

"HELT TEXAS, MORGAN KANE!"

Notes on the Pedagogies of Finding, Documenting, and Teaching the American West in Norwegian Backyards

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Abstract: Applying transnational/global Wests methodologies, this article is predicated on an admittedly polemic claim: the American West can be found on many (if not all) foreign shores. This article showcases the pedagogies employed in teaching graduate-level cultural studies seminars on the American West in a Norwegian context. American studies students were tasked with locating and retrieving traces/echoes/spores of the American West in their proverbial backyards. They conducted cultural geography fieldwork with a view to generating generation-specific content in the form of short video reels. The resultant documentary archive gestures at clear patterns. For example, the students' findings included, but were not limited to, country-specific (re)imaginings of the mythic West in different media, heterotopic spaces of performance, play, consumption and the hyperreal, instances of 'playing Indian,' iconographic scatterings, cowboy/Western poetics in music, and more. Ultimately, this article illustrates how that which we study from afar may be found in more local(ized) Norwegian contexts, imaginaries, and cultural practices.

Keywords: American West, cultural geography, rhizomatic Wests, postwest, guerilla academic

In mid-June 2024, *Aftenposten*, Norway's largest newspaper, published an article titled "Yee-ha! Cowboy-Stilen Er Tilbake" in its lifestyle supplement, *A-magasinet*.¹ The piece engages with what is perhaps best understood as a kind of 'renaissance' of all things West(ern) in certain quarters of the mainstream that is not limited to style and aesthetics. When they tackle this ongoing phenomenon, journalists in the US, Europe, and elsewhere have affixed the label cowboy/Westerncore to it; another gateway that leads down this particular rabbit hole is marked with signs that read the 'Yellowstone effect' and/or the 'Taylor Sheridan effect.' While mapping the origin and growth of this phenomenon would go beyond the scope of this article, it should be clear that this 'renaissance' has been coming since the turn of the millennium. Having repeatedly served as a psycho-socio-cultural canvas for the US in the past, the contemporary resurgence of the West has been driven primarily by a perceptible increase in popular culture/mass media output that offers mostly postwestern² narratives across the transmedia landscape,³ and—supercharged by Black Lives Matter sensibilities—the 'Yeehaw' agenda.⁴

The *Aftenposten* article centers on Western enthusiast and firearms aficionado Anne-Lise Neskværn. Known as "Rosie Sunset" on the Scandinavian Western shooting circuit, she grew up watching genre Westerns and listening to country music. During the Covid-19 pandemic, she converted her home's basement in the Tåsen neighborhood of Oslo into an opulently decorated Western lounge, reminiscent of a movie-Western saloon at a theme park. When she is not on the shooting range, she line dances with members of the Skedsmo Western Club, which is based just outside of Oslo, in Lillestrøm, and attends country music festivals around the country. Of the surprisingly abundant country music events in Norway, the Norsk Countrytreff is the country's largest, taking place in Breim, in Vestland, every year in early July. The *Aftenposten*

article stresses that organizers expect a boost in what have historically been large audience numbers due to this renewed mainstreaming of the cowboy aesthetic and country music. All of this goes to show that *Aftenposten* is not wrong in declaring that cowboy aesthetics and, by extension, the West are back in style.

It is clear that these transnational traces of this quintessentially American geo-cultural region have regained more attention, as well as popular cachet. More often than not, they are still filtered through a precritical, Turnerian lens of myth and romance. However, from an American studies point of view, and specifically from a vantage point of "doing" the discipline in non-American environments, it is not as if these traces of the West—the pedagogical efficacy of which is the principal subject of this article—have ever truly disappeared in spite of the paradigm-shifting labors of New Western historians and their postwestern scions. As a matter of fact, it is especially the latter who initiated and continue to nurture a transnational/global turn of and in Western studies. Undergirded by this *worlding* of the discipline,⁵ this article takes the shape of a pedagogical conspectus for finding, teaching, and documenting the West in transnational backyards.

