

## Towards a Politics of Failure: John Williams' *Stoner* (1965) and *Butcher's Crossing* (1960)

“Sometimes, immersed in his books, there would come to him the awareness of all that he did not know, of all that he had not read; and the serenity for which he labored was shattered as he realized the little time he had in life to read so much, to learn what he had to know.”  
(Williams, *Stoner* 25)

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**Abstract:** The recent rediscovery of the American novelist and academic John Williams (1922-1994) has seen an explosion of popular interest around two novels in particular: *Stoner* (1965) and *Butcher's Crossing* (1960). This article argues that, in these two works in particular, Williams establishes a distinct pedagogical position – a politics of failure – that proves philosophically pertinent to our contemporary condition. Both *Stoner* and *Butcher's Crossing* mark a powerful intervention in modern American fiction, shifting traditional notions of frontier heroism and post-war American triumphalism towards the experience and endurance of individual hardship, personal failure, and collective catastrophe. The article is split between equal treatments of the two narratives, biographical criticism, and reference to Williams' other work.

The recent rediscovery of the American novelist and academic John Williams (1922-1994) has seen an explosion of popular interest around two novels in particular: *Stoner* (1965) and *Butcher's Crossing* (1960).<sup>1</sup> This article will argue that, in these two novels in particular, Williams establishes a distinct pedagogical position—a politics of failure—that positions itself in stark opposition to traditional notions of frontier heroism, nation building, and post-war American triumphalism. Rather than cast a dismal light on US national development and

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foreign policy failure, this politics reveals how the experience and endurance of individual hardship, personal failure, and collective catastrophe can reveal largely ignored qualities of patience, forbearance, and fortitude.

A brief word on each: *Stoner* chronicles the life of William Stoner, born into a poor family in central Missouri at the turn of the twentieth-century. At the suggestion of a county agent, Stoner enters the University to study agriculture, but his experience of taking a survey course in English Literature, and hearing a professor give a reading of one of Shakespeare's sonnets, causes him to abandon his initial studies for the completion of a doctoral thesis and a career teaching literature. Stoner avoids combat in the First World War, marries early and disastrously, raises a daughter whom he loves but who is irrevocably damaged due to the environment created by his emotionally disturbed wife, has a brief but happy love affair which effectively ends any prospect of career advancement, and publishes one book in his lifetime.

The later novel follows William Andrews, a young Harvard student who leaves his city life in Boston to discover the great American West. Interested in the writings of Emerson, whom he once heard lecture, Andrews arrives at the frontier town of Butcher's Crossing, Kansas, tracks down John McDonald, a successful former friend of his father's who is selling buffalo hides, and joins a buffalo-hunting expedition with an experienced hunter named Miller. Miller claims he knows a part of the country in Colorado where large numbers of Buffalo reside. Andrews pay Miller \$600 to secure provisions and locate a skinner in the next town, named Schneider. The three are joined by Miller's assistant Charley Hodge, a taciturn alcoholic who regularly reads from an old Bible, and who had lost one of his hands to frostbite on a previous expedition with Miller. Often unaware of his surroundings and without the use of his right arm, Hodge is the portent of the expedition, registering dire consequences to come.

Williams has little interest in adding to the romance of the American West, remarking elsewhere that the subject had become "a victim of cheap mythologizing" and "mindless

stereotyping” in many literary works (Williams qtd. in Asquith 35). The novel prefigures the darker revisionist westerns of Cormac McCarthy in its focus upon the unforgiving and hostile landscape. Andrews quickly confronts the harshness of the American West, including the pain of riding horseback, poor quality diet, severe weather, and monotonous labor. As apprentice to Miller and Schneider, Andrews acts as a prism through which the skills and trades of buffalo hunting are rendered to readers not fully conversant with them. While conventional literary representations often suppress the legacy of violent conquest central to U.S. Western expansion through images of unclaimed space, rugged individualism, and masculine heroism, Williams’ narrative offers a refreshing attention to violence, hardship, frustration, difficulty, and monotony.

