

From Debunking the Myth of the American West by Dina Secchiaroli at the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute

Debunking the Myth

The true American West, as I said before, is very complicated and messy. In Limerick's *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* and *Something in the Soil*, she explores the myth and the truth of Western history. Limerick says, "Reorganized, the history of the West is a study of a place undergoing conquest and never fully escaping its consequences" (*Legacy*, 26). The real West was a place where different races overlapped. These races included the Indian American, Anglo-American, Latin American, Afro-American, and Asian. Not only did different people try to live on the same land, within each group came different cultures, languages and religions. The story is not an easy one to tell, and I don't try to tell it all to you now or to my students. Even after all my research I'm still learning what really happened. I'm going to let my students know this too. I'm on a scholarly endeavor and they are too. If you want to teach the historical aspects, you need to read the books on your own. I will be using excerpts from the books in my classes.

Land Boundaries

One of the problems began when Americans tried to create boundaries, lines on a map, and then expected everyone, including those not benefiting from those lines, to live by them. People wanted to own land, but they also wanted their culture to be the law of the land. Even today, people are still fighting over culture. When white Americans went West, they expected an easy fortune. They did not anticipate running into natives who showed opposition nor did they expect the hardships of the land. One of the reasons for this was the lack of communication. People in the East were unaware of what was truly happening in the West, so they believed the myth, even then. Further, the West didn't want the East to know of the problems because then no one would continue to come Westward. Westward Expansion was largely about land, not the Hollywood version of John Wayne. Limerick makes a wonderful analogy when she says, "The showdowns would occur in the land office or the courtroom; weapons would be deeds and lawsuits, not six-guns" (*Legacy*, 55). John Wayne wouldn't have been a cowboy then, rather he'd be a lawyer or a land surveyor. Brilliant analogy. Hollywood does sway our version of the past. Redistributing the land was a difficult task. The movies leave that part out. Even when there were laws, not everyone wanted to obey. The law in Washington D.C. often did not have much control over the law of the West. In fact some control didn't even come from the West. Some Eastern investors sent people for them and reaped the benefits of the hard work of the frontiersmen. Westward expansion was also about politics and statehood. We also tend to think of the pioneer/cowboy as an independent adventurer. Yet, most depended on money from the government, because they profits did not come rolling in. Most Westerners resented the government for the help. One could say that is when welfare began.

Conquest

Our nation's history is largely based on conquest. In fact, the different races that make up the West are all part of the same story - conquest. Cultural domination was the game and the West was the playing field. With all ideas and events, we must remember that it is not as black and white as we like to think or need to think. The Anglos were exhibiting nationalistic pride, and they thought their way of life was the best. They also wanted the land. As Limerick points out, our history is not as different from the histories of other nations as we'd like to think. We think of our own history as exploration and defeating the wild land and peoples, while expanding democracy; yet, we think of the conquests of South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand as barbaric and inhumane (*Soil*, 20).

The Anglo-American also felt like an innocent victim, rather than a participant in their own destiny. They often felt slighted when the Indian did not accept their help in converting to Christianity or on how to use the land. The Anglos felt that they would be able to swoop in and save the inferior Indian. They also felt that the Indian cultures would disappear. Not only did the cultures not disappear, many Indians fought back to save their culture and way of living. Many Anglos were surprised by this and angered. They then felt justified in their treatment of an ungrateful savage. That is not to say that all pioneers/cowboys were villains. Again, it is not that simple. The truth as hard as it is to understand and grasp, makes our history that much better. It is our history and we should want to know the truth.

Complexity

As I said before, it is not as clear-cut as we'd like as to who are the good guys and who are the bad guys. Limerick uses the term "moral complexity" often in her writing, and this is exactly what people are about. When we do something good or bad, it doesn't necessarily mean that we are good or bad people respectively. Things and people were just as complicated then as they are now. "The deeply frustrating lesson of history in the American West and elsewhere is this: human beings can be a mess - contentious, conflict loving, petty, vindictive, and cruel - and human beings can manifest grace, dignity, compassion, and understanding..." (*Soil*, 21). As complicated as our history is, we must remember that the Anglo-Americans did start the whole affair and came out on top in the end. But the rest is messy and the sides are blurred.

