

“There Is No Heaven to Go to, Because We’re in It Already. We’re in Hell, Too. They Coexist”: Place-Making and the Television Western Series *1883* and *Yellowstone*

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Abstract

This article explores the idea and articulation of place in Taylor Sheridan’s western series *1883* and *Yellowstone*. Through narrative and genre analysis, we critically compare these two series to demonstrate that genre semantics combine in a particular series-specific syntax to articulate place differently. Our thinking on place and adjacent concepts of trails and knots, inhabiting and occupation, as well as the differentiation between place as object and place as event, is primarily informed by the scholarship of Tim Ingold. We argue that these series’ specific and gendered articulations of place are meaningfully linked to each series’ protagonist, Elsa Dutton and John Dutton respectively. Finally, we suggest that the two series generate an additional western-genre binary that we base on Ingold’s work: occupation (particular to *Yellowstone*) vs. inhabiting (specifically in *1883*). The *Yellowstone* character Beth Dutton notably reifies this binary. *Yellowstone*, here framed as post-heyday western, postwestern and post-Western, articulates place as nostalgic and static compared to *1883*’s more expansionist and dynamic iteration of place.

Keywords: *1883*; place; television series; western; *Yellowstone*

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Introduction

This article aims to explore the purposes and parameters of place in two of the Taylor Sheridan shared universe series, the westerns *1883* (2022) and *Yellowstone* (2018–). Although *Yellowstone* was the first of these series, the events of *1883* predate those of the more contemporary-set series, which is why we first analyse place in *1883* before shifting our attention to *Yellowstone*. When we explore place through the respective series protagonists Elsa Dutton (Isabel May) and John Dutton (western genre stalwart Kevin Costner) in *1883* and *Yellowstone*, we will demonstrate how Elsa Dutton’s status in the West is not fixed, but ascendant, whereas the central figure of ageing patriarch and ranch-owner John Dutton is fixed in place; he cannot perceive himself outside of a meaningful relationship with his home, Yellowstone Ranch. Drawing from Ingold’s (2007, 2008) definition of inhabiting and occupation, we argue that Elsa’s ascendant status relates to the exploratory way in which she inhabits the earth while John’s fixed status reflects his occupation of a pre-determined environment. We argue that the series and *Yellowstone* configure place in gendered, meaningfully distinct ways. We draw on narrative analysis and genre analysis to discuss and critically compare and contrast the two series. Narrative analysis here refers to the ways in which character, plot, and theme collaborate to inform meaning. Genre analysis refers to the meaningful connections derived from applying genre-specific iconographies, conventions, and styles to appropriate examples. In this instance, the relevant genre is the western. Finally, we turn to a third character, *Yellowstone*’s Beth Dutton (John’s only daughter, played by Kelly Reilly) to demonstrate how genre conventions and notions of place are collapsed and expanded.

Since *Yellowstone*’s debut in 2018, viewership has grown by as much as 132% in the United States alone (Mercuri 2023). Sheridan takes a page from other American family sagas such as *Dynasty* and *Dallas*. As in those location-specific series, *Yellowstone*’s Dutton family members work with and against one another as corporate and Native American financial and cultural interests place the future of the family-owned Yellowstone Ranch, a political stronghold of the state of Montana, at risk.¹ John Dutton manages the family as if the human relationships between father, sons, and sister are best served by a business model aimed at preserving not only the ranch, but also, a certain way of life. At the time of writing, *Yellowstone* has sustained this overarching concern with Yellowstone Ranch as place across four and a half seasons of television (although only the first four seasons are considered here). It is this emphasis on place, and how genre conventions inform place-making, that this article explores.

An adjacent production, the single-season *1883*, premiered in 2022 and features the Dutton pioneers making their way through the frontier towards the expected conclusion:

¹ A focus on the Native American capacity for place-making falls outside the scope of this article. “Seasoned inhabitants,” writes Ingold (2008, 1803), “know how to read the land as an intimate register of wind and weather”; such is the domain of the Native American Indigenous peoples (First Nations) in the western.

founding the Yellowstone Ranch. *1883* features patriarch James Dutton (Tim McGraw) leading his family and German and other migrants on a high-risk journey to Oregon. (The character of James Dillard Dutton first appears in a brief opening flashback in season four of *Yellowstone*. This flashback is set in 1893, ten years after the events of *1883*.) While James is John's character type equivalent, *1883*'s emphasis is on James's daughter Elsa, who emerges as a primary protagonist in the series, and whose voice-over often emphasises the series' themes.

This article follows Rick Altman's (2012) semantic-syntactic approach to film genre to address specific aspects of the western genre as it is configured differently in *Yellowstone* and *1883* respectively. In this approach, genre semantics refers to basic building blocks available to a film or television director working in a particular genre. The director and their creative team deploy these building blocks in a unique arrangement that is similar to yet distinct from other iterations in its genre; this specific structuring of the semantics provides a genre film's particular syntax. Together, the semantic and syntactic approaches provide an "explanatory power" for the efficacy of a genre film while retaining the "broad applicability" inherent to genre discourses (Altman 2012, 33). Genres, Altman (2012, 35) suggests, are created when, for instance, "an already existing syntax adopts a new set of semantic elements." A syntax only becomes generic (broadly established within the genre) when the syntax is regularly repeated across numerous individual films or series (Altman 2012, 39). For Altman the western is one of the genres that has established an optimally coherent syntax.

