

Please print this syllabus before class begins, as it contains short readings we will consider

Argonauts in Skirts: Women in the California Gold Rush

OLLI, SSU, September 2022

Teacher: Leah Halper

Description: The California Gold Rush re-ordered many people's worlds, and the world itself. The experiences of Gold Rush women are an important but neglected part of our state's creation story. They provide excellent frameworks for understanding the richness of our state's history and the inequities in the distribution of rewards. Many Indigenous women lost the universe as they knew it when violence, rape, and genocidal policies devastated their communities, while many European-American women were gaining freedom and opportunity. Chinese women struggled to survive, while some African-American and Mexican/Californian women successfully reinvented themselves. The stories of Gold Rush women help us to understand how women were shaping the story of California, even as their lives were shaped by ideas about women, race, and Manifest Destiny.

Acknowledgement: SSU and I occupy Southern Pomo lands, which were settled by violence and destruction, and which were never ceded by the Pomo people. Despite genocidal state and federal policies, the Pomo people survive, and I acknowledge, support, and celebrate their efforts to retain their language, culture, and lands.

Outline—*subject to editing depending on how our time flows:*

Introductions: Could we lure you?

The Gold Rush: what we know, what we need to know

The Gold Rush by the numbers

European-American women—travel, travail, and fresh starts

A letter home

Native women—catastrophe, destruction, “protection”

An act, an ad

Chinese women—loneliness, escape,

A song, a letter

African-American women—Naming, shaming, reframing

Some mysteries

What we learned

Gold Rush by the Numbers –mostly from History.com

--March 1848-- 157,000 people in the California territory; 150,000 Native Americans, 6,500 of Spanish or Mexican descent known as Californios and fewer than 800 non-native Americans

--Dec. 1848, 7000 more had arrived (Wiki)

--Nov. 1849—100,000 non-natives had arrived

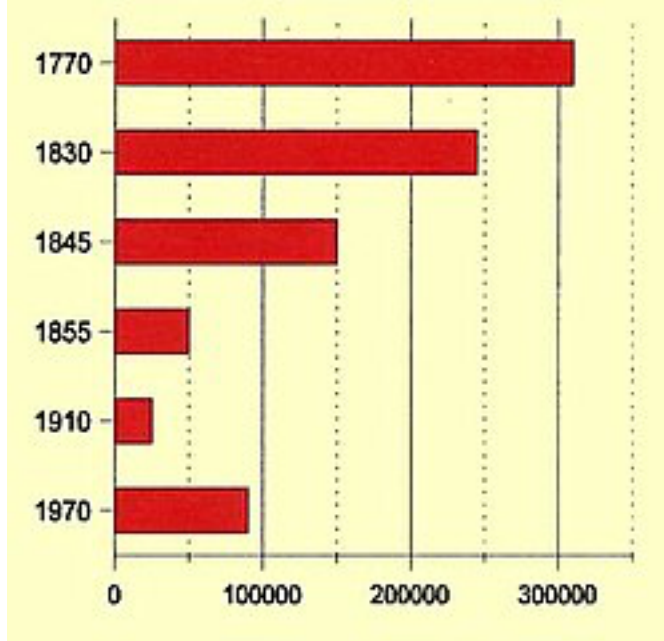
--By 1850s, 300,000 non-native arrivals so 1/90 in the US was in California

--1849, 40,000 people who arrived by ship to SF; 700 were women. In 1852, 92 percent of prospectors were men

--In 1849, an egg could cost \$25 in today's money, coffee was \$100+ per pound and a pair boots could be \$2,500

--1850 census says 98.96 percent white (91,632), 1.04 free black (965)—natives invisible

--Pre-contact estimates of NA populations range from 133,000 to 705,000 with some recent scholars concluding that there may have been as many as a million people in CA



Native California Population, according to Cook 1978. (Source: Wiki)

The Global Race

Who got to the gold first? Biggest groups?

