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All Our Stories Are Here: Critical Perspectives on Montana Literature

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Critical Perspectives on Montana Literature

Edited by Brady Harrison

University of Nebraska Press
Lincoln and London

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INTRODUCTION

Toward a Postpopulist Criticism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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another equally curious (and keenly debated) question in western studies—does place matter?—we turn for the moment to the matter of Montana scholarship and the populist tradition of literary and cultural criticism: just as much of the best creative writing about Montana and its places and peoples has tended (with exceptions, of course) to be conservative in terms of formal or stylistic experimentation and complexity, much of the best homegrown scholarship has also tended (again, with exceptions) to be conservative in its applications and investigations of literary and cultural theory. Simply put, Montana scholars have tended to read Montana writing in terms accessible to scholars and lay readers alike.

A middling, centripetal, even folksy force of plainspokenness, no-nonsenseness, and no-putting-on-airsness seems to guide both the literature and criticism, and several factors have doubtlessly contributed to this critical style. For one, many of the most celebrated Montana writers and scholars over the latter half of the twentieth century have been determined populists. Most famously, perhaps, Hugo and historian Joseph Kinsey Howard were staunch spokespeople for the dispossessed, the underclasses, the small towners. In their efforts to write about and to speak to and for the marginalized, Hugo, Howard, and others cultivated straightforward, accessible, and seemingly traditional styles and forms. In the main, they operated from the conviction that the vernacular can be used just as effectively to explore and dissect the most entrenched historical, political, and cultural problems as the highest scholarly or poetic languages.[2] At the same time, as Bevis notes, even while "Hugo did not wish to be part of an elite; he would have been happy if everyone enjoyed his work," he knew that "poetry is not easy" (152). The same could be said, perhaps, for literary history and literary and cultural criticism.

Nevertheless, the populist approach has worked very well, and the response of Montana readers has perhaps also contributed to the populism of both the writing and the scholarship: many Montanans take a proprietary interest in Montana writing. As the in-state popularity of *The Last Best Place* (1988), the massive anthology of Montana writing, and the sheer, ever-expanding number of readings and regionally, nationally, and even internationally recognized public celebrations such as the Montana Festival of the Book attest, Montanans identify strongly with the state's literary legacy and take a particular pride in the state's many voices. As one of the few cross-cultural and cross-class bonds in a geographically vast, economically precarious, politically polarized, and scarcely populated state, the canon enjoys a prominence perhaps unequaled in other states. Projects such as "One Book Montana" and "Missoula Reads"—where

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organizers encourage participants to read a particular text and then to join in publicly staged events such as readings, panel presentations, and discussions—open texts to dialogue and a sense of collective ownership that encourages appreciation, interpretation, and critique. Given the state's history of populist intellectuals and its widespread yet enthusiastic readership, we should not be surprised if the homegrown scholarship has also been populist and aimed, at least in part, at interested lay readers.

The best energies of Montana populism can be seen in the urtext of Montana literary scholarship, William Bevis's *Ten Tough Trips* (1990). Understanding the state's intellectual and populist traditions as well as anyone, Bevis opts for a relatively informal approach, mixing interpretation with anecdote, personal experience, and elegant musings on the myths and realities of the West. In chapters on Guthrie, Hugo, Welch, and others, he offers trenchant readings open, he hopes, to anyone interested in the literature. As he remarks in the introduction, "The Montana literature is so various and interesting, and the West is so intertwined with American national identity, that I thought many who do not usually read criticism or history might enjoy hearing a discussion of the books. These are personal essays, then, for a general audience. For a scholar, the writing has been a most enjoyable break from the objectivity and impersonality of professional publication" (ix).

Bevis may write for anyone interested in Montana writing, but like any good scholar he pushes his audience as well, offering sustained critiques of many western myths, ones that may still resonate with readers. As he remarks, he critiques "the pastoral and primitivist pursuits of innocence and their rejections of society, psychology, and experience; attack[s] myths of the rugged individual, especially conceived as the lone rogue male; and point[s] out flaws . . . in cherished authors" (201–2). Bevis knows the books and the writers and his readers, and he performs the best sort of public intellectual work: he shares what he knows and elevates not only the critical conversation but the community conversation as well. As he recounts, "I have had men on both sides of me reciting lines from 'The Only Bar in Dixon,' in that bar. Then they told me to tell Hugo to keep his butt out" (152–53).

