

Landscape of Enclaves

Race Relations in the West,
1865–1990

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workers rioted against Chinese laborers in California, Washington, Wyoming, and elsewhere. Hispanic vigilantes cut fences and destroyed railroad ties in the names of the people. The United States flag fluttered over the entire trans-Mississippi West by 1865, but dependence and order by no means followed conquest.⁴

It was the railroad—symbolized by the completion of the trans-continental line in 1869—rather than the military that tipped the balance of power. It prefigured the outcome of the confrontation. The railroad, linking city to city, coast to coast, countryside to markets, symbolized national capitalism's triumph over local autonomy. The railroad also revolutionized the demography and altered the pattern of opportunity in the West. And the two changes were entwined. In part as a result of the new technology, blacks and European immigrants searching for a better life and Mexican and Chinese laborers responding to the higher wages of the West could do so in unprecedented numbers and reach the farthest corners of the region. The plains were no longer remote.

Since the railroads legally owned the land in the eyes of the United States government, and because they enjoyed government subsidy and support, they had the power to impose their vision on the West, to shape the environment to meet their needs. In 1865 ten million buffalo roamed the plains. By 1890 the remaining thousand or so were all in private hands. The railroad brought into the contest all the resources of the West, eroding the refuge of time and distance that had allowed diverse peoples to make their forays into the market on their own terms. Territories became enclaves. Indians and Chicanos became minorities.

In a sense the violent western conflicts over resources were "race wars," in which "race" connoted more than biological composition.⁵ The victory of the industrial North in the Civil War cemented the belief by the victors that a certain set of attributes, including race, constituted virtue and civilization. These attributes included Protestant individualism, female domesticity, and male enterprise, all of which fed the large-scale capitalism and commercial development that were considered the source of future opportunities. Sexuality and private property were intimately related in this Anglo pantheon. Manliness itself depended on landownership and dominion. "Otherness" lay in the gender and labor structures of Chinese immigrants, the communalism of Hispanic villages, the power and autonomy of Indian women and their hunting men. "Otherness" lay in the insistence of these peo-

The violence of racial confrontation from the 1870s to the 1890s signified a desperate struggle for control in the West. Massacres littered the landscape with corpses. In 1876 a fair-haired glory boy disobeyed orders and led his relatively small force to death against the largest encampment of Plains Indians in memory. For this the much-loved General George Armstrong Custer, though dead, or perhaps because dead, became even more loved and more heroic in the popular imagination. The fascination with this battle, which has inspired more literature than any other battle, demonstrates the centrality of western race relations to national as well as regional history.³ But the violence was not limited to mutual massacres of Indians and whites. White

ple on slipping, at will, in and out of the capitalist economy and all it stood for and in remaining, as one government investigator put it, "outside of American civilization."⁶

In the imperative of Anglo capitalist expansion, there was no concept of equality that was not "same," no concept of difference that was not threatening. The role of the West in eastern eyes was to save the United States from European-style class conflict while still allowing industrial development. The West was meant to provide opportunities for refugees from the industrial East, not a safe haven for Asians, Mexicans, or Indians. In 1874, two years before his fatal meeting with Sitting Bull, Custer ignored orders to keep whites off the Sioux reservation and to keep his mission a secret. Instead, he took an enormous entourage of reporters with him when he went to investigate rumors of gold in the Black Hills. To Custer, land containing gold belonged in the hands of whites. In the prevailing view, Sitting Bull's triumph over Custer at Little Bighorn in 1876 marked savagery's triumph over civilization. Sitting Bull, a Sioux traditionalist, threatened to impede white development and therefore endangered the fragile framework of the new society Americans believed themselves to be building.⁷

Naturally, the struggle looked different to other eyes. To Sitting Bull, it resembled more a rampage of greed and selfishness, of exploitation and rigid hierarchies, whether based on race or sex or both. Resisters of this onslaught from the 1870s to the 1890s did not necessarily resist progress but the form they saw progress taking. Many adopted, when they could, new technology and manufactured goods—iron bedsteads, cookstoves, guns, and plows began showing up in remote Hispanic villages—but for their own ends.

Other groups exploited aspects of the new Anglo West to fulfill dreams impossible elsewhere. Chinese farmers bought and leased land from Anglo corporations in amounts inconceivable to them at home. Black Exodusters, fleeing the night riders of the post-Reconstruction South, found security of tenure in Kansas and Oklahoma.⁸ The lives and strategies of Indians, Hispanics, Chinese, and others did not spring only from resistance to outside aggression. They were also driven by their own past patterns and aspirations. And they struggled against loss of opportunities, self-definition, and control. Though some were new possessors and others newly dispossessed, they had this in common: None participated fully in the Anglo mythology of the West.

