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Cattle Castration and Male Sexuality in Thomas Savage's *The Power of the Dog*

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Abstract: Thomas Savage's novel, *The Power of the Dog* (1967), begins with a scene in which a rancher castrates cattle on a ranch in Montana during the 1920s. The scene was considered so graphic and disturbing that one publisher refused to publish the manuscript. Critics didn't discuss the scene in their reviews of the novel. Yet it introduces certain themes which preoccupied the author, including notions of masculinity and sexuality, especially pertaining to men living in the early twentieth-century American West. The rancher, Phil Burbank, tells his cowboys that eating the severed calf testicles will enhance their virility, alluding to the castration myth that existed in early cowboy poetry and ranching autobiographies. According to legend, the animals' genitals increased the men's sexual potency, which was necessary to compensate for the fact that cowboys were isolated from women in the sparsely inhabited West, working primarily in homosocial communities.

The myth presupposed that cowboys—and other male members of the range industry—were heterosexual, even though they were required to remain single while working for a cattleman, who was unwilling to provide housing for his employees' families and to pay these men higher wages. However, Phil, the novel's protagonist, is a closeted homosexual who tries to pass as a straight man, exhibiting certain character traits associated with "real" western men. He risks

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exposing his secret when his brother George marries a local widow, bringing Rose and her son Peter to live at the ranch owned by the two brothers. Like the bride who comes to Yellow Sky in Stephen Crane's short story (1898), Rose transforms a former homosocial community into a heterosexual space. Feeling threatened, Phil attempts to get revenge by seducing her son—a character whom some critics assume is also gay, even though the novel remains silent on this question. Peter is not a typical teenager with an emerging sexuality, but a symbol of violence and retribution: part avenging angel, part emotionless psychopath. He detects Phil's secret and plots to kill his stepfather's brother in order to save his mother's life. In the process, Savage depicts the passing of the early frontier and the arrival of a new era, in which men like Phil have become an endangered species.

Keywords: Male sexuality, homosexuality, cattle castration, American West

Under the Rainbow

In 2021, director Jane Campion will release her film adaptation of Thomas Savage's novel, *The Power of the Dog* (1967). The movie should renew interest in a work that has been neglected by scholars since its publication almost half a century ago.[1] *The Power of the Dog* tells the story of two middle-aged brothers who own a ranch in Montana in the 1920s. When George weds a local widow named Rose, Phil becomes jealous of the woman who has come between him and his brother. Phil, a repressed gay man, seeks revenge by seducing the widow's son, Peter, with tragic results. Savage accounted for the muted critical response to his work by suggesting that readers preferred "books that reward a belief in the happy ending and the pot at the end of the rainbow."[2] One publisher rejected *The Power of the Dog* after the author refused to eliminate a graphic description of cattle castration, as well as explicit references to the sexual orientation of one of the novel's main characters. Instead, reviewers referred to Phil and Peter's relationship as "a simplistic contest of good versus evil" (Savage, 1977, p. 278).

[1] O. Alan Weltzien's recent biography, *Savage West: The Life and Fiction of Thomas Savage* (Reno: Univ. of Nevada Press, 2020), is the first book-length study of Savage's life and career. An excerpt from the book appeared five years prior to the book's publication. See Weltzien, "Thomas Savage's Queer Country." Western Writers Online February 2015. 4 pp.
http://scholarworks.boisestate.edu/wwo/1/. Accessed August 14, 2021. Earlier studies of Montana writers frequently neglect to cite Savage and his critically acclaimed novel. See, for example, William Kittredge and Annick Smith, eds., *The Last Best Place: A Montana Anthology* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1990); William W. Bevis, *Ten Tough Trips: Montana Writers and the West* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1990); Rick Newby and Suzanne Hunger, eds., *Writing Montana: Literature Under the Big Sky* (Missoula: Montana Center for the Book, 1996); and Ken Egan, Jr., *Hope and Dread in Montana Literature* (Reno: Univ. of Nevada Press, 2003).

[2] *I Heard My Sister Speak My Name* (Savage, 1977, p.3). Weltzien agrees that the author's focus on the "darker side" of western experience may explain his unpopularity. See "Just Regular Guys": Homophobia, the Code of the West, and Constructions of Male Identity, (Harrison, ed., 2009, p. 119).

