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A Motorcar Runs Through It: Imagining the Unwritten Western Book

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In the last session this morning, David Radavich said, “Ultimately, Thomas Wolfe did not find the home that he was seeking. He remained restless . . . [and] his true home was in writing.” I too would like to talk this evening about the relationship between home and community on the one hand and restless motion on the other. I am interested in Wolfe’s thoughts about homes and communities in *A Western Journal*, and in the way—had he lived—westerners themselves might have continued to influence him as he worked on the next big book. We began this conference with an imaginary dialogue between Vardis Fisher and Thomas Wolfe, and I’m going to end the formal program tonight with more of the what-if game. You all are better equipped than I to speculate about what Wolfe might have written if he had lived beyond 1938; I’d like to focus narrowly on how westerners’ experiences of home, community, and motion might have found their way into Wolfe’s sympathetic consciousness and affected his ideas of home. What if he remained restless, as David Radavich said, and discovered an idea of home compatible with motion? In my reading of *A Western Journal*, Wolfe may have been moving toward such a reconciliation of opposites. From research on Wolfe’s northwest literary friends and the western news of 1938, I’m going to speculate that Wolfe was in the process of learning from his western surroundings that vital and necessary communities—homes, even—could be the creative work of people in motion.

Did Wolfe die before he could articulate in fiction an insight that homes could be the creative and vital work of people in motion? To answer this, I’ll begin with a reading of homes and other gathering places in the *Western Journal*, then share some brief stories about western homes and western mobility from Wolfe’s northwest friends and from regional newspapers published along the route of the national parks tour, any of which might have influenced Wolfe. Finally, I’d like to read to you from a west-

ern writer who came to the national scene shortly after Wolfe passed away, and who may have achieved an insight about homes that Wolfe himself was moving toward when he died.

I agree with Shawn Holliday, who wrote in 1997 of *A Western Journal*, that “Wolfe was interested in how Americans made their home on the land” (36). But in the *Western Journal*, homes—or dwellings that humans create and inhabit—are rarely attractive. Gerry Max read some of these passages yesterday, but let me remind you of a few. Listen especially for the word *blistered*, a word that appears both in letters and in the *Western Journal* in association with houses and homes. Speeding through the Mojave Desert of southeastern California, Wolfe sees “very occasionally a tiny blistered little house” (14).¹ In the small Mormon towns of Utah, he admires green farms and “pleasantness” of “Canaan,” but the “little houses of frame” are “for the most part mean and plain and stunted looking” (28). So irrigation alone is not enough to make western homes livable. In southeast Idaho, ascending to Wyoming, Wolfe admires lush farmland, but in the midst of “vernal greenness, lushness, freshness” comes again “The little blistered house / The farm buildings curiously forgotten in the vast curious landscape / The towns—blistered—little blistered houses” (47). About three weeks earlier, from Boise, Wolfe had described the southern Idaho landscape as an “abomination of desolation,” with its “little pitiful blistered towns huddled down in the most abject loneliness underneath the huge light and scale and weather” (“To Elizabeth” 768). With the exception of Logan, Utah, when *houses* appear in the *Western Journal*, they appear utterly unlivable to Wolfe’s eastern eye.

But life abounds in the *Western Journal* in places where tourists and employees of the tourist industry form transient, ad hoc communities. These transient communities replace homes as the places where life happens in Wolfe’s recorded observations of the West. I will give you three examples, and in each case, I’d like to observe two things. First is Wolfe’s exuberant and Whitmanesque style. When he describes these ad hoc clusterings of people in motion, Wolfe accumulates nouns like cars on a freight train: “kids, old men, women, young men, women—all” (50). He uses the same cumulative style to describe the exhilarating landscapes, and we heard many examples last night in Robert Morgan’s passages from *A Western Journal*. The second point to observe, after the exuberant cumulative style, is the location of these temporary gatherings in grand, majestic spaces—the opposite of the blistered and pitiful houses of the Mojave and Utah, whose environments are fierce and cupreous,

or coppery and metallic. To illustrate this cumulative vitality and these grand settings for ad hoc gatherings, I'll draw examples from Yosemite, Bryce Canyon, and Yellowstone National Parks.

