



PROJECT MUSE®

---

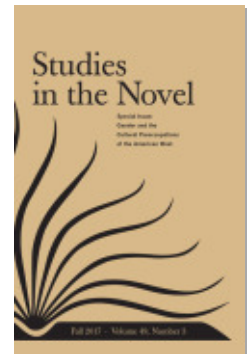
## Gender and the Cultural Preoccupations of the American West

Sigrid Anderson Cordell, Carrie Johnston

Studies in the Novel, Volume 49, Number 3, Fall 2017, pp. 299-303 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sdn.2017.0031>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/671807>



## INTRODUCTION: GENDER AND THE CULTURAL PREOCCUPATIONS OF THE AMERICAN WEST

SIGRID ANDERSON CORDELL AND CARRIE JOHNSTON

This special issue examines the novel as a tool of political engagement through which women writers have challenged prevalent notions of the American West as masculine, anti-modern, and untouched. These pervasive master narratives present unique challenges to scholars attempting to uncover and recover women's writing that resists or undermines popular and pervasive notions of the American West. Even thirty years after Annette Kolodny's foundational study, *The Land Before Her* (1984), more recent work by Nina Baym, Krista Comer, Melody Graulich, Cathryn Halverson, and Victoria Lamont has shown there is considerable work to be done to account for women writers' engagement with the West as an imaginative and political space.

And for good reason. The preoccupation with the American West as the frontier and promise of Anglo-American supremacy has given rise to the scholarly preoccupations of legitimacy and reinvention. Scholars seeking to study and recover literature that resists longstanding notions of the American West are therefore faced with the unique challenge of establishing the legitimacy of their subjects of study, as well as the expectation to "reinvent" the scholarly landscape. For example, Annette Kolodny, whose feminist and ecocritical interventions in western literary studies are now considered central to the field, faced critiques early in her career that, in Victoria Lamont's words, "dismissed her feminist work as 'faddish' and 'not really literature'" ("Big Books Wanted" 312). Critical works such as Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land* (1975) and *The Land Before Her* (1984), Jane Tompkins's *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (1992), Krista Comer's *Landscapes of the New West: Gender and Geography in Contemporary Women's Writing* (1999), and Melody Graulich's important editorial interventions advancing the field and reintroducing works by Mary Austin and others challenged existing critical paradigms, thus

necessitating new ways to frame and approach western literary studies. Since then works such as Susan J. Rosowski's *Birthing a Nation: Gender, Creativity, and the West in American Literature* (1999), Nicolas Witschi's *Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American West* (2011), Cathryn Halverson's *Playing House in the American West* (2013), and Victoria Lamont's *Westerns: A Women's History* (2016) have risen to the challenge of restructuring critical inquiry through investigation and recovery of women's voices in the American West.

As these studies have shown, scholars of gender and the West are obligated to do a lot of critical heavy lifting. Alongside the preoccupation with proving scholarly value, a second preoccupation with which scholars of women writers and the West must contend is the need to discover or declare a "new" or "post" West approach to scholarship. This trend is largely the result of longstanding, problematic constructions of the West in the American cultural imaginary, and the concomitant papering over of the truths of settler colonialism and imperialism, beginning with white settlement and crystalizing in Frederick Jackson Turner's formulation of the frontier as a formative idea in the American character. Our critical awareness that Turner's "frontier thesis" is fundamentally wrong because of its simultaneous erasure of and racism toward indigenous peoples, and the rethinking that the new western criticism ushered in as a result, has filtered through to a desire in western studies to rethink our critical viewpoints in a continual search to finally get it right.

