Research Article

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Montana as Place of (Un)Belonging: Landscape, Identity, and the American West in *Bella Vista* (2014)

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Abstract: The American West is not just a geographical terrain but a mythical construct that occupies a powerful place in the popular imagination thanks to myriad literary and artistic works that have presented the region through specific archetypes emphasizing its vast ruggedness, white masculinity, and unique Americanness. In recent decades, revisionist scholarly and artistic works, however, have attempted to offer more nuanced perspectives on the region challenging its assumed homogenous history and fixed and stable identity. In particular, women filmmakers have recast the region through multifaceted representations underlining its complexity, diversity, and transnational dimensions. This article analyzes Vera Brunner-Sung's film *Bella Vista* (2014) to examine how the film intervenes in previously constructed representations of the American West through its emphasis on transience, displacement, and belonging. Set and made in Montana, the film employs a "slow cinema" aesthetic to offer deep insights into the local and global dynamics of the place as well as the formation of identity and (un)belonging within a Western landscape. The film, as the article argues, provides a reconsideration of the West through diverse localities that are in constant relation with the outside and in turn have generated diverse individual experiences regarding the place.

Keywords: *Bella Vista*, slow cinema, American West

> "[T]he [American] West has always had a global dimension as a geographical, cultural, and economic crossroads defined by complex connectivity, multidimensionality, and imagination, even if these have often been elided in favor of a more inward-looking and emotive vision" (Campbell, 2008, p. 3).

> "Montana is still high, wide, handsome, and remote. There are many ways of looking at it and many ways of feeling about it. And there is room for all the ways" (Toole, 1959, p. 258).

The works of award-winning filmmaker Vera Brunner-Sung span across fiction, documentary, and experimental films with a special focus on place and its interconnectedness with identity. "The child of immigrants from Korea and Switzerland" (Brunner-Sung, n.d.), Brunner-Sung's works navigate the notions of home, belonging, and human connection as they relate to the land and the environment, thus paying specific attention to location and site. Her site-specific documentary, *Fallen Star: Finding Home* (2016), co-directed and co-produced with Valerie Stadler, features the process of building and installing a life-size cottage and garden by renowned sculptor and installation artist Do Ho Suh on the edge of the roof of a seventh-story building on the campus of the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). As Brunner-Sung (2019) reflects on this ambitious architectural installation featured in her documentary, "Its pale-blue structure is a scaled replica of a house from Suh's memory of his time studying in New England; inside, the furnishings and décor are quaint and cozy, but in a phenomenological manifestation of the unease of displacement, there are no plumb lines or right angles" (pp. 117–118). Brunner-Sung's *Common Ground* (2008), a short experimental

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documentary, presents the cyclical processes of transformation of the land in Southern California – (re) construction, abandonment, decay – as impacted by human activities and economics. Five-minute silent film *Minong, I Slept* (2010) also explores the remnants of human industrial activities on a remote island, called Minong, in Isle Royale and the relation between people, land, and sea as they impact and transform each other. And in two short films, Brunner-Sung depicts a particular interest in the American West: in the six-minute essay film *Hard Stares and Broken Mirrors* (2007), she employs archetypes associated with the Western film genre and the American West to offer a personal reflection on the Western, and in three-minute poetic film *First Rodeo* (2015), she pays homage to the art and performance of rodeo.[1]

The significance of place and its relation to one's identity, (in)security, and (dis)placement can be also seen in Brunner-Sung's debut feature *Bella Vista* (2014), a low-budget, independently-produced film that this article focuses on. Set in present-day Missoula, Montana, the film features the story of a transient English language instructor in her early thirties, named Doris (played by Kathleen Wise), who works at the University of Montana's English Language Institute teaching English to international students from diverse countries. Regardless of her extensive experience as a traveler across the world and her familiarity with being a "foreigner," Doris feels increasingly isolated and alone, an outsider in the vastness of the American West. By focusing on this film and its representation of landscape, identity, and belonging, I am specifically interested in how the film recasts long-standing notions associated with the American West. As Campbell (2008) mentions, "Settling the West has been for so long a key trope of how that land, that space, that political complexity has been discussed" (p. 2), and as I indicate in this article, *Bella Vista* astutely complicates the ideas of settlement and rootedness, of "building communities, taming the land, removing the indigenous populations with their itinerant ways, assimilating the immigrant into the nation, and asserting a national narrative [that] have been intrinsic to westernness" (Campbell, 2008, p. 2).

