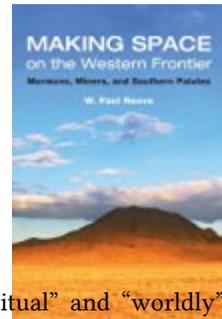


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

W. Paul Reeve. *Making Space on the Western Frontier: Mormons, Miners, and Southern Paiutes*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006. x + 231 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03126-7.

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Making Space on the Western Frontier is an attempt at a careful re-telling of a piece of western history. The book covers a forty-year period beginning in the 1860s in which Paiute Native Americans, Mormons, and miners laid competing claims to the same land (generally, the southern part of the present-day Nevada-Utah border). In documenting the struggle over this territory, Reeve wants to supplant both the traditional account of western history as something like “civilizing white conquest” as well as the more contemporary tendency to emphasize the victimization of Native Americans. In place of these approaches, Reeve pursues a more fluid account emphasizing the interaction of the various communities which circumstance brought into contact on the frontier. His stated purpose is to depict the agency, which each group of actors exhibited in dealing with the other two, and the effects that the groups had on one another. Rather than tropes of domination and conquest, Reeve says that he is interested in “the rich cross-fertilization that took place, as each group found ways to adjust to the other two while simultaneously clinging to core aspects of their respective cultural identities” (p. 4). Although there is a problematic tension in the structure of this book, the sources Reeve has brought together make for a useful historical study, which will be of interest to a variety of audiences.

From about 1300, Reeve says, the land had been occupied by the Paiutes; Mormons arrived in 1862 and miners in 1864, each for their own reasons. These reasons are central to Reeve’s account. Mormons initially came to the area to graze livestock, an enterprise that Reeve codes as communal and oriented toward the furthering of God’s kingdom as the Mormon pioneers saw it. Miners, on the other hand, were drawn in search of silver, which Reeve treats as an individualistic, economic motivation. Eschewing simple racial or ethnic categories,

Reeve uses the categories of “spiritual” and “worldly” to divide miners from both Paiutes and Mormons, and to plot the groups on a continuum of “Americanness” that, he says, explains how the groups were regarded (regarded *by whom* is an important question which will be touched on in a moment). “A hierarchy of Americanness emerged that favored the miners as the embodiment of American progress, industry, and quest for wealth. Mormons and Southern Paiutes, however, valued community over individualism and celestial rewards over material gain, ideals that placed them well outside prevailing standards of what it meant to be an American” (pp. 4-6).

Reeve begins by detailing each group’s arrival to the area, highlighting the way that each employed settlement rituals and foundation narratives particular to their backgrounds. (The treatment of the elaborate rules governing stake-claiming among miners as ritual is especially illuminating here.) He proceeds through an account of the events surrounding the settlement of the Pahranaagat Mining District beginning in 1865. It is here, as Reeve discusses the government’s efforts to protect mining interests and re-draw boundary lines so as to dilute the power of Paiutes and Mormons, that the reader first sees Reeve struggling to maintain the agency of what he has designated the “un-American” groups. By foregrounding this category of Americanness, Reeve centers his narrative on the actors who held the power to set that category and enforce its meaning: “Eastern politicians held the power to remap the frontier. They did so, quarrying the ground with symbolism that privileged mining land as somehow more American than either Mormon or Paiute land while simultaneously lumping Mormon and Paiute people together as un-American” (p. 34). Having chosen to employ a category controlled by just one of the interacting groups, Reeve makes his task of depicting “interaction”

rather than “reaction” all the harder, and by turns his reminders that Mormons and Paiutes “were not merely victims of oppressive state power but aggressive wielders of power themselves” come to look more like dogma than as conclusions explained by the sources (p. 63).

The unresolved tension in the text comes from the disconnect between Reeve’s stated purpose of telling a history of the interaction of powers and the fact that the book often appears as another account of the oppression wrought by “power,” singular; here, as elsewhere, this correlates to state and economic power. The account that Reeve presents is by no means inaccurate—there would seem to be no denying that a hierarchy of power existed among these groups, nor that Mormons and Paiutes suffered and were forced into re-acting to economic and state power as represented by miners. The problem is that the story of this domination is not the story Reeve sets out to tell; we are told repeatedly that, despite the well-trodden imbalances, the subordinated groups still acted toward one another and toward miners with agency and power, “shrewdly” using what leverage they had to effect changes in their situation. This three-pointed action, Reeve says, resulted in the “shared space” he wants to highlight. This story of interaction, though, surfaces solidly only in the meta-discourse (in the introduction and at the beginnings and ends of chapters) that the author employs to tell us about it. The burden of proving the assertions of this framing discourse is placed largely on anecdotes and a few brief gestures toward strategies of accommodation—such as Paiute conversion to Mormonism and Mormon trade with miners—which would indeed seem to tell the story of interaction if fully and deeply explored. As it is, even in the moments where the reader gets a sense of the agency which Paiutes and Mormons carved out for themselves, more time is spent re-telling the by-now familiar stories of the Americanization of Mormons in Zion and the depredation of Native Americans at the hands of Gilded-Age capitalist interests. Reeve’s two impulses—to privilege the power exercised by Paiutes and Mormons, and to chronicle the widespread neutralization of that power by those with higher degrees of self-rated “Americanness”—do not mix well. Indulging both impulses leads to claims that this narrative “moves beyond newer ideas about the West as a place of declension, conquest, or dependence” (p. 3) being required to coexist with observations that “the Mormons and Southern Paiutes experienced a forced cultural homogenization over time that fits well within a broader

national framework of Americanization” (p. 163).

Such criticisms are not intended to be sharply negative. Reeve set himself a difficult and laudable task, and in fact warns that the story he is telling is “complicated and messy” (p. 3). His stated intention, at any rate, was never to ignore the themes of declension and conquest, but to move beyond them, and chapters 4 and 5 are devoted to giving examples of the ways in which Paiutes and Mormons carved out some power for themselves. Individual elements of the book—discussion of stake-claiming as mining ritual; the influence of metaphors from the Book of Mormon on the Saints’ attitudes toward Paiutes; religious conversion and wage-labor as Paiute strategies—are quite well-executed. The text is well-researched, and Reeve has an obvious command of a wide breadth of relevant secondary literature.

Furthermore, in discussing a book like this, it is fair to ask what we might hope for in a narrative of “interaction” when the historical record presents such dramatic asymmetries. In passing, it may be noted that, for one thing, such accounts need to be more comfortable talking about cyclical, retributive violence. The tendency in such work to side with the weak often leads to discomfort in talking about the violence brought by the weak against the strong. In Reeve’s text, this discomfort leads to such odd statements as “Mormons and miners were invading [the Paiutes’] world and drastically altering their way of life. To compensate, some Paiutes incorporated Anglo cattle into their diet and economy” (p. 68). The need which Reeve obviously feels to rationalize Paiute violence in some sense betrays his larger goal—rather than all violence being presented as characteristic of the processes of interaction, among three competing groups with different dispositions and advantages in a frontier setting, Paiute violence is given a different valence, one which categorizes it as re-action and cedes, once again, the agency in the story to (in this case) cattle-owners.

Generally, it seems intuitive that an account truly focused on “interaction,” on the creation of a “shared intercultural space” by three human groups, would not be so centered on the prerogatives of one of those groups nor so insistent on appealing to categories belonging to that group. My sense is that scholars working under the rubric of post-colonial studies may be just beginning to develop answers to some of the questions posed by Reeve’s goal of privileging interaction over conquest and defeat; in some ways, he may just be ahead of his time.

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