

Anna De Biasio

Elisa Bordin, Masculinity and Westerns: Regenerations at the Turn of the New Millennium

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Electronic reference

Anna De Biasio, « Elisa Bordin, Masculinity and Westerns: Regenerations at the Turn of the New Millennium », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2015-4, document 6, Online since 06 October 2015, connection on 09 December 2015. URL : <http://ejas.revues.org/11155> ; DOI : 10.4000/ejas.11155

Publisher: European Association for American Studies

<http://ejas.revues.org>

<http://www.revues.org>

Document available online on:

<http://ejas.revues.org/11155>

Document automatically generated on 09 December 2015.

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¹ The western is by definition a masculine genre; or, we should say, by redefinition. Whereas its paraphernalia can to some extent vary, its top icon remains the strong, solitary cowboy, who —since his first modern appearance in Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* (1902)— is also laconic and charismatic, occasionally violent and at the same time chivalrous: in a word, an emblem of secure manhood. At closer inspection, the icon and the genre that hosts it are less safe than they seem. If its ancestors were pioneers like Daniel Boone and J. F. Cooper’s Natty Bumppo, the western itself was born at a moment of crisis as far as American masculinity is concerned. The turn-of-the-century exceptionalist or downright imperialist discourse of such diverse figures as Theodore Roosevelt, Frederick Jackson Turner, or Frederic Remington went hand in hand with the attempt at strengthening men’s identity, which was perceived as threatened by the new forces of modernity (industrialization, urbanization, women’s advancement in society). From its inception through its “golden age” in the 1940s and 1960s, therefore, the western effectively served the function of first reaffirming and then patrolling the borders of hegemonic masculinity, that is to say white, U.S. born, heteronormative. Yet what do the origins of the genre have in common with its resurgence between the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, as testified—among others—by the literary works of Annie Proulx and Cormac McCarthy, by television series like *Lonesome Dove* (1994-1996) and *Deadwood* (2004-2006), as well as by a long list of movies?

Elisa Bordin’s main argument is that in the contemporary revival of the western, long declared dead, it is possible to recognize a historical continuity, the present turn-of-the-century transition resembling the preceding one in its need for a redefinition of masculinity. As a result of the radical, generally pacifist movements for the emancipation of women, homosexuals, racial and ethnic minorities, and due to the increasingly strong pressure of consumerism in today’s globalized capitalism, male identity has changed in ways unimaginable one century ago. And yet the adjustments required from men (in the workplace, in the experience of fatherhood, in the relationship with women or with their bodies) generate a friction, which is often described in terms of a “crisis,” with long-standing traditional expectations about masculinity. In turn, the western itself has become more complex and fragmented, frequently taking a self-critical stance toward its own ideological premises, as suggested by the different sub-genre labels used in this study to map the contemporary production (revisionary westerns, postwesterns, neo and nouveaux westerns). The challenging question, therefore, is whether in the face of such transformations western narratives are still able to accommodate fantasies about regenerated manhood. Bordin’s general assumption is that they

do rely on the same reassuring role they used to play when American men first discovered their vulnerability. At the same time, she is especially interested in exploring the margin for “gender trouble” in a genre that more than others is associated with a conservative vision of male identity.

The analysis opens with two movies that deeply unsettle western stereotypes. Based on a true case of crossdressing, *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993) by Maggie Greenwald tells the story of a young woman who reinvents her life by becoming “Jo” once she has crossed the frontier. Bordin discusses the break in the continuity between gender and the body by means of inescapable references to Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble, Undoing Gender*) and Judith Halberstam, whose notion of “female masculinity” is read here as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the logic of the western. By focusing on the various stages through which male identity is learnt and performed, the protagonist’s metamorphosis exposes the mainstays of the genre (attire, gun handling, acts of violence) as an apparatus that enables the construction of masculinity in the very absence of the male body. Likewise, the more successful *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) by Ang Lee is accounted for as a laboratory for the deconstruction of the white, straight manhood that is the trademark of the genre. As Bordin points out, since it explodes the prohibition to same-sex desire structuring men’s identity while it casts especially Ennis as a very virile cowboy, the movie has proven particularly unendurable to tradition-oriented audiences. Both the poor reception of *The Ballad of Little Jo* and the strongly ambivalent response to *Brokeback Mountain* are thus taken as evidence of the relative imperviousness of the western to gender and sexual deviance.

