In 1893 Frederick Jackson Turner gave western historians a voice that articulated "process," the idea that a succession of frontiers defined America’s westward movement. While spirited challenges came and went, it would be almost a hundred years before the competing idea of "place"—that the West is a distinct region—reached an apparent ascendancy with the New Western History. All but lost in this recent interpretation of the West was Texas, a state whose southern traits made it an ill fit for the new paradigm. Dixieland’s roots grew deep in places such as the Blackland Prairie, a narrow north-south belt of rich, dark soil that produced cotton in abundance. The Paviliska farm, photographed above, circa 1943, was located on this prairie, along County Road 327, five miles west of Granger, a small community northwest of Austin.
The poker-faced Ken Hendrickson Jr. of Midwestern State University found himself cornered at a conference reception in Michigan by a moderately perplexed but thoroughly intoxicated colleague. Fidgeting with his glasses, the man focused on Hendrickson’s nametag, murmuring: “Midwestern . . . ? Midwestern . . . ?” Then, indignantly, he drew himself upright: “I’ve never heard of that. Where is it?” “Texas,” Hendrickson replied tersely. Visibly agitated, the wobbly professor poked holes in the air with an errant finger and badgered, “Hell, man, Texas isn’t midwestern, it’s not anywhere near the Midwest.” The unsmiling Hendrickson lobbed back: “You don’t understand, partner. We’re the only state big enough to have our own Midwest.” As he turned and walked away, the smug Texan glanced over his shoulder to see his befuddled colleague gazing into the yonder, as if to fathom the possibilities. Hendrickson was only half kidding, but the exchange highlights a point of considerable weight: any discussion about region can never be taken seriously as long as historians remain so far apart in their perceptions of where boundaries lay, or even if such lines on maps are relevant.¹

by Ty Cashion
CURIOSITY, Texas—not quite western, not quite southern, and not quite exceptional—seldom gained a voice in the presently moribund debate about the “place” that for almost two decades was central to the study of the West. Nevertheless, conceiving a Texan West and assessing its formative development, or frontier era, distinct from the Old South presents a good starting point for critically assessing the concept of regionalism in the interpretations, methods, and canon of recent scholarship in western American history. Since a new mainstream in the field began to emerge during the mid-1980s, scholars have cut cords of gumwood debating regionalism, yet their effort to define a distinct and truly inclusive American West has relied more on abstractions than hard evidence supported by interdisciplinary and statistical study. Moreover, most of the recent works professing to be western in scope have ignored, marginalized, or misunderstood the critical role that the Texan West played in the formative development of the larger region. Making a case for reuniting these estranged relations provides an appropriate foil for helping explain why the New Western History failed in its mission to establish unequivocally the West as a “place” rather than a “process.” Similarly, it demonstrates that the “next western history,” in its effort to embrace the interpretations manifested in both the “old” and the “new” of western scholarship, has brought us no closer to “fixing” an ultimate region.

All this begs the question: What’s the matter with Texas that it came to reside outside the new mainstream

