

# A HISTORY OF WESTERN AMERICAN LITERATURE

EDITED BY SUSAN KOLLIN



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*Montana State University*



**CAMBRIDGE**  
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32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

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[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107083851](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107083851)

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First published 2015

Printed in the United States of America by Sheridan Books, Inc.

*A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

A history of western American literature / edited by Susan Kollin,  
Montana State University.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-08385-1 (hardback)

1. American literature – West (U.S.) – History and criticism.

2. West (U.S.) – In literature. I. Kollin, Susan, editor.

PS271.H57 2015

810.9'3278–dc23 2015016876

ISBN 978-1-107-08385-1 Hardback

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## A HISTORY OF WESTERN AMERICAN LITERATURE

The American West is a complex region that has inspired generations of writers and artists. Often portrayed as a quintessential landscape that symbolizes promise and progress for a developing nation, the American West is also a diverse space that has experienced conflicting and competing hopes and expectations. While it is frequently imagined as a place enabling dreams of new beginnings for settler communities, it is likewise home to long-standing Indigenous populations as well as other ethnic and racial groups, who have often produced different visions of the land. This History encompasses the intricacy of western American literature by exploring myriad genres and cultural movements, from ecocriticism, settler colonial studies, and transnational theory to race, ethnic, gender, and sexuality studies. Written by a host of leading literary historians and literary critics, this book offers readers insight into the West as a site that sustains canonical and emerging authors alike, and as a region that exceeds national boundaries in addressing long-standing global concerns and developments.

SUSAN KOLLIN is Professor of English at Montana State University at Bozeman and served as President of the Western Literature Association in 2004. Editor of *Postwestern Cultures: Literature, Theory, Space*, she is also the author of *Nature's State: Imagining Alaska as the Last Frontier* and *Captivating Westerns: The Middle East in the American West*.

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## *Acknowledgments*

The task of editing a volume on the literary history of the American West is a major undertaking that involves many people. I wish to thank the contributors for their time, hard work, and insightful suggestions in making this collection possible. I also would like to thank Ray Ryan for inviting me to edit this volume and Caitlin Gallagher, Vincent Rajan, and Susan Thornton for guiding me through the production process at Cambridge University Press.

Thanks to Montana State University's Office of the Vice President for Research and Economic Development for granting me a Scholarship and Creativity Award as well as the American Studies Program at MSU for providing me with a graduate research assistant in spring 2015. For her work in proofreading and formatting many of the essays in this collection, I thank Tonya Robinson. I also wish to thank Dan Flory, David Agruss, and Robert Bennett for reading sections of the volume at various stages of its development; Susan Bernardin, Nancy Cook, Audrey Goodman, and Stephen Tatum for their suggestions and feedback on my ideas for this volume; as well as Alexandra Flory and Michaela Kollin for their ongoing support of my work. Finally, Christine Bold thanks the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding, Rachel Hunt for research assistance, and Monique Mojica (Guna and Rappahannock) and Michelle St. John (Wampanoag) for serving as Research Consultants.

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*Introduction*  
*Historicizing the American Literary West*

Susan Kollin

The project of historicizing the American literary West and the production of regions themselves has been enormously and productively complicated by recent scholarly developments. With diaspora studies, borderlands scholarship, comparative Indigenous approaches, Pacific Rim studies, transnational feminisms, settler colonial theory, and critical regionalism opening up important new archives, literary historians are developing more complex methods and nuanced accounts of the American West.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, as cultural and literary production associated with the West circulates transnationally and unevenly under the pressures of globalization, many of these regional texts accrue new audiences as well as diverse and often contested meanings. In her memoirs *Funny in Farsi* and *Laughing without an Accent*, for instance, Firoozeh Dumas takes on the genre of the popular western, noting changes in its reception across literary history and geographical contexts in ways that highlight the challenges facing regional studies. Describing her coming of age in California in the late 1970s and 1980s as the child of Iranian immigrants, the author often focuses on her father's life in recounting her experiences of cultural dislocation, regional identity, and the struggle for national belonging. At one point, Dumas recalls his childhood in Iran, noting how much her father loved watching movies. "Had it been up to him, he would have happily spent his entire childhood in front of the big screen, dreaming his life away," she writes.<sup>2</sup> "His favorites were the American westerns, where the good guys always won."<sup>3</sup>

