Introduction: "What on Earth Has Happened to the New Western History?"

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In 1989 Patricia Nelson Limerick produced a one-page definition (a manifesto, some called it) of the New Western History in conjunction with the influential *Trails: Toward a New Western History* symposium. She defined the West as a region (the area beyond the hundredth meridian); rejected the term "frontier" as the best delineator for the processes playing out in that region, offering in its place a range of terms including "invasion, conquest, colonization, exploitation, development, [and] expansion of the world market"; emphasized the convergence in the West of diverse peoples; rejected the notion of the end of the frontier ("in 1890, or any other year") with its implied divide between old West and new West; questioned the traditional model of "progress and improvement," offering instead the eminently sensible claim that "in western American history, heroism and villainy, virtue and vice, and nobility and shoddiness appear in roughly the same proportions as they appear in any other subject of human history"; and surrendered claims to absolute neutrality and objectivity, emphasizing that scholars should "care about their subjects."[1]

Limerick had first outlined these points a few years earlier in her enormously influential book *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*. In the book's introduction, titled "Closing the Frontier and Opening Western History," Limerick insisted that rejecting the frontier as the overriding thematic framework for structuring the story of the West would lead to a fuller recognition of the region's tremendous cultural diversity and to an emphasis on

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1. Patricia Nelson Limerick, "What on Earth Is the New Western History?" in *Trails: Toward a New Western History*, ed. Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin (Lawrence, Kans., 1991), 81–88. The first version of this list of characteristics of the New Western History appeared in Donald Worster, et al., "*The Legacy of Conquest* by Patricia Nelson Limerick: A Panel Appraisal," *Western Historical Quarterly* 20 (August 1989): 320–21. Limerick discusses the "manifesto" and the *Trails* symposium in "The Privileges and Perils of the Western Public Intellectual," first published in *Encyclia, The Journal of the Utah Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters* 68 (1991), reprinted in Gene M. Gressley, ed., *Old West/New West: Quo Vardis?* (Worland, Wyo., 1994), 29–48.

its twentieth-century history and the continuities between the nineteenth-century western past and the present.[2] The result of this paradigm shift, Elliott West suggested, was "A Longer, Grimmer, But More Interesting Story."[3] That story was, from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, told in a group of influential works—including Donald Worster's *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (1985), William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (1991), and Richard White's *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A New History of the American West* (1991), in addition to Limerick's *Legacy*. Those authors, in fact, earned the memorable, though not altogether fitting, label "the gang of four."[4]

Sensing a good story, the print media in those years played up (indeed, even helped shape the parameters of) the conflict between old and new western history, and placed particular emphasis on the notion of a generational divide among scholars.[5] With the public and academic furor over "political correctness" in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the release of Kevin Costner's multi-Oscar-winning movie *Dances With Wolves* in 1990, and the backdrop of the First Gulf War in early 1991, it was hardly surprising that debates over the nature and meaning of the American western past would capture headlines. The triumphal story of the settlement of the West was a core element of the nation's self-image and the redrafting of that story with a strong emphasis on the majority culture's mistreatment of minority cultures, misuse of the environment, and dedication to the pursuit of profit (rather than to other, more noble, motivations) constituted a serious questioning of the very nature and meaning of Americanism. This latest western dustup—one reporter dubbed the debate the "showdown at the politically OK corral"—received extensive coverage in newspapers and magazines including the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Christian*

2. Patricia Nelson Limerick, Introduction, "Closing the Frontier and Opening Western History," in *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York, 1987), 17–32.

3. Elliott West, "A Longer, Grimmer, But More Interesting Story," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 40 (summer 1990), reprinted in Limerick, Milner, and Rankin, eds., *Trails*, 103–11.

4. Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York, 1985); William Cronon; *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, 1991), and Richard White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A New History of the American West* (Norman, Okla., 1991). Regarding the differences between those four historians: William Cronon, departed from Limerick, White, and Worster in emphasizing the centrality of frontier processes in western American history; and the environmental history of Cronon, Limerick, and White was not declensionist like that of Worster.

