Settling the Imagined West: Victor LaValle's *Lone Women*, Black Women, and the Revision of The Frontier Myth

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The frontier myth is considered a "vital element in shaping American institutions and national character" (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 30). Through literature, particularly the Western genre, authors negotiated "a clear concept of a representative American" who was almost always white and male (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 189). Although revisions of the frontier hero have been ongoing, the rhetoric of white male supremacy must be further interrogated. This necessity is highlighted by the resurgence of the Black Western in US culture, with films such as *The Harder They Fall* (2021) and television series such as *Lawmen: Bass Reeves* (2023), among others, centering Black cowboys. Beyoncé's latest country album *Cowboy Carter* (2024) brought Black women's interaction with frontier imagery into mainstream consciousness and generated discussions about their place within country music and Western genres (Denis). *Lone Women* (2023) by the award-winning author Victor LaValle, preceded *Cowboy Carter* by a year and introduced a Black woman, Adelaide, learning to survive in the harsh environment of the Montana frontier.[1] At a time when frontier imagery is regaining currency in popular culture, *Lone Women* presents a crucial revision of the frontier narrative to undermine the dangerous rhetoric of exclusion. LaValle himself is aware of both the centrality of the frontier in American culture and the process of erasure of certain participants. In a recent interview, he asked: "What did 'winning the West' mean, and why would there be a deep investment in pretending there was only one mover on that wheel of history?" ("Victor"). LaValle proposes an alternative to traditional frontier heroism and writes against the othering

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narrative of the frontier myth, which excluded people of color, women, and other marginalized people to solidify the ideology of white masculine exceptionalism.

Reading *Lone Women* under the theoretical framework proposed by Richard Slotkin in his three-volume account of the frontier myth in American culture, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (1973), *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization 1800-1890* (1985), and *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (1992), I analyze LaValle's use of frontier tropes. These include the Other, the harsh environment of the frontier, and regeneration through violence as formative of American heroism. Serving as the basis of American white male supremacy, the merit of the American hero is his masculinity, and his whiteness is a sign of civilization. This rhetoric asserted superiority over racial and cultural Others—first Native Americans on the earliest frontiers, followed by Mexicans, African Americans, and Asian immigrants—who became victims of white exceptionalism. The hero's masculinity manifests in his agency, determination, and survival skills, as opposed to women, who are seen as passive victims or peripheral characters serving the hero's journey. I read *Lone Women*'s central character Adelaide, a Black woman, within Slotkin's framework of frontier heroism, particularly as the farmer and the hunter. Through Adelaide, LaValle undermines the white masculine ideology of the frontier myth while highlighting othering as a destructive force resulting in violence, hate, and exclusion through the monstrous Elizabeth. I demonstrate how *Lone Women* subverts the whiteness, maleness, and individualism of the frontier hero to criticize the frontier myth as insufficient for not only Black women but also anyone who finds themselves on the Other side of the frontier binary.

White frontier heroism was defined through opposition to racial and cultural otherness throughout the process of settlement. Kyle T. Mays establishes that "the foundations of the United States, its current power and wealth, were built on enslaved African labor and the expropriation of Indigenous land" (19). This position raises the question of how to reconcile reading Black and Native American people as heroes of a myth based on a settler colonialism that victimized both. As Mays claims: "It is important to understand how the white settler state helped construct the image of Black and Indigenous peoples in ways that allowed them to continue to be dehumanized and treated as separate political, economic, and social structures" (23). Furthermore, Tiffany Lethabo King points out that, until recently, the tendency in scholarship has been to focus on the negative aspects of the relationship between Native Americans and Black Americans (13). Although there are considerable differences between the relationships of Black people and Native Americans to white colonizers, both were the victims of settler colonialism. Their alternatives to the

frontier myth are crucial interventions in the destructive rhetoric of the traditional frontier myth. I suggest that in *Lone Women*, the alternative manifests as a more positive community based on collaboration rather than individualism and conquest.

The cultural and racial otherness of Native Americans served as a key concept of frontier writing. The trope of the Native American as the monstrous "dark" Other in frontier literature is similar to the haunting presence in gothic and horror narratives (Smith 315), marking American literary tradition as a place where "[the] enslaved African American ghost is the Indian ghost's double" (Miles 17). Robin R. Means Coleman views the horror genre, the presence of Black 'monstrousness' in white narratives, and the reclamation of the genre by Black filmmakers as social and cultural critique (7, 9). Reclaiming both horror and the frontier myth, LaValle writes a literal embodiment of the "dark" Other in the monster, Elizabeth, and critiques the process of othering not only by white culture but also by Adelaide herself. The horror Western allows LaValle to explicitly criticize the othering of bodies of color within the narrative of American settlement. The embodiment of frontier heroism and the rewriting of the frontier narrative from Native American and Black American perspectives reveal significant differences between the two but ultimately work to undermine the rhetoric of racial and cultural othering of both. Thus, *Lone Women* opens the frontier narrative to nonwhite and nonmasculine identities, identities that were erased from or victimized by frontier rhetoric.

I show that LaValle does not completely deconstruct frontier heroism but rather indicates how the prevalent cultural narrative of the frontier can be rewritten to be more inclusive. In his alternative, LaValle destabilizes both race and gender as constitutive of frontier heroism. In an interview with Jared Jackson, LaValle underscores that people of color and women, Black women especially, were present in the West, a fact acknowledged in historical scholarship but often absent from "popular history, generalized history" ("PEN Ten"). Through the popular genre of the Western, LaValle revises the frontier narrative and draws the attention of both scholars and mainstream audiences to mythological and historical erasures.

