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## Unsettling Frontiers: Property, Empire, and Race in Denis Johnson's *Train Dreams*

**Dominic Davies**

Senior Lecturer in English

City University of London

Contact: [drdomdavies@gmail.com](mailto:drdomdavies@gmail.com); [dominic.davies@city.ac.uk](mailto:dominic.davies@city.ac.uk)

### Abstract

This article explores the ‘unsettling’ qualities of American writer Denis Johnson’s 2011 novella, *Train Dreams*. It explores the book’s engagement with environmental crises and indigenous cosmologies to show how the metaphysical insecurities, common to much of Johnson’s fiction, come in this context to challenge the very concept of American nationhood itself—or as the novella’s title parodies, the ‘American Dream’. *Train Dreams* unsettles what I call the narrative infrastructures undergirding the story of the American frontier-becoming-nation-state: the transcontinental railroads, and the colonial property regimes that those railroads both pursued and opened up. In three central sections, the article explores Johnson’s unsettling of notions of property, then empire, and finally race. Through these readings, it shows how the novella finds its way to an indigenous critique of America as a settler colonial state. While previous critical discussions of the ‘unsettling’ qualities of Johnson’s work have until now meant that word affectively, in this article my aim is therefore to emphasise its decolonizing momentum as well.

**Keywords:** Denis Johnson, *Train Dreams*, frontiers, property, empire, indigenous critique

**Word Count:** 11,015 (including abstract, keywords, works cited, and endnotes)

### Bio Note

Dominic Davies is a Senior Lecturer in English at City, University of London. He holds a DPhil and British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship from the University of Oxford. He is the author of *Imperial Infrastructure and Spatial Resistance in Colonial Literature, 1880-1930* (Peter Lang, 2017) and *Urban Comics: Infrastructure & the Global City in Contemporary Graphic Narratives* (Routledge, 2019), along with several journal articles and book chapters exploring the relationship between literature, culture, and empire. He is also the co-editor of three books: *Fighting Words: Fifteen Books that Shaped the Postcolonial World* (Peter Lang, 2017), *Planned Violence: Post/Colonial Urban Infrastructure, Literature & Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), and *Documenting Trauma in Comics: Traumatic Pasts, Embodied Histories & Graphic Reportage* (Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2020).

## Unsettling Frontiers: Property, Empire, and Race in Denis Johnson's *Train Dreams*

### Introduction: Unsettling Frontiers

The American writer Denis Johnson's 116 page story, *Train Dreams*, originally published in the *Paris Review* in 2002 and then reissued as a slim, standalone novella in 2011, almost won him the Pulitzer Prize.<sup>i</sup> *Almost*, because while the book did *not* win in 2012, the year it was shortlisted, neither did anything else. For the first time in thirty-five years the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction was 'withheld', the panel refusing without explanation to choose a winner from its three finalists – Johnson's *Train Dreams*, David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*, and Karen Russell's *Swamplandia* (see Flood).

Several commentators have since condemned the Pulitzer board for not awarding Johnson the prize, while also speculating why the book didn't win outright (see, for example, O'Hagan). 'There is something discomfiting about Johnson's work', wrote one: if the novella 'appears as if on respectable territory', its 'tragic and surreal' ending must have alienated the Pulitzer board (Warner n.pag). Elsewhere the author Anthony Doerr, though writing in support of the book, claimed that the 'novella has flaws'. It is littered with 'tufts of seemingly irrelevant material [that] stick out here and there', he continued, peculiar tangential arrangements that leave one feeling 'vaguely unsettled' (Doerr n.pag). The economy of Johnson's prose and the brevity of the novella itself, Doerr argued, only heightened the jarring lurches of these strange narrative tangents.

Johnson's story certainly does not run along smooth narrative tracks. It takes the building of the transcontinental railroads, which at the turn of the twentieth century were opening up the last pockets of America's Western frontier to colonists, and in the tradition of much twentieth-century American frontier fiction – perhaps, most notably, Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* (1918) – disrupts their progressive, expansionist confidence with short, anti-chronological segments and 'disconcerting' realities (see Ostwalt 102-103). The result is a 'blurred quality' that reads as a 'waking dream', an effect shared by the drug-addled narrator of Johnson's much-celebrated short story collection *Jesus' Son* (1992), and so described in *Critique* by Robert McClure Smith back in 2001 (185-186). Also

writing in this journal, Timothy Parrish argues that because of these unsettling, dreamlike qualities, Johnson's fiction resists political readings: his characters are always too 'wasted' for social critique, preoccupied by deeper, metaphysical accounts of the world (Parrish 27-29). Both authors agree on the peculiar dearth of critical writing on Johnson, who though included in Harold Bloom's *Great Western Canon* and awarded a National Book Award for *Tree of Smoke* in 2007, is still to receive sustained academic attention. This may soon change, following Johnson's death in 2017, but to my knowledge there does not yet exist an essay devoted entirely to *Train Dreams*, a novella that is remarkably political in its treatment of a America as a settler colonial state—and a settler colonialism that, moreover, is not somehow mythically past or complete, but in fact a defining feature of our continually enclosing neoliberal present (see Lloyd & Wolfe).

In this article, I argue that in *Train Dreams* Johnson transplants his dreamlike narrative structures into the context of the frontier to unsettling—though never unambiguous—political effect. In the book's engagement with environmental crises and indigenous cosmologies in particular, the metaphysical insecurities common to much of Johnson's fiction come in this context to challenge the very concept of American nationhood itself. The novella's title parodies the 'American Dream', which, as several critics have shown, is in much canonical American literary fiction – from James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorn, and Laura Ingalls Wilder, through to Cormac McCarthy, Annie Proulx, and Ron Powers, among others – built on the myth of the frontier and its various incarnations (see, for example, Fussell; Busby et al.; Mogen). With this literary history broadly in mind, my aim in this article is to extend discussions of the 'unsettling' qualities of Johnson's work, which have until now only meant that word affectively, to explore its decolonizing momentum as well.<sup>ii</sup>

*Train Dreams* unsettles what I will call the *narrative infrastructures* undergirding the story of the American frontier-becoming-nation-state: the transcontinental railroads, and the colonial property regimes those railroads both pursued and opened up. With this term I draw on Lieven Ameen's differentiation of 'story' from 'narrative' in planning and infrastructure contexts. As he explains:

