

Gold rush - different racial groups



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Your Number 14 March 2007 Difference and Dominance For the white man heading west to California during the Gold Rush, movement was not directed solely by dreams of quick wealth, but also as part of a larger ideal of Manifest Destiny, the concept that the whole of the American continent was given to the white man by his god for the purpose of using and civilizing the land according to certain cultural customs. Among these was the idea that the white, English-speaking man was the superior being on the planet, followed by the white, English-speaking woman (a delicate flower in need of protection), followed by white, non-English-speaking Europeans, and then, in a descending order, men and women whose skin became progressively darker and habits progressively different from the white man's: the Mexicans, the Indians, the Chinese. Without much thought or effort on their part, Anglo men established their dominance over California by systematically asserting themselves over others.

Of course, the major motivation of those in California at this time was the desire to strike it rich. Although some people did just this, there was only a finite amount of wealth to be uncovered, leaving most men few options for increasing their status. Racism, codifying the differences between themselves and others, was one way to raise perceived power in a landscape where men were often at odds with, and at the mercy of, an environment over which they had very little control. *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* by Susan Lee Johnson, demonstrates how life was different for white men, and how they acted to maintain their superiority in California.

Theirs was a world where status had already been shaken up. Due to the scarcity of white women and the need for some means of support, many

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men found themselves employed in positions that back east would only have gone to girls. They eased the stigma of such labor by assuring themselves that such work was still manly, and by setting themselves above those of other races and cultures. They categorized the French as “dainty (small, little, diminutive)” (Johnson 118). Mexican men were seen as “‘lazy Greasers’ in ‘dirty Zerapes’” (Johnson 123) while Mexican women existed solely for the purpose of cooking and being ogled. Native Americans were afforded even less respect, and white men could murder them with impunity, with their killers “posing as heroes” (Bibby 54).

“Systematic harassment” (Johnson 125) of the Chinese forced some men out of the mines, where white men wanted to work. Language was an effective tool for keeping non-whites in their place. Brian Bibby relates the instance of Billy Preacher being introduced as “an Indian boy who has never done anything wrong” (Bibby 30). The “boy” in question was at least twenty-eight years old at the time. Just as black men in the south were made to feel childish and inferior through such address, Indian men were pigeonholed, through the language, as permanent children, who could demonstrate their goodness by following the orders of white people.

The popular tales of Bret Harte, which remains today the common basis for the American imagining of the Gold Rush, is examined in Johnson’s book. Harte’s stories present a fictionalized, and to some extent, idealized world of Boom Towns and rough-and-tumble men with good hearts. On the one hand, it is “a multiracial, multiethnic social world, in which French men and Pacific Islanders live alongside Anglos from the eastern United States and Cherokee women from the Indian Territory” (Johnson 339), but on the other hand, whiteness is still cast as the desirable norm.

Harte's stories cast the white man as the central character with other races, particularly women, occupying a less desirable stratum, and this was the prevailing view in the American West at the time. White men, with their greater numbers of men and guns, easily dominated California by forcing others into subservient positions.

Works Cited

Bibby, Brian. *Deeper than Gold: Indian Life in the Sierra Foothills*. Berkeley: Heyday Books. 2005.

Johnson, Susan Lee. *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush*. New York: Norton. 2000.