IN THE FLESH:
AUTHENTICITY, NATIONALISM, AND PERFORMANCE
ON THE AMERICAN FRONTIER, 1860-1925

DISSERTATION

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By
Jefferson D. Slagle, M.A.

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Dissertation Committee:

Professor Chadwick Allen, Adviser
Professor Jared Gardner
Professor Susan S. Williams

Approved by

Adviser
English Graduate Program
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ABSTRACT

Representations of the frontier through the early twentieth century have been subject to two sets of critical criteria: the conventional aesthetic expectations of the particular genres and forms in which westerns are produced, and the popular cultural demand for imitative “authenticity” or faithfulness to the “real west.” “In the Flesh” probes how literary history is bound up with the history of performance westerns that establish the criteria of “authenticity” that text westerns seek to fulfill. The dissertation demonstrates how the impulse to verify western authenticity is part of a post-Civil War American nationalism that locates the frontier as the paradigmatic American socio-topography. It argues westerns produced in a variety of media sought to distance themselves from their status as art forms subject to the critical standards of particular genres and to represent themselves as faithful transcriptions of popular frontier history. The primary signifier of historicity in all these forms is the technical ability to represent authentic bodies capable of performing that history. Postbellum westerns, in short, seek to show their audiences history embodied “in the flesh” of western performers. “In the Flesh” is therefore divided into two sections: the first analyzes performance westerns, including stage drama, Wild West, and film, that place bodies on display for the immediate appraisal of audiences. Section two examines text westerns, including dime novels and Owen Wister’s The Virginian, that are constrained to appropriate the conventions of performance to “display” in writing the bodies of their “authentic” western characters.
Dedicated to Julie,

who has read each word more times than it deserved.
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VITA

November 7, 1974 ............................................Born – Cottage Grove, Oregon

2000...................................................................B.A. English, Brigham Young University

2002 ..................................................................M.A. English, The Ohio State University

2000-2006 ........................................................Graduate Teaching and Administrative

Associate, The Ohio State University

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: English
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION:
POSTBELLUM AMERICA AND THE PROBLEM OF WESTERN AUTHENTICITY

So, lament it though we may, the Frontier is gone, an idiosyncrasy that has been with us for thousands of years, the one peculiar picturesqueness of our life is no more. We may keep alive for many years yet the idea of a Wild West, but the hired cowboys and paid rough riders of Mr. William Cody are more like “the real thing” than can be found today in Arizona, New Mexico or Idaho. Only the imitation cowboys, the college-bred fellows who “go out on a ranch” carry the revolver or wear the concho. The Frontier has become conscious of itself, acts the part for the Eastern visitor; and this self-consciousness is a sign, surer than all others, of the decadence of a type, the passing of an epoch. The Apache Kid and Deadwood Dick have gone to join Hengist and Horsa and the heroes of the Magnusson saga.

- Frank Norris¹

The final touchstone of . . . genuineness is the human body itself.

-Richard Dyer²

At the outskirts of Cody, Wyoming, stands a billboard advertising the Buffalo Bill Historical Center. The billboard is covered by a large photo of Buffalo Bill Cody and Sitting Bull, one picture in the well-known series of photos of the two. The text of the billboard reads “We Are the West.” The questions kindled by this advertisement are many: What is the West that is being represented here? Is it a region? A period? An idea? If a region, how can a geographical space be represented by a pair of bodies? And what does it mean for a contemporary geography to be epitomized by individuals long since

1
dead, especially when that geography is inscribed with such names as “Cody”? If a
period, what can the term “West” signify a century after that era? Moreover, why use the
geographical designation (represented corporeally, no less) to describe a temporal event?
And if an idea, why is it best embodied in a temporary resolution (Sitting Bull traveled
with Cody’s show only one season, in 1885) to a racial and cultural conflict that defined
four centuries of American colonialism?

At its heart, the billboard’s claim is not different from the claim made by the
countless westerns produced in post-Civil War America. Representations of the frontier
through the early twentieth century are subject to two sets of critical criteria:
conventional expectations of the particular genres and forms in which westerns are
produced, and the popular cultural demand for imitative “authenticity,” or faithfulness to
the “real west.” Literary critic Nathaniel Lewis argues that “western literature is
frequently, perhaps fundamentally, about authenticity” and that western literary history is
the study of Baudrillardian “production of the real” (7). This project departs from Lewis’s
position, probing how literary history is bound up with the history of other western art
forms—drama, photography, and Wild West shows, to name a few—that help instantiate
the criteria of “authenticity” that text westerns seek to fulfill. In short, it interrogates the
signs of authenticity in the postbellum and Gilded Age western and discusses why this
genre bore the burden of demonstrating itself “authentic.” This project does not claim or
attempt to “expose” the history that underlies fictional representations. It is not interested
in comparing “the real west” to its various “fake” manifestations. It engages the idea and
power of authenticity, rather than exposing the fraud. It is interested in the formation and
effects of historiography, not in verifying history. And it addresses not the conflict
between the authentic and the inauthentic, or the real versus the fake, but rather seeks to
address the compulsion to authenticate frontier narratives, the various ways in which authentication can occur, and the forms that best facilitate the seamless verification of authenticity. The relative success or failure of westerns produced in a variety of media—and the viability of the forms or media themselves as vehicles for western narratives—often depended on their respective capabilities to distance themselves from their status as art forms subject to the critical standards of particular genres and to represent themselves as faithful transcriptions of frontier historiography. The primary signifier of historicity in all these forms is the technical ability to represent authentic bodies capable of performing that historiography.

The distinction between history and historiography is crucial here. I use “history” to refer to what historian Hayden White calls “the events, persons, structures, and processes of the past” (2). Historiography is the historical discourse by which narrative and meaning are created out of the raw material of the past. In the postbellum west, the dominant American historiography is Frederick Jackson Turner’s colonialist model in “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” This historiography posits a connection between frontier experience and American character, arguing that American identity develops in response to the conditions of progressive frontiers of national development: exploring, trapping, trading, mining, farming, town-building, and industrial growth—the varied experience that historian William Deverell calls the “great narrative of the American West” (32). Though Turner delivered his landmark essay in 1893, nearly thirty years after the end of the Civil War, it was recognized as a codification of existing postbellum belief, rather than a seismic shift in the landscape of American historiography; Theodore Roosevelt, in fact, praised Turner for putting “into a definite shape a good deal of thought that has been floating around rather loosely” (qtd. in
The trends and events in which Turner grounded his historiographical narrative, then, constitute the “history” of the period he analyzes. This historiographical ideology is the basis for what Bill Brown calls “a kind of cultural shorthand . . . This is how the Western produces what we might call its ‘mythology effect’—with the

*presumption* that the West already exists as shared knowledge, with an absence of detail that insists on familiarity” (32). Western genres can elide a certain amount of information because of the presumptions about history that its audiences bring to these texts. Foremost among these presumptions is an understanding of what constitutes western history, and thus an “authentic” western.

The term “authentic” has reference to both individual and national historiographies. Authenticity is a term as fluid as it is ubiquitous in a postbellum U.S. obsessed with compelling objects and individuals to yield up their cultural meanings. The terms ubiquity and fluidity are self-reinforcing inasmuch as an ill-defined term lends itself to varied application, and a widely-used expression is likely to be adapted to wide-ranging usages. In the postbellum western, however, “authenticity” has two interdependent meanings: one I will call “individual,” the other “historiographical.” Individual authenticity is the perception of correspondence between an individual’s actions or speech and a presumed internal essence of that person. Under this definition, what has often been called the western “code” of belief and behavior may be seen as a cultural demand for equivalence between belief and action, rather than a masochistic, masculinist ethic of self-denial. As Richard Dyer argues of film stars, individual authenticity relies on the idea of “an irreducible core of being, the entity that is perceived within the roles and actions . . . . This irreducible core is coherent in that it is supposed to
consist of certain peculiar, unique qualities that remain constant and give sense to the person’s actions and reactions” (8). In the western, a performer demonstrates this “core,” never varying from it in order to display individual authenticity.

Historiographical authenticity is the perception of correspondence between a western story and western historiography. In other words, it is a measure of how well a western fits the mold of what westerns should be, based on Turner’s thesis, other western historiographies, and previous westerns that have been judged authentic. It presupposes the existence of an objective western history against which the actions of individually authentic performers can be measured. Both of these forms of authenticity, of course, rely on one another. Jane Tompkins argues that

The need for an outward display of strength and independence on the hero’s part is so strong an element in Westerns that it controls virtually every aspect of the genre, especially the hero’s relation to other human beings. He shows his independence through the successful domination of other men. This superior status is won through the hero’s actual performance only secondarily; in the final analysis, it is his birthright. (145)

This analysis, perhaps inadvertently, hints at the principles at work in the corporeal verification of individual and historical authenticity. The common axiom that “history is written by the victors” suggests that those who win the physical contests Tompkins describes may represent themselves as authentic, while dismissing as “inauthentic” the alternate narrative voices of the vanquished. As Matthew Rebhorn argues, the western represents “a contest over legitimacy, over which frontier memory would gain ascendancy” (207), and the primary battleground of this contest was the debate about authenticity. Moreover, individual authenticity, as Tompkins implies in the final line of this argument, is demonstrated by the westerner’s ability to win physical and historiographical contests because of who he is. As she later claims, “The cowboy self
was there all along; the West has only brought it out in him” (146). The social and geographical conditions of frontier life permit the simulation of individual and historiographical authenticity by western bodies who appear to be precisely what they are while performing a palimpsestic simulacrum of western identity.

The paradox of western authenticity, then, is that westerns are viewed as authentic by virtue of their ability to effectively imitate: they must simulate western authenticity by mimicking other individuals, texts, and performances that have done so. As Jon Elderfield, curator of the New York Museum of Modern Art, claims of works of visual art, “Famous pictures start to look like reproductions of themselves. They are reproduced so often that your memory of them is replaced by the memory of the reproduction” (Schjeldahl 117).³ In the case of the western, the original historical moment and the artistic copy become conflated in a remembered image of the authentic west. The originality of the historical moment is effaced by the insistence of the multiplicity of copies that they precisely replicate that originary event. It is “authentic” reproduction that naturalizes the historicity of the form and its individual manifestations. Hillel Schwartz says of Kid McCoy, “His pseudonym overtook the original and became eponymous, which is the way of things, and of people, in our culture of the copy. We admire the unique, then we reproduce it: faithfully, fatuously, faithlessly, fortuitously” (16). The idea of the west similarly overtakes its history; the western form becomes shorthand for western history and begins to reproduce itself in a relentless quest to reinscribe its own authenticity.

The always unstated presence of such an unstable, contingent model for national self-identity gave rise to the proliferation of authentications in the western, and the genre’s nearly-neurotic insistence on authenticity. Westerns often included in printed
programs or publishers’ statements corroborations from well-known figures and newspaper reports that declared the historicity of the events represented in these texts and performances. And, in performance genres, authentic objects that were ostensibly physically present during the events represented in the show were used in re-enactments and put on display as authenticators. Western narratives were generally authenticated in one of two ways: either through the re-creation or representation of historical moments, or by the use of characters or performers connected to such events. The use of authentic performers reinforced the historicity of textual and dramatic re-enactments, and the reliance on historical events coded the characters or performers as authentic westerners—a circular, self-reinforcing system of authentication.

In fact, the structures of authentication extended even deeper than this, to the level of historiographical narrative. Westerns simultaneously represented themselves as art forms and disavowed that status by claiming historical fidelity and lack of invention. To paraphrase Michel Foucault’s assessment of René Magritte’s famous painting of a pipe, the western asserts, “this is not a text.” The audience, like Foucault, questions what exactly we are reading: the text of American history? A text about the text that is American historiography? A text that seeks to present American history free from its historiographical narrative? A text that represents American history/historiography so well that audiences fail to discern any difference between text and history? Or a text that has no substantive relation to either American history or historiography? (16). This set of questions outlines the complex web of authentication in which the western must both simulate history and dissimulate its own necessary fictional or artificial nature. Westerns, in fact, both reflect a particular version of American historiography and performatively instantiate that historiography, in effect bringing into being the very historical discourse.
whereby their authenticity will be adjudicated. That is, as these bodies perform the particular histories of their lives on the frontier, they also bring into historical being a particular version of the West—a physical performance that, in gender and performance theorist Judith Butler’s terms, “constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express” (24). To be sure, performance and performativity do not necessarily coincide in all cases, but the criteria of authenticity in the western require that western performance be constitutive of western history and identity. Westerners perform themselves, their own “authentic” identities, and by so doing instantiate western and American identities and history. Performance constitutes a frontier history that it appears to simply express or reflect, and the incidents performed by Wild Westers become history via the act of performance.

This model of historiographical performance privileged certain types of performances over others. The “play-acting” (as Cody referred to it) of stage drama threatened individual authenticity. The stage drama had a long history of actors playing the parts of others and memorizing and delivering lines that were not their own, to say nothing of its association in the American mind with the “artificial” culture of Europe, rather than “natural,” authentic America. Western performers therefore referred to their work as “re-enacting” or “exhibiting,” terms that reinforced the factually-based nature of their performance. Rather than playing a role contrived solely for the stage, they re-enacted their own experience, already performed in their own past. Similarly, they “exhibited” their skills and experience, demonstrating what they had done and the acts of which they were capable, a performance setting that seems designed precisely for the display and verification of authenticity.
The requirement for authenticity became an obsession in the western during the 1880s, the period that the frontier, as it existed in the popular and legislative perception, was disappearing, taking with it the possibility of a fundamentally American experience. When historian Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his seminal essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” at the 1893 Chicago Exposition, the idea of the frontier as a model for American identity was already in crisis: the U.S. Congress had declared the frontier closed in 1890, three years before Turner delivered his landmark thesis. If the frontier was the site of Americanization, and that frontier had ceased to exist, where would Americans turn for a national identity? The western had always indulged in a certain amount of nostalgia for the vanishing or recently-vanished frontier, and the outright loss of that frontier magnified this impulse. The resulting intense attention to the authentic western body is particularly magnified during westerns of this period, with their layers upon layers of authenticity. Far from being an easily repeatable pulp formula, then, these westerns are savvy negotiations of the cultural exigencies of a particular period of American history. Their static characters, predictable values, and repeated actions are not so much reflections of their authors’ barren imaginations as of a popular imperative to secure American frontier history through a stable, iconic western character who could invoke the ideals by which Americans defined themselves. That character’s existence would validate and organize the history he performed; his unimaginable absence would leave American frontier history unintelligible and the American character undefined.

Western figures carry to their logical conclusion romantic ideals of nostalgia for a lost era that provided an ostensibly more pure and intelligible relationship to the social order. Their authentic relationship to historiography also invokes romantic conceptions of
fiction-as-history. The plots, characters, and settings of postbellum westerns, even those regarded as authentic, are often not strictly faithful to or even grounded in particular historical events; they are, however, faithful to the American historiography I have outlined here. Bill Brown argues that reading dime westerns “is a matter of witnessing not just how fact becomes fiction but also how popular culture becomes mass culture, how legend becomes mass-mediated memory” (30). The western, in fact, blurs already nebulous relationships among the categories of fact, fiction, history, legend, culture, and memory to establish a form that embraces these terms’ ambiguities to lay claim to the equally fluid category of “authenticity.” This sort of authenticity is a form of faithfulness “to the times” as understood by Turnerian historiography, a version of romanticism. However, postbellum westerns are typically constructed as realist, even “real,” works, and their audiences typically read them in the same way. In other words, realist reading strategies overlay a rhetoric of romantic “truth” in a philosophical pastiche that further confounds definitions of authenticity.

Scholars have only recently begun to consider the social and cultural contexts out of which this pastiche arose. The current model of western authenticity, as proposed by literary critic Nathaniel Lewis, is author- and text-based. Lewis contends that authenticity is grounded in authorial experience in the west; that it is transferred from landscape to author through that author’s western experience; and that it is then transmitted from author to text. Lewis claims that western authenticity may be divided into three categories: authenticity of place, author, and text. As Lewis demonstrates, “authenticity of western place has something to do with what Patricia Limerick calls with wry amusement the ‘Real West’; authenticity of author suggests a writer deeply connected to place, somehow in touch with regional spirit; and authenticity of text implies a writing
through which place shines without the interference of language, desire, or intention” (7).

This model implies that land is paramount, and that western texts attempt to erase the material process of their creation and the body responsible for that creation. However, in western performance the creative body is self-identical with the text—the performance is the work of art, and thus the impulse to efface corporeal presence that Lewis identifies is sublimated into a fetishization of that presence. Counterintuitively, the western performance is not about the west as a place—its mountains, mines, “big skies,” plains, deserts, and rivers are significant only when they are endowed with the historiographical meaning provided by the American bodies that act in those spaces. As Lee Clark Mitchell argues, “As sheer scenery, the American West is indistinguishable from parts of Australia, Paraguay, Spain, and New Jersey . . . . But phrases like “Far West,” “El Dorado,” “Big Sky Country,” or “Virgin Land” all resonate with semantic excess, imposing on that terrain the blankness of an uninscribed page” (5). The western is about the westerner who can inscribe history on that blank page, and the landscape of the west provides a field for action, or a stage for performance. The model I propose for the later century, then, insists not so much on authentic authors who claim to be able to interpret the frontier for their audiences, but rather on visible bodies, or unified performer-texts who perform their own experience and whose authenticity may be scrutinized as they re-enact their own lives. Performance genres such as drama, Wild West, and film collapse author and performer/character into a single body-text signifier, permitting their contemporary audiences to examine the authenticity of these signifiers with apparent effortlessness. The immense popularity of these performances, in turn, placed western authors under an imperative to textually “display” western bodies in their works. These authors developed a variety of strategies intended to authenticate their characters’ bodies.
through formal affinities with western performers, or to circumvent concerns about textual display altogether. The criterion of authenticity in the western thus shifted from an antebellum demand for connection with the American landscape to a postbellum imperative to display performances of American history.

Western forms are particularly subject to the requirement of authenticity because the western as cultural product is closely bound up with American nationalism through such ideals as geographical and moral progress, agrarian and industrial development, individual liberty, military power, masculine physical strength, expansion, and violent conquest in defense of these categories. Cultural historian G. Edward White claims that, more than any other region, the west has tended to elicit imaginative responses, which stress the distinctiveness of its regional heritage while closely identifying that heritage with the intrinsic “Americanness” of American civilization. . . . Countless Europeans, Asians, Africans, and Latin Americans have come to identify the western as representative of a mode of life peculiar not only to the American West but to the whole of the United States. (1)

One might add that Americans’ own self-definitions have often been imaginatively linked, consciously or not, to the frontier experience. A nation defined by ideals rather than blood, land, or history (indeed, in the nineteenth century the U.S. is often referred to as a land without history) requires concrete proof of those ideals’ success; performers who enact American history provide tangible evidence of such success by the fact of their material existence. As a consequence of the west’s close alliance with American identity, western narratives are perceived as both artistic and, more importantly, historiographical—they write and verify the history they claim to depict. Walter Benjamin claims that the authentic object “has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value” (736); for the western performer, this “use value” is the ritual
performance of American frontier history, or its ability to demonstrate the “truth” of Manifest Destiny. It is because of the lack of an American history in the popular nineteenth-century perception and the need to concretize American identity that postbellum audiences require that westerns accurately reflect the historiography they perform. This is not to say that westerns hold up a mirror to frontier conditions, but rather that these narratives measure up to Americans’ notions of themselves as a nation.

Guaranteeing the authenticity of western narratives and performers is thus necessary because of the ways in which westerns contribute to the scripting of American history and confirm nineteenth-century American identity.

In such a system of cultural signification, bodies placed on display become objects that may be examined to discover how they fit into the society of which they are products, and what they reveal about the culture in which they participate. Performances and corporeal exhibitions thus become occasions for displaying bodies that both reflect and inscribe particular views of U.S. history and society; the insistence on authenticity, then, is a demand for legible signs that speak truths about America and its role in the world. Literary critic Miles Orvell asserts that postbellum America was “a culture of spectatorship,” and that Americans were beginning to see “things as signs” (40). In this “hieroglyphic world,” objects both gave people their own identity and enabled others to read that identity. Historian Steven Conn terms postbellum faith in objects’ signification “object-based epistemology,” or “a belief that objects, at least as much as texts, were sources of knowledge and meaning. . . . In this epistemology, objects are not precisely transparent, but neither are they hopelessly opaque. The meanings within objects would yield themselves up to anyone who studied and observed the objects carefully enough” (4). In the age of Worlds Fairs and other such exhibitions, bodies provided a similar
function. Human bodies, usually racialized, were placed on display at these events as part of ethnographic and other exhibits, often for the consumption of white spectators who scrutinized them to ascertain how these bodies “fit” into the social order.⁵

To be sure, the western was not the only form that engaged with questions of corporeal signification; Henry James and Edith Wharton, to name two, were among the eastern authors concerned with the potential of the body to signify class, race, or sexuality.⁶ In fact, Mark Twain, often cited among the pantheon of western authors but always questioning the assumptions of western literature, seems perplexed in Roughing It by the incongruity between the legend of the assassin Slade and his physical appearance. Having heard tales of Slade’s twenty-six murders during his trip across the country, Twain is shocked to find himself sitting next to the man at table: “Here was romance, and I sitting face to face with it!—looking upon it—touching it—hobnobbing with it, as it were!” (110). He is taken aback by Slade’s manner: “friendly and gentle-spoken,” “pleasant,” and three times “polite” (110-11). Despite Slade’s treatment of him, and the dubious nature of the acts attributed to the assassin, Twain remembers his body: “to this day I can remember nothing remarkable about Slade except that his face was rather broad across the cheek bones, and that the check bones were low and the lips peculiarly thin and straight. But it was enough to leave something of an effect on me, for since then I seldom see a face possessing those characteristics without fancying that the owner of it is a dangerous man” (110). Twain thus examines Slade’s body for signs of the violence attributed to him and, failing to find those signs, makes narrative inform Slade’s features. Twain thus suggests that reading bodies is much more tenuous than it might seem. As Conn warns, objects, including authentic bodies, are “not precisely transparent.” Their
coloring often depends upon the authoritative, even tyrannical, eyes of the viewer, and the conviction that bodies signify reliably can be more perilous than the possibility of the fake.

The western thus assiduously assured its audiences that the bodies that occupied western forms were unmistakably legible—and its American audiences generally agreed, if only for nationalistic reasons. Indeed, at the Chicago Exhibition the Wild West was “accepted as the ‘key to all’” (qtd. in Rydell 97), functioning as a gateway between the Midway and the White City; it was not a pole in the savage-civil dichotomy, but rather a mediator—a frontier—that allowed the two to be reconciled by visitors. And in Europe by this time, Crévecoeur’s interrogative “What is an American?” had been transmuted into, “Where is an American?”—or, “Why have we not yet seen the individual who is the product and representative of America?” Frontiersmen, neither Indian nor European, fit the bill perfectly, and Cody was hailed in England as, finally, a truly American product. The western performer, then, became physical evidence of the persistence of “the American” in the face of the vanishing American experience. As long as westerners continued to exist, that America could persist imaginatively in Americans’ minds. In an era in which, as Frederick Jackson Turner argued, the frontier is viewed as the site of “most rapid and effective Americanization” (4), and the promoter of “composite nationality” (22), the frontiersman par excellence becomes the American par excellence.

The invariable and intense attention to Western bodies is a ritualistic display of bodies that simulate America—these bodies are icons that stand in for the nation. The western’s obsession with these bodies evokes Jean Baudrillard’s description of icons: this compulsion is motivated by “the idea that the image didn’t conceal anything at all, and that [this image] was in essence not [an image], such as an original model would have
made [it], but [a] perfect simulacrum, forever radiant with [its] own fascination” (5). The attention to the western body, “radiant with fascination,” seems to stem from the desire to make the body authenticate the historiography, or to enforce the body’s capacity to stand in for and conceal the hyperreality of the frontier that both body and text represent. Film critic Richard Dyer argues that “stars are involved in making themselves into commodities; they are both labour and the thing that labour produces” (6). The western performer extends this model: the western body is not only labour and its product, but also authentic and what authenticity produces, history and what history produces. Bodies are in fact the instruments of the American westward movement and of American history. They are American frontier history. The process of transmuting that corporeally embodied history in performance or text requires a system of authentication that produces a hyperreal version of the self and of American frontier history.

Baudrillard argues that hyperrealities become necessary “when the real is no longer what it was” and “nostalgia assumes its full meaning,” as in the case of the late nineteenth-century western’s representation of an always-already mythical frontier and the bodies that come to signify that frontier. There is, Baudrillard claims, “a plethora of signs of reality—a plethora of truth, of secondary objectivity, and authenticity. Escalation of true, of lived experience” (6-7). This proliferation of authentication and “escalation of lived experience” reach their zenith in the postbellum western, with its layers upon layers of authentication. He proposes that,

this is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes. . . . A hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary. (2-3)
Westerns are variously praised for their historical accuracy and consequent pedagogical function, or vilified for their historical inauthenticity, a critical category that testifies to the genre’s attempts to insulate the reality of frontier history from the imaginary of frontier mythology by means of a byzantine network of authentication centered in western bodies.

Performing western bodies provide material, concrete “proof” of popular American historiography (that is to say, of popular conceptions and inscriptions of American history); the pervasiveness of that historiography will later lend its authority to authenticate “fake” westerners. By the advent of narrative film, in fact, the test for authenticity will be actors’ fidelity to their predecessors’ bodies, rather than film actors’ own western experience. Thus a poster for the 1921 film *The Bull-Dogger* features African-American cowboy Bill Pickett not on a western landscape, but in front of Chicago’s White City, the scene of Cody’s 1893 World’s Fair triumph. The show and the performer have become the criteria of authenticity, and Pickett seeks to display his own authenticity by association with Cody’s historiographical, or history-writing, performance.

The ubiquity and popularity of western performances during the postbellum years demand that textual western genres, incapable of physically displaying bodies, import scenes of corporeal display into their texts. These authentic bodies link text westerns’ specific plots to the master frontier narrative of American historiography through the performers who embody that cultural narrative. Thus, E. Z. C. Judson (Ned Buntline) must overcome his dislike for “using time and space for description”; he claims that because the personages in his text “are real, not fictitious characters, I think it is due to
them and the reader to paint pen-portraits of the trio” (12). For Judson and other western authors, the imperative to “paint” characters is not the standard artistic necessity of the author, but rather cultural insistence on authentic, historical characters that can be textually transcribed onto the printed page. Text westerns’ inevitable moments of word portraiture often engage questions of disguise, mistaken identity, and the problems of visual portraiture in order to relocate concerns about the authentic body from textual representation to the instability of the characters themselves. These texts compulsively enact western display to invoke the stable signifying power of authentic bodies that affirm a narrative of the west as America, even as they struggle with the impossibility of physically displaying characters who are textual constructions.

The individual chapters of this study mimic the formal division between performance and text, and I have arranged them in two sections: “Performing the West” and “Literary Bodies.” Each chapter focuses on one western form and the functioning of authentic corporeal display within that form. Section one, on performance, begins with a chapter on stage drama. This chapter analyzes the authenticating strategies employed by a number of stage dramas and hybrid shows that relied upon frontier skills such as trick shooting. These works adopted a variety of plot devices that dislocate attention from the dissonance between the body of the actor and the person of the character to other sites of inauthenticity that the drama is capable of resolving. Since the players who embodied the dramas are no longer available for readings, my analysis relies heavily upon the text of these productions, as well as supporting materials, contemporary reviews, and, in one case, legal documents, to assess the success or failure of specific strategies and of the form generally.
Chapter three analyzes the Wild West, a form that marks the historical confluence of frontier conflict and media representation and is the form that is most determinedly not artistic. As such, it represents perhaps the pinnacle as well as the closure of Americans’ conception of themselves as a frontier nation. My analysis of the Wild West also relies heavily upon supporting materials to read performing body/texts and to assess how these multivalent bodies were read at the time of their performance. I focus exclusively on Buffalo Bill’s Wild West as the originator and best-known of the frontier exhibitions; as Cody’s late career with Sells-Floto and Miller Brothers 101 demonstrates, the Wild Wests that follow it are regarded as merely imitations of Cody’s “real” show. I demonstrate how his manipulation of the categories of “acting,” “re-enacting,” and “performing” provided Cody with the “raw material” for a generic pastiche that blended history, literature, nationalism, and performance in the body of Buffalo Bill himself, and helped to instantiate the frontier as the center of America and the world.

Chapter four assesses the transformations that occur between live exhibition and the film performances of William S. Hart. The film would become the dominant western form for nearly the entire twentieth century, and audience expectations of western film actor authenticity were often shaped by the corporeal aesthetics instantiated by Hart, the silent western’s premier star. Films may be, and often are, recorded in the location where their events are supposed to occur. Unlike live performers, who are constrained to imbue the spaces in which they act with authenticity, film actors can thus derive authenticity from the landscape on which they stand. However, their bodies must also compete with that landscape for the limited space within the film frame, since the requirements of western authenticity require that their spectral bodies be placed on display for visual
assessment. In the absence of an actual performing body on the screen, filmmakers use the technological ability of the medium to bring the projected bodies of actors ever-closer to their audiences, until performers’ eyes become signifiers of authenticity.

Section two begins with a chapter that interrogates the dime novel, comparing works by Prentiss Ingraham and E. Z. C. Judson that are based on Wild West figures to works by other dime novel authors who depict other historical or fictional characters. The dime novel form spans nearly seven decades, and its influence is felt in the Wild West, film, and the more serious, “literary” westerns that follow. However, even this highly popular and deeply entrenched form is affected by the predominance of performance. In 1888, six years after Cody’s show began, dime novel publishers increased the size of the books from seven by five to twelve by eight inches, in the process reducing the novels to between one-third and one-sixth of their former page length. The change was made to provide larger pictures on the cover, an almost immediate response to the shows’ raising the bar of corporeal authenticity. This chapter analyzes the dime novel’s form and content before and after the Wild West and film western. It examines the shift from “The Sons of Leatherstocking” (as Henry Nash Smith calls dime novel protagonists) to “The Heirs of Buffalo Bill,” male and female characters who imitate the Wild West’s model of corporeal authenticity.

Chapter six rereads Owen Wister’s classic western novel *The Virginian* against the backdrop of western corporeal authenticity. Recent criticism has paid close attention to the relationship between the novel’s narrator and title character, theorizing it in terms of queer discourse or marriage rhetoric. I argue that the spectatorial emphasis placed on the Virginian’s body is a relic of the authentic corporeal display made standard by the performance western, and that Wister’s novel is postmodern in its commitment to baring
those conventions. *The Virginian* textually represents both the authentic body and that body’s observer, demonstrating how a variety of gazes are subjugated into a single authenticating gaze. The Virginian’s body is an object of spectatorship not simply for the narrator, but for all the significant characters in Wister’s text, Arthur Keller’s illustrations in the novel’s first edition, and the novel’s adaptation for the stage.

In a brief epilogue, I examine the legacy of postbellum authenticity in the contemporary western. As narratives of American identity became less monolithic and agrarian, and more cosmopolitan and modern, frontier films and texts moved from the center of American culture to a temporally cyclical niche. This movement was coeval with a willingness to reexamine narratives about the west and America in a number of ways: American violence, isolationism, racism, gender roles, colonialism, etc. As the west became less culturally significant than it had been at the end of the nineteenth century, demonstrating authenticity became unnecessary, and authenticity itself became a locus for social commentary, often combined with humor. This chapter will address briefly some trends since the 1920s that have promoted and reflected the breakdown of western authenticity.

In the final tally, the billboard at the borders of Cody is an ideal voice for the “west,” or at least the western. Buffalo Bill and Sitting Bull, western bodies placed on display for our scrutiny, claim authority and authenticity in their statement, “We Are the West.” The effectiveness of American frontier historiography is evident in the fact that their twenty-first century audience does, in fact, believe them. Two icons of that historiography, each representing a mythic closure of particular sets of frontier experience, claim to speak for that experience, ask us to regard them as exemplars of a
period, of a story, of a region, and of a particular national identity. This project is a study of how this utterance becomes possible; why we recognize that the frontiersman and the Indian, more than anything else, are understood popularly as icons for “the west”; and what, for better or worse, is the cultural heritage of this iconography.
Notes

1 Norris 1185.

2 Dyer 13.

3 Elderfield made this remark in the context of a restoration of Picasso’s Les Demoiselles d’Avignon.

4 Catharine Maria Sedgwick refers to this sort of historical representation when she claims that her aim is “to illustrate not the history, but the character of the times” (3). Nathaniel Hawthorne says that The House of the Seven Gables is faithful, if not to specific events of the past, then to a higher “truth of the human heart” (vii).

5 See Conn 4-24, Rydell 2-8, and Maxwell.

6 In James’s “The Real Thing,” this display takes the form of posing for an artist. The dynamics of display and spectatorship are made explicit here, as the artist-narrator says of the apparently upper-class Monarchs, “they stood there letting me take them in—which, as I afterwards perceived, was the most practical thing they could have done.” It is, in his view, an effective strategy because it allows the artist to “immediately see them” or “seize their type,” to read them as authentic representatives of the upper-class subjects the artist is often called on to paint. Unlike his other subjects, they are “the real thing.” There is a multi-valent irony, however, in this appraisal of them. After his initial judgment, they reveal that they are not well-off, as the artist has inferred, unsettling the reliability of the body as a stable signifier. The artist quickly makes a second judgment of them, according to which “they could never have had much of a margin. Their good looks had been their capital.” Inasmuch as upper-class corporeal display is concerned with reinforcing the stability of class signifiers, they have been successful; however, it is that very reinforcement that now makes them unmarketable. Despite his recognition that they are not well-off, as he had initially inferred, the artist continues to read their bodies as inalterably upper-class “beautiful statues.” The stable authenticity they have cultivated makes them static, rather than plastic, in a commercial artistic environment that considers whether things or people “are or not is a subordinate and almost always a profitless question” compared to whether the artist can make them seem. The Monarchs “fail of being plastic” under the eyes of the examiner charged with judging their authenticity, and despite the adaptability they display to readers, his initial judgment of them remains in force. They, even more than the artist, are “ridden by a type,” whereas the lower-class model is malleable precisely because her body possesses no signs of authenticity. The Monarchs are pigeonholed in a culture of imitations in which the persistence of the lower-class absolute fake renders the Monarch’s upper-class authenticity “so much less precious than the unreal.”

Wharton’s The House of Mirth presents another scene in which a marginally upper-class subject places her body on display for spectatorial consumption and verdict. The tableaux vivants of the Brys’ party provide the occasion for Lily Bart’s display as Reynolds’s “Mrs. Lloyd.” Lily shows “her artistic intelligence in selecting a type so like her own that she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself”—that is, she intends her display to reflect an authentic relation between her body and her essential self. Lily has “purposely chosen a picture without distracting accessories of dress or surroundings,” desiring rather to “to show herself in a splendid setting” than to represent Mrs. Lloyd or to appear amidst an array of objects that would color interpretation of her scene. However, Lily misunderstands the dynamics of the display: although, as the curtain falls, the picture revealed is “simply and undisguisedly the portrait of Miss Bart,” she does not control audiences’ reading(s) of her unstable signifying body. If what her audience sees is “the real Lily,” her reality is subject to a variety of readings. Margot Norris notes that “Reynolds’s portraits are not of real women but of real women as figures of other paintings: this is, portraits of representations of representations.” Lily, then, is already enmeshed in a palimpsestic inscription of historical femininity on her body. Moreover, Lily’s unmarried status influences reception of her as Mrs. Lloyd. The latter, as a married woman, represents fulfilled sexuality, whereas Lily must represent herself as the potentiality of sexual expression. Her appearance as a married woman, then, reinforces her reputation as a coquette and, as Ned Van Alstyne remarks, makes it a “deuced bold thing to show herself in that get-up.” The “real Lily,” in fact, is visible in none or all of the readings of her; as she remarks later in the novel, the “truth” about a woman “is the story that’s easiest to believe.” To her friends,
she’s one “real Lily”; to her female society cohorts, another, and to the men of various classes in the audience, yet another. Indeed, the material consequences of unstable corporeal signification become frighteningly clear following the show, when Gus Trenor, under the spell of her body’s signification, attempts to assault Lily. Bodies are viewed as authentic signifiers but, as Conn warns, they are “not precisely transparent.” Their coloring often depends upon the authoritative, even tyrannical, eyes of the viewer, and the conviction that bodies signify reliably can be more perilous than the possibility of the fake.
Tell me square out in Bill William’s talk, how the picter war made.

- John Wallace Crawford, *Fonda*

I was curious to see how I should look when represented by someone else.

- William F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody

In 1871, midway between the publication of the first dime novel western in 1860 and the inception of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West in 1882, three frontier dramas were staged in New York theaters. *Across the Continent*, by James J. McCloskey, and *Horizon*, by Augustin Daly, appeared in March, and *Kit, the Arkansas Traveler*, by Edward Spencer, T.B. DeWalden, and Clifton W. Tayleure, made its New York debut in June. These plays marked the beginning of an epoch: from the opening of *Across the Continent* until the last episode of *Bonanza* in 1973, frontier performance was continuously presented to the American public on the stage, in the Wild West arena, over the radio waves, and on the screens of motion picture theaters and televisions, becoming the “dominant subject of drama in America for over one hundred years” (Hall 22). Hall extends the definition of “drama” to include a variety of performance media outside of live theater, but the confluence of the western genre and corporeal performance is compelling. While the
western novel would enjoy substantial popularity through the twentieth century, the explosion of western performances demonstrates the massive cultural demand for western bodies, a call that was first answered on the New York stage in 1871.

Given its popularity and cultural legacy, the postbellum western drama has received strikingly little scholarly attention. Critic Susan Harris Smith claims that American drama is a “bastard art,” “the most devalued and overlooked area in American literary studies” (10); Matthew Rebhorn extends Smith’s argument, alleging that “if nineteenth-century American theater is a bastard, . . . then stage representations of the American frontier are the bastard’s bastard, shunned by critics, forgotten by historians” (1-2). Despite this contemporary inattention, however, frontier dramas were both popular and abundant throughout much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; Stuart Hyde has documented 1200 frontier plays written between 1849 and 1917, primarily melodramatic pieces. The small body of critical work on the frontier drama has attempted to explain this popularity, connecting notions of the frontier to constructions of American identity, and describing the theater experience in phenomenological terms. Rebhorn, for example, argues that “Americans living in places like New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, in short, desired avidly to read and hear about the frontier, but, most importantly, they wanted to see the frontier” (165). The theater, then, presents an opportunity to witness an experience that is iconically American but simultaneously foreign to urban east coast theatergoers. Bruce McConachie questions this kind of regionalized exoticism, pointing out the national appeal of frontier drama: while “theatre companies had been moving west with white settlement . . . there was little that was fundamentally different between the theatre enjoyed by western spectators and that back east” (143). Given the nationalizing function of western performance, this geographical
homogeneity is not surprising. It does, however, suggest that something more than exoticism contributes to the popularity of the postbellum drama. Alan Ackerman claims that the conditions of dramatic production promote effective response to audience expectations and social trends, allowing nineteenth-century drama to serve as a “barometer of the culture’s concerns” (xii). As I have argued that the western is primarily concerned with the production of authentic frontier bodies that incarnate popular myths of American frontier identity, it follows that examining the ways that stage drama negotiates the demands of western display reveals the cultural calculus underlying its popular success and critical invisibility. This chapter thus will not undertake an overview of the massive archive of frontier dramatic works, but rather will provide a brief sketch of the range of topics addressed by frontier plays, situating the form within the context of western authenticity.

As a form, the stage drama suffered from several significant shortcomings in playing the game of western authenticity. Indeed, even in its own time the frontier drama was the subject of many critics’ contempt, and by the middle of the nineteenth century playwrights themselves had satirized early plays set on the frontier. John Brougham’s _Metamora, or, The Last of the Pollywogs_ appeared in 1847 as a satire of John Augustus Stone’s _Metamora, or, The Last of the Wampanoags_ (1829); the success of this piece prompted him to lampoon another successful fronter play, James Nelson Barker’s _The Indian Princess, or, La Belle Sauvage_ (1808), in _Po-ca-hon-tas; or, The Gentle Savage_ (1855). Other dramatists followed suit, creating a sub-genre of frontier parody that suggests the challenges confronted by authors who attempted to represent frontier history on the stage.¹ For one, the form had a long history of established conventions that permitted theatergoers to readily recognize its artifice. Compared to dime novels, early
films, and historical re-enactments, which were often quantitatively dominated by westerns, a smaller portion of works in better-established genres like drama and the high art novel took the west as their subject. The conventions of these more recent forms were therefore closely linked with the western, and the forms themselves seemed more “naturally” adapted to western narratives. The stage drama and high art novel, of course, had recognizable formal conventions of their own, which were suited to their equally conventional plots. Because of the novelty of these newer forms, their conventions were naturalized for coeval audiences by lack of familiarity and analysis. This novelty could make them appear free of convention, and therefore appear more authentic, or less contrived, because their conventions were not readily visible to audiences. The theater was also linked to a European past that alienated its representations from the novelty and liberty of America. In a period of American cultural history that was deeply invested in creating works that were fundamentally American in both subject and form, the theater presented a cognitive incongruity of filling the old bottles of stage drama with the new wine of American frontier tales. Moreover, Americans’ association of Europe with art and artifice tainted stage representations of the frontier by categorizing them as art, rather than as history—after all, there are no “history critics” who stand in judgment on the aesthetic quality of the past. Aside from a few critically successful frontier dramas, the form was widely disparaged by a theater press whose training compelled them to situate these plays within the formal context of the stage drama, rather than the generic context of the western.

Frontier dramas were also presented in a performance space that was cultured and delimited, in opposition to the paradigmatically free, open spaces of the west. Roger Hall, arguing for the superiority of performance over text, claims that:
Reading, no matter how entertaining, had its limitations. For one, it was a solitary activity, without the intrinsic comradeship and interaction exhibited by an Indian tribe, a company of soldiers, or a wagon train. Furthermore, it lacked the primal sounds of horses’ hooves, gun firing, and war-like yelps. It lacked the raw scents of gunsmoke and animals. Except for the occasional drawing, it lacked the visual exhilaration of scenic vistas and distinctive apparel. It lacked the reality of actual human beings engaged in live action. Theatre provided those sensory elements in a distinctive phenomenological experience, and the citizens of the east could stake their claim to a portion of the frontier just by purchasing a ticket. (2)

It is, Hall contends, the physical experience of proximity to the frontier that exalts stage drama above the literary forms. Despite Hall’s suggestion that the stage drama is superior because of text’s inability to display “scenic vistas,” however, the stage drama is equally incapable of transporting its viewers to such scenes. Moreover, the theater space was understood as a site of artistic performance, self-consciously adapted to the presence of an observing audience. As Rebhorn notes, “unlike other cultural media with literary content, such as narratives, pamphlets, or poetry, theater only occurs in the presence of other people” (5). In contrast to these other forms—and even to the performance genres of Wild West and film—audiences are aware both of their status as audience members and the nature of the play as an artistic artifact created specifically for their consumption. This is, of course, partly due to the long history of stage drama and audiences’ consequent familiarity with stage conventions. The western novel, Wild West, and film western, on the other hand, regardless of their self-consciousness as representations, typically purport to represent historical fact. The Wild West, as we shall see, argues that it is nothing more and nothing less than history itself, and that it permits audiences to witness that history precisely as it occurred. The novel often claims to be a historical record and provides the reader a disembodied presence in the story that allows us to textually view its events without being present in them. The film similarly transports its
audience into the scene and separates them from it through, respectively, the apparent proximity film provides to western bodies on the screen and the spatial separation it enforces between the low, dark, horizontal, small, immanent space of the audience and the high, light, vertical, large, distant space of the events portrayed on screen. With respect to other performance western media, then, the stage drama often fell short of offering a proximate relationship to western history.

“Too Durned Much Style”: Creating the Authentic Stage Body

The most significant shortcoming of the frontier play, however, was that its actors were manifestly not self-identical with the characters they performed on stage. This rift between the identity of the actor and the actions of the character created a scissure between the actor’s offstage identity and onstage personae that rendered impossible individual authenticity. These actors were merely “playing” roles, in contradistinction to later western performers who would claim to re-enact their own lives. Under such a view of western authenticity, Buffalo Bill’s notoriously bad stage acting actually made him appear more authentic, and therefore more appealing to audiences. Cody, his body imbued with narratives of his frontier experience, possessed the advantage of an “authentic” western body that could be displayed unambiguously in the theater—his body, in fact, was the sole attraction of many of his plays. Trained stage actors, lacking frontier experience and marked by their ability to play a variety of roles, displayed bodies that were valued according to the critical criteria of stage acting because of their individual inauthenticity—their ability to simulate the characters they played.
Frontier dramas therefore adopt one of two strategies: first, they utilize convoluted plots that displace audience attention from the disarticulation between character and actor to that between the appearance of a character and that character’s identity. Frontier dramas utilize a variety of forms of misrecognition, including disguise, amnesia, forgery, and paintings of characters, to shift concern about actors’ bodies to an investigation of characters’ bodies. Paradoxically, then, postbellum stage actors dissimulate their status as actors in order to simulate authenticity. That is, they must demonstrate that their characters are not who they appear to be so that audiences focus on the dissimulation of the character who performs an alternate identity, rather than the dissimulation of the actor who performs a stage character. Second, many frontier dramas seek to demonstrate that their characters’ bodies are individually and/or historically authentic, either by placing authentic westerners on the stage to play themselves—characters like Buffalo Bill, “Texas Jack” Omohundro, and Wild Bill Hickok who can re-enact their frontier experience—or by hybridizing the drama and Wild West forms in plays that include sharp-shooting or similar frontier feats.

To be sure, many of the displacement strategies listed above are common to melodrama, but the popularity of melodrama and the preeminence of the western coincide because the form and the content mutually reinforce one another, and the confluence of the two permits the stage western to destabilize the identities of its character/actors in ways that question melodramatic convention and reinforce the signifying power of western bodies. All of these displacement strategies appear to question the reliability of corporeal signification, only to insist on stable character identities in their resolution. The melodramatic devices of the frontier drama, in fact, are a mere patina of convention, as they utilize various forms of character misrecognition to
demonstrate frontier bodies’ inability to dissimulate. That is, the characters appear to mask or lose their identities, but audiences already know who these characters are and how they will end the play. Because of the reliability and legibility of the western body, many standard melodramatic devices fail to create the effect of surprise in the frontier drama.

Theater critic Daniel Gerould argues that drama often uses a secret to create suspense and interest in its audience; the secret may be divided into subtypes: the “total secret” is “contained in the exposition of the play, and unknown to both the characters and to the spectator. The spectator can only guess as to the nature of the secret (on the basis of scattered ‘hints’), to which no character has the key. The gradual revelation of the secret, while the spectator attempts to guess it, gives the melodrama its compositional tension” (158). A second subtype is the “secret for the characters”:

In this case the play’s compositional dynamics are based on the unfolding of situations which block an “easy” solution to the enigma of concealed relationships. The characters approach the solution, then move away again. . . . The spectator, as though a participant in the event unfolding on stage, has a strong ‘will’ to have the secret disclosed, but his desire must remain tense and unresolved until the denouement. (158)

Gerould’s analysis suggests that in both these “secrets” the audience and characters share the mystery, and tension is created by the spectator’s desire to see the characters definitively revealed, and thus resolve the secret. However, in the frontier play audiences who are familiar with western iconography can inspect characters to determine which character is hiding his or her identity and what is being hidden, thus circumventing the melodramatic device and finding pleasure not so much in the final revelation of character, but rather in the audience’s ability to anticipate that revelation. The melodrama, then,
functions as a useful vehicle for the stage western not because its conventions fit western plots and characters, but rather because those conventions allow circumvention in ways that reinforce the perception that western bodies are always eminently legible.

The postbellum stage western, in fact, exists at the intersection of melodrama and realism. Realism as an intellectual movement intersects with the western’s concern with authenticity, and the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, as we shall see in the next chapter. Plays as different as Augustin Daly’s *Horizon* (1871) and Joaquin Miller’s *The Danites in the Sierras* (1877) are both regarded as authentic, suggesting that something more than either realism or melodrama is a work.\(^3\) Indeed, *Horizon* was far less successful than *The Danites*, despite the fact that Daly trained his actors in techniques associated with realism; critic Jean Cutler notes that Daly’s actors “lost their stilted habits because they were taught not to mouth their lines, rant, pose or exaggerate. . . . The actors were instructed never to notice anyone on the other side of the footlights, for the audience had to be to them as if they did not exist” (qtd. in Wilmeth and Cullen 17). The confluence of this emphasis on realism as an acting technique with the western’s insistence on authenticity should have resulted in the popular success of Daly’s play; the production’s relatively modest run suggests both that popular audiences were not yet prepared for realism on the stage, and that melodramatic conventions meshed with the concerns of the western. Realist plays would paradoxically draw attention to the actor as performer; melodramas, as I have argued, relied on the instability of character identities to displace this attention onto the character, rather than the actor, as a site of potential inauthenticity.
Edward E. Rose’s appropriately titled play *The Westerner* (1899) demonstrates the form’s reliance on western bodies and simultaneous need to displace their potential inauthenticity onto the character. As a New York family awaits the arrival of the title character, James Errol, a discussion between Jessie Deans (described in the script as a “frank and unsophisticated” girl) and Charley Reid (“a tool in evil hands”) reveals the Westerner’s character, inscribing on his yet-unseen body discourses of westernness that will influence the audience’s subsequent perception of him (1). Jessie establishes the western body as a site of spectatorship when she tells Reid, “I’m just dying to see this Westerner, Mr. Errol; Mr. Reid, do you suppose he will come in with a war whoop and flourish his revolvers?” (8). Though Jessie’s statement places Errol squarely in the field of Wild West performers, it seems to be intended to frame his rather conventional appearance, for he arrives with anything but “a war whoop” and flourish. Errol’s arrival, in fact, occasions the following exchange with Harry Lawton:

Errol: Dressed to death; look at me. (Rises to Center.) The first time in store clothes for ten years.

Harry: Right in style, old man.

Errol: Too durned much style, these trousers flop so I can hardly walk, the vest says, don’t you dare to breathe; and look at those boots, I’ve got bunions from wearing them already.

Harry: My dear boy, you are in New York, what can any man want more?

Errol: I want more room, I’m cramped, confined: New York ain’t big enough for me. I want to get into my old cow boy rig, and feel Polly, the smartest poney this side of Frisco, under me and lope off over the plains; I want a whiff of prairie air and see something beside brick walls and pavements; and I’d like to sleep one night without that durned elevated railroad haunting me; that’s what. (19-20)

Given Errol’s arrival in “store clothes” that belie his western identity, Jessie’s statement provides a necessary palliative to Errol’s appearance, performing the work that his body
cannot. Errol’s complaint about the city inverts the standard construction of west as site of corporeal discomfort—or, as Jane Tompkins argues, masochism.4 Here, the city is the environment that prevents sleep, restricts sight, offends smell, and otherwise afflicts the body of the westerner. More significant, however, is the constricting city that confines the body of the westerner—not only is “this town not big enough for the both of us” in the stock western phrase, it’s not big enough for Errol alone. More importantly, Errol’s costume and his acting evince “too durn much style” for an authentic westerner. The body of the western character/performer exceeds its narrative bounds even as it fails to measure up to the demands of authenticity, and the play displaces the gap between actor and performer onto the tension of the western body in an eastern space. This tension echoes the way Rose would like audiences to understand Errol’s body transported into theatrical space, and the way dozens of playwrights of the period seek to circumvent the authenticity game in their western dramas.