By dwelling on the gay characters’ relationships with their children (to a greater extent, it should be added, than in the Annie Proulx’s story on which it is based), *Brokeback Mountain* is in itself revelatory of the important role that fatherhood has come to play in contemporary fictions of the West. This is not to imply that in the past western narratives did not portray fatherly relations: they generally did so in symbolic terms, as the classic cowboy is notoriously a bachelor, orphaned man dodging the tentacles of family and domesticity. Nowadays, however, the increased interest in the theme appears to resonate with the ample space the public debate has devoted to the question of fatherhood and its responsibilities since the 1970s, with a frequent emphasis on the necessity to strengthen a diminished role. Two movies, *3:10 to Yuma* (2007) by James Mangold and *Don’t Come Knocking* by Wim Wenders, are discussed by Bordin as representative of this general trend. Both envisage the paternal role as a necessary attribute of masculinity and at the same time as a source of anxiety, something to recover in order to assuage one’s sense of being a man.

Women, homosexuals, angst-ridden fathers are not the only subjects that gain center stage, with ambiguous results, in an imaginative space that had long marginalized or thoroughly excluded them. Revisionary westerns prove to be especially hospitable to non-white characters with (co) protagonist roles. This is the case of the TV series like *Doctor Quinn, Medicine Woman* (1993-1998), in which Native American cultures feature prominently through

the character of Sully, a white hero who rejects white people's ways to become fully Indianized. Yet is the series entirely persuasive as an attempt to amend numberless distorted representations of Native Americans? As Bordin correctly maintains, there is an underside to the appropriation of another culture, namely, the reaffirmation of white centrality and the exploitation of a sanitized vision of Indianness to bolster masculinity (both gestures date back to Cooper's *Leatherstocking* but were recently revived by Men's Movements). On the other hand, the inclusion of black protagonists in such narratives as Percival Everett's *God's Country* (1994) gives further evidence to the genre as a space that validates masculine identity. Here too the revision of the western myth appears to be partial, for the source of empowerment for the novel's black protagonist is the appropriation of the white hero's defining traits, among which reticence, righteousness, and capacity for violence. The problem of violence is at the core of Bordin's discussion of another novel, *Blood Meridian* (1985) by Cormac McCarthy. This much-praised, historically based narrative —whose telling subtitle is *The Evening Redness in the West*— revolves around a series of systematic and carefully differentiated acts of brutality committed by a gang of scalp hunters. The head of the group is the satanic figure of Judge Holden, whose symbolic antagonist would be the Kid, if only the novel allowed the possibility of breaking down the orgiastic circle of violence in which everybody participates. Due to the lack of all regenerative vision behind its reenactment of the frontier mythology, *Blood Meridian* is usually regarded as revisionary or even as an anti-western, a sort of postmodern parody that has the effect of debunking the myth of the West. Bordin aligns instead with those critics who see *Blood Meridian* as an ultimate validation of the tradition of American violence, stressing the features of the novel —such as characterization and the use of allegory— that prevent the possibility for development and change. By universalizing violence and by focusing once again on white male characters, McCarthy would “obscure practices of domination...at the expense of other possible characters, visions, and attitudes” (196). While it is always objectionable to criticize a work on the basis of what it does not do, the discussion of this major novel is especially successful in conveying the general purpose of Bordin's book, which is an investigation of the western as a highly contested ground, at various levels. From the point of view of scholarly definitions, the “battle of labels” that frames the study —Bordin herself classifies *Blood Meridian* as a neo-western— bespeaks the current eclecticism of the genre, its ability to refashion itself by following unorthodox and plural paths. A special focus on masculinity, on the other hand, shows that the resilience of western narratives has limits. Their capacity to absorb a revision of gender (but also of racial and sexual) identities very often hides a deep-seated resistance, which is ultimately the undead power of attraction of the cowboy myth.

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since 06 October 2015, connection on 09 December 2015. URL : <http://ejas.revues.org/11155> ; DOI : 10.4000/ejas.11155

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