

Good Mob, Bad Mob: Violence and Community in *The Cattle Queen of Montana* (1894)

David Rose

ABSTRACT: Focusing on the genre of the Western pioneer narrative, notably Mrs. Nat. Collins's *The Cattle Queen of Montana* (1894), the article will discuss literary representations of violence and community in the context of the accelerating westward movement on the North American continent around the mid-nineteenth century. Drawing on the theories of Georges Sorel and Richard Slotkin, the article emphasizes the productive dimensions of violence and argues for an increased recognition of the multiple intersections that connect violent acts to processes of communal bonding. The settling of the American continent was an intrinsically violent endeavor, and consequently, it will be argued, violence became a fundamental factor in shaping the modes of social interaction and communal cohesion in the 'new' nation. The literary accounts of Western pioneer narratives in general provide fascinating insights into these intricate processes and contribute to an enhanced understanding of the role of violence in the settling of the West. Collins's narrative, while maintaining a clear-cut division between the 'acceptable' violence of the settlers as opposed to the 'unacceptable' violence of the natives, relates the inherent brutality of frontier conditions with unflinching bluntness and at the same time reflects on the repercussions this violence has on emerging structures of community. By providing a reading of this narrative as well as of some of the illustrations that accompany it, the article will highlight the continuities between violence and community in the mid- nineteenth century United States and the role Western pioneer narratives played in developing these continuities.

KEYWORDS: Nineteenth-century American literature, Western pioneer narratives, Mrs. Nat. Collins, theories of violence and community, literature and political theory

Violence is all too often seen as an antisocial act, an anomaly disrupting not merely the complacency of settled social norms of interaction, but in fact the prevailing rule of law as such. Yet, as Slavoj Žižek has kept reminding us, "to chastise violence outright, to condemn it as 'bad,' is an ideological operation par excellence" (206). A violent act is in itself doubtlessly a willful disturbance of the status quo, but the evaluation of that transgression is only applied through the moral lens of society. Violence thus emerges as a double-edged sword: in addition to its disruptive character, it can also assume a productive role and become instrumental in shaping societal customs and modes of social interaction. This is particularly true for times of great social and cultural upheaval, when the norms of society are in a state of flux and subject to constant re-negotiations. One such time on the North American continent was during the accelerating westward movement in the mid-nineteenth century, when the meaning of the nation was contested frequently. It is the aim of this article to

probe into the role of violence in determining the modes of social interaction in nineteenth-century America by taking a closer look at how violent action is depicted in Western pioneer narratives and specifically in Mrs. Nat. Collins's narrative *The Cattle Queen of Montana* (1894). Reading the life stories of those who participated in the trail to the West will contribute to an enriched understanding of the cultural negotiations of violence undertaken in those days and, more generally, of the critical nexus of violence and social cohesion in America.

Ranging from physical to psychological and even legal aspects, the concept of violence has a number of possible dimensions to it. Harm can be done on many levels, which makes it all the more pertinent to specify which form of violence is to be discussed in this article. The term violence, as it will be used here, refers to concrete examples of physical violence committed by a group of people. This focus explicitly leaves aside instances of psychological or emotional violence as well as the entire field of structural violence. It also excludes acts of violence perpetrated by individuals (that may or may not be considered 'deluded' by society). In fact, one would be hard-pressed to identify any productive potential that could emerge out of these latter forms of violence. Instead, the article will concentrate on physical group violence as the form of violence that has played a crucial role in determining the modes of social interaction on the North American continent since the beginning of large-scale European settlement.

