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Marek Paryż

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Secrecy, Suspicion, Exposure: Negotiating Authority Structures in a Settler Colonial Society as Depicted in Walter Van Tilburg Clark's *The Ox-Bow Incident*

Marek Paryż

- 1 Walter Van Tilburg Clark's *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1940) stands out among classic literary Westerns as a complex insight into the social, legal and moral implications of lynching in the American West. Wallace Stegner describes it as "a probing of the whole blind ethics of an essentially false, imperfectly formed, excessively masculine society, and of the way in which individuals, out of personal inadequacy, out of mistaken loyalties and priorities, out of fear of seeming to be womanish, or out of plain cowardice, let themselves be pushed into murder" (xi). Jackson J. Benson, Clark's biographer, places *The Ox-Bow Incident* in the tradition of revisionist Westerns which he juxtaposes with popular romantic Westerns; literary works in the former category "have been realistic, antimyth, and antistereotype in their depiction of character and situation" (76). Benson refers to Thomas J. Lyon's essay on revisionist Westerns and lists Clark next to writers such as Robinson Jeffers, Harvey Fergusson, Vardis Fisher, A.B. Guthrie Jr. and Frank Waters, authors who, according to Lyon, "did not view the West as an endless frontier; they did not make one-dimensional heroes of explorers, trappers, cowboys, gun-fighters, and so forth, and they did not share the arrogance of Manifest Destiny" (Lyon 144). Alf H. Walle credits Clark with a significant contribution to the invention of the Western antihero; the critic writes: "Clark's protagonists... survive via a shrewd sacrifice of their personal integrity. As a result of this pragmatic compromise, they become antiheroes who survive" (131). Walle sees *The Ox-Bow Incident* as "a prototype of the antiheroic tradition that was to emerge as an influential subgenre in the 1960s" (132). He also claims that the novel had a rather limited effect on the Western genre at the time of its publication because the audience was not yet ready to accept a vision of

the West that emphasized that “the forces of society were all powerful” and “individuals must adjust themselves to these forces or be destroyed” (144). The fact that Clark’s novel was quickly made into a film—William A. Wellman’s adaptation came out in 1943—at least partially contradicts Walle’s opinion.

- 2 *The Ox-Bow Incident* is set in mid-1880s Nevada. Two young cowboys, Art Croft—the narrator—and Gil Carter, arrive at the town of Bridger’s Wells after a few months’ absence. The atmosphere in the town is very tense because of the recent frequency of cattle thefts. Art and Gil are in the saloon when the news about the disappearance of a large number of cattle from Mr. Drew’s ranch reaches the town. One of his foremen, Kinkaid, is reported to have been killed. The news spreads in no time, and the saloon soon gets filled with people who noisily deliberate on the necessary steps. They want to organize a posse, but in order to make it legal, the pursuers have to be sworn in by the sheriff, who has been absent from town. The local judge, Tyler, refuses to act on the sheriff’s behalf. Finally, a collective decision to form an illegal posse is reached at the insistence of three influential people: Major Tetley, Ma Grier, and Bartlett, one of the ranchers. The shop-keeper Davies, who has opposed them, joins the posse with the intention of intervening if the circumstances require it. The pursuers catch up with the alleged rustlers and take them prisoners. There is a mock trial in which Tetley acts as a judge and Davies as a defense, and a general vote takes place for or against Tetley’s verdict, which is a death sentence: In the end, the three alleged rustlers are hanged. As the pursuers are riding back to Bridger’s Wells, they encounter a group of horsemen, including sheriff Risley, Mr. Drew and Kinkaid who inform them that there was no cattle theft at Mr. Drew’s ranch. When the sheriff finds out about the lynching, he tells the men to keep quiet about it, giving them to understand that he will cover up their crime. Nevertheless, Tetley is quickly identified as the one responsible for—as it has turned out—the death of three innocent men.
- 3 *The Ox-Bow Incident* can be read through the historical lens as a portrayal of the Far West’s transition toward a more egalitarian and modern social organization. Clark depicts a stratified society in which status determines authority. In such a society, striving for a form of advancement is a shared necessity that powerfully influences individual mindsets, and this tendency can redefine even the entrenched hierarchies. Authority structures are thus negotiable, and the awareness of this—even if only intuitively—generates a sense of insecurity and reinforces determined attitudes. Individuals develop different tactics that enable them some kind of advancement, whether real or apparent, or help them defend the status quo—depending on a person’s social position. Such tactics can resort to the practices of secrecy, which are potentially conducive to creating the appearance of the limited accessibility of privilege. The more varied the social divisions are, the more evident the necessity of secrecy becomes due to the number of possible tensions and resulting changes within the authority structure. Secrecy triggers a counter-reaction in the form of suspicion, which can be seen as a tool available to the disfranchised in the struggle for power they are inevitably a part of, more often as its objects rather than agents. Therefore, in the realm of social discursive practices, such a struggle often manifests itself as gossip or rumor. Gossip and rumor can be seen as strategies of empowerment, especially if they produce a lasting effect—in the aftermath of an exposure—tantamount to a renewal of the relations of power.