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2. The reference to a “new mainstream” in this essay refers to the emergence during the 1980s of a more sophisticated western history that rescued the field from its reputation for anti-intellectualism. The term embraces revisionists and historians of the “next West” just as surely as the New Western historians, who deservedly received so much credit for injecting realism and balance into a subject where myth and fact were often interchangeable.
3. In 1975 Mark Nackman produced A Nation within a Nation: The Rise of Texas Nationalism (Port Washington, N.Y.), defending the traditional view (of the state’s white population at least) that Anglo Texans enjoyed a unique identity that made them exceptional in the American experience. T. R. Fehrenbach in Seven Keys to Texas (El Paso, Tex., 1983) articulated a framework of features that, in his understanding, made Texas unique. Most recently Bert Almon, in This Stubborn Self: Texas Autobiographies (College Station, Tex., 2002), argued that Texas autobiographical writing exudes a sense of place that reinforces notions of exceptionalism. Supporting views have hardly gone unchallenged. In the introduction to their outstanding historiography Texas through Time: Evolving Interpretations (College Station, Tex., 1991), Robert A. Calvert and Walter L. Buenger suggested that a failure on the part of writers to include historical interpretations contemporary with their works has been most responsible for perpetuating the self-perception of exceptionalism. This author will concede that Texas is unique—just like each of the other forty-nine states—but is exceptional only to the degree that it was once a nation and that it straddles both the South and the West.
4. Robert Wooster in “Toward a New Synthesis of Texas History, 1821–1940: Texas and the West,” a paper he presented at the annual meeting of the Texas Historical Association, Dallas, Texas, March 5, 1999, made some compelling observations regarding how Texas had been “cut out of the loop” in the New Western History. See also Joan M. Jensen, “Old vs. New History: Reconfiguration and Regionalism in the American West,” Western Historical Quarterly, 25 (Winter 1994), 461–62. Walter L. Buenger, in Path to a Modern South: Northeast Texas between Reconstruction and the Great Depression (Austin, Tex., 2001), xviii–xix, discussed this issue from the perspective of southern historians. Benjamin Johnson proposed that Texas authors consciously write for Texas readers and also speculated that intellectual snobbery on the part of scholars beyond the state’s borders contributes to the problem. Benjamin Johnson, “From American History to Texana: Webb, Paredes, the Rangers, and the Decline of Texas History” (paper, Western Historical Association annual meeting, Fort Worth, Texas, October 11, 2003).
5. Jerome Friek in “The Theoretical (Re)Positions of the New Western History,” in The New Western History: The Territory Ahead, ed. Forrest G. Robinson (Tucson, Ariz., 1998), 17, challenged the commonly held view that there is nothing really “new” about the New Western History. He stated: “I argue that such narratives are determined by a ‘revolutionary trope’ which proclaims the newness of these stories by reductively conflating the histories of their regional precursors.” They are distinct from an earlier generation of “new” works (such as those by Wallace Stegner or Henry Nash Smith) because the older histories “do not conform to the tropes, rhetorics, and political subtexts” of the New Western History. For some of the most insightful works in western environmental history that discuss Texas, see particularly John Miller Morris, El Llano Estacado: Exploration and the Imagination on the High Plains of Texas and New Mexico, 1536–1860 (Austin, Tex., 1997); and Dan Flores, Cog- rock Canyonlands (Austin, Tex., 1990). The body of tejano writing represents some of the most vibrant work currently being produced in the field of Texas history. Among its leading scholars are Arnoldo DeLeon, David Montejano, F. Jesus de la Teja, and Ana Carolina Castillo-Crimm.
of building a consensus for declaring exactly—or even inexacty—what those limits were. Moreover, they talked about the West as a distinct place, rather than a set of distinct places held together by a number of shared characteristics, thus leaving room for some differences. Roundtable discussions and various essays in journals and edited works pondered questions of regionalism, but precious few analytically proffered lines on maps. This dodging uncertainty made it convenient for New Western historians to ignore any part of the region that did not fit the dead reckoning of their individual interests or expertise.

Walter Nugent’s now legendary survey that asked the seemingly innocuous question, “Where is the West?” revealed just how far from consensus we really were—and still are. The results, published in Montana: The Magazine of Western History in 1992, attracted 251 responses from historians, writers, and journalists. Two-and-a-half tiers of states, from the Mississippi River to the front range of the Rocky Mountains, separated the respondents’ perceptions of where the eastern edge of the West lay. And that was from those who actually proposed a boundary. In classic Turnerian tradition, “many insisted, explicitly, on the West as a process rather than just a place,” Nugent reported. “Nine historians said that the West cannot be defined; they see no distinguishing features that are not so riddled by exceptions as to make the regional concept useless.” Others echoed the tug-of-war over “place versus process”; they contended that the West “is not a geographic entity at all, but a cultural one.” Still others felt that asking “where” the West is, invites the question of “when” the West was.

In the case of Texas, the “where” for most of Nugent’s respondents included a Texan West in the larger region.

Yet, as already mentioned, the New Western History circumvented most of the state’s contributions to the “big picture.” From the vantage of these scholars, Texas’s unique developments, such as the right to retain its public lands and a legacy of conquest so total that it all but erased a concentrated American Indian presence, produced a history that did not often resonate well within their trope. Then, there is Texas’s southern heritage. A political boundary that included an immense territory as part of the Confederacy—a land then virtually unsettled by southerners—complicates that legacy. Declaring that Texas belongs to the South by that definition means two-thirds of the state became “southern” before the society conferring that label ever dropped roots there. Such issues created a geographic no-man’s land where regional boundaries separating the Old South from the American West might otherwise naturally fall.

6. Among the most notable recent works are Hal K. Rothman, ed., Reopening the American West (Tucson, Ariz., 1998); and Valerie J. Matsumoto and Blake Allmendinger, eds., Over the Edge: Remapping the American West (Berkeley, Calif., 1999). David M. Wrobel and Michael C. Steiner, eds., in Many Wests: Place, Culture, and Regional Identity (Lawrence, Kans., 1997), argued persuasively that the total region is composed of “many Wests.” Acknowledging that the West “may indeed be a coherent regional entity,” they also suggested that it would have been more logical to reach that conclusion by constructing a bottoms-up approach composed of “subregional parts,” rather than beginning with a “whole” that “has given less attention … to regional diversity.” Ibid., 26, 10. Only Atlas of the West: Portrait of a Changing Region, ed. William E. Riebsame (New York, 1997) has attempted to approach the question of region methodically in a way that provides a distinct boundary. It contracts the region, however, to an unambiguous West that—east-to-west—begins at the front range of the Rocky Mountains and ends atop the Sierra Nevada divide. For a probing review of this notable work, see the round-table discussion in the Pacific Historical Review, 67 (August 1998), 379–420. See also Clyde A. Milner II et al., “A Historian Who Has Changed Our Thinking: A Roundtable on the Work of Richard White,” Western Historical Quarterly, 33 (Summer 2002), 137–57; and Donald Worster et al., “The Legacy of Conquest,” by Patricia Limerick: A Panel Appraisal,” Western Historical Quarterly, 20 (August 1989), 303–22.


