Article

Fertile Ground: Reading *Yellowstone* through the Analytical Lens of the Afrikaans *Plaasroman*

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Abstract

Yellowstone is an American, contemporary Western primetime television series which has evolved into a cultural phenomenon. In this article, we critically read purposive samples from this popular cultural text through the prism of the *plaasroman* (Afrikaans farm novel), a seminal subgenre in Afrikaans literature. Through an analysis of a range of tropes, we identify similarities between these seemingly disparate genres in terms of the representation of the Boer and Frontier myth, ownership and belonging, centre-periphery dichotomies, and identity. The value of this analysis is two-fold: First, it lies in what such a comparative analysis reveals about the contemporary moment in both a local and transnational context. The resurgence of nostalgic yearning for a particular brand of patriarchal, heteronormative, conservative, rural simplicity in the narratives of *Yellowstone* is read against the background of farm, and land, as depicted in the *plaasroman*. This is relevant given that there is a similar propensity for nostalgia in certain South African contexts which takes the form of appropriations of the construct of the Afrikaner Boer imaginary and the concomitant utopian farm ideal. Second, and perhaps more importantly, we argue that analysing *Yellowstone* from the theoretical vantage point of the *plaasroman*, which originates from a minor language and literary system, inverts the ways in which Global North genre-lenses are usually used to read Global South genres. The research follows a controlled case comparison approach and, building on a deep description of the *plaasroman*, presents an analysis and interpretation of *Yellowstone*'s first season.

Keywords: *Plaasroman*; Western; contemporary Western drama; *Yellowstone*; Frontier myth; Boer myth; centre-periphery; ownership; inside/outside; nostalgia/romanticising; identity; memory

Journal of Literary Studies
Volume 40 | 2024 (In Progress) | #16129 | 19 pages

https://doi.org/10.25159/1753-5387/16129
ISSN 1753-5387 (Online)
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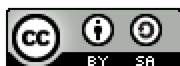

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Introduction

In one of the opening scenes of the first episode of *Yellowstone*, Jamie Dutton says: "The state of Montana has never gauged its progress by the size of its cities. We measure our progress by how those cities impact the people and surrounding land. The land that feeds them, provides their water, nourishes their souls." With its explicit romanticising of land, this quote succinctly points to the themes we explore in this article.

Some time ago, the simultaneous watching of *Yellowstone* resulted in a delicious back-and-forth about the narratives and characters in this story, which we both found intriguing. We are not alone; arguably, this show has grown into a cultural phenomenon evidenced by its undeniable popularity—as measured by ratings and fan-following internationally (Hibberd 2022). One of the ideas that emerged from our concurrent consumption of the series, and the resultant conversations, was regarding the similarities that can be drawn between the Afrikaans literary subgenre of the *plaasroman*—and even more contemporary manifestations of a renewed romanticising of land and farm life (Marx Knoetze 2020, 49)[1]—and some of the narrative devices and characters we love, and love to hate, in *Yellowstone*.

Hall (1992, 293) posits that national cultures "construct identities by producing meanings about 'the nation' with which we can identify; these are contained in the stories which are told about it, memories which connect its present with its past, and images which are constructed of it." Barnard (2006, 39) argues that, in the South African context, "popular culture, alongside political and social institutions [...] chronicle the transformation of the country." In the same vein, Kellner (1996) and milton contend that popular media provide "privileged access to the social realities of their era and can thus be read to gain insight into what is going on in a society at a given moment" (milton 2008, 255).

So, we argue that nostalgic[2] appropriations of the "Afrikaner-as-Boer" and the romanticising of the farm, or yearning for the "platteland," read in conjunction with the proliferation of right-wing movements and narratives such as "MAGA" (Make America Great Again) confirm that what we "read" in these texts can provide access into these societies in the current moment. McVeigh (2007, 13) describes the frontier as becoming the "embodiment of all that was good about America, presenting it as a place of tradition, inspiration, and heroism, the arena in which the American character was

[1] Marx Knoetze (2020, 49) writes that this romanticising of land and farm life constitutes "a type of re-invigoration of the construction of the white Afrikaner-as-Boer—a romanticising of the Boer as it were—as a means of restoring white legitimacy."

[2] While we are aware that the concept of nostalgia can itself function as a complex analytical lens through which to view texts, we are not deploying it as such in this article. Rather, we utilise nostalgia in its more basic sense, where it functions as Linda Hutcheon succinctly puts it: "Nostalgia … may depend precisely on the *irrecoverable* nature of the past for its emotional impact and appeal" (Hutcheon and Valdés 1998–2000, 31). As illustrated here, nostalgia is a powerful force within popular cultural narratives such as television dramas and novels.

forged in the past, and the repository of these values which could heal America's ills in the present." In a way that mirrors the *plaasroman*, the American, contemporary Western drama can also be read as a revived narrative, with aspects of renewed nostalgic thinking about the farm. As Hanley (2020) phrases it, these are "landscapes with [a] life in the present that was shaped by the colonial past." In an analysis of popular cultural expressions, Marx Knoetze (2020, 49) identifies a trend of "nostalgic appropriations of the Afrikaner-as-Boer imaginary, manifesting in an urban setting, so far removed from any actual farm." This resonates with Tomaselli's (2006, 143) view of the "never-never land of pastoral harmony"—a myth that "offers an explanation of urban discontent and the hope of a remedy in return" (Tomaselli 2006, 143) and the contrast between rural naïveté and urban discontent in, for example, Afrikaans film (Jansen van Vuuren and Verster 2018). These discourses, as they relate to nostalgia, land ownership, and identity, are also prevalent in transnational political discourses. So, our shared enjoyment of *Yellowstone* did not only make for good conversation, but there was also an obvious metanarrative at play, which served as impetus for this article.

