



## Thirdspace on the Frontier

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### Abstract

The “American West” evokes narratives that couple the nation’s exceptionalism and dominance with the spaces of its frontier. Seemingly codified in Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier myth, these narratives work to obscure the nation’s history of violence and settler colonialism, marginalizing the experiences of racialized communities and indigenous peoples. Still, within western writing are works that problematize those narratives and challenge the mythic pasts and presents. The other literary texts work play with national myths associated with the frontier. Specifically, this essay will look at texts by women whose work critique ideologies, histories, and borders. These authors question who gets to be a Westerner and who is may call western space a home. The *other* gaze questions issues of colonialization and mastery, and suggests different ways of looking at the land and environmental use. This alternate lens creates alternative western subjectivities, questioning what counts as authentically western. Women writers, particularly writers of color, remake the West into a Thirdspace, where borders are de-naturalized and the West re-opens into a true frontier zone of convergence and possibility. The female gaze questions the supremacy of the frontier myth by reimagining space without hierarchy and master narratives; a place that is no longer a *terra nullius* but full of possibility. We therefore see how Western women writers attempt to remake the world into a “borderlands” space that is also a home.

### Keywords

the West, Thirdspace, borderlands, representation, gender

The American West has been historically defined as a frontier space, “the meeting point between savagery and civilization,” that creates a specifically Western man (Turner 3). Dominant narratives of the West view it as a threshold space that simultaneously empties the land of its indigenous communities while infusing the space with mythic and nationalistic purpose. The West is a mix of mastery and “ethnic drag,” where, to Frederick Jackson Turner, the “wilderness masters the colonist,” and a man can strip off the vestiges of civilization and “accept the conditions which [the West] furnishes, or perish” (Campbell 229). Emptied of its indigenous populations, the West as *Terra Nullius* becomes re-enchanted by frontiersmen who imbue the landscape with a strange mythopoesis. The West thus becomes the white man’s spiritual homeland; we see this trope in authors like Edward Abbey, whose work relegates Native American’s to a metaphor for a lost era: “they are gone...the old people have left no record of disaster on the mural walls of the canyons” (102). To declare them *gone* is to be done with the work of history. For Tommy Orange and other writers, the West is “a home and a trap” where the battle between myth and reality rages (101). For Orange, “If you have the option to not think about or even consider history...that’s how you know you’re on board the ship that serves hors d’oeuvres and fluffs your pillows, while others are out at sea, swimming or drowning” (138). This tension is further complicated when we incorporate women’s voices who play with history, putting “history through a sieve” (Sikelianos 76).

The Westerner has always been a man; women and people of color emerge either as background characters or as symbols—their voices problematize western mastery and historical meta-narratives. The West they reveal is “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants” (Anzaldúa 25). This essay will look at literary texts of the West by women writers, and explore how these narratives destabilize established mythologies and histories of western space and ideology. This *other* gaze questions issues of colonialization and mastery, and suggests different ways of looking at the land and environmental use. Further, this alternate lens creates alternative western subjectivities, questioning what counts as authentically western. Women writers, particularly writers of color, remake the West into a Thirdspace, where borders are de-naturalized and the West re-opens into a true frontier zone of convergence and possibility. We therefore see how Western women writers are “caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits;” the writers in the essay are united in an attempt to remake the world into a “borderlands” space that is also a home (Anzaldúa 42).

The persistence of the western myth in the American spatial-cultural imaginary is proof that space and territory, is “one of the most important intellectual and political developments of the late 20th century” (Soja 2). Edward Soja theorizes Thirdspace as both real and imagined, and the contested space of the West as a *real* space of the imagination (11). Thirdspace is rife with contradictions and overlapping layers, a region “radically open to additional otherness, to a continuing expansion of spatial knowledge” (61). As a critical regional lens, Thirdspace allows us to see the West as “a space of extraordinary openness, a place of critical exchange” (5). Exchange and openness, as opposed to enclosure and conquest, restore the place of western history as something continually unfolding. Neil Campbell’s exploration of Thirdspace continues a critical

