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# Western History as (Post-)Colonial Studies?

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# Western History as (Post-)Colonial Studies?

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In their annual meeting in February 2010, the historians in the German Association for American Studies included a section on “American History from the Perspective of Postcolonial Studies.” The issues addressed in their call for papers reminded me of the debates among Western historians around the writing of a “New Western History.” This paper, which was presented within that section in an earlier version, raises the question how American history has addressed and integrated concerns and changes of perspective that have also informed postcolonial studies. As I will try to show, the impulses that propelled Western history in recent years have not (at least not primarily) come from postcolonial theory but from issues within the field and within American culture. The question is whether historiography could profit from considering some of the theoretical issues within postcolonial studies, or rather: how can history and textual studies meet?

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## I. The Whipping Boy of Western History

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American history dealing with the American West has for quite some time been informed by Frederick Jackson Turner, or rather, by the battle over Turner’s “frontier thesis.” Although there is always a danger of simplifying Turner’s ideas and of conflating the frontier and the West, let me emphasize two points that will be significant for the following discussion: Turner uses the frontier as a key term to describe an exceptional American history and society and he characterizes American westward expansion as a formative process (mostly in positive terms of progress, improvement, and democracy) and thus as an “Americanizing” or nation-building force (Turner 1920, Waechter 1996).

It is not too far-flung to suggest that in his time Turner already made an anti-colonial statement that was intended to emancipate American history

from the burdens of old world history. However, today most would probably point out that western history took its first steps into the direction of post-colonial studies in the 1950s and 1960s and that these first steps were part of a *critique* of Turner's ideas. By that time, historians were exposing the blind spots and omissions in Turner's narrative such as, for instance, the colonization and victimization of Native Americans and Hispanics, the experiences of women, African Americans, and Asians, the environmental consequences of westward expansion, and the role of violence (Slotkin 1973, Drinnon 1980). Revisionist historians began to argue that Turner was not even *able to see* these issues because he was steeped in the political ideologies of his time, i.e., he was anti-European, isolationist, expansionist, imperialist, ethnocentric (Waechter 1996: 20–21, 320ff). He was also seen to reflect the blinders of an American perspective defined by a frontier myth, or what Henry Nash Smith has called the myth of the West (Smith 1950). Today Smith would probably call this mythology a colonial discourse.

Much of the debates focusing on the Turner thesis have revolved around the question of perspective and the matter of positioning: from which, or rather, from *whose* perspective is the story of the frontier and of the colonization of the American West told and analyzed?

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## II. The “New Western History”

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By the late 1980s, some western historians proclaimed the birth of a “New Western History,” making a polemical splash with the launch of an exhibition in 1989 that aimed to revise and modify interpretations of the frontier and of the role of the West in American history: “Trails through Time,” accompanied by a symposium on “Trails: Toward a New Western History” (Limerick et al. 1991). The “New Western History” presents itself as a “movement” very much associated with the names of Patricia Limerick, Richard White, Donald Worster, and William Cronon, but includes many more historians who collaborated in the 1989 exhibit and who since then have explored new facets of western history. Although they deny any intention of establishing a new orthodoxy, some sweeping, overarching lines of argument can be identified:

First of all, the new western history investigates “what else was going on while the boys were having their day” (Johnson 1996: 56). It explores the mess

left behind in terms of the western natural environment and of political and social relations in the West. The goal is to debunk western myths and the myths underlying (Turner-style) "Old Western History" by "creating a new history, clear-eyed, demythologized, and critical" (Worster 1991: 7).

Second, the West emerges as a (contested) place shaped by asymmetrical power relations, a place undergoing processes that should be viewed not in terms of the "frontier" but in terms of invasion, conquest, and conflict (Limerick 1987: 23–24). Other terms available are "colonization, exploitation, development, expansion of the world market" (Limerick 1991: 86). These processes involve the convergence of diverse people and their encounters with each other as well as with the natural environment. They also involve the agency of those who are (in earlier revisionist histories) usually seen as victims (Ostler 2004). This implies that western history needs to study relationships and their change over time and to view these divergent, multifaceted experiences as part of a common history.