‘Story can be understood as the mentally constructed event (or sequence of events) a narrator has in mind’, that which captures a general sense of the underlying narrative but is not beholden to the specifics of plot; by contrast, narrative is understood ‘as the actual recounting of these events in question’, or the infrastructural foundations of a story as actually plotted across landscape and page (Ameel 321). This tension between the solid infrastructural line (both the railroad and plot, combined into a narrative infrastructure) and the proliferation of ideological fictions that arise around this central line (less concrete, but just as impactful *stories* or *myths*) are caught together in the title of Johnson’s novella. There is the rooted, material *train*, the infrastructural lynchpin of settler colonial expansion; and there are the *dreams* of the frontier, the storied imaginaries of profit and power that the train’s geographic and symbolic mobility enables.<sup>iii</sup> It is specifically by targeting and re-plotting the narrative infrastructures of property and railroad that Johnson’s novella unsettles existing mythologies of the American West, and beyond that, America’s own self-identification as a nation-state, recasting the US as a settler colonial—or indeed, *settler imperial*—power instead (Byrd xviii-xix).<sup>iv</sup>

In *Train Dreams* Johnson therefore rewrites what, most recently, Greg Grandin has described America’s founding frontier myth of ‘optimism’ and ‘progress’ (8-10). With origins in literary texts such as Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) and Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), this frontier myth was later theorized by the historian Frederick Jackson Turner in his influential essay, ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History’ (1920). This frontier story centres the expansionist ‘fluidity’ of America’s Western border in histories of the country’s constitution, culture, and development, while erasing the lives, histories, and cultures of the indigenous peoples who originally inhabited the territory. As Turner wrote, through the conflict ‘between savagery and civilization’, America had been allowed a ‘perennial rebirth’ that sustained its ideological optimism and alleviated its economic woes (2-3). While frontiersmen might sometimes trade with and even learn from indigenous people and their cultures, this frontier story invariably finishes with the ‘wilderness’ conquered and the ‘Indian’ violently disappeared.<sup>v</sup>

*Train Dreams* ostensibly repeats Turner's frontier story: it contains many of the nuts and bolts that hold this plot together, and must certainly be read against its general shape. And yet, the novella's many strange and tangential segments—what Doerr calls its 'tufts'—also unsettle and unravel this frontier myth; other stories infiltrate Johnson's narrative and set it on a different track. Most particularly, it is in the confrontation of this settler colonial project with climate crisis, on the one hand, and indigenous cosmology and critique, on the other, that the novella unsettles America's long hacked out frontier narrative and its enduring mythologization in contemporary American culture.

The remainder of the article is comprised of three central sections. Section '1' briefly outlines the novella's plot, before turning to its narrativization of property laws and environmental resistance to their inscription. In section '2', I put the novella in a larger imperial context, showing how *Train Dreams* both invokes and rejects a settler colonial narrative that is not simply built around, but in continuous 'dialogue' with, the technological development of physical infrastructure (see Nye). Finally, Section '3' shows how *Train Dreams* unsettles dominant regimes of whiteness through seemingly disconnected scenes of racially-motivated violence and ambivalent representations of indigenous people. While the colonial railroad results in the literal and violent death of one indigenous character, Kootenai Bob, and though indigenous women are throughout reduced to unspeaking objects, these figures work not to reinforce but to invert the colonialist rendering of indigenous people as 'savage': as I argue, indigenous stories in fact find their way into this book, and there constitute its most unsettling aspects. In a brief conclusion, I explore the extent to which Johnson's novella might also speak back to America's more recent narrative infrastructure—no longer the transcontinental railroad, but now the US-Mexico border wall—to suggest that, even here, the novella finds its way to an indigenous critique of America's current predicament.

## **1. Unsettling Property**

*Train Dreams* tells the strange story of Robert Grainier, a simple man living in the mountains of Northern Idaho in the early twentieth century. Grainier makes his living as a railroad builder and logger on the frontier. He marries young and builds his wife, Gladys, and their new daughter, Kate, a cabin on a remote acre in the wilderness, purchased with savings from the railroad. One day, and without warning, a raging forest fire vaporizes his home and everything in it, including Gladys and Kate, as well as much of the surrounding landscape. Bereft both of family and property, Grainier turns to camping out in the wilderness and slowly becomes a hermit, reluctant to leave the site where his cabin once stood in the hope that his disappeared wife or daughter might return. He takes some work, mostly carting goods back and forth from the railroad, and has a series of encounters with indigenous people, including a man named Kootenai Bob, as well as several women. One night, he is visited by the ghost of his wife, who tells him his daughter is still alive. Renewing his commitment to stay in the wilderness, Grainier gradually rebuilds the burned out structure of his home, befriendng a stray red dog who bears what Grainier takes to be ‘wolf-pups’ (dogs crossed with wolves). Grainier soon begins to hear wolves howling in the forest at night from across the border in Canada. Having lived alone for some time, he begins to howl back to the wolves, until one evening a ‘wolf-girl’—whom Grainier instinctively knows to be his lost daughter, now grown into a young woman—appears at the cabin with a broken leg. He crafts her a splint, and after a night’s rest in his cabin she disappears, never to be seen again. Many years later Grainier is found dead, at the end of a long life (he lives into the 1960s), by some hikers, who bury him in the same acre plot of land that he bought at the beginning of the novella.

Before mapping the larger imperial geographies of *Train Dreams*, I want first to hone in on one of the novella’s most essential inflections. Throughout the book, Johnson reflexively conjoins the delineative inscription of his narrative syntax to the settling of colonizing infrastructure into the frontier landscape, thereby inviting comparison between the two. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said forcefully described the novel’s ‘normative pattern of social authority’ as a ‘globally integral structure’ that ‘fortified’ imperialism (53, 71)—an imperialism not only of property seizure, but also



of enclosure and property creation (see Saxine). If the ‘geographical possession of land is what empire in the final analysis is all about’ (Said 78), then as Brenna Bhandar shows in her development of Said’s thesis, ‘property law [has been] the primary means’ of enabling such (dis)possession (3). More particularly, Bhandar emphasizes the centrality of the spatial, legal, and racialized regime of ‘property ownership and property form’ to what she calls the novel’s ‘narrative foundation’: working synchronously, property laws and the novel form consolidated narrative models and chronologies that rendered ‘indigenous and colonized populations as outside history’ (3).

*Train Dreams* unpacks the novel’s propertied foundations to suggest the construction of narrative as itself a crucial infrastructural tool in the production and consolidation of imperial space. If property shapes the novel’s ‘narrative foundation’, as Bhandar argues, Johnson in turn emphasizes the foundational depth of the novel to settler colonization. He does not simply trace his descriptions over the landscape, but scars them vertically into it as well. *Train Dreams* thus seeks out the profoundly physical dimensions of narrative in a settler colonial context, emphasizing a violent materialism that is sometimes absent from postcolonial discussions of colonial literature’s ‘descriptive metaphors’ (Boehmer 84) or ‘discursive interactions’ (Young 387).