regional study that frees the West from myth and ideology, asking that we “think differently about the meanings and significances of space and those related concepts” (58). The West has been homogenized into a quintessential American space; trapped in an either-or narrative, and we must instead see it as a both/and also, a postmodern hybrid space of multiple, interweaving perspectives. It is a space of ‘routes and roots,’ flux and fixity. Campbell looks for the spaces of minoritized voices, subjugated knowledges, and forgotten spaces which, “provides a kind of back talk to America’s mythic claims to realism, progress, and order” (67). Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* argues for a Borderlands ethics as a pedagogical tool for such work. She theorizes the West as a space where borders become destabilized and history converges with the present (25). Her work is a hybrid text that mixes historical inquiry with poetic exploration, playing with ideas of home and belonging, exile and difference, and wrestling with borders, real and metaphoric.

Krista Comer theorizes the West as a postmodern space, investigating issues of race and gender in relation to notions of western spatial identity. Comer’s West, like Anzaldúa’s, is a “social topography” that engages with oft-ignored socio-political issues that challenge master narratives of western expansion and identity; women writers “deploy representations of western lands and nature to talk about and, more, to challenge and change myriad social and political topics” (11). Comer revises dominant narratives by looking at alternate stories that de-mythologizing the West, returning it to the complicated site of real life. She writes women back into the western landscape that, traditionally “gendered male from a myriad of directions, relegates women to a forever status of no-space” (27). A multiracial feminist West creates an alternate identity, not a “consequence of conquest” but an open, “wild card” of subjectivity that upends western history (29). Kerwin Lee Klein continues this inquiry, asking, “Can histories tell the truth about the past” and it is this question that allows us to reimagine the task of history as a narrative creation (1). Klein examines the frontier as a narrative-historical space, investigating the historiographic construction of the West and Western consciousness. The West is constitutive of an American identity, and Turner’s thesis is a “testing ground for attempts to formalize historical discourse.” Crucially, the proliferation of myth of the West is a conflict between “people with and without history” and history (and thus the West) “belonged to certain people and not others” (7). To Klein, “History is the difference, the frontier, the event, the dialogue from which we abstract ourselves and our stories, and the deep silence of its opposed figure, the other outside of language and time, marks the very limit of imagination and the ragged image of what can be thought, told, and lived” (294). It is in this way that we can understand the West as a Thirdspace frontier, a “counter-hegemonic” space of imagination (Soja 87).

Rebecca Solnit’s *Savage Dreams* sees the West threatened by modern industrial warfare and exploitive land-use policies. It divides the land between those who interact with space and those who see it as a literal and metaphoric testing ground for Western power. Staging the “two hidden wars of the American West,” she explores the history of colonialization and exploitation, from the massacre of Native tribes in the Yosemite region to the poisoned “dust of the hundreds of nuclear tests conducted” near the Nevada test site (4). Solnit argues that the history of the West is one of conquest and erasure.

Solnit's desert is "a major dump site" for nuclear waste because "the government, which hasn't been able to make any conventional use of public, or Shoshone, land in Nevada, seems hell-bent on making it useless for everyone" (77-9). We can thus see how "the values [white Americans] attached to westward expansion persist, in cheerful defiance of contrary evidence" (Limerick 36). The West, "the most densely inhabited part of North American before the Europeans came," is emptied literally and metaphorically of the "Indian population," because "there was no place ahead to push them but the Pacific" (268-71). Solnit's repopulation of the 'empty' lands of the mythic West reveals the meticulous and intertwined work of history and war. The West and its native populations are reunited, and the destruction of one is the destruction of the other. Restoring the presence of the "people without history" Solnit's narrative lens rejects the notion of land as tamable and abundant—the desert is overgrazed, eroding, and "naked"—Solnit doesn't see a land of open possibility, just "mortality in the dust" (7, 5).

