

## Afterword

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**A**S AARON NYERGES AND GOLNAR NABIZADEH OBSERVE in their introduction to this engaging collection of essays, the consideration here of a “global system of Wests” arose out of a symposium on the idea of the “pop West” held in Perth, at the University of Western Australia, in July 2014. The idea of “pop West” is intended to emphasize the specificity of particular Western regions and “the investment in geographic struggle made by these ideas, forms, images, and imaginings” belonging to distinct local and popular, as well as global and commodified, cultures. Indeed, the localized qualities of different Western formations, and their immersion in distinctive cultures that cannot readily be brought under the control of capitalist centers, constitute one theme that emerges strongly in these essays. Nevertheless, there is an implicit dialogue throughout these essays between the Global West—a framework used most consistently by Krista Comer—and the Global South, a term that has recently gained much resonance and visibility in cultural criticism. However, as Nyerges and Nabizadeh also note, the idea of the Global South is anchored by a geographical materialism that the notion of a Global West altogether lacks: “Unlike the equator, which naturally bisects the globe into north and south, the placement of the prime meridian does not depend on the planet’s shape and was a contested matter.” The hegemony of the North over the South has been consolidated over several centuries through the distinctive industrial systems that have differentiated the Northern from the Southern Hemisphere, with American hydrographer Matthew F. Maury suggesting in 1855 that such global asymmetry testified to a plan of divine Providence whereby the Southern Hemisphere had been mapped out as inherently subordinate to the Northern.<sup>1</sup> But the problem with the West is that it depends entirely on cartographic fictions to sustain it. The placement of the zero degree

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Fontaine Maury, *The Physical Geology of the Sea and Its Meteorology* (New York, 1855), 27–28.



of longitude was the subject of fierce international disputes in the nineteenth century, with the prime meridian established at Greenwich only by a majority vote at the International Meridian Conference held in Washington, DC, in 1884, and every place on Earth being henceforth measured in accordance with its degrees east or west of this line.<sup>2</sup> But of course given the spherical nature of the planet, all such east–west coordinates are necessarily dependent upon the spatial position of the observer. China, for example, lies east of England, while California is east of China, but California is normally considered to be west of England, with the east–west rotation going full circle in every sense of that term.

Hence, the conjunctions between east and west have only ever enjoyed a relativistic relationship, something that cannot properly be said of the north–south axis. Nyerges and Nabizadeh usefully cite Kuan-Hsing Chen’s work, which asks us to ponder the implications of considering Israel or Iraq as being situated in West Asia rather than in a strategic location east of Europe, and there are many conundrums of this kind that both political and literary writers over the ages have highlighted. American poet Gary Snyder has played with the reversibility of east–west coordinates in his account of how Asian culture interacts with that of the “West” coast of America, and he has noted how Native American cartographies offer alternative mapping grids for the American continent. Snyder’s poem “Arctic Midnight Twilight” describes how “at the roof of the planet, the warp / of the longitudes gathered,” leading the poet to evoke a “Koyukon riddle”:

It really snowed really hard  
in opposite directions  
on my head.  
who am I?<sup>3</sup>

As the lines of longitude converge at the North Pole, so east and west change places, leading the poet here to interrogate conceptions of identity more broadly. In the first sentence of their introduction, Nyerges and Nabizadeh refer to Perth as “the world’s most isolated metropolis,” but one question this begs is, isolated from what? Certainly not from Indigenous territories, as many of these essays tellingly describe, nor from the Indian Ocean, whose archipelagic contours shape the planet in multiple ways. The West, as theorists from Patricia Nelson Limerick to Neil Campbell have emphasized, is “a mental act as much as an actual place” (as Nyerges and Nabizadeh rightly observe), but one might go further than this and suggest that the phrase “comparative Wests” is effectively a tautology, since “West” is by definition a comparative term, one that makes sense only in relation to other points on the compass. Although the Comparative Wests Project itself might be interested in “conceptualizing particular and localized Wests as opposed to a homogeneous West,” the material circumstances of any given local scene are necessarily counterpointed against a more nominalistic understanding of their orientation and spatial grounding.

This leads throughout these essays to a frequent double movement, whereby the projections induced by the phantasms associated with Western horizons are played off against a recognition of their inherently false consciousness. In Tony Hughes-d’Aeth’s essay, such unmasking of illusions is described specifically in terms of children’s literature, and he fascinatingly records how,

<sup>2</sup> On this issue, see Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 12.

