
Carlton Smith. *Coyote Kills John Wayne: Postmodernism and Contemporary Fictions of the Transcultural Frontier*. Reencounters with Colonialism: New Perspectives on the Americas. Hanover: University Press of New England, 2000. 167p.

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In this strikingly titled book, Carlton Smith sets out to examine the idea of the frontier as it appears in texts which subvert or resist mainstream representations of the American west. Including both the “imaginary” and the “actual” frontier in his definition of the term, and viewing it as a contested and colonized space, Smith considers works from as wide a spectrum as Sergio Leone’s Clint Eastwood westerns to Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*. He draws on postmodern and postcolonial theory in order to look at what happens when the “Other,” typically absented from colonial frontier histories, surfaces or speaks.

Smith bases his choice of texts on the argument that they are in themselves examples of the postmodern. All of the texts, he suggests, in some way direct our attention to the constructed nature of the “problematic history of the Americas,” as is evidenced by their attention to the way narratives, and histories, are created (9). In each of the chapters, dealing with Vollman, Silko, Thomas King, Sergio Leone’s Clint Eastwood films, Erdrich, and Thomas McGuane, respectively, Smith recounts the particular colonial notions of the frontier which haunt the individual text. He then points to the specific ways in which these ideas are undone or rewritten: Silko by complicating Western notions of progressive time, for example, in her use of experimental narrative structure as well as her inclusion of the Ghost Dance in her novel, and Thomas King by “intervening in the semiotic realm” in his use of oral tradition and his attention to the “liberative potential” in oral culture’s ability to disrupt fixed, written narratives. Using Bhaba to help us read Erdrich, Lacan to understand the relationships between exploration, desire, and the self in Vollman, and Lyotard to elucidate the cold war landscapes in Leone’s films, Smith usefully employs the work of postmodern theorists to help the reader see the ways in which the “the tropes of frontier discourse” are transformed in order to challenge colonial narratives of domination (9).

Postmodernism, as Smith rightfully acknowledges, has sometimes been seen as antithetical to the project of multiculturalism, a “heavy-handed appropriation of the Other by the European” (6). However, Smith suggests that these movements converge in their interest in “questions about transcultural identities and their relationship to the historic construction of the frontier” (13). Arguing that

postmodern and “marginalized” texts “speak perform the same lexicon,” Smith is convincing on the usefulness of considering such texts together (6). As he points out in the book, the very ideas of “borders” and “frontiers” are in themselves constructions, and in their attempt to explain the “shifting territory” of the frontier or of the epistemology by which we understand the world, students of both the frontier and postmodernism might well be seen as engaged in similar projects.

It is therefore interesting to note the smooth pairing of the works of authors writing “from the margins,” such as King, Erdrich, and Silko, with those such as the Leone films or McGuane’s novels. Each is concerned with undoing received ideas about history, language, and the legacy of colonialism, and Smith’s attention to both concrete historical circumstances and the way they have been reported, as well as a given author’s place in those circumstances, makes the connections between these very different works seem evident. Vollman’s vision of the ethnographer doomed to fail in his encounter with the Other, “in spite of motives,” because of an “incessant preoccupation with the self,” therefore seems at home along with Erdrich’s critique of colonial definitions of Native American identity. Smith pays careful attention to issues of gender and class; importantly, he also addresses the use of humor, certainly a central element in the works of King and Erdrich. By the book’s end the reader gains a strong sense of the link between postmodernism and border studies which he has worked to make clear. The book does not get lost in theory, but is consistently occupied with the kinds of political concerns to which Smith declares his commitment in the first chapter. While Smith relies heavily on the language of postmodernism, he provides brief, clear summaries of the theories he discusses.

To return to the book’s title, the first part, “Coyote Kills John Wayne” is drawn from a line in King’s *Green Grass, Running Water*. In the novel, John Wayne is the nickname for an Indian character; the name of the well-known star of westerns has been borrowed and used afresh, even as its other connotations cannot escape the reader. It is just this kind of revamping to which Smith addresses his book, and he successfully explores his subject. Smith’s insights into individual texts are enlightening, and suggest other ways in which we might consider borders, the ones in the texts and beyond.