

The American West once was the romantic lore of dime novels and silent films. The baby boom generation grew up playing cowboys and Indians where the Indians were rarely seen as “the good guys”. From when the American Frontier was declared closed in the 1890s leading up to the era of the Red Movement of the 1970s, the historiography of the American West was largely closed as well with little movement away from the American exceptionalism that dominated the field. However, the 1970s experienced monumental change in American society and that change was reflected in the scholarship of Western history as traditional narratives were questioned too. As the twentieth century closed and the twenty first century dawned, the field of Western history was turned on its head and the once absent Native American, re-emerged into the historiography that they had always existed in, but were rarely recognized. American exceptionalism has been replaced by American imperialism as the impact of conquering settlers upon indigenous residents and the environment can no longer be hidden from history.

The historiography of the American West was dominated for most of the 19th century by Frederick Jackson Turner’s “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” essay delivered at the American Historical Association in 1893. Turner claimed that the American experience was developed by the American frontier. He believed that European ideas had been abandoned and that America was unique in crossing a continent, winning a wilderness, and developing primitive economic and political conditions into city life.¹ His nationalistic approach emphasized American exceptionalism and Darwinism to explain why the frontier was settled. His Frontier Thesis was nearly historical gospel until challenged in the 1930s and 1940s, but the thesis was revised and revered by its supporters and is still studied today.

¹ David J. Weber, "Turner, the Boltonians, and the Borderlands," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 1 (February 1986), 66.

Herbert Bolton was one of Turner's students but was fascinated with Hispanic frontier. He founded the Borderlands school in the 1920s and although he often acknowledged Turner, his Borderlands theory largely ignores Turner's Frontier Thesis. David Weber compared the two theories in 1986 and found that the Frontier Thesis was much more important to America than it was to Mexico. The Mexicans did not consider the far northern borderlands to be a great influence on their national conscious. The arid and desolate region was not suitable for agricultural development and Mexicans found the racism of Americans greatly hampered their efforts to retain the land they were born in.² The Borderlands theory has largely remained a subset of American history in the West and certainly is not as influential as Turner.

Western history was largely relegated to Turner's Frontier Thesis as Western history was romanticized as the struggle to conquer virgin land by the exceptional American settler. Serious academic scholarship was replaced by the popularity of the western movie genre for more than the first half of the twentieth century. Western movies focused on expanding the railroads, cattle ranches, stories of revenge, fighting Native Americans, and lawmen bringing in notorious gangs. These romanticized silent and then audio films served very little to no historical purpose, but they were wildly popular and there was no market or desire to counter Turner's Frontier Thesis of American exceptionalism.

The protests of the Vietnam War and the victories of the Civil Rights movements began a shift in thinking for both the mainstream and historians. Western historian Stephen Aron writes that when Americans questioned the expansionism and conquest in Vietnam, it was not a theme to be cheered. Comparisons were made to the American West and the triumph of the Frontier

² Ibid., 79.

Thesis turned to tragedy.³ As the liberation struggles of the 1970s took hold, historians looked past the experiences of white, male protagonists that had monopolized the field and began exploring new perspectives in Western history.

Patricia Limerick was successful in sticking a challenge to the Turnerian Frontier Thesis with her book *Legacy of Conquest* in 1987. She was quick to dismiss the frontier as a nationalistic and racist construct that ignored the Native American people that had settled the land long before the white man.⁴ In 1995 Limerick would criticize Turner further in the *American Historical Review* by claiming he was a victim of presentism. He had developed his Frontier Thesis as he claimed the frontier was closing and once he had established his theory, his prestige rested on his theory. He was unwilling to criticize it, but Limerick had zero reservations about critiquing Turner. She jokes about the resilience of the Frontier Theory, comparing it to an antique car that is exempt from vehicle restrictions and requires no new analysis due to its historical significance. “The Frontier Thesis has become a classic, exempted from the usual tests of verification, evidence, and accuracy.”⁵

Limerick is amazed to find that the quest to completely disregard Turner had brought Turner back into the public spotlight. As historians sought to prove Turner wrong, others believed there must be validity to the Frontier Thesis for critics to continue attacking Turner a century later.⁶ Robert Hine and John Mack Faragher’s 2000 work *The American West: A New*

³ Stephen Aron, "The History of the American West Gets a Much-Needed Rewrite" *Smithsonian.com*. August 16, 2016. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/history-american-west-gets-much-needed-rewrite-180960149/> (accessed May 1, 2018).

⁴ Eric Foner and Lisa MacGirr, *American History Now* (Temple University Press, 2011), 265.

⁵ Patricia Nelson Limerick, "Turnerians All: The Dream of a Helpful History in an Intelligible World," *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 3 (06 1995), 697

⁶ *Ibid.*, 698.