Not quite western, but certainly not southern, Texas’s duality fell outside the distinct definition of the West proposed by some New Western historians—in spite of its arid geography and the presence of such western icons as cowboys, cattle drives, buffalo hunts, and Texas Rangers and border bandits. This undated Texas view is in Presidio County, twenty miles south of Marfa, in the Big Bend.

Yet ignoring the Texan West does not mean that it is not there. Parts of Texas, in the “old” western history at least, possess distinctly western characteristics. Stories of cowboys and Indians and the great cattle drives, the buffalo hunt on the southern plains, Texas Rangers and border bandits, pioneer women, and even Pecos Bill—and that covers only the highlights of the nineteenth-century Texan West—are better told over a margarita than a mint julep. Beyond such popular topics are the more prosaic but serious themes that scholars of the New Western History made so familiar. If parts of Texas did not fall within their western parameters, then perhaps the criteria by which they measured their Wests needed rethinking. In any event, it would seem reasonable to have expected that if New Western historians, so proud of introducing fresh concepts and voices, really wanted to embrace a newer, truer West, then they would have wanted to tell a fuller story, one more regionally inclusive.9

Oh, if it were only that simple! Nugent’s survey revealed how confusing the matter is. But more than that, deciding whether Texas or any part of it belongs to the West also raises issues of surprising complexity. What kind of approach do we use to delimit the boundaries of our West? As Howard Lamar observed, we can define “region” in any number of ways—as an appealing concept (such as in Walter Prescott Webb’s The Great Plains); “as a useful administrative approach” (political boundaries, for example); “as an ‘insider’ image of one’s local area” (geographers call these mental maps “vernacular regions”); “as a developing area whose experiences can be compared to similar developing areas” (such as juxtaposing the frontiers of North America and South Africa); and even “as a negative, local reaction to policies imposed from the outside” (such as that associated with a West whose inhabitants are bound together by their antipathy toward federal land management).10

Yet there are problems with each approach. According to Lamar, all of them “lack detailed depth and do not acknowledge the degrees of complexity . . . that some scholars feel is necessary in serious regional studies.” All of them approach the question of western-ness too narrowly, when, in fact, the region consists of many layers. Granted, each construct might take on a markedly different size and shape, but stacked one atop the other on a map, these layers might well possess the ability to hold the concept of region together.11

Another feature these approaches share is subjectivity. Defining region is a logical exercise. It allows us to devise a useful framework for handling large amounts of diverse information. Yet despite generally agreeing that the West is “a region that can be marked on a map, traveled to, and seen,” the concept of region itself, as Nugent, Lamar, and others have demonstrated, lends itself to the kind of speculation that can trap consensus seekers inside a labyrinth.


from which there is no escape. As an analytical tool, constructing any West based on shared characteristics invites others to deconstruct the concept itself by emphasizing differences and exceptions.12

Perhaps that is what inspired eminent geographer Terry Jordan to declare the quest for “total region” to be a “fool’s errand.” Many of the region-shaping issues that have only lately obsessed western historians involve concepts that represented the core of geography a half century ago. Then, as Jordan explained, “the geographic focus upon regions . . . collapsed around about 1960, blown down by a zephyr emanating from a young, confident group of geographers who offered a . . . study of process . . . as an alternative.” Again, an irony. In our own field’s recalibration that began to accumulate intellectual stock during the 1980s, it was the study of process that found itself under siege by another young, confident group of scholars, this time, historians.13

Call me crazy, but I do not see my errand as being one of a fool. How could it be, when I have such good company? Even geographers regained their senses. According to Jordan, they returned to the regional concept, but without the sense of mission that saw them desert it in the first place. “It is . . . because,” he said, “we recognize that, for all its shortcomings and potential traps, it offers a useful and valuable way to come to grips with the chaotic world.”14

Certainly, western regionalists have discovered chaos in trying to define the West. The tug-of-war between place and process presents only one obstacle to consensus. As historian David Emmons observed, we are still dealing with “the confusion result[ing] from the assumption that regions define themselves.” Charting new roads through such dead ends may eventually help us realize the kind of comfortable utilitarianism that geographers have discovered. William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin, editors of the anthology Under An Open Sky: Rethinking America’s Western Past, determined to point the way by discounting the insistence of New Western historians who eschewed the frontier process in favor of regional exclusivity. They stated: “We have no interest in pursuing what long ago became a sterile debate about the relative merits of frontier versus regional history.” They proposed instead “to recognize [the] common story [of place and process] by placing them next to each other”—a relationship they described as “from flux to fixity.” That is, they see the West as a definite place, but one that became a region only after a succession of migrating frontiers ran its course.15

