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INTRODUCTION

African Americans on
the Great PlainsBRUCE A. GLASRUD &
CHARLES A. BRAITHWAITE

Prior to the late twentieth century, the predominant histories of the West and the Great Plains included little evidence of the presence of African Americans. Nevertheless, African Americans have a long history of living in the West and evidence of this could be found in the works of two pioneering historians: Kenneth Wiggins Porter's *The Negro on the American Frontier* and W. Sherman Savage's *Blacks in the West*. Porter, a white historian, published his book in 1971; Savage, an African American, in 1976. But prior to the appearance of those two works, scant information was available. Walter Prescott Webb, in his classic *The Great Plains*, made little mention of blacks on the Great Plains: he commented on slavery but not actual slaves, and he mentioned the Dred Scott court decision but not Dred Scott the man. Similarly, Ray Allen Billington, in his oft-used textbook, *Westward Expansion*, did not discuss Estevan, although he included a chapter entitled "The West and Slavery," where he, too, wrote of the institution but nothing about slaves. Billington did reference the name of Dred Scott, but he revealed nothing about him. As Oklahoma black novelist Ralph Ellison later phrased it, to these and other historians, African Americans in the West were *The Invisible Man*.¹

Fortunately, by the twenty-first century historians acknowledged

the presence and role of black westerners. More recent editions of Billington's textbook include African Americans, and in a pivotal development, Quintard Taylor provided us with an excellent history of the black experience in the West: *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528–1990*. Although Taylor's study has a considerable amount of information about black life and history on the Great Plains, and one can find several significant book-length state studies of African Americans on the Plains—including studies of Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa, and New Mexico—still, no overall study of the black experience on the Great Plains exists.²

A first of its kind, *African Americans on the Great Plains* fills that gap and, it is hoped, will stimulate other writers to pursue studies of the black experience on the plains. The fourteen articles in this anthology, all originally published in the *Great Plains Quarterly*, cover the Great Plains as broadly but inconsistently defined. The Center for Great Plains Studies at the University of Nebraska, for example, defines the Great Plains as including the states of Colorado, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas, and Wyoming, and the Canadian provinces of Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. To that list we add Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, and Arkansas. Yet definitional difficulties still intrude; it is troublesome, for example, to label the Texas Gulf Coast and the cities of Austin and Houston as belonging in the Great Plains, although they certainly are located in a Great Plains state.

This book is about African Americans and the making of black communities on the plains. It is about race relations. It is about discrimination and violence. It is about the struggle for civil rights and against Jim Crow. It depicts African American cultural growth and contributions and it includes the many and varied economic and political aspects of those contributions. The fourteen articles are arranged chronologically and cover key topics of the black experience

on the Great Plains—organizations, employment opportunities, cultural contributions, family and gender issues, the military, prejudice and discrimination, rural and urban life, and violence. The book is intended for a broad readership that includes students, teachers, scholars, and the general reading public. Every essay is well-documented and packed with information, showcasing the resiliency and spirit of African Americans on the Great Plains of the United States.

African Americans first entered the Great Plains in 1528 when Estevan came to Texas with Spanish explorer Cabeza de Vaca. Killed while exploring New Mexico (1539), Estevan was the first in a long line of blacks who entered or settled on the Great Plains, either as slaves or as soldiers with Spanish explorers (some accompanying Coronado in 1540 and 1542 and others who aided the colonization of New Mexico in 1598). Black growth and settlement continued in succeeding years, albeit sparsely; in fact, by 1717 San Antonio's black population stood at 151. Black women were part of these numbers as well: in 1600 a black woman, Isabel de Olvera, journeyed to Santa Fe to work as a servant while other black women in the northern Spanish province were fighting to protect their rights, to file lawsuits, and to establish families and networks. Although much of the early exploration of the plains took place on the Spanish northern frontier, one slave, York, crossed the plains with the Lewis and Clark expedition and another, Jacob Dodson, accompanied John C. Fremont's expedition in 1843. Blacks became fur trappers and traders as well: two well-known examples were Edward Rose and James Beckwourth. In Minnesota, George and Stephen Bonga engaged in the fur trade and lived among the Obijway as late as 1866.³

Although slavery did not exist over the entire Great Plains, it was entrenched in Texas and in the Indian Territory. Slavery, as Paul Lack reminds us in *The Texas Revolutionary Experience: A Political and Social History*, was a major factor in precipitating the Texas Revolution.

