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Producing Public Geographies: Creating a Field Guide to the Western American Landscape

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I would like to thank Anne Knowles, Maria Lane, Arn Keeling, and the Historical Geography Specialty Group for selecting me as this year's Distinguished Lecturer. I know I am in grand company and it has been a wonderful tradition to see blossom within our group since it began many years ago.

Today, I look forward to sharing with you the story of putting together a recent book project on the American West that I argue can serve as a simple example of how historical geographers have all the necessary skills and sensibilities to produce geographical work aimed at the general public ("public geographies") and how we can thrive in the twenty-first century world of engaged scholarship. First, I plan to explore in more general terms why we *are* so well positioned to produce public geographies and why it is more important to do so than ever before. Second, I want to tell the story of putting together *How to Read the American West: A Field Guide*, because I think for me that process was invaluable in thinking through some of the opportunities and challenges in connecting with that larger potential audience.¹ Lastly, I want to share some general observations about the American West and how historical geographers can tell their stories about this region in ways that connect with the public. What can we say that deserves their attention?

Producing public geographies

Historical geographers play varied roles. We wear many hats, whether we are at an American or Chinese university, in a research library or museum, at a contract research firm working for the historic preservation community, or as a GIS technician making maps for the city of San Francisco. For those of us in academe, we do basic academic research, teach college courses, solve everyday problems in our communities, and practice what my university president refers to as *engagement*, which can include an entire constellation of public education and outreach activities.² My argument about engagement—especially in the academic world—is simply this: historical geographers are extraordinarily well positioned to succeed in engaged scholarship and it may well be a critical, demonstrable, and measurable way we have to survive and thrive in private colleges, public universities, and other institutions of higher learning in 2020, 2030, and beyond.

Before we gaze 10 or 20 years into the future, I want to reflect briefly on where historical geography has come from—especially in the United States—in the past 40 years. Specifically, let me turn back the clock to 1977, to another AAG meeting—this one in Salt Lake City—and to my very first exposure to the world of historical geography. I was a graduating senior in geography at

Cal State Northridge, attending my very first AAG meeting. It was the evening I first met Donald Meinig – whom I planned to study with the following fall at Syracuse University. The occasion was a grand round table that was entitled “Conversation on Historical Geography,” held at the Hotel Utah.³ Organized by Bill Bowen, the session featured a meeting of some of the key minds in the field at that time, including Ralph Vicerio, Michael Conzen, Donald Meinig, James (Jay) Vance, David Ward, Cole Harris, Robert Sack, and Martyn Bowden. As a young historical-geographer-in-the-making, this was indeed an impressive introduction to my scholarly world! And it was a productive conversation, focused on the pressing issues of the day. Participants at the table and from the audience explored the field’s intellectual connections with the field of history, the importance of refocusing our efforts to more urban settings, the role we might have in addressing pressing social issues and planning problems, as well as a fascinating discussion about the future job market for our field in the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, there was a good deal of discussion and debate on how well we were positioned to connect with a larger public, although the consensus seemed to be that historical geographers held no special advantages in that regard. In the late 1970s, I think we saw our greatest challenges as internal and programmatic, focused within the world of academic geography.

Now let me fast forward almost 40 years and reflect with you on some of our common struggles. The job market for academic historical geographers – in the United States especially – has indeed proved challenging. The nature of our sub-discipline and our entire field has obviously evolved in ways no one could have predicted. And the very fabric of our academic institutions – and what defines academic success and academic survival – continues to change. Indeed, the pessimists among us see little opportunity for our subfield to thrive in traditional ways and I share their concerns. However, opportunities present themselves, and my central argument is that many of them lie in the realm of producing public geographies. Historical geographers *can* participate actively in connecting with a larger audience and we can also answer Alec Murphy’s call for “enhancing geography’s role in public debate” as well as increase our visibility and value within the academic world of the twenty-first-century university.⁴

How is historical geography well-positioned to produce public geography? Why should we be able to connect with larger numbers of readers, viewers, consumers, and customers of what we create? I am optimistic. Six selling points come to mind as we orient historical geography towards a wider public. First, we have *humanistic sensibilities* which mean we can frame our stories in compelling narratives, widely accessible to broad audiences. More than forty years ago, Donald Meinig suggested that geographers could engage in the “humane art” of telling stories about localities. And more than thirty years ago he once again reminded us that geography was both an art as well as a science and that our capacity to engage with the language and sensibilities of the humanities gave us the ability to connect with larger public conversations and audiences.⁵

At our best, we also have *effective visual communications skills* to address the current generation of visual consumers. Both maps and images are an integral part of our language and, as Anne Knowles reminds us, we need to use both more effectively in today’s world of increasingly visual learners.⁶ In addition, as scholars such as Karl Offen and William Cronon suggest, we need to tell these visual stories in a digital, mobile world where books and narratives take different forms than they have in the past. As Cronon argues, however, tiny smart phone screens can be scary and frustrating places to navigate the richness of historical geography. But we are learning to try.

In addition, we often write compelling *place-centered narratives* which I think resonate extraordinarily well with a public fascinated with places, regions, neighborhoods, and urban history. We describe places and tell stories about how they got to be that way. As Alan Baker notes, we can tell these stories through a variety of compelling discourses, but we are at our best

when we offer *empirically rich narratives* that highlight the *historical specificity of particular places*. In terms of some recent book-length examples, Dan Arreola's *Tejano South Texas*, Warren Hofstra and Karl Raitz's *The Great Valley Road of Virginia*, or Laura Pulido, Laura Barraclough, and Wendy Cheng's *A People's Guide to Los Angeles* come to mind.⁷

Fourth, as Graeme Wynn and others have noted, we have seen a pronounced and creative *environmental turn* in historical geography which resonates very well with a wider public interested in climate change, environmental issues, sustainability, and environmental history.⁸ Craig Colten's *Unnatural Metropolis*, Robert Wilson's *Seeking Refuge*, and Lary Dilsaver's *Cumberland Island National Seashore* are recent examples of how these questions can be framed and narrated through the language of historical geography.

