



Call for Panels

XXVIII AISNA Biennial Conference

Facing West:

Thinking, Living, Outliving the American West

11-13 September 2025

Department of Foreign Languages, Literatures, and Cultures

University of Bergamo

The notion of American West is so overflowing with symbolism that it is virtually impossible to extricate mythic constructions from a geographical and historical reality. From a physical point of view, its borders have never been easily traceable. In the nineteenth century it was identified with the manifest advancement of the US frontier from the Appalachians to the Pacific, an unrelenting territorial acquisition grounded in the expansion of slavery and the systematic infringement of the Native peoples' rights, massacres, and wars. Nowadays the term American West often includes, besides the United States west of the 100° parallel, Canada west of Ontario, all of Mexico, and the broader Pacific region. And yet, the increasing broadening of its geographical, cultural and even linguistic boundaries coexists with a set of very recognizable images. A solitary horseman riding towards the horizon in the sunset; arid stretches of land interspersed with tufts of windswept sagebrush and overlooked by snow-topped mountains; a gas pump precariously standing in a desert

landscape cut by a highway. These overcoded representations retain, both inside and outside of the US context, an affective quality that suggests a special interplay between space, on the one hand, and the natural, human, and technological element, on the other. Although tough and challenging, the “wilderness” they allude to is less a territory to be conquered than a place in which to explore subjectivities and potentialities, including the experience of vulnerability and failure.

Since the 1970s, the revisionist cycle that invested western narratives has unsettled established conventions and expectations, questioning correlated values such as “regenerative violence” and the assertion of a national(istic) ethos centered on the West as the fountainhead of the American character. The new literary and cinematic westerns – or “postwesterns” – and the new social and cultural history have made room to subjects that were stereotyped, distorted or absent from dominant narratives, from Native Americans to women, from Blacks and other ethnic Americans to immigrants, often offering a critical look into the exploitation of nature at the hands of capitalistic profit and technological progress. Whereas the self-representation of classic western mythology emphasized coherency, rootedness, and sameness – as epitomized by Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis of the frontier – the postwestern turn has fostered an idea of the West as a diasporic and hybridized space, generated out of encounter, contact, and cultural mix. Along these lines, building on Gilles Deleuze's notion of the rhizome, Neil Campbell has developed a promising theory of westness as “mutating multiplicity” and subject-in-process, a space of pluralities and irreducible complexities. At the same time, revisionist narratives of the West also intersect with US nationalistic border politics and its representations, undercutting what the idea of the American West has meant for generations of immigrants and migrant communities – both in its mythological and in its critical version – complicating the postwestern account of the West as a diasporic space.

Extending the paradigm of westness even further, well beyond the traditional East-West trajectory, the American West can be seen as the diffused site of a radical mobility that engages notions of limit, struggle, displacement, well-being, and rebirth. A vast region where material structures and infrastructures have often played a major role in orienting values, desires, and aspirations toward a defiance of symbolic boundaries. Central to a fresh myth of mobility elaborated from the 1950s, for example, was the Pacific State Highway (Highway One), or, later, the Pacific Crest Trail (cutting through California, Oregon, Washington and British Columbia). Especially the first route reshaped not only the coastal landscape but also the map of some of the nation's most innovative countercultural movements, from the Beat to psychedelic rock. From this moment on, the American West saw a flowering of experimentalism in the arts but also in social and living practices (from the hippie communes of New Mexico and the West Coast to the Castro neighborhood in San

Francisco), through a complex impulse toward radical change at multiple levels. And yet, in the collective fantasies, the experience in the West did not only come to epitomize self-regeneration and innovative experiments in politics, economy and social life. It also became the embodiment of a setback reflected in a series of crises, either political – such as the 1992 Los Angeles Riots and the 1999 Seattle WTO protests – or economic, as in the case of the dotcom bubble implosion in 2001, which first revealed the fragile side of the Silicon Valley tech power.

The aim of the 28th AISNA biennial conference is to encourage an inquiry into the multiple meanings of the American West. We invite investigations of the region's changing history and geography, of the tensions concerning the western/postwestern/neowestern/anti-western debate in literature, cinema and historiography, and of the concept of westness as an attempt to rethink the West as an aspirational field of forces. In particular, we are looking for proposals that explore examples of limit, contact, hybridity, regeneration and failure in what continues to be a crucial context of American culture. Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

- De-colonialist and indigenous narratives of the West and the Southwest;
- East/West relations in the US context;
- The West beyond regionalism;
- The American West beyond the US;
- Stories of personal success and failure in the West from the 19th to the 21st century;
- The rise/decline/revival of West and western mythologies and icons;
- The role of violence and the wilderness in postwestern/neowestern/anti-western narratives;
- The postwestern/neowestern/anti-western in contemporary film, literature, theater, and other arts;
- The African American experience and Black communities in the west(ern) context;
- Women in the West throughout history;
- Ethnic communities and the immigrant experience in the West;
- Religious communities in the West throughout history;
- LGBTQ+ communities in the West;

- The imagination of the West in American naturalism;
- *Hard-boiled* fiction and the western paradigm;
- Modernist/postmodernist/metamodernist approaches to the western genre;
- The Highway One and counterculture in literature, art and music;
- Economic Crises in the West throughout history and as reflected in literature and art;
- Environmental movements and protest movements in the American West;
- The West before the United States: Native American politics and imperial relations in colonial North America;
- Communes and utopian social experiments in the West throughout U.S. history;
- Workers in the West: Cowboys, traders, slaves, explorers;
- The “frontier thesis”: critical interpretations of a durable historiographical and cultural trope;
- Western borders and the clash of politics and cultures;
- The environmental history of the West

TIMELINE

The deadline for panel proposals is November 22, 2024. The submitted proposals will be reviewed by the conference organizing committee and the AISNA board. The list of selected panels will be published on the Conference website by December 20, 2024.

Submissions are to be written in English and must include:

- a panel title
- a clearly stated description of the proposed topic in no more than 250 words
- contact details of the panel’s coordinator or coordinators (max. two), including their professional affiliation.

Each panel will host no less than two papers, including the coordinator's or coordinators', while panels with more than four papers will be split into two sessions. We remind aspiring coordinators that their task will include a brief introduction of the speakers, a strict monitoring of the observance of the allotted 20-minute time for each presentation, and a supervision of the following question-and-answer session, aimed at stimulating a fruitful discussion at the end of each panel.

All panel proposals should be sent by e-mail to the conference organization committee at the following address:

aisna25unibg@gmail.com

The local organizing committee

Anna De Biasio

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