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**Go West, Young Woman: Transforming Southern Womanhood through the Myth of the American West in Doris Betts's *Heading West* and *The Sharp Teeth of Love***

In 1920, Lucian Lamar Knight—best known for editing the *Atlantic Constitution*—waxed nostalgic about Southern womanhood:

It took the civilization of an Old South to produce her ["the Confederate woman"]—a civilization whose exquisite but fallen fabric now belongs to the Dust of dreams. But we have not lost the blood royal of the ancient line; and in the veins of an infant Southland still ripples the heroic strain. The Confederate woman, in her silent influence, in her eternal vigil, still abides. Her gentle spirit is the priceless heritage of her daughters. (qtd. in Jones 4)

Though others may resist such an antiquated characterization, Knight's century-old sentiments still hold a great deal of truth for women of the American South. Tradition binds the two sides, and tradition has a way of defying logic. One narrative depiction of the resulting tension is the work of Doris Betts (1932–2012). This essay will explore two of Betts's later novels, *Heading West* (1981) and *The Sharp Teeth of Love* (1997), in terms of the sometimes combustive consequences and implications of Southern womanhood.

Betts's novels depict how upholding the legacy of the Southern belle requires women to deny autonomy in favor of an impossible ideal. Unfortunately, Betts suggests, there is little hope for women to attain individualized identity within the cultural and geographic confines of the South. To remedy this predicament, Betts depicts women who consequently abandon the region in order to achieve self-actualization by traveling west, but the question quickly follows: "Why the West?" If Betts's heroines require nothing more than a blank slate, there are equally symbolic landscapes in the mountains of Appalachia or the plains of the Midwest. The answer lies in the West's potential for absolute freedom and transformation. At the same time, the inherent masculinity of the mythic West poses a problem for Betts because she does not believe achieving selfhood means completely abandoning femininity. To circumvent this issue, she creates in *Heading West* and *The Sharp Teeth of Love* feminized, transformative narratives.

### Betts and the History of the South/West Dynamic

Betts's own history is inextricably linked with the American South. Born in 1932 in Iredell County, North Carolina, Betts spent most of her life in her home state. A journalist-turned-teacher, Betts began teaching literature at the University of North Carolina in 1966 and continued to do so for the next thirty-three years. Although she loved the classroom, her passion was always writing. Over the course of her career, Betts's down-home charm (she once admitted that she "wouldn't do household tasks even if the President were coming to dinner") and her Southern sensibility enchanted readers across the South (qtd. in Evans 24). Her work has also received its fair share of critical acclaim. *Beasts of the Southern Wild and Other Stories* (1973), one of her short story collections, was a National Book Award finalist. Another short story, "The Ugliest Pilgrim," was turned into a short film that won an Academy Award in 1981 and was later adapted into an off-Broadway play that garnered the 1998 New York Drama Critic's Circle award (Vitello). Her novels have also received high praise. *Souls Raised from the Dead* (1994), for instance, won the Southern Book Award and was named one of the best books of 1994 by *The New York Times* (Vitello).<sup>1</sup> And, of particular interest here, both *Heading West* and *The Sharp Teeth of Love* received warm critical receptions and contributed to her appointment as the Chancellor of the Southern Writers Fellowship in 1997 (U of North Carolina).

The American South thematically unites Betts's novels and short stories. Often compared to Flannery O'Connor's work, Betts's writing also focuses on issues of the South and the human condition, but she treats them in a style all her own. While her early work kept its roots close to home, Betts was awed during a 1971 visit to the Grand Canyon by the West's sublimity (Evans 78). As a result, two of Betts's last three novels investigate the intersection of regional mythologies, and her writing over the past three decades has contributed to the exploration of Southern identity in a national context.

Both *Heading West* and *The Sharp Teeth of Love* draw on Betts's own experiences with the western frontier, and both find traction in the reconstructive potential of the western myth, which is inextricably linked to both national identity and physical geography. In his *American West: The Invention of a Myth*, historian David Hamilton Murdoch explains how this relationship means that America forms its national identity from western concepts, not the other way around:

The *frontier experience* permanently shaped the American character: hardy, optimistic, egalitarian, impatient of intrusive authority. Above all, it defined America's core values: individualism, self-reliance, democratic integrity. For the future, the West had created a transformational process. In retrospect, the West was inspiring, dramatic, romantic—and wild. (3, emphasis added)

The values of the frontier, in other words, have become national values, and Murdoch discusses how individualism undergirded this effect in the way frontiersmen were “forced to rely upon themselves. To be sure, the pressures of frontier life imposed the need for co-operation within the community, but to a degree of the individual’s choosing and within a milieu of equality” (2–3). With no central national identity for pioneers to enforce, the region became a place full of potential for self-actualization and personal reinvention.

In positioning the frontier in American history, the effect of Homestead Act of 1862 cannot be underestimated and, so, demands a short overview. The law stated that any man who had never taken arms against the United States government could apply for 160 acres of free land in the new territories, only stipulating that the owner improve on the land for five years (Smith 165–73). This new law allowed anyone, even a freed slave, the chance to cast off his past and become a landowner. For many, land ownership was a fully realized identity in its own right and acquisition transferred a new title and new autonomy. Although the vastness and emptiness of the region allowed for a measure of personal reinvention, the law recast the West as a place of transformation. Homesteaders were encouraged to reshape themselves and the land, and this opportunity was hard for many ambitious Americans to refuse (Murdoch 6). Although available land would be largely exhausted by 1890, the ideas of potential and change that emerged from the land-run would persist in the region’s mythology.

Culturally, the South has always provided a sharp contrast to the West. Historian W. Fitzhugh Brundage’s idea that the South’s cultural distinctiveness is stronger than others is debatable, but what is clearly true is that the enduring history of the South creates a uniquely cohesive identity. Southerners, he says, have “long” and “tenacious” memories, and their selfhoods are established in relationship to the South’s deep ties to its history and historical memory (2). Literary critic Robert Brinkmeyer agrees, saying that both Southerners and their literature “never want to stray too far” from their past (3). This intense traditionalism was initially a reaction to America’s constant evolution after the Revolutionary War. The South clung ever more tenaciously to its agrarian past as the country marched toward the Civil War and, by extension, stood against burgeoning western ideals.

