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Book Review: Manifest and Other Destinies: Territorial Fictions of the Nineteenth-Century United States

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Manifest and Other Destinies: Territorial Fictions of the Nineteenth-Century United States. By Stephanie LeMenager. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004. viii + 285 pp. Notes, index. \$50.00.

Stephanie LeMenager's *Manifest and Other Destinies* is a beautifully researched, elegantly written, authoritative and long-needed reexamination of the fictions that girded American expansion. It is also a model of inventive and interventative scholarship. Across three sections, entitled "Desert," "Ocean," and "River," LeMenager's revelatory readings of Cooper, Melville, Irving, Twain, and dozens of other nineteenth-century novelists, journalists, memoirists, and political commentators explore representations of environments that actively resisted or transformed white agrarian settlement. This is a literary history of the nineteenth-century United States that radically rewrites received understandings of the force and direction of expansionist ideologies across the century.

LeMenager explains in her introduction that "I read the United States' emergence as a continental nation in the nineteenth century through U.S. authors who elaborate a cultural nationalism both older—because more British—and newer—because more global—than Jeffersonian and Jacksonian visions of sturdy yeomen subduing the West." Her insistence that the nineteenth-century United States was more like its past and its future than like the version of the nineteenth century rehearsed through arguments dependent on or even in dialectical opposition to Manifest Destiny is brilliant. Battles for and against Manifest Destiny, LeMenager argues, distract us from attending to the many Wests that not only confounded United States efforts to contain them physically and narratively, but that literally expanded—multiplied and globalized—the possible understandings of national origin and conclusion to include networks of national, racial, and economic affiliation.

The "many Wests" argument is not so unusual, except that LeMenager pushes us to

understand oceans and rivers as existing in a constitutive narrative relationship to the non-static spaces of the West, and she traces how interanimating these three environments were to nineteenth-century cultural nationalisms. Thought together, she argues, these three are as likely to produce north-south oriented or circum-Caribbean affiliations, global market economies, or intervals of extralegal and/or nonwhite space between coastal settlements, as to facilitate the juggernaut fantasies of Manifest Destiny. It is important, LeMenager argues, to attend carefully to the scope and ubiquity of these nineteenth-century countertrajectories. "The sea and West exist in charged, dialectical tension in nineteenth-century U.S. literature," LeMenager explains. "And in the tension between these two coveted domains we can recognize the evolution of a postwestern, postfrontier theory of U.S. empire and nationhood. . . . What might happen if it turned out that the West was like the sea, after all, and more suited to commercial enterprise than to farming? In turn, what if the sea could be farmed? In short, the oceans supported theories of commercial imperialism that, when applied to the West, threatened to denature it, while the West generated images of embodiment that threatened to expose the nature of global commerce on the oceans as a war of attrition."

Manifest and Other Destinies, unlike so many first scholarly monographs, builds to a stunning conclusion. LeMenager's final reading—of Mark Twain's "Extract from Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven," which he published a year before he died—takes her argument to its unexpected but perfect conclusion, portraying Twain's endlessly metastasizing U.S.-shaped Heaven as the "ultimate de-territorialized space of national imagining and corrective to claims of Manifest Destiny." A tour de force.

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