To tease out this unique analytical—almost intertextual—relationship between the *plaasroman* and *Yellowstone*, and what it can possibly reveal about the contemporary moment, our article unfolds as follows: we introduce our research with an overview of the normative *plaasroman* subgenre with the purpose of elucidating the correlation between some of the enduring characteristics from both this genre and the contemporary Western drama (a controlled case comparison as per Wester, Renckstorf, and Scheepers [2006]). The subsequent section starts out with a broad overview of *Yellowstone* to ground the qualitative, spatial-textual analysis. Situating our exploration of this popular cultural text within the body of work on both the *plaasroman* and the Western as a contemporary television genre, we highlight how their key features overlap, even though the one is a literary subgenre and the other a predominantly film and television genre. This prism forms the theoretical departure for our analysis. This approach, which traverses transnational media forms from two former colonial countries, may deepen our understanding of *Yellowstone* as contemporary Western drama, while also providing further nuance to theorisation around the *plaasroman*, thereby broadening its critical range and analytical potential within cultural and literary studies. Using the *plaasroman*, moreover, provides a unique analytical angle in that it is situated outside of the scope of normative Western culture. Our arguments are grounded in purposively selected examples from especially the first season of *Yellowstone*.[3]

[3] To note: while this research can also be extended to the other four seasons of the series available at the time of writing, as well as to the rest of the story universe, subsequent seasons, and both the prequels, *1883* and *1923*, fall outside the limited scope of what can be presented here. An analysis of the prequels might be valuable when juxtaposed against similar earlier narratives, which is not what we set out to do here. Our focus is, in particular, on the present, or at least the latter half of the twentieth century.

Genres in Conversation

The *plaasroman* is a subgenre that is deeply embedded in Afrikaans literature. While it shares a number of characteristics with its English counterpart, the South African farm novel, the *plaasroman* stands as a generic touchstone within Afrikaans prose, and it has continued to develop since its earliest rendering through emulation, resistance, and reinterpretation (Fourie 2011; Wasserman 2000). In its early twentieth-century form, it is a subgenre replete with conservative elements: the importance of labour, both reliance on and the battle against nature, the subservient position of women, the relationship between the farm and the city, genealogical succession, conserving tradition, steadiness in (Christian, Protestant) faith, and the stereotypical depiction, or absence, of black characters (Wasserman 2000, n.p.). In later iterations of the *plaasroman*, which depart from the characteristics of the normative form, some of these aspects would be challenged by way of the novels showing a kind of meta-awareness of the problematic stereotypes often deployed in the earlier form of the *plaasroman* (Fourie 2011, 2016; Prinsloo and Visagie 2007; Wasserman 2000).

This pattern of emulation, resistance, and reinterpretation could be said to be equally valid for the Western, perhaps not as a literary genre, but definitely in its ever-developing focus. It is usually considered to be a nostalgic genre with a conservative message (Worden 2009, 222). Worden (2009, 222) writes that "an unmistakable nostalgia pervades western fiction, film, painting, photography, and television." In its most persistent form, the Western tells a tale of "simultaneous conquest of savage natives, nature and lawless renegades," as in early dime novels, from which developed eventually the cowboy archetype, "a totemic character of national folklore. Brave, self-reliant and exuding machismo from every rugged pore, he personified the all-conquering American hero" (Jones and Wills 2009, 61, 88). This setting, and the cowboy role, relies on a nostalgia for "a world of simplicity, homely values and patriotism" (Jones and Wills 2009, 101), and while women were initially presented as "prairie beauties" and "damsels in distress under threat […] and in need of rescue by White [sic] males" (Jones and Wills 2009, 121), this later morphed into roles of gentle homesteaders "who toiled away for the good of the family," as well as various permutations of the "fallen girl" (sex workers, saloon staff, etc.) who might have a "heart of gold" (Jones and Wills 2009, 122). In more recent decades, this setting and these roles have, like much of the genre, faced what Langford calls differing forms of "revisionist" reimagining (Langford 2003, 32–33).

