

Nowhere Man and the Twentieth-Century Cowboy: Images of Identity and American History in Sam Shepard's *True West*

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He appears from nowhere. Kicking up dust on the edge of some border or frontier, he walks out of the desert with a long, bowlegged stride. Or he drives into a neon motel parking lot with a pickup truck and a gooseneck trailer. It doesn't particularly matter where he comes from. Odds are he will disappear again. His name is Travis, or Eddie, or Lee, or Sam, and he walks into the late twentieth century as Sam Shepard's recreation of the American Cowboy. For thirty years, critics have attempted to attach meaning to Shepard's plays and films. They have tried to place this man, this matinee idol who describes winning the Pulitzer Prize as being "like news of a terminal illness ... something to get through so you can move on,"¹ in literary and dramatic history. Some critics, like Herbert Blau, have seen Shepard as a recorder of a lost American Dream and of the "deficiencies of our [national] theater."² Others, like David Savran, have found in Shepard "a critique of fundamental dramatic relationships."³

Any critic who approaches Shepard's body of work is immediately confronted with the difficulty of disentangling Shepard's characters from Sam Shepard the actor and writer. In his biography, David DeRose defines Shepard as a "self-made myth" at the same time that he states that "Shepard's film career has no place in this study."⁴ DeRose's convenient omission of Shepard the director and actor erases any similarity between the characters Shepard creates and the roles he chooses to play. From Chuck Yeager who "pushes the envelope" in *The Right Stuff* to Travis and Lee who come to *Paris, Texas* and *True West* from the Mojave Desert, Shepard's roles, plays, and screenplays are linked by a series of nowhere-men who have willingly abandoned a sense of time, place, and history. While the scope of this paper makes it impossible for me to examine all the dramatic and cinematic works Shepard has participated in, I would like to suggest that *True West* constructs a present that appears in Shepard's work as a whole. Like the theories of the postmod-

ern experience that have been articulated by critics such as Fredric Jameson, in Shepard's depiction of our late twentieth-century cultural moment, man realizes that he has lost a stable sense of identity and of history. This paper contends that Shepard's work as a whole engages and illustrates theories of the postmodern, while the character of Lee in *True West* challenges the precept behind postmodern theory which assumes that contemporary man's loss of subjectivity and history must necessarily be a negative experience. The endless doubling of Austin and Lee allegorizes two ways modern man attempts to solve his feelings of placelessness and alienation. As Austin clings to the image of living in the desert *with* his brother, he reveals contemporary man's lingering nostalgia for a family connection that inscribes his identity in time. In contrast to Austin's final inability to leave his brother, Lee stands as a self-declared "free agent."⁵ He registers a potentially positive sense of freedom which accompanies man when he loses his nostalgia for history and realizes that identity and the past are only myths to be performed and manipulated.

In "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," Fredric Jameson outlines a present that is strikingly similar to the one Shepard depicts in his interviews and plays.⁶ Jameson describes:

the disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve. Think only of the media exhaustion of news: of how Nixon and, even more so, Kennedy are figures from a now distant past. One is tempted to say that the very function of the news media is to relegate such recent historical experiences as rapidly as possible into the past.⁷

Jameson's postmodern society arises out of the "postwar [capitalist] boom" and the academic institutionalization of modernism during the sixties. In this culture, man has lost the ability to locate himself in time and in space. Any sense of his national and individual origins, of his place within a clear and understandable linear history, have been erased. Without the ability to ground himself in space and time, man becomes deprived of a sense of his private and public selves. The "unique self and private identity" that defined the "modernist" aesthetic becomes unmoored and disappears.⁸ As members of Jameson's twentieth century, we are trapped in an endless search for an unattainable past and for a sense of our American frontier origins. Like Lee who turns to Kirk Douglas's *Lone Star* for his model of a "true-to-life Western," (19) the only pasts the twentieth-century viewer can find are those we create through pop images and mass media stereotypes.⁹ While we may look to Chuck Yeager, to Travis, and to Sam Shepard himself to be the physical incar-

nation of our cowboy past, these characters are only empty cardboard images. They have no historical existence or actual connection to time. They reveal the past we seek as only an accumulation of consumable objects, surfaces, and produced images. Just as *The Old Man in Fool For Love* points to an invisible picture and tells Eddie, "That's realism. I am actually married to Barbara Mandrell in my mind,"¹⁰ postmodern man reaches out a hand to ground himself in time, to connect himself to other people, and finds nothing but an image that has no authenticity or existence outside of his mental present.¹¹

In an interview with Kenneth Chubb of *Theatre Quarterly*, Shepard nationalizes Jameson's description of postmodern society:

I was in Wisconsin, in Milwaukee, and for the Fourth of July we have this celebration. ... You begin to have a feeling of this historical thing being played out in contemporary terms – I didn't even know what the Fourth of July meant, really, but here was this celebration taking place, with explosions. One of the weird things about being in America now, though I haven't been there much lately, is that you don't have any connection with the past, with what history means; so you can be there celebrating the Fourth of July, but all you know is that things are exploding in the sky. And then you've got this emotional thing that goes a long way back, which creates a certain kind of chaos, a kind of terror, you don't know what the fuck's going on. It's really hard to grab the whole out of the experience.¹²

In this passage, Shepard describes the present as an experience of temporal disjunction. It is characterized by fragments, by literal "explosions" for which an individual cannot provide a context. Shepard's present cannot be "grabbed" and synthesized back together again into a "whole." It can only be a moment when contrasting emotions of "celebrating" and "exploding" unfold and overlap. Here, man is haunted by a residual "emotional thing that goes a long way back." He believes he should be able to ascribe a temporal significance to the events before him, yet his inability to narrate his present in historical terms, his sense of having lost a past, create in him a "certain kind of chaos, a kind of terror."