“Ain’t I Seen You Afore, Summers?”: Disguise and Revelation in the Frontier Play

Explicit disguise is perhaps the most common plot device of the western drama. Disguise is, of course, a commonplace of melodramatic theater, but as I have suggested it functions differently in the frontier play. Here it functions to reveal character, rather than to mask it. Playwright Edward Rose, for example, uses disguise in his frontier plays as well as his non-western melodramas. In Her Last Stake (1882), a conventional melodrama set in an upper-class home, Harold, a young man estranged from his family, returns in disguise to save his father from marriage with a gold-digging “adventurer.” He disguises himself, initially because he is yet unwelcome in the home and later to prevent the marriage, but the key difference between this disguise and that utilized by the frontier
dramas is that in this play no one can see through his disguise. The other characters only recognize Harold when he reveals himself to them. In the western drama, however, characters who are individually authentic themselves can always see through the disguise, and audiences versed in the iconography of frontier characterization can distinguish characters’ relative morality.

In Leander Pease Richardson’s *MLiss*, disguise functions in precisely this way. The play, a wholesale revision of Bret Harte’s 1860 short story “The Work on Red Mountain” and his 1863 novelistic amplification entitled *M’Liss*, is one of three stage adaptations of the story to appear in the 1870s. All three scripts mine the Harte story for material while altering the story’s events for the stage. More importantly, however, they appropriate the name of the story’s well-known protagonist in order to incarnate her on stage. The full title of Richardson’s adaptation is *MLiss; A California Idyll. A Five Act Drama, taken from Bret Harte’s Novel*, the subtitle suggesting that a primary attraction of all the M’Liss plays was to see Harte’s heroine on stage. Its plot, though, based on disguise, uses characters that are recognizable to its audience as well as to those of its characters who are adept at reading bodies.

The villains of this play are M'Liss’s aunt and her male friend Jim Waters (alias Moore), who are disguised during most of the plot. Bummer Smith, M'Liss’s father, outs Waters early in the play, asking him, “‘Aint’ I seen you afore, summers?”; Moore, of course, denies the accusation, though somewhat unconvincingly: “No—that is I—I reckon not, pardner” (4). The audience knows, however, that Smith has “seen him before, somewhere,” for several reasons. First, characters in western dramas who claim to recognize disguised figures from the past are almost invariably correct in their assessments. Second, Bummer is a trustworthy—which is to say individually authentic—
character, which is apparent both because audiences “know” him from the popular short story and novel, and because of the stock role that he enacts—that of the goodhearted miner. This knowledge of characters based on their standard western roles suggests the third place that the audience has “seen Waters before”: in the guise of any number of stage characters who disguise themselves in order to take advantage of characters like Bummer.

In trying to place the stranger, in fact, Bummer mentally runs through a number of stock western locations. On his way to the “pocket” of gold that he has discovered and that Waters and his co-conspirator plot to wrest from his control, the old miner muses: “Yes, thar’s the tracks. Somebody’s been into the pocket, and somebody knows I’ve struck the lead. Somebody knows I’ve found gold! Whose tracks (Pause.) Who was that stranger? I’ve seen that face afore. Where? Poker Flat? No. Hangman’s Gulch? No. North Fork? Yes! In ‘59. Who is he? (Pause.) Moore! That’s him. Didn’t like him then, and don’t like him now” (10). Boomer’s mental calculation of places he might have met Moore is biographical, but also catalogs the literary west in its list of places made famous by Harte’s stories. This catalog locates Moore in literary-historical discourses of western identity, suggesting his contemptible character and the end he is likely to meet in the moral calculus of the popular western.

Indeed, Moore and his companion “Mrs. Smith” murder Bummer, and the woman claims to be MLiss’s deceased mother in an attempt to wrest the mine from the girl. When schoolmaster John Gray questions the girl about her mother, she denies ever seeing her, though she “see’d her picter once”; all the girl remembers of her childhood is “being hungry, and ragged” (11). Gray informs the girl that her mother is alive, and introduces her to “Mrs. Smith,” Moore’s companion. MLiss looks her over “coolly,” then cries out,
“No!” (12). The girl tells Mrs. Smith, “I only know that you are not what you wish to seem. I see it in your eyes—I feel it here! (Hand on heart.) I don’t know what it is, but something is saying in my ears, ‘Believe not that woman, MLiss! Shun her as you would an enemy! Do not touch her, my child, for she is an imposter!’” (12). MLiss, the stereotypical child of nature, fills a role that is always individually authentic because of its connection to nature. She is therefore able to discern inauthenticity in others by visually scrutinizing them. In this episode, MLiss knows nothing of Smith except what Gray and the woman have told her, yet she, like the audience, sees through Smith’s disguise and identifies her individual inauthenticity. The site of spectatorship in the play is therefore dislocated from the observing audience to the observing character, and the site of inauthenticity is the identity and disguise of Mrs. Smith, not the disconnect between character and actor.

This is not to suggest that MLiss is entirely conventional, even for a western play. Hall argues that:

Many of the frontier romances followed the model of Davy Crockett or The Danites, in which coarse, unlettered, but tender-hearted men such as Davy and Sandy McGee court better-educated, genteel women such as Eleanor and Huldah. M’Liss reversed that usual formulation, for the charm of M’Liss stems from the burgeoning, unspoken love between the educated schoolmaster and the passionate but unlettered adolescent girl. (104)

Despite this superficial dissimilarity, the gender reversal of MLiss does little to alter the function of the characters involved. MLiss, in fact, is the literal and figural child of the Davy/Sandy character: her gender is altered, but the character remains otherwise identical. These characters, though individually authentic and able to read the bodies of others, are often the victims of those characters’ actions. In MLiss, Bummer is killed by the man whose disguise he discovers, and MLiss is convinced by Gray to move in with
Mrs. Smith despite the girl’s revulsion. When MLiss discovers her “mother’s” plot to send her to a “Magdalen Asylum,” however, she tells Gray, “All the time I had a strange, vague feeling which I cannot express,—a feeling as if she hated me and wished I was dead. Now I am sure of it, and I am sure she is not my mother” (4). MLiss’s suspicions prove correct, as astute readers of western bodies know they will, and the play’s finale reveals that Mrs. Smith is in fact MLiss’s aunt, who has left her husband to run off with Moore (6). Smith’s plea recognizes the corporeal dynamics of the play, as she tells Gray, “I am a woman, and you have me in your power. You are a man—strong—powerful. You may do with me what you will” (7). Her weakness, however, is not so much physical as metaphoric—she cannot signify as he can, for she has compromised her individual authenticity through disguise.

In fact, Gray capitulates to another character in the scene whose wishes no character coded as morally good can resist; MLiss asks Gray to “let her go. However she may have wronged me, remember that she’s a woman; and even if she has conspired against our happiness, try to think that her temptation was great” (7). Smith’s dissimulation has apparently resulted in destabilization of her gender. MLiss’s statement resituates the woman’s inauthentic body within the gender calculus of this play, a calculus that, as Hall notes, is inverted in its celebration of female corporeal authenticity. MLiss’s recoding of Smith as female places the woman in the same corporeal category as the girl’s own individually authentic body, thereby lending it a portion of that body’s surplus of sympathy. The bodies of MLiss are therefore both fluid and stable in their signification. Despite the patina of disguise, the moral dynamics of the western drama
make clear who are the good and bad characters, who is capable of reading bodies, and which bodies can alter the moral status of the characters around them through their aura of authenticity.

*The Westerner*, in fact, suggests that the stage is the appropriate space for this kind of active display of western bodies. Errol’s ability to penetrate the disguise of his duplicitous former partner Dan Farland (disguised as Andrew Burke throughout most of the play) informs the audience about Burke’s character, but also about Errol. The cowboy recognizes Farland: “Just as nervy as ever, eh? The same cool cheek. . . . Oh no, Burke is a pretty name and you’ve shaved your beard, but you’re Dan Farland, I’ll take my oath” (23). “Pretty names” and even alterations to the villain’s physical appearance fail to maintain Farland’s disguise, as Errol has no trouble unmasking his body’s significance. Errol has not always possessed this ability, however, as the following exchange indicates:

Errol: One never likes to tell how he was tricked by a scoundrel. Dan Farland was the thief’s name, (sic) A man about your size, Mr. Burke. I met him in Denver; we were both in hard luck and chance threw us together. Well, we worked hard in our claims and I made a big strike, which I meant to share with Dan, but he took all and left me, as I found him, without a dollar.

Mrs. Deans: The ungrateful scoundrel. . . .

Mary: But what became of him?

Errol: (looking at Burke.) No one knows. I think he came East, shaved his beard and perhaps now is the trusted confidant of some respected business man (sic); We may meet him every day and grasp his hand in friendship; who knows?

Burke: (turns slowly and coolly and blows some smoke half in Errol’s face.) Exactly, Mr. Errol, who knows?

Errol: Well, we’ll let him rest in peace for the present. (31-32)
Errol here reveals his past inability to see through Burke’s dissimulation, and his acquisition of authenticating vision in the interim. The distinction between Errol’s earlier inability to read Farland’s body and his present facility in doing so marks the stage as the place where identity is revealed, not hidden. It is only on the stage, not in the backstory that precedes the staged events, that Farland’s body is rendered visible and that Errol recognizes him, staking a claim for the importance of signifying bodies to the frontier drama, and averting the threat of inauthenticity. Though Burke tells his accomplice, “we hold the winning cards, he has no proof” (32), the proof is visible to both Errol and the audience who read him both through their identification with the authentic Westerner and through the lens of their own experience with western bodies.

In Joaquin Miller’s *The Danites* (1882), disguise and revelation serve to demonstrate the superiority of theater’s corporeal display over the written and spoken word. The play’s plot is structured around the disguise of Nancy Williams, the sole survivor of a family who was murdered by the Mormon “Danites,” a group of assassins charged with killing anyone associated with the murder of the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith. As the play begins, Nancy has recently moved into a cabin where three men had been killed by Danites, and is disguised as a young man named Billy Piper. The camp has just received erroneous news of her death at the hands of the Danites, and Sandy laments her death as a group of miners discuss the Danites at the “Howlin’ Wilderness” saloon. The name of this western social space suggests the falsity of distinctions between wilderness and sociability; in the institution of the saloon—and, by implication, on the stage—this dichotomy may be erased as frontier bodies meet in a social space that is recognized and sanctioned by the community. Sandy says of the Danites, “Judge, they come and go as if they came up out of, or sink into the ground, like that” (116), a
description that implicitly questions the corporeality of the Danites. Sandy suggests that they possess the ability to transform their appearance, and consequently that Danite bodies are inauthentic.

Under the threat of Danite disguise, Billy Piper falls under suspicion, as well. The ironically named Parson, “so-called because he could ‘outswear any man in the Camp’” (116), suggests that Piper might be a Danite (117). Sandy concurs that the boy is not what he seems but, marking his own capability to see through disguise, hints at the boy’s true identity:

Sandy: Why the first time I ever seed him, I met him on the trail, and he got out of it as I come by, and held down his head, all for the world like a timid bit of a girl, Judge. And when I said, ‘boy, what’s your name?’ he stammered, and as if he wanted to get away, Judge, and at last, with his head still held down, he told me his name—Billy Piper—then smiled so sadly, like her, Judge, and went on.
Judge: Well, Sandy, ain’t nothin’ wonderful ‘bout it, is there?
Sandy: No, Judge not that. It’s only Billy Piper, that’s all. That’s his name, boys. And don’t you go for to nick-name him. But, Judge, that smile was like her—like her smile, her’s. (117-18)

In case the audience has somehow missed the implication of his initial suggestion that Billy is Nancy Williams in disguise, he repeats “her” three times. The boy’s name is “only Billy Piper”; as Sandy says, “that’s his name,” but it is not his identity, which should be apparent to the audience in Sandy’s suggestion and will be definitively revealed at the play’s conclusion. To “nick-name him,” as Sandy suggests, would be to destabilize the girl’s assumed identity, suggesting that her body is not what it appears to be and rendering her vulnerable to the Danites. Sandy thus both suggests that Piper is not who he seems and insists on the stability of the boy’s identity as it is made public in his name.
Words and names, in fact, are dangerous entities in The Danites, and it is no
wonder Sandy wishes to fix Billy’s. Tim and Sandy remark that Billy says “prettier
things than you can find in a book,” and “things as sets you a thinkin’, too”—“just like a
book” (118). Billy’s book-like words mark him as different from the other denizens of
the camp, and the ability of books to discursively determine the meanings of bodies
nearly precipitates the disguised girl’s death. A Danite named Hickman tells his
companion of a run-in with Billy, saying: “Yesterday, I saw this boy’s face, as he sat
reading up yonder, by his mine; our eyes met as I stood over him. His lips trembled with
fear, and his eyes fell. He remembered the time on the Plains, years ago, when we were
commissioned by the church to slay the last of the Williams’. I say that boy is the last of
the family. I know it” (186). Danites, however, with their own inauthenticity, do not trust
the corporeal signification of others, and his companion is reluctant to accept Hickman’s
reading of Billy until Hickman produces the book Billy was reading when the town met
in the woods. On the flyleaf is the dedication, “TO NANCY WILLIAMS FROM HER
AFFECTIONATE MOTHER, NANCY WILLIAMS, CARTHAGE, MISSOURI, 1850.” The doubling of
Nancy’s name suggests the permanence of textually-revealed identity and the inability to
mask this identity in the stage west; hiding one’s name finally results in it being revealed
twice in incontrovertible print. This text produces certainty about Hickman’s reading of
Billy in the mind of his fellow Danite, and the two determine to test the young man.
Hickman gives the book to Billy, asking the boy if it belongs to him:

Billy: Yes, yes. Oh, thank you. It is mine; given me by my mother—

Hick.: Yes. I thought it was yours; I saw your name on the fly-leaf. No
mistake about it, I suppose? That is your name!

Billy: (Looks up and sees face; starts.) No, no, no! Not my name. No, no,
no!
Hick.: Well, I think it is yours and you had better keep it; and read it, too. You will not live long. (Aside and going.) Condemned out of your own mouth! (190-91)

The stability of written text threatens to produce calamitous results, as the book betrays Nancy. The duplicity permitted by the stage is thus transformed into a virtue. The fluidity of stage disguise permits Nancy to remain hidden from all but those who would help her, while the fixity of text reveals her to anyone. *The Danites*, then, suggests that the subversive possibilities of “play-acting” can be more productive or humane than the tyranny of textually-communicated identity. Text allows anyone to read your body, whereas display limits recognition to those who are individually authentic—which, in the western, invariably means morally upright. This calculus also allows audiences to feel that they are among the favored, as they have by now seen through Billy’s disguise and recognize Nancy beneath.

In fact, if Sandy’s hints at Billy’s disguise were not sufficient, the audience is provided an explicit revelation that Billy is a woman. When Sandy’s wife, known as “the widow,” charges her with being a Danite, the girl faints. The widow opens her collar and discovers that Billy is Nancy Williams (151-52). This episode again reveals the danger of words and naming, as the Danites overhear the widow utter Nancy’s name, believe that she refers to herself, and kill her and her baby. The Danites, unable to negotiate corporeal signification, believe unfailingly in the signifying power of the word. Though they are correct in their literal reading of Nancy’s name later in the play, this episode demonstrates the tyranny of the word versus the liberty of the performing body. This is not to say that the sympathetic characters in this play cannot use this tyranny to their own advantage: after the widow’s death, Billy makes Sandy promise to bury him under a
headstone inscribed with “the name that you find in this book” (197), a textual marking of the body beneath that will ensure Billy’s identity is revealed at the appropriate time and sealed by the inalterability of the written word.

Billy’s “death,” however, occurs differently than “he” has anticipated. Characters begin to identify the two Danites in camp as the play nears its close, beginning with the reformed prostitutes Captain Tommy and Bunkerhill. Like Billy, these women’s gender is masked by their male names, dislocating their primarily sexual function within the community. And as recently married prostitutes, these two characters occupy a doubly liminal position that enables them both to look and to be looked at. They are the first characters to recognize the Danites, though “nobody dares say it” (199). Once again, to speak what the body signifies is perilous, and the two remain silent until the Parson definitively un_masks them. Hickman speaks to urge the execution of Billy in the widow’s murder, but the Parson responds: “That voice! That face! Here! Didn’t I tell you we should meet again? And didn’t I tell you I should know you when we met? (Tears off beard disguise from Hickman’s face.) These are the men I saw at her cabin. These are the men that murdered her. Danites! Danites! Danites! Boys, what shall be their sentence?” (200). The Parson recognizes the Danites’ disguise, speaks their identity, and demonstrates it by physically altering Hickman’s body.

Billy’s body is the next to be unmasked, and even figuratively executed, as Captain Tommy refuses to let anyone enter his cabin, claiming that “Billy Piper is no more” (202). When the others respond, “what, dead?” Bunkerhill reaffirms the boy’s figurative passing, exclaiming as she leads Nancy out of the cabin, dressed as a woman: “Yes, Billy Piper is dead. But Nancy Williams lives!” (202). That Billy’s transformation from man to woman is coded as death reminds us again of the power of words in this
play. Captain Tommy and Bunkerhill declare him dead, effecting a perceptual change in the way that the other miners view Billy’s body. Notably, though, both the utterance and the subsequent display are required to “kill” Billy. His male body and name pass away, and Nancy is brought to life by that death. Billy’s disguise is cross-dressing, and this transformation into Nancy and her marriage to Sandy at the play’s conclusion expunge both her masculine name and her masculinized body—the death of Billy is complete.

Sandy is accorded the final words in the play, and he relates a biblical tale that reinforces the problems of corporeal display in The Danites. He tells Nancy,

> We don’t mean bad; but it’s a rough country, and we’re rough, and we’ve not been good to you. But there is an old and beautiful story in the Bible—(to audience)—you’ve all heard it before you learned to read, I reckon. It is of that other Eden. There the living God met man face to face, communed with him every day in his own form. And yet that man fell. Well, now, we don’t claim to be better than they were in Eden, even in the heart of the Sierras. (203)

Sandy’s final declaration invites the audience to identify with his tale, which antedates and supercedes the ability to decipher text. He codes the biblical paradise as “that other Eden,” in contradistinction to the Eden of California that has been present before us throughout the play. Biblical Eden is a place marked by the effectiveness of disguise, as the crisis of the narrative is Satan’s ability to appear as a serpent. Moreover, even in that Eden, where “God met man face to face,” this corporeal display was insufficient to prevent such misrecognition and disaster. Indeed, the crux of The Danites seems to be this question of the characters’ inability to read. The play, as I have suggested, makes the audience aware of Nancy’s disguise very early on, yet the characters remain in the dark. The plot is therefore occupied with demonstrating the problems of visually ascertaining characters’ individual authenticity, an insistence on the problematics of display that circumvents actors’ fundamental dissimulation.
Characters in frontier dramas, in fact, commonly misread one another’s actions, even when these are not intended to be overtly deceptive. This kind of inadvertent disguise often results in humor born of the audience’s ability to read correctly while the characters seem incapable of correctly understanding anyone. Scott Marble’s *Heart of the Rockies* (1896) provides just such a humorous misreading. A single scene in the second act demonstrates the convoluted misreadings of the play, as Mortimer Drew, a young mining engineer in love with Olga, the Swedish “waif of the mountain,” is spotted in a compromising moment. He has been injured, and Beatrice Chason, the duplicitous suitor of a rich lumber dealer, pretends to help him stand. She feigns sorrow at (intentionally) hurting him, and lays her head on his chest to empathize with his pain. Olga, watching from the bushes, exclaims: “And Joe sent me here to see this. To learn with my own eyes the truth of this woman’s claim [to be engaged to Drew]. Oh, it was cruel, cruel—“ (30). Hamilton, the lumber dealer, views the same scene from a different hiding place: “This is certainly a revelation. I was aware that Miss Chason esteemed Mr. Drew very highly, but to find her in such a position would indicate a stronger feeling than esteem. Possibly they have met before. Loved and separated, and this accidental meeting in the mountain restores them to each other. But it is strange, strange” (30). Neither character appears to seriously doubt the authenticity of the display they have witnessed, yet the audience is aware of the scene’s distortion. In the case of Olga, what she sees “with her own eyes” conflicts with what we know of Drew’s feelings to create a comical scene. The audience, familiar with the characters of the “mountain waif” and the honest young man, knows that the two will be married by play’s end (as they are), though they temporarily fail to see each other as we know them. Olga and Drew fail to perceive individual authenticity in one another because they do not possess the extra-textual background that provides
each character with historiographical authenticity within the canon of frontier characters. Hamilton’s reading, on the other hand, fails to fully understand Beatrice’s individual inauthenticity. He recognizes that she has been duplicitous in her apparent romantic interest in him, but does not see that her simulation of romance extends to this episode with Drew. He therefore invents an antecedent relationship that explains their encounter, in effect suggesting that corporeal signification is paramount, and an explanatory narrative must be created as a result of his understanding of the body, not vice versa. The remainder of the play is devoted to exploring the resolution of these questions, with each character’s intended and unintended performances revealed and new narratives of authenticity and inauthenticity constructed in response to these revelations. *Heart of the Rockies*, then, is devoted to the misrecognition and subsequent reconstitution of its characters to demonstrate the instability of identity and the final legibility of its characters. It should, then, come as no surprise that disguise—whether intentional or inadvertant—serves as a master device in western dramas. Nearly all of these plays use some form of mistaken identity, whether characters intentionally mask their bodies or are disguised even to themselves through loss of self-recognition, in order to displace the inauthenticity of the acting body.

“Can you prove her i-den-ti-ty?”: The Amnesiac Body on Stage

The most common form of self-misrecognition in the frontier play is the amnesiac character. Olga, in *Heart of the Rockies*, is an orphan whose parents were killed by Indians and who has no recollection of her family; Madge in Edwin Locke’s *Nobody’s Claim* (1882) is unaware of her wealthy parentage and status as an heiress; Carrots in Joaquin Miller’s ‘49 (1882) is nearly identical to Madge; and the plot of Elmer Vance’s
The Limited Mail (1889) also hinges on the amnesia of Nellie. These characters are not individually inauthentic so much as incapable of either individual authenticity or inauthenticity. Neither they nor the other characters know who they are, and they therefore cannot dissimulate an identity that does not exist. As the brief catalog above suggests, however, they do possess a form of historiographical authenticity that permits audiences to understand these characters’ function in each play because of the context provided by similar characters in other frontier plays. Even if the characters within the play do not know the origin of amnesiac characters, at least initially, the audience understands these characters’ accepted functions in popular western histories, and therefore who they will be within each play.

In ‘49, characters attempt to identify the body that corresponds to a particular identity: an orphan of the Mountain Meadow Massacre who is “a child of one of the old families” and an heiress who, rumor has it, lives in the California Sierras. The family owns land in Santa Clara that the city has since been built on, and that land also has a gold mine under it—a double windfall for the character who can authenticate her parentage. “Black Sam,” an old servant of the family, is sure that recognizing the long-lost body will prove unproblematic, provided he is the one to verify its authenticity: “Shuah! I would know dat chile, why I would know dat chile in Jerusalem. Why, Massa Snowe, she’d know dis ole black face for sure. She’d come right up to dis old cripple now” (11). According to Sam, age fails to alter the body’s power to signify, and geography is unable to affect that power. Colonel Snowe points out that more than twelve years have passed since he last saw the girl, but Sam maintains, “I’d know her, shuah. And she—she’d know old Sam’s black face anywhere” (12). The two possess individual authenticity that supersedes time and place and allows them to read one another reliably.
Despite Sam’s insistence, however, corporeal signification is insufficient to definitively establish identity in ‘49. Colonel Snowe, an attorney, sends Charlie Devine to find the girl, advising him that “These papers will give you directions where you may find the girl, and give you full authority to act when she is found. There is a false claimant, but this will be conviction strong as holy writ” (12). Contrary to Sam’s claims, assigning identity to an unknown body requires textual verification. Only text can provide “full authority,” and bind with a force “strong as holy writ.” ‘49 thus establishes a tension between the claims of Sam to corporeal legibility and the legal assertions of Snowe to the inviolability of text. When the play moves to the Sierras, corporeal legibility initially seems to fail, as characters disagree about the relative value of one another’s bodies. The saloon keeper Old Mississip discusses with one of her patrons the two girls who work at the establishment:

Col. Billy: Well, all I want to know is, Mississip, where’s Carrots, and why don’t you get her clothes like this one’s? Carrots does all the work, and Belle wears all the clothes.

Old Mississip: Because, Belle is a lady and Carrots is nothing but a little saucy Injin and don’t deserve clothes. And now, d’ye mind that. The Injin!

Colonel Billy: Injin! Injin? Well, she’s the whitest Injin I ever seed. A red-headed Injin. Say, Belle’s blacker than forty Carrots. (23)

This disagreement highlights the disparate readings of the two girls’ bodies. For Billy, the work Carrots performs demonstrates her character, while Mississip views Belle’s character as justification for not working. Each impugns the other’s favorite in racialized terms—Carrots becomes an Indian, Belle an African-American. Their identities are sufficiently unstable to permit racial recoding. Colonel Billy suggests how this dichotomy will be resolved as he answers Belle’s complaint that “I don’t see what Forty-Nine sees in her” with the rejoinder, “Don’t see what Forty-Nine sees in her? Why, he sees in her
soul, heart, humanity” (24). Forty-Nine is described as “a relic of bygone days” whose signature line is, “I’ve been here since ‘49, and I reckon I ought to know” (1). He is, in other words, the most historiographically authentic character the play offers up. His readings of Carrots therefore penetrate beyond the superficial, as he reads her “soul, heart, humanity”—in short, her individual authenticity. Forty-Nine provides the audience an interpretive guide to the indeterminate bodies of the play that bears his name.

Such a guide is necessary in the convoluted social and spectatorial world of ‘49. Carrots first appears onstage with these directions: “Enter Carrots, singing snatches of song, bow and arrows in hand, dress all torn, hat hanging by its strings, and hair unkept” (24). Though her appearance is not in keeping with expectations of an heiress, she does match frontier drama depictions of the “waif of the mountain” that we have already seen in Heart of the Rockies. Forty-Nine’s confirmation of her identity solidifies this audience reading of her despite conflicting readings by other characters. When Devine expresses surprise at her name, “just Carrots,” Forty-Nine responds, “Well, you see we baptize everybody over again here, and give ‘em new names. We call her Carrots because—well, because her hair is like gold, sir. Twenty carats fine, and all pure gold. That’s why, sir ” (34). The pun on carrot vs. carat casts the girl’s body as a product of the stage west, the space where identity can be so completely forgotten and also resurface definitively at the end of the play. In other words, identity in the west of ‘49 is both more and less stable than in civilized society. On one hand, establishment in the Sierras requires a pseudo-religious renaming—even a rebirth as a new person that would appear to obviate personal history as a source of personal authenticity. On the other hand, the names assigned to characters in this west are more reflective of their identities than are those assigned by parents at birth.
The fluidity of names requires that Devine identify the heiress based solely on corporeal signification and bits of personal history that outlive western “baptism.” His inquiries about Carrots are met with this response from Forty-Nine: “They took some Injins to the reservation that she was with, and after that, she was seen, a mere baby, begging about among the miners” (36). Western baptism has erased all traces of her prior life, and Devine must rely on corporeal signification to determine her identity. Of Belle, Forty-Nine says:

Well, that mout be [Mississip’s] child; but I guess she got picked up, too, by old Mississip. Wanted ‘em to sing and dance, you know, for the boys. But you see Belle, she’s stuck up. Guess she’s got blood in her. I don’t like her at all like I do my little Carrots; but I guess she’s of better stock. Leastwise, the old cat there makes a heap of her. But, I tell you, she just knocks the head of Carrots about four times of day. And when I strike it in that tunnel, I— (Enter Carrots, singing and laughing, and gets behind Forty-Nine for protection.) That’s her; that’s Carrots, all over. Got no dignity, but lots of heart. (38)

The first difference between this description and that of Carrots is its length. Belle has the advantage of a longer history that apparently serves to substantiate narratives of her “blood.” Devine accepts these narratives as evidence in favor of Belle, saying of Carrots in an aside that “This can’t be the girl. Water finds its level. She has sunk to the kitchen. The other girl is a lady” (38). Devine’s readings of the girls’ bodies might be correct in the iconography of the standard melodrama, but the western drama requires alternate reading strategies and as a newly-transplanted easterner he is unversed in the calculus of western display.

This is not to say that Devine is untrustworthy; another feature of the waif—and indeed the authentic character more generally—is her ability to read others. When Carrots whispers, “I like the looks of him,” the audience’s trust in Devine increases, despite our knowledge of the answer to her query, “I wonder if he likes the looks of me?”
Indeed, Sam soon arrives to correct Devine’s incorrect readings: when Devine presents Belle, Sam fails to recognize her, and Colonel Snowe berates the servant for his error:

Snowe: Sam, you’re a fool. Don’t you know she looks like Mrs. Williams and Mr. Williams that you started to cross the plains with?

Sam: What? Dat black face, and dat niggah-lookin’ hair? Why, my Massa and Missus was white, dey wus.

Snow: Sam, I tell you you’re a fool. I never lost a case or made a mistake. It’s got to be her, I tell you. Think I came all the way to this place to be beaten? Look again.

Sam: De more I looks, de wusser it gits. (98)

Despite Snowe’s “holy writ,” the textual evidence intended to authenticate the heiress, Sam’s visual assessment repudiates Devine’s choice. Sam is, in fact, correct as Carrots recognizes his song and begins singing with him face to face. The two of them examine one another as their respective visual assessments verify one another’s identity. Corporeal signification is thus reified at play’s end—provided the spectator is versed in the dynamics of western authenticity. Audiences familiar with the genre would know on whose judgments they can rely. This trust is necessitated by the gap between character and actor, a disparity that prohibits audiences from ascertaining individual authenticity for themselves. Characters like Sam and Forty-Nine become vital to the frontier drama, as they verify which characters are, as Carrots says, “somebody in particular” (101). Forty-Nine can assure us, in an apt metaphor for a character engaged in assaying both minerals and bodies, that she is “pure California gold, and twenty carats fine” (101).

In *The Limited Mail*, the plot is similarly devoted to battles over Nellie’s identity, and over who will have access to the money she owns. In the logic of this play, corporeal signification is entirely insufficient to determine identity. Rather, the title emphasizes that
the textual determination that proves so dangerous in *The Danites* is necessary to reveal Nellie, as the amnesiac girl cannot do so on her own. Text here is “limited” in that it remains hidden and therefore ineffective for much of the play; visual assessment, however, quickly and reliably reveals Nellie’s identity. The miscreant Giddings is the first to claim that she is an heiress, but his co-conspirator Hawkins questions Giddings’s ability to make Nellie’s body signify, asking, “Can you prove her i-den-ti-ty?” (9). Giddings demonstrates the power of text in this drama, reassuring Hawkins that “I have the necessary papers here” (9). That the papers are “necessary” to demonstrate Nellie’s “i-den-ti-ty” is a circumvention of authentic display, and demonstrates the “limited” power of textual determination. The requirement of textual support, moreover, points up the impracticability of displaying bodies that are precisely what they appear to be on the stage, while at the same time claiming that there are all sorts of circumstances in which bodies do not reveal their cultural or individual meanings, and that only narrative permits the illusion of corporeal signification. That is, people don’t actually read bodies; rather, they construct narratives of identity by locating an individual body in the context of what they know about that body and other, similar bodies. In the case of Giddings and Nellie, it is vital that he hide these narratives until the most effective moment. Hawkins therefore asks whether Zeke—his old partner and Nellie’s current guardian—is aware that he possesses the papers, to which Giddings responds: “Yes, but he does not know their contents. And I don’t intend he shall until she is my wife” (9). Giddings intends to modify the social status of Nellie’s body through marriage before he reveals the financial significance of that body.
Nellie herself recognizes the importance of her marriageable age when she asks Zeke whether, given her age, she should be given self-knowledge that would enable her to make marital choices appropriate to her identity:

Nellie: Father, do you not think that I am old enough to know something concerning myself, I mean something about my real parents?

Zeke: (With some agitation.) Why! Yes, Nellie, but I have told you all I know.—When you were but a little babe, you were found in a railroad wreck and I took you home and adopted you. (Rises—turns away down L. C.—aside.) My God! I can’t tell her that her mother was killed in that wreck and that I—I—No, no!— (15-16)

Zeke’s refusal to reveal what he knows about Nellie’s parents demonstrates the impossibility of permitting her self-knowledge while simultaneously maintaining his own veneer of individual authenticity. He participated in the train robbery in which Nellie’s mother was killed years earlier, and to reveal this information would demonstrate his own duplicity and change him from adoptive father to agent of her orphaning. It is precisely his anxiety about self-revelation, however, that enables Nell to penetrate his disguise as their conversation continues:

Nell: I thought perhaps you or John Giddings—

Zeke: (Starting nervously.): What!—Did he tell you?—

Nellie: No, he told me nothing. (Zeke turns away R., with a sigh of relief.) (Aside.) I was right! He does know something, but dare not tell for fear of Giddings. . . . Always when I have questioned him before, he has acted in this same strange manner. (Walking up and down excitedly.) I cannot rest to-night! . . . Oh, what shall I do?— It is useless to confide in my father,
for I feel he is powerless to protect me.— Oh, Heaven! to be pointed at by
the finger of shame! To be the common talk of the people is too much! I
must leave this place! Yes, I will leave here! (15-16)

Giddings, Zeke’s partner in the robbery, is the only other character who knows Nell’s
identity—in fact, as we have seen, only he can demonstrate it conclusively. Zeke’s
concern about Giddings inadvertently reveals to Nellie the dissimulation of her adoptive
father and therefore the instability of her own identity. In the absence of a stable reading
of her body within the play, she is subject to the arbitrary determinations of others, a
possibility that leads her to imagine the “finger of shame” that results from these varied
and baseless readings.

Nellie therefore resolves to leave the town, but her unstable identity leads to a
crisis about where her illegible body might be at home: “But where can I go? What can I
do to earn an honest livelihood? (Telegraph instrument clicks.) That is my answer! I
learned to-day, that a night operator is wanted at Floodwood Cut. I will apply for the
position. Yes, my resolution is taken! I will leave Redwood to-night and forever” (16).
Her concern about earning “an honest livelihood” seems misplaced in the context of the
play—as she does not know who she is, she cannot represent herself honestly regardless
of her occupation or residence. Her choice of telegraph operator at a remote station is a
reversal of her previous state; if before she was body without textual support or
signification, as a telegraph operator she represents unembodied discourse as the unseen,
anonymous conveyor of Morse code text. She has transformed from pure body without
meaning to pure meaning without body.
Nellie’s textual disguise enables her to hide from those who would endow her with a stable identity until the climax of the play. Nellie’s identity is revealed not by the villainous Giddings or the duplicitous if well-meaning Zeke, but rather by Charlie Morton, her long-lost cousin, raised by her father after her mother ran off with Nellie. Charlie tells Nellie that, “although there is no positive proof, still, all the circumstances point that you are my Uncle’s child. — Mr Harland and I have compared notes carefully, and I think it but right that you should know the truth!” (16). Charlie’s equivocation in this revelation evinces the difficulty of assigning identity to unknown bodies: the lack of “positive proof,” reliance on circumstance, and comparison of “notes” with its textual overtones all hint at this difficulty even as the play finally reveals Nellie’s past. Left alone after Charlie’s declaration, she looks at a picture of her mother, remarking on “how good, kind, and gentle she looks! Oh, if I had only known her!” (18). Despite all the evidence the play has presented against the legibility of the body, Nellie here insists on her capability to read her mother despite not having known her. Not only does Nellie discover who she is, but she assigns characteristics to her mother that the audience has already read in the girl, reinforcing our reading of the orphan’s body through her own reading of her mother’s.

The text that affirms Nellie’s past finally arrives, as Zeke finds the papers that verify her identity, and the dying Giddings confesses his participation in her mother’s death: “I want to do this square thing before I die. — Listen, all of you. — If these two men should ever be accused of a crime committed near here many years ago, — remember, I declare with my dying breath—that I and I alone, am responsible for it all” (22). The words of the dying are invariably reliable in the western, and Giddings’s admission paradoxically establishes the signification of his partners Zeke and Hawkins
through the loss of his own body. Moreover, this signification is incorrect—the two did, in fact, participate in the robbery, though both appear to have atoned for their misdeeds in the intervening years. The play thus comes full circle. The play’s story begins with a train crash that causes the death of Nellie’s mother, the dissimulation of the three villains, the reform of two of them, and the loss of Nellie’s family identity and her body as telegraph operator; it ends with a crash that enables Nellie to find her father, reveals the gang’s leader and destroys his body, seals the reform of his two partners, and restores Nellie to herself familially and corporeally. The profoundly destabilized identities of The Limited Mail, then, serve to reinforce the notion that bodies will ultimately signify as they should—lost identities will be found, and text and body will come together to signify authentically.

“Things in Black and White”: Forgery as Western Plot Device

It is appropriate that many postbellum frontier dramas are organized around a forgery; the dynamics of the forgery reflect many of the concerns of the western and permit the drama to critique the author-text model of authenticity. The forgery is a crime of textual inauthenticity that reveals the opacity of authorship. Unlike drama, which places bodies—however inauthentic—on display for inspection, text can mask its source. Dime novels, in fact, have intentionally effaced the work of the author in most cases, creating what critic Michael Denning calls “essentially anonymous, ‘unauthored’ discourse” (24). While the dime westerns use this characteristic of their production to ally the form with “unauthored” history, in the stage drama the unreliability of authorship is useful because it can serve as a site of inauthenticity. The stage drama, therefore, makes its performing bodies serve to reveal the duplicity of the forger, thereby legitimating the
stage as the space where such unmasking may occur and assuring audiences that the
drama, unlike the dimes, will make the sources of its texts visible by placing them on
stage for examination.

The plot of *The Westerner* is based on a forgery that evinces the usefulness of this
device to the frontier drama. Matthew Lawton, upon learning of his son Harry’s alleged
forgery, is outraged not by the substantial amount of the check, but rather by the idea of
dForgery. He tells Harry, “I have borne your extravagance, your wasteful way of living, but
forgery of name I cannot pass lightly over” (34). The possibility of the inauthentic
writing body repulses Lawton, and he silences his son’s claims to innocence and orders
him to “leave my house tonight forever” (34). Lawton places unquestioning faith in the
signifying power of text; as he tells Errol in drawing up a partnership with him, “it often
saves time you know to have things in black and white” (35). However, it is precisely on
the unreliability of “black and white” that this story hangs—that is, on the possibility of
the forgery, and even of the fake forgery.

Harry, in fact, is not guilty of the crime imputed to him, but has been framed by
the disguised schemer Burke. Errol suggests that the source of Lawton’s information is
significant when he argues that the man should not “turn your son out on such flimsy
evidence as that man’s word?” (35-36). Errol has already seen through Burke’s disguise,
and his reading of the man’s inauthentic body leads him to suspect the reliability of this
text. Lawton’s implicit faith in “black and white,” conversely, convinces him to doubt
even those he knows well, as in the case of Harry. The alleged forgery is therefore more
complex than mere misrepresentation of authorship. It is, in fact, a misrepresentation of a
misrepresentation, or a forgery of a forgery, since the document has been falsified by
Burke.
The fake forgery is, moreover, not the only unreliable document in *The Westerner*. Burke has arranged for Lawton to invest in a mine that the villain believes contains no gold, in order to bilk Lawton out of his money. Burke thus believes that the dispatches that arrive from the mine recounting a recently discovered vein are falsified by his men at the mine in order to convince Lawton to invest. Errol, however, sees through this apparent misrepresentation; as he tells Harry, “Burke has bit hisself; He thinks them dispatches are bluff, about the new vein; but they ain’t; they’re true! . . . There’s a new vein been discovered, I’ve seen it myself; I’ve got specimens of it here in my pocket” (37). Errol’s western authenticity—his own experience in the Diablo mine—provides him with the ability to see through textual misrepresentation. Lawton has apparently sold himself to “the devil” in the form of Burke’s mine, but Errol recognizes the “devil in the details” of Burke’s plan. His own eyes enable him to assess not just who is trustworthy, but also which among the many texts are reliable. In fact, texts are not only unreliable in *The Westerner*: they are also alterable. When Jessie finds a poem by Harry that appears to be dedicated to another woman, she assumes and accuses him of infidelity. He circumvents her accusation by demanding that she “produce the evidence” (5). She displays the poem, asserting that “My eyes are not blue, Mr. Lawton!” (6). In fact, they are brown, and the poem lauds its subject’s blue eyes; Harry remedies the problem by changing the description to the appropriate hue, and reworking the poem to include Jessie’s name, at which she quickly capitulates (6). The poem is yet another instance of unreliable text in this play, but in this case text is not only unstable in its false representation of its subjects, but in the constitution of those subjects themselves. The
problem is not, in other words, that the initial poem is a false representation of Jessie; rather, it is not a representation of Jessie at all, but is transformed into one by Harry’s alterations.

Not surprisingly, the character on whom the audience can rely to negotiate the misrepresentations of this play is the Westerner, Errol. As he tells Lawton while convincing him to retain his stock in the mine, “I’m rough sir, I ain’t much to look at but I’m square every inch of me” (8-9). In fact, Errol is precisely who the audience must look at, both as the only character who retains his individual and historiographical authenticity throughout the play and as the authentic individual capable of instructing us as to how we should view the other characters. Errol’s plea to Lawton is the same request he makes of the audience when he demands, “Look at me Mr. Lawton, will you trust me? . . . It’s your only chance—will you trust me?” (9). Lawton, like the audience, correctly reads Errol, saying, “Yes, for I see your father’s honest look in your eyes” (9). Visual inspection of Errol by characters within the play yields affirmation of his authenticity, a dynamic that stops short of the actor-character gap by permitting characters to verify other characters’ authenticity. It is through this dynamic of Lawton “looking at” the “square” body of the Westerner that Lawton decides to trust him, and Burke’s plot is subverted. The investor heeds Errol’s advice to not “mind what any body says sir, stick to me” (15). The anachronistic spelling underlines the crux of this play—the ability of Errol’s body to signify above “any body,” which would have permitted Lawton to see through textual misrepresentation had he only looked at Errol sooner.

Errol, in fact, reveals every disguise in the play, including Burke’s in the final scene. Lawton’s daughter Mary has also recognized Burke’s individual inauthenticity, though she is unsure of its source: “I have bourne your presence in this house, Mr. Burke
for years, feeling every time I looked in your face that treachery lurked there” (17). Burke responds by telling her not to “place too much dependence on this swaggering Errol,” to which Mary answers: “You coward! If James Errol stood here face to face with you now, you’d never dare say that” (18). Mary’s rebuttal notes the power of Burke’s body, which is now not merely capable of revealing textual and corporeal misrepresentation but, “face to face,” would prevent such misrepresentations from being committed. Indeed, in their final confrontation, Errol reveals Burke’s duplicity, noting that “his name was Farland” when they were partners and that “he’s shaved his beard, but I’d know his face among a thousand” (22). He tells Burke, “I know you like a book” (22), reminding us of Errol’s ability to read both bodies and texts. All forms of duplicity are alike to him, and all are eminently legible. Burke, in Harry’s words, “disappears now” (23), a corporeal reference both to Burke’s unmasking and to his individual inauthenticity. After years of dissimulation, he has no “self” to which he can be faithful, rendering individual authenticity impossible and making his body invisible. Errol, conversely, maintains both his visibility and his vision, as Mary complains at his apparent disappearance, “Shall I never see him alone?” and vows: “I don’t move from this room, until I see him” (23, 24). Mary insists on the continued visibility of Errol’s body just as Errol insists on the pervasiveness of his vision, telling the girl, “I’m going back to a wild country and wilder scenes Miss Mary. . . . I shall see your face on every mountain side and even the night wind as it murmurs through the canyons will say Mary, Mary, to me” (27). As the two declare their mutual love, they ensure that Errol will continue both to be visible to Mary and that his vision of her will persist. The Westerner thus utilizes forgery to demonstrate the unreliability of text, displacing inauthenticity onto the body of the duplicitous author in order to reify the authenticating vision of characters. It demonstrates the power of
those characters’ bodies to influence others to make appropriate choices. And it insists that inauthenticity will always be exposed by those who possess the vision to identify it. The Westerner therefore insists that audiences have the ability to judge the authenticity of characters that appear in frontier dramas, displacing the responsibility for authentication from the play to the watching audience, who are encouraged to trust their eyes.

“Is It a Good Likeness?”: Portraits as a Site of Inauthenticity

Text is merely one art form critiqued by the frontier drama, as the stage western also displaces concerns about inauthenticity onto visual representations of the body. Questioning the accuracy of these artistic displays notes the fundamental inaccuracy of all art forms, or their inability to portray bodies as they actually appear. The Gentleman from Nevada (1880), by G.H. Jessop and J.B. Polk, draws attention to the representational nature of portraiture. Pointing out the problematics of these representations is useful for The Gentleman from Nevada inasmuch as it induces audiences to think about the inauthenticity of other art forms, rather than of the theater. The play, in fact, is also engaged in strategies similar to those we have already seen. Its plot revolves around a forgery, title character Kit Gall recognizes a disguised former companion, and the play is engaged in criticisms of textual forms of communication, including letter-writing and telegraphy. The Gentleman from Nevada thus presents a multivalent critique of corporeal authenticity even as it insists on Gall’s ability both to signify and to read the bodies of others.

Gall’s most pointed critique of artistic representation occurs as he tours the ancestral home of the Egertons. The westerner is uninterested in the artistic merit of the portraits—in fact, as Alice Egerton remarks, his “views on high art are strikingly
original” in their lack of aesthetic or historical sensibility (5). After referring to his notebook, he claims that his favorite painter is “Renaissance”; when Alice tells him the Renaissance is a period, Gall offers this rejoinder:

Painter or period, what’s the odds? I liked his paintings better than any of the Titens, or Rubies or Raffles or Remnants they wanted to me to fall down and worship. Those chaps seemed to think that they had nothing to do but to sling a pot of paint in the face of the public and sign their name at the bottom of it to make a picture worth a hundred thousand dollars. Now Renaissance put in his best locks and tried to give you some value for your money. He believed in tooting his horn if he never sold a claim. (5)

Gall here becomes the representative American, bringing the authentic body of the new world to the parlor of the old, under the name of Columbus, that new world’s discoverer. His artistic judgment, in appropriate western fashion, effaces the name of the artist in favor of the accuracy and exchange value of the work. Painting is a purely practical enterprise, the appropriate aim of which is representational fidelity. Gall appraises the portraiture of Sir Peter Lely according to this standard, stating: “I reckon he’s a good painter; seems to have caught the sulky expression round the old Judge’s mouth to the life” (5). The measure of a good painting is the accuracy of its portraiture, and the consumption of painted portraiture operates according to the same dynamics as western authenticity. In this case, the painter places the body of his subject on display for verification.

Gall’s interrogation of Alice continues as he asks about a portrait of “Sir Angus Lester the founder of this family” (6). Told that “it is the oldest portrait in the collection,” Gall responds: “It does look kinder dingey. Is it a good likeness?” (7). Alice responds that the man lived “many hundred years ago” and that she cannot possibly speak to the
representational accuracy of the piece (7). Gall proposes that photography could circumvent the inauthenticity of painting, suggesting that it could serve as a superior alternative to paint portraiture:

Gall: You’ve the advantage in photography that there’s no going behind the record. If that old coon had been photographed instead of painted you wouldn’t be telling me to-day that you didn’t know whether the picture was a good likeness or not. You’d be able to say, up and up—it’s as like him as two peas in a pod, if you’d never seen so much as the shadow of his great grand-son.

Countess: But photography was not invented in his time.

Gall: So much the worse for him, but it’s invented now. When I go back to London I’ll have my picture taken and I’ll send you a copy. And you can hang it up there. I’ll stand the frame if you want to frame it, and if any one asks you who it is you say it’s Christopher Columbus Gall, and as true to life as the sun can paint it. (8-9)

Photography circumvents the inherent unreliability of painting by removing the hand of the painter from the creative process. “The record” of the body stands without human intervention, appearing naturally (“as true to life as the sun can paint it”) rather than artificially. His promise to send a picture from London appears to suggest that this photograph would be “a copy” not of the photographic original, but rather a copy of the body itself, for his instructions to Alice indicate that it is not a picture of Christopher Columbus Gall, but rather the man himself. Indeed, as Walter Benjamin argues, “from a photographic negative . . . one can make any number of prints; to ask for the authentic print makes no sense” (224). The reproducibility of Gall’s hypothetical photograph nullifies the distinction between original and copy that is critical to the Egertons’ art collection, and indeed to the authenticity problem of the stage drama. If nineteenth-
century technology has eliminated the distinction between the original and the copy, or the authentic and the simulation, then there no longer remains any useful criterion on which to base judgments about the authenticity of performing frontier bodies.

Gall’s suspicion of representational art continues as he discusses the Egertons’ sculptures. When Alice shows him the family’s collection of busts, he remarks: “Well, I can’t say I’m much on busts myself. There’s a trick they have of putting no eyes in them, which gives them the expression of an over boiled cod fish. I like animation in a bust. There was a man I used to work for in Kansas City—a mason he was—who could whittle you out a dog fight on a block of wood as neat as if it was run in a mould” (10). The absence of eyes is a reminder of the lifelessness of sculpture; in comparison, the Kansas City mason is able to create far more lively and representationally faithful figures in his chosen medium, an attribute that renders these works superior in Gall’s estimation. He continues his critique of sculpture, saying:

But what’s the use of statuary after all? Do you know when I was in Italy, I spent nine days there and took in the whole show, it used to make me wild to see a young fellow with a pretty girl on his arm, walking along and going into ecstasies about Mike Angelo and Canova, and paying no more attention to the living, moving, warm flesh and blood beside him than a trout in spring time would pay to to a june bug. Stone, cut or uncut is a very good thing in its place, but its place isn’t anywhere near the heart of an American citizen, when he has youth and beauty beside him. (10-11)

Gall’s insistence on representational fidelity here reaches its natural conclusion in the exaltation of the living body over the representational depiction. Moreover, art is incapable not only of representing the external appearance of the body, but also of demonstrating that body’s “heart.” Given that Gall is, as Alice says, “one of nature’s noblemen, and has a heart worth more than all the gold and silver that ever was dug out of his native mountains” (8), demonstration of “heart” is vital to his understanding of
authenticity. In the case of artistic portraiture, then, both the medium and the process of artistic representation are sites of inauthenticity. The presence of real bodies on the stage, meshed with Gall’s earlier negation of the distinction between the original and copy, thus legitimates stage performance over representations that require more substantial technological or artistic mediation between subject and viewer. Though the stage certainly adopts various forms of representational artifice (costumes, makeup, etc.), it does present “real” bodies, which the visual arts do not.