While the development of the *plaasroman* and the Western does not correspond exactly, both have, after their normative establishment, faced emulation, resistance, and reinterpretation. What is central to both the *plaasroman* and Western narratives is the conquest of land (in the narrative past or present), and subsequently, a preoccupation with this land. In particular stand the relational forces of history and myth-making in creating a connection between identity and land. Writing about the emphasis on land in Westerns, Jane Hanley (2020, 155) emphasises that the genre relies on location and

environment. According to her, it “often privileges visual and spatial communication and has the capacity to foreground the modes of relation between histories, human encounters, and the more-than-human worlds in which they take place and are remembered and revised” (Hanley 2020, 155). This space, inherently violently conquered (and often violently retained), is what Leon de Kock has called the “seam”: a space that is “the site of a joining together that also bears the mark of a suture” (2001, 276). This seam forever bears evidence of the conflict that created it, and so these spaces can be read as sites of contestation.

One need not look far to see how such seams came into being through the histories of South Africa and the United States. These histories evidence considerable similarities, particularly in their cultural depictions by, and within, their white colonial descendent communities. Tales of supposedly pioneering “settlers” are easy to find: in American parlance, it is signified by the early “American pioneer,” and later, those farmers, settlers, miners, and ranchers who followed the emigrant trails of Oregon, California, etc. (see Jones and Wills 2009, 88 ff.). In a certain South African cultural vocabulary, in turn, it is the Voortrekkers (forebears of modern-day Afrikaners who travelled inland during the nineteenth century) and ultimately those British miners who sought the mineral riches of what is now known as the Witwatersrand (see Hees 2003, 49 ff.). In both the Afrikaans Voortrekker and the American Frontier myths, the Boers/Pioneers are situated as figures of a unique culture, destined to inhabit supposed “uninhabited” land by conquering it. While elements of these myths spring from the actual historical movement of these peoples, much of our view of them in the present (and certainly since the latter half of the twentieth century) is retrospectively constructed to justify a certain imagined community and its (continued) claim to the land. It is within these contexts that we often find tales wherein these migrant peoples and their descendants must face off against the unknown terrain they have migrated into and continue to desire to claim as their own. In relation to this, the prominent preoccupations of the subgenre of the *plaasroman* are well summarised by author Marlene van Niekerk in her reflection on the novel *Agaat* (2004), her own modern version of the form:

> [T]here’s always a very deep male concern with the soil and with the fertility of the soil, and especially the ownership of the soil […] White people who arrived here to be the light at the southern-most tip of Africa, taming-the-country-with-our-bare-hands kind of story; the true and general mythological story of settlerdom and of taking possession. It’s a politically contested business, ownership of soil. (Van Niekerk as quoted in Fourie 2016, 39)

Van Niekerk here draws out the most salient characteristics of the *plaasroman* as it relates to the Afrikaner myth of conquest and ownership. In a comparable vein, the Frontier myth is integral to the American Western. Debbie Olson (2020, 95) writes that the myth

> encompasses a specific geographic space (wide open plains or untamed mountain country) and centers [sic] around the Cowboy figure, a lone, rugged, individualist who

> shuns polite society and city life, who packs a rifle or 6-shooter (or both), who rides a valiant steed (a beautiful and spirited horse), who fights for justice and the "American" way (democracy and freedom) by "taming" the wilderness and the "savages", and whose humble beginnings reflect the notion of the Everyman/woman who is easy to identify with. The Frontier Myth … is a myth that became the bedrock of the American cultural character.

Well before "self-aware" *plaasromans* (Fourie 2016, 38) such as Etienne van Heerden's *Toorberg* (1986), Eben Venter's *Ek stamel, ek sterwe* (1996), and the already mentioned *Agaat* (2004) by Marlene van Niekerk, the earliest form of this type of novel to appear in Afrikaans, writes Ampie Coetzee (1996, 126), is D.F. Malherbe's *Die meulenaar* (1926). While Coetzee views this as the first "proper" example of this novel form in Afrikaans, he also asserts that many of the characteristics that we retrospectively view as central to the *plaasroman* can be traced further back in South African literature. However, for the purposes of our article, the importance of the novel taking its now familiar, normative form lies particularly in what it became emblematic of. In this, the *plaasroman* reveals how land became central to the identity of those who had colonised it. As Henriëtte Roos (2015, 96) remarks, the farm served as a metaphorical pillar of Afrikaner farming culture ("Afrikaanse Boerekultuur"), and up until the 1940s the farm had been viewed through a romantic, nostalgic perspective as an idealised milieu. The American Western, in turn, arguably originated in the genre of cheap, popular fiction writing referred to as "dime novels." Much like the *plaasroman* though, its link to identity remains unshaken, even in more recent interpretations of the genre. In this regard, Langford (2003, 26) writes that the Western and/or the cowboy can typically be read as a "vehicle America used to explain itself to itself" in its focus on who makes the law, where the frontier is, and what constitutes the "good guys." These binary notions of self and other also feature strongly in most *plaasromans*, wherein the farmer and his family stand in a fraught relationship with the "other"—especially the stereotypically depicted black farm workers—from whom they must distinguish themselves (Botha 2016, 648; Prinsloo and Visagie 2007, 44).