Film historian Tim Dirks (n.d.) identifies the following selective conventions and typical elements (semantic basics) of the western, as related to plot, character, and iconography:

- The importance of maintaining law and order in a morally at-risk frontier
- A number of binary tensions, such as civilisation vs. wilderness, farmer vs. industrialist, and the individualist vs. the community
- Additional representational and visual elements such as hostile Native American characters, horses, trains, "shoot-outs and showdowns; cattle drives and cattle rustling," "breathtaking settings and open landscapes," and "distinctive western clothing."

A specific western film or television series, then, arranges and deploys the above genre elements into a unique-yet-familiar and recognisable syntax that may reinforce or challenge the status of these elements. The syntax of *1883* and *Yellowstone* respectively articulate different conceptions of place within each series' explicitly established western context and genre dynamics. While we address this latter point below, it is worth pointing out the series' genre conformities and amendments already. *1883* is the more traditional western, with its insistence on period reproduction and historical

referentiality. Under James Dutton's leadership, as well as that of war veteran Shea (Sam Elliott), the characters move along the frontier in which their understanding of civilisation (epitomised by the environmentally redundant piano in episode four) is undone by the demands of wilderness survival. While Elsa is often identified as individualistic, the series reiterates her value for her community of travellers and her family. Given the premise of the cross-frontier expedition, there are hostile (yet empathetic) Native Americans, horses, shoot-outs, cattle driving, impressive landscapes, and period-appropriate costumes. Finally, as mentioned below, a train announces Elsa's presence in the American West. Of further relevance here is Dirks's description of the western protagonist as "normally masculine persons of integrity and principle—courageous, moral, tough, solid and self-sufficient, maverick characters (often with trusty sidekicks), possessing an independent and honorable attitude." In alignment with other woman-centred westerns referred to later in this article, *1883*'s Elsa represents the values Dirks highlights above. Elsa does not hesitate to use traditionally masculine attire and attitudes to express her individuality.

Evidently, *Yellowstone*'s John Dutton is the more traditional encapsulation of the protagonist Dirks describes, although his idea of honourability is compromised by his willingness to commit crime and betrayal to ensure his own survival (and that of the ranch); he is the farmer who opposes the industrialists, although both parties are equally capable of murder. The rest of the genre conventions are present and updated: the justifiably hostile Native American characters are represented by businessman Thomas Rainwater (Gil Birmingham), who wants to claim Yellowstone Ranch as his land; ranch-hands—cowboys—tame and ride horses, rustle cattle, and go on cattle drives; each season of the series ends in a violent showdown or shoot-out; Yellowstone Ranch and surrounding Montana offer a beautiful landscape (as John himself often comments); and the characters wear distinctive clothing such as cowboy hats. While the primary mode of transport and symbol of industrialisation is not the train anymore, *Yellowstone* evokes a ghostly presence of the past when John and others such as his right-hand Rip (Cole Hauser) refer to killing and disposing of the bodies of problematic individuals as "taking them to the train station," a transitory location from where they never return.

While *1883* and *Yellowstone* occupy different temporalities, they share a number of western semantics in constructing a distinct yet recognisable syntax, which in turn results in different conceptualisations of place.

Place-Making

In our exploration of place in *1883* and *Yellowstone*, we draw primarily on the work of Tim Ingold (2000, 2008, 2011, 2019).

The dynamics of space and place are intertwined. Charles Withers (2009, 638) explains that "[like] space, its regular epistemic dancing partner in geographical ubiquity and metaphysical imprecision, place is a widespread yet complex term." Ingold (2008, 1796) posits that individuals' lives, through their actions, contribute to "weaving the

textures of the land.” Elements such as history and culture contribute to this weaving process and a palimpsestic site emerges (Casey 1996, 14). Space, then, refers to a dynamic, open area in which these textures are interwoven, and where the habitation of this space—including its histories and cultures—forms place.

Place can be conceived as both object and event. Ingold (2000, 206) provides the example of a church building that—due to its physical structure and architecture—could be considered a place. This is place as object. The building, however, also signifies “cycles of human life and subsistence” (Ingold 2000, 207). Additionally, place is “dependent on perception, identity and values” (Starr 2013, 436) and as such is also socially constructed (Withers 2009, 641); place refers to a meaningful past event, a myth, or a particular historical significance (De Certeau cited in Augé 1997, 82). This is place as event. A place’s physical landscape—a “location of meaning”—carries individual and shared meanings (Cresswell 2008, 134). Object and event must both be present to optimally configure place.