The concept of the frontier, if it is still used, is consequently redefined as a space of social and cultural interaction. As Peggy Pascoe suggests, "we need to see the frontier as a cultural crossroads rather than a geographic freeway to the West, and we need to focus on the interactions among the various groups of people who sought to control the region" (Pascoe 1991: 46). Sometimes the concept of the frontier is replaced by terms such as the "contact zone," the "middle ground," "la frontera" or the borderlands, many of which involve a turn of perspective away from the Euro-American westering direction. Here, the language of postcolonial studies is clearly discernible. The focus is no longer on distinctions between a white and a non-white history but on the intersections between people and cultures, on their mergers and mixtures, on divided loyalties and internal differences, and on the "convergence of cultures that led people to compete for power and agency" (Butler and Lansing 2008: 6).

Third, the paradigm change that this new western history wants to achieve is also reflected in its debates on the positioning of the scholar: post-structuralist influence is felt in the way historians question the possibility of historical objectivity; they want to write a history that does not claim the "pretense of scientific objectivity" but is committed to "an intellectual critique of ideology" (Johnson 1996: 65). This also means that historians write on the West "from the inside out" (West 1991: 108), a perspective which is unabashedly engaged and subjective. At the same time there is a willing-

ness, in particular reflected by Limerick's work, to assume different positions inside the West (Limerick 1987).

What made and still makes this larger perspective possible is the work of historians dealing with ethnic groups and with women, scholars within social history and ethnohistory, environmental scholars, and theorists dealing with race, gender, and class—in general, work by scholars who would not regard themselves as western historians. The “new western history” also continues the work of earlier western historians who emphasized the urban and industrial character of some frontiers and who saw the West as replicating Eastern patterns—historians such as Earl Pomeroy, William Goetzmann, and Gerald Nash who explored aspects of western development that identified the West as a colony of the East and as a place that featured labor conflicts and inequality as well as egalitarian democracy (Pomeroy 1957, Goetzmann 1966, Nash 1973, Dippie 1989). Consequently, new western historians have embedded the history of the West within larger international (or transnational) contexts such as the rise of a global capitalist economy as well as international networks of migration and immigration (West 2004, Nugent 2008).

At the end of the day, the West emerges as a place in which the federal government was and is more involved than the western myth claims (White 1991). Moreover, a focus on the twentieth-century West reveals the continuities between historical and contemporary processes and identifies it as a place in which the past still has a strong impact on the present (Nash 1973, 1985, Limerick 1987). A new western history thus needs to pay attention to the legacy of western history and its continuities.

As a consequence, the American West has emerged as a less exceptional place where similarities with European processes of colonization, colonialism, imperialism (terminological distinctions seem to remain fuzzy here) can be noted. New western historians like Limerick have been willing to see the frontier movement and westward expansion as an extension or variation of (European-derived) colonialism and in terms of an American variant of imperialism—a perspective that anchors American history within a larger, world historical context and decenters or “provincializes” the U.S. Thus studies of westward expansion and studies of empire have been increasingly brought together (Montoya 2002, Ostler 2004, Nugent 2008), although one could argue that these linkages have already been made by diplomatic historians such as William Appleman Williams (Williams 1955). For instance, Walter Nugent connects the histories of westward expansion and overseas expansion in

order to point to a continuity between both, also in terms of American “habits of empire.” He remarks that “histories of the westward movement, the frontier, and economic expansion have been treated with little reference to how America’s territories were acquired. But acquisition and settlement have been the right and left hands of the same imperial organism” (Nugent 2008: xiii). Even the discourses produced around westward expansion could be seen as variations of colonial (or, depending on the respective point of view, postcolonial) discourse. Nugent sees a relation between “a continuous narrative of the territorial acquisitions of the United States and how that history instilled in the American people the habit of empire-building” (xiii). He contends that there is a continuity of today’s American empire “with rhetoric, ideals, practices, strategies, and imperial tactics that extend back to the nation’s very first days” (xv). Nevertheless, his engagement with the ideological underpinnings of empire—focused as it is on the motivations of policy makers and the study of their official papers—could profit from a deeper exploration of the textual practices that legitimate an imperial culture, an endeavor that would link history to American literary and cultural studies as well as to postcolonial theory and studies of colonial discourse (on the uneasy relation between American studies, the study of empire, and postcolonial studies, see Kaplan and Pease 1993, Blair St. George 2000, Schueler and Watts 2003, Stoler 2006). Let us see how and where western history could meet postcolonial studies.

