

MAPPING MEN: TOWARDS A  
THEORY OF MATERIAL  
MASCULINITIES

by

DAVID R. WALLACE, JR.

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Abstract

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David R. Wallace, Jr., PhD

The University of Texas at Arlington, 2013

Supervising Professor: Stacy Alaimo

This project interrogates the possibilities of material gender theory as an interdisciplinary bridge between critical theory--like gender studies and eco-criticism--and soft-scientific men's studies. The primary theoretical argument of Mapping Men is for a re-theorizing of men's studies' social-constructionist models of masculinity in light of more contemporary critical queer and feminist theories of materiality. I assert that 19th, 20th, and 21st century American literature about rurality and masculinity highlights the unmapped, material middle-spaces (what post-structural feminist Rosi Braidotti calls the "in between") between socially-constructed theories of gender and the subjective, embodied experience of being male in rural places. Using an interdisciplinary body of scholarship, I illustrate how the historical literary cartography of American rural masculinity highlights the gender dichotomies and social injustices that arise from a retrograde reliance on socially-constructed models of hegemonic masculinity; and I argue for a material gender re-theorization.

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Chapter 1  
Hegemonic Topographies: Remapping Hegemonic Masculinities

We are men.

Jabari Greer,

2012

I am a man. I am a brother, a son, a father. I am a lover, partner, and caregiver; provider and disciplinarian. I am bread-winner, friend, and fixer. I am boo-boo kisser and hand-holder; teacher; student; taskmaster; and playmate. I am a man of multiple cultures, of the Third World and the First. I have spent time working in restaurant kitchens, in the West Texas/Eastern New Mexico oil fields, on construction sites and almost as much of my life as a teacher and scholar. I can swear like a sailor and drink most of my friends under the table, but I've been taught Victorian table manners and am highly educated. As a doctoral graduate student and career-academic, I live with my son on a subsistence salary in cheap (or, perhaps, "slum" would be a better word) housing, yet because of my education, I am always welcome in social classes "above" my own. As a child, I went to a private school, and was raised with servants, but I do my own shopping and cook my own food, wash my own dishes and scrub my own toilets. I pee, usually, standing up. If you kick me in the groin, I *will* go down. I will, like most men, likely have prostate issues as I get older. I am equally conversant in Christian theology and in the esoterica of philosophy and critical theory. I can play a song on my guitar or perform an exegesis of its lyrics. I am as comfortable at a gathering of hippies as I am drinking cheap beer in a country bar (or, for that matter, a soda at a church picnic).

I am ambiguous. I am a man whose identity is comprised of seemingly endless contradictions, from differing and often conflicting worlds—some worlds almost devoid of



the culturally-mediated construction of American masculinities; other worlds completely and utterly rife with it. I am decidedly heterosexual, but still find myself flattered by the attention of gay men, good friends with many, and perfectly comfortable recognizing beauty regardless of sex. I have tattoos and (perhaps even try to) look intimidating sometimes, but I am emotional and often wear my feelings on my sleeve. I can posture, and if necessary I can put up a fight, yet I can't remember the last time I had a physical confrontation. I can, however, remember (often in frustrated humility) the lengths I've gone to in order to avoid one. I am a child of my parents' divorce and the instigator of my own. I "suffer" from male-pattern baldness. I do not babysit my son; I parent. I am a confusion of experiences and impressions and idealizations, of good and bad choices, of conflicting theories, spiritual beliefs, and material realities. I am, in short, a *masculinity*.

I am a man and a masculinity and it is from this perspective that the following study of American male masculinities initially comes. The theoretical debate to which I am adding my voice—men's studies' key terms and concept, *hegemonic masculinities*—is one that has gone largely unnoticed outside of the discipline-specific study of *men* itself; nevertheless, it is a crack in the aging theoretical architecture of contemporary scholarship about men and one I intend to exploit. In order to do so, I propose this dissertation as the beginnings of an inclusive interdisciplinary cartography for movement between contemporary gender theory and the theoretical conceptualization of white male masculinities which primarily define men's studies as a discipline today. Because my theoretical foundation for this project is material gender theory, as I shall explain more fully below, I envision its trajectory as the first surveys for a map of heretofore unmapped spaces. The project as a whole is, as material gender theorist Rosi Braidotti writes, "a sort of intellectual landscape gardening that gives me a horizon, a frame of reference within which I can take my bearing, move about, and set up my own theoretical tent"

(*Nomadic* 16). And it is, ultimately and theoretically, a cartography of my own subjectivity. Before going any further, however, I need to make a simple yet important distinction.

As a field of study, critical masculinities studies falls under the purview of more general gender scholarship that takes under consideration the affective and effective performances of masculinities not only by and on men, but by and on women and transgendered subjects as well. *Men's* studies, by contrast, is concerned primarily with the socially-constructed nature of the performances of hegemonic masculinities embodied in biologically male subjects. Defined thusly, men's studies—though it adds its voice to the general theoretical conversation about the social-construction and cultural maintenance of masculinities—remains a distinct discipline in its own right, with its own discipline-specific history and theoretical terminology. It is this terminological and theoretical conceptualization of masculinities within men's studies in particular with which I take issue here.

My claim in this chapter, and in this dissertation more broadly, is that the hook upon which most men's studies scholarship still hangs its conceptual hat—*hegemonic masculinity*—is no longer a viable theoretical concept insofar as it is inadequate to define the heterogeneous masculinities—the fragmented and multi-faceted identities—of men in the twenty-first century. In its most contemporary social-constructionist articulations—predicated on *a priori* assumptions about the culturally discursive nature of gender—hegemonic masculinity has been pluralized and theorized as, for example, “poly-hegemonic masculinities” (Sheff 623); as a diversity of masculine hegemonies (*Understanding Men* 3-6); as “multi-optional masculinities” (*Confronting Equality* 18); as hegemonic systems of subordinated masculinities (*Masculinities and Crime* 82-3); or differentiated from the seminal “hegemonic masculinity” simply by exchanging the

singular term “masculinity” for its pluralized form (*Hegemonic Masculinities* 36). As I will describe later, my discomfort with men’s studies’ most contemporary and popularized terminological and theoretical tools is, like that of a growing number of other scholars, based in both the terminology and concept. I contend that *hegemony*—as a term used to describe the geographically specific and historically differentiated material experiences of male masculinities in the twenty-first century—is both a historically and etymologically reductive term and a static, representationally inadequate concept. Addressing in particular the men’s studies category of *rural masculinities*, I argue in the following project for a change in the foundational, discipline-specific terminology of men’s studies scholarship and for a re-theorizing of male masculinities themselves.

Men’s studies’ conceptualizations of gender have, for the most part, lagged approximately ten years behind the two most often articulated theoretical waves of feminist studies. By this token, men’s studies has historically had the benefit of following a trail already blazed. Given that feminist theory has not remained static in the time it has taken for men’s studies to articulate its most recent social-constructionist theories of gender, I see no reason to do anything but to continue to follow its trail, and so I navigate the following interrogation of hegemonic masculinity with the terminological and conceptual cartography already suggested by feminist studies within the last ten to fifteen years. I propose the term and concept, *material masculinities*. Over the course of this project, I address three “landmarks” from which to begin a foray into this heretofore unmapped territory—historical and geo-political place association, conflicted material becoming, and material masculinities co-inscription with non-human environments. I suggest material masculinities as an alternative to contemporary theories of socially-constructed masculinities—as a conceptual, cartographic tool for navigating the terrain of

twenty-first century male masculinities—and I offer up contemporary American literature as but one of men's studies' many available cultural maps.

As a means of providing a theoretical framework for the literary analyses that comprise the majority of this dissertation, I contend in the next section that men's studies' theoretical history mirrors feminist studies' own historical theoretical movements (or waves)—from gendered essentialism to the idea of socially-constructed gender to, most recently (though far less prolifically than in feminist studies), more broadly inclusive interrogations of barely-surveyed and minimally-theorized middle-spaces between the other two exhaustively differentiated conceptualizations of gender creation. Diane Fuss defines essentialism as “a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the ‘whatness’ of a given entity. In feminist theory, the idea that men and women, for example, are identified as such on the basis of transhistorical, eternal, immutable essences has been unequivocally rejected by many anti-essentialist poststructuralist [social-constructionist] feminists concerned with resisting any attempts to naturalize human nature” (xi). By contrast, when I refer to *hegemonic masculinity*—or any of its more contemporary, pluralized variations—I understand it as a social-constructionist theory of gender. Social-constructionist gender theory is the concept that gender—e.g., masculinity/femininity—is entirely discursive. Judith Butler, one of social-constructionist feminism's more popular voices, defines gender as such when she writes that it “would make no sense, then, to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, if sex itself is a gendered category. Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pregiven sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established” (10). In contrast to essentialism, social-construction is a concept of embodied, encultured, and historically unique performances of gender normativity. Diane

Fuss asserts that social-constructionism was “articulated in opposition to essentialism and concerned with its philosophical refutation, [and that it] insists that essence is itself a historical construction” (2). Social-constructionists argue that even essence itself is politically and socially constructed and are thus motivated towards a theoretical reaction against biological essentialism.

My own theoretical framework for this project, *material masculinities*, is premised in more recent feminist criticism that recognizes the interdependence of essentialist modes of thinking and the socially-construction of gender. Material gender theory is but one of an increasing number of theoretical approaches which explore alternatives to the binaries expressed in both essentialist and social-constructionist modes of thinking. Before I go any further, however, a caveat: I acknowledge from the start that the dividing lines I’ve drawn between these three theoretical movements—all of which I will refer to further either explicitly or by implication in the rest of this project—are not nearly as clear-cut as I have suggested they are. No theoretical movement has a precisely determined beginning or ending point; instead, each is conceptualized in reaction to and in conjunction with its predecessors, with all the chronological and critical overlap that interaction entails. As Fuss points out, “social constructionists do not definitively escape the pull of essentialism, [...] indeed essentialism subtends the very idea of constructionism” (5). Discussions of this sort, however, present significant challenges because “theoretical reason is concept-bound and fastened on essential notions [which] makes it difficult to find adequate representations for processes, fluid in-between flows of data, experience and information” (*Metamorphoses* 2). Theoretical interrogation is, at best, a difficult proposition simply because the terms we use to signify our concepts of gender are, from the moment they are uttered, inadequate to the task of accounting for the diversity of human and other-than-human interactions and

interconnections; of subjective, embodied, chronologically-specific experiences of gender; of the unique, geo-politically locative, culturally-embedded discursive construction of gendered normativity; or of the varied interdisciplinary contexts within which the theories themselves are applied.

Even so, if I am to take part in the discipline-specific conversation already taking place about men's studies' currently most broadly conceptualized and widely debated theoretical term—hegemonic masculinities—I am forced to use its deceptively delineating terminology in spite of the inherent representational limitations. Thus, I use the unavoidably reductive terms *male* or *essentialist*; *hegemonic masculinity* or *social-constructionist*; and *material* as a means of making distinct what are ultimately three conceptually interdependent and historically entangled theories of gender. Despite the inevitable limitations, it is nevertheless this three-tiered conceptual movement—from essentialist modes of thinking to interrogations of the cartographic, spatially-oriented, and always fluid “in-betweens” (*Metamorphoses* 2) between essentialist and social-constructionist theories of gender—that not only (reductively) defines the theoretical history of both masculinities and feminist studies, but which also informs the organizational structure of the remainder of this chapter and the theoretical lens for this project as a whole.

With this pre-existing feminist historical cartography as a template, in this introductory chapter, I outline the “essentials” of the theoretical history of men's studies itself. In other words, I begin in this chapter with a rudimentary cartography of men's studies scholarship's own theoretical movement from its essentialist beginnings to the social-constructionist theory of hegemonic masculinity that typifies it today. I follow this (necessarily) brief historical introduction with an interrogation of what I contend are the two primary difficulties with the theory of hegemonic masculinity—i.e., its etymologically-

weighted and retrograde terminology and the inevitable dichotomies that arise from social-constructionist theories of gender. I argue that rural men's studies is a primary example of these difficulties, and I suggest material masculinities as a theoretical solution. I argue that material masculinities offers an alternative to a no longer viable theory of hegemonic masculinity because it equally emphasizes *both* the material realities of geographically and chronologically-specific, subjective embodiment *and* the cultural discursivity of gender and gender normativity in local, regional, and global contexts.

In the second to last section of this chapter, I argue that contemporary American literature—as a “fictional terrain, a reterritorialization that has passed through several versions of deterritorialization to posit a powerful theory of location based on contingency, history, and change” (Kaplan 198)—offers innumerable sites for cartographic literary interrogations of the material and discursive intersections between the social construction of masculinity and material subject. I close the chapter with an outline of the course of literary study I propose to follow for the remainder of the project. As the first step towards a theory of material masculinities, then, I begin with the essentials.

### 1.1 From Head to Toe

Both the term and the concept of hegemonic masculinity have recently proven fertile ground for contention among men's studies scholars and it is impossible to take part in the contemporary debates about male masculinities without using or at least confronting the concept. Insofar as the concept of hegemonic masculinity in its multiple re-articulations provides the theoretical foundation upon which most scholarship about masculinities in the field of men's studies stands, it is first necessary to define the term as I intend to confront and complicate it in this project. As a means of doing so, I describe the conceptual movement of men's studies from its somewhat undefined essentialist

beginnings to its current social-constructionist, hegemonic perspectives of the creation of male masculinities and finally—and more recently, due in large part to the growing interdisciplinary nature of the field—to more inclusive terminologies and theoretical stances typified by theories like nomadic, cyborg, or new material feminisms. As I have already suggested, it is within this third theoretical framework that I position my own argument.

The theoretical study of men, of masculinities, and of the patriarchal power structures they represent began as a subject of feminist women's studies during the second-wave, essentialist feminist movement in the late-1960s/1970s.<sup>1</sup> Peter Murphy, in his introduction to the essay collection, *Feminism and Masculinities*, writes that the study of masculinities arises out of this movement. He asserts that although male-authored, pro-feminine works have a 2500 year history, it is only recently, since the early 1970s, that men have "turn[ed] the feminist lens upon themselves as men" (9). Murphy credits Simone De Beauvoir for creating the category of women as "Other," thereby providing a foundation not only for further feminist study, but also for the study of masculinity as the "Other-ing" gender construction (8). In short, his argument is that the essentialist feminist

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of some of the influential and preeminent feminist theorists from the second-wave who take up the fight against patriarchal power structures as a concept—and who, by doing so, provided the initial critical lenses by which feminist men's studies scholars began to interrogate themselves as men—though historically important to this discussion, are ultimately outside of its scope. It is not my intention here to provide a co-contextual history of feminisms and men's studies but to point, instead, to the parallel theoretical course men's studies has followed as a means of clarifying, however reductively, its theoretical history. Nevertheless, for further reading about the essentialist theories propagated by second-wave feminist theorists and feminism's movement into its third, social-constructionist wave, I would suggest—as an overview—Diane Fuss's *Essentially Speaking* and—for more theorist-specific arguments, the writings of Simone De Beauvoir—who argues that "One is not born, but becomes a woman" (249)—and Luce Irigaray—who, in her movement towards the social-constructionist viewpoint typified by Judith Butler and Hélène Cixous, argues that "*the feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by males subjects*. Which implies that there are not really two sexes, but only one" (86).



movement catalyzed in feminist men the need for a study of the changing nature of masculinity, especially given changing gender roles and expectations that came about with women's suffrage and wartime occupations.

Though men's studies did not begin to differentiate itself as a "categorical" discipline until the early to mid-1980s, it is nonetheless safe to say, as Murphy does, that its current social-constructionist stance is founded, roughly like its feminist parallel, in essentialist gender theory. Murphy argues that it was the second-wave feminist movement that gave men's studies its theoretical impetus. Raewyn Connell and James Messerschmidt agree with Murphy and write that the "most basic sources [of theory in feminist men's studies] were feminist theories of patriarchy and the related debates over the role of men in transforming patriarchy" (831). Connell and Messerschmidt argue, furthermore, that in its embryonic stage, men's studies' theoretical essentialism is perhaps best exemplified by its psychoanalytic critiques of male gender roles and the role they play in the political and social subordination of women, people of color, and people occupying the lowest economic tiers in the social structure (831)—that is to say, in the domination and control of de Beauvoir's "Others." As I will more explicitly address in a moment, it is precisely in response to the essentialist idea of "male sex roles" that the term 'hegemonic masculinity' was first "integrated into [the] systematic sociological theory of gender" (Connell and Messerschmidt 830) that now typifies contemporary men's studies.

At the time that second-wave feminism was beginning to make its significant theoretical in-roads, however, there were very few men participating in the academic essentialist definition of and political and social struggle against patriarchal power structures. As Sandra Bartky writes,

the Second Wave feminism of the late sixties and seventies emerged and grew strong and confident in an environment where men were

largely excluded. While intersections of race and class inflected this environment in important ways, and while there was sometimes acceptance of an “exceptional” male, an undercurrent of separatism characterized much of feminism. Consciousness-raising groups were for women only; women debated and enacted forms of political struggle with one another, but against men, at least against male-dominated institutions and practices. (xi)

Because essentialist gender theory is premised “in the gender binary that is typical of patriarchal cultures, according to which every (or almost every) human is rigorously confined within one of two mutually exclusive categories, man or woman” (Digby 2), and because essentialist feminists saw all (save “exceptional”) men as representatives of the academic, religious, social, and political institutions that subordinated them, men “doing feminism” were (and still often are) regarded with suspicion. As Tom Digby explains, feminists’ skepticism about men who took up the political and social fight against the masculine domination and subordination of women arose from an essentialist definition of “manhood [as] not just [...] different from, but as opposite and opposed to womanhood.” Thus, men in general were “expected to resist feminism” (Digby 2); While most did, there was still a growing number of men who actively gave their intellectual and material support to the feminist cause, often at significant risk to their own occupational and/or social standing (Bartky xiii).

Despite the “undercurrent of separatism [that] characterized much of [essentialist] feminism,” essentialism nonetheless provided the seminal theoretical tools men needed to “turn the feminist lens upon themselves as men.” In other words, essentialism provided a bedrock from which men’s studies scholars could begin to address the inevitable social and political injustices that are part of an inherently dichotomous, patriarchal culture. By the same token, men’s studies as a unique discipline began, ostensibly and at least in part, as a necessary response to the “exclusionary” tactics of essentialist feminist scholars (which, to be fair, were entirely

necessary—and historically understandable—in and of themselves). Men—culturally aware for perhaps the first time of their own complicity in the construction of the power hierarchies of domination and control—saw a need to address the inequalities inherent in patriarchy and, excluded from feminist circles, provided their own intellectual outlet—men's (as opposed to women's) studies. Thus, by the mid-1980s, men's studies established itself as a unique discipline with its own discipline-specific terminology, defined primarily by research in the soft (sociological, psychological, political, and anthropological) sciences (*Understanding Men 2*).

As a discipline distinct from women's studies, men's studies can trace its inception to the articulation (and subsequent popularization) of its key theoretical concept—hegemonic masculinity—by preeminent sociologist and men's studies scholar Raewyn Connell in 1982. According to Michael Donaldson's well-articulated definition approximately ten years later, hegemonic masculinity

involves a specific strategy for the subordination of women. In [men's studies' most widely published scholar's] view, hegemonic masculinity concerns the dread of and flight from women. A culturally idealised [*sic*] form, it is both personal and a collective project, and is the common sense about breadwinning and manhood. It is exclusive, anxiety-provoking, internally and hierarchically differentiated, brutal and violent. It is pseudo-natural, tough, contradictory, crisis-prone, rich and socially sustained. While centrally connected with the institutions of male dominance, not all men practice it, though most benefit from it. Although cross-class, it often excludes working-class, gay, and black-men. It is a lived experience, and an economic and cultural force, and dependent on social arrangements. It is constructed through difficult negotiation over a life-time. Fragile it may be, but it constructs the most dangerous things we live with. Resilient, it incorporates its own critiques, but it is, nonetheless, 'unravelling' [*sic*]. (645-46)

Though it took some time for Donaldson's definition to develop in the field, Connell's seminal idea of hegemonic masculinity provided men's studies with a conceptual basis for the legitimization of itself as a discipline. Perhaps more importantly though, the

concept put a unifying theoretical face on an otherwise amorphous notion of masculinity and provided a foundation for the studies of masculinity that have followed.

At the time that Connell coined the concept of hegemonic masculinity, the term *hegemony* itself was already in wide use. First popularized in Western thinking in its articulation by Marxist political philosopher Antonio Gramsci to theorize systems of social class, hegemony described socio-political class systems in which those with an abundance of wealth and resources create and maintain cultural institutions which themselves create and maintain historical power structures. Furthermore, according to Gramsci, this hegemonic relationship is constantly and perpetually renewed by complex and changeable discursive, social, and political interactions. Furthermore, both those that subordinate and the subordinated are complicit in the construction of the institutions that maintain hegemonic power structures and thereby reify cultural, political, and social inequalities (Lester 1-14). According to Steve Jones, however, Gramsci's theory of hegemony was articulated not just as a theory-of-culture-as-such, but as a strategy for political resistance. That is, Gramsci defined his theory of hegemony as a means not only of identifying the power structures and institutions of domination and control in hegemonic cultures but also of emphasizing the subjective and differentiated cultural identities of subordinated social entities as a means of opening up lanes of communication—and subsequently co-operation—by which those marginalized groups might unite against political and social injustice (Jones 41). Since Gramsci popularized the term, *hegemony* has been appropriated (and misappropriated) by a growing number of disparate disciplines—from the soft sciences to the English humanities, from cancer research<sup>2</sup> to gender theory (Lester 4), and has come to mean, in its broadest articulation,

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<sup>2</sup> For example, scholarship like David Wall and Linda Kristjanson's article, "Men, Culture, and Hegemonic Masculinity: Understanding the Experience of Prostate Cancer," or

any system by which one social entity dominates its culture by the tacit discursive, political, and social consent of the marginalized groups it subordinates (Jones 43).

Men's studies is not exempt from hegemony's terminological and conceptual appropriation. When Connell coined the term and concept of hegemonic masculinity in 1982, he did so to describe the institutionalization of masculine hierarchies among teenage boys at an Australian high school. He argued, along with his co-authors, that hegemonic masculinity described the way that performative adherence to certain dominate masculine *types* determined placement within the power hierarchies of the high school, thus enforcing a limited worldview in which deliberate (or otherwise) lack of adherence to these "normative" masculinities equaled a subordinate role in adolescent social structures (Connell and Messerschmidt 830). In other words, Connell and his colleagues argued that hegemonic masculinity as it played out in the schoolyard was a hierarchy of masculine archetypes the adherence to or rejection of which determined both male and female subjects' position in the school's social hierarchy. Connell and his colleagues argued, furthermore, that this masculine hegemony was continually reified by the tacit agreement (a sort of resting on the *status quo*) by the students who represented dominate masculinities types and by those students who positioned themselves—or allowed themselves to be positioned—in socially subordinate roles.

As a newly minted theoretical concept, hegemonic masculinity argued that male masculinity occupied the same position in culture as Gramsci's ruling class. That is to say, male masculine power was "not assumed to be normal [...]; [but] it was certainly normative [...]. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the

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Juane Nancarrow Clarke's "Prostate Cancer's Hegemonic Masculinity in Select Mass Media Depictions (1974-1995)."

global subordination of women to men” (Connell and Messerschmidt 832). Hegemonic masculinity, at the time a radical way to describe cultural gender creation and interaction, was quickly adopted by men’s studies as a key sociological theory of gender creation. And, like any theory of gender worth its salt, just as quickly it began to garner criticism and to invite reconceptualization in light of new lines of critical inquiry and new avenues of, for instance, sociological, anthropological, and psychological research. Within three years of its utterance, hegemonic masculinity was adopted as *the* key theoretical model for men’s studies.

In 1985, together with his equally distinguished colleagues Bob Connell and John Lee, sociologist Tim Carrigan systematized hegemonic masculinity theory in an article—“Towards a New Sociology of Masculinity”—“which extensively critiqued the [psychoanalytical] ‘male sex role’ literature and proposed a model of multiple masculinities and power relations” (Connell and Messerschmidt 830). In brief, Carrigan and his colleagues suggested that hegemonic masculinity was almost entirely socially-constructed and that “male sex roles” were maintained not by a genetic, biological imperative but through three basic culturally discursive (and therefore consciously changeable) interactions. They argued that in its most elemental articulation, hegemonic masculinity was cyclically reified by persuasion (by, for example, political, religious, or economic coercion); by socially enforced, gendered divisions of labor; and by “the state” (114). Furthermore, they defined hegemonic masculinity as “a question of how particular groups of *men* [italics mine] inhabit positions of power and wealth, and how they legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance” (Carrigan et al. 112). Hegemonic (male) masculinity, they argued, preserves its cultural dominance through the culturally co-operative maintenance of social, economic, religious and political institutions that “reproduce the social relationships” (i.e.,

subordinator/subordinated) which, in turn, legitimate the continued exercise of that power. Carrigan, Connell, and Lee's systemization of hegemonic masculinity effected the popularization of the term, and the term and concept of hegemonic masculinity was "integrated into [the] systematic sociological theory of gender" (Connell and Messerschmidt 830) that defines men's studies today.

Men's studies' initial "critical lens" came about as a result of the women's rights movement and the feminist theory of the sixties and seventies. In the same way, men's studies' systemization as a field of study—a result of Carrigan et al.'s theoretical articulation of hegemonic masculinity—came about as a result of radically new conceptualizations of male masculinities. One of the most sweeping examples of this re-imagining of masculinity—and one that has, as Carrigan et al. argue, changed not only the face of men's studies but also of gender studies more catholically—is the emphasis on the "inter-masculine" hierarchies of subordination and domination highlighted by the gay rights movement and the queer theory that arose from it (109).

The essentialist notions of "male-ness" as equivalent to masculinity and an "impossible oppressive [hetero-normative] masculine image" as a cultural ideal amounted to what sociologist Michael Kimmel calls "a recipe for despair" (*Manhood* 185). "[Given] what it took to be a real man," he writes, "few, if any, men [can] live up to the image and hence all men [will] feel like failures as men" (*Manhood* 185). According to Kimmel, this ideal was particularly problematic for gay men, and from the beginning of the 1970s, it was against that ideal that gay liberation threw itself. He writes that the

gay liberation movement posited a strong riposte to the facile equation of homosexuality and masculine gender identity and made the counterclaim that gay men were as much "real" men as straight men. [...] Gay liberation signaled that gay men, too, could stake their claim for manhood. Together feminism, black liberation, and gay liberation provided a frontal assault on the traditional way that men had defined their manhood—against an other who was excluded from full humanity by being excluded from those places where men were real men. It was

as if the screen against which American men had for generations projected their manhood had suddenly grown dark, and men were left to sort out the meaning of masculinity all by themselves. (*Manhood* 184)

In other words, essentialist masculinity meant that being a (white) heterosexual male meant automatically enjoying the benefits of patriarchy and, of course, reduced gender to a set of male/Other dichotomies that ignored, de-emphasized, or sought to eradicate the experiences of any man who did not measure up to “normative” masculine standards. But the gay rights movement of the 1970s and the queer theory that arose from it in the late 1970s and early 1980s complicated the issue in significant ways.

In their articulation of hegemonic masculinity as “systematic sociological theory of gender,” Carrigan et al. argue that most significantly for men’s studies, gay activists and queer theorists

challenged the assumptions by which heterosexuality is taken for granted as the natural order of things [...and] emphasized that the institutionalization of heterosexuality, as in the family, was achieved only by considerable effort, and at considerable cost not only to homosexual people but also to women and children. (Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 109)

The effect of this argument was to emphasize masculine difference by suggesting that it is “precisely within heterosexuality as it is currently organized that a central dimension of the power that men exercise over women is to be found” (Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 109 ). The gay liberation movement questioned ingrained and encultured ideals of masculinity by questioning the very premise of essentialist thinking—that is, that “ideal” masculinity *and* heterosexuality are culturally normative and, therefore, men who did not meet those standards or position themselves in relation to them were seen as failed men (*Manhood* 185).

The queer theoretical perspective on the making of masculinities effected a re-imagining of masculinity as a multiplicity of socially-constructed, encultured, and performed *masculinities* that are the product of—to borrow from environmental historian



William Cronon's assertion about cultural definitions of American wilderness—"very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history" (69). Put another way, "the history of homosexuality obliges us to think of masculinity not as a single object with its own history but as being constantly constructed within the history of an evolving social structure, a structure of sexual power relations" (Carrigan et al. 110). Masculinity, according to Carrigan et al, is the result of a historical process which includes as much as excludes the wide variety of male, female, racial, or socio-economically subordinated Others against which masculinity is traditionally and historically set. By emphasizing the hetero/homo, normative/non-normative dichotomies inherent in social and cultural performances of masculinity, the gay liberation movement, the feminist movement, and the black liberation movement and the arguments and gender theories that arose from them forced masculinity studies to re-conceptualize hegemonic masculinity, "not as a 'male role,' but as a particular variety of masculinity to which [other varieties of masculinity] are subordinated" (Carrigan et al. 110). The result, at the end of this theoretical upheaval, was a new recognition first of masculinity as "a social struggle going on in a complex ideological and political field" (Carrigan et al. 110) and; second, of masculinity as hegemonic, diverse, and as historically and regionally specific—as a multiplicity of complex conscious and sub-conscious social, political, and cultural interactions.<sup>3</sup>

In much the same way that feminist theory and criticism birthed men's studies, queer theory helped move it out of a unified notion of masculinity and participated significantly in the re-definition of masculinity as an infinitely diverse hegemonic

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting, incidentally, that only four years after Connell coined 'hegemonic masculinity' and only one year after Carrigan et al. systematized 'hegemonic masculinity' as a model for a theory of socially-constructed gender, in 1986, homosexuality was removed from the DSM, psychiatry and psychology's taxonomy of mental health disorders.

plurality—as *masculinities* that are created, modified, maintained, and acceded to by any number of different cultural institutions and social groups—masculinities that are far more fluid and subject to material, cultural, and social influence and change than an essentialist concept of masculinity was able or intended to convey. Connell's coining of 'hegemonic masculinity' and Carrigan's subsequent systemization and popularization of the term (both of which followed the shift in cultural perspectives catalyzed by movements like the gay rights movement) had the effect both of distinguishing men's studies as a discipline in its own right, and also of moving men's studies theoretical stance soundly into the realm of social-construction. Connell states that

recent research on men and masculinities has moved beyond the abstractions of the "sex role" approach to a more concrete examination of how gender patterns are constructed and practiced. "Constructionist" research has used a range of social-scientific methods to explore the situationally formed gender identities, practices and representations of men and boys. The studies range from quantitative surveys [...] to close-focus ethnographies [...], life-history studies [...], studies of organizations [...] and cultural forms such as films, novels and plays [...]. (Understanding Men 2)

The "constructionist" stance is, as I've contented, precisely where men's studies finds itself today. One need only read the most recent scholarship by men's studies other most widely published and oft-cited scholars—scholars like Michael Kimmel, Hugh Campbell, Bob Connell, James Messerschmidt, or Richard Dyer, for example,—to further ascertain the wide spread use of 'hegemonic masculinity (or masculinities)' or to be made aware of the social-constructionist theory that undergirds it.

Often as not, however, it is the term hegemonic masculinity, rather than the concept(s) it is meant to convey, that is appropriated by an interdisciplinary community of scholars, by the media, by political campaigns, or just simply by the theoretically uninformed; in short, the term 'hegemonic masculinity' with all the etymological and historical weight it carries has become part of our cultural lexicon with all that those

(mis)appropriations and subjective definitions entail. Mired in the often unimaginative scientific empiricism of its primary practitioners, men's studies has, thus far, failed to wholly embrace the most recent theoretical leaps forward exemplified by third-wave feminist gender theories like Braidotti's nomadic feminism, the post-modern cyborg articulated by Donna Haraway, and the theories of materiality and embodiment in the work of material feminist Stacy Alaimo. Instead, most masculinities scholars have seen fit to content themselves with social-constructionist theories of hegemonic masculinity as foundational theoretical models of—rather than theoretical counterpoints to—contemporary concepts of gender and normativity.

Men's studies response to essentialist feminists' 'exclusionary' tactics was to distinguish itself from women's studies. This discipline-specificity took place in the early 1980s with the introduction of the term, hegemonic masculinity, and its wide spread appropriation by the majority of scholars doing 'men's studies.' Since then, however, one of men's studies greatest problems has been a willingness to reconceptualize itself with a more theoretically progressive theoretical terminology that makes it more readily accessible to scholars traditionally outside of the sociological discussions of men's studies scholarship, on the one hand. On the other hand, a theory of hegemonic masculinities propagates the very thing it studies. Re-theorizing men and masculinities would divest men's studies of its overt complicity in the propagation of a historically and thus inevitably and perpetually dichotomous hegemonic, patriarchal culture. In other words, men's studies has been practicing exclusionary tactics of its own. By situating itself within a framework of demographics and statistics, of case studies and historical 'objectivity,' men's studies has reduced the experience of men and their masculinities to a narration of observable phenomena and limited the study of male/masculine experience to a sort of scientific discursivity that under-emphasizes (or forgets altogether) the

moment-by-moment, contextual fluidity of geo-politically specific and historically-bound male masculinities.

## 1.2 Hegemonic Difficulties

As I see them, the two principal difficulties material masculinities must confront if it is to be useful—the first premised in the second—are, first, the linguistic and etymological weight of men’s studies’ social-constructionist terminology and, second, men’s studies’ theoretical “re-conceptualizations” of hegemonic masculinity that do little more than re-position the weight and reinforce the gendered binaries it is ostensibly means to confront. These two particular difficulties reflect the theoretical history of men’s studies and highlight the sort of critical contention I expect to encounter. Any theoretical attempt to push men’s studies off its hegemonic, socially-constructed pedestal must first confront these difficulties: contradictions that are most often based in historical tradition; out-dated, deterministic, and rigidly empiricist theoretical stances; and a basic unwillingness on the part of most of men’s studies scholarship to exchange tools dulled and made ineffective by overuse for ones freshly hammered out and sharpened. In this section I will discuss these difficulties in more detail.

The first difficulty, and the one (perhaps) most easily and directly addressed, is the key term, hegemonic masculinity. In 2005, when Raewyn Connell and James Messerschmidt published the article I’ve quoted from above, their own “database search reveal[ed] more than 200 papers that use the exact term ‘hegemonic masculinity’ in their titles or abstracts [...while papers] that use a variant, or refer to ‘hegemonic masculinity’ in the text, run to many hundreds” (830). My own cursory, ten-minute search of on-line databases, a mere seven years later, turned up a comparatively astonishing 2619 scholarly articles and 2409 scholarly books that either explicitly use or refer to the term hegemonic masculinity in one of the ways Connell and Messerschmidt describe. Whether

this incredible difference can be attributed to better technology and thus, to better on-line access to a greater number of sources or to a much increased use of the term in the last seven years is ultimately anyone's guess, but the point is the same; over the last three decades, the term "hegemonic masculinity" has arguably become *the* primary theoretical staple for men's/critical masculinities studies scholarship. I assert that from an etymological perspective, both the popular cultural and academic usage of the term continually reifies the very dichotomies—and, by extension, the social injustices those dichotomies enable—that it was initially intended to describe and dismantle. I understand the term hegemonic masculinity itself as misleading and as carrying a ponderous etymological weight that creates significant theoretical and agentic problems at the intersections of cultural ideas about gender and normativity and the material realities of subjectivity and social injustice.

Richard Howson speaks to this difficulty when he writes that the term hegemonic masculinity is by nature "axiomatic" and that "the principals that define its nature and ensure its continued existence transcend the concrete everyday life of people and become a dominative force through which the possibilities for social justice in gender are made profoundly problematic" (3). Howson asserts that the term revives the very gender dichotomies against which social-constructionism is ostensibly a reaction. He argues that hegemonic masculinity as it is conceived of in men's studies

works to emphasise [*sic*] the more passive and historically deterministic view of a hegemonic situation. More importantly, a consequence of this obfuscation is that hegemony and social justice are posited as mutually exclusive possibilities because the nature of hegemony is always one of singularity, homogeneity and closure around the dominant group's core principals, and where change occurs it does so only in spontaneous and ad hoc movements as a product of history. (5)

The upshot is that by simply using the term 'hegemonic masculinity,' with all the "singularity, homogeneity and closure around the dominant group's core principals" it

implies, the power structures it sought to and was successful at elucidating are *re-constructed* rather than dismantled as men's studies originally intended.

Though I agree with Howson up to a point, he is, like those of his ilk, a social-constructionist. His chief argument is with the term itself insofar as he asserts that it promotes a deterministic perspective of and passive response to the study of masculinities. That is say, the concept of hegemonic masculinities puts masculinities themselves at a distance from those who study them, behind a critical two-way mirror, as it were. He argues, as I do, that 'hegemonic masculinity' is inadequate to the task of describing twenty-first century masculinities. As a social-constructionist himself, however, Howson stops short of calling for a removal of the critical distance between men's studies and its subject; a critical distance that is, as I've said, the bread and butter of soft-scientific, social-constructionist men's studies and the key ingredient of its lack of interdisciplinarity. My argument, by contrast, tries to close that distance by making the assertion that there are limits to discursivity, that "hegemonic masculinities" can only go so far in accurately describing the concrete and physical, moment-by-moment material experience of negotiating manhood and masculinities. In other words, my argument is that any viable critical theory of masculinities *must* take into account male, *material* experiences of negotiating masculinities; not in place of interrogations of the socially and discursively constructed nature of male masculinities, but in tandem with them.

One quite recent example of men's studies' theoretical inertia is Todd Reeser's 2010 book, *Theorizing Masculinity*. Like Howson, a sociologist, Reeser, a literary critic, makes an attempt to propose a different course for men's studies scholarship. But, also like Howson, Reeser fails to go far enough. Howson argued for a re-conceptualizing of hegemonic masculinity. Reeser makes a bold attempt to bring men's studies into the realm of literary scholarship. Both, however, are dependent on theories of the theory of

social-construction to make their argument and fail, largely, to come to any agreement. In *Theorizing Masculinity*, Reeser cites Butler no fewer than twelve times (77, 78, 80, 81, 83, 87, 88, 88n, 141, 179, 217-18). Moreover, and perhaps not surprisingly, Reeser's attempt to theorize masculinities from a critical (as opposed to a soft-scientific) perspective is predicated on Butler's theories of gender performativity and the cultural inscription of gender on the (in Reeser's case, masculine) embodied subject (81, 89).

Like Howson, Reeser seems determined to maintain a terminology and/or theoretical stance that threaten to exacerbate the very problems they are meant to address; namely, that a closed system of hegemonic masculinities and their cultural constructions lie at the heart of society's ills. Despite (or maybe because of) the linguistic turns intended to highlight heterogeneity and "important cultural and social differences," contemporary men's studies finds itself in a position of discursively (re)creating the hegemony of masculinity that is traditionally the subject of its scholarship. Men's studies is, in other words, a closed, self-perpetuating system of study, the practice of which works in favor of the very political, social, and cultural ills against which critical masculinities scholars and feminist activists have been tirelessly working. Feminist critiques of social-construction and an emphasis on material and unique subjective embodiment threaten the observer-objectivity of men's studies and thus the ostensibly empirical and entirely discursive tradition of most contemporary men's studies scholarship. The upshot is that the discipline has come to resemble, in its hegemonic, social-constructionist theoretical stance, a sort of metaphorical, soft-scientific cocoon calcified by a concept of masculinities as discursively constructed types—and therefore

taxonomic—and unwilling (but perhaps not unable) to adapt to the changing trends in contemporary critical gender theory.<sup>4</sup>

While the term ‘hegemonic masculinity’ did paint an initially useful picture, it has since been appropriated so often and in so many contexts (academic and otherwise) that it has ceased to accurately describe newly burgeoning ways of thinking about gender or the significant cultural changes in attitudes about gender performance in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Of course, the term itself is not to blame; it merely represents a linguistic problem easily rectified by using a different term. Men’s studies scholars, however, troubled by what Howson calls the “deterministic” construction represented by the use of ‘hegemonic masculinity,’ have followed in the footsteps of social constructionists everywhere. Connell and Messerschmidt argue for a continued reconceptualization of the term, asserting that despite the historical nature of the multiple meanings it carries in a given context, hegemonic masculinity as term and concept remains the principal undergirding and guiding construct for men’s studies and is foundational “to the task of understanding and contesting the power of men” (Connell and Messerschmidt 836).<sup>5</sup> Instead of addressing social-constructionist claims that even

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<sup>4</sup> I should re-emphasize two things here: One is that when I talk about men’s studies, I am talking about the discipline itself, not just about the critical study of masculinities. Much phenomenal scholarship about masculinities has been produced by other scholars working in a variety of different fields, especially in feminist gender theory, and I do not mean to imply that the theoretical/critical study of masculinities in general falls necessarily under the same problematic super-ordinate, hegemony. The second thing I want to emphasize is that when I refer to a “men’s club” I do so metaphorically. I in no way intend to suggest that the only “real” masculinities scholarship is authored by men or that only men work in the discipline of men’s studies. What I mean to suggest by “men’s club” is that the theory of socially-constructed, discursive masculinities favored by most men’s studies scholars (again, discipline-specific) supports an out-dated model of masculinities as hegemonic and misrepresents (or fails to represent at all) the experiences of men who display “non-normative” masculinities. In other words, an emphasis on hegemony only serves to propagate it.

<sup>5</sup> This is perhaps understandable given that R.W. Connell himself co-authored the article in which the term was first coined.



*essence* is culturally discursive (Fuss 3), men's studies scholarship has responded to the problematics presented by the term 'hegemony' by pluralizing the term itself. There is not, in other words, a *hegemony*—instead, there are *hegemonies*; there is not a *masculinity*—instead, there are *masculinities*.

Men's studies' social-constructionist answer to the problem of the masculine monolith suggested by 'hegemonic masculinity' has been a linguistic admission that such a monolith does not actually exist but is, instead, a *plurality* of mini-monoliths still typified by masculine dominance and, by extension, the subordination of 'non-masculine' Others. Fuss describes this problem eloquently when she writes that it is

common practice in social constructionist argumentation to shift from the singular to the plural in order to privilege heterogeneity and to highlight important cultural and social differences. Thus, woman becomes women, history becomes histories, feminism becomes feminisms [, hegemonic masculinity becomes hegemonic masculinities,] and so on. While this maneuver does mark a break with unitary [essentialist] conceptual categories (eternal woman, totalizing history, monolithic feminism [, hegemonic masculinity]), the hasty attempts to pluralize do not operate as sufficient defenses or safeguards against essentialism. The plural category [masculine hegemonies,] for instance, though conceptually signaling heterogeneity nonetheless semantically marks a collectivity; constructed or not, [masculine hegemonies] still occupies the space of a linguistic unity. (Fuss 4)

Founded as it is in social-constructionism, men's studies—by continuing to use 'hegemony' or 'hegemonies,' 'masculinity' or 'masculinities'—reifies hegemonic models of masculinity rather than discerning and dismantling them. And this is the second problem.

For men's studies, moving past the social-constructionist theories of gender performance and enculturation popularized by feminist theorists like Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler and engaging with more contemporary and broadly inclusive theories of gender is not just a promise of new directions for study. New, more contemporary theoretical avenues for the interrogation of gender creation also promise what must

inevitably be an intense, ultimately uncomfortable and deconstructive meta-analysis of the discipline itself. Fuss argues that what social-constructionists have at stake are

systems of representations, social and material practices, laws of discourses, and ideological effects. In short, constructionists are concerned above all with the *production* and *organization* of differences, and they therefore reject the idea that *any* [italics mine] essential or natural givens precede the processes of social determination. (3)

There is perhaps no better description of men's studies soft-scientific, social-constructionist stance than this one. Fuss understands social-constructionism as a mode of thinking that is based entirely on the "*production* and *organization* of differences" and on "systems of representations, [...] laws of discourses, and ideological effects" limited only by the imaginative boundaries of social and cultural discourse. It is precisely these elements of social-constructionist argumentation upon which men's studies "systematic sociological theory of gender" is built.

It is within this landscape of produced and organized difference where men's studies is, in general, ontologically encamped. Rather than attempting to rectify differences and the political, gendered, racial and environmental injustice that arises from them, men's studies with its reliance on historically and theoretically retrograde notions about culture and gender continues to perpetually reproduce those differences. By using a term that is etymologically social-constructionist and by "[rejecting] the idea that any essential or natural givens precede the processes of social determination," men's studies discursively *constructs* arguments about male masculinities and hegemony and supports its assertions with 'empirical' evidence of its own equally discursive devising. Social-constructionist men's studies is, in other words, unabashedly complicit in the culturally discursive and theoretical creation of a gender-dichotomous market for what it has to sell, and thus it keeps itself in business. Perhaps no other subject of interrogation in men's

studies better highlights the complications associated with thinking about male masculinities as hegemonic as that of rural men's studies.

### 1.3 Paper Men with Weathered Skin

One example of the (over)diversification of hegemonic, American, and male masculinities, and the one that I have taken as my subject for this dissertation, is the classification *rural*. What makes "rural" masculinities interesting for me in the context of this study is the way that the term itself reifies a hegemonic ideal through a complex process of social-construction on the one hand and also suggests an intimate connection with other-than-human nature on the other. According to *Country Boys* editors Hugh Campbell, Michael Bell, and Margaret Finney, "country boys rule the world" (1). They argue that rural masculinities—the cowboy, the hunter, the lumberjack, the soldier—are prominent in all forms of American life—in the social, the political, and the economic construction of American masculinities and that "images and experiences of rural masculinity shape all of our lives" (3). As such, "rural" masculinities are an excellent place to begin to flesh out a theory of material masculinities insofar as rurality suggests non-human space and rural masculinities themselves, given their cultural prevalence, suggest a fluid, material ideal. That is to say, on the one hand, elements of rural masculinities are in evidence in all areas of American culture. They are political, economic, and social; they are rife in American literature, film, and other media; and they are enacted by men on local, regional, and global levels and transcend class and political bias. On the other hand, "rural" masculinities are intimately associated with other-than-human environments and as such serve as a natural bridge between objective empiricism and the subjectivity of material experiences.

