Conclusion: Reimagining the American West

And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time. T. S. Eliot[1]

There's nothing more unsettling than the continual movement
of something that seems fixed. G. Deleuze[2]

Looking at the nineteenth-century American West's literary and cultural landscapes through the lens of spatialization processes has produced a multitude of crucial insights. The analysed discourses reveal that various alternative spatial imaginations existed and regularly collided with dominant spatial formats such as the frontier and manifest destiny. As a result, the West functioned and continues to function as a mental template through which local, regional, national, and global parameters of space are imagined, formatted, and ordered. Spatial imaginations of western peripheries, it becomes clear, provided vital tools for spatial entrepreneurs such as authors, policymakers, emigrants, and minorities. Spatial heuristics allow for the articulation and historicization of analytical results, as well as to contextualize and compare them with other regions and historical periods. The materials examined throughout this book included established works of literature but also spatial discourses found in adventure stories, poems, paintings, newspaper articles, and other sources. An ancillary scrutiny of previously unstudied diaries and travel journals added a vital layer of human geography that underscored the workings of spatialization processes at a grassroots level. These sources also served as a litmus test that enabled the critical comparison of established texts with discourses that developed largely outside of aesthetic and commercial considerations.

Together, the examined materials provide access to a wealth of (alternative) spatial imaginations and cultural geographies that confirm, subvert, synthesize, yet in any case complicate the epistemologies of authoritative interpretative patterns suggested by the frontier thesis and manifest destiny that celebrate character-shaping and preordained nation-building, as well as myopic (post)modern historiographies that highlight the exploitation of regions and peoples but neglect their underlying dynamics. Scrutinizing the American West through the nuanced

1 T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding", *Four Quartets*, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971 [1941], p. 53.
2 G. Deleuze, *Pourparlers* [*Negotiations, 1972–1990*], M. Joughin (trans.), New York: Columbia University Press, 1995 [1990], p. 157.

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methodological framework of spatialization processes makes clear that this long-standing dichotomy of the West as either a character-shaping process or arena for conquest, exploitation, and racism falls short in capturing the extent of its actual complexity and diversity. While both perspectives offer sensible explanations – some of which reflect themselves in the analysed materials – they also represent uniform and ideologically coloured approaches to western (literary) histories.

In contrast, the lens and language of spatialization processes can render visible opaque relationships and interactions between dominant and alternative spatial discourses. Alternative or aberrant spatial imaginations, it becomes clear, regularly emerged within spaces that were previously under the control or influence of other colonial powers such as France, Spain, or Russia. Collisions of opposing visions in regions like French Louisiana and the Oregon Country commenced in tandem with the implementation of racial hierarchies and the displacement of indigenous peoples and Others, whose spatial visions and practices threatened to undermine the expansionist ordering of the United States. The introduction of more economically and racially segregated regimes in the guise of Americanization impacted lived realities and mobility of non-white people and other subalterns. These insights prompt further questions about the ongoing narrowing of imaginational diversity that coincided with the ascendancy of the nation-state and its imperial extensions.

The findings of this book emphasize that contemporaries often viewed the supposedly organic transition towards a unified national order neither as natural nor as predetermined. Particularly during the antebellum period, a multitude of real-and-imagined spaces existed independent from the national, regional, or frontier formats as parts of actual, imagined, or hybrid discursive configurations and assemblages. The Old Northwest, as shown in the first chapter, turned into a utopian site of democratic and religious revivalism which authors like James Hall populated with the prototypical figure of the backwoodsman as an unwitting curator of the nation's "western heart". Hall's "The Backwoodsman" highlights the significance of regional placemaking performances as seemingly uncorrupted and archetypal patterns for the nation's future ordering, as well as their important role in exceptionalist narratives. Being aware of these connections also adds to the comprehension of current political discourses, for instance those that imaginatively transpose the purer values of a midwestern heartland into the corrupt epicentres of power in order to "drain the swamp".

