

Book Review

Cow-boy. Jean-Michel Espitallier. Inculte, 2019. ISBN: 978-23-69840-22-9,
131pp.

Born in Barcelonnette in 1957, Jean-Michel Espitallier is one of the most eclectic contemporary French writers. Active since the late '80s, Espitallier has published around 26 books, including novels and poetry. His most recent publications include *Tourner en rond: De l'art d'aborder les ronds-points* (2016), *La Première année* (2018), *Cow-Boy* (2020), and *Tueurs* (2022). He also founded the literary magazine *Java* (1989-2006), in collaboration with Jacques Sivan and Vannina Maestri, and coordinated an issue on 'La nouvelle poésie française' for *Magazine Littéraire* in March 2001.

Cow-boy was published in French in 2019.¹ The text traces the story of Espitallier's paternal grandfather Eugène, who left his native village Ancelle in Hautes-Alpes to migrate to the United States with his brother in the early 20th century, like millions of other European citizens at the time.

At the beginning of the book, Espitallier explains that he knows little about his grandfather. His father, like the rest of his family, was never inclined to talk much about Eugène and his American dream. The only information Espitallier had was his grandfather's name, that he left France to work as a cowboy in America when he was very young, that he returned home in 1918, that he met his wife when he returned to France, and that he tried without success to convince her to leave Ancelle to start a new life together in America before he died in his early forties.

The mystery surrounding his grandfather's life fascinated Espitallier since childhood and left him with many questions. He attempts to answer these by imagining how Eugène's life in America might have been and the reasons why his

¹ The book has not yet been translated into English.

family was always so reluctant to talk openly about him.

However, with *Cow-boy*, Espitallier seeks not only to reconstruct his family's story but also to deconstruct the Hollywood myth of the cowboy and America. Eugène is not a typical cowboy. He is not conceived as the adventurer hero of the Hollywood Westerns of the mid-20th century. Rather, he is imagined as a humble cattleman, a young migrant who, after moving to another continent, ends up doing the same job as he did at home. This is because Espitallier's objective is not to celebrate America as the Wild West of endless possibilities, but rather to criticize its capitalist organization and racism (Agnew 2015, 10). The myth of the cowboy was invented by Hollywood to romanticize the conquest of the Wild West and to promote the American dream (12). Westerns of the mid-1900s generally presented cowboys as white 'Knights of the range', heroes willing to fight the villainy of corrupt bankers and rustlers or Native Americans, depicted as evil and uncivilized, so that justice and Western values triumph (13–14). In the 1950s, cowboys were usually associated with law and order. They were presented as courageous men keen to sacrifice their personal life to settle in the Wild West and build a civil society based on moral integrity and justice (13).

Eugène is far from that, and America is not depicted as the land of opportunity where a new society based on justice and moral integrity can be founded. Instead, it is presented as a land full of violence, exploitation, and racism. Whilst Eugène spends his uneventful days watching his herd, unaware of what is happening in the rest of the continent, America faces a succession of racial murders, repressive attacks on workers, factory openings, and exploitation of natural resources. Ultimately, America is depicted as the cradle of contemporary capitalism and neoliberal ideology.

Entangling Eugène's story with this critique of American imperialism enables Espitallier to imbue *Cow-boy* with the collective and political significance typical of his writing. Influenced by Deleuze's anti-capitalist philosophy, Espitallier's texts are always openly engaged in the struggle against capitalist society and its injustices. From a Deleuzo-Guattarian perspective, Espitallier can be understood to be a 'minor writer' – a 'revolutionary writer' of a 'minor literature' (Deleuze and Guattari 1975, 149–50). In *Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure*, Deleuze and Guattari describe this 'minor literature' as being able to challenge, and therefore revolutionise, the ideological apparatus at the basis of society (149–150). Aligned with this perspective, Espitallier does not employ his memories and familial story for a narcissistic exercise in style but as the starting point for the creation of what the two philosophers call 'a people yet to come' (149–150) – that is, for the creation of new potential societies.

Eugène's experience leads the reader on a cognitive journey during which they can

begin to reflect on the images of cowboys and America proposed by Western narratives. Since the socio-political and cultural issues documented by Espitallier in *Cow-boy* are the same that afflict America and the Western world today, the reader is inevitably led to question their modes of thinking and living, potentially paving the way for the emergence of new modes that can lead to the actualization of new societies.

As often happens with his texts, *Cow-boy* does not fit into any singular literary genre; it is a hybrid and unclassifiable text sitting at the intersection between different genres, namely biography, fiction, and poetry. Sections written in the first-person singular that narrate and comment on Espitallier's family memories are alternated with fictional sections – reminiscent of Espitallier's poetic style – which imagine his grandfather's life by filling the gaps in his family's narrative, as well as traditional songs about cowboys, and impersonal lists documenting the social issues that have marked American capitalist struggle.

Cow-boy is also hybrid from a linguistic point of view; the text written in French presents numerous familiar as well as argot terms, alongside English words or expressions that give movement to the narration and oblige the reader to reconsider the concept of the mother tongue and the relationship between language and power, as exemplified here:

Il faut huit jours au paquebot pour atteindre Le Havre. Océan monotone, horizon, ronron anesthésiant des machines, lenteurs. Des ciels. Un horizon toujours le même avec option nuages, gros temps ou plein soleil. L'air est poisseux. La nuit, c'est noir. Des rencontres éphémères, peut-être. Succession *day and night, night and day, like the tick, tick, tock...* (Espitallier 2019, 92).

In this extract, Espitallier draws on expressions in both French and English. This hybridity is intensified by his reference to Cole Porter's 'Night and Day' (recorded 1932; released 1933), a song ingrained in American popular culture which includes the lyrics: 'Like the tick, tick, tock [...] Day and night, night and day' (n.p).

Ultimately, the tension between language and power also guides Espitallier's reconstruction of the story of his immigrant grandfather, providing an intricate discussion of migration, socio-political, and translation studies. At the same time, it denounces the politics of America, setting the conditions for rethinking the way we perceive America and the conquest of West. *Cow-boy's* literary-critical value emerges from its hybrid and aesthetic features, which enact the deconstruction of literary genres and exemplify the spirit of postmodern literature that requires the elaboration of new approaches to analysis and interpretation than those offered by traditional literary categories.

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