

Convergence, California, and the Newest Western History

BY STEPHEN ARON

*Convergence: "a way of seeing the large, evolving story of the American West as an interwoven tapestry of cultures and peoples, and a way of understanding how their stories are connected to one another—and to us."*¹

Convergence as a way of interpreting Western history has molded much recent scholarship, becoming, perhaps, the signature approach of Western historians in the last decade. Indeed, the accent on convergences and on the complex weave of cross-cultural connections that these interactions have generated distinguishes this "newest Western history" from its predecessor, the "new Western history."

As a cultural crossroads par excellence, California has moved to the fore in this newest Western history. That was less the case in new Western histories, whose regionalist vision, often tied to aridity, relegated California (or at least coastal and northern California) to the margins. Yet, with historians' focus now turned to demographic diversity and the multiple intersections at which cultures met and mingled, California's importance becomes inescapable. As Walter Nugent

recognizes in his 1999 survey of the peopling of the region, California has been and remains "fundamentally western . . . at the edge of the West and at its center, all at once." In Nugent's "story of its people," and in much scholarship about the West that has been produced in the last ten years, Californians command attention for the variety of their origins and for the ways in which their stories link to one another and to the world.²

THE OLD AND THE NEW

What was labeled the new Western history surfaced in the 1980s and 1990s, setting itself against an older Western history whose roots date back a century to Frederick Jackson Turner's famed 1893 essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." In that piece (and subsequent writings), Turner insisted that the settlement of successive frontiers explained American development. He and his disciples treated the West as synonymous with westward expansion, regarding the U.S. Census Bureau's reported closing of the frontier in 1890 as the endpoint of Western history.³

By contrast, new Western historians dismissed the utility of the frontier concept and substituted a regional definition that limited the latitude of



John Gast's 1872 painting, American Progress, depicts the parade of pioneer types and the vision of civilization's triumphant march across the continent—key themes in Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" that were challenged by "new" and "newest" Western historians. In Gast's allegorical representation of Manifest Destiny, Columbia, the female personification of the United States, leads settlers westward, book in hand.

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what was West. Rather than following the course of westward expansion—tracking the process of settling successive frontiers across the continent as Turnerians had done—new Western historians confined their attention to the region that is today generally considered the American West, roughly the western half of the United States. While restricting their geographic vision, new Western historians extended the field's chronology by opening up to inquiry the history of the West in the twentieth century, something historians of the frontier had tended to ignore.

Old and new also split on the meaning, message, and moral of the Western past. Where the old Western history heralded the blessings of American expansion, new Western historians condemned the ecological despoliations and cultural dislocations that attended the extension of European and American colonialism and the spread of industrial capitalism. Where the old saluted rugged pioneers, the new downplayed the virtue of individualism and disputed the myth of self-reliance, emphasizing instead the leading role that the federal government played in the

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conquest, colonization, and consolidation of the American West. And where the old put white male pioneers alone on center stage, the new widened the spotlight to reveal an astonishingly multiethnic cast of men *and* women.⁴

Combined, these distinctions supplanted an older, monocultural interpretation with a multicultural one and fundamentally changed the complexion of Western history. We now take as a starting point that the West is and has long been home to a racial and ethnic diversity that surpassed the East's population mix. But taken separately, individual studies tended to focus on the history of a single group and to consider its interactions only in relation to the "dominant" white culture. Rarely did they illuminate the full spectrum of intersections across which Western communities developed.⁵

Not all approved the embrace of multiculturalism. Critics charged that the new Western history left out the good parts and recast America's frontier heritage as a multicultural course in "failure studies." Through the late 1990s, fierce debates figured prominently in the wider "culture wars" of the era, including those triggered by visual depictions of the new Western history at major museums. Especially nettlesome was the reaction to the National Museum of American Art's 1991 exhibition "The West as America," which drew the media's attention to the revisionist agenda of the new Western history and sparked vehement objections. Conservatives expressed outrage at what they deemed the show's blasphemous reconsideration of Western art and Western

myth. The attacks, which led to the cancellation of plans for a national tour, set the stage for a series of controversies over museum exhibitions. The most vocal opponents were political and cultural conservatives, but critiques of multiculturalism were not limited to the right. Arthur Schlesinger, a lion of liberalism, worried that multiculturalism buttressed ethnic tribalism, resulting in the fragmenting of the social order and the "disuniting of America." If not for the same reasons as conservatives and liberals, those farther to the left, like Todd Gitlin, weighed in with similar fears about how multicultural separatism spelled the "twilight of common dreams."⁶