In addition, as historical geographers we have an ongoing *engagement with critical geographies* which means we are well-positioned to share our connections to social theory and social justice, but skilled enough to do so in a language that is accessible to many readers.⁹ Examples here would include both work by self-described historical geographers such as Cole Harris (*Making Native Space*, *The Reluctant Land*, etc.) as well as by a broader set of creative writers and journalists who are doing work in historical geography, including Rebecca Solnit (consider her growing list of city-focused atlases).

Finally, we can write *stories that connect the past with the contemporary world*, and this seems essential to connecting with the twenty-first-century public. Whether it is Paul Starrs and Peter Goin writing about California agriculture, Lincoln Bramwell defining the origins and character of the West's wilderburbs, or Lary Dilsaver describing the recent evolution of America's national park system, we need to connect the lines between past geographies and the worlds we inhabit today.¹⁰

Indeed, as these examples suggest, historical geographers are already engaged in producing public geographies. I could also point to Anne Knowles's connections with the Geographies of the Holocaust and with the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.¹¹ In addition, Arn Keeling's recent work on the impact of mining on northern Canada's indigenous communities is a terrific example of combining archival work and oral histories to piece together a narrative in that fragile corner of the world.¹² Closer to home, Syracuse University, my alma mater, has hired Jonnell Robinson, their Community Geographer. She interacts regularly with her larger Upstate New York environs. Much of what she does can be seen as historical urban geography, including a recent project that put students to work reconstructing and digitizing the city's underground infrastructure of deteriorating water mains and pipes in the hope of preventing future floods and water main breaks.¹³ And, of course, there is Bill Cronon's daily Twitter feed which is a non-stop celebration of digital links to some of the best public historical geography and environmental history that appears today in everything from academic journals to the popular press.¹⁴

Imagining a field guide to the American West

I thought carefully and consciously about all of these connections to public geography as I designed *How to Read the American West: A Field Guide*. So let me now turn to that story. I imagined a field guide for everyday Western landscapes, one that would include typical examples of intermountain ranching country as well as one that explored why the IHOP restaurant in Santa Fe, New Mexico, might look different than the one in Bozeman, Montana. The book was designed to incorporate farm fields (Figure 1) and commercial strips (Figure 2), places where ordinary lives unfolded.¹⁵



Figure 1. Farmworkers, Salinas Valley, California. Strawberry picking in central California's Salinas Valley remains tough physical labor. With Latin music blaring in the background, these workers put in long days to pick maturing fruit at the right point in the growing cycle. Note the portable bathrooms, mandated by law, in the background (right). The image is used to suggest how labor is an important, but often overlooked element in the cultural landscape (Figure 2.7 in Wyckoff, *How to Read the American West*, p. 93. © 2014 The University of Washington Press. All rights reserved) (hereafter © Wyckoff 2014).



Figure 2. Commercial strip, East Colfax Avenue, Denver, Colorado. Daily necessities beckon suburban commuters on this busy stretch of Colfax that offers convenient short-term loans, piercings, fast food, liquor, and gasoline. The images suggest that vernacular landscapes can be used to explore important dimensions of contemporary American life (Figure 7.3 in © Wyckoff 2014, p.93).



Figure 3. Amenity exurb, Bitterroot Valley, Montana. This scattered, low-density pattern of valley farmland (foreground), rural non-farmers on scenic hillside tracts, and nearby national forests (distant slopes) characterizes many western settings. Some residents live here and commute to nearby Missoula, about thirty minutes away. Ski runs (left) represent part of a failed resort subdivision (a “zombie development”). The image suggests how landscapes can be used to illustrate diverse stakeholders in the West, where different traditions of land use and landownership have accumulated in places over time (Figure 8.39 in © Wyckoff 2014, p. 372).

I had three reasons for writing the book. First, I embrace the notion that the landscape is a wonderful learning tool: it can reveal so much about cultural history, the interplay between people and environment, geographies of both opportunity and constraint, and the humanistic notion that the Earth is our collective and common home.¹⁶ Properly contextualized, an image can be a powerful visual parable, an invaluable way to tell a story (Figure 3).

Second, I wanted the book to challenge how we think about the West as a region, a topic that is endlessly debated, mostly by non-geographers.¹⁷ The West has for a very long time been an enticing political, economic, and environmental idea, a simple and powerful regional construct that has for many geographers proved oversimplified and unsatisfying. In addition to exploring traditional regional tropes, I also tried to portray a contemporary Western landscape that would resonate more with my own children than with my grandparents. It was important to recognize the West as a home to miners and homesteaders, but it was equally important to see it as a home to suburban commuters and South Asian immigrants (Figures 4 and 5).

Third, I wrote about the West because it is my home. Most geographers grow to love places, they develop special affinities for their own turf which manifest themselves in many ways at different scales. We may be active as a volunteer in a local organization, campaign for or against a particular political issue that impacts our state or community, or we may write an article or a book about a locality or a region we identify strongly with. I am at home in the West, whether I am in San Francisco, Santa Fe, Yellowstone, or Laramie. So I wanted this book to connect with my fellow Westerners and simply explore whether or not we were making sustainable choices in fragile places that we are basically deeding to our children and grandchildren (Figure 6).¹⁸

Then came the practical questions of how to tell the story, how to organize and structure a “field guide” to something as rich and diverse as the West. Above all, given my intended audience, I wanted an accessible approach in a manageable format.



Figure 4. Head frames on Butte Hill, Montana. Many of Butte's underground mines (right) still display both an impressive head frame (flag atop) and an adjacent hoist house (center). In the background, additional mine operations mingle with residences in one of the West's largest copper-mining settlements. The image highlights many of the traditional natural-resource industries that shaped the West's historical identity as a region (Figure 3.13 in © Wyckoff 2014, p. 137).



Figure 5. Little India, Artesia, California. Strip malls along busy Pioneer Boulevard are the commercial focus for Southern California's largest South Asian community. The image is a reminder of how a new regional vision of the West incorporates an array of diverse cultures and lifestyles that depart a great deal from nineteenth-century stereotypes (Figure 4.42 in © Wyckoff 2014, p. 197).



Figure 6. Suburbs under construction, Sonoma Ranch, New Mexico. This master-planned community near Las Cruces takes shape in several phases. Completed neighborhoods and a golf course offer immediate amenities while new streets and lots are still being carved from the desert landscape. The image is framed to contrast the native brush (foreground) and thinly-populated desert ranges (background) with the several-phased transformation unfolding in the center of the scene. Are we creating sustainable communities in these fragile settings? (Figure 7.1 in © Wyckoff 2014, pp. 284-85).

