

## Introduction to 'Reckoning with Western Nostalgia'

The essays contained in this special issue of *Comparative American Studies* range across time and media, from outdoor recreation and magazines in the Gilded Age of the 1870s, to video games, film, and television in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, taking in theme parks and heritage sites along the way. They are a reminder of the pervasiveness of the nineteenth-century historic West as a powerful and enduring symbol in American culture. At the same time, they each offer a distinctive perspective on the relationship between the making of popular nostalgia and the shifting symbolic meaning of the West, illuminating the malleability and vital mutability of Western ideas to national cultural identity. Along the way, they question some long-standing assumptions both about nostalgia and about Western exceptionalism, and meanwhile describe the broadening expressions of Western nostalgia, as its themes migrated from the pages of magazines and story books onto cinema screen and into play and interactive media. They offer contrasting visions of the West, too, from nostalgia for the idealised wilderness or the days of the pioneer to celebrations of an altogether different West, shaped by technological modernity in the twentieth century.

At each turn, it becomes apparent that the nostalgic dreams of one generation have flowed into those of the next and the next; that the West has long been a dream of a dream. Thus, far more so than simply a wish to return to an actual, particular time and place, Western nostalgia has often expressed a desire for things lost in the modern, standardised world. The conquest and colonisation and settling of the West was after all a geographically dispersed process. It is telling that much Western nostalgia refers back to an approximate time and place, or that specific events become, when viewed through this retrospective lens, mythologised as illustrative of a larger, vague historical moment. The West is the stage for those dreams.

Here, it may be significant that Western nostalgia has often been attached to a fleeting moment in national history. Perhaps the Old West continues to exercise such a powerful hold of the American imaginary because it was a time we know, from our own vantage point as nostalgic observers, was destined to pass, an exception in time. It might be imagined as a place apart from the urban, industrial world, with organised society always just outside, about to encroach. Just as we might recall our own feelings of personal loss that we experienced as a child, when a childhood sense of wonder and adventure gave way to the disenchantment of adulthood, as we were reshaped in the standardising and regulating institutions of education and labour, the West, as myth, can speak to us. The Old West can in this way symbolise our own very personal feelings and connect them to a larger, shared national memory and want of a pioneer adventure.

Yet, at the same time, what these articles show is that it is very often precisely through the modern, consumer economy that Americans have chosen to encounter and experience a fantasy West of old and find re-enchantment in their lives through those fantasies. And so, the dreamworld of the Old West has in fact always been a product of industrial modernity, and in turn shaped a modern culture of leisure and consumption.

Thus, where nostalgia was traditionally understood as a melancholic attachment to a vanished past, research across a range of disciplines in recent decades has often been more concerned with its role in comprehending social and cultural change. Granted, nostalgia might imply a regressive obsession with an idealised past, but it can also inspire progressive and utopian ideas, help individuals come to terms with the present, or inspire visions of the future (Pickering and Keightley, 2006; Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, and Routledge, 2008; Schröder, Völker, Winkler, and Clucas, 2019; Sayers, 2020). Western nostalgia, in this vein, has expressed feelings of temporal dislocation, but has also served to offer a reassuring sense of social continuity. It has expressed a longing for an idealised past,

but it also revels in the past as distinct from the present, identifying it as a place apart from the present. And it has of course exercised a powerful influence over the way Americans have imagined the present and the future.

This special issue begins with the nostalgia-making of a time before the frontier officially ended, with magazine culture of travel and tourism in the 1870s and 1880s. In “Forest and Dream: Adventure, Nostalgia, and the Making of a Sporting Tourist’s America,” Malcolm McLaughlin (East Anglia) turns the pages of outdoor-sports magazines to comprehend the changing idea of the West in national context. Evoking a nostalgia for childhood adventure stories and recalling the upper-class sporting traditions of past generations, journalists writing for *Forest and Stream* assimilated the West into an Eastern tourist’s vision of the nation, during those decades.