An illustrative example is the geographic centrepiece of Johnson’s novella: Grainier’s patch of land, and the home he builds upon it. After acquiring this ‘acre’ from a colonist ‘selling many small parcels of land’ (37), Grainier entirely rearranges its topography. He builds his ‘cabin’ on

a sparsely overgrown knoll [that] he could easily level by moving around the stones it was composed of. He could clear a bigger area cutting logs for a cabin, and pulling at stumps wouldn’t be urgent, as he’d just garden among them, to start. (37)

In this prototypically Lockean passage, Grainier remoulds ‘the State that Nature hath provided’ with the ‘*Work* of his Hands’ and, having ‘mixed his *Labour* with’ it, ‘thereby makes it his *Property*’ (Locke 27-28). The trees are extracted from the earth—their roots eventually, though not ‘urgently’, ripped out of it—and their wood is sculpted into the walls that frame the domestic space both of Grainier’s property and, historically, the novel form. In this passage, America’s ‘wild’ topography is thoroughly enclosed.

Grainier's reconstruction of his cabin after its decimation in the forest fire is similarly physical:

He built his cabin about eighteen by eighteen, laying out lines, making a foundation of stones, scribing and hewing the logs to keep each one flush against the next, hacking notches, getting his back under the higher ones to lift them into place. (51)

The landscape's physical contours are heftily reworked in these descriptions, Grainier filing down an uneven topography into something recognizable as colonial property: a patch of enclosed land marked out from its topographical surrounds. If Johnson's narrative eschews metaphor for brute force in these passages, the rhythm of his sentences still repeat, in their laboured twists and turns, and in the staccato 'scribings'—a word used in joinery, though with writerly connotations—and 'hacks' of their verbs, Grainier's meticulous etching out of property from the landscape's earthly materials.

Even as *Train Dreams* returns over and over again to this narrative deepening of colonial property lines into the American landscape, it at the same renders Grainier's markings as finite and dissoluble, unsettling them even as the sentences describing their construction take shape. Throughout the novella, infrastructural efforts to cement settler culture into the contested terrain of the frontier are thwarted by climate crises. Most notable is the forest fire, central to the novella's plot, that reduces Grainier's labours to 'ashes': climbing in its aftermath to where his cabin once stood he finds 'no sign at all of his former life, only a patch of dark ground surrounded by the black spike of spruce' (45). Only one feature of Grainier's labour-as-property survives, a segment of 'narrative foundation' buried deep into the landscape: 'He scuffed along through the ashes and kicked up one of the spikes he'd used in building the cabin's walls, but couldn't find any others' (45). A remnant of the foundations of Grainier's property remains here, but it is profoundly unsettled, dislocated from the larger narrative infrastructure that holds America's possessive imperial expansionism together and intact.

Though the fire dominates the novella as its most unsettling force, in another scene a river breaks its banks and washes away several colonial structures, including a post office; and in yet another scene, the 'surveyor' of a railroad company is shot in the shoulder by his dog (64). In *Train Dreams*, the natural surrounds are a constant and direct threat to human life. Early in the novella, a logger called Arn Peeples, who works on the frontier with Grainier, warns that 'the trees themselves

were killers’—he adds, it is ‘only when you left it alone that a tree might treat you as a friend’: ‘After the blade bit in, you had yourself a war’ (14-15). While tacking into the earth to manufacture from it property and profit provokes this retaliative agency from the landscape, this environmental sentence becomes more actively unsettling when Arn Peebles dies a few pages later from a tree that he *has* in fact ‘left alone’, when he is ‘hit across the back of his head by a dead branch falling off a tall larch’ (18). Even Grainier himself is injured during his final season of foresting, when ‘a wild limb knocks his jaw crooked’ and leaves him unable to eat properly for the rest of his life (82).

It is tempting to read these retaliations as allegories of the current climate crisis (see Chang), as early frontier and then industrializing histories come back to bite the human in the age of the Anthropocene. But *Train Dreams* drives toward something deeper still, digging down into the narrative foundations of imperial property-making in order to make the joins and bolts of their underlying infrastructure conspicuous and visible to the reader. In his much cited book, *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh worries that as a form the novel proceeds on ‘the concealment of those exceptional moments that serve as the motor of narrative’, and that it is exactly this concealment that renders ‘serious literary fiction’ so incapable of representing climate crises (17). But *Train Dreams* upturns these moments, like the foundations of Grainier’s cabin, from the earth. For if it is Johnson’s blending of the improbable into the probable that makes the novella so adjectivally unsettling, it is the novella’s broader connection of climate restlessness to histories of property, empire, and race that enables its verbally unsettling narrative work. While in Ghosh’s account the novel is confined to the domestic everyday, Johnson’s novella upends the very foundations that hold that space together. The effect is to show up the labour, dispossession, and erasure that enables the transformation of freshly colonized territory into property—foundations on which the form of the novel, in turn, is built.

## 2. Unsettling Empire

*Train Dreams*' narrative begins in 1917, three years before Frederick Jackson Turner wrote his evocative essay on the American frontier, and though the book runs back to 1886 and forwards to the 1960s to take in Grainier's whole life, the majority of the plot occurs in the 1920s and '30s. The book is set in the Idaho Panhandle, the northernmost segment of a 200,000 square kilometre state that had been a point of particular tension between competing colonial powers, Britain and the US, until the Oregon Treaty of 1846. After that settlement, the colony of British Columbia—the second colonial site where state-regulated systems of land-title were implemented (Bhandar 3)<sup>vi</sup>—was established north of the border between 1858 and 1866 with confederation in 1871, while south of the border Idaho became on 3 July 1890 the Union's 43rd state (Coleman 81). Much of the novella takes place in what Johnson calls the 'Moyea Valley' and along the 'Moyea River'; this is a slight misspelling of the Moyie River, a tributary of the Kootenai River that cuts across the US-Canada border at the top of the Panhandle. This river in turn takes its name from the Ktunaxa Nation, whose territory spans parts of both Idaho and British Columbia, and which was cut in two by the 1846 Treaty.

In 1917, when Johnson's novella begins, Grainier is working on the construction of the Spokane International Railroad. Historically, the Spokane International was a trunk line that connected the Canadian Pacific Railway's tracks in British Columbia with Spokane in Washington State, and its completion allowed the Canadian Pacific Railway to challenge its most immediate competitor lines by shuttling goods (and later, on the Soo-Spokane Train De Luxe, people) between the American Midwest and the coastal sounds of Seattle and Vancouver. The completion of the Spokane International required astonishing feats of engineering. The Idaho Panhandle is a terrain riven with gorges and canyons, coated in thickly forested expanses and harbouring deep blue lakes. It runs in a long, thin corridor down from the US border with Canada before opening up into the full width of Idaho state. The Rocky Mountain range, which cuts from British Columbia right down to New Mexico and slices the continent in two, runs along the Panhandle's Eastern border, and is referenced in one of the novella's climactic scenes (112), to which I return in this article's conclusion.

