



## Teaching to Disrupt the Narrative of Presence: Multicultural Migrations to the Great Plains

by Phyllis M. May-Machunda

Migrations are processes that disrupt, reshape, and reconceptualize places and cultures through the movement of people. Who have been migrants and what are their stories as they journey from the regions they leave and into the regions they travel to and through? What does it mean to tell stories of migration at the intersections of history, geographic landscapes, and movements of peoples in a particular region? How can we as teachers and folklorists be equipped to research the narratives of fuller, more multicultural histories of regions, accounting for diverse migrations? I have a personal and professional interest in reclaiming the multicultural histories of the Great Plains: I am a folklorist of color and a scholar of American multicultural studies born and raised in the Midwest and currently living in northwestern Minnesota on its border between the Midwest with the northern Great Plains. I contend that folklorists' interdisciplinary methodologies offer important tools that can help us find and assemble more complex stories of the multiple multicultural migrations that have shaped the region.

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About the photo: African American homesteaders in Wyoming, near the border of Nebraska. Fair use image from <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/empire-wyoming-1908-1930>.



Figure 1. Map of Great Plains, Center for Great Plains Studies, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Geographically, the Great Plains is a region distinguished by its vegetation, landscapes, and topography and also shaped by a history of persistent migrations to and through it. With its blend of characteristics of the cultures of the Midwest, South, and West with those of immigrant settlers, the boundaries stretch from Canada to the Texas/Mexico border and from the Red and Missouri Rivers to the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, with a topography that transitions from fertile farmlands to rockier and more arid ranchlands. As with any physical, social, and cultural region, its boundaries are fluid, flexible, and contested across time, weather, and purpose (see map in Figure 1).

### The Narrative of Presence

The Great Plains region, as part of the American Heartland, has been sometimes referred to as “flyover country,” a place that is pastoral, idyllic, and racially homogenous, where relatively few want to visit or live because of the impression that little of significance ever happens there.

Anthropologists Britt E. Halvorson and Joshua O. Reno in *Imagining the Heartland* (2022) argue that the tropes for the Heartland—verdant fields, homogeneous small towns, and flat terrain—have long been associated with an image of whiteness representing “the best of America” (14). This romanticized portrayal of life promotes a nostalgic worldview based in virtues of racial purity, provinciality, hard work, “traditional” Christian moral values, cleanliness, self-governance, and entitlement in contrast to urban, cosmopolitan, complex, messy, sinful, industrialized cities whose populations, some argue, are composed of irresponsible, racially diverse, and immoral people who are unworthy of citizenship and therefore should be disenfranchised. Such a bucolic image masks the diversity that has always been part of the region and sets up a perception that people and communities that do not match the idealized trope cannot have a home or a place in the region. I contend that the Great Plains as a place that projects little visible diversity is a region that carries this discourse most intensely.

I label this mythic discourse that erases its multicultural history and present, *the narrative of presence*. The narrative of presence, a discourse of belonging that perpetually relays notions of who is living and has lived in a particular place, may or may not align with historical evidence. This persistent discourse communicates through selective imagery that suggests that this region does not have—and actually, *never* had—a history of culturally diverse residents. According to Halvorson and Reno (2022), this discourse has been among the tools for constructing, implementing, and maintaining a fabricated reality that works to promote and project a fictive perception of white dominance and of the U.S. as a white Christian nation. It

has been formulated upon white supremacy and empire and normalized into a set of representations and values. This cultural place-making discourse emphasizes European immigrant settlements, agricultural productivity, white middle-class values based on industriousness, and pious Christianity as the core of American identity (11).