The expedition itself is a colossal failure. After nearly dying of thirst, the group finally locate Miller’s “secret” valley and spend the next month and a half slaughtering and skinning the buffalo. While having secured a large number of hides, Miller refuses to listen to the protestations of the others, desperate to eradicate every last animal in the valley. Eventually the weather turns and a bitter winter frost descends. The group are trapped until the summer sun melts the snows, and must survive and occupy their time. Williams carefully chronicles the growing dissatisfaction of the men, and the psychological consequences issuing from the intensity of their isolation:

Schneider’s complaining became more and more perfunctory, and at least ceased all together. Though he slept at night in the hide shelter with the other men, he spent more and more time alone, speaking to the others only when he was directly addressed, and then as briefly and noncommittal as he could. Often when Miller was off hunting for meat, Schneider would leave the campsite and remain away until late in the afternoon, returning with nothing to show for his absence. Through his apparent resolve to have

little to do with the party, he got into the habit of talking to himself; once Andrews came upon him and heard him speaking softly, crooningly, as if to a woman. (Williams, *Butcher's Crossing* 232)

“Embarrassed and half-afraid,” Andrews reports this incident to Miller only to be told that there is “[n]othing to worry about [a] man by his self gets to doing that. I’ve done it myself. You got to talk, and for four men cooped together like we are, it ain’t good to talk too much among their selves” (Williams, *Butcher's Crossing* 233). Williams beautifully oscillates between a representation of individual and collective forms of identity, refusing to subside into group cohesiveness. The four men work in unison to perform tasks such hunting, skinning buffalo and guiding the wagon and oxen, but these tasks are simply duties to be performed and never establish strong communal bonds between them. As Williams writes, while “alone in the great valley high in the mountains the four men, rather than being brought close together by their isolation, were thrust apart, so that each of them tended more and more to go his own way and fall upon his own resources” (*Crossing* 180-181). The men seldom talk at night and “when they did their words were directed to some specific business concerned with the hunt” (*Crossing* 181). Such a vision of selfhood, together and always apart, always on the cusp of danger and violence, cuts through the underlying romanticization of classic notions of Western masculinity which seek, against the rise of a modern industrial technology, a way to regain a seemingly diminished manhood through adventure, robust health, and an assertive patriotism. Without the classic staples of gunfights, enemies, and the protection of women and children, relations among the men turn to interior conflicts, malady, and group discord.

The isolation and the withdrawal of the men is most powerfully captured not in Schneider but in the figure of Miller, the leader of the expedition. Miller is tasked with shooting the buffalo and the continuous slaughter produces in him an alertness which is “unnaturally

intense” (Williams, *Butcher’s Crossing* 181). By turns, in the evenings he is “increasingly silent” and his “words were few and direct” (Williams, *Butcher’s Crossing* 181). For Andrews, Miller takes on a demonic presence, his face “black and dull with powder smoke” and his eyes “black and shining in their whites, surrounded by a flaming red line of irritated lids” (Williams, *Butcher’s Crossing* 181). This image haunts Andrews, coming “into his mind at night, in his dreams” to the point he feels pursued by a “restless presence that chased him from cover to cover” (Williams, *Butcher’s Crossing* 181). The dreams figure the “inexorable pursuit” of the buffalo Miller has forced upon the party, creating a condition of “increasing exhaustion” where “food and sleep [are] the only things that had much meaning for them” (Williams, *Butcher’s Crossing* 180).

Schneider dies on the river crossing on the return journey and the wagon overturns, destroying all the hides. When the three remaining men arrive back at the township, they find it has long since been abandoned. Williams relates this moment in characteristically poetic utterances, instances which secure his status as a major American craftsman:

The bales spread out from the immediate area of the shack and lay irregularly about the edges of the fenced brining pits. Scattered among the bales where a dozen or more wagons; some, upright, blistered and warped in the heat; their wheels were sunk in the earth and grass grew green and strong above their rims. Others were overturned, their metals bands about the spoked wheels showing brilliant spots of rust in the afternoon sun. (Williams, *Butcher’s Crossing* 273)

This lyrical wasteland discourse relies on a collective memory of the American frontier as a site of becoming, rather than the refuse and detritus of abandoned machine parts. The “blistered

and warped” wagons are entangled with the grass, “sunk in the earth” and as much part of the landscape as the discarded bales. Williams reveals how abandonment and waste are not a terminus, but rather the very condition of frontier existence.

It becomes apparent that the hide market has collapsed and even if the hunters could return and collect the remaining hides they safely stored away they would be unable to sell them. The novel ends with Miller burning down McDonald’s buildings and the remaining buffalo hides. Andrews, having spent the remaining time in the town with the prostitute Francine—one of the very few female characters in the novel—leaves and rides into the sunset acknowledging that “he did not know where he was going; but he knew that it would come to him later in the day” (Williams, *Butcher’s Crossing* 326).

