



A COMPANION TO
THE *LITERATURE* AND
CULTURE OF THE
AMERICAN WEST

EDITED BY
NICOLAS S. WITSCHI



WILEY-BLACKWELL

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AND CULTURE OF
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Editorial Offices

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
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The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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A Companion to the Literature and
Culture of the American West

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Notes on Contributors

Chadwick Allen is Associate Professor of English at The Ohio State University. The author of *Blood Narrative: Indigenous Identity in American Indian and Maori Literary and Activist Texts* (2002), he also writes about Indians in popular westerns.

Nina Baym is Swanlund Chair and Center for Advanced Study Professor of English Emerita at the University of Illinois. She is General Editor of the Norton Anthology of American Literature, and has published widely on American literary topics, especially on women writers. Her most recent book is *Women Writers of the American West, 1833–1927* (2011).

Peter J. Blodgett is the H. Russell Smith Foundation Curator of Western American History at the Huntington Library. Since joining the Huntington's staff in 1985 he has spoken and written widely on various aspects of the history of the American West and is the author of *Land of Golden Dreams: California in the Gold Rush Decade 1848–1858* (1999).

Neil Campbell is Professor of American Studies and Research Manager at the University of Derby, UK. He has published widely in American studies, including the book *American Cultural Studies* (with Alasdair Kean) and articles and chapters on John Sayles, Terrence Malick, Robert Frank, J.B. Jackson, and many others. His major research project is an interdisciplinary trilogy on the contemporary American West: *The Cultures of the American New West* (2000), *The Rhizomatic West* (2008), and *Post-Western* (forthcoming).

Krista Comer is Associate Professor of English at Rice University in Houston, Texas. Her books include *Landscapes of the New West* (1999) and *Surfer Girls in the New World Order* (2010). She is completing a memoir.

Nancy Cook teaches courses in western American studies at the University of Montana, Missoula. Her publications include essays on ranching, on Montana writers, and on authenticity in western American writing.

Corey K. Creekmur is an Associate Professor of English and Film Studies at the University of Iowa, where he also directs the Institute for Cinema and Culture. He is currently completing a book, *Cattle Queens and Lonesome Cowboys: Gender and Sexuality in the Western*, and has published numerous essays on American and South Asian popular culture.

Hal Crimmel teaches at Weber State University, in Ogden, Utah. He is the author of *Dinosaur: Four Seasons on the Green and Yampa Rivers* (2007) and co-editor of *Teaching About Place: Learning from the Land* (2008).

Brian W. Dippie, Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Victoria, BC, has published extensively on western American art. His most recent books are *The 100 Best Illustrated Letters of Charles M. Russell* (2008) and *Crossroads: Desert Caballeros Western Museum* (2010).

John L. Escobedo teaches at the University of Colorado at Boulder. His literary field of study includes US Latino/a literature and Chicano/a literature with a specialty in hybrid cultural productions and mestizo/a racial identities. He is currently completing his first book, *Dangerous Crossroads: Unraveling the Mestizo/a Conundrum*.

David Fenimore directs the undergraduate program in English at the University of Nevada, Reno. He writes on western American culture and moonlights as a Chautauqua performer, portraying, among other characters, Woody Guthrie and Zane Grey.

Audrey Goodman is Associate Professor of English at Georgia State University. She is the author of *Translating Southwestern Landscapes* (2002) and *Atomic Homelands* (2010).

Cathryn Halverson is an Assistant Professor in American Literature and Culture at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark, and the author of *Maverick Autobiographies: Women Writers and the American West* (2004). She is completing a book entitled *Playing House in the American West: Western Women's Literary Autobiography, 1840–1980*.

Eric Heyne is Professor of English at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, editor of *Desert, Garden, Margin, Range: Literature on the American Frontier*, and has published in *Extrapolation*, *Narrative*, *Western American Literature*, and elsewhere.

Hsuan L. Hsu, an Assistant Professor of English at UC Davis, is author of *Geography and the Production of Space in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (2010) and editor of Sui Sin Far's *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* (Broadview, forthcoming).

Alex Hunt is Associate Professor of US literature at West Texas A&M University. He is editor and co-editor, respectively, of *The Geographical Imagination of Annie Proulx* (2008) and *Postcolonial Green* (2010). He has also published numerous articles on the American West with attention to postcolonialism, literary cartography, ethnicity, and the environment.

Michael K. Johnson teaches at the University of Maine-Farmington. He is author of *Black Masculinity and the Frontier Myth in American Literature* (2002) and has published in *Western American Literature* and *African American Review*.

