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# Range Wars: The Plains Frontier of *Boys Don't Cry*

Christina Dando

**ABSTRACT.** In the mythology of the American West, range wars pitted ranchers against farmers, insiders versus outsiders, each struggling to control access to land, each fighting to preserve the freedom and opportunities that first drew them to the frontier. The film, *Boys Don't Cry* (2000), set on the contemporary Plains and based on actual events, tells of insiders and outsiders who attempt to claim a place. The individuals at the center of the film challenge symbolic fences and attempt border-crossings as they struggle to construct and live with their identities. Plains citizens are depicted to erect and police societal fences, defining who belongs in this landscape and who does not, a parallel to the mythic conflict between ranchers and farmers. Common to all these range wars are debates over masculine identity. The film constructs a Plains landscape that is once again frontier, spatially as well as metaphorically.

Oh, give me land, lots of land under starry skies above,  
Don't fence me in.  
Let me ride through the wide open country that I love,  
Don't fence me in.  
Let me be by myself in the evenin' breeze,  
And listen to the murmur of the cottonwood trees,  
Send me off forever but I ask you please,  
Don't fence me in.

—Cole Porter, 1944<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

In popular conceptions of American Western history, range wars pitted ranchers against farmers, insiders versus outsiders, each struggling to control access to land, each fighting to preserve the freedom and opportunities that first drew them to the frontier. Initially, ranchers wanted the land open so they could continue to

graze freely. Farmers wanted fences to protect their crops. In Western films and television, the theme of range wars captures the transformation of a landscape but also the end of a romantic era, the cowboy frontier, where individuals could roam freely. The frontier embodies the American ideal of independence, freedom, and seemingly endless possibilities. To fence the land, to erect boundaries, meant there was no open land left, and its accessibility and use were controlled, transforming space into place.

The historic reality underlying these range wars is less obvious, less black and white. There is some truth to the popular myth of range wars in the West—farmers and ranchers did challenge claims to land. However, most violence was a result of competition among ranchers, between large and small ranchers and between cattlemen and sheepherders (White 1991, 344). Like many subjects of Westerns, the concept of range wars began with an actual historic event transformed into a mythic conflict, greater and grander than it actually was; but it does not end there because as "... history evolves into myth, that myth tends to simplify and petrify the original facts, and ... these simplifications can, in turn, affect history" (Thompson 2002, 9). Crossing from history to myth is not generally problematic; the danger comes when the myth impacts real human perceptions and actions.

*Boys Don't Cry*, a film set on the contemporary Plains and based on actual events, relates the story of an insider/outsider who attempts to claim a place and who ultimately is, metaphorically, forced off the land. The individual at the center of this film struggles to construct and live with his identities, constrained by the societal fences erected by Plains citizens attempting to define who belongs in this landscape and who does not. But larger questions loom. Through *Boys Don't Cry*, the Plains landscape is constructed and reconstructed as a frontier.<sup>2</sup>

In this essay, I explore how the film *Boys Don't Cry* introduces landscape belonging—on the frontier and on the Plains. I ask who controls territory, who erects, crosses, or tears down fences? How do we define a trespasser or transgressor in this context? But first, the concepts of frontier, the Western and their relation to the Plains are sketched.

#### FROM RUGGED FRONTIER TO NUANCED BORDERLAND

The term *frontier* itself totters on an edge—is it a region or a process? Is it one of the most significant aspects of American

history or of American popular culture? This tension can even be traced to a place and a moment: Chicago, 1893, where both Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill Cody presented their versions of the frontier to markedly different audiences (White 1994, 7; Hausladen 2003, 3–4). Despite the closing of the “official” frontier in 1890 by the U.S. Census Bureau, frontier still leads a vibrant life in popular culture. It is from constructions of frontier in novels, films, and television that “the myth of frontier” comes into being “... the history of western expansion as a metaphor that symbolizes, explains, and justifies the totality of U.S. history” (Slotkin 1994, 263).

Recent definitions of frontier in the American media cover the full range of possibilities of the term, not just region and process but also positive and negative. Some scholars have acknowledged multiple frontiers, reclaiming frontiers as “... geographic space, political line, and social process. They join and divide, for good and for evil. They are gendered, sexualized, and erotically charged” (Klein 1996, 206). Gloria Anzaldúa (1999, 19) calls these new frontiers borderlands that

are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy . . . It's not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions. Hatred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape . . . However, there have been compensations . . . and certain joys. Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an “alien” element. There is an exhilaration in being a participant in the further evolution of humankind, in being “worked” on.

Anzaldúa's personal and social rediscovery of frontier captures a place as well as a process, at times dangerous, yet also stimulating and laden with opportunities, but most significantly, without borders.

