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Review of The Women's West.

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Women's West. Edited by Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987. Illustrations, notes, index. xi + 323 pp. \$24.95 cloth, \$12.95 paper.

The twenty-one essays in this collection represent some of the finest work being done in the ongoing re-examination of the American West through women's eyes. Based on papers presented at the first Women's West conference in 1983, these articles analyze faulty assumptions and omissions in earlier histories of the West; they examine the ways in which gender roles shaped western women's lives; and they formulate new methodologies for the analysis of women's private writings as vital historical records.

Editors Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson have succeeded admirably in compiling a multidimensional portrait of western women. In the opening essay, Armitage argues convincingly that women's diaries, letters, journals, memoirs, novels, poems, children's books, and oral histories are central to the current re-evaluation and rewriting of the history of the West.

Several subsequent essays analyze ways in which stereotypes of western women have perpetuated false mythologies and contributed to a "tunnel vision" approach to western

American history. Corlann Gee Bush analyzes images of women and men in cowboy art; Patricia Albers and William James evaluate visual images of American Indian women in the West; Kathryn Adam discusses portrayals of women in the Laura Ingalls Wilder stories; Elizabeth Jameson focuses on the implications of the Cult of True Womanhood for western women; Katherine Harris identifies the muting of culturally prescribed gender role distinctions among homesteaders in northeastern Colorado.

Although not as comprehensive as all readers might hope, *The Women's West* makes a significant contribution to women's history in its attempt to move away from an emphasis on the experiences of middle- and upper-class Caucasian women and toward an emphasis on diversity, characterized by the inclusion of a variety of essays on women of color, working-class women, and women in ethnic communities. Rosalinda Mendez Gonzales presents a useful historical framework for understanding western women's lives vis a vis the traditional Western mythology of hardy individualism. Mary Murphy, in discussing prostitutes' lives in mining towns like Butte, Montana, calls for a rethinking of the conventional images of the "good" vs. the "bad" woman. Patricia Zavella delineates a twentieth-century "urban frontier" in her thoughtful examination of the lives

of working-class Chicanas in Albuquerque.

Each contribution to *The Women's West* breaks new ground. Sylvia Van Kirk's essay on the role of native women in the fur trading society of western Canada and Norma J. Milton's essay on immigrant domestics on the Canadian prairies help to dispel the ethnocentric notion that "the American West" included only the western United States. Melody Graulich's analysis of power dynamics in literature on the Western family and Elliot West's discussion of child rearing on the mining frontier call for the reassessment of time-worn mythologies about family interactions.

The Women's West reflects a strong commitment on the part of scholars toward doing what poet Suzan Shown Harjo advocates in her closing essay—creating an inclusive rather than an exclusive history of the West, a history that values diverse human experiences and empowers those who help create it.

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