

**The Frontier as Masculine Territory:  
Sam Hawken's *The Dead Women of Juárez* in Context**

M. Isabel Santaularia i Capdevila  
University of Lleida, Spain

**Abstract**

Contemporary adventure narratives—from westerns and war stories to thrillers and hard-boiled detective fictions—still insistently activate the myth of the frontier, which is offered as a space where men can achieve regeneration and a sense of purpose by indulging a form of masculinity based on violence and aggression. Increasingly, however, the frontier emerges as just a temporary respite and the violence of the protagonists ends up being self-destructive. Sam Hawken's *The Dead Women of Juárez* (2011), a crime story situated on the US–Mexico border, is a case in point since the novel reveals the sterility of a myth that transports men to nostalgic spaces and past forms of masculinity rather than compel them to adjust to redefinitions of masculinity based on the incorporation of new (feminine) attributes. In this paper I analyse Hawken's *The Dead Women of Juárez* alongside other contemporary texts which, like Hawken's novel, locate the male protagonists in frontier scenarios, such as the television series *The Shield* (Fox 2002–2008), *Deadwood* (HBO 2004–2006), *Jericho* (CBS 2006–2008), *Breaking Bad* (AMC 2008–2013), *Dexter* (Showtime 2006–2013) and *Fargo* (FX 2014–). I argue that, in spite of their deconstruction of the frontier ethos and associated forms of masculine behaviour, they do not contemplate an alternative form of heroic masculinity in a culture in which the lonesome cowboy is still a national icon.

**Keywords:** Sam Hawken, *The Dead Women of Juárez*, contemporary American television series, western, the myth of the frontier, masculinity

## Introduction: The American Frontier and Masculinity

Sam Hawken's *The Dead Women of Juárez* (2011) is the author's first novel in a series situated on the US–Mexico border, which comprises *Tequila Sunset* (2012), *Juárez Dance* (2013), *La Frontera* (2013) and *Missing* (2014). Explicitly written to shine a light on the *feminicidios* that take place in Ciudad Juárez and to bring them to public attention, the novel focuses on the attempt by the American protagonist, the boxer Kelly Courtier, to rebuild his life in Mexico after his boxing career in the States fails because of his addiction to drugs, as well as on Kelly's involvement in an investigation into the disappearance and murder of his Mexican girlfriend Paloma Salazar in Ciudad Juárez. Located in one of the United States' 'new frontiers' along the Mexican–US border, *The Dead Women of Juárez* is a crime novel that contains the tropes that have attained mythic status in our understanding of the American West and which "have become embedded in western consciousness" (McGilchrist 2010: 119), perpetuated as they are through endless dime novels and western films. Namely, the novel portrays: a frontier location, the liminal Ciudad Juárez, which marks the divide between the 'civilised north' and the chaos and anarchy south of the border, aggravated by the wars waged between cartels and the federal police; the lone man, Kelly Courtier, who uses violence—in his case, his skills as a boxer—to regenerate himself and find a sense of purpose after his life disintegrates in the States; invisible, long-suffering, passive women—in the novel, the titular dead women of Juárez and their afflicted mothers and sisters; and the inevitably dark-skinned adversarial Other, in the novel embodied in Ciudad Juárez as a whole, ridden with chaos, corruption and lawlessness, and Mexicans in general, presented as openly hostile to the presence of white men seen as either imperialists taking advantage of Mexican resources and labour or as recreational tourists looking for cheap drugs and sex.

With its Ciudad Juárez–El Paso borderline scenario and the western ingredients mentioned above, Sam Hawken's novel paints a geography which presents the characteristics of America's foundational frontier, a harsh and inhospitable territory which required intrepid pioneers to rise to the occasion and approach dangers with bravery and determination. The frontier—as formulated by Theodore Roosevelt in his multivolume *The Winning of the West* (1889–96) and, above all, by Frederick J. Turner in his essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" delivered at the American Historical Association meeting in Chicago in 1893—was, in fact, essential for the creation of the nation and the formation of the American character. In their texts, Turner and Roosevelt justified the logic of westward advance as an exciting and patriotic endeavour devised to fulfil the nation's 'Manifest Destiny', that is, "the God-given right of the 'American People' to claim the North American continent" (Baker 2008: 127) and their duty to bring democracy to lands swamped in savagery and barbarism.

Turner and Roosevelt also associated the American character with the values of the frontier, which, as critics such as Jane Tompkins, Sara Spurgeon, Brian Baker and David Rio have argued, not only masked "the reality of invasion, conquest and colonialism that made possible the European settlement of the Americas" (Tompkins 1992: 4), but were also gendered, equating American-ness with the attributes of the hardy, sturdy, harsh and individualistic (male) pioneer or the frontiersman. Thus, the American frontier was constructed as a masculine arena where men could pursue their exploits unencumbered by domestic codes of conduct or by feminine interference, and the 'true American'—as Leslie E. Fiedler described him in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1967)—became "the man in the wilderness, far from the sinister corruption of the civilised world" and "rising to extraordinariness, setting [his] jaws and walking into danger" (Mead 2010: 58). The (masculine/ist) frontier ethos, therefore, was forged in, and helped advance, the belief that rugged terrains could turn ordinary American men into heroes, and the adventure yarns produced subsequently, from westerns and frontier narratives to war stories, as well as, by extension, thrillers and hardboiled detective fictions,

were committed to the re-inscription of a dominant ideal of masculinity personified in the figure and the qualities of the lonesome cowboy finding regeneration through violence, a premise discussed by Richard Slotkin in his eponymous study.

