

Writing the Modern American West

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By

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Edinburgh, 2017.

INTRODUCTION

There is a scene in Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News* (1993) in which the protagonist, Quoyle, is searching for a way out of his desperate contemporary circumstances in New York, and his aunt Agnis suggests that he remove himself to the place of his family's original settlement in Newfoundland, perhaps as a way to start his life over as part of "some atavistic drive to finish up where you started" (Proulx 29). Quoyle takes his aunt's advice, and discovers an ancestry and an origin much darker than he might have imagined. The frontier in Newfoundland is often an ugly and challenging place for Quoyle, but he is sufficiently compelled by the idea that returning to "where you started" can provide a purposeful way to come to terms with a personal history that seems to have gone wrong. The suggestion is that his family history is most authentic at its origin, and that re-connecting with this origin can be therapeutic. In Newfoundland Quoyle meets many other characters who are forced to confront traumatic experiences from the past as a way to go forward. History is most pure at its origin, and knowledge and experience of origins is a vitally important means of writing a better future.

Writing the Modern American West is a book about the importance of the idea of the origin to certain texts of the American West from the 1960s to the present day. The book provides substantial interpretations of a number of works, partly to advertise their importance as engagements with the mythologies of the West, and partly to promote the idea of examining origins as a valuable way to think about the West. A single text has been chosen from each decade from the 1960s onwards, not to suggest some conceptual development in the depiction of origins, but to illustrate its pervasive and continuing importance. The book includes fiction and non-fiction, because canonical prose narratives of the frontier of the North American continent (as it was before the United States came into existence) include important works such as Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative, Hector Crevecoeur's *Letters From an American Farmer*, and *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, each of which is a synthesis of history and fiction in ways that problematize the disciplinary distinction. Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1823) strives hard for historical verisimilitude even while it is establishing the foundations for a mythology of the nation. Contemporary works such as William Kittredge's

Hole in the Sky (1992), Mary Karr's *The Liar's Club* (1995), Linda Hogan's *The Woman Who Watches Over the World* (2001), and Jeannette Walls' *Half Broke Horses* (2009) continue this tradition of non-fiction works that contribute to how the West is understood.

Decisions about origins can be fundamentally important, and there are many different ideas of what an origin might consist of, and how it might inform interpretations of contemporary texts and experiences. For example, if we were to interpret a contemporary coming-of-age novel and we took our principal or original generic coordinates from J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, then we might arrive at a different understanding of the contemporary novel than if we took our critical bearings from Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. What is the true origin from which (literary) history derives? Questions about the character of historical provenance have the idea of the origin as their central focus.

To pursue this example further, *Huck Finn*, as a novel that perhaps initiates the beginning of the coming-of-age genre in American fiction, has a particularly interesting beginning: "You don't know about me, without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, but that ain't no matter" (Twain 11). Huck is famous critically for the distinctive character of his first-person voice; Hemingway argued that "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*" (29). But this voice begins by deferring to the earlier Twain novel and pointing out that *Huck Finn* is not really the beginning of Huck but actually a form of sequel (and *Tom Sawyer* is written in the third-person). But before the novel's first sentence *Huck Finn* begins with an "Explanatory" concerning the distinctive character of spoken dialects, and before that with a "Notice" about the perils of finding "a motive in this narrative"; the explanatory preface and the notice are attributed to "The Author" and the "Chief of Ordnance" (rather than to someone called Mark Twain) and these are two further textual deferrals of authority that are antecedent to the primacy of Huck's voice and thus problematize understandings of where his voice originally begins. This is aside from Shelley Fisher Fishkin's argument that Huck's voice has its origin in a short story by Twain from 1874 called "Sociable Jimmy" (Fishkin 14-27).

Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* is profoundly indebted to *Huck Finn*, and although it has become a canonical American coming-of-age novel, it begins with an opening sentence that refers to Charles Dickens, in Holden Caulfield's dismissive comment about "all that David Copperfield kind of crap" (1). This is a quotation that reveals a smart scholarly knowledge of the generic conventions that Holden is working in, an astute critical awareness for the sixteen-year-old New Yorker in the late 1940s, who

might be simultaneously conscious of the semantic correspondence between “Copperfield” and “Caulfield”. *David Copperfield* (1850) begins with its eponymous narrator establishing what he believes to be his foundational coordinates: “To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve o’clock at night. It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously” (49). This form of beginning might be understood as something of a generic convention, one that has its own origins in the beginning of the novel in English in the eighteenth century, perhaps in Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) or *Roxana* (1724). The latter, for example, begins her account of her life in ways that are similar to David Copperfield’s: “I was born, as my friends told me, at the city of Poictiers, in the province, or county of Poictou, in France, from whence I was brought to England by my parents, who fled for their religion about the year 1683” (Defoe 5). Roxana and David Copperfield both acknowledge in their beginnings that they cannot be completely confident of the true origins of their circumstances, but have derived this information partly from the stories of others; their true origins disappear beyond the horizon of their knowledge and have no certain provenance. This brief genealogy of origins serves to demonstrate that there is always a history (and therefore a further origin) beyond the immediate individual text. Defoe’s fiction is not necessarily the origin of the novel as an aesthetic form, the roots of which can be traced back further, to *La Princesse de Cleves* by Madame de la Fayette, and to *Don Quixote* by Cervantes. Where does such a genealogy end, and how might a knowledge of antecedent origins inform an interpretation of the contemporary text?