The possibility of allowing slavery affected Kansas deeply and was responsible for “bleeding” Kansas in 1855. And while there were no “natural limits” to slavery’s expansion, it failed only when people orchestrated its demise through legislation such as the Missouri Compromise (1820) and the Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854). Affirming the right of slavery to exist on the Great Plains was the Dred Scott decision. Scott, a Missouri slave, had resided temporarily in both Illinois and Minnesota and sued for his freedom on the basis of the fact that he had lived in free territory. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled against him, however, by declaring the Missouri Compromise unconstitutional (1857). The relationship between slavery and politics is clearly articulated in James A. Rawley’s superb book *Race and Politics: “Bleeding Kansas” and the Coming of the Civil War*. Ultimately the Civil War settled the issue: slavery would not be allowed anywhere in the United States or its territories.⁴

The Civil War created a “Black Kansas” whose population in 1860 was 627 but, as author Frank Yerby noted in one of his novels, grew to over 12,500 by 1865. By the 1870s black Kansans had established small communities and resisted discrimination, though not always successfully. During the Civil War black regiments from Kansas volunteered and fought for the Union, including engagements in Arkansas and the Indian Territory (later named Oklahoma). African Americans from Iowa also enlisted in the U.S. Colored Troops; during the war 440 fought for the Union. White Texas soldiers, as Yerby also noted, massacred black soldiers and black civilians who resided in close proximity to military engagements. Although black soldiers jubilantly entered military service, their war experiences with white Confederates were filled with normal military danger and racism as well.⁵

A federal military presence in the two slave-holding regions of Texas and Oklahoma were used to enforce national laws, to help recently freed African Americans, and to reconstruct the southern

states from 1865 to 1874. Overall, passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments to the constitution had a profound and lasting effect on African Americans on the Great Plains. They were free, they were enfranchised, and they began to vote. In Colorado, Kansas, Texas, and Wyoming, voters elected black officeholders. At the same time, however, violent white opposition to African American freedom existed, particularly in Texas.⁶

One employment opportunity that was open to black males after the Civil War was enlistment in the U.S. Army. Primarily engaged on the Great Plains, the black soldiers' deployment ranged from Texas and New Mexico to South Dakota and Wyoming. Though all served under white officers, the military offered a measure of economic security and a level of respect from society not easily gained in the postwar years. Nicknamed "buffalo soldiers" by Plains Indians, from the outset the black soldiers faced considerable opposition and antagonism, even from those under their protection. In addition to the black regulars, black citizen-soldiers in the militias of Iowa, Kansas, and Texas performed largely ceremonial functions. They were, however, activated on at least two occasions during instances of domestic disorder. Many of these men later enlisted in the black volunteer regiments that were organized for the Spanish-American and Philippine-American wars.⁷

To some extent African American soldiers played their own role in the racial strife that often resulted when black garrisons were located near white communities. As James N. Leiker shows in Chapter 1, "Black Soldiers at Fort Hays, Kansas, 1867–1869: A Study in Civilian and Military Violence," Fort Hays in Kansas provides "an example of how civilian/military interaction helped to transfer racial hatreds to the newly conquered region." Relationships between soldiers from the fort and white civilians in Hays City were filled with conflict and violence. Black soldiers did not respond passively but instead retaliated to wrongs perpetrated upon them by white racists. In their

search for protection and their struggle for acceptance these soldiers became a community. Similar civilian-military conflicts occurred in Texas and Oklahoma as well.⁸

One other attractive employment opportunity for black males on the Great Plains was that of a cowboy. Black cowboys lived and worked generally in Texas but also in the Dakotas, New Mexico, Kansas, and, occasionally, ranged as far west as Wyoming. Some black cowboys became successful ranchers, such as Daniel Webster “80 John” Wallace, who owned ranch land in Mitchell County, Texas. Unfortunately, for many years the black cowboys were “invisible” (just like many other blacks on the Great Plains). Contrary to the picture that one received from the movies and from television, black cowboys actually comprised around 40 percent of the total number of ranch hands.⁹