_Fonda_, by John Wallace Crawford (1888) also addresses this question of visual representation, but adopts a somewhat more difficult tactic of critiquing the daguerreotype. As partners Jack Crawford and Bill Williams discuss the abducted title character, the latter asks “what are she like?” (2). Bill responds by showing Jack a picture of the girl, which occasions this exchange:

Bill: Picter, picter! Lorsy, Jack, whar on arth did you git that ar?

Jack: The young girl gave it to me. ‘Tis an exact copy of the original.

Bill: Rigeral—Jack, what in human nater’s an rigeral?

Jack: The original is a lovely young girl and an orphan, uncle Bill.

Bill: Rigeral! Jack boy, how an arth war that ar picter made?

Jack: That’s a daguerreotype, uncle Bill. It’s a new way of taking pictures, discovered by some Frenchman. They may be called sun pictures, for it’s by reflecting rays that shadows are caught, as it were, and changed into substance.

Bill: What on arth, Jack, are you trying to git through you? Drat your book talk, Jack! Tell me square out in Bill William’s talk, how the picter war made. (3)

While Bill’s uneducated response is certainly a humorous riff on the backwoodsman’s ignorance of technology, it also destabilizes the terms copy, original, and substance, ideas
that are central to the western’s spectatorial calculus. Bill cannot even pronounce the word “original” because the category of the copy does not exist in his experience, and he misunderstands the word as a category comprising young female orphans depicted in daguerreotypes, rather than as the picture’s physical referent. In fact, he will refer to Fonda as a “Rigeral” when she gives him a photo later in the play (6). Moreover, Jack’s contention that the daguerreotype process transforms light into “substance” is not strictly correct—in fact, it functions in precisely the opposite manner, representing the substance of corporeality in light. Fonda therefore undermines the scientific fidelity of the daguerreotype by destabilizing the ontological categories on which it rests.

Jack’s attempt to explain the physical laws on which the daguerreotype operates, in fact, transforms into metaphor as his discussion with Bill continues:

Jack: Many a time when you have been taking a drink from the spring or the brook, you’ve seen your face peeping at you there, same as in the looking glass?

Bill: I seed my shadow in the water heaps o’ times.

Jack: Well now, suppose the light of the sun which forms that reflection or shadow, could be caught and held fast—that is when you would turn away—your image or shadow would be like a beaver in a trap. Eh, old pard, do you savy?

Bill: Lorsy, I see Jack, I do, by gosh. They sot a book larnin’ steel trap and when the shadows strike the glass, the shadows gits cotched. Massy on me, what vention won’t they git up next? Rigeral, Jack boy, that ar picter er an angel! No gal on arth looks like that ar! (3-4)

Once again, Jack’s description fails to capture the physics of the daguerreotype. His discussion of the “steel trap” of photography suggests that the “image or shadow” possesses a substance of its own that can be captured and harnessed. It is, in fact, a contradiction of Walter Benjamin’s assertion that “the authenticity of a thing is all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to
the history which it has experienced” (221). The daguerreotype is a transcription of the light reflected from the authentic body; its failure is an inability to transmit the substance of that body. Bill, the backwoodsman savant, thus says more than he appears to know when he exclaims that the picture is otherworldly. It is certainly true that “no gal on arth looks like that ar,” as bodies bear the marks of their duration and histories, while daguerreotype representations are pure image. Additionally, one daguerreotype can exceed another, as when Fonda tells Jack, “I think it is a better picture than the one I gave Captain Jack. This one was taken just before I left home” (6). The scientific representation of the daguerreotype is thus not entirely objective—one can, in fact, make value judgments about its representational accuracy, and one representation may be preferable to another. To be sure, Fonda seems to prefer the photo she gives to Jack because of its more recent date, but the principle of variable fidelity stands. In fact, photographs are taken at a single temporal moment, and they fail to represent changes in the body after that moment, another site of representational infidelity that permits Fonda to destabilize the photographic body.

Of course, a similar argument can be made about dramatic mimesis. Susan S. Williams argues that “all fictional portraits are analogous to the daguerreotype. Its image too does not stay fixed, but rather shifts in and out of view according to the position of the viewer. Because the image of the daguerreotype is traced on a silver-iodized plate, it hovers eerily between presence and absence: holding it one way, viewers can see the image, but holding it another, they see a reflection of themselves” (34). In the case of frontier drama, the stage fails to create the impression of a unified actor/character: in one moment, viewers see the character, but in another they see the actor shine through that mimetic facade. Intra-dramatic criticism of the photographic representation serves to
draw attention to the representational inauthenticity of the portrait body, while occluding its similarities to the acting body. It is a third-order Baudrillardian simulation that carefully structures the falsity of the daguerreotype to conceal the inauthenticity of the stage production in which that photographic image is presented.\(^8\)

As we have seen, questions about the relative merits of various representational media, and of individual works within those media, are central to the stage drama’s concern about its own inability to represent authentic bodies. Each of the strategies I have discussed enables the frontier play to dislocate concerns about authenticity from the bodies of its actors to a more apparent site of inauthentic representation. However, each of these conventions must finally recognize that it is merely a destabilization of other representational media, not a justification of acting bodies in the theater. The next two sections will discuss two approaches to frontier drama that do not seek to undermine and displace the calculus of corporeal authenticity, but rather to appropriate them for use on the stage.

“To Go up on the Stage to Represent My Own Character”: “Authentic” Westerners as Stage Actors

Some playwrights attempted to address the demands of corporeal authenticity directly, by creating plays about contemporary frontiersmen in which the characters were played by their namesakes. The most famous of these was Buffalo Bill Cody’s stage career. Cody starred in seven stage plays: The Scouts of the Plains (1872), Life on the Border (1876), Red Right Hand; or Buffalo Bill’s First Scalp for Custer (1876/77), May Cody; or, Lost and Won (1877/78), Boy Chief of the Plains, Knight of the Plains, and Buffalo Bill at Bay, or the Pearl of the Prairie (uncertain dates after 1877/78 season).\(^9\)
Actors represented Cody on stage before he began his career, though—the stories written about him by Ned Buntline had made him famous, and were translated into stage plays. Cody’s own acting career began almost inadvertently, when in 1872 he attended one of these plays, entitled *Buffalo Bill, King of the Border Men*. Cody later remarked that “I was curious to see how I would look when represented by someone else” (633), in this case actor J. B. Studley’s portrayal of him at the Bowery Theatre. Paul T. Nolan recounts the events of that evening:

During the performance, the audience discovered that the “real” Buffalo Bill was in the theater. At the conclusion of each act, he was given an ovation, and then at the end of the play he was called to the stage to make a speech. Cody did not want to go, but “finally consented,” he told his readers, “and the next moment I found myself standing behind the footlights in front of the audience, for the first time in my life. I looked up, then down, then on each side, and everywhere I saw a sea of human faces, and thousands of eyes all staring at me. I confess that I felt very much embarrassed—never more so in my life—and I knew not what to say. I made a desperate effort, and a few words escaped me, but what they were I could not for the life of me tell, nor could anyone else in the house. My utterances were inaudible, even to the leader of the orchestra, Mr. Dean, who was sitting only a few feet from me. Bowing to the audience, I beat a hasty retreat, into one of the canons of the stage. I never felt more relieved in my life than when I got out of the view of that immense crowd.” (i–ii)

Cody’s reticence aside, it is appropriate that Buffalo Bill’s stage career began with a performance that was pure corporeal display. Cody had no script, no lines, and no action on the stage that evening. He was not expected to demonstrate acting talent, or even ease before an audience. The spectators at the Bowery Theatre just wanted to look at him—to examine the body that corresponded to Buntline’s stories and the drama being played before them that night.
In fact, after this inauspicious beginning, Cody was immediately offered a role playing himself. During the subsequent summer and fall, Buntline repeatedly wrote Cody to convince him to, as Cody says, “go up on the stage to represent my own character” (qtd. in Nolan iii). Cody acquiesced, and began a stage career marked by its lack of acting. Critics hated the plays nearly as much as audiences loved them, and Nolan notes that not only “did the play make no sense; but no one in the cast made even any serious attempt to learn the lines Buntline had written” (iii). No one, of course, had to. The attraction of Cody’s plays was always to see Cody on stage, to assess his historically and individually authentic body as it re-enacted life on the plains. The next year Cody quit the company and organized his own troupe, together with “Texas Jack” Omohundro and James “Wild Bill” Hickock. Like Cody, these two westerners were able to make viewers of everyone, engaging audiences in compulsory spectatorship through the cultural power of their bodies. Eventually, of course, Cody left the stage for a medium that afforded him greater ability to display his authenticity—the Wild West, which is the subject of the next chapter. These plays, however, tutored Cody in the calculus of western display, and many of the tactics he adopted on stage would translate to the Wild West arena. *Life on the Border* provides an example of Cody’s stage tactics, including the ways that the form both permitted his vast capacity for self-promotion and limited his exercise of that power.

The plot of *Life on the Border* is arranged around Cody’s pursuit of a counterfeiter named Huntley—notably not a crime of dissimulated identity. Cody and his fellow westerners endow the play with individual and historiographical authenticity, so that the plot does not have to adopt strategies to displace their inauthenticity. In fact, much of the play is devoted to others’ admiration of Cody. Betty, a servant at a military post, repeatedly remarks on Cody’s physical beauty: “Oh, it’s that good looking feller it’s
for. Ooh, murther, ain’t he purty?” (33). General Duncan, after meeting and talking with Bill, remarks that “This act of yours proves to me that you are not the man you have been represented” (34-35). And Huntley worries that Cody has “been killed too many times and always comes to life again. No, I pay on money until I see Buffalo Bill dead before my eyes” (51). In all three cases, Cody’s body is the focal point of the observing character’s action: it is an object of aesthetic appreciation, a guarantor of individual authenticity, and a signifier of danger for his enemies that cannot be destroyed.

Cody, in fact, attempts to mask his body in order to prevent it from signifying to these enemies. After fights with a bear and an Indian, the latter is buried under a headstone on which Cody’s name is inscribed so that, as Bill says, “I will be dead to those who want me dead and who would murder me if they had a chance” (54). The name and buried body will serve to convince Huntley and his men that the body that is so perilous to them no longer exists—but it must be masked in the ground to so signify, and the audience is always made aware of the simulation. Cody also disguises himself, but once again the device is made apparent to the audience so that there is no danger of misreading. Cody’s body is always what it appears to the audience to be, though it sometimes fools those from whom he wishes to hide his identity. In this play, Cody’s body remains eminently legible, for the primary purpose of his stage career is to display that body in ways that demonstrate its inalterable authenticity.

“This Great Sensational Feat”: Sharpshooting in the Hybrid Western Drama

Other frontier characters did not possess the frontier experience and public fame of Cody but could establish a certain degree of corporeal authenticity if afforded stage space to display western skills that legitimated this claim. A series of what might be
called “hybrid” plays thus sprung up. These were frontier dramas intended for the stage that incorporated some elements of what would later be termed “Wild West” performance—most often sharp shooting exhibitions. Probably the most famous, and certainly the most infamous, of these was *Si Slocum*, starring Frank I. Frayne. Frayne was closely associated with the character he played in this piece; a promotional poster, in fact, places the name of Frayne and his character together to draw an equivalence between the two (Fig. 1.1). As Frayne had little success with his other plays and was known primarily for this role, this unity is not a stretch. Frayne was an accomplished marksman before beginning his stage career, and Clifton W. Tayleur wrote *Si Slocum* to showcase Frayne’s skills. Though Frayne apparently attempted to shift his oeuvre away from this type of display, his other plays were unsuccessful (“Appalling Accident”). Demonstrations of frontier skills could legitimate the acting body in ways that standard border dramas could not, and audiences wanted to see Frank Frayne as sharpshooter, not as stage actor.

The reality of Frayne’s performance was demonstrated tragically, however, on November 30, 1882 in Cincinnati, Ohio. This was Thanksgiving Day and, as the *Cincinnati Daily Gazette* noted the next morning, “everybody having a holiday yesterday, the theaters were all well patronized. This was especially the case at the Coliseum, the house being literally jammed at the matinee performance” (“Killed”). 2300 people looked on at the Coliseum as Frayne’s gun misfired during one of his trick shots and he killed his fiancee, Annie Von Behren, from whose head he was attempting to shoot an apple. Though Frayne was quickly acquitted of manslaughter by virtue of a ruling that hinged on the legal distinction between pointing a gun *at* versus *toward* another person, the dynamics of this scene and the evidence presented at Frayne’s trial and in the papers demonstrate the fluidity of onstage and offstage identity.
Frayne, of course, both plays the role of Si Slocum and demonstrates the skills he has developed in his work outside the theater. Si attempts to free his wife, but Frank’s trained body must do the shooting. Similarly, Von Behren simultaneously performs the role of a character who had been taken captive and whose husband performs a trick shot in order to free her, and places her own body—that of Annie Von Behren, not Ruth Slocum—in the path of that bullet. In other words, it is Ruth who is the captive of the bandits, but Annie whose life is actually endangered, in a perverse demonstration of the frontier drama’s calculus of the inauthentic body. Strikingly, then, the play that superficially seems to avert the threat of inauthenticity by importing scenes that require authentic corporeal performance is also the play that reveals the insurmountable authenticity problem faced by the stage play.

The public debate following Von Behren’s death, in fact, centers on the capability, or individual authenticity, of Frayne’s body. In a newspaper interview with the Cincinnati Commercial, a Chicago theater manager reveals Frayne’s recent hesitation to perform this role:

“Of late, Frayne,” said Manager Mead, “has endeavored to drop his old piece, probably feeling that he is too old to perform the part successfully. . . At the last performance here at the Olympic [Theater] Frayne fired so low that he shattered the top of the crown worn by Miss Von Behren. Nobody noticed it at the time from the stage, but Miss Von Behren was so frightened that she declared she would never take the part again. “Frayne said before the play was put upon the stage here that he disliked to play it anymore, as his eyesight was growing poor, and he was afraid an accident would happen. I was careful to turn on the sunlight while he was shooting, so as to give him all the light possible.” (“Last Scene”)

Frayne’s authenticity seems to be in question, as he is unable to perform the role that requires his own skills. Additional artificiality, in the form of stage lighting, is required for him to perform effectively, blurring the line between the authentic and the artificial
that is critical to the western performer. This technological assistance, moreover, is due to the inevitable aging of Frayne’s body, always a problem for western performers. Over time, the western body changes, becoming less capable, less visually arresting, and consequently less authentic.

The Gazette noted, in fact, that Frayne and others like him had in the past demonstrated an inability to perform correctly, reporting that Frayne had been shot in the hand by his first wife during another scene in Si Slocum, and that Frayne himself had shot a young man some years earlier “when the ball, glancing from the shield behind the apple, plowed through his ankle almost crippling him for life” (“Killed”). The paper further pointed out the prior occurrence of “similar accidents, and the case of Den Howe, who killed his wife while doing the same shot a few years ago, as well as the shooting of one of the Austin brothers by the other, was cited” (“Killed”). The impression of those in the theater business was that “this sad accident would put a stop to all exhibitions of rifle shooting as practiced by Mr. Frayne, Joseph Dowling, and others,” and would “end Mr. Frayne’s career upon the stage, if not his life, for strong and well grounded is the belief that he will never recover from the shock” (“Killed”). The onstage actions of Frayne therefore affect the possibilities of what other characters can do on other stages in a dynamic that lays bare the distinction between character and actor and the intertextuality of western performance.

The other side of the debate about Si Slocum, in fact, seeks to fortify Frayne against charges of duplicity or simulation—in short, of inauthenticity. The Commercial provides a long list of condolences and testimonials on Frayne’s behalf, including one from Annie’s mother, which reads: “I exonerate Mr. Frank I. Frayne from the sad accident. Please allow him to accompany the remains of my Annie to her home at once”
Other notes include the statements: “honest heart and true”; ”I’ll never do the shot again” (from Dowling); “it was the will of God. Don’t let it disspirit you”; and “I will go through fire and water to serve one that I know so true and noble as yourself. I am your true friend” (“Von Behren”). These statements, printed for public display, testify to Frayne’s individual authenticity as it is challenged. In fact, they serve much the same function as the corroborating letters that appear in Wild West programs, dime novels, autobiographies, and other western texts to strengthen the subject’s claim to authenticity. Frayne’s trial, in fact, is intended to establish his individual authenticity—that is, to determine whether he was in fact playing the role of heroic Si Slocum when the unthinkable happened, or whether the shot was intentional on the part of a vengeful Frank Frayne. Each witness who knows Frayne or Von Behren is therefore questioned about their relationship to determine whether the marksman was dissimulating a desire to do harm to Von Behren (“Von Behren”). Similarly, these characters and Frayne himself are asked about his alcohol consumption, and Frayne assures the court “I do not drink at all. Yesterday the light was extra good, and my sight was in good condition” (“Von Behren”). These statements are designed to test the fitness of Frayne’s body to play the role of Si, or to perform the tasks demanded of him. Once again, we see that the body of the actor is bound up with the actions of the character, despite the authenticity gap between them.

A writer identified only as J. R. C. responds in the Gazette to an editorial criticizing both Frayne and theatergoers for their joint complicity in Annie Von Behren’s accidental death. The writer remarks that the Gazette editorial was a center-shot. His skill in the use of a rifle is all that is in Frank Frayne as a theatrical performer, and the possibility of his use of it some time winding up in a catastrophe of this description is precisely what makes it a
marketable talent. The people make the market, he furnishes the commodity. With the bullet and the danger of mishap left out the article would be unsalable.” (“Actor and Public”)

This writer ironically adopts the “center shot” metaphor of a sharpshooter in order to criticize a theatrical market that values hybrid performance. The writer’s criticism of Frayne’s acting, however, is somewhat misplaced. In a cultural environment that values authenticity above all else in frontier performances, and requires that actors demonstrate that authenticity, frontier “skill” is all that must “be in” the western theatrical performer. Indeed, without this the frontier performer cannot exist as such—not only would “the article be unsalable,” but it would not be “the article” at all. The writer’s language, in fact, echoes the common locution “the genuine article,” which is what audiences seek in a western performance. It is not the possibility of failure that audiences want to see—rather, it is the affirmation of what they already believe about the west and those who reside in it.

Matthew Rebhorn argues that Augustin Daly’s Horizon “was on the cusp of realism in the theater, and thus its failures to live up to the melodramatic standards of its time may have sprung from the play’s mixed feelings on melodrama” (199). The problem with realism in western theater, however, is that it cannot achieve realistic representation in the one area that is most significant: its performing bodies. While frontier drama was successful for a time because of its ability to display western bodies, it ultimately failed to provide audiences with the appearance of “the real” that other forms of performance would achieve—notably the Wild West and the film western. The frontier drama was at times incredibly sophisticated in its critique of the western authenticity game, displacing attention from the inherent inauthenticity of its actors by demonstrating the ways in
which other forms failed to achieve representation fidelity or to effectively display western bodies. In the end, however, these sophisticated critiques were all the frontier drama could provide. Saddled with decades of convention, and images of effete Europeanism, a circumscribed and civilized space, and actors trained to simulate, the frontier drama could not effect large-scale changes in the forms of its display. Critics’ disgust at the anti-acting engaged in by Cody and his band demonstrates the degree to which western drama was beholden to the second half of its bifurcated identity—it was foremost drama, only secondarily frontier. Americans, steeped in Gilded Age nationalism and eager for corporeal evidence of their popular history, were far more interested in how the frontier could fill this cultural void. And in stepped William Frederick Cody.
Fig. 2.1. Promotional poster for *Si Slocum* (1882), Library of Congress.
Notes

1 For a discussion of parodic frontier drama, see Hall 30, 220.

2 See Reddin 56-57 for a description of Cody’s stage acting.

3 See Rebhorn 176 for a discussion of the critical reception of these two plays.

4 See Tompkins 104-106, 119, and 212-13 for discussions of the roles of pain and discomfort in the western.

5 For a discussion of the history of M’Liss from the short story by Harte through the court battle between Kate Mayhew and John E. McDonough over rights to the production of two other stage adaptations, see Hall 103-19.

6 Though the other literary and stage versions of the tale refer to the protagonist as M’Liss, Richardson uses MLiss. I follow Richardson’s orthography throughout this chapter.

7 Farland’s name, of course, evokes his relationship with Errol in the “far land” of the west, and indicates that his body and character remain unchanged since he left that place.

8 See Baudrillard 12-13.

9 Unfortunately, all but Life on the Border have since disappeared. Nolan notes that “there is one copy of Fred Maeder’s Buffalo Bill, the play that led to Cody’s first appearance on the stage, in the Harvard University Library rare book room. The Library of Congress has title pages of several of the plays in its rare book collection, but no copies of any of the plays. At the time Cody was on the road, a play could be copyrighted by the submission of the title page alone; and none of the plays in which he appeared was ever published. In fact, at the present time the only known copy of any of Buffalo Bill’s melodramas is a hand-written copy of Life on the Border, owned by Mrs. Buford Richardson of Socorro, New Mexico, a direct descendant of Captain Jack Crawford” (vi).

10 See Hall, “Theatrical Marksman” 180-81 and Performing the American Frontier 82-83 for discussions of Frayne’s career.

11 The Cincinnati Commercial newspaper transcribes the judge’s opinion in its entirety:
   It is not often that any Court is called upon to decide a case around which so much feeling exists –one that seems to touch so many springs of human nature. In the examination of one charged with any crime it is the duty of the Court to take the testimony with its full import as bearing upon the charge. It is true that in this case all crimes are skeptical, and therefore we are to look at the statutes alone, and where the statutes do not provide we look to the common law of England. As to the charge preferred by the Prosecuting Attorney and its reference to the statute, the crime must come toward the meaning of the word ‘at’ in order to bring it within the significance of the statute. The word ‘toward’ does not supply all cases. Then we have the interpretation of the words ‘toward’ and ‘at.’ I think the words ‘toward’ and ‘at’ are largely synonymous. Were there anything within the range of testimony that has been produced before me this morning, anything in the testimony before the Coroner looking toward criminal intent on the part of Mr. Frayne, anything to tell me that this defendant had borne such relations with the deceased that would cause the least shadow of suspicion, I would not hesitate in binding him over to a higher tribunal. It is a sad tragedy, and one that will have its effect. I am satisfied from the testimony that no grand or petit jury could find Mr. Frayne guilty of the charge of manslaughter. It is, therefore, my duty to discharge the prisoner. (“Last Scene”)
CHAPTER 3
THE ABSOLUTE FAKE: WILD WEST HISTORIOGRAPHY

The exhibition is full of human interest, and it is a story of human accomplishment illustrated by those to whose efforts the outcome is due, and it presents in a series of living and active tableaux scenes which historians have pictured to us; around which novelists have woven many a fascinating romance. The actors in the everyday scenes have studied no part and have no manufactured “business” to rehearse, but have simply and effectively for our amusement and enlightenment lived over scenes which they have under other circumstances and conditions been compelled to enact. From the first scene to the end of the performance there does not appear before the audience a single individual who is aught less than he there shows himself to be.

-Chicago Herald, September 24, 1893

Buffalo Bill was real. Everything he did was real. In fact this is one time that the man may be greater than the legend itself. . . . If this isn’t the way it happened, perhaps it’s the way it should have happened.

- Historian Mike Koury

Beginning in 1872, William F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody began playing himself in stage adaptations of dime novels based on his life. In an often-cited episode from one of these early stage performances, Cody exclaimed to his wife, who was seated in the audience, “Oh, but I’m a bad actor!” Indeed, the frontier dramas in which he starred until 1883 were nearly universally panned by critics; reviewers disparaged not only Cody’s acting, but also the primitive and contrived plots and dialogue of these frontier melodramas.¹ Cody was clearly not a professional actor, and the potboiler plots of the
dime novels made poor stage fare. In the eyes of audiences, on the other hand, Cody’s inability to act demonstrated his authenticity. He could not play a role other than himself, which was fortuitous since his authentic body was the primary attraction of his stage career. As I have argued, the history and conventions of the stage drama did not provide an ideal space for displaying the authentic western body. Thus, in 1882, Cody invented a new form adapted to the demands of western display—the Wild West.

That the Wild West producers were interested in presenting the show as perfect representation of historical event, rather than art object, is evident from the beginnings of the show. Nathaniel Lewis’s discussion of what he calls “The Trap of Authenticity” sheds light on the western’s impulse to disavow art—to be in the middle between art and history is to be fully neither, and accepted neither by the historian nor by the critic—a historical farce and a canonical invisibility. Cody sides with history, and his centrality on the Midway of the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, in the Wild West ring, and in his promotional posters is not the debilitating liminal location of western authorship, but rather the crucial nodal position that links a variety of American cultural discourses and marks the transition from “savagery” to “civilization.” The Wild West was thus framed as a new genre, separate from the play-acting of the stage drama with which Cody struggled. Freed from the artistic conventions and aesthetic judgments of traditional genres, the Wild West’s sole creational and critical criterion became “authenticity.” The phrase “The Raw Material of America” was coined by Cody and his publicists to promote the Wild West as historical re-enactment (historiographical authenticity) by real westerners performing themselves (individual authenticity); the Wild West was, by their order, never to be referred to as a “show.” This exhibition of historical events saw itself as closer to an embodied history book than a staged play, and deliberately disavowed many of the
traditional conventions of the stage drama in order to liberate itself from the inherited cultural associations of the dramatic performance, associations which would link the Wild West to a tradition of performance art, rather than history, and thus threaten the show’s aura of authenticity. Because Cody was able to effectively transform “acting” into “re-enacting,” a shift that emphasizes the historical truth value of Wild West performance, his exhibitions became historically performative. The Wild West actually helped to constitute the frontier history it claimed to mimic. Its generic pastiche blended history, literature, and nationalism in the authentic bodies of its performers, and helped to instantiate the frontier as the center of America and the world.

Literary critic Richard Slotkin argues that Cody’s achievement—and the genius of the Wild West—was the structuring of the “various conventions and media” that already represented the West “around a coherent set of plot formulas drawn from a literary mythology whose structure and language were (by 1870) well developed and widely recognized” (71). This restructuring and reshaping was necessary not simply to achieve dramatic force, but also—and more importantly—to distance the Wild West from traditional literary forms. The baggage of fiction carried by those literary forms had to be stripped by means of the creation of a new form, seemingly more historical and authentic, whose very novelty would mask its fictional nature by rendering it difficult to describe in familiar generic terms. This genre would adopt conventions aligned as nearly as possible with widely-believed American frontier mythologies, thus making these conventions nearly invisible to sympathetic American and European audiences. It would utilize an apparently accretive, rather than systematic, structure of authenticating materials that blended various forms and definitions of “authenticity” into an exhibition of the “real.”
Actors became “Western Celebrities,” scenes became “Pictures of Western Life,” and the stage itself was altered to become an open space on which the events of Cody’s history/biography would be inscribed.

Buffalo Bill’s Wild West was a traveling exhibition, an arena performance comprised of a series of western vignettes executed by “real westerners”; between 1883 and 1913, the Wild West crisscrossed the U.S. and traversed the Atlantic to perform in England and on the Continent. Remarkably democratic in its appeal, the show’s audiences consisted of all classes of society, including street urchins, businessmen, schoolboys, Presidents, and Queen Victoria. The exhibition was held inside an open canvas arena that was moved from place to place with the show and was adaptable to the variable locations (fairgrounds, fields, etc.) which were booked for Wild West performances. Before the formal performances of the Wild West in each city, the show’s participants marched through town in a grand parade. The incidents depicted in the show may be classified in three categories, according to the type of events they enact: re-enactments of specific historical events (e.g., “Representation of the duel between Buffalo Bill and the Sioux Chief, Yellow Hand,” “The Battle of the Little Big Horn, Showing with Historical Accuracy the scene of Custer’s Last Charge”), re-enactments of “typical” frontier events (“Attack on Settlers’ Cabin by Indians,” “Stage Coach Attacked by Indians”), and demonstrations of frontier “skills” (horse racing, “Bucking Ponies,” shooting exhibitions).

Performers were also available for visits at the Wild West encampment before and after performances. The Wild West was conceived of as a coherent whole, all of these parts contributing to its often-cited educational (or nationally interpellative) function. Its
pastiche form coincided nicely with the episodic nature of popular conceptions of frontier history, both writing and reinforcing that history as a series of often-unrelated conflicts enacted in a mythic frontier space.

That the Wild West was widely praised for its historical accuracy and consequent educative function testifies to its success at insulating the reality of frontier history from the imaginary of frontier mythology by means of a byzantine network of authentication. The Wild West was not a journey through history traditionally conceived, but rather a sibling to Umberto Eco’s “journey into hyperreality, in search of instances where the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake” (8), or “make an authentic copy” (20). The Wild West is a perfect copy of the version of American history it seeks to instantiate through performance. As with Eco’s “absolute fake,” its only flaw is that it is a fake—that is, it cannot actually “be” the past events it attempts to re-create. On the other hand, the Wild West was, in fact, historical in the sense that it instantiated an historiography that was based largely on Wild West mythology; it creates the narrative by which history makes sense of the events the show re-enacts. In the presence of an American frontier self-conception that had, by the end of the nineteenth century, defined itself out of existence through Indian wars, the Wild West provided a static frontier that compulsively masked its own hyperreality through a proliferation of authentic bodies.

**Space, Place, and the Authenticating Body**

What is perhaps most startling about the Wild West’s claim of authenticity, as critic Joy Kasson argues, is that “against all evidence of stagecraft, promoters and observers alike clung to their sense that Buffalo Bill was a historical personage and that
the experience of viewing his spectacles offered a ‘lifelike’ glimpse of the American West” (621). Though they may have noted the chronological distance between past events and present representation, most viewers did not view this rupture as motive to doubt the show’s historicity or realism. The Wild West’s creators were particularly cognizant of the context of corporeal authenticity, and were very adept at shaping American audiences’ responses to the show; when the Wild West toured abroad, however, their criteria of authenticity were sometimes questioned as the show entered into a different cultural world.

When Buffalo Bill’s Wild West traveled to Italy in 1890, the exhibition initially received the same plaudits for its historical accuracy and educational value that it received in its previous sixteen years of travels. In Rome, however, the media and the public turned on Cody’s show. In response to a challenge issued to Cody’s riders by Prince Sermonta, the American cowboys rode a herd of wild Italian horses in ten minutes. Cody, in turn, challenged a group of Italian horsemen to ride his American broncos; when the Italians succeeded, Cody refused to pay the winners on the grounds that they had taken longer than the ten minutes his frontiersmen needed to ride the Prince’s animals. The Roman media vilified Cody and ridiculed the purported “authenticity” of the Wild West, saying that the show was a farce, that the “wild” animals and Indians who ostensibly enacted historical events were in fact merely play-actors, and poor ones at that. In the midst of the uproar, a reporter from Florence’s *Il Corriere Italiano* penned this apology for Cody’s show:

> The life of the cowboys and Indians is presented as described by the authors who have written of it both more and better [than the show presents it]. To say that the representations of Buffalo Bill are an awkward caricature is simply silly. It is only natural that in a ring of restricted size
the life that is lived on the immense American plains may be reproduced only in miniature; it is therefore an imitation, more than an exact reproduction.

Buffalo Bill . . . cannot offer us the marvelous spectacles of the plains.

It is natural! Colonel Cody cannot load, with American advertising, on his ship . . . a piece of America; neither can he make the Mississippi run in our arenas; neither raise the Rocky Mountains, nor plant virgin forests inhabited by birds of paradise; neither scatter high grasses hiding rattlesnakes, nor entwine tremendous boa constrictors among colossal plants.

The advertising, for those of us who are not Americans, has been excessive: on the other hand, so has the requirement some have made of the show.

It seems to me that going to Buffalo Bill, as many have gone, with the sole purpose of gaining an idea of the apparel imagined so many times while reading romances and travelogues, one must not feel any greater disillusionment than that which might be felt attending one of the exhibitions of the Senegalese or of any other unknown or little-known people.6

The Corriere’s analysis of the obstacles and presumptions of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West hints at a number of questions that are essential to understanding the reasons why Americans found the show utterly authentic while some foreign observers, viewing the show from a perspective outside of Americans’ desire for affirmations of national self-identity, derided it as an “awkward caricature.” To resolve this split will require answering a number of questions sparked by the Corriere: What are the sources and criteria of authenticity in America? How does Cody seek to reinforce or alter those criteria? Why do so many people on both sides of the Atlantic ignore the Wild West’s clear status as artistic performance and accept it as history, accepting the show on its own terms?

To answer these questions, which is to understand “authenticity” in the era of the disappearing frontier, we must work out how authenticity was understood in postbellum America. There are four possible ways in which Wild West performance could
theoretically be understood as authentic or “real”: it could occur in the same location as the events it represents, a sort of geographic authenticity; it could transport performers and believers to the moment of time at which these events occurred, a temporal authenticity; it could reproduce precisely the same actions that transpired historically, a narrative authenticity; and it could utilize the actual participants in those events, a corporeal authenticity. All of these elements, of course, are necessary to produce the “real” event. Performances like the Wild West, which cannot meet all four criteria and yet represent themselves as real, must rely on one or more authenticating elements to construct a hyperreality that accounts for its inevitable shortcomings. As Walter Benjamin argues, “even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence” (220). In other words, even the “absolute fake” is still a fake. The Wild West is limited in its ability to utilize the first three of potential criteria of the real because of its traveling character, the impracticability of time travel, and the constrained nature of the exhibition’s arena in comparison to the broad panorama of western landscapes. The Wild West, then, relied on the last of these categories, corporeal authenticity, to do the work of all four, compelling the authentic bodies of its performers to authenticate the show’s place, space, and time in order to make the show “real.” These performers, demonstrating what they had done “out there” in the west, infused the arena’s empty space with authenticity as they inscribed on that space the experience of events that they themselves have lived. These bodies, actually “there,” brought western place to the arena’s space and the narratives enacted within it.
Authentic performers, then, break down barriers of time and space by demonstrating the continued existence of those events in the bodies that lived them and by ritually recreating the mythic time of American frontier conflict.

The Wild West re-enacts signature events in the sacred American drama of westward expansion, writing and rewriting that historical canon as it travels the nation and the world. Its re-creations evoke the foundational moments of American myth, ritually transporting its viewers to the sacred time and place of national identity formation. An 1898 promotional piece, in fact, adopts the rhetoric of religiosity in its description of the show, calling it the Wild West “revelation.” The bodies of “contemporaneous participants” return the show to the originary moments of American frontier history, the nation’s closest approximation of an official theology. The Wild West, in fact, evokes a ritual time of American history that has much in common with Mircea Eliade’s description of religious rite:

one re-enacts fabulous, exalting, significant events, one again witnesses the creative deeds of the Supernaturals; one ceases to exist in the everyday world and enters a transfigured, auroral world impregnated with the Supernaturals’ presence. What is involved is not a commemoration of mythic events but a reiteration of them. The protagonists of the myth are made present, one becomes their contemporary. This also implies that one is no longer living in chronological time, but in the primordial Time, the time when the event first took place. (Myth 19)

Eliade roots ritual re-enactment in three elements: the monumentality of the events re-enacted, the perceived proximity of the individuals who lived in the mythic time of these events, and the impression that the time of those individuals is identical with the time of the ritual’s participants. In the Wild West, events are monumental because they are the origins of American identity; the originary individuals are, in fact, in the arena; and their continued life signifies that their time is indeed identical with the time of the witnessing
audience. The Wild West participates in ritual time on a daily (sometimes twice-a-day!) schedule, compulsively “re-acting” the originary time of American history, witnessing “the spectacle” of western acts, “meeting with” authentic westerners and “relearning the lesson” of American frontier experience *illo tempore* as those westerners re-create it. The Wild West claims to reflect “the absolute truth, because it narrates a sacred history” (*Myths* 23), the nationally sacred historical truth of American frontier expansion. Thus, the Wild West is perceived as overcoming the boundaries of space and time, relocating its performance in the mythic period and geography of frontier conflict through the prophetic, authentic bodies of its performers.

The *Corriere*, lacking the American cultural context necessary to read authentic bodies, roots authenticity in geography, or the presence of landscape, and the absence of that exclusively American geography leaves only costumes as objects of aesthetic and ethnological appreciation. For Americans, on the other hand, those costumes and the bodies that inhabit them are precisely the crux of the Wild West—they are historiographical in their capacity to embody the mythical American history that they perform into existence. These performing bodies are the ingredient the show provides to authenticate the veracity of American history—it is their presence that ratifies the idea of America, and the space that surrounds them is significant only inasmuch as it provides a mythic, blank panorama on which a hyperreal American history of frontier expansion may be enacted.

The Wild West arena is, in fact, astonishingly well-suited to the space it is designed to represent. Unlike a stage drama in which the set is arranged to resemble something it is not, the Wild West arena is functionally very similar to the space for which it serves as a proxy—it is “authentic” in its resemblance to western space, not least
because it is filled by the same performers. Slotkin argues that the name “Wild West” inscribed the production “as a ‘place’ rather than a mere display or entertainment” (67); the “place” of the Wild West is, however, extraordinarily ill-defined—in fact, the adjectival appositive “Wild” in its title codes it not so much as a place, but rather as a social condition. The open, undefined space of the Wild West arena, in fact, formed an ideal symbolic space for a performance that represented itself as a transcription and re-temporalization of American frontier history. As I have noted, the arena varied in size in accordance with the spaces that were booked for its performance. Except when it performed in a pre-existing arena (e.g., Madison Square Garden), the arena was enclosed on three sides by grandstands roofed in canvas. The Chicago Times described the exhibition’s 1893 World’s Fair arena: “The seats in the inclosure are around two sides and one end. At the other end and concealing the stables is a large painting of California mountain scenery. This is 44x306 feet and the half now completed shows the Weber Cañon with Pulpit Rock and the Devil’s Slide”, a second article, less precise, stated: “At the north end of the amphitheater is a gigantic painting representing a mountain range, which forms a fit setting for the show” (“Riding Amid the Rain”). Though the first text may appear to locate the Wild West, and indeed western geography in general, in a specific location, the topography described here is in fact more legendary than actual. Devil’s Slide is located in Weber Canyon outside of Ogden, Utah; the placement of the California Sierras and Utah’s Wasatch in a single panorama has the effect of compressing western space into a series of specific, but also symbolic, locations identifiable as “western.” This effect is analogous to the function of the Wild West itself—to compress western history into a series of specific, but also symbolic, events identifiable as “western.” This space, moreover, mirrors American frontier geography in its layout;
America, too, was enclosed on three sides, the Atlantic on the east and foreign nations bounding it to its north and south. At the “open” end of the nation stood the mythic topography of the west. The arena’s space, then, was blank, free, unbound, outdoors, mobile, and open at one end—all characteristics of American frontier geography. Most importantly, however, it was occupied by the authentic bodies that imbued its space with historiographical meaning.

One Wild West program referred to the showground as a “moving canvas world, which has been seen in almost every city or town of importance in Europe and North America.” If the arena was a traveling world unto itself, then the laws that governed that world could differ from those outside—the laws of Wild West time and space, in fact, are malleable, allowing its audiences to be transported to another place and time through the mythogenic and historiographical performance they witness. Moreover, this space was unbounded, inasmuch as the public was permitted to visit the show’s performance in the Wild West Encampment before and after the arena exhibition; the performance that occurred inside the arena was merely the most highly-regimented portion of the larger performance of westernness that continued outside.

Frederick Jackson Turner, in his seminal essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” argues that the outstanding characteristic of American landscape and history is “the existence of an area of free land” on which American westward expansion will take place (1). In this case, “free” has multiple overlapping meanings: it is land without recognized legal claim, free from encumbrance of deed; this same absence of deed makes it free, or gratis, to potential settlers; it is free from narratives of history, since no history-keeping people is recognized as having inhabited it; and it is, as Turner says in “The Problem of the West,” “an open field” for individual action “unchecked by
restraints of an old social order” (213). In short, the outstanding characteristic of the American west was its function as an empty space in which Americans could act out the drama of national self-constitution. The objections of the Corriere notwithstanding, then, the Wild West did bring a piece of the American west with it, in the form of its empty, or “free” performance space that was perceived by American audiences as closer to the “authentic” American west than was the confined, artificial space of stage drama because it permitted authentic western bodies to freely perform America.

The Wild West relied on yet another spatial trope of the American west for much of its meaning and “authenticity.” Richard Slotkin claims that Buffalo Bill’s movement between the U.S. and Europe was akin to a Chicago visitor moving from the Wild West to the White City (80). In Chicago, however, the Wild West was denied a permit to exhibit on the grounds of the fair, and set up its arena just outside the grounds. The no-place of the Wild West in Chicago therefore functioned in much the same way as the space of the Wild West arena: open, liminal, and marked by freedom from social structure. The Wild West, in fact, seemed to function as the gateway between the Midway and the White City; it was not a pole in the savage-civil dichotomy, but rather a mediator—a frontier—that allowed the two to be reconciled by visitors. At the Chicago fair, the Wild West’s arena was located spatially between the ostensibly savage and base “ethnotainment” exhibits of racialized peoples on the Midway Plaisance and the purportedly refined technological and artistic attainments of “advanced” Europe and America in the White City. In this spatially and metaphorically liminal position, it provided a framework for interpreting both poles of the dichotomy through the cultural logic of frontier progress. In the Chicago fair’s social logic of hierarchy and progress, the Wild West was described as “The Key to All”; that is, it was a central link between the
official exhibits of the White City and the chaos of the Midway, a frontier of sorts that interpreted the poles of the Fair. Wild West performers thus functioned as mediators between the worlds of savagery and civilization, demonstrating their ability to transform the latter into the former. Wild West performers were regarded as true Americans able to bring the native to Europe and Europe to the native, without becoming either—a static liminality that permitted the construction of stable, authentic westerners. The inherent liminality of Buffalo Bill’s frontier character interacted with his cultivated authenticity to qualify him uniquely to speak for the frontier version of America his show created. The imaginary has become the real through the bodies of Wild West performers who, participating in the making of history by re-enacting their historical roles, efface the distinction between performance in the mythic space of the American west and performance in the mythic space of the Wild West. Authenticity is located in their bodies, and can be witnessed as they perform their historiographical roles.

As time passed, the paradigmatically open landscape of the arena and the west was increasingly effaced by the Wild West bodies that acted upon it. Cody’s fight with the Cheyenne Yellow Hand, a recurring scene in the show, is illustrated repeatedly in the annual program, and demonstrates the insignificance of landscape in comparison to the actions of its characters.¹⁰ The episode first appears in the program in 1885, accompanied by the caption, “On the 17th of July, 1876. DEATH OF YELLOW HAND – CODY’S FIRST SCALP FOR CUSTER” (Fig. 3.1). Cody occupies nearly the entire vertical space of this illustration, standing triumphantly atop the fallen Indian as the two of them occupy the space at the brink of a precipice. The background of this picture consists of roughly-shaded sky and mountains, with vaguely-sketched U.S. soldiers at the foot of the cliff. The focus of this illustration is clearly the exultant Cody, with the landscape serving as
blank space in which his action may occur. The illustration also demonstrates the degree
to which Cody’s body, as is the case with other western performers, was informed by
textual descriptions of western bodies. Cody, of course, was first known as the
protagonist of dime novels, and the 1885 Yellow Hand illustration is a nearly exact
reproduction of the cover image of the 1872 dime novel Merciless Matt, by Captain
Charles Howard. Like many of the events represented in the Wild West, this illustration
has no clear correspondent in the “history” the novel claims to provide. It is instead
emblematic of the many killings performed by Matthew Dean, much as the vignettes of
the Wild West were often purportedly representative of typical frontier events rather than
historically identifiable moments.

The next Yellow Hand illustration appears in the 1887 program (Fig. 3.2). This
picture is substantially the same as the 1885 version, but nearly all the extraneous
material is cropped from Cody and the Indian. The number of soldiers watching from
below is reduced to eleven (from eighteen) in the 1885 illustration, and the mountains
and clouds have been erased, leaving the cliff as the sole geographical feature in the
frame. The landscape has been entirely erased, leaving only the dead body of the Indian,
the acting body of Cody, and the observing bodies of the soldiers as witnesses. The scene
approximates a stage performance, with Cody as actor atop the cliff/stage, and the
soldiers below as audience. The implicit message of the transition from 1885 to 1887 is
that landscape is insignificant except as a blank theater on which the authentic west may
be performed into existence.

In 1888, yet another illustration of the Yellow Hand incident appears, this one
substantially revised (Fig. 3.3). Cody again raises the dead Yellow Hand’s scalp in the air
and again serves as the focal point of the illustration, but the landscape of this illustration
is a nondescript sloping plain, and a group of Indians ride in from the background. The altered background is significant inasmuch as it again demonstrates the insignificance of the space in which Cody’s performance occurs by subordinating it to the action performed there. New versions of the incident appear in 1893, 1905, and Cody’s 1913 film *The Indian Wars*, in which he played himself. Each of these later depictions appropriates some elements of those versions that preceded it, and each concentrates on the bodies of Cody and Yellow Hand, minimizing attention to the landscape on which their encounter takes place. In fact, Cody’s raised right hand clutching the scalp is the only element that appears in all versions of the incident, the emblematic act of frontier violence that imbues the event with national historiographical meaning.

As this discussion suggests, in fact, the bodies of Wild West performers are nearly always emphasized over the space in which they act; the primary function of a mythically empty space, whether in the actual west or in the Wild West arena, is to focus attention on the action that can occur there. Cody and his associates necessarily brought the authentic west with them on their tours, for it was embedded in their performing bodies. As Cody said, the Wild West was “reality itself” and the performers “appear just as they are; nothing more, nothing less” (qtd. in Reddin 61). Unlike his early stage career, when, as Joy Kasson argues, Cody “played the part of a real frontiersman playing the part of an actor playing the part of a frontiersman” (24), Wild West performers ostensibly “played” themselves. Wild West participants were thus viewed not as actors, but as re-enactors, and audience members were permitted to visit them at the Wild West encampment before and after the show, secure in the assurance that the performers would not, because they could not, break character. Not only did the Wild West depart from the drama in this perceived absence of traditional actors, but also in its ostensible lack of an invented
script—the show was purportedly not the product of the creative genius of an author, but was rather a transcription of history. This perceived lack of script set the Wild West apart as a genre separate from, if related to, the drama, and thus petitioned audience and reviewer to adopt alternative viewing strategies and critical apparatuses appropriate to witnessing history, rather than consuming fiction. The events the Wild West displayed were generally authenticated in one of two ways: as re-creation or representation of historical moments, or by the use of performers connected to such events. The use of “authentic” performers reinforced the historicity of the re-enactments, and the reliance on historical events coded the performers as authentic westerners—a circular, self-reinforcing system of authentication.

Once again, the Yellow Hand episode provides us with an example of how this authentication functions. Cody anticipated the performance possibilities of his 1876 confrontation with Yellow Hand and understood the potential historical significance of that event in post-Custer America. He dressed up for his battle with Yellow Hand, co-authored the news report of the event, starred in *The Red Right Hand; Or, Buffalo Bill’s First Scalp for Custer*—the stage version of the story—, and played himself in the Wild West re-enactment of the event (Kasson 36-37). This incident is intersected by interrelated discourses of authentication and Cody’s understanding of the actual event as a performance. As Kasson notes, Cody “report[ed] that it took place in front of a cheering audience of soldiers,” and he collected artifacts from the incident, including Yellow Hand’s scalp, for later use in *Red Right Hand* and the Wild West (36). The use of these artifacts would authenticate the Wild West re-enactment of the incident. This interrelation of history, performance, and artifact draws attention to the performative nature of the Wild West. As I argued in the Introduction, western performance performs into historical
being a particular version of the West. The west for which Cody’s body stands in is the
west that is constituted by his performance, a circular authentication that permits Cody to
both assert a version of western history and then claim that history is accurate because he
performed it.

**Cody, the Iconic Body**

The central attraction, and the primary authenticating body, in the Wild West was
Buffalo Bill Cody. The invariable and intense attention to Cody’s body, in fact, echoes
Jean Baudrillard’s description of icons: his is “[a] perfect simulacrum, forever radiant
with [its] own fascination” (5). The attention to Cody’s body, stems from the desire to
make the body authenticate the show, or to enforce the body’s capacity to stand in for and
conceal the hyperreality of the frontier that both body and show represented. Buffalo Bill
protected his own iconography by cultivating his status as authentic; after a brief stint as
Custer, Cody did not perform roles other than himself, and others did not play him until
his late films. This insistence on not playing other roles shielded his body from
inauthenticity by guarding against simulations (pretending to have something one does
not) of Buffalo Bill, or dissimulations (pretending not to have something one does) by
Cody (Baudrillard 3). He was, in other words, purely himself as he appeared to be.

Richard Dyer’s argument that “stars are involved in making themselves into
commodities; they are both labour and the thing that labour produces” bears an additional
burden in Cody’s case (6): he is not only labor and its product, but also authentic and
what authenticity produces, history and what history produces. The corporeal
construction named Buffalo Bill is an overdetermined system of authentication that
produces a hyperreal version of the frontier self and of American history.
As the most exemplary of frontiersmen, Cody’s biography was viewed as identical with the history of postbellum American expansion, and his body was the signifier of the national effects of that experience. While much of Cody’s perceived authenticity was due to his fame as a hero of dime novels and stage dramas, these experiences and their fictional overtones were largely disavowed in order to emphasize Cody’s frontier body. Cody’s 1883 program had already begun, in fact, to structure his claim to authenticity in these terms: “Thus it will be seen that notwithstanding it may sometimes be thought his fame rests upon the pen of romancer and novelist, had they never been attracted to him (and they were solely by his sterling worth), W. Cody would none the less have been a character in American history.” The emphasis here is on visual perception—Cody’s authenticity “will be seen” by the audience who gazes upon his body; the authors who have textualized his biography are sufficient but not necessary to Cody’s fame, as he has parlayed textual publicity into national celebrity grounded in physical performance. The 1883 biography calls Cody “the representative man of the frontiersman of the past,” “a child of the plains, who was raised there, and familiar with the country previous to railroads,” “insensibly inured to the hardships and dangers of primitive existence,” and “possessed of those qualities that afterward enabled him to hold positions of trust and without his knowing or intending it.” In other words, Cody’s fame is based in personal experience, and is a product of that experience, rather than of “intent” or even recognition—Cody, of all things, the reluctant celebrity! The biography continues: “Buffalo Bill par excellence is exemplar of the strong and unique traits that characterize a true American frontiersman. . . . The principal incidents and episodes have
additional interest from having been identified with [his] life.” Cody, then, is not merely authentic but is exemplary, and his body structures and informs the meaning of the western medium he invented.

