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The Transmigration of West: Toward a Comparative Regionalism

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IN JULY 2014 AN INTERNATIONAL GROUP OF SCHOLARS assembled in the world's most isolated metropolis, the city of Perth, on the western edge of the Australian continent. Their conversation revolved around the popular cultural dynamics of what might be seen as a "global system of Wests." The governing hypothesis of the discussion was the presence of multiple Wests in the world, configurations that could erode the global monoliths of "Eastern and Western worlds," not to mention the entrenched mythic status of the American West. Perth seemed an apt location for such a conference, positioned at the fulcrum of the US government's Indo-Pacific "pivot," a thriving center of trade, hive of growth, immersed in networks of new media traffic, the far-flung meeting place of Asian, African, Arabian, Indian, Australian, and Pacific worlds. Its geographic position furthered the intellectual proposition that supposed that Wests could be not only compared but also theorized through the popular as "pop Wests," allowing for the articulation of multiple and global Wests shaped by the rise of the culture industry in the twentieth century. In addition, we sought to incorporate "other Wests" that would parallel or complicate the settler-colonial experiences in Australia and North America. Thus, we invited scholars on Chinese geography and popular culture, introducing a new continent into the project of comparative Wests.

This special issue presents a series of articles, revised from papers first presented at the "Pop West Symposium" at the University of Western Australia in Perth. Each seeks to map the contours of a particular West and, together, the traffic of multiple, popular Wests. As such, the stories these pages tell should be taken as only several amid a planetary manifestation of what Neil

Campbell calls a “system of westness.” Amid such an international colloquium, the partitions of sub- and supranational geography are not simply crossed but also defined by “traveling or mobile discourse[s],”¹ which reshape geography and identity in fruitful but also frustrating ways. In this assumption of the mobility of discourse, we take our cue from theories of colonial spaces that posit the transmigration and competition of cultural forms rather than regard the notion of culture as bounded and self-referencing. The “struggle over geography,” wrote Edward Said, is “complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.”² By “popular” we mean simply the investment in geographic struggle made by these ideas, forms, images, and imaginings. More than this, we hope to make “pop” politically serious by charting its mobility through a global system of political geography.

The definition of “pop” culture, as opposed to “popular” culture, has often been framed in terms of a struggle against tradition that implicitly favors a spatial present over deep temporal tradition. “Pop” is synonymous with gloss, dreck, and youth; the commercial, the disposable, the unserious; the shopping mall, the concert hall, the television set. In an early and influential account it was said to be

non-reflective, non-didactic, dedicated only to pleasure. It changes constantly because it is sensitive to change, indeed it could be said that it is sensitive to nothing else. Its principal faculty is to catch the spirit of its time and translate this spirit into objects or music or fashion or behavior. . . . It draws no conclusions. It makes no comments. It proposes no solutions. It admits to neither past nor future, not even its own.³

Regardless of how arguable or useful one finds George Melly’s distinctions between traditional, popular, and pop culture, his definitions lend something to the discussion of global Wests in that the pop artifact presents a dream image that mirrors and complicates the struggle of geography as Said describes it. A lived space that combines the real and the representational, a geographic region is, as Patricia Nelson Limerick notes, a mental act as much as an actual place.⁴ In pop form, geography travels.⁵ In pop culture, the struggle over territory becomes the struggle over the idea of territory as much as over the territory itself.

Once absorbed into pop culture, geographic locations appear as what Foucault called heterotopia, suspending and reversing the power relations that keep space in place. In the process they lay power relations bare, pointing to the fabrication of imperial power while acknowledging the fact that communities are, in real life, assembled and disassembled by the caprice of those imperious designs. To that end, this collection follows multiple forms of “Westness” as they migrate across cultural borders, fully knowing, in fact hoping, that the stories may lead to places unknown and generate new thoughts and new inversions of power.

The model of global, popular, and multiple Wests might at first seem to be at odds with regionalism, an important term implied by the global struggle for geography. How might Melly’s description of pop, as sensitive to nothing but change, fit against the presumed stasis and traditionalism of the region? The purpose of this issue of *Occasion* is to articulate a construction of

¹ Neil Campbell, *The Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 1.

² Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage Books, 1994), 6.

³ George Melly, *Revolt into Style: Pop Arts in Britain* (London: Faber, 1971).

⁴ Patricia Nelson Limerick, as quoted in Campbell, *Rhizomatic West*, 41.

⁵ Edward Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (London: Vintage, 1991), 226.

multiple, changing, and comparative Wests as an aspect of the emerging discipline of critical regionalism.⁶ The postmodern figure of the rhizome and slogans of deterritorialization designed to rejuvenate interest in the region risk undoing the resistive political capacities that regions might contain as bound cultural forms. Kenneth Frampton's influential manifesto for the movement of critical regionalism sought to highlight the restive and unsettled dimensions of regional identity that would resist the standardization of the capitalist world system. It is precisely this notion of regionalism as pop, as purely sensitive to change, producing only the dreamlike alter-objects of late capitalism, that should prevent us from mistaking the aesthetic of critical regionalism as a commitment to a *residual*, rather than *emergent*, mode of production.⁷ Countering the creeping placelessness of late-capitalist development does require a popular regionalism to emerge from the place-bound, but that is not necessarily a backward-looking gesture.⁸ Jill Milroy's discussions of country—part of her advocacy of Aboriginal knowledge (also published in *Occasion*)—remind us that places have critical capacities of their own, resisting or welcoming the metaphors and theories that commentators might map on to them, and that our future depends on recognizing them.⁹

When looking for other Wests that emerge as pop-cultural dream inversions of imposed power, one could do worse than look to “A Lake within a Lake,” a poem written by Noonuccal activist Oodgeroo Noonuccal on the occasion of her visit to the popular tourist site of West Lake in Hangzhou, China, in 1985. West Lake has inspired poets for millennia, and one imagines Fredric Jameson lecturing on postmodernism not far from Hangzhou in almost the same year she wrote it. “At West Lake there is a lake,” she writes, “within a lake.” In one stanza, she tells of making her way to the lake's aquatic exclave by bridge:

The bridge across the island.
Zig – Zags its way
To confuse demons,
Who need straight paths
To satisfy their evil intent.¹⁰

⁶ Characterizing critical regionalisms as “emerging” might appear both anachronistic and conceptually compromised. First, critical regionalism is not new. Kenneth Frampton introduced the term in 1981. Second, in this traditional articulation, critical regionalism is consciously *arrière-garde*, resisting the influx of global capital through a commitment to older cultural norms. The goal of this issue then is to create an interface between Melly's notion of pop as a total present and Frampton's notion of regionalism as resistant to the presence of global capital, in the hope that the slippages and inconsistencies of this interface will be productive and help us learn something about the assumptions of global geographic knowledge.

⁷ This issue plagues Jameson's critique of Frampton's essay. Cf. Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 199.

⁸ By “late capitalism” we refer to Ernest Mandel's explanation of a third stage in the history of capitalism, following the imperialist accumulation and monopoly stages before the Second World War. To enrich the understanding of regionalism, it is important to remember that the third stage is defined by an uneven development in the laws of the motion of capital that creates the need for mediation between “many capitals” and “capital in general,” concepts that have corollaries in “critical regionalism” and “capitalist civilization,” “many Wests” and “the West.” See Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (London: NLB, 1975), 42.

⁹ Jill Milroy, “‘Country Is Speaking, Are You Listening?’ Country's Story Won't Be in English, It May Not Be the Story You Want or Imagined, but It Will Be the Story You Need to Know,” plenary talk at the “Pop West Symposium,” University of Western Australia, July 24, 2014. See also Grant Revell and Jill Milroy, “Aboriginal Story Systems: Re-mapping the West, Knowing Country, Sharing Space,” *Occasion* 5 (2013).

¹⁰ *Kath Walker in China* (Beijing: International Culture Publishing Cooperative and Jacaranda Press, 1988).

