

BOOK REVIEWS | LITERATURE AND CULTURE

SOFÍA MARTINICORENA

UNIVERSIDAD COMPLUTENSE DE MADRID

La expansión y revisión de un mito. El Oeste norteamericano en la literatura española

David Río (ed.)

Madrid: Iberoamericana Vervuert, 2023. 359 pp.
ISBN: 8491923411; 9788491923411

The publication of Neil Campbell's *The Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age* in 2008 consolidated the academic trend that no longer understood the US West to be a region bound by national limits but a global, multicultural one, and was soon followed by other works that applied the transnational turn to the field of Western studies. Some of the most recent works to adopt the transnational lens for the study of the US West include Janne Lahti's *The American West and the World: Transnational and Comparative Perspectives* (2019), Hervé Mayer and David Roche's edited volume *Transnationalism and Imperialism: Endurance of the Global Western Film* (2022), or *The Western in the Global Literary Imagination* (2022), edited by Christopher Conway, Marek Paryż and David Río. David Río, Chair of American Literature at the UPV/EHU, is also the editor of the volume *La expansión y revisión de un mito. El Oeste norteamericano en la literatura española* (2023). Supported by "REWEST," the Research Project that Río chairs at the same University, the publication of this volume contributes to this field of study by offering a thorough study of the impact of the US West on Spanish literature. As Río notes in his introduction, to this

day there has not been a comprehensive account of the representations of the West in Spanish literature. *La expansión y revisión de un mito* counters this critical neglect by offering an overview of the Spanish reception of the West as cultural myth, with a particular focus on twentieth and twenty-first century Spanish literary production. With a decidedly transnational and multicultural approach to the US West, the volume is an unavoidable text for anyone interested in the reception of the US West in modern and contemporary Spanish literature across a wide variety of genres.

The chronological approach of the book's first section attests to the sustained interest the western has exerted throughout Spanish literature and culture from colonial times up until the twenty-first century. The opening chapter, penned by M. Carmen Gómez Calisteo, is devoted to the acknowledgment of the incompleteness of traditional accounts of the first “western” stories through an exploration of Alvar Núñez de Vaca's settler writings, which predate the Anglo testimonies by decades. The author vindicates the *Naufraños* as a “pioneer” text that expands the horizons of the US West beyond narrow Anglo-white contexts. Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz authors the second chapter, in which he explores the transatlantic vision of the frontier as “discursive space” (Ibarrola-Armendariz 2023, 51),¹ as it appears on Esteban Hernández y Fernández's 1876 novel *Los hijos del desierto*. Despite the novel's interest on Native peoples at the expense of dominant identities, Ibarrola-Armendariz notes how the author cannot help but fall into certain stereotyped visions of the Indigenous populations that ultimately end up reinforcing settler colonialist dynamics. Christopher Conway's insightful chapter “Cómo leer un western popular: *Fitz Roy el pequeño cow-boy* y el cuaderno de aventuras español de la Edad de Plata (1898-1936)” proposes a methodological approach to the popular novel of adventures—one that takes into consideration three crucial elements: the editorial context of publication; the relative, or diminished importance of authorship, and the ideological and historical reading of the text. Defined by a penchant for “exotism and pastiche” (Conway 2023, 80), the Spanish popular western of the time emerges as a complex rewriting of a multitude of sources, influences and varied national traditions resulting from the “transatlantic dialogues” (Conway 2023, 92) that the volume revolves around. In Chapter 4, Fernando Eguidazu offers a thorough study of mid-century Spanish western and sheds light on two important—and opposite—figures: José Mallorquí and Marcial Lafuente Estefanía. Both were immensely popular, but while the former is representative of an arguably rigorous western, concerned with the vindication of the Hispanic heritage of the West, the latter produced novels of dubious literary quality that painted a stereotyped West full of clichés. Despite their differences, the success of both authors attests to the incorruptible interest that the western had in the reading audiences of the Spanish 1940s and 1950s. Mary S. Vásquez, in chapter 5, analyses three works that revolve around the legend of Billy the Kid. Vásquez devotes most of her discussion to Ramón J. Sender's 1965 novel *El bandido adolescente* and

1 All quotations from *La expansión y revisión de un mito* have been translated from Spanish into English by the author of this review.

the author's experience with Mexico and the US Southwest during his exile years. Vásquez then pivots to a commentary on two possible counter-mythic texts on Billy the Kid: 2019 film *In Their Own Words. Billy the Kid and the Lincoln Country War*, written and directed by Michael Anthony Giudicissi, and Rudolfo Anaya's late 1990s dramatic piece *Billy the Kid*. By offering three possible portrayals of the mythic character, the chapter highlights the conception of the West as a necessarily incomplete cultural object. Chapter 7 explores Camilo José Cela's parodic use of the epic genre in his X novel *Cristo versus Arizona*. Gonzalo Navajas unpacks the novel's deconstruction of Wyatt Earp's mythic status, resulting in a complex "counter-epic" (2023, 164) achieved through two main strategies: the proliferation of banal characters with no psychological death and the absence of a unified plot (2023, 144-45). Juan Ignacio Guijarro González devotes chapter 8 to a close reading of poems by Pedro Salinas, Gabriel Celaya and Juan Luis Panero—all of them related to different and meaningful poetic twentieth-century movements, or moments—and emphasizes the particular influence of filmic westerns and their transnational reception by Spanish poetry.

