Introduction
Historicizing the American Literary West

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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.[1] 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.[2] "His favorites were the American westerns, where the good guys always won."[3]

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."[4] 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.[5] 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."[6] 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.[7]

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.[8] 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."[9] 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."[10]

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."[11] 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."[12] 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

Middle East. At one point, she expresses concerns for her father's safety, how she is "afraid of Texas, afraid of the cowboys that would lasso him away from us," while at another point, her father wonders whether he should buy "some cattle," a "gun," and a "cowboy hat" in order to fit in to his new home better.[13] After settling in Texas, Nidali also notes uncanny similarities between the Middle East and the American West. While cowboys inspire fear, the landscape appears familiar to her. Upon her arrival at the family's home in Texas, she considers the "short dirt" road to her new house as akin to "desert" streets in the Middle East; these roads are "cut out of rock, like in Palestine."[14] Arriving in the United States, she is surprised that no one asks about weapons of mass destruction and that she is able to avoid undergoing a full body search at the airport. On the other hand, the savagery/civilization binary underpinning the western starts to take on new meanings for her. The character notes that many streets in Texas are lined with "cans of Lone Star," which she discovers is not "the soda they drink here," even though "some people could drink it like water."[15] She is also disappointed by the apparent barbarity of Americans, especially in terms of bodily hygiene. "There was no bidet. This came as a shock," she says. "How did Americans wipe their asses?"[16]

Perhaps it is no surprise that at a time when U.S. borders constitute sites of deep anxiety and are being shored up in the name of national security, writers in the West as well as scholars of the region are increasingly addressing broader geographical frameworks and a more diverse set of archives. This move entails connecting stories of the American West to global contexts, extending postcolonial criticism to literary histories of the region, placing previously marginalized groups at the center of this work, and questioning what counts as the beginnings and the ends of regions themselves. In his recent book *How to Read the American West: A Field Guide*, William Wyckoff addresses many of these issues, reminding us of the ways geographers have long argued that landscapes are never merely local; rather, "every place is connected to and defined by other places." He takes care to examine how western American landscapes are always linked "to the world beyond" and thus require the use of greater scales of assessment and frames of study.[17] Hsuan Hsu likewise notes the ways regions themselves are called into being through larger geopolitical pressures and concerns taking place in other spaces or across national and global contexts. In this way, regions carry certain obligations. As Hsu explains, the region is frequently meant to embody "familiarity, loyalty, and authentic experience," while representing a past that is perennially threatened by the forces of globalization.[18]

In their introduction to a recent volume of the *European Journal of American Studies*, Florian Freitag and Kirsten A. Sandrock also call attention to broader frameworks that are reshaping regional studies and literary histories. "Border(land) studies, New Southern studies, and Postwestern studies exemplify the shifting scholarly landscape in the field of regionalism towards more border-crossing, processual, pluralistic, and rhizomatic concepts of regions."[19] They posit a practice of "transnational regionalism" that "reads, and re-reads, regional texts from new perspectives while also adding new, previously marginalized texts to the debate"; such an approach to the writing of regional literary histories "enriches and diversifies the imaginary reservoir of a given region, destabilizing and deterritorializing received myths about and unified concepts of North American regions without necessarily doing away with the concept of region as such."[20]

Walter Mignolo's observations about the colonial matrix and recent realignments in hemispheric politics are useful to note in the context of transnational regionalisms and western American literary history. As he points out, the twenty-first century has been marked by historical shifts in the global economy and world politics toward the East in an act of what he calls "de-westernization." Mignolo examines developments in the seventeenth century when European cartographers used their vantage point to divide the planet into two hemispheres. In the nineteenth century, the United States appropriated the Western Hemisphere for its own geopolitical purposes, declaring U.S. claims across the continent and thus upending Europe's power. This was a critical development for the nation in a global setting. As he reminds us, "up to that point, the idea of the 'Western hemisphere' referred to European colonies in the New World/America. From that moment onward Western Hemisphere named and defined 'America' from a US perspective and management: the US became equivalent to America."[21] Theodore Roosevelt, a crucial figure in casting the American West as a significant terrain for U.S. interests, went further by proclaiming that Europe would remain out of "American" soils and that the United States would now serve as the "guardian" and "putative manager" of the hemisphere.[22] As Mignolo explains, since that time the "rhetoric of salvation changed," as the nation's foreign policy began positioning the United States as the agent of "world order and world freedom."[23] In adopting a "vision of its own imperial design molded in the name of liberty," the United States ultimately obscured its participation in the colonial matrix by framing its imperial discourse as "civilization, progress, and development."[24]