Borderlands are not a new landscape. The opportunities and dangers presented in this landscape have been drawing individuals since the American West entered the American imagination. Traditionally, western history and popular culture has focused on those hearty individuals, particularly white males, who went West to seek their fortunes and contribute to the development of our nation. Today, we acknowledge that those fortune seekers were

often crossing more frontiers than just that between East and West. Western history has its share of women "passing" as men, such as Mountain Charley, Little Jo Monaghan, and Charley Parkhurst, to pursue new lives in the West (Seagraves 1996). Calamity Jane long occupied a "middle ground" of sorts, not seeking to pass as a man, but adopting masculine dress and engaging in masculine activities. As for the reversal, men dressing as women, there are few examples. Among some Native American tribes a "third" gender was acknowledged, the *berdache*, individuals who would dress, work and marry as the opposite gender (Boag 1998, 336–7). Elizabeth Custer in her memoirs wrote of an army laundress, Old Nash, who married at least three times, the last to a handsome soldier, and who was found to be biologically male only after her death (Boag 1998, 334). Who knows how many women and men "passed," be it gender, race, class, occupation, etc., without detection in the West throughout its history—probably far more than we imagine. The West as frontier allowed many individuals to reinvent themselves, whether through economic opportunities (mining, ranching, business) or constructing new identities.

#### DELINEATING THE WESTERN

The U.S. Census Bureau and historians have opened and closed the frontier, yet Western film keeps the region vital. The definition of a Western evolved over the 20<sup>th</sup> century according to changes in American society. Today, the Western is much more difficult to define, but generally is viewed as being situated in the American West and involves Western history and themes (Hausladen 2003; Simons 2004).<sup>3</sup>

From its inception, the Western had to look like it was set in the territory of the American West.<sup>4</sup> In 1909, a critic wrote in the *New York Dramatic Mirror*, "Cowboys, Indians and Mexicans must be seen in proper scenic backgrounds to convey any impression of reality" (Buscombe 1998, 115). Many Westerns begin with a landscape shot, establishing the location, and emphasizing its importance (Tompkins 1994, 283–4). An early favorite filming location for Westerns was the dramatic landscape of the American Southwest with its buttes, mesas, and carved canyons, a uniquely American space that was even better in technicolor.<sup>5</sup> Monument Valley, through the work of John Ford and other directors, became iconic for the classic Western landscape and has been utilized in film, television and advertisements (Leutrat and Liandrat-Guigues 1998,

169). Monument Valley also provides another essential element—a great space to be conquered: “The apparent emptiness makes the land desirable not only as a space to be filled but also as a stage on which to perform and as a territory to master” (Tompkins 1994, 289). Seemingly empty, the space holds a great deal, from freedom and opportunities to unknown dangers.

But the Western cinematic landscape is not just wilderness, the landscape also contains pockets of humanity in the forms of ranches, homesteads and frontier towns, with towns representing civilization and wilderness the untamed object to be conquered. The tension between wilderness and civilization, often central to the story, ties into the broad theme of American expansion and the conquering of the landscape. Ford was a master of contrasting civilization and wilderness, often within the same shot using the frame of a window or doorway (Budd 1998). Between the concepts of wilderness and civilization falls the transition zone known as frontier.

Equally important to Westerns are the ties to Western history and themes. Early definitions of Westerns focused on events that occurred between the end of the Civil War and the closing of the frontier in 1890 (Walker 2001, 1–3). Later Westerns branched out: while the frontier had on paper been closed, events central to the West and Westerns, such as ranching, mining, Indian wars, and settlement, continued well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Through Westerns, the audience escapes into another world, a fantasy world, yet the film ultimately reinforces the world view and values of the day: “In the deceptively simple stories, they saw the conflicts and dilemmas of American society—its contradictions, its goals, its fears, and its hopes for itself . . .” (Butler 1994, 794). For example, the classic Western *The Searchers* (1956) reflects 1950s racial tensions, projecting them onto another race (Walker 2001, 2–3). As Janet Walker (2001, 5) phrases it:

the film western (as with other cultural forms) is *not historical in and of itself*; it *draws on* historical material. But while history is argumentative and discursive, westerns give *narrative form* to ideological beliefs and values.<sup>6</sup>

As a result, Westerns work to reassure the audience that there are simple answers to our complex world, broken down to binaries (good vs. evil, etc.), as well as providing another perspective on current societal issues. Michael Budd, in fact, identifies Westerns as being based on “a series of related oppositions—civilization and

savagery, culture and nature, East and West, settlement and wilderness" (Budd 1998, 133). These oppositions and others—good vs. bad, law vs. nature, individualism vs. conformity, garden vs. desert—are part of the work Westerns serve, for "the western provides a means for expressing the key oppositions of American history" (Musser and Byron 1998, 364).

New Western historians and film critics now recognize "postmodern Wests and westerns" and the "destabilizing" or "questioning" of traditional myths and master narratives, particularly traditional representations of history and myth, heroism and violence, and masculinity and minorities (Kitses 1998, 19). Just as American society has entered postmodernity, so too have our Westerns. But, in the postmodern Westerns' "questioning," comes questions too of what now constitutes a Western. Alexandra Keller, commenting in a 2001 essay, states that "almost every western made in the 1990s has to justify itself as a western" (Keller 2001, 28).

