Making the White Man's West

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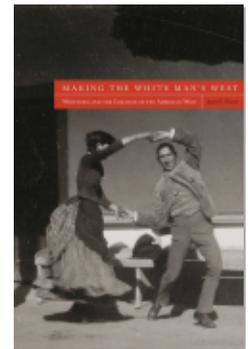Published by University Press of Colorado

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The trans-Mississippi West seemed destined to foster and shelter the white race. Concretions of myth and reality built up a society in which whites occupied the pinnacle, exercising power and control over non-white peoples. Myth and reality became inseparable, each supporting the other. The resulting society appeared as a refuge where Anglo-Americans could exist apart from a changing nation, a nation increasingly inhabited by non-Anglo and potentially incompatible immigrants. The overwhelmingly white population in certain areas of the West (the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains) reified the ideology of a white-dominated West, while the mythology obscured the presence of Indians, Hispanics, and Asians in California and the Southwest. The resulting society appeared, therefore, as a homogeneous population of Anglo-American whites, and this became the white man's West. The purpose of this work, then, is to look at how the idea of the West as a white racial refuge and the settlement of the region by Anglo-Americans interacted to create a region dominated by white Americans. Together, the continuing settlement of supposedly desirable Anglo-Americans and intellectual justifications

underlying and supporting this settlement formed something of a feedback loop. The myth supported the reality, and reality supported the myth.

Beginning in the 1840s, white Americans increasingly saw opportunity in the West, finding a sense of mission in expansion to the ocean, a belief encapsulated in the term *Manifest Destiny* (and the bane of students in introductory courses in US history). Accomplishing this conquest fell to the rugged, individualistic white settler, the homespun hero of a new American nation. In *The Winning of the West*, Theodore Roosevelt, for example, celebrated white frontiersmen, "the restless and reckless hunters, the hard, dogged frontier farmers [who] by dint of grim tenacity overcame and displaced Indians, French, and Spaniards alike, exactly as, fourteen hundred years before Saxon and Angle had overcome and displaced Cymric and Gaelic Celts." Driven by instinct and desire, these intrepid settlers fought to claim a new continent. "They warred and settled," he continued, "from the high hill-valleys of the French Broad and the Upper Cumberland to the half-tropical basin of the Rio Grande, and to where the Golden Gate lets through the long-heaving waters of the Pacific."[1] Roosevelt argued that these men, while inheritors of a Germanic-English ancestry, stood as representatives of a new people. "It is well," he warned, "always to remember that at the day when we began our career as a nation we already differed from our kinsmen of Britain in blood as well as name; the word American already had more than a merely geographic signification."[2] A continent tamed, the native population defeated, and American institutions rooted in new soil—all marked the legacy of the white man's West. Roosevelt saw in this process a clear demonstration of the continuing march of Anglo civilization. Just as the Saxons and Angles had conquered the ancient Celts, their descendants wrested control of North America from inferior Indians, Spaniards, and Frenchmen.

These lesser groups, in particular American Indians, played merely the foil to the heroic frontiersman. Indeed, Roosevelt's use of racialized terms like *blood* signified his view that race played the key role in determining the success of these new "Americans," a group he saw as having a very narrow racial and ethnic composition. Roosevelt's ideas on race and American superiority were remarkable only in their conformity to the common view of the day: the West had been settled by tough, individualistic, freedom-loving Anglo-Americans. This mythology, and the society it helped create and justify, soon came to seem natural and self-evident. Had not these brave whites tamed and settled the Wild West after all?

While historians and novelists could celebrate a white man's West, the reality proved more problematic. Non-whites had played important roles in the settlement of the region, roles that largely went unnoticed for decades. The West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries included the largest populations of Hispanics, American Indians, and Asians in the nation—hardly the racial monolith celebrated in the imagination. Yet there nevertheless existed kernels of truth in the idea of a white man's West. The presence of those racial and ethnic groups had indeed been obscured and their positions in society marginalized. In various ways, religion, political values, economic motives, and violence helped carve out areas of the West where whites composed the vast majority of the population (as in the Dakotas) or presided over non-white groups through political control and intimidation, as in California. Through these mechanisms, whites came to control the West, fashioning it into something that approximated the white man's West of the imagination.

