Introduction

Clashing stories haunt the physical and cultural landscapes of the American West, stories that led or kept people there, and that Europeans and Americans used to drive indigenous people away. Inasmuch as people believed them, stories are historical forces that demand interpretation and that, to a significant degree, explain the settlement and conquest of this vast and complex region. Books of fiction and religious faith; oral stories passed through generations; exaggerated travel accounts and the tall tales of boosterism; feverish fantasies of speculation and geographic mastery; and persistent Old World myths and allegories have all directly affected western migration and development. The West has, in other words, inextricably wedded what we conventionally refer to as the historical and the literary, the experiential and the imaginative.

The literature of the American West tells and retells the fictions and histories that have been born of this union and that in turn shape our perception and experience of the West. So intertwined are the facts of imagination and the facts of historical experience "out West" that their nominal difference can seem a mere disciplinary effect or convenience. Historians who give attention to the "imagined" West effectively demarcate it from the "real" West and so reinforce a disciplinary divide even as they cross it.[1] One of my aims in this book is to demonstrate why literary and historical imaginations should not be thought about separately, and to employ an intertextual methodology that insists on bringing the two together by locating the historical in the literary and *vice versa*, rather than by treating one as the "background" of the other. American literary studies of the West have often been as resistant to theoretical matters, even to formal aesthetics, as the field of western history has been resistant to literary concerns, which makes the aim of this book all the more pressing.[2] Western American literature is ripe for bringing together formal and historical analysis because it has long been burdened by readers' nostalgic desire for historical authenticity, as Nathaniel Lewis

argues about the rise of the western author in the nineteenth century.[3] Yet Westerns are works of imaginative art, despite the historical content that seems especially to mark them. To treat literature simply as content (ideological or otherwise) and not as verbal art is, to paraphrase Michael Kowalewski, to put it on trial rather than to give it a *hearing*.[4] Critics' neglect of western writing's aesthetic dimension has only served to reinforce the sense that the value and significance of western literature lie in the regional and historical "reality" it mimetically (and naively) represents. This neglect perpetuates the presumption, in some particular cases merited, that western fiction is aesthetically less imaginative and complex than other American literary genres.

An important aspect of the aesthetic complexity of western literature, however, derives precisely from writers' anxiety about historical content, especially insofar as historians and novelists alike have wrestled with the supposed divide between the so-called frontier and post-frontier Wests. Retrospection has been a hallmark of western writing even before Frederick Jackson Turner sought to formulate the significance of the frontier in American history. This study's starting point would seem to mark an ending, the final transformation of western "foreign" lands into national territory in the 1890s. But most of the fiction and the essays I examine (with the exception of Turner's and Owen Wister's work), stress continuity over disjunction between frontier and post-frontier, past and present, western settings in an ongoing literary history. Twentieth-century avatars of the literary West reveal the persistence and influence of the frontier as both setting and theme – up through the "revisionist" 1960s, when many new stories about the West's literary legacies emerge.

Yet, even more than with the frontier, much of the literary West's recurring preoccupation is with marriage, the unexpected but inescapable lens through which writers in this book focus on the West's ongoing national significance. That literary focus has served its own revisionist imagination of history. Literary concerns with western marriage, in settings both before and after the "end" of the frontier and in both formula Westerns and more "high brow" western fiction, counter the prevailing cultural myth that the frontier chiefly produced the masculine individual, that national figure celebrated in much formula Western fiction and film. In contrast, the nation we find epitomized in so much literature of the West resembles what we might call (to put it mildly) a dysfunctional family. As Wallace Stegner writes, "the exacerbated individualism of the frontier has left us with . . . a set of assumptions and beliefs that are often comically at odds with the facts of life."[5] Marriage is not a past

and finalized historical process but an ongoing social fact through which the fiction in this study revises nineteenth-century allegorical readings of the West as America's progressive destiny. Like their literal counterparts in the nineteenth century, twentieth-century literary marriages in the American West are burdened by the clash between belief and experience. They also carry in themselves a nation's anxious wish – and because of the violence that surrounds them, ultimately a futile one – to perpetuate a "civilized" genealogy in a region not known for American civility during western conquest and settlement.

