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Review of *Racial Frontiers: Africans, Chinese, and Mexicans in Western America, 1848-1890* By Arnaldo De Leon

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Racial Frontiers: Africans, Chinese, and Mexicans in Western America, 1848-1890. By Arnoldo De Leon. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002. 176 pp. Halftones, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth, \$21.95 paper.

Arnoldo De Leon wrote this book to fill a gap in the existing literature on the American West that either “overlooks or is mindless about the contributions of Africans, Chinese, and Mexicans to the frontier experience.” In his view, the presence of these nonwhite groups made the region a racial as well as a psychological frontier. In a short text of only 107 pages, he argues, in chapter 1, that these groups came because the frontier offered them opportunities not available in their homelands (though “homeland” is not entirely applicable to American-born blacks). That is, their motive for migrating to the region was similar to that of European Americans. These peoples of color, contrary to prevailing stereotypes, did adapt to the US political and economic systems as they tried to achieve their dreams despite the immense hurdles placed in their paths

by European Americans who dominated all the major institutions of American life (chapters 2 and 3). The author asserts, however, in chapters 4 and 5, that they “balked at becoming ‘cultural Americans’ . . . though conceding change in the social environment.” Such an assertion is too sweeping because while some individuals clung to their cultures of origin, others did not. Such an assessment contradicts the author’s earlier observation that the competitive interaction of the groups produced “changes among all those involved.”

The book has both strengths and weaknesses. Its aim is laudable. The notes and bibliography indicate that the author read widely to produce this work of synthesis. A specialist in Mexican American history, he also plumbed the literature on Chinese American and African American history in order to give the three groups parity in the study. He is sensitive to class and gender differences within each group. Many of the individuals whose stories he tells are women. He notes that the interethnic interactions ranged from the amicable to the hostile—an important corrective to some of his overly sweeping generalizations. The most interesting tidbits are the instances of cooperation among peoples of color that he unearthed. One wishes the book included more of these little known occurrences.

The book’s negative view of Native Americans, who are depicted as fierce “tribes” that “attacked” and “massacred” the migrants to the frontier, is its greatest weakness. One would think that a book about peoples of color would have seen Native Americans, who are also peoples of color, in a different light. After all, it is *their* land that the immigrants—both white and nonwhite—conquered. A more balanced picture would have included Native American perspectives on the “settlement” of the frontier.

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