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Barclay, Donald A.

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DONALD A. BARCLAY

New Mexico State University

The Laughing Horse: A Literary Magazine of the American West

As it roamed from Berkeley to Guadalajara to Santa Fe to Taos, where it finally settled in 1927, *The Laughing Horse* carried with it all the hallmarks of a literary hobo. Always selling for "two-bits" a copy and invariably printed on a shoe-string budget, this magazine of western literature and art came out in small editions printed on the cheapest of paper. One issue was printed in Mexico by Spanish-speaking printers, while another was printed in Ossining, New York by a former inmate of Sing Sing (Johnson 166). Often the typesetting and presswork were done by Willard "Spud" Johnson, the magazine's bohemian principal editor as well as a contributor of poetry, prose, and artwork. Like a good hobo, *The Laughing Horse* appeared at unpredictable intervals, its twenty-one issues spreading out unevenly between 1921 and 1939. And like most hobos of sixty years ago, *The Laughing Horse* is today almost forgotten, cast into the dust heap of little magazine ephemera while its more famous contemporaries such as *The Dial* and *The Midland* are remembered as great contributions to twentieth-century literature.

Some might argue that Spud Johnson's ephemeral publication deserves to be forgotten. It began, after all, as an undistinguished-if-upstart magazine of undergraduate literature and humor, publishing poetry and criticism and making predictable liberal jabs at athletics, military training, and the University of California administration. Typically, the editors wrote a great deal about themselves and played self-indulgent collegiate games with pen names: Johnson appeared in the Berkeley issues both as "Bill Murphy . . . a direct descendent of a convicted criminal transported to South Carolina before the revolution" and as "Jane Cavendish . . . a Boston intellectual who came West in

search of her soul" (*LH* no. 1)¹ In 1922 the editors had a predictable run-in with the censorious authorities of Berkeley: for the crime of publishing an expurgated D. H. Lawrence review of Ben Hecht's novel *Fantazius Mallare*, one editor was tried for obscenity, acquitted, and expelled from the university anyway (Johnson 164). From its birth as an unremarkable college magazine *The Laughing Horse* eventually made its way to New Mexico, following the wanderings of Spud Johnson as he eked out a living on the fringes of the literature industry; among many other jobs, Johnson held positions as a staff writer for *The New Yorker*, a bookstore manager, and secretary to Mabel Dodge Luhan (Nehls 500-502). *The Laughing Horse* was never Johnson's sole means of support, and in the harshest analysis Johnson can be seen as no more than a literary dilettante who made his little magazine into a toy stage for his own work and for the work of those friends, acquaintances, and patrons who comprised a veritable Mafia of Santa Fe and Taos artists and writers. Indeed, Johnson's magazine stands accused of many of the faults listed by Taos poet Phillip Kloss in a 1941 article:

What we need first and foremost is sincerity. The pretense and pose that prevails among the majority of the so-called intellectuals of Santa Fe and Taos obviates a renaissance before it begins. The silly Bohemianism, the false fronts and false faces . . . these are the flaw of character that makes Santa Fe and Taos ridiculous. . . . (67)

Given its history and faults, why should anyone today be interested in *The Laughing Horse*? And why, in particular, should critics and historians of western literature be interested in it? The reasons are two-fold. First, *The Laughing Horse* deserves to be remembered for the simple fact that it published the work of many important western writers; second, it deserves to be remembered because it evolved into a literary magazine with a distinctly western focus, championing western lands, peoples, arts, and ideals, and doing so with a large measure of sincerity.

¹ Most issues of *The Laughing Horse* do not have numbered pages. For this reason, all citations to *The Laughing Horse* will be to the issue number only.

That Johnson used his magazine to publish important western writers is inarguable. Some of the more instantly recognizable contributors include Mary Austin, Paul Horgan, Norman Maclean, Norman Macleod, Alice Corbin, Lynn Riggs, and Frank Waters. The works of many less famous western writers appeared as well. As with most little literary magazines, the quality of the writing varies from excellent to execrable. An example of a run-of-the mill contribution is John Ganson Evans' "Navajo":

Turquoise rings on sun-burned hands;
A parching breath from desert lands;
A mystery of purple haze,
Of empty nights and endless days.
A lonely figure near the sky,
Something quiet in his eye:
Alone, remote, untamed he stands—
With Turquoise rings on sun-burned hands. (*LH* no. 15)

But balanced against contributions of this caliber are works more deserving of lasting attention, such as Norman Macleod's "Echo of Darkness":

Constrict the shadow of sun
in the upturned shell of the desert
and darkness runs along hollow into the hills.
Penitent crosses bear
the black loam of the earth
only in shadows. (*LH* no. 19)

However uneven the quality of the writing Johnson published, he deserves recognition for at least attempting to publish serious western writing, and his magazine deserves to be remembered as a significant outlet for western writers of the twenties and thirties.

