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SPECIAL ISSUE

A Multiple and International West: History and Prospects of Western
American Studies / Un Oeste internacional y diverso: Historia y Futuro
de los Estudios del Oeste Americano

THE SUN SETS IN THE WEST: AN INTRODUCTION*

Ángel Chaparro Sainz & Amaia Ibarra-ran-Bigalondo

UPV/EHU, U. Basque Country

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

* This article has been written under the auspices of the REWEST research group, funded by the Basque Government (IT1565-22).



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

RESEARCHING THE AMERICAN WEST IN SPAIN: BEYOND PREJUDICES AND MISCONCEPTIONS*

David Río

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ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes the history of western American studies in Spain, offering a panoramic view of their genesis, development, and current situation. It is argued that the popularity of the American West in Spanish culture and society in the mid-twentieth century contrasts sharply with its neglect by academia due to a series of prejudices and misconceptions, often related to its almost exclusive association with the so-called *formula western*. I explore the increasing visibility of western American studies in the last decades of the twentieth century and its consolidation during the present century. In fact, nowadays the literature and culture of the American West receive wide attention in Spain, as illustrated by several activities, groups, individual scholars, and publications that demonstrate the vitality and diversity of this area of research.

KEYWORDS: Western American Studies, Spain, Literature, Films, Culture

INVESTIGANDO EL OESTE AMERICANO EN ESPAÑA: MAS ALLÁ DE PREJUICIOS Y CONCEPTOS ERRÓNEOS

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza la historia de los estudios sobre el Oeste norteamericano en España, ofreciendo una visión panorámica de su génesis, desarrollo y situación actual. Se destaca que la popularidad del Oeste en la sociedad y en la cultura española a mediados del siglo xx contrasta con su posición marginal en el ámbito académico debido a una serie de prejuicios y conceptos erróneos, a menudo relacionados con la asociación casi exclusiva del Oeste con el subgénero del *formula western* (novela popular del Oeste). Se explora la creciente visibilidad de los estudios en las últimas décadas del siglo xx y su actual consolidación. La literatura y la cultura del Oeste son objeto de amplia atención en España, tal y como puede verse a través de diferentes actividades, grupos, autores y publicaciones que demuestran la vitalidad y diversidad de la investigación en esta área.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Estudios Oeste Norteamericano, España, Literatura, Cine, Cultura

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INTRODUCTION

The American West was neglected in Spain as a valuable field of studies for too many decades because of its almost exclusive association with popular literature and, in particular, with the so-called *formula western*. In fact, we had to wait until the last decades of the twentieth-century for the rise to academic visibility of studies focused on this region and its imaginary, a field of research that has achieved increasing recognition in the present century. The process of consolidation of western American studies in Spain reproduces somehow the growing prestige of this research field in most European countries and in America, though in the United States the vindication of western American studies took place a few years earlier, particularly after the creation of the Western Literature Association in 1965. However, even in the United States the American West remained for many years as a minor research area due to a series of prejudices and misconceptions. The West was not only linked to the popular but low-quality *formula western*, a subgenre full of stereotypes and recurrent plots reproducing traditional frontier mythology, but also was regarded as a field of regional interest only. For example, its literature was usually labelled as local color writing, and the terms “local” and “regional” were used to minimize the impact of those stories focused on the American West. This neglect towards western writing was related to the minor role conferred to “region” and “place” for many decades in literary studies. In Michael Kowalewski’s words, “the critical assumption seems to be that region or ‘a sense of place’ is not an imaginative factor that can be internalized and struggled in the same literarily rewarding ways that writers struggle with issues of race, class, and gender” (1996, 7). Even at the end of the 1980s, a period in which western American literature had already started to achieve significant recognition, as testified by the publication of the impressive *A Literary History of the American West* (1987), a volume containing 1,353 pages, some scholars still insisted on reducing the importance of this literature, regarding it as mere regional writing. In fact, in 1988 *The Columbia Literary History of the United States* devoted only a few pages to examine western American literature, a theme that was discussed in an essay by James M. Cox significantly entitled “Regionalism: A Diminished Thing.” However, by the mid-1990s the recognition of western American literature as a valuable field for teaching and research was beyond any doubt in the United States. As Michael L. Johnson stated in 1996: “more of it is being read in the schools, at all levels, than ever before. Grade-school students are reading works by and about Native Americans. High-school students who never liked literature are coming to it in courses like Frontier Literature. College courses in Western literature of all kinds, New and Old, are now offered across the whole country” (196).

*This article was completed under the auspices of the research group REWEST (Research in Western American Literature and Culture), funded by the Basque Government (IT-1565-22).



In Spain, the huge popular success of the American West in literature, films, TV, and comics during many decades of the twentieth century, particularly since the 1940s to the end of the 1960s, sharply contrasts with its scarce presence in the academic and research realm until the last decades of the past century. The new millennium, however, has brought increasing scholarly recognition to the American West, and the future of western American studies in Spain certainly seems promising due to the consolidation of this area as a valuable research field. The aim of this article is to offer a panoramic view of the history of western American studies in Spain, its present situation, and its potential areas of development.

THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY PIONEERS: THE FRONTIER FASCINATION AND THE RISE OF ETHNIC STUDIES

The American West played a prominent role in Spanish culture and society for many years in the mid-twentieth century. It is even possible to use the term “golden era” to describe the immense popularity of the frontier imagery in novels, films, TV series, comics, and even toys in Spain during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. As Alfredo Lara stated, “Hubo un tiempo en que las novelas de vaqueros llenaban las estanterías y anaqueles de librerías y quioscos; años en los que se estrenaban en España decena y media de películas *western* y se veían tres series de vaqueros por semana en televisión. Los tebeos apaisados de pistoleros, los revólveres y estrellas de sheriff en plástico, llenaban las estanterías de todos los quioscos y jugueterías” (2013, 6).

This omnipresence of the *western* in Spanish culture and society, however, had no correspondence in the academic field because in most cases the strong links between the American West and popular culture became a major obstacle for the recognition of western American literature and films as a valuable research field. Due to the limited prestige of the West and its culture, it is no wonder, for example, that prominent experts in education criticized popular western literature, warning, in particular, about its bad influence on young readers. For example, in 1961 the scholar José Antonio Pérez Rioja in the journal *Revista de Educación* showed his despair about the main reading patterns among children and youngsters in Spain: “...apenas tenemos hoy en España lecturas adecuadas para niños y adolescentes. Por el contrario, abundan hasta la saciedad las noveluchas del Oeste Americano— falsas, absurdas, escritas incluso por españoles que ni siquiera conocen aquellas praderas” (60).

The birth of English studies in Spain under the name “Filologías Modernas” in the early 1950s meant a significant first step for the visibility of western American studies in the country, a research field that was almost non-existent due to both the extended prejudice against the *western* genre, particularly in the literary realm, and the limited presence of American studies in Spanish universities. As Sylvia L. Hilton claimed, “the United States has not been traditionally an object of study *per se* in Spanish universities but rather a secondary presence on the fringes of either English Language and Literature or Latin American History curricula” (1994, 41-42). In fact, the first monograph on American literature published in Spain, *Apuntes sobre la*





literatura americana (de los Estados Unidos de América), was a translation published in 1924.¹ Other translations of volumes dealing with American literature were published in Spain in the mid-twentieth century (e.g., Gertrude Callaghan's *Historia de la literatura norteamericana*, John Brown's *Panorama de la literatura norteamericana contemporánea*), but we had to wait until 1956 for the publication in Spain of a history of American literature originally written in Spanish, Concha Zardoya's *Historia de la literatura norteamericana*. Its author was a Chilean-Spanish professor who taught at different American universities from 1947 to 1977. In Spanish academia, the first volumes on American literature were published in the 1960s by scholars such as Cándido Pérez Gallego (*El héroe solitario en la novela norteamericana*, 1967), Juan José Coy (*J.D. Salinger*, 1968), and Javier Coy (*Teatro norteamericano actual*, written in collaboration with Juan José Coy, 1967). The consolidation of American studies in Spain in the last decades of the twentieth century also started to give visibility to research on western American literature, particularly related to the frontier and its mythology. Thus, in the 1970s and 1980s we may already see the publication of several books, articles, and book chapters dealing with the literary dimension of the frontier experience, with James Fenimore Cooper's novels as the main aim of these studies. Among these publications, we can mention, for example, José María Bardavío's *La novela de aventuras* (1977), Félix Martín's essay "James Fenimore Cooper en el umbral del Romanticismo" (1983), and, in particular, Urbano Viñuela's articles "La polémica de James Fenimore Cooper con la prensa norteamericana a principios del siglo XIX" and "Dos figuras antagónicas en la obra de Fenimore Cooper" (1983). It is even possible to find some early examples of scholarly attention to the Spanish popular fiction set in the American West, such as Juan Francisco Álvarez Macías's *La novela popular en España: José Mallorquí* (1972).

In the 1990s Spanish scholars on the West continued with their fascination with the frontier imagery, and for the first time a Spanish university, the University of León, held a conference centered on the American frontier at large, "La frontera: mito y realidad del Nuevo Mundo" (1993). The proceedings of this conference were published a year later and contained several papers covering particular aspects related to the role of the frontier experience in western American literature and culture. Some examples are "Las praderas fronterizas de Canadá y Estados Unidos" (María José Álvarez Maurín), "La novela del Oeste y 'Tamsen', de David Galloway" (Javier Coy), "De cautivos y cautiverios" (Manuel Broncano), and "El Oeste mítico de la literatura norteamericana clásica: 'Israel Potter', de Herman Melville" (Juan J. Lanero).

In the last decade of the twentieth century, it is also worth mentioning the increasing visibility of studies focused on literature by ethnic minorities in the United States closely connected to the West, such as Native Americans, Chicanos, and Asian Americans. As Michael Kowalewski has claimed, studies on works of western literature tended to be thought of in nonregional terms because of the

¹ This monograph was the result of translating the notes of a course on American literature at the University of Madrid by John Driscoll Fitz-gerald, an American Hispanic scholar.

extended prejudice against this literature, and scholarly attention to them was often legitimized under the aegis of minority studies or even environmental studies (1996, 8). The truth is that this new attention to minority literatures in the United States by Spanish scholars became a major source of visibility to neglected stories of the American West and played a prominent role in the expansion of western American studies in Spain. Thus, in the late twentieth century several remarkable book chapters on Native American literature and culture were published by scholars such as María Nieves Pascual, Esther Álvarez, Teresa Gómez, María Felisa López Liquete, María Belén Martín, Rosa Morillas, and Aitor Ibarrola. These scholars focused on authors such as Sherman Alexie, Louise Erdrich, and Leslie Marmon Silko, and also on Native American oral history. Similarly, Asian-American literature started to emerge as a rewarding field of studies with scholars such as Rocío G. Davis, Eulalia Piñero, and Begoña Simal, leading the Spanish research in this area. Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, or Asian-American poetry became the main topic of some of their chapters and articles, and at the end of the century a monograph on Chinese-American fiction was published by Begoña Simal (*Identidad étnica y género en la narrativa chinoamericana*). The impact of Native American and Asian-American studies in Spanish academia cannot be compared with the overwhelming extension of Latinx studies during the last decade of the twentieth century. The main emphasis was on Chicano/a literature, with general approaches to this writing or to particular genres, for example, fiction, and also with specific studies about authors such as Rolando Hinojosa, Miguel Méndez, Rudolfo Anaya, Richard Rodríguez, Joy Harjo, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, Cherrie Moraga, and Helena María Viramontes. In this period, among those scholars focused on Chicano/a literature, it is worth mentioning Carmen Flys, José Antonio Gurpegui, Julio Cañero, Juan Antonio Perles, María Antonia Oliver, Manuel Villar, Rosa Morillas, Imelda Martín, José Miguel Santamaría, Federico Eguíluz, and Amaia Ibarraran. In fact, at the end of the century, two universities, the University of Granada (1998) and the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU) (2000), became the sites of the first conferences on Chicano literature, and two volumes based on these conferences were published in 2000 (*Literatura chicana: reflexiones y ensayos críticos*) and 2001 (*Aztlán: ensayos sobre literatura chicana*).

The combination of different ethnic studies about minority writers with western backgrounds was the germ for the first research projects on ethnic literatures based mostly in the American West. Thus, in the late 1990s the University of the Basque Country funded the research projects “Literaturas minoritarias en los Estados Unidos de América: la representación de la identidad” (directed by María Felisa López Liquete, 1996–1997), “En la frontera: chicanos, nativos y vascos en la literatura contemporánea de los Estados Unidos de América” (directed by David Río, 1998–1999), and “La interacción de las minorías chicana, nativa y vasca en la literatura de los Estados Unidos: un proceso fronterizo y multicultural” (directed by Federico Eguíluz, 1999–2000). Similarly, the same university held a summer course in 1999 under the title “Vascos, chicanos y nativos en la literatura de los EE.UU.” In 2000 the first graduate course specifically focused on the American West was taught at the University of the Basque Country by Frank Bergon, one of the



most interesting voices of new western American writing and a professor at Vassar College. All these activities illustrate the increasing attention in academia towards the multicultural broadening of the American West at the end of the twentieth century and also anticipate the key role that a group of scholars affiliated with the University of the Basque Country would play in the promotion of western American studies in the coming decades.

WESTERN AMERICAN STUDIES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: THE RISE TO RECOGNITION

The beginning of the new century confirmed the end of the obscurity of western American studies in Spain. For the first time, there was a research group focused on consolidating and encouraging the new critical interest towards the American West as a growing source of quality literature, always heterogeneous and with a multicultural flair. It was the REWEST (Research on Literature and Culture of the American West) group, based at the University of the Basque Country. From 2001 to 2003, this group conducted its first research project focused specifically on the American West: “La representación del Oeste en la narrativa contemporánea de los EE.UU. (1980–2000),” directed by David Río and funded by the University of the Basque Country. This research project was followed by another project also funded by the University of the Basque Country and four other projects, funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation or the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness. Most of these projects paid particular attention to those authors who have stood out due to their capacity to renew and revise the traditional imaginary of western American literature and cinema. They have also examined the cultural transfers among other disciplines, such as contemporary music, television, comics, and other art forms in various formats (digital, pictorial, audiovisual). These projects have explored the West as a plural space that is in a constant process of reinvention, using different approaches from diverse and varied disciplines, such as ecocriticism, gender studies, history, ethnic studies, and cultural studies. The scope of these projects is global and transnational, and the REWEST group studies literary and artistic works about the American West that arise from other geographical areas beyond the United States. The group was officially recognized by the Basque Government as a consolidated research group in 2010, and since then this institution regularly funds its activities.

Among the most important activities organized by the REWEST group, it is worth mentioning five international conferences (2005, 2010, 2014, 2018, and 2022) focused on the literature and culture of the American West. These conferences have brought to the University of the Basque Country (Vitoria-Gasteiz) some of the best-known American experts in the field (e.g., Frank Bergon, Melody Graulich, David Fenimore, Susan Kollin, Audrey Goodman, Nicolas Witschi, William Handley, Tom Lynch, Krista Comer, José Aranda, María Herrera-Sobek, Susan Bernardin, Maria O’Connell, Nancy Cook, Linda Karell, Alan Weltzien, Megan Riley McGilchrist, Kalenda Eaton, Sergei Zhuk), plus several leading European scholars in western American studies (e.g., Neil Campbell, Marek Paryz, Cathryn Halverson, Stefan



Rabitsch, Stefano Rosso, Marc Chénétier, Stephen Matterson, Terry Gifford, Wendy Harding, Fiorenzo Iuliano, Isabel Oliveira) and also some artists and authors whose work is connected to the American West (e.g., Phyllis Barber, Gregory Martin, Sid Griffith, Bernardo Atxaga, Kirmen Uribe, Willy Vlautin, Gala Knörr, Alice Bag). The REWEST group has also organized smaller events, usually seminars and symposia, focused on specific topics such as cultural transfers in the West, western music, the myth of the West, ecocriticism, and Basque-American literature. These events have often become the source of insightful discussion on current trends in western American studies. The group is highly interested in promoting its research results beyond academia, and because of this it has organized other types of events, such as summer courses in Donostia-San Sebastián (2001, 2021, 2022) and a Western Film Week in Vitoria-Gasteiz (2023).

The REWEST group nowadays includes the following scholars: Maite Aperribay, Ángel Chaparro, Andoni Cossio, Maja Daniel, Amaya Fernández Menicucci, Amaia Ibarraran, Monika Madinabeitia, Raúl Montero, Martin Simonson, Amaia Soroa, Ane Belén Ruiz, Alfonso Berroya and its current coordinator, David Río. Although most of its members belong to the University of the Basque Country, the group has several prominent national and international collaborators who offer their expertise in different fields of western American studies and participate in the group projects and activities on a regular basis. The following are the collaborators: Jesús Ángel González (U. Cantabria: he leads current studies in postwestern films), Juan Ignacio Guijarro (U. Sevilla: a major expert on minorities in the American West), Mercedes Pérez Agustín (U. Complutense: her research focuses on Native American cultures), Neil Campbell (emeritus professor, U. Derby: the dean of western American studies in Europe), Stefano Rosso (U. Bergamo: one of the most prestigious European scholars on western American literature and culture), Cheryll Glotfelty (emeritus professor, U. Nevada, Reno: one of the founders of ecocriticism), and Marek Paryz (U. Warsaw: a major reference for the study of the *western* across narrative arts and beyond the United States). Besides, there are several other prestigious scholars who often work with the group in the organization of conferences, courses, and research projects, such as Aitor Ibarrola (U. Deusto: a leading scholar in Native American studies), Silvia Martínez Falquina (U. Zaragoza: one of the main experts on contemporary Native American fiction), Francisco Sáez de Adana (U. Alcalá: the author of excellent articles and book chapters on the comic western), Cristina Garrigós (UNED: the author of different publications on writers such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Helena María Viramontes and on gender and music), and Christopher Conway (U. Texas at Arlington: a major expert in comparative literature, western films, and comics), to name just a few professors. REWEST scholars have also supervised an increasing number of PhD dissertations dealing with the American West. For example, in the last two decades, about a dozen dissertations related to the field of western American studies have been presented at the University of the Basque Country. These dissertations have explored a variety of topics, such as Chicana literature, environmental western fiction, Basque-American female characters in western fiction, Cormac McCarthy's western novels, Frank Bergon's work, contemporary Mormon literature, and Annie Proulx's fiction.



The REWEST group has been very active in promoting western American studies both in Spain, including the organization of different sessions and round tables in the annual conferences of AEDEAN (Asociación Española de Estudios Anglo-Norteamericanos) and the biannual conferences of SAAS (Spanish Association for American Studies), and abroad. The international dimension of the group is exemplified by its regular presence in the best-known European conferences in the field of American studies (e.g., in the biannual conferences of EAAS [European Association for American Studies]) and in the annual WLA (Western Literature Association) conferences. The work of the REWEST scholars in the field of western American studies has also been recognized by the Western Literature Association, the main scholarly association devoted to the promotion of the study of the diverse literature and cultures of the American West. For example, Amaia Ibarraran was elected in 2023 as a member of the executive council of this association, and David Río serves on the board of the WLA journal, the prestigious *Western American Literature*, since 2014.

During the present century, REWEST scholars have published a long list of books, articles, and book chapters dealing with the literature and cultures of the American West, with an emphasis on the New West, paying particular attention to its realistic bent, intercultural features, female awareness, recognition of the environment's crucial importance, and transnational dimension. Because of space limitations, it is not possible to offer a detailed list of these publications, but at least we should mention some collective books, such as *Exploring the American Literary West* (ed. David Río et al.), *Beyond the Myth* (ed. David Río, Amaia Ibarraran, and Martin Simonson), *The Neglected West* (ed. Amaia Ibarraran, Martin Simonson, and David Río), *A Contested West* (ed. Martin Simonson, David Río, and Amaia Ibarraran), *Transcontinental Reflections on the American West* (ed. Ángel Chaparro and Amaia Ibarraran), *No Single Trajectory* (ed. Ángel Chaparro and Jesús Ángel González), *The New American West in Literature and the Arts* (ed. Amaia Ibarraran), *The Western in the Global Literary Imagination* (ed. Christopher Conway, Marek Paryz, and David Río), and *La expansión y revisión de un mito: el Oeste norteamericano en la literatura española* (ed. David Río). REWEST scholars have also published an important number of individual (or co-authored) books, such as *Ecoixicanismo* (Maite Aperribay), *Parting the Mormon Veil* (Ángel Chaparro), *Novelistas chicanas* (Amaia Ibarraran), *Mexican American Women, Dress and Gender* (Amaia Ibarraran), *Petra, My Basque Grandmother* (Monika Madinabeitia), *Robert Laxalt* (David Río), *New Literary Portraits of the American West* (David Río), *El Western fantástico de Stephen King* (Martin Simonson and Raúl Montero), *El Oeste recuperado* (Martin Simonson), and *From East to West* (Martin Simonson and Jon Alkorta).

The growing prominence of western American studies in Spain is not only the result of the activities of the REWEST group, as other scholars and research groups have contributed significantly to the reinvigoration of the American West in Spanish academia. For example, the research group LÈNA (Literaturas étnicas norteamericanas en un contexto global / North American Ethnic Minority Literatures in a Global Context), based at the University of València and led by Anna M. Brígido, has helped to significantly increase the presence of Native American



studies in Spanish universities with its impressive work on western indigenous cultures and literatures through a decolonial approach. Among its most recent publications, we may mention, for example, *Indigenizing the Classroom* (2021) and *Indigenous Journeys, Transatlantic Perspectives* (2023), both edited by Anna M. Brígido. Another university where the American West receives wide attention is the University of Alcalá, where the Instituto de Estudios Americanos (directed by José Antonio Gurpegui) and the research group AMICUSS (Estudios Culturales Interdisciplinares sobre Estados Unidos / American Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies), led by Julio Cañero, offer insightful approaches to several themes related to borderland issues and the Hispanic legacy in the American West, such as Hispanic popular culture in the region. Their research has extended beyond the traditional realms of western literature and film, as exemplified by Francisco Sáez de Adana's excellent articles and book chapters on the comic western. Similarly, the University of A Coruña is the site of a research group, CLEU (Culturas y Literaturas de los EE.UU. / Cultures and Literatures from the United States of America), led by Begoña Simal, that in the last decades has achieved remarkable success in several fields closely related to the American West, such as ecocriticism and environmental studies (with an emphasis on the current role of the communities of waste) and Asian-American literatures. For example, Begoña Simal has published *Ecocriticism and Asian American Literature* (2020). In other Spanish universities, we do not find research groups specifically focused on the American West, but in an important number of them there are scholars who regularly or sporadically publish remarkable books, articles, or book chapters on different aspects of western American literature and culture. It is impossible to offer a comprehensive list of these universities and scholars, but at least it is worth mentioning universities such as Cantabria (María del Carmen Camus, Alfredo Moro, Eva Pelayo Sañudo, Macarena García Avello), La Laguna (Juan Ignacio Oliva), Zaragoza (Celestino Deleyto, María del Mar Azcona, Luis Miguel García Mainar, Hilaria Loyo, Elisa Mateos), Salamanca (Paula Barba, Manuel González de la Aleja), Sevilla (María Ángeles Toda), U. Pública de Navarra (Carmen Indurain), U. Politécnica de Madrid (María Jesús de Teresa), Cádiz (Alfonso Ceballos), Pompeu Fabra (María Antonia Oliver), and Complutense (Sofía Martinicorena, Laura de la Parra, Miguel Sanz).²

The scholarly concern with the West is not limited to university professors working in the field of American studies. In fact, in the last few decades more and more works on different aspects of western American culture have been published by authors who are not directly related to this field. These authors have been successful in bringing public attention beyond academia towards the representation of the American West and its mythology in different artistic forms. Thus, several authors have examined the role of popular western novels in Spanish literature, overcoming traditional prejudice against popular western fiction. One of the major experts

² This list does not include the scholars previously mentioned in the article who are affiliated with any of these universities.



in this field is Fernando Eguidazu, who has published extensively about Spanish popular fiction in the twentieth century, including western novels. Some of his best-known books are *Una historia de la novela popular española* (1850-2000), *Del folletín al bolsilibro. 50 años de novela popular española. 1900-1950*, and *Biblioteca Oro. Editorial Molino y la literatura popular. 1933-1956* (co-authored with Antonio González Lejárraga). In these books and in other publications dealing with popular fiction in Spain, Eguidazu has explored, in particular, José Mallorquí's novels on "El Coyote," a theme that has also become one of the main aims of Ramón Charlo's studies on Spanish popular novels. In fact, Charlo has published several books specifically focused on "El Coyote" and its author, for example, *José Mallorquí, creador de El Coyote*.

Western films have also received wide attention from several Spanish authors not related to the university field of American studies. Some of these writers have offered in their books a general perspective on the western genre or on its major themes and films, for example, *Grandes temas del Western* (Xavi J. Prunera et al.), *La gran caravana del Western* (Javier Coma), *Me gusta el cine: el Western* (José María Morera), *Películas clave del Western* (Quim Casas), and *Los mejores 250 westerns* (Santiago Cellier). Other studies, however, offer a more specific approach to particular elements or subgenres of the western, for example, *Weird Western* (ed. Jesús Palacios), *El cartel de cine en el Western europeo* (Bienvenido Llopis), *Las rutas del Western en Cataluña y Aragón* (Javier Ramos), *El héroe del Western crepuscular* (José Félix González), *Cine del Oeste en la Comunidad de Madrid* (Javier Ramos and Ángel Caldito), *Italo-Western y más...* (Felix Hahlbrock), *La pluma y el Oeste* (Fernando Garín), *El héroe trágico en el Western* (Fran Benavente), and *33 Spaghetti Westerns que no te puedes perder* (José Miguel Gala).

Although films and novels have become the main aim of most studies on the West published in Spain beyond academia, other western cultural phenomena have started to gain attention in the last few decades. Thus, it is possible to find a few books by Spanish authors dealing with western music, usually viewed as a subgenre closely related to wider music genres, such as rock or country. Two of these books are *Country Rock* (Eduardo Izquierdo) and *Historia de la música country* (2 vol.: Alfonso Trulls). Another interesting book exploring the connection between music and the West is Didac Piquer and Fran González's *Summer Fun: Historia de la música surf*. However, the best-known book on western music in Spanish is still a translation published in 1987, Charles T. Brown's *Country & Western: la música U.S.A.* Other books deal with music in western films, for example, Lucía Pérez García's *Dimitri Tiomkin: canciones para el lejano Oeste*. Similarly, a few articles and book chapters on the comic western have been published by Spanish authors, though this area is still an emerging field. Possibly one of the most interesting titles is *Recordando el Oeste en la revista Coyote*, an insightful compilation by Leonor Fernández and Luis Vigil of some of the main western stories published in the magazine *Coyote* in the mid-twentieth century.

Overall, western American studies in Spain show an increasing amount of both vitality and diversity. Although the academic study of the American West is still a recent event and several areas are still underrepresented, the number of



its practitioners is growing steadily, and there are emerging subfields that may significantly enrich research on the West, for example, videogames, fashion, blogs, social networks, and podcasts. Similarly, approaches dealing with the representation of the West across cultural and disciplinary boundaries, or across national borders, may provide western American studies with new insightful views for better understanding the transnational and cross-cultural condition of the western imaginary. Besides, a new generation of scholars is already showing its ability to revive interest in western topics, creating productive analytical models to engage with a complexly diverse West. For instance, Sofía Martincorena's recent article in *Western American Literature*, "Topographies of Western Violence in Claire Vaye Watkins's *Battleborn*" (2023), to name just one example of recent Spanish scholarship on the West, fully demonstrates the gift of younger authors to explore successfully the literature and the culture of the American West with fresh critical eyes.

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A LADY'S LIFE IN THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS: AN EXCURSION TO EMPOWERMENT AND ENVIRONMENTALISM

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a reading of Isabella Bird's travelogue *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* (1879) through the lens of Environmental Studies by focusing on the material and metaphorical uses of nature, scrutinizing the recurrent trope of the mountain, and paying attention to the interaction between the intrepid traveller and nature. While the adventurer deals with the difficulties of the transatlantic pilgrimage, Bird also goes beyond the traditional hymn to the beauty of the landscape in order to condemn the degradation of nature. Arguably, the most valuable insights that this text has to offer beyond empowering women derive precisely from the author's concern for nature. Bird not only composes an ode to the mountainous scenery in prose, but also an innovative manifesto, where a number of detrimental consequences of the infamous environmental crises are anticipated well in advance.

KEYWORDS: Isabella Bird, Mountain, Environmentalism, Empowerment, Innovative Manifesto.

A LADY'S LIFE IN THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS: UNA EXCURSION AL EMPODERAMIENTO Y LA PREOCUPACIÓN POR LA NATURALEZA

RESUMEN

Este artículo propone una lectura del diario de viaje de Isabella Bird *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* (1879) desde la perspectiva de los Estudios Medioambientales, con atención al empleo literal y metafórico de la naturaleza, desentrañando el significado de la figura recurrente de la montaña y deteniéndose en la interacción entre la viajera y la naturaleza. Si bien la aventurera aborda las dificultades de un viaje trasatlántico para la época, el texto va más allá del tradicional himno a la belleza del paisaje para presentar una condena firme contra la degradación de la naturaleza. Su contribución más reseñable además del empoderamiento de la mujer sería la preocupación de la autora por la naturaleza. Bird no se conforma con componer una oda en prosa al paisaje montañoso, presenta un manifiesto innovador en el que atisba algunas de las consecuencias de la crisis medioambiental.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Isabella Bird, Montaña, Preocupación medioambiental, Empoderamiento, Manifiesto innovador.

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INTRODUCTION

Everything suggests a beyond.
Isabella Bird

A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains has formally been classified as 'travel literature' dating back to the end of the 19th century, in the context of the Westward expansion of the new Nation on a massive scale (Wrobel 2009). To read this seminal historical and literary document, literary criticism has traditionally been using the lens of 'colonial literature' in line with the imperialistic tenets of Bird's time (Morin 1999). As a woman of bourgeois origins and subject of the English monarchy, Bird was in need of readers for her volume, therefore, she always sought good manners and a proper dress code in each of her entries.¹ The fact remains that the location as well as the varied range of activities that she enjoyed place her, arguably against her will (Morin 2008, 81-82), at the forefront of what is called the New Woman's movement: writing, travelling unchaperoned, riding astride, and climbing, all of them highly contradictory ways for a woman of her class and position that envisage an impending new era loaded of radical changes, particularly with respect to women's status. Yet still, considering how nature is depicted and the relationship established with it, Bird's discourse gains relevance within the current context of the worldwide environmental and health crisis.

Beyond the fact that the leading role is played by a woman who embarks unaccompanied on an extensive journey to the New World, my research seeks to draw attention to the fact that exploitation and supremacy are not the proper way to interact with the other-than-human nature, resulting this time in a global health emergency derived from the outburst of the COVID-19 virus. In this context, Bird emerges as a visionary of environmental degradation. While her volume received at the time a general welcome by virtue of the magnificent deeds that the traveller related throughout her letters, the analysis that this study proposes brings Bird's text closer to us, by taking an environmental approach. It might reveal an ethical enquiry into the consequences of a landscape inflamed with history's violence and shaken by abuse of natural resources. Thus, rather than canonical travel letters, my research constitutes an invitation to place Bird's account right at the heart of the debate about our future as humans in relation to our Planet, an innovative manifesto for a fundamental redesign of our conservation policies and ethical behaviour.

¹ See Martín-Lucas: "Mientras que [la escritora] para ser aceptada e integrada en el mundo literario, aunque tan solo sea en un grado mínimo, debe pasar por una dama modesta, humilde y naïf, es decir, 'femenina', para cumplir su sueño de ser recordada debe ser visible y sobresaliente." (2022, 46) [In order to be accepted and integrated even to a minimum degree in the literary world, (the female writer) must come across as modest, humble and naïf, that is, 'feminine', by contrast, she must be visible and outstanding, to fulfill her lifetime dream of being remembered.]



Je me vois donc je suis.

Claude Cahun

While much of the recent scholarship dealing with British women travellers concentrates on making them known to the world through their great achievements and exploits, this study intends to pay tribute to Isabella Bird by emphasizing her commitment to nature as a herald of the pernicious consequences of development and modernity, in particular, the relationship between our economic growth and respect towards nature. We are facing an emergency of global nature, “the beginning of the end” (Puleo 2002, 36), since it has a negative impact on our health, destroys biodiversity and seriously jeopardizes our near future. And yet, as David Farrier (2019) suggests, reading literature (poetry) can help us understand and live this new age known as the Anthropocene mostly triggered by the devastating impact of human activity on nature.

Ruiz de Alegria (2020) offers a feminist reading of a work set in a notably male-dominated scenario in order to emphasize the idea of female empowerment as opposed to the traditionally acclaimed masculine empowerment in mountainous landscapes. Most importantly, since Bird’s suggestion involves quitting the simple role as muse and looking at the landscape with her own eyes (white, heterosexual and bourgeois), Ruiz de Alegria concludes that “the traveller’s discourse turns out to be of remarkable significance regarding the subversion of the patriarchal leading gaze on the mountain in the western culture” (2020, 88). Finally, Ruiz de Alegria argues that the text “seems to be pioneering and courageous for a Victorian Lady” (2020, 88) as it recognizes female sensuality.

Monica Rico, for her part, examines Bird’s position in comparison to other British subjects likewise allured by the exotism of the Far West, such as the Earl of Dunraven (2013, 83-181). For Rico, their unstable position in Britain would explain their shared attraction for the untamed lands (85), but while the British aristocrat would be running away from political and social upheaval questioning the legitimacy of his authority in Ireland, Bird would evade domesticity, illness, and ultimately the ideal of a Victorian woman. Paradoxically, in the light of Friedrich Gerstäcker’s, Richard Francis Burton’s, and Isabella Bird’s travel books, David Wrobel presents a shrinking world, the beginning of what will be known as ‘globalisation’, where no real escape is possible: “they were very much a part of the world of empire building and that their western frontier served as the primary stage for imperial endeavours, not an escape from them” (2008, 34). Additionally, Rico notes that contrary to most of Bird’s male compatriots, who celebrate The Rockies as a unique opportunity for new businesses derived from its nascent tourism industry, the adventurer celebrates instead its “grand, solitary, uplifted, sublime, remote, and, not least but last, beast-haunted nature” (121), giving way to Diana L. Di Stefano’s argumentation, where she explains how the Mountain West changed; from hostile barriers to sites of spiritual possibility to be preserved, through the idealization of risk-taking (2014, 4-5). Di Stefano introduces the romantic ideas about the sublime resonating with



transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson's texts, who advocates for the contemplation of nature and experiencing wilderness as a means of spiritual enlightenment and connection to the Divine (8). Emerson's successor, Henry David Thoreau (1817-1872), puts forward risk-taking as a potential path to transcendence, opening the door for mountain-seeking and their protection as the only wild places left after the devastating effects of industrialization (9). Di Stefano concludes with geologist, botanist, and mountaineer John Muir's pioneering conservation approach to the American landscape (13), who makes use of an almost theological language that infuses every element in nature with holiness. In that context, Rico asserts that "disavowing male violence against both wildlife and other human beings, Bird offers an alternative, the language of lyrical nature appreciation, emotional connection, and evangelical religion" (84). In the same line of thought, Susan Schrepfer mentions that through figurative language and altered aesthetic traditions, female travellers meet nature's power and their own spiritual needs (2005, 68-69).

When it comes to environmentalism, the traveller and writer Thérèse Longworth (1833-1881) displays a certain ethical approach on the subject of the depleted buffalo population in her two-volume work *Teresina in America*, 1875, reissued in 1974 (18-19). In the same vein as Longworth, Lady Rose Kingsley (1845-1925), cousin to the worldwide known traveller Mary Kingsley, positions herself against the random massacre of buffalo from the trains, in *South by West or Winter in the Rocky Mountains and Spring in Mexico*, 1874 (38-39). As Morin points out, while it is true that they are not so much criticising the killing of the creatures *per se*, but the American way of doing it in contrast to the more daring and selective British-like way, some form of compassion and sympathy permeates these female authors' texts (2008, 35-36). In addition, Schrepfer indicates that the new field of botany allowed women to enjoy outdoor spaces without suspicion while gathering new floral specimens, which provided the foundation for the aesthetics and spirituality of the feminine sublime (2005, 84). In that context, the 'naturalist' Constance Cumming (1837-1924) with whom Bird was particularly friendly (Hill-Murphy 2021, 239-240), complains about deforestation and lumbering and their adverse consequences for the local flora and fauna, in *Granite Crags of California* (1886, 341). Also, naturalist Marianne North's (1830-1890) *Recollections of a happy life: Being the Autobiography of Marianne North* (1894) gathers a number of critiques of the logging industry on the grounds that it mostly contributes to the destruction of local forests and exotic species such as redwoods and giant sequoias (211). In much the same way as Elizabeth A. Bohls refers to the internal battle that Dorothy Wordsworth wages between her aesthetic interest as a member of the privileged layers of English society and her opposition to the growing trend of scenic tourism, whose development contributed to the deterioration of the national landscape (1995, 170-208), my paper too seeks to stress Bird's particular attention to and care for nature, even if it might not straightforwardly stem so much from ecological concerns but aesthetic ones. Undeniably, her upper-class privileges and good education enable her to value not only aesthetics and spirituality, but to resist the surge in dehumanizing landscapes.



GOING WEST

As a mountain you can't grow, but as a human I can.
Edmund Hillary

Marie Dronsart, the author of *Des Grandes Voyageuses* (1894), describes British women's education as 'virile' (in Rogers & Thébaud 2008, 9), as they were taught walking and horse riding, predisposing them to be ready to travel and embark on long journeys without fear. Likewise, Rebecca Rogers and Françoise Thébaud add that British girls coming from bourgeois families were encouraged by their parents to spend some time abroad to become acquainted with other languages and cultures based on the belief that those activities would ease their performance in their subsequent role as mothers (2008, 11). In that respect, Olive Checkland reveals that Reverend Edward Bird, in performing his former duties as a lawyer in India, lost his wife and only male child (3). Back in England, with Isabella being the eldest of his second marriage, she might have enjoyed the opportunities particularly reserved for Edward's first-born eldest male child who was already deceased, giving way to Bird's particularly "virile" education (Checkland 1996, 3).

