Cowboy Justice: An American Trip

RICHARD WILLIAM HILL

THE COWBOY

Picture a Cowboy. Try not to situate him anywhere or otherwise complicate the image. Go for something distilled and iconic – whatever comes to mind without self-conscious reflection.

Perhaps, like me, you see him standing, his legs slightly apart in a gunfighter's stance. His lean body is aimed forward like a weapon, his intense, squinting gaze devouring the landscape. My cowboy is dressed in the faded red shirt and tan leather vest that I remember Matt Dillon wearing on the *Gunsmoke* TV series.[1] His revolver is holstered at his side, hand poised, waiting to draw.

What else do we know about this cowboy? We know that he is a loner. We know that he speaks little. We know that he is intelligent in a practical way, without being intellectual. Although he may be tempted to act in self-interest, we know that, *in extremis*, his moral intuitions are bound to be selfless and perfect. He is not a civilised fellow, but he will die to protect those who bring civilisation into the wild spaces he occupies.

If, like a Hollywood movie camera, we raise our perspective so that we are looking down on our cowboy from above we can imagine his relationship to the space around him. This is not precisely a question of locating him geographically, although geography figures into it. The exercise is to understand his symbolic, spatial relationship to the world. In front of him is a wilderness, an untamed land, rich in resources, beautiful and frightening, home to many fierce desires unchecked by civilised Christian morality. There may be Indians in this wilderness, but they are, as many Enlightenment philosophers posited, in a state of nature themselves.[2] Behind the cowboy follow the mechanisms of civilisation that will tap the riches of the land. One need only look at John Gast's *American Progress* for a complete inventory. George A. Croffut's marketing copy for lithographs of Gast's painting tells the story:

This rich and wonderful country – the progress of which, at the present time, is the wonder of the old world – was until recently, inhabited exclusively by the lurking savage and wild beasts of prey. ... In the foreground, the central and principal figure, a beautiful and charming female, is floating westward through the air bearing on her forehead the "Star of Empire...". On the right of the picture is a city, steamships, manufactories, schools and churches over which beams of light are streaming and filling the air – indicative of civilization. The general tone of the picture on the left declares darkness, waste and confusion. ... Fleeing from "Progress"... are Indians, buffaloes, wild horses, bears, and other game, moving Westward, ever Westward, the Indians with their squaws, papooses, and "pony lodges", turn their despairing faces towards, as they flee the wondrous vision. The "Star" is too much for them. *... What home, from the miner's humble cabin to the stately marble mansion of the capitalist, should be without this Great National Picture ... Who would not have such a beautiful token to remind them of the country's grandeur and enterprise which have caused the mighty wilderness to blossom like the rose!!!* [3]

TITLE PAGE
Thunderstorm, Interstate 69, Indiana
Photograph by Bev Koski

John Gast *American Progress* 1872

Museum of the American West collection, Autry National Center

Frederic Remington *In from the Night Herd* ca. 1890

In this symbolic landscape our iconic cowboy inhabits the very boundary-line of the frontier. In his gunfighter's pose it cuts him right in two: one foot slightly forward in the wilderness, the other slightly back with civilisation. It is the divided nature of the cowboy that makes him such a powerful and dangerous figure. He is, without doubt, an agent of civilisation. He kills Indians and imposes the law on a lawless frontier. He brings productive industry to nature. And yet to do this he also becomes a creature of the wilderness, a lover of the vast, wild, open spaces with a capacity for violence matching or exceeding that imagined in his savage enemies. He loves the freedom that civilisation will inevitably take away from him. This freedom makes him, like the Indian and the wild landscape itself, a screen for projected desire.

The divided nature of the cowboy can never be resolved one way or another. He exists only in the process of conquering the wilderness, not before or after. When the narrative ends he will ride off into the sunset looking for new freedom and a new wilderness to destroy.

So if the cowboy is a process, what is the nature of the process? Instrumentally, violence is at the heart of this process, but this violence has its own peculiar rationale that gets to the heart of American political morality. In American cowboy mythology civilisation is not simply imposed, it is re-constituted within a distinctly American framework. The morality of the cowboy precedes and enables the morality of the church or the state, the usual agents of civilisation. The cowboy's morality is pre-social, rooted in a natural law that is accessible not to intellect but to intuition. Part of his freedom is that, unlike the rest of us, he need only obey this law. In doing so he will create the conditions for church and state, but in such a way that both are uniquely underpinned by an "indigenous" natural law.

In short, cowboy morality is at the heart of American exceptionalism. In a post-September 11th Pentagon briefing, George W. Bush, referring to the hunt for Osama bin Laden, told the world, "I want justice. And there's an old poster out West, I recall, that says, 'Wanted: Dead or Alive'". We heard further echoes of frontier justice when the US decided to go to war with Iraq without the support of the United Nations. Former White House Counsel (now Attorney General) Alberto Gonzales also seems to prefer cowboy justice to the rule of international law, arguing that the US ought to exempt itself from the Geneva Convention. He wrote that the "new paradigm" of the war on terrorism "renders obsolete Geneva's strict limitations on questioning of enemy prisoners and renders quaint some of its provisions". Of course Donald Rumsfeld was quick to invoke the Geneva Convention when Iraqi forces paraded captured American troops before television cameras. On a March 23rd 2003 episode of *Face the Nation*, he pointed out that the "Geneva Convention indicates that it's not permitted to photograph and embarrass or humiliate prisoners of war". That American and British forces had already been displaying Iraqi prisoners to the TV cameras at every opportunity – often on their knees with their heads hooded in burlap sacks – never seemed to cross his mind.

Underlying these positions is the implication that international law may be well and good for some nations; but, come on, this is America! We're the good guys, riding across the international frontier in our white hats, dispensing justice. Like the cowboy, America is accountable to a higher law (increasingly derived from home-grown Christian Fundamentalism) and not the community of nations. Likewise, when the Bush administration refuses to recognise the International Criminal Court. American soldiers might be "frivolously" tried for war crimes! Absurd! As the poster for the 1953 Ronald Reagan film *Law and Order* declares: "From Dodge City to Tombstone, his guns were the only law".

Patricia Nelson Limerick writes, "If Hollywood wanted to capture the emotional centre of Western history, its movies would be about real estate. John Wayne would have been neither a gunfighter, nor a sheriff, but a surveyor, or speculator, or claims lawyer".[4] The gaze of the American sublime landscape and the landscapes of Western paintings and films is acquisitive, visually celebrating and consuming what appear to be endless miles of real estate and untapped natural resources.[5] All of this is to say that the cowboy is, historically and in our current crisis, an alibi, a sleight of hand. Cowboy morality is what America talks about while it is busy taking what it wants by force.

THE INDIAN

I find it harder to distil a single, iconic image of the Indian.[6] Since the advent of the Hollywood Western the Indian is almost always a Plains Indian. It is easy to picture his war shirt, feather headdress and painted rawhide shield. But even this is deceptive, because the Indian may not be a male warrior at all, but a beautiful Indian Princess, paddling her canoe in the moonlight, or saving her white lover from her father and the rest of the tribe.