Solnit notes the mythic West as "wherever the sun sets, the land of what's ahead, of destinations, while the East is the place of origins." The West is a symbolically where one can shed their origins and determine their destiny: "westward I go free" to a land "with a spirit of enterprise and adventure" (73). "Manifest Destiny is only a suburb of Progress," where destiny begets exceptionalism and the evolution of mythic progress leads to the bomb (74). The West was "young, pure, a child of promise... a tabula rasa on which a heroic history would be inscribed" (110). The American national imaginary could erase their history and rebuild it outside the shadow of the old world. The mythic West Solnit investigates is an "interpretive narrative" that combines a "variety of disparate items into some larger whole" into a frontier plot (Klein 48, 52). Solnit's West inverts this frontier plot, marrying the mythic West with its use as a nuclear dumping ground. The arms race is a utopian project that, "mixes a faith in the redemptive power of technology with an American sense of Manifest Destiny"—America is "blessed with vast territories and tremendous wealth," expunged of the people who have historically lived there (Solnit 140). The bomb, a symbol of totalizing destruction, is the logical evolution of Western mythology. Solnit weaves together history and myth, revealing "narrative as a point of convergence" whose collision takes place in the contested Thirdspace of the West (Klein 298).

Solnit shifts her attention to Yosemite and the "riot of life" that California represents in contrast to Nevada's emptiness (215). But California is still a crucial part of the frontier and represents "a place where different communities came up against one another" (Klein 205). To have envisaged California as a frontier is to have "figured a meeting, typically hostile" and so to remake the space as a place of beauty, signs of struggle must be hidden (Klein 206). Like Nevada, California is a place where it is easy to forget the past, "place names didn't add much...until I began reading Western history and realized the larger landscape was a crazy quilt of names of successive culture, battles, heroes, and real estate developers" (Solnit 216). Solnit details the story of the Mariposa Battalion, who in 1851 were the first group of whites to enter the Yosemite Valley and whose mission was to rid the area of the Western Shoshone. Yosemite's lushness masks its violent past, and Solnit notes that "the war and the landscape have nothing to do with each other in [the Battalion's] history, except that the war leads them to the landscape,

and geography shapes the war” (219). Solnit reveals the disjunction in the dominant narrative, between a landscape that moved the men to tears and acts of violence that reduced the valley to “an early Vietnam” (219). “Usually annihilating a culture and romanticizing it are done separately” but the beauty of the valley, paired with Manifest Destiny made California into a land where the native cultures became “a decorative past” for a utopian American future” (220). Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks* is one such story of a ‘people without history.’ The novel’s encroaching sense of danger does not stem from the harsh landscape but from white Americans, whose claim to the land culminates in its destruction: “Even when they were trespassers, westering Americans were hardly, in their own eyes, criminals; rather they were pioneers” (Limerick 36). Juxtaposing the richness of land to the emptiness of white claims: “Land is the only thing that lasts life to life. Money burns like tinder, flows off like water. And as for government promises, the wind is steadier” (Limerick 33). From thieves to pioneers, westerners constructed their own linguistic reality. In Solnit’s novel, the extermination of the Western Shoshone allows Yosemite to “function as a great natural shrine,” emptied of the past (262). “Each age writes the history of the past anew with reference to the conditions uppermost in its own time,” and Solnit’s investigation into Yosemite’s past problematizes the work of history by revealing Americans as ‘tourists and outsiders,’ a position made possible by the ‘wildcard’ of her subjectivity (Klein 61, Solnit 263).

Solnit redefines what it means to be “a Westerner all along” by framing the West as a contested space: “I’d been living in a war zone my whole life without noticing the wars, since they didn’t match any of the categories in which I’d been instructed” (88). Solnit’s understanding of her western identity is not destabilized by the “mutated, invades, hybridized” reality of the region but is made *authentic* through a restoration of the “vastly different ecology and cultures of the West” making Solnit, like other Americans, into “a stranger in paradise” in a defamiliarized landscape (263). The West is a “concatenation of different places and processes...which historians abstract from the chaos of sense data and synthesize into an individual concept” and which involves continual culling of native and local presence in a richly populated landscape (Klein 52). Solnit shows that forcing disparate and contested elements of history into one unified narrative “abandoned any hope of representing the past as it really was,” creating an increasingly hostile present that “no longer works” (Klein 56, Solnit 73).