Brunner-Sung's unique and refreshing take on the American West, of course, joins the growing number of films by women filmmakers who in recent years have reimagined this region through their works; a matter that is also reflected by Kohn (2021) in his *IndieWire* piece "Jane Campion Is Not Alone: Women Are Reinventing the Western, One Movie at a Time." Reporting on 2021 Telluride Film Festival, Kohn highlights two films showcased at the festival both made by women and set in the American West. The first, *Bitterbrush* (2021), a documentary by Emelie Mahdavian, features two modern-day female range riders who herd cattle on a remote Idaho range; a portrait of friendship, life transition, and women's skills within and in connection to the landscape of the American West. The second, *The Power of the Dog* (2021), is a Western film directed by Jane Campion based on Thomas Savage's 1967 novel of the same name. The film is set in 1920s Montana – albeit it was filmed in New Zealand – and meticulously reinvents the conventions of the genre through its emphasis on toxic masculinity and queer desires. These two films, in fact, are the latest examples of some recent films by women filmmakers who have turned their lens to the American West to recast the region in a new light and through nuanced perspectives.[2] Some of these films include Chloé Zhao's *Nomadland* (2020) and *The Rider* (2017), Kelly Reichardt's *Certain Women* (2016) and *Meek's Cutoff* (2010), Susanna White's *Woman Walks Ahead* (2017), and Anna Kerrigan's *Cowboys* (2020). Wide ranging in their styles, stories, locations, and time periods, these films, aside from their western American settings, "unsettle the mythos of American manifest destiny – and Hollywood dominance – by engaging the legacy of the classical Western with timely examinations of masculinity and of the relationship between place and nation" (White, 2022, p. 24). The success of these women auteurs in the film festival circuit and on the global stage has further attested to the significance of reimagining the western frontier and reinventing Western genre's tropes and conventions "from the headspace of women" (Mahdavian qtd. in Kohn, 2021). Reflecting on *Bitterbrush*, for example, Kohn (2021) writes, "Though dominated by Western archetypes – leather saddles and cow herding galore – Mahdavian's chatty subjects,

1 For detailed information on these and other works by Vera Brunner-Sung, see the artist's website: www.brunner-sung.com/.

2 Women have been integral to the development of Western film genre from the beginning working in various capacities as writers, directors, actors, and producers. For more information, see *Women in the Western* (2020), edited by Sue Matheson (Edinburgh University Press) and *The Girl from God's Country: Nell Shipman and the Silent Cinema* (2003) by Kay Armatage (University of Toronto Press).

Hollyn Patterson and Colie Moline, prove to be a far cry from John Wayne swagger." More significantly, it is through recasting the relationship between the place (the American West) and individuals, between location and identity, that these films see Western anew; a genre so intricately linked to its geographical context that its title reflects it.

Within this context, this article focuses on *Bella Vista* (2014) to examine how this film contemplates the idea of "westness" (Campbell, 2008, p. 8) through ruminations on place, identity, and belonging. By discussing the film's narrative and formal strategies, the paper finds that the film not only unsettles rigid and fixed assumptions often associated with the American West – masculinity, territoriality, Americanness – but also showcases the region as a multidimensional and multinational site in a constant state of becoming. The interconnectedness of the local with the global, the West with the rest, and the landscape with the individual, offers the viewers a more nuanced and critical perspective on a place that for so long has been understood as a representative of "the uniqueness of the American experience and of the imagined exceptionalism of America" (Cawelti, 1999, p. 5). Noticeably, Brunner-Sung employs a minimalist and modernist slow cinema style – with its signature long shots, "(often extremely) long takes, de-centred and understated modes of storytelling, and a pronounced emphasis on quietude and the everyday" (Flanagan, 2008) – to present critical reflections on internal feelings and emotions as they relate to the external landscape. The eschewing of conventional, plot-driven narrative storytelling thus serves as a crucial vehicle through which *Bella Vista* offers new visions of the American West. By taking time and contemplating the landscape and the characters' relation to the place, the film presents new readings of the West, and of Montana, as a reimagined frontier, "as something to cross, to push back, to go beyond" (Deleuze & Parnet, 2007, p. 37).

