



The Western Historical Quarterly

Official Journal of the Western History Association

"A Place of Extremes: Nature, History and the American West," *Western Historical Quarterly* 25 (1994), 488-505; reprinted in *A New Significance: Re-envisioning the History of the American West*, edited by Clyde A. Milner, III (Oxford University Press, 1996)

A Place of Extremes: Nature, History and the American West

Susan Rhoades Neel

Not far from the tiny gas-and-go town of Dinosaur, Colorado, a ragged dirt road drops off a high plateau and heads down toward the confluence of the Green and Yampa rivers. Deep in a desert canyon, the road ends at a place called Echo Park. Here the Green River loops back on its course carving a long, narrow peninsula from a red sandstone massif. A sheer rock wall, awash with great streaks of desert varnish, rises from the water's edge. The river is not wide—a good arm could send a stone across—nor is it boisterous, as rivers so often are in this canyon country. Like a ribbon of molten glass the water glides by noiselessly, carrying along the odd bit of cottonwood duff on its glistening surface. There is a profound stillness here, as though the earth had drawn a deep breath and held it. Nature's ordinary chatterings--the persistent flutter of wind-blown leaves, the dash of a rabbit helter-skelter through the scrub--all are rendered inconsequential by the immense, silent stone. Not even the murmuring of children at play on the river's bank breaks the spell of quietude.



Echo Park, Dinosaur National Monument. Courtesy National Archives.

I take the road to Echo Park often, sometimes in my jeep, sometimes only in my dreams. I go there to remind myself that the "nature" in the title of this essay is not merely an

academic abstraction and that western history is best, truest when it keeps nature in sight. I have little interest in a history that would posit places like Echo Park as counterpoints to the supposed depravity of modern life, their beauty and wildness posed as a stinging rebuke to our own "unnaturalness." Such a history does no more than perpetuate our imagined separation from nature. What we need is a history that has at its heart this simple but enduring truth: nature has shaped us as surely as we have it. With every turn of the season, touch of the hand, or gaze into the vast blue sky, nature and culture together have made this place called West. By attending as much to the workings of the natural world as to the human one, western history can serve to remind us that in being part of nature we are bound by it and that humans alone are not the measure of all things. And that is why, for me, all western history begins at Echo Park-and ends there, too.

THE NEW WESTERN REGIONALISM

Westerners, to paraphrase Wallace Stegner, seem to need a history to match the scenery. We are intent upon rooting our region's exceptionalism and significance in the land, in its vastness, magnificence, even its harshness. Out West, it is said, nature has worked some kind of wonder, transforming the ordinary into the remarkable, the old into the new, molding us into a more audacious and egalitarian people or, depending on who's telling the tale, into a society of extraordinary villainy and rapaciousness. From Frederick Remington to Kevin Costner, from Frederic Jackson Turner to Patricia Nelson Limerick, the western environment has been central to our popular and scholarly envisionings of the West's history. Like the strong, steady current of the Green River, the idea of a distinctive western society shaped by a distinctive nature courses through the canyons of our imagined past. This is no less true of the "new" western historians than the old for they, too, have found in nature both means and moral for the West's past. The new western history, for all its theoretical sophistication and attentiveness to the too-long neglected issues of cultural diversity, race, class, and gender continues in significant ways to be configured around ideas about nature and its role in shaping western society. My purpose here is to consider why this is so and to critically examine some of the

philosophical and historiographic assumptions about the environment present in recent efforts to reconfigure western history.

For the most part, the new western history takes as its starting point the idea that the West is a specific, identifiable place and that western history is properly the story of how that region was formed and reproduced over time through the interaction of diverse cultures with each other and with nature. Regionalism, of course, is nothing new to western history.¹ Walter Prescott Webb made the case for a regional approach in his classic 1931 study, *The Great Plains*.² Webb began with what he believed any westerner knew—the West was different. Its customs, institutions, and habits of mind were unlike those in any other part of the nation. He dismissed traditional interpretations of western history because they failed to account for the West's enduring distinctiveness. Much like

¹ For a good survey of regionalism in western history, see Gerald D. Nash, *Creating the West: Historical Interpretations, 1890-1990* (Albuquerque, 1991), 101-58. On regionalism and the new western history, see Patricia Nelson Limerick, "What on Earth is the New Western History?" and "The Trail to Santa Fe: The Unleashing of the Western Public Intellectual," in *Trails: Toward a New Western History*, ed. Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin (Lawrence, 1991), 59-77, 81-96; Donald Worster, "Beyond the Agrarian Myth," in *Trails*, ed. Limerick, Milner, and Rankin, 3-25 and "New West, True West," in *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West* (New York, 1992), 19-33; Spencer C. Olin, Jr., "Toward a Synthesis of the Political and Social History of the American West," *Pacific Historical Review* 55 (November 1986): 599-611; Frederick C. Luebke, "Regionalism and the Great Plains: Problems of Concept and Method," *Western Historical Quarterly* 15 (January 1984), 19-38; Michael C. Steiner, "The Significance of Turner's Sectional Thesis," *Western Historical Quarterly* 10 (October 1979): 437-66; Martin Ridge, "The American West: From Frontier to Region," *New Mexico Historical Review* 64 (April 1989): 125-41; Richard Jensen, "On Modernizing Frederick Jackson Turner: The Historiography of Regionalism," *Western Historical Quarterly* 11 (July 1980): 307-22; and Richard Maxwell Brown, "The New Regionalism in America, 1970-1981," in *Regionalism and the Pacific Northwest*, ed. William G. Robbins, Robert J. Frank, and Richard E. Ross (Corvallis, OR, 1983), 37-96. For examples of new western regional histories, see Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York, 1987); Michael P. Malone and Richard W. Etulain, *The American West: A Twentieth-Century History* (Lincoln, 1989); Richard White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A New History of the American West* (Norman, 1991); and Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York, 1985).

² Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Boston, 1931). On Webb and regionalism, see Gregory M. Tobin, *The Making of a History: Walter Prescott Webb and The Great Plains* (Austin, 1976); Elliott West, "Walter Prescott Webb and the Search for the West," in *Writing Western History: Essays on Major Western Historians*, ed. Richard W. Etulain (Albuquerque, 1991), 167-91; and James C. Malin, "Webb and Regionalism," in *History and Ecology: Studies of the Grassland*, ed. Robert P. Swierenga (Lincoln, 1984), 85-104.

the plainsmen he so admired, Webb imagined himself breaking trail, abandoning "well-established principles of thinking about the West and the frontier."³

Webb found the source of his region's exceptionalism in its environment. Virtually the entire reach of the continental United States west of the ninety-eighth meridian, he noted, is characterized by at least two of three key features-insufficiency of rainfall, a lack of trees, and flatness of terrain. With a hubris typical of the young Texan, Webb labeled this vast reach, "the Great Plains environment." His argument was simple: the western environment was so different from the humid, forested East that settlers were compelled to abandon old ways of doing things and to innovate new technologies, methods of agriculture, and laws. For Webb, all of western history flowed from the well-spring of environment. "[T]his land," he concluded, "with the unity given it by its three dominant characteristics has from the beginning worked its inexorable effect upon nature's children."⁴

The flaws in Webb's history are manifest. Having claimed the West for his subject, he rarely saw beyond Texas. He over-emphasized geographic unity within the West by ignoring what did not fit (the Rocky Mountains, for example), underestimated similarities between East and West, and, in some instances, incorrectly attributed western origins to technologies innovated elsewhere. Even as he wrote *The Great Plains*, its environmental essentialism and determinism had fallen into disfavor among geographers and historians alike. Webb also indulged in racial stereotyping, moving Indians, the Spanish, and Mexicans on and off the stage of his historical drama for the sole purpose of demonstrating by comparison the adaptive "genius" of white settlers. As for women, Webb saw the West as "strictly a man's country." Yet for all its egregious faults, Webb's regionalism has had a certain attraction for those seeking a new western history. Never mind that his reading of the West's history was imperfect; his accomplishment was in finding the right vantage point from which to get the best view-the fixed ground of region. The cur-

³ Webb, *Great Plains*, vi-vii.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

rent renewed enthusiasm for region as an organizing concept for western history stems from several historiographic and ideological concerns.

For the latest cadre of historians determined to wrest western history from the vice of Frederick Jackson Turner, regionalism's greatest appeal is as a counter paradigm to the frontier thesis.⁵ Turner, too, put nature at the center of western history. Nature, Turner said, made America out there in those many places called West. For Turner, nature was a transforming agent, an object of EuroAmerican desire, a stage for the play and a metaphor for the drama's meaning. On Turner's frontier, nature served as a cornucopia of potential commodities, an abundance of resources, unused and free for the taking, beckoning successive waves of frontier archetypes ever westward. From the act of exploiting nature, capitalizing on its potential, flowed all the accoutrements of "civilized" society-communities, markets, transportation systems, political institutions, law. Desiring its resources, EuroAmericans turned what they called "wilderness" into settled, "civilized" terrain, but in doing so they were themselves transformed. On the frontier, Turner said, the wildness of unsettled nature initially overwhelmed the newcomers and reduced them to a sort of "primitiveness." Thus purged of Old World habits, the frontiersman soon regained his composure and set about his business-furs were taken, trees felled, cattle fattened. From this contest between nature and colonist emerged a unique American character and a distinctive political culture-what Turner saw as those most American of sensibilities: individualism and democracy.

For more than a half century, scholars have cataloged the defects in Turner's postulation of history, not least among these being its artificial geography of "civilized" and "savage" space and Turner's wonder-working nature, deterministic and yet vaguely mystical, al-

⁵ Turner, of course, devoted as much attention (arguably more) to the idea of region or, as he preferred, section, but the new regionalists have not embraced his sectional thesis, because, as Donald Worster has noted in "New West, True West" (n. 5, p. 256), Turner did not see what we now define as the West "as a cohesive whole, fixed in place." Richard White also dismisses the sectional thesis as unconvincing. See Richard White, "Frederick Jackson Turner," in *Historians of the American Frontier: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook*, ed. John R. Wunder (New York, 1988), 671. Other historians have found the sectional thesis a useful if flawed route toward a new regionalism. See Steiner, "Significance of Turner's Sectional Thesis," and "Frederick Jackson Turner and Western Regionalism," in *Writing Western History*, 103-35; and Jensen, "On Modernizing Frederick Jackson Turner," 307-22.

ways the agent of change but never the patient.⁶ Nationalistic, simplistic, and hopelessly mired in metaphors of racial and sexual domination, Turner's frontier thesis seems to tell us more about the ambitions and anxieties of his own age than about the realities of EuroAmerican settlement or, more specifically, about the history of that region we now call the West. Some historians have argued for a renovation of the frontier thesis by purging it of Turner's jingoism and social Darwinist assumptions. It is possible to embrace within the idea of moving frontiers a diversity of cultures and to acknowledge the appalling consequences of expansionism for many of those peoples and much of the land. But other critics insist that such a retooling is wrong-headed because it overlooks the frontier's most serious conceptual flaws. Lost in space but stuck in time, the frontier is at once too broad and too narrow a concept. It has always seemed more mythic than real, not a place but a process so sweeping in effect and occurring in so many places that it defies substantive or specific description.

