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## Before the West Was West

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*Before the West Was West*



# *Before the West Was West*

Critical Essays on Pre-1800 Literature  
of the American Frontiers

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*Edited and with an introduction by*  
AMY T. HAMILTON AND TOM J. HILLARD

*Foreword by*  
MICHAEL P. BRANCH

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## Foreword

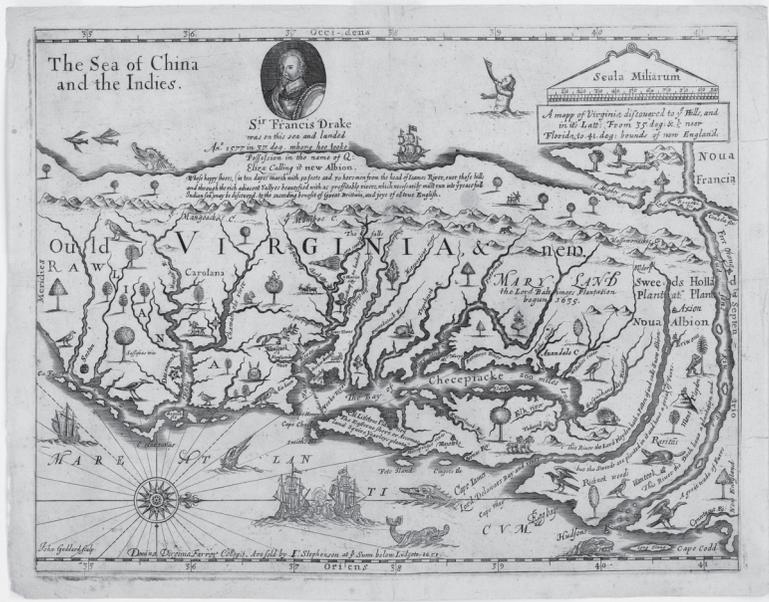
MICHAEL P. BRANCH

As a graduate student at the University of Virginia in the late 1980s, I began working with my friend Dan Philippon on a collection of environmental writing from Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains and Shenandoah Valley. Published by Johns Hopkins University Press in 1996, *The Height of Our Mountains* was an experiment in literary regionalism and bioregionalism. Although the book was geographically circumscribed to a piece of ground not much more expansive than William Faulkner's imagined Yoknapatawpha County, we had a long and well-established place-based literary tradition with which to work. After all, Virginia had been the subject of intense interest—and, consequently, frequent and detailed textual representation—since the time of Thomas Harriot's *Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (1588), Richard Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* (1598–1600), and John Smith's *A Map of Virginia* (1612). The patch of ground was small, but the expanse of four centuries was long. We had time on our side.

Throughout my residency and work in Virginia, however, my imagination inhabited the American West, where I spent summers working, hiking, climbing, paddling, and fishing in a landscape whose vastness dwarfed the mountains and valleys of Virginia. Never mind that even so astute a naturalist as Thomas Jefferson thought the Blue Ridge Mountains to be the highest in North America, here in the big West was the visceral grandeur of the Rockies and Sierra. During this period I also participated in the conferences of the Western Literature Association (WLA), where my annual challenge was to find creative ways to shoehorn the eastern authors whose work I was then studying into what I perceived to be the somewhat constrain-

ing geographical focus of the WLA. In 1992 I snuck Waldo Emerson under the radar by examining his 1871 meeting with John Muir in Yosemite; the following year I pushed Fenimore Cooper through a gap in the fence by placing his 1823 novel *The Pioneers* within the context of helpful work then being done in frontier studies. Although I seem to recall that my Natty Bumppo impression went over fairly well with the generous souls at the WLA, I had the troubling sense that eastern writers whose investment in the West was largely conceptual or imaginative would never be accepted as authentically western. After all, Henry Thoreau wasn't primarily referencing the geographical West when he wrote in his brilliant deathbed essay "Walking" (1862) that "[e]astward I go only by force; but westward I go free." Instead, he was naming and celebrating a mythological West in which the suffocating superficiality and venality of the eastern establishment might be transcended. Not being able to identify the West Thoreau invoked on any map was frustrating. How might I claim that a writer who worked within a single day's walk of the Atlantic was producing western American literature? But if I had reached an impasse, Thoreau's West was no less compelling for that.

As we continued to work on the Virginia book, however, I came to see that what united the earliest writers of Virginia was not that they inhabited and described the East but rather that they imagined and sought the West. Like Thoreau, they associated the West with much more than agricultural opportunity, well-watered pastures, and possible discovery of the Spaniard's bliss. If, like John Smith, one hailed from Lincolnshire, then there was a very real sense in which the coastal colony of Jamestown was the wild West. For seventeenth-century Virginians, the Appalachian Mountains represented the farthest reach of known physical geography. What might lie westward beyond them was anybody's guess. And guess they did. The perception of the West that informed the work of these early writers was for me perfectly crystallized in an unusual map. Originally published in Edward Bland's 1651 work *The Discovery of New Brittain*, John Farrer's *Mapp of Virginia* offered a startling cartographic representation of the West as it existed within the imaginative landscape of many colonial explorers. In the Far-



*Map of Virginia*, by John Farrer (1590–1657). From *The Discovery of New Brittain* (London, 1651), by Edward Bland. The map reprinted here is a fourth state (ca. 1652). Source: Special Collections, University of Virginia Library.

rer map, two-thirds of the North American continent appears east of the Appalachian chain! And on the western side of the Appalachians? There Farrer depicted galleons floating among sea monsters in the great Western Ocean.

In asking *where* the West is, *what* the West is, and *whose* West it is, we have been posing questions that are necessary but not sufficient to a full understanding of the long and remarkable history of western literary representation. As the work of Amy Hamilton, Tom Hillard, and their contributors to *Before the West Was West* makes wonderfully clear, 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. The essays in this collection demonstrate that seeking to apprehend the literary West in temporal as well as spatial and cultural terms leads to a range of new interpre-

tive opportunities and, more importantly, to a suite of productive new questions about westernness and its literary representation. In recent years we have seen the emergence and maturation of a range of exciting critical and theoretical methodologies that have energized the study of western American literature. But the salutary effects of work in the postwestern, polyvocal, or global West, in critical regionalism and bioregionalism, in border studies and ethnic studies, in space and place studies, and in revisionist western American history have not fully addressed what the editors rightly identify as a persistent problem of periodization. There remains, in popular literary and cinematic culture if not also in academic discourse, a largely unquestioned assumption that the nineteenth century was the “when” of the American West. In locating the “where” of the West in the trans-Mississippi region, we have inadvertently locked in a temporal framework for westernness that 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.