The concept of violence occupies a conspicuous role in Western culture. It is usually greeted with a combination of abhorrence and uncanny fascination—a self-conscious reveling in its gruesome presence that goes hand in hand with the simultaneous hope for its disappearance. Accordingly, philosophical and theoretical considerations of the subject have often centered on the possibility of the avoidance of violence while little attention has been paid to its productive dimensions.¹ One of the most lucid theoreticians concerned with these

¹ A notable exception in this respect is one form of state-sponsored violence, namely war, that has spawned an entire subcategory of its own within the theory of violence. But while war has been proverbially dubbed 'the father of all' by Heraclitus, this creative strain of thought which focuses on the inventive potential of war that has emerged out of the Heraclitean intellectual tradition is rarely reflected in the prevailing theoretical approaches toward the phenomenon of violence more generally. By and large, violence is perceived in scholarship as a factor that needs to be regulated, minimized, and ultimately done away with. (There are, of course, countless good reasons for that.)

productive aspects of violence is Marxist philosopher Georges Sorel, who in his *Reflections on Violence* (1908) elaborates on the societal necessity of violent action. In the discussion of class struggle, socialism, and the general strike that forms the backbone of his argument, violence takes on a central position. It is only through violent action, Sorel argues, that the proletariat can reawaken a timid bourgeoisie, restore some of its lost energy, and enforce the necessary class divisions, thereby preventing the otherwise unavoidable fall into decadence. According to Sorel, proletarian violence “appears thus as a very fine and heroic thing; it is at the service of the immemorial interests of civilization” and in this way may eventually “save the world from barbarism” (85). By applying this twist, paradoxical only at first glance, Sorel establishes violence not only as an indispensable facilitator of social change but more importantly as a productive and potentially positive element of societal interaction. Sorel’s groundbreaking achievement lies in the fact that he has extricated violence from its plethora of negative connotations and is instead “prepared to equate it with life, creativity and virtue” (Jennings xxi).²

That violence is a foundational element of the American nation in particular has been comprehensively argued by Richard Slotkin. In his study on the cultural significance of the frontier myth entitled *Regeneration through Violence* (1973), the diagnosis is as simple as it is devastating: Violence, Slotkin argues, has formed an integral part of the American experience since the first European settlers set foot on the new continent:

The first colonists saw in America an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation; but the means to that regeneration ultimately became the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience. (5)

In the colonists’ attempt to prevail in the new environment by subduing nature and native population under their rule, violence turned into an integral component in the founding of

² One should bear in mind that, as Jennings has phrased it, “the violence endorsed by Sorel was not very violent at all” and “amounts to little more than a few heroic gestures” (xxi). By no means was Sorel a theoretician of genocide. However, in his framing of the term violence he remains sufficiently ambivalent, which makes it possible to apply his theory rather broadly and connect it to a number of different uses—including the approach outlined in this article.

the new nation, or, as Slotkin would phrase it, it became deeply entrenched in the national mythology.³

This process has spawned a number of adjacent myths—among them the captivity myth and the hunter myth—that have accompanied and facilitated the formation of a national community, as Slotkin argues. These myths function as important cultural narratives that strive to reconcile two warring tendencies within the emigrant: the drive toward violence and destruction, on the one hand, and the recognition of the suffering associated with it, on the other. The captivity myth emphasizes familial bonds by focusing on the suffering of the captive, a suffering that in turn has only been brought about by the forceful entry into the wilderness; in the hunter myth the emigrant establishes a kinship with the Indian, but at the core of this kinship eventually lies the impulse of appropriation through annihilation. At the same time, Slotkin describes these myths as so powerful that they cast their long shadows also on more individual levels of society and eventually even leave their mark on family structures (563-65). However, it is worth emphasizing that Slotkin is not exclusively concerned with the ‘dark side’ of violence. His use of the notion of regeneration clearly also includes the potentially productive dimensions within this violent endeavor. Violence thus emerges as a creator of social bonds on the national as well as individual level: it has shaped the founding of the American nation in such a multitude of ways that it has become part of the national mythology.