Although how American novels begin is an interesting area of study in itself, *Writing the Modern American West* is not a book about beginnings in this sense, but rather about conceptual beginnings and their relation to mythologies of national identity that find expression in Western texts. This introduction begins with an interpretation of Don DeLillo’s *Zero K* (2016) as a means to illustrate the value of thinking about origins as a conceptual paradigm, not just to fiction of the American West but to American fiction more generally. DeLillo’s first novel *Americana* (1971) and his other most recent novel *Point Omega* (2010) both expressed a particular interest in the American West (as did DeLillo’s *Underworld*). An interpretation of *Zero K* also encourages us to think critically about the West not simply in terms of the trans-Mississippi or the space beyond the one-hundredth meridian, but as a region that has been taken over imaginatively by global media in ways that have extended its meaning beyond simple geographical coordinates. In some important ways, media representations have taken

over what is meant by “the West”, and in doing so have challenged what is understood by it “originally”. Thinking outside the geographical box has been strongly encouraged by the ways that “West” has been appropriated, diversified and outsourced by a global culture of the imaginary West that feeds back this “West as representation” to the so-called “real” place in ways that have the power to change it.

Caren Irr recently proposed that there is a new phenomenon in early twenty-first-century fiction that she designates the geopolitical novel. This kind of fiction relies upon the model of an origin that is “partially atavistic” (4) because each of its various sub-groups depends for its provenance on a “genre-defining predecessor”, such as the novels of Hemingway (10). The body of work that Caren Irr assembles is a useful way to think about how American fiction is moving beyond regional boundaries, both Western and American, in ways that we need to take account of: “the twenty-first-century geopolitical novel edifies contemporary readers in several senses. It shatters isolationist myths, updates national narratives, provides points of access for global identifications, and, perhaps most important, allows reflection on the emerging subjects of consensus (for better or worse) in the United States” (4). How the United States is configured, in a contemporary culture that is global in new ways, is changing how the nation is conceptualized; this has a corresponding impact on how the nation’s regions are perceived and understood. The origins of the United States as a nation are closely associated with European development of the Western frontier. As American national history was transformed by the experience of the frontier, so the pressures of globalization are transforming the United States as a nation. Globalization fundamentally affects the individual’s understanding of what constitutes home, or the original founding place or community. Any argument about the character of contemporary changes brought about by globalization needs to examine carefully the specific points of origin from which its foundational coordinates are derived; unexamined assumptions about origins have a crucial role in shaping the direction of historical arguments. Judie Newman, in *Fictions of America*, characterized the ways in which her book’s “narratives of global empire” each return to particular predecessors or antecedents for their points of departure: “In their different ways each of the works considered here appears to have closed the circle – adopting a global structure which turns back upon itself, returning to origins as if in a literary round dance” (169). Therefore, Bharati Mukherjee’s *The Holder of the World* (1993) takes for its origin Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). Mukherjee’s narrator is a “searcher-after-origins” (9) and Hawthorne’s novel begins with a nineteenth-century

preface and returns for its central narrative to the 1640s, as if to foreground the process of identifying an authoritative origin. The “West” is a cardinal direction, dependent for its meaning on where we start out. Similarly, whatever the imagined features of American or global fiction, it is always dependent for its character on the choices it makes about where it begins. This argument holds true as much for our interpretative approaches as it does for the fiction itself.

Don DeLillo’s *Zero K* (2016) is ostensibly a novel about the future, or the idea of the future, one in which the novel’s depiction of cryonic storage is a dramatic focus for the narrative to contemplate the meaning of mortality, history and eschatology. The characters Ross and Artis are wealthy Americans who invest in cryogenics in ways that show medical ethics to be trailing behind scientific advances, and which problematize what it means to be human. The vision of an apocalyptic global future is used to encourage Americans to participate in a belief in some form of immortality, of transcending personal history so as to be reborn into a more benevolent future epoch which represents the promise of utopia. *Zero K* is narrated by Jeff, the son of Ross and Artis, who is sceptical about cryogenics but who is prompted to examine the origins of human consciousness by their invitation to “come with us” (DeLillo, 2016, 120). Significantly, the possibility of this radical futurity encourages Jeff to think about the past; if this is what being a human subject is able to become, then what is human consciousness at the vital point of origin? Regardless of where human subjectivity might be going, where does it most properly begin? Jeff is therefore deeply preoccupied with his adolescence as he tries to identify what he believes makes him a person, independent of the ways in which technology can now transform ideas of person-hood. Jeff’s enquiries query the extent to which Ross and Artis remain human subjects once they are cryogenically frozen, but these questions prompt him to consider what it means to be human: what is the true origin of that which gives him an authentic self, with a fundamental and irreducible set of personal qualities?

An important part of Jeff’s response to these issues is a critical examination of history and language; his own history is recalled, and he summons an account of his formative experiences. But these moments in his history are crucially coincident with a self-consciousness about the language that expresses or defines them. Thus Jeff’s most foundational memories are profoundly informed by the drama of language acquisition. This is an account not just of the self, but of the interpretative languages of the self that are inextricable from it. Is Jeff’s knowledge of the self predicated on his understanding of language that might be employed to

articulate the very idea of the self that he is struggling with? Therefore, while Jeff is preoccupied with identifying “The moments I can’t help summoning because they’re mine” (15) he is also aware that such moments are part of a narrative history that he is creating for himself, and that such histories are composed of language right down to individual lexical units. In one early scene Jeff remembers his father calling his mother a “fishwife”, and he turns immediately to the dictionary:

Coarse woman, a shrew. I had to look up *shrew*. A scold, a nag, from Old English for shrewmouse. I had to look up *shrewmouse*. The book sent me back to shrew, sense 1 A small insectivorous mammal. I had to look up *insectivorous*. The book said it meant feeding on insects, from Latin *insectus*, for insect, plus Latin *vora*, for vorous. I had to look up *vorous* (25).

There is no natural or organic association between the signifier and the signified, only the perpetual deferral of a sense of meaning through a chain of words that does not reveal the origin of “fishwife” as some innate unity, because language functions as a system that is independent of the things that it purports to refer to. This is an important discovery for the adolescent Jeff, and it gives him an abiding preoccupation with the problem of language’s referential capacity; to what extent might language be innately duplicitous, and to what extent is his knowledge of things in the world, and of himself, completely dependent upon his knowledge of the language that describes them or defines them? What is the proper origin here, something in himself, or something in a language system that is not even properly his, except so far as he acquires it? In his pursuit of the things that make us human subjects Jeff remarks that “I tried to detect origins in some secluded bend in the English language” (40), and his figurative language suggests something hidden from him by etymology.