Historically, the analogy between marriage and the nation has had profound effects. The founders of the Republic, as Nancy Cott demonstrates in *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation*, "learned to think of marriage and the form of government as mirroring each other," as two forms of consensual union. The similarity was thought to be more than analogical: "actual marriages of the proper sort were presumed to create the kind of citizen needed to make the new republic succeed" and, later, to perpetuate "the race" and civilization. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, "the thematic equivalency between polygamy, despotism, and coercion on the one side and between monogamy, political liberty, and consent on the other resonated through the political culture of the United States." If monogamy "founded the social and political order," Cott writes, "then groups practicing other marital systems on American soil might threaten the polity's soundness." Marital nonconformists, such as Indians and Mormons, were most commonly defined as racially different from the white majority, even when, in the case of the Mormons, they were white.[6] Yet some government officials in the early nineteenth century, reinforcing the analogy between marriage and nation, had thought of interracial marriage as a means toward civilization-building and national unity. In 1816, Secretary of War William Crawford recommended that the US government should encourage intermarriage between Native Americans and Americans if other attempts at harmony failed.[7] French and American explorers also thought intermarriage would help solidify political alliances, and in a critical respect, the marriage between Toussaint Charbonneau and Sacagawea during the Lewis and Clark expedition ensured the survival of that national expedition. Especially after the Civil War, in which the non-consensual nature of slavery was seen to violate the necessary consent within both domestic and national life, the institution of laws in many western states prohibiting interracial marriage, which aligned racial with religious and national forms of identity, disguised the ways in which such consensual unions were once thought

to help the nation. The Mormons, as this book explores in the work of Zane Grey, were an important transitional group against which the nation defined itself based on marital practice and the question of consent. For decades much of the nation perceived them as domestic aliens whose "unChristian" practice of polygamy its opponents compared to slavery and who were often seen to be nonwhite, in conspiracy with Indians, and a threat to the nation. With their adoption of monogamy, the Mormons became nationally assimilable, "white," and eventually of little interest to western fiction, which turned instead toward images of alienated domesticity once marital and racial "others," against whom the nation constructed its identity out West, were thought of in the past tense.

In the present moment, with court and electoral battles being waged against resurgent polygamy and the possibility of same-sex marriage, marriage has remained pivotal in many Americans' self-understanding and identity as a purportedly unified citizenry that freely consents to representative government. Yet beliefs in consent, like the conventional love plot in fiction, obscure the ways in which marriage laws and conventions – and not the consenting parties – have prescribed gender roles, circumscribed racial identity, and delineated the parameters of citizenship. It has never been simply a private institution, and literary representations of it have always, self-consciously or not, engaged social questions, traditionally by domesticating women.

While a happy marriage has rarely been the sustaining subject of good fiction (as opposed to its culmination in the marriage plot), marriage and the novel have had a long affair.[8] In literature of the American West, the preoccupation with marriage is especially fraught with questions about the identity of American whiteness and the meaning of western history. As the literal and figurative bearer of personal hopes and national legacies, marriage throws open a previously sealed window onto the relation between western literature and western history. There are three main reasons for this. First, the stories told in these fictions often abjure the romance with individualism upon which popular western myth and some past western historiography so relies – and on this thematic level they share with the New Western History an important revision of the optimistic story of frontier individualism. Second, and more significantly, because the often violent conflicts surrounding marriage usually occur between family members and whites, the fiction in this study represents a shift away from the historical and the literary preoccupation in pre-twentieth-century western writing with white/Indian

ethnic difference and conflict. Violence between familiars, in the West's allegorically burdened context, suggests that the terms of a dominant culture such as masculinity and the racial and national identity of the American are unsettled once "civilization," in the name of which the West was settled, no longer defines itself against the "vanishing" and "savage" Other. While violence is the traditional preserve of masculinity in formula Westerns, the pervasive theme of female domesticity versus male lawless freedom breaks down in other twentieth-century western texts, in which marriage does not serve to civilize the savage male violence of the frontier but rather serves to bring that violence home. Third, the relationship between marriage and nation demonstrates how allegory operates in literary and historiographical retrospection, by putting one set of narrative terms ("this story about these two people") into a metaphorical relationship with another, often "larger," set of terms ("this story about the West"), transforming the personal into the political, the literary into the historiographical, and *vice versa*. Allegory structures the relationship between marital particulars and national universals, but also structures the present's reading of the past, whether in historiography or literature. As Doris Sommer shows in the context of Latin American romances, and as stories of the American West demonstrate in their own way, the allegorizing of nation through intimate relationships has consequences, both literary and historical, that need to be considered in tandem in order adequately to assess how readers imagine themselves as citizens.[9]

I share in the revisionist spirit of feminist scholars who have moved the focus away from masculine genres to literature by women, yet I have chosen to focus on both genders in relation to each other – to see women and men in texts by women and men – and to look at Westerns in relation to other western fiction. Early twentieth-century Westerns, I argue, have important literary relations outside of the genre that they influenced. This collective focus attempts to trouble both the identity politics of race, gender, or genre, and the binaries that critics of western literature too often rely upon in revising the Western's dominance – as if, to paraphrase Sommer in her study, one's discourse were grounded in the allegedly stable discourse that is other to it. Such binary structures of myth and counter-myth, masterplots and subversive plots, dominant and marginal, masculine dominance and feminine resistance, "old" and "new" (a western binary that is getting old) – and indeed the binary of history and literature – put things into relief politically, but they do not always relieve us of the contradictions of literary history.

