

Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and 1960s America

By Robert McGill

The fact that Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, first published in 1970, offers no explicit mention of the Vietnam War is hardly a shock, given that the book is about a nineteenth-century outlaw. However, the fact that none of the scholarly articles about *Billy the Kid* has identified the spectre of Vietnam in the volume is a little more surprising. Indeed, there have been almost no published attempts to historicize the book in any regard, beyond biographical attention to Ondaatje's penchant for naming characters after his friends and for giving the narrative other personal inflections.¹ What is more, there has been minimal scholarly interest in the fact that, by writing about William Bonney, a.k.a. Billy the Kid, Ondaatje is engaging with a distinctively American mythic figure.² Instead, critics have generally treated the book as though it were above mere national considerations. In this respect, they have followed the lead of Ondaatje himself, who claimed of *Billy the Kid* in a 1972 interview: "I was writing about something that had always interested me, something within myself, not out there in a specific country or having some political or sociological meaning" (qtd. in Boldrini 32). As a result, scholarship has failed to account for the book's political resonances at the time it appeared, especially in terms of its preoccupation with American violence. The period in which Ondaatje published *Billy the Kid* was one in which social discourse about such violence was prominent and charged, particularly after President John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963. *Billy the Kid* both deploys and interrogates this discourse, offering a view of American history as involving fraught connections between law, government, killing, media, and technology. As the book does so, both the Kennedy assassination and the Vietnam War are detectable in the text's imagery, in its narrative methods, and in its very choice of figures on whom to focus.

Attention to these traces of 1960s America in Ondaatje's portrait of Billy the Kid helps one to appreciate the ways in which *Billy the Kid* is distinctively Canadian. The lore of Ondaatje's book has long included the tidbit that his focus on an American figure was cause for concern among

certain Canadian politicians after the text won a Governor General's Award in 1971; as Ann Mandel recalls, in that post-Centennial, hyper-nationalist period, *Billy the Kid* was condemned by Members of Parliament "for dealing with an *American* hero and outlaw" (276). A view of the book as pointedly non-Canadian has had some resilience among academics. For example, in a 2008 survey of Canadian poetry, Nicholas Bradley observes—if without evident complaint—that "there is little that is identifiably or stereotypically Canadian about *Billy the Kid*" (362). This characterization is true enough in the sense that the book's personages and setting are almost entirely American. Moreover, there are only two explicit references to Canada, both brief (17, 88). Nevertheless, I wish to argue that the critical manner in which *Billy the Kid* engages with American history and culture marks it very much as Canadian, especially when one considers the kinds of attention to the US that distinguished Canadian writing of the Vietnam War era.

At the same time, *Billy the Kid* is unusual among Vietnam War-era Canadian literature, which often cast the relationship between Canada and the US as an oppositional one. Departing from such a view, Ondaatje's book models a Canadian engagement with the US that neither straightforwardly rehearses a dichotomous understanding of the two countries nor settles for the erased border of continentalism. Instead, it challenges readers to imagine Canadian identity as one marked by a simultaneous intimacy with America and critical detachment from it—something Marshall McLuhan later observed as characteristically Canadian in arguing that when people experience American mass media "in the alien milieu of Canada," those media cultivate a "philosophic attitude of comparison and contrast and critical judgement" (247). Taking up a self-consciously mediated perspective on an American story, *Billy the Kid* evinces the detached, "ex-centric" sensibility that, by the 1980s, Linda Hutcheon would identify as both quintessentially postmodern and paradigmatically Canadian.³ The preoccupation in *Billy the Kid* with violence and mass media suggests that in Ondaatje's case, at least, such a sensibility was not merely the product of the aesthetic and philosophical currents of international postmodernism. Rather, it was also fostered by distinctively North American issues of the 1960s. These issues informed signature concerns of Ondaatje's oeuvre that are forefront in *Billy the Kid*: among them, the flaws of historiography, the power of insanity, and the moral ambiguities of outlaws.

Kennedy and the Kid

If, in 1968, Al Purdy felt able to pronounce on the “personal violence which seems to be a national characteristic of Americans” (Introduction ii), it was in no small part due to the various forms of violence that had recently afflicted and been perpetrated by or in the United States: among them, the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, the Vietnam War, the police suppression of anti-war protests, the brutalities of the Civil Rights era, and the string of assassinations that led back in time from Robert F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. to John F. Kennedy. A pattern of US violence was particularly evident to Canadians such as Purdy because they had a front-row seat at the proceedings, in part thanks to the increasing availability of television. By 1967, the year that Ondaatje claims to have begun work on *Billy the Kid* (Boldrini 32), half of the Canadian population could receive American TV signals directly, and forty percent of Anglophone Canada received at least three US channels (Rutherford 137). Such was the newfound significance of television that, in the poem “Canada: Case History: 1973,” Earle Birney personified Canada as someone who “watches gooks and yankees bleed / in colour on the telly” (175). Canadian nationalists worried that such media exposure would harmfully “Americanize” Canadians. For instance, Dennis Lee, writing in 1974, remembered realizing with horror in the 1960s that “Canadians were by definition people who looked over the fence and through the windows at America, un-self-consciously learning from its movies, comics, magazines and TV shows how to go about being alive” (“Cadence” 156). Other writers went further to suggest the imbrication of mass media and American violence, as McLuhan did in 1967 when he asserted that “there is no more division between soldiers and civilians. In the TV age, the entire public is participant in the war” (qtd. in Berton 217).