When Shepard talks with Carolyn Rosen of the *Village Voice* about the Gulf War, he reiterates his sense of a lost national past:

I was in Kentucky when the war opened. I was in a bar ... and it was stone silence. The TV was on, and these planes were coming in, and I had the sense that – it just seemed like doomsday to me. I could not believe the systematic kind of insensitivity of it. That there was this punitive attitude: we're going to just knock these people off the face of the earth.

And then it's devastating. Not only that, but they've convinced the American public that this was a good deed. ... the notion of this being a heroic event is just outrageous. I couldn't believe it. I still can't believe it. I can't believe that, having come out of the

sixties and the incredible reaction to Vietnam, that voice has all but disappeared. Vanished. There's no voice anymore.¹³

Shepard recounts the Gulf War in terms that are similar to the crystalline images used to describe the memory of "where you were and what you were doing" on the day Kennedy was shot. By casting the outbreak of the Gulf War in the frozen photographic images that surround the national memory of the Kennedy assassination, Shepard expresses a nostalgia for a lost American past and registers a double loss. The present has lost the idealism of the sixties. The "voice" of protest against the Vietnam War no longer has a place in the nineties. At the same time, the world Shepard experiences has come to be characterized by larger feelings of personal and national erasure. In this "perpetual present," the American public easily envisions a whole people and their history being "knocked" off the planet. We quickly and willingly forget the mistakes of the Vietnam War. Shepard's litany here of "I can't believe it" challenges a cultural moment that is characterized by historical amnesia. Shepard nostalgically contests this present with words and narrative structure, and the viewer must look for a parallel disavowal in *True West* at the same time that she sees the moments when Austin and Lee acknowledge the sense of freedom, unaccountability, and release that is born when the search for an historical past is abandoned.

The "terror" and "chaos" that Shepard describes during the Fourth of July are an experience both Austin and Lee face in the course of *True West*. Shepard explains a reading of *True West* from the perspective of Austin and Lee's doubling relationship:

I wanted to write a play about double nature, one that wouldn't be symbolic or metaphorical or any of that stuff. I just wanted to give a taste of what it feels like to be two-sided. It's a real thing, double nature. I think we're split in a much more devastating way than psychology can ever reveal. It's not so cute. Not some little thing we can get over. It's something we've got to live with.¹⁴

Shepard warns the audience against applying any totalizing "symbolic" analysis to Austin and Lee, yet the very idea of a "two-sided" nature asks the audience to define the conflict between these two shifting "sides" – to discover what Lee and Austin allegorize or represent. Ultimately, I would like to suggest that Lee represents the "side" of contemporary man which realizes that history and individual subjectivity no longer exist in his present. The conflict that drives *True West* occurs when Austin is pulled between a double desire. He wishes both to relinquish himself to the positive freedom and anonymity of Lee's present and to contest the negative "terror" and placelessness that accompany it.

The opening stage directions for *True West* record a world where identity

has become mutable at the same time that they express a nostalgic desire to fix identity in time. Shepard first presents the characters through a list of their clothes. Thus Austin is "early thirties, light blue sports shirt, light tan cardigan sweater, clean blue jeans, white tennis shoes" and all "the costumes should be exactly representative of who the characters are and not added onto for the sake of making a point to the audience" (2-4). As each character is portrayed through a meticulous itemization of his or her clothing, Shepard creates a world where individual identity is only an accumulation of surfaces. Character and identity in *True West* can be manipulated, changed, and performed as easily as an actor discards his costume. This attention to surface suggests that character in *True West*, and in Shepard's work as a whole, cannot be read within the "modernist" paradigm of a unified and coherent subject. As a collection of surfaces and roles, Austin and Lee are parts of a whole that cannot be pieced back together again; they perform the choices and possibilities that postmodern man faces in his attempt to make daily life liveable. From the very beginning of *True West*, the stage directions alert the audience to the performative nature of masculine identity in this play for these men are literally what they wear.¹⁵ Shepard's wish, however, for the "costumes" to remain unchanged and "not added onto" exists in tension with the presentation of characters through their clothes.¹⁶ While the stage directions clearly tell the audience that identity will be manipulated and reconfigured in this work, the attempt to freeze the characters in their original clothes fights against this theatrical world; it tries to enact a world where individual identities are stable — where they cannot be transformed by time or added onto for the "sake of making a point."