Trying to understand the West from the perspective of the frontier is like viewing the scenery from a moving car—the passing terrain is blurred and distorted. Calling the idea of frontier "abstract," "bewildering," and "unsubtle," the new regionalists insist that it is better to pull the car over, turn off the engine, and survey the vista in all its stationary detail. Focusing on region seems to give concreteness to western history, a "down-to-earth clarity," says Limerick.⁷ Replacing frontier with region also allows historians to connect the twentieth-century West with its past. By its very definition, frontier history comes to an end, thus leaving more than a hundred years of western history without a conceptual mooring. Concentrate on place rather than process, however, and 1890 appears not as an end but as only one of many historical water-sheds. "Deemphasize the frontier and its supposed end," Limerick says, "and Western American history has a new look."⁸

⁶ For a useful overview of the critical response to Turner, see Nash, *Creating the West*, 3-99.

⁷ Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest*, 26.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

This "new look" strikes powerful personal and ideological chords among many new western historians. Underlying this most recent effort to replace the frontier paradigm with regionalism, is a sense, forged from the historians' own experiences, that the history of a real place and those who made their lives there has been distorted and obscured by the "vaporous frontier." Of all its failings, it is the frontier's apparent inability to explain the West in which we now live that has most animated the turn to regionalism. "I am from Banning, California, a town on the edge of the desert," says Limerick at the outset of her essay, "What on Earth is the New Western History?" Recalling her childhood experience of that dry place, Limerick questions "standing models of western history [which] simply won't fit Banning regardless of how you trim and stitch, tighten and loosen."⁹ Limerick and others have embraced regionalism because it seems to be the explanatory model best able to account for those places they know as home and those experiences that resonate through their own lives and family stories.¹⁰

For many new western historians, landscape and personal narrative intertwine into a singular trope, that of a hard life in a hard land, of environmental and social declension witnessed. "I have never been able to think of the West as Turner did, as some process in motion," says Donald Worster; "Instead, I think of it as a distinct place inhabited by distinct people: people like my parents, driven out of western Kansas by dust storms to an even hotter, drier life in Needles, California, working along the way in flyblown cafes, fruit orchards, and on railroad gangs, always feeling dwarfed by the bigness of the land and by the economic power accumulated there." The historian's witness of a life lived out in an identifiably "western" environment serves as emblem for the larger, regional

⁹ Limerick, "What on Earth is the New Western History?" 81, 82.

¹⁰ I do not mean to imply that only westerners can write western history, nor do I know of any historians who make such a claim. My point is only that within the new western history there is a keenly felt and openly expressed desire by historians from the West to tell a history consistent with their own experience of the region and perceptions of its environment. The new western historians are not unique in this, of course; as Gerald Nash has pointed out in *Creating the West* (p. 259), western historians are always writing about themselves. For a discussion of the role of nostalgia and sense of place in Turner's work, see Steiner, "Significance of Turner's Sectional Thesis," 437-66. But the new western historians have been explicit in connecting personal experience and a sense of the land with their adoption of regionalism. See, for example, Worster, "New West, True West," 24; and White, *It's Your Misfortune*, xviii-xix.

narrative. As it did for Webb, the idea of a western exceptionalism rooted in a distinctive environment fits the new western historians' sense of place. Westerners are different, Banning is not like Portage, Wisconsin, and at some visceral level it feels right to link that difference to the land. "I know in my bones, if not always through my education, that Webb was right," says Worster.¹¹

For Worster and many of his contemporaries, regionalism reflects a particular ideological outlook as well as a personal sense of western place and experience. More than mere geographic space, region can be thought of as a social ideal. Nineteenth-century regionalists such as Josiah Royce argued that regional consciousness or, in his words, "wise provincialism," fostered orderly and moral community life amidst an increasingly fragmented and materialistic society. Turner believed that regional societies were free from the exploitative and transitory tendencies of the frontier yet were resistant to the instability and divisiveness of an urban, industrial-based nationalism. For twentieth-century regionalists such as Howard W. Odum and Lewis Mumford, region represented the level of human organization at which diversity was most likely to be balanced into a harmonious unity. These regionalists based their social ideal on what they perceived as the diversity and balance of nature and believed that regional societies were best because they most effectively connect human beings with their natural environment.¹²

This tradition of regionalism has influenced much of the new western history. Rejecting the idea of scholarship as neutral or objective, the new western historians have adopted the stance of social critics and reformers.¹³ In the past, they argue, are to be found the roots of a contemporary West rife with racial injustice, economic inequity, and wanton

¹¹ Worster, "New West, True West," 24.

¹² J. Nicholas Entrikin, *The Betweenness of Place: Towards a Geography of Modernity* (Baltimore, 1991), 80. On Royce, see Robert V. Hine, "Josiah Royce: The West as Community," in *Writing Western History*, ed. Etulain, 19-41. For Turner's view about region, see Steiner, "The Significance of Turner's Sectional Thesis" and "Turner and Western Regionalism." On Odum and Mumford, see Entrikin, *The Betweenness of Place*, 75-80.