THE FRONTIER REVIVED

The search for a common past—for a framework to bring multicultural histories together—unexpectedly led some historians back to the frontier. Unexpected, because back in the 1980s and 1990s, several of the most prominent new Western historians had campaigned to eject the word *frontier* from the vocabularies of their colleagues, insisting that it was terminally tainted by racist, sexist, and imperialist associations. In Patricia Limerick's biting censure, the frontier was the "F word," its vague and ethnocentric meanings perpetuating triumphalist fantasies and foreclosing historical analysis of the West's present predicaments. Putting Limerick's frontier-free prescription to the test, Richard White published "a new history of the American West" in 1991 that omitted any mention of frontier.⁷

Still, the construct was not without defenders. Some of these retained their faith in Frederick Jackson Turner. Others conceded that Turner's usage of the word wanted for precision and that his understandings of what happened where "savagery met civilization" reflected the prejudices of his day. They maintained, however, that this baggage did not so fatally flaw the concept of frontier as to necessitate its amputation from Western history. Rather than undertaking such

major surgery, what was required was a little nip and tuck. In this renovation, the frontier stood more neutrally as the contact point between cultures. As Robert Hine and John Mack Faragher explained, this “reformulated” frontier recovered the path to “our common past” and showed the way to “our common future.”⁸

Designating frontier the central and unifying theme of their “new interpretive history,” Hine and Faragher highlighted the intercultural dimensions of Western history. From the first encounters between Europeans and Indians through the centuries that followed, they trumpeted the transformative power of interactions in frontier “contact zones.” The emergence of new peoples of mixed ethnic ancestry most obviously manifested the mingling of bloodlines. But there were subtler changes as well that evolved from generations of cohabitation and from extended and extensive cross-cultural exchanges. The resulting “cultural fusion between native and settler cultures,” Hine and Faragher argued, was “one of the most notable—and least understood—developments of early American history.”⁹

Locating what Hine and Faragher termed “composite cultures” across colonial North America was in keeping with their premise that all parts of the continent were once frontiers, and thus once Wests, at least from the vantage point of newcomers from Europe and Africa. This view of the West as a shifting place and a relative term disputed the more fixed regional orientation of other new Western historians but mirrored the perspective of many colonial historians, who in recent years also have broadened their vision of the field. Where once early American history equated exclusively with developments in the British American settlements along the Atlantic seaboard, newer colonial histories encompassed the whole of North America and even the wider Atlantic world. Like Hine and Faragher, continental colonial historians connected and compared the competing enterprises launched by European

Changing Community

The evolution of the Autry National Center’s Community gallery mirrors Western history’s multicultural makeover. When the museum, then known as the Gene Autry Museum of Western Heritage, and the gallery, then called Spirit of Community, first opened in 1988, public embrace of multiculturalism was at yet incomplete.

In its original incarnation, the Spirit of Community gallery primarily displayed artifacts of Euro-American heritage against a backdrop of familiar images of Old West towns. In 1993, the Autry moved to refresh the gallery and bring it up to date with current scholarship. The gallery’s exhibition team, led by curator Michael Duchemin, chose Indians, Mexicanos, Chinese, African Americans, Canadians, Mormons, and European immigrants—as well as Anglos—to represent the diversity of the American West, mapping the groups’ locations with 1890 U.S. census data.