I defined my West along straightforward state boundaries that got me to eastern Colorado, but not to western North Dakota, to northeastern Washington, but not to Alaska or British Columbia.¹⁹ I felt it was a large enough region that I could include Pacific coastal settings, portions of the Great Plains, and everything in between. What I did not want in my narrative was a long, convoluted, overly academic defense of regional borders. I kept it simple, and hopefully representative of how most Westerners think about the region.

How do you organize a regional field guide? I thought about a West of many sub regions, or a state-by-state approach, or a West encountered as descriptive road logs along major highways. For many reasons, none of these really worked, especially in a format designed to be less than 500 pages in length, one not plagued with multiple descriptions of repeating features, and one that could be useful in pointing out similar patterns and processes at work in quite widely separated places. In other words, a broadly topical approach worked best for me.²⁰ Then came the ruminating about what topics to explore. My 100 features obviously are merely representative of a large universe of Western landscapes and there was nothing sacred or hegemonic about the list. I encourage readers to add to the list, find exceptions and new examples, and use the book as an invitation to explore on their own. Here, my inspiration are writers such as Grady Clay, J.B. Jackson, John Stilgoe, and Bill Cronon.

After an opening essay in which I lay out some general rules for reading the Western landscape, each topical chapter begins with a few pages of historical and regional context to introduce the subject at hand, whether it be agriculture, landscapes of federal largesse, or urban and suburban landscapes. Then, I designed each feature as an illustrated even-numbered page spread (2, 4, or 6) so that the book would develop a unified look. For each feature—as in any field guide—I try to define and describe it and explore its regional expression and variants. I also ponder its diverse cultural meanings and offer tips for looking at the feature in the field, whether it is a farm town, a suburban strip mall, or a ski resort.



Figure 7. Low-density living, southwestern Montana. Large view lots, widely scattered homes, and a rural feel appeal to residents of this exurban development west of Bozeman. Contrast the settlement pattern with that of the Boise foothills (see Figure 8). Figures 7 and 8 are juxtaposed on the same page to visually compare two very different forms of rural development that appear on the edge of western cities (Figure I.7 in © Wyckoff 2014, p. 8).



Figure 8. Edges in the landscape, Boise, Idaho. This foothill neighborhood above Boise reveals open space bordered by homes. Residents encounter snakes and coyotes, while native birds find cover in shrubbery imported for shade and landscaping. The image offers a sharp contrast in settlement patterns to Figure 7 and is a reminder of the different ways in which ecological diversity is produced on the suburban fringe (Figure I.6 © Wyckoff 2014, p. 8).

The topical chapter format allowed me to organize Western landscape features in ways that might be encountered in the field and in ways that would be readily recognizable to casual users of the book. After an initial set of examples highlighting the West's diverse "Natural Fundament," two topical chapters explore traditional Western economies by highlighting "Farms and Ranches" and "Landscapes of Extraction." "Places of Special Cultural Identity" follow and these range from Hispano plaza towns to the emergent Asian mosaic. Since so much of the character of the West is often interpreted through its "Connections," I devote a chapter to features such as historic trails, narrow-gauge railroads, and the open road. A long chapter also looks at "Landscapes of Federal Largesse" and then the book concludes with an assessment of "Cities and Suburbs" and "Playgrounds." Many highlighted in-text references help guide readers to other similar features found in other chapters.



Figure 9. Miner housing, Leadville, Colorado. In larger mining towns, watch for renovated examples of mining-era housing, complete with Victorian-style embellishments and a fresh coat of paint. Often retirees and amenity seekers purchase these properties. This image is juxtaposed with Figure 10, offering a framed visual comparison of miner housing a century apart (Figure 3.22 in © Wyckoff 2014, p. 145).

I thought carefully about the process of visual learning as I designed the book. I consciously moved away from a pure text format and toward usefully juxtaposing images, captions, maps, diagrams, and text. The University of Washington Press was instrumental in helping me design every page spread of the book. They allowed me to submit the manuscript as a huge set of designed page spreads where I was able to place each of the 420 color images and more than 30 maps into the text. It produced many wonderful teaching opportunities. What better way to describe different amenity-oriented exurban settlement patterns than to show readers different examples on the same page spread (Figures 7 and 8)? What better way to think about labor, housing, and landscape in Western mining towns than to visually juxtapose—including crafting images from similar perspectives—the Victorian-era homes of Colorado’s Leadville with the mass-produced copper company housing of Arizona’s Bagdad that dates from a century later (Figures 9 and 10)? The book’s full-color mapping program was created in cooperation with Lohnes and Wright, a Bay Area GIS firm. Some of the maps are traditional, updated snapshots of subjects such as “Mormon Country,” while others are more interpretive attempts to get at topics such as the “Atomic West” (Figures 11 and 12).



Figure 10. Company housing, Bagdad, Arizona. Watch for the standardized architecture (these units offer a pleasant fusion of ranch-house layouts with Southwest-style ornamentation) of the company mining town in selected regional settings. The image is a reminder of the continuing importance of labor and housing in mining settlements and offers a visual complement to Figure 9 (Figure 3.23 in © Wyckoff 2014, p. 145).

An important part of the process – particularly for doing this type of public geography – involved creating all of the support infrastructure around the book. After all, every book begins a new conversation and it is important for the author to participate in it. *Prior to publication*, this included creating a brief video trailer for the book, which was used by University of Washington Press (and uploaded to YouTube).²¹ I produced the video with the help of a local film production company connected to my university. I also contracted with another firm to design a simple mobile-user-friendly website for the book that included brief excerpts, photos, and blurbs.²² *Subsequent to publication*, I have given more than two dozen public talks on the book in a wide variety of venues that have ranged from tiny independent bookstores around the West to larger metropolitan public library and university audiences. I have spoken at Rotary Clubs, ski resorts, and museums.²³ Portions of the book were also adopted as a freshman seminar reading at my university. I also encouraged the press to have the book widely reviewed, including both traditional academic outlets as well as popular magazines and newspapers.

