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Introduction

The American West has always been a locale both physically real and ideologically substantial, with a distinctive topography and a history the contours of which have no recorded precedent. From the colonial period forward, the region has helped to define the European as well as the American imagination. The lines of demarcation have perpetually changed. The "West" started as a boundary region beginning only a few miles inland from the East Coast. In early British and French explorer narratives, the lush, mysterious, foreboding, and ultimately sublime wilderness attracted adventurers with an almost intoxicating force. Certainly, the aspirations of these men and the monarchs who commissioned them were largely material, but written reflections reveal deeper, more indefinable motives. Even their drive for acquisition took much energy from what F. Scott Fitzgerald so eloquently defined as "the incomparable milk of wonder." In pondering the regions west of the first settlements, the early Puritans thought of the unsettled land in typological terms, as a dark "wilderness" of spiritual trial and transformation. Later fiction writers like James Fenimore Cooper, Robert Montgomery Bird, and William Gilmore Simms imagined the West as the source ground for a quintessential American story: the frontier narrative, which has become perhaps the most dominant Western world mythology since the Renaissance. In literature, film, pictorial art, and photography, stories of the frontier and the American West have been exported successfully throughout the world, and they have been received with enthusiasm from Western Europe, into Asia, through the Middle East, to India. This interest has led to a tradition of Western writing and an identifiable regional literature – the literature of the American West.

British, French, and other northern European settlers transformed their experiences into stories, and the West as an idea was initially conceived in terms of an East/West trajectory. The "West," always a word frequently used, was alternatively described as both "wilderness" and "frontier," and the geographical line that distinguished the region moved from the coast, into the

Alleghenies, past them to the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains, to the "Pastures of Plenty" in California's Great Central Valley, and further to the cliffs and surf-bound jutting rocks of Big Sur. Colonial writers ranging from John Smith, Samuel de Champlain, William Bradford, J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, and later Thomas Jefferson explored the shaping influence of Western lands on human identity. The expansion of the new nation westward in the nineteenth century fueled this mythic trajectory of mind, captured perhaps most vividly in Walt Whitman's celebratory poem of Manifest Destiny, "Passage to India." In the late nineteenth century, this East-to-West pattern of historical movement led to the most dominant historiographic understanding, which was articulated by Frederick Jackson Turner in "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893). Reflecting on what he saw as the closing of the American frontier, which he dubiously defined as an unsettled, open, unoccupied space, Turner argued that the frontier and the movement westward was the defining motive of American historical development. His consideration was valid to the extent that it recognized something collective and universal in the American imaginary, a ubiquitous idea of American cultural identity that found and still finds expression in frontier mythology. However, clouded by a Eurocentric bias somewhat typical of the nineteenth century, Turner articulated an incomplete history, and in doing so offered a false narrative, one that motivated more than a half-century of American historiographic practice. In fact, the region now understood as the American West was never empty, having been occupied by numerous groups of indigenous peoples. Its settlement was circular rather than linear, beginning with Spanish colonization and continuing with a series of migrations including Asian immigrants, former African American slaves, Hispanic migrants from various locations in a series of waves, and a constant reconfiguration of Native American cultural identities. All of these cultures and peoples produced the literature of the American West.

As is often the case when a literature is explored in regional terms, a number of issues form the complex thematic texture in Western writing. Topography is central. The themes of perpetual migration and transience, settlement, familial displacement, cultural hybridization and identity formation, resource scarcity and competition, aridity and the concomitant environmental concerns – all of these inform the "New Western Writers," now a rather conventional and rather reductive term used to describe authors, poets, and playwrights roughly of the mid-twentieth century. Political conflict dovetails with these concerns, as the inevitable competition that emerges between distinct groups, some powerful and some disenfranchised, becomes a tangible force in the creation of cities and communities, as well as industrial and agrarian infrastructure. The history and literature of the

American West takes shape from these very tangible realities, but as scholars have continued to explore the region and its writing, new lines of inquiry and new layers of understanding have more recently emerged. These include transnational American studies, borderlands criticism, and ethnicity studies, as well as eco-criticism and environmental justice studies. The relative youth of Western cities makes them a primary focus of study, and the role California and other states have played in the formation of the New Left, often in cities ranging from Los Angeles to San Francisco, and Portland to Seattle, have served to inform if not redefine the contours of public discourse and public policy nationwide.