5. The generational thesis was fully evident in Gerald Nash's overview and analysis of western American historiography, *Creating the West: Historical Interpretations, 1890–1990* (Albuquerque, N.Mex., 1991).

Science Monitor, *New Republic*, and in more popular mass circulation publications, including *USA Today*, *US News and World Report*, and even *People* magazine.[6]

In this atmosphere of heightened controversy some scholars argued that the New Western History was not really "new" after all and contended that the latest generation of scholarly "revisionists" were too presentist in their examinations and evaluations of the western past. Some historians feared that the New Western History had become a powerful and restrictive new orthodoxy; one even drew parallels with the totalitarian orthodoxies of the mid-twentieth century.[7] The impassioned debate over the 1990–91 Smithsonian Institution exhibit "The West as America" further fueled the story, as did the centennial of Frederick Jackson Turner's "frontier thesis" in 1993.[8] Western American history seemed to go from an academic backwater in the early 1980s to a thriving and innovative field, with job openings, a decade later.

The purpose of this special issue of *The Historian* is not to revisit those old debates, but instead to ask where western history is now, a decade after that exciting phase in the evolution of the field. Scholarly revisionism often becomes the new orthodoxy—this has, for example, been the case to some degree with New Left interpretations of the origins of the Cold War, and with reinterpretations of Reconstruction inspired by the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. The New Western History certainly seems to have become the new orthodoxy in the

6. The "showdown at the politically OK corral" quotation is from Janny Scott's insightful assessment of the controversy, "New Background of the Old West: Academia," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 May 1993, A5. Key examples of the newspaper and magazine coverage of the topic follow in chronological order: T. R. Reid, "Shootout in Academia over History of U.S. West," *Washington Post*, 10 October 1989; Richard Bernstein, "Among Historians the Old Frontier Is Turning Nastier with Each Revision," *New York Times*, 17 December 1989, and "Unsettling the Old West: Now Historians Are Bad-Mouthing the American Frontier," *New York Times Magazine*, 18 March 1990; Mirriam Horn, "How the West Was Really Won," *U.S. News and World Report*, 21 May 1990; Larry McMurtry, "Westward Ho Hum: What the New Historians Have Done to the Old West," *New Republic*, 22 October 1990; Terry Pristin, " 'Taming' of the Wild West Is Rewritten by Scholars: Revisionists Steer away from the 'Heroic Conquest.' They Focus on the Diverse Peoples, Conditions," *Los Angeles Times*, 14 November 1990; Brad Knickerbocker, "A Century after the West Was 'Won': Historians Reexamine Where the Region Has Been, While Other Experts Debate Where It Is Headed," *Christian Science Monitor*, 18 December 1990; Vickie Bane, "Calling *Dances with Wolves* 'Fantasy,' A Historian Sounds a Charge against the Mythic Past of the American West," *People*, 22 April 1991.

7. For Nash's fullest articulation of this argument see his essay, "The Global Context of the New Western historian," in Gressley, ed., *Old West/New West*, 149–62.

8. William Truettner, *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820–1920* (Washington, D.C., 1991). Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" and Other Essays*, ed. John Mack Faragher (New York, 1994), 31–60.

field; indeed, it seems to constitute the quintessential example of scholarly conquest. But what, to use the words of one of its chief practitioners, have been the legacies of that conquest? What are the key developments in American western scholarship in recent years and where does the field go from here? Is there a Post-New Western History to parallel, for example, the Post-Revisionist School of Cold War historiography or the postrevisionist scholarship on Reconstruction?[9]

It is clear that the leading New Western Historians of a decade ago are still at the forefront of the field, and they have been joined by a host of other scholars of the American West, both young and old, who have produced excellent work in the 1990s and 2000s. The New Western History has certainly transformed the field by catalyzing the study of race, the environment, women and gender, urban issues, and the adoption of comparative frameworks that help us move beyond the easy acceptance of notions of national and regional exceptionalism. As a result, historians are telling new kinds of stories. A good example is Gunther Peck's superb study *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West, 1880–1923* (2000). Peck examines Mexican, Greek, and Italian labor in the West—transnationally defined to include Mexico and western Canada—thus emphasizing a global context that helps redefine the boundaries of western American studies.[10]

9. For a quick introduction to the historiography of the Cold War see Ralph B. Levering's "Bibliographical Essay" in his *The Cold War: A Post-Cold War History* (Arlington Heights, Ill., 1994), 191–205; and for Reconstruction, Michael Perman's "Introduction: Emancipation and Reconstruction in History," and "Bibliographical Essay" in his *Emancipation and Reconstruction, 1862–1879* (Arlington Heights, Ill., 1987), though dated, are still useful for understanding the historiographical contours of the topic—including postrevisionism—through the mid-1980s.