The desire in *True West* to construct a stable subjectivity can be located in both the costumes and in the claustrophobic set where the play unfolds. In the Gary Sinise production, this set is built as a generic kitchen that could be any middle-class living space between the fifties and the present. Without any clear markers of time, the stage becomes an eternalized family space that renews the traditional ideal of finding personal identity through family. Curiously, Shepard's stage directions make no provision for a door. Shepard writes, "All entrances and exits are made stage left from the kitchen. There is no door. The actors simply go off and come onto the playing area" (3). The absence of a door suggests an attempt to contain and immortalize this nostalgic family living space. Without this exit, Austin and Lee do not have a threshold to move over as a physical marker of their passage into manhood and their eventual abandonment of the nuclear family structure.¹⁷ At the same time, the transient appearance and disappearance of the characters within this space contradicts the stable connection to time and to people that the concept of a family represents. On Shepard's stage, characters can surface without narrating the place from which they have come; here, Austin and Lee do not relate the distance they have traveled to return to this living room. They need

not distinguish between past and present experiences of this living space or tell the past that is essential to the endurance of the family in time.

While the living plants at the back of the stage initially seem to create *True West* as a type of edenic reprisal of Lee and Austin's familial origins, the "green synthetic grass" on the floor negates any promise of history and of a stable concept of identity that *True West* proffers. The presence of this dead plastic surface tells the audience that in the course of *True West* our nostalgic desire to believe in contemporary man's familial connection to the past will die.¹⁸ As the alcove which houses the plants is "defined only by the objects in it" (3), Shepard brings his audience into a space and time that evoke Jameson's "perpetual present." Here, in this theater that Shepard constructs, the past only appears in the present as "phony" antiques; it is a "lota' junk" (10) that will be consumed, discarded, and replaced as Austin and Lee struggle to resolve their placelessness and transform their mother's living room into a useless "sea of junk" (53).

The opening scene of *True West* creates Lee as the character who allegorizes postmodern man's acceptance of the fact that his relationship to the past has changed. Lee becomes the voice in the play that articulates contemporary man's relationship to history when he questions Austin's use of candlelight:

LEE Isn't that what the old guys did?

AUSTIN What old guys?

LEE The Forefathers. You know.

AUSTIN Forefathers?

LEE Isn't that what they did? Candlelight burning into the night? Cabins in the wilderness.

AUSTIN (*rubs hand through his hair*) I suppose. (6)

Again and again, Shepard's characters reveal their postmodern displacement by answering questions with questions like Lee who answers "I forgot" (9) when asked what he did in the desert, and like Austin in this exchange; they continually ask "who?" or "what?" and reveal their inability to place themselves in time. While Lee's badgering of Austin in this scene initially seems to illustrate a desire to connect the present to an American past, throughout *True West* Lee is the character who knows that any history or narration of the past will only be a fiction. Against the backdrop of a set that is determinedly claustrophobic and artificial, Lee implies that the candlelight image of Austin writing refracts and repeats the moment when America was born in "cabins in the wilderness." If Lee's narrative is read within the context of the "synthetic grass" of the alcove, his words acknowledge a basic artificiality and falseness at the root of an American history of origin. Embedded in Lee's narrative logic is the suggestion that if a comparison can be made between these two temporal moments, if Austin's candlelight and the "wilderness" are in fact

similar, then we as a culture have taken our national and individual identities from a past that never existed. We have tried to believe in a Forefather past that was only a fake creation of another equally fragmented moment and we have avoided seeing that the real "history" of America is our endless attempt to manufacture and produce images of an unattainable past.

Lee's comparison between the kitchen and the wilderness underscores an awareness that history is a myth and a fiction that can be performed and manipulated. Throughout the play, Lee is marked by his connection to narrative production. It is his ability to spin a mental image for Saul of the locker room that allows him the opportunity to present his film outline and to tell yet another story. While Lee initially appears to believe in a "true west" and in a moment when the American cowboy roamed free, each of the stories he tells testifies to the present's inability to construct a living image of an American past. Lee tells Saul the story of *Lonely Are the Brave*:

And Kirk Douglas is ridin' in the ambulance. Ridin' away from the scene of the accident. And when he hears that shot he knows that his horse has died. He knows. And you see his eyes. And his eyes die. Right inside his face. And then his eyes close. And you know that he's died too. You know that Kirk Douglas has died from the death of his horse. (19)

Lee's recapitulation of *Lonely Are the Brave* records the death of the American cowboy and of the American West. In Lee's summary, the present may search in the past for definition, yet all it will find is an empty image that rehearses the death of another moment in the American past; the only past the present will ever know is one where the cowboy and the mythical figure of America's past loses his freedom and ceases to exist. Deprived of his horse and of the very object that guaranteed his identity and his freedom, the cowboy in Lee's story is a type of living dead. Just as Douglas depicts himself as a "cripple" in the film itself, the cowboy Lee describes can only be portrayed as an empty figure and a reprisal of T.S. Eliot's "Hollow Men."

