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From the Acting Editor

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Examining a Mexican American West
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FROM THE ACTING EDITOR

STEPHEN TATUM

Influenced by feminist history, multiculturalism, and post-colonial theory, historians and literary critics have begun to look for new paradigms and begun to question this static construction of “the West.”

—Mary Pat Brady, “Scaling the West Differently”

The titles of panels and plenary sessions at recent Western Literature Association (WLA) annual meetings alone provide striking evidence of the accuracy of Mary Pat Brady’s above claim, which appears in her essay review in this issue of *Western American Literature* (WAL) devoted to emergent texts of the Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage Project. “Refiguring”; “Reconfigurations”; “Revisiting”; “Re-considering”; “Rewriting”; “Re-imagining(s)”; “Re-evaluating”; “New Perspectives”; “Expanding the Canon”; “Liminal Borderlands”; “Pacific Crossings”: such words and phrases populate the WLA conference programs from 1993 through 1999, where at the recent meeting in Sacramento two panels convened under the title “Recovering a Mexican American West,” while another panel met under the title “North from Mexico: Chicana/o Literature and Theory.” And as this last panel title particularly suggests, that western American writing might also be regarded as *norteño* writing, or that the borderlands of the Southwest and *del norte* might be seen as a synecdoche for “western” writing, raises fascinating questions about the construction of regional identity, its link not only with particular topographies but also its intersection with mobile cultural constructions of gender, race and ethnicity, class, and religious affiliations. Perhaps no better exemplar of the “mobile” nature of such constructions exists, at least in shorthand form, than the linguistic transition from “Remember the Alamo” to the phrase uttered by actor Elizabeth Peña at the conclusion of director John Sayles’s recent film *Lone Star*: “Forget the Alamo.”

Between its founding in 1966 and its 1985 meeting in Fort Worth, the WLA—at least in terms of scholarship and conference sessions—paid only sporadic attention to Hispanic colonial literature, Mexican American writing, Chicano/a writing. The reasons for this development (or lack thereof) are not hard to understand: in its formative years, the WLA membership was necessarily engaged in recovering

and defining a canon of writing under the sign of the region and in relation to a national literary tradition; the moment of the WLA's founding and early years was also the moment when organizations devoted to minority literatures in the United States were formed and when the study of such literatures was being promoted largely by the equally new institutions of ethnic (and women's) studies programs; scholars interested in Mexican American and Chicano/a writing were often located in Spanish, not English, departments. In retrospect, the 1985 meeting in Fort Worth is particularly notable because that year Américo Paredes received the WLA's Distinguished Achievement Award. But as I look over that meeting's program, I also see interestingly juxtaposed "A Symposium on Texas Mexican Writing," which included such luminaries as Rolando Hinojosa and Ramón Saldivar, and a "Symposium on the Cowboy in Literature," which included the well-known writers Elmer Kelton and Benjamin Capps. Here, so it seems to me now, we begin to see the emergence of a new paradigm conceiving of "the West" as a contact zone, a borderlands (which of course also includes "the medicine line" between Canada and the United States), a topography of transitions instead of a stable place.

In any case, ever since the organization's 1990 meeting in Denton, Texas, its members' scholarship and conference presentations have increasingly attended to borderlands writing (in addition to the already established attention to American Indian writing). Throughout the 1990s, plenary panels on Chicano/a writing and scholarship occur at the meetings in Denton, Wichita, Salt Lake City, Albuquerque, and—as I mentioned above—Sacramento. Publications and conference papers on such writers as Sandra Cisneros, Rolando Hinojosa, Américo Paredes, and Jimmy Santiago Baca appear regularly in venues under the headings not only of Chicano/a literature but also of "Women's Writing" and "Contemporary Writing in the West." Meanwhile, the Mexican American literature "Recovery Project" has gotten under way, and the essays in this issue of *Western American Literature* reveal, both separately and together, some of the fruits of that project and the search for newer paradigms in thinking about the West. At the very outset of her tenure as editor of *WAL*, Melody Graulich invited essays on important laws and treaties that have defined notions of ownership, citizenship, and racial or ethnic "spaces" in the West. Certainly, as readers will see as a result of these contributions, if Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 "frontier thesis" can be said to constitute the leading critical paradigm for an earlier moment of western literary and cultural studies, then it

might well be the case that, as our search for new critical paradigms continues amidst the dramatic demographic changes affecting the western United States, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo formally ending the Mexican American War will come to mark a leading critical paradigm for our studies into this new century.

It has been my good fortune to serve as acting editor of WAL, while Melody Graulich took a research leave at her home institution, and to work throughout the fall 1999 and early winter 2000 season with José F. Aranda Jr., who organized the sessions on "Recovering Mexican American Literature" at the Sacramento meeting and solicited the contributions to this issue. My thanks to him for the example of his person and his own scholarship. It's been a slice of heaven. I would also like to acknowledge how indebted I am to Sarah M. Rudd, Thomas J. Lyon Fellow at WAL, for her work on researching the images and securing permissions to reprint them in this issue. At my home institution, I want to thank both Jenny Emery Davidson for her additional help in locating possible images to accompany these essays and English Department Chair Charles Berger for his collegial and financial support, particularly in helping find a way to finance the costs of the color reproduction for this issue's cover. That he and I, in the end, drew on funds from a departmental endowment established some time ago in the name of our deceased colleague Jim Fife seemed to us entirely fitting. In his lifetime Jim Fife had been a colleague of both Delbert Wylder and Don D. Walker—and he served as the WLA's 1968 President.