Given such circumstances, it is less than surprising that *Billy the Kid* should repeatedly draw parallels between guns and cameras, as it does on its very first page when it has an unnamed photographer talk of “*the line of fire*” and shooting “*from the saddle*” (1). George Elliott Clarke observes that Ondaatje’s repeated insistence on the similarities between the respective “shootings” perpetuated by cameras and guns reminds readers that “[t]o take artistic aim at anything is to line it up within the cross-hairs of a gun sight.” But Ondaatje is not only making a theoretical point about the violence of artistic representation. He is also rehearsing an association of violence with mass media that had been well established in the 1960s. Likewise, as *Billy the Kid* goes on to present photographs of graves and to depict ambushes as though filming multiple takes of them (9, 46), it recalls

violent events of the decade preceding its publication and encourages readers to consider that many of those events became iconic in virtue of having been captured on film, from the assassination of President Kennedy, the killing of Lee Harvey Oswald, and the self-immolation of Vietnamese Buddhist monk Quang Duc in 1963 to the execution of a North Vietnamese agent by a South Vietnamese general on the streets of Saigon in 1968.⁴ Accordingly, one might revisit the critical commonplace that *Billy the Kid* evokes or reproduces various narrative forms and media in order to emphasize readers' and writers' mediated relationships to history.⁵ While the book certainly makes this emphasis, it does so in such a way as to hearken back to what were, in 1970, recent political events, thus giving Billy's story vivid contemporary resonances.

That hearkening is especially evocative with regard to the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Kennedy's death cast a long shadow over the Vietnam War, leaving many to wonder whether the president would have allowed the US to become mired in the conflict as his successors did. Many also felt that his assassination had degraded America—a feeling that increased when his brother Robert was likewise murdered during the 1968 presidential campaign. In a 1970 book chronicling the lives of draft-resisters in Canada, Doug Fetherling writes of a meeting with his older brother, an American who had served in Vietnam, and reports his brother as saying: "I've just about given up hope as far as politics, you know. All my candidates keep getting shot" (28). Accordingly, repeated references in *Billy the Kid* to Pat Garrett as an "assassin" are not innocent ones (25, 27); in 1970, the word had an outsized currency. Similarly, while it is necessarily a coincidence that Billy the Kid's birthday is November 23, the day after the assassination of President Kennedy, it is perhaps less than coincidental that Ondaatje identifies this date not once but twice in his book (59, 84). The date signposts Ondaatje's interest in tracking North American violence both in the Old West and in the wake of Kennedy's death. Although Ondaatje's Billy cannot be seen simply as an allegorical JFK, *Billy the Kid* presents parallels between the two figures that encourage readers to think about patterns of American violence, as well as about the role of visual media in the consumption of that violence.

Certain parallels between Kennedy and Billy the Kid are obvious: both figures were Americans killed by guns at a relatively young age and subsequently mythologized, held up by many as heroes and as victims of violence but condemned by others for fostering violence themselves. Moreover, fundamental details of the men's deaths remain disputed, and their respective identified killers, Lee Harvey Oswald and Pat Garrett, are

both men whose own positions with regard to the law-outlaw divide have been questioned.⁶ Less obvious but equally notable are parallels between *Billy the Kid* and narratives of the Kennedy assassination that emerged during the sixties. For instance, Ondaatje's text shares with accounts of Kennedy's death a strikingly forensic mode. In Kennedy's case, this mode was most explicit in the 1964 report published by the Warren Commission, which had been charged with investigating the assassination, as well as in texts scrutinizing the report, and even in popular periodicals. Perhaps most famously among those periodicals, *Life* magazine purchased the notorious film of the assassination shot by Abraham Zapruder, then published a series of frames from it in an article titled "The Assassination of President Kennedy" that appeared in the magazine's November 29, 1963 issue. This article, along with later texts such as the Warren Report, facilitated a public forensic analysis of the killing.

The Warren Commission's own forensic approach meant that its report, a bestseller, included documents such as autopsy records and photographic evidence from re-enactments that traced the paths of the bullets fired at the president. The report also included frame enlargements from the Zapruder film and, most sensationally, reproduced a frame showing the spray of blood and brain-matter from the president's head as the fatal bullet struck him (108). This frame brought the graphic representation of violence into the mainstream of American civic discourse. What is more, the report foregrounded the relation of film to violence in other ways, as when it featured images of a camera mounted to a rifle that had been used to re-enact the killing for forensic purposes.



Fig. 1. Rifle-mounted camera for use in the Warren Commission's re-enactment of John F. Kennedy's assassination (Warren et al 99).

This camera put the commission—and, eventually, readers of its report—in the spectatorial position of Kennedy’s assassin. Consequently, by the time *Billy the Kid* was published, much of the North American public had deeply imbibed an association of cameras with guns. Hutcheon has noted that when visual media such as film and photography are represented in postmodern Canadian literature, they are often represented as “death-dealing” (46). To be sure, such representations confirm the theoretical discussions of photography’s sepulchral nature in texts such as Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida* and Susan Sontag’s *On Photography*. However, Ondaatje’s particular camera-gun equation in *Billy the Kid* finds a direct historical grounding in the alignment of death with film that came to the fore in the wake of the Kennedy assassination.

Billy the Kid further recalls the Warren Report in terms of the two texts’ shared forensic attention to records and evidence. Early in Ondaatje’s book, Billy identifies himself as speaking from beyond the grave, reflecting on his life in the wake of his death at Garrett’s hands. Smaro Kambourelli asserts that “the rhetoric of Billy’s monologue is that of thanatography, a writing that emerges from death” (121), while Manina Jones calls *Billy the Kid* “a drama of documents” that presents a “layering of documentary evidence” in the manner of detective fiction (28, 30-31). More particularly, Billy’s narration of his death and of the events leading to it mark him as a figurative coroner investigating his own murder, one who gathers testimony and stages multiple re-enactments of the event from different angles and perspectives. Billy even pays attention to the paths of bullets, slowing them down to track their trajectories and effects. At one point well before his death, for instance, as he fires mindlessly into a mass of rats, he describes “the long twenty yard space between me and them empty but for the floating bullet” (15). The description halts time in the same way that the Warren Commission did when analyzing the Zapruder film, as the commission’s members attempted to track the changing flight path of the so-called “magic bullet” that, they concluded, non-fatally wounded Kennedy and injured Texas governor John Connally.

