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Knots and Knowledges: The Canadian West, Settler Colonial Intimacies, and Aritha Van Herk's Calgary Stampede

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Abstract

This paper explores the intimacies of settler colonial cultures in discourses about the Canadian West. In a critical regionalist reading, it positions the region between centrist and continental frameworks, Canadian variations of the Western myth, and Alberta's revived struggle for cultural and political independence from the nation-state. A case in point is the annual celebration of the Calgary Stampede, a Western Show and carnival. After addressing Stampede's spectacular production of Western culture, I revisit the event through the oeuvre of Aritha van Herk, whose 2017 prose poetry collection Stampede and the Westness of West *views Western intimacies from a white feminist perspective. By reading two of her texts, I show how van Herk attempts to ensnare the rodeo cowboy and his audience in a synaesthetic of looking-and-feeling that unsettles white male Western cultural hegemonies.*

Résumé

Cet article porte sur le traitement des intimités du colonialisme de peuplement dans les discours autour de l'Ouest Canadien. A travers la lecture critique régionaliste, la région est située entre la centralité et la continentalité nord-Américaine, les variantes Canadiennes du mythe de l'Ouest, et la lutte ranimée de l'Alberta pour l'indépendance culturelle et politique de l'état-nation Canadien. Par la suite, la célébration annuelle du Stampede de Calgary, un grand spectacle Western et un carnaval, figure comme étude de cas. Après avoir abordé la production spectaculaire de la culture Western au Stampede, je reviens sur cet événement par l'approche féministe et intime d'Aritha van Herk dans sa collection de poèmes en prose Stampede and the Westness of West *(2017). Partant de deux textes de cette œuvre, j'analyse la façon dont van Herk empêtre le cowboy de rodéo et ses spectateurs dans un regard-ressenti qui déstabilise des hégémonies culturelles Western de l'homme blanc.*

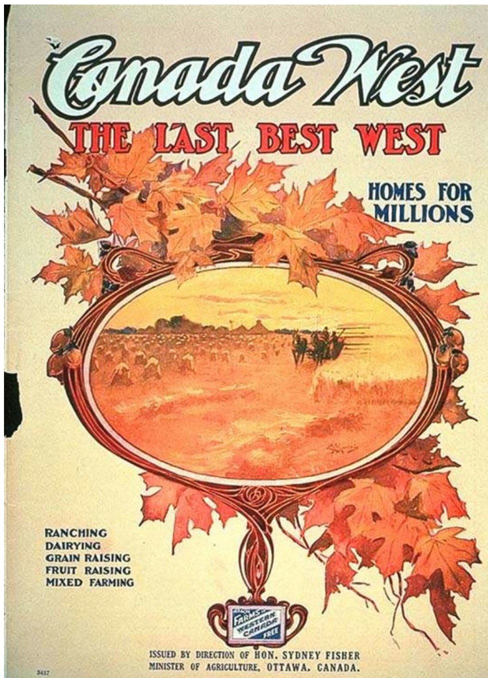

Figure 1: "Canada West" campaign poster, Canadian Museum of History, 1909, Library and Archives Canada.

"West of What?" to "Wexit": Alberta between centrist, continental, and new nationalist discourses

Locating Alberta and/in the Canadian West uncovers ideological positioning and relational gestures in a historiography that is predominantly male, in terms production and topics (Jacobs 2011). Recent scholarship has compared the Canadian and US Wests, critiqued such comparisons, or shifted the focus to ecocritical readings (e.g. Higham/Thacker 2006; Felske/Rasporich 2005; Kaye 2009 and 2011). The Canadian West as a symbolic landscape is often compared to the Canadian North and its position in the Canadian cultural archive (Grace 1991, Katerberg 2003, Rosenthal 2009). The present argument seeks to show the entanglement between political, cultural, and gendered economies in the settler colony of the Canadian West. I examine how Western spectacles regulate 'being in the West' through body regimes, including clothing, behavior, spectatorship, and heteronormative sexual desire. I therefore first discuss the Canadian West within the framework of critical regionalism (Paul 2014) to show its production through invented traditions and political and socioeconomic interpellations.[1] The second interest of my analysis, in turning to the Calgary Stampede, addresses settler colonialism's impact on the body, its disappearing of Indigeneity, and what Ann Laura Stoler has called the "tense and tender ties of empire" (Stoler 2006a; see also Ballantyne/Burton 2009 and Morgensen 2012). Stoler contends that "matters of the intimate are critical sites for the consolidation of colonial power; that management of those domains provides a strong pulse in how relations of empire are exercised; and that affairs of the intimate are strategic for empire-driven states" (2006, 4). Canada's imperial legacy is hardly disputable, but the question of Canada's post/colonial status and literatures brings

1 Paul argues that critical regionalism lays bare the discursive formation of regions, critiquing their essentialist and romanticized image; debating their relation to the nation as geopolitical structure; inventing alternative geographies, and devising new connections among regions.

no conclusive answer, as Laura Moss' 2003 collection *Is Canada Postcolonial? Unsettling Canadian Literature* has productively shown.