1 From "The West" to "The Wests"

Returning to the East Coast from a recent trip to Missoula, Montana, I was intrigued by individuals' reactions to the place that I had just visited. Upon hearing where I am returning from, the airport taxi driver asked if in that vast open space, in the middle of nowhere, I could easily find a taxi and was visibly shocked when I updated her on the ease of finding airport taxi, shuttle, Uber, and/or Lyft. A few days later, I shared some of my trip's photos with two American friends who have never visited Montana, or much of the American West. While both attested to the beautiful landscapes and vistas, one jokingly asked if I went on this trip equipped with a cowboy hat and boots, and the other lamented that the place seems so white! These comments, in fact, succinctly reflect the deep constructedness of the region as a fixed and an-already-known place: vast, open, anti-modern, white, and male-dominated. They underline the formation of the status of the American West in popular imagination "as 'pre' – for its position as a pre-lapsarian, pre-social, and pre-modern space" (Kollin, 2007, p. xiii); an assumption that has been sedimented over the centuries through representations of the region in numerous novels, paintings, photographs, films, and television series. Western films, in particular, have played a significant role in framing the place in specific ways and shaping popular responses to the region. As Mitchell (1996) observes, "The image remains unaltered in countless versions from the genre's beginning – a lone man packing a gun, astride a horse, hat pulled close to the eyes, emerging as if by magic out of a landscape from which he seems ineluctably a part" (p. 3). The interconnectedness of white masculinity, as represented by the figure of a cowboy, with the western landscape in these films has thus positioned the understanding of the region as a masculine space.

The tropes that classical Western films presented – "desires for settlement against the odds, establishing roots in the New World, transforming the earth from wilderness to garden, taming land taken from its 'savage' populations, expressing a renewing masculinity as the source and engine for these actions, domesticating the feminine within this new western world…" (Campbell, 2013, p. 11) – all have helped perpetuate a unified narrative of American progress and expansion, and of American national identity, at the center of which resides the defining role of the American West as not only a geographical terrain but also an ideological and mythical space. As Campbell (2013) writes, "The origin story of the United States was *solidified* in the Western, *materialized* in the actions of its heroes and villains, and *naturalized* through its specific geomystical symbolic

locations" (p. 11; original emphasis). It is within these ideological and mythical frameworks that the reflections on the region in general, and Montana in particular, that I encountered, find their ground. A mythology that according to Montana author Kathleen McLaughlin "has overwhelmed the reality" (qtd. in Graf, 2023). McLaughlin considers her experience of growing up in Montana, as "a difficult place" to live and make a living, in contrast to "the falsehoods of cowboy homogeneity and untouched ruggedness that's been construed in the national consciousness" (qtd. in Graf, 2023). In recent years, a growing number of scholars of the western American culture, artists, and filmmakers have attempted to present more nuanced and polyvocal perspectives on the American West as a geographical terrain that has always been in flux and full of diverse and transient people – indigenous tribes, railroad and mine workers, immigrants, farmers, ranchers, hunters, and trappers, to just name a few; a site of constant movement and migration, simultaneously local and global (Campbell, 2008, 2013; Comer, 2015; Goodman, 2021; Kollin, 2011). This reframing of the American West in recent discourses crucially challenges the ideas of settlement, rootedness, and belonging; notions that a film like *Bella Vista* productively works with and subtly reflects upon.

Montana's tough, yet rich land, has historically subjected the state to diverse encounters. Montana historian K. Ross Toole, writing in 1959, contends, "The economic picture has often been one of exploitation, overexpansion, boom, and bust" (p. 5), which fascinatingly has not occurred through exclusively inward activities and longtime settlement. Rather, as Toole (1959) explains,

> The land was far away from the main stream of American life. Its wealth, almost without exception, was of such a nature that it could only be converted into coin of the realm by devices and methods created and paid for outside of the region. The raw material could rarely be fabricated on the spot because of the simple economics of distance. And so the land – what was on it and in it – was given over to others. Distance meant cost, cost meant capital, capital meant absentee ownership, absentee ownership meant absentee control, and absentee control meant operation in the essential interest of outsiders with local interests a very secondary consideration (p. 249).

The economic specificities of Montana have thus always connected the state to outside of its boundaries making Montana a crossroads of diverse groups of people and interactions. As Massey (1994) argues, "[T]he identity of place is in part constructed out of positive interrelations with elsewhere. … The identity of a place does not derive from some internalized history. It derives, in large part, precisely from the specificity of its interactions with 'the outside'" (p. 169).

