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Review of *Coyote Kills John Wayne: Postmodernism and Contemporary Fictions of the Transcultural Frontier* By Carlton Smith

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Coyote Kills John Wayne: Postmodernism and Contemporary Fictions of the Transcultural Frontier. By Carlton Smith. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2000. Notes, index. x + 167 pp. \$45.00 cloth, \$17.95 paper.

Delivered at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner's now-famous frontier thesis speech, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," contends with only one other nineteenth-century development in terms of popularity and influence: Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. These narratives provided complementary visions of Western history that centered on white males, marginalizing women and people of color. Together they shaped both academic and popular perceptions for most of the twentieth century.

It is this racialized and gendered vision of the West that Carlton Smith takes as the starting point for *Coyote Kills John Wayne*. Contemporary Western fiction, Smith contends, challenges the masculinist foundations of conventional narratives and transforms the frontier into a transcultural borderland. Smith analyzes a range of texts and films that offer alternative visions of the frontier; these include William Vollman's Arctic narratives,

Sergio Leone's Western films, Thomas McGuane's fiction, as well as works by Native novelists Leslie Marmon Silko, Thomas King, and Louise Erdrich. The juxtaposition of these texts is one of the strengths of *Coyote*, offering vastly different conceptions of the West that resist the hegemonic impulses of conventional narratives.

At the same time, this juxtaposition provides an opportunity to think of the West as the site of complicated, often violent interactions between cultures, a history suppressed or obfuscated in Turner's speech and Buffalo Bill's Wild West. In this respect, however, *Coyote Kills John Wayne* replicates rather than challenges the cultural work of these narratives. Smith's primary concern is with the ways in which contemporary Western texts "perform postmodernism" by providing "inquiries into the constructedness of identity and the role of semiotics in creating discursive formations." These "disruptive strategies," Smith contends, undermine "fixed identities, imperial narratives" and even "the frontier itself." Smith's analyses of Western texts demonstrate how

they bear out the theories of Homi Bhabha, Frederic Jameson, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and others. This use of postmodern theory elides differences between texts with fundamentally divergent concerns. In Smith's analysis, for example, Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* and Leone's *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* absurdly perform essentially the same cultural work, although Silko's novel examines the devastating colonial history of the Americas while Leone's film is primarily concerned with Western filmic conventions. This approach results in serious misreadings of both primary and secondary sources by reducing texts deeply concerned with colonial dominance, political resistance, and complex cultural relations to forms of "semiotic appropriation" that ultimately bear little relation to the historical contexts that shape them.

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