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### III. Western History Meets Postcolonial Studies: Discourses of Westward Expansion

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Many years ago, I tried to identify the discourses surrounding westward expansion (particularly those by women) and relate them to what postcolonial studies have termed “colonial discourse” (Georgi-Findlay 1996). David Spurr has defined colonial discourse as the particular languages which belong to the historical process of colonization, “enabling it while simultaneously being generated by it” (Spurr 1993: 1). Another definition identifies it as “an ensemble of linguistically-based practices unified by their common deployment in the management of colonial relationships” (Hulme 1986: 2). The classic elaboration on colonialist textual practices is, of course, con-



tained in Edward Said's *Orientalism* which focuses on the variety of textual forms in which the West (meaning mainly Europe) produced and codified knowledge about non-western/non-metropolitan areas and cultures, especially those under colonial control (Said 1978). Colonial discourse analysis, as part of postcolonial studies, thus looks critically at the rhetorical practices and positions through which the West constructs, interprets, and analyzes the category of the foreign, strange, non-Western other in order to support and legitimize the actual processes of domination of one people over another. As Linda Hutcheon has suggested, the "post" in "postcolonial" designates both a time "after" colonial rule and the implications of an "anticolonial" attitude: "On the one hand, *post* is taken to mean 'after,' 'because of,' and even unavoidably 'inclusive of' the colonial; on the other, it signifies more explicit resistance and opposition, the anticolonial" (Hutcheon 1995: 10). Postcolonial theory consequently deals with the aspects of colonial discourse which survive beyond the classic colonial era and which continue to color perceptions of the non-Western world. At the same time it defines itself as an activist political project (Young 2003:4).

Reading and analyzing diaries, letters, memoirs, and travel reports related to westward expansion and written by both men and women, one can identify the rhetorical patterns that Said and others have identified in European writings about the Orient, Africa, or Latin America (Pratt 1992, Georgi-Findlay 1996). These can consist in rhetorical gestures that impose order and authority over an unfamiliar, often threatening, western physical and cultural landscape. Especially the manner in which the western landscape and its native inhabitants are described is often reminiscent of the way European explorers have "exoticized" and "othered" people and landscapes. Often historical processes are "naturalized," that is, frontier activity is described as an innocent interaction with nature rather than as a historical act of human intervention. Attempts at mapping and knowledge-building (for instance, in sweeping, panoramic views where the eye moves over broad expanses of land) can be read, despite their claims at scientific neutrality, as acts of appropriation in the service of empire-building (Pratt 1992, Greenfield 1992). Native cultures are often "feminized": American Indian men appear as effeminate dandies, even as aesthetic objects. The focus on the bodies and appearance of Indian men distances and neutralizes their male power, a sign that these texts (especially travel narratives) are often occupied with issues of control over self and others (Georgi-Findlay 1996). These textual practices have been identified by postcolonial theorists as rhe-

torical gestures that formulate hierarchies of power and/or legitimate the necessity of paternal rule over childlike, feminine people who are incapable of ruling themselves (Young 2003: 2–3). On the level of textual practices, one can therefore establish a close relationship between westering and colonizing, between discourses of discovery and politics of imperial expansion, and between mapping, knowledge-building, and empire-building.

At the same time, in many westering accounts (especially, but not only, in those written by women) we also get a sense of the insecurities involved in the empire-building enterprise. There are moments when mental maps simply fail, when the good and the bad guys are not wearing the right hats, when the strange “other” looks and talks back and reveals the blind spots and powerlessness of the writing “self.” At the end of the day, reading these accounts and trying to make sense of them in the context of their time was a tremendously rewarding experience that illuminated for me nineteenth-century American ideas about land, nation, race, and gender and made me think about westward expansion in new ways. There is no doubt in my mind that historians need to interrogate texts and textual practices in order to understand the ideological basis of historical and political activity, and thus also to understand the ideological underpinnings of the historical meta-narratives they create.