In this regard, Brunner-Sung's *Bella Vista* presents an insightful multiculturalism and a local/global dynamic in Montana. Filmed on location and casting actual international students from the University of Montana representing such diverse countries as Morrocco, Saudi Arabia, Uzbekistan, and Japan (ReelWestMontana, 2014a), the film not only presents cultural exchanges within an educational context but also delves into the complexities of human connection to a place and to each other. We often see Doris in silent long shots and long takes as she roams around or observes the landscape (Figure 1). These silences and wide-open spaces present Doris as a small figure engulfed by her surroundings thus emphasizing her feelings of displacement, insecurity, and vulnerability as well as her deep contemplation of the place.

The majority of communications and interactions in the film occur between Doris and her students, who themselves are trying to feel connected to the place, in part through learning English from Doris. There is thus a subtle paradox at work as Doris tries to instill a sense of "at-homeness" in her students, especially through language and culture, while herself is feeling "out of place." Within these contexts, the film reinvents the conventions of Western genre in two ways. First, in classical Western films, silence is an important feature of the male hero's character. As Tompkins (1992) writes, "To be a man [in these films] is not only to be monolithic, silent, mysterious, impenetrable as a desert butte, it is to *be* the desert butte" (p. 57; original emphasis). This is in part a form of exerting power and authority that "suggests the inadequacy of female verbalization" and "silences the one who would engage in conversation" (Tompkins, 1992, p. 59). The silence of Doris in *Bella Vista*, in contrast, is a response to feeling like an outsider in the American West, rather than feeling empowered and having authoritative control. To break out of the vulnerability of displacement, it is Doris's conversations and interactions with the international students that brings a sense of meaning and connection to the place for her. Otherwise, Doris often seems reluctant to engage in social interactions. She, for instance, ignores her colleague's invite to join them for a friendly lunch preferring instead to eat her lunch alone in her car. In another

Figure 1: *Bella Vista* (2014), Courtesy of Slowtale, LLC.

scene, Doris is walking home on a street sidewalk. A distant voice says "hi," and Doris tries to avoid it. Shortly, a teenage boy approaches her and walks with her. The boy greets Doris and says, he "was just trying to make a conversation." Through their conversation then, we learn that the boy lives with her father in a nearby motel, and that he has just lost his gaming device at a laundromat and he is going there to look for it. While Doris is at first caught off guard by the unexpected encounter, the conversation stays with her as the life of a lone boy living a transient life resonates with her own transient status. Some days later, she finds the boy's device and returns it to the motel where he lives only to learn that the boy and his father have moved on heading east. The ephemeral encounter thus reveals that it is not necessarily that Doris has closed herself to the outside world, rather the place itself at times hinders the possibility of a lasting connection and communication.

Second, Tompkins (1992) argues that "the Western's rejection of language" prompts "its emphasis on landscape. Not fissured by self-consciousness, nature is what the hero aspires to emulate: perfect being-in-itself" (p. 57). While *Bella Vista* profoundly emphasizes the landscape and the solitude of the *female* character in it, there are some scenes in the film that the landscape brings about human connection and dialogue. At the end of one of her class sessions, Doris laments Missoula's cold winter weather saying, "Back out into this weather; huh guys?" Then one of her students, named Aman, who is from Kazakhstan approaches her and says, "I don't mind. I'm from Kazakhstan. I'm used to it. Maybe much colder in Kazakhstan. … But you know, mountains look like home; the same for me. Maybe people are a little bit different." And in another scene, Aman is taking photos of Missoula's vast landscape on his cellphone from a hilltop when an American man jogging passes by and asks him if he could give Aman a hand by taking his picture with the landscape (Figure 2). Aman agrees, and after the photo is taken, he asks the American man if he can now take his picture with the landscape. The man initially seems surprised by this suggestion but agrees to be the subject of a picture (Figure 3). The scene thus challenges the idea of an outsider/tourist versus an insider/settler and the relationship that these positions invoke in relation to the landscape – new and awe-inspiring for the former and familiar and already-known for the latter.

The local/global and inside/outside dynamics and their relation to the landscape are also portrayed in a scene in which Doris and her students visit the Historical Museum at Fort Missoula. Established in 1877 "as a permanent military post," the Fort's main purpose was to protect the settler community "in the event of conflict with western Montana Indian tribes" (Historical Museum at Fort Missoula, n.d.). The history of the Fort, in fact, attests to a settler colonial past when people from "elsewhere" encroached on the native lands laying claims to ownership, territoriality, and rootedness. The "open fort" model of the post thus nevertheless

Figure 2: *Bella Vista* (2014), Courtesy of Slowtale, LLC.