An example like Anne-Lise Neskværn's makes for an effective entry point; her identity, embodied cultural practices and their attendant im/material spaces, is enmeshed in a lattice of traces that point to what Krista Comer has delineated as "global West circuits,"⁶ upon which we can track the "traffic of multiple, popular Wests."⁷ These traces, or, more precisely, rhizomatic spores, coalesce into what Neil Campbell injected into the discipline as "the presence of westness . . . a complex, unending palimpsest" that is "a system of westness."⁸ They then lend themselves well to being leveraged in student-friendly and age-/generation-based tasks that are geared toward

teaching the American West as transnational/global Wests in a European American studies setting. One specific task—an exercise in cultural geography fieldwork and documentation—will serve as a showcase for how the transnational/global turn in Western studies, led by scholars such as Campbell, Comer, David Wrobel, and Janne Lahti, among others, can reinvigorate a much-needed critical interest in the popular West among students and scholars alike. After all, the American West is the fastest-growing geo-cultural region in North America across most metrics. Consequently, the West *matters* to the future of the United States, the global community, and American studies in particular.

Appreciating Global Wests by De-Exceptionalizing the Region: A Mini Primer

Generally, when we think about the American West entering the popular global consciousness, we tend to locate it vis-à-vis the US, making its hard and soft power felt around the globe in the lead-up to World War II, and then more forcefully during the ideological showdown with the Soviet Union afterwards. However, the efforts of global Wests scholars to de-exceptionalize the American West have aimed at historical periods and their popular culture output that preceded the 'American Century.' In seminar sessions, students are introduced to these 'deeper' historical roots of global Wests, which then become the basis for them to engage in the necessary "*transmotional* route work"⁹ as they are tasked with finding echoes/traces/spores of the West in their proverbial backyards. Their findings have since become the seedstock for an evolving, peer-generated archive that gestures at rather clear patterns; they include but are not limited to country-specific (re)imaginings of the mythic West in different media, heterotopic spaces of performance, play, consumption and the hyper-real, instances of 'Playing Indian,'¹⁰ iconographic

scatterings, cowboy/Western poetics in music, and more.

Whenever students encounter spores of the West outside of the United States, they appear to be firmly lodged in an all-too-familiar mesh of national exceptionalism—and they usually are, at least in part. However, since the spores, as well as the region itself, are always-already encased in a transnational frame of reference, deploying the global Wests paradigm in the American studies classroom is not only rewarding, but also essential. Consequently, there is a need to identify what students have to know about the transnational turn in Western studies and the global Wests paradigm in order to find, appreciate, and document spores of the West in Norwegian lifeworlds.

Strictly speaking, global Wests are hardly anything new, but their copresences have been obfuscated by "the well-known narrative of the West as the lodestone of national exceptionalism."¹¹ Yet, despite spawning a powerful mythos of exceptionalism that also entered a reciprocal exchange with scholarship from the turn of the twentieth century (chiefly by Frederick Jackson Turner and the sizable cohort of historians he influenced), the West as tripartite entity in geography, history, and the imagination¹² has always-already been transnational/global. Conceptualizing, understanding, and teaching the American West as global Wests is essentially predicated on "a new architecture for area studies"¹³ indebted to critical and comparative regionalism. This is the type of area studies Neil Campbell envisions, which Krista Comer has pegged as both "a critical perspective that opens the regional West, beyond its Turnerian limits, to the world," and "a critical knowledge project able to intervene upon American cultural imperialism."¹⁴ In short, global Wests scholars have answered the call Walter Nugent made already in the 1990s, i.e., a call to do away with exceptionalist teaching of the region.

Fueled by poststructuralist vigor and rigor, teaching the West as global Wests in American studies then becomes an exercise in de-exceptionalizing, i.e., globalizing, and indeed *worlding* the region. Students can be eased into Campbell's new architecture for area studies by coming to terms with the simple fact that the cardinal directions of East and West are predicated on what Paul Giles has called "a chimerical line of longitude."¹⁵ Consequently, we can shift what we denote as 'West' by way of a 'simple' turn of the globe; by foregrounding its constructedness in cartographic terms and using that to accentuate the imaginaries that have been (re)imagining the West ad nauseam, the longitudinal coordinates that locate the West become loose, uprooted, fungible, and transposable to other longitudes that include, but are not limited to, Nordic meridians.

