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RECONSTRUCTING RACE

ELLIOTT WEST

During what might be called the Greater Reconstruction, 1846–1877, territorial acquisitions as well as southern slavery forced a new racial dialogue between West and South, unsettled racial relations and presumptions, and finally led to a new racial order encompassing western as well as southern people of color.

I LIVE IN A TOWN THAT DOESN'T KNOW WHERE IT IS. Fayetteville is in northwestern Arkansas—that's clear enough—but when somebody asks us locals to explain just where in this wide republic *that* is, things get dicey. The architecture and the lovely fall colors suggest the Midwest. The pace of life, the accents, and the studied eccentricities all speak of the South. Some put us elsewhere. At a party soon after I arrived, I told a colleague's wife my field of study. "Oh, the West is a wonderful place to live!" she said in her soft Carolinian rhythm. I asked when she had lived there. She looked at me, as if at a slow nephew, and answered: "Why, now."

Living and working along the seams of national regions is a fine encouragement to wonder about the differences and continuities among them—in appearance, in habits and points of view, and beneath all that, in their histories. Two things I know for sure. The South thinks it is different from the rest of the country, and it is race that southerners use most often to explain their separateness. The tortured relations of black and white, slavery and its rage and guilt, the war that ended slavery and the tormented generations that followed, the centuries-long embrace, intimate and awful on so many levels—all that, we're told, has set southerners apart and has made the South the central stage of America's racial drama.

Yet from my office on the cusp of regions, I have questions. I have no doubt that the South and southerners are peculiar, and I am sure that race helps explain how and why. My problem lies in how we have allowed the South to dominate the story of race in America. From my perch, three hundred miles west of Memphis and one hundred and twenty-five east of Jim Ronda, it looks as if the South, with a Jeb Stuart audacity,

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has surrounded and confined how we think, talk, and write about this essential part of our history. And with a few recent exceptions, we have mostly gone along with it.¹

I would like to look again at race in America during the crucial middle years of the nineteenth century and wonder aloud what that story might look like if expanded to more of a continental perspective. Specifically, I will bring the West more into the picture. If I have a general premise, it is that the acquisition of the Far West in the 1840s influenced, much more than we have credited, our racial history—how people have thought about race, how racial minorities have fared, and what policies our government adopted. In fact, since race is always a bellwether of larger forces, I think we need to consider that the great gulping of land in the 1840s had as much to do with shaping the course of our history as any event of that century, including the Civil War that dominates the story as we tell it today.

Taken together, the acquisitions of 1845–1848 comprised our greatest expansion. The annexations of Texas and Oregon and the Mexican Cession made the United States much larger and richer—and far more ethnically mixed. Languages are one crude measure. While the United States grew in area by about 66 percent, the number of languages spoken within it increased by more than 100 percent.² That number would grow still more during the next few years as tens of thousands flooded into the California gold fields. In the 1850s, no nation on earth had a region with so rich an ethnic stew as the American West.

Expansion triggered an American racial crisis. We have always taught that to our students, of course, but we have missed at least half the point. The connection we make is between expansion and slavery. We say that new western lands, full of opportunity, made the question of black slavery dangerously concrete outside the South. That, in turn, set loose disputes that by 1861 would tip us over the edge of catastrophe. This sequence seems to give the West a prominent role in America's racial history, but the effect is ironic. Because race remains strictly a matter of black and white, and

¹ For two studies of race in America that go beyond consideration of black and white, see Scott L. Malcomson, *One Drop of Blood: The American Misadventure of Race* (New York, 2002) and Ronald T. Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1979). A recent approach complicates the issue nicely through study of evolving notions of whiteness and what has distinguished it. See David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London, 1991), Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York, 1995), and for a survey of the literature, Peter Kolchin, "Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America," *Journal of American History* 89 (June 2002): 154–73.

² My admittedly crude generality is based on an estimate of non-Indian languages, plus the relative numbers of Native languages spoken in the United States before and after the annexations of the 1840s, as compiled by Ives Goddard in "Native Languages and Language Families of North America," to accompany *Handbook of North American Indians*, gen. ed., William C. Sturtevant, vol. 17 (Washington, DC, 1996). Area of the United States increased from roughly 1.77 to 3 million square miles.

because its prime issue is African American slavery and its central event is the Civil War, western expansion is important only on eastern terms. Once the Mexican War does its mischief, the focus quickly swings back East and stays there. The West has its consequential moment, then remains at the edge of the action.

But that's nothing close to the whole story. Expansion was double trouble. It not only sped up the old conflict between North and South. By complicating so hugely America's ethnic character it raised new questions on the relation between race and nation. These questions centered on the West. The best introduction to them is through the rhetoric surrounding expansion. In that rhetoric the acquisition of the West was both explained and justified in terms of the inferiority of its nonwhite native peoples. Mexicans were called inherently debased, unable to govern themselves, and too slothful and torpid to realize the West's potential. In a minor masterpiece of circular reasoning, Thomas Jefferson Farnham declared Southern California's darker peoples indolent, then cited as evidence their "lazy color."³ Indians were said to be mostly incapable of settling down to the useful arts of farming and industry, and they were inherently violent to boot. Anglo Americans, by contrast, were described as so naturally superior that they could hardly help but expand into neighboring territory so unsuitably held by lesser peoples.⁴

The racial rationale for conquest was one more expression of the Romantic spirit coloring all aspects of the westward movement. The world of the Romantics was made up of distinct groups—the terms *races* and *nations* and *peoples* were used interchangeably. Every race had its own virtues and vices.⁵ Only a generation or so earlier, in Jefferson's America, such traits were said to be pliable. Eastern Indians, the Jeffersonians argued, only had to be immersed in white culture in order to evolve in abilities and manners, finally reaching something like parity and merging into full citizenship. By the 1840s, however, the Jeffersonian view had given way to the Romantic, which drew a far harder line. Now the character of each race was said to be as innate and unchanging as fur to a cat and hoots to an owl. One writer went so far as to give Mexicans a category separate from humanity, "Mexicanity." Anglo Saxons (or Caucasians, or Teutons, or Anglo Normans), on the other hand, were humankind's finest, but their

³ Farnham is quoted in "'Scarce More Than Apes': Historical Roots of Anglo-American Stereotypes of Mexicans," in *New Spain's Far Northern Frontier: Essays on Spain in the American West, 1540–1821*, ed. David J. Weber (Albuquerque, 1979), 302.