Figure 3: *Bella Vista* (2014), Courtesy of Slowtale, LLC.

points to the closed and protected boundaries that were in direct interaction with the outside (Historical Museum at Fort Missoula, n.d.).[3] The actual walls, however, did appear in the Fort when it was used as a Japanese internment camp during World War II (WWII). As the female tour guide explains to Doris and her students, with the rising animosity toward the Japanese during the war and after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, many Japanese were removed from the Pacific Coast and sent to interior camps in the American West. Fort

3 According to the museum's website, "Fort Missoula never had walls; it was an 'open fort,' a design common for posts located west of Mississippi, except during its time used at [sic] an Alien Detention Center during WWII" (Historical Museum at Fort Missoula, n.d.).

Figure 4: *Bella Vista* (2014), Courtesy of Slowtale, LLC.

Missoula was one of these camps where between 1941 and 1944, in addition to Japanese, held over 1,000 young Italian men who used to work on ships and were held captive once Italy declared its alliance with Germany during the war. As the tour guide mentions, the Italians were so moved by the beautiful landscape of Missoula, which called it Bella Vista, literally "beautiful view." And this is where Brunner-Sung's film also gets its title. Doris, who has been struggling whether to stay in Missoula or to leave, asks if the Japanese and Italians ended up staying in Missoula. The tour guide responds that while all the Japanese left, some of the Italians stayed and married local women. Significantly, as Streamas (2007) notes, during WWII, the government appropriated the issues of expulsion and imprisonment and the horrors of displacement and marginalization through a rhetoric of the frontier calling the Japanese evacuees "pioneers" and a detention center a "pioneer community" (p. 175). But in contrast to "a culturally valorized" frontier with a "linear progression, and a regeneration of national ideals," the racialization of and discrimination against Japanese Americans at this time indicate that "groups can experience the same space as open or constrained, liberating or paralyzing, public or agoraphobic" (Hsu, 2011, p. 146).

It is in light of this different experiencing of a place by individuals that Doris's visit to a Native American Reservation finds a new dimension (Figure 4). For thousands of years, various native tribes have called Montana their home, and as the encroachment and expansion into the territory increased, many tribes were subjected to forced migration and relocation to designated areas called Reservation. While visiting one of these Reservations, Doris runs into a Salish man, and the two introduce themselves through their connection to the place. Doris says, "I'm living in Missoula now, but I'm not from here. You?" The Salish man responds, "I grew up a few miles from here. … This Reservation is our ancestral land." Doris asks if he still feels connection to the land today to which the Salish man positively responds adding, "We still have cultural sites down there. We have stories down there," and further asserting that losing one's history is "quite dangerous." The Native American resistance and perseverance, as the Salish man thus implies, have occurred through knowing diverse indigenous histories and cultures and their significant connections to the land and the possibilities they provide for identity formation, stability, and belonging. It is in part through this interconnectedness of place and identity that Native American history and culture have been preserved and transferred across generations.

Whether in her classroom, in Fort Missoula, or in the Reservation, Doris seeks to explore how individuals form a feeling for a place and how they stay connected to it. What ultimately *Bella Vista* confirms through

Figure 5: *Bella Vista* (2014), Courtesy of Slowtale, LLC.

these representations is "the American West [as] a landscape that is a mosaic of overlapping histories, cultural identities, and degrees of power, self-determination, adaption, and hybridity" (Hunt, 2011, p. 231).

2 Landscapes of *Bella Vista*

As a film that focuses on the exploration of place and identity, *Bella Vista* pays special attention to the landscape through its both title and representation. Reflecting on the importance of using real Montana locations, Brunner-Sung mentions that "the location is really built into the script, built into the story" and that Montana, as a Western landscape with its powerful connotations in the popular imagination, serves as "a particularly appropriate location" to think about "themes of creating a new home and a new future" (ReelWestMontana, 2014b). Thus, for the filmmaker, the place functions as a constructed space and the landscape as a particular framing of that space through which internal emotions and psychological feelings are materialized. The film underlines "that the view itself cannot be divorced from other experiential aspects that accompany it" and that the landscape always relates to "different personal, cultural, and social" experiences (Lefebvre, 2006a, p. xv). Aman's enjoyment of the scenic views and his reflection on the Montana landscape, which reminds him of his homeland, Salish man's connection to the place as his ancestral land, and Doris's detachment from the landscape as she contemplates issues of (un)belonging, displacement, and identity all indicate the multiplicity of looking at and experiencing the same landscape.