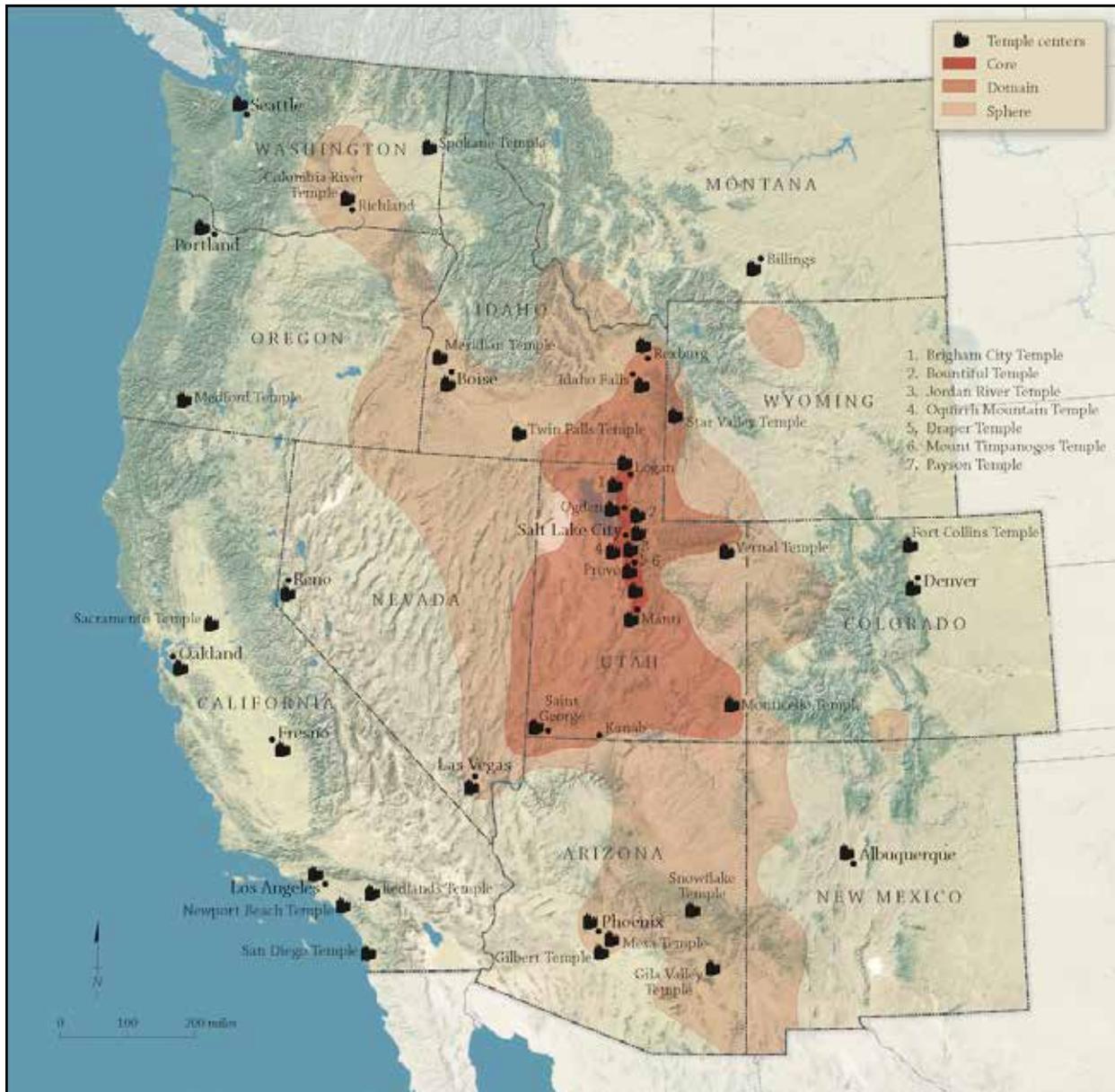


Figure 11. Mormon country. This regional map represents a simple update to D.W. Meinig's classic version and also benefits from new interpretations offered by Paul Starrs and an updated mapping of Mormon temples across the region. It is included in a 4-page spread on "Mormon Country" landscapes in the West. Sources: D.W. Meinig, "The Mormon Culture Region: Strategies and Patterns in the Geography of the American West, 1847-1864," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 55 (1965): 191-219; Paul F. Starrs, "Meetinghouses in the Mormon Mind: Ideology, Architecture, and Turbulent Streams of an Expanding Church," *Geographical Review* 99 (2009): 323-55; and <http://www.ldschurchtemples.com/maps> (Figure 4.28 in © Wyckoff 2014, p. 185).



Figure 12. The Atomic West, 1941 to the present. The locations on this map are a sampling of features from the nuclear age that can be seen in the West. The map is part of a four-page spread on “The Atomic West” in the region (Figure 6.34 in © Wyckoff 2014, p. 269).

Six stories about the twenty-first century West

So how do historical geographers produce public geographies focused on the American West and how do we frame our narratives? While the particular settings and players may vary from place to place, we can keep several general storylines in mind that play to many of our disciplinary strengths. Historical geographers are well positioned to . . .

- tell stories about the *West's changing population*, its infamous tales of boom and bust, growth and decline.²⁴ This is a theme that both touches specific localities and shapes a larger historical narrative for the entire region. During my teenage wanderings around the West in the early 1970s, there were about 33 million people living in the region, including my home state of California. Today, there are more than 70 million people in the same region and the West's population is projected to reach 100 million during the second half of this century. But the other part of the story is just as important: the population increases, while dramatic in a single generation, are also very spatially uneven: many portions of the West have fewer people today than a century ago, while other localities have been completely transformed.²⁵ The implications of these changes for daily life, for making a living, and for environmental and landscape change have been enormous.

