

A CONTESTED WEST. NEW READINGS OF PLACE IN WESTERN AMERICAN LITERATURE.

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The traditional field of the Old West never seemed to attract much attention in Spanish academia. Luckily, the rise of the paradigm of the New West has altered that anomaly so that, nowadays, a solid body of research on the subject is being carried out in several universities all over Spain. The leading exponent of this new scenario is David Río, who teaches U.S. Literature at the University of the Basque Country, and is one of the three editors of *A Contested West*. After exploring for years the intricacies of the South, over the last decade he has shifted his attention to the West, putting together conferences and publications, as well as a major research project. He is also behind an unusual project in Spanish academic circles: creating a book series, 'American Literary West', with an editorial board formed by names as distinguished in the field as Frank Bergon, Neil Campbell, Richard W. Etulain, Maria Herrera-Sobek, or Peter Hulme. Three essay collections on the multiple identities of West have been published in only three years: *Beyond the Myth. New Perspectives on Western Texts* (2011), *The Neglected West. Contemporary Approaches to Western American Literature* (2012), and now, *A Contested West. New Readings of Place in Western American Literature* (2013).

Like its predecessors, the third volume offers challenging and insightful views on the West. Even the cover departs from the traditional iconography, since it is a colorful reproduction of a poster depicting a Chicana field worker. Author Rick Bass pens a brief but densely lyrical introduction on the ineffable essence of the territory, noting that "there is something about the West which, though it might thus far elude precise capture, nonetheless exists, thrums, is redolent with the ability, it seems, to both generate and receive deep emotion" (iv), words which bring to mind *The Great Gatsby*. He also adds the suggestive notion that, most likely, the art and the literature of a space as vast as the West are characterized by "a greater imaginativeness, [. . .] greater loneliness, greater joys, greater volatilities of weather and the seasons" (vi). Many of the essays in the collection do move in this direction,

either explicitly or implicitly. In his equally brief presentation, one of the editors, Martin Simonson, states that *A Contested West* aims at revealing “some of the many—and intriguingly different—accounts of the complex relationships between the West as a physical reality (space), on the one hand, and human inhabitation and interpretation of this territory (place), on the other” (ix).

The opening section of the book, “Preliminaries: Human Perception and the West,” is formed by three essays. In the first one, “The Bioregional Imagination in the American West,” Cheryll Glotfelty offers an excellent overview of the concept of ‘bioregion’, which can be traced back to the 1970s, and which opens fruitful possibilities for reading texts about the West. Glotfelty, who recently coedited the volume *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place*, explores the pioneering work of Peter Berg or Gary Snyder (who reappears later in this review). In the last section of her essay, entitled “Toward a Bioregional Critical Approach,” she enumerates—in a clear and didactic fashion—many of the issues left to be explored in this new protocol of reading. One of the most illuminating passages in her essay is when she contends that, from a bioregional perspective, a sharp contrast ought to be established between the validity of political borders, on the one hand, and geographical ones, on the other: “identifying and identifying *with* regions makes more ecological sense than kowtowing to arbitrarily drawn political boundaries, such as those of nations, states, and counties” (9). In these virtual virtual times, when cultural and communicative barriers blur faster than ever before, her proposal seems quite appealing. In “Small Towns in the American West as Affective Landscapes: The Example of Wickenburg, Arizona,” Nancy Cook tries to “suggest a loose set of writing/reading practices, informed by an eccentric reading of academic work in critical regionalism, cultural geography, landscape studies, affect theory, and studies of everyday life” (24), truly an interdisciplinary methodology. Like Glotfelty, Cook also charts new territories available for further intellectual exploration but, while Glotfelty’s proposal relied on the idea of the ‘bioregional,’ Cook’s largely rests on the notion of ‘affective landscapes.’ If in the first half of her essay she sets up a critical framework, the second is devoted to exemplify her critical approach, which clearly departs from conventional scholarship by heavily relying on personal experiences. The last essay of this opening section, Terry Gifford’s “Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* and a Post-Pastoral Theory of Fiction,” focuses on a successful author who has struggled to reinvent the Southwest in the turn of the century. At the outset of his analysis, Gifford points out that, until now, ecocriticism has largely centered on poetry and non-fiction, while rather neglected fiction. Like other essays, this one also strikes a clear pedagogical note when he enumerates the several features that make McCarthy’s abstract apocalyptic novel a post-pastoral text. In a section called “What Are the Features of Post-Pastoral Fictional Narratives?,” several pages are dedicated to discussing the main

characteristics that link novels such as Rick Bass' *Fiber*, Brian Clarke's *The Stream*, or Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain*.

