

SECTION SEVEN

TEACHING BEYOND BORDERS

THE CHALLENGES of *writing* comparative and borderlands histories of the North American West that include women are, if anything, even tougher when it comes to *teaching* those histories. Anyone who teaches western history must confront the ongoing male-centredness of the region's narratives. Trying to incorporate a comparative approach involves having to confront the nation-centredness of the narratives and historiography. Adding gender into the mix can seem almost impossible. These two articles show how two experienced teachers, one based in England and one in Montana, have risen to these and other challenges.

Margaret Walsh, who teaches at the University of Nottingham in England, highlights the obstacles and opportunities of teaching the history of women in the Canadian and U.S. Wests outside of North America to non-North American students. Her students have little exposure to comparative history, little knowledge of the North American West, and whatever knowledge they might bring into the classroom is likely to have been informed by American popular images of its West. This may sound daunting to many, but Walsh sees it as an advantage in that a

more “symmetrical template is possible” when the whole class is approaching a topic as outsiders.

It may be fortunate to have this advantage, as Walsh describes the daunting questions such a course poses. On what grounds can the two Wests be compared, and how can gender be incorporated at a fundamental level? How can one bring together two very different historiographical and theoretical trajectories? Walsh offers useful strategies and themes to frame the course and the questions it must address about the two Wests and about how gender has operated, historically, in both.

Mary Murphy teaches at Montana State University in Bozeman and, therefore, faces a different challenge, because she and her students are “insiders” to at least one part of the course content. This is an advantage in her classroom because her students can bring their own relevant family histories into the room, even if the downside is that “the myths of the West as created in the late 19th and early 20th centuries are alive and well and wreaking havoc every day.” Unlike Walsh, Murphy must begin by tackling persistent male-centred and jingoistic myths about both Wests before students can imagine women at the centres of western histories and probe the similarities and differences of women’s lives on both sides of the border. Murphy offers a conceptual structure of organizing the course around two axes: the apt and useful metaphors of longitude and latitude. The “longitudes” of her course focus on the economic, legal, and political “commonalities of women’s experiences across the border.” The “latitudes” focus on “how, despite the commonalities of geography, of women’s biology, and of a dominant Anglo culture, women’s lives in the American and Canadian Wests differed because of the structure and policies of the two nation states,” including crucial legal differences in access to land, definitions of race, and treatment of racial ethnic minorities.

Both Walsh and Murphy offer strategies to teach critical thinking. The comparisons of two national histories, two Wests, and of how being male or female mattered, combine to invite new insights into the significance of nations and the significance of gender.

Walsh and Murphy teach through the border in two key ways: they use the border as a teaching tool while highlighting its permeability.

The challenges of teaching a gendered and comparative history of the North American West thus have a significant payoff, deconstructing Western myths, making it easier to incorporate non-traditional elements into the familiar narratives, and demonstrating simultaneously how much and how little a border can matter.

Walsh's and Murphy's classrooms are an apt metaphor, too, with which to conclude this volume, posing as they do the challenges of teaching simultaneously the boundaries of difference that must be respected and the borders of social inequalities that remain to be bridged. The histories of women in all our Wests clarify the dual meanings of borders—those that protect, and those that exclude. This volume, we hope, takes us one step over the lines that have erected the borders of privilege and exclusion in our histories, our classrooms, in our Wests.