10. The global repositioning of western American history was well underway a decade and a half ago, as evidenced in Walter Nugent's essay "Frontiers and Empires in the Late Nineteenth Century," which appeared in the *Western Historical Quarterly* (1989) and was also included in the *Trails* collection. Even earlier still, historians were comparing the processes of white settlement in various colonies; see for example Donald Danoon, *Settler Capitalism: The Dynamics of Dependent Development in the Southern Hemisphere* (New York, 1983); George Wolfskill and Stanley Palmer, eds., *Essays on Frontiers in World History* (Austin, Tex., 1981); and Howard Lamar and Leonard Thompson, eds., *The Frontier in History: North America and Southern Africa Compared* (New Haven, Conn., 1981), are good examples. Still earlier examples include Earl Pomeroy, "The West and New Nations in Other Continents," in John Alexander Carroll, ed., *Reflections of Western Historians* (Tucson, Ariz., 1969); and H. C. Allen, *Bush and Backwoods: A Comparison of the Frontier in Australia and the United States* (East Lansing, Mich., 1959). Still, while there is certainly a long tradition of such comparative scholarship, the New Western History, with its emphasis on empire, colonization, race, gender, environment, and cultural exchange has helped nurture comparative approaches. Patricia Nelson Limerick championed the benefits of global approaches to western American history in her 2000 Western History Association presidential address, "Going West and Ending Up Global," *Western Historical Quarterly* 32 (spring 2001): 5–23.

The term New Western History is not nearly so widely used today as it was a decade or so ago, but the impact of that approach is clearly evident in the essays that comprise this special issue. The ten past presidents and the current president of the Western History Association (WHA) have all reflected on the state of the field, paying special attention to developments in their particular areas of interest. In addition, John Mack Faragher, author of an important review essay in the *American Historical Review* on western history a decade ago, has written a companion piece reflecting on important works in the field during the last ten or so years.[11] Norris Hundley's reflective piece developed into a full-fledged essay on recent scholarship on western water issues and serves as a companion to his WHA presidential address of 1995.[12] These two essays comprise the "Historiographical Overviews" section.

The ten essays in the "Reflections" section have simply been placed in alphabetical order by author, rather than arranged in subsections. Historians of race and gender will find much to dwell on in the essays by Peter Iverson, Elliott West, and Glenda Riley. Scholars of empire and of the environment will be drawn, respectively, to the essays by Limerick and White. The field of western cultural history is well covered in the essays by Richard Etulain and Brian Dippie. The effects of the digital revolution on western American studies are explored in the essays by Iris Engstrand and Janet Fireman on the Southwest Borderlands and Los Angeles, respectively. And James Ronda reminds us both that the nineteenth-century West remains a remarkably fertile field for scholarly investigation and that the West was envisioned within a global context during that century. These dozen historians have, between them, provided an excellent road map to recent developments in western history.

The question of what has happened to the New Western History is left up to readers to decide. One thing that will be clear from these essays is that western American history is currently, and has been in recent decades, a remarkably exciting, innovative, and influential field of study. If there is a new orthodoxy dominating the field, then it is one marked by remarkably flexible parameters that house a very wide array of interesting stories and approaches. I am grateful to the essayists, first for agreeing to take on the task of charting the contours of recent scholarship, and second, for producing such thoughtful and compelling reflections on the topic.

11. John Mack Faragher, "The Frontier Trail: Rethinking Turner and Reimagining the American West," *American Historical Review* 98 (February 1993): 106–17.

12. Norris Hundley, "Water and the West in Historical Imagination," *Western Historical Quarterly* 27 (spring 1996): 5–31.