

Comparative Wests: An Introduction

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THIS VOLUME of *Occasion's* investigation of "Comparative Wests" is part of an ongoing trans-institutional, transnational research project into the transformation and persistence of settler-colonial worlds in the western United States, western Canada, and western Australia. In January 2012, a gathering of historians and archaeologists, anthropologists and indigenous studies scholars, architects and art historians, lawyers and land planners, hailing from North America and Australia, gathered at Stanford University. After rigorous discussion in Palo Alto and subsequent peer review, these essays are the result of that meeting.²

The idea of "Wests" in these very different national contexts deserves an explanation. On the one hand, the early twenty-first-century commonsense geographical notion of "West" is conveniently applicable: these studies concentrate on the western regions of the continents under consideration rather than their Easts or Norths or Souths. But more than this, these Wests have been historically peripheral regions in Anglophone settler-colonial societies. In this sense, these Wests are regions continually enmeshed in the processes of uncertain, and reversible, incorporation into settler states, whose centers of political and economic power lie generally to their east. The term "Wests" may risk implying the existence of an "eastern" point of view, but

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that is far from our intent. Indeed, the contributions that follow view these Wests from multiple and shifting positions. Historically understood as distant from the centers of colonial and national political and economic power, we understand these Wests to be at the center of some of modernity's most fraught struggles. In the essays that follow, these Wests are homes from which we travel and to which we return, places we visit, and in which we hope to permanently remain. The Wests we compare are sites of cosmological centeredness for some, as well as spaces of epistemological, ontological, and geopolitical struggle for all. We hope that the methodology of approaching these regions and their histories as "Comparative Wests" opens up spaces for thinking through, and beyond, the practices, contests, and legacies of settler colonialism.

The primary goal of our Comparative Wests project was initially bracketed by time and space—in many respects we imagined a set of "Wests" that were defined as coming under the auspices of the United States, Canada, and Australia during the nineteenth century. These were Wests that were claimed by those nations, but national control over those regions was never complete and was always mediated through the invasion of and interaction with in situ societies and, indeed, nations and countries. The Comparative Wests project—a collaboration between Stanford's Bill Lane Center for the American West, the Australian National University, and the University of Western Australia—emerged from what we identified as a need for a set of studies that investigate the *processes and consequences* of settler colonialism and the incorporation of indigenous societies and territories by nation-states that during the nineteenth century claimed but never fully controlled these regions. We are also concerned with the long legacy of the resulting ecological and cultural changes, attended by new regulatory settler governments. The articles here will give the reader a nuanced understanding of how complex these processes and consequences have been and continue to be.

As with the many Wests, this volume has multiple origins. One was a two-year Stanford-based Sawyer Seminar Series sponsored by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, during which the project came to provide a foundation for new types of exploration into the processes of rapid cultural, economic, and environmental transformations initiated by interactions between nation-states, settler-citizens, and the indigenous societies they were attempting to subjugate. That path joined with work undertaken at the University of Western Australia. Support from the Australian Academy for the Humanities and a University of Sydney United States Studies Centre-sponsored research collaboration award led to a 2011 symposium in Perth that explored the diversity of issues that fit within the Wests' broad tent. Our common intellectual project began with an acknowledgment that generations of scholars have already thoroughly demonstrated that nation-based notions of western "frontiers"—a dominant discourse still in each of our Wests—cannot account for the complex social and ecological transformations that have shaped and continue to shape these regions.³ Nevertheless, the symposia were effective in drawing our attention toward the problems that still result from imagining the Wests of settler-colonial expansion as "frontiers"—either untouched frontiers upon which was painted the progress of developing nation-states or as frontier of pristine landscapes to be protected from this progress. It is abundantly clear that as long as the idea of frontiers continues to be the dominant narrative through which the social, economic, and environmental transformations of these Wests are

³ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: H. Holt, 1920). Among the late twentieth-century critiques of Turner, see Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987).

framed, we will never understand how our countries—as constructed and distinctly storied landscapes—emerged and changed and continue to change.

However, we also quickly began to question one of our own premises: that the emergence and transformation of these disparate countries of these Wests took place at roughly the same time, in just a few short decades around the late nineteenth century, exhibiting similar structures, institutions, ideologies, and cultural and environmental changes. To be sure, much of the constructed regional spaces and commodified aspects of the environment in these regions (in what are now more densely networked global economies) share a nineteenth-century nexus of increasing tensions between indigenous and settler occupation; land, resource, and labor exploitation; increasing human and capital mobility; and emerging conceptions of space and national identity—to touch on but a few of the themes explored in this volume. But those processes have deeper, ongoing temporal and ecological ramifications, which ended up constituting one of the key motivations for our continuing comparison of these “Wests.” The dynamics of social and environmental change in the North American West and Oceania did not start or stop with nineteenth-century settler colonialism, nor has the multidirectional movement of people, ideas, and commodities across the Wests diminished, even to this day.

In aiming to secure and define national territories, the nation-states that now encompass these Wests continue to be enmeshed in political struggles among property-rights advocates, global mining firms, farmers and pastoralists, indigenous activists and allies, and international migrants and citizens, among others, all of which reflect persistent tensions among the descendants and inheritors of settler-colonial conflicts, and all of which remain thick with racial ideologies of national belonging and exclusion.

