Introduction

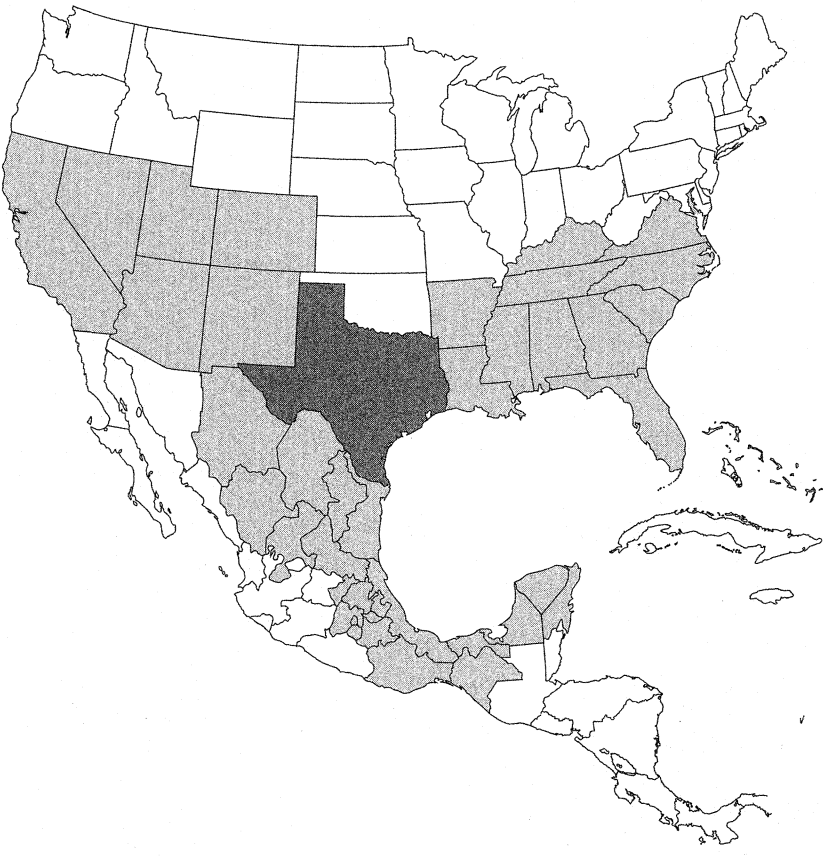
When one thinks of sharecroppers, images of the plantation South come to mind—poor folks, blacks and whites, dressed in overalls, their wives cooking, washing, and raising children in one-room shacks with no running water and very little furniture, while partially clothed children play at their feet. One perhaps thinks of the plantation world of the Mississippi Delta, the "most southern place on earth," according to the historian James Cobb, where thousands of mostly black sharecroppers tilled the land with mules and plows not much changed from Reconstruction days. One conjures images of riding bosses, planters, credit merchants, fatback and molasses, boll weevils, and unending poverty for the men, women, and children, many suffering from pellagra and rickets, who worked from "sun to sun" dragging long cotton sacks on farms they did not own. This was the New South of the first four decades of the twentieth century, a region tenaciously rural and constant in its loyalty to the culture of cotton.[1]

Whatever image of the South one summons, it largely excludes Texas cotton farmers, even though Texas, as a slave state of the Confederacy, experienced defeat and Reconstruction and became the nation's leading cotton-producing state by 1890. The postbellum image of the South also overlooks twentieth-century Texas and its large population of Mexicans, both native-born and immigrant, who came increasingly to displace Anglos and blacks on cotton farms in central Texas after 1910. As part of the Spanish borderlands before 1821 and as a Mexican state until 1836, Texas has had a long history of interaction between Mexicans and Anglos, as well as between masters and slaves on plantations in east Texas.[2] East

Texas, for example, fits comfortably within the cultural and historiographical boundaries of the South, with its history of slavery, cotton, and postemancipation society. South Texas, however, shares more commonalties with the history of the "trans–Rio Grande North" and Mexico than with the U.S. South. These discrete cultural regions of east and south Texas overlap in south-central Texas from Waco to Corpus Christi, where cultural elements of the South, the West, and Mexico have come to form a unique borderlands culture. Spanish, French, German, African, Mexican, English, Polish, Czech, and other groups have left their cultural mark in a society of such great social heterogeneity and hybridity that one geographer has called it the "shatter belt." Texas is thus culturally and historiographically at some distance from the "most southern place on earth," but its cotton culture nevertheless makes it recognizably southern, even if the state's large Mexican population continues to link it with other western states and Mexico (see Maps 1 and 2).[3]