Just as Richard White’s It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West became the overview of choice for the New Western History, Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher’s The American West: A New Interpretative History now bears the standard for flux to fixity. As tempting as it is to retreat to a middle ground where place and process can coexist amicably, this strange symbiosis embraces a premise flawed by two fundamental problems.16

First, until those successive frontiers enter what New Western historians have generally agreed was the West, the flux represents little more than the formative development of other regions. These frontier stories go farther to explain the character of mature sections that became, for example, New England, the Midwest, or the South, than they do the American West.17 A common frontier history might connect the Pequot War, the destruction of Tippecanoe, and the Trail of Tears to the extermination of the Wiyots on Oregon’s Humboldt Bay, but none except the last episode reveals anything about the conquerors in a mature region that gave us the nuclear West and the Sagebrush Rebellion. This assumes, of course, that the western experience truly produced some distinctive attitudes unique to the fixed region.18 That said, we can have a frontier history, or we can have a regional West. Certainly, we can have both of them separately. Yet connecting the two approaches presents a curiously disconnected history that leaves two pots half full.


14. Jordan, “The Concept and Method,” 22. See also the work of D. W. Meinig, particularly his Imperial Texas: An Interpretive Essay in Cultural Geography (Austin, Tex., 1969). While dated, this seminal study nevertheless presents a systematic case for identifying nine regions within the state itself, supported by a rubric that assesses such parameters as migration origins, religious influences, economic activities, population distribution, and ethnicity. See also Mark Busby, ed., The Southwest (Westport, Conn., 2004), Greenwood Press, rather than the editor, determined the boundaries for The Southwest (part of its series on American regionalism). Interestingly, the volume includes all of Texas. Noticeably, when the authors of the topical essays generalize about the state or region, they consistently provide explanations to note the exception that the eastern third of the state presents.

15. William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin, “Becoming West,” in Under An Open Sky: Rethinking America’s Western Past, ed. William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin (New York, 1992), 23. Frisk, in “Theoretical (Re)Positions of the New Western History,” 30–32, took exception to the proposition that the debate over place versus process has become sterile. He argued instead that the editors “lost the chance to bring the debate into the open [by not naming scholars such as Patricia Limerick and Donald Worster, thereby establishing] a public dialogue that would flesh out the differences and identities between these noncontending geographies.” The “quite ‘dead horse’” die-hard regionalists are beating, he suggested, is the “strawman,” the “allegorical Father” Frederick Jackson Turner.


17. For a discussion of this concept, see Gerald Thompson, “Another Look at Frontier/Western Historiography,” in Trails: Toward a New Western History, ed. Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin (Lawrence, Kans., 1991), 94.

That brings us to the second problem with the next western history. By the time fixity enters the story, it suffers from being unable to address the same question that dogged the New Western History—that is, just where do we fix it? Regarding the Texan West, this new interpretation appears to provide no greater insight into the concept of region than the one it seeks to replace. If the field in general, so praiseworthy of flux to fixity, truly put stock in the next western history, we should have expected by now to open the Western Historical Quarterly and see essays that transport us to places where old friends such as Natty Bumppo or King Philip roamed the forests of earlier frontiers.

The field of western history, then, would be better off if it forgets flux to fixity and allows frontier historians to go in peace. The rest of us can return to wrestling with the concept of “place” no matter how surfaced or unwilling the proponents of this newest school might be. In a recent Western Historical Quarterly, Stephen Aron of the University of California–Los Angeles praised the next western history for “transcending [the] stale debates and false bifurcations” of regionalism. This interpretation, he contended, “recognizes that no single spatial scale or interpretive framework can capture the complex history of the American West.”

Quite simply, I disagree. New Western historians allowed their end of the debate to grow stale because they rarely ventured beyond abstract definitions of their unwieldy region. Notwithstanding Richard White’s inexplicable “Trans-Missouri” West, Clyde Milner’s vernacular description in The Oxford History of the West demonstrates as good an example as any. He promised a “volume [that] will view the American West primarily as a distinct place,” then produced a vague definition that located it “somewhere beyond the Mississippi [where] the horizon is more distant, the land more open, and the sky much larger.”

That begs the question: How do you map a state of mind? Perhaps in 1994 the New Western History was enjoying an ascendancy that did not demand a tangibly grounded explanation. About that same time, however, the millstone of ideology and an apparent lack of interest in testing those abstract definitions began to undercut its intellectual stock.

Perhaps as a region of the whole, the American West approaches a complexity that seems as intimidating as Aron contended. Yet, if we begin with the premise that the West is composed of several constituent subregions, as David M. Wrobel and Michael C. Steiner argued in their anthology Many Wests: Place, Culture, and Regional Identity, then surely a capable framework for capturing the region’s complex history already exists.