The "White man" is usually either seen as the brutal force defeating Indians or as the democratic adventurer exploring our land. It is not that easy. Both images are true. Some white men were brutal in their dealing with the Indians, and their bigotry and greed motivated them. But there were also good-intentioned men who truly thought that they were helping the Indians by wanting them to assimilate. A problem lay in different laws regarding property and conduct. Of course confusion and problems occurred. Each contract may have held different meanings to the different groups, and in fact, often only a few members of a tribe who spoke English took part in the contract writing. Many times, these tribal members had no authority over the rest of the tribe. And they wanted the entire tribe to agree to the contract? We tend to lump the "white man" into one group, but they were also very separated, not only by ethnicity, which will be discussed next, but also by economy. The government officials had a very different experience than the farmer or the miner. And the miner had a completely different life than the owner of the mine. Limerick creates a 12-point guide to war, which is funny and poignant. She

finds patterns in the history of the American West in her *Something in the Soil*. One of these patterns applies here; "Whites were often quite disunited themselves, so disunited that white Americans sometimes looked as if they might kill each other before the Indians got a chance at them" (*Soil*, 50). The complexity is illuminated here.

In the same way, we lump the "Indians" together, yet we must realize that there are and were many different tribes of Indians and many fought each other way before the Anglos even came to shore. Often, a tribe would take advantage of the white American's need for land and strike a deal that would be disadvantageous for their enemy. "The idea of an Indian war as a conflict of whites against Indians seldom had much to do with reality because Indians were usually on both sides of the conflict" (*Soil*, 47). Some Indians worked with the Anglos against their own, but we must remember not all did. Many accepted assimilation, while others stood firm to maintain old values and traditions.

Race and Cultural Relations

The West is where many ethnicities and cultures came together in the same land. We often think of the race problem as the whites against the Indians, the Mexicans, and the Chinese, but there were so many more people. There were tensions between the Irish and the Cornish miners, too. The environmentalist fought the ranchers to conserve resources. People were busy trying to understand each other in the face of extraordinary obstacles to that understanding. With different cultures, languages, and laws, the different cultures had their work ahead of them, so of course, there were misunderstandings, fights, hostility and problems. It was, again, very complicated. That is not to say that many of the problems could not have been avoided. Compassion, understanding, and empathy are important factors that can make the convergence of cultures much easier to handle. Our history has always been obsessed with distinguishing one ethnicity from another. " 'Distinguish' is, of course, by no means a synonym for 'divide.' Ethnic groups can be distinguished from each other and still be quite compatible, even collaborative and mutually respectful" (*Soil*, 241).

Another one of Limerick's patterns of war is the reminder that before a war happened, there was already a history of tensions between parties. This history was often spanned over many years, yet we often think that a war broke out over night. When the Anglo Americans came to the land, they brought debilitating diseases with them that killed so many Indians whose immune systems hadn't built any antibodies to the illness. Because the two cultures took so long in getting to know and often dislike each other, the racial and cultural lines blurred. The fact that Indians rode horses and used guns shows this. Further, mixed marriages were common, and racially mixed children were the result. When they grew up, they were often torn between cultures and loyalties and sometimes could also mediate between the two. The term "Indian" and "White" became increasingly political as the bloodlines mixed, rather than racial.

The Women of the West

Women were not included in Turner's version of the West. Women of the West were typically seen as oppressed, being taken West by their husbands. The truth is that women were just as involved as the men in making history and settling the West. Under the Homestead Act, spinsters and widows had the

right to claim land. Many women took full advantage of this, staking claim for themselves. Further, many wives helped their husbands work the land. They were as invested in their future as the men were. The women were just as cruel and prejudice as the men. When I say this I don't just mean the white women either. They were not saints, nor were they all sinners. Again, the recurring theme is that all people in the West were complicated and couldn't be labeled solely by one category.

Take the prostitutes for example. Hollywood has made the prostitutes of the West look like they loved being prostitutes, made a good deal of money, and were accepted by all of the town. The reality is that there weren't a lot of job opportunities for women, and this was one way to make their own money. Further, prostitutes did not make much money after they took out rent, clothes, food, etc... Married women degraded prostitutes, and they were looked down upon by many - not the happy, go lucky people in the movies. In fact, they had hard lives, not saying that other women didn't. When they had children, it was hard to find childcare. History has found that many daughters became prostitutes like their mothers. The historian Ann Butler has studied the life of the prostitute and has shown that suicide was the most common way to get out of the life of a prostitute. Morality of the West is not as concrete as most people like to believe. We feel we can judge those of the past, when we must make it clear to the students that this would be dangerous. People have layers and are multifaceted. Looking at them through a two-dimensional angle does not tell the whole story. This doesn't go for only the women, but also for the men and for all the different races too.