- 4 This article discusses the ways in which *The Ox-Bow Incident* problematizes the issues of secrecy, suspicion, gossip and exposure as a basis for the depiction of a variety of regulatory practices in a hierarchized society whose structures of authority enter a phase of renegotiation. Such regulatory practices have to do with the fact that the striving for advancement entails an entrapment between the conflicting tendencies of secrecy and exposure. The condition of advancement is the sacrifice of a degree of personal autonomy. The defense of personal autonomy requires self-discipline; in turn, acts conditioned by self-discipline strengthen the effectiveness of social regulations. Regulatory practices are also connected with the perception of the external forces of influence, which not only shape the common understanding of norms, but also help define the horizon of collective aspirations. The dynamics of social relations as presented in *The Ox-Bow Incident* is surprisingly complex, given that the novel is populated by stock characters of the Western genre, including a shop-owner, a minister, a saloon keeper, a judge, a sheriff, ranchers and cowboys.

1. Secrecy and Suspicion as Regulatory Social Practices

- 5 The social tensions that Clark's novel addresses through the themes of secrecy, suspicion and exposure can be seen as symptomatic of a settler colonial society. Alex Trimble Young and Lorenzo Veracini write that "[s]ettler social orders are established via logics of elimination and exclusion, dispossessing Natives and then attempting to police the racial, gender, and class boundaries of the settler polity" (4). As a result of the absence of indigenous characters, *The Ox-Bow Incident* foregrounds internal tensions within the settler community. The issue that is thus problematized concerns different forms of inequality—and the ambivalent intuitions that they trigger—especially over ownership, but also over other manifestations of public prominence. As Patricia Nelson Limerick observes, "[f]rom macrocosm to microcosm, from imperial struggles for territory to the parceling out of townsite claims, Western American history was an effort first to draw lines dividing the West into manageable units of property and then to persuade people to treat those lines with respect" (55). Respect for ownership, in particular land ownership, can collide with the egalitarian consciousness that Lorenzo Veracini discusses in his theoretical overview of settler colonialism: "'settler society' is in itself a fantasy emanating from a painful perception of growing contradictions and social strife, where the prospect of settler migration literally operates as a displacement of tension, and where the longing for a classless, stationary, and *settled* body politic can find expression" (*Settler Colonialism* 75; emphasis in the original). In *The Ox-Bow Incident*, the rustling activity and the ensuing violence bring to light a larger crisis, arising from the impossibility of fulfilling the egalitarian idea. Most of the men in the lynching mob represent the class that hardly participates in the privileges of ownership. The lynching that they vote for aims to perpetuate a social order that ascribes only subordinate roles to them. At the same time, however, the radicalism of this action has seemingly empowering consequences, without really strengthening either the individual or the collective sense of agency. Egalitarian longings, often fueled by various local antagonisms, function according to the binary logic of inclusion and exclusion, and ultimately help reinstate such a dual mechanism of social regulations.

Secrecy and suspicion are practices through which egalitarian impulses and disciplinary imperatives manifest themselves in comparable degrees.