To take the last of these first, in Yellowstone, strangers come together in the act of waiting for Old Faithful to erupt: "and the people watching," Wolfe writes, "Middle-America watching—kids, old men, women, young men, women—all—and the hot plume, the tons of water falling" (50). Wolfe transforms disparate strangers into a collective and representative "Middle-America" sharing an experience of anticipation and admiration for the big geyser. The building with the proper scale to host this gathering is the "enormous Inn" of Yellowstone (49), which serves "all the supper one could eat \$1.00" (50). Wolfe delights in the numerous activities available inside the inn as much as the variety of people outside at the geyser. People are eating, drinking, reading, dancing, and singing in the big lodge. The big lodge, the big geyser, and the big supper provide a grand and fitting backdrop to a grand and vital gathering of people.

Other gatherings are represented with similar energy and scale earlier in the auto tour. By Wolfe's estimate—which was probably on the high side, like his word counts—the lodge and campground of Yosemite accommodated "1200 little shop girls and stenogs and new-weds and schoolteachers and boys—all, God bless their little lives, necking, dancing, kissing, feeling, and embracing in the great darkness of the giant redwood trees" (11–12). At Bryce Canyon in Utah, it's employees rather than tourists who inspire Wolfe to Whitmanesque accumulations. In place of "shop girls and stenogs and new-weds and schoolteachers and boys" at Yosemite, he watches the "waitresses, maids, bell boys etc" of Bryce Canyon gathering outside after breakfast to sing the tourists off (32). In place of pitiful houses, the settings for these abundant ad hoc communities include the "sky-bowl of starred night" at Yosemite (11) and the "enormous Inn" and "tremendous lodges" (49–50) of Yellowstone. At Bryce Canyon, after talking with one woman who made bird calls and another woman who sold curios and "had life in her," he thought of his cabin as "home" (30, 31).

This word shows up again from Wolfe in the *Western Journal* after his long report in Pocatello, which you heard in the final remarks this morning. Wolfe thinks of himself as "home" after a long journal entry in Bryce Canyon, and a long journal entry describing the green, lush town of Logan, Utah, and the entry into Idaho. "Home" in the journal appears to be any place that offers some repose to the fevered traveler and writer. And the com-

munities in which people eat, drink, dance, sing, and even—at Yosemite—reproduce are transient encounters of people on the move, like Wolfe himself.

Of course, the most important transient community is the little family formed of Wolfe, Ray Conway, and Edward M. Miller themselves, on the road together for two weeks. Though Conway has not joined Wolfe and Miller for beer at night, and Wolfe has disapproved of Conway's careful accounting along the way, everyone seems reconciled on the last day. The travelers start slowly on Mount Rainier on 2 July, with Conway telling quiet stories of his mountain climbing expeditions on Washington's Mt. Rainier and Oregon's Mt. Hood. Wolfe sees a new side of Conway in this single morning of leisure, appreciating the quiet way he tells of carrying injured climbers down the mountains (69). In Olympia, Conway is in no haste to part, offering to take Wolfe to see the capitol, and Wolfe in turn admits to a "hollow feeling" as he watches the white Ford "flash away" (71).

So far, my reading of the *Western Journal* suggests that Wolfe was rejecting the notion of a rooted home altogether, relishing the idea of motion, pure motion, as the meaning of it all. But I don't think the nightly notes from the national parks tour tell us everything he was learning about home and motion in the West. If the journal offers an aesthetics of exhilarating motion, the newspapers tell a more chastening story of lives in motion as lives on the edge of collapse. Both economically and aesthetically, motion in the West was not always as exuberant as Wolfe felt it to be in the crowded parks.