By projecting the region as a place of, for, and by white residents, the narrative of presence promotes exclusive notions of freedom and the possibility of fresh starts for whites, while simultaneously erasing centuries of multicultural history. The narrative of presence is a tool of colonization that constructs and normalizes new hierarchies of power that privilege the dominant group and obscure, replace, and erase personal and cultural identities, histories, and ways of being for those colonized. Through this lens, freedom and full citizenship are for white males only, while BIPOC people are mostly defined as intruders, tokens, exceptions to their race, outsiders to the community, or racial stereotypes.<sup>1</sup> Such perspectives have contributed to and justified a distorted worldview that sustains an absence of knowledge about the lives and cultures of BIPOC peoples in the region and in its history. Further reinforcing this narrative of presence is the exclusive binary framing of the stories of white settler/Native encounters that happened during 19<sup>th</sup>-century settlement, implying that few other peoples existed on the Great Plains until, perhaps, the late 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

The actual history of the region runs contrary to imagery projected by the narrative of presence. Since the arrival of the first Western settlers, people of color have lived and worked throughout the Great Plains. A lens of migration allows for the examinations of the region as an aggregation of contested, layered, and multifaceted sites by the diverse circumstances of the people moving to and through them. Each migration process and cultural community has contributed significant strands to the narratives of this region, shaping it into a dynamic borderland—a place of deep contradictions that generate both complicated identity formations and political resistances within multifaceted contexts of domination (Anzaldúa 1987).

### **Interdisciplinary Tools of Disruption**

Among the interdisciplinary perspectives that folklorists can use to disrupt the narrative of presence include history and geography. Disruption of home and rootedness, family, friends, and safety have been central aspects of the migration stories of those who have come to the Great Plains. History offers the framework for asking the questions of who has been present and what has happened here. What were the forces precipitating migrations to the area and have also caused migrations from it?

Culturally, the Great Plains is a region undergirded by more than 350 generations of distinct Indigenous populations, who waged wars against removal but were eventually displaced from these lands by the U.S. Government to make room for white settlers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014). Their forced removal violently disrupted regional ecologies, with the massacre of buffalo herds, and gold and silver mining on sacred lands. Beginning in the mid-1500s, Spanish and African men explored parts of the region preceding Spanish colonists who later settled there and intermarried with Indigenous peoples, transforming into Mexican communities who have lived in the southern portion of the Plains for centuries (Katz 1987, Taylor 1999). These migrations transformed the region into a crossroads for settlers who, through forced and voluntary migrations, from across the country and the globe, have sought opportunities for better lives.

Through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Indigenous peoples from the southeastern U.S. and the Midwest east of the Mississippi River were forcibly removed to Indian Territory on the Great Plains. For centuries, thousands of Black people migrated to the Great Plains to establish new homes and seek safety from the violence of enslavement and racial oppression. In addition, tens of thousands more Black people traveled on the multiple trails carved through its landscapes to go further west (Moore 2016). Chinese men migrated to the Great Plains to work on the railroads in the 1870s. Some Mexicans worked as migrant farmworkers harvesting sugar beets and other crops, while others, along with African American men, worked on ranches and cattle trails as cowhands, cooks, and wranglers. During World War II, Japanese Americans were incarcerated in internment camps such as Fort Lincoln near Bismarck, North Dakota, and Fort Stanton in New Mexico (Burton et al. 2000). In the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, refugees from Asia and Africa have settled in these communities seeking to restart their lives after surviving wars, disease, and violence in their homelands.

Migration has been a constant dynamic in the region; there is no single story that can represent the spectrum of experiences. Older narratives have been fragmented or erased from memory. Some stories are buried in community, county, regional, and state archives, museums, and historical societies. Historians and literary scholars of the West have done most of the existing research on migrants to the Great Plains. This work could be extended and deepened with oral histories, folklore interviews, and archival research about family and community migration stories, place settlement histories, documentation of the traditions and celebrations related to civic and labor organizations, as well as narratives of exclusion and expulsion because of differing values, morality, ethnicity, gender, and social class from those cultural communities.



African American homesteaders in Nicodemus, Graham County, Kansas. Historic American Buildings Survey, Engineering Record, Landscapes Survey, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ks0077.photos.069503p>.

## African American Presences

Examining the migrations of African Americans on the Great Plains illuminates the dynamic complexity of the region and offers a glimpse of the insights that interdisciplinary methods can reveal. Although migrations to and through the Great Plains have been a small sector of the multi-layered and multi-branched African American migratory history, historians Howard Dodson and Sylvaine A. Diouf contend that migration has been a fundamental feature of the experiences of African-descended peoples in the U. S. for over 500 years (2004, 7, 9). Some African Americans were forced to migrate in enslavement and through sale; others sought self-determination and refuge from violence, war, precarity, and exploitation. Still others migrated to the Great Plains by choice, seeking freedom in “the Promised Land.” African Americans were documented as explorers, fur trappers, traders, translators, interpreters, and frontiersmen during the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in the region (Katz 1987). Some, gaining fluency in Native languages, joined Native American communities and served as translators and negotiators for Native communities in the Dakota, Montana, and Wyoming Territories (Taylor 1999, 48-50; Porter 1934).

