

## Abstract

In the field of US historiography, western expansion has regularly been understood as either a linear sequence of nation-building processes at a moving frontier or in terms of settler colonialism, exploitation of resources, and displacement of non-white peoples. The present book suggests that shifting the focus towards space in nineteenth-century cultural discourse opens new perspectives on the placemaking dynamics of the American West. Introducing a semantics of spatialization processes makes visible an imaginative diversity that subverts the unidirectional interpretive patterns that structure traditional approaches. Authors of western fiction and other spatial actors, the book argues, negotiated the scope of the American West through a plethora of spatial themes, tropes, metaphors, and agendas. Some of these processes solidified into spatial metanarratives like the character-shaping clash of civilizations at the frontier or the nation's manifest destiny to overspread the entire continent. However, juxtaposed to and beneath canonized and self-reproducing narratives, it becomes clear, exist(ed) multiscalar, alternative spatial imaginations, which largely remain hidden under ideologically authoritative axioms.

Utilizing a wide selection of sources to access these spatialization processes, this book explores the parameters that informed the creation, affirmation, or subversion of spatial imaginations regarding the American West. In doing so, it introduces a spatial semantics that enables the systematic and interdisciplinary evaluation of its findings. The examined sources include works of literature, poetry, paintings, newspapers, speeches, photography, and other cultural performances that reveal the West as a discursive assemblage whose dynamics become accessible by scrutinizing the imagining, formatting, and ordering of spaces. While key discourses about the West surfaced in the nineteenth century, their comprehension also becomes crucial for the understanding of contemporary debates that take place at regional, national, and global levels and under such ambiguous terms as globalization. Introducing spatial literacy into the humanities highlights the epistemic fracture points of traditional analytical categories by offering a disruptive and interdisciplinary addition to literary and cultural studies.

*I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy. It is geography at bottom, a hell of wide land from the beginning.*

C. Olson<sup>1</sup>

*It does not matter whether the world is conceived to be real or only imagined; the manner of making sense of it is the same.*

H. White<sup>2</sup>

*The world can only be found in the word.*

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<sup>1</sup> C. Olson, *Call me Ishmael*, New York: Grove, 1947, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> H. White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, p. 98.