One of the times when the intersections between the phenomenon of violence and the American experience were most prominent was in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Gold Rush of 1849 in California, among other factors, was driving more and more people to cross the American continent in an attempt to find their fortune and build a new life. But on their trail to the West, the settlers encountered not only adverse conditions of nature but also tribes of Indians. These ‘impediments’ were to a large extent greeted in accordance with the national myth—by applying violence. The life stories of those who experienced the frontier conditions first hand provide fascinating insights into the daily

³ The realm of national myths is of central importance to Slotkin’s argument, for it is the mythology of a nation, he states, that represents the “intelligible mask of that enigma called the ‘national character’” (3).

struggles of the trek across the continent and life in the Far West. These Western pioneer narratives negotiate crucial issues of violent action and social cohesion and can therefore be seen as contributions to the cultural work of framing the role of violence in the American experience.

Of particular relevance to the issues of collective violence discussed here is a text by Mrs. Nat. Collins, who came to be known as the “cattle queen of Montana.” Her narrative, originally published in 1894, tells the story of her journey across the plains and of five decades of life in the American West—a time frequently interspersed with descriptions of outbursts of violence. One account of the aftermath of a violent encounter with Indians is exceptional in its brutality and inclusion of gruesome detail.

They soon returned with the mutilated bodies of a man, woman and child, and the sickening sight of those bodies as they lay in the main street of Denver [...] will haunt me to my dying day. The man had been scalped and his body torn limb from limb, the straggling, bloody shreds of flesh dangling in ghastly fringe about the bones at the point where they had been severed from the body. [...] The body of the woman was mutilated in an equally devilish manner. The fair hair of the beautiful unfortunate was thickly matted with clotted crimson blood; [...] into her snowy breast the fiends incarnate had plunged their deadly knife, and with the cruelty of minions of hell had torn forth her very heart. Nor did their fiendish nature find satisfaction even after the accomplishment of these brutal deeds, for her body bore further evidence of having been employed to satisfy the brutish, beastly passions of the living devils into whose power she had by fate been placed. The body of the child [...] had been gashed from breast to lower limbs, and the intestines were fully exposed to view. (50)

This description, in its almost voyeuristic, yet repellent fascination with the torn human body, is reminiscent of a classical horror story. But it is not only remarkable in its excessive goriness, equally striking is the description of the perpetrators of the deed. By ascribing to them traits that portray them as subhuman and animal-like (“fiends,” “minions of hell,” “brutish, beastly passions”), the Indians and their actions are placed outside the realm of acceptable human interaction. Instead, these “living devils” appear as clearly racialized by effectively contrasting them with the “fair hair” and “snowy breast” of the victim.

In its depiction of Native Americans, Collins’s text reflects a long tradition of framing Indians as potentially dangerous savages that can be traced back to the heritage of early New England Puritanism. In many ways, the narrative echoes previous representations such as those provided in captivity narratives that emerged out of the Puritan tradition and which

frequently referred to Native Americans as ‘devils.’ The text thus places itself into a continuum of literary and cultural works that posits members of Indian tribes as dangerous, violent, and inherently antagonistic others and in this way actively participates in the ongoing process of the social construction of violence. Mary Rowlandson’s captivity narrative (first published in 1682), for instance, begins with a description of an Indian attack that is strongly reminiscent of the account provided by Collins. In her text, Rowlandson refers to the Indian combatants as “a company of hell-hounds” (120-21), as “ravenous Beasts,” and as “black creatures [...] which made the place a lively resemblance of hell” (121).⁴ In Rowlandson’s captivity narrative, however, all of this is cast in starkly religious terminology. True to her rootedness in the conventions of New England Puritanism, she envisions the enemy in the opening scene as nothing less than diabolical: a bunch of “merciless Heathen[s]” (120) whose only aim it is to slaughter as many good Christians as possible. In partaking in the social construction of violence that focuses on religiously justified processes of othering, the Puritan tradition has established a powerful rhetoric of opposition and conflict that (albeit with reduced religious fervor) has also left its mark on Collins’s narrative. The legacy of New England Puritanism thus continues to exert its influence, creating many of the rhetorical building blocks out of which *The Cattle Queen of Montana* is constructed.