Johnson's geographic setting thus lands in the peculiar crosshairs of a man-made colonialist borderline and a geologically-made natural one, the former running east to west, the latter north to south. This confluence is echoed in the other two border-crossing narrative tracks that structure the novel's plot: the Spokane International, that carves its way up the Panhandle, and the Kootenai River, which flows along a parallel path. The tussle between these two conflicting narrative orderings of geographic space—the imposed colonial infrastructure, and the flowing river—motors the plot of *Train Dreams* forward not to consolidate settlement in the region, but rather to *unsettle* stories of frontier expansionism and the new colonial border.

When the novella opens, the Spokane International company is midway through the construction of an 'Eleven Mile Cut-Off' bridge across a gorge. Profit of course motivates the building of this infrastructure: the bridge is so-called because 'it eliminated a long curve around the gorge and through an adjacent pass and saved the Spokane International's having to look after that eleven-mile stretch of rails and ties' (12). Space and time are literally 'compressed' here, as the railway claws the US empire into itself (Harvey 204). Importantly, the success of this infrastructure project, along with the 'progressive' narrative it supports, drive the novella's *own* plot uncharacteristically forward in these early scenes. Grainier, who through the rest of the novella expresses little desire for anything in particular, is in these early moments 'hungry to be around other such massive undertakings, where swarms of men did away with portions of the forest and assembled structures as big as anything going, knitting massive wooden trestles in the air of impassable chasms, always bigger, longer, deeper' (12). Grainier therefore travels to labour on 'the Robinson Gorge Bridge, the grandest yet', and after its completion, he continues beyond to become a logger in the forests opened up by the new railroad. The storied qualities of these infrastructural feats are not lost on Johnson, as he 'knits' these technological feats into a larger narrative of settler empire: 'From the landing the logs went on railroad flatcars, and then across the wondrous empty depth of Robinson Gorge and down the mountain to the link with all the railways of the American continent' (13).

The brevity of Johnson's novella and the pithiness of his descriptions betray his close attention to word choice. The word 'nation' would feel right here; but by swapping it out for 'continent', Johnson refuses the colonial geography that, in the present of his novella, is splicing up America with property plans, railway lines, and freshly carved state boundaries.<sup>vii</sup> While at first celebrating the infrastructural might of railroads such as the Spokane International, it quickly becomes apparent that *Train Dreams* is trying to shake off the strait jacket of nation and property, an unsettling poise that turns up in the form of the novella itself. At 116 pages long, the novella packs the great American frontier into a parcel that looks disconcertingly small next to, say, Herman Melville's great American 'novel as encyclopaedia', *Moby-Dick* (1851), which in its attempts to assimilate colossal spaces into its descriptive grids arrives ultimately at the 'exhaustion of omniscience' (James 75-76). Instead, Johnson works in what Douglas Trevor calls the novella's 'creative no man's land', a form resistant to 'the strictures of length' and instead drawn to a 'hazy sphere' that allows readers, 'as with Grainier's own thought processes, [to] drift along' (102-104). In its form, then, *Train Dreams* reengineers the narrative infrastructure on which the American frontier story is built; as the novella progresses, it fidgets with and against the railroad, in the process making newly unsettling stories possible.

Despite the meticulous detail in which infrastructure construction is described throughout *Train Dreams*, the vast communication networks historically tying America together repeatedly fail to build into 'progressive' narrative sense. For example, Grainier arrives as a young boy into Idaho on a train, but is unable to remember where his journey began. 'He'd started his life story on a train ride he couldn't remember' (24), we are told, and though the novella takes in more or less every other consequential event in Grainier's life, the specificities of this first journey are never revealed:

As far as he could ever fix it, he'd been born sometime in 1886, either in Utah or in Canada, and had found his way to his new family on the Great Northern Railroad, the building of which had been completed in 1893. He arrived after several days on the train with his destination pinned to his chest on the back of a store receipt. [...] The whole adventure made him forget things as soon as they happened, and he very soon misplaced this earliest part of his life entirely. (26)

The railroad, designed to build like the novel a newly imagined and coherent nationalism (Anderson 24-25), functions instead to unsettle Grainier's narrative, disorienting rather than 'fixing'—and Johnson's verb there, with its evocation of infrastructure construction and repair, is purposefully chosen—his geographic origins. There is further slippage in this paragraph, too: it is usually 'things' that are 'misplaced', as objects in space, while memories are more commonly forgotten. In switching these verbs around, Johnson further unsettles the progressive narrative infrastructure of the railroad and echoes instead the roughly sketched borderland from which Grainier is said to originate.

Grainier is able to decipher only two events from the 'patchy memories' of his childhood: the first, 'the mass deportation of a hundred or more Chinese families' (27), I will return to in the next section of this article; the second, a day when the Kootenai River break its banks, continues the environment's sentient unsettlement of colonial property law. The Kootenai River is an integral geographic reference point for Grainier throughout the novella, and its steady flow is introduced in these early chapters as an alternative narrative infrastructure that literally runs *underneath* the meticulous bridge scaffoldings that Grainier himself helps to build. Like the novella's larger geographic setting, which sits at the crosshairs of perpendicular geological and colonial boundaries, the novella begins with Grainier himself located in the middle of a bridge over a river, the one line running perpendicular to the other in a similarly fashioned intersectional point. The result is more than a dramatization of the binary juxtaposition of 'civilization' and 'savagery' along directly oppositional axes, and neither of these narrative infrastructures—river or bridge—'win out' in any final sense. Instead, in *Train Dreams* their relationship is mutually responsive and entangled: on one occasion, a great bridge is successfully constructed over the Robinson Gorge; on another, the water rises, breaks structures apart, and washes them away.

Grainier had patchy memories of a week when the water broke over its banks and flooded the lower portion of Fry. A few of the frailest structures washed away and broke apart downstream. The post office was undermined and carried off, and Grainier remembered being lifted up by somebody, maybe his father, and surfacing above the heads of a large crowd of townspeople to watch the building sail away on the flood. Afterward some Canadians found the post office stranded on the lowlands one hundred miles downriver in British Columbia. (28)

Here the river unsettles and displaces a post office, an integral node in the communications network spanning the settler empire and enabling the incorporation of new territory at its frontier. That the river takes its name from the Ktunaxa Nation is doubly meaningful as well, on the one hand registering an indigenous repulsion of settler infrastructure, while on the other repeating a common colonial trope that blends indigenous people into ‘the natural world’ (Paz 279; Grandin 18). But again, there is deeper significance—and perhaps more ambiguity—to this paragraph as well. While the ‘frailest structures’ break apart as they are rushed downstream, the post office peculiarly stays intact: the Canadians do not find *bits* of post office, but the entire building ‘stranded on the lowlands’ of British Columbia. Indeed, the word ‘undermined’ emphasizes the water’s erosion not of the post office’s integral structure, but more particularly its *infrastructure*. The expanding river dislocates the building from the earth into which it was built, just as the fire levers the foundations of Grainier’s cabin up and out of the soil.