⁴ On racial justifications for expansion, see Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, MA, 1981), 208–48; Robert W. Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination* (New York, 1985), 270–301; Thomas R. Hietala, *Manifest Design: Anxious Aggrandizement in Late Jacksonian America* (Ithaca, NY, 1985), 132–72; Albert K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansion in American History* (Baltimore, 1935), 162–89.

⁵ George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (New York, 1971), 97–129; Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 158–86.

superior traits were just as unchangeable as the inferior ones of western natives. Whites and nonwhites were separated from each other by what Francis Parkman called in *The Oregon Trail* the “impassable gap” between his own kind and Indians.⁶

Romantic racism pervaded American culture in the 1840s. Even many abolitionists and opponents of the Mexican War, like Ralph Emerson and Theodore Parker, embraced Romantic racial thinking.⁷ It found its sharpest focus, however, where we would expect, in the nation’s two racial hotspots, the South and West. We can hear it in southerners’ defenses of slavery and in the histories and essays about inevitable expansion, in high literature like the southern fiction of William Gilmore Simms and in the dozens of popular western novels portraying “Mexican monkeys” and blood-thirsty Indians.⁸ A key to understanding the western racial crisis is to see it in a dynamic relationship with that of the South. The new questions raised by expansion were distinctively their own—they took their shape from the West’s own conditions—but they also played on, and were played on by, older issues rooted in the South and in black slavery. What emerged was a dialogue between regions that tells us a lot about America’s genuinely continental racial preoccupations.

Some focused on the racial similarities of two regions inhabited by darker peoples. What, they wondered, might happen if southern blacks should move west and mix with other races? The Mississippian Robert Walker argued cleverly to northerners who disliked both slavery and blacks that Texas annexation would actually reduce the nation’s black population. Freedmen and slaves would flow naturally toward the Southwest and eventually into Mexico, attracted by the concentration of duskier peoples. This ingenious notion of Texas-as-siphon-hose was picked up by several prominent figures, including James Buchanan and John O’Sullivan, coiner of the phrase “manifest destiny.”⁹ Others were deeply disturbed by the mingling of nonwhite peoples of the South and West. When Senator Thomas Hart Benton looked at Florida’s Seminole conflict, then looked westward, he saw the prospect of a continental race

⁶ Richard L. Wilson, *Short Ravelings from a Long Yarn, or Camp March Sketches of the Santa Fe Trail*, ed. Benjamin F. Taylor (Santa Ana, CA, 1936), 120; Parkman quoted in Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U. S. Indian Policy* (Middletown, CT, 1982), 85.

⁷ Emerson opposed the Mexican War in part because it was an unnecessarily violent means to do what was already ordained—to bring about the domination of the continent by “the strong British race,” part of the Teutonic tribes who “[had] a national singleness of heart, which contrast[ed] with the Latin races.” Parker, an ardent abolitionist, nonetheless believed in rankings of civilization: Africans were on the bottom and Indians only slightly higher, and Anglo-Saxon America was destined to rule North America: “We are the involuntary instruments of God.” Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 177–80.

⁸ For an excellent analysis of these themes in popular literature set in the West, see Robert Charles Cottrell, “A Study of Western and Southwestern Popular Fiction of the 1835–1860 Period” (master’s thesis, University of Texas at Arlington, 1977).

⁹ James P. Shenton, *Robert John Walker: A Politician from Jackson to Lincoln* (New York, 1961), 38–9.

war—an alliance of blacks and Indians that would set loose “the ravages of the colored races upon the white!”¹⁰

Others feared not conflict but intimate union. Romantic racists held that sex across the racial divide dragged the superior partner down toward the inferior. They explained Mexico’s defeat by its mixing of European blood with Indian—the term of the day was *mongrelization*—and pointed at what they considered the sorry state of southern mulattos to warn what might happen as triumphant Anglos mingled with the West’s motley of peoples.¹¹ What may be the two earliest uses of “hybrid,” as applied to people rather than plants and animals, were by the Alabama physician Josiah Nott, whose racial theories were a major prop of slavery, and by Washington Irving. In *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville*, Irving warned that out West the amalgamation of Indians and whites would produce hybrid races, the mongrel peoples he described in *Astoria*, “like new formations in geology, . . . [made from] the ‘debris’ and ‘abrasions’ of former races, civilized and savage.”¹²

Other commentators concentrated on the obvious differences between West and South. These contrasts, like the parallels, tell us a lot about the thinking of the day. In particular, they bring out a crucial theme otherwise easily missed—the relation between race and distance. At the heart of the southern dilemma was the fact that blacks were enmeshed in white society. They were considered always a threat, yet they were economically essential, from cotton fields to kitchens, and so had to be kept close. From the white perspective, the problem with blacks was that, metaphorically and literally, they were inside the house. The problem with Mexicans and Indians was the opposite. They might have been technically inside the nation’s borders in 1848, but they were far removed from white control. Just as troubling, they were close by to others of their own kind. The 49th and 33^d parallels cut arbitrarily across nearly two thousand miles of the West’s cultural grain, and as for the Rio Grande, it didn’t divide the land and peoples on either side of it any more than a zipper divides a pair of pants. Cultural kinsmen just over these meaningless borders would reinforce every deviant tendency of western peoples. The possibility of overcoming these problems of distance—of bringing the new country fully under control—raised a further problem.

¹⁰ *Congressional Globe*, 25th Congress, 3^d session, Appendix, 5 February (Washington, DC, 1839), 162.

¹¹ To Thomas Jefferson Farnham the same “law of Nature” that left the southern mulatto inferior to either of the races that produced him cursed the mingling of white and Indian races in California and Mexico. Weber, “Scarce More Than Apes,” 295.

¹² Washington Irving, *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville*, ed. Robert A. Rees and Alan Sandy (Boston, 1977), 269–70; Washington Irving, *Astoria, or Anecdotes of an Enterprise Beyond the Rocky Mountains*, ed. Richard Dilworth Rust (Boston, 1976), 152. Robert J. C. Young attributes to Nott the first use of *hybrid* as applied to humans. See Young’s *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London, 1995), 6. He refers to Nott’s “The Mulatto a Hybrid—Probably Extermination of the Two Races if the Whites and Blacks are Allowed to Intermarry,” *American Journal of the Medical Sciences*. 6 (n.s., 1843): 252–6.