There is as yet little critical commentary on the two novels or Williams more broadly, with journalistic reviews and articles currently dominating the response to his work. Last year, Mark Asquith published the first critical introduction to Williams’ four novels, alongside developing an attention to literary and cultural contexts, contemporary critical reception, and Williams’ style (Asquith, *Reading the Novels of John Williams*). Jeff Frank has seized upon *Stoner* as a novel that “helps us find what we are searching for: a way to live—and talk about – teaching in a dignified and artful way” and “encouraging us to see the potential that literature holds for how we think about teaching” (233). Finally, Maureen Clark has proposed that *Stoner*’s habitual interiority “functions as a political symbolic filter to challenge commonly-held impressions of heroism understood as garrulous, action-based cultural code of behavior in the practice of everyday life” (1). Both novels are steadily beginning to accrue the attention they deserve, and it therefore remains a central goal of Williams’ scholarship to bring these works to a wider audience and to offer critical insights.

To propose that Williams establishes a politics of failure is not to say that the novels are themselves failures in form, content, or character (although one should note Williams’

reputation was modest and his work enjoyed minimal commercial success); if anything, Williams is something of a neglected master stylist. Indeed, Williams' oeuvre is something of an exercise in stoicism in the face of marked (and market) failure, futility, loss, and public dishonor across historical periods as distinct as ancient Rome, the nineteenth-century American West, and twentieth-century Midwest. Williams remains a literary outlier, and his work offers a double contrast; firstly to the dominant forms of US postmodern writing that were shaped and produced under the socio-cultural conditions 1960s and, secondly, to hegemonic forms of American masculine identity which tend to blur the boundaries and distinctions between myth and history. As Williams' scholarship is starting from a relatively fresh position, a brief introduction to the author's life, work, and style is therefore necessary.

Aside from the two novels already mentioned, Williams has published one other novel and a novella. The first, *Augustus* (1972), is an epistolary historical fiction, detailing the life of the first Roman Emperor. The novel shared the National Book Award the following year with John Barth's *Chimera* (1972), cementing Williams' status as a contemporary American writer in league with William Faulkner, John Updike, Saul Bellow, and Thomas Pynchon. The novella *Nothing But the Night* (1948) was Williams' first foray into fiction, and it chronicles the life of twenty-four year old Arthur Maxley, who has suffered an unnamed childhood trauma. Unlike the expansive ambition of *Stoner*, the narrative frame of *Nothing But the Night* is confined to a single day. Arthur confronts his long absent father only to argue and then leave. The novel ends in a re-performance of the traumatic act Arthur first witnessed as a child before a neighbor intervenes. While I will not pursue this here, the narrative clearly resonates with Freud's theory of *Nachträglichkeit* in which the neuroses experienced by an individual are often a product of a delayed response to a traumatic impression to which they cannot adequately react.<sup>ii</sup> Williams later disowned the novel, stating that when "Alan Swallow published it, I didn't realize how bad it was" (Williams, "An Interview with John Williams" ). It was, remarks Williams,

“flowery and overwrought and verbose and sometimes too dramatic” (Williams, “An Interview with John Williams”). In attempting to write a popular psychological novel, “its real landscape was the interior” which proved to be “of no great significance” (Williams, “An Interview with John Williams”). Two volumes of poetry, *The Broken Landscape: Poems* (1949) and *The Necessary Lie* (1965), and an edited anthology of *English Renaissance Poetry*, complete his works. A manuscript collection and assorted papers are currently housed at the University of Arkansas. Williams left behind a fifth unfinished novel, *The Sleep of Reason*.

As Morris Dickstein has remarked of Williams’ fiction, the three novels are “strikingly different in subject matter” and yet share “a simple, resonant, sculptured style, eloquent in its restraint.” John McGahern likewise proposes that the novels are remarkable “for the diversity of their settings” and “could easily pass for the work of four different writers” (McGahern ix-xvi). Nevertheless, for Dickstein, they share a similar narrative arc in their depiction of “young man’s initiation, vicious male rivalries, subtler tensions between men and women, fathers and daughters, and finally a bleak sense of disappointment, even futility.”

### **Hardship and Failure in *Stoner***

The opening of the novel situates Stoner as an unexceptional man, seemingly without academic accomplishments or any lasting intellectual legacy. In a less than glowing account of his life it is said, on the very first page, that “few students remembered him with any sharpness after they had taken his courses” while “colleagues, who held him in no particular esteem when he was alive, speak of him rarely now” (Williams, *Stoner* 1). Born “in 1891 on a small farm in central Missouri near the village of Booneville,” Stoner narrowly avoids a life of hardship and toil working the dry and unprofitable land. This life has produced parents worn out on work: a

father who at thirty [...] looked fifty” and a mother who regards “her life patiently, as if it were a long moment she had to endure” (Williams, *Stoner* 2). Stoner’s deflationary sense of selfhood is constructed by generations of Stoners working privately owned farm enterprises, an inheritance “given to him by forefathers whose lives were obscure and hard and stoical” (Williams, *Stoner* 226). He never seeks to forget this heritage, however, and indeed the years of “hardship and hunger and endurance and pain” (266) on the Booneville farm equip him with a critical distance” – a “cautious faith” – “so that he was not caught in the rushing that he observed” around him (Williams, *Stoner* 227-228). Indeed, Stoner’s quiet nature and passivity mean he is rarely a victim of rash and impassioned decisions, often choosing to replace what are often presented as rash acts with methodical thought.