The second section of the book, "Contested Notions of the West," also includes three contributions. The first one, Christian Hummelsund Voie's "From Green to Red: Nature Writing Goes West," is without a doubt the most provocative essay in the entire volume. He emphasizes that he wants to prove that "the shift from East to West, from green to red, while ostensibly promoting radical revisions in landscape aesthetics, should also be recognized as symptomatic of a highly conservative impulse" (66). He then proceeds to dismantle some of the commonplaces about the East-West dichotomy, and to uncover stereotypes about the Old West and the New West too. Along the way, he dares to critique respected names in the field like Gary Snyder (mentioned by Glotfelty in her essay). Voie repeatedly denounces that a fake image of the West as a territory of freedom and emptiness has been carefully constructed so that, ultimately, "what makes the region more appealing to nature writers than the East may simple be that it looks 'better.' In the West you do not have to see the damage at all times" (86). It is always stimulating to find a young scholar defending his views in such a forceful tone. The only essay in *A Contested West* devoted to the first inhabitants of the West, Native Americans, is written by M^a Felisa López-Liquete. She offers a dense theoretical reading of the concept of space in the West, illustrating it with references to Native American authors like Leslie Marmon Silko. She opens her analysis with a brilliant meditation on the problematic relation between space and its representation in maps and similar documents. As she contends, "the map is not the territory, even if they are experienced maps instead of maps of power: knowing the place is a means of mastering, controlling, and limiting it, demarcating its borders and its frontiers" (95-96); these words bring to mind the late Edward Said's insights on the frequently invisible links between knowledge and power in his masterful *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). In her wide-ranging argumentation, López-Liquete borrows notions from many disparate sources which go from Humboldt to Herman Melville (an author she has studied in depth). Alongside Native Americans, the Chicano community also has a major right to claim the West as its original territory. In the essay which ends the second section, "Dissolving False Divides: A Chicana/o Revision of Urban Domestic Spaces," Juan Ignacio Oliva offers a brief but revealing analysis of the ambivalent role that the symbolic space of *el Barrio* plays in Chicano/a identity politics. To illustrate his critical inquiry on the concepts of both 'topophilia' and 'topophobia' (which he takes from Chinese-American geographer and environmental critic Yi-Fu Tuan), he discusses four recent poems which illustrate the experience of inhabiting *el Barrio*: Angela de Hoyos' "La Gran Ciudad," Alberto 'Lalo' Delgado's "El Barrio," Irene Blea's "Spaces like the Barrio," and Rina García Rocha's "The Truth in My Eyes." All these texts allow him to conclude that "equal feelings of attraction and rejection to the urban domestic

spaces inhabited by Chicana/o appear, tracing a picture of the dualistic sense of place experienced in the United States by ethnic minorities” (119-20).

The last section of the book, “Case Studies: Different Wests,” opens with the longest essay in the entire collection, Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz’s “Considering the Naturalist Ethos in Anne Proulx’s *Fine Just the Way It Is*.” Ibarrola-Armendariz (whose views on *The Road* Terry Gifford quoted in his essay) demonstrates, once again, that he is one of the most perceptive readers of U. S. literature in Spanish academia. He offers a brilliant study on Proulx’s 2008 short-story collection, in order to show how an author who built her reputation writing about the East (winning a Pulitzer for her novel *The Shipping News*) “has managed to endow Wyoming landscape and her fiction with a very special ethos by combining the more conventional aspects of nature-writing with some innovative and oppositional elements that contain a certain critique of the traditional vision of the American West” (131). He discusses several stories from this *Fine Just the Way It Is* to prove his hypothesis that the book should be understood as “landscape fiction.” Among the many topics he delves into is Proulx’s problematic relationship with Naturalism, a tradition Ibarrola-Armendariz has studied extensively.