In keeping with the new Western history, the exhibition’s creators decided to treat each group separately. True, objects were organized into common categories—family, occupation, education, religion, and politics—to facilitate cross-cultural comparisons. Still, the glass that divided one vitrine from another reinforced the impression that the communities existed in isolation. So did the layout of the gallery, which arrayed the “ethnic” cases around the perimeter of the room, leaving the center (and the largest case) for the display of “Anglo” artifacts. The intent was to suggest how the minority groups looked through and struggled with the dominant majority, a design decision that also built logically from the scholarship of the day.¹

The time has come for another remodeling of the museum’s Community gallery—and of the museum as a whole—moving beyond the separatist perspective of multiculturalism to embrace the connectedness of all our stories in the true spirit of the newest Western history.

powers and made relations with Indian peoples central to the story of early America.¹⁰

Our understanding of the cultural fusions that occurred on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century North American frontiers owes a great deal to the work of Richard White. There is some irony here, since it was White's 1991 textbook that provided the most thorough frontierless history of the American West. Yet in that same year, White also published *The Middle Ground: Empires, Republics, and Indians in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815*, which provided frontier historians with a metaphor to make sense of the convergences that blended the worlds of Europeans and Indians. True, White was quite specific about the particular conditions that brought the middle ground into existence between the French and Algonquian Indians in the western Great Lakes in the second half of the seventeenth century. Born of mutual weakness and fortuitous misunderstandings, White's middle ground was at once a diplomatic alliance and also a broader blurring of European and Indian ways. As his book detailed, the middle ground endured (if often tenuously) through much of the eighteenth century and extended (if often tentatively) around the Great Lakes and into the Ohio Valley.¹¹

The Middle Ground inspired a rush to uncover similar intercultural arrangements. Instead of the middle ground, those who followed White found (or claimed to find) middle grounds across colonial North America. Rather than a landscape dominated by Europeans, their scholarship emphasized the power that native peoples exercised and their ability to compel accommodations from colonial intruders. As Jeremy Adelman and I argued, this was particularly true in the continent's interior and in those places where the claims of European empires overlapped. Being between, we maintained, allowed Indians to play Europeans off one another, the better to negotiate more favorable terms of trade and defend the integrity of their territories.¹²

Looking beyond the excavation of middle grounds, the latest Western history has affirmed the existence and persistence of "native grounds"—that is, zones where Europeans remained subordinate to Indians. These works recognize that the expansive colonial domains claimed by Europeans bore little relation to the actual situation on the ground. They acknowledge as well that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Europeans were not the only expansionist powers—and not always the most successful. Most striking was the empire built by Comanches, who expanded their realm across the southern plains at the expense of neighboring Indian peoples and to the detriment of would-be European claimants. "In the Southwest," Pekka Hämäläinen has asserted, "European imperialism not only stalled in the face of indigenous resistance; it was eclipsed by indigenous imperialism," which in the case of the Comanches saw power and domain continue to expand well into the nineteenth century.¹³

To the east of "Comancheria," in the territory claimed by the United States following independence, the balance of numbers and power tipped more quickly away from Indians. To be sure, the possibility of their benefit from imperial competition did not disappear overnight. In postrevolutionary America, France, Spain, and Britain continued their transatlantic rivalry, though, as François Furstenberg discerned, "all united in hoping to see the region between the Appalachians and the Mississippi dominated by Native American power" that would create "a buffer zone to stall U.S. expansionism west of the Appalachians."¹⁴

Although assistance from Europeans helped bolster Indian resistance for a time, after the War of 1812, the waning of imperial rivalries and the flood of American settlers across the Appalachians doomed both native grounds and middle grounds. Increasingly, American and Indian councils involved more dictation than negotia-

tion. And instead of convergences, American policy promoted divergence by executing the removal of eastern Indians to lands beyond the Mississippi River. Applying an anachronistic term, several of the newest Western histories have asserted that these forced relocations amounted to state-sponsored "ethnic cleansings." These were intended to create exclusive occupation for Americans and to reduce what had long been a complex weave of cultures to a simpler pattern.¹⁵

CALIFORNIA CROSSROADS

Although the United States consolidated its political control from the Atlantic to the Pacific during the nineteenth century, the western half of the continent defied efforts to simplify its demographic and cultural mix. This was especially the case in the territory that the United States took from Mexico in 1848. And nowhere was the ongoing drama more apparent than in California, where, following the discovery of gold, people rushed from across the continent and oceans. Thus thrown together, the fortunes and fates of an unrivaled assortment of inhabitants were entwined.

