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**Frontiers of Fiction: *Outlawed* and the
Reinvention of the American Western**

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ABSTRACT

This undergraduate dissertation examines *Outlawed* (2021) by Anna North as a reimagining of the Western genre through the lenses of postmodern fiction and the literary construction of the witch figure. The study is organized around three methodological frameworks: the Western as a culturally significant American narrative form, postmodern fiction with a focus on formal innovation and historical reformulation, and the association of the witch with midwifery, focusing on her as both a persecuted figure and an agent of control used by a patriarchal society. Each of these frameworks is developed in a specific section and subsequently applied to a close reading of *Outlawed* (2021). The dissertation investigates how the novel engages with Western motifs, employing narrative strategies associated with postmodernism, particularly Alternate History, and draws on the symbolic and political dimensions of the witch figure to allow the narrative to focus on collectives traditionally excluded from the Western tradition.

Keywords: Western, Postmodernism, Alternate History, Witch, Feminism

RESUMEN

Este trabajo de fin de grado examina *Outlawed* (2021) de Anna North como una reformulación del género western a través de las perspectivas de la ficción posmoderna y de la construcción literaria de la figura de la bruja. El estudio se estructura en torno a tres marcos metodológicos: el western como una forma narrativa estadounidense con un fuerte arraigo cultural, la ficción posmoderna con énfasis en la innovación formal y la reformulación histórica, y la asociación de la bruja con la figura de la matrona, centrándose en ella tanto como figura perseguida como agente de control utilizado por una sociedad patriarcal. Cada uno de estos marcos se detallan en una sección específica y se aplican posteriormente a una lectura detallada de *Outlawed* (2021). El trabajo desarrolla cómo la novela dialoga con el género del western, empleando estrategias narrativas asociadas al posmodernismo, en particular la historia alternativa, y recurriendo a las dimensiones simbólicas y políticas de la figura de la bruja para centrar la narrativa en colectivos tradicionalmente excluidos por la tradición del Western.

Palabras clave: Western, Posmodernismo, Historia Alternativa, Bruja, Feminismo

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INTRODUCTION

This undergraduate dissertation explores *Outlawed* (2021), a novel by American journalist and author Anna North, as a postmodern reimagining of the Western genre that incorporates feminist and speculative elements to critique dominant cultural myths of the American frontier. The novel is set in an alternate 19th century United States, in which a mysterious epidemic decimated the children population, giving rise to a theocratic society where infertility is viewed as a sign of moral and spiritual failure. Within this world, barren women are persecuted as witches and either executed or exiled. The protagonist, Ada, a young midwife cast out of her hometown due to her infertility, joins an outlaw gang and ultimately seeks to create a space of knowledge and resistance. Through this narrative, North revises core elements of the Western tradition, such as the outlaw figure, the frontier hero storyline, and male rugged individualism, while introducing new frameworks centered on collective resistance and reproductive autonomy.

The central aim of this undergraduate dissertation is to examine how *Outlawed* functions as a postmodern feminist Western by analyzing its engagement with three frameworks: the Western as a genre with deep ideological underpinnings in American culture; postmodern fiction as a literary mode characterized by historical reworking and genre hybridity; and the myth of the witch as a figure associated with midwifery, female knowledge, and the persecution of women under patriarchal systems. These frameworks form the basis of the methodological chapter needed for the analysis of the novel. The first section of the methodology examines the Western as a cultural myth and narrative structure, drawing particularly on the genre analyses of John G. Cawelti (1984) and Will Wright (1975), among others. The second section considers the formal and thematic features of postmodern fiction, paying special attention to the Alternate History subgenre. The third and final section of the methodology turns to the literary and historical constructions of the witch, dealing with both feminist approaches and historical events to understand the symbolic weight of the figure.

The second chapter constitutes the analysis of the chosen novel by employing the three frameworks for a close reading of *Outlawed*. This chapter is structured into three sections corresponding to each of the methodological lenses: the first analyzes the novel's engagement with Western motifs and character types; the second explores its formal and

narrative features as a postmodern text; and the third examines the political and symbolic function of the witch figure. Through this structure, the analysis demonstrates how *Outlawed* functions as a hybrid text that not only revisits genre conventions but actively challenge the ideological systems that sustain them. Ultimately, the study argues that *Outlawed* not only destabilizes traditional genre expectations but also reclaims narrative space for figures traditionally excluded or vilified within the Western genre.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: The Western meets Postmodernism

1.1. The Western genre

The purpose of this section is to define the origins and main traits of the Western as a genre so to be able to carry on with the analysis of the proposed novel as a postmodernist take on the genre.

1.1.1. Historical Context

Even though the Western is mostly seen as a genre with simple archetypes and themes such as the good guys vs the bad guys, guns, horses and lassoes, it reflects the historical and cultural background of its origins. Although this particular genre appeared at the end of the nineteenth century, the historical background relevant to its inception goes back to the Revolutionary War (1763-1783), which culminated with the Treaty of Paris, granting the independence of the 13 colonies from the British Empire. As Steffen Wöll explores in *The West and the World* (2020), after the war, the territory beyond the Appalachian Mountains was still a mystery for the settlers. Because of this fascination by those uncharted territories, the general population started to gain interest in atlases and geography books such as Jedidiah Morses *Geography Made Easy* (1784). According to Susan Schulten in *The Geographical Imagination in America: 1880–1950* (2001), this type of books created “a common territorial and topographic basis for nationhood” (Schulten 2001, 19) as the knowledge of America’s geography, so recently claimed from the British, turned into a way to prove the patriotism of its citizens. This interest only increased with the journals sent back to the colonies by explorers such as Lewis and Clark, who were tasked by President Thomas Jefferson to travel the newly acquired territory from France in 1803; these journals gave detailed descriptions of the geography, the Native American settlements with whom Jefferson wished to trade and fueled the fascination with the West (McVeigh 2007). This desire to know what was beyond the colonies was the inception of what would become the Frontier Narratives, which paved the way for the Western genre.