The frontier ethos and its ideological foundations were brought to critical scrutiny after the Vietnam War. The conflict was promoted using frontier rhetoric which the citizenry received from political speeches delivered by the President, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, himself fashioned as a war hero and a new frontiersman, as well as “from fanciful heroic portrayals of the West on television and film” (McGilchrist 2010: 26). As a consequence, “the war in Vietnam received much of its ideological justification from the idea of the ‘Old West’ and the myth of the frontier” (ibid: 26). However, the myth proved unable to mask the ugliness of the conflict as “[t]he climbing death toll and the planeloads of body bags” (Owens 2000: 31) containing the bodies of young American men, the revelations of massacres of innocent civilians and the images of burning villages forced a re-appraisal of events that had been seen as heroic in the past. Thus, as John Hellman writes, the Vietnam War was “the destruction, not of America, but of the myth which gave it life and in which Americans once believed” (1986: 110). The erosion of the myth of the frontier led to a disclosure of the agenda behind the country’s ‘Manifest Destiny’, revealed to stand for crass imperialism. It also necessarily involved a re-evaluation of the dominant form of aggressive masculinity that achieved heroic status through violence and adventurous forays into the wilderness. Other social developments in the sixties and seventies, such as the rise of feminism, the civil rights movement, and the pacifist and environmentalist doctrines spearheaded by the hippie and other lower-profile youth movements, further undermined the cultural orthodoxies of the times and brought the white-frontiersman model of masculinity and the myth that had spawned it to a spiralling downfall.

This assault on the frontiersman ethos that set the standards for hegemonic masculinity has resulted, allegedly since the nineties and still nowadays, in a crisis of masculinity among certain groups of men since they feel they have been deprived of the traditional referents of masculinity they looked up to for self-definition, as well as of the avenues of self-realisation they relied on to achieve a sense of importance and authority over Others, be it women or ‘other’ races or sexualities, or so authors such as Arthur Brittan, Anthony Clare, Susan Faludi and Michael Kimmel claim.<sup>1</sup> While this crisis may not be all-encompassing, widespread or, for that matter, new,<sup>2</sup> the truth is that, in the last decades, there have been significant social transformations that have profoundly affected the lives of contemporary Western men—who are no longer supposed to adhere to a stoic and aggressive form of masculinity as defined, for example, by Feigen Fasteau in *The Male Machine* (1974), or to expect their historical superiority to go unchallenged. As Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank J. Barrett explain, “never in history have men been so subject to question, media scrutiny and critically informed scholarship” (2006: 9).

Many critics and commentators locate the origins of this supposed crisis in external factors, such as the diminishing value of the physical, labouring male body in a technologised and bureaucratised society, a prevalent social and cultural disapproval of traditional displays of masculinity, and women’s triumphant assaults on male citadels of privilege that have resulted in a postfeminist society which has experienced a veritable ‘genderquake’, the idea popularised by Naomi Wolf that “the white male elite has lost its authority and is in the throes of losing

---

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Brittan, for example, wrote about men in crisis in the following terms: “Everywhere there are casualties, everywhere men are nursing their bruised egos, everywhere the course is littered with the debris of their unresolved sexual conflicts. [...] Now all we can see is the spectacle of countless millions of men experiencing acute gender anxieties. Something has gone badly wrong in the male psyche” (1989: 27).

<sup>2</sup> In 1987, for instance, Michael S. Kimmel explored the crisis of masculinity in history in his article “The Contemporary ‘Crisis’ of Masculinity in Historical Perspective”.

power” (Whelehan 2000: 5).<sup>3</sup> However, and, in my opinion, more pertinently, critics such as Faludi and Kimmel blame the anxiety, and concomitant anger, they observe in contemporary American men on their internalisation of dated notions of entitlement, privilege and authority based on the blueprint of the “time-tested tenets of what might be called the national male paradigm” (Faludi 2000: 26) associated with the iconic figure of the frontiersman and with the creed that to the (white American) man belongs the right to possess and conquer other territories and peoples. That it is manly to be surly, hostile and violent is an attitude which Faludi calls “the new desperado mandate” (ibid: 37). Norman Mailer described such an attitude as early as 1963 in the following terms:

[I]t was almost as if there were no peace unless one could fight well, kill well (if always with honour), love well and love many, be cool, be daring, be clashing, be wild, be wily, be resourceful, be a brave gun. And this myth, that each of us was born to be free, to wander, to have adventure and to grow on the waves of the violent, the perfumed, and the unexpected, had a force which could not be tamed. (qtd. in Faludi 2000: 37)