¹³ Worster and Limerick have been explicit in calling for an activist or reformist western history. The history of the West, says Worster, "cannot be kept isolated from public controversy, struggles over power, the search for new moral standards, or the ongoing human debate over fundamental principles and values." Worster, "Beyond the Agrarian Myth," 16; see also, Limerick, "Trail to Santa Fe," 63-67.

destruction of the environment. An imperfect understanding of the past, however, has too often blinded us to these problems and inhibited efforts to correct them. Only by lifting the veil of old Turnerian mythologies, the western historians argue, can society be reformed. If we are to create a more humane and just society, we must begin by taking a cold, hard look at our flawed past. "We need new kinds of heroes," says Worster, "a new appreciation of nature's powers of recovery, and new sense of purpose in this region—all of which means we need a new past."¹⁴ The purpose of western history ought to be, in Worster's words, to "discover a new regional identity and set of loyalties, more inclusive and open to diversity than we have known, more compatible with a planet-wide sense of ecological responsibility."¹⁵ In such a western history, region serves as the conceptual bridge between interpretation of the past and the historians' reformist agenda. The new western history, in summary, has headed for the terra firm of region because it constitutes a literal and intellectual landscape especially appealing to the most recent generation of western historians. Concerns about the role of nature in the West's history and about human impact on the environment are central to the historiographic foundation of the new regionalism as well as to its broader philosophical underpinnings. The challenge confronting the new regionalists is to articulate what Michael Malone calls a "genuine regionalism," that is, a paradigm that does more than tip its hat to the idea of the West as a distinctive place only to dance off with older interpretive modes.¹⁶ Not surprisingly, in trying to construct such a paradigm, the new regionalists have relied on their own particular reading of western environmental history and of the environment itself in order to define the region and to find for its past a new significance and narrative structure.

¹⁴ Donald Worster, "A Country Without Secrets," chap. in *Under Western Skies*, 253.

¹⁵ Worster, "Beyond the Agrarian Myth," 18.

¹⁶ Both Worster and Malone have noted the need for a regionalism that does not simply apply the older Turnerian approach to a specific geographic locale. See Michael P. Malone, "The 'New Western History,' An Assessment," in *Trails*, ed. Limerick, Milner, and Rankin, 100; and Worster, "New West, True West," 24.

ARIDITY AND THE DEFINITION OF WEST

In his essay, "New West, True West," Donald Worster urges historians to ignore the western history path marked out by Turner and to follow instead the road sign reading, "To a fixed geographic region."¹⁷ Turner's path, the new regionalists warn, is covered with brambles so thick and thorny that we will never reach our destination. But the road to region, we are assured, is unobstructed, the route straight and true. We won't get lost because the place called West is set out on the map for all to see. Forget that "vague mythical landscape" of frontier and think region, Worster says, and the West takes on "a clear, concrete shape."¹⁸ Yet, for all its promised clarity, the concept of West as place turns out to be as problematic in its own ways as the idea of frontier. Whatever virtues region may have over frontier, precision and constancy are not among them. Nothing better illustrates this than the role accorded environment in efforts to define what constitutes the West.

Regionalists have long defined the West by a singular condition of environment-aridity. More than a century ago, John Wesley Powell pointed out the demarcation of the continent's humid and arid regions at the one hundredth meridian. Webb made that observation central to his environmental definition of West in 1931 and even more directly several decades later when he declared that "the heart of the West is a desert, unqualified and absolute."¹⁹ Over the years regionalists have offered up a fuller, more varied list of cultural as well as environmental map coordinates for the West. Look for that territory with the greatest diversity of racial and ethnic groups, the new regionalists say. Look for that region that, until the early twentieth century, had the highest ratio of urban to rural population, and which today has the most public lands and the most unoccupied space. But it is aridity, regionalists continue to insist, that constitutes the region's most fundamental characteristic. A host of features may differentiate the West from other parts of the nation, but aridity serves as the connecting sinew of region, unifying all its disparate

¹⁷ Worster, "New West, True West," 22-23.

¹⁸ Worster, "Agrarian Myth," 11.

¹⁹ Walter Prescott Webb, "The American West: Perpetual Mirage," *Harper's*, May 1957, 26.

aspects like musculature holding a body's many parts into identifiable form. "Aridity, and aridity alone, makes the various Wests one," said Wallace Stegner.²⁰

Aridity, it would seem, confers on western regionalism coherence and authority, but beneath the surface elegance are some disturbing flaws. In defining the West by aridity, regionalists acquiesce to the very bias that heretofore has privileged the history of Anglo American settlement in the region. While it is true that climate influences the particular configuration of topography, flora and fauna in any given area, nature assigns no value to these variations. Climate takes on meaning only through the cultures inhabiting a place. The significance attached to the physical reality of average annual rainfall below twenty inches varies among the West's different peoples. We cannot assume, for example, that Ute Indians perceived the sparse annual rainfall in the Great Salt Lake Valley in the same way as the Mormon colonists who arrived in the mid-nineteenth century, or the ethnic Mexicans who came decades later to work in the valley's mills and smelters, or the Japanese truck farmers who came in the early 1900s, or the Hmong refugees of the 1970s. The fact that in the dry West rivers are few, erratic, and often surrounded by formidable canyons has an entirely different significance to indigenous agriculturalists, hispanic pastoralists, and Anglo urban entrepreneurs. From the many meanings climate has had in the West, why select aridity, which reflects a particularly Anglo-American perception of the environment, as the region's defining feature?

Aridity is a concept burdened with ethnocentric connotations. Implicit in the idea of a region lacking enough water for things to grow and that is dry, barren, lifeless, and dull, is a binary vision of a place that is lush, fecund, and productive.²¹ An arid region, in this

²⁰ Wallace Stegner, "Living Dry," *The American West as Living Space* (Ann Arbor, 1987), 8.