Perhaps another factor influencing the relative conservativism of Montana literary scholarship has been the prominence of the writers themselves in discussions of the literature. In *Writing Montana: Literature Under the Big Sky* (1996), for example, the editors, Rick Newby and Suzanne Hunger, are poets, and the majority of the contributors, including Blew, Bill Borneman, Earl Ganz, Greg Keeler, Melissa Kwasny, Lise McClendon, Maile Meloy, Gwen

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Petersen, Noelle Sullivan, Wilbur Wood, and Paul Zarzyski, are best known as poets, short story writers, novelists, and memoirists. Yet even as their essays reveal, one could argue, some disinterest in contemporary literary and cultural theory and theorists, they open vast areas of Montana writing for further study. In "Brinig: The Truth Game," for example, Ganz offers one of the first critical considerations of queerness in Brinig's work; in "Exquisite Magazine Corpses," Sullivan explores the history of literary magazines in Montana and sees old issues "as a testimonial to others' language, if not mine. I can hope, against proof, that some words endure" (72). The scholarly works likewise address writers who have not received enough attention—Hart, for example, looks through "'Eyes to See': The Writers of Eastern Montana," while Watson considers "Engendering Montana Lives: Women's Autobiographical Writing"—and likewise seek as wide an audience as possible.[3] The collection's determinedly populist bent suggests, in an enlivening manner, that writers and scholars share both a keen interest in Montana literature and a cross-disciplinary openness calculated to expand the critical and public conversations.

The next step in homegrown criticism can be found in Ken Egan Jr.'s *Hope and Dread in Montana Literature* (2003). A clear successor to Bevis and Hart, Egan sees deeply into what he dubs the "Montana identity" (3). Undertaking readings of writers from the 1860s to the present, he offers a persuasive diachronic analysis and argues for a powerful dialectic of dread and hope at work in Montana literature and culture. In particular, his analysis of how the "tragic sensibility" of McNickle and Hugo gives way to the "provisional hope" of Welch and Doig shows not only mastery of the texts but also of Montana history. Thoroughly steeped in western and Native American studies, *Hope and Dread* constitutes a landmark in the field. Nevertheless, Egan's work appears to retain a measure of Montana critical populism: even as his analysis draws on Hegelian and Marxist concepts such as the dialectic and political unconscious and applies them to Montana literary, cultural, political, and economic history, he keeps his work reader-friendly and, like Bevis, available to anyone interested in Montana writing. With the history of Montana populist criticism in mind, we can now turn to the present interventions.

The contributors to *All Our Stories Are Here* come along at a fortuitous time: the fields of literary and cultural criticism could not be more open. If, over the past decade or so, some of the more ferocious energies of such schools of theory and criticism as poststructuralism and postmodernism have waned—and been the subject of robust critiques and attacks as can be found in such antitheory/antitheorist tomes as *Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the*

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Humanities (1999) and *Theory's Empire: An Anthology of Dissent* (2005)—literary and cultural criticism and many schools of theory such as feminism, gender studies, queer theory, and more have continued to flourish. Readers of the present volume will find a remarkable range of critical practices: some of the contributors work proudly and steadfastly in the tradition of Montana populist criticism; others unapologetically engage in high theory; still others work in the tried-and-true tradition of biographical criticism; a number build on the critical practices and provocations of regional studies, western studies, Native American studies, queer theory, and more; at least one of the contributors blends the energies of postcolonial theory with those of the personal essay. Collectively, the contributors follow no one critical school or methodology, and they participate in a wide range of ongoing discussions and debates in multiple fields. Those looking for a unified field theory of Montana criticism or Montana writing will not find it here; if we contradict ourselves, very well then, we contradict ourselves.

Although the contributors to *All Our Stories Are Here* disagree on critical strategies and practices, they nevertheless agree on a few matters. For one, all agree that Montana literature merits far more critical consideration; they all share a determination to expand, complicate, and celebrate the study of Montana and western writing. More complexly, each of the scholars—whether implicitly or explicitly—engages an abiding issue in western studies: does place or region matter? In the introduction to one of the best collections on western writing, *Reading the West* (1996), Michael Kowalewski argues, for example, that "region," as a critical category, needs to be central in western studies. He remarks, "Finding region an important factor in literary studies is still often seen as the equivalent of being an overenthusiastic salesman with a special marketing territory. Regionalism, it seems, is often next to boosterism, a puffing of 'merely' local talent—a kind of literary chamber of commerce juxtaposed to the three national congressional houses of race, class, and gender" (8). Scholars, he argues, must pay particular attention to place and its influences on consciousness and literary practice; criticism of western writing, he contends, must emphasize region, attending to all its cultural, racial, gendered, sexual, historical, and literary complexities.