Transnational and transcultural considerations call attention to the circular nature of the West's colonial history, recalling truths already known but often ignored. In a flash of historical time, the American West was a magnet for a plethora of cultures, religions, languages, economies, and continually dynamic trans-hemispheric linkages. In the early nineteenth century, President Andrew Jackson, who hailed from Kentucky, self-identified as a "Westerner," and in doing so he meant to evoke a range of mythic associations: the frontier, visionary expansionism, egalitarian democracy, the rejuvenating power of violence, and the primacy of the individual. As the boundary shifted, so the range of peoples and cultures that redefined the American West multiplied. Many of the Native Americans who preceded the Spanish conquest were quickly lost to history (although fortunately their lives and cultures are preserved in part in early European explorer narratives), as distinct but hybrid plains cultures emerged – the Sioux, the Comanche, the Apache, and the Kiowa – who built societies and modes of living around the horse. This hybridization is in many ways the grand pattern of Western identity considered in a transnational and transcultural context, as native people reconstituted their own regional cultures, drawing an essential aspect of their sustaining identity from the European settler, while maintaining with stubborn force their own sense of self. In the nineteenth century, these tensions inform the diasporic experiences of migrants from the East certainly, but also from discrete groups like the Mormons and those not frequently enough considered in the linear conception of westward expansion. These included mixed-race Latin peoples, displaced Native Americans, Chinese and Japanese immigrants, African Americans moving during the postbellum period from the slave states, and peoples of various backgrounds displaced by the affirmative materialist dream of an industrial revolution that for them had become a nightmare. It is a process of cultural displacement, migration, blending, and hybridization that continued throughout the twentieth century and into the present time. This remapping of the West, which preserves but enriches the regional and geographic model

with concepts of movement that can be charted along ethnic, economic, and cultural lines, has led to a more complete understanding of the American West as a locus point for an international imaginary. One might note the striking visual representation of this cultural complexity at the conclusion of Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West*. The film begins in a train station, as three outlaws wait to murder the man who will become the film's mysterious but sympathetic protagonist. After the dark fairy tale reaches its conclusion, the iconic image of the train (which appears with evocative frequency throughout the film) emerges again, as a former prostitute provides water to the rail workers who gather around her. Ennio Morricone's score lifts to a crescendo and the camera pans to group of workers – white men, Mexicans, African Americans, others with shrouded faces implying an infinitude of ethnic identities – and the panoply of cultures and peoples merge around perhaps the most evocative symbols of nineteenth-century America, the Western town and the train.

In a contemporary context, the national mood immediately following the defeat of Germany and Japan in World War II was highly vulnerable, and this anxiety is perhaps expressed in the seemingly desperate attempt to retain and reaffirm an American mythology centered still in the premodern rural West. Western films in the 1950s and 1960s demonstrate this sensibility and, interestingly, popular Western television series in the 1960s such as *Bonanza*, *The Big Valley*, and *High Chaparral* are thinly veiled capitalist allegories in which the hero is the Captain of Industry (the rancher) and the villainous antagonist is frequently the indigent poor man who resents the hero's "legitimately" earned success. Running parallel to this allegory is the social reality it embodies in figurative terms. The West that dominates is no longer the rural but the urban and suburban. The Western hero's analog lives certainly on the East Coast, but he has moved to Los Angeles, San Francisco, Portland, and Seattle. In these postwar years, an economic expansion of unprecedented scale occurs. A defense industry focused on the space age locates itself primarily in Southern California, agricultural economies expand, the petroleum industry grows and flourishes, particularly in Texas and California, leading to one of the greatest migrations in American history, initially from East to West, but later from countries around the world. Cities expand and suburbs flourish. Vast Western spaces remained, but people lived primarily in sprawling coastal and semi-coastal regions in vast numbers, and in this context, the social fabric changed. The primacy of extended families faded as nuclear families relocated, and the insularity of the nuclear family was stressed and complicated by the civil rights movement and a rapid reconsideration of gender roles that contributed to or at least ran parallel with rising divorce rates and new familial arrangements. A significant

migration of peoples from the Far East and Middle East occurred as a result of international conflicts and employment opportunities in the new Western economy. Transience, that central reality in the Western experience, was yet again the leitmotif of the postwar West. A mini-mall built in 1950, complete with a supermarket, a movie theater, and a drugstore, decorated with colors and landscapes of the space age, was razed and leveled in 1975. In its place came the new and expanded supermarket, a ten-screen movie theater, a video store, a vegetarian eatery, all draped in the light brown stucco that conformed to earthquake code. Perpetual change and impermanence was the outer projection of the social sphere, as city people struggled to constitute identities – marriages, friendships, political alliances, religious affiliations – in a new urbanized and suburbanized West. This experience of the postwar West and what has come to be called the "post-West" is explored by a host of authors.