The explicit bloodiness of the passage from Collins’s narrative quoted above fulfills one main function: to set off the ‘savage’ Indians from the ‘civilized’ white settlers. It should be kept in mind that civilization as a concept continued to be unmistakably racialized in the discourse of the time. It was seen as intrinsically and exclusively linked to whiteness, as an achievement other ethnicities could not possibly attain (Bederman 25). The concept of civilization thus comes into play in multiple ways here. To begin with, the gory violence depicted in the excerpt detaches its perpetrators from any civilized behavior. The pioneers themselves may resort to violent action, but their violence, firmly grounded in the discourse of civilization and therefore per se ‘legitimate,’ is of a different kind—not least because it is

⁴ Interestingly, Rowlandson’s narrative also shares with Collins’s the detailed depictions of the violent acts committed, for example, when she describes a victim of the attack as being “chopt into the head with a Hatchet” (120). Another passage details how the attackers have treated one of their victims, how they “knockt him in head [sic], and stript him naked, and split open his Bowels” (118).

directed against an enemy that is perceived as subhuman and therefore standing outside of the bounds of civilization. But in addition to this aspect of racialization, the concept of civilization of the time also had a distinctly gendered element. What allegedly distinguished civilized white society from ‘the savages’ was also the role of women. Excluding women from the realm of armed conflict and, at least theoretically, even hard work and depicting them as delicate and domestic—a characterization not common to the same degree in Indian cultures—represented just another pillar of civilization (Bederman 25, 27-28). In this way, the description of the female victim in the quotation above assumes crucial importance: by forcefully including the “snowy breasts” of white women into the ranks of combatants, the Indians once more confirm their position beyond any stage of civilization. The triangle of gender, civilization, and suffering also plays a central role in a photograph that is included in Collins’s narrative (fig. 1).⁵