In their introduction to this volume, Hamilton and Hillard quote western environmental historian Richard White’s perceptive and liberating observation that “the boundaries of the American West are a series of doors pretending to be walls.” *Before the West Was West* shows how White’s insight may also be applied to the temporal boundaries of the West—borders as arbitrary and limiting as the geographical constraints that have, until relatively recently, restricted western American literary studies. *Before the West Was West* is a vital contribution to the ongoing critical reassessment of the boundaries of westernness in all its vexing and fascinating plurality of cultural and literary forms. The book helps us recognize why conceptual formulations of the West emergent in the work of writers like Crèvecoeur and Jefferson are indispensable to the American literary canon. It directs our attention to remarkable engagements of the West that appear in the work of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Spanish and French explorers whose ideas of the region are rooted in their encounters with the land and its Native peoples. Even in texts produced by Pilgrims and Puritans like William Bradford and Mary

Rowlandson whose cultures are often identified as foundational to America's national mythology, we recognize how profoundly formulations of identity depended upon contrasting the providential mission of the faith community with the "howling wilderness" that lay to its west. Indeed, by compelling us to travel back in time to the earliest records of the European imagination of North America as the West—back even so far as twelfth-century sagas of westerling Norsemen, and even back so far as precontact Native American oral traditions—Amy Hamilton and Tom Hillard's book demonstrates that what we might call the "conceptual West" has roots that are deep in time as well as deep in the soil of a region that one might identify on a map.

When, in 360 BC, Plato described the location of the lost world of Atlantis, he noted only that it existed beyond the Pillars of Hercules. That is to say that, like other writers of ancient Greece and Rome, Plato had a concept of the West, which he embraced as the landscape of imagination. Like John Farrer, whose cartographic depiction of North America featured the Pacific lapping the western flanks of the Appalachians, Plato depended upon a vision of westernness to inspire a liberating sense of possibility in himself and in his readers. *Before the West Was West* helps us understand that the West, which has always existed beyond our reach yet within the grasp of our imagination, is a triangulation of a place on earth, a moment in time, and an act of visualization.



## *Acknowledgments*

The field of western American literature has, especially in recent years, been open to multiple new ways of approaching literature and region. Our heartfelt thanks and admiration go to our many colleagues who have been putting pressure on the parameters of the field in exciting and productive ways. Their work has made this collection possible.

The seeds of this book were first planted over a decade ago, and we'd like to thank Cheryll Glotfelty, whose casual conversation with Tom at the 2003 Western Literature Association (WLA) conference in Houston about giving a presentation on *Edgar Huntly*—an eighteenth-century novel—first set us on the path of asking questions about the “when” of the West. That same year, Annette Kolodny's University of Arizona graduate seminar on American frontier literature, which began with the Vinland sagas, encouraged us to begin rethinking period and region in important ways. With her guidance and unflagging support of this project at every stage, Annette has been a model of mentorship that we can only aspire to. And Mike Branch, who attended all of the panels on the early West we put together at WLA meetings over the years and read drafts of our article and book proposal on the subject, has been an incredible and invaluable friend and mentor to us both.

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And of course, this collection simply couldn't be possible without the scholars and writers whose work appears in it. Our admiration and appreciation for all of the contributors to this collection cannot be overstated. We are inspired by the work you do, and we are endlessly grateful for your patience, your willingness to meet deadlines, and your encouraging and enthusiastic support for this volume. It's been a pleasure to work with every one of you.

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*Before the West Was West*



# Introduction

## *Reconsidering the “When” of the West*

AMY T. HAMILTON AND TOM J. HILLARD

In recent decades, scholars of western regional literatures have collectively put pressure on how region is defined and limited: Where are the lines that mark East from West and North from South? What are the contours of the stories that arise from particular regions? Whose voices count as authentic representations of a particular place? How is region defined in the twenty-first century amid a rising interest in globalization and digital environments? These questions have challenged scholars in western American studies to define region not only geographically and culturally but also temporally. However, 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 remained in the background, if not ignored altogether. Scholarship in western American literature has long moved beyond the classic “westerns” of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to explore contemporary twenty-first-century texts, but rarely does the critical lens of western literary studies turn its gaze in the other direction: backward in time before the nineteenth century. In short, while critics have become adept at examining *where* and *what* western American literature is, the question of *when* is still largely a blank spot on the map.

In 1997 a group of scholars addressed these evolving definitions by publishing *Updating the Literary West*, a volume that answered their observation that “[i]n a climate of nationwide canon examination . . . the western canon itself . . . needed to be re-examined” (Westbrook xiii). *Updating the Literary West* engaged a wider demographic of authors, texts, and regions and considered recent developments in New West regionalism and history. Amid this canon

reexamination, James H. Maguire addressed the question of *when*, writing that “new research and new literary theories have led, if not to wholesale reassessment, at least to the widespread feeling that the West’s early literature *should* be reassessed” (77, emphasis in original). By referring to “early” literature, Maguire suggests that western literary studies needs to explore the problem of periodization. He argues that “many anthologies of American literature now include excerpts from western exploration narratives written from the 1540s to the time of the Lewis and Clark expedition” (76). He points to the earlier field-defining volume *A Literary History of the American West* (1987) and notes how that book mentions these narratives but does not “convey a sense of the size and range of this body of writing. Why such neglect?” Maguire asks (76). He couches the issue of neglect not as a wholesale dismissal of early writings but as relegating texts from the sixteenth through the early nineteenth centuries to mere passing references and footnotes. Unfortunately, Maguire’s assertions about the importance of these early writings are not supported by the rest of *Updating the Literary West*.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the flux in the field that has consistently challenged the boundaries of the imagined West, there remains an unspoken assumption about when western American literature begins: paired geographical and temporal boundaries situate the West’s beginnings west of the Mississippi and in the nineteenth century. Maguire’s call for reassessing literature from earlier periods—now nearly two decades past—remains largely unheeded. Indeed, why such neglect?