Male same-sex relationships were common on the western US frontier.[1] However, after the term "homosexuality" became equated with sexual deviance in the late nineteenth century, representations of same-sex desire gradually began to disappear from regional literature. By the 1960s, attitudes about homosexuality were beginning to change. In 1960, University of Montana professor Leslie Fiedler, a resident of Savage's home state, published *Love and Death in the American Novel*, an analysis of male homoerotic relationships. Like Fiedler's study, *The Power of the Dog* examines definitions of masculinity and attitudes toward same-sex relations in the American West. Savage makes Phil's hidden sexual orientation known to the reader, describing an adolescent crush the rancher once had on a cowboy named Bronco Henry (Savage, 2001, p. 221). While Phil assumes that Peter is also gay, calling him "Miss Nancy" and "sissy" (Savage, 1967, p. 169), Savage never reveals Peter's orientation.[2] Phil disdains Peter because he exhibits stereotypical traits of the homosexual male: he is well groomed, introverted, and close to his mother. Elsewhere, however, the rancher compares Peter to the "Jews" (Savage, 1967, p. 60) and calls him a "Frog" (or a Frenchman), implying that the Midwestern transplant is merely different from the cowboys and ranchers who live out West. Because other characters believe Phil to be straight, his own assumptions about Peter's gayness may also be inaccurate. Ultimately, *The Power of the Dog* complicates its study of male sexuality by relating it to a unique culture of masculinity that existed in the early American West.

[1] For accounts of male same-sex relationships on the western frontier, see Blake Allmendinger, *The Cowboy: Representations of Labor in an American Work Culture* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992); Chris Packard, *Queer Cowboys* (New York: Palgrave, 2005); Susan Lee Johnson, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (New York: Norton, 2000); and Peter Boag, *Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2011).

[2] One critic suggests that all three male characters are gay. Olson describes George's marriage as a "defection" to the enemy or the opposite sex. See West of Desire: Queer Ambivalence in Montana Literature (Harrison, ed., 2009, p. 107).

The novel begins with a grisly scene that takes place during a cattle roundup.

> Phil always did the castrating; first he sliced off the cup of the scrotum and tossed it aside; next he forced down first one and then the other testicle, slit the rainbow membrane that enclosed it, tore it out, and tossed it into the fire where the branding irons glowed. There was surprisingly little blood. In a few moments the testicles exploded like huge popcorn. Some men, it was said, ate them with a little salt and pepper. "Mountain oysters," Phil called them with that sly grin of his, and suggested to young ranch hands that if they were fooling around with the girls they'd do well to eat them, themselves. (Savage, 1967, p. 3)

Phil refers to the belief that eating calf testicles enhances a man's virility. In the late nineteenth century, cowboys began disseminating this myth to counter the perception that they were "metaphorically castrated when they were cut off from society, isolated from women and families, and forced to live with other single men on ranches out West." In cowboy vernacular, the verb "to cut" means to castrate a calf, as well as to isolate a head of stock from the rest of a herd.[1] After separating a calf from the group, the castrator deprives the animal of its sexual organs, thus distinguishing it from the reproductive cattle that remain in the herd. Eventually, the steer will be shipped to market and slaughtered, unlike the remaining bulls and cows on a ranch.

Historically, gay men have been criticized for not contributing to the propogation of the human species, thus "severing" themselves from the rest of society (Edelman, 2004, p. 5). In *The Power of the Dog,* Phil tries to prove that he is more manly than the cowboys who traditionally

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[1] *The Cowboy* (Allmendinger, 1992, p. 51). The castration myth appears in numerous cowboy autobiographies published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as in cowboy poems such as The Oyster (Black, 1986, p. 28).

sever the calves' testicles. Unlike other ranch owners, who were more likely to supervise the rounding up, branding, and castration of livestock, Phil participates in the performance of these tasks. Instead of wearing gloves, like the cowboys, he wrestles the animals with his bare hands, occasionally cutting them with his pocket knife and exposing his skin to the flames that heat the branding irons (Savage, 1967, pp. 3-4). Yet Phil is unmarried and childless. By contrast, Peter is the product of heterosexual parents who move from Chicago to rural Montana, hoping to establish the husband's medical practice in "the Wild West" (Savage, 1967, p. 19). After his death, Peter decides to follow in his father's professional footsteps. While dissecting dead animals on his stepfather's ranch, the teenager learns how to cultivate the bacteria taken from a carcase and poison Phil with anthrax. The rancher's demise represents a victory for reproductive society.