Initially published in 1965, Williams’ third novel sold less than two thousand copies and was out of print the following year. The British novelist C.P. Snow championed it, asking in a 1973 article for the *Financial Times* “why isn’t this book famous?”. The answer Snow gave, is that “we live in a peculiarly silly age” in which very “few novels in English, or literary productions of any kind, have come near [Stoner’s] level for human wisdom or as a work of art” (20). For Snow, the seriousness of *Stoner* remains antithetical to the age of postmodern fiction which often choose to pursue what Rachel Adams has termed “darkly comic ambiguities” in its “depiction of the sharp polarization of the globe, fears of looming nuclear apocalypse, and newfound distrust of a government enmeshed in secrecy and conspiratorial activity” (249). As Adams notes, postmodernism remains the dominant form of literary experimentalism during the Cold War, “a period marked by the ascendance of transnational corporations, the upheavals of decolonization, fears of nuclear holocaust, and the partitioning of the globe into ideological spheres’ deploys numerous formal and conceptual innovations such as dark humor; themes of paranoia, skepticism, and conspiracy; preoccupation with close reading and textuality; and complex formal experimentation” (250). *Stoner* is also a narrative

of disillusionment with America's domestic difficulties and often ill-defined foreign policy, but William Stoner's endurance, passivity, and quiet interiority are markedly distinct from the postmodern pyrotechnics of more popular writers operating during this period.

The British novelist Julian Barnes has likewise observed that *Stoner* became, belatedly, a "quite unexpected bestseller" which "publishers themselves could not quite understand." Distinctions between European and American literary traditions remain important here, for in many respects *Stoner* is closer to the European tradition of novel writing. Barnes calls the prose "clean and quiet," with the titular character able to endure "many disappointments" and believe the academe has not betrayed him. As Maureen Clark observes, the novel acts as a counter-measure to Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), in which the "melancholic view of American life proffered by *Stoner*'s scholarly protagonist" seems more suited "to the cultural palette of European readers" (4). The novel stands in opposition to the loudness of American capitalist triumphalism through the quiet heroism of a single, ignored individual.

It is in this sense that *Stoner* is a contemporary fiction. As the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben writes, "those who are truly contemporary [...] those who truly belong to their time, are those who neither fully coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands" (40). "Those who coincide too well with the epoch," Agamben notes, "are not contemporaries" (41). Truly understanding or inhabiting the present moment, then, at least for Agamben, requires an attraction and resistance that adheres to the present moment "and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it" (Agamben 41). *Stoner*'s focus on the quiet life of a university academic is contemporary in that it does not follow the dominant forms of US literary writing during postmodernism. As Maureen Clark argues on this issue, despite the extensive range of historical upheavals that occur throughout, the narrative "is one of disillusionment with a nation more in step with passionate, impulsive actions associated with cultural heroism than with cool, astute consideration of possible destructive consequences" (2-3). In particular, Stoner's mentor,

Archie Sloane is wracked by the effects of the First World War on the English department and society outside the university. Sloane was a child during the American Civil War (1861-1865), but inherited a sense of the traumatic consequences of the conflict: “A war,” Sloane remarks, “doesn’t merely kill off a few thousand or a few hundred thousand young men. It kills off something in a people that can never be brought back. And if a people go through enough wars, pretty soon all that’s left is the brute, the creature we are (35).

Seeing the war as an affront to civilization, Sloane remarks that it should not be the job of the scholar to “destroy what he has aimed his life to build” (Williams, *Stoner* 36). Personally affected by the losses sustained in two rapidly succeeding World Wars, Sloane dies in his office “of causes obviously natural but never precisely determined” (Williams, *Stoner* 90). Stoner receives this death as a heroic act, as if somehow “Sloane had willed his heart to cease in a last mute gesture of love and contempt for the world that had betrayed him so profoundly” (Williams, *Stoner* 90).