This collection marks an attempt to begin rectifying this neglect.<sup>2</sup> Rather than relegating early western literatures to other designations—such as “early American,” “early Iberian,” “Native American,” “early French-American”—the scholars in this book read these early texts and examine their tropes and themes *as* western American literature. Shifting the critical perspective in such a way moves scholars beyond narrowly delineated categories and allows for the study of how literature of the West develops over time and space. By engaging with texts from earlier periods, the contributors to this book destabilize not just assumptions about *when* the West was but also the idea that there is a singular western story. Earlier texts testify

to the development of multiple Wests at different times and in different regions. Loosening the grip of the nineteenth century as the starting point for western American literature broadens the field significantly by revealing unstated and limiting assumptions about literary history and regional development.

To be clear, we do not wish to reestablish any one specific definition or to set new parameters for “the West.” In fact, this volume aims to question the implicit and often assumed beginnings of western American literature by teasing out the complexities of a range of pre-nineteenth-century texts through the lens of western American literary studies. Our goal is not to create a new theory for when the West began or to identify an authentic beginning of western American literature. Rather, we see this book as initiating a conversation about how our collective understanding of the West is affected when we take seriously the shifting conceptions of “the West” in earlier periods not typically considered in western American studies.

### Surveying the Field

Before exploring how reimagining temporal borders can expand our understanding of the literary West, it is important to establish what current conceptions of the region are and how they developed. To map out this development, we began by surveying the scholarship related to western literary studies, a journey that took us through the back issues of the journal *Western American Literature* (*WAL*), into the contents of past Western Literature Association (WLA) conference programs, and to countless other scholarly books and essays from the past half century. As we began this expedition, one goal was to unearth what, if anything, had really *ever* been published about early, pre-1800 “western” texts. Another was to chart the changing definitions of what is meant by “western literature.” Here is what we found.

Since the formal beginnings of the field of western American literary studies in the 1960s, definitions and the issue of periodization have been the source of scholarly struggles. In the first issue of *WAL*, published in the spring of 1966, editor J. Golden Taylor declared the need for the serious study of western American literature, stating that the founding scholars of the WLA believed that “the prevailing

critical condescension toward Western literature is as notoriously uninformed and prejudiced as it is supercilious,” and “if the genuinely good literature of our region is ever to be recognized and taken seriously at home or in the world at large, it must be read and critically assessed by knowledgeable scholars familiar with the world it represents” (3). In this brief editorial, Taylor identifies the major early concerns of western literary studies—namely, the lack of serious critical engagement with and elitist contempt for western texts. Importantly, he also defines western American literature as a literature situated *in a region*.

Just a few pages later in that first volume, John R. Milton underscores the regionality of western American literature by arguing that “[b]ecause the [western] climate is variable, with temperatures running to extremes in both heat and cold, conflict and drama may involve only one man and the land. In contrast, the conflicts of the East are social, involving groups of people, traditions of behavior, and human competition” (8). In the essay that follows Milton’s, Don D. Walker defines the West as “a vast unsettled wilderness, a region, real or imaginary, ‘out there’ in the mountains, forests, plains, and deserts” (15). Together, Taylor, Milton, and Walker thus set an early definition: western American literature is bounded by region, individualistic, masculine, and rural in theme, and, most importantly, it is in opposition to the social, urban-themed literature of the East. Taylor’s, Milton’s, and Walker’s conclusions are echoed in the first Constitution of the Western Literature Association (1967), which defines the West with geographical precision: Article II, Section 1 declares that the “purpose” of the WLA “shall be to promote the study of the literature of the American West in all its varied aspects, and especially through the publication of a scholarly quarterly journal, *Western American Literature*. The term ‘American West’ is here interpreted to include [the] Trans-Mississippi United States with extensions into Canada and Mexico.”<sup>3</sup>

Even as early as the first issue of *WAL*, however, other articles highlight the difficulty of arriving at a widely accepted definition of “western.” For example, Taylor’s, Milton’s, and Walker’s articles are published alongside an essay by Jim L. Fife that acknowledges the

challenges of identifying the boundaries of the West. Fife writes: “The fact that what has been called the West has moved from the Eastern forest land across the Mississippi, over the prairies, and into the mountains and desert, suggests that the word ‘West’ does not describe a geographical entity so much as it names an idea. The idea has always resisted attempts to identify it precisely, but it is clear it has something to do with the romantic ideal of America’s destiny which was so widespread in the nineteenth century and which, in fact, is by no means dead in the twentieth” (34). Fife offers an important counterpoint to the other critics’ voices, rejecting definitions of the West as geographically bounded in favor of one that poses the West as a concept. Considering the West as an idea, one that is created by or reflected in the very texts we study as western American literature, opens a space for literary scholars to rethink *which* texts we study and therefore *which* West we imagine. However, Fife closes this space as soon as he opens it by identifying what he sees as the dominant theme of western literature—“the romantic ideal of America’s destiny”—with the nineteenth century and thus nineteenth-century conceptions of where the West lies. In effect, he reinstates the regional as well as temporal boundaries of the West.

Only three issues later, *WAL* Executive Editor Delbert E. Wylder argues that the eagerness of western literary scholars to defend and differentiate western and eastern American literature inevitably results in further stereotypes. In defining western literary scholarship, the very critics who demand a voice in turn silence those whose vision of the West does not accord with their own. Employing the western imagery of cattle ranching, Wylder argues, “we have allowed ourselves to create an additional stereotype in order to separate, superficially, the mavericks from our closely guarded herd, which we brand with the iron of historical authenticity” (242). He goes on to ask, “How many critics who have written on Western writers have insisted that all Western literature fit the patterns of nineteenth-century local color realism or be denied the brand of critical approval; in short have insisted on a pattern as stereotyped and stifling to creative growth as the pattern of the Eastern publishers?” (242). The issues Wylder raises here about the repressive effect

of searching for a single “authentic” western literature are concerns that others have voiced over the ensuing years; yet there has continued to be an impulse among critics to set parameters for determining what “counts” as western and what does not.