The final scene featuring the two antagonists is also a potentially sexual act. However, because it involves two men, it leads to death instead of the creation of life. The moment Peter makes contact with his victim—handing Phil a piece of poisoned leather, which the rancher is braiding into a rope—is both deadly and intimate. The novel's opening scene is also violent and sexually graphic. A man grabs a calf's scrotum with his bare hand and slits the "rainbow" membrane, exposing its testicles (Savage, 1967, p. 3). A later roundup becomes eroticized when two cowboys remove their shirts before dragging calves into the branding chute, while dogs who have feasted on their organs watch in silent content, observing the orgy of "sweaty bodies" and dismembered genitals (Savage, 1967, p. 162). Phil encourages the cowboys to consume the products of their labor, alluding to the testicles' aphrodisiacal qualities. Instead of doing so, the men assert their masculinity by stripping to the waist, subduing and desexing the calves.

Although the cattle industry depended on the reproduction of livestock, it was considered impolite to refer to the sexual nature of this enterprise in western frontier society. People living in cowtowns "turned a collective blind eye to the fact that animal sex reproduction and pregnancy played roles in economically sustaining the human

world." The sex organs of bulls and the udders of cows were removed in pictures of cattle that appeared in business advertising, brand books, and newspaper ads. In 1869, a group of concerned citizens in Abilene, Kansas forced the owner of the Bull's Head Saloon to alter the logo of its "thoroughly masculine" namesake. They also persuaded the Bull Durham Tobacco Company to add a "fence plank to hide the testicles of their trademark printed on all packages of cigarette 'makings'" (Allmendinger, 1992, 59.) In *The Power of the Dog,* the townspeople in Beech, Montana are also prudish, refusing to acknowledge their own sexual appetites. When George and Rose host a dinner party, their guests are afraid "the talk might treacherously veer to the facts of breeding, to the purchase and worth of bulls and studs, delicately called gentleman-cows and he-horses, but suggesting all the same that there was more to life, more to marriage, than merely living in the same house together, and that every couple in that room was guilty of it—however far they now sat apart with wooden faces, however unresponsive." (Savage, 1967, p. 140)

Hypocritically, the town tolerates prostitutes because they keep cowboys sexually satisfied (8), thus preventing them from quitting their jobs, getting married, and leaving the range industry. The brothel serves as an occasional sexual outlet for the men, while simultaneously reenforcing their professional status as bachelors. Female cooks and servants eventually become discontent working at the Burbank ranch, realizing "that they could not marry a hired man, for there is no place on a ranch for a married man" to live (Savage, 1967, p. 122). Phil chooses to remain single because he isn't attracted to women. Unlike the formula western, which has a "persistent obsession with masculinity" (Mitchell, 1996, p. 3), featuring heterosexual males who are either married or single, Savage's non-genre novel questions stereotypical definitions of manhood. In *The Power of the Dog,* male sexuality is a construct, like the frontier society that is gradually imposing itself on the natural landscape. From a distance, Beech, Montana looks like "a mirage floating just above the horizon." On closer inspection, the town reveals itself to be both real and artificial, featuring "two false-fronted saloons" (Savage, 1967, p. 18).

The cowboys construct their own personas, imitating their favorite western movie stars and country singers. Phil also performs his identity, demonstrating that masculinity is "not simply a blunt biological fact," but "a cultural fiction that must be created" (McCall, 2001, 4). But Phil is a "real" westerner, not a dude. The rancher's old saddle and "plain" steel spurs suggest that the rancher isn't concerned with appearances (Savage, 1967, p. 5), unlike his hired hands, who blow their money on "silver mounted spurs," fancy "headstalls," and other showy gear for their mounts (Savage, 1967, p. 181). Yet Phil also has a taste for western finery, braiding leather and horsehair bridles, halters, and ropes. Paradoxically, in doing so, he not only constructs his identity as an authentic western male, he cross-identifies with an ostracized group in society, paying tribute to the ex-convict who taught him this "remarkable skill" (Savage, 1967, p. 220). Historically, inmates at western state and territorial prisons specialized in making handcrafted equipment for horses. At the time the novel takes place, in the 1920s, the prison in Deer Lodge, Montana had more than fifty inmates producing such goods (Martin and Martin, 2016, 14). Halters, bridles, and ropes controlled a horse's movement, while the prisons in which they were made prevented convicts from leaving their cells (Allmendinger, 1992, pp. 88-94). At the same time, convicts used their "fantastic artistry" to overcome the "despair" caused by incarceration (Savage, 1967, p. 220), immersing themselves in their craft until they became "unaware of their surroundings" (Martin and Martin, 2016, 31).