In the twentieth-first-century West, the legacy of a society dominated by whites remains powerful, an insistent echo that somehow refuses to die. At issue is the question of who controls the region. As the historian Patricia Nelson Limerick asked, "Who [is] a legitimate Westerner, and who [has] a right to share in the benefits of the region?"[3] When white Americans conquered the West, they instituted a process of control based around racial identity that forced the region's many minority groups to cling to the peripheries of power, society, and even space, as in the case of Indian reservations.[4] Despite its long history of racial diversity, many promoters, developers, and dreamers touted the West as the ideal location for a society of Anglo-Saxon whites. Blessedly free of undesirable immigrants—those Eastern and Southern European hordes, descending upon the Eastern Seaboard in the thousands—the Anglo-American could find refuge and respect in the West. This dream of a white refuge never fully died.

Indeed, the controversy surrounding Arizona's new immigration bill serves as one recent example of the battle over control of the West. Senate Bill 1070, signed into law by Arizona governor Jan Brewer in April 2010, was seen as the strictest immigration law in the country.[5] It mandated that immigrants carry documentation showing their status and allowed police officers to detain and arrest people suspected of being in the country illegally. Governor Brewer and other supporters of the bill argued it would not be used to single out Hispanics. Critics, including President Barack Obama, denounced the law as

targeting not only illegal aliens but also legal residents of Hispanic descent. From Los Angeles, Roger M. Mahoney, a cardinal in the Catholic Church, compared the bill's requirements for people to show papers to "Nazism." The Mexican-American Legal Defense and Educational Fund called the act an effort in "racial demagoguery," "cowardly," and "tantamount to a declaration of secession."[6]

Clearly, legislators designed the law to target Hispanics, and some legal residents will likely be detained, if only briefly, by law enforcement officials. The law, however, raises deeper questions and exposes underlying racial tensions in the American West. Mexicans had long lived in Arizona and the rest of the Southwest. They did not come to the United States; the United States came to them with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. In the decades following the acquisition of the Southwest, the border remained permeable, crossed and re-crossed by those in search of opportunity. Nevertheless, many white Americans have never been completely at peace with the Hispanic presence in the United States. Part of the reason for this uneasiness, beyond simple racism, is that Anglo-Americans never envisioned the West as an ordinary place. In thousands of novels, movies, and cigarette advertisements, the West had long been the crucible of American desires and dreams, and its swaggering heroes had always been white.

As whites began their settlement of the West in the 1840s and 1850s, they saw the region as the nation's last chance to create a white racial utopia. Such a dream seemed tangible, even in the racially diverse West, since American Indians and Asians were denied citizenship and power, and even Hispanics, though technically citizens, often found themselves marginalized. The East, in contrast, witnessed an influx of Southern and Eastern European immigrants in the late nineteenth century, immigrants whose ethnicity, culture, and language made them suspect but who, nevertheless, could be naturalized as citizens since, as Europeans, they belonged to the white races—although such categorization had long been contested. To be sure, practical economic considerations—such basic things as the location of valuable minerals or access to fertile farmland—provided a strong motivation for settlement, but when envisioning their new cities and towns, westerners imagined them filled with desirable citizens. In the minds of nineteenth-century white Americans, a desirable citizen was, like themselves, white.

Racial schizophrenia, therefore, characterized the West, in reality diverse but in mythology a white refuge. The region's wide open spaces, attitudes toward privacy, and supposed status as white man's country attracted extremist groups like the Aryan Nations, anti-government right-wing groups like the Freemen, and extremists like the Unabomber Ted Kaczynski, a left-wing terrorist.[7] Richard G. Butler founded the Aryan Nations in 1974, purchasing a 21-acre "compound" in Hayden Lake, Idaho, that would become the headquarters for the avowedly racist organization.[8] He envisioned the creation of a "Northwest Territorial Imperative," a whites' only homeland to include the states of Idaho, Washington, Oregon, Montana, and Wyoming. Drawing—consciously or not—from the old racial Aryanism and Social Darwinism of the nineteenth century, Butler declared, "Aryans are Nordic in their blood . . . North Idaho is a natural place for the white man to live."[9] Indeed, when the allegedly racist Los Angeles homicide detective Mark Furhman, at the center of the O. J. Simpson trial, relocated from Los Angeles to Sandpoint, Idaho, his choice of destination seemed appropriate.[10]

While contemporary extremist groups sought out the region for its alleged fitness for their ideals, another powerful institution grappled with the legacy of its own exclusionary past. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, from the time of its founding until 1978, denied the priesthood to black men (all white men in good standing could be priests) on the basis of blacks having been saddled with "the Mark of Cain." As the Civil Rights movement advanced and Americans became more accepting of African American equality, the doctrines of the Mormon church seemed increasingly anachronistic. The doctrine also proved problematic in efforts to win converts in the Third World, regions of the world where the church saw tremendous growth. Thus, on June 9, 1978, Spencer Kimball, the head of the church, announced that he had received a revelation from God opening the priesthood to all males "without regard for race or color."[11] Kimball also promised the opening of missions in predominately black areas of the United States as well as Africa.[12]