Kasson and Slotkin list Cody’s occupations as ox-team driver, messenger for the outfit that would operate the pony express, wagon train participant, prospector, trapper, hunter, Indian and outlaw fighter, civilian army scout and guide, hotelier, railroad and real-estate speculator, buffalo hunter, cattle rancher, development advocate, farmer, teamster, drover, “Civil War soldier in a Jayhawk regiment,” and posse-man; he was linked to “horse races, buffalo-shooting contests, and hunting excursions” in which he exhibited frontier skills for a variety of publics (Kasson 11-13). This long list of occupations and skills ties Cody to what historian William Deverell calls the “great narrative of the American West”:

We all know about this West, the West of little houses and prairies, good and bad guys, Conestogas, and lusty days of yesteryear. This image is one that, as one writer put it, casts the West as “America’s primordial sandbox.” This is the mega-narrative, the supernarrative of many names, one equally as good as another: the legend of national fulfillment, the saga of cowboys and Indians, the hardy pioneer epic. . . . It is what so many people, adults and schoolkids alike, still think and believe when they imagine the West: that it is somehow different from the rest of the country and its history is different from the rest of the country’s history, that it is marked by adjectives like rugged, brave, and true more than any other time or any other place in all the American past. (32)

The “mega-narrative” outlined here by Deverell serves to locate the creation of American identity in the mythical West and to locate that West as America, or inscribe western identity as American identity. It presumes an equivalency between the terms “West” and “frontier,” both in their various permutations. And it is tied, in nearly all those permutations, to Buffalo Bill. His participation in virtually all of the various frontiers that constitute this mega-narrative inscribed on his body the representative experiences of
those frontiers, enabling him to authenticate re-creations of those experiences, and
making the body of Buffalo Bill an experientially overdetermined stand-in for the
frontier, and thus for America. Bill’s Body became the text on which the frontier could be
read and interpreted. Thus, an 1898 Courier book piece “JUST WHAT IT IS” ends with
the declaration that “[M]any spasmodic, ephemeral efforts to imitate [the Wild West]
have been made, but all lacking in their LEADERS the service, association and universal
recognition that renders the fame and standing of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West
imperishable.”

The show’s appeal, even its implied immortality, are a result of Cody’s
service, association, and recognition—in other words, the presence of his body, imbued
with that authenticity, in the arena.

The 1910 program’s “Valedictory” statement, Cody’s farewell to the public,
alludes to this connection, saying:

Few remain of the great leaders in war and peace, many of whom ‘came
out of the West,’—the West of the old pioneer days,—the ‘Wild West,’
with which all my life has been so closely interwoven.

From early boyhood to these whitening years, I have tried to play
my part in the great drama of our national life. . . .

It has been my privilege to be an eye-witness of the opening, and
marvelous development, of the Far West, from an uncharted battle-ground
of roaming tribes of hostile Indians to its transformation into the greatest
agricultural, mining and industrial field of achievement, on the face of the
habitable globe.

Cody “interweaves” his own life with the imaginative life of American national
historiography, claiming that the American frontier experience and his own experience
are self-identical. That experience is coded as a “drama,” echoing the Wild West’s
performance and Cody’s earlier stage career. He again echoes these forms with his
invocation of “eye-witnessing,” the same function he has asked his audiences to fill for
decades. And he invokes the tribal past and industrial future of America, implicitly
locating himself at the center of this transition as the individual responsible for effecting it. The cost of this evolution, though, is the possibility of others like him. The 1898 Courier book includes a statement from “a leading journalist” that Cody is “decidedly the most unique character of the century, the one connecting link that holds together the wild, rough frontier past, with all its glories of physical manhood, and the almost too intensely refined present of mental manhood, machine action and emasculating commercialism.” Cody unites in his body the past and future of a nation now lacking such bodies.

It may be this absence of contemporary equals to these frontier bodies that motivates the 1898 Courier book to state:

> It has been well said that there often arises a man who makes the world think, but how few have made the world stare. Among the latter Buffalo Bill is so pre-eminent that those who visit his great, realistic, life-endowed reflex of heroic and romantic history and universal equitation wish for a dozen pair of eyes to drink in all its lessons and enchantments.

This passage renders the primary attraction of the Wild West in spectatorial terms. Cody has “made the world stare”—specifically, they have stared at him as the signifier of western history. Cody’s authentic body is the subject of the gaze that desires “a dozen pair of eyes” to “drink in” his nationally-signifying body. This body is marked by its pre-eminence, even among the other authentic western bodies of his show.

Perceptions of Cody’s authentic body were not shaped wholly by his historicity, but also by its evident capacity for western masculine action. The 1885 program includes a piece by “Curtis Guild, proprietor and editor of the conservative Commercial Bulletin, Boston” that demonstrates the degree to which attention was focused on the physical capability of Cody’s body:

> Never was a finer picture of American manhood presented than when Buffalo Bill stepped out to show the capabilities of the Western teamster’s whip. Tall beyond the lot of ordinary mortals, straight as an arrow, not an
ounce of useless flesh upon him limbs, but every muscle firm, and hard as
the sinews of a stag, with the frank, kindly eye of a devoted friend and a
natural courtly grace of manner which would become a marshal of France,
Buffalo Bill is from spurs to sombrero one of the finest types of manhood
this continent has ever produced.

Cody here demonstrates the “capabilities” of the whip, but by extension his own
capability. His body exceeds those of other humans in its size, shape, utility, strength, and
“grace,” a reminder that western authenticity includes elements of the corporeally
exceptional, even the superlative. This authentic body provides meaning to the show and
concrete demonstration of American history, becoming the most significant signifier of
that history. No wonder the inside cover of the 1898 Courier contains this statement from
Cody, under the title “Col. Cody’s Only Card”:

TO THE PUBLIC:

Once and for all, and all rumors and reports to the contrary
notwithstanding, I beg to most positively assure my comrades, friends,
patrons, and the press, that wherever and whenever my ‘Wild West and
Congress of Rough Riders of the World’ is billed to appear, there will I be
with it also. That I not only personally direct it as a whole and every
production connected therewith, but invariably appear at each and every
afternoon and evening performance, conscientiously fulfilling every
advertised promise made in my name. My place has always been at the
front; I have not been accustomed to loiter at the rear.

The final sentence of this statement emphasizes Cody’s frontier character, which, as I
have suggested, is often derived from his martial experiences in the west. He has “been
accustomed” to the front both militarily and at the syntactical and physical form of his
own Buffalo Bill’s Wild West. His body “appears” in each of its performances and
“directs” the show as it provides historiographical meaning to the events represented
therein.
Bill’s body was constantly fetishized as a stand-in for the west—Wild West programs invariably depicted him as their primary aesthetic object, and his presence in the physical and symbolic center of the arena continually reinforced the historicity of the show by reminding the audience of the layers of frontier experience inscribed on his body. Kasson, in fact, claims that “the most valuable asset of the Wild West was the body of its star” (268), and his body remained a valuable property even as his show declined. Perhaps nowhere is this clearer than in the Wild West’s publicity posters, most of which feature Cody. In an often-reprinted 1889 poster advertising the Wild West’s arrival in France, Cody’s face appears superimposed on the side of a running buffalo; the caption reads “Je viens,” or “I am coming” (Fig. 3.4). The first person singular is notable here—Cody says “I am coming,” not “We are coming.” This utterance melds his identity with that of the iconic animal of the American west to symbolically fuse the two words of his own sobriquet; in this poster Buffalo Bill becomes Buffalo/Bill. Indeed, the two images are remarkably similar: facing the same direction, both with woolly beards, the arcing outline of Cody’s hat echoing the upsweep and decline of the buffalo’s back. Cody is the west just as the buffalo is the west, natives of that soil who belong there, who emblematize frontier freedom, strength, and nostalgic loss. When Cody says, “je viens,” all of this is bound up in the “je” indicated: the land, animal, wildness, action, and iconic face are all represented in Cody. His visage stands in for all that the bodies of buffalo and Bill have experienced, for the American frontier west.

Cody similarly stands in a synechdochic relation to the frontier in an 1898 panoramic promotional poster for the Wild West entitled “Westward the Course of Empire Makes its Way.” The poster is derived from John Gast’s 1872 allegorical lithograph “American Progress,” in which a female variously interpreted as progress,
Providence, Manifest Destiny, or America floats above the American landscape, overseeing the American nation from the cities of the east to the pioneers, trappers, and departing Indians of the west. In the Wild West version, Cody stands in for this emblematic spirit, not suspended in the air but rather atop a rock promontory, rifle in hand; he is distinguished from the ephemeral Spirit by his corporeality and his geographical grounding—both of which provide concrete demonstration of the reality of American frontier progress and of Cody himself. From this position, facing westward, Cody oversees the various stages of American frontier life in which he has participated, and apparently ensures the success of that venture. The empire that makes its way westward is both America and Cody himself, the personified spirit of westward migration. Cody’s body thus stands in for the various stages of American frontier progress and for the ideals that motivate and govern that progress.

From Cody as icon of American frontier it is but a short leap to Cody as icon of America, and America as center of the world. The 1910 illustration “From Prairie to Palace” centers Cody between old Europe and frontier America (Fig. 3.5). In much the same way that he mediated between the exhibits of Chicago’s White City, here Cody is the link between civilization and wilderness. He stands with the Indian, the buffalo, the wagon train, and the European aristocracy in scenes that are more compositionally busy as the level of civilization increases. Cody’s iconic image is, like the frontier, centered in relation to these scenes, the paradigmatic American body that has “been there” in all these scenes and can therefore mediate between them. Cody similarly centers himself spatio-temporally in the 1896 poster “Center Hit of the Century.” In this image, Cody’s face is depicted in the center of the composition, surrounded by concentric rings occupied by Wild West performers who enact scenes suggestive of the show itself—one group of
Indians attacks a stage coach; a group of cowboys lasso cattle; one man does a rope trick; Rough Riders of various nations occupy other rings and the space outside the circular central illustration. The globular form of this illustration is reminiscent, in fact, of the Wild West arena and of the world, with Cody at the center of both. He is, of course, also at the center of his time, as the poster’s title reminds us. In this illustration, all the world’s the west, and Cody’s body is its center.

Cody’s stints with the less popular and successful Wild Wests of Pawnee Bill, Sells-Floto, and the Miller Brothers emphasize his corporeal presence as authenticating force; these shows effectively bought authenticity in the form of Cody’s body. In 1914, when Cody performs with the Sells-Floto Circus, his is the only segment in which no action is described: “Before you appears Buffalo Bill himself, famous scout, Indian fighter, civilization builder, one of America’s Best Beloved Citizens—the friend of presidents, famous generals, princes and kings—and a man who has carried the United States flag to every city of consequence in Europe.” Cody performs no action in the Sells-Floto arena, simply riding out into the ring to be seen. The mere presence of his body is sufficient to signify American frontier experience; his body has symbolically subsumed this history, becoming an icon of nineteenth-century America. By 1903, in fact, Cody needs no other authentication—at least on his program cover. This cover features a bust of Cody, isolated, without even text to interpret his significance. His body is all.

“Poor Worthless Devils”: Cody’s Supporting Performers

Cody’s body, though the most culturally significant in the Wild West, was of course surrounded by a variety of other performing bodies with varying degrees of signifying value. All of these bodies were regarded as authentic, but some of them were
valued by individual identification while others were merely nameless frontier figures. Media accounts generally recognized the Wild West’s insistence on corporeal authenticity, and highlighted the authenticity of its performers in their accounts of the exhibition. A *Chicago Times* article dated 7 May 1893 and entitled “Buffalo Bill’s Big Show” reads:

> The Wild West is unprecedented as an attraction that introduces the identical characters of whom it tells. There Indians that take part in the entertainment are the very ones who were prominent in the stirring scenes of the frontier; the horses they ride are veritable untamed western products, and the scenes they enact have been actual occurrences. The . . . cowboys are not imitators, but are the genuine articles, and the military are actual enlisted members of the different corps they represent. Lastly, but the most prominent of all, is Col. W. F. Cody (Buffalo Bill), whose record as scout, guide, and hero of the plains is attested by the highest military authority, and whose history is part of the history of the early days of the great wild west.

The show’s “attraction” is the link between its performers’ roles and their lives. The writer insists on the individual and historiographical authenticity of the performers: they are the “very ones,” “veritable untamed,” “the genuine articles,” “actual members,” whose authenticity is “attested” by authorities. The emphasis here is on the truth value of the performers, whose bodies can speak for the reality of the frontier because they are “not imitators.” This locution suggests the complexities of western authenticity, because the performers clearly do imitate history—the history they imitate may in fact be their own, but it is nevertheless an imitation. The passage also makes clear that these bodies are subordinated to the historiographical body of the Wild West’s primary attraction, Cody himself. His history is identical with that of the nation, and the other performers of his show partake of his authentic aura. The other performers are subordinate in that they can play only the single historiographical role that reflects their experience, while Cody’s comprehensive biography enables him to represent a broad spectrum of frontier types.
Ensuring that history is accurately recorded often includes comparing the actual experience of Wild West performers to apparent fictions in their textual biographies. Frank Wheelan’s 1883 program biography notes that “his gallant and successful struggle against odds, while being well authenticated, will seem more like fiction than fact”; here, authenticity both approximates fantasy and exceeds it, making the authentic the site of both historiography and entertainment. The factual, then, becomes the appropriate object of consumption. Similarly, a portion of the 1883 Wild West program’s biography of Dr. Carver (Cody’s partner that year), reads: “His history eclipses anything yet adduced in the most extravagant romance.” Here, Carver’s body testifies to the falsity of fiction as it supplements that form. Physically, “Dr. Carver is a fine specimen of physical manhood—six feet two and a half inches in height, and ‘built from the ground up;’ is polished in manner, and of pleasing address; modest in demeanor; with all the accomplishments in flood and field of his Indian tutors; of undaunted nerve; is a pistol and a bow and arrow expert; a perfect horseman—in fact, a model plainsman.” He is clearly a model, held up both as a cast of the true frontiersman and an object of emulation, and we know that he is authentic because his body demonstrates his “perfection.”

In 1883, the program trumpets “Carver’s Wonderful Success”—a triumph over Captain Bogardus in a shooting match. The next year Carver had separated from the Wild West, replaced in his sharpshooter role by the same Bogardus whose defeat had been ballyhooed the previous year. His biography includes an illustration of him wearing a medal earned by his shooting prowess, and is accompanied by a list of similar medals he has won and a statement that, “When appearing in public, in my shooting acts, I wear these badges, and have my cups at hand, that all may be seen to be bona fide, and just what they are represented to be in every particular.” As the recent inferior competitor of
Carver, Bogardus’s textual description must do the work of reversing his description in the previous year’s program. In this case, Bogardus’s body cannot signify alone, and the accompanying text draws attention to one of the peculiarities of the discourse of authenticity: it requires not simply faithful representation or correspondence, but rather excellence in one’s field of action, or what Owen Wister would later call “quality.” It is not enough to demonstrate frontier experience—Wild West performers must be the best of their category. The text of programs and promotional materials establishes this merit, while corporeal performance verifies it.

This dynamic required that the show insist on the individual authenticity of its performers, or their ability to represent their own lives. An 1893 Chicago Herald article entitled “Shows that Are Sui Generis” remarked that the popularity of the show was due in large part to the authenticity of performers who merely played themselves:

The actors in the everyday scenes have studied no part and have no manufactured ‘business’ to rehearse, but have simply and effectively for our amusement and enlightenment lived over scenes which they have under other circumstances and conditions been compelled to enact. From the first scene to the end of the performance there does not appear before the audience a single individual who is aught less than he there shows himself to be. This is as equally true of the trained soldiers representing the cavalry nations of the world as of cowboys and Indians in war, and living witnesses both testify in unmistakable terms as to the unquestioned daring and heroism of the gallant leader, Colonel W. F. Cody” (24 Sep. 1893).

These performers’ bodies re-enact what they have already “enacted” in real life, making them authentic in extremis. They do nothing in the arena that they have not already done elsewhere. Thus the Wild West’s linkage of mythic time, space, and action operates through the bodies of the exhibition’s performers; it is only through the perception of
these bodies’ authenticity that the other three forms of authenticity are possible. Time, space, and action are thus subordinate to the bodies of performers, bodies that are constantly fetishized in the Wild West.

The Wild West’s promotional materials and the show itself reinforce this image of bodies writing history in open space, and journalists acquiesced to these claims, specifying the authenticity of performers’ bodies as the most significant element of the exhibition. The *Chicago Inter-Ocean* reports that “its exhibits are actual and living and typify characters and incidents, and its scenes are strictly accurate reproductions of events that have actually occurred and are enacted by people who really took active part in the occurrences depicted.”14 According to this reading of the Wild West in the context of the White City’s other displays, the performers’ bodies are the exhibits, and what they display for view is authenticity. The 1898 Courier book includes an article by “a leading journalist,” who says that “the great thing about Col. Cody’s exhibition is that it is the real thing. There are no counterfeits, no ‘make-ups,’ no ‘supers,’ no tinsel. Each and every member of the great aggregation can truthfully and fearlessly say: ‘When you speak of me, speak of me as I am.’” Again, the Wild West is described as an exhibition, not a show, and this writer locates the exhibited object in the performers’ bodies—not counterfeited, embellished, or revised, but simply “as they are.” The show does not intermediate between performer and viewer in any way—what audiences witness is individual authentic performer.

As I argued in the Introduction, western performance is the writing or creation of history. It constitutes a frontier history that it appears to simply express or reflect, and the incidents performed by Wild Westers become history via the act of performance. Slotkin hints at this process, perhaps inadvertently, in his argument that “The Wild West and its
principals managed not only to comment on historical events but to become *actors*

themselves” (69—italics added); here, Wild West performers are actors in the sense of

playing a fictional role (precisely the form of representation the show wished to avoid);

and physically functioning to create both a specific putative historical record and a

historiographical discourse of western frontier experience. Understood in this way, the

impulse to authenticate Wild West performances becomes a desire to ensure that history

is written accurately, and authentic artifacts and performers become the guarantors of that

historical accuracy.

Given the show’s insistence on accuracy, we might be surprised at the relative

paucity of photographs in Wild West programs as compared to illustrations. We might

begin to account for this difference by noting that photographs were more expensive and
difficult to reproduce than illustrations, but there is also an aesthetic of truth at work in

this decision. Miles Orvell argues in *The Real Thing* that late nineteenth-century

Americans, “in their own fascination with the new medium [of photography], luxuriated

in the many diverse forms it might take, one moment celebrating its capacity for a

seemingly literal imitation of reality and the next its use as a vehicle for fantasy and

illusion” (77). Photography was enhanced by paintings and drawings in combination

prints that stretched the limits of the form and drew attention to the limitations of the

photograph.¹⁵ This understanding of photography as an artistic, illusory form threatens to

undermine the Wild West’s claim to reality. The Wild West could not use photos of the

events it re-created because the resulting image would be doubly-distanced from the

event reenacted—the spatio-temporal distancing inherent in reenactment, and the artistic
distance of the photograph. Portraits, however, could be used judiciously. Photos appear

for the first time four years into the exhibition in 1887, nearly all of them portraits of
significant performers: Cody, Annie Oakley, Buck Taylor, “The Cow-Boy Kid” (Johnnie Baker), and others, as well as one shot of the Wild West Encampment. These photographic portraits could bring the authentic bodies of western performers much closer to the audience than was typical (or even possible) in the Wild West arena, allowing audiences to scrutinize them much more closely than they could during the performance. It also fixed these bodies so that spectators could view them before and after the show, taking time to examine them fully, a leisurely spectatorship that was impossible in the always-moving exhibition itself.

Somewhat startlingly, the Wild West occasionally did engage in the Victorian aesthetics of combining photograph and painting. In 1893, a series of photo-paintings appeared in the program that used a photograph of a well-known European landmark as the background (e.g., the Roman Colosseum, St. Peter’s Cathedral) and depicted painted-in Indians in the foreground. In the 1898 Courier book, a photo of the arena appeared, with Wild West performers painted in. In these cases, the photo-paintings were aggregate compositions of the cast or one category of performers. This enabled the Wild West to easily change the show’s equivalent of “extras” by refusing to assign them a specific identity. In this permutation of authenticity, the “real” is aligned with the “typical” in the corporeal equivalent of the “Attack on Settlers’ Cabin by Indians.” Authentic performers are those who are most representative of the west, and their individual identities are, as the program will later argue, fungible. The dynamics of western corporeal authenticity require only that these bodies be western, not (in most cases) that they be specific westerners.
Under certain circumstances, in fact, western bodies were even interchangeable. The body of Cody is the most obvious exception to this interchangeability, and there were other figures whose well known individual authenticity singled them out for particular attention—Annie Oakley and Sitting Bull spring immediately to mind. On the whole, however, Wild West performers were often anonymous or fungible, deriving their authenticity largely from the show’s self-sustaining mechanisms of authentication, the most significant of which was Cody’s body. The 1883 program thus speaks of “the cow-boys” as a class, singling a few of them out for distinction, but lumping the rest together in “a band” that is separated by “only a slight line of demarcation” from an analogous group of “vaqueros.” Meanwhile, Carver, Bogardus, Buck Taylor, John Nelson and others are singled out for attention, typically because of some outstanding attribute that authenticates them more fully as representatives of frontier life. Taylor is “thoroughly ‘to the manor born’ or . . . completely a typical Westerner by ancestry, birth, and heritage of association as this noted herdsman, whose eminence is based on the sterling qualities that rank him as a ‘King of the Cowboys.’” Again, his authenticity is located both in the correspondence between his Wild West performance and interior essence (“to the manner born”) as well as his excellence. These characteristics are reflected, of course, in his body: “standing six feet three and a half inches, with a powerful, well-proportioned frame, possessed of a strength that is marvelous, he is a fine representative of his class.” Nelson, or “Cha-Sha-Shan-na-po-ge-o,” is “a representative of the best class of ‘Squaw Men.’” However, even those given individual recognition by the Wild West are not always manifestly distinguishable from their class. The black and white illustration that accompanies Carver’s biography in the 1883 program covers the full height and two-thirds of the width of the page. The frontiersman is adorned in wide-brimmed hat, fringed
buckskin coat, and chaps, with his hair trailing behind him in the wind as he rides a running horse; the figure is shooting at glass balls being thrown into the air by another man on horseback. Once again, the landscape is nearly indiscernible, with a few grass patches in the foreground, hills behind, and clouds in the distance. We certainly may be forgiven for assuming that this drawing, complementing the program’s textual description of the man, is Carver himself. However, the back cover of the 1885 Wild West Program includes this same illustration—but in this case the figure on horseback is identified as Cody. In these early years of the show, it should be noted, the criteria of corporeal authenticity are not as well developed as they will be in the 1890s—Cody, in fact, at this point still plays other people. He has not yet developed the iconic authenticity that will distinguish him in later decades. In this episode, even individually significant bodies are interchangeable inasmuch as they are authentic. That is, it is sufficient that the body is recognizably, verifiably western—the name assigned to that body is insignificant, at least in these early years of the show.

Not only bodies are interchangeable, but biographies could be exchanged as well. John Higby’s 1885 program biography is identical to Fred Matthews’s 1884 description, except for the addition noted below in added italics: “‘John Higby,’ Who manipulates the ribbons of the Old Deadwood Coach, is a man who all his life ‘has been thar’ on the Overland and other routes, passing through every stage, and gaining a reputation in the West second to none, and equaling his old friend and compatriot, ‘Hank Monk,’ and Fred Matthews.” In this case, not only are the historiographical functions of the two men indistinguishable but the text that provides context for their bodies is identical as well. The interchangeability of these bodies provides insight into the function of bodies in the Wild West. Again, the significance of the mounted cowboy is not his individual identity,
but rather that he is a body who is both individually and historiographically authentic. In
a show that constructs its authenticity by presenting bodies capable of performing
“western” actions, any body capable of performing those actions can perform
historiographically. The specifics of that individual authenticity (i.e., what name is
assigned to the body, what the particulars of that experience are) are largely insignificant,
and the bodies often interchangeable. The Wild West in this case insists on
historiographical authenticity, at the expense of individual authenticity. These
interchangeable performers are not who they claim to be, but they do possess bodies
capable of representing frontier history, and are therefore authentic.

This interchangeability does not imply that all bodies are equally valuable. An
unattributed press clipping pasted inside one copy of the 1884 Wild West program
describes “A SERIOUS ACCIDENT. Major Frank North of the Wild West Show
Thrown from his Mustang.” North broke seven ribs, injured his spine, “and he suffered
some internal injuries,” prompting an unnamed cowboy to remark, “Why couldn’t it have
been one of us poor worthless devils instead of Major North, a man whose place can’t be
filled.” Some bodies are more authentic, more emblematic, more significant than others;
in North’s case, the reporter says that he is “a man who has figured prominently in the
frontier history of the country and was the first frontiersman who visited the east.” This
description locates North’s authenticity in his historiographical and performative
significance, values that could not be matched by one of the nameless, “worthless”
cowboys who played unattributed roles in the show and on the frontier.
“Exact, Complete and Entirely Genuine”: Textual Representations of the Wild West

Despite postbellum Americans’ faith in corporeal signification, of course, bodies are not legible, and the Wild West therefore relied heavily on text to imbue the bodies of its performers with nationalizing significance. The show produced its own texts in the form of programs, Courier books, and advertisements, but it also appropriated texts produced by others, including newspapers, to textually introduce its characters to audiences and to frame the Wild West not as an artistic event, but rather as a historical exhibition. I will discuss here two categories of program materials: original pieces created by the show, and media accounts of the Wild West excerpted in the programs.

The 1883 Wild West program initiates the “Salutatory,” a message from General Manager John M. Burke, which was recycled annually in the program. The essay was reprinted unaltered in the program for a decade, coming under minor revision in 1893 only because “law and order and progress pervade the Grand West.” A Chicago Globe article in April 1893 quoted directly from the salutation (including much of the passage excerpted below), blurring the lines between journalism and promotion, and indicating the degree to which the Wild West’s promotional claims were believed. Burke claims that

The story of our country, so far as it concerns life in the vast Rocky Mountain region and on the plains, has never been half told; and romance itself falls far short of the reality when it attempts to depict the career of the little vanguard of pioneers, trappers, and scouts, who, moving always in frontier have paved the way—frequently with their own bodies—for the safe approach of the masses behind. . . . It is for the purpose of introducing them to the public that this little pamphlet has been prepared. Hon. William F. Cody (‘Buffalo Bill’) . . . has organized a large combination that, in its several aspects, will illustrate life as it is witnessed on the plains.
Intended as an introduction to the Wild West form, this statement frames audience responses within a national historical context—Burke begins by conflating American and western histories in a statement that implicitly locates the west as the site of American history. He asserts that the show illustrates not simply life on the plains, but rather “life as it is witnessed on the plains,” implying the presence of an observer who sanctions the scenes here represented and “witnesses” to their reality and national significance. The Salutatory thus attempts to script audiences’ response to the Wild West performers, locating viewers as “witnesses” of the frontier as it is re-created before their eyes, rather than as critics or patrons of performance art.

Burke also compares reality to romantic fiction, setting the two categories over and against one another; not surprisingly, the latter comes up short. The real is supplemented by an aura of authenticity that eclipses the fictional, or artificial. This supplement is provided by the bodies that Burke argues have “paved the way” for the progressive waves of American social order, sometimes anonymously, and thus must be “introduced” to those who have benefited from their actions; he implies, in fact, that these performers must be known for their work to be complete. The Wild West is linked to the real, the actual, the historical by its use of those individuals who embody and enact Manifest Destiny, individuals whose acts and persons will be “introduced to the public” by the Wild West. The purpose of the Wild West is to accurately represent the unembellished incidents and character of American frontier history, to tell the stories of those who have participated in the making of that history, to “illustrate life,” and to instruct. The purpose of Burke’s text, then, is to provide an historiographical context against which audiences can read Wild West bodies, or to locate them within a frontier hyperreality that they create cooperatively with Burke’s text. The 1883 program later
states that the exhibition’s purpose is to introduce the unacquainted to “great realistic pictures of Western life.” From its beginnings, the Wild West represented itself not as a show, which would be dangerously similar to the play-acting that Cody found so vexing, but rather as an exhibition of “real” western events that are either specific to a particular moment and place in the past or “typical” of frontier life, and are performed by real westerners. The Wild West claimed authenticity as its primary aim, and abrogated the claims of art upon performance.

Inside the back cover the 1898 Courier book, the Salutatory is supplemented by a similar statement entitled “JUST WHAT IT IS.” Like the Wild West itself, this piece lacks a traditional title. Instead, it uses a descriptor that indicates the show’s content without allying its performance with literature, a form of artistic representation. Like the Wild West—and like history—this text apparently lacks an author, as none is credited in the program. The exhibition is extolled as “an absolutely distinct and original innovation,” an assertion that rhetorically distances the Wild West from stage dramatic forms. It claims that the show is

an exact, complete and entirely genuine historical and equestrian revelation, many of the participants in which played brave and famous parts in the dread and dangerous scenes of savage warfare, hazardous exploration and pioneer advancement which are so vividly, powerfully and accurately reproduced as to actually partake more of reality than of imitation. That, inasmuch as it either contains or commands all the personality and material indispensable to the complete and satisfactory formation of such an exhibition, it cannot be duplicated or even imitated above the level of petty and ludicrous travesty and imposition.

That the Wild West is allegedly “exact,” “complete,” and entirely “historical” textually scripts the relationship of its performers to the events of the past and the historiographical narrative of the American frontier. Exactness claims an exact correspondence between past events and present performance. Completeness claims that American frontier history,
described as “warfare,” “exploration,” and “pioneer advancement,” is a unified whole that is represented entirely in the show, excluding alternative voices by scripting their experiences and interpretations as inauthentic. Moreover, describing the Wild West as a “revelation” codes it as canonical, divinely manifest, inalterably true—it “contains or commands” people and material by its authority. The statement continues:

Its advent in the field of entertainment was the first departure from the artificial to the natural, and was as such acclaimed a revelation twenty-five years ago. Choosing episodes from thrilling native history, ere its pages were dry, and when its leader, its people, and its every claim and action were still in the limelight of contemporaneous participation in the scenes presented.

The Wild West creators here return the reader, through romantic nostalgia, to a sort of western golden age, an era of frontier prophet-patriarchs who brought American performance out of a corrupted artificiality by performing a revelation that they themselves lived. Again, the imagery is religious, and performers’ claim to authenticity is rooted in their personal frontier experience.

This claim to authenticity infuses its performance with meaning throughout its run, both as an assertion about the nature of the Wild West and as an explanation for its success. The 1887 program notes the unparalleled popularity of “this extraordinary exhibition of the realism of life on the frontier,” arguing that no “attraction of any sort” has had such success, because there has been none “in subject and in the realism of its illustrations, more deserving of patronage.” The Wild West’s producers were certainly not sparing in their claims.

Widespread acceptance of the Wild West’s claim of corporeal authenticity was bolstered by corroborating letters and testimonials incorporated into their promotional materials, and media accounts from viewers that informed performers’ bodies even as
they claimed to represent them. One such document was a letter from Samuel Clemens that lauded the Wild West, saying, “Down to its smallest details the show is genuine— . . . and the effects produced upon me by its spectacles were identical with those wrought upon me a long time ago by the same spectacles on the frontier. . . . ‘The Wild West,’ with its wonderful gathering of vaqueros, cowboys, hunters, Indians, sharpshooters, transcripts of real life in the far West . . . make up a panorama of events which are but pages in the history of the American frontier.”

Clemens, well-known as a western author, draws on his own status as a westerner to locate the show’s authenticity in the effect produced by its performers. In other words, he recognizes the show’s historicity because viewing the actions of its performers produces in him the same feelings as his own western experience—an implicit claim to authenticity on Clemens’s part that also textually sustains the Wild West’s claims. This assessment of the Wild West is transcribed from Clemens’s letter into the exhibition’s program as evidence that real westerns recognize the character of the Wild West.

Journalist and editor Brick Pomeroy’s newspaper account, included in the 1885 program, similarly informs the bodies of Wild West performers, and is also transcribed into the program as promotional document:

[Cody] has brought together material for what he correctly terms a Wild West Exhibition. I should call it the Wild West Reality. The idea is not merely to take in money from those who witness a very lively exhibition, but to give people in the East a correct representation of life on the plains, and the incidental life of the hardy, brave, intelligent pioneers, who are the first to blaze the way to the future homes and greatness of America. He . . . wishes to present as many facts as possible to the public, so that those who will, can see actual pictures of life in the West, brought to the East for the inspection and education of the public.

“Buffalo Bill” has brought the Wild West to the doors of the East. There is more of real life, of genuine interest, of positive education in this startling exhibition, than I have ever before seen, and it is so true to nature and life as it really is with those who are smoothing the way for millions
to follow. All of this imaginary Romeo and Juliet business sinks to utter insignificance in comparison to the drama of existence as is here so well enacted, and all the operas in the world appear like pretty playthings for emasculated children by the side of the setting of reality. . . . I wish every person east of the Missouri river could only see this true graphic picture of wild western life; they would know more and think better of the genuine men of the West.

In light of the show’s aims, it comes as no surprise that Cody and his cohorts included Pomeroy’s article, along with many other similar pieces, in the Wild West program. Echoing much of what the Wild West troupe has said about itself, Pomeroy recycles the language of American frontier progress in the image of pioneer bodies laying the groundwork for America and the frontiersmen “smoothing the way.” He accepts without question the exhibition’s assertion to represent “as many facts as possible,” the show’s “setting of reality,” and the performers’ genuine western essence. The evidence of the show’s authenticity is visible as “actual pictures of life” that the show performs for audiences’ scrutiny. The “material” he cites consists primarily of the bodies of Wild West performers whose historicity is informed by texts like Pomeroy’s.

Pomeroy also makes an implicit analogy between photography (motion pictures not yet having been invented) and the Wild West’s vignettes; historian Martha Sandweiss argues that “even in the nineteenth century, [western] photographs plucked the mystic chords of memory and stirred the imagination of Americans curious about the social and geographical landscape of the nation’s new west” (14). The effects of photography were precisely the aims of the Wild West: to evoke the nostalgic social imaginings to which Sandweiss refers; to answer those imaginings with an accurate, even scientific, representation of frontier conditions; and to fix perceptions of those conditions in particular images and moments through a “graphic picture.” Pomeroy contrasts the authenticity of photographic representation with the imaginary, insignificant,
emasculated, infantilized stage drama represented by Shakespeare and opera. The explicit contrasts between these forms are reinforced by further set of binaries that the comparison evokes: England/America, old/new, dead/living, art/history, high/low culture, and fake/real. In each of these oppositions, the Wild West is associated with the positive half of the binary, as viewed through postbellum American eyes.

A Chicago Post article from 1893 argued that that Wild West “exhibits are all animate, all types of human diversity and of scenes that are not mere fancy or ideal pictures but actual occurrences, and are enlivened and made more real by the addition to them of the very people who have enacted them in real life.” Again, history is supplemented by the bodies of the people who lived it, and the historical scenes the show instantiates as history are not simply “real,” but rather “more real” because of their presence. The “reality” of the show is contrasted with mere “realism” of the stage in a Chicago Tribune article from May 1893:

In these days when stage realism has become a species of ‘fad’ and adherence to actuality appears to be demanded in pubic performances it is a gratification to theater-goer, critic and student alike to see the new demand accord strictly with merit, with no chance of offending, and teaching historic lessons with impressive and attractive force. A visit to Buffalo Bill’s Wild West convinces that this all can be done. History, realism, education and amusement are here all combined. The Wild West is held up as an example of true realism, faithful to historical “actuality,” rather than the false realism of the stage drama. The authenticity gap confronted by stage performers is effaced in the Wild West’s model of historiographical display.

Even writers who hint at the problems of conflating history and performance seem to have accepted the Wild West’s historicity in the end. An unattributed newspaper clipping inside the front cover of the Buffalo Bill Historical Center’s copy of the 1884 Wild West program asserts that “it is to truthfully illustrate life on the plains that the Hon.
W. F. Cody last year organized the Wild West exhibition.” The Deadwood stage coach scene, the “most exciting event of the afternoon,” sparks the observation that “the imagination did not have to be very severely strained to make one believe that the coach was actually threading its way over a prairie as it rolled around the track.” The author’s tacit admission that the Wild West is not precisely history, since the imagination must be engaged if not strained, is tempered by a desire to believe. The presence of the authentic coach, driver, and Indians, imbues the arena with a measure of perceived geographical authenticity, provided the viewer is willing to exercise a degree of imagination. And audiences were apparently at least as willing as journalists to do so: the correspondent writes that, as the scene ended, “the audience breathed freer at seeing the passengers step out unharmed.” Despite the necessity of imagination, then, audiences accepted the Wild West’s rhetoric of authenticity, believing at some level in the reality of what they saw re-enacted before them. The distinct difference between these reports on the show and the show’s propaganda is the use of “realistic” in place of “real.” These writers resist the show’s notion of performance as the spatial, temporal “real” event, but accept the Wild West’s claim to faithfully represent history along with the version of historiography it instantiates. This rhetorical gap denotes a tacit acknowledgment, perhaps unconscious, that the Wild West does not live up to its claims of “reality.” The power of authentic, historiographical bodies, however, permits observers to overcome this awareness and believe that the Wild West does, in fact, represent American history more “realistically” than other cultural forms.
Historian Mike Koury’s statement at the beginning of this chapter, part of a commentary on the Wild West that accompanies clips of the exhibition itself, demonstrates the temporal staying power of this authentication—even in the face of evidence to the contrary. Koury notes the gap between the Wild West and history, the supplement that the show provides to the events of the past, but closes that fissure by referencing Cody’s authentic body: “to him it was always an exhibition—an exhibition of the great things he’d seen and the things he’d done—oh, maybe they were a little grander when he retold them, but he did them—he was there in person, and it makes all the difference in the world. . . . So you see the material that Bill used in the Wild West show actually came from real life—while perhaps embellished, he really was there, he really did do it. . . . But all these were real and Buffalo Bill was real and it made the difference in this Wild West show because Buffalo Bill had been there and he had done it.” The real is here associated with the authentic body of Cody himself, and the events of the past are subject to revision by performance historiography: “If this isn’t the way it happened, perhaps it’s the way it should have happened.” Cody’s historiographical body serves to perform a history that is, paradoxically, more credible than the historical events that actually transpired. His body, icon of western historical experience, possessed the ability to write history; his having “been there” and “done it” renders any production in which he participates authentic. The performing body thus becomes the story of the west and the purpose of the western, and Cody provides the coporeal-historiographic model for others to follow. For decades after the Wild West, westerns would represent copies of Cody’s body under a variety of different names and in an assortment of media—a simulation of a
simulation of westernness. As we shall see, the legacy of his signifying body would pose significant technical challenges for the writers of text westerns, as well as the western performance forms that followed.
Fig. 3.1. “Death of Yellow Hand—Cody’s First Scalp for Custer,” illustration from 1885 Wild West program, Buffalo Bill Historical Center Center, Cody, Wyoming; MS6.6.A.1.4.18.
Fig. 3.2. “Death of Yellow Hand—Cody’s First Scalp for Custer,” illustration from 1887 Buffalo Bill’s Wild West program, Buffalo Bill Historical Center Center, Cody, Wyoming; MS6.6.A.1.6.34.
Fig. 3.3. “Death of Yellow Hand—Cody’s First Scalp for Custer,” illustration from 1888 Buffalo Bill’s Wild West program, Buffalo Bill Historical Center Center, Cody, Wyoming; MS6.6.A.1.8.21.
Fig. 3.4. “Je Viens,” Buffalo Bill’s Wild West poster (1889), Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming; P.69.442.
Fig. 3.5: “Prairie to Palace,” Buffalo Bill’s Wild West poster (1910), Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming; P.69.21.
Notes

1 See Reddin 56-57 for a description of this episode.

2 See introduction for definitions of authenticity.

3 See Slotkin 67 for a discussion of the name “Wild West.”

4 The 1898 Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Routebook lists the biggest arena for that year as Boston, at 198’x397’; the smallest was Uniontown, PA, at 125’x325’; “standard size generally used” was 166’x347’. MS VI Microfilm roll #2, Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming.

5 There is, of course, a certain amount of overlap among these forms, as in the use of the Deadwood stagecoach for the Indian attack on the stage scene. According to the 1884 program, “When [Cody] learned that [the stage] had been attacked and abandoned and was lying neglected on the plains, he organized a party, and, starting on the trail, rescued and brought the vehicle into camp” for use in the Wild West. The real stage thus becomes a specific authenticating object for the ostensibly typical or representative sketch.

6 The Wild West program would later remark: “We found that most of the Italians who came to see the show, did not believe that the bucking horses were ‘genuine.’ How they accounted otherwise for the actions of the animal I can’t imagine. No decent horse could possibly be trained to do the things these horses do, for, as the Colonel points out, while you might teach a horse to caper madly you could not possibly induce him to do things that hurt him physically unless he was by nature crazy or as they call such horses in the west, an ‘outlaw.’ These buckers at the Wild West Show are without a doubt the finest lot of ‘bad ones’ in the world. They are the pick of the western ranchers, and comparatively few men live who can ride them.

In Florence I remember than an Italian Count who was captain in a crack regiment of cavalry, expressed a wish to ride a bucking horse. The matter was arranged but the Count saw two or three performances before the one at which he was to try his luck. Close observation of the actions of the horses must have led him to change his mind, for he did not appear to ride.” There is, notably, no mention of the group of men in Rome who did ride the broncos. This text is from the 1906 or 1907 program; which of these two years the program actually appeared has not been established.

7 This untitled article from the Chicago Times 14 Apr. 1893, appears in Cody’s 1893 scrapbook.

8 See note 12 on the 1906/07 program.

9 This newspaper review is cited in a review of the Wild West in the Daily Sporting Gazette, 24 Jun. 1893.

10 For a discussion of the history of the Yellow Hand episode and the various forms in which the story was relayed, see Kasson 34-40.

11 The Courier book is a more comprehensive, durable program printed for a few tours of the Wild West by Boston’s Courier Co.

12 This image appears again on Cody’s return from Europe, this time with the buffalo running in the opposite direction and captioned “Home Again from Foreign Lands.”

13 For a discussion of Gath’s lithograph, see William Handley, Marriage, Violence, and the Nation in the Literary West, New York: Cambridge, 2002, pgs. 27-28. Handley argues that this lithograph is “the most widely disseminated image of the West in the nineteenth century.”

14 This undated, unattributed article from the Chicago Inter-Ocean, appears in Cody’s 1893 scrapbook.

15 For more on Victorian photography, see Orvell 73-102.
This untitled, unattributed article dated 27 April, 1893, appears in Cody’s 1893 scrapbook. Cody’s scrapbook is his collection of articles about the Wild West from the cities in which they exhibited. While it might seem that Cody would collect only those articles that affirmed the show’s quality and authenticity, he appears to have collected everything he could obtain—including the negative reviews of the Italian press. Unless otherwise noted, newspaper article citations come from this archive.

Quoted in 1887 Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Program.

This untitled article from the *Chicago Tribune* 7 May 1893, appears in Cody’s 1893 scrapbook.
CHAPTER 4

THE BODY PROJECTED: WILLIAM S. HART AND THE FILM WESTERN

Buffalo Bill is dead, but Bill Hart still remains.

- *The Oregonian*, March 1920

Exhibition value begins to displace cult value all along the line. But cult value does not give way without resistance. It retires into an ultimate retrenchment: the human countenance.

-Walter Benjamin

It is a critical commonplace that the western played a central role in the early film industry, and that the genre remained popular throughout film history. Historian Tag Gallagher, in fact, argues that “rather than the cinema inventing the western, it was the western, already long existent in popular culture, that invented the cinema.” When William S. Hart arrived in Hollywood in 1914, however, his old friend Thomas Ince informed him that the genre was played out, and that westerns were unmarketable “at any price” (Hart 194). The “death of the western” was, of course, greatly exaggerated, and in the two years that followed Hart was the most profitable male motion picture star in America. His films remained immensely successful into the 1920s, giving new life to the moribund genre and reinventing the screen cowboy for audiences worldwide. The popularity of his films, and the resurgence of the feature western that accompanied them, was marked by acclaim not for the west as a subject for motion pictures, but rather for Hart as a performing westerner. One of his reviewers effused that “no actor before the
screen has been able to give as sincere and true a touch to the Westerner as Hart” (qtd. in Koszarski 39). He, more than film stars before him, recognized the medium’s potential to display western bodies that could represent frontier history with “realism” and “truthfulness.” Hart’s films exploited the medium’s capacity to bring the image of his western body into close proximity to spectators, reifying Hart’s face as signifier of the west while occluding other performers and even the western landscape.

To be sure, Hart was neither the first nor the last of the silent western stars. However, he was the preeminent western star during the genre’s short period of silent film preeminence. Film historian Andrew Brodie Smith divides the early western into four stages, beginning after the demise of the western actuality film, a short-lived genre of regional boosterism that displayed pure landscape before eastern viewers. Viewers were fascinated by film’s ability to bring western views to their neighborhoods, but without western bodies who could simulate the process by which that land was given national significance, this appeal was limited. Smith’s first stage of the western, which lasted until 1911, “combined the sensational depiction of violent crimes with scenic western landscapes”; during the second, from 1911-13, filmmakers sought to efface the form’s dime novel past, whitewashing racialized characters and sensational events; during the era from 1913 to 1919, westerns appealed to middle-class and female viewers by reinforcing family and religious values; and in the 1920s, the western’s popularity faded and the short “program” westerns emphasized the “stoic, isolated, cowboy hero” (3). While the western is continuously on screens for decades, examining periods when western features are highly successful and produced in abundance is most fruitful because of how moments of profusion and profit illuminate the socio-cultural role westerns fill in the American historical imagination. Hart was the central character of the
silent western’s six-year zenith, reinventing the film cowboy made famous by G. M. Anderson and establishing the feature film context for the program western. This chapter will analyze his negotiation of the demands of corporeal authenticity in the age of film.

Hart’s career marks a turn away from landscape and toward the western character as the center of film narrative. Film’s ability to present western landscapes, of course, had been one of its primary selling points during the medium’s early years, as evidenced by Gallagher’s claim that the western invented cinema. The stage drama and Wild West had exhibited authentic westerners before audiences, but as the Corriere Italiano reporter observed, these productions were incapable of transporting western landscapes into their circumscribed performance spaces. Film, Walter Benjamin argues, possesses a transportive power that overcomes this geographical limitation of the stage and arena:

> Technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself. Above all, it enables the original to meet the beholder halfway, be it in the form of a photograph or a phonograph record. The cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art; the choral production, performed in an auditorium or in the open air, resounds in the drawing room. (220-21)

The film western, similarly, can put the “wild” landscapes of the west on display in the “civilized” movie houses of America and the world. As I have argued, however, this landscape holds only temporary appeal in the absence of bodies that impart to it historical significance. These bodies make that land American by performing a popular national history in its empty space. Film audiences, in fact, quickly lost interest in viewing landscape actualities because of the absence of these historiographically performative bodies. However, film also permits western bodies to be placed before audiences with greater geographic authenticity than its predecessors, because those bodies can be filmed in the western settings most appropriate to their exhibition. Film therefore offers the
illusion of “being there” to witness not a re-enactment of popular frontier history, but the real thing as it occurs. It brings together west and east, open frontier landscape and enclosed urban modernity, in the “halfway” space of the movie house.

More importantly, film’s capability to present “the original meeting the beholder halfway” brings the western body into apparent proximity to spectators while simultaneously displaying that body “out there” in the west. Film westerners can be brought “nearer” to viewers through close-up shots, in contradistinction to the distance imposed by the Wild West arena and the theatrical stage. This visual intimacy allows viewers to assess the authenticity of film westerners in much greater detail than is possible in other media. While promotional materials for the Wild West and stage drama focused tightly on the bodies of their western performers, the requirements of these media prevented such scrutiny during the performance. On screen, actors can be examined closely in mid-performance and in unequaled detail. Paradoxically, however, the closer the camera approaches to the western body, the more the body occludes the landscape that is ostensibly the defining characteristic of the west. Screen space, unlike the mythically boundless space of the west, is delimited by the frames of the motion picture camera and the theater screen. This frame permits either a body in close-up or a panoramic landscape to be seen at any one moment—there is, quite literally, “not room for the both of them” within this space. The western star is thus in constant conflict with the landscape on which the acting body stands, competing with that land for the attention of the camera that directs the attention of its audiences. That the western body so often wins this struggle suggests the cultural significance that makes it so attractive to audiences. The tight closeups that mark Hart’s films efface the ostensible advantage of
film over other genres—its ability to bring the land to the screen—and demonstrate that film’s other asset is far more significant—its ability to present larger-than-life western bodies for scrutiny at close proximity.

The image on the theater screen, of course, is not actually a body, but rather a luminescent projection of that body’s image on celluloid. What the screen image conveys is the absence of the body, a lack that necessitates the projection of its diaphanous image. Walter Benjamin argues that the task of the film actor is to “operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura. The aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it” (740). The flickering light on screen is not the body, and cannot replicate its aura—and yet we understand it as an accurate representation of the actor’s body even as we sense that body’s absence. This simultaneous presence and absence divides the body of the star and prompts attempts to efface the distinction between the original and the reproduction. Richard Dyer suggests this split in his discussion of stars as “both labour and the thing that labour produces”:

> We can distinguish two logically separate stages. First, the person is a body, a psychology, a set of skills that have to be mined and worked up into a star image. This work, of fashioning the star out of the raw material of the person, varies in the degree to which it respects what artists sometimes refer to as the inherent qualities of the material; make-up, coiffure, clothing, dieting and body-building can all make more or less of the body features they start with, and personality is no less malleable, skills no less learnable. . . . Part of this manufacture of the star image takes place in the films the star makes, with all the personnel involved in that, but one can think of the films as a second stage. (6)

The star is thus engaged in a multivalent construction of public identity, transforming him- or herself not simply into a commodity, as Dyer argues, but into a piece of
performance art—and celluloid copies of that piece for display in theaters. The western, with its legacy of corporeality and its decades-old insistence on the authentic, serves as a particularly fraught locus for the creation of the star.

