C dead in the long grass, Lassiter riding out of the hills, Venters getting back his guns, perfunctory prairie funerals. Why does the Western leave so much behind? Why does it welcome violence so much? Above all, why does it jettison the country's most pervasive, deep, and sustaining framework of beliefs? The clue, I think, lies further back in the nineteenth century, in the domestic "sentimental" novels that for so long dominated the cultural scene. The dispensation which the Western sets itself against is represented not so much by Sheldon and his contemporaries, who mark an era of transition, but by the writers who set the stage for them: Harriet Beecher Stowe, Susan Warner, Maria Cummins, and the dozens of other women whose work had such a profound effect on American values and mores before and after the Civil War.

In their books, a woman is always the main character, usually a young orphan girl, with several other of the main characters being women too. Most of the action takes place in private spaces, at home, indoors, in kitchens, parlors, and upstairs chambers. And most of it concerns the interior struggles of the heroine to live up to an ideal of Christian virtue—usually involving uncomplaining submission to difficult and painful circumstances, learning to quell rebellious instincts, and dedicating her life to the service of God through serving others. In these struggles, women give one another a great deal of emotional and material support and have close relationships verging on what today we would identify as homosocial or homoerotic. There's a lot of Bible reading, praying, hymn singing, and drinking of tea. Emotions are expressed very freely and openly. Often, there are long-drawn-out death scenes, in which a saintly woman dies a natural death at home.

The elements of the typical Western plot arrange themselves in stark opposition to this pattern not just vaguely and generally, but point for point. First of all, Westerns are always written by men. The main character is always a full-grown adult male, and almost all the other characters are men. The action takes place either out-of-doors—on the prairie, on the main street—or in public places—the saloon, the sheriff's office, the barber shop, the livery stable. The action concerns physical struggles between the hero and a rival or rivals, always culminating in a fight to the death with guns. In the course of these struggles the hero frequently forms a bond with another man—sometimes his rival, more often a comrade—a bond which is more important than any relationship he has with a woman and is frequently tinged with homoeroticism. There is very little free expression of the emotions. The hero is a man of few words who expresses himself through physical action—usually fighting. And when death occurs it is never at home in bed but always sudden death, usually murder. Finally, nature, which has played only a small role in the domestic novel where it is always pastoral and benign, looms very large in the Western, where it is grand, monumental, dwarfing the human figure with its majesty, the only divinity worshipped in this genre, other than manhood itself.

This point for point contrast between a major popular form of the twentieth century and the major popular form of the nineteenth is not accidental. The Western answers the domestic novel. It is the antithesis of the cult of domesticity that dominated American Victorian culture. The Western hero, who seems to ride in out of nowhere, in fact comes riding in out of the nineteenth century. And every piece of baggage he doesn't have, every word he doesn't say, every creed in which he doesn't believe has been deliberately jettisoned. What isn't there in the Western hasn't disappeared by accident; it isn't there because it has been repudiated or repressed. The surface cleanliness and simplicity of the landscape, the story line, the characters, derive from the genre's will to sweep the board clear of encumbrances. And of some encumbrances more than others. If the Western deliberately rejects evangelical Protestantism, and pointedly repudiates the cult of domesticity, it is because it seeks to marginalize and suppress the figure who stood for those ideals.

If you look back over the scenes I have cited, there are no women present in any of them, except the one from *Riders of the Purple*
Sage which openly dramatizes what most Western novels and movies have already accomplished and repressed: the destruction of female authority. Repeating the pattern of the domestic novels in reverse, Westerns either push women out of the picture completely or assign them roles in which they exist only to serve the needs of men.

At first, a woman will often seem independent, as in Gunfight at the OK Corral (1957), where Rhonda Fleming plays a lady gambler (Laura Dembo), daring, clever, vaguely aristocratic, whom Burt Lancaster (Wyatt Earp) wants to get rid of because she’s trouble. He ends up courting her, lukewarmly, as, in the course of the film, she becomes more and more demure—as is suitable for the marshal’s future consort. But toward the end, when she asks him to stay with her, he can’t; he has to go help his brother, a marshal who’s having trouble in another town.