#### GENDER AND THE WESTERN

Into this landscape of the Western, we introduce its natural inhabitants, the cowboy, who is essential to westward expansion and the advancement of civilization—the conqueror of the Indian and the conduit for America's manifest destiny (Eisfeld 1995). Early Western history and Western films constructed a world focused exclusively on them, holding them up as examples of idyllic masculinity, embodying courage and vigor, enjoying male camaraderie and the love of women (Dittmar 2002, 146; Johnson 1993).<sup>7</sup> The role "Others" (women, minorities) play in westerns is to "affirm the maleness of western society" (Butler 1994, 776). The heroes are always recognizable by their style of dress, their few social ties, and their distinct talents, particularly with horses and guns (Tompkins 1994, 287–8). Our Western heroes are "invariably both morally good and best at fighting" (Durgnat and Simmon 1998, 76).

Western heroes are often portrayed as seeming to spring from the frontier environment itself, reflecting its harsher elements: "To be a man in the Western is to seem to grow out of the environment, which means to be hard, to be tough, to be unforgiving" (Tompkins 1994, 287). The violent conflicts between hero and rival(s) typically take place outdoors or in public places, involving physical struggles and culminating in a fight to the death with guns (Tompkins 1992).

The relationship between the cowboy and his landscape includes his gaze. Nearly every Western features at least one

thoughtful scene of the hero (think especially of John Wayne and Clint Eastwood) gazing at the landscape: to watch for evidence of enemies, to assess an environment, or simply to enjoy a striking vista. The film viewer is positioned with the hero and allowed to share in the gaze and in the pleasure of the view.<sup>8</sup> Just as frontiersmen and cowboys gaze at land, so too they gaze at women—assessing a threat, watching for a challenge, or enjoying a view—as they master this other. In Laura Mulvey's decisive work "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," she analyzes the ways in which the pleasure in looking has been constructed as male active and female passive, and, in doing so, film "reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle" (Mulvey 1989, 14). Women perform within the narrative for the gaze of the spectators as well as the male characters, reinforcing the hegemonic masculinity of Western culture (Mulvey 1989, 19). With this masculine gaze, there is little room for non-heterosexual personalities, forcing all to adopt what Gillian Rose calls "the self certain he(ro)" (Rose 1993, 107).

This visual mastery over women and land is often conflated, with landscape described in feminine terms by masculine writers, with the American landscape presented as a desirable virgin to be conquered or as a nurturing, bountiful mother (Kolodny 1975).<sup>9</sup> Feminists have offered alternatives to the hegemonic masculine gaze, drawing perspectives from women's lives that suggest a focus on relationship, harmony, and intimacy, contesting the distancing and mastery of the masculine gaze of both women and landscapes (Rose 1993, 110–12).

Film frontiers, however, do not last and give way to the new inhabitants of the frontier: farm and ranch families. These families, headed by a strong man, supported by a wife and children, take the wilderness and transform it into a garden, transforming the landscape from space to place (Boag 1998). Farm and ranch families play a small role in Westerns, for their presence represents the end of the frontier. White women are central to the transformation of the landscape from wilderness to civilized space, representing a cultivating force that softens, for example, rough dwellings and adds the touches that make them homes.<sup>10</sup> Women instigate social institutions such as schools and churches that will tame some cowboys (but not all) into wearing a clean shirt and settling down. Just as farm families do not have a significant place in Westerns, neither do women, except to provide an occasional visual respite of pleasure.

There have been instances of "gender frontiers" in Western films. Characters such as Doris Day's *Calamity Jane* (1953) and Joan Crawford's Vienna in *Johnny Guitar* (1954) occupy "middle ground," dressing as men, engaging in masculine activities, but always clearly as attractive women, providing that visual respite. Male "cross-dressing" has seldom been seriously presented, mostly done for comic effect, as in Marlon Brando donning a pioneer woman's dress in *The Missouri Breaks* (1976) (Cook 1998, 296). It was not until the postmodern Western, *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993), based on the story of Little Jo Monaghan, that "gender-passing" was addressed in the Western film genre. Little Jo, in life and in film, left her tragic life in the East as a woman and came as a man to the West, her "masquerade" not discovered until death (from natural causes), after 35 years in the West (Seagraves 1996).

#### THE PLAINS IN CINEMA AND AS FRONTIER

The Plains, despite their importance to Western history, never featured prominently in the American consciousness and were seldom utilized for filming Westerns.<sup>11</sup> Many major events of Western history, tapped for Westerns, were in fact set on the Plains, such as conflicts with Plains Indians and the heyday of the cowboy. In fact, the Plains are strongly associated with frontier violence, more so than other portions of the West, with the Plains frontier as a place where "... violence and disorder rule the day. No other region of the United States is given this distinction more than the Great Plains" (Ellis 2004, 387).

Given their history, their association with frontier violence, and their Western landscape, why were the Plains not more utilized in films? Certainly, the Plains are more challenging to capture on film than the dramatic landscape of the Southwest or the Mountain West. In addition, the spectacular landscapes of mountains, buttes and desert created a visual image of the thematic conflicts embodied in westerns—wilderness vs. civilization, good vs. bad, etc. (Hausladen 2003a, 307). To the eye, the Plains could not capture the conflict; their vast spaces seeming to lie open and docile compared to the challenges presented by the far West. What is there for a Western hero to conquer? Adding to the Plains' image problems is the association in the American consciousness of the Plains with agrarian settlement and with immigrants, two subjects that are the antithesis of Western themes.