Approaching westward expansion by way of westering accounts and reading them through the lens of colonial discourse analysis may thus help to identify powerful mental processes at work that support westward expansion. Doing so certainly tempts us to unmask and interpret textual practices (and thus also the westering myth) as part of a veiled (Euro-American) grasp for power over non-white others, as a tool that provides images and ideologies which ultimately help to secure that hegemony over the colonized “other.”

Yet this way of reading westward expansion still raises a host of uncomfortable questions: Is this the only way of reading these texts? How representative are the texts and textual practices we analyze? Are we perhaps overrating their significance and centrality? What is the relation between textual practices and “real” political and social action and interaction “on the ground”? What do these readings say about the ideologies underlying our own scholarship? In fact, all of these questions reflect my increasing discomfort with both the focus on linguistic models and the politics of activism that have dominated the study of colonialism and postcolonialism for quite some time. Perhaps it is time again to refocus on the material condi-

tions, foreground the “organization of power and the influence of social and economic fundamentals,” and deal with topics such as “the organization of work and social relationships” as well as the role of the state that have been displaced by the focus on “the terrain of ideas, languages, and propaganda” in the study of colonialism and empire (Fradera 2009: 34). As Peter J. Kastor has suggested, it is possible “to connect [the] worlds of policymaking and cultural production in order to reconcile the seemingly conflicting interpretations of U.S. expansion” and to understand “how U.S. cultural production responded to and engaged conflicting attitudes toward expansion” (Kastor 2008: 1004)

What I am suggesting here is that textual studies and an engagement with rhetoric and discourses, although they can be very productive for an understanding of western history, cannot stand alone. They need to be accompanied and complemented by the nitty-gritty historical work that identifies and analyzes the economic, political, and social forces and the various agents and conflicting perspectives driving westward expansion.

I am also suggesting that the study of (colonial, imperial, empire- and nation-building) discourses, despite an undisputed need for transnational perspectives, still also needs to take local or national particularities into account. Although the exceptionalist mindset may be held responsible for what Amy Kaplan has called the “Absence of Empire” in American studies (Kaplan 1993), the long absence of the U.S. from postcolonial studies can also be explained by the particular forms that colonialism and postcoloniality have assumed in American history. As comparative studies of empire and colonialism have established in recent years, processes of expansion and empire-building do not work the same way all over the world (Watts and Schueller 2003, Stoler 2006). They entail different forces and actors, different social and cultural interactions between different kinds of people in situations that cannot always be compared to those that postcolonial studies have had in mind (Ostler 2004).

Postcolonial studies cannot be, and probably never have been, a unified field. The processes and agents driving, for example, British empire-building and colonial expansion are not the same as those driving American westward expansion and U.S. settler colonialism (whose contradictions may be subsumed in Thomas Jefferson’s phrase of the “empire for liberty” which imagines the U.S. as both empire and postcolonial nation). The rhetorical practices connected to British and American colonialism (although both European-derived) need to be analyzed within their respective contexts in

terms of their patterns, functions, and effects, although their similarities should also be taken into account. For example, as Mark Rifkin's study of the broader ideological structure of the U.S. empire has shown, there is a particular dynamic at work in U.S. administrative and legal discourses applied to western lands and peoples prior to the Civil War that shows a commitment to both democratic process and imperial authority (Rifkin 2009).

The meeting between western history and postcolonial studies can thus help to avoid oversimplifications. Western history has taken into account the particular mechanisms defining the American westward move, including the role of political ideas and ideals, national and local decisions, and individual actors that may have supported or defied imperial aspirations. Its collective work (I am particularly including here Indian history as well as the histories on women and minorities) has shown that viewing the West as a product and result of a colonial, imperial or global history still does not erase the particularities of its emergence. One size (of postcolonial theory) therefore does not fit all.