For example, in their introduction to *Fifty Western Writers* (1982), Fred Erisman and Richard W. Etulain illustrate the power of these early definitions of the West as well as the desire to subvert them. For Erisman and Etulain, the American West “is a place, defined loosely by the Mississippi River to the east, the Pacific Ocean to the west, Canada to the north, and Mexico to the south” (xi). Once they have established this regional definition, they attempt to complicate it by writing that not only is the West a geographical location, it is also “a state of mind, a circumstance created by the slow but inexorable interaction of landscape, climate, and diverse cultures, coming together over a period of more than two centuries” (xi).<sup>4</sup> Further, they write that the West has become “a cliché, a never-never land created in the minds of persons who take their impressions from the movie screen or the television” (xi). In attempting to define the West, Erisman and Etulain exemplify the tension in these competing definitions and point to a continuing difficulty: the persistence of older, strictly regional definitions and the simultaneous desire to move beyond them.

In 1974 this tension was reflected in the amended Constitution of the Western Literature Association. In this document, Article II, Section 1 was rewritten to state: “The literature of the American West is interpreted to include the literature of the American frontier in *any region* of the United States, the literature of the Trans-Mississippi United States and the literature of other nations sharing with the United States the frontier experience” (emphasis added). This new constitution (which remains in effect today) recognizes the internal contradictions and complications of “western America,” now including under its purview “any region of the United States” as well as “other nations” that share a “frontier experience.” These changes raise provocative questions: Does “western America” refer to a geographical region? A state of mind? An imaginary construction? All of these things?

In the 1975 volume of *WAL*, Gary Snyder gets to the heart of the matter of these blurry definitions. He writes:

[A]ll the experts here dodge off the question when anybody asks them “What is a Westerner, Really, what is the West?” Nobody wants to say. . . . The West as it’s talked about seems to me to be concerned with the history of literature of the period of exploitation and expansion west of the tree line. . . . It’s a period of rapid expansion, first phase exploitation. It’s not a literature or history of place, I think. It’s a history and a literature of feats of strength and of human events; of specifically white, English-speaking-American human events. It’s only about the West by accident, about this place by accident. . . . Space and aridity, confronting that and living with that is a key theme in Western literature, but only incidentally. (260–61)<sup>5</sup>

Here Snyder articulates one central issue in defining “the West” and “western literature.” The problem, his essay points out, is the strong correlation between “West” and a mythic sense of “feats of strength and of human events,” which raises the question: Can myth be bounded by space and time? The amorphousness of myth and its rejection of a strict or easy definition continuously clashes with the desire of western American literary scholars to define their field without committing to a single definition.

Despite the potential flexibility evident in these competing and ambiguous definitions, and despite the openness to literature in “any region” of the United States, there still is little scholarship on early American, east-of-the-Mississippi, or early south of the Rio Grande literature through the critical lens of western American literary studies.<sup>6</sup> A cursory survey of *WLA* conference programs demonstrates this lacuna. In the early years of the association, the papers focused largely on texts from the second half of the nineteenth century onward, with only occasional presentations on “easterners” such as James Fenimore Cooper, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, and Washington Irving.<sup>7</sup> Very seldom have presentations ever ventured earlier than the nineteenth century, other than a few papers on Álgvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, Mary Rowlandson, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, and Charles

Brockden Brown.<sup>8</sup> Without doubt the WLA programs highlight the flexible and changing interests of western literary scholars, with a shift in presentation topics toward nature writing, ecocriticism, and texts by women and people of color beginning in the 1980s and an increased interest in “postwestern” texts and urban spaces in the 1990s and 2000s. Yet texts from earlier centuries remain largely absent from the programs, and many of the papers mentioned above were generated by a relatively small group of scholars. In short, based on the available record, an examination of WLA meetings and publications in western literary studies reveals a collection of what seem to be unspoken assumptions: for scholars of western American literature the West means something specific—a place (west of the Mississippi), a time (the nineteenth century and later), and, perhaps, a theme (the “western”).

But these older assumptions certainly haven’t gone unchallenged. In recent decades, scholars who are aware of the slipperiness of the concept have questioned definitions of the West in new ways. For example, in 1993 Richard White declared that “[t]he boundaries of the American West are a series of doors pretending to be walls. . . . The geographical boundaries were not naturally determined; they were politically determined” (3–4).<sup>9</sup> Also in 1993, Gerald Nash argued that “[s]cholars have written about the West as a frontier, of course, but also as a region, as an urban civilization, and as an element of myth. These varying perspectives have done much to broaden our awareness of the complexities of both cultural as well as environmental influences that have shaped the West” (21). Nash acknowledges here the “varying perspectives” that constitute “the West” and therefore western literature, and he later argues that these perspectives should be expanded to include the West *after* 1890. Yet while he views these definitions as limiting the “authentic” West to the nineteenth century, he never argues that this leaves out pre-1800 literature and history. Similarly, in *Unsettling the Literary West* (2003) Nathaniel Lewis notes that western American literature “has generally presented itself as self-contained, a regionally grounded body of works by a group of writers alone in the world, independent and proud” (11). His book critiques the accepted, if largely unarticulated,

definitions of western literature in important ways, yet his study begins with literature in the 1830s, in effect reinstating the West as a nineteenth-century phenomenon even as he questions other aspects of defining the West.

As scholars continue to grapple with a definition for “western American literature,” many are pushing the field’s boundaries in still other directions. A perusal of recent publications reveals the widening scholarly interest in western texts by once-excluded groups: women, Native Americans, Chicanas/os and Latinas/os, Asian Americans, and African Americans, among others. Scholars are increasingly interested in the polyvocal West, recognizing that attention to the multiplicity of western voices enriches and complicates the imagined West. The West is no longer tied so securely to the idea that it is “a history and a literature of feats of strength and of human events; of specifically white, English-speaking-American human events,” as Snyder contended. The increased attention to these other voices, these other “Wests,” has unequivocally strengthened and expanded western literary scholarship.