As we have seen, the primary motive for the will to authenticate the western is its social role as ritualized performance of American national identity. Western performers, I have argued, provide evidence of frontier history, confirming in Americans’ minds the national history and identity in which they already believe. Western bodies thus serve a ritual function, instantiating the history that they claim to represent. Walter Benjamin, however, argues that film confounds ritual: “Mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic print, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the ‘authentic’ print makes no sense” (736). On the other hand, the filmic work of art in question is doubled—it is both the translucent celluloid projected onto the screen, and the acting body that leaves its visible trace on that celluloid. While it is true that “to ask for the ‘authentic’ print makes no sense,” to ask for the authentic body of the actor does “make sense.” In this way, Benjamin’s claims that “the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity,” and that “the whole sphere of authenticity is outside the technical—and, of course, not only technical—reproducibility” accurately characterize the film artifact, but fail to address the acting body as a work of performance art (733). In the absence of the possibility of an original celluloid artifact, the aura of the original work of art subsists solely in the acting body, and to view “in the flesh” that fetishized body and thereby discern its authenticity is the conditio sine qua non of Hollywood celebrity culture, and of the western in particular.
It is, after all, the western, with its insistence on authenticity, that has the greatest investment in resolving the distinction between on- and off-screen bodies. Fans during the silent era spurned western actors who did not perform their own stunts as inauthentic, and many of these actors fictionalized or embellished their own frontier biographies to sustain an aura of authenticity. Christine Geraghty notes that the Hollywood system has always sought to efface the distinction between actor and character, arguing that it “was very much associated with personification, with the notion that the stars did not act but were themselves and that the pleasurably recognizable repertoire of gestures, expressions, and movements were the property of the star not of any individual character” (191); in other words, the “person of the actor” is the “consistent entity” (199). Geraghty, however, despite her assertion that stars did not act, emphasizes acting techniques such as “gestures, expressions, and movements,” and, as we have seen, “acting” is anathema in the western because it connotes artifice, and therefore inauthenticity. Jeanine Basinger’s assertion that “Hart doesn’t act, really” therefore affirms Hart’s status as an authentic performing westerner, even as it insists in the final word that acting constitutes the “reality” of the screen performer (187). Moreover, Geraghty’s emphasis on standardized performance suggests that Hollywood stardom does not bring the actor’s person to the screen, but rather brings the screen persona to the actor’s off-screen life.

In either case, the acting body is at the center of debate, and the central issue is individual authenticity—that is, whether what we see on screen corresponds to the “essence” of that body, or is “merely” acting. As Richard Dyer argues, “how we appear is no less real than how we have manufactured that appearance, or than the ‘we’ that is doing the manufacturing.Appearances are a kind of reality, just as manufactured and individual persons are. . . . Yet the whole media construction of stars encourages us to
think in terms of ‘really’” (2). For most film actors, the flexibility to perform a variety of roles across genres is highly desirable, and the question of appearance versus reality is subservient to credible representation of character. In the silent western, however, Dyer’s contention that appearance is a form of reality is the lynchpin of authentic star identity. Stars must have a western biography that authenticates them textually and appear in all situations to reflect that biography; appearing out of western character on or off screen undermines stable western identity.

To appear in non-westerns, or to appear as non-western off screen, would, moreover, be to multiply images. As Benjamin argues, “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. . . . The technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence” (734). A “unique existence” is precisely what the western performer must claim. To be sure, this existence is simulacral inasmuch as it imitates a mythic western persona that is based on a precession of performers. However, to multiply the performing body in a range of roles or genres is to undermine that aura of authenticity that imbues it with cultural significance and box office marketability. To insure against the inauthentic, then, one must be able to inspect the body closely and repeatedly. In film spectatorship, this impulse has roots both in the western’s particular brand of authenticating corporeal display, and in the technological conditions of modernity, as Benjamin points out:

The “decay of the aura” is caused by “the desire of contemporary masses to bring things “closer” spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its image, or, rather, its copy. (735)
The film westerner thus occupies a position at the nexus of several cultural forces: a modern desire for proximity to the work of art, including the actor; a nostalgic impulse to assess the body of the westerner; a modern demand for acting bodies that demonstrate a stable identity across on- and off-screen roles and genres; and a postbellum belief in corporeal authenticity.

Because of the pervasive nature of the Hollywood star system and the technological reproducibility of the acting body, then, the western film star is in many ways a more complex construction than are western performers in other media. Facing this set of competing demands, the films of William S. Hart bring their hero almost uncomfortably close to audiences, relying on frequent close-ups that allow us to examine Hart’s body in detail. That body, in fact, is the story of a Hart film: as a *Motion Picture Weekly* writer said in 1918, “It’s Hart. That’s all. And that’s enough.” The purpose of Hart’s films is to place his body close to audiences for their scrutiny, effacing the western landscape, other characters, and the shortcomings of film while assuring audiences of the veracity of his version of American frontier history.

“*A Boy Rider*”: Creating the Authentic Film Body

Hart’s biography was carefully crafted to present him as an authentic westerner who could faithfully represent frontier history on the film screen. He spent his childhood in Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Dakota Territory, and finally New York, as his father worked a series of flour mill jobs. He would later entitle the chapter of his autobiography that covered the earliest portion of this period “*A Boy Rider,*” a rhetorical maneuver intended to emphasize his western upbringing by recounting what appear to be wholly fabricated or wildly inflated tales of his western exploits. This pose was a
necessary tactic to provide textual aid to audiences’ readings of his film body. Despite newspaper claims that western roles would be a natural fit for Hart “considering that for a number of years he roamed the plains in that capacity” (qtd. in Davis 46), Hart’s primary training to play his western characters came as an actor in melodramas and Shakespearean plays. His career as a western performer, in fact, did not begin until he secured a role in the first stage production of *The Squaw Man* in 1905; indeed, biographer Ronald L. Davis notes that until that time “the press did not seem to be aware of the actor’s western background. In interviews he had simply stated that he had been reared in New York and was trained as an actor” (46).

*The Squaw Man*, however, was Hart’s introduction to the genre from which he would rarely depart over the next two decades. In describing his decision to take the part, Hart demonstrates the commitment to western authenticity that would characterize descriptions of his films in the years to come. He characterizes the play as “the first presentation of a real American cowboy that Broadway had ever seen” (qtd. in Davis 46), and claims that he accepted the role when producer and director George Tyler told him his role “was a sure enough cowboy” and assured him that he could “play it as a cowboy” (Hart 168). The play, in fact, served as the springboard for Hart’s career as a western performer, largely because of an apocryphal story that provided Hart a far more valuable testament of his westernness than his own superficial claim to a boyhood on horseback.

Buffalo Bill ostensibly was among the audience when *The Squaw Man* opened at Wallack’s Theater on October 23, 1905. Davis describes his response to the play:

> When the curtain fell, Cody asked permission to meet the fellow who had played Cash Hawkins. “Who’d you ride for?” Cody asked Hart as they shook hands. Hart answered that he hadn’t ridden for anyone. “But I knew
the West,” the actor said, “I’ve ridden all over it with my father, Nick Hart.” Cody supposedly beamed and exclaimed, “My God, are you little Willie?” (47)

More important than Hart’s role in the play—or than his autobiographical claims to a western heritage—was this testament from Cody. The authentic frontiersman’s affirmation of Hart’s performance effectively transforms the actor into a westerner, informing readings of Hart’s body. Because of audiences’ faith in corporeal signification, convincingly playing the role of a westerner authenticates one’s western identity—especially when it is confirmed by the paradigmatic postbellum westerner, Buffalo Bill. Hart, an easterner by birth and training, thus models a form of Western stardom that figuratively and literally reverses Cody’s move from the stage to the arena. Just as Cody has lent his authenticity to the participants in his show, he authorizes Hart’s performing stage body and jump-starts the actor’s career in western performance.

Hart’s autobiographical description of the motivation for his move from the culturally respectable stage drama to the upstart medium of film echoes this episode and his purported attraction to The Squaw Man. While on tour in Cleveland, he stopped at a movie theater that happened to be screening a western:

It was awful! I talked with the manager of the theater and he said it was one of the best Westerns he had ever had. None of the impossibilities or libels on the west meant anything to him—it was drawing the crowds. . . . Here were reproductions of the Old West being seriously presented to the public—in almost a burlesque manner—and they were successful. It made me tremble to think of it. I was an actor and I knew the West. . . . The opportunity that I had been waiting for years to come was knocking at my door. (191)
In this retrospective description of the inception of his film career, Hart expresses a doubled nostalgia—not simply for the lost frontier, but also for the loss of the authentic representation. Recognizing the cultural demand for authenticity and the potential economic windfall available to the filmmaker able to exploit that demand, he markets himself as the actor capable of representing the authentic westerner and the authentic west.

On a swing through Los Angeles with the play The Trail of the Lonesome Pine, Hart phoned his friend Thomas Ince and visited Inceville, the producer’s outdoor production camp in Santa Ynez Canyon. Struck by the group Ince had assembled, Hart writes: “I was enraptured and told him so. The very primitiveness of the whole life out there, the cowboys and the Indians, staggered me. I loved it. They had everything to make Western pictures. The West was right there!” (193-4). Notably, Hart’s characterization of the constituent elements of the west includes “primitiveness” of life and characteristic personages. In other words, the landscape is less important than the presence of bodies who make present once again the historical west. Hart clearly understands the significance of the authentic body to the screen western.

The actor often conflated his biography with his filmography, characterizing his filmic work as a natural extension of his past life. He described On the Night Stage (1915) as “full of the life of my boyhood” (Davis 71) and “reproducing the days that were dear to me” (72); the New York Dramatic Mirror called it “a picture in which the character will persist after the story is forgotten” (qtd. in Davis 72). More than an imaginative creation of the scriptwriter, of course, that memorable character is the figure of William S. Hart, the purported real-life antecedent of the screen creation. Not everyone accepted his claims to authenticity at face value, of course; Hart’s biographer notes that
“former ranch hands at Inceville found Bill’s claims to knowledge of the old West amusing. Some of the cowboys who worked with him maintained that he did not ride well and was actually afraid of horses” (75); when experienced cowboys came to Hollywood and “heard Hart dilate on being ‘part of the West’ and how the West was in his blood, many of the former ranch hands chortled behind the actor’s back. Hollywood columnist Adela Rogers St. Johns insisted that William S. Hart never failed to use a double in risky action, was ‘scared to death of horses,’ and ‘just never was the Real Thing’” (79). As might be expected of a popularly successful western performer, however, this opinion was in the minority. An article in Newsboys’ World in September 1921 argued that “Sometimes there’s a lot of difference between a real cowboy and a movie actor who plays the part; but after you have spent an hour or so with William S. Hart, you realize that he is one actor who knows the West and could be elected sheriff of the Panhandle if he cared to run for that office” (Davis 148); in fact, Hart had been nominated for sheriff of an Oregon county the previous year (Davis 148). His performance of western identity on screen and off had supplemented his meager western experience as a youth sufficiently to transform him into a “real” westerner. Again reversing Cody’s career, Hart moved from the screen to the west. Where Cody had parlayed his frontier life into raw material to authenticate his performing body, Hart’s perceived authenticity as an acting body provided him with the reputation to become a credible and marketable frontier figure.

By the time of Hart’s nomination for sheriff, of course, the frontier had been officially closed for three decades; frontier figures existed only in Americans’ imagination, and in the absence of the real thing film characters stepped into the gap. Utilizing the conventions of corporeal display, these actors created a hyperreal screen
frontier that concealed the absence of an actual civilizational border. In Jean
Baudrillard’s terms, the screen frontier functions as a third-order simulacrum that “masks
the absence of a profound reality” (6). This absence is perhaps one reason why Hart
insisted on translating his screen persona to his offscreen life. Davis notes that “Gertrude
Gordon, writing for Motion Picture Magazine in 1916, said that talking to Hart for an
hour was ‘like turning the pages of a Bret Hart story or leafing through a series of
Frederic Remington pictures.’ Others found the actor stuffy, mannered, and constantly
‘on’” (78). In the absence of a frontier and a personal, authentic relationship to that
frontier, Hart could not break character for fear of revealing the hyperreality of twentieth-
century frontier performance. No critic would have claimed that Cody was “constantly
‘on’” because there was no perception that he played a role. Hart, on the other hand, had
a far more tenuous claim to a frontier past, and played characters who were expressly not
himself. He therefore compulsively maintained his frontier persona to efface these
deficiencies and make all his on and off screen characters conform to the performative,
hyperreal construct that went by the name of William S. Hart.

The one constant across these performances was Hart’s unmistakable face, and his
films and promotional materials emphasized this face as authenticating presence, to great
effect. One of the most effusive Hart reviews, of The Silent Man (1917), observed of the
ubiquity of the star’s face: “They gave us a lot of good close-ups of Bill, and somehow
the old scout just looks you in the eye and makes you believe it. . . . Of all the heros that
are gathering coin for saving the sheros on the screen, I believe Bill Hart comes nearer to
convincing every time he does something than anyone I know” (qtd. in Koszarski 77).
Here, Hart becomes an “old scout” despite his lack of western experience, and his eyes
possess the communicative power to “convince” the spectator of his authenticity. A
review of *The Patriot* (1916) similarly remarked that, “Next to the galloping horse there is nothing which brings a Western tang to a picture so successfully as the fine, long, melancholy face of William S. Hart. Mr. Hart can do things with his eyes and the corners of his mouth that almost make you hear the sweep of the wind, and see rolling country and hear hoof beats” (qtd. in Koszarski 56). In this review, Hart’s face stands in for an archetypal Western landscape. The landscape, in fact, is nearly superfluous, as his face makes it “almost” present in the eyes and ears of the viewer. Though this face might go by a variety of screen names, a reviewer points out that “all Hart plays are somewhat similar, and in the majority it is more Hart than story” (qtd. in Koszarski 42). Hart’s body is the authenticating presence for the story, and so is greater than the character he plays or the narrative in which that character is situated. The power of Hart’s face is similarly reinforced in promotional shots taken of him. These were invariably close-ups that highlighted his face. The most famous of these depicts Hart in his trademark two-gun pose (Fig. 4.1). Others show him in his cowboy hat, looking directly into the camera, a pose that accentuates the eyes, which authenticate him as Western performer (Figs. 4.2-4.3). The most striking element of these photos, as of all images of Hart, is their homogeneity. In each of them Hart represents a different character, and wears a different costume, but they appear strikingly similar because of Hart’s inalterable body, particularly his piercing eyes. Hart can play any part and don any costume, because his eyes remain a stable signifier of his authenticity, across roles and periods.

Hart’s films often evince a similar homogeneity. Devoted to revealing the individual and sometimes historical authenticity of Hart’s characters, they follow a standard pattern of character reform/revelation through a series of close-up shots that permit audiences to closely inspect Hart’s character. The remainder of this chapter will
examine several of Hart’s films, ranging from his early career to his retirement, analyzing the range of strategies these films adopt to confirm Hart’s authenticity and his enemies’ dissimulation.

“You or Me Has Got to Do a Heap o’ Lyin’”: *Keno Bates, Liar*

*Keno Bates* was released in 1915; only two reels in length, it presents in a compact narrative the questions of corporeal authenticity with which all Hart’s films are concerned. Hart plays the title character, who, along with his friend Wind River, is proprietor of the Double Stamp saloon and gambling hall. When Jim Maitland loses his money playing cards at the saloon, he holds up the two partners and steals their money. Keno and Wind River mount up and chase Maitland, who has fled into the hills. Keno shoots the bandit in self-defense, and upon examining his dead body finds a locket with a picture of a woman enclosed, and a letter announcing the arrival of Maitland’s sister Doris. Keno and Wind River look at the locket, then the letter, then the locket again, examining the girl’s face as they assess their circumstances and plot their response. Keno finally speaks: “‘Wind River,’ you or me has got to do a heap o’ lyin’.” To lie, of course, is to willfully abrogate their individual authenticity by representing themselves falsely. The two characters appear in close-up as they look into the distance, a set-piece shot that allows us to look at their faces and read in them who will be the liar—though of course we already know this from the film’s title. As this shot continues, both men bow their heads as the frame fades to black. They hide their faces from the audience, who cannot inspect them as they contemplate their duplicity. This pose prevents the dissonance caused by reading a face that signifies authenticity in a moment in which the character who wears it must choose to dissimulate his actions.
The partners’ impulse to hide their faces contrasts with the film’s spectatorial dynamics to this point. Maitland, the thief, has masked himself to hide his identity while committing the robbery. Keno, on the other hand, walks slowly toward the camera during the chase scene, nearly colliding with it before passing out of the frame just to its right. This shot permits a long moment of inspection that permits the audience to verify Keno’s authenticity, since they will have to trust him despite his lying for much of the film. In contrast to Maitland, who makes his face invisible to avoid legibility, Keno here wants to make his visible.

Keno’s dissimulation begins when Doris arrives on the stage: he informs her that her brother was his partner and was killed in a mine accident, and that she can live in her brother’s old cabin (actually Keno’s own home). His lying therefore spares the girl’s feelings, and his duplicity is intended not to hide his own justified killing of Maitland, but rather to efface her brother’s crimes. He dissimulates not his own identity, but Maitland’s. As Doris mourns her brother at the cabin, the camera centers Keno between the girl and Wind River. Though Hart’s body is centered in most shots in his films, in this case the composition reflects the status of each character relative to their knowledge of and response to Maitland’s death. Doris, at left, knows nothing of Keno’s actions and therefore has nothing to mask; Wind River, at right, knows the story but need not dissimulate because Keno has absolved him of that necessity; Keno, in the middle, mediates between the two positions, with his knowledge of and responsibility for Maitland’s slaying, and his dissimulation of the need for that act. He stands between the worlds of innocence and knowledge of western life, protecting Doris from the possibility of the fake or the inauthentic embodied by her brother.
A week later, at the saloon, dancing girl Anita finds a locket with Doris’s picture inside. A close-up shot shows her anger, and she follows Keno from the saloon to Doris’s cabin. Having arrived there, Keno places a gun belt around Doris’s waist, ironcally arming her with the guns she will use to shoot him in a fit of anger at his apparent duplicity. This act of physical arming, in fact, parallels Keno’s having armed her with a motive to harm him by his choice to deceive her about Maitland’s death. The day after this episode, Anita informs Doris that Keno shot her brother. Keno shortly arrives and Doris pulls the gun that Keno gave her, asking him if he killed her brother. The close-up shot of Keno that follows lasts sixteen seconds, as the cowboy looks into the distance, closes his eyes, nods almost imperceptibly, opens them again, and looks at Doris. This long take permits the audience to examine Keno’s face at the moment his individual authenticity finally shines through, disproving the title of the film and confirming corporeally the trust that we have placed in him.

Doris, however, unfamiliar with the calculus of western display, misreads his admission and shoots him in a fit of vengeance. Keno staggers off, walking to the saloon to tell Wind River he is leaving the settlement. Wind River immediately runs to Doris’s cabin, and a series of intercut shots displays Doris packing, Keno falling from his horse, and Wind River informing Doris that her brother “was a thief” whom Keno “shot in self defense.” As Wind River speaks, the camera flashes back to the scene in which the two partners stood over Maitland’s body and Keno declared while looking at Doris’s picture that one of them would have to lie. The flashback informs Doris—and emphasizes for the audience—the corporeal impetus for Keno’s decision. He declared that one of them must lie while looking at Doris’s face, to protect her rather than himself.
Doris and Wind River pursue Keno, reaching him just as he falls to the ground from the gunshot wound inflicted by Doris. As the film ends, she reads to Keno, who is lying in bed as Wind River observes them through a window, unseen by Keno. The cowboy kisses Doris’s hand, she puts her head on his shoulder, and the frame fades to black. While this sort of romantic conclusion is atypical of the western genre, it is surprisingly common in Hart’s films. Owen Wister said of cowboys that they leave “no posterity, for they don’t marry.”15 Indeed, the popular frontier narrative from Leatherstocking through the twenty-first century is replete with men who refuse to marry the women with whom they become romantically involved. As William Handley notes, by the turn of the twentieth century this tendency is somewhat mitigated:

There are no American Adams from the classic mold here. Neither are there particular, Turnerian individuals. Instead, there are complicated, often very unromantic and at times exceedingly violent relationships that carry the burden of the western past, rendered for us through the distortions of retrospection and the perspectives of lonely narrators. It is as if the American Adam has grown up and realized that his youth has passed him by. He looks back into someone else’s relationship or domestic situation, searching for but not finding that which no American has ever found: a perpetually happy home on the range. (7)

If this is the case for the twentieth-century western novel, however, many popular westerns continue to abrogate the marriage plot, though as Handley argues this inability to participate in matrimony precipitates a certain malaise on the range. Hart, because of the temporary nature of his roles, is able to “have it both ways,” in Forrest G. Robinson’s well known locution. His characters are all “one-offs” whose screen lives do not continue after the single film in which they appear; these characters may be married at the end of the film without limiting their use in future narratives. In fact, their participation in the
marriage plot even augments the nationalizing function of the western by linking them to
the next Turnerian stage of society and by enabling them to participate in marriage-based
American sociability.16

Keno Bates is also atypical of Hart films in its reliance on landscape. This film
utilizes far fewer close-up shots of Hart than will pictures at the height of his popularity,
resulting in more frame space available for the adversarial co-star of the western film, the
landscape. Two factors account for this difference, both related to the time of its releases.
First, Keno Bates is slightly closer historically to the era of the actuality and landscape
films, which understood the landscape itself as the primary attraction of western film.
Second, Keno Bates appears early in Hart’s career, when the actor’s body does not yet
possess the iconic aura of authenticity that will be attributed to it in the coming years.
The plot of the film, however, is characteristic Hart, relying heavily on his body to
demonstrate his character’s individual authenticity in spite of his characterization as a
“liar.” While Keno lies within the plot of the film, he cannot lie to the audience, who
knows who he is, the motives for his actions, and that he must eventually come clean.
The title, in fact, casts him as a liar in spite of the audience’s recognition of the moral
appropriateness of this choice. Moreover, the title’s text cannot alter his corporeal
signification, and we believe what we see in Hart’s body rather than what we read in the
title.

“I’m Shootin’ Straight Tonight”: Hell’s Hinges

Hell’s Hinges (1916), probably his best-known film, heightens the emphasis on
Hart’s face and eyes as signifiers of his character’s individual authenticity. In this picture,
the body of Blaze Tracey, Hart’s character, is held up in favorable comparison to the
duplicitous or weak bodies of the film’s other characters. *Hell’s Hinges* demonstrates Hart’s increased reliance on the image of his body, particularly in close-up shots, to perform the work of the story. The revelation of Tracey’s character occurs early in the film, and much of the rest of the plot is dedicated to illustrating the social consequences of his individual authenticity in the face of others’ failure to demonstrate this attribute.

Tracey is introduced by a series of shots that demonstrate his movement from distance to proximity. By the time he reaches the men gathered in the street to taunt the “Petticoat Brigade,” he is pictured in a medium shot, a range he will not exceed for the early portion of the film, except during two scene-setting shots in the saloon and in the street as the minister’s stage arrives. These shots provide ample opportunity for viewers to assess Tracey’s body and to evaluate his authenticity in light of a brief intertitular introduction: “BLAZE” TRACEY. The embodiment of the best and worst of the early West. A man-killer whose philosophy of life is summed up in the creed “SHOOT FIRST AND DO YOUR DISPUTIN’ AFTERWARD.” This description’s emphasis on “embodiment” underlines the centrality of the body to the western genre, and Tracey’s good-bad duality sets the terms for his emergent individual authenticity. Tracey, in fact, is described as one-half of another duality in the film—the distinction between he and “Silk” Miller: “Mingling the oily craftiness of a Mexican with the deadly treachery of a rattler, no man’s open enemy and no man’s friend.” A subsequent long shot of Silk permits the audience to verify this description of his character, as he stands smoking a cigarette in his jet black garb. A third intertitle outlines the relationship between these characters, highlighting their similarities as well as their differences: “The two most dangerous men in the territory, widely different in every characteristic, but agreed on one point: that neither LAW NOR RELIGION shall ever come to ‘Hell’s Hinges.’” Even this
lone unity, however, is motivated by divergent views. Tracey opposes religion and law because natural law and individual authenticity will govern his actions; he needs no artificial structures to constrain his behavior. Silk, however, opposes these two socializing institutions because their demands would constrain his presently unfettered self-interest. The former acts based on the inviolability of his individual authenticity, the latter on the fear of exposing his inauthenticity.

The stark distinctions between the two men become clear when Faith arrives with her brother Robert Henley, a recently ordained minister. Tracey is presented in a series of close-up shots as he looks at Faith. After an intertitle that reads “One who is evil, looking for the first time upon that which is good,” we again see Tracey in close-up as he removes his hat, indicating his appropriate response to the body of Faith, but also presenting more of his own body for our assessment at the moment his morally upright identity becomes physically visible. As the other men look on horrified by his reaction, Tracey turns and walks away, contemplating what he has just seen and his corporeal reaction to it. Though the observing men and Tracey himself appear confused, we understand that Tracey’s innate goodness has been made to surface in his response to Faith. Silk, of course, has no such reaction to the girl; he instead sustains the mob that attacks Henley’s first church service, demonstrating his fundamental moral depravity against the backdrop of Tracey’s goodness. Tracey’s response to Faith, in fact, averts the mob threat; as she prays, Hart turns back toward the barn that serves as a church building and, looking at her, decides to jump to the pulpit and in his standard two-gun pose to ward off the mob, and maintain that display as the group leaves.
Tracey remains for Henley’s sermon, but is unmoved. Though his lack of response may seem to indicate his attitude toward religion remains unchanged, this refusal is appropriate in light of Henley’s preaching. Earlier in the film, we have been told that the minister remains “untouched by the holy word he is conveying but taking an actor’s delight in swaying his audience.” For Henley, preaching is an inauthentic performance, motivated not by a socially and morally appropriate desire to serve, but rather by external response. This intertitle also implicitly criticizes acting by noting the difference between the authentic performance of the “good” minister and the artifice of the actor. Tracey, in fact, is converted moments later when Faith calls on the congregation to “heed [God’s] call.” Recognizing the individual authenticity of her performance, Tracey responds in kind, and his conversion is corporeally visible in a series of close-ups that demonstrate the correspondence among his actions, facial signification, and interior transformation. Standing face to signifying face with Faith, Tracey tells her, “I reckon God ain’t wantin’ me much, ma’am, but when I look at you, I feel I’ve been ridin’ the wrong trail.” Notably, Tracey does not say that he is a bad man, or that he must reform, but that he is on a trail that does not reflect his internal identity. The cowboy metaphor implies that changing his trail is a viable course, particularly for a rider as capable as any of Hart’s characters.

Blaze is moved to action by the impact of Faith’s visage, unlike Reverend Henley, who, face to face with Faith as he sets fire to his church, fails to respond appropriately to that face. A reviewer of The Darkening Trail (1915) would call the recurring phenomenon of corporeal response in Hart’s films “the psychological effect of mind upon mind” (qtd. in Koszarski 22). In the tradition of the sentimental melodrama, Blaze is the hero who is appropriately moved by the heroine’s face—he accurately reads the message
of Faith’s eyes, and we can thus trust his vision. Hart’s authenticity is thus derived at least partly from his ability to accurately read others’ authenticity, and we trust him because he correctly judges who is trustworthy.

After the hung-over Henley sleeps through a sermon, Silk suggests that Tracey’s trust in religion has been misplaced. After a series of close-ups that serve to corporeally reinforce their respective functions in the film, Silk tells Tracy, “He’s like all the rest of ‘em, Blaze—a low down hypocrite and liar. There ain’t no such thing as real religion.” In the western, the most egregious offense is to be a hypocrite or liar, because both of these are forms of misrepresentation of the self that undercut the genre’s insistence on individual authenticity. In response, Tracey tells a story of the best roper in the territory, Arizona Frank, who he once saw “rope a steer with as pretty a throw as was ever made, but the rope broke and the steer got away. That wasn’t Arizona’s fault. It was the thing he was dependin’ on that was no good.” The implication for western audiences is that they must be able to “depend on” their own judgment or that of trustworthy characters to assess which characters are authentic, and the film’s corporeal emphasis suggests that the only reliable signifier is the body. This anecdote is therefore followed by a close-up of Tracey’s face, a body that townspeople and viewers can “depend on.”

Tracey carries the incapacitated Henley back to his home and goes to find the absent doctor; while he is out, Henley escapes and joins the crowd at Silk’s saloon. As he drinks with the revelers, an intertitle informs us that the inauthenticity hinted at in his first sermon is complete: “Past the point of sane thought—struggling weakly through a delirium of strangely distorted faces and sounds.” Henley cannot perceive correctly, and has lost his sense of self. He accompanies the crowd to the church, and sets it afire as his sister pleads with him to help her. Tracey, returning with the doctor, sees the church
burning, rescues Faith, and walks to the saloon. The doors seem to magically open as Tracey draws both guns and fires, killing Silk. In the climactic sequence of the film, Tracey is pictured close-up in his signature two-gun pose; he will maintain this stance for the next seventeen shots of him, including three more close-ups. This pose is iconic of all Hart’s characters, and his prolonged stance underlines this revelation of the core of the Hart cowboy. Tracey, in fact, tells the crowd, “I’m shootin’ straight tonight, and I’m plum willin’ to kill!” The pun on “shooting straight” here reminds us that Hart’s characters are always “straight shooters” in two ways, their western martial skills inseparably connected to their strident individual authenticity. Tracey’s implicit disavowal of frontier violence in his romantic union with Faith at the film’s conclusion, as I have argued, does not undermine Hart’s characters, as the next film will provide the same fundamental character and revelatory plot in a different guise. A Hell’s Hinges review observes that Hart is “excellent in the close ups when his facial expressions carry the story unaided” (qtd. in Koszarski 39); it is no surprise, then, that the actor’s best-known film is one in which that face is placed before viewers almost constantly, revealing the individual authenticity of the man who occupies the character.

“By Their Fruits Ye Shall Know Them”: The Toll Gate

By the end of 1919, Hart and Ince’s constant feuds had reached a head, and the actor broke with his longtime producer, signing a contract with Adolph Zukor’s Famous Players that would give Hart creative control over his films.17 The second picture produced by Hart’s new company, The Toll Gate (1920) would become “Bill’s biggest moneymaker” (Davis 138).18 The film is largely standard western fare: villains attempt to rob a train, the hero escapes from agents of the law, holds up a saloon, takes revenge
against his archenemy, falls in love with a woman, and refuses to marry her at the film’s conclusion. Landscape in *The Toll Gate* is also stereotypical: “western” in that it is geographically unidentifiable (“North Fork,” “the border”) and serves primarily as a backdrop for historiographical action. Hills serve to hide Hart’s character, Black Deering, from a search party; a lake functions as the site of a little boy’s near-drowning, permitting Deering to meet Mary; an incline facilitates Deering’s escape from a train; and rocks serve as hiding places in a gun fight. The landscape is a prop as much as a geographical setting. *The Toll Gate*, like most of Hart’s films, is as much concerned with displaying Hart on screen as with its plot—and the plot is primarily the revelation of Deering’s character over the course of the film.

The opening shot, in fact, draws a formal equivalence between the film and Hart himself. The show opens on a western background with text that identifies the producer in small text along with “William S. Hart” and “The Toll Gate” in equally large print. Hart’s entrance in the film underscores this significance. As his band of outlaws, The Raiders, arrives in the cave that serves as their hideout, their horses swim through an underground body of water at its entrance. Hart is in the lead, and the others hold torches that provide sufficient light to allow filming; initially, only their torches and the mounted Hart are visible, the rest of the frame immersed in darkness. In effect, the other actors in this shot become members of the crew who work to illuminate Hart’s body, which is thespectatorial center of the film. The first intertitle underscores his significance, reading: “Why the band has known no failure—Black Deering, the leader”; this text is followed by a shot of Hart in close-up that provides our first of many opportunities to scrutinize the face of the westerner.
The Toll Gate, like other Hart films, is obsessed with the visage of its main character. The longest sequence in the film without a shot of Deering occurs when the soldiers who have captured him are playing dice; they have left the door to their boxcar open as the train goes up hill, causing it to slow. The audience is aware that Deering will escape, and the tension of the scene is heightened by our inability to see him. To this point in the film, Deering has not failed to appear on screen for more than one or two consecutive shots, so this absence is conspicuous. Hart and his fellow filmmakers seem to recognize that the star’s body is the primary attraction of any western film, and while they can occasionally refuse to display that body in order to create suspense, to do so for any extended period would undercut the film’s popularity. Audiences come to the theater to see Hart, and filmmakers do not want to disappoint these viewers.

Even when other characters carry forward the action, Hart’s body is often made the primary spectatorial object through framing. As Deering’s lieutenant and eventual betrayer Tom Jordan speaks to convince the other members of the band to “do one last job,” Jordan stands in the foreground and Deering in background, as we would expect since Jordan is the active character at this moment. Both characters, however, remain in focus and Jordan is offset to the right side, so that his arms occasionally wave outside the frame. Deering, meanwhile, remains close to the physical center of the frame, reminding the audience of his significance. Deering suggests the importance of this spectatorial dynamic when he tells his band: “We’re worth about five thousand a head an’ they ain’t particular how we’re brought in.” Deering’s speech emphasizes the price placed on the western body, a common device in westerns that parallels the valuation of performing western bodies. Western performers all have a price on their head, as corporeal display is the economic engine of the western. Audiences pay to see these bodies “an’ they ain’t
particular” about the plots in which they act. Deering’s suggestion that the prices are all the same, however, is clearly false, as we have seen, since the bodies of westerners who, like Hart, succeed in representing themselves as most authentic are worth far more than their fellow performers. *The Toll Gate* reinforces this concern with corporeal aesthetics when Jordan, following his betrayal of Deering and the latter’s subsequent capture, tells his former captain: “I’m glad they didn’t kill you. You’ll make a pretty picture ‘standin’ on nothin’ and lookin’ up a rope.” In this intertitle, the western body is characterized as a “pretty picture,” with a potential pun on the aesthetics of western film—the pretty motion picture. Hart, of course, does make a pretty picture in both senses, since his body is the primary attraction of the popular films he creates.

Protecting the authenticity of that body by ensuring that audiences can read it correctly is essential to maintaining the attraction of the body as western spectacle. *The Toll Gate* therefore engages in a complex array of representational devices intended to reveal Deering’s character. First presented as the leader of The Raiders, the film moderates this portrayal by demonstrating his desire to end his alliance with the outlaws. The film also suggests that Deering’s outlaw persona is merely a facade, primarily through masking his body during his morally ambiguous moments. During the scene in which Deering and The Raiders hold up the train, his face is masked, Lone Ranger style; the subsequent intertitle reads, “Take a good look at him, that’s Black Deering,” and is accompanied by an illustration of the masked Deering to the right of the intertitular text. This command, however, encourages an action that is impossible. Deering’s masked face prevents the viewer from “taking a good look at him,” and the illustration reminds us that the actions performed by Deering at this moment are not reflective of his “real” self, but
rather mask that self beneath evil deeds. Deering’s outlaw identity thus serves as a form of disguise, and the primary purpose of the film’s plot is to reveal the “true” Deering that underlies that disguise.

Another series of masked images occurs after Deering meets Mary, an apparent widow who has promised to hide him from the pursuing lawmen. The first accompanies Deering’s statement that “I’m an outlaw an’ them men comin’ are after me. I figure to use your husband’s clothes an’ his name.” After Mary volunteers to help him, the illustration appears again when he responds: “‘Remember, I’m watchin’ every move you make.” And after the woman assures him that he can trust her, he answers: “I ain’t trustin’—nobody,” we see the illustration one more time. The mask serves to demonstrate that these apparently merciless actions do not reflect Deering’s “real” character. Like the physical mask, they efface the innate goodness of the authentic westerner. Since such actions are incongruous with the physical appearance of the western body, that body is hidden so that it cannot signify authenticity while simultaneously performing actions that undermine the moral and historical calculus of western display. The sequence of masked images that accompanies his early encounters with Mary results in Deering’s final physical and psychological unmasking. After seeing Mary tell her son that he must call Deering “Daddy” and tell the sheriff’s men he is the boy’s father, a series of close-ups represents Deering’s rescission of his earlier warning that “I ain’t trustin’ nobody.” The close-up shots of Deering allow audiences to read his face in the context of his morally upright actions, suggesting that his “real” self is revealed in these unmasked moments.
Perhaps the most curious unmasked view of Deering, however, occurs when he and Mary plot to feign marriage to save him from the pursuing sheriff. The lawman asks if the couple will put his men up for the night, and in an episode intertitled “The test of a man’s truthfulness and of his soul” Deering attempts to carry off the pose. The lawmen all sleep in Mary’s front room as the two hesitate to retire to the bedroom; Mary goes first as Deering hesitates, retires, looks for escape out the window but spots a guard who would prevent his flight. Deering picks up a Bible and reads a passage from the Sermon on the Mount:

Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?

Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit.

A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.

Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. (Matthew 7: 17-19)

The final verse of this passage is highlighted, and Deering seems to have made his choice. These verses, in fact, are central to the western’s insistence on corporeal authenticity, since the only way to identify which bodies represent benevolent frontier colonialism is to judge the actions, or “fruits” they display for audience consumption.

Deering responds physically to the lesson, indicating the revelation of his “true” character that has been hidden under his outlaw disguise. As he puts the Bible down, however, he pulls from it a photograph of Mary with her husband, who is Deering’s archenemy Jordan. Following two relatively long takes of Deering in close-up, separated by a shot of Mary sleeping from Deering’s point of view, the final intertitle of the masked Deering appears: “When a man’s heart goes black with the poison of revenge.” Another
series of shots cuts between Deering and Mary as the former approaches her bed, and Mary tells him, “I’m still trusting you.” This moment unmask Deering permanently; he nods and steps away, and will not appear masked after this, even when he kills Jordan at the end of the film. He has now discovered Jordan’s duplicity and disavowed his own, and Jordan’s murder represents the triumph of the individually authentic Deering over the inauthentic Jordan. Deering’s identity has been established definitively, and his face is no longer prevented from signifying, even while performing otherwise morally ambiguous actions.

Deering’s body, in fact, is characterized by its visual legibility immediately following his final unmasking. A shot of the door with the superimposed phrase “By their fruits ye shall know them” underlines the scriptural and spectatorial moral of the film as Deering exits, telling the lawmen, “Roll out, boys, I ain’t Jim Brown I’m a liar—I’m Black Deering.” Deering in effect unmasks himself, undoing his physical dissimulation as he permits the lawmen to “know him.” Paradoxically, in Deering’s admission that he is “a liar,” he constitutes himself as a truth-teller, both verbally and physically attesting to the actions of his past. As the reformed bandit hands his gun to the sheriff, the lawman tells him, “They might call you Black Deering, but, by God, you’re white.” This visual characterization of Deering, in addition to its racial overtones, suggests that Deering is visible, legible, or clear. His identity is no longer shadowed, but is eminently ascertainable.21 The final scene reinforces this characteristic of the black-clad Deering, as the sheriff responds to Deering’s insistence that Mary and her son “get back to your own people” with the exclamation, “Provin’ you can’t tell how white a man is by the color of his coat.” In The Toll Gate, as in other western displays, the body signifies, not the
clothing; the western’s insistence on individual authenticity displayed corporeally controverts assumptions that westerners are constituted by their western garb by subordinating the sartorial to the corporeal.

Unmasking Deering, then, permits his body to signify and reveals his character to the audience. When the Army sergeant removes the mask after capturing Deering, he recognizes the face and the film flashes back to his memory of Deering riding eighty miles to warn the sergeant’s fort of an impending Apache attack. This action demonstrates the signification of Deering’s face, and when the flashback ends, the soldiers lean in closer to get a better look at that face, assuring themselves of what they see there. All this happens while Deering is unconscious from fighting his captors, and when he awakens he begins blinking his eyes as if trying to see straight. As we have seen, the reification of Hart’s body finally distills western corporeal display to intense scrutiny of the eyes, and here the split evil/good Deering makes his eyes and face difficult to examine, through masking and injury. Just as the soldiers attempt to ascertain the character of this contested body, so the audience’s gaze is thwarted by the limited visibility of Deering’s eyes.

Deering is never precisely inscrutable; as I have suggested, his masking exists to demonstrate instances in which the audience infers that he is hiding his true character. Jordan, conversely, does not provide even a hint of his duplicity until it is revealed by plot events. Neither the audience nor Deering is aware that Jordan has betrayed The Raiders or abandoned his wife and son until the moment that he appears in the train car and in the picture frame. These appearances belie Jordan’s performative facade as friend, husband, and father, and reveal the degree to which his physical dissimulation unfits him to fill the role of personally authentic westerner. In fact, Jordan’s duplicity prevents him
from knowing even himself; when Deering confronts his archenemy, he tells Jordan he will kill the villain “for two reasons”: “One of ‘em you know, an’ the other you never will know.” The villain’s duplicity keeps him from the self-knowledge of the authentic Deering, who knows more about Jordan than does the villain himself. Deering therefore subordinates Jordan’s body to his own, discarding his own guns and throwing Jordan off a cliff to his death.22

The film ends with a medium shot of Deering riding right to left out of the frame, followed by an intertitle that once again underlines the picture’s message: “By their fruits ye shall know them-.” The background to this text is a landscape with a high cliff at left and a man on horseback at the summit between the words “by” and “their.” The letters fade, leaving only the picture of the cowboy that signifies that message. The body of William S. Hart, the prototypical westerner of the decade, represents the personal authenticity that stands at the core of The Toll Gate’s corporeal dynamics, and he is the last image to appear in the film. Louis Reeves Harrison, writing in Moving Picture World, says of the actor’s role in the film: “Hart is supposed to be at home in the role of an outlaw, but his skill of portrayal is far from being merely a question of type. He represents the combined daring and cunning of the American fighting male. He not only looks the part, but he acts it with keen intelligence. There constantly shines in his eyes the combined pugnacity and caution of the true gunman of the West” (qtd. in Koszarski 121). Though Hart is certainly the preeminent representative of the regional western type, The Toll Gate extends his corporeal signification, demonstrating the nationalizing function of the westerner’s body. The ideological work of the film is distilled in his eyes,
incorruptible signifiers of personal authenticity on which Americans can base notions about national and individual identities, secure in the power of the eyes to finally speak authentic truth.

“It Takes Two to Make a Bargain”: Tumbleweeds

Tumbleweeds (1925) was Hart’s final film, and it presents a somewhat different model of authentication than do many of his previous pictures. This film locates its narrative in a specific historical moment and geographical space, the Cherokee Strip Land Run of 1889. Hart plays Don Carver, foreman of the Box K Ranch, which has been forced to vacate the land ahead of the homesteaders. Tumbleweeds is less concerned with displaying Hart’s body than with representing the variety of homesteaders and the social transition from ranch to settlement. It attempts to present a historical epoch, and we see fewer close-up shots of Hart’s character, more landscape shots, more shots of characters other than Hart’s (including montages of cattle herds and working cowboys), and a greater number of characters who stand in for a wide variety of western types. In short, the film is occupied primarily with historical, rather than individual, authenticity. This shift may have been necessitated by Hart’s aging body, always a problem for western performers who relied on their ability to demonstrate westernness through acts of physical prowess. The combination of Hart’s aging body and the film’s reliance on a different model of authentication, along with United Artists’ failure to publicize and distribute the film effectively, may also help to explain the film’s relative lack of popularity.23
When Hart’s character is introduced, he is described as “just another tumbleweed”; this appellation and the film’s title are derived from a cowboy song that recurs throughout the picture and equates cowboys with the land they inhabit:

Oh, I’m a rollin’ rambler,
A tumblin’ tumbleweed,
The prairie is my race track,
The wild wind is my steed!

I never cease my roamin’;
I’m always hard to catch—
But the punkin stays forever
In the same old garden patch.

The punkin lays and waits
To be turned into pies and tarts,
But the tumbleweed it jumps the fence
And heads for other parts!

This song highlights the significant differences between the cowboys who are being pushed off the land and the settlers who come to inhabit it. The former are mobile, wild, and natural, while the latter are static, civilized, and cultured relative to the ranch hands. Facing the encroachment of the settlers and the threat of domestication (“turned into pies and tarts”), the cowboys will “jump the fence” and find another land that offers them the freedoms formerly provided by the Cherokee Strip. Indeed, once they have finished rounding up the Box K cattle the cow hands virtually disappear from the picture, with the exception of Don Carver, played by Hart, and Kentucky Rose, both of whom belie the cowboy song by settling down at the end of the film.

Kentucky’s capitulation to civilized life is nearly immediate, whereas Carver fends off the life of a homesteader until well into the film. The two partners spot the first of the homesteaders early in the picture—a widow named Mrs. Riley. Seeing the woman, Carver looks off at the horizon, refocusing his gaze to view the land that has been his
home rather than the source of its loss. Carver begins to ride off, but Kentucky goes to help the woman while Carver watches from a distance, refusing to come into close physical proximity to these nouveau westerners who know nothing of the land yet now possess rights to its settlement. Carver thus appears to withhold his authentic body from these inauthentic new western bodies. Kentucky, however, is smitten, sighing, “It can’t be a disgrace to be a homesteader when a woman like her is one.” Carver merely replies, “We’re goin’ back to our cows.” These animals, for him, are the rightful denizens of the Strip, and returning to them will insulate the two cowboys from the apparent attractions provided by the homesteaders.

Some of the interlopers are less individually authentic than others, of course, and Mrs. Riley will demonstrate her character by uniting Carver with the woman he loves at the end of the movie. The individually inauthentic Noll Lassiter and Bill Freel, however, will provide the personal conflict within the larger historical plot, as Carver sets out to expose them. We are introduced to Noll when he offends a demure young woman, then assaults a boy who is feeding his dog from a ladle at the town well. Carver steps in and, in a series of close-ups, ascertains that the man is neither the boy’s father nor the dog’s owner, then demands that he apologize to both. When Noll attempts to escape, then draws his gun, Carver disarms him, throws him in a water trough, forces him to beg pardon of both the boy and the dog, and warns him to “act like a man after this.” Noll’s assertion of superiority over a boy and an animal contrast with earlier depictions of Carver, who rescues two wolf pups whose mother has been poisoned and spares the life of a snake he finds in his path. Carver’s mercy to those less capable than himself suggests
his “manhood,” and a lack of manhood indicates historiographical inauthenticity, since those who lacked masculinity did not often figure in historiographical narratives of frontier life.

Noll’s character is further revealed when he meets a man he knows as Benton, but who now goes by the name of Bill Freel. As I have argued of western stage villains in chapter 2, Freel’s self-imposed name change is an indicator of individual inauthenticity, as it represents an attempt to alter his corporeal signification. Freel plans to claim the land on which the Box K ranch house sits because it provides control over water access for the region, and he hopes to marry Noll’s half-sister Molly, though she is overtly disgusted by the dandy. Noll is sent to spy on Molly and Carver (in whom she is romantically interested), and hides himself behind a newspaper to watch their movements. As I have argued, hiding one’s face is in the western often an indicator of inauthenticity, and the subsequent scene, in which Freel confronts the two lovers, presents a series of close-ups that allows us to assess the faces of Freel and Carver, verifying our opinions of their characters. Noll and Freel, not surprisingly, become “Sooners,” arriving on the Strip before the race begins, killing a ranger sent to patrol the area, and shooting Kentucky’s horse out from under him. The crime of the Sooners is the presence of their body on a forbidden landscape, a violation that functions in counterpoise to the way that Carver’s body is presented as belonging on, and even unified with, that land. The Strip is a liminal landscape between wilderness and law, and Sooners violate both the old, “natural” law of the frontier by occupying open western land without the western attributes that permit survival, and the new, “civilized” law of the U.S. government by occupying land that cannot yet be legally claimed. They therefore fit neither in the “old west,” nor in the new society that follows the land rush, doubling their inauthenticity.
Carver, conversely, demonstrates characteristics that allow him to occupy positions in both social orders. When the ranch boss initially asks him, “Don, why don’t you register for a piece of land and settle down?” Carver responds, “The only land I’ll settle down on will be under a tombstone.” He initially appears unfit for civilized life, accidentally lassoing Molly in an attempt to capture the fleeing Kentucky, and falling down as he turns to leave after apologizing to her. Carver’s body, eminently capable in the environment of the frontier cattle ranch, initially functions inappropriately or not at all in civilized settings, demonstrating his western authenticity even as it reveals his inexperience in society. Once again, however, Hart’s character demonstrates himself able to correctly read the bodies of other characters. When Molly reveals that she and her family are homesteaders, he recognizes in her the future of the Cherokee Strip and, crying, tells her, “It’s a right good idea, miss—I been aimin’ to stake out a claim myself.” Carver’s tears here seem to externalize his pain as he recognizes the necessity of a new way of life. There is no more “jumping the fence,” because Molly’s homesteader body represents the new west and demands that his own body change its abilities and occupation in response to those conditions. He even disavows the “tumbleweed” moniker when Molly, hearing cowboys singing the song outside her window, asks Carver, “That’s what you cowboys call yourselves, isn’t it—tumbleweeds?” He responds, “Yes, ma’am; I been a tumbleweed all my life but now I’m aimin’ to settle down—I’m gettin’ real house broke.” This response points up the ways that Carver’s mobile, free body must be domesticated, or “house broke” in the manner of a wild animal to submit to the demands of homesteader society. It marks the completion of his transition from westerner to homesteader.
Given the liminal, shifting status of Carver’s body throughout the majority of the film, it is not surprising that the camera provides fewer opportunities for close inspection of that body in *Tumbleweeds* than in many of Hart’s other pictures. In fact, we often see Carver’s awkward attempts to conform to the unfamiliar corporeal aesthetics of civilized society. Carver pokes fun at Kentucky, who is holding Mrs. Riley’s baby, a pose entirely out of place in their old frontier life, but appropriate to his new homesteader identity.

Kentucky responds to this jibe by touching Carver’s clothing, noting that his old partner is “all duded up,” his dress incongruent with his western body. When Carver arrives early to visit Molly, he notices his hair is disheveled and engages in a comic series of attempts to prevent it from standing up, finally cutting off the offending piece with his pocketknife just before Molly enters. The cowboy whose rumpled hair matched his western identity now has to groom that body for social acceptability. In his hurry, Carver leaves the lock of cut hair sitting on the piano, where Molly surreptitiously folds it into her handkerchief in an action that indicates the frontier body’s attraction, despite its social awkwardness. This gesture also prefigures Molly’s complete possession of the western body, as she and Carver will be coupled at the end the film.

After Carver is unjustly arrested as a Sooner while rounding up stray cattle for the Box K, the film’s representation of his body changes. He is brought back to town where the cries of a lynch mob await him. The soldiers who have captured Carver protect him from the mob, though not from Molly’s misreading gaze. In several American shots from Molly’s point of view, the men around Carver are darkened while his body is illuminated, directing the audience’s interpretation away from the forces of the law that shape Molly’s reading of him as a criminal and toward the authentic body that signifies his innocence. Molly (probably lacking access to the filmic lighting techniques that shape our
interpretation) sees only Carver in chains, the socio-legal context shaping her reading of his captive body. From this scene, Carver is taken to a makeshift stockade constructed of wooden rails, where his imprisoned body is subsequently displayed. In several shots of him taken from outside the stockade wall, Carver’s body is hidden by the wall but his face remains visible through a gap between the rails. Though his body is masked by an apparently illegal act, his face continues to signify through the prison walls. This point of view shot from outside the prison, in fact, actually serves to hide his imprisoned body, revealing only the visage that serves as a stable signifier of authenticity across Hart’s films.

