

David Rio, Amaia Ibararán and Martin Simonson, eds. 2011: *Beyond the Myth: New Perspectives on Western Texts*. London, Vitoria and Berkeley: Portal. XXXIII + 274 pp. ISBN: 978-84-938360-7-8.

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The cover of the opening volume in Portal Education's collection *The American Literary West*, *Beyond the Myth: New Perspectives on Western Texts*, edited by David Rio, Amaia Ibararán and Martin Simonson, combines the mythical western image of a horse grazing in an open pasture at sunset with the panoramic view of some of the skyscrapers in downtown Los Angeles. The combination of these two iconic representations of the West is in tune with the book's aim to go beyond, as its main title claims, mythical representations, views and meanings of the 'old West' to include the polyhedral nature of the contemporary urban West: a West that is not anchored in time but is constantly evolving and adapting to changing historical and social circumstances. Yet, as the cover design and some of the chapters in the book suggest, myth informs history and can neither be ignored nor done away with. Myth does not need to be incorporated into reality because it is already a part of it. As David Rio states in the introduction, following Richard White, "The mythic West imagined by Americans has shaped the West of history just as the West of history has helped create the West Americans have imagined. The two cannot be neatly severed" (xiv). A myth-producing factory itself, probably no other city is better equipped than L.A. to capture the complexities and diversities of living with (or in spite of), and outliving one's own myths. Like the vast and open plains of the Old West, the city of L.A. was and still is for thousands of people —from aspiring actors to the many undocumented immigrants walking its streets— the stuff that dreams (and myths) are made of. The mediated nature of the myth is suggested here by using a mirror image of the skyscrapers in L.A.'s financial district. To those familiar with the skyline, the left/right reversed image produces a sense of estrangement similar to Freud's notion of the *unheimlich*, which neatly captures some of the topics of the book, namely, the re-reading and re-visioning of many old and contemporary myths in a wide variety of western texts.

The book explicitly seeks to situate itself within the field of Western American Literature and to contribute a new perspective to those proposed by, among others, Neil Campbell's *The Rhizomatic West* (2008) and Michael Johnson's *Hunger for the Wild* (2007), the anthology edited by Susan Kollin *Postwestern Cultures* (2007), and articles by Kollin, Alex Hunt and Daniel Worden, included in *A Companion to the Literature and*

*Culture of the American West* —edited by Nicholas Witschi (2001)—, all of them works that are engaged with in this volume, particularly in the Introduction. Rio, Ibararán and Simonson approach the topic from the more general framework provided by border theory and Border Studies. Thus, they place the American West and the American Frontier, and as a consequence the literature produced about them, on the cultural space of the border. In this sense, by attempting to transcend traditional conceptions of borders and boundaries and conceptualizing western writing as belonging to “an international imaginary” (xxi), the book makes an interesting addition to the complex and ever-expanding field of Border Studies. Following the path opened by Gloria Anzaldúa’s foundational text, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), the border, with its manifold and contradictory dimensions and meanings, has become a prolific area of research within cultural and literary studies, from Hicks’s *Border Writing: The Multidimensional Text* (1991), Henderson’s *Borders, Boundaries and Frames: Essays in Cultural Criticism and Cultural Studies* (1995), Benito and Manzanás’s *Literature and Ethnicity in the Cultural Borderlands* (2002), to Schimanski and Wolfe’s *Border Poetics De-limited* (2007), to name just a few. The popularity and multidisciplinary interest in the topic is also evident in the recent publication of two companions to the field: *The Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies* (Wastl-Walter 2011) and *A Companion to Border Studies*, edited by Wiley-Blackwell (Wilson and Donnan 2012). Conceptually, the American Frontier that generated the corpus of western literature is seen as a specific historical manifestation of the border, as a particular way of drawing and redrawing borders and, in the process, constructing a nation on the strength of the expansion in its borders. In this sense, the concepts of border and frontier enter into a dynamic tension in the current book, which also inscribes itself within the larger theoretical underpinnings of Border Studies. Borders, border myths and border dynamics feature prominently in most of the chapters of this anthology that, in the tradition of so-called postfrontier writing, compels us to see the West as a matter of perspective. As Rio claims via Robert Gish, “West is ‘here and now’ from indigenous perspectives, West is perhaps still west, although maybe urban and rural, from Anglo and African American perspectives. West is north from Mexican American perspectives” (xiv). The scope of the book is not restricted to written narratives and also includes other western texts: from the *Star Trek* franchise and the star persona of Woody Guthrie to the urban-to-rural migration of the last decade.