The contest between the zigzag and the demon's straight path is formalized in the grammar and punctuation of Noonuccal's poem. The period after "island" separates the noun from its active verb with a jarring terminality. The line does not just pivot around the enjambment between "island" and "Zig" but severs itself, disconnecting its next motion from its last in irrevocable terms. Thus, punctuation, grammar, and image collude to defy the demon path of straight syntax that the poet invokes only to dismember. The Chinese lake-and-garden setting provides a figure for evading the sheer edge of an intent that could easily be translated into the modernization projects of China, the United States, or Australia, what some authors in the issue will call "developmentalism." However, the point here is not to claim authority of interpretation over Noonuccal's poem but to proffer the figure of "a lake within a lake" as a model for comparative regionalism, one harnessing together multiple geographic sensibilities, as well as defying the old/new, inner/outer binaries that imply straight paths and clean breaks on the battleground of geographic struggle.

FROM CRITICAL TO COMPARATIVE REGIONALISMS

Seeking the modesty and stability of "comparison" over the potential mystification of the "critical," this volume builds on the example of comparative western studies formulated in a 2013 issue of *Occasion*. Before that, in 2010, the Comparative West Project announced a collaborative research model with the goal of conceptualizing particular and localized Wests as opposed to a homogeneous West. The comparative inquiry involved the Bill Lane Center for the American West at Stanford University, the Australian National University, and the University of Western Australia and investigated "the *processes and consequences* of settler colonialism and the incorporation of indigenous societies and territories by nation-states that during the nineteenth century claimed but never fully controlled these regions."¹¹ In their introduction to the issue, the authors also noted that western geographic zones "have been historically peripheral regions in Anglophone settler-colonial societies" due to the reinforcing circulations of labor, capital, and cultural production.¹²

The uncertainty and unevenness that marked much of the formation of western "peripheries" appear to have continued into the twenty-first century, shaped by the competing forces of universalizing capital and strongly rooted local identities. In 2015 the treasurer of Western Australia, Mike Nahan, drew on local memory to raise the specter of the state's earlier desire for secession, conveying his frustration over the high share of national tax paid by the state. The territory of what Charles Dickens called the "almighty dollar" places Western Australia both inside and outside the Australian nation-space, since the nation's free-trade policies and global location have put that state both inside and outside the sphere of Chinese consumption of Australian raw materials. Looking outward from these uneven grounds, these essays construe global Wests as enmeshed in the rise of the culture industry in the twentieth century, tracking the mass proliferation of ideas, forms, and images that continue to shape the struggle over globalizing space. They thus broaden the geographic scope as well as the temporal period of the first Comparative Wests Project. In order to incorporate more than just settler-colonial societies that see their Wests as peripheries, they consider the new axis connecting Australia's west to China's, where

¹¹ Brian F. Coddling, Ethan Blue, Douglas W. Bird, Jon Christensen, and Richard White, "An Introduction to the Comparative Wests," *Occasion* 5 (2013): 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1.

the transliteration of empire moved west to east rather than east to west. Kevin Latham and Chen Hong's contributions to this volume introduce this additional Global West to the conversations of New Western History or New Western Criticism, moving "westness" beyond the Anglophone world. In *Asia as Method*,¹³ Kuan-Hsing Chen wonders what impact it would have to imagine Iraq and Israel as West Asian places. Where does this position the continent's center and periphery? In answering, comparative regionalism has the potential to refigure the cultural coordinates by which scholars map and conceive their subjects.

This particular manifestation of comparative Wests—aligning the cultural histories of the Chinese, American, and Australian Wests—hopes to elucidate the prerogatives and limits of critical regionalism more generally. The varied and several Wests that this project supposes bring to mind what Krista Comer calls "Other Wests"¹⁴ or, as she puts it in this volume, the ability to think the West "otherwise." At the same time, wide comparative analyses of these kinds, or of anything—people, texts, places, regions, nations—risk making a bargain with apophenia, the tendency to find meaningful connections among immense pools of information. But apophenia implies connections that aren't there: delusions, muddledness, misprision. It opposes the clarity of epiphany, or intellectual breakthrough. The challenge, it would seem, facing any attempt to map an expansive and uncharted comparative geography is to sidestep the *apophenic* and achieve the *epiphanic*.