Carver’s corporeal authenticity is further strengthened by the ways in which he is displayed after his escape from prison. He effects his escape by hacking through one of the rails with his pocket knife, then using the broken rail to vault over the wall. As he mounts his horse and rides off, the soldiers assigned as guards shoot at him, but are unable to harm Carver’s iconic body as he disappears over the horizon. The land rush has already begun, and the film’s cinematography shifts as Carver pursues the homesteaders. Alternating between panoramic shots of the land rush and panning and tracking shots of Carver as he overtakes wagons and riders, the camera draws progressively closer to the cowboy’s body. In these somewhat chaotic shots, Carver is always recognizable as the rider moving faster than all the others; where other riders climb out of a stream bed to go around an overturned wagon, he simply jumps it on horseback. Soon the camera focuses only on Carver overtaking others, with nothing else interspersed; Carver’s authentic body has supplanted every other potential visual attraction of the film. Even the landscape is effaced, for as Carver’s speed increases the land begins to blur behind him, making his
body the sole attraction of the scene. He even overtakes a man who has two horses and switches to the fresh horse while running, suggesting that the authentic westerner on his horse is more capable than a homesteader with two horses at his disposal.

When Carver arrives at the Box K, he finds two horses already there; firing into the ranch house, he enters in his two-gun pose; as in *Hell’s Hinges*, Carver holds this pose through multiple shots as Freel and Noll demonstrate their inauthenticity by cowering in a corner, then running. Carver stops Noll, but then liberates him, saying, “There’s just one who’s savin’ you a heap of trouble and you know who it is—I’ll give you ten seconds to get out of sight.” Carver insists on the visual in this decree, commanding that Noll’s inauthentic body disappear from the spectatorial order of the film. Freel, however, has escaped, found Molly, and told her Carver drove them off the claim and tried to kill them. When Molly and Freel arrive at the ranch house, the girl accuses the cowboy: “The last time I saw you, you were under arrest—you’re not only a ‘Sooner’ but you’re a thief.” Molly cannot disregard the legal context that informs her reading of Hart’s body, and she begins to cry at his apparent inauthenticity as we see Carver’s confused face in close-up. As an eastern female, Molly is unversed in reading the western body; the audience, however, recognizes her error. Between close-ups of his face, which is made eminently visible to the audience at the moment in which its signification is questioned, Carver asks, “Do you believe that?”; she responds, “I believe what I see.” The audience, of course, also believes what they see, and they recognize that Molly does not know how to interpret what she sees, or does not understand what is most significant about the objects of her vision. The audience, however, has been tutored by
the western genre in the dynamics of western display. We trust in Hart’s iconic body because of what we have seen it do so many times on the screen, and because of what this film has told us about the place of Carver in the calculus of western corporeal display.

Molly, failing to read his body correctly, orders Caver to go, and he retires into the isolation that characterized his life on the ranch. Seeking out his old partner, he finds Kentucky about to “get hitched” to Mrs. Riley. Carver responds, “I aimed to do the same, but I missed by a mile.” This idiomatic response points up the changing dynamics and demands of the west—Carver has never missed at anything before, but the new world of the settlement requires different aptitudes, and the frontier equivalent of his social blundering is “missing by a mile.” He continues: “I got to carin’ for her somethin’ fierce—but it takes two to make a bargain.” This assertion puns on The Bargain (1914), the title of the first film in which Hart played a starring role; this early film, in typical Hart fashion, ends with a fulfillment of the romantic plot as Hart’s character Jim Stokes is forgiven by love interest Nell Brent and the two cross “the border” to establish a life together. In Tumbleweeds, the “two” necessary to “make a bargain” are missing on two levels: first, Molly has refused to forgive him, subverting the expected resolution. Second, there is no more border, and two social states, or two sides of the border, are necessary to complete the escapist romance plot. In the geographical and social world of Tumbleweeds, no such border exists, and Carver’s recent reversion to his western identity seems to have unfit him for life in civilization. The solitary male body is no longer acceptable in the social world created by the homesteaders—neither is it sufficient to sustain a film narrative, as evidenced by the roughly equal number of close-up shots assigned to Hart and his female lead in Tumbleweeds. Carver, however, seeks to disavow these complexities, averring that “Women aren’t reliable—cows are—that’s why I’m
headin’ for South America where there’s millions of ‘em.” This statement echoes Carver’s earlier dismissal of Kentucky’s love interest, “We’re goin’ back to our cows.” It also demonstrates that the presence of cattle—or the social order in force when cows are prevalent—makes male solitude possible, thereby liberating Carver to act with the western authenticity that served him so well before the coming of the homesteaders.

As he departs, however, Carver encounters Freel and Noll, who have stolen a claim from and old Christian couple who has appeared in nearly every homesteader montage. Carver spots the villains, slaps them around, and orders them to draw their guns. A close-up of Carver from the point of view of the two villains follows, which demonstrates both his individual authenticity and the visual assessment that leads them to refuse his order. Carver disarms the two men, binds them, and forces them to walk back to town, where he turns them over to the soldiers whose comrade they have shot. The Major, after a close-up of the cowboy from his point of view that demonstrates a military assessment of Carver’s body, allows him to go free. Carver turns toward the hotel and, in an eleven-second close-up, covers his eyes with his hand, removes it, blinks, and walks off the left side of the frame. His gestures suggest that he is reestablishing the significance of his western body, voiding it of the traces of civilization as he prepares to return to cowboy life in South America. As he enters the door of the hotel, however, the film abruptly cuts to an intertitle that reads “DON!” followed by a shot of Molly with arms outstretched; she has been informed of Noll and Freel’s villainy by Kentucky, and the romantic plot is thereby fulfilled. *Tumbleweeds* ends with an affirmation of the homestead west and of the role of marriage in that society, as two extreme long shots of the couple embracing on a promontory above the plains are separated by a single shot that briefly depicts the ghostly image of a man on horseback superimposed on
tumbleweeds blowing across the frame. This shot characterizes the cowboy as a phantasmic, temporary figure in American history, who disappears as the tumbleweeds become entangled in barbed wire fence—itself long an icon of western civilization and the end of open range life. This image is also fitting in the context of Hart’s career, as his spectral, projected film body has ended its brief appearance. However, that body can still function to supply historiographical meaning to the newly civilized landscape. Carver’s arm in the first shot of the couple is raised as if introducing his new bride—and by extension homesteading America—to the west, his body providing an index of that landscape’s past and future meaning.

Hart, in fact, has filled that role for a generation of Americans, and with his final film bids farewell to the west he represented in the form of figures like Carver. Tumbleweeds is about the disappearance of the west and the authentic westerner, and it is fitting that it marks the disappearance from the screen of the figure who has been to this point film’s most authentic body. Carver’s romantic attachment at the end of the picture is similar to those of so many of Hart’s characters, yet this time there is no return from that state in the person of another isolated frontiersman in another film. The date of the 1889 land rush suggests this end, as it occurs only months before Congressional closure of the frontier. The film therefore signifies the end of the west, as well as the end of Hart as representative westerner.

Hart did appear one more time on screen—fittingly enough, playing himself rather than a fictional role. The 1939 reissue of Tumbleweeds is preceded by Hart’s “Farewell to the Screen,” in which the actor describes the film and provides a summation of his screen
career. In this piece, Hart appears markedly older than even his 1925 screen persona—and he speaks. A Film Daily reviewer said of Hart’s appearance in this piece:

For the first time that great Western actor who set the standard for all Western stars who followed, Bill Hart, appears on the screen in closeup, and speaks. And what he says is not just an ordinary speech . . . . He makes you understand and feel what the old timers felt about their western country. But the big surprise that will come to everybody is the remarkable quality of Hart’s voice. It is one of the most vibrant dramatic and emotional male voices that has ever been heard on the screen. If Hart was a younger man and came into pictures today, he would zoom to the top as one of our finest actors. (qtd. in Kozsarski 149)

This reviewer highlights Hart’s role in defining the westerner for film audiences, and the authority he has been accorded to speak about the “Western country.” It also highlights the “closeup” that enabled viewers to inspect his authentic body in all his films. Hart’s body has always been viewed as extraordinary, and the exceptional character of his body is shared by that body’s vocal capability, in a final attestation of the authenticity of William S. Hart.

The picture itself alternates between close-ups and American shots of Hart speaking of “this great American epic.” If, as I have argued, all Hart’s films are concerned primarily with displaying his body, his farewell distills that concern to its essence, removing even the pretense of plot to display Hart on screen one last time. As he ends his discussion of Tumbleweeds, Hart removes his hat and the camera cuts to his face as he begins speaking of his career: “My friends, I loved the art of making motion pictures. It is as the breath of life to me.” He explains his departure from film not as an economic decision (by the middle of the 1920s he was no longer marketable as a film star), but rather in terms of the toll western life takes on the performing body: “through those hazardous feats of horsemanship that I loved so well to do for you, I received many major injuries. That, coupled with the added years of life, preclude my again doing those
things that I so gloried in doing.” Hart’s injuries and age have altered his body, damaging its authentic aura and preventing it from serving as icon of the western past. Film, of course, records the body at a particular historical moment, and the body that Hart displayed on screen in 1925 was markedly different from the one that appeared in frequent re-releases of his films from a decade earlier.

Hart describes his film acting in “real” terms, evoking his horseback flight from a “pursuing posse, crossing a log that spans a canyon,” and “the harmless shots of the baffled ones that remain behind.” The action, of course, was staged, and the shots harmless because the guns of the posse were loaded with blank cartridges. Hart’s filmic claim, however, was always that the west his films represented was the real west, and at the height of his popularity audiences believed him wholeheartedly. Basinger notes that Hart’s on-screen authenticity was matched by his life away from film. She argues that “Writers and reviewers of the time always paid tribute to Hart’s sincerity, and to the character of a man who kept himself apart from the sometimes wild social life of Hollywood in the 1920s” (186), an observation that a 1923 Variety review seconds: “Bill Hart is a regular guy, on and off. He never has been a faker, on the stage or on the screen” (qtd. in Basinger 186). Hart was engaged in the manufacture of a “historical” frontier and of an “authentic” frontiersman, and the construction of these categories required blurring the lines between art and history to performatively instantiate western history and the western persona.

Walter Benjamin argues that “with the emancipation of the various art practices from ritual go increasing opportunities for the exhibition of their products. It is easier to exhibit a portrait bust that can be sent here and there than to exhibit the statue of a divinity that has its fixed place in the interior of a temple” (737). Film thus makes it
possible to “send” western bodies elsewhere, but also marks their “emancipation” from the very historiographical “ritual” that had endowed those bodies with national meaning, as well as social and commercial appeal. The popularity of the western, and of individual western performers, has risen and subsided in correspondence with cultural conditions that required western bodies. The western has therefore been most prevalent in eras in which a performance of western identity could help resolve crises of national self-construction. In the first decades of the twentieth century, with the “Americanizing” frontier closed, the first World War looming, and modernization challenging the ways that Americans thought of themselves, the nation looked to its frontier past to reclaim a sense of authentic Americanness. By the 1920s, victorious in war and certain of unlimited economic prosperity, Americans no longer required the western’s particular brand of national ritual. The frontier was no longer culturally relevant and the western became, for a time, the province of trick-ropers and sharpshooters who acted for entertainment rather than to substantiate America’s notions of itself. Audiences no longer demanded authentic bodies, and the cultural criteria of authenticity on which William S. Hart constructed his career disappeared with the significance of the frontier that made those criteria possible.
Fig. 4.1. William S. Hart as Bowie Blake in *The Devil’s Double* (1916), Library of Congress.
Fig. 4.2. Publicity photograph of William S. Hart (February 1918), Library of Congress.
Fig. 4.3. Publicity photograph of William S. Hart (March 1920), Library of Congress.
Notes

1Quoted in Davis 148.

2See Benjamin 738.

3Quoted in Hine and Faragher 503.

4This according to an Exhibitors Herald box office poll of 2500 theater owners that ranked “the female and male motion picture stars which brought in the most money each year”; see MacCann 9.

5From Hart’s foreword to his children’s book Pinto Ben and Other Stories (New York: Britton, 1919); quoted in Davis 47.

6See Smith 9-36 for a history of western “actuality” and landscape film.

7See note 6.

8See Smith 20-28 for a discussion of the shift from landscape actualities to crime films.

9As I noted in my discussion of frontier drama, however, film also imposes a separation between the performance space of the screen and the spectatorial space of the audience.

10Quoted in Smith 175.

11See Davis 3-21 for a discussion of Hart’s itinerant youth.

12See Davis 26-44 for a discussion of Hart’s stage career before The Squaw Man.

13While Hart had acted in The Great Northwest in 1896 (Hall 182), this role had little effect on popular perceptions of him as an authentic westerner, and he continued acting in standard stage fare until 1905.

14It could be argued that the program western of the mid-1920s and beyond functions as a Baudrillardian fourth-order simulacra “that has no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum” (6). These films adopt the conventions of western corporeal representation, but evacuate the form of cultural meaning as they distill the western to a series of physical displays performed for their own sake, rather than to accomplish ideological, nationalizing work. They present pure western iconography, an empty shell of formal characteristics that masks these characteristics’ lack of correspondence to any frontier “reality.”

15Quoted in Payne 89.

16See Handley 10-42 for a discussion of the rhetorical connections between marriage and the American nation during the postbellum period, and the implications of this link for western narratives.

17See Davis 130-36 for a discussion of Hart’s break with Ince and subsequent negotiations with Famous Players and newly formed United Artists.

18The first film produced by the William S. Hart studio was Sand, released in February 1920.

19The internal quotes in this passage are portions of Deering’s warning to his band of outlaws earlier in the film, which Jordan now mocks.

20Deering similarly masks himself when he burns down Jordan’s cantina, and the illustrated intertitle appears several more times, including when Deering vows revenge against Jordan.

21There are several such characterizations of Deering in Toll Gate: he tells the sheriff, “Give me a chance to
die like a white man” before gaining permission to fight Jordan, and after Jordan attacks Deering on the train the soldiers tell the traitor, “This car’s for white men.”

22 After the men vote, against Deering’s wishes, to hold up the train, the hero foreshadows this outcome for Jordan. Jordan taunts Deering, saying, “Of course, if you’re reformed an’ afraid—”, at which Hart punches and knocks him out. Deering’s physical response to Jordan’s challenge counters this threat to his authenticity by demonstrating Deering’s corporeal superiority to the challenger and therefore his superior claim to western authenticity.

23 See Davis 185-88 for a history of Tumbleweeds and Hart’s successful lawsuit against United Artists.
Cut loose first from the code of gentility that had commanded Cooper’s unswerving loyalty, and then from the communion with God through nature that had made Leatherstocking a saint of the forest, the Western hero had become a self-reliant two-gun man who behaved in almost exactly the same fashion whether he were outlaw or peace officer.

-Henry Nash Smith

In Edward S. Ellis’s *Across Texas* (1893), cowboy Arden Strubell describes to his young Pennsylvanian companion Nick Ribsam the theory and practice of branding cattle. Nick expresses concern that “there would be a confusion of brands,” to which Strubell responds: “No; that can never happen, for the law requires the brand to be recorded in the county clerk’s office. . . . The law compels every cattle owner to record also with the country clerk the ear-marks, crops, half-crops, upper and under bits, upper and under slopes, splits, swallow-forks, and jingle-bobs. When all this is done, the ranchman can identify his property as easily as you could pick out your own father in a crowd” (88). When Nick imagines that cattle sold or transported “become pretty well covered with brands,” Strubell again assures him quickly: “So they do; after a few shiftings about, I have seen them so thickly branded that there seemed no place for anything new in that
Strubell’s insistence on the reliability of the brand is certainly problematic in light of cattle-rustling’s historical ability to cast doubt on the brand. However, this insistence resonates with another form of corporeal marking, one upon which the dime novel western insists: the “brand” placed on the bodies of its human characters. The brand is, of course, a mark placed on the body of an animal intended to denote its provenience, and Strubell’s tale foregrounds this purpose of the brand—to ensure the authenticity of the bovine western body. The dime western analogously marks the bodies of its characters in order to signify their meanings both within particular stories and with respect to the larger narratives of frontier history within which western characters circulate. The postbellum western body stands at the center of a perceived correspondence between western history and western art; it also legitimizes the participation of western art forms in shaping historical narratives. Strubell’s assertion, then, suggests that textual western bodies are marked in such a way that audiences can scrutinize their authenticity, assessing quickly where each body fits in the pantheon of western history and comparing each body’s actions to the historical “script” that shapes that character’s behavior. Palimpsestic textual “brands” reveal each character’s relationship to authentic westernness, ensuring correct historiographical assessments so that misunderstandings about a character’s authenticity, as Strubell says, “can never happen.” Indeed, the dime novel western, in both plot and characterization, is assiduous in its devotion to revealing the truth of the body; whether disguised, mistaken, lost, unknown, or de-racialized, the dime western renders visible the authentic body, and each body is invariably rewarded or punished according to its ideological role in promoting or impeding popular notions of frontier history.
Dime novels have been largely neglected by critics, and outside of Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land* (1950) dime novel texts had undergone little serious textual analysis until Christine Bold’s *Selling the Wild West* and Michael Denning’s *Mechanic Accents* both appeared in 1987. Certainly Albert Johannsen’s exhaustive bibliographical and biographical reference, *The House of Beadle and Adams and its Dime and Nickel Novels* (1950), is an invaluable resource to dime novel research, but the texts themselves remained widely unregarded. Michael Denning notes that most of what has been written about dimes comes from fans of the form, rather than from scholars. The reasons for this are often only too evident: Daryl Jones claims that by the 1850s the literary quality of the western had deteriorated into “poorly written, highly melodramatic, and embarrassingly derivative” pulp, resulting in scholarly neglect of the period between 1860 and 1902, when critics “credit Wister’s *The Virginian* with resurrecting the western from the murky realm of sub-literature” (4-5). Jones suggests that two factors explain the lack of attention paid to these works: the ephemeral nature of the dimes, and “the genre’s undeniable mediocrity”; at the same time, however, he notes the form’s influence in shaping notions of the west and the western (4-5).

Though dimes were published in a variety of genres, including the detective novel, the working-class morality tale, the sensational crime narrative, the schoolboy adventure, the travel or safari account, and the labor agitator novel, the western was both the first and the most popular dime novel genre. Christine Bold demonstrates that “the first profitable mass literature in the United States was the Beadle dime novels, in 1860. Because enthusiasm for the west coincided with the technical innovations which made mass production and mass distribution possible, westerns were the most numerous and most popular type of dime novel” (xiii). Naturally, then, the preeminent fan-zine of the
A dime novel western was entitled *Dime Novel Round-Up*, indicating the form’s ties to the western. The dime western seems to have had a remarkably broad readership. While Denning argues that the primary readership of the dimes was working-class (4, 27), his project is devoted in part to discovering the reading habits of the working class and the class inflection of the dimes, and his analysis is dedicated primarily to dime genres other than the western—detective and “mechanic” tales, labor novels, and other narratives of the city. Albert Johanssen, the indexer of the first and most popular dime publisher, on the other hand, claims that, dime publishers, at least in the early years, targeted—and at least occasionally reached—a broad audience, advertising in the *New York Tribune* and receiving favorable reviews in the *North American Review* (9). Dime author Eugene Sawyer, perhaps in a moment of self-justification, similarly claims that “It is not [. . .] only the ‘submerged tenth’ who reads cheap stories. I have been in bookshops and seen bankers and capitalists gravely paying their nickels for the same tales as their elevator boys read” (Burgess 532). The major dime novel archives in the U.S. indicate that at least some middle-class and upper-class men collected dimes, though this tells us little about the form’s broader readership. What may be said about the issue of determining dime novel audiences is that they were read by upper, middle, and working classes, though in what numbers each of these groups participated in dime readership is unclear: as Denning says, “though this question is now central to the study of popular culture, it remains a difficult and elusive one” (27).4

What is more clear is the cultural work performed by dime novels, particularly the national historiographical function served by those that purport to tell stories of the frontier. The dime novel western insisted upon its links to American frontier identity in order to claim that it was not fiction, but rather history, a claim that many other dime
novel genres (e.g., the detective story, the adventure narrative) could not make. Denning argues that “dime novels are best considered as an essentially anonymous, ‘unauthored’ discourse, not unlike journalism” (24). This formal link to journalism or even to the unauthored “history” of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, distances the dime western from the field of literature and allies it with reportorial representations of historical fact. It seems to be for this reason, as well as to protect the industry from authors who jumped from one firm to another, that “the tendency of the industry was to shift from selling an ‘author,’ who was a free laborer, to selling a ‘character,’ a trademark whose stories could be written by a host of anonymous hack writers” (Denning 20). The character, or textual performer, rather than the author, became a “brand” (to use Strubell’s analogy in a commercial sense) that the firm could market. Characters thus took precedence over all else in the novel, from a marketing as well as a cultural standpoint, and the central concern of the dime western was to represent characters on paper.

Henry Nash Smith characterizes the leading men of the dime novel western as “The Heirs of Leatherstocking,” men who, like James Fenimore Cooper’s frontier hero, mediate between “savagery” and “civilization” as they embrace the “best” of each culture. Smith laments the dime novel’s departure from certain of Leatherstocking’s values and the consequent flattening of the frontier character. However, he fails to consider three significant formal or cultural differences between Cooper’s writing and the dime novel in its heyday. The first is the shift in form from Cooper’s novels to the dimes. Cooper’s work attempts to negotiate, as Smith and others have noted, the tension between American masculinity and Victorian literary convention, which centered on the courtship of a middle- or upper-class female protagonist. Dime westerns, on the other hand, mimed the conventions of the historical novel in their early days, but passed quickly to
hypermansculinized frontier stories that were excoriated by critics of the day. The controversy over the pernicious effects of dime novels was an intensified version of the debate about fiction more broadly, and the dime western depended upon its formal links to the authentic and the historical to fend off these critiques. The western dime’s claim that it educated its readers in the history of the American frontier enabled the form to abrogate its sensational pulp roots. The western, the argument went, portrayed the frontier history that constituted Americans as a people, and dime westerns therefore modeled for their audiences an American ethic of self-reliance and physical capability that its readers could emulate.

The second shift between Cooper and the dimes is the simultaneous multiplication and codification of discourses about the frontier that enable western authors to draw upon a variety of well-established sets of ideas about who frontiersmen should be and what they should do. Though the range of western media was, as I have suggested, regarded hierarchically from most to least authentic, the sheer number of western productions and the commonalities among their characters created generic expectations about those characters. The characters themselves, in fact, are neither individuals nor imitations of a western type, but rather simulations of “the westerner,” who is derived from other such simulations. Even as representations of the authentic westerner proliferated both in quantity of characters and in the variety of mediums in which they appeared, these characters became more homogeneous. The proliferation of western forms in the period prior to and simultaneous with the rise of the dime novel thus provided dime authors with a reliable western iconography on which to base their own western characters.
The third significant cultural modulation occurred during the decades of the dime novel’s long run. The rise of performance westerns such as stage drama and Wild West shows codified and reified already circulating conceptions of corporeal authenticity. The dime novel form spans nearly seven decades, and its influence is felt in the Wild West, film, and the more serious, “literary” westerns that follow; however, even this highly popular and deeply entrenched form is affected by the predominance of performance. Western performances recode audience expectations of “authentic” westerners and of the dynamics of authenticity, shifting the site of authentication from the author who has gone west to the performer who recreates his experiences in the west on stage or in the arena. These western performers place their bodies on display for the verification of audiences, a form of corporeal authentication in which, as I have argued in the Introduction, text westerns cannot engage. The dime western thus seeks other methods of textually and visually authenticating its characters.

In 1888, six years after Cody’s show began, dime novel publishers increased the size of the books from seven by five to twelve by eight inches, in the process reducing the novels to between one-third and one-sixth of their former page length. The change was made to provide larger character pictures on the cover, an almost immediate response to performance’s shift in the dynamics of authenticity to a corporeally-based model. The dime novel’s second response to this shift in the dynamics of authenticity is to alter its character representations. As Smith points out, this often results in a flattening of characterization; such standardization of description, however, is precisely the aim of authors who seek to integrate their characters into popular discourses of the authentic westerner. If it is sometimes difficult to distinguish characters’ respective moral qualities based purely on their actions (an ambiguity that seems to be the crux of Smith’s
criticism), their physical descriptions make visible their relationship of their ideological function to popular narratives of western history. Because readers locate the bodies they read within this history, the morality of their actions is immaterial—the man justifies the means. The dime novel thus becomes deeply invested in demonstrating how its characters’ bodies continue to signify even when masked by disguise or amnesia. These formal threats to characters’ authenticity, in fact, constitute the means by which the reliability of corporeal signification is confirmed; the signifying potential of their bodies always exceeds the capacity of the mask to efface that potential.

This chapter analyzes the dime novel’s relationship to western authenticity before and after the Wild West and film western, examining the shift in authenticating strategies from Smith’s “The Sons of Leatherstocking” to “The Heirs of Buffalo Bill,” male and female characters who imitate the Wild West’s model of corporeal authenticity. By the end of the 1880s the spectatorial dynamics of the dime novel were clearly established, and would vary little over the following decades. As we shall see, the development of dime novel characters over the first three decades of the form demonstrates the dime’s liberation from antebellum fiction and its subsequent negotiation of literary legacy and contemporary culture. Though the attention paid to individual character types varies across the dime novel period, the form is constantly devoted to revealing the truth of the body and its ideological significance in American frontier history.

**The Early Dime Novel: Land and the Female Body**

Dime novel westerns prior to the 1880s vary markedly in the depth and quality of their character descriptions from those that follow the rise of the performance western. These authors, in the tradition of the antebellum border romance, often appeal to the
landscape as a source of authenticity, and generally give far more attention to the bodies of their romantic female heroines than to their frontier men. The first of the dime novels was a frontier tale: Anne S. Stephens’s *Malaeska; the Indian Wife of the White Hunter*, published by Beadle in 1860. *Malaeska* was a reprint, with some modifications, of a serial that had appeared in *The Ladies Companion* in 1839, and the story thus has much in common with the historical novel of that era, particularly the debate about miscegenation among James Fenimore Cooper (*The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), *The Wept of Wish-Ton-Wish* (1829)), Lydia Maria Child (*Hobomok* (1824)), and Catharine Maria Sedgwick (*Hope Leslie* (1827)). The early western dime novels that followed *Malaeska* would similarly adopt the example of their literary predecessors, the historical novels of the early nineteenth century. *Malaeska* tells the story of an Iroquois “princess” (Malaeska), whose father and white husband kill each other in battle. About to die, her husband sends her to his parents in Manhattan. There, Malaeska’s racist father-in-law takes her son from her, hiding his native parentage from the boy and the world, and permitting Malaeska to remain in the house only as a servant. When Malaeska attempts to take her son from his grandfather’s New York home to live with her people, the two are captured, and the boy is returned to the city. The two remain separated for years, until the boy returns home from Europe, engaged to marry a girl from the settlement near Malaeska’s home; Malaeska reveals his parentage and he, steeped in his grandfather’s racism, drowns himself.

Like the miscegenation novels of the 1820s and 1830s, *Malaeska* is a text deeply concerned with the representation of both the American landscape and the female bodies that occupy that land. *Malaeska* is set in the Catskill Mountains, a scene that became the paradigmatic American landscape of the early nineteenth century because of the work of
Cooper, Irving, and the Hudson River School of painters. Preeminent on this landscape are not the masculine bodies of Cooper’s frontiersman, but rather the female bodies of Victorian literature who compete with Leatherstocking for attention in the early Tales but are narratively defeated by him in the later novels of the cycle. After an extensive landscape description, three male characters are introduced: the first is “an Englishman of about forty,” whose clothing is described in a single sentence and of whose body not a word is provided (62). The other two, “much younger and dressed in home-made cloth, over which were loose frocks manufactured from the refuse flax or swingleed tow” (62), receive slightly more descriptive attention:

Both were handsome, but different in the cast of their features. The character of the first might be read in his gay air and springy step, as he followed close to the Englishman, dashing away the brushwood with the muzzle of his gun, and detecting with a quick eye the broken twigs or disturbed leaves which betrayed the course of the hunted bear. There was also something characteristic in the wearing of his dress, in the fox-skin cap thrown carelessly on one side of his superb head, exposing a mass of short brown curls around the left ear and temple, and in the bosom of his coarse frock, thrown open so as to give free motion to a neck Apollo might have coveted. He was a hunter, who had occasionally visited the settlement of late, but spent whole weeks in the woods, professedly in collecting furs by his own efforts, or by purchase from the tribes of Indians encamped at the foot of the mountains. (62)

This figure, in Cooper’s American mythology, is the Leatherstocking figure, the character who attracts the narrative gaze and serves as the center for the plot of the
novel—or even multiple novels. His “characteristic” dress marks him as the Cooperian hunter without further character elaboration, and his occupation links him with the Leatherstocking of the early Tales. This character, however, named William Danforth, enacts the miscegenation hinted at in Cooper by marrying Malaeska and producing a mixed-blood son, then dies in battle with Malaeska’s father. Far from serving as a model for American frontier progress, Danforth instead moves the plot toward tragedy. He is, in fact, marked more by the absence of his body than by its presence: he throws his cap into a pond to feign his presence under the water so that he can escape from Malaeska’s tribe (72-73), and his absence permits his son’s adoption by Danforth’s parents, Malaeska’s exile, and the secret that will lead to his son’s suicide.

The third figure introduced in the scene initially appears to serve as an Edward Oliver Effingham character, the high-born Englishman who disguises himself as a hunter before bridging old and new worlds through his marriage to Elizabeth Temple in Cooper’s *The Pioneers*. Malaeska’s Arthur Jones was more sedate in his looks, and less buoyant in his air. There was an intellectual expression in his high, thoughtful brow, embrowned though it was by exposure. A depth of thought in his serious eye, and a graceful dignity in his carriage, bespoke him as one of those who hide deeper feeling under an appearance of coldness and apathy. He had been a schoolmaster in the Bay State, from whence he had been drawn by the bright eyes and merry laugh of one Martha Fellows, a maiden of seventeen, whose father had moved to the settlement at Catskill the preceding summer, and to whom, the report said, he was to be married whenever a minister, authorized to perform the ceremony, should find his way to the settlement. (62-63)

Arthur Jones, however, quickly disappears from narrative significance. He shoots an Indian, precipitating the battle in which Malaeska’s husband and father are killed, then marries Martha Fellows and reappears only to accompany his daughter Sarah to New
York and back. Eschewing Cooper’s narrative competition between hero and heroine, then, Stephens renders her male characters narratively invisible and concentrates the story almost exclusively on the latter—at least until the tale’s climax.

The disappearance of all three of these men leaves Stephens’s female characters in the narrative spotlight. The first of these to be introduced is Martha Fellows, seen through the eyes of Jones, who “watched with a jealous feeling the blush as it deepened and glowed on her embrowned cheek; he saw the sparkling pleasure of her hazel eyes, and the pretty dimples gathering about her red lips, like spots of sunlight flickering through the leaves of a red rose” (68). Her physical response to Danforth marks her as something of a coquette, an impression that is not fully eradicated by her subsequent tears as Jones goes off to fight and the revelation that her attentions to Danforth marked her knowledge of his secret marriage (69, 85). Martha’s apparent duplicity and her “air of a spoiled child” (70) renders descriptions of her purely physical, without the attendant markers of individual authenticity that attend the novel’s other two female characters: Malaeska, and Martha’s daughter Sarah.

It comes as no surprise that Malaeska is often characterized in natural terms—e.g., “she crouched, like a frightened hare” (91)—or that she is of noble Indian lineage. However, her body also serves as the node that links the other characters together, at least in the first portion of the novel. The burial scene of father and husband is really about Malaeska; four bodies are depicted in this scene, and she connects them all, as daughter, wife, or mother to each. Stephens’s depiction of Malaeska’s mourning—“her face bowed on her bosom, stupefied with the overwhelming poignancy of her grief,” her body
“motionless and lost in sorrow” (84)—mirrors the novel’s climax, as Malaeska is found lifeless on her son’s grave (163), the final body of the four in the earlier scene to fall and the last of these bodies to be rendered textually “visible.”

Malaeska’s body becomes a spectatorial object most explicitly when she travels to Manhattan to meet Danforth’s parents. She is described in the stereotypical Indian garb typical of nineteenth-century descriptions of natives, complete with feathers, beads, and bow and arrows, in a description that makes Malaeska an object of visual consumption both for the urbanites of the text and for Stephens’s largely urban readership: “It was a strange sight to the phlegmatic inhabitants of Manhattan, when Malaeska passed through their streets in full costume, and with the proud, free tread of her race” (89). The dynamics of Stephens’s description place the reader in the position of these Manhattanites, witnessing the textual display of this “strange sight” just as the spectators who are by implication present in Stephens’s scene treat her as a physical display. Her dress is even described as a “costume,” indicating that she is performing for two audiences: those who see her body in the street, and those who read her body in the text. In fact, that Stephens describes Malaeska’s observers only indirectly renders Malaeska the only body in this scene, directing the reader’s attention without distraction to the body of the Indian.

In these instances, Malaeska is displayed only in ways unremarkable in the nineteenth century—as disappearing Indian, as a type of a race that is often placed on display for white consumption, and as “evidence” of the tragic results of miscegenation. In order to become an appropriate spectatorial object for the sentimental text, the signs of race on Malaeska’s own body and the body of her child must be effaced. In the logic of sentimental display, “true” femininity is signified by its absolute corporeal legibility—
women who are deserving of the reader’s attention cannot hide the thoughts and feelings that are made visible on their bodies. This form of individual authenticity supercedes all other concerns, and can even occlude race, as in Malaeska. She is first introduced when Danforth enters a wigwam just before the Indian battle begins: “She wore no paint—her cheek was round and smooth, and large gazelle-like eyes gave a soft brilliancy to her countenance, beautiful beyond expression” (71). As we expect, Malaeska is characterized by her resemblance to nature (“gazelle-like” eyes), but she is also explicitly unlike standard nineteenth-century Indians in her lack of “paint.” This absence signifies both her unwillingness to engage in the combat that will shortly occur, and her inability or refusal to hide the signifying power of her body. To be unpainted is to disavow the artifice that permits coquetry or dissimulation in characters like Martha. Malaeska is also depicted as sartorially dissimilar from her tribe: though “her dress was a robe of dark chintz, open at the throat, and confined at the waist by a narrow belt of wampum,” this dress, along with “the bead bracelets on her naked arms, and the embroidered moccasins laced over her feet, was the only Indian ornament about her” (71-72). While we are left to wonder what other “Indian ornaments” might mark her as more “Indian” than these, Stephens’s syntax neatly skips over the bracelets and moccasins, using the singular “was” and “ornament” to efface these racial markers. In case we have missed the point that Malaeska is atypical, Stephens adds: “Even her hair, which all of her tribe wore laden with ornaments, and hanging down the back, was braided and wreathed in raven bands over her smooth forehead” (71-72). These markers of Malaeska’s individual authenticity, if not her conformity to discourses of historiographical Indian authenticity, do not go unread by her husband, who is moved by the immutable external signs of her sincerity: “That beautiful child—that young mother kneeling in her humiliation—those large dark eyes, dim with
the intensity of her solicitude, and that voice so full of tender entreaty—the husband’s heart could not withstand them. His bosom heaved, tears gathered in his eyes, and raising the Indian and her child of his bosom, he kissed them both again and again” (76).

Malaeska’s corporeal signification prompts an appropriately corporeal response on the part of Danforth, who models the sympathy readers should feel with Malaeska.

Nor do changes in Malaeska’s body with age mute its signifying power. When Malaeska returns to her tribe after losing her son, Stephens describes the changes that have occurred in Malaeska’s body during the intervening period: “Malaeska had changed greatly during the years that she had been absent among the whites. If the lightness and grace of youth were gone, a more imposing dignity came in their place. Habits of refinement had kept her complexion clear and her hair bright. She had left them a slender, spirited young creature; she returned a serious woman, but queenly withal” (114). Despite the “great changes” that Stephens references in the first sentence of her description, the essential characteristic of Malaeska’s appearance seems unchanged: her body’s ability to signify her character. That character, of course, is unrelentingly authentic. As Sarah Jones tells her mother after the young girl’s first meeting with Malaeska, “There was nothing about her that did not seem like the whites but her skin, and that was not so very dark” (123). In nineteenth-century racial terms, darkness has both a physical and a metaphoric dimension. Malaeska’s lack of dark skin thus marks her as legible, honest, authentic. Unlike standard depictions of “bad” Indians, who dissimulate their intentions, Malaeska is invariably precisely what she appears to be. She is, as Sarah tells William, “an Indian, but not a common one, I assure you” (149); “she is a white in education, feeling, everything but color” (151).
As Malaeska’s deracialized body links the major characters in the first half of the novel, Sarah Jones’s connects them in the second portion. Like Malaeska, Sarah’s body evinces her thoughts and feelings; her whiteness, however, makes that “essence” eminently legible: “all the elements of an intellectual, delicate, and high-souled woman slumbered in the bosom of [Martha’s] child. They beamed in the depths of her large blue eyes, broke over her pure white forehead, like perfume from the leaves of a lily, and made her small mouth eloquent with smiles and the beauty of unpolished thoughts (124). Sarah’s body is described in terms of what it demonstrates, the interior sentiment it externalizes and makes visible to observers. While Malaeska’s body must give up its life, Sarah’s remains to bear witness to the destruction of the Danforth home at the end of the novel. She is the only major character in the novel untouched by miscegenation or artifice, and therefore the only character that is entirely legible. Like Malaeska, time and experience do not change her significantly; when Sarah returns home from her educational exile in New York, she is

the same warm-hearted, intelligent girl as ever. She was a little more delicate in person, more quiet and graceful in her movements; and love had given depth of expression to her large blue eyes, a richer tone to her sweet voice, and had mellowed down the buoyant spirit of the girl to the softness and grace of womanhood. Thoroughly and trustfully had she given her young affections, and her person seemed imbued with gentleness from the fount of love, that gushed up so purely in her heart. (148)

If anything, Sarah’s time away from home has rendered her body more legible than before her departure, as it has stripped away youthful distractions. She is, in fact, “love” embodied, and Stephens notes that this sentiment is visible on her body. Malaeska
describes this legibility when she tells Sarah, “You need not tell me more in words, I can read it in the tone of your voice, in the light of that modest eye” that she will soon be married (153).

This is not to say that Sarah is ever inscrutable. In Sarah’s account of their first meeting, Malaeska gazes at Sarah after the girl reveals her name and relationship to Martha, whom the Indian met after Danforth’s death: “her eyes were fixed upon my face with a strange stare, as if she did not know what she was gazing so hard at. She looked in my face, in this way, for more than a minute after I had done speaking” (121). Satisfied by what she sees, Malaeska tells the girl her story, a testament to both Malaeska’s skill at reading Sarah’s individual authenticity and the absolute legibility of the girl’s body.

Similarly, William’s response to Sarah, in fact, mirrors that of his mother in his own first encounter with the girl. As they talk in his grandparents’ home, “there was something so innocent in Sarah’s loveliness—something so unstudied in her graceful manner, that the very contrast she presented to the artificial women of the world with whom he had been of late familiar, gave her an additional charm in the young man” (139). Dissimulation is not limited to the Indian, but may also be a tactic of the “artificial woman” of Europe; Sarah, then, presents an ideal of antebellum American femininity—absolutely authentic and legible in her appearance.¹² She is also, notably, awarded the privilege of the last word in the novel, as the only character in view when the Danforth home is destroyed and the tale ends.

The final major character in the novel, William, is the disguised character whose identity must be revealed. The stage is set for his unknowing simulation of whiteness in the tale’s first description of him, as a baby: “Danforth kissed the child, whose eyes certainly bore a striking resemblance to his own; and parting the straight, black hair from
a forehead which scarcely bore a tinge of its mother’s blood, muttered, ‘It’s a pity the little fellow is not quite white’” (72). His similarity to his father, however, will prevent others—and even himself—from discerning his mixed-blood status. Even William’s eyes, the darkness of which is a standard nineteenth-century indicator of miscegenated ancestry, are described as similar to his father’s, and when Malaeska touches the boy’s cheek, it becomes “rosy with English blood” (72). Mrs. Danforth reinforces this reading of William’s body in her first look at the baby:

He is, poor child, he is! . . . like him, as he was when we were both young, and he the blessing of our hearts. Oh, John, do you remember his smile?—how his cheek would dimple when we kissed it! Look up on this poor, fatherless creature; they are all here again; the sunny eye and the broad forehead. Look upon him, John, for my sake—for the sake of our dead son, who prayed us with his last breath to love his son. Look upon him! (92)

William’s grandmother implores her husband to witness the boy’s resemblance to his white father, believing the infant incapable of racial simulation. Her entreaty, in fact, is to a visual assessment of William’s status, to “look upon him!” and there see the whiteness of their son. Her husband, however, is aware of the boy’s unconscious simulation of whiteness—or dissimulation of Indianness—and desires to tear “the two races asunder, in the very person of his grandchild, could the pure half of his being been thus preserved” (94).

The reader, of course, is also aware of William’s dissimulation, and Stephens provides signs of his Indianness that should be readily visible to others in the novel. As Malaeska teaches the boy to hunt, for example, he demonstrates the repressed characteristics of his Indian parentage: “The boy started up—his eye brightened and his thin nostrils dilated, the savage instincts of his nature broke out in all his features” (99). And Martha’s assessment of the arriving groom provides hints of his disavowed lineage:
“she saw her husband and daughter coming up from the creek, accompanied by a slight, dark, and remarkably graceful young man, elaborately, but not gayly dressed, for the fashion of the time, and betraying even in his air and walk peculiar traits of high-breeding and refinement” (146). His darkness and gracefulness are unmistakable traits of the Indian in antebellum discourse, and his dress and “peculiar traits” should make him an object of suspicion, as the audience is well aware. When William is finally informed by Malaeska of his “sable birthright” (160), the incongruity between his own and others’ assessments of his body precipitates his suicide and his mother’s death. Misreading or misrepresenting the body, the moral is, leads to tragedy.

The visual dynamics of Malaeska influenced the dime novel western through subsequent decades. Increasingly, however, the authors of dime westerns attempted to push the boundaries of Stephens’s model, while recognizing that their audience expected a certain degree of similarity. The Texas Hawks; Or, The Strange Decoy (1872), by Joseph Badger, Jr., for example, relies heavily on landscape description at the expense of characterization; the novel begins with a five-paragraph description of a hunting camp that, by his admission, is of the type that “have been described time and time again” (9). This detailed landscape is followed by a brief, general description of the characters that inhabit the camp:

As already incidentally mentioned, the party consisted of half a score of hunters, all young—the eldest scarcely numbering thirty years, while one or two were a third less than that. They were such men as can only be found apart from the great cities, nurtured in the broad West, their limbs and lungs fully developed by the clear, pure atmosphere of the prairies. They would have been out of place in a ladies’ drawing-room, because they were at home here. Their hair was worn long; scarcely one of their faces had ever known the touch of a razor, giving their beards a glossy silkiness seldom seen, that even the scorching sun, or crinkling winds of winter could not destroy. (10)
Even this brief description of the hunters conflates them with the landscape—products of the prairie atmosphere and untarnished by the “razor” of civilization. Indians are no longer visible on this landscape, their racialized bodies supplanted by white hunters whose presence on the landscape is naturalized in similar terms. Authority and authenticity in these descriptions are located in the landscape, and characters are significant only insofar as they demonstrate the effects of topography on the body. Badger thus reifies the land at the expense of character.

The relative insignificance of these male bodies contrasts with a description given by one of the hunters of the “wild woman”:

At first I could only see her head and shoulders. On her head she wore a small cap of some kind of fur, with two or three brightly-dyed eagle-feathers, such as the Kiowas wear. Her dress—what I could see of it—seemed to be made of tanned fawn-skin, trimmed in Indian style. . . . Now I could see that she was white—though her complexion was that of a rich brunette. A more beautiful face I never saw. I can’t describe it—only that her great big eyes were black and shining as those of a deer; that her figure was the most superbly developed, the most symmetrical that I ever beheld in my life. Boys, that face and figure has haunted me ever since. If that woman is as good and pure as she is beautiful, she would be well worth dying for!” suddenly added Hawksley, puffing vigorously at his extinguished pipe. (10-12)

This woman, her descriptive moniker evocative of the wildness of the prairie on which she lives, is also associated with that landscape. However, her body is an object of observation in ways that those of the hunters are not. If the spectatorial dynamic of the hunting camp locates the hunters themselves as products of the landscape, that of the “wild woman’s” appearance marks landscape features as outgrowths of her body. Like Malaeska, her fur hat, eagle feather, and deerskin dress transform the natural inhabitants of that landscape into ornaments for her body, as does the association of her eyes with
deer. These evocations of her wildness, however, are tempered by references to her "symmetrical" figure, a textual marker of the romantic "purity" to which Hawksley refers. Landscape and female body are the spectatorial center of this text.

A similar reification of female display is at work in Edward S. Ellis’s *The Hunter’s Cabin* (1862). Ellis begins his narrative with a brief and indirect description of Sylvester Stanton that contrasts markedly with his depiction of Stanton’s daughter, Annie. Ellis describes Sylvester Stanton as:

>a man about forty-five years of age, dark-haired, heavy-browed, strong-limbed and muscular. An inveterate hunter, he possessed all the skill, daring, and peculiarities of that class. He spent days in wandering through the woods with no companion save his dog and gun, sleeping by his lonely camp-fire with no roof but the blue canopy of heaven, with no sentinel but his faithful brute. Miles and miles he wandered off in pursuit of the deer, oblivious to the peril that threatened both himself and his child. Ten years before he had emigrated to this spot with his young wife and lovely child, both of whom he loved with the fondest affection. (10)

In contradistinction to post-1880s descriptions of the western male, Ellis’s description focuses on Stanton’s actions rather than his physical appearance. These actions invoke Cooper’s hunter. The description certainly tempers its Leatherstocking-like description of the solitary male by referring to his family, but as we are told shortly thereafter, Stanton’s wife has died in the interim, leaving him free from romantic attachment. Stanton thus stands, Leatherstocking-like, between civilization and wilderness, but in the case of Ellis’s hero the balance is tilted toward domesticity.

This focus on Stanton’s familial status is consistent with the narrative’s focus on his daughter. Ellis’s description of Annie emphasizes her body far more than does the description of her father:

>Annies Stanton was about eighteen years of age, the image of what her mother had been before her. Her figure was graceful but rather petite. Her hair was of a light brown, her eyes full and of a deep blue; her nose small
and slightly Roman, and her teeth as white and smooth as pearls. Her complexion was as rich and luxurious as the crimson side of a peach. Her hands and feet, so symmetrically molded, would have set a sculptor in rapture. (10)

Unlike Ellis’s description of Stanton, nothing of Annie’s character and occupations is explicitly stated in this sketch. Ellis, rather, draws on well-worn tropes of femininity to evoke her character through her physical appearance. Annie’s character is revealed to attentive readers through her physical descriptors, as she is physically nearly identical to the hundreds of sentimental heroines who have preceded her. This dynamic of corporeal signification has, in fact, much in common with displays of western men in the decades that follow.

**The 1880s: The Body of the Performer**

The 1880s mark the rise of the historical performer in the dime novel. As we have seen, the heyday of the frontier stage drama was in full swing by this decade. Buffalo Bill Cody had become the subject of frontier stories nearly ten years earlier, and began performing on stage in 1872. The cultural pieces were therefore in place for a model of authenticity that focused squarely on the body of this new breed of western performer. Indeed, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West was born in 1883, touring its first full season the following year. The dime novels of the 1880s begin exploring the demands and opportunities offered by these shifted conceptions of corporeal authenticity. In turn, the ability of audiences to scrutinize performers’ actual bodies created a cognitive perception of the authenticity of those bodies. According to the logic of individual and historiographical authenticity, the accuracy of physical descriptions in the text ensured that those texts’ plots were historically faithful as well. For this reason, the dime novel in
the 1880s was often an instrument of the Wild West and other performance westerns, providing biographical context to help audiences read performers’ bodies, as well as creating publicity for the performances in which they worked. This apparent faith in the signifying power of bodies elided the capability of text to inform corporeal legibility. Despite nineteenth-century faith in the reliability of corporeal signification, these western bodies, of course, were embedded with meaning only when assimilated into discourses of western identity that were often established textually. Bodies without a narrative to inform them could not signify, despite the contentions of western performers to the contrary. The dime novel and performance western therefore relied upon each other for the authentication each could not provide: performance made visible the body that was textually absent, and text infused performing bodies with cultural meaning.

This cultural shift was accompanied by diminishing descriptions of the female body in the dime novel. E. Z. C. Judson (writing under the pseudonym Ned Buntline) provided this description of William F. (Buffalo Bill) Cody’s twin sisters, Lottie and Lillie, in *Buffalo Bill and His Adventures in the West* (1886): “They look alike, are dressed alike, and are exceedingly beautiful. I will not waste time in description—just imagine hazel eyes, dark brown hair, slightly brunette complexion, figure of perfect symmetry, and you will have them before you” (8). Though this sparing portrait is followed up by a characterization by one of the novel’s minor characters as “purtier than any pictur that was ever painted” (8), it is clear that the bodies of these two women are not the text’s primary object of description. Judson’s aesthetic simile asserts that the signifying power of even these subordinate bodies exceeds the representational capabilities of the visual arts—their physical conventionality situates the two girls in the context of the sentimental novel, making it clear that they represent the positive ideals of
such narratives. Judson notably makes no claim that the girls are “purtier than” his own textual portrait, despite its brevity and conventionality. The distinction he creates between visual and textual representation makes an implicit claim on the part of the author that text possesses a greater capability to represent the body than does painting.

Judson, in fact, precedes his description of the novel’s three major characters with a disclaimer: “I don’t like to use time or space for description, but as the three men now before us are real, not fictitious characters, I think it is due to them and the reader to paint pen-portraits of the trio” (12-13). The sort of physical description Judson eschews is the only task a portrait painter undertakes. Judson, then, makes a second claim for the superiority of text over visual art, and allies his own description of the men not with art, but with history. In the cultural economy of the postbellum western, to side with art in the dichotomy between art and history is to disavow historiographical authenticity, the western’s primary critical category. The bodies of the Cody sisters are thus subordinated to the historically verifiable bodies of the text’s male characters, and Judson suggests that his “pen-portraits” of the men are history, not art.

The artistic limitations of his descriptions, in fact, become clear as he begins to describe Cody and his two companions, of whom he states: “Three more perfect men, in point of personal beauty, never trod the earth” (12). Judson first provides a description of Wild Bill:

six feet and one inch in height, straight as an ash, broad in shoulder, round and full in chest, slender in the waist, swelling out in muscular proportions at hips and thighs, with tapering limbs, small hands and feet, his form was a study. His face, open and clean, had regular features, the nose slightly aquiline. His large bright eyes, now soft and tender in expression, were a bluish gray in color, shaded by lashes which often dropped over his bronzed cheek as he looked down, somewhat confused in female society, to which he was unused. His long brown hair fell in wavy masses over his shoulders, but it was fine, soft and glossy as silk. (12-13)
This description contrasts sharply with Judson’s pictures of the Cody twins, in both its length and its detail. The body of the “real” male has replaced that of the “romantic” female as object of textual gaze. Wild Bill’s demure downward gaze in the presence of the opposite sex, in fact, marks him as an object of visual consumption very similar to that of the sentimental heroine. If, as I argue in the next chapter, Owen Wister struggles to represent the visual dynamics of a male narrator watching the body of The Virginian’s (1902) title character, here Judson grapples with the history of literary sentimentalism that has located women as spectatorial objects. He negotiates the demands of this history by merely reversing the dynamic, placing Wild Bill under a gaze that transforms his body into a feminized spectatorial object.