Amid this reevaluating, there has also been greater attention given to contemporary western writings that find their stage in the heart of western cities, not on wide-open prairies or in dusty old cow towns.<sup>10</sup> Reflecting such changes, in *The Rhizomatic West* (2008) Neil Campbell advocates reconceiving the West much more broadly as “an interactive process of constitutive contacts and mobilities” (4). He calls for reimagining the American West not as a geographically bounded region but rather in terms of “‘process geographies’ that are ‘routed,’ contingent, and mobile, formulating an alternative regionalism ‘viewed as initial contexts for themes that generate variable geographies, rather than as fixed geographies marked by pre-given themes’” (45).<sup>11</sup> Importantly, Campbell recognizes that the West is always subject to change and that any definition of the West and therefore of western literature must take into account the mobility, fluidity, and complexity of these ideas. Campbell disrupts the notion of the West as “a fixed, permanent geographical and ideological fact” (38) in order to shift our attention outward to the urban, global, and virtual “West”: the “New West.”<sup>12</sup> In his intro-

duction to the 2011 *Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American West*, Nicolas Witschi writes that “the exact outer boundaries of this place have long been debated and contested, so much so that the American West is often rightly described as a dynamic region of ever-shifting demographic, geographic, and cultural indicators” (4).<sup>13</sup> This shifting scholarly landscape is apparent in recent movements in bioregionalism, as well as critical regional studies and postwestern studies, which Susan Kollin sees as working “against a narrowly conceived regionalism, one that restricts western cultures of the past and present to some predetermined entity with static borders and boundaries. Postwestern studies instead involve a critical reassessment of those very restrictions, whether they be theoretical, geographical, or political” (xi).

### Questioning the Survey Lines

This thumbnail history of the field shows that questions of *where* and *when* to locate the American West and *whose* voices count as authentically western have engaged and frustrated scholars since at least the 1960s, when western American literature became a distinct field of study. Yet despite the myriad arguments and perspectives offered, the numerous definitions forwarded, there remains a clear neglect of pre-nineteenth-century texts among scholars of western literary studies. In effect, while many aspects of the definitions seem elastic and fluid, the implicit boundary placed at the beginning of the nineteenth century has remained largely unexamined and unchallenged. The problem lies in the definitions themselves, which are both loose enough to encompass a huge range of texts as “western” and yet bounded (seemingly arbitrarily) by region and period.

Frederick Jackson Turner’s famous and controversial 1893 “frontier thesis” offers some explanation about how these definitions came about as well as potential avenues for challenging them. In that lecture, Turner claims that the frontier created “a new product that is American,” explaining how “[a]t first, the frontier was the Atlantic coast. It was the frontier of Europe in a very real sense. Moving westward, the frontier became more and more American. . . . Thus the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from

the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines" (4). Moreover, he contends that "to study this advance . . . is to study the really American part of our history" (4). By this logic, when forging a national identity, the farther west one travels, the more American one becomes—that is, as one moves westward, American identity becomes increasingly distinct from its European antecedents. Of course, the faults and limitations of his argument are well known to scholars of western American literature and history, who, as Campbell asserts, have "long sought to challenge such binary approaches by questioning defining texts like Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, by taking popular culture seriously, by exploring the 'hidden histories' of race and gender, and by engaging with the complexities of border studies" (60).<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, Turner's claim to an authentic Americanness located in or influenced by geography has died hard. In fact, his thesis calls to mind the early scholarly attempts to define western American literature as something distinct from literature of the East.

Making this distinction between West and East was a natural and necessary step in defining a new field. All pioneers, geographical or literary, need to distinguish (and defend) their territory from claims that have already been staked. And, as Nathaniel Lewis has illustrated, by the 1830s western writers were already aggressively setting their work apart from the wider American literary landscape. Literary magazines such as Timothy Flint's *Western Monthly Review* and James Hall's *Western Monthly Magazine* gave voice to western writers and western-themed literature. The outcome was a battle for authenticity: "Virtually every author in every western genre from novel to tourist manifesto," Lewis contends, "claimed that his or her work was 'true,' an accurate representation of the western landscape and its people" (28). If western authors and critics are committed to claiming an authenticity in western writing, they must necessarily be committed to a firm definition of what authentic western writing *is*. The struggle to assert the legitimacy of the field is at the heart of the issue of definitions. It would seem that despite all the compelling and widespread critiques of Turner's frontier thesis, its basic parameters—ones that emphasize *nineteenth-century* European

American westward expansion into trans-Mississippi geographical regions—still hold sway over the field.

In 1973 Richard Slotkin published his influential study of the American myth of the frontier, *Regeneration through Violence*. To some degree Slotkin's text does take up the issue of earlier versions of the West, focused in this case on the formation of the frontier. His project, as he articulates it, is to "attempt to define at least one of the cultural archetypes which emerged from the historical experience of the American colonial frontier to function as myth in our culture" (9). "[T]racing the development of the conventions of narrative literature," he continues, is "tracing the development—by accretion of symbols characteristic of cultural values—of a distinct world vision" (21). For Slotkin's purposes, this "distinct world vision" is one made up of European archetypes of the male hero combined with the experience of the frontier, "the rogues, adventurers, and land-boomers; the Indian fighters, traders, missionaries, explorers, and hunters who killed and were killed until they had mastered the wilderness; the settlers who came after, suffering hardship and Indian warfare for the sake of a sacred mission or a simple desire for land; and the Indians themselves, both as they were and as they appeared to the settlers, for whom they were the special demonic personification of the American wilderness" (4). While Slotkin's work does shift attention to the years preceding the nineteenth century, it remains firmly connected to a particular reading of the frontier—one rooted in violent male confrontation with the "wilderness." In maintaining this understanding of westward movement and the frontier experience, Slotkin's text remains securely tied to formulations of the frontier that hold the nineteenth century as the period of the "true" frontier. It is in the nineteenth century, Slotkin contends, that "the literature of frontier heroes [evolves] out of the Puritan literatures of human subjection to God and natural forces" (412). By this time the myth of the frontier and the men who conquer it had become familiar; it had become the American story. Thus, for Slotkin, the earlier literature is important for its participation in the development of a particular western narrative, the story of the brave frontier hero, a narrative that, according to Slotkin, continues to dominate American definitions of nation and history.