Afflicted by a mysterious illness², probably related to an unrequited love, Isabella Bird is urged to depart on a long journey as the perfect antidote to appease the source of her agony. In possession of a certain fortune after her parents' demise, the traveller feels free from parental restrictions to plunge into such an exciting adventure. While in untamed American lands, Bird relishes sending a day-to-day account of her adventures abroad. Originally written as letters to her sister Henrietta, it subsequently appeared as a serial in the English weekly *Leisure Hour* (1878), and it was not until 1879, six years after accomplishing her heroic feat, that it became a proper volume³ (Morin 2008, 2). Unlike the travel letter, where a dialogue between the sender and the recipient is on display (Romero 2007, 481), Bird's missives are usually void of dialogue, resulting in an extensive monologue about the heroine's daily routines:

I was actually so dull and tired that I deliberately slept away the afternoon in order to forget the heat and flies. Thirty men in working clothes, silent and sad looking, came in to supper. The beef was tough and greasy, the butter had turned to oil,

² Kay Chubbuck (2002, 4-7) speculates that Bird's mysterious ailments may have derived from carbuncle (a skin infection). In contrast to Chubbuck's view, Anna Stoddart (2007, 28) and Olive Checkland (1996, 3) appear more inclined to think that Bird's physical complaint might also be of a more psychosomatic nature as a result of a failed relationship. Monica Rico suggests Bird's invalidism "as a kind of self-expression." (2013, 91)

³ Jacki Hill-Murphy notes that before discussing the letters with her publisher, John Murray, Bird revised them, cutting out all the personal details until she felt they were suitable for Murray to look at them (2021, 233). See also Chubbuck: "Isabella's first biographer was hand-picked; she was given explicit instruction about what to write" (2002, 2-3).



and beef and butter were black with living, drowned, and half-drowned flies. The greasy table-cloth was black also with flies, and I did not wonder that the guests looked melancholy and quickly escaped. I failed to get a horse, but was strongly recommended to come here and board with a settler.⁴ (Bird 1982, 617)

According to Karen Morin, the traditional Victorian adventure tale presents the exploits of a male hero whose major deeds are related to the conquest of the land, search of gold or the colonial administration (2008, 67). As for women, by contrast, while a few of them travel to the West as writers or tourists, women are mostly expected to build their own family household irrespective of the selected location (Morin 2008, 68). However, Bird-like women are “well-qualified” (Middleton 1973, 67), resourceful and capable of almost anything, underscoring their dual status: marginalized as women, but privileged within the framework of colonialism—white, rich and devoting their existence to writing and the practice of scenic tourism. Under those circumstances, Bird’s account abounds in anecdotes and incidents where either the heroine’s physical integrity or dignity is at risk:

There are unaccountable noises, (wolves), rummagings under the floor, queer cries, and stealthy sounds of I know not what. One night a beast (fox or skunk) rushed in at the open end of the cabin, and fled through the window, almost brushing my face, and on another, the head and three or four inches of the body of a snake were protruded through a chink of the floor close to me. (Bird 1982, 674)

Her involvement in perilous missions seems to suggest that Bird deliberately depicts herself to make her achievement “more heroic” and to prove her “personal credit” (Morin 2008, 78). Further, Sara Mills argues that many female discourses present women travelling unaccompanied and “without coming to harm” so as to “reinforce the notion of imperialism” (1993, 22), which means that the mother country rules over even the most distant of its territories. This is even more true when talking about issues of visibility and etiquette since travelling, mountain climbing, riding astride and hunting disturb female adventurers being compelled to negotiate gender boundaries and exhibit contradictory representations of themselves (Stanley 1997, 147-167; Lane 2003, 1601; Morin 2003, 208; Schrepfer 2005, 73-74, 78-70; Jones 2015, 116).

Contrary to the male heroes, boastful of their accomplishments and conquests, Morin says that the Bird-like travellers “demonstrate not triumph or domination over place but a particular kind of triumph over self and emotive attachment to place” (2008, 52). While traditional Victorian women often resorted to “sickness, anorexia, neurasthenia or even wearing corsets” (Morin 2008, 78) in the battle for achieving a certain control over their bodies, the protagonist attains female empowerment through physical exertion to exhaustion. Still, if there is something

⁴ All the citations referring to Isabella Bird’s work have been extracted from *A Lady’s Life in the Rocky Mountains* (1982), introduced by Pat Barr.



genuinely strange in the story, it is the unlikely⁵ relationship between the explorer, a Victorian lady, and James Nugent⁶, a desperado trapper, who oddly guarantees the realisation of the traveller's dream: "the Rocky Mountains realise—nay, exceed—the dream of my childhood" (Bird 1982, 849). And yet their liaison embodies the most engaging of the love stories. In addition, it contributes to moving the story forward, as the couple's emotional involvement grows throughout the story.

THE MOUNTAIN AND ITS METAPHORICAL USES

This is no region for tourists and women.

Isabella Bird

Mountain Jim embodies the exquisite combination of intelligence and sensibility wasted due to the harsh living conditions and the alcohol abuse. The author presents the desperado trapper as "a broad, thickset man, about the middle height" (Bird 1982, 1131), and although he lost an eye after a violent encounter with a bear with nobody around to help him, Bird admits that he must have been a handsome man: "his face was remarkable" (1134). In addition, Jim is well-mannered. As though paving the way for the subsequent 'encounter', Bird cannot possibly present the male protagonist in a more favourable manner, even his conversation is pleasant, so much so that the traveller forgets that Jim "was as awful-looking a ruffian as one could see" (Bird 1982, 1211). Jim is endowed with the genuine ability to easily cope with the outdoor spaces Bird praises so much: he "is a complete child of the mountains" (1151). Everything suggests that Bird might not have found a more skilful guide: "I should never have gone halfway had no 'Jim' *nolens volens*, dragged me along with a patience and skill, and withal a determination that I should ascend the Peak, which never failed" (Bird 1982, 1319). This triumphant moment becomes in fact an anti-climax, since the traveller confesses that she would not have reached the summit without his help.⁷ More, Jim loves nature and kids madly, has a sense of humour,

⁵ See Pat Barr: "The surprisingly intense relationship that developed between Isabella and her "dear desperado," as she called Jim Nugent, was as improbable as any musical comedy plot, and more fascinating because, as far as one can judge from material still extant, it was the nearest Isabella ever came in her life to a romantic sexual passion" (1982, 152). See the title of the book by Chris Enss: *The Lady and the Mountain Man. Isabella Bird, Rocky Mountain Jim, and their Unlikely Friendship*. 2022. See Jacki Hill-Murphy: "There are many books and articles written about this affair between two extraordinary individuals in the Rocky Mountains. But this was 1873 and in a Victorian society fuelled by gossip Isabella would never have shaken off a tainted reputation" (2021, 257).

⁶ Known as Rocky Mountain Jim. According to Rico, there is no evidence to verify the biographical information offered by Bird about Nugent (2013, 113): "son of a British officer from a good old Irish family who ran away from home to become one of the famous scouts of the Plains" (Bird 1982, 2644).

⁷ See Morin: "They represented themselves as actively 'conquering mountain peaks as well as passively waiting for the men to do it, as fearing danger and fatigue but also ridiculing the



expresses acute judgments, writes poetry, his knowledge of literature is extensive, his manners are studied, and he possesses a melodious voice.

At a time when merely talking to strangers breaks social conventions, the text is rich in images of physical contact. Those are especially striking in Bird's descriptions of the ascent of Long's Peak, where the protagonist confesses that she sometimes "stood on his shoulders" (Bird 1982, 1372) while on other occasions she "was roped to Jim" (Bird 1982, 1313) to make the ascent easier for him. In one of the most compromising moments of her adventure, Jim even "dragged [her] up, like a bale of goods, by sheer force of muscle" (Bird 1982, 1310). The text is also sprinkled with comments concerning the freer manners Jim possesses, implying the traveller is risking her reputation: "his manner was certainly bolder and freer than that of gentlemen generally" (Bird 1982, 1252). A kind of danger that, far from dissuading her, exercises a magnetic attraction over her: "He took me back to the track; and the interview which began with a pistol shot, ended quite pleasantly. It was an eerie ride, one not to be forgotten, though there was no danger" (Bird 1982, 1985). The previous quotation, suggesting the pleasant ending of the interview with Mountain Jim, might constitute a literary strategy employed by Bird to pave the way for the final scene where she describes the heroine's arguable first sexual encounter as it is implied by the portrait of the couple around the fire, in a heavenly remote spot, under a ceiling of glittering stars while Jim is smoking:

I sat for two hours by the camp fire. It was weird and gloriously beautiful. The students were asleep not far off in their blankets with their feet towards the fire. "Ring" lay on one side of me with his fine head on my arm, and his master sat smoking, with the fire lighting up the handsome side of his face, and except for the tones of our voices, and an occasional crackle and splutter as a pine knot blazed up, there was no sound on the mountain side. (Bird 1982, 388)

In fact, the very same moment when Bird lets us know about the coronation of Long's Peak coincides with the traveller's questionable intimate rapport—"it is one of the noblest of mountains, but in one's imagination it grows to be much more than a mountain" (Bird 1982, 1190)—suggesting a disguised reference to the male genital organ evoked by the growth of the mountain. The remarkable utterance indicates that while Bird follows the female travel writing conventions, emphasising her domestic abilities and values, the character that Bird constructs of herself in the tale exceeds gender expectations and opens the door to innovative female narratives through landscape and far away settings. In any case, it is not so much about whether Isabella Bird actually enjoyed her first intercourse as it is about the fact that she dared to fabricate it and put it down on paper. Bird insists on the fact that "in that vast congeries of mountains" (3219) Long's Peak turns out to be "alone in imperial grandeur" (3220), where the mountain might be read as the embodiment

incompetency of local male guides, and as 'resisting' adventure, yet expressing female empowerment and abandonment in it" (1999, 489).



of the male genitals, opening the door for the world of female perception and sensual empowerment. Given the circumstances described, the leading role played by the male genitals is of paramount significance to understanding the text, not least because literature has been traditionally more prone to show female ones. In addition, Jim's masculinity, the male protagonist *par excellence*, has been reduced to a purely phallic symbol. One might wonder whether the fact that the complete list of charming peculiarities describing Jim as the 'Casanova' of the Rocky Mountains has been reduced to his genitals is an ironic use of metonymy.

From this perspective, Christine DeVine argues that Bird makes use of a "phallus-rich metaphorical landscape and an allegorical hero" (2007, 1) in order to transcend reality and give way to a heroic journey, where the author is allowed to go beyond societal as well as narrative boundaries. Ruiz de Alegria (2018) analyses Bird's text in terms of a bildungsroman, where the female protagonist's odyssey might illustrate an initiation journey into an arguably first relationship. Of German origin, the *raison d'être* of the bildungsroman is, according to Miguel Salmerón (2002, 59), the training and personal growth of the protagonist. In fact, the explorer's embarkment is the perfect framework for testing the heroine's resilience and adaptability, and it marks a turning point in the traveller's life similar in complexity to entering a new stage of life. Yet, in Ruiz de Alegria's view, the author's most valuable contribution "is not so much about whether Isabella Bird actually enjoyed her first intercourse with Jim, as it is about the fact that she dared to put it down on paper" (2018, ii). It is no surprise, then, DeVine's argument: "Bird's travel narrative has been shaped to resemble a quest romance" (2007, 1).

ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

*We cannot shape the huge hills or carve out the
valleys according to our fancy.*

Dorothy Wordsworth

Concerning Lake Tahoe, it is described as "a dream of beauty at which one might look all one's life and sigh" (Bird 1982, 229). The heroine likewise admits "being bewitched by [its] beauty and serenity" (Bird 1982, 377). As for Lake Donner, it leaves her "smitten by its beauty" (Bird 1982, 419). Similarly, she describes the landscape from the top of Long's Peak: "in unrivalled combination all the views which had rejoiced our eyes during the ascent" (Bird 1982, 1357). It not only captivates her, but it also "satisfies [her] soul" (848). Surrounded by nature, she admits feeling unable to do justice to the beauty of the place, nor to "the glorious sublimity, the majestic solitude, and the unspeakable awfulness and fascination of the scenes" (Bird 1982, 1185). The fact is that she enjoys the ascent of Long's Peak, to the point that Estes Park means "grandeur, cheerfulness, health, enjoyment, novelty, freedom, etc." (Bird 1982, 1060) to her. Given the circumstances, she decides to draw sketches to immortalise the *vista*, and offer her sister Henrietta proof of its beauty. Even in spots not particularly attractive, probably due to their proximity to urban



areas, as is the case of Truckee, the mountaineer finds an excuse to take pleasure in observing the landscape. However, it is not the sight the only sense to be pleased, for she is also sensitive to genuine sounds of nature entangled with those caused by human beings: “the sharp ring of the lumberer’s axe mingles with the cries of wild beasts and the roar of mountain torrents” (Bird 1982, 340). This predilection for nature seems to be far from new in the protagonist’s life based on the following expression: “Mountains—the Sierras of many a fireside dream” (Bird 1982, 292).

As the narrative goes on, so grows the traveller’s affection for nature, so much so that she admits that the Rocky Mountains “are gradually gaining possession of [her]” (Bird 1982, 556). She even confesses to feeling like a victim of “the mountain fever” (Bird 1982, 1162). Surrounded by the “elastic air,” it is no coincidence that the “fatigue has dropped off from [her]” (Bird 1982, 836) and she appears reluctant about the idea of going back to urban areas “even in thought” (Bird 1982, 235). Even in the nice city of Denver, the protagonist is persuaded that “it was too much of ‘wearying world’ either for [her] health or taste” (Bird 1982, 2429). It is no wonder then that as soon as the adverse weather conditions confined her at home, the explorer longed for “the rushing winds, the piled-up peaks, the great pines, [and] the wild night noises” (Bird 1982, 3040). So Bird identifies nature with some kind of shelter against the inevitable progress of the ‘civilisation.’

From the negative connotation of the adjectives that the voyager employs to describe the impact of the gold rush (uninviting, blazing, repulsive and muddy), it is inferred that she feels aversion to the spaces displaying nature’s serious decline:

Very uninviting, however rich, was the blazing Sacramento Valley, and very repulsive the city of Sacramento [...] The dusty fertility was all left behind, the country became rocky and gravelly, and deeply scored by streams bearing muddy wash of the mountain gold mines down to the muddier Sacramento. (Bird 1982, 247)

The huge Pacific Train could not escape the above negativity either: “its heavy bell tolling thundered up to the door of the Truckee House” (Bird 1982, 464), not least because to the adventurer’s mind, ‘civilisation’ creates deafening noises as well as “long broken ridges and deep ravines” (251), threatening nature and its population. On the one hand, the gold rush attracts a significant number of prospectors; as a result, nature “straggles out promiscuously” (Bird 1982, 513) where “rubbish heaps, and offal of deer and antelope produce the foulest smells [she has] smelt for a long time” (Bird 1982, 512). Following this sudden and uncontrolled increase in the number of residents, the explorer condemns the pressure that true nature bears: “there is not a bush, or garden, or green thing” (Bird 1982, 513). Moreover, she points out that Colorado Springs has no appeal “from its utter treelessness” (Bird 1982, 2024). As for Boulder, the explorer admits that she runs away terrified after realising that following the discovery of its enormous mineral wealth “a picture of desolation where nature had made everything grand and fair” stands instead (Bird 1982, 2505). At the same time, the adventurer utterly rejects mining, as it “fill[s] the district with noise, hubbub, and smoke by night and day” (Bird 1982, 2497), and she insists that



she “ha[d] turned altogether aside from [it]” (Bird 1982, 2498). Being fully aware of the quick deterioration of the landscape, the traveller also notices that nature is eroded to the point that “the footprints of elk and bighorn may be sought for in vain on the dewy slopes of Estes Park” (Bird 1982, 1303). In that sense, the adventurer’s plea for the traditional agriculture that “restores and beautifies” (2499), in contrast to the mining, which “destroys and devastates” (Bird 1982, 2499) constitutes one of her strongest and most audacious statements in favour of nature. In this sense, Randall Rohe’s description of the damaging effects of the mining’s impact in the Far West is reflected in Bird’s chronicle: water and air pollution, diversion of water, alteration of terrain, erosion, and deforestation (1986, 299-338):

These mines, with their prolonged subterranean workings, their stamping and crushing mills, and the smelting works which have been established near them, fill the district with noise, hubbub, and smoke by night and day ... Agriculture restores and beautifies, mining destroys and devastates, turning the earth inside out, making it hideous, and blighting every green thing, as it usually blights man’s heart and soul. There was mining everywhere along that grand road, with all its destruction and devastation, its digging, burrowing, gulching, and sluicing...All the ledges covered with charred stumps, a picture of desolation, where nature had made everything grand and fair. (Bird 1982, 2177-2182)

The traveller also manifests her concerns about the population. As a matter of fact, land use and ‘development’ make escalate tensions between the population and nature. Afterwards, the heroine goes on to describe the misfortunes experienced by Digger Indians to whom she depicts as “a most impressive incongruity in the midst of the tokens of an omnipotent civilisation” (Bird 1982, 268) and “dying out before the white race” (262). Based on the testimony provided by a Western pioneer about moving on, “as one place after another had become too civilised for him” (Bird 1982, 305), not even those first settlers feel comfortable with the flourishing of ‘modernity’. By contrast, the most remote and unspoiled nature of the mountains, where the mountaineer indulges herself in listening to the lumberer’s axe, is for her a haven of peace, calm and harmony. In that context, the adventurer defines the air of Wyoming and Boulder as “the elixir of life” (Bird 1982, 400, 2440), and that its “air and life are intoxicating” (1409). The loneliness of lake Donner “pleased [her] well,” (Bird 1982, 421), and she confesses that she “soon fell asleep” (775) on a table left up the canyon since “the stillness is profound” (Bird 1982, 635). Meanwhile, in Colorado, the protagonist has “the pleasant feeling of gaining health every hour” (Bird 1982, 1903), a perception that she shares with the avalanche of consumptives, asthmatics, dyspeptics, and sufferers of nervous disorders going on pilgrimage to Colorado. In fact, “statistics and medical workers on the climate of the state represent [it] as the most remarkable sanatorium of the day” (Bird 1982, 3215). In conjunction with “the influence which persistent fine weather exercises on the spirits” (Bird 1982, 2182), the traveller also attributes mineral and medicinal qualities to the waters of Colorado. That is why thousands “come to drink the waters, try the camp cure, and make mountain excursions” (Bird 1982, 2056). It is no wonder that the Victorian traveller feels overjoyed outdoors, on horseback, dressed in her



easy Hawaiian outfit, and sleeping, weather permitting, “under the stars on a bed of pine boughs” (Bird 1982, 1410).

When it comes to the non-human animal nature, on the one hand, complaints about and rejection of violence against animals are a constant feature in Bird’s text. On the other hand, her many expressions of sympathy towards non-human animal nature are no less noticeable. In that regard, it is essential to consider the accuracy of judging the capability of feeling pain, instead of the ability to reason, the key element in guiding human behaviour towards all living beings, that is, sentient beings (Sanz 2015, 302; Anton 2017, 57, 62). Within this framework, the protagonist is fully aware of the catastrophic consequences of the killing of the buffalo by the white men: “maddened by the reckless and useless slaughter of the buffalo, which is their chief subsistence” (Bird 1982, 420). To deal with this injustice, Bird plainly reproduces the threats made by Indians:

The Indians have taken to the ‘war path’, and are burning ranches and killing cattle. There is a regular ‘scare’ among the settlers, and wagon loads of fugitives are arriving in Colorado Springs. The Indians say, “The white man has killed the buffalo and left them to rot on the plains. We will be revenged.” (Bird 1982, 1606)

Loss of biodiversity and the triggering of an unequal and unfair war between natives and white men are at the heart of the passage above. Similarly, the treatment animals are subjected to by humans gives the adventurer great sorrow. Bird defines the system as “one of terrorism” (Bird 1982, 1690), as a result, the calves live obsessed since they are marked until the day they are consigned to the slaughterhouse. However, the main aspect that emerges, probably due to Bird’s own experience, and, therefore, the deep knowledge that she shows on the subject, is the exquisite treatment that horses receive in Colorado. Contrary to British tradition, in America there is no need for a whip. In line with the prevailing degree of respect and worship towards horses, Bird christens her most beloved and loyal Indian pony ‘Birdie’. Bird describes her as “a little beauty, with legs of iron, fast, enduring, gentle, and wise” (Bird 1982, 1803). Before becoming acquainted with her, Bird has ridden other horses to whom she devotes equal respect and consideration: “a blithe, joyous animal” (Bird 1982, 1087) who follows his guardian “without being led” (1088). Bird confesses that hers has been love at first sight:

In addition to the charm of his movements he has the catlike sure-footedness of a Hawaiian horse [...]. I could have ridden him a hundred miles as easily as thirty. We have only been together two days, yet we are firm friends, and thoroughly understand each other. I should not require another companion on a long mountain tour. (Bird 1982, 1089)

By the way it proceeds, the previous excerpt describes the adventurer as though she starred in the Lone Ranger in the American Old West, with a horse as her only company. For lack of female models, Bird simulates male ones. On top of that, due to the fact that animals have not been mistreated, rather trained by the voice, Birds points out that horses “exercise their intelligence for your advantage and



do their work rather as friends than as machines” (Bird 1982, 1094). About Ring, Mountain Jim’s devoted dog, Bird states that he has “a wistful human expression” (Bird 1982, 1256) and that “he is almost human in his intelligence” (1258). Jim subsequently addresses him as though his dog were a human being. Ring is loving and seeks the contact and the strokes of his guardians: “lay on one side of me with his fine head on my arm” (Bird 1982, 1390). Moreover, Ring plays the role of a guardian angel by order of Jim: “Ring, go to that lady, and don’t leave her again to-night” (Bird 1982, 1259). In addition, the proximity and contact with wilderness is not a matter of concern for Bird. She gives an account of the presence of “a snake three feet long” (Bird 1982, 698) and finds that “bears stripped the cherry bushes within a few yards of us last night” (828). Proofs of sympathy show up every now and then “as the horse had become fidgety and ‘scary’ on the track, I turned off in the idea of taking a short cut” (Bird 1982, 348). On another occasion, when Bird watches a female bear with her offspring, she tries to quieten her horse, to avoid frightening them. Similarly, prairie dogs are bestowed with human features:

Acting as sentinels, and sunning themselves. As we passed, each gave a warning yelp, shook its tail, and, with a ludicrous flourish of its hind legs, dived into its hole. The appearance of hundreds of these creatures, each eighteen inches long, sitting like dogs begging, with their paws down and all turned sunwards, is most grotesque. (Bird 1982, 548)

The description above suggests that prairie dogs greet passers-by and take advantage of their situation to protect the land while sunbathing. There is no doubt that each line of Bird’s text exudes admiration and devotion towards all sort of species. She is familiar with them, and she refers to them with a mixture of poetic tenderness and scientific accuracy:

Crested blue-jays darted through the dark pines, squirrels in hundreds scampered through the forest, red dragon-flies flashed like ‘living light’ exquisite chipmunks ran across the track, but only a dusty blue lupin here and there reminded me of earth’s fairer children. (Bird 1982, 366)

Apart from the recurring references to rich and varied wild fauna, the preceding extract highlights the heroine’s deep knowledge of the precise species populating the Rockies. It comes as no surprise that Bird selects two animals as silent companions of the main protagonists. On the one hand, Ring’s role as the usual comrade for solitary beings such as Jim is remarkable. On the other hand, Birdie, the Indian pony, is Bird’s tireless friend. With their companionship, they complement or emphasise the heroes’ features. Bird also shows an ethical concern for the suffering animal: horses, cattle in general, even bears, and, indeed all the species are treated as living, sentient beings, and share the ability and human need of caring and being cared for (Antón 2017).

In this connection, Ruby Wax reminds us that unlike in the Victorian age, where the Planet abounded in wild and remote settings, now it is becoming increasingly more complicated to run away from what constrains us, since



exploitation and supremacy have ended in destroying biodiversity and seriously jeopardizing our near future (2022). To cite one simple example, a busy ski resort for billionaires stands at the very same place where Isabella Bird met her spiritual needs, and her childhood dream materialised.

CONCLUSIONS

In *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*, as I have tried to demonstrate in the preceding pages, the protagonist epitomises the ideal of a Victorian woman, who despite being attributed with the most genuine virtues of a lady but stimulated by remoteness and inspired by a mountainous landscape, finds the favourable space to negotiate etiquette, visibility, gender roles, and ultimately, contest the powerful idiosyncrasy of the Victorian womanhood.

When it comes to the task of scrutinizing the recurrent trope of the mountain, my paper has illustrated that Isabella Bird makes a metaphorical use of it, since the adventurer takes visual pleasure in a mountainous landscape from a female, white, and heterosexual perspective. And yet, no matter whether the explorer truly entertained an emotional involvement with the desperado trapper because, as this analysis has tried to prove, at the end of the day, it is the author's talent and bravery what counts to fabricate a fascinating story. In light of this, the traveller's testimony seems to be pioneering and courageous for a Victorian lady, not only because her discourse challenges the patriarchal leading gaze on the mountain in the western culture, but because it endows the female heroine with a certain degree of sensual empowerment, calling into question the classical identification of the female body with nature, and the categorization of women in their reproductive role.

Similarly, considering the deterioration of the landscape observed and denounced within this captivating travelogue, my analysis has shown that the author emerges as a dependable herald of the devastating effects of economic growth and human greed. While it is true that Bird's particular attention to and care for nature might not straightforwardly emanate so much from ecological worries but aesthetic ones, it is nonetheless true that rather than a passive activity, by observation, Bird humanizes the landscape through the language of lyrical nature appreciation, emotional connection, and evangelical religion. Additionally, since Bird's sublime taste on landscape is intricately bound to the needs of its 'inhabitants', non-human animals are treated as sentient beings as a means of resisting the surge in dehumanizing landscapes.

Consequently, in no respect should this literary work be simply treated as travel literature when letter writing allowed Bird to go beyond societal as well as narrative boundaries in search of empowerment and environmentalism. If nothing else, we can always hope that literature will show the way forward to redesign our conservation policies and stimulate ethical behaviour in the Anthropocene era.

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FAULKNER'S RENEWAL OF THE FIGURE OF THE GRIZZLY BEAR IN THE AMERICAN WEST: FROM ANCESTOR TO POLITICAL SYMBOL

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ABSTRACT

The role of the grizzly bear in many Native American tribes has had a tremendous cultural, spiritual and ecological significance, which was objected by the colonisers' anthropocentric conception of wildlife as an instrumental value to humans. Literature has been one of the main sources to find traces of this Native American conception of the grizzly bear as deity as well as the colonists' perspective of the nonhuman animal as threat to be tamed. In this article, I will analyse some folk tales and William Faulkner's "The Bear" (1942) in order to demonstrate the existence of this conception of the grizzly bear in the American West, as well as the importance of literature for its perpetuation.

KEY WORDS: Human-Animal Relationships, Hunting, American West, Bear Imaginary, Native American Folklore

LA RENOVACIÓN DE FAULKNER DE LA FIGURA DEL OSO PARDO EN EL OESTE AMERICANO: DE ANCESTRO A SÍMBOLO POLÍTICO

RESUMEN

El papel del oso pardo en muchas tribus nativo americanas ha tenido una gran importancia cultural, espiritual y ecológica, lo que supuso un contraste con la concepción antropocéntrica de los colonizadores sobre la naturaleza entendida como un instrumento para beneficio humano. La literatura ha sido una de las fuentes principales a la hora de encontrar signos de este entendimiento del oso pardo como deidad por parte de los nativo americanos, así como de la perspectiva colonizadora sobre este animal no humano como una amenaza que debe ser domada. En este artículo, analizaré algunos cuentos populares y «El oso» de William Faulkner (1942) con el objetivo de demostrar la existencia de esta concepción del oso pardo en el oeste americano, además de la importancia de la literatura en su perpetuación.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Relaciones Humano-Animales, Caza, Oeste Americano, Imaginario sobre el Oso, Folklore Nativo Americano



INTRODUCTION

When it comes to worship towards nonhuman animals¹, the powerful image of the bear should be highlighted, having persisted up to present times among a great number of cultures all around the world—the bears' charisma has always been “capable of invoking a range of emotional and behavioural responses from people across the world” (Hughes et al. 2020, 2). Despite the strikingly similar bear rituals and beliefs that are found in America, Europe and Asia, the shared perspectives on this nonhuman animal among a great number of Native American tribes stick out. The main reason behind this need for granting importance to the bear's worship is the high regard that many Native American tribes hold for him, for the bear even became a symbol of their own identity. This cultural symbol was deliberately targeted during colonialism; that is, believing Native American religious beliefs to be primitive, the bear was hunted in order to make use of the land and remove their main threat to tame it. This attitude led to the almost extinction of grizzly bears and their inclusion in the Endangered Species Act in 1973 (Chaney 2020, 9).

Two main reasons why the bear was such a significant creature to Native Americans are noticed. On the one hand, a great number of Native American tribes saw a clear resemblance between this creature and themselves—they were the only creatures that often “stand on their hind legs and, from time to time, walk upright” (Rockwell 2021, 2), as well as having paws “similar in structure to our hands” (Comba 2019, 150). In other words, these tribes saw a clear link between humans and bears due to their akin anatomy. These common physical traits constituted a highly meaningful aspect for them, for they traditionally made use of anthropomorphization of the world around them, assigning human motives to both nonhuman animals and inanimate objects.

On the other hand, as Joseph Epes Brown states, among Native American tribes it was believed that nonhuman animals had been on Earth before humans and, therefore, count with a divine origin which enables them to have certain proximity with the Great Spirit (2007, 38). However, due to this resemblance mentioned earlier, the bear was seen as the father of the human race and, consequently, the most appropriate connection to the Great Spirit.

Nevertheless, as time has gone by, due to colonialism, capitalism and technological advances, the bear has moved on to become not only a sacred being, but also “like people from way back who still lived free and wild in nature before they were constricted into settlements” (Storl 2018, 23). In other words, there is a new understanding of the bear as a reminder of this long lost natural past, influenced by these Native American beliefs. In fact, as Chaney asserts, “the presence of grizzlies

¹ I have decided to use the terms “nonhuman animals” and “human animals,” even though this use of the terms may encourage the perpetuation of the binary relationship between both. The reason why I have chosen this option is because I aim at laying out the existence of this border, for in order to acknowledge this border, it is crucial to point at the factors that have created it.



draws many other people to the same landscape in hopes of experiencing some dream of authentic Nature” (2020, 7).

Literature may be one of the most useful sources in order to demonstrate and analyse this evolution—from his² depiction as a deity and protective parental figure in traditional Native American tales, the bear in contemporary American fiction has moved on to symbolise these long lost natural roots. Thus, the main objective of this article is to show the existence of this evolution through literature. In order to do so, I will analyse Native American folklore and its influence in William Faulkner’s “The Bear.”

THE BEAR IN NATIVE AMERICAN FOLKLORE

In the essay “From Worship to Subjugation: Understanding Stories about Bears to Inform Conservation Efforts” (Hughes et al. 2020), the portrayal of bears throughout history and across geographic distribution is analysed. The study was based upon the idea that by looking at how this nonhuman animal has been depicted, his or her meaning in society would be able to be described, which may be a determinant factor to design conservation actions that match these beliefs. This way, the researchers were able to differentiate four themes in narrative texts in relation to the bear.

First, bears are usually presented as a symbol of kinship, in which they are depicted as ancestors due to their “human-like traits and behaviours” (Hughes et al. 2020, 2) and, as a consequence of this traditional bear worship that has been mentioned previously, it does not come as a surprise that this theme is the most common. Second, we find their utilitarian image, in which stories tend to depict bears’ main goal as fulfilling humans’ needs (Hughes et al. 2020, 6). Third, some stories show the threat bears may pose to humans (Hughes et al. 2020, 6); and, finally, the fourth constitutes a political representation of the bear as a symbol of power and national pride (Hughes et al. 2020, 6). What I defend here is that these traditional depictions of the bear—which, as a matter of fact, are also found in other cultures apart from the Native American—have evolved into a new conceptualisation more related to a political perspective of the bear as a symbol that fights against capitalism and culture. Thus, a great number of contemporary literary works, getting

² It is important to keep in mind that I am treating nonhuman animals and human animals as equals. Hence, for instance, when not being referred to by the name “nonhuman animals,” the possessive pronouns such as “his” have been used instead of “its.” It must be taken into account that these notes only apply to what I have written and that quotes included by other authors may have opted for using other options. I want to also state that in these cases the bear is referred to using the masculine gender, for the bear characters in the literary work analysed are male and traditionally the bear deities were also considered to be male and, therefore, will be referred to as such in the following pages.



their inspiration from these traditional Native American tales, represent the bear as a symbol of these long lost human roots with nature.

As it has been mentioned earlier, one of the reasons for this admiration is the belief of the bear being the origin of the human race. One of the clearest examples of the perspective of bear as kin is found in the mythology of the Modocs of California. The legend asserts that, when the Chief of the Sky “grew tired of his home in the Above World,” he decided to walk down Mount Shasta from the sky and there he created a great number of creatures present in wildlife nowadays—the otter, the bird, the fish, the beaver and the grizzly bear. Nonetheless, it was to the latter to whom he granted the ability to talk and walk on two feet. After he made the decision of settling down on Earth, bringing his family down from the sky. One day, his little girl, while being alone in the woods, bumped into one of the grizzly bears, who brought her with him to his home. Being brought up by them, she got married with one of the grizzly bears and many children were brought into the world from this union, which was considered the origin of the human race. Hence, the Modocs see the grizzly bear as a parental figure, as an ancestor, addressing him as “Grandfather” (Erdoes and Ortiz 1984, 85-87).

Another example is found in the tale “The Girl Who Married the Bear,” which despite counting with many different versions across North America, the one belonging to the Indians of the southern Yukon may be worth highlighting. This tale narrates how a bear married a woman, taking her away from her family. At the beginning, the girl does not notice that her now husband is actually a bear, due to his human-like figure. When her family comes to take her back, the bear is killed, making the girl face a terrible dilemma—she has to choose her loyalties and decide between her husband and her own relatives. She makes her decision and ultimately kills her own family out of revenge, running away to the forest with her children and having started to become a bear herself. The bear is her kin now (Rockwell 2021, 116-121).

In Native American communities, it is not only the nonhuman animal’s strength and size that make bears one of the toughest creatures in the wild, but also their association with medicine. Due to bears’ endurance in a fight, being able to keep on with it in spite of injuries, Native Americans believed that these creatures were capable of healing themselves and, therefore, may possess knowledge to heal serious wounds. One of the best examples of the bear represented as utilitarian is the Pawnee’s tale “The Medicine Grizzly Bear,” which tells us about a bear that teaches a boy the secrets of the plants. The reason why the bear chooses this particular boy is due to the fact that he believes he is worthy of receiving the sacred knowledge of the plants. It is because of his worth that not only does the boy receive this wisdom but he also will always count with the bear as a spirit guide (Grinnell 2008, 737-744).

Considering women to be dangerous during their menstrual periods, most Native American tribes isolated them when showing signs of their first periods. The main reason behind this was the belief of their possessing menacing powers that would injure or contaminate the rest of the tribe. Nevertheless, a great number of tribes not only associated women with danger, but also considered them to be related to the figure of the female bear. In spite of the undoubtable admiration for



the bear that these tribes possessed, they were also conscious of the dangers that these nonhuman animals could entail due to their powerful physical characteristics which granted them with great strength. In fact, many tribes only hunted bears when necessary, always after asking for permission and in a ritualistic manner. This understanding of the creature as threatening was more linked to female bears, creating this sort of evil creature called the she-bear (Rockwell 2021, 14-17).

One example of this type of tale is found in the folklore of the Nez Percé. As Rockwell points out, “Wali’ms and the Grizzly-bear Women” tells us about five grizzly bear sisters who kidnap children, which therefore may have been used in order to scare children from the tribe (2021, 133). Another example is the tale “The Bear Woman with the Snapping Vagina” from the Yavapai, which tells about this boy who is told by his mother not to cut the doe that he hunts on the left side first. Despite his mothers’ instructions, he ends up doing it out of pure curiosity and, as a consequence of violating the human-animal relationships, he is made to marry a she-bear. This she-bear’s main characteristic is her obsession for insisting to have intercourse with the boy in order to injure him with the bear teeth that she has in her vagina. There is no doubt about the link between this she-bear figure and uncontrolled nature; that is, this character constitutes an animal metaphor of the feminine and the nature that must be controlled and feared (Rockwell 2021, 126-129).

In the essay “From Worship to Subjugation: Understanding Stories about Bears to Inform Conservation Efforts,” the authors assert that this category is related to “bears as a politicized actor” (2020, 5); that is, as propaganda of national and political pride. This is also linked to the image of the bear as a symbol in the environmental cause. In this way, it is not surprising to see how environmental activists have used the polar bear to protest—this was the case when in July 2011, 60 Greenpeace campaigners, some of which were dressed up as bears, protested against an oil and gas British company in Edinburgh due to their operations in the Arctic (Milmo 8 Jul 2011). In literature, this use of the image of the polar bear has become quite common in Young Adult and children’s fiction in recent years. In *The Last Bear* (2021), for instance, the author Hannah Gold tells us about April, a girl who has come to live on a remote island in the Arctic along with her father. There, she befriends a polar bear and both of them begin their journey to discover the secret parts of the island, along which they will together discover the diminishing species and disappearing ice caps of the Arctic.

In relation to this, it is not surprising to see how the bear has not only been represented as a symbol of this environmental cause, but also as a means of depicting this human long lost natural past. During the 20th century, concerns around nature and animal conservation started to be widespread. In the case of the grizzly bear in the American West—and also in other areas of the American continent—, after being hunted for a long time due to the threat that it embodied in the colonialist cause in their westward expansion, concerns about their ultimate extinction appeared. Moreover, this portrayal started to be related to the rise in awareness about the indigenous situation, beginning a process of indigenization of the bear—clear similarities were seen between the decolonial movement in the



American West and the ones fighting for bear conservation, mainly due to the traditional religious beliefs that Native Americans held for the bear.

FAULKNER'S "THE BEAR"

Providing a conclusion for the meaning of Faulkner's short story may constitute a challenge of great difficulty, for three versions of it have been published, each clearly laying out a different development of the events. The first version, entitled "Lion," was published in *Harper's Monthly Magazine* in 1935 and "it has a more humorous effect than the other two versions" (Brunauer 1974, 11). In this first-person narration, the little boy Quentin tells us about the story of Lion, a hunting dog, and Boon, a half-Indian man who, instead of taking care of his dog, seems to be owned by the animal. In this version, Old Ben, a well-known bear among the inhabitants of the territory, plays a minor character used to portray the relationship between the man and the dog—after the dog is attacked by the bear, Boon stabs and ultimately kills the animal in an attempt to save the dog. Some time later, Quentin tells the reader about Boon's mental state, describing a behaviour that may be that of a madman (Faulkner 1935, 185-200).

In the second version published in 1942 in *The Saturday Evening Post* and entitled "The Bear," the story starts to differ in many ways from the first one. As the change of title implies, the story does not focus on Lion, the dog, but rather on the figure of Old Ben. It narrates the story of how Quentin, over a period of years and with Sam Father's mentoring, attempts to trail the bear, "a huge and sage legendary bear who always defies capture" (Lydenberg 1952, 63). However, when he is given the chance to finally kill the creature, he does not shoot and, although the boy tries to understand why he did not do it, he finds himself unable to provide an answer for it (Faulkner 1942a, 19).

Finally, in the same year, Faulkner published a third version with the same title, "The Bear," in his short-story volume *Go Down, Moses*. The most important change that this version introduced was in relation to Sam Fathers, who becomes the boy's "spiritual father, guiding him at every step from childhood to adulthood" (Brunauer 1974, 13). Moreover, Sam seems to possess gifts that may be compared to those of the figure of the shaman, enabling the hunting group to ultimately achieve their goal. In fact, this is precisely another significant change in the previous version, since here Old Ben is finally killed by Boon, which, as it happens in "Lion," seems to drive him crazy (Faulkner 1942b, 163-191).

In the following pages, I discuss the depiction of the bear in William Faulkner's "The Bear," focusing on the second and third versions due to the importance that they grant to the bear character, Old Ben. Since my main objective is to demonstrate the existence of this political turn in the representation of bears in literature, I have decided to follow a thematic analysis. First, I analyse how the natural world is portrayed; second, I focus on the image of the bear; and, finally, I go through the animalising and deanimalising processes found throughout the story.



Thus, what I defend here is that all these literary processes contribute to creating this bear's symbolism.

Creating the binary opposition between culture and nature and representing culture as the desirable one has led the human race to separate itself from nature up to a point where human animals seem to have completely forgotten about their own natural past. But this craving for imposing culture's superiority and importance as the only way through which the human race is able to achieve this wholeness is precisely what makes them incomplete, making us forget about our own origins.