Phil correctly guesses that the man who taught him is an ex-convict. The rancher's "shrewd sense told him all he needed to know" (Savage, 1967, p. 220). Both men fear being outed by people who might guess their secrets. Like the ex-convict who remains imprisoned by his past, Phil lives in a figurative closet.[1] His hiding place is also a performative space. The rancher escapes to his room to avoid listening to Rose play the piano, then mocks her singing by adopting "a chillingly

[1] For more on the closet as a metaphor for the "secret" of homosexuality and the oppression of gay men, in particular, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1990).

accurate female falsetto" (Savage, 1967, p. 100). Phil assumes a campy persona while parodying his sister-in-law. On another occasion, he retreats to his room "with a quick, light, high-arched step on his rather small feet." As the rancher begins playing the banjo, Rose realizes that "he was playing precisely what she was playing—and better." When Phil stops playing, she becomes even more upset. "[S]o pointed was his silence she could no longer practice at all until she knew he was out of the house" (Savage, 1967, pp. 123-24). Phil experiences the "nonresidence" of queer bodies, a sense of disorientation or not "feeling at home" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 170). With George's marriage, and the transformation of the brothers' home into the dwelling of a heterosexual couple, Phil must take refuge in his bedroom or leave the house altogether.

The "west" can refer to a geographic region, a cardinal direction, or a point of orientation. It also alludes to a genre whose typical protagonist is a heterosexual male, working in homosocial environments. On the early frontier, homosexual men were seldom acknowledged to live and work in these same-sex environments, and depictions of the naked male body were considered taboo. Savage departs from this tradition, examining the blindness and silence associated with the male anatomy and sexual desire. The brothers share a bedroom before George's marriage. "Never had [they] appeared naked before each other; before they undressed at night they snapped off the electric lights." George bathes once a week, "entering the bathroom fully clothed, locking the door behind him" (Savage, 1967, pp. 7-8), while Phil goes once a month to a watering hole, known only to the brothers and the late Bronco Henry. "The spot was precious, and must never be profaned by another human presence. Luckily, that spot could only be approached through a single passage in the willows, so grown over that you had to stoop and crawl." (Savage, 1967, p. 171)

Phil fell in love with Bronco Henry before the term "homosexuality" became associated with sexual deviance.[1] Thus, he remembers the watering hole as a space associated with "innocence and purity."[2] But it has since become a place of shame and secrecy, another version of the closet, requiring him to "stoop and crawl" in order to enter the hideaway. Peter accidentally intrudes on this spot as Phil gazes into the water, "strangely moved by his own naked reflection." As the rancher curses him, Peter runs like a deer, "leaping back into the sheltering bush" (Savage, 1967, pp. 170-71). Savage compares Peter to nature, suggesting that the homosexual man disturbs the environment with his presence. In a later scene, Peter also looks in a reflecting surface. But when he sees himself, he thinks about the rancher he plans to kill. He combs his hair, while standing in front of his bedroom mirror, dragging "his thumb across the teeth of the comb. His lips formed a single word. 'Phil…'" (Savage, 1967, p. 216)

The title of the novel alludes to a passage from Psalms: "Deliver my soul from the sword,/My darling from the power of the dog" (22:20). Initially, Phil is the man with a sword, the cattle castrator, the man who persecutes his brother's effeminate stepson. But the two characters eventually reverse roles. The reader learns that Phil is gay and that the wounds on his hands make him vulnerable to Peter, the novel's ultimate predator. As Peter looks in the mirror, he plays with the "teeth" of the comb, as he handles the scalpel that he uses to skin and dissect dead animals (Savage, 1967, p. 211). Peter becomes an *homme fatal,* using the knife to transfer anthrax onto the leather, then seducing Phil with a promise to watch him braid the rope. After making this promise, he

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[1] The term first appeared in Charles Gilbert Chaddock's 1892 English translation of Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis. The Power of the Dog* takes place in the 1920s, sometime after the election of Calvin Coolidge in 1923. Since the rancher is now a middle-aged man, it is likely that his romance with Bronco Henry occurred more than twenty-one years ago, before *Psychopathia Sexualis* was published.

[2] This phrase recalls Fiedler's statement that American writers are obsessed with "death, incest, and innocent homosexuality." See *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960, p. xi).

"turned and walked back to the wagon, his stiff new levis going snip-snip-snip, like scissors." (Savage, 1967, p. 229)

Westerns dramatize conflicts between different racial and ethnic groups struggling to control the frontier. In Savage's non-genre novel, however, two white men battle for psychological dominance in a region where the internal frontier is the only terrain left to explore. Questions about Phil's sexuality and Peter's motivations for committing murder transform *The Power of the Dog* into a work of inward reflection. Phil sees the image of a dog on the hillside, chasing its unknown prey (Savage, 1967, p. 67). Although he identifies with the predator, he is also a future victim—a closeted gay man ultimately undone by his secret passion and self-loathing. Savage's protagonist is a sexually complicated male character and unconventional western figure, like fictional males in other regional works that were published in the same ten-year period, including John Herlihy's *Midnight Cowboy* (1965) and John Rechy's *Sexual Outlaw* (1977). Peter is the novel's antagonist, as well as Phil's successor. He declares that the "dog is dead" (Savage, 1967, p. 275), then takes its place at the end of the novel. During Phil's funeral, an animal attaches itself to Peter. "It was the first of the dogs to adore him. His first friend." (Savage, 1967, pp. 272-73)