According to Faludi, in our contemporary ethos this ‘desperado mandate’ has become merely a matter of cosmetics, a posture with no social responsibility attached to it in a context in which men have lost “a useful role in public life, a way of earning a decent and reliable living, appreciation in the home, respectful treatment in the culture” (2000: 40). Also, as Kimmel argues, under more egalitarian conditions, white men cannot expect that their sex and race will automatically grant them pre-eminence in society. These situations, Faludi and Kimmel claim, have translated into legions of angry white men who feel beleaguered, cheated of their birthright, which promised them ascendancy simply because they were white and male, and, as a consequence, “a lot of men seem to believe that their only alternative is to draw the wagons into a circle, hoping that a reassertion of traditional ideologies of masculinity—and a return to the exclusion of ‘others’ from the competitive marketplace—will somehow resolve their present malaise” (Kimmel 2015: 10). Even though contemporary conditions call for re-adjustments of masculinity and for a degree of adaptability to new forms of being a man, the sense of powerlessness experienced by many men is often still countered by retreatism into heroic patterns of behaviour. In fact, the image of the western heroic man is “re-invoked, again and again, as a symbol of America’s rightness, goodness, honourableness, and manliness” (McGilchrist 2010: 37) in the media, in popular narratives and even in the discourse of politicians to justify military intervention abroad, especially after 9/11. Thus, traditional western mythology “still has a hold on the public imagination” (Rio 2014: 23) and survives as a means to legitimate violence in contemporary America, as Richard Slotkin explains in *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (1992). The frontier and the wilderness, in turn, are still conjured up as loci of stable identity for alienated, anxious and angry white men that want to escape the conditions of modern life and the pressures and demands of domesticity. As Jane Tompkins explains:

The West [as well as the frontier/wilderness] functions as a symbol of freedom, and of the opportunity for conquest. It seems to offer escape from the conditions of life in modern industrial society: from a mechanised existence, economic dead-ends, social entanglements, unhappy personal relations, political

---

<sup>3</sup> Even though the gains of feminism cannot be denied and women have advantages they did not enjoy in the past, at least in our Western world, it does not mean that women have achieved equality with men in all areas of their lives. Also, popular media still disseminates sexist images of women, as well as the idea that the home is women’s rightful sphere of action, a situation which critics such as Imelda Whelehan, Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters, Susan J. Douglas, and Diane Negra refer to in terms such as retro-sexism (Whelehan), the postfeminist mystique (Munford and Waters), enlightened sexism (Douglas) and retreatism (Negra).

injustice. The desire to change places also signals a powerful need for self-transformation [...]—[...] a translation of the self into something purer and more authentic, more intense, more real. (1992: 4)

Popular narratives often resort to frontier scenarios, against the backdrop of which angry white men expect to regain a sense of manliness through violence, or which are used as escape routes where they will find alternatives to oppressive domestic conditions, alienating working environments or the repercussions of the law. Examples abound among contemporary television series. The actual historical frontier is reproduced in the series *Deadwood* (HBO 2004–2006), in which the Deadwood encampment is presented, at the beginning of the series, as a dreamscape where men can start anew unencumbered by their pasts and devote their lives to prospecting for gold and spending the money they earn on women, gambling and alcohol. In *Jericho* (CBS 2006–2008), a series of nuclear explosions that destroy the major cities in the United States returns the Jericho community to a pre-technological past which resonates with western iconography. This lapse into the past precipitated by the destruction of contemporary society guarantees a reinstatement of men in their traditional roles as masters and commanders and allows them to exercise a form of masculinity based on inborn ingenuity, physicality, aggression and manual work. Characters such as Vic Mackey (Michael Chiklis) and Walter White (Bryan Cranston) from *The Shield* (Fox 2002–2008) and *Breaking Bad* (AMC 2008–2013), respectively, are modern-day cowboys who are not above breaking the law and who operate in the frontier-like ganglands of Los Angeles, in the case of Vic, and the New Mexico–Mexico borderlands and desert, in the case of Walter. In both series, the protagonists ‘break bad’ to make money to provide for their families, but they increasingly get lost in their bad-boy roles, which they prefer to the alternative of home and their demanding and asphyxiating wives and children. In the context of the frozen desolation of rural Minnesota in the television series *Fargo* (FX 2014–), meek, henpecked and insignificant men go feral through their association with outlaws and desperados, who plunge them into lives of violence, murder and, also, excitement. And to mention one last example, the serial killer Dexter (Michael C. Hall) in the eponymous series (Showtime 2006–2013) escapes his cosmopolitan Miami life and settles in an unspecified lumberjack location up north after almost exchanging his murderous instincts for a contented life as a loving husband and father.

### **The Frontier and Masculinity in *The Dead Women of Juárez***

The frontier city of Ciudad Juárez, as stated, is the chosen setting for Sam Hawken’s troubled protagonist, Kelly Courtier, to start anew and leave behind his past after being involved in a hit-and-run accident in which he killed a boy riding a bicycle while driving under the influence of drugs. However, the frontier fails to deliver, as the myth promises, any form of regeneration for the protagonist, and while Hawken resorts to the iconography and thematic patterns of the western, he ultimately critiques the ideology that accompanied it and gave it power, including the implication that aggression necessarily grants control over the environment and that the exercise of violence will restore men to positions of authority and privilege.