As African American populations grew in the Great Plains, they settled along the Missouri and other rivers, along railroad lines, and in urban areas. Thousands more lived dispersed in small communities across the plains—in small numbers and sometimes as the sole Black people in their communities. Low numbers have not meant absence. These migrants built a range of relationships within communities that were not allowed to develop in other parts of the country.

Within both small and large communities, African Americans constructed institutions to serve community needs. They built neighborhood churches that provided and continue to offer religious, political, educational, and community services for African American residents as the center and backbone of their communities. During Reconstruction, African American churches served as the offices of the Freedman’s Bureau, and later, during the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Civil Rights Movement, churches became community service centers and hubs of justice activities (Taylor 1999). They built public and religious educational institutions throughout the region, including several historically Black colleges and universities, to ensure educational access for all ages and counter the limitations of segregated educational practices.<sup>2</sup> Of particular benefit to migrants were African American newspapers (although many are now defunct). *The Kansas City Call* (1919-present), *The Tulsa Star* (1913-1921), and *The Dallas Express* (1893-1970) are three among scores of Black Great Plains newspapers developed to address the concerns and carry the views, news, events, and ads of particular interest to thriving African American communities by promoting migration through job opportunities and educating subscribers about their legal rights. These communities also established recreational institutions and activities. Baseball teams, such as the Nicodemus Blues, a local Kansas team, or the acclaimed Kansas City Monarchs, a Negro League professional team, traveled throughout the region to play other Black, integrated—and occasionally even white—professional, semi-professional, and local teams.

Geography offers other illuminating frameworks. By mapping locations and tracing the routes of migration and events over time, one can begin to see the region as contested, connected, and rich with layered and overlapping histories and events that resonate with the migrations that shape the region. For example, in the 1830s and 1840s, the U.S. Government forced hundreds of thousands of Indigenous members of the southeastern tribes to migrate from east of the Mississippi River on the Trail of Tears to Indian country in Oklahoma to make room for white settlers (Frank

2010). As part of these Indigenous communities, thousands of Black people were also forced to make this tortuous trek. Some were enslaved by Native Americans while others were intermarried with and descendants of Native American families (Miles 2019, Roberts 2021).

As a result of this migration, thousands of Freedmen settled in at least two dozen small towns in Indian Territory. With later migrations, Oklahoma hosted over 50 all-Black communities, with the largest concentration founded between 1865 and 1920 by people seeking to build communities free of racial oppression. One of the largest of these towns was Boley, Oklahoma, founded in the Creek Nation in 1903. Built on the dream of Black self-sufficiency, the community still exists. Some of these smalltown settlers, dismayed with diminishing opportunities for Blacks and the establishment of racial segregation as Oklahoma moved toward statehood, migrated again by the thousands to Alberta and Saskatchewan, Canada (Franklin 2010). For those who remained in the new state of Oklahoma, after a period of thriving, many Freedmen's settlements declined with the droughts and economic hardships of the late 1920s through 1940s. Additionally, some all-Black towns died when the railroads chose to bypass them. Today, 13 Black farming communities, made up of the descendants of people enslaved by the Five Civilized Tribes, continue to exist. Relationships between these descendants and the Five Civilized Tribes continue to be fraught with challenges of identity, citizenship rights, and land rights as African Americans have sought to homestead in freedom (O'Dell 2010, Wolters 2015, Miles 2019, *Tulsa World* 2021). Investigating the routes, settlements, and remigrations of these settlers would highlight the relationships of freed people to the Native Nations to which they have been affiliated and related by blood, and to Black settlers who settled in Oklahoma through later migrations.