As a result of the tensions that may be traced to the Homestead Act, the South was locked out of the frontier ideal, so, as Allen Tate observes, the South’s Europeanism only deepened its separation: “The War between the States was the second and decisive struggle of the western spirit against the European—the spirit of restless aggression against a stable spirit of ordered economy—and the West won” (301). Although the American West’s ideology prevailed over the South on a national level, the regions remain deeply dichotomous, and the tensions between the cavalier and Yankee, agriculturalist and industrialist, and conservative and liberal endure.

### A Southern Exodus in *Heading West* and *The Sharp Teeth of Love*

Betts's narratives show how regional identities still shape personal identities, particularly in regard to the traditional construct of Southern femininity. This tradition, while transcending time, has become only more complex. In fact, the social stipulations placed on the Southern woman are often paradoxical: she should be a moral pillar and a wilting flower, domestic but resourceful, able but dependent. Anne Goodwyn Jones discusses this contradictory identity, explaining, "When the image [of the Southern woman] exhorts both intelligence and submission, both bravery and fragility, conflict seems inevitable" (xii). *Heading West's* Southern heroine, Nancy Finch, finds herself facing this inevitability. Nancy lives a sedate – but dissatisfied – life. A middle-aged librarian tasked with an overbearing mother, disabled brother, and self-absorbed sister, she lives in a stifling cocoon. Born and raised in Greenway, North Carolina, Nancy feels trapped in her average life, so, when she ends up the victim of a kidnapping, Nancy hesitates to free herself. The farther west her kidnapper, Dwight Anderson, takes her, though, the more Nancy fantasizes about reclaiming her life. In what becomes an archetypal journey of self-discovery, Nancy finds herself in the Grand Canyon searching for freedom from both Dwight and her old, Southern identity.

*The Sharp Teeth of Love's* Luna Stone also finds herself travelling from the South into the West. Like Nancy, she moves against her will; her fiancée, Steven Grier, takes a job in California and decides to relocate with Luna to the West Coast. Despite the chance to leave her troubled past in Chapel Hill behind, Luna is deeply unhappy about the move, and the farther west the pair travel, the more disgruntled Luna becomes. Her unhappiness boils over in Nevada, where she leaves Steven and seeks solace in the openness of the Nevada desert. There, she meets two other broken individuals: the hard-of-hearing Paul Cowan and a sexually abused child named Sam. When two mysterious men – presumably employed by Sam's former pimp – kidnap Sam, Luna and Paul risk everything to save the boy. Their journey takes them across the Nevada wilderness, where Luna must decide whether she will embrace her autonomy or return to the Southern heritage she left behind.

Clearly, both *Heading West* and *The Sharp Teeth of Love* deal with the exodus and self-actualization of the heroines. Although both novels similarly explore the needed journeys toward selfhood, Nancy and Luna have different levels of cognizance concerning their entrenchment in Southern systems, and they ultimately offer different perspectives on the search for identity and the necessity of community. Whereas *Heading West* capitalizes on the strict and obvious contrast between the regions, *The Sharp Teeth of Love* recognizes the dangers of complete individuation and explores the possibility of small, functional communities that still allow for autonomy in the struggle of Southern women for selfhood.

### Cultural Ambivalence and Adaptation

Through her depictions of both Nancy and Luna, Betts maintains that the Southern belle is an impossible—and dangerous—ideal. For instance, within the first moments of Nancy's abduction in *Heading West*, the narrator explains Nancy's relationship to her home and family, saying, "Nothing of Nancy's life except a few tepid love affairs had taken place unseen by her family and she was almost glad to think she might die, at least, at a distance" (19). As a member of Southern society, Nancy tries to adhere to its normative standards. She remains loyal to her family while trying to fit into the Southern community, but, ultimately, Nancy's need for independence and "distance" leaves her unable to fit the mold. Her inability—which Betts portrays as more of an *impossibility*—causes Nancy's discontent. Jones's discussion of the Southern woman's sacrifice is helpful in understanding Nancy's dissatisfaction, for, according to Jones, a Southern woman "serves others—God, husband, family, society—showing in her submissiveness the perfection of pure sacrifice" (9). Unfortunately, Nancy's continued sacrifice leaves her feeling jaded and "[eaten] alive" (19). It makes her restless, and her kidnapping gives her the opportunity to find the separation she so craves. Her desperation stresses the way the South forces community on its residents, but it also demonstrates the dangers inherent in patriarchal systems of oppression. Coupled with their duty to sacrifice themselves to benefit others, Betts's portrayal of death as one of the only autonomous acts for a Southern woman dramatizes (rather morbidly) that the cessation of life is at least one moment wherein one can truly *live*, as it were, apart from community.

Nancy's relationship to Southern community further illuminates the complications of the postbellum belle identity. When she daydreams, Nancy imagines herself back home:

her astral corpus walked along Crosby Avenue down the slope where sweetgums had cracked the sidewalk and sent up shoots on the far side. She set an ectoplasmic foot on initials some long dead child had fingered there in wet cement as she passed the car of the newcomer who, in 1960, had circulated a petition to rename the old street for a Hollywood singer; Mama had never resigned herself to saying Crosby instead of Boykin. (82)

This dream demonstrates her connection with her community. Like a good Southern girl, Nancy knows the history of place and family. Betts's imagery of Nancy's astral corpus is overtly symbolic of her intrinsic connection with the South. However, her struggle to be a successful Southern belle has also left Nancy disillusioned. Brinkmeyer and Debra Rae Cohen argue Nancy's personal discontent can be contextualized in a larger fabric of social constraint: "These [Southern] female characters tend to flee not only specific and individualized frustrations but the structural limitations

placed on them by traditional southern constructions of femininity" (258). Nancy's dissatisfaction with her socially mandated identity prompts her to avoid situations where she can contact the police after her kidnapping, and, when she does find herself near a telephone, she often sabotages her own rescue (72, 85). It would be easy to discount Nancy's actions as a kind of Stockholm Syndrome, but Betts counteracts this notion through her character's awareness of her actions. Nancy knows what she does is irrational: "It was insane to postpone calling for help. Insane" (85). Still, she does postpone, and, in doing so, uses her own kidnapping as her ticket away from the oppressive identity foisted on her by the South.