Ciudad Juárez in the novel has elements of the traditional western enclaves found in numerous classical and revisionist westerns or in related genres set in contemporary Mexico, such as Robert Rodriguez’s films *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996) and his ‘Mariachi’ trilogy—*El Mariachi* (1992), *Desperado* (1995) and *Once upon a Time in Mexico* (2003). It is a city of seedy bars and saloons, like *La Posada del Indio*, which, in spite of its name, is not an inn and “barely a saloon” with its “tiny stage for a single dancing girl, a compact bar with two men doubling as bartenders and pimps, plus a dozen tables around which girls constantly [circulate]” (2011: 16). In tourist districts “jammed with gringos” (ibid: 39), there are shabby strip clubs and brothels, with hookers “on all the corners, standing alone or in clusters” (ibid: 39). Away from the tourist spots, streets are dusty and cars, trucks and the few pedestrians who

dare to walk outside bake in the sun in areas where “apartments and businesses freely [mix] in a dingy clustering of old buildings stained by age and little upkeep” (ibid: 282). There are prisons described as “dark and filthy and terrible” (ibid: 218); decrepit and brutal *palenques*, where cock and dog fights take place, situated in neighbourhoods that “[rot] into the desert flats” (ibid: 68); and the *colonias* at “the porous boundary between Ciudad Juárez and the sun-bleached wild beyond” (ibid: 96). These *colonias* are sprawls of “shanties built from scrap wood and corrugated aluminium” situated where “the streetlights and paving [end]” in a broken landscape of “dirt, sand and a few water-starved trees” (ibid: 96). The *colonias* are dangerous—one of the protagonists recalls a uniformed policeman he knew was “beaten or stabbed patrolling the *colonias* or collecting statements for some crime or the other” (ibid: 187)—as is the whole of Ciudad Juárez, at siege ever since “the Sinaloa cartel came to the city” (ibid: 173) and the war between the cartels and the federal police started. As a consequence, in different parts of the city, the landscape changes from western-like to resembling a war zone with barbed wire, barricades and jeeps mounted with heavy machine guns, where policemen chase “the bad men with AK-47s and rocket launchers” (ibid: 191). The presence of “bloodthirsty” (ibid: 12), “hardcore” (ibid: 15) *traficantes* also means that, even though the number of policemen in the city has multiplied, the law is less enforced. The police are so busy trying to contain the cartels that other crimes go undetected, and, when so many people are dying because of the drug wars, brutal interrogation practices and police corruption are waved away as insignificant.

Although the actual demarcation between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso is difficult to spot because the two seem “washed together along the banks of the Rio Grande in the wake of a flood” (ibid: 159), they are distinct territories at opposite ends of the law-and-order spectrum. In El Paso, the law is operative and justice works. In Ciudad Juárez, chaos, anarchy and corruption rule, so the city is the perfect hide-out for Kelly, where he can escape the consequences of his crime in El Paso. In Ciudad Juárez, he makes a living by participating in shady boxing fights and selling soft drugs to tourists with his Mexican friend Estéban Salazar, with whom he establishes a homosocial bond based on true friendship, unwavering loyalty and mutual respect. His relationship with Estéban’s sister, Paloma, also means that Kelly has access to wild sex. Stereotypically, Paloma—described as “not beautiful”, with her “wide hips and a full body that stupid men up north would call chunky” (2011: 19)—is sexually uninhibited, making sure Kelly has his fair share of satisfaction as well—when she gives him a blowjob, her grip on his member is “tight, insistent and her mouth [...] searing” and when he “[comes], she swallow[s]” (ibid: 21). His stint in Ciudad Juárez and his relationship with both Estéban and Paloma have positive, revitalising effects on Kelly, who decides to give up hard drugs for good, exercise to be on top form and stop participating in fights in which he is simply used as a punch-bag, paired with healthier, younger and fitter Mexican fighters for the entertainment of crowds who enjoy seeing a gringo bleed. When he is made an offer to take part in illegal bare-knuckle fights, he is adamant he is now fit and healthy and will not consent to be used as a sacrificial lamb, so he tells the man who offers him the deal, “Goddammit, you little son of a bitch. [...] You want to fight with me? I don’t give a shit how many guys you got with you, I’ll tear you a new asshole! [...] You find somebody else to bleed for you” (ibid: 73).

Kelly embraces Ciudad Juárez in spite of, or maybe because of, its flaws since, like other frontier heroes, he finds its wilderness freeing and invigorating. He is described as having a “wandering spirit” and “not afraid to go where other Americans never went. At first [...] because he was still in the grip of an addiction, but eventually because he [developed] a taste for the city and its people” (ibid: 168). Furthermore, when Paloma disappears and is found murdered, Kelly is given the opportunity to stand tall and put his honed boxing skills and appetite for what he considers noble fights to good use in order to avenge her.

Indeed, Ciudad Juárez is a space where women disappear, literally, in this case, because of the *feminicidios*. Women are murdered in their hundreds, “all certainly gone and gone forever”

(ibid: 22), and those who are still alive have all lost somebody and are grieving. While Hawken's intention is to condemn the situation, he perforce presents women as victims that need to be rescued or avenged, so the novel re-enacts the classical western scenario in which women figured largely as vulnerable maidens. In a further similarity to classical westerns, women in Ciudad Juárez have no agency since they are unable to bring the *feminicidios* to public notice or to trigger a reaction from the authorities. It is not by chance that the group of women who work for a solution to the *feminicidios* are called *Mujeres Sin Voces* (Women without a Voice)—inspired by the real-life organization *Voces Sin Eco* (Voices without an Echo). Once a month, they dress in black and gather near the Paso del Norte International Bridge. They parade silently along rows of idling cars, carrying banners on sticks to remind “the *turistas* that while they come to Mexico for a party, women are dying” (ibid: 23). In spite of their efforts, the dead women of Juárez remain invisible since “the women in black [cannot] be everywhere, standing silent vigil, forcing the *feminicidios* to surface” (ibid: 202). Their actions are, further, mostly symbolic and do not entail actual investigations by the members of the group into the disappearances and murders; nor do they approach the police. With the drug wars, “everything else is pushed to the side” (ibid: 236), but, even before, the police did not listen since women are expendable in Mexico. The authorities see the murders more as an “embarrassment” than as a problem, so “it was almost a relief when the cartels started killing each other; it took the pressure off” (ibid: 154). All in all, the *Mujeres Sin Voces*, with their black veils framing their faces, become hollow and disembodied “artifact[s], [...] monument[s] to loss and pain” (ibid: 63), haunting the streets of Ciudad Juárez, their voices unheard.