Millions of people from all over the world received the message and converted. Addressing the church's past perhaps, the official website states, "There are estimated to be between 350,000 and 500,000 members of the Church with African heritage."[13] The church, however, has struggled to change its image as predominately white. In response to the misconception that all Mormons are white, the church's website, for example, assures viewers

of their inclusiveness on its "Frequently Asked Questions" section, noting, "There are no race or color restrictions as to who can join The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. There are also no race or color restrictions as to who can have the priesthood in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints."[14] In perhaps the final arbiter of relevance, Google's search engine ranks "Are All Mormons White" behind only "Are All Mormons Rich" and ahead of polygamists and Republicans—despite their best efforts, therefore, Mormons still have some work to do in addressing their past.

Arizona's immigration law, the presence of white supremacist groups in the Pacific Northwest, and the Mormon church's genuine efforts to wrestle with its past are just some of the echoes of an older vision of the Anglo-American West as a domain for whites. Behind these recent events are older ideas and beliefs that shaped, in ways both successful and unsuccessful, the white man's West.

Before launching into the overall discussion of the role whiteness played in defining the West, it is important to wrestle with a few definitions of some major issues. The first is determining the "West" for the purpose of this study. Scholars have long debated the difference between the West and the "frontier" as a process, the former a physical location and the latter an ever-moving process of change. Just as important and no less confusing, scholars have pointed out the myriad differences in environment, ethnic composition, and culture. No less a historian than Frederick Jackson Turner argued that there were four subregions of the West: the Prairie states, the Rocky Mountain states, the Pacific Slope, and the Southwest. Each of these represented very distinctive natural and human environments. More recently, David M. Wrobel, Michael C. Steiner, and their contributors to *Many Wests: Place, Culture, and Regional Identity* struggled to divine the boundaries of the West. Unable to effectively locate the region, they decided to "present the West in all its regional diversity by focusing on many of the Wests that constitute the larger whole."[15]

This study takes a broad view of the role whiteness played in the intellectual and physical creation of the trans-Mississippi West, including chapters on railroad settlement programs in Minnesota and the Dakotas, efforts to define whiteness among the Mormons in Utah, and attempts to square the beneficent climate of the Southwest with the racial history of Anglos, Aryans, and other descendants of Northern European settlers. Each of these places, to be sure, showcased different environmental and cultural characteristics,

but each played a smaller role in a larger story of the Anglo-American set-tlement and transformation of the trans-Mississippi West in the nineteenth century. Interestingly, the various promoters and creators of whiteness in the West ignored the larger issues and focused more on issues closer to their subregion. Promoters in California, for example, spent a great deal of time explaining how climate would allow whites to develop a level of culture and innovation unprecedented in world history. Promoters in colder climates, like the Dakotas, instead focused on the similarities between the ancestral climates of newcomers—Norwegians, Germans, and Swedes—and the land they offered for sale. Comparatively few, therefore, focused on the West as a larger region, and none seemed to view the West as homogeneous. From our perspective, however, viewing the larger trans-Mississippi West through the lens of whiteness reveals fascinating patterns. In places like North Dakota, for example, where Northern European whites formed the vast majority of the population, whiteness came to be celebrated as self-evident. In eth-nically diverse places like the Southwest, promoters, in the view of scholars like William Deverell, literally whitewashed the non-Anglo past, creating a white-dominated society with just enough of a non-white presence to lend a sense of exoticism.

Finally, despite the environmental differences, the trans-Mississippi West as a whole came to be settled by Anglo-Americans in the decades between the 1840s and 1890s. This meant that the cultural influences shaping this set-tlement, including the promotion of whiteness as the standard of belonging, were extended throughout the region at roughly the same time. Whiteness provided the basis for meting out privilege and control; falling on the wrong side of the line meant falling into a secondary status. These subregional dif-ferences certainly influenced both the perception and reification of white-ness, but only by studying the West as a larger region can we ascertain the full scope of the process of making the white man's West.