It is relatively easy to explicate the rather abstract scaffold of the global Wests paradigm to students by way of concrete historical examples—usually of the popular kind—that scholars have placed front and center in their work. Critical and comparative regionalists such as Aaron Nyerges and Golnar Nabizadeh have firmly concluded that "in pop form, geography travels."¹⁶ I would hasten to add that not only does it travel, but it also excites because, as Krista Comer reminds us, "pop Wests [are] migrating locations, not static hemispheric or conceptual structures."¹⁷ In order to help students cultivate a global Wests mode of thinking and engaging, three categories of examples—all of which are rooted in, or, perhaps better, *routed* through the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century—serve as a testbed for (re)worlding the West of the past: a) European travelers such as Friedrich Gerstäcker and their all-too-often sensationalist travel writing; b) contemporary mass attractions like George Catlin's travelling 'Indian Gallery,' Buffalo Bill's Wild West and its imitators; and, what is perhaps best described as c) com-

parative imperialism. Even though the late-nineteenth-century West became frozen in time as an exceptionalist narrative Neverland, David Wrobel has stressed that it was *also* "a century of global contextualization of the American West by Europeans and Americans."¹⁸ Different imperial 'frontiers' were in dialogue with each other not least because those who set, influenced, and carried out expansionist policies took a keen interest in their rivals' ventures. From these excursive forays into global Wests of the past form a knowledge/methods packet students need to move to the next stage: engaging in cultural geography fieldwork. Equipped with these deep global Wests roots and routes, they are then let loose on Norwegian backyards in pursuit of a deceptively simple goal: find the West in their own here and now.

"Hvor Er Den Neste Ville Vest Byen?"¹⁹

The deeper historical roots and routes of global Wests are the substrate upon which, according to Nyerges and Nabizadeh, "the rise of the culture industry in the twentieth century" took place, "tracking the mass proliferation of ideas, forms, and images that continue to shape the struggle over globalizing space."²⁰ The task students are asked to complete opens with the admittedly polemic claim that the American West can be found on many (if not all) foreign shores, including the Nordics. These cohorts of American studies students have to carry out cultural geography fieldwork within approximately two weeks. They are directed to discover echoes/traces/spores of the American West in their immediate everyday lifeworlds in Norway.²¹ Campbell's observations serve to remind them that "all the 'routes' by which we might travel are, of course, no longer tied to physical movement . . . since every billboard, every commodity purchased, every radio, iPod, CD player, TV, and PC permits 'travel' to some extent, however virtual, creating a movement that affects the local and

interferes with perceptions of where and what we are."²² Thus, students arguably know that what they are looking for can take many forms (e.g., symbols, narratives, performances, spaces/locations, bodies, objects, etc.). These forms then transpose and/or remediate (elements of) the mythical West, the historical West, and/or the contemporary West. Not only do they have to identify and travel on these global Wests routes in their own lifeworlds, they also have to document one specific example by way of recording and posting a video reel (e.g., on Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, or similar). The reel has to include a short comment—voiceover or text overlay—on their specific example, explaining what it 'says' about and/or how it 'makes use' of the American West in its specific/local(ized) context(s). Their videos should be no longer than two to three minutes and they subsequently share them on an electronic learning platform (Canvas, Blackboard, Moodle, or similar). Prior to the next seminar session, students are tasked with watching each other's reels before they are then showcased and further dissected in class. Taken together, the students' slice-of-life reels contribute to a work-in-progress documentary archive of global Wests in Norway (as well as in other places). The student-generated seedstock of the archive has since gestured at certain patterns or categories of global Wests that map closely onto the concerns of critical and comparative regionalism; they speak to "issues of place, bodies in place, and knowledges derived via textuality and discourse," as well as to "place as a critical location, an orientation, and material structure."²³