Despite her actions, Nancy does suffer from some ambivalence about her decision to stay with Dwight, but she becomes resolved as the narrative progresses. Although her Southern sensibilities encourage her to "call for help," return to home, and go through the motions of domesticity, her fledgling selfhood revolts at the idea of returning to servitude and total sacrifice (85). Nancy does not know how to be both free and domestic: she *cannot be both*, especially in the South. Despite her attempts to be a belle, Nancy cannot completely suppress her own needs and is torn between duty and autonomy. Returning to the South would require Nancy to embrace Southern womanhood once again, and Betts's novel shows that no amount of personal effort can reconcile the tension inherent in that identity.

Betts's treatment of Luna Stone in *The Sharp Teeth of Love* is notably different from that of Nancy Finch. Whereas Nancy recognizes the oppressive structures of Southern womanhood, Luna does not. Unlike Nancy, Luna is not born in the South; instead, she adopts the region as her home. She explains to her fiancée, Steven Grier, that her time in North Carolina "is the longest I've ever lived in one place" and that "it was my first real home" (4, 12). And, while Nancy finds herself chafing under a system into which she was born, Luna legitimately attempts to adopt Southern ideology; Luna wants to be a Southern belle. Although Betts depicts Nancy and Luna as oppressed by regional definitions of femininity, Luna is *complicit* in this system. Even so, Luna, too, is ultimately unable to fulfill the requirements of Southern womanhood.

After a complete psychological breakdown—the result of the stress from her parents' divorce and her anorexia—Luna begins to adopt ideals of Southern womanhood. In a life that feels listless and disconnected, Southern femininity offers Luna both structure and place. Her attempts at assimilation begin during her institutionalization. She remembers that first "the doctors cured me of flirting," the first step to ensuring her new virtue (30). Her doctors eventually—and symbolically—reconstruct a broken Luna not as she was before, but as Southern belle. Her newly assigned identity pushes her into a more "appropriate" field—art—and Luna finds she has "a knack for reproduction" (15). After her stay in the hospital, Luna "now welcomed the boundaries that being a copyist imposed on her hand

and eye" (16). Betts uses this statement as a parallel to Luna's mimicry of Southern womanhood. She is not Southern by birth, but she copies the culture's ideal of femininity in order to fit in. After her hospitalization, Luna does everything possible to keep her psychological meltdown private; after being marginalized once, she desperately seeks assimilation.<sup>2</sup> Luna's post-psychotic identity is thus no identity at all. Rather, desperately fearing disconnection, Luna assumes the trappings of Southern identity by forcibly inserting herself into a community. As she does in *Heading West*, Betts in this way shatters the surfaces of the Southern belle identity.

### The Mythic Landscape of the West

Both *The Sharp Teeth of Love* and *Heading West* depict a world in which women cannot find legitimate autonomy while remaining in the South. Only the mythology of the West presents this opportunity, which is clear as soon as Betts's heroines enter the frontier. For Nancy, this appeal begins as she crosses the Mississippi River from Tennessee into Arkansas. As she, her fellow abductee Jolley, and Dwight approach the river, they find themselves at a traffic stop designed to *find* Nancy. Nancy stays silent, despite being stopped for a considerable amount of time--a subconscious act that preserves her "freedom." As they drive away, Nancy remarks, "'I meant to tell them. . . . It happened so fast.' The lost moment and now the river boundary seemed to mark a dividing point between this part of her life and the next" (72). The Mississippi has long been a dividing mark between the eastern and western halves of the United States, and, when she crosses it, Nancy immediately feels the pull of her future and the distancing of her past. She begins looking west, which is a much different action than just heading west: "She stared ahead through the misty rain trying to see the country's second, western half" (72). Nancy's gaze is critical in this passage, signaling the beginning of an ideological shift. Although she will continue to reflect on the South throughout the rest of the novel, this one moment shows her willingness to embrace the promise of the West.

Taken from mythic perspective, Nancy's gaze invokes the river Styx. In Betts's westernized retelling, Dwight plays the role of Charon, the boatman, who is conducting Nancy to a new life rather than the afterlife. As in the Greek myth, everything is different on the far side of the river. Nancy notices that "though the drizzle seemed to disappear below the bridge without reaching the river, the loaded logs gleamed dark. The car passed into West Memphis and traffic thinned out" (72). The landscape transforms into something dark, foreign, and unknown. It is also spacious, and Nancy almost instantly finds herself in emptiness as "traffic thinned out." Like a kind of psychological Etch-a-Sketch, her kidnapping shakes the stability of Nancy's identity and leaves her empty, a ready slate for a new and unpredictable personal narrative.



Like Nancy, Luna's first encounters with the western landscape signal her impending transformation. When Luna first leaves Chapel Hill, she is "homesick" for the place she left behind (25). No amount of reassurance from Steven can convince her California will make her as happy as North Carolina. However, the moment Luna sets eyes on the West outside of La Junta, Colorado, she forgets Chapel Hill. She immediately thinks of famous artists and remembers Moran's complaint about painting western landscapes:

"It's hopeless. Too big. Just hopeless." She remembered the misty calendar scenes of Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Moran's attempts to make oil and canvas reproduce light and water in Yellowstone. "What good would it do an astronomer to have a telescope that showed all the stars at once? The sky already does that." (28)

Luna, desperate for confinement within a community, initially finds the western landscape completely overwhelming. Despite this problem, she cannot keep it from acting on her, and the vista makes Luna "physically starved" for something to read (28). Her hunger symbolizes a subconscious desire for Luna to fill the void of her selfhood with something legitimate and meaningful. Furthermore, Luna's anorexia and her body must be closely considered here. According to Patricia Yaeger in her *Haunted Bodies: Gender in Southern Texts*, the ideal Southern woman is physically petite because a controlled body promotes Southern hierarchy and ideas of normative womanhood. Before entering the West, Luna desperately tries to miniaturize herself to fit in.<sup>3</sup> When her life derails, Luna controls the only thing she can—her body. She tells herself, "I am a body, I don't just have a body. I am a soul, I don't just have a soul," even though her "skin surfaces now seemed both translucent and penetrable" (17). Luna's anorexia is a direct result of her need to conform to normative Southern femininity, and her physical hunger serves the same purpose as Nancy's gaze. Luna's appetite represents her break with Southern culture, and it works against the idea of a petite, controlled body. Eating is Luna's first true act of resistance, and it happens only through relocation into the West.