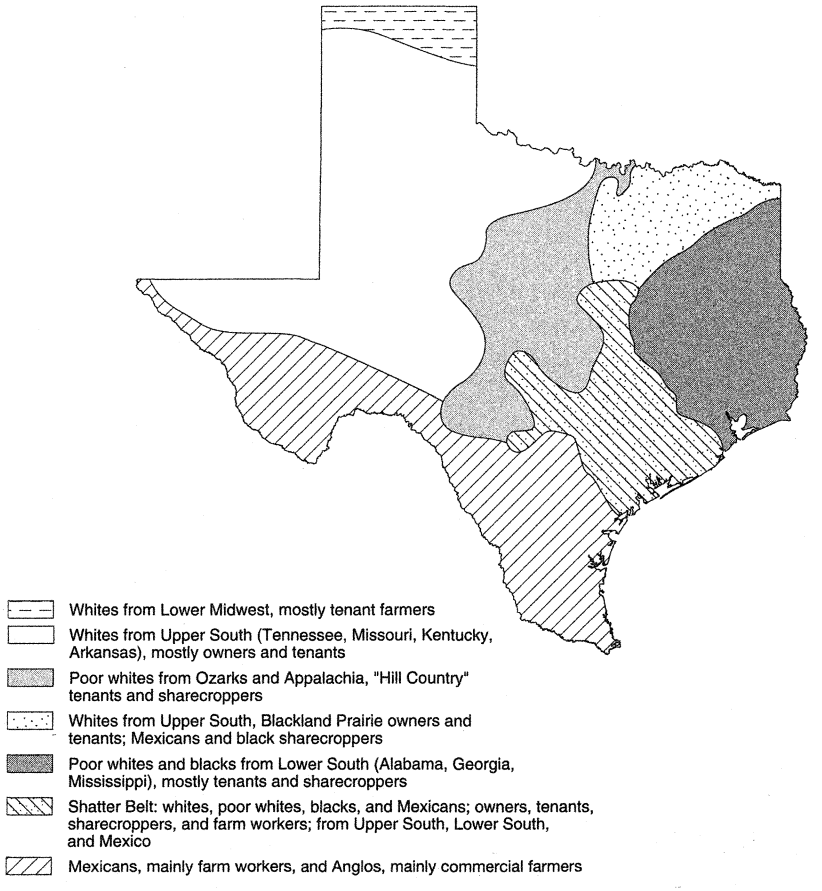
As the cotton culture of the South advanced westward, Texas retained the image of a state more western than southern, in part because, as one Texas historian has noted, cotton makes Texas seem "too southern, hence Confederate, defeated, poor, and prosaic."[4] In Texas, "unlike the Deep South," wrote the anthropologist Oscar Lewis, "there was no leisure class to romanticize cotton farming, and it could at no time compete with ranching in capturing the imagination of the people as an ideal way of life."[5] Tourists flock to San Antonio more than any other Texas city because it alone captures the image that Texans most like to project of themselves—defenders of the Alamo, victors in the war against Mexico, pioneers in the western wilderness, manly cowboys and rich cattle barons. But while longhorns, Stetson hats, and the romance of ranching have replaced cotton, mules, and overalls in the historical imagination of Anglo Texans today, the fact remains that most Anglo Texans were descended from transplanted Southerners who had fought hard to maintain the "color line" in Texas and to extend its barriers to Mexicans. Many Anglo Texans thus often wore two hats: the ten-gallon variety as well as the white hood of the Invisible Empire.[6]

The large presence of Mexicans in Texas is one obvious feature that has distinguished Texas from the rest of the South and unites it with other states of the Southwest and West with large Mexican populations. Indeed, if we count Texas as a southern state, following the lead of the census, until 1930 the South—not the West—was home to more Mexicans than was any other region of the country.[7] One central Texas landowner referred to the region as "the West" because, he explained,