As one of those constituent subregions, the Texan West provides a case in point; it is also capable of informing the other voices in the new mainstream. To the extent that the next western history revived Frederick Jackson Turner, his concept of a westering people reinventing their society on a new frontier finds an outstanding example in the Texan West. Perhaps New Western historians were so passionate about abandoning all vestiges of Turner that they rejected this article of faith out of hand. If so, they allowed themselves to be betrayed by rigid ideology. Nevertheless, they should have recognized that “conquest,” so near to the heart of their interpretation, also implies an effort to imprint. In this regard, the Texan West as an offspring of the nineteenth-century American South, emerged when a largely cracker culture wandered onto an expansive frontier and tried to extend familiar ways of life. Once there, however, the land, the prior occupants, and the moment in history combined—just as Turner said—to form a new region, familiar in some respects, but one sufficiently different to make it unique.

Let us look at the puzzling exclusion of the Lone Star state from a different vantage. Did New Western historians cut Texas out of the loop because it challenged their ideological notions of regionalism? Or, did they believe the state’s Dixieland roots reached so deep that its West

21. The same year that The Oxford History of the West was published (1994), social historian Michael Allen produced a prescient essay, “The ‘New’ Western History, Stillborn,” for The Historian (vol. 57, 1994), in which he repined that the new social history in general was dying as a result of its intellectual failings and for politicizing its endeavors. He also faulted the movement for producing “alabaster prose” and “literally hundreds of studies and monographs in the fields of gender, class, race, and economics” that often alienated these historians from “readers outside their academic circle.”
During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Fort Worth, the self-styled city “where the West begins,” became the metropolis for the vast, arid expanse beyond the ninety-eighth meridian while during the same formative period, Dallas, just twenty miles to the east, grew into the financial center for the eastern Texas post-Civil War cotton economy of slaveless plantations and tenant farmers. The distinct difference between the two cities is revealed in the architecture of the Fort Worth Livestock Exchange (above) and the Cotton Exchange building in Dallas (right).

was merely an indistinguishable appendage of the Old South dressed up in a cowboy hat and boots? And what about the next western history? Did it largely steer clear of Texas merely because the New Western History seemed to have gotten away with it? In the near-absence of any explanations, we suddenly see before us a fertile intellectual ground for reexamining concepts of regionalism that appear anything but stale. It might also lead us to rediscover, revise, and reincorporate the works of such historians as Rupert N. Richardson, J. Evetts Haley, Carl Coke Rister, J. Frank Dobie, and Kenneth F. Neighbours. Texas as portrayed by these regionalists was an integral part of the American West. And just as western historians today have forgotten or underutilized the works of these scholars, they are permitting more recent Texas western scholarship to languish in anonymity.24

Historians making the case for a Texan West can draw not only from the history and historiography of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but also from cultural geography, art and architecture, and the regional literature and film as well as data that can be quantified. We must consider the process that turned southerners into westerners and examine the shared history that binds the Texan West to the larger region. Investigating just a few of the parameters will make the case that the field’s retreat from regionalism was entirely premature.
A rough line following the Chisholm Trail south to the Balcones Escarpment almost to San Antonio, then dropping southeast to the coast between the San Antonio and Guadalupe Rivers, marks the divide where the geography, climate, and shared experience of eastern Texas and the Texan West diverged. The U.S. military erected a chain of antebellum forts to protect the frontier along this same divide, further emphasizing the separation.

Traditionally, aridity has been the most unifying, and probably the most maligned, theme that connects the region’s disparate sections. Critics need only mention the wet timberlands of the Pacific Northwest to make their point.\(^\text{25}\) Yet, rationally, an arid divide almost half a continent in breadth severed any kindred ties that the well-watered Northwest might have developed with the forested land back east. To argue otherwise defies common sense. In practical terms, aridity persists as the most logical point of departure for identifying an eastern border for the American West because of its dictatorial effects on cultural geography.

At the yonder edge of the Old South, the well-watered prairies and timbered land begin to retreat into a dry arc that outlines two-thirds of Texas. Backtrack along the broad path from the Red River, where Texas drovers picked up the Chisholm Trail into Indian Territory, down to the southeastern edge of the Balcones Escarpment, and then follow a course between the San Antonio and Guadalupe rivers to the Gulf of Mexico, and a good starting point for an approximate zone of sectional convergence presents itself.\(^\text{26}\) If the Texan West begins here, it is not only on account of aridity, but also because this divide demarcates a subregion whose general traits hold the larger western region together. In composite terms, the New Western History identified the American West as a place that shares a history of conquest and the mixing of ethnically diverse peoples in a land whose economic identity derives primarily from limited opportunities.\(^\text{27}\) In the trope of the next western history, contact among vari-


\(^{26}\) North-to-south, this definition has the Texan West straddling the ninety-eighth meridian to a point between Austin and San Antonio. The river courses that encompass south Texas extend east of that line to the Gulf of Mexico. See Jerry Thompson, A Wild and Vivid Land: An Illustrated History of the South Texas Border (Austin, Tex., 1997), 1, who presents a well-developed argument for defining the northern limits of south Texas as the Balcones Escarpment and the Guadalupe River.