The Canadian West oscillates between the Canadian nation-state and the US American frontier myth, centrist, and continental views, between nationalist dissent, regionalist folklore, and, finally, imperial pull. The latter indicates the structural hegemony of Anglo-Saxon culture which, in the logic of settler colonizers who "come to stay" (cf. e.g. Veracini 2013), shapes the feeling of "being in the West" as relational to various far-off centers. Regarding Canadian national boundaries, the Canadian West is far away from the Eastern government, and East of the country's prosperous Pacific Rim province British Columbia. Regarding biopolitics, it forms part of the North American steppe (called "prairie" in Canada and "the plains" in the US). Regarding the legacies of local color and cultural practice, it is related to but also different from the US-American West and the urban and multicultural settings of the Canadian East. Before and beyond these imperial mappings, the Canadian West squats on the land of the Blackfoot Confederacy, and the Salteaux and Cree First Nations territories mapped by the Treaties 6, 7, and 8, respectively.

From the centrist view, the Canadian West was overlooked in the nation-building process: The provinces Alberta and Saskatchewan joined the nation only in 1905. Between the Dominion in 1867 and 1905, the Northwest territory separated the Eastern governmental center and the prospering pacific rim of British Columbia, with the Rocky Mountains as a natural divide. The government's interest in this area was slow at first, but the declining fur trade and the influx of US-Americans led Ottawa to claim the territories. In the framework of the Canadian nation-state, the West fenced off US expansionism and ascertained the CPR's passage to the Pacific. The West is a provincial backwater, called "the empty quarter" (Joel Garreau), or "Greater Montana" (qtd. in Katerberg 2003). As Bill New argues in *Articulating West* (1972), the Canadian West is a product of the East: "the West" is interpellated by the "Eastern" expansionist and imperial vision; Elliott West talks about a "grid of influences" of "eastern controlled, resource-driven expansionist enterprise, translated into eastern desires and then projected onto western spaces" (2004, 7). The centrist view of the Canadian West thus doubles the colonial relations between center and periphery: Ottawa would look to London, but the Canadian West would look to Ottawa. This view percolated in the government's 1890s "Canada West" marketing campaign, which canvassed the Western provinces to potential settlers in Northern Europe, Britain, and the US. After the alleged "closing" of the frontier in the US (see Frederick Jackson Turner's influential frontier thesis in 1893), the "Last Best West" promised a chance at Western life to white Europeans who thought they had missed their opportunity (see fig. 1; Devereux 1997, Sharp 1947).

The poster shows the image in a nostalgic picture frame resembling days long gone, framed by maple leaves in an overall sepia tint composition. The capture promises "Homes for Millions" and a host of farming varieties available to those pining after the ideal depicted in the frame. The division between the straw stacks

to the left and the tall grain to the right emphasize the harvesting work of the generic farmer; who work moves towards the viewer.

The "Canada West" campaign amalgamated the centrist view with the US-American frontier myth and its promises for a simple but hard life (see e.g. Paul 2013). The continental view pits the Canadian West against Eastern Canadian politics and urban lifestyles on the one hand and against the US West on the other hand; opposite the violent and individualist narratives of the US Wild West, Canadian popular culture constructs a "Mild West" that builds on Canadian stereotypes.[2] Compared to the US-American cowboy gunslinger, the Canadian cowboy is described by the *Calgary Herald* as a literate "gentleman in boots" (qtd. in Slatta 1990, 51): "The rough and festive cowboy of Texas and Oregon has no counterpart here. Two or three beardless lads may wear jingling spurs and ridiculous revolvers and walk around with a slouch [but] the genuine Alberta cowboy is a gentleman. He almost most [sic] certainly can read and write."

While the era of "frontier life" and cattle ranching was relatively short-lived, it looms large in Alberta's cultural self-image, emphasizing resistance against the faraway government and resilience in the face of natural hardships. Its politics have recently been shaken up: in 2015, the (social-democratic) New Democratic Party unseated the Progressive Conservatives for the first time since 1971, garnering a new "sense of empowerment, activism, and influence in effecting political change" among First Nations commentators (Clark 2019, 248). Yet, the 2019 election swept the conservative party back to power and put pressure on Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to address Alberta's struggles. The Alberta secessionist movement, working towards either national independence or joining the US with a rhetoric of rebellion (see e.g. Brown/Lamoureux 2016) has picked up this cue and invigorated the call for Alberta's "Wexit" (Toy 2019).