The book opens with a preface by US writer Gregory Martin. The great-grandson of Basque immigrants in Northern Nevada, Martin’s piece explores issues of identity and belonging while telling the story of his one-year-long stay in the small community of immigrant Basques in the ghost town of Mountain City. His moving piece ‘Elegy and the Defiance of Elegy: Longing and Writing in the American West’ tells the untold stories of small places and lives that never made it into history books. In an indirect way he touches on some of the issues regarding space that will be recalled in later essays of the collection. Spatial considerations are paramount to the topic of the West and, therefore, the analysis

and the implications of space are the overarching themes running through most of the pieces in this anthology.

The volume is structured in three different but interrelated sections: ‘Continuity and Renewal’, ‘Beyond Stereotypes’ and ‘Cultural Transfers’. The essays in the first section address the resilience and powerful hold of the old myths about the West in contemporary US culture. In ‘The Rural West as Frontier: A Myth for Modern America’, J. Dwight Hines explores the prevalence of the frontier myth and its myriad contradictions, in the search for authenticity behind the urban-to-rural migration of some members of the upper middle-classes in the 1990s. Drawing on his own ethnographic research, Hines argues that the myth of the frontier seamlessly encapsulates the two coexisting but antithetical ideals of progress and regress that comprise the cultural dialectic of Modernity. In spite of the many closings of the frontier that may have been argued from different perspectives, Hines maintains that the frontier will remain open, and, therefore, its power effective, as long as we remain modern subjects.

The frontier and the rugged landscapes of the mythical West are essential to Aitor Ibarrola’s reading of the trope of the double in ‘David Guterson’s *The Other*: The Doppelgänger Tradition Visits the American West’. In this essay Ibarrola sets out to explore the combination between the psychological complexities of this narrative trope, which he considers “alien” to the literature of the American West, and the traditional topics in the fiction of the region, such as social non-conformism, masculine bonds and, in particular, the clash between wilderness and civilization, here embodied by the divergent life paths of the novel’s mirror protagonists. In their duality these two protagonists become an embodiment of the border itself, and their intimate friendship, characterized by simultaneous co-dependence and alienation, casts an interesting light on the way the narrative revises the meanings of the mythical western border.

Male friendship and the border also feature prominently in Maria O’Connell’s ‘That Boy Ain’t Right: Jimmy Blevins, John Grady Cole, and Mythic Masculinity in *All the Pretty Horses*’. For O’Connell, the wounded masculinity of the protagonists of McCarthy’s book is a consequence of their reliance on two interrelated iconic male myths, the romantic knight and the all-American cowboy, that are rendered as both obsolete and inadequate in a modern environment such as that of the novel. O’Connell finds homosocial relationships in this context damaging, not only for the women, but mainly for the men, who become both victims and perpetrators of the male patriarchal system that oppresses them.

The last chapter in this section, ‘Western Images in Paul Auster’s Work: From *Moon Palace* to Later Fiction’, by Jesús Ángel González, explores the role of western landscape and imagery in four novels by Paul Auster: *Moon Palace* (1989), *Mr Vertigo* (1994), *The Book of Illusions* (2002) and *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006). For González, the metafictional elements in these novels both lay bare the constructed nature of most myths about the American West and highlight their enduring power on the contemporary historical and political situation of the US. These novels, González claims, problematize the idea of the

West as a fixed concept and render it a fluctuating and even evanescent category, more a symbolic than a physical place.

The essays in the second section of the book, 'Beyond Stereotypes', question the sense of homogeneity that emerges in some visions of the American West. Neil Campbell's illuminating essay, 'Affective Critical Regionalism in D.J. Waldie's Suburban West', argues for the postnational and transnational possibilities embodied in expanded regionalism by looking at D.J. Waldie's accounts of suburban life in Lakewood, Los Angeles. Drawing on the spatial theories of Michel Foucault (1980) and Michel de Certeau (1984), he argues that Waldie's writings challenge suburban normative mythology and its illusion of homogeneity and predictability and compel us to look beyond the suburban grid and engage in the multiplicity of lives lived within it. The grid may be limiting but never paralyzing, Campbell claims, quoting Waldie. There is room for creative use of the urban space "inside and alongside these much-maligned patterns of everyday existence" (93). Another presumed type of homogeneity is revised in Monika Madinabeitia's 'Shoshone Mike and the Basques'. In its examination of the portrayal of Basques in the West in both fictional and non-fictional accounts of a real life event —the killing of four stockmen, three Basques and one Anglo, in the winter of 1911— this essay contributes to a further exploration of the complexity of the history of the American West and its ethnic diversity, one in which "Indians, Hispanics, Norwegians, Basques and Armenians have much to tell" (108). Yet, as this comparative analysis shows, Basque characters are either absent from these accounts or are the object of racial discrimination of different sorts, which shows the Old West mentality still at work well into the twentieth century.