Critical regionalist approaches have mitigated the necessity to reinvent the field by presenting frameworks to demystify the ways that constructions of region and geographic boundaries limit western literary studies. Krista Comer rethinks nationalist, white, and masculinist constructions of the American West by applying a feminist and postmodernist lens to reveal the ways that women have remapped traditional spatial fields in *Landscapes of the New West*. In *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture* (2003), Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse demonstrate the ways that a regional focus can expose the mythologies that generic conventions of realism perpetuate (4). In "Literature and Regional Production" (2005), Hsuan Hsu overturns the logic of chronological, linear progression in his analysis of regional literature and the ways that "regional identification—which often takes the form of nostalgia for past modes of production—coalesces from the outside in" (62). Neil Campbell's *The Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age* (2008) employs Deleuze and Guattari's theory of the rhizome to think "beyond [the West's] function as a national unifier...to view it as unfinished, multiple, and 'open'" (9). These critical regionalist approaches have generated new methods of inquiry that account for and expose the critical blind spots and cultural ideologies that have marginalized women writers and generated structures of power that conceal the truths of settler colonialism and imperialism.

The contributors to this special issue draw on this critical regionalist framework to propose new methods of inquiry that, as Susan Kollin urges, “remind us how important it is to continue carefully assessing and evaluating the political burdens placed on western spaces in national discourse” (x). The essays assembled here examine the ways that women novelists have located themselves in the West—both imaginatively and geographically—asking how these narratives have engaged cultural “preoccupations” with the West as an extension of the predominantly white, masculine public sphere. Examining these narratives, each contributor has taken up aspects of gendered representations of the longstanding contested nature of the occupation of western territories and, more recently, US borders.

This special issue takes up the gendered aspect of “preoccupations” of the West because these stories still have yet to be fully accounted for in our literary histories of the West—and because gender remains an important organizing principle in our understanding of the West. In speaking of the ethnic diversity of the subjects in her study, Krista Comer argues, “I settled on what might be received as a ‘multicultural’ representation of the movement not from a pluralist desire to celebrate diversity in American culture—a desire that lends itself to underestimating racial hatreds and injustice—but as a representational methodology that might heed the various new tellings of western history that issue from this body of literature” (9). Likewise, we have turned to women writers, and have taken the perspectives of queer writers and writers of color as objects of study, not simply in an attempt to celebrate diversity, but because different—and, as we see them, crucial—literary histories emerge when we take a broader range of stories into account.

To open the issue, Leslie Allison’s “Reading the West Sideways: Queering the Frontier in Jean Stafford’s *The Mountain Lion*” proposes a queer reading of the American West to argue against facile notions of progressive development that dominate western mythologies. Allison’s reading of Stafford’s 1947 novel resists reading the West as masculinist on the one hand, and domesticated and feminized on the other. In place of such readings, Allison offers a “sideways” approach to western literature that draws on ideas of queer failure to generate a perspective that destabilizes ideas of the mythic, masculine West. Considering texts such as *The Mountain Lion* that do not neatly fit into “feminist” or even “domestic” templates, but instead celebrate indeterminacy, Allison’s approach generates methods of reading or seeing the West that uncover new forms of resistance in western women’s writing.

Each of the essays in this special issue takes up a version of this “sideways” approach, privileging the inquiry that comes from intervening in overly simplistic ways of reading gender in the American West. Tace Hedrick’s essay, “‘The Spirits Talk to Us’: Regionalism, Poverty, and Romance in Mexican American Gothic Fiction,” explores the potential of Latinx gothic novels to make visible the forgotten and erased narratives of Mexican Americans.

Taking Mary Castillo's *Lost in the Light* (2012) and Alisa Valdes's *The Temptation of Demetrio Vigil* (2013) as her subject, Hedrick considers the ways that the generic conventions of gothic romances reveal the specific regional experiences of Mexican Americans. The female protagonists' love interests who materialize as a supernatural presence in both novels, Hedrick argues, function as the return of repressed histories of Mexican American poverty and violence. Through unsettling histories of these Mexican American men, these authors have used generic conventions to subvert the conventional narratives of national belonging through attaching a "pejorative sameness" (325) to racial and ethnic groups.