Places “are created things” that are “bound up with power” (Cresswell 2008, 136). Given the emphasis on power, location, meaning, and attachment, it follows that one can conceive of a “place identity” “as a separate subidentity containing the individual’s schemas and cognitions concerning various environments” (Hopkins and Dixon 2006, 175). Place forms *a part of* space rather than simply *existing in* space (Ingold 2011, 30). Ingold (2000, 229) further explains that “lives are led not inside places but through, around, to and from them, from and to places elsewhere.” Here, Ingold emphasises the idea of various connected places, places that are further imbued with significance on the basis of meaningful connections between them.

Place is made explicit through movement. Individuals’ movements develop into trails, and while these movements could be place-binding, they are not bound to place. When various trails intertwine, like the tying of a knot, a place (or knot) is formed (Ingold 2011, 37). Ingold (2019, 112) explains that a series of places or knots combine to construct a narrative. Narrative can be likened to a tapestry of knots. The essence of such a narrative lies not in a linear development where the past is placed irrevocably behind the present and the present precedes the future, but rather in the events that occur as the narrative unfolds. In the western series *1883* and *Yellowstone*, place and place-making obtain distinct genre qualities.

In the context of the American West, land (the base semantic substance for all places) is at the centre of frontier expansion and settlement. Chirica (2019, 47–48) foregrounds the Homestead Act of 1862 in opening up the West for settlement, while the Oklahoma Land Rush and the Dawes Act of 1887 “opened for settlement of unassigned lands left vacant in the post-Civil War period.” The period 1890–1900 was a time of severe social upheaval as “[i]ndustrial monopolies and business cartels [...] fuelled political protest and conflict between labour and capital, and many in the United States became nostalgic for a simple vision of America” (Carter 2014, 7); this simple vision remains evident in

John Dutton's regular yearning for earlier times in which good and bad were, apparently, more easily differentiated. As Chirica (2019, 53) describes it, the mythical West became a rallying point for Americans to gather against national threats such as war and economic depression. She writes: "A *sense of place*, of rootedness, can provide [...] stability and a source of unproblematic identity" (2019, 53; emphasis added). It is this rootedness and identity that John Dutton claims to fight for, as this rootedness and sense of identity are linked to land and property ownership.

Concomitant with land and expansion, the idea of myth is central to the American imagining of the West. Myths about the West inform the identities of westerners and Americans as "the West is critical in the creation of American identity" (Chirica 2019, 58). For Marcus Stiglegger (2022, 144), "[if] the western film is the heart of the North American myth, then all updated variants can be understood as transformations of that myth." American television has long retold and informed new mythological iterations of the idea of the West and its links to space and place. Their narratives of conquering and triumph—politically and religiously—linked to the notion of American Manifest Destiny. As Neil Campbell (2013, 336) notes, the "mythic frontier of the West was predicated on control"; this control was exercised over nature (the land; wild animals) and by establishing settlements across the frontier. These narratives reiterate Cresswell's (2008) argument (as previously mentioned) that places "are created things ... bound up with power." Contemporary westerns such as *Yellowstone* and *1883* offer variations on established mythologies and narrative conventions. Claiming that all American westerns promoted the notion of Manifest Destiny and its ideological affiliations, though, would be disingenuous, and American western television series shifted between such ideological sustenance and a more critical historical and formal revisionism.

The television western had been a popular viewing staple for American audiences since the early days of the medium. Set in a frontier settlement, *Gunsmoke* (1955–1975) ran for 20 seasons, while the ranch-based family saga *Bonanza* (1959–1973) had 14 seasons, and *Little House on the Prairie* (1974–1983) nine seasons. Much later, *Dr Quinn, Medicine Woman* (1993–1998) popularised the image of the strong professional woman (a medical doctor) as a vital presence in the predominantly masculine frontier life. More contemporary westerns such as *The English* (2022) and *Godless* (2017) have retained an emphasis on women on the frontier. Berg (2000, 222) reminds us that "[h]istorically, the western has been a virtually exclusive male-domain" where very few western feature films, for instance *Bad Girls* (Kaplan 1994) and *The Quick and the Dead* (Raimi 1995), respond to this male dominance of the genre. Other noteworthy western television series include the astutely counter-mythological *Deadwood* (2004–2006), the revisionist *The Good Lord Bird* (2020), the genre hybrid *Justified* (2010–2015) and its sequel *Justified: City Primeval* (2023), which combine the semantics of the western with that of the police drama, and the frontier-focused genre hybrid *Firefly* (2002–2003), which combines western conventions with science fiction. Across these series, marshals, sheriffs, and outlaws try to outdo one another to claim (or habituate) a specific

rural or urban space as their own (and thus establish place), or at least, as being under their control, a space that they are in some ways responsible for (or can claim as a shared place). In the discussion below, we address *1883*'s and *Yellowstone*'s western syntax and, importantly, how the emphasis on woman protagonists Elsa and Beth either invigorate or affirm articulations of place by way of inhabiting or occupation, respectively, in the two western series.

