

---

Noreen Groover Lape. *West of the Border: The Multicultural Literature of the Western American Frontiers*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2000. 224p.

PETER L. BAYERS  
FAIRFIELD UNIVERSITY

If one's conception of the "frontier" in American literature calls to mind images of gritty, individualistic male hunters, cowboys, and/or Indian fighters "winning" the West for civilization, Noreen Groover Lape's *West of the Border* might lead one to reconsider his or her assumptions about the American "frontier." A timely book which has much in common with other recent reconceptions of the American frontier, *West of the Border* has little to do with what one might consider the conventional images of the frontier and instead is driven by the notion that the frontier is a site of cultural contestation, a "contact zone," or a struggle between a "closed frontier" and an "open frontier." For Lape, "Closed frontiers denote the termination on intercultural relations and the institution of Anglo dominance; open frontiers indicate the continuation of intercultural relations and resistance to Anglo dominance" (13). In her highly readable analysis of an eclectic historical mix of autobiography, romance, trickster tales, dime novel, short story, and essays by Native American, white, and biracial Chinese American, African American, and Native American authors, she skillfully buttresses her argument that the frontier hardly embodies the traditional heroic image of Natty Bumppo or John Wayne forging their white male identities over and against the "virgin" wilderness and "savage" Indians. Instead, her readings of these various works underscore the challenges facing multicultural *peoples* of the West who were not of the dominant culture.

Lape does not make the mistake of oversimplifying these authors by romanticizing them, but shows how their relationship to the dominant culture was often ambivalent, simultaneously subverting and bolstering the dominant culture and its values. In her historically grounded readings of the autobiographies of James P. Beckworth, Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, the trickster narratives of Mourning Dove and John Rollin Ridge, the short stories of Sui Sin Far and the romances of her sister Onoto Watanna, and finally the writings of Mary Austin, Lape argues that these narratives reflect W.E.B. Dubois' theory of "double consciousness," which is evinced in different ways, depending on the author. For instance, because he has little control of his "double consciousness," the biracial — white and black — Beckworth subverts but ultimately capitulates to the dominant ethos toward Indians by advocating their destruction. In her *Life among the Piutes*, however, Hopkins, who while attracted to the dominant culture, ultimately undermines white cultural authority by advocating communal tribal rights in reaction to the

---

“General Allotment Act” of 1887, which encouraged Indian assimilation to the individualist values of the dominant culture. Although Dubois’ theory works fairly well for Lape’s purposes, some readers might wish Lape employed more current postcolonial and/or postmodern identity theory to nuance her readings of each author. After all, she herself notes that these authors rarely struggle with their *double* consciousness; rather, they negotiate “two (or more) worlds” of consciousness (21).

What I found to be perhaps the most interesting part of the book is Lape’s reading of how differently the sisters Sui Sin Far (Edith Eaton) and Onoto Watanna (Winnifred Eaton) negotiated the perils of their bicultural/biracial Chinese and white heritage. Whereas Sui Sin Far wrote proudly (and at times stereotypically) of Chinese culture, her sister, in order to combat and/or capitulate to white ethnocentrism and racism toward Chinese Americans, passed herself as Japanese and wrote about the conflicts between Japanese Americans and whites. At the time her romances were written, Japanese Americans were considered far less threatening to white American hegemony than Americans of Chinese descent. While it is a minor quibble, in regard to Lape’s reading of Watanna’s romances, it seems odd that at one point in her analysis she uses only Cathy Davidson’s analysis of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century sentimental novel to shed light on Onoto Watanna’s early 20<sup>th</sup>-century sentimental romances. While it is not by any means inappropriate for Lape to allude to 18<sup>th</sup>-century novels, I thought the addition of an analogy with Watanna’s contemporary sentimental novelists would help Lape’s analysis.

In her handling of the biracial Cherokee/White Ridge’s *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta*, Lape sheds original light on the narrative by reading it as a trickster narrative. Read in part as an allegory which responds to white dispossession of Cherokee lands, Murieta, who at the beginning of the novel is an innocent miner of Mexican descent, becomes an outlaw bandit because he has been unjustly wronged by white miners. But as the novel progresses, Murieta takes sensationally bloody revenge upon any and every race and cultural group he and his men encounter. Although initially the novel undermines white cultural authority as Murieta seeks revenge against whites, Lape argues that “the novel rejects all political positions to signify the trickster” because Murieta victimizes peoples regardless of their backgrounds. As a result, Ridge does little to challenge the power relations between whites and other cultures. I cannot help thinking, however, that Ridge is writing less in the trickster tradition than simply writing a sensational and contradictory Western dime novel to appeal to as many readers as possible in order to make a buck (which the novel did not do). He was, after all, a newspaperman attuned to the desires of his 19<sup>th</sup>-century audience which hungered for the sensational. Additionally, it seems odd that while Lape does use their Chinese

---

names to denote the “Eaton” sisters, she does not use or even mention John Rollin Ridge’s Cherokee name, “Yellow Bird.”

That being said, this is a fine book, written with clarity and rhythm, and it is a valuable book for anyone teaching Western or Frontier literatures. Historically far-reaching in its scope, it also will be of interest to 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century Americanists.