



Women in the West: a case study on The American West

The American West, c1835–c1895, is a popular option on the Pearson Edexcel GCSE History specification, in which students explore US exploration and settlement of the American West and its unfolding impact on the Plains Indians, from the opening of the first wagon trails west to the immediate aftermath of the closing of the Indian Frontier.

Recent academic research into the American West has been focusing on the opportunities for greater inclusivity through new voices and new perspectives, with the Women's West becoming a particular growth area of scholarship.

*Inspired by this, **Nicole Ridley** has redesigned how she teaches the American West and introduced more women into the course. Traditionally seen as a very male space, she has included women as protagonists, not passengers, in the narrative, exploring their impact on society, politics, culture, and economics. In this case study she discusses the approach she took in her research and selection of female stories to cover, the strategies she employed for diversifying her lesson structures, and the positive impact this has had on her students' understanding of the topic.*

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Diversifying the American West: gender and race

Recently, teachers across the community have been putting huge efforts into diversifying the curriculum but there is still more to be done, particularly at Key Stage 4. The American West has suffered the same plague as any other period, having been written by the victors, the powerful, and the white. This has led to the idea that the West was dominated by men, and consequent stereotypes of male warriors, gunslingers, politicians, and historians leave minimal space in the narrative for anyone else. Despite the fact that this study focuses on the importance and consequences of events for whole communities, the textbook that I first used to get to grips with the content mentioned over 82 men by name but only six women. Additionally, five out of those six women were white.

This is a problem because gender and race were two of the most determining factors of experience in the West and, without them, students cannot truly comprehend and connect the unfolding narrative. The five white women, privileged by virtue of their skin, cannot reflect the hardships suffered by women such as Amanda Johnson, a freed slave trying to improve her fortunes, or indigenous women like Pretty Shield, stripped of power, home and identity. For groups like the Exodusters and female Plains Indians, the importance of events like land rushes or government acts were very different. They experienced certain consequences of white settlement that white people did not, and such a narrow lens when it comes to experience will damage students' accuracy and the sophistication of their causal explanations.

To address the imbalance, I began a project to find more women's names by using JSTOR, personal interest blogs, and academic works. Initially, I thought that just including women's names rectified the problem, and I do believe that including someone's name is a mark of respect to their place in history. However, in doing this I was still perpetuating the idea that women were present and watching, but not contributing – I was 'diversifying' the names and not the process, probably because I wrongly believed that women's stories were important but just not the story we were studying. Western



historians such as Susan Lee Johnson and Margaret Jacobs have argued that there is a lack of attention and accuracy in how the role of women is portrayed, that too often they appear as passive, domestic, and without their own agency. In reality, women were not just eyes to view the changes that men made in America, not passengers but protagonists in their own right. Aspects of the American West were definitely masculine, but it is inaccurate to see this history as male because gender was actively negotiated in all parts of the West. Women had a genuine impact on its development: politically, socially, and economically.

Further, many textbooks that do look at the role of women stop at their travel West, their fight for a living, and their role in the creation of communities. Whilst essential, these stories are largely social and cultural, albeit with political and economic dimensions (dimensions that, I would argue, are too nuanced to be analysed at this level, on this option). They are not enough to break down the idea that the West was male, and exclude women who fought hard for physical and political freedoms, who negotiated treaties or economic relationships, and whose role in government was undeniable. This is particularly poignant in the case of indigenous women, who had incredible scope in top-level decision making, scope that should not be ignored because it was over the government of tribes and not the USA. It is by challenging and diversifying the structural narrative that we continue to break down the walls that keep women out of the curriculum. Therefore, I expanded the project and began to change the way I approached the specified content and the structure of my lessons.

Does this approach give us extra content to deliver?

We have a duty as historians to provide an accurate narrative and a duty as educators to provide a diverse and representative one, but there is an understandable concern among many history teachers about the amount of content we are already expected to cover. First, I don't believe that women are 'extra' to the curriculum and so are not extra content that is being added. People and events named in the specification – for example, Billy the Kid or the OK Corral – clearly have to be covered, but many areas of the specification content are purposefully broad; 'The Plains Indians' life on the reservations' and 'Changes in the cattle industry...', for example, cover the experiences of both men and women because both men and women were active on reservations and ranches. Whilst their individual experiences and decision-making might be more nuanced, men and women can still tell the same story.

For example, I use the women below as case studies to cover specified content. For the majority, the only extra information I add is their name.

Women	Area of study
Luenza Wilson	Migrating for gold and early life in San Francisco.
Olive Oatman and Topeka	Dangers of travelling West – Olive was captured by Native Americans and her release was negotiated by Topeka. Olive and her sister then lived with Topeka for five years.
Clara Brown	Migration West after the Emancipation Proclamation (1863) – Clara became a mining pioneer in Colorado.
Eagle Woman (Matilda Picotte Galpin)	Trader and negotiator between white and indigenous communities – Eagle Woman is credited as being the only woman to sign a government treaty (1882).