The "Wexit" debate is supported by collections like *Writing Alberta* (Melnyk/Coates 2017), which claims Alberta's distinct literary identity. Heralding Alberta writing's resistance against "pushback from traditional quarters […]—Canadian Literature (1960s) and Prairie Literature (1970s)" (ibid., 2), it argues that Alberta has a "national" literature, complete with a history, shared themes, and "a canon" as well as a "political boundary" (ibid.). The genealogy presented here starts with pictographs and First Nations Winter counts, proceeds through fur trader's stories, and finds its real beginning of the canon in William Francis Butler's 1872 "non-fiction classic, *The Great Lone Land*." *Writing Alberta* reiterates the settler colonial gesture by incorporating indigenous and postcolonial literatures and topics (called "complexities" that make obvious that "Alberta is not an isolated literary environment and never has been", 3)

2 The term "Mild West" was coined by Robert Francis' discussion of the role of the RCMP in the Western provinces (Francis 1989, 29-51). Displays of a Canadian "Mild West" are offered, for instance, in George Bowering's novel *Caprice* (1987) or William Phillips's film *Gunless* (2014); both hinge on inverting the US stereotype and a self-ironic commentary on the validity of such national(ist) stereotyping.

into the grand Anglo-European archive of the written canon. In leaving behind the deconstructive and performative premises of Canadian Literature and Prairie Literature, Melnyk and Coates peddle settler colonial epistemologies. They showcase settler colonialism's double cultural work of foregrounding settler narratives at the cost of disappearing indigenous epistemologies ("we came here") and indigenization of the settlers ("the land made us", see Morgensen 2012, 9). It seems that the Canadian "Mild West" is still essentially "Western," after all. Similarly, the Calgary Stampede stages regional cultures and indigenizes white settler practices, thus forging a Western Canadian "icon, brand, myth" (see Foran's 2008 book title): It markets Western cultures and thus creates the Stampede as a legend in its own right.

Settler Chic and Going "Western" at the Calgary Stampede

On July 5, 1967, the *Calgary Herald* described the Stampede as composed "by and of" Calgarians, and directed at no lesser audience than "the world" (qtd. in Foran 2008, 2). Its Western culture is embodied and performed by the body politic of the locals ("citizens" calling on the white male norm of the national subject). But "Western" also allegedly becomes available to all during the Stampede, due to its carnivalesque character: The lines between acting and being Western are typically blurred as Calgary offers to the "the world" the experience of going "Western" problematically equals going "native", as I will show below.

The Calgary Stampede capitalizes on hospitality, conviviality, and simplicity, experienced by visitors and locals during public pancake breakfasts, line dancing, rodeo sporting events, Western music entertainment, Indigenous traditions and encounters, and evening shows. It builds on the historic period of cattle ranching in Canada operated, as Johnston and MacKinnon claim, "by American know-how and Eastern Canadian or European capital" (100). The Stampede spectacle thus reiterates the invention of the Canadian West by Eastern (Canadian, US-American, European) interpellation by drawing on settlement history on the one hand and, on the other hand, by canvassing nostalgic (re)productions of a usable past in the Wild West spectacles.

Its inventor, Guy Weadick, was an American with a hunch for adapting the US-American Western show somewhat involuntarily to the latter-day Canadian multiculturalist ideals. In 1912, Weadick, a show cowboy who had traveled with Buffalo Bill's Wild West on the American circuit, convinced four Alberta ranchers to start an agricultural fair with show elements. Weadick had never worked on a ranch, but possessed enough show experience to envision a Western carnival that would allow everyone to go "Western." In a rulebook, he spelled out the recipe for coupling business with folklore in, as he insisted, an authentic representation, a "real pageant of the plains, devoid of the old stereotyped Wild West exhibition [...] no circus parade of actors tricked out to tawdry and unauthentic trappings of a pseudo-picturesque nature [...] open to the world—no color or nationality barred" (qtd. in Kelm 2009, 719 and 721). Weadick's vision extended also to dress and the Western costume. In the same rulebook, he

decreed: "This is a WESTERN celebration by WESTERNERS, so discard the caps etc., and wear your big hats and other badges of the stock country" (ibid. 721, caps in original). Weadick thus made the Stampede open to all, blending the "authenticity" of the prairie pageant with the European ritual of the carnival, during which for a given time, social hierarchies are masqueraded and suspended. When all can become Westerners for the better of a week, the "authenticity" rests not in the dress, but in the presence of Western-clad bodies at the (show) events and exhibits. Until today, the Stampede combines elements of agricultural exhibition and carnival, such as sheep shearing, steer wrestling, or wild-cow milking that replay in ritualized form the scenes of settlement and mastering and civilizing of the "wild".[3]

Juxtaposed to the outdoors and wilderness tropes is the domestic culture displayed at the Stampede; the program includes Western dining and dancing, chuckwagon cook-offs and the celebration of a trademark Western hospitality that is extended to all in a gesture of dress-up: honorary guests receive Stampede honors in a white-hatting ceremony that combines Canada's national colours with the good guy costume of the Western, where white hats often distinguish the heroes from the villains in black hats. In 2013, for instance, the white-hatting ceremony was accompanied by an oath "sworn" by the newcomers:

> "I [insert name], havin' visited the only genuine Western city in Canada, namely Calgary, and havin' been duly treated in exceptional amounts of heart-warmin', 'hand-shakin', tongue-loosenin', 'back-slappin', 'neighbor-lovin' western spirit, do solemnly promise to spread this here brand of hospitality to all folks and critters who cross my trail hereafter. On the count of three, we will raise our hats and give a loud YAHOO!" (private record)

The hatting ceremony seeks to make Westerners of everyone, but it replays the Western "machine" that opposes the "good" white cowboy/settlers and their foes, the "Indians." As Emma LaRoque (1994) claims, the reproduction of Western culture puts First Nations peoples in an ever "reactive" situation and ultimately renders impossible any reconciliation between "colonial history and contemporary life" (151). Like any celebration of Western culture, the Calgary Stampede perpetuates settler chic, thus cannibalizing indigenous traditions and knowledges into a celebration of settler histories. The Western spectacle is a body regime pertaining to dress, habit, and an alleged shared fascination with Western ways. The private and

3 The violent treatment of animals for entertainment purposes has been critiqued by animal rights activists and prompted improvements on site; in a personal discussion with the author, farmers at the agricultural exhibit argue that they follow high standards and keep veterinarians close. For an overview of Stampede Animal Rights politics, see for instance Kevin Young, 2017: "Animal Racing. Shifting Codes of Canadian Social Tolerance", in: *The Palgrave International Handbook of Animal Abuse Studies*, London, Palgrave, 271-288.

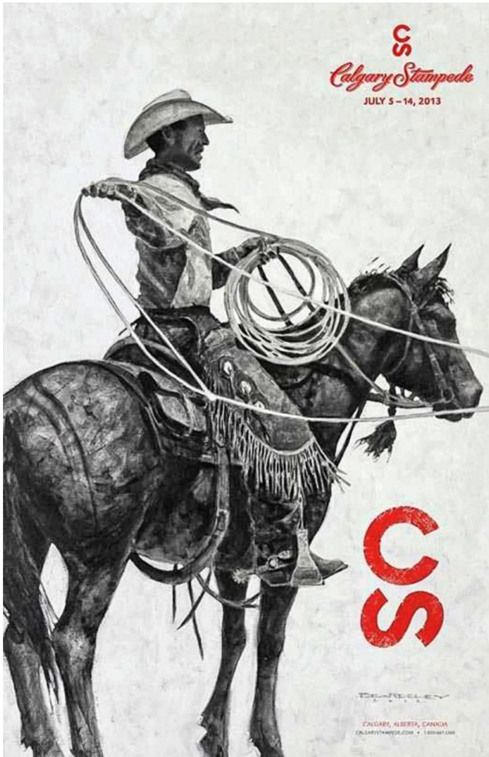

Figure 2: Duke Beardsley. Calgary Stampede Poster 2013. Courtesy of Calgary Stampede Archives.

public spheres are fused; domesticity is colonized and linked, as Tony Ballantyne (2009) has stressed, to the public stage and the imperial state.

The continued success of the Stampede stems from its mixture between Western heritage, its ongoing popularity, its agriculture and trade fair features, as well as its carnivalesque capacity to comment on pressing issues of the day (cf. Foran 2008). All of these features are combined in the icon of the cowboy and the cult of (mostly white) Western masculinity attached to this figure.[4] Since 1977, the Stampede includes exhibits of Western Art that furnish cowboy culture to visitors and provide official posters, as seen in 2013 with Duke Beardsley's celebration of the working cowboy (see fig. 2). Beardsley iconizes the cowboy, offering no reference to the setting or time of this portrait. He is typically disinterested in the viewer but focused on his aim beyond the frame, his body posture as alert as his horse's in a symbiotic still life. The grey color scheme and pointillism of the visible brush strokes echo the grimness of a prairie morning, the joylessness of the work, but also black-and-white

4 See esp. Seiler 2009 and Varga 1984. The rise of the cowboy as icon of popular culture is closely linked to the development of the Western narrative, initiated by dime novels in the 19th century and developed by the Western film and the Hollywood film industry. The cowboy is arguably a fantastic projection of a white urban elite; as Christine Bold has shown, the success of Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902/ first filmed 1914) was orchestrated by the "Frontier Club", Eastern powerplayers from business and politics who wanted to see their white masculinist fantasies spoon-fed to diverse urban audiences (cf. Bold 2013). Hence the intricate whiteness of the cowboy which has been affirmed in popular culture but critiqued by historical work highlighting the work and presence of black and Native American cowboys (such as Texas Jack Omohundro at Buffalo Bill's Wild West). In the Stampede context, the most telling example might be the Indigenous athlete and winner of the very first saddle bronc competition in 1912, Tom Three Persons, a member of the Blackfoot Confederation; see also LaRoque (1994).