Entering the frontier initiates Luna's transformation. Her habits change almost instantaneously, and she finds that the "next morning . . . she woke early, perhaps because this western sunlight seemed to break through the glass and strike hard against her eyelids. Steven must be deeply asleep, since his mouth was closed" (35). Steven, secure in a strong, patriarchal identity, is unaffected. In contrast, Luna feels the West pulling her toward self-actualization. This scene marks a shift for Luna within *The Sharp Teeth of Love*. She, like Nancy, becomes discontented and leaves Steven for the Nevada desert. For both Nancy and Luna, their awe of the western landscape makes them susceptible to its transformative influence, and their interaction with the environment solidifies their identity formation. Betts uses the pull of the West to relocate her heroines to the only place where

they can discover themselves, though mere presence is not enough. Both Luna and Nancy must travel through the harsh western environment before they can emerge with in fully realized selfhood.

### Heading West in *Heading West*

Thematic analysis of Nancy's journey in *Heading West* sheds light on the ways in which Betts figures the frontier as essential to Nancy's quest for autonomy. Although she has always had a measure of self-awareness, Nancy's life in the South prevents her from acting on it because it challenges definitions of Southern womanhood. It is important that Nancy dreamed of escaping this oppression long before Dwight kidnaps her, which points to her longstanding dissatisfaction with Southern femininity. This condition is apparent in the opening pages of *Heading West*, where Nancy imagines herself escaping the confines of her family to join a gang of western outlaws for a life of crime (8). Before even learning Nancy's name, we know that she thirsts for freedom. Nancy understands that there is something about her that refuses the confines of Southern culture, but she cannot mount any sort of effective resistance while still geographically and emotionally ensconced in the region.

Initially, Nancy's decision to use her own kidnapping as a vehicle for outward movement is a difficult one. As Nancy, Dwight, and Jolley move across Tennessee, Nancy's desire for freedom wars with her duty toward her family. It is only when she calls home and finds that her family is getting along just fine without her that Nancy embraces her need for freedom. The news "set her mind afire with anger, one thought igniting the next, like pine cones catching ablaze. As always, she saw, everything depended on her alone, including her escape" (65). Betts's description of Nancy's rage as a wildfire is itself a western image; more importantly, this moment signals Nancy's conscious separation from her family. She metaphorically burns the psychological ties that bind her to her mother, brother, and sister. As such, the frontier pushes Nancy toward physical and emotional independence. Although she has yet to cross the mighty Mississippi, she is already psychologically in the West.

Nancy starts to understand who she is *not*, which is the first step in her identity creation. We see this effect when Nancy stares off into the wilderness at Banelier, a campsite just outside of Amarillo: "She seemed for the first time to stand on the edge of a west she had only seen in pictures" (99). Nancy is on a physical and metaphorical precipice. This situation is her first real immersion into the western wilderness, and she is struck by land's immensity in the same way pioneers were—she recognizes the land's great potential and danger. Positioned with the frontier before her and the South behind her, she must decide whether to continue forward into the unknown or turn back to the familiar. More notably, Nancy's decision is wholly her own for the first time in the novel. Nancy is at a crossroads

where she understands who she was, and who she will become is open to seemingly limitless possibilities.

Nancy's identity has yet to solidify, but, once she tastes freedom, she is ready to abandon the trappings of the South and recreate herself from whole cloth. She discards her old clothes and fantasizes about her future, envisioning a "New social security number. Denver, El Paso, Santa Fe. Celeste Victor might marry a rodeo king. Peroxide, a permanent. Mexico. Berlitz Spanish" (124). She imagines what her new selfhood will look like and plans her revision of the Southern Nancy Finch into a free, western woman. Her commitment to change becomes obvious when she openly refuses to return home (131). Nancy wants to continue her reinvention, and she gets the chance to try out a new identity when she meets the doctor J. Waldo Foster and his young, hyperactive son, Benjy. Foster is obviously interested in Nancy and quickly strikes up a conversation (132–37). When he asks her about herself, Nancy responds, "'I inherited [a horse] farm and manage it now.' The inheritance part was true — her grandfather's one hundred red clay acres were growing a crop of broom sedge, sorrel, and dock, with pine and hardwoods around each field" (138). Nancy begins trying on a new *persona* as one would a new pair of boots, testing out the fit and adjusting as needed. From there, "she began improvising her biography" (138). She explains to Foster that her parents died and her grandfather assumed guardianship, and tells stories of her made-up life on a thoroughbred farm. She effectively rewrites her own history (138–40).

Nancy is confident that she will never meet Foster again, and that safety lets her construct a completely new *persona*. That is not to say Betts believes that an individual can switch identities spontaneously. For Betts, true autonomy is not playacting. Rather, Betts uses the West to expose her characters' inner truth in a way that reveals what one might call "true selfhood." This idea becomes clear when Nancy confesses and tells Foster the truth: she is from North Carolina and has been kidnapped (156). Through this series of exchanges, Betts shows that Nancy has to look inside herself and establish her identity based on inner truth. The western wilderness, then, functions more as a microscope than an artist's canvas. Identity can be remade, but it has to base itself on reality.