Most of the examples that have been gathered so far can be grouped into a category that encompasses heterotopic spaces of performance, play, consumption, and the hyperreal. There, Campbell asserts, the West is "in a state of constant 'becoming,' the idea of the West . . . is put under question, its authenticity interrogated,

the more it is performed and 'virtualized.'"²⁴ Students have documented a number of 'Wild West' towns and clubs, despite the fact that these have arguably become less popular and numerous over the past two decades. For example, Deadwood City is located in Vikersund about ninety minutes east of Oslo. It is operated by a club that offers entertainment and social programming during the summer. Among other things, Deadwood City stages narrated train robberies and gunfights. Club members appear to be into historical reenactment, too. Inspired by the long-running TV series *Gunsmoke* (1955–75), Dodge City, another Western town, has been erected just outside of Svarstad, about an hour-and-a-half south of the nation's capital. Also run by a club, Dodge City's erstwhile 'mayor,' Erik Thorbjørnsen, stressed that apart from indulging in playing cowboys and Indians, their club aims to promote outdoor activities and nature education.²⁵ A little bit further afield and across the Swedish border, we find Rock River City and the regionally rather well-known Western-themed amusement park High Chaparral. There are also quite a number of bars and restaurants in and around Oslo that incorporate Western iconography in their decor. More often than not, they lean into Western Americana, especially road and diner culture that is steeped in the Route 66 mythos. Examples range from the Palace Bar and Grill and the Johnny Rockets franchise to the burger joint Lille Amerika and the BFF Diner.



Westernbyen på Kløftefoss

33 år med evigvarende gullrush og nye sprell i gatene siden 1991

HJEM INFO □ WESTERNSHOW TOGRAN-DAGENE WESTERNKIOSKEN HISTORIEN □ BLI MEDLEM SO-ME □



Hva er Deadwood City ?

HER FINNER DU OSS

Figure 1. The 'Wild West' in rural Norway.

Play and playacting are common features in the traces of the West that students have collated. For example, Oslo's The Escape Games offers a *Ville Vest Ekspresen* escape room adventure. Donning faux western wear, players 'wake up' as travelers on a steam train and then try to solve and ultimately foil a sinister plot. There are at least two larger festivals—one in Halden and one in Vanse—where Americanophiles gather every year, and where one can delight in a hodgepodge mix of American car and road culture, Americana, and Western-style reenactments. In spring 2023, the University of Oslo's on-campus student pub Kjeller'n organized a Western-themed *Cowbofest*, which featured, among other things, a costume contest with prizes (Figure 2).

The carnivalesque reenactments and, more generally, the playing with and/or on the West that one may encounter in these spaces are

anything but unproblematic from a racial justice/equality point of view. Student observations have been in line with those of the author when it comes to the general popularity of (still) allowing children to play 'cowboys and Indians' at Halloween. Even though the mainstream might not place too much weight on such seemingly 'harmless' practices, Indigenous studies scholars and post-/decolonial activists have been working hard to make clear that Indigenous cultures and their knowledge traditions are not 'playthings.' One particular incident drew the attention of a number of students. In October 2017, the then-finance minister of Norway, Siv Jensen, was met with harsh criticism from the media and the Nordics' own Indigenous Samí population after having shared a picture on social media that showed her dressed in an Indian 'costume' she wore to

"Helt Texas, Morgan Kane!"
10.22439/asca.v56i2.7382

a theme party at the Ministry of Finance (Figure 3). The irony of this tasteless act of appropriation and racialized harm is rather self-evident in a cultural context where the nation state continues to wrestle with the latent impact that its own settler colonial legacy has on the Sami people. Students have shown solid comparative thinking and racial sensitivity in setting this particular spore of global Wests into dialogue with local concerns and wider post-/decolonial studies.

