

Reproducing the Frontier: How Media Images Shape Perceptions of Natural Environments of  
Wilderness

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: Reproducing the Frontier: How Media Images Shape Perceptions of Natural Environments of Wilderness

The visual image has long been renowned for its world-shaping abilities. This study argues that the worlds of images give life to visual cultures for how audiences go about “visualizing” physical space through images that blur the line between fiction and reality. This study attempts to uncover a longstanding myth of how visual culture has led to the social and physical change of the state of Montana, specifically in how the cultural myth of the American Frontier has been creatively reproduced through visualized entertainment to promote fantasy over reality for the purpose of creating and regulating power relations among territories, races, and genders. An analysis of the television show, *Yellowstone*, is analyzed to deconstructs how visual biopolitics shape and dictate a new frontier, maintaining oppressive structures throughout the natural landscape that imply relations of purification, exemption, and expulsion. This study begins by understanding what the Frontier Myth is and how it came to be, followed by understanding how it is utilized in the entertainment show *Yellowstone*, whereby the portrayals of territorialization, race, gender and agriculture are analyzed. Lastly, the study will suggest further research opportunities for future studies.

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how we found them. I strive to preserve and maintain those memories to the best of my abilities. It is usually not until much later we realize how fortunate our lives were in our upbringing. The more distance I put between myself and home, the clearer it becomes how far they went to give me a proper upbringing and a fulfilling life. It is because of this realization that I dedicate this thesis to them.

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## Introduction

This visual communication study seeks to understand how images portray modern-day wilderness, specifically, images relevant to the natural landscapes and geologic features of Montana. When a person wants to view a place, they have never visited, they often turn to images as the first step in understanding and knowing what a place looks like. These natural environments have been increasingly finding their way into the mainstream of mass culture—a result of the recent influx in entertainment production taking place within state boundaries from television shows such as *Yellowstone* and cinematic films such as *A River Runs Through It* and *The Horse Whisperer*. The popularity and lasting cultural legacy of these entertainment programs have long been charged for the upsurge of transplants migrating into the state to claim residency. Images of nature and landscapes have a supreme force over human agency, connecting humans with the environment by presenting space as a utopian fantasy that is deemed real and natural (Brereton, 2005; Vannini & Vannini, 2016). The image that portrays nature can have a liberating sensation, momentarily transporting the viewer to a metaphysical ontology, while simultaneously exploiting the location. Cinematic films that feature Montana have played a role in shifting the cultural and ecological perception of the state, in addition to exposing new generations to wilderness settings and all its practical uses. Before Robert Redford’s film *A River Runs Through It* (ARRTI) was released in 1992, Montana was “a world apart from all others” as it was described by Norman Maclean in his infamous novella. Prior to 1992, the state experienced a moderate amount of fishing pressure on its rivers, often being visited by more experienced and dedicated fisherman that had an affinity for conservation and were widely aware of the opportunities the streams within the state had to offer. After 1992, the fly-fishing scene amplified into an industry that saw a sixty percent increase by 1993 (Kelly, 2019, Para 3). In the decades

that followed, a novice first-time fly-fisher visiting the state would have frequently been met with snidey remarks referring to the individual as someone attempting what they witnessed in the film *ARRTI*. While the film changed the fly-fishing industry and sparked an economic boom of transplants moving to the state and causing a spike in the cost of living, it distributed a new visibility for Montana.

*ARRTI* introduced a vision for Montana, one that aptly resonated with audiences and continues to do so almost thirty years since its release. Phillippe Rousselot's Academy Award winning cinematography constructs what Barbara Novak calls "the 'Christianized sublime', a natural landscape iconic of bourgeois democratic values and of regional and national pride" (Novak, 2007, p. 27). Redford's reproduced look into Montana's past continues with a longstanding tradition of creating a relationship between the most pristine and unspoiled space, and the national white identity. The epistemology of Redford's visualized "Montana" is one that is encoded as what Mirzoeff refers to as "white seeing space" a space that forms from new modes of power based on artificial forms of vision (2021). *ARRTI* visualized Montana as a nostalgic pastoral place that was still relatively untouched by the outside world, where there "was no clear line between religion and fly-fishing," but rather clear connections to family values, gender expectations, reproduction, traditions, and political assumptions (Nichols, 2003). What may be considered entertaining and representative to the viewer, ceases to be gripping storytelling and becomes a form of surveillance, one where the viewer is a tourist getting a first-hand look into a new world where the nostalgic desire for a physical space untouched by sin exists in the wilderness of Montana. By actively visualizing the wilderness landscapes in *ARRTI* as wild space alienated from the modern world, the images that were intended to preserve the space had the opposite desired effect, serving as a mode of hegemony that wiped out the cultural

identity and replaced it with a modern lifestyle in the state. *Yellowstone's* images have been accomplishing similar processes, changing Montana's cultural identity to coincide with the disenfranchised settler that refuses to lose his land in the face of modernity's inescapable march. This time, rather than promoting the vision of Christian family values, the images seek to endorse those what is considered "natural" and white dominant.

Growing up as an avid fly-fisherman in Montana during the early 2000's, I was naturally fascinated by the film that showcased some of the places where I had fished. The demography of those who had seen ARRTI seemed to be split into two groups: those who had seen the film and were influenced to transplant to Montana because of the film, and those who had seen the film and reviled it for the influx it brought to the state. Because of this, for most of my adult life, I have lived under the pretense that entertainment can change physical space. This thesis is my attempt to understand just how much a media representation influences physical space, whether fiction paves the way for reality through the proliferation of neoliberal land consumption, and whether images constructed through technology accurately represent pristine nature. What is at stake is the loss of vision and way of life that has long been reflective of the state's identity. Montana burns its impression on all that passes through. Once renounced as a state for offering a free and open recreation paradise, it has found itself becoming increasingly privatized in the last decade as wealthy urbanized residents search for a new beginning and reprieve from the disarray of the cities. With the loss of space and the rise in modernity, wilderness further becomes lost. New legislation seems directly aimed at pricing out lower- and middle-class residents in hopes of turning the state into a haven for the wealthy elite. In addition to the exponentially driven vast quantity of tourism the state sees annually, Barkey and Weddell (2023) maintain that while media representation does have economic benefits within the state, the image of Montana has

been projected to a wider audience, and for those that visited, the images contributed to effecting people's desire to visit, as well as purchase property. By studying and understanding the role of visuality, we can begin to uncover how place and space can become vulnerable and potentially harmed because of visibility.



Figure 1. Protagonist, John Dutton (played by Kevin Costner) admires his spacious cattle ranch. While the ranch is fictitiously set in Paradise Valley, it is produced near Darby, Montana.

The television entertainment show, *Yellowstone*, is neo-western set in Montana that mirrors many similar dramatic arcs and plot devices found in the primetime soap opera, *Dallas*. While the power struggles and internal family feuds are still present in the series, oil fields have been exchanged for natural wilderness. The show revolves around oligarch and Yellowstone ranch owner, John Dutton (See figure 1), a sixth-generation rancher whose primary goal is to halt modern progress for the benefit of preserving his ranch and the surrounding lands. To sum it up, Dutton's goal is to preserve the world he has always known by keeping out the modern world at

any costs. Land developers are the primary antagonists in the show, as many private interest companies are looking to obtain portions of Dutton's land to develop condominium homes, small communities, and airports, in addition to maintain the largest cattle herd in the world. Moreover, members of the indigenous community are also conspiring to annex portions of the ranch to reclaim what was stolen from them during westward expansion. Dutton's reign as the natural rightful ruler through the land is in question, as he is growing older and in need of an heir to pass the ranch on to. His surviving three children (see figure 2) are all flawed; Jamie (played by Wes Bentley) serves as the family lawyer and is considered "too weak" to be an effective leader, Beth (played by Kelly Reilly), despite her effective capabilities as a competent leader, despises the ranch due to the chronic amounts of traumatic emotional scarring the landscape has inflicted on her character, and Kaycee (played by Luke Grimes), is ostracized from the family for having disobeyed his father by marrying a Native American woman, Monica, for which they share a son, Tate. Lee Dutton is John's oldest son, and in the pilot episode, is framed as the most dedicated and deserving of taking over the ranch due to his similarities to his father. Unfortunately, Lee is killed in the pilot in a cattle raid. And John's wife, Evelyn Dutton, has a few minor appearances in the first season, seen by flashbacks to convey her as a supporting counterpart to the Dutton enterprise. Her death is shown in a flashback early on in season one. What these relations show is a flawed family in what could be considered a perfect world—the last of a dying generation in a place that is often referred to as "the last best place." The included image details the Dutton family tree as represented in the series.

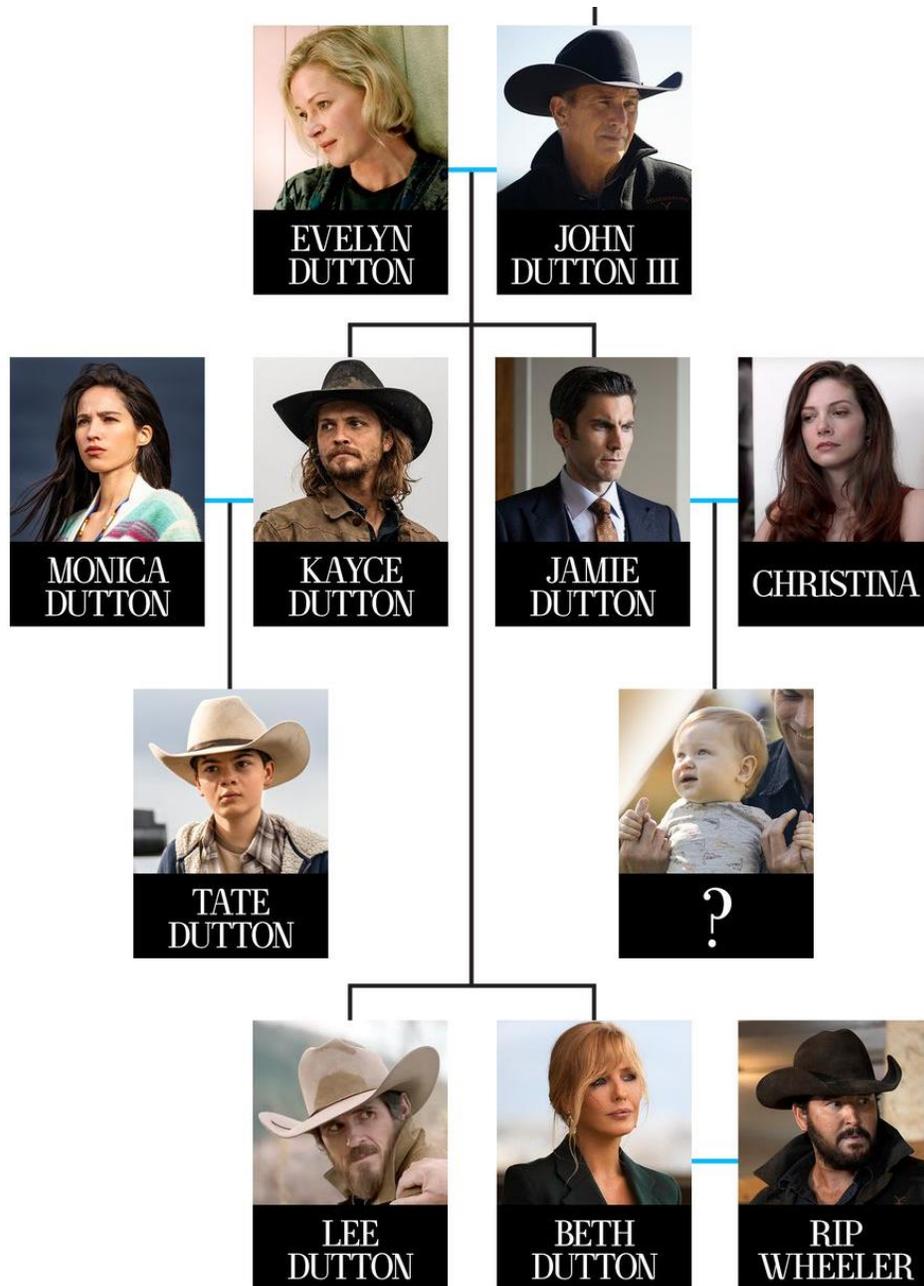


Figure 2. The Dutton Family Tree

Described by John Steinbeck as “a great splash of grandeur,” Montana is a mixture of rolling grass prairies and agricultural fields juxtaposed against unspoiled mountainous backdrops and elegantly sculpted vistas that hold the headwaters for many of America’s most iconic rivers (Spence, p. 4). Such eye-dazzling wild spectacles are a visual storyteller’s paradise, leading to

the state's growing popularity and western mystique (D'Ambrosio, 2016) And yet, Montana's representation in media as a wild untouched landscape void of human civilization is ironic because its wildernesses are confined to set locations surrounded by human-formed boundaries and can only remain intact with human management (Franklin, 2006). Montana's wildernesses have reached the realm of postmodernity—once conveyed as romantic imaginations of pristine landscapes, they have been reduced to places of environmentally driven consumer experiences. Representations in entertainment draw scores of crowds and new residents' intent on consuming the land for capitalist interaction purposes. The population influx continues to eliminate one of the last remaining intact, wild ecosystems, remnants of the frontier and the American West—the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem—and simultaneously, reestablishes a new societal era of iconographies that depict Western lifestyle living as reserved for the most privileged societies. This distribution of visibility embeds new truths about the cultural framework of a physical place that while overemphasizing the hyperreality of these features are inherently untrue (Makarychev, p. 53-54). In essence, images pertain the power to caricaturize space into a new frontier waiting to be settled and cultivate a new idea of the frontier through cultural representation in media.

