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By Manny Fernandez May 7, 2016

What Make Texas Texas

People in this rapidly changing state believe their way of life is under attack, and they are making a kind of last stand by simply being Texan



Dian Sierra having her photograph taken by a friend recently at the Broken Spoke dance hall in Austin, Tex. Credit Ilana Panich-Linsman for The New York Times

HOUSTON — Gov. Greg Abbott’s campaign sent me an email one morning, showing the governor aiming a pump-action shotgun in my direction. This was a view of an elected official I had never seen — the get-your-hands-up view. If I contributed \$25 to his campaign, I would be entered in a contest to win a shotgun. The subject line of the email read: “Shotgun!” It was a typical morning in Texas.

The prize was special, though. It was not a rare antique. It was, the email noted three times, a Texas-made shotgun.

Those are some of the most potent words in the state's vocabulary: Texas-made. In a cupboard in our home here, we had [a bottle of 1835](#), a bourbon bottled in Texas and named for the year of the first battle for Texas independence. My crunchy peanut butter is made with Texas-grown peanuts. My salsa of choice is [Native Texan](#) ("Born in Texas, Never Leavin' Texas"). I am not sure where our minivan was made, but as I idle at red lights I know the heritage of the Toyota Tundra in front of me. The stickers on the pickup trucks, [built in San Antonio](#), declare: "Born in Texas, Built by Texans."

The Lone Star List

Twelve events, moments and places that make Texas Texas.

(<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/05/08/us/08lone-star-state.html>)



I was born and raised in Central California, and I moved to Houston from Brooklyn in June 2011 to cover Texas for The New York Times. I live here with my wife, my 7-year-old son and my 3-year-old daughter, who keeps a pair of pink cowboy boots outside on the porch or inside by the front door. I have covered stories in the South, the Midwest and other parts of the country. People in those places identified with their political party, their job, their cause, their sexual orientation, their city, their race. Almost no one identified with their state the way Texans do.

Who are these people, these Texans? What do they tell us about America? What to make of a state that is so focused on itself? I wrestle with these questions all the time.

One day, behind a general store in Central Texas, a firearms instructor in a wide-brimmed cowboy hat reached for the butt of his holstered gun as I approached him for an interview. The general store, the hat, the reach for the gun: the line between the myth of Texas and the reality of Texas is razor thin.



The Texas-based grocery store chain HEB stocks many state-themed items. Some of the most potent words in the local vocabulary are “Texas-made.” Credit Ilana Panich-Linsman for The New York Times

I have met Texas Rangers who actually do seem larger than life and artists and writers who have taken the state’s entrepreneurial energies in entirely cool directions. I’ve met conspiracy theorists, Texas secessionists and Texas nationalists (there is a difference), as well as those in the parallel and wholly separate Texas made up of the uninsured, the undocumented, the imprisoned and the poor. Much of it is not my world, but despite that — or perhaps because of it — I think I’m becoming a little bit Texan. The historian [T. R. Fehrenbach](#) once wrote that Texas “shaped those who lived upon it more than they changed it.”

You don’t just move to Texas. It moves into you.

My life as a Texan is exactly what you might imagine it would be. The other day, I crawled around the bathroom floor trying to catch a palm-size green anole lizard that had sneaked into the house. I spent a recent weekend at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, eating Frito pie and watching the piglet races with my children. My son stands every morning in his classroom and recites the Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag. And then he makes another pledge to the Texas flag, in accordance with [Section 25.082 of the Texas Education Code](#), which requires all children in public schools to recite the two pledges. It is not some vestige of the late 1800s: The law was passed by the Texas Legislature in 2003.

About a month after I moved here, a 41-year-old man named [Mark Stroman](#) told Texas that he loved Texas, just before Texas killed him. As he lay on the gurney in the state’s execution chamber, Mr. Stroman, a convicted murderer who had an eighth-grade education and was a native Texan, uttered as part of his last statement, “Texas loud, Texas proud.” It was a jaw-dropping moment that set a theme for me. After nearly five years in Texas, the theme has only intensified: the metamorphosis of Texas, the country’s second-most populous state, into ultra-Texas, of a singular state into a singular superstate.

“I think part of the reason Texas is having a moment is because it’s being more itself than it’s ever been,” said Stephen Harrigan, a novelist and essayist in Austin who is writing a history of the state. “It’s Texas unchained, in a way.”

Texas, of course, comes by its sense of being a place apart honestly: From 1836-1845, it was its own country, the Republic of Texas, and it has long feasted on hyperbole. But these days Texas does feel increasingly like a caricature of a caricature.

