

Opinion: California isn't the real West

By Joe Mathews

Let's stipulate that U.S. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia was wrong to dissent in last month's ruling legalizing same-sex marriage nationwide.

But Scalia was right when, in the same dissent, he suggested that California is a different place than the American West. And in so doing, he unwittingly raised an important question about California's future.



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Scalia made his point via a swipe at his colleagues for being unrepresentative of the United States population (and thus wrong to impose their support for marriage equality on the entire country). After noting that all nine justices attended Harvard or Yale law schools and that only one grew up in the Midwest, he wrote that the court has “not a single Southwesterner or even, to tell the truth, a genuine Westerner.” But what about Justice Anthony Kennedy, who is from Sacramento? Scalia's answer: “California does not count.”

The words “California does not count” prompted California pundits to fly off the handle. How dare he disrespect California? Of course we count! “Antonin Scalia Doesn't Heart California – or Get Us, Either” said an *LA Times* headline.

Attorney General Kamala Harris coolly countered Scalia – an old-school “originalist” who thinks the U.S. Constitution should be read as it was in 1789 –with a line from old-school rapper Ice T: “Don’t hate the playa, hate the game.” You should know that Ice T’s line was inspired by one from Gandhi’s 1927 autobiography (“Hate the sin not the sinner”) and St. Augustine’s 424 A.D. letter (“with love for mankind and hatred of sins”), so Harris out-originalist-ed the originalist Supreme Court justice by more than 1,300 years.

Despite the snappy California retorts, Scalia’s fundamental point went unchallenged, because he’s right: California doesn’t fit in the American West. Or anywhere else for that matter.

Indeed, the best book ever written about California – Carey McWilliams’ “California: The Great Exception”, published in 1949 – is about precisely this reality. California is singular among Western U.S. states in how it was settled so early, grew so quickly, and changed so suddenly. Our Western neighbors are more plodding, less populous places.

“One cannot, as yet, properly place California in the American scheme of things,” wrote McWilliams, adding: “California is no ordinary state; it is an anomaly, a freak, the great exception among the American states.”

But is California still such a great exception? Not exactly. Yes, we’re the only state to break ground on high-speed rail. But in a number of ways, we have begun to resemble other Western states.

Most crucially, California is no longer a state of arrival, a destination for the world. Immigration is flat. More people have been leaving California for other states than have been moving here from the rest of the country.

As a result, states like Nevada, Arizona, Oregon and Utah – having received so many Californians seeking cheaper living –

have effectively been colonized by us, and are voting and eating more like California. All four now have In-N-Out Burger outlets, as does Texas, another big destination for exiting Californians. And as we jack up tuition at our universities, more California high school graduates head to public universities in neighboring states. (I've seen this firsthand while teaching at Arizona State University).

Those of us left behind in California are also more Western – because we are more likely to have grown up here. In previous generations, California was populated by people from Asia, Latin America, and the American Midwest and South. In today's California, the majority is homegrown – born and raised in California – and newer arrivals are more likely to be from Las Vegas than Little Rock. This homegrown California is also older – and less dynamic. We remain more ethnically and racially diverse than other Western states, but there are signs that our diversity lead is narrowing.

It's not just demography making us more Western; drought has a role too. We're becoming a drier place, with dustier landscaping that resembles Arizona and Nevada. Last year, we finally regulated groundwater, as other Western states have been doing for years.

If these trends persist, and California continues to Westernize, it will pose questions for our state and our country. The fact that California was so exceptional often accelerated change nationwide. As the historian H.W. Brands has noted, the American dream was of slow, tedious Poor Richard's Almanac-style growth until California became a state – and gave us a new, faster dream of rapidly accumulated wealth. Will it be good for us, and for America if we become just another Western state?

For now, you are right, Justice Scalia. California doesn't really count as Western. But time has a way of changing the meaning of many things, including marriage and our messy

state.

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