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Part I  
Introduction

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# Imagining the West

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At the first meeting of a class I recently taught on western American literature, I asked my students to come to the next session prepared to share one interesting fact, impression, or idea that they could find out about the American West, something they did not already know. I did not specify a particular research method or source, and I left the definition of “American West” entirely up to them. Having learned through our initial conversations that very few of the students in this class could claim any real familiarity with the region other than the vague sense that “west” meant a direction on a map that indicated a region of the nation other than their own, my goal was simply to see what a group of students from the upper Midwest would come up with, to gauge their first impressions or, at the very least, learn the dominant clichés and assumptions with which they may have come into the class. Not surprisingly, the overwhelmingly favorite research method for this assignment was the online search engine. What was slightly surprising, however, at least to me, was the fact that not a single student brought in a piece of information about any time period other than the mid- to late nineteenth century. We heard about famous gunfighters, about notorious frontier cattle towns, even about some women of ill repute with hearts of gold. To be sure, not all of the mini-reports presented genre clichés – there were reports on the city of Seattle’s rebuilding after an 1889 fire and about travelers’ experiences on the overland trail, mostly from the California Gold Rush and afterward. A few students brought in information about such conflicts as the Modoc War and Custer’s defeat at Little Bighorn, while one student presented information about the establishment of Yellowstone National Park. In short, what my students found when they went looking for the American West was by and large the late nineteenth-century West of popular culture and national mythology.

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*A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American West*, First Edition. Edited by  
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Although it would be easy to attribute the outcome of this admittedly brief, impression-based assignment to my students' rather limited understanding of the American West, the ostensible root causes are in fact much more complex. If the kinds of information that predominate in the results of a Google search are any indicator, then my students are not alone when, as a phrase, the "American West" evokes for them a preponderance of images, ideas, and historical artifacts from the post-Civil War, pre-twentieth-century period, the so-called "Old West." Which is to say, the typical results of a typical search-engine query actually reinforce, by virtue of their higher ranking through popularity, the kinds of ideas and impressions one might be seeking to move beyond. Of course, one must almost certainly first have a sense that there is a potential "beyond" to move toward when it comes to locating a powerful mythos within a larger framework of cultural production and history. This very well could mean that many of my students, upon finding the "Old West," were confident that they had found the West as it is more broadly understood. Such an assumption would not be entirely wrong, but as residents, artists, and scholars of the West have long recognized, it does not even come close to being entirely correct either; the West of myth is merely one extraordinarily powerful, overdetermined facet of a much more complex and, hence, much more interesting array of regionally specific cultural productions. My students had certainly heard about issues related to immigration along the borders of the Southwest, and they knew quite a lot about the popular music scenes in Los Angeles and Seattle. But in their minds, these phenomena were not part of something called "the American West," at least not at the start of our class. Bridging these different aspects of the geographically western portions of the United States thus posed both a problem and an opportunity, the very same challenges faced by a *Companion* such as this one.

On the one hand, as noted above the American West is a place. Its outlines are roughly demarcated in the east by the line of aridity indicated by the 98th meridian and in the west by the Pacific Ocean, while its northern and southern reaches are defined by the nation's borders with Canada and Mexico. Of course, the exact outer boundaries of this place have long been debated and contested, so much so that the American West is often rightly described as a dynamic region of ever-shifting demographic, geographic, and cultural indicators. It is, nevertheless, a place most people would say they recognize when they look at a map of the United States: those portions generally found on the left side. On the other hand, the American West is also an extremely powerful idea, one that has evolved over several centuries in the imaginations of countless people both in the US and abroad, an idea (re)produced in books, movies, paintings, and the like. It is an idea that shimmers with abstractions such as frontier, opportunity, honor, individualism, and justice, and it is often (but not always, to be sure) recognized by visual cues such as the cowboy hat, the horse, vast stretches of open rangeland rimmed by snowy peaks or desert mesas, and the handgun. It is an idea very much alive in a bumper sticker, widely popular in recent years, that asks, "Where Are You Now, John Wayne? America Needs You." This plaintive appeal for redemptive heroism (or perhaps retributive vigilantism) hardly

concerns itself with anything even remotely specific to a regional geography; it is the idea that matters.