But even the male Plains warrior is tricky to read. What is he doing? Most often he is an unseen menace in the landscape. Viewers of Hollywood Westerns are encouraged to anxiously scan the horizon for him. He is such a part of wild nature that you don't see him until he pops up out of the wilderness like a jack in the box. I remember tasks from children's activity books: "How many Indians can you find hidden in this picture?" At first you couldn't see anything at all, just a forest. Then, as you looked more closely there they were. Thus the Indian attack requires no more explanation than a hurricane or other natural disaster. They attack because that's their nature.[7]

Frederic Remington *A Peril of the Plains* ca. 1890

Perhaps the most frightening thing that Indians do is to take captives. The threat of Indian captivity is the predominant Indian trope in all media, from the first accounts of Indians to the present. Initially the captivity narrative projected an outright fear of Indian masculinity and its threat to the purity of white, Christian women. Very quickly, however, the subtext of sexual desire branched off into a kind of pornography that could be enjoyed as it was being condemned; a covert expression of desires that had become twisted through repression. There is now an entire sub-genre of romance fiction based on the captivity narrative in which the fantasy of wild, Indian masculinity is openly indulged. The titles say it all: *To Tame a Savage, War Cloud's Passion, Savage Heat, Catch a Wild Heart*, or, for the more poetic, *A Promise of Thunder*. A captivity film by Ron Howard, *The Missing*, appeared as recently as 2003 (although the film seems to imagine itself as a "balanced" representation because it includes a "good" Apache as well as an "evil" one).

If the captivity narrative is the most persistent Indian trope the most ubiquitous contemporary one has to be that of the "vanishing Indian", particularly the endless variations, in all media, on James Fraser's sculpture *The End of the Trail*. This is a sad, vanquished Indian slumped astride his equally depressed and emaciated horse. His war lance hangs at his side, its point aimed impotently toward the ground. And, for those who still didn't find the message clear enough, Fraser planned to have a monumental bronze version cast and placed on a cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean, the final terminus of western expansion. Wartime metal shortages mercifully put an end to this ambition. By the time the original *The End of the Trail* was created in 1915, this passive, melancholic response to Native

American genocide was well established. In an 1844 text, George Catlin, the renowned "Indian painter", paused in his discussion of the extinction of the bison for a brief reverie on what he considered to be the inevitable, if regrettable, Native American genocide:

Nature has no where presented more beautiful and lovely scenes, than those of the vast prairies of the West; and of man and beast, no nobler specimens than those who inhabit them – the Indian and the buffalo – joint and original tenants of the soil, and fugitives together from the approach of civilized man; they have fled to the great plains of the West, and there, under an equal doom, they have taken up their last abode, where their race will expire, and their bones will bleach together.

Can you imagine a similar scene in Nazi Germany? An artist saying to himself, "Gee, it's kind of sad what's happening to the Jews. I bet a melancholic sculpture about their inevitable, tragic extinction would be a real hit".

The savage warrior, Indian Princess and vanishing Indian are united in that they are all representations that depend on the presence of the cowboy. Much more rare than a "sympathetic" representation of the Indian is a representation of the Indian for his own sake. The warrior needs white settlers to attack, the princess a white man with whom to fall in love and to whom she can betray her community, and the vanishing Indian can't vanish without plenty of help from white civilisation.

GONZO CURATING AND THE STATE OF THE COWBOY NATION

In the winter of 2004, Jimmie Durham invited me to work with him on this exhibition. He explained that one of my tasks would be to travel the American West in search of cowboy and Indian culture.

I also wanted to look closer to home – partly because Canada is very quick to let itself off the hook in these matters and partly because I wanted to get a sense of just how big the American West is: how wide is this mess and how deep does it run? The question dovetailed with a project I was beginning work on in collaboration with Gallery TPW and a group of young Aboriginal artists in Toronto called 7th Generation Image Makers (7thGIM).[8] 7thGIM is an art programme that was then run by my wife Bev Koski and artist Maria Hupfield, through Native Child and Family Services in Toronto. The artists involved were Wil Gaikezheyongai, Neil Crawford, Michael Crawford and Katie Longboat. We decided that we would travel up and down Yonge, Toronto's best-known street, mapping and documenting all of the representations of Indians: everything south of Bloor street and north of King. What we found was instructive: a system of exchange that bypassed the local mainstream culture altogether. There were quite a few shops selling plastic "made in China" Indians. These were a bizarre mélange of stereotypes, including fake looking Plains warriors praying under even faker looking Northwest Coast totem poles. These shops were inevitably run by recent immigrants and sold their wares primarily to tourists.

The absence of Aboriginal imagery for local consumption reflects mainstream Canada's wilful disinterest in the subject, a situation also reflected in Toronto's museums. Despite possessing a large Indigenous collection, the Royal Ontario Museum keeps it in vaults or in a tiny gallery in the basement. Cultures of the world celebrated in depth upstairs; Native cultures hidden away downstairs like a hastily repressed memory. Where the US celebrates its conquest of Indigenous peoples, mainstream Canada pretends to forget. They tried to

appropriate us as an image of Canadian national heritage in the 1960s and early '70s (think Expo 67), but once they realised we were, as a group, fairly pissed off about having been colonised, we became immediately uninteresting. If they could really forget, have the memory of us burned out by some new medical procedure, like Jim Carrey in the film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, Canadians would sign up in droves.

ACROSS THE BORDER

On July 22nd, 2004 my wife, Bev Koski, and I, feeling like spies, cross the border into the United States at Port Huron, Michigan. Bev is of Anishnabe (Ojibway) heritage; my mother was Cree. We are armed only with a rental car, a road atlas, and a list of appointments with curators in Western museums from Indianapolis to Los Angeles. Once past the anxiety of the border (who knows what these newly frightened and angry Americans are likely to do?), the lure of the open highway is powerful and seductive.

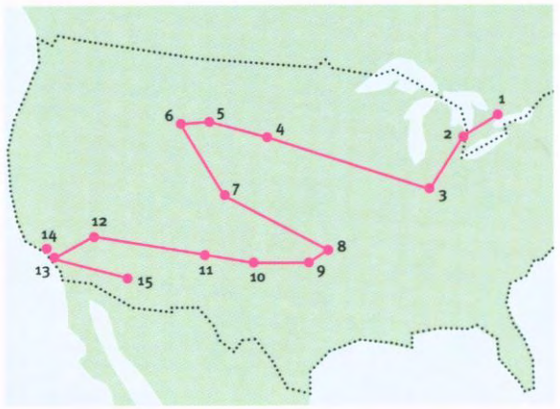
Our expected destination that night is Indianapolis, a day's drive from Toronto. We have an appointment in the morning with a curator at the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art. Towards evening, a few hours before arriving in Indianapolis, we run into two brief but very dramatic thunderstorms. Because the land is flat we can see them in the distance, layers of very dark clouds over patches of light sky. On the periphery are grey, waving sheets of rain. Either we overtake the storms, or they overtake us, but one way or another we end up in torrential rain and lightning for about ten or fifteen minutes at a time. Just when it seems that it is going to be impossible to see well enough to continue driving it lets up a little and we are able to keep going. A romantic part of me imagines it as a message from the Thunder-beings, a reminder not to forget the significance of the land. This is a point driven home throughout our trip as we become aware of the contrast between the remarkable landscapes we are encountering and the strange ideological uses to which they have been put in the mythology of the West.

Colonial apologists claim that we didn't deserve the land because we weren't using it productively. John Locke wrote:

As much land as a man tills, plants, improves, cultivates, and can use the product of, so much is his property. He by his labour does, as it were, inclose it from the common. ... God, when he gave the world to all mankind, commanded man also to labour ... He that in obedience to this command of God, tilled and sowed any part of it, thereby annexed to it something that was his property, which another had no title to, nor could without injury take from him.[9]

You can see where we mild-mannered hunter/gatherers are going to come out in Locke's scheme. And this idea remains operative at the greedy heart of contemporary global capitalism, which now insists that if there is something of value to be had and you aren't exploiting it for profit, you are, in effect, stealing from someone who could.

