

# STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING THE AMERICAN WEST IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

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Growing up in Texas along the U.S.–Mexico border, I learned informally about the influence of Mexico on Texas and American western history by absorbing lessons on vaqueros, rodeos, and *corridos*. Unfortunately, the history I was supposed to learn in public schools was more provincial and tended to emphasize Texas and United States exceptionalism while ignoring the role of Mexican Americans in history. As a college professor, I have sought to incorporate the history of underrepresented peoples and the history of the American West in several of my courses. In the first part of the U.S. survey, I devote five to six class sessions to western history topics by linking developments in the American West to broader issues in U.S. and world history. Stephen Aron's essay gave me several useful ideas about incorporating a world perspective into teaching about the American West. In the future, I plan to assign his essay, design discussions that focus on the global influences of the region, and show a documentary that makes links to world history.

Portraying the American West as an indigenous homeland and as a contested space of Indian and European colonial powers helps explain American territorial expansion. Introducing indigenous territorial rights early in the semester helps students understand the fallacy that white Americans expanded westward into “virgin wilderness.” Fortunately, several recent United States survey textbooks begin by focusing on Indian societies *before* European settlers began arriving in the Americas.<sup>1</sup> While covering sixteenth-century developments, I discuss the Pueblo Indians’ territorial rights to the area that would become New Mexico. I show students photographs of the multistoried structures at Mesa Verde to explain how the Pueblo Indians were among the first people in the American West who built “planned communities.”<sup>2</sup> Aron’s essay can be used to demonstrate the contested origins of the United States and to place indigenous revolts in comparative perspective. He explains that indigenous nations responded to European incursions by migrating, accommodating, or rebelling. On the week that we discuss King Philip’s War, I plan to ask students to compare that event to the Pueblo revolt of 1680. Students will read a summary of these rebellions and articles about the Pueblo revolt before dividing into groups to discuss their causes.<sup>3</sup> Several textbooks also introduce Spanish colonialism of Mexico’s Far North in early chapters, which will allow me to discuss various European colonization efforts. Aron’s essay will also be useful for a class discussion on the significance of Indian nations’ migrations into and within the territory. This discussion will complicate territorial rights by exploring the reactions of indigenous nations of the Southwest to the migrations of Indians from the Southeast and Midwest, following their expulsions by European colonists. Another useful exercise is to ask students to discuss Aron’s point about the fluidity of colonial demarcations owing to Indians’ power to contest colonial authority throughout the eighteenth century.

Students have found it useful to compare Spanish and French “frontiers of inclusion” to the British “frontiers of exclusion” because it explains the relationship that each colonial power had with various Indian nations. The “frontier of inclusion” policy sought to incorporate Indians as laborers, subjects, traders, and mates. By contrast, the “frontier of exclusion” policy generally excluded Indians from British and American societies in favor of removing indigenous people from their native lands.<sup>4</sup> Understanding the Spanish plan to use missions, presidios, and pueblos to colonize Mexico’s Far North also explains the presence of these structures throughout the American West (and parts of the Southeast), and of Spanish-language place names. Comparing European colonial projects places the competition for North America, and

the Americas in general, in a world perspective. Finally, a comparison of the Spanish and British policies toward Indians also helps dispel the “Black Legend” myth of Spanish colonialism, which combined anti-Catholic and anti-Spanish views with propaganda about Spanish cruelty toward indigenous people.<sup>5</sup> The need for colonial officials to negotiate with indigenous nations can also be illustrated by comparing the French and Spanish frontiers of inclusion. The Canadian and Mexican national governments struggled to attract colonists to their borderlands partly because indigenous nations posed a serious challenge to their authority. Aron’s characterization of American military campaigns against Indians and their removal onto reservations as comparable to the “ethnic cleansing” followed by the Germans and Japanese is sure to generate discussion. Such a comparison would also convince students about the relevance of studying the American West in a global context.

Examining American westward expansion in a global context also challenges popular notions of the American West. By comparing American westward expansion to colonial conquests elsewhere in the world, students can discover similarities that discount American uniqueness. European colonization of Africa, Asia, and Latin America has aggravated ethnic conflicts, transmitted disease, and increased inequality, as did American westward expansion. Similarly, European conquests have depended on large government outlays.<sup>6</sup> I ask students to evaluate the implied viewpoint of the term “westward expansion,” the image of how the American West was settled by white Americans, and the wars fought to obtain control of the area. I lead the class discussion on these questions before students read about westward expansion in order to motivate them to question their assumptions. We begin by discussing “manifest destiny” after reading John O’Sullivan’s definition of the term.<sup>7</sup> Students generate a list of advantages and disadvantages related to American belief in manifest destiny. Though it served to unite white Americans, this view was detrimental for the people of color encountered by westward-moving Americans. Discussing how Americans justified violence through their belief that God was on their side can lead students to question contemporary armed struggles where people waging war hold similar beliefs. I ask students to reevaluate their image of the American West. Influenced by movie and television portrayals, students usually characterize white settlers as rugged people, independent ranchers, and gun-toting cowboys. These views allow me to challenge the traditional myths of the American West by explaining Richard White’s argument that this region was one of the most dependent on federal government intervention.<sup>8</sup> From military conquest and railroad development to land distribution and restrictive immigration laws,

the federal government was heavily involved in helping white Americans gain control of the American West. Other useful discussion questions include:

- Was it the “West” for the Pueblo, Ute, or Gabrielino Indians?
- How might Mexicans refer to the region known as the “American West”?
- Why was the Texas Revolution fought? How is the Texas Revolution related to the U.S.-Mexican War? On which side did Texas-Mexicans fight?
- Who started the U.S.-Mexican War? Why was it fought?
- What were the consequences of U.S. victory?

A global comparison can also highlight how race and racism have been employed to justify conquest. Like westward-moving Americans, European colonists in Africa, Asia, and Latin America employed violence to dispossess indigenous people, whom they characterized as “barbarians.” In addition to its active role in conducting numerous wars against Indians, the U.S. government also helped dispossess Mexicans. A discussion of the U.S.-Mexican War not only illustrates the U.S. government’s large role in gaining control of the American West, but also highlights the racial and ethnic views of white Americans. In the colonial survey, I devote two class sessions to discussing the war and its impact by linking the war to larger issues, including immigration, sectional conflict over slavery, and nativism.<sup>9</sup> Students gain a deeper understanding of the views prevalent at mid-century by reading several documents and discussing them in groups. The congressional debates surrounding the U.S.-Mexican War are quite useful in exploring Americans’ racial views of Mexicans and Indians. After students read parts of speeches by Senators John Calhoun and John Dix, I ask them to explain why Calhoun was opposed to incorporating “all of Mexico” while Dix favored it.<sup>10</sup> By reading the congressmen’s speeches, students gain a thorough understanding of the ways manifest destiny influenced (and was influenced by) white Americans’ racial perceptions. Students are often surprised at the racial views expressed by these congressmen, and they often become interested in learning more about the racial assumptions of white Americans in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup>

To highlight the global links to the American West, I have shown parts of a documentary on the San Patricios, a group of soldiers who defected from the U.S. Army because of the abuse they suffered from fellow soldiers who held nativist and anti-Catholic views.<sup>12</sup> Composed of Irish and German immigrants, the San Patricios fought alongside the Mexican military until several were captured in Mexico City and executed for treason. Students in

my courses are fascinated with the San Patricios, so we have had great discussions about nativism and the role of immigrant soldiers in the U.S. military. I have linked this topic to world history by discussing the factors (for example, the Irish potato famine) that spurred immigration from Europe. Examining nativism against Irish and German immigrants helps students understand the role of anti-Catholicism in the nineteenth century, and also lays a foundation for a discussion of how European Americans eventually enjoyed the privileges of whiteness while Mexican Americans were largely excluded.<sup>13</sup> In discussing the war, I point out that it contributed to the sectional struggle over the expansion of slavery into western territories. I have also linked the debates on westward expansion to the political differences between Whigs and Democrats, Jefferson's vision of an agrarian republic, the Wilmot Proviso, and James Polk's expansionist presidential platform.

Finally, I have used the U.S.-Mexican War to discuss political opposition and civil disobedience. Students are often surprised to learn that the war generated significant opposition from the U.S. public, and that the Whigs (including Abraham Lincoln) criticized the conflict as "Mr. Polk's War." Students have had fruitful discussions after reading sections of Henry David Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience."<sup>14</sup> This influential essay, explaining Thoreau's opposition to an "unjust" war, would later shape the views of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.<sup>15</sup> A global approach can also change the way that I teach the history of California's Gold Rush. The discovery of gold created a population boom as more than seventy thousand newcomers arrived in California from other parts of the United States and regions of the world. I plan to emphasize the global links of this large-scale immigration/migration by discussing the arrival of miners from China, France, Chile, and Mexico. Susan Johnson's *Roaring Camp* discusses the global forces that led men to leave their country of origin and the trade links that facilitated this migration.<sup>16</sup> I have previously assigned portions of *Roaring Camp* and asked students to discuss the interethnic tensions among the newcomers, Mexicans, and Miwok Indians. The mining camps' diversity would not last because nativist sentiments eventually led to the passage of the Foreign Miner's Tax (1852), targeting Chinese, Mexican, Chilean, and French miners. Widespread nativism also led to the creation of the Workingman's Party and the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882). The Gold Rush also contributed to the image of California and of the American West throughout the world. I plan to ask students to contrast the experience of "foreign" miners with the image of the American West presented in typical western films.

I will not have enough time to implement each of my proposed plans.

