

Ángel Chaparro Sainz and Amaia Ibarraran Bigalondo, eds. *Transcontinental Reflections on the American West: Words, Images, Sounds beyond Borders*. The American Literary West, Series Editor: David Río. London: Portal Education, 2015. Pp. 424. €20.90. ISBN: 9788494197130.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/ersjes.38.2017.155-160>

Fortunately, someone neglected to remind editors Ángel Chaparro Sainz and Amaia Ibarraran Bigalondo that albums or CDs are anachronisms in this day of instant digital downloads and personal song mixes cherry-picked from the vast on-line music archive. Taking as their model Led Zeppelin's 2003 triple live album, *How the West Was Won*, recorded during a 1972 concert tour through the United States, they organized this eclectic essay collection into three 'singles'—"Spac(in') the West"; "Travel(in') the West"; and "Perform(in') the West"—each one comprised of five essays plus a "bonus track." The collection begins with an 'overture' that includes a lyric epigraph entitled "The Water Wars" by Willy Vlautin of the Portland, Oregon band Richmond Fontaine; "Ode to the Mohave," an evocative creative non-fiction piece on Lake Mead by Phyllis Barber; and a very personable introduction by the editors, "How the West Won Us." Being from Utah, "Where the Streets Have No Name," I prefer U2's best-selling 1987 album, *The Joshua Tree*, or perhaps Bruce Springsteen's brilliant 2005 album, *Devils and Dust*, as models for rocking Western discourse, but must admit that Led Zeppelin works fine here.

Vlautin and Barber first lay down a dry thematic riff with texts that focus on the most precious Western resource, water, and the increasing lack thereof, with individual and regional survival in the balance. As Vlautin writes:

The West is falling, the water wars have just begun
 The West is falling to strip malls and planned estates
 The West is falling just has hard as I am (. . .)
 Wait until the aquifers are done. (15)

Barber adds that



This work is licensed under [CC-BY-NC](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

ES REVIEW. SPANISH JOURNAL OF ENGLISH STUDIES 38 (2017): 155–160

e-ISSN 2531-1654 | ISSN 2531-1646

The Rockies are expected to deliver on the promises made to those along the [Colorado] river's banks and to the cities of Las Vegas, Phoenix, and Los Angeles. But the lawmakers have allotted more water than the river has to give. The mountains follow a different timetable, one not drafted by construction workers, public minds, and engineers. (19)

Vlautin and Barber thus ground the collection in very timely creative and political expressions of real climates and actual landscapes before it moves on to all the scholarly theorizing about literary, cinematic, musical, dramatic, and other representations of the West —the unstated irony being that while the Central Valley and Lake Mead are drying up, the oceans are rising, and the United States is currently experiencing rain and flooding in all the wrong places, while the subnormal Sierra Nevada, Uintah, Rocky, and other mountain snowpack cannot keep up with the increasing water demand from a growing population.

Further, the editors reinforce this pragmatic grounding by eschewing an impersonal meta-critical introductory stance in favor of articulating a personal ethos and ethic by writing how they, as Europeans, have been “won” by the West, thereby staking their own personal claim to some space within the discourse that defines contemporary Western Studies. They argue persuasively for a transnational, even transcendental, West with shifting borders permeable enough to include all of their collection's contributors, each with a different background, perspective, and insight on the American West. While I'm skeptical that this collection (or any collection for that matter) succeeds in “erasing the boundaries between the tangible distances that exist in physical space and the limitless space of the mind” or in providing its readers with an “up close and personal” view of “the image from the collective unconscious that is now the American West” (36) —I do think that it successfully represents current global thinking as well as emerging theoretical approaches to the West by doing productive analytical work with a variety of canonical and non-canonical Western texts, films, and music.

Spac(in') the West. O. Alan Weltzien opens this “single” with “The American West and Other Wests,” a very useful historical orientation on traditional and transnational Western space, with a particular focus on Irish American poet Eamonn Wall's “Irish West” and *Western American Literature* editor Tom Lynch's “Australian Outback” (46). Weltzien knows his Western history and criticism, weaving and contextualizing the work of

Wall and Lynch, with their emphasis on “ecocriticism and the settler-colonial imaginary,” within the larger discussion of American West / Other Wests (45). He thereby creates a rich conversation between the two in his precise analysis of their work and considers the implications for “current transnational analyses” of the West (57). Wendy Harding’s and Jacky Martin’s dense, theory-driven “The West beyond Borders: The Case of the Tule Lake Region” argues that the West exists as a “space that is unstable, opportunistic, open-minded, and ultimately unpredictable” requiring “constant refoundation (. . .) [and] (. . .) multiple regeneration” to maintain its “vitality” (61). Influenced by geographer Doreen Massey and philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, they reconceive “territory” as “zones of instability” and “fields of tensions” that constitute a “field of forces rather than a bounded entity” that are connected to the “intentions, needs and perceptions of the persons or groups that construct or imagine the West” (62). All their highfaluting and complicated theorizing, however, comes right back down to earth thanks to their careful analytical exploration of Tule Lake as practical example of how theory can do real work in the real West —historical, political, racial, and environmental. Essays by Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz, Maite Aperribay Bermejo, and Maja Daniel —writing on, respectively, *The Round House* by Louise Erdrich, *Under the Feet of Jesus* by Helena María Viramontes, and *Close Range* and *That Old Ace in the Hole* by Annie Proulx— round out this “single,” along with a ‘bonus track’ by Claire Cazajous-Augé writing on “The Hermit’s Story” by Rick Bass. The first three essays offer substantial introductions to these texts and make some clear connections to a number of interesting theoretical and critical approaches, but they tend to traffic more in observations on plot, character, and content rather than in theory-driven argument/analysis. Cazajous-Augé does much better in this regard, building a discussion driven by significant theoretical and critical perspectives.