The forensic mode of *Billy the Kid* is even more forefront when a third-person narrator describes the scene of Billy’s death as though providing courthouse evidence, observing: “This is a diagram then of Maxwell’s, Pete Maxwell’s, room. Bed here against the wall, here’s the window where he put his hand through” (96). Ondaatje also imagines an exhumation of Billy’s body, along with an autopsy-like examination of it (101). Moreover, there are references to photographs being taken of the bullets that killed

Billy (109), a phenomenon that similarly took place with regard to the bullets that struck Kennedy.



Fig. 2. Photograph of the “magic bullet” identified as having wounded President Kennedy and Governor Connally (“Bullet”).

Meanwhile, at one point Billy describes his shooting by Pat Garrett in this manner:

(watch) bullet claws coming
 at me like women fingers
 part my hair slow
 go in slow in slow
 leaving skin in a puff
 behind and the slow
 as if fire pours out
 red grey brain the hair slow
 (76)

The word “watch,” set off from the rest of the poem, works as a punning pointer regarding what follows. Insofar as the word denotes a timepiece, it signals the poem’s deceleration of time. As an imperative to look, the word emphasizes the scene’s spectacle and the reader’s position as witness. After this pointer, the pursuant short lines break up the instant of death as though we are to observe it frame by frame. Returning to this scene later, Billy further describes his “brain coming out like red grass” (99). Accordingly, if David Donnell is right that the “central focus of [Ondaatje’s] book is explicit violence to the human body, especially the face, head, brain and stomach” (243), it is difficult not to notice that the text’s representation of

Billy's death at the hands of the "assassin" Garrett has strong affinities with the graphic violence of the Zapruder film's most notorious moment, in which the president was struck in the head. Likewise, the representation of Billy's death rehearses the slow-motion scrutiny to which the moment of Kennedy's death was subjected.

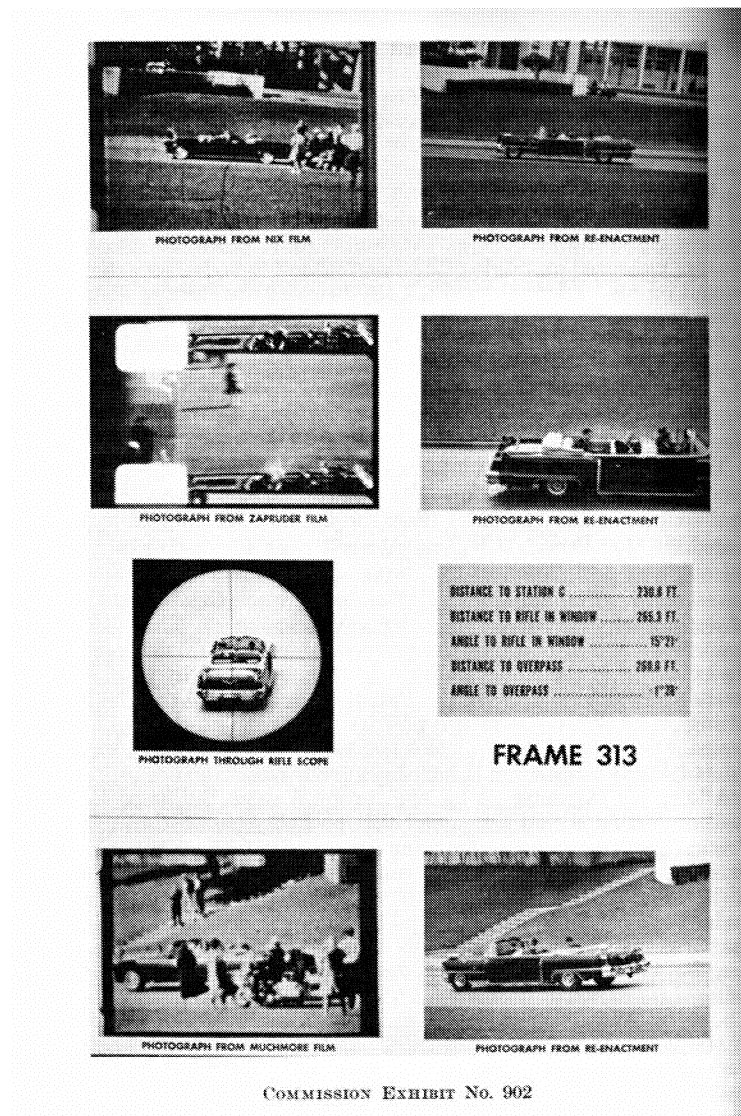


Fig. 3. A page from the Warren Report that juxtaposes the most notorious frame of the Zapruder film with other images from the assassination and images from a re-enactment, "slowing down" the scene to analyze it (108).