Elsa Dutton and Place in *1883*

1883, similar to Kelly Reichardt's female-centred western *Meek's Cutoff* (2010), demonstrates that the landscape is not a space to simply "ride over; it encloses, baffles, throws up obstacles. The film's female protagonists—cooking, mending, collecting firewood—live *in* it and with it" (Thornham 2019, 25; emphasis in original). It is here that "[landscape] [...] ceases to be 'something we travel across' (Massey 2006, 46) in our journey towards becoming (human, or subject, or hero) but becomes itself the intersection of different stories, different temporalities. Our own journey, with its 'overarching narrative', is 'actually the fact of intersecting with a multiplicity of other stories'" (Massey 2011 cited in Thornham 2019, 5). Ingold (2007, 81) describes a person's active participation in the "world's continual coming into being" as inhabiting. Elsa establishes a "trail of life" that contributes to the "weave and texture" of the world. Elsa's trails link various points in space through movements of inhabiting, thus enabling place. In this sense, Elsa is the narrative momentum that brings space and place together in a series of trails, knots, and tapestries of location and meaning.

In *1883*, various trails form because of multiple characters' relationships along space. In episode four, titled "The Crossing," for example, trails combine to form a knot: the crossing of the Brazos river. The Brazos river must be crossed, but it is a dangerous manoeuvre. The river marks place as object: the river has tangible contours that carve out a mappable geography. Three groups need to cross, each a particular movement that effectively configures a trail. The river crossing in the western genre is often a major narrative event, as in Howard Hawks's *Red River* (1948), and so it is in *1883*. The crossing of a river signifies leaving the known (places) behind and embracing the unknown—a space that potentially poses new threats. The characters' experiences with the river additionally mark it as event, particularly through Elsa's experience of the river crossing.

Firstly, James oversees people crossing the river. The promise of Oregon motivates the pioneers to risk crossing the river. Despite James and Margaret's planning and interventions, a number of pioneers drown. Secondly, the food-and-supplies bearing wagons need to make it across. Finally, the cattle (overseen by Elsa and the other cowboys) must cross between the bodies of the dead floating in the river. These key movements can be considered three trails that intertwine to form a single knot, namely the crossing of the Brazos river, demonstrating place as event.

Elsa's observations provide further insight into the complex interweave of trails that constitutes this knot:

I had abandoned every memory of Tennessee as if I was born on this journey. But I wasn't. We were leaving a place, and seeking another. And the journey was a necessary, miserable road between the two. Somehow, I felt immune to the dangers of this place. As if the land and I had struck a deal. I could pass on heart so long as I loved it. And I did. I loved everything about it. But crossing the Brazos taught me there was no deal. No matter how much we love it, the land will never love us back.

Elsa's experience and articulation of place differs from the majority of the pioneers. In episode eight she explains that people and animals alike share the need to turn a space into their own place—to create a home. However, the plains are not conducive to the construction of homes. The plains align with wanderers, vagabonds, and cowboys whose home is made up by the ground, the sky, and their saddle. Their journey is their destination, and as such they are always home. Elsa continues: "I have no home. Which is to say, my home is everywhere." Elsa's home is established through a number of events and relationships—that is, trails—that intertwine to form various places or knots, ultimately resulting in the narrative (tapestry of knots) that is *1883*.

Elsa moves through spaces defined by rules and social conventions. She often resists these restrictions. In her view, cities are entities created by man's dirty hands (episode seven); cities weaken the individual (episode five) and trap people in a cloud called civilisation (episode eight). When travelling by train (episode one), economy traveller Elsa breaks the travel class rules by sitting in a first-class cart. Later, she jumps off the train rather than climbing down from it once it comes to a standstill. In addition, Elsa prefers wearing pants to dresses: "The dress felt like a prison built just for me, choking me by the neck" (episode nine). Generally, Elsa finds social customs redundant: "The farther west we travel, the more those rules and customs become a burden" (episode four).

Elsa is adventurous and curious, and she constantly aims to establish new relationships (that is, trails with the potential of knots and thus place-making) with subjects and objects outside of her immediate environment. Elsa's trail of adventure changes direction when James involves her in herding the cattle (episode two). One of the cowboys, Wade, spits with disdain when he sees that she is joining them. By the time their paths separate, however, he tells her: "It was a hell of a thing riding with you" (episode ten). By this time, a relationship—a shared place—was already in place. Another of the cowboys, Ennis, becomes Elsa's paramour. Elsa's shared adventures with Wade and Ennis contribute to the formation of her identity. She states: "I know what I am now. I'm a cowboy" (episode four). Elsa recognises that she is on a dual journey: "One was filled with danger and death and despair, the other, adventure and wonder" (episode three). From episode seven onward, Elsa's relationship with Sam becomes romantic. They shape one another's sense of place, both physically and psychologically. Sam tells Elsa that all the land within view is part of his home and

therefore part of her home, too. Elsa is receptive to Sam's Native American traditions, which in turn informs her sense of place. When Margaret laments to Elsa that she barely recognises her (episode eight), Elsa responds: "[I] barely recognise me either. And I'm happier for it." Elsa's navigation of various places, all connected in meaningful ways, has had a profound impact on her subjectivity.