Nancy finally becomes autonomous during her escape into the Grand Canyon, the sublime and quintessential western landscape. Furthermore, the location presents a perfect environment for an archetypal journey. Just as Nancy must literally hike down into the depths of the canyon to escape Dwight, she must also travel deep into her consciousness to find her selfhood and fully escape the South. Both journeys are arduous and dangerous, but traveling through the western landscape evokes its mythology in its most powerful form because the myth of the West is one of reformation. Nancy's reaction when she glimpses the Grand Canyon supports this reading:

Nancy jerked backward once as earth opened the size of her eye, her mind, and exploded beyond; then she bent to hold the rail and sway across it as if she might wing out on that silent air. She opened the mouth but no words were in it. In stages going downward for a mile the sunlight gilded and bleached and reddened and finally failed among the rocky cliffs and walls. She stretched half her body above clinging plants, and watched them give way to distance fit only to dream about. And wide as forever, from her right hand and equally far to the left, the stone wilderness rolled endlessly in streaked slopes and terraces and bright towers until mountains turned blue without ceasing and drifted out of her sight. (191)

Although Nancy does not consciously invoke western mythology, Betts certainly does. The West is more than a place; it is an entity that “opens” Nancy’s mind and explodes there, convincing her that she can transcend the environment that she might “wing out” into the “stone wilderness” and never look back. Betts’s diction is mythic: Nancy can literally fly free of the trappings of her past, and she can “dream” and go on “forever” through the mountains that continue “out of her sight” (191). The vast distances invoke the ideas of possibility, freedom, and space that characterize western ideology.

Nancy’s decision to hike the Grand Canyon precipitates another symbolic metamorphosis. The pull of the landscape is infectious, and Nancy decides to venture out on her own. She discards her sister’s hand-me-downs in favor of completely new clothing, and the only thing she keeps is her “old pocketbook” (196, 235). Nancy loses the last vestiges of her Southern past as she tosses aside her old clothing, and consequently she physically recasts herself as a blank slate. Her squeaky clean, fresh-from-the-store outfit works just like her emergent identity: it is uncomfortable at first because it is completely void of memory and history. At this point, she thinks that escaping Dwight will seal her emancipation, and she heads deep into the canyon in hopes of finding freedom. But the promise of the West is not without cost, and Nancy soon finds herself in a struggle for survival against both the landscape and Dwight.

In the end, Nancy’s autonomy can be realized only by regeneration through violence. Western historian Richard Slotkin explains that the myth of the West was invoked to do more than create a romanticized national identity. Its original task was to “explain and justify the establishment of the American colonies . . . account for our rapid economic growth, our emergence as a powerful nation-state, and our distinctively American approach to . . . modernization” (10). Conflict was central to this process, so violence became a critical component of the frontier’s history and mythology. According to Slotkin, the marriage of violence and the West “represented the redemption of American spirit or fortune as something to be achieved by playing through a scenario of separation, temporary regres-

sion to a more primitive or 'natural' state, and *regeneration through violence*" (12, emphasis added). Slotkin theorizes, in other words, that it is the violence of the frontier that is instrumental to the West's transformative process. By facing and surviving violence, people learn how to conquer their darker nature, and, continues Slotkin, thereby reform their consciousness into something that mediates between savagery and civilization (10–14). This process is why Nancy's drive through Texas, ride through Bandelier, and subsequent escape from Dwight are muddled by memories of the South. Nancy cannot fully transform until she ventures into the Grand Canyon, confronts Dwight, and escapes.

Nancy's own regeneration culminates in her final showdown with Dwight. He has tracked her through the canyon and trapped her at the edge of an overhang. At that moment, "Nancy changed in an instant. [Dwight] came into very sharp focus. To die was one thing, but to be hurt any more? No, enough of that, no" (212). Dwight, once her ticket to freedom, now symbolizes the oppressive systems that have manipulated Nancy since her childhood. His commands—to come, to follow, to serve—are violent echoes of her family's and the South's demands. By facing off against Dwight, she stands up to the system that dictated her old, oppressive identity. She physically defends herself for the first time in the novel. Her body is bruised, broken, sunburned, and dehydrated, but she manages to survive the confrontation. Dwight, on the other hand, falls over the cliff to his death (213). The physical battle against the environment and Dwight is necessary to cement Nancy's new autonomy. In defeating Dwight, Nancy experiences regeneration through violence, symbolically conquering Southern patriarchy and womanhood and placing herself in a position finally to realize her own identity.

Nancy's identity solidifies during her painful recovery. Badly injured in her canyon ordeal, Nancy recuperates at a friend's home and begins to embrace a sense of her own self with the help of Hunt Thatcher. As his last name implies, Nancy's interactions with Hunt allow her to patch the holes in her new identity. He helps her understand her situation, asking her difficult questions such as why she did not "run like hell" when Dwight abandoned her in Bandelier (297). She responds, "At that time I *was* running, but running away from home" (297). Her conversations with Hunt help her come to terms with her resentment of the South and her community, and Nancy realizes the crippling nature of her bitterness. Her anger allows the South to maintain one last foothold of power, and letting it go lets her permanently leave the South behind (366).

While Nancy moves toward this reconciliation throughout the novel, her body manifests her psychological transformation. From changing clothes to noticing new things about her reflection, Nancy's body metamorphoses in relation to her new identity. The final, dramatic, and most symbolic shift is her last. Nancy is severely sunburned during her ordeal

in the Canyon, and her skin literally peels off in a bizarre metamorphosis. Hunt and his mother, Chan, repeatedly tell Nancy they are excited to see her “new” face, implying that it will not be the same as that of the spinster from North Carolina (303). Nancy’s exposure to the western landscape causes her body to remake itself, mirroring the construction of her identity. By the end of the novel, Nancy emerges from her ordeal physically and mentally changed, independent, and autonomous.