Another rather sizable category of examples encompasses global Wests in narrative form (broadly conceived). On the one hand, there are variants of and variations on genre West-erns while, on the other, there are narratives rooted in Norway's emigration history. The long-running *Morgan Kane* series occupies a prominent position. Created as a pulp-style Western hero by Kjell Hallbing in 1966, the book series comprises eighty-three titles that remain in print and have by now become available in electronic form. *Morgan Kane* has reached a predominately male readership that spans different generational cohorts. Hallbing, who wrote under the pseudonym Louis Masterson, sold more than ten million copies in Norway and another ten million abroad. His oeuvre was also adapted into an equally successful comic book series by Norwegian illustrator and cartoonist Ernst Olsen Meister. Swedish singer Benny Borg, who represented Norway at the Eurovision Song Contest in 1972, has been an avid fan of *Morgan Kane* since the launch of the series. Very reminiscent of Marty Robbins's signature style, Borg collaborated with Hallbing to produce "Balladen Om Morgan Kane," which stormed the Norwegian charts in 1973. He followed up with two ballads about two other figures in the Kane universe—"Legenden Om Metzgar" (1973) and "Sangen Om Jesse Rawlins" (1974), respectively—but they did not perform as well. *Morgan Kane* has



Figure 2. Partying like cowboys at UiO.



I present to you: The Norwegian Minister of Finance.
[#culturalappropriation](#) [#notacostume](#) [#disrespectful](#)
[#butwhy](#) [#sivjensen](#) [@NativeApprops](#)



9:16 PM · Oct 13, 2017

Figure 3. Spiller indianer i Norge.

also lent his name to a Western-themed section—Morgan Kane City—in the Tusenfryd amusement park on the southern outskirts of Oslo; it is another heterotopic space where global Wests are performed and consumed. Students also documented the presence of other European print-genre Westerns that have been published in translation and have gained popularity in Norway. After submitting



Figure 4. Tex Willer and his companions in the retail wilds of Norway.

their video reel, one student brought to class their father's collection of the Belgian comic book series *Zilverpijl* (published as *Sølvspilen* in Norway). While the series went out of print in 1986, the long-running, Italian-produced comic book series *Tex*, which has been telling the exploits of fictional Texas Ranger Tex Willer since 1948, is readily available in translation; it can be found in the newspaper/magazine section of almost every major grocery and/or bookstore in Norway (Figure 4).

Norway has a relatively long and rich emigration history. Generally, Norwegian Americans are located in the Upper Midwest, especially in Wisconsin and Minnesota. However, there is a sizable presence of people who claim Norwegian descent in the Dakotas, Montana, and Washington State, as well. Bergen-based director Frode Fimland produced the award-winning documentary *John: Den Siste Norske Cowboy* (2021), in which he spotlights the life of one rather unique Norwegian American: John Hoiland. The late Hoiland was a nonagenarian rancher who lived all by himself on a small spread outside of Big Timber, Montana. The film offers a delightful portrait of aging and masculinity in the rural West, and it sets the Norwegian agricultural heritage into dialogue with Western livestock raising economies.



Figure 5. *Hva synger den norske cowboyen?*

Last but not least, as the example that provided the anecdotal entry point in the introduction has already shown, the all-too-popular and common intersection of cowboy/Western aesthetics and country music is alive and well in Norway. Lindesness-based singer-songwriter John Erik Loland released the aptly named single "Norwegian Cowboy" along with a music video in 2012.²⁶ Alternating between English and Norwegian, the song lyrics and imagery of the music video juxtapose the coastal working class of Southern Norway with Western rural romance and nostalgia (Figure 5). Even though this student-centered, extramural task of cultural geography fieldwork has been conducted over a relatively short period of time, its rich and diverse results point to a promising start for excavating more global Wests as a rhizomatic presence in Norway and the Nordics in general.