Map 1. Texas as a Border Province between the South, the West, and Mexico.

central Texas was the western part of the cotton belt—it was, in other words, "the West" of "the South."[8] In shifting their self-image from South to West, Anglos may have been influenced by the growing presence of Mexicans in Texas after 1900 and the proportional decrease in the percentage of blacks in the population.[9] The fusing of the cultural practice of the South and the West for more than a century in Texas led one Work Projects Administration (WPA) author to observe in 1940: "More Southern than Western is the State's approach to most political and social questions; more Western than Southern are the manners of most of its people."[10] Central Texas at least remained southern in its maintenance of Jim Crow segregation of Anglos, blacks, and Mexicans, but as the development of large-scale industrial "cotton ranches" shifted cotton production from the South to the West after 1920, the growing



Map 2. Ethnoracial/Cultural Regions of Texas. Adapted from Terry G. Jordan, John L. Bean Jr., and William M. Holmes, *Texas: A Geography*, Geographies of the United States Series (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1984), 91.

reliance on Mexican farm workers made parts of south-central Texas seem less like the Mississippi Delta and more like the San Joaquin Valley of California.[11]

The cotton culture of central Texas represents a special case for the study of class formation and white racial ideology precisely because it brings together two sets of race and class relations—blacks and whites in the South, and Mexicans and Anglos in the Southwest. The fusion of cotton and cattle culture, of plantation and ranch, created a hybrid economy that mixed mostly small farmers (whether as tenants or sharecroppers on plantations or owner-operated family farms) with large-scale, industrialized cotton ranches that employed hundreds of farm workers. In

south-central Texas many blacks and poor whites were displaced as tenants and sharecroppers and were reduced to farm workers, along with Mexicans, on corporate cotton ranches. At the same time, white farm owners in central Texas replaced white and black tenants with Mexican sharecroppers because owners believed they could better control and exploit Mexican immigrants. The quintessentially southern image of blacks and poor whites on sharecropper farms was yielding to a hybrid southwestern culture in which Mexicans transgressed the racialized boundaries between farm worker, sharecropper, and share tenant and forged new identities in the racially charged borderlands between whiteness and blackness.

In rupturing the black-white polarity of southern race relations, the presence of Mexicans in central Texas raises some interesting questions about the way in which "whiteness" itself fissured along race and class lines. White Texans had a long history of invoking the color line in their social, economic, and political interactions with African Americans, but they had little experience in plantation society with what one contemporary sociologist called "partly colored races."[12] Were partly colored Mexicans, in other words, white or nonwhite? As a racially mixed group, Mexicans, like Indians and Asians, lived in a black-and-white nation that regarded them neither as black nor as white. Although small numbers of Mexicans—usually light-skinned, middle-class Mexican Americans—claimed to be Spanish and therefore white, the overwhelming majority of Texas whites regarded Mexicans as a "mongrelized" race of Indian, African, and Spanish ancestry. In Texas, unlike other parts of the South, whiteness meant not only not black but also not Mexican.[13]

Whiteness also came increasingly to mean a particular kind of white person. Not all whites, in other words, were equally white. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, the eugenics movement, which advanced the theory that behavior and racial traits were genetically determined and therefore inherited, influenced popular thinking on issues ranging from immigration restriction to prohibition of interracial marriage, sterilization, and the decline of the white civilization by barbarians from within as well as without.[14] Eugenicists had lost confidence in the social Darwinist notion of "survival of the fittest"—what worried them most was survival of the unfit. "Race scientists" influenced by eugenics, like Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard, popularized the idea that the "Nordic" race was in danger of being overwhelmed not only by the "rising tide" of dark people in the world but also by the biological reproduction of "defective" whites. In 1922 Vice President Calvin Coolidge echoed the theories of Stoddard and Grant when he claimed that

Nordics became biologically inferior whites when mixed with other races. At its extreme, eugenics called for the sterilization of "moronic," criminal, insane, drunken, sexually perverse, and other "cacogenic" (bad-gened) whites.[15] While immigrant Jews, Slavs, Italians, and Irish were "becoming white" in the urban areas of the East, poor whites in Texas and elsewhere in the South were heading in the opposite direction—losing whiteness and the status and privileges that whiteness bestowed. Poor whites in the cotton South came not only to be seen as a social problem but also to be located in the racial hierarchy as the "trash" of whiteness.[16]