Faulkner represents this need to rejoin with this natural world by depicting the characters' desire to hunt the bear. As Segarra points out, hunting has been traditionally regarded as a means of rejoining with the animal spirit and nature (2022, 83). It does not come as a surprise therefore to see how in a great number of cultures and eras, hunting constituted a rite for the young in order to show their worth. Thus, nonhuman animals' slaughter was seen as the inevitable way to become a respectable adult. Faulkner succeeds in depicting this in his short story, telling us about how the main character begins attending these yearly gatherings with his father and his friends in order to hunt a bear that apparently is impossible to get hold of (Faulkner 1942a, 1-3).

In Faulkner's writing of the bear, I perceive a strong influence of the bear's traditional depictions. First, as it has been mentioned in the previous section, the abilities that the animal possesses constitute the main reason for bear worship and, overall, their doubtless strength. This respect for the animal is also depicted in the three versions of Faulkner's short story. In all these versions, the magnificent shape of the animal is highlighted, mentioning multiple times through the story his "crooked print, shaggy, huge ... too big for the dogs which tried to bay it, for the horses which tried to ride it down, for the men and the bullets they fired into it" (Faulkner 1942a, 2).

Apart from his physical aptness, the bear's intelligence has also been highlighted in multiple cultures. As Brunauer points out, for Indians of the Montagnais-Naskapi, for example, "his [the bear's] soul-spirit knows especially when the hunters are on his trail and so he does what he thinks best to do in order to save himself" (1974, 21). In other words, this nonhuman animal is in fact considered superior to all beasts by virtue of his relentless intelligence (21). Faulkner also makes use of this intelligent image of the bear, by granting Old Ben with the ability to not be hunted; that is, the capability of avoiding the hunters' attempts to beat him. As a matter of fact, in the second version of the story, Sam Fathers—who has Indian roots, which would explain his understanding of the bear—even states that "he's smart. That's how come he has lived this long" (Faulkner 1942a, 7).

In this way, Faulkner depicts Old Ben as the king of all animals, including humans, as a creature able to survive all challenges of any creature attempting to hunt him, for it was "too big for the dogs which tried to bay it, for the horses which tried to ride it down, for the men and the bullets they fired into it, too big for the very country which was its constricting scope" (Faulkner, 1942a, 2). The kid even asserts that this group of hunters do not actually gather every year with the objective of hunting the creature, but rather to "keep yearly rendezvous with



the bear” (Faulkner 1942a, 3), the creature that has earned himself a name, Old Ben. Old Ben is hence depicted as a sort of deity that is “absolved of mortality” (Faulkner 1942a, 10).

This god-like image may be the reason for the reluctance to kill the animal. In the second version, on the one hand, the boy develops his hunting skills in order to achieve his objective of ultimately killing Old Ben. Nonetheless, despite being given the opportunity to fulfil his ambition not only once, but twice, he makes the decision of letting him live (Faulkner 1942a, 17). One of the reasons for this decision may be that Ike realises that hunting a sacred animal as Old Ben may become a sort of rape, a violation of the wilderness and a divine entity. In fact, this reluctance to slaughter the animal is also present in the Indians of the Plains, who hesitate to kill the bear or eat him, for him being considered a noble creature (Brunauer 1974, 17). However, some tribes decide to kill the animal as a tribute. In these cases, “the reluctance to use a gun when hunting bears seems to have deep traditional roots” (Brunauer 1974, 25). In fact, in these territories, bear hunt is characterised by its strict ceremonialism (Hallowell 1926, 57). First, the location of the animal should be determined, which was often believed to come in a dream. There are clear signs of this in Faulkner’s short story: “the bear ... had run in his [the boy’s] listening and loomed in his dreams since before he could remember to the contrary” (Faulkner 1942a, 7). Hence, it was as if they were destined to run into each other and the bear, being a sacred divinity, was aware of it from the very first start, emerging in the boy’s dreams, foreseeing the future events.

After being located, they proceed to the slaughter. Even though the method may vary from tribe to tribe, the use of guns is generally avoided when hunting bears, which “seems to have deep traditional roots” (Brunauer 1974, 25). In both first and third versions, Old Ben is ultimately killed, but not with a gun—despite the fact that all hunters own one, the bear is killed with a knife in the end (Faulkner 1935; 1942b). Furthermore, in the second version, the boy makes the decision not to kill the bear on both occasions that he bumps into each other. The second time this happens, Ike’s father cannot believe that the boy has not been able to shoot him and asks him why he could not do it (Faulkner 1942a, 19). But the boy is also confused, he does not understand his decision either.

In this way, the political depiction of the bear is of great importance in order to understand Ike’s actions at the end of the story. On the one hand, for critics such as John Lydenberg, Faulkner’s depiction of the bear also acts as a symbol of the relationship between humans and nature, to the old life now lost (1952, 63). From this point of view, Old Ben’s death in the third version would symbolise man’s destruction of the wilderness. However, in the second edition, where the bear is not actually killed at the end, the bear constitutes a totem animal, the god who can never be bested by men with their hounds and guns. The short story would therefore be an attempt to portray man’s plight in a world impossible to control and fully grasp. Thus, their conquest of Old Ben becomes a violation of the wilderness and the Southern land.

In order to make them fit into this world where humans are understood as the centre, nonhuman animals are regarded from the perspective of the human,



imposing certain behaviours and characteristics among them. This way, they are stripped of their own animality, removing them from their own world and imposing some concepts that they probably are not even conscious about, which leads to us stealing “their spirits, [...] their very animality” (Malamud 2011, 14). This has precisely been one of the greatest problems when it comes to representing nonhuman animals in literature. This anthropocentrism has contributed to their portrayal as symbols and metaphors of human animal characters in the story and to grant them human personality traits and behaviour. In the case of the bear, one of the first deanimalising actions is undoubtedly the connection between both species’ physical appearance. In fact, as it has previously been mentioned, the physical similarity between humans and bears constituted one of the first reasons to regard this nonhuman animal as an old ancestor and, therefore, to spread his depiction as a deity among a great number of cultures.

Moreover, deanimalising processes of humans have also been common in a great number of stories. Despite the fact that it used to be a means of scaring peoples in the past—their connection to their own animality was more of a proof of their inexistent uniqueness—, at the beginning of the 20th century, it became a way to represent freedom, that is, returning to our own origins.

Even though there is no doubt about the deanimalising process that the bear goes through due to the similarities with humans described in traditional Native American tales, Faulkner also includes two aspects that contribute to this phenomenon. On the one hand, the act of naming the animal may be highlighted. For affective bonds between human and nonhuman animals are made reality by giving a name to the latter, individualising and humanising them in order to make for the former group to grow more empathy for other species. As Segarra asserts, it was Vicky Hearne who highlighted the importance of the name given to nonhuman animals, since it has always been traditionally believed that without a name and somebody that can call you by it, a moral life cannot be reached (2022, 127). This is related to the conception of nonhuman animals as non-evolved and lacking reason due to their not belonging to society, culture and civilisation—from their perspective, the only reasonable aim in life. This point of view is related to the idea presented by Leonard Lawlor that asserts that naming the nonhuman animal would only work if they use the name that identifies them when they interact with those of their own kind, since using a human name would entail imposing humanity (Segarra 2022, 127).

Although in the first edition of the story the bear was a minor character and, therefore, did not have a name, Faulkner saw it necessary to change this in the other two versions. This is because he also sees the fact of having a name as honourable and positive, since human animals are the ones who are first in the hierarchy. Throughout the story, the bear that they are trying to hunt is depicted as a sort of deity and they mention the fact of having his own name, Old Ben, as the definite proof that demonstrates his value: “the tremendous bear [...] had earned itself a name, a definite designation like a living man” (Faulkner 1942a, 2). Faulkner even decides to show the bear’s divine soul and status above some humans by not



granting a name to some men: “[...] men myriad and nameless even to one another in the land where the old bear had earned a name” (Faulkner 1942a, 3).

On the other hand, the topic of communication must be brought up. Lucie Desblache’s concept of the animal’s silence puts forward the possibility of respecting nonhuman animals’ silence; being the absence of an articulated language not regarded as lacking, but rather as a characteristic of another species different from our own (Segarra 2022, 128). This respect for their silence is clearly portrayed by Faulkner. As it has been mentioned previously, Faulkner’s short story mainly depicts Old Ben as an immortal soul whose wisdom makes it impossible to hunt, symbolising, in this way, humans’ hopelessness when it comes to attempting to control nature. Hence, Old Ben’s lack of speech comes as more proof of his divine nature, for it increases his mysterious image.

This animalising process does not actually have to be noticeable in the physical realm, but rather as a psychological process in order to blend with nature itself. Taking this into account, although Faulkner does not actually portray an animalising process of the human, it is true that hunting may be also understood as such; that is, of returning to these natural roots long lost, recovering therefore this animal spirit that humans have traditionally refused to embrace. As Segarra points out, the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset defended the idea of hunting as a manifestation of species’ hierarchy (2022, 84). Moreover, the philosopher highlights the need to give the inferior creatures—nonhuman animals—the possibility to run away so that this activity does not become a killing (Segarra 2022, 84). Thus, from this perspective, hunting constitutes a process through which humans return to their animal condition and, later, they should leave their prey free in order to demonstrate this human supremacy.

This process is precisely the one that Faulkner narrates in the second version of the story—despite the great efforts of Ike to hunt Old Ben during all those years, in the end he decides not to kill him. In other words, he embraces this animality to later make his superiority clear. Nonetheless, in the third version of the story, Ike ends up killing Old Ben. In this version, he embraces this animality too much. This is related to the understanding of hunting as the ritual for the youth to demonstrate their manly worth whilst blending with their true nature (Segarra 2022, 83); that is to say, for Ike, killing Old Ben means leaving childhood behind and becoming a respectable adult.

CONCLUSIONS

The main objective of this article has been to analyse how the portrayal of the bear in the American West has evolved from embodying the divine to constituting a symbol of humans’ lost natural roots. In spite of the fact that the literary work analysed has proved to be a great example of this political representation, it is also important to keep in mind that this evolution does not automatically erase the previous depictions of the bear, but rather we find some echoes of them as well in contemporary works.



In traditional Native American beliefs, the bear has undoubtedly constituted a figure of great importance—the grandfather of humankind, an old relative, the knowledgeable figure that can pass on the wisdom related to medicine. It has also been stated that in the majority of cases this worship came as a direct consequence of the similarities in behaviour and physical traits between bears and humans, as well as this nonhuman animals' strength and hunting expertise. Nonetheless, with Western colonialism, these Native American beliefs were not considered to be valuable. The figure of the bear in North America became hence an enemy of the colonial endeavour; on the one hand, due to the threat that a being with such characteristics may constitute in the attempt to control the land; and, on the other, owing to the colonialists' enterprise of suppressing means of pagan worship.

In the case of William Faulkner's "The Bear," we are introduced to this new portrayal of the bear as a political symbol. In the first one published in 1935, the bear does not have much importance, whereas in the next two versions published in 1942, the nonhuman animal becomes a significant character. Nonetheless, in all three versions, the bear is linked to a divine nature due to the impossibility to kill him. This way, in attempting to hunt him, the men are contending with wilderness itself—the bear becomes a symbol of their natural roots that they are also trying to control.

Despite the bear being portrayed as an immortal soul, the three versions of the story contain a different ending for the characters. In the first and third versions of the story, the nonhuman animal is ultimately killed by one of the characters. In both cases, the man seems to suffer from a mental affliction afterwards, which may be understood as the consequence of his sin; that is, "a punishment by the bear-like-god for not following the rules of bear sacrifice" (Brunauer 1974, 27). In other words, since the sacred ceremony of sacrifice was dishonoured—as traditional Native American beliefs state—and, with it, the bear-god, the nonhuman animal did not give his consent to be killed, which was a mandatory aspect during the sacrifice ceremony. In the second version, however, the boy Ike develops his hunting skills in order to achieve his objective of killing Old Ben (Faulkner 1942a, 1-3). Nonetheless, despite being given the opportunity to fulfil his ambition not only once, but twice, he makes the decision of letting him live. One of the reasons that critics have provided as explanation for this decision is that the boy realises that hunting a sacred animal as Old Ben may become a sort of rape, a violation of the wilderness and a divine entity (Lydenberg 1952, 63).

In conclusion, the American West seems to require the bear again, the old king of the wilderness, to remind them of that which was attempted to destroy once. Thus, the bear has returned to remind us of the possibility of respecting Native American beliefs as well as the importance of nature conservation in order to respect our own origins.

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SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE: LAND AND HOUSING IN CHICANA LITERATURE*

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the novels *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1984), *So Far from God* (Castillo, 1993) and *Under the Feet of Jesus* (Viramontes, 1995) and the drama *Heroes and Saints* (Moraga, 1994) from the perspective of social and environmental justice, taking into account Cherríe Moraga's concept of Land, in which home plays a primary role. The sense of justice in these works emerges from an oppressed landscape in which the environment, the homes and the bodies of the protagonists reflect the damage done to the environment and to human beings. The analysis of the above-mentioned literary works shows how different Chicana authors advocate the achievement of concepts such as social and environmental justice, while at the same time denouncing the impossibility of Chicanos achieving the desired American Dream.

KEYWORDS: Chicana Literature, Social and environmental justice, Land, Housing, American Dream.

JUSTICIA SOCIAL Y MEDIOAMBIENTAL: TIERRA Y HOGAR EN LA LITERATURA CHICANA

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza las novelas *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1984), *So Far from God* (Castillo, 1993) y *Under the Feet of Jesus* (Viramontes, 1995) y el drama *Heroes and Saints* (Moraga, 1994) desde la perspectiva de la justicia social y medioambiental teniendo en cuenta el concepto de tierra de Cherríe Moraga, en el que el hogar juega un papel primordial. La conciencia de justicia de estas obras surge de un paisaje deprimido donde el entorno, los hogares y los cuerpos de las protagonistas son reflejo del daño infligido al medio ambiente y en consecuencia también al ser humano. El análisis de las obras mostrará cómo diversas autoras chicanas abogan por la consecución de conceptos tales como justicia social y medioambiental y al mismo tiempo denuncian la imposibilidad del pueblo chicano para alcanzar el tan ansiado sueño americano.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Literatura Chicana, Justicia social y medioambiental, Tierra, Hogar, Sueño americano.

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From the Spanish conquest in the 15th century to the final demarcation of the current border between the United States and Mexico in 1848, the territories and borders of the North American Southwest have varied greatly. Following the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed and Mexico lost a significant portion of its land to the United States. These annexed territories now make up the American Southwest and have provided the backdrop against which races and cultures have mixed and clashed. As a result of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, this newest part of the American territory was inhabited by Mexicans who were classified as Mexican-Americans or Chicanos. Historically, Chicanos have been a subject nation to both the Spanish conquerors and Anglo-Saxon culture. In the 1960s, however, they began to realize that they had been taken advantage of and consequently began to organize and to fight for their rights. They adopted the term Chicano and began to use it in a positive way. Since then, the term has come to reflect the pride of belonging to a mixed race; a race that can trace its origins back to the ancient inhabitants of the region, but at the same time recognizes that living in the United States distinguishes them from their Mexican neighbors.

Within the Chicano community, a variety of social organizations and movements have emerged to actively fight for social rights. These had their origins in the pacifist, anti-racist, and anti-war movements of the 1960s and 1970s and included the Chicano Movement, the Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán, the Crusade for Justice or the Raza Unida Party, but undoubtedly one of the greatest milestones of the Chicano movement was the creation of the United Farm Workers Association (UFW), an agricultural trade union that fought to improve the working conditions of farmworkers. The racism, discrimination and oppression suffered by the Chicano people would soon be reflected in their art and literature. Their works of art began to describe the most significant characteristics of their identity and to depict their experience as citizens belonging to a minority group.

Since the beginning of the Chicano Movement, its greatest battles have been the demand for social justice and the fight against the environmental pollution to which Chicanos are exposed due to the direct contact with pesticides and toxic products in their workplaces as well as in the land they inhabit. The term *land* refers to Cherríe Moraga's concept of land: "[...] land is more than the rocks and trees, the animal and plant life that make up the territory of Aztlán or Navajo Nation or Mayan Mesoamerica. For immigrant and native alike, land is also the factories where we work, the water our children drink, and the housing project where we live" (Moraga 1993, 173). It is important to note that Chicano society as a whole is subject to social and environmental injustices that Benjamin Chavis has defined as environmental racism:

Environmental racism is racial discrimination in environmental policy-making and enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of communities

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of color for toxic waste facilities, the official sanctioning of the presence of life-threatening poisons and pollutants in communities of color, and the history of excluding people of color from leadership of the environmental movement. (1994, xi-xii)

Because of issues of race and class, all those territories -the land, the workplace, the housing projects, and even their bodies- are exposed to pollution and environmental degradation. As Devon Peña affirms, “Ecocide and ethnocide go hand in hand, and people of color are also «endangered species». [...] Chicano environmentalism is not so much about the preservation of nature and wilderness as it is about struggles to confront daily hazards and threats to health and well-being in environments where we live and work” (1998, 14-15).

Social and environmental racism and the impossibility of reaching the American Dream are inherent in numerous works of Chicana literature, including the novels *The House on Mango Street* (1984) by Sandra Cisneros, *So Far from God* (1993) by Ana Castillo and *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995) by Helena Maria Viramontes and the drama *Heroes and Saints* (1994) by Cherríe Moraga. The chronological analysis will focus on issues of social and environmental justice.

THE AMERICAN DREAM, AN ILLUSION FOR THE CHICANO COMMUNITY

The American Dream is defined as “the ideal by which equality of opportunity is available to any American, allowing the highest aspirations and goals to be achieved” (Murtoff 2023, n.p.). This dream includes, among other things, free mobility, a well-paid job and a beautiful home. As Kaup points out:

in the United States the home is more than just a shelter; it is a national institution almost as sacred as the American flag. In home ownership, the American Dream and the American Way are manifest: the civic values of individualism, economic success, and self-sufficiency are asserted [...] in «the single-family detached house.» (1997, 361)

Indeed, owning a house is a key component of the American Dream which “symbolizes autonomy, achievement, and national pride” (Diaz McConnell and Marcelli 2007, 199). But in a highly stratified American society, merely 50 percent of the Latinos own a house, one of the lowest rates compared to non-Hispanic whites (76 percent) or Asians, Pacific Islanders, and American Indians (60 percent) (Diaz McConnell and Marcelli 2007, 200). Moreover, Chicanos, like other racial minorities, tend to be isolated in peripheral neighborhoods. Numerous American cities reflected, and still reflect nowadays, these racial and class divisions, with a middle-class population in the city center and a lower working class or mixed-race middle class in the suburbs:



[...] *ghettoization* and *barrioization* were more complex and dynamic than can be explained by residential segregation alone. [...] Both were affected by de facto and legal restrictions and by the prevailing attitudes of the dominant white society. Both were shaped by the internal forces operating in their respective populations—the desire to locate near their own people and to establish their folkways and institutions in an urban milieu. And, both were shaped by the external societal forces which confined blacks and Chicanos to their own sections of a city. (Camarillo 1984, 2)

THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET

This is the case of Sandra Cisneros' *House on Mango Street* (1984). Set in a large city, the novel denounces the extreme working conditions of the Hispanic population and depicts their living conditions in a very low-income peripheral neighborhood. The novel portrays aspects of the Chicano experience within the barrio and at the same time evidences the various struggles of the female protagonist (Lewis 1997; Sendin 2004). This oppressive reality is manifested in the main character of the teenager Esperanza Cordero, whose name means “hope”. The family used to live in numerous precarious rental properties but finally manage to settle on Mango Street. Esperanza feels ashamed of all the houses the family had lived in before, and she does not feel comfortable in their new home either:

Once when we were living on Loomis, a nun from my school passed by and saw me playing out front. [...] Where do you live? she asked. There, I said pointing up to the third floor. You live *there*? *There*. I had to look to where she pointed [...]. You live *there*? The way she said it made me feel like nothing. *There*. I lived *there*. I nodded. I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to. But this isn't. The house on Mango Street isn't. (Cisneros 1984, 4-5)

Housing is part of the environment that affects the way people feel and behave, and the characteristics of this environment are important because they condition the development of young people and, therefore, the development of society (Garza 1984). It is precisely because housing has such profound effects on the individual that it is important for everyone to have decent housing. Adequate housing is what Esperanza dreams of, and is recognized as a right in a wide range of international instruments, such as the Declaration of Human Rights or the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. As recognized by the UNO, “adequate housing must provide more than four walls and a roof” (2014, 3).

Life on Mango Street captures the gap between the American Dream and the social reality of the young Chicana protagonist. Esperanza constantly dreams of living in a beautiful home with garden, like the ones her father works on: “I want a house on a hill like the ones with the gardens where Papa works” (Cisneros 1984, 86). But belonging to a minority group and a lower income class she is forced to live with this harsh reality: “I am tired of looking at what we can't have” (Cisneros 1984,



86). The American Dream clashes once again with the multiple discriminations that Chicanos and other minority groups endure.

For Esperanza, living in the *barrio* means growing up surrounded by poverty and segregation, but as she matures, the protagonist of this *Bildungsroman* seems to find a balance between her desire to leave this reality behind and her need to stay in touch with her community and her origins: “One day I’ll own my own house, but I won’t forget who I am or where I came from. Passing bums will ask, Can I come in? I’ll offer them the attic, ask them to stay, because I know how it is to be without a house” (Cisneros 1984, 86). Like many women from impoverished ethnic communities, Esperanza is a victim of race, class, and gender discrimination. Nevertheless, she is able to break through these limitations and desire a home of her own:

Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man’s house. Not a daddy’s. A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody’s garbage to pick up after. Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem. (Cisneros 1984, 108)

SO FAR FROM GOD

Ana Castillo’s *So Far from God* (1993) is another novel that describes the environmental pollution and racism faced by Chicanos. The main protagonists are the matriarch Sofia and her four daughters Esperanza, Caridad, Fe and La Loca. It is the story of the Valle family’s struggle between unemployment, assimilation, environmental racism, and the poverty and discrimination faced by Hispanics in the rural Southwest. Although the family lives in an impoverished environment, Sofia is the pillar of a home around which the lives of these five women revolve, a home where the daughters feel safe and valued. Even though some of the daughters leave the house in search of a better life, they always return home whenever they have problems: “She had grown up in a world of women who went out into the bigger world and came back disappointed, disillusioned, devastated, and eventually not at all. [...] At home she had everything she needed. Her mother’s care and love, her sisters [...]” (Castillo 2005, 151-152). Castillo hence constructs their family home as a ‘site of resistance’, following Bell Hook’s theory of the homeplace. Hooks affirms that:

it has been primarily the responsibility of black women to construct domestic households as spaces of care and nurturance in the face of the brutal harsh reality of racist oppression, of sexist domination. [...] making homeplace [...] was about the construction of a safe place where black people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination. (2001, 384)

Castillo built this site of resistance with the figure of Sofia and the home she built for her daughters, but also on the public sphere, first becoming the leader of



the M.O.M.A.S. association (*Mothers of Martyrs and Saints*) and later being elected as Mayor of Tome. Sofia's home, like the entire town of Tome, is a site of resistance where the protagonists fight not only for social justice, but also for environmental justice.

Each of the novel's protagonists is a victim of racism and discrimination, and their struggle for justice is constant. Fe, one of Sofia's daughters and the most assimilationist, has always pursued the American Dream and has worked really hard trying to achieve it. She got married and had the desire to buy their own house as soon as possible, so they "settled into a three-bedroom, two-car-garage tract home [...] with option to buy. They furnished it all new [...] and bought a brand-new sedan model" (Castillo 2005, 176-177). She left her job at the bank, where she would never get a promotion, and started working at Acme International, where the pay was really good, but "in addition to the raises she was getting nausea and headaches that increased in severity by the day" (Castillo 2005, 177-178). The workers at Acme -most of them poor, racialized women- are not aware of the risks they face, but they suffer from severe headaches and nausea, many have miscarriages, and others suffer from cancer. The workers are lied to about the nature of the chemicals they handle, and as a result some of them, including Fe, develop brutal cancers. However, the pollution is not limited to the workplace, as "the chemical she more than once dumped down the drain at the end of her day, [...] went into the sewage system and worked its way to people's septic tanks, vegetable gardens, kitchen taps, and sun-made tea" (Castillo 2005, 188).

The Environmental Justice Movement defends the idea that the workplace must ensure the health and economic security of its workers. But the job that would theoretically help Fe pursue the American Dream is killing her and contaminating the whole community and its environment. As Castillo denounces, the dream has become a nightmare again because "[u]nlike their abuelos and vis-abuelos who thought that although life was hard in the «Land of Enchantment» it had its rewards, the reality was that everyone was now caught in what had become: The Land of Entrapment" (2005, 172).

HEROES AND SAINTS

Cherrie Moraga's drama *Heroes and Saints* (1994) also deals with the struggle of the Chicano community, but this time the story is set in the agricultural fields of California. In the Author's Notes Moraga affirms that although *Heroes and Saints* is fiction, it was written in response to numerous events that took place in the late eighties, such as the grape boycott or Cesar Chavez's fast, to name a few. Moraga additionally states that she saw the documentary *The Wrath of Grapes* (Chaves, 1984), which denounces the tragedy of the people of McFarland, in the San Joaquin Valley of California, where a so-called cancer cluster was discovered. This documentary inspired the character of the main protagonist of her drama.

The play is set in in 1988 in McLaughlin, California, a fictional town in the San Joaquin Valley. The main protagonist, Cerezita Valle, is "a head of human



dimension, but one who possesses such a dignity of bearing and classical Indian beauty she can, at times, assume nearly religious proportions” (Moraga 1994, 90). The people of McLaughlin know that “Cere turn out this way because Dolores pick en los files cuando tenía panza” (Moraga 1994, 94). As mentioned above, the Environmental Justice Movement defends the idea that the workplace must ensure the sanitary and economic safety of its workers. One of the seventeen principles of environmental justice is directly related to the issues and problems Moraga writes about because it proclaims “the right of all workers to a safe and healthy work environment, without being forced to choose between an unsafe livelihood and unemployment” (Taylor 2002, 43). Dolores, Cerezita’s mother, not only worked in the fields while pregnant, but she also worked in a packing house where she was still exposed to pesticides: “The poison they put on the almonds, it would make you sick. The women would run out of the place coz they had to throw up. Sure, I dint wannu go back in there, pero after a while you start to accept it because you gottu have a job” (Moraga 1994, 99). They had to work in contaminated environments to make a living, but the chemicals and pesticides contaminated their workplace as well as their housing projects, and their living environments:

You don’ believe me, but they bury all their poison under our houses. Wha’ chu think that crack comes from? An earthquake? The house is sinking, te digo como quicksand. [...] They lied to us, Lola. They thought we was too stupid to know the difference. They throw some dirt over a dump, put some casas de carton on top of it y dicen que it’s the “American Dream”. Pues, this dream has turned to pesadilla. (Moraga 1994, 102-103)

The protagonists see how their American Dream turned out to be a nightmare because their housing project was built on what was once a dump site for pesticides and chemicals, with the full knowledge of the contractors and authorities. They are victims of the environmental racism, and the protagonists are aware of the reality: “Our homes are no longer our homes. They have become prisons. When the water that pours from the sink gots to be boiled three times before it can pass your children’s lips, what good is the faucet, the indoor plumbing, the toilet that flushes pink with disease?” (Moraga 1994, 110-111).

UNDER THE FEET OF JESUS

Under the Feet of Jesus is Helena Maria Viramontes’ first novel and was published in 1995. The protagonists to whom Viramontes gives voice are poor immigrant peasants working in the agricultural fields of California. As Grewe-Volpp (2005) points out, they are subjected to the violence of the State, to a precarious economic situation, and to social stigmatization. The novel recounts the life of a large Chicano family headed by a mother named Petra and her five children, among whom we find Estrella, the teenage daughter and main character. Sixteen-year-old Alejo, from Texas, joins the family soon after the story begins. The novel describes



the ups and downs of the daily life of these seasonal workers, as well as their dreams, their fears and hopes.

The inequalities and discrimination suffered by Chicanos are described not only in the workplace, but also in the social sphere. The protagonists face constant discrimination and harassment from Anglo-Saxon society, which frequently treats them as inferiors. Seasonal workers get neither recognition nor a fair wage, with serious consequences for the family. Because of the temporary and precarious nature of their work, they do not own their own homes and are forced to change both their homes and their schools each time they change jobs. As they moved from place to place, none of the houses they have lived in felt even close to a home, and the housing units have not even met minimum health and sanitation standards:

Perfecto inspected the two-room bungalow [...]. He rattled the knob, stepped into a dingy room with a window facing the porch. The stink of despair shot through the musty sunlight, and he knocked a fist against the window to loosen the swollen pane to get some fresh air into the room. ... There were no beds and only a few crates used for chairs arranged around one table [...]. Perfecto figured only men had stayed here. (Viramontes 1996, 8)

The precariousness of their working and living conditions has other negative effects on the personal hygiene of the characters, which occasionally makes them the object of racist attention:

... some of the teachers were more concerned about the dirt under her fingernails. They inspected her head for lice, parting her long hair with ice cream sticks. They scrubbed her fingers with a toothbrush [...]. She remembered how one teacher ... asked how come her mama never gave her a bath. Until then, it had never occurred to Estrella she was dirty, that ... the vigorous brushing and tight braids her mother neatly weaved were not enough for Mrs. Horn. (Viramontes 1996, 25)

Viramontes' novel clearly echoes the torturous working conditions that Chicano farmworkers must endure. Their workday is achingly long, and their tasks are performed under the burning sun, but they are paid poorly and live under precarious conditions: "For the pay we get, they're lucky we don't burn the orchards down" (Viramontes 1996, 45). But no member of the family can afford to lose their job, neither the aging Perfecto, nor the teenage Estrella, or the pregnant Petra. The novel denounces once again that the landlords did not respect the principles of environmental justice.

Under the Feet of Jesus contains heartbreaking descriptions of agricultural fields and the living conditions of the farmworkers. California, like many other agricultural areas, is recurrently portrayed as a paradise, but the novel shatters this idea of a natural agricultural wonderland where healthy fruits and vegetables grow on their own and shows the reality of that world and the people who make these goods available to us. It sets aside bucolic stereotypes of nature and farming to convey the gritty reality of the food and agricultural industries. It could also be argued that the patriarchal capitalist system abuses both nature and humans for the sake of



achieving its goal of the maximum profit. Nature has been abused and mistreated for centuries. Intending to obtain greater food production, the agricultural industry uses pesticides and insecticides that pollute the soil, the subsoil, and the waters. These practices damage not only human health, but also the natural environment. Viramontes' work illustrates the real situation Chicano laborers have suffered for decades and denounces how pesticides and insecticides are sprayed without notice, even while the peasants are working in the fields:

She heard the faint buzzsaw engine of a biplane as she approached to the fence. ... 'Weren't they gonna spray the orchards next week?' Estrella asked matter-of-factly, and pointed to the biplane which dusted the peach trees not far from the barn. ... 'Since when do they do what they say?'
'... I thought I had no business in the barn, Estrella replied. ... I thought you said it was dangerous.'
'It means extra money'. (Viramontes 1996, 73-74)

Viramontes' protagonists once again face the same problems. They suffer from social and environmental racism, and their precarious economic situation prevents them from doing anything about it. At the beginning of the story, many of the youngest protagonists, except for Estrella, seem largely unaware of the dangers of pesticides, yet they do wonder if there will be consequences for their future health. However, the main characters become increasingly aware of the dangers of pesticides and chemicals. This harsh reality is exemplified by the character of Alejo, a sixteen-year-old Californian who falls seriously ill after being poisoned by pesticides in the agricultural fields. Alejo's cousin Gumecindo and other seasonal workers must continue working and are therefore unable to take care of the sick teenager, so the young man remains alone for days, thinking that he does not wish to die in solitude. Given his situation, Alejo is taken in by Estrella's family. Her mother, Petra, feels that she should take care of him, as she would like others to do for her children: "If we don't take care of each other, who would take care of us? ... We have to look out for our own. [...] It's not good to leave people behind. [...] If Arnulfo or Ricky or my hija got sick, I would want someone to take care of them, won't you?" (Viramontes 1996, 96-97). What Petra does in caring for the sick Alejo could also be considered as another example of what Hooks (2001) defines as a 'site of resistance'.

CONCLUSIONS

Our homes should be our shelters, the place where we feel safe, the places we share with our families, where we rest and live, in capital letters. But as we have seen in the novels and dramas analyzed, this is not the case for the Chicano community. As Garza (1984) points out, everyone must have decent housing so that individuals can develop correctly along with the community. He also affirms that the Hispanic population is particularly vulnerable in terms of housing.



Chicana literature frequently focuses on the identity or the coming of age of the protagonists, the family and the fight for their rights. All of the literary works analyzed address issues of identity, race, class or gender, and social and environmental justice are always central themes. Some focus more on social justice concerns, while others do also emphasize environmental justice issues. As Kaup (1997) notes, the topic of home had a greater presence since the decade of the eighties and it is a constant in almost all Chicano literary works, where homes are generally depicted as poor or very poor. The houses or rentals usually lack minimum health and sanitation conditions, and they are frequently built on polluted land. With their portrayal of the Chicano reality, it is clear that Cisneros, Moraga, Castillo, Viramontes and other Chicana writers aim to make visible the discrimination, pollution, and lack of development suffered by the Chicano people, and thus join the struggle against the invisibility of these workers, their living conditions and the precarious economic situation of Chicanos. Cisneros, Moraga, Castillo and Viramontes are openly fighting for a better world, a world where healthier lives can be guaranteed and where well-being, sustainable economic growth and decent work can be promoted for all. A world where inequalities are reduced within and among countries, and where cities and human settlements are inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. This would mean effectively achieving not only social but also environmental justice.

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“SQUINTING THROUGH GUNSMOKE”: WILLIAM BURROUGHS’ ERRANT, WORLDED WEST

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ABSTRACT

William Burroughs had been challenging closed worlds since the 1960s. Haunted by the West, born in St Louis, Missouri and dying in Lawrence, Kansas, it was as if he knew America’s inheritance was seeded on the frontier and his characters were caught up in a conditioned cycle of mythic action. His fiction, with its wild experimentation, hallucinogenic cut-up forms, and extreme states of dislocation strove to interrupt such mythic systems and cycles through what I term in this chapter errantry. Burroughs’ fiction presents alternative, errant worldings – carnivalesque plural worlds that refuse to fit into a presupposed pattern, always wandering astray from prescribed paths.

KEYWORDS: Errantry, the American West, Worlding, Cut-ups.

“SQUINTING THROUGH GUNSMOKE”: EL OESTE ERRANTE DE WILLIAM BURROUGHS

RESUMEN

William Burroughs ha desafiado los límites del mundo desde 1960. El autor nacido en San Luis, Misuri y fallecido en Lawrence, Kansas, siempre mostró una predilección especial por el Oeste. De alguna manera, parecía aceptar que la semilla y la herencia de los Estados Unidos se encontraba en el mito de la frontera y que sus propios personajes estaban condicionados por ese ciclo mitológico. A través de la experimentación que puso en práctica en su obra, con su uso alucinógeno de la técnica del cut-up o sus estados extremos de dislocación, Burroughs perseguía la interrupción de esos sistemas y ciclos mitológicos. Es lo que en este artículo denomino con la cualidad de lo errante. La obra en prosa de Burroughs ofrece alternativas, mundos errantes, carnavalescos, que rechazan los patrones presupuestos, buscando siempre un camino alternativo a lo prescrito, aunque esto signifique deambular.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Errante, Oeste Americano, Worlding, Cut-ups.

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In a sense, it's all one book. All my books are all one book.

Philippe Mikriammos

It was precisely because the wilderness was gone that we needed the cowboy.

Zeese Papanikolas

All art attempts the impossible.

William Burroughs

WILLIAM BURROUGHS'S WEST

William Burroughs' writings are haunted by the American West, with countless references to its geography, history, and mythology scattered throughout his novels, nonetheless he rarely appears in any books of Western Studies and has become truly its "El hombre invisible".¹ One critic even called him "a cultural dodo-bird" (Norval 2018).¹ This article begins to correct this. He confessed in his autobiographical essay "The Name is Burroughs", that at the age of 12 he "wrote bloody westerns" (2013, 4). As early as 1965 Conrad Knickerbocker in the *Paris Review* asked him, "You've said your next book will be about the American West and a gunfighter", to which Burroughs replied, "Yes, I've thought about this for years and I have hundreds of pages of notes on the whole concept of the gunfighter ... I've been thinking about the Western for years" (Knickerbocker 1965). Subsequently, his work was littered with references to westerners like Jesse James, Billy the Kid, Pat Garrett, Wyatt Earp, and Bat Masterson, but it was not until *The Place of Dead Roads* in 1983 that he turned his attention to writing his version of a Western. Born in St Louis, Missouri, schooled in Los Alamos, New Mexico, stationed during the war in Coldspring, Texas, and dying in Lawrence, Kansas, it was as if Burroughs, despite his global travels during his life, always felt a magnetic pull back to the West.

In *The Place of Dead Roads* (1983), the focus of this chapter, this fascination is referred to as "The drag of the West ... an inexorable suction ... stepping westward a jump ahead of the Geiger" (1987, 263). It was as if Burroughs knew instinctively that America's inheritance in the present was seeded on the frontier, with its initial promise of new freedoms and possibilities, but equally lost there in the rampant exploitation and control described by Zeese Papanikolas as "represented by the western push of white America, and the sense of loss and sorrow under the triumphs of a restless, unstable population" (2007, 16). Burroughs' West shares Papanikolas's "anticipatory shiver of disappointment ... embedded in the American inheritance" and hidden in the silence "of something withheld, of something locked behind the omissions of the printed words" (2007, 16, 19). These were the words and images of the Western myth of progress, opportunity, and the promised good life which

¹ This is a name given to Burroughs by the Spanish boys in the Native Quarter of Tangier. Michael Prince's article is a rare exception (see bibliography).

“locked” something behind them in what Burroughs calls “a black hole” where “light itself cannot escape” (1987, 263). In Burroughs’ writing there was a constant and frenzied attempt to “unlock” language as if to open up such black holes and let light in, since “The new way of thinking grows in this hiatus between thoughts” (1974, 91).

As always in Burroughs’s work, the lure of fixed images or dominant mythology is a dangerously stultifying process in need of mutation, unlocking, and derangement. In *The Naked Lunch* (1959), his breakthrough novel, he refers to “infinite potentials and differentiation and independent spontaneous action” as always preferable to “basic American rottenness”, which like an “inflexible machine” replicates ideas and images “always reproducing more of its own kind” like a hideous virus (1968, 156). This is Burroughs’ ever-present dark vision of a control society whose population have been conditioned and reduced “to generalized sub-humanity, to elements in a scheme, to mere shifts in energy” (Mottram 1977, 269).² For Burroughs, this is inexorably connected to the West and “the theme of failure that inevitably accompanies the dream of conquest” (Papanikolas 2007, 20). With this in mind, he wrote in his “Red Night” trilogy, *Cities of the Red Night* (1981), *The Place of the Dead Roads* (1983), and *The Western Lands* (1987), of the failure of a utopian community in the Americas: “The chance was there. The chance was missed. The principles of the French and American revolutions became windy lies in the mouths of politicians” (2010, xiv).