Of course, in the interaction of place and idea there are many more numbers than two, many more encounters and experiences than can be catalogued in a binary opposition between one region and one idea. In the matter of migration and settlement, for example, the American West has, to be sure, most commonly been imagined as a promised land for westward-moving pioneers. "Westward the course of Empire takes it way" declared Ireland's Bishop Berkeley in a 1726 poem entitled "Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America," a sentiment that inspired more than a few generations of mostly Anglo-Europeans in their pursuit of conquest or, as some have put it, of new places to live and work. One admiring group in 1866 even named the town for a new university in California after the bishop. However, equally compelling are the patterns of movement prompted by the idea of Gold Mountain, the legendary icon that drew travelers from China to the shores of California and British Columbia and propelled them not westward but eastward across the continent. So too have immigrants from Japan and other parts of Asia crossed the Pacific Ocean in a movement that is distinctly anti-Hesperian in its orientation. Just as significantly, the promise of El Norte has for several centuries drawn people on a northbound trajectory, starting with the Spanish conquistadors who ranged from Mexico as far as central Kansas in search of Quivira. While such golden legends were never realized, the hope for greater economic certainty was and remains to this day an important motivation, though certainly not the only one, for people seeking to move northward into the so-called West. And when we also consider, as we should, the settlement patterns of Native Americans, for whom movement was not and is not a matter of immigration so much as fundamentally one of maintaining a rich tradition of local habitation, rural or otherwise, we might just begin to appreciate the full complexity of the patterns of exchange and cultural contact that have flowed across the continent, often along border-defying lines.

One particularly noteworthy demographic feature of the American West is the pace at which people moving from all directions – north, south, east, and west alike – are converging in the region's urban centers. In 1990, US Census data demonstrated that 86 percent of the West's population could be found in an urbanized environment, in contrast to only 75 percent of the population east of the Mississippi River (Riebsame et al. 1997: 55). Since then, this trend has only increased (see Abbott 2008), with demographic shifts and cultural crossings rapidly eliminating – or at least redefining – borders on all sides. This pattern contrasts sharply with the popular impression of the American West as a largely rural space populated by ranchers, cowboys, and the occasional outdoorsman. To be sure, vast stretches of land do remain sparsely populated in the extreme, giving the overall region a population density that is still lower than, for example, that of the Northeast. But the growth of western urban culture betokens a multiplicity that is not easily understood, or explained away, by a critical or historical focus on a single direction of travel or a single idea about a place. As the population of the American West continues to shift and diversify in not only urban

but also suburban and rural settings, the region's cultural productions will no doubt continue to evolve such bold, new, and engaging forms as those that range from cowboy poetry to surf punk music to Chicano vampire fiction.

Sometimes the artists working with these evolving forms seek to engage ideas about the West as much as they strive to communicate something about themselves and the communities that sustain them, and sometimes they do not. That is, many producers of culture living in the West experience the tensions posed by the many variations of the idea of the West quite keenly. In such cases, one is never simply from the West or writing simply about "the West"; one is always working around popular ideas encountered both within and beyond the region. However, often enough the question of such ideas being a factor in a particular element of the literature and culture of the American West is irrelevant. Simply put, just as the West's patterns of migration give the lie to binary assumptions about what is and is not "western," so too does the work of many artists and writers argue for there being more numbers than two when adding up histories, genres, and forms. Is the Brooklyn-born son of Russian Jewish immigrants who while living in Oregon writes a fable about a baseball team called the New York Knights a western author? Is his novel? What about the poems rendered in Chinese characters on the walls of an immigration detention center in the middle of San Francisco Bay? Or how might one assess the western aspects of things like Seattle's grunge sound, or gangsta rap and hair metal from Los Angeles, or narco corridos from the borderlands? Judging by the kinds of assessments offered by recent scholarship and which are very much evident throughout this *Companion*, these things certainly are western American, even if they do little, if anything, to address the familiar mythos of the dominant narrative. Recent studies in the field have focused on such topics as women writers in the new urban West, the questions and problems associated with claims to authenticity that are both literary and identity-based, nature writing's relationship to ideologies of the real, the landscapes of waste created by the military-industrial complex, and the longstanding multicultural and multi-ethnic character of the West's diverse populations. And while a certain disciplinary contradiction has resulted from an academic and political call for recognizing distinctive, uniquely regional voices in the midst of theoretical and equally political claims about the inadequacy or undesirability of such, the essays found in this *Companion* should provide for the possibility of extending inquiry into just about every direction that might suggest itself when looking at the American West.