According to Steve Almond, the novel occupied something of the status of an illegal import, with graduate students in the 1990s treating it “like some form of delicious contraband” (Maggie Doherty on Almond). For Almond at least, the importance of *Stoner* is the manner in which it appears so consciously set against the dominant forms of postmodern expression, which often favor system over individual. Re-issued in 2003 by Vintage and the NYRB Classics in 2006, *Stoner* has become what the critic Philip Maughan has termed a “literary Lazarus” (16).

Despite the centrality of the university, the novel does not have a clear academic audience in mind or consciously employs a knowledge of academic reading practices. Thus, the novel is hardly metafictional; despite its location within the moment of the American countercultural revolution, it often shies away from the metafictional impulse and the deployment of specific literary and theoretical terms that originated in University English after the close of the Second World War. Williams offers a partial insight into the reasons for this in his

introduction to an anthology of Renaissance poetry published some two years before *Stoner*. For Williams, “if we read as if we were not mortals listening to another mortal – the style may seem flat, bare, almost lifeless. But if we *listen* to the poem, we shall hear beneath the emphatic stresses, beneath the bare and essential speech, the human cadence of the human voice, speaking to us as if we were alive: (xxvii). As Jeff Frank has observed on this issue, “Williams doesn’t say the expected,” instead inverting a form of criticism that later came to dominate the study of university English (235). Williams here seemingly offers a challenge to the historicist and Marxist-inflected schools of literary criticism, claiming that the poem is not an artifact interesting for carrying traces of its historical and ideological situation, but rather is “speaking to us” to affirm a shared and common humanity. For Frank, Williams views the “bare essential voice of humanity” as one that can “reach us, can wake us, can make us see what it would mean to be alive” (235). Frank is not alone in inscribing the novel a profound emotional impact. Mel Livatino recounts the tale of an otherwise “incisive and demanding literary critic brought to tears when he spoke of the novel, unable to say anything more than convey a hope that she will read it” (417). In turn, she remarks: “I have never encountered a more powerful novel—not a syllable of it sentimental” in its recapitulation of the “tragic circumstances of his life.” (417). Both critics attest to the scholarly challenges involved in reading Williams: the power of the prose coupled with a simple and direct style which seemingly eludes critical comment.

*Stoner*’s love of verse and his subsequent transfer from agriculture to English is kindled by a professor who pays more attention to feeling than structure, historical context, or form. *Stoner* feels this in the most “subtle [and] deeply evocative way” as his professor enquires whether *Stoner* can hear what Williams termed “the human cadence of the human voice.” (*Stoner* xxvii). *Stoner* “pondered the words Archer Sloane spoke in class, as if beneath the flat, dry meaning he might discover a clue that would lead him where he was intended to go” (9).

Finding the students subdued, “edgy and puzzled, half-frightened,” Sloane briefly recapitulates the formal features:

“It is a sonnet, Mr. Stoner,” Sloan Said dryly, “a poetical composition of fourteen lines, with a certain pattern I am sure you have memorized. It is written in the English language, which I believe you have been speaking for some years. Its author is William Shakespeare, a poet who is dead, but who nevertheless occupies a position of some importance in the minds of a few.” (10)

After reading the sonnet again, Sloane asks the following question: “Mr. Shakespeare speaks to you across three hundred years, Mr. Stoner; do you hear him?” (11). Stoner attempts to respond to the question of the meaning of the sonnet but cannot complete his sentence. What is privileged here, in this transformative moment, is a shared experience of reading a text where student and teacher become “co-workers, not equals in certain ways” in “the shared desire to commit to the promise of learning something of value and importance” (236). Sloane dispenses with the formal properties in an off-hand way and this narrative moment functions to reveal something of Williams’ position on reading. As a university teacher, Williams complained about the shift towards a “purely utilitarian, problem-solving way of doing things more efficiently, both in the arts and sciences, all of which can be predicated and measured” (*Stoner* xv). For Williams, this manifests most clearly in distinct attitude towards the text, “as if a novel or poem is something to be studied and understood rather than experienced” (*Stoner* xv). What Stoner experiences in the classroom is less an appreciative understanding of the components that make up the text but rather a felt experience of reading that, at least for the moment, transcends his ability to put it down in written language. As a young man, Stoner thus operates

on the boundary of some vital insight, but cannot properly articulate or express this sentiment in critical terms. For Williams, this is the introduction to literature *par excellence*.