Not mentioned among the contributors listed above is D. H. Lawrence, a writer whose relationship with *The Laughing Horse* dated back to the magazine's Berkeley days and continued through the years in New Mexico. Johnson published many examples of Lawrence's artwork and writing, devoting the whole of one issue to works by and about Lawrence (*LH* no. 13). Included in this "D. H. Lawrence Number"

are "A Little Moonshine with Lemon," in which Lawrence compares a night in Italy to a night in Taos; "Europe Versus America," in which Lawrence expresses relief at being out of America and calls himself a fool for having once said, "Europe is finished for me"; and "The Plumed Serpent," in which Mabel Dodge carries on about the profound sufferings of the artist/genius and generally gushes over Lawrence.

In light of all the important western writers who contributed to *The Laughing Horse*, it seems ironic that the one thing that is remembered about the magazine is that it published some very minor work by an English writer who spent a total of eighteen months in New Mexico. In one example of this selective memory, the authors of *The Little Magazine* flatly conclude: "Lawrence's contributions to the magazine are what make [*The Laughing Horse*] important for modern literature . . ." (Hoffman, Allen, Ulrich 266).

The issue of Lawrence's importance aside, the question remains as to whether publishing the work of writers who happen to live in the West, especially in the somewhat precious West of Santa Fe and Taos, makes a magazine western. Indeed, some of what Johnson published was not in any sense western, despite his statement that *The Laughing Horse* was "a journal of, by and for New Mexicans" (165). For instance, all of issue Number 17 was devoted to the subject of censorship and was western only in the sense that it was published in support of New Mexico's Senator Bronson Cutting, who at the time was fighting to revoke the power of customs officials to censor imported literature and art. Occasional individual non-western contributions, such as Paul Horgan's "A Note on the Princess Maimonides" (*LH* no. 15), can also be found in the pages of the magazine. Despite such obvious lapses, Johnson's magazine was in principle and outlook a western literary magazine.

One of the western principles upheld in *The Laughing Horse* (in poetry, prose, and artwork) was the belief that the western land was both beautiful and powerful. Many of the poems Johnson published revel in the sheer physical beauty of the western land, while at the same time acknowledging that this beauty is in part defined by a powerful harshness. Lynn Riggs' "The Arid Land" defines the West as a dry wasteland "Under its iron band / of sky," yet concludes that it is a place that "we yet may love" (*LH* no. 14). Mary Miller's "No More Green Boughs" rejects the (presumably eastern) "shaded valleys green between the hills" and commands:

Give me cool, candid dawns and evening intervals
Serene and spacious, like the drawing of my breath;
And the great nights when all the marching stars
Descend into the desert; I require these; (*LH* no. 21)

A different side of the land's power is presented in Mary Austin's eco-moralistic story "Lone Tree," in which the desert takes fatal vengeance on a brutal miner who spitefully uproots a tenacious tree (*LH* no. 15). The magazine's non-fiction similarly celebrates the harsh beauty of the western landscape. In "Agua," Spud Johnson devotes an entire essay to the spiritual importance of water in a burning land (*LH* no. 11); while in "Cerrilos Hills," Haniel Long lovingly describes "those turquoise cones to the southwest" and reaches a conclusion that stands as representative of the magazine's Romantic vision of the West: "The beauty of landscape . . . is one of the caresses by which the mother of men hopes to bring her children to fulfillment" (*LH* no. 12).

A second tenet of *The Laughing Horse* is that the uniqueness of the peoples of the Southwest, especially the Native American peoples, is something to be affirmed and celebrated at all times. One significant and farsighted affirmation of this tenet is the diversity among the magazine's contributors, who include male and female artists and writers representing the three major peoples of the Southwest. This diversity, as well as the absence of racism and sexism in the magazine, may in part be attributable to the influence of Mabel Dodge Luhan, a woman well known for her feminist sensibilities and her Native American husband. Besides being a regular contributor, Luhan was also one of Johnson's patrons after 1927 (Weigle 15).

