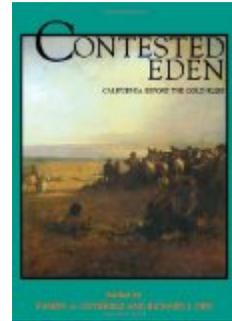


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ramon A. Gutierrez, Richard J. Orsi, eds. *Contested Eden: California Before the Gold Rush*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1998. xi + 396 pp. \$31.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-21274-9; \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-21273-2.

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No

Not too many years ago, California history was a largely celebratory venture, a concatenation of tall tales, ancestor veneration, and hero worship. For every thesis, however, exists an antithesis, and for every yin a yang. And so, in the 70s, came what might be termed the “new” California history (close kin to the “New Western History”), which transformed the genre into a tale of dispossession, conquest, and resistance, a tale which has dominated the historiography of pre-1848 California ever since. It follows, of course, that from this clash of opposites must follow—as Hegel would say, “synthesis”—and what better occasion for it than 1998, the sesquicentennial (one-hundred-fifty-year) anniversary of California statehood? Well, on second thought, maybe not.

If not “synthesis” in the Hegelian sense, what we do get in 1998 is “synthesis” in the methodological sense. In *Contested Eden: California Before the Gold Rush*, editors Richard Orsi and Ramon Gutierrez have brought together a medley of “synthetic” approaches to pre-1848 California history that—despite differences in theme and theory—harmonize quite nicely. We are treated (pardon the laundry list) to analyses of catastrophic environmental change; the diversity of pre-Columbian California Indians; the rationale for Spanish exploration; the economy of Spanish and Mexican California; the creation and “recreation” of Californio society; relations between Californios and Indians; relations between church and state; the nature of gender and patriarchy; the impact of foreign immigration; Californio resistance during the Mexican War; and the history of visual representations of early

California.

All these topics are brought together in one book—in essence, an overview of California history before the American conquest—which is itself part of a four-volume series celebrating the state of California’s sesquicentennial anniversary. This, the first of the four, is a comely and rich volume, a showcase for the best in recent California scholarship, and a measure of how far California historians have come since the days of old. *Contested Eden* will surely please both historian and layman, and will leave no one adrift in the sea of imagination that used to be California history. For the sake of decorum, however, let us not explore too closely the irony of a book that decries much of what has happened since Europeans transported “the state” to California, yet celebrates the anniversary of statehood.

Particularly rewarding is *Contested Eden’s* re-evaluation of European-Indian relations in California prior to 1848. Just about every article in this collection deals—many at great length—with this theme, and a number of interesting insights emerge. Consider Steven Hackel’s “Land, Labor, and Production: The Colonial Economy of Spanish and Mexican California.” Hackel observes—in the course of his broad-ranging essay—that historians have for the most part focused on only two forms of Indian labor in early California: convict and mission contract labor. Hackel points out, however, that “forced labor” was not the rule. Both Christian and non-Christian Indians performed voluntary labor on the pre-

sidios and in the pueblos, thus making themselves free agents in the economic marketplace.

The point here is that Indians did not invariably choose either to accept or to reject altogether the work regimen of the Spanish. Some Indians, to be sure, fled from the Spanish and returned to hunting and gathering (at least until ecological catastrophe made this impossible), but still more seem to have incorporated, on a selective basis, the work orientation of the Europeans.[1] To argue that Indians were utterly disoriented by the Spanish worldview and work regimen and could only be made to accept it by coercion is to deny the Indians their full humanity.

Under what circumstances, however, did some Indians choose to work voluntarily? Did they do so in order to purchase “status” goods, or under the compulsion of dire need? Or did they work—as did the Catawbas of the Carolinas—in order to preserve their communal and personal identity as Indians, and to salvage the vestiges of a traditional way of life? That is, did they continue to involve themselves in both “wage” labor and in gifting and reciprocity?

