

David Rio. 2014. *New Literary Portraits of the American West: Contemporary Nevada Fiction*. Bern: Peter Lang. 300 pp. ISBN: 978-3-0343-1590-6.

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Tupelo Hassman's *Girlchild* (2012), one of the novels discussed in David Rio's book, is presided over by an everyday oxymoron, the mobile homes that constitute the confined space where the protagonist moves, or rather, fails to move. This paradoxical combination of change and stasis is likewise captured by the image on the book cover. Here, Nevada is figured as place: a relatively stable arid landscape cut through by a human-made road, a less permanent feature that suggests mobility. The desert, in our human timescale, conjures up a vision of Nevada as permanent—even though the boundaries of the state have changed over the years. The road, at first, when seen in the foreground, looks simple and straight, though later, in the distant background, it becomes winding and convoluted. Likewise, Nevada fiction, Rio implies, has moved from the straightforward master narrative of the frontier experience to a more diverse and dynamic literary panorama. The interpretation of this image is confirmed by Campbell (2000), who describes the emerging New West as “a complex space—city and desert, settled and transient, fragile and booming at the same time” (2000, 154, quoted in Rio 248). In this book, Rio takes up the task of exploring precisely the complexity and “dynamism of present-day western writing” (243) that Campbell had talked about.

Rio's *New Literary Portraits of the American West: Contemporary Nevada Fiction*, as the title itself suggests, has a very ambitious scope in that it tries to capture *both* the commonalities that Nevada literature shares with other Western literary traditions *and* the distinctive features that characterize it. The book is structured as an introduction, three chapters—the third of which is itself subdivided into four major sections—and a brief final chapter of conclusions. Rio's introduction “vindicates place and regions as [the] fundamental analytical categories” (12) that will buttress his study. The author also explicitly states here the need to complement regionalist and place-based perspectives with “other relevant critical categories such as race, ethnicity, gender, class and religion” (14). Attempting to proffer a broad survey of Western literature along all these axes is beyond the scope of this book, so Rio narrows the literary corpus to “mainstream fiction

set in Nevada” rather than covering all the literature written by Nevada authors (15). It is therefore the setting of the story rather than the writer’s birthplace or residence that becomes the criterion for selecting the texts to be analyzed. As Rio reminds us, there has been, until now, no volume specifically devoted to Nevada fiction, partly because, like Western literature in general, it has been neglected or “underestimated in the critical realm” (16), to such an extent that “certain western works, in order to be legitimized by the academy, have been classified in non-regional terms,” as belonging to “Chicano Studies, Native American Studies, or Environmental Studies” (37-38). Thus, one of the author’s aims in writing this book is to reverse this critical neglect.

The chapter that opens the volume, “The American West Revisited” (19-44) provides the historical and literary background necessary for the subsequent analysis. Drawing on previous work on Western literature, Rio reviews canonical theories, like Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis (1893), at the same time that he explores the first signs of the revision of the myth of the West which was to allow “postfrontier fiction” to emerge in the 1960s. In “The Silver State vs the Sin State” (45-64) Rio complements his general description of Western literature by zooming in on the literary tradition associated with Nevada from its inception until the 1970s, with special attention to Laxalt and Clark. In these two initial chapters, the author starts to map out the major thematic threads that will structure his longer third chapter, namely: the demystification or debunking of the western formula; the impact of women and multiculturalism; the rise of environmental concerns; and, last but not least, the increasing fictional attention given to city life. While all these trends are noticeable in Western literature as a whole, Rio argues, there are also certain features that prove unique to Nevada fiction: the prominent presence of Basque American writers; the centrality of nuclear concerns in Nevada; and the special relevance of Las Vegas in recent Nevada literature.

In chapter three, Rio finally arrives at what constitutes the core of his study, the fiction *about* Nevada published in the last four decades. For clarity’s sake, the author chooses to divide this long chapter into four different sections corresponding to distinctive thematic trends in recent literary works: “Reinterpreting the Wild West,” “A Multicultural and Feminized West,” “The Environmental West” and “The New Western City.” This strategy makes a lot of pedagogical sense, even if, in proposing four topic subchapters and thus reading Nevada literature along thematic lines, the author implicitly relegates formal categories to a secondary position. In addition, by choosing a thematic structure for the book, Rio inevitably pigeonholes literary texts in one of the pre-assigned categories: revisiting the Wild West, multiculturalism, women’s issues, environmental concerns and urban focus. However, as acknowledged in the book itself, many of the works included in this study cut across these boundaries and explicitly tackle two or more of these themes. Thus, while the author tries to explain how his interpretations necessarily dovetail into one another, there is still a considerable degree of overlap that might have been avoided.

