

Introduction

Did you know that an African American¹ cowboy invented the sport known as steer wrestling? Bill Pickett introduced the sport while performing in rodeos in the early twentieth century. After wrestling a steer to the ground, he would bite the animal's lip, paralyzing the steer and forcing it to surrender to his control.²

Did you know that "The Yellow Rose of Texas" was written by a Texas plantation owner who was in love with one of his slaves? In the mid-nineteenth century, Colonel James Morgan composed the ballad in honor of Emily West, a "high yellow" woman with "golden-skinned" charms.³

Did you know that not all of the Okies who left Oklahoma during the Dust Bowl and who moved to California were white? There were also a number of African American immigrants. Some of them, who are now almost one hundred years old, still live in the small town of Teviston.⁴

Although whites represent the majority of the population, other races and ethnic groups live in the West. In Westerns, minorities often play subordinate and stereotypical roles. But in reality, non-whites have made major contributions to the West throughout history.

Like other racial and ethnic groups, African Americans have been visible in the region for centuries. But scholars did not begin to study the West and its inhabitants until fairly recently. In "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," published in 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner complained that nineteenth-century American historians paid too much attention to the North and the South. While focusing on tensions between the two regions, scholars neglected the West. According to Turner, the Civil War was merely a sectional "incident" and a brief affair compared to westward migration, which was a national movement that continued throughout most of the century.⁵

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Martha Williams, one of the original black Okies, lives with her son Clay in a shack in Teviston, California. (Photograph by Matt Black © 2000)

Turner overemphasized the importance of the frontier in order to compensate for the previous lack of attention the West had received. In some fields, such as African American history, the West has continued to play a peripheral role until recently. For example, historians of the nineteenth century have concentrated on African Americans who were slaves in the South and who moved to the North after escaping or receiving their freedom. But what about the African Americans who journeyed to the West during the same period?

Since the early sixteenth century, people of African origin have inhabited the western part of the continent. African slaves accompanied early Spanish explorers and later Lewis and Clark. They intermingled with other races, settled throughout the region, and worked in many professions. However, until the twentieth century, people of African heritage, including African Americans, were less numerous in the West than other racial and ethnic minorities. In the nineteenth century, for example, whites were more attuned to the presence of Mexicans and Native Americans because large numbers of indigenous peoples posed a greater threat to American empire than a few thousand African American slaves or freedmen and -women.⁶ In the states, “the color line” referred to invisible barriers and social and legal distinctions

between blacks and whites.⁷ The term was not used in the West. But Turner's phrase "the frontier line" had a similar meaning.⁸ It referred to the border between "civilization" and "savagery," represented by whites and indigenous peoples, respectively. Mexicans and Native Americans constituted the "other," the presence that stood in the way of westering "civilization." Until the frontier was secured and territories and states were created, there were no laws or social codes governing black-white relations. African Americans on the early frontier were perceived as relatively nonthreatening entities.

Today, people associate the West with sepia-tinged memories of a rural frontier, even though most of its residents now live in large and increasingly sprawling metropolitan areas. Thus, another reason why we tend to forget that there is an African American West is because African Americans did not begin migrating to the region in large numbers until the twentieth century. When they did so, like many other Americans, they moved to urban locales. Since the West is not urban, in the minds of people who cling to the notion of a mythic frontier, the concept of a modern multicultural West is not very popular.

Until recently, the only books on the African American West were specialized histories that documented the roles played by African Americans in the preindustrial West. *The Negro Cowboys* (1965), by Philip Durham and Everett L. Jones, claims that approximately five thousand cowboys on the frontier were of African origin. *The Buffalo Soldiers* (1967), by William H. Leckie, tells the story of the U.S. Army's nineteenth-century African American cavalry regiments. *Exodusters* (1976), by Nell Irvin Painter, chronicles the migration of African American homesteaders to Kansas in the late 1870s. *Blacks in Gold Rush California* (1977), by Rudolph M. Lapp, documents the presence of African American miners in the mid-nineteenth century. Several general histories of the African American West have appeared more recently. *The Black West*, published by William Loren Katz in 1987 and revised many times over the years, is an accessible history aimed at nonspecialists. *In Search of the Racial Frontier* (1998), by Quintard Taylor, provides a comprehensive survey of African Americans in the American West. It spans almost five hundred years and serves as an indispensable guide for scholars in African American and western American history. *African Americans in the West* (1998), a bibliography of secondary sources compiled by Bruce A. Glasrud, is designed to help scholars interested in conducting further research.