In his book *The Six-gun Mystique* (1984), John G. Cawelti attributes the inspiration for the Western as a literary genre to the author James Fenimore Cooper, who was considered to be the first true American novelist and the main representative of the Frontier Narratives. Cooper’s books *The Leatherstocking Tales* (1823-1841) narrate the adventures of Natty Bumppo, a man of European lineage who has been raised by Native

Americans, making him the true American man as he represents the union between the settlers and the natives. The first of these novels, *The Pioneers* (1823), established many of the plots, characters, and themes that would become recurrent in the first iterations of the Western narratives, such as the clash between civilization and wilderness, the confrontations between Native Americans and settlers, and the portrayal of the American frontier as a land of opportunity but also penury. In his novel *Adventure, Mystery and Romance* (1996), John Cawelti argues that Cooper's novels combined fictional issues related to the settlement of the American wilderness and the archetypal pattern of the adventure story in a way that has become the core element of Westerns. Even though Westerns can have several different plots, they still follow the basic challenge to a hero and the development until the ultimate confrontation with an antagonist. Cooper also became the first writer to establish the landscape division of the townsmen, the savages, and the intermediate hero, a core element of the Western. In any Western story, there is the new settlement (or a fort or a ranch) where townsmen inhabit, then there is the wilderness that surrounds the settlement and where the savages live and threaten the community.

As civilization advanced in the 19th century with the unification of 36 states after the American Civil War (1861-1865), there was a romanticization of nature and the image of the West that had been created by American settlers, writers, and artists. The American art movement the *Hudson River School*, filled the collective imagination with landscape paintings of the America untouched by civilization, where one can be free and live in harmony with nature (The Metropolitan Museum of Art 1987). This movement, alongside the frontier narratives, created the nostalgia that was essential for the creation of the Western as a genre.

1.1.2. Dime Novels

The early stages of what we now know as Western fiction appeared around the start of the American Civil War in the format of "Dime Novels" (Cox 2000); this type of novels are the American equivalent of the British "Penny Dreadfuls", which were really cheap, short novels, printed in bulk, and usually distributed in newsstands. Due to their price and poor quality, the target audience for the Dime novels were teenagers or adults belonging to lower classes, mostly male, who saw in the wilderness and hectic plots developed in those

short stories, a “semi-real space where “real” masculinity and moral integrity could be performed unrestrained from societal restraints” (Wöll 2020, 26). These stories revolved around violent heroes who are justified by the corruption of those who are in power. These acts of violence were a method of rebellion against the restraints of organized society, motivated by the desire to avenge a loved one or rebel against injustice.

The stories include from shooting Indians and conquering the West to tales of honor, betrayal, and love. The figure of the heroine appears and falls into two categories (Jones 1970); first, we have the damsel who is the reward for the hero. In this type of stories there can be two suitors (our hero and his antagonist), the hero not only desires her for her beauty but also for her fortune as this character usually comes from a prestigious family, and the humble but rowdy hero doesn't have the economic means to court her, so he enacts violence against the other suitor who is morally corrupted in some way and thus, the hero gets what he wants, the girl and the money. The second category of the female in Western Dime Novels would be the “ruined or fallen woman”. In Edward L. Wheeler's dime novels *Deadwood Dick's Ward* and the *Black Hills Jazebel*, this type of women is clearly illustrated. First, we have an “Amazon”, a woman who dresses in men's clothes and knows how to shoot a gun, with a fake male name; she is a fallen woman, a widow, or a woman who has no male relatives to take care of her. This type of woman has lost her femininity and virtue and thus their stories cannot have a happy ending. Another fallen woman would be the one that is seduced by the villain, most of them ended their stories death or secluded. The Western Hero may collaborate with a fallen woman to achieve a common goal but would never marry one.

Dime novels took the tropes created by the Frontier narratives, established by James Fenimore Cooper, and the stories of real historical figures from the West to build the myth of the Western. The two most notorious cases would be Calamity Jane and Buffalo Bill. Their real names were Martha Jane Canary and William F. Cody. Martha was a scout in the frontier known for wearing masculine clothes and fighting Native Americans in the frontier. Her notoriety made her the protagonist of the Dime Novels written by Edward L. Wheeler and eventually worked in the Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. Ned Buntline created the first Western legend by taking the story of William F. Cody, also a scout during the civil war and a buffalo hunter, and creating the character of Buffalo Bill in his Dime Novels and later on, by creating Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show (McVeigh 2007), a

traveling show featuring cowboy stunts, fights with Native Americans and the performance of highly dramatized historical events. It gained such popularity that it toured in the U.S. and even in Europe and helped establish the imagery of the Western internationally.

Gradually the Cowboy replaced the Frontier man as the Western Hero and with the publication of Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, considered to be the first great Western novel, the western formula was established and replicated in novels, films, and TV shows in the twentieth century (Cawelti 1984).

1.1.3. The Seven Western Stories

In his book *The Six-Gun Mystique*, John G. Cawelti (1984) introduced seven archetypes for Western Stories as recurring plots within the genre which have been widely used in research and academic papers as a reference point for the analysis of any Western story. Before developing the seven Western Stories, he first defines their Settings. Furthering the development of the two landscapes already determined by Cooper in his novels, Cawelti identifies that the hero of the Western stories is the only character that has the freedom of movement between the wilderness and the settlements. On the contrary, all the secondary characters are stuck in their settlements, at the mercy of the inside threats such as corrupt lawmen, bankers or ranch owners, or in danger of the outside threats like the Outlaws.

First, there is the most popular plot, the Classic Western. This plot follows the story of a mysterious gunfighter that arrives to a community that is in need of help either by being either accosted by outlaws or by the corruption of those who are in power. In these stories, the hero restores order through violent acts, and, once he considers that his job is done, he leaves the town as he does not belong in civilized life.

The Marshal Western follows the figure of a lawman or the sheriff of a community in danger, the main character faces moral dilemmas, but his duty is to uphold the law and justice in a weak society. This Western centers on justice instead of a personal vendetta. Next would be the Revenge Western, where the action follows a protagonist that is driven by a personal loss or betrayal, seeking retribution outside of the law.