What does the future hold? Where will those 100 million people live and how will they reshape the region's settlement landscape? The West's historical geography suggests the pattern: several regional settings will attract the lion's share of this new population.²⁶ Look to the great and sprawling metropolitan fringes for continued growth, where open land, amenities, favorable subdivision laws, and new investments in infrastructure will reinforce patterns of expansion that accelerated after 1970. The West's attractive, smaller micropolitan centers also have enduring appeal (Figure 13). In addition to the current list of growing localities (including places such as Kalispell, MT; Bend, OR; and St. George, UT), even smaller places will blossom as people seek out more isolated but attractive corners of the region. The rural West's amenity-rich "wilderburbs," popping up literally on the edge of wilderness, will also generate growth, often in fragile environmental settings prone to water issues, unpredictable wildlife, wildfires, and floods. Settings such as the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, Utah's Greater Wasatch Mountain region, and the attractive backcountry of northern New Mexico come to mind. Lastly, the West's resource-rich geography (including metals mining, various forms of oil and natural gas development, and even coal) will episodically beckon, though the harsh recent downturns in many of these settings (gold mines in Nevada, coal mining in the Powder River Basin, or oil prospects in the Bakken) were a reminder of the unpredictable nature of these boom-and-bust businesses.²⁷

- We also . . . tell stories about *water in the West*, helping connect the dots between private capital, state and federal bureaucracies, unpredictable environments, and a procession of settlers, city builders, and suburbanites bent on refashioning water-deprived landscapes in predictable, profitable ways. The past two centuries suggest the process has rarely been smooth: Westerners have tried to map, talk, reimagine, spend, hallucinate, and engineer themselves out of aridity for a long time without much success. In the West's far-flung urban areas, water has played a central role in shaping the pace and direction of metropolitan growth as well as in defining a city's regional-scale suzerainty over its hydrologic hinterlands. For Western farmers and ranchers, the various ways for capturing water have also involved everything from tapping local streams and groundwater supplies to huge inter-basin transfer schemes mostly subsidized by the taxpayers (Figure 14). For the recreational West, water is



Figure 13. Saint George, Utah. Since 1980, much of Saint George's growth has been generated by retirees who enjoy its desert climate and small-town amenities. Diverse subdivisions offer many choices, but overall planning initiatives have been modest. This view, taken just northeast of town, shows how new residents seek out attractive view lots on nearby mesas. The image is part of the story of "Retirement Communities" in the West (Figure 8.52 in © Wyckoff 2014, p. 383).

also a dominant part of the business, whether it is the setting for whitewater rafting, sport fishing, or snowboarding.

Some of the West's best regional-scale scholarship has focused on water and how legal, political, and economic institutions have evolved to manage that precious commodity.²⁸ With a few outstanding exceptions, however, the story of the West's water and how it has played out in particular irrigation schemes, suburban developments, and desert oases still awaits full narration.²⁹ The vocabulary, sensibilities, and tools of the historical geographer are superbly positioned to tell these tales, both from the traditional perspectives of environmental history as well as stories that integrate water with race, labor, and social justice. The water narrative is also a moving target in the twenty-first-century West and historical geographers can bring essential perspective to issues such as dam removal, sustainable technologies, and managing and adapting to the realities of regional climate change.

- We certainly can . . . tell stories about *post-1970 cultural transformations* that have profoundly reshaped the cultural geographies of so many Western localities. Consider my own hometown of Burbank, California.³⁰ When my mother was born there in 1924, it was a small, largely Anglo community, an outpost of Midwestern migrants in southern California. When I grew up in Burbank in the 1960s and 1970s, all of the San Fernando Valley was already experiencing diverse, mostly Latin American immigration attracted to the region's growing job opportunities. Today, Burbank's residential landscape has gentrified: it is a comfortable suburb of expensive homes and upscale shopping centers. The town's cultural geography has further diversified: Latinos, Anglos, Armenians, Russians, and Asian Americans call Burbank home.



Figure 14. Managing water, southern New Mexico. Allocating irrigation water in the Rio Grande Valley involves timely releases from the mainline canal (foreground) to flood nearby fields, all controlled by an elaborate system of smaller laterals and headgates (on canal, left). The image is a visual invitation for readers to closely follow the path of water in Western communities (Figure 2.29 in © Wyckoff 2014, p. 110). Over 30 percent of the population is foreign born (although this is below the average for Los Angeles County).

Burbank's story has been repeated in many Western places and today the larger region is home to one of the most diverse human populations on Earth. Most profoundly, Latinization continues to reshape the twenty-first-century West: about thirty percent of the region's population self identifies as Latino, a varied mix of immigrants and native-born citizens with roots from diverse areas of Mexico, Central America, and beyond.³¹ Asian American communities in the West have also transformed neighborhoods from southern California's San Gabriel Valley to the extraordinary collection of Vietnamese eateries on the west side of Las Vegas. The cultural landscape offers one accessible way to explore the consequences of this transformation and it also reveals many examples of fascinating mixing as Westerners, old and new, create culturally hybridized landscapes that have reshaped so many localities (Figure 15).³²

- We also . . . tell stories about the extraordinary *corporatization of the Western landscape*. Bret Wallach's recent book, *A World Made for Money: Economy, Geography, and the Way We Live Today* is a book-length, global-scale exploration of the argument, but the vigor and recent timing of regional landscape change (a reflection of global-scale capital investment) in the American West makes that part of the world an especially appropriate example of how corporate capital has refashioned our everyday lives.³³ Corporate capitalism has commodified and organized the Western landscape and, as Don Mitchell points out, the landscape has become a site of accumulated capital investment.³⁴

Seen in this way, the landscape becomes a great way to explore the evolving nature of capitalism in the West, initially apparent in investments in the region's natural resources (fur trapping, mining, lumbering, oil drilling, etc.), later complemented by its growing industrial base (metals smelting, steelmaking, airplane manufacturing, etc.),



Figure 15. Latino market, Toppenish, Washington. The hybrid wording in Mi Favorita Market suggests how this central Washington farm town is changing and how the West’s Latinos have reshaped the regional landscape. Part of a six-page spread on “Latino Communities,” the image explores the cultural mixing and tensions evident in the region’s vernacular landscape (Figure 4.21 in © Wyckoff 2014, p. 178).

and most recently a twenty-first-century service economy anchored in recreational and cultural amenities and the fruits of mass consumption (golf resorts, ski towns, commercial strips, strip malls, etc.).³⁵ For readers, using a simple pair of quite different looking landscapes (Figures 16 and 17) to suggest that common processes produced both settings demonstrates an important lesson about how capitalism itself has evolved and how the built landscape can be an evocative guide to that story.