Lee's choice of *Lonely Are the Brave* (1962) as an example of a "true-life" story and a "contemporary western" argues that the American history Hollywood constructs never existed. Accompanied by his horse Whiskey, Douglas spends most of this film trying to escape over a mountain ridge to Mexico. The plot follows him fleeing from the police who have tracked him ever since he deliberately went to jail to help his friend Paul break out. From the opening credits when airplanes race across the desert sky and Douglas cuts a barbed wire fence that has partitioned off the land he wishes to gallop over, this film supports Lee's commentary on the illusory nature of American history by documenting the impossibility of recovering the frontier moment. In his interview with *Theatre Quarterly*, Shepard describes the attraction cowboys hold for him:

Cowboys are really interesting to me – these guys, most of them really young, about 16 or 17, who decided they didn't want to have anything to do with the East Coast, with that way of life, and took on this immense country, and didn't have any real rules. Just moving cattle, from Texas to Kansas City, from the North to the South, or wherever it was.¹⁹

The cowboy Shepard sketches here is a staple ingredient in mass culture's portrayal of the American "wilderness." In one sense or another, be it through pop guns, *Bonanza*, or billboard ads for the Marlboro Man that we saw through the back window of our parents' Buick station wagon, this cowboy occupies a central place in American childhood. He possesses an almost mythical sense of freedom as Shepard gives him the vague and endless territory of "wherever." He has no "rules." He leads a migratory life that is a "perpetual present" but without the anxiety that Jameson ascribes to this experience. The reader could probably continue to list the external qualities of Shepard's cowboy indefinitely, yet we must also recognize certain problematic similarities that arise between Shepard's and Lee's imaging of the cowboy. Just as Shepard can only draw the cowboy in vague terms and empty adverbs like "that way of life" and "really interesting," Lee's choice of *Lonely Are the Brave* as an emblem of a "true west" implies that the cowboy and the frontier moment in American history cannot be depicted in physical terms. As the only man on horseback in the film, Douglas is the last American cowboy and is doomed from the very beginning. With his roaming space increasingly crisscrossed by barbed wire fences and super-highways, Douglas must either die or come to inhabit a claustrophobic interior space that lacks the freedom of the wilderness. When the credits close on Douglas's cowboy hat in the middle of a highway after he and his horse have been hit by an eighteen-wheeler, the viewer is not surprised. All along, this film has advised us of its inability to portray a living cowboy. In the final scene, when Douglas's "eyes die" and the ambulance doors close on his paralyzed body, he receives both a physical and a psychological form of death. The ideal of freedom he clung to vanishes without having been visually portrayed by the film, and the viewer believes that the mythical American frontier never existed because it cannot be materialized in our present.

While Lee fixates on the death of Douglas's eyes in the closing scene of *Lonely Are the Brave*, this film is in fact structured around an endless foreshadowing and repetition of the cowboy's death. Douglas turns his final blank stare on his audience several times during the film. We see it when he is beaten by the jail guard, when he parts from his friend Paul in prison, and when he contemplates leaving Whiskey behind on the mountain. In its emptiness, this gaze documents and eternalizes the moment when the cowboy ceases to exist in the viewer's present. In the moments when Douglas abandons this look, the audience knows that he has simply chosen another form of

death. For the brief second after Douglas decides to take Whiskey with him over the mountain, the viewer thinks that his eyes have come "alive." In the valley below the mountain ridge, however, the sheriff interprets Douglas's animation differently. According to the sheriff, if Douglas "let loose of that horse," he'd "make it"; when he decides to drag Whiskey after him, he chooses between two forms of death. Without his horse, Douglas is as good as dead inside; he is deprived of the very mobility that defines him as an American cowboy. At the same time, the audience also realizes that Douglas's return to Whiskey makes his death inevitable. By choosing Whiskey, Douglas marks himself for extinction. He accepts death over the fate of living in a world where a *living* cowboy has no place.

Like Lee's synopsis of *Lonely Are the Brave*, his idea for a film is structured around the rehearsed death of a piece of America's past. At the end of Act One, Lee tells Austin his idea:

So they take off after each other straight into an endless black prairie. The sun is just comin' down and they can feel the night on their backs. What they don't know is that each one of 'em is afraid, see. Each one separately thinks that he's the only one that's afraid. And they keep ridin' like that straight into the night. Not knowing. And the one who's chasin' doesn't know where the other one is taking him. And the one who's being chased doesn't know where he's going. (27)

The cowboys in this scene are characterized by the same loss and alienation that Lee sees in the Douglas movie. Here, they have no notion of the future, of where they are going, and no memory of the past or where they have come from. As an image which initially seems to give the present a sense of definition and history, Lee's cowboys reflect only placelessness. They exist in the middle of an endless present where lines cannot easily be drawn between good and bad, death and living. These men are part of a quest that has been emptied of its historical meaning. They have no connection to time, to place, or to other people. What is striking about Lee's narration is his ability to visualize what it feels like to be the extinct cowboy. When Lee says, "they can feel the night on their backs," he tells the audience that he knows what it is to be these two men because their life is the quintessential experience of man in the late twentieth century. According to Lee, postmodern man is chased by a "night" and by a "void" that lie somewhere behind him. He is haunted by the fact that he is supposed to come from somewhere and he is trapped in a quest where he unsuccessfully attempts to find and narrate his point of historical origin. Ultimately, as Lee presents narrative in his summary of these two films, he reveals that any history man tells will only rehearse the oxymoronic nature of an American history.