Despite the sentimental overtones of this description, however, Judson’s “pen-portrait” of Bill is paradigmatic. In fact, descriptions of “authentic” westerns bodies are highly imitative and allow for very little variation, as is evident in Judson’s subsequent description of Cody: “The same picture will do for Buffalo Bill, only this difference noted. The eyes of the latter were nearly a blue in color, his height one inch less, and his hair a little more wavy and a shade lighter” (13). The requirements of western corporeal authenticity require that authentic bodies look much like Wild Bill; in needing to provide a second character description immediately, Judson has “pen-painted” himself into a corner. The two characters whom he has just described (like the Cody twins) look nearly exactly alike, as indeed they must in order to signal their authenticity. To vary even slightly, in fact, is to risk signifying otherwise, as Judson’s description of the third cowboy indicates:
Dave Tutt, nearly of the same height, was equally well formed, but here the resemblance ceased.

His eyes were black as jet and deeply set, though his features were perfect, and, when he chose, his expression soft and winning. His hair, curling slightly, was black and glossy. But with all his beauty, there was a sensual expression about his mouth so utterly different from that in the other two, and a fierce, passionate longing in his eyes, which made the two girls, instinctive in their purity, shrink from him.

Lillie, toward whom his glances seemed from the first to be directed, especially felt, and scarcely could conceal, an aversion. (13)

Despite his “resemblance,” the minute differences in Tutt’s physical description indicate his substantively different identity. His ability to choose a “soft and winning” expression demonstrate that he is willing to manipulate his body’s appearance for effect. This choice differentiates him from the individually authentic westerner, whose body always signifies in harmony with a presumed internal essence. Moreover, Tutt’s duplicity is visible in his eyes, the instrument of perception, and his mouth, the instrument of verbal representation. Visual perception and verbal truth-telling are the coin in trade of the western, as to undermine their reliability would be to render assessments of authenticity arbitrary and therefore meaningless. Tutt, in fact, misreads the visual dynamics of the scene; though Judson locates authentic male bodies as the appropriate spectatorial objects of the text, Tutt gazes at the girls, who index appropriate audience response in their revulsion. 13

Judson concludes this short scene by remarking: “Now this most unpleasant picturing duty is over, and I can heave ahead on my story” (13). The irony of this remark is that the story has already been told in his descriptions. The bodies of Judson’s characters signify their roles in a narrative struggle to claim the right of simulacral historiographic significance. We already know from these descriptions who is good, who is bad, who is
the object of our gaze, who is duplicitous and who “authentic,” who will continue to live and signify westernness and who must be snuffed out both physically and in literary-historiographical narratives of frontier progress.

The audience’s ability to read characters appropriately accounts for much of the appeal of the dime novel, as even its adolescent readers can recognize that they are privy to plot knowledge that the novel’s villains do not possess. Corporeal literacy also allies the audience with characters who read the bodies of the story correctly. These sharp-eyed heroes and dew-eyed heroines serve as the audience’s “eyes” for many character descriptions, trustworthy not only as objects of visual assessment but also as subjects of that appraisal. These are invariably the “good” characters of the dimes, whose visibility is matched by their vision. Their vision, moreover, is not merely active in its communication with the audience, but also at times in its ability to “speak” to characters within the text. Later in *Buffalo Bill and His Adventures in the West*, for example, Lillie is taken captive, notices the admiration of one of her captors, and decides to transmit him a visual message: “A look—ah! how much a look can say!—told the lesser ruffian of the two that the captive liked him better than she did her captor, if no more. His eyes met hers again and again, and a glow of strange pleasure flushed his face, for he certainly saw in her look an encouragement of hopes which were but too pleasing” (60). Lillie is able to read her two captors sufficiently well to know which of them is the most manipulable reader; not coincidentally in the ideology of the dime novel, that character is also the most susceptible to her designs. Unsurprisingly, her visual interlocutor “mutters,” “By all the reptiles that ever crawled, Dave Tutt goes under if she says I can take his place, . . . And if I can read eyes, that is what she means’” (60). As merely “the lesser ruffian,” however, he cannot “read eyes” correctly; corporeal signification and corporeal literacy are closely
linked, and his own duplicity prevents him from discerning the artifice of the girl. He infers Lillie’s romantic intent, as she plans, but fails to understand it as an escape ploy rather than as a spontaneous and candid expression of sentiment. The dime novel thus constructs characters both by presenting them for the reader’s inspection and by demonstrating their ability or inability to read other characters in the text.

The spectatorial dynamics that evolved during the first three decades of the dime novel’s existence determined much of its content and message in the years thereafter. The obvious question for dime authors and publishers, then, was how to continue to create interest in a form that was largely static, and insisted on the legibility of bodies to the point that there was little character development, or even mystery about the identities and fates of characters. The dime western was fundamentally conservative in its reification of dominant constructions of frontier history, and the form’s creators could rely on audiences’ desire to see the nation progress textually and to reaffirm their notions of the mechanism and meaning of that progress. However, dime novels were also primarily escapist, and required some element of suspense to ensure that readers would continue to consume them. The dime therefore developed a number of strategies to both temporarily destabilize characters’ identities and to reaffirm the fundamental inalterability and signifying power of the authentic western body.

“You Say it Has Not Wholly Disguised Me”: Dime Western Disguise and Revelation

Beginning with the racial disguise of William in *Malaeska*, dime westerns often relied heavily on various forms of disguise as a plot device. Much like their stage counterparts, characters in dime westerns were often disguised, mistaken, amnesiac, lost, or de-racialized, and the plots of individual dimes centered on the eventual revelation of
the authentic self. In many cases, the reader becomes aware of the deception early in the book, which permits authentication on two levels: first, the reader can identify the signs of the authentic body, instances the artifice becomes visible and readers can take pleasure in their complicit participation in the ruse. Second, these moments test the vision of other characters in the tale by identifying which of them are able to detect the imposture. These are typically the heroes and (less often) heroines of the dime, the historiographically authentic characters with whom the reader is supposed to identify because of their significance to popular American frontier history. However, characters with such insight may also be villains whose own dissimulation enables them to detect artifice in others. Disguise in the dime western thus reaffirms the signifying power of the body by rendering visible the authentic body that has been masked by plot twists, and it reveals the moral dynamics of the story by indicating who possesses the visual acuity or duplicity to assess these dynamics quickly and accurately.

_Merciless Matt: Or, Red Thunderbolt’s Secret_ (1872), by “Captain Charles Howard,”14 demonstrates how far this tactic is pushed in the dime western. The novel tells the story of the events surrounding the Creek Indian attack on Fort Mims, Alabama on August 30, 1813. Matt Dean, a fictional character whose family has been killed during the battle, seeks vengeance against the tribe responsible for their deaths. Nearly every character in the novel is disguised in some way. The most simple of these is the Creek Indians who, fearing the “White Slayer,” dress as Cherokee and Chickasaw—a disguise which is, however, ineffective, as their hunter sees through their disguises (17). Other characters adopt disguises that are much more complex and often figurative, as well as physical.
Myra Dean, the daughter whom Matt believes was killed at Fort Mims, is depicted in multivalent disguise: she is in fact alive, unbeknownst to all but two characters; she has gone insane, losing her sense of self, place and time and going by the name “Snowflake”; and she is hidden in the cave of the mixed-blood Creek Weatherford. Moreover, Rafe Ringbolt, a “renegade American disguised among the Creeks” (42), attempts to further mask Myra’s survival so that he can marry her (69-70). Myra’s identity is visible through her multiple disguises when Ringbolt encounters her in the cave, marking her body as authentic signifier of identity, even in the absence of her own self-recognition:

Rafe Ringbolt saw that the face before him was as pale as the leaves of the water-lilies, and the eyes emitted a light which he had not seen flash from human orbs for many a long year. The new-comer was fantastically arrayed in the skins of the snowy fox. Not a somber shade relieved the whiteness of her garments, but the renegade caught a glimpse of auburn hair, stealing from beneath her snowy plume. She shrunk back when near the renegade, but a word from Nowedah infused new courage into her timid heart, and she crouched before Ringbolt with a perceptive shudder.

‘How like yet how very unlike Myra Dean!’ murmured the outlaw, with his eyes fixed upon the face of the girl. ‘But yet I think ‘tis she; but good God! her mind is completely gone—as crazy as a trapped mouse.’

The girl’s voice was not needed to confirm the supposition of the man, for the eyes which were fastened upon Ringbolt, with a stare terribly akin to lunacy, told their story only too truly.” (42-43)

Myra’s pale face signifies her deracialized status, as she is ostensibly an Indian queen named Snowflake—a moniker that itself suggests her whiteness. The girl’s “auburn hair” reinforces this impression, as does the whiteness of her “snow fox” pelt clothing, like her skin with a “somber shade.” The “light” emitted from her eyes again underlines her whiteness, and also suggests the power of the body to signify both identity and loss of sanity. Despite her own loss of self-awareness, her body continues to correctly signify her identity—individual authenticity persists despite the apparent absence of individuality.
The girl’s identity is definitively exposed when she regains her sanity. Sitting in the cave with Nowedah, the light in Myra’s eyes changes, and she responds to the Indian woman’s query: “‘Snowflake?’ cried the girl. ‘Woman, I am not Snowflake. Tell me, who art thou, and how came I here? Oh, where have I slept so long? Woman, I say, tell me all about myself. I can recall but little now, and that little is terribly vague and uncertain’” (74). The change in the signifying “light” indicates the return of the signified—that identity that the body has revealed throughout the story despite the absence of its referent. Unlike the audience’s awareness of her, Myra’s self-awareness is yet incomplete, as she implores Nowedah to “tell me all about myself” in order to reconnect her own self-conception with the experiences her body has undergone in the months of her stupor.

The power of Myra’s eyes is recalled by the nickname of her betrothed, Len Marion. The insane Myra refers to him as “Pretty Eyes,” a name that her Indian guardian Nowedah cannot link to any character (53). The audience, however, learns that this sobriquet refers to Len when his Creek friend Neowathla refers to him as Pretty Eyes (63). Len’s body is also a site of contested narratives. He claims that a red round mark above his eye should tell a story of his bravery in the Fort Mims battle, but Matt refuses to believe because “men saw” Len sneak away as the battle began (64). Matt tells Len, “whenever I look at you, I will see you flying to the rubbish of Fort Mimms, leaving my family to perish unprotected”; Len responds, “You needn’t look at me often, then, and I promise to keep out of your sight as much as possible” (66). This instance speaks to the fundamentally unstable status of the signifying body: the body itself cannot speak, but rather resonates with narratives that are superimposed on the viewer’s understanding about who and what that body is. Len’s “disguise,” then, is merely narrative, existing in the gap between what his body signifies and what others say about him. Because of what
Matt thinks he knows about Len, he reads the young body as inauthentic—lacking correspondence between his apparent strength and courage and his flight at For Mims. Authenticity indicates correspondence between narratives about a body and the appearance of that body. When these two conflict, readers and characters within the text must decide which to believe, and in this case Matt incorrectly chooses narrative over body. The lesson for the reader is that we can trust visual assessment over narrative, and should therefore judge characters according to their textual “appearance.”

Ironically, Len’s promise to “keep out of your sight” is precisely what he should not do. According to the logic of the western dime, the signifying power of Len’s body should eventually break through its narrative “paint” to reveal his character. In fact, for the reader versed in dime morality, Len’s individual authenticity is apparent in his ability to read others. When Ringbolt tells Matt that the woman hidden in Weatherford’s cave is not Myra, Len believes the renegade is lying (70); as the reader knows that Ringbolt has already recognized the girl (42), Len’s vision is verified and his trustworthiness established. To ensure that the reader has not missed the point, we are told that during their hike to Myra’s cave “Len Marion never removed his eyes from Rafe Ringbolt and the renegade could not but believe that he was a suspected man—that his heart was being read by his youthful rival” (79). Reading hearts and bodies is what authentic westerners do, and Len’s ability to do so prefigures his absolution from the cowardice of which Matt has accused him and his marriage to Myra at the tale’s end (102). Ringbolt, on the other hand, dies because of his deception (100).

Len’s accuser, Matt Dean, is perhaps incapable of discerning Len’s identity because his own is uncertain and bound up in disguise. Matt dresses as a Creek Indian to take revenge against the tribe for killing his wife and daughter, and disguises himself so
well that General Coffee fails to recognize him. Matt remarks, “If your keen eye can’t
pierce my paint, then I reckon as how I’m safe, General” (18). Coffee responds, “Matt
Dean, you can fool the oldest of them” (18), completing an exchange that marks Matt’s
ability to manipulate his appearance so effectively as to “fool the oldest of them,” his
recognition that this manipulation is merely a disguise that does not alter his white
western identity, and the non-western general’s inability to visually assess western
bodies. The phrase “pierce my paint” marks Matt’s belief that his disguise functions
merely as a shell over his skin, and to “pierce” it would be to see the authentic Matt that
must be hidden to accomplish his violent aims. However, Matt’s disguise is more
complex than a mere skin covering. He adopts the “paint” to become the feared Creek
killer, the “White Slayer.” Matt’s disguise enables him to remain unrecognized while
externalizing his vengeful impulses—he is the White Slayer, whether he wears the paint
or not. In fact, it could be argued that Matt’s everyday dress is his disguise, as it masks
his violence and permits him to live in civilized society. His identity as Matt allows him
to dissimulate the “vengeance” that is his self-proclaimed purpose for living. Even the
moniker “White Slayer” is ambiguous in its significance: is this figure a white who kills,
or one who kills whites, specifically the “civilized” white within Matt Dean?

Moreover, Matt possesses a hidden identity of which he is himself unaware but
that is known to the mixed-blood Indian Weatherford. Weatherford is a historical figure
whose role in the Fort Mims attack is debated, but in the novel he is charged with leading
the massacre. He rescues Myra, shelters her in the cave with Nowedah, and spares Len’s
life at Fort Mims. Throughout the novel, Weatherford suggests that he possesses a secret
about Matt, a secret that he reveals at the tale’s end. Weatherford is Matt’s half-brother:
their father was a white trader who married a white girl; after giving birth to a son, she
died and the trader departed after marking his son’s arm with an identifying tattoo. He then married a Seminole woman, who gave birth to Weatherford. The trader soon died, but left a mark on Weatherford’s arm that was identical to that on Matt’s (101). The mark on Matt’s body is therefore a marker of his Indian-like character, a mark that Matt has failed to read on his own body because he is unaware of who he is and is therefore unable to read himself or others. If not exactly a “half-breed,” as Weatherford calls him, Matt is related to the man he had considered his greatest enemy and the murderer of his family; in fact, the man is his brother and the savior of his daughter. Matt’s inability to read others’ bodies has led him to an inauthentic relationship to himself, as well as to his daughter and half-brother. While Matt may be “merciless,” as the title suggests, his more important quality in the context of this narrative is his lack of authenticating vision.

For other characters, however, lack of an identifiable past can serve to heighten the appearance of authenticity. Prentiss Ingraham’s *California Joe* (1882) presents just such a case. The full title of the piece is *California Joe, the Mysterious Plainsman. The Strange Adventures of an Unknown Man, Whose Real Identity, Like that of the “Man of the Iron Mask” Is Still Unsolved*. The tale is thus presented as a mystery of identity, an impression heightened by the novel’s opening lines:

> “Who was California Joe?”
> Kind reader, that question I cannot answer any more than I can the queries:
> “Who was the Man of the Iron Mask?”
> “Who wrote the ‘Junius Letters?’”
> But from the time he entered upon the eventful career of a border boy, when he was in his seventeenth year, I can write of him, and many a thrilling tale of his adventures can be told.
> But go beyond that night when he first appeared to a wagon-train of emigrants, and became their guide, and all is a mystery, as though a vail had been drawn between him and the years that had gone before, for of himself this strange man would never speak. (2)
California Joe, like Turner’s frontier or America in the nineteenth century, is described as without history. He arrives on the frontier at the moment of corporeal maturity to occupy a position of authority. In effect, his history is insignificant, as it is typically not by their pasts that we understand frontier characters, but rather by the way that their actions conform to notions of appropriate westernness. In this way, the body of the western dime novel character echoes the construction of the nineteenth-century American nation, ostensibly without a past and subject to judgment only according to the ideals evinced by its present and future actions. Unlike dime characters who hide their pasts, Joe knows his own biography, even if the reader does not. Moreover, in the iconography of the frontier the reader knows precisely who Joe is. His past is inscrutable, but his body is eminently legible, though not immediately, and the tension of the tale lies precisely in readers’ attempts to decipher the meaning of this body.

Joe appears to the men of the above-mentioned wagon train as they are hunting, and immediately draws their visual attention: “All glanced in the direction in which the one who had made some startling discovery was gazing, and every eye became riveted at once in a manner that proved the thrilling cry of their comrade had not been uncalled for” (2). Appropriately, the men attempt to visually ascertain who the boy is, and what he intends, and Ingraham gives us several conflicting markers: a “snow-white” horse, black clothing and rifle, and a “very pale” and beardless face (2). Altogether, an indecipherable body that presents both menacing and reassuring signifiers. In the face of such contradictory signification, the men disavow Joe’s corporeality, believing that he is a ghost and naming him “the Forest Phantom” (2). The men mistrust him, some of them claiming that “if he was honest he would show himself” (2), revealing an abiding faith in corporeal signification. If they could just see him, they would know who and what he is.
The members of the train, which is lost on the prairie, become unsure of Joe’s identity and unwilling to trust him, and decide not to follow his trail the next day. Joe circumvents their guards and appears in camp. The pioneers are taken by the incongruity between his young body and frontier dress, noting that his boots “were four sizes too large for the wearer,” that his hat “seemed never to have been intended to fit the head upon which it rested,” and that he “carried a rifle large enough for a man of full size, and a pair of revolvers, knife, and hatchet in a horse-hair belt”; indeed, “to the emigrants he appeared like one who had found his clothing and arms separately,” and they surmise that he is the survivor of a massacre from which he salvaged the clothes he wears (3). Despite his ill-fitting clothes, however, they note his “bold, fearless face, a trifle reckless, with earnest black eyes, full of fire, and that seemed to look straight into one’s soul” (3). Similarly, “his form was well-built, sinewy and supple, and yet he looked like one who had been ill, or else met with some great sorrow” (3). Joe, despite his youth, possesses the face, eyes, and form that indicate his individual authenticity, and the pioneers read him correctly. When Joe warns the train of Indian danger, Ingraham tells us that “Somehow, all in the emigrant train, once they looked into the honest face of the mysterious youth who answered only to the appellation of Joe, trusted him. . . . The grumblers became silent, and the entire train was anxious to follow his advice” (3). The hidden body that bred unease in the pioneers when unseen has become visible, and accomplishes the opposite effect. After having visually assessed his body, the settlers trust him absolutely. Even his age is effaced by this visual examination; when he tells the captain of the train that “Boys are as good as men often, I guess,” the man looks at Joe and “feels that he at least is” (3).
The ability of Joe’s body to signal his authenticity increases as he ages. After Joe rescues the wagon train, Joe decides to head west and the story moves ahead in time some years. While at a wedding, a member of the train named Major Van Dorn questions his friend about a man in attendance whom he recognizes:

"Did you see that man, Stewart?" asked the major of his brother officer.
"Yes, major, and a dashing looking fellow he was, with an eye like an eagle," was the reply.

The one to whom they referred was six feet in height, superbly formed and had a mass of brown curls hanging down his back.
His face was full of daring, resolute, and his eyes were black, lustrous, and in repose sad, while a slight mustache was just shading his lip.

He was dressed in a full suit of buckskin, fringed and beaded, and even in the settler’s cabin wore a black sombrero, the broad brim turned up in front.

Around his waist was a belt made of a panther-skin, and in it were a pair of revolvers and a long bowie-knife. (10)

Though in the context of the story Van Dorn and Steward know Joe from his wagon train heroics, they—and the novel’s readers—might know him from any number of other descriptions of frontier heroes. His height, hair, eye, suit, weapons, and expression are characteristic of the frontier hero in ways that Henry Nash Smith lamented. Though Joe still lacks a past, his present tells the other characters and the reader all they need to know about who he is. In fact, Joe engages in a series of frontier vocations reminiscent of Buffalo Bill: border trapper, Army scout, and miner are added to emigrant train guide, Indian fighter, and rustler of Indian horses for the Army (18). In the absence of a verifying past, Joe is endowed with an authenticating present that permits him to stand in for a broad spectrum of western experiences, assuring his historiographical fidelity.

Moreover, as a character Joe possesses the advantage of being extratextually verifiable, a soldier whose character is attested to by no less an authority than General George Armstrong Custer. The novel includes an excerpt from Custer’s book My Life on
the Plains, in which he speaks of California Joe. The General describes his efforts to consolidate the cavalry, uniting the scouts “in a separate detachment under command of one of their own number” (13). He laments that his unfamiliarity with the scouts necessitated his selecting a leader “somewhat at random”:

There was one among their number whose appearance would have attracted the notice of any casual observer. He was a man of about forty years of age, perhaps older, over six feet in height, and possessing a well-proportioned frame. His head was covered with a luxuriant crop of long, almost black hair, strongly inclined to curl, and so long as to fall carelessly over his shoulders. His face, at least so much of it as was was not concealed by the long, waving brown beard and mustache, was full of intelligence and pleasant to look upon. His eye was undoubtedly handsome, black, and lustrous, with an expression of kindness and mildness combined. On his head was generally to be seen, whether awake or asleep, a huge sombrero, or black slouch hat. A soldier’s overcoat, with its large circular cape, a pair of trowsers with the legs tucked in the top of his long boots, usually constituted the make-up of the man whom I selected as chief scout. He was known by the euphonious title of “California Joe;” no other name seemed ever to have been given him, and no other name appeared necessary.

“This was the man whom, upon a short acquaintance, I decided to appoint as chief of the scouts.” (13-14)

Custer’s visual assessment of Joe, whose appearance invited such assessment, convinced him that this man was the appropriate choice for chief. Just as the fictional characters in the dime novel find on Joe’s body the signs of western authenticity, so the real-life general sees him and trusts him. Joe’s authentic body shines through his disguised past to both “attract the notice of the casual observer” and withstand the test of the authenticating spectator.

Many other dimes also adopted the disguise motif, including two 1897 novels by Prentiss Ingraham. In the first, The Gold Witch’s Shadower; or, The Lone Mascot of Deadman’s Den, nearly every character is disguised. Dare Sloan poses as an old man and the mysterious Dare Devil; Dora Sloan dresses as a young man and the equally
mysterious Gold Witch; Susan Carr disguises herself as a helpful nurse and the Gold Witch; Richard Doyle dresses as a woman; Dean Dangerfield appears as Dan Field, a road agent and forger (also a form of misidentity); and Hal Burton is disguised as Burt Henry, also a road agent and forger. Notably, Buck Brandon, whose body is made visible on the cover illustration, is the only major character who does not shift identities, and also the only one who is a true westerner among the group—a cowboy with a ranch in Nebraska. The westerner is thus the bearer of the only stable identity in the novel, and is given the privilege of the only graphic representation in the text.

In the other 1897 Ingraham novel, *Buffalo Bill in Disguise*, Cody goes undercover to discover a band of road agents. Cody calls himself William Fredericks (an easy shift from William Frederick Cody) and is variously called by others the Quick Shot Sport, the Gent in Velvet, the Man in Velvet, the Marvelous Quick Shot, the Friend to Tie To, the Stranger Sport, Stranger Pard, and Sport at Large. Cody’s name, in fact, is destabilized to demonstrate how his body signifies equally regardless of the name; the name is fluid, fungible, whereas the body is constant and consistently Buffalo Bill. An old cavalry mate named Brad Loyd, in fact, recognizes him despite Bill’s change in appearance:

“In the first place, you cannot disguise your eyes. I saw them to-night as I remembered them when you stood at bay against the Indians, with me lyin’ wounded at your feet. They had that same look tonight when you seized Knock Out Kit in your arms and dashed him down upon the floor. Again, I know what Buffalo Bill’s strength is, and we soldiers never knew a man who could equal it.”

“Well?”

“For some reason, you have cut off your long, thick, waving hair, and the change is remarkable in you.”

"Well?"
"You have also shaved off your handsome moustache and imperial, and that changes your whole face, softens it wonderfully, and takes away the military air."

"Yes."

"The cause of all this must have been very important."

"Yet you say it has not wholly disguised me, for you still insist that I am Buffalo Bill?"

"You are Buffalo Bill to me."(9)

At this, Cody admits his identity and reveals his purpose to Loyd (9). Despite his changes in name and physical appearance, Cody’s body continues to signify his identity. The potency of his individual authenticity, in fact, gives his body historiographical significance, as Loyd recognizes not just who Cody is but describes what he has done. Loyd penetrates Bill’s disguise after he witnesses Cody’s feats of strength, which remind him of his old cavalry mate (9).

Cody’s own gaze is able to penetrate the identities of the road agents, “in a day and night making a discovery that is worth more than [Loyd’s] whole two years’ work” as a U.S. Secret Service Officer (10). And he ascertains that Billy Brass is not what he seems, a suggestion that the reader is intended to find in ambivalent physical descriptions of the disguised character. In short, Buffalo Bill’s body uncovers the disguises of each character in the novel, including his own inadvertent, but inescapable signification to Loyd. Disguise in the dime western is always temporary, and invariably serves to demonstrate which characters are capable of hiding their identity, which bodies signify in spite of attempts to conceal or simulate, and which characters can see through the disguises of others.
"A Living Character of To-day": Historical Figures in the Dime Western

The three novels discussed above also evidence another tactic of the dime western: the inclusion of well-known historical figures whose appearance and actions could be verified historically and could therefore lend their authenticity to the novel. The dimes relied heavily on the textual representation of western performers, who had already been authenticated by the shows in which they re-enacted their lives. Textual portraits of these performers’ bodies could possess an aura of extra-textual referentiality, providing a sense that the words of the description must be true because they could be verified visually. Besides Buffalo Bill Cody, who was first introduced to the American public in the dimes and for whom multiple dime series’ were named, Wild West performers Pawnee Bill, Fancy Frank, Texas Jack Omohundro, Arizona Joe, Buck Taylor “The King of the Cowboys,” Broncho Bill, Calamity Jane, and California Joe, among others, were featured in western dimes. Historical bodies possessed the advantage of historical location; that is, these characters’ claims could be corroborated by authoritative military, political, or historiographical voices, often embedded within the text in the form of testimonials or letters. These letters, in fact, constituted a sort of western sub-genre, present across a variety of western texts to verify the bodies that occupy them.

In the western dimes, these sorts of statements become increasingly prevalent as time passes. As my analysis above indicates, early dimes typically imitated frontier texts of the 1820s and 1830s not just in their form, but also in their subject matter. Dimes written about characters who lived in the early republican period could not refer to the contemporary bodies of their characters. As the nation began a major westering period following the Civil War, these bodies were readily available for textual representation, and many of them were well known through news reports, stage dramas, photographs,
sketches, films, or the various Wild West shows. Many of the statements that attested to these characters’ historicity were either overt, as in the statement from Custer above that bears a striking similarity to those included in the programs of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West. Others were somewhat less obtrusive, as in the “author’s notes” contained in many of Prentiss Ingraham’s works.

Ingraham was particularly fond of these kinds of authenticating notes, likely because he wrote dimes about Cody and other Wild West performers who were contemporary figures with lives that were prime for literary mining. On the front cover of Ingraham’s *Pawnee Bill, The Prairie Shadower* (1888) is a note that reads: “Pawnee Bill is G. W. Lillie, Government Scout and interpreter, now living on his ranch in the Indian Territory, near Medicine Lodge. ‘May Lillie, the Gold Queen,’ is the wife of G. W. Lillie, and has had a most romantic life on the plains.—THE AUTHOR.” The note serves to link the story to Bill’s body, which is in turn linked to that paradigmatic frontier site, “Indian Territory.” Pawnee Bill, in fact, was a Wild West performer who left Cody’s enterprise to establish his own show, then rejoined Cody in 1908 to form Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and Pawnee Bill’s Far East. The novel’s form reflects the episodic nature of popular conceptions of the frontier, and the format of the Wild West: it is a collection of episodes more than a coherent narrative. It is clearly made to hang together, but as a showcase for Bill’s western body rather than an Aristotelian plot. *Arizona Joe* (1897) and *Buffalo Bill’s Mazeppa-Chase* (1895) contain similar statements about the title character (“A living character of to-day”) and about Lees Ferry proprietor John D. Lee, respectively. These notes linked the character descriptions found in the dime novel text to the historical bodies, coding the dimes as history rather than literature, and assuring readers of the individual and historiographical authenticity of the characters depicted in the dimes. For
As a characterization of western dime novel performers, Strubell’s assertion that misrecognitions of the branded body “can never happen” is thus both too simple and entirely correct. The bodies of dime characters are quite often mistaken for something they are not, but their real identities and historiographical significance are invariably revealed by the novel’s end. A form that is incapable of physically displaying its characters has both the asset of manipulating their appearance textually without concern for the immutability of its actors’ bodies, but it also cannot display its characters for visual authentication as do performance western genres. The convoluted plots adopted by western dimes to demonstrate the signifying power of its characters’ bodies acknowledge the weaknesses of the form even as they insist that bodies are paramount in the western. Its characters, in fact, display a different kind of “branding,” an association between the authentic aura of the western body and its textual manifestations that has much in common with branding as a contemporary marketing strategy. Western bodies are the

many of the same reasons, some dime novel westerns were described as autobiographies, particularly the Cody novels. Many dime novels about Cody and his companions, for example, were attributed to his authorship. Johanssen argues that claims that Ned Buntline, Ingraham, or John Burke wrote all of these are certainly false; Buntline likely wrote none of them, Ingraham certainly wrote several, Burke’s participation is unclear, and Cody himself did at least some of his own writing. Regardless of the actual authorship of these novels, Cody’s name on the cover certainly helped to attest to their truthfulness by its link to his paradigmatically authentic western body.
stock and trade of the genre, and a Buffalo Bill novel, to use the most prominent example, bears the authority of the performer into the bodies of the text, making it more valuable or desirable because it is viewed as more authentic than an “off-brand” text.

The standardized characters and plots that assured audiences of these texts’ authenticity also provoked their critical invisibility. As I have argued, what critics have regarded as these texts’ failure of literary imagination is actually evidence of the complex tactics the dimes evolved in response to the cultural demand for corporeally-validated authenticity. The same tactics that made these texts culturally relevant in that moment made them for decades afterward appear formulaic. Alan Ackerman’s assertion that drama serves as a “barometer of the culture’s concerns,” which I discussed in chapter two, is equally true of the dime western, and it is ironic that so effectively meeting the expectations of the period of their publication should result in a perception by later readers that western dimes are highly inaccurate depictions of the west. Forms that quickly and effectively respond to cultural conditions, however, often lose their relevance when those cultural conditions pass and readers approach these texts with reading strategies and expectations that are radically different from those anticipated by their authors. This is particularly true of the western, the representational tactics and ideological content of which often change with evolving views of the American nation.

Because of the cultural context of the western as a national drama, the dime western as a form is much more deeply invested in questions of authenticity and corporeal representation than its counterparts in other pulp genres. The detective novel, the working-class morality tale, the sensational crime narrative, the schoolboy adventure, the travel or safari account, and the labor agitator novel all seek to address the concerns of a particular class or category of the American population, while the dime western
attempts an historiography of the nation. The form aspired to more than other pulps, and it fell further in the public estimation than its competitors as Americans’ understanding of themselves shifted over time. The conventions of western corporeality the dime western developed to circumvent its inability to display bodies, however, would influence film, radio, stage drama, and the literary western, leaving a textual legacy of which the cultural pervasiveness has thus far gone under-recognized. It was a legacy with which subsequent western authors were forced to wrestle, however—and foremost among them was Owen Wister.
Notes

1Virgin Land 119.

2See Denning 13-14 for discussion of the very sparse history of dime novel criticism.

3Johanssen notes that Beadle sought a specifically juvenile, masculine readership as the form waned (9).

4See Denning 27-46 for a discussion of the critical history of dime readership. Though Denning in this chapter argues that the working class was the primary audience for these novels, his argument does not appear to preclude wide middle- and upper-class readership, not does it account for his focus on genres that would readily find an urban working-class audience.

5See Smith 64, Bold xi, Cawelti 206, Slotkin 467-68

6See Denning 47-61 for a discussion of the dime novel debate as it related to the form’s primarily working-class readership.

7See Jones 7 for a brief discussion of this change in format.

8See Smith 64-65.

9See Brown 53-55 for a short publication history of Malaeska.

10For a discussion of miscegenation as it relates to Leatherstocking, see Mann.

11The absence of male bodies, in fact, has in other cases physical effects on the bodies of the females to whom they are most closely linked. After the death of her husband, “the raven threads that lay in the snow” of Mrs. Danforth’s hair “were lost in the general whiteness before the funeral was over” (143); after William’s suicide, Malaeska undergoes a similar change: “Until the evening before, her dark hair had retained the volume and gloss of youth, but now if fell back from her hollow temples as profusely as ever, but perfectly gray” (162).

12Sarah’s mediation between these two inauthentic worlds is metaphorized in her relationship to the Danforth’s garden, which stood outside the window of her finishing school in New York. Upon her arrival at the school, we are told that “nothing could have been more desolate than the room, save that it was redeemed by two narrow windows which overlooked the angle of the green inclosure in which the house stood” (127); later, Stephens relates that, in the midst of the drudgery of school, “it was a comfort that the windows overlooked that beautiful garden” (128). The garden is characterized after William’s return as “a paradise” (140). Nature in Malaeska is therefore represented as the appropriate home for and manifestation of American femininity, the place where Sarah may act without the pretense of the finishing school. However, this “paradise” is a garden in the city—a kind of middle space between urban and country life where the two can be joined. And as a paradise, it appropriately contains a serpent, in the form of William’s mixed-blood identity; the garden is the site of William and Sarah’s courtship, in which the seeds are sown for his encounter with Malaeska and his suicide. For discussions of the significance of the garden in the American imagination, see Kolodny and Marx.

13Judson, in fact, belabors this reading of Tutt’s body in a conversation between the twins after the men leave:

“What a handsome man that Mr. Tutt is!” said Lottie, as the two men [Wild Bill and Tutt] rode off.

“Handsome in face and form, but oh so ugly in his heart and soul, something tells me!” said Lillie. “He looks at me and my spirit shrinks from him, as if I could see a fiend instead of the man before me. I cannot say why, but I fear him and I hate him!” (34)
Their servant, Kitty, similarly remarks: “I’m just like Miss Lillie in belavin’ that there’s a hape o’ badness in that man, forbye all his good looks. Sure when his eyes are set on me, I shiver all over. And last night when the young master said that bullets from the house went all to night him and his friend, I saw a shadow come on that man’s face, and there was no good in it!” (35)

14Johanssen lists Captain Charles Howard as one of the pseudonyms of Thomas C. Harbaugh. He does not list Merciless Matt among Harbaugh’s early Beadle work, but Beadle’s New Dime Novels old series, no. 629 does appear in Johanssen’s list of Harbaugh’s Beadle pieces.
CHAPTER 6

“ENTER THE MAN”: TEXTUAL DISPLAY IN THE VIRGINIAN

There are some things we say but must not hear;
There are some things we do yet cannot know; . . .
Sculpture’s so bare, and painting so illicit,
And poets unconventional at best;
Give Art a chance and Art will not miss it;
Art has a craving to parade undressed.

-Owen Wister

Owen Wister penned the verses above in an 1893 poem in the Texas Journal that lamented publishers’ requirements that he dilute the western language and violence of his stories to appeal to female audiences. Wister’s daughter Fanny writes that her father found such censorship “hard to endure, and he was as realistic as his publisher would allow him to be” (253). While Fanny’s characterization of Wister’s desire to write stories that accurately reflected western life seems correct, this statement and the poem also speak to Wister’s attitude toward authenticity in the western. He ridicules the refusal of authors, publishers, and the public more broadly to recognize life as it is lived, and praises the ability of art to unmask the conventions that prevent Americans from fully seeing life in art. His most famous novel, The Virginian (1902), thus undertakes to make
“bare” the spectatorial conventions on which western authenticity is based. Spectatorship in *The Virginian* “parades undressed,” in full view of readers, even as Wister simultaneously adopts the conventions he exposes in order to authenticate the story.

Often cited as the classic or paradigmatic literary western, the cultural influence of *The Virginian* (1902) certainly has not been underestimated by critics. Six printings of the book were released in the first six weeks after its initial publication; it went through sixteen printings in the first year, and was the best selling work of fiction for that year and fifth the next (Bloodworth 45). The novel’s initial reception was matched by its critical response. As Melody Graulich writes in her introduction to the essay collection *Reading The Virginian in the New West*, “For the past hundred years, *The Virginian* has been an important cultural icon, one of those forefathering texts—frequently taught, often referred to—largely because of the relationship between Theodore Roosevelt and Wister and because it has been read as the progenitor of the much-critiqued and widely-read western” (xi). Loren Estleman claims that “the western novel as it has come to be recognized sprang full-grown from the imagination of Owen Wister in 1902. In style and content, *The Virginian* owes little to the dime thrillers of Ned Buntline and Prentiss Ingraham and bears little resemblance to the more sanguinary, less sanguine ‘oaters’ of a later day that are often and erroneously considered typical of the form” (25). In Graulich’s and Estleman’s descriptions, *The Virginian* represents both a revision of the popular western of the nineteenth century and the basis for the twentieth-century western genre. It is a transitional moment in the history of the genre in which the westerner is refigured according to altered cultural demands.
However, *The Virginian*’s cultural significance is tempered by recent academic trends that have brought this novel into disfavor. Even as Graulich describes the novel’s massive cultural influence, for example, she argues that recent critical perspectives have led to scholarly neglect:

As critical responses to western American literature evolve, focusing not on a mythic Anglo-Saxon pioneer West but on change, diversity, borderlands, the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, multiple migrations, cities, the Pacific Rim, and technology, will *The Virginian* seem hopelessly retrograde, one of those seminal patriarchal texts that we would like to bury in Boot Hill, a novel that captured, like a photograph, a static view of a West immobilized in a past that existed only fleetingly, if ever, so narrowly framed as to fence out vast expanses of history and experience? Always challenged for its ‘inauthenticity,’ its class, racial, and sexual politics, its fairy-tale ending, decried by New Western historians as representing everything wrong with the mythic Old West, *The Virginian* received only six brief mentions in the massive *Updating the Literary West*, sponsored by the Western Literature Association. (xi-xii)

Graulich’s analysis highlights Wister’s politics as the primary motive for *The Virginian*’s descent into critical disfavor, but she also notes that scholars’ notions of what constitutes “authenticity” have influenced their perspectives on the novel: approaches such as “change, diversity, borderlands,” etc. destabilize Wister’s version of the west and cast doubt on the authenticity of its representations. In this way, the critical conversation about the western is still very much actuated by questions of authenticity.

Recent criticism has attempted to rescue *The Virginian* from its hopeless conservatism, claiming that it both asserts the patriarchal, elitist views for which it has been castigated and simultaneously undermines those views. Blake Allmendinger, William Handley, Susan Kollin, and Forrest G. Robinson have analyzed the relationship between the novel’s narrator and title character, characterizing it in romantic or homoerotic terms that question the novel’s commitment to its own love story; Graulich and Stephen Tatum argue that such arguments “show how gender identity and the related
issue of homoerotic desire both constitute the novel’s central, structuring absence and explain its overall dis-ease” (72). The dominant critical position in current scholarship thus focuses on the latent homoeroticism of *The Virginian*’s male-male gaze. As my argument thus far indicates, however, the primary cultural context for *The Virginian*’s particular brand of corporeal display is the demand for authenticity in western performance. The novel, in fact, lays bare the spectatorial dynamics of western authenticity. Strikingly, nearly everyone in the text and its accompanying first-edition illustrations is looking at the Virginian. Wister draws the reader’s attention to the dynamics of western display, rendering textually visible both the object of viewership—the western body—and its subjects—the audience or readers who stand in authenticating judgment. Wister’s task is to create a character that can (literally) embody and contain both the dynamics of display and the contradictions between popular/populist narratives of the west and Wister’s politics. He divides these responsibilities between two characters: the Virginian embodies, while the narrator contains. It is wise of Wister to avoid allowing the Virginian to tell his own story. The western body purports to signify without words, though, as I have argued, this contention is often belied by text’s capacity to inform or establish identity in a variety of performances and texts. The Virginian is the signifying body who is ostensibly legible and therefore cannot interpret himself. The narrator, who is from the east—the geography of text, rather than bodies—must interpret his body for readers, controlling the variety of possible readings that might otherwise result. Louis Owens argues that “lines of demarcation have been established in Wister’s West to control historical, cultural, and social chaos” (74); while he focuses on “the
reservation boundaries meant to keep Indians in place and out of the way,” there is another line that is, I think, more significant in controlling the “chaos” of the postbellum west—the sight line that connects the narrator to the Virginian.

This sight line subjugates and focuses intra-textual readings of the Virginian’s body through the lens of a male speaker made effeminate by his lack of western masculinity. The Virginian is the object of a spectatorial gaze that is not simply the narrator’s view, but rather a complex of gazes in which readers are almost invariably reading the response of a character who is reading the Virginian’s body.\(^3\) This permits Wister to demonstrate the responses of a variety of characters to that body, while ensuring that potential differences among their gazes are filtered through the mitigating voice of the narrator. In a trick of authorial sleight-of-hand, Wister occupies his readers with the multi-faceted appearance of the Virginian, after all the proper object of western display, as he alters the populist political and social world the western body has, by 1902, come to represent in the popular imagination. Through the dynamics of a multivalent spectatorship, *The Virginian* seeks to direct attention at his exhibited body, invoking the stable signifying power of the authentic western body that affirms a narrative of the west as America as it performs a Wisterian version of American frontier history and makes the western body the guarantor of those ideals.

“*We Cannot See Ourselves as Others See Us*”: The Authentic Body on Display

From the outset, the Virginian’s body is the primary object of interest for the other characters in the text. Graulich, in fact, characterizes it as a “novel about the world’s most beautiful spacious guy” (199), a description that, perhaps inadvertently, highlights the protagonist’s corporeal dominance throughout the text. The novel’s title
invokes the Virginian as character—that is to say, it frames the text neither as a love story between the Virginian and Molly Stark Wood, nor as a narrative of his fulfillment of duty toward himself, his employer, and his civilization in the climactic duel with Trampas. Rather, the focus of the novel is the Virginian himself. As we read the text we read him, and as we look at his body through the eyes of other characters we read the history of the west. Significantly for Wister, this body is split between east and west: he was born in the eastern place from which his namesake is derived, but has been revealed as the iconic westerner as he performs on the historiographical stage of the western landscape. The Virginian is, fittingly, a split character who embodies the geographical and ideological contradictions with which Wister is occupied. That he has no name is significant in two ways: first, it denies him the specificity of individuality, making him an icon of western identity that may be duplicated in others who embody traits that Wister views as integral to the west. We should, of course, remember here Wister’s insistence on the truth of types over individuals in “To the Reader.” Second, the Virginian’s lack of a name points to the gap between name and identity—his identity is located in an authentic correspondence between his body, its actions, and what Forrest Robinson calls a “code” of beliefs and values (49). What the man is called has nothing to do with this nexus, as the Virginian tells Molly when she coyly rebuffs his advances on the grounds that they haven’t been properly introduced: “Don’t you think pretendin’ yu’ don’t know a man,—his name’s nothin’, but him,—. . . don’t you think that’s mighty close to hide-and-seek them children plays?” (92, italics Wister’s). The Virginian’s claim on Molly is similar to Wister’s claim on the reader—neither we nor Molly need to know the Virginian’s given name, because we know from this text and from other westerns who he is—what we “see” is very much what we get. Invoking the signifying power of the western body links
Wister’s text to western performance forms. By replicating the dynamics of authentic western display, Wister can claim authenticity for his text despite its two significant differences from those forms: the novel’s politics and the fact that it is a text, incapable of displaying flesh and blood in the manner of performance. The Virginian’s textual display is mediated verbally to a much greater extent than, for example, Buffalo Bill’s. The Virginian is not a body that can be visually examined or linked to specific historical moments. Wister’s textual “display,” then, is a simulacrum of western performance that has come to define the terms of authenticity.

The primary descriptor of the Virginian’s authentic body is the novel’s narrator; throughout the tale we see the Virginian through the narrator’s eyes or more diffusely through the eyes of other characters whom the narrator watches. This unnamed easterner who, as the story begins, has traveled to Wyoming to visit the ranch of Judge Henry, provides the eyes through which we see the Virginian. This dynamic, because of the male-male gaze it implies, introduces a certain awkwardness and disavowal in his descriptions of the Virginian’s body. The narrator will remark of the Virginian, “I have never seen a creature more irresistibly handsome” (164), and concede that “had I been a woman, [his smile] would have made me his to do what he pleased with on the spot” (167). Forrest Robinson argues that the narrator is “Molly’s leading, if unannounced, competitor in love” (45), and William Handley asserts that “his envy sends him voyeuristically into the couple’s honeymoon, in abrogation of his fictional self: the narrator bleeds into author in an excess of vision” (76). If the narrator’s vision is “excessive,” as Handley argues, it exceeds his bounds as individual in more instances than the honeymoon; throughout the novel the reader watches the narrator watching the Virginian, or even the narrator watching another character watch the Virginian. The
narrator must therefore represent a variety of gendered, classed, and regional gazes—in short, we view the Virginian through his eyes, but this unnamed narrator functions not primarily as a distinct character, but rather as a spectatorial index for the impressions of other characters. He serves merely as reporter, and is the opposite of the Virginian in nearly every way—passive, Eastern, literate, and perhaps most importantly, invisible. Sitting in the saloon as the Virginian plays cards, he notes, “No man occupied himself with me” (29), and upon meeting the Virginian he notes, “we cannot see ourselves as others see us, or I should know what appearance I cut” (15). The implication of this statement is that the Virginian cannot see himself accurately and thus cannot narrate his own story, as he would fail in representing his own authentic body. The narrator is thus the observer, the Virginian observed, and the former’s corporeal absence serves to heighten the presence of the Virginian’s body as observed by others, both singly and in groups.

Perhaps the largest group whose vision the narrator represents is the crowd that gathers to hear the Virginian’s tall tale at the Rawhide train station. He has been made foreman and sent on a trip by Judge Henry to sell a herd of steers; during the railroad journey, his men contemplate a mutiny, which the Virginian counters by telling a story about the lucrative restaurant market for frogs’ legs. As his story continues, trains leave, closing off the mutineers’ departure options. At the same time, a crowd gathers to witness the spectacle of the Virginian misleading his men. One man in the crowd remarks, “Oh, I must call my wife! . . . This is what I came West for” (131); his wife, disappointed at having been called to view what she considers “merely” an impromptu deception, leaves as he tells her, “Better see it out, Daisy. This beats the geysers or anything we’re likely to find in the Yellowstone” (132). Here is the attraction of the west, in an echo of Wister’s
empty plains and absent cowboy: not the natural and geological wonders of even so fantastical a place as Yellowstone, but rather, the performance of the authentic westerner. He, not the landscape is what one “comes West for.” The Virginian’s body thus displaces the iconic landscape as object of western spectatorship. The traveler’s admonition to his wife, with its idiomatic emphasis on vision (“see it out”) is magnified by the gaze of the crowd that “edges close” around the Virginian (133): “All eyes watched the Virginian and gave him their entire sympathy. . . . Even the Indian chiefs had come to see in their show war bonnets and blankets. They naturally understood nothing of it, yet magnetically knew that the Virginian was the great man. And they watched him with approval” (133). Once again, the vision of the crowd is mediated through the eyes and words of the narrator. Through his vision we observe “all eyes” watching the Virginian, a dynamic that makes explicit the narrator’s function as spectatorial index for the novel’s various gazes. Though the Virginian himself is engaged in telling a story, a vocal act that should presumably require primarily auditory participation on the part of the crowd, this passage describes their activity as exclusively visual. Even the Indians, paradigmatic signifiers of authenticity in America who ostensibly understand nothing of the story’s verbal content, gather to observe the Virginian and approve his corporeal performance. The natives are not necessary to this scene, and they do not aid in furthering the novel’s plot—in fact, Wister generally erases Indians from the social world of The Virginian. In this episode, however, they serve to fill out the spectrum of American spectators who have gathered to witness the Virginian’s nationalizing corporeal performance. His body is on display for the scrutiny of the travelers that press around and gaze on him as authentic westerner and Americanizing presence. In fact, it is the “everyday” Virginian—not a contrived persona for the purpose of exhibiting the western character—that is on display: “He sat by the fire
with the frying-pan, looking his daily self—engaging and saturnine” (133). The signifying power of the Virginian’s body transforms the landscape that surrounds him into a stage for the performance of the western identity. He is “his daily self,” surrounded by the accoutrements of his quotidian life.

As the Virginian finishes his story, averting the mutiny and bringing the suspense of his observers to a climax, one of the ranch hands reacts with striking physical affection: “‘Rise up liars, and salute your king!’ yelled Scipio. ‘Oh, I’m in love with you!’ And he threw his arms around the Virginian” (135). This sets off a sequence of well-wishers, many of whom want to greet and shake hands with the storyteller. The cowboy’s declaration of love and the crowd’s desire for physical contact with the Virginian’s authentic western body certainly remind us of the narrator’s disavowal of sexual attraction to the protagonist; but they also render this one-to-one dynamic of spectatorship more diffuse, and provide us with an indication that there is almost certainly more to the narrator’s gaze than simple homoerotic attraction. Indeed, in the next description of this scene the Virginian’s display is transmuted into a site of national solidarity: “Possibly the supreme—the most American—moment of all was when . . . the Pullman trains . . . began to move westward at last. Every one waved farewell to every one, craning from steps and windows, so that the cars twinkled with hilarity” (136).

Observing the Virginian’s western body, then, has a unifying, nationalistic effect. This is the kinetic force of the authentic body, which does not passively receive gazes, but rather actively shapes its viewers’ perceptions of the frontier and of the nation. In fact, when Judge Henry hears the story of the narrowly-averted mutiny, he feels satisfaction in the knowledge that “he had trusted his man, and his man had proved worthy” (151)—worthy of the financial trust placed in him, but also worthy of the crowd’s perception that the
performing body they saw before them in fact embodied ideals of American national identity as manifest in the west. In other words, he had fulfilled their expectations of the authentic westerner, expectations motivated by their observation of him and pre-existing notions of western corporeal authenticity.