### Regional Identity in *The Sharp Teeth of Love*

Luna’s journey mirrors Nancy’s in many ways—she ends up in the West against her will, escapes into the wilderness, and finds identity—but her transformation begins much more subtly. In her discontentment with her fiancée Steven after she enters the West, the couple’s harmony is undermined by petty squabbles. When Luna has the gall to argue, he questions, “Luna, what is your problem?” (47). Despite his obtuseness, Steven senses something different about Luna before she notices it in herself. Her aggressiveness takes her by surprise as she continues to “pick, pick, pick. She kept doing it” (47). Whereas she used to rely on Steven’s control and dominance, she now finds herself acting against him, which surprises them both. Unlike Nancy, Luna subconsciously shifts away from Southern culture. While Nancy chooses to change, Betts’s later work acknowledges the difficulties in understanding the dangers of systemic oppression. Luna’s entrenchment in the South keeps her from seeing her own lack of autonomy, but she still recognizes that “the West makes you feel you could strike out and do just anything” (53). Although more subtly than Nancy’s journey, Luna’s quest for identity thus begins.

Eventually, Luna becomes so frustrated with Steven the Southern Gentleman that she leaves him. In a note she leaves for him, she explains that they have no “synchronicity” (54). The truth is that, now that Luna is in the West—and the West has started to “pull” at her, just as it tugs at Nancy—she and Steven *are not* in synch. Her small struggles within their relationship bother Steven, and he constantly attributes them to being hormonal or premenstrual (65). Steven continues to use the rubric of the South by tying Luna to her body that, given Luna’s eating disorder, persists as a *locus* of confinement and social control. In conjunction with this role, he continues to read the Southern belle’s fragility onto Luna—a practice in futility because she has begun to reject the South’s ideologies. The West has awakened Luna’s hunger for identity, which helps her recognize Steven’s constant, hovering Southern presence as an oppressive force.

Steven’s representation of Southern patriarchy is much different from Dwight’s in *Heading West*. Dwight’s sociopathic villainy keeps closely with second wave feminism. He is overtly threatening, and Betts uses his character to delineate clearly the inequalities perpetuated by a violently oppressive patriarchy. Comparatively, Steven represents ideas of masculine power

that are more in keeping with third wave feminist theories. In these terms, he represents not an actively oppressive patriarchy but a system whose sexism is so entrenched that it perpetuates itself. Steven may not be as overtly menacing as Dwight, but that profile does not make him less dangerous. His gentlemanliness puts a pretty face on the South's gender paradigms, and it successfully lures women like Luna into complacency. Luna *wants* to marry Steven and adopt Southern femininity. Only by crossing into the West does she begin to extricate herself from patriarchal structures.

Entering the Nevada desert gives Luna her first real taste of freedom, and she begins to unearth her identity. She has an appetite for the first time in months, and she enjoys the solitude of her small campsite. In fact, Luna is happy and remarks that she "felt neither haunted nor melancholic but free, almost lighthearted" (97). Luna acutely feels her freedom. With no Steven to dictate her actions, Luna drives around the countryside and thinks, "*Free*, I thought, looking down on junipers rooted in cracks in the rock that the wind had turned sideways and shoved over, but still they lived" (97). The imagery in this passage parallels Luna's life—blown about by those around her, she finds her first real foothold in the Nevada desert. The same emphasis on freedom in *Heading West* permeates *The Sharp Teeth of Love*. Like Nancy, Luna, too, finds the freedom in the vastness and anonymity of the frontier. Not only does Luna revel in her disconnection from her home and family, she slowly begins to recognize the transformative potential of the West. She, like Nancy, hopes it will be a place of discovery.

Luna's psychological transformation becomes more pronounced the more time she spends in the desert. In the South, Luna valued her skill to be a good copyist, not a good artist; the South emphasized normative behavior over individuality, and she easily traded her perceived marginalization for community (16). In the West, Luna becomes artistic and, so, moves a step closer to true autonomy. One night, while she is sitting in her campground, Luna pulls out her sketchbook to try and capture the likeness of Tamsen Donner's ghost, who she believes visited her the night before.<sup>4</sup> Luna remarks, "I always drew things and not people," and Luna's desires take her by surprise once again (105). Ditching still life for portraiture is Luna's decision, and it moves her further away from her Southern self. And, just as she is discontented with the *status quo* of her love life, she becomes dissatisfied with the *stasis* of her art. Although it is a vestige of her life in North Carolina, Luna strips it of the South's influence in order to make it her own. In that way, art becomes an integral part of Luna's burgeoning identity, and her artistic capability blossoms as she explores the environment. Like Nancy's choice to stay with Dwight, Luna's decision to embrace her art is her first step to experiencing the transformative potential of the West.

Unlike Nancy's thrust to separate herself from everyone around her, Luna's journey toward identity is informed by a community in the desert.

While camping, she meets Sam, a young boy who has run away from a prostitution ring and has made a life in the Nevada wilderness, stealing from campsites for food (99, 160). She slowly wins his trust, and, on one of their hikes, she and Sam encounter Paul Cowan (192–93). They form a little rag-tag group of displaced people, and Luna quickly falls in love with both Sam and Paul. Luna starts to understand herself in terms of how she can compensate for Sam’s and Paul’s deficiencies. Although she and Steven had “talked about children only in a negative way – how not to have any yet,” Luna quickly becomes maternal when she finds that Sam is by himself (104). She constantly pesters him about eating, and her fussing prompts Sam to admonish her with a nonchalant, “Don’t be a mama” (127–28). Although the remark is offhand, Luna reacts strongly: “It was as if my chest blushed from the ribs out with the surprising warmth that brought, so I made my voice gruffer than I felt. ‘Jumpy and touchy’” (127–28). She does the same with Paul, who wants to balance Luna in return. He decides that he will be “her appetite and she will be his ears” (188). In so portraying the two characters, Betts contends symbiosis is foundational for healthy relationships. This thesis is considerably different from that of *Heading West*, for, although Nancy travels with Dwight and Jolley, they are in no way a community. Forced together by circumstance, Nancy strikes out on her own as soon as she can. For Nancy, the search for autonomy must be done alone. Luna, however, *wants* to maintain this small community, and augments her search for selfhood through identification with Sam and Paul. The West remains a transformative space, and Betts recognizes the potential for community in *The Sharp Teeth of Love*.