Thus, while it makes much sense that western history meets postcolonial studies, some negotiations are in order. Both also need to discuss (and perhaps solve) a common image problem that they face. While they are both hard at work unmasking and unveiling myths and ideologies, the results of that work are not always positively received or even acknowledged, for that matter, by an interested public. In the case of postcolonial studies this has, I believe, a lot to do with its theoretical jargon (while it may also have something to do with its politics). In the case of the new western history this image problem is part and parcel of the political situation in which it emerged—in the context of a politically and culturally polarized America of the 1980s and 1990s that was deeply divided over issues such as the role of cultural, ethnic and gender diversity in politics and education (with multiculturalism, political correctness, affirmative action serving as keywords in the battle), the role of the state, and the core values of the nation. Within the context of these “culture wars,” any interpretation of American history, particularly with regard to the American West, becomes an issue of public politics subject to the scrutiny of a sensitive public. This especially regards the mythology and iconography tied to the American frontier and the West.

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#### IV. Consequences: Mythbusting and Its Problems

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As the new western historians have learned, writing new histories of the American West in a way that is “clear-eyed, demythologized, and critical” (Worster 1991: 6–7) may have problematic consequences. One inkling of this was the controversial public reaction to a 1991 art exhibition which reflected the spirit of the new western history. As Michael Johnson suggests, in its radical reinterpretation of paintings of the western landscape, “The West as America” participated in an “interpretational showdown” by annotating well-known paintings, sculptures, and photographs with “wall texts that interpreted the works as conspirational propaganda for Western expansion” and as ideological constructs. Art and artists, the exhibition suggested, were in collusion with an entrepreneurial and political elite whose goal was to appropriate western lands and resources (Johnson 1996: 202–05). The wall texts implied “how much the history of the West is a history of rhetoric” and how “the settling of the West blurs with the selling of the West” and “the conquest of native cultures merges with the conquering power of culture itself” (Byran J. Wolf, quoted in Johnson 1996: 205). What bothered many observers was that the wall texts did not seem to say much about the paintings’ aesthetic quality, imbuing them only with a subtext of shame and guilt: “they purveyed only a critical negativity, and they didn’t smile when they said it” (202–03). Harsh public reactions forced the show’s designers to replace the wall texts “with less shrill editions” but the “overall tone, with its leftist tendentiousness, was little diluted by that tactic. The harsh reactions continued” (203).

What is at stake here is the interpretation of westward expansion in terms of its moral legitimacy. The exhibition implicitly seems to describe it as a conspiracy in the service of a white political, economic, and cultural elite that assumes an ethically doubtful hegemony over colonized peoples. As Johnson suggests, some observers were especially irritated by the way the exhibition “demythologized the rationalizing stories white America likes to tell itself about the positive meaning of Western colonization” (204). What added to the irritation was that “it seemed to impose political correctness on an age different from our own” (203)—a critique that needs to be well taken by historians. The public uproar around the exhibition was also a reminder of the fact that the frontier and the colonization of the West are so entan-

gled with issues concerning American national identity and American self-images that any debunking of its familiar images hits right where it hurts and may therefore be (whether rightfully or wrongfully) perceived as politically loaded or even biased. It should therefore come as no surprise that the exhibition became a battlefield in the “culture wars” of the 1990s (Kearns 1998: 377, 399).

The new western history has not escaped similar criticism. It has been accused of being too politically correct and of trashing white people, capitalism, and the federal government. As Michael Johnson has pointed out, critics have argued that the new western history is too critical of white westerners and too negative about the results of westering. Some accuse the new western historians of leading a “politically correct posse” in the tricky “lynching of Turner’s ghost” (Gerald Thompson, quoted in Johnson 1996: 62). Gerald D. Nash even “accuses them of intellectual totalitarianism,” while William W. Savage, Jr. refers “to their field as ‘whorishly fashionable,’ to their approach as ‘self-serving’ and marked by ‘increasingly dogmatic posturing,’ and to them as ‘cranky and mean-spirited’” (62).