African Americans ventured westward for numerous reasons other than in search of employment or to serve in the military. Some were seeking an escape from the South, taking railroads, boats, or simply by walking. Some sought free or inexpensive land on the Great Plains. Others headed to Oklahoma in an effort to establish all-black towns and make Oklahoma a predominantly black state. Some moved westward from the North and entered Nebraska or the Dakotas. A search for freedom and economic opportunity, to escape violence and intimidation, and a taste for adventure all propelled the African American westward movement. Countless black women also enjoyed the West’s opportunities. South Dakotan Kate Chapman encouraged everyone “for the sake of health, wealth and freedom, come west.”¹⁰

In 1877 a massive migration to Kansas, led and encouraged by a black man from Tennessee, Benjamin “Pap” Singleton, began. Two years later a larger, unorganized, and leaderless mass migration occurred from the southern states of Tennessee, Mississippi, Kentucky, Louisiana, and Texas. Though the numbers are murky, between 1877

and 1880 over twenty-thousand African Americans migrated to and settled in Kansas; the African American population of Kansas grew by over twenty-six thousand between 1870 and 1880. These migrants became known as the “Exodusters.” Buoyed by the chance for free land, by the spirit of John Brown, and by an opportunity to live apart from whites in separate black communities, the Exodusters established over a dozen towns such as Nicodemus and Dunlap. In the end the movement suffered from false promises and eventually failed; some of the migrants returned to their homes in the South while others moved to cities on the Great Plains. As Joseph V. Hickey notes in “‘Pap’ Singleton’s Dunlap Colony: Relief Agencies and the Failure of a Black Settlement in Eastern Kansas,” the movement to Dunlap, Kansas, had great potential for success. Dunlap Colony was carefully planned, received considerable financial support, and attracted about a thousand residents, yet it declined within twenty years. Local racial prejudice and discrimination created problems that plagued the community; more important, the failure of good-hearted relief agencies led to its downfall.¹¹

The Exodusters were not the only African Americans on the Great Plains who moved to the region’s larger towns and cities. Despite the romance connected with many black occupations and settlements during the nineteenth century, a large number of blacks migrated to the urban centers—Denver, Kansas City, Topeka, Omaha, Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio. Blacks worked as personal servants, hotel waiters, railroad porters, cooks, and janitors. They operated barbershops and restaurants, served as newspaper editors, and included a small but important professional class. Black women discovered opportunities for networking, for employment such as teaching, for religious endeavors, and for family matters. In one late nineteenth-century example, African American women in Great Falls, Montana, joined forces to establish and maintain their church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church. In some places, however,

it was difficult for black women to obtain teaching positions; Ruth Flowers, the first black woman to graduate from the University of Colorado (in 1924), was forced to leave Boulder for South Carolina to secure a teaching job. In general, jobs for black women in Denver were difficult to find and hard to keep, leading to the often-repeated comment to “try being a black woman!”¹²

In these Great Plains cities, African Americans realized that they had to work together to make their communities viable and to protect themselves from racists and racial violence. Principal among their problems were the actions of their white neighbors. Shawn Leigh Alexander’s “Vengeance without Justice, Injustice without Retribution: The Afro-American Council’s Struggle against Racial Violence,” focuses on the 1901 case of Fred Alexander, a black man who was lynched in Leavenworth, Kansas. Previously, blacks on the Great Plains organized local Afro-American leagues and ministerial alliances to protest white brutality as well as Jim Crow society. By 1901 the League had vanished and in its place the Afro-American Council emerged. Supported by and working with the council, blacks on the Great Plains strongly protested Fred Alexander’s lynching and sought the imprisonment of those responsible. Later, a 1919 brutal lynching and race riot in Omaha, Nebraska, and a 1920 lynching in Duluth, Minnesota, led to the growth and influence of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).¹³

Race riots and lynchings were not the only instances of violence faced by African Americans in the cities during the first decades of the twentieth century. Clare V. McKanna Jr., in “Black Enclaves of Violence: Race and Homicide in Great Plains Cities, 1890–1920,” examines racial violence from one other perspective, pointing out that high interracial homicide rates were prevalent on the Great Plains during the years from 1890 to 1920. Racial violence in Coffeyville and Topeka, Kansas, as well as in Omaha, resulted from “enclaves of violence” where males, alcohol, cheap guns, idle time,

and a convenient place came together. Around 80 percent of blacks who were charged were convicted; whites so charged received lesser sentences or were acquitted.¹⁴