Shifting focus from the colourful descriptions of sports magazines to something brutally concrete, George Jaramillo (US National Park Service) looks at a very physical and material manifestation of the early twentieth century frontier, in the guise of the Grand Coulee Dam, Washington State. Built in the 1930s along the Columbia River, the Grand Coulee remains a monolithic reminder of federal government power both in and over the West. In his article “In a Different Light,” Jaramillo focuses his attention on the famous light show held at the Coulee Dam since the 1950s, charting the show’s history and its celebration of the frontier technological sublime.

In “Nostalgia for the Old West in Knott’s Berry Farm,” John Wills (Kent) considers another celebratory landscape, but one purposely dedicated to play, entertainment, and profit. In the 1940s and 1950s, agricultural entrepreneur Walter Knott created Knott’s Ghost Town, a Wild West-themed amusement park, next to his restaurant business in Orange County, California. The town proved an elaborate mix of authentic old buildings and new amusement props, and its nostalgia for the Old West proved incredibly popular with clientele. Wills shows how Knott’s personal nostalgia combined with a mass desire to play ‘cowboy’ and ‘pioneer’ at this early Western-themed amusement park.

No exploration of frontier nostalgia is complete without some consideration of the Hollywood Western, arguably still the anchor for much of our sentimental and romantic longing for the cowboy era. In “Re-Thinking the Hollywood Western of the Fifties,” Brian Faucette (Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute) looks at three films released in the mid-century directed by Delmer Daves, *Jubal* (1956), *3:10 to Yuma* (1957) and *Cowboy* (1958). Faucette relates this film trilogy to period thinking about masculinity and shows how Daves as a film director employed the old frontier in his movies to question contemporary notions of conformity, consumerism, and most of all male identity. Faucette argues that the film trilogy forwarded a more progressive “model of masculinity” than typical to the time, or to the Western genre itself.

Over the decades, nostalgia for the frontier has been serviced by a range of media technologies. In the 1970s, with the Hollywood Western arguably dead (or at least commercially found wanting), one of the first video games to find success in American arcades was a Western, Midway’s *Gun Fight* (1975), while one of the most successful and applauded video games of recent years is Rockstar’s frontier-set *Red Dead Redemption* series. In “The Historical Environment as Aged Icon in the Gamed West,” Jeffrey Lawlor (CSU Long Beach) looks at how the video game Western preserves frontier nostalgia by gifting to a new audience an immersive digital frontier rich in mythology and iconography. In particular, Lawlor shows how far games capture a sense of decay and ruin in their frontier designs, perfecting the West in both play and memory as an ‘aged icon.’

Frontier nostalgia has often been about looking backward in time to a halcyon age, but it also connects with future-gazing. Rounding out this issue, we explore how frontier nostalgia

filters into collective visions of the future, as well as continues its hold over our entertainment consciousness. In “Do Android Detectives Dream of Electric Cowboys?” Michael Docherty (Innsbruck) deploys a frontier lens on the *Blade Runner* franchise, revealing fresh insights into the dystopian world of replicants, informants and future ruin. Focusing on the second instalment, *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), directed by Denis Villeneuve, Docherty highlights the Western themes infiltrating the science fiction neo-noir movie. In particular, he explores the fruitful interface between the noirish detective (Ryan Gosling’s K and Harrison Ford’s Deckard) and classic frontier lawman, and the film’s reliance on wilderness motifs and settings. Docherty shows just how embedded Western references and frontier nostalgia are in popular entertainment.

In “They Don’t Make Anything Like They Used To,” Stefan Schubert (Leipzig) and Eleonora Ravizza (Leipzig) look at the first season of HBO’s *Westworld* (2016) television series. A sophisticated programme that expands on Michael Crichton’s original 1973 film, *Westworld* documents the lives of androids and humans alike that inhabit a complex and realistic theme park setting. As with *Blade Runner*, the difference between those with artificial intelligence and those with natural intelligence is far from transparent, with plot twists galore. While *Westworld* very much services nostalgia for the old frontier in visual terms, Schubert and Ravizza deftly reveal how the series and its characters (especially lead Dolores Claiborne played by Evan Rachel Wood) fundamentally challenge the idea of the West as a white male power fantasy, although complexities exist in the programming, and our ideas of the West and how we reckon with Western nostalgia continue to evolve.

## References

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