Looking back on her California childhood, the author mostly remembers the kindness she received from her neighbors, but at one point tells of drastic changes that occurred after the Iranian Revolution. "It all started in 1979," Dumas writes. "It seemed like on Monday, everyone was asking us if our carpets really do fly. Then on Friday, those same people were putting 'I Play Cowboys and Iranians' bumper stickers on their cars."<sup>4</sup> While her father may have aligned himself with the good guys featured in the

westerns he enjoyed in Iran, the subject position he claimed for himself would be challenged by responses to international events unfolding in the late 1970s. U.S. orientalist discourse, which often portrayed Iranians as intriguing exotic Others hailing from the land of Persia, dramatically shifted in the wake of the Iranian Revolution and the American hostage crisis. Her father's beloved westerns were now deployed against him in the United States, their meanings reconceptualized as he and other Americans of the Iranian diaspora found themselves placed on the side of savagery, as the enemy to be defeated by the Anglo cowboy who introduces progress, freedom, and civilization to the global frontier.

The project of casting groups perceived to be national threats into the predetermined role of "bad guys" has served as an ongoing ritual shaping and informing settler colonial understandings of the American West. Jodi A. Byrd notes, for instance, how the Indian as "the original enemy combatant" has often served an important role in popular and political discourse where it circulates globally as the primary means by which the United States defines groups perceived as dangerous to American interests and national security.<sup>5</sup> In her study *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism*, Byrd addresses the practice in broader terms, tracing how the figure of the Indian and the idea of Indianness are often the foundation upon which "the U.S. empire orients and replicates itself by transforming those to be colonized into 'Indians' through continual reiterations of pioneer logics, whether in the Pacific, the Caribbean, or the Middle East."<sup>6</sup> The act of depicting enemies as Indians provides a justification for U.S. power and creates the "conditions of possibility" for a seemingly exceptional America simultaneously to enact and to mask its imperial designs.<sup>7</sup>

These accounts of the contested meanings of the western and westernness as well as of Indians and Indianness open up important lines of inquiry for the project of writing a literary history of the American West and for understanding the emergence of regions themselves. Building on insights articulated by Dumas and Byrd, scholars may recognize how ideas often associated with the popular western and western American literature in general – including stories about heroes and villains, frontier violence and land claims, as well as battles between savagery and civilization – are rarely bound by or restricted to local issues or national concerns. It is interesting to note, for instance, that even during an era when the popularity of the genre ebbs and flows, the western has come to serve a critical function in U.S. discourses that circulate inside and outside the country. The deployment of the western after 9/11, for instance, drew renewed attention



to the global dimensions of regional culture and how the iconography and rhetoric of the West have often been used to speak to developments beyond regional and national boundaries.<sup>8</sup> Scholars of the American West have increasingly engaged transnational and comparative frameworks in their literary histories, foregrounding how cultural production carries significance across diverse spaces. David Rio develops this line of thinking, noting the manner in which western American literature has never been a “literature of regional interest only” while foregrounding the crucial “theoretical and practical aspects of interpreting the literature as part of a global phenomenon.”<sup>9</sup> As he explains, “the international dimension of the West is not only related to the traditional power of western mythology to engage the imagination of non-American audiences, but also to the sheer origins of the West as an international borderland.”<sup>10</sup>

Just as Iranians and Iranian Americans saw the western deployed against them as a morality tale that placed them in the role of the enemy, so Arabs and Arab Americans have experienced a similar shifting history and set of concerns in their position as the new national threat after 9/11. The Jordanian American author Laila Halaby takes on this history in her novel *Once in a Promised Land* (2007). Reexamining notions of the West as an exceptional space in an exceptionalist nation, her story centers on the experiences of an Arab couple living in Arizona and the terror they face in being considered national security threats after 9/11. The characters are familiar with the western and how it has been used to define and restrict various populations in and outside the United States. At first the husband, Jassim, jokes about being placed under surveillance by a vigilant security guard who mistakes western movies for reality and who now “thinks she’s Clint Eastwood.”<sup>11</sup> Once pulled toward an America that promised “Disneyland and hamburgers, Hollywood and the Marlboro Man,” the couple becomes increasingly unsettled, their new status summed up quite well by a sticker on a teenager’s skateboard that reads “Terrorist Hunting License.”<sup>12</sup> As a real estate agent who sells others access to the American Dream, the wife, Salwa, no longer finds herself at home in the West, shut out of the “promised land” as the U.S. war on terror leads to their increased sense of dislocation and alienation.

Randa Jarrar, who grew up in Kuwait and then moved to the United States after the first Gulf War, takes up similar ideas in her novel of the American West, *A Map of Home* (2008). When her father is relocated to Texas, the main character, Nidali, confesses her fears about the region and its inhabitants, anxieties that may be traced historically to global circulations of the western in U.S. political discourse across places such as the