The film also emphasizes the landscape through its style. The slow aesthetic approach of the film becomes apparent in the opening scene of the film, which also positions its perspective on the place and its relation to the main character, Doris (Figure 5). In a long shot of a snow-covered forest, a barely visible, small figure in the distance slowly, and rather cumbersomely, approaches the camera, and upon reaching the midpoint of the frame, she leaves it from the right side. The only sounds heard in the shot are environmental sounds. The camera is static, and the shot lasts approximately four minutes.

Reflecting on her style in *Bella Vista*, Brunner-Sung explains,

> I'd like to give an audience the freedom to be in the space with the character, and not to control their point of view too much; long takes, with wider shots. Also, a wide shot shows how a person relates to their setting. That's something that's really

> important to me also: looking at how we connect with the space around us and that has to do with psychological space as well as physical space (ReelWestMontana, 2014c).

The many long shots and long takes of the film not only highlight Doris's contemplation of her surroundings while she manages her daily tasks or just wanders around the city but also offer the viewers the possibility of reflection on the place and their connection to it. By taking time and progressing slowly, *Bella Vista*'s world primarily operates based on the specificity of the gaze – the gaze of both the characters and the viewers – in relation to the landscape. This style starkly differentiates the film from the plot-driven and narrative-centered style of dominant mainstream cinema whose aim is "the conversion of seen into scene" (Heath, 1981, p. 37) and thus composing "the frame in function of the human figures in their actions; … Frame space, in other words, is constructed as narrative space" (Heath, 1981, p. 36). In dominant cinema, as Heath (1981) discusses, "It is narrative significance that at any moment sets the space of the frame to be followed and 'read'" and thus "narrative [serves] as the taking place of film" (p. 36). *Bella Vista*, in contrast, suspends the narrative causality, and through a Bazinian approach, "refrains from disturbing the spatial and temporal unity inherent in pro-filmic reality" (Flanagan, 2008). Through employing a durational excess, the aesthetic of slow allows for an authentic representation of the place and time, and also prompts a sense of phenomenological immediacy and intimacy in relation to the landscape. The film thus presents what Lefebvre (2006b) calls "a *doubly temporalised landscape*," which is a landscape that is "subjected simultaneously to the temporality of the cinematographic medium and to that of the spectator's gaze" (p. 29; original emphasis). From the long shot and long take scene in which Doris visits an old cemetery baring traces of diverse people who lived in Missoula to the beautiful vistas and wide-open spaces of Montana that Doris (and the viewers) observes while driving on the road, the senses of vulnerability and isolation that she feels mingle with the landscape "itself [as] a physical and multisensory medium … in which cultural meanings and values are encoded, whether they are *put* there by the physical transformation of a place … or *found* in a place formed, as we say, 'by nature'" (Mitchell, 2002, p. 14; original emphasis).

Through Doris's conundrum of at-homeness as well as other characters' feelings and experiences of the landscape, *Bella Vista* also challenges the conventions of Western genre's portrayal of male hero's relation to the landscape. Mitchell (1996) recognizes an intricate interconnectedness between the body of Western male hero and the western American landscape which "helps define an ideal of masculinity" that is similar to the landscape – tough, rough, ungiving, and silent. Therefore, "gender becomes a matter of defining the body vis-à-vis the earth" (p. 173). In the same vein, Tompkins (1992) considers the western landscape "the ideal toward which human nature strives. … [T]he qualities that nature implicitly possesses – power, endurance, rugged majesty – are the ones that men desire while they live" (p. 72). Tompkins (1992) goes further in her discussion by underlining the feminization of the landscape in the Western genre thus emphasizing a paradoxical approach in the genre's representation which "both glorifies nature *and* suppresses it simultaneously" (p. 76; original emphasis). As she writes, "There is nothing to stop the horseman's free movement across the terrain. He can conquer it by traversing it, know it by standing on it" (Tompkins, 1992, p. 75). For Tompkins (1992), this interaction of the male hero with the landscape turns it into a substitute for the woman, which according to her, "the Western casts out at the start" (p. 81). This feminization of the landscape has been also discussed by other feminist scholars in the fields of cultural geography and literary studies (Kolodny, 1975; Rose, 1993).