As our contributors demonstrate, the incorporation of colonized lands remains contested and to some extent uncontrolled—these dynamics remain front and center in many of the contemporary environmental issues these Wests continue to face (as shown by Alistair Paterson, Frank K. Lake, and Judee Lena Burr). While “country” and “nation” are sometimes used synonymously, many authors here make clear that a country has a sense of home and landscape that often distinguishes it from the more administrative phenomena that define a nation-state (particularly for Aboriginal conceptions of *country*, as shown by Jill Milroy and Grant Revell). Today, many countries persist in (and sometimes in spite of) the nation-states that engulf them. Emblematic among these are the indigenous lands and societies of western North America and Australia, where despite common assumptions of collapse, indigenous countries flourish, often beneath the scope and authority of the nations that claim them.

Contributions in this volume touch on many of these shifting themes, which are often common between but simultaneously different within each West. Contributions by Paterson, Lake, and Burr highlight the environmental legacies that bind present social and environmental issues to the legacies of historical contact between indigenous populations and settler-colonialists. Traditional uses of fire by Australian Aboriginal (Paterson) and North American Indian (Lake) groups came into conflict with the economic concerns of settler-states; as a result, thousands of years of evolving ecological relationships between humans and the land were interrupted. Today, in a somewhat ironic twist of fate, the administrative states built on ending these practices now turn to traditional practitioners for advice and insight into how best to use fire as a land management tool. Meanwhile, fire and other traditional environmental practices maintain a central role in many individuals’ daily lives and have become a focal point over claims to land, though with varying success across and within the Wests (Burr).

As these scholars highlight, understanding the Wests requires that we appreciate the nuances of these social and environmental relationships in context. Similarly, the contributions by Milroy and Revell, who examine modes of Aboriginal narrative, and by Jared Dahl Aldern, who interprets North Fork Mono narrative, highlight that if we are to *know* these Wests, we might have to set aside our own ways of knowing. Their essays suggest that scholars situated within Anglophone (or other) epistemologies may not be able to understand indigenous perspectives (past or present) simply by translating indigenous ways of knowing. We may need to shift our own perspectives and worldviews, just as we would learn another language. While difficult, even the attempt to do so may allow us to see things more clearly as scholars (Milroy and Revell) and denizens and may also support the maintenance of valuable differences into the future (Aldern).

Perhaps equally important to understanding different ways of knowing is to understand how indigenous individuals in postcontact Wests appropriated trappings of settler-colonial society for their own. Darren Jorgensen discusses how the icon of “the cowboy” in Aboriginal Australia emerged as a symbol of freedom and mobility. As with many objects and ideas, horses and the notion of the cowboy were intertwined with the settler-colonial economy. But as Aboriginal involvement in cattle stations began to dwindle, the cowboy became an icon and a story retold through the creation of European-style art produced by Aboriginal artists. Here, the appropriation of a colonial object gave rise to a new icon, genre, and form of material culture, something we see with other forms of art today (Milroy and Revell).

Lest we forget that the story of these Wests would not exist without seafaring, immigration, and exchange, contributions by Ethan Blue and William M. Taylor explore how the Wests were tied together through transportation across oceans, especially the Pacific. Taylor complicates the common interpretation of clipper ships and their role in creating the Wests: aestheticizing speed during and after the clipper era was arguably more important to the formation of the Wests than any actual impact these vessels had on taming distance and building the Wests. Blue highlights the role of private shipping firms in shaping the Wests. Firms became intertwined with the movements of commodities between nations and their colonies (and later between nations), including the movement of people. This role tied businesses to immigration policies, and when these came into conflict with profits, firms responded with subversion and protest, revealing how immigration policies emerged as much from private international interests as they did through policy—a trend that continues today.

The study of these Wests opens space for work that is both comparative and connected, that both enriches local studies and traces global histories. Since the nineteenth century, these Wests have become ever more densely linked by networks of capital, migration, governmental alliances, and complexes of opposition and accommodation by indigenous peoples who produce their own alternative global networks. The Comparative Wests project addresses long-unanswered challenges to study “other Wests than ours,” as Herbert Heaton once put it.⁴ Heaton referred to the American West as “our west,” but the scholars in this volume eschew the assumptions of national, racial, and, for some, even human-centered parochialism. The Wests we investigate are rich sites of complex interaction, contradiction, and struggle; we treat them not as discrete units to compare (as in the traditional social-scientific comparativist tradition) but rather as regions whose peoples, economies, and historical processes are fundamentally intertwined. We hope that this volume opens new vistas onto the spaces and places that we thought

⁴ Herbert Heaton, “Other Wests than Ours,” *Journal of Economic History* 6 (1946): 50–62, doi:10.1017/S0022050700052906.

we knew. Understanding the commonalities and differences among Wests other than our own—wherever they may be—can be a starting point for deeper understandings of the legacies of nineteenth-century settler colonialism and the worlds that survive it in the twenty-first century and beyond. [A](#)