Although the link between identity and land would become highly mythologised over the decades in various *plaasromans*, as Van Niekerk also refers to (as quoted in Fourie 2016, 39), there is some overlap with the English farm novel. In his discussion of Olive Schreiner's novel *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), Coetzee makes a pertinent observation about the farm as space: "The farm […] has a twofold being: as land it is in essence nature; as habitation it is in essence town. These two aspects merely coexist, juxtaposed. They form no synthesis" (1986, 2). There is, therefore, the often unacknowledged but persistent tension between the farmland as simultaneously inhabited-but-wild-space in both the *plaasroman* and the Western. The farm, perceived to be closer to the original, more natural state of the land, thus serves as a perpetual apposition to the urbanity of the city. This becomes key to the fantasy of landownership, which Nicole Devarenne also views as "a masochistic fantasy about the loss of authority" (2009, 630) as it pertains to white, heteronormative, patriarchal power. The

strength of this fantasy lies in the imbrication on an existential level between the farmer (and his family), on the one hand, and the land on the other.

As Van Coller (2003, 51) writes, in the normative *plaasroman*, the farm is not just a space in which the characters accidentally live. Rather, the farm is marked as a mythical space and the relation between the farmer and the cosmos is not just a romantic identification; in the normative *plaasroman* the farm is revealed to be the source of meaning. Through the farm the Afrikaner—or here, the farmer or rancher, more broadly speaking—is conjoined to the land and his history, and through the farm he can make a claim on the land, which itself always has allegorical implications for land ownership in white settler societies. It is for these reasons that the farm must not be lost, hereditary succession must be assured, and the farm remains in all ways superior to the city (Van Coller 2003, 51). The farm space therefore finds much of its appeal in its supposed simplicity, and thus, the threatening and frightening outside becomes reinforcement for the idealised past: "the farm [is presented] as the site of a clear, but 'fair', social hierarchy (patriarch, wife, sons and daughters, tenants, servants, beasts, and land)" (Cairne 2007, 21)—a spatiality which ties together relations of race, gender, and power. In the *plaasroman*, the seemingly constant social roles (Roos 1998, 25 quoted in Fourie 2016, 42) of the characters are important axes around which the narrative revolves. As such, character as epic element is key in analyses of the *plaasroman*. The characteristics inherent to this subgenre, but also the elements central to the narrative within the novel—i.e., the land, the personae, the events, etc.—are spatially determined. Gitte Postel (2006, 23) summarises this effectively: inside and outside, culture and nature, civilisation and savagery, us and them.

Yellowstone: Television as Defining Transnational Shared Meanings

Yellowstone premiered in June 2018 on the Paramount Network. The series centres around ownership of the largest ranch in Montana, the Yellowstone Dutton Ranch, commonly called "the Yellowstone." It follows the Dutton family with their—sometimes incredible—family intrigues, which play out against the background of the continuous conflicts related to the fictional ranch, which borders on the Broken Rock Reservation, and the constant pressures of developers.[4] The ranch functions as both the main setting and the metaphorical heart of the show. It is also this centrality of land that forms the focus of our analysis. Taken together with the labelling of the show as "prestige TV for conservatives" (Horton 2022; Mathews 2018) and a "Heartland drama" (Hibberd 2022), it presents fertile ground for a comparative analysis between this

[4] While Yellowstone comprises the original series, the story and the Dutton family that is central to the story have since been incorporated into a shared story universe spanning a period from 1883 to the present day. Two prequal spin-offs, titled *1883* and *1923*, also written by Taylor Sheridan, premiered in 2021 and 2022, respectively. A third spin-off, entitled *6666*, which is based on the eponymous ranch in Texas, is also in the development phases. The creation of this storyverse supports our argument on the popularity of the series and its potential cultural importance.

popular cultural text and the *plaasroman*, which, as outlined in the previous section, explicitly uses similar tropes.

The central characters include the patriarch and landowner, John Dutton III, and his children, Jamie, Lee, Beth, and Kayce. The life of the family is largely governed by what one opinion piece has called "mega-wealth, squabbling siblings, [and] a family guarding its assets" (Horton 2022). The foundation of this landowning family is John, who is depicted from the very first episode as a strong-willed rancher who exerts control over his children, cowboys, and the politics of a large section of Montana.

As is the case with the *plaasroman*, the farm, or ranch, is represented as holding the power to determine true destiny. In the first episode of *Yellowstone*, a character remarks to the antagonist Dan Jenkins that he feels "different here, my skin tingles. I've never felt like this before," to which Jenkins replies:

> Because you live in a city. Cities are the sunsets of civilisation, monuments to an exhausted landscape … What you're feeling is instinct, a hunger for new land, that's woven into your DNA. That's the reason our species survived … That tingle is the sensation of touching your destiny.

What Jenkins expresses here is a romanticised description and an explicit Frontier-esque reference to ideas of survival. This underscores the quote at the start of our article which presents progress as measured by land, not cities, a view that contrasts with the connotations of urbanisation to progress, or growth. In *Yellowstone*, there is a constant binary opposition between the city and the farm. The city is associated with vulnerability and dislocation, while the renewed nostalgic yearning for life in the "platteland" connotes a life of plenitude, security, and a certain set of traditional values.[5] Part and parcel of the construction of the rural space as ideal is a revised, edited, and romanticised version of the past. John Dutton, for example, emphasises that things are done his way, with a member of the influential Livestock Association reminiscing that he remembers "when your way was the only way, and the world was better for that." In several ways, this harkens back to "the farm as the site of a clear, but 'fair', social hierarchy" (Cairne 2007, 21). The way things used to be, such as a clear distinction between land and city, and the power relations between the dwellers of and in this space, which is now under threat, is idealised as simple, and, therefore, desirable. Through this, an inside/outside dichotomy takes shape between the farm and urbanisation, to which we return further on.

