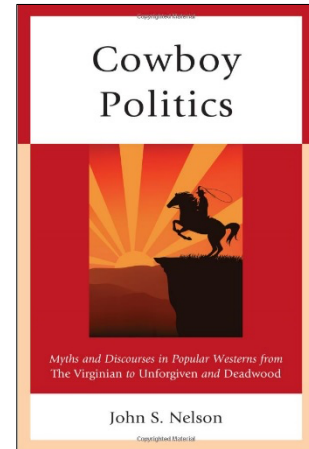


John S. Nelson, **Cowboy Politics: Myths and Discourses in Popular Westerns from *The Virginian* to *Unforgiven* and *Deadwood***, London, UK: Lexington Books, 2018, 412 pp., \$120.00 (hardcover).

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During the winter of 2016, in the high desert of Eastern Oregon, an armed standoff once again situated the American West as an arena for frontier politics and environmental conflict. The weeks-long struggle at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge featured armed ranchers, militants, and self-declared “patriots” from several western states holed up in federal buildings, citing their longstanding grievances over the U.S. government’s management of public land. One iconic media photograph from the standoff showed protester Duane Ehmer—adorned in cowboy hat and displaying an American flag—riding his horse Hellbox during a patrol of the snow-covered sagebrush landscape. The image was published by multiple media outlets, including *The New York Times*’ front page. Such a moment invoked the cowboy yet again as a symbol for larger hinterland disputes but also the polarization between distinct ideologies and worldviews in civic life. It also provided an opportunity to ponder the rich yet contentious mythology generated by the cowboy—and more broadly, the western frontier—via national media coverage but also the popular culture genre better known as the western.

This crossroads of high-country culture, narrative, and ideology is fully parsed out in John S. Nelson’s ***Cowboy Politics: Myths and Discourses in Popular Westerns from The Virginian to Unforgiven and Deadwood***. Westerns, of course, come out of the tradition of the frontier and the American West. Their nature as media artifacts is therefore equal parts material and discursive. Their prominent role in constructing a cultural and geographic heritage also offers a dynamic, relevant arena for contemplating the way popular culture fuels political myth making in the United States. In novels, movies, and television dramatizations, according to Nelson, the western stands in not only for one nation’s story but for civilization itself. Such narratives align with the broader idea of the west: to be “immediately consummated, deconstructed, destroyed, transcended,” writes Nelson (p. 27). “Western truths are self-conscious myths. They take themselves to be thrilling tales of yesteryear that enact themselves ‘tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow’ as well” (p. 27). Westerns also offer a counternarrative to modern civilization by producing an accessible political theory while interrogating contemporary politics. Yet the West, he writes, “is less about escaping civilization than making fresh starts that explore character and community alternatives to eastern templates” (p. 5).

The mythology produced by the western, therefore, helps us to understand political discourses in the context of hinterland fights and moral stories of the frontier but also the larger struggles of humankind. In this sense, it helps navigate complex social and political terrain. Nelson’s explanation of “cowboy politics” situates the mediated, dramatized frontier as an arena for environmentalism and rural populism and as a catalyst for reshaping culture and politics. When played out in the domain of movies, television programs,

and novels, western narratives conceptualize the West as a “place for fresh starts and freedoms by individuals, families, even peoples” which in turn regenerate civilizations (p. 81). These starts, perhaps counterintuitively, are imbued with nostalgia as they seek to ward off the advances of the industrial economy: “The green valleys, golden plains, and steep passes yield to the iron rails and rites of an encroaching civilization” (p. 83).

A strength of Nelson’s tome—and by extension the genre—is the embrace of conventional forms, particularly from the golden cinematic era, alongside productions from recent decades that are much more reflexive or even ironic in their worldview. This is especially important in light of reimaginings of the West, and its icons, in both scholarship and the popular press. Nelson argues early on that his interpretation of the western runs contrary to more established understandings of frontier and western mythologies. His overview calls special attention to a range of elements within westerns—including terror, spectacle, vengeance, virtue, and forgiveness—and their role in developing “institutions for political community, including modern government.”

Nelson’s western therefore is equal parts civic and wild. The importance of the genre to more contemporary politics is highlighted by Hollywood blockbuster films such as 1992’s *Unforgiven* and 1990’s *Dances with Wolves*. Nelson tracks how these movies, as well as a number of similar productions in their wake, toggle between individual violence/vigilante justice and government institutions/ law enforcement. It’s no surprise that some of these productions offer an existentialist worldview. But others have offered up western settings as microcosms of a reborn nation and an emergent staging ground for the politics of feminism, multiculturalism, and environmentalism.