Lee's stories relate the unrepresentability of moments in American history at the same time that they suggest that the frontier has shifted away from land

into the realm of Hollywood. Gena Rowlands tells Douglas that "the world you and Paul live in doesn't exist, perhaps it never did," and *True West* as a whole argues that the only vestige of the past left to modern man is the experience of watching mass culture endlessly replay the death of Douglas, the last cowboy, and other moments in American history.²⁰ In his *Theatre Quarterly* interview, Shepard resurrects the possibility of a late twentieth-century cowboy when he speaks of "run[ning] around the streets playing cowboys in New York. . . . in the midst of all these people who were going to work and riding the buses."²¹ The world the brothers confront in *True West* is the world Douglas leaves behind in *Lonely Are the Brave* and it is the world Shepard inhabits in New York City in 1963. This world has been divided by highways and strips of neon lights. Unlike Douglas's final paralysis and the psychological death of his eyes, however, this world offers Lee "salvation" in the form of Hollywood and it allows Shepard the freedom of "playing" and discarding different roles.

Lonely Are the Brave unfolds as a battle between technology, in the form of the police with their helicopters and CB radios, and the simplicity of Douglas and his horse Whiskey. As a film and a necessary result of the same technological advances that trace and kill Douglas, *Lonely Are the Brave* articulates a new kind of American wilderness. Lee's metamorphosis from transient to screenwriter in Saul's eyes reveals that in Hollywood there are no "rules." If the mythical cowboy had freedom, if he possessed the ability to appear from nowhere and disappear again without a trace into the desert, his twentieth-century counterpart possesses the freedom to endlessly invent himself. Just as Saul applauds Lee's screenplay when he states, "It's incredible, Austin. We've got three different studios all trying to cut each other's throats to get this material. In one morning. That's how hot it is" (34), in the twentieth-century frontier of Hollywood's artificial images, man need only learn how to sell the death of America's past in order to grasp hold of a new wilderness. Although Austin tells Lee, "You don't understand how things work down here" (14), Lee understands the Hollywood dream machine better than his brother. As Lee creates a screenplay built around death and describes "turn[ing] myself right inside out" and "[g]ettin' paid to dream. Ridin' back and forth on the freeway just dreamin' my fool head off" (25), he understands that Hollywood endlessly prolongs the placelessness and alienation its audience hoped to solve by coming to the movies. Instead of providing an escape from our postmodern world, Hollywood sells the audience the death of distinct moments in American history.

Shepard defines Austin and Lee as potential doubles, and the crisis Austin confronts in the course of *True West* is whether he will learn to tell his brother's story about American history and identity. Austin is purportedly writing "a period piece" (13), but what he lacks at the beginning of the play is Lee's ability to recognize and manipulate the fiction that is America's past.

From the opening scene, *True West* dramatizes the question of whether Austin will adopt Lee's "real life" story of a culture and an identity that have been "[w]iped out" and marked with death (11). Almost immediately after Austin complains that Lee's film is "not enough like real life" (21) and describes his brother's characters as "illusions of characters" (40), he tells the story of their father's teeth and reveals a tentative acceptance of Lee's version of contemporary man's position. Like Lee's narratives, Austin's anecdote is based on a part of man dying. The father in this story, with his rotting teeth and his alcoholism, is a literal house of decay. He symbolizes the type of waking death, where part of a man dies and his body continues to live, that surfaces in Douglas's final scene. In Austin's story, the progenitor of the family connection he sought when he told Lee, "I'd like to just spend some time with you" (14) is revealed to be only a hollow, dying shell. Both Lee's narratives and Austin's personal anecdote are based on an itinerant aimlessness. As Austin travels from bar to bar looking for his father's teeth, he becomes embroiled in the same unsatisfied quest that defines Lee's cowboys and most of Shepard's characters. The two cowboys in Lee's film ride off in search of something they cannot define, and Austin looks unsuccessfully for his father's teeth. He searches for the object that will metaphorically piece the image of the father and of the family back together again, at the same time that his actions register the hopeless loss of the family structure he seeks.

The form of Austin's story reflects the transience of its narrator and portrays a potential change in his character. While Austin previously objected to writing the literalism of Lee's cowboy being "fifty miles from the [Texas] border into his outline (20), here he mimics Lee's narrative form and concisely documents the "[e]ight days in the rain and the sun" that it took his father to get to Juarez, Mexico (41-2). Halfway through the story, Austin loses the thread of his narrative and Lee interrupts to ask, "So what happened?" (41). As Austin digresses into a description of teeth and says, "Some are more expensive. Like the big ones in the back -" (41), he authors a narrative that emphasizes the aimless impermanence of both his words and himself. In an about-face from his previous criticism that Lee's story was "not enough like real life," Austin concludes his anecdote with the declaration, "Now that's a true story. True to life" (42). When Austin echoes Lee's description of his "true-to-life Western" (19) at the end of his narrative, he tentatively validates the loss of family and history told by his brother as the only "true" story modern man can tell himself.