<sup>3</sup> Gary Snyder, *Mountains and Rivers without End* (New York: Counterpoint, 1996), 95, 97.

in Dorothy Hewett's first published poem, the nine-year-old author self-consciously chronicles how her dream is only a dream. Yet this educational program in Western Australia, where children were set to work writing poems about the growing of produce and the cultivation of nature, reflects in interesting ways on the more advanced mythology of this regional territory. Western Australia's ideology of "developmentalism," in Kieran Dolin's phrase, was organized around its mythologization of itself as a "Golden Island," the place where Australians could always be "young and free" (as in the rhetoric of "Advance Australia Fair"), in ways that might not be true in other parts of the post-Federation country. Hughes-d'Aeth intriguingly links these poems encouraged by state pedagogy to the sense of childhood evoked in the stories of J. M. Barrie and Rudyard Kipling around the turn of the twentieth century, narratives that "became a forum for playing out the world's adult struggles in disguised form," and in this sense the double consciousness embedded within Western landscapes, where myth and reality seem to coexist in the same frame, can be seen to resonate in illuminating ways with the broader dynamics of Victorian and modern culture. The whole issue of settler colonialism, as outlined in Dolin's comparative treatment of Western Australia and the American Pacific Northwest, has been organized in recent scholarship around a structural discrepancy between the settlers' language of "command and threat," as Dolin puts it, and the claims of Indigenous peoples who have been dispossessed from their lands, and Dolin also recounts here how Aboriginal voices were silenced in the fiction of Randolph Stow. But such omissions are hardly surprising, since the imposition of linguistic or metaphorical structures upon the inchoate condition of a natural landscape can be read as analogous to ways in which settler colonialism imposed itself upon a preexistent world, not merely the Indigenous environment itself but also the state of anteriority to which language lays only a belated claim. Campbell in *The Rhizomatic West* uses the deterritorializing matrix of Deleuze and Guattari to unpack the ways in which mobility and displacement are always already incorporated into Western formations, but if settler colonialism implies hegemonic assumptions of various kinds, it also postulates a rhetorical imperialism to which a double-edged discourse of presence and absence becomes endemic.<sup>4</sup>

T. S. Eliot's notion of the region as, in Hughes-d'Aeth's words, "mediating between unity and diversity, protecting culture from the excesses of each," certainly seems an interesting historical idea, one characteristic—like the city or the nation, to which it was analogous—of a modernist investment in bounded space, but it is difficult to see the region achieving a similar kind of traction within the networked world of the twenty-first century. In this sense, the invocation by Nyerges and Nabizadeh of "critical regionalism" as a developing idea seems to me problematical; Fredric Jameson in *The Seeds of Time* wrote of this term as "selected, no doubt, in order to forestall the unwanted connotations of the terms *national* and *international* alike . . . with a view toward resisting the standardizations of a henceforth global late capitalism and corporatism," but he also suggested how the phrase implied an economic self-sufficiency that was implausible within a postmodern condition of global markets.<sup>5</sup> Rather than being an apology for critical regionalism per se, the essays in this collection characteristically critique ways in which knowledge is institutionalized and consolidated, with the terra incognita of Western landscapes forcing an interrogation of the very idea of physical space and a human being's fraught ontological relation to it.

<sup>4</sup> Neil Campbell, *The Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 202.

Golnar Nabizadeh's treatment of the film *Lucky Miles* usefully correlates the cinematic narrative with its foregrounding, in the film's opening titles, "areas in Australia, Iraq, and other places," cartographic maps and charts that turn out to be illegible as the film proceeds, with Indigenous knowledge in this work betokening a kind of negative theology, the manifestation for Western observers of what it is that they do not know. Campbell, we might remember, wrote his account of "postwestern" America from the East Midlands of England, and some sense of the West as a perpetually vanishing horizon, a line of sight that becomes evanescent in its very tracking, is a thread running through all of the accounts of the West enumerated here.