Jeff therefore becomes powerfully interested in the dictionary: “I tried to define the word *roller* without sneaking a look in the dictionary” (55), and his concern with the nature of language becomes sufficiently intense that “I could not chew and swallow without thinking of *chew* and *swallow*” (89). There is an anxiety here that the origin of consciousness inheres in language, a social system or structure that is independent of personal subjectivity, and which to some extent must therefore govern it, or at least govern the forms of expression that are available for it. As Martin Heidegger once argued “For, strictly, it is language that speaks. Man first speaks when, and only when, he responds to language by listening to its appeal” (214). The true origin for Jeff then, subsists somewhere in language acquisition, as if in knowing the words for the self,

a language of the self, it might be possible to arrive at a better understanding of the self. When Jeff discovers that his father's name, Ross Lockhart, is not his real name, his mother Madeline explains that this process of creating a name was integral to constructing a sense of the person Ross wanted to become, thereby "Bringing him closer to self-realization. This was the term Madeline used, *self-realization*" (81). The italics serve to ironize the expression, as if the very idea of this kind of personal fulfilment is something Jeff is wary of and detached from, because there is something inherently suspicious about its language; perhaps the notion of self-realization precedes the experience of fulfilment and informs it, even though such language is counterfeit. Simultaneously it demonstrates that Jeff's father believes that language is crucial, that it has the power to define us and how others perceive us, even though names might be as randomly contingent as other forms of words. Jeff's father's real name is Nicholas Satterswaite.

This discovery compounds Jeff's obsessive interest in the issue of language and reference, or is perhaps the true origin of it. After this revelation in his adolescence, Jeff is always concerned with people's names: "I looked again at the woman in the headscarf, unnamed still. She would not be real until I gave her a name" (72). When he thinks of his partner in New York, Jeff observes "Emma Breslow. I liked to say the name, I liked to tell myself that I would have guessed if she hadn't told me what it is" (176). Most significantly, Jeff is acutely aware of how even one extra syllable in his own name, as spoken by Artis, has the power to alter his sense of who he is, so that subjectivity might be transformed even by the smallest semantic unit: "I was Jeff to everyone but Artis. That extra syllable, in her tender voice, made me self-aware, or aware of a second self, more agreeable and dependable, a man who walks with his shoulders squared, pure fiction" (18). We might ask what powers of agency remain for self-determination when Jeff's sense of identity is so circumscribed by the forms of autonomous language that articulate it. Perhaps these kinds of knowledge suggest the possibility of taking control of language so as to wrest personal agency from it; to acquire linguistic control as a means to write his own history rather than simply be the dupe of it.

For example, as a rebellious adolescent, Jeff remembers himself reading a difficult European novel from the 1930s, "a secondhand paperback crammed with huge and violent emotions in small crowded type on waterlogged pages" (26) and he muses: "Maybe I was trying to undermine the discourse, a form of self-defense" (34); he dedicates himself to reading as a means of self-discovery: "books that helped tell me who I was, the son who spites his father by reading such books" (26). Jeff

remembers himself being engaged in an oedipal struggle in which disputes over language become central to his developing sense of his own identity, part of the word of the father, a symbolic discourse not just of his own father but of his whole culture and society, of the Lacanian symbolic order, a struggle in which language is a crucial point of origin. Adolescence is a fundamental point of origin for much of Jeff's narration, and the proximity of his memories to the coming-of-age genre and its engagement with masculinity and oedipal narrative gives an ironic self-consciousness to his awareness, suggesting his knowledge of this as simply another form of language of the self that might simply be generic rather than individual; that the forms of the self's composition might already be written before he appropriates them. Meanwhile, his father is preparing himself for cryonic suspension in Kazakhstan: "He would empty out his years on the long plane journey. I imagined him losing all his Lockhartness, becoming Nicholas Satterswaite. How a tired life collapses into its origins" (204). The end is characterized by a return to the beginning, and by a recognition of its fundamental importance.

Language is not the only signifying system that serves as a vital origin for Jeff's sense of identity, because "I was always good at math. I felt sure of myself when I dealt with numbers. Numbers were the language of science" (151). Numerical values provide Jeff with an alternative language of the world; he remembers that his father left his mother when he was thirteen: "I was doing my trigonometry homework when he told me ... I examined the formulas on the page and wrote in my notebook, over and over, *sine cosine tangent*" (14). Again, the words are italicized, drawing attention to their status as words. Simultaneously words and numbers come together here, as they do in the novel's title: "It concerned a unit of temperature called absolute zero, which is minus two hundred and seventy-three point one five degrees celsius. A physicist named Kelvin was mentioned. He was the K in the term" (142-3). This convergence of the two systems of reference reveal Jeff trying to understand the origin of subjectivity in the languages that we use to articulate it; there is a catch, however, because "the temperature employed in cryostorage does not actually approach zero K" (143). There is no exact numerical correspondence of the mathematical kind that might be expected here: "The term, then, was pure drama, another stray trace of the Stenmark twins" (143). There is no true origin in this language, even though different human languages are the only means available to Jeff by which to approach the idea. How then can he articulate a concept of human subjectivity that survives the challenges made to it by the technologies of cryogenics? Where is the humanist origin that resists the sophistry of the Stenmark twins?

