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Western American Literature, Volume 53, Number 1, Spring 2018, pp. xi-xix
(Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/wal.2018.0017>



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Introduction

Pasts, Presents, Futures

SUSAN BERNARDIN AND KRISTA COMER

Placing Ourselves

The Western Literature Association's fiftieth anniversary conference in 2015 marked an opportunity to think about, through, and across the field of western American studies. While a milestone conference inevitably recognizes foundational moments in our field's formation, it also calls us to engage with current concerns and imagine forward. Hosted by co-presidents David Fenimore and Susan Bernardin at Harrah's, the quintessentially Reno casino hotel, participants gathered at what Will Lombardi dubbed "WestEdge"—a place that resists easy placement. Reno is many Wests, after all, alternately defined by juxtapositions, edges, and movements. Reno's urban river edges aging casinos and borders states and bioregions; the city has served as a through line for histories of multiethnic labor and for movements of emigrant trails and railroad lines, pasts and "futures" of booms and busts. Musician and comics artist Arigon Starr (Kickapoo and Muscogee) and Choctaw writer LeAnne Howe gave performances in Sammy's Showroom, built by Bill Harrah for famed African American singer Sammy Davis Jr. within the confines of regional and national white supremacy. The central presence of Indigenous arts and scholarship at this conference underscored that everywhere our conference meets is Indian Country, in this case Washoe and Paiute homelands. Writer and musician Willy Vlautin's keynote appearance made visible and audible the gritty understories of edgy urban Wests. Posthumous recognition of foundational Basque American writer and journalist Robert Laxalt recognized Basque histories of immigration and home-building in the intermountain

West, yet another understory in popular lexicons of the American West. Several panels organized by José Aranda featured Latino/Chicano Wests, including one in collaboration with the Latino Research Center (Emma Sepulveda Pulvirenti, director) honoring the first anthology of Latino writers in Nevada. The many ways we could locate this conference's presence in Reno speak to the definitional complexity of western American literary and cultural studies, past, present, and future. How do our various locations inform the critical lenses and languages we use? The histories and inheritances we draw from? The conversations we might have, or be unable to have, across our differences?

To foreground these questions about the tenses and tensions of the field, its many-stranded pasts and future possibilities, the conference featured three linked plenaries—Genealogies, Keywords, Methodologies—that are the focus of this special issue. At their core, these sessions were driven by the five staples of journalistic inquiry with an added sixth “w”: who, what, when, where, why, West. Perennial questions related to the “us,” the “we” of the Western Literature Association, seemed especially present at the Reno conference, as did the question of where we are when we talk about “the West.” We conceive our “field” here as the intersecting and at times incommensurate bodies of knowledge that express the organization's critical enterprise and institutional purposes. If a commemorative or anniversary issue might be expected to strike a celebratory tone or consolidate critical trends, and celebration is warranted to be sure, what the fiftieth annual conference suggested additionally was the benefits of openness to lines of thought and to critical histories that disrupt whatever “our” common sense might be.

Western Killjoys

To recognize the exclusions, omissions, and erasures in any project defined as western American studies is to risk invoking the figure of the “killjoy.” In her influential essay, “Feminist Killjoys (And Other Willful Subjects),” Sara Ahmed names the problem of being seen *as* the problem when calling out systems of oppression, including misogyny and sexism. She writes, “feminists are read as being unhappy, such that situations of conflict, violence, and power are read as *about* the unhappiness of feminists, rather than being

what feminists are unhappy *about*" (67). In the context of western American studies, what happens when dissent, interruption, or intervention are perceived, subconsciously or not, as complaint? Rephrasing Ahmed, what is needed for the western killjoy toolkit? How do we engage in core questions of the field while also working toward transforming it? How might western American studies refuse to function as a field of containment, one that incorporates rather than reckons with minoritized histories and viewpoints? After all, the additive approach of multicultural models of inclusion ultimately privileges particular perspectives, timelines, and trajectories as normative. So how do we meaningfully facilitate conversation across and among what are often separate or parallel but not intersecting knowledge projects: western American studies; feminist studies; Indigenous studies; environmental studies; latinx and borderlands studies? Aspirationally, how might methodologies drawn from such fields as Indigenous studies or queer studies fundamentally reframe western American studies? What, in other words, will be the future of our future archive, when we look toward the centennial conference of 2065?