For Burroughs, the “windy lies in the mouths of politicians” expresses the broader corruption of the missed chance of the West (and of America) as incorporation, capitalism, bureaucracy, and control increasingly overtook the potential of such early freedoms. Under a pull to nation-building unanimity, the West became the crucible and testing ground for a version of the American people forged on the frontier, as defined most famously by Frederick Jackson Turner’s “The Significance of the Frontier in American History”. As Gilles Deleuze famously explained of such a process of unanimity, or what we might term myth-building, it addresses a people “presupposed already there” (2000, 217). Thus, rather than still becoming whilst changing, and challenging the world in which they existed, such “presupposed people” became fixed and contained by the controlling power of what Burroughs saw as preprogrammed discourses, beliefs, and stories. Deleuze admired Burroughs greatly, and clearly saw in his writing a struggle against this very notion of programmed or presupposed controls and recognised his push towards “the

² Even *The Naked Lunch* opens with a western road trip, from Kansas City into Texas to Houston, and across the border into Mexico: “On through the peeled landscape, dead armadillos in the road and vultures over the swamp and cypress stumps. Motels with beaverboard walls, gas heater, thin pink blankets” (1968, 31). One of his most infamous characters, Bradly Martin, epitomising control and corruption appears in *White Subway* (1964) as a cattle rustling rancher sitting on his porch in an 1899 Western. He is “A God of stupidity, cowardice, ugliness ... the spirit of our age” according to Burroughs and “Mr Bradly Mr Martin is a high level behind the scenes manipulator. Gunslinger?” (http://www.stopsmilingonline.com/story_detail.php?id=1268&page=2)



invention of a people” in the imaginative disruption of his work (2000, 217). Writing in 1977 of his respect for American literature, Deleuze could be directly referring to Burroughs when he commented: “The great and only error lies in the thinking that a line of flight consists in fleeing from life; the flight into the imaginary or into art. On the contrary, to flee is to produce the real, to create life, to find a weapon” (2002, 49). For as we shall see, Burroughs’ work unlocks this “error” engaging with and “weaponizing” flights into the imaginary, forging new and different spatial dimensions. For him, “Space is the new frontier” and “[t]o travel in space you must leave the old verbal garbage behind: God talk, country talk, mother talk, love talk, party talk” (2013, 168). Similarly, Deleuze argued that the function of writing is “to be a flux ... which combines with other fluxes ... intensive, instantaneous and mutant – between a creation and a destruction ... through which life escapes from the resentment of persons, societies, and reigns” (2002, 50).

The original dream of America epitomised by the promise of the West, soon became “The entropy of false traditions of fixed centre and linearity, god and priest, king and tycoon, chief of police and chief surgeon” (Mottram 1977, 269), “the poker-playing, whiskey-drinking evil old men who run America”, through “cattle, oil, and real estate” (Burroughs 1987, 96), all servants of the “inflexible machine” (Burroughs 1968, 156). In 1986, three years after *The Place of Dead Roads*, Burroughs wrote a scathing poem, “Thanksgiving Day,” in which he exclaims, “Thanks for the American dream, / To vulgarize and falsify until / the bare lies shine through”, relating this terrible loss once more to the West: “Thanks for a continent to despoil /and poison. / Thanks for Indians to provide a /modicum of challenge / and danger” (1989). Thus, for Burroughs, “America is not so much a nightmare as a *non-dream*,” with its aim of wiping any genuine dream out of existence, a process that he insists “was well laid by the turn of the century” (1974, 102).³ Appropriately, Frederick Jackson Turner argued that the Western frontier “closed” in 1890 whilst *The Place of Dead Roads* opens in 1889 and concludes in 1899, as if framing this non-dream process.

As Burroughs put it in *The Job*, “The last frontier is being closed to youth” and so the nineteenth century dream of opportunity once set out by Turner has dissolved into corruption and control. It is the artist’s role to find new spaces of expression, for “there are many roads to space ... [and] freedom from past conditioning” (1974, 21). “The old settlers,” Burroughs said, “are stuck back in the 19th century ... [and] create a gap [between different peoples] by assuming that it exists” (53). The opening section of *The Place of Dead Roads* is an example of how such past conditioning might be interfered with and disrupted. The written text is preceded by a sketch map showing precise geographic locations in the American West, from Colorado to Kansas, and into Missouri, all which figure in the novel and yet, in chapter 1, Burroughs disrupts this apparent cartographic certainty. Immediately, we are told that we are reading about “What *appeared to be* an Old Western shoot-out” in 1889

³ As he writes, “dreaming is a biologic necessity ... Deprived of this airline we die. The way to kill a man or a nation is to cut off his dreams” (1987, 44).



between an author of “western stories”, William Seward Hall and one Mike Chase (1987, 13 – emphasis added). But Hall himself writes under a pseudonym “Kim Carsons”, who, as we soon discover, is also a character in the book we are reading. The Hall /Carsons’ book *Quién Es* is now quoted from via a Sunday paper and appears to be a time-shifting tale set partly in 1920s New York.

For the reader then, these openings are deliberately disorientating, unsettling stable Western history and mythology so that we have no certainty of time, place, or character, only “what appeared to be”. As Simon O’Sullivan explains, “Fiction – in the guise of typical communication and the dissemination of information – operates here as a strategy of control” (2016, 215) and for Burroughs this “typical” fiction or myth must be undone and reframed. Hence, the novel’s opening is an elaborate labyrinth of collaged quotations, texts within texts: newspaper, novel, poem, and film, like a version of his own famous cut-up method precisely achieving what that technique had always intended, “a stuttering and stammering – a deterritorialization – of typical representation, pitched against the dominant fictioning-machine and its productions” (215). Burroughs’ reworked cut-up method disrupts and re-arranges this consensual, mythological world in the opening of *The Place of Dead Roads* culminating when the controlling figure of the “Director” shouts as Kim Carsons “shoots a hole in the sky” causing a “Rip in the Master Film” (1987, 17). In this surreal dislodging of reality and of cultural control in its form as the Master Film, Burroughs’ technique allows us through its layers, behind the performance, and towards what the rest of the novel will explore, an alternative *spaced-out* world where, as Deleuze and Guattari put it, “one single dream”, like that maintained by myth, is challenged and an “opposite dream” created, “something other than a literature of masters” (2003, 27, 17). In other words, what Burroughs, using a Western metaphor, calls the “Big Ranch” is to be countered by Kim Carsons’ flight plan, his “Big Picture” (1987, 154-55; 98).⁴

UNPLOT, UNWRITE THE WEST

Burroughs’ “techniques of discovery” (1974, 21) including multiple narrative strands, cut-up techniques, identity splices, and endless time-space shifts are some of the ways in which he counters such elements of “Big Ranch” control and conditioning. The West becomes an elaborate performance space to play out his new mythic struggle and delve behind its facade: “Guns glint in the sun, powder smoke drifts from the pages as the Old West goes into a penny-ante peepshow, false fronts, a phantom buckboard” (1987, 182). Consequently, the “last frontier” mythology, rooted in the Western genre, is both used and disrupted throughout the

⁴ Space in Burroughs is intergalactic but also something less material, “related to flows, energies and the liveliness of things ... always ‘in construction’, rather than fixed and certain, let alone static” (Crouch 2010, 11).



trilogy, being intercut or interrupted with science fiction, gangster and pirate stories. Hence, as a reader, such as in the opening discussed above, we swing between and across genres, discomfited and unsettled by montage techniques resulting in a kind of “delirium” in which “multilevel events and characters” coexist (1974, 30). Above all, the aim of Burroughs’ writing is a direct assault on the reader, to force him “out of his own frame of reference” (1974, 36) and into alternative spaces, however unpleasant, where new and different thought is possible. Only then, as Deleuze and Guattari put it, is there “the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility” (2003, 17).

This latter “community” emerges in *The Place of Dead Roads* through the figure of Kim Carsons, whose name echoes ironically the Western adventurer “Kit Carson”, and yet as a “gay shootist” his goal is to assemble an “opposite dream” in the form of the underground Johnson Family, “a cooperative structure” with no boss man and an egalitarian ethos (1987, 106). Like Carsons himself, the Johnsons are fluid and flexible: “We’re all actors and we change roles”, moving through unlikely, shadowy spaces, “freight cars and jails ... seedy rooming houses and precarious compounds” (1987, 106; 98-99). Burroughs’ antithetical Western hero Carsons is both “all square-jawed and stern and noble like the Virginian” (1987, 125), “like any old John Wayne cowboy” (1988, 72) and *unlike* them simultaneously. Gay with “unwholesome proclivities” (1987, 23), he reads Rimbaud and Aleister Crowley, and he can’t even tame his horse like all good cowboys should. “In short”, as the novel puts it, “Kim is everything a normal American boy is taught to *detest* ... but he is also given to the subversive practice of *thinking*” (1987, 23). Going against the American grain, and, as such, reformulating the American Western’s norms, Carsons unleashes subversive, contradictory, errant thought into the West, through his own actions and that of the Johnsons, turning assumptions upside down and inside out, always working against “the sacred cows on which the West is built” (1987, 125).

Hence, Carsons can perform a role in the Master Film, but persistently acts to counter these stereotypes of Westness and masculinity with his extreme actions and interruptions. For example, he is often seen assuming a pose for a real or imaginary camera, wishing “there was someone here to take his picture” (1987, 59), as if constructing an alternative performance than the scripted stereotypes of the Master Film. One of his lovers, Tom Dark, is a photographer who explains the possibility of such an alternative film: “we attempt the impossible: to photograph the present moment which contains the past the future” (1987, 85). Like Carsons’ multiple identities cloned across the novel, this “impossibility” stretches and breaks time, “stands outside the film” and so disrupts the “control-oriented universe” by creating spaces containing present, past, and future (1987, 195).

As a result, Carsons’ very existence is described as “inferential”, like an ethereal construction of “traces ... fossils ... fading violet photos, old newspaper clippings” (1987, 181). He is as much a collage or cut-up as the novel itself: “Kim didn’t fit, and a part that doesn’t fit can wreck a machine” (97). His presence wrecks the *machine* of myth, of expectations, temporality, and of the presupposed contained in America’s epic story of a nation built from the West, an idea underpinning the struggle within the central book of Burroughs’ trilogy.



Carsons, who is also the *nom de plume* of William Seward Hall, you will recall, is the “man of many faces and many pen names, of many times and places” whose goal is to “unplot, and unwrite” the controlling Master Film and “to invent his way, write his way” into new spaces (1987, 107; 45).⁵ His aim is, therefore, ironically, a peculiarly *Western* one, to find space beyond the restrictions of the world he was born into, a world of “monumental fraud ... [where] the game is rigged”, and regenerate “Potential America” (PDR 98-99; 140). As Charles Olson wrote, “I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy” (1967, 15). Carsons’ “imaginary space trips” are practice for the possibility of “the real thing”, “like target shooting” (1987, 43), and conjure up a dreamed-of new community, no longer dedicated to the “controlled proliferation of identical objects and persons” (1987, 93). This is a vision of a Johnson-style community run “by those who actually do the work” (1987, 98) and who are willing to oppose the rich and powerful. As he puts it perfectly, “Ever see the marks wise up and take a carnival apart?” (98). Mustering all this weird, transgressive energy, in these flights into the imaginary, Carsons and the Johnsons reimagine the West as a speculative vision for America and the world, as if, as he puts it, “the promised land hit back” (1987, 147).

BURROUGHS’ ERRANTRY

Burroughs’ desire to “unplot and unwrite” the Master Film of history and literature is fundamentally, I would argue, an example of errantry. Caribbean philosopher Édouard Glissant argued that errant thought “challenges and discards the universal [or mythic] – this generalizing edict that summarized the world as something obvious and transparent, claiming for it one presupposed sense and one destiny”, favouring instead opacity, relations, and diversity (1997, 20). Rejecting universalizing thought, like that encompassed by Western mythology and replayed in the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny and countless speeches by US politicians, Glissant emphasised instead diversity and opacity in what he famously called the “poetics of relation”, projecting interrupted, mobile, and unfixated worlds rather than a single, unanimous one. As I have shown, Burroughs’ work shares this same, radical goal. The primary sense, etymologically, of errantry and error is related to the French verb *errer*, from the Latin *errare*, to wander off or stray from a path. As Samuel Talcott explains, “Error is that which I can no longer think, but what I could think before. In recognizing the duty to no longer think what I thought, I aver in the same moment, *the power to think otherwise than I should*” (Talcott 2019, 93, quoting Georges Canguilhem – my emphasis).

⁵ Carsons is cloned and so exists as “thought patterns in a number of different brains and nervous systems” (1987, 105).



Such *thinking otherwise* is the lifeblood of Kim Carsons' opposite dream in the novel and central to his speculative quest for an alternative, potential new community disavowing the founding myths of the West and "rewriting history" (1988, 59). Jean-Luc Nancy explains this urge using similar terms, "myth is not simple representation, it is representation at work ... it is *fiction that founds*. And what it founds is not a fictive world, but fictioning as the fashioning of a world" (1991, 56 – emphasis added). For Nancy, like Burroughs, myth is constantly at work shaping society, "fashioning" a particular version of the world, and yet this can be "interrupted" and undone at its limits: "The myth does not end, nor is it lost, but in fact, because it itself does not disappear, it must be interrupted, its mything or fictioning diverted" (Biro 2019, 68). To understand Burroughs' cut-up Western, *The Place of Dead Roads*, therefore, one must recognise these perpetual interruptive diversions whereby time, identity, and place all shift from what appears to be a regular "19th century western", as he calls it (2013, 53), into a worlded whirlwind of space and place with no origins, no stability, no foundations.

As his early cut-up method evolved into his later works, Burroughs' time-space collages, as in *The Place of Dead Roads*, echo Anna Gibbs' experimental "cut up technique" whereby "the plot is uncertain; place is displaced; setting becomes unstable; site gives way to constantly shifting situation" (2020, 25). Any sense of a "prerecorded" reality is being undone in Burroughs' endlessly shifting "interruption, appropriation and collage-montage" narratives (2020, 31). Deliberately repurposing "what remains of myth", Burroughs breaks apart, *cuts-up*, the reader's expectations and assumptions derived from the "seduction" of mythology and all its attendant control systems (2020, 31). Gibbs calls this "the overarching protective shelter of story" guiding us along particular well-trodden, narrative paths (2020, 32). However, as one reads *The Place of Dead Roads*, any "protective shelter" fragments, and its safe pathways become errant or even aberrant, like "a series of interruptions ... a stuttering account of something that does not produce a narrative" (2020, 33).

In Burroughs' own words, "Cut-ups establish new connections between images, and one's range of vision consequently expands" (1978, 5). "This happens in dreams of course", he writes in *The Western Lands* (138), where errantry runs amok and as in all his novels forms of travelling (into space, back and forward in time, into and out of the human body, beyond human identity etc) are commonplace. Thus, it is the founding fiction of the West he *cut-ups*, rearranging existing order, language, and mythology, offering up a scrambled, errant counterforce: "If you want to challenge and change fate", Burroughs famously wrote, "cut up the words. Make them a new world" (quoted in Mottram 1977, 37). Just like Kim Carsons resisting the Master Film: "He just did not *fit*" (1987, 97).⁶

⁶ As Brion Gysin explains in *The Third Mind*, "Shuffle the pieces and put them together at random. Cut through the word lines to hear a new voice off the page. A dialogue often breaks out. 'It' speaks" (1978, 44).



Recalling Nancy's point above, Burroughs' textual and psychic interruption functions as errantry precisely because it "disrupts by *sending myth's propriety astray*, bringing into play fragmentation and variance, it suspends 'fusion and communion' and in this interruption 'something makes itself heard, namely, what remains of myth when it is interrupted'" (Biro 2019, 68, citing Nancy 1991, 61–62). Indeed, what remains of myth in Burroughs' novel wanders astray from prescribed paths performing alternative, *errant worldings*, carnivalesque plural worlds that refuse to fit into a presupposed, preprogrammed pattern. His is an errant, worlded West opened-up and intercut with London, Tangier, Paris, Panama, and New York, to set against the ever-controlled lost promise of an American society corrupted and exploited by the wealthy, powerful few, the owners of what Burroughs called the Reality Studio, makers of the Master Film. Burroughs anticipated such a worlded vision in *The Yage Letters* and *The Naked Lunch* through his "Composite City" with "New races as yet unconceived and unborn, combinations not yet realized ... where all human potentials are spread out in a vast silent market ... where the unknown past and the emergent future meet in a vibrating soundless hum" (2006, 50, 53). For Burroughs, therefore, writing is delirium, madness, straying, assembling a different kind of "we", a people (or a community), as Deleuze put it, that is missing and not already there, scripted and prerecorded, but rather *becoming* like "the seeds of the people [and a world] to come" (2000, 221).

Burroughs' delirious writing constantly stutters and strays in battling to interrupt the control virus eating away at difference and possibility. He terms it the "right virus" because it claims always to be right: "This RIGHT virus has been around for a long time ... from the Inquisition to the Conquistadores, from the American Indian Wars to Hiroshima" and it is the job of the artist, to be "cutting off this air line" and so stalling its growth (2013, 19-20; see also 1987, 140-1). As the virus operates within linear forms, within established language structures, and according to presupposed conditioning, it is art's function to counter and disrupt these frameworks through errantry.⁷ Early on, Burroughs stated his aim clearly: "I am attempting to create a new mythology for the space age. I feel that the old mythologies are definitely broken down and not adequate at the present time" (Mottram 1999, 80). He continued, "Hell consists of falling into enemy hands, into the hands of the virus power, and heaven consists of freeing oneself from this power, of achieving inner freedom, freedom from conditioning" (80).

As Glissant explained, errantry works against these old mythologies, emerging from "the destructuring of compact national identities", seeking "new forms of identity" "experienced as a search for the Other ... rather than an expansion of territory" (1997, 18). For Glissant, like Burroughs, this would come through

⁷ As Burroughs wrote, "When art leaves the frame, and the written word leaves the page, not merely the physical frame and page, but the frames and pages of assigned categories, a basic disruption of reality occurs. ... Instead of appropriating by framing and signing, remove the frames and the pedestals, yes, even the signatures. Every dedicated artist attempts the impossible ..." "Apocalypse" at <https://www.haring.com/!art-work/65>



“detours that lead away from anything totalitarian” (1997, 18). Once again, this helps explain Burroughs’ use of the cut-up method through which anything totalitarian is “constantly being cut by seemingly random factors” creating “bits and pieces, shreds and patches” that serve as “interruptions” to the Reality Studio (2013, 53). Hence, linearity and conventional patterns of time are altered as if “your whole life spread out in a spatial panorama, a vast maze of rooms, streets, landscapes, not sequential but arranged in shifting associational patterns” (1988, 138). Such spatiality is uncontrolled by the Master Film, unsettling the “prerecorded universe” of totalitarianism and rejecting the controls of time, as sequence, labour, and destiny, since “as soon as anyone goes into space the film is irreparably damaged” (1987, 194, 195).

To be errant in Burroughs’ work is to err from the path set by controlling forces, by “malefactors who are sabotaging our space program”, “vampire mummies”, “Venusian agents”, “Mafiosi”, “Slave Gods”, overseeing an imposed “universe” which is “controlled, predictable, dead” because it is reductionist, monological, and regulated (1987, 150, 164, 59, 153, 59). As I have argued throughout this chapter, such “antimagical, authoritarian, dogmatic” thinking in Burroughs’ work has its roots in an incorporated West, the “deadly enemy of those ... committed to the magical universe, spontaneous, unpredictable, alive” (1988, 59). It is an exemplary space of colonization, violence, and imposition controlled by the few at the expense of the many – a reversal of the original democratic dream of America and the West. In *The Western Lands*, he writes, borrowing from Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act 3 Scene 6, “Well, let determined things to destiny hold unbewailed their way” (1988, 59), reminding us of the notion of Manifest Destiny tied to the supposed immortality to be found in the Western Lands.⁸ And yet these Western Lands are far from an exceptionalist paradise in the trilogy, but “vampiric ... kept solid and operative with fellahin energy” (1987, 173) like “an exclusive country club” for the wealthy and powerful (1988, 196). This “unpleasant, precarious, and dangerous concept” of Western Lands as a destined goal persists because “it works” creating a “whole system” of mythic control (1987, 174). In reality, however, “there aren’t enough Western Lands to go around” (174) and so ultimately any notion of democratic freedom and free land soon faded from the Western dream replaced by reservations, range wars, and enclosure. When resources are scarce, they are controlled *not* for all, but for the few.

Blending Egyptian and American cultures, the point is clearly made: “Not only had the rich monopolized the land and the wealth, they had monopolized the Western Lands. Only the members of certain families were allowed to mummify themselves, and so achieve immortality” (1988, 101). As always in Burroughs’ fiction space-time and history intersect and overlap, here ancient Egypt with the US West, suggesting the eternal, worldly struggle over control and power, the battle of the

⁸ Burroughs uses the paradisaical Western Lands from the Egyptian Book of the Dead, but he clearly has in mind also the problematic American version.



powerful and the “fellaheen” whose “blood ... flesh and bones” built the Western Lands (1988, 106; 1987, 173-4).⁹

CONCLUSION: QUIÉN ES?

So often in reading Burroughs’ work one encounters the question, “Quién Es?” “Who is it?” Appropriately for this essay, they were the last words of Billy the Kid. This question, with its opacity, uncertainty, and doubt mirrors so much of the reader’s relationship to Burroughs’ fiction. Looking unflinchingly into the darkness, we ask “who is it?” – what is out there and where are we?

Reading the trilogy, and especially *The Place of Dead Roads*, takes us into this darkness, through the West and beyond, tracing themes and motifs familiar in US history and myth whilst divesting them of their exceptionalist authority or triumphalism, for these are *worlded* concerns. Amid this, however, what Burroughs holds on to, somewhat surprisingly, is the possibility of “a land of dreams” (1988, 165) built not on the fixed and regulated controls of a vampiric capitalist elite with “voices full of money ... preserved in money” (1987, 111), but upon something more fluid, magical, and “less solid”, as he puts it, like “the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock ... the last and greatest of human dreams” (1988, 165). In evoking *The Great Gatsby*, he reminds us of the unfulfilled potential of the West and of the American nation itself. For like Fitzgerald’s novel, Burroughs’ trilogy is a “story of the West” with its infinite regret at freedom’s loss and human reductionism. As he put it in his deeply ironic “Thanksgiving poem” of 1986 with its clear reference back to *Gatsby*, “Thanks for the last and greatest betrayal / of the last and greatest /of human dreams”.

Carsons’ desire, as both gunfighter and, as it turns out, author ghostwritten by William Seward Hall, is, like Burroughs’, to rekindle the energy of human dreams and defy powers of control and imposition, not to achieve a tangible, material dream of progress, but to produce a dream-space for potential freedom through his narratives themselves. As Charles Olson famously wrote of Herman Melville, “He lived intensely his people’s wrong, their guilt. But he remembered the first dream” (1967, 19). In deranging the codes of language, society, and myth, the weapons that Burroughs “advocate[s] are weapons that change consciousness ... weapons of illusion” (2018, 136). In the hyperbolic language of *The Place of Dead Roads* the aim is “to become a god, to shoot his way to immortality, to invent his way, to write his way” (1987, 45). Ultimately, for Burroughs, “Writing, if it is anything, is a word of warning” (1988, 213), and above all, a warning about the abuse of mythology and power.

⁹ “Fellaheen” derives from the Arab word for a peasant. Jack Kerouac uses the term in his work, as does Burroughs. Broadly, it signifies the oppressed and the resisters.



As he puts it in *The Western Lands*: “Whenever anyone reads his words the writer is there. He lives in his readers” (45). The reader, therefore, carries the fight through and beyond Burroughs’ weird routines, his words, his warnings, giving a kind of immortality beyond the book itself, because, as he said, “that’s what art is all about” (1988, 165). This, of course, is never a comfortable, stable process, but “A warning ... a shaft of terror, a future of blackness, error and ruin between radiance and darkness” (1988, 245). This latter phrase, “error and ruin between radiance and darkness” echoes back to “Quién Es?” and Billy the Kid looking out from the darkness, whilst simultaneously evoking Burroughs’ edgy, errant spirit always working between established paths “trying to make something happen in the mind of the reader” (2013, 75). Errantry, as we have seen, always contains within it the notion of “error”, not as a purely negative force, but rather as “the knower’s straying afield of himself”, as Michel Foucault put it (1992, 8). Indeed, Foucault’s transgressive, errant spirit *straying afield of himself* shares much with Burroughs’ aim as a writer: “to change the boundaries of what one knows and to venture out a ways from there ... to go back through what I was already thinking, to think it differently, and to see what I had done from a new vantage point and in a clearer light” (1992, 11).¹⁰

Towards the end of *The Western Lands*, Burroughs invokes a spirit that typifies this goal of his writing, and which returns us to my central argument about errantry: “I’m the uninvited mole / The errant lawless soul / ... I’m a singularity... I’m a lock without a key” (1988, 243). As with all errant, worlded fiction, Burroughs’ novels are transgressive, non-reductive, non-exceptionalist, dialogical, relational, and communal as all worlding texts should be. He is truly “the errant lawless soul” working through the personae of his novels and in an increasingly dehumanising and inhumane world of reductionist politics and closed ideologies, what we need now as much as ever, is more humanity not less. Finally, this errantry pointing towards future worlds is always best expressed in the reclaimed language of the Western: “my saga”, he writes dramatically, “will shine in the eyes of adolescents squinting through gunsmoke” (1987, 45).¹¹

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¹⁰ “Foucault had a very deep admiration for Burroughs”, writes Gilles Deleuze in *Two Regimes of Madness* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2007, 326). In 1975 at the “Schizo-Culture” conference at Columbia University organized by Sylvère Lotringer, John Cage shared the stage with Deleuze and Foucault introduced William S. Burroughs.

¹¹ Even at his death Burroughs maintained a haunted relation to the West. “William had his heart attack while journaling. Armed to the end with piece and pen, he didn’t take off his .38 till the paramedics were on their way. Bent over in his writing chair in his green army jacket, grimacing and groaning, clutching his chest like a gut-shot cowboy, he removed the holster and gun from his belt to stash under his pillow, and then they took him away.” *Hikuta!* Tom Peschio on Burroughs and His Guns <https://realitystudio.org/biography/hikuta/>

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REGENERATION THROUGH VIOLENCE: ECHOES OF THE MYTH OF THE WEST IN JIM HARRISON'S *A GOOD DAY TO DIE**

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ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes some of the reverberations of the myth of the West present in Jim Harrison's early novel *A Good Day to Die* (1973), where the myth is put to the test of compatibility with the real world. Richard Slotkin's notion of regeneration through violence as well as Jane Tompkins's observations regarding depictions of masculinity in 20th century popular westerns find affirmation in the novel's narrative. Despite the contemporaneous concern for increasing technology-aided control of nature, evident in other novels, it is remarkable how *A Good Day to Die* recreates many of the aspects of the myth of the West. Arguably, the novel simultaneously proposes that the kind of perspective that Donna Haraway terms "situated knowledges" in the end allows the unnamed narrator to maintain a more realistic connection with reality than what the myth offers.

KEYWORDS: Jim Harrison, American West, Regeneration through violence, Road Novel, The Nez Percé.

LA REGENERACIÓN A TRAVÉS DE LA VIOLENCIA: LOS ECOS DEL MITO DEL OESTE EN *A GOOD DAY TO DIE* DE JIM HARRISON

RESUMEN

Jim Harrison explora la compatibilidad del Oeste mitológico con la realidad del mundo en una de sus primeras novelas, *A Good Day to Die* (1973). Las reverberaciones de ese planteamiento se observan en una novela que sirve para confirmar las perspectivas de Richard Slotkin y Jane Tompkins sobre el Oeste Americano, el primero a través de su concepto de la regeneración a través de la violencia y la segunda con sus observaciones sobre las masculinidades representadas en los westerns populares. A pesar de la preocupación contemporánea por la aplicación de la tecnología en el dominio sobre el medio natural, también presente en otras obras, es muy interesante cómo *A Good Day to Die* recrea muchos de los aspectos que relacionamos con el oeste americano, al mismo tiempo que propone la viabilidad del concepto que Donna Haraway llama "conocimientos situados."

PALABRAS CLAVE: Jim Harrison, El Oeste Americano, Regeneración a través de la violencia, Road Novel, Nez Percé.



The worst of all things is not to live in a physical world.
Wallace Stevens¹

The aim of this essay is to analyze the echoes of Western mythologies in Jim Harrison's second novel, *A Good Day to Die* (1973), where they are questioned and juxtaposed with the actual world. Deleuze's and Guattari's concepts of "striated" and "smooth" space as well as Frampton's ideas on how the human body interacts with space help to position the myth of the West as insufficient and often spurious to see reality in its complexity. The characters of the book are a threesome in their twenties, the male unnamed narrator, Tim, and Sylvia, who set out west from Georgia with a goal to blow up a dam in the Grand Canyon. When it transpires that no dam is being built in that location, they nevertheless continue the journey west to Montana, the men's minds set to blow up any dam that stands on a river. Their trip is a show of destructive behavior towards themselves, each other, and Sylvia, and has a tragic outcome. The male characters' unyielding resolve to go west and destroy a dam is representative of their pursuit to free themselves of social constraints and to relive the myth of the frontier, which becomes conflated with the myth of the road, leading westwards to freedom and reiterating the direction of American expansion. While Harrison's later works (*Dalva*, *The Road Home*) overtly criticize US nineteenth century politics of westward expansion at the expense of Indigenous Americans and alternate ways of seeing the world, *A Good Day to Die* is an early example of a novel that reimagines the American West as multidimensional. In employing a Nez Percé saying as its title and in imagining the tribe's flight from the onslaught of the American army, the novel undermines the myth of the West in its readiness to triumph at the expense of ignoring the factual brutal underpinnings. The narrator's love of fishing and his understanding of rivers translates into making the West accessible for him on a much deeper level than what the myth offers.

For the male heroes of Harrison's novel, the narrator and Tim, the trip becomes an escape from the existing or pending confinements of marriage and domesticity but also a healing maneuver aimed at repairing trauma, disappointment, and aimlessness. Tim is a Vietnam-war veteran, physically and psychologically

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scarred, impulsive and violent, while the unnamed narrator is disillusioned with the mediocrity of middle-class living, married but away from home, fishing in the Florida keys and reflecting on “that long pull of boredom in marriage” (Harrison 1973, 135) and the “nastiness involved in earning a living” (135). By going west and communing with the open spaces of western American landscape that, according to Tompkins, represent independence, freedom, and grit in the myth of The West, the two men seem to hope to free themselves from the purportedly crippling obligations to women and society and regain vitality and balance, since, in popular culture The West

functions as a symbol of freedom, and of the opportunity for conquest. It seems to offer escape from the conditions of life in modern industrial society: from a mechanized existence, economic dead ends, social entanglements, unhappy personal relations, political injustice. The desire to change places also signals a powerful need for self-transformation. (Tompkins 1992, 4)

Freedom, escape, and self-transformation are the three things that, according to Tompkins, travelers typically long to find in the West. Notably, the same three features are said to characterize the road trip as “an iconic American experience” (Brigham 2013, 15). So hitting the road and going westwards means embarking on a classic American adventure of an escape and liberation from oppressive social frameworks and of exploration, to find a new self through the regenerative powers of nature.

From the outset of the novel, the classic tropes of the myth of the West are deflected, as if in a funhouse mirror, by what happens on the road. Firstly, the trip is premised upon a miscalculation of actuality in that it follows a hearsay according to which the Grand Canyon is in peril of being flooded in consequence of the construction of yet another dam on the Colorado river. Secondly, the woman, instead of being left behind in a domestic setting, is taken along on the trip. Thirdly, the trip does not heal or solve anything but, contrarily, has a tragic outcome. To begin with, the information about the construction of the dam turns out to be false, but since the canyon has functioned as one of the ultimate symbols of majestic western American nature, the men jump at the opportunity to defend the landscape that represents the features they feel they are being deprived of. So, in addition to going simply to fulfil the need to commune with nature in order to regain lost vitality as in the model suggested by Tompkins, they become driven by an imperative to protect a symbol assumed to be endangered with annihilation.

Echoing Tompkins’s proposition that the Western hero’s pain resolves in violence, the existential angst of the male characters in *A Good Day to Die* translates into a belligerent plan as Tim impulsively decides that blowing up the (nonexistent) dam is the only way to go forward. Once the aggression has been ignited, there is no turning back. The absence of the dam does not convince Tim and the narrator to return or abstain from violence, because their defiant determination to protect the canyon and free the Colorado river from the obstruction that would hamper its flow represents the imperative to protect their freedom and strength, assumed to



be endangered by a relationship with a woman. They continue north-west in search of any dam that blocks a river, and the force of their resolve turns not only against the structure they finally select to blast but also against Sylvia.

Consequently, the trip itself becomes a brutal ascertainment of masculinity at the expense of the female hero, who is perceived as being similar to a dam erected on a river – an obstacle that hampers the free flow of male expression. For the male heroes, the trip thus becomes synonymous with the freedom to abuse the woman and indulge in destructive behavior such as excessive consumption of alcohol and drugs, reckless driving, paid sex, and getting into fights and arguments. But for the heroine, the trip is more of a rollercoaster ride of pain brought upon by cruelty, rejection, abandonment, physical violence, and triangulation. For Sylvia, the road, to use Krista Comer's words, is not "suggestive of possibility ... as it was for Kerouac and so many masculine figures in literature and cinema" (Comer 2015, 164); rather, Sylvia is a "prisoner to the road" (164), a hostage to the idea that she is like an obstacle that restricts the free expression of manhood – a concept that has her entrapped in feeling obliged to disprove it. But, in a final twist, the way west in *A Good Day to Die* becomes equally not "suggestive of possibility" for the male characters. It becomes a distortion thereof, where the masculine figures squander the road's promise on fighting each other, playing malicious games that degrade and objectify the female hero, only to end up destroying a farmer's property, killing a dog and a cow, losing Tim in the explosion, and leaving the narrator to face the consequences.

As the novel progresses, the road increasingly represents erratic movement, disconnection, and displacement while the narrator, very much like Sal Paradise in Kerouac's classic *On the Road*, is ambivalent about being on the move. As Ording proposes, Sal is constantly torn between "the desires for the new and for the normal, the road and the home hearth" (Ording 2013, 91) and "much of the action in the novel has Sal settling down to serious work, relieved to be home again off the road, only to be swept away again the next time Dean comes courting for kicks" (88). Similarly, the narrator of *A Good Day to Die* is manipulated into going on the trip by Tim and, while on the move without the possibility to turn back, he relieves the sheer craziness of the journey by imagining himself in circumstances emanating stability. An idealized history of the American West plays a significant role in how he shapes these reveries, which often are about domestic life on the frontier. The daydreams draw his attention away from the anxiety-inducing chaos of the road towards safer spaces of stability. However, in keeping with the men's tendency for cruelty towards Sylvia, these fantasies feature women who are lifeless and devoid of agency. What is more, those domestic settings that the narrator imagines frequently acquire their safety and stability at the expense of female active presence, as the woman is either objectified or erased, as in the following fragment: "I might be a Jimmy Stewart type working a ranch in a valley with a fine trout stream running through it, a grand herd of Hereford cattle, and a lovely woman named Ramona or something like that as a helpmate" (Harrison 1973, 83). The woman is listed here as one of the narrator's possessions, in one breath with a trout stream and a herd of pedigree cattle. Physical attributes matter, but her name, "Ramona or something," does not – she could be anyone as long as she is good-looking and benign, very



much like a pure-bred cow. She is presented in reductive terms, as a “helpmate” – support to the man, with no agency of her own. An active presence of a woman with personality and agency would destabilize the film-still-like perfect image of a safe retreat. The stasis of these mental pictures brings counterbalance to the chaos of the road but at the expense of the female character.

In another reverie, the narrator tries to pacify his anxiety by imagining Sylvia literally dead. “I had an instantaneous sweeping fantasy of Sylvia in a log cabin in Montana late in the nineteenth century. It is May with only a few traces of snow left. She’s in bed and has just died in childbirth; I’ve failed as a midwife. I gather the three children around me... Her face would be beautiful but pale” (Harrison 1973, 47). In this homesteader fantasy of potential domestic happiness, the only agency is left to the man. The woman, ultimately passive, is showcased against beautiful yet static, like she is, landscape reminiscent of an Ansel Adams photograph. She is pale like the black-and-white palette so characteristic of the photographer’s vision that fixes the object in a timeless, contextless void. As in the previous fantasy, the woman’s pleasurable physical attributes, not agency or active presence, stabilize the picture. It is the man who will now start anew and fully participate in life without the obstacle of having to relate to the woman. Holding the memory of her lifeless beauty, he will become rejuvenated in the process, as the image of early spring suggests, and maintain full, indivisible control over his life.

In the foregoing fantasy, the male hero has the opportunity to finally commune with pre-industrial unspoiled nature, where there are no dams to regulate the flow of rivers, that run freely and stay wild in a landscape where no civilizational hindrance stops them or interferes with the natural processes that go on inside them. By analogy, the man is on his own and no woman is present, who, like a dam on a river, would check the natural flow of his expression. In this fantasy, set in a grand mountain landscape of nineteenth century Montana, when no significant civilizational incursions existed, the narrator’s yearning to avoid having to adjust to a woman or, in other words, his longing to experience, as Owen Wister would say, “the onset of the natural man himself” (Wister 1902, 256), is especially visible. The narrator’s failure as a midwife is evocative of his inability or an unwillingness to be responsive or communicative and, as a consequence, to effectively mediate in the delivery: not only is the woman dead, but the “child [is] dead too” (47). In the popular Westerns, which the narrator of *A Good Day to Die* evokes in his reveries, effective communication is not one of the capacities of “the natural man,” who prefers to be silent, for “nature is what the hero aspires to emulate: perfect being-in-itself ... no more talkable to than a river or an avalanche,” as Jane Tompkins puts it (Tompkins 1992, 57-58). Reticence and communion with nature are the attributes of the Western hero and, hopefully, also the conditions for self-transformation and regeneration.

As Tompkins argues in *West of Everything*, being uncommunicative is one of the paradigmatic attributes of masculinity in the Western. In the films and the novels that she discusses, the male hero is silent and unyielding and favors actions over words, which are associated with femininity. With his reticence, the man maintains control over himself and the outside because to speak is to open up, to



lose control, to reveal one's intentions and emotions to the world, to share oneself and expect a response, to render oneself vulnerable. Tompkins writes, "To speak is literally to open the body for penetration by opening an orifice; it is also to mingle the body's substance with the substance of what is outside it. Finally, it suggests a certain incompleteness, a need to be in relation" (Tompkins 1992, 56). By contrast, the western man is self-contained, impenetrable, and complete; he does not need to communicate or to be in a relationship. A woman, on the other hand, would use words profusely, indicating that she is lacking and thus in need of being controlled by a man to achieve completeness. As Tompkins argues, this is visible, for instance, in a scene at the end of the cinematic Western *Red River* (Howard Hawks, 1948), where the heroine, Tess Millay, directs a tirade of words at the hero, and then, as if realizing her own inadequacy, asks him to make her stop talking. He obliges first by covering her mouth with his hand and then by kissing her.

In a similar vein, the narrator of *A Good Day to Die* fantasizes about asserting control over Sylvia, making her a participant of another reverie of domestic stability. "I should own a duck ranch, a harmless spread speckled with ducks. ... The children could have a duck or two to play with. Sitting on the porch she would say the ducks have been good to us this year. I might have to tell her to shut up" (Harrison 1973, 147). As in the two foregoing reveries, this one too has the woman domesticated and silenced, with the narrator posing as the stereotypical Western man. However, when this fantasy is juxtaposed with what happens in terms of the plot, the image of the reticent man in control of himself and his woman becomes comically distorted, thus setting the stereotypically Western tropes at a distance and demonstrating that they are too narrow to fit the complexity of the world that the protagonists travel through.

The threesome are on a mountain road in the Rockies between Idaho and Montana, with the narrator on drugs in the back seat, giving a lengthy drug-propelled "odiously boring lecture on Indians" (Harrison 1973, 146). The ensuing fantasy about operating a duck ranch puts his own real lack of control in comic contrast with the imaginary Western hero's self-command, since the narrator's manner of speaking – loud and incoherent – as well as the dubious accuracy of the information contained in the lecture is comparable to nonsensical quacking.