Peruvians Brits Californians Italians Turks Hawaiians Basques French Chileans
Oregonians, Mexicans Chinese Germans East Coasters Filipinos Brazilians Caribbean
Islanders

Readings

1. I work so hard that my Arms pain me so severely that I kneed someone to fan me so I do not find much comfort anywhere. I made a Bluberry pudding to day for Dinner. Sometimes I am making soups and cramberry tarts and Baking chicken that cost four Dollars a head and cooking Eggs at three Dollars a dozen. Sometimes boiling cabbage and Turnips and frying fritters and Broiling stake and cooking codfish and potatoes...Sometimes I am taking care of Babies and nursing at the rate of fifty dollars a week but I would not advise any lady to come out here and suffer the toil and fatigue that I have suffered for the sake of a little gold.—neither do I advise any one to come. – Mary Ballou, 1852 letter to sons, “I Hear the Hogs In My Kitchen,” from *Gold Rush, a Literary Exploration*, ed. Michael Kowalewski. Heyday Books, 1997

2. 1850 California Act for the Protection of Indians, summary

- An Indian could be declared to be a “vagrant” by the courts if it was perceived that he could not support himself, or if he was found “loitering,” or if he was leading an “immoral...course of life.” If an Indian was found to be a vagrant, he could be forced to work for whoever would pay the most for up to four months.

- Sometimes Indians were found to have broken a law and were required to pay a fine. If the Indian could not pay, he might be “bailed out” by a white person who would pay the fine. The Indian would then be forced to work for the white person until he had paid off the fine.
- A white person could bring an Indian child before a court official. If the child’s parents agreed, or if his “friends” agreed, the court could make the white person responsible for the “care, ...control, and earnings” of the child until the child became an adult. That meant until 18 if the child was a boy, and until 15, if a girl.

3. \$50 REWARD –LOST TWO INDIAN GIRLS, ONE ABOUT Ten, the other fourteen years old. The oldest Is tattooed on her cheeks and chin. Both had on dark Calico dresses, and the hair of each was cut close. Any Information that will lead to their recovery will be Liberally rewarded: and any person returning them to Me shall receive the reward above named. J.H. WRIGHT Plaza, Marysville[\[47\]](#)

4. "I got a letter to-day from a minister in Sacramento. It was addressed to Mammy Pleasant. I wrote back to him on his own paper that my name was Mrs. Mary E. Pleasant. I wouldn't waste any of my paper on him. The letter wasn't in the house fifteen minutes. I sent it right back to him unread. "Between you arid me, I don't care anything about it, but they shan't do it — they shan't nickname me at- my age. If he didn't have better sense he should have had better manners. It just rouses my Kanaka blood," and the old lady stamped her foot in mock rage, and we both laughed at her Kanaka blood. –Mammy Pleasant the Woman, *San Francisco Call*, by Isabel Fraser, Volume 91, Number 29, 29 December 1901

5. Song for married women in China

Oh, just marry all the daughters to men from Gold Mountain;
All those trunks from Gold Mountain—you can demand as many as you want!
O, don't ever marry your daughter to a man from Gold Mountain—
Lonely and said—a cooking pot is her only companion!

–Marlon K. Hom, *Songs of Gold Mountain: Cantonese Rhymes from San Francisco Chinatown*. UCP 1987

6. Letter from Sing Kum 1876 My father was an industrious man, but we were very poor....My father sold me when I was about seven years old; my mother cried. I was afraid, and ran under the bed to hide. My father came to see me once and brought me some fruit but my mistress told me to say he was not my father....I was sold four times. I came to California about five years ago. My last mistress was very cruel to me; she used to whip me, pull my hair, and pinch the inside of my cheeks. A friend of mine told me of this place (Methodist Mission Home in SF) and at night I ran away.

– From Yung, Chang, and Lai's *Chinese American Voices* (15-16), originally found in Rev. O. Gibson's *The Chinese in America*, Hitchcock & Walden, 1877.

Resources for further inquiry

Cilker, Noel C. "A Little China Leader, a Brothel Owner, and Their Clashing American Dreams in Gold Rush San Francisco." *Chinese America: History & Perspectives* . 2018, p57-63. 7p.

Eifler, M.A. *The California Gold Rush: The Stampede that Changed the World*.

Gold Greed Genocide the untold tragedy of the California gold rush https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FeksO_rGepw

Gold, Greed, and Genocide: 20 Years Later
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HNP_-OmkNkE

[Johnston-Dodds, Kimberley, and Sarah Supahan](#). "Involuntary Servitude, Apprenticeship, and Slavery of Native Americans in California." The California Indian History Website. 2022. Available at <http://calindianhistory.org/>

Johnson, Susan Lee. *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush*.

Levy, JoAnn. *They Saw the Elephant: Women in the California Gold Rush*

Lindsay, Brendan C. *Murder State: Californian's Native American Genocide, 1846-1873*

Owens, Kenneth, ed. *Riches for All*.

Paddison, Joshua. *A World Transformed*.

Rohrbough, Malcom J. *Days of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the American Nation*