Despite the strong agricultural association, contemporary cinema suggests that the Plains landscape can be successfully transferred to film. For example, Brian Cimino's panoramic *Heaven's Gate* (1980) and Kevin Costner's revisionist (or post-modern) *Dances with Wolves* (1990) were each filmed in the Plains and beautifully capture both the landscape and Western themes.

Anzaldúa's borderlands—places of both positive and negative opportunity and danger—are reflected in the popular usage of the term *frontier* in connection with the Great Plains. In February 2002, the state of Nebraska revealed its latest tourism campaign slogan: "America's Frontier." Its marketing director commented, "When you think 'frontier,' you think new and possibilities and exciting . . . Everyone has an image of a frontier. For most people that's a positive image" (Hammel 2002, 1). The University of Nebraska system currently uses as its slogan "Pioneering New Frontiers," stating on its website (yet another frontier), "We've always been pioneers. It's the frontiers that have changed."<sup>12</sup> In contrast, recent newspaper articles, such as "America's Failed Frontier" and "Slow Death in the Great Plains," focus on low population densities and restored grasslands, and are reopening space on the Plains (Egan 2001; Hyde 1997; Kristof 2002). This frontier, as the media is describing it, is a landscape of abandonment and death, of isolation and ceaseless winds, a landscape that civilization is retracting from (Dando 2005).

Recent cinematic portrayals of the Plains, such as *Boys Don't Cry* (2000) and *The Laramie Project* (2002), reinforce the association of the Plains with frontier, are set on the Plains, and take their plots from recent violent events on the Plains.<sup>13</sup> *Boys Don't Cry* is based on the events that led to the murder of Brandon Teena/Teena Brandon, a transsexual Nebraska youth. While the film is not a documentary, it draws on documentary as well as historic Western film traditions, walking a fine line between the two, constructing a Plains landscape that is once again a frontier.

#### THE FRONTIERS OF *BOYS DON'T CRY*

*Boys Don't Cry* tells the tragic tale of a transsexual Nebraska youth, who in attempting to establish his own identity and find a place for himself, is caught in a web of his own lies and deceptions and is ultimately murdered.<sup>14</sup> His most serious crime is passing as a man when physically he was a woman. The murder of Brandon Teena and the subsequent trials made national news, as the details of Brandon's life were made public. The tragedy,

combined with Brandon's identity crisis, caught the American public's attention, eventually resulting in both a documentary (*The Brandon Teena Story*, 1998) and a Hollywood production (*Boys Don't Cry*, 2000). While the documentary was produced first, the theatrical film reached a much broader audience, propelled by Hilary Swank's Academy Award winning performance as Brandon.

As *Boys Don't Cry* begins, Brandon is in a mobile home bathroom, just having his hair cut short by his cousin Lonny. Brandon is dressed in a western shirt, jeans, and a western belt. He tops off his new haircut with a cowboy hat. The clothes, the accoutrements of a cowboy, immediately tie Brandon to the Western landscape. The scene could easily be of a cowboy getting spiffed-up for a night on the town after time on the range. Brandon however, is heading for the roller rink, a location that serves as a surrogate to a Western dance. When Brandon meets up with a girl at the roller rink, she tells him "You don't seem like you're from around here," but we are left wondering what "here" she is referring to: This rink? This city? This landscape? The first few scenes of the film are essentially placeless: a trailer park, a roller rink, a bar, places all that might be common to many towns in contemporary America. These Western illusions are then anchored to the Plains when the audience sees a caption to a scene—Lincoln, Nebraska 1993—that establishes the setting and time of the film.

It is not until Brandon leaves Lincoln and goes to the small town of Falls City that the landscape is made visible. Brandon leaves Lincoln at night with Tom and Candace who are going to a party in Falls City where they reside. Brandon awakens inside a home the next morning, not knowing where he is. Out the window, the quiet Plains stretch. Brandon phones his cousin Lonny, standing outside an older home on the Plains, few other structures visible, and says, "I don't know where the fuck I am!" He has crossed into a territory he cannot identify. He searches around and finds something that indicates that he is in Falls City, Nebraska. Lonny responds, "What're you doing down there? That's not even on the map." The flat landscape, the spacious sky, the home, evoke two different Plains time periods familiar to many Americans through historic photographs: the early settlement process when homes were few and far apart, such as those of Solomon Butcher, and 1930s Farm Security Administration photographs. It is virtually timeless. There is also a sense of both place and placelessness. While the landscape is distinctively Plains, it could be described as nowhere.

As viewers, we too, do not know where or when we are, except we know we are some driving distance from Lincoln, so close to civilization yet so far away. Brandon's lost cry evokes another Plains movie moment: Dorothy awakening from the tornado to find herself in Oz (*The Wizard of Oz* 1939). Dorothy whispers to her dog Toto, "I don't think we're in Kansas anymore, Toto," a gentler query to displacement than Brandon's blue-tinged outburst. Dorothy's trip to Oz takes her from Depression-era Kansas, shot in black-and-white, to the full Technicolor wonderland of Oz where she is welcomed as a hero. Brandon is also initially shown in darker tones, all night settings, until he awakens in Falls City. But Brandon does not awaken to a Technicolor Oz. Brandon discovers in Falls City a place where he can be who he feels he truly is; a young man.