Cavalry Western revolves around the altercations on the frontier, following the struggles of military men. These stories deal with the battles against Native Americans as society tries to expand civilization towards the West and are often of a patriotic nature, focusing on the conflicts that arise within the military hierarchy, testing loyalties.

One of the most popular motifs is the Ranch Western. These stories focus on the life around a ranch and deal with family conflicts and land disputes. This is one of the only motifs in which women and domestic life are central to the action as the conflict often comes from land ownership and economic power rather than gunfighters.

Another story would be the Empire Western, which follows a protagonist who is after power, trying to build a legacy whether by acquiring land or owning cattle. These stories often glorify the conquest of the West as something heroic and necessary.

Finally, the last Western Story identified by Cawelti (1984) and developed by Will Wright in his work *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (1975) is the Outlaw Western. In this case, the main character of the story is an outlaw, who is rebelling against society after being wronged. Unlike the cowboy hero, the outlaw operates by personal codes of honor or survival and often meets his inevitable downfall, either by dying, by being betrayed, or failing to achieve his plans. In this type of stories, the Outlaw is not considered to be a villain, but a romanticized figure, as their ideals and inability to exist in society resonated with the readers of the time.

The Outlaw Western has some common character types such as the Romantic Outlaw, a person seeking freedom from the constraints of society, usually charismatic and morally ambiguous; there is also the Doomed Gunslinger, who is hunted by his past and is very proficient with guns; another character would be the Noble Thief, who only steals from the rich and fights corrupted systems; then there is the Rebel Antihero, only interested in personal justice, with a “by all means necessary” mentality, often recurring to violence; and, finally, the Outlaw Gang, a group of mischiefs that are bound by loyalty and who have been shunned from society.

Some key themes of these stories are the struggles between Individualism and Society, as the Outlaws embody individuality and the refusal to be tamed by laws or societal expectations and often die for their ideals. Another key theme is the pursuit of

freedom. Outlaws live in the wilderness, free of attachment, but are unable to establish themselves permanently as they are constantly hunted by the law. Often there is also a plot of betrayal, as the loyalty among the Outlaws is often tested by self-interest as each outlaw has his own tragic background that may come in conflict with the needs of the group.

Although my analysis for the novel chosen for this paper will mainly focus on the figure of the Outlaw, it will also take into account all the other relevant settings and plots associated with the genre to further explore how the postmodern approach of the author has developed the genre.

1.2. Postmodern Fiction

In this section, I intend to explore the key elements of Postmodern Fiction, paying special attention to the subgenre of Alternate History, as the book being analyzed in this essay belongs to this category.

Postmodern Fiction is a genre that originated after World War II, as Europe had to rebuild what had been destroyed in the war. This was an era marked by skepticism and the revaluation of modernist ideals; while modernism previously sought to find order through innovative narrative techniques such as the stream of consciousness of James Joyce, postmodernism questioned the very idea of narratives. In his work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-François Lyotard defined postmodernism as a literary current defined by the incredulity towards metanarratives (Lyotard, 1984). In his book, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction* (2009), Bran Nicol explains how Postmodern authors started to explore relativism and subjectivism, and how this experimentation allowed them to challenge and encourage the readers to actively engage with the text and interpret its meanings beyond the words written on paper.

In his book *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), Brian McHale develops some of the key elements of Postmodern Fiction such as metafiction, intertextuality, paranoia and fragmentation. Metafiction is a self-aware narrative technique where the text acknowledges its own fictional status. The authors insert themselves into the narrative, breaking the fourth wall by commenting on the story as they write it.

Another key element of this type of fiction would be intertextuality. This type of narrative allows Postmodern writers to subvert genres and challenge the cultural assumptions associated with them, as it involves blending different narratives and borrowing ideas and themes from previous works.

Another recurring element in Postmodern Fiction is paranoia, which reflects the distrust of institutions and technology that was prominent after the war. These narratives also deal with individual's anxieties as the characters are often unable to distinguish between reality and illusion as they inhabit increasingly conspiratorial world.

Fragmentation is another key element of Postmodern Fiction. By disrupting the conventional linear narrative, writers can present multiple stories and perspectives within the same story, embracing the ambiguity and the figure of the unreliable narrator as we see the perspective of different characters at different points of the story.

Linda Hutcheon in her work *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988) also includes the technique of Pastiche as one of the key elements of Postmodern Fiction. Pastiche merges multiple genres and styles within the same work, allowing authors to pay homage to several genres and blur the boundaries between popular or low-brow genres and those considered to be more elevated.

1.2.1. Alternate History

After delving into the main characteristics of postmodernist fiction, the next necessary step is to examine the Alternate History genre, as the book being analyzed in this essay belongs to this literary category.

Alternate History, or uchronia, is a literary genre that explores the ramifications of changing specific past events of the World's history. The term "uchronia" was coined by Charles Renouvier in his work *Uchronie: L'utopie dans l'histoire* (1876), in which he reimagined a world where Christianity did not overthrow the multi-deity worship of the Roman Empire.

In theoretical terms, Alternate History is aligned with the Theory of Possible Worlds formulated by Lubomír Doležel in his book *Possible Worlds of Fiction and History: The Postmodern Stage* (2010), in which he claims that fictional texts create fictional worlds

that are logically possible alternatives to the real world. In the article “Los mundos posibles de la ucronía: una proposición de subgéneros” (2023), Daniel Lumbreras develops Lubomír Doležel's theory to propose several categories within the Alternate History genre, all stemming from its central concept, which is the “point of divergence”, meaning where the fictional world gets separated from the real timeline of the world. As Doležel (2010) dictated, this point of divergence and the fictional world that emerges from it must be plausible and historically relevant within the narrative and the real world.

In his article, Lumbreras identifies several types of Alternate History, the first of them called Realistic Uchronia (Ucronía Realista) which reimagines a past that diverged from real history at a specific point (the point of divergence); in this case, the story takes place after that divergence, developing a believable evolution and simulating how historical events could have unfolded realistically. Lumbreras argues that these stories invite to critical reflection of historical determinism, allowing the reader to challenge the reasons that led to historical events.

