

Beyond the Myth: New Perspectives on Western Texts.

Edited by David Rio, Amaia Ibarraran, and Martin Simonson.
 Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain: Portal Education, 2011. 318 pages, \$21.90.

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Beyond the Myth inaugurates a new series on “The American Literary West” that, according to its back cover leaf, “addresses theoretical and practical aspects of the West as a pluralistic literary space, including its multicultural broadening, its international dimension, and its connection with other artistic realms.” In his introduction, chief editor David Rio stresses this anthology’s “postwestern perspective,” its “postregional dimension” (xv). As such, it contributes to the current, transnational criticism of western American literature and popular culture: a criticism that, as much as anything, underscores the revisionist, cultural studies approach prevalent in the past generation.

Beyond the Myth succeeds in bringing a fresh look at a series of texts that are not, for the most part, yet canonical. Rio makes the point that eight of its twelve essayists are Europeans (mostly Spanish) who, in effect, “challeng[e] reductionist regional and national perspectives and vindicat[e] the point of view of the outsider” (xvi). The collection reflects the virtues and limitations of the outsider perspective—and there are, unsurprisingly, limitations. In anthologies of this kind, the sections sometimes feel uneven, as do the quality of the essays. Most of these essays widen the territory by offering compelling readings of texts or figures which, I suspect, are not often assigned or discussed in western American lit classes.

The contributions swing, sometimes uneasily, between the personal and the theoretical. For instance, Gregory Martin’s foreword, a surprisingly personal narrative, is offset by Rio’s theoretical argument in his introduction. Rio admits that the book’s three sections—“Continuity and Renewal,” “Beyond Stereotypes,” and “Cultural Transfer”—interrelate and overlap, and particular essays might be placed elsewhere (xvi). In the first section, essays devoted to David Guterson’s *The Other* (2008) and four Paul Auster novels demonstrate ways in which writers recycle and revise traditional western tropes.

Three essays analyze varying stories on limitation. “Shoshone Mike and the Basques” reviews sundry accounts of a 1911 historical episode in Nevada involving the deaths of three Basques, to analyze historical interpretations of Basque identity. Phyllis Barber’s essay honestly presents the challenges of writing personal memoir in a Mormon milieu; Carmen Camus’s essay, which concludes the collection, reviews the sad but unsurprising censorship of a range of American pop cultural texts during the Franco dictatorship.

Rio, in his introduction, salutes British critic Neil Campbell as the godfather of transnational criticism, and Campbell’s essay, “Affective Critical Regionalism in D. J. Waldie’s *Suburban West*,” demonstrates a

relatively recent critical subject and lens. As a product of a Northwest suburb, I find this outsider's interpretive approach— affective critical regionalism—of more than slight interest, though its language tends toward the critically dense. A later essay by Juan Ignacio Guijarro provides a compelling Chicano reading of poet Tino Villanueva's *Scene from the Movie GIANT* (1993). One of the volume's best essays, David Fenimore's "From California to Jarama Valley: Woody Guthrie's Folk Banditry," artfully analyzes the legendary bard's rhetorical strategies and reaches a moving conclusion that implicates all of us.

Altogether, *Beyond the Myth* signifies a solid contribution to the emerging literature of transnational criticism, one that reminds us that the US West belongs to the globe, not merely the region.

Women Writers of the American West, 1833–1927.

By Nina Baym.

Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011. 384 pages, \$40.00.

Reviewed by Christie Smith

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This book is a tease. It wants you to stop what you're doing and rush to the nearest decent academic library or used bookstore in some dusty western city, pull books from the shelves, and curl up and read for two solid weeks. Nina Baym has given us a provoking, but glancing knowledge of 343 women writers of the West, which only whets the appetite for a deeper knowledge. In an overview talk on the book she delivered at the Willa Cather conference at Smith College in June 2011, Baym allowed that the number of authors for the book kept growing, even since the publishing date. She said that she'd originally wondered if there were even a hundred women who had published at least one book set in the West between 1833 and 1927 but found that once the project got started, they came out of the woodwork in droves. This compilation is impressive, if necessarily lacking in depth; Baym herself notes that she had to "sacrifice depth for breadth" (2). But we get a tantalizing and long overdue look at the hundreds of novels, memoirs, journalistic works, poems, and texts in many other genres by adventurous and engaged women about their western experiences.

Baym does an excellent job of modeling a humble and work-in-progress tone with biographical material on the authors, noting areas for further research, even though she is a scholar of considerable stature. She also has a generous attitude toward the often sentimental and sometimes predictable plotlines of particularly the nineteenth-century novelists. That is not to say that Baym's analyses lack an edge, however. The chapter on California, for example, dryly notes that Mary Austin, that wonderful stylist, was an early example of creative nonfiction taken to the limit. And when describing Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913), Baym terms Alexandra Bergson's love of the land a "deeply romantic