But there are other ways to know, value and make use of land. Often this knowledge is embedded in Aboriginal languages. Two friends, Heidi Bohaker and Darlene Johnson, recently told me about an Anishnabe (Ojibway) elder they had met who knew the names of many different Thunder-beings. He could tell, by the type of clouds that were forming, which Thunderer was creating a storm and what sort of storm it was likely to be. This blend of practical observation and symbolic narrative comes out of a long and rich connection to a particular landscape - in this case, the Great Lakes.



AN AMERICAN TRIP

1 **Toronto, Ontario**
2 **Port Huron, Michigan**
3 **Indianapolis, Indiana** (The Eiteljorg Museum)
4 **Wall, South Dakota** (Wall Drug)
5 **Sheridan, Wyoming**
6 **Cody, Wyoming** (Buffalo Bill Historical Center)
7 **Denver, Colorado** (Denver Art Museum)
8 **Tulsa, Oklahoma** (Gilcrease Museum)
9 **Oklahoma City, Oklahoma** (National Cowboy Museum)
10 **Amarillo, Texas**
11 **Santa Fe, New Mexico** (Institute of American Indian Arts)
12 **Las Vegas, Nevada**
13 **Los Angeles, California** (Autry National Center)
14 **Simi Valley, California** (Ronald Reagan Memorial Foundation)
15 **Phoenix, Arizona** (The Heard Museum)

Artist Fernando Palma Rodríguez is also concerned about knowledge lost with the loss of Aboriginal languages. He is Nahua (Aztec) and his home community, Atocpan-San Pedro, is on the brink of being absorbed into the suburban sprawl of Mexico City. He and others in his community have been working to maintain and renew interest in their language, which contains, for example, a great deal of information about local plants, including their medicinal uses. They hope to use this knowledge to argue the value of protecting their local environment. Palma Rodriguez has focused on the image of the Monarch butterfly. The North American Monarch's annual migration can range up to 3000 miles – from Canada to Mexico – but the butterfly is especially sensitive to environmental changes and has suffered a steep decline in recent years. For Palma Rodriguez this is a warning of trouble to come.

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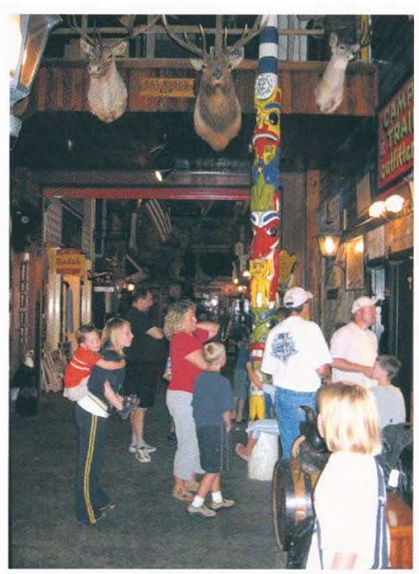
In his sculpture *Tocihuapapalutzin (Our Lady Butterfly)* Palma Rodríguez has crafted a flock of Monarchs from the detritus of the consumer capitalism that is currently threatening their survival. Their colourful wings are cut from aluminium beverage cans and made to flap by rods connected to motors from discarded cassette players. The flock's movements are controlled by a computer, which in turn creates different patterns of movement in response to the presence of the viewer – highlighting a relationship to which we might otherwise be blind.

The Eiteljorg Museum is located in a downtown area of Indianapolis containing a number of parks and civic buildings. It is our first Western museum, so we take a little time wandering around the grounds checking things out before going in. Out front are two bronze sculptures, a feature that we later discover is universal to Western museums. They inevitably depict wild animals, Indians or cowboys. The Eiteljorg has two out of three: leaping antelope out front near the street and, on a hill closer to the entrance, a larger-than-life Indian holding up a feather.

On the way out of town that afternoon there is a commercial on the radio insisting that real men don't eat quarter-pounders at McDonald's, they eat half-pounders at some place called Hardees. Since I doubt even Americans would associate being overweight with masculinity, one can only assume there is some cowboy connection: If you can't punch cattle for a living, you can at least lunch on cattle, the more the better.

Our next official stop is several days' drive away in Cody, Wyoming: the Buffalo Bill Historical Center. Our plan is to head northwest across Illinois and Iowa and then west through South Dakota to Wyoming. Before long we become bored with the endless cornfields of Illinois and start to pay attention to the many highway-side signs. Some contain political messages. Often they use a strategy of breaking up the message across consecutive signs, perhaps to build suspense or simply to make life easier for those who find reading a challenge. Somewhere in Illinois, planted in a cornfield, Bev spots a pair of signs that suggested its poster finds thinking a challenge. The first reads simply: "Terrorists". Okay, you've got our attention with the subject! Just down the road the second sign provides the predicate: "Love gun control". I spend several miles trying to imagine a scenario in which a terrorist would, indeed, be more likely to benefit from gun control than from having easy access to weapons.



Wal Drug, Wall, South Dakota

I can't recall when we begin to see signs for Wall Drug, which is located on the edge of the Badlands in South Dakota. It may have been in Iowa. Wall Drug has devised a marketing strategy based on the tedium of flat, endless cornfields. They have scattered signs for their store ("World's Largest Drugstore!") on highways for hundreds of miles in all directions. Each one carries a message designed to make an event out of your potential arrival in Wall. The closer you get the more hysterical they become. I hesitate to even mention the

place, for fear that this text will become yet another sign pointing to Wall Drug. When we finally do arrive, Wall Drug turns out to be not a drug store, but perhaps the world's largest tourist trap curio shop.

I sometimes have nightmares in which I am making my way through an endlessly large house that is somehow occupied by a malevolent presence. I travel from room to room seeking an exit. Each room is distinct. Each is claustrophobically cut-off from the outside world, a micro-environment with its own décor, mood and logic. Wall Drug is the closest I've come to that experience in waking life. Over the years it has grown as a conglomeration of, and elaboration on a variety of distinct buildings all now painfully merged into one. Like a Las Vegas casino, once you are inside it seems to go on in all directions without relief or exit. There are many rooms of different scales and types, all crammed with kitsch, most of it celebrating the mythology of the American West. There are movie posters, a complete range of clothing, hunting trophy animal heads, Western-style firearms that may or may not be real, endless trinkets. There is also a strange species of totem pole that we grow accustomed to in the course of our travels: remarkable only because it bears absolutely no aesthetic relationship to its Northwest Coast originals. There are also plenty of dioramas. They make me reflect, not for the last time, on this desire for simulation and the eerie parallels between museum strategies of exhibition and vernacular forms like Wall Drug.

There is an area with a series of staged photo-opportunities: Western images painted on plywood with holes strategically cut through it so that store customers can insert themselves into the scene. In one there is a tipi with an Indian woman standing in front of it holding a baby in a cradleboard. The baby is held out for display, rather than embraced. Both the entrance to the tipi and the woman's face have been cut out as invitations for visitors to mockingly assume Indian roles. As I pass by, a young white girl runs up, her family trailing. She is giddy with excitement and shouting, "Let's get our picture taken with the squaw!" The stereotype is quickly enacted as bodies compose themselves within the framework provided. A snap of the shutter freezes and preserves the tableau. In a moment it is time for the farce to be re-enacted by the next family. And the next. And the next. It is an efficient little assembly line for reproducing a nasty gendered ideology.

Wall Drug, Wall, South Dakota

Artist Lori Blondeau has argued that the representation of Aboriginal women is typically limited to the dichotomy of the squaw: a beast of burden and slave to men and the Princess (who needs no introduction).[10] Her photograph *The Lonely Surfer Squaw* uses satire and her own performing body to entangle this dichotomy and pull it to pieces. Here is Blondeau gamely pretending to be trying to live up to an ideal of California beauty (and you can almost hear the Beach Boys in the background singing their longing ode to eugenics: "I wish they all could be California girls!"). However, surfboard, fun-fur bikini and mukluks not withstanding, Saskatchewan in winter is not hospitable to beach-bunnies or semi-clad Indian Princesses. We can laugh them away as the nonsense they are.