Travel(in’) the West. Much like the Weltzien essay, Krista Comer’s “Place & Worlding: Feminist States of Critical Regionalism” sets a proper tone for the rest of the essays in this “single” with its sophisticated theoretical framing of space, place, border, gender, region, feminism, and so forth under the term “worlding,” which she views as an “instance of feminist critical regionalism: a political and knowledge practice sensitive to issues of place across spatial scales” (154). Drawing on state and feminist labor theories as well as key critics and theorists such as Neil Campbell, José Limón, Gayatri Spivak, and Stephen Tatum, she defines “critical

regionalism” as a “method of critical or global study attuned both to comparative big picture analyses and linked to the deep local” (156). Warning us to exercise caution in playing fast and loose with current global constructions of the West as “without borders,” she rightly reminds us that, “[s]ome places, like indigenous tribal lands in the U.S. and like women’s bodies, are at pains to establish themselves as boundaried, not porous spaces open to anyone who wishes to move through them” (157). Like Harding and Martin, she demonstrates the efficacy of her theoretical apparatus by using it to do some productive scholarly work with three significant representative texts: *González and Daughter Trucking Company* by María Amparo Escandón, “Woman Hollering Creek” by Sandra Cisneros, and *The Round House* by Louise Erdrich. “Horace Greeley’s 1859 Overland Journey: Or, How Marx and Engels Shot It Out with Daniel Boone” by David Fenimore provides an intriguing, well-researched historical discussion of Greeley’s five-month western trip in light of social theory contemporary to the time — rugged individualism meets socialism on the road as reported in Greeley’s 33 dispatches— but, alas, the titular shoot-out is only metaphorical. Carmen Indurain’s “A Cross-generic American West: The Road Movie’s Legacy from the Western” traces and links the conventions and contexts of these two genres, which have cross-bred to inject both with some needed hybrid vigor. Indurain underscores the value of her essay’s critical foundation with ample examples to illustrate its points. “‘The Wisest and Meanest Man West of the Mississippi River’: Dashiell Hammett as a Western Writer” by Jesús Ángel González also links two genres —the hard-boiled detective novel and the Western— in its discussion of *Red Harvest*, Hammett’s first novel, one with the potential to adjust the way we will consider Hammett’s career hereafter. In “Modes of Violence in Recent Westerns,” Stefano Rosso discusses a number of Western novels and films —King Vidor’s *Duel in the Sun*, Elmore Leonard’s *Valdez Is Coming*, Charles Portis’s *True Grit*, Larry McMurtry’s *Lonesome Dove*, Cormac McCarthy’s Southwestern novels, and Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained*— in terms of their depictions of violence as informed by theories set forth by a number of scholars, most notably Richard Slotkin, but rarely goes deeper than some general observations. Finally, the ‘bonus track,’ Patxi Urkigo’s rambling “Influence of the North American Westerns on Film,” informs and entertains because of Urkigo’s encyclopedic knowledge of his subject matter seasoned with a soupçon of European intellectual superiority.

Perform(in') the West. This “single” represents well the varieties of Western performance. Antoni Monserrat’s “*The Ghost of Tom Joad Revisited: Springsteen’s Lyrics in Post-Reagan’s America*” provides a crucial historical context for Springsteen’s second unplugged album (after *Nebraska*) with summaries and thoughtful commentaries on each of the songs. Monika Madinabeita’s “Identity Choices through Music: Basques in Boise (Idaho)” explores Basque identity in terms of the Basque diaspora into the American West, specifically their immigration to Idaho and their development of Basque-American hybrid identities through festival traditions and particularly music. Well researched and insightful, the essay undermines easy Basque stereotypes such as sheepherding and focuses on contemporary constructions of “identity narratives *with and without* the homeland” (313). María Ángeles Toda Iglesia’s “Joseph Lovece’s *The Steam Man of the West*: Crossing Borders of Gender and Genre in Steampunk Representations of the West” begins with an excellent definition and description of “steampunk” for those unfamiliar with this postmodern hybrid of nineteenth-century mechanics and fashion characterized by “pastiche, parody, intertextuality, the concentration on micro—rather than macro— history, and the role of popular culture” (322). Iglesia’s fine discussion aligns theoretical exploration and textual analysis, so that the novel opens up the theory as much as the theory opens up the novel. ““Damn It, Jack! They still Need You!”: Jack Bauer as the Hero of a Never Ending Western” by Luis Díaz Pulido is somewhat of a self-indulgent romp through the popular television series *24* that reviews key plot and character developments and then connects them generally to standard Western themes without much serious analysis. In ““Everyday Use”: Female Art and Native American History in the Play *The Star Quilter* by William S. Yellow Robe, Jr.,” Juan Ignacio Guijarro González first observes that “drama has not fared too well in the field of Western Studies” (353) and then offers a brief history of Native American drama, which sets the stage nicely for his scene-by-scene discussion of Yellow Robe’s *The Star Quilter*. With Alice Walker’s widely anthologized story “Everyday Use” informing González’s analysis, the tension between the practical and aesthetic values of quilts as American folk art reiterates itself in a different cultural context. I trust that his concluding call for more research and writing on Native American drama will find ample response in the future. “The Road to Wigan Pier Ends in Tioga,” Scott Sigel’s discussion of Rick Watson’s poetry, completes the

collection as its final “bonus track.” With its autobiographical frame and poetic conversation peppered with Mikhail Bakhtin references, the essay seems a fitting final word for a collection that displays and engages a multitude of voices.

PHILLIP A. SNYDER
Brigham Young University
phillip_snyder@byu.edu