John, moreover, shows an awareness that those who own the land have great power in determining what this "clear, but 'fair'" hierarchy looks like. He emphasises the value

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5 Van Zyl (2008, 127) writes that, even though the terms "countryside" or "rural areas" may be considered synonyms for the Afrikaans term "platteland," she prefers to use the latter because it "embodies the very imagery, identity, values and notions that Afrikaners yearn for." For that reason, the word *platteland* is also preferred here.

of owning the land, and its superiority to the city when he says, in reference to the Yellowstone: "Leverage is knowing that if someone had all the money in the world, this is what they'd buy." From a narrative perspective, notions of landscape, location, and environment are deployed in service of identity—they are not forces and identities in and of themselves. The many establishing shots of the landscape of rural Montana serve to visually emphasise the importance of the land, and a multitude of aerial shots of the Yellowstone specifically establishes the majestic nature of the farm. Power and property are thus depicted as inextricably connected. And the Duttons have it all: their power is centred in, and on, the land.

Along with this prevailing distinction between city and farm—and linked to the Frontier myth—belonging and ownership, or possession, are depicted as something that one "fights for," not only once, but continually. This ownership is worked for, and "deserved," as evidenced, for example, in Jamie's comment that there are "[n]o weekends on a ranch." And, perhaps most significantly, this desire to continue fighting becomes part of the identity and is carried over through generations.

This clear inside/outside dichotomy between the Yellowstone and what stands outside it structures the power relations within the narrative world of *Yellowstone*. Central to the inside is the Dutton family, with John at its head, followed in order of relation to this power centre: the Dutton children and their families. Just outside the central core stand the other farm inhabitants (principally the employees, such as the cowboys/farmhands) and select allies external to the farm (other ranchers, Governor Lynelle Perry, the State Attorney General, Livestock Commission agents, etc.). On the outside are found the supposed "enemies" of the Duttons: Chief Thomas Rainwater and the people of the Broken Rock Reservation, developer Dan Jenkins, and more broadly, the so-called "transplants"—allochtones who have settled, or seek to settle, in Montana and who work counter to the impetus to conserve proffered by the Duttons. The contrast is, thus, not just spatial, but also on the level of human relationships, which, of course, results in the characters both moving spatially between the supposed safety of the ranch and the danger of the outside world, and shifting metaphorically in terms of their distance from the centre of power or their affiliation with the forces outside of that centre. However, these relations are not as simplistic as they might initially seem.

John is the first character introduced to the viewer. In the very first opening scene of the series, his hand, signifying control, moves across the screen as the camera tracks towards a horse's face, after which the camera snaps back and John steps into the frame. The camera shifts to reveal the site of a vehicle accident. The horse is severely injured and is swiftly euthanised by John, who has sustained a head wound. As the camera changes angle and more of the site is revealed, the viewer sees that the accident happened on a road next to a pasture. After surveying the load of the large truck involved in the scene—a large construction vehicle that visually dwarfs John—and establishing that the other driver has died, John walks over to the pasture and speaks to the cattle

aimlessly staring in his direction as they graze, saying, “The things we lose to keep you fed.”

Three important character aspects are established here, which depict John as an idealised rancher: the steadiness and decisiveness of his actions and demeanour, his attachment to the land, and the power he wields in this space. He is a tough man, but gentle and firm with the farm animals; he is in tune with the farm as inhabited-but-wild space, and his decisions are in the interest of the farm. Ownership of nature, or the ranch, is here represented in a romanticised way, with the constant struggle between man versus nature, or man as having power over nature (which is, of course, a romanticised myth that exists in both Frontier mythologies and the *plaasroman*).

Later in the first episode, he is established not just as the patriarch on the Yellowstone, but also as a kind of godfather figure within the ranching community. John exerts a high level of control over his children and the cowboys who work his land. In the same way his father did before him, he allows a limited number of criminals to work as cowboys on the ranch, subject to their being branded on the upper left chest with the Y-shaped brand of the ranch, and to swear lifelong loyalty to the Duttons and their ranch. Within the confines, or borders, of the ranch, the Duttons are a law unto themselves. And oftentimes, this law is also justified as moral (“clear but fair”) behaviour—or, at the very least, certain actions are justified because they ensure the sustainability of the ranch.

Kayce, the youngest of John’s sons, shares his father’s rugged appearance, but they have a complex relationship. Kayce is initially shown as being least involved with the Yellowstone and his family. In fact, he is introduced to the viewer on the Broken Rock Reservation where he lives with his wife and son. The viewer learns that he is the only one of the Dutton children who also bears the Y-shaped brand of the ranch on his body. As revealed to his wife by his father, John himself branded his son for disobeying him “one too many times.” While he initially refuses to submit to his father’s authority, the conflict between the Dutton family and High Chief Thomas Rainwater, newly elected leader of the Broken Rock Reservation, forces him back into his father’s political ambit.