At first they listened civilly with the tape deck turned low, not knowing that I had dropped one of Tim's spansules to try to ameliorate my growing dread which had got totally out of hand. ... And not that I really knew much about Indians ... but I countered my ignorance with what I thought was eloquent invention. I characterized my favorites – Nez Percé, Cheyenne, Blackfoot and Mandan, maybe Oglala Sioux. I kept on through the switchbacks on Chief Joseph Pass, embellishing each doubtful fact with mystery. ... Sylvia's arm trailed over the seat and I could barely hear Dylan on the deck; my voice grew an octave higher and was on the verge of quacking. (Harrison 1973, 146)

Ironically, instead of using the sparse, epigrammatic language befitting that of a classic Western male hero, the narrator breaks into a nervous rant to alleviate his own anxiety and sexual attraction to Sylvia, as she looks on and listens. Her



composure is contrasted with the narrator's behavior, which rather resembles that of a Western female, described by Tompkins as "blathering on ... and beneath it all really asking for sex" (Tompkins 1992, 61). The image of an anxious "quacking" man on drugs, "asking for sex," in juxtaposition with the impenetrable, monolithic "human incarnation of nature" (Tompkins 1992, 58) featured as the hero of popular Hollywood Westerns undermines the paradigm. With the reversal of roles and an ensuing tableau of a happy duck-raising family, Harrison achieves a comic distortion of the paradigm, thus proposing that myth is a grossly insufficient means to tackle reality.

As Campbell makes clear in *The Rhizomatic West*, the insufficiency of myth in understanding reality can be illustrated using Deleuzoguattarian terms that talk about space. The authors of *A Thousand Plateaus* distinguish between "striated" and "smooth space"; in the former kind, as on a map, reality is flattened and homogenized, crammed into a formula of one-dimensional discourse, which is regulated and standardized to comply with the logic of straight lines that simplify and trim the irregular landscape into identical rectangular shapes. In the mythic narrative of western American expansion and the frontier, a part of which are the later stereotypes of men and women forged by the popular Western films discussed by Tompkins, the complexity of reality was similarly trimmed to propagate nation-state building. In *A Good Day to Die*, the road reiterating the direction of nineteenth-century American expansion to the west is part of that striated space, and it prompts the protagonists to revisit the stereotypes contained in the myth. Whereas the narrator, in his ambivalence of being on the road and his acknowledgment of the historical and now erased presence of Indian tribes on the territories the road dissects, is hesitant to go along with the stereotypes of "westness" (Campbell 2016, 160), Tim is ready to immerse in the kind of freedom they promise.

For one thing, Tim is fond of cowboy props that in popular culture epitomize the American West. At the outset of the trip in Valdosta, Georgia, he is seen walking out to the car "wearing a newish pair of black tooled cowboy boots" while "Sheriff Bobby Brown [is] talking about law and order" on the radio (Harrison 1973, 38). Then, in Agua Prieta, Mexico, he gets himself a pistol (48). Finally, in Tucson, Arizona, he purchases a pair of "Tony Lama boots" (91), "pale blue and heavily tooled with steep heels" (88). The gadgets align him with and help him build a one-dimensional "mythic construction of 'westness'" (Campbell 2016, 160) which he embraces and holds onto, aided with drugs. His identification with the gadgets helps him focus on the goal of the trip with a determination of a sheriff administering justice. It helps him escape engagement in immediate matters of life that need attention, such as the relationship with Sylvia or his health. As a driver, his demeanor brings to mind a cowhand breaking a wild bronco. "He gunned up the street leaving a thirty-foot stretch of rubber before he double-clutched into second, snapping my neck" (Harrison 1973, 38). Moreover, the car itself is like a wild horse: "tight and muscular," "aggressive," understeering. Also, in his treatment of Sylvia, Tim plays a classic Western male figure: uncommunicative, distant and controlling to the point of being abusive, sometimes violent. His addiction to speed, meaning both car velocity and a drug (such as cocaine) that deprives him of sleep



and relentlessly brings about perpetual agitation, consolidates his motions in a one-directional effort towards (self)annihilation. Just as the myth obscures and erases parts of reality, the addiction makes the “smooth spaces” of the unfolding country and of human relationships at hand invisible and irrelevant.

The “smooth space,” although suppressed, is still there, and it exists side by side and overlaps with the “striated space.” Dissecting the landscape in blacktop and dirt lines, the road that the trio travel takes them through a country that is alive and vibrant with the sounds of nature and with untold stories of Indigenous American presence, which become accessible to the narrator through his imagination and body. This is evident in chapter fourteen when the narrator sets off before dawn to go fishing in the Big Hole river near Wisdom, Montana. His senses are attuned to the particulars of the place in such a way that one is reminded of Kenneth Frampton’s discussion of “the capacity of the body to read the environment in terms other than those of sight alone” (Frampton 1990, 28). Away from the road, its perpetual anxiety and one-directional pull towards destruction, the narrator is able to immerse himself in the environment as well as to sense its richness beyond what the “striated space” of the road imposes.

Apart from the fantasies of home that alleviate the narrator’s anxiety linked to being on the road, there are a few spaces in the real world that make him feel safe: these are the woods and water. He says, “I felt safe in three minimal areas of Michigan, Montana and Key West. Or pretty much in any woods or on any body of water” (Harrison 1973, 37). So, using his senses, the narrator establishes himself in the place and starts reading it in terms of the body’s engagement with space. Because it is dark “about an hour before dawn” (137), he cannot use sight; instead he uses the feel of air-temperature on his skin, hearing, smell, and also taste. “[T]he bed was so warm and the air cool” (137). He hears an owl and Sylvia’s breathing. Her breath “intermingle[s] with the hooting of the owl and a very distant sound of a whippoorwill” (138). “[T]he odor in the dark of the sage and sweet-grass and pine resemble[s] a subtle perfume” (138). He eats “some sharp cheddar and crackers” and reflects: “Sitting there in the cool dark I felt more conscious than I had in the previous eight days and I rather liked this unexpected awareness” (137). It is through the body and its senses that the narrator establishes his presence and places himself in the environment. As the novel draws to a close, it is as if his fantasies of placedness and domesticity that persisted throughout the trip acquire flesh, gain real, physical shape in Wisdom, Montana, where the earlier settler fantasy is re-enacted in real life with Sylvia’s breath intermingling with other sounds of nature. The chaos, displacement, danger, drunkenness, drugs, and anxiety of the road give way to full awareness, engagement, and conscious being.

The narrator’s body, trained in interacting with rivers, the sea, and the woods, allows him to open up to experiencing Montana as inscribed not only with what the colonial settlers established and containing not only the realizations of their worldview, culture, and institutions, but comprising also what was there before. On the ground, the narrator’s vision, unlike that of a driver, who must focus on the road ahead, is stable and at ease to take notice of the small-scale and employ the imagination to see beyond what is nominally there. This way of knowing through



an embodied engagement with one's environment can be thought of in terms of Donna Haraway's concept of "situated knowledges" (Haraway 1991, 187), which counter the way myths operate. Myths depend on apparently universal, disembodied, and "unlocateable" (Haraway 1991, 191) knowledge, whose power Haraway calls "the god-trick of seeing from nowhere"; and this lack of a physical viewpoint allows to "put the myth into ordinary practice" (Haraway 1991, 189) – the author of the stories that myths propagate being no one; myths are just there, as if a given. And myths have the power to draw "veils over the surface of reality" (Frampton 1990, 29) in ways that make seeing the world in its complexity and diversity difficult. So, according to Haraway, "only partial perspective promises objective vision" (Haraway 1991, 190); only a viewpoint based on subjective and experiential being legitimizes generalizations. Rebecca Solnit talks about a similar way of understanding the world when she says that growing in and through a particular place offers a "coherent foundation" to reach out into the farther world (qtd in Campbell 2022, 11-12). This way of seeing is advocated for in *A Good Day to Die* through Harrison's narrator, who, when going fishing, experiences his environment not through the tropes of myth but rather through interaction and what he calls "errant details," which enable him to see what the myth typically glosses over.

Gibbon's men had watched the squaws come out of the teepees and stoke the morning fires before returning to their husbands and children. ... Then the charge with the Cavalry shooting low into the tents to pick up as many sleeping bodies as possible.... I had a sharp heavy strike but failed to hook the fish. ... The water reminded me of the name of Chief Looking Glass. I looked at my reflection in the water and said it aloud several times. He drank water here. Funny how such errant details make it real as if my own reflected body were that of Looking Glass taking a drink a few minutes before the battle. (Harrison 1973, 139-140)

In his later novels (such as *Dalva* and *The Road Home*) and essays, Harrison often makes it painfully clear that American nation-state building happened at the expense of Indigenous tribes, who were killed or evicted from their homeland. In a 2008 novel, for instance – *The English Major* – he reinvents the names of the states as the names of the tribes that previously lived in the territories now divided into states. In "Poetry as Survival," he paints a poignant metaphor to illustrate the scope of annihilation that accompanied the formation of the United States. He asks the reader to "imagine a map of the United States covered with white linen" that is "riddled with the blood of over two hundred Native American civilizations we virtually destroyed, from Massachusetts to California" (Harrison 1991, 300). *A Good Day to Die* is an example of Harrison's fledgling literary political advocacy for seeing the United States as not only a product of Western-European ideologies but also a place where other ways of seeing and making the world matter.

By contrast to the narrator's embeddedness in physical reality and his openness to where the "errant details" of that reality might lead, Tim's determination to follow the myth is achieved through a disconnection from his body and a suppression of the senses with alcohol, drugs, and violence. In fact, it is only by



disregarding the body and its needs that he can pursue the dream – something ephemeral which Haraway calls the “deadly fantasy” (Haraway 1991, 188) that “*disembodies* experience” (Campbell 2016, 11; emphasis in the original). Attempts at putting the myth of the West into practice disconnect Tim from the world and the reality at hand and in the end literally kill him. But the narrator’s ability to feel safe practically “on any body of water” (Harrison 1973, 37), be it Michigan, Key West, Oregon, or Montana, is an instance of a “partial perspective” that spans out to “objective vision,” a “situated knowledge” that stems from an embodied experience of active engagement with a river. His perspective, although partial, subjective and locatable, allows him to feel at home on any river.

A Good Day to Die affirms Richard Slotkin when he writes that myths influence us “with such power that our perception of contemporary reality and our ability to function in the world are directly, often tragically affected” (Slotkin 1973, 3). The trajectory that Tim follows is an emanation of this. His choice and single-mindedness to follow the escape route west to attain questionable freedom by leaving behind everything he has failed at tragically affects his perception of reality. Drugs and alcohol blur that perception even further, altogether removing him from reality as it is. Through the character of the narrator, the novel roots for engagement and curiosity, openness and connection to the physical world, which unfolds in a diversity of stories. While employing a framework and tropes typical for the road novel and the Western, *A Good Day to Die* draws on the contemporaneous concerns that had found expression in the counterculture of the sixties and in later environmental protection movements. Edward Abbey’s novel *The Monkeywrench Gang*, featuring a similarly minded group of young people set on blowing up the Glen Canyon Dam, closely followed (1975). Although Harrison was skeptical about technology and progress, the emerging concern of this early book is that the myth homogenizes and appropriates reality in ways that hide and regenerate violence, while partial knowledges and communication, interaction and engagement with reality may open ways for reckoning history and clear vision.

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GO WEST! (VILLAGE): QUEER DISPLACEMENT AND NEW YORK AS THE LIBERATORY WEST IN AMERICAN LESBIAN FICTION

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the idea of the American West as the promise of hope for freedom, as it was repossessed by United States queer literature after the 1950s. Hope is promised as a total contrast from tradition: for queer, specifically lesbian characters, it switches Eastwards, looking for the *dreamland* not on *going west* but on going to New York. Queer narratives since the 1950s draw on the displacement of the lesbian characters from their homes, forcing them to relocate, recurrently the West Village in New York. The analysis of storyline repetitions present in representative lesbian fiction throughout the decades will be done on several works. I show that the ideal of the West, core to the construction of the American Dream, was reversed in American lesbian fiction, relocating hope after displacement to the queer populated West Village in New York City.

KEYWORDS: Lesbian Fiction, The American West, Queer Displacement, Lesbian Studies, Queer studies.

¡VE AL OESTE! (DE NUEVA YORK): DESPLAZAMIENTO QUEER Y NUEVA YORK COMO EL OESTE LIBERADOR EN LA FICCIÓN LÉSBICA AMERICANA

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza la idea del Oeste Americano como la promesa de libertad y esperanza, repositada por la literatura queer estadounidense después de la década de 1950. La promesa de esperanza se opone totalmente a la tradicional: para los personajes *queer*, específicamente lesbianas, la promesa se vuelve hacia el este, buscando el Sueño Americano, y no en irse al oeste sino a la ciudad de Nueva York. Las narrativas *queer* desde los años cincuenta se alimentan del desplazamiento de las protagonistas lesbianas de su hogar, del que están forzadas a marcharse, recurrentemente hacia el West Village de Nueva York. El análisis de las repeticiones narrativas presentes en ficción lésbica de diferentes décadas se estudiará en varias obras, demostrando que la idea del oeste, tan central en la construcción del sueño americano, se invierte en la ficción lésbica estadounidense.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Ficción lésbica, Oeste Americano, Desplazamiento *queer*, Estudios Lésbicos, Estudios *Queer*.

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NEW YORK CITY AND QUEER AMERICAN FICTION

New York City has been considered for decades a beacon of commerce, culture and social revolution. The literary scene is no exception to this tendency. For the LGBTQ community, New York City has been a key setting, even before the Stonewall riots in the West Village in 1969 set a precedent for queer rights everywhere. Similar to Eastern Coast Americans expanding westwards in hopes of becoming landowners, or the next generation, rushing to California in search for the promised gold, the queer community found a symbol of opportunity and identity in this East coast capital. In this article, I argue that New York City has been repeatedly used in sapphic fiction from the 1950s to today as the land where the promise of prosperity is equal to everyone who seeks it, thus being used as the concept of a new West but for the sapphic identity. The city of New York becomes the uncontested destiny for sapphic characters who flee their hometowns, families, and cities, (oftentimes in the Western side of the United States) in order to live their identity, which had been until then repressed or unacceptable.

For this, I will be looking at several fiction works across history, all of which have a sapphic¹ protagonist as a driving narrator or a main character. The works mentioned are also, except for *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, written by sapphic or queer identified authors. By looking at the motivations for the Western Expansion and the Gold Rush of the 19th century in the United States of America, it becomes clear that the character's motivations and narratorial devices used to describe them are parallel. The works included for comparison are, chronologically, *The Price of Salt* (1952) by Patricia Highsmith, *Odd Girl Out* (1957) by Ann Bannon, *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973) by Rita Mae Brown, *The Color Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker, *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* (2017) by Taylor Jenkin Reid and *One Last Stop* (2021) by Casey McQuiston.

THE IDEA OF *THE WEST*

Renditions of the United States West in Hollywood are not singled-out movie scripts starring Clint Eastwood. The widely-acknowledged tradition stems from a long line of migration stories across history, which spread their ivy branches as the ideology that was to be reproduced over and over in fact and fiction. Cowboy moods, empty deserts, and lonely cabins (or tents) are all a part of a complex context that sprung during the Westward Expansion and consequently led to the phenomenon of the heavenly West that narratives had used over the years. The idea of the *Manifest Destiny* mainly influencing the settler duty to expand and conquer

¹ Throughout this article, I will be using the term *sapphic* to refer to female characters who are romantically or sexually involved with other female characters, including bisexual, lesbian or pansexual.



the land towards the Pacific Ocean of the United States people, would develop as an idea in the late 18th century. Motivation for the Westward Expansion peaked when gold was discovered in the western side of the infant country, near Sierra Nevada, which would come to be known as the Gold Rush. The news that gold was to be found in Sierra Nevada and Northern California *rushed* citizens to the territory in search of quick wealth from 1849 onwards. The Gold Rush stimulated not only a patriotic meaning of *going west*, but also an economic significance that made a few of these eastern Americans wealthy. As thousands of young citizens rushed to find the beacon of what could lead them to a wealthy future in this newly acquired land (California) the idea of the American Dream rooted even deeper. The economic motivation behind the Gold Rush marked a historic migration movement, but the ideal promise of prosperity made a much deeper mark.

To understand the dimensions of the imagery of the United States West as the land of chance I am mostly interested in highlighting that (1) Land exploitation and farming became a synonym of American pride, as well as national identity and (2) the West as we know it, never was. The western frontier provided the working class with the possibility of self-development free from the old order. The Homestead Act of 1862 made it possible for many Americans to get a piece of land by simply moving into it, which would, in five years' time, become their property. Naturally, certain conditions had to be met, including the building of a home, and the testimony of neighbors and a minimum stay of five years' time in the working of the land. Many Americans could grab their lives in search for acres where to become landowners, contributing to the great expansion in the West.

(1) The establishment of farms with its consequential rural life, contributed greatly to the folkloric ideal of the western landowner who was an agent of his own future on the undiscovered land that he conquered. Examples of this idyllic setting and the pride that it ended up entailing flood the paragraphs of literature representing the ambiguity of the American West, as shows in the landmark work *The Grapes of Wrath*. Steinbeck's focalizer emphasizes the key component of the land: the nobility of exploitation of the land:

The driver sat in his iron seat and he was proud of the straight lines he did not will, proud of the tractor he did not own or love, proud of the power he could not control. And when that crop grew, and was harvested, no man had crumbled a hot clod in his fingers and let the earth sift past his fingertips. (Steinbeck 2008, 46)

(2) The West as we know it, never was. The leading representative images passed down through the artistic rendition of an idea of the West existed only as so. In fact, "the West in media representation was seen as a testing ground for the national experience" (Varner 2013, 4). The dreamland that *frontiersmen* or *cowboys* founded in the West and would become one of the most representative chapters in the history of the United States survived through the decades as an ideal and took many shapes and forms until its decay later in the second half of the 20th century as described through the literary scene of the times, like the works of the Beat Generation.



Given the tempestuous nature of the expansion of the frontier, narratives set on the west enhanced the identity markers that had characterized the Western Expansion. In other words, it was in the world of literature that the idea of the American Western developed and has survived through the generations. “It [The Western frontier] also became a concept synonymous with US national identity [...] the geography of the American West becomes conflated with an idea not just of what the West was, but what it meant” (Cooper 2016, 70). These concepts of conquering, land exploitation and farming powerful cowboys in literature set in the American west bond very closely with the ideal characters of the Western narrative, both literal and figuratively. Men in the American West are in search of their inherited right to power, personal development, and freedom. Western novels provide us with innumerable examples of what this masculinity went on to mean, as well as the pursuit of the American identity that they were trying to establish (Davy Crocket, Deadwood Dick, Diamond Dick...). Dime western novels, like E.Z.C. Jackson’s *Buffalo Bill* narratives, depicted the ideas that ended up representing the ideas of the western man and served ideological purpose for soldiers during the American Civil War.

The protagonists of the western spirit were men who brought forth their own demise, becoming a symbol of self-made men, oftentimes a romanticization of lawlessness, the promise of liberation of indigenous land. Cooper analyzes the idealization of outlaws like Jesse James who appear as the physical representation of the frontier, all of them an embodiment of the power over a lawless, undiscovered land (2016, 71). New York City, serves in sapphic stories in the United States the same purpose as this lawless, undiscovered land. The idea that *going west* had served for United States fiction. Characters in sapphic fiction decipher the unwelcomeness that they are experiencing in their home lands and seek refuge in the movement. Movement to the West Village, or the queer west that I have been referring to, thus relates to the North American Westwards Expansion in three ways, in the first place, displacement from the home, or lack thereof, secondly, the discovery or reassurance of an identity and lastly, the hope for growth and development.

DISPLACEMENT AND MOVEMENT: “BUT WE HAD TO GO *SOMEWHERE!*”²

Sapphic characters start to make a mark in published American novels that confer them with a voice not earlier than the 1950s. Pulp narratives provided the American public with cheap sensual stories that ranged in diverse topics, being the first best-selling pulp fiction one that featured a lesbian relationship. Publishers filled convenience store shelves with narratives about young women falling in love

² Marijane Meaker referring to covert queer bars in New York City in Scheidegger’s documentary *Loving Highsmith* (2022).



written by men, causing an unsuspected result: actual sapphic women were reading these narratives. They were learning, maybe for the first time, that there were other sapphics who existed in the United States. Publishing houses soon started to receive manuscripts under pseudonyms, works by sapphic authors who now knew they could write about the type of love they felt.

Sapphic fiction from the United States shares with Western literature and the idea of The West a need for special movement. This literature perseveres through the displacement of characters throughout the decades, translating the metaphorical expulsion from the family institution and the status quo to a physical expulsion from the territory. Two main causes can be cast for this physical and metaphorical displacement. The first, the need of a narrative ending with reparation of heteronormativity (the queer character is cast out, thus normality is restored) The character can also make an individual choice, triggered by the feeling of discomfort that the original setting of the novel provides. This is normally presented as rejection from a familiar setting. Chesire Calhoun and others have referred to this displacement because of the perception of queers as a “threat to the family” defending that “anxiety about the possibility that the family disintegrating from *within* can be displaced on to the specter of the hostile outsider to the family” (2003, 141 *emphasis in the original*). The consistency of this family disruption by the queer in the writing of characters in sapphic fiction responds to this need to construct “gay men and lesbians as outsiders to the family” and adds that it “also facilitates stigma-threatening comparisons” (2003,141) including the accusations of women of being sapphic lesbian if they “fail to comply with gender norms”. The stigmatization of non-compliance with feminine standards has consistently been used as a reason for physical outcasting in what is commonly known as American lesbian literature, including canonical works such as Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues*, Bannon’s *Odd Girl Out* (1957), *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop* by Fannie Flagg, *Spring Fire* by Marijeane Meaker and other more recent works of sapphic fiction including *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2015) or even the recent *Delilah Green Doesn’t Care* (2022). The consequence of the displacement from the nuclear heteropatriarchal family pushes for re-location. In situations of outcasting, American fiction interprets the American West, as previously mentioned, as a feeling of hope. The reading of this land would normally push North American outcasts to the West, but it pushes sapphic characters to New York City in the east.

Bannon’s *Odd Girl Out* sets a precedent on what could be published. This work marked a first in the sapphic subgenre of pulp fiction: identity awareness. The protagonist in *Odd Girl Out*, Laura, is refreshingly aware of her lesbian identity. Her voicing her identity as a lesbian settles her decision to abandon her small college town to find a new life in New York City. Restoration of order, usually death or expulsion, in sapphic fiction was devised to destroy what was thought to be a threat to the institution of the family. Laura’s decision is somewhat forced, having been publicly shamed and abandoned by her lover. However, she is one of the first protagonists to recognize her own sexual identity without the shame attached to it: “I know what I am, and I can be honest with myself now. I’ll live my life as honestly as I can, without ruining it. I can’t do that here and I can’t do it with you. That’s over now”



(Bannon 2015, 110). This betrayal and shaming narrative repeats in modern lesbian works, such as Linda Hill's *Never Say Never* written over 30 years after. However, Laura's identity assertion imprisons her in her outcasting and consequent move to the *promised land* that the city is for sapphic characters.

The journey Molly Bolt (in Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle*) undertakes is an arduous one, the same as the one leading the Joad family to their Western demise in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Unwelcomeness in the familiar home, together with a lack of economic and cultural resources for a fresh start, requires a queer rebirth that she finds in New York City. Molly Bolt's journey to the LGBTQ scene is the key that she uses to grow her own hope and freedom. *Ruby-fruit Jungle* provides its protagonist, Molly Bolt, with the necessary tools to engineer a happy ending, eliminating the need to punish her with death, which had to be endured by many sapphic characters before her. Molly, however, is displaced and cast out in response to her sapphic identity assertion, leading her to her outcasting.

Highsmith's *The Price of Salt* served as a first window into the scene that Molly Bolt was able to enjoy. The setting of the novel in the early 1950s emphasizes the domesticity of sapphic women in the city at the time, but it also highlights the undercover sapphic community that the novel's protagonist (Carol) was a part of. Carol's friends, more explicitly Abigail, are oftentimes past lovers that the married woman has kept in her close circle, which helps portray the private, yet existent and strong, relationships between women in the anonymity of the big apple. The traditional United States west makes an interesting appearance in this landmark piece. Therese and Carol's two-week trip Westwards drives the two lovers to physical freedom, where they reach the peak of their physical intimacy in the novel. Nonetheless, said triumph quickly overturns, as the plot pushes the trait of the poisoned West for sapphic American characters: the two lovers are caught by a private investigator and must immediately return to New York City. The recordings that the private investigator collects in the west will serve as proof of indecency in court, making her lose custody of her daughter. The custody battle was the protagonist's main concern during the entire narrative. The fact that these tapes are recorded in the west points at a tendency to portray the west as a non-safe space for the queer community in American fiction.

The lesbian migration east-wards, inverting the liberatory qualities of the American literary West is consistent in these works of fiction. Other examples are shown in *Rubyfruit Jungle* where Molly's mother kicks her out as soon as her relationship with her childhood friend is made public: "A queer, I raised a queer, that's what I know. You're lower than them dirty fruit pickers in the groves, you know that?" (Brown 2015, 3). There is no space for Molly's queerness in her western home, there is not even room for a conversation about it: "I don't want to hear nothing you can say." (Brown 2015, 3 ch.4). The situation makes the home an unsafe space one that has to be fled. The trip that Molly takes, unlike the one in Steinbeck's narrative, is not transformational, but rather a means to an end. The quality of California as a promise land, described in dime novels since the 19th century, is reverted in the case



of the queer community. The end of the sapphic journey is New York City where they can finally start developing a life with no punishment.³

Using terms like *relocation* or *movement* in these contexts can be tricky. Contrary to journeys in United States literature towards the west for its figurative hope and promise, the journeys undertaken by many of the female protagonists in these narratives should be referred to as a displacement. Following the words of Caren Kaplan, movement promises the contradiction of security and freedom, in that there is “oscillation and tension between the liberating promise of mobility and the security of fixed location” (Kaplan, see Sheller 2021, 32). Movement has landed a liberatory capacity, but it is inseparable from making a choice about it. The lack of choice in a character’s narrative for movement prevents the liberation. If the choice is not made, then there is displacement. Thus, sapphics in American fiction are displaced from the *fixture* of their original location, which they are forced to abandon.

Movement, as exemplified by the ample tradition of roadtrip bildungsroman fiction in American literature, fictionalizes the growth in a controlled-sphere metaphor. In queer terms, movement serves not only as a metaphorical walk towards growth to places where they can expand and develop, but also a literal one. North American sapphic fiction has fed from the tradition of narratives of the American West.

As it is the case with Therese, Laura and *Molly*, August Laundry, protagonist in the 2021 best-seller *One Last Stop*, makes her way to New York City searching for liberation. August has recently transferred to Brooklyn College to escape her family situation and feel more at ease with her life. Even though the protagonist lives in San Francisco, another of the most accepting places for LGBTQ population in the United States, her choice to move east-wards links the narrative to the inherited trait of the endless possibilities of NYC. The narrative establishes the tone of immersion in the queer scene with the very first few lines, when August responds to an advert on a room for rental:

“SEEKING YOUNG SINGLE ROOMMATE FOR 3BR APARTMENT UPSTAIRS, 6TH FLOOR. \$700/MO. MUST BE QUEER & TRANS FRIENDLY.” (McQuiston 2021, 12)

In *One Last Stop*, the protagonist’s lost uncle, fled his hometown for New York and later California. This is also the case for August’s love interest, Jane, who landed in New York after experiencing several places in the Western side of North America. The journeys of these characters were both experienced in the 1970s, a time of great LGBTQ liberation, also adding to the queer migration to NYC.

Other modern works have also perpetuated the idea of the West as a place not suitable for lesbian women. In the 2017 best-seller *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* Taylor Jenkins-Reid provides her main character, Evelyn Hugo, with happy

³ Similarly, although from the focalization of an outside spectator, Alice Walker presents in her work *The Color Purple* the ideal of the sapphic liberation of New York City.



queer ending only when the couple is in New York City. Encompassed in the strict rules of Hollywood stardom, Evelyn falls in love early in her career with her screen-nemesis Celia St. James. The two women are stuck in the Western cinema industry, whose pressure drives them to never being able to publicly live together or have their identity accepted. Although the two spend most of their lives in an on and off relationship, the only time the narrative allows them to be truly at ease with their love is when they establish their residence in an apartment of the Upper East Side. Immediately after the move, Evelyn felt liberated “I was free to go wherever I wanted” (Jenkins-Reid 2017, 360) so much so that the women could walk around as a couple confidently, a problem that had been the main struggle in their relationship up until that point “And then she [Celia] calmly, confidently, took my hand” (2017, 360). The weight of their movement or migration to the city does not seem to have such a strong hold in Jenkin-Reid’s text, but it does suggest the inheritance of the lesbian idea for the liberatory qualities of this city.

THE WEST VILLAGE

Using the words *allow to exist* to describe the situation of the LGBTQ community in the second half of the 20th century New York City might seem surprising, but it is not that far from the truth, at least for sapphic women. The fact that many of the novels with queer protagonists set the city as the LGBTQ West is not a random choice. In fact, past and present American sapphic narratives in this field happen in New York, they have their protagonists escape to New York City or mention the liberating atmosphere of the Big Apple (examples range from the analyzed in this article to Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) to *Delilah Green Doesn’t Care* (2022) by Ashley H. Blake. Registered sapphic organizations are nonexistent in North America until 1955, contrary to the scarce gay organizations that existed in the late XIX and early XX century in the United States (Mattachine Society founded in 1950, Student Homophile League, in 1966). Another way of queer women to gather was conforming a part of other minorities organizing meetings, to avoid attention. One of the most popular areas for these groups was New York City and most specifically, neighborhoods like Greenwich Village or the West Village, home to the *Stonewall Inn*. The city did not lack state laws against the practice of homosexuality, but it let these groups slip through some cracks, which will eventually drive to it becoming the first city in the United States to reduce sodomy to a misdemeanor:

Although police and law enforcement agencies frequently kept records on suspected homosexuals, they often adopted a policy of ignoring these files except when it was convenient to do otherwise. [...] Although only a handful of these people were arrested during my tenure in that job, their activities were observed (perhaps unknown to them) and their files were periodically updated. Such a practice could pose threats to any gay person [...] in any attempt to elicit change. There was also a kind of unofficial censorship on the topic. (Bullough 2008, 4)



There is a key component of the way in which the NYPD is described to act in relation to any suspicion of homosexual behavior: they possessed the ability to look over it. This would have been impossible in many other United States cities, let alone small towns in the mid-western side of the country, that most sapphic protagonists are running away from. Laura, for instance, the protagonist in *Odd Girl Out* left her town for New York City, where she will move to Greenwich Village and go on to discover more of her sexuality in subsequent novels of the *Beebo Brinker Chronicles* series. She is far from being the only one. New York City neighborhoods also represented a haven for the protagonist of Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973): "And that's where I was going. There are so many queers in New York that one more wouldn't rock the boat" (Brown 2015, 164).

The constant raids that transgender, sapphic, gay and bisexual citizens of New York City suffered throughout the decades before and after the Stonewall riots add up to the evidence literature shows that this city provided, at least in theory, a bigger scenario for the development of sapphic women and consequently, sapphic characters in American literature.

IDENTITY

The principle of the sapphic eastward migration described above draws similarities with the ideal of the westward expansion. Sapphic characters across the second half of the 20th century needed a place to run to, a symbolical West that could bring them the prosperity that they were not achieving in the society they were brought up in. Like the heroes and anti-heroes in Western novels, the protagonists of the sapphic lesbian fiction I am centered on have a clear objective when leaving their homes, goals more established in some narratives than others. There are two crucial differences with the protagonists of western fiction, the first variation lies in the destination. The second difference is the ultimate necessity to flee in need of survival. Not leaving their home states could suppose the abandonment of their identity and lack of development outside of the norm that had been established, as well as consistent violence. In contrast to western dime novels, where leaving the home state aligns with a duty to expand and *conquer* western land.

Sapphics in novels from the 1950s on did not escape the wild gunshots of saloons, but rather the inherited roles expected from their gender. Mid-western women had a specific binary oppositional role in western fiction, if any, which did not allow for much development. Gentle tamers' role "has been sentimentalized and given a rhetorical mystical importance approaching sainthood" (Irwin and Brooks 2004, 11). Breaking out of these roles, necessary for the balance of the developed idea of the western territory, would imply making a statement against patriotism itself. As it has been previously discussed, fixed ideals were key for the development of a worthy new American mind, which prided in the purity of intention in its functionality. This shows even in the late second half of the twentieth century, where "women have remained invisible to most writers [...] the impression is left that women played insignificant roles in settling the American West" (2004, 12).



The protagonists in *Odd Girl Out* by Ann Bannon, Laura and her lover Beth, struggle to recognize their love for each other and identity in their small college town. They had been in a stormy relationship for a while when the shunning of an unmarried pregnant student changes their perspective. Consequences would be far worse for them was their relationship to be discovered. Their decision to flee is imminent: they are going to try their luck in New York City, but in a final plot twist, only one of them builds up the courage to actually abandon everything. Although the mandatory punishment of the novel for Laura (for being openly happy with her queerness) is her having to give up the only life she has known, as well as losing her lover to a man, to her, this decision is a bold statement. Laura might not be allowed to love women in the small Illinois town she was raised in, but she is going to find the place where she will be allowed to. Not moving would push her into a life of social shame, isolation and lack of identity.

The main protagonists in *The Price of Salt* (by Patricia Highsmith) further exemplify the impossibility of survival in their trip westwards. The private investigator that destroys Carol and Therese's relationship could only get the necessary evidence in the western town of Colorado Springs, and it is only when they return to New York City that they achieve a happy ending. Similar escapism from the west in sapphic characters is present in the story of August (*One Last Stop*, 2021), who "Always wanted to try it" (McQuiston 2021, 20), and discovers that the solution to her ever-present family secret had always been in New York City. Her identity gets resolved only in her time in the city, and not in the other places she has tried: "New York, it's ... I don't know, I tried a couple of cities. I went to UNO in New Orleans, then U of M in Memphis, and they all felt ... too small, I guess." (2021, 20). The anonymity that August finds in the big city helps her find her smaller, chosen community.

In Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) the presence of displacement and absence of movement creates an interesting switch in Celie. When forced to marry Mr. _____, she is displaced from her home entirely, lacking the ability to move. Her nemesis and eventual lover, Shug Avery, turns moving into her identity. Shug Avery moves around the country finding music gigs that provide the musical stardom that she is after while Celie watches from afar, only allowed to self-identify through Shug.

SURVIVAL

Susan Lee Johnson states in her chapter on American Western masculinities that "That [white masculinity] rhetoric not only has obscured the vast diversity and stubborn inequities of western life but also has informed configurations of power and politics from Hollywood to Washington, D.C., and has been exported by U.S. media to far corners of the globe" (1996, 93). The established positions women developed during this time are now intrinsic to them and run well into the current times that are described in novels from the 20th century.

NYC held an institutional environment that proved to be relatively safer for queer people, but it also was home to an endless array of professional opportunities



that still today makes it one of the most popular cities of the country. This can be found in Highsmith's *The Price of Salt* with the character of Therese Belivet, who had an undiscovered identity until she moved to New York. It provided her with the possibility of pursuing a career in scenography and most importantly to discover and take a chance in her lesbian affair with Carol. Although debatable, Highsmith's *The Price of Salt* is described to be the first lesbian American narrative with a happy ending. Among other facts, publishing houses refused for years to give up mandatory moralistic punishment for their lesbian protagonists, but for Therese, who got to not only stay alive at the ending of the novel but also to successfully move in with her love interest Carol, New York City seems to have served its liberatory purpose. Similarly, in Jenkins Reid's novel, Evelyn Hugo and Celia St. James manage to live their relationship fully only when they are in New York City. The shame and secrecy that the paparazzi scene forces upon them in Los Angeles almost vanishes in the city, giving them a taste of the domesticity, they could never achieve on the west coast.

Independence is also a key feature of the sapphic survival of Molly in *Rubyfruit Jungle* after her mother banishes her from their family home as soon as she discovers she has been involved with women. The focalizer makes important remarks about this in the story. Her financial situation does not improve until she manages to get a job and save to go to school and pursue her projects as a filmmaker: "I had \$14.61 in my jeans, that's what was left over from Faye's money and the remains of mine after the bus ticket. That wouldn't get me half to New York City" (Brown 2015, 164). New York City was the place for Molly to be able to explore her identity as a lesbian in an environment that allowed it more than her hometown and had a platform for it, but most importantly, it was the place where she had a chance of, as a queer woman, getting a job and an education that would allow her to move in the queer scene and build a life.

Movement for survival, especially movement to New York City brings a recurrent topic in sapphic United States fiction as is also seen through Laura (*Odd Girl Out*), who had to move in order to survive social outcasting and identity crises. Molly Bolt fights for the entire narrative to be taken seriously, once she has found her place in New York:

Damn, I wished the world would let me be myself. But I knew better on all counts. I wish I could make my films. That wish I can work for. One way or another I'll make those movies and I don't feel like having to fight until I'm fifty. But if it does take that long then watch out world because I'm going to be the hottest fifty-year-old this side of the Mississippi. (2015, 291)

She is determined that she has found the place where she will be able to survive, regardless of how much time breaking barriers takes.



CONCLUSIONS

The American literary West has served as one of the most influential developments of cultural history in the 19th century. Its influence ranges to the literary scene of today. The strong hold of tradition and masculinity in the idea of the West, did not make room for the sapphic characters who suffered from displacement in the 20th century fiction. The feeling of unwelcomeness would not go unnoticed by these characters in lesbian fiction written from the 1950s on. It became ingrained and rooted in the psyche of a community that would have to go on to find a new idea of the freedom of the West.

In this article, I have shown how the sapphic community went on to find a *new west* in the LGBTQ populated neighborhoods of New York City, such as the West Village and Greenwich Village. The inherited trait of migration from the Westward Expansion, the hope found in moving to a place unknown in search of a new way of living, is common in sapphic narratives, which largely portrays New York City as their preferred destination.

In the first two texts chronologically, *The Price of Salt* by Patricia Highsmith and *Odd Girl Out* by Ann Bannon, the pattern of escape is very clearly shown through the characters of Therese Belivet and Laura Landon, who chose New York City to construct their own identity. Although Therese's origin is not described in the novel, it is made clear through the narrative that moving out was her only option in order for her life to become her own. In the case of Laura, whose reason for escape is her relationship with Beth in her small-town college campus, New York City is the first and only place coming to her mind. The narrative makes it clear that the city will be the place where she can become free from all the shame and ideals of the past to explore herself and her sexuality.

As we advance further in time, the same narrative can be extracted from Rita Mae Brown's 1973 *Rubyfruit Jungle*, whose protagonist must flee the western town she was raised in for a chance at the rebirth she finds in New York City. This allows her to know love and achieve a filmmaking career, which is something her Western town shunned her for. New York City serves as the new West the lesbian community found in the literary world. Migration has a role to play in both recent best-selling novels 2017 *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* and the 2021 novel *One Last Stop*.

In spite of the unwelcomeness that Lesbian American fiction depicts in the traditional American West, some recent narratives are starting to promise a reconciliation. The 2022 novel by Ashley Herring Blake, *Delilah Green Doesn't Care*, shows a main protagonist who, felt unaccepted in her native western US town in Oregon under color of her queerness, manages to come back from her adoptive New York City to build back her life and pursue her lesbian relationship. Until then, one thing becomes clear: in sapphic American fiction, New York City becomes the queer West.