CONNECTING CULTURE ALONG THE "SEVENTH ARC"

As a form of apophenia, it is tempting to think of the Malaysian Airlines flight that vanished over the Indian Ocean in March 2014 as a twenty-first-century manifestation of the "lost colony" of Roanoke. That earlier loss transpired on an island in the Outer Banks of the Carolinas over the years 1587 to 1590. Today the Outer Banks is a pleasant place for a summer holiday. In 1587 it was a regrettable place to be deposited by a commander more intent on chasing Spanish gold galleons than establishing a colony. When an English ship finally returned to Roanoke three years later, there was nothing left of the 115 people who had disembarked there. The disappearance of the colonists became a footnote "implanted in the American epic" not simply owing to the enigma posed by a "lost colony" but because it dramatically punctuated the geographical anxieties of England's westward push to the Americas. After his half brother drowned during an Atlantic crossing, Sir Walter Raleigh, Roanoke's main backer, returned his attention to Ireland, a more proximate target.¹⁵

The place where power is centered is only as important as where it intends to move. In an Anglophone context, it is helpful to recall the roots of American colonization in the step-wise colonization of Ireland and to consider the timid advance of British power westward when considering the current place of the Indian Ocean in global consciousness. More recently, the enigmatic power of the loss of flight MH 370 recapitulates the sense of geographic anxiety and alterity England felt regarding the Americas in the late sixteenth century. Six months after the jet vanished, a *Huffington Post* article described the "desolate stretch" of the southern Indian Ocean

¹³ Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

¹⁴ Krista Comer, "Exceptionalism, Other Wests, Critical Regionalism," *American Literary History* 23, no. 1 (2010): 159–73.

¹⁵ D. W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History*, vol. 1, *Atlantic America, 1492–1800* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 30.

where ships searched for clues.¹⁶ Very little of the seabed of the search area had been mapped in any detail.¹⁷ The last received communication from the plane allowed the Australian Transport Safety Bureau to place the crash site along a mythic-sounding “seventh arc”—a huge global radius passing through western China, Ho Chi Minh City, and Jakarta and then sweeping out to sea almost 2,000 kilometers off the coast of Western Australia.¹⁸ The wreckage was presumed to be no more than 38 kilometers to the west and 55 kilometers to the east of this giant arc, and sunk to a strange land perhaps 6.5 kilometers below the waves. As the government of Australia admitted, far from looking for the proverbial needle, they were a long way from finding the haystack. Recalling Roanoke, the power of MH 370’s disappearance consists, not in the loss of the passengers’ lives (for that, any plane crash could suffice), but in the fact that there are still places on the globe into which travelers can disappear.

At the same time, the direction in which power moves is only as important as its origin. The space delimited by the various arcs determined by analyzing MH 370’s communications is precisely that into which the United States announced its desire to venture in the twenty-first century. Hillary Clinton’s vision of this as the “Pacific Century” is now well known.¹⁹ But “Pacific” is a misnomer here. If one considers Hawai’i as the nation’s pivot, “Pacific” would be the correct term, but with more US Marines in Darwin, “Indo-Pacific,” a term Clinton started using the same year she announced the “Pacific Century,” would be more accurate. Similarly, in her article, Clinton notes that the “Asia-Pacific has become a key driver of global politics.” Astride the two oceans, the government of Australia has embraced “Indo-Pacific” as a meaningful regional designation. Into this context was born the Perth USAsia Centre (itself launched by Clinton) at the University of Western Australia, an international policy think tank that focuses on Australia’s role in the Indo-Pacific region and whose support made possible the conference where these papers were presented. If, amid a sea of information more vast than expected, Clinton’s geographic vision returns us to a scholarly interrogation of geography, at what point do apophenic lines of flight turn to epiphany? At what point do new connections and new axes cohere into understanding?

The essays in this issue explore the contours of those questions by admitting connections and disconnections between the “westness” of China, the United States, and Australia. Touching on themes such as ecocriticism, mobility and feminism, and “developmentalism,” these essays offer considered inquiries into critical regionalism as it moves into new Wests. Each scholar brings his or her expertise to bear upon the emerging concept of Global Wests—not a reductive attempt to homogenize conceptions of western geographic zones but precisely its opposite: to tease out specificities and disjunctions as well as surprising similarities between these areas. The essays published here reflect the developments from the “Pop West Symposium” and demonstrate the ongoing relevance of cultural geography in the twenty-first century.