Interpretive History does not abandon Turner's Frontier Thesis, but embraces and expands it. They contend that the frontier has always moved in America and so it simply is anywhere that cultures meet. For them frontier history becomes "a tale of conquest, but also one of survival, persistence, and the merging of peoples and cultures that gave birth and continuing life to America."⁷ *The American West's* expansion of the frontier does not limit the history to just white expansion across the United States, but allows the Frontier Theory to encompass many cultures all across North America. This work decidedly brings Turner into the next century. Even without works like Hine and Faragher's, the Frontier Thesis is now as much a part of the historiography of the American West, it will never disappear. The exceptionalism that blinded early historians must be explained in order to understand how the field arrived where it is today.

As the field progresses further into the twenty first century, the Native American history that Turner completely ignored has taken on a new focus. Historians can no longer separate the American West and Native American history as Turner did. Turner's Frontier Thesis closed the American frontier in the same decade that Native Americans had finally been relegated to the reservation and then further assimilated through the Dawes Act.⁸ The public was willing to assimilate Native Americans too as they largely ignored Native American history with the exception of the wildly inaccurate dime store novel or western genre movie. Historians also ignored Native Americans as the *American Historical Review* never published a Native American essay in its first ten years and only limited scholarship after that. When Native Americans were

⁷ Stephen Aron, "The American West Reprised, Revised, and Revived," *Reviews in American History* 28, no. 2 (2000), 248.

⁸ David R. Edmunds, "Native Americans, New Voices: American Indian History, 1895-1995," *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 3 (06 1995), 718.

discussed, they were merely objects of European or early American actions or policies.⁹ From 1920 to 1960 only four Native American articles were published in the *American Historical Review*.

Tragically as Native Americans were being ignored, their history was quickly disappearing. Without a complex writing system, most Native American history was orally transmitted. As Native Americans were assimilated into American culture and the older generations passed away, that oral history died with them. The Native American view of history was slowly being conquered by American exceptionalism as well and the ability to recover those lost perspectives would be forever lost.¹⁰

The Civil Rights movement and Vietnam war would alter Native American and American West history forever. As the power and historiography of ethnic groups expanded, Native American movements did as well. The disillusionment of the Vietnam War ran deep through academia and the popular conscious. So when soldiers in Southeast Asia referred to the Vietcong controlled jungles as “Indian Country”, the conquest of Native Americans was suddenly front and center in the American mind. The Red Power movement focused on the oppression of Native Americans and sought to bring attention to their plight. The occupation movements at Wounded Knee and Alcatraz brought the Native American perspective of history to forefront of white America and energized Native Americans to refocus on their past from their perspective.

As ethnohistory developed to counter the historian’s fear of an undocumented Native American past, Native American women’s history began to develop. Nancy Shoemaker’s

⁹ Ibid., 720.

¹⁰ Ibid., 721.

Negotiators of Change points out that traditional documentary evidence is very limited for Native American Women.¹¹ White men's written history of Native American women is completely biased through their agency and limited in scope. As a result most of the scholarship on Native American women has come from interviews and oral testimony. What has been discovered is that Native American societies were much less dominated by men and women had much more freedom. Their domesticated lives as farmers was highly valued and Indian women were much more free than their European counterparts. However, as Native Americans had more and more contacts with settlers, women's influence waned as the tentacles of European influence wrapped around Native American life. According to historian David Edmunds, the scholarship on Native American women is still limited and there is still ample room for growth in the future.

12

As the new century dawned, the old historiography of Native Americans was discarded and a new historiography showing the agency of Native Americans flourished. Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron published "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in between in North American History" in 1999 and they attempted to show the frontier as a zone of intercultural penetration while also recognizing Bolton's borderlands as the contested boundaries between colonial domains.¹³ Adelman and Aron outline a history of European exploration that forced Native Americans to interact and adapt. As the French, British, and Spanish empires expanded, all three interacted with the borders of one another. In between

¹¹ Ibid., 736.

¹² Ibid., 737.

¹³ Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in between in North American History," *The American Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (06 1999), 816.

were Indian tribes that were ravished by European microbes even where Europeans hardly existed. Firearms had changed the interactions between Indian nations as tribes fought to use captives to replenish their disease ravished numbers.¹⁴ As the European imperialists fought in North America and beyond, Native Americans were utilized as vital allies. Early national borders were hardly sealed and Native Americans and settlers paid little attention to the lines on a map.

Unlike historiographies of the past, Adelman and Aron showed that Native Americans had always been present and that Turner's concept of the American pioneer settling an empty land was false. The frontiers and borderlands were always diverse and included the mixing of people and power. The agency of Native Americans was real and influential despite their eventual conquest by the European powers and the United States. Works like Richard White's *The Middle Ground* (1991), Juliana Barr's *Peace Came in the Form of a Woman: Indians and Spaniards in the Texas Borderlands* (2007), and Pekka Hämäläinen's *The Comanche Empire* (2008) all showed that Native Americans were not just savages that had to be cast aside as the American frontier expanded, but were rational agents that had just as rich histories and agency in the history of the American West.