These groups called all elements of their social life—food, gender structures, sexual relations, labor relations, house forms, religion, val-

ues regarding land and profit making and accumulation—into the struggle. Considering the all-encompassing nature of the contest, the ability to claim physical territory on a scale unimagined in the East was central to the ability to resist total accommodation and dependency. Territorial control provided a key card in negotiating status. Not only Chicanos and Indians but Exodusters and Asians sought safe space for development according to their own lights. Lieutenant Colonel Allensworth had escaped slavery, joined the navy in the Civil War, turned clergyman in Kentucky, and finally served as an army chaplain for the black Twenty-fourth Infantry before retiring and founding Allensworth, California, to be a black "city on a hill." Its promoters touted it as the place where "your exertions are appreciated."⁹ Too few histories have compared racial and ethnic minority settlements in the West with those in the East, but the territorial dimension of race in the West seems more deeply rooted than in the East. Indian reservations simply provide the most obvious example of the persistently territorial nature of race relations, which, like the colony at Greeley, will not disappear.

It is problematic, on the other hand, to create a history that shows Anglos united, pressing forward usually swiftly and always surely toward their aims, maximizing order and domination as though they always knew how and where to find each. Anglos from the 1870s to the 1890s were also adjusting to the new force and vigor of large-scale industrial capitalism. They, too, had trouble adapting and often resisted. And then there were the other immigrants: the ones from Europe.¹⁰ Irish and German, Cornish and Welsh laborers, who tried to drive the Chinese into the sea in the West, could be both engines and victims of change. Chinese exclusion and western racism from the 1870s to the 1890s emerged in the context of shrinking economic opportunity, of frightening conflict and disillusionment across the country. Philadelphia, New York, Baltimore, and St. Louis went up in flames during the railroad strike of 1877. And Big Bill Haywood made a prototypically western drift from cowboy to miner to farmer to radical labor organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World. If the West was the last great hope the United States had of avoiding industrial strife and a permanent working class, then amid that strife it seemed only sensible to preserve that haven for the chosen. The myth of western opportunity had a shaping impact on the region not only because it molded federal policy but also because newcomers brought those fears and mythic expectations with them to the West.¹¹

Members of ethnic and racial groups under fire were hardly in a

position to provide a united resistance. There is a recurring theme of minority groups gaining opportunities or resisting repression at the expense of other minority groups. Black Exodusters, for example, moved onto what had been Kaw Indian land, and the government placed its black troops in the frontier as Indian fighters. Moreover, in Dodge City, blacks complained of Chinese competition in service-sector jobs. Oklahoma Indians who had owned many slaves before the Civil War did not seem universally disposed to welcome black tribal members.¹²

Through intermarriage and interracial sex, different races did make common cause of a sort. Our understanding of the sexual dynamics of race relations in the West, however, is still primitive. In Butte, Montana, labor organizations boycotted Chinese services and employers of Chinese immigrants. They claimed the action "protected" white women endangered not by sexual advances but by labor competition from Chinese men. Yet women's sexuality was at issue. In Butte, as in most of the West, the local labor market options for Chinese men and for women of all races had long been limited to the service sector, and organized labor in the 1890s claimed white women were drifting into prostitution because Chinese competition undermined their wages. True (white) womanhood apparently lay not in the home but in the shop. Yet white women were not party to the movement, and the boycott forced out of business several white female lodging house keepers who employed Chinese male servants. When these white women asked the police for the much-vaunted "protection," the police refused. Similarly ambiguous, whites condemned the Chinese for immoral practices yet supported the total control tongs exercised over their prostitutes; police returned escapees and turned the other way at murders.¹³ Clearly these constructions of feminized men (men in so-called women's jobs) and women unworthy of protection (Chinese prostitutes and independent female lodging house keepers) were related to the legitimation of larger structures of economic, racial, and sexual subordination. Definitions of proper womanhood were used to accord or withdraw protection. Similarly, manhood was bound up in providing protection for proper women against "others." It is in this light that William Curtis's statement, reporting from Custer's camp in 1874 for the *Chicago Inter-Ocean*, should be read: "If Susan B. Anthony wants to vote . . . let her take a scalp."¹⁴

In the business of boundary maintenance, of ensuring "otherness" on a racial frontier, sex itself is hardly beside the point. In the West, sexuality and gender played a crucial role not simply in fantasy

and fear of captivity by Indians but in ideology, law, and behavior. Fur trappers and traders had married Indian women. Anglo entrepreneurs had married daughters of Hispanic elites. As Anglo settlement and economic dominance increased, however, intermarriage at elite levels declined and sexual alliance gave way to (sexual) conquest. Rumors abounded that General Custer, with lordly liberality, distributed captive female Indians among his men.¹⁵ It was not simply the sex ratio that led white men to be more active in interracial sex than white women. It is women, after all, who are the repository of racial purity, and the rape of women has been a traditional part of a conquering army's celebration. Such sex could exhibit hegemony concretely as well as symbolically.