Besides visually invoking frontier, Brandon's sense of community also hinges on people and places on the edge or margin. Falls City includes elements typical of a Western small town: a bar, police station, factory, and older homes. At a party outside of town, local youth hangout and drink, while the young men "bumper ski." Brandon is called to participate. "You're up, cowboy." As he skis, Brandon raises his free hand like a rodeo rider until he is tossed and ends in the dust. Later, in the local bar, Brandon watches Lana and two other girls sing karaoke, swaying to the country-western tune "The Bluest Eyes in Texas." The country western music, its references to Texas, again ties the setting to the West.

While there are ample clues to place the film in the West, it is a modern Western landscape. Ironically, Brandon's ideal community appears to be a trailer park. Trailer parks traditionally have been on the margins of the landscape, occupying a netherworld somewhere between city and country (Jackson 1984). Brandon appears in the beginning of the film in a trailer park in Lincoln and later professes his desire to have his own trailer park in Falls City:

The thing about the trailer park is we'll have picnic tables, people playing music, and barbecues every night. We'll invite all our friends: Candace, Kate, your mom. Heck, even John if he don't kill himself first. Best of all, we'll have our own Airstream.

The mobility of the trailers, their lack of permanence, reflect Brandon's desire for a place in neither camp (city or country), but a place nonetheless, just as his sexuality is also in a sort of middle ground. All could be described as forms of frontier. Brandon's vision of a trailer park echoes those dreamy visions of early

explorers of frontier, envisioning a future place in this space as they employ the magisterial gaze. Interestingly, Brandon's vision is not from an overlook point but from a cozy position, inside, curled up with Lana.

The community that Brandon finds in Falls City and strives to become part of is one of people on the margin who are often termed "trailer trash" or "white trash" (Jarosz and Lawson 2002). When Brandon shows Lonny a picture of Lana, saying, "Isn't she beautiful?" Cynically, Lonny replies, "If you like white-trash." Stereotypically, trailer trash refers to blue-collar workers or unemployed workers whose lives are focused on work and having a simple good time (drinking with friends) and whose homes might be trailers, modular homes or older homes. This marginal community is literally white trash: there is no hint of any color in the community, fitting with stereotypical images of both the American Midwest and Plains.<sup>15</sup>

While there is no trailer park in Falls City, Brandon's community there occupies the margin: Candace and Lana's homes appear to be on the outskirts of town, or even outside of town. There are no complete families, only the family that has been created. The men appear to have no homes, relationally or physically: none are shown to have family. John and Tom share a house but John confides in Brandon that he considers Lana's house his home. John is shown in one scene to have a little girl, his child with a woman not revealed in the film. Nevertheless, it is the women who have homes. Candace has her home that she shares with her child (no father identified), Lana lives in her mom's home where they all spend significant time.

Throughout *Boys Don't Cry*, masculinity is associated with outside and femininity with interior spaces. This patterning is also familiar to the Western movie genre. Women were associated with civilization and domestication and assumed to belong to civilized places, such as homesteads or towns or the East (Cook 1998). Men, particularly Western heroes, were associated with wilderness, and were responsible for taking space and transforming it. Western male heroes were the most mobile population, capable of moving between civilization and wilderness although always seeming more comfortable in the wild.

In the film, Brandon is at his most masculine when he is outside. In Lincoln, he is shown exhilarated at running from the angry brothers of his girlfriends. In Falls City, he bumper skis at a party because it is what the men do in Falls City. At the party, he

talks with Tom about his ideal work, laboring in an oil field. For Brandon, real work is smoke jumping to fight fires. Both oil field roustabout and smoke jumper are hard, outdoor activities. We could even call them deluxe blue-collar jobs. Later in the film Brandon and John each watch Lana at work from outside the factory (at different times), reinforcing the masculine gaze. When Brandon makes love with Lana, it is outside, in the grass at night. Like the classic Western hero, Brandon seems at his most masculine, most virile when outside.

But differences remain between Brandon's masculinity and that of John and Tom. Brandon talks with Tom around a campfire (a very Western image) and Tom confides that he and John have cut and burned themselves, that it helps them "snap back to reality." Brandon avoids the male ritual when he announces, "I guess I am a pussy compared to you."<sup>16</sup> However, he seems the more masculine, more heroic of the men. Early in the film, Lonny questions Brandon's pursuit of girls, after witnessing Brandon being chased and threatened by his girlfriend's brothers. Brandon responds, "Tell them [his girlfriends] that. They say I'm the best boyfriend they ever had." Brandon's masculinity comforts the girls; he is polite, tender, and he buys them gifts. This is a sharp contrast to John and Tom's rough masculinity of mistreating women, engaging in crime (both were in prison previously), and living a marginal existence. While John and Tom are natural men, their overt violence (self-mutilation, and later rape and murder) is at odds with Brandon's performed masculinity.