In a context in which nobody cares about the *feminicidios*, and taking into account that Kelly is now personally affected by what happens in Ciudad Juárez, he seems to be fashioned to play the part of the angry avenger and rescuer of damsels in distress we find in so many Hollywood productions. He has the skills, the motivation and even the will. Before Paloma's murder, he did not really care about the *feminicidios*. If anything, he considered them a bother since they had the effect of putting Paloma, a member of *Mujeres Sin Voces*, into a dark mood. When he went jogging, “the numberless flyers demanding *justicia* fluttered as Kelly passed, as if trying to draw his attention away from the silly pursuits and into their world of the dead” (ibid: 32). But the flyers are such a fixture of the urban landscape in Ciudad Juárez that Kelly did not pay attention. Now that Paloma is gone, the flyers draw his eyes, “demanding *justicia*, *justicia*, *justicia* like every time before, but the faces [are] different because he [sees] them now” (ibid: 96). Paloma's murder took place while Kelly, having relapsed, was taking drugs and was lost “inside a needle and swimming in *chinaloa*”, or heroin (ibid: 104). Even if Paloma had called for him, he would have been beyond hearing it. Consequently, Kelly is devastated because of his failure to help her and he takes “his anger and fear and sorrow” to the fields of pink crosses that act as memorials for the women murder victims and prays for “*Justicia para Paloma*” (ibid: 103).

Kelly's anger, however, is wasted in sorrow, self-pity and alcohol. He spends the night after he finds out Paloma has been killed “in an alley sucking at the neck of a tequila bottle” and he feels “like a zombie”, “as dead as Paloma”, “bathed in sweat and reeking of shame” (ibid: 104, 106). To make things worse, he is arrested, accused of having murdered Paloma, and, though his heart races in anger, he feels “drained, not invigorated” (ibid: 111), he “tremble[s]”, cannot “breathe deeply” (ibid: 113) and cries. Once imprisoned, he is subjected to vicious torture to make him confess to the murder, so he spends the nights in prison hurting, his body so sore “his muscles [shriek]” (ibid: 136) when he moves, and he has to make an effort to urinate. He is also haunted by nightmares in which he sees the little boy he killed in the States or Paloma as she was found—raped, mutilated and burnt; he wakes up weeping or soaked in his own urine. His only act of resistance in prison is his refusal to confess to killing Paloma so that the police can close the case and conveniently put the blame on an American drug-fiend who is

not part of the community. His cell mate urges him to confess—“You think you are some kind of tough *hombre*? Believe me, you aren’t so tough as you think” (ibid: 136)—and warns him he will end up dead if he does not comply. Indeed, Kelly is not tough and, even though he is not ultimately killed, he ends up in a coma, hooked up to a respirator.

At this point, the novel subverts the plotline of the classical western since the hero is incapacitated and ousted from the narrative. It also departs from post-classical westerns such as *The Shootist* (Don Siegel, 1976) or *Unforgiven* (Clint Eastwood, 1992). Even though, as Brian Baker explains (2008:133–143), they subvert parts of the Turner myth since their heroes do not nostalgically favour the individual ethos of the frontiersman and do not disavow progress, which they help to advance, in these stories the heroes still resort to violence to right wrongs and avenge injustice. Thus, like their classical counterparts, revisionist westerns still encode “[a] kind of martial or violent masculinity [...] as central to the mythic narrative of the frontier” (ibid: 128).

Hawken’s novel also challenges the Hollywood habits and formulae that apply to the action hero, on whom is systematically inflicted a large number of traumas as part of a process that involves destruction, re-emergence and regeneration. As Susan Jeffords, Yvonne Tasker, Ina Rae Hark and Richard Dyer have pointed out, the suffering white male body as spectacle is part of a tradition spanning centuries of Christian iconography. In action narratives, as in the story of Christ’s ascent after crucifixion, the representation of men in agony is seldom defeatist. The emphasis lies not on pain, but on endurance and resistance, as exemplified in the action films of the eighties and nineties, in which the apparently invincible bodies of Sylvester Stallone, Bruce Willis or Arnold Schwarzenegger are constantly lacerated; yet they always overcome their injuries and go back, with a vengeance, to their mission.

Paul Smith in his article “Eastwood Bound” explains the pleasure and discursive implications of what he calls “the masochistic moment” using Freud’s psychoanalysis. He argues that the pleasure of masochism is not to be found when physical pain is being inflicted, but is rather a deferred pleasure experienced when men regain the power that the masochistic moment deprived them of. According to Smith, therefore, the humiliating lessons of masochism “do not last, they come and are gone, forgotten as part of the subject’s history of struggle in learning how to triumphantly reach symbolic empowerment” (1995: 91). In Smith’s interpretation, the pleasure we obtain from the spectacle of white males going through hell, malaise and abasement is that of seeing them, reptile-like, regenerate their potent bodies, regain control of their lives and of the narrative action, and re-assert their positions of authority and power through a re-activation of their skills in violence.