As Native American history has taken on new significance in the field of American Western history, intense debates about who can tell and how that history is told have developed. Pekka Hämäläinen addresses this with the American Historical Association by acknowledging that Native American communities have been experiencing improvements in their economies and society. As a result, Native American intellectuals are becoming more vocal and entering

¹⁴ Ibid., 818.

graduate school and faculties.¹⁵ A emerging theme is that Native Americans should write their own history and decide how they are disseminated to wider audiences. Edmunds addresses the issue of the “Indian voice”, that is telling the history of what is important to Native Americans, not outside groups. Even as Native Americans focus on issues important to them, Native American scholars believe it is important to express their perspective on issues that outside groups continue to find important to Native Americans so their voice will be heard.¹⁶ As Native American scholars debate this issue, their “Indian voice” is difficult to pin down as Native American tribes are extremely diverse and their individual experiences are greatly varied.

Further, since Native Americans did not have a written history of their own, they believe more emphasis should be placed on oral history and that much of their written history is biased and suffers from white stereotyping from Eurocentric written history. Hämäläinen sees this overall debate as already impacting the scholarship as Native and non-Native writers have produced studies that narrow that gap. “Terms like ethnic cleansing, extermination, cultural genocide, and historical memory are entering the scholarship with unprecedented theoretical vigor.”¹⁷ Edmunds contends that despite the continued disagreements, the positive impact is clear when non-Native American writers are cognizant of the Indian voice and seek to include it. He also sees value in continued non-Native American scholarship as it allows Native American scholars to research and address those topics from their perspective. He finds hope in the young, talented Native American historians who have emerged from the tribal communities.¹⁸

¹⁵ Pekka Hämäläinen, "The Futures of Native American History in the United States," *Perspectives on History* 50, no. 9 (12 2012).

¹⁶ Edmunds, 738.

¹⁷ Hämäläinen.

¹⁸ Edmunds, 739.

Native American history has also been experiencing an increase in transnational comparisons about indigenous issues.¹⁹ These transnational studies compare such topics as treaty-making processes in New Zealand and the United States, diasporas across the Americas and the Pacific rims, and the forced removal of indigenous children into state institutions in Australia and the United States. Given the history of North America as European imperialists traded and conquered each other's colonial claims, Native Americans and even the settlers switched from border to border. These dispersed people even in North America have benefited from a transnational approach to understanding their history inside the North American continent.

In conclusion, the past forty years of American West historiography has experienced an unprecedented change in methods and scholarship. What started with Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis dominated in themes of Darwinism and American exceptionalism has been nearly abandoned by all current historians. The once invisible stories of Native Americans have been recognized as being inseparable from the historiography of the American West and are being sought after and included in a myriad of new and exciting scholarship in the field. Along with this recognition comes challenges as the Eurocentric methodologies of historical inquiry do not mesh with the largely oral history of the indigenous peoples of North America. Further compounding the field are the very real consequences of conquest and oppression that European invaders thrust upon an entire continent and who has the authority to tell the story. However, historians have risen to the task and understand that the best way to tell the story is from many perspectives and that fresh and unique viewpoints and methodologies will give a broader and

¹⁹ Hämäläinen.

more accurate view of the American West.

Bibliography

- Adelman, Jeremy, and Stephen Aron. "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in between in North American History." *The American Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (06 1999): 814. doi:10.2307/2650990.
- Aron, Stephen. "The American West Reprised, Revised, and Revived." *Reviews in American History* 28, no. 2 (2000): 245-50. doi:10.1353/rah.2000.0021.
- Aron, Stephen. "The History of the American West Gets a Much-Needed Rewrite." Smithsonian.com. August 16, 2016.
<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/history-american-west-gets-much-needed-rewrite-180960149/>.
- Edmunds, R. David. "Native Americans, New Voices: American Indian History, 1895-1995." *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 3 (06 1995): 717. doi:10.2307/2168602.
- Foner, Eric, and Lisa MacGirr. *American History Now*. Temple University Press, 2011.
- Hämäläinen, Pekka. "The Futures of Native American History in the United States." *Perspectives on History* 50, no. 9 (12 2012): 814. doi:10.2307/2650990.
<https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/december-2012/the-future-of-the-discipline/the-futures-of-native-american-history-in-the-united-states>
- Limerick, Patricia Nelson. "Turnerians All: The Dream of a Helpful History in an Intelligible World." *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 3 (06 1995): 697. doi:10.2307/2168601.
- Weber, David J. "Turner, the Boltonians, and the Borderlands." *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 1 (02 1986): 66. doi:10.2307/1867235.