*Train Dreams* is not interested in surface-level deconstructions or repairs, but in a deeper unsettlement that cuts to the foundations—the *narrative infrastructures*—of the frontier myth. It is therefore significant, too, that the post office has made it across the colonial border, all the way through Johnson’s Moyea tributary, making a journey parallel to the route of the Spokane International. The flow of Johnson’s river, like its real-life counterpart, disregards the borders of neighbouring settler colonies: by taking a chunk of property (both the building, and the many letters and parcels it contains) with it, the river’s counteractive narrative flow unsettles not only the infrastructures and borders of the expanding American empire, but the many mythologizing frontier stories that are circulating in written, rather than oral, form.

### 3. Unsettling Race

The brief and markedly sparse dialogues scattered throughout *Train Dreams* all index this larger theme of failed communication and narrative breakdown. Those that Grainier can comprehend—that



is, those spoken in English—tend to leave him ‘[m]ixed up and afraid’ (72), unable to straighten out ‘the chronology of the past’ (23). Grainier is not bereft entirely of socialization: he attends school in his local town, Bonners Ferry, and despite a dry comment that ‘[h]e was never a scholar’, he does learn ‘to decipher writing on a page, and it helped him to get along in the world’ (29). Johnson here insinuates writing as a world-making technology that, like the railroad, enables the production and consolidation of settler narratives in imperial and frontier contexts. However, by suggesting the written sentence and plotted railroad as comparable settler colonial weapons, *Train Dreams* produces an unsettling, twofold critique: first, it reveals these narrative infrastructures to be routed through white supremacy, and built on the displacement and expulsion of non-white populations; and second, it disrupts those narrative infrastructures with orally transmitted indigenous stories, unsettling the momentum of their forward-moving colonial progress and the frontier myth they support.

Writing of settler colonial infrastructure in twenty-first-century Australia, Kregg Hetherington describes the narrative ‘tense’ of infrastructure as ‘future perfect, an anticipatory state around which different subjects gather their promises and aspirations’ (40). The progressive momentum built into infrastructure not only parallels, but narratively underpins, a larger frontier mythology and its promise of perpetual freedom, movement, and growth. Yet in the colonial context, progress for some yields expulsion—if not extermination—for others. As Hetherington remarks, if to ‘behold something as infrastructure is to suspend that thing’s present as the future’s necessary past’, then the narrative tense of infrastructure produces ‘a temporal trap for certain subjects (such as indigenous people) who are condemned to disappearance in an emerging order’ (42). In *Train Dreams*, Johnson’s project of infrastructure unsettlement comes about through its irregular, dreamlike temporalities. It is therefore especially significant that these temporalities are in turn drawn from indigenous storytelling traditions that defy the presumptuously linear chronology of settler infrastructure construction, along with the purportedly ‘progressive’ frontier mythologies it supports.

In the novella’s opening scene, Grainier and his fellow railroad workers attempt to throw ‘a Chinese labourer caught, *or in any way accused of*, stealing from the company stores of the Spokane

International Railway', off the partially constructed bridge (3, my emphasis). The Chinese labourer's implied innocence is confirmed on the following page, when one of his assaulters confirms the attack was 'just for fun' (4). Referred to repeatedly as the 'Chinaman' (today a derogatory term for its historic abuse in colonial contexts), this character is violently Othered through descriptions of his incomprehensible language: 'A rapid singsong streamed from the Chinaman voluminously' (3); he is 'incomprehensible' and 'speaking in tongues', constantly 'weeping his gibberish' (4-5). However, as adjectivally unsettling as this outwardly racist depiction might be, Johnson twists it into a deeper unsettlement of the frontier's undergirding narrative infrastructure. The railroad gang—or 'party of executioners', as they are described—try to toss the Chinese labourer into the river and to his death. However, in the struggle he grabs onto the scaffolding of the unfinished bridge, 'dangling over the gorge and making hand-over-hand out over the river on the skeleton form of the next span' (5). By dropping 'downward along the crosshatch structure', he is able to escape: soon, 'the Chinaman had vanished' (6).

Here the bridge, a feat of infrastructural engineering that symbolically affirms and physically enables white settlement, is subverted, transformed into a framework that enables the Chinese labourer's survival. Most simply, the bridge works symbolically against its original colonial purpose. More significantly, however, the Chinese labourer's escape and presumed survival haunts Grainier, who comes to harbour guilt for his participation in the violence, as well as a fear that he might be avenged. Certain that 'the Chinaman [...] had cursed them powerfully' (8), this initial event, which Doerr misreads as 'seemingly irrelevant material', comes to structure Grainier's understanding of the fire that kills Gladys and Kate, and that erases his settled property from colonized land: which is to say, Grainier narrates that disaster, in which he loses everything, as a direct consequence of his own brief act of unquestioning racism.

The novel then connects this single act of anti-Chinese racism to a more sustained and structural campaign of white supremacy. As mentioned above, the first of Grainier's 'earliest memories' is of 'a mass deportation of a hundred or more Chinese families' from his childhood town, Bonners Ferry

(26-27). It is possible to pinpoint this fictional scene to a real historic event, when in 1892 the white ‘residents of Bonners Ferry, Northern Idaho gave the fifty Chinese railroad workers living in a community outside of town two and half hours to leave’ (Yu 266). This was of course not an isolated incident, but one of many white attacks on Chinese communities throughout the period.<sup>viii</sup> In Johnson’s rewriting, the Chinese families are again Othered through linguistic difference, described as a ‘strange people [...] jabbering like birds’ (27). As unpalatable as these descriptions may be, with this retelling *Train Dreams* centres racism in a frontier mythology that otherwise habitually denies—or even celebrates—its white supremacist origins.

By thus unsettling the frontier, the novella makes space within itself for a series of alternative stories that further dislodge the progressive narrative of American imperialism. In its refusal to arrive teleologically at an explicable and ultimately settled conclusion, the novella’s tangential—and undeniably peculiar—tangents alienate the future perfect tense of settler colonial infrastructures, while also undermining the white supremacist narratives those infrastructures support. What is more, the novella’s unsettling narrative divergences are connected to local indigenous histories and amount to what might be read as an indigenous critique of America’s frontier myth.