With regard to the Kennedy assassination, scrutiny of the evidence infamously failed to end with the *Life* article and the Warren Report. Rather, documents including photographs and film footage were second-guessed by endless commentators, thus drawing attention to the interpretability and possible falsifications of visual media. The Warren Report, in particular, was viewed with suspicion; by 1968, a sufficient number of condemnations of the report had appeared that an anthology of excerpts from them, *The Weight of the Evidence*, was published. It became clear that abundant documentary evidence did not necessarily lead to a single, obviously true finding about the assassination. Instead, many people came to believe that pieces of evidence had been cherry-picked, manipulated, disregarded, or destroyed in order for the Warren Commission to reach the politically expedient conclusion that Oswald had acted alone. In a 1966 bestselling book titled *Rush to Judgment*, for example, Mark Lane claims that the Warren Commission suppressed photos of the crime scene, and he makes much of the fact that an incriminating photograph of Oswald with a rifle in his hand and a pistol on his hip was retouched prior to publication (344, 357-62). In *Billy the Kid*, Ondaatje similarly draws attention to the unreliability of photographs by titling his book “*Left-Handed Poems*.” The subtitle alludes to the sole extant photograph of Billy the Kid, which—by virtue of a holster apparently situated on his left hip—seemed to establish that he was left-handed until it was revealed to have been printed in reverse. By nodding to a falsehood about Bonney established by historical evidence, Ondaatje’s subtitle implicitly admits from the outset to his book’s own historiographic impostures. Moreover, by gesturing to a case of photographic misrepresentation, the subtitle announces Ondaatje’s fascination in *Billy the Kid* with the limitations, contradictions, misleading qualities, and occasionally outright falsity of photographs and other documentary materials.

Such a fascination is further evident on the first page of *Billy the Kid*, as the photographer whose voice it relates tells an addressee about his latest photographs: “*I will send you proofs sometime*” (1). Jones has pointed out that the word “proofs” has an ironic connotation, given the book’s interest in matters of narrative inauthenticity (33). That connotation is echoed later when Billy remarks to an interviewer: “I could only be arrested if they had proof, definite proof, not just stories” (84). *Billy the Kid* thus shows an interest in the problematic use of photographs as evidence, casting doubt on the putatively transparent referentiality of visual media in a way that was virtually mainstream in the wake of the Warren Report. While T. D. MacLulich is right to say “‘The camera never lies’ is a popular misconception which *Billy the Kid* challenges” (108), the misconception was previ-

ously challenged by those who scrutinized photographs related to the Kennedy assassination. Indeed, one 1967 book questioning the Warren Report includes a chapter bearing the title “Pictures Can Be Made to Lie” (Marks 99).

Billy the Kid’s casting into doubt of photographic evidence helps to qualify the text as “historiographic metafiction,” that category of postmodernist texts which, as Hutcheon observes, pay attention to things such as the emphases and exclusions in stories about history, even while the texts themselves go about narrating history (66). Recognizing that Ondaatje’s self-reflexive attention in *Billy the Kid* to the vexed relationship between historical events and narratives about them had an antecedent in scrutiny of the Warren Report, one might also recognize that Ondaatje’s insistence on the fragmentary, partial, and contradictory nature of narratives about Billy the Kid likewise matches a popular refusal in the 1960s to accept the report’s findings. More generally, there was a refusal to accept handed-down narratives that seemed designed to reassure the American people about the presence of rational order and security in the face of destabilizing violence. Accordingly, one can situate *Billy the Kid* in a stream of North American thought during the sixties that was sceptical about celebratory master narratives of American society.

Whether or not Ondaatje was conscious of the ways in which his representation of Billy—and, more particularly, of Billy’s death—echoes the assassination of President Kennedy and the subsequent investigation of that event, those echoes consolidate a sense that although *Billy the Kid* dwells on violence in nineteenth-century America, it is also channelling much more recent events. In that regard, there was a certain irony in the fact that Kennedy himself had drawn on the mythology of the Wild West when, in his speech accepting the Democratic nomination in 1960, he had declared the new decade to constitute a “new frontier” in the United States. As he did so, he implicitly cast himself in the role of the cowboy hero.⁷ While Kennedy sought to establish a continuity between the pioneer spirit and his own aspirational politics, people reacting to his murder a few years later were liable to see less salutary patterns in American history. In the August 21, 1964 edition of *Time*, for instance, it was reported that a list of ostensibly remarkable coincidences between the assassination of Kennedy and that of Abraham Lincoln had been circulating (“Compendium”). As *Billy the Kid* draws on the imagery and forensic mode that became widespread after Kennedy’s death, it similarly encourages readers to consider stories that had been repeated across generations of American life, including the violence that those stories often involved.

The Western, the Vietnam War, and American Technologism

If scepticism about master narratives of American history took root with the Kennedy assassination, it came into full flower during the Vietnam War, as casualties grew and reports surfaced of atrocities committed by US soldiers. Most notorious among them was the 1968 My Lai massacre. When that event became public knowledge in 1969, North Americans also learned of efforts by the US military to cover up the massacre. Such revelations undermined the American government's claims to the moral high-ground in Vietnam; the government's discourse of righteous action in Southeast Asia was, increasingly, taken to mask the promotion of US self-interest. And although some US government officials attempted to affirm the war effort by making what Richard Slotkin calls "Western-movie and frontier references," others invoked America's frontier history in ways less flattering to the US (*Gunfighter* 524). In 1969, for example, the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, which had been created by presidential order after the assassinations of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., connected contemporary violence to the Wild West in a negative manner when it concluded that "America has always been a relatively violent nation" and that this violent streak could be traced, in no small part, to America's frontier history (Eisenhower et al. 1, 8). In the same year, the news of the My Lai massacre prompted commentators to identify a frontier antecedent for it: a letter to the editor in *Life*, for instance, compared the massacre to the one at Wounded Knee, South Dakota in 1890 (Water 46). As a result, when Ondaatje published *Billy the Kid*, the Wild West had already been well established as a touchstone by the Vietnam War's apologists and opponents alike.

