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Halverson, Cathryn

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Westerns: A Woman's History by Victoria Lamont (review)

Cathryn Halverson

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(Review)

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Book Reviews

Victoria Lamont, *Westerns: A Woman's History*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2016. 210 pp. Cloth, \$55.

One frustration voiced by those working in the field of western women's literature is how often editors, peer reviewers, and well-meaning colleagues urge one to read and cite Jane Tompkins's 1992 *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* and, more recently, Nina Baym's comprehensive *Women Writers of the American West, 1833–1927* (2011). With Victoria Lamont's *Westerns: A Woman's History*, however, we now have a more useful, more persuasive, and more provocative study about the West and women's cultural production by a scholar who has devoted her career to the subject. I am hopeful this book will become the new default recommendation, as it certainly warrants.

In Lamont's words, *Westerns: A Woman's History* is "a revisionist account of the origins of the popular western" that recovers "the many women who helped constitute the genre" (1). It proves just how wrong Tompkins gets it in conceiving of the Western as "a male-authored backlash against the woman-authored sentimental novel" (2), as well as the fallacy of a more widespread belief that women's Westerns were necessarily domestic. That her mission is twofold makes Lamont's work of critical relevance outside of western studies: in addition to recovering authors and texts she uncovers the array of material conditions and cultural mechanisms that erased women's participation in the genre. As part of this investigation she consulted numerous archival collections.

Chapter 1 focuses on the first important cowboy novel, Emma Ghent Curtis's 1889 *The Administratrix*, to show why Curtis "transforms her heroine into a man with a gun" (26) even as she argues for women's vaunted moral authority. Chapter 2 pairs Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, often identified as "the foundational western" (33), with Francis McElrath's exactly contemporaneous *The*

Rustler (1902). Both books were inspired by the range wars in Johnson County, Wyoming, but from this history produce very different plots and arguments. Chapter 3 turns to B. M. Bower and Caroline Lockhart, coupling biographical and critical inquiry to analyze the differing strategies by which these writers claimed “cultural authority over the emergent western novel” (54).

“Why Mourning Dove Wrote a Western,” chapter 4, demonstrates that Okanogan novelist Mourning Dove found the popular Western a more enabling genre than the ethnography she was urged to write, especially since it shared features with traditional Native storytelling. Chapter 6 hones in on pulp magazines to discuss the “western love story magazine,” which was eventually deemed a second-rate imitation of the masculinist action Western despite emerging in tandem with it.

Chapter 5, “Cattle Branding and the Traffic in Women,” is especially ambitious, even as it consolidates earlier claims and reviews some of the texts and authors that appear in previous chapters. Lamont’s collective reading of *The Rustler*, Bower’s *Lonesome Land* (1912), and Katharine Newlin Burt’s *The Branding Iron* (1919) offers an astonishing new view of the West. Having “displaced abolitionism as the origin of American feminism” (104), the West is rendered in these texts as “a space in which patriarchy is exposed and feminist consciousness is raised.” Cows roam freely through *Westerns*, which describes female characters as both “literally rustled” and “figuratively rustled” (108), and my dream version of the book would include some commentary about Winnifred Eaton’s 1924 *Cattle*, a “Why Onoto Watanna Wrote a Western.”

The study is an exemplar of what close reading can accomplish, and its prose is always polished, exact, and eminently lucid. Yet Lamont can express in a single dense sentence a concept or claim to which other critics might devote a paragraph, and I wished from the introduction more of the expansiveness and successive iterations of key arguments that characterize the body chapters. Her outline of the factors that suppressed the visibility of western women writers, for example, could have been amplified by some of the material in her recent review essay of the field, “Big Books Wanted: Women and Western American Literature in the Twenty-First Cen-

tury" (*Legacy* 31.2 [2014]: 311–26). Relatedly, Lamont leans heavily on scare quotes, especially early on: "quality" publishers, "serious" fiction, "respectable" readers. More than just a distracting punctuation habit, their preponderance indicates a missed opportunity to unpack prevailing notions of aesthetic, genre, and publishing hierarchies. This additional work would have helped orient the reader for the chapters to come, to then be revisited in the final chapter about the Western marketplace.

These are minor issues, and by the book's end Lamont has accomplished her goal: finessing the tricky task of proving both that women's voices have been suppressed and that they developed an identifiable, important tradition nonetheless. While these authors had only "loose social and cultural affiliations" (102) and wrote "in relative isolation both from each other and from the male-centered frontier club that dominated western cultural production" (7), their books exhibit "a set of shared concerns about women's position in postfrontier American society" (101). The study, moreover, testifies to the diversity of women writers and the western spaces they portrayed. Many "tacitly or explicitly reproduced colonial and racist ideologies" (75), but not all were middle-class or white; nor were they, as Lockhart's homophobic attack on a former friend underscores, always committed to fostering "female communities" (74), a favored argument in western studies.

In recovering legacies among western women writers, Lamont herself achieves major stature as a feminist scholar of the West, and she identifies her own critical genealogy by dedicating the book to western scholar Christine Bold. I look forward to seeing how future generations extend, respond to, and are inspired by her work.

Cathryn Halverson
University of Groningen, the Netherlands