Zero K also brings together ideas about the future and the importance of a history of origins in the character called Stak, the adopted son of Emma Breslow, this “stranger in the house” (174). Stak is rescued from a “facility for abandoned children” in Ukraine (171) by Emma and her husband (who has Ukrainian roots) and taken to live with them in Denver at the age of five or six; he does not even have known parents, only what Jeff terms “a biological mother and father” (177). Stak is now fourteen years old and lives with Emma in New York; Jeff reveals that he was taken from Ukraine partly for Emma’s own personal reasons, her altruism compromised by her need to save her marriage: “She saw a life bereft of expectation” (174), but this is accompanied by a gamble on Stak’s future with Emma and her husband. Stak is an orphan, origins obscure, from “a country that was itself an adoptee” (174). He disappears abruptly when he is fourteen, and subsequently appears, mortally wounded, fighting back in a self-defence unit against the forces of the country that adopted it. Stak’s narrative thus suggests that origins, however problematical, have a power that cannot be resisted; that there is a fated inevitability about the return to points of beginning that exert a lifelong control over history. Jeff’s brief relationship with the adolescent Stak is notable for the correspondences between them. Like Jeff, Stak has a particular fascination with languages: “He likes to recite temperatures. The numbers tell him something. Tucson one hundred and three degrees Fahrenheit. He always specifies Fahrenheit or Celsius. He relishes both words” (176). Stak appears to speak Pashto/Afghani and he uses it to engage a New York cab driver in a conversation about the Taliban. Jeff recognizes this as an opportunity to grasp new forms of knowledge, “to turn a stranger’s scant life into lavish fiction” (181) because, as Emma has already observed, Stak has an aptitude for fictionalizing: “He improvises now and then, inflates something, expands something, takes a story to a limit in a way that may or may not test your standards of belief” (178). Stak, then, might be an embryonic novelist, “What he imagines becomes real” (178-9) and Jeff meets him at the crucial moment of his adolescence, “Fourteen is the final bursting forth” (179). Adolescence is depicted as the crucial point of origin in Jeff’s personal history; he was thirteen when his father left, and all his important memories of the past return to this period in his life. Although Jeff is now thirty-four (49), he still finds himself observing phenomena with a calculated naivety: “I watched all this, innocently, as an adolescent might” (202). The correspondences between Jeff and Stak suggest that coming-of-age in adolescence is the vital moment of origin, associated principally with language acquisition and (for these teenaged boys) the oedipal conflict of establishing autonomous individuality.

At the same time however, the novel recognizes this kind of interpretative language as something of a generic cliché, as a language already written by convention, and therefore potentially mendacious, unoriginal, capable of defining the individual's experience by the pressure of its traditional forms. So the novel offers this point of origin, and, by its very language, "the final bursting forth", ironizes it at the same time. This is wholly characteristic of DeLillo's prose style, forever drawing attention to the linguistic construction of those habits of language that purport to define experience. Nevertheless, these scenes with Stak reveal Jeff to be a narrator who is prompted to examine the nature of origins by Artis' invitation to join her in cryonic suspension. When he contemplates his relationship with Emma he observes that "We were still in the early times and even if the romance endured it would continue to resemble the early times" (180). From such origins a grammar is established, and it is one that history will not fundamentally change, but "remain stamped as in the first days and nights" (180). It is perhaps inevitable that Stak should return to Ukraine, as if to emphasize the inescapability of origins, "a native son come home" (264). History takes its meaning from the circumstances of its origin, and an understanding of the fate of all characters demands a proper consideration of the nature of how and where history began.

The associations between Jeff and Stak suggest that Jeff is not a conventional narrator but one with a strongly intellectual and creative curiosity about the importance of origins. If Jeff is a surrogate novelist, then perhaps the interior monologue of Artis at the centre of *Zero K* is his finest or most original creation, its formal experimentation an attempt to resist the generic stylings of adolescent coming-of-age that characterize his rather ironic treatment of his own origins: "I try to imagine an inner monologue, hers, self-generated, nonstop, the open prose of a third person voice that is also her voice, a form of chant in a single low tone" (272). Here too is the concern with beginnings, with what makes Artis a human subject at some profoundly valuable level of origin; Artis is imagined by Jeff's composition as someone asking questions about the nature of her identity, where it comes from and what it is constituted of that is not the product of subsequent socialization: "Am I someone or is it just the words themselves that make me think I'm someone?" (158), and, facing the prospect of cryonic transformation, "What does it mean to be who I am?" (162). The stylistic form and structure of Artis' enquiries is as important as the questions themselves, because it constitutes a prose language that might prompt fresh and original engagements with questions of the origins of subjectivity that other narrative languages might obscure. In particular, the third and first- person contrapuntal structure dramatizes a consciousness

trying to think both from within itself and from outside itself simultaneously, as if to negotiate an articulation of the original self, both romantically and dispassionately.

Jeff is especially taken by Artis' characterization of drops of water on a shower curtain "in the process of unfolding" (19) because he recognizes here a vital moment of origin, something in the process of becoming; that liminal experience is itself an epiphany, a revelation of origins. This is vitally important, however banal, because for Jeff "it's the things we forget about that tell us who we are" (172). Artis does not simply regard the drop of water, but her imagination endows it with meaning: "I gave a certain kind of life to the drop of water" (18). Creating a language of these experiences is a means to express what it is to be human, in ways that technology, however sophisticated, cannot aspire to. In the end, for Jeff, it is human creativity, art and aesthetics, that define us; the very act of creating the account of Ross and Artis that becomes *Zero K* is itself the expression of a quintessentially and uniquely human consciousness, so that the composition of the novel becomes its own answer to the question of origins. As Artis remarks when she considers the architectural designs of the cryogenic facility, "The only thing that's not ephemeral is the art" (51). We can see Jeff's creative imagination at work in one example where he contemplates the end of things, "*Last things*", and the word for this, eschatology. His figurative language at this moment recalls Artis in the shower: "They were drenching me in last things" (144). The imaginative correspondences are themselves the expression of human subjectivity in the very process of making sense of experience. This creative act is the expression of the origins of a consciousness that is uniquely human. As he contemplates his relationship with his father, Jeff also worries over the absent son that Stak might have been, "Somewhere near a road sign reading *Konstantinovka*" (270). Jeff cannot imagine Stak with an origin, only in relation to a sign for an origin, and even here perhaps, in a subtle pun, Stak is "reading". Everything is a sign, if only we can learn to interpret it competently and creatively. This too returns us to origins.