In related fashion, the scale economies of modern corporate America, the hugeness of corporate investment, and the standardization of corporate-financed technological innovation—all superb examples of modernity’s material expression—have a visible analogue in the Western landscape: it is no coincidence that today’s open pit gold mines, industrial-scale farms, large subdivisions, or corporatized ski resorts are *big*; they literally loom large on the landscape and this “scaling up” of the visible scene is a remarkable and fascinating testament to the power and efficiency of corporate capital to remake our everyday world (Figure 18).

- We also . . . tell stories about the *enduring symbolic power* of the Western landscape and the West as a distinctive region. Our interest in places—their origins, evolving character, and significance in social relations—includes a fascination for how place identity is historically shaped by place meanings, symbols, and representations.³⁶ No piece of North American geography looms larger on the map in its symbolic importance, in the richness and plasticity of its social construction, than the notion of the “American West.”³⁷ The idea of the West provokes popular delight, promotes perennial debate, and has worked its way into the broader cultural conversation for much of the nation’s history. One way to explore that curiosity with a broader public might recognize the power of creative artists and writers to reflect and shape how we think about the region: James Fennimore Cooper, Thomas Moran, Jack Kerouac, Georgia O’Keefe, Ed Abbey, Wallace Stegner, and Leslie Marmon Silko—among many possibilities—have each explored the character of the West and their work offers a wonderful path into a wider public discourse about the region in which geographers are well positioned to participate.



Figure 16. Old West landscape, Johannesburg, California. This abandoned mine, with its tall headframe (left, housing the hoist that lifts ore to the surface) and tailings (mine residue) pile (right), sits just south of town. The image is juxtaposed with Figure 17 to suggest the diverse ways that various forms of capital investment are manifest on the Western landscape. While representing different eras, the images suggest that “Old” and “New” Wests actually have a great deal in common in the story of how capitalism has transformed the region’s built environment (Figure I.8 in © Wyckoff 2014, p. 9).



Figure 17. New West landscape, Twin Falls, Idaho. This commercial strip, largely shaped by corporate capital, is a landscape superbly designed for the automobile. Familiar signs and symbols help direct motorists and whet appetites. This image offers a visual contrast to Figure 16, while at the same time revealing how these landscapes are both sites of transformative capital investment, two sides of the same coin (Figure I.9 in © Wyckoff 2014, p. 9).

Symbolic landscapes can also be found outdoors and another storytelling strategy can focus on the landscape itself, the scene that actually appears through the car windshield, the one that surrounds us on a country walk or a neighborhood amble, or the one that unfolds below us on a cross-country airplane trip. Most Americans navigate these landscapes casually and uncritically, thinking little about the ordinary scenes that define their everyday lives. Historical geographers have demonstrated



Figure 18. Breckenridge, Colorado. Once a sleepy mining town, “Breck” became the site of large-scale ski-inspired development after 1961 and is one of North America’s most visited winter resorts. Condos crowd the foreground, while distant slopes have been cropped for winter’s return. The image suggests that size matters when it comes to the corporate transformation of the West: super-sized landscape features offer economies of scale and often reveal corporate capital (Figure 8.32 in © Wyckoff 2014, p. 365).

how many meanings are imbedded in this vernacular landscape and how the past—at least in legible fragments—is manifest in what remains today.

In addition, the West is rich in landscapes that make more explicit reference to the region’s history, geography, and the cultural meanings people have attached to them (Figure 19). What better theater for “public geographies” than public spaces? Historical geographers can be terrific tour guides—both literally and metaphorically—on these journeys. Sites of historic preservation, stylized regional architecture (both residential and commercial), commemorative statues and monuments, the designs and symbols of public open spaces and civic centers, and the diversity of public art can all tell rich and complicated stories about place identity and landscape change.

- Finally, the stories historical geographers tell ultimately reflect on *connections between landscapes and time*.³⁸ Beginning with the geological fundament, the American West (consider the visual spectacles of the Grand Canyon, Yosemite Valley, Crater Lake, or Yellowstone) is unusually rich with examples that reveal vivid narratives about how diverse earth processes have shaped the region’s physical geography. And the region abounds in both truly ancient and very recent geological stories to tell.



Figure 19. Cowboy sculpture near Jal, New Mexico. These metallic monuments to western ranching mark the horizon on a remote hill in far southeastern New Mexico. The Trail Ahead is a four-hundred-foot-long metallic sculpture (completed in 2000 by Brian Norwood) that was sponsored by the local chamber of commerce. The landscape is a reminder of how the West's symbolic, mythic identity is often expressed in material ways (Figure I.15 in © Wyckoff 2014, p. 13).

Beyond that, the human landscape—from the windy vastness of Chaco Canyon to the vibrant bustle of downtown San Francisco—becomes a wonderful treasure chest of examples that tell tales of how time passes in a place. Every building, street, urban neighborhood, or rural community is an accumulation of historical memory that often goes unseen and unappreciated unless we make an effort to piece together the surviving visual remnants and to place them in larger, richly nuanced narratives of how they got to be that way. Those stories begin with biographies, with individual lives rooted in a place. The stories include families, immigrants, investors, and workers. They include homes, business blocks, towns, mine wastes, national parks, places of shared memory, forgotten and abandoned places. And the American West—always with at least one foot positioned in the future—is even full of landscapes that tell stories about tomorrow, or what a presumed tomorrow might have to offer (Figure 20).

Maintaining our visibility

My experience with the Field Guide—both before and after publication—has convinced me that historical geographers possess all of the necessary tools and sensibilities to engage with broad public audiences and that this is a strategy we can use to define our identities in academic settings that increasingly pressure us to justify our usefulness. We can be key guides to and interpreters of that larger world, whether it involves solving a local problem, assembling a museum exhibit, writing a book, or designing a website or mobile application for public consumption. Historical geographers can share their knowledge in evocative and interesting ways and we can tell our stories about places—both textually and visually—to an audience that appreciates how yesterday's world can help us understand today's. This can be one important way we can maintain our visibility as a subfield. It is an argument we can make to university administrators as they explore ways to acquire or keep their status as Carnegie Community Engagement institutions.³⁹ We can also impress university and trade presses with the argument



Figure 20. City hall, Rio Rancho, New Mexico. Rio Rancho is the self proclaimed “City of Vision.” Building a city hall amid undeveloped acreage is designed to spur growth in this high-desert landscape northwest of Albuquerque. It is a visual reminder of how time and landscape are interwoven: the visible scene reflects tangible changes that have already occurred as well as human aspirations about tomorrow’s world (Figure 7.44 in © Wyckoff 2014, p. 321).

that historical geography sells, that we can connect our work with a book-buying public eager to learn more about places, people, and landscapes. Looking at the successful historical geographers practicing their craft today—including quite a few people in this room and a number of my former students—I can see this is already happening. In some ways it is a logical extension of that fruitful “conversation on historical geography” that I witnessed almost 40 years ago in Salt Lake City, but in other ways it recognizes a changed academic world and a growing public demand for what we do best. I trust our potential for producing public geographies positions us well to continue that conversation far into the future.

