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INTRODUCTION

Theorizing the Rhizomatic West

*Nothing less is asked of the thinker today than that
he should be at every moment both within things and outside them.*

Theodor Adorno

*Culture is contested, temporal, and emergent. Representation and
explanation—both by insiders and outsiders—
is implicated in this emergence.*

James Clifford

*There's nothing more unsettling
than the continual movement of something that seems fixed.*

Gilles Deleuze

A System of Westness

“Like people and schools of criticism, ideas and theories travel—from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another. Cultural and intellectual life are usually nourished and often sustained by this circulation of ideas, and whether it takes the form of acknowledged or unconscious influence, creative borrowing, or wholesale appropriation, the movement of ideas and theories from one place to another is both a fact of life and a usefully enabling condition of intellectual activity.” Edward Said’s words suggest how ideas and theories travel or are borrowed and used in different places for different purposes: “For borrow we certainly must if we are to elude the constraints of our immediate intellectual environment.”¹ I take this as a starting point for this book’s project, the examination of a traveling or mobile discourse, the American West, while avoiding certain constraints in its examination. In this I am exploring an anomaly in western studies between the “lines of flight”—that is, mobility and migration existing both as ideas and as the material conditions that transformed the region as tribes, immigrants, nomads, conquerors, traders, trappers, farmers, and many other forms of transient peoples passed through—and the mythic quest for rootedness, settlement, and synthesis so often accepted as the outcome, the final point, and the essential identity of this fluid movement. The desire for fixity, belonging, and integration has an impressive presence in

the narratives of the West relating both to the needs of a modern state to present a solidity and unity at its heart—the foundation of national identity—and to the developing discipline of western studies itself. This zealous mission has the quality of a form of “intra” imperialism amplified by the West’s “self-representation as the fount of Americanness,” a unified, coherent metanarrative in which a singular, national identity is explained and justified.² Such ideological weight remains in political rhetoric and representation, whether through Ronald Reagan assuming the role of wood-chopping rancher in California or George W. Bush defining foreign policy as a simplistic sheriff/outlaw screenplay. It is sedimented in historiography through the Turner thesis, the art of Bierstadt and Russell, the western novels of Wister or Grey, the western films of John Ford, the photographic epics of Ansel Adams, the fashion iconography of Ralph Lauren, and the advertising of Marlboro, all constructing interrelated aspects of a westward creation story. In the West, it claims, is the evidence of a nation forged out of the intense and diverse experiences of the so-called open, vacant frontier, transforming encounter and contact into a closed, destined relationship of evolution and progress toward the production of an essentially rooted American character. Settling the West has been for so long a key trope of how that land, that space, that political complexity has been discussed. Putting down roots, building communities, taming the land, removing the indigenous populations with their itinerant ways, assimilating the immigrant into the nation, and asserting a national narrative have been intrinsic to westernness. However, as West-based writer Charles Bowden comments, these mythic frameworks act as a screen, and “we hide behind the feel and the image of the taking, the days of the pioneers, the vestments of the cattle industry, the pageants of the Neolithic cultures we gutted, the image of the gun, the memory of the roar of our firepower when the trigger was pulled.” These frameworks, he goes on to argue, must be broken and questioned, because “We need to look at ourselves, with love, with doubt, with clear eyes.”³

To borrow from James Clifford, one might argue, therefore, that conventional narratives have “privileged relations of dwelling over relations of travel,” despite the fact that travel was central to the processes that brought people to the West in the first place. As it was for Clifford’s