The crisscrossing of cultures, as recent scholarship elucidates, predated the American conquest of California. Long before the Spanish arrived, California was home to a greater density of people and diversity of languages, cultures, and polities than anywhere else in precolonial North America. This, along with the variety of environments that existed in close proximity, encouraged extensive and intensive exchanges. To a tragic extent, the Spanish disrupted ecologies, devastated native populations, and severed many of the precolonial inter-Indian networks, leaving Indians much weakened when confronting colonial invaders.¹⁶

Still, new books by James Sandos, Kent Lightfoot, and Steven Hackel demolish the once prevalent assumption that, for better or worse, the Spaniards dominated California Indians completely. Instead, these studies detail how California Indi-

ans rebuilt communities and created new ones in the face of significant population declines and colonial demands. Within the communities that developed inside the missions, Indians and Spanish engaged one another on unequal terms, but even there Spanish authority depended on a stratum of native officials largely drawn from the ranks of traditional Indian leaders. Outside the missions and presidios and farther from the coast, Indians more readily demonstrated their power, raiding Spanish people and property and thereby retaining control over the terms of convergence.¹⁷

Mexican rule brought important changes to intercultural affairs and expanded the international presence in California. By secularizing missions, granting lands, and removing mercantilist barriers, the Mexican government encouraged immigration and further opened California to global trading circuits. The influx of people and products altered relations between natives and newcomers, most obviously on the sprawling ranches that depended on Indian labor to produce the hides and tallow that became California's chief export.¹⁸

Long viewed as a provincial fantasy, the economy and culture of Mexican California now has been given a much harsher makeover. In three seminal books, Albert Hurtado captures the cosmopolitanism of Mexican California, particularly around the polyglot settlement of New Helvetia established by John Sutter. But there is little to be admired in Hurtado's portrait of Sutter or in his portrayal of Indian workers' abuse at New Helvetia and elsewhere in California. So, too, Hurtado's illumination of the more "intimate frontiers" between men and women drains the romance from oft-told tales of life in "Old California," though it (together with a number of other recently published studies) also underscores how cross-ethnic marital and sexual unions sometimes engraved and other times effaced boundaries among peoples.¹⁹



*Three-quarters of a century after the U.S. victory over the Californio militia at the 1847 Battle of Rio San Gabriel, largely Anglo audiences in southern California flocked to see John Steven McGroarty's *The Mission Play*, advertised here in a 1921 brochure. The drama, a romanticized account of life at Mission San Gabriel Arcángel, epitomized what historian William Deverell has called the "whitewashing" of Los Angeles's Mexican past.*

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While intercultural relations shifted with the transition from Spanish to Mexican governance, often to the detriment of Indians, following the takeover by the United States the world of California natives shattered. With their lands overrun by goldseekers, Indians scrambled to keep a place in American California. Many were pushed onto reservations; some continued to work on ranches; others labored in mines or took jobs in

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towns, almost always for the lowest wages or as the result of forced indentures that resembled enslavement. And across California, disease, starvation, and violence took a rising toll, turning what had been a demographic decline prior to the Gold Rush into a demographic disaster.²⁰

Indians who survived the Gold Rush shared California with peoples from across the United States and around the world. That diversity and the complexity of relationships between men and women from so many places (and among men when there were few if any women) have figured prominently in the last decade of historical writing. Along with exploring how the world connected in and changed California, the newest Western scholarship has widened the lens to expose how California connected to and changed the world.

The Gold Rush, as Malcolm Rohrbough, Brian Roberts, and Leonard Richards explain, transformed the American nation more than any event between the Revolution and the Civil War, its impact felt as much by those who stayed behind as by those who trekked to California in search of gold. The travels of those who crossed the continent left a deep imprint on the lands and Indians in between the "states" and California. Those who came from Europe and the eastern United States by sea generally portaged across the isthmus of Central America. But while most moved across as quickly as possible, their presence, as

Aims McGuinness details, changed Panama forever. Others made the longer trip around the tip of South America, joined by gold hunters from South America, principally Chile. The lure of gold rippled across the Pacific, too. The biggest swells hit Hawaii, Australia, and most profoundly southern China, whose history was now increasingly interwoven with California's.²¹

Although the Gold Rush and subsequent waves of migration brought the world together in California, a host of biases and measures sought to keep peoples apart—or at least put them in their place. Chief among these, and now a prime focus of scholarship, were the shifting boundaries of “whiteness.” In the second half of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, the dynamics of whiteness exercised considerable control over the opportunities of life in California—where individuals could reside and work, what they were paid, with whom they associated, and even whether they could enter California at all. For Mexicans, the shift seemed to push them from within the circle of those considered white to outside it. By contrast, the trajectory for European immigrants generally moved in the other direction, and as the privileges of whiteness opened up to them, the roles and rights granted to Indians, Mexicans, Chinese, and African Americans narrowed.²²