Therefore, I will attempt to include some of my plans within lessons on immigration, the development of the railroad, and industrial labor. Placing the American West in a global context is worthwhile because it will enhance students' understanding of U.S. and world history.

## Notes

1. Some textbooks that cover precontact indigenous societies are: John Mack Faragher, Mari Jo Buhle, Daniel Czitrom, and Susan H. Armitage, *Out of Many: A History of the American People*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J., 2000), 14, 18–19; Jacqueline Jones, Peter H. Wood, Thomas Borstelmann, Elaine Tyler May, and Vicki L. Ruiz, *Created Equal: A Social and Political History of the United States*, 2nd ed. (New York, 2006), 5–41; Philip J. Deloria, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Jack N. Rakove, and David Burner, *This Land: A History of the United States* (Maplecrest, N.Y., 2003), 2–59.

2. The Pueblos' permanent housing structures led Spanish explorers to call the area Nuevo Mexico because the region most resembled settled indigenous communities of central Mexico.

3. A summary of the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 and King Philip's War is found in chapter three of *Out of Many*. A very useful anthology with articles and discussion questions is David J. Weber's *What Caused the Pueblo Revolt?* (Boston, 1999).

4. The frontiers of inclusion and exclusion are discussed in Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher, *The American West: A New Interpretive History* (New Haven, Conn., 2000), 37–38, 57; Faragher et al., *Out of Many*, 52.

5. For instructors who wish to obtain more background on the Spanish colonization, I suggest several articles on the Spanish borderlands that appeared in the issue of the *OAH Magazine of History* from summer 2000, titled "The Spanish Frontier in North America"—see *OAH Magazine of History* (Summer 2000) 14:4. This issue includes a historiography article by David J. Weber; several articles by borderlands historians on missions, communities, and mestizo societies, and excellent lesson plans by secondary-school teachers. For a succinct discussion of the "Black Legend" myth, see Iris H. W. Engstrand's "How Cruel Were the Spaniards?" in this summer 2000 issue. A more thorough examination of the "Black Legend" is found in chapter 12, "The Spanish Legacy and the Historical Imagination," in David J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (New Haven, Conn., 1992).

6. A useful comparison of frontiers in the United States and Latin America can be found in David J. Weber and Jane M. Rausch, eds., *Where Cultures Meet: Frontiers in Latin American History* (Wilmington, Del., 1994).

7. An excerpt from John O'Sullivan's Democratic Review and some useful discussion questions can be found at: <[http://www.historytools.org/sources/manifest\\_destiny.pdf](http://www.historytools.org/sources/manifest_destiny.pdf)>.

8. Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A History of the American West* (Norman, Okla., 1991), 57–59.

9. For a useful overview and lesson plans on the U.S.-Mexican War, visit the PBS Web site created to accompany a two-part documentary on the war at: <<http://www.pbs.org/keramexicanwar/educators/>>. The lack of knowledge about the U.S.-Mexican War among students reminds me that this is the United States' "forgotten war." Numerous monographs and textbooks inaccurately refer to the conflict as the "Mexican War," and therefore reveal the authors' U.S.-centric approach to the study of Mexico's Far North (or the United States West). U.S.-based scholars might be surprised to learn that Mexican scholars refer to the war as "The War of North American Invasion." A discussion on the public's general lack of knowledge of the U.S.-Mexican War and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo can be found in Richard Griswold del Castillo, "The U.S.-Mexican War: Contemporary Implications and Mexican American Civil and International Rights," in Iris H. W. Engstrand, Richard Griswold del Castillo, and Elena Poniatowska, eds., *Culture y Cultura: Consequences of the U.S.-Mexican War, 1846–1848* (Los Angeles, 1998), 76–96.

10. Clyde A. Milner III, Anne M. Butler, and David Rich Lewis, eds., *Major Problems in the History of the American West* (Boston, 1997), 160–63.

11. A useful article to explain the links between manifest destiny and racial views is Thomas Hietala's "The Myths of Manifest Destiny," in Milner et al., *Major Problems in the History of the American West*, 169–81.

12. Mark Day, *The San Patricios* (Vista, Calif., 1996). Information about this documentary is available at: <<http://www.dayproductions.com/theSanPatricios.html>>. As an alternative, I have also shown segments of the movie *One Man's Hero* (Video and DVD from MGM, 2000), but factual inaccuracies, poor acting, and an unnecessary love story mar this Hollywood version.

13. David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York, 1991); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998); Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley, Calif., 1997).

14. The original essay and several academic articles analyzing Thoreau's writings can be found at: <<http://thoreau.eserver.org/civil.html>>.

15. Stanley Wolpert, *Gandhi's Passion: The Life and Legacy of Mahatma Gandhi* (New York, 2001), 68, 72; Faragher et al., *Out of Many*, 404–5.

16. Susan Lee Johnson, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (New York, 2000), 57–95.