The logic of the colonial matrix addressed by Mignolo deeply informs the historical emergence of the western itself, with its central conflict embodied in the struggle between the forces of savagery and civilization along an ever-shifting colonial frontier. While the genre is often framed as a uniquely American form, various scholars have pointed out that the western is actually not a homegrown genre, but in fact developed out of a global history of settler colonialism. The western thus shares much in common with narrative traditions found in other cultures, where the tale may be known as the colonial adventure story, the Outback narrative, or the *plaasroman* (African farm novel).[25] In narratives that wage battles between savagery and civilization and that pre- or coexist alongside the western, however, there is often tremendous ambivalence about the modernizing project, just as there has always been resistance to the cultural and political enterprises upholding the colonial matrix.[26] Mignolo points to recent projects of de-westernization and other long-standing efforts to "decolonize subjectivities that have been captured and enslaved by the rhetoric of salvation and the illusion of happiness and well-being in the name of modernity."[27]

This collection of critical essays on the literary history of the American West places regional production in comparative and global contexts while also addressing the diverse cultural traditions and critical perspectives composing this body of work. In adopting a more extensive scope of study and frame of reference, critics are able to take up the challenge offered by Christine Bold in her recent analysis of the "frontier club" and American cultural power. Bold's work shows how an elite group of eastern Anglo-Saxon males in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries played a crucial role in defining the region in narrow ways that served to enhance and uphold their own racial and class interests. The literary and regional visions they produced and promoted worked alongside legislation they helped enact, all of which shaped the development of the American West for their own purposes. In doing so, members of the "frontier club" successfully marginalized other voices, interests, and understandings of the region, such that today scholars are still grappling with the consequences of these exclusionary practices.[28] Bold's study encourages critics to ask questions about how we narrate the "beginnings" in our literary histories of the region and to attend to how our frames of study may unwittingly work to exclude or marginalize key players from the past and the present.

In many ways, this work also connects with observations offered in Amy Hamilton and Tom Hillard's edited volume *Before the West Was West*, which asks important questions about how we determine the starting

points – the ways regions such as the American West come into being as such. The editors note, for instance, that while "the intersections of geography and culture have been foregrounded in attempts to reconsider region – and the West in particular – issues related to temporality have been in the background."[29] In his foreword to the volume, Michael P. Branch also argues that in focusing their primary attention on "the 'where' of the West in the trans-Mississippi region," literary historians have often restricted their work to a narrow "temporal framework" that ultimately "ignores important elements of its ideological roots, which were struck in soils east of the Mississippi, south of the Rio Grande, and long before the dawn of the nineteenth century."[30] As he explains, "there is tremendous value in asking when was the West, for it is only within the fluid context of cultural and environmental change that the dynamic literary geography of the region can be fully figured."[31] Hamilton and Hillard further point out that by questioning the starting point of the West, literary historians may also succeed in diversifying their object of study by destabilizing the idea that "there is a singular western story."[32]

In an effort to narrate more inclusive stories about the region, *A History of Western American Literature* opens with the section "Homelands," which complicates how critics determine what constitutes the beginning moments of the literary West and how the space has accrued a regional identity. In her essay, Susan Bernardin examines literary and cultural production before the West was understood or defined as such, at a time when the terrain was a homeland to numerous and distinct Indigenous populations and a space that would only later become the site of many nations' colonial desires. In his chapter, José F. Aranda Jr. contributes to a similar critical project that complicates historical beginnings by tracing "the Recovery Project" of Hispanic literatures in the United States, which locates and examines published work written between the colonial period and the 1960s. Ultimately, the project has helped recast literary histories of the region by offering more extensive visions of the western American past that are not centered on Anglo origins.

The process through which a landscape becomes a region is the subject of a number of essays in the second part of the collection. This section, "Making a Region," begins with Nicole Tonkovich's discussion of gender, race, and national imperatives embodied in the domestic frontiers shaped by European American women writers in settler colonial communities. The section continues with Nathaniel Lewis's treatment of nineteenth-century tales of labor that involve trading, mining, and ranching and that may be read for the intellectual work they performed

in transforming the space into an American terrain. Next, Sarah Jaquette Ray's essay about how western nature writing in general and the nature essay in particular historically served U.S. expansionist interests by recording, describing, and organizing landscapes so that these spaces could be better understood, claimed, and managed for the national mission. In addition, Nicolas S. Witschi focuses on the development of a distinct regional voice and tradition of humor in the "local color" writing of the nineteenth century, while Daniel Worden addresses the emergence of the literary western, its relation to other traditions of popular writing including the detective story, its malleability as a cultural form that is able to address a number of ideological positions, and finally its persistence in the twenty-first century in a wide range of global culture.

