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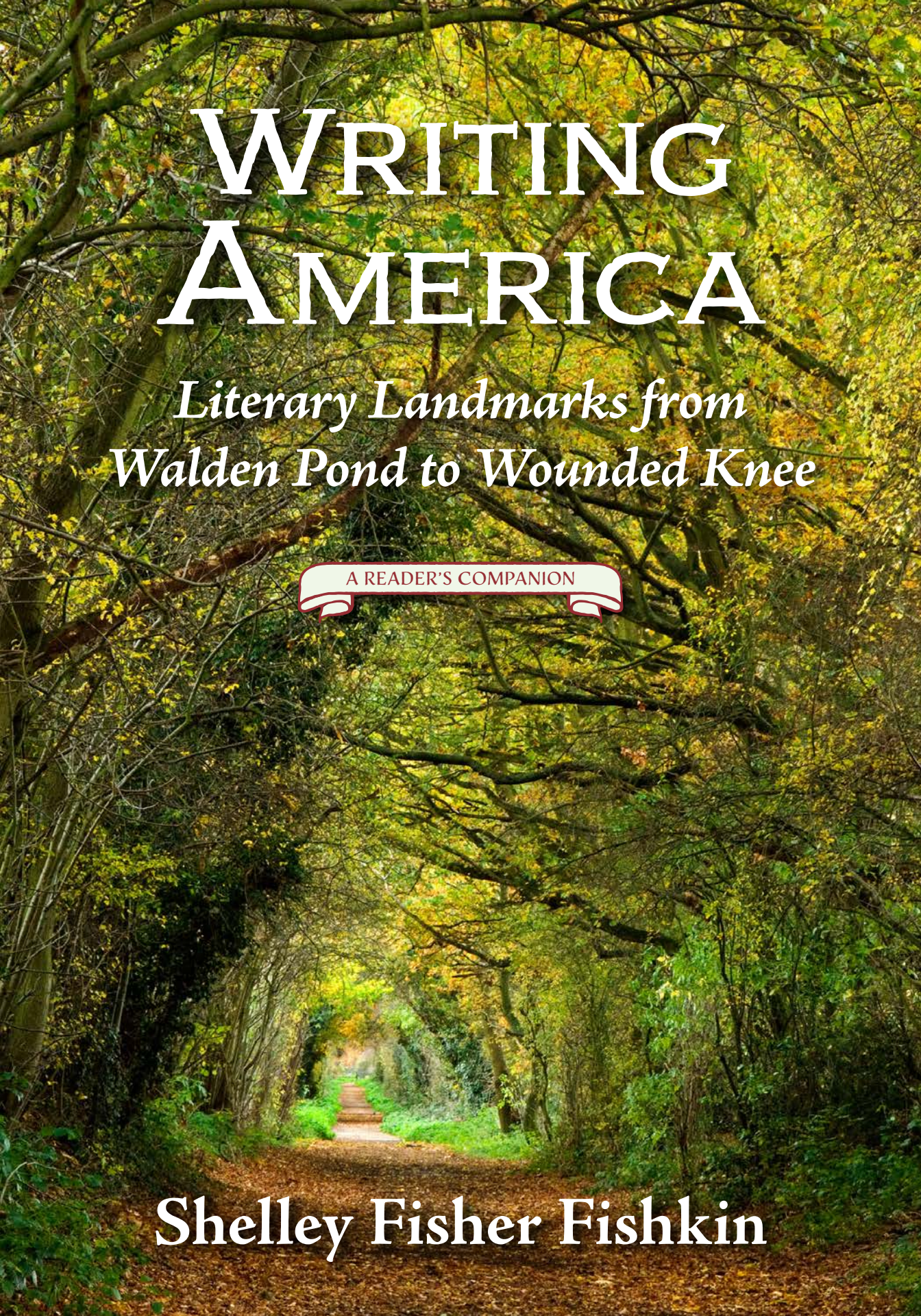
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WRITING AMERICA
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A READER'S COMPANION
Shelley Fisher Fishkin

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Behind the pink Portscheller facade of the Manuel Guerra House and Store in the Plaza of the Roma Historic District, Roma, Texas, Manuel Guerra mobilized the region's Mexican American working-class majority to consolidate the power of his mentor, political boss Jim Wells. Wells was the model for Judge Norris, the character who sets the plot in motion in Américo Paredes's novel *George Washington Gómez*.