In Krista Comer's insightful piece, she aligns this interrogation of the Western trope of mobility with a feminist critique of transnationalism, pointing out how contemporary theories of globalization have tended to marginalize questions of gender and, in particular, women's consciousness. This leads her into a broader critique of how people embody and internalize the idea of space, something she works out through an analysis of films such as *Johnny Guitar*, which pertinently asks the question of what "mobility" means. Concomitantly, Nicholas Ray's film asks larger questions "about the nonmobility, the nontravel, of this kind of Global West tale. We still don't know: What has happened?" Comer suggests that Australian studies scholarship is "far ahead of US scholarship" in its treatment of how settler colonialism has affected Western landscapes and the mythologies that underwrite them, but it might also be true to say that US scholarship is generally ahead of its Australian counterpart in its consideration of how rhetorical aporias frame the conceptualization of Western space. Comer's own stringent analysis, with its dexterous negotiation of differential gender assumptions and its reflexive awareness of how Western narratives aspire to naturalize themselves by repressing their own conditions of metaphorical production, might be seen as a critical equivalent to Sam Shepard's play *True West* (1980), which again demystifies all of the paraphernalia of authenticity that have long surrounded this mythopoeic trope. Shepard himself, as both writer and actor in a variety of theatrical and cinematic works, has long been a key figure in how these legends of the postmodern West have circulated through American culture, and it is no coincidence that he plays the role of "a literary man named Beverly" in *August: Osage County*, one of the films that Comer examines here in her effort to think "across Global Wests."

Traditionally, the romantic idea of the West as a site for progress or emancipation has depended upon its intellectual enclosure within a bounded environment. It is interesting from Chen Hong's account of literature and culture in China's West to see similar kinds of pattern being repeated in another national situation, where economic development and a popular incorporation of "forests, rivers, deserts" lead to the heightened sense of a Chinese "spirit of the West." Yet this romanticization of the West as a phenomenon centered on "diminishing rural spaces and the anxiety-ridden confrontation between development and traditionalism" is clearly different in kind from how China regards the West in its geopolitical form, a line of encounter epitomized by the dissemination of US political interests across the Asia-Pacific region. In a paper delivered at the 2015 International American Studies Association meeting in South Korea, Mari Nagatomi showed how country-and-western music became part of the way in which US culture reconditioned Japan after the Second World War, with Hiroshi Toyama's band The Western Ramblers epitomizing how the country-and-western style—known in Japan simply as "western"

music—appeared publicly to embody values of freedom, prosperity, and democracy.<sup>6</sup> In his stage acts Toyama emphasized flamboyant western costumes so as to make U.S. culture more accessible to Japanese audiences, and this suggests how the “West” also became a political, and indeed an imperial, conception within this transpacific orbit. There is a fatal ambiguity, in other words, between the west and the West, between the idea of western topography as an oppositional space working dialectically in contrast with the more traditional social hierarchies of a circumscribed eastern region, such as we see across the national states of Australia, China, and the United States, and the notion of the West as a more amorphous geopolitical category, attempting to impose its hegemonic values on many different parts of the globe.

In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, his metafictional novel about ways in which American global culture crosses Indian national space, Salman Rushdie chronicles the fortunes of a Bombay nightclub singer called “Jimmy Cash,” who trades in what he calls “‘Country and Eastern’ music,” a set of twangy songs about ranches and trains and cows with an idiosyncratic Indian twist.<sup>7</sup> This indicates, in Rushdie’s typical stylistic idiom, how cultural zones are creatively superimposed and inverted upon themselves. Such transpositions suggest how one characteristic of the West, in all of its forms, is its perennial susceptibility to reversal and implosion. Rushdie’s post-modernist aesthetic of disorientation perhaps represents one extreme version of this, but many of the essays gathered in this collection similarly imply ways in which the West becomes an inherently self-contradictory phenomenon, as in Hughes-d’Aeth’s observation of poetic double vision, Dolin’s recognition of the contradictions built into ideologies of “developmentalism,” Comer’s feminist deconstruction of received assumptions of Western mobility, and Nabizadeh’s account of how Western maps dissolve into the amorphous unmapped spaces. In this light, it might be argued that western narratives become a rhetorical counterpart to strategies of deconstruction, an allegory for the paradoxical condition of representation in which meaning is evoked and revoked simultaneously. If the Global South is based on a planetary system of domination and subordination that finds its analogue in a naturalization of planetary conditions, the Global West operates as a more elusive phenomenon, a chimerical line of longitude to the Global South’s more visible line of latitude. The West is, by definition, a system not sanctioned by any kind of natural condition, but one constantly changing in line with the expansions and contractions of geographical perspective. If the Global South is first cousin to the postcolonial condition, the Global West might be said to relate more to a poststructuralist paradigm, based as it is on both a recognition of material space and a self-consciousness about how its necessarily contingent parameters are constructed. A

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<sup>6</sup> Mari Nagatomi, “Defining Democracy: Hiroshi Toyama and Country and Western Music in Japan,” paper presented at “Constellating ‘Americas’: Ex/Changes beyond Transnationalism,” International American Studies Association, Seoul National University, August 17, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Salman Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), 209.