NOTES

1. William Wyckoff, *How to Read the American West: A Field Guide*. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014).
2. The Montana State University [Position Statement](#) on Outreach and Engagement was drafted in 2013 and became part of the university’s 2015 Strategic Plan.
3. The roundtable discussion was nicely summarized in Robert Newcomb, “A Conversation on Historical Geography,” *Historical Geography Newsletter* 7, nos. 1 and 2 (1977): 43-46.
4. Alexander Murphy, “Enhancing Geography’s Role in Public Debate,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 96 (2006): 1-13.

5. D.W. Meinig, "Environmental Appreciation: Localities as a Humane Art," *Western Humanities Review* 25 (1971): 1-11; and Meinig, "Geography as an Art," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 8 (1983): 314-28.
6. For an excellent discussion of the importance of visualization in historical geography, see Anne Kelly Knowles, "Why We Must Make Maps: Historical Geography as a Visual Craft," *Historical Geography* 42 (2014): 3-26. On the relevance of the digital age to the practice and relevance of historical geography, see Karl Offen, "Historical Geography II: Digital Imaginations," *Progress in Human Geography* 37 (2012): 564-77. The topic was also the focus of William Cronon's British Academy Lecture in Geography which was delivered at the International Conference of Historical Geographers in London in 2015. The lecture was titled "Who Reads Geography or History Anymore? The Challenge of Audience in a Digital Age." A [podcast](#) of the lecture is available.
7. Baker's concluding remarks on the relationship between history and geography are particularly relevant. See Alan R. H. Baker, *Geography and History: Bridging the Divide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 206-227. For examples of accessible, placeful cultural and historical geography, see Daniel D. Arreola, *Tejano South Texas: A Mexican American Cultural Province* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); Warren R. Hofstra and Karl Raitz, eds., *The Great Valley Road of Virginia: Shenandoah Landscapes from Prehistory to the Present* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), and Laura Pulido, Laura Barraclough, and Wendy Cheng, *A People's Guide to Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).
8. A good overview of the environmental turn in historical geography is Graeme Wynn, Craig Colten, Robert M. Wilson, Martin V. Melosi, Mark Fiege, and Diana K. Davis, "Reflections on the American Environment," *Journal of Historical Geography* 43 (2014): 152-68. Additional context is provided by Karl Offen, "Historical Geography I: Vital traditions," *Progress in Human Geography* 36 (2012): 532-35. For examples of accessible work in environmental historical geography, see Craig Colten, *Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005); Lary M. Dilsaver, *Cumberland Island National Seashore: A History of Conservation Conflict* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004); and Robert M. Wilson, *Seeking Refuge: Birds and Landscapes of the Pacific Flyway* (Seattle: University of Washington press, 2010).
9. Excellent examples of thoughtful, readable historical geography that is contextualized within social theory are Cole Harris, *Making Native Space: Colonialism, Resistance, and Reserves in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002); and Harris, *The Reluctant Land: Society, Space, and Environment in Canada before Confederation* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008). For creative atlases that exemplify how critical geographies and notions of social justice can be made accessible to a wider public, see Rebecca Solnit, *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); and Rebecca Solnit and Rebecca Snedeker, *Unfathomable City: A New Orleans Atlas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).
10. Karl Offen makes the case for connecting historical geography with the contemporary topic of climate change in his "Historical Geography III: Climate matters," *Progress in Human Geography* 38 (2014): 476-89. Other fine examples demonstrating the current relevance of historical-geographical context are Paul F. Starrs and Peter Goin, *Field Guide to California Agriculture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Lincoln Bramwell, *Wilderburbs: Communities on Nature's Edge* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014); and Lary M. Dilsaver, ed., *America's National Park System: The Critical Documents, Second Edition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Press, 2016).

11. Anne Kelly Knowles, Tim Cole, and Alberto Giordano, *Geographies of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).
12. Arn Keeling and John Sandlos, eds., *Mining and Communities in Northern Canada: History, Politics, and Memory* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2015).
13. Robinson's work with Syracuse University students was profiled in "Innovation in the Salt City," *Maxwell Perspective*, Fall 2015, 1-3.
14. Cronon's frequent tweets ([@wcronon](#)) are a treasure trove of accessible stories for historical geographers and environmental historians culled from eclectic sources, both scholarly and popular. In addition, his [website](#) contains many accessible links to projects and resources that are of interest to historical geographers.
15. My interest in vernacular landscapes was nourished by various chapters of D.W. Meinig, ed., *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979) and by Michael Conzen, ed., *The Making of the American Landscape* (New York: Routledge, 2010). Enduring classics remain Grady Clay, *Close-Up: How to Read the American City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973); John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Jackson's *Landscape in Sight: Looking at America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), edited by Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz; and many books by John R. Stilgoe, including his *Metropolitan Corridor: Railroads and the American Scene* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); his collection of essays, *Landscape and Images* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2005); and his thoughtful meditation, *What is Landscape?* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015).
16. In addition to sources cited in note 15, I also learned a great deal about the significance of landscape from Chris Wilson and Paul Groth, eds., *Everyday America: Cultural Landscape Studies after J.B. Jackson* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Richard H. Schein, ed., *Landscape and Race in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Don Mitchell, "New Axioms for Reading the Landscape: Paying Attention to Political Economy and Social Justice," in J. Wescoat and D. Johnston, eds., *Political Economies of Landscape Change: Places of Integrative Power* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 2007), 29-50; and Mitchell's "Battle/fields: Braceros, Agribusiness, and the Violent Reproduction of the California Agricultural Landscape During World War II," *Journal of Historical Geography* 36 (2010): 147-49.
17. Various earlier cartographic versions of the "West" are nicely illustrated in Derek Hayes, *Historical Atlas of the American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009). An interesting summation of the West as a region by historians is explored by Walter Nugent, "Where is the West? Report on a Survey," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 42, no. 3 (Summer, 1992): 2-23. Geographers have also weighed in, especially on the West's regional complexity. Three thoughtful examples are D. W. Meinig, "American Wests: Preface to a Geographical Introduction," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 62 (1972): 159-84; Thomas R. Vale and Geraldine R. Vale, *Western Images, Western Landscapes: Travels Along U. S. 89* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1990); and John Wright, "Four Symbolic Boundaries of the American West," *Geographical Review* 104 (2014): 229-41.
18. Creating sustainable places is addressed in Meinig, "Environmental Appreciation." Also, see William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 69-90; and Charles F. Wilkinson, "Toward an Ethic of Place," in Stewart L. Udall, et al., *Beyond the Mythic West* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1990), 71-104.
19. My simple division of the West included the states of Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Idaho, Nevada, California, Oregon, and Washington.