With a geography disciplinary lens, we might also focus on ecology and land use. Significant numbers of African American men worked the Plains making their living as cowboys. Scholars estimate that African Americans composed at least 25 percent of cowboys, or 5,000 to 6,000, in a multicultural workforce that crisscrossed the Great Plains from 1865 to the 1880s (Hardaway 2006; Patton and Schedlock 2011, 510). Most Black cowboys had worked as enslaved ranch hands in Texas before gaining freedom, and many had previously served as Buffalo Soldiers. As cattle work lessened, many began working for the railroads (Lorenz 2020.) A map overlaying the locations of forts that stationed Buffalo Soldiers, cowboy cattle herding trails, and railroad routes that reshaped settlements where people lived and conducted business would reveal more important details about African American migrations and settlements.

Acquiring and owning land was an important driver of African American migration. Many African Americans homesteaded and farmed in parts of the Great Plains. A remarkable example was Civil War veteran William Thornton Montgomery (1843-1909), who successfully ran a bonanza farm of more than 1,000 acres south of Fargo, North Dakota, in the late 1880s (Newgard 1994; Library of Congress Manuscript Div. 2021, 3).<sup>3</sup> For most African American homesteaders, however, the challenges were formidable, and many failed because of drought, economic hardship, and the rise of racial violence. Even fewer African Americans had opportunities to own ranches. However, some of the few who did were Black cowboys who had been mentored by white ranchers (Earnest and Sance 2017, Moulton 2023).

Archaeology also offers valuable insights. First, archaeological findings indicate that Fulani herders from Cameroon/northern Nigeria, enslaved to tend African cattle during the Spanish slave

trade, were the first cattle handlers in Mexico and the U.S. In enslavement, these men developed, mastered, and taught skills of herding from horseback and lasso techniques used by generations of vaqueros and cowboys, laying many of the foundations for cattle ranching in the Great Plains and the rest of the U.S. (Curry 2023; Fischer 2022, 609-22; Sluyter 2012).



Hector Bazy Herding Horses ca. 1890–1910. [Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum](#).

Second, Roseann Bacha-Garza, a historian and program manager for the [University of Texas Rio Grande Valley's Community Historical Archaeology Project with Schools](#), is researching a southern Underground Railroad system running from Alabama, Louisiana, and Texas through the Great Plains and across the Rio Grande River into northern Mexico. The [El Camino Real de los Tejas Trail](#) is surmised to be part of this hidden freedom network. Through the oral histories and community archaeology of two interracial families who settled in Texas, the Nathaniel Jackson-Matilda Hicks and John Ferdinand Webber-Silvia Hector families, Bacha-Garza and other scholars are uncovering this hidden route to freedom used by thousands of southern African Americans to escape to freedom during enslavement (UTRGV 2019).

Oral history, autobiography, and literature illuminate the experiences of migrants by uplifting their voices through personal or witness testimonies, interviews, or their creation of experience-informed literary figures. The stories of African Americans who experienced the mass expulsion of the Trail of Tears, the brutality of the 1921 Tulsa Massacre, the service of the Buffalo Soldiers, or the chronicles of single women migrants have been kept alive primarily through oral history in African American families and communities. African American women were half the new Black settlers migrating to the Great Plains. Mostly as members of families or communities, these women migrants worked as domestic workers, cooks, laundresses, housekeepers, nursemaids, and nannies for white settlers, and as teachers and entrepreneurs such as seamstresses, milliners, hairdressers, and midwives in their own communities (Riley 1998). Less often, some women sought to build

new, and more independent lives on the Great Plains. For example, at least two single women managed to stake claims and homestead successfully in Montana (Behan 2006). Agnes “Annie” Morgan (ca. 1844-1914) was born in Maryland and came west to the Dakota Territory as a domestic servant to a white family. During the 1880s, after being widowed, she was hired to help a county attorney in Montana care for his uncle who was ill with a severe drinking problem on an abandoned farm. After curing the uncle, possibly with rootwork, she stayed on the farm, staked a claim, and continued to help heal others, including a Civil War veteran who had typhoid.<sup>4</sup> Bertie Brown (ca.1870s-1933), born in Missouri, was in her 20s when she settled in the Lewistown, Montana, area in 1898. While keeping a garden, raising chickens, and planting wheat, oats, and barley on her 25-acre homestead, she was known as a manufacturer of some of the best and safest moonshine in the region during Prohibition (Baumler 2014). By migrating to this region, these Black women entrepreneurs were able to defy gender and racial societal constraints to achieve greater self-determination and financial independence than most Black, and even white, women of their day.