Visual communication has long influenced our perceptions and helped us find meaning and make sense of the world around us. The way in which the frontier and wilderness has been perceived has been re-envisioned many times since its initial conception. Henry David Thoreau once famously declared that “in wildness is the preservation of the world” and yet, the more images of wilderness that civilizations produce, the more the narrative around which landscapes get to be visualized and who gets to live in direct proximity to these areas challenges the idea that we are in fact preserving anything at all (Bassani & Simões, 2021). Rony writes, “Visual biopolitics does not just produce empty signifiers: these visual myths contain the resemblances

of the historical real. Visual biopolitics collapses the effects of the present, past, and future, and it is therein that an artist, a filmmaker, a writer can wield and take back her power” (Rony, p. 7). In other words, artists embody a substantial contribution when it comes to the visual development and overall display of a place. Visual representations are often coded with signifiers that reveal themselves to those visualize themselves in the most premier state.

With all this in mind, I have long desired to understand how images can be used to deceive, naturalize, and produce ideology. I attempt to uncover what social structures are widely accepted through images that subject us into becoming subjects, which stories play a societal role in designating the privileged from the marginalized, and how reproduced visuals bury these beliefs deep into our subconscious. The earliest visuals of the frontier tell a different story, one that is reminiscent of the story of Creation. One where the Frontier is a reproduced Eden; visually simulated as a sublime, pristine place separated from society and untouched by human activity, plentiful in resources, and boundless and free of any social confines. And yet, despite all its perfection, the story tells is that sin led to the disintegration of the Garden of Eden—a cautious parable that has become far too often visually realized in all civilizations. As Dunaway points out, all major civilizations that eventually fell, from “Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome,” began with the destruction of their Eden (2005, p. 134). Since its discovery, the North American continent has been portrayed as a return to the original Eden. And yet, despite our best collective efforts to maintain and preserve our wild spaces, American expansion led to the continent becoming a wasteland, as many of the natural wonders and cultural landscapes were demolished to welcome settlement (Dunaway, p. 135). The oncoming of the expansion led a few conservation reformers to uncover innovative solutions for how the landscape could be preserved in the face of such catastrophic industrialization. The National Park Service has its conception in

1872, when the American Calvary was dispatched to the Yellowstone territory for the purpose of forming a visual presence to manage excessive poaching and logging practices that had been running rampant through the region. In addition, The Wilderness Society relied on the photography of Ansel Adams, who's panoramic photography of expansive landscapes served as a visual monument to bring Americans closer to nature, often coming in the form of the coffee table book (Dunaway, 2005). To display a visual medium promoting environmental reform was to take personal ownership in preventing the disappearance of wilderness.

For as long as the natural world has existed, the beauty it displays and the endless amount of freedom it advocates has drawn us in and desired to be gazed upon. With the most natural visions of the Frontier vanishing firmly into the past, humans turned to mechanical visions to document the land and continue interest (Dunaway, xviii). Ever since humans developed artistic aesthetics, we have been placing natural landscapes within frames (Harper & Rayner, 2010), from the earliest landscape paintings to modern-day cinematic narratives, visual schemata have long been used extensively for viewing and experiencing nature and further transformed the way we see the natural world (p. 34). And yet, while the amount of visual truth within a frame contains a wealth of information, the frame can never fully reproduce the authentic visual stimuli that of the full, original visual truth. The German romantic painter Carus criticized the frame point of view, stating:

“Look at the natural landscape in a mirror! You will see it reproduced with all its charms, all its colours, and shapes; but if you capture this reflection and compare it to the effect a finished work of art representing a landscape has on you, what do you notice?—It is obvious that the work of art falls short of the truth; for whatever it is that makes the beautiful natural shapes so charming, the colours so

luminous, it is never fully achieved in the painting. You experience at the same time the feeling that the authentic work of art constitutes a whole, a little world in itself; a reflection in retrospect will always appear to be a fragment, a part of infinite nature, detached from its organic links and circumscribed within its limits from nature”

(Salt, 1983 p. 42)

In other words, no matter our best efforts, human technology or artistic capabilities can never fully capture the sublime reality and authenticity of wilderness through a frame. Furthermore, our attempts to do so blur the line between reality and fiction. This is my attempt to evaluate, understand and describe how the discourse of visual media is breathing new life into the wilderness at the intersection of nature and culture.

### **Literature Review**

This research draws primarily from scholarship pertaining to the Frontier Myth and wilderness, as well as from Michel Foucault’s theoretical concept of biopower. To begin, the original American Frontier has its origins in seventeenth century Europe, when the early colonization began, seeking out a new world for the sake of “fructification in the name of progress, civilization, and Christianity” (Nash,1982 xii). For as long as the West has existed, there has been a looming desire to seek out its origins. Richard Slotkin states that the Myth of the Frontier “is our oldest and most characteristic myth, expressed in a body of literature, folklore, ritual, historiography, and polemics produced over a period of three centuries” (1973, p. 10). Conflict has always been central to the myth, as it brings about the achievement of progress, seen as “the redemption of American spirit of fortune as something to be achieved by playing through a scenario of separation, temporary regression to a more primitive or natural state, and “*regeneration through violence*” (1973, p. 12). When the Frontier was declared closed in 1890, a

result of U.S. Colonial practices, new Frontiers began opening that could be used as a symbol to promote American Nationalism (Slotkin, 1973 & Sturgeon, 2009).

The concept of wilderness in the United States has changed through almost three centuries of colonization periods. William Cronon's premier essay, *The Trouble with Wilderness*, thoroughly articulates how wilderness is a social construction, built out of ideology and colonization, as well as through the many interpretations of human gaze—from Thoreau to Muir, to Leopold and Abbey, all these interpretations played a role in symbolizing the frontier into mythology (1996). Some areas of wilderness reach iconic status based on their excessive perceptual interpretations of geologic landscapes in mass media. For example, the Grand Canyon has become a symbol etched into the minds of millions from “works of art, books, magazine accounts, calendars, stereographs, government reports, postcards, tourist guides and railroad advertisements” (Neumann, p. 5). These various visual interpretations assimilated together into the twenty-first century to establish a mythic identity of the Grand Canyon comprised of nature, culture, history, and narratives (p. 5-6). Visual representation of place embodies the power to establish geologic features as cultural icons meant to be consumed. This paper seeks to understand how society views wilderness from the re-mediation processes.

Landscape discourse has been studied meticulously by researchers from many different academic fields. The juxtaposition of landscape and social practices has been associated with W. J. T. Mitchell who characterizes landscape as a medium, represented by “painting, drawing or engraving by photography, film, and theatrical scenery[...] in which cultural meanings and values are encoded, whether they are put there by physical transformation of place in landscape [...] or found in a place formed, as we say, ‘by nature’ [...] landscape is already artifice in the moment of its beholding, long before it becomes the subject of pictorial representation” (2002,

p.14). Raad furthers this idea of how landscapes are socially constructed based on the relationships between people and their environment, “we make meaning of a landscape based on a mental viewpoint (2021 p. 102). The work of Tuan states that “since our thoughts organize and interpret the data we take in through our senses, landscape is a construct of the mind” (1979). These constructed dominant images of how a landscape should be viewed and interpreted are not by accident, but through the means of cultural production as articulated by Michel Foucault to produce reality, objects, and rituals of truth to produce power (2012, p. 194). Utilizing these constructs and bringing them into the mass culture has the opposite desired outcome, rather than displaying landscapes, and the wilderness to open interpretation, they are instead confined into a prisoner-like captivity, incapable of accurately and honestly portraying authentic reality and utilized for consumption.

With all the various channels of media, the mediatization of wilderness, and the replication of wilderness visuals, these postmodern mediation processes socially construct the way in which we view landscapes and other geological entities. What is lacking are foundational studies to understand how the creation of wilderness within a visual medium attempt to be manufactured and remade within reality. In some cases, Hollywood portrayals of wilderness have generated new tourist industries around the world, using film to serve as a representation of place and culture and allow for the virtual movie induced tourist experience (Tzanelli, 2007; Riley et al., 1998). John Shultis went further to understand the impact technology has on the wilderness, rather than understanding how wilderness is conveyed through technology, his findings revealed that technology is a powerful force that both enables and simultaneously, disables the wilderness, in addition to changing the overall meaning (2012). Other research based

in leisure indicates that societal and cultural forces create human-wilderness relationships through many methods including tourist encounters.

If wilderness really is to be utilized as a medium, it has undergone many different representations from the way they are interpreted in media. Naussauer argues that landscapes are more of a medium than a scenery based on how human development “anticipate the social and environmental implications of our incessant attempts to adjust nature and adjust to nature” (2012, p. 221). Vidon however argues that the wilderness used to be synonymous with authenticity, as “spatialized time” that disrupts “established routines, habits, and conventions and brings about renewed emotional experiences” (2018, p. 218). Since the earliest colonial times the American wilderness has gone from being represented as a place of known from savagery and void of ethical being, to a place of salvation and sublimity meant to remain untouched from civilization, and more recently to a status symbol that emphasizes tourism, self-promotion, and luxury living as a refuge for the upper class (McGaurr et al., 2015; Vidon, 2018; Cronon 1995). In other occurrences, places such Yellowstone National Park might convey a visual grammar of the wild pristine, but due to their societal drives for consumption, these iconic locations have become looted by many amateur tourists seeking to replicate a destination to a natural order that no longer exists (Rutherford, p. 122).

The wilderness is an idea, a social construction built out of numerous discourses manifested through many different mediums. One could spend a great deal of time trying to uncover how different forms of media create different representations of wilderness. This thesis's purpose is to understand how wilderness is manifested through television through the drama series, *Yellowstone*. Based on how the wilderness has changed identities to support the societal identities of people through simulation, this study asks: **(RQ)** How does *Yellowstone* understand

the concept of wilderness? And (RQ2), How does the concept of wilderness convey race, gender, and class, in *Yellowstone*? Further, this study hypothesizes that the show's images are inscribing new norms for what it means to be wild and how we should view wilderness through government influences. This forced reshaping has not just affected our visual ideas of what the wilderness is, but also demands "interdisciplinary and multifaceted knowledge-making and understanding on many scales... Yet each area of knowledge that fed into the new idea of the environment had its own history and set of techniques that in turn shaped the new understanding" (Warde et al., 2018, p. 4). This new historical era of postmodernism is currently constructing perceptions of what the wilderness is through various mediums, with representations that simulate a wild that does not exist. This study aims to uncover what current trends are taking place to change our perspectives of the wilderness and outright reinvent the natural world.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research study will use theoretical ideas surrounding biopower. Screens have long laid claim to serve as a window to the real world (Litwick, 2015, p. 47). Marshall McLuhan remains the seminal icon who ushered in the framework for media ecology, famously asserting that "the medium is the message," because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and form," transforming people and cultures through the content within the screen while becoming oblivious to the power that the medium takes hold over the potentials of life (McLuhan, p. 101; Valiaho, 2014). Simply put in other words, the technological instruments humans use to model communication processes simultaneously remodel us (Roncallo-Dow & Scolari, 2016, para 14). The technological instruments we use to remodel social and visual communication processes can reshape the way we see the world through a

metaphysical world of moving images (Ivakhiv, 2013). Ivakhiv's research has centered around the epistemology in which film worlds create media ecologies in the minds of viewers worldwide, moreover, his work attempts to understand the effects these fantasy worlds have on those that continually view and consume their pristine nature. What Ivakhiv immediately points out and is one of the biggest takeaways from this study, is that the world we experience and the world moving images portray are not the same world, but rather a new environment that can reach the heights of perfection through illusive techniques rather than what realistically exists in the human world (Preface, x, para 2). What all this does is formulate how humans formulate their own media ecologies within their own unique cognitive way of seeing, experiencing, and understanding from the visual image-worlds that have been constructed from all the various modes of visuality (Ivakhiv, 2013, p. 1). Where Ivakhiv's research comes up short is what transpires when media ecology crosses the boundary from fiction into reality. When media ecology is born on a screen, it gestates in the minds of viewers worldwide until it reaches the pinnacle of visual economy.

To understand how visuality constructs normative perceptions of dominant visuals and how populations come to view objects and space, we must examine the origins of the political uses of dominant images, as well as an image's relationship to power (Poole, 2013, p. 7). The physical environment's management deals with the changing of nature by making space governable. Warde et al. write that "in order to make things governable they must be visualized and organized, made legible and envisaged with sufficient information to make such steering possible" (2018, p. 160-161). In other words, if space is visualized for the masses to see, space must be modeled before it can be reworked and re-envisioned to allow certain power structures to be assembled within the material reality. Poole suggests adopting a visual economy as a way

of understanding the “production, circulation, and consumption” of images that leads to a re-imagining discourse and societal perceptions (Poole, p. 8). All images that portray wilderness settings belong to a visual economy. Pasi Valiaho’s research attempts to map how images frame and mediate our conceptual reality through a biopolitical apparatus that makes us see and experience the world in the manner we are told to normalize and adopt. Valiaho writes, “the visible domain of pictures and screens evokes the invisible realm of visualizations, beliefs, and affective engagements, and it is at the intersection of these two — the visual economy — that power becomes established and that political rule over territories and the minds and bodies of people is implemented” (Valiaho, 2014, p.6).

