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Detecting the Real Fictions of History in Watershed

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Detecting the Real Fictions of History in *Watershed*

William R. Handley (bio)

Late into Percival Everett's 1996 novel *Watershed*, the narrator and

protagonist Robert Hawks, a hydrologist who has felt compelled to investigate the murder of two FBI agents near the (fictional) Plata Indian Reservation, considers "how I had done so much to remove all things political from my life." As a disinterested scientist disinclined to care about even the applications of his work, he is accustomed to seeing himself "as an objective, hired gun," regardless of whether the state or the Naturalist's Conservancy is calling on his expertise.¹ As with the emotional distance that Jake Gittes, the private investigator in the film *Chinatown*, usually puts between himself and his clients (in a story in which water also plays a leading role), so with Robert's cool, studied, and guiltless indifference to the social and political realms: his detachment is, in the end, not immune to the entanglements of the personal and political past, to the history in the water. The "desire to know more" about a case in which he is not involved turns into "a longstanding, unanswered, personal quest" (153) to understand his grandfather, an atheist and doctor who committed suicide while on a hunting expedition with the young Robert. This desire to know more also becomes a historical quest that leads Everett's narrator not only to discern the connections and differences between African- and Native American experience under American colonialism, including the narrator's personal experience at the hands of white police officers, but to participate in a minor act of revolution alongside members of the Plata Creek tribe, in which he acts no longer as objective scientist but as a human subject with a borrowed gun. Part mystery, part western, *Watershed* is a novel in which history weighs heavily, perhaps more so than in any other of Everett's works. If Everett's other westerns, *God's Country* and *Grand Canyon, Inc.*, are mischievous re-workings of generic conventions that call to mind Mark Twain, then *Watershed* is a non-formulaic but equally revisionist western more like John Sayles' soberly searching film *Lone Star*, in which an investigation into the incestuous western past has both personal and political consequences for the curious.

Seen together, Everett's western novels both exhibit and tackle one of the central literary problems in literature of the American West: how does a western writer free his imagination and at the same time respond

to the demand for historical authenticity that readers for two centuries have brought to this cultural landscape (whether real or imagined) of conquests and land-grabs, of national myths and regional realities? The formula Western (in its most popular version and with little sense of irony or parody) often responds to the history of American expansion and colonialism with [End Page 305] reductive typologies, Manichean morality, and neat plot resolutions—all of which Everett's work dramatically eschews.² In other words, while ostensibly taking on "historical" subject matter, the formula Western, with all of its attendant nostalgia for a "vanished" frontier, is historically escapist: fantasy and imagination trump realism in a retrospective look at an "old" West. When more "highbrow" (and white) western writers such as Willa Cather, Wallace Stegner, and Cormac McCarthy face the western past, an ethically more ambiguous and palimpsestic view emerges of the present as the product of a continuous and ongoing, nonlinear and non-progressive history. Yet their work is no less creative and imaginative for facing history. Indeed, as I will argue about *Watershed*, these works of western fiction are historical in the deepest sense: not because they offer up "facts" or because they "faithfully represent a bygone era," but because they are self-conscious about the way in which the "truth" of history is never objective but always subjectively imagined. Moreover, "history"—especially the history of American racism is itself a record of discourses that, however factually false or fictional, have had the very real power to bruise or destroy people, cultures, and landscapes.

Watershed begins near the story's end, as Robert Hawks sits inside a small church on the Plata Indian Reservation, holding in...

DETECTING THE REAL FICTIONS OF HISTORY IN *WATERSHED*

by William R. Handley

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