When John and Tom rape Brandon in punishment for passing as a man, it is outdoors, also the location for classic frontier violence. While classic Westerns are often focused on conflicts over resources, it might be argued that the conflict that develops between Brandon and John and Tom is over territory (gender) as well as resources. Brandon has crossed from his natural territory of being born female to his new world of masculinity, a passing based on his performance of masculinity, rather than his biological right to be on this ground. When John and Tom discover that Brandon is female, they rape him, attempting to drive him back to female. But in the film, their actions appear to have no impact. Brandon continues to appear to be male, he is not returned to femininity. While John and Tom seem to be exhilarated and perhaps bonded by their action, any pleasure from this brutal and violent act is not shared with the viewers. Brandon has a chance to leave town (or the territory as it were) but he hesitates, waiting for Lana to

come with him. He stands his ground over his resources—Lana, who is desired by both Brandon and John—and we might say his territory (his masculinity as embodied by his heterosexual relationship with Lana).

Ambiguity is added in a scene after the rape and before the murder where Lana and Brandon make love and where Lana is fully aware of Brandon's femininity. It is left open to audience interpretation whether that love was as a heterosexual couple with Brandon in a male role or as a lesbian couple with Brandon in a female role (Esposito 2003, 237). Whatever the answer, it ends in death. But death does not come outdoors or in a public space, it ends by gunfire in Candace's living room, a civilized space.

Brandon appears to be at his most feminine in interior spaces. A scene that establishes for the audience how he transforms his body is set in a bedroom at Candace's house. Brandon's body is exposed to the viewer's gaze as he bandages his breasts and adds a dildo to his underwear. When he is completely dressed, having completed his transformation, he grins at himself in the mirror and declares, "I'm an asshole." Ironically, he does not have the tools of a woman either: he has to steal feminine hygiene products from a convenience store. He is shown cleaning up dishes at Lana's house (a domestic task) while the others are sitting around the table, an action that puts him under the calculating gaze of Lana's mother.

In the film climax, where John and Tom strip Brandon, the setting is in Lana's bathroom, again an interior location and arguably the most intimate one at that.<sup>17</sup> Jennifer Esposito (2003, 239) pithily phrases it, "Biology betrays Brandon." Brandon is pinned to the bathroom wall and stripped of his pants. The camera's gaze is that of the women, standing in the bathroom door, peering in. When Brandon's body is revealed, he is also shown to be standing with the women (behind them), as if he is imagining what the scene must look like. Brandon's pubic hair is revealing as much as it is concealing because nothing is visible but the pubic hair. Yet, it is the presence of absence that is supposed to be remarkable. The gaze here is quite marked. The men are all standing in the bathroom, the women are in the hall. Brandon is shown to be in both places—pinned in the restroom and standing with the women—and yet he is the subject of everyone's gaze. John and Tom's action might be said to literally reclaim the patriarchal gaze, exposing Brandon's feminine body to the gaze of all. But what is presented could be termed a frontier of sorts; from the waist up

he appears to be male, but from the waist down female. Brandon is both and neither. He is a frontier.

The film ends with the camera lingering on a prairie sunrise and a train's whistle blowing in the distance. The credits roll to "The Bluest Eyes in Texas," Lana's karaoke song.

It is inarguable that Brandon is depicted in the film as searching for a place for himself, a place of sexuality and identity as well as a geographical space. While Lincoln, a civilized place, initially offers Brandon a home in the margins of a trailer park, it is not until Brandon moves off the map that "Finally everything felt all right." Off the map, in the margins, on the frontier, on the Plains, Brandon found what he was looking for. But what he did not expect was death. From Lincoln, he knew the male heterosexual response to his border-crossing identity and realized the physical threat of beating (what men in conflict do) but seemingly not the rape (what men do to women) and the shooting (what cowboys do). Brandon was used to frontiers as gray zones, his own sexuality caught between masculinity and femininity, but frontiers are also highly contested territory. Linda Dittmar (2002, 148) suggests that Brandon's murder was not just because of his sexual ambiguity; it was also

because of other contingencies, notably the brutalizing and dysfunctional life in a small Midwestern farming community that is stranded, at the end of the millennium, in the material and spiritual poverty of dead-end lives.

In this interpretation Brandon's friends in Falls City want to get out of Falls City, to go to Lincoln or beyond. Brandon finds instead that he prefers frontiers.

The Plains frontier landscape as it is constructed in *Boys Don't Cry* is dark, literally and figuratively. Most of the scenes are set at night, utilizing night Plains skies with time-lapse clouds, heightening the isolation. Film frames of placeless and timeless. The community also is dark. It is marginal, just managing to get along, and in the end deadly. While the classic Western dichotomy of men associated with exteriors and women with interiors is apparent, so too is Brandon's border-crossing. He appears to be able to easily handle both landscapes, yet belong to neither. Ultimately, Brandon finds violence in both landscapes because neither is a haven for him. There is some irony in the name Falls City. Brandon thought he had a place for himself but all he found was his undoing. While he was of the Plains, having lived his life in Lincoln, he was denied a place, denied a community.