For us as editors, the process of gathering revised versions of many of the plenary offerings as well as new work by a range of scholars in western American studies has depended crucially on attention to matters of relationality, of collaboration, and of accountability to the facts and implications of life and work in settler societies. "We are all caught up in one another," Scott Morgensen teaches, and the spaces between us, to use Morgensen's phrase, offer chances for learning, political understanding, and alliance (1). It allows insight as well into limits, fault lines, fraught spaces where we cannot listen to one another very well. These spaces establish what as editors we came to call "the mess we work with"—the contests over place, over the language(s) we use to speak of place, over resources and meanings. In our editorial efforts we have chosen not to smooth out unevenness. Instead, we have encouraged pressure points and provocations, not with the aim to readily resolve them but rather to establish relations, even when uneasy, and to invite ongoing conversation. Simply put, we have wanted to step into spaces of fracture and conflict and to do our work *there*. As scholars working in western American studies through the lenses of Indige-

nous studies (Bernardin) and feminist studies (Comer), we both see the productivity of conversations across difference—to “sit with” differences while seeking shared ground. Given the hospitality for which the WLA is famous and the relatively intimate scale of our community, we reached aspirationally toward building closer relationships and forming new critical kinships. Critical relationality of this kind is fragile, vulnerable, subject to every bad wind. Recognizing its tender and tentative status in order to shelter and treasure relations we now have is, in spite of the odds against alliances, part of our work.

Contributions: Genealogies, Keywords, Methodologies

At Reno’s Genealogies plenary, speakers Lisa Tatonetti, Krista Comer, and William Handley chose lineages, trajectories, and legacies that must engage US West scholars. Stephen Tatum served as plenary chair. Although the term “Genealogies” invokes Foucault’s tactical history-doing and the nonlinearity of knowledge and power processes, it also aims to make visible intergenerational continuities. Acts of retrospective recovery and prospective imagination, the lesser recognized histories and knowledges spotlighted in the plenary, demand what else is hidden from view, absent from the record.

In “The Indigenous Erotics of Riding Bareback, or, the West Has Always Been Queer,” Lisa Tatonetti unsettles origin stories that underpin heteronormative settler genealogies of the West. A queer West killjoy, Tatonetti delineates the long continuity of queer Indigenities that have been unmarked in western American studies, helping us to “better see the West that has always been.” Krista Comer urges US Western studies “Toward a Feminist Turn.” Noting the importance of women scholars and scholarship about women and gender to the fields constituting and traversing Western studies, she asks why, then, feminist thought *as feminist thought* is so absent both in recent scholarship and in the annual Western Literature Association conference program?

William Handley’s talk, “Environmental Genealogies,” while not offered here, feeds into Sylvan Goldberg’s contribution, “Anthropocene Frontiers: The Place of Environment in Western Studies.” With the term “geologic” West, Goldberg argues for a

genealogical break with pastoral, agricultural, arid, domestic, and wilderness Wests. He puts the problems of scale and risk associated with theorizing the Anthropocene at the center of western American critical attention. Stephen Tatum, in “Unhomely Wests, Meditations in Critical Archaeology,” offers a series of philosophical reflections on the problems of homelessness and dispossession at this moment in history. Tatum cuts a large swath across populations and literatures, grappling with aesthetics, poetics, affect, political economy, and power.

The design of the Keywords plenary was conversational and collaborative, provisional and provocative. Participants identified a keyword of their own choosing, departing from a term, subfield heading, or other organizing or theoretical interest. They prepared short conceptual pieces, reflecting on how their keywords highlighted crucial shifts, interventions, lenses, or approaches to our field. Ultimately, a broader range of perspectives than were originally featured in the conference session appear here and include these: Land, Mexican, Pedagogy, Postwestern, Queer, Regionality, Settler, Sovereignty, and Visuality. Sequenced alphabetically, these nine keywords invite readers to note dissonances and affinities. Definitions, but hardly definitive of the full range and reach of the field, they compel us to take the measure of what is missing and contingent. Simply put, there is a great deal that is important to the field that is not here. At the same time, the juxtapositions of critical approach and theoretical orientation in play here stress the rich dynamisms of the field. Taken together, Keywords alternately remind, affirm, and query what has and should matter in our respective world(s).

In “Postwestern,” Susan Kollin cautions that “important instances of scholarly research and creative interventions predate and achieve many of the same goals [that] go by other names than ‘postwestern.’” Yet “postwestern” functions as a useful analytic of local–global relationality, one epitomized by transnational movements of the cinematic Western. “Regionality,” argues Neil Campbell, involves the process of opening the local or bounded regional West to the world, a frictional and productive agitation. Regionality works against a fixed sense of region as known and flat, gathering “people, places, and things” into affective assemblages

that move. With “Visuality,” Audrey Goodman places ways of seeing and of imagining sight at the center of understandings of power and place. She shows how critiques of visual authority and social organization “along many spatial and temporal scales” reframe histories of western American knowledge production. “Pedagogy,” Randi Tanglen’s submission, delineates how the institutional history and mission of the Western Literature Association dovetails in important ways with the guiding philosophies of critical pedagogies. Tanglen forwards pedagogy as a way to advance the intersections of social justice, the West, and the aims of education. The keyword “Queer,” by Ryan Wander, invites critics to embrace the still untapped promise of queer theory for thinking otherwise in western American studies and against the grain of broad heteronormative social organization. “Queer” suggests less a politics of identity, he notes, than a politics of difference and relationality.