Similarly, there is what Lumbreras denominates as Projected Uchronia (Ucronía proyectiva), where the story presents a “what-if” scenario into the future. While this type of Alternate History still tries to maintain plausibility, its futuristic setting makes it more speculative as its focus is to explore future implications of the point of divergence, often overlapping with science-fiction. This subgenre allows for more creative freedom as the author can bend the boundaries of realism while still maintaining a plausible cause-and-effect relationship with the past.

Lastly, Lumbreras mentions the Impossible Uchronia (Ucronía Imposible). In this type of narrative, the divergence from real history is not based on cause-and-effect logic as it seeks a more radical break from history. These stories seek to explore more philosophical or ideological questions through the distortion of reality.

To further develop the analysis of Alternate History narratives, I have taken into account Karen Hellekson's approach in her book *The Alternate History: Refiguring Historical Time* (2001), in which she focuses on temporal structures instead of content.

The first one would be the Eschatological Model, which focuses on narratives that develop toward an ultimate end or destiny. Narratives following this model often deal with apocalyptic or redemption themes often related to religious concerns. These alternate history narratives do not emphasize what could have happened differently in history but how the world is moving forward in this timeline.

Next, she describes what she denominated the Genetic Model. Stories that follow this model emphasize cause-and-effect, tracing how the event of divergence mentioned by Lumbreras in his article, can lead to a chain of events culminating in a radically altered present. This is considered to be the most prevalent in Alternate History stories as it relies on plausibility, dealing with history as something malleable but rational.

Another model would be the Entropic Model. These narratives center on the concept of decay and how worlds derived from historical divergence cannot sustain themselves, breaking down over time. By contrast, the Teleological Model deals with a narrative in which every subsequent event since the divergence seems predetermined, as though fate controls the timeline, and the outcome of the story aligns with some higher purpose.

Taking into account the concepts developed by Lumbreras and Hellekson in their works, it is evident that Alternate History fiction not only deals with “what-if” scenarios but also serves as a tool to reframe history as we know it, allowing authors to comment on current ideologies and redefine the boundaries of the traditional historical novel through a postmodernist viewpoint.

1.3. The Witch Myth

The final section regarding the methodology necessary for the analysis of the selected novel for this undergraduate dissertation, deals with the figure of the witch. Since the Early Modern European witch-hunts that persecuted midwives and healers, among other groups of people, the figure of the witch has become one of the most powerful symbols in contemporary literature, especially when it comes to texts related to gender issues as it has been reclaimed by contemporary feminism as a symbol of resistance.

1.3.1. Witches as Midwives and Healers

In the Europe of the 16th century, midwives played an important role in communities, providing essential medical care to women, especially during pregnancy and childbirth. Both Ehrenreich and English in their work *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* (2010) emphasize that midwives were much more than medical practitioners, as they were also responsible for passing down their knowledge through generations of women. This knowledge included herbal remedies, pain management, contraception, and even abortions, all the skills that male-dominated medical institutions and religion would seek to control and suppress. As Sollee notes in her work *Witches, Sluts, Feminists: Conjuring the Sex Positive* (2017), midwives existed in an intersection among knowledge, community trust, and independence. She observes that “midwives were the ones who stood at the threshold of life and death, their hands guiding new life into the world, yet also holding the potential to be accused of causing harm if things went awry” (Sollee 2017, 22). This duality made them essential in a community but also feared, which made them vulnerable to suspicion and accusation, especially during times of high infant mortality and social unrest¹.

In *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-century Representations* (1996), Purkiss traces the demonization of midwives to the publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487), which was the first text to associate midwives with witchcraft. Kramer and Sprenger, the authors, argued that midwives were one of the main threats to the Catholic Church, linking their craft to Satanic rituals and the alleged murder of newborns. Purkiss argues that those accusations were rooted in the Church’s interest in controlling women’s reproductive knowledge. Furthermore, midwives’ knowledge of herbal remedies was often seen as evidence of sorcery. Chollet highlights in *In Defense of Witches: The Legacy of the Witch Hunts and Why Women Are Still on Trial* (2021) how those skills that used to make them indispensable, now put them at risk as they are seen

¹ Recent research suggest that midwives were not more specifically targeted as witches than other groups of women and were sometimes enlisted by inquisitorial systems to regulate and control births. See Elizabeth Allemang. Spring 2010. “The Midwife-Witch on Trial: Historical Fact or Myth?” *Canadian Journal of Midwifery Research and Practice* 9, no. 1: 10–20.

However, for the purposes of this dissertation, I have chosen to focus on the texts that relate directly to the novel under analysis.

as threats to religion and society. She also notes that even successful births could become grounds for suspicion, as communities might attribute the survival of the mother to the midwife's alliance with supernatural forces rather than to her skills and experience. Ehrenreich and English (2010) argue that male physicians, wanting to monopolize medical knowledge and practice, used religious rhetoric to discredit midwives, joining forces with the Church to further associate midwifery with witchcraft. Sollee remarks that "what had once been a domain of female expertise and community solidarity was systematically dismantled and absorbed into patriarchal structures of power" (Sollée 2017, 42). The witch-hunts became a mechanism for the consolidation of male control over both medicine and reproduction, seeking to silence generations of female knowledge. Purkiss (1996) also mentions how midwives were marginalized but also used by the authorities, as they were sometimes employed to search for witches' marks or to verify pregnancies in cases of alleged infanticide. Midwives were both suspects and agents, which shows the complex ways in which patriarchal institutions relied on and sought to control female knowledge. The association of midwifery with witchcraft was also exported to colonial settings, where it got mixed with racial anxieties. Chollet (2021) highlights that in colonial America, midwives who treated white and black women were targeted as threats to the social order, as their work challenged both patriarchal and racial boundaries.