Much of the strain between John and Kayce becomes visible in the first episode when John visits Kayce while he is breaking a stallion at his home in the Reservation. John tells Kayce that if he manages to break the stallion’s “spirit, no horse will serve you better.” Kayce maintains that “he’ll serve me just fine with spirit intact,” but John does not relent: “I used to think the same thing at your age. Hope you prove me wrong.” Kayce’s disapproval of the perceived lack of independence from his father’s authority on the Dutton land also translates into his decision to not let Tate, his own son, spend much time with his father or on the ranch. In opposition to Kayce’s reluctance, John is clearly still trying to ensure hereditary succession on the Dutton ranch. When Tate is allowed to visit the Yellowstone, John is quick to remind him of his place in the greater scheme of things. When asked if he can ride a horse, Tate responds by saying, “Of

course I do. I'm Indian." While John does not show any signs of thinking less of his daughter-in-law or grandson based on this heritage, he does make clear in his response that Tate cannot be both simultaneously: "Yeah, maybe so. But you're a cowboy today."

While Jamie serves to act in the interest of the Yellowstone in his capacity as a lawyer, and Beth functions as a business and political fixer of sorts, Lee is the Dutton who, besides his father, works most simply as a rancher. He manages the day-to-day care of the livestock with the support of the farmhands, while he also serves as an inspector for the Montana Livestock Association, of which John also happens to serve as commissioner. Lee's presence in *Yellowstone* is mostly spectral, as his demise in the first episode serves as a catalyst for much of the narrative conflict that drives the show. While Lee is actively involved in running the ranch, his father makes it clear that he (Lee) cannot see beyond his view as a cattleman—in other words, he cannot see the ranch and all it encompasses from the perspective of a landowner, which makes him unsuitable as heir to the ranch.

John is aware of the authority he wields and the pragmatic requirements of his position as landowner. Much of this is presented to the viewer in the first major scene wherein we see John and Jaime together. Tending to his own headwound from the aforementioned accident, they discuss the outcome of the attempt to force the sale of some of their land. In the conversation, John exposes that he does not view Jaime as suited to take over as landowner when he (John) is gone. Not only does he admonish his son for not asserting authority against an opponent—"when you say no, it must be the death of the question"—but he reminds his son that he thinks "like a lawyer" and not a "landowner." While John recognises the importance of protecting the ranch through legal strategies, and he is responsible for his son becoming a legal practitioner, it is viewed as a lesser profession to ranching. Indeed, unlike ranching, it seems, John believes that there is no true generational value in legal practice.

In a disruption of the idea of patrilineal reproduction, it is perhaps Beth who seems most like her father. Whereas John is introduced to the viewer in the accident scene where he euthanises an injured horse, Beth is introduced to us in her role as a cut-throat partner at an investment bank. In a tense meeting with a firm that the bank is trying to force into a merger, Craig, the owner of the firm, refers to Beth as the bank's "hatchet man." Beth is presented as having a high amount of agency in her sexual provocativeness, and she openly defies conservative and traditional notions of female gender identity and sexuality through her dominance over almost everyone she interacts with. In the rest of the scene, it becomes clear why the use of the term hatchet *man*—including the gendered aspect thereof—holds true. After a long explanation about how she will destroy the company if Craig does not comply, Beth asks, "So what's it gonna be? Are we restructuring your company tomorrow, or killing it?" Like her father, Beth is decisive. John puts down a horse; Beth puts down a company. Unlike her father, however, she does not couch it in any kind of romantic nostalgia. Beth's ruthlessness is later also shown when she begins targeting Jenkins and his family. While waiting in a bar in town

to insinuate herself into a meeting of Jenkins and his developer partners, a man attempts to flirt with her. She, however, quickly eviscerates the man, easily identifying him as an outsider, an urban dweller: "You look like a real soft fuck, Ted. All you city boys do." To Beth, masculinity is closely imbricated within a gendered, spatial domain. Men who work the land are hard, "real" men. Men from the city, who simply vacation in Montana, are not considered masculine. Beth, who has a close relationship with her father and is eager to please him, situates herself within this matrix of ruggedness as well—despite her being a woman. This is validated by John, who, in turn, appears to trust his daughter more than any of his other children, and he reveals at various points his view that Beth is "tougher" than any of his sons. This ruggedness is also the basis of Beth's belief that the Duttons will defeat Jenkins. In colloquial terms, Jenkins is not "man enough" to face off with the Duttons and be victorious.

In later episodes and through a series of flashbacks, the viewer will learn that Beth was hardened both by her mother and by experience. Her dominant personality is a result of not just trauma related to her mother's death, but also because of a cruel sense of gender awareness instilled in her by her mother. Yet despite Beth's strength, both John and Beth herself view her as unsuited to inherit the farm and continue the Dutton line. For both of them it is because, as Beth admits to Jamie later in the first season, she has no interest in the ranch and the land itself:

> I don't give a shit about this place. If Dad died tomorrow, I would sell my share to the Four Seasons, and I would swim laps in the pool they built without an ounce of remorse. Everything I do is for him.