French Philosopher, Michel Foucault never wrote anything on nature or environmental issues (Alberts, 2013), and yet, his work on biopower has been written about through many different philosophers across many different fields. The idea of biopower first appeared in Foucault’s 1976 publication of *The History of Sexuality*, as a regulatory power over the management of life via the maintenance of populations—specifically “birth rates, life expectancy, health, and well-being” (Rutherford, xiii). Biopower was seen as power over life, whereas Foucault’s next main contribution of biopolitics was focused on “the power of life itself,” specifically, the subjectivities we structuralize in creating an identity (Rose, 2006). In lectures that Foucault delivered in at the College de France in 1978 and 1979, he introduced his ideas his ideas surrounding the term governmentality, an extension through his concepts of biopolitics that is understood to be seen as a set of “techniques and procedures for directing human behavior” (Rose et al., 2012, p. 83). Since its inception, the Foucauldian concept of biopolitics has been adapted and applied to every institution of society, crossing many different boundaries, from the practical, the theoretical, and the philosophical, in addition to encompassing

a multitude of operationalizations that a singular definition that comprises all subfield intersections is mostly non-existent (especially since Foucault tended to change the underlying meaning of biopolitics in his texts). Biopolitics extends to how the sciences, histories, and environments have changed discourse through many different forms of power from institutions and how they affect overall populations (Lawlor & Nale, p. 256). These power structures effectively create normative discourses within society and culture to manage all forms of social life, from the total population to the individual. What is ongoing is how and to what effect the role of governmentality works in shaping the way we look at the world, how we perceive the world, and what politics are at play in constructing our subjective imagination with what visual norms come to be undisputed. Foucault would agree that visibility does affect the formation of discourse, and that entertainment television aids in the production, as well as the reproduction, of social discipline through enculturating viewers to values and norms useful to the development of "docile" individuals and to the maintenance of hegemony in society (McCoy, 1988, p.72).

According to Foucault's concept, the population is the immediate vehicle for which biopower propagates, specifically through the sovereign state that administrates all regulation of life (Lemke, p. 4). Makarychev indicates that visual politics also fall into the sphere of the sovereign state, directly how the world is to be seen, stating "visual regimes as elements of statecraft, power relations, and sovereignty define how the world is seen, how our perceptions are anchored, and how images can be politicized, securitized, and weaponized" (Makarychev, p. 52). Indeed, the way images can inscribe populations into subjects based on their unique illustrative, material, and symbolic form that catches the eye has biopolitical ramifications that determine who and what gets to be seen. Visual biopolitics is a sub-field that has been

frequently associated with how media images animate certain populations more susceptible to social and environmental injustices based on how they are portrayed, both in journalistic media and entertainment. And yet, no matter how ethically images are handled and utilized, they can never truly represent a concocted idea, but merely a surface illustration that can capture the gaze. As Hariman writes, “images are seen as fragments of events and thus meaningless without verbal contextualization; they depict only the surface features of the world, rather than structure, complexity, or subjective depth; they activate merely emotional reactions that short-circuit critical reason; they “aestheticize reality” and promote voyeurism, nostalgia, and other fantasies; this capacity for enthrallment becomes a means for mass manipulation and political domination, creating a society of spectacles and scopic regimes” (2015, p. 240). Hariman furthers this by insinuating that images create caricatures that eliminate visual traits and hinder what is realistically considered visual truth.

The purpose of this thesis is to understand how visual discourses regarding certain cultural relics, such as wilderness, become widely accepted normative concepts through hegemonic representational practices. Biopower also extends its mediation to cerebral processes as well, using media and moving images to transform our minds and our world. The visual grammar encoded into moving images gives life to narratives that shape how populations view the world and their environments. Moreover, Giles Deleuze cited two very important observations in the power cinema holds over its viewer in relation to time, as well as its abilities to affect the viewer's modes of thinking, as well as the body. One of these observations was cinema's ability to place a viewer in an environment to give life to inanimate matter, and second was his pre-theorized way of linking images and signs to build a conceptual practice (Natalio, p.

108). What our conscious mind is submitted to, is what Deleuze refers to as a “technological simulation of conscience, that inaugurates the post-medial condition of ubiquity and the converging of digital encoding (Natalio 2015, p. 110). The theoretical model that Deleuze implies is that cinema dissolves moral thought processes and opens the mind up to the possibility of manipulation. With enough expansion, these forms of mediation may very well lead to the realization of Baudrillardian theories. However, while this study was initially tempered around cultural reconstruction from Baudrillardian theories of simulacrum of hyperreality, which is based on signifiers void of meaning, Larasati remains adamant that images that feature people, territory and geological features retain a historical connection to the past. Thus, while replica images of wilderness could shape the audience’s perception of reality, their historical context bear striking similarities to their predecessors, creating connections that audiences can recognize reality from hyperreality. Larasati maintains that visual biopolitics is less about producing empty signifiers, and more about preserving historical reality through visual narratives (2022, p. 12).

*Yellowstone* features this idea that only a certain select few of the population have the right to experience an untouched wild landscape. Many scenes from the series features various personalities from different backgrounds, a homesteader, an urban transplant, and an indigenous community all wanting sole access to the wild land that holds the power for reclaiming, maintaining and surviving their way of life. This is one of the primary stances German political scientist, Dietrich Gunst, made in his observations on biopolitics, stating “biopolitics embraces anything to do with health policy and the regulation of the population, together with environmental protection and questions concerning the future of humanity” (Lemke et al., 2011, p. 24). And yet, as Thoreau once proclaimed, “in wildness is the preservation of the world,” these individuals look to capture some form of value that has long since moved on from the

landscape (Vannini & Vannini, p. 22). This wild nature they seek to control, one that is already surrounded by boundaries and used for many different agriculture and social occurrences, is nothing more than an illusion. The wild left the wilderness long ago, confiscated by the various bodies seeking to preserve it and embodying it themselves. It is with this that I think biopower's attempts to control all aspects of life gives way to artificial realities, one where power usurps the natural from all resources and produces Baudrillard's simulacra, an alternative of what we were after and something entirely different.

### **Methods**

To better understand how wilderness is represented in media, this study incorporated a series of media text analyses to understand how the Frontier Myth is conveyed within the show, *Yellowstone*. Sturgeon declares, "to examine the frontier myth in U.S. popular culture means to examine a central narrative about violence, race, and gender that has constructed the United States' legitimacy as a nation" (2009, p. 56). All these narrative themes are represented within *Yellowstone* and were analyzed to understand how they represent the new frontier. The purpose of this study will attempt to define and uncover how the frontier structures as a visualized biopolitical society, how the frontier is visualized as setting within the show, and further elaborate the quality to which wilderness is structurally portrayed in regulating our understanding of nature, as well as how it features, race class, and gender. Kitses describes how social and cultural structures of wilderness and the frontier give rise to the mythologies that societies hold in belief (Needham, 2010). Bearing this, visuals were analyzed for structural elements and thematic underpinnings, as well as archetypal sets of characters found within films set within the frontier and how they reinforce the myth of wilderness. Currently,

*Yellowstone* consists of five fully produced seasons that feature fifty-three fully produced episodes, each up to one hour in length. All fifty-three episodes from each season were screened, along with an intensive note taking process for diagnosing visual and discursive structures of wilderness, as well as how the visuals construct or deconstruct the Frontier Myth, as identified by Sturgeon.

The Frontier Myth was introduced during the second screening of the show. Sturgeon's definition of the myth was highly influenced by Slotkin, who describes the myth as "an intertwined set of powerful ideas... that legitimated the process called "progress" by the conquerors and "conquest" by those subjected to it. The struggles against Indians and the domestication of the land, and violence was instrumental for survival and success...history is essentially the story of social evolution, seen as "progress," a process paralleling evolution" (2009, p. 54-55). In its most basic form of understanding, the myth centers around how one group colonized and conformed another group into their way of life. Deploying the Frontier Myth over wilderness opens numerous intersections where the myth coincides into Foucault's ideas of biopower, ranging from colonization, domination, and control, as well as culture commodification, exploitation of natural resources, subject formation and regulation of reproduction. All these themes are present in *Yellowstone* and quickly became the visual codes that were collected for the data set.

The coding method for this study aimed to uncover how the series *Yellowstone* utilized recurring themes related to the Frontier Myth and biopower. A deductive coding approach was incorporated utilizing the framework that Sturgeon writes about in constructing the Frontier

myth. This approach was chosen as many of the analyzed visuals reflected the following notions. Thematic analysis was introduced during the second half of examining the data set, and the subsequent second viewing. Described by Braun and Clarke as “a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set” the method quickly gained traction in helping to identify the themes being employed by the Frontier Myth (2012, p. 57). The first viewing of the show began before a finished proposal was submitted and featured an initial data set that contained fewer visual signifiers relating to the show's landscapes and more to the thematic discourse of the show's dramatic plots. This early pass was more concerned with discovering, recording, and plotting moments and scenes that featured exterior wilderness landscapes, as well as discourse that spotlighted any language that referred to anything that could be considered wild or natural. After changing research questions, from exploring **(RQ1)** how *Yellowstone* frames wilderness, to **(RQ2)** how *Yellowstone* explores the concept of wilderness in relation to race, gender, and class, an inductive analysis of the collected data was performed, combing through the initial notes with thematic elements often associated with the Frontier Myth. These observations revealed a higher correlation in that the Frontier Myth was undoubtedly the framework for the show.

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- Civilized Progress removing the natural, or “continued and expanding industrialization and commodification,” as well as the “concomitant destruction of natural resources and environments” (p. 55)
- Industrialized wilderness or discourse of visuals indicating that “primitive is inferior to the so-called developed or civilized” (p. 55).
- Thematic content relating to Manifest Destiny and colonialism, or white Americans having a “divinely ordained mission to “civilize” or “democratize” those (darker peoples who are believed to be less cultured and more natural, as well as to occupy and “improve” their land (p. 55). In the show, this is mainly featured through the villains.
- Territorial expansion, or “areas that white Americans may occupy...are in effect empty lands waiting for their use, a concept often accompanied by ideas of the land as female, fertile, rapable, and in need of being tamed” (p. 56).
- Regeneration through violence, or the conceptual idea that violence is a necessary transformative force needed to shape and structure the American experience (p. 55).
- Masculinization of American Character features all predominantly white settlers embodying traits that are seen as democratically masculine, honorable, hardy, innovative, individualistic, risk taking, and competitive to offset all challenges of the frontier” (p. 56).
- Feminization of American Nature, or the idea that “American nature, typically imagined as the mountains, plains, and rivers of the American West, is the prototypical arena necessary to produce American character” (p. 56). In this case, nature is seen as a feminine entity dominated by masculine bodies.

- Discourse or visuals relating to “American exceptionalism” or, “the assumption that the United States is not really imperialist or expansionist, merely a reluctant warrior; in other words, Americans fight only to uphold democracy and protect the weak, never to dominate, exploit, conquer or control” (p. 56).

The initial codes that were used to identify biopower had an inductive coding approach that were formulated from many different sources that were culled together throughout the first viewing (Rutherford 2011; Rutherford 2013; Lemke et al., 2013). The codes used to find biopolitical themes is detailed as follows:

- Power over life: One of the main ideas that derives from biopower is “making live and letting die.” This control over life comes in the form of the sovereign being able to extinguish life on its own accord, but also serves an industrial and agricultural production free of epidemics, disease, and famine (Lemke, p. 36).
- Regulation of population/reproduction or the idea of preservation of race or the idea that racial biologies are to remain wholesome, with no potential racial mixing taking place (Lemke, p. 12). Many types of sovereign power authorities take an active role in designating that laws, regulations, and policies are upheld to prevent unjust racial mixing. This also comes in the form demographic and geopolitical ramifications. Those who migrate to the state of Montana are considered invaders and must be dealt with adequately. Reproduction follows the same rhetoric, as disciplined reproductive behavior prevents the contamination of genetical purity.

- The governance and domination of objects into subjects: In its broadest terms, governmentality is “made up of techniques and procedures for directing human behavior” (Rutherford, 2013, xii). Yellowstone itself could be seen as a visual form of governmentality, one where the Frontier Myth is glorified as a national idea of subduing and taking over land, and exercising power over free subjects. Within the show, there are many other notions where biopower centers on controlling and regulating populations of the state. This can be in the most recognizable trait of legislative politics, down to agriculturalists controlling a herd or a body, as well as disciplinary behaviors that seek to normalize for the good of totality.
- Spatial dynamics: Space matters in biopolitical environments, and “different bodies (are) governed in different ways based on social markers like race, class, gender and sexuality” (Rutherford, 2013, xvii). Identifying the landscape of each space and the boundaries that surround these social markers can uncover where the boundaries and begin. The shaping of boundaries “as a regulated and unified system of marketable signs and images in which irregular and uncoordinated semiotic elements are treated as alien, foreign, and inappropriate, and therefore expelled. Through the lens of this concept, national identity appears as a complex semantic construct incorporating a wide range of visual products pertinent to culture, morals and ethics, memory politics, and borders” (Makarychev, p. 55).

While the literature on frontiers and wilderness is quite plentiful, operational definitions of each term can be difficult to navigate in articulating what constitutes each area as existing.