The latter theme is especially salient here. Western discourses, according to Nelson, are by their nature rooted in a historic mythology about the West—therefore providing a distinct form of pathos that connects the heroic cowboys to the lands they often seek to protect. In other words, the aesthetics of the West are predicated on the land, including its lakes, rivers, grasslands, and mountains. Frontier ecologies stand in not only for a landscape to be protected, but one that represents the cowboy’s aspirations for attunement to nature and both individual and community virtues:

The soul who fails to open to the peculiar beauties of western lands—from the high plains and scraggly shrubs to the barren buttes and wild flowers or the rocky deserts and tumbling weeds—is a soul who finds no home in the West... The lands nurture character as much through opportunities of beauty as through tests of will, intelligence, or judgement. (p. 113)

The western is therefore imbued with an enduring land ethic and a set of ready-made appeals and myths that communicate the alarming challenges facing the American hinterland.

The prairie fight over the Keystone XL pipeline offers a contemporary issue through which to consider Nelson’s interpretation of western narratives. The longstanding petroleum pipeline saga has reimbued the Great Plains with larger-than-life protest storylines that draw from a cowboy mythology via news coverage, social media, and even a Woodstock-like rock festival featuring musicians Willie Nelson and

Neil Young. In warding off the ecological threat of oil and gas infrastructure, environmental organizations like Bold Nebraska have adjoined the symbols of prairie heritage to ecological opposition while assembling stakeholder alliances featuring farmers, ranchers, and tribal community members. The organization's struggle resembles a cinematic western, with its emphasis on morality, honor, and anger. Seen through Nelson's cowboy politque, pipeline populism rhetorically makes prominent a medieval code of western chivalry that rewards direct and brutally honest confrontation.

For scholars of populism within political communication, this is an important distinction. And it helps to explain why narratives borne of the West, fictionalized or not, take on dramatic characteristics while doing away with moral ambiguity. Here, Nelson invokes Clint Eastwood's character Will Munny in *The Unforgiven*. In facing down his enemies in a conclusive, apocalyptic showdown, the Eastwood protagonist is fully actualized and appreciated. Inherent in the cowboy's populist appeals, therefore, is an unwritten code of its larger community that shields the interests of fellow citizens and a broader collective.

Yet some critiques from scholarly and journalistic quarters justifiably put into question this community interest. The production of mythology during the previously noted Oregon standoff, with its invocation of the aggrieved cowboy-patriot operating outside of the law, was as divisive within the West as it was across the country. Along these lines, Brian Calvert (2019), the editor-in-chief of *High Country News*, recently wrote about how the cowboy hat endures as a thorny symbol in national politics. Its association with a certain kind of Americanness, he argues, has historically helped justify war and exploitation, particularly when it is adorned by politicians and other opinion leaders. Yet he also pointed to a new wave of popular performing artists such as Orville Peck and Lil Nas X who have appropriated the cowboy hat both in the spirit of "rebellious zeal, glamor, and zest" (Calvert, 2019, para. 6) and to reimagine American identity.

Aligned with this view, Nelson points to westerns as an arena for contemplating the contributions of civilizations and cultures: American settlers, Native Americans, and immigrants from Mexico and Asia. He also ponders the cowboy's enduring representation of an independent spirit in American life. Challenging some existing western mythology, Nelson identifies the western's desire for representation through a multitude of individual characters but also collectives, whether the unit is the family, working group, community, or gang. The emphasis on individuals in westerns is almost always a focus on their leadership of such social entities: "Westerns promote leaders as ways to organize and mobilize their nearly omnipresent collectivities, and westerns pursue sovereign governments as ways to counter or discipline corporate powers" (p. 93).

This rendering of cowboy politics thus situates the western as a contemporary touchstone for long-simmering political debates and social struggles in American life. Nelson's civic cowboy still rides off into the sunset, but only after the pursuit of robust government, institutional reform, and spirited defense of the collective.

Reference

Calvert, B. (2019). *What the cowboy hat says about "Americanism."* Retrieved from <https://www.hcn.org/issues/52.1/west-obsessed-what-the-cowboy-hat-says-about-americanism>