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In *Red Handed* and *Remember In Grade...* Terrance Houle also highlights the awkward disjunction between pre-conceived identities and everyday experience. Whether caught in car headlights in his powwow regalia, or petulantly jammed into an ill-fitting craft-paper Indian costume, Houle embodies the discomfort of attempting to make a place for the cultural, the personal, the contemporary and the quotidian under the enveloping pressure of a spectacular stereotype.

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Beneath these layers of mis-representation, the process of colonisation did play out in gendered terms and it was often women who held communities and families together during the most difficult times. This was the case in my own family, which perhaps explains my affection for Faye Heavyshield's remarkably restrained sculpture. *Sisters*, composed of a circle of women's shoes with their heels inward and toes pointing defensively outward. Heavyshield has appropriated and inverted the stereotype of the pioneer's "circled wagons" and the toes of the shoes are cloven, suggesting a link to some other power of which the missionaries and Christian boarding school teachers would not approve. The women themselves are left to the imagination, but I have no trouble picturing them. They are my mother and my aunt dressed up to be taken seriously, always on guard, always ready to fight if necessary. I like the scale of the piece, too, the way in which the toes point out in every direction occupying all of whatever space they happen to be in.

In South Dakota and Wyoming it becomes clear that the identification with cowboy culture has moved out of the museums and tourist shops and into people's daily lives. When we stop to eat, the restaurants are filled with locals dressed in cowboy attire; maybe not whole outfits, but cowboy hats and boots here, big belt buckles there; shirts with pearly white snaps and pointy pockets. All the stuff cowboys were taught to wear by Hollywood designers. Often the men sport big, nineteenth century handlebar moustaches to ground their look further in faux-historical veracity.

The tourist welcome centre where we stop as we enter Wyoming provides an official state map. The legend on the front reads: "Cowboy-up America! Wyoming". Trying to make sense of this phrase now, as I write this, I look it up on the web. Immediately I discover a rich vein of vernacular culture. The phrase apparently comes out of rodeo culture. Someone who, for example, picks himself up after a bad throw from his horse has "cowboy'd up". You can find numerous products sporting the phrase, including a T-shirt with the text "Cowboy Up" printed on top of an iron cross. You can also find a remarkable poem, *Cowboy Up America*, by Jeff Hildebrandt, managing producer of the Westerns Movie Channel. It was written in response to the September 11th attacks and an illustrated version is apparently on display in the Bush White House. These are some choice stanzas:

When a Cowboy's in a pinch
he just tightens up the cinch,
spurs his horse and rides right through it
'cause that's the way the Duke'd do it.
He'd Cowboy Up.

And with our country now in danger
a cowboy's like the old Lone Ranger.
Ridin' hard and shootin' straight
fightin' those who spread the hate.
He'd Cowboy'd Up.

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So, let's give Uncle Sam a hand
'cause we're all ridin' for his brand.

And with that Texan in the saddle
our posse's gonna win the battle.
Let's Cowboy Up, pull our hats down tight.
Be rough and ready for the fight.
Our country's through with playin' games.
We're kickin' butt and taking names.
Yeah, Cowboy'd Up, pard, that means you.
Stand up tall and 'fore we're through
we'll kick 'em right in their gee-had
'Cause now, they've made the Cowboys Mad.[11]

Not one of the cowboys in this poem is an actual historical figure – they are all fictional characters or actors who played cowboys. This is such a thorough case of simulation preceding and dictating reality that it would leave even Jean Baudrillard speechless. America is tough because John Wayne pretended to be tough in movies – never mind that he spent World War II out of harm's way on Hollywood back-lots. It makes me wonder just how long rich, industrialised America can continue to propagate such wilful mass stupidity. With George W. Bush and "Cowboy Up America" it has clearly reached a new low. At least Ronald Reagan or Will Rogers could pass themselves off as purveyors of folk wisdom. What Bush and Hildebrandt have on offer can't even be described as that, since wisdom is clearly absent and their folk credentials are patently false. I can understand the fascistic impulse to harness an invented folk simple-mindedness, but this new breed of stupidity is so aggressively and wilfully moronic that it must have some other agenda. Is it a unique species of privilege to be so secure in your power that you don't even have to pretend to have reasons, ideas or even viable cultural forms?

We stop for gas in Sheridan, a town named after the Indian fighting general who said, "The only good Indians I ever saw were dead".[12] As we head west we find ourselves on a single lane highway, climbing into the Bighorn Mountains. The scenery is spectacular as we wind up steep roads. Bev, who is afraid of heights, takes pictures out the window with her eyes closed so that she will know what she missed. At some point things level out a bit and we find ourselves in a gorgeous high mountain plain where we are able to stop to eat and stretch our legs. Waiting outside by the car I marvel at the number of bikers who roar by. "At least they provide a break from the cowboys," I think to myself. Like so many contemporary identities, that of the biker seems to have crystallised into a perfectly distilled, micron-deep caricature. Anyone can try on this identity simply through correct personal grooming and the strategic consumption of clothing and accessories. The motorcycle itself is desirable, but, in my experience, optional.

As the bikers ride by the gas station I pay more attention to their outfits. They show a marked consistency, with only trivial variation. Their heads are usually wrapped in bandanas, which are often printed with an American flag or skull-and-crossbones. That these are seen as interchangeable is telling. And no helmets for these patriotic outlaws – perhaps there is nothing inside their heads that they consider worth protecting. Indeed, protecting one's brain must seem downright un-American during the Bush presidency. Un-cowboy. I am suddenly struck by the obvious. These guys *are* cowboys. The "iron horse", the fringed leather "saddle bags" should have given it away immediately, but I see now that the case can be

made on the semiotic analysis of moustaches alone. So many of the bikers have artfully arranged handlebar moustaches, just like their cowboy colleagues. They are pursuing the same mythology of individual freedom through mobility and a threatened capacity for violence.

We arrive in Cody late in the afternoon on the 25th. This gives us a chance to scout out the town and visit the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in preparation for next day's meeting with curators. Cody is pure cowboy monoculture. Nestled amongst the mountains it is isolated, but Yellowstone Park to the west and the Mount Rushmore Monument in the Black Hills to the east mean plenty of tourists. These tourists seem to be almost exclusively white families eager to be put in touch with an imagined cowboy heritage. This desire is fed by the Historical Center and innumerable Western-themed tourist shops, motels and campgrounds. Where else is the image sold to tourists also the one that the locals aspire to? It is cowboy from top to bottom, from the official state culture – "Cowboy Up America" – to the pedagogical institutions, to the tourist culture, to how ordinary people imagine their own lives. A campground provides the option of tipis to its guests. One is decorated with the American flag – I suppose this is to preclude the possibility that you might actually "go native" while staying in it.

Campground, Cody, Wyoming

That said, the five-pointed star from the American flag did make its way onto Plains tipis and other objects. Celestial imagery is very important in our cosmology and tipis, for example, are often decorated with the moon, sun or stars. On earlier objects stars were depicted as circles. At some point the five-pointed star appears in the visual language of Plains imagery. Whether this type of star was interpreted by Plains artists as an American "national" symbol is difficult to guess. This concept would likely have been quite alien, given how important the idea of individual variation was in questions of personal adornment, even when identifying group affiliation. In Plains drawings one often notices the striking contrast between the uniformity of American soldiers and the individuality of particular Plains warriors. The star was most likely recognised as a power symbol and appropriated for that reason.