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A POSTMODERN TWIST TO THE WESTERN FILM TRADITION IN *THE BALLAD OF BUSTER SCRUGGS* BY THE COEN BROTHERS*

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ABSTRACT

Although the Coen brothers had already made films related to the Western genre, *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* (2018) is a different venture, since they wrote the script of this anthology movie comprising six stories themselves. Besides delving into some of the themes that they have dealt with in their filmography—mortality, ethics, violence, justice, etc.—they also provide the film with a number of postmodern twists that hint at an effort to work through some of the problems posed by the mythology of the American West. *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* contains the use of intertextuality across various art forms, a parodic treatment, and the inclusion of unusual perspectives that are all typical of postmodern aesthetics and politics of representation.

KEYWORDS: *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*, Western mythology, postmodern aesthetics, genre conventions, parodic self-reflexivity.

UN GIRO POSTMODERNO A LA TRADICIÓN DEL WESTERN EN *LA BALADA DE BUSTER SCRUGGS* DE LOS HERMANOS COEN

RESUMEN

Aunque los hermanos Coen ya habían dirigido películas del Oeste, *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* (2018) es un proyecto diferente ya que ellos mismos escribieron el guión de este Western episódico dividido en seis tramas distintas. Además de seguir indagando en algunos de los temas que los Coen ya habían tocado en su filmografía—la mortalidad, la ética, la violencia, la justicia, etc.—este filme incorpora una serie de giros postmodernos que revelan un interés por explorar algunos de los problemas que la mitología del Oeste americano plantea. *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* incluye rasgos como el uso de la intertextualidad entre diferentes formas artísticas, toques paródicos, y la inclusión de perspectivas alternativas, todos típicos de la corriente postmodernista.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*, Mitología del Oeste, Estética postmodernista, Convenciones de género, Reflexividad paródica.

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The postmodern basks in the proliferation of micronarratives. It holds itself in opposition to all that is static, and attempts to decenter, detotalize, and demythologize while taking nothing, including its own (non) premises very seriously. In this way, postmodernity interrogates all that we once took for granted about language and experience.

Lance Olsen, *Circus of the Mind in Motion*

In the movie's most memorable storylines, the filmmakers appear to be working through some sort of problem in their, and our, relationship to the mythology of the American West. Either they're deromanticizing a long-held archetype [...] or they're attempting to recast a familiar plotline through a rarely considered point of view

Dana Stevens, Review of *The Ballad of B.S.*

INTRODUCTION

For the past forty years, the Coen brothers have proved that they can deal with almost any film genre and set their stories in various regions of the U.S.—both real and imaginary. Nevertheless, from *Blood Simple* (1984) and *Raising Arizona* (1987) to *No Country for Old Men* (2007) and *True Grit* (2010), it is also evident that the American Southwest and Far West have always held a special appeal for the gifted duo. Michael Koresky has remarked that “themes of the American white man’s bumbling attempts at realizing his own ‘manifest destiny’ can be detected through all the Coen films we might dub Westerns” (2018, 37). Indeed, the Coens have shown that they feel as comfortable with a canonical Western such as *True Grit*, which contains many of the devices and story beats of the genre, as with hybrid evolutions of the tradition in *No Country for Old Men*, which incorporates features of the psycho-thriller and film noir. Even a black comedy like *The Big Lebowski* (1998) introduces the figure of a cowboy—played by Sam Elliott—who functions as a Chandler-style type of narrator. Although the Coen brothers are well-known for often subverting and parodying the codes and styles of different film genres, in the case of their incursions into the Western tradition, audiences have had to wait until *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* (2018) to enjoy a full-fledged deconstruction of the myths, tropes and conventions of the genre. As William Jensen has noted, “this anthology film consists of six vignettes that explore life and death in the American West in the last quarter of the 19th century”; but what is fascinating about it is that “sometimes the Coens put a new spin on familiar tropes, and other times they

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explore virgin territory” (Jensen 2019, 39). Although the film accommodates many of the staple ingredients of Western movies, such as gunslingers, the hanging tree, bandits, wagon trains, stagecoaches, and, of course, the inevitable Indians, the movie is packed with abrupt turnabouts, peculiar characters and engrossing dilemmas that are by no means common in conventional Westerns. In this sense, one could argue that while using many of the typical figures, motifs, and conventions of classical Westerns, the Coen brothers are also trying to challenge and deromanticize many of the myths associated with the American West by concocting memorable, self-reflective narratives. In her book *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon describes in great detail the effects that these types of wayward metafiction have on our understanding of history and culture:

Such a clashing of various possible discourses of narrative representation is one way of signalling the postmodern use and abuse of convention that works to ‘de-doxify’ any sense of the seamlessness of the join between the natural and the cultural, the world and the text, thereby making us aware of the irreducible ideological nature of every representation—of past and present. (1989, 53)

The Coens’ process of de-doxification and denaturalization of Western myths begins with their choice of characters, most of which are presented as being blatantly anti-heroic (cf. Koresky 2018, n.p.). Unlike the protagonists of classical Westerns, these are mostly feckless individuals living on the margins of emerging societies who can hardly be said to pursue any laudable goals, other than surviving in a violent environment. As several reviewers of the film have argued, there is something nihilistic about the Coens’ portrayal of these characters because their stories illustrate “the remorselessness of the universe and the mostly hapless efforts men undertake to [...] ‘avert the evil decree’” (Podhoretz 2018, 38). In a characteristically postmodern fashion, the directors play with the reprobate characters—which may range from outlaws and covetous impresarios to gold prospectors and a damsel in distress—to show, mostly by means of ironic inversion, that “randomness, contingency, and even absurdity” (Wilde 1981, 10) usually gain the upper hand in our existence. Although the characters are very diverse and driven by distinct motivations—reputation, greed, loyalty, love, etc.—they are all innocents “alone in an unpredictable universe without design” (McGrath 2019, 45). But if the plots of the six stories are governed by a great deal of uncertainty and randomness, little else can be affirmed about the endings of these short narratives which, while providing a sense of closure, also contain a shade of ambiguity and incompleteness that is habitual in postmodern art works (cf. Davis 2007, 3-5). Curiously, as several critics have argued, the open-endedness of tales such as “Meal Ticket” and “All Gold Canyon” contribute to the audience’s feeling that, despite their diversity in tone and style, the six stories are ultimately part of a single, unified work with thematic and philosophical resonances that are shared by all the episodes (cf. Stevens 2018, n.p.; Koresky 2018, 37).

In the first epigraph to this article, Lance Olsen states that postmodern micro-narratives—such as those comprised in *The Ballad*—are very useful because they come to interrogate and undermine the hierarchies and absolutist discourses of



certain mythologies by means of more plural and parodic perspectives (1990, 148). Very much like Hutcheon, he is convinced that by “using and ironically abusing” specific codes and forms of representation of a genre, art works may destabilize and detotalize it, thus producing a critique of its ideology (cf. Hutcheon 1989, 8). In the pages that follow, a number of postmodern techniques and tactics observable in the Coen’s film will be explored to show how they compel us to look at Western mythology in a very different light. As they have admitted in some interviews, influenced by the spaghetti westerns of Sergio Leone, they were interested in doing “deeper things” with the genre by playing with some of its key features (Rottenberg 2018, n.p.). Among the devices that the duo use most profusely in *The Ballad*, a reference to the intertextuality across different art forms—but also with regard to other films—seems totally unavoidable. Not only do they nimbly borrow materials from other arts, but they manage to hybridize them successfully with their sophisticated filmic techniques to get the best out of them. Likewise, the Coens are very fond of introducing parodic reversals of expectations in their depiction of the West which challenge some of the tenets central to the “grand narratives” of the region (cf. Lyotard 1984, 60). Far from merely trivializing our previous understanding of those myths, this parodic treatment attempts to show the constructed—and often prejudiced—nature of those totalizing assumptions. Finally, a few pages will be devoted to the importance of perspectivism and the inclusion of generally excluded points of view in the narratives of the American West. As Hassan has claimed, one of the key features of postmodern aesthetics is precisely this “carnivalization” of the fictional work, which exploits “polyphony, the centrifugal power of language, [and] the ‘gay relativity of things’” (1987, 171).

INTEGRATING VARIOUS ART FORMS AND THE ROLE OF INTERTEXTUALITY

Something that may bewilder readers when they go over the reviews of *The Ballad* is the fact that they are likely to come across references and allusions to comics, short story collections or illustrations, rather than to other movies. Unusual as these connections may initially appear, once one reads the analysts’ observations, they seem fully justified given the Coens’ dependence on and devotion to those other artistic expressions. Koresky, for example, claims that “ever wary of do-gooder cinema [such as some recent ‘revisionist Westerns’], the Coens have excavated the concept of the dime-store pulp Western, those paperbacks that hearken more than 150 years” (2018, 37). And, indeed, this author manages to evince how the tightness of dialogues and the clarity of observation in the film are reminiscent of this type of popular fiction. Not just that, but regarding question of morality, “dime-store novels are a good reference point for the Coens, whose rich, occasionally florid and grotesque style conceals hard moral centers—if never certitude” (Koresky 2018, 38). Other reviewers have found it much more appropriate to compare the film to the comics and cartoons of the 1950s and 1960s, which often told stories of physical violence and moral depravity, usually buttressed by unexpected turnabouts and



climactic punches (Lalire 2019, 86). It is somehow natural that the movie should be associated with these forms of popular entertainment because they also contain certain generic elements—such as the charismatic outlaw, the wagon train’s tortuous journey or the stagecoach exchanges—as well as the very theme of American frontier, all of which are pushed to glaring extremes and problematized. Although they are never abject imitators of those other art forms, they employ some of their outlines and saddle-worn conventions to dig deeper into their brand of American existentialism (cf. O’Sullivan 2018, n.p.). While it is true that most comparisons in reviews and articles are drawn with popular forms of art, such as penny dreadfuls and cartoons, there are also several references to consecrated authors from which the Coens have also scrounged a few things. Manu Yáñez wrote in *Fotogramas*, for instance, that “it is possible to imagine the film as an unlikely combination of the imaginings of Mark Twain, with his earthy wit, and Cormac McCarthy, with his implacable vision of the most sinister aspects of human nature” (2018, n.p.; translation by the author).

But, of course, the visual device that most ostensibly indicates the Coens’ indebtedness to other forms of art in the movie is the dusty, morocco-bound book of Western stories, each accompanied with a color plate, which opens the film and carries the audience from one story to the next. Obviously, one could think of this age-old gimmick of a book’s turning pages as a facile resource to get the audience to move in a smoother manner from one episode to the next. However, the look and tone of the volume evoke the aforementioned turn-of-the-century dime novels and the children’s books of the 1950s with great detail. According to Stevens, “the book we return to between chapters is a marvelously complete object, right down to the prose we briefly glimpse on its pages, written in a wholly different style than the spoken dialogue—which itself varies widely in style from one story to the next” (2018, n.p.). Likewise, the illustrations do not only capture some of the most emblematic moments and characters in the stories, but they also serve the purpose of bringing art and life closer by being masterfully inserted in the motion picture. McGrath argues that, besides being unified by “the existentially bleak proposition that life is tough and then you die,” the six segments of the film are also connected thanks to these “visual motifs” appearing at the outset and the end of each segment (2019, 44). The concepts of collage and montage, so consonant with postmodern art, come to mind here since what has been described above is a transfer of materials from one art form to another (literature to film) and the subsequent dissemination of those borrowings (writing and illustrations) through the new medium. For Gregory Ulmer, there is huge inventive and subversive potential in these devices: “Montage does not reproduce the real, but constructs an object [...] or rather, mounts a process [...] in order to intervene in the world, not to reflect but to change reality” (1983, 86). By inserting these pieces of Americana, it is clear that the Coens are trying to change our perception of some visions of the West and also setting themselves apart from other cineastes who have opted either for the raw realism of many Westerns or the hushed contemplations of violence by directors like Peckinpah and Eastwood.

Besides the original screenplay by the Coen Brothers, two of the most widely praised and award-winning aspects of *The Ballad* have been the production and costume design, both of which are clearly oriented “to push the limits of authenticity”



(Desowitz 2018a, n.p.). Obviously, art director Jess Gonchor and costume designer Mary Zophres, both of whom have been long time collaborators of the Coens, were expected to make an extra effort to look for the equipment and attire that would best suit the various stories in the film. The former has explained in interviews how difficult it was to reproduce the kind of settings that the film required: “It was like six different movies and one of the hardest things I’ve ever done because there was nothing off the shelf. Everything had to be manufactured, down to the nails and hardware” (Desowitz 2018a, n.p.). Likewise, Zophres had to do her historical research via photographs, diaries, and museums to dress the characters in clothes characteristic of the second half of the 19th century. All reviewers have concurred that both collaborators managed to produce “visually rich” microcosms that successfully complement each of the episodes, “while also remaining true to the overall tone of a quirkily absurd world” (McGrath 2019, 44). In the same line, the soundtrack of the movie, mostly composed of old cowboy songs and 19th-century ballads, neatly fits each of the segments, sometimes helping to bring forward the action and at other times creating a very specific atmosphere. Consequently, Carter Burwell’s score works well to reinforce some of the traditional archetypes of westerns, while also occasionally undermining their meaning by showing the fissures in their ideology. Helpful analytical tools have been developed by Bateman and Schmidt to show how these multimodal and intermedial components of films are vital to establish their final meaning; as they contend, “they force themselves on the viewer with an immediacy that appears far more effective and affecting than their equivalents in texts” (2012, 4). No doubt, the Coen brothers were helped in their attempt at integrating different art forms—from cartoons and fashion to landscapes and music—by the utilization, for the first time in their long career, of digital technologies. As their cinematographer, Bruno Delbonnel, rightly noted, it would have been quite impossible to capture on film some of the effects that the stories demanded: “It would have been too expensive and time consuming and we had a lot of visual effect shots. It doesn’t cost much and you can do take after take and we were doing a lot of stunts” (Desowitz 2018b, n.p.).

THE RHETORIC OF PARODY AND DARK HUMOR

The section above has revealed that the Coen brothers are heavily indebted to other artistic expressions—comic books, short story collections, musical traditions, etc.—which played a central role in building intertextual linkages with other Western materials (cf. Fiske 2000, 220-221). Furthermore, the impression of authenticity—almost hyperreal, at times—of the spaces and the characters in the film was greatly enhanced by use of computerized high tech which allowed them to play with light, textures, and colors in very innovative ways. Thus, although as some critics have remarked, there are noticeable echoes of classics such as *The Searchers* (1956), *Stagecoach* (1939), *High Noon* (1952) or *Destry Rides Again* (1939), *The Ballad* can also be observed to simultaneously reinvigorate and caricaturize some of the commonplaces of the genre (Jensen 2019, 40). According to Hutcheon, this is



precisely what postmodern representations do, for “the postmodern is said to involve rummaging through the image reserves of the past in such a way as to show the history of the representations their parody calls to our attention” (1989, 93). The key term here is parody, which is supposed to be a contesting revision of the past that—rather than nostalgic—both affirms and undercuts the power of the representations of history and myths (cf. Gehring 1999, 6-7). It should be said that some renowned scholars have played down the role of postmodern parody by arguing that it simply denotes “the imprisonment of the past” by means of pastiche that, in fact, prevents confronting the present (Jameson 1983, 117). Nevertheless, seeing parodic art as a mere self-absorbed game of societies that do not want to face or deal with their past and prefer “to live in a perpetual present” (1883, 125) is to obviate that postmodern films do indeed try to represent history, although in frequently ironic and darkly humorous ways, which can also be remarkably critical. If anything, *The Ballad* shows that the rhetoric of parody has great potential to reveal the kind of misrepresentations that have governed our vision of the American West. Its subversive and contestatory nature is, therefore, undeniable, even if, as Hassan has explained, ultimate truths are never easy to come by in these works (1987, 170).

The two opening segments of *The Ballad*, the title story and “Near Algodones,” set the tone of the movie as they are filled with recognizable elements of traditional Westerns, but the treatment is mostly burlesque. The first begins in Monument Valley—where else?—with Tim Blake Nelson riding a horse and playing a guitar while singing the popular cowboy song “Cool Water.” These early images and rhythms resonate in the audience’s minds with memories of Gene Autry and Roy Rogers, although we soon realize that behind the “hero’s” immaculately white garb and easygoing temperament hides the ego of a ruthless gunslinger. The Coens have great fun showing how Buster outshoots all his adversaries with a cartoonish violence that sometimes recalls the most macabre scenes in Quentin Tarantino (cf. Lalire 2019, 86). Needless to say, much of the irony of this initial story lies in the contrast between Buster’s appearance as the most harmless yokel conceivable—always smiling and singing—and his barbarous behavior during the shootouts. Predictably, though, Buster finally confronts a kind of double of himself—although clad in black—who proves to be a faster draw and shoots him through the forehead. The ending of the chapter overflows with the parodic undertones that suffuse the tale as Buster and the young man in black sing a bittersweet duet called “When a Cowboy Trades his Spurs for Wings,” declaring hope of a place above where people are better, while Buster’s spirit abandons his body and rises to heaven:

An’ at’s where I’m off to, to
 trade my gui-tar for a lyre and
 sing those sweet songs where they
 ain’t no clinkers to sour the spell
 and cain’t no gunplay inter-trude. (Coens 2018, 16)

As Yáñez observes, this opening story is “openly caricaturesque” (n.p.) and undermines some of the clichés and images most widely used in Western



mythology. Gehring is right, however, when he emphasizes that “it takes as much creative talent to both perceive a given structure and then effectively parody it as it does to create a structure in the first place” (1999, 4). Much the same thing can be said about “Near Algodones,” in which James Franco plays the role of a hapless bandit who escapes a lynching—thanks to the intervention of a band of Indians—after an unsuccessful bank robbery, only to face the gallows again for a crime he never committed. Once more, the Coens drain this criminal life of any glory and his acts of any antiestablishment exuberance as the story builds to a scaffold gag line that teases at, but refuses moral redemption for the foolish cowboy. Near the end of his execution, the bank robber looks at the terrified, whimpering convict next to him and in a calm voice and with a somewhat patronizing smile asks: “First time?” (Coens 2018, 29). As mentioned above, these initial chapters set the tone for the anthology as they reflect on the capriciousness of human existence and the ambivalence of generic codes—mostly revealed via “ironic inversions” (Hutcheon 2000, 6)—to excavate topics such as violence, inequity or despair.

Nevertheless, as most reviewers have agreed, it is in the next three sections of the film where the parodic treatment of the materials grows particularly effective as they contain both a revision of the myths, often attended by a reevaluation of them, and a permission for “a nostalgic indulgence whose self-awareness indicates critical distance” (Schniedermann 2022, 70). The protagonists of “Meal Ticket,” “All Gold Canyon,” and “The Gal Who Got Rattled” may seem as foreign to our experience as those in the first two segments; still, they come across as much more humane and cordial than the flat and cartoonish characters in the opening tales. Liam Neeson as a traveling Irish impresario and Tom Waits as a dedicated gold prospector deliver performances that are not only highly convincing, but also convey profound messages without uttering more than a handful of lines. Tompkins has shown how distrustful Westerns are of language and domesticity (1992: 49-50), and how that paucity of dialogue opens up space for human actions and gestures that speak volumes about people’s feelings and mental dilemmas. In “Meal Ticket,” for instance, the taciturn showman played by Neeson and the legless and armless “Artist” working under his care—played by Harry Melling—rarely converse; however, when their business revenues begin to decline, their faces and interactions reveal their darkening thoughts and dread of the future. Much of the irony in this story derives from the discrepancies between the Artist’s gorgeously-voiced and exultant declamations of Shakespeare, Shelley, and Lincoln’s addresses and the reactions from their uncouth and illiterate audiences. But the occasional dark humor in the tale turns truly sinister when the viewers realize that it is a rooster that will cause the impresario to put an end to the Artist’s show—and his life (cf. Podhoretz 2018, 39). “All Gold Canyon” is a chapter inspired by a short story of the same title by Jack London, and indeed the audience soon discover clear traces of the original in it—the pioneering spirit, the greed, the suspicion that something may go wrong, etc. Nevertheless, once again, the Coens play with and distort some of those original themes and ideas by giving them a comic twist that shows the moral ambivalence of certain aspirations. For Paul McDonald, though, this dark humor is not so much a destructive, nihilistic force driving us to pure cynicism but, rather, a constructive



and affirmative one that helps to interrogate—and even provide answers to—crises of “values and representations” (2010, 20).

THE CRUCIAL IMPORTANCE OF PERIPHERAL PERSPECTIVES

In the second epigraph to this article, Dana Stevens maintains that in *The Ballad* the Coen brothers can be seen to demystify some of the common archetypes and codes of the genre, and to refashion some of the “familiar Western plotlines” through peculiar viewpoints (2018, n.p.). Obviously, the fact that they decided to shoot a portmanteau film encompassing different stories helped them a great deal in pursuing this second goal, since the contexts and the participants in each of the segments vary substantially. It should also have become evident in the discussion above of “Meal Ticket” and “All Gold Canyon” that the Coens feel much more sympathy for the lonesome underdogs in these incipient societies than for the heroes. Edward Said has been one of the most consummate defenders of the importance of representing “humane marginality” in works of art—and criticism—precisely as a “counter-practice of interference” against the hegemony of cultural myths (1983, 157). Like other theorists of postmodernism (Hassan, Lyotard, Wilde, etc.), he is fully aware of the power of alternative micronarratives to challenge and delegitimize the values and conventions that managed to dominate certain histories and arts. This shift of interest toward more marginal and often conflicting versions of particular contexts is vital not only because it reveals the constructed nature of the codes governing a genre but, moreover, it also helps to dwell upon the social and moral values underpinning those societies (cf. Hutcheon 2000, 5). In this regard, Jake Coyle has pointed out that *The Ballad* “corrals a stampede of Western archetypes and clichés only to invert, distort and deliriously amplify them,” but this is only the start, since its revisions of “old Western myths” usually come in the form of “morality tales” (2018, n.p.). Although making such a claim may sound a bit overblown—given the above-mentioned ambiguity and open-ended character of the stories—it is important to realize that “The Coens’ work is justified because it uses humor to challenge our philosophies and certainties, whether spiritual or political” (McGrath 2019, 45).

In all likelihood, the two stories in which the Coens’ interest in representing unusual perspectives of the West in their anthology film is clearer are “The Gal Who Got Rattled” and “The Mortal Remains,” which, although bleak in their conclusions, incorporate engrossing insights into the human condition. As Koresky surmises in his review of the film, the duo “may see the writing on the wall, and acknowledge American history’s cycles of brutality and idiocy, but they’re not ready to give in just yet” (2018, n.p.). “The Gal,” as the title suggests, focuses on the adventures of Alice, a “young little lady” heading West on a wagon train to meet her husband-to-be in Oregon. The fact that the segment explores the experiences of a woman in a prevalently masculine microworld is already innovative enough in a Western (cf. Tompkins 1992, 61-65), but, furthermore, the episode offers glimpses of loyalty and romance which contrast with the otherwise brutal context. Unfortunately, despite the devotion and protection offered by one of the trail guides—superbly played by



Bill Heck—during the journey, Alice comes to a sardonic end when she and the other guide come across an Indian party and she is compelled to fulfil the frontier rule of “saving the last bullet for yourself”: “He puts his finger on her forehead. ‘You put it right there so’s ya cain’t miss.’” (Coens 2018, 89). Most reviewers have agreed that, besides being the longest section in the film, “The Gal” delves into topics which are rather unusual in the genre—anxiety, frailty, love or kindness—as most of the turns in the plot are perceived from the perspective of a young woman. The closing chapter of the hypothetical storybook, “The Mortal Remains,” is the most philosophical and also dialogical of all the segments, as it depicts three very different characters—a talkative Frenchman, the wife of a preacher, and a fur trapper—riding a stagecoach to Fort Morgan, Colorado. If “The Gal” is seen to give a nod at Raoul Walsh’s *The Big Trail* (1930), “The Mortal Remains” reverberates with echoes from John Ford’s classic *Stagecoach*, although, as Podhoretz has noted, “this one is more Sartre than John Ford” (2018, 39). And, indeed, the story captures the intense exchanges between the three travelers, each of whom narrates passages of their life stories and then all quarrel about the true nature of human beings. Once again, the Coen brothers lose sight of the more habitual Western topics and let the characters consider more transcendental issues. The threesome, however, are accompanied on their ride by two skeptical bounty hunters—played by Brendan Gleeson and Jonjo O’Neill—who counterpoint the travelers’ deep ruminations about life and mortality with comments and songs that mostly reveal the pointlessness of all those reflections. The disturbing ending of the episode—and of the film—suggests that the iconic Western stagecoach may be playing here “something of a stand-in for the mythological boat that crosses the River Styx into Hades” (Lalire 2019, 86).

Although it is conspicuous that the last two segments of *The Ballad* reflect much more explicitly the Coens’ intention of exploiting the advantages of multi-perspectivism to go on interrogating and subverting some of the codes of the genre, there is little doubt that the other chapters also do the same. If as Hassan and others have maintained, one of the aims of postmodern peripheral perspectives is precisely to drift away from unique truths and a “world fixed and found” (1987, 157), then it is clear that stories such as “Near Algodones” and “Meal Ticket” are intent on pursuing that objective. Even if bank robbers and traveling showmen may be among the conventional fixtures in Western mythology, entangling them in unusual situations allows the audience to see customs and hierarchies from a very different angle. It is no wonder, in this regard, that several theorists of postmodernism should highlight the clear confluences existing between some of their disquisitions about contemporary art works and the proposals put forth by feminist critics, also enthralled and preoccupied by the necessity of alternative perspectives (Hutcheon 1989, 20-21).



CLOSING REMARKS

Some viewers and reviewers of *The Ballad* have complained that, despite the gorgeous and nuanced elements of filmmaking in the movie, they were disconcerted by the significant variations in mood and subject (see Sorondo 2018, n.p.). As the analysis above has shown, there is indeed a great deal of diversity and heterogeneity across the six tales that were written by the directors over a period of more than twenty years. There has also been an intense debate about whether the film should be watched as a six-part TV series—as Netflix probably intended—or they should be enjoyed in one single sitting, as the filmmakers thought. Although critics have considered the pros and cons of both options, they have generally agreed that trying to simulate the theatrical experience, that is, watching it all at once and without being distracted by any interferences is much more recommendable (cf. Podhoretz 2018, 39). This is so for two main reasons: on the one hand, despite the apparent diversity of the settings and the disparity of topics covered in each case, one can still speak of a single, underlying worldview of the American West present in all the segments; on the other hand, and perhaps more importantly bearing in mind the aims of this article, all the tales seem to share a number of postmodern techniques that can be said to determine their purpose. In Hutcheon's words, "postmodern film is that which paradoxically wants to challenge the outer borders of cinema and wants to ask questions (though rarely offer answers) about ideology's role in subject-formation and in historical knowledge" (1989, 117).

The key aim of this article has been to show how the use of a number of postmodern techniques is integral to the kind of effects that the Coen brothers want to achieve in *The Ballad*. For example, it has been noted that the duo are extremely fond of including references to other artistic works—novels, cartoons, etc.—connected with the American West. As Hallet and other scholars have maintained, this incorporation of intermedial references and representations (both intratextual and extratextual) may "affect many levels and dimensions of the meaning" of a postmodern work (Hallet 2015, 612). In the case of *The Ballad*, it was clear that these intertextual references served the dual purpose of providing unity to the omnibus film and problematizing some of the clichés prevailing in Western narratives. Assisted by the theories developed by experts such as Gehring and Hutcheon, it has also been demonstrated that the use of parody is essential to substantiate the kind of critique—both formal and ideological—that the movie makes of conventions and values associated with the Western mythology. As Gehring states, "because parody is based on triggering a viewer's prior knowledge of a given genre or auteur, it is naturally important to showcase early on (through icons) which particular subject has been nominated for the user-friendly hot spot" (1999, 10). To a great extent, this is what the analysis above has tried to accomplish. Finally, this contribution has also dwelt upon the importance of including multiple perspectives in an art work in order to puncture some of the hegemonic hierarchies and values in a given genre. Perhaps the words of one of the bounty hunters—or reapers—in the closing segment of the film may serve to illuminate this view:



You know the story, but people can't get enough of them, the familiar stories, like little children. Because they connect the stories to themselves, I suppose, and we all love hearing about ourselves, over and over. So long as the people in the story are—us, but *not* us. Not us at the end, especially—the Midnight Caller gets *him*, not *me*... I'll live forever..." (Coens 2018, 111; italics in original)

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“AND THERE IS HOPE ON THE ROAD”: *NOMADLAND*’S AMERICAN WEST

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ABSTRACT

Jessica Bruder’s *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-first Century* (2017) and Chloé Zhao’s *Nomadland* (2020) display a contemporary phenomenon which is growing in America, especially in the most western states: people who “choose” the road and mobility as a way of life, thus becoming nomads. The aim of this paper is to reflect on the topic of the American road within this book and movie, on its real and mythical sides, and on issues of mobility. This will inevitably lead to consider the contemporary American West, here too in its real and mythical features. Bearing in mind the strong connection between the American road and the American West, *Nomadland* contributes to a reimagination and a rethinking of American mobility.

KEY WORDS: American Road, American West, Mobility, Nomadism

“AND THERE IS HOPE ON THE ROAD”: EL OESTE AMERICANO DE *NOMADLAND*

RESUMEN

Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-first Century (2017) de Jessica Bruder y *Nomadland* de Chloé Zhao (2020) muestran un fenómeno contemporáneo que está creciendo en América, especialmente en los estados más occidentales: personas que “eligen” el camino y la movilidad como forma de vida, convirtiéndose así en nómadas. El objetivo de este trabajo es reflexionar sobre el tema de la carretera americana dentro de este libro y película, sobre sus aspectos reales y míticos, y sobre cuestiones de movilidad. Esto llevará inevitablemente a considerar el Oeste americano contemporáneo, aquí también en sus características reales y míticas. Teniendo en cuenta la fuerte conexión entre la carretera americana y el oeste americano, *País Nómada* y *Nomadland* contribuyen a una reimaginación y un replanteamiento de la movilidad americana.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Carretera americana, Oeste americano, Movilidad, Nomadismo

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Considered as a subgenre of travel writing, the American road narrative has sprung and evolved as a quintessentially American genre, in which the road trip, particularly journeys embarked on motorized vehicles, represents opportunity, reinvention, and escape. The end of the road trip suggests the encounter with a better reality or, if that is not the case, the road is still there to be travelled, thus, once more, perpetuating the idea of opportunity.

Furthermore, the American road trip gives Americans the chance to exert the so praised American spirit of restlessness, something that is considered distinctive of the American character, as already, in 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner, with his Frontier Thesis, was strongly advocating: “He would be a rash prophet who should assert that the expansive character of American life has now entirely ceased. Movement has been its dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise” (Turner 1893). In the introduction of *The Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing* (2009), the importance of travel and its connection to the American identity is emphasized:

Travel and the construction of American identity are intimately linked. This connection undergirds commonplace descriptions of America as a nation of immigrants and a restless populace on the move ... American travel writing, like travel itself, is constitutive, a tool of self- and national fashioning that constructs its object even as it describes it. (Bendixen and Hamera 2009, 1)

Travel and its undeniable characteristic – movement – are at the basis of the American nation. Travel and movement have generated “a restless populace on the move”, as if they had created a specific breed. For Americans, every sort of opportunity could be attained through change, through movement. To move meant to hopefully get new opportunities, at least in idealistically terms. This is the core of the American journey, and, later on, of the American road trip: opportunity.

The purpose of this paper is to reflect upon the American road – and its connection to the American West – and on contemporary nomads by focusing on Jessica Bruder’s nonfiction account *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century* (2017) and, also, taking into account its film adaptation (2020), written, produced and directed by Chloé Zhao.

Nomadland displays a contemporary phenomenon which is growing in America, especially, but not uniquely, in the western states. This phenomenon manifested itself after the 2008 economic and financial collapse which made the lives of Americans hard to sustain, thus leading them to choose the road as a place to live. Jessica Bruder had been road tripping the American West with her van, driving 15.000 miles for three years. She had been meeting and interviewing van dwellers and nomads, trying, in this way, to understand better not only this phenomenon, but also the nomad lifestyle. As Bruder states in an interview for *The Amberst Student*:

I feel like when you immerse with a population, you’re there all the time and you get to become part of the furniture . . . I wanted to be around 24/7. I wanted to be there at night. I wanted to learn just everything I could. So for me, immersion



was definitely the way to go. It wasn't the idea that I could somehow merge with and become part of this population. The idea was if I really wanted to be a faithful chronicler, I would interview people but I would also observe them. And I would learn in both ways. (Picciotto 2021)

Bruder's immersive style has resulted in a realistic and poignant chronicle, in which myths and realities intermingle. Chloé Zhao's movie is based on Bruder's book. However, the film adaptation focuses more strongly on Fern, a fictional character interpreted by Frances McDormand. The movie also portrays real nomads, such as Linda May, Bob Wells and Swankie.

Bruder starts her book with two epigraphs which deserve attention. The first one is part of Leonard Cohen's song "Anthem" (1992): "There is a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in". The second epigraph is from an anonymous commenter in the journal *Arizona Daily Sun*: "The capitalists don't want anyone living off their economic grid". Those epigraphs are a synthesis of what the book will show; Bruder's voice interweaving with that of the nomads'. Cohen's words suggest hope, despite the suffering and difficulties; whereas, the second epigraph is a clear critique of the capitalist system. There is the road, there is hope, but there is also an economic, political and financial system which has failed and which has ignited a phenomenon like that of nomadism to spread.

In the Foreword, Bruder highlights:

THERE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN ITINERANTS, drifters, hobos, restless souls. But now, in the second millennium, a new kind of wandering tribe is emerging. People who never imagined being nomads are hitting the road. They're giving up traditional houses and apartments to live in what some call "wheel estate" – vans, secondhand RVs, school buses, pickup campers, travel trailers, and plain old sedans. They are driving away from the impossible choices that face what used to be the middle class. (2017, xii)

Due to the Great Recession, many Americans found themselves in a difficult economic situation: "in a time of flat wages and rising housing costs, they have unshackled themselves from rent and mortgages as a way to get by. They are surviving America" (Bruder 2017, xiii). Having decided not to be designated as "homeless", but merely as "houseless", these new American nomads have chosen "a life on wheels" (2017, xiii), working at seasonal jobs for a living and experiencing the road as their home. Furthermore, Bruder underscores the nomads' longing for something more than mere survival. This yearning is perceptible in the following quote:

Being human means yearning for more than subsistence. As much as food or shelter, we require hope. And there is hope on the road. It's a by-product of forward momentum. A sense of opportunity, as wide as the country itself. A bone-deep conviction that something better will come. It's just ahead, in the next town, the next gig, the next chance encounter with a stranger. (2017, xiii)

This paragraph is a clear invocation of the myth of the open road. The road trope owes its creation to Walt Whitman's poem "Song of the Open Road" (1856),



part of the collection *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman attributes to the open road, and to travel itself, positive qualities. The American road came to be seen as a place of freedom, independence, equality, observation and discovery. Moreover, Whitman also considers the road as a place immersed in Nature or, at least, as a place in which Man can still find the possibility to connect with Nature (Whitman 1856, section 4). As Gordon E. Slethaug claims in “Mapping the Trope: A Historical and Cultural Journey” (2012), “He [Whitman] invests the road with a philosophical and religious aura that becomes a recognizable part of the image. ... the road is the subject of meditation, a repository of wisdom, a participant in communication and a social equalizer” (2012, 16). Whitman created a solid, strong, and idealized image of the American road. This transcendental aura around the American road will continue to hold a great power. To give an example, in William Least Heat-Moon’s nonfictional road book *Blue Highways: A Journey into America* (1982), the open road is described as “a beckoning, a strangeness, a place where a man can lose himself” (Heat-Moon 1982, 1). In a similar manner, this lure of the open road is reiterated in *Nomadland*. Contemporary vandwellers, wanderers, and nomads see the road as an opportunity to change their current situations and as a way to create a new sense of community. However, their longing for opportunities in the American road is not a complete deliberate choice. Hence, the paradox. The freedom that they proclaim, in their choice of undertaking a life on the road, is not a totally free choice, since it stems from the unbearable life conditions caused by the American system: “They are surviving America” (Bruder 2017, xiii). Living on the edges of American society represents their last opportunity and their way to find “common understanding, a kinship . . . a glimpse of utopia” (2017, xiii). This recalls the Puritans’ early hopes in the New World.

21st century nomads work at seasonal jobs in order to economically maintain themselves. There are different kinds of jobs available for itinerants, though the conditions offered are anything but good. Around this spreading nomadic phenomenon, Amazon¹ has been able to create its own profit. In concomitance with the housing crash in 2008, Amazon launched a specific job program called CamperForce. The program has been only discontinued this year, but, since 2008 until 2022 it has been at work. Its objective was to recruit vandwellers, RVers and nomads for short seasonal jobs, and to employ them at their warehouses, called “fulfillment centers”. On Amazon official website, CamperForce job offers were advertised and the rhetoric used was quite captivating, perpetuating the idea of being on the road and of experiencing adventure. However, CamperForce is not an easy job:

¹ Amazon.com, Inc. is the largest online retailer, founded by Jeff Bezos, in 1994, in Bellevue, Washington, and, originally created as an online commerce of books. As Bruder explains in the book, CamperForce is a specific program created by Amazon: “. . . a labor unit made up of nomads who work as seasonal employees at several of its warehouses, which the company calls “fulfillment centers,” or FCs. Along with thousands of traditional temps, they’re hired to meet the heavy shipping demands of “peak season,” the consumer bonanza that spans the three to four months before Christmas” (Bruder 2017, 45).



The workers' shifts last ten hours or longer, during which some walk more than fifteen miles on concrete floors, stooping, squatting, reaching, and climbing stairs as they scan, sort, and box merchandise. When the holiday rush ends, Amazon no longer needs CamperForce and terminates the program's workers. They drive away in what managers cheerfully call a "taillight parade". (Bruder 2017, 45)

Being on the road has a cost. Amazon CamperForce provides jobs which are usually very tough. Considering also that the nomads' average age is not young, these seasonal jobs prove to be prejudicial for their health. This policy to hire older people is also common to other jobs, like the sugar beet harvest. One of the workcampers interviewed by Bruder – David Roderick – has explained why companies prefer older people, and, mainly, it is because managers feel that they can trust elderly people, knowing that, for almost all their lives, they have worked hard: ““They love retirees because we're dependable. We'll show up, work hard, and are basically slave labor”” (Bruder 2017, 60). It is, with no doubt, an attitude based on exploitation. They do not only know that they can work hard, but that they are dependable, that they need that job. Thus, they will do whatever is necessary to work properly and receive a retribution, even if small. Another workcamper, Phil DePeal, has even compared his job at Amazon CamperForce to the Army, thus stressing the toughness of the job (Bruder 2017, 62). This policy to hire retirees or older people has also been defined by Monique Morrissey, an economist at the Economic Policy Institute, as “the first-ever reversal in retirement security in modern U.S. history” (Bruder 2017, 62), foreseeing a worsening in the next generations regarding the retirement issue.

Linda May, one of the vandweller interviewed by Jessica Bruder, was contemplating to apply again for a seasonal job at CamperForce when she meets Bruder, but she then changed her mind, given the fact that the previous year she “ended up with a repetitive motion injury from using the handheld barcode scanner. It left behind a visible mark, a grape-sized lump on her right wrist. Even worse was what she could not see: a searing pain that radiated the length of her right arm, from thumb to wrist, through elbow and shoulder, ending in her neck” (Bruder 2017, 9). Those jobs, advertised and promoted in the most positive light, are causing chronic and serious injuries. Despite this, vandwellers continue hitting the road. On the one hand, they are drawn by the idea of the open road; on the other hand, out of necessity. This also reveals another paradox: contemporary nomads long for freedom, from being unchained from a failed society, though they are still bound to it, namely considering the fact that they are working for capitalistic companies, like Amazon.