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Mexican American Writers in the Borderlands of Culture

LA LOMITA HISTORIC DISTRICT
ROMA HISTORIC DISTRICT
SAN YGNACIO HISTORIC DISTRICT
SAN AGUSTIN DE LAREDO HISTORIC DISTRICT
LOWER RIO GRANDE VALLEY, TEXAS

Around 1830, when Jesús Treviño built a stone compound for himself and his family in the ranching outpost of San Ygnacio on the northern bank of the Rio Grande (in what is now the San Ygnacio Historic District), his home and the land around it was part of Mexico (according to Mexico, that is—but not in the eyes of the Native American tribes in the area). By 1836, it was claimed by the Republic of Texas—although Mexico did not recognize that claim. For a brief period in 1840, it was claimed by the Republic of the Rio Grande, a breakaway Mexican state that included parts of Texas and northern Mexico. With the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican War in 1848 and established the Rio Grande as a southern border between the United States and Mexico, Jesús Treviño's fortified residence was recognized by Mexico as being in the United States. But what may have appeared to the United States as a "natural" boundary between the two countries was highly unnatural for the many families who lived on both sides of the river, who went back and forth frequently, and who, in time, would have trouble adjusting to the complex regulations governing a passage that for many had become as routine as crossing from one side of the Mississippi River to the other was for many citizens of, say, Missouri and Illinois. What did it mean, many must have wondered, to all of a sudden be living in a new and different country—without ever having left home? Unlike the immigrants who came to this country from abroad, the Mexicans of the Lower Rio Grande Valley had not chosen to come to the United States at all: they were Mexicans living in Mexico, who were

conquered by military force and who now found themselves a minority in a nation run by people who did not even speak their language.

From the 1750s (when the first Europeans settled here) to the present, the Lower Rio Grande Valley has been a place where Indian, Spanish, and Anglo cultures rub against each other, sometimes setting off sparks of violent physical conflict, other times sparking boldly original creativity. In the four National Register Historic Districts of this region—San Ygnacio, La Lomita, Roma, and San Agustin—one can see and touch the physical remains of the complex cultural heritage that shaped this area in such distinctive ways. These places evoke the past with architecture and artifact. But if we want that past to live and breathe and if we want to understand the ways in which it continues to suffuse the present, we must read it through the powerful and luminous poetry and prose of imaginative writers from the Valley such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Américo Paredes, Tomás Rivera, Jovita González, and Rolando Hinojosa.

The two-hundred-mile border area between Laredo and Brownsville on U.S. Routes 83 and 281 includes scores of sites on the National Register, ranging from rural chapels to town plazas, from houses and stores to ranch buildings, agricultural fields, forts, and an irrigation pumping station—as well as many other historic sites not yet on the register (the National Trust for Historic Preservation has named the Lower Rio Grande Heritage Corridor one of America's Most Endangered Historic Places). The San Augustin, San Ygnacio, Roma, and La Lomita Historic Districts, in Webb, Zapata, Starr, and Hidalgo Counties, respectively, on the banks of the Rio Grande include a rich sampling of many of these sites, and together evoke much of the history that infuses the work of twentieth-century Chicano writers from this region. Poet and essayist Gloria Anzaldúa, author, editor, or coeditor of books including the groundbreaking *Borderlands/La Frontera; This Bridge Called My Back: Writing by Radical Women of Color*; and *Haciendo Caras: Making Face, Making Soul*, was born and raised in Hidalgo County, not far from La Lomita Historic District, as was the prolific fiction writer Rolando Hinojosa, author of *Estampas del valle y otras obras*, recast in English as *The Valley*, as well as more than half a dozen other novels. Jovita González de Mireles, author of *Caballero, Dew on the Thorn*, and other fiction, was born and raised on her family's ranch in Roma. Américo Paredes, the pioneering novelist and folklorist of the border, whose books include the remarkable novel *George Washington Gómez* and *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero*, was born and raised in Brownsville in nearby Cameron County. And Tomás Rivera, author of the original and compelling coming-of-age novel about a young migrant farmworker, *. . . Y no se lo tragó la tierra* [*. . . And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*], worked as a child in fields in this region. The Lower Rio Grande has