While I favor these progressive politics and admire many aspects of the criticism they inspire, I also want to be circumspect about the tendency to romanticize the figure of the author that can ensue, often in an attempt to salvage what is redemptive in the troubled West. The opposite tendency – to reject reading an author for political reasons – is one I have more sympathy with, but see as structurally related to the romanticizing tendency. (I am thinking, for example, of the title of Elizabeth Cook-Lynn's *Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner and Other Essays*, and of how some critics have celebrated that title in studies about neither Stegner nor Cook-Lynn.) These concomitant tendencies – to romanticize the good folks and divide them from the demonized bad folks – are a legacy of the Western itself (if not the Western world). It is that dualistic tendency I want to resist and rethink in this book. To see such binaries in structural relation to each other is neither to neutralize their moral or political differences nor to ignore the historical legacies that shape canons. In the culture and politics of identity, it is difficult not to take authors and texts personally and politically, and yet the ethics of reading involve a necessary displacement of the reader's self in order properly to read the alterity within literary ambiguity, and to respect the otherness within the self. This is not a matter of "eating one's spinach," but of appreciating what the particular act of reading involves, and by so doing, of increasing its pleasures and surprises. As critics we should be as open to confronting literary history as we are open to confronting history itself, with revisionist eyes. When we shy away from the challenge to reread books we think we already know, books that seem to justify our political disdain of them, we have started to give up the critical battle, though we may win the political fight.

I confess that I am not a fan of Westerns. I don't like the social categories they often celebrate, let alone the effect they have had on so much American culture and politics. But the literary effects of demonization fascinate me: what gets left out; how the text reveals its blindnesses; whether the ethical failure of a novel like Wister's *The Virginian*, for example, is related to its aesthetic form or narrative methods. I am also fascinated by how our own critical retrospect blinds us to what a book's first readers immediately recognized. The chief villain of Zane Grey's most popular Western is a Mormon cleric, not a cattle rustler or Indian – and the historical specificity of the Mormon polygamist, who holds relatively little interest for most readers and critics today, enthralled the novel's first readers. As with people, the books that we think we know best can surprise us when we suspend our assumptions. There is, for

example, more *overt* male homoeroticism and female homosocial desire in Owen Wister and Wallace Stegner, respectively, than in Willa Cather, and there is more violence, if one merely counts literary corpses, in Willa Cather and Joan Didion than in Owen Wister's and Zane Grey's influential Westerns. Most significant of all, in bringing together Westerns and other major western writers from the turn of the century through the 1960s, this study reveals that women as a civilizing force are no longer what the American Adam, like Huck Finn, lights out for the territory to escape. Indeed, there are no American Adams from the classic mold here. Neither are there particular, Turnerian individuals – even in Turner's historiography. Instead, there are complicated, often very unromantic and at times exceedingly violent relationships that carry the burden of the western past, rendered for us through the distortions of retrospection and the perspective of lonely narrators. It is as if the American Adam has grown up and realized that his youth has passed him by. He looks back into someone else's relationship or domestic situation, searching for but not finding that which no American has ever found: a perpetually happy home on the range.

In chapter 1 I lay out the interrelated thematic, formal, and historical reasons that marriages in the literary West represent allegories of national consolidation and conflict. Violence between familiars in these novels compels us to rethink the binary of savagery and civilization upon which Manifest Destiny and Turner's historiography relied in order to justify western conquest. Retrospective readings of the West's national significance in the twentieth century, I argue, continue to allegorize the American nation, but with far less confidence as to what masculinity, whiteness, and American character mean after the end of so-called "frontier democracy." Chapters 2 to 7 form two parts: chapters 2–4 concern writers who would seem to serve the designs of American empire (after the era of conquest) and chapters 5–7 concern writers who call imperial designs into question by self-consciously distinguishing between narrative and experience and by figuring marriage in ways that revise the Western's traditional allegories of male conquest and female submission, of male freedom and female civilizing constraint. In both parts, however, I explore the persistence of forms of violence surrounding marriages that are resistant to assimilation within (white) nationalist ideology. Self-consciously or not, all of the writers in this study read the West in ways that undermine popular American faith in individual freedom and the promise of Progress. Yet the writers in this study are by no means an

exhaustive list of the western writers, from Jack London to Marilynne Robinson, who have imagined the western past and future through marriage and family. Nor are they universally representative: this book does not, for example, attempt to represent what literary marriages might mean in relation to national identity for Native American, Chicano/a, and other writers of color. My hope is that my readings will provide a way of thinking through such issues in other texts as well as the comparative functions of nostalgic retrospection; that it will offer a way of contrasting relations between the personal and the public, between historical legacies and the literary imagination, or between violence and romance among any number of literary canons that make up the cultural complexity of a region we can only ethnocentrically call "the West."

