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

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The western is by definition a masculine genre; or, we should say, by 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 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 as threatened by the new forces of modernity (industrialization, urbanization, women’s advancement in society). From its inception 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 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 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 others) 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 reassuring role they used to play when American men first discovered their vulnerability. At the same time, she is especially interested in 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 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 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.  

4 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
doing 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.  

5 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-
TV series like *Doctor Quinn, Medicine Woman* (1993-1998), in which Native
American cultures feature prominently through the character of Sully, a
.

Yet is the series entirely persuasive as an attempt to amend numberless
distorted representations of Native Americans? As Bordin correctly
, namely, the reaffirmation of white centrality and the exploitation of a

Movements). On the other hand, the inclusion of black protagonists in
such narratives as Percival Everett’s *God’s Country* (1994) gives further
evidence of the white hero’s defining traits, among which reticence,
righteousness, and capacity for violence.  

6 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 ch
d its reenactment of the frontier mythology, *Blood Meridian* is usually
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 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 ays he

general purpose of Bordin's book, which is an investigation of the western as a highly contested ground, at various levels. From the point es 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 ut 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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