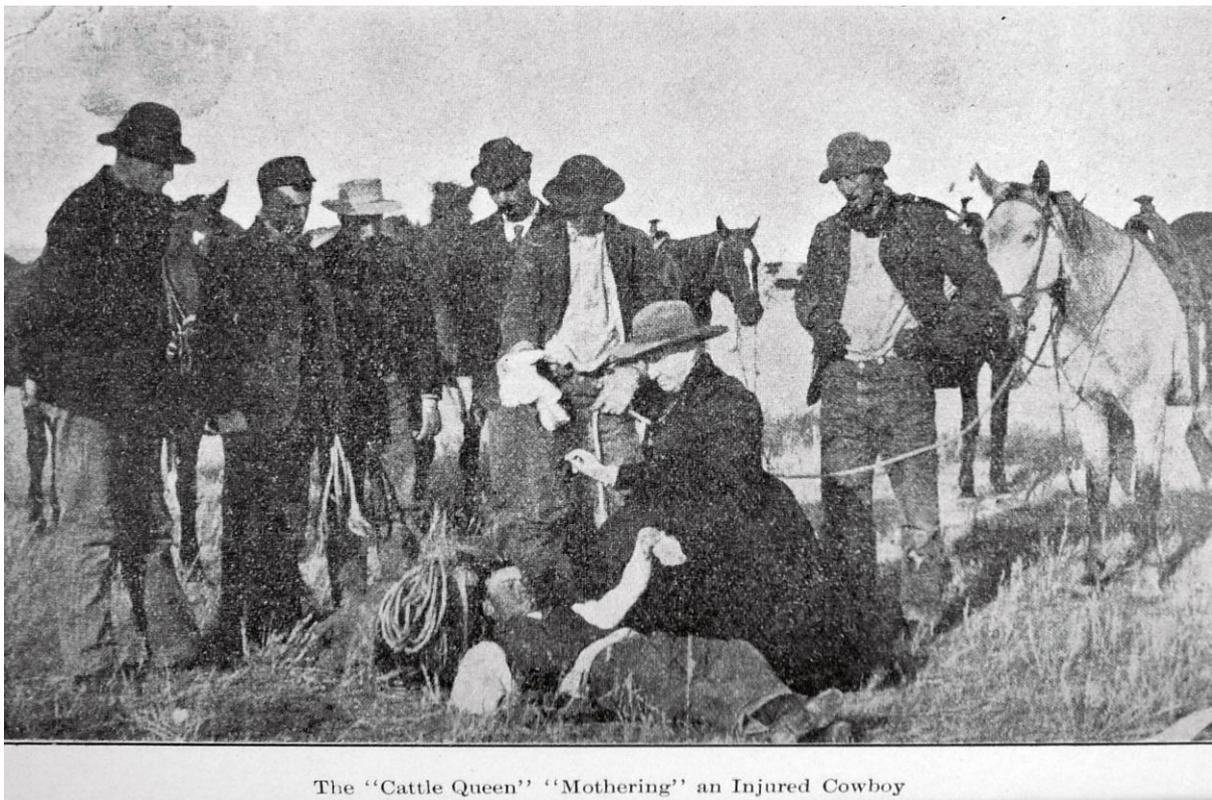


Fig. 1. “The ‘Cattle Queen’ ‘Mothering’ an Injured Cowboy.” *The Cattle Queen of Montana* 112. Image Courtesy of John Hay Library, Brown University.

⁵ The authorship of the photograph (as well as of several drawings in the book) remains unclear. The title page merely states: “Illustrations from special photographs taken in the early days,” but does not specify an artist.

The image seems to reinforce prevalent notions about gender roles and the position of women in society. Collins is here depicted as fulfilling the basic tasks of caregiver and supplier of comfort and solace, tasks that any 'civilized society' would deem appropriate for their female members. All of this is encapsulated in the use of the term "mothering" in the caption. At the same time, the entire setting undermines traditional ideas about the position of women in society. The heroine is far away from anything remotely resembling a domestic sphere; she is in the wilderness, alone among men. Under frontier conditions, strict notions of femininity were not always easy to maintain and made way for a more fluid conception of the roles women might assume in society. The image reinforces this shift by depicting Collins as the active center of the scene, admired by the male bystanders.

But the picture is also remarkable in a different respect. The suffering we see here may or may not be the result of an Indian attack (it could as well simply be an accident), the crucial point is that a violent act has happened which has affected those involved in it. The men stand united, side by side in a kind of semicircle, as if gathering around a camp fire, watching what has happened to one from their midst. Even though we know little about the relations between the people in the photograph, the image represents a powerful example of community. More precisely, the image depicts an occasion of communal bonds that would not have come about in this form without the manifestation of pain and suffering. The photograph can thus be read as an illustration of how the omnipresent dangers of frontier life become instrumental in creating structures of communal cohesion.

The perpetration of violent acts—as well as the related processes of community formation—are by no means a one-way street. The settlers are not merely passive recipients of violence, they also assume an active role in applying violence against Indians. Collins's narrative describes how, outraged by the "bloody crime[s]" committed by the Indians, a number of Denver citizens form a vigilante group named "Denver Volunteers" with the intention of "protecting the homes and lives of the settlers" (51). The violence they commit is framed in the text as a legitimate act of self-defense against the atrocious Indian attacks. Firmly grounded in the belief in their principles of order and civilization, the vigilantes strike back while in the process "the red man was invariably bested and soon hostilities were [...]"

suspended” (51). The violence is hence presented in the narrative as justified because it restores peace—it is acceptable violence as opposed to the Indians’ unacceptable violence.

However, the acts of violence perpetrated by the settlers are not solely directed against their Indian adversaries. Occasionally the recipients of violent action are also other members of the white population that are seen as criminal, immoral, or otherwise dangerous to the community. A representation of an act of violent self-justice within the pioneer community can be found in one of the illustrations in Collins’s book (fig. 2).