Although most of the contributors would agree—in spirit *and* in practice—with Kowalewski that place matters, that region matters, that the very materiality of the state's geography (or, given its natural diversity, *geographies*) and history (or, given its cultural diversity, *histories*) impacts and gives weight and substance to Montana writing (even as Montana writing in turn gives weight

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and substance back to an understanding and experience of place and history), can we then take the additional step and assert that from this place (these places) and this history (these histories) we get something distinct, a body of literature that we can clearly and confidently name "Montana" writing? If one were to take all place names and references to historical events from, say, *Fools Crow* or *A River Runs Through It* or *Winter Wheat*, could one still say on the basis of plot or way of telling or thematics that these masterpieces were by and of Montana? Does something hold all the works and writers we consider here together in something like a coherent or cohesive whole? The answer to these superloaded questions must, no doubt, be "no." There cannot be any single "Montana" of the imagination. Rather, however many themes one identifies (as I did earlier in this Introduction), or however extensive or limited a list of writers one evokes, or however many definitions, categories, or tropes one offers, the arguments must remain happily provisional—Montana's too big, too complex, too full of competing histories and stories to be neatly summed up (though some have tried and done well: think "Big Sky" or "The Last Best Place"). Yet even if one cannot say that such a thing as a distinctly Montanan literature exists, writers and scholars can still explore and argue over the implications and nuances of place, nature, history, memory, self, desire, and more in the lived and imaginative experiences of Montana and the West.

Part I of this collection, "Does Place Matter?" begins with a provocation. In direct challenge to some of the assumptions about place that we have just touched on, Tamas Dobozy, in an adroitly theorized reading of regionalism, "Burning Montana: Richard Ford's *Wildlife* and Regional Crisis," argues that for Ford, region does not determine or define literature or culture but rather becomes "one of the many options for voicing desire." At the same time as Ford denies the importance of region, *Wildlife* "enacts a drama of regionalism by commenting on the ways in which various 'needs' find articulation via a landscape that is not exactly commensurable with either need or articulation, and which therefore continually exceeds, or 'burns away,' the categories that structure it in communal myths and beliefs." Dobozy, via Ford, not only unsettles romantic and commonsense notions of region, but also nicely works against both established arguments about place in western studies and in the next contribution.

Next in Part I, Roger Dunsmore, an unapologetic old-school Montana populist, finds a much different understanding of region in his poets: for Mark Gibbons, Vic Charlo, Ed Lahey, and David Thomas, few things in life matter more than place and taking possession of a place. The region—its land, people,

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and history—sinks into people if they work hard enough to know the place where they live; as Dunsmore writes, for these poets "human wholeness and sanity have historically required that there be something essential between the 'you and any place' where we would live well. And the name of this something essential is 'home.'" Like Nancy Cook, Karl Olson, Alan Weltzien, Gregory Morris, and others in this collection, Dunsmore foregrounds the work of writers who have not received a great deal of critical or popular attention; like Hugo and Howard, he brings a populist passion to his analysis, writing in a style of criticism open to anyone who cares about Montana poetry.

In "West of Éire: Butte's Irish Ethos," Matthew Jockers offers a literary history of Butte's Irish Americans and argues for precise cultural and historical understandings of place. Focusing on an array of writers, he argues that Butte's literature differs not only from the majority of western writing but also from the majority of Irish American writing: on the one hand, and in antithesis to much western writing, Butte's prose and poetry foregrounds community over the individual; on the other hand, where Irish American writing from the Midwest and East often documents the struggles of the Irish against poverty and discrimination, Butte's Irish writing displays an exuberance over the opportunities, cultural diversity, and wealth of Montana's glittering hill-town: "This exuberance manifests itself in a literature that takes success for granted while largely ignoring the fact that the mining lifestyle was anything but easy." If place and region matter, Dobozy's, Dunsmore's, and Jockers's writers by no means agree on how or why it matters; the question remains very much open and vital.

As Mary Clearman Blew, Julia Watson, Caroline Patterson, and others have argued, Montana's women writers have not received their critical due, and in Part II, "Women Writing Montana," we begin with a perfect segue from considerations of place to a consideration of women writers, place, and more.[4] In "Home on the Range: Montana Romances and Geographies of Hope," Nancy Cook, working in the best traditions of cultural studies, foregrounds the study of mass market romances set in Montana, analyzing the cultural work of what some consider a "low" or (too) "popular" literary form aimed primarily at women readers. Building on the research of such scholars as Janice Radway, Melody Graulich, and others, Cook argues that in these romances, "Montana serves as a place conducive to the seemingly 'natural' linkage between finding love and finding a place to love, meaningful and remunerative work, a commitment to a cohesive and supportive community, partnership with one's spouse, and a stable and safe home."