Migrants wrote literature about their migrations and lives in the Great Plains, too. Nat Love (1854-1921), who lived some of his life in Deadwood, South Dakota, wrote the *Life and Adventures of Nat Love, Better Known in Cattle Country as “Deadwood Dick,” by Himself* (1995 [1907]). Incorporating tall tales and exaggeration, both aesthetic characteristics sometimes used in African American oral tradition, Love relayed stories about his life as a cowboy. Journalist Era Bell Thompson (1905-1986) wrote an autobiography, *American Daughter* (1946), about her family’s migration from Iowa to North Dakota as a child. Langston Hughes (1901-1967) incorporated his childhood experiences in Lawrence, Kansas, into *Not Without Laughter* (1930); and Gordon Parks (1912-2006), born and raised in Fort Scott, Kansas, wrote the semiautobiographical novel, *The Learning Tree* (1963). There are few stories in African American children’s words about their experiences of migrating and growing up in the Great Plains. In 1905, Oscar Micheaux, a novelist and recognized as the first African American filmmaker of feature-length films, homesteaded near Gregory, South Dakota. A practitioner of Booker T. Washington’s industrial philosophy for Black advancement, Micheaux drew on his experience in the Dakotas for his first novels and films (Bernson and Eggers 1977).

Folklore and artistic expressivity also illuminate the vitality and vibrancy of the beliefs, creativity, and cultural practices of migrating communities. African American neighborhoods and small towns hosted church and anniversary events to mark their community’s migration history. As descendants from those communities migrated to other places, these neighborhoods and towns hosted homecoming celebrations to lure descendants to make return visits and to commemorate the original



Snapshot from homecoming events in Nicodemus, Kansas, 2006.

[Collection of Nicodemus Historical Society](#)



community's migration and settlement history. Like family reunions, these recurrent celebrations reaffirm bonds of belonging and reinvigorate community oral histories and traditions.

African American musicians also created regional forms of jazz rooted in the diverse music traditions brought to and mixed in each city. Emanating from larger cities such as Kansas City, Omaha, Topeka, Dallas, and San Antonio arose Blues-influenced territory jazz bands performing Jump music and Western Swing dance music.<sup>5</sup> Among the Big Band leaders were Alphonso Trent (Dallas); Andy Kirk and the Clouds of Joy (Oklahoma City); Walter Page and the Blue Devils (Oklahoma City and Kansas City); Troy Floyd (San Antonio); and Bennie Moten, George E. Lee, Jay McShann, and William "Count" Basie (Kansas City). Other influential musicians from the Great Plains include Charlie Christian (Texas), who developed the electric guitar as a jazz solo instrument; Ornette Coleman (Fort Worth), the jazz saxophonist, trumpeter, and violinist who was a primary creator of free jazz; Ada Brown (Kansas City), a jazz vocalist; Jimmy Rushing (Oklahoma City), a Blues vocalist; and Wynonie Harris (Omaha), a Rhythm and Blues vocalist. The confluence of military bands and multiple cultures—European, Native American, and African American from the South—imbued these music traditions with distinctive sounds and danceable energies as a marker of the cultural presence of African American life on the Great Plains.

Rodeo, a multi-genre performance tradition, also emerged from the cultural synergies of migration. With the demise of cattle drives and the rise of rodeo as a commemoration of cowboy culture, African American cowboys and cowgirls have sought to participate and competitively showcase their traditional skills of cattle handling, horse riding, and roping in rodeo events.<sup>6</sup> Celebrating cowboy cultural traditions, skills, and ways of life, African American participation in rodeo has challenged the narrative of presence by uplifting Black history, creativity, and practice of cowboy life. Their practice of this tradition challenges the American popular culture image of the cowboy as an exclusive heroic symbol of white masculinity. This mythic image fortifies the message of white dominance conveyed by the narrative of presence while distorting and erasing the multicultural history of the tradition. After consistently being either excluded from participation in white rodeos or facing discriminatory judging when they did participate, African Americans during segregation created a network of Black rodeos on the Soul Circuit throughout the Great Plains that continues to this day. This circuit nurtures an African American performance aesthetic, despite access to less funding and prestigious prizes than white rodeos have (Patton and Schedlock 2011, 513). Boley, Oklahoma hosts the oldest Black rodeo on Memorial Day Weekend.