Through their outward appearance (e.g. their hats, jackets) the men executed are clearly marked as ‘two of their own.’ What is once more remarkable here is not primarily the depiction of the victims of the corporal punishment but the group of citizens that has gathered around them. Their portrayal in this image is comparable to the bystanders in the first image, only this time the sense of community that they exude is even more tangible. Their gaze directed straight at the spectator, the men appear as a uniform mass in which individual traits become blurred.⁶ In the sea of hats, beards, and indistinct-looking faces, the hanged men, tellingly clad in black, are the only ones who stand out. This is reinforced by their position in the middle of the picture; significantly, almost the entire upper half of the image is reserved for the ropes. In contrast to the previous image, however, the bystanders do not appear spellbound by the victims. This time they literally do not focus on the outlaws themselves, but look directly at the imaginary viewers as if posing for a family portrait. Their minds apparently not occupied with the hangings anymore, they ostensibly ignore the corpses like an evil left behind, concentrating on their community instead. The caption (“The Vigilance Committee at Work”) leaves open which and how many of the men belong to the active vigilantes and which are merely spectators—in this way the distinction between avengers and society becomes obliterated. The illustration represents another powerful image of community that has emerged through an act of violence: the victims still dangling behind them as if to remind the men what brought them there in the first place, the congregated mass of settlers faces the spectator as a unified community.

⁶Significantly, with the exception of the young boy in the front, only men are visible in this image.

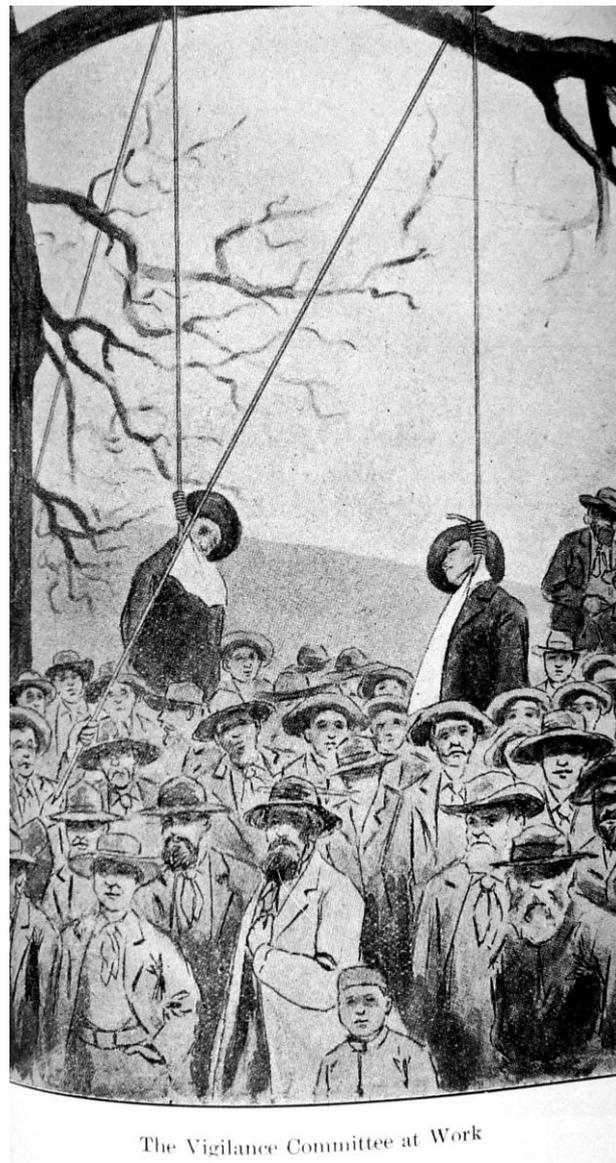


Fig. 2. "The Vigilance Committee at Work." *The Cattle Queen of Montana* 176. Image Courtesy of John Hay Library, Brown University.