## THE TRAGIC PLAINS

Hell, I even thought I was dead but I found out it was just that  
I was in Nebraska.

—*Unforgiven* (1992)

The Plains have long been portrayed as the setting for tragedy. In literature, Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* (1918) and Ole Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth* (1927) paint dark portraits of immigrant experiences on the Plains. Interpretations of the Dust Bowl, in films such as Pare Lorentz's *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936), and John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), focus public attention on the disaster of American settlement of the Plains (Krim 1994). Without a doubt, elements of Plains history are tragic, but to concentrate on the tragic ignores that not all settlers were forced off the Plains by harsh experiences, and that the Plains are still home to many Americans. Films such as *In Cold Blood* (1967), *Badlands* (1973), and *The Laramie Project* (2002), each based on actual violent events on the Plains, have also focused on psychopaths in this landscape.<sup>18</sup> *Boys Don't Cry* provides another view of the tragic Plains.

The Plains setting works well for *Boys Don't Cry* on a variety of levels. The drama was filmed in Dallas. As some viewers were probably aware of the actual events, setting it in any other location risked credibility. But the images we are given of the Plains are mostly through night scenes and gray days, no big blue skies evident. While intellectually an audience may recognize the Plains as an American place, we are provided few images to give us a strong sense of place, just glimpses of a gray city and gray landscape with seemingly little life. This blah, marginal location works well with the narrative because it emphasizes the isolation and loneliness experienced in this setting. Location works toward answering the basic question, how did this happen? By setting the film on the Plains, an area still contemplated as frontier, an association re-enforced by the media, audiences can make the connection between frontier and areas on the margins of civilization, where violence is assumed to be a more common element of life.

The Plains as it is constructed in *Boys Don't Cry* is not a warm and supportive environment. I do not want to say that Plains rural communities are hostile to non-heterosexuals and thus reinforce the stereotype. However, the Falls City community, as thinly as it is constructed in the film is, surely, hostile to other than heterosexuals.

It creates, to invoke Yi-Fu Tuan, landscapes of fear (Tuan 1979). This is not a frontier full of excitement; rather, it is a place where borders are policed. There is good shown in the community; Lana loves Brandon and does not seem to care about his gender or his sexuality. Lonny attempts to support Brandon and encourages him to stand-up to his troubles in Lincoln. But, at the core, is the brutal violence and voiced opposition to those who do not fit into a heterosexual society.

Ultimately, the film constructs and reconstructs a modern frontier landscape on the Plains. A frontier spatially, in terms of population density and development, and metaphorically, a frontier between a supposed all-heterosexual society and a society that embraces all, regardless of sexuality, race, or gender. Throughout the film are clues that suggest that it is a Western or at least draws on Western traditions—Brandon being outfitted in the beginning as a cowboy and other Western cultural clues (music, rodeo, etc), the Western landscape that is ambiguous (but certainly not agrarian), the tragic shoot-out in the end—yet it is set in the recent past and addresses a topic that traditional Westerns would not touch. And through the film there is a questioning of the binary thinking and black-and-white thinking so pervasive in American society and so strongly associated with Westerns. There is evidence of the classic Western binaries—good/bad, masculine/feminine, individualism/conformity, civilization/savagery. However, the viewers are presented with evidence that complicates, breaks down these binaries, and suggests that life is simply not so clear-cut: not all who appear male may be male; heroes are not as clearly cut as they appear; civilization can be savage. By opening the door to a more complicated landscape, viewers are being challenged to look beyond the binaries and accept the ambiguity that comes with our postmodern society. Yet the filmmakers do not push things too far: the audience is not expected to accept Brandon completely as The Hero of the film. His death at the conclusion allows the audience to come to their conclusions—be it mourning the tragedy or saying he brought it on himself—to make their own way, as it were, across this moral terrain.

Frontiers are counter to the binaries of nature and culture, wilderness and civilization, space and place. To be a frontier implies being an area of transition from one state to another, a form of gray zone without absolutes. John and Tom, for example, police these boundaries in a landscape that is essentially without borders. While space can be associated with masculinity and

wilderness, and place with femininity and civilization, frontiers or borderlands break with these binaries. They are all and neither, allowing for exploration, both the thrill of new territory and the threat of the unknown. No binaries in the West; no fences on the frontier.

Brandon is the character who truly crosses frontiers. William Cronon, writing of wilderness as frontier, ties this together: "Seen as the bold landscape of frontier heroism, it is the place of youth and childhood, into which men escape by abandoning their pasts and entering a world of freedom where the constraints of civilization fade into memory" (Cronon 1995, 79). Brandon, just 20 years old, escapes Lincoln and finds Falls City a location where he can be who he perceives himself to be and creates a place for himself. He wants to stay in Falls City, care for his loved one, and aid in the transformation of the landscape. While he appears to be a civilized man, in actions and intentions, visually he is repeatedly tied to the cowboy, again challenging the binaries and representing frontier.

