

PROMPT: evaluate the extent to which migration transformed the western United States across a broad time period in the mid- to late-nineteenth century.

During the mid- to late-nineteenth century, the western United States underwent profound transformations largely fueled by waves of internal and international migration. From the 1840s California Gold Rush and the subsequent boom in mining communities, to the later establishment of transcontinental railroads and homestead settlements, migrants fundamentally altered the social, economic, and environmental landscape of the West. Although the influx of newcomers brought economic opportunity and led to the creation of new communities, these changes also intensified conflicts with Native Americans, reshaped labor relations, and had lasting consequences for the region's ecology and demographic character.

During this period, the United States was emerging from the era of Manifest Destiny, a belief that westward expansion was both justified and inevitable. The Western frontier, by the mid-nineteenth century, was viewed as a place of opportunity. The discovery of gold in California in 1848 set off a massive rush of prospectors and merchants who transformed sleepy Mexican ranchos into booming, albeit chaotic, mining towns. These migrations were facilitated by the general context of industrialization and the federal government's willingness to promote settlement through legislation like the Homestead Act of 1862, which offered land to those willing to improve it. As the railroads connected Eastern markets to Western resources, the West became integrated into the national economy, providing not only minerals and crops but also new consumer markets. This period of rapid economic integration meant that migration to the West was not just episodic—it was a long-term process that attracted farmers, ranchers, laborers, and entrepreneurs from the United States and abroad.

As migrants poured into the West, the social fabric of the region changed dramatically. Ethnically diverse communities sprang up around mining camps and railroad hubs. Chinese laborers, for example, played a crucial role in building the Central Pacific Railroad, yet they faced discriminatory policies and violence. Similarly, white settlers encroached upon and ultimately seized Indigenous lands, causing the displacement of Native American nations. The transformation was not purely economic; it also involved a social reordering. Towns grew out of what had once been remote outposts, complete with saloons, schools, churches, and local governments. The steady arrival of migrants thus gave shape to permanent communities that replaced more transient mining camps. Over time, these settlements turned into towns and cities, and the West became more socially and politically aligned with the rest of the country.

However, not all changes were purely beneficial or celebrated. The arrival of so many migrants put intense pressure on the environment. Bison herds were nearly driven to extinction due to overhunting—some of it for sport, and some to undermine the livelihood of Plains tribes. Grasslands were overgrazed by cattle, and the introduction of large-scale agriculture required the use of irrigation methods that altered local ecosystems. Additionally, class divisions within these communities sometimes hardened. Many railroad and mining companies employed immigrant labor under harsh conditions. This created tensions that would later lead to labor

disputes and anti-immigrant sentiments, most notably the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which curtailed further Chinese migration.

In total, the extent of transformation was vast. Migration did not merely add people to the West—it reoriented its economy, shaped its demographic profile, intensified conflicts with Indigenous peoples, and permanently altered the environment. Although the region retained some of its rugged individualistic mythology, by the late-nineteenth century, the Western United States was a patchwork of cultures and economies that stood firmly integrated into the broader American nation. The cumulative effect of these migrations was to turn a sparsely populated expanse into a settled, economically diverse, and socially complex region, setting the stage for further development in the twentieth century.

SCORE BREAKDOWN:

A. Thesis/Claim (1 point):

Earned: The essay's thesis in the first paragraph clearly states a historically defensible claim, outlining how migration transformed the West economically, socially, and environmentally.

B. Contextualization (1 point):

Earned: The essay situates the argument within the broader context of Manifest Destiny, the Gold Rush, and industrialization, providing the background that led to mass migrations.

C. Evidence (2 points):

Earned:

- **1 point for using evidence:** The essay uses specific historical evidence (e.g., Gold Rush, Homestead Act, Chinese railroad workers, environmental impact on bison) to support its argument.
- **2 points for supporting the argument with evidence:** The evidence is not merely mentioned but is tied back to the argument of transformation (e.g., the Gold Rush leads to permanent towns, Chinese laborers' role in railroads integrating the West with the national economy, environmental destruction). This earns the full 2 points for evidence.

D. Analysis and Reasoning (2 points):

Earned:

- **1 point for historical reasoning:** The essay uses cause-and-effect reasoning throughout (migration causes economic integration, settlement patterns, and ecological changes).
- **0 points for complex understanding:** While the essay is clear and well-structured, it does not fully achieve a complex understanding that might involve nuanced comparisons or contradictions, a deeper analysis of changing attitudes over time, or a thorough

exploration of multiple perspectives to the point of demonstrating a more sophisticated and nuanced argument.

Thus, the essay earns 1 point for thesis, 1 for contextualization, 2 for evidence, and 1 for analysis and reasoning, totaling 5 points out of the possible 6.

Total Score: 5/6