Turner's frontier thesis and Slotkin's foundational work raise important questions of terminology: What is the relationship between "frontier studies" and what we call "western literary studies"? In other words, how do we conceive of "West" and "frontier"? In answering these questions, Annette Kolodny's definition of the frontier is instructive. She also identifies the frontier as a place where different cultures meet, but she redefines it as not a dividing line but rather a shifting zone where "the term 'frontier' comes to mean what we in the Southwest call *la frontera*, or the borderlands: that liminal landscape of changing meanings on which distinct human cultures encounter one another's 'otherness' and appropriate, accommodate, or domesticate it through language" (8).<sup>15</sup> In considering the "frontier" as one component of "the West," we don't intend to situate the frontier as the *only* way of conceiving the West, acknowledging also the many lived experiences, narratives, and stories that are indeed part of any western landscape prior to and/or separate from European American interventions. Yet the history of North American "frontiers"—whether defined by borders of settlement or zones of contact between peoples, cultures, and landscapes—is *much* older than the nineteenth century and *much* more geographically widespread than the states west of the Mississippi.

There are potential problems, however, in drawing too close a connection between the terms "frontier" and "West." In *Exploding the Western* (2005) Sara L. Spurgeon describes the frontier as "a set of symbols that constitute an explanation of history," and its "significance as a mythic space is more important than any actual geographic location" (8). Kathleen A. Boardman has cautioned against conflating "West" and "frontier," arguing that the frontier as it is traditionally understood—as the line between European American settlement and land/indigenous peoples/the "wilderness"—forces "formerly excluded groups" to become part of "the West" only if they are "constrained to discuss a topic chosen by someone else. Women and various ethnic groups are the 'other,' and their literature is characterized as an 'inversion' of the dominant myth, or as a response to it" (56). Boardman's warning is important, and scholars must proceed with caution: Are we opening up the issue of defini-

tions only to force preexisting structures onto previously excluded lives and literatures?<sup>16</sup>

We find that reading literature from earlier periods as western American literature allows us to see the real and meaningful connections between different texts as well as the development of national ideologies and mythologies. Pushing the boundaries of what has been considered (implicitly or explicitly) the authentic and appropriate purview of scholars of western American literature reveals the ways that, as Campbell contends, the imaginary West “glosses over the very complex relations and contacts that actually existed in the various spaces of the West, as well as the multiple ways in which the West spilled out beyond its immediate geographic boundaries” (7). Such reimagining does not negate the real impact region has on narrative and identity, nor does it flatten out western literary studies so that all texts are western, all spaces are West. Rather, a goal of this book is to complicate contemporary methodologies in western literary studies by questioning why the boundary has been placed at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

So we return to the questions of what “counts” as western American literature. If it *is* simply literature of “the West” as a loosely defined geographical area stretching beyond the rooth meridian, then the point of this book is moot. But we know it isn’t, since there has been an undercurrent of suspicion about the definition at least since the first issue of *WAL*, in which Don D. Walker admitted that “the West” could be “a region, real or imaginary” (15), and Jim L. Fife explained that the West is not “a geographical entity” but rather “an idea” (34). If we take Campbell’s cue and see “the West” not as a securely rooted geographical entity but as a series of “‘process geographies’ that are ‘routed,’ contingent, and mobile,” then as scholars we *must* push ourselves to look outside a limited geographical or temporal range. And if we are to take to heart Kolodny’s 1992 advice that we “let go our grand obsessions with narrowly geographic or strictly chronological frameworks,” then we need to start considering seriously texts that appear prior to the nineteenth century and in places that we now call “the East” but were once very much “the West” (3). More recently, Krista Comer has described a

remapping of the West that includes a multiplicity of geographies and “spatial imaginations,” arguing convincingly that “these spaces and the New Western critical modes of analysis needed to articulate them forced a rethinking of the who, what, where, and why of the West” (“New West” 246). To this important list we add the question “when.” Simply put, we must acknowledge that the ideas of “West” and “frontiers” require a wider scope of critical analysis, one that includes temporality.

In the end, at issue is an awareness of literary influence and lineage, as well as historical perspective. We don’t mean to suggest that all scholars of western American literature should suddenly become early Americanists.<sup>17</sup> And we don’t want to impose our own version of what counts as an “authentic” West. Nor do we intend to explode boundaries so much that the unique aspects of the field—and the contemporary geographical U.S. West—are lost. But why isn’t there more scholarly conversation between early Americanists and western Americanists? And why aren’t the standard western American literature publications covering more texts prior to the nineteenth century? The gaps are surprising, because the implications of reading pre-1800 texts alongside or even *as* “western” texts are manifold, as the essays in this collection clearly demonstrate.

### Unearthing the Survey Stakes

The contributors to *Before the West Was West* approach the question of “*when* was the West” from a wide variety of perspectives. Together they offer an important challenge to prevailing opinion about the origins of the literary West. Surveying literatures as diverse as Mayan oral narratives, Vinland Sagas, accounts of French and Spanish exploration, Puritan captivity narratives, and the writings of Thomas Jefferson, among others, the essays reveal western American literature to be multilayered, polyvocal, and transhistorical. Together they uproot the traditional—if implicit—boundary marking the beginning of the literary West at the opening of the nineteenth century, and collectively they radically reimagine what the field of western literary studies might look like if it considers literature from earlier periods of North American history. We have arranged the essays

chronologically, beginning with Paul Zolbrod's examination of a series of Native American oral traditions and ending with Renaud Contini's analysis of one of Thomas Jefferson's lesser-known publications. While using a chronological organization may seem to reinforce the very linear history this book calls into question, we believe that because the book is predicated on the notion of temporality it is important to retain a chronological order, despite its potential pitfalls. Arranging the essays chronologically allows readers to appreciate a broad range of where and when western stories can be found.

In the first two chapters, Paul G. Zolbrod and Annette Kolodny each encourage us to rethink the dominant foundational myths of the American West. Zolbrod examines Native American narratives about the origin of corn to trace the development of a pre-European contact narrative that connects tribal groups across the Americas, one that suggests an alternative and indigenous transmission of stories moving northward and eastward out of Mexico. Kolodny similarly reimagines the contours of later western story lines by analyzing and tracing their roots back to the eleventh-century Norse epics we now know as the Vinland Sagas. Kolodny argues that the Vinland Sagas, which are stories of exploration and European-Native contact, "opened to Americans new possibilities for retelling their stories of who they were as a people." Anglo-Americans adopted these stories as their own, seeing that history as a "mirror of . . . validating ancestry . . . [in which they] saw themselves as manly, courageous, bold, enterprising, entrepreneurial, and—like Leif Eiriksson and Thorfinn Karlsefni—wise leaders with good judgment." The sagas, Kolodny posits, provided Anglo-Americans with a mythical ancestry that presaged and validated their own westering impulse.