While this moment of reversal in the second act implies that Austin will fully embrace Lee's story by the end of the play, Austin is ultimately unable to relinquish his lingering belief in a familial connection. As Austin asks Lee "how" he "learn[ed]" to live in the desert and whether he will "teach" him how to survive (48-9), he clings to a world where knowledge is passed down between brothers and the family is maintained. Instead of the freedom of

being a "free agent" that Lee finds in the desert, Austin creates the desert as an almost edenic reprisal of male family relationships. In the final scene, Austin warns his mother, "I'm goin' to the desert. There's nothing stopping me. I'm going by myself to the desert" (58), yet he is powerless to accomplish this act. As a character who is never seen entering or exiting the stage, Austin cannot escape from the physical and psychological family space he inhabits. At the end of the Sinise production, Austin stands up and considers leaving Lee in a slow-motion freeze-frame that reflects the impossibility of his acting alone. When this sequence of shots is coupled with the fact that the last word of the play is Austin's "Lee?" (59), *True West* leaves Austin in a world where he nostalgically clings to the hope that the idea of family will ground him in time and in space.

When Austin attacks Lee with the telephone cord, he tries to blot out the story of alienation that Lee tells. Austin constricts Lee's throat and becomes a physical representation of Shepard's litany of "I can't believe." Austin cannot "believe" that he lives in a world where man has no connection to time, people, or history. He finally refuses to acknowledge that Lee's narratives of alienation are exactly "like life". Austin battles Lee to escape his verbal reminders of a postmodern world, yet Austin's actions also paradoxically express a desire to "stop" Lee's desertion and to maintain the idea of family that is embodied in Lee's physical existence as his brother. The symbolic act that reveals his desire to reinstitute a faith in person-to-person communication, is when Austin attacks his brother with a telephone cord (57). As he tightens the cord, however, he is caught in the ultimately ironic act. He wishes to kill his brother and disavow the story of man's alienation, but the only physical act he can think of will also destroy the family he wishes to uphold. Whichever way Austin acts, if he kills his brother or lets him live to continue to disseminate his narratives, he will be perpetuating the idea that the family has died in the twentieth century. Austin wraps the cord around his brother's neck and faces another version of the two forms of death that confront Douglas in the course of *Lonely Are the Brave*. Whether Lee dies or lives to speak, Austin's actions will still reflect a world that has been evacuated by any sense of stable identity or by a grounding in family history.

If Austin is caught at the end of *True West* in a no-man's land where he tries to escape the postmodern "void," Lee challenges Austin's version of postmodernism by leaving the audience with an image of the freedom man can experience when he finally relinquishes himself to his lack of history. At the beginning of the second act, Lee speaks to Austin and prophetically forecasts the trajectory of the rest of the play:

They can't touch me anyway. They can't put a finger on me. I'm gone. I can come in through the window and go out through the door. They never knew what hit 'em.

You, yer stuck. Yer the one that's stuck. Not me. So don't be warnin' me what to do in this town. (31)

In contrast to Austin who is "stuck" in his search for a world where identity and history are fixed, Lee possesses the almost miraculous ability to appear, disappear, and change identities. Lee knows the way in and the way out of his mother's house. On a metaphorical level, he knows how to extricate himself from the trap Austin occupies because he has mastered the ability to perform endless versions of himself. He embraces a world made of fragments and surfaces and he lives in a present where identity cannot be stable, where he has the power of play and the ability to perform endless mutations of character. In his very alienation, Lee experiences a release that Austin cannot obtain. Like the Jay Gatsby figure who "[springs] from his Platonic conception of himself,"²² Shepard tells us that once modern man accepts Lee's actions and abandons the myths of history and identity which Austin clings to, he will be free to endlessly invent himself and to get paid for "dreamin'."

The stage directions of *True West* promise an "evolution of the characters' situation" (3-4), yet at the end of the play it becomes clear that Austin and Lee have not changed their basic qualities. Austin is still "stuck," and Lee has simply adopted, performed, and discarded the role of Austin in the endless shape-shifting that defines his character. In some senses, it is impossible for Lee to "change" and to become his brother because the nature of his character is transformation and performance. At the end of *True West*, when Lee asks his mother for some antiques because he needs "somethin' authentic. Somethin' to keep me in touch. It's easy to get outa' touch out there" (56), he appears to have "evolved" dramatically from the man who lampooned his mother's Idaho plates and described her house as a "fuckin' rest home" (22). Lee, however, does not request the plates out of a desire to reconnect with the idea of history. He simply performs and manipulates Austin's nostalgia for a connection with the past to benefit his own solitary life in the desert. Austin thus becomes a role Lee adopts to continue to build a world cluttered with surfaces, fragments, and meaningless objects. Like the stories he told Austin, Lee's removal of the antiques from his mother's house perpetuates a world of alienation and placelessness. When Lee takes the plates, he deprives his mother of the objects that she believes tie her to the present; he becomes an active part of the force which drives his mother into the void where she feels that "[t]his is worse than being homeless" (59).

