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10. Meat Fiction and Burning Western Light: The South in Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon's

Preacher

Nicolas Labarre

Published from 1995 to 2000, *Preacher* is a violent, provocative and influential series. It was one of the defining titles of the Vertigo imprint, a division of DC Comics aiming at adult readers that emerged from the successes of Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing* and Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*. Scripted by an Irishman, Garth Ennis, and drawn by an Englishman, Steve Dillon, it is a deliberately blasphemous, violent and profane epic, a quest for an indecisive God in a southern landscape saturated with popular culture.

With a narrative center located between Louisiana and Texas, *Preacher* belongs to the field of southern fiction. The physical geography of the series is secondary, however, to its the representation of the South as a mythic and mass-culture-saturated place. The series equates the South with a mode of identity, a way of seeing the world, and it questions the South's representations in mass culture. The series acknowledges the dominant representation of the South through what Tara McPherson calls a "stock set of recurring icons" and characters, but it severs these icons from their historical roots, using them as free-standing signifiers which it reconstructs or discards (76). The South, in *Preacher*, is a set of representations loosely connected to geography. It is close to becoming what Scott Romine -- borrowing from Baudrillard -- announced as a potential final development for southern literature in general: to construct a South that is "a weightless simulacrum," creating its own reality through the deployment of conspicuously southern elements borrowed not from the "natural" world but from preexisting cultural objects (43). In her study of photography in contemporary southern writing,

Katherine Henninger shows how representations of the South have been naturalized to hide the power struggles which have shaped those representations (180-181). By deliberately conflating fiction and reality, *Preacher* negates this naturalization and creates a space where symbols and representations of the South can be freely examined and re-evaluated, placed into conversation and conflict. Further, *Preacher* attempts to chart the ground for a renovated hybrid fiction which would blend the iconography of the South and the West in order to redefine both the limitations and the possibilities of southern identity, offering a version of the South that is self-consciously in dialogue with its popular representations and with the real histories those representations both reveal and conceal. From this dialogue comes the possibility for a new, more complex South, one that acknowledges its histories and representations without being constrained by familiar narratives.

The ostensible southernness of the series is established in its very first issue with broad strokes, relying on the reader's familiarity with a set of symbols codifying the South. In this issue, most places (a diner, a street in Dallas, a flying structure in Heaven, a cave) are drawn as blank spaces, devoid of details, with the notable exception of Annville, Texas. There, pickups are parked outside the "Long Trailer" bar, decorated with a Budweiser emblem; a Dallas Cowboys helmet is prominently displayed inside. Steve Dillon, a penciller with a tendency to standardize the look of secondary characters, lavishes unusual details on the crowd to emphasize the many twisted and subhuman figures who inhabit the place (see figure 10.1).

<figure 10.1>

These visual clues establish a familiar vision of a certain South, with some support from non-diegetic captions (the lyrics to Willie Nelson's song "Time of the Preacher"), thematic elements (the eschatological theological vision, reminding the reader of the Bible belt setting

through visions of fiery apocalypse), emphasized accents for comic effect, and some easily identified xenophobic southern road police. In this first issue, Ennis and Dillon bring together familiar visual or aural markers of southernness, borrowed from innumerable popular culture products, from *Easy Rider* (1969) to *Thelma and Louise* (1991) or *Blood Simple* (1984), and used here as a functional background, a place stocked with beefy extras, without children, elders or any aspiration to realism. This setting is in fact disposable, destined to be burned to the ground when Jesse Custer, a white-clad preacher, becomes the vessel of a god-like entity, Genesis, an event which initiates a 66-issue quest for God.

This use of identifiable genres is not limited to the representation of the South in the series. *Preacher* presents its many pop cultural references openly and uses them as part of an ongoing meta-fictional discourse. Most characters are popular culture experts, and even European villains know their Westerns well enough to make casual reference to them: the narrative universe of the series is, by many respects "right outta the movies" (35:13), although Steve Dillon's stiff, semi-realistic graphical treatment always keep these references at a distance. The range of these references is vast -- from buddy cop movies (issues #5-7, a *Lethal Weapon* parody) to Rob Reiner's *Spinal Tap* ("Who turned the volume of ignorance up to eleven?" Tulip asks [29:7]) to advertisements, such as when the Irish vampire Cassidy refers to the United States as "Marlboro country" (29:17) -- but they generally fall into two broad categories. Some of them function merely as in-jokes or narrative shortcuts, a quick way to characterize the protagonists, à la *Pulp Fiction*. The other set of references is central to the narrative and theme of the series since, taken together, they outline the complex and conflicting representations of the South in popular culture. The cumulative weight of these references casts a doubt about the possibility of reading *Preacher's* world as a self-contained, coherent, diegetic universe. While characters in

Preacher never acknowledge the fact that they are comic book creations, Custer nevertheless accepts his role as a character in a fiction. He is mentored from his early age on by a faceless but easily recognizable John Wayne whom no one but him can see or hear but who is nevertheless capable of helping him. In one striking instance, Custer's drugged trip into his unconscious takes the form of a visit to a movie theater, where he once again meets John Wayne.