Western film aesthetic. Beardsley emblazons the hardship, human-animal companionship, and disinterest in mundane worldly matters ascribed to the cowboy.

The cowboy type's characteristics spill over into the show-cowboy or rodeo-cowboy type who performs cowboy life for entertainment. Rodeo was invented as a show act for the Wild West shows and masculinized across North America (see e.g. Wooden/Ehringer 1996; Kelm 2009): from 1923 onwards, women were allowed to compete at the Stampede in one discipline only, barrel racing. Women riders became the ornamental part for rodeo as trick riders dandies or rodeo queens entertaining at night opposite the day program of sports (see Weninger/Dallaire 2017). As a consequence, rodeo became the sphere of the hypermasculine cowboys, whom Weadick envisioned as a role model, "courteous and self-contained, truthful, honest and brave" (qtd. in Kelm 2009, 719).

The Stampede rodeo offers, in the sense of Eric Hobsbawm's words (1983), an "invented tradition" that invites identification with a group or imagined community, in this case, the fabulous community of "Westerners". The rodeo creates excitement and a sense of ranch life, despite the fact that the Canadian "Beef Bonanza" (Johnston/MacKinnon 1985, 100) was short-lived (1881 to 1890s) and generally less successful than the roundups south of the border.[5] Rodeo embellishes a regional past and turns it into a sport with rules that have little bearing on historical ranch routines, where horse breaking was a rare activity, and riders would stay with their horses as long as they could. In real life, bull riding, the pinnacle of all rodeo events, was unnecessary and too dangerous; it best served as a bravery contest on the ranch.

The Stampede thus exemplifies not only the transformation of settler culture into an 'indigenous' conundrum, but also the explicitly gendered and sexual processes at work in settler colonialism (cf. Morgensen 2012, 9f.). Following Ann Laura Stoler's (2006) argument that colonial practices are immediately embodied and intimately link gender and sexuality to capital and empire, the rodeo cowboy's entertainment work displays an innuendo of white male struggle for economic and cultural value and, Eastern recognition. The celebration of the Stampede as Western culture spectacle compels "non-Westerners" to go Western; the audience is, in this sense, not the "world" as the *Calgary Herald* imagined, but the "empire," a disembodied power interpellating the West to groom its culture and maintain its narrative of difference from and membership of the nation-state—such as in 2011, when William and Kate, Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, visited the Stampede during their Royal Tour and were, of course white-hatted.

5 Johnston and MacKinnon wrap their nostalgia for cattle ranching in a rhetoric of violent displacement with the arrival of homesteading under a new government: "The doom of the big ranches was sealed in the late 1890's with the election of a Liberal government that abolished the Closed Lease System, cancelled existing leases, and opened the ranching country to homesteading. No longer protected from homesteaders, and particularly from American dryland farmers who began to arrive about 1900, ranchers were forced to retrench" (Johnston/MacKinnon 1985, 100f.).

Language knows (k)not: Collapsed spaces and voyeuristic intimacies in *Stampede and the Westness of West* (2016)

Aritha van Herk's oeuvre is tethered to the Canadian West and her own positioning as a writer. Her early piece "A Gentle Circumcision" (van Herk 1985), her "incorrigible" historiography of Alberta *Mavericks* (van Herk 2002) and her most recent *Stampede and the Westness of West* are not bookends, but rather vantage points in a deliberately rhizomatic oeuvre that offers vistas of amorous and odious, mocking and dead serious specimens of Canadian Western cultures. She is both a Stampede fan and commentator who plays with appearances, for instance by wearing a pink cowboy hat and cowboy boots-earrings in a 2018 interview on Calgary's Stampede culture, in which she calls the Stampede a "low-grade virus" that breaks out in July every year.[6]

In *Stampede and the Westness of West*, van Herk frames the spectator's experience of the West at the Calgary Stampede. A variation of her own onlooker self (van Herk was named the first Artist-in-Residence in 2012), the lyrical I/narrator/experiencer renders this experience in what she calls "prose poetry," texts that straddle genre boundaries between poetry, creative nonfiction, dramatic monologue, meditation, collage, and historiography. The title promises an essentialist enlightenment on the "Westness of West," which is turned on its head right away--not least with the cover showing a deliberately un-iconic grass-river-land (see fig. 3).

Likewise, the titles of the prose poems assembled are brief, mostly nouns, often monosyllabic ("Noise", "Race", "Chucks", "Buck", "Lust"), reminiscent of a keywords list or catalog. Yet the titles merely masquerade the complexities of the contents, whether for the connoisseur of Stampede protocol or for the ignoramus. Straight up, van Herk therefore asks readers to do the work of ordering themselves: should we read page by page, piece by piece? Should we leaf through? And likewise, who is this "I" who sometimes talks to us, who rather asks questions instead of providing answers, builds oxymora and metaphors? The opening piece, "The dreaming" (11), performs just that: piecing together snippets of Stampede knowledge and reception contexts, juxtaposing those who leave the town at its beginning ("The curled lip … dismissing this déclassé debauch, this faux fiesta …", ibid.) with the self-reflective dreamer herself: "Am I trapped in a synthetic documentary? […] Am I artist or patron?" (ibid.) The dream comes to a sudden end in a "pandemonium of hope," a threat and an elation: "Stampede or else." (ibid.) The text stages a poetic dance of authorial positioning and teases the implied reader to latch onto the ever evasive "Westness of West" paraded in the title.