The redefinition of American Indian identities in contemporary society is the key issue in Elisa Mateos's 'Revision of American Indian Stereotypes and Post-Indian Identity in Sherman Alexie's *Flight*'. Mateos claims that the reductionist and essentialist nature of most stereotypes about Native Americans curtails their chances to engage with contemporary life and culture. Her essay relates the fantastic migrations among different bodies and historical moments of the novel's protagonist to the need to construct contemporary *postindian* identity as a flexible and changing category that incorporates both Native and non-Native American traits.

The last chapter in this section, 'The Pros and the Cons of Writing Confessional Memoir in the Mormon Milieu', by Mormon writer Phyllis Barber, is an insightful reflection on the rationale behind writing confessional memoir and, to a certain extent, on the role of writers and the nature of writing. However, whilst having been written by the author of two memoirs dealing with the experience of being born into and shaped by both the American West and Mormonism, the piece itself does not engage directly with the role of Mormons in the construction of the American West.

The last section of the book moves away from written texts and looks at the mythical American West in other artistic expressions. It opens with 'The Bronze Rose of Texas: Film and Chicano I/dentity in Tino Villanueva's *Scene from the Movie GIANT*', by Juan Ignacio Guijarro. Villanueva's collection of poems is, for Guijarro, an illuminating and

touching meditation on the absence of Chicanos in Hollywood history and a vindication of the potential of art, poetry in this case, to heal wounds and confront social injustice. The poems are inspired by Villanueva's complex reaction, as a Chicano teenager watching the film for the first time, to the scene in which the character played by Rock Hudson in *Giant* fights the owner of a diner over some Chicano customers. Finding his identification options in the scene curtailed and frustrating, Villanueva reflects in his poems both on Chicano cultural (mis)representation in films and official US history as well as provides an insightful account of how real spectators may find a place of resistance within films in spite of the texts' narrative and ideological maneuvering. The second chapter in this section, "Wagon Train to the Stars": Star Trekkin' the US Western Frontier', by Stefan Rabitsch, sees the US western frontier as one of the primary themes in the *Star Trek* franchise. The article analyzes the implications and meanings of *Star Trek's* primary intertext (the 1950s television show, *Wagon Train*) and claims how the show's inherently postmodern storytelling manner constructs the mythical western frontier as a polysemic text that allows for the exploration of a variety of issues such as race, ethnicity, gender identity or the dialectics between faith and reason, among others. Unfortunately the chapter never really develops any of these issues in detail nor does it provide any specific examples from the texts, offering instead a rather lengthy contextual introduction.

Next, David Fenimore analyses the transnational figure, legacy and appeal of folk singer Woody Guthrie in 'From California to Jarama Valley: Woody Guthrie's Folk Banditry'. For Fenimore, Guthrie's folk compositions and performances reflect his instinctive understanding of borders as imaginary lines trying to mask and sometimes even deny our collective humanity. Guthrie emerges from this article as a natural born border-crosser: "By singing and writing about rich and poor, capitalist and worker, American and Mexican, police and outlaw, Guthrie reconciled these contraries and, with ironic humor created a lyrical utopia that to this day rights wrongs, locates the dislocated, gives a home to the homeless, and lends a voice to the voiceless between all borders real and imagined" (231).

The section closes with Carmen Camus's essay on the impact of Franco's censorship on the translation of some western novels into Spanish: 'How Some of the West Was Lost in Translation: The Influence of Franco's Censorship on Spanish Westerns.' Through the analysis of three different novels —*Duel in the Sun* (Busch 1946), *Horseman, Pass By* (McMurty 1961) and *Little Big Man* (Berger 1964)— approved for translation by the censorship board in three different periods, she concludes that most of the changes, both those demanded by the censors and those produced by the translators' self-censorship, had to do with sexual morality and, in particular, with the portrayal of the female characters, who lost some of their independence and sexual drive to make them closer to the prototypical woman promoted by Franco's regime.

*Beyond the Myth* brings together a wide variety of perspectives on different historical and cultural aspects of the American West. The essays in this wide-ranging volume share a strong theoretical foundation and, taken together, constitute a valuable contribution to both American Studies and Border Studies, and, more specifically, to the study of

Western American Literature and Critical/Cultural Regionalism. By locating their study at the intersection between American and Border Studies, the authors manage to frame the all-important historical concept of the American Frontier within a novel perspective. The essays offered in this volume are a relevant and interesting account of the variety and heterogeneity that attend an apparently inexhaustible myth; one that, although geographically and even historically bounded, has long transcended its own frontiers.

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