The Plains have long been associated with binaries—garden/desert, passage/barrier—but they have also been associated with gradients or transitions—elevation, precipitation, vegetation, settlement (Allen 1993; Harrington and Harmon 1991). In fact the landscape itself is one long transition. Perhaps we need to embrace the positives as well as negatives that come in our identification with frontier. If we view frontier to mean interface or transition zone, it transforms from a landscape of fear to one of opportunities and possibilities. Perhaps Brandon's death did not significantly change life in Falls City, but it has opened discussion outside of the academy and the medical community about transsexuality and gender identity, and about violence against those not fitting into neat categories.

The Plains today means more than just the stereotypical Plains landscape of earth and sky. It means living in a frontier zone that was really never closed, as much as the census and Turner closed it over 100 years ago. If the Plains are frontier, the interface between East and West in the United States, it is a pivotal region, the linchpin connecting our nation. We could argue whether or not European Americans ever truly adapted to life on the Plains, whether Plains settlement was one great environmental disaster or not, whether the frontier ever really closed. Whatever side of the fence we take, popular perceptions of the Plains endure via media portrayals. The Plains are once and forever a frontier.

## NOTES

1. Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters performed "Don't Fence Me In" for the film *Broadway Canteen* in 1944. The song became a tremendous hit.

2. In approaching this essay, I found three volumes to be particularly useful: S. Aitken and L. Zonn, eds., *Place, Power, Situation and Spectacle: A Geography of Film* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994); J. Kitses and G. Rickman, eds., *The Western Reader* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998); and J. Walker, ed., *Westerns: Films Through History* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

3. This is arguably so even when Westerns are filmed in Spain and star Italian actors as in Sergio Leone's so-called spaghetti Westerns.

4. The American public has long been familiar with the Western landscape, introduced to its topography from descriptions in the popular press, by the publicized work of artists such as Albert Bierstadt, and by the work of expedition artists and photographers such as Thomas Moran or William Henry Jackson (Buscombe 1998, 116-118; Abel 1998, 78).

5. Buscombe in "Inventing Monument Valley" cites a French study that mapped the settings of 411 Westerns as well as the actual location where the Westerns were made. The study found that the settings were heavily weighted toward the Southwest, including Texas and New Mexico. In terms of actual locations, the Southwest again dominated, although very few were filmed in Texas or New Mexico (Utah or Arizona stood in) (Buscombe 1998, 119).

6. Emphasis is Walker's own.

7. There is a great play on these masculine ideals in Clint Eastwood's postmodern Western *Unforgiven* (1992), where all the men are given their weaknesses: "Will's falling off his horse, the Kid's near blindness, the Sheriff's diabolical carpentry," and ultimately, the trigger to the film's events, the prostitute's client's "teensy little pecker" (Thumin 1998, 344-5).

8. The elevated gaze, tracing "a visual trajectory from the uplands to a scenic panorama below," has been termed the magisterial gaze, signifying mastery over the land (Boime 1991, 1).

9. See also Jane Tompkins' discussion of Western heroes and the feminization of landscape in "Landscape: The Language of the Western," in L. Engel, ed., *The Big Empty: Essays on Western Landscapes as Narrative* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), especially pages 295-299. While acknowledging Western fiction's feminization of landscape and its suggestions of maternal solace and/or sexual relief in wilderness, Tompkins argues the cowboy is actually closer to a desert monk, testing their spirit in the wilderness.

10. Native American women are traditionally viewed in art and letters as part of the natural landscape. Hispanic women are fixtures in Western films and part of the frontier landscape.

11. Joni Kinsey's work has contributed significantly to our understanding of the Plains. See her *Plain Pictures: Images of the American Prairie* (Washington: University of Iowa Museum of Art by the Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996). As for work addressing the Plains on film, see David Wishart's essay on "Film" in *The Encyclopedia of the Great Plains* (2004) and Ronald Wilson's essay on "Film and Theater" in *The Great Plains Region: The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Regional Culture* (2004).

12. From [http://www.nebraska.edu/news/news\\_campaign.shtml](http://www.nebraska.edu/news/news_campaign.shtml), accessed 1 July 2005.

13. *The Laramie Project* (2002) was based on the actual 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming.

14. I will be referring to Teena Brandon as Brandon Teena and as "he" throughout the essay. Throughout *Boys Don't Cry*, Brandon identifies *himself* as Brandon Teena and as a man.

15. In the actual murder, three people died—Brandon, a woman friend (renamed Candace in the film), and a young black man named Philip Devine (Brody 2002). Devine was Lana's sister's boyfriend. It is unclear why the filmmakers erased Devine but his presence would have certainly complicated the story.

16. Ironically, to be "fully" male, Brandon would have to undergo "cutting"—gender reassignment surgery.

17. A recent *New York Times* article (March 4, 2005, page A11) describes "a new political frontier: the campaign to make sure that transgender people . . . can use bathrooms without fear of harassment." This topic has also been addressed in Kath Browne's "Genderism and the Bathroom Problem: (Re)materializing Sexed Sites, (Re)creating Sexed Bodies" *Gender, Place, and Culture* 11: 3 (Sept. 2004): 331–346.

18. For the record, *In Cold Blood* is set in Kansas, *Badlands* in South Dakota, and *The Laramie Project* in Wyoming.

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