

9-1-2001

*Review: Krista Comer, Landscapes of the New West:
Gender and Geography in Contemporary Women's
Writing (Chapel Hill, NC, 1999)*

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Recommended Citation

This book review first appeared as Martin, Wendy, "Landscapes of the New West: Gender and geography in contemporary women's writing" *American Literature*

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the American dream—on the lack of social progress, the rarity of meaningful work, and the destruction of traditional communities. While such a conclusion will not surprise anyone who has considered even briefly the mood of contemporary fiction, as Hume sagely points out, “the near universality of [an] element cannot be dismissed simply because everyone notes it” (79). Indeed, most readers will be surprised by the sheer redundancy of various figures for American disillusionment, a redundancy that comes to light most powerfully as Hume recounts (in almost list form) the vast numbers of dead children, lost loves, and exploitative jobs that occupy a central place in the contemporary novel. Once the evidence is amassed, one cannot but agree with Hume’s conclusion: “The current generation of writers . . . can usefully be characterized as the Generation of the Lost Dream” (292).

Despite the scope of this study, *American Dream, American Nightmare* succeeds because of Hume’s sharp eye for detail. A master of the one-thousand-word critique, she is able to succinctly move through dense novels without neglecting significant themes or ignoring pressing issues. Although she must, for brevity, slight historical context and biographical interpretation, her readings are well able to stand on their own and frequently, moreover, break new critical ground. Specialists in the field may wish for a deeper level of analysis, and others may be disturbed by her reluctance to group novels into racial or gender categories, but most readers will find her approach eminently sensible and her critiques intellectually evenhanded. In fact, I can think of no better text to introduce graduate students to the field, enlighten specialists working in earlier periods, or guide the general reader looking for a map through the terrain of contemporary fiction. *American Dream, American Nightmare* does its readers a great service.

Eric Schocket, Hampshire College

***Landscapes of the New West: Gender and Geography in Contemporary Women’s Writing.* By Krista Comer. Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press. 1999. x, 302 pp. \$45.00.**

The American West has traditionally been associated with masculine images, icons, and ideologies: the rugged, self-reliant cowboy; the unfenced range, distant mountains, and Pacific coast beyond; the persevering quest for independence and freedom—all are emblematic of the frontier in American literature and culture. Krista Comer’s study of the writing of contemporary American women and its relationship to the landscape, indeed landscapes, of the American West presents new interpretations of the frontier that challenge our habitual assumptions about our geography as well as our literature and culture.

Asserting that modernism and, especially, postmodernism provide an opportunity for a new regionalism that gives voice to American women writers, most notably to women of color, Comer explores the work of Gloria Anzal-

dúa, Sandra Cisneros, Wanda Coleman, Louise Erdrich, Maxine Hong Kingston, Barbara Kingsolver, Cyra McFadden, Leslie Marmon Silko, Terry Tempest Williams, and others who transcend local and even national boundaries. These writers make it abundantly clear, Comer argues, that the discourse of landscape is a discourse of social and political topography as well as spatial location. As Comer further observes: “New female regionalists deploy representations of western lands and nature to talk about and, more, to challenge and change myriad social and political topics: the qualities and compromises of women’s lives, racial history (especially white racial history), the pain of racism, feminist political dreams and utopic societies, feminist erotics, postmodern economics, the relationships between human and non-human nature, the relationship of non-Europeans to nonhuman nature, female-imagined nationalisms, Anglo female stoicism, a female-imagined ecology, a feminist State—and the list goes on” (11). By reconceptualizing narratives of nature and nation and by constructing representations of social relations that embrace an ethic that is “transnational, postmodern, feminist,” these writers use geographical spaces to open up cultural possibilities, individual and collective. One of the writers Comer discusses at length is Joan Didion, who recreates social relations in a novel like *Play It As It Lays*, placing female desire and female reproductive concerns at the center, rather than the periphery. Similarly, a writer like Maxine Hong Kingston connects the Asian American experience with the economic, social, and cultural history of the American West in *The Woman Warrior* and *Tripmaster Monkey*. Other writers, like Louise Erdrich and Leslie Silko, expose the dangers to Native Americans of clinging to nostalgic tropes of nature. In their rich fictional tapestries of Native American life in the twentieth century, both Erdrich and Silko create narratives that underscore the need to “adapt,” “accept change,” and “integrate the past with [the] present, retaining the old ways, but in new and different, and finally, modern fashion” (187).

As Comer observes, “The American West was born out of a desire to imagine, enforce, enact new nationalisms. It continues to serve this role in American cultural and countercultural life” (200). As her book demonstrates, Western landscapes will continue to fuel the complicated imagination and diverse dreams and dramas of a nation that is, for better or worse, ceaselessly on the move.

Wendy Martin, Claremont Graduate University

***Higher Ground: From Utopianism to Realism in American Feminist Thought and Theory.* By Sally L. Kitch. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press. 2000. x, 308 pp. Cloth, \$45.00; paper, \$17.00.**

Higher Ground is an ambitious synthesis that makes a provocative argument. It’s several books in one: a literary history, a critique of theory, and a mani-