Beyond the midwife-witch was the figure of the maleficent witch, which represents the fully demonized form of the female power. She was depicted as a consort of the Devil, who uses her sexuality to corrupt men and disrupt social order (Purkiss 1996). This figure was created as a way to control women who refused to conform to patriarchal expectations, whether by remaining unmarried, having no children, or being outspoken (Chollet 2021).

1.3.2. The Feminist Witches

Brydie Kosmina in *Feminist Afterlives of the Witch* (2023) explores how the witch has become a powerful icon in feminist activism, particularly through the slogan "We are the granddaughters of the witches you couldn't burn" (Kosmina 2023, 5), which was popularized during the Women's Marches of 2017. This activism transforms the witch from a figure of fear to one of intergenerational defiance and solidarity. Chollet (2021) further argues that modern women's experiences, such as choosing not to marry or have

children, aging without seeking male approval, or asserting sexual autonomy, continue to provoke the same anxieties that once led to witch-hunts.

1.3.3. The Witch in Literature

The earliest depiction of witches in literature comes from Folklore and fairy tales, which have long served as a vehicle for cultural anxieties about witches. Two of the most infamous witches in folklore and fairy tales are Baba Yaga, from the Slavic tradition, and the witch from the story of *Hansel and Gretel* (1812). Both are women who prey on children, seeking to consume them. Baba Yaga is particularly significant as she appears as a figure who embodies both maternal instincts and the wickedness of harming children. In her work, Purkiss (1996) exemplifies how these tales functioned as cautionary lessons for children, and women, echoing the historical fears of midwives harming infants.

As literature advanced throughout the centuries, so did the figure of the witch. In early modern drama, witches were used in theater to echo the current political disorder and female rebellion of the time, contributing to the popular beliefs about witches previously introduced by folk tradition and demonological texts. Some examples would be the witches from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1623) who represent temptation, chaos, and subversion, and *The Masque of Queens* (1692) by Ben Jonson, and *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621) by William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, and John Ford, all of which explicitly tied witches to female sexuality and social turmoil.

The witch in postmodern stories often appears as both a victim of historical oppression and a figure of feminist resistance. Kosmina (2023) highlights how contemporary authors and artists blend historical, fantastical, and pop-cultural references to challenge linear understandings of history and identity. This aligns with Purkiss's (1996) argument that the witch is "a created myth," shaped by shifting cultural contexts and collective fantasies. Sollee (2017) further develops how the figure of the witch in postmodern texts blurs the lines between fact and fiction, encouraging readers to reflect on how history is constructed and told. This way, the witch becomes what Sollee calls a "kaleidoscopic" (Sollee 2017, 9) figure that challenges the patriarchy from within, becoming a powerful metaphor for the instability of gender and history, represented as a figure who resists categorization.

In order to understand the role of the witch in contemporary narratives, it is important to understand her literary evolution and how her representation has changed throughout

history, from a scary tale to get children to behave, to a powerful metaphor for female liberation. This methodological background provides the necessary framework for the analysis of Anna North's *Outlawed*. By exploring how *Outlawed* utilizes the themes of gender and identity together with the traditions of both the witch figure and the Western, we can better understand how postmodern literature reshapes cultural myths and reinvents genre conventions.

2. ANALYSIS OF *OUTLAWED* BY ANNA NORTH

2.1. About the author

Anna North is a contemporary American novelist and journalist whose work deals with gender politics, historical imagination, and speculative fiction. North's trajectory as a writer began with writing for outlets such as *Salon*, *BuzzFeed*, and *Jezebel*, where she frequently wrote on topics concerning gender, sexuality, and labor. These themes continued into her tenure at *The New York Times*, and later at *Vox* where she currently works as a correspondent (Goodreads). Throughout her career, North has continued to cultivate her interest in reproductive justice, midwifery, and the structural inequalities found within medical and legal systems that regulate the female body. Her investigative work on abortion access, family policy, and the criminalization of reproductive decisions is key in the creation of the fictional universe of *Outlawed* (Romano)

In her novel *Outlawed* (2021), North draws from feminist dystopian fiction, most notably Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Both texts depict societies in which reproductive capacity is linked to moral worth and social belonging, and both follow the stories of women who attempt to reclaim their autonomy under authoritarian regimes (Romano). *Outlawed* has been celebrated by both critics and readers for its genre-defying qualities and political commentary. Matt Schley, writing for *KQED*, describes it as "The Handmaid's Tale meets Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" (Schley).

2.2. *Outlawed* as a Western Novel

Anna North's *Outlawed* is at its core a Western novel, as it adopts the genre's main conventions, settings and archetypes. The novel is set in a semi-lawless frontier filled with isolated towns and vast wilderness, recreating the landscape of the Western. Beyond the setting, the story follows the story theme of the Outlaw Western as it deals with the adventures of a gang of outcasts, all of them fugitives, seeking to gain retribution or

change the world that has left them behind. The novel also reflects the genre's tensions between civilization and wilderness, law and freedom, and community and individualism. *Outlawed* features distinct Western elements: a rugged journey of exile and self-definition, a band of outlaws with competing moral codes, and a climactic heist against a corrupt establishment

The protagonist of *Outlawed* is Ada, a character who embodies a new kind of Western hero. Her journey follows the classical pattern of exile and reinvention: she is cast out of her community because of her infertility, as in the society in which she was brought up, an infertile woman is accused of being a witch and only has two options, exile, or death. Ada chooses exile and is sent to a convent where infertile women cohabit and are kept out of sight; here she finds acceptance and a community, but Ada needs something else. She does not want to spend her life hidden away in a convent; she wants to help other women suffering the same fate. One of the sisters from the Convent helps Ada with her research and finds a medical book from a woman who seems to have the knowledge to help with infertility. Ada asks the Mother Superior for permission to abandon the convent: "Mother... I saw a woman hanged for being barren. If I'd stayed at my family's house, I would've been hanged. Imagine if people understood barrenness, even a little. Think how many women could live" (North 2021, 42). After receiving her approval, she ventures into the wilderness where she eventually finds The Hole in the Wall Gang, and her adventure reaches the next stage, the Outlaw Western. Similarly to Natty Bumppo from Copper's series *Leatherstocking Tales* or the solitary cowboy of the dime novels, Ada is caught between civilization and wilderness, between imposed norms and self-discovery. Still, unlike these figures, Ada's heroism is not rooted in physical dominance or stoic masculinity, but rather in healing and learning to accomplish her objective of helping barren women. She represents the inversion of the Western hero as a woman armed with midwifery knowledge rather than a gun.