The antagonistic relationship between imperial infrastructures such as the railroads and indigenous lives is established in an early scene. Shortly after the novella introduces its only named indigenous character, ‘a Kootenai Indian named Bob’, the cause of his death is recounted, even though it takes place a decade or so later in 1930—a chronological jump typical of *Train Dreams*’ disorienting timeline. Though set during Prohibition, in this scene colonists from Canada arrive in Idaho and persuade Bob to try ‘a jug of shandy’ (54). Bob is reduced to animalism in his subsequent binge: he laps at the beer ‘like a thirsty mutt’ and has very soon lost ‘the power of speech’ (55).

Some time after dark he wandered off and managed to get himself a mile up the tracks, where he lay down unconscious across the ties and was run over by a succession of trains. Four or five came over him, until late next afternoon the gathering multitude of crows prompted someone to investigate. By then Kootenai Bob was strewn for a quarter mile along the right-of-way. (55)

In this instance of colonial violence, the ‘ties’ that root the frontier narrative to settled land are transformed into an executioner’s block, coupling settler colonization with the ‘elimination of native societies’ (Wolfe 2). In Bob’s loss of ‘the power of speech’, too, the linguistic difference of the indigenous is reduced violently to silence—an especially resonant image when we remember that the Ktunaxa language is a language isolate (a language that does not share ancestry with any other). This redirects us back to the Chinese railroad labourer’s ‘gibberish’ and his community’s ‘jabbering’, where difference is marked by the incomprehensibility of Chinese to the novella’s white, English-speaking characters; and it also points forward, to ‘a Kootenai woman’ who appears later in the novella, and who ‘never spoke’, but who instead ‘muttered to herself continually, sighed and grunted, even whistled very softly and tunelessly’ (95-96).

*Train Dreams*’s narrative is therefore patched together with silences that, though at no point allowing the indigenous a site for politically recognizable speech, nevertheless connect to one another in ‘transit’; they ‘exist relationally’, to use Jodi Byrd’s terms, combining to reveal ‘the underlying structures of settler colonialism that made the United States possible as oppressor in the first place’ (xvii). So while Johnson’s narrative silencing could be read as what indigenous scholar Gerald Vizenor has called the ‘absence, literary tragedy, nihility, and victimry’ of representations of indigenous peoples in settler discourse, *Train Dreams* also—and perhaps even at the same time—models Vizenor’s notion of ‘narrative resistance’, which turns on an unsettling ‘aesthetics of survivance’ (2).

Before proceeding with this argument, I want briefly to emphasize that I make no claim for *Train Dreams* as a decolonial or decolonized text, and I am aware too of the risks of cultural appropriation. However, I would point out that while *Train Dreams*’ disruption of the frontier story occurs through its inclusion of an indigenous survivance narrative, the reviews cited at the beginning of this article suggest that the novella’s unsettling affect does not require the recognition of that narrative *as such* from settler readers. Johnson’s is not an assimilationist project that seeks to slot indigenous stories neatly into a stable colonial dispensation. Rather, settler colonialism is

fundamentally unnerved and destabilized, or *unsettled*, rendered continually and irrevocably fragile through indigenous presence. The power of this indigenous unsettlement derives in part from the fact that its source remains elusive and ‘tricky’ (to use another of Vizenor’s terms), partially included within, yet also always slipping beyond, the settler gaze of Grainier and perhaps even Johnson himself.

Kootenai Bob is ‘a steady man who had alway refused liquor and worked frequently at jobs in town, just as Grainier did, and they’d know each other for many years’ (*TD* 52). The two characters are similar in disposition, and their first names—Robert and Bob—are versions of the same. In their only dramatized conversation in the novella, Grainier asks Bob about the wolf-pups recently birthed by the stray red dog. Though at first skeptical that a wolf would impregnate a dog, Bob eventually concedes that it could be possible. ‘Might be you’ve got yourself some dog-of-wolf’, he says: ‘Might be you’ve started your own pack, Robert’ (53). The text conflates this transgression of species borders with national ones almost immediately: Grainier hears howling ‘packs in the distance, some as far away as the Selkirks on the British Columbia side’—a geography that, like the Ktunaxa Nation, has been arbitrarily cut in two by a colonial treaty line. It is at this moment that Grainier himself begins to blur the racial and developmental narratives contained by the colonial categories of ‘civilized’ and ‘savage’. Worried that one of the young wolf-pups is ‘not growing in the direction of [its] own nature, which is to howl when the others do’, Grainier takes it upon himself to demonstrate the action:

He stood up straight himself and howled long and sorrowfully over the gorge, and over the low quiet river he could hardly see across this close to nightfall... Nothing from the pup. But often, thereafter, when Grainier heard the wolves at dusk, he laid his head back and howled for all he was worth, because it did him good. [...] after an evening’s programme with his choir of British Columbian wolves he felt warm and buoyant. (53)

Grainier first invokes the hierarchal system of colonial categorization (‘your own nature’) that organizes the frontier and its inhabitants not only spatially, but also temporally, into discrete developmental trajectories. However, he then himself, and in the same breath, transgresses these categorizations. Linear movement hovers over this scene: the wolf-pup grows in a natural ‘direction’; Grainier stands up ‘straight’. But the howl, a non-linguistic sound that echoes orally throughout the

novel to establish relations with both Chinese and indigenous characters, unsettles the frontier's narrative teleologies. That the howl echoes over the gorge, across which Grainier once built a railroad, unsettles the novella's earlier infrastructural ambitions, replacing them with the 'quiet river' that runs right through northern Idaho and the Moyie tributary, and over the border into British Columbia.

Kootenai Bob is bemused when Grainier decides to tell him of 'this development': 'There it is for you, then', he says. 'That's what happens, that's what they say: There's not a wolf alive that can't tame a man' (53). This subtle inversion of the colonial categories of civilization and savagery is embedded in a larger Ktunaxa cosmology that understands animals as 'guiding spirits of the people'. In the Ktunaxa Creation Story, a huge sea monster known as Yawu?nik is chased by the Chief animal, Nałmuqçin, all the way down the Kootenai River, which flows through the geography in which *Train Dreams* is set. When Yawu?nik is finally caught, his body is torn to pieces by Nałmuqçin, who then wipes his bloody hands on the grass and says: 'This will be the red people, they will remain here forever' ('Creation Story'). This story affirms both the indigeneity and survivance of the Ktunaxa Nation.

But there is an additional survivance narrative coded into *Train Dreams* via its preoccupation with wolves who, much like the river, disregard the colonial treaty line. Ktunaxa people talk of their survival of the residential school system—for which the Canadian government formally apologized in 2008—and other methods of 'cultural genocide' through a re-patterning of their Creation Story (Coulthard 124-125). This 'time of struggle, of surviving attempts at assimilation and annihilation, [is described] as a period when the Ktunaxa patterned themselves after the wolf and, in echoes of the creation story, sing its songs and say its prayers as a means of calling that power to themselves' (Gahr 28-29). The Ktunaxa also look 'to the wolf for guidance' more generally, following an animal they understand to be 'a very powerful warrior' that will offer them 'spiritual strength in dark times'—so long, that is, as humans fulfil their 'obligation to the earth, to the animals, and to all the living beings that have prepared the way for us' (Gahr 30).