As these reactions seem to suggest, a basic problem that continues to beset western history has to do with the complex significance and function of mythology and narrative. This problem is twofold. On the one hand, in their search for an anti-mythical history new western historians may create their own counter-myths. Thus, in their attempt to solve the contradiction between a “frontier of Hope” and a “frontier of conflict and conquest” (Whitehead 2001), new western historians may have sometimes strayed too far into the latter direction. On the other hand, new western historians may underestimate the power of and necessity for myth. If the westering myth is unmasked so easily, one may ask, why doesn’t it want to go away? In the end, none of the arguments against the Turner thesis and not even the concentrated power of new western histories have been able to blunt the persistent attraction and durability of the frontier story as a compelling narrative. One only needs to look at current popular and political culture and one can observe the continuing power of the frontier myth in fantasy movies, in western clothing, in the popularity of new country and western music, in (more or less critical) references to “cowboy politics,” and in political calls for the transcendence of boundaries (“Yes, we can”). As many debunking scholars have learned, the American public continues to use “the term ‘frontier’ in an overwhelmingly positive manner” (Kearns 1998: 398), perhaps

even, as Patricia Limerick has suggested, as a “kind of multicultural common property” and “cultural glue” in an atmosphere of division and fragmentation (qtd. in Kearns 1998: 398).

Moreover, frontier and western myths and narratives seem to provide a tricky challenge to the writing of new western histories. Richard White’s *“It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own”*: A New History of the American West (1991), Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher’s *The American West: A New Interpretive History* (2000), and Richard Etulain’s *Beyond the Missouri: The Story of the American West* (2006) all compartmentalize history and myth by putting the discussion of images, myths, and narratives into separate chapters. Obviously, the meeting of history and textual studies is still an awkward one, suggesting that new western history could profit from integrating the latter’s approaches to textual patterns, rhetoric, and ideology.

Nevertheless, by going public and taking the heat, the new western historians ultimately have also been able to influence the practice of public history, as found, for example, in museums (Dood 2009). This influence on public history can also be seen reflected in film documentaries such as Ken Burns’s *The West* or in the film westerns of the 1990s (Clint Eastwood’s *Unforgiven*). The same applies to the constructions of western history in the TV series *Deadwood* (HBO, 2004–2006) which, in its efforts to create historical verisimilitude simultaneously violates and affirms the limits of a contemporary “politically correct” entertainment.

Of course, with the years the “newness” of the “new” western history has naturally worn off. While many Western historians have continued in their attempts to revise western history, others acknowledge both the durability of the “old” western history and the messier vision of the “new” one, pleading for a synthesis of both. Thus Richard Etulain attempted to write a history that acknowledges the complexity of the western story and avoids both its triumphalist and condemnatory extremes (Etulain 2006). Others have begun to revise the revisionist “new” histories. For example, Richard J. Orsi argues that the impact of “large, powerful business corporations” such as railroads “on the process of settlement, economic development and environmental change in a frontier region” is more complex than sometimes assumed by historians who characterize the railroad as a “diabolical organization” and a deterrent to economic development (Orsi 2005: xiii). Orsi finds that the Southern Pacific Railroad actually identified “its corporate interests with the public welfare and promoted more organized, efficient settlement, economic

development, and more enlightened resource policies in its service area” (xiv) than has been acknowledged by more critical historians.

In another example, the business of tourism in the West and the tourist, also at times critical targets of new western histories, are rehabilitated and defended against accusations of tourism as “the new imperialism of the postmodern, postcolonial world.” The tourist, Wrobel and Long suggest, can only be “a pitiful straw man or woman” for current historians “for the purpose of expressing their intellectual laments over the artificiality and soullessness of modern corporate, capitalist culture” (Wrobel and Long 2001: 2).

Finally, another recent trend in western history is a renewed focus on reconciliation and restitution, an endeavour in which the historian may play an important role (Ned Blackhawk 2006: 5, Smith 2010). Patricia Nelson Limerick herself has recently turned toward harnessing the western myth in the service of healing the “lesions” produced by westward expansion. While she “struggled diligently” through her early career “to replace the romance clinging to memories of western history with realism,” and to point out “what went wrong in the past,” she found herself wanting to work on behalf of the more positive and productive task of healing and restoration. Although “many American pioneers and settlers in the nineteenth century were agents of colonial and imperial expansion,” she muses, “they nonetheless demonstrated extraordinary courage, persistence, ingenuity, and pluck.” Why not turn the pioneering spirit into a positive tool and put it to work “on behalf of remediation, restoration, and repair”? The answer seems self-evident: “We will heal the West because it is the western thing to do” (Limerick et al. 2009: 7–9). Perhaps this could also serve as a new outlook for the meeting of western history and postcolonial studies.

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## About the Author

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