This interpretation of *Zero K* demonstrates the value of thinking about the nature and significance of origins; the origin is a means to historicize the circumstances of conditions and experiences that might otherwise seem wholly contemporary or without precedent. It is aetiological in that it helps to understand contemporary experiences not in terms of their novelty but as the outcome of the historical processes that inform or determine them. For *Zero K*, Kazakhstan becomes a neo-frontier, one that problematizes how we might think about the West. The other substantial interpretations of *Writing the Modern American West* do not necessarily

address the nature of human consciousness in the way that *Zero K* does, but they do use the origin to examine the processes of historical causation. For Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) the way to understand the tragic circumstances of Pecola's experience (and by extension a generation of young black girls like her) is to come to terms with the material conditions of her parents, her culture, and their whole history as far back as it can be purposefully traced. As the novel's narrator comments at the start of the novel, "There is really nothing more to say – except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how" (4).

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CHAPTER ONE

AMERICAN ORIGINS

“In the beginning all the world was America”
—John Locke, 1689.

There is a moment in Poe Ballantine’s *Love and Terror on the Howling Plains of Nowhere* when the narrator is lamenting the inability of the police to search for a missing person; he comments that “Officials didn’t conduct a search because they didn’t know where to *start*?”, and invoking *The Sound of Music* as an instructive primer on the question of origins, he concludes in an exasperated tone that “the *beginning* is a very good place to start” (Ballantine 244). Ballantine’s frustration is understandable in the specific circumstances, but we might still ask in more abstract terms, where might anything be said to begin, because this is an issue that haunts many texts, and many areas of enquiry and matters of interpretation. There is always some antecedent narrative that informs or determines the present one, and thus presents itself, however obliquely, as the true or original point of beginning. But this origin is itself informed by further narratives of origin that inform or determine its character or nature. This process proceeds vertiginously, perhaps beyond the horizons of our vision or knowledge, beyond any origin that might be designated “original”. There are potential beginnings almost everywhere, depending on our critical and political priorities, and often it is those priorities themselves that define the preferred choice of origin. Any contemporary belief (“Make America Great Again”) is given authority by the invocation of an origin that appears to secure it, legitimate it, or underwrite it. If any point of (historical) origin is preceded, or even determined, by prior circumstances that give rise to it (and which themselves constitute a further “true” point of origin) then origins recede again and again beyond the immediate source of narrative, always pointing toward some further circumstances that are antecedent to it. The origin is “always already” informed by prior circumstances that offer themselves as the true antecedent origin. Thus the danger of identifying a definitive moment of origin is that, not only might it be mistaken, but that it is ahistorical if it fails to recognize that any such

moment of true beginning is itself the product of antecedent historical circumstances that inform or define it.

The texts of *Writing the Modern American West* seek to define origins that cannot always be definitively known, but only gestured towards as a kind of fantasy, myth or fiction. If there is no true origin (because true origins are a form of myth) then the only grounds of study are the politics of narratives that would claim such an origin. In other words, we cannot study the thing itself, only the social politics of how certain myths of true origins are constituted, promulgated, and become socially accepted. The origin, then, is a significant concept in history, philosophy, cultural theory and (literary) interpretation; in fact, in all acts of interpretation, especially where that origin is taken as self-evident. For example, in the context of history, a quotation from Michael Herr's *Dispatches* which considers the beginning of the war in Vietnam illustrates this succinctly:

You couldn't find two people who agreed about when it began, how could you say when it began going off? Mission intellectuals like 1954 as the reference date; if you saw as far back as War 2 and the Japanese occupation you were practically a historical visionary. 'Realists' said that it began for us in 1961, and the common run of Mission flack insisted on 1965, post-Tonkin Revolution, as though all the killing that had gone on before wasn't really war. Anyway, you couldn't use standard methods to date the doom; might as well say that Vietnam was where the Trail of Tears was headed all along. (Herr 46).

Herr suggests that the war in Vietnam in the 1960s (or at least American involvement in south-east Asia) is the inevitable end of American aspirations of empire, the true origin of which is the forced removal, in 1838-9, of the Cherokee from their ancestral homelands to an area that is now part of modern Oklahoma. Herr's disavowal of "standard methods" of historical analysis suggests there is no clear or simple way to identify definitively the origin of this particular historical process. The prevalence of forms of violent conflict in American history goes all the way back to the beginning of the nation, even to the very idea of the nation before it was founded. A similar argument might be proposed concerning 9/11; that it was not (only) the beginning of something, but also the outcome of an antecedent history that should be paid equal attention if 9/11 is to be properly understood. Nor were the Indian Wars (including the Cherokee removal) necessarily the true origin of aspirations to empire. Such an origin might be found at earlier points in American history, in earlier expressions of Manifest Destiny (the phrase itself dates from 1832) or even in the European history that preceded the "original" colonization of the North American continent. As Jonathan Raban once wrote, "Before it

was anything else, America was the voyage itself" (Raban 9). That is to say, the United States existed as an idea in the European imagination even before the North American continent itself was "discovered". Is Herr, then, entirely mistaken to argue that American involvement in south-east Asia is the historical outcome of process that significantly preceded it, and if not, then how far back towards a putative true beginning might such processes be traced? Also, what different forms of cultural analysis might be produced by historicizing cultural experiences in ways that seek to examine how an ideology of origins is installed and promoted? If American involvement in Vietnam is understood as having an important relation to the Trail of Tears, then what forms of knowledge does this association produce?