Turner noted “In the census reports it is treated as the margin of that settlement which has a

density of two or more to the square mile. The term is an elastic one, and for our purposes does not need a sharp definition. We shall consider the whole frontier belt, including the Indian country and the other outer margin of the “settled area” of the census reports” (1920, p. 3). The rise in population led to the closure of the frontier in 1890 after it was deemed the population density contained at least two people living per square mile (García-Jimeno & Robinson, 2008). Another issue in defining the frontier is that every country has its own unique set of understanding for what exactly constitutes the frontier. This study will rely on a different definition by Turner as “the meeting point between savagery and civilization” (p. 2). The Wilderness Act of 1964 defines wilderness as “A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” (1964, p. 71). The problem with this definition and many others like it, is that it is irrelevant in entertainment television based on the presence of human agents inciting dramatic conflict upon the landscape. In the pivotal essay “The Trouble with Wilderness,” Cronon argued that wilderness definitions always incorporated western dualisms, such as wilderness and civilization, that encourage that people buy into and support the myth of wilderness in civilized urban areas but continue in their environmentally destructive ways. While many other definitions like these exist, they focus more on the ideological and ontological rather than the structured visual of wilderness.

Constructing an operational definition of wilderness for this study has been a conundrum for many reasons. First, the non-human world is difficult to define, as the way civilizations change determines how we look at the natural world. Raymond Williams stated

that nature is the most complex word in the English language and the same can be said for many of the components- it is the greenery outside in the landscape. The operational definitions are presented as follows:

The definition of nature that is used for this analysis has a dualistic meaning and it derives from Sturgeon's interpretation, as the "presentation or legitimization force that authoritates truth, and rational order that supports the construction of inequality" (p. 12). Nature is all the phenomena that takes place in environmental and philosophical contexts—nature in the environment describes the forces for all entities outside of the human world. The philosophical context describes human nature "for understandings of human evolution, inherent human capacities for violence and sex and differences among humans" (Sturgeon, p. 17). The process of naturalization is an adjective that can have the same cultural arrangement as legitimation, and "may deploy or depend on a dualism of gender, race, or national status that assigns certain groups to a more "natural" or inferior status, or it may not" (Sturgeon, p. 12). The Frontier Myth also embodies a wealth of definitions, but for the purpose of this study uses the version put forth by Sturgeon as well, which states that the myth comes from "the idea that continued American conquest is a form of natural progress, supported by the assumption that there is an evolutionary drive to develop pristine nature and civilize 'savage' peoples" (p. 82). The frontier represents a region outside of civilization that is unsettled and undeveloped. Wilderness is the area and space between civilization and the frontier. Reproduction has one definition, but the term is used to describe two different contextual forms: the biological and the artistic aesthetic.

At its most basic founding principle, reproduction serves as the copying or duplication of the original. What each has in common is maintaining details to the original, but both take liberties and changing, for better or for worse, the original item. One is the societal form of reproduction, which seeks to understand how we reproduce people, families, cultures, societies, and the planet (Sturgeon, p. 121). The other is the visual artistic form of reproduction which recreates reality from something that already existed and is judged by its authenticity to the original (Nichols, p. 9). This form of reproduction is often digital and often strives to maintain details that are faithful to the original but takes liberties where changes can enhance the source. For example, *Yellowstone* is considered a reproduced medium due to its basis as a fictional source presenting modern issues in present-day Montana and puts a contemporary perspective on it that creates dramatic entertainment. Representation is about reality, usually about someone or something that happened and frequently strives for objective interpretation rather than subjective perspective. Visual representation attempts to keep imagination at minimum, relying on truthful depiction rather than duplication. In the case of this study, many of the images used to display issues relating to territorialization, racism, gender, sexuality, and agriculture, these issues are not accurately represented based on their portrayal within the show. Many of these complications truthfully are problems that need to be addressed, not just in Montana. But considering how the show reproduces in favor of representing, almost all of the societal issues have been altered to allow for dramatic effect to the point the show approaches the hyperreal.

The visual is what is presented before us. It is an assemblage of signified meanings that make up the overall visual interpretation using images. I use the term 'images' in its most

technical form, as Merriam Webster's dictionary defines the word as "a visual representation of something" that also embodies "popular conception," "vivid or graphic representation," and "an impression of something." The images of *Yellowstone* encompass all these concepts. Montana is a visual symbol of national identity and *Yellowstone* is one signifier that makes up an area of visual relation that can be used to interpret the cultural landscape. This form of seeing is not natural, and it creates more questions surrounding the context of how much visibility stems from actual truthful sources versus reproduced interpretations.

### **Analysis & Discussion**

Language and visuals produce reality, and in the case of wilderness as it is portrayed in the neo-western television show, *Yellowstone*, the reality of wilderness is less of a symbol representing undeveloped, uncultivated, and free landscape, but framed as a cultural reproduction full of societal interpretations and meanings (Nash, 1982 & Barnes, 2009). *Yellowstone* frames wilderness as a modern-day tragedy, telling a reimagined story of the discovery of the *new world*, one where settlers still encounter savages, hostilities exist over colonial conquest, and war continues to rage over the defending of land. What sets *Yellowstone* apart from many other neo-westerns is that it is produced with a phenomenological and ontological lens that acknowledges its setting in the Anthropocene as the primary threats to the show's ecological world. The world is one where many social intersections merge into themes regarding natural environments as very fragile, enviously coveted, rooted in class, gender, race, nation, and deeply political. Modern day Montana serves as the setting for the series, and though the Montana produced within the images coincides less with reality and more of the imaginative hyperreal, where the artificial meets reality, the series creates an illusive fantasy from fact (Gunning & Harper, 2010). Embedded

within the narrative's revisionist relationality is an overarching theme that the natural is becoming obsolete due to the modern rise in global western thought—one that removes all elements of naturalness and putting in its place biopolitical elements of progress, development, governance, and globalization. This translation of space into place offers a troubled, and bewildering stance on what wilderness is and how it should be seen and viewed through entertainment images in modern civilization and society. This stance against biopolitical themes is what drives the dramatic narrative forward throughout the show, producing the reality for how audiences accept what wilderness is, how it should be used, and most importantly, who gets to use it.

*Yellowstone* is a concocted tale that features the 'Frontier Myth', a frequently used concept in entertainment where characters brave the primitive space between civilization and the unoccupied frontier amidst a backdrop of westward expansion and hegemonic culture reset. Sturgeon writes of the frontier myth that "the concept of the frontier always assumes a boundary between something called civilization and something called wilderness. In the American imaginary in which the western frontier is the mark of our nation's character, "civilization" is symbolized by the white cowboy, gunfighter, or lawman, while wilderness is symbolized by Indians." (2009, p. 53). Often regarded as the catalyst for American Nationalism, the myth utilizes attitudes and anxieties of Euro-American settlers attempting to overcome hardship in a precivilized land while displacing indigenous people is a natural process that is part of the progression that resembles manifest destiny (Slotkin, 1973; Sturgeon, 2009; Nash, 1982). *Yellowstone* flips this model, presenting wilderness in a "post-frontier" setting, one where wilderness has been conquered, developed, and urbanized and what lingering areas of wilderness remain intact, man attempts to keep it pure by defending it from modern progress. Central to the

myth is the critical point where the civilized meets the primal uncivilized, often in the form resembling the American savage, where settlers attempt to colonize, restructure, and recultivate indigenous tribes to adopt civilized modern ways to render them useful in society, or face banishment from their native lands. As a Shoshone delegate wrote in 1865, “wild Indians, like wild horses, must be corralled upon reservations,” *Yellowstone* begins at a moment, where all social groups are occupied to their own specified and bounded region (Jacoby, 2014, p. 119). Historically, many films that feature the frontier myth present space and landscape as an entity in need of being conquered by man, or as Slotkin stated, through the use of “regeneration through violence” (Slotkin, 1973).



Figure 3. The intermediate Dutton Family. John Dutton, Center (played by Kevin Costner). Kaycee Dutton left (played by Luke Grimes). Jamie Dutton, back center (played by Wes Bentley). And Beth Dutton, right (played by Kelly Reilly).

This regenerated frontier myth is a biopolitical landscape pertaining to Michel Foucault’s concept of biopower, or the sovereign’s ability to exert regulatory control, governmentality, and management over morality through the manifestation of power and dictating who is able to live and exist within the modern environment (Mbembe, 2019; Rutherford, 2011). *Yellowstone* offers an important reconceptualization of what it means to think about managing wilderness, serving

as a site where those that preserve the natural landscape preserve the American soul and identity (Dunaway, xv). Rutherford writes that “territory is more than merely land, but a rendering of the emergent concept of space as a political category: owned, distributed, mapped, calculated, bordered, and controlled”—in other words, governmentality doesn’t always derive from controlling the population, but from the territory as well (Rutherford, 2013). Furthermore, an entertainment show forces the viewer to orient themselves cognitively and bodily in relation to their own worlds, specifically “in ways that support the hegemony and expansion of the US settler and imperial state within the parameters of the optimization and maximization of white life,” based on the images one consumes (Wander; Ivakhiv). Visual biopolitics is a concept equipped to plug national identities for societies in political crisis through the politicization of territory via visual images, enticing viewers to phenomenologically align themselves with hegemonic images that favorably portray white triumph on the frontier (Wander, 2021; Ezerova, 2023). This vision of white supremacy in the wilderness and racial hierarchy sets up normalized ideologies of who rightfully belongs in the wilderness, and who is considered a ‘other.’

## *Territorializing Wilderness*



Figure 4. The *Yellowstone* ranch embodies some of the last remaining pristine wilderness in the show and designates who is allowed to have access to such space.

*Yellowstone* attempts to create an alliance between the pure, sublime, untouched wilderness, and the heteronormative, patriarchal nuclear family (see figure 4). Raymond Williams attributes 'nature' as being "the most complex word in the English language, (i) the essential quality and character of something; (ii) the inherent force which directs either the world or human beings or both" (p. 164-165). Nature and culture, though not immediately the same concepts, share a relatively consecution of implications, one frequently being that anything that is deemed natural is often seen as being ideal and being structured as normative in western society through the dominant use of mediated imagery (Ivakhiv, p. 77). Normativity is often derived from sovereignty, and western society has celebrated the reproducing of the

heterosexual patriarchal family as the most stable, divine and normative family structure that has become the most widely accepted dominant family structure in America—any other identity outside of this network is considered foreign and treated as such in a hostile manner. One of the subplots of *Yellowstone* revolves around John Dutton examining his family for who will take over running his ranch when he is no longer capable of doing so. And yet, the nuclear family that John Dutton longs for seems like a disappearing reality—a Baudrillardian simulated truth of the past that can never be fully realized. John's wife Evelyn is deceased, and often indicated that her death sparked the fall of the natural family structure; his oldest son, Jamie, is revealed to be adopted in season three; his daughter, Beth, has been rendered infertile of her child bearing capabilities; his youngest son, Kaycee, was cast out of the family after impregnating a native woman; and Lee, the son who was the closest to a biological clone to John dies from a gunshot wound in the pilot episode. In *Yellowstone*, the nuclear family is portrayed as a distorted truth.

The *Yellowstone* Ranch featured in the show embodies one of the frames of representation the Vannini's describe through wilderness and national identity. The ranch serves as a mythological symbol comfortably nestled on the edge of large valley, surrounded by meadows that leads into a rugged mountain landscape (the mountain landscape being the modern-day Bitterroot mountains in western Montana), and known primarily through its large barn that visually displays a large 'Y' for Yellowstone. The ranch serves as a powerful national symbol of a dying demographic, one where the wild settings reveal the generation's foundational nature through cultural norms, values, and life practices that relate to rugged individualism (Vannini & Vannini, p. 85). Even the name, Yellowstone, conjures up a wealth of emotions that

harken back to Roland Barthe's ideas surrounding mythologies, postulating a relation between American national identity through Yellowstone National Park. Rutherford refers to the discursive structure of the word Yellowstone as a "nostalgia machine," and further indicating that the term harkens back "to the halcyon days of western expansion in the United States and serves as a monument to the nationalism, the frontier, and wilderness" (2011, xx). Known for its status as the first National Park, Yellowstone became home to some of the most sublime, and culturally significant wilderness landscapes in the nation, the result of our democratic practices declaring that some places should be left alone. Under this umbrella of pristine space includes a multitude of unifying factors that create identity, including "common space, a collective history and memory, relations with nature and god, visions of the future, prideful national politics and a collective self-image" (Vannini & Vannini, p. 85). The nostalgic visual myth What this results in is a collective image making process that results in what Mirzoeff refers to as "white-seeing space" which erases preexisting culture and distributes new absolute ownership based on visibility (Mirzoeff 2021). In the case of *Yellowstone*, the visual favors the settlers as the rightful rulers of the land, not just as Americans, but as stewards that see to it the land remains natural. The settlers in the series operate under the now iconic symbol of a 'Y', short for *Yellowstone*, which presumably is less associated with the nationhood of wilderness and more alongside ideas of violent domination. This symbol has become signified in place in pop culture and is frequently on display in areas of Montana and the Rocky Mountain region.

The overarching main recurring plot element in *Yellowstone* is the intrahuman conflict between various American stereotyped characters, including the settlers, the natives, and the urban developers, and their virtuous historical backgrounds that they embody or exploit for the purpose of seizing and retaining control of the wild landscape. Historically, these tensions have

been recurring issues in Montana dating back to the nineteenth century. The show features settlers living on land that was taken from the Native Americans, that they are trying to avoid losing to 'out-of-staters' with private interests. For any viewer that finds their way to the series, most streaming platforms (and in the case of the Peacock streaming service) images used to outwardly promote, and grab viewer attention frequently use thumbnails featuring a strong and defiant Kevin Costner dressed in western attire that is reminiscent to that of a sheriff. Immediately, the image sets a subjective precedent in the subconscious that the white male will be positively portrayed as the most virtuous and who the audience should sympathize with. What these plot devices and image productions do is set a visual biopolitical standard in the American subconscious as to who gets to rightfully live in certain spaces and who is treated as a hostile outsider based on how each group is humanized within the images. Urban developers and transplants from liberal regions of the U.S. are routinely constructed as antagonists in the show, and often dehumanized based in the way they are framed, often partaking in some activity in a manner that is considered disrespectful based on their civilized roots and creating a clash of cultures. Slotkin points out that many western films often deem those that are the closest to nature often retain moral character, a narrative idea that favorably portrays the Dutton family throughout the series (1973, p. 248). Overall, *Yellowstone* creates recognizable characters from the incorporation of stereotypes to explore post-frontier themes related to identity, culture, and conflict.