Margaret Fuller's travelogue *A Summer on the Lakes* in contrast imagines the Old Northwest as a feminist counter-utopia in which progressive, emancipatory ideals might come to fruition if individuals are willing to transcend hypermasculine and violent spatial practices. Fuller's personal approximation of

native people and western landscapes as well as her psychological struggles in trying to apprehend them in an unbiased manner make plain that the West draws much of its discursive power from processes of simulation that relentlessly reproduce its most visceral tropes. Paul Laurence Dunbar's poetry further complicates the discursive dynamics of the Old Northwest. Contrasting the local colour melancholy and black vernacular of poems like "Goin' Back" with the orthodox meters of poetic triumphalism during the Reconstruction period emphasizes the spatial dimensions of issues like double consciousness and passing that confronted and continue to confront people of colour in the US and elsewhere. Dunbar's writings demonstrate how symbols that are usually confined to their literary interpretation can work towards spatial formatting, for instance how writing poetry in standard English symbolically enables the region to pass into the nation's spatial ordering by wearing the masks of manifest destiny, exceptionalism, and Jim Crow.

After its purchase in 1803, American policymakers and authors worried about the integration of the Louisiana Territory into a spatial order that embraced republican principles but was equally reliant on racial and economic hierarchies. As shown in the second chapter, incorporating this vast area sparked fears about ethnic Otherness and the loss of the Early Republic's fragile identity. Unlike the social frontiers of the Old Northwest, incorporating this macro-region presented uncertain and open-ended challenges that required preformatting Louisiana's human geographies. Hall's "The French Village" lays bare the dominant strategies designed to tame this unfamiliar West, depicting Louisiana's colonial populations as static and anachronistic actors, transfixed in the chronotope of a pre-democratic bubble. Hall suggests that introducing the United States' "progressive" order could remedy the French population's lack of spatial agency through, among other things, strict racial hierarchies based on the Black Code. Discussing the fate of Native Americans in the territory, George Catlin lays down his vision of a museal space that is destined to vanish under the wheels of progress and should be archived in the nation's cultural memory. Through his writings and paintings, Catlin creates awareness for the plight of native peoples and establishes the West as an affective space, yet concurrently works on its dissolution as he forcefully extracts artefacts and provokes intertribal wars as a result of his spatial performances.

The Oregon Country comes into view as the supposedly final destination of the nation's transcontinental preordination. Scrutinizing Francis Parkman's widely-read book *The Oregon Trail* through the optics of spatialization processes undermines its conventional readings as an ode to white mobility and manifest

destiny. His textual encounters with partly opposing, partly overlapping imaginations of subalterns, emigrants, traders, natives, and the Mormon kingdom of Deseret destabilize views of the Oregon Trail as a straightforward path to an American Empire. Additionally, the book's blending of the incommensurable West with Europe and New England unveils the contradictions between the transatlantic trajectories of American exceptionalism and the paradigm changes necessitated by the nation's movement towards the Asian-Pacific hemisphere. In turn, Washington Irving's *Astoria* relates more deep-seated issues than John Jacob Astor's and Thomas Jefferson's dreams of an American commercial empire in the Far West. Fort Astoria's failure, it becomes apparent, was not only a result of the War of 1812 but was augmented by a host of regional formats and practices that integrated the Oregon Country with adjacent spaces. This integration hinged on interethnic cooperation and trade networks that contested the implementation of racial and economic hierarchies that propped up societies east of the Rocky Mountains. The imagined empire of Astoria instead collided with opposing ideas and practices of Native American, Russian, and Hawaiian actors who undermined its economic mobility and placemaking agency.

Historical and contemporary imaginations of the Oregon Country further emphasize the significance of "minor" spatial actors in criticizing superordinate narratives and ordering processes through their advocacy of regional autonomy. Examples range from historical revisions of democratic myth-making at the Champoeg Meetings, the ecotopian formatting of the Cascadian bioregion, to loyalist counties that imaginatively uphold the constitution against illegal immigration. Engaging with these grassroots actors puts emphasis on the weaknesses of contemporary universalist narratives that frame spatial ordering alongside concepts of globalization and neoliberal commodifications of regional difference. These findings substantiate the West as a discursively highly contested arena that is by no means "complete" but remains in constant flux as part of ongoing and open-ended processes of spatial formatting and ordering.