There are few literary studies of the African American West, for the obvious reason that not every historical personage leaves a literary record for the sake of posterity. Some early African Americans, including slaves and



Mary Ellen Pleasant, nineteenth-century San Francisco entrepreneur. (Author's collection)

ex-slaves, were illiterate. Others were too busy homesteading, prospecting, ranching, serving in the military, or running small businesses to keep journals, compose fiction and poetry, or write autobiographies. For instance, Mary Ellen Pleasant came to San Francisco during the gold rush, worked as a cook, invested her wages, and eventually became a wealthy real estate maven and

entrepreneur. She owned three laundries and a boardinghouse, speculated in mining, and became notorious for harboring a fugitive slave. If ever a life deserved to be chronicled, it was certainly hers.⁹

Other African Americans, prominent as well as obscure, narrated their personal histories. But they lived in the West for a short time and their experiences there made up only a small portion of their autobiographies. *The Life and Adventures of James Williams, a Fugitive Slave* was published in 1873. But only five of the fifty-six chapters cover the author's career as a miner and businessman on the early frontier. In 1902, Miffin Wistar Gibbs published *Shadow and Light*. A brief portion of the autobiography covers a period in the mid-nineteenth century when Gibbs was a San Francisco merchant, newspaper founder, and community activist. The remainder documents his travels to Canada, to the American South, and to lands overseas. The first work in African American literature dealing extensively with the American West is *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth* (1856), the autobiography of a mulatto who worked in the fur industry and lived with a tribe of Crow Indians. However, Beckwourth does not identify himself as a person of color; instead, he attempts to pass as white in his autobiography.

Beckwourth's book raises the following question: To what extent can a work offer insights into the African American western experience when its author denies having had a "racial" experience? The question that arises most frequently in this study is that of representation. In the nineteenth century, for example, African Americans in the West were a diverse group of people. They were slaves, ex-slaves, and freedmen and -women. They lived in segregated towns and farming communities, with whites, and among indigenous tribes. Some had pure African blood. Others had white antecedents, Spanish and Mexican ancestors, and relationships to Native Americans. They pioneered the Great Plains, crossed the southwestern desert, and discovered routes through the Rockies. Can a few literary works by a handful of writers, not all of whom identified as people of color, speak for the thousands of African Americans living in the region prior to the twentieth century? Probably not. For this reason their works are even more valuable. Such documents, including Beckwourth's autobiography, a trilogy of homesteading novels by Oscar Micheaux, and racial melodramas by Pauline Hopkins and Sutton E. Griggs, were published at a time when accounts of African Americans in the region were rare.

In the twentieth century, as the number of African Americans in the region increased, so did the volume of literature about the African American western experience. Where there was once a scarcity there is now an abundance of

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artistic works to consider, including futuristic fiction and historical novels, Westerns and mysteries, contemporary urban dramas and regional autobiographies, not to mention music and film. Again, there is the problem of representation. Since it is impossible to consider each of these works, which ones should a critic select for analysis in a representative study? In the first three chapters of this book I evaluate works by individual authors, such as James P. Beckwourth, Oscar Micheaux, Pauline Hopkins, and Sutton E. Griggs, among the few African Americans writing on the West in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the remaining five chapters I sift through the material that has accumulated over the last one hundred years, attempting to group together works that are products of cultural movements, such as the Harlem Renaissance; examples of genres, such as Westerns, detective fiction, and historical novels; and literature that examines similar themes, such as women's rights and urban unrest.