The value of land is a theme frequently questioned from the pilot episode and through all fifty-three episodes. There are many reasons why landscape is valued and sought after. In essence, humanity is a fallen kingdom, and trying to recapture a lost relic of the past. It is the story of the garden of Eden, when man was removed from a place that considered to be perfect.

It is that perfection that the characters see in the ownership of land, that by possessing a vast, pure, and fully intact quantity of territory, humanity can start over and reestablish a new natural democratic process, righting all the mistakes of the past. The wilderness within the *Yellowstone* ranch is occupied territory under a constant state of siege. The ranch itself could be viewed as a military institution, whereas Mbembe puts it, “allows for a modality of killing that does not distinguish between the external and the internal enemy” (2019, p. 82). Because of this crisis, it is worth noting that the characterization of the show can be broken up into three different segments: the settlers, the Natives, and the transplants (another term for others). All three groups desire the territory and place value on it for their own virtuosic agendas—the transplants want to progress the land forward, remaking it into a new image to rectify the downfall of modern-day society. The settlers want the land to remain stagnant, with no need to progress the landscape forward, and the natives are intent on taking what was once rightfully theirs back and restoring it to its once primal state. Indeed, the cultural background of the human intruder influences how their gaze reflects what they see, yet what they all have in common is a desire for freedom, to live their lives in the manner they desire.

The frontier myth presented in *Yellowstone* comprises all sorts of American made cultural arrangements that are not to be disturbed or broken. This is done discursively through the characters, as much of the scripted dialog revolves around inequality, power, and oppressive structures, as well as aesthetically displayed through many of the thematic subplots promoting the securing and sustainability of the heterosexist family structure, but also visually in its most literal form as many episodes feature cowboys building fences to maintain divisions and keep out some unseen force. The boundaries that contain natural wilderness apply to this logic as well, land is to remain in its most natural state, and not to be developed or progressed into anything

other than what has always been. Historically, the Hollywood western “claims landscape and the frontier for its symbolic meaning... to translate geographical spaces and bodies into epic mythologies and concepts of freedom (Needham, p. 45-46). A careful examination of Hollywood western films will reveal that the genre favorably portrays right wing values and heterosexual family structures. A television show, such as *Yellowstone*, serves to reproduce and normalize ideas about what constitutes the most naturalized. From the obvious plot pieces, centering around which land belongs to which group of people, to which groups of people are allowed to live within Montana, *Yellowstone* encodes a geographic territorial ontology that underlies many sociological binaries—cowboy vs. Indian, man vs. woman, heterosexual vs. homosexual, conservative vs. liberal, old vs. new, natural vs. invasive, etc. Every season of the show concentrates on the Dutton family fighting off an outside force from stealing their land and disrupting the order of life. From the moment the show introduces the Dutton's, they are depicted as a flawed family, living in the shadows of their ancestral past where modernity is threatening to kill the one thing that has remained intact for over six generations, their large wealth of untouched wild landscape. What I propose is the significance within the desire to keep the wilderness natural, and what the entire series effectively conveys literally and metaphorically is that the survival of natural wilderness symbolizes the survival of the American nuclear family.

## *Racializing Wilderness*



Figure 5. Monica Dutton, (played by Kelsey Asbille) glances across the fictitious Broken Rock Indian Reservation. The indigenous environments are often portrayed as decaying and desolate compared to other environments.

Wilderness was always inherently Indian before the arrival of European civilizations brought the moral landscape that created the divisive conflict on the frontier. *Yellowstone* makes attempts to usurp the history of native genocide and oppression in favor of white space and white victimization using plots that come in the form of land disputes, cultural differences, and historical differences. Slotkin describes these divisions as wilderness/civilization, and Indian/white, citing that the “conquest of wilderness and the subjugation or displacement of the Native Americans who originally inhabited it have been the means to our achievement of a national identity, a democratic polity, an ever-expanding economy, and a phenomenally dynamic and “progressive” civilization (Slotkin, p. 10). In other words, removing the Natives from their native lands was instrumental in shaping the national identity of American wilderness as it is currently known (See figure 5). Historically, the Frontier Myth has been frequently employed to affirm white settler ascendance in western expansion. Changing the history of the natives and wilderness, as Jacoby effectively states some of “the earliest authors accounts of the Yellowstone

region literally wrote Indians out of the landscape, erasing Indian claims by reclassifying inhabited territory as empty wilderness” (Jacoby, 2014, 117). *Yellowstone* the series takes the liberty of doing this exact phenomenon in a multitude of ways, it also attempts to revision, reinvent, and reshape the issues into a modern backdrop. In the pilot episode, protagonist John Dutton inquires to his youngest son, Kaycee Dutton, that he wishes to have a relationship with his half-blood grandson. Kaycee was born on the ranch and remained until John kicked him off for defying the family by impregnating his future native wife, Monica—an event never visually shown, but merely referred to. Kaycee reluctantly agrees to let John have a role in Tate’s life and brings him to the ranch for day of riding, wrangling, fishing, and riverside barbecue. Upon their arrival, Kaycee has Tate dressed in western attire, similar to what the cowboys wear daily, effectively identifying him as one of the white civilized westerners and erasing his heritage. When Kaycee lets their presence be known, John approaches his grandson inquiring if he knows how to ride a horse. Tate responds, “of course I do, I’m Indian.” John pays this statement no attention, almost seemingly ignoring it to proclaim that identity has no merit on this day, “today you are a cowboy,” he declares effectively exterminating his cultural ancestry and using his sovereign right to remake him in the image of that who conquered the frontier.

The actual production has other opportunities to rightfully correct history when given the opportunity but makes no effort to do so. The ranch that serves as the primary setting for the series is called the Yellowstone Dutton Ranch, when it is in fact called Chief Joseph Ranch, and its location is on the western side of the state in Montana, roughly two-hundred miles from where the show claims it to be. The ranch gets its name from the Nez Perce leader, Chief Joseph, renowned for his defiance of the U.S. western expansion during the American Indian Wars of the 1870s. While the ranch serves as a symbol of Joseph’s leadership and resilience to maintain his

way of life in the face of uncertainty, the show re-envisioning it as a place for white masculine modernization from what is almost a reverse show of history, where white people are being infringed upon and forced to give up their lands and way of life.

Because of the hostile and aggressive portrayal of Native Americans, viewers are less inclined to sympathize with the longstanding history of indigenous oppression and empathize with white characters. The conflict between Western expansion and indigenous culture is still relevant in the modern depiction set in the show and is very much on display as one of the driving forces of the narrative. Boundaries are never to be crossed, and any attempt to do so is meant with hostility. In the pilot episode, after Dutton's cattle have wandered off onto lands that are controlled by the natives, the cowboys devise a plan to move the cattle back on to Yellowstone Ranch land, using a tactic that is frequently employed in most western films, a raid. However, instead of incorporating common western tropes of horses and six-shooter pistols, common to the John Ford golden age of westerns, these cliched symbols have been replaced for a massive motorcade of law enforcement vehicles, Kevlar vests, and automatic weapons. The rustic raids of the past have been replaced with militarist visuals. While the sequence follows these riders on their way to engage with their cattle thieves, the sequence features the motorcade exiting onto Montana State Highway 43, the road that will take any driver to the Big Hole Battlefield—the site of the last major armed conflict between the Native Americans and the U.S. military in August 1877. This is significant because the Nez Perce lost the battle, resulting in eight-hundred survivors roaming through the wildernesses of Montana, Idaho and Wyoming in their attempt to make it to the Canadian border before surrendering to U.S. authorities in what became one of the last acts of defiance on the American Frontier. *Yellowstone* inserts this tiny visual detail during a scene where both the Natives and the Cowboys prep to meet in a

confrontation. It comes after Kaycee is told to leave his home on the reservation and return to his father's ranch, as regardless of what happens, he will be judged by the actions of his father, alluding to generational enmity that occupies the land. The scene itself sets a haunting tone for what is to come, two different groups of people on a collision course with each other, each visually showing their force in strength over muted frontier, covered by a somber soundtrack of Pusifer's *Tumbleweed*—it's as if they are alluding to the past that is still relevant, as if the legacy of the frontier has materialized in a ghostly trance. The landscapes are historically encoded with racial violence keeping the past alive. It is especially important considering that the early seasons were shot in Utah and despite the vast distances in location, the filmmakers still felt the need to shoot the convoy on such a historic location. While the conflict is played up in the show, the landscapes are still coded with historical memories between the settlers and Natives. Seeing and treating each other as a threat when boundaries are unceremoniously crossed, governmental and law enforcement agencies incite political war as means of cultural asunder.

One of the central themes the series explores is that white patriarchal culture must not disappear in the same way indigenous culture did. From the pilot episode, *progress* is seen as the modern force that the Dutton's are out to stop from changing the natural way of life in Montana. The dualistic rhetoric however is that racialization is still the motivating factor that confines certain characters to intended environments. Since the invention of the Hollywood Western, the portrayal of Native Americans has undergone many extensions from the noble savage to the ecological Indian. Ironically, these portrayals, have the opposite desired effect—rather than embracing Native culture, these stereotypes homogenize actual identities through idealization of wishful thinking as a product of white liberal guilt (Ingram, 2000, p. 46). These portrayals frequently depict Native Americans as cliché beings “of redemptive nature, a source of solace

from the damage caused by white, militaristic and environmentally polluting U.S. society,” while white settlers are frequently portrayed as morally righteous beings on the right side of good (Sturgeon, p. 57). *Yellowstone* both continues and inverts this stereotype, in that the Natives still maintain a spiritual connection to the land they seek to reclaim, but the show also portrays the cowboys as supreme ecologically friendly beings keeping nature and wilderness naturally intact. Ironically, the Native Americans are frequently framed as political aggressors looking to take back the land that was stolen from them, a subplot that depicts the Dutton family as victims when in historical terms, Natives have always been oppressed at the hands of white society.

American entertainment has reshaped the Native American stereotype on two different occasions. The first was noble savage, which was a romanticized portrayal of indigenous people living in harmony with nature, and the second was the ecological Indian, a term that emerged out of the environmental movement during the twentieth century that signified Natives as stewards of the land. While these concepts do appear in *Yellowstone* in their portrayal of the Native Americans, the concepts seemingly apply more towards the Dutton’s than the Natives. Many of John Dutton’s frequent philosophical observations on the state of modernity imply that the environment is a fragile entity, endangered of disappearing due to anthropocentric ways of human-domination being employed across the land. In Season 1, At a gala dinner for all the agricultural farmers in Montana, John addresses the crowd by conveying that all the Dutton’s are buried in a field on the ranch. “When a tree grows on the ranch, he knows what fed it. Ranching is only business where the goal is to break even and survive another season. Last long enough for your children to continue the cycle, and maybe the land is still theirs when a tree sprouts from you” (S1E6). While this statement has elements of civilization and domestication, it contains more analogous language to the longstanding Native American virtue of living with the land,

rather than off it. In another episode in the second season (S2E5), Kaycee confronts antagonist Dan Jenkins over a longstanding quarrel related to Jenkins wanting to build a housing development in the valley where the Yellowstone ranch sits. In a moment that sounds ironic coming from a cowboy, Kaycee tells Jenkins “We just want to live our lives the way we’ve been living them for the last hundred years and you keep coming here and trying to take that away from us!” This scene displays a trope that was present in Kevin Costner’s previous frontier epic, *Dances with Wolves*, where “the white man becomes the Indian and through contact with indigenous society engages in an act of rejection of his own history (Sturgeon, p. 71-72). The concept of the white man usurping the transgressed identity becomes blatantly obvious in a scene in S3E1, following a string of events that resulted in six men being killed in raids, Kaycee’s son Tate being kidnapped, and all while facing the looming possibility of losing the ranch—Monica reminds John of the shift in how one group of people replaced another by observing “when this land belonged to my people a hundred and fifty years ago, children were stolen and men were killed. Families were herded away like cattle. And nothing's changed, except you’re the Indian now.” This usurpation of history visualizes white society in the central focus as victims amidst the second wave of westward expansion.

The white space landscapes are visually portrayed as healthier than those of the reservation, which are portrayed as desolate and decaying. The Broken Rock Indian reservation is set on a desolate impoverished arid plain where lush vegetation and water is scarce. To live on the reservation, is to live a life on the reservation, is an upbringing that could be considered reprehensible, where structures favor necropolitics due to the unfavorable living conditions. Infrastructure is crumbling, requiring most residents to live in manufactured mobile homes that are placed on the landscape. Chairman, Thomas Rainwater (played by Gil Birmingham)

embraces a vision that the primal lands that were taken from his people can be bought back by building large expansive reservation casinos and motels on the land, further distancing the tribe from the way of life they once knew and creating an environment that aligns with a modern simulacrum. This is juxtaposed against the Dutton Ranch which is expansive to the horizon. Surrounded by wilderness, mountains, flowing streams, meadows, and woodlands, in every direction, the ranch embodies a world of prosperous life. One thing I found interesting about the interior of the ranch house was the lack of windows and the dark ominous environment. The Dutton's might live in a sublime landscape, yet they seem uninterested in looking at it within the interior of their home. It is as if the landscape stops being landscape and becomes property and once an object has become subjected to property, it stops being looked at as a symbol of freedom and through a lens of enslavement.