anthropologists, it is more ideologically convenient to study rooted communities in the field (so-called fieldwork) as fixed and unitary, and consequently “to marginalize or erase several blurred boundary areas, historical realities that slip out of the *ethnographic frame*” (emphasis added). Often excluded in such a narrow and particular focus on the local is “the wider global world of intercultural import-export in which the ethnographic encounter is always already enmeshed.”⁴ Applying Clifford’s perspective to the West might allow for some productive rethinking of how western space has been viewed over time—to displace fieldwork with what Paul Gilroy terms “route work” and to consciously step outside the frame of settled community to perceive other forces at work in cultural space now viewed as a contact zone where “disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other.”⁵ As Clifford writes, the ethnographer, like the western historian or writer, “has localized what is actually a regional/national/global nexus” and marginalized “external relations and displacements,” when according to Mary Louise Pratt’s definition of “contact zones,” what is significant are “copresence, interaction, inter-locking understandings and practices.”⁶ Too often, however, the West has been seen from within the West by westerners creating “naturalized affiliations between subject and object,” as Paul Giles puts it, defining a space in which American concerns are at the fore and where settlement is the key to the understanding of social and cultural forces and where identity has been shaped by restricted local parameters.⁷ However, the West has always had a global dimension as a geographical, cultural, and economic crossroads defined by complex connectivity, multidimensionality, and imagination, even if these have often been elided in favor of a more inward-looking and emotive vision. To view the cultures of the West more globally alters this point of vision, “putting pressure on the conceptual frameworks by which we have traditionally grasped the social world.”⁸ If, therefore, the culture of the West is viewed globally, it can be detached from its isolation as purely American, a “fixed locality” of “boundedness and coherence,” requiring us, as Clifford says, to “step away from notions of separate, integral cultures” and see culture as traveling with “multiple external connections . . . a shifting paradox, an ongoing translation,” refocusing the West as “encounters, co-productions, dominations, and resistances” with the

emphasis shifted to “hybrid, cosmopolitan experiences as much as on rooted, native ones.”⁹ Thus the concept of the local and the regional so often at the heart of western studies is put under question or opened out until it is interrupted and interfered with by international (or rather outer-national forces), global flows that rupture the “self-perpetuating circuit which tries simply to appropriate the authenticity of the land to underwrite certain forms of social authority or aesthetic closure.”¹⁰

To examine the West in the twenty-first century is to think of it as always already transnational, a more routed and complex rendition, a traveling concept whose meanings move between cultures, crossing, bridging, and intruding simultaneously. Rather than the assumption that “roots always precede routes” in the definition of culture, one might rethink “any local, national, or regional domain,” such as the West, as an interactive process of constitutive contacts and mobilities.¹¹ In these terms, the work of Said and Clifford encourages a reorientation of culture as both roots and routes, both dwelling and traveling, which has much to offer western studies, providing an alternative framework that deterritorializes established traditions, displacing static myths with complex, intersecting strands.¹² Such theoretical concepts, as so often, find better expression in different forms, and for me it comes via Bowden, first, at the opening of *Blood Orchid*, his scathing, broken “unnatural history of America,” where he writes that “I seek roots, just as long as they can accommodate themselves to around seventy-five miles an hour and no unseemly whining about rest stops or sit-down dinners,” defining himself as “A person fated never to settle yet always seeking the place to settle”; and second, toward the end of the book, which consistently critiques the mythic frame of nationhood as embodied in the American West with its imposed ideology of “one big tribe, the rainbow tribe,” which he tries to comprehend and discovers only the following: “We are embedded in this thing called the West but we cannot see it. It is always . . . over the next hill, the far side of the mountain, up the farthest canyon, something that slipped away yesterday, last week, twenty years ago, the last century. . . . Or it never was at all. . . . I can’t find the West . . . and nobody is likely to frame an elegant map of it and put it on the wall. . . . It’s a kind of secret thing.”¹³