Gretel Ehrlich’s novel, *The Solace of Open Spaces*, rethinks the West rhizomatically by departing from the cowboy archetype, viewing it as a more fluid identity (Campbell 10). Ehrlich’s work employs a Western environmental trope depicting Wyoming as a wild and transformative space. After the tragic death of her partner, Ehrlich moves to Wyoming to “lose herself” in the “hallucinatory rawness” of the territory. Ehrlich’s Eastern friends cannot understand the appeal, it “appeared to them as a landscape of lunar desolation and intellectual backwardness” (ix). Leaving the city is a “digression” that becomes permanent—it is a more authentic way of being that yields an “unquenchable appetite for life” (x). The self in the West is awake, and what is authentic can only be earned through trials with that land. But Ehrlich’s cowboy is a woman, and her negotiation of femininity and Western tropes speak to a new sort of Westerner with a “tolerance for ambiguity” that “shapes new myths” of the West (Anzaldúa 104). Ehrlich’s

local knowledge proves her authenticity, while her position “outside” the western frame is a “strategy for opening up and scrutinizing established ideologies” and archetypes (Campbell 14). The West is not a space of conquest but cohabitation. Ehrlich’s West “can heal what is divided and burdensome in us,” if we don’t “built against space” (15). The language she uses to describe the land is domestic; a landscape of “coziness” and “family,” “a slow accumulation of days” demanding stillness (4-5). A domestic West is a “conscious rupture” from “oppressive traditions” and her stillness halts Manifest Destiny (Anzaldúa 104). The land fosters intimacy, characterized by ‘ache and softness’ that leads Ehrlich and her community to cling to each other (72). Ehrlich portrays the ranchers and western men as tough *and* gentle: “Because these men work with animals, not machines or numbers, because they live outside in landscapes of torrential beauty...their strength is also a softness, their toughness, a rare delicacy” (52-3). This radically different description revises the cowboy archetype, rejecting the aesthetic closure of what makes a Westerner (Campbell 15).

Ehrlich represents a “minor” voice. Her narrative is “deterritorializing,” seeking to “displace or question dominant, normalized, and official territory” in a landscape simultaneously enchanted and real (Campbell 62). The West is not a “dream environment” but a space where the western myth appears thin next to the hybrid characters in Ehrlich’s narrative (Campbell 66). Ehrlich’s voice enacts Thirthing, as the “spatial imaginary” of the West “is opened up by this process of critical exchange and interrogation, unfixed from its binary position through the intervention of a third perspective—interjecting an-Other set of choices” (Campbell 59). She argues, “We live in a culture that has lost its memory” and very little of the past remains relevant (103). To Ehrlich, “it does no good to ask historical questions” as history is incomplete (69).

Ehrlich also “examines relations of difference and dominance” through constructions of gender that reveal an “awareness of the rhizomatic, uncontrollable nature of westness” (Campbell 173). The clearest example of this is in Ehrlich’s depiction of winter, where human behavior mimics the seasonal cycle of abundance and scarcity. Winter “creates a profound camaraderie...even though at this time of year we veer toward our various nests and seclusions, nature expresses itself as a bright fuse, irrepressible and orgasmic” (73-4). The land, temporarily fallow, releases people from their duties and they instead tend to each other. In warmer months when the land needs work, westerners are more solitary. Ehrlich depicts people in an affective relationship with the natural world, coexisting with the land as an element of a larger ecological system.

Ehrlich’s description of nature as ‘orgasmic,’ connects landscape to desire, where nature isn’t a sexualized object but a partner in joyous union. Creating “topographies of desire,” Ehrlich rejects gendering the West as a woman to be conquered (Comer 156). Her gaze depicts the Plains as masculine, a place to fulfill her desire—not through conquest but communion. Her life in Wyoming is “an unaccountably libidinous place” where she wants to “lie down among the muddy furrows, under the frictional sawing of stalks, under corncocks which look like erections, and out of whose loose husks sprays of bronze silk dangle down” (130). The language is that of pleasure, not dominance. We are thus able to conceive of the West from outside the normative frame of “prescribed masculinity,” where we see competing desires “for control and order, for types of

possession (over women, land, money), and for power” (Campbell 167). Ehrlich’s is a Thirdspace relationship that promotes a “counter discourse of nature” that redefines desire “through some more diffuse and multiple geography of pleasure” (Comer 157). Ehrlich rejects mastery, conquest, and machismo, extending her counter discourse to men in her work, for whom “to be tough is to be fragile: to be tender is to be truly fierce” (44). The “erotic possibility” of Ehrlich’s narrative creates “a truly *alternative* new West” (Comer 164).