Essential to the study of the literature of the American West, a field of inquiry emerged inevitably from a powerful if not distinctively American preoccupation. That school or paradigm has been alternately called eco-criticism, eco-poetics, environmental literary criticism, and green cultural studies. There are traceable linkages between this contemporary critical movement and the history of American nature writing, and these relationships cannot be ignored or underemphasized. Spanish explorers such as Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and Bartolome de la Casas wrote narratives of natural encounter that present American lands in spiritualized, sublime, and often deeply reverential terms. In a reinterpretation of their own experience through biblical typology, colonial Puritans in the Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay Colonies envisioned nature as both wilderness and garden, investing and imbuing it with a deep sense of the sacred. From coast to coast, the earliest settlers and colonists, most religious to varying degrees, defined their relationship with the land spiritually, and contemporary notions of "preservation" were alive in the concept of stewardship, a sense that "ownership" in a conventional sense was an untenable and spiritually bankrupt conception, the seed ground for corruption and religious declension. By no means did these colonists possess a modern environmental sensibility, but the true source of exploitation came from the avaricious material interests that traveled with them in greater numbers on the same transport ships. Thus was initiated an historical tension between the forces of environmental responsibility – a respect for and even a reverence for nature and the natural world – and a powerful legion of interests that saw nature as a thing to mine and exploit for material gain. This tension finds its expression in the work of American transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who are resonating voices speaking in

militant response to the extremes of the Industrial Revolution. Throughout the late nineteenth century and even today, their ideas inform the *zeitgeist* of American environmentalist conception, and it is worth remembering that the national park system as well as the civil rights movement can be directly traced to these nineteenth-century critics of culture and history.

Given the role that nature and the environment have played in the work of many Western authors, it is inevitable that eco-critical considerations would become an important avenue of scholarly endeavor in the field. The notion of region itself invites these approaches because eco-poetics and environmental literary criticism often begins at a fundamentally ontological level, as it inquires into the very meaning of place as a category of understanding. For Western writers and the eco-critics who explore them, nature becomes a physical reality to understand and a perceptual reality in the minds of travelers, settlers, and, in the end, readers. Important and yet quite common questions emerge: In a naturalistic context, what defines our relationship to the land? In what way are we "kin" to it and stewards of its material resources? In the context of its mystery, in what way may we cultivate an experience in nature that transcends the physical? Environmental literature and criticism is varied in its assumption about the nature of these essential relationships, ranging from Marxist-inflected inquiries into the role that literature has played, ideologically, in creating a superstructure supporting exploration and expansion, to historical considerations of the tension between "civilization" as an ideal and "nature" as a sustaining force, to a more contemporary inquiry into the relationship of words and things, between writing and American lands.

Thus, the study of Western American literature has a long history, with a diverse array of authors and genres represented. Critics have explored this distinctive literature for decades from a number of critical perspectives motivated by an evolving set of historiographic assumptions, and recent critical paradigms have served to enrich this field of inquiry and open spaces for a range of new and important realms of understanding. Long-held preoccupations motivated by the unique nature of the Western American experience also deserve continued inquiry, interests that serve to blend the regional and the universal: the human propensity to unspeakable violence, rapacious greed and the will to power, metaphysics and questions related to the existence of God, and the ever-present, malleable, contested, but perennially evocative notion of the "American Dream."

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M. CARMEN GOMEZ-GALISTEO

Transnational Wests: the literature of Spanish exploration

For centuries, the West remained a scarcely known region only very few dared to venture into, which helped to perpetuate its mystery at the same time that it enhanced its attraction. Traces of the presence of the Spaniards, the first Europeans to set foot in the West, can still be found in a number of ways, most visibly in place-names but also in religious, economic, and legal practices as well as in literature (Bolton xlvii–xlviii). As it happened in other territories that would, in time, become part of what now is the United States of America, the first texts produced in the West were written not in English but in Spanish. These were authored by Spanish conquistadors so as to register their exploits. Geographical and ethnological descriptions occupied much space in their writings, but so did their expectations about what was to be found. In their minds, these territories were the setting for legends and myths.