To comprehend what Bowden calls this “secret thing” is the skepti-

cal action of route work, following ever-multiplying paths without resorting to any established vision—a vision he describes as “a world left mumbling to itself, a perfect garden with the dreaded outside, the fabled Other held at bay and the neat rows of cultures and genes safe behind some hedgerow.” Bowden’s work is about “vitality, rough edges, torn fences, broken walls, wild rivers, sweat-soaked sheets,” a disorderly assault on the perfect, mythic, and essentialized spaces of western mythology in writing that he parallels with graffiti in its capacity to “speak for the mongrel, the mestizo, the half-breed, the bastard, the alley cat, the cur, the hybrid, the mule . . . that pounds against all the safe and disgusting doors.” If, as Bowden suggests, the West is too often represented as some “perfect garden . . . safe behind some hedgerow” of stories and established iconographies, then the task of critical regionalists is to disrupt this flow of ideas through the activation and articulation of the “dreaded outside.”¹⁴ To think of the American West more as fluid graffiti and less like a determined “rooted body that grows, lives, dies” is to open it up more sharply as “constructed and disputed *historicities*, sites of displacement, interference, and interaction” in which the cultural architecture of the West is consistently remodeled and expanded.¹⁵

All the “routes” by which we might travel are, of course, no longer tied to physical movement, to bourgeois privileges of a white middle class, since every billboard, every commodity purchased, every radio, iPod, CD player, TV, and PC permits “travel” to some extent, however virtual, creating a movement that affects the local and interferes with perceptions of where and what we are.¹⁶ Traversing the West as tourist site, website, advertising imagery, fiction, theme park, film, or immigrant experience—all of these are continuations of the processes that constructed the American West like those described in a novel that in many ways has come to encapsulate a myth of settlement, *The Virginian* (1902). In one scene in Owen Wister’s classic novel, the West is seen as exactly a space of difference being transformed into “America,” forging the East (the “tenderfoot” narrator) and the South (the traveled Virginian) with the “rainbows of men-Chinese, Indian chiefs, Africans, General Miles, younger sons, Austrian nobility, wide females in pink.” As Wister writes, “Our continent drained prismatically through Omaha once.” In this space, this prism, language and meanings collide and

refract as the cosmopolitan “bill-of-fare” announces “salmis, canapés supremes,” and “Frogs’ legs à la Delmonico,” while the owner speaks of eggs as “white wings” and rare beef as “slaughter in the pan.” In this prismatic, hybrid mix Wister captures a vision of a diasporic West full of encounter, contact, and fusion, a vision he is swift to consign to the past, like the Indian and the buffalo, referring only to the palace as a lost, nostalgic memory of another West already being overtaken. This is a revealing episode, demonstrating a consistent pattern in Wister’s novel whereby an awareness of and fascination for ideas of cultural mixing, of a subject-in-process, and of the West as diasporic are tempered and retreated from by a more conventional belief in and desire to institute an essentialized American identity as the “natural” product of the social evolution of the fittest.¹⁷

In Wister’s metanarrative, national identity is forged by melting down exterior differences into a “new product,” as Frederick Jackson Turner called it, a composite American self, formed out of a migratory westward journey, contact with the rigors of climate, geology, and indigenous populations, and the consequent realignment of European values in the soil of the frontier: “a people composed of heterogeneous materials, with diverse and conflicting ideals and social interests, having passed from the task of filling up the vacant spaces of the continent, is now thrown back upon itself, and is seeking an equilibrium. The diverse elements are being fused into national unity” (emphasis added).¹⁸ In displacing the uncertainty and fluidity of migration and movement he asserts a rhetoric of interiority, of essential, rooted identity as the focus for the epic narrative giving coherence and authority to the westward urge of nation building, providing America with a distinct creation myth, or what Bowden called the “perfect garden.” Indeed, Turner’s use of organic, corporeal images suggests that the very lifeblood of this settled America, its “body politic,” emerged by transforming “the slender paths of aboriginal intercourse,” broadening them for an “ever richer tide” far more “complex” than the “originally simple, inert continent.” Fluidity is thus converted into solid “organs” and rooted, settled identity, metaphors of glaciation halted to become stable human landscape.¹⁹ As Richard Slotkin has written, “myth-making is simultaneously a psychological and a social activity . . . its function is to reconcile and unite . . . individualities into a col-

lective identity” (emphasis added).²⁰ The multiplicities and mobilities of the prismatic West momentarily acknowledged by Wister and Turner are brought under control in the service of a coherent national narrative with a gridlike neatness revealing its mythic (rooted, treelike) structure. What it glosses over are 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, becoming a global, transnational phenomenon.