We had justified conquest by calling western natives cultural simpletons, political knuckle walkers and violent drifters. We said they were hopelessly incompatible with our way of life. How then would they ever fit in once the West was made truly part of the republic?

Out of this conversation of West and South we get a sense of the full racial crisis triggered by expansion. It was partly about Free Soil, the question of whether southern slavery, with its nonwhite peoples as essential insiders, would spread to the West. But equally pressing were questions about nonwhite peoples already there, racial outsiders, beyond the government's reach and with no obvious part to play in national life. Should they—could they—be brought inside? And if they should, how? And if not, what should we do with them? The quick and facile answer, commonly heard at the time of the Mexican War, was that Indians and Mexicans would simply melt away before the expansion of superior white society. What exactly melting meant, how it would happen and where the residue would go—all that was vague. In any case, this notion of ethnic evaporation kept the potentially explosive issues comfortably out-of-focus.¹³ White America could tell itself that as time passed the problems would solve themselves. As Anglos took possession of the West, they would never need to live in any numbers for very long as close neighbors with nonwhites.

And then, within roughly two hundred hours of the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, that glib expectation vanished. Gold was found in California. What melted away was not Mexicans and Indians but the easy conceit that whites and nonwhites would never have to face each other. If you are looking for examples of how regionally lopsided we historians have been in our treatment of race in these years, nothing shows it better than how we have told the California story, starting with the name we give to those who supposedly first found and dug the gold: *fortyniners*. The rush, of course, began the year before. By the time easterners showed up, the diggings had some whites from California, Oregon, and Australia, but mostly Indians, Californios, Sonorans, Chileans, Peruvians, and Hawaiians. These first gold diggers, the *fortyeighters*, blasted the easy comforts of racial supremacy. Far from twiddling away their time, these crowds of lazy-colored people were energetically and efficiently pulling money from the ground—wealth that white Americans presumed was theirs. Then, only a few years later, came the Chinese, more alien in appearance and custom than any voluntary immigrants in American history. Now they too worked, and worked well, this field of dreams.¹⁴

In California, the racial crisis begun by expansion was suddenly taken to a new level. The 1850s saw two violent episodes. Both arose from the prospect of white settlement, and both concerned the role of race in controlling natural resources. One

¹³ Dippie, *The Vanishing American*, 12–31; Hietala, *Manifest Design*, 155; Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 210, 230, 243–4.

¹⁴ Rodman Wilson Paul, rev. ed. by Elliott West, *Mining Frontiers of the Far West, 1848–1880* (Albuquerque, 2001), 226–52.

we've made the center of our attention. The other we've virtually ignored. The first was in Kansas. Its question was whether southern slavery, that system of nonwhite insiders, would have a part in the new agricultural economy of the Plains. Every survey text covers in detail the Free Soil fight, its characters and events. The second episode was in California. The question there concerned nonwhite outsiders and their place in the new economy of mineral wealth. This episode was just as revealing and a lot uglier. First Chileans, Sonorans, and others from South and Central America and Mexico were forcibly expelled or confined to marginal diggings. Then much the same was done to Chinese through physical and economic harassment. And throughout this period and the decade that followed, white Californians waged a brutal campaign against Indians.¹⁵ The term "genocide" is tossed around far too easily in discussions of Indian policy, but this was the genuine article—roundups, assaults, destruction of families (including child-stealing), and organized hunts of extermination. This second conquest of California took a human toll hundreds of times that of the Kansas raids and bushwhacking.¹⁶ Yet it gets at most a line or two in our texts and rarely a sentence in our lectures.

These twin episodes, Bleeding Kansas and Bloodier California, were fitting pre-*ludes* to the 1860s, years of unmatched violence rooted in our racial dilemmas. The toll of those years, of course, was incomparably greater in the East, but the level of carnage there should not obscure the fact that the Civil War's racial consequences, like its preliminaries, were truly continent-wide. While the war resolved part of the southern question by ending African American slavery, it made western issues more pressing than ever. The war accelerated developments that drew the West into the nation more quickly and fully than anyone had predicted. That, in turn, made it impossible to avoid the West's racial questions. Put another way, the Civil War did for much of the West what the gold rush had done in California—destroyed the illusion that whites somehow would never have to answer how they planned to live with free people of color. More generally, the war shattered or shook institutions regulating race

¹⁵ For an excellent work that has gotten too little attention from historians of race during this period, see Tomás Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley, CA, 1994). Almaguer's is by far the best work we have thus far on the impact of California on the shaping of American racial thinking. On ethnic and racial conflict spawned by the gold rush, see Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *Days of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the American Nation* (Berkeley, CA, 1997), 220–9; Paul and West, *Mining Frontiers of the Far West*, 204–6, 228–30, 239–42, 244–7; James J. Rawls, *Indians of California: The Changing Image* (Norman, 1984), 171–201; Clifford E. Trafzer and Joel R. Hyer, eds., *Exterminate Them! Written Accounts of the Murder, Rape, and Enslavement of Native Americans during the California Gold Rush, 1848–1868* (East Lansing, MI, 1999); Robert F. Heizer, ed., *The Destruction of California Indians* (Lincoln, 1993); Albert L. Hurtado, *Indian Survival on the California Frontier* (New Haven, 1988), 100–92.

¹⁶ Dale E. Watts, "How Bloody Was Bleeding Kansas?: Political Killings in Kansas Territory, 1854–1861," *Kansas History* 18 (Summer 1995): 116–29. Watts tallies fifty-six killed in politically motivated violence in Kansas.

from coast to coast. It jumbled identities and began a time of unprecedented racial disarray.