Opening ceremony of the 100<sup>th</sup> Birthday Rodeo and Bar-B-Q Festival at the Boley Rodeo Arena in Boley, Oklahoma, 2003. Photograph by Steven M. Cummings. Jubilee Research Collection, Anacostia Community Museum, Smithsonian Institution.

African Americans, in each of the migrations to and through the Great Plains since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, have required and demonstrated stamina and resilience in the face of varying degrees of racial oppression, such as de facto segregation, housing and job discrimination, lynchings, and mob violence. The efforts to stamp out and control Black prosperity through the 1921 Tulsa Massacre was only one of several violent incidents attempting to re-subordinate Black people. Tulsa’s Black community rebuilt stronger within five years, only to be damaged by urban removal when U.S. Interstate I-244 was built through the community (Ellsworth 2009, Goble 2001). However, African Americans have continued to pursue social justice, leading resistance against the constraints of segregation, limited citizenship, and educational and economic rights since the end of Reconstruction. Lawsuits against school segregation in Oklahoma and Texas set precedents for the 1954 Kansas case, *Brown v. Board of Education* (Franklin 2010, Glasrud and Wintz 2019).



This poster features African American rodeo showman Bill Pickett (1870-1932). “The Bull-dogger”/Ritchey Lith. Corp., 1923. [Ritchey Lith. Corp] Photograph, <https://www.loc.gov/item/92500459>.

### Engaging in Interdisciplinary Research with Students

The interdisciplinary tools of Folklore Studies helped undergraduate students majoring and minoring in American Multicultural Studies where I taught in Minnesota to reveal a fuller story of BIPOC migrations to the Great Plains. In one of my intermediate classes, I assigned a unit in which my students conducted research at the Clay County Historical Society to investigate the local history of BIPOC individuals living in Moorhead, Minnesota, a small city across the Red River from Fargo, North Dakota. In the 2000s, the Black population was less than 1 percent in the town, and although several reservations were within a short drive, the Indigenous presence in Moorhead was barely visible to most residents. My students’ assumption was BIPOC people were a recent presence in the city. Learning to search through interviews; read censuses; use city directories and maps; and peruse school, community, government, and other archival records, my students discovered that African Americans had migrated to Moorhead in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and established a presence in the community that waxed and waned in size over decades. One Native American student even discovered where her Chinese grandfather had migrated when he left the family. Shocked and inspired by their discoveries, some became

so excited at the transformation of their knowledge that they located where these residents had lived, researched their lives, and visited the cemetery where they were buried. Although this unit really engaged the students, we could only spend three weeks on this aspect of research, so it became a project that different classes contributed to over several years. Students noted that both individuals and families migrated and built businesses and institutions that are no longer extant. Families often lived together or in neighboring housing. While there is much more research to be done, the assignment effectively disrupted the narratives of presence for the region and revealed new questions, contexts, and knowledge about our regional community to the students.

## Conclusion

Disrupting the narrative of presence on the Great Plains reveals substantive multicultural histories of migration to and through lands originally inhabited by Native peoples. Through the lenses of the diverse cultures residing in the region over the past four centuries, these histories expose the hard truths of colonialism and racism in the Great Plains alongside narratives of BIPOC people seeking to make real dreams of survival, hope, and opportunity.