²¹ The terms "dry," "lifeless," "dull," and "uninteresting" appear in various definitions of arid. See, for example, *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*, unabridged ed. (Springfield, MA, 1986); *Oxford American Dictionary* (New York, 1980); and Sir Dudley Stamp and Audrey N. Clark, eds., *A Glossary of Geographical Terms* (1961; 3d ed., rev., London, 1979), 34-35. See also the entry for "hydrology" in *Van Nostrand's Scientific Encyclopedia*, ed. Douglas M. Considine (1938; 7th ed., rev., New York, 1989), esp. 1502-3; "Mean Annual Rainfall" in *Historical Atlas of the American West*, Warren A. Beck and Ynez D. Haase (Norman, 1989), 3; and Mohamed T. El-Ashry and Diana C. Gibbons, "The West in Profile," in *Water and Arid Lands of the Western United States*, ed. El-Ashry and Gibbons (Cambridge, ENG, 1988), 1-19.

sense, is an aberrant one, a deviation from an environment of adequacy, specifically one suited for European-derived, non-irrigated agriculture. The "arid" West has meaning only in relation to the "normal" East where the landscape is verdant, the wide rivers traversable, and all the "customary" ways of making a life from the land are possible. Which environment is called normal and which aberrant depends entirely on who is doing the labeling. It would be just as accurate to point out the abundance of rainfall in the East, but that condition is rarely remarked upon by scholars because they assume it as the norm. Only the West's aridity is marked in much the same way that descriptors denoting otherness are attached to people, as in "the black politician" or "the woman attorney," but never "the white congressman" or "the male lawyer." By singling out aridity as the West's defining characteristic, regionalists position the ediface of western history on an inherently ethnocentric foundation. For those who would reject the idea of frontier as ethnocentric, such a definition of region will hardly do.

Not only is the concept of aridity culturally biased, it falsely implies an ecological coherence to the region that does not in reality exist. Substantial sections of the region west of the one hundredth meridian are not arid. The heaviest rainfall in all the continental United States occurs in the Pacific Northwest, for example. In California, annual precipitation varies from under two inches in the Mohave Desert to more than ninety inches in the Sierra Nevadas. Similar degrees of variation characterize Oregon, Washington, and Idaho. A greater proportion of Texas is humid or subhumid than is arid. Minnesota has more semi-arid land than Kansas, but few would call it part of the West. Regionalists rightly insist that some level of generalization must be tolerated in defining the West because no region is entirely homogeneous in its physical characteristics. But such diversity would as easily warrant the conclusion that climate divides the West internally as the assertion that aridity unifies the region. What logic justifies accepting aridity as the appropriate generalization when so many events important to western history occurred in non-arid places—the California and Alaska gold rushes, for example, or the rise of the Pacific-Asia trade, the timber and fisheries industries, and the creation of America's first national parks and forests?

The danger in accommodating aridity as a generalization is that it obscures what may be a far more salient characteristic of the western environment—extreme variability. Precipitation, which varies dramatically both temporarily and spatially, is a good case in point. Consider the examples of Electra and Tamarack, two California towns located just fifty miles apart. Tamarack, at an elevation of 8,000 feet, gets an average of forty-two feet of snow annually. Electra, situated at an elevation of 725 feet above sea level, has less than one inch of snow per year. Throughout the West precipitation occurs unevenly over the course of widely differing annual cycles. California receives most of its rain in the winter and spring, while in Tucson, Arizona, nearly the entire year's precipitation arrives in sudden torrents between July and September and in parts of the Pacific Northwest it rains on nearly half the days of the year. The West also experiences irregular wet and dry cycles, some extending over many decades. In Los Angeles, for example, the one-hundred year annual average is nearly fifteen inches of rain but within that time span were years with as much as forty inches and as little as six. The hallmark of the West's hydrology is unpredictability and variability.²²

Such extremity typifies many aspects of the western environment.²³ The highest peaks and lowest valleys in the continental United States are to be found in the West, as are the widest seasonal fluctuations in temperature and variation in humidity. Trace on the map virtually any component of the physical environment (type of vegetation, precipitation, temperature, distribution of animal species) and you will find the eastern part of the continent characterized by broad bands of similarity with gradual change generally according to longitude, while in the West there is a dizzying swirl of pattern corre-

²² Norris Hundley makes this point about California: "It is a mistake ... to think of California in terms of averages and regular cycles of precipitation... ..[G]reat irregularity characterizes the typical precipitation pattern throughout California." Norris Hundley, jr., *The Great Thirst: Californians and Water, 1770s-1990s* (Berkeley, 1992), 9, 13.

²³ William Cronon suggests the idea of extremity in his essay on Kennecott, Alaska: "The thing that initially most strikes one about Kennecott is just how western it is.... Although [Kennecott] inverts the dryness that characterizes large parts of the arid West, it shares with the rest of the region a more fundamental trait: a climate of extremes. It has too much cold, too much rain and snow, too much and too little sun to be mistaken for anywhere else on the continent." William Cronon, "Kennecott Journey: The Paths out of Town," in *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past*, ed. William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin (New York, 1992), 32.

sponding largely to the region's radically varied topography.²⁴ It is this environmental eccentricity that has most influenced western life and that accounts in good part for the enduring place of the West in national mythology. For millenia, peoples have set their epic tales in extreme places, imagining their gods and culture heroes as residents of the darkest forests, the highest peaks, the most desolate deserts. Americans have done no less, locating their nation-building myths and secular heroes out West. Nor is it surprising that in our postmodern tales of anguish and alienation, the heroes drive their cars through vast western spaces, seeking oblivion at the edge of strange western precipices. Regional history must begin not with an unjustified assertion of geographic unity but with an acknowledgement that the western experience has been forged in an environment of profound variability and extremity.

