Review of *Hell of a Vision: Regionalism and the Modern American West* by Robert L. Dorman

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This thorough study of the American West takes as a given the region’s contested and continuously shifting identity among scholars as well as among artists, activists, and government agencies. One of Robert Dorman’s many contributions to the field in Hell of a Vision is his decision to chart the formations of these multiple Wests alongside each other, from the latter half of the nineteenth century to the present day.

The primary texts examined here range from the canonical to the unexpected. Dorman’s archive begins with John Wesley Powell’s maps of the “Arid Region,” produced in 1891 for the U.S. Geological Survey. He later turns to novels by Willa Cather, Owen Wister, Mari Sandoz, and Rose Wilder Lane; films from Sergio Leone’s spaghetti westerns to Brokeback Mountain; and numerous federal legal documents, including the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934 and the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act of 1988. Through these interdisciplinary sets of readings, Dorman demonstrates how the development and modification of the nationalist West—the West as defined by the federal government and perceived by the nation as a whole—gave rise to what he calls the Old West culture industry, only to be supplanted by less mythologized representations of the region in recent decades.

While Hell of a Vision opens with Powell’s panoramic views of the Great Plains and the Rockies from the top of Long’s Peak, Dorman’s investigations of political and cultural change in the more contemporary West focus on the local (urban planning in Portland, Oregon, for example) as much as the regional (the Sagebrush Rebellion, in which conservatives across the Plains and mountain states opposed federal land-use restrictions). No matter the scale of the case study, though, several antagonisms emerge throughout the book: the agrarian West vs. the wilderness West, government intervention vs. self-determination (most notably during the Dust Bowl, when the Great Plains was America’s “disaster zone”), and consumerism vs. conservation, to name a few.

These tensions are accurately reflected in the book’s subtitle, and Dorman ably traces the many lives of regionalism, both as a critical term and as a way of living, throughout the West’s encounter with the modern world. Especially engaging are his discussions of western regionalism as a corrective ideological stance, first against a nationalism that sought to erase cultural difference, and then, in the book’s final chapter, against the de-territorializing effects of globalization. Dorman is careful not to endorse a strident form of regionalism, though, and his balanced perspective throughout the work makes it a useful addition to existing scholarship on the modern West.

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