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Role of Race in the West

When it comes to race in the West, race is more fluid and flexible than others might think. When one went West their race got more simplified based on their skin color, it was no longer as difficult as the East. The role of race in the West was to culturally make people different than one another and make it seem like one race was superior over the other. Race was like a totem pole in the West. There were advantages given to other races that weren't given to lower totem pole races. The whites were always seen as the more superior and more privileged than any other race in the West. This was a time where white supremacy was very present, and people were aware of it. While the Indians and the Mexicans and any person of color were the ones that were on the bottom of the totem pole and seen as less. Race is superior over gender and class, people see your race before anything else. Once they see your race then they act accordingly based on your gender and class. The racial culture of the West was different than any other part of the country at the time.

In the West, race was something that became a simpler issue that was made less complicated. Once someone went out West their race was alternated to one that fit the categories of race in the West. In the book *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction* by Linda Gordon, she writes "even less did they know that that mobility took the form of a racial transformation unique to the American Southwest, that the same train ride had transformed them from Irish to white" (19). When the orphans were taken out West to be taken in by the families, their racial categories

changed, Irish in New York was seen as non-white and were treated as if they were such. They were one of the ones that were at the bottom of the totem pole in the East. The East also had a bigger variety in their race categories, Gordon stated “The racial system in New York in these years was complex and changing rapidly” (12). They had races that in the West wouldn’t even be considered or even play a factor when it came to how people treated them, if you were white you were white and if you weren’t then you just weren’t. When the children got to the West their race went to white because of their skin color and they were treated much differently than they were in New York. They were seen as too good to be with the Mexican-American families that were taking them in, according to the people in the West. Which in the long run created this big fight and ordeal about how the “white” orphans would not get the life they deserved if they lived with the Mexican-American families. Even in the cases of if the family was financially stable to give the child a great life, which comes to the point again of race being considered over class.

Race in the West was a bigger factor than class and in fact played a role in making the class based on the people’s race. People seen other people based on their race before they took into consideration their class and gender. The Mexicans in the Gordon book were payed way less and treated as second class citizens compared to the white people.

When it came to race in the West it seemed to be only skin color deep. People saw you for your skin color and treated you accordingly. Which means the lighter the skin color the more superior you seem or get treated better than someone with that of a darker skin complexion. Gordon writes that “the nortenos liked to consider themselves more “like” Americans not only temperamentally but also in a discourse about “color” that became part of their regional identity. Norteno superiority over the southern chilangos was expressed as the superiority of whiteness over brownness” (53). Even when both of these groups of people came from Mexico they still

defined themselves different than one another based on their skin color. The whiter you are the better you are in the West, “whiteness became a “nature,” signifying bravery, independence and rebelliousness, honoring a personal conduct that was hardworking, democratic, egalitarian, and open to individual achievement...” (Gordon 54). This was something that was present in the world of a working man but also an issue that was present in a woman’s world as well. Gordon stated “lightness of color had a special salience for nortenas because it fashioned definitions of beauty and decorum. Women’s sexual modesty and chastity was part of lightness. Indeed, lightness shaped the very identity of “civilized women” distinguishing the nortenas from Indian women” (54). The women that were lighter of color were superior to the women of color, people hid higher expectations for a woman with a lighter skin tone. The women that were of a darker skin were at the bottom of the totem pole when it came to race, not taking their gender into consideration. Even the Mexicans wanted to have the effects of whiteness and to have their children also have this so they have it easier when growing up, “...with the Mexicans’ desire for things American, for mobility, for lighter offspring...the former was a shade of complexion, a calibrated measure of status...a mark of all around superiority” (Gordon 77).