At the time of Bruder's interview, Linda May is ready to get back on the road, working, for her third summer, as a campground host, at Hanna Flat, in San Bernardino County (California). Campground hosting is another widespread job among nomads. In a similar way to Amazon CamperForce's ads, campground hosting is promoted in an attractive way:

Ads for the job splashed with photos of glittering creeks and wildflowers-choked meadows . . . “Get paid to go camping!” cajoles a recruiting banner for American Land & Leisure, another company that hires camp hosts. Below the headline are



testimonials: ‘Our staff says: ‘Retirement has never been this fun!’ ‘We’ve developed lifelong friendship,’ ‘We’re healthier than we’ve been in years.’ (Bruder 2017, 6)

With promises of closer contacts with Nature, this picturesque description is overturned by the actual reality of the job which, for instance, does not provide any type of warranty: vandwellers can be fired at any time (Bruder 2017, 23). Another frustrating aspect of the job is that, in general, they work more than they expected, and they do not receive more money for that extra job. Bruder reports some of the employees’ complaints and the situation appears indeed anything but positive. Some of them even complain of not “being provided with water while working in the heat” (Bruder 2017, 24). California Land Management is one of the companies that hires seasonal workers under these poor conditions. In the book, Bruder discloses how she has written to the company, recounting the vandwellers’ tough experiences at the camping sites, and, in response, Eric Mart, the company’s president, has denied everything reported by Bruder (Bruder 2017, 25).

Linda May, and her friend Sylvianne Delmars, also a vandweller, have not complained about the situation and the conditions of their jobs as campground hosts (Bruder 2017, 23). On the contrary, they are enthusiastic since they feel that they can finally be free from their previous restrictive reality: “Linda was ready to feel her world opening up again after it had shrunk to the size of a sofa. For too long, she’d been without her accustomed freedom, that accelerated rush of newness and possibility that comes with the open road. It was time to go” (Bruder 2017, 10). The lure of the open road is felt by Linda May. She has always been a hard-working and self-reliant woman – working at different jobs and raising two kids on her own – and, even if working at seasonal jobs is not the best situation for a sixty-four-year-old woman, she sees it as a way to be independent, living in her own space, and to be free (Bruder 2017, 27). Bruder describes Linda May’s trailer, called “the Squeeze Inn”, as having “the same interior length as the covered wagon that carried Linda’s own great-great-great-grand mother across the country more than a century ago” (2017, 4). Moved by a sense of opportunity – a sense conveyed by the vastness of the country, linked to the promise of change – Linda’s predecessors headed West in search of a better life. Linda, with her Squeeze Inn, is a modern version of early migrants in the American West, almost as if she was perpetuating a tradition.

Likewise, Sylvianne Delmars, sixty years old, has embraced her new nomadic life. She has worked in several different fields: as a waitress, in a corporate healthcare, in retail, acupuncture, and catering (Bruder 2017, 16). Her choice to live on the road was prompted by a series of circumstances: “her car stolen, her wrist broken (no insurance), and a house in New Mexico that she couldn’t sell” (Bruder 2017, 15). She also explains how it felt the first time that she slept in a car, feeling that she was “a horrible failure or a homeless person” (Bruder 2017, 15). Then, she got used to that new life. She describes her nomadic life in the following terms:

On her blog, Sylvianne Wanders, she also characterized the transition like this: “A not-quite-retirement-age baby boomer gives up her sticks ’n bricks former miner’s cabin, her three part-time jobs, and her attachment to any illusion of security this tattered remnant of the American Dream might still bring to her tortured soul. The



goal: to hit the road for a life of nomadic adventure as the Tarot reader–Shamanic Astrologer–Cosmic Change Agent she was always meant to be”. (Bruder 2017, 16)

In this description, the American Dream is called into question, proving to be illusive, something that was supposed to bring stability, but that, in reality, has mainly tormented people. Between her illusive life and a nomadic one, Silvianna chose the latter. She even wrote a song to honor her new life, entitled “vandweller anthem” (Bruder 2017, 16-17), in which she calls herself “Queen of the Road”. Through the song, she mainly praises freedom and continuous movement, which allows her to reconnect with the Earth. In *Wanderers: Literature, Culture and the Open Road* (2022), David Brown Morris states that: “Wandering – aimless movement without a destination – is an antidote to confinement and takes the sinuous shape of the trail, winding and unwinding, with “nowhere to go” (2022, 3). This recalls Silvianna’s attitude, since she uses wandering as a way to cut off with a restrictive and consumerist society. In fact, that is what she vindicates in her song: “I’ve finally cut the cord / Unlike society’s consumer hordes” (Bruder 2017, 17).

As mentioned previously, the increased escalation of nomadism in America occurred as a consequence of the Great Recession. However, even earlier than 2008, nomads were already roaming in America. In 2003, author Richard Grant published *Ghost Riders: Travels with American Nomads*, a book in which he describes the nomadism phenomenon, also reporting some specific nomads’ stories. Grant stresses how the phenomenon is becoming more and more common among retired and old people, those that he labels as “the Eisenhower generation” (Grant 2003, 287). Basically, Grant explains that this generation is, generally speaking, moved by a feeling of rebellion against how the American society views retirees, and, on the whole, regarding the way in which aging is considered:

as a time of slowing down and solidifying, of moving about less and less until you stop moving altogether. The Eisenhower generation has staged a mass rebellion against this model of retirement. Some thirty million retirees have left behind their homes, families and communities and struck out for new sociological frontiers . . . After a working life spent paying off mortgages, raising families and accumulating possessions, they were called by the other American dream – ‘burn down the house and saddle up the horse,’ as Mike Hatfield described it. Or more precisely, sell the house and buy an RV with the proceeds. (Grant 2003, 287-288)

The acknowledged image of the American picket fence² – representing stability and the fulfillment of the American Dream, in its materialistic side –

² “The American Dream has long been bound up with America’s politics and political ideology, and for the most part the relationship has been harmonious. When in the 1920s ownership of a single-family house became woven into the dream as one of its central components, it was for deliberately political purposes: the dream house would become the standard material artifact accepted as fulfillment of the dream-myth. The rapid expansion of single-family housing after mid-century, by accelerating the numbers of Americans realizing the dream, thus became a principal mechanism of American political stability and economic prosperity. And for the remainder of the century this



has become a nightmare for most Americans who, in counter-response, as Grant has underscored, have chosen the other American Dream, based on freedom and movement.

Going back to Bruder's books, the reader reaches another key moment when Bruder meets and introduces Bob Wells, a well-known nomad, living in a van since 1995. In 2005, Wells created the website CheapRVLiving.com, where he gathered information for people who wanted to lead a nomadic life like his (Bruder 2017, 69). Wells is also the organizer of the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous, the largest gathering of nomads which takes place every year, in January, in the desert close to Quartzsite, Arizona (Bruder 2017, 140). In an interview with Bruder, Wells's point of view recalls Grant's words, specifically regarding the American Dream: "When I moved into the van, I realized that everything that society had told me was a lie – that I had to get married and live in a house with a white picket fence and go to work, and then be happy at the very end of my life, but be miserable until then," he told me in an interview. "I was happy for the first time ever living in my van" (Bruder 2017, 73). Thus, Wells highlights that there could be more opportunities to be happy, detaching from a system which has proved to be a failure: "By moving into vans and other vehicles, he suggested, people could become conscientious objectors to the system that had failed them. They could be reborn into lives of freedom and adventure" (Bruder 2017, 74). There is the possibility of a new life, different from the previous restrictive one, and there is an obvious awareness when choosing a mobile life. Bruder, then, stresses that this mobile attitude has some connection with the mid-1930 migration West, during the years of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, thus emphasizing that contemporary nomads are somewhat the descendants of an established practice in the American West: that of moving. As Bruder discloses, the 1930s witnessed the first major mass production of house trailers and many Americans, facing economic distress, "chose" a life on wheels:

At the time, millions of dispossessed Americans shared the sentiments Bob later echoed. They'd upheld their end of the social contract, yet the system had let them down. Some of those people had a revelation – that they could escape the stranglehold of rent by moving into house trailers. Becoming nomads. Getting free . . . We are rapidly becoming a nation on wheels," wrote one prominent sociologist in *The New York Times* in 1936. "Today hundreds of thousands of families have packed their possessions into traveling houses, said goodbye to their friends, and taken to the open roads . . . [soon] more families will take to the road, making an important proportion of our people into wandering gypsies". (Bruder 2017, 74-75)

Nevertheless, Bob Wells brings attention to the following aspect: the 1930s migrants – also known as the Okies – hit the road in search of new opportunities,

arrangement worked. Indeed, it embodied all the hallmarks of a highly successful myth: it was taken for granted, as a bedrock tenet of American citizenship and culture, that to have that single-family house was to fulfill the dream, and it was assumed that to fulfill the dream was to have "made it" in America" (Archer 2014, 8).



with a desire to escape a constraining reality and looking for something better, though hoping to return, one day, to a stable life (Bruder 2017, 78). Bob Wells, on the other hand, views the present situation through different lenses: “Rather he aspired to create a wandering tribe whose members could operate outside of – or even transcend – the fraying social order: a parallel world on wheels” (Bruder 2017, 79). Therefore, he is not considering nomadism as a temporary solution, but as another way of living.

All in all, even if there is a distinction between the contemporary nomadism and the 1930s migration, vandwellers see themselves as coming from a long tradition. Don Wheeler, another nomad interviewed by Bruder, has been living in a 1990 Airstream and working at an Amazon CamperForce, in Oregon. He claims the following:

workcampers are modern mobile travelers who take temporary jobs around the U.S. in exchange for a free campsite – usually including power, water and sewer connections – and perhaps a stipend. You may think that workamping is a modern phenomenon, but we come from a long, long tradition. We followed the Roman legions, sharpening swords and repairing armor. We roamed the new cities of America, fixing clocks and machines, repairing cookware, building stone walls for a penny a foot and all the hard cider we could drink. We followed the emigration west in our wagons with our tools and skills, sharpening knives, fixing anything that was broken, helping clear the land, roof the cabin, plow the fields and bring in the harvest for a meal and pocket money, then moving on to the next job. Our forebears are the tinkers. (Bruder 2017, 46-47)

Therefore, Wheeler highlights that their lifestyles have roots in the past, having taken inspiration by the emigration West. Their ancestors are the tinkers, people who have always been working in different places and have always been on the move. As reported in an article from *The Guardian*, contemporary vandwellers, workcampers, and hoboes regard themselves as pioneers, outlaws, and cowboys (Brooks 2021). To a certain extent, a correlation between the Old West’s pioneers and the contemporary nomads in the West can be identified. In that experience of contact with the frontier and the western territories, pioneers got away from civilization and completed a process of rebirth: “The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization” (Turner 1893). Turner considered that the frontier experience was the event that had marked American history, and Americans in general, given the fact that it also provided them with some specific characteristics, among which “coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness”, “that restless, nervous energy, that dominant individualism, . . . and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom” (Turner 1893). Contemporary nomads quite fit in Turner’s description, mainly for the aspects referring to individualism and optimism, stemming from freedom. These new nomads can be read as the “new pioneers”, moving away from society, from an Old America which has failed them. They seek to experience rebirth through the open road. Bruder notices that the conversation with workcampers was most of the time marked by optimism, despite the sufferings: “Other stories were less chirpy, but still they emphasized the thrill



and camaraderie of the open road, sidestepping the challenges that had driven so many people to radically reimagine their lives” (Bruder 2017, 163). Besides, she also emphasizes how “positive thinking, after all, is an all-American coping mechanism, practically a national pastime” (Bruder 2017, 164). Not only nomads themselves depict their lives on wheels as a bright narrative, but also the media portray their lifestyles as something hilarious. In this way, the reasons that prompt them to choose the road are not only hidden and neglected, but it also happens that their struggles get related to that very same hilarious life on the road.

Nomadland's film adaptation is more focused on Fern's life, a fictional character. Fern comes from Empire, Nevada, and she has lost everything (Zhao 2020). The story of small-town Empire is recounted by Bruder in the book. Empire was a small factory village of three hundred people, “wholly owned by United States Gypsum, the company that makes Sheetrock. The place was a throwback to the much-romanticized heyday of American manufacturing” (Bruder 2017, 39). Almost all the Empire's inhabitants were working there, included Fern's husband (Zhao 2020). On December 2, 2010, due to the recession, United States Gypsum closed, and, with it, also the small town. Even Empire's ZIP code was erased. Empire's residents were basically forced to leave and the village was fenced with chain-link. To make things even worse, Fern's husband died (Zhao 2020). Thus, within a few years, Fern lost her husband, her job as a teacher, and her homeplace. However, as actress Frances McDormand states in an interview: “Once she (Fern) hits the road, the possibilities become open, and her sense of self sufficiency is tested” (TIFF 2020). The road does not only provide Fern with a new purpose, but it becomes a way to test her mettle. The road becomes her homeplace. It represents her freedom and self-discovery. During the film, Fern's grief and suffering are perceived, as well as some of the difficulties she has to endure on her nomadic life. The movie opens with Fern leaving Empire, and crying while embracing one of her husband's belongings, this suggesting grief and hopelessness (Zhao 2020). Fern leaves with her van, in the direction of Desert Rose RV Park, in Fernley, Nevada, to work at an Amazon CamperForce. The landscape is barren, and full of snow, almost corresponding to Fern's feelings. In Desert Rose, Fern meets for the first time Linda May, and, with her, she encounters other nomads, thus approaching and embracing her new life. Linda May invites Fern to participate at the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous, in Quartzsite, Arizona (Zhao 2020). Fern accepts the invitation and travels toward Arizona. The landscape gets here a different color and shape. The camera's focus shoots the road and the landscape in a meaningful way: it promises hope and a path towards healing.

At the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous, Fern recounts her story of loss and grief to Bob Wells (Zhao 2020). In his opinion, hitting the road and becoming a wanderer represents the best option to overcome all the suffering. Living on the road serves as a good opportunity to (re)connect with Nature, something that, in Bob Wells' opinion, will make all the difference to Fern. On the whole, the movie portrays Nature as immense, thus providing a sense of infinity, opportunity, and hope, and the American road is the means that allows this reconnection.

In *American Road Narratives: Reimagining Mobility in Literature and Film* (2015), author Ann Brigham argues that mobility, and, consequently, American



road narratives, have been dealt with in a traditional and more fixed way, almost always understood as rebellion. She provides new insights when approaching road narratives, not only focusing on rebellion and escape: “mobility is not a method of freeing oneself from space, society, or identity but instead the opposite – a mode of engagement” (Brigham 2015, 4). To a certain extent, *Nomadland* holds the promise of the road as an escape; though, in my perspective, the experience here is more about (self)-reinvention: “Road narratives show how mobility is continually invoked and reimagined as a process for transforming subjectivity and space in the wake of larger conflicts” (Brigham 2015, 8). Both the film and the book disclose a complex social phenomenon in which the tough and hard sides of this specific kind of mobility are shown. Zhao and Bruder display the harshness of the contemporary nomadic life: the struggle to work at seasonal jobs at Amazon CamperForce or at the beet harvesting in North Dakota, the poverty of nomads and their loneliness, as well as the problems related to personal hygiene, and, specifically in the book, the perils associated to the life on the road, like, for instance, getting intimidated by passersby:

Living in a white van comes with its own set of challenges, though—what one guy at the RTR called the “creepy factor,” the cultural stereotype that connects them with child molesters and other noxious predators . . . It’s also common for vandwellers – regardless of vehicle color – to get harassed by passersby who assume they’re up to no good. As I write this, one guy in an online forum just recounted waking up after midnight to harassment from strangers who had no reason to bother him. They were shaking his van and yelling “Come on out, you fucking pervert!” and “We’re gonna kick the shit outta you!”. (Bruder 2017, 178)

Notwithstanding this, *Nomadland* invokes and reimagines mobility, since, in their own way, vandwellers engage with their social conflicts through mobility, through the American road. Likewise, space, and in this case mainly the open spaces of the American West, are summoned mostly in a rhetoric instilled with freedom and opportunity. As Chloé Zhao states in “Chloé Zhao on *Nomadland* and the road to self-rediscovery” (2021): “I feel like the American road, that part of the country [the West], and the spirit that’s in that landscape is in the people whose ancestors arrived there. They were always chasing the horizon and wondering what’s beyond it. It’s still there . . .” (Fuller 2021). Thus, even though reality has proved to be harsh, contemporary nomads still see and believe in the promise of the American road, in the promise of the American West as a regenerating and hopeful space, and in the possibility of creating new communities.

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THE WILD, WILD PROMISED LAND OF UPPER SILESIANS: PANNA MARIA AND ITS CULTURAL HERITAGE*

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ABSTRACT

In the mid-19th century, a small number of families from the Upper Silesia region of Poland emigrated to Texas and established Panna Maria, which many historians have identified as the oldest enduring Polish settlement in the United States. The current study focuses on the cultural identity of these settlers and their descendants. It also discusses various aspects of the lasting cultural impact that the Panna Maria story has had on the two areas involved, Texas and Upper Silesia itself. The approach will draw on the theoretical frameworks of cultural and ethnic studies.

KEYWORDS: Cultural Identity, Ethnicity, Panna Maria, Silesia, Polish American

LA MUY SALVAJE TIERRA PROMETIDA DE LOS SILESIANOS:
PATRIMONIO CULTURAL DE PANNA MARIA

RESUMEN

A mediados del siglo XIX, un pequeño número de familias originarias de la región polaca de la Alta Silesia emigraron a Tejas y fundaron Panna Maria, que, para muchos expertos, es el asentamiento más duradero de la inmigración polaca en los Estados Unidos. Este artículo se centra en el estudio de la identidad cultural de estos emigrantes y de sus descendientes. Aquí, también se discuten algunos aspectos de lo que consideramos el largo impacto cultural que la historia de Panna Maria ha tenido en las dos regiones que experimentaron este movimiento migratorio, Tejas y la Alta Silesia. Mi perspectiva se fundamentará en el aparato teórico de los estudios culturales y étnicos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Identidad cultural, Etnicidad, Panna Maria, Silesia, Polaco Americano.



The combination of Silesian/Polish and Texan/American culture led to a surprising degree of cultural and artistic creation. The foundations of this can be traced back to the mid-19th century, when a small number of families hailing from the Polish region of Upper Silesia received an invitation from Father Leopold Moczygamba to establish a new settlement in Texas. Motivated by the promise of a better life, these intrepid pioneers embarked on a grueling two-month journey, culminating in their arrival on December 24, 1854, at a barren and unwelcoming location that they would subsequently call Panna Maria. Beneath the shade of an oak tree, they gathered to celebrate Christmas Mass, an event often regarded as the foundational act of what many historians see as the oldest enduring Polish settlement in the United States.

As Charlton Ryan (1992) notes in his article “From Fact to Myth,” over the years there has been a transformation – or mythologizing – of this settlement, effectively turning the historical events themselves into a myth of origin. With this in mind, one of the aims of the present paper is to reflect on the cultural identity of the Silesian community in America, both the settlers themselves and their descendants, by examining some of the works that derive from the original historical event. In addition, I will discuss a variety of the cultural aspects of the Panna Maria story and the mutual influence that the settlement has had on the two areas involved: Texas/America and Upper Silesia/Poland. To this end, the theoretical frameworks of cultural and ethnic studies will be used. In particular, my interest lies in exploring the complexities of ethnic identity, including the challenges of negotiating dual or hyphenated identities in the context of Panna Maria.

Given the intricacies of these critical approaches, a brief theoretical overview will first be provided, including an exploration of the connection between cultural identity and ethnicity, this being especially useful in such a diverse place as the United States. According to Neil Campbell, “America is a place where different identities mix and collide, an assemblage, a multiplicity, constantly producing and reproducing new selves and transforming old ones and, therefore, cannot claim to possess a single, closed identity with a specific set of values” (2006, 22). As Campbell also notes, no scholarly work can speak for or fully explain all the cultural phenomena that have arisen in such a varied and multilayered context; on the contrary, a wide variety of different or even disjunctive stories constitute the *texture* of America, the *threads* of which may be “diverse, coherent, contrary and competing, crossing and separating, clashing and merging, weaving in and out of one another, forming and de-forming, gathering and fraying all at the same time” (Campbell 2006, 23). Hence, identity in America is a constantly shifting territory, and rather than being a single fixed idea of “Americanness” it is a plural concept that emerges through its very multiplicities, not by means of conformity and closure; a new and convincing definition of cultural identity in the United States, then, is “not based on any true Americanness, any ‘oneness’ of agreed values and history, but the recognition of difference” (2006, 36).

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By the same token, Stuart Hall's work on cultural identity underlines the fact that identities are not fixed or predetermined, but are constructed through a subtle interplay of cultural, social and historical factors. He argues that identity is not something inherent, but instead something that people actively create and negotiate, an approach that challenges essentialist notions of identity. In his article "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Hall explores the complex interplay of cultural identity and the experiences of diaspora communities, shedding light on how these processes shape individuals' sense of self and belonging in an increasingly globalized world; he claims that "[t]here are at least two different ways of thinking about 'cultural identity'; the first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" (1990, 225). A second perspective on the concept of cultural identity by Hall recognizes that "as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute what we really are; or rather – since history has intervened – 'what we have become'" (1990, 225); he adds that "[c]ultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being.' It belongs to the future as much as to the past" (1990, 225).

Looking specifically at the case of diaspora communities, it is notable that cultural identity and ethnicity often overlap, especially when individuals strongly identify with their ethnic group's cultural practices and traditions; as such, ethnicity plays a central role in shaping one's cultural identity. An interesting definition of ethnicity here is provided by John N. Bukowczyk in the article "Polish Americans, Ethnicity and Otherness." His article compares the notion of ethnicity to that of class, and cites English historian E.P. Thompson: "I do not see class as a 'structure,' nor even as a 'category,' but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships... class is a relationship, and not a thing" (qtd. in Bukowczyk 1998, 299). Nonetheless, Bukowczyk's principal claim here is that ethnicity is a more tangible entity than class, in that "it has connoted a set of values and attitudes; customs, practices, usages, and behaviors; identities, consciousness, and meaning which have had, in a sense, a life of their own and, as such, have been transmitted – 'handed down' – across generations" and – as he expresses somewhat poetically – it implies "immutable ties of race, of 'blood'" (1998, 299). Bukowczyk goes on to argue that the concept inevitably encompasses a set of relationships, indeed a broad range of these, which exist "between ethnic groups and the 'larger' (or dominant) society, between ethnic groups and their homeland societies and cultures, between and among persons who consider themselves members of the same ethnic group, and, finally, between ethnic group and ethnic group" (1998, 299).

Turning to the complex issue of identity in America, we might recall Richard Slotkin's observations on the relationship between ethnicity and nationality; in his article "Unit Pride: Ethnic Platoons and the Myths of American Nationality" he reiterates the definition of a nation-state proposed by Anthony D. Smith, Benedict Anderson, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Etienne Balibar, according to which it is a "type of community and culture distinct from earlier forms of social organization like the clan, the tribe, or the premodern commune" (2001, 470); that is, a nation



is an “imagined community” (Anderson qtd. in Slotkin 2001, 470) or a “fictive community” (Balibar and Wallerstein qtd. in Slotkin 2001, 470), one which is not itself based on “long-standing kinship, customary, and face-to-face relations” (Slotkin 2001, 470). Slotkin argues that, in the context of the formation of modern states, it is important to note that these have not typically been constituted by a singular, homogenous cultural group. Instead, modern states have frequently integrated disparate and sometimes even contrasting ethnicities, each possessing its own unique historical trajectory, and in some cases different languages. This phenomenon is underlined by Wallerstein and Balibar (qtd. in Slotkin 2001, 479), who propose that a systematic examination of the history of the modern world reveals a recurrent pattern in which statehood typically precedes the emergence of nationhood; such an observation challenges the prevalent (mis)conception that nationhood precedes statehood. It goes without saying that the concept of nationality as a construct based on fictive ethnicity finds particular relevance when applied to the culturally multifaceted case of the United States.

The story of the Silesian settlers – their difficult situation in the homeland, their particular attachment to tradition and the Catholic faith, and the cultural duality, triality or even quadrality of their descendants – makes them a particularly interesting case for analysis from the perspective of ethnic studies. In order to truly understand their story, some historical details about the *old country*, or rather, the multilinguistic and multicultural region that they considered to be their motherland, must be understood within the turmoil of Europe at that time.

As described by T. Lindsey Baker in *The Early History of Panna Maria* (1975), Poland, one of Europe’s oldest countries, underwent a significant change in A.D. 966 when King Mieszko I adopted Roman Catholicism, thus aligning Poland with Western influences. The country would go on to expand in both size and importance during the Middle Ages to become an influential European power in the Renaissance period. However, internal conflicts and a growing divide between the middle and lower classes and the land-owning nobility weakened Poland’s central government. By the late 18th century, the Polish king enjoyed limited power, and Parliament’s ability to function effectively was hampered by the ability of individual members to veto decisions and to dissolve the assembly with a single vote. Meanwhile, neighboring Prussia, Russia and Austria were strengthening as centralized powers. This situation led to the partitioning of Poland, with the first division occurring in 1773, followed by others in 1793 and 1795. Although a puppet state called “Poland” persisted within the Russian Empire, Poland as a separate entity ceased to exist, and its land and people were divided between Prussia, Russia and Austria.

Upper Silesia, where the founders of Panna Maria lived, while not part of these partitioned provinces, was significantly impacted by these partitions. It had changed hands from Poland to Bohemia in the early 14th century and was ruled by Hungarian kings and Habsburgs until Prussia’s Frederick the Great acquired the territory in 1742. Once Prussia seized control of the majority of the Silesian region, Prussian nobles subjected the native Poles there to serfdom. In addition, Prussian authorities actively encouraged the migration of settlers into the territory and



pursued a policy of Germanization across all aspects of life there. However, the Polish language, rural traditions and the Catholic faith all persisted among the peasantry.

Beginning in 1807, Prussian land reforms in Upper Silesia sought to end serfdom, but imposed costs on peasants, who were required to give up a significant portion of their land to nobles while incurring debts in the form of mortgages. The nobles were also released from their responsibilities to the former serfs, and now restricted their grazing rights, ultimately leaving them in a more challenging economic situation. Moreover, during the 1850s Upper Silesia experienced a significant rise in food prices, leading to increased poverty in the region. On top of that, massive flooding of the River Oder in the 1850s had a devastating impact on the peasants in the region, since the floods struck when the grain was ripe in the fields and potatoes were maturing in the ground, thus causing maximum damage to agriculture. The final straw came in the form of severe epidemics of typhus and cholera that plagued Upper Silesian peasants during the same period.

At this moment, Father Leopold Moczygemba, a Franciscan monk born and raised in the Silesian village of Płużnica and one of five priests working in the newly-created, sprawling diocese of Texas, wrote to members of his family encouraging them to join him in this new land of opportunity and prosperity in the United States. The news spread rapidly. As Baker notes, “[t]he tales about Texas were believed in every respect in that the more difficult circumstances had dulled the natural criticism of the peasants’ normally sharp reason” (1975, 10), and many peasants soon decided to depart for this *promised land* of freedom and abundance in search of a better life.

As historian Andrzej Brożek observes,

[...] the possibility [for the migration] became reality under the influence of factors which may be grouped loosely into three categories: first, objective factors – the absence of the material means of existence at home – which were only felt implicitly by the population; second, those objective factors – social, linguistic and political discrimination—which became a part of the people’s consciousness; third, subjective and even irrational motives (“summed up in the legend about the ‘land of promise’ across the Ocean” 29).” (1973, 21)

As for the voyage itself, the bare facts seem to be provided by Baker (1975, 12-15), who compiled and developed the historical studies of Brożek and Dworaczyk. According to these sources, in early 1854, soon-to-be emigrants from the Opole Regency in Silesia began preparations to leave for Texas, arranging with an agent from a sailing company to facilitate their journey from Silesia to Galveston. The first group of Silesians embarked on this journey in September 1854, traveling by train from the Opole Regency to the port of Bremen. From Bremen, they boarded the vessel “Weser,” arriving in Galveston on December 3, 1854 after a nine-week voyage, and thus finally reaching the New World. Upon their arrival in Galveston, the Silesians sought to contact Father Moczygemba, but he was not there to greet them, and as a consequence they were classified as “from Germany” in the official records. The colonists then followed the Gulf’s coastal plain to Indianola, either by



foot or in hired Mexican carts, which took approximately two weeks; from there they headed inland to San Antonio. After almost three weeks of overland travel, they arrived in San Antonio on December 21; Father Moczygamba met them there and guided them to their future settlement, located fifty-five miles southeast. Upon their arrival at this location – the small plateau situated between two streams known as San Antonio and Cibolo – on December 24, the colonists celebrated a Christmas Mass under a large oak tree, not only as a thanksgiving but also as an entreaty for strength in the face of adversity. They soon gave the settlement the name “Panna Maria,” meaning “Virgin Mary”. One theory about the name’s origin suggests that it was chosen to honor the Virgin’s Immaculate Conception following the corresponding Papal Bull, whereas others attribute the name to Father Moczygamba’s vision of a church in Kraków dedicated to St. Mary surrounded by a great light.

To conclude the historical part of the story of this Silesian migration, it is important to note that the initial wave of migrants was of just 60 families, a total of some 150 people. As Reverend Jacek Przygoda reported (1970, 80-81), three further groups of Silesian pioneers arrived soon after, including 16 families in 1855, 700 peasants later the same year, and about 30 families in 1856.

Bearing in mind the grueling Atlantic crossing, plus what must have seemed like an interminable journey on foot from Galveston to their destiny in Panna Maria – the inhospitable prairie with no refuge in sight – one can easily envisage the hardship involved. Some of the migrants perished at sea and others while walking inland, due either to exhaustion or poisonous bites – from creatures hitherto unknown to them – and they all suffered great hardships in their attempts to survive the early years. According to the factual data collected by the historians mentioned above, and also based on testimonies and autobiographical accounts collected by a number of scholars – Patrycja Nosiadek (2020) and Charlton Ryan (1992) among them – a complex image of these first Silesian settlers in America emerges, one which is particularly appealing to examine and compare with the story of Panna Maria as it has been disseminated as a part of the cultural inheritance of the migration over the ensuing generations.

Before turning to a number of works of fiction based on the narrative of the Silesian settlers in the Lone Star State, it will be instructive to discuss the cultural events that arose from Panna Maria’s unique history. In this way, a thought-provoking connection can be made between the factual data and the forging of the myth; the aforementioned article by Charlton Ryan (1992), “From Fact to Myth”, establishes a useful paradigm here in terms of the way in which this settlement story can be framed. Ryan draws our attention to the kind of changes that crept into the story over time. Having examined numerous historical sources, he deems particularly noteworthy those alterations introduced into the narrative after World War II. It will suffice to list just a few of these. According to the modified version of the story, instead of using ox-drawn covered wagons when travelling inland, the immigrants are said to have carried their belongings on their backs, walking barefoot. Meanwhile, the fact that they were mocked by local people during the journey due to the women’s short dresses and the men’s inadequate clothes disappears from the narrative. Also expunged from the history is the image of the Silesians digging holes



in the ground in search of refuge, struggling with wild creatures, disease, drought, cold and starvation, harassment from neighbors, cowboys and the Ku Klux Klan; instead, they are depicted fighting rattlesnakes and suffering religious persecution, such as the difficulties they encountered when building their church. On the other hand, the picture of them carrying a cross all the way from Poland is emphasized – indeed, the size of this religious artefact increases over time – and references to the oak tree also change, with the tree becoming “historic, memorable, famous, or venerable” (Ryan 1992, 36). As Ryan observes, such variations “only attest to the narrative’s acquiring mythic qualities” (1992, 35); he claims that, although the story of Polish immigrants arriving in Texas does not involve superhuman beings and supernatural events, it still qualifies as a myth of origin in light of the broader definition proposed by Roland Barthes (1957) – that a myth can serve as a communication system through which specific information is conveyed by means of speech or discourse for social purposes. Viewed through this broader lens, the Polish immigration story functions as a myth that narrates how American Poles can explain their presence in Panna Maria. The narrative hence serves the social purpose of affirming the self-identity of Polish Americans and reinforcing their traditions, essentially providing them with a heritage. In this way, the story goes beyond being a simple narrative and defines Polish Americans as a recognizable group.

The interpretation provided by Ryan, and especially his answer to the question of *why* the story changes, goes hand in hand with the adjustment/acculturation/assimilation paradigm which Thomas and Znaniecki have developed in their research (cf. Bukowczyk 1998, 300). Bukowczyk points out that from the work of Thomas and Znaniecki – and from the critical compilation by Irwin Sanders and Ewa Morawska – a broad line of interpretation can be drawn that “summarizes the immigrants’ relationship with the society around them: they describe a progressive succession of ethnic identities – from Poles in America, to American Poles, to Polish-Americans (with the hyphen), to Polish Americans (without the hyphen), and finally to Americans of Polish descent” (1998, 300).

Ryan (1992, 40), in reflecting on the reasons for these alterations, alludes to the celebrations which were held in Panna Maria to commemorate its founding. First, in 1929 there was a commemoration known as the Diamond Jubilee or the Grand Homecoming, the emphasis here being on Polishness/Silesianness and ties to the old country. The following decade, in 1936, a strong focus on Texanness appeared in Panna Maria’s Centennial Pioneer Reunion; Father Leopold Moczygemba’s sacrifices were highlighted, and indeed he was considered by the Texan authorities to be one of the Lone Star State’s heroes. In 1966, some time after World War II and during a widespread surge of national patriotism, a great celebration of Poland’s Christian Millennium and Anniversary of Nationhood took place, first in the White House, with three residents of Panna Maria representing American Polonia, and later that year in Panna Maria itself, with President Johnson himself attending the ceremony of placing a huge stone mosaic of the Black Madonna in the Church of Panna Maria. Ryan stresses the fact that



[...] the focus on Panna Maria's history had been readjusted again. Now American Poles were celebrating their heritage, just as Texas Poles had done in 1936 and as the first descendants had celebrated their Upper Silesian heritage in 1929. And the story of their origin that these American Poles had been telling had been changing to include the new emphasis upon their Americanism. These Polish Americans in attendance at the dedication of the Black Madonna mosaic had learned their American history in American schools, and perhaps for this reason the story of the Poles in America was taking on subtle parallels to the story of America's founding by her Pilgrim Fathers. (1992, 40)

Of note here is that this development of ethnic identity in Panna Maria, with many of its inhabitants recognizing themselves as Americans of Polish descent, did not cease or decline. On the contrary, it has flourished in the 21st century. The Polish Heritage Center Foundation was established in 2011 due to the efforts of Bishop Emeritus John W. Yanta, a descendant of the first Silesian settlers; The Polish Heritage Center was subsequently inaugurated in 2021, and provides an educational experience of the history of Poland, and of the Polish-Texas immigrants in particular. As Lauren Robinson puts it, “[t]he center is proud to be a site that honors Polish history and culture, while sharing with future generations the legacy and traditions left behind by the Polish immigrants to Texas” (2023, 68).

Today's Upper Silesians have also shown a very particular interest in those Americans of Polish descent, often seeing in them the heirs to the ancestors of the whole region. In 2014, marking the 160th anniversary of the first group's emigration to Texas, an exhibition entitled “Texan Poles Yesterday and Today” was organized by the Society of Friends of Sławięcice from Kędzierzyn-Koźle, Poland, in collaboration with the Diocesan Museum in Opole, and in cooperation with the Father Leopold Moczygemba Foundation from San Antonio, USA. The exhibition opened first in March 2014 at the Diocesan Museum in Opole, and since then has been shown in numerous cultural, educational and political centers, the Polish Senate included. Displayed on 21 panels, it seeks to shed light on the history of this emigration, the lives of subsequent generations of emigrants, and the achievements of their contemporary descendants. By using touchscreens, visitors can listen to recordings of interviews with the heirs of these first Silesian families. And the issue of the Polish-Silesian presence in the US population is by no means a marginal one; it is currently estimated that over 200,000 people in the United States are descendants of Silesian emigrants from the 19th century.

Similarly, a documentary produced by the Polish television station Katowice and directed by Dagmara Drzazga, *Panna Maria. Pionierzy i potomkowie (Panna Maria. Pioneers and Descendants)*, was released in 2005. Apart from reporting on the 150th anniversary of the Silesian emigration, Drzazga interviewed four descendants in their homesteads. 15 years later, in 2020, the film's director and cameraman returned to the same place to make a second part of the documentary, *Pokolenia (Generations)*. In this film, its creator attempts to meet with those who had previously been interviewed, and to explore questions relating to their identity, whether their Silesian roots are important to them, and if they still know the language of their



ancestors. He found that all these people continue to feel proud of their origins, cherishing the history of the town and of their own families. A small number do understand Polish, although they struggle to speak it; when they do, they can only do so using the Silesian dialect. Their spiritual guide in the recovery and/or solidification of the cultural identity is Father Franciszek Kurzaj, who himself comes from Silesia and has been the pastor of the Silesians in Texas for many years; Kurzaj is also the main character in the documentary. It is due to his efforts and enthusiasm that, in collaboration with his brother Gerard Kurzaj, the inhabitants of Panna Maria have had a chance to visit the land of their ancestors; so too have members of other Polish-descended communities and parishes in nearby Bandera, Cestohowa, Kosciusko, St. Hedwig, Falls City, Yorktown, San Antonio, Meyersville, Las Gallinas, White Deer, and McCook, these being daughter colonies of the original mother colony of Panna Maria. As many of those interviewed in the documentary state, they hold dear the emotional journeys they made to Silesian villages, the birthplaces of their ancestors, and what moves them in particular seems to have been the visits they made to the graveyards in these villages; they cannot help but feel moved and overwhelmed by finding so many familiar surnames, including their own, on the gravestones.

If we turn to cinematographic works that deal with the topic of the Silesians in America, key are the so-called Silesian Westerns, also known (in parallel to Spaghetti Westerns) as *Kietbasa Westerns*. These were made by Józef Kłyk, a self-taught Polish filmmaker from Pszczyna, Upper Silesia. Having developed a deep passion for cinema from young age, a particular fascination for American movies, chiefly Westerns, greatly influenced his work. Although Kłyk initially crafted his narratives using standard American Western storylines as inspiration, over time, and under the influence of texts by historian Andrzej Brożek, he began to make these immigrants the subjects of his films. The result was the Silesian trilogy *Szlakiem bezprawia* (*Through the Path of Lawlessness*), released in 1984, 1985 and 2006, played by amateurs from the director's own village (exclusively Silesian-speaking); the films explore the relationships between the settlers and their Texan neighbors. The main character in all three movies is Wawrzyn Złotko, a Silesian fugitive from Prussian rule; as Szymkowska-Bartyzel has pointed out, what is especially notable about him is that he is “a typical hero of American Westerns: very manly and brave, with life experience that allows him to build a very unambiguous code of values which he follows. He is uncompromising and knows that he can rely only on himself” (2014, 60). Oddly enough, he is also “a typical Silesian, for whom the community he comes from and its values (religiosity, solidarity and tradition) are very important” (2014, 60). Szymkowska-Bartyzel concludes by noting that

[t]he Silesians in Kłyk's Westerns represent the highest moral principles to which other social groups in Texas should aspire. In *The Free Man* [2006], the last part of the trilogy, Wawrzyn returns to his homeland because he misses his country and feels Texas would never become his home. Wawrzyn represents the mental dilemmas of many Silesian immigrants, their longings, pains, and nostalgia for their lost homeland. (2014, 60)



Of fundamental importance in any analysis of Panna Maria's history is the literary fiction that has drawn on the story, both in the USA and in Poland. With regard to the former, the novella *The Ghost of Panna Maria* was published in 1990 by a Texan, Rita Kerr. She worked as an elementary school teacher for 26 years, and on retiring began extensive research on the Lone Star State, the result of which was a body of work including 20 children's books and several adult novels. In the preface to *The Ghost*, Kerr states that "[t]he historical facts [...] are documented. The ghost stories are based on folk tales and are, perhaps, fiction" (1990, ix). Indeed, the book seems to reflect the hardship still suffered by the Polish settlers after a decade since the establishing of their new home in Texas. The first chapter opens with a bloodcurdling scene featuring a teenage boy, Jacob, fighting an enormous rattlesnake; in the following chapters, readers learn that danger awaits both children and adults at every turn, and that exhausting work is the daily reality for the whole community. Nonetheless, Jacob and his sister, Anna Maria – the story is narrated from their perspective – enjoy their life in Panna Maria, which centers around Polish traditions and the Catholic faith. Whereas the ghost-related elements in the book are no doubt intended to be scary for young readers, what is truly thought provoking and extremely sad is the unhappy ending to the story: not only does their mother die suddenly of a fever – probably yellow fever – but the dream of a better future for the 12-year-old girl is broken. Anna Maria's parents wanted her to finish her schooling, which we might well understand as one of the first meaningful changes in their immigrant existence, the first indication of success and progress; however, "Anna Maria's world was shattered [...]. She knew nothing would ever be the same again" (1990, 82), and it was now her duty to become the woman of the house and to follow the destiny of her female Silesian ancestors.