None of this is to fault Hackel, who could not possibly have answered such issues fully—assuming the sources offer full answers—without hopelessly distending his essay. His task, after all, was to describe the economies of Spanish and Mexican California in a brief essay, a task he succeeds in with aplomb. Yet the “loose ends” do pose fascinating questions. Hackel tells us, for instance, that, by the mid-1790s, so many Indian laborers worked among the Spanish that a process of mutual acculturation had begun. Just as Indian laborers spoke Spanish, so too did many settlers speak the Indians’ languages (p. 128). This is a fascinating observation simply because it points to the possibility of a “middle ground” in California, an arena of cultural exchange rather than, or in addition to, conquest and resistance.

One is nonetheless left wondering just how far this process of mutual acculturation extended. What happened, for instance, to those phantom actors in California historiography, the “indios barbaros” who became vaqueros and peons, yet did NOT become Christians? Hackel suggests that these pueblo-and-rancho-by-day, rancheria-by-night Indians “continued to practice many elements of their culture,” including the manufacture of pottery (p. 134), but he (and the other authors) then leaves us dangling. We know, of course, that these “gentiles” also retained their knowledge of herbalism and healing, but what became of their traditional gods, feasts,

and dances? Did they practice them covertly, or simply forget them as they were gradually pulled into the orbit of Christianity and Spanish work discipline? And did Indian cultural practices—assuming they were retained—alter the style and intensity of Indian labor? Perhaps further research will tell.

In contrast to Hackel, others focus on resistance to the Spanish and their patriarchal society. Antonia Castaneda, for example, brings feminist and post-modernist insights to the study of early California in “Engendering the History of Alta California, 1769-1848: Gender, Sexuality, and the Family.” This essay reminds one of Ramon Gutierrez’s work on Spanish New Mexico insofar as it explores the seamy web of sexuality and deviant—and not-so-deviant—behavior in colonial society. What emerges is a portrait of a less-than-static patriarchal society, a society continuously forced to buttress itself against the challenges of its least powerful members, women. Not only did women challenge the authority of church and state, but also the authority of the family. “The evidence,” writes Castaneda, “illustrates that the patriarchal family—ostensibly the norm in colonial California—was always a highly contested realm” (p. 245). Plaudits to Professor Castaneda for bringing cultural and feminist scholarship to California history.

Some criticism might be appropriate, however. First, like other feminist scholars, Castaneda writes—correctly—that Europeans defined Indian women as witches, and often treated them as such. This “demonization,” Castaneda explains, was symptomatic of the “Christian imperialist gaze,” through which “non-Christian women and their mestiza daughters were sexualized, racialized, and demonized for their ostensibly religious crime of witchcraft” (p. 237). Of course, Europeans deemed Indian males “witches,” too, on occasion. But more importantly, if we are to criticize European culture for its “demonization” of the “racialized” other, shall we withhold our criticism from Indian cultures that likewise defined Europeans—not to mention one another—as witches and demons? [2] Such behavior is (or was) ubiquitous throughout the world, particularly among peoples under stress.

The difference, of course, is that the Europeans often held the power to punish Indian “witches,” whereas Indians rarely held the power to punish Europeans. In singling out Europeans for their xenophobic and gynophobic propensities, however, I sometimes have the feeling that we become more intent on “demonizing the demonizers” than exploring the complex and at times ambiguous nature of colonial power.

Castaneda tells us, for instance, that a group of Gabrielino men, captured after following a female shaman into rebellion at Mission San Gabriel, were lashed “as much for following the leadership of a woman as for rebelling against Spanish domination” (p. 236). The evidence given is the following statement by Governor Pedro Fages, who explained that he had the men whipped in order to “admonish them about their ingratitude, underscoring their perversity, and unmasking the deceit and tricks by which they allowed themselves to be dominated by the aforesaid woman” (p. 236). Suppose, however, the rebellion had been led by a man (as others were). Should we presume, therefore, that Fages would have punished the culprits less severely? Or that his explanation would have differed, apart from the substitution of the word “man” for “woman”? One could argue, indeed, that Toypurina herself, the shaman in question, got off rather lightly in the affair (she was banished to Monterey, where she converted, married a soldier, and bore four children). The question then becomes not whether Toypurina was more harshly punished because she was a woman, but whether she used her gendered status to escape harsh punishment.