Successful whites—cotton growers, merchants, bankers, and those whom eugenicists often called Nordic whites—began to racialize poor whites as the "scrubs and runts" of white civilization, both as an excuse to displace them and as a justification for the impoverished condition of those who remained.[17] Edward Everett Davis, a researcher who wrote numerous articles on cotton culture in Texas during the 1920s and 1930s, wrote an inferior novel published in 1940, titled *The White Scourge*, in which he portrayed cotton as the scourge of southern society because it attracted "white trash" like "iron filings to a magnet." The cotton culture of the South provided an elemental means of subsistence for "lowly blacks, peonized Mexicans, and moronic whites," Davis mused, which enabled them to reproduce their "hideous kind" and populate the cotton belt with "America's worthless human silt."[18] But the novel also suggests that "trashy" whites, not cotton, were the real "white scourge"—the "human debris" of whiteness—that posed a serious menace to the rest of white civilization. Davis encouraged east Texas Congressman John Box, one of the leading immigration restrictionists of his day, to read Stoddard's popular *The Rising Tide of Color against White World-Supremacy*, published in 1920, to understand the urgency of restricting the "lower races" from admittance to the United States because they frequently intermarried with "marginal" whites who had "just enough intelligence to beget children, hew wood, draw water, and pick cotton."[19]

Although more than twenty-five states had enacted sterilization laws by 1925, sterilization as a eugenic solution to eradicating inferior "germ plasm" had been largely ineffective. Davis argued that the only way to preserve the "racial hygiene" of the white race in the South was to abolish cotton agriculture, because it provided a means of subsistence for "feeble-minded" poor whites, as well as for racially inferior Mexicans and blacks. Taxing the land to force landowners to sell to small farmers, Davis believed, would enable white farmers to restore the racial virility

and manhood of the South. In using the title of Davis's novel for this book, I suggest that the scourge of the South and the nation was not cotton or poor whites but whiteness itself—whiteness not simply as the pinnacle of ethnoracial status but as the complex social and economic matrix wherein racial power and privilege were shared, not always equally, by those who were able to construct identities as Anglo-Saxons, Nordics, Caucasians, or simply whites. Poor whites, always low-ranking members of the whiteness club, were banished in the early twentieth century on the grounds that they were culturally and biologically inferior. The "wages of whiteness" conferred privilege on those who were able to claim whiteness, as historian David Roediger has ably shown, but they also invoke the biblical injunction that the "wages of sin" is death—death to the notion of racial, and therefore social and economic, equality.[20]

The heterogeneity and hybridity of whiteness became more transparent in this region, where whites were both the most successful landowners and among the most impoverished sharecroppers. White tenants blamed the system for their inability to escape tenancy, while bankers, landlords, and credit merchants became ever more critical of the tenant class, implying that failure to ascend the ladder to ownership reflected the incompetence or laziness of Mexican, black, and "sorry white" tenants rather than any deficiency in the system itself. Many Mexicans, on the other hand, moved from migrant work to sharecropping and share tenancy over time and often had as much claim to whiteness as did some of the poor whites with whom they competed.[21] The emergence of a rural class of "white trash" made whites conscious of themselves as a racial group and fearful that if they fell to the bottom, they would lose the racial privileges that came with being accepted for what they were *not*—black, Mexican, or foreign born.[22]

Behind this geography of region thus lie complex and often overlapping geographies of racial power and difference. The cotton culture of this fertile region of central Texas was not racially static or bipartite but a site of multiple and heterogeneous borders where different languages, experiences, histories, and voices intermingled amid diverse relations of power and privilege. Partly for these reasons, the categories of Anglo, black, and Mexican are wholly inadequate—and even misleading—in describing the highly miscegenated culture of central Texas. Anglo, for example, exists as a label principally in opposition to Mexican and denotes, rather crudely, all non-Mexican whites, thereby conflating widely diverse cultural groups in Texas, such as Germans, Czechs, Wends, Irish,