\(^{27}\) Limerick, “What on Earth Is the New Western History?” in Limerick, Milner, and Rankin, eds., Trails; White, It’s Your Misfortune, 4; Limerick, Milner, and Rankin, eds., Trails, 36–38; Worster, “New West, True West,” 149–50. See also Buenger, Path to a Modern South. While this work focuses primarily on northeast Texas, it nevertheless represents a brilliant examination of how “being Texan” related to the sweeping changes that the South experienced from the post-Reconstruction era down to the eve of the Great Depression.
ous European and native groups in Texas set in motion a flux that created some distinctly western characteristics. When the first generations of Texans got through inventing their world and other Texans began inheriting it, the heirs identified with a past that left some of them feeling they were growing up in the South; others surely felt they were westerners.

The formative development of the state’s prairies and plains created a unique history that began to separate the Texan West from the Old South. The development of a brown and white biracial society along the Mexican borderlands, the protracted clash between frontierspeople and Plains Indians, and the rise of the cattle kingdom form the most obvious connections that bind the arid two-thirds of the state to the West. But more subtle factors were also at work, even before the Anglos arrived. For example, upon orders from Mexico City, soldiers uprooted Spaniard Gil Ybarbo and his neighbors from their piney woods home around Nacogdoches following the French cession of Louisiana to Spain in 1762. They moved the east Texans to San Antonio de Bexar, a dry and inhospitable environment first described in 1718 as a veritable paradise by Spanish pioneers who likened it to a slice of the Iberian Peninsula. When Ybarbo and his people could not make the unfamiliar land produce, and a new location half-way to their old homeland began to attract Comanches, he damned the royal edict and led the entire group back into the bucolic woods, where, for awhile, they enjoyed the leisurely way of life to which they had grown accustomed.

Later, when the slave-holding Anglos approached the Texan West, they found the limits of their empire proscribed by this same stingy land that held out to bondsmen the promise of Mexico and freedom to the south; to the west lay the threat of Comanches, whose regard for African Americans did not extend to a recognition of humanity. One far-seeing Alabama man provided a good metaphor for the transition that he and others would experience in the Texan West. On his way to seek a new life in the land beyond the tree line, he stopped along the way to trade his slaves for cattle and gold. Dry farming techniques would eventually make the land bloom white, but those cotton bolls would be pulled, as west Texans say—not picked—and without chattel labor and the imperative of expanding an “empire for slavery.” Here, the contest for the land, pitting the expanding Anglos against the native peoples and tejanos, produced a history that was distinctly western.

The very un-southern tradition of fighting Plains Indians was already established by the time the state’s

Republic era ended; also by then the tejano homeland had largely contracted to an area that would afterward define its limits for the remainder of the century. After Texas became a state, lines of U.S. military posts further shaped its western heritage. Before the army compelled the last Apache holdouts in the trans-Pecos to accept reservation life in 1886, the federal government had built more forts for frontier protection in Texas than in any other western state.

The Civil War, of course, interrupted this military relationship, but the larger experience did as much to produce a Texan West as any other process or series of events. With the federal soldiers out of the picture, the frontier from South Texas to the Red River lay exposed to various bands of recently displaced Indians. Elsewhere Texans marched off to fight Yankees; those who remained on the frontier, whether as individuals, groups of settlers, or in ranging companies, contended with native peoples anxious to settle the score. Closest to Indian Territory, the nascent society in what was then northwest Texas receded up to a hundred miles, so the state’s historians until recently have contended. Yet almost unnoticed, ranchers there were beginning to understand what cowmen in south Texas had learned from the Spaniards and Mexicans. Borrowing those ways and modifying practices they brought with them, “cow hunters” as they were called, expanded their open-range operations into a land that antebellum first-comers, a group composed largely of southern farmers, believed had no utilitarian value. In this way, some of the seeds of the great postwar cattle empire and its iconic cowboy were sown well beyond Walter Prescott Webb’s “South Texas triangle.”

After the war, bitter and belligerent Anglo Texans in the interior resisted “carpetbagger rule.” They, of course, lost a large stake in any claim to the history of conquest that characterizes the West because they suddenly found themselves counted among the vanquished. On the frontier there was little memory of defeat; rather, survival occupied their thoughts. In fact, with Reconstruction came frontier folk begging for federal troops to “occupy” their land. And when the bluecoats came, they were welcomed by a people who were quick to dine with them, dance with them, ride with them, and overlook—even if grudgingly—that when the cavalry rode to the rescue, it was often the Ninth and Tenth Cavalries made up almost exclusively of African American soldiers.