Peter's orientation remains unknown. Instead of portraying him as an adolescent with sexual desires, Savage transforms him into a character who is part avenging angel, part emotionless psychopath. Peter delivers his "darling" mother from the power of the dog (Savage, 1967, p. 275). But instead of fighting bullies at school, he studies them with the cool detachment of a serial killer. Peter knew that "he must oppose them on his own terms, not theirs. And he knew it was not only they for whom he harbored this novel, cold, impersonal hatred" (Savage, 1967, p. 34). Later, he wrings a rabbit's neck in a ruthless manner that "Phil couldn't help but admire" (Savage, 1967, p. 259). In the formula western, a man kills "cleanly and purely at a distance through the magic of his six-gun," covering "the nakedness of violence and aggression beneath a skin of aesthetic and moral propriety" (Cawelti, 1984, p. 88). In *The Power of the Dog*, however, the rabbit scene foretells how Peter

will kill Phil with his hands, wearing gloves, unlike Phil, to avoid becoming poisoned by anthrax (Savage, 1967, p. 242). The fact that *The Power of the Dog* isn't a conventional western becomes apparent in the opening scene, as Phil cuts through the "skin" of propriety, shocking readers with a graphic depiction of cattle castration. Whereas killing a man with a gun from a distance conceals the intensity of the male characters' feelings for each other, the opening scene reveals the cattle and Phil's nakedness and vulnerability.

The castration scene also reveals the relationship in the novel between sexuality, power, waste, and recycling. Whites who migrated out West in the nineteenth century greedily consumed the region's natural resources, littering the landscape with their refuse. The pile of scrotums in the branding corral represents the conquest of the West and the harvesting or destruction of the natural world (Savage, 1967, p. 3), recalling similar scenes in western American literature: the slaughter of a buffalo herd, a field of tree stumps, abandoned mine shafts, a pyramid of animal skulls (White, 1994, p. 241). Phil removes the testicles because steers don't breed. He leaves them for the dogs and the cowboys because he is a superior male, the owner of "the biggest ranch in the valley [who] could afford any damned thing he wanted" (Savage, 1967, p. 5). Characters who lack such power recycle the parts of nature that people like Phil reject, thus giving their lives beauty, meaning, and sustainability. Rose is an artist who makes a flower arrangment out of weeds growing next to the fence in the horse pasture. When Phil makes fun of her, it reminds George of a Christmas years earlier, when he tried on a present from his mother, putting over his clothes "a dressing gown of blue silk and funny slippers to match" (Savage, 1967, pp. 133-34). In that moment, George becomes a comical cross-dresser, the victim of his mother's emasculation and infantilization.[1]

[1] Schmidt writes about ideologies that "phobically associate mass culture…with female and queer bodies," in *The Poetics of Waste: Queer Excess in Stein, Ashbery, Schuyler, and Goldsmith* (2014, pp. 4-5).

The castration process transforms a calf's fertile sexual organs into sterile waste, while the slaughter of beef cattle results in the accumulation of hides that no one in the novel uses. One of the wealthiest, most powerful, and biggest consumers in the region, Phil disposes of items that others who are less fortunate recycle.[1] Rose sells the hides to buy alcohol, drinking to mask the pain caused by Phil's psychological and verbal abuse. She rationalizes her decision by claiming that if Phil sold the skins, he would add the money "to a sheaf of other uncashed checks she had seen in a cubbyhole in George's office…. Were such checks, like the hides, at intervals ritually burned?" (Savage, 1967, p. 248). Phil refuses to sell the hides to local Jews, whom he compares to scavengers. "Jews after hides, Jews after junk, Jews with the eye on the quick buck, bargaining for rusty iron, mowing machine frames, rake frames, lengths of pipe and so forth that collects on a ranch" (Savage, 1967, pp. 137-38). *The Power of the Dog* features other kinds of scavengers, as well. Magpies "pick at the sores" on livestock "and eat [their] living flesh" (Savage, 1967, p. 68), while a pile of fence posts becomes a sanctuary for the gophers that Peter kills and for other "small living things" (Savage, 1967, p. 252). Everyone in the novel is either a scavenger, a predator, or prey.