Because they are so very present in American culture, an interrogation of rural masculinities from a material perspective is, in essence, an interrogation of American

masculinities more generally. The study of rural men which I exemplify and interrogate in the remainder of this project is an exceptionally appropriate place to begin to address the problems I've highlighted above for three reasons. First, rural men's studies scholarship is, by in large, social-constructionist and so representative of the field more generally. Second, rural men's studies highlights the discussion about 'hegemony' as the "popular conceptual hook upon which [men's studies] theorists hang related ideas about masculinity" (Campbell, Bell, and Finney 11) and to which I address the primary claim of this dissertation and this chapter. The delineation of the sub-discipline itself as the study of "rural masculinities" indicates a discomfort with the outright use of "hegemony" as an identifier for the subject. At first glance, this solves the first of the two problems I've outlined above. However, this change in terminology also suggests the second reason that rural men's studies proves to be such a fruitful site for investigation.

What the identifier "rural" amounts to is an example of a social-constructionist attempt to "*produce* [...] difference," to emphasize heterogeneity by further diversifying not only the subject of study, male masculinities, but the discipline itself. Said another way, by identifying itself as "rural men's studies," the study of rural masculinities constructs *another* category into which men fit or, alternatively, do not. Rural men's studies, despite its identifying label, remains firmly within the bounds of the social-constructionist understanding of gender creation that typifies scholarship about hegemonic masculinities and is, despite its emphasis on the "natural" world, still at odds with material gender theory. Hugh Campbell, Michael Bell, and Margaret Finney define the study of rural masculinities specifically (and men's studies more broadly) as study founded on "a socially constructed, [hegemonic] basis [for] masculinity" which concerns itself with "the role of history in constructing masculinities, [...] the continuing invisibility of masculinities [as a result of hegemony], the idea of plural or multiple masculinities,

[...and] the interaction between representations and practices of masculinity in all its multiple and relational forms” (11). Rural men’s studies’ foundational argument seeks to emphasize both homogeneity and difference by re-labeling (and labeling further) a social-constructionist discipline of study in order to acknowledge heterogeneity, rather than addressing the retrograde nature of the theoretical stance and the soft-scientific methodology it uses to produce and organize masculinities within a binary framework.

The third reason that rural masculinities and their academic and (in the case of my own subject of analysis) literary articulations provide such a profitable avenue for the interrogation of both men and men’s studies is drawn directly from this relabeling. Rural men’s studies offers literary critics and material gender theorists an excellent *entrée* into the discipline of men’s studies because an analysis of rural men’s studies insists not just on a discussion of socially-constructed hegemonic masculinities, but also on a discussion of male masculine interactions with the non-human world. Another way to approach this idea is to recognize that by implication, male masculinities who are not “rural” are understood as automatically “urban” or, at the least, “non-rural” and are therefore defined and differentiated from “rural” masculinities by their lack of contact with non-human nature. As I shall show in the following chapters, this understanding has the effect both of idealizing certain masculinities and of creating an false distance between “real” masculinity and “real” nature and a culture which will always try to make the *thing* represent the ideal rather than the other way around.

As Fuss has argued, it is in the nature of constructionist argumentation to “*produce and organize differences*” and to assert, furthermore, that those differences are politically, socially, culturally-constructed and maintained. The distinction “rural masculinities” and its scholarly articulation has done and continues to do this in spades. Rural men’s studies produces and reifies socially-constructed dichotomies and gendered

connections between human culture and non-human nature—dichotomies and associations that eco-critics, environmental activists, and feminist theorists have long sought (and have been increasingly successful in their efforts) to dismantle. Rural masculinities, in particular, is a good subject for a material gender theory of masculinities because it occupies a “middle ground,” precisely what material masculinities is concerned with. It does this in two ways: It has divested itself—terminologically speaking—of ‘hegemony’ or ‘hegemonies’ in the way it identifies itself, so it is making a concerted effort to highlight difference and the way that difference translates to a wider culture.

On the other hand, though, rural men’s studies maintains its social-constructionist and hegemonic notions of male masculinities in general. Additionally, in its definition of what are ultimately arbitrary boundaries between rural and non-rural men, rural masculinities scholarship recreates and reifies not only cultural gender dichotomies, but also environmental ones. Thus, it associates particular types of masculinities—like the cowboy and the soldier—with non-human nature in a way that both makes them iconic and, at the same time, separates them from their embodied experience. Unlike feminist gender theory, social-constructionist men’s studies scholars have not sought to divest masculinity of its intimate connection with nature. Rural masculinities is an example of this and is, therefore, an exceptional subject for a study of material gender theory that recognizes both the culturally-discursive construction of masculinities and the physical, material experiences of non-human nature. That is to say, material masculinities exist in the in-betweens. They are not rural or urban, they just are. To classify them is to bolster the dichotomies that have made the study of gender so fruitfully problematic in the first place.

#### 1.4 Mapping Material Masculinities

The concept of material masculinities is not intended to be a reinvention of theory. It is an attempt to move men's studies rather abruptly through approximately ten years of theoretical history and place it emphatically within the realm of humanities scholarship and contemporary gender theory. Material masculinities is a way of conceiving of men *both* as discursively conceptual *and* as embodied material subjects, always inscribing themselves on culture and non-human nature, and always being inscribed upon. In other words, material gender theory recognizes the middle ground between essentialist and social-constructionist modes of thinking; it understands gender as something that is *both* material *and* socially/discursively constructed. The principal difficulties that stem from the theoretical terminology of masculinities and the theoretical malaise that has stymied it, as I have argued them, boil down to the same thing: A reliance on etymologically-loaded terminology like hegemonic masculinity and a failure to more broadly conceptualize itself as a discipline in conversation with a great many other, "non-scientific" academic disciplines like critical gender studies in the humanities. In order for men's studies to continue to take a productive part in the increasingly impactful and progressively more complicated cultural and academic discussions about gender taking place in the contemporary academy, it must, on the one hand, abandon the over-reductive terminology it uses to define its course of study. On the other hand, it must re-conceptualize the concept of masculinities altogether in light of the more contemporary gender theory I've alluded to above. It is my hope that material masculinities will, as a theoretical tool, contribute to the terminological and conceptual re-imagining both of men and of itself that men's studies so badly needs.

Material masculinities, like any newly-minted concept, is bound to garner its critics. It is from the camps of those who believe that men's studies needs to retain (and

simply re-conceptualize) the term and concept of hegemonic masculinities and of those who believe that the re-conceptualization has already taken place and are content with the theoretical *status quo* where I expect the first critical sallies. I look to pre-empt those predicted criticisms in the following section by outlining the way in which material masculinities confronts the difficulties I've outlined above from a terminological standpoint and by more directly positioning material masculinities as a contemporary theoretical framework and a workable alternative to the social-constructionist gender theory that dominates men's studies.

I should be clear that men's studies has done much for the conceptualization and dismantling of patriarchal power structures. As a discipline, men's studies has had and continues to have a substantial voice in the cultural debates about gender. My purpose till now has been to establish my academic credentials as a men's studies scholar in the humanities taking part in a discipline-specific terminological debate rather than as a feminist gender scholar writing about masculinity. I concede that it is a fine distinction I am making. However, outside of men's studies and its soft-scientific practitioners, the idea of hegemonic masculinities still goes largely unquestioned in either culture or the academy.

What men's studies needs is a new theoretical framework founded on an *a priori* understanding of masculinities as agentic and yet unfixed, as fluid and changeable and culturally and environmentally co-contextual, as subjective and utterly and consistently unique; as, to appropriate Deluze and Guattari's term, rhizomatic. Instead of the uncontained theoretical mush that comes from over-dicing, men's studies needs a theoretical framework that contains what are *already* fluid masculinities; not a theoretical stance in which masculinities are over-differentiated and by which means new and harmful social, political, and environmental dichotomies are perpetually being drawn, but



one which accepts *a priori* that masculinities are material, subjective, and infinitely unique, as are the men who enact them.. As I understand it here, material masculinities is just such a framework.

From a purely linguistic/etymological perspective, *material masculinities* does two things in the building of a bridge between contemporary men's studies scholarship and progressive critical gender theory. On the one hand, the word *material* suggests from the start a more expansive view of masculinities than the alternative hegemony and serves to update a discipline-specific terminology and make it both more theoretically viable and more accessible to scholars outside socio-scientific fields of study. The idea of materiality also asserts a wider view of masculinities and echoes Braidotti's ideas about the constant re-mapping and re-negotiation of the multiplicity of gender identities of the female nomad and, by extension, the re-mapping of both conceptual and material spaces through which she travels (*Nomadic* 6). Braidotti writes, for example, that the nomadic subject is "the affirmation of fluid boundaries, a practice of intervals, of interfaces, and of interstices. [...The nomad is an] opening up, through successive repetitions and mimetic strategies, spaces where alternative forms of agency can be engendered" (6-7). She argues that gender itself is a constant renegotiation of identity and experience and that this renegotiation takes place in a space which is, as Caren Kaplan asserts, "a fictional terrain, a reterritorialization that has passed through several versions of deterritorialization to posit a powerful theory of location based on contingency, history, and change" (198). Braidotti asserts in *Metamorphoses*, furthermore, that a "figuration" like the nomadic subject is "a living map, a transformative account of the self—it is no metaphor [...it is] history tattooed on [the] body " (*Metamorphoses* 3). Identity is, for Braidotti, ever-changing..

The negotiation of gender is, as the sub-title of *Metamorphoses* suggests, a “becoming,” a fundamental drive to “not to know who we are” but instead “what, at last, we want to become” (*Metamorphoses* 2). Like Braidotti’s female nomad, the material male subject moves through a conceptual *and* material space where physicality and gendered performance are perpetually re-mapped, “reterritorialized,” and re-membered—fluid, in constant flux, and shaped as much by re-memory and past experience as by instinctive and encultured responses to a given moment. Material masculinities are a “materialistic [mapping] of situated, or embedded and embodied, positions” (*Metamorphoses* 2). They are, likewise, masculinities who are defined in moments that take “place in between nature-technology, male-female, black-white, in the spaces that flow and connect in between” (*Metamorphoses* 2). The material space which the material subject embodies and through which he moves is also an always fluid, ever-changing, equally conceptual and materially concrete landscape constantly mapped and re-mapped in the historical moment and physically altered through mutual co-inscription.

For Braidotti, both the conceptual and the material “space” traversed by the gendered nomad is locative; the construction of “social and symbolic” gendered identity takes place in “highly specific geo-political and historical locations [...]” (*Metamorphoses* 3), and thus a study of gender is associated intimately with eco-critic Lawrence Buell’s definition of “place” as “associatively thick” (*The Future* 63). For Buell, our cultural understanding of relationships with the non-human environment are constructed in the same way that Braidotti argues gender is created, maintained, and re-negotiated. Buell argues that there is a distinction between the “highly specific geo-political and historical locations” suggested by Braidotti—what Buell calls “place”—and spatiality, which he defines as an “abstraction,” and as “associatively [...] thin, except for sublime ‘spaces’ set apart as ‘sacred’ and therefore both infinitely resonant and at one remove from the

quotidian idiosyncratic intimacies that go with ‘place’” (*The Future* 63). For Buell then, the distinction between “associatively thick” place and its “associatively [...] thin” opposite, space, is a matter of both cultural inculcation and the transformative subjective experience which turns “space” into “place.”

Buell’s discussion of our culture’s tendency to absolve itself of responsibility to the other-than-human environment by placing more importance on certain “places” than others echoes environmental historian William Cronon’s assertion that our concept of non-human wilderness as outside of and separate from human culture from us has the effect of allowing us to rationalize our own cultural environmental irresponsibility (Cronon 81, 84-5, 89). At the same time, however, Cronon suggests that what Buell calls “associatively [...] thin” space is far from conceptually empty. He argues that our ideas of “wilderness” spaces are culturally created and historically imbued with association—with everything from religious belief to family tradition—and are, despite the environmental ambivalence of American culture, still thick with associations (Cronon 69-70). The same has been historically true, of course, in the construction of gender dichotomies and in the ill-fated associations between femaleness and the non-human world—that is to say, a concept of hegemonic masculinity which subordinates women is also complicit in the cultural ambivalence about the domination, subordination, and destruction of other-than-human nature and those human entities associated with it.<sup>6</sup>

For Braidotti and Buell spatiality as a concept is an emphasis on the “in between” spaces that define “geo-political and historical locations” also has the unfortunate effect

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<sup>6</sup> As I will show in chapter four, Kate Soper argues, from a psycho-analytic theoretical perspective, that the very terms we have historically used to describe the other-than-human world precipitate an Oedipal violence against women. She cites, not completely tongue-in-cheek, the wide-spread use of the term “Mother Nature” and the parallel cultural references to “raping the virgin landscape.” In my own article, “Parachutes and Multi-tools,” I describe, for example, British adventurer Bear Grylls’ military-masculine approach to non-human nature as “pornographic

of emphasizing the dichotomies—male/female, masculine/feminine, nature/culture, etc.—that they are in reality determined to deconstruct. Like their ideas about spatiality, material masculinities suggests landscapes—both material and conceptual, both human and non-human—that are perpetually in the abstract, always in flux, and are constantly re-mapped and re-negotiated through experience and according to the exigencies of the moment. At the same time, however, material masculinities acknowledges the realities of the male embodied subject, the interactive and widely diverse system of which he is a part, and the possibilities that lie with a rejection of old empirical maps in favor of a new, wide-open cartography that resists the reductive hierarchies put in place by the concept of hegemonic masculinity. In contrast to Braidotti and Buell’s “figurations” of space, however, materiality suggests with Cronon that there are no in-betweens because, from an material standpoint, there are no boundaries. As a concept, material masculinities resists concession to the parameters that restrict the breadth of what Braidotti calls “in between.”

Like the term material masculinities itself, the theoretical concept it is meant to invoke is a step outside the traditional parameters of socio-scientific men’s studies scholarship. Material masculinities resists categorization, calls into question the social-constructionist theory that dominates masculinities scholarship, and, to echo Murphy’s assertions about the early feminist movement and the critical lens it provided men, material masculinities turns a critical eye upon itself and upon the hegemonic practice of “creating men” through the discourses of the socio-scientific study of masculinities. As a theoretical term, material masculinities has three main goals: to open up the study of masculinities to more widely conceptual cartographies, to move men’s studies more firmly both into the humanities and onto more solid theoretical ground, and to place men’s

studies under the critical microscope as itself a producer and product of the very social and political hegemonic hierarchies it claims to be trying to dismantle.

Like feminist gender theory in the early to mid-eighties, men's studies scholars, [in] their zeal to reject the modernist grounding in the material, [...] have turned to the discursive pose as the exclusive source of the constitution of nature, society, and reality. Far from deconstructing the dichotomies of language/reality or culture/nature, [or masculine/feminine] they have rejected one side and embraced the other. (Alaimo and Hekman 2-3)

The "retreat from material reality" (Alaimo and Hekman 3) that characterized feminist theory's movement from essentialism to social-construction is mirrored in its extremes by men's studies' movement from essentialism to the social construction upon which rests hegemonic masculinities. But as Alaimo and Hekman argue, there is a middle ground, a wide open "space" in which gender studies scholars can examine the co-contextuality of materiality and the discursive production of gender. Culturally gendered subjects are, in other words, also materially embodied subjects. We are *both* material *and* conceptual beings. But, men's studies has a great deal riding on the social-constructionism it predominantly espouses. The articulation of gender and gender normativity that has come from the patriarchal discourses of the sciences, both hard and soft, is based in social-constructionism and thus a theoretical movement forward is, for men's studies, not merely a re-framing of its ontology, but a new ontological process altogether. It falls, then, to disciplines for whom such a ontology is already in place to engage with the social-constructionist empiricism of most of masculinities scholarship from a wide variety of theoretical perspectives, a discipline just like literature studies.

### 1.5 The Literary Terrain of American Masculinities

As cultural artifacts, literature and film reflect in a variety of ways the culture that produces them; by extension, a critical interrogation of literature and film is an interrogation of both the culture and the manner in which it conceptualizes itself and the

entities that constitute it. In the context of men's studies scholarship, the study of literature offers a window into the complex and perpetually shifting nature of American masculinities and often does so retrospectively. Literature provides a map of where cultural conceptions of masculinities and Others have been and suggestions about which direction they might be headed. In the case of the chapters that follow, literature and film provide a map of the co-contextualization of masculinities, culture, and other-than-human nature—of the geo-politically locative and conflicted material spaces between discursive representation and the embodied experience of material masculinities.

Having described the initial cartographic survey of material masculinities above, in the following chapters I highlight the three landmarks I alluded to earlier. In chapter two, I emphasize the historically and geo-politically specific place association that is inherent in material masculine becoming. To do this, I interrogate Annie Proulx's 2002 novel, *That Old Ace in the Hole*. *That Old Ace in the Hole* is the story of Bob Dollar who, when we meet him, represents an identity premised entirely on socially-constructed, performative templates. I argue that Proulx uses Bob's journey from his childhood home in Denver to the location of his new job as a site scout for a pig farming conglomerate in the fictional town of Woollybucket, Texas, to dislocate him in figuratively unmapped spaces between the two.

I assert that by making his discursive knowledge (i.e., maps and an intellectual knowledge of the area) useless, Proulx highlights the limits of discursivity. I conclude, furthermore, that Bob's experience of personally empty, dislocated spaces force him to experience the world in its immediacy and, as such, give him the concrete foundation for his subjective identity that he had heretofore lacked. I show how Bob's corporeal experience of dislocation and unmapped spaces serves to bring his discursive ideals into contact with his embodied experience, and I suggest that the landscape in which Bob

loses his way is a literary representation the material “in-betweens” I described above. I suggest that theorized as a material figuration, Bob’s movement across the non-associative spaces between Denver to Woollybucket suggest the same conceptual movement from a dependence on socially-constructed performative templates to an *a priori* acknowledgement of the influence of the embodied experience of geographically and historically place-association that material masculinities is intended to undertake. Thus Bob, his material becoming enabled by his dislocation, becomes a literary representation of a material figuration.

As the second elemental landmark on this material masculine cartography, I emphasize the material conflict that arises from the contact between culturally discursive ideals for masculine performativity and embodied experience the embodied experience of place—the parameters for which I defined in chapter two in my discussion of Bob. The primary text for chapter three is (arguably) Proulx’s most famous work, her Western short story *Brokeback Mountain*. The primary subject is the mythic American cowboy. I assert that the ubiquitous cowboy stereotype—made popular by the traditional Western genre—misrepresents the embodied experience of rural men and discursively distances rural masculinities and non-human nature from their physically concrete and historically locative context. In contrast to Bob, who becomes material when he is geo-politically contextualized, rural masculinities figured in the cowboy lose their materiality when they are disassociated from the regionally-specific places the embodied experience of which helped to construct the stereotype in the first place. I argue that by extension, popular cultural representations of the cowboy offer ample opportunity to explore the as-yet unexplored spaces between cultural notions about rural masculinity and the corporeal actuality of their moment-by-moment navigation of regionally specific gender norms for hegemonic heterosexuality.

I show how, because she is familiar with (and even appreciates, to some degree) the tropes that typify the Western genre, Proulx is able to make use of traditional themes and settings to highlight the contradictory nature of the traditional Western's claims about hegemonic masculine heterosexuality and its co-inscription with the non-human world. In particular, I interrogate her (de)construction of "cowboy" masculinities and "frontier" landscapes as they are expressed through the lives of and homosexual relationship between her two main characters, *bona fide* country boys Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist. Theorized as material figurations, Jack and Ennis represent the hegemonic heterosexuality that typifies the region about which Proulx writes. More to the point, however, I argue that when Proulx writes gay cowboys in a culturally circumscribed non-human landscape, she does so not only to emphasize existent constructions of hegemonic masculinities, but also to highlight the conceptual and physical conflict that arises when encultured ideals come up hard against the corporeality of (in this case, homosexual) rural male experience. In short, Ennis and Jack's story is one of material conflict.

With historical, geo-political place-association and material conflict as waypoints on the material masculine map, in chapter four I move on the third elemental landmark which I've promised to underscore—the material masculine co-inscription with non-human nature. In order to do this, I take as my primary texts David Morrell's 1972 novel, *First Blood*, the novel's 1982 film adaptation of the same name—directed by Ted Kotcheff—and its more contemporary progeny, William Friedkin's *The Hunted* (2002). I argue first that like the cowboy, hegemonic masculine stereotypes of the soldier like the ones represented in these texts are ubiquitous in American pop-culture; and that the American soldier is, additionally, a particularly "rural" masculinity. I follow this with a discussion of the way that *The Hunted* and a recent headline news story suggest the



continued influence and contemporary cultural relevance of Morrell's forty-one year old novel and the film and masculine icon (Rambo) that it produced. Having established the relevance of my primary texts, I move on to an interrogation of the discursive process by which texts and films like *First Blood* and *The Hunted* participate in the social-construction of violent hegemonic masculine stereotypes co-contextualized by a feminized, sexualized, and subjugated non-human nature. I conclude chapter four with a re-theorization of the literary and cinematic soldier as a material masculinity. Like the cowboy in chapter three, it is precisely because of the hegemonic soldier stereotype's iconic status and the discursive distance between his cultural representation and his embodied and conflicted experience of geo-politically specific place that he proves such a rich site for an interrogation of material masculinity and non-human nature's co-inscriptive construction of ideals for human/non-human interaction.

In chapter five, I take a step back from the map table where I have been working and, rather than sketching in more landmarks, I attempt to plot a course between them. As such, I rearticulate the primary arguments from each of the previous chapters, elucidate the connections between them, and draw the conclusions I've suggested along the way. I conclude *Mapping Men* with a discussion about the way material masculinities—as an embodied theory—translates to the classroom; that is to say, I make the claim that material masculinities is only another socially-constructed theory of masculinity until it has an embodied representation. Given that the university is the traditional place where theoretical scholarship finds a wider cultural audience, I begin there. In terms of what I call a “pedagogical figuration,” I apply considerations of the aforementioned landmarks of materiality to a pedagogy of “teaching in-between.” I suggest, first, that these landmarks are not specific to material masculinities. Instead, they are analogous to elements of a pedagogical cartography by which male instructors

teaching gender studies can navigate between the historical (and still prevalent) assumptions about patriarchy and male authority and the unavoidable necessities involved in facilitating a course from such a position of authority and in a university context which traditionally reinforces those assumptions. I argue that teaching in-between entails an alternative way of thinking about the culturally discursive and material spaces of the classroom and I offer the “pedagogical figuration” as an example of this.

#### 1.6 Conclusion

Ultimately, it is my hope that *Mapping Men* will serve to raise questions—questions about the way we’ve been thinking and questions about the accuracy and adequacy of the conclusions we’ve drawn. Men’s studies key concept of hegemonic masculinities has done much to explain the way that culture influences the male performance of masculinity and the contexts which construct and are constructed by those culturally discursive performances. There is no denying that in a very real way, we are all socially-constructed gender identities. However, gender identity is not premised entirely in socially-constructed and performed gender norms. It is also constructed of the embodied, moment-by-moment navigation of historically and regionally specific cultures and landscapes, of physical and conceptual conflict, and from the subjective experiences of the non-human world, written on the body and mind in indelible, corporeal ink. That being said, here’s Bob, materially speaking.

Chapter 2  
Becoming Cartographies: Material Geographies in Annie Proulx's *That Old Ace in the Hole*

There was some open space  
between what he knew and  
what he tried to believe...

Annie Proulx, 1997

Annie Proulx's *That Old Ace in the Hole* is transitional, both with regards to this interrogation of material masculinities and in terms of her narrative itself. It begins as a novel about transition from urban to rural environments, from ahistorical cultural discursivity to historical and embodied place association, and from socially-constructed performativity to material becoming. It is also a significant contemporary literary example of the most basic elements of a material masculinity—history and place—and his reciprocal relationship with non-human nature. Broadly put, *That Old Ace in the Hole* as a novel about transitions highlights the first of the three landmarks that comprise material masculine gender identity and enable material becoming—geo-political, historical place association. According to Rosi Braidotti, the “positioning that comes from our embodied and historically located subjectivities also determines the sort of political maps and conceptual diagrams we are likely to draw” (*Metamorphoses* 167). With this in mind, *That Old Ace in the Hole* serves as an initial, literary cartographic survey of the as-yet unmapped, material middle spaces between essentialist ideas about “male-ness” and socially-constructed ideas about performativity. The following analysis of *That Old Ace in the Hole* serves as the beginnings of a conceptual cartography of the spaces between

men's studies' social-constructionist methodology and contemporary critical gender and environmental studies.

Broadly put, the primary argument of this chapter is that Proulx's characterizations and imagery highlight (consciously or otherwise) the middle-ground between essentialism and social-construction—between embodiment and enculturation. In the following sections, I assert, first, that in order to navigate the literary cartography that literature about men and masculinities represents, it is first necessary to re-theorize socially-constructed, hegemonic “rural masculinities” as material masculine figurations. I follow this theoretical unmapping with a brief discussion of Proulx's relevance to a material interrogation of the contemporary American literary cartography about masculinities. In the next section, I interrogate the novel itself and assert that Bob Dollar and the environments in which he finds himself are representative of figurations for the material and unmapped landscapes—what Braidotti calls the “in-betweens” (*Metamorphoses 2*)—between hegemonic notions of masculinity and the actualities of subjective, embodied association with my first landmark for a cartography of material masculinities—historically- and geo-politically specific place.<sup>7</sup>

## 2.1 Materially Speaking, A Figuration

Like Braidotti's articulation of the embodied nomadic figuration which came about as an attempt to address the over-reductive tendencies of social-constructionist feminist gender theory, material masculine figurations are intended to confront the socio-political appropriations of hegemonic masculinities. Material masculinities theorizes its figurations by situating them both conceptually and experientially in specific geographical locations

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<sup>7</sup> Coincidentally, the regional western culture into which Bob Dollar ventures is also the subject of chapter three; thus, *That Old Ace in the Hole* also provides a tidy segue into my discussions of the more specific rural masculine stereotypes—like the cowboy and the soldier—that comprise the remainder of this project.

and within equally precise historical, social, political, in short, cultural contexts. The material masculine figuration is, then, located at once in the subjective, embodied present and—by virtue of his embodied place-association—in the cultural history of human experience (or lack thereof) with non-human nature. Moreover, material masculinities does not merely pluralize hegemonic masculinity as a theory of socially-constructed masculinities is wont to do, but goes a step further and urges the individualization of masculinities as utterly unique and as predicated equally on embodied, material subjectivity at a given historical moment in a location-specific context *and* on the cultural inscription of masculinities and the performance of masculinities by men.

My general example for this project is the literary and filmic American rural masculine stereotype. Re-theorized as a material figuration, rural masculine archetypes like the ones under discussion here are reflective of the nomadic figuration articulated by Braidotti. That is to say, as a material figuration, a rural masculinity is “an iconoclastic, mythic figure ...[and] is consequently a move against the settled and conventional nature of theoretical and especially philosophical thinking” (*Nomadic* 4). He is, moreover, “[a] politically informed [image] that [portrays] the complex interaction of levels of subjectivity” (*Nomadic* 4). In light of over two hundred years of American political history, it is hard to deny that in both account and image, rural masculinities are imbued with significant political weight; weight which does indeed both portray and catalyze “complex interaction of levels of subjectivity. In other words, rural masculinities represent *American* masculinities—and, by extension, American political ideologies; social, economic, gendered, or racialized stratification; and non-human landscapes.

For Braidotti, furthermore, the nomadic subject is—*a priori*—a material figuration. He or she is both a conceptual *and* embodied figuration; one located at once in

theoretical inquiry and in material, physically inscriptive space. Post-structural gender figurations are not, she writes, merely “figurative ways of thinking, but rather more materialistic mappings of situated, or embedded and embodied, [subject] positions. [...] A figuration is a living map, a transformative account of the self—it is no metaphor” (*Metamorphoses* 2-3). The paradoxically situated and fluid subjectivities of the figurations that populate Braidotti’s theory of cartography are, additionally, staked firmly in an “account for one’s locations in terms both of space (geo-political or ecological dimension) and time (historical or genealogical dimension)” (*Metamorphoses* 2). Furthermore, material figurations are subjectively spatial accounts by which men’s studies can re-theorize gender in light of material, experiential subjectivity rather than solely through a reliance on objectively empirical, critically distant and, thus, inevitably static, socially-constructed models of masculinity.

Rural masculinities, re-theorized as material masculine figurations, successfully meet Braidotti’s primary cartographic requirements as a post-structural figurations whose materiality “is neither reproduction nor just imitation, but rather emphatic proximity, intensive interconnectedness” (*Nomadic* 5) and whose accounting of themselves is conceptually spatial—in Lawrence Buell’s sense of space as non-associative and yet-to-be-mapped (*The Future* 62-66)—yet with the materially locative and chronological specificity of the nomad. Like Braidotti’s nomad, furthermore, rural masculinities as figurations exist in perpetually unmapped and remapped empty spaces between cultural dichotomies—between, for example, masculine/feminine, nature/culture, rural/urban, or hetero/homosexual. They are, in effect, a “*value*, truth is not a guarantee for [them]; nothing prevents [them] from being a perpetual alibi: it is enough that [the] signifier has two sides for [them] always to have an ‘elsewhere’ at [their] disposal” (Barthes 123). Simply by virtue of their widespread cross-cultural appropriation—by scholars; authors,

film-makers, politicians, fashion designers, or by any number of other media—rural masculinities are present in contemporary American culture as a Barthesian myth constituted by both “empty form” and “full meaning”—that is, by perpetually renegotiated subjective materiality *and* by culturally and historically changeable discursive conceptualizations (Barthes 123).

To paraphrase Roland Barthes, a man is materially a man, of course.<sup>8</sup> But a man expressed as a rural masculinity is no longer just a man but is instead an *idealized masculinity* imbued with a whole host of often disparate historical, political, social, economic, racial, or gendered meanings (Barthes 109). As a discursive construction—in other words, as a conceptualization—rural masculinities in their endless variations have, like well-behaved myths, transcended their materiality and become symbolic of a set of values, traditions, ethics, and beliefs. Their appropriation as cultural icons has, however, had the effect of distancing them from their materially embodied, sexualized and gendered subjectivity. It is precisely to the over-symbolization of rural masculinities, to their culturally discursive, mythological status, that a re-theorization of rural masculinities as a post-structural, material gender figurations is most dangerous. It is not the performative transcendence of their physiognomy that ideally positions rural masculinities as material masculine figurations; it is their subjective, embodied, and day-to-day negotiation of regionally specific performative templates that does so; it is, in other words, their materiality itself.

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<sup>8</sup> “Every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society, for there is no law, whether natural or not, which forbids talking about things. A tree is a tree. Yes, of course. But a tree as expressed [...] is no longer quite a tree, it is a tree which is decorated, adapted to a certain type of consumption, laden with literary self-indulgence, revolt, images, in short with a type of social *usage* which is added to pure matter.” (Barthes 109)

Another element of the material gender figuration is the embodied experience of history. Braidotti writes that the nomad is absolutely “not a metaphor.” The nomad lives, moves, and *breathes* in “highly specific geo-political and historical locations—history tattooed on [the] body” (*Metamorphoses* 3). For the material masculine figuration, this undeniable and unavoidable materiality is particularly important because of how intimately insinuated he is in the political and socio-cultural *zeitgeist* of a nation whose interactions with the other-than-human world have historically reflected hegemonically patriarchal, white masculine attitudes about (and thus interactions with) *human* Others. By the same token, rural masculinities’ conceptual appropriation has had the effect, as I’ve suggested already, of distancing them from their material gendered and sexualized subjectivity. Rural masculinities have become generally representative of American masculinities.

One of the primary difficulties I must address here before moving on to an material interrogation of Annie Proulx’s Western fiction—and, more specifically, Bob Dollar—is textuality itself. If, as I have argued, material masculinities are both socially-constructed and subjective, embodied, and infinitely malleable, then a theoretical discussion of the literature about material masculine figurations must confront its own discursivity. Braidotti acknowledges this problem when she writes that

Thinking through flows and interconnections remains a difficult challenge. The fact that theoretical reason is concept-bound and fastened upon essential notions makes it difficult to find adequate representations for processes, fluid in-between flows of data, experience and information. They tend to become frozen in [...] metaphorical modes of representation which itemize them as ‘problems’ [(much like hegemony)...] We live in permanent processes of transition, hybridization and nomadization, and these in-between states and stages defy the established modes of theoretical representation.  
(*Metamorphoses* 2)

For Braidotti, the answer to this difficulty was to articulate a theory of cartography—i.e., a theory of conceptual mapping by way of the female nomad—which “fulfills the function of



providing both exegetical tools and creative theoretical alternatives” (*Metamorphoses* 2). In the same way, my own answer to the problem of interrogating masculinities without over or under emphasizing their discursive construction is to suggest material masculinities as a similar cartographic theory populated by masculine figurations, perpetually becoming—like, as I explain below, Proulx’s Bob Dollar—and co-inscribed by and with embodied, experiential, *and* historically discursive interaction (or, again, lack of interaction) with other-than-human environments.

## 2.2 Drawing Regional Cartographies

I begin my application of material masculinities with Proulx’s *That Old Ace in the Hole* for three principal reasons: First, I start here with Proulx because she is popular and contemporary. Her novels and short fiction have been adapted to the screen; she has won multiple awards for both; and, as a historian from the *Annals* school, her grasp of the historical connections between human cultures and non-human landscapes has and continues to influence the course of contemporary regional fiction. Second, I’m beginning here with Proulx’s work because it is representative of the post-modern interrogation of traditional literary tropes that has come to typify much of regional fiction today. Her work is an unquestionably complex and historically informed cartography of rural masculinities, of the other-than-human world that shapes and is shaped by them, and of the subjective and often destructive conflicts that arise between socially-constructed concepts of hegemonic masculinity and actual lived, material experience. Thus and thirdly, I begin in particular with *That Old Ace in the Hole* because it illustrates so well the representational nature of the material masculine figuration and the elements that enable his becoming.

In chapter one, I described a literary cartography as a “culture-in-stasis” by which men’s studies scholars can (re)map the open spaces between essentialist theories of

masculinity and the key concept of socially-constructed, hegemonic masculinities that largely frames men's studies scholarship today. Proulx's regional fiction is just such a historically-founded cartographic account of the materiality of rural male masculinities. The central conflict in most of Proulx's regional fiction is the perpetual confrontation between regionally-specific cultural identities and non-human environments and the material realities of geo-political, subjective, and embodied place-association. Elizabeth Alebe writes that Proulx confronts romantic perspectives of landscapes that are "a part of the American identity, a myth based not on an actual landscape but a skewed *account* [...]" of people and places (114). As such, one of the central thrusts of Proulx's regional fiction—as a representative of the genre—is to perform an almost meta interrogation of regional rural masculinities (like the cowboys in *Brokeback Mountain*, or the hardened fishermen in *The Shipping News*, for example) *and* of the way in which those stereotypes are reified both by their *a priori* association with non-human nature and by their perpetual, conceptual appropriation by American and international pop culture-at-large. With regards to *That Old Ace in the Hole*, Alebe argues that Proulx's writing—specifically her western fiction—"is an example of [...] contemporary [fiction] that cannot avoid commenting on the myth of 'previously constructed,'" and which, additionally, continues to dominate popular cultural ideas about western landscapes and the populations that inhabit them (114).

I have chosen to work here with Annie Proulx's *That Old Ace in the Hole* because Proulx emphasizes the conceptual and material co-inscriptive nature of male masculine relationships with "wild" other-than-human environments as a means of suggesting that—given the "dominant, inhuman force" (Weltzien 100) of the other-than-human nature with which they are associated—material masculine figurations must be themselves malleable and ever-changing landscapes, unpredictable identities who absolutely cannot be forced

into the reductively discursive paradigms they themselves have helped to construct. Put another way, the figuration of the rural masculinity is virtually indistinguishable from the landscape with which he is historically and materially associated. And like her human characters, the other-than-human landscapes Proulx draws—though subjugated and made culturally palatable by the “literary gentleman wielding a pen” (Nash 44)—continues to defy human, “civilized” attempts to control and master it.

As a regional author, Proulx is representative of other regional literary fiction insofar as she is quite obviously aware of cultural and regional stereotypes and popular tropes typical of the genre and uses them in her work. However, rather than simply reifying traditional regional masculine stereotypes, Proulx’s fiction is premised on the production of “alternative figurations or schemes of representation for these locations, in terms of power as restrictive (*potestas*) but also as empowering or affirmative (*potentia*)” (*Metamorphoses* 2). Proulx’s regionally specific characterizations are not simply reifications of stereotypes, of masculine myths, but rather caricatures designed to highlight and dismantle her audiences assumption about regional cultures. Braidotti addresses precisely this principle when she writes that

The classical notion of the subject treats difference as a sub-set of the concept of identity as sameness, that is to say equating it to a normative idea of a Being that remains one and the same in all its varied qualifications and attributes. This univocity [...] rests on an inherently normative image of thought, this being the Being of a subject who coincides with consciousness, rational judgement [*sic*] and who is endowed with an immortal soul. Hence the importance of thinking ‘difference’ so as to disengage it from the reactive pole of a binary opposition which is organized to affirm dialectically the power and primacy of the Same. (*Metamorphoses* 70-1)

By characterizing and then dismantling rural masculine archetypes, Proulx confronts rural masculine ideals and calls into question American cultural assumptions about “normalized” white male masculinities, about gender and sexuality, and about human culture’s intimate and inescapably material connections to other-than-human landscapes.

In fact, it “is Proulx’s detailed evocation of the landscape and its citizens that gives her [...] leverage” (Alebe 114), and this is why Proulx is such an excellent starting point for a de-mythologizing—a re-theorizing—of rural masculinities like the subjects of this dissertation.

For Proulx, non-human nature is not simply a backdrop against which the human drama in her novels occurs but is itself a materially agentic actor in the drama. Apart from their explicitly representative nature, Proulx’s fiction about men and the non-humana serves as an ideal site for material interrogation because of her emphasis on both historical and embodied identification with other-than-human nature environments as associative place. In other words, not only does she emphasize the materiality of her characters and their subjective experience of non-human landscape and environment, but she also addresses in great detail the materially concrete inscription of the other-than-human environment on embodied and gendered human subjectivity and of that co-inscription on the historical cartography which is her subject. In writing about Proulx’s regionalist fiction, Christian Voie argues that “[as] surely as the ranchers and engineers write the story of human progress onto the landscape, that same landscape fingerprints the histories of the very people striving to reshape it, exploit it, or merely inhabit it” (39). Proulx herself states that when she writes, “Everything that happens to a character comes welling out of place. Even their definition of themselves” (qtd. in Steinberg 58), She highlights the mutually co-inscriptive—and the both physically contextual and historically conceptual nature—of human interactions with non-human landscapes. In other words, insofar as “the conceptual cartography of Proulx’s landscape contain human populations split along an axis determined by the roles people assume within landscape” (Voie 39), she makes that cross-dichotomy interaction a major theme in all of her western writing.

But Proulx is a writer of regions and her work—and in this critical context, her “masculine” characterizations—also represents the broader material ideal under discussion in this dissertation. In other words, Proulx’s grasp of regionalism, her delightfully poignant characterizations, and the accurate placement of her finger on the historical pulse of American culture make her masculinities at once regional and at the same time part of a wider, more global literary movement. At the same time that she “[elevates...] landscape imagery [...with a] corresponding reduction of character to [regional] caricature” (Weltzien 100), she positions her characters within a historical timeline that points to “evidence of some communal accomplishment that, if highlighted, can weaken the specter of massive impersonalism” (Jahner 22). Her characters are representative, indeed. However, while they are regionally specific “caricatures,” they nevertheless operate as subjects whose material experience is founded in a wider national and international historical tradition. Proulx’s literary cartographies, in line with Braidotti’s requirements for material becoming, place all of her characters in specific geopolitical locations at precise moments in history and have the added bonus of being, like her particularly masculine characterizations, both globally issue-specific *and* inextricably tied to regionally specific place.

In addition to its regional specificity and its global applications, what makes Proulx’s writing such an apt site for material interrogation is the manner in which material spaces and experience inscribe themselves on the bodies of her characters and vice versa. Proulx is concerned with the way that those mutual material interactions both effect and are affected by the regionally specific performances of masculinity that have come to be associated in our culture with the rurality—ranching and rodeo-ing, for example. In other words, her regional fiction is a “blending of physical and emotional landscape. [...Where characters] fall over cliffs that are at once moral and emotional and

ultimately tied to the physical manifestations of place” (Johnson 25). In highlighting the connections between and misrepresentations of rural masculinities and non-human environments, Proulx confronts and dismantles notions of masculine hegemony and, by extension, addresses the historically patriarchal domination of both human and non-human Others. Moreover, Proulx emphasizes the disconnect between the reality of male masculine relationships with other men—as she does in *Brokeback Mountain*, the primary text for the following chapter—with women, and with the other-than-human environment and their culturally discursive representations. In so doing, Proulx “marks” transparent rural masculinities and thus makes them culturally visible in the same way that the editors of *Country Boys* suggest that socio-economic, gendered, racialized, or non-human Others are made visible against a rhetorical background of traditionally white, heterosexual, and hegemonically masculine American political discourse (8).

With regards to the claims of this project, Proulx is concerned with two primary issues. Broadly speaking, she sets her novel in rural western locations and thus enters into a discussion about land ownership and use and the inevitable divisions between the human and non-human that the domestication of other-than-human environments and the discursive construction of “rural” masculinity entails. More specifically, she is concerned with the way that those divisions are reflected in the characters who are co-inscribed with their environments but must still (re)negotiate traditional regional ideals of normative cultural identity. What makes Proulx’s *That Old Ace in the Hole* such a poignant comment on the materiality of American “rural” masculinities is the manner in which Proulx intentionally produces characters—both human and non-human—that highlight cultural dichotomies as a means of investigating the material spaces in between them. As a regional writer, Proulx is concerned with regional difference and thus narrates settings that are distinct from one another. However, once she articulates those

differences, her writing concerns itself with the constant (re)negotiation of the subjectively experiential and historically-anchored material middle-spaces between the cultural dichotomies she points to in her narrative.

### 2.3 “In every chapter of life’s book...”

Bob Dollar, is not (initially) a “rural” masculinity. Instead, he comes to the “double-panhandle country north of the Canadian River” (Proulx 4) from Denver, where he was abandoned by his parents at his Uncle Tam’s junkshop when he was a child. Bob, characterized as a naïve and fragmented identity, gets a job working as a heretofore untraveled site scout for corporate pig farming conglomerate, Global Pork Rind Co., under the supervision of the unpleasant Ribeye Cluke. Posing as site scout for a luxury home development company, Bob sets up shop in the Texas panhandle. His base of operations is the fictional town of Woolybucket. Bob lives on the outskirts of Woolybucket, in a turn-of-the-century bunkhouse on the defunct Busted Star Ranch belonging to self-appointed Woolybucket historian, Lavon Fronk. Bob’s job is to find elderly ranchers (or their heirs) and/or bankrupt ones and feel them out with regards to buying their land for “luxury home development.” If a rancher were to express interest, Bob was to contact Ribeye Cluke (all very cloak-and-dagger), who would then send a “money person” to close the deal. Bob’s directive is, then, to talk to people.

The majority of the novel consists of precisely this—Bob talking to people. Prior to his arrival in Woolybucket, he begins reading the (fictional) exploration of one (non-fictional) Lt. James Abert, cartographer for the U.S. Topographical Corps and—in the novel—the first white man to lay eyes on the panhandle country. As he insinuates himself into the ranching culture, he learns the history of the place following Abert’s exploration. LaVon Fronk makes him privy to 150 years of town history; and, in his conversations with other members of the community, he begins to understand the

historical, symbiotic, embodied connection the population has to this regionally specific place. At the same time and little by little, Bob learns about the adverse effects that corporate hog farming has on the panhandle environment, both human and non-human. He finds himself in the position to witness the conflict between corporate attempts to buy up overgrazed ranchland on the high plains and a regional culture's attempt to retain its land, its history and, by extension, its identity. Insofar as his journey mirrors Lt. Abert's, Bob is connected to the pre-settled high plains. LaVon Fronk's history lessons and his relationships with the residents of Woolybucket give him a more personal association with the history of the high plains subsequent to Abert's mapping of them, and his own embodied experience of them place him directly in the middle of Woolybucket's present.

Ultimately, Bob quits his job. When he makes the trip from Woolybucket to Denver to do so, Ribeye Cluke sends in a "money person." Despite the gender ambiguity implied in the title "money person," it is in fact a woman, Evelyn Chine—who has a reputation for doing "anything it takes" to close a land deal—that Cluke sends to Woolybucket. In the process of consummating her deal with the Woolybucket's most hated character, Francis Scott Keister, she arouses the ire of Keister's wife, who takes a gun to them both, wounding Eveylen before she is dragged kicking and screaming from the diner where the confrontation takes place. This brings to light that one of the novel's principle (though conspicuously absent) characters, Ace Crouch, has been secretly buying up all of the grazing land around Woolybucket in an attempt to keep the town, its history and thus its identity, alive. At the novel's conclusion, Ace donates the land to a local monastery located on a ranch dedicated to environmental conservation and to repopulating the high plains with bison. Even if just as a witness, Bob Dollar becomes part of the region's history. Though Bob's future is ambiguous at the novel's end, when we



last see him he is preparing to visit Uncle Tam in Denver and contemplating a permanent move to Woolybucket.