Additional motivation for diversifying our teaching of the American West can be found in the impact on a students' understanding and explanation. Human histories are widely regarded as a hook to help engage students with a new topic by allowing them to empathise with the human experience, rather than the unfamiliar historical setting. A meaningful and nuanced understanding of emotions and actions leads to more meaningful and nuanced narrative links when writing exam questions, and the questions themselves are set up to encourage students to write about the experience rather than the individuals. This is the argument made by many history teachers, notably [Alex Ford](#) in the articles he has published in *Teaching History*: narrative questions become more natural as the story does. In the past year, I have seen my students engage much more with lessons that included personal case studies than when we looked at large, ostensibly homogeneous groups. They were able to connect events with greater nuance and wrote about the wider period in much more depth.

Strategies for diversifying lesson structures

Below are three strategies I use to diversify the structure of my lessons but limit the new content introduced, involving the strategic use of enquiry questions and illustrations on PowerPoints or lesson materials. They are intended to be used as a pic'n'mix – as and when they are appropriate to the lesson, content, and class:

First, I don't try to challenge the traditional narrative but recast it from the start by immediately **presenting an updated version of the story**. We don't have time to teach an inaccurate history and then pick it apart, so far better to discuss alternative interpretations as stretch and challenge activities further into the course.

Second, I **use enquiry questions that directly involve women**, bringing their names into the historical spotlight without changing the content of the lesson. It is not always possible or appropriate to do this, so I also use questions that target multiple perspectives and help position women, very naturally, among other important actors.

Enquiry question	Purpose of enquiry
Why did Buffalo Calf Road Woman decide to fight at Wounded Knee?	Female warriors were known, but uncommon. Therefore, this shows the desperation and anger of the indigenous by this point in the story and the tension rising between all parties involved.
What was difficult about Lizzie Johnson's life as a cattle rancher?	Lizzie owned cattle and participated in drives up the Chisholm Trail, so her experiences tell us about the role, hardships, growth, and decline of the cattle industry.
Who was impacted by the terms of the first Fort Laramie Treaty (1851)?	The lesson involves a discussion of the terms themselves and their impact on a cross-section of leaders, communities, and individuals.

Third, I **focus on the point of analysis** and not the event itself. Imbalances of power are clearly important but, to an extent, it doesn't matter that a group of white men orchestrated the first Fort Laramie Treaty (for example) because the impact of its terms extended far beyond their control. Students are asked to analyse the consequences and importance of the treaty for a greater range of people. I don't expect students to remember the names of these women when they revise (although



they often do), but they do remember the human experiences because they have more stickability than faceless groups. In this way, students revise the same content with a representative lens.

Enquiry question	Purpose of enquiry
Why was Zitkala Sa's upbringing so difficult?	We do not focus on Zitkala Sa herself, but on the evidence of cultural decline, westernisation, and poverty in indigenous communities shown through her diaries.
Why was it difficult to prove up a Homestead?	Abbie Bright's diary discusses her struggle with proving up her own homestead in Kansas because of the terrain, weather, and lack of resources.
What were the consequences of the Removals Act (1830)?	The politicians who orchestrated the Removals Act (1830) did not experience its consequences – Milly Francis, 'the Creek Pocahontas', travelled the Trail of Tears and was relocated to Oklahoma. She never saw her husband again because he was relocated at a different time and died on the journey.

Even though the Removals begin five years before the specification content begins, they continued until 1837 and are essential contextual knowledge for the decisions taken by Plains Indians later in the 1800s. This is a point made by Jeffrey Ostler in his fantastic book *Surviving Genocide*, which argues that the legacy of genocidal potential and genocidal acts, even from the 1700s, impacted the relationship between the US and the Plains tribes in the nineteenth century.

Finally, we can **recast the narrative through the sources and interpretations** that we use to illustrate lessons, rather than the content.* We can use diaries, paintings, songs, oral histories, or other sources created by women to avoid cementing the idea that the West pivoted around the work of men. At the same time, this increases students' exposure to the wider period. By including interpretations written by active female historians, we can change students' perceptions of history and working historians today, further breaking down any gender stereotypes that they might hold. This could be as 'written pictures' to add depth or scaffolding to teacher explanations, as utility activities, guided reading, or by analysing the interpretations for accuracy. I like to use a range of inaccurate, traditional, and revisionist historical interpretations to test students' knowledge and recall, like a version of 'find and fix the mistakes', which includes a stretch and challenge activity that asks students to critique the interpretation.

This selection of sources and interpretations is particularly important because the choices we make in illustrating the course are a statement of our personal intent for the curriculum, and a way that we can reflect the growing recognition of the need to improve diversity, equality and inclusion in the teaching of history, and in education more widely. More representative history is more accurate history, and by pursuing this we better serve our students and help them to develop as more rounded historians. In class, we talk openly about different interpretations of the West and I have seen their explanations – particularly in the narrative question – become much more considered as a result.

* Sources and interpretations are not assessed in the Period study, but are important components of GCSE History, and their use helps to enrich students' historical understanding of the American West.