The study of the Black West has been ongoing since the early twentieth century, with Delilah Beasley, William Loren Katz, and Quintard Taylor, among others, recovering the stories of Black people who influenced Westward expansion. However, despite Taylor's plea that "we must pursue the significance of the black presence in the West beyond simply locating African Americans on the scene" (21), inquiry into the Black imagination of the West in African American literature has been lacking. Michael K. Johnson's *Black Masculinity and the Frontier Myth in American Literature* (2002) and *Hoo-Doo Cowboys and Bronze Buckaroos: Conceptions of the African American West* (2014), along

with Blake Allmendinger's *Imagining the African American West* (2005) and Eric Gardner's *Unexpected Places: Relocating Nineteenth-Century African American Literature* (2009), are the only full-length studies on Black authors' frontier writing. These scholars show the immense potential of studying Black writers' employment, criticism, and revision of the frontier myth, calling for more research into the Black West: "[A]s scholars continue to develop conceptual frameworks for understanding the material collected in that archive, we will begin to have a fuller picture of how the African American West has been experienced, imagined, and performed" (Johnson, *Hoo-Doo* 241), especially in Black women's texts.

In *Speculative Wests: Popular Representations of a Region and Genre* (2023), Johnson explores the continuities between Pauline Hopkins's *Winona* (1902-03), Charlotte Nicole Davis's *The Good Luck Girls* (2019), and Justina Ireland's *Dread Nation* (2018). He identifies "a tradition of women's—and specifically Black women's—western writing" (190). The importance of this tradition lies in the culture-forming power of the frontier myth. Glenda Riley stresses that the exclusion of African American women from studies of the Western frontier "both impairs their sense of identity and unbalances the historical record" (27). The identity provided by the frontier myth promotes white masculine American exceptionalism and supremacy, creating tension for nonwhite and nonmale Americans. *Lone Women* belongs to an understudied tradition of Black Western heroes and moves Black American women from the margins to the center of the most important American myth—the myth of the frontier. LaValle's novel engages in the project of myth-making that Riley recognized a need for twenty-five years ago and is yet to be fully realized.

The Frontier Myth and the Black Imagination

The centrality of the frontier in American culture has been widely studied, most famously expressed by Frederick Jackson Turner in his influential essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893).[2] Turner defines the frontier as "the outer edge of the wave—the meeting point between savagery and civilization" during the settlement of the American continent (28). He interprets the frontier as formative of American politics, capitalism, legislation, and nationality (45-46, 56-57). Greg Grandin suggests that the frontier is one of the most influential cultural narratives in the United States (2). Similarly, Slotkin traces the prevalence of frontier imagery in American cultural consciousness from the first permanent European settlement in the 1600s to the political rhetoric of John F. Kennedy's "New Frontier" in the twentieth century and beyond (*Regeneration* 21; *Gunfighter* 504). Introducing the formation of American identity as explorers,

adventurers, and settlers on the ever-shifting Western frontier, Slotkin uncovers historical, cultural, and literary processes that created a distinct American mythology.

Unlike Turner, Slotkin engages with the racialized rhetoric of the myth. He shows that the prevalence of the "savage war" and the dehumanization of Native Americans as the "dark" Other was the beginning of the racist rhetoric ingrained in the building of American society, becoming a tool for the oppression of various minorities (*Gunfighter* 13, 19). Through racial stereotypes, the frontier myth defined the boundaries of American heroic identity against the Other, basing white American exceptionalism on racial difference (Grandin 52, 88-89; Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 11-15, 18-19). Westward expansion was thus not only a space of exploration and conflict with Native Americans over land but also the basis of the American ideology of white exceptionalism and supremacy. Consequently, the role and contributions of people of color to the formation of the frontier expansion have often been ignored.

The omission of women, Native Americans, African Americans, and Asian and European immigrants from the frontier narrative has been called into question by critics, inviting a reexamination of the concept of the frontier itself.[3] Recent revisions of the West, in both local and global terms, have produced the concept of the *postwestern*. According to Susan Kollin, the postwestern helps to "offer strategies for reevaluating dominant frameworks" while acknowledging that "these challenges have been underway for some time in Indigenous studies, environmental humanities, queer theory, feminism, borderlands criticism, transnational studies, settler colonial theory, and postcolonial criticism" (61). She warns against the assimilation of individual works of scholarship under the umbrella term *postwestern* and underscores the importance of acknowledging particular histories (61-62). My examination of LaValle's novel builds on historical scholarship of the US West by focusing on the experience of African Americans on the American frontier. I argue that he uses the overlooked participation of African Americans in the West to criticize the rhetoric of othering within the frontier narrative and its implications for American culture.

Despite some of the earliest publications about Black historical frontier figures appearing in the early twentieth century, the Black West only gained widespread attention in the 1970s, after the publication of William Loren Katz's *The Black West* (1971) and Kenneth Porter's *The Negro on the American Frontier* (1971).[4] Since then, scholars have explored the historical impact of Black people, including Black women, on the frontier.[5] Although African Americans' historical engagement has been documented, proving that the frontier has always been relevant to Black people, the examination of the frontier's place within Black art and mythmaking has been lacking.