Perhaps most prominent in this regard was Sam Peckinpah's 1969 film, *The Wild Bunch*, which, in its introduction of new levels of graphic violence to the Western, has frequently been taken to comment on the war's senseless violence.⁸ Notably, Peckinpah followed up *The Wild Bunch* in 1973 with another Western, *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*. Likewise, Ry Cooder released his recording of the traditional song "Billy the Kid" in 1972, and Billy Joel released his song "The Ballad of Billy the Kid" in 1973. To my knowledge, there is no evidence to suggest that any of these artists was familiar with Ondaatje's book. Indeed, Ondaatje's friend and fellow Canadian poet bp Nichol was initially unaware that Ondaatje was working on a book about Billy the Kid, even while Nichol himself was writing his own short volume of poems about the figure, published in 1970 as *The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid*.⁹ Accordingly, while critical attention to intertextuality with regard to Bonney in Ondaatje's book has

focused on antecedents such as the film *The Left Handed Gun* and Jack Spicer's "serial poem" *Billy the Kid*, both of which appeared in 1958,¹⁰ there was a remarkable synchronicity of artistic interest in Bonney during the early 1970s.¹¹ By that time, US government-directed brutality in Vietnam and at home had led to the formation of increasingly militant resistance groups such as the Weathermen, making Billy the Kid—imagined as a heroic outlaw who had been both the perpetrator and the victim of violence—an especially attractive figure.

Given this context for Ondaatje's book, there has been remarkably little critical interest in the text's relationship to the war. Even in 1972, when Stephen Scobie published a review examining both Ondaatje's and Nichol's books about Bonney, Scobie noted evocations of Vietnam only in Nichol's text.¹² However, Ondaatje was certainly attentive to the conflict. For one thing, he was living and publishing in Toronto, a popular destination for draft-dodgers. More particularly, Ondaatje was publishing with the House of Anansi Press. The press was a hotbed of draft resistance: its co-founder, Dennis Lee, worked as a counsellor to draft-dodgers, while the press's first paid employee, Doug Fetherling, was a draft-dodger himself. By the fall of 1968, American anti-war expatriates Ann and Byron Wall were also involved with Anansi.¹³

As for Ondaatje, he wrote explicitly about the war in a poem, "Pictures from Vietnam," that was published in 1968 and shares several themes with *Billy the Kid*. After the poem's title hints at a relationship between violence and representation, the text goes on to describe a "boy with gun" in Vietnam who might be taken to prefigure Ondaatje's Billy, another "kid" with a gun. Indeed, the conspicuous lack of an article in the phrase "boy with gun" anticipates the appearance of a similar locution in *Billy the Kid* during a moment in which a figure who has shot someone is said to embrace "the moral of newspapers or gun" (7). In "Pictures from Vietnam," the boy "with gun" is not described as having shot anyone, but he is watching a woman as she holds and feeds her child. The ethics of such watching—and the ethics of readers' own "watching" of the scene—are called into question in the poem's next stanza, which is composed entirely of the words "Beautiful photography / that holds no morality." The phrase is ambiguous. Does it suggest that photography—as well as, perhaps, watching in general—is amoral, or does it suggest that photography and watching are, more problematically, immoral? Reading across Ondaatje's texts, one might associate photography's lack of morality in "Pictures from Vietnam" with "the moral of newspapers or gun" in *Billy the Kid*, which, in that book, is described as one in which "bodies are mindless as paper flowers you

dont [sic] feed / or give to drink" (7). The statement suggests that newspapers and guns both reduce bodies to objects for which one has no responsibility—a dubious morality, to say the least.

In "Pictures from Vietnam," the moral dubiousness of watching is confirmed as the poem goes on to describe an aerial bombardment that leaves the woman's child with "its side unlaced like tennis shoes" (131). The startling simile stands as a recognition on Ondaatje's part of the difficulty that attends writing about war from the distanced position of the affluent West, where most people are likely to witness or participate in "battles" only figuratively at events such as athletic contests. The simile thus draws attention to Ondaatje's mediation of others' suffering, to readers' position as spectators of that suffering, and to the possible harm that such mediation does by aestheticizing violence. In other words, the poem displays a sensitivity to a situation shared by most Canadians and Americans in the course of the Vietnam War: one in which they were engaging with the conflict primarily through mass media. McLuhan might have been right, in a sense, to suggest that "the entire public" in North America was "participant in the war," but Ondaatje's poem is a reminder of how limited that participation was. Such concerns in "Pictures from Vietnam" have marked corollaries in *Billy the Kid*, which repeatedly draws attention to Billy as a figure who moves between being a participant in violence and an observer of it. For instance, he is someone who, at the book's outset, testifies to having killed many people, but his presence at the murder that was deemed to spark the so-called "Lincoln County War"—fought by rival commercial factions in New Mexico in 1878—is that of a mere witness: he watches the killing from a "*distant hillside*" (55).

Ondaatje's previous work aside, it is difficult to avoid recalling the Vietnam War when contemplating *Billy the Kid* if one considers that the text characterizes Billy as a twenty-one-year-old American who is good-natured but caught up in violence and traumatized by watching friends be gunned down, someone who has fought in a seemingly senseless conflict and been driven to the edge of sanity. These characteristics strongly echo the depictions of US soldiers in Vietnam that were circulating by the late 1960s. Likewise, the book's list of people killed by Billy includes friends along with enemies, thus resonating with war-era reports that "it was not uncommon for Americans to shoot each other" in Vietnam (Neufeld 80). Meanwhile, as Billy goes on the run from the law, is apprehended and badly treated, then escapes—and as he crosses the Canada-US border (17, 88)—he has conspicuous affinities with certain American deserters from Vietnam.¹⁴ Moreover, insofar as Ondaatje's version of Billy is a criminal

who casts himself as unfairly singled out by the law, he is liable to engender an ambivalent response in readers similar to the ambivalence that greeted American deserters and draft-resisters in Canada.