Philip Deloria, in *Playing Indian* (1998), provides an interpretation of how the Boston Tea Party "became thoroughly entrenched as a key origin story" (2). This is not simply a historiographical abstraction, but has material consequences for American lives. Deloria is especially alert to the social politics of how historical narratives like these are constructed and given wide cultural authority, particularly in the service of dominant narratives of national identity that privilege certain social groups and marginalize others. The Boston Tea Party therefore "offers a defining story of something larger – American character ... the first drumbeat in the long cadence of rebellion through which Americans redefined themselves as something other than British colonists" (2). Some sense of what it means to be uniquely American requires historical circumstances from which American character might be said to originate. Similarly, but from a different historical and political perspective, Stephanie Coontz, in a book significantly entitled *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, argues that the Eisenhower administration (1953-61) was the beginning of a mythology of the American family that has serious contemporary social and political consequences: "Our recurring search for a traditional family model denies the diversity of family life, both past and present, and leads to false generalizations about the past as well as wildly exaggerated claims about the present and the future" (14). Historical origins then, whether in 1773 or 1953, are employed in the service of cultural and political ideologies that have as much to do with the present as they do with the past.

To return to Poe Ballantine, the beginning is the best place to start, but what constitutes the true, authentic and original place to start? What, in short, is the real origin? Any story has a point of beginning, but simultaneously that point of beginning is itself informed by an antecedent history, and is therefore another form of true origin. Such questions are

aetiological, they describe a philosophy of causation from a point of authoritative origin. This question has particular resonance for texts of the American West, where different versions of true origins are often invoked as a vital part of the politics of authenticity (which is itself a version of the origin): is everything at its most pure and authentic at the origin? How do we choose to identify this elusive point of beginning, and what political investments are made in these choices and decisions? *Writing the Modern American West* is an extended contemplation of the idea of the origin as it is played out in a number of texts of the American West since the 1960s. It argues that in the absence of the origin, the *idea* of an origin is used to underwrite various influential cultural narratives that seek to legitimate particular points of view. The book is an investigation of the ways in which origins are associated with a variety of important ideas to do with loss and absence: authenticity; nostalgia; historical provenance and cultural legacy; violence and trauma; Eden and utopia, and the politics of historiography. *Writing the Modern American West* argues that each of these ideas is dependent upon a political discourse of true beginnings. Although they do not always fully acknowledge it explicitly, many important contemporary debates in cultural politics and literary criticism are motivated by a preoccupation with the concept of the origin: authenticity, globalization, cultural appropriation – each needs some idea of an origin (variously understood) from which to shape its central arguments. *Writing the Modern American West* therefore offers interpretations of its texts both as an advertisement for their value as specifically Western works, but also as evidence of the usefulness of the idea of the origin for thinking about a variety of important interpretative issues.

For example, Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease, in their important collection of essays, *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, begin by offering a revision of how American studies was originally conceived as a subject. They lay bare the processes by which founding accounts of the discipline were predicated on contested ideas of the origins. Both Kaplan and Pease begin by returning to a point of origin from which to initiate a fresh theory of American studies. A new beginning requires a fresh theory of the true and proper origin. Kaplan begins by arguing that “The field of American studies was conceived on the banks of the Congo”, a reference to Perry Miller’s *Errand into the Wilderness* in which he experienced an epiphany in Africa that founded the “beginning of a beginning” (Kaplan and Pease 4). This origin is itself an echo of Marlow’s “beginning of the world” in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Donald Pease begins “New Perspectives on U.S. Culture and Imperialism” by arguing that American

culture “was from its origins grounded on” what Richard Van Alstyne characterized as “an *imperium* – a dominion, state or sovereignty that would expand in population and territory, and increase in strength and power” (Kaplan and Pease 22). The efficacy of these arguments is less important here than their strategy of returning to established points of origin and unpicking their assumptions; of suggesting that their origins are problematical and need to be newly historicized, that is to say, understood as a function of particular cultural circumstances that pertained in their historical moment but perhaps no longer. This is characteristic of political struggles over origins, where each new point of beginning helps to define a new and different history that writers seek to legitimize. It is a way to suggest that the current narrative is mistaken, because it started out at the wrong place, or that we did not think critically enough in the first place about where it started. *Cultures of United States Imperialism* is especially valuable for the ways in which it begins by going back to various beginnings in order to provide a revision of histories that have not been paid sufficient attention. This alerts us to the politics of origins and their consequences. The collection begins with a chapter by Myra Jehlen which itself begins with a quotation from Flaubert’s *Dictionary of Received Ideas*, as if to concur with the Bible that “In the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1). This serves to demonstrate that it is not only our primary texts that are preoccupied by origins, but our own interpretative approaches, and perhaps our very idea of the subject.

The United States has a unique relation to the concept of the origin because of its historical removal from origins; this produces a desire for unity and integrity, and for forms of symbolic return to an origin that cannot be fulfilled, only proliferated. As Stuart Hall succinctly expressed it:

It is because this New World is constituted for us as a place, a narrative of displacement, that it gives rise so profoundly to a certain imaginary plenitude, recreating the endless desire to return to ‘lost origins’, to be one again with the mother, to go back to the beginning ... Who has not known ... the surge of an overwhelming nostalgia for lost origins, for ‘times past’? And yet, this ‘return to the beginning’ is like the imaginary in Lacan – it can neither be fulfilled nor required, and hence it is the beginning of the symbolic, of representation (402).

The United States’ origin is associated with a particular form of desire, one associated with a nostalgia brought about by deracination (at least in the Eurocentric view). The Lacanian “imaginary” interprets this desire as the origin of all forms of representation that would seek to fill a lack, to compensate for an original absence that is in fact the expression of an

irrecoverable loss. Not only is the idea of origins especially relevant to the study of the United States, it has also acquired particular urgency in the late twentieth century. The idea of the origin has widespread resonance in theories of postmodernism, partly because the late twentieth century is so often characterized in terms of separation from the so-called “real” by the power and preponderance of media representations that work to inform, or determine, our understanding of ourselves and the world, of the word and the world; of the real in ways that separate us from an origin. Steven Connor, for example, situates his discussion of the origin in terms of Walter Benjamin and Jean Baudrillard:

Benjamin arguing that the aura of the original work of art is lost with the predominance of mechanical reproduction, and Baudrillard proclaiming that the very opposition between original and copy has been lost in an age of simulacra, or repetitions without originals. At the same time, it is possible to see how the proliferation of reproductions actually intensifies the desire for an origin, even if that origin is increasingly sensed as an erotic lack rather than a tangible and satisfying presence (151)

This argument is similar to Stuart Hall’s in pointing out that the origin is a powerful expression of desire: there is no origin, only the desire for an origin, and this is experienced as a lack or an absence, one that the desire for an origin seeks to assuage. As Baudrillard expressed it, “When the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning” (6). This calls for a different understanding of what is termed “real”, a sophisticated interpretation of the concept of the origin. In the critical language of Lyotard, the origin is a form of “grand narrative”, a form of knowledge that underwrites all manner of other cultural interpretations (xxiv)

Deborah Root, in her book *Cannibal Culture*, argues that: “No cultural practice is or ever has been totally authentic, fully and seamlessly inserted into a social context in such a way that permits the experience of perfect presence. But the fact that things can be made to look this way is not without interest ... Appropriation, like exoticism, is dependent on a rhetoric of origins” (78-81). The marvellous understatement of “not without interest” covers a huge range of important cultural enquiries, to which Root’s book is an exemplary contribution. What form of origin does interpretation seek to privilege? Each instantiation of origins strives to establish and prioritize a form of teleological narrative from which a particular historical lesson is derived. In the United States especially there is a close relationship between the use of the origin and political narratives of declension. For example, the Jeremiad (a particularly, if not uniquely, American form) is a story of the fall-from-grace that flourished right at the beginning of European culture on the North American continent; if there

was a falling away from the very start, then at what antecedent point was there true harmony, except in a prelapsarian mythology of perfection? The Jeremiad is associated with Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) and especially with his sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (1741). It is a Puritan lamentation of the broken covenant and the fall from grace. But every generation has its own version of “the way we were”, or some other similar aspirational cultural ideal, and it is one that usually relies upon an imaginary origin for its authority. But there is no truly original condition here, because such an origin is defined as a departure by its very nature, as an Eden myth which posits some form of loss as the central condition of its existence. The idea that the origin is conceived by its nature as a separation from a state of grace, as a loss of original unity and integrity, is one that has had a powerful and pervasive influence on American culture from its inception, as studies of the modern American Jeremiad demonstrate.

Sara Spurgeon, in her introduction to *Exploding the Western*, positions her own story in terms of ideas about beginnings: “What is for me a journey back to my origins ... is also a journey back to the origin stories of modern America” (viii). The beginning of the individual American citizen’s experience is coterminous with dominant ideas about the beginning of the nation. This is a prevalent alignment in the coming-of-age genre especially, where the personal story acquires national significance because of its association with a mythology of the United States as a country that is itself still in the process of growing up. This coming of age, individually and nationally, necessitates a departure from a point of origin that is often imagined retrospectively in idealized forms. In other words, the struggles of modernity, however conceived, are lamented in favour of a sometimes nostalgic return to a point of origin that is a fantasy of wholeness and contentment. This origin is the expression of desire, and it emphasizes the vital importance of ideas about beginnings to American culture. The importance of a concept of origins to national identity has been noted by a number of critics, among them Paul Gilroy and Homi Bhabha. Gilroy’s theory of diaspora and identity is critical of a theory of national identity that relies simply on “our culture of origin”, and he concludes that “Contrasting forms of political action have emerged to create new possibilities and new pleasures where dispersed people recognize the effects of spatial dislocation as rendering the issue of origins problematic” (335). Bhabha has argued that the idea of the nation is haunted by an awareness that “despite the certainty with which historians speak of the ‘origins’ of nation as a sign of the ‘modernity’ of society, the cultural temporality of the nation inscribes a much more transitional social reality”

(1). The tension that this characterizes could be understood as a trade-off between the desire to install a moment of beginning as definitive, and a recognition that any such origin requires constant renovation in the context of contemporary experience. Either way, the concept of the origin is vital to secure a sense of national identity. The texts of *Writing the Modern American West* are investigations of where that most authoritatively begins, or, as William Least Heat-Moon asks at the start of the American road trip that became *Blue Highways*, “But where to begin a beginning?” (3).

Jacques Derrida's first published work was a rejection of the idea of the origin in Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*, and much of Derrida's writing thereafter was preoccupied with the problem of how the origin functioned in philosophical thinking. For Derrida, origins are installed or invoked as an idea that acts as a guarantor of meaning that is capable of securing textual interpretation, but as if such an origin was itself outside textuality, when in fact it is a product of it. For Derrida this origin is a metaphysics of presence. So, for example, in “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences”, Derrida is wary of interpretations that propose to identify the origin of meaning outside the play of signs, in which and by which any such meaning must itself be expressed. There is no such origin; Derrida subsequently employed the terms “supplement” and “trace” to indicate the vestige of the idea of the absent origin in philosophical and critical thinking. This had widespread implications for how ideas about meaning were constituted in a variety of disciplines: how are interpretations secured by reference to a point of origin, or by an original concept of authoritative value, when the very idea of the origin is itself wholly contingent, unstable, simply a matter of further, and perhaps infinite, interpretation?

For example, Roland Barthes, in “The Death of the Author”, rejects the idea of the writer of a literary text as the authoritative guarantor of its meaning, because a writer “can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original”, and because writing by its very nature “traces a field without origin – or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins” (Barthes 1468). An author is not the originator of the language that they use, and therefore for Barthes, “A text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” (1469). As Barthes' language suggests, the real source of these issues with origins is language itself, partly because the idea of the origin is already a function of the language that expresses it; it is not itself outside language. The very idea of the origin then is a semantic one, and post-structuralist thinking particularly has its beginnings in linguistic

theory, and especially in the problem of how language signifies. The true origin here is in the nature of language and in any referential capacity that it might purport to have.