The relevance of the frontier to Black authors has been acknowledged in publications focusing on the literary West, such as *The Frontier Experience and the American Dream* (1989) and *Updating the Literary West* (1997) (Mogen, Busby, and Bryant 10; Bold 870). However, studies specifically focused on Black frontier writing have been few and far between. The aforementioned texts by Johnson, Allmendinger, and Gardner remain the only full-length studies of the Black literary frontier, highlighting the ways in which Black authors conform to or subvert generic conventions as a form of criticism of the myth. These scholars stress the necessity of further interrogating the frontier myth in African American literature, with Johnson stating: "Both African American participation in the history of settling the American West and African American participation in the genres of the Western and the frontier narrative have been ongoing, yet in terms of both actual history and genre history, we seem continually to forget that participation" (*Hoo-Doo* 239). Since Johnson's 2014 publication, there have been few works on Black women within this framework. One of the most recent entries is Shelly Jarenski's "Homes On-the-Road, Terrorized Cabins, and Prophetic Nightmare-scapes: Emma J. Ray's Unsettling Western Fantasies" (2020), where Jarenski analyzes the revision of the frontier narrative in Emma J. Ray's autobiography *Twice Sold, Twice Ransomed: Autobiography of Mr. and Mrs. L. P. Ray* (1926). Jarenski concludes that Ray "not only undermines the gendered norms of frontier fantasies, but she also reveals the racialization of these fantasies. In so doing she is able to more profoundly deconstruct the myths of the frontier than have many more celebrated and studied writers" (411). I identify similar tendencies in *Lone Women*. By examining their depiction as frontier heroes, I explore the role of Black women both in the historical settlement period and in contemporary literature. I propose the hunter hero and the farmer hero of Slotkin's frontier myth as crucial to understanding *Lone Women*. LaValle revises the white man's frontier myth by writing a Black woman as the hunter and farmer to destabilize both race and gender as constitutive of frontier heroism. LaValle restores Black women to not only the historical frontier but also its mythic counterpart. Frontier heroic myths find their origins in the captivity narrative. Through literary accounts of contact with Native peoples, the budding American nation created the Other on which it could project its anxieties and against which define its identity (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 55-58, 394). The tropes of Native American "savagery," the passivity of the female captive, the transformative potential of the wilderness as "a psychological and spiritual quest, a quest for salvation in the wilderness of the human mind and soul" (39), alongside the male hero, emerge as dominant aspects of the mythology (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 135; Sivils 87). These tropes have produced distinct strains of the myth, such as the hunter and the farmer.

The hunter myth sees the white man willingly entering the wilderness, isolated from the restrictions of civilization, where he confronts not only the physical environment but also the wilderness inside him, symbolized by the hunt of the beast (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 307, 559-60). The hunter must adapt and learn to navigate the environment, becoming self-reliant, encountering violence and death in order to hunt the beast. In the act of killing the beast, he accepts the savagery of himself, which leads to the hero's greatest transformation. Slotkin identifies this process as the titular "regeneration through violence," a kind of rebirth in which the European settler is transformed into an American hero, a symbolic blend of civilization and savagery (553-57). Thus, regeneration through violence becomes "the organizing principle at the heart of each subdivision of Western genre-space" and a basis of American national identity (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 352). However, it is not only the hunter myth that offers a heroic identity to Americans, and the wilderness is not always a site of the hero's violent transformation.

The second critical hero of Slotkin's myth is the farmer, the ostensible opposite to the solitary quest of the hunter. The farmer seemingly subverts both the violent and individualistic tendencies of the hunter. He is concerned with the wilderness "as humanized and gentled, symmetrical, orderly, and peaceful—nature as the farmer shapes it" (*Regeneration* 203). He adapts to the environment and cultivates wilderness for his profit and to spread civilization across the continent (262-63). The farmer's endeavors, alongside his exchanges with Europeans and Native Americans, are formative of American capitalism masked by the American Dream (Slotkin, *Fatal* 38). Slotkin claims that "the farmer, like the Puritan captive, is a mediating figure between the American wilderness and the civilized world" (*Regeneration* 213). However, the expansion of cultivated land reveals that the farmer hero is not as peaceful as he appears. The land that the farmer inhabits is only free after the genocide and displacement of Native Americans under US policies. Furthermore, the actual act of cultivating the land for farming took a sinister turn as farms turned into plantations.

Due to Southern slavery, the experience of Black people on the actual American frontier was complicated by their apparent opposition to the aforementioned mythic tropes. The plantation was both an agricultural operation and a racialized, patriarchal structure that served to empower the patriarch. Slotkin explains: "With slaves, [a man] was the associate and ally of the wealthiest and oldest plantation families, even if he continued to live in a scruffy frontier cabin in the Mississippi or Alabama backwoods" (*Regeneration* 463). The exploitative nature of slavery and its connection to the formation of white identity as opposed to "dark" Others created a conflict in which "the planter was a lonely agent of civilization, living and working in a village of African savages, for whom civilized discipline was hard to learn, painful to suffer, and tempting to throw off" (Slotkin, *Fatal* 145). In reality, the planter or patriarch

behaved "savagely" toward the enslaved people. Although Slotkin points out the implications of slavery for the development of American society, he does not highlight the hypocrisy and instability of the mythology itself. He ignores the fact that white people built their rhetoric of freedom and wealth on the backs of people othered by the dominant narrative, whom they dispossessed, enslaved, or killed. He does not contemplate the perspective of Black people on the frontier myth, only discussing the presence of African Americans in literary accounts in the context of the captivity narrative.

Despite the fact that captivity was central to the experience of enslaved people (Pierce 85), Slotkin does not explore the perspective of Black people in his analysis of the captivity narrative. Slotkin considers only Josiah Henson's *Father Henson's Story of His Own Life* (1858), a narrative of an enslaved man adhering to the Puritan rhetoric of sin and salvation (*Regeneration* 441-42). This narrative became the inspiration for the character of Uncle Tom in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Dedicating more attention to the fictionalized version of the story, Slotkin views *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as an inversion of the typical captivity narrative, depicting the Black man as the captive of white people. Since Stowe is a white person, it is not surprising that Slotkin finds that "[the novel] preserves the structures and moral biases of that mythology intact" (*Regeneration* 442). The shortcoming of Slotkin's analysis is thus made evident. Even with the abundance of materials authored by Black people, such as Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and Harriet Jacobs, among others, Slotkin ignores the perspective of Black authors on captivity in favor of white retellings of those stories. Even more striking, the discussion of Black women within the narrative is almost completely absent from Slotkin's otherwise detailed account of the development of the frontier myth. Since Slotkin himself firmly places Black people within the frontier myth, the omission of the Black women's experience in this framework from his or any other scholarship reveals a significant gap in American mythology, a gap that I suggest LaValle identifies and writes against.