This sequence bears further scrutiny: Drugged, sitting on a tombstone in a graveyard, Custer starts his inner voyage through a six-panel sequence (32:6; see figure 10.2), a series of tightening close-ups that lead us into Jesse's film-structured unconscious. In each successive panel (excepting an over-the-shoulder view of Custer's guide), the frame closes in on Custer's face, grimacing, with his eyes rolled upward, while he goes through the credits of the movie to come: "Voodoo features presents / A Mind's Eye production / Of a Jesse Custer film / God almighty / The Saints of Killers / Those damn angels / and the Duke / in." These six panels create a very short temporal unit, one that follows a staccato rhythm signaled by the minute changes from one panel to the next and the fracturing of the text into brief word-balloons. The moment-to-moment transitions, to use Scott McCloud's terminology (69-75), use such small increments that they come to suggest the successive frames of a film's tracking shot. Thus, even though the presence of word balloons, the narrowness of the panels, and Dillon's style prevent any confusion with actual film frames, the word "Genesis" that appears on top of the next page (see figure 10.3) in huge serif type, cannot be interpreted as anything but a movie title (32:7).

McCloud suggests that moment-to-moment transitions require little closure, little effort from the reader. Here, they are used to guide this reader through a paradoxical change of medium, from the "reality" of the comic world to Custer's unconscious, drawn in the form of a movie theater with Jesse as an audience member. John Wayne appears in the center panel, an image on a movie

screen, his face heavily shadowed as he faces the reader while framed against an open, brightly colored canyon landscape. In *Preacher*, Dillon uses ragged panel borders and numerous overlapping or borderless panels, a strategy which prevents any easy identification between the comic page and movie stills, but he draws the screen in Custer's mind with straight lines, in sharp contrast with the erratic borders of the page on which it appears. In the last panel of the page, Custer himself is drawn almost as he was at the beginning of the six-panel sequence of the previous page, but the narrow panel in which he had been inscribed is now as wide as the page itself. He wears the same costume, and his black hair still stands out on a black background thanks to a white outline, but he now looks relaxed, smiling, with a soda and a popcorn bucket in his hands. The introduction to the movie world as Custer's unconscious thus also foreshadows the opposition between the constraining world of the South and the open space of the West.

<figure 10.2>

<figure 10.3>

The scene demonstrates that there is no bright line between what is accepted as "reality" and what is considered "fiction" in *Preacher*. Dillon's graphic treatment is identical, on both sides of the straight line of the movie screen; Custer is not drawn in a different visual style from the John Wayne he sees. Thus, Dillon draws the attention to the theoretical separation of the two media, only to unite them as part of a continuous narrative universe. The sequence is in effect a reversal of critic Irving Howe's famous dismissive judgment of cinema: "The movie-house is a psychological cloakroom, where one checks one personality" (498). Mass culture critics such as Howe perceived the movies as an external force that threatened the individual. Custer's psyche is, on the contrary, entirely bound within the theater's wall, emphasizing the role of popular

conventions in the shaping of one's identity and of southern identity in particular -- although at this point, a shift toward other genres and regional representations is already apparent.

This erasure of boundaries and the lack of a diegetic universe in which "reality" could be separated from "fiction" implies that the stereotypical characters and situations which Custer confronts in the course of the series should not be considered simply as embodiments of stereotypes, but, to a certain extent, as the stereotypes themselves. Custer's quest is also a *genre-shaping* endeavor, in which a fiction based in exploring and enacting the most familiar clichés of the South's representation explicitly reshapes itself from issue to issue. Southern identity is thus constructed through a visual adventure narrative rather than purely through written or spoken language. Significantly, Custer is awarded a word-based power early in the series: he has the capacity to utter self-fulfilling prophecy, inescapable orders. However, when he is confronted with powerful southern clichés -- notably a fallen belle in a crumbling plantation manor and a klansman -- that power of simply rephrasing the world is shown to be either ineffective or inappropriate. The conflict has to be played out as a violent and visual struggle, a fact that underscores how thoroughly common conceptions of the South are constructed and disseminated through visual images.

As *Preacher* became a success, Steve Dillon and Garth Ennis shifted the emphasis of the series, downplaying its religious elements and turning their attention to an investigation of the nature of the United States and the South in particular.¹ The first covers of the series (Custer in prayer, with a burning church in the foreground for #1, Custer angrily questioning an angel for #4, and so on) sketched a blasphemous religious approach which was conceived as the selling point of the series, judging from the promotional material which preceded it: "Jesse Custer was a young small-town preacher slowly losing his faith . . . until he merged with a supernatural being

called Genesis. Now endowed with a strange ability, Jesse sets out on the biggest mission a preacher could imagine: to find God -- literally" (*Absolute Vertigo* 2). However, after a brief episode in New York, *Preacher* moves back to the South. If the southern background was an ephemeral creation in the first story arc, borrowed wholesale from Hollywood to be destroyed after a few pages, it becomes much more elaborate from this point in the series. This added complexity is not, however, a shift to "realism," for the South is consistently treated as a set of representations more than as an actual place.