The essays can be grouped according to three themes: “mobility and development,” “edges and centers,” and “a new axis of Wests.” In “mobility and development,” Krista Comer’s essay on

¹⁶ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/05/malaysia-airlines-flight-370_n_5936966.html (accessed May 3, 2015).

¹⁷ <http://www.smh.com.au/national/indian-ocean-sea-floor-under-suspected-mh370-wreckage-unmapped-and-unknown-20140325-35g5is.html> (accessed May 3, 2015).

¹⁸ <http://www.airtrafficmanagement.net/2014/09/seventh-arc-remains-key-to-finding-mh370/> (accessed May 3, 2015).

¹⁹ *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/> (accessed April 29, 2015).

thinking “otherwise” across Global Wests reflects on the importance of feminist critique in critical regionalism and Global Wests studies, while maintaining the difference between each point of inquiry. Comer usefully engages with the theme of mobility by examining three film texts, namely, *Johnny Guitar* (1954), *August: Osage County* (2013), and *Opal* (2014).²⁰ By reading each of them as counterhistorical texts, Comer produces an analysis that reveals how these “revelatory” films “gesture toward what is so hard to imagine in settler imaginations: the end of the settler story, postsettler thought, decolonial inhabitations.”

The next essay, by Kieran Dolin, continues this line of inquiry in a different, yet related domain. Dolin surveys the ways in which laws on ownership and property shape experiences of place in first-person narrative texts by William Kittredge, Randolph Stow, and the Indigenous writers Simon J. Ortiz and Charmaine Papertalk-Green. By tracing alternative conceptions of the relationship between subjectivity, land, and ownership, Dolin carves out a valuable critique of the ethos of developmentalism in Australia and Anglo-American contexts. The poetics to which Dolin attends demonstrates the significance of alternative perspectives on representations of land. This is particularly so given that these alternative perspectives remain “a minority position in both nations, and the very mechanisms that promise change occasion disappointment.”

Golnar Nabizadeh’s essay on the film *Lucky Miles* (2007) by Michael James Rowland launches the next theme, “edges and centers.” Nabizadeh considers post-Western narratives in relation to contemporary Australian film, arguing that *Lucky Miles* brings migrant and Indigenous subjectivities into the Australian “heartland.” This creates an alternative arrangement of the politics of belonging in “the West” by privileging Indigenous knowledge systems above those of Australian settler society. The film’s central characters carve their own meaning within the expanse of the Australian landscape—a place that cannot simply be appended to the journeys therein but that retains its majestic difference as a zone of discovery.

The next essay in this section, by Kevin Latham, offers an overview of representations of Western China in Chinese popular culture starting with imperial China but with a stronger focus on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Latham draws attention to four key areas: the classic novel *Journey to the West* and its popular cultural legacy, the role of Yan’an in Chinese Communist Party history, Western China in the fifth-generation films of the 1980s, and the multiple associations of Western China in contemporary news and popular culture, ranging from a kind of internal “Occidentalism” to nostalgic fantasy. Latham argues that Western China has in various ways and at different times enjoyed an ambiguous status as simultaneously central and peripheral in China’s popular cultural history, a status that has given it unique, if greatly divergent, roles in the construction of Chinese political, cultural, and historical self-understandings.

The final theme, promising “a new axis of Wests,” is inaugurated by Tony Hughes-d’Aeth, who considers regional education practices in Western Australia during the early decades of the twentieth century. Hughes-d’Aeth examines the deeper, and sometimes disconcerting, truths of which children’s writing spoke; his analysis reveals the multiplicity that informs the domain of Westness in this context and the textual resistance to being harnessed to an orthodoxy of “the West.”