Initially, Peter is a socially marginal and powerless character, the ideal prey for a bully like Phil. Later, he becomes the hunter who disposes of Phil. Until then, unlike the effeminate teenager, the older man has succeeded in hiding his weakness—his difference from the other men who work on the ranch. Phil downplays his college education and his family's social standing in the community, assuming an anti-intellectual, egalitarian attitude that makes the cowboys respect him as one of their own kind. But other characters realize that Phil doesn't belong in rural Montana. They perceive him as a person living a useless existence. "Some who knew Phil said, 'What a waste!' For ranching was no demanding or challenging occupation, once you had the ranch, and

[1] Thompson argues that one "indication of status" is measured by the number of objects a person can afford to discard. See *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (1979, pp. 1-2).

required brawn but little brain. Phil, people marveled, might have been anything—doctor, teacher, artisan, artist." (Savage, 1967, p. 9). Although he mocks Peter's artistic accomplishments (Savage, 1967, p. 40), Phil is also a craftsman, braiding a rope out of leather. Like Rose, he transforms castoff materials and unappreciated objects into works of art. The same talent enables him see "this thing his heart called The Hound on the Hill." (Savage, 1967, p. 137). When Peter also identifies "the running dog," Phil fears that the younger man is now stalking the rancher (Savage, 1967, p. 259).

Unlike natural goods and waste products, which can be recycled or eaten, the detritus of civilization is permanent trash, a reminder of the non-indigenous presence of white people and a by-product of industrialization. While trailing cattle to market, the cowboys notice the land "where years before a man like them had failed; where the road wandered near a barbed wire fence, a rusty sign peppered with bullet holes urged them to chew a brand of tobacco that no longer existed" (Savage, 1967, p. 13). A neighbor has repurposed an "abandoned log shack," turning it into a loafing shed for horses seeking shade. But the metal sign no longer serves a purpose. It merely comments on the passage of time and the vanity of human endeavors.

The non-biodegradable offal of white society has been a concern for writers in western American literature since the beginning of the settlement period. One of the first great works in Montana literature, Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902), features an early scene in which the narrator, an eastern tenderfoot, enters the town of Medicine Bow. It resembles similar towns that "litter" the frontier, "from the Columbia to the Rio Grande, from the Missouri to the Sierras…. Houses, empty bottles, and garbage, they were forever of the same shapeless pattern." The narrator finds no useful meaning in the "shapeless" sight that greets his eyes. Eventually he looks away from the town, noting that above its "foulness swam a pure and quiet light, such as the East never sees" (Wister, 2002, p. 9). In *The Power of the Dog,* however, the landscape has no redemptive features. Even the most pristine view of the Montana frontier makes cowboys yearn to return to white civilization. "The new

sun rising above the eastern hills showed a world so vast and hostile to individual hope that the young cowhands clung to memories of home, kitchen stoves, mothers' voices, the cloakroom at school and the cries of children let out at recess" (Savage, 1967, p. 13). Savage's West is a place where almost no one feels at home. Peter's late father regrets bringing his wife and son to Montana (Savage, 1967, p. 21). Rose becomes an alcoholic during her second marriage to George, the only character who seems rooted in the novel. Phil is dis-oriented because his sexual orientation makes it impossible for him to live in the homophobic ranching world; to feel comfortable in his own skin. In his autobiographical novel, *I Heard My Sister Speak My Name* (1977), Savage wrote that he moved to Maine in order to get as far as he could "from the ranch in Montana where I grew up, and where my mother was unhappy" (Savage, 1977, p. 7). Like most of the characters in *The Power of the Dog,* the author felt unhappy living out West. However, he returned to his home state in his imagination, seeking to rewrite the past.[1] The fact that he did so repeatedly suggests that he never succeeded in banishing the ghosts of his childhood, or that the attempt eventually became an obsession. Annie Proulx speculates that having his teenage surrogate defeat the fictional version of the man who abused his mother must have given Savage vicarious satisfaction. According to Proulx, every time someone reads the novel, "the child that was Thomas re-kills him as surely as the fictional Peter Gordon removed his mother's nemesis" (Proulx, 2001, p. 273).