Finally, one suspects that Castaneda too readily accepts the idea of a golden age prior to the arrival of Europeans, a time when men and women participated equally in peace-loving societies based on reciprocity between men and women and between kin, community, and nature. Many forms of reciprocity, to be sure, were ingrained in Indian cultures, but I’m not so sure that the “core religious and spiritual beliefs, values, and traditions” of California tribelets “generally accorded women and men equivalent value, power, and range of practices,” or that, despite the occasional female chief or shaman, California tribelets exhibited “matriarchal sociopolitical organization” (p. 234). Even in tribelets “governed” by women, men retained significant avenues of authority and autonomy (Gabrielino men—who threatened to kill Toypurina after her failed revolt—are case in point).

Castaneda’s portrait of California Indian societies stands in stark contrast to Doug Monroy’s California “warrior” societies, which accorded women very little power and authority.[3] Monroy has pointed out, moreover—like Richard White in the context of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Great Lakes—that Indian women potentially gained something by converting; not only did they gain access to grains, metal pots, and beef or mutton, but they also gained freedom from the tyranny of “warrior” husbands, fathers, and brothers.[4] Robert L. Hoover, similarly, has elaborated sev-

eral incentives Indians had for entering missions, including escape from traditional enemies and the possibility of improving one’s social status (many California Indian societies were strongly hierarchical, a fact passed over by Castaneda).[5] Castaneda, by contrast, suggests that Indian women had nothing to gain from the missionaries and everything to lose, a proposition that does not consistently hold up. This is not to say that Castaneda is wrong—far from it—her portrait of Spanish patriarchy and gendered power relationships is well drawn. My criticism is that Castaneda’s thesis admits no ambiguity.

If we eulogize one culture in order to chastise another—as I think Castaneda does to an extent—we (watch out! here comes the preachy part) recreate the very binary oppositions we profess to abhor. We, like Christian imperialists, are then left with an oversimplified paradigm of “right versus wrong” and “good versus evil.” In my view, it is important to recognize that insofar as we portray Indians—or any subaltern group—as less than perfect, we do not become apologists for imperialism, we merely become better historians.

James Sandos’s useful and provocative essay “Between Crucifix and Lance: Indian-White Relations in California, 1769-1848” likewise espouses a sometimes oversimplified paradigm of “conquest and resistance.” Sandos—employing the precepts of anthropologist James Scott—thus identifies “the hidden story” of resistance, a story “conveyed in rumors, folktales, trickster stories, wish-fulfillment, gambling, gossip, and a host of other indicators of opposition to domination that it is incumbent on us to recognize.” Again, three huzzahs for cultural history—of which I myself am a practitioner—yet one must hasten to add that the “hidden story” is not invariably a tale of opposition unless we read it as such. By way of illustration, I’ll comment on two of Sandos’s examples.

On page 198, Sandos introduces Pablo Tac, a neophyte from San Luis Rey who was sent to Europe to become a priest. Tac, Sandos explains, never “lost his Indian identity or his peoples’ sense of outrage at Spanish occupation,” a conclusion Sandos interpolates from Tac’s written account of the missionaries’ arrival and subsequent tenure in California. Tac—who was thirteen when he wrote—recalled, for instance, the first contact between his people and the Spanish. “What is it you seek?” shouted one of the Indians, “get out of our country!” This, we are told, exemplifies Indian resistance. Tac also describes a folktale in which an Indian boy eats forbidden figs in a mission garden, and, when discovered by an Indian gardener, transforms himself into a raven (p. 198).