The final essay, by Chen Hong, draws attention to the ways in which the concept of “the West” in Chinese culture has linked with diverse and often-conflicting images, so that, for example, underdevelopment is accompanied by primordiality; uncouthness is contrasted with unrestrained forthrightness; and barrenness comes with open wilderness. This essay attempts to

²⁰ Not to be confused with a film with the same title from 2013 about the life of the naturalist Opal Whiteley.

categorize the images of the West in the works by representative Western Chinese authors such as Jia Pinwa, Chen Zhongshi, Zhang Xianliang, and Lu Yao, and here Hong offers an important analysis of representations of western inland China and its differences from the “Wests” of Australia and the United States.

Finally, the “Afterword” by Paul Giles reflects on the advantages and limitations of the comparative approach. Giles compares the notion of a Global West with that of the Global South, describing how the West has relied on “cartographic fictions” in a more obvious and slippery way than that of a hemispheric south that is “anchored by a geographical materialism.” Giles sets the essays in a literary tradition that has knowingly manipulated the relativistic and reversible coordinates of east and west, a consequence of which has been the upending of the promise of a mythic western terrain that offers emancipation, regeneration, and progress. For Giles, this issue finally deconstructs a “fatal ambiguity” between the west as an oppositional space and the West as a geopolitical category of power. In its grandest manifestation, the study of the Global West might complement the study of the Global South in a way analogous to how poststructuralism complements postcolonialism.

DIRECTORIES OF POWER

Indeed, the relativity of east–west coordinates frustrates the concept of a “true” west, challenging any intercultural project meant to define those positions. The belief in four cardinal directions probably arises from ancient Hindu cosmology, specifically the *Rg Veda*’s account of Viswakarma, the god-architect of a layered universe whose earthly plain was divided quadrilaterally.²¹ However, the directional system divided by four right angles is perhaps too culturally widespread to rest on sure origins. Speakers of Guugu Yimithirr, an Indigenous language of northern Queensland, embed “absolute” cardinal location in every speech act, referring to objects in space not in relation to their bodies (e.g., left of me) but according to compass cardinal points (e.g., south of me). However, the longitude that globally arranged east and west has as much to do with standardizing time as space. Unlike the equator, which naturally bisects the globe into north and south, the placement of the prime meridian does not depend on the planet’s shape and was a contested matter.²²

Despite the east–west division being more arbitrary than the north–south division, no application of four directions, drawn in two dimensions, is adequate to a spinning and tilting spherical object like our planet. Paul Giles has explained how literary form makes use of such conundrums. His discussion of Washington Irving and Herman Melville suggests how American novelists reversed colonial hierarchy by using “a rhetorical form of inversion within which the recognizable world spins on its axis and turns into its opposite.” The spin that creates the diurnal rhythms of night and day (connected to the difference between east and west) is linked to a “systemic structure of antipodean reversal” that puts over what once was under, and under what once was over.²³ As Saussure said of language, geography is notoriously arbitrary and differential, or in the words of singer Tom Waits, “I never saw the East Coast, till I moved to the West.”

²¹ *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, ed. John Bowker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²² Derek Howse, *Greenwich Time and the Discovery of the Longitude* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

²³ Paul Giles, *Antipodean America: Australasia and the Constitution of U.S. Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 159.

The limits of thinking through the paradigm of “the West” alone, which was considered in volume 5 of *Occasion*,²⁴ are confirmed and overcome in the arbitrary and reversible coordination of cardinal directions. The impossibility of keeping things in place is a natural aid for comparison. By organizing a dialogue that includes “other Wests,” this issue hopes to respond to Lisa Ford’s call to not just suggest comparison but produce it.²⁵ The location of the Chinese West is arguably a more vexed geographic question than the location of the West in the United States and Australia, because of the obvious disagreement over where it begins and ends, an ambiguity considered by Latham here. At the same time, China, the United States, and Australia each have vast western territories struggling with the powers of “development,” “authenticity,” and the human imagination. Despite the discrepancies and problems caused by the status of the “West” as an unfixed and floating signifier, the intercultural comparisons between and across geographic regions present an important method for understanding the migrations of power and powerlessness, as well as for conceiving the future direction of regionalist critique. A

²⁴ Especially in Ethan Blue, “Finding Margins on Borders: Shipping Firms and Immigration Control across Settler Space,” *Occasion* 5 (2013).

²⁵ Lisa Ford, “Comments on Comparing Wests,” *Occasion* 5 (2013).