In the process of researching and writing this book I came to realize that there is no such thing as a "representative" African American western experience. Although James P. Beckwourth attempted to pass as white in his autobiography, other African Americans were not only proud of their heritage but militant in their support of minority rights. The South Dakota homesteader Oscar Micheaux was a conservative who admired Booker T. Washington. But his contemporary, Sutton E. Griggs, a Baptist preacher from Texas, was more politically radical. In a novel he published at the turn of the century, Griggs debated whether African Americans should secede from the nation and form their own government. He anticipated a black nationalist movement that would become more influential in the decades to come.

There are many different impressions of place, just as there are many different types of racial experience. For Pauline Hopkins, the West is Kansas Territory in the mid-nineteenth century. In her historical novel, published in 1902, the African American characters fight to make Kansas a free state when it enters the Union. They join John Brown's brigade and fight to abolish the institution of slavery. Langston Hughes remembers Kansas differently in his fictional autobiography, published in 1930. Here, Kansas is portrayed as a midwestern state populated by small towns and neighborhoods where African Americans lead mostly peaceful if not trouble-free lives.

Kansas is either the West or the Midwest, depending on its position at a particular time. Similarly, Texas and Oklahoma are part of the South as well as the West. In *Shadow and Act* (1953), Oklahoma native Ralph Ellison notes that the state, like the Deep South, has a history of slavery and racism. But he also suggests that Oklahoma was a frontier during his youth, to the extent

that it offered greater freedom and more opportunities for racial minorities. Although California is geographically part of the West, in some ways it seems to be an exceptional place, a land of extremes. But the West has never been one thing in particular. It has represented different things to various people living in numerous places over hundreds of years.

For some African American writers, the West is an uncivilized territory. For others, it is a cultivated farm or a rural community. For many, however, the West is a city, sometimes more dangerous than the early frontier. Jewell Parker Rhodes sets her historical novel *Magic City* in Tulsa in 1921, during one of the largest race riots of the twentieth century. In *Twilight: Los Angeles*, Anna Deavere Smith dramatizes the “uprising” that happened in 1992 in Los Angeles. Although many African American westerners live in urban locations, not all of them view urban experience in a negative light. Even those writers and artists who explore racial unrest and social apocalypse often believe that regeneration and redemption are possible. *Magic City* concludes with the hero’s decision to build a new Tulsa out of the ashes. *Twilight* refers to that moment right before darkness, to a time of hope, not despair.

African Americans disagree about whether or not the West is a place of promise. Over the last several centuries they have migrated to the region in order to establish segregated townships and farming cooperatives as well as experimental racial utopias. But Toni Morrison, Pearl Cleage, and Octavia Butler suggest that these “ideal” communities were sometimes imperfect, impractical, or conceptually flawed. Some individuals embraced the West while others rejected it. James P. Beckwourth left St. Louis at an early age. He spent most of the rest of his life in the Rocky Mountains, in the Southwest, and in the Sierra Nevada, working successfully as a fur trader, scout, and self-employed businessman. However, Oscar Micheaux lost his farm in South Dakota, became disillusioned, and went back to Chicago. Other African Americans had mixed emotions about the region. Several members of the Harlem Renaissance grew up in the West. Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, and Taylor Gordon were raised in Kansas, Utah, and Montana, respectively. They left the West in order to pursue artistic careers in New York. Yet during the Renaissance they wrote about their experiences growing up in the West, revealing various feelings, ranging from nostalgia to bitterness.

Many African American writers, artists, and filmmakers work within genres while expanding the boundaries or resisting the limitations that those genres impose. For example, “black” Westerns obey the same formulas as traditional Westerns. At the same time, they depart from tradition by introducing racial themes and prominent minority characters. Similarly, “black”

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detective novelists, such as Chester Himes and Walter Mosley, have noir sensibilities. Like other writers in the noir detective tradition, they set many of their works in western cities such as Los Angeles. However, unlike their white counterparts, Himes and Mosley frequently examine racism and the role it plays in society.