In the case of Kelly, no such re-empowerment after torment occurs. He is not only banished from the narrative: if he ever wakes up from his coma, he will be maimed for life. Finally, he is superseded by other men who decide to investigate Paloma’s murder and the other deaths and disappearances of women in Ciudad Juárez. Significantly, they are Mexican: Rafael Sevilla, an old state policeman who has been following Kelly, hoping he would lead him to bigger drug dealers, and who wants to help Kelly because he thinks he is innocent; and Enrique Palencia, a young local officer, who is revolted by his chief’s—Oscar Garcia, also known as *La Bestia*—use of torture to obtain confessions from innocent suspects. Enrique is described as “either a fool or a romantic” (Hawken 2011: 163) because he still has a conscience and wants to do what he thinks is right, so he decides to help Sevilla in his quest for justice. Sevilla is not, at least at the beginning, the prototypical tough and cynical detective in the hard-boiled tradition. The only point in common he has with the hardboiled detective is that he has to operate outside the official line since his job as a state policeman in charge of stopping the drug wars in Ciudad Juárez precludes him from the investigations into the *feminicidios*, conducted by the local police. Sevilla comes from “a time before the black-clad army of federal police and the barbed wire and the ramparts of concrete steel” (ibid: 191). He is also old, and a drunk

ever since his daughter and granddaughter disappeared and his wife committed suicide. Consequently, he does not belong to the new and dangerous Ciudad Juárez; he is a “ghost [in his own department] passing through [...] the halls from investigation to investigation [...] though it [is] well past his time” (ibid: 266). His energy fails intermittently when he feels overwhelmed by sorrow for his loss and by shame for not having been able to find justice for his daughter and granddaughter, but he is committed and makes good on a pledge to one of the *Mujeres Sin Voces*: “When the time comes I’ll be sure you have a voice. You’ll tell everyone. They will listen” (ibid: 227). Even though he is beaten up once during his investigation, he does not relent and finds out who is behind Paloma’s death: a rich Mexican, Rafa Madrigal, who uses his own son to kidnap women and bring them to an old apartment building where Madrigal and other rich men rape, kill and discard them. Oscar Garcia, *La Bestia*, knows about this and turns a blind eye in exchange for bribes. When Paloma began to suspect Madrigal could be involved, he had her killed. At the end of the novel, Sevilla charges into the apartment building and shoots both Garcia and Madrigal. After that, trembling, crying and hurting physically, he is taken to hospital, where he goes to see Kelly, who has just awoken from his coma, and comforts him when he cries.

Kelly’s expulsion from the action invalidates the idea that it is the role of the white man to intervene in areas regarded as conflict zones which have to be sorted out and ‘normalised’ into democratic and civil societies. Sevilla explains that, in Juárez, “we are always looking for *el extranjero*, the monster we have never seen before who will do us harm, but we hurt ourselves so well [...] we don’t need strangers. We are a city of dead women. We feed on our own” (ibid: 130). However, if Ciudad Juárez’s present malaise is caused by Mexicans, the narrative action also establishes that Mexicans themselves have to find solutions, since Americans are either unresponsive or unable to cure the ills afflicting the city, as is made evident by the fact that, in the novel, American individuals materialise solely as tourists who regard the city as a playground for indulging their craving for sex, drugs and booze and who stick to areas where they can satisfy these cravings. Consequently, they never see—or, rather, want to see—the real Ciudad Juárez of crime, violence, corruption and social disorder.

The novel also shows that the American authorities regard Ciudad Juárez as a contaminated zone that has to be contained—they warn prospective tourists about the dangers they may encounter there, namely “pickpockets and muggers and drug dealers and AIDS” (ibid: 38), and they subject travellers going north to practices that involve “drug-sniffing dogs and mirrors to look beneath frames and endless questions about where [they are] coming from and where [they intend] to go” (ibid: 268). Otherwise, they are only concerned about Ciudad Juárez if the drug wars affect the *maquiladoras* turning out “everything from tote bags to engine parts, mostly for American companies” (ibid: 11). Through the description of how the *maquiladoras* operate, paying criminal wages for hard and boring labour, the true nature of America’s interventionist policies is revealed for what it is, an economic endeavour fueled by greed which, admittedly, guarantees everyone in Ciudad Juárez a job but does not have any effect on the whole country, where people “[get] poorer and living conditions [rot] away with them” (ibid: 11).