Artist Nadia Myre has been repeating that act of appropriation in her own work. Myre is not willing to surrender either stars or stripes to the cause of American nationalism. In *Stars and Stripes* she liberates both design elements from the US flag. They float against a background of dark blue stroud, a woollen cloth that historically was a popular trade item. The stroud's colour and rich texture suggests the appearance of the evening sky. It is arranged in a grid that appears to be in the process of coming apart or reorganising itself, with blank spaces opening up to new possibilities.

See pages 136–137

Myre performs a similar alchemy on Canada's Indian Act, translating all fifty-six pages into beads. Each letter of each word is represented by a single white bead. All the remaining space is beaded red. The object is transformed before our eyes from a brutal legal language to a tactile object. The Indian Act, which was passed without our consultation, codifies Canada's relationship with Aboriginal nations, but in a form that was deliberately inaccessible to us. Prior to this, when European states and their settler colonies were dependent on, for example the Haudenosaune (Iroquois Confederacy), for trade and military alliances they often went to great lengths to use Aboriginal political documents, such as wampum belts, in their political relations with them. The shift to incomprehensible, one-sided documents like the Indian Act was a deliberate signal, a failure to communicate that communicated a great deal. The most

pernicious fallacy about the colonisation of North America (and a favourite of liberal school teachers) is that it was all just a colossal failure in cross-cultural understanding. What I call the, "Oh, sorry, we forgot to notice that you were human beings," excuse. We can choose how far we want to go in understanding one another, and the ignorance and savagery visited on us could only have been deliberate and self-interested at its core. Racism is largely a product of and *post facto* alibi for colonisation, not an original motivation.

The Buffalo Bill Historical Center is fronted by a bronze sculpture of Buffalo Bill, standing with a rifle in one hand and a cowboy hat in the other. He must be all tuckered out from flogging his ass all over the world. On the wall by the entrance are hanging banners with a picture of Buffalo Bill carrying an American flag and text exclaiming: "We are the West!" The alliteration in Buffalo Bill's stage name, reminds me of all the superheroes with similar handles: Clark Kent, Peter Parker, Bruce Banner. Names designed to appeal to children. Is Buffalo Bill the prototype of the comic book super-hero? A model for all of the arrested-adolescent entertainment that will one day form the heart of American culture?

The kids climbing on the Buffalo Bill sculpture out front makes me wonder what it means to merge the fiction of Buffalo Bill with the didactic role of the museum. What radical rethink would it take to frame these works critically within this institution? How easily the social technologies of the museum can be used to authorise and legitimate virtually anything. Inside, the point is driven home as I watch family after family wandering among the Western paintings in reverential awe. The impressive architecture and a general reverence for museums work on them as much as the art. I wonder how cowboys reconcile their macho code with the kind of attention to interior design required by "museum quality" exhibits? The answer is probably the same way they responded to the work of the Hollywood designers that outfitted and accessorised John Wayne: they love it; and paradox be damned. At one point I watched a woman try to engage her bored kids: "Now look at this one," she said, pointing to a fanciful cowboy painting, "Look, that's just how it was, he's painted it just how it was". My first impulse was to kidnap this poor kid and send him for deprogramming, but you are only allowed to do that with marginal cults. Once a cult gets big they call it either a religion or a nation and all bets are off. And I've already mentioned how cowboys feel about Indians capturing their kids.

Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming

Visiting curators the next day was equally strange. Not that I wasn't treated with courtesy by everyone I met. And all the security, storage and conservation protocols that I am familiar with from museum work are the same, but here you are met by a guard at the security desk who, along with all his fellow guards, is dressed in a marshal's outfit, right down to the cowboy hat and tin badge. In the vaults are not only cowboy paintings, but also large collections of firearms. When I left for a lunch break one of the guards came chasing out after me, asking me to stop. Chased down by a cowboy! It was like a moment from one of my nightmares. I relaxed when he very politely informed me that I had forgotten to give back my visitor's pass.

After my meetings I had to collect Bev from an internet café on Sheridan Avenue (yeah, that bastard again). Bev found it uncomfortable in Cody and refused to go into the Buffalo Bill Center. When I found her it turned out she hadn't escaped completely. Above her computer was a large poster with a photograph of a moustachioed cowboy posed in front of a Ford pickup that appeared to be driving out of his crotch. In case this phallic imagery is too subtle

Bev at an Internet Café, Cody, Wyoming

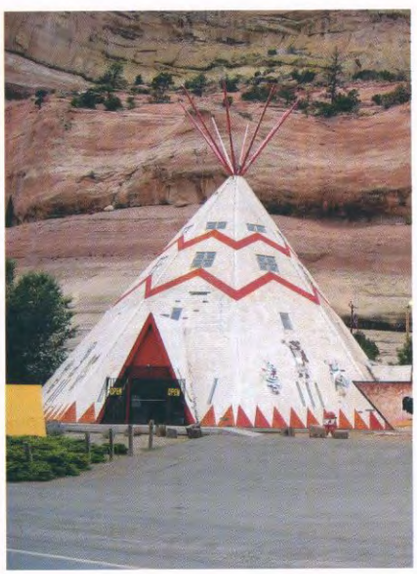
adobe and in a southwest style. While this is certainly an aesthetic improvement over the standard cinderblock strip mall that spoils beautiful landscapes all over North America, it is also a bit strange. There's something nice about the imprecision of pueblo-style adobe architecture; everything is round edges and straining towards amorphousness. At the same time, adobe McDonald's and Holiday Inns test one's credulity. Also, it would feel better if there weren't so many quaint, expensive details making everything seem precious and fake. The whole thing seems inextricably tied to Santa Fe's high-end southwest tourist shtick. The homogeneity also becomes a bit oppressive to other cultural styles and it's interesting to see how, for example, ethnic restaurants attempt to identify themselves by trying to work their own architectural stereotypes into the adobe designs. We saw a Greek meander pattern on the side of an adobe building and a Thai restaurant in which the adobe was painted bright pink.

Santa Fe is also home to the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA). IAIA has been accused of existing to teach young Aboriginal artists how to make art for what is ultimately a deeply conservative southwest "Indian Art" market, although they have, at times, produced teachers, artists and exhibitions that exceed such limitations. A good example of this is the evening youth event that we attended while we were in town. It is linked to an exhibition by Apache artist Douglas Miles. Miles is showing a group of skateboard decks that he has painted, inspired by his son's desire to have a skateboard with "Native" imagery. The event itself involves a poetry slam, graffiti performance, skateboarding and other high-energy goings on that sometimes intrigue and other times make me feel old and sleepy – all by very young artists, who have grown up in urban environments or between the city and the rez. Bev and I are both surprised to see the extent to which these young artists share similar interests to those she works with in Toronto. The need to develop a language for talking about Aboriginal urban experience is critical. At the same time it seems a bit sad that MTV has made American hip-hop the default youth protest culture; not just because it often falls into predictable dead-end traps, but also because it seems to overwrite local manifestations of culture as much as it enables their expression. But perhaps I am just getting old.