To that end, the essays in this book are arranged into three distinct but overlapping sections. The chapters in the first section that follows this introduction describe and interpret the American West chiefly through an orientation that is historical. Whether concerned with a strictly literary history or with narratives that are more broadly cultural, the chapters in "Regions and Histories" focus on the production of specific centers of expression that have been variously based on geography, on identity, and on a combination of the two. Topics in this section include early exploration narratives; the role of periodical publication in the fostering of a culture of literacy; and the mostly textual productions that characterize a number of generally recognized

regions such as the Southwest, Alaska, Montana, and the Great Plains, as well as the texts emblematic of and/or often used to understand the West's various population, demographic, and ethnic groups. It is in this section that the desire to honor distinctive voices, to recognize the collective communities around which artists and critics alike tend to group people, is perhaps most prevalent, even as the concluding chapters on class, postcolonial perspectives, and suburban spaces begin to break down those lines.

Although it is also focused on identifying and analyzing specific histories of expression, the next section, "Varieties and Forms," attempts to look more specifically at how a wide array of genres have proven useful in imagining the West. The creators and purveyors of some of the West's most widely known iconography in both painting and literary realism are examined, as are the popular poetry and folk songs that are all too often overlooked in academic work. The accomplishments of autobiography and of domestically themed writing are also analyzed, as are the forms and genres perhaps most frequently invoked in understanding how the western US became the American West: environmentally sensitive literature and criticism, film, and, when considering the urban West, detective fiction. If the goal of the previous set of chapters can be thought of as providing analyses of what has been said of and in the West and where it has been said, then this next section is more intent on the ways of seeing, imagining, and (re)producing the West that have proven historically and culturally significant.

The final section offers even closer interpretations of specific histories, genres, and texts that highlight, with more sustained readings, a number of the persistent questions about the evolving nature of western American identity, movement, representation, performance, and iconography. Topics in this "Issues, Themes, Case Studies" section include the cross-marketing of *The Lone Ranger* radio programs; the annual performance of the *Ramona* pageant in California; Buffalo Bill's *Wild West*; the identification of place; and efforts to represent and understand such recent western phenomena as the growth of a nuclear weapons industry and the perduring prominence of Las Vegas.

Taken as a whole, the chapters in this *Companion* pose important questions about what counts as a valuable or useful text; how such texts contribute to the articulation of regional, communal, and individual identity; and what the social, cultural, or historical ramifications are for imagining the West, one's self, and oneself in the West in certain ways. Placing their various answers into dialogue with each other, the chapters that follow suggest ways of historicizing and theorizing cultural work both within historically determined or accepted divisions and across them. Ultimately, the chapters in each of these three sections do resist easy categorization, the arrangement into discrete sections being perhaps just another attempt to corral an inherent borderlessness. Yet, whether interested in a historical approach, a genre-based approach, or a case-study approach, each of the chapters that follow conveys something of the vital nature of the American West. In so doing, they each in their own ways reaffirm the value of regional studies in an age of globalization and trans-hemispheric studies.

For all the theorizing about the breakdown of borders and regional distinctions – and such work is quite valid and necessary, to be sure – we still find people living in and producing regionally distinctive cultures, erecting dividing lines, establishing ways of identifying equally through separation and combination. This process is as evident among those who would advocate a Virginian-like return to what they perceive as a once dominant Anglo-Saxon monoculture as it is among those who see endless hybridity and post-national, post-racial identities across the West. It thus falls to the study of regions to understand the products that arise in the interaction between places and ideas, bearing in mind that there will always be more than one or two of each in play.

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