In the theory of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the tree typifies this limited, rooted model, “hierarchical” and working “along preestablished paths,” and appropriately, Bowden’s commentary on American history in *Blood Orchid* utilizes the organic image of the orchid and its roots as a bloody metaphor for destructive, rapacious possession: “The roots get thicker by the year, at first fine lines like lace on the bark of our lives, the skin of our life, the hopes of our life, and then coarsening as more and more wealth and power surges through and at first the roots begin to look like snakes, then like cables and later like giant aqueducts . . . nothing but blood, thick, sticky, virulent.”²¹ In contrast to arboreal rootedness, Deleuze and Guattari propose the grasslike rhizome as an alternative image of thought, since “Thought is not arborescent, and the brain is not rooted or ramified matter . . . the brain is much more grass than tree.”²² As John Rajchman reminds us, a “given society or culture is never exhausted by its constitutive relations or distinctive divisions; on the contrary, it is always ‘leaking’ (*en fuite*), and may be analysed or ‘diagrammed’ in terms of its ‘lines of flight’ (*lignes de fuite*).”²³ Spaces are always far more complex than the East-West frontiers defined by Turner (or the western grid I will discuss in detail), and it is in studying these rhizomorphic “leakages” or “lines of flight” that don’t tally with the official, mythic images that we might produce a different and more sophisticated “diagram” of the West. This is the aim of *The Rhizomatic West*.

Against Turner’s notion of a blank page upon which America wrote its new identity in the West, one can posit another vision and style of language, of the West as a more complex text like that defined by Roland Barthes as “made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation . . .

[where] a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination."²⁴ This is like Wister's hybrid text uncontained by his imposed mythic grid of nationalism, maintaining "dreaded outside" perspectives on the West from within and from without: found in ethnic voices, the discounted, awkward and delinquent, the foreigner and the "minor," and in all the panoply of "fugitive poses" that in themselves unsettle or rupture the orderly segmentations and definitions of established "westness."²⁵ Kathleen Stewart, writing about another American region, defines Appalachian culture as a complex system that is "not either/or but both/and: both global and local, both tactile and imaginary, both set and fleeting, both one thing and another . . . [where] moments of cultural naturalization and denaturalization are interlocked . . . a place where centripetal and centrifugal forces . . . form a unity of opposed forces."²⁶ This "insurrection of knowledges," as Foucault terms them, is close to the sense of the West that I wish to explore in this book, a mobile genealogy of westness, a cultural discourse constructed through both national and transnational mediations, of roots and routes, with its territories defined and redefined (deterritorialized) from both inside and outside the United States.²⁷

In his explication of Deleuze's thought, Rajchman writes: "If, then, segmentation of social space permits a geometry of horizontals and verticals within which to chart or locate all social 'movement,' minorities and becomings work instead with 'diagonals' or 'transversals,' which suggest other spaces, other movements. To 'diagram' a space is to expose such diagonal lines and the possibilities they open up . . . a map that is not the 'tracing' of anything prior, but which serves instead to indicate 'zones of indistinction' from which becomings may arise."²⁸ In western terms, these "other spaces" of "minorities and becomings" refute the neat narrative lines that join point to point, frontier to frontier, as in Turner's "cord of union"; on the contrary, they suggest the intersections of many tangled lines, like those in westerner Jackson Pollock's paintings, always bifurcating and crossing others, forming and deforming, making more lines rather than reaching some final, settled point.²⁹ Turner's "fluidity of American life" that begins his thinking about expansion and frontier mobility falters because it follows only a "single line" (the frontier), believing it leads inevitably to one destination (na-

tionhood, union, a fixed identity). To rethink the West rhizomatically, beyond its function as national unifier—"a holding together of a prior or virtual dispersion"—is to view it as unfinished, multiple, and "open" and to recognize that "beneath . . . official histories and divisions there exist other powers, actualised through other kinds of encounter and invention," tracing divergent, entangled lines of composition that both interconnect and split apart constantly.³⁰