### 2.3.1 Performing “Bob”

My interest in *That Old Ace in the Hole* is in the transformative experience that Bob has on his way to the panhandle of Texas. In it, Proulx’s imagery reflects not just a movement from a fragmented, urban “non-place” to a rural region with its own unique and shared cultural history, but also Bob’s transformation from socially-constructed to material masculinity—from performative template to embodied subjectivity. Insofar as the purpose of this chapter is to serve as a conceptual bridge between social-construction and material gender theory, it is Bob’s own “bridge-ness” that concerns me here. Bob’s experiences while in Woolybucket are the evidence of his becoming and becoming is perpetual and never-ending. Because this chapter is itself meant to be transitional—a movement across boundaries, I focus in the remaining sections of this chapter on Bob’s movement from Denver to Woolybucket.

When readers first meet *That Old Ace in the Hole*’s principal protagonist, Bob Dollar, he is already a victim of socially-constructed hegemonic masculinity. Though Bob is not himself a rural masculinity figuration, he is nonetheless a masculine *tabula rasa* who encounters western culture as one whose identity has always been determined entirely by context. His movement towards a recognition of his material identity takes him between a starkly urban context—his uncle Tam’s thrift shop/apartment in the heart of Denver, Colorado with its non-descript city streets—and the unique culture and landscapes of the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles. Bob’s final acceptance of and into the western community of Woolybucket and, thereby, into its shared cultural history and intimate attachments to the non-human landscape are reflective of the malleability of the material masculine figuration whose becoming takes place in context and according to

the exigencies of the moment. Furthermore, as a material masculine figuration, the formation of Bob's identity from the story's beginning to its ostensibly positive, ambiguous ending ties him both experientially and conceptually to the history of place and to its both culturally discursive and physiognomic exigencies. As his understanding of the rich, historical, and co-inscriptive relationship the regional ranching culture has with the landscape grows—and as he comes to know and become attached to the land and the people himself—his identity takes on increasing coherence. More than just space to be navigated, Bob's experience of west Texas ranching culture becomes subjectively associative, one of conceptual space becoming subjective place, and one of a fragmented, socially-constructed masculinity becoming a place-based, historically-fecund, material identity.

Bob is the quintessential material masculine figuration. As we read more about Bob, it becomes clear that he is a mosaic. He exists (at first uncomfortably) in the middle spaces between his ideas about social success and performance—about “Being” in the world—and his experience of growing up “in withering poverty” (Proulx 9), ostracized in a world that does not meet his literature and fantasy-fed expectations. In *Transpositions*, Braidotti writes that, “[viewed] spatially, the poststructuralist subject may appear as fragmented and disunited” (151), and when we meet Bob, prior to his transitional journey to Texas, that is exactly what he is. Bob's identity is comprised of the cast off bits and pieces of and ideas about other people's lives, and he sees himself as made up of “many small parts that [do] not join, an internal sack of wood chips” (9). He is raised by recluses and lives with a perpetual feeling “of oppression, loneliness and a sense of being an out-cast” (Proulx 33). He “sees his slippery self as a reindeer” (37), feels that he is “in fragments” (9), and constantly rewrites both his memories of the past and his fantasies about the future. The problem, of course, is that while his fantasies are

malleable, Bob—in terms of his embodiment and concrete, lived circumstances—is not. Braidotti also asserts, however, that “on a temporal scale [... the post-structuralist subject’s] unity is that of a continuing power to synchronize its recollections. This creates a continuity of disconnected fragments” (*Transpositions* 151). Set outside of history, in essence, Bob’s understanding of the world-as-it-is is limited to culturally discursive experience and to socially-constructed ideas about successful being in the world. With no historical and subjective place-anchor to give his fragmented identity cohesion, Bob is no more than a collection of random and mysteriously interconnected performative templates.

Abandoned as a child by his parents on the doorstep of his Uncle Tambourine’s donation-dependent thrift store, Bob “knew he had a solitary heart for he had no sense of belonging anywhere” (37). He is defined by a fading family history, by a lack of concrete connection to place, and by his inability to reconcile his social ideals and vague notions of the performance of “hirsute and muscular” (36) adulthood with his own material experience and lack of agency. Bob

had no idea who he was, as his parents had taken his identity with them to Alaska. The world was on casters, rolling away from him as he was about to step into it. [...] Uncle Tam’s house and shop were way stations where he waited for the meaningful connection, the event or person who would show him who he was. At some point he would [...] somehow reconnected with his family. (37)

For Bob the material figuration, identity is inextricably tied to a sense of family history—a connection both antecedent to and proceeding from himself and of which he has little and none respectively—and to a parallel lack of connection to place. He is essentially wandering a conceptual landscape, stumbling upon and camping at the remnants of other people’s campfires.

By the same token, Bob’s economic ideals and ideas about what constitutes social success (and therefore a resonant, public identity) are premised on his limited,

lower socio-economic, and subjectively comparative experiences. He is fired from his first job as an inventory clerk with Platte River Lightbulb Supply and is “glad, for he [does] not want a life to a kind of fidgety waiting among lightbulbs, as for a report card. He wanted to aim at a high mark on a distant wall. If time had to pass, let it pass with meaning. He wanted direction and reward” (5). The contrast between Bob’s understanding and performance of identity and his inability to reconcile that understanding with his reality illustrates the limits to social-constructionism’s ability to accurately reflect the lived experience of becoming a masculinity. At the same time, however, the contrast between what he is taught by or extrapolates from his culture and what he is taught by his embodied experience of the world open up windows onto the material, co-inscriptive, as yet unexplored middle-spaces between the two.

Over the course of the novel, Bob begins to draw a subjective cartography of these spaces, and this happens in both culturally discursive and concretely physical ways. In other words, Proulx addresses Bob’s materiality by first emphasizing the performative nature of human social interaction. Second, by taking him through a transitional, cross-boundary journey, Proulx characterizes Bob’s own material becoming as contingent on an embodied connection to regional landscapes, the human populations that inhabit them, and to the histories that define geo-politically specific cultural identities. Bob’s own identity becomes anchored in the both physical and conceptual co-inscription of a regional human culture and the non-human nature with which that culture is discursively associated. Bob’s personal history up to the point we first meet him on page one highlights the unproductive polarizations inherent in social-constructionist performativity. Proulx characterizes Bob (both implicitly and explicitly) as fragmentary and by disconnecting him from his familial history of place. Braidotti argues that material identity is constructed, in part, from the perpetual re-articulations of subjective, embodied

experience of associatively thick place, a “retrospective map of place,” (*Nomadic* 6), and it is just this sort of experience that Bob lacks prior to his initial experience of the high plains. He is, in a very real sense, the human representation of a thrift store donation. His sense of identity is premised entirely on the present, with no connection to the past and no clear course mapped for the future. Bob Dollar figures a great many men who strive, bored and frustrated, to live in adherence to (or, as I’ll discuss in a moment, in rebellion against) traditional hegemonic normativity; men who nonetheless find themselves unavoidably and unaccountably in its ragged unmapped middle—both in terms of available performative templates and with regards to material (e.g., political, economic, locative, or physiognomic) opportunity. In short, the way that Proulx characterizes Bob’s upbringing highlights the frustrating inability of most men to adequately meet the standards of any of the increasingly numerous static types that are premised on popular cultural conceptualizations of hegemonic masculine homogeneity.

Bob’s life prior to his job with Global Pork Rind is characterized by his enculturation with and attempts at traditional “masculine” performativity. Proulx emphasizes this in a number of different ways. The most illuminating way she does this, however, is by initially constructing Bob’s fragmented, unanchored identity of socially prescribed reactions to human and non-human Others that are, at the same time, absent both historical and geo-political context. Bob’s fragmentation happens in different ways—for example, through his transitory human relationships (37); by living in the “imaginary worlds” of books and becoming a “sucker for stories told” (8); and through the fantastical cartography he draws of the future while always (re)negotiating the world for the first time (36-37). Proulx uses devices like these to define and compromise what is Bob’s initially socially-constructed, performative identity. These fragments of Bob’s social-construction play an important and interconnected role in positioning Bob for the material

transformation he undergoes over the course of the novel. More significantly, his simultaneously categorically-discursive and fantastical idealizations of the world are in direct conflict with his experience and, thus, emphasize the substantial (though, alone, inadequate) role that culturally discursive representations of masculinity play in determining male, material interactions with both human and non-human Others.

One of the most noteworthy fragments of Bob's heretofore unanchored, directionless identity are his formative human relationships, "way stations" though they were. To different degrees, each relationship illustrates a confrontation between the socially-constructed norms that Bob is encultured with and the "Real-ness" (Hunt 1) of his subjective embodied experience. In this way, each becomes a landmark on the landscape that defines Bob's conceptual cartography. As a child, most of Bob's social interaction was, assumedly, with the men that raised him. Quite literally donated to his uncle's thrift store, Bob lives with two elderly, white men, both of whom are utterly steeped in the past. The two men share a passion for costume jewelry—the older and rarer, the better—and for antiques, right down to ritualizing their weekly viewing of *The Antiques Roadshow*. Their active social interaction outside of the thrift store is comprised primarily of antiquing and costume jewelry conventions. Though one of the prerequisites for a material figuration is a subjective connection to history, Tam and Bromo's connection is—like Bob's—merely one of bits and pieces, taken from their context in both time and place. In light of their business—that of selling the cast off bits of other people's lives—their fascination with historical cultural artifacts and their limited engagement with popular culture emphasize the inability or unwillingness of both men to live in the present; something that is also recognizable in other areas of their relationship and echoed in Bob's own understanding of the world. The most explicit example of this is the two men's carefully compartmentalized homosexuality.

Though naïve, unworldly Bob does not realize until his own adulthood that Tam and Bromo are gay, their business arrangement (what amounts to a civil union), their intimately shared hobbies, and the part each plays in Bob's upbringing are in fact slightly off-kilter caricatures of traditional domestic gender roles. At the same time, however, the partners are careful to appear heterosexual, and they sacrifice intimacy to maintain that image. Tam and Bromo represent the conflict between adherence to performed hegemonic gender normativity and subjective, embodied materiality. Their relationship is at once a deliberate adherence to culturally "acceptable" gender performance and a willful (though private) circumventing of it. And though their homosexuality and their careful hiding of it is indicative of a disconnect between performativity and reality, and though life with them built the foundation for Bob's own identity, theirs is not Bob's only influence. In fact, Tam and Bromo represent in general the elements of performativity, fantasy, and disconnects with reality that many of Bob's other relationships prior to Texas represent more specifically. In other words, many of the elements of Tam and Bromo's approach to the world are reflected, both implicitly and explicitly, in the mirrors of Bob's own perspectives and both sexual and homosocial encounters. Perhaps the most noticeable component of Bob's conceptions of the world are the fantastical ones.

In addition to a world populated by the unattached fragments of other people's history, Bob grows up in a world mediated by the cultural discursivity inherent in the written word. Tam, for example, is "an ardent environmentalist with lifetime subscriptions to *Audubon*, *High Country News*, *Mother Nature*, *Wildlife of the Rockies*, and *Colorado Wildlife*" (15) yet, except for one aborted desert hike (23-25), never actually engages with the nonhuman world in the physical sense. Bromo, by contrast, lives in a state of constant anger at the predictability of cultural tropes. Everything enrages him. At one point, he rails against wall calendars, "especially the scenic types with their glowing views

of a world without telephone lines, rusting cars or burgers stands, [and] he despised kittens, motorcycles, famous women and jazz musicians of the special-interest calendars as well. ‘Why not photographs of feral cats? Why not diseases?’ (15)? But despite Bromo’s frustration with the culturally discursive misrepresentations that are so clearly a reflection of the life he himself feels obligated to lead, both he and Tam feed Bob’s own tendency towards fantasy. It is because of Tam that Bob becomes “a sucker for stories told.” It is from Tam that Bob learns the trick of “[sliding] into imaginary worlds, *passive* [italics mine], listening, his mouth agape, a hard listener for whatever tale unfolded” (8). Bromo plays his part by opening “a charge account for Bob at the local bookshop where he was allowed to buy one book every two weeks. [In return,] Bob’s longing for the books [overcomes] his dislike of any obligation to Bromo” (15). Bob’s fascination with books feeds his imagination, as it should. And, in fairness, it is Bob’s love for the written word and his inherently “inquiring mind” (30) that enable him to ultimately gain acceptance in Woollybucket (Alebe 119). The conflict arises when Bob discovers that his fantastical expectations—the performative templates he extrapolates from his reading—do not match his material reality.

There are two particularly poignant, interconnected examples of the conflict between Bob’s fantastical, discursive, and purely performative expectations and his confrontation with material reality—his fantasy about “rescuing” his parents, and his fantasies about sex. From the moment Bob is deposited on Uncle Tam’s doorstep, he lives in a fantasy world. In one particularly

deep fantasy that had started a few months after [his parents] disappeared: he imagined himself [...] a hirsute and muscular adult [paddling] a red canoe up a raging Alaskan river, and then [hiking] into the wilderness as winter was coming on. Just when he was on the verge of freezing in a terrific blizzard he came upon a cabin in the wilderness. Inside was an old couple, feeble and emaciated. [...] Bob told them who he was, their long-lost son, and they fell on his neck and told him they had found gold but Rick Moomaw was after their claim. In the fantasy,



he laughed and flexed his arms, said he could and would break Moomaw to pieces. (37)

Bob imagines himself saving his parents; over time, he amends his fantasy to enhance in his mind the heroic role he plays, to explain his parents' absence, and to explore the possibility of personal agency in rectifying his own circumstances. Tam enables this fantasy, telling Bob, "I *told* Viola and Adam to bring you over. The plan was for you to stay with me until they got back from Alaska. After they got their cabin built they were coming back to get you and you were all going to live in Alaska. You staying here was a temporary thing. We just don't know what happened" (7). Bob all too willingly accepts Tam's story and his rescue fantasy takes root. As Bob grows older, however, he realizes that his parents are never coming back. He hears his family talking and hears in Tam's voice that it "was not possible for two grown people to disappear as had Adam and Viola" (7).

Bob—of unassuming temperament and average height and build—eventually realizes that he will never rescue his parents (nor, for that matter, that he will ever be as "hirsute and muscular" as he believes he must be to do so); and that, in fact, they don't want to be rescued. Bob's fantasies, when confronted with the reality of circumstance and physiognomy, fall to pieces. With his dawning awareness, Bob's fantasies about and pursuits of masculine "normativity" turn to other things; specifically, to "dreams of sluttish blonds with enameled toenails" (37). Again, however, Bob's fantasies come up against reality when he meets Marisa Berdstraw. Bob imagines himself with a "curly-headed, dimpled girl" (16). As there are "no dimpled girls with curly hair at Front Range High," he is, instead, "picked out by a big, unclean girl with a muddy complexion [...who] wore lipstick of a dark red color that made her teeth glow beaver yellow" (16). She "[inveigles] him into a sexual servitude *with all the declarations and trappings of professed love but none of the reality* [italics mine]" (16). Their "encounters in her gritty sheets, awash in her

strong body odors, [leave] him restless and disappointed" (17). "He [does] what she [says] and she [has] a pattern of events and behavior worked out in her mind" (16). When the relationship is over, he feels "neither sorrow nor relief" (17).

In the same way that his masculine fantasy of saving his parents is rendered meaningless when confronted with the physical limitations of his reality, Bob's sexual encounters with Marisa Berdstraw are pale, unpleasant, decidedly non-fantastic reflections of what he imagines that sex should be. Together, Bob's two encultured approaches to life highlight his inability to navigate the conflicted middle spaces between socially-constructed paradigms and ideals for performativity and the material realities of subjective, embodied experience. Put another way, the confrontation of his *perception* of the world with concrete reality signals the beginnings of his exploration of the material "in-betweens" that characterize him by the novel's finale; material spaces that are themselves mapped by the conceptual recognition of the co-inscription of culturally discursive ideals and the realities of physical interaction with the objective world and into which Bob has yet to venture. Perhaps more importantly to Bob the material figuration, however, is the realization that all is not in fact what he hoped and that nothing is accomplished by waiting for a "meaningful connection [...that would] show him who he was." Without his knowing it, Bob's ultimate acceptance of his parents' abandonment and what amounts to his sexual enslavement by an unpleasant representative of the female sex are the first measurements in his subjective survey of the cartography of his embodied material identity.

Tam, Bromo, and Marisa Berdstraw are, though noteworthy landmarks, by no means the only influences in Bob's life that both shape his approach to the world and illustrate Proulx's emphasis on the inadequacy of encultured performativity without historical and geo-political place attachment. Bob's only friend, "the evil fat boy" Orlando

Bunnet (31), for example, presents Bob with an alternative means of approaching the world—but alternative or otherwise, it is still a performative template. To make an otherwise long story short, Orlando represents a counter-cultural reaction to ideas of normativity; but in doing so, he also helps to construct those ideals. Orlando can only be Orlando, in other words, because cultural norms for gender and behavior are so firmly entrenched in the American *zeitgeist*; and that is precisely what appeals to Bob, for whom the *status quo* has been so spectacularly ineffective:

In every installment of life's book, Bob knew, [...] there was a fat boy. [...] In front of him stood a suety person of sixteen, his round head bound in a black cloth imprinted with skulls and crossbones, his chin decorated with seventy or eighty pale blond whickers and an assortment of pimples. [...] He was not like other fat boys. He was not jolly, he did not smile appeasingly, his eyes were not naïve and innocent. Bob Dollar knew instinctively that this was an evil fat boy. At once he took an ardent liking to him. He liked that fat boy because he was unlikable. (31)

Bob's friendship to Orlando—though in direct contrast to the socially-constructed elements of his own haphazard and fragmented experience—is nonetheless still the same “sliding into imaginary worlds” that defines his love for reading. Like his connections to his family through Uncle Tam—or Tam and Bromo's hidden relationship—or the disconnect between his sexual fantasy and lived experience, Bob's relationship with Orlando is, essentially, one of safely “trying on” a template for social performance. And like the others, it is inadequate for Bob because, for Bob, it is *only* performance.

Like the performance of both rebellion and complicity against hegemonic power structures that are represented in Bob's relationships with Tam, Bromo, and Orlando—his formative homosocial interactions—Bob's relationship with his boss at Global Pork Rind, Ribeye Cluke, is an explicit example of Proulx's opinion of the hegemonic face of corporate business—a “composite of human behavior” (361)—and exemplifies yet another performative template which Bob naïvely adopts. In addition, Ribeye Cluke serves as the perfect segue into an interrogation of the middle spaces between Bob's

entirely socially-constructed, performative identities and his material experience. Cluke represents an “ideological tension” between “capitalist ownership [and] land preservation [and its human inhabitants]” (Voie 46) and, by extension, represents in a broad sense hegemonic approaches to both. We first meet Ribeye Cluke when Bob is receiving both his job assignment and an overdose of unasked-for but willingly absorbed “wisdom” from him. Cluke’s ostentatious hegemonic “maleness,” his second-hand ideas about regionally-specific cultural performance, and his attitudes about land usage all serve as the initial points from which Bob begins to (re)map both his own identity and the cultural and non-human landscapes he encounters. In other words, Bob’s interactions with Ribeye Cluke and the ideals he adopts from him provide perhaps the most striking points in Bob’s transition from socially-constructed, fragmented identity to a material figuration premised on subjective place association and *a priori* homogeneity. In fact, Cluke represents a conflation of all that Bob understands about and expects from life up to that point. Though his interaction with Bob is brief, his ideals and ideologies have a significant impact on Bob’s initial, displacing experience of “the double-panhandle country north of the Canadian River” and the people he encounters there.

Cluke’s performance of gender and its implicit connection to his ideas about non-human landscape is one of the most striking elements of all-that-is-Ribeye. He represents, at once, all of the socially-constructed ideals that Bob himself aspires to and reflects formative elements of Bob’s own enculturation. Ribeye is the socially-constructed template for the “high mark on a distant wall” which Bob has in his sights. At the same time, however, his masculinity is also an embodied performance and his physical appearance is as much a part of his identity as his hegemonic position in a traditionally patriarchal corporate power structure. He occupies a position of social and economic influence, in other words, and *also* sports a very manly mustache which he

habitually smoothes and which “[resembles] a strip of porcupine” (5). He is (over)confident and his outward “manly” appearance is calculated, ostentatiously performed, and complicit (both tacitly and otherwise) in an economic, social, and gendered hierarchy—exemplified by his position as a “regional operations manager” with his “glass-topped desk, the gleaming surface like a small lake,” and by the “red smile” of his female subordinate, his secretary Lucille (5). Broadly put in terms of the performance of hegemonic masculinity, Bob’s brief time with Cluke emphasizes two things—the embodied materiality of male masculine performance and the way that the experiential realities of rural life (and thus, intimate association with non-human nature) work to construct cultural paradigms for regionally specific performances of masculinity.

We first meet Cluke in the novel’s opening pages; thus, he represents a sort of retrospective amalgam of the elements of Bob’s own becoming—elements which we discover through flashback over the next four chapters and which reflect (albeit distantly) the changes that Bob himself will undergo as he develops as a material figuration. Proulx’s caricature of Cluke suggests that there are both social and physiognomic exigencies involved in maintaining hegemonic ideals of social status and gender normativity. In other words, performance can never be *just* performance, but is instead constrained and/or constructed by physical, material exigencies. Proulx emphasizes this from the moment Bob Dollar walks into Cluke’s office. Instead of shaking Bob’s hand, Ribeye smoothes his porcupine strip of a mustache and then begins to perform the most ubiquitous and egocentric male act in history—he shaves his face:

Mr. Cluke picked up a can of shaving cream from the top of the filing cabinet and shook it. From a drawer in his desk he removed an arrangements of braces, straps and fittings and put it over his head so that part rested on his shoulders, and another part that was a large disk against his breast. He tugged at the disk and it opened out on a telescoping arm, becoming a mirror. He applied the shaving cream to his heavy cheeks and, with a straight razor which he took from his pencil

jar, unfolded it and began to shave, skirting the borders of his mustache.  
[... Slapping] his face with a manly heather aftershave lotion [...]. (5, 10)

Though the above passage is a short one, it nonetheless contains a number of metaphorical connections that point to the co-inscription of culturally discursive performances of masculinity *and* the embodied, place-associated nature of material masculine figurations.

In the same way that Tam and Bromo are funhouse reflections of traditional, hegemonic domesticity, Cluke is a distorted reflection of materiality—one that Proulx very clearly expects readers to find both humorous and, ultimately, distasteful. Cluke is a caricature, clearly representative, and Proulx uses shaving to illustrate this. Most importantly, though, Cluke's grooming is a culturally-discursive act of boundary making that emphasizes social-construction's reliance on embodied materiality. Material masculinity is not *only* performance, in other words, but is instead comprised of both performance and embodied necessity. Braidotti asserts that "[material] becoming is neither a reproduction or just imitation, but rather emphatic proximity, intensive interconnectedness," and in the act of shaving, Cluke evinces an "emphatic proximity"—a performative response to the dual realities of his physiognomy and the performative expectations of his job. In terms of characterizing both Cluke and the corporate world of which he is a part, the act of shaving serves two main functions. On the one hand, it stylizes and ritualizes the performance of masculinity. On the other, shaving as a metaphor emphasizes Cluke's position as representative of corporate hog farming and the traditional, economically warranted philosophies about land usage that characterize both westward expansion and industrialization.

Most obviously, Cluke's personal grooming is performance and a matter of personal (corporate) appearance—both the performance of a certain *type* of hegemonic masculinity, in other words, and an adherence to standards of grooming typical of

“businessman” stereotypes and the economic and political structures a businessman figuration represents. From the moment that Bob walks into Cluke’s office, Cluke uses shaving to create social and physical boundaries—boundaries, as I will explain in a moment, that also point to the corporate philosophy about land usage which Cluke represents. His grooming frames his conversation with Bob; the beginning of his shaving coincides with the beginning of their meeting, and when he is finished, has slapped on his “manly heather aftershave lotion,” and “swept a speck of shaving cream from his earlobe” (11), the conversation quickly comes to an end. In addition, by shaving in front of Bob, Cluke both avoids physical contact with him and highlights Bob’s subordinate position; one does not groom oneself in front of someone whose opinion matters, in other words. By shaving, then, Cluke not only defines the boundaries of his conversation with Bob, but the boundaries of their social interaction and their respective places in the existing corporate power structure. Finally, with regards to Cluke’s performance of hegemonic masculinity, is the way he shaves.

Insofar as the entirety of his instructions to Bob take place while he shaves, Cluke’s performance speaks of long, practiced habit—of the material necessity of shaving. He cannot simply *perform* masculinity and still fit into his “niche.” Rather, he is always (re)creating the boundaries of his masculinity—not becoming, but become. In his representation of a hegemonic type, he must constantly “[skirt] the borders of his mustache” and “[slap] on manly heather aftershave” in order to meet the standards for acceptable appearance that are an inherent part of his corporate culture. The performance of socially-constructed male masculine ideals are, to a significant degree and often unconsciously, influenced by the necessities and limitations of embodied maleness; in Cluke’s case, by the life-long growth of facial hair and the long, ritualized act of shaving it.

In addition to emphasizing the middle-ground that shaving represents—an unconscious concession to embodied material masculinity—the way Cluke's toilet ritual takes place also suggests what is for Proulx the primary theme of *That Old Ace in the Hole*. In light of the fact that Proulx is principally concerned with western cultures and landscapes in this novel, Cluke's performance of shaving also emphasizes what have long been environmentally destructive American ideas about human and non-human interaction. One of the ways Proulx illustrates this is by making connections between the commonplace, male act of shaving—with all of Cluke's *accoutrement*—with the most universal elements of a corporate environment. Cluke takes his shaving cream from his filing cabinet and his shaving mirror from a drawer in his “glass lake” desk. Most poignantly, however (and especially in the context of Proulx's emphasis on Bob's own love of the written word) he takes a straight razor from his pencil cup. Given Ribeye's position as a regional operations manager for Global Pork Rind, Inc., we can make obvious assumptions about the contents of the filing cabinet which gives Cluke his shaving cream. The mirror represents a slightly more complex—perhaps even psycho-analytical—problem. Telescoping out from the center of his chest and the focus of his attention during the entire conversation, the mirror suggests that when Cluke is talking to Bob, all he really sees is himself. Bob is, in Cluke's eyes, nothing more than a reflection of his own subjective perspective of the world—and an expectation that Bob fulfills quite readily at the novel's beginning. In addition, Cluke stores the mirror in his desk, itself a symbol of both his social position and the place from which he runs his regional operation.

Though there is, no doubt, much more to say about the mirror in particular, in the context of this project it is the straight razor, its storage place, and the use to which Cluke puts it that suggest the most intimate connection between Cluke's own performativity,



materiality, and his culturally discursive ideas about non-human environments. As I've said, Cluke is a distorted reflection of a material figuration. At the same time that he is illustrative of the physical requirements involved in the articulation of a gendered ideal, he is also clearly a performance—a caricature—of a socially-constructed male masculine stereotype. Proulx further emphasizes his complicity in these arbitrary hegemonic power structures through his use of his straight razor to articulate the borders of his outward appearance at the same time that he discusses with Bob his (Global Pork Rind's) opinion of the regional culture—both human and non-human—to which Bob is being sent. Taken in context with one another, the razor and Cluke's land usage philosophy betray the socially-constructed perspective of human and non-human Others that Bob takes with him when he first goes to the panhandle. When Cluke is ready to shave, he takes his straight razor (no mere disposable or electric razor for the manly Ribeye) from its storage space in pencil cup on his desk. With it, he skirts "the borders of his mustache" and in so doing defines, in a very material way, the boundaries of his socially-constructed, outwardly performed masculinity. What is of particular interest here, however, is the fact that the razor which Cluke uses to define the boundaries of his physical cartography comes from the same place as the tools he uses to concretely—as in pen and paper—define the regionally specific boundaries of the corporate landscape that is Global Pork Rind and further define and enlarge the territories represented by the large map on the wall behind his desk.

As Cluke defines his own physical cartography, he also maps out for Bob the relationship Global Pork Rind has with the panhandle ranching culture and his opinion not only of the people there, but also of the non-human environment itself:

Bob, we don't have many friends down there in the panhandles, except for one or two for the smarter politicians, and because of this situation we have to go about our business pretty quietly. [...] In other words, Bob, don't let the folks down there know that you are looking for sites for hog

facilities or they will prevaricate and try to take us to the cleaners, they will carry on with letters to various editors, every kind of meanness and so forth, as they have been brainwashed by the Sierra Club to think that hog facilities are bad, even the folks who love baby back ribs, even the ones hunting jobs. [...] (5-6)

One of the most interesting things about Cluke's initial characterization of the panhandle culture "north of [...] Canadian River" (11) is his rhetorical turn of phrase that puts the blame for corporate hog farming's failure to take hold squarely on the shoulders of both the gullibility of "indigenous" population and on the discursive machinations of the Sierra Club.

Cluke says as much by what he does not say as he does by what comes from underneath his carefully circumscribed facial hair. In the same sentence ("In other words, Bob [...]") in which he urges Bob to be "circumspect" (5) and deliberately deceptive, he castigates the panhandle residents for literally writing editorial lies about hog farming. He cites what is perhaps the most iconic activist environmental organization in the United States—nature writer and environmental activist John Muir's Sierra Club—as having brainwashed the populace, thereby both ignoring the cultural history and material place association of the panhandle residents and suggesting that given their rurality, they are incapable of thinking for themselves. He cites, furthermore, the benefits of corporate food production (i.e., food and employment) and suggests that enjoying pork and employment on a hog farm are paramount concerns. In doing so, Cluke implies that personal desire and political and economic gain outweigh what Bob soon learns is significant degradation to both the unique and irreplaceable non-human environment of the panhandle and to the long and storied history of place-attachment which undergirds the cultural identities of a people who have lived on and worked the land for generations.

Cluke's ambivalence towards the history of the panhandle's human culture is matched only by his ambivalence towards the landscape itself. Or rather, as I've already

made clear, he sees things—whether human or non—only in terms of Global Pork Rind's profit margin. After telling Bob to be "circumspect," he goes on to explain that, for Global Pork Rind, "[the] panhandle region is perfect for hog operations—plenty of room, low population, nice long dry seasons, good water. There's no reason why the Texas panhandle can't produce seventy-five percent of the world's pork. That's our aim" (6). Most notable in this statement is Cluke's "here/there" perspective of the Texas panhandle that protects him from the consequences of the destruction to human and non-human cultures and histories that his decisions and actions precipitate. That is to say, Cluke has no personal attachment to the panhandle save his bank account. Cluke's lack of place-association places him perpetually at a distance; it puts him in a position where his responsibility to both the people and the non-human environment extends only as far as the map on his wall, his corporate success, and as his cloak-and-dagger communications with the "mirror images" of himself like Bob that he sends out to do his bidding (12). He is equally ambivalent about the destruction of the land and the dismantling of the culture and sees both as useless until mapped onto his corporate cartography. And it is, as I've said, our subjective cartographies by which we navigate our becoming.

Material masculinity is not only constructed from without—from culture-at-large—but also from the subjective, embodied experience of place, of non-human environments, and of human Others. William Cronon argues that as a culture, we have the wrong idea about nature. We understand it as outside of us, as distant; and thus we are ethically and morally able to abdicate our responsibility for it (Cronon 83). The same mentality that conceptualizes non-human nature as an entity always at a distance from culture is responsible for a denial of the physical realities and co-inscriptive nature of becoming a material gender identity. For Cluke, the "panhandle region" with its plentiful "room, low population, nice long dry seasons, [and] good water" is not subjectively associative.

Cluke has no connection to the panhandle except for a mental concept of empty space on a map just waiting to be filled. For Ribeye, the panhandle is not a *place* with its own unique history, culture, and fragile other-than-human environments. He understands the human population in much the same way—as empty, ahistorical and, therefore, non-associative space. If nothing else, Ribeye’s understanding of the rural panhandle highlights the subjectivity of material place-attachment—something that Bob and Cluke are both ostensibly without—in much the same way that “the evil fat boy” Orlando clarifies hegemonic power structures by living in rebellion against them. Shaving implements and corporate maps aside, perhaps the most telling part of the conversation in Cluke’s office is his advice to Bob about how he should present himself to the folks in the panhandle. Cluke moves from framing his mustache and the conversation to Bob’s own job “performance” with nary a hitch. After mapping out for Bob Global Pork Rind’s relationship with the panhandle culture and making his claim for the hog farming possibilities of the panhandle, Cluke details the role Bob should play when he arrives in the panhandle. He begins with, “Bob, I notice you are wearing brown oxford shoes” (6).

Bob’s shoes are a crux for Proulx. Bob’s “Cole Haan [shoes] which retailed at \$300 plus, but which [Uncle Tam] had fished from a donation box left at the loading dock of his thrift shop” are, in fact, a narrative tool Proulx uses to connect Bob’s past to his present and, by virtue of Cluke’s advice, his present to his future. We learn about Bob’s past in hindsight over the course of the first four chapters interspersed with glimpses, like Cluke, of the present, and this begins with the shoes. I have already established the “cast off” nature of Bob’s upbringing and the socially-constructed templates the standards of which he fails meet—or, conversely, his experiences that fail to meet the standards of his “literary” imagination. The gleaming Cole Haan shoes that he wears to his interview with Cluke are simply another articulation of Bob’s attempt to put on the cast off identities

of others and to meet his (and Tam's) socially constructed ideals of social performance. In the context of this discussion, however, it is Cluke's opinion of Bob's shoes and the material open spaces they suggest that is of primary interest. On the one hand, Bob's shoes give us our first insight into his upbringing and thus provide both Bob and the reader with a connection to his past as well as the first of several narrative iterations of socially-constructed templates that Bob tries on. On the other hand, however, the social template the shoes represent also provide an insight into the way that socially-constructed ideas about (and performance of) rural masculinities are in fact materially, and thus malleably, co-inscribed with non-human nature. In short, Cluke tells Bob to buy some cowboy boots.

After the flashback—which begins when Cluke comments on Bob's second-hand attempt at business attire—Cluke explains his expectations:

Now, Bob, [...] you cannot go down to Texas wearing brown oxfords. [...] I've spent enough time down there to know a pair of brown oxfords can set you back with those people. Despite oilmen trigged out in suits, and wealthy wheat growers with diamond rings, the figure of respect in Texas is still the cattleman and the cattleman wants to look like a cowboy. [...] For] sure you have got to get yourself a decent pair of cowboy boots and wear them. You don't need to wear the hat or western shirts, but you got to wear the boots. (10)

And, of course, the ever-suggestible Bob agrees, "seeing the logic of it" (10). Again, for such a brief passage, there is much of note. Inherent in Cluke's statement is his (and, up to this point, Bob's) patriarchal and hierarchal perspective of the world; everything is performance and, thus, everything can be performed. Again, Cluke evinces a "here/there" mentality with his reference to "those people." He argues, likewise, for a social hierarchy. For Cluke there is a distinct difference between those with money—the oilmen, "wealthy wheat growers" and cattlemen—and those without—i.e., cowboy. He asserts further that though the cattleman is *the* "figure of respect" in Texas culture, even the cattleman "wants to look like a cowboy." Essentially, Cluke cannot imagine a world in

which *being* is anything other than the donning and doffing of performative “costumes” and that is based in the same profit/loss world view that clearly gives initiative to his ability to separate his personal experiences (“I’ve been down there enough...”) from the cultural and environmental damages Global Pork Rind inevitably causes.

Perhaps most important, with regards to the cowboy boots, however, is the way in which they speak as a symbol to American fascination with rural masculinities like the cowboy and the non-human landscape with which they are associated. Insofar as Cluke is representative of a particular, socially-constructed world view, it is not the boots themselves but what they represent in culture-at-large that is of the most interest with regards to this dissertation. Cluke makes it clear that *all* Bob needs are the boots. He doesn’t need the other western wear so commonly associated with the cowboy—“the hat and western shirts.” He needs only to buy and wear the boots. Cluke’s costuming suggestions expand Bob’s own perspectives about hegemonic masculine performance. Bob enters Cluke’s office wearing shoes that—in addition to being cast-off—represent Bob and Tam’s idealized notions about the performance of a “business masculinity.” Cluke, rather than dissuade Bob of that notion, he adds to the concept of “business masculinity.” He does so by citing oil men, wealthy wheat farmers, and ranch owners as representative.

Cluke understands the construction of masculinity as an entirely externally performative process. He sees a distinction between rural men and urban men; and within those categories, suggests even more carefully defined templates for masculine performance. Cluke’s perspective is notable for this reason because he argues for heterogeneity in the same way that men’s studies suggest it by simply trading the singular *hegemonic masculinity* for pluralized (albeit regionally specific) versions of the same hegemonic and stereotypical masculine conceptualizations. Cluke’s stereotypes,

in other words, are more specific, but they are still stereotypes distanced from the embodied experience and historical place-association that comprise material gender identity.

Cowboy boots are, like the men and women that wear them, material figurations. Their existence in culture—either in work or fashion—suggest not only a socially-constructed aesthetic, but also a historical, place-associated physicality—“history written on the body.” They represent an embodied relationship to (and a reaction against) non-human landscapes and, in turn, bestow upon their wearer (whether cowboy or Bob) a sense of the history and culturally-discursive ethos that accompanies the cowboy figuration. In contention with Daniel Worden’s argument that western “masculinity does not reside in the male body but instead in a series of performative gestures and public performances” (1), cowboy boots are evidence of the “qualities of character, themselves carried in physiognomy—the body of the white male [...], lean, sinewy, hard, taut “ (Dyer 34). Cowboy boots are, in other words, more than just footwear. Their practical, material use undergirds the social performance that Cluke suggests to Bob. It is because cowboy boots are *both* practical from the subjective, embodied perspective of the working cowboy and can also be put to performative use that they can represent the materiality of the cowboy.

Cowboy boots, as they were originally intended, were not an attempt at fashion; the idea was premised in the embodied experience of being a cowboy in terms of health, safety, and comfort. While they are not necessarily “masculine” footwear (and despite the fact that women have a long history of being working ranch hands), cowboy boots were invented by a man for work in what still is a male dominated occupation and are more readily associated with *cowboys* than their female counterparts. World renowned boot company, Sheplers, writes in their history of the cowboy boot that,

around 1870 some ingenious cowboy took his boots to a shoemaker and asked for a pointy toe so he could get his foot into the stirrup more easily; a taller shaft to protect his legs; and a bigger, thicker, underslung [*sic*] heel so his foot wouldn't come out of the stirrup during the rough riding on the trails. The knee-high design protected his legs from the thorns of mesquite trees, barbed wire, snakes, and other dangers. The cowboy boots were [...] loose enough on the top so that they could be wiggled out of easily if the cowboy was hung up in the stirrup and needed to get out in a hurry. The tough leather [...] also protected the cowboy's ankles from being bruised by the wooden stirrups, and his legs from rubbing against the stirrup leathers. The cowboy boots were stitched on the outside to keep the leather from buckling and eventually rubbing against the cowboy's leg. ("The History of Cowboy Boots")

The upshot is that cowboy boots were designed with the health and safety of the cowboy in mind. They were not part of an attempt to perform a western masculinity, but an attempt to keep the cowboy alive and healthy—very material concerns—while he worked the land.

Proulx's emphasis on cowboy boots serves as a cross-boundary connection between Bob's past (Tam), his present (Cluke), and his eventual future (the regional culture the Texas panhandle). In addition, the boots also serve as both a foreshadowing and a crux upon which turns Bob's transition from *performing* identity to material *becoming*. Cluke's demand that Bob wear the boots is at once Proulx's recognition of a regionally specific culture and its historical connection to the land—of embodied, and thus physically inscripted, experience with non-human environments—and of the socially-constructed symbolism attached to the men who wear them. The cowboy boots are one of Proulx's many nods to the spaces between social-constructionist performativity and the moment-by-moment, contextual, embodied, and subjective experience of becoming masculine in a regionally specific culture. Instead of a costume—the accoutrement of a performed role—cowboy boots are a socially-constructed concession to the embodied experience of the working cowboy. Cowboy boots are also a concession to concrete place. It was (and is) the physical exigencies of working in a very specific type of



landscape that make the boots necessary. It is, likewise, that type of landscape with which cowboys themselves are associated. Like Cluke and his shaving, the cowboy boots he demands Bob buy are tacit argument against social-constructionist assertions that masculinity—even male masculinity—is founded entirely on the performance of historically and perpetually changing gender norms. At least, they are once Bob puts them on his feet.

### 2.3.2 *Material Bob*

As I wrote in the introduction for this chapter, the landscape in *That Old Ace* functions as the ideal representative of the material middle spaces between hegemonic (and thus social-constructionist) ideas about masculinity and the ever-changing and, by extension, perpetually re-mapped cartography of material masculine experience. Thus, Proulx's novel serves as a transitional text that moves this project forward from a discussion of men's studies social-constructionist approach to masculinity to a material analysis of rural masculinities. I suggested, also, that my primary interest in Proulx's *That Old Ace in the Hole* lies in the way that Bob represents the permeability of socially-constructed boundaries between human culture and non-human nature and between the cultural performance of masculinity—represented here by Denver and Bob's upbringing—and the material realities inherent in his subjective and embodied place-association with the Texas panhandle. Voie writes that to "Proulx's characters, relocation from urban cityscapes to wide-open rural landscapes [represents] the beginning of ideological transformation" (41). It is precisely with the *event* of Bob's relocation that I am concerned here. His re-locative experience is where he ceases to be an example (or not) of hegemonic masculine types and *becomes* a material masculinity. Bob's embodied experience of non-human nature constitutes the point where his "derailed [life is] put on track through immersion in landscape. [Furthermore, those] immersions are not the

ambulatory meanderings they appear to be initially, but guided excursions in the process of becoming” (Voie 48). With regards to this novel, it is the process of material becoming that most interests me.

Material masculinity is the point and material becoming is never linear. Thus, it is important for me to clarify that neither Proulx’s plot line nor Bob’s becoming are nearly as linear as I may have made them seem. I have outlined them the way I have in order to show how Proulx emphasizes the inadequacy of systematic models of performativity for accurately defining the material experience of becoming “masculine.” Post-structural philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari write that

there are as many sexes as there are terms in symbiosis, as many differences as elements contributing to a process of contagion. We know that many beings pass *between* [italics mine] a man and a woman; they come from different worlds, are born on the wind, for rhizomes around roots; they cannot be understood in terms of production [or, alternatively, performance], only in terms of becoming. (242)

Actual, physical context—“rhizomes around roots,” life with jagged edges—as opposed to contexts merely social (an academic or business environment, for example) gives priority to some experiences—some indelible evidences of our embodiment—and subordinates others; this happens perpetually with no regard to existing “production” of conceptual cartographies.

The concept of material becoming flies in the face of social-constructionist contentions that the elements of subjective identity are simply historically-based performative templates with which an individual invests himself at any given moment. Men’s studies key social-constructionist concept that “being ‘like a man’ has little to do with possession [of the attributes of biological maleness] and everything to do with performance” (Worden 1). Hegemonies (heterogeneity notwithstanding) deny the possibility that embodied experience of place (i.e. landscape or lack thereof) undergirds discursively constructed ideas and mythologies about masculinity—on the one hand; and

that that it does so through, on the other hand, an identity and connection to human and non-human environments which are carried visibly and permanently on and in the body of the material male subject. Though enculturation and ideas of social performance play a role in the becoming of a gendered subject, giving them the place of prominence produces an inevitably deterministic list of *types* of masculinity. By contrast, the fragmental cohesion of the becoming subject acknowledges *both* his sub-conscious adherence to performative norms *and* his foundation in the subjective, embodied, and material experience of something which lies outside the boundaries erected by human cultural discursive empiricism. The material masculine subject (in this case, Bob), “thus constituted inhabits a time that is the active tense of continuous ‘becoming’” (*Transpositions* 151) and is, by extension, a Braidotti-an post-structural figuration whose subjective history in and with unique geo-political places and landscapes can be read in their physical cartography.

Bob’s abandonment; his upbringing with Tam and Bromo; his inscriptive experiences with Marisa, Orlando, and finally with Cluke; and his inability to accurately define his own identity—to become more than an “internal sack of wood chips”—all point to the trying on, disappointment by, and subsequent discarding of inadequate or fantastically idealistic performative templates. Furthermore, I’ve argued that Cluke, by suggesting (nay, demanding) that Bob buy and actually *wear* cowboy boots, highlights what is for Proulx a traditional, hegemonic concept of the world at large. Put another way, Cluke is representative of both socially-constructed hegemonic power structures and, by virtue of the boots, the material exigencies that undergird them. He highlights, in this way, the fact that social-construction is itself founded in the material, subjective, and embodied experience of perpetually becoming an identity.

It is not Bob's fragmented identity that is the problem, however—identities are always an amalgam of fragments of our experiences. Instead, the fragmentation that form the pieces of Bob's material becoming are a result of his lack of subjective experience of specific geo-political and historical cultures and the landscapes that have molded them both materially; landscapes which are iconized with those cultures in the uniquely American cultural *zeitgeist*. In the same way that Proulx emphasizes Bob's socially-constructed (and ultimately inadequate) templates for social interaction, she emphasizes the socially-constructed overlays he carries with him into the "unmapped" spaces between Denver and Woolybucket. Like she did with Bob's experiential disappointments as he grew up, Proulx highlights the way the physical spaces—"a sense of [which] can only be cultivated through attention to detail of landscape, history, and story" (Voie 46)—through which Bob passes on his journey to Woolybucket also fail to meet his preexisting culturally discursive expectations. One of the ways she does this is by "losing" Bob—by dis-locating him—in the very material middle-spaces between Denver and Woolybucket.