The narrative arc that begins with the story "All in the Family" (#8) opens with a flashback to a moment in 1974 when Jesse had to watch his father being shot in the head.² Only toward the end of the issue does the reader discover that the scene and most of the issue took place in Louisiana, in a plantation of all places, "the privileged site of Southern history and femininity," as Tara McPherson puts it (44). Significantly, this is also the first issue of the series during which Ennis deals with the backstories of its characters, as Custer and his girlfriend, Tulip, tell each other about their past. This visit to the South is thus positioned first and foremost as a trip to the past, a trip through history: this South is a place of memory and the source of Custer's identity rather than just a geographical place.

These episodes revolve around the L'Angelle family: a decadent southern clan living in Angelville, a decaying plantation set on the border of Texas and Louisiana, where they are held in the thrall of an anachronistic and horrifying matriarch. The L'Angelles are Custer's family on his mother's side, from whom he had run away in his teens and who now seek to bring him back to the plantation. Even more than in the in series opening, Ennis and Dillon deploy identifiable icons of the South. Issue #8 has three splash pages: a swearing Custer, the plantation, and Marie L'Angelle, a fallen belle. These full page pictures hint at the ambiguous status of these images.

Not only are they part of the narrative sequence, but they also stand on their own as icons do. The clichés are presented as such, they are not naturalized. As seen in figure 10.4, Marie L'Angelle, most often referred to as "Grandma," is always shown wearing the same white negligee as Vivien Leigh in Kazan's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, herself a broken version of the belle, a similarity further underlined by her French name and her habit of setting genteel social codes against human feelings. According to critic Kathryn Seidel, Blanche DuBois in Tennessee Williams's play is an anachronism who "withdraws into of world of illusion and madness" (166). Marie L'Angelle in *Preacher* follows the same path, but in the preserved southern plantation where she lives with her two adopted sons, T.C. and Jody, this world of illusion becomes the accepted common ground. Unlike Blanche Dubois, these characters are shown as powerful within their realm. This power is made clearer by the presence within the narrative of another southern family, a swamp-dwelling clan whose physical deformities indicate generations of incest and whose son, Billy-Bob, becomes a friend to the young Jesse Custer. Angry but passive victims of the L'Angelles' violence, their helplessness emphasizes by contrast the power that a similar character, T.C., can wield once he is integrated into a power structure such as the L'Angelle family. T.C. is known for his indiscriminate sexual appetites, including his lust for chickens. Yet though he is arguable no less sexually deviant than the incestuous swamp-dwellers, he occupies a position of power and authority. The plantation may not be intrinsically superior to its counterpart, the swamp-dwellers' home, but it is immediately presented as dominant, in a literal interpretation of the relative power these narratives have in popular representations of the South.

<figure 10.4>

The power of the plantation owners, of southern aristocracy and the power of the stereotypes themselves in popular culture are thus reaffirmed through three issues (#8-10), during which the outsiders, Custer and Tulip, are tied and helpless. Blanche DuBois was powerless to impose her will and values upon Stanley Kowalski and his friends, but the constant threat of violence in Angelville makes even Custer adopt a deferent attitude in front of Marie L'Angelle. However, as soon as he frees himself, he can claim his identity back. He does not long for a lost past, he does not acknowledge the faded beauty of the belle. Instead, he challenges the coherence of the fictional world delineated by these "treasured icons" of the South (McPherson 5).

Custer's point of view, in this instance, is that of the outsider. While he remains a southerner throughout the series, he does not belong among these decaying representations of southern icons; rather, he brings to the narrative oppositional readings of the power structure within the family. His role in revealing the inherent tensions in the southern plantation narrative is first made clear in the way his presence affects the belle herself. The stereotype of the fallen belle is first taken to the extreme of having Marie reprimand Custer on his language, even when he is protesting a genuine act of horror -- his dog having been nailed to a post (9:20) -- a reprimand that contrasts her attachment to formality with her monstrous appearance. Set in the past, the scene also functions as a powerful anti-nostalgic device. When Marie is first introduced, the full page picture presents her as a disheveled bald monster in a wheelchair, with long claw-like fingers, retaining formality and dignity in her speech alone: "Hello Jesse, won't you please introduce me to your young ladyfriend?" (8:21). At this point, the fallen belle merges with the terrifying image of the paralyzed cannibal patriarch in another southern family, that of Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. The sense of ritual seen in the dinner scene of Hooper's

film, in which a young girl is offered to the sub-human patriarch, is reproduced here with several pages during which Custer and Jesse wait for Marie L'Angelle to appear, before being presented to her. In both cases, members of the family submit to the elder, even though the elder's physical state betrays his or her decrepitude, especially when opposed to the youth of their victims.