The love affair never goes anywhere and occupies only a small part of the footage because the person Wyatt Earp really loves is Doc Holliday, another gambler and troublemaker, whom he had also tried to get rid of at the beginning of the movie. Thus, the Laura Dembo character is both an extension of Wyatt Earp (as she starts to wear high-necked, long-sleeved blouses she gets more and more like him, a straight-arrow, letter-of-the-law type); yet at the same time, as gambler and troublemaker, she is a screen for Doc Holliday, an alibi the movie supplies Wyatt Earp with so that his love for Doc won’t mark him as “queer.” Either way, she’s the shadow of a more important male. Female “screen” characters, who are really extensions of the men they are paired with, perform this alibi function all the time, masking the fact that what the men are really interested in is one another. Western novels and movies not only tell stories that stem from the positions men occupy in the social structure, and tell them from the man’s point of view, they concentrate on male-male relationships, downplaying or omitting altogether those areas and times of life when women are important in men’s lives.

In doing so, they also suppress what women stand for ideologically. Near the beginning of The Searchers (1956), after a woman and her older daughter have been raped and murdered and a younger daughter carried off by Indians, Ethan Edwards (John Wayne), who is heading up the search party, is addressed by an older woman, who says: “Don’t let the boys waste their lives in vengeance.” He doesn’t even dignify her words with an answer, and the movie chronicles the seven years he and his adopted nephew spend looking for the lost girl. In this story, as in many Westerns, women are both the motive for male activity (it’s women who are being avenged, it’s a woman the men are trying to rescue) at the same time that what women stand for—love and forgiveness in place of vengeance—is precisely what that activity denies. Time after time, the Western hero commits murder, usually multiple murders, in the name of making his town/ranch/mining claim safe for women and children. But the discourse of love and peace which women articulate is never listened to (sometimes the woman who represents it is actually a Quaker, as in High Noon and Cheyenne Autumn), for it belongs to the Christian worldview the Western is at pains to eradicate. Indeed, the viewpoint women represent is introduced in order to be swept aside, crushed, or dramatically invalidated. Far from being nugatory or peripheral, women’s discourse, or some sign of it, is a necessary and enabling condition of most Western novels and films. The genre’s ideological plot depends upon an antithetical world of love and reconciliation both as a source of meaning—it defines the male code of violent heroism by opposition—and as a source of legitimation. The women and children cowering in a background of Indian wars, range wars, battles between outlaws and posses, good gunmen and bad, legitimize the violence men practice in order to protect them.

Yet at the same time, precious though they presumably are since so much blood is shed to save them, their lives are devalued by the narrative, which focuses exclusively on what men do. Westerns pay practically no attention to women’s experience. Nor could they. When women wrote about the West, the stories they told did not look anything like what we know as “the Western.” Their experience as well as their dreams had another shape entirely, as scholars like Annette Kolodny have begun to show.16

Now, the question is, why should this de-authorization of women have occurred? Why are Westerns so adamantly opposed to anything female? What, in the history of the country at the turn of the century, could have caused this massive pushing away of the female, domestic, Christian version of reality?
The answer to this question must lie partly in a story of counterviolence, a story I will not be telling here: in the violence of women towards men, in whatever suppression of male desire and devaluation of male experience followed from women's occupying the moral high ground of American culture for most of the previous century. The discourse of Christian domesticity—of Jesus, the Bible, salvation, the heart, the home—had spread from horizon to horizon in the decades preceding the Western's rise to fame. And so, just as the women's novels which captured the literary marketplace at mid-century had privileged the female realm of spiritual power, inward struggle, homosociality, and sacramental household ritual, Westerns, in a reaction that looks very much like literary gender war, privilege the male realm of public power, physical ordeal, homosociality, and the rituals of the duel.

But Westerns arise in response to phenomena that are not only cultural and literary. During the period immediately preceding their emergence on the national scene, the role and status of women in American society was changing rapidly. In the decades after the Civil War, there was a massive movement of women out of the home and into public life. Aptly termed "social home-making," the movement was inspired by women's participation in antebellum reform activities, which had been centered on church and home.

We hear "A woman's place is at home" [wrote Carry Nation, one of the great reformers of the post-Civil War era]. That is true but what and where is home? Not the walls of a house. Not furniture, food or clothes. Home is where the heart is, where our loved ones are. If my son is in a drinking place, my place is there. If my daughter, or the daughter of anyone else, my family or any other family, is in trouble, my place is there. [A woman would be either selfish or cowardly if she] would refuse to leave her home to relieve suffering or trouble. Jesus said, "Go out into the highways and hedges." He said this to women, as well as men.17

During the reform era, millions of women involved themselves in socially improving activities outside the home.