Beth is also aware, of course, that she is physically unable to continue the Dutton line, as she endured a forced sterilisation when aborting a pregnancy during her teenage years. This inability to bear children is one aspect of Beth's gender identity that treads closer to more conservative depictions of women, as Beth feels a deep sense of loss and inadequacy due to her sterility. Just like the *plaasroman*, the Western is usually considered to be a nostalgic genre with a conservative message. One can see elements of this when Beth says to Rip, for instance, that "it's funny. I always remember your dick as being bigger. I guess that's just the nostalgic in me." The delivery of this quippy insult, somewhat of a characteristic of Beth throughout the show, summarises narratives of the Old West well. It must be acknowledged that Beth challenges this through her straightforwardness regarding sex (in the first episode, but also throughout the series), and indeed, she represents something very unlike the traditional woman in these types of stories. However, this is not necessarily a radical recasting of traditional gender roles. Rather, Beth has simply adopted some qualities traditionally associated with men, and she uses these to navigate power relations as she assists her father in protecting the ranch. Beth, ironically, becomes traditionally masculine in two significant ways: through her domineering tactics and her tragic inability to bear a child. When John tells her that she will have to stay on the ranch longer before returning to her life outside of Montana, her response to this—"just tell me who to fight"—is as indicative of the way

she venerates her father as John's answer—"everyone"—is illuminating of his idea of what the Duttons and their ranch are up against. John's conceptualisation of the threats to the ranch (and lineage) reveals *Yellowstone* to be "a local instantiation of a transnational cultural politics" (Carolin 2021, 67) of the USA, in much the same way as the *plaasroman* and other recent popular cultural concerns with the farm as sites of identity are telling of associations in the South African context.

The "everyone" the Duttons must fight refers to several characters in the show, but in the first season, it is specifically Dan Jenkins and Chief Rainwater who threaten the ranch. In both cases, this is illustrated through both physical and metaphorical fences between the Yellowstone and Jenkins's land, and the Yellowstone and the Broken Rock Reservation. In the case of the former, the episode employs a scene wherein John and Jenkins meet at the fence between their properties. The visual difference is stark: On John's side, the landscape is wild and serves only as grazing for cattle, whereas on Jenkins's side, the landscape has been tamed and transformed into a manicured golf course. John rides up to the fence on a horse, and Jenkins has ridden up in a golf cart. In the ensuing interaction, several important things are established or confirmed. Jenkins notes that "every millionaire I know wants to be a cowboy. Authenticity's the one thing money can't buy," as he further suggests building a rodeo in Bozeman to "honour men like [John]." John, who is aware that Jenkins views his way of life and the way of life of those like him simply as stereotypes and a remnant of a past long gone, responds disdainfully: "Parading us in front of your friends isn't an honour, Dan, it's an insult." As the conversation leads onto the topic of Jenkins's development, he admonishes John for his desire to conserve things as they are: "It's called progress, John, and progress doesn't need your permission." But the viewer is already aware of what John then replies: "In this valley it does."

The viewer would be hard pressed to not side with John here. Ranching and the Yellowstone are depicted as beautiful and ideal, and those who inhabit it are presented as authentic in their identity. John comes to represent the "real" cowboys (read: real Americans), while Jenkins (and his ilk) represents a fake version of it—people who want the spectacle of the identity, but do not want the actual identity. This positioning is supported by the visuals: John is up on his horse in his pasture for the duration of the exchange, while Jenkins is standing on the other side of the fence, near a golf cart, golf club in hand, on his golf course. Jenkins calls John a "fucking hypocrite" for pretending that his protection of the land has anything to do with environmental concerns, since John is a cattle rancher. John returns the insult when the interaction ultimately ends, and he calls Jenkins a "cocksucker." While John is never shown to be openly homophobic, his resorting to a homophobic slur to insult Jenkins chimes with the rather conservative ideas around masculinity portrayed in the series. While not outright, the notion of same-sex desire remains a threat, even if just revealed through several instances where

homosexual slurs or homophobic comments are expressed.[6] This constitutes another overlap with the *plaasroman*. While non-normative sexualities may not feature explicitly in the normative *plaasroman* as one of the threats to the farm, within the ontology of the farm as space, it follows logically that such sexualities would be perceived as a threat.

The other main source of narrative tension arises due to the fence between the Yellowstone and the Broken Rock Reservation. As the show opens, the fence had come down (and it is strongly implied that it had intentionally been taken down), resulting in some of the Yellowstone's cattle walking onto the Reserve. Chief Rainwater claims the cattle, as he is legally entitled to do, but John resists this. During a ceremonial hunting scene on the ranch, the Native Americans are allowed to shoot a single buffalo, but Rainwater, attending in his role as Chair of the Reserve, views it as a mockery. When he is accused by John of stealing the Yellowstone cattle, and ranchers are called "victims" by John, Rainwater retorts: "You people don't know the concept of victim. […] How can you stand there on a ranch the size of Rhode Island and accuse me of theft?" To Rainwater, the quest to retake the Yellowstone, land which once belonged to his people, is existential. He rejects the narrative of victimhood deployed by John here—a narrative which in both the mythologies of Boer and Manifest Destiny is often deployed as justification for certain actions committed in the past, frequently at the expense of native peoples. Rainwater goes further, and admits to John later in the season that:

> I'm going to pull down every fence, and any evidence that your family ever existed, will be removed from the property. It'll look like it used to when it was ours. I will erase you from the future, and then I'll do it to the next ranch, and the next, and there's nothing that you can do to stop it. See, I am the opposite of progress, John. I am the past, catching up with you.