Assisting Marie L'Angelle are her two adopted sons: T.C. and Jody. Both are violent, both have a twisted sexuality, and both evoke a conjunction of familiar images, from John Boorman's *Deliverance* to Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*: zoophile monsters, half-beasts of the bayou, degenerates living with burning crosses on their lawns. They embody a familiar type in Deep South narrative, described by David Bell as "the badlands of the rural; its sick, sordid, malevolent, *nasty* underbelly" (94). They are, in other words, the flip side of the the rural utopia of plantation fictions, just as Marie L'Angelle's role as a fallen belle, pushed to grotesque extremes, displays its similarities with the cannibalistic elders of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. The L'Angelles are not just a southern family; instead, they encompass most of the negative imagery associated with the South. All the characteristics commonly attributed to southern society -- its sense of place, of family, of history, of *belonging* -- are presented as potential sources of horror, to the heroes and to the reader. There is a horror in being assimilated by this version of the South, as Marie L'Angelle makes explicit in this exchange:

Marie L'Angelle: You've still got plenty of that Texas white trash father of yours in you, haven't you? That worthless waste of life who left you nothing but his name.

Jesse: That's all I'll ever need.

Marie L'Angelle: Well, Perhaps I'll take that from you too, Jesse. I'm taking everything else. Perhaps I'll change your name like I changed my own, when that useless cretin I married went and fell in the gumbo. Jesse L'Angelle. Hm. (8:22)

Being devoured by the swamp and being devoured by the L'Angelles are here equated, as they are on several other occasions: the mode of punishment favored by the family for its rebellious members is a stay in a coffin underwater. Cannibalism and body horror become metaphors for an identity crisis. In *Reconstructing Dixie*, Tara McPherson mentions her surprise at discovering an ad for a Scarlett O'Hara doll, "a mythologized image of innocence and purity" presented in an elaborately ornate box, in the very same issue of the *Los Angeles Times* that featured an article about James Allen's collection of lynching photographs and the horrors they revealed. For McPherson, the coincidence serves "as a powerful illustration of our cultural schizophrenia about the South," a condition which allows us to idealize the southern belle without considering the monstrous violence that enabled her coveted lifestyle (3). "All in the Family" challenges that schizophrenia through an organized destruction of the symbols (the plantation is burned, the family is an artificial one, the belle is monstrous) which culminates in a reduction of the bodies to pure flesh and meat. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, from which this aesthetic of the body horror seems to have been partly borrowed, has been described by critic Lew Brighton as the "Gone with the Wind of Meat Movies" (qtd. in Bloom). "Meat movies," a term sometimes simply referring to especially gory horror films, applies more strictly to a subset of films focusing on cannibalism in the late sixties and in the seventies, films which have also been called "hillbilly horror" for their insistence on opposing rural and urban settings, North and South (Lopez 132, Bell 97-99). *Preacher* brings to light the paradoxical cultural identity of a region defined simultaneously by the plantation myth and by such violent representations.³ It exposes the

"tensions, ambivalences and ruptures" which exists in these narrations of the regions (McPherson 235).

Just as the L'Angelle plantation is located on the border of Louisiana and Texas, *Preacher* shows the place from the perspective of two apparently incompatible codes: plantation mythology and meat fiction. Such a mash-up of hitherto incompatible southern representations is not new, and Jon Smith notably delineated a similar process of juxtaposition in his study of punk appropriation of diverse southern narrative. For Smith, drawing on Dick Hebdige's study of subculture, a renewed sense of southern identity can be achieved through a borrowing and reconfiguring of "plundered" icons and codes of the region (86-89). However, *Preacher* does not always present this diversity of representations as enabling creative reconstructions, but often as obstacles to such reconstruction. Horrified by both visions, Custer destroys his enemies by fire, suggesting the possibility of a renovated southern identity which would forego these reified genres and representations. Two similarly depicted brawls signal this reversal (#10 and #12): a young Custer is shown grievously hurt by his uncle Jody, then a later fight plays out in symmetrical fashion, while Custer only asks "Getting old?" (12:9). What is at stake here is not so much a defeat of the South, but a defeat of a familiar depiction of the South as a place of submission and decay, a defeat which makes possible a renovated conception of the region, a transition for which Custer is but a means.

Having thus exposed the limits of a mythologized conception of femininity and family in the South, Ennis and Dillon again use meat fiction as a counterpoint when they address the issue of race relations in a story arc focusing on the Ku Klux Klan. Narratively and thematically, the two episodes are connected: in one of the establishing scenes of this arc (#41-48) Custer encounters a member of the inbred family who used to leave near the plantation, and even more

significantly, he later finds mother, who was supposed to have died at Angelville; further, the plantation itself serves as the background of the cover for #43. Salvation, where the story is set, is a Texas town, and again a frontier, for *Preacher* positions Texas alternatively as belonging to the South and to the West. While Custer could not live in Angelville, in Louisiana, his connection with Salvation proves more ambiguous; while nothing could be saved in Angelville, Salvation can -- unsurprisingly -- be salvaged; while African Americans were conspicuously absent from the L'Angelle plantation, their fate is immediately called to attention in Salvation. This is a segregated South, where one Mexican idiot can be befriended, but where the "colored folks" mostly live in a place nicknamed "Coontown" (41:19). When Custer consents to be the sheriff of the town, he discovers that the city is in the hands of a diminutive meat-packer, Odin Quincannon. However, when Custer gathers the population to resist Quincannon (45:14), the first question raised at the gathering is about the presence of African Americans, previously absent from both the city center and the visual space of the comics.