Ondaatje's depiction of Pat Garrett, the Lincoln County sheriff, similarly resonates in terms of the war. In *Billy the Kid*, Garrett is an "academic murderer," someone who "had decided what was right and forgot all morals" (25). Such a characterization is notable given that anti-war critics in the late sixties explicitly cast the US government as prosecuting an insane war under the guise of rationality. This view was often articulated with reference to a notorious quotation from a US officer in South Vietnam, who had defended a 1968 attack on a village by declaring: "It became necessary to destroy the town to save it" (qtd. in Braestrup 254).¹⁵ In the same year, Marine Corps counterinsurgency specialist William Corson published a book about the war in which he observed that this language of destroying towns to save them was "the language of madness...which if allowed to continue [would] destroy not only the people of Vietnam, but also the moral fabric and strength of America" (289). In the account of the My Lai massacre published in the December 5, 1969 issue of *Life*, there was a further emphasis on the war's insanity, including a description of the dissociated, almost mechanical manner in which the US soldiers went about killing Vietnamese villagers. Photojournalist Ronald Haeberle, who was present at the massacre, was quoted as recalling: "There was no expression on the American faces.... They were destroying everything. They were doing it all very businesslike." Haeberle also observed that after shooting a Vietnamese child, an American soldier "simply got up and walked away" (qtd. in Wingo et al. 41). This description bears a close resemblance to the characterization of Garrett in *Billy the Kid* as someone who has "the ability to kill someone on the street walk back and finish a joke" (25). *Billy the Kid* characterizes Garrett as rational, calculating, and dispassionate to the point of madness. At one point, the narrator calls Garrett a "sane assassin sane assassin sane assassin sane assassin sane assassin sane," running the words together to suggest that Garrett's particular brand of dispassionate, calculating sanity might, in fact, be a form of insanity (27). Moreover, the book emphasizes Garrett's masochistic relentlessness, as when it describes his project of building a tolerance for alcohol, a process that he intended "to last only two years" but that resulted in him becoming "addicted, locked in his own game," so that the process "continued into new months over which he had no control" (26). Given the other echoes of the US military in Ondaatje's representation of Garrett, it is difficult not to hear in this depiction of Garrett's project a further evocation of the Vietnam War, a nod

to the way in which the war became a much more prolonged and devastating conflict for America than anticipated.

If Ondaatje's Billy emblemizes the American veteran of Vietnam, Ondaatje's Garrett serves as a reminder that veterans were not the only ones responsible for the war's insanities and violence. In that respect, a statement that Billy makes about his involvement in the Lincoln County War echoes self-defences that US soldiers in Vietnam offered for their participation in atrocities such as the one at My Lai. Billy remarks: "there was no criminal punishment that could be genuinely brought against me without bringing it against everyone connected with that war" (86). Moreover, *Billy the Kid* consolidates its implicit commentary on the Vietnam War through its telling of a story about a man named Livingstone, who is said to have been exempted from military service in the American Civil War because of a limp, and who then insanely attempted to breed a race of mad dogs. The story's narrator, John Chisum, claims that Livingstone became so apparently stable in the attempt that "now they probably would accept him in the army" (63). Here, even as the emphasis on an exemption from military service once more evokes the Vietnam War, with all its controversies regarding the draft, Ondaatje reinforces his depiction of the military as an insane institution.

Notably, Ondaatje's choice—like Peckinpah's in *The Wild Bunch*—to deploy the Western as a vehicle for an anti-war critique also constitutes a historiographical intervention, characterizing the Vietnam War and the Kennedy assassination alike as parts of a pattern of violence in American history. At one point in *Billy the Kid*, an anonymous narrator asks if there is "some reasoning we can give to explain all this violence" (55). Ostensibly, the question refers to the violence in Billy's life. But because the referent of "this violence" is left decidedly ambiguous, the question encourages readers to consider connections between the Wild West and more recent violence. As *Billy the Kid* makes such connections, it identifies recurring tensions in America: perhaps most conspicuously, between the pursuit of "what [is] right" and the enactment of violence in that pursuit. If the Western frequently wrestles with the paradox that, in order to maintain peace, agents of the law rely on the use or threat of violence, it is not surprising that the Western found a new currency during the Vietnam War, when the American state was often threatening and actually using force, both in Southeast Asia and domestically. In this regard, it is also not surprising that the war years produced *Regeneration Through Violence*, Slotkin's classic 1973 account of the celebration of violence in the American myth of the frontier. It would not be until Slotkin published *Gun-*

fighter Nation in 1992 that he would explicitly observe how the frontier myth played out in Hollywood Westerns and government rhetoric during the Vietnam War, but when *Regeneration Through Violence* was published, its implications in terms of contemporary America hardly needed spelling out. As for *Billy the Kid*, it presents an equally damning view of American history and identity with similarly clear implications for the America of the Vietnam War era. Moreover, the book's self-reflexive attention to the pre-occupations of the Hollywood Western, along with Ondaatje's association of the camera with the gun, diagnoses the Western as a key participant in the promotion of American violence.