6 https://globalnews.ca/video/4330030/calgarys-stampede-culture; see also Katherine Roberts' assessment of van Herk's "Sundance Style" and performances commenting on cowboy myths (Roberts 2010), which makes an argument similar to mine but sticks to literary performance.

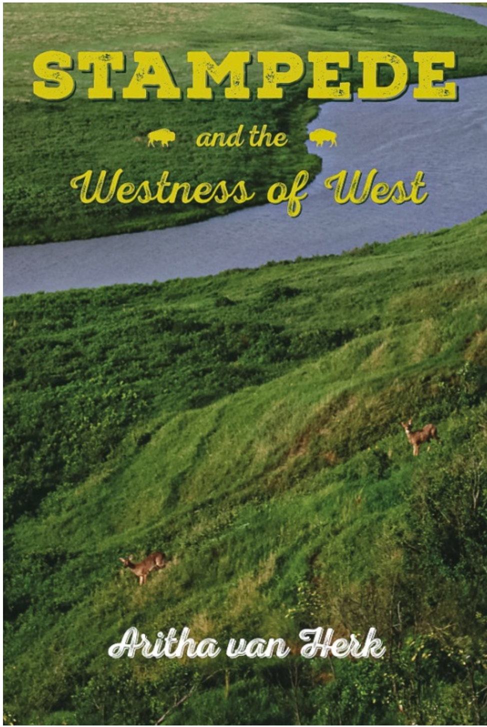

Figure 3: Aritha van Herk, 2017, *Stampede and the Westness of West*. Cover image.

Throughout the collection, amid the many synesthetic references and glimpses of Western knowledge, van Herk evokes the narrator as an experiential node. This is achieved by a priority given to looking-with-feeling through time and space. The narrator looks out for, at, back at, and beyond the Western spectacle. Her looks and the talking about them stage intimacies and desires fulfilled and unrequited. They blend past, present, and future into an incollapsible moment of being-in-the-world which, importantly, remains an ontology unto itself. *Stampede and the Westness of West* is composed in a roughly diachronic arch of expectations, starting out with "the dreaming" about the Stampede and ending on "Shooting a Saskatoon," a version of van Herk's ongoing meditation on the West enhanced for the present volume. The trope of looking-longingly creates an intimacy within the Western carnival which inverts the very sense of the spectacle: van Herk transforms the action, the movement, and the performance in the public sphere into a private experience that can neither be communicated nor imitated. Why bother reading about it then? Because it illuminates and troubles the workings of settler colonial intimacies and the long-neglected primacy of bodily knowledge over wording and worlding.

"Lust" (van Herk 2017, 50-52) begins with the narrator's *fait accompli*: "I kissed a cowboy. Enough already, I finally kissed a cowboy." (50) After this confession, the text quickly resorts to an academic stance, pleading the necessity of the act for, among others, "my education" and "my blood pressure." (ibid.) The poem thus discusses the Western romance narrative and the performance of gender roles at the rodeo. The narrator spirals out to return to the moment; she talks about the cowboy as a generic figure, parades cowboys at the rodeo to the implicit reader, and then returns to the narrator's meeting with the man and brief moment of (staged) intimacy.

The middle part heralds cowboys (in plural) as the essence of the Western spectacle and of the rodeo: "Whatever is western, they are, whatever is frontier, they are;

whatever is gumption they are". The cowboy here is not a singular individual but identified as a group; "they" are identified by the spectators, who in turn become the collective "we" opposite the cowboys: "we" dress up Western, use "cowboy language" and "toughen up" for the imaginary pain we feel when seeing the cowboy bucked off. Van Herk casts the infield as theater: the performers in the middle are interpellated as "cowboys" in the gaze of the onlookers. They spin so fast and shine so bright they freeze the movement of the rodeo into a still ("cowboys concretize the dynamic center of rodeo, they outspin the midway", 50).

Still, the cowboys are real, but beyond grasp: In dressing western and watching the rodeo, the onlookers "picked their pockets and stole their idiom." The narrator's admission that "we're mail order imitators" of the cowboys explains her desire: she wants to consume the figure she can only ogle from the sidelines: "no wonder I wanted to kiss a cowboy." (51) This phrase also marks the return to the encounter between individuals in the text: the reader is represented with a documentary snippet about the cowboy that turns out to be make-believe: he claims he is "from the East," a "Maritimer" from the Atlantic provinces, but the narrator sees straight through his palimpsest performance, the alias of the Maritimer performing as cowboy just "a fine disguise for a man from High River," a town just outside of Calgary (50f.). The figure of the cowboy, as we have seen above a product of Eastern business and politics, is thus pulled from Calgary to the exotic (of equally provincial) Maritimes and back to his Western ways, the Westerner posing as Easterner posing as Westerner.