The first four chapters of *That Old Ace in the Hole* are, like Bob himself, fragmented. Interspersed with the flashbacks Proulx uses to emphasize Bob's fragmented and socially-constructed past, however, are chronologically linear accounts of his journey from Denver (Bob's fragmented past) to the panhandle of Texas (his present). The principal difference between Proulx's accounts of Bob's past and his present journey is the immediacy—the "active tense"—with which we see Bob's culturally discursive overlays give way to the material realities of the landscape through which he is passing. In particular, in the first pages we come to know Bob as a man of symbols being disconnected from the romanticized ideals those symbols have always held for him. The road he is following, for example, runs

along a railroad track. He thought the bend of the rails unutterably sad, those cold and gleaming strips of metal turning away into the distance made him think of the morning he was left on Uncle Tam's doorstep listening for the inside clatter of coffee pot and cups although there had been no train nor track there. He did not know how the rails had gotten into his head as symbols of sadness. (1)

Significantly, as the book progresses and Bob becomes more invested in the landscape and its history, his symbolic (and romantic) ideas about the railroad change. As Bob comes to understand the historical, political, economic, and social impacts that the railroad has had on Texas farming and ranching culture, his association becomes less symbolic and ethereal and instead becomes one of personal, experiential and historical place association.

In addition to the concrete historical and economic impacts of the railroad on the high plains—and with regards to Bob's materiality and the co-inscription of culture and non-human nature it implies—the railroad is a metaphorical device that not only connects that past to the present, but also one that forever crosses the middle spaces between the two cultures that have made Bob Bob. Proulx exemplifies Bob's gradual (rather than explicitly dichotomous) transition between cultures—and thus between world-views—in other ways as well. For example, as he drives, he listens to the radio. The further he gets from Denver and the culture it represents

NPR [fades] from the radio in a string of announcements of *corporate supporters* [italics mine], [is] replaced by a Christian station that [alternates between] pabulum preaching and punchy music [... and which he then switches to] shit-kicker airwaves [and] songs about staying home, going home, being home and the errors of leaving home. (1)

Like the railroad, the radio—with its movement from corporate sponsored news media to “shit-kicker” music rife with the subjective experience of place association—suggests the linearity of Bob's transition in a way Proulx's narrative does not, struck through as it is with flashbacks. In addition, and more to the point, what we find out about Bob's life

through flashback, Proulx highlights through Bob's initial perceptions of the rural high plains themselves.

The non-human landscape in Proulx's work is just as much an agentic character as the human caricatures she draws; and, in addition, often reflects the characters themselves in material ways. Proulx uses Bob's initial experiences of the high plains, then, to illustrate his malleability—to emphasize the way that a willingness to change—or to recognize the ability to change—one's perspective, to re-locate one's identity, is an essential part of material (gender) identity. For Proulx, Bob's initial reaction to the non-human environment through which he is passing—and in which he gets lost—is a reflection both of Bob's as-yet entirely performative identity as well as of the socially-constructed and unnecessarily dichotomous nature of cultural ideas about the relationship between humans and the non-human world; ideas which precipitate mutually destructive interactions between the two.

As it is with "real" life, it is difficult to draw a definitive line between Bob's "conversion" from socially-constructed, hegemonic masculinity to material figuration. This is because it is the nature of a material masculine figuration to be undefined, to be always becoming, in context and in the moment. Bob's relocation from a "urban cityscape" of Denver to the geographically and historically iconized regional culture of the Texas panhandle is nevertheless a narrative middle space that Proulx uses to articulate both cultures and in which Bob both loses who he was and re-orient himself. Between his departure from Denver and the time he settles himself on LaVon Fronk's Busted Star ranch, Bob stops trying to adhere to socially-constructed ideals and begins (re)mapping the landscape both subjectively—in terms of embodied experience and his own conceptual cartography—and objectively with regards to his already familiar proclivity towards culturally discursive representations of reality. Thus, Bob himself becomes

representative—a material figuration—whose movement into middle grounds that bear the evidence of both human attempts at definition and of non-human nature’s patient resistance to it signals the start of his material becoming.

In terms of the novel as a whole, Bob’s material becoming begins as Proulx pieces together the fragments of his life for us over the course of the first four chapters—and at particular geo-cartographical moments on his way to establishing himself in the un-renovated 19<sup>th</sup> century bunkhouse on the Busted Star. In terms of Bob’s subjective experience of non-human landscape, he starts becoming a material figuration when he loses his way between the “Oklahoma pistol barrel” and his destination in Texas.

Kenneth Hada argues that Proulx’s “method is to portray the landscape in accurate detail so that the characters can become pronounced *within* [italics mine] the landscape” (qtd. in Abele 120). That is why, in Proulx’s first sentence, we meet Bob as he is driving “east along Texas State Highway 15 in the panhandle, down from Denver the day before, over the Raton Pass and through the dead volcano country of Northeast New Mexico to the Oklahoma pistol barrel, then a wrong turn north and wasted hours before he regained the way” (1). It is on the “roaring spring morning” after getting lost that Bob first sees the panhandle. As he listens to “shit kicker” music and watches the railway “turning away into the distance,” he experiences for the first time an unfettered horizon.

As he moves ever closer to his destination, “the ancient thrill of moving against the horizon into the great yellow distance [heats] him, for even fenced and cut with roads the overwhelming presence of grassland [persists], though nothing of the original prairie [remains]” (1). From the moment Bob is initiated in the rural culture/landscape of the Texas panhandle, he understands his journey as one that he shares with many others. The “ancient thrill of moving against the horizon” is ancient, after all, and one that has catalyzed migration, settlement, and exploration for millennia. In this, perhaps for the first

time, Bob finds himself part of something both concrete—in terms of his subjective and embodied reaction to the physical landscape he is traversing (i.e., it is a “thrill” that “[heats] him”)—and historically locative in terms of the “ancient” footsteps he is following. But, as I’ve said, Bob’s initial experience of the Texas panhandle and his realization that he is, perhaps for the first time, part of something bigger than himself comes on the heels of first getting lost in the non-human landscape.

By sending Bob north hours out of his way instead of directly to his destination, Proulx effectively disconnects Bob from Denver and his fragmented past and places him in what are for Bob completely literally unmapped spaces. Significantly, Bob does not simply cross these “empty” spaces, but instead spends an entire day wandering around lost in them. When he discovers he is lost, he finds that he is also unable to use his map, “a gas station cheapo stamped *Central and Western States*” (27) to rectify his predicament because there are no towns or roads on it that answer to his location. Bob, unable to locate himself within the culturally-discursive cartography of the map, resorts to guesswork and begins, thereby, to map his own experiential—and thus material--cartography. But Bob, being Bob, lacks a sense of direction—apparently as true for him materially as conceptually. Instead of turning east as he literally guesses, Bob follows a “set of dusty ruts dotted with manure [north], a primitive road wandering through uninhabited grazing land. There [are] no towns, no gas stations, no houses, no corrals, no traffic. He [is] the only person on an endless track without turnoff nor intersection” (27). When he sees a “weather-beaten sign, the first he had seen” that reads COMANCHE NATIONAL GRASSLAND<sup>9</sup> and checks his map again, he discovers that he is back in Colorado. Because “he [can] not bear to retrace his path to the fetal boomtown

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<sup>9</sup> According to the USDA Forest Service, the Comanche National Grassland were established in 1960 and “[include] over 440, 000 acres in southeastern Colorado” (www.usda.gov).



[of Teemu],” he forges ahead and though “he [finds] the road [he loses] the day” (27). Finally, at dusk, Bob finds himself outside of Boise City, Oklahoma at a bed-and-breakfast where he opens a parting gift from Bromo Redpoll—the exploration journal of one Lieutenant James William Abert (“*Expedition to the Southwest, An 1845 Reconnaissance of Colorado, New Mexico, Texas and Oklahoma*”) (28)—and Proulx begins his region-specific cultural (re)education.<sup>10</sup>

Bob’s day wandering lost is, notably, framed by a historical, even nationalistic association with place. As I suggested just above, Bob realizes as he crosses the landscape that he is following in ancient footsteps and that the horizon which thrills and heats him has been chased for millennia. But it is not simply landscapes and horizons which open Bob up to this recognition. It is his literary/discursive knowledge of Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, and Oklahoma that first reveals to him his place in the larger movement of history. Bob’s knowledge of the history of westward movement, however, is relegated to books and, by extension, kept at a distance; at least until he has his own subjective and embodied experience of that place himself. As he leaves Teemu, Oklahoma, he “[thinks] of the storekeeper’s apparent ignorance that it had taken Santa Fe centuries to build up from its start as a trading town for Mexican hides and Indian silverwork. [...] So, thinking of the Santa Fe Trail [...] and thinking how he would soon be crossing that ghostly track, he took a wrong turn” (26-27). Though presumably Bob never does intersect “that ghostly track,” it is his recognition that he is making the same journey made by those responsible for westward expansion and the subjective historical connection that implies that open Bob up to his own material becoming. More to the point, it is a combination of historical/discursive *and* embodied place association—and

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<sup>10</sup> Though the journal Bromo gives Bob does not actually exist, Lt. Abert is himself a historical figure who “spent many years in the service of the Topographical Corps” (Proulx 361).

the physical immediacy of the place and his embodied experience of it—which begin to lay a concrete foundation for the subjective, material identity he heretofore lacks.

In the same way that his own prior historical knowledge and increasingly subjective experience of the landscape he is traveling through prepare him to be dislocated—are, in fact, the reasons he becomes so in the first place—the way he spends his last moments of his first day suggest the other side of the narrative historical framework within which Bob’s material becoming begins. Before going to sleep on the evening before he enters the Texas panhandle, Bob spends time reading Lt. Abert’s exploration journal. As a literary device, Lt. Abert’s journal about exploring and mapping the Texas panhandle serves several purposes in terms of Bob’s material becoming. Most importantly with regard to Proulx’s narrative transition from Bob’s performative identity to his material figuration, however, are the implied points of identification he has with the lieutenant who is, like Bob, exploring and surveying the panhandle for the first time. When Bob opens Bromo’s gift, there is a note attached. Bromo, who “has an uncanny sense of what [books] Bob [will like],” writes to him that he

[...] thought the adventure of Lt. Abert might interest you as he was the first to systematically explore the region you are now in and at approximately your age. I hope you take as much interest in what you see as he did. The broadly engaged mind is the source of a happy life. Good luck. P.S. Keep away from Oklahoma. (28)

The upshot is that Bromo sees in Lt. Abert something of Bob. Moreover, his gift becomes Bob’s historical touch-point. Abert is not merely a “ghostly track” which Bob hopes to intersect, in other words, but the literary ghost himself whose subjective, material experience—in print and on a map—not only influences Bob’s perspectives of panhandle culture and landscape, but also, in terms of cartography, assumedly played a leading role in the construction of popular cultural ideas about the central high plains and the people who live and work the land there.

Though Bromo explicitly points to similarities between Bob and Lt. Abert in terms of age and location, it is the implied connections between the two men, given what we know about Bob, that are the most poignant. For example, as I have explained, Bob grew up an abandoned child, socially outcast through no design of his own, and unable to find a stable public (or private) identity; Bob was unable to find his niche. Lt. Abert, as Bob learns that first night, suffered in similar ways. As a West Point cadet, Abert was a failure who “stood near the bottom of his class in all but drawing, where he ranked first” (30). Bob, who has firsthand experience with social derision, feels “his heart [go] out to Lieutenant Abert [who,] surrounded by military bullies, sissy drawing his only skill” (30), ultimately joins the Topographical Corp and thus plays a culturally significant role in the settlement and subordination of the non-human environment of the central high plains. Bob’s inability to locate himself—either conceptually or geographically—reflects Abert’s experience at West Point and his part in the exploration of previously unmapped country.

Like Abert, Bob crosses the high plains without the benefit of a map. Significantly, Abert does his surveying at the behest of an organization of which he is but an infinitesimal part and which has as its only goal both the culturally discursive and the physical subordination of the non-human Other. Bob, by comparison, goes to the panhandle with similar orders from an organization with similar goals. By virtue of their employment, therefore, Lieutenant Abert and Bob Dollar are complicit in the respective construction and reification of conceptions about distinctively good or bad “versions” of non-human nature and of its both native and non-native indigenes. Put another way, in the same way that Bob is sent to the panhandle as Cluke’s emissary to scout for hog farm locations that Cluke can then add to the map on his office wall, Abert is sent to the panhandle as an emissary of the U.S. government and tasked with drawing the map itself. Both men, in this context, represent similar and very particular notions about non-

human landscape, its value, and its usefulness; they are both, however, only tiny cogs in the hegemonic economic and political social constructions that still drive both government and corporate entities to over-use and degrade the “empty,” “useless,” and non-associative spaces of the American West. Ultimately, each man’s advent on the high plains signals significant historical and cultural change for the region’s human population and will inevitably (or in Bob’s case, further) threaten the fragile ecology and abundant (or in Bob’s case, rapidly depleting) natural resources that make the region so agriculturally desirable.

Given Bob’s predisposition towards the literary, it doesn’t take a profound suspension of disbelief to accept that the identification he feels with Abert is real and at once both historically/culturally discursive and physiological. His “heart [goes] out to” Abert, and his identification with him is not merely intellectual, but also emotional; akin to the “ancient thrill” he feels on his first morning in the panhandle. In addition, he is *reading* about Abert’s historical journey at the same time that he is making the journey himself, at approximately the same age, with the same essential goal in mind, but almost 150 years later. Thus, the journal points to the co-inscription of moment-by-moment, locative experience of non-human environments and the socially-constructed influence of the written accounts of those experiences on broadly cultural conceptions of human and non-human rural environments. Environmental historian Roderick Nash has suggested that it was “the literary gentleman wielding the pen, not the pioneer with his axe” who was responsible for instigating changes in the historical antipathy that American culture had toward non-human nature; and, by extension, for subsequent subjugation of American other-than-human environments (44). Without concrete, contextual experience of the landscape, however, for the most part men like Abert would never have written their exploration narratives or fictionalized accounts of the frontier. And if they had not,

presumably men like Bob would never develop the historical and geo-political place-association with regionally specific cultures and landscapes that Proulx implies is possible with—and even necessary for—material becoming.

One final note with regards to Lieutenant Abert's exploration narrative: I asserted in chapter one that one of men's studies most poorly utilized tools for the study of male masculinities is the American literary record. I argued that literature, because it is a creation of culture, is a reflection of the culture that produces it. In this light, American literature about men and non-human nature provides a conceptual cartography from which men's studies can extrapolate an accurate picture of the geo-politically locative, moment-by-moment, and subjectively embodied experience of perpetually becoming a material masculinity at very specific moments in history. It is worth noting, then, that Lt. Abert's journal does much the same thing for Bob. Abert's journal is, in essence, a 150 year old guide book to the region that contemporary Bob is subjectively experiencing. Abert was even a cartographer whose work surveying and drawing maps of the Southwestern United States influence not only Bob's subjective encounters with the landscape but also, assumedly, served as the discursive template by which cultural ideas about the high plains were defined. On the one hand, then, Abert's journal is quite literally a historical, cartographic account of one man's material experience of heretofore unmapped spaces. On the other hand, Bob's initial identification with Abert on both emotional and intellectual levels creates an increasingly intimate, subjective association with the region that Abert explored and with which Bob himself is about to bodily interact. Abert's journal serves, in short, as a literal and conceptual historical cartography of the becoming of both a nation and man. Using Abert's journal as a literary map in the same way I've suggested men's studies needs to approach literature, Proulx implicates Bob in

both the historical and the subjective, embodied place-association upon which material masculinity is premised.

Bob's experience wandering the less-than-mapped grazing land in Southeast Colorado is a literary device that Proulx uses to dis-locate him in space and to disconnect him from the intensely culturally discursive elements of his fragmented and scattered identity; to usher him, in other words, into his becoming. I also argued that Bob's initial becoming is framed by both subjective experience and "objective" literary knowledge of historical events and people in specific geographical locations; and in the midst of—what is for both Bob and Lt. Abert—previously unmapped and, therefore, purely conceptual space. However, in hindsight, perhaps "framed" is the wrong term to use. Rather than serving as historically and geographically poignant bookends for his dislocation, Bob's missed intersection with the historic Santa Fe Trail, his subjective identification with Lieutenant Abert—and even his own appearance in the panhandle—are instead Braidotti-an campsites on the conceptual landscape of material masculinity's co-inscription with a unique, endangered, and irreplaceable other-than-human environment.

Alternatively, the two moments that begin and end Bob's day—and in conjunction with Bob's journey itself—serve as landmarks in the same historical cartography. Bob's missed connection with the Santa Fe Trail is nonetheless indicative of his ability to see himself as part of a larger historical storyline. His initial reading of Abert's journal and his subsequent identification with Abert himself serves as an additional touch point for both Bob and his reader. For the reader, Bob's subjective and embodied experiences of historical place-association provide a sense of definition—of amorphous boundary lines—to the literary map that Proulx is drawing; literary landmarks in a fragmented cartography, as it were. For Bob, the moments of subjective, experiential history provide both concretely *geographic* and discursively *conceptual* cartographic reference points which

he uses in different ways to orient himself in the middle spaces between Denver and his destination in the Texas panhandle. Notably, Bob orients *himself*. In light of the “early years” when Bob merely waits for someone to show him where to go and who to be, it is significant that Bob discovers his own agency with regards to the visceral experience of being lost and alone on an “endless track” that he cannot locate on his “cheapo” gas station roadmap—nor, by extension, within the culturally discursive boundaries the map represents and which always been Bob’s way of understanding the world. When he does finally make it back to the highway and, eventually, to the Badger Hole bed-and-breakfast outside of Boise, he has completely regained his sense of direction, but it is a direction he has, possibly for the first time in his life, determined for himself. Thus, his success at (re)orienting himself in both the physical and the historically discursive landscape is representative of his material becoming.

After a long, disorienting day, Bob finally falls asleep, but not before Proulx reiterates the material connections between history, geo-political place-association, and the exigencies of embodied experience one more time:

Now in Boise City, which the woman with crimped hair told him had been accidentally bombed by the U.S. Air Force during World War II, he fell asleep [...], awakened a little after midnight by a raucous alarm and red flashes on the television screen warning residents [...] to seek shelter as a spotter had reported a funnel cloud moving northeast [...], just over the Texas line. The screen flashed a map and he saw the tornado was seventy miles east of him and moving away, went back to uneasy sleep, wondering if in this job he would be reaped in the whirlwind. (41)

Proulx places Bob securely within the context of history; he is falling asleep in a community that had uniquely intimate experience of World War II. When he is awakened, it is by a “raucous alarm and red flashes” which, in context, bring to mind air raid sirens and the flash of explosions. However, rather than bombs, it is a tornado warning—a common occurrence in the spring on the high plains. Bob’s disorientation (or what we can assume is disorientation given that he is awakened by alarms and flashes in the

middle of the night) is alleviated when the “[television] screen [flashes] a map and he [sees] that the tornado [is] seventy miles east of him.” In other words, once he has located himself both in the moment and on the map, he falls again into an “uneasy” sleep. Bob’s last thought as he drifts off is a subconscious recognition of the material connections between culturally discursive construction and embodied experience and highlights the material exigencies of living in a region like the central high plains. Put another way, Bob’s fear that he might be “reaped in the whirlwind” (especially given the context in which he has the thought) is a real fear from both the perspective of his job performance and in terms of his helplessness in the face of non-human nature’s own uncontrollable actions. No matter how well he performs or which templates he tries on, life still happens. What Bob discovers in the “unmapped” spaces is that he has agency.

Bob’s story, of course, does not end with his advent in the Texas panhandle. The remainder of the novel is Bob *being* material. As he becomes increasingly aware of the rich cultural history of Woollybucket and of the unique, co-inscriptive relationship the residents of the high plains have with the non-human environment, he also becomes an increasingly substantial part of that history. The more he learns, the more disassociated from and disgusted with Global Pork Rind and its corporate “high water mark” he becomes. Ultimately, Bob quits his job with Global Pork Rind and, we are led to believe, moves permanently to Woollybucket to open a bookstore. The end of the novel, however, is not the end of Bob, of Woollybucket or, for that matter, of corporate farming’s conquest of the panhandle ranchland. In the same way that Bob’s experiences of subjective place association serve as landmarks on the conceptual landscape of his material becoming, the novel’s final lines are not the end of the story but simply the final landmark to which we, the readers, are privy. Proulx writes:

He wanted time to stop, just for a few days, an hour. He needed to sort things out. But of course nothing stopped nor slowed, the minutes



tumbling down, the day moving to a close, everything up in the air. [...] He would go back to Denver but not for long. LaVon owed him the story behind the photograph showing the deep scars on her grandfather's back. (359)

Bob, who began his life as a fragmented identity—abandoned, living in an imagined, often (fantastical) future, with both literally and figuratively no sense of direction—discovers the value of living in and being part of a present that is founded firmly on the visible, *material* evidence of historical connection to place. His transitional experience getting lost between Denver and Woolybucket reflects the disorientation and sense of dislocation he feels growing up. And, when the novel ends, Bob's sense of the future is concrete—unlike, for example, his rescue fantasy—because it is firmly based not only in his own moment-by-moment, physically effective *and* affective experience of the landscape and culture, but also in a very real sense of his personal connection to the history of the place.

## 2.4 Conclusion

At its broadest, *That Old Ace in the Hole* is the story of a man who moves from an urban to a rural region. Bob the figuration, in other words, crosses the same boundaries that this project is itself meant to cross. My purpose in beginning my literary analysis with this novel has been because Proulx articulates the most basic element of material identity so well—that becoming is, first of all, an on-going process. In order to initiate this, Proulx dislocates Bob. She takes him from the fragmented culture and performative templates that he knows, dislocates him in both time and space, and introduces him to the panhandle as a material masculinity. *That Old Ace* is the story of a collision between two distinctly different cultures—Denver/Global Pork Rind and the Texas panhandle/Woolybucket—one premised on the performance of socially-constructed templates, one premised on a materially co-inscriptive relationship with the non-human world. Bob Dollar navigates the middle spaces between the two, both

conceptually and physically. From the moment of his advent upon the Texas panhandle, Bob starts becoming. He is a literary, material figuration whose transition from socially-constructed performativity to material becoming illustrates the reciprocal nature of embodiment/essence and social-construction in the production of gender identity.

Bob Dollar is a transitional figure. By characterizing Bob the way she does, Proulx highlights the dichotomies between regional (or, urban and rural) cultural ideals of success, identity, and non-human environment. Bob is also lucky. His inherent malleability make his transition from socially-constructed, performative identity to material masculinity a positive step forward. When he takes his job with Global Pork Rind, Bob is searching for a concrete, stable identity and is fortunate that the “installments of [his] life’s book” (31) lead him to a place where he discovers that it is the journey, not the destination—the *becoming*, not the *being*—that is important. For other men, however, this same realization comes at great cost to themselves and to the people whose lives their own material experiences affect. In the same way that Bob’s transitional experience highlights the dichotomies represented by culturally discursive, performative identity and the material, place-based experience of becoming, the material figuration of western rural masculinity—the ubiquitous cowboy—highlights the destructive masculine/feminine, culture/nature, hetero/homo dichotomies that exist within regional cultures much like the one where Bob himself ends up. In the following chapter, I take under consideration the hegemonic masculine stereotype of the mythic American cowboy and the experience of being a material masculinity in rural cultures premised almost entirely on hegemonic, heterosexual masculine normativity. Through an re-theorization of the cowboy as a material masculine figuration in Annie Proulx’s *Brokeback Mountain*, chapter three also surveys the second landmark for a cartography of material masculinities—conceptual and embodied conflict.

### Chapter 3

#### Western Cartographies: The Conflicted Cowboy as Material Masculinity in Annie Proulx's *Brokeback Mountain*

The passing of these  
unromantic men constitutes the  
passing of a romantic era. It was  
a rough and ugly era, but in the  
light of that which came after, it  
was heroic and exciting.  
from *The Tulsa World*,  
1929

Few post-modern, regional authors have navigated what Susan Kollin calls the “unstable and shifting form” (560) of the Western genre—or done so with a finger so accurately placed on the cultural pulse as successfully as Annie Proulx.<sup>11</sup> By the same token, few recent Western authors have had the still resonating cultural impact that her 1997 novella, *Brokeback Mountain* has had.<sup>12</sup> In *Brokeback Mountain*, as in her other western fiction, Proulx demonstrates that she is familiar with the traditional structure, themes, and gender stereotypes associated with the Western genre. She also exhibits her adeptness at taking those structures, themes, and tropes and turning them around on themselves, at once both acknowledging and subverting them; and, in doing so, emphasizing the unmapped and conflicted spaces that critical de-construction leaves

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<sup>11</sup> With the exception perhaps, I would argue (in a different place, at a different time), of Cormac McCarthy and Percival Everett—to varying degrees.

<sup>12</sup> *Brokeback Mountain* was reprinted as one of eleven short fiction pieces about Proulx's home state of Wyoming included in her 1999 collection, *Close Range*.

behind. Though it may seem contradictory to suggest that Proulx situates herself within the genre by situating herself at a remove from it—by separating her Western protagonist from his traditional performativity—by framing her story this way, she establishes her credibility as a Western author. From the first, she makes her readers aware that she is cognizant of and taking issue with the traditional Western's resistant elements as I outline them in the context of my exegesis below. Proulx builds her cowboy hero from the skin outward; that is to say, she begins with a specimen of naked, male humanity and adds the historical and cultural layers to him that she initially takes pains to strip away. Proulx asserts her right to allow the remainder of *Brokeback Mountain* to be “shaped by a certain desire for and attraction to the classic features of the Western” (Kollin 560), and she makes it clear that it is precisely those features with which she is in contention. Ultimately, by situating herself from the beginning at the heart of the Western tradition's “contested center” (Robinson 2), Proulx opens up and explores the conflicted material middle spaces between geo-politically specific conceptions of masculinity and the embodied experiences of rural men in non-human nature.

Most importantly in terms of this dissertation, Proulx's western fiction is a commentary on the way that the “self-subversion” (Robinson 2) of the Western genre enables it to act as a historical “continuum, its [cultural] critique operating along a spectrum” (Kollin 560). In short, given the persistent popularity of the Western genre and the significant and conflicted role it plays in idealizing rural masculinities and the non-human landscapes in which we expect to see them—and given Annie Proulx's culturally significant contributions to the Western genre—*Brokeback Mountain* is a potent example of the materially “tattooed” (*Metamorphoses* 2) cartography of the physical and conceptual conflicts that comprise the second landmark of material masculine becoming.

Though its 2005 film adaptation by acclaimed director Ang Lee leaves it with little need for introduction, *Brokeback Mountain* follows the homosexual relationship of two men, Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist, from its inception in May of 1963 to its violent end twenty years later, in August of 1983. The relationship the story details begins when Jack and Ennis first meet at the managerial trailer of Farm and Ranch Employment, where “they came together on paper as herder and camp tender for the same sheep operation north of Signal [Wyoming]” (Proulx 5). The two are tasked with herding sheep on the “summer range [that] lay above the tree line on Forest Service land on Brokeback Mountain” (Proulx 5). At the time, both men are young—“Neither of them was twenty” (Proulx 5). Ennis is engaged to be married; Jack has hopes of making it big on the rodeo circuit; and “both [claim] to be saving money for a small spread” (Proulx 5).<sup>13</sup> Over the course of that summer in 1963, in the apparent isolation of the Forest Service “wilderness” represented by Brokeback Mountain, Jack and Ennis develop an intense, passionately sexual, occasionally violent friendship; one that they both ostensibly leave behind on Brokeback Mountain—Ennis to get married and Jack to rejoin the rodeo circuit.

Ennis does get married—to the non-descript Alma, with whom he has two daughters—and Jack follows suit, marrying the ostentatious and domineering Lureen, the daughter of the owner of a large Texas farm machinery business. Despite Ennis’s assertion on Brokeback Mountain that “I’m not no queer” and Jack’s, “Me neither. A one shot thing. Nobody’s business but ours” (Proulx 15), four years after leaving Brokeback Mountain behind, the two men rekindle their friendship and with it, their sexual relationship. With that rekindling, Ennis and Jack set in motion a cycle of conflict

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<sup>13</sup> This is a further (or rather, a precursor to) the iteration of the American land ownership ideal that Proulx addresses in *That Old Ace in the Hole*. Proulx suggests that it was the desire for open land and its availability, the obtainability of free-range cattle, and the regional differences in the price of stock that fueled the settlement of the high plains of the central United States.

between their own encultured regional understandings of masculinity and the undeniable material realities of their sexuality. Over the course of twenty years, the two men meet for “fishing trips,” for “a couple of high altitude fucks once or twice a year” (Proulx 42), but are unable to live permanently outside the entrenched regional parameters for masculine gender normativity. This conflict, of course, does not happen in a vacuum and the material consequences of Ennis and Jack’s relationship are far reaching and affect their families, their jobs, every aspect of their lives—culminating ultimately in Ennis’s divorce and the unsutured end of Jack and Ennis’s love affair when Jack is violently murdered in rural Texas.

On the one hand, with regards to tropes, structures, and settings—to characters and landscapes—Proulx hits all of her traditional Western stereotypes in *Brokeback Mountain*. On the other hand, however, she turns those stereotypes on their respective ears. Proulx uses the “unstable and shifting form” of the Western to exploit its inherent contradictions and to empathetically critique the assumptions it makes about white, male masculinities and the non-human nature with which they are historically co-inscribed. Furthermore, by shifting the foundation upon which the historical Western stands—by using its own literary conventions to contradict its hegemonic tradition—Proulx rightly suggests that even the term “cowboy,” by virtue of its ubiquity and despite its regional specificity, is nonetheless an insufficient signifier. In Proulx’s eyes, in other words, “cowboy” is at once an overly deterministic, socially-constructed *type* of masculinity and, conversely, so broadly appropriated and interpreted that as a defining term it has ceased to describe the material experience of becoming masculine in rural western places—it has the effect, in fact, of making rural western men largely invisible.

### 3.1 Invisible Cowboys and Empty Landscapes

In American popular culture, the American cowboy is mythic, omnipresent, and conspicuously transparent. The cowboy's "lone figure, pitted against outlaws and nature, a variation on the solitary, rootless male who searches endlessly for his identity, [...represents] the cultural version of American rugged individualism, [and is] a cornerstone of our economic and political mores" (Morton and Conway 197). He is historically associated with westward expansion and Manifest Destiny; with unmapped spaces and savage wilderness; and with "masculine" and nationalistic values like courage, moral and physical strength, independence, ingenuity, or simple, straightforward patriotic, flag-waving pride.<sup>14</sup> He has moved across the amorphous and imaginary borders between the urban and the rural and fluidly from a position of localized idealization to a position of globalized, mythologized stereotypicality. He has left his rock in front of the prairie campfire and has positioned himself instead on the plush cushions that furnish the halls of immense political power. Alternatively, he has found himself inextricably enmeshed in the nets and webs that political power weaves.

The mythic cowboy can be found in the White House and in prison. He has, in many cases, abandoned his horse and bedroll in favor of the limousines and feather beds that come with the accumulation of vast amounts of wealth. He has moved seamlessly from historical materiality to page to stage to screen. He is an advertising icon, a fashion pioneer, and an embodied ideal. He is represented in historical texts; in literary fiction and non-fiction; in innumerable films and television shows; and in the print media. The cowboy is present in beer and pickup truck commercials; he can be seen in school books and on church logos. He is—if you have lived for long in the Western United States as I have—likely your next door neighbor, your co-worker, or your friend. There is, in other

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<sup>14</sup> To paraphrase Mark Twain, the cowboy is simply the man who shouts the loudest.

words, virtually no place on the American cultural landscape where the cowboy has not made his camp. He is so present in every aspect of American cultural life, in fact, that he has become invisible. (Dyer 38).

In their discussion of rurality, gender normativity, and the invisibility of white masculinities in the United States, Hugh Campbell, Michael Bell, and Margaret Finney suggest that when we think about the “norm,” we subconsciously, uncritically adopt white male ideals.

[...] We ask, for instance, when we will have the first ‘woman’ president or prime minister, or the first ‘black’ president or prime minister. Obviously, the male version of a politician is linguistically (and socially) unmarked, while the female or black politician is clearly marked—and therefore signaled as not normal. In this way, masculinity (and white masculinity at that) has often hidden itself from our eyes using the disguise of ‘the norm.’ (8)

Although it may seem incongruous to assert the local, regional, and global appropriation of stereotyped masculinities like the cowboy and at the same time argue for their cultural invisibility, the truth is that we are so familiar with cowboy masculinities that we are only actively aware of them when they are placed directly within our “line-of-sight.” In the same way that the biological realities of “male-ness” and unspoken heterosexual guidelines for homo-social nudity create a veil of invisibility in a men’s locker room, for example, western rural masculinities like the cowboy are so historically and politically symbolic; so pervasively iconic; and so inherent in traditional ideals for manliness that we have quite simply forgotten *how* to notice the role they play in the power structures they help to construct; and which, in turn, reify their hegemonic status.

The cowboy is not only an ever-present part of the cultural landscape, he is an American mythology. Robert Davis writes that the

myth of the American West [...] is so deeply ingrained in the American experience that the physical closing of the frontier left Americans with a deep nostalgia for the values implied by the experience. [...] As] defined by popular culture, [the myth of the West] offers imaginative escape from



contemporary social and economic constraints into a simpler and more individualistic time. (xx)

The cowboy in the open landscapes of the West embodies that “imaginative escape.” His elevation to the status of myth —and by extension, his complicity in the construction of heterosexual, hegemonic gender normativity has had the effect of normalizing rural masculinities to the point of making them transparent. That is, until one way or another they make themselves known.

Historically, one of the principal ways in which the American cowboy has made himself known (and available for appropriation) is through the genre of literature and film we call the Western. The culture into which the literary cowboy made his entrance was a rapidly changing one. Rural populations were shrinking and cities growing. Marian Morton and William Conway state that

throughout the nineteenth century, as men relinquished roles as independent farmers living close to nature for jobs dependent on technology in industry and offices, dime novels glorified and popularized the cowboy. The official closing in 1890 of the Western frontier (symbol of limitless opportunity) and the simultaneous emergence of our first giant corporations [curtailed] the possibilities for individual advancement [...]. (195)

As might be expected, the industrialization of the eastern United States and fewer avenues for “individual advancement” in a culture which has long prized rugged, bootstrap individualism produced a certain amount of concern among early twentieth century men. Sociologist Michael Kimmel argues that the growing American fascination with cowboys and western landscapes at the end of the nineteenth century coincides with an increasing male anxiety about the “feminizing” influence of industrialization and corporatization (91). He writes that “puny eastern city men—like Theodore Roosevelt [and] Owen Wister [...]—all came west to find a cure for their insufficient manhood. That each returned a dedicated convert, trumpeting the curative value of the strenuous life, is part of the story of how America was won over to the west” (91).

Scholars of the Western genre credit Wirster as the first Western novelist and his 1902 novel, *The Virginian*, as setting the political stage—and the narrative structure—for the novelized accounts of the West that came after it. Susan Kollin, for example, gives him this distinction and describes his novel as the story of “a transplanted southerner who joins forces with a group of powerful Wyoming ranchers in order to make the West safe for frontier capitalism” (557). *The Virginian* tapped into the cultural male anxiety about the emasculating influence of city life that sent Wirster himself West in the first place. From its inception as a genre, the Western novel very deliberately helped to discursively construct the political, social, economic, and gendered ideals of the early twentieth century culture that produced and consumed it. *The Virginian* had as its primary theme a desire for the man-making attributes of the western frontier. However, this “trumpeting” of the benefits of non-human nature highlights a significant element of the Western genre. As I will elucidate more thoroughly below, the conflict inherent in Wirster’s dreams of an empty, uninhabited frontier where manhood could be reified and the novel’s less-than-tacit support of the capitalist project which had already brought about the frontier’s demise is but one of many sites of resistance where the traditional Western “[o]verturns its] dominant themes” ( Kollin 560). Proulx’s ability to situate her narrative within these sites of resistance is what makes her not only an excellent example of the Western genre and its traditions more generally, but also what defines *Brokeback Mountain* as what Kollin describes as an “anti-Western” (560).

In her discussion of Cormac McCarthy and contemporary western literature, Kollin defines the contemporary post-modern Western as “anti-Western.” She writes that the Western needs to be understood not as a static tradition, but instead as operating along a spectrum of historical cultural critique. She argues of the genre that

[on] the one end [of the spectrum] may be found the classic Western, which upholds—with varying degrees of success—the codes and

conventions of the form, its Anglo male protagonist, and the national project, but which contains resistant elements that undermine its cultural logic and status as a discrete, coherent entity. On the other end may be found the anti-Western. (560)

The anti-Western author does not attempt to re-write history or forego traditional tropes so much as to complicate them by placing them more solidly within geo-politically and chronologically specific contexts that reflect both the discursive nature of the cowboy hero and the political and embodied realities of western rural masculinities. According to Kollin, the “anti-Western [is] itself an unstable and shifting form that engages in a critical dialogue with the genre but that is also shaped by a certain desire for and attraction to the classic features of the Western.” Elizabeth Alebe speaks to this tendency in Proulx’s writing when she asserts that the “romantic view of the West [is] a part of the American identity, a myth based not on an actual landscape, but a skewed account of its citizens and history. [...] *Brokeback Mountain* [...] is an example of a contemporary Western text that cannot avoid commentary on the myth of the West as previously constituted” (114). By addressing the “myth of the West as previously constituted,” but by doing so using some of the same tropes, themes, and structures that helped to create the myth in the first place, *Brokeback Mountain* highlights the “unstable and shifting” ground that “anti-Western” writers like McCarthy and Proulx attempt to (un)map.

Proulx’s novella also performs a poignant meta-interrogation of the culture that appropriates and mythologizes western masculinities like the cowboy and the empty, non-human spaces in which we as a culture expect to see him. As a stereotype, the cowboy has been politically and socially appropriated on a global scale, yet the rural masculinities he represents still remain intimately and subjectively tied to geo-politically specific histories and landscapes in the American West. By addressing what is arguably the most ubiquitous masculine stereotype in the United States and by doing so within the confines of geo-politically specific place and time, Proulx is able to not only show a

genuine respect for the literary tradition of the Western, but also to critically call into question the cultural assumptions those traditions make about men and non-human nature. “Anti-Western” authors like Proulx write the cowboy as a figuration; as a historical and literary representative of the cooperative roles that cultural discursivity *and* subjective, embodied experience of concrete place and historical moment play in the process of gender construction. They write them, in other words, as material masculinities; and in doing so, they make them visible again.

### 3.2 Squeezing Spaces

Becoming a material masculinity is not an easy or necessarily freeing thing. It is not an instantaneous process where one becomes—or *starts* becoming—a masculinity and questions of “manliness” and cultural ideals and standards for masculine (and by extension, social, political, and economic) success simply fall away. Material masculine becoming “is a persistent challenge and an opposition to [...] steady identities” (*Metamorphoses* 119). It “is neither linear nor sequential, [...but] flows, like writing, it is a composition, a location that needs to be constructed together with, that is to say in the encounter with, others” (*Metamorphoses* 118). A man whose embodied experience comes into conflict with his encultured assumptions “may be empowered or beautified by it, but most [...] are not; some just die of it” (*Metamorphoses* 3). That some die of their becoming speaks to the physical consequences—even the violence—that contradictions between discursivity and material experience can precipitate. Material masculine becoming is accompanied by contestation, by the both physical and conceptual “erasing and recomposing [of] the former boundaries between self and others” (*Metamorphoses* 119)—by being *forced*, one way or another, to navigate the fluid middle spaces between regionally distinctive performances of masculinity and the context-contingent, embodied and therefore subjectively unique experience of self-in-place.

Material masculinity is about conflict. It is “history tattooed on [the] body” (*Metamorphoses* 3), on the landscape; on the body as landscape. The conflict is between socially-constructed representations and concrete actuality—between the “written” and the real. Material masculine figurations like the cowboy are representative of these contradictory and perpetually fluid cartographies through which men must daily chart a course. A cowboy figuration, in particular, represents a historically imbued contestation of the middle spaces between hegemonic American cultural standards for being “manly,” and the embodied, moment-by-moment actualities of being male in rural places. For the material masculinity figured in the cowboy—for whom “the encounter with others” has always been associated in varying ways with violence and brutality—with the (predominantly white, male) domination and subjugation of Others, human or otherwise—those conflicts reach far beyond the regional culture with which western rural masculinities are materially co-inscribed.

In fairness, however, the cowboy himself is not to blame. In the same way that the cowboy is—by virtue of his materiality—a series of discursive and material contestations, so the Western that made him a myth is itself “an approach and retreat from a contested center, [which enables] a similar pattern of address and withdrawal in [its] readers” (Robinson 2). In the context of a discussion of the “anti-Western” stylings of Annie Proulx, the “contested center” which both Kollin and Forrest Robinson point to is figured in rural cowboy masculinities and in the frontier landscapes with which they are co-inscribed. Though confronting the way that American culture and literature have appropriated the cowboy is absolutely necessary, equally important in a material critique is an interrogation of the cowboy figuration’s historically locative, geo-political context—that is to say, the regional geographies and human cultures that live and work there. A material masculine subject cannot be removed from his context insofar as his own

identity is inextricable from it. To do so is to deny the embodied experience of men and (in the case of the cowboy) to reduce rural experiences of “male-ness” and masculinity to a set of politically fecund discursive myths. A masculinity removed from his context—in terms of both historicity and of regionally-specific place-association—is not a becoming material masculinity; instead, he is a socially-constructed hegemonic type. The Western, by mythologizing rural male masculinities in the cowboy, removes those men from their geo-politically specific cultural context; and by extension, it denies them their embodied and unique material identities.

This distance between the discursivity of the cowboy and the embodied experience of rural men highlights one of the Western tradition’s “resistant elements.” Richard Slotkin argues that the cowboy’s close relationship with nature—his reversion to a “more primitive and natural condition of life” (14)—is meant to be a transformative one, a relationship that transforms the cowboy so that he can then transform the “false values” (Slotkin 14) of human culture. By removing the cowboy from his *actual* context, the Western creates a masculine *type*—a “white male body [...] constructed as a static entity; hermetically armoured [*sic*], phallicized, solid and silent” (Meisenheimer 441); a romanticized, hegemonic masculinity “static both personally and racially” (Meisenheimer 446). And so, instead of opening up room for transformation of either the masculinity or the culture of which he is a part, the Western creates and reifies a static masculine type; this, in turn, points to the “deep seated contradiction [that] exists in the genre—or gender—which promises ‘new consciousness’ and universal transformation (change) [as the Western does] through a totalized stasis (no change at all)” (Meisenheimer 446). That is to say, rather than “[purging] the false values of the ‘metropolis’” as the cowboy hero’s adventures are ostensibly meant to do (Slotkin 14), the cowboy is, in fact, a hegemonic representation (a myth) of them.

Once a rural man is defined as a “cowboy,” he ceases to exist as such; instead, he becomes faceless and absorbed into a broader, historical mythology that de-emphasizes the embodied reality of becoming. To remove a cowboy figuration from his historical and geographical context is to make him entirely performative—to accentuate things like boots or belt buckles, campfire harmonicas or conservative politics—in favor of acknowledging the brutal poverty and dangerous occupations; the scars and squints; the skin cancers and bowed legs; the alcoholism and spousal abuse; or (as Proulx shows in *Brokeback Mountain*), the violently enacted homophobia that can and often does define the physiognomic realities of rural men and women. It is one thing, therefore, to interrogate widely-varied performances of “cowboy” masculinities in equally varied contexts and to empirically typify them as such, as men’s studies is wont to do. It is quite another thing to interrogate the cowboy as a figuration in terms of his unique, embodied, and historically locative material experience of Western landscapes (the cultural conceptions of which he helped to materially create); and, thus, to theorize him not as a champion of white, male hegemony, but as a material masculinity who is as subject to the idea of masculine (cowboy) hegemony, its power structures, and its unachievable ideals as any Other. This site of resistance between the discursive romanticization of the cowboy and rural male embodiment is where Proulx begins her anti-Western assault on the hegemonic traditions that typify the Western genre.

### 3.2.1 *Cowboys in Relief*

From the opening paragraphs of *Brokeback Mountain*, Proulx takes issue with the “myth of the West as previously constituted,” and she does so both by emphasizing Ennis Del Mar’s embodied materiality (in contrast to his social performativity), and by removing him from the landscape with which we traditionally associate the cowboy. Though the novella itself is a Western, Proulx begins her story by divesting the ostensible

hero of the performative accoutrement with which the Western associates the cowboy masculinity—i.e., the hat, the jeans, the western shirts and cowboy boots. When we first meet him in the prologue, in fact, Ennis is naked.<sup>15</sup> He is a far cry from the romanticized, “personally and racially static” cowboy hero the Western popularized. Instead, he is in late middle-age, recently unemployed, and has the social graces of a man who rarely spends time with other people.

Rather than “a [person of] a certain build, complexion, facial type, carriage, gesture, and demeanor; who [dresses] a certain way, [carries] certain accoutrements, [has] few or no social ties, [is] expert at certain skills (riding, tracking, roping, fistfighting, shooting) and terrible at others (dancing, talking to ladies)” (Tompkins 73), when we first meet Ennis, all we see is a male human being, subject to erosion by both wind and time:

Ennis Del Mar wakes before five, wind rocking the trailer, hissing in around the aluminum door and window frames. The shirts hanging on a nail shudder slightly in the draft. He gets up, scratching the grey wedge of belly and pubic hair, shuffles to the gas burner, pours leftover coffee in a chipped enamel pan [...]. He turns on the tap and urinates in the sink, pulls on his shirt and jeans, his worn boots, stamping the heels against the floor to get them full on. (Proulx 3)

When we are introduced to Ennis, he is utterly without evidence of the costume with which we associate the cowboy. He is simply a naked man—his body a physiognomic cartography of age and occupation—in a poor trailer being buffeted by unimpeded gusts of wind typical on any given day on the high plains.