Texas has long had an anti-Washington streak, but, lest anyone doubt it, the state has sued the federal government more than 40 times in the past 13 years. In December, an executive committee of the [Republican Party](#) of Texas approved a resolution supporting secession and calling for the issue to be put to voters statewide. (Party leaders [struck down the resolution](#) after a heated debate.)



Bryson Grant, 6, sharing a funnel cake with his parents at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo in March. Credit Ilana Panich-Linsman for The New York Times

This new ultra-Texas started in 2009, shortly after President Obama took office — replacing a Texan, George W. Bush. Since then the lines between being pro-Texas, anti-Obama and anti-American blurred, and there has been no going back. So while other red-state governors gripe about federal overreach, Mr. Abbott is the only one to propose, in a 92-page document called the Texas Plan, a convention of states to amend the Constitution to allow states to override Supreme Court decisions and federal regulations.

Before he was elected in 2014, [Sid Miller](#), the Texas agriculture commissioner, traveled the state using an unofficial campaign slogan supplied to him by his campaign treasurer, the rocker and conservative provocateur Ted Nugent: Keep Texas “the last best place.”

The notion of Texas as the best place, the exceptional place, is an old one. In his 1961 book about Texas, [John Bainbridge](#) described the state as “a mirror in which Americans see themselves reflected, not life-size but, as in a distorting mirror, bigger than life.” He called the book “The Super-Americans.”



Visitors at the Houston rodeo in March, wearing state flag shirts. A Texas-centric worldview has reached a cultural fever pitch in the state today, shaping many facets of life. Credit Ilana Panich-Linsman for The New York Times

But the idea that Texas is the last place is part of a new phenomenon. People throughout the state say they believe that their way of life is under assault and that they are making a kind of last stand by simply being Texan. It is this fear, anger and sometimes paranoia that lurks beneath the surface of Texas politics and that underlies the expansion of gun rights, the reflexive antagonism toward Washington, and the opposition to abortion, [same-sex marriage](#) and other issues that seems essential for succeeding in state politics these days. Senator Ted Cruz's remarks dismissing New York values at a Republican debate should come as no surprise. That's how people from the last best place talk about other places.

But Texas is not under attack. It is merely changing as America changes with it. It is a majority-minority state that has become increasingly diverse and nonwhite — rural Texas is shrinking while urban and suburban Texas is expanding — and the tension between what Texas is and what it was has come to define the state.

The hard-right domination of Texas politics frustrates the state's Democrats and plenty of others in Austin, Houston, Dallas and San Antonio. They are agitated, but they stay put because they view Texas as forever, and Republican Texas as a kind of temporary occupation. It's hard to know if they're right, but easy to see why people's emotional investment in Texas transcends conservative politics.



Rocky Duran showing off his Texas-themed tattoo at the Broken Spoke. Credit Ilana Panich-Linsman for The New York Times

Consider [Jack S. Blanton Sr.](#), an oil tycoon and philanthropist from Houston who died in 2013 at age 86. His brothers were born in Texas but, to his chagrin, he was born in Shreveport, La. One day 40 years ago, his daughter, who was living in Boston, went into labor with his first grandchild. By the time he arrived from Houston at the hospital, visiting hours were over.

So Mr. Blanton climbed up the hospital's fire escape to see his newborn granddaughter. And he had something with him: a baggie of Texas dirt, which he put under the baby's bassinet, so she could begin her life over Texas soil, or something close to it.

"It's sort of like getting baptized," said Mr. Blanton's daughter, Elizabeth Blanton Wareing.

As the world grows smaller, as technology obliterates the significance of where we live and work, as Americans become more transient, Texas resists. It declares, to itself and the nation: Place matters. America needs a superstate, or to put it another way, an antistate. Sometimes we love it here and sometimes we are disgusted here, but, to twist Gertrude Stein's line about Oakland, Calif., there is a here here. We tattoo Texas on our arms, buy Texas-built trucks and climb fire escapes with Texas dirt in our pockets. Place, we are unsuubtly suggesting, matters.

At [Mr. Abbott's inauguration](#) last year in Austin, I sat facing a stage assembled on the steps of the Capitol. Before Mr. Abbott's speech, Texas marked the occasion with the sounds of warfare. It was the inaugural tradition of cannon fire.

People flinched as the echo of artillery filled the streets. From a distance, it must have sounded like Austin was under attack. Up close, it felt like the opposite: Austin was doing the attacking. And there, for me, was Texas: The last best place with state-sanctioned cannon fire, making people proud while making people wince.

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