While the Angelville episode was an open parody of plantation romances, the focus here seems to be on an actual historical issue. However, segregation in Salvation is so open, so close to a caricature (Quincannon's lawyer is also a Nazi fetishist, for instance) that it functions once more as a pure signifier, a conflagration of familiar structures and images, from the tyrannical industrial leader to the gathering of the Klan. Tara McPherson notes that post-Civil Rights popular fiction about the South tends to use a "covert" or "lenticular" approach to racial logics (73). *Preacher*, in contrast, resurrects a more "overt" approach, drawing from *Birth of a Nation* in a manner similar to how the Angelville episode reconstructed *Gone with the Wind* (which also includes a Klan raid in the novel, although not in Selznick's adaptation). From the onset of the

episode, this social order is an anachronism, surviving only through the passivity of the locals, but one bound to collapse under an outsider's gaze.

Once more, the bodies and flesh serve as metaphors for the corruption of the social order. The meat packing plants were the setting for the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and Quincannon is presented as a diminutive Meat God, a minuscule Odin talking about himself in the third person, first introduced to the reader in an episode entitled "The Meat-Man Cometh." As with the plantation and Grandma L'Angelle, his first appearance takes place in a splash page (42:4): he comes out of a hangar, wearing his glasses, white briefs, socks, garters and shoes, covered in blood. The blood forms a red X on his white chest, and taken together with the blue door behind him, they evoke a fragmented Confederate flag. Quincannon stands for this mythical Griffithian South: he is a klansman (*Birth of a Nation* was initially released as *The Clansman*, the title of the Thomas Dixon novel it adapts), and he is also a grotesque parody of a man whose body -- short, bald and myopic -- is contrasted with the power he assumes. His lawyer's sadistic habits frequently incapacitate his workers and his plant pollutes the region; but most shocking of all, his love for brutalized flesh is demonstrated by his habit of making love to a matronly-shaped stack of meat from his abattoir, a hideous effigy which he even abuses verbally.

Here, as in the L'Angelle story arc and in more minor episodes, such as a visit to a cult of "vampires" in New-Orleans (#30-33), stock representations of the South are embodied by unambiguous villains, united by a taste for violence inscribed in the flesh. Carnality and brutalized flesh exist in a state of tension, of unstable equilibrium with the idealized plantation-centered narrative that is still the dominant popular representation of the region. What emerges from this conflict is not the complex, dialogic narrative hoped for by scholars such as McPherson (254-55), but a succession of horrifying tableaux (the aforementioned splash pages) that will be

ended by Custer's arrival. This South, conceived not as a place but as a field of conflicting representations, is unsustainable because the gap between these conceptions cannot be bridged. Custer declares as much when he discovers a badly wounded Quincannon making love to his meat girl, and decides to kill him: "This ain't a mercy killing, I'd sure like to know what is"(48:8). Like the L'Angelle plantation, the meat-packing plants, are also thoroughly razed by fire. The fire acts as a powerful symbol, placed as it is in opposition with the tainted flesh presented before; Custer cauterizes these old wounds, but *Preacher* suggests that his intervention is only incidental. Before the destruction of his plant, a lightning bolt strikes Odin (himself a distorted thunder God), at a time when he is threatening to destroy Salvation. His pretensions to divinity are denied, but this *deus ex machina* (to quote Custer, "that was pretty fuckin' lucky" [47:19]) is more than a narrative trick: Odin, Marie L'Angelle and their subordinates, are characters out of their time, bound to be eventually destroyed. Custer's presence, once more, reveals the tensions and exposes the contradictions of representations already bound to fall apart.

These two episodes, and a few ancillary moments beyond the scope of this essay, suggest the impossibility of getting to a unified notion of southernness through established popular representations. They accomplish within the comic a task similar to that undertaken by academics such as Barbara Ladd, in pointing out the "anxiety" surrounding a conception of the South, based around a litany of all-too familiar places -- "working plantations . . . tobacco fields and tobacco barns, small towns, 'niggertowns'" -- that "animate southern literature, that construct memory and shape the future" (47). These episodes also hint at the problematic relationship between southernness and place, through the emphasis on frontier and on Texas, a state belonging at once to two different regions. Yet, just as Barbara Ladd concludes that "the South still means something" (57) in spite of its perpetual construction and reconstruction, *Preacher* suggests the

possibility of reinventing southernness through a questioning of authority and a displacement of some of the most conventional representations of the region, with values and codes of the Western as a suggested alternative.