Demographic differences certainly accelerated after the war. Even though southern laws and religious life readily adapted to the Texan West, immigration agents attracted a foreign and northern element in which cultural idiosyncrasies were tolerated, and Yankee ingenuity flourished without the ire and contempt directed at alien carpetbaggers in the interior. Other southern antecedents and a rabid racial prejudice also remained, but notably there were far fewer African Americans in the Texan West than in the eastern third of the state. With reshaped occupations such as cowboying, trail driving, and soldiering, freedmen (freed men, at least) enjoyed better opportunities than their sharecropper counterparts in east Texas, and more often than not they worked alongside whites with whom they shared a mutually oppressive experience borne of manly occupations and a harsh land. Since there was little history of slavery in the Texan West, neither did freedmen have to walk past plantations and encounter other degrading reminders of the peculiar institution, nor were they com-

peled to tip their hats to “ol’ Massa” on the streets. If they met their so-called “betters,” it was just as likely eye-to-eye and from the backs of their horses.

As the Panic of 1873 knocked a recovering South to its knees, where in places it remained for almost a century, the Texan West provided a safety valve and produced an economy that made the land bloom—for a while. Boom times came one atop the other in the 1870s and 1880s—a bison boom, a cattle boom, a railroad boom, and a settlers boom. But a devastating bust always followed, which drove home a distinctly western lesson. In east Texas families could “make do,” hunting small game, planting gardens, and catching catfish. Not so in the Texan West. There, people said, “If you ain’t workin’, you ain’t eatin.”

Distinguishing a Texan West from the Old South by identifying some of the historical forces that separated them begs the resonance of abstract comparisons. As Clyde Milner has demonstrated, the “shared memory” of the pioneers supremely influenced the self-perceptions of local people. These vernacular regions, as geographers call them, fill the Lone Star State’s “events calendars” with a dizzying spectrum of historical themes that contrast West and South. David Wrobel expanded this concept by suggesting that regional identity is the result of interplay between the perceptions of residents and outsiders—“interior and exterior regionalism,” as he described it.

Perhaps no mediums express more powerfully Wrobel’s concepts of regionalism than art, literature, and film. The mute canvas speaks “place” most often by drawing on the preconceived notions of artist and patron alike. In this regard, images of Huntsville and Abilene would surely convey South and West, no matter whether the artist had in mind the towns of Alabama and Kansas, respectively, or the Texas communities whose landscapes gave their founders a case of homesickness. On the other hand, there would be no mistaking Albany, Georgia, for its namesake town on the parched rolling plains of old northwest Texas. Stereotypically, the West of the written word and big

34. Acknowledging the aforementioned work by Clyde Milner, Wrobel explored the concept of interior and exterior regionalism in “Beyond the Frontier-Region Dichotomy,” Pacific Historical Review, 65 (August 1996), 401–30. He most recently elaborated on the concept (even if he did not mention these terms explicitly) in Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West (Lawrence, Kans., 2002), by examining how land promoters, through their work, and settlers, through their reminiscences, had a tremendous impact on shaping how both the historic and popular Wests are perceived.
screen strikes a triumphant theme in a land of vast proportions, where the prize—even if it is merely survival—is worth the hard-won fight. Contrast that with the miasma of the “Lost Cause.” It pervaded a South that is at once familiar and comfortable, yet repellent and confining. Both regions, of course, can exude a sense of foreboding. Yet, in the Texan West of writers such as J. Frank Dobie or Larry McMurtry, the mortal threat emanates from without—whether Indians, outlaws, or the elements. Conversely, in the Texan South of such writers as William Owens or John Howard Griffin, the enemy more routinely comes from within, as an expression of some morally disquieting character flaw.\(^{35}\)

To the extent that the Old South parented the Texan West, its issue achieved a regional diversity that too easily allowed New Western historians to discount it as part of the distinct “place” they envisioned. Why the next western history followed suit is anyone’s guess. Nevertheless, two substantive questions central to regionalism deserve our attention. First, can we adequately comprehend an American West that does not include Texas? And, conversely, to what extent can the Texan West help us better understand the larger region?

With regard to the first question, scholars of the new mainstream have composed a regional story that scarcely acknowledges a Texan West. Look at virtually any work in our field whose intent is to survey an inclusive West—the most salient examples include Richard White’s *It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own*; Clyde Milner, Carol A. O’Connor, and Martha A. Sandweiss’s *The Oxford History of the American West*; Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher’s *The American West*; or, even the Ken Burns’s PBS production, *The West*—and, sure enough, you will find those boundary-shaping events in which Texas played the role of catalyst, but the rest of the state’s contribution to the formative development of the larger region is at best ancillary to the story. As a western historian with a research interest in Texas, I am somewhat mystified on one hand by the attention these volumes extend to Stephen F. Austin’s colony, Sam Houston, and the revolution that delivered the fertile eastern third of Texas into that “empire for slavery.” On the other hand, I am bewildered that so little of the history that unfolded in the arid two-thirds of the state seems important enough to include in the core of the larger West.