This survivance story is woven into *Train Dreams* not as ‘inscribed absence’, but as a ‘sense of presence’ (Vizenor 3), one that unsettles the imperial confidence of America’s frontier mythology by rewriting the narrative infrastructures of property and railroad that underpin it. Shortly before *Train Dreams*’ climactic episode, when Grainier’s daughter, Kate, returns to him as a ‘wolf-girl’, Johnson offers some rare precision amidst the novella’s otherwise anti-chronological, dreamlike blend of events. Importantly, Kate returns ‘in the two or three days after Kootenai Bob has been killed under a train’, an act of colonial violence that, only now do we learn, slows the train quite literally in—or on—its tracks. Members of the Ktunaxa tribe insist on gathering Bob’s remains from the railroad so that they might give him a proper burial:

On these three or four crisp autumn evenings, the Great Northern train blew a series of long notes, sounding off from the Meadow Creek crossing until it was well north, proceeding slowly through the area on orders from the management, who wanted to give the Kootenai tribe a chance to collect what they could of their brother without further disarrangement. (98)

While the progress of the train is stunted in this scene, the narrative picks up a different, unsettling chronology, one that hastens the arrival of Grainier’s daughter-turned-human-wolf. The train’s ‘whistle got the coyotes started and then the wolves’; the animals then start howling ‘without let up all night’, their barrage of utterances ‘disarranging’ the train’s linear progress; and then suddenly wolves flood into Grainier’s ‘clearing and around it, many forms and shadows, voices screaming’, again remaining linguistically—and now also visually—beyond recognition (99). Johnson here rewrites a scene from what is perhaps one of the most well-known and enduring literary accounts of the American frontier: in *Little House on the Prairie*, Laura Ingalls Wilder includes a story called ‘The Wolf-Pack’ in which the protagonist, Laura, and her father, Pa, find themselves in their frontier cabin surrounded by a pack of howling wolves (Wilder 80-98). However, while Laura and her Pa—significantly, father and daughter—stay secure in their house with ‘windows’ and ‘doorways’ tightly fastened, Johnson’s Grainier stands ‘in his doorway’ in this scene, teetering on the threshold between the domestic sphere of his cabin and the wilderness outside, just as the novella teeters formally between short story and novel.

Grainier's daughter, Kate, utterly dissolves this final frontier when she appears in the clearing around the cabin, now part-wolf and part-human (she 'growled', 'barked', 'snapped'), and injured and in need of assistance. Grainier brings Kate—whom he decides to call 'Kate-no-longer'—into his cabin and lies her on the 'pallet' that he is using as a bed. She passes out and he tends to her wounds, before himself falling asleep. The trains, which have been roaring up the valley throughout the book, on this night 'do not wake him, but only entered his dream' (102). He is instead eventually awoken by 'a much smaller sound': his daughter, the 'wolf-girl', leaving the cabin through the window—yet another threshold—from which Grainier then watches as she makes her way back towards the river.

In this scene, the novella's various tangents consolidate into something meaningful, refracting the 'many forms and shadows' of indigenous stories into an estranged plot that unsettles conventional notions of narrative progress, the novel's domestic boundaries, and the archetypes of the frontier story they each support. The straight, linear track of colonialism's developmental teleology, which is concretized into the infrastructure of the railroad and the foundation pins of Grainier's cabin, is dislodged and partially undone: there is no 'will have been' to Johnson's novella, no future perfect tense—only a sense of deep unsettlement.<sup>ix</sup>

### **Conclusion: New Narrative Infrastructures?**

In Greg Grandin's account, Donald Trump's 2016 election campaign promise of a wall that would run along the full 3000 kms of the US's southern border with Mexico, marked 'the end of the myth', the demise of the frontier's spatial mythology—perhaps even the end of the American Dream itself. While America was once built, both culturally and economically, on the transcontinental railroads that opened up the West to settlement, for Grandin this myth of 'perennial rebirth' has solidified into Trump's new vision of a hard border wall, epitomizing a larger cultural shift. If the wall remains mostly an imagined rather than actually built infrastructure, it still generates new narrative material, the perennial expansion of the transcontinental railroad swapped out for the solid stasis of the wall.



For Grandin, the new stories enabled by this infrastructural shift can be read out of both broad cultural dispositions (the mainstreaming of racist epithets, for example) and quite specific policy changes, from Trump's (often broken) promises of economic nationalism, his commitment to political isolationism, and an end to America's century-long history of global military interventionism (Grandin 14-15).

I want to conclude by suggesting that the geography of *Train Dreams* goes some way to unsettling this new narrative and infrastructural arrangement as well—in part by questioning its newness. For example, throughout the novella the wolves both howl and move across the treaty line that divided up Ktunaxa territory in the nineteenth century, but that in the twenty-first also marks the hardening edge of the newly configured American—though still settler colonial—nation. This borderline is the focus of the novella's penultimate scene in which, shortly before Grainier's death, Johnson's protagonist is caught by a sudden and uncharacteristic wave of sexual desire. Though he is celibate for the majority of the novel, this peculiar flush of arousal is best described as Grainier's being 'in heat'; Grainier himself follows his daughter and crosses 'the line' between human and non-human, becoming wolf-like in the novella's final three pages. Trying to walk off this heat, Grainier makes his way to the top of a mountain from which he is able to see right across the colonial border, and it is only in this climactic scene that the Rocky Mountain range—so central to the novella's geography—is eventually referenced by name:

At sunset, all progress stopped. He was standing on a cliff. He'd found a back way into a kind of arena enclosing a body of water called Spruce Lake, and now looked down on it hundreds of feet below him, its flat surface as still and black as obsidian, engulfed in the shadow of surrounding cliffs, ringed with a double ring of evergreens and reflected evergreens. Beyond, he saw the Canadian Rockies still sunlit, snow-peaked, a hundred miles away, as if the earth were in the midst of its creation, the mountains enough for everybody to get his own. The curse had left him, and the contagion of his lust had drifted off and settled into one of those distant valleys. (112)

While borders are dissolved in this passage, and narrative progress too is 'stopped', its narrative politics push in two contrasting directions. On the one hand, the sky reflected in the mountains and the mountains in the lake, and the trees in a blackness metaphorically described as the volcanic

‘obsidian’ of the earth’s crust, all repel systems of colonial categorization. This emphasis on Grainier’s optic dissolution of the colonial borderline, which indexes the continuing settler status both of Canada and the US in the present of Johnson’s writing, thus pushes against the new narrative infrastructures of border walls and national enclosure. On the other hand, however, Grainier reproduces an imperial, propertied vision of colonial space (‘mountains enough for everybody to get his own’). The expansive frontier still operates here as a valve for social pressures, the ‘curse’—which, we remember, begins with Grainier’s racially motivated attack on a Chinese labourer—finally absorbed and resolved by the landscape’s expanse. Though a potentially radical moment of border erasure, the passage still appears, at least in this first reading, to draw its critique of hardened borders from the persistent myth of the frontier.