What Ennis proposes, through Custer, is first a shift of emphasis from symbolic structures, erected to maintain a decaying status quo, to individuals. When Custer arrives in Salvation and hears a group of drunks verbally abusing a Mexican man in a bar, the reader comes to expect a bar fight, a recurring motif in *Preacher*. The composition of the panel itself, recalling that of Custer's arrival in Annville's bar, reinforces this expectation. However, this time, he is stopped by the good-looking and evidently intelligent barmaid (later revealed to be his mother) who advises him to look at the scene from another perspective: "Hector's a little slow, doesn't know too many people. And those dicks are pretty good to him, most of the time. Hell, sometimes it's even his turn to go home with Cora" (41:18). Thus, Custer's and the reader's attentions are drawn to the necessity of going beyond superficial representations, to focus on individual point of view: to move away from a stereotypical situation (the racist comments) and encompass oppositional, individual readings of the same scene. The racism is not denied, the stereotype is not without basis, but the politics of the interaction cannot be reduced to a superficial reading. Custer, an outsider, is unable at first to perceive what the insider points out. Custer's deputy later emphasizes the difference when she notes:

Custer: Time to venture forth an' do battle on behalf of the good folks of Salvation.

Deputy: They may be rednecks, but they're *our* rednecks. (46:11)

This dialogue hinges on a speech made by Custer in the previous issue -- when rousing the people of Salvation to unite and resist Quincannon -- in which the word "redneck" had a more controversial context:

It's up to you to decide what ["Texan" is] gonna mean here. Is it a buncha fat, bigoted rednecks givin' in to crooks and corporations, 'cause they're too big to fight an' we kinda like'em in charge of us anyhow? Way the Yankees see us? Or is it drawin' a line in the dust an' sayin' *no further*. [emphasis in the original] (45:16)

Being from the South is not a problem *per se*, but behaving in accordance to southern clichés is. The disparaging notion here is not that these people are rednecks, but that in being complacent, they conform to a stereotype defined by the outside world. Custer's speech incites them to act as independent individuals and not as byproducts of an established symbolic order. *Preacher* therefore seems to answer McPherson's call for a "model of southern mixedness . . . rooted in everyday life in the South, a life that is not finally reducible to the iconic status of certain southern symbols" (31). This liberal creed of the preeminence of individual on the system often takes the form of anarchistic outburst in *Preacher*, with a forcible and often violent rejection of any authority figures, in a series which ends with the murder of God himself. A striking example of this rebellion of the individual is provided in a full-page illustration of an immense "fuck you" dug into the Mojave Desert: this is a message to NASA and the world, from a failed astronaut, refusing to accept the fact that he wasn't chosen by the institution. "I showed them. I spelt it out for them. And I made sure they could see it on their goddamn fucking shuttle" (39:16).

This stand for the individual against the symbol is refined at a late point in the series, after the Salvation story arc (#53), through the case of Elvis Presley. The cover of the issue, by Glenn Fabry, is a pastiche of a Jasper Johns American flag, and the self-contained episode tells

the story of a road trip from Salvation to New York, during which Custer meets several hitchers. While the tone is mostly farcical, the common topic of these stories is the American dream. A series of rags to riches narratives exemplifies the possibility of escaping one's origin and predestined path. The last hitcher in the story, drawn as a faceless figure, a silhouette, is set up as a foil to Custer's worries that the country may not be able to sustain the weight of its accumulated dreams. In this context, the dreams are also to be understood as the various power structures, real and symbolic, against which Custer has been pitted.

Yore concern is touchin'; mighty touching [. . .] But this here's the greates' an' fines' country ever was or will be, yessir. Ain't no needa be afraid for her. Juz 'cause she openza gates to th' stars, that don't mean ever' man steps through emz gonna climb that high. All 'merica does is show th' way. (53:22)

Through allusions to Colonel Parker, notably, it is clear at this point that the hitcher is none other than Presley, a southern icon to be sure, but also an actual individual. By blanking out his image, presenting him as a silhouette and by having him point out to the freedom an individual has within a symbolic representation, Ennis and Dillon dissociate Elvis the individual from Elvis the icon. This Elvis walked away from his iconic status: "Ah juz live ma own dreamz, 'steada worryin 'all tie 'bout ever'body else's" (53:21) Through a symmetrical disposition of Elvis and Custer in four consecutive panels, Dillon posits equivalence between Elvis's role and Custer's, while the narrow framing creates a resemblance between the two profiles: Elvis's resignation from his iconic status is more than an individual act; it shows the way to Custer, and potentially to others (53:20-21).