Lone Women and the West

Examining LaValle's novella *The Ballad of Black Tom* (2016), Yumi Pak points out that rather than portraying Black women as active characters, LaValle depicts them through constant allusions. Pak interprets their "absent presence" as proof of LaValle's awareness of "what Black women make possible in their respective communities and beyond," despite their largely overlooked roles (Pak 358, 368). *Lone Women* is thus a next phase in LaValle's work, one in which a Black woman, Adelaide Henry, takes center stage. Although LaValle's identity as a Black man raises questions about his representation of Black women, he revises the very rhetoric that has historically victimized them, presenting a story centered on an empowered Black heroine. Thus, LaValle

gestures toward the pervasive necessity to rewrite not only the popular historical narrative but also the frontier myth from the perspective of Black women. By moving to the hostile environment of the Montana frontier and learning to navigate it, Adelaide embodies the farmer and the hunter heroes, proving that the actions of the frontier hero are not exclusive to white men. Through allusions to racism and bigotry, the story destabilizes gender and race as bases of frontier heroism. It highlights the rhetoric of othering within the frontier myth, which is disrupted when the origins of the monster that Adelaide brings with her are revealed. After a striking display of violence, the town of Big Sandy is not safe for Adelaide and her friends, who are excluded from the promise of freedom and wealth. Instead, the women establish a new town and replace the individualistic, antagonistic, violent frontier rhetoric with collaboration, acceptance, and empathy. LaValle's critique of the frontier myth is framed in a historically accurate setting, established from the beginning of the novel.

The introduction of Adelaide relies on the depiction of Adelaide's family as a part of the Westward expansion:

> There were twenty-seven Black farming families in California's Lucerne Valley in 1915. . . . Adelaide's parents were lured west by the promise of land in this valley. . . . This invitation was one of the few that the United States extended to even its Negro citizens, and after 1866, the African Society put out a call to "colonize" Southern California. The Henrys were among the hundreds who came. They weren't going to get a fair shot in Arkansas, that was for damn sure. The federal government called this homesteading. (LaValle, *Lone* 3-4)

Immediately, African Americans are established as homesteaders, even though "'Negro farmers got the worst land'" and "'tried to make the best of it'" (190). Black presence is thus reinstated within frontier mythology. To escape the racism of the Reconstruction era, Adelaide's parents go west alongside other homesteaders, in this case pointedly called colonizers, who believe in the "'promise of this great country . . . that all of us may find our fortunes through the blessing of freedom this nation promises'" (158). The Henrys adhere to the rhetoric of the frontier myth and become farmers. From the very beginning, the novel presents a revisionary narrative of Westward expansion by highlighting the Black presence on the frontier. The journey of Adelaide, who on Tuesday "had been a farmer [and by] Wednesday . . . became a fugitive" (7), provides a heroic tale of a Black frontierswoman.

Following the mysterious death of her parents, Adelaide travels to Montana after the example of Mattie T. Cramer. Cramer was a real historical figure whose "renderings of a woman facing not only the challenges of the prairie but also the condemnation of the society she was leaving" inspired women to move West (Carter 43). Cramer "had less than one hundred dollars to her name" but bought property in Montana and built a successful farm on

it (LaValle, *Lone* 19). Adelaide understands the capitalist dimension of the West, carefully rationing "$154, a large sum of money and still hardly enough for an entirely new life" during her journey (7). Later, the success of a Black woman, Bertie, serves as a testament to the perseverance of Black women on the frontier: "[T]he U.S. Department of the Interior officially recognized this territory as [Bertie's]. A proud day for any homesteader, but for a Black woman born in the last years of American slavery this feat amounted to a major historic victory" (129-30). The ownership of land is immensely important for Black people whose ancestors, according to Slotkin, were viewed as "livestock rather than men" (*Regeneration* 412) and worked on the land without having any right to it. Through Bertie's and Adelaide's emphasis on property, LaValle both literally and metaphorically claims space for Black women in the American landscape, stressing that they were part of the narrative of national expansion despite their contributions remaining largely ignored. However, the reclamation of her space does not come easy for Adelaide, as the purchase of land near the Canadian border leaves her with "twenty-seven dollars and sixty-five cents left. Winter hadn't even begun" (LaValle, *Lone* 53). The significance of capital and survival is central to the frontier myth, especially the myth of the farmer hero.

Adelaide as the Farmer Hero

The survivalist dimension of Adelaide's journey mirrors the experience of the first farmers on the American frontier grappling with the harsh environment. On the way to her homestead, Adelaide notices the wind that "nearly snapped her spine" (30) and the coyotes that "cried in a nearly human tone" (41). Mr. Olsen makes an ominous remark: "'This land is trying to kill every single one of us'" (48). Even against the hostile environment, Adelaide is determined to embody the frontier farmer hero. Arriving at her property, she assesses the "empty cabin, no food, a well that didn't work, the utter emptiness of the landscape, and that wind, which never seemed to stop," and she "[wonders] how she ever thought she would survive" (52). Like frontier heroes in the wilderness, Adelaide is completely isolated. Although a lone Black woman on a desolate stretch of land seems antithetical to the white farmer/patriarch of the frontier myth, Adelaide proves otherwise.

Adelaide is naturally strong and made stronger by the hard work on her parents' farm. Her work ethic is attributed to her mother Eleanor, who used to say, "*A woman is a mule*" (17), echoing Zora Neale Hurston's Nanny in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) (29). Eleanor's words were "meant to prepare her daughter, train her up in endurance and acceptance" (LaValle, *Lone* 17). Not only is Adelaide strong and able, but she is aware that "A mule can kick backwards and sideways" (18). Adelaide's identity as a Black

woman does not exclude her from the farmer myth due to her gender and race. Throughout the novel, she engages in the same behavior as frontier heroes. She navigates the landscape, rations the food she obtains from Mr. Olsen, secures water, and makes a plan for the land. Adelaide considers "that perhaps she'd done exactly what she claimed she wanted to do: started again" (55). This realization provides her with a sense of home. According to Slotkin, one of the phases of the frontier hero is "an act of creation—the attainment of a new heroic identity for the hero, the establishment of a settlement, the saving of the harvest" (*Regeneration* 304). Adelaide's sense of home and success follows this development to a degree. Despite having the knowledge of farming necessary for her survival, her experience on her parents' farm is insufficient against the harsh climate of Montana.

