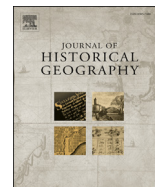




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Review

Karen R. Jones, *Epiphany in the Wilderness: Hunting, Nature, and Performance in the Nineteenth-Century American West*. Boulder, University Press of Colorado, 2015, 360 pages, US\$55 hardcover.

Too often, the frontier history of the American West is popularized as a two-dimensional tale of cowboys versus Indians, with successive waves of explorers, trappers, soldiers, and settlers pushing westward, overcoming obstacles of (Native) man and nature. While many of these same elements remain in view in *Epiphany in the Wilderness*, historian Karen Jones calls forth a refreshingly diverse cast of characters, processes, and perspectives in this ambitious book.

In the introduction, Jones highlights her intentions to present a richer version of western US history: 'Disentangling the complex relationships between the human actors and the wild things they pursued sits at the heart' of the book (p. 5). This rings true, though not every tangled thread of U.S. western development can be picked fully loose, and the actual events of this period are likely just too messy to fit honestly into a clean chronology.

At one level, *Epiphany in the Wilderness* centers upon the 'colorful procession of sport hunters' (p. 8) that inundated the nineteenth century American West. Jones identifies this group of gun-toting visitors as the main interest of her book, and while it's true that *Epiphany* attends to sport hunters in vivid detail, this framing sells the book a bit short. It's necessarily about much more than sport hunters, and keeping to this orbit at times seems to limit the book's reach. While sport hunters played a critical role in the political ecology of the nineteenth-century American West, and Jones does well to elevate these characters, their motives, and their lasting impacts on frontier ecology and culture, the systematic destruction of the American bison as a genocidal program to eradicate indigenous culture and resistance only fleetingly comes into view.

Jones readily acknowledges that the history of the American West is replete with complexity, contestation, and diverse characters. To try to capture this, Jones structures the book around three main sections. The first, *Actors and Agents*, includes chapters on the masculinity of the hunt and frontier-era Hunter Heroes; the martial culture of guns and their evolving technologies; and the proto-feminism of Hunter Heroines in the early West. The second section turns upon ideas of *Story, Image, and Trophy*, with chapters dedicated to nineteenth-century art and photography, stage(d) productions of the West, and animal taxidermy. The relatively short final section moves to *Saving the Frontier*, and the emergence of a US conservation movement and rejection – at least in part – of the frontier hunting ethos.

While the book's main sections provide a helpful degree of internal coherence, taken chapter by chapter *Epiphany in the*

Wilderness seems to reproduce some of the complexity Jones pledges to disentangle. To her credit, Jones avoids the temptation to try to fit American frontier history into a series of distinct and progressive eras. Without this, however, it's a bit hard to find a coherent narrative arc. The American West was (and in many ways remains), for example, highly masculinized, but also can be seen as a place where women created political and personal identities that defied convention. The relationship between humans and wildlife is similarly difficult to cast in singular form – or as a steady progression – as wanton killing, market hunting, trophy hunting, 'hunting' by camera, and anti-hunting perspectives co-existed and overlapped; many of these do even today. A visit to one of the many 'game farms' that exist across Texas and other parts of the US West, for instance, would quickly dispel notions that we now live fully in an era of fair chase, just as the mounted heads of taxidermied wildlife in myriad western bars, hotel lobbies, and airport terminals demonstrate that we have not exactly moved beyond creating the "necrogeographies" that Jones describes more historically.

Taken individually, the chapters hold together well. Individual or clusters of chapters would work nicely in a course reader or to examine a theme such as the role of women or that of performance in the early American West. Chapter six's examination of taxidermy stands out for its examination of preserved carcasses that spread across North America and Europe as animals were killed, then mounted and shipped as trophies. It's difficult to find a broadly progressive message in the book as a whole, but this does come through in some of the individuals Jones profiles, and for whom the title's promise seems to hold. William Hornaday, Bill Cody, and Aldo Leopold, for example, each seem to find their life-changing moment in the wild, though a bit late for the thousands of critters that died at their hands before this came to pass.

Jones consistently acknowledges that the American West never was exclusively a proving ground for masculine hunting heroes, the province of demure (or raconteur) women, or source of anti-hunting or conservation sentiment. It was each of these, and more. And yet, I can't help but wish that Jones's history linked more explicitly and more often to the many politics of nature, both past and present. Jones brings the political ecology of hunting women, for example, into view, noting that, 'women found in the landscape of the hunt a place for the loosening of cultural norms... successful hunting endeavors undoubtedly fostered the idea of women as strong, resilient, and competent in realms typically seen as the preserve of men' (p. 129). This is an enticing prospect – that the feminine (and feminist) performance of the hunt would springboard women toward emancipation, suffrage, and careers in politics or business – and I would have loved to see Jones explore

these possibilities in more depth. She later offers a hint of what this might look like, with the intriguing example of Martha Maxwell's activist brand of truth-in-taxidermy (pp. 253–262). Instead of developing these ideas more fully, Jones largely dismisses the linkages between hunting and progressive feminist politics as being difficult to document and the disjointed efforts of 'deviant figures' (p. 129). That said, Jones's characterizations of early western

women, both well-known and obscure, are rich in detail and effectively disrupt any visions of a uniformly masculine American frontier.

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