

Californios, Anglos, and the Performance of Oligarchy in the U.S. West

Evan Rothera
Sam Houston University, ecr036@shsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Rothera, Evan (2019) "Californios, Anglos, and the Performance of Oligarchy in the U.S. West," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.21.1.20

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol21/iss1/20>

Review

Rothera, Evan C.

Winter 2019

Gibb, Andrew. *Californios, Anglos, and the Performance of Oligarchy in the U.S. West.* Southern Illinois University Press, \$45.00 ISBN 9780809336470

Andrew Gibb, currently assistant professor of theater history, theory, and criticism at Texas Tech University, offers an important revision of modern understandings of the U.S. West, particularly California. “Despite the individualist ideology that valorizes the working-class Anglos frontiersman,” Gibb asserts, “the truth is that ever since he began to arrive in the West, he had led a life dominated by local oligarchs (1). As Anglos arrived in California, they discovered a uniquely californio (Mexican Californian) system of social organization. This book draws heavily on theory, particularly the idea of performance, to demonstrate how public events both celebrate and proclaim the power of the oligarchy. This allows the author to focus on cooperation (theater, after all, is collaborative) and deemphasize a more traditional conflict paradigm. Thus, the book is intimately concerned with the development of accommodation and acculturation in California. However, unlike people in other regions of the Americas, californios did not acculturate to Anglo culture; Anglos accepted californio behaviors. In sum, this is the story of how “californios performatively fashioned a unique regional tradition of oligarchic rule into which they invited successive waves of immigrant and conquering Anglo elites” (23).

Gibb begins with social relations and performance in Spanish and Mexican California. Spanish missionaries, he asserts, prepared Native Californians for “oligarchic rule through the imposition of a new form of hierarchical social structure and dependent labor conditions” (37). However, California, like Texas, was a Spanish and Mexican periphery. Local elites often complained about the lack of soldiers, supplies, and money. “A lack of coercive governmental structures made it difficult for Californian oligarchs to maintain their power by force. Even had such structures existed, however, californios would have been constrained in their use by local labor conditions” (39). In short, limited options led to mutual dependence between landowners and laborers. Landowners often performed obligations while making concessions to their

laborers. Baptisms and dances, for instance, became important sites of performance: wealthy elites would toss coins to the crowd or put on parties where everyone had a defined role. As time passed, Anglos, particularly merchants, began arriving in California. Many of the new arrivals wanted to participate in local culture and understood the possibilities of the californio lifestyle. To secure these benefits, however, they had to accommodate themselves to californio patterns of life. The wedding of Ana de la Guerra to Alfred Robinson demonstrates this tendency: how elite Anglos accommodated and became assimilated into the Mexican oligarchy.

The rest of the book explores how californios pursued their strategy of performative integration during and after the U.S. War with Mexico. Fourth of July celebrations and the performances staged during the war “should be read not as competing visions of a national future but rather as intercultural collaborations between elites, aimed at perpetuating local oligarchic power structures” (69). Commodore Robert F. Stockton, after arriving in California during the war, “rapidly acquired the taste for californio-style speechmaking” (97). Here Gibb overlooks the fact that bombastic speeches such as Stockton’s were quite common in the U.S. long before Stockton went to California. Californios provided spaces for U.S. theatrical productions and musical groups, a tendency fully in line with they believed to be their oligarchic obligations. Performances varied tremendously, a point that becomes obvious with the consideration of William Ide’s participation in the Bear Flag Revolt. Although Ide did his best to fashion a democratic California cast in the model of virtuous Jeffersonian yeoman farmers, Ide and his fellow Bear Flaggers handed power to John C. Frémont and other U.S. military officers. Californio leaders courted these elite Anglos and made alliances with them. African American hotel owner William Leidesdorff allowed the New York Volunteers to stage a minstrel show in his hotel. Leidesdorff, Gibb speculates, may have been trying to “undermine ideas of race as biological fact and inculcate perceptions of race as performed act” (145).

The climax of the book is the constitutional convention of 1849 and the performances of Doña Angustias de la Guerra Jimeno. She, along with other californianas, hosted dinners and parties in their homes and presided over a lively social scene in Monterey. “The social milieu in which the delegates worked must certainly have affected their decisions,” Gibb asserts, “and the record of that social context is dominated by the frequent, glowing mentions of Angustias and her californiana compatriots” (167). Angustias de la Guerra Jimeno was not the only performer; businessman and diplomat Thomas O. Larkin also held parties, although his were smaller and

more intimate gatherings. Still, “whether staged in the relatively selective and sedate New England manner of Thomas Larkin or in the more open and lively californio style of Angustias de la Guerra, the performances Californio elites gave for their colleagues in their Monterey homes clearly made a case for the continued firm grip of an oligarchic hand on the rudder of California’s future” (175). The book concludes with a brief discussion of California after 1849 and notes the rejuvenation of seigneurial trends by people like Dorothy Buffum Chandler. Gibb might have spent more time on the post-1849 material, because his discussion feels somewhat scattered and episodic.

Californios, the author contends, “in cooperation (rather than conflict) with Anglos, performatively fashioned a regional power formation that significantly shaped the social and political development of the greater U.S. West from the nineteenth century to the present day” (197). This quote captures both the strength and weakness of this book. On the one hand, Gibb’s analysis generally supports his point that Anglos and californios used performance to fashion an oligarchic culture. At times, some of his examples feel a bit divorced from the context and he might have paid additional attention to how other elements of life in Mexican California interacted with these performances. On the other hand, his argument about a regional power formation shaping the social and political development of the region is more tenuous and needed further development. At the end of the day, performance clearly played a role in the development of California, it would seem, but perhaps not quite as important a role as Gibb thinks. All that said, this thought-provoking piece of interdisciplinary scholarship should be read by specialists in theater history, western history, and Mexican history.

Evan C. Rothera is a Lecturer in the Department of History at Sam Houston State University. He can be reached at ecr036@shsu.edu.