Restrictive laws and deep-seated prejudices regulated the terms and frequency of convergences, though these barriers—and this also is a hallmark of the newest California histories—were vigorously contested and occasionally breached. To be sure, limited opportunities could and did pit nonwhite groups against one another. In their recent dissertations, D. Michael Bottoms and Joshua Paddison chronicle the post-Gold Rush struggles of Indians, Mexicans, Chinese, and African Americans to gain a higher rung on California's multiethnic ladder. All too often, struggles of turned into struggles *between*, with arguments for the elevation of one group rest-



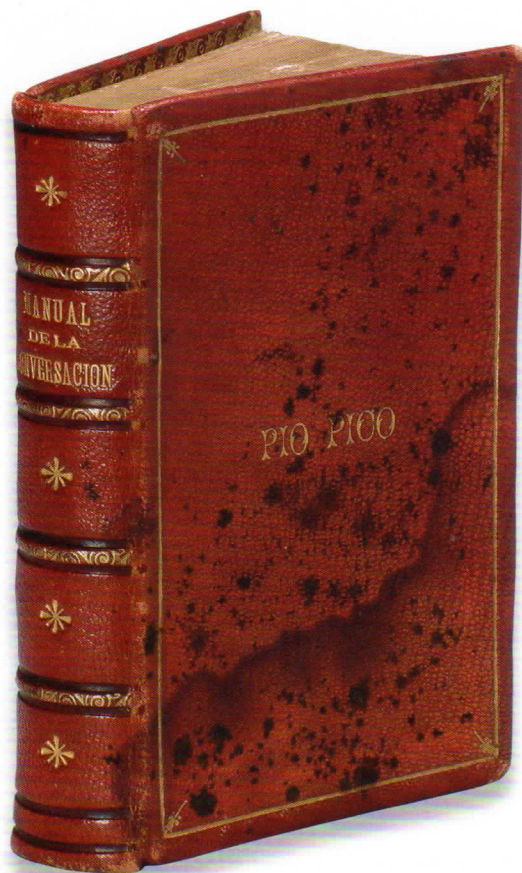
The cowboy has long exemplified the mythic Old West, but the example of the Spanish and Chinese vaquero is evidence that diverse cultures assumed the role, making it an appropriate symbol for the convergence of traditions and peoples that is central to the newest Western history. In this postcard, a Chinese vaquero rides in the San Jose Roundup, advertised as “California's Great Frontier Celebration,” in early July 1916.

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ing on claims of superiority over one or more of the other nonwhite groups. By the end of the nineteenth century, countless opportunities were closed to California's nonwhite populations. Still, the reconstruction of race relations, in California and across the West, remained an ongoing matter, though many openings did not become visible until well into the twentieth century.²³

OPENINGS

The twentieth-century West, which figured so little in the imagination of Frederick Jackson Turner and those who took their cues from his frontier thesis, has become by all measures the dominant concern of the last several generations of Western historians. This is immediately apparent to



This 1857 Spanish-English conversation and phrase book, Manual de la Conversación, belonged to Pío Pico (1801–1894), the last Mexican governor of California. Pico's life spanned the transitions in California from Spanish to Mexican to American rule, and his career exemplified the challenges that faced Californios as they adjusted to the laws and language of the United States. While borders were redrawn over the course of Pico's life, the borderlands that he inhabited have become a focal point of recent scholarly inquiry.