Black soldiers stationed along the Texas-Mexico border also were involved in racial incidents during the last years of the nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth century. The most explosive incident took place in 1906 at Brownsville, Texas, when black soldiers allegedly rioted in the town. The black soldiers were summarily discharged from the army, though little evidence and no confessions emerged. In "Prelude to Brownsville: The Twenty-fifth Infantry at Fort Niobrara, Nebraska, 1902-06," Thomas R. Buecker argues that these black soldiers, members of the well-regarded 25th Infantry, had fought in the Spanish-American and the Philippine-American wars; in their previous posting in Nebraska they had been treated well and had acted as model troops, gaining the respect of the Nebraska communities in which they resided. Yet those same black soldiers encountered a very antagonistic society in Texas and the congenial treatment they had received in Nebraska made the behavior of Texans seem even worse; the disparity was virtually impossible to accept and violence broke out. White Texans did not change their behavior, and later in 1917 a riot with black soldiers and white townsmen occurred in Houston.¹⁵

Race riots on the Plains were not limited to black military-white civilian episodes during the first years of the twentieth century. Although a riot in 1910 had decimated the black community in Anderson County, Texas, in 1919 race riots broke out in Elaine, Arkansas, Longview and Port Arthur, Texas, and Omaha, Nebraska, as black soldiers returning home from World War I refused to submit to Jim Crow treatment. Other racial riots took place in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1921, in Sherman, Texas, in 1930, and in Beaumont, Texas, in 1943.¹⁶

Not all African American twentieth-century history on the Great Plains is filled with violence. Black life was affected by and had an

effect on urbanization: African Americans, to borrow a phrase from Darlene Clark Hine, were engaged in “making community.”¹⁷ They played a part in the Harlem Renaissance, fought in and supported World War I and World War II, and suffered through the ravages of the Great Depression of the 1930s. Bent on creating a better, more equitable, and more humane society, they participated in the civil rights movement and focused on closing fissures in the glass ceiling, on expanding their opportunities, and on living in a Plains society without Jim Crow segregation. By the twenty-first century African Americans could take pride in what they had accomplished but nevertheless continued their efforts toward a fairer share in that society.

As blacks on the Great Plains organized and challenged racism through organizations such as the Afro-American League and the National Afro-American Council, they also aided in developing their communities through self-help, economic betterment, and racial uplift programs with group emphasis. As Dennis N. Mihelich points out in “A Socioeconomic Portrait of Prince Hall Masonry in Nebraska, 1900–1920,” the black Masons were a group of individuals and clubs who worked together to create a better community. What Mihelich also discovered was that membership in the Prince Hall Masons crossed class boundaries and resulted in “a multiclass fraternity.” By working together the Masons survived the lynchings and race riot crisis of 1919, owned their own homes, and in general were young and socially mobile.¹⁸

As noted earlier, one goal of many African Americans on the Great Plains was to create predominantly black towns and communities in Oklahoma. As R. Bruce Shepard explains in “Diplomatic Racism: Canadian Government and Black Migration from Oklahoma, 1905–1912,” blacks discovered that the movement to create black towns and communities in Oklahoma led to fierce white resistance and anti-black discrimination that culminated in Jim Crow legislation as soon as Oklahoma became a state in 1907. Three years later

the state legislature disenfranchised black Oklahomans by use of a literacy test and a grandfather clause, the latter of which insured that whites owned the right to vote. As a result of *de facto* and *de jure* discrimination, a significant migration effort by black Oklahomans to move to Canada emerged. White Canadians reacted negatively to this migration and supported a successful diplomatic effort by their government to keep blacks out of their country. Black Oklahomans realized that discrimination was manifold—they escaped vicious anti-black behavior in the South and settled in Oklahoma, only to face increased discrimination when they tried to move to a potentially desirable new country and were met with stiff resistance. Most black Oklahomans remained in Oklahoma, eventually owning their own homes and achieving gainful employment despite the growing discrimination.¹⁹

Changes beginning with the end of World War I, gradually became apparent in the ability of blacks on the Great Plains to reduce the number of physical threats and create more viable communities, even in Texas. This was the advent of the “New Negro.” For the remainder of the twentieth century the history of African Americans on the Great Plains revolves around six themes, each partially visible in previous years as well: (1) increased political activity; (2) protest and resistance to discrimination and violence, e.g., in Texas blacks led the attack on the white primary, and in Kansas on segregated public education as well as demonstrating a commitment to civil rights; (3) racial cohesiveness; (4) search for freedom; (5) significant cultural contributions, including a close relationship with the Harlem Renaissance; and (6) representative and responsible roles for black women.