The metaphorically driven landscape of the West became the focus of this book's interrogations, which in their attempts to map spatial imaginations draw attention to their inbuilt fluidity and connectedness to scalable knowledges and discourses. Spatial imaginations as cultural vectors of spatial formats and spatial orders, it turns out, are not static but relational; they rarely pit binary formats – for instance global integration versus local autonomy – against each another but more often disassemble and reassemble particular parameters in order to advance or critique specific narratives. Their study thus calls for intertextual, intersectional, interactive, and interdisciplinary approaches that understand "literary space as a mobile category that materialises at the

intersection of author, text and reader".[3] Any discussion of spatial imaginations must make itself aware of these dynamics, but also of the fact of its own constructivist tendencies that privilege certain perspectives and voices over others that might appear "less spatial". Acknowledging these issues means bridging the pitfalls of anything-goes theory and concurrently loosening the ubiquitous shackles of presentism. To reach these goals, the methods of critical regionalism, new historicism, and the fusion of horizons were vital instrumental in the engagement with the polysemous and transitory nature of spatialization processes.

The introduction and exemplary application of a new spatial metalanguage represents a stepping stone towards a more spatially literate humanities that for the longest time has confined itself to focusing on issues of race, class, and gender. While spatial turn scholarship suggests revising this analytical triangle with the methods of literary and human geographies, practising this revision is no effortless and straightforward task. Instead, it regularly leads to junctions, detours, and into dead ends. Navigating spatialization processes therefore calls for openness, flexibility, and a healthy amount of curiosity and willingness to experiment with disciplinary conventions. While the present book does not propose the dismissal of these conventions, it drives home that "talking spatially" always includes a reappraisal of previous research that centres around conventional categories. In this manner exploring the epistemic borderlands of cultural and literary studies can be immensely rewarding and productive, but can also become a daunting task that opens itself up to criticism from those who have made their homes within these categories. In the words of Gilles Deleuze: "There's nothing more unsettling than the continual movement of something that seems fixed".[4]

Finally, creating spatial literacy means entering a dialogue, in the case of this book with the epistemologies of the American West. This dialogue is guided by the objective of bridging perspective differences through the fusion of historical horizons and results in what Edwards calls *décalage*, namely "the reestablishment of a prior unevenness or diversity [by] the taking away of something that was added in the first place, something artificial". As the subject of literary and cultural spatialization processes is itself a "virgin territory", connecting historically disparate perspectives amounts to "a process of linking or connecting across gaps – a practice we might term *articulation*".[5] In exploring the largely

3 S. Luchetta, "Literary Mapping: At the Intersection of Complexity and Reduction", *Literary Geographies* 4 (2018) 1, pp. 6–9, at 6.

4 Deleuze, *Negotiations*, p. 157.

5 Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, pp. 14; 11.

uncharted dynamics between textuality and spatiality, articulation means finding one's own voice with the help of spatial semantics.

Articulating the finding of this book leads to the realization that the American West is not a place sui generis that can be fixated on mental or actual maps and thus be recognized in its entirety. The West is also not a lost state of mind, whose archetypal fragments can, like a broken vase, be glued together in an exercise of "discursive archaeology". If anything, the American West resembles a multilayered assemblage of real-and-imagined places, histories, practices, discourses, and knowledges that are imagined, formatted, and ordered via interconnected, intercultural, and intertextual spatialization processes. These processes reveal the West as a set of mental templates that are constantly reproduced and readjusted within various contexts that make it experienceable and imaginable. The West therefore perpetually inspires actors to create, broadcast, or subvert narratives according to their own agendas and beliefs and thus to perpetually de- and reconstruct the West on local, regional, national, and global scales and at the intersections between them.

While many of these dynamics originated in nineteenth-century discourses and thus warrant an analytical focus on the cultural productions of this period, they continually inform present-day debates about border regimes, regional differences, separatist movements, migration flows, or geopolitical power relations. In the end, there is no single American West that wondrously appears before our eyes through geographical measurements, empiricism, metaphors, or the composition of grand ideological narratives. Although we do not, as D. H. Lawrence promised, "know the place for the first time", interfacing the West with a wide spectrum of spatialization processes has led to a better understanding of its workings.[6] Advancing spatial literacy has exposed many strata of palimpsestic complexity hidden underneath the most visible and dominant narratives of the nation's westering, thus providing ample potential for comparisons with other global contexts and a productive point of departure for future research.

6 Eliot, "Little Gidding", p. 53.