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From Cook and romances we turn to the venerable Bevis and his analysis of Blew's postmodern yet distinctly western feminism in *All but the Waltz*. Building directly on his arguments in *Ten Tough Trips* and bringing to bear currents of feminist theory (and thereby extending and complicating his engagement with the populist tradition), Bevis argues in "Feminism and Postmodernism in the New West: Mary Blew and Montana Women's Writing Since 1990" that the memoirist relies on a fragmented, skeptical, "quilted" narrative style as a means of speaking against "the dominant western male voice of terse certainty, common sense, natural authority." Like Judy Blunt and other second-generation western feminist writers, he argues, Blew critiques the masculinist cowboy tradition but does not wholly reject it either, opting instead for a tough-minded generosity toward others and their stories.

In Part III, "Gay and Lesbian Literature Under a Big Sky," Karl Olson and Alan Weltzien bring the latest developments in gender and queer studies to bear on Montana writing. In "West of Desire: Queer Ambivalence in Montana Literature," Olson, building on the work of Bernard DeVoto, Ken Egan, and others, explores the abiding ambivalence in Montana and western writing between loving the West and its promise and hating the damage humanity has done to the land and its people: "It is here, on the love/hate equipoise westerners maintain with the West, that I detect the queer edge." Offering some of the first detailed readings of the landmark fictions of Myron Brinig and Thomas Savage, Olson argues that these two lesser-known contemporaries of McNickle and Guthrie "make explicit the connection between the degradation of the West and the deprivation of the queer." For Olson, as for Kittredge and others, stories matter a great deal: we know ourselves through the stories we read and tell.

In "'Just Regular Guys': Homophobia, the Code of the West, and Constructions of Male Identity in Thomas Savage and Annie Proulx," Weltzien offers a trenchant dissection of the politics of literary reputation and the very real, very worldly politics of exclusion and violence toward gays and lesbians. Finding Savage's exclusion from *The Last Best Place* and from Bevis's and Egan's studies "inexplicable," he argues that the masculine codes and values of the West have worked to silence the voices of sexual minorities. Nevertheless, even as Savage and Proulx "do not offer much hope for gay men," they "courageously insist on the need for change: for a more inclusive masculinity that embraces, rather than shuns and despises, gay men."

If D'Arcy McNickle and James Welch have received perhaps more critical attention than any other Montana writers, Jim Rains and Andrea Opitz demonstrate that their complex, masterful fictions continue to invite elegant

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and sophisticated analyses. Building on the latest trends in Native American studies, Jim Rains opens Part IV, "Native Revisions/The Problems of History," with "'He Never Wanted to Forget It': Contesting the Idea of History in D'Arcy McNickle's *The Surrounded*." Deeply concerned with alterity and the ability of Native Americans to write their own histories, McNickle, as Rains argues, also relied on his fiction as a means "to explore and contest the very idea of history." Reopening "the book of the past" through Archilde's quest for identity, the novelist "demonstrates the way in which America's history could—and should—be forced to accommodate the individual histories of the disparate cultures that comprise the nation." Like Paula Gunn Allen, Arnold Krupat, David Moore, and others, Rains foregrounds a distinctly Native American epistemology and historicity.

Opitz, drawing on the work of diverse literary and cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall and Lisa Lowe, argues in "A Haunted Nation: Cultural Narratives and the Persistence of the Indigenous Subject in James Welch's *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*" that Welch, like McNickle, focuses on the problems of history and self-representation and continues, in *Heartsong*, the process of revisioning history that he began in *Fools Crow*: in Welch's final novel "what is produced by the Wild West show as the 'vanishing Indian' emerges as a 'ghost' in an alternative space—outside the 'historical' narrative and thus outside the nation space—and reveals that 'other' material and social histories indeed leave traces that are in excess of U.S. cultural and national narratives."

