Book Review: Unsettling the Literary West: Authenticity and Authorship

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Its promise to revolutionize western studies aside, Nathaniel Lewis's Unsettling the Literary West offers several smart readings of western texts along with a unique analytical approach to the field. Lewis's central claim is that as early as the 1830s writers of western literature felt an undue obligation to capture the "true West," to produce books that stressed accurate renditions of landscape, and, however exaggerated, to claim real-world credentials to substantiate their observations. Though most of these writers understood absolute realism to be impossible, they were performing for eastern audiences whose interest lay not in artistic perception but in the "genuine" frontier. The result was a literature that "suppress[ed] the imaginative power of authors and the discursive play of language" and compelled critics to read western books more as cultural history than art.

While Lewis insists that such misreadings have constrained western writers unto today, he seems to be tracking a critical more than authorial tendency. From Timothy Flint and James Hall in the 1830s to later writers like Joaquin Miller and Frank Norris, Unsettling the Literary West charts the anxiety of historical influence that caused some writers to despair over their inability to offer a perfect representation of region. But Lewis is also quick to highlight writers—from Kirkland, Poe, and Twain to the postmodernists—who intentionally played with regionalist boundaries and whose transgressions yielded narratives far more complex than critics realize. The quest for "authenticity," then, becomes more academic impulse than totalizing malady, not a precept that western writers refused to violate so much as a critical shorthand forcing doctrinaire readings onto unreceptive texts or ignoring those texts altogether.

Perhaps the book's arguments about the persistence of authorial anxiety would have carried more weight if explored in greater depth, but Unsettling the Literary West addresses only about a dozen books at length, ranging from the start of the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth. Also, some conspicuous figures are absent from this lineup: Cooper, Harte, Wister, Cather, and others whose presence might have complicated the book's central thesis.

Finally, though, the epilogue confirms Lewis's modest hope that his book will encourage critics to read literature "as literature," and it is this smaller overture to art—to the notion that western writing must be more than fodder for scholars of cultural studies—that reclaims the sense of purpose with which the work begins. Unsettling the Literary West will not rewrite the landscape of western studies, but its methodology compels further investigation into this tyranny of "the authentic." And in more expansive fashion, Lewis's book echoes other recent studies that favor innovative dialogue with western texts over the traditional but restrictive rubrics into which such texts are too often collapsed.

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