The identification of such violence as closely imbricated with technology serves to distinguish *Billy the Kid* as a Canadian text, insofar as that identification echoes ones by Canadian nationalists who, during the Vietnam War, were preoccupied with castigating what they saw as the violent techno-capitalist drive of the American empire. George Grant influentially cast the US in these terms in his 1965 book, *Lament for a Nation*, and he did so again in his 1969 follow-up, *Technology and Empire*. Such a view of America quickly became widespread among Canadians: in 1968, for instance, Farley Mowat called the US "a machine for greed" (5), and The Guess Who sang of the US "war machine" in their 1970 hit song, "American Woman." Meanwhile, "Two Heroes," a war-era narrative about Billy the Kid by bp Nichol, observes: "Billy was in love with machines. He loved the smooth click of the hammers when he thumbed his gun" (197). Ondaatje's Billy is not so different from Nichol's, given his fascination with the mechanical and with his own machinic body. In one poem, he refers to his penchant for watching "the stomach of clocks / shift their wheels and pins into each other"; in another, he marvels at "the clean speech of machines / that make machines" and at those machines' potential for violence, believing that "one altered move" could "make them maniac" (7, 40). Ondaatje's Garrett, himself committed to machine-like self-discipline, corroborates a machinic view of Billy, claiming once to have noticed Billy's "left hand churning within itself, each finger circling alternately like a train wheel" as Billy performed finger exercises for his gun hand (43). Accordingly, in contrast to American popular films of the late 1960s such as *Easy Rider* and *Cool Hand Luke* that tended to idealize young, anti-establishment characters, *Billy the Kid* deconstructs the apparent opposition between Billy and Garrett, suggesting that the problem is not a conflict between two Americas—in the terms of 1970, between the establishment and the counterculture—but rather one of violent technologism pervading all of America.

Meanwhile, Canada finds a figurative incarnation in *Billy the Kid* in the ranch-house of John and Sallie Chisum, where Billy takes refuge for a time after being injured in a fire. Judith Owens observes that Billy represents the ranch as “a pastoral world” which sometimes appears “Edenic.” It remains to be pointed out that although the Chisum house is literally in the American Southwest, it is aligned with Canada insofar as the book depicts the house as a figurative counter-America. In particular, the tranquility and sanctuary that the house offers to those affected by American violence have affinities with Canada as it was increasingly imagined during the Vietnam War. Indeed, when Billy remarks that “every animal that came within a certain radius of that house was given a welcome” (35), he echoes Pierre Trudeau’s declaration that Canada, in accepting draft-resisters, would be a “refuge from militarism” (qtd. in Epp, “My Own” 9). Just as Canada not only declined to participate militarily in Vietnam but also harboured up to 100,000 US war resisters, the Chisum house is represented in *Billy the Kid* as set apart from violence; as Scobie notes, Ondaatje even abandons the historical record to represent John Chisum as a “peace-loving man” (49). What is more, the Chisum house in *Billy the Kid* is a place where people tell stories of insane violence—such as the story of Livingstone and his dogs—but treat those tales in a detached, critical manner: for instance, Sallie Chisum simply calls the narrative about Livingstone “a nasty story” (64). In that regard, Ondaatje’s representation of the house reflects a growing view among Canadians during the war era that their country was a “peaceable kingdom,” what William Kilbourn called in 1970 “a way and a hope, an alternative to insanity” (xi).¹⁶ Ondaatje depicts the Chisum ranch as a locus of natural rhythms, joyous sexual congress, and bodily healing, a place that has “nothing near [it] for almost a hundred miles” and so is both literally and figuratively apart from the violence of the American West, as well as from the industrial American East with its “machines / that make machines” (41, 40). The implicit “Canadianness” of the house is underscored by the reproduction in *Billy the Kid* of a photograph ostensibly representing Sallie and John Chisum that is, in fact, a photograph of two of Ondaatje’s friends, Canadian residents Sally and Stuart Mackinnon, in period dress (28).¹⁷ Moreover, John Chisum’s claim in the book that he was once a singer aligns him with the “Canadian group, a sort of orchestra,” for which Billy expresses a fondness (61, 88). While Dennis Cooley has observed that the “orchestra” reference is a nod to the Canadian sound poetry group the Four Horsemen, the Four Horsemen themselves are paralleled in *Billy the Kid* by Billy’s group of four American fugitives with “[f]our horses outside” that is ambushed by Garrett and his men (20).

Standing in contrast to this group and its participation in American violence, the Canadian “orchestra” and John Chisum evoke peaceful Canadian artistic production.

In a September 1965 issue of *Canadian Forum*, Abraham Rotstein and Melville H. Watkins cited the Vietnam War, along with other areas of US foreign policy, in rebuking America for its commitment “to the solution of total justice at any price” (126). In doing so, they were part of a wave of Canadian writers through the later 1960s and early 1970s who were highly critical of the United States and for whom that criticism was foundational to their sense of Canadian difference. At the same time, many of them were apt to criticize Canada’s complicity in the war, whether by targeting Ottawa’s putative quietism or by condemning Canadian firms’ manufacture of US munitions.¹⁸ Following Grant, these writers were also liable to muse on the possibility that American technologist neo-imperialism might soon erase Canadian difference and sovereignty, if it had not already done so. Grant, for one, warned Canadians in 1969 against self-righteousness with regard to American atrocities in Vietnam, declaring: “What is being done there is being done by a society which is in a deep way our own” (*Technology* 74). If Canadian critics have been unable to see *Billy the Kid* as a “Canadian text,” it may be because the book follows Grant in raising the possibility that Canadian identity and American identity are not necessarily oppositional. While *Billy the Kid* plays on the trope of Canada as a “peaceable kingdom” in its depiction of the Chisum ranch, it otherwise leaves open the question of whether its diagnosis of a recurring American penchant for violence might also be applied to Canada. Ondaatje’s Billy is, after all, a murdering border-crosser with a taste for Canadian music. What is more, the book’s fascination with an American mythic figure and his legacy risks fostering, if not rehearsing, the same obsession with American life and media that Lee attributed to Canadians in the 1960s. Simultaneously, though, *Billy the Kid* manifests an ethos that McLuhan would celebrate later in the 1970s when he identified a Canadian as someone who is “intellectually detached and observant as an interpreter of the American destiny” (227). In that regard, it might be said that the book’s focus on America is what most conspicuously distinguishes it as Canadian.