Elsa and James's relationship, or shared sense of place, forms another significant knot. James brings Elsa into the fold as an emerging cowboy (episode two). He introduces her to sleeping in the field (not a wagon) and gives her a gun for protection. James encourages Elsa to become a skilled and independent woman and assures Margaret on several occasions that Elsa is equipped to survive the trail to Oregon. When Margaret is concerned about Elsa's behaviour, she accuses James of letting "[Elsa] run wild" (episode nine) and asks James how she is supposed to turn Elsa into a woman if he "treats her like a man." James answers: "Plenty of ladies in this world. Pretty short on decent men, though." James's relationship with Elsa is sustained into Elsa's death (episodes nine and 10).

We encounter the fatally wounded Elsa in the opening scenes of episode nine. While slowly dying, she senses a shift in her inner, psychological environment and describes the sensation as the dislodging of her soul from her chest. She continues: "I looked out at the Sagebrush. The colours looked different. Sharper. Looked up at the sky. The clouds seemed to race above us, as if new rules applied to time and space above me." Elsa does not fear death, but fears that she will be forgotten, just like "the abyss of unmarked graves along the Oregon trail" (episode 10). James assures her that she will be remembered. He explains to Margaret: "Where she dies, that's where we stay. She'll be with us. And we can visit her any time you want" (episode 10). Elsa would be present and absent. James fulfils his promise to Elsa by taking her to choose the place where she wishes to die. The valley is, fittingly, referred to as Paradise. War veteran Shea thinks of Elsa as more alive than anyone else: "I'm 75 years old and she has out-smiled me, out-loved me, out-fought me. She's outlived me. She's outlived all of us" (episode 10). Without naming it as such, Shea recognises the significance of the various trails that intersect in Paradise Valley, at the site of Elsa's grave.

John Dutton and Place in *Yellowstone*

If Elsa's grave marks the significance of Paradise Valley in 1883, by the time *Yellowstone* begins the area is a memorial site which also claimed John Dutton's wife. Yellowstone Ranch is a place where numerous historical trails resonate as present-day knots. If 1883 enacts place-making, *Yellowstone* memorialises place at the cost of creating new places. If 1883 had characters actively working to create trails and form knots, or places, thus enabling place through inhabiting, the characters in *Yellowstone* are already anchored in their identities to a piece of land from where their trails and sense of place emanate. Ingold (2007, 81) defines this relationship with place as one of occupation, where people take their place in a world that has been prepared for residency in advance. "I own this land," John Dutton claims or strongly implies on numerous

occasions in *Yellowstone*. This statement is a legal claim speaking to the ownership of private property, and is therefore also an ideological statement concomitant with capitalist views of land as property. The West has always been defined by “expansionist modes of land-based entrepreneurialism” (Rabitsch 2022, 239), and this expansionist mode—the process of expansion is itself shown in 1883—has in *Yellowstone* resulted in Dutton’s Yellowstone Ranch being at the centre of land contestations that involve varying corporate interest, including that of Native American entrepreneur and politician Thomas Rainwater. “Private property defines *Yellowstone*,” Black (2022) contends, referring to a season one scene where Dutton tells a group of Chinese tourists on his ranch that “We don’t share land here.” The frontier lines in *Yellowstone*, established through occupation, are—as Ingold (2007, 81) describes occupation—“built to restrict movement rather than to facilitate it.” *Yellowstone* “presents ownership as stewardship of the land” (Kuusela 2024, 715): owning and occupying the land mean managing it responsibly, which Dutton trusts only himself and his family to do.

By the time *Yellowstone* begins, then, and in contrast to the expeditionist aims of the would-be settlers in 1883, the Duttons have long been fixed in place through various socio-political and economic factors. In addition, the very environment of Montana lends itself to western iconographies in breathtaking shots of the landscape and its mountains. The nature of this spectacle simply changes when *Yellowstone* presents seasonal passage from summer to winter, and unlike those who pioneered the frontier in 1883, the Duttons can hunker down in place all season long. Advancements in infrastructure and technology enable companies to proceed with business as usual; there is no financial or otherwise expansionist need for movement, a movement that would generate new trails (relationships and experiences) and conjure new knots. While a river cuts through Dutton’s land, it simply provides water and is a site of recreational fly-fishing. John Dutton’s reminiscing about Montana, Yellowstone Ranch, and his forebears’ plight to own the land (what Rabitsch [2022, 237] calls a “pervasive elegiac nostalgia”) further crystallises—even mythologises—the ranch and its environment as a distinct place.

John Dutton has inherited, or occupied, a sense of place (insofar as place is considered object); he did not help create it. Comparatively, if John sustains what already exists as place it was Elsa who marked (and further motivated her family to mark) this place for the Duttons, and whose life and death are the original impetus for this particular place-making. In the western, “[time] itself [...] is both historical—dates, events and historical personages are referenced—and mythical” (Thornham 2019, 37). Alternately broad and specific in its detail, Dutton’s constant references to the past, and to what is at risk and can be lost, evoke the spirit of the post-Western. Put differently: in *Yellowstone*, place, then, is syntactically configured as “post.” As González (2015, 73) explains, *postwestern* refers to “a critical stance” while *post-Western* denotes “a genre of literature or film.” Post-Westerns tend to focus on “the regional mythos and [...] their reverberations within the contemporary world” (Campbell 2013, 332), in other words, the persistence of place across time and as geographically located in land and as psycho-

spiritually located in memory. John Dutton fits the context of the postwestern where the “traditional Western’s man of action has become static, cautious, and passive, much more of a ponderer” (Campbell 2013, 340).² While Dutton is not passive *per se*, he is certainly reactive instead of proactive.