The Rawhide station incident is the largest single group before whom the Virginian is exhibited, but it is composed nearly exclusively of men. The narrator’s vision elsewhere includes three women whom he observes watching the Virginian, each responding to him differently. The first, the married proprietress of the eating-house, views him from a window in a scene that is difficult to read as anything other than overtly erotic: as she gazes with lips “faintly parted, . . . no woman’s eyes ever said more plainly, ‘I am one of your possessions’” (41). The second female observer, Molly, is also clearly attracted to him, but her fascination is substantively different from that of the eating-house proprietress; the narrator reveals that: “No one of her admirers had ever been like this creature. The fringed leathern chaparreros, the cartridge belt, the flannel shirt, the knotted scarf at the neck, these things were by now an old story to her. Since her arrival she had seen young men and old in plenty dressed thus. But worn by this man now standing by her door, they seemed to radiate romance” (91). Challenging the commonplace that “the clothes make the man,” in this case the man makes the clothes. Like Wister’s empty landscape, western clothing means nothing if not vivified by the body that occupies it—to “get an outfit,” as in Huck Finn, is not sufficient to become a westerner. Molly’s vision, as filtered through the narrator, recognizes the Virginian’s body, not the clothing, as significant. The “romance” radiated by that body is of two kinds, both of which work to sustain Wister’s project: first, the romantic love plot that will culminate in marriage between eastern and western “quality” at the novel’s end;
second, romantic notions of history and moral truth in which his novel is, according to
the preface, grounded. What is most significant about this passage, however, is its
distinction between the accoutrements of historiographical authenticity (the outfit) and
the substance of that authenticity (the body of the man that occupies it).

The third significant female observer of *The Virginian* is Molly’s great aunt,
whom Molly visits on a trip home to Vermont. The aunt views the Virginian not in
person, but in a photograph that Molly has brought with her: “It was full length,
displaying him in all his cow-boy trappings,—the leathern chaps, the belt and pistol, and
in his hand a coil of rope” (171). In shock, Molly’s aunt declares, “Has a man like that
presumed— ”; “‘He’s not a bit like that. Yes, he’s exactly like that,’ said Molly” (172).
The question here is precisely what “like that” means, a question that the aunt’s rejoinder
may help us answer: “I suppose there are days when he does not kill people” (172). “Like
that,” then, means western in the mythic sense, and Molly’s aunt reads the Virginian’s
character in much the same way that her great-niece has—with one significant difference.
Molly’s aunt tells her, “My dear, you have fallen in love with his clothes” (172),
mistaking the clothing that marks western authenticity for the quality itself; her claim that
Molly loves his clothes is a denial precisely of the “quality” that makes that clothing
“romantic” to her. Molly responds to her aunt, saying, “It’s not his clothes. . . . He often
wears others. He wears a white collar like anybody” (172). Molly disavows the
superficiality of sartorial markers of authenticity and reifies the man beneath them. The
Virginian is worthy of her love not because of what he wears, but rather because of his
body’s ability to externalize the intrinsic qualities he embodies as an “authentic”
westerner. That “quality,” she knows, shines through whether he wears “all his cow-boy
trappings” or a “white collar like anybody.”
All of this is, of course, related through the same narrator in another instance of his “excess of vision” (Handley 76). While Susan Kollin argues that “the hero is continually made into a feminized object of a sexual gaze as the narrator eyes the Virginian’s body” (243), in fact it is the narrator who is repeatedly feminized as he adopts the gaze of various female characters in his capacity as spectatorial lens. This complex of gazes often bleeds over into descriptions that superficially appear to be straightforward individual observations by the narrator. His first words in the novel, in a chapter entitled “Enter the Man,” record that: “Some notable sight was drawing the passengers, both men and women, to the window” (11). This “sight,” or spectacle, given the gathered crowd, is the attempt of a group of cowboys to catch a wild pony in a corral. The scene is reminiscent of the Wild West, with its demonstrations of cowboy skill for the enjoyment of crowds, and the rail car serves to both frame the scene and separate audience from performers, as in a dramatic production. Against this backdrop, the narrator spots a figure who stands out from the scene:

For the first time I noticed a man who sat on the high gate of the corral, looking on. For he now climbed down with the undulations of a tiger, smooth and easy, as if his muscles flowed beneath his skin. . . . I did not see his arm lift or move. He appeared to hold the rope down low, by his leg. But like a sudden snake I saw the noose go out its length and fall true; and the thing was done. (12)

His “business,” in this scene, is twofold: first and most simply, it is to rope the horse; second, it is to serve as an object of scrutiny for the people on the train or, as another cowboy calls it, “displaying himself” (119). Gathered as a spectatorial audience, the passengers watch his body that differs from those of the other cowboys; even before he moves, the narrator notes that he stands out from the others. Where they whirled the rope, his movements are minimal. Where they fail to capture the horse, he effortlessly tames it.
From the novel’s first words, then, the Virginian is cast as an object of visual consumption, a figure of the western landscapes who is described in terms of that land. He is a western “sight”/site ogled by train-bound tourists. These travelers watch the Virginian perform, and regard him as an authentic westerner, one who fulfills nationalist expectations of men of the west. The narrator functions as *vox populi* in this scene, verbalizing the gaze of the others who observe the Virginian from the train. As the scene closes, in fact, he appropriates another passenger’s declaration into his own description of the scene; this ungendered observer comments, “That man knows his business”—an implicit comment on the performer’s ability to accomplish tasks that westerners are capable of completing. In other words, the narrator vocalizes his fellow passengers’ recognition of the Virginian’s authenticity, or their sense of his correspondence to notions of western identity.

This cowboy is, of course, the Virginian, and the reader, like Molly and the narrator, should know *him* without knowing his name. His body signifies his identity as “authentic” westerner, the suitable subject of a western tale. As the narrator disembarks his train (for this is his stop), he spies the Virginian yet again, this time in conversation, and we are provided with a more complete physical description of the cowboy:

Lounging there at ease against the wall was a slim young giant, more beautiful than pictures. His broad, soft hat was pushed back; a loose-knotted, dull-scarlet handkerchief sagged from his throat, and one casual thumb was hooked in the cartridge-belt that slanted across his hips. He had plainly come many miles from somewhere across the vast horizon, as the dust upon him showed. His boots were white with it. His overalls were gray with it. The weather-beaten bloom of his face shone through it duskily, as the ripe peaches look upon their trees in a dry season. But no dinginess of travel or shabbiness of attire could tarnish the splendor that radiated from his youth and strength. . . . Had I been the bride, I should have taken the giant, dust and all. (12-13)
The Virginian wears the uniform of the working cowboy; in the iconography of western performance, he is clearly the protagonist, the authentic representative of western society and object of admiration. The Virginian’s physical appearance before his observer is so genuine as to outshine those images that invoke the type of the cowboy—this man is so authentic that he surpasses, and thus refocuses, the archetype. The narrator’s admiration for the Virginian as individual, then, is swallowed up in his fascination as an icon of authentic western identity. The Virginian’s “beauty” surpasses the possibilities of “pictures,” and Wister fails to specify whether by this term he intends the precise scientific reproduction of photography or the visual invention of painting. The more general term “pictures” leaves both these possibilities open, and suggests that the physical presence of his body possesses an aura of authenticity that no reproduction can claim—hence Molly’s aunt cannot see beyond his clothes in the photographic reproduction. Moreover, Wister makes no similar claim about the inability of the written word to represent the Virginian; textual representation, then, apparently supersedes the graphic arts. Wister’s opening statement, by implicitly legitimizing textual representation, frames the physical description that follows as a demonstration of the author’s ability to display bodies textually, to the detriment of visual artists.

The narrator’s attraction in this passage is notably not the individual beauty of particular features, but rather those markers that signify his authentic westernness: “youth and strength,” the shine of his face, and the dust that covers him—in other words, those attributes that mark him as virile, natural, masculine, and western. The narrator claims the dust that covers the Virginian as part of the picture, but is careful to locate his beauty not in this mark of the landscape upon his body, but rather in an aura that shines through that landscape. As in the preface and Molly’s reading of his clothing, it is the body of the
cowboy that signifies, over and above landscape or clothing. This passage’s heightened attention to the Virginian’s body and its conclusion with the narrator temporarily occupying the position of the bride, has been the source of much of the scholarship on the narrator’s homoerotic gaze. It is important to note, however, the narrator’s multivalent vision throughout the text, and his ability to speak through a variety of characters in differing subject positions. During the honeymoon scene, for example, the narrator does not merely adopt the position of the bride conditionally (“if I were”—he actually speaks for her and the Virginian in private conversation. Similarly, he variously occupies the positions of rancher, cattle rustler, Indian, train traveler, northeastern gentlewoman, drummer, ranch hand, and villain, as we have seen. This multivalent gaze provides the disembodied narrator the possibility of assessing the Virginian from a variety of subject positions, all of whom reach the same conclusion about the Virginian’s “quality,” or authenticity. This focusing of an otherwise diffuse spectatorship reinforces the cowboy’s mythic status as Wister concentrates his reader’s attention on the Virginian. Everywhere we look in the novel, characters are watching the Virginian—it is impossible to see anything else.4

**Displaying “Quality”: Land, History, and Corporeal Authenticity**

This emphasis on the supremacy of character is evident in Wister’s lament over the loss of the frontier that appears in *The Virginian*’s prefatory “To the Reader”: “It is a vanished world” (6). Though the landscape—mountains, sunlight, earth, air—is yet present, the cowboy is gone. The landscape invokes his presence, and “you wait for the horseman to appear. . . . But he will never come again. He rides in his historic yesterday.” “The west,” in Wister’s view, is a social world that corresponds to the historical moment
of the cowboy whose body stands in as icon for that world. Landscape in this passage serves to mark the loss of the cowboy—it possesses power to evoke him, but in its emptiness marks his absence. The land is merely an historiographical stage on which the cowboy performs American history, and in the absence of the westerner, the land is not really west. It requires the presence of a western body to endow it with narrative and national significance, and the loss of the westerner elicits the elegaic mode. From the novel’s inception, then, the westerner’s body takes precedence over the land that it occupies. And though this westerner has departed temporarily, the ideals that Wister sees in him—activity, strength, work, respect, social conservatism—may be found in others, as “his wild kind has been among us always” (7). Wister is interested in the Virginian as an exemplar of these values, a character who is “authentic” inasmuch as he fully embodies western experience and values.

The question of what constitutes a “real” westerner, one who is worthy of the respect and adoration of the novel’s other characters—especially the eastern schoolteacher Molly—stands at the heart of Wister’s social ideology. He posits:

There can be no doubt of this:—
America is divided into two classes,—the quality and the equality. . . . Both will be with us until our women bear nothing but kings.

It was through the Declaration of Independence that we Americans acknowledged the eternal inequality of man. For by it we abolished a cut-and-dried aristocracy. We had seen little men artificially held up in high places, and great men artificially held down in low places, and our own justice-loving ears abhorred this violence to human nature. Therefore, we decreed that every man should thenceforth have equal liberty to find his own level. By this very decree we acknowledged and gave freedom to true aristocracy, saying ‘Let the best man win, whoever he is.’ Let the best man win! That’s America’s word. That is true democracy. And true democracy and true aristocracy are one and the same thing. (101)

The westerner who is worthy of admiration and love, the westerner who is “authentic” in his correspondence to national frontier ideals is, of course, a representative of “the
quality.” The west is the space in which the artifices of human systems are abolished and “every man” has “equal liberty to find his own level.” Wister’s racist, classist version of the west is an argument for a particular kind of history, a struggle to define the west and those people who inhabit it. It is an attempt to delimit what constitutes western history and who are the real westerners, the figures who embody that history. It is, in short, an assertion about historiographical authenticity. The Virginian, the representative par excellence of Wister’s natural aristocracy, is the most genuine westerner because he is the character who most closely aligns with the “democratic” values that lead to survival and success in Wister’s west. He is the figure who quite literally wins the battle to tell the story of the west. The book’s tight narrative focus on the Virginian, according to this ideology, is not so much an artistic choice as it is the “natural” tendency demonstrated by other characters in the book to watch and admire his western body in its function as icon of frontier history.

This scrutiny places the authentic westerner always on display, always performing his authenticity before an audience. As the Virginian tells the narrator, “if you go to try a thing on in this Western country, you’ve got to do it well. You’ve got to deal cyards well; you’ve got to steal well; and if you claim to be quick with your gun, you must be quick, for you’re a public temptation, and some man will not resist trying to prove he is the quicker. You must break all the commandments well in this Western country” (261). In the east “you can be middling and get along” (261), but in the west one is always on display, and one’s personal and historiographical authenticity is constantly under threat by others who would tell a different (hi)story about the frontier. Westerners must be what they claim to be, for the westerner stands as a “a public temptation” to others who wish to
demonstrate themselves more accurate and full embodiments of western ideals. The Virginian proves himself authentic by withstanding these assaults, particularly the threat posed by Trampas.

The conflict between the Virginian and Trampas begins at a card game early in the narrative, when Trampas calls him “you son-of-a-----,” The Virginian draws his pistol, famously responds, “When you call me that, smile!” and Trampas backs down. It is clear, however, that their showdown is not permanently over: “One doubt remained: what kind of a man was Trampas? A public back-down is an unfinished thing,—for some natures, as least” (29). As a character trying to prove his “quality” and thus validate his claim to represent western history “authentically,” Trampas’s refusal to fight produces a gap between western ideals and his own actions. This gap can be closed only by remediating his early cowardice through an act that will relocate him as an exemplar of western ideals—his duel with the Virginian. Molly, of course, objects to this duel, serving as a foil for the Virginian’s impulse to authenticity. To her objections, he responds: “I belong hyeh. It’s my life. If folks came to think I was a coward— . . . [my] friends would be sorry and ashamed, and my enemies would walk around saying they had always said so. I could not hold up my head again among enemies or friends” (309). His “belonging here” is linked to his embodiment of the ideals that make him authentic—if he were to abrogate those ideals, he would no longer “belong” in the west, and the consequences of his estrangement would be both social and corporeal. The inability to “hold up his head” contrasts sharply with descriptions of the Virginian’s body throughout the novel; this “slim young giant” who appears taller than his six feet and in whom “dominated a something potent to be felt . . . by man or woman” would be brought low by a failure of authenticity (12, 16), and his lack of this quality would be just as visible as
its presence. Molly rejects this argument, asking him, “If you know that you are brave, and if I know that you are brave . . . what difference does the world make?” (309). Here, “bravery” metonymically represents the set of qualities that constitute the Virginian’s western identity, and Molly makes an ontological claim that authenticity exists regardless of its perception by the world at large. The Virginian, however, again refutes Molly’s argument: “Can’t yu’ see how it must be about a man? It’s not for their benefit, friends or enemies that I have got this thing to do. . . . What men say about my nature is not just merely an outside thing. For the fact that I let ‘em keep on sayin’ it is a proof I don’t value my nature enough to shield it from their slander and give them their punishment” (309). The Virginian here re-emphasizes the visual calculus of authenticity, chastizing Molly for her failure to “see” what makes a westerner signify—what he “is showing” by fighting Trampas (309). To refuse to defend his “nature” would invalidate his claim to “quality,” and mark him as yet another member of the “equality” who fail to demonstrate a correspondence between their words, beliefs, and actions—in short, it would be a failure of personal authenticity and therefore a demonstration of his lack of historiographical authenticity. Thus, when Molly says she cannot marry him if he duels with Trampas, the Virginian bids her goodbye. He leaves for the duel in his wedding garb, exchanging one form of ritual ceremony for another. The Virginian’s duel with Trampas is a ritualized performance of authenticity, and failure to perform would render him undeserving of the admiring gaze directed at him by Molly and nearly everyone else in the novel—to say nothing of the text’s readers.
“To Doubt the Truth of My Own Impressions”: Authenticity and Ideology

Wister renders a variety of perspectives on the Virginian’s body in order to ensure that body is unequivocally authentic. For a westerner like the Virginian, equivalence between the categories of seeming and being is, as I have argued, inviolable, and the novel works to illustrate this level of internal authenticity, as well as his faithfulness to grand narratives of western and American identity. Both of these definitions, or levels, of authenticity work together in perceptions of the Virginian’s body to construct him as icon of historiographical authenticity—he stands in for the personal integrity of the first form of authenticity, and the assumption of this form enables readers to unquestioningly read him as authentic to narratives of westernness and Americanness, despite the dissonance between Wister’s politics and the popular/populist ideals typically evoked by western display.

*The Virginian* adopts the conventions of display in order to justify and mask its ideological content. As Robert Shulman points out, Wister’s version of western history is stridently anti-labor, anti-immigrant, and anti-Populist. Christine Bold argues that vocalizing this history was the primary motivation behind Wister’s art: “What drove Wister and Remington was a desire to create, in stylized fiction, an alternative to the pattern of western history. They struggled to present the western archetypes in ways which would protect their own versions of the west from the changes happening on the real frontier” (xv). That Wister succeeded in passing his whitewashed version of frontier history, and in particular the Johnson County War of 1892, as an accurate representation of Americans’ western experience is remarkable in light of more widely-held notions of western freedom and populism; it is also a testament to the rhetorical power of historical narratives of the west that locate the west as the landscape where American ideals of
liberty, strength, individuality, and hard work are most visible. The icon of these ideals is the figure played in Wister’s novel by his title character. Thus, by displaying the Virginian as an authentic westerner in the tradition of the Wild West, Wister can validate his brand of historical revisionism by invoking frontier ideals that contradict that history. In other words, he can focus on an icon of western populist values in order to efface the elitist nature of the novel’s ideology, authenticating his story through his title character.6

This authentication is both individual and historiographical, which in this case is to say that the Virginian’s individual authenticity and the historical fidelity it implies allow Wister to write a version of western history that is at odds with the popular historical narratives westerners typically embody. Forrest Robinson argues that “the resonance of this novel derives to a significant extent from its dramatization of key areas of tension within our national culture. More specifically, this manifestly fictional cowboy is real for us because his dual, incomplete, and finally incompatible allegiances to the natural and the civilized mirror our own” (53). In other words, because the narrative of the individual’s relation to American history that we imagine is the same version that the Virginian enacts, the novel resonates with us, or seems historiographically authentic.

Wister’s own view of history takes explicit shape in his Preface to the first edition of the short story collection Red Men and White (1895). The Preface outlines a brief “frontier thesis” of American history akin to the longer documents written by Frederick Jackson Turner and Wister’s friend Theodore Roosevelt; in Wister’s case, this thesis illustrates a deterministic, progressivist version of history in which “various centuries” are “jostled together” in nineteenth-century America:

We have taken the ages out of their processional arrangement and sent them marching disorderly abreast in our wide territory, a harlequin platoon. We citizens of the United States date our letters 18—, and speak
of ourselves as living in the present era; but the accuracy of that custom depends upon where we happen to be writing. While portions of New York, Chicago, and San Francisco are of this nineteenth century, we have many ancient periods surviving among us. (vi)

Southern duels and Texas lynchings evidence the retrograde tendencies of America’s southern and western regions (vi-vii), marking these as more primitive societies in need of the tempering influence of Wister’s revisionist west. Though Wister’s image of marching eras partakes of the rhetoric of Turner’s thesis, for Wister the wildness of the frontier must be restrained by the cumulative experience of European culture. Yet “we Americans, judged not hastily, are sound at heart, kind, courageous, often of the truest delicacy, and always ultimately of excellent good-sense”; indeed, it is government which begets the nation’s “folly” (viii). Wister uses his 1895 Preface, then, to espouse an oxymoronic cultured populism in which the people govern the nation—but only the right people, “the quality,” as he will call them seven years later in *The Virginian*. The Preface to *Red Men and White* could, in fact, serve as a manifesto for the politics of the deeply divided *Virginian*.

Political manifestos, however, are not the standard content of literary prefaces, a fact that Wister acknowledges as he steps back from his politico-historical discussion: “But all this is growing too serious for a book of short stories. They are about Indians and soldiers and events west of the Missouri. They belong to the past thirty years of our development, but you will find some of those ancient surviving centuries in them if you take my view. In certain ones the incidents, and even some of the names, are left unchanged from their original reality” (viii). Wister’s claim here is for the historiographical and individual authenticity of his stories “about Indians and soldiers.” The syllogism would read something like this: the American history and character are
outlined in the Preface; the stories reflect the Preface’s historiography; therefore, the stories are historically authentic. Wister’s narratives, however, whether in short story form in *Red Men and White* or in *The Virginian* are clearly involved in shaping the history they claim to mimetically represent. That is to say, the stories are not simply authentic because they reflect Wister’s ideology of western history, but rather his historical model helps to shape the form and content of his stories—the theory and the literary practice reciprocally define the authenticity of one another.

Wister resolves the ideological dissonance between his politics and “authentic”—which is to say popular—western history by recourse to a geographical and narrative distance that estranges Americans from their own national stories. He argues that the “Atlantic American,” devoid of imagination, has been particularly alienated from these narratives “of his soil” by geographical and imaginative distance: “the elk-hunter has at times returned with tales at which the other Atlantic Americans have deported themselves politely; and similarly, but for the assurance of Western readers, I should have come to doubt the truth of my own impressions. All this is most natural” (v). It is, in other words, “natural” that stories perceived as fantastic, fictional, or inauthentic are in fact the most real, factual, “authentic” histories of the nation. Wister thus averts the threat of inauthenticity by claiming that the appearance of fiction demonstrates fact—the fault for apparent failures of authenticity lies not with the text or the author, but rather with the reader. Wister, in fact, stands in a long tradition of westerners who claim that frontier America itself obviates the need for fiction: “When our national life, our own soil, is so rich in adventures to record, what need is there for one to call upon his invention save to draw, if he can, characters who shall fit these strange and dramatic scenes? One cannot improve upon such realities” (1895 Preface to *Red Men and White* ix). Wister here averts
the standard American debate about the categories of fiction and history, claiming that fiction is unnecessary, or that the author’s role is not to formulate plot and scene whole cloth, but rather to contrive characters appropriate to actual events. That the nation’s narratives fail only in providing characters sufficient to its narratives is both a paradox and wholly consistent with Wister’s vision of the nation. The contradiction emanates from the requirement to create characters to perform events that Wister claims are historical, and have therefore been performed by flesh-and-blood historical figures whom Wister could, conceivably, use in his own tales. Given Wister’s politics, however, rank and file frontiersmen are insufficient to his purpose of inscribing a class of natural noblemen onto the western landscape. He must create a class of figures who can embody and authenticate his historical narrative—western bodies that invoke discourses of authenticity to legitimize a Wisterian version of the west. All that remains is to “draw” characters who embody his version of history.

Wister’s prefatory “To the Reader” in *The Virginian* initiates the novel’s often implicit discussion of the significance of these discourses of western authenticity, and of the function of fiction to create, reinforce, and reflect them. Noting that the book’s announcement led some newspapers to believe the book was a historical novel, Wister dismisses the “mistake” as “most natural” (6), adopting precisely the same words he used seven years earlier to reconcile misperceptions of his stories’ inauthenticity. He makes his case for the historicity of his fiction, arguing that the book is as historical “as any colonial romance. Indeed, when you look at the root of the matter, it is a colonial romance” because of the frontier setting of postbellum Wyoming (6). If it is not historical in its particulars, it “pictures an era and personifies a type,” a form of realism that “presents faithfully a day and a generation” (6). Wister thus argues for a certain form of
historical authenticity embodied by his title character—if the narrative and the character do not correspond to the life of an historically identifiable individual from Wyoming’s past, they do reflect frontier experience in a way that is potentially more representative of that experience than a particular story can possibly be.

This notion of authenticity is misunderstood not just by newspapers who assume that his tale is a more or less strict transcription of past events and figures, but also by some of his readers, including a “cow-punch” who inquired as to the historical specifics of one of Wister’s stories. After Wister told him that the story took place in no “real” setting and the action referred to no “real event,” the cowboy demanded, “Why . . . do you waste your time writing what never happened, when you know so many things that did happen?” Wister writes, “I could no more help telling him that this was the highest compliment ever paid me than I have been able to help telling you about it here!” (7-8). The author’s pleasure in this “compliment” is double: first, that he knows so much about the west that he can write stories that appear strictly historical, even to a denizen of that country, and second, that his knowledge of the west enables him to write what could or should occur rather than what does. In other words, he can write westerners who evoke discourses of corporeal authenticity, lending that authentic aura to his tales and permitting him to write his own version of history. As an easterner writing about the west, this is satisfying to Wister on a personal level; as an author deeply invested in the relationship of westward expansion to national identity, it confirms his ability to create ideologically-grounded narratives that appear historically-based and convince even westerners that they are historically “authentic.”
Wister relies on some of these real-life westerners to correct the “most natural” misapprehensions of his tales’ authenticity by some of his readers. Wister includes in his Preface to the 1928 edition of *Red Men and White* a letter from a U.S. Marshal dated Tucson, Nov. 22, 1895: “. . . I read *A Pilgrim on the Gila* . . . the author drew his pictures true to life” (xiii; elisions Wister’s). This testimonial functions to counteract perceptions of inauthenticity even as it draws on a textual aesthetic of illustration that Wister will adopt in his novel. Wister similarly claims that

*In The Serenade at Siskiyou,* there is also but little invention. The facts upon which it is based were narrated to me by an officer of Wells Fargo & Co. during the visit which I made to San Francisco in 1893. . . . At Siskiyou (Redding was the real scene of the incident) the action of the women produced the action of the men as recorded—an irregular but highly wholesome dealing with crime. (Preface to 1928 *Red Men and White* xv-xvi)

This authenticating anecdote locates Wister’s short story in a repertorial milieu, classing it with the reports of corporate agents and newspapers, as well as with the novels of realist authors. The location of the events transcribed has been altered but the facts of the case remain the same. As in the Preface to *The Virginian,* specific location is fungible—characters signify and imbue mythically empty western space with national meaning. Thus, characters are paramount because of their capacity to betoken the narratives and ideals invoked by western space, and *The Virginian*’s narrator is occupied primarily with writing the body of his hero.

**Drawing the Body: *The Virginian*’s First Edition Illustrations**

The multivalent gaze of the narrator is replicated in Arthur I. Keller’s illustrations to the first edition of *The Virginian.* Each of these illustrations directs our gaze from characters who watch him to the Virginian’s own body, the spectatorial center of both the
novel and the accompanying illustrations. Stephen Tatum has argued that, consistent with Keller’s previous assignment to illustrate William Dean Howells’s critical monograph *Heroines of Fiction*: “he undoubtedly seemed to . . . the Macmillan staff, as well as perhaps to Wister himself, an ideal choice for the task of rendering, among other things, the Virginian’s romantic interest, Molly Stark Wood” (5). Tatum’s analysis follows this line of inquiry, arguing cogently that Molly serves as the compositional center of the illustrations in which she appears. However, even these illustrations, in which Keller appears to have consciously centered Molly, she serves as an index for the direction of the audience’s gaze. In the four illustrations in which Molly appears, in fact, she is looking at or for the Virginian as she clings to his body. In the illustration that faces the title page, Molly accompanies the injured Virginian back to Skunk Creek after saving him from an “Indian” attack (Fig. 6.1). The caption reads: “By his side the girl walking and cheering him forward,” a locution that simultaneously centers attention on Molly as the subject of the sentence and displaces that attention by locating her next to the Virginian and directing her, and our, attention at him. Moreover, her action in this image is directed toward the Virginian, marking him as the spectatorial and narrative center of this picture. The illustration replicates this dynamic established by the text of its caption, with Molly at the compositional center of the picture, as Tatum argues, but her gaze directing our attention at the Virginian’s always-displayed body. Molly’s body is, furthermore, below his, forcing her to look up at him from a position of inferiority. Her physically awkward position in the illustration accentuates our perception of her desire to look at him by demonstrating the contortions she will undergo to avoid breaking her gaze. Her body must be distorted; his, even injured, remains the primary object of visual consumption.
The illustration that faces page 476 (Fig. 6.2), in which Molly pleads with the Virginian not to fight Trampas, reproduces and heightens this visual dynamic. The caption reads, “‘For my sake,’ she begged him, ‘for my sake,’” and Molly is literally on her knees, supplicating the now-healthy Virginian. Her gaze is directed at him, indexing the reader’s attention along a strong leftward and upward line created by her dress, back, and upstretched arm to the Virginian’s face. He looks out the window, as in other illustrations refusing to direct his gaze at other characters—the Virginian is an object of spectatorship, not a spectator himself. His gaze out the window also enables the light to fall across his face, illuminating it to permit the audience to more closely scrutinize him. Molly’s face remains only partially visible, reinforcing the notion that she serves as a secondary visual attraction by allowing us to see only enough of her face to determine where her gaze is directed.

The other two first edition illustrations depart slightly from the similar dynamic of these two, though they also locate the Virginian as object of the reader’s gaze. In the illustration facing page 357 (Fig. 6.3), the Virginian whispers to a photograph of Molly’s aunt, “I promise to make your little girl happy.” Here Molly, centered in the open doorway, looks not at the Virginian, as in the two previous illustrations, but rather for him. In the absence of his authentic western body, her spectatorial gaze has no object, and she appears hesitant, worried, even lost in her own cabin. Her searching gaze leads the viewer to seek what she is looking for, and in the Virginian’s body—outside of the central compositional space and near the margin of the illustration—we find that object. Molly, entering the doorway, is depicted in much more subdued tones than is The Virginian, who stands out visually from the light grays of the room. His size dwarfs both Molly and the photo of the aunt, just as his narrative and historiographical significance
dominates the other figures in the text. If in these three illustrations Molly knows that the
Virginian is to be the focal point of her and our gazes, in the illustration facing page 101
(Fig. 6.4), captioned “The Rescue,” she appears conflicted about that object. As in the
first two illustrations, she clings to the Virginian’s body as he continues riding. However,
in this illustration she does not look at him, but rather over his shoulder at the coach in
which she was recently riding. Her body in this picture, rather, masks all but the
Virginian’s head and hands, hiding the erstwhile object of our and her gaze. Until the
honeymoon, Molly’s role in the novel is to prevent his body from signifying—to
sublimate his westernness into eastern manhood and question and even erase his
signification of authenticity by spurring him to inauthentic actions. The episode in which
she shows her aunt the Virginian’s picture is the only moment before the honeymoon in
which Molly appears conflicted about his signification, unsure what his western dress
means, what might change if he wears a white color, and if he is in fact “like that” (172).
In the spectatorial economy of Wister’s novel, then, to make Molly not merely the
compositional but also the narrative center of the scene requires the erasure of the
Virginian’s body. Thus Keller paints her body over his, unifying them in a single
spectatorial object that requires the viewer to focus on her. Molly’s body here takes on
the aura of the Virginian’s by virtue of their visual union, so that she becomes the
primary visual object only by allowing her body to “become” his. He thus lends the
signifying power of the authentic western body to her as she attempts to efface that
power. His face and hands, the instruments of action and the primary signifier of
individual authenticity, are the only parts of his body that remain visible and attest to that
body’s indomitable signifying power.
In the other four illustrations that accompany the first edition, the Virginian is typically both the compositional and narrative center. An illustration of the “frawgs” story places him in the midst of a homogeneous crowd at the climax of his narrative (facing page 200). Illustrations of his initial showdown with Trampas (facing page 29), and the baby switching scene (facing page 122), reproduce similar spectatorial dynamics. And in an illustration depicting Shorty’s death (facing page 421), the narrator observes the corpse of Shorty, which even in death looks upward at the Virginian, replicating the textual dynamic in which the narrator watches characters who watch the title character. The draw of the Virginian’s authentic western body is such that even dead men gaze at him.

“Two-Faced Son of a -----”: The Virginian on Stage

The signifying power of the Virginian’s body is also an implicit theme of the stage drama adaptation of the novel written by Wister and Kirke La Shelle that first appeared in 1904. Though generally regarded as an inferior work in comparison to the novel, the drama reveals a deep occupation with the title character’s body. The drama, though, as might be expected given my discussion of stage authenticity, is animated by a different set of concerns about authentic representation. The promotional poster for the drama focuses tightly on the body of the illustrated Virginian, implying that the body is the primary bearer of meaning in the play (Fig. 6.5). However, the body that represents the Virginian on stage, Dustin Farnum, has an insuperable authenticity problem: he is, of course, not the fictional Virginian. That the Virginian’s face is partially obscured suggests this failure of authenticity and suggests the contested meaning of Farnum’s
acting body; though the outcome of the play will decide the historiographical and individual significance of the Virginian, viewers cannot hope to find in Farnum—or in an illustration—the signs of western authenticity.

The content of the play, however, disavows the gap between performer and character, insisting on the signifying power of the Virginian’s body. Mrs. Hewie (a character unique to the play) recognizes the title character merely from Molly’s description of him as “tall, big, and strong and gentle” and her statement that “I wish I could see him again” (4). Once again, the emphasis here is on the Virginian as object of visual consumption, and Mrs. Hewie recognizes the Virginian’s “quality,” or authenticity, from Molly’s brief description. She models correct response to his body in her desire to “see him again,” a desire that presumably echoes the audience’s own longing. The Judge calls him “my Virginian, a man in ten thousand” (4), implying the degree to which the Virginian is worthy to represent the history of the west. He verifies this intimation later, when he remarks that “the foreman of a ranch must be in his way, quite a leader of men, and such a man is not easy to find” (19). After Molly remarks that she “likes such men” and Hewie relates the “frawgs legs” story, the Judge decides to name the Virginian to the post (20). In all these cases, the absence of the novel’s narrator requires that individual characters index for us the Virginian’s “quality.” Unlike the novel, which sought to textually represent the Virginian’s body and to contain divergent readings, the drama can rely on the physical body of Farnum—despite his authenticity gap—to shape these readings. The visual dynamics of the play, in fact, mark him as the real thing. When Molly “sees him” but does not “notice him” (7) at a dance, the Virginian angrily soliloquizes: “She knowed me right away, and took the trouble not to see me. Well, I’m glad I didn’t dress any different from what she saw me when I carried her out of the
river” (8). As I have argued, the Virginian is a person who everyone in the novel looks at, and “knows right away” because of his historiographical simulation of westernness. In this passage, it is more “trouble” not to see him than to recognize his presence.

That the Virginian is the westerner who is capable of representing his region’s history is reinforced in his dealings with Trampas and the other cattle thieves. When Molly wonders at his willingness to lead the party sent to apprehend them, he responds: “I belong to the West. I must do its work” (29); when Molly protests that this work “is lynching---lawlessness, where I come from it is murder,” he answers: “This is the West, ma’am.” The Virginian’s appeal is to regional codes of belief and behavior, adherence to which makes him “authentic” and the disavowal of which would annihilate his identity. Thus Molly’s threat that “If you should do that—I would never want to see you again” is a box without an exit (29). Her emphasis on the visual nature of her desire highlights the problem of her statement: if he pursues the thieves she will not want to “see him” again because his body will signify for her the western authenticity that has motivated him to actions that she abhors. She will understand what that body means, and that the actions it undertakes are reflective of an internal essence. If, on the other hand, he refuses to go she cannot see him again as he is, for he will have abrogated the westernness that defines him and lost the authenticity that makes him an object of spectatorship. Even many of the Virginian’s enemies recognize his personal authenticity, though they wish to undermine his version of western history: when Trampas calls the Virginian “the damned sneak” and a “two-faced son of a -----” (31), Steve challenges him, saying that although they’re now enemies “he’s alright.” Steve’s insistence on the Virginian’s authenticity is necessary in
the play because Farnum’s representation is, in fact, two-faced. Steve’s refutation effaces this site of inauthenticity by asserting that the actor-character complex that constitutes the stage Virginian engages in no dissimulation of his identity.

Trampas, of course, serves as the major threat to the Virginian’s personal and historiographical authenticity, never conceding his “quality.” When the Virginian attempts to avoid a showdown by telling Trampas “I don’t want no trouble with you,” Trampas accuses him of “dodgin’ it right along” (41). To the Virginian, however, personal and historiographical authenticity are paramount, and as in the novel he risks losing Molly to maintain them. In one of the few passages transcribed verbatim from the novel to the play, the Virginian discusses “how it must be about a man” (42-43). The discussion that follows centers on the results of backing down from this challenge, and the Virginian tells Molly, “you couldn’t love me like that” (43). The language “like that” echoes Molly’s conversation with her aunt, and reinforces our understanding that the Virginian, more than anyone else, is precisely “like that.” To cease to embody western ideals would be to abrogate all that makes him the object of Molly’s affection and our interest. She threatens to leave him if he fights Trampas, but he holds her and asks, “Will you look at me and say that?” She tries to repeat her threat but cannot as she looks at him. Once again, the play reifies the signifying power of the actor-character’s body, effacing the distinction between the two. The power of this unified, “authentic” stage body strips Molly of her will and renders her incapable of asking that body to renounce its authenticity. The Virginian, of course, kills Trampas, and Molly fights through the crowd to find him, saying, “’I will—I will—I will see” (44). Molly’s emphasis in this scene is visual—her insistence on seeing the Virginian is consonant with the visual dynamics of the play as well as the novel. The play ends as she does see the Virginian, marking her
attachment to him as visual, and reassuring herself and us that he is yet who he has claimed to be. In the drama, Molly serves as the Virginian’s primary spectator, and her confirmation of the Virginian-Farnum complex assures viewers that they can trust the body they see on stage, despite its authenticity gap.

In the novel, of course, Molly marries the Virginian after his gunfight with Trampas, and they honeymoon on a geographically unidentifiable western island. As they lounge on the island, the Virginian tells Molly “often when I have camped here, it has made me want to become the ground, become the water, become the trees, mix with the whole thing. Not know myself from it. Never unmix again” (321). The Virginian now wants western authenticity of a different sort—a literal unity with the land that would disembody him and even possibly strip him of consciousness. He desires dissolution in the unfettered nature that makes possible his western identity. Paradoxically, this union would bereft him of his hard-won historiographical authenticity and the body that makes it visible even as it provides him a new form of individual authenticity that links him directly, even indistinguishably, to the American landscape. However, it would also relieve him of the requirements of that authenticity, of “how it must be about a man,” and of constant performance. Jane Tompkins, in fact, argues that, because the Virginian “must police his body’s boundaries so severely . . . the pressure the hero feels to dispense with social codes and burst the boundaries all at once is tremendous” (154). In yet another instance of having it both ways, the Virginian is both driven to display his authentic body and tormented by the cost of this performance. On his honeymoon, on a island in the wilderness, with no one near him but Molly, the Virginian is still being scrutinized by the intrusive narrator and his voyeuristic readers. The man who entered as
the novel began cannot exit its spectatorial complex, and to be the west that makes possible authenticity would be easier than to be the westerner, always subject to verification and assault.

If for the audience there is visual pleasure in the authentic westerner, that performer takes little pleasure in the paradoxes that define him both provisionally and inalterably. Lee Clark Mitchell argues that these paradoxes are often resolved by contemporary readers in different ways than they were by Wister’s early audiences: “Possibilities left by the author in a state of unresolved tension are foreclosed as readers make sense of texts (and, in particular, of popular texts) through assumptions that appear natural at the time. If those assumptions are generally less than obvious to later generations . . . it is only because the conditions that produced those assumptions have altered so fully” (96). We have often looked through the lens of the twentieth-century western to understand the cultural legacy of *The Virginian*, in the process losing sight of the text’s own nineteenth-century heritage. Mitchell argues that Wister’s novel “raised expectations for a genre it did not actually quite define, prompting readers to exceed the text in their own reconstructions” (96). However, the genre that *The Virginian* helped to redefine causes us to not only “exceed the text,” but also to fail to identify what it does express, or the cultural and artistic questions with which it wrestles.

In *The Virginian*, the most significant of these questions is the role of corporeal display in the text western. The novel is postmodern in its engagement with western display, overtly exposing the dynamics of spectatorship while simultaneously relying on those dynamics to accomplish its ideological purpose. Wister took a fantastic risk in exposing the dynamics of western display to the view of his readers. Only a highly skilled artist could walk this narrative tightrope, and later western authors lacked the skill,
courage, and perhaps most importantly, the cultural impetus to attempt it. Western authors who followed Wister often mimicked the form of his story and character without his concern for corporeal display. These authors abdicated thorny questions about spectatorship and the western body to the filmmakers who were able to present those bodies relatively unproblematically. Wister’s novel therefore stands alone not because it revised the dimes that preceded it, nor because it served as a model for the pulps that followed, but because it engaged with the dynamics of western corporeal display complexly and self-consciously, liberating the text western from the problem of corporeal authenticity as it pushed the boundaries of text’s capacity for display.
Fig. 6.1: “By his side the girl walking and cheering him forward.” Arthur Keller illustration in Owen Wister, *The Virginian* (New York: Macmillan, 1902) facing title page.
Fig. 6.2: “For my sake, she begged him, ‘for my sake.’” Arthur Keller illustration in Owen Wister, *The Virginian* (New York: Macmillan, 1902) facing page 476.
Fig. 6.3: “I promise to make your little girl happy,” he whispered.” Arthur Keller illustration in Owen Wister, The Virginian (New York: Macmillan, 1902) facing page 357.
Fig. 6.5: “The Virginian,” promotional poster for Owen Wister and Kirke La Shelle’s stage drama (1904): Library of Congress.
Notes

1 This poem is quoted in its entirety in *Wister out West* 253-54.

2 See, for example, Bold 44-45, Mitchell 118-19, and Tompkins 149-55.

3 In *Shane* (1949), Jack Schafer comes as close as any western author to replicating this spectatorial dynamic, and the 1953 film adaptation of Schafer’s novel makes visually evident the multivalent gazes embedded in Wister’s and Schafer’s texts.

4 The only characters who appear not to be able to see the Virginian correctly are Trampas and Balaam. Trampas is punished for his lack of vision by his death in the novel’s culminating duel. Balaam is temporarily blinded in a fight with the Virginian after physically abusing a horse; see Dorst 45-48 for an analysis of this scene.


6 See Handley 68 for a discussion of Wister’s denial of Turnerian frontier ideals.

7 Though the Virginian does look at Molly’s aunt in this illustration, it is at a photo of her that he gazes, not her physical person. In *The Virginian*, photos do not possess the same authentic aura as bodies, as we have seen in the exchange between Molly and her aunt. Thus, the Virginian may look at a photo, despite the novel’s insistence that is the object, not the subject, of spectatorship.

8 See Hall 192-98 for a discussion of the production and plot of the drama.

9 The stage production also relies heavily upon readers’ knowledge of the novel to bridge plot gaps, suggesting that it was intended as a supplement to the text rather than as a stand-alone work of art.

10 *Shane* (see note 3) is the most obvious exception to this tendency.
We require a visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of origin, which reassures us about our end.

Because finally we have never believed in them.

-Jean Baudrillard

As narratives of American identity became less monolithic and agrarian, and more cosmopolitan and modern, frontier films and texts moved from the center of American culture to a temporally cyclical niche. This movement was accompanied by a willingness to reexamine narratives about the west and America as they relate to American violence, isolationism, racism, gender roles, and colonialism. As the west became less culturally significant than it had been at the end of the nineteenth century, the popular western was often viewed as a necessarily inauthentic representation of a history that was more complex and contradictory than the genre had ever been willing to reflect. Authenticity itself became a locus for social commentary, often combined with humor. This epilogue will address briefly some of the ways that westerns since 1925 have promoted or undermined the legacy of authenticity.

By the 1920s, as Paul Reddin argues, “Americans valued a good story about the West more than authenticity. . . . Earlier Wild West showmen had built their careers around the belief that bona fide experts on the frontier should tell their own stories, but
most Americans rejected that supposition in the 1920s” (199). The Western had lost its ritual power to instantiate American history and geopolitics, a loss precipitated at least in part by the reproductive powers of film. As Benjamin argues, “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. . . . The technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence” (734). The history of the movement from Wild West to film is a movement from authentic, unique performer who stands in ritualistically for American history to authentic, reproducible performer who is paradoxically more individual because liberated from nationalism and more reproducible because a product of technology. The reproducibility of western film bodies demonstrated that authenticity could be manufactured, and therefore that corporeal authenticity was unreliable. Moreover, the loss of the frontier eventually rendered display of historical frontier figures impossible, leaving actors without frontier experience to fill the roles of frontiersmen.

As the western lost the potential to represent authentic bodies for display, it insisted increasingly on the formal elements that had previously served to sustain the authenticity of those bodies. The western became, as Wister envisioned, a cultural vessel that could be filled with ideological content, ranging from the social contract of *High Noon* to the apocalyptic violence of *The Wild Bunch*. These films used the western’s familiar conventions, settings, and characters to convey admonitory messages about the social state of the nation. In this sense, they filled a similar role to the nationalizing performances of their postbellum and early twentieth-century predecessors; however, it could be argued that there is nothing fundamentally western about the content of these films, and certainly not about the performers that inhabit them. The western has become
pure form, a familiar set of conventions that can be used to illustrate a variety of national messages.

These films resemble earlier westerns in their form, though their content is radically different. Jean Baudrillard argues that objects in a hyperreal order “no longer resemble anything, except the empty figure of resemblance, the empty form of representation” (45). In the case of twentieth-century westerns, the form is all that remains; as in the case of the Wyoming license plate cowboy, the western body is pure icon. It has been emptied of individual, authentic identity, and remains as a mere outline of its formerly full-bodied nature. Westerns repeatedly fell out of favor in the twentieth century and were reborn under different guises not so much because the stories that they told were seen as inauthentic, but rather because their truth or falsehood ceased to be culturally relevant. The form’s power to evoke national identity could then be co-opted by authors and filmmakers who recognized that these “empty figures of resemblance” could be made culturally relevant in moments of national uncertainty precisely because Americans recognized the nationalizing power these figures have possessed. The western has been, since the postbellum era, America’s national genre, and its conventions retain their recognizability and their evocative power, even if the narratives they invoke are no longer significant to most Americans.

This lack of significance does not imply a lack of cultural interest. Many westerns of the post-World War II twentieth century have probed the bounds of authenticity and of the western form, whether seriously or paradoxically. In Jack Schafer’s *Shane* (novel 1949, film 1953), the title character’s body is an object of spectatorship for the other characters of the text and the film. Shane insists on his individual authenticity, telling Bob Starrett, “A man is what he is, . . . and there’s no breaking the mold. I tried that and
I’ve lost” (113). However, both the film and the novel mark his visual inscrutability; though other characters are curious about his past, Shane refuses to reveal an individual history that would inform readings of his body. In the absence of such markers, the other characters—especially Marian Starrett in the film adaptation—transform him into an object of visual interest for his own sake. The dynamic of corporeal display remains, though the cultural context that provides the western body with significance has been radically diminished.

Other late twentieth-century films seek to “expose” the fundamental inauthenticity of the film actor’s body. In Three Amigos! (1986), the title characters are silent western stars who are fired by their studio boss; the inhabitants of a Mexican village terrorized by an outlaw see the three on screen and mistake their performing bodies for the real thing. They telegraph the three, who arrive in town prepared to put on a show, not fight. In an exchange with a German friend of the outlaw, amigo Ned Niederlander asserts his authenticity against claims that Ned’s films misrepresented his physical capabilities. Ned is challenged to a duel by the German, who idolized film star Niederlander as a child and “dedicated his life to the art of the quick draw”; as he says, “I looked up to this man, I studied his every move. It was my dream to be as fast as Ned Niederlander . . . He was a god to me!” The German has fetishized the corporeal authenticity of the westerner, and is disillusioned when he learns about trick photography—as he says, “I was crushed!” Believing that Niederlander’s apparent speed was inhuman and impossible, he argues that “No one can be as fast as you appear to be!” The distinction between being fast and appearing fast strikes at the heart of corporeal authenticity in the film western, suggesting that what appears on screen differs from the projected body’s capability. Film becomes, in this formulation, a site of inauthentic performance that cannot be trusted.
Perhaps the most direct critique of western corporeal authenticity is delivered by the film *The Quick and the Dead* (1995). The plot of this picture is a “quick-draw contest” between a number of stock characters, including the Indian, the Kid, the prisoner, the foreigner, the woman, the preacher/reformed gunfighter, the dandy, the hired gun/African-American, “the Pride of Texas,” the Mexican, and the town’s despotic ruler. It is, in other words, a contest of corporeal authenticity that will demonstrate which of these stock characters possesses the most capable body; the contest reifies the body of the western gunfighter, and destroys those bodies that are shown to be inauthentic in their inability to triumph. The town’s despotic ruler Herod makes a distinction between his own hands and the kid’s hands in a way that sets the body of the western gunfighter apart: “Here’s a gunfighter’s hand, here’s a farmer’s hands. . . . You know, Cort and me are killers—we’re the genuine articles. But you—you’re from different stock.” The gunfighter possesses a certain type of body, substantively different from that of other men, authentic and unchangeable. As Herod says of another fighter, “Don’t let the . . . man tell me it’s *not in his blood anymore*. That’s the worst kind of liar.” The individually authentic western body cannot alter its constitution, and the bodies of this picture are immutably authentic.

The duels themselves are highly conventional corporeal contests that reify the palimpsestic form of the western. The first duel begins at noon, as the bartender gives over the space of the main street to this performance, saying, “Gentlemen, the street is yours.” The moments preceding the duel are composed of intercut Vertigo shots in which the dueling bodies remain stable as the audience and town appear to move backward. These respective static and dynamic states suggest the inalterability of the western body, even absent its cultural signification. These shots change to close-ups of eyes before the
duel, providing the audience a final chance to scrutinize their bodies before their authenticity is put to the test. Herod’s death in the final duel is marked by a shot in which his shadow is cast on the ground in front of him and a ray of light shines through the bullet hole in his chest, creating a small round circle of light in that shadow. This fetishization of the hole, however, points up the emptiness of his body, which has been demonstrated inauthentic by his loss in the duel. It also suggests that the western body more generally has lost its cultural significance, and is composed of pure absence. *The Quick and the Dead* is itself pure form, the western distilled to its essence of contested authenticity and corporeal display.

As Jean Baudrillard claims in the epigraph above, the convolutions, parodies, and mimesis undertaken by twentieth-century westerns differ from their nineteenth-century predecessors primarily in the later works’ willingness to overtly contest the meaning of western conventions. Postbellum and early twentieth-century westerns, as we have seen, were aware of the problems of authenticity and sought strategies that would enable them to efface the contradictions and complexities inherent in displaying western bodies for examination. Late twentieth-century texts have had less at risk culturally than their predecessors, and therefore have been willing to interrogate the terms of authenticity on which the genre is based. While their postbellum counterparts sought to stabilize corporeal representation, more recent westerns have been interested in the dissonance created when the western body fails to correspond to generic expectations.

Western bodies presented “in the flesh,” however, still possess a certain nostalgic ability to imply a more authentic time, even if the historical and national narratives that undergird those bodies no longer possess the power to inform Americans’ sense of themselves. These bodies suggest, perhaps too simply, an era in which people really did
believe in grand narratives of American progress, and acted in consonance with those beliefs. This period is memorialized for most Americans primarily in the film western, which paradoxically serves as the last refuge of authentic performance, as country and western singer-actor Buck Owens suggests in “Act Naturally”:

They’re gonna put me in the movies
they’re gonna make a big star out of me . . .
and all I gotta do is act naturally. . . .
Notes

1Baudrillard 10.
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