Notes

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- 1 One critic who does historicize Ondaatje's book is Joel Deshayé, who locates *Billy the Kid*'s focus on celebrity in a historical period—namely, the 1960s and 70s—that, as Deshayé sees it, offered unique opportunities for poetic celebrity in Canada (6). Stephen Tatum, meanwhile, observes that cultural representations of Billy the Kid from the late 1950s to the early 1970s reflect “the general era’s alienation from mainstream American values and institutions” (153). However, Tatum offers no historicizing comments about Ondaatje’s text in particular. As for commentators who have identified references to Ondaatje’s life in *Billy the Kid*, Lee Spinks is one of several to observe that the boy pictured in cowboy gear near the book’s end is Ondaatje. Sam Solecki connects the “missing parental figures” in *Billy the Kid* to Ondaatje’s relationship with his father (*Ragas* 9), while Ian Rae notes that a scene of Billy in a barn provides the reader with “a glimpse of Ondaatje at his desk in the barn of Blue Roof Farm near Kingston, Ontario, where much of the text was composed” (107). Rae also observes that the character Livingstone is named after Ondaatje’s friend Ken Livingstone (119).
- 2 An exception in this regard is Céleste Derksen, who considers Ondaatje’s narrative in relation to the ideological baggage of the Western. However, Derksen is principally focused on the 1987 stage adaptation of *Billy the Kid*, not Ondaatje’s book. Another exception is Aarthi Vadde, who attends to the book with regard to Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier hypothesis and the Western. Vadde does so in order to suggest that Ondaatje’s book substitutes a transnational ethos for the American exceptionalism that Turner’s hypothesis helped to cement. Vadde writes: “Ondaatje transforms Billy from a national icon to a global one, working against the imperialist strains of frontier mythology” (259). Vadde’s argument depends to no small extent on Ondaatje’s 2008 afterword to *Billy the Kid*, in which he dates his longstanding interest in the American West to his childhood in Ceylon. I would suggest that although Ondaatje’s afterword does encourage readers to recognize elements of the book pointing toward its investments beyond North America, these elements are relatively few.
- 3 Hutcheon writes: “Since the periphery or the margin might also describe Canada’s perceived position in international terms, perhaps the postmodern ex-centric is very much a part of the identity of the nation” (3).
- 4 Quang Duc’s self-immolation was photographed by Malcolm Brown, and the image was named the 1963 World Press Photo of the Year. Eddie Adams photographed the Saigon execution and won a 1969 Pulitzer Prize for his work.
- 5 For arguments along these lines, see Bethell, Blott, and Boldrini, to name just a few.
- 6 Popular stories in the nineteenth-century American West maintained that Garrett and Billy had once been friends, while various commentators have speculated that Oswald was working for the CIA or FBI. For an example of the latter speculation, see Joesten 129.
- 7 For a discussion of Kennedy’s speech, see Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 2.
- 8 See, for instance, Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 591–613, as well as Galperin.
- 9 This book would, along with other poetry published by Nichol, win him the 1970 Governor General’s Award for Poetry, while Ondaatje’s *Billy the Kid* won a specially created Governor General’s Award for Poetry and Fiction in the same year. Nichol and Ondaatje had discovered in 1968 that they were both writing about Billy the Kid, and they subsequently shared their manuscripts with each other (Rae 119).

- 10 Vadde is one critic to reference *The Left Handed Gun* (263n7), while Rae mentions Spicer (20).
- 11 In the documentary *Easy Rider: Shaking the Cage*, Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda claim that Billy, one of the modern-day protagonists of their 1969 film, *Easy Rider*, was named after Billy the Kid. Similarly, it is tempting to think that the fictional cinematic outsider-hero and Vietnam veteran Billy Jack, first portrayed by Tom Laughlin in the 1967 film *The Born Losers*, was given his name in part to evoke Bonney. Another notable text of the day to feature Billy the Kid as a character was Beat writer Michael McClure's 1965 play, *The Beard*, which made headlines when performances were shut down by police in California, then again in Vancouver in 1969, sparking a court case. For an account of the case, see Page. *The Beard* is significant with regard to Ondaatje's text not only because McClure's play put Billy the Kid in the Canadian public's eye but also because it paired him on stage with a fictionalized Jean Harlow, anticipating Ondaatje's character Angela D, whom Ondaatje presents as Billy's lover and whose name echoes that of Hollywood actor—and Western star—Angie Dickinson.
- 12 Scobie wrote of Nichol's book: "Parallels to the VietNam war may be drawn at each reader's personal political discretion; but it does seem clear that Nichol is fully conscious of political applications" (46). The war also informed another text that Nichol wrote about Billy, "Two Heroes," in which Billy and a friend are described as having ended up in Africa, where they "took to killing people just to make the pain less that was there between them but people didn't understand. They tried to track them down, to kill them, & they fled, north thru the jungles, being shot at as they went" (198). The passage's parallels with the Vietnam War are corroborated when the narrator imagines that Billy might have escaped death at the hands of Pat Garrett by going north to Canada (196).
- 13 For a history of the House of Anansi during this period, see Chapter 8 of MacSkimming.
- 14 For instance, in a nonfiction book published in Canada in 1970, titled *I Would Like to Dodge the Draft Dodgers but...*, deserter John Webb writes of being beaten with a rubber hose after being arrested for going AWOL, then of escaping and fleeing to Canada (45).
- 15 For an account of the quotation's immediate notoriety, see Braestrup 254-60.
- 16 The use of the phrase "peaceable kingdom" to describe Canada was popularized by Northrop Frye in 1965 (251).
- 17 Rae confirms this identification (118).
- 18 E.g., George Ryga's 1969 play *Compressions* and Dennis Lee's 1972 poem *Civil Elegies* both make reference to the Canadian manufacture of napalm (Ryga 109; Lee, *Civil* 42).

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