As indicated above, then, Yellowstone Ranch evidences the aftermath of the conquest of the frontier, and Dutton’s narrativisation of this conquest, whether implicit or explicit, legitimises his ownership of Yellowstone as place. According to Liza Black (2022; emphasis added), *Yellowstone* maintains the idea that America is the domain of whoever retains control of it, erasing “the history between Natives and settlers” and “turning Montana into a place of brute force with *no national past*.” For Dutton, Yellowstone (and much of Montana) is the story of his family’s hardships in successfully conquering the frontier, and while *Yellowstone* begins by foregrounding conflict between the Duttons and their immediate community, by season five, John represents the interests of that same community as governor of Montana (Kuusela 2024, 714). Rabitsch (2022, 247), however, suggests that *Yellowstone* explicitly positions the Duttons as colonial transgressors: “[m]ore than once, John all but declares that their holdings were essentially stolen from the original stewards of the land.” The perspective that *Yellowstone* casts on the Duttons’ history is romantic and triumphalist; historical facts of force and coercion do not sway John Dutton’s stance on and occupation of his ranch, for which the Dutton legacy is a foundational myth. In *Yellowstone*, John Dutton opts to narrate his family’s legacy as mythology, and not as history rooted in colonial transgression. Clearly, *Yellowstone* is also a family succession drama, which Kuusela (2024, 702) identifies as the type of television series that focuses on “[i]ntergenerational and dynastic transmission of wealth, power and privilege” in which much time is spent preparing children to take up the various responsibilities and privileges of belonging to this family. *Yellowstone* specifically focuses on the Duttons as a landowning family in a “contemporary America and [which dramatizes] the growing tensions between the meritocratic American dream and patrimonial forms of capitalism that place family dynamics at the heart of public and economic life” (Kuusela 2024, 705). In *Yellowstone*, the Dutton family claims to protect cowboy culture, which is metonymic of “the Americanness of the settlers” (Kuusela 2024, 712). Representationally, Yellowstone Ranch is a microcosm of America. As Stefan Rabitsch (2022, 236) describes it, the “livestock-raising economy the Dutton family partakes in is contingent on having access to, control over, and ownership of land.” As such, *Yellowstone* qualifies as a “postwestern entrepreneurial drama” (2022, 236) where capitalist forces and family ties combine in the interest of economic and cultural control and ownership. In this rather melancholic postwestern and post-Western context in *Yellowstone*, place is then qualified by its economics; if place in 1883 was a result of collaboration and cooperation, place in *Yellowstone* is in a state of competition.

² Campbell is here writing about Sheriff Ed Tom Bell from *No Country for Old Men* (dir. Coen 2007), but the features apply to a range of westerns, including *Yellowstone*.

In addition, *Yellowstone* is also an elegiac western as well as a post-heyday western. The former relates to the series' mourning of a specific place, while the latter emphasises protagonists of advanced age. As Douglas Pye (2012, 245) explains, the western's "romantic narrative and archetypal imagery" are "localized by recent American experience—the potential source of a number of conflicting but interrelated streams of thought and imagery." Lusted (2003, chap. 9) explains that the western is elegiac when the tone conveys "a pervasive sadness, inspired by the passing of ways associated with a culture no longer fashionable or valued," where a romantic past is remembered as meaningfully superior to the present. Importantly, and of particular relevance to *Yellowstone*'s John Dutton, is that in the present, the hero is not simply an isolated or solitary figure, but is at risk of being made redundant. The hero's social function is called into question, as is their ties to violence (and Dutton is known for the violence used to sustain the status quo). The place, Yellowstone Ranch, is encased in this nostalgic, past-privileging perspective. In addition to this elegiac status is that of the post-heyday western, which as Jean-Christophe Cloutier (2012) explains, focuses on an aged and ageing protagonist. The post-heyday western intensifies its elegiac tone by focusing on characters who are not quite yet ready to die, and so, like Dutton, age on in a world that is changing fast. Cloutier (2012) adds that the post-heyday protagonist grapples with "a betraying body and anxiety about his own irrelevance" (112) as "he knows that his time is running out" (114). This western is characterised by a melancholy tone (2012, 128). With increasing ill health, John Dutton experiences something of "being overtaken" manifesting in familiar places being reconfigured into spaces due to infrastructural and economic change establishing boundaries not of nature (a river, a line of trees) but of economic determination (cf. a golf course, condos, a new airport with increased tourism). Dutton's experience reifies his sense of Yellowstone Ranch as a closed space and natural as well as spiritual resource that must be protected. In this regard, we turn to Stiglegger who posits the notion of the (character's) inner frontier as "the encounter with strangers in what is supposedly one's own: one's own country, one's own city, one own's family" (2022, 144). From Elsa's point of view, the place-making in 1883 occurs outside of a framework of land-as-ownership, as movement along the frontier (inhabiting) contains the potential of ownership but only actualises that potential in the very end (occupation). It is against these confrontations in his inner frontier that John Dutton also struggles in maintaining a sense of place in a changing world and with his increasing sense of impending death. Whether mapped psychologically or materially, the historical frontier's border was "advancing constantly westwards" though a "westerling process," which Chirica (2019, 50) explains:

discarded many European aspects that were no longer useful, for example churches and aristocracies, intrusive government, and control of the best land by a small gentry class. Every generation moved further west and became more American, and the settlers became more democratic and less tolerant of hierarchy. They also became more violent, more individualist and distrustful of authority.

