
Epiphany in the Wilderness: Hunting, Nature, and Performance in the Nineteenth-Century American West.

by Karen R. Jones

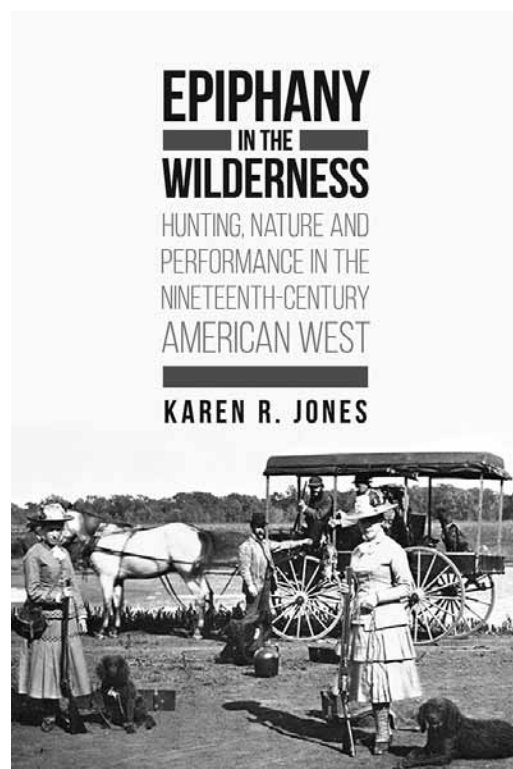
xiii + 363 pages, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index.
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Drawing on the postmodernist icons Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and their intellectual progeny, Karen R. Jones's *Epiphany in the Wilderness: Hunting, Nature, and Performance in the Nineteenth-Century American West* brings the intellectual avant-garde to western American history. In particular, Jones employs Michael Callon and Bruno Latour's "actor network theory" and the emerging field of performance studies "to see hunting as a ritually constituted activity in which protagonists construct a sense of meaning around an event, place, community, and self by repeating and reinforcing behaviors, rites, and interactions" (p. 13). Hunting, in her theatrical metaphor, puts actors (human hunters as well as their prey animals) on a stage (sometimes literally) that she calls "the game trail" to act and reenact the ritual of hunting. Hunting, therefore, has long contained a variety of important social meanings, helping to define gender, class, racial, and national identity.

Jones organizes her book around three "acts," as she calls them. Act one, "Actors and Agents," looks at the relationship between hunting and gender and the development of the hunter hero as "leading man" of the hunting drama, with his trusty steed and reliable firearm in supporting roles. Theodore Roosevelt, George Armstrong Custer, and William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody all took memorable turns playing this role. In a time of increasing material comfort and civilization, these men and their brethren hunted as a way to prove their masculinity and martial character. The initial act of hunting could best be completed in the rugged West, especially the Great Plains and Rockies, where the largest game animals dwelled. Typically, the hunting trail provided a male stage of trial and camaraderie, but some women participated as well as a way to transgress social norms and empower themselves.

Jones's second act, "The Afterlife," looks at the ways in which the ritual of hunting was remembered and reenacted in literature, art, photography, and theatrical performance. Hunter heroes penned thrilling narratives that testified to their authenticity and related the hunting trail experience to the masses. Photography added a sense of realism to tales of hunting, and theatrical representations—especially those of Cody's Wild West Show—made the hunting trail performance resonate with modern people. The art of taxidermy, meanwhile, provided material evidence, a theatrical prop, of the hunter's prowess.

Finally, act three, "Saving the Hunting Frontier," looks at the role performance played in developing a conservation ethos



at the fin de siècle and in the ghost dance movement among American Indian groups.

Hunting could take on many forms: subsistence hunting by American Indians and settlers to provide valuable meat for their families; industrial-scale market hunting, most notably by professional bison hunters; and sport hunting conducted by wealthy white elites. While Jones mentions the former groups in passing, it is clear that she is primarily interested in elite sport hunting, and with good reason, as this group is the most congruent with her theatrical schema—and most influential in shaping national mores. One of the challenges of reading any theory-laden work is to decide whether the addition of theory adds anything to our understanding of historical processes. At their worst, complex epistemological schemas make opaque that which is obvious, but at their best, they introduce a new framework for understanding the past. Fortunately, *Epiphany in the Wilderness* is much closer to the latter condition. Certainly, hunting is a familiar topic, and many historians, including Dan Flores, Elliott West, and Andrew Isenberg, have written on the demise of the bison and other topics, but none has done a better job of demonstrating the important role hunting played as a salve for a nation afraid of losing the characteristics that made it exceptional. Participating in the hunting trail (if only by reading tales of hunters' exploits or attending reenactments) gave Americans an identity, allowing them to act out familiar roles even if the play itself was changing.

Reviewed by Jason Pierce, associate professor of history, Angelo State University, San Angelo, Texas.