This tautology frames the interplay between performer and onlooker. As the cowboy "profession" is performed, so is the effortless veneration by the spectators, whose onlooking is really a laborious effort. Van Herk calls all of this "work": the performance of the West is a communal task shared between the cowboys and the spectators: those who watch the cowboy do the "work" of voyeurism; those who "tag along" do the work of "side-kickery." (52)

In the end, the relation between cowboy and spectator reenacts the gendered narrative of the Western romance: the narrator is playing out "the cowgirl code" displaying herself for the man. Once in the arena, no action is required on her part: "get up, dress up, show up, never give up." (ibid.) Her performance of passive cowgirldom succeeds as she is being kissed, unraveling in that moment her secret cowgirl desire. – However, in retrospect, the narrator confesses that this romantic hiatus, the shared kiss, was a sham: "he pretended to be reluctant and I pretended to be eager." (ibid.) This rather disappointing outcome thus inverts once more the relation between participants entrenched in their roles. It can be read in various ways: first, as a due reward for the spectator's hard work of voyeurism; second, as mutual reassurance (between the narrator, the fake cowboy, and the audience) that the romance of "cowboy kisses cowgirl at the rodeo" is alive; and finally, as satisfaction for the reader and onlooker of the scene of the kiss. We, the readers, are addressed throughout the text, implicitly with the opening line "I kissed a cowboy," in between

as the inclusive spectator "we" opposite the object of our gaze, and in the narrator's final shout-out to herself: "kiss that damn cowboy, and get it over with" (ibid.).

The "Lust" of the title thus becomes a lusty engagement in voyeurism and charade, in acting and observing oneself in action. The semiotics of the West is used as a stage here, and as the characters and audience indulge in masquerade, they rejoice in subversive laughter about figment stories, identity work, and the performance of Western gender role stereotypes. With the logic of looking-and-feeling, van Herk turns the tables on Laura Mulvey's seminal "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (Mulvey 1975). Where Mulvey argues that the female figure is frozen in a symbolic order opposite the male onlooker's defining power, van Herk's spectator returns the gaze and enters herself onto the scene. The carnival of the Stampede is an arena of exposure and performance; the task is to playact a romance story to get it over with. You just have to make sure you are seeing it and you are seen doing it.

Hence, van Herk's own performance as Stampede artist and cowgirl poetess refracts the images and stories of the Canadian West's cultural industry. Granted, van Herk participates in the making; she has become a local celebrity. But her cowgirl artist persona also shifts the emphasis to the gendered nature of the West she tried to "circumcise" in 1985 (van Herk 1985). In the continued spectacle of *Stampede and the Westness of West*, she posits a female experience/author/artist persona at the center of it all that is ultimately entangled in knots of knowledges, as the second text discussed here shows.

In "Shooting a Saskatoon" (van Herk 2017, 92-97), the look and feel of the mythical West meditate on Western (i.e. white and settler colonial) language. The title "Shooting a Saskatoon" was inspired by a misunderstanding: the narrator was asked by a European whether in the Canadian West, "Is it possible to shoot a saskatoon or is that animal too elusive for bullets?" (95) However, saskatoons are berries native to North America and represent an important nutrient for First Nations, specifically in the fruity paste of pemmican. The name might have reminded the European ignoramus of the "raccoon" or another animal foreign to European minds. Van Herk's text is a response to this "unlikely question" which for her becomes "the perfect metaphor for the west." (ibid.) Her engagement with the West includes attempts at naming and translating it or pinning it down in space or time. The text performs and troubles the settler colonial desire of applying a European epistemology (language poetry, self-location) to the West. As a coda to *Stampede and the Westness of West*, "Shooting a Saskatoon" parades the failure of a Western-only perspective and shows the difficulty of "mak[ing] space" for Indigenous Feminisms (Green ^{2}2017) and to address the questions van Herk's literary cowgirl poetess does not feel entitled to answer for us. The poem "Treaty Seven" (65) makes space for the indigenous settlement at the confluence of the Bow and Elbow rivers at today's site of Calgary and asks us to ponder the politics of the participation of First Nations people at the Stampede: "celebration or exploitation" (ibid.)?

"Shooting a Saskatoon" offers a mixture between reader-address and self-inquiry. It provides questions and advice about going West and glimpses of the West's phenomenology. It begins with hearsay and ends with death by language: "This west the story goes, is a real place, with sky and sagebrush, with a small and a swagger and a whiskey swig sweetness uncorrupted by language. In this real west, the distilled perfections of mornings and afternoons and evenings are not just observed or articulated but tasted, touched, worn" (92). Juxtaposed to this beginning of sensations and incorporations of the West, in the end, is the journey to the West, prompted by the advice "go West." Van Herk transposes the formula of Western expansionism "go west, young man" into her own text; it makes "another state of mind stumble to its feet and try to untie the intricate knot of language that ties us all to death" (97).

