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Review of *Becoming Western: Stories of Culture and Identity in the Cowboy State* By Liza J. Nicholas

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Becoming Western: Stories of Culture and Identity in the Cowboy State. By Liza J. Nicholas. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006. xviii + 214 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00.

Becoming Western presents representative moments in the development of Wyoming, among these the waging of the Johnson County War, the development of dude ranches, the memorialization of Buffalo Bill in his eponymous town site, the founding of an academic program at the University of Wyoming, and a campaign for state-wide office in the late 1970s. Along the way, we meet the writers, entrepreneurs, and artists one would expect to see in a cultural history of Wyoming. We see few of the contemporary scholars and critics, however, whose nuanced handling of the same material might have cautioned Liza Nicholas against the overreaching that has produced this unfortunately flawed book. The introduction signals that we will be in for a bumpy ride: the unique, lived experience of people in Wyoming reveals qualities that are defined as "Western"; these qualities, in turn, illuminate what it is to be "American." Throw in a few references to a discourse of the West, confined without explanation to a particular political entity, and we have prepared for us a treacherous terrain of logical leaps and uncharted ground to be negotiated in a fog of myth and history.

In her eagerness to reach beyond specific episodes to the level of myth and discourse,

Nicholas does not ground her subjects in time and space. That she places Rock Springs in the wrong quadrant of the state is only emblematic of a larger problem: Wyoming becomes undifferentiated terrain in which cowboys (real and *manqué*), miners (and minions of distant captains of industry), entrepreneurs (and shy-sters), and locals (ingenuous natives and wily transplants) perform their representative acts. Historical events are strip-mined for their higher value rather than carefully excavated for the particular evidence that could be revealed.

To abuse a metaphor, I should disclose that I have a stake in some of the territory to which Nicholas would like to lay claim. For the past twenty-seven years I have directed the University of Wyoming's American Studies Program, the founding of which in the early 1950s occupies a significant portion of chapter 4. Her account of this episode is puzzlingly thin. How does the founding of this program differ from or resemble the formation of American studies as an interdisciplinary field in the 1950s? How did the decade's American studies project engage the subject of an exceptionalist American ideology, of which the Wyoming pronouncements are only one example? Without engaging these questions, among others, Nicholas leaves us with caricatures, rhetorical flourishes, and inaccuracies.

Nicholas begins her book with an autobiography that resonates with my Wyoming undergraduates: Teresa Jordan's 1993 *Riding the White Horse Home*. Perhaps Jordan could have been a guide for Nicholas's work: how Jordan surveys the emotional power of home terrain, how she honors individual histories through multiple sources sensitively interpreted, how she maps the territory, and how she positions herself vis-à-vis her subject matter. Nicholas has her hands on rich material that could yet yield the stories of the West more complexly than the fable she has constructed.

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