At the conclusion of this analysis, the freedom with which Lee falls in and out of identities appears to be strikingly similar to the manner in which Sam Shepard conceives of himself as a writer and actor. In each of his interviews, Shepard perpetuates the belief that he became a playwright because of his powers of self-creation. Shepard reveals the same propensity toward self-invention and "playing" at identity that defines his characters when he tells

Robert Coe of the *New York Times*, "I don't go to the theater – I go to the rodeo, go to the track a lot, too – I guess you could say my cultural appetites are kinda narrow."²³ Like Lee's untraceable appearances and disappearances, in this quotation Shepard exists *sui generis*; he springs from his Gatsby-like conception of himself and he simply walked into the literary world that gave him the Pulitzer Prize. While the past in the form of the sixties and the Vietnam War clearly haunts Shepard, he disavows the idea of literary influence:

I always liked the idea that plays happened in three dimensions, that here was something that came to life in space rather than in a book. I never liked books, or read very much. . . . I didn't really have any references for the theatre, except for the few plays that I'd acted in. But in a way I think that was better for me, because I didn't have any idea about how to shape an action into what is seen – so the so-called originality of the early work just comes from ignorance. I just didn't know.²⁴

In both of these statements, a world where a man can appear and vanish, where he is no longer plagued by a sense of a lost past, is the only viable present left to man.²⁵ Like Lee, the best that late twentieth-century man can hope for is a world where he walks out into the desert, where he no longer worries that he should be searching for something because the sand has already erased his footsteps and the memory of the place from which he came. In Shepard's plays, if man can tell a story that kills the side of himself that was Austin, if he can learn how to market the death of the past, he will be able to move beyond the "terror" and "chaos" that accompany the twentieth-century loss of identity and history. Ultimately, in the present that Shepard's twentieth-century cowboy inhabits, man must choose whether to second Shepard's "I can't believe it" or to obtain the release that accompanies the recognition that the events of American History are only a series of innumerable and easily forgotten self-inventions.

NOTES

- 1 Robert Coe, "Saga of Sam Shepard," *The New York Times Magazine*, 23 November 1980, 58.
- 2 Herbert Blau, "The American Dream in American Gothic: The Plays of Sam Shepard and Adrienne Kennedy," *Modern Drama*, 27:4 (December 1984), 520.
- 3 David Savran, "Sam Shepard's Conceptual Prison: *Action* and the Unseen Hand," *Theatre Journal* 36:1 (March 1984), 57.
- 4 David J. DeRose, *Sam Shepard* (New York, 1992), 6.
- 5 Sam Shepard, *True West* in *Sam Shepard: Seven Plays* (New York, 1981), 19. Subsequent page references to the play appear parenthetically in the text.
- 6 In his biography of Shepard, DeRose approaches the playwright through Jameson and theories of the postmodern. DeRose suggests that Shepard grew up in a world

much like the one Jameson describes, that Shepard experiences a "personal post-modern discomfort" with "a world that has come unfixed" (3-4). As I have previously noted, DeRose's exclusion of Shepard's forays into popular culture illustrates an ironic desire to disavow the very world Jameson describes.

7 Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle, 1983), 125.

8 Ibid., 112-4. While my essay is not concerned with elucidating the distinction between modernism and postmodernism, it should be noted that other critics like David Savran choose to read Shepard's work within the paradigm of modernism. I interpret Shepard as a postmodern playwright because his work reveals a collapsing of the distinctions between high culture and popular culture that Jameson marks as one of the defining characteristics of postmodernism.

My essay also approaches Shepard and the concept of postmodernism from the perspective Alan Wilde clarifies in *Horizons of Assent*. Wilde argues that "Modernism reaches through order toward stability," while postmodernism is characterized by "a willingness to live with uncertainty, to tolerate and, in some cases, to welcome a world seen as random and multiple, even, at times, absurd" (*Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination* [Philadelphia, 1987], 44).

From this critical perspective, traditionally "modernist" works like Eliot's *The Waste Land* and "The Hollow Men" entertain the possibility that a coherent and unified subject no longer exists, yet they do so with an anxiety and a sense of loss that is missing from "postmodern" texts.

As will become clearer later in my argument, I read Lee as an allegorical representation of a desire to abandon the anxiety of modernism and to embrace the "uncertainty" of a postmodern world.

9 Ibid., 118.

10 Sam Shepard, *Fool for Love* (San Francisco, 1983), 27.

11 In *A Cinema Without Walls*, Timothy Corrigan finds the same loss of history and of masculine subjectivity in *Paris, Texas* that I locate in *True West*. Corrigan suggests that "[with] the new waves of the sixties ... the relation with modern history became a crisis of images that never quite fit, marking the melancholic distance between a masculine self and his restless regeneration" (*A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam* [New Brunswick, NJ, 1991], 158-9. Corrigan reads *Paris, Texas* within the genre of the road movie and finds:

the road in *Paris, Texas* goes from a photographic home to the space city of Houston where banks need no people, where the future is the electronic perception of no one's point of view, and where the dialectic between a male subjectivity and a symbolic historical order collapses into the identity of material images. ... Together it maps a visual trajectory that points off the road and into an outer space where this way of looking expects to see only its own frames emptied of objects and to encounter other equally empty frames.