Some African Americans reinvent genres such as Westerns and noir. Others use literature as a means of rewriting history. For example, African American women have become increasingly visible in western American literature. In *Flyin' West* (1992), Pearl Cleage reimagines the Exoduster migration that occurred in the late 1870s. African American women play significant roles in her drama, though they tend to be overlooked by historians. Toni Morrison was inspired to write *Paradise* (1997) after reading about a forgotten chapter in African American history: the founding of African American townships on the western frontier. Her novel also includes a group of mysterious women who challenge a patriarchal African American rural community. Few African Americans wrote about the West in the nineteenth century, and most of those who did were men. However, contemporary African American writers, including a large percentage of women, have recently written historical novels and plays situated in the early American West, told from the perspectives of women and racial minorities.

Frederick Jackson Turner was never more readable than when he was writing about the presence of Americans on the western frontier. Unlike some other historians, who write in unimaginative prose, Turner loved vivid metaphors and colorful imagery. In his essay, for example, he alternately refers to the influx of immigrants and the advancement of “civilization” as a “frontier line,” as a “tide” (36), and as a “series of waves” (44). Some of these phrases have received critical scrutiny.¹⁰ But one of my favorites has gone overlooked. At one point in his essay, Turner describes westward movement as “an uneven advance,” with “tongues of settlement” protruding into the American “wilderness” (42). I love this phrase even though I have no idea what it means. Like most metaphors, it evokes poetic associations instead of defining something concrete. Maybe the “tongues” are peninsulas, extensions of human society. Or maybe Turner is referring to the protruding part of a wagon or trailer known as the “tongue,” which attaches to the hitch of a vehicle. But if this is the case, then what is the “hitch” and what is the “vehicle” that pulls the wagon of “civilization”? At this point, my mental process, like the metaphor, begins to break down.

On a literal level—the one level on which Turner may not have intended it—the phrase “tongues of settlement” suggests the articulation of a presence

in the American West. Ironically, Turner never acknowledged the existence of African Americans on the early frontier. Yet they have asserted their presence in the region over the course of the last several centuries, speaking in various “tongues,” including the oral tradition, literature, music, and film.

Since the 1960s, the field of western American literature has expanded to include works by Chicanos, Native Americans, and Asian Americans. Scholars have become more interested in the experiences of western Jews, Mormons, and other religious minorities. Environmentalists and feminists have helped to redefine what used to be a politically conservative field. Yet within this increasingly diversified discipline, African American writers remain almost invisible.¹¹

This book offers the first comprehensive study of African American literature about the American West. The only other book on this subject is Michael K. Johnson’s *Black Masculinity and the Frontier Myth in American Literature* (2002). Because he writes on the subject of black masculinity, Johnson focuses almost exclusively on writings by African American men. In this book, however, I explore a variety of issues that pertain to African American women and men, on the early frontier and in the urban American West. I write primarily about literature, although I discuss other works, such as Western films and West Coast rap music, to the extent that they share with the literature certain generic affinities and thematic concerns.

This is an inclusive and representative study, but it is not an encyclopedic survey of works in the field. I have chosen examples of literary genres, movements, or trends, leaving out other examples that might have served just as well. I have excluded works such as *American Daughter* (1946), by Era Bell Thompson, simply because I could not find a way to incorporate it into my study. I limit myself to considering works by African Americans who represent the experience of living in the American West. I do not write about African Americans who were born or raised in the West unless they portray the West in their work. In addition, I do not include depictions of African Americans by white western writers and filmmakers. In many such novels and films, African Americans play secondary or stereotypical roles.¹² While it might be useful to contrast black and white representations of the African American West, it would also result in privileging, to some extent, these white representations, many of which have already been widely disseminated by the popular media. I have chosen to redress this situation by giving priority to works in which African Americans tell their own stories and take center stage. Doing so not only adds to our appreciation of African American literature but contributes to our understanding of the American West.