

Susan Kollin (ed.). *Postwestern Cultures: Literature, Theory, Space*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2007. xix, 267 pp.

Despoina Feleki*

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

Postwestern Cultures: Literature, Theory, Space, edited by Susan Kollin, is the fifth volume in the Postwestern Horizons series. Kollin's introduction accentuates the power of political value attached to western space in national discourse and constitutes, along with thirteen other inspiring essays, an interdisciplinary investigation of the American West as a dynamic space that is being informed by socio-cultural, economic and technological parameters, intertwined in a globalising network. The authors' explorations of the American West's "in-betweenness" oscillate between the past and the future, the local and the global, and the regional and the national, with the aim of opening up to a new post-western overview of U.S. space in relation not only to what precedes it but mainly to what comes beyond.

Moving away from Frederick Jackson Turner's restrictive frontier thesis proposed in 1893, which saw the West as an overabundant free land exercising a formative force on existing populations, the writers challenge similar frontier discourses, drawing on "global studies, feminist theory, cultural studies, environmental criticism, cultural geography, queer studies and critical race theory" (xi). Neil Campbell discusses John Brinckerhoff Jackson's theory of the "vernacular landscape of 'in-between'" (63) in the 1950s, a "'proto-postmodern' vision of the West as a complex network of 'sampled' cultures, forms, and ideas without the imposed metanarratives of the frontier..." (65), as well as Edward Soja's theory of "thirdspace" in the 1990s. Soja's "thirdspace" moves between "firstspace", which occupies the real, and "secondspace", which occupies the imagined, and transforms and restructures both in a creative process (60-61). These concepts question established binary notions of space and constitute some of the theoretical threads in the volume that help the evolving and culturally defined nature of space unfold. From Las Vegas and San Francisco to Alaska, to the waves of the western ocean, to the bridges and to the Japanese American internment

*Despoina Feleki is an appointed English teacher and a PhD Candidate. Her fields of research include contemporary American literature, writing technologies and popular culture theory. She can be contacted at depfeleki@hotmail.com.

camps, western space re-emerges as a powerful network of inter-personal and inter-cultural relations affected by global policies.

The volume is made up of three parts: “Newer New Wests”, “Nature and Culture” and “Contested Wests”. The first part best captures the tendencies and frictions at work in the globalised American West of the twenty-first century, with Stephen Tatum’s images of “flow” acting as the backbone that connects all the essays together. Tatum brilliantly sketches how flows of capital, technology, and human and animal populations cause the restructuring of the economic, socio-cultural and political landscape, leading to the deterritorialisation and, ultimately, to the re-territorialisation of regional space. Gayatri Spivak’s notion of “spectralization” of the “so-called rural” (15) explains how “deterritorialized, postregional cultural imaginary materializes as a particular type of *interface* between distinctive geographical realities, finanscapes, and emergent types and divisions of labor” (16), as showcased by Tatum in a discussion of Douglas Coupland’s *Microserfs*.

Michael Beehler explores the West through the prism of William Gibson’s virtual West in *Virtual Light* (1993), where virtuality exists as a state of the real rather than a simulation. Despite the voyeuristic looks through virtual glasses, reminiscent of a pornographic experience associated with the male body, human contact ultimately outrivals prosthetically supported technological and architectural wonders. Problems such as the re-articulation of masculinity and the re-location of the female as a subject are discussed by Krista Comer, who proposes surf discourse and imagery as a new approach to new critical regionalism.

The essays in the second part attempt a re-evaluation of the necessary elements in nature writing and in the writer’s unmediated relationship with nature. After Lee Clark Mitchell’s questioning of notions such as “authenticity” and historical truth favoured by western literature, he suggests doing away with the Western frontier in favour of a more inclusive American literature. David Oates attempts the crossing of the “gender frontier” in natural writing while Capper Nichols and Kollin examine how the frontier experience through the practices of backpacking and survival is inevitably associated with a culture of consumption and economic profit.

The problems of disintegrated subjectivities and interracial co-existence on western space, as opposed to the issue of man’s appropriation of western land, are tackled in the third part. Beth Loffreda, John Streamas and Melody Graulich discuss the difficulty in crossing the frontier imposed by a conservative and hypocritical society when one is not white or straight, although the belief in the potential of every individual to move beyond the castrating

prejudice of the American culture and its limiting legislative system is insinuated. The last two essays by Audrey Goodman and Nancy Cook loop back to Tatum's train of thought and present Western space as the nodal point where the human factor, technology and economic profit converge. Goodman is right to cite Henri Lefebvre's claim, that "[s]pace 'cannot be separated either from the productive forces, including technology and knowledge, or from the social division of labour which shapes it, or from the state and the superstructures of society'" (207).

By overcoming the barriers of an outdated frontier theory, this collection ambitiously explores the "outsidedness" of the American West in the new millennium and voices the need for new perspectives on, and reconfigurations of, an always promising West. One of *Postwestern Cultures* strengths lies in the fact that the analyses are informed by the writers' personal experience in tandem with evidence drawn from literature and film. Although the problem of the construction of a coherent American identity on the American West haunts all critics in the volume, a satisfying answer is evaded and the future of the American citizen on Western landscape in the course of an all-powerful globalising force remains to be further investigated.