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Review of "Postwestern Cultures: Literature, Theory, Space." Edited by Susan Kollin

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Postwestern Cultures: Literature, Theory, Space. Edited by Susan Kollin. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007. xix + 267 pp. Photographs, notes, references. $35.00 cloth, $19.95 paper.

Postwestern Cultures addresses "the highly charged and continually shifting meanings" of a space that occupies an outsized, even mythic place in the national imaginary: the American West. The essays in this collection do not focus on this myth or its deconstruction in recent history, criticism, and media; rather, they set out to question, through approaches ranging from ecocriticism and critical regionalism through theories of space and gender, the viability, potency, and destructive power of its iconography. By calling into question the fixed positioning of the West in the national imagination—its history, its material culture, and its status as a "pre-lapsarian, pre-social, and pre-modern space"—the essays invite readers to consider the various "Wests" that circulate in a modern global economy.

The four essays of the first section locate the West in contemporary culture. Using Gayatri Spivak's concept of spectralization,

Stephen Tatum reads the computer culture of Douglas Coupland's *Microserfs*, set nominally in the technology and entertainment centers of Seattle, Silicon Valley, and Las Vegas but actually in the spaces of global capitalism that connect them, as "remap[ping] the American West as a postregional, consumer electronic interface." In reading the West as image, Krista Comer analyzes one of its durable icons, the California surfer girl, in contemporary surf and teen cultures. By employing the lens of critical regionalism, Comer critiques the surfer girl image's potential for a false erasure of racial difference while acknowledging that such features as the *Luna Bay* series of teen novels and surf camps for older women provide a message of resistance to dominant cultural assessments of women's bodies. Neil Campbell finds that John Brinkerhoff Jackson's work in western cultural geography anticipates Edward Soja's theory of "thirdspace," or the intersection of real and imagined space, while Michael Beehler discusses William Gibson's closed spaces and spaces of play in *Virtual Light*.

Addressing material rather than virtual culture, essays in the later two sections, "Nature and Culture" and "Contested Wests," focus on the ways in which traditional western subjects and treatments prove insufficient and even self-contradictory, with several focusing on conventional views of western identity. Articles by Melody Graulich, Capper Nichols, and David Oates employ personal narrative to demonstrate that tropes of the West intersect and are inadequate to contain the complexity of such issues as adoptive identity, environmental marketing, and the gendered spaces of nature writing. The most striking of these accounts is Beth Loffreda's discussion of gay identity in Laramie, Wyoming, after the murder of Matthew Shepard in 1998. Despite policies designed to enforce both tolerance and remembrance, "queer public space" is still marginalized, and the quiet reminder to faculty that "scheduling idealism" so that GLBTQ issues are not raised during the legislative session hints at the "struggle between the nostalgic form of regional identity and a queer remaking of it." John Streamas sees a similar disjuncture between the frontier myth and the actual experiences of Japanese-American citizens interned during World War II as represented in children's books; even recent juvenile novels cast the experience not as imprisonment but as a frontier adventure rife with opportunities for patriotic self-sacrifice.

In addition to the essays on identity, several articles address land use as a site of conflicting versions of the West. Audrey Goodman pairs the different means of "cultivating" the land with hospitality versus "cultivating" it with the atomic bomb in her discussion of Otowi Bridge, New Mexico, its resident Edith Warner, who ran a tearoom at the site, and the scientists at Los Alamos. Another investigation of such conflicting uses of western land is Nancy Cook's reading of real-estate ads for "economic-unit" or "trophy ranches" in Montana. As Cook demonstrates, the wealthy person's romantic fantasy of a view ranch, abetted by a desire for isolation and a mobility that leaves him or her independent of local businesses, has serious consequences for the towns that the ranches used to support. Susan Kollin exposes a similar unacknowledged romanticism about land use in an essay about Alaska nature writing: although going alone into the wild is a key feature of popular survival narratives, the ostensible purity of such contact with "extreme nature may be converted into cultural capital precisely through the act of narration." Consuming nature and converting it into cultural capital requires that the wilderness be preserved as a leisure space for the "play that mimics work" rather than releasing it for use by those who actually work in these settings. Lee Clark Mitchell also questions the logic behind such "authentic" experiences, contending that good writing, not authenticity, is what makes great literature and that the standards of realism and authenticity be dropped altogether.

In short, with its multiplicity of approaches *Postwestern Cultures* works to liberate "the West" from its moorings in place, time, and myth. Its interesting and insightful essays provide ways to construct the region not as a static

but as a fluid entity that, like Whitman's iconic American self, "contains multitudes."

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