Figure 6. Tate Dutton (played by Brecken Merrill) speaks to his great grandfather Felix Long (played by Rudy Ramos) on the Broken Rock Indian Reservation.



Figure 7. Tate Dutton speaks to his grandfather, John Dutton on the Yellowstone Ranch .

Other U.S. Frontier conflicts put white men and natives on the same side of expansion, but still in vastly different contested territories. Historically, the U.S. military has been framed in entertainment in a negative manner as the destroyer of indigenous culture, and the onset of imperialism (Adams, 2009). To counter this stereotype, the entertainment industry made a slew of films beginning in the early 90s and into the 2000s (*Dances with Wolves*, *The Last Samurai*, *Hidalgo*), that depicted a good U.S. military man that can reverse, or somehow lessen the destruction that militarism had in causing the disappearance of Native Americans (Sturgeon, 2009, p. 74). In the pilot episode, Kaycee Dutton, an ex-Navy Seal, lives on the Broken Rock Indian reservation with his wife Monica and his son, Tate. At this point in the series, a herd of cattle belonging to the Dutton Ranch have wandered over into the Broken Rock Reservation—the cowboys claim they were stolen by cutting the fence, the natives claim the cattle wandered on their own accord, it is never fully articulated who is right or wrong. In one

scene, after the cattle have wandered to the wrong side and the Dutton's are at odds with the Natives, Monica's brother-in-law and ex-military serviceman, Robert, joins Kaycee's family for dinner one night at their residence on the Reservation. In the scene, Robert begins to detail what he will do when the Natives divvy up the Yellowstone ranch cattle between the tribe, a topic that immediately causes Kaycee to go on the defense by stating that the cattle are not his to divvy. While both men are different in their cultural upbringing, they share a unique bond by both being former military servicemen, a bond that is frequently portrayed as transcending race and culture. In this case, the divisions are still bitter, with both men reflecting on how many men they killed in war to obtain service medals. This scene highlights that the ordeal to "militarizing" indigenous people into white society does not remove the historical complexities of deep-seated grievances and competing visions for the future.

*Yellowstone* naturalizes the white patriarchal family as the most righteous family structure for maintaining reproduction, anything that does not meet these criteria is outside the realm of what is considered normal, is considered unnatural, and dehumanized. Sturgeon points out that villains in eco-entertainment routinely lack reproductive abilities and the means to maintain steady families, "typically embody(ing) a sexualized other, a nonreproductive unnatural upper-class twit, often limp-wristed, unpatriotic and seen as a subversive to the nuclear family" (Sturgeon, p. 109). Sturgeon writes that in the genre of eco-entertainment, "the figure of the evil male homosexual often inhabits the villains" that are found from geopolitical areas considered to be more liberal such as the coastal communities (p. 111). For example, the primary antagonist through the first two seasons is land developer, Dan Jenkins, a capitalist from Southern California who is determined to build a housing community right next to the Yellowstone property boundary. Jenkins is never outed for being a homosexual male; based on the way that

he attempts to form a perfidiousness relationship with John's daughter, Beth. However, there are multiple visual clues featured in the show based on his relationship to the natural land he ravenously desires. Needham writes that "homosexuality as long been the secret of the western", often displaying the male in its most virile and desirous form, as well as creating a connection to the western landscapes through homoeroticism (p. 56). Jenkins clearly feels a sense of freedom by looking at the natural landscape in Montana, something he lacked and felt confined without in California. Meanwhile, Jenkins's wife, Victoria, is out of place in Montana, preferring civilization over rural landscapes that creates a division between her and Dan that leaves her clearly unsatisfied. In a scene from the first season, Victoria is finally shown a good time after having a wild encounter with Beth at a bar that leaves her feeling reinvigorated. Dan knowing that Beth is out to destroy his family, promptly leaves with Victoria in tow, retreating to their luxury home where Victoria strips down to her underwear and asks Dan to make love to her. Dan responds by telling her to go to bed, clearly with no interest in his wife at all. Most scenes that feature Dan and Victoria, while very few were produced, all of them display a deteriorating relationship. Alternatively, the series features Jenkins more frequently in scenes with strong, powerful men engaging him in topics ranging from greed and politics, all of which appear to profusely excite Jenkins. One scene in season two features Jenkins learning how to shoot a gun from a hired bodyguard, and ecstatically proclaiming that he "feels like a god" once he learns how to take life. While not entirely definitive in queering Jenkins' sexuality, his character does carry some connotations of homosexuality.

A second example of the evil homosexual stereotype comes in the form of a homosexual undercover journalist, named Sarah Nguyen, from an unspecified New York magazine, vacationing in Montana with her girlfriend when she reads a newspaper article on the Indian raid

John Dutton conducted to retrieve his cattle. Later, Nguyen has a brief encounter with John on a river, where she recognizes him as the man from the raid. There's no dialogue in the scene, but ominous tense music and slow meaningful cuts of the two looking directly at each other suggest some form of recognition. No further reasoning is given, but the aspiring journalist seizes the opportunity to write an article that will expose the Dutton empire. Nguyen begins by posing as a staffer in Jamie Dutton's election staff during his run for Montana's Attorney General to create a tie to the family. After Jamie chooses his political career over the family, John disbars him from ever returning to the ranch and in his frantic state, chooses to go through with the interview to give up damaging information he has that could incriminate his father and lose the ranch. Eventually John and Jamie reconcile, and Jamie is forced to stop Sarah from printing the story at all costs, a matter he takes into his own hands by luring her into the wilderness where he strangles her to death. Afterward, with the help of Rip and Walker, the trio dump her lifeless remains in an overturned kayak in a river to make her death look like a recreational accident. This subplot is troubling because of its insinuation that Nguyen's attempt to expose the Dutton family is an egregious attack on nuclear family values. A second reason comes from the recurring social issue within the show that human migration finding its way into the wilderness is a contentious problem because it destroys the way of life it sanctifies. The recurring narrative of urban east coast populations being blamed for gentrifying and overrunning rural places is a common social consensus that results in dehumanizing transplants that seek out the freedom of the wilderness. And lastly, in an era where journalists have dubbed 'enemies of the people,' a white heterosexual man strangling the life out of a homosexual female journalist of Asian descent loudly affirms that America's most natural locations, which have been conveyed as sites

of liberation, still restrict those that don't fall in line with the naturalized heteronormative nuclear family.

Foreign bodies are given the same treatment that the Indians and members of the incorrect gender receive, addressed as uncivilized characters lacking in awareness to and needing white guidance on how to properly conduct themselves in natural landscapes. While their presence has always played a role in the history of immigration upon the American wilderness, minorities are mostly written out in *Yellowstone*, favoring the cowboy vs. Indian narrative instead. Racism is never outright verbally addressed in the show, but merely ignored except in one key scene. The opening scene of Episode 6, Season 1 features a group of Chinese tourists that have crossed a fence on the Yellowstone Ranch to admire a large Grizzly Bear. John Dutton sees this reckless act while passing by and attempts to get in between the bear and the group, wielding a rifle and proclaiming that the group has trespassed in addition to being outright ignorant of the dangerous situation. When John attempts to move them back toward their tour bus, he is met by a Mandarin translator which informs himself as being the owner of the property and that they are all breaking the law. When one tourist steps forward to challenge John's claim, questioning how one man can own so much land and how it should be shared, John responds by firing the rifle into the air, sending the tourists scrambling back to their bus and immediately states "this is America, we don't share land here." As Amin-Hong agrees, this one scene effectively reveals the modern era of "how racism has alienated Asian-Americans and other people of color from land, rendering the environment hostile to nonwhite settlers" (2023, p. 407). Further, *Yellowstone* signifies white land ownership as naturally, historically, and culturally recognized truth that white bodies can enforce settler militarism through hostile and racial acts of violence to defend their property and assert their dominance.

## Gendering Wilderness



Figure 8. Beth Dutton converses with Rip Wheeler (played by Cole Hauser) on the Yellowstone Ranch grounds. The show routinely objectifies women and represents white heterosexual men as the worthiest identity.

Throughout the show, *Yellowstone* visually constructs how space constructs gender identities. The white masculine cowboy identity is favorably portrayed as the most natural within the show, following a longstanding tradition that Evans describes the “representational paradigm whereby heterosexual white manhood (i.e., “real men”) is construed as the most “natural” social identity in the United States: the “true American,” the identity most deserving of social privilege” (p .183). Anyone that does not fall into this social category is seen as an unnatural “other,” whose presence is not welcome in such a natural setting and must be removed. To begin, the pilot episode of *Yellowstone* introduces the character of Jimmy Hurdstrom, (see figure 9) a young, weak, undisciplined, petty drug addict with a criminal background that is one strike away from facing long-term imprisonment. When his grandfather pleads John Dutton to take Jimmy on as a ranch hand to keep him out of trouble, John sends the family fixer, Rip Wheeler, to give

Jimmy the ultimatum between prison or working on the ranch, Jimmy agrees to become part of the ranch and is followed up by Rip searing the symbolic ‘Y’ brand on Jimmy’s left pectoral muscle, showcasing that he now shares a powerful bond with the Dutton family through ownership and loyalty. At various points in the series, the phrase “the brand isn’t something you earn, it’s something you live up to” insinuates that branded individuals are more than just cowboys in the Dutton inner circle, they are also part of the Dutton crime enterprise, a distinction that means they can never leave ranch confines because they have seen and been involved in criminal activity. More importantly, when an order is handed down to a branded man, the task is meant to be unquestionably carried out.



Figure 9. Jimmy Hurdstrom (played by Jefferson White)

For the first four seasons, Jimmy’s quest for manhood becomes a comedic consolation in the show, as he is incessantly verbally ridiculed by his peers, cruelly beaten by other cowboys, and a victim to multiple serious injuries from a subplot in the third season to become a rodeo

cowboy. The visual construction of Jimmy's social identity is very much to that of the common Disney trope of the supercrip, or one that overcomes odds to obtain his real manhood. And yet, the biopolitical processes at play treat his identity formation as a slave that belongs to a master on plantation that experiences a political juridical structure. As Mbembe articulates it, "the slave's labor is needed and used so he is therefore kept alive, but in a state of injury, in a phantom-like world of horrors and intense cruelty and profanity" (2019, p. 75). Jimmy's inability to learn the "cowboy way" are frequent subplots within the show. By the fifth season, Jimmy grows into a man worthy of the ranch's respect. He does this by taking on new challenges, such as rodeoing, saving lost calves, and falling in love. John Dutton and Rip eventually send Jimmy to Texas where he is out of the Montanan wilderness and on the wild prairie. The change in environment prevails, allowing Jimmy to blossom into the rugged cowboy identity the *Yellowstone* ranch hands could not instill in him and finally claim mastery over his masculinity. John Dutton's ability to turn young adolescent boys into able-bodied men is visual theme in the series because John seemingly can help any male realize their masculinist power but cannot get any one of his male offspring to effectively embody the discover this revelation.



Figure 10. Recent Governor elect, John Dutton, advances toward the victory party following his win of the Montana governorship.

Contrast to how men are portrayed as the rightful exceptional rulers of the land, the placement of women is called into question many times throughout the series. At the start of the series, the setting is heteronormatively structured and normalized across the landscape of the show, configured through the knowledge and techniques that Foucault describes in the *History of Sexuality* as “institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections... that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power... as its principal form of knowledge political economy and its essential technical means apparatuses of security... this type of power which may be termed government, (results) on the one hand, in the formation of a whole series of specific government apparatuses, and on the other, in the development of a whole complex of savors” (Foucault 1991a, 102-3). In other words, the artificial version of Montana featured in the show has been established as a complex where men are the beneficiaries, concerned with the relations to all social structures. Despite its modern naturalization, Montana is still a fertile frontier landscape brimming with western ethos, a feminine terrain that clings to its purity, where

mother nature remains undesecrated by patriarchal culture (Kolodny, 1977). Progress comes in the form of modern taming, developing the landscape as a form of feminist civilizations, and bringing with it the modern forms of oppression. The women featured in *Yellowstone*, while powerful in their own accord, are not treated kindly, and are often treated as secondary to the male characters (see figure 10). The natural processes and landscapes within the show challenge women and lash out in many different forms creating an array of physical and psychological barriers that are never truly resolved. Moreover, women are routinely forced to adapt to the physically masculine tasks that come with ranch life without question or forced to remove themselves from the premise.

The politics of gender and reproduction are explored regularly in *Yellowstone*. Foucault's concept of biopower exists for the sole purpose of domination of the human body and taking control of the population and asserting a social hierarchization capable of asserting its influence with hegemony-like effects (Foucault, p. 141). In the show, the white cowboys work predominantly in agriculture which is a western industrial system which destroys nature and simultaneously oppresses women (Sturgeon, 2016, p. 117) In the pilot episode, the Yellowstone Ranch embodies a thematic trait consistent in the long-standing tradition in westerns, in that the industrial environment that maintains livestock is void of a single female body. Val Plumwood writes that the human body most associated with the conquest of wilderness is predominantly the male body, and that unless they are under the escort of a masculine guard, women have no place in the wilderness (Plumwood, p. 662 & Vannini & Vannini, p. 59). The wilderness of the Yellowstone Ranch metaphorically takes on virginal themes, such as "untouched," "wholesome," and "complete," yet these meanings are taken to imply that 'virgin' indicates an

absence of human presence rather than untouched by masculinity. It is the masculine white heterosexual male that freely ventures into the wild landscape without restraint.