Grace, a distant neighbor, points this out when she suggests home improvements against the weather and offers Adelaide potatoes, aiding Adelaide's survival since "[t]he woman might as well have given Adelaide gold" (LaValle, *Lone* 63). Furthermore, Grace promises to bring Adelaide wood, and thus begins their friendship. Adelaide is grateful for Grace's generosity but is aware of the dependence it creates: "And a white woman? Might as well go beg a man for assistance next. Eleanor Henry's child playing the helpless role?" (64). However, their relationship is not one-sided. Traveling across the winter landscape to Grace's house, Adelaide is motivated by their mutual survival: "She needed to get wood for her own survival, and for theirs" (92). When she arrives, she finds that Grace has been shot. Sam, Grace's transgender son, is bound in the basement.[6] Grace reveals they were attacked by a band of fugitives called the Mudges, a family Adelaide has warned them about. Grace promises that "[she's] going to trust [Adelaide]" (101), laying a foundation for further collaboration between the women. The arrival of Bertie Brown, "the only other Black woman in all of Chouteau County" (104), expands the women's network. After helping Grace, Bertie returns with "a small sack of food" and a horse she purchased in Adelaide's name (107). By providing Adelaide with transportation and food, Bertie also aids Adelaide's survival, widening the circle of collaboration between women in this remote land. It is not the white patriarch who ensures the running of the homesteads but a community of women who manage to survive and rewrite the masculine myth of the frontier. Although their collaboration is possible on the frontier, it is not without adversity.

From the beginning, racism and bigotry are present in the background of the narrative. When Adelaide asks Mr. Olsen about other Black people in Big Sandy, he speaks of Bertie Brown and Annie Morgan, who died a year prior.[7] Adelaide responds: "'Two Negroes. And one of them is dead'" (47). Interestingly, the only two Black people in Big Sandy are women, subverting the masculine dimension of the frontier. Even though Bertie is an established member of the Big Sandy community, the racist attitudes of other inhabitants

do not evade her. One of the townspeople "simply wouldn't believe Adelaide wasn't Bertie and turned belligerent when Adelaide wouldn't agree" (71). Although the West was seen as less racist due to the low number of enslaved people, racist attitudes still traveled westward and influenced the lives of African Americans (Woods 130), as depicted by the inability of the townsperson to distinguish between two Black women.

However, Black people were not the only minorities on the frontier. LaValle exemplifies this through Bertie's lover, Fiona Wong, who is called a "Celestial"—"a common slur for the Chinese" (LaValle, *Lone* 131). Mr. Olsen's earlier attempts at comforting Adelaide also points to the racism against Asian people:

> "It's really the Chinese who get the horns out this way, Mrs. Henry. Lotta people don't like them. And the red man has few friends."
>
> "I see," she said quietly.
>
> "I'm not helping your peace of mind, am I?" (47-48)

The existence of racism, regardless of its target, gives Adelaide no comfort. The struggle against the marginalization of both Chinese immigrants and African Americans during the late nineteenth century, according to Edlie L. Wong, resulted in "black and Chinese writers [who] first began challenging the idea of America and Americanization as radical Reconstruction dismantled and reformulated the foundational narratives of white racialized citizenship and national identity" (12). LaValle uses the frontier setting to link racism toward Black, Asian, and Native American people and draw attention to the othering of all nonwhite people during American settlement. As Mr. Olsen comments, "'I wish I could say better of the human animal, but I can't'" (LaValle, *Lone* 48). Thus, the civilized/savage binary indicts the "civilized" people who use cultural othering to justify settler colonialism and white exceptionalism.

LaValle's critique does not ignore the fact that his characters are working land stolen from Native people. In the opening of the novel, he establishes the violent displacement of Native Americans through their absence: "The native population had been decimated, cleared off the property. Now it was time to give it all away" (3). LaValle also uses the term *territory* throughout the novel (22, 67, 235, 273), implying the violent and destructive forces of the settling of the frontier (Greyser 46, 52). Significantly, the only character in the book connected to Nativeness is Clement Cardinal, a Métis traveler from Saskatchewan. He warns the women against the "'six white men headed west'" and offers them safety: "'Come live with the Métis, we're more civilized than the Americans and the Canadians'" (LaValle, *Lone* 232). Clement openly reframes the civilized/savage binary by positioning white people as "savage."

Thus, he depicts frontier heroism as a blend of white and Native culture (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 21) and illustrates the concept of a "New Nation" of Métis people (Burelle 15). Despite Clement warning the women and supposedly inverting the frontier myth, in which a white hero saves the women (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 15), it is the women who save themselves in a striking rewriting of the frontier hunter myth.

The Hunter and the Beast

The beast is an important figure in Slotkin's hunter myth (*Regeneration* 307). In Adelaide's journey, the beast is not found in the wilderness; rather, she brings it with her to Montana, after it kills her parents. When the beast escapes Adelaide's trunk, the mysterious "it" is fully on display: "Great folds of leathery skin hung from the bottom of its arms. . . . Some would call it a *creature*" (LaValle, *Lone* 82). Adelaide is the only person who can subdue the monster since she has lived with it her whole life: "It arrived on our doorstep the same day, the same minute, my mother gave birth to me. She received her blessing and her curse in an instant. . . . Did it bubble up from the depths of hell? . . . At first she took it for an animal. Maybe a mountain lion's cub, or a rattlesnake" (86-87). The characters call it a beast, the devil, a monster, and a demon, highlighting the horror elements of the story. The narrative constructs the creature as a secret, the source of familial shame, and a burden that impedes Adelaide's freedom. In the traditional hunter myth, Adelaide would kill the beast, shed the restraints of civilization, and thus undergo regeneration through violence. However, in this story, the monster saves Adelaide from the Mudges, although the saving act "seemed almost accidental" (118). Adelaide fails to interpret the monster's purpose, but its act of protection is a sign of humanity.