It is important as well for regional history to recognize that the western environment is not immutable. Throughout the region, in the great forests of the Rockies, Sierras, and Pacific Northwest, on the prairies, along the coastal and inland waterways, even in the southwestern deserts, the distribution and diversity of plant and animal species is the result, in part, of land use by indigenous and migrant peoples. For as long as humans have inhabited the West, they have altered the environment. It is a mistake, as Richard White has argued, to think of region as "something that has always existed in some neat geographical package" because the environment is dynamic not static.²⁵ The region is not a fixed entity, says White, but "a land and people constantly in the midst of reinvention and reshaping."²⁶ The West is given character as a singular place not by some intrinsic quality of environment but by changing relationships forged between western

²⁴ For graphic illustrations of this, see National Geographic Society, *Atlas of North America: Space Age Portrait of a Continent* (Washington, DC, 1985) and *The National Atlas of the United States of America* (Washington, DC, 1970).

²⁵ White, "It's Your Misfortune," 3.

²⁶ Richard White, "Trashing the Trails," in *Trails*, ed. Limerick, Milner, and Rankin, 39.

peoples and the land. "It is this sense of historically derived relationships," says White, "that is central to the regionalism of the New Western History."²⁷

By resisting facile definitions that fix the West in a timeless nature and by adopting instead a more complex concept of region as a changing mosaic of relationships among different peoples and different environments, regionalism takes on a new depth and vitality. But this relational West raises its own set of definitional questions. What, precisely, are the "historically derived relationships" that define the West? Limerick characterizes these relationships as conquest, by which she means "the drawing of lines on a map, the definition and allocation of ownership (personal, tribal, corporate, state, federal, and international), and the evolution of land from matter to property."²⁸ White says that the West is "a product of conquest and of the mixing of diverse groups of peoples," a process largely centered around conflicts over possession and use of land and natural resources.²⁹ For Worster the West "derives its identity primarily from its ecologically adapted modes of production."³⁰

Conquest, conflict, modes of production—all certainly are to be found in the West, but how are they unique to the region? How was capitalist exploitation of western water different from experiences in other parts of the nation, in the coal mines of Kentucky, for example, or in the cotton mills of the South or the logging camps of Minnesota? How was conquest in California different from conquest in New England or in the Ohio Valley or in Hawai'i? What distinguishes conflicts over land and resources among Europeans, Native Americans, and Anglo Americans in the East or in the Great Lakes region from those in the West? Significant differences do exist, for example in the greater role played by the federal government in the West. But these differences have yet to be fully delineated by the new regionalists, and we are left with nagging doubts about just what

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest*, 27.

²⁹ White, "It's Your Misfortune," 4 and "Trashing the Trails," 36-38.

³⁰ Worster, "New West, True West," 27.

it is that makes the West a region. It is entirely possible, as Michael McGerr has suggested, that as different as the western environment is, human interaction with it may not result in a society substantially different from that in other places.³¹ Having staked their claim in the "mappable West," albeit one vastly more sophisticated than Webb's old region, the new regionalists still face the challenge of adequately defining the region. Without such a definition, regionalism will be open to the same charges of ethnocentrism, vagueness, and irrelevance leveled at the concept of frontier.

It is worth noting, with some irony, that as the new regionalists chart their way through the relational West they may well find themselves on that old frontier road once again. If we think of the West not as a fixed entity but as a product of changing relationships, then our attention logically shifts from the operation of historical processes in a specific place to those processes that create the region. The relevant question, in other words, is "how and when did the West become a region?" That is precisely the issue William Cronon and his fellow neo-Turnerians put at the heart of a new frontier history. Frontier and region are not "isolated, alternative ways of viewing the American past but rather [are] phases of a single historical process," say Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin.³² The process of moving from frontier to region-invasion of a place by a new people, settling new communities there and establishing new economic, political, and social systems-occurred throughout America. The result are regions as varied as New England, the South, and the West, but that difference in outcome should not obscure the fact all of America shares a common history of making the transition from frontier to region. This characterization of frontier and region is not inconsistent with the new regionalism, which posits much the same relationship between place and process. What does distinguish the two approaches are differing ideas about the relationship of region to nation or, more specifically, the significance of the West in the nation's history.

³¹ Michael E. McGerr, "Is There a Twentieth-Century West?" in *Under An Open Sky*, ed. Cronon, Miles, and Gitlin, 247.

³² William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin, "Becoming West: Toward a New Meaning for Western History," in *Under An Open Sky*, ed. Cronon, Miles, and Gitlin, 7.