However, there is a dangerous claustrophobia in this reading, one that Grandin too risks in his analysis. If the US is confined either to its settler imperial past or to its xenophobic and bordered future, then the only alternative to the narrative infrastructure of Trump’s wall is a return to the original conduit of the frontier, the transcontinental railroad—which, as *Train Dreams* itself dramatizes, has genocidal consequences. It is exactly this analytic slip, in which a commitment to liberal values and multicultural politics inadvertently erases America’s settler colonial origins and continued settler colonial status, that Byrd outlines in her indigenous critique of colonialism. As she writes, this liberal paradigm, in its impulsively counteractive rejection of Trump’s hardened borders, risks coercing ‘struggles for social justice for queers, racial minorities, and immigrants into complicity with settler colonialism’ (xvii).

I do not suggest that *Train Dreams* somehow dramatizes the full complexities of Byrd’s indigenous critique—it does not. But as I have argued throughout this article, it does unsettle the frontier myth on which the contemporary settler state is built. This unsettling, I have argued, occurs most powerfully through Johnson’s elusive incorporation of indigenous stories into his rewriting of the frontier, and similar processes are at work in this concluding paragraph. When we read these into the text, *Train Dreams* begins to plot a route through the enclosing pressures of the transcontinental

railway and the US-Mexico border wall, the two narrative infrastructures that currently structure and delimit political debate.

Johnson's brief reference to Grainier's vision of the 'earth in the midst of its creation' reintroduces the Ktunaxa cosmologies that, as I have shown, elsewhere in the novella unsettle the imperial ambitions of the frontier's narrative infrastructure. In the Ktunaxa Creation Story, after Nałmuqçin has caught Yawu?nik and torn him apart, and created the Ktunaxa people from Yawu?nik's blood, he rises to his feet in excitement. Standing upright too quickly, he knocks himself dead on 'the ceiling of the sky' and falls back to the ground:

His feet went northward and is today know as Ya·tiki, in the Yellowhead Pass vicinity. His head is near yellowstone Park in the State of Montana. His body forms the Rocky Mountains. [sic] ('Creation Story')

According to this cosmology, when Grainier looks out across the mountains and forests in this concluding moment of visual clarity, his gaze falls on the creator of Ktunaxa people: the mountain range becomes the great Nałmuqçin, a sentient terrain that resists its segmentation into propertied acres and wills the unsettlement of its continued colonization—a colonization operating through the perpendicularly aligned infrastructures of border and railroad. While Johnson's is still a story of settler colonialism set in this infrastructural crosshairs, there remains in this scene a 'sense of native presence', to borrow Vizenor's words, a narrative of 'survivance, and continental liberty [that is] dynamic, and elusive, as it always has been in native oral stories and literature' (5).

Grandin's mistake, perhaps, is to suggest the shift from transcontinental railroad to border wall, and from frontier to hardened border, as narrative progression in American mythology, the latter somehow begetting the former, yet still separate from it. By contrast, the dreamlike narrative of *Train Dreams*, which cycles and blends the frontier myth rather than straightening it out into linear sequence, helps us to see that the two are in fact connected, underpinned by the same settler colonial logics of white supremacy, spatial re-territorialization, and the elimination of surplus populations (Lloyd & Wolfe 110). It is thus by unsettling narrative infrastructures on the frontier, and the larger stories of property, empire, and race they sustain, that Johnson's short, dreamlike novella is

profoundly political: by speaking to pressing questions of climate catastrophe and indigenous repatriation, and developing newly invigorated narrative infrastructures that facilitate rather than close down avenues to a properly decolonizing anti-colonialism, *Train Dreams* has much to offer us in the turbulent political atmospheres of the twenty-first-century.

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<sup>i</sup> The original printing of Johnson's story can be found in Issue 162 of the *Paris Review* (Summer 2002). Throughout this essay I work from the 2013 paperback reissue of the standalone text.

<sup>ii</sup> *Train Dreams* is unsettling, but I do not argue that it is wholly *unsettled*. The settler colonial state remains intact, both within its novelistic story world and without, and its politics are not unambiguous. To claim it as a 'decolonized' or 'decolonial' text would therefore be to erase the fully radical implications of such terms. For an extended discussion of those, see Tuck & Wang.

<sup>iii</sup> For just a few accounts of the imaginative power of infrastructure in different imperial and settler colonial contexts see Headrick, Edgerton, Murray, and Davies.

<sup>iv</sup> When I describe the US as an 'empire', as I do in the title of this article, I do not only refer to those colonized territories 'external' to the borders the existing nation-state, i.e. the US empire in Latin America or the Pacific, but also to its imperialistic, settler colonial seizure of indigenous lands. As indigenous scholar Jodi Byrd points out, any discussion that splits American imperial possessions into 'internal' and 'external' territories inadvertently reinforces the sovereign integrity of the US as a nation-state, rather than a settler colonial one (xviii-xix).

<sup>v</sup> For a comprehensive survey of the origins of America's frontier story, as well as its enduring appeal and reification in twentieth- and twenty-first-century popular culture, see Slotkin's trilogy on the subject, and also Bold.

<sup>vi</sup> The first was South Australia.

<sup>vii</sup> In this resistance to the time and space of the nation, *Train Dreams* anticipates Wai Chee Dimock's call to read American Literature through 'deep time', 'a set of longitudinal frames, at once projective and recessionary, with input going both ways, and binding continents and millennia into many loops of relations, a densely interactive fabric' (3-4).

<sup>viii</sup> Most famous in this regard is the slightly earlier Rock Springs Massacre of 1885, when a group of white miners murdered almost thirty Chinese immigrants in the state of Wyoming. For an account that puts the massacre, along with wider racial tensions, at the centre of its analysis of labour relations in the Rockies, see Wolff.

<sup>ix</sup> Though I do not want to foreground this perspective here, I think it is possible to read the novella as a story in which Grainier is himself Ktunaxa. His origins are unidentified, but we know he arrives on a train from the treaty borderlands somewhere in the middle of Ktunaxa territory. His physical features are never described, and he shares the same first name as the only named Ktunaxa character in the novella. His amnesia around his early years might even be a coded allegory of the genocide of indigenous cultures perpetrated through colonial settlement.