Western American writers often examine the ways in which the region shapes a person's destiny. But Savage's characters feel disconnected from the West, their homes, and their families. *The Power of the Dog* features interior spaces of refuge: real and metaphorical closets, outdoor retreats, and mental landscapes where characters seek to outwit their enemies. The novel becomes a material manifestation of one of these interior landscapes: the product of an author's mind. In the

[1] Savage's novels set in Montana include *The Pass* (1944), *I Heard My Sister Speak My Name* (1977), also known as *The Sheep Queen,* and *The Corner of Rife and Pacific* (1988).

process of writing the novel, Savage rearranges the past, making his own sexuality—and Phil's—more explicit. The author reveals his heterosexuality, dedicating the novel to his wife. He also makes it clear that Phil is the sexual other. In *I Heard My Sister Speak My Name,* Savage describes the man who inspired the character as "a bachelor by profession, a woman-hater" (Savage, 1977, p. 273). In *The Power of the Dog,* Phil is not only a bachelor and a misogynist, but an actual homosexual male. Savage problematically equates the three terms (bachelor=misogynist=homosexual), while simultaneously refusing to explain what constitutes a "professional" bachelor.[1] He never suggests that Peter—like the author—is gay. But he makes the reader question whether the author's animosity toward his stepfather's brother is based solely on the man's actions or on assumptions Savage makes about the sexual orientation of Phil's real-life counterpart.

Tied to the land, but feeling alone, Phil turns to the past. He tells stories about the early range industry and his hero, Bronco Henry. He collects arrowheads, although he despises the Indians who made them (Savage, 1967, p. 179). His version of western history begins with the arrival of white US explorers. Phil tells Peter that he once discovered the date "1805" carved on the side of a cliff in one of the back pastures on his ranch. "Must have been some fellow from the Lewis and Clark expedition," he says, adding, "There were real men in those days." He also tells Peter about a trail of rocks he discovered that lead into the mountains. "What say maybe sometime just you and me might look for 'em again? Follow 'em to the end?" (Savage, 1967, p. 236) Phil imagines the early frontier as a homosocial space inhabited by white explorers, ranchers, and cowboys. He would like to return to this era by disappearing with Peter into the wilderness, following in the footsteps of "real men" such as Lewis and Clark.

[1] The cowboys in the novel are also referred to as members of a "profession." But they are also portrayed as heterosexual. In the bunkhouse, they lust after "the pert women who modeled corsets and underwear" in the Montgomery Ward catalogue (Savage, 2001, p. 5).

By the 1960s, western American writers were beginning to depict the experiences of characters who lived in a region that was inhospitable to sexual minorities. Although most of these works are set in the contemporary mid-twentieth century, they suggest that not much has changed since the 1920s, when Savage's novel takes place. In Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966), Perry Smith murders a family on their Kansas farm in order to prove his manhood to his heterosexual accomplice, Dick Hickock. In Larry McMurtry's *The Last Picture Show* (1966), a coach in a small Texas town struggles with his attraction to his male athletes. In "Brokeback Mountain" (1997), *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), *The Laramie Project* (2000), and *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2012), male and female sexual minorities become victims of persecution and violence. Although these works "courageously insist on the need for change," they don't necessarily offer their characters hope. For these men and women, "the hope becomes the dread, the dream the nightmare, the belief the despair."[1]

Life Imitates Art

Although I was born in the West, and have worked as a professor in the field of western literature for thirty years, I didn't discover Savage's novel until 2010. My mother had died the year before. In the meantime, I had reconnected with my estranged father and stepmother in Colorado Springs. That summer I visited them in their townhouse on the south end of town, not far from the ranch where our family had lived before my parents' divorce.

One day I met the woman who lived in the upstairs unit. Her name was Linda, and she was one of those neurotic types most people enjoy in small doses. My dad and stepmom thought Linda drank. Sometimes she came to visit them without phoning first—showing up at their door, inviting herself inside, and proceeding to babble about

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[1] Ken Egan, Jr., *Hope and Dread in Montana Literature* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2003), xviii.

whatever was bothering her at the time. My stepmom thought Linda had problems in her marriage and needed to get a job. My father had suffered a stroke that had left him partially paralyzed, and my stepmom had MS. For Linda, it must have been like having a captive audience.

After my dad told Linda I was gay, she tried to bond with me. "I think my son's gay too," she confided as we drove to the liquor store. We had to hurry before her second husband got home from work. He was a policeman, as well as a minister, which wasn't surprising since a lot of people in Colorado Springs were born-again Christians who opposed gun control.

I don't remember why Linda thought her son was gay, but after meeting his stepfather I began to share her concern. When we got back home, he was sitting on a couch in the living room. There was a Bible on the coffee table and a gun on the arm rest next to him.

Linda must have realized that her second husband hadn't made a good first impression. The next time she saw me, she tried to redeem him in my eyes by telling me that one of his relatives was a writer. She and her husband hadn't read his work, but after a couple minutes she remembered his name. When I returned to Los Angeles, I did some research and discovered that Thomas Savage had died in 2003. Most of his novels were out of print, though Amazon had a used copy of his most admired work, *The Power of the Dog*.