While enslavement brought some African Americans to the region, hundreds of thousands more over hundreds of years migrated voluntarily, pursuing their fundamental beliefs in the possibilities of full citizenship that the region promised. Although the numbers of African Americans in some parts of the Great Plains may be small, they have not been absent. In part, the impression of absence has been an intentional creation of white settlers through legacies of hostility, violence, limited rights and opportunities, and forced removal from the region. While some individuals were “accepted” into their local communities, the majority, especially in larger population centers, experienced lukewarm acceptance and second-class citizenship. Some even faced outright rejection. A disrupted narrative must also tell the stories of African American dreams, persistence, resilience, perseverance, and diversity as they pursued opportunities not attainable or sustainable in the South. It must draw on interdisciplinary approaches to unearth the vivid buried histories to counter monocultural discourses of the American Heartland, the Great Plains, and other regions—and provide the dynamic narratives of how African Americans and other people of color migrated to new places, such as the Great Plains, to realize their dreams of working and creating homes in freedom.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> BIPOC is a term of coalition among racial groups, arising from youth of color on the East Coast around 2013. It is designed to recognize differential experiences of the implementation of systemic racism in the U.S. across racial groups and foregrounds the fundamental racial constructs that have particularly harmed Black and Indigenous communities and individuals over centuries. Cultural racism, a key facet of systemic racism, has included the banning of languages; erasure and trivialization of cultural traditions, history, and community knowledge; criminalization of religious practices; and distortion of cultural imagery—strategies that all uphold the narrative of presence (May-Machunda 2022, 46).

<sup>2</sup> Among the extant religious and public historically Black colleges and universities in the Great Plains are Wiley College (1873), Prairie View A & M University (1876), Texas College (1894), St. Philip’s College (1898), Texas Southern University (1927) and Southwestern Christian College (1948) in Texas and Langston University (1897) in Oklahoma (The Hundred-Seven 2018).

<sup>3</sup> William T. Montgomery was a subscriber to the principles of Booker T. Washington. Montgomery’s family had been enslaved on the plantations of Jefferson Davis’ brother who especially valued the skills of Montgomery’s father,

Ben, and built a relationship with the Montgomery family. William T. Montgomery's brother Isaiah T. Montgomery was the founder of one of the most prosperous Black Freedom Settlements in Mound Bayou, Mississippi.

<sup>4</sup> Territory jazz bands are local and regional dance bands that played before local and regional segregated audiences in the period between the World Wars (1920s-1940s), primarily in the days before radio. These bands blended a variety of musical styles in their communities to create regional sounds. African American communities in the Great Plains hosted a preponderance of these bands that travelled between small and medium-sized towns throughout the region. During the Great Depression, some of the best African American musicians in these groups migrated to the larger cities of the region (Berg 2011). Scholars note that these bands provided critically important training grounds for some of the most consequential jazz innovators to contribute to the development of jazz in the 1930s and 1940s (Schuller 1991, 772).

<sup>5</sup> Rootwork is an African American traditional healing and protection practice drawn from conjure or Hoodoo (Chireau 2006, 4). Anchored in African traditional religious practices brought and used during enslavement, rootwork synthesized knowledge from Indigenous and European communities as well. It is a technique that requires knowledge of plants, their uses in medicinal formulas, and their corresponding spiritual incantations. In the U.S. many traditional practitioners have been African American women.

<sup>6</sup> Wild West and rodeo showman Bill Pickett (1870-1932) was one of the most famous African American cowboys to make a living performing in this sport and, later, in movies (Patton and Schedlock 2011). He is credited with inventing the technique of "bulldogging," by which he wrestled steers to the ground in rodeo.

## URLs

University of Texas Rio Grande Valley's Community Historical Archaeology Project with Schools