- 6 Community leadership, as depicted in *The Ox-Bow Incident*, is conditioned not only by land ownership, but also—in more symbolic terms—by a given individual's role in the settlement's history. The founders of the community remain the actual decision-makers, as it were, aside from the legal authorities. This is true in particular in reference to Major Tetley, a Confederate veteran of the Civil War, who is introduced as a man whose personal history is inextricable from the settlement's development: "Excepting Drew, Tetley was the biggest rancher in the valley, and he'd been there a lot longer than Drew, the first big rancher in the valley, coming there the year after the Civil War" (Clark 79). Another character that symptomatically embodies the settler colonial order is Jenny Grier, called Ma, a boarding-house owner, who on the one hand enjoys the benefits of progress—her business depends on people's mobility—and on the other stresses her attachment to the old ways by cherishing a self-image as a pioneer woman: she pays no attention to her looks and has made a virtue of sheer physical strength and endurance. Their prominence in the community is additionally enhanced by the marginalization of the characters who represent the official institutions of law and order: the judge and the sheriff. As community leaders Major Tetley and Ma Grier are juxtaposed with the men who are to form the group of lynchers:

None of the men... owned any cattle or any land. None of them had any property but their horses and their outfits. None of them were even married, and the kind of women they got a chance to know weren't likely to be changed by what a rustler would do to them. Some out of that many were bound to have done a little rustling on their own, maybe one or two had even killed a man. (35)

- 7 Clearly, the democratic potential of this group is very limited. As a collective, the men do not identify equality with a collective achievement conditioned by individual empowerment, therefore the equalizing process generates new disciplinary practices instead of democratic norms. Nevertheless, this is a crowd that "becomes a kind of melting pot in which the authorities that seem unshakable eventually collapse" (Girard 115).
- 8 Already the first chapter of *The Ox-Bow Incident* shows how the practices of secrecy and suspicion, expressed through personal behaviors, generate microscale tensions within the community. It portrays a group of men who have met at the saloon, and while talking about the unsettling recent events, they begin to eye one another with suspicion, almost in a habitual manner. And, indeed, some of them seem to behave as if they had secrets to hide. Secrecy and suspicion are thus shown as a double bind that manifests itself on the most basic level of interhuman relations. The scene in question begins with Art Croft pondering the apparent enigma of the saloon owner named Canby. They first eye each other briefly, and Art notices Canby's "watery pale blue eyes, such as alcoholic old men sometimes have, but not weak, but hard and uninterested" (6). Obviously, this is the kind of look that is meant to put off all those who would want to know too much, and Art—perhaps even somewhat mechanically—is motivated by such a will to knowledge. In the end, however, he only admits Canby's inscrutability: "I wondered again where he'd come from. He looked like a man who knew he'd been somebody. Nobody ever found out, that I know of" (6).
- 9 It is symptomatic that in such acts of scrutiny the roles can change very quickly, and an observer can become an object of observation, having been suddenly caught off-guard,

as it were. He is then forced to assume a defensive stance, his speech and behavior concealing his incertitude. This is what happens when Art and Gil ask a series of questions about the recent rustling activities, unaware that this suffices to arouse suspicions in the other men, especially that the time of the two cowboys' arrival at the town has been rather unusual, given the seasonal rhythm of their work—they have come too early. Interestingly, it is Canby who utters a remark that makes Art realize that he and his companion should be more careful as to what they say; after one of Gil's questions the saloon keeper simply notices that they "want to know a lot" (15), implying that it is unclear why they need to know so much and casting doubt on their intentions. Art admits: "I was going to ask more questions. I didn't want to, and yet I did" (15). His reluctance to ask further questions expresses his awareness that even a purely neutral remark or gesture entails a risk of misjudgment. The point is that, under the circumstances, nobody takes the trouble to verify what has been said. Secrecy becomes indispensable even if a person does not have any secrets to hide.

- 10 The problem of secrecy and suspicion, meaningfully though implicitly signaled by Art's exchange with Canby, finds a more direct expression in the card game scene that follows and during which insinuations are clearly verbalized. In this scene, Gil yields to a provocation articulated by Farnley, who will soon become one of the most vociferous members of the lynching mob. After a series of Gil's wins at the card game, Farnley cannot refrain from making a comment about his luck:

Farnley sat staring at Gil's cards for a moment.
 'Jesus,' he said, 'that's damned long luck[.]'....
 'Wouldn't suggest it was anything by luck, would you?' he [Gil] asked[.]