Susan Kollin is Professor of American Literature at Montana State University, where she also teaches in the programs in American studies and gender and women's studies. Her essays have appeared in *American Literary History*, *Contemporary Literature*, and *Modern Fiction Studies*. She also edited *Postwestern Cultures: Literature, Theory, Space* (2007).

Nathaniel Lewis is the author of *Unsettling the Literary West* (2003) and co-editor, with William Handley, of *True West: Authenticity and the American West* (2004). He currently chairs the English department at St. Michael's College in Vermont.

Bonney MacDonald is Professor of English and Department Chair of English, Philosophy, and Modern Languages at West Texas A & M University. She has published *Henry James's Italian Hours* (1990) and essays and articles on writers such as William Dean Howells, Mark Twain, Hamlin Garland, John Muir, Frederick Jackson Turner, Gretel Ehrlich, William Kittredge, and Wallace Stegner. She is currently at work on a book on Turner and modern theories of mobility.

Susan Naramore Maher has published widely on the literature of the Great Plains and of the American and Canadian West. With Thomas P. Lynch, she is co-editor of a forthcoming collection, *Artifacts and Illuminations: Critical Essays on Loren Eisely* (2011). She is currently completing a book-length study entitled *Deep Maps: The Literary Cartography of the Great Plains*. Dr. Maher is Dean of the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Minnesota Duluth.

Barbara Barney Nelson teaches at Sul Ross State University in Alpine, Texas. She has published extensively about the rural West, including *The Wild and the Domestic* (2000) and *God's Country or Devil's Playground* (2002).

Tara Penry is Associate Professor of English at Boise State University, where she teaches nineteenth-century and western American literature, and where she has edited or co-edited the BSU Western Writers series since 2000. Her essays on nineteenth-century California periodicals have appeared in *Western American Literature* and *American Literary Realism*. She has also published on American sentimental literature, western and otherwise.

Karen E. Ramirez is the Associate Director of the Sewall Residential Academic Program at the University of Colorado, Boulder, where she teaches courses on Native American literature, women's literature, and the American West.

Gary Scharnhorst is Distinguished Professor of English at the University of New Mexico, editor or author of over thirty-five books, editor of the journal *American Literary Realism*, and editor in alternating years of the research annual *American Literary Scholarship*.

Jefferson D. Slagle is a member of the English faculty at Brigham Young University-Idaho. He is the author of articles on authenticity in the western dime novel and the construction of authenticity in the West. His current project examines

the interplay between western performance and character representation in text westerns.

Stephen Tatum is a Professor of English and Director of the Environmental Humanities graduate program at the University of Utah. His most recent book is *In the Remington Moment* (2010).

Kathleen Washburn is an Assistant Professor of American and Native American literature at the University of New Mexico. Her work focuses on configurations of indigenous modernity in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature and culture.

Edward Watts is Professor of English at Michigan State University. His books include *An American Colony: Regionalism and the Roots of Midwestern Culture* (2002) and *In this Remote Country: Colonial French Culture in the Anglo-American Imagination, 1780–1860* (2006).

O. Alan Weltzien is a Professor of English at the University of Montana Western, in Dillon, MT, where he teaches a range of courses in Montana, western American, and American literatures as well as courses in nonfiction and nature and environmental writing. He has authored, edited, or co-edited five books, and published dozens of articles. He is currently working on a book about the Pacific Northwest's volcanoes.

Nicolas S. Witschi is the author of *Traces of Gold: California's Natural Resources and the Claim to Realism in Western American Literature* (2002), of a Western Writers series monograph on Alonzo "Old Block" Delano (2006), and of articles and essays on Mary Austin, John Muir, Sinclair Lewis, and Henry James. At present he is Associate Professor and Associate Chair in the Department of English at Western Michigan University.

Gioia Woods was 2010 President of the Western Literature Association, author of the Western Writers series monograph *Gary Nabhan*, and co-author of *Western Subjects: Autobiographical Writing in the North American West* (2004). She is Associate Professor of Humanities in the Department of Comparative Cultural Studies at Northern Arizona University.

Daniel Worden is Assistant Professor in the Department of English at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs. His work on representations of the American West from dime novel westerns to HBO's *Deadwood* has appeared in *Arizona Quarterly*, *The Canadian Review of American Studies*, and the anthology *Violence, the Arts, and Willa Cather*.

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Part I

Introduction

1

Imagining the West

Nicolas S. Witschi

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.

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 its 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