The next official stop on our itinerary is Las Vegas. This is at Jimmie's request. He lived in Las Vegas for a while many years ago and wanted to see what was up with the local Paiute community. His instructions were: *I have fond memories of the Southern Nevada Paiutes from when I lived there in 1959. They were the poorest people I had ever met, but also among the most generous. Perhaps things have changed, but I am sure that the Greyhound bus station is still called Paiute Square and there are still Paiute young men and women hanging out for tragic reasons. The Paiute community used to be just off the runways of the old airport. Perhaps since there is a new airport something has changed there. But I have heard through the telegraph that some people are trying to sell Paiute Indian crafts to tourists in Las Vegas. So our two methods of contact are the bus station, the tourist information bureau and whoever you might see selling Indian stuff. I realize this is a strange trek I am demanding. My only real advice is ... stay away from Paiute prostitutes except for discussion and watch your back. ... Take Bev and make it a honeymoon.*[14]

I thought I understood the logic. It would be worth knowing what kind of Indian art was being made in a city that is arguably the most pure expression of American fantasy and desire.

Our route into Las Vegas took our altitude sick bodies down (down, down, down) along Interstate 40, out of New Mexico and across northern Arizona, where the tourist shops



Roadside tourist shop, Interstate 40, Arizona

In Kansas real men love Jesus

for the target audience he also has his hand cocked at his hip, finger pointing like a gun toward the viewer. Poor Bev! I rescued her and we fled south to Denver.

Our appointment at the Denver Art Museum is early in the morning the next day. Denver is more of a cowboy city than I'd realised, but at least its urbanity is an antidote to toxic Wyoming. It shocks me a bit to see that the museum also has a dedicated cowboy art wing, although after Buffalo Bill, I am just relieved that the security guards are devoid of ten gallon hats and marshal badges. When I get back to the car Bev has found a food stand and bought some tamales and burritos for our breakfast. We eat them in the car as we leave Denver. Delicious.

To reach the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, Oklahoma, we reverse direction, heading east through Kansas and then south into Oklahoma. Kansas, it has been scientifically proven, is flatter than a pancake.[13] To entertain ourselves as we drive we sometimes scan the radio stations. Often it seems you can go right down the dial and hit nothing but evangelical Christian stations. Some are airing neo-conservative talk shows or just preaching. Others are playing Christian rock (shudder) and even "family values" radio plays. Radio plays! I had thought they still existed only in the domain of public broadcasters. But here the Christians have all angles covered. When Bush wins the election on "values" in November it's hard not to be disappointed but impossible to be surprised.

The Gilcrease is a lesson in spatial priorities. The main floor is a palace for a truly impressive collection of cowboy art – everything from Catlin to Remington. In a single large room in the basement are the Indian artefacts, ethnographically categorised and housed in Plexiglas-topped drawers that visitors can open and inspect. At nearby computer stations you can look up information on the artefacts. The situation is at once ideologically unsatisfactory and very engaging: so many interesting things to look at. Bev spends hours down there. I continue on in my role as anthropologist upstairs, but also spend some time opening drawers in the basement.

National Cowboy Museum, Oklahoma City

Walking into the National Cowboy Museum in Oklahoma City nearly takes the breath out of me. There are more marshal-outfitted security guards at the desk to the left, but who notices them? The architecture is pointing elsewhere. The foyer of the museum is a large, long corridor stretching away from the main doors. At the termination of this axis is the plaster original of Fraser's *The End of the Trail*. At eighteen-feet tall and raised on a six-foot wooden platform it dwarfs everyone around it. Yes, by far the most dominant visual element in the National *Cowboy* Museum is a dying *Indian*. To enhance the effect of the glowing white plaster, it is surrounded on three sides by windows, which bathe it in light. We had been seeing endless variations on *The End of the Trail* in tourist shops – the Indian suspended in a state of constant vanishing all over America – but here was the original relic, an altar for who knows how many insincere prayers.

We head for Santa Fe, cutting across the Texas panhandle and stopping for the night at a motel in Amarillo. We wash off the desert dust and cowboy trauma in the motel's little outdoor pool. The meal we have at the Mexican restaurant next door may or may not be "authentic", but it is an improvement on the roadside fast food joints and "family restaurants" that we have endured for most of the trip. In my experience family restaurants are like family values; smart people, including smart families, stay the hell away from them.

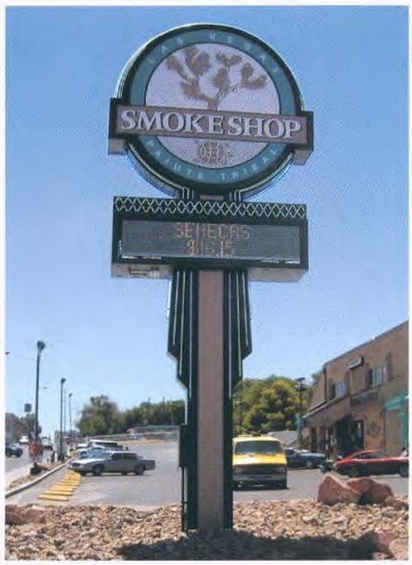
Santa Fe is one strange place a designer city catering to wealthy tourists. From the look of things the municipal building code must require that all buildings be built from

reach a scale and frequency that we have yet to encounter. The most memorable is near Lupton, Arizona, just across the New Mexico border. The place is a string of mostly unremarkable buildings, although one of them is a large wooden tipi (do I need to tell you this is not a local Indigenous architectural form?). The entire area is plastered with so many signs that it is quite hard to tell if these are discrete shops, or if the place is one large entity called "Navajoland" or "Yellow Horse Trading Post". What makes it remarkable is the setting: it is backed by an enormous cliff-face that is coloured a dusty shade of rust-red. The cliff is concave in many places and on a sheltered ridge halfway up someone has placed a string of wild animal models, everything from bears to eagles, all crowded together for those without the time or inclination to spot them for real. Many of the tourist shops along I-40, including this one, are on Diné (Navajo) territory and many have Diné owners or staff.

Bev coming out of a roadside tourist shop, Interstate 40, Arizona

Throughout our journey I have been stopping and buying tourist kitsch for this show wherever I find it. I have found this to be a humiliating experience, causing me a form of embarrassment that I haven't felt since trying to buy an issue of *Playboy* when I was fourteen. Each time I tell myself that I am buying it for perfectly good reasons, that I am really a clever international spy and should be getting a James Bond-like thrill from pulling one over on these stereotype merchants. But all I can think is, "What if someone thinks I'm really into this stuff?" When the sales clerks are Native it's especially hard. I buy a poster of some hack's version of *The End of the Trail* at one of the tourist stands along I-40. (He even has the nerve to put a copyright logo above his signature!) The Native woman who sells it to me is wearing a T-shirt with an American Flag and the text, "America Strong and Proud". I feel like we are both degraded in the process. I want to ask her how it feels to sell this stuff, what it means to her and most of all why she would identify with and celebrate America's strength and pride? But I don't have the nerve.

Our way into Las Vegas takes us over the Hoover Dam, the source of hydroelectric power for all those glittering lights. Traffic is jammed up for miles because uniformed officials are individually inspecting all vehicles for explosives. All trucks of any size are being diverted to an alternate route. We can also see construction underway for a new highway that bypasses the famous dam altogether.