 'I wasn't going to,' he said; 'but now you mention it.'

 'Make it clear,' he said, his voice thick and happy.
 'There's a lot of things around here that aren't clear,' he said.
 And then Gil had to say, 'You're talking about cows now, maybe?'
 'You're saying it this time, too,' Farnley told him.
 'Come on, boys, the game's over,' Canby put in. 'The drinks are on you, Carter.'
 (21-22)

- 11 Mary Beth Crain highlights the importance of the card game scene and writes: "Clark deftly weaves the tensions and insecurities which each man feels about the rustlers into one large undercurrent of distrust, which boils over into the makings of the lynch mob" (241). With respect to Gil's exchange with Farnley, it should be pointed out that the former character virtually falls into a verbal trap he has set on himself. Farnley does not formulate an exact accusation, he "only" points to what Gil's own words possibly conceal, and this has an effect that is perhaps more powerful than if Farnley attacked him openly without having any grounds for such an attack. The situation, entailing a real risk for Gil, results from a mere pretext. The card game scene is the first indication that in the community of Bridger's Wells the circulation of suspicions functions as a policing strategy.
- 12 On the whole, the card game scene exemplifies a specific narrative and compositional quality that marks the singularity of *The Ox-Bow Incident* within the genre of the Western, namely the use of extended passages in which the characters' speech dominates, with the descriptive element reduced to the necessary minimum. Such passages function as the primary vehicle of narrative development and help frame the legal and moral issues addressed in Clark's novel. What thus emerges from the text is a

spectrum of rhetorical strategies: the characters deliver monologs, present arguments, offer counterarguments, conduct questionings, resort to linguistic evasions, share insinuations, articulate dilemmas. The dynamics of rhetorical forms is responsible for the novel's dramatic effect; sensational action has secondary importance in this respect. Clark analyzes the mechanism of the language of power that directs human actions and even sanctions human deeds through acts of enunciation.

2. The Panoptic Environment

- 13 There is an interesting connection between the motif of secrecy and the construction of the narrative voice in Clark's novel. Art Croft notices a lot and draws inferences from what he sees; one could say that he sees and understand more than an average man of his kind would, even if the stereotyped assumption concerning cowboys' simple-mindedness can hardly be taken for granted. As a matter of fact, Art wants to create an impression of himself as a simple-minded individual, and at one point he admits, "I'm slow on a new idea" (49). However, various hints undermine such a self-image of Art. He is percipient and precise in his account of the events as much as—and more importantly—in his characterization of the main actors in the tragedy about to happen. Each major character is introduced through a longish description, neatly combining the physical features and the personality. Some personal details mentioned in Art's narration are actually quite intimate and, for example, refer to people's emotional dispositions. Symptomatically, Art occasionally makes brief remarks suggesting his curiosity about apparent secrets that have not been unveiled. Thus, he points to the unclear sources of Judge Tyler's fortune: "I couldn't help wondering where the Judge got the money for that house. Brick doesn't come for nothing, that far out. But then, of course, the Judge had business in other parts too, and now and then a big stake did come out of some of the mining or water litigation" (58).
- 14 If there is a secret that bothers Art for some reason, he comes up with a clue to it, making surmises on the basis of his knowledge or awareness of how things are in places like Bridger's Wells. Tetley is introduced through a metonymy showing that, as a personage, the Major virtually extends onto the estate he has built: "Tetley was like his house, quiet and fenced-away; something we never felt natural with, but didn't deride either" (79). It is important to point out that in this sentence, by switching to the first person plural, Art adopts a normative point of view, which is anchored in the notion of class. Later in the novel, Tetley's house is described as "big and secret" (95). Art's narration is punctuated with observations of a similar kind, but since they are formulated as if in passing and scattered throughout the text, their immediate sense is far from obvious. Of Ma Grier, Art says: "There were lively, and some pretty terrible, stories about her past, but now she kept a kind of boarding house on the cross street, and it was always in surprisingly good order, considering how dirty she was about herself" (76). He suggests here that he has knowledge he is not going to share and actually puts himself in a position of one who controls the circulation of information. It should be added that the ways in which Judge Tyler, Major Tetley and Ma Grier have been introduced in the novel have one crucial common aspect, namely they link secrecy to status. Accordingly, observation and the resulting verbalization of suspicion function as an equalizing factor.