This reduction of the icon to the individual is not, however, the only escape from reified representations of the South in *Preacher*. As pointed out earlier, the diegetic universe of the

series is a meta-fictional one, with no direct aspiration to realism. Thus, this reduction to the individual is channeled through the replacement of a set of conflicting codes, the multiple southern genres which make it impossible to fashion a coherent identity, by a more unified genre, one that is more focused on the individual than on a social order. In short, the southerner becomes a Westerner. Robert Brinkmeyer has shown that this strategy of displacement, of seeking in the West an alternative to the constraining values of the South, has been adopted by a wide range of authors as a way to shed a new perspective on southern fiction. According to Brinkmeyer, this shift has consequences on the "cultural myths shaping America's conception of itself" (3) in the way it allows these authors to negotiate the opposition between movement and immobility, between the American pioneer and the southern hero bound to a specific location. Though not created by southern authors, *Preacher* fits this description well, but it also fits with Brinkmeyer's refusal to reduce the use of the Western to an *escape* from the South. The Western used in a southern context is a powerful instrument of cultural critique: in other words, these narratives are still about the South, even when they seem to displace it entirely (Brinkmeyer 112-113).

The West is present, in *Preacher*, predictably, through popular culture references and especially through allusions to the Western movie tradition, including John Ford's or Howard Hawk's classics (Quincannon is the name of a character in Ford's *She Wore a Blue Ribbon*, for example) as well as the spaghetti Western, but stopping before the revisionist reversal of the seventies. In *Preacher*, motherly advice is generic formula, as exemplified by Christina's recommendation to Custer in Salvation: "Tradition demands you start cleaning this place up. Run the bad guys out of town on a rail, fall in love with the town beauty, acquire a drunken but amusing sidekick. How about it, stranger?" (42:6) Later, remarking on one of the more mundane

aspects of his job, he sarcastically jokes, "It's just like *High Noon*. I knew it would be." (45:8). From its very beginning, *Preacher* brings identifiable elements from the West into its southern fiction: from the ethereal John Wayne, to the Saint of Killers -- a character whose appearance is straight from a spaghetti Western. Explaining why the letter column is called "Gone to Texas," Ennis firmly ascribes a Western tropism to the series:

It's called *Gone to Texas* -- not just because Jesse Custer is himself from Texas, or because the first four issues of the book are set there [. . .] but because it is a Sodding Great Title for anything. It sounds big and wide and epic and downright American, like the kind of thing John Wayne himself probably said on a regular basis. (1:41)

Through quotations, borrowings, and numerous visual markers (guns, hats, showdowns in deserted towns, and so on), this connection to the Western is regularly reaffirmed. Custer himself is a Western hero by his own admission and in the evaluation of people close to him: quick with his fists, apt to start a bar brawl, loyal to the extreme to his friends. He even owns a lighter which was given to his father by John Wayne himself. He is, or tries to be, the "solitary figure breaking free from his community" identified by Robert Brinkmeyer Jr. as the archetypal westerner (4). However, this identification with the Western hero remains incomplete or at least ambiguous. While his behavior is that of the westerner, Custer is visually set apart from the stereotype in his black and white preacher suit. Moreover, he hates guns and is thus set in sharp contrast with a true-to-type Western character, the Saint of Killers.

More importantly, Custer identifies himself as a southerner on several occasions, notably when discussing American culture with Tulip or when aligning with the people of Salvation. He

takes pride in being a southerner who disproves southern clichés, notably when he rebuffs Tulip for putting too much faith in pre-established images of the region (in this case, *Deliverance*):

Tulip: Considering your upbringing, I'm surprised you don't just drool all day and play the banjo.

Custer: That's just your damn yankee stereotype of the South. You don't start rapin' canoeists 'cause you had grits for breakfast. (34:13)

Custer's identity is therefore ostensibly southern, yet not completely beholden to popular representations of the region, and the Western is used as an alternative source of self-definition. *Preacher* does not forego the relation to place that has long been seen as crucial to southern fiction, but it expands on the ambiguity of its main locale, Texas, as part both of the South and the West, as affirming and defining community and empty frontier simultaneously.

This dual identity plays out throughout the series. Custer's way to fight the southern stereotypes is often to resort to a Western behavior, pitting one genre, one set of conventions against another. In a telling passage in *Salvation*, Klansmen besiege the sheriff office where Custer and his assistant are holed up. The siege recalls the confrontation in Howard Hawks's Texas Western *Rio Bravo* (1959), especially in light of John Wayne's importance in *Preacher*, but the Klansmen are reenacting classical southern scenes, complete with burning crosses and white robes (45:22-23). The issue of southern femininity, first addressed through the grotesque figure of Marie L'Angelle, is also reframed through the use of a Western prop: Custer's assistant in *Salvation* is a beautiful African-American woman, initially confined to a predictably marginal role. When Custer invites her to buy an ostensibly oversized firearm, she is able to turn the table on the Klan and seize power over the town. She does not renounce her femininity nor her blackness, but at the end of the *Salvation* arc, she is the new sheriff. Custer's transformation of a

southern town in a Western setting does not only transform his own identity, but is also shown as a vector for profound cultural transformations, with a shift of power from a fat male white character to a fit African-American woman.