Era Bell Thompson epitomized these and other aspects of black life on the Great Plains in the years after World War I. Born in 1906 in Iowa, Thompson’s family moved to North Dakota in 1914 because her father believed they would encounter less prejudice and more

opportunity there. Thompson was raised with few other African Americans in her circle of friends and acquaintances. In fact, the entire black population of North Dakota in 1920 was only 467. Thompson attended the University of North Dakota, later graduated from Morningside College in Iowa, and enrolled in graduate coursework at Northwestern University. She moved permanently to Chicago in 1931 and published her autobiography, *An American Daughter*, in 1946. Thompson's book detailed her experiences in North Dakota, noting that gatherings with other African Americans brought "a feeling of brotherhood, of race consciousness, and of family solidarity." She later was hired by John H. Johnson as editor for *Negro Digest* and then for *Ebony*. She died in 1986. Michael K. Johnson's article, "'This Strange White World': Race and Place in Era Bell Thompson's *American Daughter*," examines the effects of growing up in "this strange white world" of white people and white snow. Amid what W. E. B. Du Bois referred to as "double consciousness," Thompson and her family created their own African American culture on the North Dakota frontier.²⁰

Other African Americans on the Plains, cognizant of the spirit of the "New Negro," also worked to develop their own culture on the Plains. In a singularly comprehensive overview entitled, "The New Negro Arts and Letters Movement among Black University Students in the Midwest, 1914–1940," Richard M. Breaux describes the effect of those ideas on university students in the Midwest in a cultural explosion that overlapped the Harlem Renaissance. Breaux explains that black students at the universities of Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, and Nebraska made many contributions to the spirit and actuality of the New Negro movement. The students were involved politically and produced literature and art as well as music. As Breaux concludes, "blacks with a variety of talents and political views deserved the title New Negroes."²¹

The New Negro movement, also referred to as the Negro

Renaissance or the Harlem Renaissance (due to the significance of its locale), fostered a large number of African Americans who ventured to Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s to participate in that exciting moment in black social and cultural history. Many of them were originally from the Great Plains and this movement captured the spirit of the Great Plains, as Richard Breaux depicts so well. It was even more wide spread than Breaux's analysis. The Harlem Renaissance existed on the Great Plains outside the major universities, in its urban centers such as Houston, Dallas, Oklahoma City, Kansas City, Wichita, and Omaha, and in smaller communities such as Marshall, Texas, where two black colleges, Wiley and Bishop, were located.²²

Representatives of the movement included Oscar Micheaux, a South Dakota homesteader and later writer and filmmaker whose autobiographical novels, *The Conquest* and *The Homesteader*, told us much about black life in South Dakota; singer Taylor Gordon, who in *Born to be Free* described growing up in Sulphur Springs, Montana; author Langston Hughes, whose novel, *Not Without Laughter*, describes growing up in Kansas; and writer and editor Frank Marshall Davis, who was raised in Arkansas City, Kansas, and matriculated at Kansas State University in Manhattan. All were important figures in the Harlem Renaissance.²³ From Texas came Bernice Love Wiggins, a black poet from El Paso, who in 1925 published her book of poems, *Tuneful Tales*. Lillian B. Horace, another black Texan, published her first novel, *Five Generations Hence*, in 1916 (it was also the first novel published by a black woman on the Great Plains). Wiley College professor and poet Melvin B. Tolson joined the renaissance in Harlem during the summers, and eventually wrote his master's thesis on the Harlem Renaissance, the first scholarly work on this significant movement. J. Mason Brewer (the Alain Locke of Texas) collected black Texas poetry and published *Heralding Dawn*, a great contribution to our knowledge of Texas writers of that era.²⁴

These figures were not alone. From New Mexico came Mexico-