- 15 Observation defines Art's agency, and the same is true of most of the characters in the novel, an aspect highlighted by the recurrent references to the activity of looking. Tellingly enough, every time Art introduces a new major character, he mentions the shape and expression of their eyes: "He [Davies] would have been a good figure for a miser except for his eyes, which were a queerly young, bright and shining blue" (30); "Her fine face [Ma Grier's] had fine big gray eyes in it, but was fat and folded" (75); "Irony was the constant expression of Tetley's eyes, dark and maliciously ardent under his thick black eye-brows" (88). Such remarks not only constitute elements of the convention of character description, but—in light of the ambivalent construction of the narrator—they can be interpreted as reflections of Art's heightened consciousness, and possibly also of his own feeling of insecurity. He is watching others and realizes that, at the same time, he himself is being watched. Class difference has little consequence in that regard, and it appears that the horizontal mechanisms of observation, hence of control, accelerate the erosion of vertical social hierarchies, the process attested to by Art's rather irreverent portrayals of the prominent townspeople. All in all, the town of Bridger's Wells functions analogically to a Panopticon—to bring up Michel Foucault's influential theory of disciplinary institutions. Foucault demonstrates how Jeremy Bentham's architectural idea, originally aimed at the improvement of the organization of prisons, in the course of time came to define a variety of disciplinary practices within open environments. Foucault writes that the Panopticon is a mechanism that "automatizes and disindividualizes power," "Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up" (202). Therefore, as Foucault further argues, "it does not matter who exercises power. Any individual, taken almost at random, can operate the machine" (202). Art can certainly be seen as such a random agent of observation.
- 16 The main purpose of the Panopticon was to induce individual psychological mechanisms of self-control, conditioned by "a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 201). There are narrative hints in *The Ox-Bow Incident* attesting that Art has developed a habit of self-control, and it does not have anything to do with the archetypal self-restraint of many a Western hero; it has to do with his heightened consciousness when he becomes a target of other people's attention. Accordingly, he behaves in ways that allow him to avoid such situations. This is shown early on in the novel in the scene at Canby's saloon: a meaningful contrast between Art and Gil becomes apparent as the scene unfolds. Gil is acting with excessive—and irritating—self-confidence, and he talks with a rashness that can bring about serious consequences, the risk he does not seem to understand. Art, on the other hand, understands it only too well: he feels appalled by his friend's stupidity and lack of foresight. He would want to interfere and prevent Gil from compromising himself, but such an action would make both of them more visible and more suspicious. The only situation in which Art performs an action that draws the attention of other men is when—after Davies's encouragement—he goes to inform the Judge about the goings-on in the town. He succumbs to Davies's persuasion and immediately begins to feel "queer": "I knew the men were watching us, and I felt queer myself, walking instead of riding, but Joyce [Davies's clerk] had said it wasn't far, and he didn't have a horse, and I'd have felt still queerer doubling up with him" (55).

- 17 Davies and Gerald Tetley, who was forced by his father to join the posse, treat Art as their confidant, perhaps because he has been reserved for most of the time, unlike the agitated men who have insisted on the pursuit and the lynch. The point is, however, that Art is not really willing to share his feelings, observations or dilemmas with them; rather, his attitude, which is far from active engagement, encourages them to talk when they feel such a need. The moments of his closeness to Davies and young Tetley—the enunciations of these two characters can be seen as a vehicle for establishing the novel's moral perspective—create the illusion of his own moral sanction as a narrator. What undermines this illusion is the fact that he lacks courage to take meaningful action and even to say something that would cause resonance. It is unclear whether he agrees with Davies or Gerald; all that he offers them is his readiness to listen to them, and not support. All in all, Art avoids situations in which he has to take sides, and when the pressure of circumstances leaves him no choice he is bound to side with the majority, because this allows him to stay invisible. This is tellingly reflected in his comment after the vote following the trial of the alleged rustlers: "He [Tetley] was disappointed that anyone had ventured to support Davies; I'm sure he hadn't expected as many as four others. I know I hadn't" (182). He projects his intuitions on others, anticipating the moves of the majority.
- 18 One symptomatic example of how panoptic practices shape the realm of social life in *The Ox-Bow Incident* is the regulatory function of gossip. While it would be far-fetched to claim that gossip is a central motif of Clark's novel, it nevertheless enhances the role of suspicion in defining the modes of social control depicted in the text. The problem of gossip is addressed directly in a monologue delivered by Gerald Tetley in his anguished conversation with Art Croft:

'Your simple life.... Your quiet life. All right... take the simplest, quietest life you know. Take the things that are going on around us all the time, so we don't notice them any more than old furniture. Take women visiting together, next-door neighbors, old friends. What do they talk about? Each other, all the time, don't they? And what are the parts they like, the ones they remember and bring home to tell to the men?'
....
.... 'Gossip, scandalous gossip, that's what wakes them up, makes them talk faster and all together, or secretively, as if they were stalking enemies in their minds; something about a woman they know, something that can spoil her reputation: the way she was seen to look at a certain man, or that she can't cook, or doesn't keep her parlor clean, or can't have children, or, worse, could but won't. That's what wakes them up.' (101)
- 19 Gerald then tells Art about a young woman named Rose Mapen who was forced to leave Bridger's Wells after the local gossips had targeted her. "They drove a girl out. Made a whore of her with talk," says Gerald (102). It is worth mentioning that Rose appears in person in a later episode: the men in the posse spot a stagecoach and dash forth to stop it—she is among the passengers. This episode does not seem to be well-integrated with the main plotline, but its incongruity accentuates the problem of gossip in the novel. An abstract idea voiced by Gerald manifests itself here through a concrete impersonation. Rose is with her husband, a gentleman from San Francisco; her marriage, which has boosted her social position, is a triumph by means of which she achieves compensation for all she suffered through as a victim of gossip.

3. The Equality of the Pack

- 20 Gerald Tetley, who resembles some of “the grotesques” in Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) in his attachment to an idea that alienates him from the community, has a notion that gossip expresses a larger antagonistic principle of social existence, which he describes through the metaphor of the wolves and the rabbits. The force that drives society is, as Gerald puts it, “the pack” (104). Those who embody the pack do not necessarily exercise actual power in terms of social influence, they create and maintain the appearances of strength, expressed through their propensity for violence, often in symbolic form. As Gerald says to Art, men are “careful to keep up their cheap male virtues, their strength, their courage, their good fellowship, to keep the pack from jumping them, as the women are to keep up their modesty and their homeliness. They all lie about what they think, hide what they feel, to keep from looking queer to the pack” (104). Some people who merge with “the pack” compensate for various personal weaknesses or deficits. Gerald tells Art about a woman who almost went berserk when the news of Kinkaid’s death arrived, yelling at the men in the saloon to go after the killers. He says: “She’d take any dead man as a personal grief; it makes her feel important” (103). Interestingly, earlier in the novel Art makes a very similar remark about a young cowboy who brought the news of what had happened at Mr. Drew’s ranch to the town: “He was feeling important, but wild too, talking fast and waving his right hand, and then slapping the gun on his thigh” (27). The point is that both the woman and the cowboy want to achieve brief recognition in ways that are acceptable to “the pack.” Albeit short-lasting, such recognition appears to be rewarding, or perhaps—conversely—it is rewarding because it does not last long; otherwise, as a result of a continuing exposure, the woman and the cowboy would be likely to start feeling “queer.” What occasions these moments of recognition is the circulation of unverified information. The reason why a person should not remain “important” for too long is that they would risk antagonizing “the pack.” Gerald thus perceives the motivation behind the actions of “the pack”: “They don’t weed out the unfit, they weed out the best. They band together to keep the best down, the ones who don’t share their nasty gossip, the ones who have more beauty or charm or independence, more anything, than they have” (102). Gerald’s words could be dismissed as an expression of his peculiar character and mindset if it had not been for various narrative hints that confirm his view of the society, beginning with Art’s withdrawn attitude or his concern about Gil’s “queerness.”
- 21 Clark’s novel thus identifies gossip and related discursive practices as a factor of social homogenization. Kathleen A. Freeley and Jennifer Frost write that “[g]ossip occurs within distinct social groups” and therefore it helps cultivate “social relationships and a sense of solidarity” (8). Gossip plays a role in the shaping of views, expectations and norms within a given community, and in this way it defines its boundaries. Accordingly, “[w]hile gossip contributes to camaraderie within groups, it simultaneously establishes or reinforces who remains outside” (Freeley and Frost 8). The practices of gossip that consist in the intentional circulation of unverified information usually fall into the category of gossip that Karen Adkins labels “weaponized”; this sort of gossip is negative and destructive, and it is typically aimed at “a single behavior (or set of behaviors)” (179). Adkins further writes that weaponized gossip often functions as “a marker of underlying and unjust social structures” (181).