Stoner's slow progress in teaching—he struggles to engage students in lectures and publishes comparatively little by modern academic standards—is gradually rewarded however as he steadily learns how to impart his love of literature and literary criticism through a growing confidence and ability:

the love which he had hidden as if it were illicit and dangerous, he began to display, tentatively at first, and then boldly, and then proudly ... He suspected that he was beginning, ten years late, to discover who he was; and the figure he saw was both more and less than he had once imagined it to be. He felt himself at last beginning to be a teacher ... It was a knowledge of which he could not speak, but one which changed him, once he had it, so that no one could mistake its presence. (115)

This development is only possible with the return to the university of those students who had survived the horrors of the war. Without direct commentary, Stoner comes to understand this moment as one of profound significance for intellectual advancement, self-fulfillment, and the creation of an authentic politics, one in which a generation of young men and women returning from war can find consolation in literature. He plays a central role in this constructivist effort:

[Stoner] worked harder than he had ever worked; the students, strange in their maturity, were intensely serious and contemptuous of triviality. Innocent of fashion or custom, they came to their studies as Stoner had dreamed that a student might—as if those studies were life itself and not specific means to specific ends. He knew that never, after these few years, would teaching be quite the same; and he committed himself to a happy

state of exhaustion which he hoped might not end. He seldom thought of the past or the future, or of the disappointments and joys of either; he concentrated all the energies of which he was capable upon the moment of his work and hoped that he was at last defined by what he did. (258)

The novel thus stands apart from much of the writing emerging from the co-productive context of critical theory and the creative writing program. In turn, the novel expresses a deep and profound commitment to forms of reading and teaching divorced from the emergence, from the 1960s onwards, of deconstruction and anti-humanist thought at its worst, which Allan Bloom takes as his central object of criticism in *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987). As Adam Kelly has recently remarked on this issue, developing a point made by Mark McGurl : “post-war American fiction is inseparable from its institutional contexts,” and therefore the “academic context of the post-1960s English program, with its increasing incorporation of theory into the teaching of literature, may be just as materially relevant as the expansion of the creative writing program during that period” (396). Writers coming to prominence in the 1960s were thus often “co-productive of such a Theory-intensive mode, subsequent authors, such as many of those [...] write immanently to academic theoretical concerns, thereby further complicating a firm delineation between the critical and creative spheres” (Eve 38). *Stoner* is a novel that ranges across major developments in twentieth-century American history, and ends with Stoner’s death in 1956, shortly before the high-tide of postmodernism. Published in the mid-1960s, at the mid-point of the Vietnam War, it does not seek to retrospectively inscribe these moments with a postmodern affective designation and seems curiously immune to the dominant styles of late-twentieth-century American prose. The novel seems closer to forms of openness and honesty, a critical designation Kelly has termed “New Sincerity” in relation to twenty-first century US fiction. This orientation perhaps accounts for the recent success of the

novel and points to wider social and cultural symptoms in operation around the moment of its rediscovery.

This argument can be furthered with an illustrative example. As a Fellow of the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, the then twenty-seven-year-old aspiring novelist Michael Mewshaw was assigned to Williams as a tutor. Apprenticed to a man he had "then neither read nor heard of" Mewshaw wryly remarks that Williams was "as old as my father" and "might have been described as out of step with the times" (18). Youthful hubris aside, Mewshaw attends to some of the reasons surrounding Williams' reputation. Contemplating the "rare still figure" seemingly at odds with the frenetic dancing and drinking of the writers' conference, and his evident dissatisfaction with being assigned to Williams, Mewshaw thought:

Was it any wonder why he and his work had been shunted into the shadows? How could this shy nondescript author compete with Mailer's bravado, Tom Wolfe's white suits and spats or Philip Roth's bible of masturbation? A restrained, realistic academic novel like *Stoner*, no matter how well written, naturally didn't get the same attention as John Barth's *Giles Goat Boy*, a postmodern romp that depicted the university as the universe. And if *Stoner* was largely unknown, Williams previous novel *Butcher's Crossing* had disappeared without a trace. Only after his death would it be recognized as a precursor of Cormac McCarthy's western chronicles of existential mayhem. (18)

Williams' prose is far from the postmodern pyrotechnics of Pynchon or Barth, and, as Mewshaw suggest, appeared too far removed from its own time. Williams patiently constructs a character who quietly bears hardship and disappointment, and whose heroism is not to be located in garrulous acts of self-defiance but in a compassion for, and understanding of, human struggle.