- 12 Sam Shepard, "Metaphors, Mad Dogs and Old Time Cowboys: Interview with Sam Shepard" by Kenneth Chubb and the editors of *Theatre Quarterly*, in Bonnie Maranca, ed., *American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard* (New York, 1981), 196.
- 13 Carol Rosen, "'Emotional Territory': An Interview with Sam Shepard," *Modern Drama*, 36:1 (1993), 9. While this quotation reveals a nostalgia evident in all of Shepard's work, it should be noted that this interview occurred in 1992 while *True West* was first published in 1981.
- 14 Robert Coe, "Saga of Sam Shepard," 122.
- 15 Innumerable articles have been written about the nature of masculine identity in Shepard's oeuvre. Of particular value are Gary Grant's analysis of the layers of the self revealed by Shepard's private papers at Boston University's Mugar Library ("Writing as a Process of Performing the Self: Sam Shepard's Notebooks," *Modern Drama*, 34:4 [1991], 549-65) and Henry I. Schvey's "A Worm in the Wood: The Father-Son Relationship in the Plays of Sam Shepard" *Modern Drama*, 36:1 (1993), 12-26.

Schvey's allegorical reading of *True West* aided my interpretation of Shepard's creation of character. In this piece, Schvey notes briefly that "Austin...represents the side of Shepard that has accommodated himself to material success" and moved away from the counter-cultural sixties, while Lee represents the part of Shepard that is "rough and crude, lives outside the law, and is drawn toward the elusive image of his father."

- 16 As these opening pages have perhaps illustrated, the constraints of this paper force me to omit an analysis of the construction of female character and identity in *True West*.

The frequent marginalization of women in Shepard's work has received recent attention from feminist critics such as Lynda Hart. In "Sam Shepard's Pornographic Visions," Hart creates one of the frequently seen feminist arguments against Shepard. Hart's analysis calls for a resisting reading of the playwrights and deplores the critical majority who "valorize" Shepard. (*Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 21:2 [1988], 69).

In contrast to Hart, nowhere in Shepard's work do I feel that he is presenting a determinedly realistic commentary on a type of ur-womanhood. The female characters Shepard creates, in all their one dimensionality and marginalization, are simply one of the many results of the rootlessness and trapped state that his male characters inhabit. Shepard's female characters are integral to the social construction of masculine identity that his plays thematize and deconstruct. As the audience confronts these female characters, we are forced to ask, "if we would criticize Shepard for his portrayals of women, how then is it possible for a playwright to problematize masculine identity without including male perceptions and creations of women?"

- 17 This point was suggested to me by comments Dr. Lynda Hill made after reading a draft of this paper. I would also like to thank Tim Corrigan, yet again, for his unflagging support and help with this paper.
- 18 In "Expectation, Confutation, Revelation: Audience Complicity in the Plays of

Sam Shepard," (*Modern Drama*, 30:2 [1987], 147-60) Steven Putzel takes an approach that many critics seem wary of adopting in Shepard criticism. Putzel examines how the spectator "constitutes meaning" in the act of watching Shepard's plays. I have tried to incorporate the attention Putzel pays to the audience in my frequent use of "we" throughout this paper.

Putzel argues that *Suicide in Bflat*, *Angel City*, *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Fool for Love*, and *A Lie of the Mind* all play with "certain American pop-cultural expectations" and a sense of cultural "historicity" (148). One of the real benefits of this essay is that Putzel identifies distinct historical moments in these five plays. From the world of Raymond Chandler novels and film noir that appears in *Suicide* to the disappearing American farm culture that dominates *Curse of the Starving Class*, Putzel describes the historicity of each play and gives the audience a series of historical moments that we can find woven into Shepard's oeuvre as a whole.

- 19 Shepard, "Metaphors, Mad Dogs, and Old Time Cowboys," 190. See note 12.
- 20 This argument may be supported by the moment when Lee tells Austin that he is doing people a "favor" by stealing their televisions. Theories of the postmodern have long associated television with a rehearsal of modern man's death (Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* [New York, 1992], 14). When Lee makes this comment, he subtly reveals his innate understanding of the codes of popular culture. He implies that if an audience removed their televisions, they could escape repeatedly witnessing the death of their history and identity.
- 21 Shepard, "Metaphor, Mad Dogs and Old Time Cowboys," 190. See note 12.
- 22 F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York, 1980), 99.
- 23 Coe, "Saga of Sam Shepard," 56. See note 1.
- 24 Shepard, "Metaphor, Mad Dogs and Old Time Cowboys," 190-1. See note 12.
- 25 Shepard expresses the same problematic relationship to the past that he allegorizes in the characters of Lee and Austin when he describes memory as a kind of "inner library":

it must be true that we're continuously taking in images of experience from the outside world through our senses, even when we're not aware of it. How else could whole scenes from our past which we thought we'd long forgotten suddenly spring up in living technicolor? These tastes from our life must then be stored away somewhere in some kind of inner library. So this must mean that if I could be truly resourceful, I could draw on this library at any given moment for the exact information needed ("Language, Visualization and the Inner Library" in Bonnie Maranca, ed., *American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard* [New York, 1981], 215).

The image of the inner library demonstrates a wish for the past to remain in the present and in memory as a physical, concrete, and lasting entity. At the same time, the concept of time as a book that can be opened, and then shelved and forgotten, illustrates the desire to live without time that can be located in the freedom Lee espouses throughout *True West*.

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