Interestingly, one of two historical novels published in Poland on the theme, Michael Sowa's *Tam, gdzie nie pada. Ballada o śląskim Teksasie* (*There, where it doesn't Rain. A Ballad about the Silesian Texas*), also emphasizes the female point of view, this time in a very progressive way. The novel, published in 2021, is written in Polish, but all the dialogues between migrants are in *modified* Silesian, as the author puts it, so it is easier to read by all Polish readers (there is also a brief Silesian-Polish dictionary included at the end of the book). The cast of characters includes some historical ones, such as the Moczygemba family and John Twoigh, a Texan landowner; however, the main protagonists, the Porada family and their oppressor, the anti-hero Arnold Szpyra, are fictional. The novel consists of three parts: "Homeland," "Voyage" and "Home." A particularly curious feature of the text – some might call it unrealistic – is that Marysia Porada is not at all depicted as an archetypal 19th-century Silesian woman. From the very outset, she reflects on her miserable station in life as a woman, forced by her family to emigrate:

Why does someone else always think that they have to make a decision for her? [...] Is it just because she is an ordinary peasant girl, a girl with no land, no property, no home of her own, whose only prospect in life is to marry, give birth to a dozen children and enjoy the happiness she encounters, if the lover does not turn out to be a drunkard or some other wretch? Płużnica, [...] America, [...] all the same



wherever in the world, the order has always been established by men for their own benefit. (2021, 159)¹

Oddly enough, Marysia turns out to be the only Silesian who understands the new world; she symbolizes the bridge between tradition, the rustic life view of her ethnic group, and American freedoms, the endless possibilities for all no matter one's social background or gender. Once in Texas she rejects a very likeable suitor, ignoring his objections that “[i]t's not normal, such things are not done. Since people have always been uniting into families, this is the order, this is how both you and I were taught at home” (2021, 280). In her response, she refers to the transition – only noticed by her at the time, it seems – between the two worlds: “Our values, traditions... I don't know if we will be able to cherish them, to live them, as it used to be at home. That's why I'm asking you, leave me, give me that freedom you told me about in Silesia” (2021, 280). Eventually, she is compelled to stand up to the entire community, defending all women's rights to take part in decision making, and to leave the Silesian ways behind: “It was like that in the old land, but does it have to be like that here, too? If it is to continue like that, that the man is always in charge in the house, and the woman has to obey him, than nothing has really changed for good” (2021, 324).

Nonetheless, and despite Marysia's singular example, the importance of tradition is conspicuous in the novel, especially in the case of Father Moczygemba's wide-ranging opinions, seen as stable and trustworthy, the very cornerstone of their identity:

Take Silesia. To who it currently belonged meant absolutely nothing. [...] The Slavs were already accustomed to constantly shifting boundaries [...] (2021, 199)
The question of national identity was alien to a Silesian. What mattered to a Silesian was land, family and tradition. Everything else would have to be subordinated to these three values, and one had no *raison d'être* without the other two. (2021, 200)

The other historical novel, largely faithful to factual events, is Zygmunt Skonieczny's *Ślązacy na Dzikim Zachodzie* (*Silesians in the Wild West*). Published in 2010, it tells the story of the immigrant Jan Moczygemba, one of the four siblings who went to Texas after being encouraged by their brother Leopold. As the author has indicated, the choice of Jan was due to his longevity, the colorful life he led, and his leadership abilities. In the novel, there are several chapters set in the 21st century; these depict a number of contemporary characters of Polish descent – plus Father Franciszek Kurzaj – who are seen researching their ancestor's histories and who themselves illustrate the successful careers that Polish descendants had enjoyed.

The text clearly focuses on the identity of its main characters, with the reader invited to observe their struggles with the new language, the inhospitable landscape,

¹ All quotations from SOWA, Michael. 2021. *Tam, gdzie nie pada. Ballada o śląskim Teksasie*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Lira. Translations my own.



their religious fervor and attachment to tradition, as well as their collective virtues and vices. As for their initial identity in Texas, the Polish priest and insurrectionist Antoni Rossadowski, Father Leopold's successor, noticed his parishioners' "unfamiliarity with the past and national culture and a poor comprehension of their region in connection to the fate of Poland after the partitions"² and the need to defend this "fragile Polishness" (2010, 127). To remedy the situation and at the same time help them understand their new country, Rossadowski resorted to storytelling; the priest's idea was to gather all the settlers together after Sunday Mass and describe for them both the current situation in Poland and the history of Texas. He wanted them feel an intrinsic part of this new Texan land, just like all the other races and ethnicities that had come from abroad and made the place their own through their own toil and sweat.

It would not be until the Civil War that some Silesian immigrants had the chance to truly assimilate with other Texans or indeed with Americans from other states. Yet at this point, with several of their young men dying on the battlefield, the community's perception was far from patriotic; they now asked themselves: "In the name of what? [...] In the name of this land that is difficult to clear and cultivate? Or perhaps of a country that continued to be a refuge for adventurers, a country which they did not have time to get to know better and claim as their own?" (2010, 166). However, by the time the War ended the Silesian soldiers had come to feel Texan, with a sense of belonging to the state and also with an increased distrust of the federal government. Thus, the veterans "returned with a huge baggage of experience to a still backward and hermetically sealed environment [...] Now they [...] were to bring a new spirit to the Polish settlements and push life towards faster changes" (2010, 175). At the same time, this was their opportunity to remind the American world about the tormented realities of their motherland; when preparing for the veterans' parade, another Polish priest and insurrectionist blessed them and reminded them of "our [other] heroes [...] without a homeland... It hurt and still hurts my heart to see the humiliated homeland, mine and yours, because one was once Poland. Maybe today at least you will show a little of this proud Poland" (2010, 208).

It is undeniably the case that over time the Silesians had embarked on a process of integration. A very prosaic symbol of this assimilation is that of their principal national vice: drinking. Thus, when Jan first explains the local ways to some later immigrants, he says: "Here Americans drink this brandy or whiskey. One is made from grapes, the other from barley. But both are expensive and our people don't like the taste" (2010, 100). The Silesians preferred their own moonshine, which they had always brewed from grain or potatoes and – they claimed – they would always favor. By the end of Jan's life, however, he chooses to drink whiskey, and when his friends rebuke him for preferring it over their peasant moonshine, he answers: "[I]n youth one would drink anything, in old age a person becomes more

² All quotations from SKONIECZNY, Zygmunt. 2010. *Ślązacy na Dzikim Zachodzie*. Szczecin: My Book. Translations my own.



picky” (2010, 305); we might add that “picky” here, while not openly stated, implies a specifically American choice.

Back in 1854 the Silesians set out from a place where they had long been discriminated against as an ethnic group; as Szymkowska-Bartyzel puts it, “[t]hroughout its history, Silesia has always been under someone’s reign, has belonged to other countries, and has never been autonomous. Silesians have often been under the repressive influence of foreigners who imposed their religion, language, and culture on them” (2014, 54). Thus, the issue of identity in the area of Upper Silesia had already been a complex and problematic one in the 19th century. In villages like Płużnica, the peasants felt *at home* when professing their Catholic faith, maintaining their traditions, speaking Silesian and making a living from farming their own land. Being a part of Poland seemed an important factor too, although probably not the crucial one. Most of these conditions could not have been satisfied under Prussian rule, and for this reason they left in search of a better future and as an expression of their particular quest for freedom.

Once on the other side of the Atlantic, the issue of cultural identity for the Silesians in Texas became not only more complicated but, more importantly, an evolving issue. Most of the settlers from the first generation would call themselves Silesians, although through the efforts of the priests – typically political refugees and supporters of Polish uprisings – the parishioners began over time to consider themselves Poles. Then the men were called up to fight in the Civil War; having fought alongside other Texan dwellers – some from very dissimilar racial or ethnic groups – these men returned to the community with a sense of pride in their state, that is, feeling themselves to be Silesian-Texans. Over time they passed this feeling on to their children who, having been born in Texas, knew little about Silesia and did not want to follow all their ancestors’ traditions (Jan’s adult son at one point comments on the issue of a dowry for his future Mexican wife: “Maybe in your place it was like this, and some place called Silesia, but not in Texas” (Skonieczny 2010, 271); because of that, and also because of this second generation’s schoolteachers, Polish nuns, they could now be defined as Polish Texans. The events that changed such a perception were the two World Wars; at these times they were simply Americans, dying for their *homeland* and fighting together against *the other*; they were now part of the nation, the *nationhood* clearly coming before *statehood*, to recall Slotkin’s terms (2001). Eventually, in the sense that cultural identity is a matter of *becoming* and “belongs to the future as much as to the past” (Hall 1990, 225), today’s inhabitants of Panna Maria describe themselves as Americans of Polish descent. Thanks to Father Frank (Franciszek Kurzaj) their Polishness has been rekindled and ties with the homeland of their ancestors have been re-established.

In addition, it is intriguing to observe that Father Leopold Moczygamba’s remains were exhumed in 1974 from a cemetery in Detroit – where he died, having escaped his disillusioned parishioners, who wanted to lynch him – and was buried under the famous oak tree. Hence, as well as being seen as a Texan hero, he was also acclaimed “Patriarch of Polish Immigrants”; some years later he would be called the “Patriarch of American Polonia”, and finally the “Father of Polish Immigration to the USA” (Ryan 1992, 43-44).



As the Silesian poet Jan Goczoł wrote:

“[...] to be a Silesian certainly does not result from the place of residence. Not even from the place of birth. Because these are external, physical facts. A Silesian, on the other hand [...] is a state of self-awareness. Historical self-awareness, cultural self-awareness, in some sense also - social and political. Self-awareness that does not yield to opportunistic or herd pressures.³ (qtd. in Cofałka 2009, 11-12)

The question of cultural identity, then, is not just a matter of *becoming* but is also one of *being*; it involves those “immutable ties of race, of ‘blood’” (Bukowczyk 1998, 299), that *thing* which embraces a broad range of relationships with one’s homeland society. As such, it is something that Father Frank – the modern *Patriarch of Americans of Silesian/Polish descent* – as well as cultural/literary production relating to the story of Panna Maria, have put into motion in recent decades, and which will continue for years to come.

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³ From COFAŁKA, Jan. 2009. *Księga Ślązaków*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar. My translation.

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BASQUE IN THE WEST: EUSKARA JALGI HADI MUNDURA*

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ABSTRACT

Thousands of individuals have left the Basque Country, Euskal Herria, throughout its history. In the US West they encountered a language barrier, which had an effect on their relationships and ability to settle in the host nation. Conversely, their educated children spoke English fluently, which accelerated their integration into mainstream America. Euskara, the Basque language, disappeared from many households as an outcome of this assimilation. This essay explores the history of Basque emigration and settlement in the region, the relationship between Euskara and the American West since the 19th century, and highlights some of the ongoing initiatives to advance Euskara and its usage in the region.

KEYWORDS: Basque, Settlement, Immigration, Euskaldun

EL EUSKERA EN EL OESTE AMERICANO: EUSKERA SAL AL MUNDO

RESUMEN

Miles de personas han abandonado el País Vasco, Euskal Herria, a lo largo de su historia. En el oeste estadounidense se encontraron con la barrera lingüística del inglés. Por el contrario, sus descendientes recibieron hablaban inglés con fluidez, lo cual aceleró su integración en la sociedad estadounidense. El euskara, la lengua vasca, desapareció de muchos hogares vascos como resultado de esta asimilación. Este ensayo explora la historia de la emigración vasca y el asentamiento en la región, la relación entre el euskara y el oeste americano desde el siglo XIX, y destaca algunas de las iniciativas en curso para promover el euskara y su uso en la región.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Euskera, Asentamiento, Inmigración, Euskaldun

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Basques who immigrated to the United States (versus South America) faced a language barrier, which impacted their settlement and the relationship they established in the host country. Due to their limited proficiency in English, first-generation Basques were taunted, and their employment options were limited to occupations that did not require language skills, such as sheepherding, which was a tough and lonely job that no one else wanted. Instead, their children learned English and acquired an education, which allowed them to assimilate into the culture of mainstream America. One of the outcomes of this assimilation was the loss of the Basque language, Euskara, in almost all Basque families. This paper explores the relationship of Basques in the West with Euskara since the late 19th century and showcases some of the current efforts to promote Euskara in the American West.

Over the centuries, Basques have travelled in search of employment, trade, or additional colonial endeavours. Basques “were quintessential shipbuilders and mariners in fifteenth century Iberia and actually took part in the voyages of discovery and expansion of imperial interests of both [Portuguese and Spanish] Iberian powers” (Douglass 2013, 1). Similarly, “Basque whalers left the Bizkaian and Gipuzkoan coasts as early as the seventh century for their North Atlantic hunts, and documents from 1540 demonstrate that they most likely had been fishing off the coasts of Greenland for a considerable number of years” (Totoricagüena 2004a, 82). Aside from the scant Basque presence during Spain’s exploration and colonisation of the present-day states of Florida, Louisiana, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California, one could argue that the historical beginning of Basque immigration to the United States was the California gold rush in the middle of the nineteenth century (Douglass 2016, 10). When the Basques arrived in the West, they discovered a job opportunity in the unpopular and despised profession of sheepherding. The story began in the 1850s, when a small group of Basque adventurers in the California gold fields grew disenchanted with their lot as miners and started working as shepherds. The middle period, which lasted into the early twentieth century, started in the 1870s as Basque herders spread across the American West (Lane and Douglass 1985, 1). Even though not many Basque immigrants worked as shepherds in their home country, their agrarian roots and values of tenacity, endurance, and hard work frequently assisted them in finding success in the sheep industry. A Basque sheepherder’s life was an isolated one. They would frequently be left alone for weeks or months at a time and resided in extremely rudimentary sheep waggons or tents. In the American West, being a sheepherder was considered a denigrated occupation, but since it required no education and no command of English, it gave the young Basque men economic opportunities.

By 1870, Basques had begun to spread into northern California and Nevada, where the demand for sheep to feed the new miners had increased due to the booming economies brought on by gold and silver strikes. Later, in the 1890s, Basques migrated

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to southern Idaho and Oregon and had colonised the West's open-range regions by 1910. Basques asked for assistance in the Basque Country as their herding practices in the US grew. Nonetheless, the western American open-range industry declined strongly during the 1970s, which had a direct effect on the number of Basques leaving for the US. Similarly, as the economy of the Basque Country improved and salaries became competitive, "fewer Basques wanted or needed to emigrate for economic reasons" (Toticagüena 2004a, 219) and preferred to remain in their homeland.

For almost exactly a century, Basques dominated the sheep business in the United States. However, "[b]y the 1970s, most of the second and third generation Basques had moved into different industries, occupations, and professions" (Toticagüena 2023, 2003). Their immigrant parents worked arduously to provide them with more opportunities than those they had been given, and they tried to instil in their children moral principles and good habits that, when combined with education, would give them a strong foundation for a prosperous life in the United States. Many people progressed through this process to become, for instance, managers, bankers, lawyers, and business owners (Bieter and Bieter 2003, 4). Frank Bergon, a Basque American scholar and writer, claims in his novel *Wild Game* that "Laxalt, Arrizabalaga, Ybarguengoitia were familiar names around Reno, but no longer of shepherders. The solitary Basque herders of previous generations—those tough "Black Bascos" as they were derisively called—had pretty much vanished ... Most of the Basques ... sold cars, taught school, ran banks ..." (1995, 2-3). Once Basques felt integrated into the hostland, or rather fully assimilated, they started to feel that they were lacking in the Basque aspect of their identity. That is why, the same way the first generation needed meeting places, like boarding houses, to feel "Home Away from Home" (Echeverria 1999), subsequent generations started to build Basque Centers, Clubs, and alike to engage with their own ethnic ancestry. These are the hubs where Basque American traditions consciously began to develop and have continued to do so ever since. Through dances, picnics, and sporting events, Basque traditions were preserved, ensuring the survival of cultural elements and paving the way for the third generation. Besides, in the 1960s and later, it became less fashionable to be American alone in what many people perceived as a bland, vanilla culture, and it became more popular to be from somewhere, to have an identity that would set one apart and make one more recognisable. Because of this, the third generation, unlike the first two, was able to display their ethnic pride publicly (Bieter and Bieter 2003, 3-4, 5).

Modern-day Basques are assimilated citizens who proudly assert both their Basque and American identities. As expressed by the fictional Basque American character Jack Irigaray, in *Wild Game*, when he was a kid, "they were all just Americans, not even hyphenated ones. His two little girls—who sang Basque songs and danced the jota at the Zazpiak Bat Club, were more conscious of their ethnicity. When Jack was their age, he was just another Westerner—Nevadan" (3). Irigaray's children show how later generations benefited from the effort of previous Basques to raise the younger generation in an environment of ethnic pride and thus give them the opportunity to be proud of their roots. However, many Basque Americans did not speak Euskara at this point, as English had taken over as their



primary language. The novel *Shoshone Mike* (1987), also by Bergon, exemplifies the loss of Basque from first to second generation Basques, which was primarily prompted by the need to assimilate into society as quickly as possible and appear to be American in the community's eyes to avoid discrimination. At the time, Basques were frequently disparaged and did not benefit from the current recognition. Such experiences adversely influenced their feelings towards their own origins, as is typical in migrant settings.

There are many and varied political, social, and economic factors that encouraged Basque migration, but the following could be highlighted: economic hardships in the homeland, demography, rural exodus, the French Revolution (1789), Napoleonic (1799-1815) and Carlist Wars (1833-1876), the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), the ensuing Franco dictatorship (1939-1975), the conscription laws that required all young men to serve four years in the Spanish army, or the loss of Spanish colonies like Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. However, according to the renown Basque anthropologist Julio Caro Baroja (1985, 21-22), the primogeniture inheritance system used in Basque territories was the main reason that drove Basques from their native land. An intact farm could only be inherited by one sibling from a family, and it could not be divided. Children who would not inherit were sent to or joined the Catholic Church, while others worked on ships, joined the military, or moved to newly colonised lands. While Basques from rural areas were more likely to immigrate to the USA, Basques with some type of formal education were more likely to do so to Latin America, where their command of Spanish was clearly advantageous (Totoricagüena 2008, 44; Lasagabaster 2008, 67). Those Basques who left for America were called “Amerikanuak” (Douglass and Bilbao 1975, 1) by those in the Old World.

The Old World, or Basque Country, is a small region with a relatively small population—just over three million people. The three provinces in France are referred to as the North, *Iparralde*, and the four provinces in Spain are known as the South, *Hegoalde*. Lapurdi, Zuberoa, and Low Navarre, on the one hand, and Araba, Gipuzkoa, Bizkaia, and Nafarroa, on the other, have long been attached to France and Spain, respectively. The French-Spanish border has marked a deep division within the country, especially since 1659. The status and development of Basque have been particularly affected by this administrative division. In addition, *Hegoalde* has been distinguished administratively in the current Spanish state since the Constitution of 1978. The Basque Autonomous Community (BAC) of Euskadi is made up of the three provinces (Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa, and Araba) according to the Statute of Autonomy adopted following the 1979 referenda, and there is a unique autonomous statute for Nafarroa (Totoricagüena 2004a, 55-56). These divisions have led to identity conflicts among the Basque people, and they have likewise affected their linguistic expression, both at home and in the diaspora. Although Basque has been co-official with Spanish in Euskadi since as late as 1978, there are ongoing debates and tensions regarding the achievement of full recognition and equal status of Euskara as an official language within Spain. Additionally, Basque has been co-official only in a small part of the north of Nafarroa since 1982 and non-official in *Iparralde*. This has had implications within the homeland and among the Basque



communities in the US West. Furthermore, speaking Euskara was a crime during the dictatorship of Francisco Franco (1939–1975). The use of Euskara was forbidden in public settings such as religious services, schools, publications, radio, and the streets. This repression against the language had repercussions; for instance, Euskara was being lost by many families out of fear and the language was not transmitted in some generations. Euskara survived the dictatorship, but because of the repression, it continues to face many challenges.

Although Euskara plays a crucial role in preserving the Basque cultural identity, acting as a symbol of resilience and resistance against external forces throughout history, and although centuries ago Basque was the predominant language, nowadays, however, only part of the population speaks it. The last Sociolinguistic Survey¹ indicates that in *Iparralde*, the use of Basque has been decreasing since 1997. Gipuzkoa is the most Basque-speaking province (30.6%), followed by Bizkaia (9.4%), Nafarroa (5.9%), *Iparralde* (4.9%), and finally Araba (4.8%). Although Gipuzkoa shows the highest rate, its use has also diminished in the last 10 years, while it has increased in Araba (“Hizkuntzen” 2021). The provinces of Lapurdi, and particularly Bizkaia, which received a large number of immigrants before the end of the 19th century, include a large number of people who are completely ignorant of Euskara. In Nafarroa and Araba, the loss of Basque took place mainly in the 18th and 19th centuries. Zuberoa, Low Navarre, and the interior areas of Lapurdi have a very low population density and have been a source of emigration themselves (Zuazo 1995, 5).

Basque immigration into the US took place during a time when the Basque language had a low social status and was seen as the language of the uneducated rural populations due to the language attitudes of the French and Spanish regimes. Hence, migrants carried with them these attitudes. The shift in attitudes experienced in the homeland after the 1960s was not something that earlier migrants experienced or witnessed. That is, they did not experience the social advancement and prestige that Euskara now enjoys in their native land (Totoricagüena 2008, 45). This lack of exposure to the positive changes in attitudes towards the Basque language may have contributed to the creation of negative stereotypes and beliefs among earlier migrants. As a result, they may have continued to view the language as inferior or less valuable, even as approaches back home began to shift. Similarly, this perception may have influenced their decision not to pass on the language to their children, particularly at a time when, as previously explained, Basques were discriminated against and consequently tried to assimilate into the mainstream as soon as possible. This assimilation process involved adopting the dominant language of the new country, further marginalising the Basque language within their own community. Additionally, economic and social pressures may have played a role in discouraging the transmission of the Basque language, as speaking the hegemonic

¹ A street survey that analyses linguistic competence and the use of Euskara in the streets. It is conducted every five years. This one was conducted in 2021 and its results were published in 2023.



language was seen as necessary for upward mobility and integration into society. Nowadays, though, Basque Americans are well-respected and recognised citizens within mainstream America, and their attitude towards Euskara has changed. Native speakers, *euskaldun zaharrak*, feel not only safe but also proud to use Euskara. Learners and neo-speakers, *euskaldun berriak*, are likewise proud and motivated to learn Basque.

Nonetheless, the processes that Euskara has lived through and is still undergoing in the homeland also affect the motivation of *euskaldun zaharrak* and potential learners, or *euskaldun berriak*, in the US. One of such processes is its standardisation. Basque was primarily a spoken language with significant dialectal variation for most of its recorded history (Zuazo 1995, 22). Basque is a minority language, a linguistic isolate, unrelated to either French or Spanish, and lacks the literary heritage of these other languages, unlike other neighbouring minority languages like Catalan and Galician. The ruling class of the Kingdom of Navarre, which ruled over the region for eight centuries (816-1620), never made Basque the official language of the court. In the sixteenth century, a small amount of writing in Basque started to appear. In an effort to make their texts readable by as many readers as possible, authors typically wrote in the dialect of the area in which they lived while using the Roman alphabet and borrowing words and spellings from one another. Modernising reformers and nationalist elites turned the status of Basque into a point of interest in the late nineteenth century, making both its declining use and its “unregulated” nature a problem. Standardising Basque appeared to be a necessary step towards becoming a modern, logical country, as evidenced by the growing push for Basque-language education, industrial growth, and potential state-building on the horizon (Urla). Although Euskaltzaindia, the Royal Basque Language Academy, was established in 1918 and tasked with standardization, these efforts were long-term hampered by the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) and dictatorship. Only in 1964 did a standard orthography gain widespread acceptance, and in 1968 Euskaltzaindia started developing guidelines for standardising different aspects of grammar. Koldo Mitxelena, a renowned linguist and Academy member, was given the assignment. Mitxelena and the academicians decided to create the *Euskara Batua* [Unified Basque] amalgamated standard, which was “nobody’s spoken language” at the time (Hualde and Zuazo 2007, 7). The force behind *Batua* was not the financial or social support of a group of already-proficient speakers, but rather a grassroots Basque schooling and adult literacy movement, which served as its promoter and initial means of dissemination. It would later come to represent both *euskaldun berriak* and the movement to restore national languages (Urla et al. 2018, 26).

Due to the complexity and breadth of Euskara *Batua*’s effects on native speakers, opinions on this standardisation process differ among Basque speakers. While *Batua* has contributed to the language’s unification and guaranteed its continued use in media and education, it has also sparked discussions about identity and the preservation of various dialects. The *euskaldun zaharrak* in the diaspora have also been impacted by this controversy. They brought their own dialects to the US and, hence, find it extremely challenging to communicate in *Batua*. As a result, many native speakers, particularly those who have not been schooled in



Basque, believe that their Basque is inferior and often avoid using it. Both the US West and *euskaldun zaharrak* in the homeland are impacted by this. Additionally, *Batua* is the language learned by Basques in the diaspora, making communication in Euskara amongst natives and learners difficult. This language barrier between *Batua* and *euskaldun zaharrak* creates a divide within the Basque community as it hinders effective communication and understanding. Furthermore, the difficulty of using *Batua* for native Basques in the diaspora adds another layer of complexity to the motivation to use and foster it.

Another area of discussion is the terminology used when referring to Basqueness. The terms “Basque” in English or “vasco” in Spanish imply Basqueness and ethnic identity and encompass a broader range of aspects related to identity. On the contrary, the term *euskalduna* usually specifically refers to someone who speaks Euskara. Therefore, being Basque does not automatically make one *euskalduna* unless the term is used interchangeably with “Basque” or “vasco”. In summary, while “Basque” and “vasco” can encompass various aspects of identity and the Basque Country, *euskalduna* is often used to specifically discuss and identify the people and their language; “This primal identifying factor invokes one of the strongest indicators of Basque cultural uniqueness, the language” (Totoricagüena 2004b, 20). This emphasis on language can sometimes lead to a perceived hierarchy where those who are native speakers or fluent in Basque may be seen as (more) authentically Basque than those who are not.²

The motivation to speak Euskara in diaspora settings is typically based on identity and strongly held emotional ties to ancestors. The motivation might also be related to becoming “more Basque,” and for some, this would fill a void of feeling less strongly Basque than Basques in their homeland or the diaspora. Although instrumental rewards do not exist, learning and using Euskara have intrinsic rewards. Notwithstanding this, diaspora Basques maintain Euskara for the same psychological and emotional reasons that they uphold their ethnic identity. Maintaining a chain of language transmission is frequently an important aspect of defining one’s identity and has a high status within diaspora communities. In the case of Basque, speaking Euskara identifies a person as Basque and *euskalduna*. In addition to the sense of belonging and cultural pride it brings, speaking Euskara also serves as a way for the diaspora Basques to connect with their roots and maintain a strong connection to their heritage, further enriching their understanding of their own culture and history (Totoricagüena 2008, 44-47).

A person’s affective connection to a language has a positive impact on the outcome. Today, a sizable portion of immigrants and subsequent generations of Basques in the diaspora of the West have a very positive attitude towards ethnic identification and actively promote the idea that maintaining the ability to speak Euskara is an essential part of being Basque. This strong emotional attachment

² Although this is not the topic of discussion in this essay, it is important to recognise that Basque identity in the diaspora is multifaceted and encompasses various aspects beyond just language.



to their language contributes to their motivation and dedication to learning and preserving it, resulting in a higher success rate in language acquisition compared to those who lack such a connection. Additionally, this sense of cultural pride fosters a sense of belonging and identity among the Basque diaspora, reinforcing their commitment to passing down their language to future generations. This deep-rooted connection to their language not only enriches their sense of self but also strengthens their bond with other Basque communities around the world.

Similarly, the fact that Euskara is considered one of the most enigmatic languages in the world due to its lack of demonstrable relationships with other languages currently adds to its high status in the diaspora. Linguists and philologists have extensively studied Euskara, but to date, no conclusive evidence or theories about its origins have been widely accepted. The survival of Euskara is “one of the most extraordinary of historical phenomena. It is the unique case in Europe of the preservation of an indigenous language that through several millennia has resisted invasions and influences...” (Tovar 1957, 17). In other words, the uniqueness of Euskara sparks curiosity and fascination among the diaspora Basques, making it a source of pride and identity.

Calculating the number of Basques living in the USA at any one time in the past is not an easy task due to the fact that they have traditionally been counted as Spanish or French in censuses. Unlike in previous censuses, the ones in 1980, 1990, and 2000 allowed Basque Americans to define themselves as Basque. The results showed that with each decade, higher numbers of people claimed Basque identity. The figures of the 2000 census reflected that the presence of Basque Americans was significant in the West, with approximately 58,000 persons—10,000 more with respect to the 1990 census—in the entire United States, out of which almost 21,000 were in California, followed by Idaho (6,637) and Nevada (6,096). California has the largest Basque population within state boundaries. However, Basques are simply one more ethnic group of hundreds and are not as noticeable as they are in Idaho or Nevada, where the overall population is much lower. The last American census to give a detailed profile of the Basque American presence was in 2000. Unfortunately, the approach was abandoned in the 2010 census (Lasagabaster 2008, 67-68; Douglass 2016, 5). The difficulty of calculating the number of Basques makes it even more challenging to estimate the number of Basque speakers.

While Euskara or any other Basque identity-related signs were strictly prohibited in *Hegoalde*, in the Basque West, the *Euskaldun Ordua* (Basque Hour) radio programme was created by Basques in Buffalo, Wyoming, and it debuted on Sundays in 1956 with announcers who volunteered their services and funding from the Basques in the Buffalo region. Every Sunday at noon for forty years, the programme included music as well as regional and national news in Euskara. In Idaho, Julian Lachiondo and Cecil Jayo started airing radio programmes in the Basque language in the early 1950s. Espe (Espectación) Alegria presided over “The Basque Program” from Boise, Idaho, from 1956 to 1982. After publishing a manual on how to learn Basque in English in 1965, Oregon native Joseph V. Eiguren authored one of the first English-Basque dictionaries in 1974. Both the University of Nevada, Reno’s Basque Studies Program and the Idaho Basque Studies Center’s classes in



Boise began operations in 1967 and 1974, respectively (Totoricagüena 2008, 58). In the 1970s, Boise State University's Basque Studies department took over 100 students from Idaho to Oñati, a small village in Gipuzkoa, to immerse them in Euskara ("Looking Back" 2015, 2).³ Many of the participants are fluent Basque speakers today and are strongly involved in the Basque community. In 1973, Boise, Idaho's first *ikastola*⁴ was established as an after-school full immersion programme for elementary school-aged kids. Boise's *ko Ikastola* is now a full-immersion Basque language school for kids aged four to six that was established in 1998. From Monday through Friday, kids go to school and spend the entire day learning and playing in Euskara (Totoricagüena 2008, 58-59).

Government policies in the Basque Country have been working to increase language and identity awareness in the US West to preserve the cultural heritage associated with Euskara. In 1948, the various leaders present at the VII Eusko Ikaskuntza (Basque Studies Society) Congress in *Iparralde*, agreed that international action was necessary to advance Euskara. Due to this, Eusko Ikaskuntza established the International Day of Euskara that same year. The Basque Government in Exile maintained "delegations" abroad during the Franco dictatorship, and strong ties existed with the immigrant Basque communities, which mainly addressed questions of political identity and the restoration of democracy in Spain. The creation of cultural policies for the diaspora in the Departments of Culture and Education and in the office of the Presidency in Euskadi, all occurred after Franco's death in 1975. Relationships between the Basque Centers and Euskadi underwent a qualitative change in the 1990s because of increased activity, funding, engagement, and communication with Basques living all over the world (Totoricagüena 2008, 56-57). The First Congress of Basques was held in Donostia in 1982, one year after the Basque Autonomous Community government was established. 203 delegates from nine countries attended and requested funding for materials and teaching aids, as well as for Euskara teachers in the diaspora to receive pedagogical training. A Basque Government Advisor for Relations with Basque Communities and Centers was appointed in 1985. The Basque Government's Department of Culture took control of relations with the Basque Centers, or *Euskal Etxeak*, in 1986, and in 1988, the homeland began funding their cultural activities (Totoricagüena 2008, 59).

The interactions between the Basque Autonomous Government and the Basque Communities Abroad are governed by Public Law 8/1994, which was passed on May 27, 1994. The right to the supply of published and audiovisual material designed to facilitate the transmission of knowledge of Basque history, culture, language, and social reality is granted to Basques who reside outside of their country of origin. This material is intended for display and distribution among Basque communities. The Basque Centers are to be given resources so they can

³ Inspired by this initiative, in 2023, a programme called Ateak Ireki (Open Doors) was offered to over 30 youths from the US (<https://www.ateakireki.eus/?lang=en>).

⁴ Basque school.



schedule Basque language classes within their budgetary constraints. The body of the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country's public administration regulates how members of the Basque community can apply for and obtain certificates of Basque language proficiency (Totoricagüena 2008, 61). Currently, HABE⁵ oversees these certificates.

Argentine Basque initiatives wishing to promote Euskara led to HABE's initial involvement with the diaspora. *Argentinan Euskaraz* (Euskara in Argentina) began in 1990 as a result of a request for assistance from the Basque Government made by the Federation of Argentine Basque Entities (FEVA) in order to hire language teachers and produce materials in the diaspora. After a decade of success teaching Basque in Argentina, the Department of Culture expanded the programme by making it accessible to other Basque Centers worldwide through HABE (Totoricagüena 2008, 62). Since 2018, the Etxepare Euskal Institutua (Etxepare Basque Institute)⁶ has been in charge of this programme, now known as *Euskara Munduan* (Basque in the World), led by Kinku Zinkunegi since its creation. *Euskara Munduan* goes in line with one of the missions of the Etxepare Euskal Institutua (EEI), which is to encourage Basque language literacy and use among Basque communities worldwide.

Despite the fact that *Euskara Munduan* is not as popular in the US as it is in South America, particularly in Argentina, EEI has other programmes that support the instruction of Basque. The ones that are available in the West include, on the one hand, teaching Basque in the Euskal Etxeak thanks to collaborations with NABO (North American Basque Organization) and on the other, in higher education via partnerships with various universities. Through the programme of lecturers, *irakurleak*, the University of California Los Angeles, Boise State University, Idaho, and the University of California Santa Barbara offer Basque language and Basque culture lessons, totalling nearly 240 students (Irakurleak 2023). Similarly, the Eloisa Garmendia Chair at BSU, the Jon Bilbao Chair at the Center for Basque

⁵ HABE (Helduen Alfabetatze eta Berreuskalduntzeako Erakundea, or Institute for Adult Literacy and Basque Language and Regulation of the Basque, for the instruction of the Basque language and literacy to adults). A network of adult-educational Basque language schools was established in the Basque homeland after Franco's death in 1975 by organisations like AEK, a coordinator for the instruction of the Basque language and literacy. The institution was established by the Basque Government in 1981. Through initiatives to train Basque language instructors, after-work language programmes, the development of pedagogical materials for both children and adults, the establishment of numerous publications, and the production of radio programmes, HABE encourages the learning of the Basque language and literacy, particularly for adults. Through the Department of Culture of the Basque Autonomous Community, they are also responsible for promoting and coordinating Basque language programmes outside Euskadi (Totoricagüena 2008, 61).

⁶ The Etxepare Basque Institute is a public institution. The law establishing and governing EEI was approved by the Basque Parliament in 2007, and it was introduced in 2010. Since that time, Etxepare has worked to promote international cooperation, encourage exchange and communication between creators, professionals, stakeholders, and public institutions, and increase the international presence and visibility of the Basque language and contemporary Basque creativity (<https://www.etxepare.eus/en/who-we-are>).



Studies (University of Nevada, Reno), and the Frank Bidart Chair (California State University Bakersfield) promote academic research and specialised education in Basque Studies, primarily at the graduate or postgraduate level. Specialised teachers, artists, or creators are selected to participate at the partner universities.

The main objectives of EEI are the promotion, dissemination, and global projection of Euskara and Basque culture. It operates within the general confines of the foreign policy of the Basque Government as well as the linguistic and cultural norms of the Basque Autonomous Community. In collaboration with other national and international organisations, the mission of EEI includes fostering interest in the Basque language and culture throughout the world. In order to do so, EEI has assumed the responsibilities of the majority of international programs for Basque language and culture that were being developed by the Directorate of Relations with Basque Collectivities and by the Department of Culture.

Etxepare Euskal Institutua takes its name from the poet and writer Bernart Etxepare. His book, *Linguae Vasconum Primitiae* (1545), was the first book published in Euskara. A prologue by the author and fifteen verse compositions on various topics, including praise for the Basque language, make up this relatively small book that is written in the Lower Navarrese dialect. The last two compositions are specifically about the Basque language. Etxepare tried to show that Euskara was “as good as any tongue to write in” and at the same time, he hoped “upcoming generations might be motivated to perfect it” (Altuna 2012, 12-13). Etxepare believed that Euskara had the potential to be just as effective and worthy as any other language for writing and communication and thus tried to promote it. He wrote “Euskara, jalgi hadi mundura” (Basque, go forth into the world!), which matches the motto of EEI: Euskara. Kultura. Mundura. (Basque. Culture. To the World.)

EEI's mission goes hand in hand with Etxepare's vision and vindication. By making Basque accessible to those in the American West, EEI not only internationally promotes the instruction, study, and use of Basque, but it also enhances its international recognition, which positively impacts its prestige and location in the world map. In doing so, more Basques in the West are likely to feel interested and engaged in learning and using the language and creating stronger identity connections. This increased interest and commitment can lead to a (re) vitalization of Basque culture and traditions in the American West, fostering a sense of belonging and pride among the Basque community, which also enriches global linguistic and cultural exchange.

However, although all actions and initiatives play a crucial role in the promotion and use of Basque, none of this would be possible without the effort and active engagement of the many volunteers, teachers, Basque speakers, and Basque learners in the US West. Their passion and commitment contribute significantly to the vitality and growth of the language and create a strong sense of community among Basque speakers and learners. This collaborative effort has not only preserved the language but also fostered a sense of pride and identity among its speakers and learners, ensuring that Basque continues to flourish for generations to come. As a result, Basque not only thrives within its native region but also gains recognition and appreciation on a global scale. It is thanks to the many Basque speakers and



learners in the diaspora of the American West that every time they use it or learn it, Basque becomes less of a minority language worldwide. It is also thanks to them that Euskara goes forth into the world, Mundura.

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