Throughout the story, the narrator implies that the beast has a capacity for humanity. It calms down when Adelaide sings to it and gets scared when Adelaide leaves or threatens her own life. When the beast flies away, its thoughts range from incessant hunger to the assertion that "*Even a demon dreams*" (169) and "*Make a home here. So high up you will never be found*" (185). Dreaming and the need for a home point toward the beast's humanity. The beast's human origin is finally revealed after Adelaide admits: "'I came here with my sister'" (198). Adelaide recounts the birth of her twin Elizabeth (the beast), her parents' insistence on hiding Elizabeth in the barn due to her difference, and Adelaide's transgressions so she could be with her sister: "Maybe back then, they actually were sisters rather than what they became, Adelaide just one more jailer" (206). Adelaide's reluctance to accept Elizabeth as a thinking being stems from her fear and guilt over treating Elizabeth badly: "*Did I do enough?* Why even ask the question when the answer was so clear? Nowhere near enough" (233). Adelaide's friends' reaction is

surprising, as they are sympathetic toward Elizabeth, help Adelaide find her, and thus subvert the antagonism toward the monstrous Other.

The women's plan to seek Elizabeth in the mountains is interrupted by Elizabeth herself, who snatches Adelaide. Adelaide is dropped through the trees, and despite the violent fall, "The thought of Elizabeth made her rise. Or, to be more precise, it made her crawl" (243). Adelaide's journey adheres to the arc of the hunter myth, entering the wilderness to hunt the beast. She even adopts the strategies of the frontier hunters: "[S]he found a place where the snow showed tracks that hadn't been covered by new snowfall yet. At first she'd taken them for bear or moose tracks. Something four-legged and large and wild. But they could belong to Elizabeth, too" (245). In this moment, Adelaide fully becomes a hunter. When she finds Elizabeth, she does not confront the wilderness in her sister but the savagery inside herself: "'I wished you all were dead, . . . I hoped you'd kill each other. And I would finally be free of my family'" (246). Adelaide follows the hunter myth in recognizing the wilderness inside her, much like the white hunter who has accepted the savage parts of himself. However, unlike the white hunter hero who "[t]hrough the ordeal and discipline of the hunt and its culmination in violence, . . . has achieved a regeneration of the spirit" (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 551), Adelaide does not kill the beast. Instead, she empathizes with her:

> "But I never thought of you," . . . "Of you outside of me, I mean. My suffering helped me forget yours." . . .
> "You needed a sister," . . . "But instead, you got me." . . .
> "If you kill me right here, I won't blame you." (LaValle, *Lone* 246-47)

Adelaide's understanding of Elizabeth's suffering reverses the hunter myth by humanizing the beast instead of making the hero more "savage." The fault is not with the monstrous Other but with Adelaide, the farmer and the hunter. She mourns her errors and "wept as Elizabeth's flames consumed her" (247). The flames Elizabeth breathes do not kill Adelaide, and she experiences regeneration through the lack of violence. She does not kill the beast, and she does not die. She frees herself from the destructive narrative of otherness imposed on both Elizabeth and herself, offering a significant rewriting of the frontier narrative.

The description of Elizabeth as the monstrous "dark" Other is an obvious allusion to the construction of racial Others in American history, especially within the frontier myth. The criticism provided by the novel, however, does not simply point out the racism and bigotry of the frontier narrative. Blending the genre of horror and Western allows LaValle to explicitly explore how even those victimized by such rhetoric can perpetuate it. The Henrys cannot see past Elizabeth's difference, her assumed monstrosity, and they treat her

with fear and shame. As a child, Adelaide does not share their view and sneaks into the barn to be with her sister. However, "Eleanor stayed up waiting and caught her. A beating every time. Eventually Adelaide stopped going" (206). Adelaide learns the practice of othering from her parents and fully adopts it later, regarding Elizabeth as a demon and a monster. To evade her own guilt, Adelaide is reluctant to accept Elizabeth as her sister. As she points out during her epiphany, it is the years of mistreatment, confinement, and lack of empathy that make Elizabeth act violently.

At first, Elizabeth accepts her family's definition of her and refers to herself as a demon. LaValle names the acceptance of demonization through cultural or familial narratives as one of his concerns. He explains: "I do think that a family or a culture's narrative about a person can turn someone into a monster. . . . That's part of the heartbreak of it, because that has to be trained into a person. That's not a thing that anyone believes about themselves from birth" ("Victor"). The shift from "monster" to Elizabeth in the narrative shows a possible unlearning of not only the familial legacy of fear and shame but also the cultural narrative of the "dark" Other. After she reveals Elizabeth's true identity to her friends, Adelaide no longer calls Elizabeth a demon but acknowledges her as her sister, and Elizabeth's thoughts no longer refer to herself as "it" but as "she" or by name. The act of naming fully humanizes Elizabeth, both to herself and others, and continues the legacy of naming in African American culture as an identity-defining break from oppressive narratives (West 116, 121). Furthermore, Adelaide recognizes her guilt in the subjugation of Elizabeth. This acceptance, however, is not shared by others in the Big Sandy community, who still rely on the frontier rhetoric of monstrous otherness to preserve their supremacy.

When the townspeople learn about Elizabeth, who to them is still the beast, a vigilante group led by Jack Reed hunts her. Despite previously preaching about equal opportunities and freedom (LaValle, *Lone* 158-59), the townspeople capture Grace, Bertie, and Fiona for helping Adelaide and Elizabeth. When they prepare to publicly execute them for endangering the values of the town, Mrs. Reed states: "'Did I offer hospitality to someone who brought evil to our town? . . . And these women, it seems, have decided on damnation as well'" (249). Echoing the "lynch mob" (274) and witch hunts, the town adopts the Puritan rhetoric of damnation to justify the execution. Jack Reed proclaims that the execution is "'[f]or the sake of our town'" (251) to "justify that violence in terms of sacred mythology" (Slotkin, *Fatal* 303). Adelaide interrupts the spectacle, "barely [appearing] human. . . . Not a woman. Not a man. Something dug up from a grave and reanimated, maybe. A creature. A thing" (LaValle, *Lone* 258). To the audience, Adelaide is dehumanized, providing another excuse for the behavior of the townspeople, vocalized by Mrs. Reed: "'It is my sincere hope . . . that when we rid ourselves of you, we save ourselves

from your corruption'" (258). This lack of remorse forces Adelaide to allow Elizabeth to attack the assailants, despite offering them mercy.