The third part of the collection is titled "Geographies of the Literary West." Susan Naramore Maher's essay in this section excavates the buried histories of dispossession, violence, and thwarted dreams in Great Plains literature, while Audrey Goodman's essay examines the complex intermingling of Indigenous, Latino/a, and Anglo cultures in the literary borderlands of the Southwest. Nancy S. Cook addresses conflicted understandings of the Rocky Mountain West, as numerous populations struggle over the place-based meanings of this diverse terrain, while Stephanie LeMenager attends to the different outcomes that result in offering social and cultural definitions of the Pacific Northwest or in choosing ecological ways of explaining regional development. In her essay, Ernestine Hayes examines the important forms of knowledge that emerge when literary critics remap the Far North of Canada and the United States from Indigenous rather than settler colonial perspectives. Finally Krista Comer extends discussions of regional literary production to incorporate global concerns. She notes that while the U.S. West has always had an international dimension, critics must proceed with caution in using transnational perspectives in their histories of regional cultural production, lest they unwittingly replicate the expansionist claims and acquisitionist efforts of their literary and political predecessors.

The final section of the volume is titled "The Twentieth Century and Beyond: Literary Movements and Critical Perspectives." In her chapter on early cinematic westerns, Christine Bold restores to memory Indigenous presences and absences and foregrounds how evidence of Native performances in these films is often "hidden in plain sight," left undetected by audiences and critics who are trained to overlook Indigenous contributions to the early history of cinema.

In his essay, Dana Phillips examines western American literature and the concept of "environing," a term he borrows and extends from Timothy Luke to address the ways environments are never static or inert entities, but function in an interactive manner with the human populations who historically engage and produce them in turn. Lee Clark Mitchell's chapter examines the tradition of hardboiled or noir fiction in the American West as a body of writing typically set in urban spaces that displaces romantic notions of the region as a wilderness or that celebrates it as an unspoiled terrain. Robert Bennett also reframes critical discussions about the region in his essay on Beat writers. Rather than focusing on the Beats as a tradition or generation, he redirects our discussions to ideas about geography and movement, specifically to the diasporic mobility of Beat authors, whose travels internationally shaped the concerns and themes of their writings about the region.

John Gamber's essay likewise examines ideas about temporality and place. His discussion of Native American writers and the literature of sovereignty points out how Indigenous writers counter erasure and reconfigure literary history by imagining new futures for Native peoples. Meanwhile, Jane Hseu restores to memory the literary production of Asian America, examining how popular understandings of the region and stereotypes about race have often marginalized Asian Americans and their contributions to the West in general and the development of the region's literature in particular. Jonathan Munby likewise notes how a focus on the frontier myth has necessarily excluded African Americans from literary histories of the region. His argument shifts critical attention to how black writers productively worked both with and against this rhetoric in narrating African American experiences across rural and urban Wests.

Andrew Patrick Nelson contributes to discussions of western cinema by focusing on Hollywood film production after the 1930s, tracing the development of the genre across a time when it reached tremendous heights of popularity. While fewer westerns are being produced today, Nelson points out that the genre is gaining new attention as a prestige art form that is now able to garner important awards and gain greater respectability and presence in the industry. Next, Stephen Tatum takes up the challenges of historicizing urban spaces by looking at the emergence of the New West and by using critical regional studies that attend to postmodern developments and the globalizing world system, both of which are rapidly reshaping the region's economies, identities, and narratives. Meanwhile, David Agruss redirects popular accounts of the region's literary history, using queer theory and close readings of the literary and cinematic productions

of *Brokeback Mountain* as a means of challenging the heteronormativity that has typically defined the West. Finally, Neil Campbell examines the emergence of new narrative possibilities for the region that are offered by what might be called the post-western, a broad term describing developments in literary, cinematic, and critical texts that disrupt Frederick Jackson Turner's "creation myth" about American national identity.

During an era of rapid global change ranging from climate and other environmental transformations to increased flows of culture, capital, and labor, scholars of the U.S. West are extending and complicating their conceptualizations and historical understandings of the region. New literary scholarship is attending to the ways the places and histories of the West often exceed the confines of the region yet is also proceeding with some caution, adopting greater frames of study while being careful not to engage in colonizing practices, or what Mignolo might call projects of "re-westernization."[33] As this collection seeks to demonstrate, the field of western American literary and cultural production remains a vibrant area of inquiry, as regional, national, and global scholarship along with critical studies of race, gender, and sexuality continue to complicate our literary histories as well as our spatial and cultural understandings of this diverse body of literature.

Notes

1 For examples of this work, see Ella Habiba Shohat and Evelyn Azeeza Alsultany, eds., *Between the Middle East and the Americas: The Cultural Politics of Diaspora* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013); Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Press, 1987); Chadwick Allen, *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); Sonia Saldívar-Hull, *Feminism on the Border: Chicana Politics and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); and Neil Campbell, *The Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008).
2 Firoozeh Dumas, *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir Growing up Iranian in America* (New York: Villard, 2003), 88.
3 Ibid., 89.
4 Firoozeh Dumas, *Laughing without an Accent: Adventures of a Global Citizen* (New York: Random House, 2009), 161.
5 Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xviii.