This progressive replacement of the codes of southern fiction with Western images finds its logical conclusion in the epilogue of the series. After a showdown at the Alamo (the setting of the John Wayne film of the same name), the series ends with a cowboy gunning down God and his angels in Paradise, Custer and Tulip escaping the city on a horse, riding toward the sunset, with Custer half-confessing that he wanted to be a cowboy all along. The issue also opens with three epigraphs all dealing with dreams, cowboys and the West. Western values have thoroughly replaced the southern imagery which defined the early stages of Custer's quest.

However, for all its appearance of westward movement, *Preacher* still remains bounded in the intermediate State of Texas. For one thing, it leaves its main protagonist remarkably unchanged, or *unmoved*: apart from his preacher collar, his appearance is very similar to what it was in the first episode, and even the eye he lost along the way has been restored by God. Steve Dillon's graphical treatment in *Preacher* is kept deliberately simple (Osborne), with few other clues to the characters' state of mind than their immediate appearance (their state of mind is not reflected in the background, and the page layouts are relatively straightforward, for instance). In this context, this graphical continuity denotes the limited range of the transformations that took place in the course of the 66 issues. Noticeably, Custer may also kiss his attractive African-American assistant in Salvation and install her in a position of power, but he nevertheless leaves her to go and find his white girlfriend.

This stability underlines the fact that *Preacher* does not ultimately go West. In the course of the series, Custer goes East, North, but also West (Los Angeles) to no avail. Even a trip to the

South of France, to an alternative South, only triggers more fights and violence: the only place he can find first salvation then closure is Texas. Going East is identified with Europe, a region associated with evil in *Preacher* (the villains include a Nazi-worshipping secretary, the treacherous Herr Starr, a European religious organization, a De Sade, and so on) but the West outside Texas is not satisfying either. Custer's journey is a short one: from one border of Texas, where the L'Angelle plantation was located, to the other, toward which he rides at the end of the last issue. The old South and its decaying meat have been verbally and visually assaulted into non-existence, but the South remains. The Western is offered as an alternative model for a southern identity, but this alternative is only sketched through preexisting images and situations from the canon of the genre. When Custer and Tulip ride into the sunset, they are actually riding into something very close to a blank, empty page. The two consecutive two-page spreads in the issue feature a shot-reverse shot framing might be the closest approximation of cinema techniques in the series, but the fact is that, as depicted in figure 10.5, at the end of the journey, the protagonists ride into emptiness and not a fully realized Western setting. Having denounced the stifling effect of southern representations at length, *Preacher* does not construct a new fully defined southern identity from the Western genre. To paraphrase the blanked out Elvis in the road trip episode, all the Western does is "show the way." It does not produce a new hegemonic set of representations.

<figure 10.5>

This analysis does not exhaust the possible readings of *Preacher*, but it does suggest that far from being simply the "100% old-fashioned narrative" described by Ennis, it addresses the cultural identity of the South, exposing the discrepancies and omissions in some of the most enduring representations of the region, then offering a smaller, less ambitious and less

hegemonic set of codes, the Western, as a source for a possible reinvention of this identity. A key difference between this endeavor and other uses of the West to reinvent the South, such as those identified by Brinkmeyer, lies in the fact that both creators of *Preacher* are outsiders. Their vision of the South is from its very start a self-conscious cultural construction, crafted together from various sources and media, and they choose freely which of these images will be retained in their reconstruction of the South. Thus, like the punks studied by Jon Smith, they foreground the "arbitrariness" of these codes and images, severing their historical significance to focus on the way they coexist and contradict themselves in contemporary popular culture (95). Though *Preacher* bears no connection to the "actual" South, its irreverent use of preexisting images, conventions and genres, over an extended period and page count, reconnects it with some of the powerful tropes of southern fiction and southern identity. The ironical and grotesque moments in the narrative merely underline its tenacious exploration of the myth-making and cultural-shaping possibilities in the interface between regions. At the end of her study of southern representations Tara McPherson, expresses her hope for "models for change that help us narrate different futures, models often beginning at the level of the micro and the personal, although they mustn't end here"(255). Through its anarchistic outburst against a reified vision of the South, *Preacher* does seem to offer such a model, even though its solution to a reification of a romanticized past history often involve nothing more than a fist-fight and a cleansing fire.

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Notes

¹ Following the end of Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*, the series established itself as the top seller of the Vertigo imprint, and reached respectable sales of approximately 50,000 copies per issue, while top-selling comic books of the period sold around 200,000 copies (Miller et al 827-8).

² Although this essay cites individual essays, the stories discussed here are also available in trade paperback collections. The issues focusing on the L'Angelles are included in *Preacher: Until the End of the World*, and the issues focusing on Jesse's adventures in Salvation are included in *Preacher: Salvation*.

³ Another example of the link between *Preacher* and the Southern meat movies is to be found in another episode of cannibalistic mutant hillbillies (#39, "For All Mankind), recalling Wes Craven's seminal *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977).