Paiute-run smoke shop, Las Vegas

Our search for Paiute art took several unexpected turns. My report to Jimmie read: *We went looking for Paiutes in the area around the bus station as you suggested, but there was really no life on the streets whatsoever. Given that it was 110 degrees this may only have been for reasons of self-preservation. Falling back on a more contemporary strategy we looked up Las Vegas Paiutes on the internet and quickly discovered a Paiute-run smoke shop in the vicinity. We reasoned that if they were selling tax-free tobacco they must have been doing it on tribal land. We went inside to see whom we could talk to and were surprised to see that most of the people working the cash registers looked to be white or Hispanic. As two non-smokers it was hard to hang out and blend in as shoppers, so we began talking to a clerk who directed us to one of the managers. He said that the Paiute community ran the store, but that they themselves lived in a gated community that was strictly off limits to the public (you can imagine them having to fend off all the tourists). We asked if he knew of any artists in the community, or where we might go to meet artists. He couldn't think of any, but suggested that we drop by the Indian Center (at which point we were quite embarrassed not to have thought of that ourselves) and sent us on our way with directions.*

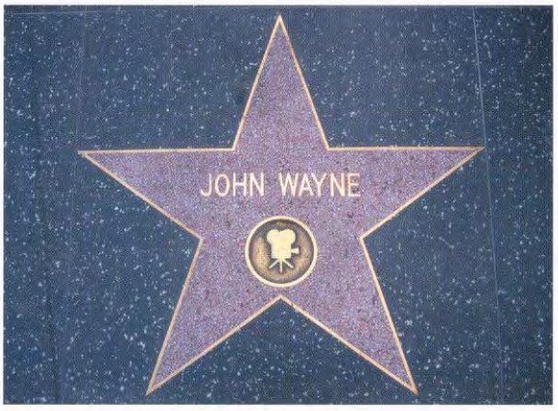
At the Indian Center we met a friendly receptionist, an Aboriginal woman whom I think was from Minnesota, who explained things. Apparently revenue from the smoke shop and other investments provides each of the (very few) enrolled members with an annual income of around $100,000 dollars per year. By now you can see where this is going; lots of fighting over who is and isn't an enrolled member, but, for some at least there's no need to work as a cashier in the smoke shop or staff the local Indian centre, and there's certainly no need to make art. ... It's interesting because, with casino money coming into more and more communities, the question of how money gets distributed and particularly the old question of who is and who is not an enrolled member has become even more heated than usual in a lot of places.

I suppose that, if we'd had time, we could have stayed longer and dug deeper and met some un-enrolled Paiutes who were making money for themselves as artists. But perhaps not finding Paiute artists in Las Vegas was as instructive about the current state of the colonial situation as finding them.

Las Vegas seems to be driven by a species of excess that is closely linked to a kind of faux-exoticism that we have become familiar with. And of course its very excess is exotic in itself. That combination of tourism and predictability was on my mind during our entire stay in Las Vegas. Each bit of exotic difference needed to be perfectly recognisable and comprehensible in advance, preferably in a single glance from a moving car. For Paris there are replicas of the Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe. And Caesars Palace answers the age-old question: What if the Romans had built luxury high-rise hotels? In Las Vegas more is always more, but never enough. The defining cultural experience is really the "All you can eat buffet". In Britain they tend to say, "Eat all you like", which is quite different. The exhortation to eat all you can suggests a frantic level of consumerism, a kind of panic that one might not be consuming enough. In the most overweight nation on earth, nine times out of ten the lean, mean cowboy riding the range has been replaced by a tubby cowpoke, tucking into an all you can eat buffet, his cowboy shirt stretched out over a belly resting awkwardly on a rodeo-sized belt buckle.

When I initially contemplated going to Los Angeles I felt vaguely guilty. Perhaps it wasn't really necessary and stemmed more from my omnipresent desire to swim in the ocean than my bloodhound pursuit of the cowboy? But there was the Autry National Center (a conglomeration of three previously distinct Western-themed museums, one of which was created through the philanthropy of the singing cowboy, Gene Autry) in Griffith Park and the newly discovered Reagan Library just north in Simi Valley. More importantly, by the time we got to Wyoming I knew that LA was really the hub of all this nonsense. It was Hollywood that taught cowboys how to be cowboys; that took an unglamorous working-class job and turned it into an iconic identity. And it was Hollywood that taught Americans that they are cowboys; that they each have a stake in that identity and the privileges that flow from it. Hollywood is the funhouse mirror that America spends its time looking into in a frantic cycle of anticipation and mimicry. But how long until mimicry becomes reality – and what sort of reality is that then? Fly into John Wayne International Airport, visit "Frontier Land" at Disneyland, track down the stars dedicated to any number of cowboy celebrities on Hollywood Boulevard – it's all one reflection after another, regressing back to nothing. All the genuine complexity and diversity of American experience disappears in the process – what a magic act.

Indian Princess, shop in Caesars Palace, Las Vegas



John Wayne's star, Hollywood

The Autry is perhaps the most self-reflexive of the cowboy museums, probably because in an urban setting like LA the façade of rustic anti-intellectualism is (almost) unsustainable. Some of the text panels include warnings to visitors that what they are seeing are stereotypes. And yet, as always, the design of the galleries and the seductiveness of the objects themselves speak more loudly than the didactic panels ever will. And they are all singing the triumph of the cowboy. The exhibits that are most memorable are those on 1950s popular culture. There is a boy's bedroom that is done up entirely in cowboy products: bedding, curtains, toys; the entire environment is cowboy with no relief. It is a kind of nightmare of indoctrination, yet in my heart I know I would have loved a room like this when I was a kid.

Bronze sculpture of Ronald Reagan, Reagan Library, Simi Valley, California

The Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum is perched atop a small mountain in Simi Valley. Reagan was known to describe America as "the shining city on the hill", a divinely favoured beacon to the world, so the setting surely has similarly religious implications. To reach the Library you drive up a winding road – Presidential Drive – hung with banners depicting previous presidents. The grounds provide beautiful, commanding views in all directions, mostly of other arid mountains and valleys, which are covered in scrub grass and brush. The library itself is built in the Spanish mission-style: red-tiled roof and white-washed walls, all built around a central courtyard. The ambiance is certainly similar to the cowboy museums, right down to the inevitable sculpture outside the main entrance. In this case it is a bronze sculpture of cowboy-Reagan. The library has become a pilgrimage site for Republicans heartbroken by Reagan's death just a few months earlier and flowers are strewn at the sculpture's feet. Three synthetic red roses and a small American flag dangle from his cowboy hat. Bev has once again refused to go in, opting instead to view the grounds. I take a few deep breaths before I enter, reminding myself that they won't be able to tell by looking at me that I am not "one of them". There aren't democratic-socialist detecting alarms at the door.

There are indications of how Reagan linked himself to the mythology of the American West throughout the exhibits. A movie poster for the 1951 B-Western *Cavalry Charge* bears the tag line: "The U.S. Mounted Dragoons Roar into Battle against Savage Hordes". Apparently when the titular final cavalry charge was filmed, the actors playing Indians would be shot off their horses and then get up, get on new horses and ride around for another pass.[15] This perfect interchangeableness is one of the many advantages of killing hordes rather than individual human beings. The highlight of the exhibits, possibly eclipsing even the cruise missile, is a to-scale reproduction of the Oval Office with interior decoration capturing a moment in the Reagan presidency. Western items abound: a bronze saddle, numerous sculptures of mounted cowboys, such as Frederic Remington's *The Outlaw*.

The ripest ground, however, is a section on Reagan's "Western White House", the Rancho del Cielo, located in the hills near Santa Barbara. Reagan named Rancho del Cielo – Ranch in the Sky – himself. Obviously the man had a strong urge to occupy what he imagined to be divinely favoured heights. This connection to what he saw as America's divine (Manifest) Destiny is elaborated in an audio clip that plays in the Rancho del Cielo section. It is from an interview Reagan did with Barbara Walters in 1990:

I've always believed that there was some plan that put this continent here to be found by people from every corner of the world who had the courage and the love of freedom enough to uproot themselves – leave family and friends and homeland to come here and develop a whole new people called Americans. You look at the beauty of it, and God really did shed his grace on America, as the song says.

Standing in the museum I try to flesh out the implications of Reagan's version of God's plan. Did God put North America where it was with Americans in mind, brilliantly foreseeing the need for an entire back-up continent? North America is, in effect, Plan B – put in place knowing that there was a good chance that Plan A, Europe, would turn out badly?