Kelly is not associated with the abuse and oppression that the American tourists and the *maquiladoras* denote for Mexicans. Furthermore, he considers Ciudad Juárez his home and finds its harshness re-energising at the beginning. Nevertheless, his whiteness disqualifies him from being fully incorporated into Mexico, so he remains an “outsider” (ibid: 158). His exclusion from the narrative halfway through the story and his replacement by Mexican investigators, therefore, points at a critique of the idea that it is America’s ‘Manifest Destiny’ to intervene in problem zones and make them better, something the novel suggests is only set in motion if American economic interests are endangered. Further, however, Kelly’s narrative eviction and his inability to re-surface after his physical ordeal are significant in terms of

gender, since Hawken not only denies his protagonist the rebirth that follows torment and debasement in so many westerns and other traditionally male-centred genres, he also invalidates the frontier and the wilderness as liberating provinces where white men can test their manly attributes of aggression and domination. In the inimical world of the frontier, the hero has to defeat adversity to become a ‘real man’; he has to “fight to defend the innocent from villainous outlaws, fight off the attacks by indigenous tribes, subdue the harsh wilderness and bring it under human control” (Adams 2015: 170). In Hawken’s novel, instead, the frontier defeats Kelly, swallows him up and ultimately spits him out, broken and paralysed. Hawken, in fact, describes Ciudad Juárez, as a “hard wind off the desert” which “cut[s] stone and slice[s] away the soft parts of a man until there [is] nothing but sharp edges and an underlying brittleness that an unexpected blow [can] shatter” (2011: 168). Indeed, Kelly’s incursion into the wilderness of Ciudad Juárez delivers such a blow, and his re-hardened body is shattered as a result.

### Conclusion: The Defeating Frontier

Kelly’s destruction, paralysis and removal from the frontier result from personal flaws, but his incapacitation has wider implications if we take into account the fact that there are many other texts that confront men with the wilderness/frontier just to have them beaten by it, even when, unlike Kelly, they do actually fight, which suggests that, in the end, the violent masculinity connected with the frontier is nothing but destructive. If we consider the television series mentioned before, the pattern is quite consistent. In *Deadwood*, Wild Bill Hickok (Keith Carradine) is the prototypical western gunman hero who used to shoot his way into celebrity and recognition, but he is aged, ailing and supernumerary; his death in the series does not just respond to historical facts, but acts as a prelude to the demise of old forms of masculinity that have to be replaced by newer, more adaptable types as civilisation finally overtakes the Deadwood community. The law also catches up with Vic Mackey in *The Shield* and Walter White in *Breaking Bad*: Vic is not imprisoned because of his crimes but he ends up caged in, anyway, relegated to office work in an asphyxiating cubicle; Walter is hit by a stray bullet from his own contraption while protecting his erstwhile partner, Jesse, in the final shootout. Two of the protagonists of *Fargo*’s second season follow Vic and Walter’s fate: Ed Blumquist (Jesse Plemons) is killed during a shootout; Mike Milligan (Bokeem Woodbine) ends his days in an office. Both had adopted violence as a way of life: Milligan to go up the ladder in the criminal organisation he works for, and Blumquist, prompted by his wife, to escape the routine and stagnation of small-town life. In *Dexter*, the protagonist is granted a frontier scenario to end his days, but it is a self-inflicted exile because he thinks his murderous instincts will destroy his lover and son if he continues with them; he is already responsible for his sister’s death.<sup>4</sup>

In the stories considered in this article, to conclude, the violence of the frontier hero is self-defeating and, rather than regeneration, the adherents of the myth barely achieve survival. While contemporary narratives like *The Dead Women of Juárez* may still nostalgically recreate

---

<sup>4</sup>*Jericho* does not challenge the frontier myth, presenting as it does a masculinist ethos where men can regain a sense of power through the exercise of violence. Interestingly, its dystopian point of departure leads to an imagining of a utopian community that can start anew in a pre-technological, pre-capitalist world. Consequently, it is the only series among those considered here that departs from realist portrayals of past and present times and conjures up a whimsical future society in which men and women adopt traditional gender roles and patriarchal values. This does not mean that the series does not contemplate the negative effects of violence: indeed, the patriarch and leader of the Jericho community, Johnston Green (Gerald McRaney), is killed as a result of post-apocalyptic violence. Admittedly, the Jericho men do not abhor violence after Johnston’s death but, at least, the logic of revenge is progressively undermined as Johnston’s sons learn that, if things are to work better for the Jericho community, they have to rely on cooperation rather than on anger.

the myth of the frontier and its promise of regeneration through violence, they expose the fact that the aggression required to inhabit the myth will, at best, merely grant crisis-ridden white men a short respite from what they regard as the asphyxiating constraints of present life, but will not guarantee salvation in the long run. Even though this destruction-by-frontier plot in Hawken's novel and other frontier stories entails a critique of a hegemonic form of violent masculinity, these narratives do not attempt to re-write masculinity in order to accommodate soft spots in the hero's armour. However, at any rate, they address the sterility and devastating potential of a myth that transports men to nostalgic spaces and past forms of masculinity rather than compel them to confront the present and adapt in order to meet the challenges of new social conditions that demand redefinitions of masculinity based on the incorporation of new (feminine) attributes. Whether these 'New Men' can be fashioned as heroes in a culture in which the lonesome cowboy is still a national icon and a prototype of heroic masculinity is yet unclear.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, at least, texts like Hawken's *The Dead Women of Juárez* teach men who try to find relief in the wilderness, or their wilderness, to escape the asphyxia and alienation of contemporary times that myths ultimately "reach out of the past to cripple, incapacitate, or strike down the living" (Slotkin 1973: 5). Such men should learn from these texts and look into the future instead of doggedly seeking new frontiers to stage old forms of masculinity.

### **Acknowledgments**

The author wishes to acknowledge the support provided by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness for the writing of this article (Research Project FFI2013-45101-P).