Yellowstone Ranch is at the centre of the Duttons' collective existence. Guided by the notion of place as object, the ranch has seen improved infrastructure and a stable environment. Guided by the notion of place as event, the integrity of the ranch is compromised since its trails (all connected to the one family) all emanate from the ranch (the homestead; outbuildings; its open spaces) and return to the ranch.

As epitomised by John Dutton, *Yellowstone* borrows conventions from the post-Western, elegiac western and post-heyday western: John Dutton is the ageing, increasingly vulnerable, and regularly reminiscing protagonist who holds on to a clearly bordered place, Yellowstone Ranch. He vows to protect and preserve this ranch against exploitative corporations that are interested in bringing in tourists and large businesses. These corporations would redraw land borders and literally remap Yellowstone's geographical presence in Montana.

In their respective articulations of place, *1883* and *Yellowstone* offer an additional genre binary that these westerns explore syntactically. Drawing on Ingold (2007, 2008), we articulate this place-specific binary as *occupation vs. inhabiting*. Ingold (2008, 1979) writes that an occupied world "is furnished with already-existing things"—a world already built—while a world that is "inhabited is woven from the strands of their continual coming-into-being." To inhabit is to be a part of a process, not a product. Here, occupation characterises John Dutton's experience and positioning of Yellowstone Ranch's static nature, as opposed to Elsa Dutton's experience of the trail-making of place as she moves along the frontier.

Beth Dutton and Place in *Yellowstone*

Yellowstone's Beth Dutton apparently challenges this place-specific occupation vs. inhabiting binary, but in the end, she confirms Yellowstone Ranch's status as static in the context of the prior discussion. Beth emerges from the series' syntax as a combination of gendered genre conventions: she is a homesteader as well as a gunslinger. As a contemporary post-Western, *Yellowstone* brings the "deviance" of Beth Dutton into a predominantly masculine space. It is this ostensible "deviance" that threatens—but finally fails—to vitalise John's static sense of place. Beth is often a perpetrator and victim of violence. Beth's free sexuality and verbal candour give her a claim to power, even as she re-commits psychologically and physically to the foundational occupied place that is Yellowstone. Across the series, Beth challenges the idea of long-term romantic commitment by undermining Rip's commitment to her. She purposefully uses words as weapons to isolate herself from potentially meaningful personal and professional relationships. However, Beth and her fiancé Rip eventually move into the ranch homestead with John, in an attempt to re-establish the building (object) as a home (event) and thus rekindle a shared sense of place. For Beth, Yellowstone Ranch and John Dutton are one and the same; she is overtly hostile to her father's paramours throughout seasons one to four in an attempt to alienate them and rid the ranch of their intrusive presence. Effectively, Beth's hostility to other women means

to reify the notion of her father's home as occupied, and, as such, that no other women (besides relatives) can reasonably be accommodated in that place.

Elsa and Beth share a pivotal line, first spoken by Beth in *Yellowstone*'s second season: "I think heaven's right here. So's hell. One person can be walking the clouds right next to someone enduring eternal damnation. And God is the land." In 1883, Elsa Dutton says: "There is no Heaven to go to, because we're in it already. We're in hell, too. They coexist. Right beside each other. And God is the land." The last line in each quote assigns divinity to the land, where this divinity is both sacred and wrathful. As the events of 1883 demonstrate, this land giveth and it taketh away while the land itself remains. Beth lives on the land that Elsa and other colonial transgressors obtained for the Dutton family. "Landscape," writes Thornham (2019, 17) "visualizes, aestheticizes, harmonizes and finally narrativizes the uneasy combination of utopian fantasies and unresolved ambivalences and resistances in the imperial desire for mastery." Conquest of the land is a "masculine exercise" (2019, 19), and in this case a colonialist and capitalist exercise as well, with both Elsa and later Beth contributing to this conquest. Their shared line affirms the land as space while place manifests through their conquests. Additionally, Beth's conquests—primarily in business and romance—in the end always return her to the ranch as the primary site of her existence and identity as John Dutton's daughter.