With this, Rainwater confirms John's greatest fear, and that is that not only will his family lose the land which they tie their identity to, but also the hereditary nature of their ownership—their legacy—will cease to exist. As it stands, he has already lost his son to this conflict. John's response is, as becomes characteristic of him, short and to the point: "You're a thief, and you're going to prison, where the past catches up with everyone." Here John interprets the law, as it is often done in the *plaasroman*, as an objective arbiter rather than an inherently biased system designed to maintain white settler interests. The exaggerated invocation of the law here only reinforces its very failures to produce justice. If one reads this within broader historical and cultural narratives of the USA, Rainwater here comes to represent the Native-American tribes all over the country whose ancestors were dispossessed of their land, while John comes

[6] Instances of such casual homophobia are to be found throughout the series. While these are obviously not above criticism, it must be acknowledged that depicting ranchers in a traditionally conservative state such as Montana as anything but casually homophobic would be unrealistic. As a prestige contemporary Western drama series, the show is obliged to have some grounding in reality.

to represent the settler-colonial people who enacted said dispossession, as well as their descendants. Whereas Rainwater gladly leans into his own analogy, John refuses it—his concern with the past seems to end once it goes beyond the personal history of his family. In this regard, he lives only according to the rules and status quo of the present, when, of course, it is to his benefit.

Conclusion, or: Making the Ranch Great Again

The parallels we have drawn between the genre of the *plaasroman* and the contemporary Western, and the fact that there has been a recent resurgence of surrounding discourses, undeniably reveal something about the nature of the society within which they are produced.

In both contexts, there is a nostalgic reach for what is perceived to be "simpler" times, and in this yearning the urge toward mythology, be it for the Voortrekker or the Frontier, can be found. Extrapolating this into a broader cultural and socio-political context, both cultural texts feature discourses of ownership and belonging that may function as justifications for nationalism. Depictions of imperialism, colonialism, racism, paternalism, and violence, which can all be linked to versions of nationalism, coincide with manifestations of this in South Africa and America, but also more broadly in transnational discourses of our time.

Crucially, however, Worden (2009, 222) argues that "accounts of western fiction ... that emphasize [sic] the formulaic, mythical, even universal qualities of the western" can be contrasted with scholarship that interprets the "western as a complex retelling of American history." This resonates with Van Niekerk's view on more modern iterations of the *plaasroman* as a more complex text (as quoted in Fourie 2016, 39). Our argument, consequently, is that both the *plaasroman* and the contemporary Western drama—despite their formulaic nature—reveal something about the South African and American contexts that goes beyond a mere conservative message. Within these narratives there are definite indications of worlds with the potential to destabilise the narratives of control, and world-making practices which underpin colonial legacies.

Television and, more broadly, popular culture undeniably present ideal tools for mythmaking, but negations such as the ones above, therefore, also provide further nuance to theorisation of these texts. Specifically, our analysis has as its goal the broadening of the critical range and analytical potential of these texts within cultural and literary studies. Our hope is that a study such as this one will go some way in proving that themes we identify in these texts reveal some more general tendencies when it comes to contemporary manifestations of a renewed romanticising of land and farm and its concomitant histories and lifestyles. This allows for an investigation of the local, but also the universal, thereby offering further elucidation regarding our understanding of contestations around land and identity in a globalised present.

Linked to the above, the contribution we hope to make here lies in the application of indigenised, or localised, theory proving its relevance as an analytical tool in analysing global cultural production. Using the *plaasroman*, arguably, provides a unique analytical angle in that it is situated outside of the scope of normative Western culture. While it certainly relates to subgenres such as the farm novel, the *plaasroman* no doubt has its own unique characteristics. For Buonanno (2008), work on the indigenisation of genres has a possible subversive element, and we argue that this also pertains to the analysis presented here. In asking questions about the cultural specificity of particular television cultures and productions, and in being careful to not impose Eurocentric or other Westernised assumptions on our understandings of such cultural formations, a possible contribution lies in a reversal of what Gunaratne (2009, 2010) calls a "centre-periphery structure in the social sciences" (Ray 2012, 238). By starting and ending with the South African case, we challenge the centre-periphery dichotomy. In this way, analysing global television culture can be a way of enhancing cross-cultural understanding, highlighting the subtly different meaning structures that people in other parts of the world inhabit. The *plaasroman* and the Western prove to be a particularly valuable means to this end because they deal so prominently with the cultural intimacies of feeling, of mythmaking, and of identity.

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