## Conquest and Its Consequences

The late success of *Stoner* has led to the republication of Williams' other works. As a revisionist Western, *Butcher's Crossing* dismantles the myth of American identity, expansion and progress through the harshness of frontier day-to-day life. Andrews' passionate and enthusiastic idealism about the American West and his desire to experience first-hand the buffalo-hunt results in disillusionment and destructive consequences. In Williams, the West becomes not a stable, defined reality, but a complex cauldron of social, political, and economic forces that are constantly in flux and motion. On returning to the town, Miller and Andrews are shocked to hear McDonald's arguments that the hides will be nothing more "than a comfort to you in your old age" (291). Miller insists upon the verbal agreement between the partners, "four dollars apiece for prime hides" and aims to "hold [McDonald] to it" (293). The terrible irony of the situation is revealed: if Miller had returned when the group had initially planned, the hides could have been sold: "funny thing," McDonald remarks, "you're just about seven months too late. If you had got back when you was supposed to, you would have got your money. I had it then. You could have helped ruin me" (Williams, *Butcher's Crossing* 292). Fluctuations in the buffalo market, analogous—as McDonald points out—to what happened to the sale of Beaver hats where "you couldn't give the skins away" have meant "nobody wants any more" (Williams, *Butcher's Crossing* 293). The novel carefully reflects the uncharted dilemmas of living under the dominant influences of an emerging capitalist market-economy.

In general terms, *Butcher's Crossing* offers a critical image of contemporary social and economic conditions surrounding the near-extirpation of the bison and subsequent economic crash. The decline of the buffalo population was affected by predation, disease, climate, and the commodities market, and while Williams remains sensitive to these, he remains with the

consequences of a destructive vision of masculinity.<sup>iii</sup> During the expedition, Miller becomes frantic with the fury of the slaughter, shooting for several hours:

Miller shot, and reloaded, and shot, and loaded again. The acrid haze of gunsmoke thickened around them; Andrews coughed and breathed heavily and put his face near the ground where the smoke was thinner. When he lifted his head he could see the ground in front of him was littered with the mounded corpses of the buffalo, and the remaining herd – apparently little diminished – circling almost mechanically now, in a kind of dumb rhythm. (Williams, *Butcher's Crossing* 156)

The phenomenon Williams depicts is termed a “stand” where, after the elimination of the herd’s leader, the remaining Buffalo as Andrews observes: “just stand there and let him shoot them. They don’t even run” (153). Williams here constructs an image of Miller devoid of all subjectivity; a machine much like the Sharps rifle he wields:

During the last hour of the stand he came to see Miller as a mechanism, an automaton, moved by the moving herd; and he came to see Miller’s destruction of the buffalo, not as a lust for blood or a lust for the hides or a lust for what the hides would bring, or even at last the blind lust of fury that toiled darkly within him—he came to see the destruction as a cold, mindless response to the life in which Miller had immersed himself. (158-159)

Like the Pequod in Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851), the hunting party is a pioneering outpost of industrial capitalism. Miller, Andrews, Schneider, and Hodge all have clearly defined roles and represent a division of labor in their exploitation of a natural resource. The process of slaughter,

skinning, and commodification are constituent parts of the emergence of industrial capitalism during the period. Overconsumption of the Buffalo had resulted in the expansion of the territorial range of commodity-searching exploration. The commercial hunt of buffalo was finished by the winter of 1883, shortly after the historical moment the novel purports to represent.

The anachronism of their venture is signaled when the group return and take rooms at the hotel. The owner immediately assumes they have been prospecting in Colorado. When told they have been hunting, he replies, incredulously, “For what?” (Williams, *Butcher’s Crossing* 278). When informed by a weary Andrews, he follows with a notion that he had “once heard they used to be buffalo up there” (Williams, *Butcher’s Crossing* 278). The much-anticipated railroad never comes to Butcher’s Crossing but is set down “about fifty miles north of here” (Williams, *Butcher’s Crossing* 293). Dependent upon a series of profitable transactions, the town is left remote from the emerging trans-national networks of commerce and exchange. The title of the novel seems to suggest a work that actually seeks to strengthen the ideological and conceptual foundations of an otherwise flourishing industrial capitalism. The crossing of the railroad tracks never occurs and the men are left subject to the more destructive effects of capital as the drive of social and economic change. *Butcher’s Crossing* presents a world increasingly colonized and co-opted by the power of commerce.

The critique that the novel renders does not simply reside within the notion that the moods and attitudes of the characters are all governed by the logic of capitalist exchange. Andrew does not appear particularly affected by the loss of revenue. He confirms to McDonald that the group was cleaned out but claims that “it doesn’t matter” (Williams, *Butcher’s Crossing* 295). While Miller and McDonald have both lost their livelihoods, Andrews’ objective was not to generate profit from the hunt but to experience the reality of the American West. In the room he takes towards the close of the novel, Andrews stares into the mirror: “he

could see no expression and no identity where he looked,” and his skin “felt numb and lifeless” (281-289). The “crossing” of the novel’s title then refers less to the anticipated networks of national capitalist exchange than to the moral, vocational, and even spiritual development of Andrews as he returns—or crosses—where his journey first began.