In miscegenation laws, which remained in force through much of the twentieth century, as well as in the more studied landowning and school segregation acts, western Anglos institutionalized racial-sexual frontiers not just with Indians but with blacks, Mexicans, Chinese, Japanese, and other groups. Gender, sexual, and race systems reinforced each other in the West as in the South.¹⁶ A systematic comparison of southern and western attitudes toward miscegenation and other forms of race mixing is desperately needed and should be built on an as yet unwritten account of the subject for the West.

While there has been little serious attention paid to sexuality and sexual rhetoric in the West beyond prostitution, there has been increasing attention paid to the gender differences in racial contact.¹⁷ But historians should be more sensitive to the power relations involved. Women creating careers for themselves as interracial mediators, for example, may not have enjoyed the freedom to question the larger framework within which they worked. In 1881, five years after Little Bighorn, Alice Fletcher sat in a tent on the Great Plains, conversing with Sitting Bull. According to her, Sitting Bull looked at his wives and then implored Fletcher, "You are a woman, take pity on my women for they have no future. The young men can be like the white men, can till the soil, supply the food and clothing. They will take the work out of the hands of the women. And the women, to whom we have owed everything in the past, they will be stripped of all which gave them power. Give my women a future!"¹⁸ Six years later Fletcher was administering the Dawes Act, allotting land only to men. Working with the United States government, she could not control the structure within which she operated. Women of both sides, it is crucial to remember, were constantly negotiating their status within their own groups and families while negotiating their status vis-à-vis other groups.

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A woman's position in one group could supply her with leverage in others or, conversely, could undermine her influence.¹⁹

The framework in which Fletcher operated prevailed by the 1890s. Under the weight of eastern expectations and resources, resistance by minority groups had had limited impact. Subordinate groups did retain some measure of control over their communities and choices, but the parameters of the larger world in which they found themselves were increasingly codified and fixed by the 1890s.²⁰ Land claims courts determined Hispanic land grant ownership based on Anglo, not Hispanic, law, and the Dawes Severalty Act provided for the individual allotment of Indian lands only to adult males. Both were symbols and realities of the primacy (though not totality) of Anglo conceptions of property and manliness by 1900.

The West remains not a frontier but a continuous series of frontiers formed and re-formed from all sides, characterized by change, interchange, and mutual dependence.

Racial confrontation lay at the root of western history, and it never went away.⁵⁰ Central to the discourse of any succeeding era were the language of race and a struggle between races for territory, for hegemony, for boundary setting, for definition. "Otherness" itself had a fluid definition. In Anglo eyes, Mexican-Americans were sometimes a race and sometimes a more permeable ethnic or cultural group, depending on the demands of the local economy. Ethnicity and race were constructs specific to time, place, and persons.⁵¹

Historians have had a crucial role in such redefinitions. Chief Justice William Rehnquist placed the blame for a 1980 judicial reversal squarely on "revisionist historians." In 1877, in the aftermath of the Black Hills gold rush and Custer's last stand, the United States government abrogated an earlier treaty with the Sioux and took the Black Hills for white development. In 1942 the courts upheld the government's action. In 1980, however, the Supreme Court acknowledged possible treaty violations. Rehnquist, in a scathing minority dissent, claimed that the law had not changed since 1942 but that the interpretation of events had.⁵²

Rehnquist was right; no longer can the West be seen as a place where whites fled to work out their destiny in splendid isolation. To write the history of race and ethnicity in the West, to make the invisible visible, is to re-create the West's history. Historians had a strong hand in creating a picture of the post-Civil War West as an empty West, ignoring the international frontier that preceded it.⁵³ Though they now recognize that conquest internalized the borderlands and did not erase them, there is still a long way to go in achieving coherence as well as color for the new portrait.

My aim here is not simply to create one possible framework for a more comprehensive, coherent picture of race and ethnicity in the West. It is also to transform our understanding of other aspects of western history, such as sexuality and gender systems and national political and ideological shifts whose relation to issues of race and ethnicity has never been clear. The West is a messy place. The experiences of both majority and minority groups occurred in the context of multiracial or multicultural dynamics. Any larger historical narrative

of the region must partake of an interactive multifaceted model. It must allow the constant interaction and diversity within and between groups itself to become the story. By doing so, it builds a framework within which we can understand the continual tensions created by forces that simultaneously erode boundaries and re-create them.