John Dutton is established as a patriarch and a widower, losing his wife, Evelyn in a flashback sequence early in the first season. His only daughter, Beth Dutton, (see figure 11) is an independent no-nonsense, outwardly tough character with an unapologetic demeanor, that struggles with many personal demons. The one trait she refuses to show is weakness in any form, a skill she was taught by her mother. Beth was raised on the ranch surrounded by men and is taught early that to effectively make it in a masculine world, she is going to have to toughen up. In a flashback from the first season, Beth is late to the Christmas morning gathering, prompting Evelyn to go upstairs and investigate, finding Beth sobbing in the bathroom from painful cramps, brought on from her first period. After drawing her daughter a bath, Evelyn seizes the moment to provide Beth with a new perspective that she is about shift into, where men will begin to treat her like she is weaker, and that if she is not careful, she may start to believe about herself the way men look at her. Evelyn then states that from this moment on, she will have to be hard on her, claiming “I have to turn you into the man, most men will never be. And I’m sorry in advance for doing it because you’re going to hate it, sweetheart”—the last phrase causes a drop in her tone, from one that affectionate and loving, to one that is bound in enmity.

The second moment that traumatically scars Beth comes when she watches her mother die in an accident after being crushed by her own horse during a leisurely ride. Overcome with fear and unable to react, Evelyn humiliates Beth with vicious remarks, accusing her of causing the accident and instilling a traumatic event that prevents Beth from maturing further as she ages. Lastly, Beth’s most serious flaw is revealed in the third season when another flashback sequence exposes she was sterilized from her natural reproductive ability to bear children. When young

Beth becomes pregnant, she decides to abort. Trying to keep the pregnancy hidden from her father, she turns to her older brother, Jamie, for help and direction. Jamie agrees to help her by driving her to a reproductive clinic on the reservation where the rules are different for minors. Jamie sets up the procedure, but something goes wrong that is never fully articulated during the process and the abortion renders Beth sterile. With this, Beth's reproductive rights are gone, the result of a male having decided for her. Because of this, Beth embodies aspects of the Anthropocene, a natural entity that has lost its naturalization due to the touch of humanity. As a result, her inability to reproduce the nuclear family will likely lead to the eventual extinction of the Dutton empire.



Figure 11. Beth Dutton (played by Kelly Reilly).

Annette Koldman writes “there is a long tradition of portraying nature as a feminine wilderness in need of taming; for a man to do so is to develop his masculine identity” (p. 124). Michel Foucault’s ideas on governmentality of the natural world echoes this sentiment from the idea that natural domains should be under some form of control or reign that could faithfully make decisions within the environment’s best interest (Warde, p. 160). In the first four seasons

of *Yellowstone*, Montana in under the rule of female Governor, Lynelle Perry, an eloquent leader with a lifetime of political achievements and a profound understanding of how to successfully navigate state and national politics. She is also the romantic interest of John Dutton, indicating the power-hold that John has in the political system for generating favorable policy to protecting his ranch (see figure 12). Governor Perry's role in the show incorporates a compelling dualism in that she is a woman, and because of that, she is never in the wilderness without a male guide, but moreover, she alone has a considerable amount of power in governing the well-being of wilderness. In season three, John orders his livestock herd to be moved to a summer feeding ground and chooses to spend much of the season in that environment, effectively removing him from most forms of communication in the process. In S3E3, Governor Perry is forced to visit John in the wilderness after a development group declares intent to build a new city in the same valley as the Dutton ranch. During the visit, Governor Perry reveals the great conflict of being a politician in a state of wilderness—“how to keep Montana growing, without losing that thing that makes it Montana.” It is in the wilderness that the Governor signifies that without political power, the wilderness would disappear.



Figure 12. John Dutton and Montana Governor, Lynelle Perry (played by Wendy Moniz) share a tender moment in the wilderness.

The sixth episode of the first season delivers a striking moment between Beth and John that displays the forced adaptation that women must adhere to reside within the wild confines of the ranch. Following a poorly conducted meeting between Beth and Governor Lynelle, where Beth rashly insulted the governor and threatened her not go near her father, John confronts Beth in kitchen of the ranch house. Beth declares that Lynelle can never meet the standard to be considered part of the Dutton family, affirming that her standard is in relation to her mother, Evelyn. The mention of Beth wanting her mother causes John to physically snap. He breaks a glass and corners Beth and barks, “you’re the only child I have tough enough to take this advice. Now, you need to man up, you understand?... and don’t you ever mention your mother to me again. You forfeited that right a long time ago.” The exchange leaves Beth clearly rattled. In this moment, John infers that the natural family is indeed broken, and that the natural nuclear family as Beth knew it can never be put back together again. Governor Lynelle, which represents the state of Montana and the wilderness, the very thing that took Beth’s mother away from her, is where John’s intentions clearly lie. Being in a relationship with the governor is preserving his

relationship to the natural landscape. Simultaneously, John reasserts that the wilderness landscape they live upon is no place for a woman. Evidently, women are pressured to adapt to whatever setting men place them.

The fourth season introduces the character of Summer Higgins, a civilized east coast liberal and a supporter of environmental justice that opposes progress and is immediately portrayed as a counter to the Dutton way of life. John and Summer strike up an uneasy relationship, based on sharing similar values despite having different beliefs. These values come from the way they both oppose progress, yet both have different views on how to see through what each individually deems to be the rightful way of life. Throughout season four and five, her presence serves as the representative for the neoliberal audience being taken on a tour of the ranch to learn and uncover how the frontier cultural lifestyle is framed as morally righteous compared to other civilized and liberal forms of living. In season five, after Summer is arrested by state officials for protesting the development of an airport in Paradise Valley, John Dutton has her sentence commuted to house arrest on the ranch, where all her ideological points as an environmentalist are debunked one by one from all her various interactions with the Dutton family and ranch hands as she listens to their justifications that support their way of life. In S5E5, as John prepares the cowboys to ride out and round up the cattle from their summer feeding grounds, he interacts with Summer that puts this relationship into perspective.

**John:** “You want to come tomorrow?”

**Summer:** “Do I want to sit on the back of an animal you broke into submission to gather animals you plan to harass and imprison before you mutilate their bodies? No, I think I’ll stay here.”

**John:** “(chuckles) Summer you are so full of shit. You know the first thing that happened to you when you were born? A complete stranger took a pair of scissors and cut away that part of your body that had been feeding you for nine months. Then that stranger handed you over to another stranger who held you upside down and slapped you on the back and on the bottom until you screamed, then they placed you on a steel scale and immobilized you in a blanket before handing you back to your mother. And if you were a boy, later that day another stranger comes along, takes you away, runs all sorts of tests on you before cutting off the foreskin of your penis. Never mind that all those things were done to save and improve your life.”

When summer still refuses to see John’s point, he reminds her that it explains why he is the current governor of Montana and why she is under house arrest, if she is incapable of seeing the reasoning behind the frontier way of life and needs a first-hand look into how the civilized environmentalist model is completely incapable of preserving the natural landscapes they claim to want to protect. Only by visually seeing and experiencing the rural agriculturalist way of life firsthand does she effectively understand that ranching does not harm the land but is needed to effectively maintain the ecosystem.

Summer’s stay at the ranch is not without contention; Beth immediately treats her with hostility due to their cultural and value differences, as well as the innate obligation to protect her father from political opposition. This contentious rivalry, coupled with Summer’s divisive views on every cultural aspect of the Dutton way of life, culminates in a scene where Beth drags Summer out from a family dinner for disrespecting the provided food due to her vegan lifestyle and beats her senselessly on the front lawn of the ranch house. They both trade physical punches and verbal insults before Rip interrupts them, by asking “do you think you’re going to beat the

other one into respecting your opinion?” And yet, the regeneration through violence that was pivotal in turning the frontier into the modern-day west is called out and questioned in this moment, and seemingly by a masculine character that used the technique more than anyone in the series. The physical violence used to protect and maintain the ranch are seemingly reserved only for men, whereas women must find a different manner. After the fight, which favorably portrays Beth as the winner in the match-up, Summer begins to break down on her personal set of values and beliefs. She begins by eating the food that she would previously not touch, she begins to help in certain roles, such as helping other women on the ranch prepare food for the cowboys, attending brandings and going to the county fair. At the end of S5E7, Summer professes that she was wrong to judge the Dutton family based on their way of living, insinuating that regeneration through violence ‘whipped’ her into a submissive role.

**Summer:** “I understand now. I understand why you brand and why you vaccinate and why you move them from one pasture to another. Twelve million tourists a year come to Montana from cities. You might want to think about inviting a few of them over so they understand who you really are and what you really do because they have you pegged as a bunch of misogynistic bigots who are ruining the environment and that is not who you are.

John responds by saying “you’re a very smart woman, Summer,” a claim summer responds to by stating “I am a smart person,” seemingly ignoring her gender having become indoctrinated in the heteronormative lifestyle that has overtaken the frontier.

## *Agriculture in the Wilderness*



Figure 13. The ranch hands of *Yellowstone*.

Agriculture is the industry that is featured as the primary force for which the conflict of *Yellowstone* is set against. Favorably portrayed as a romanticized profession, *Yellowstone* routinely depicts the profession saving the land from progress and treating the predominantly white heterosexual cowboy ranch hands as the rightful sovereign saviors to the land. This is shown frequently as all the ranch hands treat the landscapes in a manner that is reflective of a pastoral relationship that is ecologically friendly and responsible juxtaposed to characters that are not considered native to the state, representing the modern progression, and lacking in ecological awareness. It is paradoxical that ranchers are portrayed as stewards of the land when their agricultural practices work against the protection of wilderness by eliminating it. An important concept that is never mentioned in the show is how agriculture changes landscapes. Cattle ranches play a very destructive role in their effect on the environment, ranging from over-grazing, soil erosion, water contamination, and wiping out certain plant and animal life based on

their daily consumption, as well as alter climate (Ayers, E., & T. Prugh. 2004, p. 12).

Historically, domestic cattle grazing has long been a complex issue, accepted in areas that were legislatively deemed wild due to the vague and confusing definitions surrounding “reasonable regulations” of wilderness livestock grazing (Cole, para 3, 1989). Moreover, using the wilderness as a site to produce biopolitical capital can be seen as a technology of power used by humans to dominate animal subjects, as well as the employed ranch hands.

Being that the ranch raises cattle, their reason for raising livestock is never fully articulated within the show but merely hinted at being related to sustenance and nutritional purposes. This brings in notions surrounding food politics, as the agriculturalist, which is deemed the most righteous, with the moral superiority as the rightful rulers that are allowed to retain control over the land, retains much control of the biopolitical welfare of feeding much of the human population. Stephen Thierman details how the slaughterhouse is a site that serves as a “technology of power.” The technologies Thierman refers to are those that “determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends of domination...by their own means or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (2010, p. 94). This does not simply refer to objects used to service a goal, but more aptly for Foucault, this is how humans go about reconstructing objects into subjects. Because of the way the ranch is framed, it portrays the ranching lifestyle as a way of life that is rugged and demanding but invoking a cultural significance to the American West. Nonetheless, the ranch’s technologies of power serve more as an oppressive form of power over the animals maintained, as well as the ranch hands working onsite.

Many episodes often feature long montages of the ranchers working as a team to collect, corral, brand, impregnate, birth, euthanize, and market their cattle over contemporary country musician soundtracks that illuminate cultural perspectives of rural simple living and tell stories about how the rugged landscape create hardened bodies. These are often followed by wide shots of characters situated against ideal landscape backdrops, reminiscing about how the world once was and how the oncoming change from progress will inevitably demise it. For the cowboys featured in these scenes, these images manifest a “national sense of destiny” that the American frontier belongs to the white agriculturalist by featuring his environment through the magisterial gaze, where the disciplining of bodies takes place to create subjects (Gunning & Harper, p. 38). It is the cowboy image, enveloped in the American character of the white heterosexual man that represents the sovereign power of control within the fictional version of Montana.



Figure 14. Ranch hands of Yellowstone perform routine work relating to overseeing and maintaining the cattle herd.

Animal welfare is visually understated in *Yellowstone*. The operation of maintaining a herd of livestock against such a majestic landscape can easily persuade viewers that the ranch is an environmentally ethical and necessary mode of production to sustain food security. Animal welfare however is understated and regulated to form of oppressive power that reproduces animals for the purpose of killing, all of which takes place in the wilderness. Open range beef has long been promoted as the most environmentally friendly form of beef for consumption (García-Torres et al., 2016). As Blue states, “beef is a paradoxical symbol, representing power, success, virility, status, ‘Americanness’, ordinariness, mass culture. Beef, of course, is derived from the cow, herself an ambivalent conjuncture of meaning, from a source of income to the reviled symbol of capitalism,” Beef consumption is deeply ingrained with power relations (Blue p. 10). Beef is the primary staple in the American food industry and John Dutton’s sovereign ability to provide the American population with a healthy sustainable supply of food is one of the dramatic plot devices featured. Cattle progressed right alongside the western expansion and with it came a variety of technologies and practices to better maintain and regulate the herd for premier amounts of production.