Throughout, van Herk links 'the literal' to 'the imaginary'. Returning to the 'literal' entails looking at the letters, the meaning of a word beyond the context in which it is used; conversely, the 'imaginary' means everything beyond, that which is not expressible and cannot be put into letters or words. In this play between the word out of context and the image beyond the word, she employs Western language and Western tropes to explain that which cannot be explained, the West: "A monster of indifference and mistress of camouflage, this west performs as escape artist and tightrope walker, ineradicably beautiful, and oh so silently eloquent. (92)"

The narrator takes detours not only through sense perceptions but also through the West's materiality: "Lariat and its largo can never be said the same way twice, threading through the keyhole of the square dance" (93). She conjures the movement of the lasso (the lariat), when being roped, a paradoxical spectacle: It looks slow and you can barely detect the movement, but it becomes a perfect circle only when spun very fast. The lasso's largo, its slow and tranquilizing quality, contrasts and corresponds with the form and movement of square dancing. In Western square dance, couples form and abandon each other, move back and forth and return to the initial form of the circle. Both the square dancers and the flying lasso move perpetually and seemingly slow, composing in movement forms that have to collapse when the movement stops. Both the lasso and the square dance also obscure the individualism of the person and the primacy of the human body, as the viewer's attention is drawn to the circular form.

The circle represents the basis of the knot that van Herk uses to symbolize the West. Throughout the text, she collapses the West into knots, entangled entities of language, experience, place and time. The knot represents a central motif, bound up in idiomatic references, as a collection of quotes from the text shows:

> The west's roundup has ridden the cusp between literal and imaginary, differences and its discontents, the *knots* of invention and actuality.
> If only we could *knot* the west into a handkerchief of distinguishable landforms. But the west won't fit.

> Maybe west's occupants can lean toward the literal, but the west is still a *knot* that no one can cut, Gordian or not, tongue-tied, a double positive. That intricate looped pattern a *knot* that pulls tightness toward incomplete completion, a souvenir and an invitation, a carnival that refuses to fold up and close itself down. (van Herk 2017, 92-97, emphasis added)

In the last two quotes, the double positive of the Gordian knot is echoed in the figure eights the Chuckwagons make around the barrels after the starting horn sounds, as they "pull themselves through the terrible knot around two barrels and must stay upright in the chalk circles" (96). Echoing the loop shape of the lasso and the square dance, the figure eight during the Chuckwagon race becomes the magic number or magic form here: It twists the circle once and represents the middle ground between the loop (or zero, if you like) and the knot which entangles the line. Where the loop allows for perpetual movement, the knot has a way in, but no way out. In the thrill, danger, and spectacle of the Chuckwagon races, the Western carnival itself is ingrained, a festival that resists the rules of the carnival: it does not end, neither in time nor in space: "a carnival that refuses to fold up and close itself down." (ibid.) The endless figure eight becomes the knot of no return, a disruption of movement and space-time in its own right, the Charybdis of white conquest.

Conclusion

Aritha van Herk's Western carnival throws all the questions back at us. Her West oscillates between the centrist and continental views I outlined in the beginning. She evokes the Canadian West as a place defined through the gaze from the East. Simultaneously, she uses the continental viewpoint for recalibrating the US American Western narrative from a performative and feminist point of view. The spectacle of the Stampede offers a rich landscape of performance to the eye, it survives only when the viewer participates in the show.

Van Herk lassoes the reader with a synesthetic experience of the Western narrative. As van Herk argues, the West must be experienced rather than shown, maybe even swallowed whole. It must be touched, worn, and incorporated. The absence of a personal pronoun to go with "Westerners" indicates this: van Herk does not talk about "Us Westerners," "them," or "the" for that matter, but leaves this category open to all, in the very sense of Weadick's inclusive vision, while at the same time troubling the notion of a Canadian multicultural carnival with her language criticism. And this explodes not only the space and time of the West. It also extends the West's presence beyond the terminating uses of language that "ties us all to death." (97) Ultimately, van Herk's prose poetry positions the West beyond and betwixt the discourses of centrist and continental. Her work debates with the essentialist quest of an Alberta national canon outlined in the first part of this essay, bearing witness to postmodernist Prairie Literature's attempts at "unsettling" and the Eastern interpellating gaze. While at first sight, van Herk's white feminist view might be prob-

lematic for reenacting the indigenization of settler colonial views ("the land made us"), her prose poetry in *Stampede and the Westness of West* articulates a fundamental critique of narratives of filiation, heritage, and legacy. At the end of the day, the Canadian West remains the European cultural imaginary's cul-de-sac.

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