The social dynamics that finds reflection in the increased use of weaponized gossip is characterized by “compromised social trust” and “community insularity” (Adkins 183). As Adkins observes, such social conditions “emerge in communities with sharp and stark divides of power (social, economic, racial, gender), or communities in which power is being renegotiated, challenged, or undermined” (183). Adkins’s discussion applies to the situation depicted in *The Ox-Bow Incident* quite well. In the novel, the spread of suspicions—and the resulting gossiping activity—has its source in a larger community crisis. The reactions that this crisis necessitates and their consequences, contrary to the intentions of some of the actors, do not lead to the reassertion of the endangered order. They accelerate its change.

- 22 The renegotiation of power relations, triggered by a growing general suspiciousness, has to do with a redefinition of the structure of social leadership, epitomized by Major Tetley. When a crowd gathers in reaction to the news of Kinkaid’s death, most of the people are seething with anger, excitement and impatience, but nobody is in a position to take decisive steps. After Tetley’s arrival has been announced, they all agree that the decision about forming a posse should be postponed until they hear his opinion. Nobody has the courage to question the Major’s authority, even if some of the men perceive his superiority with a hint of irritation. Tetley lives a secretive life, but public recognition gives him satisfaction, and he performs the role he has been expected to assume with conviction. Art Croft says of Tetley: “Wherever he came things always quieted down, and nothing sounded important except what Tetley had to say. Partly, I think, that was because nothing else seemed important to Tetley either. A man so sure of himself can always sound important if he isn’t a windbag, and Tetley was no windbag” (80). The very fact that the Major has decided to show up at the gathering anticipates the course of events about to happen; Art believes that the only reason why Tetley joins the crowd is that “he want[s] that lynching” (80). Tetley’s delayed arrival is something of a show: he is wearing “a Confederate field coat with the epaulets” (88) and the first thing he does is challenge the Judge by criticizing his indecision. By denigrating the man who has been installed in a public office to embody and ensure the rule of law, the Major symbolically takes over his role. His performance culminates in his enactment of the trial of the alleged rustlers.
- 23 The town of Bridger’s Wells reflects, in Robert B. Heilman’s words, “two different senses of community: the inclusive historical one, nonlocalized because reflected in all places, and the exclusive, local, present one mysteriously coercive in its ‘immediacy and strong animal grip’” (90). The posse in Clark’s novel could be compared to the hunting pack described by Elias Canetti in his seminal *Crowds and Power* (1960). “The hunting pack moves with all its force towards a living object which it wants to kill,” writes Canetti (97). The chase initially generates a feeling of equality in the hunters because each of them “has the same object in view and is closing in on it” (97). However, the sense of equality or unity evaporates immediately after the killing of the prey: “Once its goal has been reached, the pack undergoes a sudden change, as sharp and clear cut as its goal has been.... Everyone suddenly stands still around the outstretched victim. From all those present a ring forms, consisting of all to whom a share of the game is due” (98). The hanging of the three alleged hustlers marks an analogous moment in *The Ox-Bow Incident*, but its implications are crucially different. In the case of the hunting pack, those who exercise the greatest power claim the biggest share of the prey—in accordance with the rules that every hunter understands. In Clark’s novel, the rule of share concerns responsibility for the killing. Tetley expects

all the men in the posse to share this responsibility on equal terms with him, hence his insistence on the vote. By emphasizing equality in crime, he diminishes his role in directing the dramatic course of events. Paradoxically, his manifest assertion of authority when he acts as the judge in the trial of the three prisoners is followed by his apparent abdication. His powerful agency has turned into a tool of collective will, but it is precisely this powerful agency that makes it impossible for him to merge with the rest of the men after the killing. The lynching signifies the beginning of a new form of his exposure, which has nothing to do with his heretofore public acts. He has never wanted to integrate fully with the community he helped to found, and now his estrangement accelerates his sudden change into yet another victim.