C. Pam Zhang’s novel, *How Much of These Hills is Gold*, tells the story of two sisters, Lucy and Sam, on a journey through the California wilderness to bury their father, Ba. Their California is both imagined and real as they search for a new home. Set in the 1800s, the novel forces historical events, like the completion of the transcontinental railroad, into the background. The book warns “this land is not your land,” and indeed California is hostile to the immigrants who built the land. Despite this, Sam claims ownership of a land made rich through their work: “This is ours to defend” (65). In the Chinese mining camp and flashbacks to Ba and Ma’s use as cheap labor for the railroad, Zhang creates a counter-history to California. Lucy’s journey articulates the stories of those who created the Leland Stanfords of California’s history. Lucy is outside the dominant narrative, and from her perspective, “the West is no longer “epic”—settled, enclosed, and internally coherent...but is seen more “as a meeting place...of connections and interrelations... dialogic and diasporic histories” (Campbell 25). When the railroad is completed, she only “hears the cheer that goes through the city the day the last railroad tie is hammered. A golden spike holds track to earth. A picture is drawn for the history books, a picture that shows none of the people who look like her, who built it” (317). Zhang’s use of historical context reveals “the West’s enduring masculinist identity” whose discourse is often a “white thing” (Comer 8-9). Lucy’s dual place inside and outside history makes complicates ideas of home, and exposes “the racial and gendered assumptions” of the West and its dependence on “people of color and/or women for its coherence and intelligibility” (Comer 9).

Zhang writes an alternative history of California through Ba, who claims he was the first to find gold in the California hills. Ba tells Lucy, “All your life you heard people say the story starts in ’48. And all your life when people told you this story, did you ever question why” (190)? Historical fact is destabilized yet still powerful, as Ba can only share this after he dies: “This story’s hard to tell...Got no flesh and rightly I shouldn’t hurt, but rememory hurts me” (215). Ba’s admission is not only memory but rememory; Ba continually returns to this memory in such a way that it destroys his future. Further, the trauma of having the discovery of gold assigned to white men erases the presence of California’s native and immigrant populations from history: “luck isn’t something we have. Not in this land” (167). History is a narrative white Americans told about the West “to claim it, to make it theirs and not yours” (190). Still, our relationship to the past, particularly the mythic past, is strong: “It’s got its claws in you,” Ma says. Her fingers dig into Lucy’s hand. “This land’s claimed you and your sister both, shi ma” (155). The inability to resist the mythic West and the interconnectedness of Asian-American and California history, converge in Lucy’s “claim upon western regional identity” (Comer

109). Still, the novel demonstrates the limits of this inclusion, manifesting in Lucy's inability to find a true home.

Lucy cannot place herself, whether it be in the mythic land of tigers that formed the California of her childhood, the town of Sweetwater, or San Francisco. Unable to make sense of her environment, Lucy engages in a game that attempts to define the boundaries of various objects: "what makes a dog a dog" (29)? These games go unanswered; borders are fluid and undefined. Lucy's game ends with a final question: "What makes a home a home" (306). Lucy's home is an in-between place—the land of her birth is not a homeland. Before Lucy can answer herself, the ground seems to burst open—an old white man "draws a heavy gold pocket watch from his vest" and, looking at her sister Sam says, "Now let's settle up" (307). History as a gold watch has caught up to them, and thus the "territorial structure of exploitation and domination" extends to Sam and Lucy's indebtedness to white America; they are merely invisible workers on land that does not belong to them (Soja 92). Sam has stolen the gold, returning it to the earth: "That gold won't wash up for ages and ages. Maybe next time someone honest will find it—someone like us. Maybe things'll be different by then." The voice of her father speaks in the background, "*you belong here too Lucy girl. Never let them tell you otherwise*" (308). "Of all the persistent qualities in American history, the values attached to property retain the most power" (Limerick 56). Returning the gold to the earth is a rejection of gold rush values and the idea of the land as something you can claim.