I examine Turner's poetic historiography in chapter 2 as a fusion of secularized Christian allegory and Emersonian organicism and argue that the frontier thesis represses historical agency and violence in order to create a unified national meaning by means of its literary debts. In chapter 3, I explore how Owen Wister's influential Western *The Virginian* drives toward the altar of marriage in order to perpetuate the author's racial ideology, which figures "democracy" in quite different ways from Turner's. What Wister omits – chiefly, the challenge posed to the heterosexual imperative by same-sex desire – produces a narrative of affective disjunctions that mirror the divorce between first-person narrative and forms of omniscience throughout the novel. In chapter 4, I argue that although Mormon polygamy has largely been neglected in readings of Zane Grey's immensely popular Western *Riders of the Purple Sage*, it in fact impels the imperialistically loaded plot to rescue the heroine Jane Withersteen, especially in the context of the racially "not-quite-Other" figure of the Mormon polygamist who seeks to claim her. A magazine crusade against resurgent polygamy, which Grey was aware of when he began writing his novel, aroused both paranoia and nostalgia in American readers – who would make Grey's novel a bestseller.

Chapter 5 turns to the divided world of Willa Cather, who writes against the sort of western marriage plot found in Owen Wister in order to create an anti-masculinist form of western heroism and a "country" resistant to the call of Americanization, especially through her decoupling of marriage from prevalent notions of civilization. In *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, and *A Lost Lady*, Cather's nostalgia draws on the desire for western romance yet ironically and self-consciously reveals the nationalist and blinding effects of such nostalgic retrospection. I trace the development of this critique of the West's function in US national symbolic culture

through a writer Cather influenced, F. Scott Fitzgerald, in chapter 6. *The Great Gatsby* is also a response to the Turnerian ideals that had become popular in American culture by the time Turner republished his essays on the frontier in 1920. Writing against a Turnerian paradigm, Fitzgerald portrays the self-reflexive and destructive allure of "the West" through the marriage and violence of Tom and Daisy Buchanan and through the longing and retrospection of Jay Gatsby and Nick Carraway, all of whom Nick calls "westerners." In his unfinished novel *The Love of the Last Tycoon: A Western*, Fitzgerald extends the idea of the West into a form of the Hollywood imaginary in order to offer a critique of American Enlightenment ideas and to demonstrate how retrospection and indeed the sign of "the West" itself allow one to imagine causality where there are accidents and to erase agency where there is responsibility for violence. In chapter 7, I turn to Wallace Stegner and Joan Didion, whose literary debts to Cather and Fitzgerald, respectively, emerge in their shared concerns for how belief and historical experience collide in shattered western marriages. For both Stegner and Didion, the troubled western past is irresolvably present in marriages that draw upon both historical and literary sources and that represent the causal effects of romantic hopes on western American experience. In the Afterword, I revisit debates about the relationship between western literary and historical study in order to argue that the literary West and western literary criticism not only provide a thematic revision of some "old" western history, as recent critics have argued, but also challenge us to recognize why the literary and the historical are inseparable whenever we read the West. And there is another challenge for western literary critics: to locate, in the literary object of our study rather than in the disciplinary disagreements between ourselves and western historians, the value of our own critical enterprise.

CHAPTER ONE

Western unions

> The United States is unique in the extent to which the individual has been given an open field.
>
> Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Problem of the West" (1896)

> The nomadic, bachelor West is over, the housed, married West is established.
>
> Owen Wister, preface to *Members of the Family* (1911)

Is the Marlboro Man lonely? Answering this question demonstrates the social truth behind this icon of the antisocial western individual. If we answer yes, we imply that his solitude is neither desirable nor sustainable. If we answer no, we have yet kept company with him by believing in his contentment and admiring him for it. Whether we answer yes or no, we have put ourselves in the picture, animated him. Of course, we can also refuse to pose the question and consider it meaningless, in which case we kill him off. Indeed, he cannot live without us. His continuing life, manifest in a dying advertising campaign, attests to a deep contradiction in American beliefs and experience. Many Americans celebrate an individual in the landscape of the American West who never settled the West by himself or even much lived there in his grand isolation. He does not refer to himself in his individuality so much as to some need in those who believe in him; he is a social creation who embodies a profoundly asocial ideal. To the extent that he ever existed, he always had a family, if only one he left behind; he probably had a best friend, some admirers and enemies, occasionally a wife and children – and a federal government that backed him up. He resembles his admirers more than they may want to believe, and perhaps for this reason he is left alone without having questions put to him about his feelings.

In her analysis of a more fleshed-out cousin of the Marlboro Man, Joan Didion argues that in making a hero of Howard Hughes, Americans exhibit their instinctive love of "absolute personal freedom, mobility,