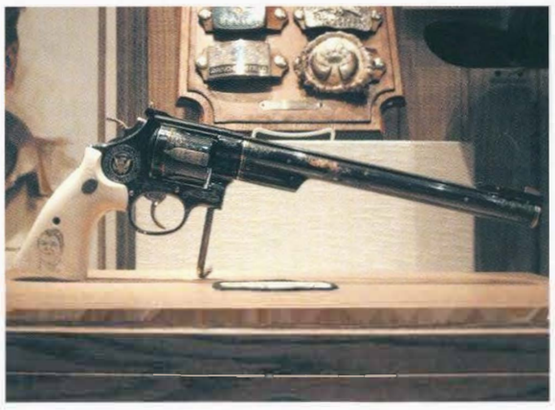
The Rancho del Cielo display case is full of Western items, including one of the Gipper's cowboy hats, a collection of Western belt buckles and a presentation model of a long-barrelled Smith & Wesson revolver. It is engraved and inlaid with gold, including an image of the presidential seal on the frame where the Smith & Wesson logo would normally reside and a portrait of Reagan on the pearl-white grip. American firearms manufacturers frequently give "presentation" handguns to presidents. Colt has given cowboy-style presentation revolvers to many presidents, including Reagan, Nixon and John F. Kennedy.

Colt used the Kennedy revolver to launch a new line of retro cowboy-style six-guns called the New Frontier. According to the Autry's firearms curator, the Kennedy revolver appears to have been left unfinished after his assassination. It is of a type known as a single-action army revolver – the classic Western six-shooter and identifiable, even to a firearms novice, as a cowboy gun. The cylinder is decorated with depictions of the White House, the Presidential Seal and PT Boat 109, which Kennedy captained in Word War II. Even a president from "back East" couldn't afford to ignore or escape cowboy mythologising.

Colt's New Frontier product line was inspired by Kennedy's 1960 speech accepting the Democratic nomination. Like Reagan, he starts with some implied Manifest Destiny:
For I stand tonight facing West on what was once the last frontier. From the lands that stretch three thousand miles behind me, the pioneers of old gave up their safety, their comfort and sometimes their lives to build a new world here in the West. ... They were determined to make that new world strong and free, to overcome its hazards and its hardships, to conquer the enemies that threatened from without and within.
He goes on to describe a "new frontier" posed by the challenges of the 1960s:
Beyond that frontier are the uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered pockets of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus. ... I am asking each of you to be pioneers on that New Frontier.

It is a nice trick, to try and force America to confront the new and modern by appealing to cowboy pioneer machismo. A few years later the creators of *Star Trek* would pick up on Kennedy's "new frontier" of space, upping the ante to describe it as "the final frontier". Sometimes the crew of the Starship Enterprise tore around space as cold warrior colonists, other times they painfully tried to obey the "prime directive" and not interfere with worlds that would prefer to be left alone. In 2004 George W. Bush completed the circle, referring to astronauts as "courageous spatial entrepreneurs". Can we assume then that the goal of the first manned flight to Mars will be to establish a McDonald's franchise? My advice to the Martians: Watch out!

* * *



Revolver, Reagan Library, Simi Valley, California

See page 169

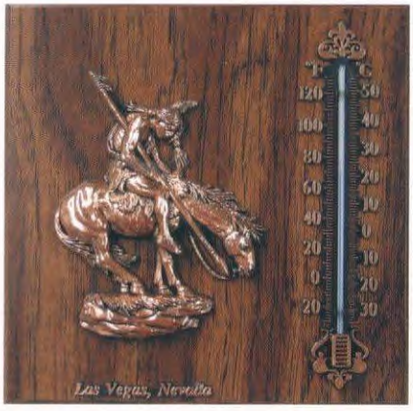
The End of the Trail ceramic tile above urinals, roadside gift shop

Our trip home from California is quick and largely uneventful. We make only one museum stop – the Heard in Phoenix, Arizona – and from there it is a direct drive to Toronto. There are numerous roadside souvenir stands and in some we come across more extraordinary *The End of the Trail* images. I am torn between two favourites. The first is a bronze fountain nearly as tall as me. The bowl is filled with dry ice, which creates a constant atmospheric mist and at the base is the suggestion of a classical column, just in case we might not be taking it all seriously enough. The second is a pair of ceramic tiles featuring the image in a southwest setting. What makes them special is their location above the urinals in a public toilet. How nice to be able to reflect on the tragic plight of the American Indian for a few moments while you empty your bladder.

As appropriate as it may be, I don't want to end this essay at a public urinal. I'll end more optimistically, with the work of Kent Monkman. He has recently been painting homoerotic encounters between cowboys and Indians set within increasingly majestic and sublime landscapes. Think Tom of Finland meets Albert Bierstadt. These paintings have an enormous disruptive potential precisely because they engage with, rather than deny, the powerful vein of fantasy and desire that runs through the mythology of the West. Desire is Monkman's Trojan horse. Once inside this fantasy world he unleashes a form of gay camp that is at once antithetical to and implicit within the original images of rugged masculinity and dangerous freedoms. The mythology "goes Native", consumed and transformed from within by an excess of its own potential. The damage to the myth seems more thorough and complete than any attack from without. It becomes both dangerously seductive and hilariously absurd. In the end we may have to laugh these cowboys to death.

The End of the Trail fountain with dry ice, roadside gift shop

See pages 96–97 and catalogue cover



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2 Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr, *The White Man's Indian*, New York: Vintage Books, 1979, p 20.

3 http://www.ashp.cuny.edu/progress.htm January 17, 2005.

4 *The Legacy of Conquest*, New York, London: WW Norton & Co., 1987, p 55.

5 Richard Abel, '"Our Country"/Whose Country? The "Americanisation" Project of Early Westerns', *Back in the Saddle Again*, E. Buscombe & R.E. Pearson, [eds.], London: British Film Institute, 1998, pp 78–80; and Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of American Culture*, New York: Hill & Wang, 1982, pp 17–18.

6 I am aware that the term "Indian" is offensive to many Indigenous people of the Americas, myself included. I use it here only to indicate that I am referring to the fictional construct of "the Indian" and not to real Indigenous people.

7 In *The Invention of the Western* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) Scott Simmon notes that in early Westerns it was often felt necessary to provide explanations for Indian attacks, but by the time the classic Western had developed the "motiveless" attack was the standard.

8 There is information about the project, including an interview with the participants at: http://archive.photobasedart.ca/index.php?c=show&id=04068&h=archive

9 John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, (1764), Thomas Hollis [ed.], London: A. Millar et al., Book II, Chapter 5, paragraph 32.

10 Lori Blondeau, artist's statement in *Native Views*, Joanna Bigfeather, [ed.], Ann Arbor, MI: Artrain USA, 2004, p 20.

11 http://www.cowboyup.com/cowboyup_meaning.html February 26, 2005

12 According to Wolfgang Mieder, Sheridan is often misquoted as saying "The only good Indian is a dead Indian," a folk proverb the history of which Mieder explores in: '"The Only Good Indian Is A Dead Indian": History And Meaning Of A Proverbial Stereotype', *De Proverbio: An Electronic Journal of International Proverb Studies*, http://www.deproverbio.com/DPjournal/DP.1.1.95/INDIAN.html, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1995.

13 Really! See the proof at: http://www.improbable.com/airchives/paperair/volume9/v9i3/kansas.html February 27, 2005.

14 Email from Jimmie Durham to the author, May 28th, 2004. The text has been copy-edited with Durham's approval.

15 http://imdb.com/title/tt0043725/trivia, March 6, 2005.