In its focus on communal structures that have been strengthened by a shared act of violence, the illustration adds an additional layer to Collins's text. The image is embedded in the narrative at a point where the formation of a vigilance committee is described, but the description in the text frames this process in rather abstract terms. Collins speaks of the committee's task to "render to friend or foe impartial justice" (178) in order to "cope successfully with the bands of murderers, desperadoes and robbers that infested the country" against which "none but extreme penalties inflicted with promptitude would prove of avail" (177). But apart from voicing these general demands, the text itself does not deliver

an actual description of the act of lynching.⁷ Interestingly, the term violence is not applied at all in the text when referring to these acts of intra-group punishment. Instead, the actions of the vigilance committee are exclusively labeled as “justice.” By picturing both, the community of avengers as well as their victims, the illustration contributes a sense of corporeality, a grounding in the concrete effects and realities of violent action that Collins’s text alone fails (or rather declines) to establish.

In its representation of violence, Collins’s text distinguishes between what could be termed ‘the good mob’ as opposed to ‘the bad mob.’ The deeds of lawless individuals or Indian tribes are depicted as acts of gruesome violence and therefore unacceptable, while on the other hand the violent acts perpetrated by the community of settlers appear as justified examples of self-defense that eventually strengthen the communal bonds. Describing the situation among the pioneers of the Far West as intrinsically violent, a condition worsened by the easy availability of “[p]oisonous liquors” and the “absence of good female society in any due proportion” (176), Collins makes a case for the need to establish communal structures of self-justice.

[U]nder these circumstances it became absolutely necessary that the good, law-loving and order-sustaining men should unite for mutual protection and for the salvation of the community. Once having united, the demands of necessity provided that they must act in harmony, punish crime, repress disorder and prevent outrage, or the inevitable result would follow that the throes of anarchy would envelope society and their organization would fail from the start. (177)

Where a group of citizens wielding “the swift-descending and inevitable sword of retribution” came into existence, however, “[a]s if by magic the face of society was changed within a few short weeks” (178). Relying on what might be termed the morality of the mob, Collins thus presents the collective use of violence as unavoidable for the survival of a thriving frontier community.

⁷ One could argue here that this is more than understandable since it would undermine its own textual intentions. Unlike the description of the Indian attack quoted before, where the inclusion of violent detail was used precisely to highlight the opponents’ lack of ‘civilization,’ this would prove counterproductive here. A too detailed description of these violent acts of self-justice could very well lead the readers to question their underlying validity and justification.

With this observation, the argument comes full circle: In a similar vein, Sorel has also explicitly emphasized the need for collective violent action and even lynch law under certain conditions and describes it as a potentially moral act. It is certainly more than an interesting coincidence that he takes as an example the situation “towards 1860, [in] the country of Denver” (176). He then quotes from Paul de Rousiers’s *La Vie Américaine*:

The honest American has the excellent practice of not allowing himself to be crushed on the pretext that he is virtuous; a law-abiding man is not necessarily timid [...]. Such a man, placed in a new country, full of natural resources, wishing to take advantage of the riches it contains and to acquire a superior situation in life by his labour, will not hesitate to suppress, in the name of the higher interests he represents, the bandits who compromise the future of his country. (qtd. in Sorel 177)

Here, as well as in Collins’s text, violence emerges as a necessary force in the settlement of the American West—a force that may eventually even strengthen the social bonds within individual frontier communities. Employing a highly racialized and gendered version of ‘civilization,’ *The Cattle Queen of Montana* juxtaposes a gruesome and damnable violence of Indians and bandits against a civilized and productive violence apparently perpetrated by the majority of white settlers. Collins’s Western pioneer narrative thus fulfills the cultural task of providing the inherently violent settling of the American continent with a sense of vindication and a seemingly strong socio-moral foundation for future conquest.

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