Ennis is not characterized as a stereotypical western hero, but instead merely as a human male whose embodied necessities—for example, the need for sustenance, the exigencies of age and dry skin, or the need (and ability) to stand up and pee in the kitchen sink—make him identical to anyone who shares his physiognomic characteristics.

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<sup>15</sup> That is, of course, if we assume that his lack of socks when he gets dressed is the maintenance of a youthful habit of (as Jack Twist pointedly notices) going without either socks or “drawers” (Proulx 4, 11).



Ennis does get dressed, however, and from the moment he dons jeans and “[stamps] the heels [of his worn boots] to get them on,” he takes on a set of cultural expectations the historical weight of which provides the impetus for the story. Roland Barthes writes that every

object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society, for there is no law, whether natural or not, which forbids talking about things. A tree is a tree. Yes, of course. But a tree as expressed [...] is no longer quite a tree, it is a tree which is decorated, adapted to a certain type of consumption, laden with literary self-indulgence, revolt, images, in short with a type of social *usage* which is added to pure matter. (109)

And yet a tree has an undeniably material existence. The very paper upon which these words are printed speaks to the materiality of the tree. So while a tree is cut and crushed, pulped and chemically treated, it is still, at its core, a tree. Like a tree, the cowboy is a crushed and “chemically treated” version of the materiality of rural men. And, as I argued in chapter two, this happens the moment Ennis puts on his cowboy boots. No longer naked, no longer just a man, Ennis becomes a cowboy with all of the cultural associations and performative expectations that go along with that static masculine stereotype.

When Ennis stamps on his boots, he ceases to be merely a naked man living “a closed, silent existence” within the claustrophobic four walls of tiny trailer (so small as to be, presumably, without a toilet). Instead, he becomes a fully-fleshed character; fully-fleshed insofar as he has *already* been subject to cultural appropriation and exists historically in “an oral state [...] of social *usage* which is *added* [italics mine] to pure matter.” By drawing Ennis in this way, Proulx directly confronts the Western myth of the cowboy by pointing to Ennis’s “pure matter” before dressing him in the costume which culture automatically expects him to wear. This opening scene sets up the novella’s primary conflict—the conflict between Ennis’s material, embodied self and the

performance of cowboy masculinity in a rural context—and Proulx frames her story with it. In the final line of the story, Ennis, contemplating his future without Jack (a future we catch a glimpse of in the story's prologue), comes to the conclusion that "there was some open space between what he knew and what he tried to believe, but nothing could be done about it, and if you can't fix it you've got to stand it" (54-5). In this statement Proulx highlights Ennis's life-long conflict "between what he knew"—his corporeal experience of homosexuality— and "what he tried to believe"—his encultured understanding of western masculine performance—in the same way that she initially draws us an image of a naked man transformed into a performative template. And, like the prologue, Proulx gives us Ennis in the context of his trailer, waking naked from a dream of Jack.

After Jack is killed, Ennis sets up a shrine to their love. In his trailer, below a thumbtacked postcard of Brokeback Mountain, Ennis drives a nail and hangs two shirts, one inside the other—and one stained with Jack's blood—that he and Jack wore their last day on the mountain (54, 17).

Around this time Jack began to appear in his dreams, Jack as he had first seen him, curly-headed and smiling and bucktoothed, talking about getting up off his pockets and into the control zone, but the can of beans with the spoon handle jutting out and balanced on the log was there as well [...]. The spoon handle was the kind that could be used as a tire iron. And he would wake sometimes in grief, sometimes with the old sense of joy and release; the pillow sometimes wet, sometimes the sheets. (54-5).

As she does in the prologue, Proulx gives us Ennis "in the flesh." His subjectively unique experiences, his memories and dreams, have bodily manifestations. His grief and joy alternately bring tears or ejaculation; and they do so when he is asleep and unable to consciously control his emotional and physical reactions.

Ennis's subjection to physical necessity and his lack of control over his dreams and sleeping body bring into sharp relief not a cowboy stereotype but a embodied and immediate example of a man defined by his male body and unique personal experience.

By framing her story with iterations of Ennis's embodiment, she removes from him the cultural weight represented in the myth of cowboy and makes his experiences—and, by extension, his performance of masculinity—isolated and unique. Proulx herself says, in fact, that Ennis and Jack are *not* cowboys. Instead, they are simply rural men (boys, really) who think that they must perform “cowboy” because—having lived in the rural west all of their lives—that is all they know to be available to them. (Silverblatt 154). When Ennis (and Jack) perform cowboy masculinities, therefore, the performance is obvious because we are privy first to their materiality.

Proulx calls into question the very idea of “cowboy” as an adequate signifier for rural men. By highlighting Ennis's materiality, she performs a meta-commentary on the Western genre itself and suggests—as Barthes does of the cultural myth—that “cowboy” as a signifier is nothing more than “*a type of speech*” (Barthes 109) which is distanced from its material context at the moment of its cultural utterance. And like Barthes, Proulx is trying to “define things, not words” (Barthes 109). In other words, before the Western got ahold of him, the cowboy existed in culture the way a “cook” or a “policeman” exists in culture—as an occupation with a title that indicates its purpose.<sup>16</sup> The actuality of rural male masculinities and the role they played in the closure of the western frontier—their historical and geo-political place attachment—left them “open to appropriation by society.” The moment he was appropriated and typified in the cowboy, the rural man became “laden with literary self-indulgence [and] images” that romanticized him and made him “personally and racially static.” By presenting us Ennis in his birthday suit, Proulx begins her anti-Western by stripping away a century and a half's worth of

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<sup>16</sup> The etymology of the word, “cowboy,” and its regionally specific iterations is an interesting study, but one that exceeds the bounds of this argument. Suffice it to say that Proulx is concerned with the material consequences of the word rather than the word itself—with “things, not words.”

nationalistic, literary, self-indulgent layers—by reminding us that the human paper on which the Western is written is still a growing, changing, *becoming* tree.

### 3.2.2 “*The Blankness of the Plain*”

A cowboy figuration is not constructed entirely by his boots, of course. Or rather, the cowboy’s figuration extends beyond the performativity automatically implied by his clothing to the landscape with which traditional Westerns associate him; his cultural identity—his myth—is, in fact, inextricable from it. Thanks in part to the Western, in part to the role rural masculinities have played in the settlement of the West and the closing of the frontier, the cowboy *is* his context, or rather, he carries his context with him. The traditional Western landscape

by its hardness and austerity seems to have selected its heroes from among strong men in the prime of life [...]. [Those] who exhibit [cowboy] traits in Westerns are invariably white, male, and Anglo-Saxon, [and, thus,] the Western naturalizes a certain racial, gender, and ethnic type. [...] Nature makes it obvious, even to the most benighted, who her chosen are; the sage-dotted plains, the buttes, the infinite sky tell more plainly than any words what is necessary in a man. (Tompkins 73)

Reciprocally, the Western makes it clear what kind of man is necessary for the *creation* of nature.

The Western’s traditional context for the cowboy, “[hard] and [austere]” (and, according to Tompkins, apparently female), creates the cowboy as “a person (of a certain kind) [who] can remain alone and complete and in control of himself, while controlling the external world through physical strength and force of will” (Tompkins 75). In the same way that the “the sage-dotted plains, the buttes, the infinite sky tell more plainly than any words what is necessary in a man,” the weathered skin and the stoic gaze of the mythic cowboy are a physical cartography of his experience with and domination of non-human nature. For Proulx, the racial, gendered, and ethnic type figured in the cowboy hero is clearly an inadequate representation of the embodied interaction of rural men in non-

human environments. Part of the cowboy's costume is other-than-human nature, and so in the same way that Proulx frames her story by highlighting Ennis's materiality—and, by doing so, making the cultural weight of “performing cowboy” self-evident—she begins *Brokeback Mountain* by removing the landscape that contextualizes the mythological cowboy from the picture altogether.

Proulx highlights two primary sites of resistance located in the Western's conception of nature—the construction of paradigms for human/non-human interaction and the construction of hegemonic power structures and the static, “normative” gender stereotypes they represent. In his automatic association with a certain type of landscape, the traditional cowboy becomes *part of* the landscape—when we picture him, we also imagine the deserts, the mountains, or the plains which he historically traversed but in which the traditional Western still holds him in stasis. Conversely, when we imagine these landscapes, it is a simple thing to populate them with the figure of the cowboy. Beyond this point it becomes a chicken-egg question of which entity constructs the other. Calling a rural man a cowboy automatically invests him with a cultural weight that distances him from his materiality—naturalizing (and, thereby, “normalizing”) a static type of masculinity and all of the social and environmental injustices that come part-in-parcel with it. Similarly, naturalizing the cowboy romanticizes a non-existent frontier and maintains the hegemony inherent in the (predominantly) white, masculine, heterosexual male domination of non-human nature.

The Western instigates a conflict between the discursively empty landscapes represented by the “frontier,” and the immediate and contemporary material experiences of and in non-human environments long since subjugated to human use. The upshot is that the naturalization of the cowboy mythology and the romanticizing of non-human nature implied by it play a profound role in the contemporary cultural construction of

paradigms for human and non-human interaction. By creating a less than critical distance between the “*social usage*” of still-open frontier and its man-making attributes, and the material reality of being male in rapidly shrinking rural places, the traditional Western reifies environmental ideals exemplified in Manifest Destiny—in the national project to settle the West—and the land use and abuse historically inherent in it. Proulx confronts these ideals by, first, de-contextualizing Ennis altogether and; second, by later setting his relationship with Jack in non-human landscapes that reflect the characters themselves; that echo traditional Western structures and themes; and which contradict the Western’s retrograde reliance on hegemonic notions of gender, sexuality, and human relationships with(in) nature.

In the tradition of the Western, the cowboy hero is brought into sharp relief by landscapes which, “made palpable through exposure and infinitely prolonged by the absence of obstacles, offer unlimited room to move” (Tompkins 75), and which “flatter the human figure by making it seem dominant and unique” (Tompkins 74). When we first see Ennis, however, he is scratching his crotch, peeing in the sink, and enclosed in the claustrophobic space of a tiny trailer. From the moment Ennis “wakes before five, wind rocking the trailer, hissing in around the aluminum door and window frames” (3), we understand him not as a man who can “control the external world through physical strength and force of will” but as a man who has, in fact, no control at all. Removed from the “openness of [...] space [in which] domination can take place virtually through the act of opening one’s eyes” (Tompkins 74), Ennis’s eyes open in the dark confines of a trailer pummeled by unimpeded wind. Significantly, however, though he is removed from the cowboy’s visual context, Proulx still characterizes Ennis as a rural man in a landscape where, “prolonged by the absence of obstacles” like buildings, walls, or even trees, such wind can blow unhindered.

The wind that “booms down the curved length of the trailer” and in “its roaring passage [abrades it with] fine gravel and sand” (3)—not to mention the rocking trailer itself—suggests a rural setting devoid of wind-breaks or even permanent human architecture. Rather than drawing him in the context of a landscape open to domination, Proulx represents Ennis as subject to the both his embodiment and his environment. In addition, Proulx gives the hint that Ennis has always been subject to external forces rather than the other way around. Presumably, the “shirts hanging on a nail [shuddering...] in the draft” created by the “wind hissing in around the [...] door and window frames” (Proulx 3) are the same two shirts we watch Ennis hang on a nail underneath a postcard picture of Brokeback Mountain at the story’s conclusion (Proulx 54). Like Ennis in his trailer, the shirts—and the subjective, embodied, geo-politically and historically unique experiences they represent—are subject to the uncontrollable forces of nature.

When we are first treated to Proulx’s version of the Western hero, he both suggests and defies the genre’s tradition. Rather than the cowboy we have been taught to expect, Proulx instead introduces us to an example of a rural man, completely isolated from both human and non-human contexts, and subject entirely to forces over which he has no control. Nevertheless, in the remainder of the prologue and in the story that follows it, Proulx dresses Ennis both with an embodied history and with a performative, encultured masculinity—in a cowboy’s clothes, with a cowboy occupation, and in a contemporary version of the cowboy’s historical, “natural” environment. This is Proulx stripping away culturally self-indulgent layers and reapplying them in context; reminding us again that in the case of both rural men and landscape “a tree is [still materially] a tree;” and that adequate representations of rural men acknowledge both the uniquely embodied experience of maleness in rural places, and the means by which different

elements of culture appropriate those experiences and layer them in the service of specific political, social, economic, and environmental ideals.

### 3.2.3 *By Virtue of Nature*

Perhaps more importantly in terms of addressing the disease rather than the symptoms, however, the naturalization of the cowboy and the political (and fantastical) ideology expressed by the Western's conceptualization of his "natural" context have played a significant role in the construction of the hegemonic power structures and gender ideals that subjugate both human and non-human Others and are still prevalent (but under increasing critical scrutiny) in contemporary American culture. Proulx both "address[es] and withdrawal[s]" from—and deliberately highlights—these sites of resistance which Kollin, Robinson, and Meisenheimer assert are typical in the Western tradition. She does this from the first by de-mythologizing the cowboy—by constructing him simply as Ennis Del Mar, a material masculinity—and by taking issue with the Western's conception of non-human environments and their co-inscriptive interaction with rural men. The remainder of *Brokeback Mountain* does take place in primarily rural contexts—in narrative landscapes that distort those in which we are accustomed to seeing our cowboy heroes—in the same way, that is, in which Ennis himself is a distorted reflection of the Western's traditional cowboy masculinity.

As she does in much of her fiction, Proulx uses the non-human environment to reflect the cultural cartography her characters are forced to navigate. In doing so, she confronts the Western's notion of hegemonic masculinities and its continued reification of the historical project to pastoralize non-human nature; and she makes the case that the two have a shared history and as goes one, so goes the other. Proulx strips away the literary self-indulgence of the Western tradition and gives both her protagonists and her landscapes geo-political and chronological specificity. She separates the layers that



cultural artifacts like the Western have applied to rural human and non-human environments from the reality of the materially shrinking spaces between the two. In short, Proulx uses the cowboy and his landscape to highlight the conflict inherent in becoming by squeezing the material spaces between his discursivity and his embodied experience; by forcing Ennis, Jack, their families and her readers to erase and redraw the boundaries between themselves and both human and non-human others, and between “what [they know] and what [they try] to believe.”

When Ennis and Jack first “come together on paper as herder and camp tender for the same sheep operation” (5), Proulx never calls them cowboys. Instead, as she does with Ennis in the prologue, she highlights their material circumstances and de-values the political and cultural performance the traditional cowboy embodies. Neither rides a horse or is driving cattle. Instead, both drive dilapidated pick-up trucks (perhaps the next most ubiquitous mode of “cowboy transportation”) and mean to work as shepherds. Rather than riding an unfettered range, open to domination, which they “can conquer [...] by traversing it, know [...] by standing on it” (Tompkins 75), Proulx relegates Ennis and Jack to the “summer range [that] lay above the tree line on Forest Service land on Brokeback Mountain” (Proulx 5). She does not offer her readers the wide-open frontier “the Western revels in” (Tompkins 76); a frontier that has long represented infinite opportunity for individual advancement. Her landscape is, instead, circumscribed by boundaries, legislation, domestication; and, furthermore, by its regionally and historically specific place association. Proulx’s cartography “shows success in conquering the land and establishing an order upon it [...]” and in bringing “the form of borders to a land [...] without them” (Dyer 35, 33). If Tompkins’ claim that the Western naturalizes the cowboy is to be believed, then when Proulx installs Ennis and Jack in culturally subjugated, bounded landscape, Ennis and Jack are “naturalized” insofar as they are bounded,

circumscribed and “legislated” by the same geo-political culture. Proulx shrinks her cowboys’ world down to a managed size and shows their unique and embodied reality to be specific to a locale or a region; but not, necessarily or generally, to men in rural places.

In the Western tradition, according to Richard Slotkin, a cowboy hero must cross the border into [Wilderness] and experience a ‘regression’ to a more primitive and natural condition of life so that the false values of the ‘metropolis’ can be purged and a new, purified social contract enacted. Although [...] the Wilderness [is the cowboy’s] enemy, [it provides] him with the new consciousness through which he will transform the world.  
(14)

Once again, Proulx follows the Western formula; but only in its most elemental form and only enough to highlight the genre’s resistant spaces. Ennis and Jack do cross a border into “wilderness.” But the wilderness they enter is one that is carefully controlled and regulated, distinctly bounded by elements of culture. Their boss Joe Aguirre “[trucks them] to the jump-off” (7), where they unload their borrowed horses from a trailer, meet the sheep, and a “bandy-legged Basque [shows] Ennis how to pack the mules, two packs and a riding load on each animal ring-lashed with double diamonds and secured with half hitches, telling him, “Don’t never order soup. Them boxes a soup are real bad to pack” (Proulx 8). (In Proulx’s Western, apparently, culture only extends so far as one is able to easily transport boxes of soup.) They drive their sheep from the trailhead to their “Forest Service [...] designated [campsite] on the [grazing] allotments” (6). Even when they are established “above the tree line [in] great flowery meadows and the *coursing, endless wind* [italics mine]” (8), they are still subject to the arbitrary, discursive cartography established by the Forest Service. Sleeping outside of their camp to protect their flock from the ravages of nature—i.e., coyotes (and, it seems, lightning storms) (7)—for example, is against Forest Service regulations; and to obey their boss and sleep outside their designated campsite, they must break the law (6).

Like the intensely regulated “wilderness” into which they venture, Ennis and Jack are bounded, circumscribed versions of masculinity. This is Proulx’s nod to the Western’s tradition of naturalizing its cowboy masculinities. The non-human world, dominated and controlled, is under the same hegemonic thumb as the one we go on to learn that Ennis and Jack—though ostensibly representative of it—are subjected to themselves. As she does in her prologue, Proulx builds Ennis and Jack from their physiognomy outward (Proulx 7-8). Significantly, she also highlights the ways in which their subjective experience of their regional culture (and of *nowhere else*) helps to map not only their bodies, but also the regionally-specific boundaries between human and non-human nature (Proulx 11-12) and between Ennis and Jack’s encultured concepts of masculinity and material experiences of homosexuality.

We watch as Ennis and Jack, preparing to leave the trailhead, don the costumes, the accoutrement, even the seemingly mundane skills that we traditionally assume of the cowboy—e.g., packing a mule. We watch them become cowboys, in other words, in the same way we watch as Ennis takes on cultural and historical weight with every stamp of his boots. They are not cowboys until they leave the trailhead. Despite their activities—i.e. hunting, riding, camping—they are still only poor rural men, “hungry for any job,” working part time as shepherds; and are, as Proulx asserts, only doing it because they know of nothing else. Loaded-for-bear, the two men enter the “wilderness” by literally crossing a border into “a more primitive and [presumably] natural condition of life,” the only obvious elements of human culture those they bring with them. However, the two men do not venture against a horizon that represents limitless possibility, but instead into one that is bound on all sides, bordered and legislated and (if the image of the shepherd is any indication) brought resoundingly within the “domestic” sphere. Likewise, Ennis and Jack are bounded men; bounded both by their skin and by their unique, historically and

geopolitically locative experience of western “cowboy culture.” Proulx contracts the Western’s tradition, takes the vast landscape of the frontier and compresses it into the space of Brokeback Mountain, regulated and set off by roads and lines on a map. Similarly, she takes the cultural myth of the cowboy and compresses it not only by a discursively limited natural setting, but by regionally and chronologically specific cultural paradigms for the performance of cowboy masculinities—i.e., in rural Wyoming, in 1963, with all of the political, religious, staunchly heterosexual conservatism inherent in that region and era.<sup>17</sup>

### 3.3 Lonesome Cowboys and Western Drag

Ennis and Jack’s story brings into focus the manner in which a material masculinity is constructed of *both* concept *and* body; co-inscribed with non-human nature and bound by historical place-association; and—though constrained by enculturation, circumstance, and physiognomy—always moving from one moment of becoming to the next . For Proulx, the both conceptual and physical boundaries of her Western operate as a vice-grip on her rural male characters. Over the course of the story, she turns the crank and squeezes these spaces until Ennis and Jack’s embodiment and enculturation come into contact and into material conflict. In so doing, she puts immense pressure on the traditional Western’s paradigms for romanticized landscape and static heterosexual cowboy masculinities and exposes the material core of both. Ennis and Jack’s regression to “a more primitive and natural condition of life” (Slotkin 14)

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<sup>17</sup> On October 7, 1998, a gay University of Wyoming student, Matthew Shepard, was found hanging on a barbed wire fence on the side of a rural highway outside Laramie, Wyoming. Beaten and left for dead because of his homosexuality, Shepard died five days later on October 12, one day shy of the year anniversary of the publication of *Brokeback Mountain* (October 13, 1997). It is into this culture, but fifty-five years before Shepard’s murder—and approximately forty years prior to the gay rights movement—that Ennis and Jack are born; and with which, by the time we meet them in 1963, they have been thoroughly inundated.

is for Proulx more than the physical movement across the arbitrary demarcations of culture represented by the trailhead, the horses, the flock of sheep that “flowed up the trail like dirty water through the timber,” or by Brokeback Mountain itself (Proulx 8). Their naturalization is clearly a conceptual one as well insofar as it represents a separation from the “false values of the ‘metropolis’,” a movement to a place where “a new, purified social contract [can be] enacted” (Slotkin 14). Brokeback Mountain itself represents a non-human landscape ostensibly separate from and, therefore, free of the regionally-specific “manly” values that have described the course of both their lives.

Proulx illustrates this by bringing into conflict Jack and Ennis’s embodied navigation of their culture’s cartography for hegemonic, heterosexual male normativity and their own “natural condition”—i.e., their suppressed homosexuality. She highlights these two elements through anecdotes from each man’s past experience of heterosexual male dominance, by their own contemporary, geo-politically specific ideas about cultural normativity and social success, and by naturalizing and, by extension, normalizing their physical attraction for one another. Ennis and Jack’s culturally entrenched ideals for masculine performativity are typified by both sex and violence; by a very material collision between embodied flesh and geo-politically locative masculine “normativity.” They reflect, in different ways, hegemonic cultural ideals for masculine “manly” performance; and, moreover, suggest as Braidotti does that while “some may be empowered or beautified by [their becoming...], most [...] are not [...].” The nature of each man’s experience is, furthermore, utterly unique; as are their both conceptual and embodied (their *material*) reactions to it. Their experiences, implies Proulx, define the role each takes in their relationships—with each other and with their families—and are an integral part of each man’s identity. Four years after Ennis and Jack begin their sexual relationship on Brokeback Mountain, a letter from Jack prompts a reconnection between

the two men. Jack visits Ennis and they go “off in Jack’s truck, [buy] a bottle of whiskey and within twenty minutes [are] in the Motel Siesta bouncing a bed” (Proulx 23). Hidden away in the enclosed space of a room that “stank of semen and smoke and sweat and whiskey, of old carpet and sour hay, saddle leather, shit and cheap soap” (23), Ennis tells Jack about the time that his father, prior to his death, took him to see the body of a man murdered for being gay.

In response to Jack’s suggestion that they get “a little ranch together, little cow and calf operation” (28), Ennis replies:

It ain’t goin a be that way. We can’t. I’m stuck with what I got, caught in my own loop. Can’t get out of it. Jack, I don’t want a be like them guys you see around sometimes. And I don’t want a be dead. There was these two old guys ranched together down home, Earl and Rich—Dad would pass a remark when he seen them. They was a joke even though they was pretty tough old birds. I was what, nine years old and they found Earl dead in a irrigation ditch. They’d took a tire iron to him, spurred him up, drug him around by his dick until it pulled off, just bloody pulp. What the tire iron done looked like pieces a burned tomatoes all over him, nose tore down from skiddin on gravel. [...] Dad made sure I seen it. Took me to see it. [...] Dad laughed about it. Hell, for all I know he done the job. If he was alive and was to put his head in that door right now you bet he’d go get his tire iron. Two guys living together? No. All I can see is we get together once in a while way the hell out in the back a nowhere—. (29-30)

And so they do for the next sixteen years. Nine year-old Ennis’s horrifying experience is a foreshadowing of Jack’s own violent death at the hands of men using tools like the ones used to kill Earl. More than a literary device, however, this exchange highlights a regionally specific western culture’s ideas about male gender normativity and suggests the way those ideas are propagated, handed down, from generation to generation. More importantly, Ennis’s anecdote points the violently material consequences of those socially-constructed ideals to rural men like Earl, Ennis, and Jack. (Or, as I’ve related in the footnote above, Matthew Shepard—brutally murdered for his sexuality just a relative stone’s throw from Signal where *Brokeback Mountain* is initially set.)

Jack's own violent experience of heterosexual male dominance lacks the objective distance that typifies Ennis's memory. Ennis, upon meeting Jack's father after the murder, recalls a story that Jack once told him:

Jack was dick-clipped and the old man was not; it bothered the son who had discovered the anatomical disconformity during a hard scene. He had been about three or four [...] always late getting to the toilet struggling with buttons, the seat, the height of the thing and often as not left the surroundings sprinkled down. The old man [...] one time worked into a crazy rage. "Christ, he licked the stuffin out a me, knocked me down on the bathroom floor, whipped me with his belt. I though was killin me. Then he says, 'You want a know what it's like with piss all over the place? I'll learn you,' and he pulls it out and lets go all over me, soaked me [...] I'm bawlin and blubberin. But while he was hosin me down I seen he had some extra material that I was missin. I seen they'd cut me different like you'd crop a ear or scorch a brand. No way to get it right with him after that. (49-50)

Earl, the man whose body Ennis was shown as a child, was a grown man whose failure or unwillingness to adhere to regionally specific gender norms resulted in his horrific, stomach-churning murder. "[Three] or four" year-old Jack was, however, subject to his father's "crazy rage" through no choice of his own and his memories are all the more heartbreaking and scarring for it. In its essence, the scene constitutes a violently distorted pissing contest between two generations with incestuous, sadomasochistic, homo-erotic overtones.

Whereas Ennis is encultured with an ideal—taught, second-hand, the consequences of bucking the system—Jack is himself the victim of masculine violence. Ennis is taught to enact an ideal—to dominate (violently, if need be)—and directly witnesses the consequences for failing to do so. Jack is, by contrast, encultured with his own victimhood; with his subjugated position as less-than-human chattel whose genitalia—whose manhood—has been "cut [...] like you'd crop a ear or scorch a brand." Each man's trauma, furthermore, defines their masculine performance and social interaction and reflects the role each takes in their relationship. It is worth noting again

that neither of the men—but Ennis especially—can imagine a life outside of the one they know.

To be fair, Jack's imagination ranges further than Ennis's, but each man's world is still bounded by regionally specific cultural idealizations of normative interaction between men and Others. Ennis, for instance, tells Jack that he looks at people on the street and wonders if there are others who have the same material battles he and Jack must fight: "This happen to other people? What the hell do they do?" he asks. "It don't happen in Wyomin [sic] and if it does I don't know what they do, maybe go to Denver," Jack replies (Proulx 30). But "maybe" is as far as even Jack is willing to go. It is not only concepts, though, that present the obstacles each faces. Their material circumstances—the uncontrollable external world—prevent either of them from pursuing any other options. Ennis and his older brother and sister are orphaned. Jack is reared in the rural isolation of a tiny, run-down ranch by an emotionally and physically abusive father. Both are "high school dropout country boys with no prospects, brought up to hard work and privation, both rough-mannered, rough-spoken, inured to the stoic life" (Proulx 4). The upshot is that Ennis and Jack, brought up in the same rural culture, must choose from options limited by socially-constructed ideals of hegemonic masculinity combined with external circumstances against which they have no agency.

### *3.3.1 Ennis Gives Up*

Each man's childhood trauma serves as a primary catalyst for the circumscribed choices they make. Ennis, for the most part, works in landscapes exemplified by Brokeback Mountain. He is a ranch-hand and the epitome of the stoic, weather-creased, strong and silent cowboy; the kind of man who likes "riding [...] that [lasts] longer than eight seconds and [has] some point to it" (Proulx 12). Jack, by contrast and though only a mediocre bull-rider, is "infatuated with the rodeo and fastened his belt with a minor bull-



riding buckle, but [contrary to the glamorous image of a rodeo cowboy,] his boots were worn to the quick, holed beyond repair" (Proulx 7). Ennis bows his knee to cultural ideals, but shuns the culture. Jack, still unconsciously seeking to measure his own manhood against his father's—himself a veteran bull-rider—over-performs. In the same way that Ennis's memory foreshadows Jack's death, Jack's memory stands as a metaphor for the isolation and cultural subjugation that already defines Ennis's life when they first meet.

For Ennis, like his father before him, violent masculine performance in the service of gender "normativity" is the status quo and "if you can't fix it you've got to stand it" (Proulx 30, 55). This performance of regionally specific masculine normativity is, of course, complicated by Ennis's repressed sexuality. The way that Ennis "stand[s] it" is—by virtue of a practiced nomadism and a predilection for the "stoic life,"—to socially, physically, and geographically isolate himself (and by extension, his homosexuality) as completely as possible from the "false values of the metropolis" (Slotkin 14) he is, as a cowboy hero, traditionally meant to transform. Proulx illustrates this through the disintegration of his family (31-34), by virtue of his sexual abstinence in contrast to Jack's sexual exploration (26, 41-42), and by the nomadic nature of his life and occupation (31-32). Ennis, who runs "full-throttle on all roads whether fence mending or money spending" (14) makes the extreme and conscious choice—motivated by the very concrete fears of either being visibly "different," of being horrifically murdered, or both—to spend his life as, essentially, a hermit. Ennis buys into his culture's

current representations of masculinity [for] white men [which] unfailingly [depends] on a relatively stable notion of realness and the naturalness of both the male body and its signifying effects [; ... a cultural paradigm in which] white men derive enormous power from assuming and confirming the nonperformative nature of masculinity. (Halberstam 234-35)

By not choosing, in other words, Ennis *does* choose. He chooses to abdicate his agency and, thus, to remain stoically complicit in the same culturally discursive gender stereotypes and hegemonic power structures that define his own material becoming.

Instead of attempting to change his situation, rather than “erasing *and* [italics mine] recomposing the former boundaries between [him]self and others” (*Metamorphoses* 119), Ennis abandons his social and familial responsibilities and isolates himself as completely as possible from the culture that drew the boundaries in the first place. Ennis’s childhood experience taught him that social and geographical isolation is the only way to avoid either being complicit in or being the victim of the homophobic violence that kills men like him, Earl, and Jack. Ennis has been raised to believe that heterosexuality is abnormal, unnatural, and he can see no other option but to disassociate himself from the culture that defines it—and by extension, him—that way. If no one is there to remind him that he is “different,” in other words, he can avoid the material conflict and consequences he has been taught to believe are inevitable. Distinct from the way that Ennis deliberately shuns the public eye, however, Jack deliberately places himself at its center. Whereas Ennis lives in tacit, conceptual adherence to heterosexual normativity but rejects the culture that maintains it, Jack welcomes “cowboy culture” with open arms but lives in open sexual rebellion against it—a rebellion, as Ennis predicts (41), that eventually gets him killed. Like Ennis, however, Jack’s choices over the course of his life reflect his anecdotal childhood experience of violent, heterosexual male dominance and the material—that is to say, the both conceptual and physiognomic (not to mention psychological)—costs of it.

### 3.3.2 *Jack Plays Dress Up*

As a child, Ennis is terrorized into accepting heterosexual gender norms as unchangeable and, unchangeable himself, perceives of no choice but self-imposed exile.

Jack's experience operates in a different way. Instead of being shown, indirectly, the consequences of contesting gender normativity, Jack is taught, first-hand, that he will never measure up to the only "manly" ideal he knows. Isolated on his parents' ranch, like Ennis a high school drop-out, Jack's measure for a man comes entirely from his father—"a not uncommon type with the hard need to be the stud duck in the pond" (Proulx 48)—and his father makes it clear when he pulls out his fully-grown, uncircumcised penis and urinates all over the sobbing three year-old that Jack will never measure up. Jack perceives his inability to meet both the standard of his father and his father's standards to be in some way predicated on his physical lack, his "notched" and "branded" penis. Whereas Ennis has been raised to avoid emasculation at all costs—taught early in life that failure to adhere to gender norms would result in his literal castration, in being "drug [...] around by his dick until it pulled off" (29)—Jack is raised with the belief that he is *already* emasculated. Thus, he situates himself in cultural contexts that provide him the opportunity to ostentatiously prove otherwise. Moreover, Jack's ranching metaphors for his circumcision, "notching" and "branding," call to mind the practice called "gelding," a surgical procedure by which ranchers (or, more likely, the working cowboys they've employed) remove a bull or horse's testicles, essentially castrating them.

The association between castration and circumcision and the role the two play in the construction of and conflict between sexual identity and gendered performance is one that psychoanalysts have struggled with ever since Freud suggested that circumcision "makes a disagreeable, uncanny impression, which is to be explained no doubt by its recalling the dreaded castration" (Freud 91). In his discussion of the conceptual emasculation of Jewish men, for example, Sander Gilman writes that at the turn-of-the-century, the "clitoris was seen as a 'truncated penis.' Within [this] understanding of sexual homology, this truncated penis was seen as an analogy not to the body of the *idealized*

*male* [emphasis mine], with his large, intact penis, but to the circumcised (“truncated”) penis [...]” (38). In other words, the circumcised penis was equated to the clitoris, to the “truncated” genitalia of a woman and, by extension, to femininity more generally. This misconception is clearly part of Jack’s problem—his visceral experience of the differences between his own circumcised, toddler’s penis and his father’s “large, intact penis” cement in his young mind a perceived lack in the substance of his own maleness. Castrated, circumcised, or gelded, however, the “fear of the dreaded castration” is, according to Jacques Lacan, an oversimplification.

Whereas Freud understands “sexual difference [to be] founded on the recognition of the penis—or lack of it,” Lacan believes that “entrance into subjectivity is the result of a specular [or visual] (mis)recognition” (Adams and Savran 11). According to Rachel Adams and David Savran, “one of the most important contributions of Lacanian psychoanalysis [...] is its elaboration of the difference between the visible and the invisible, the penis and the phallus. The Lacanian phallus is not an organ but a sign, a privileged symbol of patriarchal power and authority that becomes associated with the penis, but cannot *be* that with which it is associated” (11). The phallus is essentially what I refer to in this project as hegemonic masculinity. To echo Barthes, a tree laden with the immense weight of cultural, political, social, economic, even environmental layers, crushed and “chemically-treated” over the course of Euro-American history. Lacanian psychoanalysis “proposes that because no subject can actually possess the phallus [live up to the ideal that hegemonic masculinities represent], both men and women suffer the mark of castration, albeit in different ways” (Adams and Savran 11). The phallus is a hegemonic masculine ideal; a “valorized signifier around which both men and women define themselves” (Grosz 116). Small wonder, then, that the “phallicized” cowboy whom Meisenheimer asserts is the Western’s traditional hero has achieved the status of myth.

And small wonder, as well, that Jack Twist experiences that “specular (mis)recognition” of his own “notched” and “branded” penis as a physiognomic failure to meet the hegemonic masculine ideals personified by his father.

Ennis responds to his fear of castration/emasculatation by isolating himself from the social and cultural environments that normalize hegemonic cowboy masculinities. In doing so, he “ironically fosters hegemony” (Boyarin 283). He fades, essentially, into his context, making himself invisible in the same way that Campbell, Bell, and Finney argue white masculinity—by virtue of its ubiquity—is a transparent “norm.” Jack goes in quite the opposite direction. His belief that he is already castrated/emasculated creates in Jack a need to prove himself, to over-emphasize his performance of hegemonic gender norms.

Jack’s over-performance of cowboy masculinity can best be described as a sort of “cowboy drag.” Judith Halberstam defines a “drag king [as] a female (*usually*) [emphasis mine] who dresses up in recognizably male costume and performs theatrically in that costume” (232). Given Jack’s predilection for rodeo belt-buckles and the theatrical and public nature of the rodeo, Jack fits the bill. Suggesting that Jack is performing “cowboy drag” is, of course, complicated by the fact that he is a *man* performing masculinity. However, particularly in light of his perceived emasculatation, Jack’s choice to become a rodeo cowboy and his physically committed performance of it (Proulx 25)—both in dress and in terms of the extremely dangerous event, bull riding, in which he participates—suggest the same sort of hyperbolic performance of masculinity as that of a drag king; but on a culturally circumscribed stage. Halberstam argues that within a drag culture where performances of masculinity are often parody, “gay macho male clones [gay men theatrically performing masculine stereotypes] quite clearly exaggerate

masculinity” (235).<sup>18</sup> She also suggests that for men like this, this performance of masculinity “tips into feminine performance” (235). Because the culture into which Jack is born and the rodeo culture in which he invests himself sets distinct limits to the stage on which he can perform—and because Jack is, unlike Ennis, impelled to prove his masculinity within those contexts—Jack’s tipping “into feminine performance” takes place in other ways; at least initially, and particularly with regards to the roles he takes in his personal relationships.

### 3.3.3 *Border Bandits Playing House*

Between Jack and Ennis is a gulf, what amounts to a space that can only be mapped by their subjective experiences of each other. Ennis, on the one hand, has faded into the historically traditional hegemonic background that typifies his culture—emphasizing his masculinity by ‘performing nonperformativity.’ Jack, on the other hand, has spent his life not seeking invisibility but instead pursuing a masculinity that “has already been rendered visible and theatrical in [its] various relations to dominant white masculinities” (Halberstam 2354). He doesn’t *maintain* a masculinity, but rather *pursues* an always receding and contradictory masculine ideal premised in his own perceived physiognomic lack and his desire to be Meisenheimer’s “phallicized” cowboy; to, in fact, *be* his father. It is this gulf between Jack and Ennis and the lives they have chosen that Proulx uses to emphasize their materiality. Simply put, Ennis represents an entrenched conceptual (though clearly not material) hegemonic masculine ideal for the enactment of white, male masculinity associated with a geo-politically specific region of the western United States. Jack, by contrast, represents the ostentatious performance of cowboy associated with western masculinities on *both* regional and global levels. Proulx uses

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<sup>18</sup> An example of this sort of performance might be the 1970s disco group, The Village People, who featured—among other stereotypes like a construction worker, a policeman, and a biker—a cowboy.

Jack's over-performativity and Ennis's deliberate under-performativity to open up the material spaces not only between varied performative templates for cowboy masculinities, but also between performativity and subjectively unique, embodied experience of geo-politically specific place. In the 'tradition' of the anti-Western, she does this by naturalizing their homosexuality and by bringing their more "primitive" selves into clearly non-conceptual, violent conflict (in direct relation to their visibility) with their culture's ideals for heterosexual normativity.

Ennis and Jack's relationship is naturalized in the same way that Tompkins, Slotkin, and Meisenheimer suggest that the cowboy hero, by crossing the borders between nature and culture, becomes a naturalized (normalized) bridge between the two. That is to say, Tompkins argues that nature chooses "her" man—and, thus, that "(certain) type of person" (74) is naturalized. Slotkin argues that when the traditional cowboy hero crosses the border between culture and nature, he undergoes a "regression to a more natural and primitive condition of life" with which he can enact a "new, purified social contract [...], [a] new consciousness through which he will transform the world" (14). Meisenheimer, for his part, suggests that the Western's tradition "boils down to a topographical formula of Town (or civilization), Landscape (usually dangerous territory inhabited by Indians or outlaws), and a [typically white, male] Mediator between the two" (Meisenheimer 445-46). Proulx both "addresses and withdrawals" from the sites of resistance these concepts describe.<sup>19</sup> Clearly, for Proulx, the boundaries between nature and culture are neither as solid nor as delineated as the Western defines them—either in terms of the impermeability of the physical boundaries erected between human settlements and non-human nature itself, or with regards to the equally conceptual and

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<sup>19</sup> Indeed, with regards to the cultural paradigms for male masculinity with which Jack and Ennis must contend, it is questionable whether they are the heroes or, as Meisenheimer suggest of the Western's non-human landscape, the outlaws.

embodied material spaces between western rural cultures' historically traditional ideals for heterosexual male normativity and Ennis and Jack's "naturalized" enactment of their sexuality.

Ennis and Jack, representative as they are of the wide-open middle spaces between traditional hegemonic masculinities and the ostentatious and culturally circumscribed "feminized" performance of masculinity, find themselves set on opposite sides of this gulf after they have settled into their designated places as "herder and camp tender," Jack sleeping on the mountain with the sheep, Ennis 'keeping the home fires burning': "During the day Ennis looked across a great gulf and sometimes saw Jack, a small dot moving across a high meadow as an insect moves across a tablecloth: Jack, in his dark camp, saw Ennis as night fire, a red spark on the huge black mass of mountain" (Proulx 9). Jack is a rodeo cowboy, unaccustomed to long days in the saddle, and Ennis likes the kind of riding that "lasts longer than eight seconds and has some point to it." Before long they switch places and Ennis takes on the role his life experiences have taught him to prefer—long hours, sleeping in the saddle, with no one around but the sheep and the coyotes he is being paid to kill—that of the "insect on the table cloth." Jack, for his part, willingly takes on the more domestic role in their working partnership—preferring instead to be the "red spark on the huge black mass of mountain"—attending to the campfire and the domestic chores of cooking, firewood accumulation, and heating bathing water.

Significantly, the conceptual gulf that Proulx figures in the landscape and on the other side of which each moves beneath the gaze of the other is physically crossed both in terms of 'crossing each other's trail' in the actual trading places, and in terms of the sexual relationship that develops when Jack and Ennis make their switch. Likewise, in the same way that the landscape in which they are naturalized echoes the traditional



Western's frontier fantasy but is nevertheless circumscribed by culture both physically (roads and trailheads) and discursively (laws and maps), so their sexual relationship begins within the domestic confines of the camp that echo the culture/nature divide and is enabled when each takes the role for which their subjective experiences of their rural culture has prepared them to take. Nonetheless, their physical relationship is non-discursive, a purely physical act ostensibly enabled by their "regression to a more [...] natural condition of life from which the 'false values of the metropolis' [are] purged" (Slotkin 14), and which (save once, in the Motel Siesta) takes place only in non-human, natural contexts.

It becomes the men's habit to stay up late drinking, talking, "each glad to have a companion where none had been expected" (Proulx 12). Ennis, "dizzy drunk on all fours one cold hour when the moon had notched past two" (13), decides that he will stay in camp. Later, when Ennis wakes Jack with "the clacking of his jaw" (14), Jack invites Ennis to share his bedroll:

It was big enough, warm enough, and in a little while they deepened their intimacy considerably. Ennis ran full-throttle on all roads whether fence mending or money spending, and he wanted none of it when Jack seized his left hand and brought it to his erect cock. Ennis jerked his hand away as though he'd touched fire, got to his knees, unbuckled his belt, shoved his pants down, hauled Jack onto all fours and, with the help of the clear slick and a little spit, entered him, nothing he'd done before but no instruction manual needed. They went at it in silence. [...Without] saying anything about it both knew how it would go for the rest of the summer, sheep be damned. (Proulx 14-15)

The way the men's first sexual encounter makes concrete the dominant-submissive role with which each man has been encultured from childhood. Proulx goes on to write that they "never talked about the sex, let it happen, at first only in the tent at night, then in the full daylight [...], quick, rough, laughing and snorting, no lack of noises, but saying not a goddamn word [...]" (Proulx 15). Their sex takes place without words, a natural, non-

discursive act that is beyond the ability of human language (i.e., social construction) to describe.

Proulx naturalizes the men's relationship in other ways as well. For instance, except for their reunion at the Motel Siesta, in the smoky, smelly, enclosed space of their motel room, Ennis and Jack's relationship is bounded on all sides by non-human contexts. The non-human setting of Brokeback Mountain forecasts the "hell out in the back a nowhere" (Proulx 30) where the two men meet to escape the prying, homophobic eyes of their communities for the next sixteen years:

Years on years they worked their way through the high meadows and mountain drainages, horse-packing into the Big Horns, Medicine Bows, south end of the Gallatins, Absarokas, Granites, Owl Creeks, the Bridger-Teton Range, the Freezeouts and the Shirleys, Ferrises and the Rattlesnakes, Salt River Range, into the Wind Rivers over and again, the Sierra Madres, Gros Ventres, the Washakies, Laramies, but never returning to Brokeback. (Proulx 35)

And never returning, for that matter, to the Motel Siesta (or anything like it). By situating her cowboy heroes in natural settings but relegating their enacted homosexuality entirely to those places, Proulx forbids them to be the transformative mediators who "enact a new, purified social contract" (Meisenheimer 4456, Slotkin 14) that the traditional Western expects the cowboy to be.

Another instance of Ennis and Jack's naturalization is the intimate connection—threaded through the entire text—between Ennis, ranch work, horses, and Jack. For example, when Ennis and Jack reunite after four years, they are beside themselves. Ennis, pressed against Jack and at a loss for words, says "what he [says] to his horses and daughters, little darling" (Proulx 21). When they have made love in the Motel Siesta twenty minutes later, the room stinks "of [...] sour hay [and] saddle leather [...]" (Proulx 23), and Jack exclaims to Ennis that, "Christ, it got a be all that time a yours ahorseback makes it so goddamn good" (24). In light of these examples and the positions each takes

in the only sex act to which we are privy, it becomes clear that Ennis (the mounted) and Jack (the mount) are a reflection of Ennis's intimate relationship with non-human Others and—insofar as Ennis represents an encultured hegemonic masculine ideal—of the interaction between human culture and non-human nature. In addition—and not to be crass—that Jack is 'being ridden' reflects the over-performative nature of his rodeo career insofar as his embodied reality and private sexuality is in contention with his public performances of hegemonic cowboy masculinities.

