

THE SUN SETS IN THE WEST: AN INTRODUCTION*

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In Westerns, the cowboy rode his horse into the sunset. The West is where the sun sets. It is also the dawn of exciting academic research. The articles collected here are proof of this dawn. They all explore the complexities of the American West, its representation in culture and its impact on individual and collective identities. They show how this specific focus resonates with international reverberation.

David M. Wrobel and Michael C. Steiner, when they examined sense of place in the American West, concluded: “many Wests lie within the larger West” (17). There are *many* Wests. This rich tapestry of Wests evokes the multiple experiences that have articulated a wide array of cultural narratives. In the first days of 2024, the Smithsonian Institution closed an exhibition that run for almost six months. Under the title “Many Wests: Artists Shape an American Idea,” the Smithsonian gathered a collection revealing that “ideas about the American West, both in popular culture and in commonly accepted historical narratives, are often based on a past that never was,” and showing how contemporary artists offer “a broader and more inclusive view of this region, which too often has been dominated by romanticized myths and Euro-American historical accounts” (“Many Wests”). Many Wests indeed.

The West has been able to transcend its geographical bonds and erode the pledges of time. The influence of its romantic narratives is still pervading and strong today and it has trespassed foreign territories. Western lore and symbolism were decipherable for a boy or a girl in an American household in the late 1950s watching *The Adventures of Rin Tin Tin* on television, but it remains equally comprehensible for a Gen Alpha kid who watches today how Gabby goes on a Wild, Wild West adventure in one of the episodes from *Gabby's Dollhouse*. In the 1970s, nobody would frown upon Sonny & Cher wearing Western flannel shirts or singing “A Cowboy’s Work Is Never Done.” Today, the members of an underground rock band from London such as Black Midi wear cowboy hats, record music videos with Western aesthetics or release songs entitled “Western” and similarly nobody is surprised. The tropes of the romantic West remain, but ambiguities and paradoxes have also captivated its essence. In the academia, researchers have taken on the adventure to explore the interconnections, exchanges and permutations between those many different Wests. The sun has not just set and the West remains both origin and destination, direction and inspiration, truth and fantasy. That is why, probably, it seems such a universal experience.

When arranging this collection of essays, our challenge has been to mirror this wide-ranging stamp, in the conviction that we have provided a sample of a

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multiple West. The forthcoming essays offer a panoramic view of Western studies, with a stress on the international accent that has characterized this field in recent years.

This collection starts with David Ríó's contribution, which proposes a review of the origin, development and current situation of Western American studies in Spain. The essay analyzes the way in which the evident popularity of Western texts in the country was never accompanied by scholarly recognition, because of the stereotypical idea that connected the West to the formula Western, considered minor in terms of quality and academic interest. Ríó argues, however, that, on the contrary, the situation has changed today, proof of which is the amount of scholars who are publishing on the field, such as the authors of some of the essays included in this collection. Iratxe Ruiz de Alegría, as an example, explores Isabell Bird's travelogue *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* (1879), "and ode to the mountainous scenery in prose," in her words. However, she defends that one of the essential contributions of Bird's text is its portrayal of a deep concern about the degradation of nature, and, hence, the text becomes an environmental manifesto. In this same line, Irati Jiménez proposes an interesting analysis on the relevance of the grizzly bear for Native American tribes through the study of diverse folk tales, as well as its importance as an essential element in the construction of the West, as exposed in William Faulkner's "The Bear" (1942). Maite Aperribay-Bermejo adds to the significance of literature in terms of environmental engagement, and in particular of environmental justice, with the analysis of the work of four Chicana authors: Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, Helena María Viramontes and Cherríe Moraga. The next two essays delve into the impact of the American West in the lives and works of authors such as William Burroughs whose work, in Neil Campbell's observation, attempted to break with the patterns of the mythic action (related to the frontier as the seed of America) that its characters are trapped in, through what he defines as errantry. The myth of the West is also challenged in Jim Harrison's *A Good Day to Die* (1973), a novel where, in Elżbieta Horodyska's words, "the myth is put to the test of compatibility with the real world." The author's scrutiny of the novel through the lens of Richard Slotkin's notion of "regeneration through violence" and Donna Haraway's idea of "situated knowledges," as well as Jane Tompkins' challenge of the representation of masculinity in the West, allows her to conclude that Harrison's approach to the myth is more realistic than mythical. Patricia García-Medina, on her part, proves that the idea of the American Dream as directly related to how the West was reversed in lesbian fiction after the 1950s, where the West Village in New York became the epitome of hope and freedom.

The next two essays address the relevance of cinema in the construction of said Western myth. In particular, Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz analyzes the way in

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which the Coen brothers' *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* (2018) explores many of the big themes that they have worked with in their filmography, and also adds the idea of challenging the so-called myth through the six stories that compose the movie. This same challenge is observed in Alice Carletto's analysis of Jessica Bruder's *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-first Century* (2017) and Chloé Zhao's highly acclaimed *Nomadland* (2020), both of which address issues of the West as related to the idea of the American road and the American mobility as a myth.

The volume closes with two essays of a more cultural essence. The first example, proposed by Maja Daniel, accounts for the creation of the community of Panna Maria in Texas, defined as the oldest existing Polish settlement in the US, as well as of its cultural impact on both Texan culture and on the Upper Silesian one, origin of the first settlers of Panna Maria. Monika Madinabeitia also observes the strategies of adaptation and of cultural survival of an immigrant community in the West. In particular, she accounts for the relevance of the Basque language (and of its loss) for assimilation of the Basque community into the US cultural and social landscape. She also examines the several initiatives that are taking place in the present for its revitalization.

The West is at the very heart of the foundation of American identity and its history and culture are still springs for academic reflection when researchers aim at understanding the past, present and future of American identity. The West is where the sun sets and its myth draws an across-the-world shadow.



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ARTICLES