Perhaps no better portrayal of Foucault’s concept of biopower has been produced in popular entertainment than in *Yellowstone*. For the first four seasons, John Dutton could be metaphorically viewed as the sovereign power governing his cattle herd to regulate and control their wellbeing. In the pilot episode, John Dutton and his oldest son, Lee, drive through a large field of cattle inspecting the herd. John looks through a pair of binoculars and a single cow, who’s ear tag reads ‘1138.’ Lee opens a notebook lined with tagging information and instantly relays to John, that the specific cow is eleven years old. “Get rid of her” he tells his son as they move forward. Moments later, a down cow is spotted and John and Lee spring into action. They

identify the issue as a breeched birth and work as a team, with John kneeling on the cow's head to keep her still, and Lee grabbing the feet and forcibly pulling the calf out of the mother. When the duo has succeeded in saving both animal's lives, the mother and the calf run away as both John and Lee look on as the images thematically portray ranching lifestyle, birth and renewal, and family dynamic in a favorable manner. Afterwards, John and Lee sit atop a hill watching their cattle feed and reflect on the importance of maintaining a herd:

**John:** "When you look at that calf, what do you see?"

**Lee:** "I see a life I got to feed and defend until it grows up and feeds me."

**John:** "That's what a cowboy should see. But a cattleman sees a \$293 investment worth \$1,100 in seven months whether it feeds anyone or not."

**Lee:** "I wish I saw it different, Dad."

**John:** "We see it the way we see it, son."

This epistemology in relation to livestock regulation flows through the entirety of the show, questioning the cost of life and how best to reproduce (Wadiwel, 2002). Once the capitalism worth of a cow is determined, the value of a single cow devalues the wilderness in which ranches strive to maintain as natural. The rise of anthropocentric structures within the global world warrants the need for a long-term solution to impending food shortages and the commodification of the "wilderness-raised cow" can service as a commodity.

The ranch also serves as a site of discipline through the process of domesticating wild horses into modes of production. In the pilot episode of the series, Kaycee Dutton captures a wild mustang that has local oil drilling workers concerned for their safety due to how mean the horse is. When Kaycee places the horse in a pen, the horse becomes irritably angry and starts to thrash wildly, causing Kaycee to express "he's upset about losing his freedom." Symbolically, this

scene summarizes the entire frontier myth and concurrently displays the sovereign power's systemization of rewilding horses for biopolitical technologies of power. Historically, the horse has had an important influence on the development of societies for well over a thousand years due to its convenience as a technology, a means of production, consumption, transformation, and even a war machine (Halaçoğlu, p. 15). *Yellowstone* highlights some of the most premiere equestrian tactics that showcase the animal-human relationships that agriculturalists employ to turn the horse into a civilized device for creating a human place in the wilderness.

The series is intent on keeping nature natural, and untouched, halting developmental progress by any means necessary. The primary protagonist in the show is landowner, John Dutton, a sixth-generation rancher in southwest Montana that owns the largest ranch in the American west on the boarder of Yellowstone National Park, known to those that live and work there as '*the Yellowstone.*' Dutton's three children, Jamie, Beth, and Kaycee, all embody some form of Dutton's ideological identity based their life choices, and career driven interest that Dutton utilizes in his attempts to keep the land pure and under his control—Jamie, a Harvard educated lawyer, uses his political savviness to fight for the well-being of the land in areas of government, Beth, a sadistic expert in the field of finances uses her expertise in economics to retain ownership over the land, and Kaycee, the youngest of the kids employs his background in the military and law enforcement across an array political positions to implement security over the land, its residents, and to remove any threat that is considered unnatural.

## Limitations and Further Research

The idea of wilderness is profoundly embedded in the Frontier Myth. The *Yellowstone* series rarely ventures into the wilderness, choosing instead to look upon the whole assemblage rather than focus on all the pieces that make up the wilderness. *Yellowstone* implicates that wilderness is ‘out there’ but in a changing socioeconomic climate, where expansion and urban development are taking place at an alarming rate, the once untamed wilderness is becoming zoned and fenced off, seemingly becoming broken and domesticated as the horses the characters rewild in the series. The march of progressive civilization conquers all that gets in its path and the few that attempt to stop amount to nothing more than slowing it down.

One topic that was not set within Sturgeon’s idea of the Frontier Myth is the portrayal of law enforcement. While some aspects of governmentality and law enforcement agencies are briefly touched on in this analysis, more careful attention needs to be looked at and thoroughly expanded upon to understand how the series portrays law enforcement in rural areas, and remote rugged environments. Initially, the Frontier was seen as a lawless territory, free from all legal and regulation confines, reserved only for the tribal differences between indigenous territories. The law enforcement agencies in *Yellowstone’s* Montana are inconceivably corrupt, from the top of the federal offices down to the local outfits. John Dutton is the head of the Livestock Commission Agency, an office that he egregiously uses to his advantage to enforce his personal control on the political landscape in Montana, as well as for the purpose of committing personal crimes and vendettas against his enemies and using his office to avoid legal scrutiny. The County Sheriff, Donnie Haskell is a character whose loyalties change throughout his tenure with the show, but he is often a personal pawn of the Dutton family, manipulating the legal system and opening loopholes allowing John and his ranch hands to commit crimes that go unnoticed and

avoid legal consequence. The tribal police play a significant role predominantly in season one, covering up two separate acts of murders committed by Kaycee Dutton, including two white men that abducted and assaulted a Native American minor, as well as a meth cooker that Kaycee executes after his lab explodes and leaves him severely burned. Furthermore, the cattle raid in the pilot episode that sets most of the dramatic tension in motion is framed as a raid between cowboys and Indians but is actually a raid between two opposing police forces—the Livestock Commission and the Tribal police. This intersection of law enforcement jurisdictions adds more tension to a frontier that exists in explicit boundaries Overall, law enforcement is depicted as a flawed institution that is favorable towards reinforcing the structures and frameworks that secure white society.

A second topic that could be further expanded upon is the portrayal of black people on the frontier. Historically, black representation has been largely controlled by white men that were largely concerned with the naturalizing of difference (Finney, 2014, p. 71). Not just in the case of entertainment media, but societal boundaries have rendered black representation as invisible in wild settings, further cementing their status as unchangeable constructed identity, and further securing the racial hierarchy that has always been prevalent in both the natural world and society. *Yellowstone's* theme's regarding race are primarily reserved for the Native American plotlines, yet the series does feature two black wranglers that live and work on the ranch. One recurring character, Colby, is featured through all five seasons. The second character is a drifter that arrives at the ranch in season two, going by the name of “Cowboy,” and plays a role that is considered ‘wasted’ due to a lack of development before disappearing at the end of the season. Both characters offer supporting roles and seem shoehorned into a world that has been mostly void of black representation, yet despite what appear to be good intentions is portraying

equitable relations onscreen, all the black people featured in *Yellowstone* are still under the control of metaphorical white plantation owners. Clearly, visual biopolitics dictate how black people have been long absent from wild spaces.

A further area of discussion involves the generational Dutton family saga. As it currently stands the series is yet to be concluded as the last episodes aired in November 2022, and the series has been on hold since early 2023 due to contract disputes, scheduling conflicts, and the 2023 Writers Strike. At the time of this writing, the rumor is that the final episodes will conclude the series with a scheduled airdate of November 2024. In its absence, Paramount created two spinoffs of the Dutton family, *1883* and *1923*. Each one featured a different era of the Dutton's. *1883* details how the Dutton's came from back east to settle the Yellowstone homestead, and *1923* tells an early twentieth century story of a different generation of Duttons facing various adversities on the frontier, ranging from westward expansion to the Great Depression. Each series acts as a prelude to *Yellowstone*, spinning a more dramatic narrative into the lore of the original show, while also expanding and filling in many gaps on the show's narrative themes. Both series' feature the American Frontier myth in different eras and both likely feature visual biopolitical relationships at a time when the frontier was vastly spacious before being divvied up to settlers and homesteaders. Further text analysis would be needed to understand how entertainment television continues to reproduce the myth of the frontier, what kind of stereotypes come out of the visual biopolitics relationships, as well as how themes from the original *Yellowstone* run carry over into the shows. At this time, a third spinoff has been ordered, titled *2024*, which is rumored to be a continuation of the original *Yellowstone* program, but with different characters and potential to be set in a different location. A fourth spinoff, *1944*, has also been ordered but currently offers no details as to what the plot will revolve around.

## Conclusion

Viewers can easily be tricked by the images that *Yellowstone* features. This study looked at how visual biopolitics dictate the Frontier Myth that conceptually drives the series *Yellowstone*. Through a careful analysis of the current fifty-three episodes that encompass the initial run, *Yellowstone* visually renders the Frontier Myth as described by Sturgeon to be rooted in white rural heteronormative nuclear families as the most naturally deserving of living near wilderness settings and within the frontier. Visual biopolitics is still a very new area of research, and its current point in modernity, this theoretical framework has primarily applied to areas of journalism that uncover how images and visual representation are used to regulate life among populations. The work I have developed contributes to the field of visual communication as one of the first studies that has applied this theoretical framework to an entertainment television show to uncover how the images regulate who is able to reside within certain geophysical spaces. Moreover, *Yellowstone* continues to leave a lasting impression on the viewer and the many landscapes of Montana. For one, it has shifted the political landscape from one that was considered predominantly purple in the twentieth century, to one that is entirely conservative, nationalistic, and oppose to all forms of progress. This barrier in progress has led to consequences within both the civilized world and the natural world. The barrier in progressive leadership has resulted in the recent dysfunction and degradation of the natural world, where aquatic life and animal life have been dying off at an alarming rate due to increase in longer hotter summers and shorter winters, as well as the loss of habitat. Despite previous knowledge and research indicating the seriousness and urgency to act, the current leadership administration faces accusations of having ignored such warnings and removing personnel to prevent the publication of such truths. The show has also been accused of inciting a cultural war within the

state that favors the wealthy elite, with legislation being passed to remove middle- and lower-class citizens. High property taxes have left sixth generation families unable to pay the fees needed to remain on land, the public education system has been gutted as school levies have recently failed to pass, and gender politics continue to keep any identity outside the white heterosexual male barred from all leadership roles (Browning, 2024; Ochenski, 2024). We all look on images of place and desire that the location within the image be the way we imagine it to be in our conscious minds. When the imagination takes over the image, reality dissolves. Yellowstone might take place in Montana, but it effectively disintegrated the Montana of my youth.

The wilderness as it currently stands is broken, encoded with social and biopolitical frameworks that give certain demographics more liberty to experience and live within their wonder, while pushing away and shunning others. The wilderness areas all over America are all individually unique in their own distinctive ways. The wildernesses of Montana still retain a hint of unaltered landscapes that remain in the manner they have always been. The debate over their operationalization and sanctity will undoubtedly continue to change through the course of time, but one thing that must begin to change is the way we use visual imagery to shape perceptions of who is and who is not allowed to have a place in wild space. Entertainment remains agentic that wilderness serves as a symbol, one that is void of all human activity. However, every entertainment drama that features a wilderness setting incorporates a human presence in some aspect or another encountering the wild setting. The wilderness always signifies a redemptive purity for white masculine characters that display many different discourses involving nature and environmentalism that produce modern day ideology. The entertainment world's role is merely to mediate these discourses. Further, philosopher Neil Evernden argues that "the objectification

of nature through photography is a strategy which encourages environmental damage” (Evernden, 1992, p. 32). To open one’s eyes, to look upon, and to see, is to incite a need to dominate. For all the masses that have watched and viewed entertainment programs like *A River Runs Through It* and *Yellowstone*, domination took place, even through a reproduction on the screen. Responsible and ethical use of images must begin to prominently feature territory, race, and gender politics in a positive light in regard to all natural resources. The way frontier narratives have favorably portrayed white society as an institution for progress in natural environments will always expose forms of oppression for people and land, further allowing the frontier myth to thrive. Reproducing the myth regularly through each generation continues to remove all naturalness from cultural identity and further lead to hegemonical power forms to maintain a social order, and further lead our world into one of the artificial.

One lasting paradox that needs to be further uncovered surrounds how the desire to maintain and preserve the natural landscape shifts the cultural landscape (Graber, 2010). When we make every attempt in our being to preserve an identity that has always been deemed natural and considered “our way of life,” we lose sight that the *natural* ceases to be and is nothing more than a construction. Like the American wilderness, and National Parks celebrate a past that is no more. The Montana of my youth was the result of visuals constructed into an assemblage that were acquired over a lifetime woven from media, narrative, politics, and vastly full of binaries. Makarychev writes that visual biopolitics exist where borders are found, and further, where there are binaries, there will be elements of visual biopolitics present (2021, p. 66-67). Further, Makarychev writes “the idea of transforming a border from a walled protection area into a space for bodily communication between children and their parents correlates with a broader understanding of the two sides of the border area as a single ecosystem that may be

administratively divided but is connected through nature as well as intense human mobility” (p. 68). While the series *Yellowstone* is yet to conclude, it is worth noting that the primary goal of John Dutton is to find an heir to pass his vast amount of land on to. The goal of Broken Rock Tribal leader, Thomas Rainwater, is to reclaim the land and primally restore it back to his people. While Rainwater and Dutton are heated rivals, Rainwater does not know that Jamie is adopted, Beth is sterile, and that Tate Dutton is John’s only legit grandson. Bearing all this, I am hopeful that the show will conclude with Tate becoming the heir to the *Yellowstone* Ranch and distributing the land back to his people and a new era of frontier will evolve—one that distributes a new visual in a that has become increasingly hostile and segmented—one that removes the boundaries from the national identity.

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