In "'I Have Had Some Satisfactory Times': The Yellowstone Kelly Novels of Peter Bowen," Gregory Morris demonstrates that Native American writers are not the only ones concerned with the legitimacy and authority of history, storytelling, and myth-making. Offering the first critical treatment of Bowen's rewrites of the historical Yellowstone Kelly's adventures and exploits, Morris argues that Bowen, like many of his postmodern peers, distrusts history and mocks the claims that historical fiction makes to historical veracity. Rather, Bowen plays fast and loose with the events of Kelly's life in order to critique the Euro-American metanarratives underlying westward—and overseas—expansionism: "Bowen's historical mode is powerfully comic, but beneath that ludic, playful history lies a more subversive ideological critique of the American mythos and of the American identity."

Finally, in Part V, "Hugo-Land," Steve Davenport and Lois Welch investigate the impact and lasting importance of Richard Hugo and the creative writing program at the University of Montana. In "Richard Hugo's Montana Poems: Blue Collars, Indians, and Tough Style," Davenport, drawing on recent work in men's and literary studies and analyzing Hugo as both a teacher and a poet,

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locates class, racial, and gender anxieties at the heart of Hugo's aesthetic: although the teacher-poet wanted to be tough, wanted to live and write as hard as Jack London or Ernest Hemingway, he leavened his portraits of the dispossessed and abandoned towns with sympathy and sentiment. Davenport contends, "It is, in fact, the failure of his flight from sentiment, his self-imposed prohibition against melancholy, that makes his poetry so powerful, so affecting, so human." These same qualities, he suggests, also made Hugo a great friend and mentor to students and colleagues like James Welch and William Kittredge.

In "Semicolonial Moments: The History and Influence of the University of Montana Creative Writing Program," Lois Welch takes a step back and surveys the crucial part the creative writing program has played in the formation of Montana writing. Analyzing the roles played by such key figures as H. G. Merriam, Warren Carrier, Fiedler, Hugo, and others, she traces the growth of the program into a regional—and then national—powerhouse and reads, if with wry edges, the program's success in terms of postcolonial theory. As Welch argues, "we could examine the development of Montana writing in a postcolonial light: as resistance to eastern hegemony, as primarily representational, as historically grounded, as reversing the relative advantages of center and margin. The fascination of the hegemonic (eastern, urban) culture with the indigenous and the remote (consider the Western Myth, Mythic Montana, and the Noble Savage) has increased from the 1970s through the end of the century."

As these critical investigations in Montana literature reveal, this is a good time to be working in Montana and western studies: not only are there many more writers and texts to be explored but the battles over methods and approaches continue unabated. Much more work remains to be done—many articles and books remain to be written about, say, Montana's women writers or about the state's postcolonial condition—and still more critical practices need to be brought to bear on the state's extraordinary literary corpus. Nevertheless, these contributors, building on the work of their predecessors, fill in a few more pages on the literary history and culture of Montana. Collectively, they suggest that the criticism will engage still other critical practices and methodologies, and that there can only be an increase in critical interest in Montana writing. In true Montana tradition, the work will continue.

NOTES

1. Howard Hawks, for example, directed Kirk Douglas in *The Big Sky*, and Guthrie received an Academy Award nomination for the screenplay for *Shane*; several of Johnson's stories, including "A Man Called Horse," "The Hanging Tree," and "The

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Man Who Shot Liberty Valence," were made into critically acclaimed films starring such Hollywood icons as Gary Cooper, James Stewart, and John Wayne.

2. As Guthrie wrote in 1959, "When Joseph Kinsey Howard died in August, 1951, I said that Montana had lost her conscience. Who but he could push and lead us to a recognition of our shortcomings? Who would tackle prejudice and privilege and so awaken us to them? What voice would speak for the neglected, the oppressed, the victimized? Or for our misused inheritance of soil and water and timber?" (x–xi). As one measure of the power of Howard's voice, recall that in 1981 the readers of *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* selected Howard's *Montana: High, Wide, and Handsome* as "the most significant book on the state." Egan writes, "Think about it—a political diatribe that assaults big business, false dreams, and foolish settlement prospects, chosen as the most telling, most important book about the region" (95).
3. Hart, a celebrated professor of English at Montana State University–Billings, is well known to many Montanans via her "Montana Books and Authors" program on Billings public access TV. She is also the author of *Thomas and Elizabeth Savage* (Boise State University Press, 1995).
4. As Watson writes in "Engendering Women's Lives: Women's Autobiographical Writing," "women's histories and lives have too often been erased in official documentary, cinematic, and narrative histories of the West, where the prevailing trope of rugged individualism celebrating solitary selfhood in mountain grandeur has a decidedly masculine cast" (122). In "Writing and Fire," Blew offers a similar argument on Montana and western women: "The women have always been writing but have gone unheard until lately" (332).

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PART I Does Place Matter?

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