The West is Everywhere—Everywhere is the West

By way of a brief conclusion-cum-outlook, it makes sense to revisit Paul Giles's assertion that any West is contingent on chimerical longitudinal coordinates. In other words, we can turn the globe by a few or more degrees, and new global Wests spores are likely to come into view. The student-centered task that has been

showcased in this article emerged from a conscious effort to respond both critically and creatively to what are often unrealistic and outright contradictory demands placed on the humanities in a neoliberalized, necrotic education 'market.' On the one hand, teaching in higher education, individual class tasks, and student engagement should always be geared toward instilling high degrees of scholarly rigor, conduct, and accountability; and they should always be research-informed/research-driven at that. Yet on the other hand, effectiveness is measured, and on rare occasions rewarded, only if student graduation rates are maximized and the teaching of transferable/marketable skills is apparent. Consequently, the student-centered task of finding and documenting global Wests in Norwegian backyards is part and parcel of pedagogical principles that are geared toward cultivating a student-scholar peer culture of co-creation and co-ownership. In other words, such tasks are designed to serve as a kind of *guerilla academics* with a view to subverting dubious new public management policies. The task cross-fertilizes engagement with and understanding of somewhat challenging theories and methods with critical media literacies that call for and foster (new) media production, dissection, and presentation skills.

The pilot stage of this task took place within an American studies context in Poland in 2021. What began as a one-off experiment later took the shape of something that could, and indeed has, become a transferable and replicable teaching format. It was also during the pilot phase that the first contours of the different categories within which one could place spores of global Wests quickly coalesced—there is no shortage of 'Wild West' towns and Western-themed amusement parks, as well as localized variants of genre Westerns, in Poland and beyond. The presence of exchange students from both Europe and further afield added even

more to the rhizomatic "system of westness"²⁷ that scholars like Neil Campbell invite us to explore. Consequently, the seedstock of global Wests spores in Norway will be expanded in future iterations of seminars that are geared toward teaching the American West. It is also within the realm of the possible that the task could become an anchor point for conducting collaborative work with scholars and their students in other Nordic countries. Similarly, American studies scholars specializing in other topic areas and their attendant popular imaginaries might want to consider having their students take the classroom outside the classroom and into their everyday lifeworlds. On that note: *ri videre, Morgan Kane, ri videre!*²⁸

Notes

1. Holtvedt, "Yee-Ha! Cowboy-Stilen Er Tilbake," 48.

2. For entry-level postwestern scholarship, see Campbell, *Post-Westerns*; and Kollin, *Postwestern Cultures*.

3. For example, on television, the number of shows that are either set in the West and/or feature distinctively Western 'types' has noticeably and steadily increased since HBO's *Deadwood* (2004–06). These titles often but not always cross-fertilize with crime drama. Not only is the West(ern) alive and well in the movies, but best-selling video games such as the *Red Dead Redemption* series also point to the popularity of the West across all media.

4. The term was coined in a tweet by Internet archivist Bri Malandro in 2018, labeling a certain Western aesthetic in contemporary African American fashion, art, and music (see Reese).

5. For a more comprehensive take on worlding the West(ern), see Campbell, *Worlding the Western*.

6. Comer, "The Problem," 208.

7. Nyerges and Nabizadeh, "The Transmigration of West," 1.

8. Campbell, *The Rhizomatic West*, 1, 37.

9. Campbell, *The Rhizomatic West*, 37.

10. For a foundational text on the concept of 'playing Indian,' see Deloria, *Playing Indian*.

11. Wrobel, "Prologue," 4.

12. For an easy-to-use introduction to and working definition of the West in these terms, see Mogen, "The Frontier Archetype," 18; and McMurtry, *Sacagawea's Nickname*, 9.

13. Campbell, *The Rhizomatic West*, 37.

14. Comer, "The Problem," 205–7.

15. Giles, "Afterword," 5.

16. Nyerges and Nabizadeh, "The Transmigration of West," 2.

17. Comer, "The Problem," 208.

18. Wrobel, "Prologue," 10.

19. Translated by author: "Where is the next Wild West town?"

20. Nyerges and Nabizadeh, "The Transmigration of West," 1.

21. If Norway is not their home country, they may also trace routes of global Wests in their country of origin.

22. Campbell, *The Rhizomatic West*, 5.

23. Comer, "The Problem," 210.

24. Campbell, *The Rhizomatic West*, 26.

25. Kvasjord, "'Ville Vesten' i Lardals."

26. Loland, "Norwegian Cowboy."

27. Campbell, *The Rhizomatic West*, 37.

28. Translated by author: "Ride on, Morgan Kane, ride on!"

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