Mythic California resides in the background as an "emplotted cultural space" into which Lucy and Sam write their own experience in cowboy fantasies and their time as outlaws looking for gold and buffalo (Comer 105). The West has always been a Thirdspace where dreams and reality converge. Lucy and her family are not immune to the (western) promise of renewal and fortune, but that destiny is continually denied to them, highlighting the fragility of the West as a redemptive landscape. Lucy and Sam straddle two wests, and "stand as if at a threshold" in a miner's cabin decorated with 'the cipher of a tiger as protection' (51). The unified West is destabilized by "a foreign culture," exposing it as a series of overlapping spaces (Campbell 16).

In the wilderness, without landmarks or socio-historical referents, Lucy and Sam float in a dreamworld that disappears when they emerge into white civilization, the tiger prints in the dust disappearing into fantasy (229). What is visible is their race, their femininity, their foreignness—despite being born in California. At the end, having fulfilled her debt to the 'old white man,' Lucy is granted a boon—she will be given what she wants, if only she names it. But her wants reside in that threshold space and cannot be named, "because this land had gouged in you an animal's kind of claiming, senseless to words and laws"—a claim to home that resists narrative (320). We cannot articulate the sort of Thirdspace existence Lucy yearns for, akin to "the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods...if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture—*una cultural mestiza*" (Anzaldúa 44). She cannot explain what makes *this* home and home. Home is what Lucy wants, but it only exists in the in-between spaces.

Karen Tei Yamashita's novel, *Tropic of Orange*, dissolves the border between north and south, creating a geography of mobility. The shifting landscape between Los



Angeles and Mexico is threaded by a thin line running through a “native orange” that disrupts notions of migration, identity, and belonging. Movement is paramount in the novel, emphasized by the freeways that run through Los Angeles, a vascular system that unifies and disrupts the city. Reading the novel within the larger framework of the West and border theory, Yamashita depicts Southern California as a transnational space, but one that still contains its own locality. Folding Mexico into Los Angeles, *Tropic of Orange* argues for a different perspective of the West; no longer looking to the frontier from the East, Yamashita’s alternate cartography sees the shared space of Cali-Mexico as an entire world that might move past spatial and demographic borders.

Yamashita’s Los Angeles challenges what is considered western. Urban space is a “non-canonical” landscape that allows subaltern persons to imagine and relate to the West (Comer 62). Southern California is seen as “West of West,” and ideological narratives do not have as much of a hold—Yamashita rejects the “rural yardstick” of traditional western writing for an urban authenticity (Comer 69). The novel is set in a different West: “2,000 miles of frontier” with barbed wire, INS and border patrol, “its great history of migrations” (Yamashita 198). For women and people of color, L.A. is “where it all comes together,” where “in its vast cultural diversity, Los Angeles has become that place where every place in the world is” (Comer 66). *Tropic of Orange* “symbolizes...the geographical experience of postmodernity...as a contemporary heterotopia, as an evocative ‘counter-site’ in which all other real sites within the synchronous culture are ‘simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted’” (Soja, 14). The city-as-counter-site is lined by “four thousand species” of Palm trees, a iconographic multiplicity that “See beyond the street, the houses, the neighborhood. See over the freeway” (32). Outside of space and time, theirs is a postmodern, hybrid perspective, asking “whose territory is it anyway” (81)?

*Tropic of Orange* depicts the West as a “traveling concept” whose “roots and routes,” are embodied in the emblematic orange (Campbell 114). The orange that fascinates Rafaela, herself split between global north and south, grows on a tree her employer Gabriel brought from Riverside: “It was a navel orange tree, maybe the descendent of the original trees first brought to California from Brazil in 1873 and planted by L.C. Tibbetts. This was the sort of historic detail Gabriel liked. Bringing an orange tree (no matter that it was probably a hybrid) from Riverside, California to his place near Mazatlán was a significant act of some sort” (11). Privileging hybrid symbols, Yamashita’s West is “always already transnational, a more routed and complex rendition, a traveling concept whose meanings move between cultures, crossing, bridging, and intruding simultaneously... an interactive process of constitutive contacts and mobilities” (Campbell 5). The orange’s migration into Los Angeles is one of many “transversals, which suggest other spaces, other movements” that allows us to think of the West of *Tropic of Orange* “rhizomatically” as an “unfinished, multiple, and ‘open’” space that contrasts with the overcoded West of the Turner thesis (Campbell 9-10). Falling from the tree, the orange rolls “just beyond the frontiers of Gabriel’s property to a neutral place between ownership and the highway” (Yamashita 13). We can situate Yamashita’s narrative in this space between ownership and movement, where anything is possible because historical boundaries have been erased. Crossing into California, the orange

makes territories ambiguous; there is no longer a border but a borderland. As a borderland, L.A. “is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (Anzaldúa 25). Yamashita’s narrative thereby enacts a radical Thirdspace understanding of the West, where the border is only “an imaginary line” (151).