If anybody back then was curious about the shiftiness of race relations and categories, they should have visited the area where I live now, the area called at the time "the border," a southwesterly arc of a thousand miles from western Missouri and eastern Kansas down to what is called the border today, the Rio Grande Valley. Here, where South touched West, was a grand display of the seemingly limitless combinations of racial arrangements and identities. Imagine a tour of the border during the fifteen years after the war. We would start in Kansas with a new look at the Exodusters, whose move from South to West was, paradoxically, both a rejection of, and an aggressive claim to, a traditional racial order. We might listen to the freedman J. H. Williamson praising former slaves as the rightful inheritors of manifest destiny. In cultural terms, he was saying, blacks were whites, and out West they would fulfill the promise of Jamestown and Plymouth, saving the wilderness from those who would never do it justice. "The Indians are savage and will not work," he argued. "We, the negro race, are a working people" who would, he implied, subdue the land and build towns, churches, and schools.¹⁷ Frederick Douglass also reminded white America of the freedman's privileged status as an insider. The only reason the African American had not been hunted down like the Indian, he told the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1869, was that "he is so close under your arm, that you cannot get at him." This closeness, however, had made "the negro . . . more like the white man than the Indian, in his tastes and tendencies, and disposition to accept civilization. . . . You do not see him wearing a blanket, but coats cut in the latest European fashion."¹⁸ From Kansas we would move southward into Indian Territory among the Creek freedmen. These former slaves argued, to the contrary, that they *were* Indians, or at least so mixed in blood and history that distinctions were meaningless. The point was worth making, since being Indian meant keeping the political power and an economic stake that mixed blood leaders were trying to take away. Here we might listen to the ex-slave Warrior Rentie ridiculing his mixed blood opponents, those "Indians, or rather would be Indians, . . . who have the strong vein of Negro blood . . . [men] who hardly know whether [they are] black, red or white."¹⁹

Next we would travel to central Texas into a variation of what Albert Hurtado calls in California an "intimate frontier" full of households of whites, Indians, blacks, Hispanics, and mixes of all four. We would see this familial snarl helping create new

¹⁷ *Report and Testimony of the Select Committee of the United States Senate to Investigate the Causes of the Removal of the Negroes from the Southern States to the Northern States. Part II*, 46th Cong., 2^d Sess., Report 693 (Washington, DC, 1880), 305.

¹⁸ Quoted in Linda K. Kerber, "The Abolitionist Perception of the Indian," *Journal of American History* 62 (September 1975): 294.

¹⁹ *Muskogee (Indian Territory) Phoenix*, 7 November 1892. My thanks to Gary Zellar for pointing out this article.

social and legal forms on this piece of the border.²⁰ This troubled region was the temporary home of Buffalo Soldiers, black and Seminole cavalrymen who fought Plains Indians and who also patrolled southward along our final stop, the national boundary with Mexico. Here we would see these blacks and Indians and black Indians clash with Hispanics moving as always back and forth across this porous border.²¹ If our visit was in 1875 we would see the racial ambiguities mixing with changing politics, with bewildering results. When black troops clashed with Mexican Americans not far from Brownsville, Texas, authorities—Reedemer Democrats hardly known for their Hispanic sympathies—suddenly embraced these locals as noble white citizens most dreadfully abused by degraded black invaders sent by foul Republicans. Philip Sheridan shook his head at the confused identities along the stream that itself was always shifting restlessly in its bed. “It is hard to tell who is who, and what is what, on that border, . . .” he wrote William Sherman. “The state of affairs is about as mixed as the river is indefinite as a boundary line.”²²

Sheridan’s confusion should be ours. In the years after the Civil War, all America was a kind of borderland where racial edges and meanings were shifty and blurred. First expansion had vastly complicated our human composition, then more aliens had arrived out West by the tens of thousands. Old issues and new were compounded by unprecedented distances and unimagined wealth. Then war dismantled the nation’s most elaborate racial institution and brought western questions to a boil. Never had America’s sense been so uncertain of how its racial parts fit together, or even what those parts were.

Small wonder, then, that many Americans looked hard for unconfused racial boundaries, and how predictable that they found answers in the area they trusted more and more to understand the present and predict the future—the field of science. One of the most startling points that pops up when we look at race continentally, when we bring the West into the story, is this: our moment of highest idealism, as we ended slavery and as some talked genuinely of racial equality, was also the moment when we gave the gravest credit to the most rigid racial divisions imaginable.

Race science had long overlapped with Romantic racism. Now it came to the fore. While Romantics defined races intuitively through gauzy notions of tribal and national spirits, scientific racists said they could puzzle it all out by carefully

²⁰ Albert L. Hurtado, *Intimate Frontiers: Sex, Gender and Culture in Old California* (Albuquerque, 1999); Mark M. Carroll, *Homesteads Ungovernable: Families, Sex, Race, and the Law in Frontier Texas, 1823–1860* (Austin, 2001).

²¹ For a recent study, see James N. Leiker, *Racial Borders: Black Soldiers Along the Rio Grande* (College Station, TX, 2002).

²² P. H. Sheridan to General W. T. Sherman, 6 July 1875, Special File of Letters Received, War Department, Military Division of the Missouri, 1866–91, M1495, reel 11 (in author’s possession; acquired from the National Archives, Washington, DC). My thanks to my colleague Patrick Williams for pointing out Sheridan’s remark.

describing, physically measuring, and comparing this group and that. But the implications were the same. Races were distinct. Some were better than others. And mixing them was risky business, especially for those at the high end of the scale. The most radical race scientists were the polygenecists, who argued that races had separate origins—that, in effect, Africans, Asians, Europeans, and Indians were different biological species.²³ As with the Romantics, their discussions always pointed toward public policies, and always these discussions were a dialogue between West and South.

Before 1861, not surprisingly, race scientists focused on slavery and differences between blacks and whites. Slavery apologists like Josiah Nott said that science made clear that African Americans would forever be intellectually and morally inferior and so must remain slaves. How did he know? He answered that races were physically, measurably distinct and, just as important, had been so since creation, with no apparent changes. Physical differences reflected different natures and qualities, so it followed that some races had been superior to others from the start. And so they always would be.²⁴ This argument depended ultimately on showing physical distinctions among living peoples and those long gone, especially among skulls, the subject of the new field of craniometry, the measurement of angles, slopes, and above all brain capacity. When African Americans ended up last in the skull rankings, Nott and others concluded that science declared slavery to be the natural order of things.

To make their case, however, scientific racists relied far less on Africans than on Indians. Their principal authority, and the nation's leading polygenecist, was Samuel Morton, the founding father of American anthropology, whose masterwork, *Crania Americana*, was a collective study of hundreds of Native American skulls. Morton's work was buttressed by what many consider the first work of modern American archaeology, Ephraim Squier's *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley*.²⁵ Squier, backed by Morton, wrote that skulls dug from Mississippian mounds were thousands of years old (in fact it was hundreds) and yet identical to modern Indians. So the links of the

²³ For examples of work on racial science, see William Stanton, *The Leopard's Spots: Scientific Attitudes toward Race in America, 1815–59* (Chicago, 1960); Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (Dallas, 1963), 54–83; Robert E. Bieder, *Science Encounters the Indian, 1820–1880: The Early Years of American Ethnology* (Norman, 1986); David Hurst Thomas, *Skull Wars: Kennewick Man, Archaeology, and the Battle for Native American Identity* (New York, 2000), 36–43; Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 116–57; Gustav Jahoda, *Images of Savages: Ancients [sic] Roots of Modern Prejudice in Western Culture* (London, 1999), 63–96; Joseph L. Graves, Jr., *The Emperor's New Clothes: Biological Theories of Race at the Millennium* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2001), 86–104; Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York, 1981), 30–72.