Postwestern and critical regionalism studies, as well as the critical and creative interventions of “those who do not conform to the norms of the settler state,” poise scholars, in Alex Young’s estimation, to engage with settler colonial studies and “the transnational study of empire more broadly.” “Settler,” a descriptor for the normalized, ongoing violence of colonization in the United States, Canada, and other settler nations, serves as a sharp edge to methodologies that do not address the contemporaneity of this violence. With “Land,” foundational ecocritic Cheryll Glotfelty makes the case for the Western Literature Association to embrace more fully the bioregional as an activist ethos and guiding framework, drawing from thinkers such as Aldo Leopold. In yet another register, Kirby Brown demonstrates the complexity of “Sovereignty” for Indigenous scholars and allies and its impetus “for a variety of political, intellectual, and methodological projects.” By embedding his discussion of sovereignty within a relational web of intellectual kinship, Brown honors diverse genealogies of thought while centering “questions of nationhood, citizenships, and belonging.” Finally, in choosing “Mexican” as keyword over the more common signifier “Borderlands” in western American studies, José Aranda spotlights its complexity as a term that invokes statelessness at the same time it serves as “underestimated index for comprehending Spanish /

Mexican / Anglo settler colonialisms in pre- and post-1836 America.” The sustained, slippery meanings of “Mexican” across “identities, ideologies, territorial holdings, and politics” make it all the more urgent to mark them, especially in this precarious and urgent political, national, and cultural moment.

In their invocation of engaged, transformative thinking, both past and future, Keywords advance methodologies suited to the task. The final session of interlinked plenaries at Reno—Methodologies—marked a major methodological moment for the field. In their recuperation of earthworks knowledges, LeAnne Howe and Chad Allen modeled the making of Indigenous research methodologies. While their work could not be included here, their memorable performance at Reno offered a powerful rejoinder to conventions of academic presentations and scholarship. Through acts of collaborative, embodied research that include walking among, listening to, and witnessing earthworks at different times of day and seasons, Howe and Allen work to reactivate Indigenous memories and knowledges of and from these places. Their efforts to resituate these sites within Indigenous rather than settler terms emphasize the transformative potential of decolonial methodologies.

In this issue, ally scholar Joanna Hearne resituates the dominant “lines of sight” produced by cinematic Westerns. Through the decolonial lens provided by her work here and elsewhere, we can never see Westerns in the same way. Moreover, in the hands of Indigenous filmmakers, Westerns—“the very generic form intended to represent their demise”—instead incubate Indigenous knowledge and continuance. In a similar turn to popular culture, Christine Bold works to facilitate the archival recovery of intergenerational Indigenous vaudeville performance. Bold not only asks how scholars might recover the ephemerality of performance, she stages the complexity of doing so as a settler scholar working within the structural limitations of print. Like Howe and Allen, Bold highlights her work as relational, ongoing, and collaborative. Most notably, as a settler scholar, Bold embeds the tricky task of “building relations of research” with Indigenous theater artists Monique Mojica, Gloria Miguel, and Muriel Miguel as she and they uncover their family’s history in vaudeville.

Pedagogies for the Future

Contributors to this anniversary issue communicate a number of questions and directions to pursue as we move through the next half century. First, the Western Literature Association continues to be a social space to negotiate fields, an incubation space for ideas and experimentation. What is the relation of the WLA as an organization, however, to the fields that cross it? Might the WLA more explicitly act upon the field's legacy of critical pedagogy that Randi Tanglen raises for our consideration? What would an explicit ethos of accountability or responsibility look like?

Taking our cues from the contributors, and putting our own commitments on the table, we imagine a field that prioritizes issues of allyship, critical relationality, and more robust engagements of scholars with communities and publics. Embracing the role of public intellectualism will be key to a process of new learning, listening, and teaching. As an organization, it behooves us to telegraph clearly what we stand for. What would a reimagined mission statement for the WLA announce as our values? Here are some thoughts, hardly a complete list, but a beginning. A renovated mission statement might recognize Indigenous homelands and territories, commit our scholarship to ending the masculinist violence so synonymous with western American legacies, insist we work in languages beyond English, and practice a more fierce environmentalism. It might ask us how much we are willing to give, and give up, for the project of critical relationality.

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KRISTA COMER is a professor of English at Rice University and affiliated with the Rice Center for the Study of Women, Gender, and Sexuality. Her books include *Landscapes of the New West*, *Surfer Girls in the New World Order*, and the 2013 spring/summer issue of *Western American Literature*, devoted to works of younger scholars. She has been writing essays lately out of a new project, "Feminist States of Critical Regionalism," as well as directing The Institute for Women Surfers, a

public humanities project in grassroots political education. In 2003 she served as president of the Western Literature Association.

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