In exploring the presence and absence of women in the western, Thornham turns to Sandra Myres's (1982) three dominant images of women in the West. Firstly, "the refined lady" is often resistant to the idea of travelling west but somehow (kidnapping, coercion) does end up going west where they await their release from "savagery" at the hands of a "noble," heroic frontiersman (2019, 18). Secondly, "the sturdy helpmate and civilizer of the frontier" is dedicated to the ideal of taming and civilising the West. She is a caretaker, nurturer companion who is capable of using firearms (2019, 19). Thirdly, the "bad woman" represents a range of deviant femininities who may be (all or one of the following) "foreign" (or, non-white), masculinised, or sexually aberrant (denoting a moral failure of "natural" womanhood) (2019, 19). Beth and Elsa challenge these stereotypes as well as traditional conceptions of the woman in the West, where place-making relate to notions of domestication, but also productive deviance and mobility that involve the traversals of place along space.

Matthew Carter (2014, 1) explains that revisionist history has brought to light numerous historical narratives associated with "silent" groups such as women. As indicated earlier, the figure of the woman was limited to particular spaces. Referring to the figure of Marian in the classic western *Shane* (Stevens 1953), Malpas (2015, 41) writes that she "[inscribes] herself onto the landscape [...] through a small and fragile garden that she has planted alongside the cabin" she inhabits. Such a garden could represent growth, sustenance, and stability in an otherwise challenging frontier environment. The frontier is the opposite of the city (as seen in *Yellowstone*); the more urban spaces of Montana beyond Yellowstone Ranch offer Beth some provocative possibilities to explore and

challenge its social, gendered boundaries. “The city,” writes Thornham (2019, 51), “is conceived as a male space. [...] Its public sphere of work, politics, citizenship and urban leisure pursuits is a masculine one, increasingly separated in modernity from the privatized feminine domestic sphere where men find relaxation and in which women are contained” (2019, 51). As an active participant in the areas of business, politics, and citizenship, Beth does not allow herself to be contained in any traditional domestic setup. Beth for the most part establishes the rules of engagement of her professional and personal life. In her often urban-located professional life of business and politics, Beth’s conduct is often masculine-coded. In her personal life of family loyalty and matters of romance, Beth surrenders much of her “deviance” to recognise the masculine authority of her father and his conservative rule, which she abides by under his roof and care. Beth does not pursue an existence of *Yellowstone* outside of a patriarchy based on the often-violent conquering of already-inhabited spaces in order to occupy them.

Taking the city as a male space that contains women and *contains* women, place in these western series’ dynamic of occupation and inhabiting itself emerges as gendered depending on who co-creates and even benefits from the trails that are actualised in space.

Conclusion

In this article, we demonstrated that place in *1883* and *Yellowstone* is genre-specific and gendered, and that *Yellowstone* as post-Western, for instance, articulates place as mournful and static. Indeed, place is articulated differently through young Elsa Dutton’s future-anticipatory expansive experience of trails and knots in *1883* on the one hand, and ageing patriarch John Dutton’s past-fixed view of place as enclosure. As such, we drew on Ingold (2007, 2008) to argue that the two western series offer a new western genre binary that is place-specific: the practice of inhabiting (*1883*) and the act of occupying (*Yellowstone*). Finally, we argued that Beth Dutton collapses this binary only to affirm John’s sentimental and nostalgic sense of *Yellowstone* Ranch as enclosure.

In the modern American imagination, the idea of “the West” has connotations with “independence, self-reliance and individualism” (Chirica 2019, 51). According to González (2015, 60), it is typical of westerns to demonstrate a “male individualistic self-reliance.” In *Yellowstone*, John Dutton’s self-reliance becomes—as his children confirm—frustratingly myopic and inflexibly self-interested, which limits what he can conceive of as a future. In the hopeful and exuberant anticipation of her possible futures in *1883*, Elsa comes to embody such primarily masculine-associated independence, self-reliance, and individualism until her death. These features are linked to her experiences of trials and knots, where her independence translates into agency; her self-reliance is to the advancement of the community of travellers; and her individualism enables place-making, to participate in meaningful relational knots, and to, in the end, have her body interred in the land that she configured into a place for herself.

Elsa's journey throughout 1883, as we have shown, is a constellation of meaningful knots in which her sense of attachment (even as she speaks of risks, threats, and loss) to the land she traverses is clear. Her traversal through different places is necessarily pluralistic. This is a layered iteration of place that is at odds with John Dutton's framing of his land as a cemetery anticipating its dead. When John says, "I am the opposite of progress," he is making a claim about the importance of cultural stasis and homogeneity for Yellowstone and Montana. Elsa, however, is, as Margaret describes her, "driven by the wind" and Sam names her "Lightning Yellow Hair" in appreciation of Elsa's swiftness on horseback. Both these descriptions align with Elsa's sense of adventure and her continuous movement along the frontier as new places come into being when trails combine as knots. As Ingold (2008, 1808) writes, "Places, then, do not so much exist as *occur* [...] [as] stations along ways of life." As Elsa puts it herself: "I have no home. My home is everywhere." In contrast, only Yellowstone Ranch is John Dutton's home because he owns the property and the deed to the land, and because it has belonged to his family for generations. The tension between inhabiting (1883) and occupation (*Yellowstone*) is confirmed: drawing on Thornham (2019, 25), John's sense of place is marked by immanence (contained in the world), while Elsa's passionate creation and navigation of trails and knots make transcendence possible (where "transcendence" means to be meaningfully separated from the world) (Thornham 2019, 25).

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