Interesting as these anecdotes are, do they constitute “outrage at Spanish occupation,” or even “Indian identity”? While Tac’s recollection of his people’s initial response to the Spanish surely shows fright and anger, it does not show that Tac himself APPROVED of such a response, nor does it show that his people understood the nature of the Spanish threat. It shows only that Tac’s people were afraid of mysterious foreigners. And as for the tale of the boy in the garden, how much of it is about a young man who despises the Spanish, and how much is simply about a boy who likes fruit? It is important to note in this context that Tac’s tale is reminiscent of Eve consuming the forbidden fruit, although Eve, sadly, did not escape by transforming herself into a raven. At any rate, shamanic “shape-shifting” is not purely an Indian contrivance; such scenarios recur often in European folklore. We must then ask, was Tac telling an Indian folktale, a European folktale, or some combination of both?

Or was Tac not relating a folktale at all? According to Minna and Gordon Hewes’s translation of Tac’s narrative, no literal transformation or “shape-shifting” is implied. Rather, the boy—perhaps Tac himself—chokes on a fig, causing him to make a crow-like noise which alerts the gardener. The gardener then castigates the boy as a “crow without wings” and threatens to shoot him with an arrow, causing the boy to run—not fly—away.[6] Whether folkloric or not, the tale hardly constitutes “outrage at Spanish occupation.”

Don’t get me wrong; Sandos’s essay is an important contribution to this book insofar as it re-evaluates the various meanings of “frontier” in the California context. The flaws, however—albeit minor in the context of the whole—give pause to the reader. Surely there is, or was, a “hidden story” of opposition in Spanish California, but perhaps it was not so straightforward as we would like it to be.

Sandos also cautiously approves historian George Harwood Phillips’s evaluation of paintings made by neophytes under the direction of the friars at Mission San Fernando. The paintings, showing Christ making his way along the “via dolorosa,” depict Christ’s tormenters as Indians. Phillips interprets this as evidence that the painters identified themselves with Christ, and portrayed their Indian “overseers,” or “alcaldes,” as Christ’s tormenters.

But why cite this admittedly “controversial” conclusion (p. 207)? As related by Sandos, the case seems conjectural at best. One could as easily argue that the painters wished to portray Christ’s tormenters as “hea-

then” Indians. Or perhaps the tormenters represented the painters themselves, who sought to illustrate their own sin, their own “evil” propensity to renounce Christ. The friars who directed the painting, after all, were quite adept at this sort of self-criticism.

If the friars were adepts at self-criticism, so also were they adepts at something else: medieval utopianism. Michael Gonzalez explores this theme in an outstanding addition to the *Contested Eden* collection titled “‘The Child of the Wilderness Weeps for the Father of our Country’: The Indian and the Politics of Church and State in Provincial California.” The missionaries, Gonzalez explains, sought to re-create the “primitive church” and saw the missions as opportunities to establish genuine Christianity, with its ethic of cooperation and brotherly (or at least paternal) love. “To the Franciscans,” Gonzalez writes, “the individual was anathema.” This anti-individualism, however, soon brought the friars into contention with the officials of the state, who were imbued with Enlightenment concepts of rationality and self-interest. Gonzalez uses this ideological conflict as a springboard to explore the history of shifting alliance between the missionaries and the state, with the Indians—who always greatly outnumbered hispanic colonists—serving as the prize to be won by each. He who controlled the Indians, Gonzalez rightly tells us, controlled California.

There are a number of other superb essays in this collection, and I recommend each and every essay to the reader. I particularly commend Doug Monroy’s “The Creation and Re-Creation of Californio Society” for its rich sense of irony and its profound cultural insights, and Lisbeth Haas’s “War in California, 1846-1848” for its exposition of Californio identity and opposition to the American conquest. I also commend the editors for their thoughtful choice of illustrations and maps, all of which accord nicely with the points made in the articles (take note, reader: the lovely color illustrations that make this book rather expensive appear at the back, along with Anthony Kirk’s thoughtful essay, “Picturing California”; if you are barbaric enough to sever them from a worthy book, some of these illustrations are good enough for framing).