Although the relationship between Luna and Paul is, potentially, in balance, Betts also suggests danger. Luna enjoys community, but she is very close to creating an identity in reaction to the people around her just as she did in North Carolina. Betts prevents this outcome by sending both Luna and Paul into the wilderness in search of Sam, and they both are regenerated through violence. When Sam’s former pimp abducts him, Luna and Paul desperately work to bring him home. Despite their intentions, the pair soon finds themselves lost in the Nevada wilderness, and the landscape leaves Luna awestruck. Like the Grand Canyon in *Heading West*, the vistas from the Sierra Nevada Mountains are sublime. The landscape brims with potential and danger, which Luna recognizes as “[Paul] spread [his] fingers in the air to stop Luna so her senses could slowly filter forward into the view and all it promised. She did gasp. Yes, the panorama was beautiful and unreal all at once” (223). The language in this short passage is particularly interesting, suggesting transformation for both Luna and Paul and holding hope that they will grow *together*. More immediately, it gives Sam hope for escape. Soon, though, they recognize how unforgiving the West can be.



Luna is awestruck by the Sierra Nevada range, but Paul (the first person narrator of this section of *The Sharp Teeth of Love*) quickly recognizes the dangerous landscape for what it is:

On the edge I worked my way precariously past her. Below, the rainwater ponds were glittering, but so was the waning sunlight on shafts of stone that stood upright below us, well placed to fracture skulls or snap spines. I won't pretend; the risk of falling scared me. Not until now had I mentally allowed that we armatures could actually die on this Sierra Nevada descent, which I had mistaken for an inconvenient walk home. Nobody was searching for Luna or Sam or me in these granite mountains. We could drop here, break bones, and decay just as unnoticed as sick old eagles or lost Pomeranian dogs. (207)

Just as Nancy was at the Grand Canyon, both Paul and Luna are battered by the Sierra Nevada. They are thirsty, sunburned, and exhausted. Slips on the loose rocks have led to tender ankles and multiple bruises, and the couple's focus soon shifts from finding Sam to their own survival. The terrain continually tests them, and they discover that, "In the West, distance is so deceptive. Maybe as tricky as in the Sinai wilderness" (224). Just as Sinai tests the Israelites only to deliver them when they escape from the desert, the West does the same for Paul and Luna. They must suffer regeneration through the violence in order to transform, and their deliverance manifests as self-actualization and the formation of a functional community.

All of Luna's changes solidify as she recuperates from her ordeal in the Nevada desert, and like Nancy, they manifest themselves physically. For instance, her ordeal in the wilderness reaffirms her personal resilience, and Luna is now empowered enough to make her own decisions. Although seemingly minor, it is the first time Luna has this level of autonomy. When her father, Steven, and Paul try to convince Luna to return to Steven, she "[f]lew, almost literally seemed to levitate, into high rage. Screamed at them — so close to Paul's amplifier that he had clapped his hands over both ears. Grabbed up a bed pillow and pummeled Steven first on one side and then the other of his excessively handsome face" (279). Previously, in playing the part of a cog in a patriarchal machine, Luna abdicated her personal desires to fit the Southern ideal. After her regeneration through violence, however, Luna refuses to return to that status quo. She maintains, "I don't want to start over, I want to start new" (279). Luna realizes that she cannot return to Steven because she refuses to sacrifice her self. Now that she has found her identity, she will not relinquish it to embrace Southern womanhood again—as she says, she wants to be a "new" person. After her transformation, Luna becomes fully capable of defending herself and controlling her life.

### Transforming a Transformative Space

Interestingly, Betts's quest to refigure Southern womanhood within the mythology of the West forces her to re-imagine the way western spaces traditionally operate. Nancy and Luna explore gender roles just as much as they do their identities, and neither one abdicates her femininity for something decidedly more masculine. This resistance is noteworthy because the West has traditionally been a space for *masculine* reformation. As Murdoch notes, "The frontier therefore brought forth *men* of extraordinary stature, *men* possessed of courage and skills to meet and overcome the dangers, so that the West could be made ready for the advance of civilization. Thus the archetypal American hero is the frontier-tamer" (3, emphasis added). The people who were able to transform both themselves and the landscape were predominantly men. Furthermore, Murdoch is quick to point out that these pioneers paved the way for a view of civilization that casts American expansionism in both imperialist and patriarchal terms. Drawing on Lee Clark Mitchell's *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*, Brinkmeyer explains that "central problem that Westerns explore—the glue that holds the genre together—is the construction of masculinity" (29). Brinkmeyer elaborates on Mitchell's observation, explaining that the Western genre also deals with the cultural anxieties surrounding definitions of manhood (29). This emphasis is glaringly obvious when one evaluates the emergence of western heroism. Near-mythic figures such as Wild Bill Hickok, Jesse James, and Buffalo Bill Cody set the standard for manliness, and their aggression and independence established a standard of exaggerated masculinity. By the end of the nineteenth century, they had attained the status of national heroes and had become the standard-bearers of American manhood. Masculinity thus becomes central to both western mythology and American national identity, laying the groundwork for the perpetuation of patriarchal social systems.

The women who were able to make names for themselves in the West were forced to renounce their femininity—either in part or in whole—to do so. Smith explains that tales of western heroines did not filter back to the eastern United States until 1845, and then the most "promising means of effecting a real development in the heroine" was disguising her as a man (112). Calamity Jane, one of the most popular heroines of the time, dressed like a man so she could ride with Deadwood Dick and participate in his heroic escapades. Not all western heroines were cross-dressers like Calamity, though. Annie Oakley, another famous western heroine, was quite the lady. Standing at just five feet tall and weighing 110 pounds, she always performed in a proper skirt. However, she built her career on her sharpshooting, and her 1878 Parker Brothers sixteen-gauge double-barrel shotgun was as much her trademark as her chestnut hair (Smith 21). Although Oakley embraced her femininity, she earned place in western lore because she possessed—and expertly wielded—a phallus. Her abil-

ity to outshoot any man, including her own marksman husband Frank E. Butler, gave her masculine status despite her feminine appearance.<sup>5</sup>