- 24 Tetley cannot avoid stigmatization, and he realizes this soon after the lynching. When the lynchers meet sheriff Risley's party, Judge Tyler, who is with the sheriff, attacks Tetley personally, and only then addresses his companions. Although he is determined to accuse all the men in the posse of murder, he singles out Tetley as the one who takes the blame. "Everybody would hang it on Tetley now," says Art (191). In a later conversation with Art, Davies remarks that Tetley is "merely the scapegoat" (202). Interestingly, the indispensability of a leader that could turn into a scapegoat is mentioned much earlier in the novel, before it is known who will fulfill this role. Art and Joyce are having a conversation on their way to the Judge's house, and Joyce tells Art about Davies's assessment of the situation: "He says they have to get a leader; somebody they can blame," to which Art meaningfully replies: "Scapegoat" (57). Despite his self-professed lack of sophistication, he understands the mechanisms behind the community life of Bridger's Wells better than he is willing to admit. After Tetley has killed himself, everybody believes it is because of his guilty conscience after Gerald's suicide—"Who would have thought the old bastard had that much feeling left in him?" (217)—Tetley's death, in essence, is a sacrifice that brings an end to the community's moral crisis. Concomitantly, the suicides of both Gerald and his father signify the end of a settler dynasty and thus the inevitability of a social renewal.

4. Conclusion

- 25 Lorenzo Veracini writes that "in the context of appraising different political traditions, settler collectives often 'remove' to establish a *better* polity, either by setting up an ideal social body, or by constituting an exemplary model of social organization" (*Settler Colonial Present* 42-43; emphasis in the original). However, as he further observes, despite the suppression of the "images of decultured life and numbing isolation in unsettled borderlands" by means of what he calls "culture techniques," "[r]eal life... defies these attempts and settlers recurrently fail to establish the regenerated communities" (*Settler Colonial Present* 43-44). As a result, the reality of a settler colonial order is marked by various internal tensions or crises. *The Ox-Bow Incident* offers a unique insight into the complex social dynamics of a crisis resulting from a renegotiation of power structures within a settler community. The novel establishes crucial homologies and causal connections between phenomena rooted in different levels of social existence. It shows that the erosion of the old regime is accelerated by the factors that have hardly any visible influence on it. The themes of secrecy, suspicion and exposure enable such problematization by drawing attention to how tacit forms of social functioning subvert manifest relations of power.

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ABSTRACTS

The article discusses the ways in which Walter Van Tilburg Clark's 1940 novel *The Ox-Bow Incident* problematizes the issues of secrecy, suspicion, gossip and exposure as a basis for the depiction of a variety of regulatory practices in a hierarchized settler society whose structures of authority enter a phase of renegotiation. The novel can be read as a portrayal of the Far West's transition toward a more egalitarian and modern social organization. Clark depicts a stratified society in which striving for a form of advancement is a shared necessity that powerfully influences individual mindsets, and this tendency can redefine even the entrenched hierarchies. Secrecy and suspicion exemplify the tactics through which individual interests fuel a larger process of the renegotiation of power relations within the settler collective.

INDEX

Keywords: secrecy, suspicion, settler colonial order, panopticism, The Ox-Bow Incident, Walter van Tilburg Clark, U.S. West

AUTHOR

MAREK PARYŻ

Marek Paryż is an Associate Professor and the chair of the Section of American Literature at the Institute of English Studies, University of Warsaw. He is the chief editor of the *Polish Journal for American Studies* and senior editor for literature and culture of the *European Journal of American Studies*. His book publications include *The Postcolonial and Imperial Experience in American Transcendentalism* (Palgrave, 2012) and a co-edited volume of essays *The Post-2000 Film Western: Contexts, Transnationality, Hybridity* (Palgrave, 2015).