---

<sup>5</sup> It is symptomatic that, in Hawken's novel, the white hero is superseded by a man of a different ethnic origin, Sevilla, but not by a different type of man. Sevilla, after all, has to resort to violence to avenge Paloma's death and find those responsible for her and other women's murders.

## References

- Adams, Jeffrey. 2015. *The Cinema of the Coen Brothers: Hardboiled Entertainments* (London and New York: Wallflower Press).
- Baker, Brian. 2008. *Masculinity in Fiction and Film: Representing Men in Popular Genres 1945–2000* (London and New York: Continuum).
- Breaking Bad*, created by Vince Gilligan (AMC 2008–2013).
- Brittan, Arthur. 1989. *Masculinity and Power* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell).
- Clare, Anthony. 2000. *On Men: Masculinity in Crisis* (London: Chatto & Windus).
- Deadwood*, created by David Milch (HBO 2004–2006).
- Desperado*, directed by Robert Rodriguez (Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1995).
- Dexter*, created by James Manos Jr. (Showtime 2006–2013).
- Douglas, Susan J. 2010. *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism: How Pop Culture Took Us from Girl Power to Girls Gone Wild* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin).
- Dyer, Richard. 1997. *White* (London and New York: Routledge).
- El Mariachi*, directed by Robert Rodriguez (Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1992).
- Faludi, Susan. 2000. *Stiffed: The Betrayal of Modern Man* (London: Vintage).
- Fargo*, created by Noah Hawley (FX 2014–).
- Fasteau, Mark Feigen. 1974. *The Male Machine* (New York: McGraw-Hill).
- Fiedler, Leslie A. 1967. *Love and Death in the American Novel* (London: Jonathan Cape).
- From Dusk Till Dawn*, directed by Robert Rodriguez (Dimension Films, 1996).
- Hark, Ina Rae. 1993. "Animals or Romans: Looking at Masculinity in *Spartacus*", in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, edited by Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London and New York: Routledge), pp. 151–173.
- Hawken, Sam. 2011. *The Dead Women of Juárez* (London: Serpent's Tail).
- . 2012. *Tequila Sunset* (London: Serpent's Tail).
- . 2013. *Juárez Dance* (Marston Gate: Pax River Books).
- . 2013. *La Frontera* (Paris and Dublin: Betimes Books).
- . 2014. *Missing* (London: Serpent's Tail).
- Hellman, John. 1986. *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Columbia University Press).
- Jeffords, Susan. 1994. *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press).
- Jericho*, created by Stephen Chobsky, Josh Schaer and Jonathan E. Steinberg (CBS 2006–2008).
- Kimmel, Michael. 1987. "The Contemporary 'Crisis' of Masculinity in Historical Perspective", in *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies*, ed. by Harry Brod (Boston: Allen & Unwin), pp. 121–153.
- . 2015. *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era* (New York: Nation Books).
- Mailer, Norman. 1963. *The Presidential Papers* (New York: Penguin).
- McGilchrist, Megan Riley. 2010. *The Western Landscape in Cormac McCarthy and Wallace Stegner: Myths of the Frontier* (New York and London: Routledge).
- Mead, John. 2010. "9/11, Manhood, Mourning, and the American Romance", in *Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture and the 'War on Terror'*, edited by Jeff Birkenstein, Anna Froula and Karen Randall (London and New York: Continuum), pp. 57–68.
- Munford, Rebecca, and Melanie Waters. 2014. *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Postfeminist Mystique* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris).
- Negra, Diane. 2009. *What a Girl Wants? Fantasising the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (London and New York: Routledge).

- Once upon a Time in Mexico*, directed by Robert Rodriguez (Columbia Pictures Corporation, 2003).
- Owens, Barclay. 2000. *Cormac McCarthy's Western Novels* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press).
- Rio, David. 2014. *New Literary Portraits of the American West: Contemporary Nevada Fiction* (Bern: Peter Lang).
- Roosevelt, Theodore. 1889–96/1995. *The Winning of the West* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press).
- Slotkin, Richard. 1973. *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600–1860* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press).
- . 1998. *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press).
- Smith, Paul. 1995. “Eastwood Bound”, in *Constructing Masculinity*, edited by Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis and Simon Watson (London and New York: Routledge), pp. 77–97.
- Spurgeon, Sara L. 2005. *Exploding the Western: Myths of Empire on the Postmodern Frontier* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press).
- Tasker, Yvonne. 1993. *Spectacular Bodies: Genre, Gender and the Action Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge).
- The Shield*, created by Shawn Ryan (Fox 2002–2008).
- The Shootist*, directed by Don Siegel (Paramount Pictures, 1976).
- Tompkins, Jane. 1992. *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- Turner, Frederick J. 1893/1963. *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (New York: Frederick Ungar).
- Unforgiven*, directed by Clint Eastwood (Warner Bros., 1992).
- Whelehan, Imelda. 2000. *Overloaded: Popular Culture and the Future of Feminism* (London: The Women's Press).
- Whitehead, Stephen M., and Frank J. Barrett. 2006. “The Sociology of Masculinity”, in *The Masculinities Reader*, edited by Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank J. Barrett (Cambridge: Polity), pp. 1–26.
- Wolf, Naomi. 1993. *Fire with Fire: New Female Power and How It Will Change the Twenty-First Century* (London: Chatto & Windus).

**Author contact email:** [isantaularia@dal.udl.cat](mailto:isantaularia@dal.udl.cat)