By the time the Spaniards turned their attention to North America, the Spanish conquest and colonization of the Americas had already been under way for several decades. Despite the gold and silver found in New Spain and Peru, the disappointment and frustration at not finding the mythical places that the Spaniards had expected to discover in the New World drove them to explore territories further north. In the minds of the Spaniards, the failure to locate El Dorado, the Seven Cities of Cibola, Calafa Island, the Fountain of Eternal Youth, and other equally magnificent places only meant that they would have to be more extensively searched for. There was absolutely no doubt in their minds that they would eventually come across cities made of solid gold or an island where pearls abounded. After all, had Hernán Cortés not encountered a civilization so wealthy and glorious that he had exacted an enormous ransom from its ruler? Surely, wealth surpassing that already acquired lay waiting to be claimed, free for the taking, as multiple eyewitnesses hinted at and writers promised.

The fact that little was known with certainty about these territories was no deterrent, for folk beliefs, legends, and the dreams of those who had

already been to other American possessions made up for the lack of reliable information (Allen 41–43; Gomez-Galisteo, *Early Visions* 53). In the light of the lack of authoritative sources of information and the discovery of phenomena that contradicted previous sources of knowledge such as the Bible or classical works, the influence of the spirit of adventure the *novelas de caballería* (knight stories) conveyed should not be overlooked or underestimated. An example of this is the fact that California was named after the setting of one of these novels, *Las sergas de Esplandián* (1510) by Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo (Buelna Serrano, Lucino Gutiérrez Herrera, and Ávila Sandoval 354–355).

Fueled by these dreams, the Spaniards enthusiastically undertook the conquest of North America. Expeditions typically followed one of two possible courses – either a full-fledged expedition from Spain (or other Spanish colonial territories) or an *entrada* from a nearby Spanish settlement. In contrast to the careful and time-consuming preparations of an expedition, an *entrada* consisted of a smaller number of conquistadors sent to explore, claim possession of the lands discovered in the name of the Crown, and assess the financial prospects of the area before returning to Spanish territory to report on their findings. Then, if the profitability of the project was deemed worthy, a more organized and better-equipped expedition would be sent. In contrast to the bourgeoning Spanish cities established in the first discovered territories, the settlements in North America "were the northern outposts of Northern Spain, maintained chiefly to uphold the country against foreign intruders and against the centers of Spanish colonial civilization" (Bolton xlv).

Amazed by their findings and wishing to have their deeds properly recorded (more often than not also exaggerated in the process to boost their own importance), Spanish conquistadors, more than newcomers of any other nationality, felt compelled to put their discoveries, thoughts, and impressions in writing (Iglesia 525). As it happened, the narratives, poetry, and drama that the conquistadors wrote in Spanish constitute the first pieces of North American literature – in spite of having often been overlooked in favor of texts written in English about Virginia and New England several decades later. The first text dealing with the West is *The Account* (alternatively known as *La Relación* or *Naufragios*, first published in 1542) by Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca. This work is the chronicle of the nearly decade-long wanderings of three conquistadors (its author, Andrés Dorantes, and Alonso del Castillo) and Estebanico, a Muslim slave. They were members of the ill-fated expedition of Pánfilo de Narváez, the only survivors out of the six hundred who had sailed from Sanlúcar de Barrameda, Spain in June 1527. They would not return to Spanish territory until 1536, when they were

found by troops from New Spain (present-day Mexico) and taken to Mexico City to report to the viceroy. During the years in between, the four survivors had been wandering throughout the Southwest, living among several Native American groups. Cabeza de Vaca penned *The Account*, the written testimony of their experiences, upon his return to Spain as part of his petition to Charles I for a royal pension and other honors. Cabeza de Vaca sought these as a reward in return for what he saw as a most valuable contribution to the advancement of the Spanish presence in America, if only from a literary point of view, as will be explained later in this chapter.