²⁴ For a succinct statement by Nott, see Josiah C. Nott, *An Essay on the Natural History of Mankind, Viewed in Connection with Negro Slavery* (Mobile, 1851).

²⁵ Samuel George Morton, *Crania Americana; or, a Comparative View of the Skulls of Various Aboriginal Nations of North and South America . . .* (Philadelphia, 1839); E. G. Squier and Edwin H. Davis, *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley; Comprising the Results of Extensive Original Surveys and Explorations* (New York, 1848).

argument ran: Indians were separate, always had been and always would be; the same was true of blacks; both were inferior to whites; because blacks were necessary, inside the house, they had to be controlled by whatever means possible. Science and common sense demanded it. Thus, scientific racists held up Indian skulls and pronounced them proof that black slavery was good and proper.²⁶

By the Civil War, the focus of race science was shifting dramatically westward, where expansion had muddled America's racial identity. Scientific racists addressed, for instance, the perplexing issue of the Chinese. As long as Asia had been a distant abstraction, persons as varied as Thomas Hart Benton and Bishop (later Cardinal) John Newman said that by reaching the Pacific we were fulfilling a global destiny; in the Far West the noblest traits of European and Asian cultures would magically merge to become the finest flowering of civilization.²⁷ But then large numbers of Chinese actually showed up. Here were people at least as alien in appearance and custom as Africans, yet free to move through society, and unlike Mexicans it was impossible to picture them as lazy. They were frighteningly industrious. As their numbers grew, so did the anxieties of white Americans. Verbal attacks on Chinese, in a sense, were the oldest form of race-baiting—Asians were ascribed dangerous and incompatible traits sure to wreck our future if they took root—but the rhetoric was up-to-date. It was staunchly scientific. Besides the usual cranial measurements, much was made of the immigrants smaller stature, relative hairlessness, and delicate features, all suggesting an innate femininity that would dilute America's vaunted Anglo Saxon manliness.²⁸ Most striking was how scientific authority was applied to customs and cultural traits. Their apparently ancient, unchanging lifeways meant Asians were biologically unable to rise to Western civilization and join our political process. In this golden age of the study of disease, the racial rhetoric also leaned sharply toward the medical. In 1862, a California physician, Dr. Arthur Stout, published *Chinese Immigration and the Physiological Causes of the Decay of a Nation*. Chinese, he wrote, would seed America with various diseases, including consumption, scrofula, syphilis, and the vaguely defined "mental alienation." Interestingly, Stout considered these diseases both inherited, part of the Asian's racial makeup, and communicable. Chinese, that is, apparently could not get rid of these diseases, but they could give them away.²⁹ The most infamous Chinese

²⁶ Stanton, *Leopard's Spots*, 22–44, 82–9.

²⁷ William M. Meigs, *Life of Thomas Hart Benton* (Philadelphia, 1904), 308–10; Newman is quoted in W. H. Hickman, "The Coeducation of Races," in *Mohonk Conference on the Negro Question*. Reported and Edited by Isabel G. Barrows (1890; reprint, New York, 1969), 63.

²⁸ A western editorial, for instance, advised that "the Chinese are half-made men. . . . As the strong races fall back before their hordes, there is, of course, a weakening of the State, for they have none of the elements of the men who make formidable soldiers." *Territorial Enterprise* (Virginia City, NV), 23 June 1877.

²⁹ Arthur B. Stout, *Chinese Immigration and the Physiological Causes of the Decay of a Nation* (San Francisco, 1862), 20–3.

custom, opium smoking, was called a kind of infectious disease. Hearty Caucasian lads who picked up the pipe not only became listless addicts; some medical writers claimed that anyone who smoked would develop Chinese coloring, attitudes, and behavior, which in turn became a transmittable condition: "Orientalness."³⁰

Chinese immigration helped make the West a prime focus of scientific racism, yet the fresh notions and the bizarre theories always spoke to older, broader questions. As Americans reshaped their institutions after the Civil War, all those Asians were simply one more proof of white superiority; they reminded us how vital it was to keep racial rankings uppermost in our thinking. How could anyone expect Chinese to blend into American society, asked an essayist in *Popular Science Monthly*, if neither Indians nor blacks could? Science insisted that the only healthy society was one that was racially homogenous. Mixing races—any races—led to cultural decline. This essayist pointed to current and ancient examples of what were, in his opinion, the seediest mongrelization (degradation): Mexicans and Romans.³¹ Or, as Dr. Stout put it, moving from a discussion of specific diseases to medical metaphor, welcoming either Chinese or black freedmen into American society would create "a cancer" in the nation's "biological, social, religious and political systems."³²

Race science also shifted westward in its field work. America's prime material for racial measurement were Indian remains, and the lands acquired in the 1840s offered bounteous opportunities for bone hunters. This strange variation of westward expansion is hinted in the career of one of the most ardent scientific racists, Louis Agassiz. Swiss emigre, naturalist, and geologist, founder of Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology, opponent of Darwin, and arguably America's best known scientist, Agassiz was an enthusiastic convert to polygenesis.³³ He befriended and collaborated with both Nott and Morton and considered the latter's skull studies one of the great accomplishments of the age. The outbreak of the Civil War shocked him, not because of its promised bloodshed, but because he predicted it would free the slaves and thus mongrelize white America. When news of Fort Sumter arrived at Harvard a friend found Agassiz walking the streets, sobbing and exclaiming: "They [the abolitionists] will Mexicanize the country!"³⁴ At the end of the war, with his wife Elizabeth and a young William James, he toured Brazil, ostensibly to gather specimens and study geology, but also to observe and photograph (and criticize) the human results of that country's long

³⁰ Diana Ahmad, "Opium Smoking, Anti-Chinese Attitudes, and the American Medical Community, 1850–1890," *American Nineteenth Century History* 1 (Summer 2000): 57.

³¹ Gerrit L. Lansing, "Chinese Immigration: A Sociological Study," *Popular Science Monthly* 20 (April 1882): 724–6, 734.