This return is remarkably different to the circuitous routes plotted in McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* (1985). In McCarthy’s novel, Americans and Spanish buffalo hunters happen on a chance meeting, but “the disposition to exchange [is] foreign” to both parties (McCarthy 121). Consequently, the “parties divided upon that midnight plain, each passing back the way the other had come, pursuing as all travelers must inversions without end upon other men’s journeys” (121). In McCarthy’s desert, men are “doomed to spiritual exhaustion,” forced to retrace movements in perambulations seemingly without end (Beck 64). Rather the re-crossing in Williams’ novel is, despite the disasters encountered, pedagogically redemptive.

The discussion between McDonald and Andrews at the end of the novel functions to highlight distinctions between innocence and the experience of the American West. For McDonald, the mistake of youth is to think “there is something to find out,” while in actuality “there’s nothing” (Williams, *Butcher’s Crossing* 295-296). In McDonald’s view of the expedition, there is nothing to show for it: “A year gone out of your life, a busted wagon that a beaver might use to make a dam with, some calluses on your hands, and the memory of a dead man” (Williams, *Butcher’s Crossing* 296).

In the final section of this article, I want to briefly juxtapose this novel with the work of McCarthy to draw out some critical insights related to the mythologized versions of American identity. Both Williams and McCarthy render landscape through a lyrical yet often spare prose style. For David Holloway, McCarthy’s longer fiction attempts to solve a critical dilemma between language and narration, transforming the “revisionist reading of western American history [...] into a trope for wider anxieties about the paralysis of language” (37).

These anxieties about narrative's ability to represent the world are pursued by McCarthy through a prose that seems "almost to have been etched in stone," producing a "physical weightiness" that is paradoxically "nimble and spritely, capable of moving in unexpected directions" (Thompson 88). As Lucas Thompson argues on this issue, McCarthy is so idiosyncratic his sentences almost require reverse engineering, a process of "dismantling and then rebuilding a sentence in this way gives us a chance to see the subtle shades of meaning that particular linguistic choices enable, as well as showing how inextricable form and content really are" (89). Reading McCarthy involves not simply a process of measuring the accuracy of his representation, but an analysis of the ways in which language remains able, or not, to hold to a critical effectivity in its engagement with the history of late capitalist western restructuring. As Patricia Nelson Limerick argues, Western expansion through "conquest was a literal, territorial form of economic growth" and "the most concrete, down-to-earth demonstration of the economic habit on which the entire nation became dependent" (28). Cycles of prosperity and recession, of boom and bust, had long characterized the American economy, with the American West "at the far end of the whip, providing the prime example of the [...] instability of capitalism" (Nelson Limerick 29).

As I have argued, the achievement of *Stoner* and *Butcher's Crossing* is that they construct a politics of failure, a distinct pedagogical position that moves away from individual achievement and national triumph towards an acceptance of personal hardship, disaster, and failure. Stoner's life is one of uneventful quiet endurance, while the futility of the hunting expedition in *Butcher's Crossing* is revealed in the colossal waste of life, labor, and energy. In a 1985 interview with Bryan Woolley, Williams remarks that, despite these failures, Stoner is a "real hero," as he is a "witness to values that are important" ("An Interview with John Williams" 20). For Williams, this is because of "Stoner's sense of a *job*," of "Stoner's love of work," which forms his central contribution (xiv). In both novels, Stoner and Andrews fail, and

fail pitiably, but they endure their share of pain and hardship with remarkable restraint and solemnity. This is a politics of failure but one that does not judge too harshly, bearing “witness to values that are important” (“An Interview with John Williams” 21).

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<sup>i</sup> *Stoner* remained relatively unknown until translated into French in 2013; in France, it quickly became a European marketing phenomenon.

<sup>ii</sup> J. Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis have defined *Nachträglichkeit* as a term “frequently used by Freud in connection with his view of psychical temporality and causality: experiences, impressions and memory-traces may be revised at a later date to fit in with fresh experiences or with the attainment of a new stage of development. They may in that event be endowed not only with a new meaning but also with psychical effectiveness” (111). I have explored contemporary fiction in relation to the theory of *Nachträglichkeit* in my article “Reading the New Ruins: Loss, Mourning, and Melancholy in *Dissident Gardens*.”

<sup>iii</sup> The slaughter of the American bison was also in part an attempt to starve Native Americans into submission. For more information, see Phippen, “Kill Every Buffalo You Can!”.