
H-France Review Vol. 19 (March 2019), No. 40

Emily C. Burns, *Transnational Frontiers: The American West in France*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018. ix + 223 pp. Series: The Charles M. Russell Center Series on Art and Photography of the American West, Volume 29. Figures, notes, bibliography, epilogue, and index. \$45.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-8061-6003-0.

Review by Sarah J. Blackstone, University of Victoria, retired.

Transnational Frontiers: The American West in France is a beautifully designed and executed volume. The illustrations and photographs, many in color, and the large format, heavy paper, and beautiful dust jacket photo make this visual history a rare volume in today's scholarly publication market. It is hard to find a publisher who will invest so lavishly in a scholarly work as we settle for library bindings, on-line publication, few or no photographs, and facsimile reproductions for most of our work. Both the author and the press should be congratulated for producing this impressive volume.

Burns has created a meticulously researched and extensively documented chronicle of a three-way cultural exchange between the United States, France, and American indigenous peoples. She accomplishes this through the analysis of the visual and material culture of the American West in France between 1865 and 1914. She tackles many interesting phenomena in the book, from analysis of displays featuring the American West at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900, to the works of Rosa Bonheur, to the use of postcards as a medium for self expression.

The methodology of the study “draws from art historical models that emphasize the connections between aesthetics and social discourse and the multiplicity of visual culture’s meanings in different contexts” (p. 4). Burns seeks to interweave “models of nationalism and transnationalism, suggesting that no one single framework enables a complete theorization of the displays, appropriations, and dynamic complexities of meaning raised in the study” (p. 4). While it is true that Burns draws heavily from a number of different theories and models to analyze varying types of art and production, and these theories are appropriately chosen and applied, I think this approach makes the arguments in the book hard to follow. The multiplicity of theories and approaches make the chapters seem more like a series of articles, each on a different topic and each using a different model for analysis, instead of a connected study leading to a conclusion that brings new understanding to cross-cultural exchange. The through-line of the book is difficult to find and reading from chapter to chapter can be quite confusing. This leads to the ultimately unsatisfying conclusion, “Conversations in late nineteenth-century Paris within the American artist community and among the responses to Buffalo Bill’s Wild West together participated in a discourse in which the American frontier became a flexible metaphor that

established the foreign capital as a site to define identity, and as an international frontier ripe for taming” (p. 164). That said, the individual chapters provide important insights and can be read and studied separately from the overall study to good effect.

One of the real strengths of the book is the inclusion of American indigenous peoples, particularly the Lakota nation, as “an active participant within construction of the American West in France” (p. 5). Burns uses many examples throughout the book to support her contention that “Indians did not exist as mere free-floating representations between French and U.S. cultural exchange; rather, indigenous people were active participants in negotiating these stereotypes” (p. 5). She further explains, “American Indian performers in France played to cultural expectations, but they also used the press platform and international encounters with visitors as a site for critique and for survivance” (p. 17). The idea of “playing Indian,” both by French and American artists, and by Indians themselves, is at the center of many of her chapters and she navigates the complexities of this idea very adroitly, bringing clarity to the difficult concept that such performances can be a form of resistance and survivance and are not simply the result of colonization and cultural dominance. Of particular interest is the chapter titled “Mita Kola” which chronicles the exchange of postcards between an Oglala man named Jacob White Eyes (Jacob Ištá Ská) and French aristocrat Folco de Baroncelli. Burns analyzes the images on the postcards to show how Ištá Ská used this form of correspondence to “define his European travel experience and in shaping his identities at Pine Ridge Reservation” (p. 119), and how these shaped identities did not match what Baroncelli wanted the Oglala to be.

The chapter “Mobilities” presents a very interesting analysis of the representations of American Indians at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900. The objects included for analysis range from Rookwood Pottery vases depicting individual Indian figures to sculptures depicting Indians and other western figures and their placement in the Exposition, to the display provided by the Indian boarding schools. This chapter is a wide-ranging look at the various competing cultural tropes of the American West that greeted visitors attending the Exposition, and Burns provides compelling examples of how objects in the Exposition offered several different layers of meaning for American Indians, crossing from erasure and subjugation to survivance and political activism. “The U.S. displays in Paris reveal the complex narratives of identity in spite of state-sponsored attempts to control ideas of western expansion and U.S. history” (p. 117).

Though Buffalo Bill’s Wild West is in the background of the book from start to finish, there is little or no analysis of the show itself. This seems an odd omission from a book that covers such a wide range of topics. There is no description of the narrative created in the show, no analysis of the role of native performers in that narrative, and no mention of how Parisians, Americans, or Indians regarded the show as a performance. Perhaps Burns felt this topic has been well covered by other scholars, but some mention of why the show is not part of her study would have been helpful. Just as she has found multiple intentions and meanings in many other objects and works of art in Paris during this period, a closer examination of the actual show might have resulted in the discovery that the Wild West was also a site for diverse interpretations and understandings of the Indian performers and the American West.

This lavishly produced, carefully researched, and meticulously documented study is well worth reading and the arguments, theories and questions posed are important ones. It is a fine exemplar of how to conduct studies that fall outside our well-defined academic disciplines, that force us to consider and use the work of scholars in other fields of study, that challenge us to broaden our

own scholarly perspectives and research materials. The extensive notes and bibliography should inspire others to delve deeply into further research and Burns has graciously provided a set of questions that demand further research and consideration.

Sarah J. Blackstone
University of Victoria
sblackstone1468@gmail.com

Copyright © 2019 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172