The Hole in the Wall Gang further grounds the novel in the archetypes of the genre. The whole gang fits the Romantic Outlaw archetype since they all are alienated by society and are morally driven in their criminal activities, each following their own personal code

without being truly villainous. Upon meeting The Kid², they share with Ada their vision for their future:

“We may be barren in body, dear Doctor, but we shall be fathers of many nations, fathers and mothers both. You see, when we found this land, I knew it was promised not just for us, but for the descendants of our minds and hearts, all those cast out of their homes and banished by their families, all those slandered and maligned, imprisoned and abused, for no crime but that God saw fit not to plant children in their wombs. I knew that we would build a nation of the dispossessed, where we would be not barren women, but kings.” (North 2021, 86-87).

However, as Ada is the character that is the most developed out of all the members of the gang, she embodies the archetype of the Romantic Outlaw the most. As mentioned, all members of the gang have their own personal codes and motivations, but Ada’s moral vision is what eventually makes her abandon the settlement. She is not interested in symbolic rebellion against the establishment or in escapism from reality, she seeks to build a viable alternative to the social order by risking her own safety to help other women.

Besides the Romantic Outlaw, each member corresponds to a recognizable Western type through a queer and feminized perspective. The clearest embodiment of Wright’s Doomed Gunslinger is The Kid, the leader of the Hole in the Wall Gang. Like the tragic gunmen of classical Westerns, The Kid is a charismatic figure that resist gender classification. The Kid’s utopian dream to form a society for the infertile and socially marginalized follows the frontier’s promise of reinvention, but The Kid is also consumed by their own ideology, as they become increasingly rigid and willing to risk the lives of their followers for a vision the rest of the gang eventually begins to doubt. Other members of the gang fall onto Wright’s typology in similarly subversive ways. Cassie functions as a second Doomed Gunslinger, loyal to The Kid’s vision but aware of its limitations. She represents the tragic stoicism of the old West, unwilling to abandon its values even as they collapse around her. News also particularly embodies the Romantic Outlaw as he is sociable, humorous, and emotionally open. His biracial identity and his backstory where he was used by a doctor as a warning against mixed-race relationships, as he claimed to promote infertility, add depth to this traditionally lighthearted archetype. Texas,

² I will be using they/their/them pronouns to refer to The Kid as they are a non-binary character

aggressive and insubordinate, reflects the Rebel Antihero as she is not loyal to any higher cause but instead insists on personal autonomy, exposing the fragile unity of the outlaw collective. Agnes Rose functions as the Dime Novel's "fallen woman" turned fighter; she disrupts gender norms through both her backstory and her gun-slinging skill, evoking the Amazon-type heroine of early Westerns. Each member of the gang follows the traditional Western archetypes, but North exposes the gendered, racial, and reproductive exclusions on which those archetypes have historically existed. By filling the outlaw band with women, queer, and infertile characters, collectives that do not have any protagonism in the classic Western novels, *Outlawed* brings light to the previously ignored by the Western genre.

Similarly to authors such as Wheelers and Buntline who created the characters of Calamity Jane and Buffalo Bill out of real-life gunslingers, North has acknowledged in her interview for *KQED*, that the Kid is inspired by the real-life figure of Butch Cassidy, a connection reinforced by the gang's hideout being named after the real Hole-in-the-Wall Pass in Wyoming, a famous hideout of Cassidy's Wild Bunch.

The gang's central mission is an elaborate heist involving using explosives to steal all the money from the Bank in Fiddleback, in order to buy the town using disguises; this plan follows The Kid's desires to build a community for people like them and places *Outlawed* squarely within the tradition of the Outlaw Western. Cawelti's (1984) model of the outlaw story emphasizes rebellion against a corrupt or unjust society, the formation of a tight-knit gang, and the inevitability of failure or betrayal. In classical Westerns, the outlaw's plans to rob a bank or kidnap a damsel, and the inevitable downfall of the heist, often reaffirms the necessity of law and order; in *Outlawed*, however, the heist does not seek to harm others or just rebel, it is a political statement that strives to create a sanctuary for those rejected by mainstream society. The heist also dramatizes the gang's internal conflicts, as some deem the plan to be too dangerous and refuse to participate, echoing the familiar motif of betrayal so present in the traditional outlaw narrative.

Furthermore, Ada's romance with Lark enriches her position as a postmodern Western hero. Traditional Westerns often relegated love to the margins, positioning women as passive rewards for the hero's success or as tragic figures destined for abandonment or death. In contrast, North treats Ada's attraction as integral to her emotional journey. Her

feelings for Lark complicate her loyalty to the Kid and challenge her understanding of love as her first husband was integrated into the society that seeks to punish her and abandoned her as soon as she was a target. Her relationship with Lark allows her to explore love and desire without the pressure of conceiving a child. Lark also subverts and resembles the traditional love interest as he is a man who has been castrated for his sexual proclivities but ends up dead, following the same fate as many of his female predecessors.

Ultimately, *Outlawed* operates as a feminist and queer rearticulation of the Western tradition. It does not simply parody or reject genre conventions but uses them as a medium to build a new narrative. In its landscapes, character dynamics, and outlaws motifs, the novel affirms the appeal of the Western while challenging the exclusions on which it was historically built. The result is a Western where the frontier is not a space of conquest but a stage for reinvention, and where the outlaw is not a tragic man, but a healing woman who dares to imagine another way of living.