For Derrida, language does not refer in some straightforward and unmediated way to the things that it appears to signify; he takes issue with Saussure as a starting point to argue that the meaning of signs is not simply present in them, but is in fact deferred through other signs in a process of differentiation: “The signified concept is never present in and of itself, in a sufficient presence that would refer only to itself ... every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences” (Derrida, 1982, 11). The origin of meaning is a product of differentiation because the very idea of an original presence of meaning is only something that can be endlessly deferred through language. Language necessarily creates a distance from the things that it purports to signify, because it can never be identical with what it presents to the reader through its system of signs. This results in what Derrida characterized as “the lost or impossible presence of the absent origin”, and “an ethic of nostalgia for origins” (Derrida, 1988, 121). Rather than a fixed point of origin as the principle of an organising structure or as a transcendental signified, Derrida used the term “trace” to characterize what has happened to the idea of the origin: “The trace is not only the disappearance of origin – within the discourse that we sustain and according to the path that we follow it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a non-origin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin” (Derrida, 1976, 61). In the absence of the origin we have the trace of the origin’s absence, which, in terms of Derrida’s interpretation of the division at the linguistic sign, is constituted “reciprocally”, between absence and presence, that is to say, through forms of hierarchy rather than some fully integrated and unified “origin”. Derrida’s use of the term “trace” is a means to account for a major issue with the idea of the origin, and it is a key component of his theory of logocentrism, which designates the privileged role that logos, or speech, has been given in western philosophical discourse.

It is not, then, possible, according to post-structuralist theory, to identify a definitive concept of origin that might serve to underwrite all those forms of interpretative discourse that depend on such an origin for their efficacy. Further, it is likely that when such an origin is constituted then such a definition leads almost inevitably to narratives of decline, to the characterization of a falling away from that moment of origin when conditions were apparently at their most ideal at the point of inception.

Moreover, it is often the case that points of origin are identified precisely in order to support and substantiate the narratives of declension that are already in place. That is to say, the mythical origin is itself in fact a function of narratives of decline, and moments of origin are created principally to give such narratives credence.

Derrida was not the only writer to identify the importance of the origin to critical thinking, and especially to western metaphysics; indeed, Derrida sees the origin at work in a wide variety of writers going all the way back to Plato. Michel Foucault, in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”, quotes Nietzsche’s *The Wanderer and His Shadow* to argue that “The lofty origin is no more than ‘a metaphysical extension which arises from the belief that things are most precious and essential at the moment of birth’. We tend to think that this is the moment of their greatest perfection” (Foucault 143). Foucault recognizes Nietzsche’s challenge to the pursuit of the origin “because it is an attempt to capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities, because this search assumes the existence of immobile forms that precede the external world of accident and succession. This search is directed to ‘that which was already there’, the image of a primordial truth fully adequate to its nature, and it necessitates the removal of every mask to ultimately disclose an original identity” (Foucault 142). Like Nietzsche and Derrida, Foucault is suspicious of any concept of origins that functions as a guarantor of meaning: “What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity” (142). This is perhaps to concur with Derrida that what lies at the origin is not unity and integrity but a kind of split or division, because the origin is not at one with itself but divided by its very nature: “In this play of representation, the point of origin becomes ungraspable. There are things like reflecting pools, and images, an infinite reference from one to the other, but no longer a source, a spring. There is no longer a simple origin. For what is reflected is split *in itself* and not only as an addition to itself of its image” (Derrida, 1976, 36). Again, the origin of this critique lies in the nature of language itself, and especially in the post-Saussurian linguistic theory that underwrites much of Derrida’s philosophy. Derrida characterizes a system of hierarchies that is underwritten by a belief in an origin that holds the system in place but which is itself unquestioned, and he therefore discerns in the history of metaphysics a persistent investment in the concept of the origin that has been insufficiently examined.

Derrida returned to this problem of the use of the concept of origins throughout his career; in *Limited Inc* for example, which emphasizes the centrality of origins to much western thought:

The enterprise of returning ‘strategically, ‘ideally’, to an origin or to a priority thought to be simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, self-identical, in order then to think in terms of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident etc. All metaphysicians from Plato to Rousseau, Descartes to Husserl, have proceeded in this way ... And this is not just *one* metaphysical gesture among others, it is *the* metaphysical exigency, that which has been the most constant, most profound and most potent (Derrida, 1988, 93).

The complexity of this issue refers back again and again to language, and to the limits of language’s ability to represent something outside itself or anterior to itself, a sign that might act as an origin, or be designated an origin, that stands outside or beyond interpretation. How can close critical interpretations of texts posit the idea of an origin that is not itself open to close critical scrutiny, and where would such a methodology lead? As Derrida argued in 1990: “Everything begins by referring back, that is to say, does not begin; and once this breaking open or this partition divides, from the very start, every *renvoi*, there is not a single *renvoi* but from then on, always, a multiplicity of *renvois*, so many difference traces referring back to other traces, and so to traces of others” (Derrida, 1990, 136). This is a lucid statement of how the investigation of origins leads back necessarily, in a process of infinite regression, to issues in linguistic theory about language’s referential capacity. The ultimate point of origin therefore is always language itself, or the ability of any signifying practice to make present something that is not simply a function of its own grammar. These are ideas about origins that are fundamentally important, not just to individual acts of interpretation, but to the foundation of entire disciplines, and have therefore been hugely influential in the humanities. Clearly there is no simple resolution to the problem of how interpretation might proceed without some recourse to a concept of an origin, or foundational epistemology, that is not itself open to critical scrutiny; all such origins are themselves contingent in this way. For Edward Casey:

The issue of origins here becomes that of how (if at all) origins are to be commemoratively recalled. If ‘everything begins by referring back (par le *renvoi*), that is to say, does not begin’, everything is in effect a memory trace – but of what? If not of a beginning, then of an (absent) origin. Everything begins by forgetting this origin ... even if a given text contains *renvois* to a concealed ‘origin’, these referrals in no way sustain this putative origin or its concealment. Recourse to commemorative thinking becomes pointless when origins are regarded as so hopelessly irretrievable (607-8).