Elizabeth's attack on the oppressors in a theater is not narrated. LaValle obscures the scene of gratuitous violence that is common in frontier stories. Yet the impact of the implied violence is still visible: "The floors were dark and slick" (265) and "[t]hey were, at this point, only parts of people, flung about as wildly as the chairs" (266). Although the theater is covered in blood and body parts, it is revealed that only those who hunted Adelaide and her friends were killed while the rest of the audience, although complicit in the planned execution, is permitted to leave. Similarly, Adelaide pleads for Joab Mudge to be spared, relying on Elizabeth's mercy:

> *She spared her sister. Saved her sister.*
> *The other women, too. And the child.*
> *She chose to do that. Because of her, they had survived.*
> *And her? Yes, her too.*
> *Elizabeth had survived.* (268)

This illumination of Elizabeth's consciousness shows that not only does Adelaide undergo regeneration without becoming violent but also Elizabeth herself is transformed from a threatening, ostracized demon into a being with agency who chooses mercy. The only people Elizabeth has killed are those who threatened her or her sister out of hate and prejudice. Although Elizabeth's otherness seemingly impeded Adelaide's freedom, it is her abilities that eventually free the women from Big Sandy's violence. Means Coleman writes: "In 'Black horror' films women are not merely victims. Rather, they continue to thrive as conquering heroes, capably battling zombies, . . . taking on cannibal monsters and sexist co-workers" (208). LaValle's novel displays this tendency by constructing Black women not as victims but as heroes fighting against the townspeople. By rescuing the women held captive by the bigoted townspeople, Elizabeth offers perhaps the biggest revision of the frontier myth in *Lone Women*: transforming the beast into the hero. Although Elizabeth is the "dark" Other of the frontier myth, it is no coincidence that the town is eager to put the blame on a group of two Black women, a Chinese woman, and the mother of a transgender child. All of them threaten the white, masculine, patriarchal, heteronormative dimension of the frontier myth and must be eradicated, like all Others. Thus, Elizabeth's transformation into a hero criticizes both the othering and sexism of the dominant narrative. However, due to the violence the women use at the end to protect themselves and survive, the group cannot remain in Big Sandy.

The rhetoric of white exceptionalism and supremacy is too ingrained in Big Sandy's foundation, and to stay would put the women in danger. Jake Casella

Brookins calls the climax of the novel "a bloody reclamation of the frontier's promise." However, the women do not reclaim the frontier myth unchanged. Instead, they find an abandoned town with only ghosts of destructive cultural narratives, such as the gallows that the women take down, symbolically disavowing violence (LaValle, *Lone* 273). The town, named Two Sisters after Adelaide and Elizabeth, is a blank slate for the women to write their own cultural narrative within the framework of an insufficient frontier mythology. They do so by promoting collaboration, acceptance, and empathy alongside self-reliance and endurance. LaValle's narrator writes: "But they remained. They endured. And at times they thrived" (275). As a result of this reversal of the white individualistic masculine frontier myth, the town is sought out by other women: "Instead, she said, *I've been looking for this place*. . . . As if they'd been drawn there—across the state or across the continent—by an instinct. Some looked like they'd come straight here, while others seemed like they'd been wandering the plains for half their lives. Nevertheless, this is where they settled" (274). Significantly, Elizabeth is no longer ostracized: "Elizabeth greeted the kids. The little ones adored her—every child wants to learn that dragons are real—and each day she basked in their love. She had never dared to imagine a life outside that wretched barn, but here it was anyway" (274-75). Previously considered the "dark" Other and the beast of the original frontier myth, Elizabeth, alongside her twin Adelaide, becomes "a Black Enduring Woman" who, as Means Coleman claims, serves as an "important political and feminist symbol" (214). LaValle thus locates the possibility of unlearning the destructive processes of othering and bigotry within the transformative space of the frontier myth, in which cultures met and melded (Limerick 27). As such, the novel becomes an alternative to the dominant frontier narrative still built on the promise of self-reliance and freedom but without the marginalization of Others.

Although the characters, especially Adelaide, behave like the frontier heroes of Slotkin's myth, they also show that some of the building blocks of frontier heroism are not sustainable; violence breeds violence, individualism is antithetical to survival, and othering creates monsters. Thus, LaValle scrutinizes the frontier mythology based on exclusion and hate toward cultural Others while retaining those parts of the myth that might be worth preserving, such as resilience, persistence, and economic freedom. In *Lone Women*, white men are sidelined while women of different cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds and different sexualities take center stage. Through collaboration, they defeat the real beast of Big Sandy: bigotry. LaValle's view of exclusion from cultural narratives, however, is not simplistic. LaValle shows that the problem does not lie only with white people. Through the example of Elizabeth and her family, he criticizes the othering of people by both the dominant society and marginalized people who subscribe to the rhetoric of demonization. Although Elizabeth initially embodies the weird, uncanny, and monstrous elements of gothic, horror, and frontier narratives,

her otherness is accepted rather than demonized by the end of the story. Elizabeth also becomes a crucial part of the community proposed by LaValle as an alternative to the destructive traditional myth.