However, Nash (1996) convincingly calls for the employment of "non-essential ideas of landscape, place and nature" that breaks away from the dualities of feminine/masculine, nature/culture, dominated/dominant, by acknowledging constructedness and instability of "ideas of identity and landscape" (p. 157). In other words, instead of assuming a fixed and universal identity for the gaze (as masculine) and the landscape (as feminine), we need to be attuned to the fact that "this looking operates within and across subjectivities defined through class, race, sexuality and geography" (Nash, 1996, p. 157). It is within this context that *Bella Vista*'s nuanced representation of the western American landscape finds its ground. From its main character's struggle to identify and unite with her environment to the international students' attempts to translate the landscape cross-culturally to the Native American man's deep connection to the landscape, what we see in *Bella Vista* is the centrality and multiplicity of ways of looking, of identity formation, and of (un)belonging as constituted through visions of the land and the landscape. It is also in this context that the ending of the film finds its meaning. At the end of the semester, Yuri, an international student from Japan, brings a gift for Doris to the

English Language Institute but learns that Doris has found another job somewhere else and has left Missoula. While Doris disappears from the place and from the filmic space toward the end of the film, it is now Yuri to whom the film's perspective shifts to as she engages with her surroundings by doing laundry at a laundromat, looking at the landscape, working on her homework at a diner, riding a bus through the city, and attending a dance fitness class. Yuri, it seems, is finding her place in Missoula. The ending scene, in particular, offers a hopeful relational perspective through which the individual and the community, the uniqueness and the commonality, and the local and the global are embraced and celebrated. In a medium shot, the camera focuses on Yuri as she follows the rhythmic dance of a fitness group to an upbeat music. Then in a medium long shot, the camera depicts Yuri and a few other individuals in the group who are dancing, and ultimately a long shot presents Yuri along the entire class as she has now blended in the entire group who happily and energetically dance to the music. The feelings of at-homeness and belonging can thus gradually prevail in the American West, and at the end, it is an international student who feels more connection to the place than Doris – an American – regardless of the fact that both felt 'out of place' at the beginning. The changing of the seasons from winter at the beginning of the film to spring at the end also alludes to this hopeful transformation. Moreover, given the history of the Japanese internment camp in Missoula during WWII, the film's ending – focusing on a Japanese international student who seems to be finding a community in Missoula – points to the multiplicity of Japanese experience in Missoula in different time periods and within various contexts.

3 Conclusion

In recent decades, scholars of the western American culture have presented nuanced accounts of the American West as a region that has always been transnational, global, and in constant relation with other regions and places. Calling for alternative ways to understand the region, Campbell (2016) argues for the consideration of "the local and specific to be interventionist in wider, more distanced or global projects," while urging for a refusal "to allow the local to become static, nostalgic, or reductive" (p. 3). Vera Brunner-Sung's *Bella Vista* is such an interventionist project that is simultaneously attuned to the multiplicity of the local and the global and their dynamic relation with each other. From its production to representation to exhibition, *Bella Vista* has engaged local, national, and global individuals. A locally produced independent film made and set in Montana, *Bella Vista* casts actual international students from the University of Montana alongside other (local and national) individuals, who together bring to the screen a multifaceted representation of the American West. Through its slow aesthetic – long takes, long shots, static camera, emphasis on silences and the everyday – the film emphasizes the landscape and the characters' relationship to the place further offering a mediation on the notions of identity and belonging. In addition to being exhibited at international film festivals, such as International Film Festival Rotterdam, Filmfest Hamburg, and San Diego Asian Film Festival where it received George C. Lin Emerging Filmmaker Award – the film had a screening tour across Montana reaching diverse local audiences. As Brunner-Sung (2015) reflects on the film's screening tour in the state, "From small ranching communities to college towns to an Indian Reservation to the state capitol, we found that our core themes of isolation and migration in the West resonated." Ultimately, *Bella Vista* puts forward a notion of the American West where, in the words of Massey (1994), "localities can in a sense be present in one another, both inside and outside at the same time," and where "the construction of specificity [occurs] through interrelations rather than through the imposition of boundaries and the counterposition of one identity *against* an other" (p. 7; original emphasis).

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