

BRADY HARRISON AND RANDI LYNN
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The US West has always been a “multicultural, multiaccented, multi-layered space” (Campbell 2) and, consequently, a disputed territory. Although studying the cultural complexity that the US West represents can be rewarding due to the diverse pedagogical possibilities it offers in the classroom, teaching about such a contested space can feel demanding. *Teaching Western American Literature*, edited by Brady Harrison and Randi Lynn Tanglen, emerges as a potential tool to overcome these challenges. Published in 2020 as part of the *Postwestern Horizons* series—edited by prominent western scholar William R. Handley—the book features contributions by a wide range of scholars of the US west who delve into different pedagogical practices aimed at teaching western literature and culture in heterogeneous academic environments. Spanning thirteen chapters grouped into four larger sections, the volume intends to expand the hegemonic view of the west while fostering critical engagement in larger debates and disciplines that transcend western studies. Additionally, the volume aims to bridge the gap between research and pedagogy—arguably one of academia’s overdue issues—and advocates for a “generative” understanding of teaching and scholarship where these two categories reinforce each other (5).

Part 1, entitled “Teaching the Literary Wests,” begins with Chadwick Allen’s thorough unpacking of the different tasks and assignments involved in his course’s several units. Allen offers a glimpse of the myriad of possibilities that the western, both in its classic and its revisionist form, and both in literature and other media,

offers to students—including those pertaining to non-humanistic fields. Melody Graulich's teaching strategies in Chapter 2 are also targeted at prospective scholars as well as gen-ed students. In her course, Wallace Stegner's 1971 novel *Angle of Repose* is used to address issues of citizenship and environmental activism in the west. In the attempt to engage them in what Graulich calls "our democratic processes" (51), students are invited to write a letter, emulating Stegner's "Wilderness Letter," and send it to an actual person or institution of their choice. Kalenda Eaton and Michael K. Johnson's "Teaching the Black West" closes the first part of the volume. Both authors' respective courses revolve around the importance of Black communities in the development of the west. This is addressed through the study of canonical texts along with references to contemporary culture that help motivate students. In a field long-dominated by a white-settler perspective, Eaton and Johnson's contribution is a necessary one for anyone involved with teaching (and researching) western US literature.

Amy T. Hamilton's "Gender, Affect, Environmental Justice, and Indigeneity in the Classroom" opens the second section, devoted to the topics of "Affect, Indigeneity and Gender." Based on her ample experience teaching several courses in Native American Literature, Hamilton ponders the possibilities that affect brings to the classroom when lecturers don't dismiss it as an un-scholarly experience—something which, the author rightfully notes, potentially "erases minority voices and experiences" (93). Lisa Tatonetti's chapter explores the mechanisms whereby the hegemonic myth of the west is created—mechanisms that systematically erase nondominant and nonheteronormative identities. Combining scholarly sources with artistic and literary Indigenous creation, Tatonetti effectively spells out the ways in which students might learn to queer the (Indigenous) west and, in doing so, to drop the hegemonic narratives about western conquest, settlement and Native removal that they have been taught. Gender identity is also the focus of the next chapter, where Amanda R. Gradisek and Mark C. Rogers draw on classic feminist western scholars, such as Annette Kolodny or Jane Tompkins, to explore the secondary role that women have played in dominant accounts of the west. While most chapters offer examples of teaching practices that have been generally successful, Gradisek and Rogers acknowledge the "resistance" they met from students who were "puzzled that not everything fit into the western genre mold" they had expected (138).

This reveals one possible drawback of focusing on classic expressions of the genre, namely, that they may end up reinforcing the formulaic conventions of the genre that the course intends to debunk.