Of all southwestern peoples, Native Americans figure most prominently in *The Laughing Horse*. Native American literature is represented by translations of native songs and tales, one example of which is Natalie Curtis Burlin's "Song of the Horse," a poetic translation which attempts to convey both the meaning and meter of a traditional Navajo song (*LH* no. 9). Mary Austin's "The Coyote Song" is just one of many Indian tales Johnson published in translation (*LH* no. 14). Besides translations, many contributions attempt to portray contemporary Native Americans realistically, as does Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant's short poem "Fiesta":

Under white hooped tops of prairie schooners
come dark Pueblos, bearing plenty over
desert ridges.

Heads bound with purple, like the seers,
they stare from wrinkled Eastern masks
and smile with tilted eyes. . . . (*LH* no. 14)

Several of the magazine's essays concern themselves with determining the nature of the Native American and the extent to which Native American reality differs from white reality. Jaime d'Angulo's "Do Indians Think?" (*LH* no. 12) considers the workings of Native American logic, while Nellie Barnes' "The Indian Poet and His Song" (*LH* no. 15) examines the Native American as creative artist. Like all of the magazine's contributions on Native Americans, the essays of d'Angulo and Barnes are respectful of native peoples and make no claims for the superiority of Euro-American culture.

Hispanic and Anglo culture also figure in the pages of *The Laughing Horse*. Besides publishing contributions by numerous Hispanic writers, Johnson published several contributions about Hispanic life in New Mexico. Margaret Larkin's short play "El Cristo" (*LH* no. 12) deals with the most exotic side of New Mexican Hispanic culture, *los penitentes*, while Robert Bright's short story "Chicken Thief" (*LH* no. 21) concerns itself with the more mundane interactions between Anglo and Hispanic neighbors. As for Anglo culture, Johnson did not fail to publish works on the New Mexican cowboy. Maurice Lesemann's "Cow-Ponies" is a non-jingling man-and-horse poem that reads as if it were written by someone who really knows the difference between a jennet and a jackass (*LH* no. 10).

Another Anglo type frequently portrayed in *The Laughing Horse* is the white, middle-class tourist. Unlike the Native American, Hispanic, and cowboy, the tourist is a figure of mockery, as can be seen in Constance Maynard's "Curios" (*LH* no. 19), in which a motoring tourist family descends on an Indian shop in classic boob fashion: the father is a blowhard, the mother is a shrew who can ask only "How much is that?", and the son is a destructive brat who ends up taking a tomahawk to the leg of a display case. The parents, uninformed on the history and culture of the Southwest, get into an argument over whether Kit Carson was a bandit or the author of *Ben Hur*, and they scorn the shop's San Ildefonso

pottery and genuine kachinas in their quest for ". . . Indian souvenirs: little dolls and things." The inspiration for the family in "Curios" could well have been taken from an earlier illustration entitled "Oh, Lookat!" (*LH* no. 18), which features a frightening tourist family dominating and disrupting an otherwise peaceful New Mexico plaza scene.

Because of its contrast to *The Laughing Horse's* egalitarian attempts to understand and embrace Native American culture, the consistently harsh treatment of Anglo automobile culture stands out as particularly insensitive and vicious. The insensitivity is perhaps evidence of the cultural elitism of the generally well-educated, sometimes quite-wealthy members of the Santa Fe and Taos art and writing communities; the viciousness may have had a more practical economic impetus: Santa Fe had always been a railroad resort and its status as a popular destination was somewhat threatened by the advent of automobile tourism (Tydeman 205). Both attitudes, though, may have their deepest source in a painful sense of loss. Throughout the twenties and thirties it was obvious that an idealized West was rapidly disappearing, and from the high literary perches of Santa Fe and Taos it was easy to put the blame for this disappearance on tourists and their automobiles. In "A City of Change" Witter Bynner laments the changes automotive progress has brought to Santa Fe:

The native earth which used to touch our feet on the edge of the Plaza is being sealed out of sight, out of touch. These pavements may grow machines now, but not persons. The little adobe houses near the Plaza have cast down their grassy crowns before a bulk of garages, garages in the Santa Fe style, yes, but inviting blatant vehicles which hurry people's errands and harden their faces. . . . There are fewer and fewer black shawls, fewer and fewer burro riders. The free market place opposite Burro Alley is a thing gone and forgotten; it was unfair to the grocers. There are no more Indian pots to be seen and advantageously bought in the patio of the New Museum. (*LH* no. 11)

The only solace Bynner can take is that he knew Santa Fe and the Southwest in the good old days. "I had come in time," the poet writes.