Cabeza de Vaca's work originally followed the formal structure of the *relación* (account) and, to denote this, its original title is *La relacion que dio Aluar nunez cabeça de vaca de lo acaescido en las Indias en la armada donde yua por gouernador Panphilo de Narbaez desde el año de veynte y siete hasta el año de treynta y seys quo bolvio a Seuilla con tres de su compañia* [*The account that Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca gave of what happened in the Indies in the navy where Pánfilo de Narváez was governor from the year 27 to the year 36 when he returned to Seville with three of his company*]. However, Cabeza de Vaca's text soon departed from the rigid conventions of the genre and from the royal instructions regarding official writings that conquistadors were given (Borrero Barrera). The formality of the official report vanishes to instead express the physical and mental anguish of the survivors' trials (Pupo-Walker 279). The exact data and detailed descriptions expected in a report are replaced by imprecision, as Cabeza de Vaca ignores his exact whereabouts, a state of uncertainty matched by his doubts and distress at being in unchartered territory. To this was added his acculturation to the several Native American groups he lived with, adopting a number of roles (go-between, trader, healer [Wade; Gomez-Galisteo, "Subverting Gender Roles"]), further contributing to his confusion (Borrero Barrera). Instead of the official chronicle he was expected to submit as treasurer of the expedition, he created a highly original text that included elements of the *relación* as well as of other colonial texts such as the letter to the king and the *crónica de Indias* (*Chronicle of Indies*) or natural histories, romances of chivalry, the picaresque novel, moral novels, and the pastoral (Bravo-Villasante 8–9), making the resulting work different from existing discourse types (Mignolo quoted in Borrero Barrera). Furthermore, in narrating the miracles and supernatural occurrences that he claimed to have witnessed in the Southwest, his account at times reads like an adventure story, closer to works such as *John Mandeville's Travels* or *The Travels of Marco Polo*.

The vision of the West that Cabeza de Vaca transmitted would become, over the years, deeply ingrained in the popular imagination. He created

an image of the West that to a large extent persists today – the West as an extraordinary place, where man fights for survival against an alien and extremely dangerous environment. Moreover, it is also peopled by Native Americans, who threatened the Europeans' survival but also made them redefine and reconceptualize their own identity. With its emphasis on the miraculous and almost incredible occurrences that happened to them, Cabeza de Vaca's text acquires a literary quality reminiscent of adventure tales. Some of these novel-like elements are probably the product of the writer's imagination and written with the sole purpose of holding readers' attention (different from the aim of the work as a whole, which is to bear testimony to his heroism and reflect well on his character with an eye on being granted royal prerogatives) and owed much to the literary taste of contemporary readers (Maura 220; Pupo-Walker 84). To name but one, a fictional episode is the pirate attack on the ship in which Cabeza de Vaca returned to Spain, which would have not been out of place in the Byzantine novels that were popular readings then (Pupo-Walker 84). *The Account* also contains elements from the *novelas de caballería*, a very favored reading in Spain at the time even though it was already out of fashion in Europe, or the picaresque novel, a typical Spanish genre.

Lost, drifting, with no certainty about his exact location, sometimes enslaved by the Native Americans, at other times regarded as a healer and a miracle-maker, Cabeza de Vaca could conquer neither these territories nor these peoples. His only contribution to the Spanish conquest was his recollections in the form of his book, as he had failed to take possession of new lands: "no me quedó lugar para hacer más servicio de éste, que es traer a Vuestra Majestad relación de lo que en diez años que por muchas y muy extrañas tierras que anduve perdido y en cueros, pudiese saber y ver" (Cabeza de Vaca 4).[1] Nevertheless, his writings served him well enough for his purposes for, even though the next expedition to Florida was assigned to Hernando de Soto, much to Cabeza de Vaca's chagrin, Cabeza de Vaca got the post of *Adelantado* [governor] of Río de la Plata, present-day Argentina. Yet with *The Account* he failed to achieve historical credibility. The emphasis on God having chosen him to carry out important deeds that permeates all his work played against him, as did his recurrent self-portrayal as a hero, and his emphasis on the similarities between his own situation and Jesus Christ's (Maura 45, 134).

That he wrote during the colonial period has not been an obstacle to Cabeza de Vaca being regarded as a forerunner of Chicano literature or even as the first Chicano writer. For Bruce-Novoa, *The Account* should be read as a "founding as well as a fundamental text of Chicano literature and culture" (quoted in Silva). Cabeza de Vaca, like Chicanos, was thoroughly