“Place and Regionality” define Part Three, where the four contributors to the section put an emphasis on the western sense of place, often through the use of place-based learning. The volume’s seventh chapter is written by Karen R. Roybal, who uses decolonial ecocriticism to teach her course “Environmental Justice in the Southwest.” With a majority of non-English majors enrolled, this course combines the in-class study of Chicana texts such as *So Far From God* (1993) by Ana Castillo or Cherrie Moraga’s *Heroes and Saints* (1994) with place-based learning. The course’s ultimate aim is to develop the students’ engagement with out-of-class activism against environmental injustice. Representations of place are also central to Nancy S Cook’s teaching, who in the next chapter explains how she combines theory and literature to explore regionality, ordinary affect and the everyday. Using the work of Ben Highmore and Kathleen Stewart on the everyday, Cook develops a productive approach to talk about the west in a non-totalising way, focusing on what the west may mean for an individual rather than a national collective. “Western Writers in the Field” by O. Alan Weltzien coincides with Roybal’s approach in that Weltzien’s course also values the importance of actual place in the study of texts. His teaching practices include several course-based travels, understood as “active learning,” which prove that going to places that are relevant to texts is an informative experience. Laura Laffrado closes the third section with a chapter on the oft-neglected Pacific Northwest. Laffrado teaches Ella Rhoads Higginson’s 1902 novel *Mariella, of Out-West* to discuss issues of canonicity, especially as they affect western literature, inviting students to “avidly engage the work of recovery” (219). Following the lead of scholars such as Nina Baym or Melody Graulich, Laffrado concludes that *Mariella* is “the foundational novel of the Pacific Northwest” (206) as well as an ideal text to study a region hardly ever taken to be emblematic of the US west.

The last part of the volume is dedicated to the study of “Hemispheric/Global Wests,” indicating the increasingly transnational approach to western literature and culture that the volume attests to. In chapter 11, Tereza M. Szeghi uses María Amparo Ruiz de Burton’s *The Squatter and the Don* (1885) to explore questions

of land, nationality and citizenship as they impact different communities, especially Euro-Americans and Californios. To navigate the complexity of an ideologically challenging text, Szeghi employs three frames to teach the text, which she terms the national, the transnational and the Human Rights frame. Andrea M. Dominguez's chapter addresses western notions of normalcy and heteronormative, able-bodied masculinity, especially as they inform dominant nationhood. Using James Welch's *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* (2000) as an example of a transnational novel, questions of power, normalcy and otherness as they occur in the global context of the novel are tackled through a set of different activities, including "think-pair-share" discussion or close reading practices. Vanja Polic's chapter on western Canadian literature closes the volume. Envisioned as a rhizome, Polic's course—which she teaches in a Croatian context—delves into the postmodern forms of the western as they appear in Canadian fiction. According to Polic, displacing the US west to its northern frontier helps underline the multiple ways of displacement that revisionist westerns involve. Through the study of the dominant myth of the west and the subsequent analysis of Canadian (post)western texts, the discussion centres on the production of place, history and national identities, hoping that this discussion will ultimately prompt students to consider Croatia itself as a heterogeneous, multicultural country.

Teaching Western American Literature does an excellent job of providing a rich, practical template for teaching the US west in a wide variety of contexts. The volume's strength lies in the wealth of strategies and resources supplied by the contributors, which will prove useful not only to researchers of the US west, but to anyone interested in updating or refashioning their teaching practices in the humanities. Additionally, the volume might be useful as an alternative introduction to western studies for someone with no exposure to the field, as virtually most indispensable names and works of scholars of the North American west are featured. One refreshing aspect of the book is the accounts provided by chapters like Gradisek and Rogers' about teaching practices that did not do so well in class, as opposed to the successful approaches described in most chapters. While reading about strategies that do work among students is evidently illuminating, information about teaching methods that posed problems in the classroom (and the reasons why) is also worth sharing. Likewise, further examples of the circumstances and

challenges of studying the US west in a non-American context, like Povic's, would have been informative for the growing body of US scholars based out of the American continent. Beyond these potential avenues for further research, *Teaching Western American Literature* successfully postulates the pedagogical value of western literature and culture for students of all disciplines, including those with a non-humanistic background or with prospective career paths different to academia.

WORKS CITED

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