³² Stout, *Chinese Immigration and the Physiological Causes of the Decay of a Nation*, 7–10.

³³ Edward Lurie, "Louis Agassiz and the Races of Man," *Isis* 45 (September 1954): 227–42.

³⁴ Quoted in Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York, 2001), 102.

history of racial amalgamation.³⁵ By then he was also looking westward into his adopted nation's ethnic stewpot. He acquired for his new museum at least one Native American head, bottled in alcohol, and in January 1865, he wrote a reminder to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton:

Now that the temperature is low enough . . . permit me to recall to your memory your promise to let me have the bodies of some Indians . . . All that would be necessary . . . would be to forward the body express in a box . . . I should like one or two handsome fellows entire and the heads of two or three more.³⁶

During the years that followed, thousands of bodily remains, particularly skulls, were taken from graves, battlefields, and hospitals. A small army of amateur and professional collectors packed them off to Harvard and to the Field Museum, the Smithsonian, and the American Museum of Natural History. Franz Boas financed his research in the Pacific Northwest partly through this grisly trade. "It is most unpleasant work to steal bones from a grave," he wrote his wife, "but what is the use, someone has to do it."³⁷ The most aggressive collector by far was the federal government. The Army Medical Museum began gathering remains soon after its founding in 1862, and in 1868 it formally asked its field officers to acquire large numbers of "adult crania," past and present, to provide "accurate average measurements."³⁸ Over the next quarter century more than two thousand skulls arrived in Washington.

The headhunting frenzy was partly a macabre competition for all Native artifacts, especially among private museums, but the government kept its eyes fixed on the goals of race science. The purpose of anthropometry, the measurement of living and dead to document racial divisions, was to describe a statistically average specimen for every category. All then could be set within a descriptive schematic that showed relations of races to one another and, through that, an intellectual and moral hierarchy of peoples, sort of a racial flow chart. There were some setbacks—the brain capacity of the Apache leader Mangas Coloradas turned out to be greater than that of that legendary pumpkinhead, Daniel Webster—but the quest continued. The burst of activity made

³⁵ Louis Agassiz and Elizabeth Agassiz, *A Journey in Brazil* (Boston, 1871), 298–9. Agassiz used his observations of the population around Manaus to comment that the "natural result" of interbreeding among races and the further mixing of "half-breeds with one another" was to create "a mongrel crowd as repulsive as the mongrel dogs." With obvious implications for social policy in his adopted home of the United States, he went on to write that "boundaries of species" of all kinds were "precise and unvarying," a truth applying to "the different species of the human family . . . or so-called races," and that the mixing of these species/races would result in irreversible degeneration of the original stock.

³⁶ Edward Lurie, *Louis Agassiz: A Life in Science* (Chicago, 1960), 338.

³⁷ Quoted in Robert E. Bieder, *A Brief Historical Survey of the Expropriation of American Indian Remains* (Boulder, CO, 1990), 30.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 36–7.

the American West the envy of international anthropology. Continental researchers clambered for data from American graverobbing.³⁹

This vigorous government bone-gathering—this three decades of publicly funded skull-dugger—is remarkable by itself. It is also revealing, especially when we bring its western perspective together with that of the South. For me, at least, its very luridness makes it impossible to miss how thoroughly conflicted Americans were, not just on their ideas of race, but on their basic moral stance toward it. At the moment we took the most dramatic step in our history toward racial justice, freeing one nonwhite people from slavery, we were gathering up skulls of another, and doing it on the premise that this nation was composed of starkly defined races that learned men could tabulate into an obvious hierarchy from best to worst. As some *white* Americans were considering how and how much *African* Americans might be integrated into public life, others (and sometimes the same ones) were thanking the fates that hopelessly unfit *Hispanic* Americans would soon melt away to nothing, were hunting to annihilation *Native* Americans in the hills of California, and were warning that *Asian* Americans were a human pestilence—were literally an intrusive disease in the body politic. That racial attitudes of these years were uncertain is not news. But when we pull back to a truly continental viewpoint, “uncertain” seems a pale word to use. Never had this nation been so mixed and multicolored in its human makeup. Never had our presumptions about race been so jangled and divergent. And never had we faced such fundamental decisions about the arrangement of our racial parts—their standing and social prerogatives, the reach and limits of their political due, whether indeed they should be here at all.

The term for this era, Reconstruction, has always thrummed with racial implications, but when broadened to apply seriously from coast to coast, the term strengthens and its implications deepen. In the twenty years of tumult after 1846, attitudes and institutions of race were in fact being reconstructed, and more thoroughly than we have recognized. Listening to the clatter of opinions, not merely about black-white relations but also, in the color code of the day, about red, brown, and yellow, the range of possible outcomes seems to me a lot wider than we have allowed. When I shift my attention from the idealism of Reconstruction’s radicals toward what was being said and done out West, and when I remember how rapidly that idealism would wither by the late 1870s, I wonder whether this nation flirted more seriously than we have admitted with a racial order far more rigid than what we finally got. I wonder what kind of America we might have seen if the headhunters and racial purists had carried the day. Frankly (to use a boyhood phrase) it gives me the shivers.

But of course something else happened. We turned away from the western tendency toward absolute racial divides, even as we compromised an eastern ideal of a fuller racial equality for former slaves. Among the theorists, the hard lines of scientific

³⁹ Ibid, 40.

racism softened. Polygenesis, the teaching that races were born separate and could never merge, fell from favor. Racial distinctions were as strong as ever, and so was the trust in sorting them out by skull volume and the length of fingers, but now everyone once again was called part of one humanity. Races were unequal at the moment, but they were all moving along the same path of development. We seemed to be back around 1800, back to the Jeffersonian faith in turning Indians into whites. But there were two big differences. The new ideas about race were full of pretensions from the new science, especially evolutionary notions of social Darwinism.⁴⁰ And now the government was expected to take charge of racial development as it never had before. The federal government, newly muscular after the Civil War, would act within its borders much as other imperial powers did in their distant colonies of Africa and Asia. Washington would claim the jurisdiction and the know-how to be a kind of racial master, part policeman, part doctor, part professor.⁴¹

The key to understanding this last twist in the story is the powerful drive toward national consolidation. This theme—the integration of a divided America into a whole—is the one our textbooks tell us ruled the late nineteenth century. And so it did. Those texts, however, usually tell us that the sectional crisis and Civil War were the prime causes behind that drive, while, in fact, consolidation took its energy at least as much from the expansion of the 1840s. Acquiring the West stretched our distances, enriched our variety, and uncovered enormous wealth on our farthest edge. That, as much as secession, compelled us to think in terms of pulling it all together and keeping it that way. Making a firmer, tighter union meant resolving questions about differences within this nation, and close to the top of the list were questions about race. Here, too, westward expansion, as much as the conflict of North and South, had churned up matters and pushed us toward some resolution. It follows that if we want to understand what happened—in national consolidation, in American race, and in how the two wove together—we need to keep our eyes moving in both directions, toward both West and South.