Betts's novels work against the idea that autonomy is reserved for men, so neither Nancy nor Luna rejects femininity or acquires a symbolic phallus in order to access the mythology of the West. For Betts, doing so would be no better than remaining in the South—the masculinity evoked by western mythology is just as oppressive to womanhood as the Southern patriarchy. Instead, Betts recodes western spaces and uses them as locations for female reformation. Most obviously, Betts uses the Grand Canyon as a yonic symbol in *Heading West* and sends Nancy into the womb of the frontier. Betts discusses the canyon as a place of “double passage,” a metaphorical vagina that takes incomplete people like Nancy and gives them personal rebirth (199). Nancy's reformation happens within a feminized western space. Betts's novel also considers the sexual implications of identity formation, and Nancy has a sexual awakening with Hunt Thatcher. She and Hunt have sex in the desert surrounded by the western landscape, and Nancy “looked at him fiercely when her climax was becoming real . . . and found Hunt staring directly into her face, which no doubt had altered even more than before” (305). Betts's inclusion of this scene solidifies the couple's relationship and shows that Nancy's sexual experiences in the wilderness fundamentally inform Nancy's new identity. Nancy need not reject her sexuality to claim autonomy; instead, her sexual reawakening is as important to establishing her identity as her psychological rejection of Southern constructs.

Luna's sexual awakening and self-discovery also occurs in a feminized, though less hostile, space. In their search for Sam, an abused orphan, Luna and Paul Cowan, a nearly deaf former theologian, must venture deep into the Nevada wilderness. They eventually make their way down a mountainside and stop at “the bottom of the rocky canyon,” which becomes the site for Luna's own self-actualization (209). As Nancy discovers at the Grand Canyon, Luna finds herself in a symbolic womb; however, whereas Nancy's journey into and out of the wilderness is incredibly painful, in *The Sharp Teeth of Love* the yonic canyon offers a place of rest and solace. That is not to say Betts abandons the idea of regeneration through violence. Luna still has to go through physical trial, but Betts's later novel figures feminine western space as maternal rather than aggressive. Luna is a much more delicate character than Nancy, and she requires a safe space for her own sexual awakening. The canyon answers this need, and she and Paul impulsively have sex once they reach the bottom. In the past Luna catered to her partner's sexual whims, but now Luna satisfies her own sexual hungers. She seizes control of the moment, telling Paul that she is “tired of fast” and adjusts their position for *her* pleasure (210–11). In taking control of the sexual experience, Luna continues to come to terms with her body, her desires, and herself.

In both *Heading West* and *The Sharp Teeth of Love*, the main characters embark on distinctly similar journeys to find selfhood. Nancy and Luna, however, become noticeably different individuals despite shirking off the trappings of Southern womanhood via the myth of the West. In doing so, Nancy and Luna show that regional identity cannot be conflated with actual autonomy, and though the West's mythology provides a space for individuation, it is only a facilitator for self-actualization. The woman herself must choose to change. Both Nancy and Luna do so, Nancy through her decision to keep heading west and Luna in her refusal to return to North Carolina. Yet neither woman accepts a homogenized western identity in place of her Southern one. Rather, both women embrace the potential of the myth without internalizing it. They learn to navigate the complex mythologies of the American South and West in order to find selfhood that defies regional definition and social control. In that way, the messages about autonomy in *Heading West* and *The Sharp Teeth of Love* remain relevant in showing how true autonomy exists outside social definitions.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The following are Betts's major publications to date: *The Gentle Insurrection and Other Stories* (1954), *Tall Houses in Winter* (1957), *The Scarlet Thread* (1964), *The Astronomer and Other Stories* (1965), *Creative Writing: The Short Story* (1970), *The River to Pickle Beach* (1972), *Beasts of the Southern Wild and Other Stories* (1973), *Heading West* (1981), *Souls Raised From the Dead* (1994), and *The Sharp Teeth of Love* (1997) (Evans xv-xvi).

<sup>2</sup> The first page of *The Sharp Teeth of Love* finds Luna alluding to a hospital stay while she looks at an old diary: "She opened the book to its blank page for today, and wrote the date, April 16, 1993. In fact, since she'd left the hospital, almost all the pages were blank" (3). However, it is not until Luna begins her first person narration in "Part 2: A Ghost of her Former Self" that she talks about her breakdown, saying "Steven doesn't know about this" (85). The lack of information, and the conspiratorial tone in which Luna discusses her institutionalization, show Luna's fear of being exposed as an "outsider" to the community she adopted. She is comfortable telling the story only once she is in the wilds of Nevada, safely away from any part of her Southern community.

<sup>3</sup> Yaeger uses the term "miniaturization" to refer to the South's preoccupation with small, delicate female bodies. Yaeger warns about the concept's inherent dangers: "The willful miniaturization of the female body may seem comical, but it is also quite dangerous. What is, in fact, lost in this idealized miniaturization of the body . . . [is] the danger of power" (291). Thus, diminutive female bodies are symptomatic of a larger patriarchal desire for dominance and female subjugation.

<sup>4</sup> Although fictionalized in Betts's novel, the figure of Tamsen Donner was a member of the infamous Donner Party. Born in Massachusetts in 1801, she eventually became a teacher and moved to North Carolina as a young woman. Her first husband and son died tragically, and she eventually remarried. In the spring of 1846, Tamsen set off with her second husband George Donner, their five daughters, and 80 other men and women on a pioneer expedition to San Francisco Bay. Unfortunately,

she and the rest of the party were stranded in the Sierra Nevada. After sending her daughters to safety, she remained behind with her husband; when the rescue party arrived to look for survivors, her body was never found ("Tamsen"). Luna's obsession with Tamsen Donner—the woman with no body—parallels her own eating disorder. Luna constantly feels the need to police her body, and Tamsen becomes the narrative's ultimate representation of being bodiless.

<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that this emphasis on masculinity is a specific construction of the *mythic* West. The historic West, on the other hand, relied on women. Marjorie Bell Chambers explains, "Over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth century [women] established their homesteads, sometimes on their own without a male partner, and adapted to the strenuous life of the mountains, high plateau country, deserts, and great river valleys of the West" (70–71).

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