English, Polish, and French—to say nothing of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. In reducing all whites of European descent into one category, the term *Anglo* thus fails completely to identify any single ethnic group—too often they all tend to look alike. The Irish, for example, remained outside the circle of whiteness until they learned the meaning of whiteness and adopted its racial ideology. Texas Germans who belonged to the Republican Party did not share the racial animosity of other whites toward Mexicans and blacks and were frequently suspected of being traitors to their race. Some German landowners not only rented to Mexicans and blacks, as did other whites, but socialized with them and, in some cases, formed political alliances with them.[23] Since not all European groups became white at the same time or came to enjoy the "property right" in whiteness equally, the fissuring of whiteness in the region into Nordic white businessmen farmers and poor white tenants is a central concern of this study, for "white trash" ruptured the convention that maintained whiteness as an unmarked and normative racial identity. Most whites nevertheless occupied a position in the social structure and in the agricultural economy more like one another than like Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and African Americans. Consequently, I sometimes use the term *Anglo* when discussing relations between whites and Mexicans, because some Mexicans claimed to be white.

Anglo Texans, for their part, often failed to differentiate between Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants, referring to both simply as Mexicans, a word that conflated race with nationality. This fact became painfully clear to American citizens of Mexican descent during the repatriation drives of the 1930s, when immigration officers routinely deported Mexican Americans along with resident Mexican nationals.[24] For many white Texans, a Mexican American was simply a contradiction in terms, a hybridization of mutually exclusive races, nationalities, and cultures.[25]

The use of the term *Mexican* also glosses over intra-ethnic conflict that characterized relations between Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans during the first decades of the century. Mexican nationals frequently referred to Mexican Americans as *pochos* (gringoized Mexicans) or agringados, while many Mexican Americans favored immigration restriction, claiming that Mexican immigrants took away jobs and lowered wages. Some Mexican Americans also began to embrace whiteness by representing themselves as Latin Americans and Spanish Americans who feared that the constant influx of poor and largely illiterate agricultural workers reinforced the Anglo stereotype of Mexicans as nonwhite peons and "birds of passage."[26]

Although most scholars recognize the inadequacy of terms like *Anglo* and *Mexican*, many still regard the category of black or African American as unproblematic, readily identifiable, and easily, if mistakenly, defined. After centuries of thinking of blacks as a separate racial group, we often overlook the fact that Black Americans, like Mexicans and Anglos, are also ethnically diverse and represent generations of intermarriage with Anglos, Mexicans, Asians, Indians, and other groups. Our stubborn refusal to recognize black ethnicity stems from what the African American novelist Ishmael Reed has termed America's "secret of miscegenation," which underlies our insistence on the separateness of whiteness and blackness. To illustrate the power of miscegenation's secret in the social construction of whiteness, Reed explained that when he mentioned his Irish-American heritage to a professor of Celtic studies, the professor's only response was to laugh.[27] Some people still wonder how a black person could also be part white if, as many have been acculturated to believe, it is impossible for a white person to also be part black.[28] Although Anglos and Mexicans relied on some monolithic, reified notion of blackness for their own race-making purposes, the so-called one-drop rule of southern racial ideology placed constraints on the ability of African Americans to exploit the ethnoracial fissures forming in central Texas during the first half of the century.

Despite the contradictions inherent in the nomenclature, I use the terms *Anglo/white, black*, and *Mexican* because they conform to the ways in which these diverse groups constructed their own identities as distinct from members of the other groups. However imaginary the homogeneity of these communities might be, the boundaries separating the groups were real enough: For example, central Texas Czechs and Germans, who spoke different languages and often attended different churches and schools, still thought of themselves as whites when they were in the company of Mexicans and blacks.

In culturally crisscrossed central Texas, overlapping economic systems and racial hierarchies enable us to examine how systems of domination and subordination were structured through processes of racialization and white racial construction. Over time, the region's poor whites and Mexicans, more so than African Americans, underwent significant transformation in their ethnoracial status and identity. However, in order to understand some of these changes, we need first to have a basic understanding of the complex system of land tenure in the cotton South, which contemporaries sometimes called the "agricultural ladder."