Two grim stories stand out to me:

1. According to the Portland *Oregonian*, as Wolfe, Conway, and Miller departed on their tour, a Minnesota woman who had spent a month in a cabin of a Portland "automobile camp" killed herself and her three children after her husband had been away "for a week or more, looking for work." Though the camp sheltered more families than this one, this story did not give any sign of community formation or vitality in shared experience. No one knew the woman well enough to explain to authorities why she felt so hopeless with food on the shelves, though the camp's proprietor could report that the family owed \$24 in rent. ("3 Tots" 1)
2. Two young men—probably college friends—set out from homes in Chicago and the East to test them-

selves in the mountains of New Mexico. One was the heir to a Chicago fortune, so the story was covered daily by the Associated Press, and multiple western newspapers carried updates during the second week of Wolfe's national parks tour. It took several days for the search party to find the heir after finding his climbing partner because the heir was on the opposite side of New Mexico's Sandia Peak from his friend. Journalists or recovery crews speculated that a bolt of lightning must have severed the rope that bound the two friends as they stood on the summit of the peak, jolting them down opposite sides of the mountain. (Sikkema and Penry, panels 2–6)²

The *Western Journal* hints ever so slightly that even under the spell of tourism, Wolfe recognized the precarious lot of Americans who traveled to find a job. In the closing image of the notebook, he recalled the sight of hoboes riding on top of a Northern Pacific train. Some of the men look as peaceful and contented as Huck Finn on his raft, "stretched out on their backs lazily inviting the luminous American weather" (74). But sandwiched between the "little slaughtered wild things in the road" (73) and the closing phrase of the notebook, such luminous laziness is also deadly dangerous. This memory of a freight train in Montana "blasting towards us up the grade" with its cargo of men represents for Wolfe "the pity, terror, strangeness, and magnificence of it all" (74). If transience in the *Journal* feels most often magnificent, Wolfe understands—at least as he looks back on the journey and tries to sum it up—that it is also pitiful, terrifying, and strange.

The writers Wolfe met in the northwest would have helped him to complicate his insight about homes and communities in motion. Stewart Holbrook and James Stevens had traveled the country as loggers and manual laborers in the 1910s and '20s. Both wrote with Wolfean exuberance about the tall tales and wild braggadocio of such men. For example, *Holy Old Mackinaw*, Holbrook's nonfiction bestseller of 1938, captures the proud voice of itinerant loggers testing their own strength against the dense northwest forests:

When the first loggers saw the fir that grew along the banks of the Columbia and around the Puget Sound they said there couldn't be timber that big and tall. It took, so they told each other, two men and a boy to look to the top of one of these giants.

And thick? Holy Old Mackinaw, the great trunks stood so close that the boys wondered how a tree could be felled at all! And between the trunks grew a jungle of lush growth that no Maine or Michigan logger had ever imagined. You actually had to swamp out a path to a tree and to clear a space around it before there was room to swing an ax. . . . It would take some doing, mister, to let any daylight into this swamp. (161)

In loggers' vernacular ("Holy Old Mackinaw," "swamp out," and "mister") and the perspective of men who have seen Maine and Michigan, Holbrook balances dignity with bemusement. His humor is not that of the local colorist laughing at his subjects but that of the inside man reverencing the industry's own tall tales ("It took, so they told each other, two men and a boy to look to the top . . ."). Both Stevens and Holbrook wrote with humor and reverence of northwest laboring men who built transient communities in bunkhouses and forests, with a folklore that bound them together even after they left the woods.

But both also knew an underside to itinerant labor. In James Stevens's novel *Brawnyman* (1926), for example, the confident young protagonist, Jim Turner, at one point worries about his future. He confesses to a friend,

"It made me sick to think that sometime I might be a feeble-minded, weak-bodied old stiff like some of the broken-down dynos who was workin' in that camp. And it made me sick to think I'd probably end up like so many of them did— . . . at the best help to start a cemetery in a new railroad town. . . . I let it prey on my mind so much that I even wrote a poem or two." (139–40)

But writing poems about death makes him feel "foolish," and the combined acts of confessing to a friend and "tramp[ing]" on a trail restore Jim Turner's optimism. Before long, he feels again the "power" in his muscles and forgets his worries (140). Still, Stevens has taken the long view and shown why he, for one, left the life of itinerant logging. It was young man's work, and if its communities were both tight-knit and transient, its "rotten camp[s]" were not enough to fill a man's entire life. If itinerant communities were necessary to the characters in Holbrook's and Stevens's working-class stories, they were not sufficient.