The second section is dedicated to contemporary rewritings of the West, and it begins with Manuel Pérez Jiménez's study on twentieth century Spanish drama from the "Transición" period, which uses allegorical drama to stage the political conflicts of the time. Within this context, the West is used as a means to reach a larger goal, its elements containing a symbolic quality that interpellates the Spanish audience by providing critical commentary on the sociopolitical reality. Pérez Jiménez goes on to explore other iterations of drama that use different aesthetic strategies related to the West for varied purposes, ranging from Fernando Arrabal's surrealism to the more contemporary Teatro Verbo of authors like Zo Brinviyer. In the next chapter, Ángel Chaparro Sainz uses the prism of Neil Campbell's "rhizomatic west" to explore Agustín Fernández Mallo's 2007 novel *Nocilla Dream*. The spaces of the Nevadan desert and the city of Las Vegas, with their respective symbolic associations, take up most of the chapter's discussion. Despite the novel's apparent lack of a critical agenda, it manages to deconstruct the mythic West by offering a plethora of cultural references that undo the archetypal image of the region and produce a distinctly postmodern take on the transnational West. In chapter 10, Andoni Cossío and Martin Simonson study Pedro Andreu's post-apocalyptic novel *El secadero de iguanas* (2010), an example of a Spanish *weird western*. After a brief outline of the genre's rich—albeit rather traditional, in its approach towards the West—history within the Spanish context, the authors argue that elements such as the centrality of a young woman's narrative point of view, the positive appraisal of the archetypal Other and the presence of features from the fantastic and science-fiction genres make this novel an apposite example of the malleability of the West as a source of aesthetic and thematic experimentation. In chapter 11, Raúl Montero Gilete moves to the realm of children fiction to analyse *Cabeza Nublada y Pies Ligeros*, written in 2018 by Miguel Ángel Villar Pinto. After a review of Western literature for children and young readers during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the author concludes that Villar Pinto's work is an example of realist children fiction

set in the Far West that incorporates traditional features of the genre, such as the rites of passage and a didactic aim, but which nonetheless incorporates a reified conception of Native American peoples. In his chapter, Iker González-Allende focuses on the specific region of the US Midwest and its representation in Ana Merino's novel *El mapa de los afectos* (2020). Like Nevada in Chaparro Sainz's discussion on *Nocilla Dream*, the Midwest has been construed stereotypically as a region that conflates clichés mostly related to its rural character. González Allende argues that Merino's novel, set in rural Iowa, stages the struggle between the archetypal affability that the region is said to display—typically used in marketing campaigns—and the violence that in fact permeates its society. Amaia Ibarra-Bigalondo follows this vein in her exploration of a contemporary novel's representation of the West. She analyzes how Silvia Coma's 2020 *Pioneras* combines some of the most formulaic attributes of the "Old West" with others more akin to a New Western sensitivity. The novel thus emerges as a contemporary rewriting of a classic western that simultaneously debunks some of its premises while evincing the difficulty to let go of the landmarks of the western genre. David Río's final chapter on this section focuses on Jon Bilbao's 2020 novel *Basilisco*. Río reflects upon the novel's complex imbrication of past and present, Old West and contemporary Spain, and praises its metafictional quality. According to Río, Bilbao's novel is particularly masterful in its exposure of "the artificiality of the myth of the frontier" (Río 2023, 319), which makes it impossible to tell western myth from western reality, in typical post-western fashion.

The volume's last, shorter section includes three contributions by artists who offer their vision of what "writing the West" may mean today. Combining three different textual genres, Ana Merino reflects upon the acute sense of place that imbues her poetry and fiction, especially the one she derives from being a foreigner in Iowa; Pedro Andreu reflects on his aforementioned novel in an interview conducted by Cossío and Simonson, and Luci Romero's poetry offers a different way of writing the West and its themes: civilization, settlement, and myth.

The publication of *La expansión y revisión de un mito. El Oeste norteamericano en la literatura española* throws a new slant on the general field of Western studies and emerges as an invaluable source for those studying transnational representations of the West. The volume's inclusion of a wealth of genres (drama, fiction, film) and subgenres (allegory, weird western, neo-western, children's fiction) and traditions stands as proof of the "consolidation of the transnational projection" of the western genre (Río 2023, 310), while it also confirms the theses of theorists of the West like Nathaniel Lewis, who argue that there is no "authentic" West; all we have is an unending series of simulacra, rewritings and re-configurations of a cultural myth. Despite the volume's focus on a dominant, hegemonic idea of the West—an idea imposed by the volume's chosen corpus—the book manages to advocate for a multivocal, heterogeneous West and it attests to the enduring influence that this mythic world has held over cultures and traditions across the world.



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