2.3. *Outlawed* and Postmodern Fiction

Outlawed use of the subgenre of Alternate History places the novel within the terrain of postmodern fiction. As theorized by Lubomír Doležel in his *Theory of Possible Worlds* and Karen Hellekson (2001), alternate histories are defined by a “point of divergence”, a moment when the fictional world breaks away from the real historical timeline. In *Outlawed*, this divergence is manifested as a deadly epidemic that devastated the child population of the United States: “We had read Burton’s *Lessons of the Infant Jesus Christ* every year since third form, so we had heard about how God sent the Great Flu to cleanse the world of evil” (North 2021, 1). The catastrophic loss of life produced a cultural trauma that reshaped the nation’s religious and social systems, the American Civil War did not take place and thus, the United States was never formed and instead appeared what are called Independent Towns. In this alternate reality, the figure of the infant Jesus becomes the dominant religious icon, symbolizing the sanctity of childbirth: “We knew that baby Jesus had appeared to Mary of Texarkana after the sickness... and struck a covenant with her: If those who remained were fruitful and peopled the world in His image, He would spare them further sickness” (North 2021, 1). This fixation displaces the traditional emphasis on Christ’s death and resurrection and instead focuses on biological reproduction. It follows what Hellekson categorizes as a “Genetic Model” of alternate history: the novel builds a plausible chain of events from a speculative rupture and

explores how institutions and ideologies evolve in response. North's imagined society offers a critique not only of historical gender oppression but of contemporary anxieties about reproductive justice, state surveillance, and moral purity.

The Postmodern technique of Pastiche is central to the novel and is closely related to the technique of Intertextuality. *Outlawed* draws primarily from two distinct genres: Western fiction and the growing subgenre of Witch fiction. Pastiche deals with the mixing of the visual and thematic motifs of the Western like gunfights, desert landscapes, outlaw gangs, and frontier justice, with the symbolic and historical frameworks of the subgenre of Witch fiction. The barren woman, the midwife persecuted for her knowledge, and the community of exiled non-conforming women all evoke the traditional figure of the witch as described in both historical accounts and feminist reappropriations.

Intertextuality references how the novel engages with texts and historical discourses related to the genres, for example, *The Kid*, as mentioned before, is inspired by a real-life gunslinger. Another example would be Ada's awareness of how most of the medical books related to pregnancies that she had access to were written by men. While Intertextuality structures the novel's relationship to past texts, Pastiche deals with the aesthetic and generic form of the genres. By bringing these two genres together, North crafts a hybrid narrative that confronts the patriarchal and theological legacies found within both traditions.

The theme of paranoia, a recurring feature of postmodern fiction, is shown through the novel's depiction of theocratic rule and gender surveillance. Women are expected to undergo constant testing for fertility; midwives are monitored and suspected of sorcery; barren women are blamed for drought, disease, and death. Ada's departure from her hometown is motivated by fear of persecution, but the threat does not dissipate, it merely shifts. Even among the outlaws, power and suspicion circulate.

Outlawed's fragmented structure allows the story to avoid being constricted into a progression of events centered around a single heroic action, as it was the norm in traditional Western novels. The novel is composed of specific encounters with different communities, starting with her hometown, and continuing with the convent, the wilderness and the Hole in the Wall Gang, Fiddleback, and, finally, the town where she opens her clinic. In each of these locations, she finds different stories and motivations.

This type of narrative allows the story to avoid a traditional heroic ending, as we do not know how Ada's story ends, and we are left to wonder whether she was able to successfully help other women or if she was caught and vanished again or even killed. This postmodern device also helps blend both genres mentioned in the above section; the first chapters when she was still living in her hometown reflect more the literature related to Witches and, as the story progresses and we advance to the next events in her life, it progresses towards the Western genre.

Furthermore, metafiction is present in *Outlawed* in a subtle way as it does not break the fourth-wall or draw attention to its fictional status. However, it deals with metafiction through its use of Alternate History as a narrative strategy; by creating a world shaped by a point of divergence, North is able to critique how historical narratives are constructed and the values they reflect. The narrative reflects real-world anxieties such as the fight for reproductive rights, the rising danger of religious fundamentalism, and the medical misinformation present in all kinds of media, all of which align with metafiction's interest in questioning the neutrality of narratives.

In sum, *Outlawed* exemplifies the postmodern project of interrogating dominant narratives whether they are historical, religious, or literary. The novel deconstructs normative assumptions about gender, power, and identity through various postmodern devices. By imagining a world where fertility defines moral status, North critiques not only patriarchal histories but also the contemporary politics of reproduction.

2.3. Witches in the Wild West

The figure of the witch provides a crucial interpretive lens for understanding the symbolic and ideological roots of *Outlawed*. Although Anna North's novel does not contain supernatural elements, it draws extensively from the historical associations between midwifery, reproductive knowledge, and patriarchal fear, associations that have long defined the witch figure in both early modern history and feminist theory. As Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English (2010) declare, midwives were often persecuted for possessing medical expertise that challenged the authority of male physicians and religious institutions. Ada, the protagonist of the novel, is a young woman who is being trained by her mother to become a midwife. Her mother shares with her remedies linked to a long tradition of women healers such as the procedures to assist in pregnancies and

childbirth, and herbal remedies to help with female pains; this knowledge puts them both in a dangerous position as it was considered by the institutions as both indispensable and suspicious. When Ada fails to conceive, she is not treated with compassion, but instead, she is targeted as a threat to other pregnant women and is exiled, which exemplifies the historical persecution of midwives and barren women as described by Sollee (2017) and Chollet (2021) in their respective research.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the world of *Outlawed* is one in which these expectations have been magnified by historical trauma. Following a fictional epidemic that killed large numbers of children, society becomes obsessed with fertility. The worship of the infant Jesus replaces traditional Christology, and the sanctity of motherhood becomes the dominant social and moral ideal. In this altered context, every woman is expected to bear at least one child and are even encouraged to cheat on their husbands if that allows them to get pregnant, as men's infertility was not discussed but a possibility: "Don't think of it as being unfaithful to your husband, think of it as keeping yourself safe" (North 2021, 5). Those who are unable to bear a child, are accused of witchcraft or must turn against other women to accuse them of being witches, to try to save themselves. As part of this system, barren women are banished to convents, similar to jails designed to remove non-reproductive women from public view. These convents serve to isolate and silence women who cannot or will not serve the reproductive demands of a patriarchal society.