Wolfe's northwest friends and the seep of western news into consciousness would have supported Wolfe's insight of the *Western Journal* that people can make homes and communities in motion, but the friends and the news would have encouraged

him to take a complex or even a chastened tone. I am speculating that Wolfe's next novel would have reached an understanding of home rather similar to what Wallace Stegner offered in his autobiographical novel of 1943, *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*. In this novel Stegner criticizes the unrealistic optimism of Americans like his father, Bo Mason (whose name Wolfe would have recognized in the western nickname for hoboes!). Bo Mason drags his home-loving wife and two boys from western dream to western dream, eventually succeeding only by violating the law and keeping his family ever on the run. Bound to such a man, Elsa Mason never gets the home she craves. For the most part, then, the novel is a tragedy mourning a society's abandonment of comfortable homes for illusory western dreams.

But Stegner's young protagonist, Bruce Mason, like Eugene Gant, has to make his own way in the world, and his parents' tragedy does not have to be repeated. Raised on the move in the West, he makes his home in motion in a way his mother cannot. Approximately 450 pages into the novel, Bruce drives west from his Minnesota law school to his parents' new house near Reno, meditating on home. Fellow rambler Thomas Wolfe would have understood Stegner's insights. Driving across "the continental sprawling hugeness of America" (457), Bruce Mason thinks,

It was a grand country, a country to lift the blood, and he was going home across its wind-kissed miles with the sun on him and the cornfields steaming under the first summer heat. . . .

But going home where? he said. Where do I belong in this? Going home to Reno? I've never been in Reno more than six hours at a time in my life. Going home to Tahoe, to a summer cottage that I haven't ever seen, that isn't even quite completed yet? . . . Where do I belong in this country? Where is home?

. . . Maybe I'm going away from home, not toward it. Or maybe I've never been home. (457–58)

It takes Bruce eight pages to get to Reno, his thoughts alternating between snatches of popular music, passages from Spenser, Milton, and Keats, and thoughts like these about home. Ultimately, elated by the sensations of motion itself, he decides, "I'll take it. . . . I love it. . . . Even if I don't know where home is, I know when I *feel* at home" (463).

The tragedy of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* loses some of its sting when Bruce Mason gets in a car and sees and smells the open western landscape. His senses recognize the whole region

of the arid west as home, so that his parents' failure to find a place becomes the son's gain. Specifically, he feels this connection to the region when he drives through it. Through the open window of a moving automobile the wind-kissed miles and steaming cornfields lift his blood. Bruce Mason feels most exuberant about motion as the defining western experience of home when he is driving a car across the West—the same feeling that Wolfe records in his *Western Journal*.

I am speculating that once he stepped out of the car, Wolfe would have felt other influences—as Stegner did. If *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* is a tragedy leavened by a homecoming road trip, Wolfe's next novel might have been the inverse—an exuberant story of migration chastened by the West's persistent question: What happens if you've walked from Louisiana to Seattle in search of a job, like one man who arrived in Seattle the same day as Wolfe (Sikkema and Penry, panel 6), or hoboed from the logger's Skidroad to California only to find there is no work (panel 2)? Already sensitized to social inequities by the Depression and his last trip to Germany, Wolfe would have noticed that the bluebirds were not singing beside the lemonade springs for everyone in the West. Only in the last line of his national park journal—when he *got out of the car* in Olympia and remembered road kill and hoboes on a train—did Wolfe get on paper the insight that headlines and friends would have reinforced: Americans were in motion, surely, and their transient communities were magnificent, but they could also be pitiful, terrifying, and strange. In his next book, perhaps Wolfe was going to show us that home and community were the magnificent and terrifying work of people in motion.

Notes

1. Passages quoted from *A Western Journal* are from the 1967 edition. In that printing (as in the 1951 first edition) the text is presented in italics. All quotations in this article will be in roman type. Also note that the University of Pittsburgh Press made at least one silent correction in the later edition.
2. This six-panel poster has been published as a supplement to this issue of the *Thomas Wolfe Review* (with funding through a grant from the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies at Brigham Young University).

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