With “Bikes Travel Back: An Inner Trip into Phyllis Barber’s *Raw Edges* from an Ecocritical Viewpoint,” Ángel Chaparro Sáinz forcefully demonstrates that the paradigm of the New West must accommodate not only ethnic minorities traditionally neglected like Chicanos, Native Americans, or even African-Americans, but also other silenced voices like the Mormons. Chaparro Sáinz, who recently authored the book *Parting the Mormon Veil. Phyllis Barber’s Writing* (2013), has become a key figure in unearthing the social and cultural idiosyncrasy of this religious group, which remains rather invisible both in high and popular culture, with a few notable exceptions like HBO’s *Big Love* or the award-winning musical *The Book of Mormon*. His essay clearly shows that, even today, there remain major areas still to be explored in reconstructing the history of the West. His solid analysis of *Raw Edges*--Barber’s second autobiographical work--is based on a feminist theory, according to which “women feel a different bond to nature, one that rejects the ideals of conquest and domination and argues for recognizing and validating connectedness, one that affirms the beauty and spirituality of nature” (160). Chaparro pays special attention to topics such as the Mormons’ attachment to place and their sense of belonging. In “Writing the Toxic Environment: Ecocriticism and Chicana Literary Imagination,” one of the most respected voices in Chicano Studies, María Herrera-Sobek, offers a suggestive ecocritical analysis of three recent works by Chicana authors: Cherríe Moraga’s play *Heroes and Saints* (1994), Ana Castillo’s novel *So Far from God* (1993), and Rosaura Sánchez and Beatrice Pita’s science-fiction novel *Lunar Braceros: 2125-2148* (2009). Her choice of genres needs to be highlighted since, on the one hand, the presence of drama in West Studies remains small compared to the novel, poetry, or even non-fiction, and, on

the other, science fiction is not frequently associated to the West or to Chicano writing. Herrera-Sobek makes use of a ‘theoretical construct’ she has coined, “aesthetic activism,” by which she refers to “the use of the beautiful in the pursuit of social justice” (173-74). She adds that, in the three texts she has selected, “literary language is employed to promote a strong critique of the United States’s disregard for the environment, particularly as it concerns Mexican American workers” (174). Even though the three texts have been published over the last two decades, they are timely brought in connection with the legacy of the Chicano Movement, and with pioneering authors like Alurista, Rudolfo Anaya, or Juan Felipe Herrera, thus setting up an insightful dialogue between past and present, between male and female. The collection ends with Monika Madinabeitia’s “The Myth of the Frontier in T. C. Boyle’s *The Tortilla Curtain*.” She provides a solid reading a novel which in 1995 generated controversy because it dealt with the thorny issue of the so-called ‘illegal immigration’. Madinabeitia’s approach to the symbolic clash between a Chicano and an Anglo family is based on founding myths of the West (and the whole nation, for that matter) like the American Dream or Manifest Destiny, since they opened up “the possibility of taking nature as a nourishing source of both financial and spiritual greed” (193). She also links Boyle’s novel to the notion of ‘environmental racism’ (or ‘environmental exclusion’), used by white supremacists to delimit the physical and social space in the West, proving that some of the most powerful ideological tenets of the Old West have yet to be fully eradicated.

Like the other two preceding volumes in the series, *A Contested West. New Readings of Place in Western American Literature* also closes with a useful Name Index, a paratext that is luckily becoming more common in Spanish academic publications. This volume is, without a doubt, a brilliant contribution to the field of the New West; it offers a wide array of critical approaches which always enlighten the understanding of a part of the United States which, for the longest time, depended on a set of narrow stereotypes and misconceptions. Anyone interested in the discipline of U.S. Studies can only hope that volumes of this same intellectual rigor will soon appear to consolidate this outstanding book series.

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