Or had he? The good old days of each person's idealized West are always dying days, always diminishing under the steady push of change that is sometimes derisively labeled "progress." Faced with the loss of

their idealized Southwest, *The Laughing Horse* circle chose to blame the automobile tourist for converting the Southwest into what one English tourist called "the great playground of the White American" and for converting the southwestern Native American into what this same tourist called "a wonderful live toy to play with" (Lawrence, *LH* no. 11). The change in the Southwest and its people, however, had been going on long before the first automobile tourist appeared in New Mexico; the automobile and its occupant was simply a convenient target for frustrated artists and writers.

All this may seem like a digression from the thesis that *The Laughing Horse* was a literary magazine with a western point of view, but it is not. The nostalgia for a disappearing West that is embedded in almost every poem, story, and essay Johnson published is greater proof of his magazine's western character than any editorial statement of purpose. To care about the West is to sorrow over its steady disappearance, and *The Laughing Horse* expressed its share of such sorrow.

Yet in an irony that is so familiar to the student of the West that it is no longer ironic, *The Laughing Horse* can be said to have actively contributed to the demise of the West that it pined for in its pages. Just as surely as the overgrazing cattleman, the clear-cutting logger, and the high-grading miner consumed their Wests, so the entire New Mexican literary establishment of Johnson's era consumed its West. By extolling the harsh beauty of the southwestern landscape and the uniqueness of its peoples, tourism was promoted, and with tourism came the resultant deterioration of the landscape and transformation of the peoples. What Witter Bynner wrote of the people of Santa Fe in general applies most specifically to those writers and artists (locally known as "sensitives" [Horgan 22]) who contributed to *The Laughing Horse*: "We are all doing it. We can not help ourselves. We are attracting people here. We are advertising. We are boosting" (*LH* no. 11).

Even without intentionally boosting, the writers attracted tourists. Shelley Armitage has observed of New Mexico that "from the beginning, literature and tourism grew together" (25), and for all the distaste Johnson and his contributors might show for the automobile tourist, writers and artists were part of what the tourist crowds came to see. The 1931 *Santa Fe Visitor's Guide* realized this, identifying "George Park's New Mexico Cafe as the place 'where the artists and writers go to dine and talk'" (Weigle and Fiore 36). While such selling of writers and

artists as tourist attractions is expected in a visitor's guide, *The Laughing Horse* itself did much the same thing in its own pages. A running advertisement for La Botica de Capital announced:

BEN HUR was written across the street from our store and ever since then

CELEBRITIES have had their Ice Cream Sodas & COCA-COLAS at our fountain:

GEN. DAWES as well as Gen. Wallace, Marsden Hartley & Kit Carson, Carl Sandburg and

EVERYBODY! (*LH* no.14)

Other advertisers were just as much a part of the effort to commercialize, develop, and otherwise cash in on the New Mexico tourist industry. In fact, a list of *The Laughing Horse's* advertisers includes just about every kind of business venture that could profit from tourism and development: New Mexico Power, the Santa Fe Railroad, Fred Harvey Indian Detours, the Don Fernando Hotel, the Spanish and Indian Trading Company, H. H. Dorman Real Estate, the Santa Fe Chamber of Commerce.

Despite their professed dislike for tourists and commercialization, *The Laughing Horse* circle was as guilty as anyone of transforming Northern New Mexico from Last Frontier to Tourist Mecca. Like so many others, these artists and writers discovered a West and, by discovering, destroyed the thing they had found. This does not negate, however, what *The Laughing Horse* was or mean that the magazine should not be remembered. It was a sincere western literary magazine guided by a solidly western consciousness. That it suffered an all-too-western fate only makes it a more genuine part of the literary history of the American West.

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