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anyone who has attended a conference of the Western History Association. At these gatherings over the last twenty or so years, panels and papers about the twentieth century far outnumber those dealing with earlier times, and “borderlands” has supplanted “frontier” as the construct most favored by Western historians. But the change in chronology and keyword hardly has diminished the importance of convergences. Indeed, the entanglements of the postfrontier era resembled those of the past, albeit in an amplified fashion and, again, particularly in California.²⁴

Consider the movement of people into the West. As Walter Nugent synthesizes, although homesteading peaked early in the twentieth century and then largely collapsed, the West continued to be a colossal magnet for people, both internal migrants and immigrants from other nations. Of course, the magnetism was not spread equally across the region, nor did the inflow of foreigners progress at an even clip. Overall, no place witnessed growth like California and no other western state matched its ethnic heterogeneity.²⁵

This explains why California has attracted so much attention from historians of the twentieth century and why Los Angeles, where these trends were magnified, has generated an especially abundant body of fresh scholarship. The growth of population in the city (and surrounding area) has been astonishing and has raised the question, asked repeatedly by scholars, “why L.A.?” That is, why did a site lacking the geographic attributes upon which major metropolises generally are built grow so spectacularly? The most common answer credits boosters who “white-washed” its Mexican past and dreamed a great city into being.²⁶

Of late, however, scholars have shown less interest in elite “Anglo” promoters and have explored the expectations and experiences, the actions and interactions of humbler Angelenos of darker complexions. The arrival of waves of these newcomers transformed the ethnic profile of Los Angeles, which through the first third of the twentieth century had been the “whitest” of major American cities. From where and why the nonwhite and foreign born came and how they got along have emerged as the latest key questions. Destructive riots in 1965 and 1992, the latter of which repeated some of the same sad struggle between nonwhite groups that Bottoms and Paddison found in the late nineteenth century, pointed historians toward depressing conclusions about the convergence of peoples in Los Angeles. But in a more uplifting vein, studies by Shana Bernstein, Scott Kurashige, George San-

chez, Allison Varzally, and Mark Wild revisit the city's multiethnic neighborhoods such as Boyle Heights and recover social networks fashioned in streets, shops, and schools that have trespassed across group boundaries. From these associations, at first fleeting and fragile, these authors trace the emergence of more lasting bonds that have translated into joint political action and have challenged the legal protections afforded to whiteness.²⁷

The largest stream of immigration into Los Angeles has come across the Mexican border, a site of concentration for some of the most innovative scholarship on the twentieth-century West. How groundbreaking becomes clear when the newest work is compared with the founding generations of border—and borderlands—studies. As pioneered by Herbert Eugene Bolton and developed by scores of his students, the study of borderlands emerged in the early twentieth century as a subfield of Western history, taking as its turf the expanse of Spanish colonial claims that were subsequently incorporated into the United States. In the Boltonian vision, the “Spanish Borderlands” extended to meet or beat European imperial rivals’ ambitions in western and southeastern North America, stretching from coastal Alaska and British Columbia south along the Pacific littoral and then eastward across the lowest tier of current states all the way to Florida. Focus blurred and receded with the Napoleonic Wars and other European events that brought the demise of the Spanish Empire.²⁸

By contrast, the latest generation of scholarship updates the geography and demography of the borderlands, working both sides of the current boundary between Mexico and the United States and reaching right to the present. And where Bolton and his disciples tended to spotlight European interests only, the newest borderlands studies adopt the lens of convergence. Informed by a variety of disciplinary perspectives, scholars of the borderlands accent the vibrant cultural productions and the blending of ways that developed

across this region, at once divided and connected by the international border that runs through it.²⁹

In an even greater departure from earlier studies in the Boltonian tradition, it has become impossible to speak about “the” borderlands as denoting a single zone. In fact, scholars working far from the Mexico–U.S. line have unfurled the banner of borderlands, reconceptualizing the southern U.S. boundary and the northern border with Canada as borderlands and even seeking to compare border zones on opposite ends of the western United States. Indeed, in this era of globalization and transnationalism, borderlands seem to be everywhere—or at least on everyone’s mind. The recent literature includes scores of books and articles that employ the construct of borderlands to interpret the histories of Central and Eastern Europe and the territories where Europe and Asia bleed together. These borderlands, needless to say, are a long way from Bolton’s, but what makes the newest Western history so exciting is that they are no longer a world away.³⁰

So where does current scholarship leave the history of California and the American West? To be sure, no other part of the West can match California’s complexity of complexions. Still, that should not make California marginal to the West. Rather, it is like the rest of the West, indeed, like the nation as a whole—only more so. For the history of convergences in California, especially since the Gold Rush, often has prefigured subsequent developments across the United States. In other words, the interethnic history of California is like the history of the United States—only before so.

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