20. For other enjoyable topical journeys into the world of landscapes, see Grady Clay, *Real Places: An Unconventional Guide to America's Generic Landscape* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Stephan Harrison, Steve Pile, and Nigel Thrift, eds., *Patterned Ground: Entanglements of Nature and Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004); and Barry Lopez, ed., *Home Ground: Language for an American Landscape* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2006).
21. More and more publishing outlets make use of video material from authors as an inexpensive way to market a book in the world of online catalogues and advertising. My simple video gave me an opportunity to speak to readers. I recorded my remarks in an appropriate outdoor setting (a nearby mountain canyon in southwest Montana) and it included some of the images from the book.
22. As Cronon suggests, for a generation of consumers increasingly oriented to mobile phone screens, having "mobile friendly" web content is a logical way to connect with the public.
23. Marketing a book to the general public involves a cooperative venture on the part of both author and publisher. A classic guide full of good ideas is John Kremer's *1001 Ways to Market Your Books* (Taos, NM: Open Horizons, 2008).
24. The long heritage of the West's boom-and-bust economy is described in Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1987).
25. William Wyckoff, "Life on the Margin: The Evolution of the Waning West," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 52, no. 3 (Summer, 2002): 30-43.
26. The ongoing story of urban and amenity-driven population growth in the West is assessed in Philip L. Jackson and Robert Kuhlken, *A Rediscovered Frontier: Land Use and Resource Issues in the New West* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Press, 2006), William R. Travis, *New Geographies of the American West: Land Use and the Changing Patterns of Place* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2007); Carl Abbott, *How Cities Won the West: Four Centuries of Urban Change in Western North America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008); and Bramwell, *Wilderburbs*.
27. The West's fluctuating natural-resource economy is closely followed by *High Country News*. For example, see Paige Blankenbuehler, "Nevada's gold mining industry is hanging on—for now," *High Country News*, 13 August 2015; and Jonathan Thompson, "This is what an oil bust looks like," *High Country News*, 23 March 2016.
28. Two regional classics of Western water history remain Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); and Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986).
29. A growing list of more locally-defined water studies focused on dams, recreation, irrigation, and more are slowly accumulating. A nice sampling would include Robert A. Sauder, *The Lost Frontier: Water Diversion in the Growth and Destruction of Owens Valley Agriculture* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1994); Mark W.T. Harvey, *A Symbol of Wilderness: Echo Park and the American Conservation Movement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994); Mark Fiege, *Irrigated Eden: The Making of an Agricultural Landscape in the American West* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999); Blake Gumprecht, *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Ellen E. Wohl, *Virtual Rivers: Lessons from the Mountain Rivers of the Colorado Front Range* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); Robert A. Sauder, *The Yuma Reclamation Project:*

- Irrigation, Indian, Allotment, and Settlement along the Lower Colorado River* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2009); April R. Summitt, *Contested Waters: An Environmental History of the Colorado River* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2013); and Anthony F. Arrigo, *Imaging Hoover Dam: The Making of a Cultural Icon* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2014).
30. Much of Burbank's (and the surrounding San Fernando Valley) story is contextualized nicely in Laura R. Barraclough, *Making the San Fernando Valley: Rural Landscapes, Urban Development, and White Privilege* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011). Burbank's modern population is profiled as part of a larger interactive map of Los Angeles County in a featured [online edition](#) of the *Los Angeles Times*.
 31. The profound Latinization of the West is profiled in Daniel D. Arreola, ed., *Hispanic Spaces, Latino Places: Community and Cultural Diversity in Contemporary America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004); Eliot Tiegel, *Latinization of America: How Hispanics are Changing the Nation's Sights and Sounds* (Los Angeles: Phoenix Books, 2007); and Cristina Benitez, *Latinization: How Latino Culture is Transforming the U.S.* (Ithaca, NY: Paramount Market Publishing, 2007). The U.S. Census publishes regular updates on these regional and national trends. See their website for a [recent report](#).
 32. Published sources on the West's increasingly varied ethnic landscapes are reviewed in Wyckoff, *How to Read the American West*, 399-400. Examples of various ethnic landscape features across the West are found in Wyckoff, *How to Read the American West*, 160-203.
 33. See Bret Wallach, *A World Made for Money: Economy, Geography, and the Way We Live Today* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015).
 34. See Mitchell, "New Axioms for Reading the Landscape," and Mitchell, "Battle/fields: Braceros, Agribusiness, and the Violent Reproduction of the California Agricultural Landscape," 147-49.
 35. On the larger importance of capitalism in the West, see William Robbins, "In Pursuit of Historical Explanation: Capitalism as a Conceptual Tool for Knowing the American West," *Western Historical Quarterly* 30 (1999): 277-93. Also, see Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest*. On connections between capitalism, technology, and the scale of landscape transformation, see Timothy J. LeCain, *Mass Destruction: The Men and Giant Mines that Wired America and Scarred the Planet* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009).
 36. Wyckoff, *How to Read the American West*, 13-19, 395-96.
 37. Wright, "Four Symbolic Boundaries of the American West."
 38. Alan Baker reflects on "landscape geographies and histories" in his *Geography and History*, 109-155. In a related vein, see David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country, Revised Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
 39. The Carnegie Community Engagement Classification is defined [online](#), where a list of participating campuses is included.