The only general criticism I have is that there exists a certain amount of redundancy, since most of the authors attempt to provide syntheses of recent scholarship along with more specific themes. This is to some extent unavoidable, of course, in a book that provides a broad overview of pre-1848 California. Yet two articles

on ecological change seem particularly guilty of redundancy (when read together), although both are readable and excellent essays in their own right.

Which brings me to a final question: what is it that gets “contested” in “Contested Eden”? While these essays bring forth the newest California scholarship in a readable format, the authors “contest” one another’s points of view surprisingly little. The “contestation” here is between nature and European, between Indian and European, between church and state, between man and woman, between Californio and Americano, but NOT between historian and historian.

The paradigm we are then left with is not precisely the 60s tale of ruthless and bloody conquest (a la Howard Zinn), nor is it the 90s “middle ground” paradigm (first enunciated by Richard White) that describes the frontier as a place of mutual concession, adaptation, and even—by some reckonings—cultural borrowing. With the possible exception of Steven Hackel, the authors of *Contested Eden* stay within the paradigm popularized in the 70s and 80s, portraying a realm of perpetual “contest,” a realm in which conquest is never complete, allowing the dispossessed room to maneuver, howsoever stiffly, in order to survive.

Perhaps this “contest” paradigm still prevails in California historiography simply because there was no “middle ground” in California. The Spanish and Mexican settlers of California did not, after all, make the sort of military and economic alliances with Indian tribes that the English and French did. Hence California Indians, at least those in coastal areas, never gained political and social strength comparable to that of the Iroquois or Great Lakes Algonquians, nor did they attain a comparable ability to negotiate—both culturally and politically—with the Europeans. And yet insofar as California was NOT a “middle ground,” it stands as an anomaly within Spanish America, which, on the whole, was the ultimate “middle ground,” a place where cultures and peoples both battled and blended.

One suspects that—when the historiographical moment is ripe—some variant form of a “middle ground” will indeed be discovered in Alta California, and some lucky historian will win a coveted award for discovering

it. Meanwhile, however, the “contest” paradigm continues to reign in California historiography at least partly because California is itself still a contested place, a place where people of color continue to be under “European” attack, particularly during the reign of Pete Wilson. Thus, while many Western historians rush to embrace the new “middle ground” paradigm—positing a measure of cultural exchange, if not harmony, in frontier arenas—California historians stay aloof. “What do you want?” they seem to ask, “get out of our country!” Perhaps they are right.

Notes

[1]. Albert Hurtado makes the same point in relation to certain Indian laborers (albeit exceptional) at Sutter’s Fort. Albert Hurtado, *Indian Survival on the California Frontier* (New Haven, 1988), 69.

[2]. Edward Castillo reports that neophytes sometimes poisoned friars precisely because they took them to be witches. Edward D. Castillo, “The Native Response to the Colonization of Alta California,” *Columbian Consequences: Archaeological and Historical Perspectives on the Spanish Borderlands West*, ed. David Hurst Thomas, I (Washington, D.C., 1989), 383.

[3]. Douglas Monroy, *Thrown Among Strangers: The Making of Mexican Culture in Frontier California* (Berkeley, 1990), 8-9, 13-14.

[4]. *Ibid.*, 33.

[5]. Robert L. Hoover, “Spanish-Native Interaction and Acculturation in the Alta California Missions,” *Columbian Consequences*, I, 397.

[6]. Minna and Gordon Hewes, eds. and trans., “Indian Life and Customs at Mission San Luis Rey: A Record of California Mission Life Written by Pablo Tac, an Indian Neophyte,” *Native American Perspectives on the Hispanic Colonization of Alta California*, ed. Edward D. Castillo (New York and London, 1991), 49-50.

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