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HIST 413

Race in the West

Race in the American West was used as a tool by Anglo-American settlers to establish a new, cohesive cultural identity to establish superiority in a harsh and competitive environment. The complex cultures of the American East and Europe began to simplify as more and more white settlers moved to the West and had to compete with Mexican and Native American cultures for land and resources. Culture gave way to race as settlers began to identify competitors by language and skin tone rather than by culture and background, creating an “us vs them” mentality.

Skin color was the dominant means of racial structure in the American West. As settlers began to move to the frontier, they also began to shed their traditional, cultural heritage in favor of becoming White Americans. This new identity not only helped to distinguish true Americans in the West but was also used as a tool to accent non-whites as foreign aliens underserving of the frontier’s resources. Mexican and Natives did not have the white skin as American settlers and were thus deemed inferior. In her book *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction*, Linda Gordan writes, “The inferiority of Mexicans was part of the Anglo’s right to be there and to have what they had” (Gordan, 151). White Americans viewed Mexicans as a lesser cast of society than themselves. In fact, Anglo settlers did not use the word Mexican as a nationality, but instead used it as a racial descriptor. To them, Mexican was not a nationality but rather it was

synonymous with race and was used similarly as white or black. According to Gordan, “large portions of the Anglos were immigrants and to them ‘Mexican’ was a racial-ethnic, not a national designation, while to the Mexicans, *mexicano* was in considerable part a term of nation and patriotism” (Gordan, 103). Plain and simple, Anglo Americans viewed whites as superior, and Mexicans were not white.

The Anglo Americans that settled the West also had a similar opinion about the native peoples that inhabited the area. However, while white settlers viewed Mexicans as an inferior caste of western society, they viewed Native Americans as an inferior species. As S.C. Gwynne writes in *Empire of the Summer Moon*, “they hated Indians with a particular passion, considering them something less than fully human, and thus blessed with inalienable rights to absolutely nothing,” (Gwynne, 20). White settlers viewed Native Americans as nothing more than violent savages standing in the way of American progress. They did not, and often times could not, distinguish the differences in Native American tribes, only viewing them as yet another alien race. So strong was their hate for Native Americans that difference in tribes did not prevent angry whites from committing genocidal acts upon the natives. Commenting on Kelsey Douglass’ campaign against eastern Texas tribes in 1839, Gwynne writes, “Texas commander Kelsey Douglass requested permission to clean out the ‘rat’s nest’ of other, mostly peaceful tribes in east Texas... Their innocence was besides the point,” (Gwynne, 77). Gwynne also continues to describe the horrors that the natives suffered at the hands of white settlers and that even though tribes like the Alabamas and Coshattas were spared from bloodshed, they still had no right to Texas lands. Gwynne writes, “they were moved from their own fertile fields to much less desirable lands. Thus were tens of thousands of acres of superb farmland in east Texas opened to white farmers,” (Gwynne, 77).

The white settlers of the west also considered interracial individuals as less than human. The only deserving people were pure bred whites, all others were second class or less. Gordan writes, “the ugly Anglo phrase ‘half-breed’ was first applied to Native Americans and was always derogatory: it meant ‘mongrel’ and carried the assumption that a blend of origins was somehow inferior to one,” (Gordan, 97). Those of mixed race were considered an abomination to white settlers, and whites that took in those alien cultures like Cynthia Anne Parker and Margarita Chacon were an anomaly. Gordan writes about Chacon saying, “Her choice of racial identity was remarkable, forswearing the advantages that an Anglo persona could have brought her” (Gordan, 37). Sometimes, whites were so surprised by these rare occurrences that they become topic of popular legend. In regard to Cynthia Anne Parker, Gwynne shares a line from a former Indian agent in 1893, “the heart of more than one dusky warrior was pierced by the darts of her laughing eyes and the ripple of her silvery voice, and laid at her feet the trophy of the chase” (Gwynne, 102). This romanization of Park portrays her as a queen among her captives and so superior to the Comanche culture that their warriors are swoon over her. More bleak stories however, state that Parker did not have a choice of rejoining white culture and instead was a prisoner of the Comanche. When Parker reentered Texan society in 1860, she would often draw crowds of curious white Texans that wanted to catch a glimpse of the “White Skaw”.

Through stereotypes and hatred, white settlers used race as a tool to dominate the American West. Race was used to disenfranchise non-white peoples in order for White Americans to have a reason to deny them any rights they might have to the West’s land and resources.