Taking a somewhat different approach, both Cassander David Smith and John L. Miles turn their attention to well-known figures from early American writings: Esteban, best known from his role in Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's 1542 *Relación*, and Mary Rowlandson, famous for her 1682 genre-defining Native American captivity narrative. Smith encourages readers to resituate Esteban from the margins of critical conversations to the center to consider how his representation in Fray Marcos de Niza's 1539 narrative of the search

for the Seven Cities of Gold exemplifies the “relationship between black Africans as textual representations and as actual, material presences on the early western American frontier.” Miles offers a fresh reading of Rowlandson’s narrative, which has long been the subject of scholarly analysis. He interrogates the changing Puritan response to “wilderness” captured in her story, which he reads as an important precursor to and influence on Turner’s later nineteenth-century formulations of “the frontier.”

In their essays, Rebecca M. Lush, David J. Peterson, and Gordon M. Sayre examine how literary conventions shaped early representations of the West. In a work of feminist historicism, Lush traces the influence of imperialism and European romance traditions on depictions of North American lands and peoples. She examines Aphra Behn’s rendering of frontier Virginia in her 1690 play *The Widow Ranter*, exploring “the role of Native American women leaders in the formation of colonial fantasies” and showing how Behn projected qualities of English royalty and courtly romance onto the Native cultures of colonial Virginia. Peterson’s and Sayre’s analyses consider the complications of common western imaginings of violence, villains, and heroes. In his chapter, Peterson reconsiders the famed unreliability of Louis Hennepin’s 1697 *A New Discovery*. Rather than dismissing his writing as a grand hoax, as so many have done, Peterson emphasizes how the missionary’s narrative “produces an alternate vision of European *and* the often ignored indigenous westering as a collective enterprise, a frontier commonwealth” that serves “the ‘public good.’” Sayre argues for the importance of using the tools of literary analysis in addition to those of historical analysis to investigate the contested stories surrounding the little-known 1720 Villasur Massacre (in present-day New Mexico) and its legacy as recorded in two eighteenth-century hide paintings.

Focusing attention on the frontier hero, in their analysis of Charlotte Lennox’s *The Life of Harriot Stuart* (1750) Sara Spurgeon and Marta Kvande make a persuasive case for an alternate origin point for this figure, one located in the work of an English novelist. They position Lennox as “the true originator of the western” and suggest that the western, “that most masculine and ‘American’ of genres,

turns out to originate in a protofeminist narrative created by a creolized British colonial woman.”

Turning to questions of regionalism, Tara Penry compellingly traces evolving conceptions of region and national identity in a range of writings by J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur. She considers the connections between the regional vision of Crèvecoeur’s writing and later theories of “the West,” arguing that though “[a]s a regionalist, Crèvecoeur was not particularly interested in the West,” his interest in “woods,” “interiors,” and “wilderness” positions him “beside Frederick Jackson Turner as an oracle of the significant force that the West would become during the nineteenth century.”

In his essay, George English Brooks explores how the tensions within the 1776 Domínguez-Escalante journal reveal the competing interests and motives of that famous expedition and the ways that the landscape and cultures found in the desert Southwest challenged and unsettled them. As this and other chapters demonstrate, the realities of the “western” North American frontier did not easily or often match up with European preconceptions of those locations and the people who inhabited them.

In the final chapters, Robert Woods Sayre and Renaud Contini take up the varied ways that regional identity was developed west of the Mississippi in the eighteenth century. Sayre examines the competing claims for and representations of the eighteenth-century trans-Mississippi West by different national interests, looking particularly at Jean-Baptiste Trudeau’s *Voyage sur le Haut-Missouri, 1794–1796*. Finally, Contini focuses his analysis on Thomas Jefferson’s nationalistic intentions in his lesser-known 1803 *An Account of Louisiana*, exploring Jefferson’s “series of micromyths about an enormous swath of land that he sought to incorporate into the new nation’s grand narrative in order to turn Louisiana into an American reality.”

Taken together, these collected essays demonstrate that there is no single clear, unified idea of what the pre-nineteenth-century American West was. Instead, they reveal a disparate and multifaceted body of literature that arises from a wide-ranging set of cultural backgrounds and influences—all of which precedes the more readily agreed-upon notion of western American literature as a nineteenth-

century and later phenomenon. The lines of inquiry exemplified by the contributors to this volume suggest a reimagining of *when* and *where* the West began that will inevitably deepen our understanding of western American literature. The view these essays offer encompasses precontact oral narratives all the way to Jefferson's turn-of-the-nineteenth-century writings. They examine stories across the American continent from Mexico to Canada and narratives in languages including Mayan, Navajo, Lakota, French, English, Spanish, and more. But this is only a starting point. As diverse as the literature examined in this volume is, the example set by these authors suggests ever more possibilities for study, opening up definitions and expanding our conceptions about what western American literature can be. Examining earlier texts as western American literature creates inroads into and connections among various western spaces throughout history, the people who inhabit and travel them, and the stories that shape them. The boundaries that have been assumed to be at the beginning of the nineteenth-century West are not, and never were, impenetrable. As the essays that follow demonstrate, including earlier texts that are set in places that were once West though may now be considered East or South or North promises to enrich western literary studies and offers scholars new ways to conceive what we mean when we say "West."

#### Notes

The introduction was published in a somewhat different form in *Western American Literature* 47:3 (Fall 2012): 287–307.

1. Aside from an article by Donald A. Barclay and Peter Wild about exploration narratives as precursors to western literature, *Updating the Literary West* rarely moves before the early nineteenth century in its examination of the Old West, in effect repeating the pattern in the prior volume that Maguire notes. In 1994 Barclay, Maguire, and Wild published an anthology of early western American exploration narratives titled *Into the Wilderness Dream: Exploration Narratives of the American West, 1500–1805*. In 2002 Edward Watts and David Rachels published an anthology, *The First West: Writing from the American Frontier, 1776–1860*. While their anthology does engage pre-1800 writings, the bulk of its texts were penned in the nineteenth century.