ENVIRONMENT AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WEST

Whatever faults are to be found in the frontier thesis, original or neo-Turnerian versions, its one undeniable virtue is in claiming a place for the West in the nation's history. By stressing an enduring western exceptionalism, regionalists like Webb relinquished much of the West's place in the bigger story. As Elliott West has noted, Webb gave "specificity and permanence" to western history by linking the region's unique culture to a distinctive environment, but in doing so he "surrendered western history's special claim-the notion that it provided a unifying vision for all Americans."³³ An unabashed western chauvinist, Webb, in the end, found little of national significance in the region's history. And therein has been western regionalism's most disaffecting flaw. Beyond those momentous nineteenth-century events that completed the United States as a continental nation, what happened in the West struck many scholars as irrelevant to the main currents of American history. To be sure, western history could be interesting, even lively, and many historians happily retreated into a provincialism that highlighted the colorful and melodramatic aspects of the West's past. Others scholars, however, especially those writing in the 1960s and 1970s, ignored regionalism altogether and chose to place western subjects in interpretive contexts that seemed closer to the center of American history-urbanization, the persistence of ethnic cultures, the divisions of race, class, and gender. The new regionalists, however, have been dissatisfied equally with localism and with a history that does no more than replay national trends on the regional stage. Central to their construction of a new western history has been the search for a wider significance to the western experience. Although committed to the idea of West as a distinctive place with its own, intrinsic local meanings, the new regionalism insists that, in important ways, the West accounts for what America has become.

The new regionalists point to the crucial role of western resources-minerals, timber, agricultural products in the development of the national economy. They also note that the demands of bringing the West into the national and, ultimately, the global market sys-

³³ West, "Walter Prescott Webb," 174.

tem, stimulated the expansion of the federal government, profoundly altering the relationship of the central state to all regions of the nation. But, as important as these economic and political factors were, the greatest significance of the West, the new regionalists say, is to be found in what Limerick calls the legacy of conquest.

As nowhere else in America, the new regionalism posits, in the West an Anglo-American culture driven by the imperatives of capitalism indulged in an orgy of subjugation and exploitation. "Conquest," writes Limerick, "forms the historical bed-rock of the whole nation, and the American West is a preeminent case study in conquest and its consequences."³⁴ In this tragic tale-and it is as tragedy that the new regionalists see the West's history-nature is no less a victim than those dispossessed and exploited peoples shoved to the peripheries of western society. "The drive for the economic development of the West," says Worster, "was often a ruthless assault on nature, and it has left behind it much death, depletion, and ruin."³⁵ For the new regionalists, social and ecological disruption are the interwoven consequences of conquest-they are part of a whole cloth.

The new regionalist version of the West's significance draws heavily on recent work in environmental history, a field that has evolved simultaneously (one might even say symbiotically) with the new western history. Since the 1980s, much of the best scholarship in environmental history has focused on the ecological changes resulting from the expansion of European and Anglo-American systems of land use and on the ideological and institutional mechanisms through which those systems have been perpetuated. Indeed, the great transformation of North America's indigenous landscape into one organized according to what Cronon has called the logic of capital has become the dominating trope of environmental history.³⁶ Environmental histories of Island County,

³⁴ Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest*, 28.

³⁵ Worster, "Beyond the Agrarian Myth," 13.

³⁶ For good historiographic overviews of the field, see Richard White, "American Environmental History: The Development of a New Historical Field," *Pacific Historical Review* 54 (August 1985), 297-335; Donald Worster, "Doing Environmental History," in *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History*, ed. Donald Worster (Cambridge, ENG, 1988), 289-307; and "A Round Table: Environmental History," *Journal of American History* 76 (March 1990): 1087-1147.

Washington, New Mexico's Sangre de Cristo Mountains and Pajarito Plateau, the badlands of the southern High Plains, and the Calapooia Valley in Oregon, to cite just a few examples, have greatly enhanced our understanding of conflicting systems of land use in the West and of how ecological change, sometimes intentionally, but often inadvertently, impoverished some western peoples while enriching others.³⁷ In addition to these environmental histories, recent studies focusing on landscape art and photography in the West, on the history of science in the region, and on the movement to preserve wilderness and scenic landscapes have suggested that those currents within American society that may once have been seen as in opposition to the imposition of a market system on the western environment actually served to rationalize that process or to provide new forms of commodifying nature.³⁸

Yet, for all the valuable insights provided by these studies, the environmental history of the West is not sufficiently extensive or conclusive to warrant an assertion that, in Limerick's words, the national "faith that humans can master the world-of nature and of humans" was put to its greatest test in the West or, as Worster has suggested, that in its ecological relationships western society "best exemplifies the modern capitalist state at work."³⁹ Too many questions about the human interaction with the western environment remain to be answered before the new regionalism can justifiably recast the significance of the West in terms of ecological change. Western environmental history, for

³⁷ See Richard White, *Land Use, Environment, and Social Change: The Shaping of Island County, Washington* (Seattle, 1980); William deBuys, *Enchantment and Exploitation: The Life and Hard Times of a New Mexico Mountain Range* (Albuquerque, 1985); Hal K. Rothman, *On Rims & Ridges: The Los Alamos Area since 1880* (Lincoln, 1992); Dan L. Flores, *Caprock Canyonlands: Journeys into the Heart of the Southern Plains* (Austin, 1990); and Peter G. Boag, *Environment and Experience: Settlement Culture in Nineteenth-Century Oregon* (Berkeley, 1992).

³⁸ See, for example, Nancy K. Anderson, "'The Kiss of Enterprise': The Western Landscape as Symbol and Resource," in *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820- 1920*, ed. William H. Truettner (Washington, DC, 1991), 237-83; Michael L. Smith, *Pacific Visions: California Scientists and the Environment, 1850-1915* (New Haven, 1987); Arthur E McEvoy, *The Fisherman's Problem: Ecology and Law in the California Fisheries, 1850-1980* (Cambridge, 1986); and Chris J. Magoc, "'The Selling of Wonderland': Yellowstone National Park, the Northern Pacific Railroad, and the Culture of Consumption, 1872-1903" (Ph.D. diss., University of New Mexico, 1992).