nourished creativity in its valley with both mortar and metaphor: the sites we can still visit today along its banks were constructed out of stones, mud, clay, and other building materials drawn from the river; and the literature that has given this part of the country a special place in the American imaginary has been drawn from the river, as well, as writers reared on its banks have wrought from the cultures that clash and mingle in its flow works of the imagination of rare and lasting power.

Before the Spaniards colonized this region, the land now occupied by these historic districts was inhabited by Coahuiltecan Indians, and later by Lipan Apaches, Comanches, and other Native American tribes. The first European settlements in the areas that would become the San Augustin, San Ygnacio, Roma, and La Lomita Historic Districts were organized in the mid-eighteenth century by José de Escandón, a Spaniard charged by the governor of New Spain with establishing Spanish colonial settlements in northern Mexico. All of the districts occupy land that was divided by Spanish royal commissioners in the mid-eighteenth century into *porciones*, or land grants, each of which included about two-thirds of a mile of river frontage and extended back from there for eleven to sixteen miles. San Ygnacio was settled in 1830 by Jesús Treviño and other former residents of the Escandón-founded settlement of Revilla on a corner of a land grant that Escandón had made to José Vázquez Borrego in 1750. San Agustin Historic District in Laredo was a colonial city of New Spain (San Agustin de Laredo), founded under the authority of Escandón in 1755. Roma-Los Saenz was founded in the mid-1760s by local ranchers who were his followers. And La Lomita sits on two *porciones* originally awarded in 1767.The region became officially a part of the United States in 1848 with the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo—but to this day, many residents conduct their lives in Spanish rather than English, in communities suffused by Mexican culture, Mexican architecture, and Mexican traditions. The "natural" border between the two nations turns out to be a highly *un*natural border for many who grew up there, like Anzaldúa, who sees the border as a

1,950 mile-long open wound
dividing a *pueblo*, a culture,
running down the length
of my body,
staking fence rods in my flesh,
splits me splits me
me raja me raja

"This is my home," she continues, "this thin edge of / barbwire." "The U.S.-Mexican border," Anzaldúa writes, "*es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture."

The Jesús Treviño fort and residence in the San Ygnacio Historic District—a compound composed of several one-story buildings made of local river sandstone, with hand-hewn doors made of local mesquite—was surrounded by a high stone wall with *troneras*, or gun ports, to defend against attacks by Comanches and Lipan Apaches. In 1851, an unusual sundial was constructed above the fort's main entrance. It has two faces, one facing north (for summer) and one facing south (for winter). It serves as a daily reminder that in this region of contested identities and allegiance, one must look both north toward the United States and south toward Mexico to get one's bearings.

Getting one's bearings in this turbulent part of world has never been easy. The late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Spanish-Mexican *hacienda* society gave way to an Anglo-Mexican ranch society in the mid-nineteenth century, which was transformed into a segregated farm society by an agricultural revolution at the turn of the century, which gave way—only in part—to an urban-industrial society as the twentieth century neared its close. What we see today at the San Ygnacio, La Lomita, Roma, and San Agustin historic districts reflect all of these historical moments, superimposed on one another over time. The Chicano writers from the Valley whose lives were shaped by this history help us see in vividly concrete terms those complex layers of human experience.