Though Proulx does naturalize Jack and Ennis's relationship within a non-human setting (in a distorted echo of the traditional Western's), she nevertheless makes it clear that the open spaces of the frontier no longer exist and that no one can ever be truly isolated. She reminds us that she is turning the crank of a both narrative and historical vise; and that the borders between non-human nature and human culture—and between embodiment and socially-constructed performative ideals—are far more amorphous and interdependent than the Western makes them seem. Jack and Ennis's sexual relationship gradually moves from the domestic sphere represented by the tent out into the surrounding non-human contexts, "only the two of them on the mountain [...] suspended above ordinary affairs and [ostensibly] distant" from human culture (15). Even though they are in the 'uninhabited' spaces of Brokeback Mountain, however, it is when they move from the 'domestic' to the 'natural' that their sexuality comes into conflict with their culture for the first (but not the last) time.

Proulx suggests that even the non-human nature in which Jack and Ennis 'regress' falls within a 'domestic' sphere which defies the Western tradition. She writes that Jack and Ennis "believed themselves invisible, not knowing that Joe Aguirre had watched them through his 10x42 binoculars for ten minutes one day, waiting until they'd buttoned up their jeans before bringing up [a] message [...]" (15). Aguirre refuses to hire

Jack the following year, arguing that he wasn't paying them to "stem the rose" in favor of watching the sheep (27). The point is that even in the "wilderness" where the traditional Western hero is divested of the "false values of the metropolis," Ennis and Jack are in reality never completely isolated from the cultural ideals for male masculine performance that have plotted the courses of their lives. Again, when the two men see each other four years later, it is when their relationship moves into the public sphere— (when Alma sees the two men holding each other outside their apartment (21)—that their sexuality and culturally normative ideals come into conflict. Indeed, it is after this that a "slow corrosion [works] between Ennis and Alma" (31), a corrosion that ultimately leads to Alma testing her hypothesis about her husband's friendship (Proulx 33); and, by extension, to their divorce and Ennis's abdication of his familial responsibilities (34).

Ennis and Jack's sexual adventures, natural and non-discursive though they may be, still resonate with and in their encultured idealizations of the performance of regionally specific hegemonic masculinity. Ennis, raised in brutally staunch heterosexuality, "[hauls] Jack onto all fours" and penetrates him. Jack, though he initiates the event, nonetheless assumes a compliant role that reflects his darkly sexual childhood experience being emotionally subjugated and physiognomically dominated at his father's feet. In any case, the roles they physically exemplify—both in terms of the jobs they perform and with regards to their relative sexual positions—are not relegated to the (contradictory) confines of Brokeback Mountain. They are mirrored in different ways in Ennis and Jack's lives both before and after their first summer together.

In a particularly poignant echo of Ennis and Jack's first sexual experience, for example, Proulx describes a sexual encounter between Ennis and Alma which involves Ennis bringing Alma to orgasm with his hand before he "[rolls] her over, [does] quickly what she [hates]" (19). Ennis's (and Alma's) sexual frustrations are, unlike Ennis's sex

with Jack, prefaced with words (and therefore, 'unnatural'); specifically, Alma's request that Ennis quit ranch work and that they move with their daughters to town. Ennis acquiesces (to Alma's request that he resign himself to living within parameters of culture expectations) and Alma complies with Ennis's (utterly embodied) sexual demands. Although they eventually get divorced, they do move to town. "They [stay] in the little apartment [Ennis favors] because it [can] be left at any time" (Proulx 19), and it is here that Jack tracks him down, four years later. When Ennis and Alma finally divorce, Ennis all but abandons his daughters and goes "back to ranch work, hired on here and there, [...] glad enough to be around stock again, free to drop things, quit if he had to, and go into the mountains [with Jack] at short notice" (32). When domesticity doesn't work out for Ennis, he abandons it altogether and throws himself into the isolation of ranch work and his "wilderness" rendezvouses with Jack.

Jack, for his part, continues to play a role, to publicly and hyperbolically perform a public stereotype in direct and physical conflict with his subjective embodiment. Before a leg "[busted] in three places [...] fuckin [*sic*] busted ribs, sprains and pains, torn ligaments"—and the fact that rodeo "ain't like it was in [his] daddy's time" but instead is made up of "trained athletes [*sic*]"—force him to retire from the rodeo circuit (Proulx 25), Jack meets and marries Lureen, the daughter of the well-to-do owner of a farm machinery business near Childress, Texas (Proulx 22). When he does, he enters into a relationship that very clearly puts him in a subordinate, dependent position; one where, when her father dies, "Lureen [has] the money and [calls] the shots" (Proulx 39). In reaction to his subordinate position, Jack 'plays dress up.' His father-in-law dead and his wife in control of the family business, Jack finds

himself with a vague managerial title, traveling to stock and agricultural machinery shows. He had some money now and found ways to spend it on his buying trips. A little Texas accent flavored his sentences [...].

He'd had his front teeth filed down and capped, said he'd felt no pain,  
and to finish the job grew a heavy mustache. (Proulx 35)

Again, Jack's outward appearance—his public performance—happens in a context and to a degree that isolates his public, performed identity from his private subjective embodiment. Unlike Ennis, who divests himself of the need to go back and forth between the two, Jack attempts to operate in the spaces in between. By writing Jack's eventual death the way she does, furthermore, Proulx suggests that the farther apart conceptual notions of masculinity and its material enactment are, the more violent the confrontation between the two.

Though both men perform heterosexuality—Ennis has two daughters and is “putting the blocks to a woman who [works] part time at the Wolf Ears bar in Signal”; and Jack has a son and has “a thing going with the wife of a rancher down the road in Childress” (Proulx 38)—Ennis typically distances himself from his heterosexual relationships as soon they present “some problems he [doesn't] want” (Proulx 38). Jack, on the other hand, carries on his ostensibly heterosexual affair (we can surmise, later, that the affair was actually with the rancher himself; indeed, Ang Lee suggests as much) under threat of getting “shot by Lureen or the husband one” (Proulx 38) and thereby seeks out the kinds of problems that Ennis tries to avoid. Ennis rejects the public eye and loses his family because of it. By contrast, Jack can't be himself without some variation of public performance; and it is *that* which prompts him to enact his homosexuality outside of its “natural” context; actions which, in turn make him the object of a performance of rural male homophobia—a performance with utterly embodied consequences. Furthermore, insofar as Jack's death is an echo of Ennis's childhood memory, Proulx seems to be implying the sort of unbreakable “loop” in which Ennis perceives himself to be caught (29) and which prevents him from acquiescing to Jack's plea that they live on a ranch together (in direct contrast to his compliance with Alma's

similar plea that they move to town). When Jack attempts to do what Ennis cannot—to express his homosexuality outside of the confines of non-human nature and his relationship with Ennis—he is himself caught in a own loop of his desire to both possess and escape the only hegemonic ideal he knows. Socially-constructed performative templates aside, however, both Jack and Ennis nonetheless remain material masculine figurations.

Ennis and Jack's individual childhood experiences of heterosexual masculinity suggest that those experiences serve to determine, in part, the conceptual and physiognomic roles the two men play. *Brokeback Mountain* seems at first to offer Ennis and Jack as examples of socially-constructed hegemonic masculinities who either perform white male masculinity by abdicating performance altogether—like Ennis—or by over-performing to make-up for a perceived lack, like Jack. However, Proulx also pays particular attention to their embodiment and to the manner in which their bodies influence and are influenced by time (we see the men grow older, complete with the physical evidence of the lives they have lived); by their gendered performance in geo-politically specific cultures (like marriage, fatherhood, or the rodeo); and, ultimately, by their embodied sexuality (which Proulx implies is natural and therefore normal). Ennis is a rough-and-tumble ranch hand who represents a certain isolated and weathered stoicism American culture associates with westward movement and the frontier cowboy. Jack, the rodeo cowboy complete with an oversized belt buckle and the broken bones to prove his manliness, suggests a publicly performed, contemporary version of the cowboy. In either case, Ennis and Jack (homosexuality notwithstanding) seem to fall solidly within the parameters of contemporary culture's idea of the quintessential cowboy. At the same time, however, by making her protagonists gay, by "outing" them within the context of a rural culture historically (and violently) opposed to homosexuality, and by confining all but

one of their sexual encounters to an agentic “wilderness” environment ostensibly distinct from human culture, Proulx deconstructs the cowboy stereotypes she has herself suggested; and highlights the imaginary nature of the discursive cultural divide between hetero and homosexual masculinities, and between the human culture which constructs western masculine ideals and the cowboy’s co-inscription with other-than-human, “natural” environments.

### 3.4 Conclusion

I have argued that Proulx’s anti-Western treatment of the Western genre’s tradition of romanticized (frontier) nature and static (predominately white, male) masculinity highlights the materiality of rural masculinities; and, furthermore, that their materiality is conceived and maintained by the conflict between concept and embodiment. For Braidotti, the nomad is just such a material figuration. For Proulx, this material subjectivity is figured in the cowboy. Like Braidotti, Proulx clearly believes “in the potency and relevance of the imagination, of myth-making, as a way to step out of [...] political and intellectual stasis [...]” (*Nomadic* 4). In the same way that Braidotti uses the nomad, Proulx uses the “iconoclastic, mythic figure [of the cowboy to] move against the settled and conventional nature of ” (*Nomadic* 4) the Western genre’s hegemonic heterosexuality and traditional conceptualizations of non-human nature.

It is the legend, the lifestyle, and the “qualities of character, themselves carried in physiognomy—the body of the white male [...], lean, sinewy, hard, taut, the cowboy as white male ego ideal” (Dyer 34)—with which he is so often associated that allows the cowboy to catholically represent (or at least to be generally present in the performance of) a wide variety of American masculinities and an equally significant number of historically traditional, American political valuations. Proulx addresses this social appropriation. She does this, most obviously, by acknowledging the “embodied and



therefore sexually differentiated" (*Nomadic* 3) nature of Jack and Ennis's masculine performance and in doing so suggests that material subjectivity "is neither reproduction nor just imitation [(i.e., Ennis and Jack, respectively)], but [is] rather emphatic proximity, intensive interconnectedness [...], the affirmation of fluid boundaries, a practice of intervals, of the interfaces and of the interstices" (*Nomadic* 5, 7). Proulx's naturalized masculinities and their direct confrontation with hegemonic ideals for the performance of regionally-specific male masculinities is her way of bringing to light the overlapping influences of both objective and subjective history, moment-by-moment embodied experience of place, and socially-constructed ideals for enacting maleness—what I have described as material masculinity.

Ennis and Jack, despite their tacit (Ennis) or hyperbolic (Jack) adherence to hegemonic gender normativity, are nevertheless neither static nor romantic; nor are their subjective cartographies mapped out solely in a conceptual vacuum. Instead, their cartographies are also drawn indelibly (even fatally) on their bodies. Proulx illustrates the "notion of [...] materiality by emphasizing [Jack and Ennis's] embodied and therefore sexually differentiated" subjectivity (*Nomadic* 3). By emphasizing their embodiment—both in terms of their physiognomy and their sexuality—Proulx points to the conflicted middle-spaces between embodied history and the socially-constructed power structures founded in an ideal of heterosexual masculinity. She does this by naturalizing her protagonists in an acknowledgement of the Western's tradition, but presenting her characters as "alternative political [...] figurations]" (*Nomadic* 4) that contend directly with the heterosexual, landscape-dominating mythology of the Western cowboy hero. By stripping her characters to their material core, by "dressing" them in the costume and landscape of the Western, and by emphasizing their embodied sexuality she shows her

readers the “contested, multi-layered and internally contradictory subject-positions” (*Nomadic* 13) inhabited by rural men.

In *Brokeback Mountain*, Proulx takes two cowboy stereotypes—the silent, enduring, range-riding Ennis and the flashy, ostentatious, bull-riding Jack—and suggests that, though both perform cowboy masculinity in different ways, neither man can be accurately defined as a “cowboy.” She addresses this by making it clear that becoming a masculinity in rural places is an intensely subjective, entirely unique experience of material embodiment that cannot be reduced to the socially-constructed, romantically static type figured in the Western tradition. By using the Western tradition against itself—that is to say, by naturalizing and thereby normalizing Jack and Ennis’s sexuality by virtue of their association with non-human nature—Proulx uses historical and geo-political specificity to bring cultural ideals and moment-by-moment embodiment into violent, heartbreaking contention; thus illustrating the second elemental landmark of material masculine becoming—conceptual and physical conflict. In chapter four, I combine historical and geo-political place attachment and material conflict with the third landmark on this material masculine cartography. Using David Morrell’s novel *First Blood*, Ted Kotcheff’s 1982 film adaptation ten years later, and William Friedkin’s *The Hunted* (2002), I interrogate the hegemonic masculine stereotype of the iconic American soldier and bring into sharper relief material masculinities’ co-inscription with non-human nature.

Chapter 4  
Martial Cartographies: The Soldier as Material Masculine Figuration in *First Blood* and  
*The Hunted*

[It] is in the mythological  
marriage of Ares and Aphrodite  
that Harmonia is born.

Richard  
Heckler, 1989

God said to Abraham, "Kill me a  
son.'[...] Abe said, "Where do  
you want this killing done?" God  
said, "Out on highway 61."

Bob  
Dylan, 1965

The United States was born of war—war against the North American continent's human and non-human Others and war against other countries. Since its inception as a nation, the United States has settled and dominated the non-human landscape from east coast to west; it has exterminated or resettled an entire population of native Americans; and it has fought in eleven "major" conflicts—three of which took place on "American" soil.<sup>20</sup> Thirty-three of our nation's forty-four presidents have served in leadership

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<sup>20</sup> The Revolutionary War, the Civil War, the "Indian Wars," the Mexican-American War, the Spanish-American War, World War One, World War Two, Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, and the current, ten year-long "Gulf War II." This list, of course, omits hundreds of

positions in the U.S. military. At any given time, approximately twelve percent of the living U.S. population has veteran status and veterans make up the largest homeless demographic in the nation (14%) (Perl 7-8). At the time of this writing, there are approximately 1.5 million active duty military personnel serving in both domestic and foreign theaters and as a nation we are involved in a war that spans two countries. Soldiers have always been a significant part of American culture—of human culture. Many of the first American cowboys (both working cowboys and outlaws) were ex-soldiers; and next to the cowboy, no other hegemonic masculine ideal is more prevalent in American culture than the soldier.<sup>21</sup>

Like his Wild West counterpart, the soldier has moved from the embodied physical spaces he occupies to the stage, the page, and to the screen. He has been appropriated as a national, hegemonic masculine ideal in politics, in business, in literature and in film. Like the cowboy, the soldier is everywhere. He has, and no doubt will again spend time in the White House; and given that at the time of this writing the United States is in its tenth year of its second Gulf war, he is no doubt behind us at the grocery store, in front of us at a stoplight, or sitting in a desk in our classrooms.<sup>22</sup> If he is not there, he is in the pages of the books we read and the running across the screen in the films we watch, and he is influential. Susan Jeffords writes that military “imagery is [...] emblematic of the operation of contemporary dominant U.S. cultural formations.

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other known and unknown police actions (like Grenada and Panama, for instance), advisory roles, etc. to which the United States has committed military resources.

<sup>21</sup> As I noted in chapter two, it is a Civil War veteran who is credited with designing the modern cowboy boot.

<sup>22</sup> I should add the caveat here that I understand that a conversation about the history and present service of women in the military is an essential one. Only three months ago, on January 24, 2013, when outgoing Defense Secretary Leon Panetta signed the order allowing female soldiers to fight in combat units. However, with regards to this project, it is the traditional hegemonic masculinities represented by male soldiers with which I am primarily concerned.

More specifically, [...] of the general restructuring and circulation of ideological production in America today” (1). His shared history with the cowboy and the similar roles he plays in the “ideological production” of American masculinities alone make the soldier an obvious place to continue a discussion of material masculinities in the context of an American literary cartography.

Up to this point in this project, I have emphasized two of the three landmarks for a cartography of material masculinities—historical and geo-political place-association in chapter two and the conflict inherent in embodied becoming in chapter three. In the process, I’ve alluded in different ways and to varying degrees to the third landmark which I referred to in chapter one—American masculinities’ intimate and co-inscriptive relationship with non-human nature. In this chapter, I make this third landmark of material masculinity, of its presence in the lives of rural men—and, thus, of American masculinity more generally—the focus of my analysis. Broadly put, the map for this chapter follows two parallel routes. On the one hand, I argue that in both military and popular cultural contexts, non-human nature is conscripted in the construction of the “ideal” hegemonic masculinity.

On the other hand, I assert that because of this hegemonic masculine “ideological production,” pop-culture representations of military masculinities nevertheless provide important insights into the way that non-literary soldier figurations occupy both discursively mapped and materially unmapped spaces. I suggest that as products of a decidedly hegemonic system, the military—itself the product of a traditionally hegemonic, patriarchal culture—and by virtue of their both discursive and embodied co-inscription with the non-human world, soldier figurations highlight the middle-spaces between socially-constructed performative templates for masculinity and the rural male embodied experience of geo-politically locative and conflicted non-human

places. Like the cowboy, the soldier is *both* a performed hegemonic masculinity and a material figuration. He is representative of a cultural military ideal for masculine performativity and of the “history tattooed on the body” (*Metamorphoses* 3) that comes from the moment-by-moment corporeal effects of martial violence. He is geo-politically specific and the nature of his martial existence is both physical and conceptual conflict. And he is, moreover, constructed by virtue of his historically intimate associations with the non-human world.

To make my argument, I stand in the present and look backwards over the historical literary topography. I first assert the rural heritage of the soldier figuration as a means of placing this material analysis firmly within the boundaries of men’s studies’ conversation about rural masculinities. I then interrogate William Friedkin’s 2003 film *The Hunted* and argue that the film highlights the “generational” nature of American ideals for the rural masculine stereotype figured in the soldier and that by doing so, it also suggests material middle-spaces where embodied experience comes into conflict with socially-constructed expectations for masculine interaction with others. *The Hunted* also serves as a poignant instance of the contemporary relevance of these tropes about men and nature introduced in David Morrell’s 1972 *First Blood* and Ted Kotcheff’s 1982 film adaptation of the same name. I assert that both *First Blood* and *The Hunted* are exceptional examples of the material interchange between cultural ideals about military masculinities and the corporeal experience of contemporary rural men. I argue that popular literature and film about martial action make a number of *a priori* assumptions about non-human nature and “normative” masculine interaction with it, and that these assumptions work to articulate socially-constructed binaries which make visible the unmapped material spaces in-between. Within this framework, I theorize the foundational roles that conflict, geo-political/cultural place-association, and co-inscription

with non-human environments play in the becoming of material masculine figurations represented in the texts' main characters.

#### 4.1 Soldier Boys

Some may argue that a modern soldier is not necessarily a rural masculine stereotype. In terms of statistics and body counts, however, he is. According to the U.S. Department of Defense, enlistment “[data] show that urban areas are [...] underrepresented among new recruits [...] and rural areas are overrepresented” (U.S. Dept. of Defense 3). Likewise, the Carsey Institute, a University of New Hampshire-based research institute, claims that in the current war, the excessively high number of casualties among soldiers from rural areas can be explained by the equally lopsided enlistment demographics:

Today, rural Americans are paying the ultimate sacrifice in disproportionately high numbers. [...] Department of Defense records [show] soldiers from rural America are dying at a higher rate than soldiers from big cities and suburbs. In all but eight states, soldiers from rural areas make up a disproportionately high share of casualties. The high death rate for soldiers from rural areas is linked to the higher rate of enlistment of young adults from rural America. The higher rates of enlistment in the Armed Forces among rural youth are [...] linked to diminished opportunities [in rural places]. (O’Hare and Bishop 1)

Higher enlistment rates by rural men, not to mention higher casualty rates, underscores the significant contribution that rural men have made to—and the very material, immediately embodied consequences of the role they play in—the construction of the hegemonic masculine stereotype

Though William O’Hare and Bill Bishop are addressing statistics from the most current Iraq conflict, the primarily rural composition of the American military is nothing new. The first American “soldiers” were predominantly homesteaders and farmers formed into bands of militia to fight the British Army during the Revolutionary War. The same was true during the Civil War, except that the farmers and homesteaders fought

each other. After the Civil War, rather than returning home, many of those soldiers became cowboys and chased the opportunities promised by a still wide-open frontier and a newly invigorated national project (French 94). Alternatively, they remained in the military and, thus, participated in the genocide and relocation of the continent's native population—working hand-in-hand with their civilian, cowboy counterparts. Together, the cowboy and the soldier played an important role in the cultural construction of the romanticized hegemonic masculine ideals made so popular by men like Western novelist Owen Wister or quintessential soldier/cowboy/*über-mann* and twenty-sixth president of the United States, Teddy Roosevelt.

In terms of the way culture idealizes the soldier masculinity, even more important than his history or the concrete data about his rurality is his representation in film and literature—his cultural production. In other words, we understand the soldier (perhaps even subconsciously) as a rural masculinity and, more often than not, we portray him as such on page and screen. By way of canonical example, Stephen Crane's 1895 novel, *The Red Badge of Courage*, tells the story of an eighteen year old farm boy, Henry Miller, who dreams of martial masculine glory and so joins the Union Army during the Civil War. Not only is Henry a rural man, his experience of war is an experience of big-N, feminized Nature. A more recent example of the cultural iconization of the rural soldier is Stephen Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) in which the titular Private Ryan, the object of an Army-sanctioned rescue mission, is one of three brothers from a rural farming community in Kansas who enlisted to fight in WWII. Another recent example, William Friedkin's *The Hunted* (2003), starring Benicio Del Toro and Tommy Lee Jones, points to the cultural conflation between rural masculinities and violent martial action in a more complicated way. *The Hunted* makes for an interesting site for interrogating the rurality of the soldier figuration for two significant reasons. Though the film never makes Hallam's origins



(rural/urban) clear, it does go to great lengths to highlight the rural masculinity of Bonham and the generational nature of it. In addition, as I will go on to discuss, *The Hunted* is a poignant example of the cultural influence still wielded today by the forty-one year old *First Blood*.

*The Hunted* details the stories of L.T. Bonham—a civilian—and Aaron Hallam—a special forces assassin who suffers from PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), has a mental breakdown, and goes on a killing spree in rural Oregon. Bonham is his ex-instructor and mentor and the man who unwillingly hunts and eventually kills Hallam. Bonham is a civilian working for the Wildlife Fund in northern British Columbia when he is asked by the FBI to track down Hallam. In his (guilt-ridden) past, Bonham—the son of an Inuit tracker—contracted with the military to teach wilderness survival and tracking, hand-to-hand killing techniques, and basic weapons (knife) manufacture to Hallam and his special forces cohorts. It is, ostensibly, this past Bonham is trying to escape when we first see him, tracking an injured wolf across the snowy wilds of British Columbia. By contrast, we are introduced to Hallam in the context of war, tasked with killing the commander of the army perpetrating a genocide in a town in Kosovo. The population being gunned down by the dozens is clearly rural and the town itself is on the verge of being obliterated, a crumbling representation of human culture about to be quite literally wiped off the face of the landscape (as Hallam overhears from the man he is about to kill). It is this atrocity that Hallam's own martial violence is meant to mitigate.

The scene is horrific, and after Hallam assassinates (in the most bloody and brutal manner—up close and very personal) the man commanding the genocide and is decorated in private for it, he begins to suffer from nightmares of the experience. After a psychotic break, he goes AWOL and hides in the wild forests of northern Oregon. When Hallam kills two deer hunters he suspects (and, the implication is, rightly so) are hunting

him using techniques he learned from Bonham, the FBI asks Bonham to find him and bring him in. Bonham does so after tracking Hallam through the “wilds” where he is hiding. Significantly, as I’ll discuss in more detail in a moment, when Bonham first hunts Hallam at the behest of the FBI, he does so on an electronic leash—a GPS transmitter planted on him by the lead FBI agent. In this first confrontation with Hallam, Bonham loses. However, the FBI saves him from Hallam’s knife at the last moment and Hallam is taken into custody. While being transported by fellow-special forces operatives who try to induce Hallam to commit an “honorable” suicide, Hallam kills his captors and escapes. The remainder of the film has Bonham (this time without a tether) hunting Hallam across a varied series of landscapes—urban, rural and in-between—that highlight the violent potential and martial prowess of “natural,” rural men. The film’s dénouement takes place at an intersection of the urban and the rural, on the banks of a rushing river where the drainage system for the nearby city has its exit. After a bloody knife fight, Bonham kills Hallam, cradling him and crying as the FBI, led by a female agent, makes its late entrance onto the scene.

*The Hunted* highlights two particular elements with regards to cultural associations between rural men, non-human nature, and the violence inherent in human warfare. Like *First Blood*, *The Hunted* emphasizes the military and cultural assumptions about superior martial ability and “natural” masculinity. What concerns me most at the moment, however, is the way that *The Hunted* is suggestive of the both military and cultural construction of ideals for rural masculinity, and the manner in which those ideals are represented as inherited, natural and, thus, normal. As I suggested about the cowboy and the experiences of rural men in western regional cultures, the constitution of the rural masculine ideal (and ideology) of the soldier is the product of a multi-generational insistence on the performative elements of that type of masculinity.

Because the discursivity—the social-construction—of the hegemonic masculine stereotype represented in the soldier cannot adequately account for the corporeal male experience of place (words alone, in other words, can never be adequate) the actual comes into conflict with those performative ideals. Rachel Woodward writes that in Britain, “a rural inheritance is woven into the very fabric of the armed forces” (247) and is no less true for soldiers in the United States.

Traditionally rural skills like hunting, tracking, and practiced marksmanship—skills learned at young ages and in familial contexts—are well-suited for the military. Moreover, military training and action take place in rural locations and; as I’ve already suggested, when compared to those of urban men and women, rural enlistment rates (and thus casualties) are disproportionately high. Suffice it to say that because of the rural history of the American military, the skills we suppose he has, and the affinity for non-human/rural environments we traditionally associate with rural men, we *expect* the rural soldier to be good at his job. Whether he *actually* is or not is quite another matter. More importantly with regards to this discussion, however, we expect the history, skills, and relationship with the non-human environment to have been passed down from generation to generation and cultural representations of the soldier represent this expectation. It is these “inherited” element of the rural masculine soldier icon that *The Hunted* illuminates, and which “informs the production of many of the ways of talking about masculinity” (Woodward 237) in our culture today.

An example of this generational trope comes in Bonham. Bonham, as he tells his female FBI contact, grew up in the rural “wilderness” and is the son of an Inuit tracker and military veteran and learned all of his martial skills from his father. He, in turn, passes on these skills to Hallam who, during his PTSD-induced breakdown, begins to conflate L.T. with an absent father of his own. L.T., for his part, feels a father’s

responsibility for Hallam and for the havoc he wreaked; thus, his man-hunt for a killer becomes instead a desire to do his “fatherly” duty and kill his “son” himself.<sup>23</sup> That he succeeds suggests that ultimately, it is an inherited rurality and “natural” ability that make a man a better killer, not military training. Bonham was never in the military and; as such, he gives us a glimpse of the material in-betweens circumscribed by the military ideal he both abhors and helped to construct and his own embodied experience of the non-human world. His rurality heavily influences a military ideal, and his rural inheritance and affinity for the natural world give him the ability to defeat and kill a much younger, special forces (and personally) trained assassin—who, as Bonham points out, is “special” and “can kill anyone without regret.” Both men are the best at what they do. Both men “inherit” their skills from experts. Both men are associated with the military—in terms of both literary device (e.g., Bonham’s name) and personal history. L.T. Bonham, by virtue of his more historical attachment to rural non-human nature, however, was simply better.

Despite the hegemonic masculine conflation with the non-human world *The Hunted* seems to construct, its constructions nevertheless operate to open up conceptual middle-spaces for an interrogation the manner in which place and conflict give identity and definition to fragmented and perpetually fluid material masculinities. By extension, these discursive constructions make visible the figurative material masculine becoming of the film’s primary male characters. Re-theorized as material masculine figurations, in other words, Bonham and Hallam become illustrative of the way that socially-constructed boundaries—between masculine and feminine, between nature and culture, between military and civilian, even between right and wrong and truth and lies—operate in concert with the “tattooed,” corporeal, and conflicted experience of geo-politically specific place in the production of subjective gender identity.

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<sup>23</sup> This is reflected in the first line of the film, quoted as an epigram above.

One of the ways that Friedkin does this is by dislocating both Bonham and Hallam from place and history—in much the same way that Proulx does with Bob Dollar. Bonham—the son of a military veteran—was forbidden to join the military and, with his father dead, he has no family—biological or military—left. That is, of course, until he reconnects with Hallam. Hallam, for his part, is the son of a long absentee father and as I've suggested, finds his father-figure in Bonham himself. Moreover, both Bonham and Hallam are, in a very real sense, nomadic—both by virtue of occupation and in their physical, day-to-day lives respectively. Bonham is an environmental activist who—at his introduction—lives and moves in non-human spaces that are ostensibly unmapped and unmarked. He is a former military trainer and, when his affair with the military was over, he worked as a tracker for the FBI—with all the travel that implies. His roots are, at the least, shallow ones. Hallam is, quite simply, a military tool who we first meet in the fiery heart of a decidedly foreign and uninhabitable environment. As such, both men are, like Bob, men who adopt socially-constructed templates—trainer, tracker, environmentalist or invisible tool of a traditionally hegemonic, masculine institution. They are men who find themselves dislocated in undefined (chaotic), unmapped (un-map-able) spaces which are circumscribed on all sides by physical and conceptual boundaries. And their conflict with one another in metaphorically and subjectively poignant landscapes enables their material masculinities—their always-becoming a *collection* of fragments rather than just *being* fragmentary.

Insofar as material masculine figurations are, like their female nomadic cousins, always in a state of “transition, hybridization and nomadization, [...] in-between states that defy the established modes of theoretical representation” (*Metamorphoses* 2), their definition—their in-the-moment representation—is predicated on “highly specific geo-political and historical locations” (*Metamorphoses* 3)—on at least one of the three

landmarks I am suggesting. For Bonham and Hallam—and, as I shall show, for *First Blood*'s iconic Rambo—these landmarks are the cartographic points by which they triangulate their place in the wider cultural landscape. Their representative identities are premised in specific place—the rural “wilds” of northern Oregon—and delineated by violent conflict between Bonham—cultural expectations for normative behavior (i.e., not going on murderous killing sprees)—and Hallam—the chaotic, irrationality of the “primitive” (and thus naturalized) masculinity. At the same time, however, both men live and move between the two poles—Bonham becoming “natural,” and Hallam, quite clearly already the socially-constructed tool of a historically hegemonic masculine culture.

It is not its emphasis on the multi-generational and historical place association or the conflict that arises between constructed ideals and embodied reality alone that make *The Hunted* a necessarily unique example of dichotomous, martial masculinities and the material middle-spaces they open up. Other examples of this trope like the ones listed above exist. There are two reasons, however, that make *The Hunted* such interesting cultural site for a material interrogation. Like the primary texts in the previous chapters, on the one hand, *The Hunted* emphasizes the third of the three landmarks I suggested in the first chapter and which I interrogate further below—the co-construction of material masculine subjectivity and cultural notions of the non-human world. On the other hand, by virtue of its obvious use of traditional hegemonic martial masculine tropes, Friedkin's film stands as evidence of my claim that literature and film about material masculinities presents a significant and much-unexplored historical cartography for the study of men and the construction of masculinity in the United States. In a close comparison with David Morrell's *First Blood*, *The Hunted* as a text represents a literary frontier—a revisionary middle-space where traditional notions of hegemonic masculinities and their

interactions with the non-human are both reified and deconstructed. And Friedkin owes it all to Rambo.

#### 4.2 Real Life Rambo(s)

Before I begin to survey the third landmark for a theory of masculinities, I want to first establish *First Blood*'s enduring contemporary cultural influence in a material sense. *First Blood*'s ostensible protagonist, Rambo, has become synonymous with "going off the reservation." Since Morrell first published the novel in 1972, Rambo has become an icon, a masculine stereotype for natural, righteous rage—embodied, in 1982, in the hard-muscled, tightly-bounded frame of one Sylvester Stallone. Despite the forty-one years between Morrell's novel and today, Rambo is still running rampant through our culture and leaving fatally material wreckage in his metaphorical wake. For instance, in February of 2013, Christopher Jordan Dorner, an ex-L.A. police officer and honorably discharged veteran noted for his skills as a sharpshooter, went on a killing spree in retaliation for being fired from the Los Angeles Police Department.

In a twenty-three page manifesto, Dorner lays out the reasons for his actions, claiming that his name (his reputation) had been taken from him and promising that, as a result, the "violence of action [would] be HIGH," and that he would "bring unconventional and asymmetrical warfare to those in LAPD uniform whether on or off duty" (Dorner 12). Over the course of nine days, Dorner held two civilians hostage and killed two others, and shot two law enforcement officers, killing one of them, all while leading police on the largest manhunt in California's history. After fleeing to the mountains and crashing his car, Dorner hijacked a pick-up truck and after crashing that one as well, took refuge in a mountain cabin where he was surrounded and where he killed a San Bernardino County Sheriff's deputy and wounded another in a shoot-out. The cabin caught fire and Dorner burned to death while trying to escape. Over the course of the nine days before his

death, the ex-police officer garnered a significant internet following. When Los Angeles police killed two innocent civilians, claiming that they thought the victims *were* Dorner, blogs, tweets, Facebook pages and status updates showed growing support for his “righteous” warfare against a police department with a long history of corruption and scandal. As time progressed and Dorner remained at-large, one word in particular began to pop up more and more frequently from his supporters. Had Dorner remained alive, he might have found that though his name was taken from him by the Los Angeles Police Department, the American public replaced it with one becoming myth—Rambo.<sup>24</sup>

If Jordan Dorner is any indication, Rambo’s literary vehicle, *First Blood*, is as relevant today to a discussion of American masculinities as when it was first published over forty years ago. Dorner is not the first man (nor, no doubt, will he be the last) to be associated with the iconic Rambo, moreover. The word “Rambo” has become a common noun, defined in the contemporary lexicon as an exceptionally aggressive man willing to violently break the law to achieve a (subjectively) righteous goal. It is also a verb, an adjective, and an adverb, and the *Oxford English Dictionary* credits Morrell’s novel with its creation. Dorner, insofar as he believed his actions to be righteous, was most certainly a Rambo. That the word was used to describe him multiple times, in almost a quarter of a million public forums, in just nine days, over forty years after Morrell first took the name from a species of apple and the French philosopher Rimbaud (Morrell ix), highlights the impact that the novel has had and continues to have in American popular culture.

In addition to pointing both to the impact a given text can have on the cultural perceptions of masculinity and the contemporary relevance of the forty-one year old *First*

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<sup>24</sup> At the time of this writing, a simple Google search for the words “Dorner Rambo” pulls up 209,000 sites that make this connection.



*Blood*, Dorner's base of public support shows that despite the politically correct eschewing of violent masculine ideals, the American public is still enamored with and tacitly complicit in the construction of violent hegemonic masculinities represented by literary characters like Rambo and Hallam. The upshot is that Dorner's Rambo experience ended far differently than the film character with which he was associated. More specifically with regards to the primary argument of this dissertation, Dorner's rampage and its deadly outcome suggests a material collision—a conflicted and bloody middle-ground—between embodied experience and culturally discursive representations of hegemonic masculine stereotypes. In the following section, I interrogate this conflicted middle ground more fully. In doing so, I highlight some of the clear parallels between these cultural artifacts that—though separated by more than forty years, numerous police actions, and two major wars—still tell the same tale of the cultural idealization of soldier masculinities and their co-inscription with the non-human world.

#### 4.2.1 *Rambo Re-Theorized*

Texts like *First Blood* and *The Hunted* are significant examples of a historical literary cartography of the rural masculine stereotypes represented by the soldier and their co-inscriptive relationship with cultural ideas about nature. Between the three, they suggest that hegemonic masculinities not only create but are also created by an inherently victimized and righteously violent non-humanity. Put another way, popular cultural texts which are focused on soldier masculinities in nature, texts which have environmental and masculinist themes like *First Blood*—and its filmic progeny *The Hunted*—conflate violent masculine stereotypes and their other-than-human martial contexts; they conscript nature for the construction of a violent masculinity and vice versa. They do this in two primary ways: by representing martial masculinities as feminine nature's fellow victims, "as *victims* above all—an identity to which women are

interior” (Elshtain 213)—and by suggesting that their “remasculinization” can happen only by virtue of their intimate and metaphorically sexualized association with it. These representations have had and continue to have significant material consequences in the lives of both men and women, as well as in terms of human interactions with and responsibility for non-human environments.

Morrell’s novel and Kotcheff’s film do both of these, and in so doing, reify hegemonic dichotomies that each, in his own way, is ostensibly trying to dismantle. Re-theorized as material masculine figurations, however, the binaries that both Morrell and Kotcheff emphasize also work to open up the material middle spaces where social-construction and embodied experience come into conflict. *First Blood* is the story of a violent conflict between two men, two generations, and two very distinct worldviews. In setting up these polarities, novel and film create space in which to interrogate the materiality of the soldier figuration. The novel is set in and around the environs of a village—Madison—in the hill country of rural Kentucky, where Chief of Police William Teasle runs a tight ( but benevolent) township.<sup>25</sup> When Teasle first sees Rambo, he doesn’t see a decorated war veteran and hardened practitioner of guerilla warfare. Instead, he sees “just some nothing kid [...with] a long heavy beard, and his hair [...] hanging down over his ears to his neck, [...] a rolled-up sleeping bag near his boots on the tar pavement,” trying to hitch a ride outside a gas station (Morrell 3)—a type he has seen and run out of town more than once before. For his part, when Rambo first sees Teasle, he doesn’t see a likewise (though less impressively) decorated Korean War veteran and practiced leader of men or a compassionate man in throes of a divorce, his own life disintegrating in time with his aging body. He sees instead a pattern—just

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<sup>25</sup> The film, by contrast, sets the story in the rural Northwest, where Teasle is the chief of police in Hope, Washington, set there to avoid weather in Kentucky while filming, but the *mise en scene*—a primeval, unmapped forest—is the same.

another cop in another small town about to tell him he isn't wanted there and that he needs to move on.

Twice, Teasle “helps” Rambo by giving him a mandatory ride past the town limits. Both times Rambo walks back into town. When he returns to town the third time, having decided that he will not let the pattern continue, Rambo is arrested. Because Rambo has no identification, Teasle and his men still have no idea who they have arrested when they book him into the Madison jail. From the moment he is led down into the basement cellblock, Rambo—an escaped POW—begins to get increasingly anxious. His tension comes to a head when Teasle and two of his deputies attempt to cut his long, matted hair and Teasle nicks his ear. In the throes of a flashback to his imprisonment, Rambo loses control, uses a straight razor to slash open the stomach of one of the deputies, and escapes the jail. Naked, he runs from the police station, hijacks a motorcycle from a passing citizen, and leads Teasle and his men on a chase up into the unmapped hill country wilderness that surrounds Hope/Madison.

This first section of *First Blood* illustrates the way that outward appearance—that is to say, a particular cultural performative template—is often at odds with the embodied experience of the performing masculinity. Teasle sees just another filthy, recalcitrant vagrant, the likes of whom he has run out of town before. Rambo sees just another overbearing, redneck lawman from just another rural town. Rambo, of course, is more than a mere vagrant. He is a Vietnam veteran, winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor, an ex-POW suffering the psychological and physical consequences of violent trauma, and a stone-cold killer. Teasle is also more than merely a small-town police chief. He is an orphan who saw his father killed in a hunting accident, a veteran of the Korean War, winner of the Distinguished Service Cross and is, when he and Rambo first encounter

one another, in the midst of a painful, emotionally-charged divorce.<sup>26</sup> At any rate, each man is significantly more than the assumptions each makes about the other. As hegemonic masculinities, each man represents a stereotype—the redneck cop and the dirty hippie, the conservative establishment and the “wild and free” anti-establishment. Re-theorized as material masculine figurations, however, the poles they represent serve to emphasize the conflicted material middle-ground between cultural expectations for normative behavior (such as when Teasle tells Rambo to get a job and cut his hair) and the embodied experiences of each man (such as when, for example, Rambo has flashbacks of torture while Teasle and his men are trying to shave him with a straight razor, driving him over the edge of sanity). Teasle’s attempt to force Rambo to conform to his own personal expectations for normative masculinity (short hair, clean shaven) come directly into conflict with Rambo’s subjective (and as we know from the scars that criss-cross his chest and back), corporeal experience of warfare. The end result is a great many violent deaths.

Where the novel’s first section takes place in the town itself, the second section takes place in the wild, (literally) unmapped Kentucky hill country. In doing so, it articulates borders between Teasle’s world—the establishment/culture—and the unmapped, natural world represented by Rambo—the anti-establishment/nature. As I will explain more completely in the following sections, it is this particular binary—nature/culture—that, re-theorized in light of material masculinities, serves as the third landmark in this cartography, that of material masculinities’ co-inscriptive construction with the non-human world. In the meantime, let a summary of this section suffice. When

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<sup>26</sup> The rank of military service awards is as follows: Congressional Medal of Honor, Distinguished Service Cross, bronze star, silver star, Purple Heart, Distinguished Flying Medal, and Distinguished Service Medal. Rambo and Teasle, then, are decorated with the two top-ranked military service awards respectively.

the second section begins, Teasle and his men make camp at the foot of the hills to wait for supplies and reinforcements, while Rambo finds a bootlegger and his son deep in a ravine and convinces them to give him clothes, food, and a rifle. When the sun rises, Teasle and his men go on the hunt, using dogs led by Teasle's foster-father, Orval, to track him. Over the course of the next day and night, Teasle and Rambo play a cat and mouse game through the wilds of Kentucky. By the end of the first day of the manhunt, however, it is no longer Rambo who is being hunted, but Teasle. After escaping imminent capture by climbing down a sheer cliff face and launching himself into the branches of a thirty-foot pine tree, Rambo traps Teasle's posse at the top of the cliff and begins to pick them off with rifle fire one by one, until only Teasle and two of his deputies leave the cliff alive. While they waste ammunition and try to avoid becoming Rambo's next victim, the men learn that the man shooting at them with such accuracy from below is not "just another kid," but is instead an expert at exactly the kind of guerilla tactics of which they have found themselves victims. Nightfall finds the three men running in terror through rain-drenched woods as Rambo, reveling in the proof that he has not lost his edge in spite of months spent convalescing in a V.A. hospital, silently hunts them. He kills each of the deputies in turn, and the second full night ends with Rambo the one on the hunt and Teasle tearing himself to shreds as he desperately escapes by crawling through a bramble patch—which, notably, comes to an end in a fallow field at the edge of a rural highway.

The final section of the novel highlights the conceptual and material middle-spaces between encultured expectations for hegemonic masculinity and the corporeal realities of men and between discursive constructions of men and nature and the often fatal actualities of navigating both gender and landscape. Put another way, the final third of *First Blood* (intentionally or otherwise) interrogates the open spaces between the

establishment and anti-establishment and between nature and culture that the first two sections articulate. In this final third of the novel, Teasle—barely alive after his night on the run—marshals his willpower, his strength, and the Kentucky National Guard. These weekend warriors, aided by “most of the police in Basalt county” and “[...] by the police of six counties and a good many private citizens who liked to shoot” (3), hunt Rambo through the wilds of the Kentucky hill country, literally mapping it as they go. Rambo leads them on a merry chase, at one point even burying himself in mud under a stream bed overhang to avoid a National Guard skirmish line. Increasingly frustrated with his inability to pin Rambo down, Teasle enlists the aid of Colonel Sam Trautman, the man responsible for Rambo’s special forces training.

Trautman, with his knowledge of Rambo’s capabilities and entrenched tactical predilections, helps Teasle narrow his search until Rambo is finally cornered in an abandoned mine where—exhausted, lacerated, and suffering from a broken rib from his plunge into the pine tree—he had spent the previous night. Rambo knocks out the supporting struts, making the entrance to the mine impassable. In Kotcheff’s film, the mine entrance is, as I explain in my discussion of the hegemonic sexualization of nature, closed by a rocket fired by an inept National Guardsman. In either case, Rambo follows a faint current of air down the mine shaft into the depths of the hillside, through increasingly claustrophobic passageways, coming finally to an underground river and the entrance to a cave from whence the air flows. The cave houses a colony of bats and to reach the above-ground entrance, Rambo must first crawl through the feet-deep slime—with the attendant bat cave insects—that coats the cave floor. Rambo does escape the cave, exiting above a highway where he can see the National Guard arrayed against him.

While Rambo is making his escape, Teasle is—as a result of his experience that first night—having a minor heart attack and collapsing on the floor of the Army truck

where he has made his base of operations. He is moved back to town, to his office, and while he is unconscious he has a prescient dream and sees Rambo, escaped from the mine, moving through a junkyard at the edge of the police cordon, stealing a police car, and heading back towards the center of Madison. When he comes-to, he races to intercept the deranged Green Beret. What follows is another cat-and-mouse chase; but this time, rather than through the unmapped hill country, Rambo and Teasle chase each other through the streets of Madison. Along the way, Rambo wages war on the township, blowing up a gas station, a sporting goods store, and—in the final act—the newly-painted Madison/Hope police station. Blocks from the latter, the two men confront each other in a neighborhood at the edge of town where—second-guessing each other’s tactics—they manage to shoot each other at the same time. Rambo, fatally wounded, crawls through a field behind the house where this all takes place, still trying win his own personal war. As Teasle lies dying on the street in front of the house, Trautman, carrying a shotgun and trailed by the remainders of Madison’s police force, goes after Rambo himself. Teasle, believing that he and Rambo should be together at the end, crawls to his feet and follows Trautman into the field. The final confrontation takes place and Rambo, only moments from death, fires one final shot and shoots Teasle in the head just as Trautman pulls the trigger on the shotgun, ending Rambo’s war once and for all.

This final section of *First Blood* highlights the same middle-grounds—both in terms of geographical space and with regards to the material masculinities that contest both nature and each other within it—of which Bonham, Hallam, and their martial context are representative. As I suggested of both of *The Hunted*’s main characters, Rambo and Teasle occupy these material middle-spaces. They are, in other words, literary examples of material nomadic subjectivities, figurations whose conceptual and physical movements are nonetheless fixed at particularized points on a historical cartography and predicated

on subjectively specific attachments to region-specific, geographical place—place heavily invested with political ideologies and contextual, cultural notions of “acceptable” masculine (gainfully employed or violent) behavior and (shorn and shaven or “natural”) appearance.

