

Valerie J. Matsumoto and Blake Allmendinger (eds.) *Over the Edge: Remapping the American West*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1999. xii + 399 pp. ISBN: 0-520-21149-9, \$48.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

Up until the 1970s, our ideas about the history of the American West were dominated by a unitary vision which connected that history to a grand mythical narrative about the progress of Euro-American civilization across the continent. In the later part of the

nineteenth century most historians described this movement as an aspect of the fateful conquest of the world by Anglo-Saxon Christian democracy and its institutions. This, for example, was the vision which activated Theodore Roosevelt's great saga of *Tlze Winning of the West* (1889), itself reflecting the romantic nationalistic sagas of George Bancroft and other mid-nineteenth century American historians. Frederick Jactson Turner's frontier thesis largely took the place of the Anglo-Saxon germ theory in the early twentieth century, but the frontier thesis also offered a synthetic, quasi-mythical vision of western history. Turner's followers continued to envision the form of that history in terms of grand narratives of the westward movement of Euro-Americans. Among these were major syntheses like Ray Allen Billington's *Westward Expansion* (1949), Frederick Merk's *History of the Westward Movement* (1978) and Walter Prescott Webb's *The Great Plains* (1931) and *The Great Frontier* (1952).

However, the generation of western historians who came of age during the terrible ambiguities of the Vietnam War increasingly saw that history in a very different way. The work of this group constituted a fundamental revision of the Turnerian approach to western history. Many of these revisionist historians were trained by Howard Lamar at Yale. Lamar's own work, especially his important *Dalcota Territory, 1861-1889: A Study of Frontier Politics* (1956), adumbrated the new western history by eschewing grand narrative for more limited regional studies and by de-mythicizing Turner's vision of the pioneer by focussing on conflicts and ambiguities between groups contending for control of the West. The work of this new generation of western historians was exemplified in such influential works as Patricia Limerick's *The Legacy of Conquest* (1997), Richard White's *'It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own'* (1991), Donald Worster's *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West* (1994) and Michael Malone and Richard Etulain's *Tlze American West: A Twentieth Century History* (1989). These historians de-mythicized the grand theories of the past by concentrating instead on the complex conflict of cultures in the West, on the role of race and gender in western history, on the ecological impact of the westward movement and on more recent periods of western history.

Now in a new anthology, *Over the Edge: Remapping the American West*, we encounter the first stirrings of a still younger generation of western historians and critics and can get some idea of the directions in which their new interests and methodologies are leading them. These directions are quite diverse. From the beginning, *Over the Edge* signals this diversity with a dialogue between the two editors, a Japanese-American woman historian and a gay white male literary critic and popular culturalist. With such an introduction, it's not surprising that the essays also range considerably in subject, methodology, and stance.

Some of the essays grow directly out of the revisionist history of the last three decades and thus furnish a kind of transition between that work and the explorations of younger historians. Appropriately enough, the lead essay is a commentary on the significance of tourism in the West by one of the leading revisionist historians, Patricia Limerick. Others like Susan Lee Johnson's 'Domestic Life in the Diggings: The Southern Mines in the California Gold Rush,' Virginia Scharff's 'Mobility, Women, and the West,' Peggy Pascoe's 'Race, Gender, and the Privileges of Property: On the Significance of Miscegenation Law in the U.S. West,' and Valerie Matsumoto's 'Japanese American

Women and the Creation of Urban Nisei Culture in the 1930s' continue the interest in ethnicity, gender and cultural conflict in the West so characteristic of the revisionists.

Somewhat more of a departure from revisionist approaches are a number of essays which explore in line with the anthology's title, *Over the Edge*, the implications of Blake Allmendinger's dictum that 'today, although the West may be settled, its meanings and boundaries remain unfixd and unsealed' (4). One of the most interesting of these essays is Jesús Martínez-Saldaiia's 'La Frontera del Norte.' Martínez-Saldafia makes the important observation that 'The American West does not exist only in the collective consciousness of this country. It is also present in the imagination of peoples of other nations' (376). He then analyzes three different meanings of the American West to Chicanos: as '*el territorio yerdido*, the unknown but much celebrated portion of the national territory lost through an unjust war to the aggressive forces driven by Manifest Destiny;' as '*el viejo oeste*, a site inhabited by fictitious blond-haired, blue-eyed cowboys valiantly creating a society of law, order, and progress amidst the instability fomented by war-mongering, uncivilized *pieles rojas* ...and wicked outlaws;' and as '*el norte*, the temporary or permanent destination of millions of Mexicans who have been forced to cross the northern border into the United States, at times searching for political stability and refuge, but generally seeking better economic opportunities than those found in the nation of origin: *la patria*.' (376) Other essays of particular interest are Mike Davis's discussion of the scientific and military devastation of large sections of the American West in 'Dead West: Ecocide in Marlboro Country,' Douglas Flammig's study of the interplay of African-American myths of the South and the West in the life of the writer Arna Bontemps, and Blake Allmendinger's analysis of the way in which the myth of the West shaped even a biblical best-seller like Lew Wallace's *Ben-Hur*.

At first glance, the essays in this volume are so diverse in subject and method that it's difficult to see what links them aside from the fact that they all deal in some way with the western part of the United States. Perhaps, this is a necessary corrective to the deceptive sense of unity created by imaginative syntheses of western history like the frontier thesis and other grand myths of the past. Yet in spite of the most conscientious efforts by younger historians to liberate themselves from the simplifications of traditional western mythology, the one common theme which emerges in many of these very diverse treatments of the American West is the continuing influence of the mythical West, no longer construed as reality, but as the imaginative perception of what it means to cross the frontier. One of the editors remarks in the course of the introductory dialogue that 'though I reject western clichés, I know that I do so while at the same time embracing pastel cow's skulls, tin sheriff's badges, and politically correct items of clothing including anything that wiggles when it moves' (1). Even as it approaches a condition of postmodernity, the American West remains one of the great cultural myths of the modern world. As an executive quoted in *Fortune* put it, 'Silicon Valley is the Wild West of private enterprise' (375).