Consolidation, racial or any other kind, means finding common ground. There must be standards to measure the parts of the nation and to decide what fits where. In bringing West and South and their peoples more tightly into the union, two standards were most important. The first was economic. From Virginia plantations to Nevada mines and Nebraska homesteads, the nation would be pulled together under the ideals of free labor and yeoman agriculture and through the realities of corporate capitalism. The second standard was a union of mores—custom, religion, language, and the rest of what we call, inadequately, “culture”—nurtured from Boston to Charleston

⁴⁰ Dippie, *Vanishing American*, 95–138; Gossett, *Race*, 144–75.

⁴¹ For an interesting comparative study that places the United States in the context of the modern states' campaigns to absorb indigenous peoples by subduing them, transforming their cultures, and integrating them economically, see John H. Bodley, *Victims of Progress* (1990; reprint, Mountain View, CA, 1999). My thanks to John Mack Faragher for introducing me to this book.

to Tombstone. A national economy and a national culture—together they would provide the common ground of the new America. America's racial parts would have to find their place, if they had a place to find, on that ground and inside its boundaries. Watching the results, West and South, is a revelation, not just about our racial drama, but also about the entire process of expansion and the remaking of a nation.

The case of the Chinese was the most extreme. They were America's most anomalous people. In language, dress, foodways, religion, and customs they seemed beyond the pale, and with their vast predominance of men, they lacked what all other groups, however different, had in common: the family as their central social unit. Culturally, then, the Chinese were uniquely vulnerable. Economically, their potential was much more promising, but ironically that made them a special threat. From early in the 1850s, some had compared Chinese work gangs to black slavery and had suggested them as a solution to the Far West's chronic labor shortage. An editor predicted (and he meant it positively) that the Chinese will "be to California what the African has been to the South."⁴² After the Civil War, some raised the possibility of Chinese playing the African in the South itself. In 1869, businessmen met in Memphis to consider importing Asia's rural workers into their cotton fields and factories. They heard that the Chinese, "industrious, docile, and competent," could be shipped in five hundred at a time at \$44.70 per head.⁴³ Bitter opposition, however, came from opponents of slavery and, more effectively, from champions of free white labor. Close to the heart of the Chinese image as hopelessly alien was the notion that they were sheeplike, easily controlled, and utterly without the individual gumption to stand up to their bosses. This made them free labor's ultimate nightmare: a race of automatons used by monopolists and labor-bashers to undercut wages or cast out honest workers altogether. The most vicious assaults on Asians came from spokesmen for white workingmen like Henry George and in political movements like California's Workingmen's Party. In the end, the Chinese found themselves without either a cultural or economic base in the new nation and with virtually no natural constituency. They suffered the most excessive answer to America's racial question. As of 1882, they were excluded.⁴⁴

The case of Hispanics was the oddest. Their numbers were greatest in relation to whites in the Southwest, our least populous region with resources that were, for the moment, the least exploitable. This corner of the nation consequently was the last to be brought close and consolidated, which in turn lessened somewhat the pressure to

⁴² Quoted in Earl Pomeroy, *The Pacific Slope: A History of California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Utah, and Nevada* (1965; reprint, Lincoln, 1991), 266.

⁴³ Stuart Creighton Miller, *The Unwelcome Immigrant: The American Image of the Chinese, 1785–1882* (Berkeley, 1969), 173; John R. Commons et al., *A Documentary History of American Industrial Society*, vol. 9 (Cleveland, 1910), 80–3.

⁴⁴ Elmer Clarence Sandmeyer, *The Anti-Chinese Movement in California*, Illinois Studies in the Social Sciences Series, 24:3 (Urbana, 1939). (This book was reissued in 1973 with a new introduction by Roger Daniels and in 1991 in paperback.)

resolve its racial issues. Mexican-Americans still carried the burden of the old rhetoric, the images of listless, unenlightened people, but they were not as alien as the Chinese. After all they were Christian, albeit Catholic, and were family-oriented farmers. And they fit the emerging economy. They did the grunt labor in mines, and they worked the land in a system of debt peonage strikingly similar to southern sharecropping. Hispanics, that is, posed little cultural threat and played useful economic roles. The upshot was partly to ignore the racial issues raised by expansion and partly to turn vices into virtues. Mexican-Americans were either rendered invisible, segregated in cities and countryside, or they were reimagined as a bit of American exotica in a region we could afford to fantasize as an escape from fast-paced modern life. In the land of *poco tiempo*, these people of color became what was much tamer: people of local color.⁴⁵

That left African and Native Americans. Their case was most revealing of all. Since the 1840s, southern blacks and western Indians had been counterpoised in our racial thinking: insiders and outsiders, enslaved and free-roaming, the essences of South and West. Now they converged. They were brought together as events of the 1860s shattered older arrangements and assumptions. Emancipated blacks still were insiders—they were, in the fine phrase of Frederick Douglass, close under the arm of white America—but they were no longer controlled through slavery. While not as free-roaming as Indians, they were definitely on the loose. Indians, meanwhile, contrary to the claims of the 1840s and 1850s, were obviously not vanishing. In fact, their lands were being pulled into the national embrace far more quickly than anyone had guessed possible. Indians were not as enmeshed in white society as the freedmen, but they *were* being brought inside the house. Blacks and Indians found themselves suddenly moving from opposite directions into the national mainstream. Paradoxically, liberation and conquest were carrying them to the same place.