In “Reinterpreting the Wild West” (66-91), the first section of chapter three, Rio highlights “the growing concern with historical accuracy” (91) and the concomitant revision of the mystified Wild West in novels like Frank Bergon’s *Shoshone Mike* (1987) and Thomas Sánchez’s *Rabbit Ross* (1973). In the second section—“A Multicultural and Feminized West” (91-149)—the author broadens the horizon of the “white male” version of the west by encompassing multiethnic and “female-oriented” texts. The huge gap between racialized minorities and people of European descent cannot be underestimated and, as Rio himself admits, non-white authors continue to be underrepresented in literary and academic circles, even if, demographically speaking, they are more significant than ever. This may explain why more than half this chapter is devoted to the analysis not of Native American or Chicano literature, but of Basque American writings. When the chapter turns to describing the ‘Feminized West,’ only texts penned by women writers are associated with “women’s topics,” a fact that could be misinterpreted as denying the contribution of male writers to this field. However, after the academic ostracism that women writers have suffered, this compensatory measure is understandable. As Rio convincingly argues, female authors, just like minority writers, have long been “excluded from dominant literary discourses,” and this is all the more true in the case of western literature (139).

While the first sections of chapter three offer informative explanations of the main narratives dealing with the myth of the Wild West, multiculturalism and women, it is in the last two sections where Rio offers his most original and insightful analysis. Section three, “The Environmental West” (150-183), offers a cogent explanation of why the state has come to be known as “nuclear Nevada.” In particular, the pages devoted to the Nevada test site subgenre prove the author’s point as regards the centrality of region and place in this literature. Throughout this section Rio skillfully demonstrates how contemporary Nevada fiction has ingeniously incorporated “the increasing concern for ecological fragility and degradation” (184), even if the use of some theoretical concepts like orientalism or internal colonialism is occasionally unclear. In the last section, “The New Western City” (184-242), Rio teases out some of the most intricate issues at work in recent Nevada fiction, and he also carries out the most innovative analyses in the book. The interpretative study of novels like Willy Vlautin’s *The Motel Life* (2006) and Tupelo Hassman’s *Girlchild* (2012) proves especially valuable: very little critical work has been published on these narratives to date, so the author is clearly opening new ground here. According to Rio, despite their diverse perspectives, most of the urban novels analyzed in this section share an increasing concern with class. In these texts, as the author insightfully puts it, the trope of the “Nevada wasteland” acquires “a socio-economic” dimension that is bound to be more and more relevant in post-recession US (248).

Understandably enough, in the concluding chapter the author prefers to highlight the realistic impulse of new Nevada literature, in contrast to the previous chapters’ hundred year span of mythologized, formulaic and monolithic versions of the west.

In fact, throughout the whole book, there is a noticeable emphasis on the value of historical accuracy, of being faithful to “true” Nevada, even though the object of study is not biography or history but fiction. Rio is surely conscious of this conundrum, which might be the reason why he chooses to include Vu Tran’s warning that “the emphasis on realism has often become a handicap when offering a proper novelistic portrait” of Nevada icons like Las Vegas (213). That same mimetic approach to literature prompts Rio to reinforce the privileged position of insiders, i.e., Nevada authors. Paradoxically enough, in the introduction Rio had cogently defended his own stance as an outsider. In what David Simpson (2002) and Jeffrey Gray (2011) call an *azza* statement, whereby the critic acknowledges her/his own situatedness, Rio explains: “As a non-American, non-westerner, and non-Nevadan I lack the insider’s perspective;” and yet, he adds, the increasingly multicultural nature of Nevada fiction and “its power to engage the imagination of a transnational audience justify the use of an outsider’s point of view” (18). To quote Bakhtin, as Rio himself does, such a stance is not only justifiable, but desirable, for “it is only in the eyes of another culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly” (1986, 7; quoted in Rio 18).

All in all, *New Literary Portraits of the American West* is an excellent piece of literary history. As a critical survey of literature about Nevada, Rio’s book constitutes the perfect complement to *Literary Nevada*, the comprehensive anthology edited by Cheryl Glotfelty in 2008. Due to its panoramic scope, Rio’s volume cannot be expected to engage in an in-depth analysis of every single text featured in its corresponding section. As a result, this book should be read side by side with other volumes offering author-specific studies, like Lynn Marie Houston and William V. Lombardi’s *Reading Joan Didion* (2009) or Ángel Chaparro’s *Parting the Mormon Veil* (2013), or together with books engaging in theoretically-informed criticism of selected Western narratives, like Neil Campbell’s *The Rhizomatic West* (2008).

At the end of the book, and implicitly departing from his accustomed realistic stance, Rio claims that Nevada writing epitomizes the “interaction between place and fiction in western writing” to such an extent that “present day Nevada exemplifies the power of fiction to reinvent both a state and a region” (249). In this power of reinvention lies the trope of mobility or change, which once more intersects with that of rootedness or stasis. Like Hassman’s mobile homes and Vlautin’s motel culture, contemporary Nevada fiction acknowledges both roots and routes: the road draws our eyes towards the unknown future, but it winds its way through and around the well-known landscape of Nevada’s past.

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