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Invisible Natives: Myth and Identity in the American
Western, and: Black Masculinity and the Frontier Myth in
American Literature (review)

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and interpreting Mrs. Bird as a spokeswoman for a kind of moral cosmopolitanism, Crane recognizes Stowe's status as a political theorist and her participation in the jurisprudential debates about higher law that raged around her.

In many ways, Crane casts a far narrower net than Pagnattaro in the subjects of his analysis: Stowe, Emerson, Douglass, and Chesnut emerge as the major literary players. But in this elegantly written and powerfully argued book, Crane broadens even a specialist's understanding of the political, cultural, and jurisprudential issues surrounding slavery, abolition, and post-Reconstruction. His analyses of the roots of current Supreme Court conservatism are terrific, and his implicit defense of a jurisprudence of human dignity is, in the final analysis, deeply moving. Ultimately, Crane's book inspires us to believe, as Justice Anthony Kennedy said so eloquently in his opinion on behalf of the majority in the recent *Lawrence v. Texas* decision that overturned Texas's same-sex antisodomy statute, that "[a]s the Constitution endures, persons in every generation can invoke its principles in their own search for greater freedom." The vision of a law that respects all its citizens regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, or other social category transcends processes of defiance or assimilation. Rather, it imagines the law as a dynamic, consensual, intellectual, humanistic organism—as an instrument of justice.

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***Invisible Natives: Myth and Identity in the American Western.* By Armando José Prats. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press. 2002. xxi, 317 pp. Cloth, \$49.95; paper, \$21.95.**

***Black Masculinity and the Frontier Myth in American Literature.* By Michael K. Johnson. Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press. 2002. ix, 293 pp. \$34.95.**

Two new critical studies add to our knowledge of Western literature and film by focusing on the exclusion and representation of racial minorities. In *Invisible Natives*, Armando José Prats argues that the formula western narrates the myth of conquest, a "powerful mythology of triumphalist nationhood" (2), by marginalizing the presence of Indians or by having white characters assume native identities and adopt native perspectives, thereby replacing indigenous others with cinematic facsimiles (think of *Dances with Wolves*).

Anyone familiar with Hollywood westerns knows that Indians, the typecast opponents of westward expansion, must be pushed off the screen, not just removed from the land, in order to make way for "civilization." Prats admits that his thesis is not entirely new, citing Richard Slotkin's investigations of the "myth of the frontier" and Patricia Nelson Limerick's interest in legacies of conquest as two inspirations. The virtue of *Invisible Natives* is its ability to shed new light on these familiar perspectives. Chapter 3 is especially illu-

minating, demonstrating that so-called revisionist westerns, like traditional westerns from which they supposedly differ, take for granted the defeat of the "other." While these films moralize over the tragic disappearance of Indians, they do so in order to expiate our collective guilt as a nation. According to Prats, "revisionism must tell the story of the Indian to those of us who remain, and who, for remaining, are by implication Conquest's beneficiaries" (132). In the last two chapters, however, the book gets into trouble, overelaborating the distinctions between the white western hero, the Indian other, and the white man who "turns" Indian. In the process of explaining such concepts as the Double Other, the Space of the Same, and the Othered Same, Prats complicates his argument without much benefit to readers.

Black Masculinity and the Frontier Myth in American Literature also offers numerous valuable insights, although it is not always able to defend some of its more intriguing assertions. Johnson shows how nineteenth- and twentieth-century African American writers test certain theories in American literature: that the West is less racist than other geographical regions; that the frontier offers equal opportunities for all pioneers; that violence is a component of the Western experience, a necessary rite of passage into manhood for black as well as for white men. He draws interesting parallels between seemingly dissimilar works, such as Owen Wister's *The Virginian* and Pauline Hopkins's *Winona*. At the same time, he is careful to indicate the lack of agreement among African American writers, some of whom, like Nat Love and Oscar Micheaux, see the West as a place where African Americans can assimilate; others, like Hopkins, imagine the West as a place where they may revolt.

Like Prats, Johnson appears on less solid ground in the final chapters. Here he looks at other "frontiers," including the deep South in a Richard Wright short story, and Europe and Africa in novels by William Gardner Smith and John A. Williams, respectively. He defines these nonwestern geographical spaces as symbolic frontiers where African Americans come into cultural contact with whites, while in the process defining black masculinity. But he offers little textual evidence to support the suggestion that these places are equivalent metaphorical settings, citing only one instance where a character uses the word "frontier" to identify his environment (228). Nonetheless, Johnson's attempt to think about the frontier in global, cross-cultural terms is useful and his comparisons are thought-provoking, as are his arguments in the early chapters, concerning more traditional African American westerns.

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