2. For our initial call to reexamine the early periods of western American literature, see our 2012 essay, "Before the West Was West: Rethinking the Tempo-

ral Borders of Western American Literature.” This introduction includes revised versions of much of the material in that essay and is reprinted here with permission of the journal *Western American Literature*.

3. Both the WLA constitutions and the archives of past WLA conference programs later cited in this essay are located in the Western Literature Association Papers at the Boise State University Library Special Collections and Archives, MSS 182, donated by James H. Maguire.

4. Curiously enough, Erisman and Etulain’s claim of “more than two centuries” implicitly suggests that western American literature is primarily a nineteenth- and twentieth-century phenomenon. Why not say “more than three centuries”? Or “four”?

5. Snyder’s essay is a transcript of a talk he gave at the Western Writers Conference at Utah State University on June 12, 1974.

6. In the 1975 volume of *WAL* John Cawelti acknowledged the East Coast, Colonial lineage of “western” literature. To him, the “God’s Country” idea of the West first appeared “in the seventeenth century Puritan plan for a godly community in the Massachusetts Bay colony” (275). From that point onward, “the hope of founding a purified religious community in the West has been a continuous thread in our history from the evangelical migrations of the 18th century, through the religious utopias and theocratic colonies of the 19th century including the great Mormon movement into the desert, down to the California communes of the twentieth century” (275). Cawelti’s acknowledgment of the importance of pre-1800 literature to the West, however, is a brief moment in an essay that generally focuses on nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts. More recently, Andrew Menard’s essay “Down the Santa Fe Trail to the City upon a Hill” was published in the Summer 2010 issue of *WAL*. Menard reads Susan Shelby Magoffin’s journal *Down the Santa Fe Trail and into Mexico, 1846–1847* as “a kind of displaced domesticity that harked back to one of the nation’s most anguished and enduring symbols of social space: John Winthrop’s City upon a Hill” (163). He traces the development of this theme through Mary Rowlandson’s captivity narrative and James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking* novels before focusing on Magoffin’s journal. While Menard’s essay draws important connections among these texts and encourages scholars to think about earlier works, the essay is primarily interested in forwarding a new reading of a nineteenth-century text.

7. There were presentations on James Fenimore Cooper in 1973, 1976, 1980, 1988, 1989, and 1993; on Henry David Thoreau in 1976, 1978, 1979, 1985, 1987, 1989, 1991, 1994, 1996, and 1997 (it is interesting to note that presentations about Thoreau stop in the late 1990s, which coincides with the creation of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment [ASLE] as a separate organization focusing on ecocriticism and the study of nature in literature); on Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1979, 1992, and 1994; on Walt Whitman in 1976, 1980, and 1997; on Herman Melville in 1979, 1980, 1985, 1994, 1995, 2000, and 2005; and on Washington Irving in 1971 and 1976.

8. Papers on Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca were presented in 1993, 1997, and 2008; on Mary Rowlandson in 1993, 2006, and 2009; on J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur in 1989 and 2006; and on Charles Brockden Brown in 2003 and 2007. Another noteworthy exception was Eric C. Brown's paper "The Bard Comes to Yellow Sky: Shakespeare and the Western" at the 2004 WLA meeting in Big Sky, Montana.

9. White goes on to argue that in acknowledging the political nature of the West one can then ask, "Where is the West?" and even "When did the West begin?" (4). The West, he contends, "did not suddenly emerge; rather, it was gradually created" (4).

10. These temporal shifts are reflected in the themes and locations of the 2003 and 2005 WLA meetings: "The West of the 21st Century," hosted in Houston's Westin Galleria Mall, and "Cultures of Memory and Forgetting in the American West" in Los Angeles.

11. In making this claim, Campbell quotes Arjun Appadurai, a social-cultural anthropologist who focuses on modernity and globalization.

12. One text of particular note in the study of the "New West" is Krista Comer's influential *Landscapes of the New West: Gender and Geography in Contemporary Women's Writing* (1999).

13. Witschi's introduction also draws attention to the West of the imagination as a largely nineteenth-century phenomenon, stating, "[A]s a phrase, the 'American West' evokes . . . a preponderance of images, ideas, and historical artifacts from the post-Civil War, pre-twentieth-century period, the so-called 'Old West'" (4). While Witschi goes on to argue that this definition is severely limited in ways that include time period, and he uses pre-1800 explorers and poets as support, only one of the thirty-three essays in the anthology engages with pre-1800 literatures. That one essay, Edward Watts's "Exploration, Trading, Trapping, Travel, and Early Fiction, 1780-1850," offers much-needed attention to earlier eras, but it is also largely focused on nineteenth-century frontier narratives.

14. Pointing out several of the central critiques of Turner's "thesis," Patricia Nelson Limerick writes: "In fact, the apparently unifying concept of the frontier had arbitrary limits that excluded more than they contained. Turner was, to put it mildly, ethnocentric and nationalistic. English-speaking white men were the stars of his story; Indians, Hispanics, French Canadians, and Asians were at best supporting actors and at worst invisible. Turner was also primarily concerned with agrarian settlement and folk democracy in the comparatively well watered Midwest. Deserts, mountains, mines, towns, cities, railroads, territorial government, and the institutions of commerce and finance never found much of a home in his model" (21).

15. Kolodny's earlier books *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (1975) and *The Land before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontier, 1630-1860* (1984) also engage with the literary development of the American frontier and, importantly, explore representations of the frontier produced in some of the earliest periods of European exploration in the Americas.

16. Tom Lynch argues that the continued critical insistence on the close association between the West and the frontier is problematic because it emphasizes a “moveable process, not a place” and leaves the land “in a much altered and diminished condition” (26). He calls instead for an attention to bioregionalism, “the meeting ground of a variety of interpenetrating arid lands bioregions” (24). By reconceptualizing the West as a series of bioregions, Lynch advocates increased attention to the relationship between literature, community, and “internally coherent” place (22).

17. Though, interestingly enough, the scholarly journal *Early American Literature* was also founded in 1966, the same year as *Western American Literature*.

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