Among the issues they addressed were prohibition of alcoholic beverages; ending prostitution; sterilization of criminals; improvement of prisons; physical education for girls and boys; sex education as a means of ending "vice"; pure food laws and the cleaning up of food-processing plants; child labor; public sewers; antitrust laws; tax reform; public utilities: wiping out political machines; vocational training for girls and boys; good nutrition; free libraries; parks and recreation; protecting historical landmarks; public transportation, and peace.18

This list may seem exhaustive but to it can be added: working with the immigrant populations in the inner city (Jane Addams and the Settlement House movement); agitation for Indian rights; the founding of schools of higher education for women (this was the era when the women's Ivy League colleges were established); the women's labor movement—the forming of women's groups within already existing unions and the founding of the ILGWU; and, of course, most famous of all, the suffrage movement which ended in 1920 with women getting the vote.

Among the factors that allowed for this greater activity in the public sphere were a decrease in the birth rate and changes in the technology of housekeeping which made an enormous difference in the amount of time and energy women had available for work outside the home.19 While it is true that the industrialization and urbanization responsible for these improvements also created the conditions of overcrowding and dehumanized labor that men wanted to escape by dreaming of a home on the range, and that a huge and ethnically diverse population badly split along class lines needed a classless male hero who could stand for "everyone," and while it is also true that the militarism excited by the war with Spain, and the popularity of survival-of-the-fittest philosophies could be said to have produced the impetus for the Western, these standard notions of where Westerns came from do not recognize that the circumstances they cite refer almost exclusively to men and men's experience. What I want to argue specifically here is the idea that the Western owes its essential character to the dominance of a women's culture in the nineteenth century and to women's invasion of the public sphere between 1880 and 1920.

For most of the nineteenth century the two places that women could call their own in the social structure were the church and the
home. The Western contains neither. It is set in a period and in an environment where few women are to be found and where conditions are the worst possible for their acquiring any social power: a technology and a code of justice both of which required physical strength in order to survive. Given the pervasiveness and power of women's discourse in the nineteenth century, I think it is no accident that men gravitated in imagination toward a womanless milieu, a set of rituals featuring physical combat and physical endurance, a *mise en scène* that when it did not reject culture itself, featured, prominently, whiskey, gambling, and prostitution—three main targets of women's reform in the later years of the nineteenth century. Given the enormous publicity and fervor of the Women's Christian Temperance Union crusade, can it be an accident that the characteristic indoor setting for Westerns is the saloon?

Most historians explain the fact that Westerns take place in the West as the result of the culture's desire to escape the problems of civilization. They see them as a return to the concept of America as a frontier wilderness and as a reenactment of the American dialectic between civilization and nature. My answer to the question, why does the Western take place in the West, is, the West was a place where technology was primitive, physical conditions harsh, the social infrastructure nonexistent, and the power and presence of women proportionately reduced. The Western doesn't have anything to do with the West as such. It isn't about the encounter between civilization and the frontier. It is about men's fear of losing their hegemony and hence their identity, both of which the Western tirelessly reinvents.

Notes

2. Ibid., 56.
3. Ibid., 59.
4. Ibid., 56.
5. It is a mistake, I think, to try to assimilate novels by Zane Grey and Louis L'Amour, and movies starring John Wayne and Clint Eastwood, to a literary "leatherstocking tradition" starting with Cooper and ending with *Lonesome Dove*. Western novels as we now know them—not dime novels but the kind that sold as books—became best-sellers at the beginning of the twentieth century, at the same moment when Western movies began to be shown in theaters. While the novels of James Fenimore Cooper, the dime novels of the 1860s and 1870s, and the novels of Charles King in the 1880s had some elements in common—rescue plots, for example, and frontier settings—the earlier forms had nothing like the consistency that marks popular Western novels and movies since the turn of the century. The Western as a cultural force makes its appearance with the publication of Owen Wister's *The Virginian* in 1902 and the screening of Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* in 1903. At this moment, from being one among many popular forms, it becomes central. And it disappears, for all practical purposes, at another moment—some time in the mid-to-late 1970s, when Westerns were supplanted at the box office (though not yet at the bookstalls) by horror and science fiction movies. The fact that the seventy-five-year period during which Westerns flourished coincides with America's dominance as a world power suggests that the genre is intimately tied to the country's sense of itself, both politically and psychologically.
7. Ibid., 59.
8. It is not really fair to single out Etulain for holding such attitudes; nor do all the historians he cites in his notes share them equally. I am using his essay to demonstrate that there is more than a superficial similarity between the values the Western promotes, on the one hand, and those that historians assume, on the other.
10. Ibid., vi.
12. Although *The Virginian*, which appeared ten years earlier, satirizes the church in its devastating portrait of a self-important clergyman, the novel never really takes Christianity seriously, as though its hash had already been settled.
15. Ibid., 301.
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