That brings me to the second question. To what extent can the Texan West help us better understand the larger region? If the new mainstream had invested more energy in examining the Texan West, this constituent part of the whole would have enhanced the canon, tested some assumptions, and generally enlarged the importance of the western story. As part of the post–Civil War phenomenon that saw the land crossed and crisscrossed by railroads and filled by townspeople, pastoral folk, and those involved in the extractive industries, the Texan West is certainly capable of informing the larger region. It can also be instructive to learn how these same people responded, when, like other westerners, they came to realize that the land was too often marginal, and the market economy that attracted them could be exploitative. With that in mind, what do we make then, of the fact that populism emerged on the edge of the Texan West as a response to both rustlers and an abusive crop-lien system, yet while the movement thrived on the leeward side of the rocky and windswept rolling plains and hill country, it failed to gain much traction in the Texan West?\(^{36}\)

Issues regarding violence, especially those that grew out of human convergence, present other intriguing comparisons. During antebellum times, for example, the federal

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35. Any number of works elaborate on this theme. See, for example, Tom Pilkington, *State of Mind: Texas Literature and Culture* (College Station: Tex., 1998); Bosby, ed., *Southwest: Almon, This Stubborn Self*; Don Graham, *Giant Country: Essays on Texas* (Fort Worth, Tex., 1998); and Larry McMurtry, *In a Narrow Grave: Essays on Texas* (New York, 1968).

36. Richard White appropriately acknowledges the beginnings of the movement in 1877 as a precursor to the Farmers’ Alliance. See White, *It’s Your Misfortune*, 372.
government shared responsibility with the State of Texas for formulating Indian policies. Their combined failure produced the sordid Reservation War, resulting in an Indian exodus from Texas whose repercussions were felt far beyond the state’s borders.37 Later, during Reconstruction, the federal government tied Texas to the supervisory Department of Louisiana before realizing that the western part of the state belonged to the protective Department of the Missouri.38 The bloody interim certainly challenges the blanket contention of New Western historians that the federal government accompanied the pioneers every step of the way.39 Convergence also led to a protracted contest between Anglo Texans and mexicanos, culminating in a frontier border war as late as the twentieth century’s second decade that extended into both Mexico and Texas along the length of the Rio Grande from Brownsville-Matamoros to El Paso-Juarez, and from there into New Mexico.40 Other manifestations of violence led to vigilante movements that arguably challenge what Richard Maxwell Brown concluded about the nature of these extralegal societies.41 Finally, comparing Texas Rangers with U.S. marshals as well as the way riparian and fencing laws provoked violence add further texture to this topic.

One of “many Wests within the larger West,” the Texan West represents a formative part of a whole that western history cannot afford to exclude. The similarities outweigh the differences. This desert in southwest Texas’s Presidio and Brewster counties is part of an area that once supported a trade route between Mexico and San Antonio, silver and mercury mining, and ranchers running small herds of goats, sheep, and cattle.

Perhaps the most important answer to the pair of questions regarding the Texan West’s place in the larger region lies in what “place” historians Wrobel and Steiner expressed about appreciating the “many Wests within the larger West.” In their estimation, the “theoretical debates that have driven the field . . . have helped western historians become very effective at defining the metaphorical forest, but a little reluctant to recognize its constituent trees.” Examining “different western subregions could prove particularly useful in helping western historians see beyond the forest.”42

Ultimately, and at the risk of being redundant, defining even loose boundaries for the American West is virtually meaningless without coming to realize that the region of the whole is composed of constituent parts bound together by characteristics that are not always shared in common. In this respect, too many purportedly inclusive western histories have overlooked or miscast the Texan West and its role in the big picture. In his enduring essay of 1987, “New West, True West,” Donald Worster asked: “Where is the West?” which drew an abundant and often inspired response. But equally important, he posed a subordinate question that many of the loudest voices seemed consciously to avoid: “Where is it not?”43 If scholars in our field give the proponents of “place” another shot at defining the region, perhaps they will focus just as much on the second question as the first. This will compel a reconsideration of the many layers that combine to form a more inclusive and accurately constructed section. Surely there is a corresponding relationship between the field’s flagging vitality and its failure to come to grips with such fundamental concepts. Paying more attention to peripheral subregions like the Texan West might just provide the elixir to make the old body new again.

TY CASHION is associate professor of history at Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas. He is the author of five books, including A Texas Frontier: The Clear Fork Country & Fort Griffin, 1849–1887 (1996), Pigskin Pulpit: A Social History of Texas High School Football Coaches (1998), and, with F. Jesus de la Teja, The Human Tradition in Texas (2001). The author wishes to express gratitude to the many colleagues who provided critical readings as well as others who offered suggestions in both conversation and correspondence.