Yamashita uses magical realism as a form of Thirdspace. Exploring multiple stories at once, the novel begins by redefining time and space in a “hypercontextuality” chart spreading each story onto a simultaneously occurring field, creating multiple ways of reading. The past is precarious, as “time folded with memory. In a moment, everything could fold itself up, and time stand still” (86). Yamashita creates a chaotic landscape where spatial politics cannot reckon with history, and the past is level with the present. The freeway is also an example of magical realism, and a Thirdspace metaphor. The freeway runs through and out of Los Angeles, binding it internally and to the larger world beyond; a border and a route, it connects and separates people and regions. We can read the freeway as the heart of Los Angeles, veins that traffic the lifeblood of the city—movement and change. Routes and roots, the freeways are “a great root system, an organic living entity” (37). As the novel progresses, the freeways evolve into a Thirdspace as the city’s homeless population moves onto the immobilized freeway, making a home of the abandoned cars and growing crops “in the dirt coming up through the concrete” (217). The freeways become an other space, as the hidden world of the homeless is brought onto the visual field. The homeless colonize the freeway: “people living in abandoned luxury cars, creating a community out of a traffic jam,” halting movement and progress, and reimaging the cars as a symbol of rootedness instead of modernity and migration (155-6). It is a “generative utopia...a make-believe paradise that successfully makes you believe in make-believing” (Soja 274). The freeway is no longer a symbol of urban modernity but a free-way—community and habitation. Misusing the freeway, the homeless stage a resistance to the spatial politics of the city and “the myth of the first world” (Yamashita 259). Crucially, these alternate geographies have always existed. Manzanar, a homeless ‘traffic conductor,’ is uniquely able to comprehend this multiplicity: “*There are maps and there are maps and there are maps.* The uncanny thing was that he could see all of them at once...for each map was a layer of music” (56). The West is not a singular narrative, but where “the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture” (Anzaldúa 25). If we could ‘see everything at once’ like Palms, we might see it.

Yamashita reveals the true history of the West as a place where cultures “MERGE, MERGE, MERGE. They all converged everywhere all at once” (207). Her borderland ethics shows hybridity and multiplicity as new ways of being, the postmodern city of Los Angeles creating new representations of space and self. History cannot explain Yamashita’s landscape: “Just cuz you get to the end doesn't mean you know what happened” (252). In the novel’s final image, Bobby embraces his family, holding onto the lines radiating from the orange: “What’s he gonna do? Tied fast to these lines...What are these goddam lines anyway? What do they connect? What do they divide?” (268). He has to choose. Letting go of the lines connecting north to south, Bobby embraces his family, an act that releases the folded space of the region. The Tropic of Cancer, “a border made

plain by the sun itself” is unmade as it enters into the realm of narrative possibility where, finally revealed as a mythic construction, allows us to let go (71). The West is a conflicted terrain, where myth, ideology, and counter-narratives converge. We therefore begin at the “closing of a great historic movement,” forcing it open through the restoration of *other* voices (Turner 1). Looking at the West as written by women and peoples of color, the West is no longer a “victim of history” but “a place undergoing conquest and never fully escaping its consequences” (Limerick 26). These writers reimagine and recontextualize the real and imagined space of the West as a place and process. Thirthing-as-Othering defamiliarizes the West, revealing it as an ever-changing hybrid space of “radical openness” (Soja 5). These writers explore “The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incomparable frames of reference [causing] *unchoque*, a cultural collision” (Anzaldúa 100). This collision restores the image of a “layered, ‘baroque’ West, always breaking out of the containing grids of definition, fixity, national certitude, and mythic closure, a labyrinthine West that refuses to be any single thing” (Campbell 300).

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