The notion of a ladder was a fundamental tenet of American agriculture from the Civil War to the New Deal. It held that the young male farmhand could climb, rung by rung, through the stages of hired hand, sharecropper, and tenant farmer to farm owner. It guaranteed opportunities for all farmers, in theory at least, to move across social and economic boundaries toward farm ownership, which was both the symbol of and the passport to full citizenship in the democracy of rural America.[29]

In central Texas a sharp distinction separated sharecroppers and tenant farmers, in part because of the social and racial stigma attached to being a sharecropper. Sharecroppers were essentially wage hands hired to work on farms they did not own. Landowners hired them to produce cotton for the landowner. Instead of paying sharecroppers in wages, however, owners sold the cotton at the end of the harvest and paid them one-half of the proceeds of the sale, minus any debts the sharecroppers owed the owner for supplies. Sharecroppers were often called "halvers" because they worked for half of the cotton. They owned no tools or work animals, which the owner supplied. The owner also arranged credit for the sharecroppers and their families to purchase supplies at the town store, which sometimes the landowner owned himself.

Tenant farmers occupied a higher class position on the agricultural ladder than did sharecroppers, mainly because they owned their own plows, work animals, and tools. Since they owned their own capital, they were able to rent land from the owner for one-fourth of the cotton and one-third of the grain, usually corn they grew to feed their workstock. They kept three-fourths of the cotton and two-thirds of the corn as income. For this reason tenants, to use the vernacular of the time, rented "on thirds and fourths." As true renters, they owned the crop and therefore were legally entitled to sell it themselves. They established their own credit arrangements and worked without supervision by the landlord. Share tenants, in other words, thought of themselves as farmers, not as sharecroppers or farm workers. Sharecroppers, on the other hand, received cotton as wages for labor and legally were not accorded the status of renters or farmers. White sharecroppers nevertheless liked to think of themselves as farmers who only temporarily occupied the lower rungs of the agricultural ladder. As one might expect, therefore, the majority of share tenants in central Texas were white, whereas most Mexicans and blacks, who often owned little or no capital, were sharecroppers or migrant workers.[30]

The region I examine in this study differs from the usual southern patterns in important respects. First, central Texas did not have as exten-

sive a history of plantation farming as did other southern states where plantations had operated before the Civil War and where blacks often constituted a majority of the workforce. Second, the majority of farmers in the central Texas cotton belt were white share tenants, not black sharecroppers; they farmed on the richest soil in Texas for cotton, the Blackland Prairie, and aspired to own their own farms, as had many of their white ancestors. Third, white owners and tenants came increasingly to rely on Mexican migrant labor to harvest the crop and gradually began to replace white and black sharecroppers with Mexican sharecroppers and wage laborers. These variations on the southern theme of cotton agriculture produced complex and odd configurations as Mexicans competed with blacks and as both groups competed with white tenants, sharecroppers, and wage workers. White tenants did not share the same economic interests with white sharecroppers; and among black, Mexican, and white sharecroppers and wage laborers, competition and racial prejudices frustrated efforts to organize effectively. Finally, white tenants worried over the introduction of yet another nonwhite group requiring its own schools, churches, and neighborhoods.[31]

Movement up or down the agricultural ladder raises a series of questions about economic competition and popular mobilization. Were there recognizable patterns of confrontation among the groups as each tried to effect certain economic and political outcomes? How did whites respond to the challenges to the racial order and defend their interests and privileges as whites? The legacy of antiblack racism in central Texas and of white Southerners' abhorrence of social equality with blacks led many white farmers to seek political alliances, however reluctantly at first, with Mexican sharecroppers and tenant farmers between 1910 and 1920. Together they formed numerous locals of the Socialist Renters' Union and Land League, founded in Texas in 1911, and organized against land monopoly, high rents, low wages, and inferior living conditions on cotton farms. The radicalism of Mexican workers in the Socialist Party, Renters' Union, and Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) complicated southern notions of whiteness that constructed white manhood, in part, in opposition to docile, peon Mexicans.

In examining the conflicts between owners and tenants, Anglos and Mexicans, blacks and whites, men and women, as well as the conflicts within different classes and races of farm men and women, this study assumes that whites are raced, men are gendered, and women are marked by class. Although the conflicts between landlords and tenants in the triracial borderlands of central Texas best exemplify the relationships