Jennifer L. Lieberman's and Geneva M. Gano's essays investigate the ways that infusing neglected perspectives into narratives of western progress and innovation often privileges one group at the cost of marginalizing another. In "Women's Power in the American West: Mary Hallock Foote and Honoré Willis Morrow's Tales of Electrification," Lieberman argues that the obscurity of women's tales of electrification in the American West has contributed to masculine-gendered narratives of progress and the subsequent mythification of the western past. Foote's novella "The Harshaw Bride" (1896) and Morrow's novel *The Exile of the Lariat* (1923) draw attention to women's roles in adopting technologies in rural, western communities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This approach subverts electrical industry narratives of competition between past and present, preservation and modernization, emphasizing instead cooperation and compromise. As Lieberman shows, however, "authors subvert electrical industry promotional materials in their portrayal of white women but...stabilize stereotypes about indigenous women's anti-modernity in their attempts to accentuate white women's roles" (344). Gano examines how Michelle Tea's novel *Valencia* (2000) celebrates a rebellious, oppositional queer community in San Francisco's Mission District while at the same time erasing, and at times co-opting, its Latinx past. As Gano illustrates, Tea's novel takes up the double-edged frontier: for example, how it might serve as a space for liberation and rebellion for the queer community while that community might be implicated in the erasure of its racial history. Ultimately, Gano asks about the limits of rebellion and critique—how do we account for and understand what Tea is up to in pushing against boundaries around sexuality while becoming implicated in perpetuating problematic narratives of race, gender, or sexuality? Importantly, framing her analysis through the Mission district as a frontier space, Gano illuminates how the rhetoric of the wild West continues to be a useful tool for claiming personal freedom for whites while perpetuating the erasure of nonwhites.

Sigrid Anderson Cordell and Carrie Johnston connect these regional constructions of race and belonging to global politics in their essays. In "Between Refugee and 'Normalized' Citizen: Narratives of Exclusion in the Novels of Bich Minh Nguyen," Cordell examines two novels by Bich

Minh Nguyen that highlight questions of identity, inclusion, and exclusion in the Vietnamese American community, connecting these questions to post-September 11 heightened hostility toward immigrants in the US. Johnston's essay, "Postwar Reentry Narratives in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*," locates the American West as not a point of origin, but rather as a place that is always being reinvented to create, circulate, and reinforce nationalist narratives of belonging and exclusion. Reading Silko's novel alongside Fountain's, Johnston argues, reveals the imaginative construction of the West as a point of origin of US national security during global conflict. In their critical regional approaches, both Cordell and Johnston demonstrate the ways that the West is called upon to respond to global conflict, revealing "the larger-scale contradictions of imperialism and commerce that are provisionally resolved by such regional identifications" (Hsu 38).

Overall, this special issue highlights potential new directions for critical work on women and the West that fully engages with the complexities and contradictions of what the West has meant for scholars and writers. While Turner's frontier thesis has been usefully contested for its imagining of the frontier as an empty space to be colonized, these essays show that the frontier as an abstract idea continues to be a fruitful metaphor for women writers to think through gendered and racialized relationships to history, sexuality, politics, space, and identity.

## WORKS CITED

- Baym, Nina. *Women Writers of the American West, 1833-1927*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2011.
- Campbell, Neil. *The Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2008.
- Fetterley, Judith, and Marjorie Pryse, eds. *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2003.
- Halverson, Cathryn. *Playing House in the American West: Western Women's Life Narratives, 1839-1987*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2013.
- Hsu, Hsuan. "Literature and Regional Production." *American Literary History* 17.1 (2005): 36-69.
- Kollin, Susan, ed. *Postwestern Cultures: Literature, Theory, Space*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2007.
- Kolodny, Annette. *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1984.
- Lamont, Victoria. "Big Books Wanted: Women and Western American Literature in the Twenty-First Century." *Legacy* 31.2 (2014): 311-26.
- . *Westerns: A Women's History*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2016.
- Tompkins, Jane. *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*. New York: Oxford UP, 1992.