The Alternative Myth

Victor LaValle's *Lone Women* presents an alternative frontier narrative that subverts the expectations of frontier heroism. In depicting a Black woman as a frontier hero, LaValle writes against the white masculine ideal. LaValle's focus on a Black woman undermines gender and race as a basis of frontier heroism while adhering to Slotkin's theory of the frontier myth. LaValle does not deconstruct the frontier myth or heroism but offers a communal alternative to the previously individualistic heroic ideal. Furthermore, LaValle's criticism of the concept of the Other points to the destructive force of the civilized/savage binary as a basis of white supremacy and extreme individualism. By reconfiguring Adelaide's view of the monstrous Other into an empathetic acceptance of Elizabeth, LaValle proposes a replacement of destructive individualistic heroism and thus creates space for previously unheard voices. In *Lone Women*, he does not offer a brand-new myth but an alternative frontier narrative that favors collaboration, acceptance, and empathy, creating a more complete view of frontier history. Changing the frontier narrative beyond recognition would alienate the book from a wider readership and work against the popularization of the Black Western. LaValle's rewriting of the frontier myth through the story of a Black woman both echoes established frontier tropes and spotlights their revision.

The resurgence of Western imagery in popular culture suggests a return to the foundational myths of the American nation.[8] Furthermore, the ongoing discussions surrounding race and gender, culminating in global public involvement such as the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 and the reaction against the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* (1973) in 2022, directly threaten the white masculine exceptionalism of American cultural narratives. Police brutality, the 6 January 2021 attack on the US Capitol, and the symbolic violence of legal action and discrimination against marginalized people—both prior to and in 2025—are symptoms of the struggle between the pursuit of human rights and efforts to restore the narrative of American patriarchy and white supremacy.

At the same time, scholars have sought out unheard voices to fill out the record of American history, as seen in *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* (2021) and the works of Saidiya Hartman, Beauty Bragg, and others. Similarly, critics have recovered both historical and fictional accounts of marginalized people on the frontier. These narratives offer new perspectives on frontier mythology and introduce them to wider audiences.[9] Given current critical and public interest in American myths, the 2023 publication of *Lone Women* is not surprising. It speaks

to not only the original frontier narrative but also the problems of race and gender and thus holds significant potential for further study.

Alongside other revisionist works, LaValle's novel places marginalized people at the center of the popular Western to destabilize the destructive propaganda of the original frontier myth, which is rooted in violence, exclusion, racism, and sexism. Interrogating contemporary alternatives to the frontier myth in literature not only diversifies frontier history and mythology but also significantly rewrites their most dangerous narratives. LaValle reverses the process of othering and undermines the masculinity and individualism of the myth in favor of a more empathetic, collaborative version. The study of *Lone Women* alongside older, more critically engaged Western texts illuminates changing attitudes toward the frontier myth. In historical scholarship, the Black frontier has been documented, but the relevance of the frontier myth to the Black imagination remains vastly unexplored. Black women's place within the Western genre is understudied, creating an unbalanced record of the literary and historical frontier. The intersection of race and gender doubly disadvantages Black women within both the frontier narrative and the American nation, and their marginalization is reflected in the lack of analysis of Black women's frontiers.

Adelaide in *Lone Women* is not the first Black frontierswoman to appear in literature. From Pauline Hopkins's *Winona* (1902-03) and Michelle Cliff's *Free Enterprise* (1993), to the westward migration in Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986), the utopian frontiers of the future in Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), and more recently, Charlotte Davis's *The Good Luck Girls* (2019) and Justina Ireland's *Dread Nation* (2018), Black women have been carving out their place in the mythic frontier for decades. LaValle's *Lone Women*, then, not only rewrites the frontier myth but also continues the long tradition of imagining Black women within the frontier narrative. The popularity of the novel—published by a major press and optioned for a television series—indicates the promise of the Black frontierswoman as a culturally central mythical figure, offering an alternative to earlier mythologies, much like Beyoncé's Grammy-winning *Cowboy Carter*.[10]

Despite this promise, however, Black women's voices within the frontier framework remain unheard and understudied. I suggest that the study of not only the historical frontier but also its mythic counterpart will enable us to understand the complicated historical and cultural narratives that have shaped American national identity. Even more importantly, the excavation of these narratives reclaims the place of Black Americans, and Black American women especially, at the center of the national mythology.

Notes

1. Nearly all of Victor LaValle's fiction has been nominated for or won prestigious awards, including the Nebula Award, the Shirley Jackson Award, the Hugo Award, and the American Book Award.
2. Notable studies of the frontier include works by Theodore Roosevelt; Henry Nash Smith; Patricia Nelson Limerick; Richard White, Limerick, and James R. Grossman; Gregory H. Noble; and Greg Grandin.
3. See Ray Allen Billington; White, Limerick, and Grossman; and Margaret Walsh. Significant revisions of the frontier include works by Gloria Anzaldúa, Stephanie LeMenager, and Neil Campbell, including feminist revisions by Annette Kolodny, Glenda Riley, and Walsh.
4. See Delilah Beasley's "Slavery in California" (1919) and *The Negro Trail-Blazers of California* (1919).
5. See W. Sherman Savage, Lawrence B. de Graaf, Quintard Taylor, Roger D. Hardaway, Tricia Martineau Wagner, William Loren Katz, and Taylor and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore.
6. Grace has been shunned by the community for allowing Sam, born as a girl, to present as a boy. Mrs. Reed tries to force Sam to dress as a girl and Grace to allow it.
7. Bertie Brown and Annie Morgan are both based on real historical women who shared their names. Information about Brown and Morgan is available at the Montana Women's History website (2014).
8. Donald Trump's plea to "make America great again," the NFT depicting Trump as a cowboy, and Joe Biden's reference to a John Wayne film at a press conference in Vietnam on 10 September 2023 are just a few examples of contemporary evocations of the American frontier.
9. Current examples of new perspectives on frontier mythology include the self-reliant women in the television series *Godless* (2017), Native American representation in the television series *Frontier* (2016-18), the story of a Chinese immigrant in the film *First Cow* (2019), and the aforementioned Black Westerns.
10. *Lone Women* is currently in development as a TV series with EMJAG Productions (LaValle, "Victor LaValle"; "Lone").

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