

Darek Thomas Sr.

Professor Johnathan Rees

History 417

September 17, 2018

The American West, in the late nineteenth century, was branded as a land of individualism. Many immigrants and natural born Americans, alike, seen in the West opportunities of diversity, free labor, and a chance to shoulder their way through the new American political climate. The vast resources found in the West, and the necessary means of extracting and bringing those resources to market, provided opportunity for any American willing to take on the risks of a boom/bust economy. The importance of Western history, in relation to American history, is that it is the key component in shaping America's image as the land of opportunity.

Patricia Nelson Limerick provided that it is necessary to consider multiple points of view when studying Western history. Northerners, Southerners, newly freed African slaves, Mexican, European and Asian immigrants all converged in the American West to give it a unique characteristic unlike any other part of America. "Western America," said Limerick, "shared in the transplanted diversity of Europe"¹ Limerick claimed that the makeup of the West called into question many of the racist views that were previously held by many white Americans. Race relations became less important as all Western settlers were provided with the same

1. Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, (New York, Norton, 1987) 206.
2. Heather Cox Richardson, *West from Appomattox*, (New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2007) 225.
3. Ibid. 69.
4. Ibid. 127.

opportunities, and with such a diverse make-up no longer could people be held back by the color of their skin, or place of birth.

The diversity of the West gave hope to all Americans. “The image of the West,” according to Heather Cox Richardson, “as a land of political and economic freedom enthralled easterners of all backgrounds, but it had a special resonance for Southern African Americans.”² Southern African Americans saw in the West opportunity to work for fair wages, have a say in their governance, and accumulate property and wealth. Many saw the West as an escape from the newly formed Jim Crow era during the reconstruction period. Richardson claims that nearly 20,000 Southern blacks migrated West during the first half of the 1880’s.

What most newly freed slaves hoped to find in the West was what many Republicans, like Lincoln, were pushing for in America: free labor. Richardson claimed that “The relation of the government to the spread of free labor was more straightforward in the West, where there was no traditional American system of government to overturn.”³ The American government pushed for Easterners—with their Republican values—to settle places in the West. The idea of the Free labor movement came into stark contrast with the Native Americans, who vehemently fought against it, and the reality of what took place in many Western states.

The American Indians saw the encroachment of Eastern Americans onto Western lands as a threat to their way of life. Richardson claims that the Natives had two choices, to either assimilate or be annihilated by the encroachment of the settlers. Many American Natives fought tooth and nail to hold on to their ancestral lands. The war between the Natives and settlers helped

1. Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, (New York, Norton, 1987) 206.
2. Heather Cox Richardson, *West from Appomattox*, (New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2007) 225.
3. Ibid. 69.
4. Ibid. 127.

to shape an ideal of Western culture that dominated American life. Many thrill seekers would move West in hopes of adventure and opportunity. The idea was in direct conflict with the reality.

The truth was that even though most Western states claimed to be all inclusive and diverse there were heavy restrictions on many Western settlers. Places like Oregon, California and Nevada restricted blacks from labor unions and practiced segregation. The Chinese immigrants fared no better than African Americans. Where ever the Chinese worked they were exploited and lived in slave-like conditions. The national consensus of Chinese immigrants, in 1882, helped to pass the Chinese Exclusion Act with little resistance from the nation. Despite the differences between the idea and the reality of the West there was real opportunity for American upward mobility.

The vast resources—gold in California, silver in Colorado—that was available in the West needed to be brought to markets in the East. The railroads that were built to connect to these resources provided great opportunities for people like Andrew Carnegie and the overall American economy. Many Easterners and immigrants from Europe went West building the railroads and industries that go along with them. Richardson states that the railroads in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War became America's first big businesses. The opportunities provided by the railroads helped to shape the idealized image of the American West. So much so that, "Throughout 1872," Richardson states, "growing attention to the West helped to reinforce ideas of America as a beneficent land where anyone willing to work could succeed."⁴ However, opportunity did not always equate to upward mobility.

1. Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, (New York, Norton, 1987) 206.
2. Heather Cox Richardson, *West from Appomattox*, (New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2007) 225.
3. Ibid. 69.
4. Ibid. 127.

What did develop in the West was a system of exploitation and class warfare. Whether Chinese, Mexican, Indian or African American work on the railroads did not provide much of an opportunity to achieve the American Dream. Miners, prostitutes and railroad workers increasingly found themselves being exploited with very little government intervention.

1. Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, (New York, Norton, 1987) 206.
2. Heather Cox Richardson, *West from Appomattox*, (New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2007) 225.
3. Ibid. 69.
4. Ibid. 127.