After reading the novel, I was struck by the similarities between fictional Montana in the 1920s and the real West almost a hundred years later. The mother who drank, the son who might or might not be gay, the forbidding male authority figure, and the ever-present potential for violence.

A decade later, director Jane Campion is poised to release her film adaptation of Savage's novel. In the American West, the LGBT community continues to fight for equality. Campion may have chosen to adapt *The Power of the Dog* because of its contemporary relevance, and she will undoubtedly treat the themes in the novel with particular

sensitivity, given the focus of her previous films. Campion's best-known film, *The Piano* (1993), concerns a widow who remarries and moves to the New Zealand frontier with her child. In addition to sparking interest in a long-neglected work, especially among specialists in queer studies and regional literature, *The Power of the Dog* should appeal to scholars who situate their work within transnational contexts—particularly in New Zealand, where the production is currently filming. Campion's movies often feature psychologically complex female characters, suggesting that her upcoming adaptation may also position Rose as a central figure, unlike Savage's novel, which treats her as a secondary character. In either case, it will contribute significantly to the growing body of work of one of the world's most esteemed filmmakers.

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Thomas Savage'ın *The Power of the Dog* Romanında Öküz Hadımı ve Erkek Cinselliği

Öz: Thomas Savage'ın *The Power of the Dog* (1967) romanı, bir çiftçinin 1920'lerde Montana'da bir çiftlikte bir öküzü hadım etmesiyle başlar. Sahne o kadar ayrıntılı ve rahatsız edicidir ki bir yayıncı bu romanı basmayı reddetmiştir. Eleştirmenler romanı ele alırken bu sahneyi tartışmamıştır. Ancak, bu sahne, erkeklik ve cinsellik gibi, özellikle Amerikan Batı'sında erken yirminci yüzyılda yaşayan erkelerle ilgili olarak yazarı meşgul eden bazı temaları takdim etmektedir. Çiftçi Phil Burbank, erken dönem kovboy şiirlerinde ve çiftçi otobiyografilerinde görülen hadım mitine göndermede bulunarak, kovboylarına buzağının bölünmüş testislerini yemenin onların erkekliğini arttıracağını söyler. Yerleşimin az olduğu Batı'da, kadınlardan izole bir şekilde, çoğunlukla homososyal toplulukların bir parçası olarak çalıştıkları gerçeğini telafi etmek için gerekli olan bu mite göre, hayvanların genitalleri erkeklerin cinsel güçlerini arttırmaktadır.

Her ne kadar çalışanlarının aileleri için kalacak yer sağlamaya ve erkeklere daha fazla maaş vermeye niyeti olmayan sığır sahipleri için çalıştıkları sürece bekar kalmaları gerekse de bu mit, kovboyların —ve hayvancılık sektörünün diğer erkek üyelerinin de— heteroseksüel olduğunu varsaymaktadır. Ancak romanın baş kişisi Phil, "gerçek" Batılı

erkeklerle özdeşleştirilen bazı özellikleri sergileyerek heteroseksüel bir erkekmiş gibi kabul görmeye çalışan, henüz kendisi hakkında dışarıya açılmamış bir eşcinseldir. Erkek kardeşi George kasabadan bir dul ile evlenip, Rose'u ve oğlu Peter'ı ikisinin birlikte yaşadığı çiftlik evine getirince, sırrı tehlikeye girer. Stephen Crane'in kısa öyküsündeki (1898) gelinin Yellow Sky'a gelmesindeki gibi, Rose homososyal topluluğu heteroseksüel bir mekâna dönüştürür. Tehdit altında hisseden Phil, —kitap bu konuda sessiz kalsa da bazı eleştirmenlerin eşcinsel olduğunu varsaydıkları—oğlunu baştan çıkararak intikam almaya çalışır. Peter cinselliği gelişme aşamasında tipik bir genç değildir. Bir şiddet ve cezalandırma sembolüdür: yarı intikam meleği, yarı duygusuz psikopat. Phil'in sırrını keşfeder ve annesinin hayatını kurtarmak için üvey babasının kardeşini öldürmeyi planlar. Bu süreçte, Savage ön saflardaki değişimi ve Phil gibi erkeklerin tehlike altındaki türlerden olmaktan giderek uzaklaştığı yeni bir dönemin gelişini resmeder.

Anahtar kelimeler: Erkek cinselliği, homoseksüellik, öküz hadımı, Amerikan Batı'sı