<https://www.utrgv.edu/chaps>

El Camino Real de los Tejas Trail <https://www.nps.gov/elte/index.htm>

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## Classroom Connections

### Additional Teaching Resources About African Americans on the Great Plains

#### ***Homesteading***

- <https://www.nps.gov/teachers/classrooms/black-homesteaders-on-the-great-plains-life-liberty-and-the-pursuit-of-happiness.htm>
- <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/africanamericanheritage/teachers.htm>
- <https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/exodusters-african-american-migration-to-the-great-plains/teaching-guide>
- Lucas, Decoursey Clayton. 2005. African American Homesteading on the Central Plains. *OAH Magazine of History*. 19.6: 34-9, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25161997>. (Lesson plan)
- <https://www.wyohistory.org/education/toolkit/black-14>
- Great Plains Black History Museum, Omaha, NE  
<https://gpblackhistorymuseum.org/#OnExhibit>
- <https://www.ops.org/Page/1823>
- <https://www.cilc.org/ContentProvider/ViewContentProvider.aspx?id=387>
- <https://www.unl.edu/plains/oklahoma-black-homesteader-project>
- <https://www.unl.edu/plains/black-homesteader-project>
- <https://www.zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/nicodemus-town-company-founded>
- <https://www.archives.gov/education>
- <https://www.archives.gov/news/topics/african-american-histo>
- <https://www.okhistory.org/blackhistory>
- <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/westward-expansion-encounters-at-a-cultural-crossroads>
- <https://www.education.ne.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/pioneers.pdf>
- <https://prairiepublic.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/ush22-soc-nicodemus/nicodemus-and-black-settlements-in-the-west-interactive-lesson>
- <https://oercommons.org/authoring/36817-lesson-3-1850-1874-african-american-settlers/view>
- [https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/ranchhouse/1867\\_essay6.html](https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/ranchhouse/1867_essay6.html)

#### ***Buffalo Soldiers***

- <https://prairiepublic.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/great-states-idaho-10.2/activity>
- <https://prairiepublic.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/49e8d07f-313d-44af-924a-591b0c96aeaa/buffalo-soldiers-in-new-mexico>
- <https://www.nps.gov/foda/learn/education/upload/buffalosoldiers.pdf>
- [https://legacy.education.texashistory.unt.edu/lessons/psa/Buffalo\\_Soldiers](https://legacy.education.texashistory.unt.edu/lessons/psa/Buffalo_Soldiers)

### ***Black Cowboys***

- <https://www.socialstudies.com/blog/teaching-about-the-american-west-black-cowboys>
- Childs, David. 2023. How the West Was Really Won: The History of Black Cowboys in the West (with Classroom Teaching Resources). *Oregon Journal of Social Studies*. 11.1: 25-60, <https://sites.google.com/site/oregoncouncilforsocialstudies/O-J-S-S/o-j-s-s-issues>.
- <https://qualifications.pearson.com/content/dam/pdf/GCSE/History/2016/Teaching-and-learning-materials/HTOTM-2110-black-cowboys-worksheet-final.pdf>
- <https://texancultures.utsa.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Cowboys-and-Cattle-Drives-Lessons-Grade-4REVISED.pdf>
- [https://www.nps.gov/articles/series.htm?id=B2C78EF4-E6BD-2683-F3C10A5112A391E5&utm\\_source=article&utm\\_medium=website&utm\\_campaign=experience\\_more&utm\\_content=large](https://www.nps.gov/articles/series.htm?id=B2C78EF4-E6BD-2683-F3C10A5112A391E5&utm_source=article&utm_medium=website&utm_campaign=experience_more&utm_content=large)

### ***Migration History Charts***

- <https://www.archives.gov/education/family-history>

### ***Montana Historical Society***

- <https://mhs.mt.gov/Shpo/AfricanAmericans/ForTeachers>
- <https://mhs.mt.gov/Shpo/AfricanAmericans>

### ***North Dakota Studies***

- [https://www.ndstudies.gov/sites/default/files/PDF/newsletter\\_fall\\_2015\\_web.pdf](https://www.ndstudies.gov/sites/default/files/PDF/newsletter_fall_2015_web.pdf)

### ***Books for Children***

- <https://www.readingrockets.org/books-and-authors/booklists/biographies/celebration-and-remembrance-childrens-books-about-black>

### ***Oklahoma Historical Society***

- <https://www.okhistory.org/blackhistory>

### ***Immigration***

- [https://www.ilctr.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Teaching-Immigration-with-the-Immigrant-Stories-Project-FINAL\\_opt.pdf](https://www.ilctr.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Teaching-Immigration-with-the-Immigrant-Stories-Project-FINAL_opt.pdf)
- <https://www.unhcr.org/us/what-we-do/build-better-futures/education/teaching-about-refugees>
- <https://pulitzercenter.org/builder/lesson/migration-and-refugees-lesson-plans>
- <https://kasc.ku.edu/educator-resources>
- <https://www.lostboysfilm.com/learn.html>