Like defining the West, defining whiteness at first seems an easy task. A white person is, most obviously, a person who appears to be white. Indeed, this seemingly obvious fact informed legal decisions. In cases about racial identity and therefore fitness for citizenship, the courts often deferred to the "man on the street" definition of whiteness. In other words, if an average man walking down the street saw an individual as white, then that person could legally claim membership in the white race. If this sounds subjective,

it was. Peoples of mixed parentage fell between categories like black and white, as did various other ethnic groups. At times some ethnic groups, like the Irish in the nineteenth century and Italians at the end of that century, found their whiteness contested. Living in a nation that separated peoples into either white or non-white categories, these newcomers struggled with being in-between. Not surprisingly, immigrants quickly realized the benefits whiteness conferred and tried hard to claim it for themselves. In time, most European ethnic groups succeeded and soon came to be considered as white as their Anglo-American neighbors.[16]

Racial identity, therefore, remained largely a social construction, shaped, defined, and contested by those claiming whiteness and those arbitrating it. As such, it could also be contradictory. A group could be seen as non-white in one locale and then be perceived as white in another, as Linda Gordon's interesting study of Irish-Catholic orphans in *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction* has demonstrated. The historian Ariela J. Gross, meanwhile, has argued that defining "race" meant hitting a constantly moving target. Americans could use the term to describe the supposedly "grand divisions of mankind" (the Caucasian race or the African race) but also to describe smaller groupings like the "Italian" races or "Celtic" races.[17]

This work, building off of previous whiteness studies, looks at the role whiteness played in setting the West apart as the most desirable region of the country and in defining who controlled what was truly the country's most diverse region. Most westerners, certainly the boosters and opinion shapers featured here, used a narrow definition of whiteness to exclude others. They focused their efforts on appealing to a supposedly declining Anglo-American, a person whose ancestry could be traced to England or the Germanic tribes of Northern Europe. This left other groups, like the Irish, Italians, and other, more recent immigrants, beyond whiteness; but, of course, this proved to be the easiest boundary to cross and more and more European ethnic groups crossed it, at least in part. These groups, nevertheless, could be seen as threatening the domination of Anglo-Americans, and thus it was with no small measure of relief for whiteness promoters like Frank Bird Linderman that comparatively few of these groups lived in the West, excepting perhaps in the mining districts of the Rockies. Indeed, for Linderman, those polluted, immigrant-ridden mining towns stood for everything he despised in modern America and were in marked contrast to the idyllic world of Anglo-American

settlers and friendly Indians. Similarly, Hispanics in the Southwest, although legally classified as whites, generally found themselves excluded as beyond the limits of whiteness. African Americans, American Indians, and Asians, of course, could not aspire to whiteness. Promoters of whiteness could then proclaim the region as a refuge from a changing population in the late nineteenth century. The East, filled with suspect recent immigrants, represented a fallen civilization, but the West remained the true white man's homeland— white, of course, in this most limited sense. Barred from contesting their whiteness (unlike those eastern immigrants), American Indians, Asians, and Hispanics lent the region a veneer of exoticism that masked the reality of Anglo domination.

NOTES

1. Theodore Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West: The Spread of the English-Speaking Peoples* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1889), 41.

2. Ibid., 34.

3. Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), 349.

4. Indeed, sometimes marginalizing Indians was not enough, as promoters often left reservations completely off of maps in an effort not to alarm potential settlers. See David M. Wrobel, *Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 34.

5. Randal C. Archibold, "Arizona Enacts Stringent Law on Immigration," *New York Times*, April 24, 2010.

6. "MALDEF Condemns Arizona Governor," Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund, http://maldef.org/news/releases/maldef_condemns_az_governor_042310/ (accessed May 17, 2010).

7. The deep causes of these disparate movements are examined in Richard White, "The Current Weirdness in the West," *Western Historical Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 4–16. While the violence White discusses has declined in the last twenty years, the underlining tension, if anything, has become more palpable.

8. The Aryan Nations, "The History of the Aryan Nations," http://aryan-nations.org/?q=node/5 (accessed December 20, 2011).

9. Evelyn A. Schlatter, *Aryan Cowboys: White Supremacists and the Search for a New Frontier, 1970–2000* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 64–68.

10. See Fox Butterfield, "Behind the Badge," *New York Times*, March 2, 1996, http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/03/23/reviews/fuhrman-profile.html (accessed December 20, 2011).

11. Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest*, 325.

12. Newell G. Bringhurst, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks: The Changing Place of Black People within Mormonism* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1981), 196–97.

13. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Mormon Church Demographics," http://www.mormonbeliefs.org/mormon_beliefs/mormon-beliefs-culture/mormon-church-demographics (accessed December 20, 2011).

14. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Frequently Asked Questions," http://mormon.org/faq/#Race (accessed December 15, 2011).

15. David M. Wrobel and Michael C. Steiner, eds., *Many Wests: Place, Culture, and Regional Identity* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 9, 14.

16. Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), shows the racialization of the "new immigrants" to America and how they gradually were able to claim whiteness and its benefits.

17. Ariela J. Gross, *What Blood Won't Tell: A History of Race on Trial in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), ix.