

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Fall 2007

Review of *Hollywood's West: The American Frontier in Film, Television, and History* Edited by Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor & *Making the White Man's Indian: Native Americans and Hollywood Movies* By Angela Aleiss

Armando Jose Prats
University of Kentucky

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Prats, Armando Jose, "Review of *Hollywood's West: The American Frontier in Film, Television, and History* Edited by Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor & *Making the White Man's Indian: Native Americans and Hollywood Movies* By Angela Aleiss" (2007). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1454.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1454>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

REVIEW ESSAY

Hollywood's West: The American Frontier in Film, Television, and History. Edited by Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005. xii + 373 pp. Illustrations, filmography, notes, bibliography, index. \$40.00.

Making the White Man's Indian: Native Americans and Hollywood Movies. By Angela Aleiss. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005. xix + 211 pp. Photographs, notes, selected bibliography, index. \$44.95.

REVIEWING THE WESTERN

The Western, yet again, lies dormant. The revival that began in the late eighties with the greatest of adventures on the Great Plains, *Lonesome Dove*, and peaked some years later with Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (followed closely by George Cosmatos's *Tombstone*), announced that the genre had reclaimed its luminous moral core, even if it would henceforth cast its light in chiaroscuro of regret and remorse. Released in late 1990, Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* revitalized the Indian Western, though in doing so it also revived the rancid myth of the Vanishing American. Whatever else may be said about it, Costner's film validated other important Indian Westerns—*Geronimo: An American Legend*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, and Ted Turner's *Geronimo*.

Despite the prequels and spin-offs—and even despite the popularity of HBO's *Deadwood*—the Western's light had dimmed again. *Open Range* (2003) and the Indian Western *The Missing* (2003), as well as the two miniseries *Into the West* (2005) and *Broken Trail* (2006), however lavishly produced, but dimly mirror Westerns of the preceding decade. Two of these titles feature Robert Duvall attempting to resuscitate *Lonesome Dove*'s adorable Gus McCrae. *The Missing* features Tommy Lee Jones,

who played McCrae's crusty sidekick, Woodrow Call. And *Broken Trail*, a cattle-drive tale of the Great Plains, has Costner in the lead, connecting him inevitably not so much to *Dances with Wolves* but to the failed *Wyatt Earp* (1995), which is surely the *Heaven's Gate* of its time. Yet this dormancy, lamentable as it always is, also signals the opportunity for new investigations into the Western. Two promising and timely studies have seized the opportunity.

Framed by a solid introduction and, at the back end of it, an excellent filmography and a first-rate bibliography, *Hollywood's West: The American Frontier in Film, Television, and History* offers both canonical and revisionist insights into the Western. The editors plunge into their introduction with all the vigor of a Sooner land rush, attending to Western history, art, and scholarship at breakneck speed. What they choose to see along the way, however, does not always accord with one's view of "The West, Westerns, and American Character," as they title their introduction. In the review of scholarship, for example, they give Henry Nash Smith (*Virgin Land*) his widely acknowledged due as trailblazer, but the pursuers of trails as adventurous as Smith's own do not fare so well here. It is disappointing to find Patricia Limerick credited with an

idea—*la frontera*—first put forth by the late Gloria Anzaldúa (does contributor Kimberly Sultze know this?). The editors cannot do better for John Cawelti's genius for concision and classification than to reduce it to "enthusiasm and ingenuousness." Moreover, they briefly discuss—and all too soon dismiss—Richard Slotkin's magisterial work as "wrongheaded," though Slotkin is likely the most cited author in the collection. In truth, these editors want their Westerns good and simple—if not downright nostalgic. And this is, perhaps, why an important movie like *Little Big Man* gets short shrift, or why *Soldier Blue* and *Ulzana's Raid* receive no mention at all—as if the Vietnam War had never touched the Western.

Some of the more compelling essays in *Hollywood's West* endeavor to redefine a genre that is already omnivorously inclusive. One admires J. E. Smyth's effort to bring *Cimarron* (1931) to bear on the conventions of the Western as well as Cynthia J. Miller's original essay on "hybrids." Another piece on a movie based on an Edna Ferber work, Monique James Baxter's on *Giant*, aptly complements Smyth's. John Shelton Lawrence brings a sophisticated sense of Western history to his account of the evolution of the Lone Ranger. Matthew Costello's essay on the "rewriting" of *High Noon*, however, labors inevitably under the reproving glower of Howard Hawks's *Rio Bravo*. Readers who recall John Wayne's scorn for *High Noon* will keep inserting *Rio Bravo* between the lines of Costello's essay, only to find it, alas, condemned in an endnote: "The omission of *Rio Bravo* from my study may seem unjustified." Indeed.

Perhaps the jewel in this crown is Joanna Hearne's "The 'Ache for Home.'" Rich in references to both the history of white-Indian relations and the Indian Western, Hearne's

viewing of *Devil's Doorway* is admirably researched, clearly written, and impeccably argued—a model for the finer things that may yet come of further studies of the Western.

Angela Aleiss's *Making the White Man's Indian* unearths a huge number of Indian Westerns, especially from the early silent era, thereby affirming a current trend in film studies—reconstruction via archival records. Aleiss, to be sure, does not always distinguish between movies she has actually screened and those she has only read about, and this poses basic problems with her study. *Making the White Man's Indian* aspires to a deeper general critique than the one twice attempted by Michael Hilger (1986 and 1995). More often than not, however, the argument seems burdened rather than directed by its own basic premise—that the Indian's is "an evolving screen image." By the lights of this uncritically held assumption, a century's worth of Hollywood Indians should have already produced remarkable progress toward the apotheosis of a culturally authentic American Native. So one looks for signs of this *telos*, only to find summaries forced into chronologies that are never quite free of arbitrariness. Moreover, Aleiss seems as oblivious of the Western's stubborn iconographies as of its cruel typology, both of which reflect American cultural memory's resistance to revision, let alone evolution. The book, accordingly, reads for the most part like a long annotated filmography—useful enough as far as that goes; but it falls well short of demonstrating that one hundred years of images of the Indian have produced anything more than flatteringly distorted mirrors of America's imperial mythologies.

ARMANDO JOSÉ PRATS
Department of English
University of Kentucky