Deleuze's processive philosophy exemplifies the approach I intend to take to "westness," defining it as an *art brut*—a sort of outsider's art with its "own raw materials that permit it to enter into external relations . . . with other disciplines," while "the whole is not given, and things are always starting up again in the middle, falling together in another looser way . . . [with] nothing of the well-planned itinerary; on the contrary, one is taken on a sort of conceptual trip for which there preexists no map—a voyage for which one must leave one's usual discourse behind and never be quite be sure where one will land." His desire is to get outside preexistent forms, narratives, and assumptions and all the mechanisms that contain, enframe, and delimit possibilities in order to present and explore alternative "voyages" for which the "map" (or "diagram") is ever forming and deforming. In these metaphors of mobility, spatiality, and outsideness, of going "off the map" via encounters and reinventions, Deleuze offers a process and approach I wish to apply, in varying ways, to understanding the overcoded West not as a single region but as a mutating multiplicity, a "way of departing from the compartmentalization of knowledge, yet without recourse to an organic unity (Romantic nostalgia for its loss)."³¹

Testing the Grid

One of the defining geometrical images of thought in the United States has been the grid as an organizing principle for settlement of towns and cities, then outward into the control, possession, and acculturation of nature itself, and more generally as a metaphor for contained, bounded ways of thinking. One cannot think of the West as rural or urban space without visualizing the powerful checkerboard symmetries of the meshlike grid as it arrests and orders space, seemingly cutting up and arranging nature into culture, ordering chaotic flows into a defined

“schedule.”³² The underlying conceptualization of space that produced the grid historically and translated it so prominently onto American soil relates, I believe, to a certain approach to complex, multiple spaces that aligns this material practice to a whole way of thinking that Deleuzian theory helps me to unravel or unfold. William L. Fox writes that the grid system of mapping and land division “lead[s] us to believe that we understand where we are” and helped to “create a series of assumptions” about possession built around the visual control gridding appears to supply. This “cartographic imperative is a direct corollary to the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, which . . . held that the land was ours for the taking,” providing a “cocoon” of “customary perceptual protocols” through which we contain the landscape.³³ President Jefferson, himself a surveyor, understood in his 1785 Land Ordinance the power of the grid as a tool of mapping empire so that mass emigration might follow to secure and unify the central West against the British and Spanish. As Fox writes, “To map the land, therefore, was in no small measure to claim it,” for “the grid exercises authority over space by applying a ruler to it in all senses of the word. It stretches out a straight edge across unenclosed space and automatically extends a map to the romantic horizon.”³⁴

As Fox points out, the gridding of the West gave rise to the division of farmland and the transfer of “straight corridors” to the railways (and later the freeways), and it guided transcontinental telegraph lines, then the routes of power lines, telephone wires, and fiber-optic cables; therefore, to comprehend the impact of such a project was to uncover “the national nervous system.” The grid, in Fox’s analysis, becomes a meme, an “idea that survives, as if it were an independent organism, by replicating itself in different forms from mind to mind,” but its overwhelming function as map and cartographic segmentation “abstracted us away from looking at land.”³⁵ As J. B. Harley writes, “The steps in making a map—selection, omission, simplification, classification, the creation of hierarchies, and ‘symbolization’—are all inherently rhetorical . . . they signify subjective human purposes . . . the map maker merely omits those features of the world that lie outside the purpose of the immediate discourse.” Cartography, therefore, controls and orders the world, disciplines and normalizes it, becoming “a silent arbiter of power,” like the surveyors who helped “construct” the West as “a whorl of contour