³⁹ Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest*, 29; and Worster, "Beyond the Agrarian Myth," 14.

example, has yet to fully explore the varieties of human/ nature relationships in the region, particularly as they vary by class and gender, or to account for the ways in which the environment has been used to resist Anglo-American expansion. Nor do we have good comparative studies to demonstrate that what occurred in the West was markedly different from the environmental history of other regions.

NATURE AND A NEW WESTERN NARRATIVE

Regardless of how the new regionalists reconfigure the West's significance, their histories will have to match the narrative power of that old frontier tale. "The greatest attraction of the frontier thesis," William Cronon argues, "has been its simplicity and its sense of movement, its ability to shape and set in motion so many of the mere facts that American historians need to narrate."⁴⁰ Turner's narrative structure gave the disparate pieces of the past an order and coherence, connecting America's many places to a national culture through a common story—all places had the same storied past and, therefore, in some sense shared in the nation's fate. This is one of the reasons that the frontier thesis has had, and continues to have, a powerful hold on the popular and scholarly imagination. If regionalism is to break the hold of frontier on western history, it will have to replace not only Turner's interpretation of the western past, but also his narrative form. The great challenge for western historians is to find a new way of telling the story of the West, of ordering and signifying the facts, that is at once reflective of the new visions they have of and for America and yet as compelling in its "movement" as Turner's frontier thesis.

Upon what warp can this new story be woven? Nature, say the new western historians, can serve as one of the strong narrative fibers out which a new western history cloth can be made. By making the interaction of people and the natural world the narrative device, Cronon says, "western history can become what it has always been, the story of human beings working with changing tools to transform the resources of the land, struggling over how that land should be owned and understood, and defining their notions of political and cultural community, all within a context of shifting environmental

⁴⁰ Cronon, "Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier," 170.

and economic constraints."⁴¹ Limerick also suggests that in focusing on "the story of human efforts to 'master' nature in the region," western history takes on narrative continuity.

Although western historians may wish for environment to serve as a narrative thread connecting the full chronological sweep of the region's history, the task, so far, has proven beyond the methodological capability of environmental history. In practice, while the human/nature dialectic has provided narrative focus to nineteenth-century environmental histories of the West, that has not been generally true of twentieth-century studies. Indeed, environmental historians have treated nature very differently in the frontier and post-frontier eras. In their studies of the frontier West, environmental historians have brought the dialectic between nature and culture into focus by concentrating on a singular process—the extension of a EuroAmerican system of land use across the region. Because the process of imposing EuroAmerican ways of perceiving, valuing, and using nature was, in the West, largely (although not completely) a nineteenth-century phenomena, the human/nature dialectic has tended to recede from historical view in the twentieth century. Nature as a concrete reality shaping the lives of western peoples is largely absent from twentieth-century history.

This is not to suggest that nature and culture ceased to be mutually informing in the twentieth century, only that the lens through which historians seem best able to discern the dialogue became irrelevant. The conversation between humans and nature is one carried on between parties so familiar with one another that a knowing nod and a few cryptic words convey meaning. For historians looking in on the parties, it is often difficult to tell that a conversation is even going on, let alone what the discussion is about. Finding ways of capturing the human/nature dialectic and tracing its trajectory through time remains the most difficult challenge facing environmental historians. To date, they have accomplished this best by focusing on dislocation, either cultural or ecological; that is, by looking at a moment in time when ecological relations break down—the Dust

⁴¹ Ibid., 172.

Bowl, the decline of California's coastal fisheries-or when distinct cultures are in conflict.

Nature, it would seem, ill-serves the goal of connecting frontier and post-frontier Wests into a single narrative scheme. Writing nature into the western narrative poses another challenge. As western historians seek to tell new stories of the West they need to be cautious not to mistake the ordering of narrative for simplification. Turner not only gave western history "movement"; he set that movement to epic rhythms. The heroic intonations of the frontier thesis derived from Turner's plotting of events, but also from his distillation of so much into simplified patterns and of so many into stereotypical characters. Neither people nor nature can be reduced to stock types. Facile dichotomies between "natural" and "unnatural," "wilderness" and "civilization," between harmony and disorder do not reflect the concrete reality of an intricate, changeable natural world. Western history with nature in it must consist of complex, finely textured stories set to subtle, discordant harmonies not to the strident, heroic cadences Turner chose. In these stories we will find no easy lessons, no exportable heroes. The past will not provide us with a transcendent set of values about nature and how to treat it. Nor can we use past nature as a moral template for our own social relations, judging society by how successfully it mirrors a perceived orderliness or balance in nature.

Yet, our histories should be meaningful ones with significance for our own lives. No one has made a better case for why that is so than William Cronon. "Stories about the past are better," he reminds, "if they increase our attention to nature and the place of people within it [because] narratives remain our chief moral compass in the world. Because we use them to motivate and explain our actions, the stories we tell change the way we act in the world. We find in such stories our histories and prophecies both, which means they remain our best path to an engaged moral life."⁴² Who we are, as individuals and as a society, derives in part from the ways in which we have drawn our physical and spiritual sustenance from the physical world in which we live. All peoples of the West have found in nature sources of delight and of terror, tools of oppression and means of

⁴² Cronon, "Nature, History, and Narrative," *Journal of American History* 78 (March 1992): 1375.

maintaining human dignity. Western history should teach us about the centrality of nature to the human experience, indeed, of how that experience is not apart from nature. As problematic as the role of environment remains in recent efforts to construct a new western history, it is the insistence on making nature a part of the story that insures the field's continuing vitality.