Where exactly they would end up, and how they would get there, would be the self-appointed job of the newly centralized government, and nothing in the history of Reconstruction is more illuminating as the programs that resulted. As usual, we have treated events in the West and South as if they rolled along utterly independent of each other, while in fact Washington's treatment of blacks and Indians ran as a stunning parallel. Official strategies were virtually the same. Economic integration for freedmen was to come through forty acres and a mule, or at least some measure of agrarian self-sufficiency; for Indians, the answer was to be allotment in severalty. For cultural integration, ex-slaves would be educated under the Freedmen's Bureau; for Indians, it would be agency and boarding schools. (And sometimes, most famously in the Hampton Institute, the two were schooled in the same places.) For both, Christian service

⁴⁵ David G. Gutiérrez, "Significant to Whom?: Mexican Americans and the History of the American West," in *A New Significance: Re-Envisioning the History of the American West*, ed. Clyde A. Milner II, (New York, 1996), 68–71; George I. Sánchez, *Forgotten People: A Study of New Mexicans* (Albuquerque, 1967).

and evangelism directed and suffused the entire enterprise, mixing religious verities with the virtues of free enterprise, patriotism, and Anglo American civilization.

The differences were not in the government's goals and methods but in the responses to them. Freedmen, as insiders, had worked within private agriculture for generations and had been sustained by their own Christian worship. They found the government's stated goals perfectly fine. The Sioux and Apaches and Nez Perces and others, as outsiders, had their own traditions and cosmologies and relations with the land. They replied differently. Some accepted the new order, but for others the government finally had to turn to its strong arm to impose what former slaves wanted all along.

It takes a little effort, I will admit, to see Freedmen's schools and the Little Big Horn as two sides of the same process, but blink a few times and it makes perfect sense, once you look at Reconstruction's racial policies, not on strictly southern terms, narrowly, as an outgrowth of Civil War, but rather as a culmination of a development that began in the 1840s. Its first stage began with the expansion of the nation, and with that physical growth we were unsettled profoundly in our sense of who we were and might be. This stage raised a series of new racial questions and aggravated older ones. The second stage, the Civil War, brought those questions to the sticking place. By ending slavery and bringing the West closer into the union, the war left the nation as mixed and uncertain in its racial identity as it ever had been or would be. By revolutionizing relations of power, the war also opened the way for a settlement of a sort. In the third stage, from 1865 to the early 1880s, the government used its confirmed authority to flesh out the particulars of a new racial arrangement. Some peoples it excluded, some it left on the edges, some it integrated on the terms and by the means of its choosing, including in some cases by conquest and coercion.

This Greater Reconstruction was even more morally ambiguous than the lesser one. It included not one war but three—the Mexican War, Civil War, and War against Indian America—and while it saw the emancipation of one non-white people, it was equally concerned with dominating others. It included the Civil Rights Acts and the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, but it began with U. S. soldiers clashing with a Mexican patrol on disputed terrain along the Rio Grande in 1846. And it closed, practically, with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and symbolically, in 1877, with Oliver Howard—former head of the Freedman's Bureau who had risked his life and given his arm for emancipation—running to ground Chief Joseph and the Nez Perces along our northern border, forty miles shy of freedom. Always the Greater Reconstruction was as much about control as liberation, as much about unity and power as about equality. Indians were given roles they mostly didn't want, and freedmen were offered roles they mostly did, but both were being told that these were the roles they *would* play, like it or not. There has always been a darker side to *e pluribus unum*, and when we look at the parallel policies toward Indians and blacks, we can see it in its full breathtaking arrogance. When the Lake Mohonk Conference of Friends of the Indians turned from its

usual concerns to devote two annual meetings to answering the so-called “Negro Question,” one of its members, Lyman Abbott, was asked why no African Americans would be attending. He answered: “A patient is not invited to the consultation of the doctors in his case.”⁴⁶

I hope no one takes from what I have written any intent to lessen the enormity of southern slavery in our history or to devalue in the slightest its human costs. My southern friends, especially, might argue that the way I am telling the story neglects the sheer weight of black-white relations in our national consciousness and the scale of the calamities spun off by slavery. They might tell me also that my version misses the genuine idealism generated from abolition and the Civil War. They might say all that and more, and if they do I will admit that they might be right.

But there are a few things I know. I know we should put our foot down and not allow the Civil War to continue behaving as it does now in our texts and histories, sitting there like a gravity field, drawing to itself everything around it and bending all meanings to fit its own shape. I am certain that, while we call the mid-nineteenth century the Civil War Era, acquiring the West had at least as much to do with remaking America as the conflict between North and South. I know that race is essential to understanding what happened during those years, and I know that the conquest and integration of the West is essential to understanding race. I am sure that we will never grasp the racial ideas of that time without recognizing that they took their twisting shapes partly from exchanges between West and South—a vigorous, strange dialogue that included not only slavery apologists and the familiar tropes about black inferiority but also rhetorical flights on opium smoking, color-coded *Zeitgeists*, and headhunters and bodysnatchers in caps and gowns. And I am confident that when we bring the West more into the story, when we end the isolation of episodes like the California gold rush and the Indian wars and make them part of a genuinely coast-to-coast history of race in America, we will have learned a lot.

The lessons will teach us again how western history has plenty to say about America today. In the 1960s, movements for the rights of black Americans encouraged us to look back with new care at slavery, emancipation, and reconstruction. The situation today—when Hispanic Americans are our largest minority and Asian Americans are arriving in unprecedented numbers, when Pat Buchanan is fanning fears about brown and yellow hordes, when the fastest growing minority in southern cities is American Indians, and when I read in my local newspaper about rallies by an Arkansas anti-Hispanic group with the unintentionally ironic acronym of AIM (Americans for Immigration Moratorium)—this situation should encourage us to look yet again at those middle years of the nineteenth century, this time in search of the roots of racial thinking that goes beyond the simpler divisions of black and white.

⁴⁶ Abbott quoted in *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, ed. Louis R. Harlan, vol. 3 (Urbana, 1974), 70, n.1.

The larger point, of course, is a broader awareness of the most troubling theme of our past. For many of us that awareness will mean a more intimate implication, especially if we live outside the South, or like me along its edges. Race is not the burden of southern history. Race is the burden of American history. Its questions speak to all of us, whichever region we call home, and press us all to ask where and how far we have fallen short in keeping promises we have made to ourselves. In 1869, near the end of the Great Reconstruction, the reformer and spiritualist Cora Tappan took this continental perspective when she offered her audience an observation that, in its essence, is still worth making today:

A government that has for nearly a century enslaved one race (African), that proscribes another (Chinese), proposes to exterminate another (Indians), and persistently refuses to recognize the rights of one-half of its citizens (women), cannot justly be called perfect.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ *Standard* (Boston), 29 May 1869, quoted in Kerber, "Abolitionist Perception of the Indian," 295.