By way of example, for Rambo, Vietnam is very much a material campsite. Rejected at every turn by the establishment that asked him to fight and for which he has suffered—pronounced unworthy, unforgivable, from the moment he steps foot off the plane—Rambo finds himself perpetually wandering an unfriendly place while “his mind [...] [returns] to the war” (Morrell 16). He bears its marks upon his body and his psyche. Having run away from the farm that was his childhood home at the age of seventeen after almost killing his abusive, alcoholic father, he enlists in the military and finds there a new family and, by extension, a new family history. When he returns from Vietnam, though, that history has already ended by virtue of the deaths of his brothers-in-arms. The only “family” he has left is the absentee father-figure, Trautman, who ends his life. Vietnam, his memories of it and the traumatic effects it has had on his subjectivity, is for Rambo a landmark, a vantage point from which he can see only empty, inhospitable landscape and the perspective from which he approaches the world around him. In the same way that Brokeback Mountain served as a material campsite from which Jack and Ennis navigated their own becoming, in other words, Vietnam serves as the geo-political jumping off point for Rambo’s material becoming. By the same token (and, again, like Jack and Ennis), when his materiality—the equal influences of physical and psychological trauma and his encultured (military) methodology for interacting with the world around him—comes into contact with what has become an alien cultural performativity, violent conflict ensues.

Notably, in this final third of *First Blood*, the material conflict takes place in the same sort of middle-spaces between the non-human world and human culture where the



second section of the book ends; the story ends, moreover, in the same sort of geographical in-between spaces where *The Hunted* begins twenty-one years later. As I pointed out, *The Hunted* begins with a focus on Aaron Hallam skirting the fringes of a genocide in Kosovo, crawling through the hellish, body-littered rubble of a cultural center in the final stages of destruction—a town quite literally on the verge of being wiped off the landscape. When, as I explain below, Rambo re-enters Hope/Madison after being “reborn” of feminine nature, he reduces the town to rubble. In addition to multiple gas stations, a sporting goods store, and a hardware store (where he procures dynamite), he destroys the building where it all began, Teasle’s home base—the police station. In Kotcheff’s film, as I shall show, he uses an enormous machine gun and shoots it into splinters. In Morrell’s novel, he quite simply blows it up. At any rate, the effect the same. What once was a bastion of culture is now rubble and the town, the establishment, becomes a chaotic, violent middle-space—no longer a town but a war zone. And like Hallam, Rambo skirts the fringes.

The novel’s *dénouement* takes place in neither the town proper where Teasle is the law—as the first section does—nor in “wild” nature, where Rambo reigns supreme—as the second section details. Instead, the men’s final confrontation (and reciprocal murder) takes place on the edge of town, in an overgrown, disused field that separates the town from the non-human world represented in the second section. This field is, moreover, a narrative echo of the fallow field through which Teasle crawls after his escape through the bramble patch, an empty space between wild nature and human culture and between the second section of the book and the third. It might even be suggested that the field represents for Rambo and Teasle a common ground, an undefined—and therefore neutral—Rogerian space between their two worlds where they can finally come to some “agreement.” In the same way that Hallam and Bonham

represent a series of cultural dichotomies, become in-between them, and have their final, violent confrontation in the undefined “rural” spaces between concrete culture and wild nature, Rambo and Teasle also move back and forth across constructed boundaries and, finally, meet in the middle.

It is worth noting that the story that Morrell tells in his novel differs in a number of significant ways from the film adaptation ten years later. Morrell himself makes note of this in his 1988 introduction to the novel’s second edition (xi-xii). *The Hunted* makes use of elements of both the novel and the film. Though Morrell’s novel is credited for creating the word “Rambo,” as I discuss below, it was Ted Kotcheff’s 1982 screen adaptation that rocketed Rambo into the iconic stratosphere. One significant difference is that in the film, Rambo doesn’t die (and neither, for the most part, does anyone else).<sup>27</sup> And a good thing it has been for Stallone, too. The film has thus far produced three film sequels (the most recent the 2008 *Rambo*) with one in the works, and two novelized sequels—*Rambo: First Blood Part II* in 1985 and *Rambo III* in 1988—written by Morrell himself. *First Blood* and *Rambo* have also been spoofed or referenced in comedies like *Hot Shots!* (1991), appropriated as dramatic themes in films like *Son of Rambow* (2007), and imitated in films like *Sniper* (1993) and *The Hunted* (2008). The upshot is that despite having his head blown off with a shotgun, Rambo is alive and well and still enthusiastically infiltrating the American cultural *zeitgeist*.

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<sup>27</sup> An alternate ending does exist, in which Rambo places a gun in Trautman’s hand in the ruins of the Hope police station and forces him to shoot him in the chest. This ending, however, didn’t test well with focus groups and was re-filmed, with Rambo alive and Trautman escorting him, blanket-clad, into the waiting arms of the police who have surrounded the building. By the same token, the novel’s death toll is well-nigh uncountable, while the filmic version has only two deaths, both caused by Rambo throwing a rock at an impetuous deputy shooting at him from a hovering helicopter while he clings to his perch on the aforementioned cliff face.

Rambo's mortal status at the conclusion of the novel and its film adaptation are only one difference, but its position as a catalyst for the thirty-three years of cultural influence that have followed *First Blood* (1982) makes it a significant one. Differences notwithstanding, Morrell's novel and its cinematic antecedents—*First Blood* and *The Hunted*—are significant examples of not only the geo-politically specific conflict that undergirds material masculine becoming, but also of the third landmark I've suggest for this cartography—material masculinities co-inscriptive construction with non-human nature. In the following section I define this landmark by, first, interrogating the texts' similar hegemonic masculine tropes of victimized masculinities “regenerated” against the backdrop of feminine, sexualized natures and, second, by re-theorizing the popular cultural conflation of men and nature in light of a theory of material masculinities.

#### 4.3 Saving (Masculine) Natures

As pop-culture representations of hegemonic soldier masculinities, *First Blood* and *The Hunted* conflate rural masculinities and the non-human environment by suggesting that despite the hegemonic masculine stereotype he represents, the soldier's intimate relationship with non-human nature make him “natural” and, thus, a fellow victim of culture's tendency towards domination, degradation, and destruction. According to David Ingram, in culturally discursive representations of men and nature, male “heroism [...] is [often] identified with saving as well as conquering nature” (36). Nature, represented as victimized, is dependent on these masculinities for its own cultural signification, and is mastered by them for its own good. By the same token, however, the soldier masculinities in these texts are dependent on non-human nature for their own masculine identities. The relationship is symbiotic and inseparable and, moreover, often articulated in terms of the gendered power structures that typify patriarchy. One of the

ways this takes place is by the feminization and subsequent sexualization of non-human nature.

Historically, nature is culturally constructed as feminine. Stacy Alaimo writes that the dual meanings of nature converge at the site of woman, fixing her in a vortex of circular [argument] [...] that obscures the contradictory meanings of the term 'nature,' which is subordinate to Man, and yet contains Man's Truths" (3). Kate Soper extends this argument and proposes that as a culture, we have an Oedipal—and dualistic—relationship with a feminized nature in which "Mother Nature" is also characterized as "virgin landscape." And in either case, as she points out, it is this landscape that we rape, degrade, and control (*What is Nature?* 122-7). It doesn't take a great leap of logic to see, then, that representative male interactions with a traditionally feminized non-human world like the ones in this chapter's primary texts' mirror long-standing hegemonic masculine gender ideals—men the dominators, women the dominated.

Soper further articulates this idea in "Feminism and Ecology" when she argues that we must acknowledge that our signifiers for nature play a significant role in our corporeal interactions with it; but that in the process, we must also be careful not to underemphasize the impact that our corporeal experiences of nature and gender have on the meaning which we attach to those signifiers. She writes that the social-constructionist eco-critical approach understands nature

as a cultural effect and emphasizes the semiotic roles of the concept in mediating access to the reality it names. [Social-constructionist approaches to nature are]targeted at the cultural policing functions of the appeal to nature and its oppressive use to legitimate social and sexual hierarchies and norms of human conduct. [It] invites us to view the nature/culture opposition as itself a politically instituted and mutable construct. (312)

But as I argued of men's studies approach to the study of male masculinities, de-emphasizing or (worse) ignoring the embodied navigation of place- and history-specific

non-human environments amounts to an attempt to make the signified match its signifier rather than the other way around. Thus, the articulation of discursive (ultimately anti-corporeal) metaphors for nature automatically makes nature a political tool for the production of inequitable gendered power structures.

Left to its own devices, non-humanity is inherently apolitical; the non-human world—though it has enormous stake in its own political standing—is likely unaware its definition is even under discursive contention. But, appropriated, it can be controlled as a ward and wielded as a weapon. In the same way that the traditional Western novel suggests a still-open frontier where masculinity is naturalized and sheds the “false values of the ‘metropolis’” (Slotkin 14), a common twentieth-century representation of the non-human world is, as Stacy Alaimo suggests, of a “pure field apart from social struggles” (18). Like the cowboy and the Western, the soldier and his contemporary literary and filmic vehicles still suggest that this sort of apolitical non (human) space exists and that it is an “ideal site for playing out [...] anxieties about threats to white male middle-to-upper-class social power” (Alaimo 18). Nature only becomes political, in other words, when like Barthes’s mythological tree it is imbued with any number of political, social, literary—with any number of *cultural* contexts and significations.

*First Blood* and *The Hunted* each provide significant examples of the way that the hegemonic masculine co-victimization with nature and the figurative sexualizing of male relationships with the non-human environment serve as tools for the recovery and reassertion of a presumably lost or questioned masculinity. Despite the presumably environmentalist themes in each film, the non-human world is nonetheless an object rather than an agent. “She” is eye-candy, a beautiful rape victim, a damsel in distress and the decidedly sharp-edged backdrop against which the texts’ “male protagonists [can] recover an essential, authentic masculinity, and thereby [...] reassert the hegemony

of the [...] male not only over non-human nature, but also over his ethnic, racial and gender subordinates” (Ingram 36). Significantly, in all three texts, the gender subordinates to which Ingram refers include subordinate masculinities—men who ultimately fail to live up to the naturalized hegemonic masculine ideal the novel and, more specifically, the films suggest. *First Blood* and *The Hunted* first reproduce these rural masculine soldier stereotypes (exemplified in the cultural imagination like the clearly disturbed Jordan Dorner) by closely associating them with a nature that is both separated from human culture by amorphous boundaries and subject to it in varied ways. They also construct Rambo and Hallam in particular as fellow-subject/victims of that culture and; furthermore, they suggest of all four men under discussion here—Rambo and Teasle, Hallam and Bonham—that martial success is directly related to their ability to operate independently of cultural contexts. Morrell’s novel created Rambo and told his story and Ted Kotcheff’s film made Rambo an icon; and each is equally influential in its own way.

#### 4.3.1 *Man and Beast*

In strikingly similar ways, *First Blood* and *The Hunted* make automatic assumptions about their soldier masculinities’ co-inscription with non-human nature. Both Rambo and Bonham win in the end, and both have their origins—at least from our perspective—in wild, undefined nature. Perhaps the most striking element of these texts is the way that both use their martial masculinities’ association with nature to construct a clear dichotomy between the human and non-human while at the same time suggesting that “real” masculinity—something that is, by definition, socially-constructed—is “natural.” Morrell’s stated purpose for writing *First Blood* was to “[dramatize] the philosophical division in our society” that was characterized by the juxtaposition between the unrest and violence at home and the bloody conflict taking place in Vietnam (viii). Rambo, he writes “represented the disaffected,” and Teasle “the establishment” (ix). Though he is

“[wary] of stereotypes” (x), he nonetheless makes it a point to “emphasize their polarity” (x) and by virtue of this—and perhaps without meaning to—he emphasizes another, the nature/culture binary that Kotcheff exploits so effectively.

For example, we first see Kotcheff’s Rambo walking down a rural dirt road, his backdrop a dense, primeval, Hawthorn-ian forest typical of the rural Northwest. In the novel, we first see Rambo at a gas station in Madison, but we learn before too long that he has no specific destination—and no specific origin but the woods:

“Where you headed?” he heard Teasle ask.  
“Does it matter?”  
“No. [...] Just the same—where you headed?”  
“Maybe Louisville.”  
“And maybe not.”  
“That’s right.”  
“Where did you sleep? In the woods? ”  
“That’s right.” (Morrell 6)

Both novel and film highlight Rambo’s apparent lack of origin (save, of course, the woods), leaving an indistinct chronological gray area between his experiences in the war and his appearance in Madison/Hope. Furthermore, The film adaptation emphasizes its environmentalist themes and Rambo’s (and those like him) assumed connection to—and, thus, co-victimization with—non-human nature by adding a telling opening scene.

The film opens with Rambo following the dirt road where we first see him back-grounded by the forest (in which Morrell suggests he spent the night) into an idyllic rural village, set in a clearing beside a lake. He is there to find his fellow Green Beret and the only remaining member of his unit, Delmar Berry. From talking to the man’s mother, he discovers that though Delmar survived the battlefield, he succumbed to cancer caused by the military defoliant Agent Orange months before Rambo’s return to civilian life. Berry, Rambo’s only remaining brother-in-arms, suffers the same fate as the non-human environment in which he served his country—that is to say, Agent Orange killed them both. In this opening scene—forest and clearing—Kotcheff establishes Rambo’s

“natural” origins and the story’s environmentalist thematics (which, if I am to be honest, Morrell approaches with more subtlety). In addition, Kotcheff uses this scene to establish Rambo’s victimhood through his connections to the deceased Berry and the non-human environment they both fought in, to say nothing of the negative cultural reception of returning soldiers. Rambo, like many nonfictional veterans returning home from Vietnam, came back “to find only rejection, scorn, and prejudice from the country whose ideals he fought to defend” (Jeffords 127-128). Berry was Rambo’s last human connection between his experience of war (the natural) and civilian life (the cultural). It is worth noting, furthermore, that the rural village into which Rambo so confidently strides represents the kind of rural in-between spaces that serve as the setting for so much of *First Blood*’s action, and that Delmar’s death prevents Rambo from conceptually crossing those spaces and reintegrating into civilian life. I will interrogate these rural in-between spaces more thoroughly in my re-theorization of the rural soldier as a material masculine figuration in the following section.

In the meantime, suffice it to say that Rambo and his martial expertise are naturalized in other ways as well. In the film, for example, when he is being booked into the Hope jail, he is called a “sorry excuse for a human being” and told that he “smells like an animal.” Hours later, as Teasle and his deputies hunt him through a darkened, primeval forest, one of the deputies cheerfully suggests that, “It won’t be long before we have this one stuffed and mounted, eh, Will? We’ll make him into a bearskin rug,” while another deputy recalls the success of a recent deer hunting trip in the same area. Morrell accomplishes the same thing, first by sending Rambo charging naked into the forest, and second by making him the object of a helicopter manhunt which he escapes because a deer, flushed from cover, attracts the attention (and the bullet) of the deputy. This doesn’t last long, however, the turning point in both narratives coming when one of the



deputies realizes that “[we] ain’t hunting him; he’s hunting us” (Kotcheff). And over the course of the novel’s first section, Rambo does exactly that, killing approximately fifteen men before Teasle, the only remaining enemy, escapes through the bramble patch.

In wild, non-human nature, natural law reigns supreme. And its human representative is Rambo. As Teasle, his deputies, and the dog-handler fight for every step through a dense underbrush that seems to actively be trying to keep them from moving forward, Rambo blends into the landscape—camouflaged with leaves and mud—and incapacitates (but doesn’t kill) anyone. Kotcheff’s Teasle, rather than escaping by crawling desperately (and painfully) through a bramble patch as he does in the novel—an image from the novel analogous to the filmic one above—gets caught. Rambo issues him an ultimatum that establishes Rambo as nature’s man and Teasle as culture’s representative and sets up a distinct boundary between the two once and for all. With his knife at Teasle’s throat, as lightning flashes and thunder crashes, Rambo tells him: “I could have killed them all. I could have killed you. In town you’re the law, out here it’s me. Don’t push it. Don’t push it or I’ll give you a war you won’t believe.” This quotation hardly needs elucidation; nevertheless, by including this scene, Kotcheff clearly means to establish Rambo as nature’s representative. Teasle and his deputies fight for every step; Rambo moves silently. With their white hats, barking dogs, and muttered curses, Teasle and his men stand out clearly from the darker colors of the forest. By contrast, Rambo *becomes* nature. When Rambo issues his ultimatum, he establishes what, up to that point in the film, the action has already made clear—there is a difference between masculinities like Rambo and Teasle. That difference is predicated entirely on the context in which each is *the* authority. In town, Teasle is the law. In the wild, Rambo is king.

*The Hunted* naturalizes its principal male masculine characters in similar ways. For example, like Rambo, Bonham is intimately associated with the natural world from the moment we meet him and we are left with that association at the film's conclusion. Rather than ostensibly emerging from the forest as Kotcheff's Rambo does, however, Bonham is *in* the forest, quite literally communing with nature. In this introductory scene, Bonham is tracking a wolf. The wolf—a snowy white to match the snow through which it runs—has caught its leg in a trapper's snare and is dragging it behind him. Bonham tracks it through the snow and, when the snare gets caught on a bush and the wolf is well and truly trapped, he approaches it as it snarls and growls to warn him away. Digging in the snow at the base of a tree, he finds some moss which he chews to make a poultice. After calming the assumedly wild and dangerous animal with a little sweet talk and a calming presence, he removes the snare from the wolf's bloody leg, applies the poultice, and sets it free. Bonham's follow-up to this concrete environmentalism is to go to the "bar" where trappers apparently spend their time while they wait for their snares to do their work. Once there, he proceeds to teach three rural men—twice his size and half his age—a very physical lesson about the use of snares on forest service land by wrapping the snare around its owner's neck and slamming his head against a table, knocking him out cold. From the moment of our introduction to him, Bonham is, like Rambo, nature's man. He is, at least when we first meet him, clearly established as an obviously a *good* man whose violent skills are well-used used in the salvation (or, perhaps, servicing) of a victimized non-human world.

It is only after we are introduced to this "natural" Bonham that he is contacted by the FBI and we learn about his past as a tracking and knife-fighting instructor for the special forces—where Hallam was his best student. Bonham makes it clear, over the course of the film, that he deeply regrets his time working with the military. In his mind,

he feels that he has in a sense dishonored (Mother) nature and the memory of his father by using his natural abilities/skills to teach men to kill other men. He believes, moreover, that he is ultimately responsible for who Hallam has become. As intimate with nature as a son with a mother, Bonham is characterized not only as a physically and ethically dominate masculinity in the process of saving a victimized non-humanity, but also as a fellow-victim—albeit of his own oppressive guilt. That Bonham is nature's man is even more evident in the emotionally poignant final scene of *The Hunted*. as he holds the body of the man he has intimately killed, he screams out his grief. Instead of his cries—so clearly obvious in his posture, grief-stricken face, and wide open mouth—all we hear is the rushing, crashing roar of the river where he sits holding Hallam's bloody corpse.

More than just this connection to the “natural,” Bonham's salvation and remasculinization are the result of an assertion of his physical intimacy with a feminized “Mother Nature,” a physical act which leads to the son replacing/becoming the father and, in the process, fighting off a similar attempt by his own military “bastard.” Bonham is given the opportunity to make amends for his dalliance with the Armed Forces by killing his misbegotten, half-breed son. First, however, he must take his father's place. In *First Blood*, Rambo saves the angry, violated virgin. Nature has been raped; and “her” salvation comes when Rambo, naturalized masculinity *extraordinaire*, penetrates her and denies access to the “lesser” men who represent the culture who violated her in the first place. In contrast to Bonham's transition from repentant prodigal son to lover, however, Rambo's transition is from lover to son. In any case, the end result is the reification of aggressive, dominate hegemonic masculinities constructed against the backdrop of a non-agentic, feminized cultural construction of non-human nature as both dependent on male masculinities for its identity and subject to their will.

#### 4.3.2 Sexing (Sexy) Nature

Bonham and Rambo's male masculine "relationships" with a feminine and sexualized non-human world in particular are evidence of our culture's historical and continuing tendency to create metaphors for nature that conflate women with nature, and the salvation and/or dominance of both with idealized, hegemonic masculine stereotypes like the soldier. It becomes clear, then, that these texts are about renegotiating masculinity, not feminism. While these texts are not concerned, necessarily, with cultural problems that arise from feminine metaphors for nature, that association is nevertheless a significant element of the negotiation of material masculinities, both then and now. Lawrence Buell writes that "[w]e cannot begin to talk or even think about the nature of nature without resorting to [metaphors]" and that "our choice of metaphors [for nature] can have serious consequences" (*Environmental Imagination* 281). The consequences that accompany our choices of metaphor for the other-than-human world are as wide ranging as the metaphors themselves, and they affect both human culture and non-human environments in significantly detrimental ways.

As Soper points out, American culture has a long history of feminine and sexualized metaphors for the non-human world that have proved annoying at the least, and disastrous at the most, for both nature *and* women. The evidence for this claim is directly in front of our noses. On the one hand, the evidence is the environmental degradation taking place before our eyes and in the environmental disasters—caused only by human error—which seem to be happening with ever increasing frequency. Nature, as it were, is only an object, there to be used and, once it is no longer useful, discarded. On the other hand, we can see evidence of these metaphors represented in the highly-charged and public political debates about women's bodies and their right to decide for themselves how they use and/or abuse them—debates only made necessary

because of still powerful (though aging and crumbling) constructions of hegemonic masculine relationships with the “natural” world.

Despite their clear attempts to suggest culturally relevant environmentalist themes, *First Blood* and *The Hunted*’s similar reproductions of naturalized, violent masculine stereotypes—twenty-one years apart—coincides with (even relies on) their reproduction of nature as both feminine and sexualized. Each text provides important examples of American culture’s Oedipal construction of nature as both a mother and a lover, as a savior and as a beautiful rape victim very much in need of saving. Texts like these make the assertion not only that nature is an apolitical space—and thus open for contestation—where victimized and questioned masculinity can be recovered, but that the primary male characters’ remasculinization is effected by the figurative sexual conquest of nature itself. In this way, they underscore both the conscription of nature in the creation of hegemonic martial masculinity, and the conscription of martial masculinities in the ideological production of a feminine metaphor for an other-than-human environment that provides both succor and sex.

Bonham is nature’s man, able to approach and intimately interact, without consequence, with vicious wild animals who are scared and in pain—a wolf whose natural instinct is to fight or flee and who, trapped, cannot flee. He confronts and physically dominates human threats to the non-human world, and as the rest of the film makes clear, he is far more comfortable in natural contexts than he is in cultural ones. The film’s conflict originates (much like the wolf/trapper scenario) when the two come into contact with one another—when Bonham is unfaithful to his familial roots and has an affair with culture, represented by the military. In his introductory scene, he is self-imposed exile, doing penance to nature in the snow-bound wilds of British Columbia for his illicit past, a chastised and repentant son. Bonham’s noncommittal intercourse with

the special forces itself produces a son, Hallam, whose position with regards to the non-human world makes *The Hunted*'s cultural ties to *First Blood*—and both texts' conscription of a feminized non-human in the production of naturalized masculine violence—a rich site for an interrogation of material masculinity. But I will say more about Hallam's material figuration in the following section. For now, it is enough to say that he is the bastard son of Bonham's illicit relationship with the military—one whom, in Hallam's mind, Bonham has denied and abandoned—and that his psychosis is an explicit example of the film's contradictory assumptions about the incompatibility of the nature/culture polarities that Bonham and the military represent. And these polarities, as I've suggested, are sexual in nature.

The masculinity-nature interaction that *The Hunted* constructs suggests that the material conflict that catalyzes Bonham's material becoming begins when he has, for lack of a better word, intercourse with nature. In the process, Bonham, a tool of culture (much like the AWOL soldier he is hunting), is regenerated as a "natural" masculinity and, reciprocally, nature becomes both mother and lover. The FBI takes Bonham to the forested site of what is ostensibly Hallam's second multiple murder—a pair of men who, as Hallam suggests after he is captured, are only ambiguously hunters—and he kicks them all out of the crime scene. Before they leave, the agent in charge of the manhunt gives Bonham a walkie-talkie which he only reluctantly accepts and he leaves the FBI behind and begins to track Hallam through the jungle-like forest. We learn that the walkie-talkie is actually a GPS tracking device and that the FBI has been following him at a distance, holding what is (for all intents and purposes) his electronic leash. During that initial hunt, Bonham takes on the aspects of an animal on the scent. As he walks away from the FBI into the forest, he sheds his jacket, dropping it over a branch, and falls onto all fours. At one point, he even freezes like a dog on point when he senses and smells,

rather than sees, Hallam nearby. By the time he tracks Hallam to a natural cave in the trunk of a huge tree, he is filthy, muddy, and wet—as much a part of the forest as any wild animal. It is at this point in the narrative, after Bonham has become animal-like and physically intimate (one might say gluttonous) with his non-human surroundings, that he crawls half-way into the opening in the bole of the tree (shaped suspiciously like female genitalia) and finds Hallam's hiding place.

It is within this womb-like cave in the trunk of this ancient tree that Bonham first discovers the nature of his illicit fatherhood. Hallam is not inside the tree, but the elements of his fragmented identity are—including a Bible, marked in Genesis, that tells the story of God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Later, as he hunts Hallam for a second time, he discovers a footlocker filled with un-mailed letters from a clearly slipping sanity to Bonham, which refer to him as "L.T." and imply that he holds the position of "father" in Hallam's mind, a clear conflation of the generational nature of military hegemony and Hallam's own upbringing absent a father. Clearly the product of an deranged mind, the letters imply that Hallam perceives Bonham to be a replacement for his own absent father, that he believes Bonham has abandoned him (when Bonham fails to answer his letters), and that he trusts only his father-replacement to procure his salvation. When Bonham discovers his parentage in the pages of the Bible, Hallam's shadow blocks the light that enters the natural opening of the tree. Bonham crawls backward out of the same womb-like cave where his "son" has hidden in safety and confronts him face-to-face. What follows is a well-choreographed cock-measuring contest as the Hallam pulls from his belts the primary weapon of their profession—a vicious-looking knife, serrated on one side, a filet blade on the other, approximately six to

seven inches long<sup>28</sup> with a side-profile like a sharpened, circumcised penis. Bonham, knifeless, uses a stick to great effect, and the men proceed to try to kill each other. As Bonham told the clueless FBI agents only hours before, he himself taught Hallam how to manufacture the knife with knowledge passed down to him by *his* father. In short, Bonham fathers a half-breed son of culture and nature—a military bastard—who is, as I show of Rambo, reborn of nature, reborn of same womb that Bonham himself penetrates as part of his regenerative masculine process.

The procreative (and thus, sexualizing) elements *The Hunted* highlights are represented in much the same way in *First Blood*. Rambo stands at an intersection between the characterizations of Bonham and Hallam. He is, in many ways, a combination of the two; and is, insofar as form follows function, the literary and cinematic patriarch whose shoes Bonham and Hallam seek to fill. Like Bonham, Rambo is a naturalized and victimized masculinity from the moment we meet him. Both men *become* nature and their violent ends are achieved by virtue of their intimate association with nature—their ability both to adapt to non-human environments and to adapt those environments in the pursuit of their own goals. For example, Bonham manufactures the knife with which he kills Hallam out of a piece of flint, and Rambo makes stakes out of tree-limbs which he uses to set traps for the deputies who are hunting him. Like Hallam (and, not incidentally, like Dorner), Rambo “heads for the hills” when things go south; and Rambo’s conceptual dislocation—and, by extension, the story’s plotline—is predicated

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<sup>28</sup> It is worth noting—if for no other reason than an eye roll and a smile—that Stallone’s Rambo carries a knife with a blade that appears to be almost a foot long. The “survival” knife he carries had a compass in the hilt, which was itself hollow and filled with any number of things—fishing hooks, matches, twine, and whatever else a thirteen year-old boy in the eighties could cram into the Army-Navy knock-off he bought with his lawn mowing money the summer before eighth grade.



on his experience of the physically and psychologically traumatic experience of fighting a war.

Furthermore, both Rambo and Hallam's occupations required that they operate primarily on their own. Thus, like both of the other men, Rambo's cultural guilt and unique intimacy with death—"He noticed dead things more. Not in horror. Just in curiosity in how they had come to end" (Morrell 15)—is his alone to bear. There are additional similarities between the texts' masculinities, origins, and individual experiences—those to which we are privy and those to which we are not—that better serve my discussion of material masculinities below. In any case, what I am most concerned with here is the way that Rambo's masculinity is co-inscribed with a feminized and sexualized natural world and, thus, the way it still operates as a template for the construction of influential hegemonic masculine stereotypes and their subjugated Others evident in more contemporary cultural texts like *The Hunted* and in real-life examples of men like Jordan Dörner.

In *First Blood*, non-human nature is ostensibly wild and untouched, never before mapped, and moreover, clearly a reflection of Rambo himself and the culture/nature binary the texts construct. I've suggested these dichotomies already. Notable, however, is the way that both novel and film suggest that Rambo's infiltration of the hill country wilderness around Madison/Hope is what gives the non-human environment its cultural definition—just as, from an American perspective, the Vietnam War made the country itself a historically-associative place. At the same time, wild nature defines Rambo's identity. After surviving his night in the hills and bramble, Teasle musters the National Guard and sends them in skirmish lines into the primeval forest. However, the map he uses to organize his manhunt has

almost no interior details. "Nobody ever wanted a breakdown of these hills before," the county surveyor had explained when he brought it. "Maybe if a road goes through there someday, we'll have to chart it. But surveying [...], especially in that kind of rough country, [...] never

seemed practical [for] something nobody would ever likely need.”  
(Morrell 170-1)

As Rambo leads the inept soldiers of the National Guard through landscape that “begins to look as if it is [the wild jungles of] Vietnam” (Dyer 159), the soldier’s hunting him call in their coordinates, and Teasle and his assistants begin to fill in the map. Rambo’s presence in this unmapped, wild hill country is ultimately what makes the cultural definition of nature necessary.

The converse is true as well, however. As the map is filled in, so is Rambo’s past and thus, his own cultural definition. As Teasle stands before the empty map, Sam Trautman—Rambo’s commanding officer and the Green Beret colonel responsible for his training, arrives at Teasle’s behest. Similar to the generational tropes evident in *The Hunted*, Trautman suggests an inherited, and thus natural, aptitude for killing and from Trautman we learn a great deal about Rambo, his martial experience, and (if we weren’t aware of it already) that Rambo is

an expert in guerrilla fighting, he knows how to live off the land [...]. [...] He’s learned patience, so he can hide somewhere and wait out this fight all year if he has to. He’s just one man, so he’s hard to spot [...] [Doesn’t] have to synchronize himself with other units, so he can move fast, shoot and get out and hide some place [*sic*] else, then do the same all over again. Just like my men taught him. (Morrell 176)

In Morrell’s novel, as Teasle fills in the map, he also adds to his discursive (as opposed to physical) knowledge of his enemy. In Kotcheff’s version, however, as Teasle fills in the map, right before Trautman arrives, he first hears from the Washington State Police that Rambo is a decorated Vietnam veteran and Green Beret, but the effect is the same. Rambo’s cultural definition and the cartographic appropriation of otherwise “useless” landscape coincide and suggest that texts that feature characters “like Rambo [...] the primary impetus driving [the] narratives is the regeneration of masculinity [...]” (Jeffords 135) against a backdrop of otherwise unmapped non-human nature. Rambo—*persona*

*non grata* to his foes—is a blank slate onto which his identity (his masculinity) is mapped by virtue of his association with an equally “blank” nature. In return, the empty map and the non-associative space which it references is given cultural standing only insofar as its articulation is useful to Teasle/culture’s objective.

Both Morrell and Kotcheff conceive of nature not only as an unmapped wilderness whose definition only comes from the violent masculinities that inhabit it, however, but also as a beautiful rape victim, deflowered but otherwise pristine. On the one hand, this literary/photographic metaphor—for nature as at once virginal and violated—highlights a discursive instability inherent in the genre itself which I will address further in the following section. On the other hand, it also gives further credence to Soper’s claims about the feminized and sexualized (re)production of metaphors for nature that serve not only to undergird irresponsible cultural notions about human interaction with non-human nature, but also to reify the inequitable patriarchal power structures—clearly evident in our culture—that those metaphors represent. As the following example shows, it is Rambo’s masculinity that restores the despoiled virgin’s honor and in return, she provides succor and regeneration. Rambo literally penetrates the earth and heals it. When he does so, he also reenters the womb and is reborn from nature as a victoriously violent, sexualized hegemonic masculinity with all of the necessary phallic accoutrement. Novel and film represent this by having Rambo penetrate, not the “vaginal” bole of an elderly tree as Bonham did, but the gaping evidence of forced entry—a long-abandoned mine shaft.

As Teasle’s net closes in, Rambo—exhausted, hungry, and nursing a splintered rib—finds the entrance to the mine hidden in the hills and goes inside. In Morrell’s novel, he closes off the entrance to the mine—making it inaccessible to his pursuers who are gathering outside—by pulling down the wooden supports that keep the entrance from

collapsing in on itself. By itself, Rambo's action isn't necessarily a sexual metaphor—it is just a man on the run, hiding in the obvious place. In light of this discussion, however, the hyper-masculine Rambo's entrance into the mine is a metaphorical sex act that essentially restores the raped earth by closing its "wound." Rambo, a masculinity already "produced as a victim" (Jeffords 128) penetrates an equally victimized nature and in the process, both are healed.

It is notable that up to the moment the National Guard begins to search for Rambo and he escapes by discovering and entering the mine, the non-human world is yet "a space untouched by political inequities" (Alaimo 88) insofar as it has no cultural articulation at all save Rambo and Teasle's subjective, embodied experience of it. The moment Rambo enters the mine, however, nature becomes imbued with another layer of social signification exemplified in the patriarchal power structures that place "feminine" in the subject position. In other words, *First Blood* begins by simply constructing nature/Rambo as dichotomous with culture/Teasle and nature itself as "an insecure and uncomfortable environment against which civilization [... wages] an unceasing struggle" (Nash 8). As soon as Rambo penetrates the earth via the man-made mine shaft, though, the non-human world becomes "saturated with [the] cultural ideals" (Alaimo 88) typical of hegemonic masculine power structures. As he does in his opening scene, Kotcheff illustrates these ideals in a way Morrell never intended.

As it does with Bonham and Hallam's knives, for Rambo it all comes down to the phallus. With National Guard soldiers surrounding the entrance to the mine, Rambo is trapped. Significantly, the soldiers (masculinities) who gather outside are clearly differentiated from the hyper-masculine Rambo—by their day jobs as clerks, teachers, or dentists, for example, by the way they cower when Rambo fires his weapon over their heads, despite their own dominant numbers and fire power, and as I'll discuss further in

the next section, by their physiques. The most telling moment comes when an over-eager National Guardsman, in direct disobedience of Teasle's orders, fires a (phallic) rocket launcher before he is supposed to. In context, this "premature ejaculation" further differentiates the inept National Guard from the hegemonic masculinity that Rambo represents. More to the point, the rocket has the effect of sealing the mine entrance as Rambo himself does in the novel, trapping him in a womb-like cave analogous to the tree trunk where L.T. Bonham first begins to admit and confront his parentage.

Rambo the victim "saves" nature the victim by virtue of a penetrative act which leads, ultimately, to the regeneration (the birth) of the violent hegemonic masculinity he represents. His rebirth, moreover, takes him into direct confrontation with culture's representative, Teasle. It is while he is trapped in this rocky womb that Trautman first contacts Rambo. This moment is notable because it highlights the generational aspects of naturalized violent masculinity that I exemplified in Bonham and Hallam. Speaking to Teasle when they first meet at the command truck where Teasle is pouring over his empty map, Trautman says, "I've come about my boy. [...] I didn't train him myself, my men did. But I trained the men who trained him, so in a sense he's my boy" (Morrell 172). It is significant then, in this light, that immediately after his "seminal" conversation with his military "father," Rambo begins the birthing process. The mine shaft where Rambo is hiding is connected to natural passageways that thread beneath the hill. Again, Morrell and Kotcheff emphasize nature's femininity by pushing Rambo through these dripping passageways and out through a *natural* orifice, covered in the slime, reminiscent of afterbirth, that coated the floor of the cave.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Interestingly enough, the walls of the tunnel that Rambo follows, while reminiscent of the tunnels Viet Cong soldiers used during the war, are flesh-colored.

First the fellow victim, lover, and ultimately, the savior of a violated virgin landscape, Rambo is reborn of (Mother) nature as nature's violent, .80 caliber machine gun-wielding son. By representing non-human nature as both lover and mother, Morrell, Kotcheff, and Friedkin position it as subject to the hegemonic masculinities they construct against its backdrop. Despite the political and social statements inherent in these metaphors, however, these texts (*First Blood*, in particular) attempt to disguise nature as "a supposedly apolitical [space]" (Alaimo 88), the effect of which is to suggest *women* as the same—both without their own political agency and existent only insofar as they are contextualized by hegemonic masculinities. However, it is not only nature that is sexualized and by extension, objectified.

As I promised above that I would elucidate further, one of the ways these texts sexualize nature is to contextualize it with hegemonic martial masculinities that represent a long, historical association between killing and sex. Glenn Gray addresses the cultural tendency to conflate sex and killing when he writes that

our own sensations must convince us that sexual passion in isolation and the lust for battle are closely akin. Such sexual passion and war have been married from the beginning and there is no cause to speak of an illicit relationship. To be sure, the sexual partner is not actually destroyed in the encounter [as the victim of a killing is], [but is instead] merely overthrown [...] The passions [for sex or killing] have a common source and affect their victims in the same way while they are in their grip. (68)

David Grossman, a military psychologist, further articulates this idea when he asserts that the "linkage between sex and killing becomes unpleasantly apparent when we enter the realm of warfare. [...] [Just] as the highly personal, close-up, one-on-one, intense experience of killing can be like sex, so can sex be like killing" (Grossman 137). He goes on to suggest two particular elements of the connection between killing and sex that are particularly poignant in light of this chapter's primary texts. First, as Bonham and Hallam's relationship suggests, killing can be as intimate as a one-on-one sexual

encounter, and second, as *First Blood's* violently explosive *dénouement* indicates, this ideological production of masculinity can be downright pornographic.

According to Grossman, the intimacy of killing increases the closer to the victim the killer is (95). He writes that “the piercing of the enemy’s body with [a knife] is an act with [...] sexual connotations [...]. To reach out and penetrate the enemy’s flesh and thrust a portion of ourselves into his vitals is deeply akin to the sexual act, yet deadly [...]” (121). Bonham and Hallam’s knives and the context in which they use them take on a special significance in a discussion about naturalized violence and sexualized nature. Indeed, the profiled-penis shape of their knives, the feminized, sexualized non-human environment, and the “intimate brutality” (Grossman 121) their fighting style add homoerotic overtones to their violent interaction. Grossman states that this kind of close-in killing is “private, intimate occurrence of tremendous intensity, in which the destructive act becomes psychologically very much like the procreative act” (137). At any rate, the intimacy they establish in their fighting is, like Bonham’s own “naturalness,” emotionally highlighted at the film’s conclusion. After a violent fight with knives each has made since Hallam’s escape—Bonham’s of flint and Hallam’s of steel—and dripping blood from multiple wounds, Bonham finally rectifies his infidelity and kills Hallam with a knife-thrust to the stomach. From that moment, he never lets him go. Instead, as Hallam slowly and painfully bleeds to death and Bonham’s screams of grief are lost in the voice of the river, Bonham cradles his “son,” holding him on his lap as the FBI comes running up—this time too late to save a life.

In contrast to the “intimate brutality” with which Bonham dispatches Hallam with his knife, Rambo’s gun—and the manner in which he uses it—is far more public (he virtually blows up an entire town) and thus suggests a graphically pornographic

perspective of hegemonic martial masculinities.<sup>30</sup> Grossman writes that for “those who have never experienced it, the depiction of battle that Hollywood has given us, and the cultural mythology that Hollywood is based upon, appear to be about as useful in understanding killing as pornographic movies would be in trying to understand the [emotional] intimacy of a sexual relationship” (2). The socially-constructed disconnect between the reality of war and the embodied experience of martial conflict is evident in a comparison of the way the violence takes place in each text. In *The Hunted*, the violence is intimate, reserved to only the two men in combat with one another. Rambo, on the other hand, just lets it all hang out.

Israeli military psychologist Ben Shalit expands on Grossman’s statement when he argues that the “pleasures of combat” are a result, not of “the intellectual planning [...] but of the primal aggression, the release, and the orgasmic discharge” (2). This “primal aggression” and “orgasmic discharge” are particularly evident at *First Blood*’s climax (pun indeed intended). Rambo—wrapped in bandoliers of ammunition like swaddling-clothes around an infant—somehow acquires an .80 caliber machine gun and, with a prolonged yell of frustration and anger, essentially cuts the police station where Teasle has taken refuge to pieces. Stallone, his mouth straining open and his face a rictus of anger, holds the huge weapon with one sweat-slicked, muscle-bound arm, feeding ammunition into it with the other—and with each shot, his body—tense and strained—jerks back and forth. What makes this scene particularly “pornographic” is, first, its public nature. Whereas Bonham and Hallam fought with knives in private—on the borders of the nature/culture binary *The Hunted* ostensibly suggests—and thereby maintain the sexual intimacy that

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<sup>30</sup> Interestingly enough, Sylvester Stallone’s first starring role was in the soft-core porn film, *Party at Kitty and Stud’s* in 1970, rereleased as *Italian Stallion*, titled from a line in Stallone’s *Rocky* (1976) and, incidentally, Stallone’s nickname since the film was released.



Grossman argues is analogous to killing with a penetrative weapon, Rambo's display of orgasmic violence takes place in the middle of the street in Hope/Madison, directly under the gaze of the town's frightened inhabitants. In addition to its very public nature, the pornographic aspects of this climactic scene are evident in the weapon Rambo uses and the way he uses it.

The graphic image of a physically powerful Rambo—his body straining as though in the throes of an orgasm—“explosively spewing a stream of bullets [as though] [...] explosively spewing a stream of semen” (Grossman 136) from an enormous weapon is the money shot. One of the hallmarks of most pornography is the “money-shot,” during which the male actor ejaculates on the face of his female object. Grossman's comments about the similarities between killing with a gun and this particular fetish lend further evidence to the pornographic nature of this scene. He argues that the

concept of sex as a process of domination and defeat is closely related to the lust for rape and the trauma associated with the rape victim. [...] This process can be seen in pornographic movies in which the sexual act is twisted, such that the male ejaculates—or “shoots his wad”—into a female's face. The grip of a firer on the pistol grip of a gun is much like the grip on an erect penis, and holding the penis in this fashion while ejaculating into the victim's face is [...] an act of domination and symbolic destruction. (137)

In Rambo's case, the domination and destruction are hardly symbolic. His violent orgasm results in the literal destruction of the police station where Teasle is hiding. Likewise, in light of Grossman's statement, it is notable that Rambo—having spent himself—enters the police station and shoots Teasle, but doesn't kill him. Instead, he stands over him where he lies on the floor and puts his (now smaller) weapon directly in his face. And that is, as they say, the money shot.

#### *4.3.3 Ambiguous Border Lands and Material Natures*

As hegemonic masculinities, Bonham, Hallam, Rambo, and Teasle represent traditional dichotomies between nature and culture and, particularly, between masculine

domination and feminine subjection. As rural masculinities, these sorts of literary characters “excuse or mitigate [sexual violence’s] essence and nature as evil” (Eboe-Osuji 74); by extension, they help to construct idealized masculine violence—sexual or otherwise—as a return to the true nature of men. In return, nature is feminized, sexualized, and, ultimately, conquered and used by the hyper-masculinities who enter her. Representative hegemonic masculinities such as the male characters in these texts continually reify “the theory that sexual violence [or, rather, sex *and* violence] is an ‘inevitable’ part of armed conflicts” (Eboe-Osuji 74). As I suggested above, this not only has the effect of naturalizing hegemonic masculine violence, but also of reproducing destructive patriarchal stereotypes of weak or useless femininity saved and given meaning by that naturally violent man. Theorized as socially-constructed templates, mere encultured performances of embodied (human and non-human) experience, they are overly simplistic—suggesting dichotomies where there is only difference—interrogating the opposing faces of the coin, but forgetting entirely the material in between.

Re-theorized as a material masculine figurations, however, the hegemonic gender binaries these male characters suggest and the non-human environments that contextualize them highlight the same sort of “unstable and shifting form” (Kollin 560) that characterizes the material middle-grounds in the Western genre—with which Proulx deals so handily in *Brokeback Mountain*. Instead of culturally “[marking] their own transcendent subjectivity by separating themselves from the natural world” (Alaimo 3), at one time or another, the marital characters all cover themselves in it; and in each story, the bloody, violent, sexual climax takes place in a “No-(wo)man’s” (*Nomadic* 19) land between the culturally described borders of the human and the non-human. At the same time, their interconnection with nature as a sort of military institution—the natural context

for martial action—sheds light on the persistent dualistic metaphors inherent in cultural tropes for nature to which Alaimo and Soper refer. Their representations of human/non-human co-inscriptions emphasize the way culturally constructed culture/nature binaries work to make visible unmapped landscapes between space “to which meaning has been ascribed” (Carter, Donald, and Squires xii)—that is to say, geo-politically associative place—and the “geometrical or topographical abstraction” that implies a decidedly non-discursive landscape. (*The Future* 19). It is in these geographical open spaces in which these material masculine figurations move, and in concert with the non-human environment with which they are co-contextualized, where they work to dismantle the constructivist boundaries that contain them.