While *Outlawed* critiques the patriarchal obsession with female fertility through the metaphor of witchcraft, it also deals with the complexity of the women who participate in enforcing those norms. Characters such as Ada's former mother-in-law exemplify internalized misogyny, serving as agents of a system that claims infertility as both a moral and spiritual failure. However, the figure of the Sheriff functions as the crucial reinforcement of these gendered moral codes. As a representative of the state, the Sheriff does not merely enforce laws; he embodies the collusion of legal authority with theological and reproductive orthodoxy. He functions similarly to the inquisitors of early modern witch trials as the male figures who enforce the laws on paranoia and rumors. What *Outlawed* reveals, then, is not only that witchcraft accusations serve to discipline non-reproductive bodies, but that this phenomenon requires a gendered hierarchy in which women monitor each other while men ensure the ultimate control and power.

Throughout the novel, Ada searches for a woman rumored to have found ways to help barren women like herself, someone who offers healing, answers, and perhaps, salvation. This unnamed healer functions as a symbolic projection of the witch-midwife: the keeper of forbidden knowledge. Ada's quest is not just for her own safety, but for finding the truth, a woman who can correct the misinformation and fear that have shaped her life. Before getting to know the work of this woman, the only sources of reproductive knowledge Ada encounters are books written by men, filled with falsehoods, superstition, and outright misogyny. These texts perpetuate ignorance and blame, reinforcing the structures of power that seek to control women's bodies. This reflects the historical dynamic outlined by Ehrenreich and English (2010), in which male physicians gradually supplanted midwives while spreading misinformation about female anatomy and reproduction. Ultimately, Ada discovers that the woman she has been searching for may be dead or has vanished and she must become that figure herself. After the partial disintegration of the Hole in the Wall Gang and the failure of their last great heist, Ada chooses to leave outlaw life and return to her calling as a midwife, not only to deliver children, but to study and protect women's reproductive health. She dedicates herself to investigating contraception and abortion, opening a clinic to help any woman in need. Ada's journey reflects the fate of many midwives who, as described by Chollet (2021) and Purkiss (1996), were persecuted for their expertise and independence. But unlike many historical figures, Ada survives and refuses to be erased by a system that equates womanhood with childbirth and knowledge with heresy. Instead, she reclaims the legacy of the healer and becomes the woman other women seek for help: "This story ends in September in the year of our Lord 1895, When I came over the mountains a wife and a widow, a doctor and an outlaw, a robber and a killer and ever my mother's daughter, and set up shop in the surgery of Mrs. Alice Schaeffer and got to work" (North 2021, 260).

Through Ada's journey, North offers a powerful reworking of the witch myth: not as a supernatural being, but as a woman who dares to know, to heal, and to protect. The novel demonstrates how stories of exile and accusation can be rewritten as stories of resilience and self-definition.

CONCLUSION

The focus of this undergraduate dissertation was to examine *Outlawed* (2021) by Anna North as a postmodern feminist reconfiguration of the Western genre. In doing so, it offered a reading of the novel through three frameworks: the Western as a historically and male dominated American narrative form; postmodern fiction as a literary convention grounded in formal experimentation and historical disruption; and the figure of the witch as a figure with deep roots in the historical persecution of midwifery and reproductive knowledge. Each of these frameworks was first developed in methodological terms and then applied to a close reading of the novel in order to demonstrate how North engages with and transforms the Western tradition.

In the first chapter, the Western was approached as a genre built on frontier mythology and archetypal character types, and focused on narratives of individualism, lawlessness, and resolution of conflict through violence. *Outlawed* (2021) adopts many of the fundamental structures of the Outlaw Western, such as the marginalization by the ruling institutions, and the morally ambiguous quest for freedom of the outlaw gang. However, it reformulates these structures by including characters previously excluded from the genre as is the case with women, both as figures of oppression and oppressed, and queer and gender non-conforming individuals. By leaving behind the figure of the solitary and mysterious male hero, the novel evolves from the traditional values of conquest and masculine authority that have defined and restricted the genre for so long.

The second chapter explored the novel's relation to postmodern fiction, with an emphasis on its use of Alternate History as a literary device. North constructs a speculative version of the late 19th century United States that reflects current anxieties around reproduction autonomy and patriarchal control and thus enabling the text to reconfigure the formal conventions of the Western while also questioning its origins.

The third chapter explored the figure of the witch as a culturally significant figure associated with female knowledge, midwifery, and her complexity as a victim of the witch-hunts but also as an agent used to oppress other women. North's novel reframes the witch not as a supernatural being but rather as a historically marginalized subject whose association with reproductive care made her a threat to religious institutions and the male dominated medical field of the time. Ada, the novel's protagonist, is cast out for her

infertility by other women within her community, but eventually she reclaims her identity as a midwife even though it puts her at risk. Her development reflects a current reclaiming of the witch as a figure of political resistance and agency.

Taken together, these frameworks reveal that *Outlawed* (2021) does not merely critique the Western from the outside but engages with its internal codes in order to imagine a different version of the myth. By giving protagonism to collectives that have historically been excluded from the Western canon, such as barren women, queer outlaws, and gender nonconforming people, the novel opens up a space in which other visions of the frontier can take shape.

The Western has lived in the American and European imagination for decades, not only through literature but also through painting, photography, and especially cinema. As readers and viewers, we seek to see ourselves reflected in the stories we consume, particularly when those stories are structured around such romantic ideals of freedom and redemption as the Western. In *Outlawed* (2021), Anna North uses the postmodern device of Alternate History and, by drawing focus to the oppression of women who dare to seek knowledge and are deemed as witches, she is able to craft a version of the Western that, even though it may not be realistic, it is plausible within the story's context. Through this narrative framework, she creates a space in which women and queer people are not only included but given protagonism. The result is a vision of the Western that avoids exclusion and reinvents possibility, allowing those long marginalized by the genre to participate in its world.

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