All four of the men I’ve discussed in this chapter move in-between culturally discursive notions of normative masculinity, sexuality, and non-human nature and the embodied realities of bleeding in the dirt in places that reject traditional cartographic definition as one side of the nature/culture dichotomy or the other. This is represented not only by virtue of the place-association and the material conflict that I described above, but also in the non-human contexts in which we are privy to their material becoming. The masculinities figured in *The Hunted* and *First Blood* are contextualized both by and with non-human nature and, as such, their intimacy with it implies the third landmark on a cartography of material masculine. Their movement in-between the visually defined borders of culture (discursivity) and nature (corporeal actuality) made the tacit assertion that it is not only “place” and “conflict” that bring fragmented masculine identities into focus, but the corporeal, individualized, experiential contention with cultural ideals, this time ideals about nature as a the subject not of male/female gendered power structures, but of a insularly masculine military hegemony. In this light, texts like these become more about the “erasing and recomposing the former boundaries between”

(*Metamorphoses* 119) men and nature and less a discussion about the wholesale buying into traditional gender ideologies.

Against a material backdrop, nature has its own agentic subjectivity devoid of the discursive influence of nature. If it is not “feminine,” it cannot be dominated by the masculine—at least not conceptually. Similarly, if a male masculinity is no longer “hegemonic,” he is—again, at least conceptually—no longer constructed as its rapist, son, *or* protector, but instead as a fellow subjectivity. Like the men that inhabit it, it ceases to *be* nature and instead is always *becoming* nature. In view of a material, becoming nature inhabited by becoming material masculinities, the specific settings in which Morrell, Kotcheff, and Friedkin set their characters take on new significance. In the same way, in other words, that the characters themselves are representative of the material middle grounds between social-constructionist performativity and the embodied experience and trauma of war, the non-human actor that serves as the context for their becoming is itself a conceptual and physical middle ground.

Bonham, Hallam, Rambo, and Teasle, though they are represented as necessarily violent hegemonic masculinities, nonetheless bear the marks of materiality already “tattooed on [the bodies]” of the material masculinities that have preceded them in this project. The conceptually and physically undefined in-between landscape in which they move and where their violent confrontations take place serves as another landmark—like place association and conflict—that brings their always immediately renegotiated material subjectivities into momentary focus. For Bob Dollar, these in-betweens were the Comanche National Grasslands. For Jack and Ennis, they are represented in the culturally-bounded forest service land on Brokeback Mountain, in Ennis’s insular aluminum trailer, and in Jack’s final rural roadside resting place. For the martial men under discussion here, the in-betweens are represented in the semi-rural

contexts of their chases and by the context of their final battle. Bonham and Hallam skirt the edges of civilization and wild rural-Oregon forest and consummate their intimate relationship on a strip of rock between the sewer outlet for Silver Falls, Oregon and the untamed white-water of a rushing, raging river. Rambo and Teasle move in and out of, back and forth between, the geographical in-betweens figured in the unmapped white-space of the Kentucky hill country—circumscribed on all sides by highways—and the bramble patch and empty, unkempt field that separate culture/law/Teasle from nature/chaos/Rambo at the end of the novel's second section. And as that section ends, so does their hyper-sexualized, violent performance reach its bullet (semen) spraying climax in a disused lot on Madison's city limit.

We are all—human and non-human—material subjectivities. In all of these scenarios, the boundaries between culture and nature and between human and non-human become amorphous, both in terms of the non-human environment and with regards to the masculine figurations who coalesce between those discursively constructed poles. By co-inscripting material (as opposed to hegemonic) masculinities and the non-human world, a theory of material masculinities makes sexualized and feminized metaphors for the non-human world ineffective and unnecessary. If (like material masculine figurations themselves) nature is perpetually in flux—subjectively experiencing and being experience by multiple and fragmented situated knowledges which both inform it and each other— then historically popular metaphors like “Mother Nature” and “virgin landscape” are (like the homogenous heterogeneity of hegemonic masculinity) inadequate to the task of accurately signifying either the signified or its equally metaphorical human *doppelgangers*.

#### 4.4 Conclusion

As an alternative theoretical figuration, a material masculinity's co-inscription with nature divests nature of its cultural signification (and, thus, its discursive subjugation) in the same way that it calls for a embodied, lived-male divesture of hegemonic, gendered relationships with nature. This doesn't mean that we abdicate responsibility for the non-human environment or for the role men must play if there is to be a significant, concrete change in the nature of masculine/Other interaction. If the word creates the thing rather than the other way around as social-constructionism suggests, however, then if nothing else, discursively depriving masculinity of its theoretically- and culturally-reproduced hegemony (and, by extension, nature of its discursively and inequitably gendered metaphors) universally levels the gendered playing field for male and female, black and white, gay and straight, human and non-human Others inclusively. In terms of non-human nature, materiality suggests cultural, representational standing predicated not on human definition but instead on its own unique subjectivity. As a material subjectivity, in other words, nature stops being "feminine" or "masculine" or, for that matter, even "nature." Instead, the non-human world becomes—like material masculinities and the female nomad—an element of a universal becoming whose own materiality (whose own moment-by-moment identity) is defined by both discursive expectations and concrete reality, by conflict between the two in geographically specific places, and in perpetually metamorphosing reciprocity with Others.

For a material masculine figuration, this third landmark is the one which makes the first two possible. Without it, there would be no place, no conflict...no gender. There would be, in other words, nothing to define the in-betweens. While this is materially true for everyone, human and non-human, American or otherwise, it is particularly so for American men—both in concept, cultural influence, and corporeal reality—within the

implied historical spectrum. Despite the increasingly-documented role that women played in Westward Expansion; in the subjugation of the non-human landscape; and in the genocide of the continent's Native American indigenes, men—and thus masculinities as a gendered performance—are still discursively (and almost exclusively) set in opposition to and/or as stewards of entropic non-humanity, just as women are still so often conflated with it. The key, as Braidotti implies, is not to try to be rid of the differences. Instead, we must acknowledge differences (which we have done in spades) and find new, alternative, more positively productive ways to represent them; figurations that emphasize encultured landmarks—like the masculinities I've re-theorized in this chapter (and in this dissertation as a whole)—as a means of plotting a course through *unsubstantiating* material middle spaces between social-constructionist notions about discursivity, performance, and historical change, and the geo-politically locative and contested—the individualized and physiologically-tattooed—cartographies of material masculinities-in-the-moment. In short, instead of continuing to emphasize static difference, a material masculine figuration is a theoretical framework that accepts its own changeability right from the start. Material tent-sites are , for the most part, subjective. This project is but one of map, an initial survey, an alternative approach for mapping men mapping men.

## Chapter 5

### Material Cartographies: Places, Spaces, and Material Embodiment in the Classroom

Let our practice form our doctrine, thus  
assuring precise theoretical coherence.

Edward Abbey, 1975

When I first began this dissertation, I had in mind only intellectual examples of the way that gender and sexuality affect *every* aspect of all of our lives. I styled myself a feminist and had read the history and theory of women's rights and feminist gender studies. And I knew, of course, that gender inequalities exist. Coming from the perspective of a white, educated male raised in a hegemonically white masculine culture, however, I only understood the effects of gendered power structures from a distance, so to speak. Writing the previous chapters has been transformative. As I've gone through my days, increasingly I've recognized my ideas and conclusions playing themselves out in my own life and in the lives of those around me—I've begun to see myself and others as an embodied, material figurations. I can no longer even pretend to be objective—just a scholar writing about a theoretical concept—because the nature of materiality is to bring the actual into conflict with the discursive and this has been true for me in significant ways. In a very real sense, I have become a walking, breathing example of the sort of material masculine figuration I've conceptualized; I am a man who occupies a constantly re-mapped and renegotiated middle-ground between cultural discursivity and physical embodiment—between theory and experience. Rather, I have begun to *realize myself* as a material masculine figuration and seek out the in-betweens rather than just happen upon them. I've found in those spaces confrontation and confirmation,



beautification and no small amount of pain. But that is just me; my experience is unique and like any (re)telling, my story and my theory are limited by the boundaries of my knowledge and my language.

The problem with any critical theory is—like my own inability to adequately describe the transformative process of writing this dissertation—that “theoretical reason is concept-bound and fastened on essential notions [which make] it difficult to find adequate representations for processes, fluid in-between flows of data, experience and information” (*Metamorphoses* 2). Our concepts for things and people are inadequate, not the things themselves. Inequitable power structures—whether gendered, racialized, political, or economic—arise when we allow our words for things to supersede the things themselves; when we try to force the thing to mirror the word rather than the other way around.

In arguing that men can be reduced to an increasingly complex series of discursive moves, systematized as ever more numerous static types of hegemonic masculinities, social-constructionist men’s studies prevents itself from moving past the conceptual, the empiricized, the taxonomized. In the process, two things happen. First, the individual and material experiences of gender and embodiment of most men are never adequately accounted for. Second, men’s studies continually recreates its own subject of study, sending out curious and friendly feelers to investigate the more inclusive critical gender studies of which it is a part, but mostly remaining self-enclosed behind the crumbling architecture of hegemonic masculinity. Over the course of this project, I’ve sought to confront these problems and illustrate an alternative way of thinking—a theory of material masculinities that bridges (or, perhaps, opens up for exploration) the gaps between men’s studies’ systematic sociology of hegemonic masculinity, contemporary critical gender studies in the humanities, and the embodied experiences of individual men as they are represented in American literature and film. In the following chapter, I draw

connections between the ideas and texts that have formed the substance of this project. I close with thoughts about the pedagogical approach male instructors who teach sex and gender must take if they are to successfully navigate and confront the historical, conceptual, and inequitable gendered power structures against which they have taken up theoretical arms. In short, I conclude this dissertation with a discussion of the way that a theory of material gender can be *embodied* in the non-theoretical space of the university gender studies classroom.

### 5.1 Transition Men

The primary argument governing this project is with men's studies key term and theoretical concept, *hegemonic masculinity*. As I've described it, hegemonic masculinity is a socially-constructed masculine ideal around which members of a society—both men and women—articulate their own gendered identities. I argue that the term and concept of hegemonic masculinity is inadequate to the task of accurately describing the male experience of becoming masculine in the twenty-first century; and that new ways of thinking—new terms and new concepts—are necessary if men's studies is to engage with the more contemporary and inclusive theoretical discussion taking place in the academy today. Men's studies and critical gender studies share a common theoretical history and, because my goal is inclusivity, I see no reason to attempt to change that trend. Thus, as an alternative to hegemonic masculinities, I suggest the term and concept of material masculinities, premised on critical feminism's theories of materiality—predominately those of Rosi Braidotti.

Both implicit and explicit in my argument is the understanding that men's studies has a critical gap to close. For men's studies to continue to remain a viable voice in the increasingly interdisciplinary field of critical gender studies, it must cross the open space between itself and its subject, and it must adopt a more contemporary theoretical

vocabulary that suggests new ways of thinking about men and masculinity. I offer material masculinities as a new vocabulary and suggest over the course of this project three theoretical landmarks for its study. I suggest American literature, specifically literature about rural men, as one of many historical cartographies that plot a course between men's studies soft-scientific methodology for the study of gender and contemporary critical gender theory.

The primary subject of my interrogation in this dissertation has been men's studies hegemonic masculine type, rural masculinities. I chose rural masculinities for two reasons. On the one hand, rural masculinities exemplifies social-constructionist men's studies' wont to pluralize its terminologies in an effort to express heterogeneity while still using concepts that express a singular hegemonic ideal. In other words, rural masculinities are a *type* of hegemonic masculinity, not an alternative to it. The second reason I have chosen rural masculinities as my subject is because rural masculinities undergird the construction of gendered power structures in our culture and are, thus, ubiquitous (Campbell et al. 2). The enormous roles—both historical and contemporary, embodied and conceptual—that cultural ideas about rural men play in the construction of gendered power structures alone make the American literary cartography of rural masculinities a worthy site for an interrogation of material masculinities.

Because my broad purpose has been to cross the critical gap between the social-constructionist theory that comprises most of men's studies scholarship and contemporary material gender theory, The first text I addressed is a literary example of just such a transition. In chapter two I argue that Bob Dollar, the principal character of Annie Proulx's *That Old Ace in the Hole*, is a narrative representation of a becoming material masculinity—a metaphor for the male counterpart to Braidotti's female nomad. I assert that his movement across and dislocation in the "empty" landscapes between his

childhood home in Denver, Colorado and the location of his new job with a corporate hog farming conglomerate in the rural town of Woolybucket, Texas are literary devices that Proulx uses to highlight the unmapped open spaces between socially-constructed performance of gender and the embodied experience of becoming a material subject. In this context, I elucidate what I consider to be the most elemental building block of material masculinities—the personal and physically embodied association with historically fecund and geo-politically specific landscapes and cultures. I argue that by dislocating Bob in the “empty” spaces between Denver and Woolybucket, Proulx suggests that material becoming can only begin when a man’s performative template for masculinity proves inadequate and there are no others to take its place. Bob ultimately settles in Woolybucket (we assume), and so I follow his example and settle in a rural location.

Instead of the rural Texas panhandle, in chapter three I choose to settle in rural Wyoming with a discussion of the mythic American cowboy and Annie Proulx’s *Brokeback Mountain*. My argument is that the American cowboy is the archetypically American, hegemonic masculine stereotype and an ideal example of the way “rural masculinities” both influence every aspect of contemporary culture and are, at the same time, constructed by it. I argue that the traditional Western’s romanticization of the cowboy has the effect of distancing the cultural *idea* of him from the day-to-day actualities of rural men for whom Western culture is not romantic at all. I assert that Proulx recognizes this literary complicity and confronts it; and that, in so doing, she highlights another of the elemental aspects of a material figuration—the physical and conceptual conflict inherent in material masculine becoming. Whereas Bob (dress-up paper doll that he is) is never explicitly aware of his becoming, Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist are uncomfortably aware of the open spaces between their embodied experience of masculinity and their regional Western cultures’ expectations of heterosexual masculine

normativity. Jack brazenly ventures into these unexplored material middle spaces and pays for it with his life. Ennis, by contrast, chooses to comply with his culture's expectations and spends the rest of his life as a lonely nomad, his waking hours mere interludes between his dreams of Jack.

In chapter four, my critical lens is focused on the final of the three foundational landmarks for an initial cartography of material masculinities—one which has already been threaded to varying degrees throughout the previous three chapters. Using the rural masculine stereotype of the soldier, I undertake an interrogation of material masculinities' co-inscriptive relationship with non-human nature. This chapter combines the ideas of geo-political place association from chapter two and the conflicted nature of material masculine becoming from chapter three and adds to them an emphasis on the way the other-than-human environment is historically co-contextualized—and, by extension, co-constructed in the cultural *zeitgeist*—with American masculinities. The literary vehicles for this analysis are David Morrell's *First Blood*, with ample reference to its film adaptation, and William Friedkin's *The Hunted*. Like the cowboy, the rural masculinities in these texts have the effect of creating a distance between cultural expectations for (primarily rural) soldiers and the subjective, embodied experience of men in culture more broadly. I argue that each man is an example of the way that non-human nature is conscripted to conceptually and materially construct and maintain these inherently, naturally violent, hegemonic masculine ideals. I suggest, finally, that Rambo and Hallam are also representative of a material masculine figuration whose story—stories—suggests the open material middle spaces where socially-constructed ideals inevitably come into conflict with the realities of a non-discursive, non-human environment and the subjective, embodied experience of men becoming-in-place.

It is important that I reiterate something: these men I have discussed—Bob, Ennis and Jack, Rambo and Teasle, Bonham and Hallam—are metaphors. A material figuration is not. Each man is instead representative of a material figuration, and I have used their stories to highlight what I consider to be the most concrete elements of becoming a material masculinity. The real texts are the men I interact with from day to day. Or, more to the point, the primary text is the person I see in the mirror when I wake up in the morning, bleary-eyed and scratching (but absolutely *not* urinating in the sink). As I've alluded, this has been driven home to me over the past few months as I've seen my own ideas move and breath around me, as I've moved and breathed with them. As this project has neared its completion, I have asked myself "what's the point?" with increasing frequency. I haven't questioned the point of the writing process. I've questioned the point of a theory of material masculinity that has no material effect, that remains confined to the page. The very nature of materiality is the reciprocity between the cultural discursivity exemplified by men's studies' social-constructionist theory and the subjective, embodied experience of navigating the topographies of regionally-specific expectations for gender normativity.

I decided that instead of ranting about material masculinities on a busy street corner in downtown Dallas, an approach that was less likely to get me arrested might be to bring my ideas to theory's quintessential entry point into culture-at-large, the university classroom. The result was that my questions became more specific. I struggled with how a male instructor like myself can, on the one hand, have credibility teaching a theoretical history of gender that makes men like me automatically complicit in the construction of the power structures I have ostensibly signed on to help deconstruct. On the other hand, I wondered how to emphasize the embodiment that is a crucial part of material masculinities in a traditionally discursive context like a gender studies classroom

without either undermining (or abdicating altogether) my academic authority or crossing the lines of propriety. I wondered, in short, about how to actually *embody* material masculinity in the undeniably socially-constructed space of the classroom.

The answers to my questions were inherent, I've since discovered, in the questions themselves. It boils down to this: We are each and every one of us a material figuration, our inescapably gendered identities circumscribed and defined—sometimes knowingly, sometimes not—by skin and words, by our encultured knowledge of things *and* by the things themselves. This is as true outside of the classroom as within it; and, whether they recognize it, like Ennis, or not, like Bob, it is as true for my students as it is for me. Regardless of the varied cultural histories, belief systems, traditions, and expectations we each carry when we walk through the classroom door, our materiality is nevertheless something we all have in common. For a male instructor like myself, articulating these ideas in an academic classroom that has historically positioned masculinity and its male representatives as the “enemy”—and which is, furthermore, composed of predominately female students—presents a unique challenge. As it turns out, however, material masculinities, because it is an *embodied* theory, lends itself very well as a tool for meeting this challenge on a discursive level and to the non-theoretical spaces of the gender studies classroom.

In a general sense, this project has been aimed at developing a more inclusive critical vocabulary by which men's studies can engage with contemporary gender theory and, thus, with critical gender studies. Concurrent with my writing, my experience in the classroom has highlighted—in visceral ways—the challenges that male instructors who teach sex and gender face in light of thousands of years of male, masculine cultural domination (challenges which are only pale reflections of those faced by female instructors every day). Together, they have opened up a previously uncharted space

between my own unconscious expectations and my embodied realities; spaces I knew were there—but only theoretically. The results of this unmapping—this conflict between my cultural expectations and the actuality of my experience teaching gender studies—are the ideas that follow; the seeds of an evolving pedagogy that I call “teaching in-between.”

## 5.2 Teaching In-Between

Though an increasing number of male scholars are engaging in critical gender studies in the humanities, the discipline still remains largely dominated by female scholars and teachers. And because the discipline itself arose from the essentialism that drove the feminist movement in the 1960s and 70s, even students who have had some exposure to more contemporary gender theory retain elements of culturally entrenched, essentialist notions of masculine and feminine normativity; of gender roles; and, often, of men-in-general as representative of the patriarchy against which feminism must do battle. This puts male instructors at a disadvantage. In light of our cultural history, it may seem nonsensical to suggest that a male instructor (particularly a white, male instructor like myself) faces a disadvantage in a classroom at institutions of higher learning where he has historically reigned supreme both as subject and authority. In fact, my experience, when compared to that of many of my female colleagues, has taught me that being a man lends me a certain *a priori* authority in a general studies classroom that most of my female colleagues have to work harder to attain. One colleague, for example, has shared with me stories about students who refuse to be taught by a woman; who constantly question her authority and ignore her instructions (and make it clear her sex is why); or who even try to physically intimidate her when they feel their work or behavior has been wrongly critiqued. One of my female colleagues had a student who wrote on an evaluation that her breasts were too big for her to be teaching at a public university. The student claimed that the professor’s breasts had distracted him/her and were the reason



for the student's lack of attention in class and subsequent failing grade. Another female colleague received a death threat in which her sex and physiognomy were specifically addressed. Other women have told me similar stories of conflict between their embodiment and cultural ideals and the challenges that this conflict poses with regards to establishing their credibility in the classroom.

When I was nervous before the first class I ever taught, my mentor told me to keep in mind that, regardless of how I feel, I know more about my subject than my students; and therein lies my credibility. For female instructors—particularly in undergraduate general studies courses—credibility, and thereby the “right” to be in authority, doesn’t always come so easy. I have understood—and tried to empathize with—the kinds of challenges that female instructors face in terms of classroom management—that often they cannot count on intellectual brilliance and academic credibility alone to establish their authority in the classroom, but must first draw very clear, authoritative boundaries between themselves and their students; between instructor and instructed. But I understood this only in theory because, for good or ill, my male embodiment has—over the course of my career—lent an *a priori* credibility to my position as instructor. A gender studies classroom however, as I’ve only recently learned, is a different proposition altogether.

The challenges that female instructors face establishing their credibility in the classroom on a daily basis were driven home to me, when, on the second night of my course, “Sexing Nature: American Literature, Gender, and the Non-Human,” a female student from the Women’s and Gender Studies Program here at the University of Texas at Arlington openly challenged the course materials I had assigned and, by implication, my right to teach a gender studies course. She did so honestly, sincerely, genuinely. She was not trying to be disruptive or to “throw me off my game.” She wasn’t consciously

attacking *me*; she just needed clarification. And her question was simple. She asked why, in the texts I had assigned the class to read, there was an inequity in the number of male and female protagonists (I had four texts that featured male characters and two with female). I pointed out—quite proudly—that I had an equal number of male and female authors. In response, she suggested that, in light of the fact that historically men have always been the subject *and* scholar (the closest “career scholar” at the time being, of course, myself), and because this was a Women’s and Gender Studies course, we should be reading only female authors; or, at the least, only books with female protagonists.

I anticipated questions like this, but not on the second night of class, before we even finished reading over the syllabus. This is the kind of critical thinking and comfort with questioning that I try to establish in all of my classes, but I was taken off guard, so to speak, by how quickly it had begun. Admittedly, I panicked a little. I fumbled through an answer; the sort of answer where, the deeper I dug myself, the less I could stop digging. I knew what I was talking about—have thought about these ideas for years—but, though I knew the trees, I had trouble describing the forest in layman’s terms. I threw out words like “hegemony” and “cultural invisibility,” “social-construction” and “post-structuralism,” “normativity this” and “gendered that.” And as you might expect, no one understood even half of what I was saying. I chased one rabbit trail after another until, when class was over, I was as confused as my students.

I went home that night unsettled, and I stayed unsettled all weekend, but not for the reasons I at first thought. Granted, I had flubbed the answer to a complex question on only the second night of class. Granted. But I’d flubbed answers before, for much the same reason, and I’d recovered well enough. Even after I had more carefully articulated an answer and made notes for the next class though, something continued to trouble me.

It wasn't until after a conversation with a close friend, who herself teaches gender studies (and here's me establishing my credibility), that I was able to put my finger on it. For the first time, in the context of this gender studies course, I had discovered what it means to walk into a classroom without the historical, social, political, the *cultural* authority that traditionally attends male instructors in the university. In fact, it was *precisely* that presumed cultural authority that undermined my credibility in the first place. I knew my subject on an intellectual level and my students could tell, flubbed answer notwithstanding. For the first time, however—because of my body—I had to establish my right to be in the authority position in the classroom.

A gender studies classroom, I've discovered, is something of a microcosm in which gender roles, so to speak, are reversed. And my experience in one is no less ubiquitous for male instructors than it is for female instructors in more general contexts. To be sure, male instructors are probably less likely to be the victims of physical intimidation, but passive-aggressive—and no less disruptive—behaviors still work to undermine course objectives and the classroom community just the same. Prominent men's studies scholar Michael Kimmel, for example, talks about confronting this challenge on the lecture circuit where female audience members sometimes disrupt his public speaking engagements and (often aggressively) challenge his right to be a "feminist" (Kimmel 59-60). Thomas Wartenberg—a professor at Mount Holyoke College, an all-women's institution—writes about the similar pedagogical challenges (not to mention the ethical considerations) he faces as a male feminist teaching women a philosophical tradition that consists entirely of white men from patriarchal societies (Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, etc.) (Wartenberg 132). Other male gender studies scholars tell similar stories. The upshot is that male instructors in gender studies classrooms must overcome, on a vastly circumscribed scale, the same sort of encultured gender prejudice

that female scholars and instructors have encountered since the inception of the American university.

That gender studies exists as a subject at all points to the pedagogical challenge that needs to be met. That it takes place, in most universities, in Women's *and* Gender Studies Programs (or some variation thereof), however, points to the means for meeting that challenge. In short, "teaching in-between" is at once a pedagogy of deliberate inclusivity and of highlighted difference. The questions of how, when, and why gendered difference and inequalities takes place are the questions with which gender studies is most broadly concerned. At my own university (and at a great many others in recent years), the Women's Studies Program has overtly acknowledged that becoming gendered does not happen in a vacuum, simply by including "gender" in their program name. This type of thinking, at its broadest, is precisely the argument that this dissertation as a whole seeks to make. Men's studies, by maintaining its current social-constructionist stance and its key theoretical term and concept of hegemonic masculinities continues to construct itself within a self-reifying vacuum. In its reaction to the academic and political (s)exclusivity practiced by essentialist feminism, men's studies built a theoretical wall around itself—a wall that new material gender theories like material masculinities are attempting to breach.

At the same time, however, and perhaps contradictorily, a pedagogy of teaching in-between demands that male instructors in gender studies classrooms overtly acknowledge the embodied differences that put disciplines like Women's Studies and Men's Studies in place to begin with. There is a fine line to be walked between a inclusivity and difference. Too far on one side and we run the risk of under-emphasizing subjective identity, of making gender overly objective as social-constructionist men's studies is wont to do. Too far on the other side, we find ourselves in danger of re-

establishing the sort of gendered power structures that a gender studies course is ostensibly designed to directly confront. For the sake of debate, I want to touch on pedagogical iterations of each of the three major material elements I've outlined in terms of what I will refer to as a "pedagogical figuration." I'll then move on to suggest practical ways these elements can be addressed in the physical spaces of the classroom.

#### *5.2.1 Teaching Fragments*

A pedagogical figuration, as I understand him or her, is a material figuration—a *representation*, but not a metaphor—and instructors and students alike fit the criteria for it. As Braidotti writes of her nomadic material figuration, pedagogical figurations are embodied, "situated, [...] culturally differentiated" (*Nomadic* 4), and infinitely malleable forms of knowledge. They are geo-politically and historically situated, individualized identities—fragments of multiple cultures and experiences, brought together in one place, at one time—that "[allow] for otherwise unlikely encounters and unsuspected sources of interaction of experience and of knowledge" (*Nomadic* 6). Both instructors and students, in other words, are pedagogical figurations insofar as their geo-politically locative, embodied experiences of gender determine the way they interact both with the curriculum and with others inside and outside of the classroom community. A pedagogical figuration is an embodied *and* culturally-constructed difference, a representation of the collective experience of being subjectively unique. Teaching in-between means emphasizing the sameness of these differences. I will address this idea more thoroughly below. In the meantime, let me say that emphasizing difference inevitably creates conflict—both embodied and conceptual—but that conflict is the catalyst for change and is the nature of a perpetually becoming material subject. It is conflicts that open up the middle spaces where teaching in-between takes place. It is only when students' (and instructors') personally-held conceptualizations, beliefs, and traditions come into contact with those of

others that alternative ways of thinking become apparent. These sorts of conflicts happen whether the instructor is male or female, because issues of gender and sexuality are deeply personal and emotionally charged subjects. However, in a gender studies classroom, comprised primarily of female students, emphasizing difference and embodiment creates not only conceptual conflicts but also—analogueous to my female colleagues' experiences in general studies classrooms—embodied ones.

For male instructors, emphasizing sexual difference (even talking about sex—particularly about the female body, with female students) flies in the face of decades—if not centuries—of pedagogy, of warnings about and examples of the dangers of crossing that line. Because of this engrained and entrained caution with which most men approach discussions of sex, sexuality, and gender in multi-gendered classrooms, for male instructors, teaching in-between might seem counterintuitive—particularly given that the student demographic in a gender studies classroom is largely female. Nevertheless, there is nothing to be gained from denying difference and physical embodiment.

Denying immediate embodied difference only makes the issue of physicality that much more divisive if for no other reason than because embodied difference is obvious and to deny it is to deny the significant role corporeality plays in the construction of gender identity. Instead of theoretically empiricizing issues of sex, gender, and embodiment (or, worse, avoiding them altogether; something that is virtually impossible in a gender studies classroom anyway), a pedagogy of teaching in-between amounts to a deliberate effort to highlight the “sexually differentiated structure of the speaking subject” (*Nomadic* 3). When a male instructor overtly and deliberately acknowledges sexual difference—when he highlights the way embodiment operates to construct difference—he also lays the groundwork for the inclusion of the individuated and embodied pedagogies figured in each member of the class. Theorized as pedagogical figurations, each

member of the class—teacher and student alike—is a subjectively constructed, embodied and distinctive gender studies curriculum—a inimitable set of situated knowledges. For male instructors, making these knowledges part of the curriculum this means approaching the subject material and the students with a level of humility and forthrightness, of openness and personal disclosure with which he may not be comfortable.

Some of the best teaching advice I've ever gotten—advice that has guided my teaching philosophy more broadly—is to always be willing to admit when I don't know the answer to a question. Male instructors in gender studies classrooms must be willing to take it a step further and to admit that—*because* of their “sexually differentiated structure”—there are question they can *never* answer. This amounts to what Elizabeth Ellsworth calls a “practice grounded in the unknowable” (323), a pedagogical realization “that the focus of education should not be on ‘knowing’ the Other (since this is impossible, anyway), but on a radical openness in communication and an attention to the (unknowable) particularity of the Other” (Zembylas 150). In fact, a pedagogy of teaching in-between demands that male instructors both de-emphasize their own institutional and conceptual authority and, in turn, reinforce students' personal and cultural authority in active and obvious ways. This can be chaotic. However, students who take gender studies courses are (more often than not) motivated to do so for deeply personal reasons and, by extension, take the curriculum seriously. Thus, de-emphasizing one's “position of authority” is not equivalent to allowing students to throw away the map, as it were, but is instead a re-positioning of oneself as a fellow cartographer drawing a new map altogether. A male instructor teaching gender and sex must position himself as a fellow figuration who “engages with his [...] external others in a constructive, ‘symbiotic’ block of becoming, which bypasses dialectical interaction [...] [and is] a persistent challenge and

an opposition to steady identities" (*Metamorphoses* 119)—both his own and his students'. Instead of drawing (discipline-specific, gendered, or academic) boundaries, the embodied pedagogy figured in a male instructor takes part in the "erasing and recomposing [of] the former boundaries between self and others" (*Metamorphoses* 119). To paraphrase approximately a million movies, this means that the teacher must—conceptually and physically—become the student.

Of course, I've called my approach "teaching *in-between*" and so the question of how exactly emphasizing *difference* works materially to confront inequitable power structures must be answered. Hegemonic power structures, after all, are created by emphasizing perceived difference and are precisely that in opposition to which the feminist movement and, by extension, critical gender studies as an academic discipline arose in the first place. The answer, like the question, is two-pronged. On the one hand is a careful definition of terms and concepts and of coming to a consensual understanding of the inadequate nature of theory—in other words, of drawing a basic theoretical cartography which prepares students to recognize the open spaces between "academic" concepts and the actualities of their own embodied experience. Both in the classroom and out, the hope is that they will then recognize their own agency and the role they can and do play in mapping those spaces with their bodies and with their words. On the other hand—and perhaps unsurprisingly—successfully wielding embodied difference as a tool for interrogating the unequal distribution of economic, social, and political power depends a great deal on the way that the classroom community conceptualizes the space of the classroom itself. First and briefly, however, word and things.



### 5.2.2 *Word and Things*

In order for a productive conversation to take place, the discussion's participants first need a common language. But language is limited. Signifying anything makes it tend towards the static when in truth, nothing is ever static. Men's studies' "rural masculinities," for example, implies a static opposition. For every rural masculinity, an urban masculinity stands opposite him. Perhaps more importantly, rural masculinity implies rural femininity; by continuing to maintain, pluralize, and rearticulate hegemonic concepts of masculinity, men's studies works against the current trends in contemporary critical gender theory. The fact remains, however, that particularly in the twenty-first century, the boundaries between dichotomies like rural and urban are growing increasingly hard to maintain and so emphasizing difference—individuated material figuration—instead of opposition or dichotomy is essential. And there are significant material spaces to navigate between the two.

In response to an interviewer's assertion that

despite recent and sustained interventions men, boys and schooling, girls, gender equity and anti-homophobia collectively continue to argue from assumptions of masculinity as the sole province and dominion of the male body premised by a binary regime of heteronormative and normalizing gender" (Crowley 460),

and that in order for this to change, the binaries must be done away with all together,

Judith Halberstam replies:

No. We live in a binary system, and [...] it's like a category thing. It's not going to go away because we critique it. It will change its meaning and it can proliferate in its manifestations, but when you look around any room you know who's a man and who's a woman. The binary is a huge part of everything. (qutd. in Crowley 463)

Categories play a significant role in every aspect of our lives. The trick, says Halberstam, is to move past discussions of binaries towards confronting the power structures those binaries have been ill-used to construct.

It is not so much that binaries like “masculine/feminine,” “male/female,” “rural/urban,” or “hetero/homo” create unjust and inequitable power structures simply by virtue of cultural utterance. It’s simply that they fail—at the moment of that utterance—to adequately represent the wide variety of interactions and embodied experiences; geo-politically locative gender norms—or interdisciplinary, multi-cultural contexts within which the terms and concepts themselves have been appropriated, bandied about, and ultimately redefined. Contemporary gender theory, increasingly interdisciplinary and inclusive as it is, is particularly “open to appropriation by society” (Barthes 109). For male instructors who are (still) assumedly representative of the patriarchy which has traditionally defined the university, an overemphasis on the extrinsic finality of the academy’s teleology works in favor of the very power structures a gender studies course is ostensibly designed to interrogate and actively deconstruct.

The terms we use to signify our concepts of, in this case, gender are, as post-structural theorist Roland Barthes argues in *Mythologies*, inadequate to the task of accounting for all of the politically, theoretically, literarily self-indulgent layers that have been added to them. “A tree is a tree,” Barthes asserts, “but a tree as expressed is no longer quite a tree” but is instead layered with any number of types of “social usage” (109). The same is true of a gendered, embodied figuration. Nevertheless, the conversation must start somewhere, and so the binaries and categories inherent in culturally discursive constructions of gender normativity and interrogations of them are, for good or ill, a necessary starting point.

But let me reiterate: words are only a starting point. All of these ideas—inclusivity, an emphasis on embodiment and conflict, and difference and opposition—are, when confined to the page, merely conceptual. The purpose of theorizing a gendered subject is not to provide an answer or an accounting of truth, but instead to provide a

platform from which to begin asking questions and against which to gain traction for active political and social agency. I expect the same of the literary texts I teach. In this light, a pedagogy of teaching in-between doesn't mean teaching between binaries or dichotomies like male or female, rich or poor, instructor or student; but teaching in the spaces between the cultural discursivity of theoretical argument or literary texts and the actuality of gender and sexual difference. Teaching in-between means not teaching, but learning and providing access to the situated knowledges, fluid identities, and embodied experiences of an entirely coincidental population of pedagogical figurations. Like a theory of material masculinities, teaching in-between is only a successful approach to teaching if the ideas have some practical application beyond the page, in the classroom itself. Successfully conceptualizing oneself as one pedagogical figuration among others is "not the mimetic impersonation or capacity for repetition of dominant poses, but rather [an example of] the extent to which these practices open up in-between spaces where new forms of political subjectivity can be explored" (*Nomadic* 7). Teaching in-between, in other words, begins with an overt, enacted, declaration—an out-loud and embodied acknowledgement—that it is difference and not opposition with which the conversation is concerned.

To emphasize difference instead of polarity means using a critical vocabulary that is itself admittedly and proudly amorphous. A purely theoretical interrogation is, at best, a difficult proposition because words by themselves are limited in their meaning and circumscribed by grammatical, semantic, and culture and context specific boundaries—boundaries between signifier and signified and, by extension, between the signifieds themselves. Hence, an argument for a pedagogy premised in any and/or all of the thirty to forty embodied gender theories that occupy a given gender studies classroom. A pedagogical figuration who lives "in permanent processes of transition, hybridization and

nomadization [...] [in] in-between states and stages [that] defy the established modes of theoretical representation" (*Metamorphoses* 2) is constantly remapping the cartographies of gender theory and enacting those maps in the space of the classroom. In short, a pedagogical figuration represents a theoretical perspective that understands gender identity as inherently and inexorably changeable and; furthermore, as something that cannot be articulated with mere words.

### 5.2.3 Pedagogical Topographies

In the previous four chapters, I emphasized—to varying degrees—the importance of non-human element in enabling material masculine becoming. This is problematic for “pedagogical becoming,” of course, because non-human nature rarely makes a more than conceptual appearance within the hallowed halls of academia. Nonetheless, the elements that make non-human nature so influential the becoming of a material masculinity still exist, in analogous ways, in the classroom. For Bob, Ennis, Jack, Rambo, and Teasle, the non-human constituted a “non-partisan” space apart from the influence of cultural discursivity—yet still circumscribed by it—their embodied experience of which facilitated their becoming. For the gender studies classroom to be a place where “axes of differentiation such as class, race, ethnicity, gender, age, and others intersect and interact with each other in the constitution of subjectivity [...] [through] the simultaneous occurrence of many of these at once” (*Nomadic* 4), the gender studies classroom must be just such a space. Teaching in-between means constructing a sense of communal place-association with a space that both students and instructors conceive of as neutral—an in-between space “where all ties are suspended and time stretched to a sort of continuous present. [An oasis] of nonbelonging, [a space] of detachment [...]” (*Nomadic* 19). For a male instructor, this amounts to walking a fine and carefully considered line between the dominant pose of the teacher-scholar and the

(at least culturally) subordinate role of the student. The ways to do this are limited only by the creative capacity of the instructor and—I suppose—to his comfort level in a classroom.

One of the ways I approach this, often with humorous results, is by literally starting class on the first day as one of my students. It has become my habit over the past few years to start a semester by coming to class a few minutes early on the first day and taking a seat among the desks facing the front of the room. Usually, I'll sit quietly and listen to bits and pieces of the conversations around me; occasionally I'll take part in or even strike up those conversations. I wait until a few minutes after class begins, just when my fellow students are starting to get a bit restless, before standing up and exclaiming to the class that someone needs to teach the class and if the instructor isn't going to show up to do it, I'll do it myself. Of course, most students quickly understand what's happening (although more than once a student has remained unsettled for a time as if unsure I am telling the truth once I "reveal" that yes, I am indeed the instructor of record). The effect is the same, however, insofar as this ice-breaker becomes a common (and light-hearted) experience, as well as an experience in which students (at least initially) identify me as one of their own. By the same token, my subsequent move to the front of the room to take my place in front of them highlights in a physical way that despite my entrance, I am still charged with facilitating the class.

Another way that the physical space of the classroom can be used to "embody" teaching in-between is in the basic arrangement of the classroom furniture and an instructor's both physical and conceptual place in that arrangement—or rather, the role each plays in the determination of the other. I have my students arrange their desks in a circle, though at a university like UTA where we teach all over campus, often in rooms without moveable furniture, sometimes this particular configuration isn't possible. Of

course, with a little creativity, obstacles like that are fairly easy to overcome. When the exigencies of actually disseminating information—of building the terminological and conceptual framework I alluded to—don't keep me in an instructor's traditional place at the front of the room, I am part of this circle.

In the discussions that take place here, I concede—not my intellectual/academic authority, which is but one small element of a pedagogical figuration—but my embodied authority. Not only do I remove myself visibly from the locative position of authority in the front of the classroom; but also, because sex and gender are our subjects and making cultural connections and confronting stereotypes our aim, I *verbally* set aside my own embodied curriculum and emphasize students' authority, right, and responsibility to speak. And, though I find it difficult sometimes, I do my best to allow my fellow to scholars guide our discussions—our becoming—and take part only as a fellow figuration whose own embodied experience has, in the moment, positioned him as student rather than teacher.

To be sure, humorous ice-breakers and moving desks around are really only stage props and so, ultimately, it boils down to how well you set the scene. The classroom is only an empty stage that doesn't come to life until its figurations walk through the door. A male instructor in a gender studies classroom, because of the cultural weight he carries with him, must himself walk through the door as an actor—not a director. And, though he may not use the metaphor of a stage, he must verbally acknowledge his own lack of knowledge of certain gendered embodiments, describe his own figuration, and encourage his students to see themselves as such within the context of the classroom. Whatever else, a pedagogy of teaching in-between requires that an instructor—male or female—believe what they teach. A male instructor who teaches gender studies must truly believe in the agentic potential of the interrogations the class

undertakes and must see not only himself—his intellectual authority and physical embodiment—as the source of knowledge; he must actually believe that his students are themselves rich and complex pedagogies. It can be painful and humiliating when students correct an instructor's academic assumptions about what it is to be female, it can open up raw places; but as Braidotti writes, it can also beautify. Students with intensely personal reasons for taking a gender studies course will brook no rote recitation of theory because they know automatically and unconsciously that theory is only half the story. The other half of the story of the construction of gender and the injustice that arises from it is written on the bodies of the living, breathing texts—texts that are being rewritten (and are re-writing each other) on a moment-by-moment basis, texts who are themselves “fluid in-between flows of data, experience and information” (*Metamorphoses* 2). Most importantly, these are student-texts and instructor-texts, material figurations who take their revisions with them when they leave the classroom.

### 5.3 Conclusion

Material gender theory is just that, a theory. It has been criticized—to me personally—as “unsubstantial” and “non-empirical.” I disagree with this criticism. Instead, I prefer to think of it as *unsubstantiating*, as “undoing the structures of domination by careful, patient revisitations, re-adjustments, micro-changes” (*Metamorphoses* 116). Material masculinities is not an attempt to create a new type of masculinity; instead, a theory of material masculinities is an attempt to dissolve the static hegemonic types—the metaphors that are tired and out-dated and no longer adequate—and replace them with an alternative way of approaching the study of male masculinities. As Lawrence Buell suggests with regards to culturally-discursive romanticizations of non-human nature (*The Environmental Imagination* 281), the metaphors we choose to represent the world have serious consequences. Not a type any more than he is a

metaphor, a material masculine figuration is an *a priori* acknowledgement that every man is a individually constructed, gendered subject; a masculinity whose historically and geopolitically locative embodiment plays a co-inscriptive role with culturally discursive ideas about masculine normativity in the construction of his identity. The social-constructionist gender theory that typifies contemporary men's studies scholarship is, alone, inadequate to the task of articulating the experience of most men. Raewyn Connell himself articulates this contradiction when he suggests that hegemonic masculinity is an ideal which *most* men fail to live up to (Connell and Messerschmidt 832). In its theoretical attempt to distinguish itself from essentialism, men's studies pluralized rather than abandoned its over-reductive terminology and, in the process, has reproduced (has, in fact, multiplied) the very dichotomies that it ostensibly sought to deconstruct when it conceived of itself as a discipline.

The time has come to stop the rearticulation of dominant poses. For the last fifty-some-odd years, gender theorists have articulated those poses, have defined them, created metaphors and theories and methodologies for the study of them and yet the power structures, though their architecture bears evidence of rusting antiquity and critical assault, still persist. As material feminist scholars have sought to do in their interrogations of social-constructionist feminist theory, I have sought to do here with a theoretical movement towards material masculinity. There will no doubt be contention with my ideas. As I said in the introduction, I expect contention. My purpose has never been to articulate an unassailable theory, but to open up the material spaces that men's studies, in its rush to construct and reify hegemonic male masculinity, completely fails to address. Opening up these material middle-spaces between discursivity and embodiment, like any material enterprise creates conflict; and from conflict comes growth.



At any rate, in any discussion about materiality there will always be paths to follow and any number of directions to take—always questions to ask and perspectives from which to ask them. In the same way that American literature about rural men is but one cartography for material (un) mapping, the elements of material masculine becoming I have described in *Mapping Men* are but three pathways connected to pathways of race, of class, of technology, etc.—and those paths themselves intersect with uncountable others. At the time of this writing, hegemonic masculinities, as both term and concept, dominate men's studies' theoretical approach to the study of gender. Together, they pit the intellectual strength exemplified in the brilliant scholarship the discipline produces against the more progressive critical theories of gender that typify gender studies more broadly. Rather than trying to reach the same location, but from different directions, a theory of material masculinities suggests for men's studies an alternative approach. *Mapping Men* is a new map that offers men's studies a more inclusive terminological and theoretical voice in the larger conversation taking place about gender in the academy today and, thus, new directions in which to explore.

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### Biographical Information

David Wallace presently teaches critical gender studies, eco-criticism, and American literature at the University of Texas at Arlington. He has served as reviewer for *Aethelon: A Journal of Sports and Literature* and as a frequent contributor to the Routledge Press Annotated Bibliography of English Studies. He has been an invited speaker to symposia on sustainability and gender studies pedagogy, and a guest lecturer on the subject of men's and critical masculinities studies in graduate and undergraduate seminars. David has presented scholarship, fiction, and non-fiction works on many occasions and his short story, "The Crosswalk," was published in the critically-acclaimed *Amarillo Bay* (Winter 2005). This is his first major scholarly project. He is currently serving as the Fiction and Non-Fiction Acquisitions Editor for the Lamar University Press and on the advisory board for the San Marcos, Texas-based *Heirloom Blooms at Wild Acres Ranch*. When he is not sitting in front of a computer, David has a crush on the South Texas hill country; is a performing musician who loves folk and bluegrass music; and is the proud, single-father of an amazing son named Liam.