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CHAPTER 7

The Black Frontier

Aparajita Nanda

As a nationalistic concept, *frontier* refers to America's westward expansion, which was propelled in the nineteenth century by Manifest Destiny. Culturally, *frontier* promises even more: the creation of communities, the development of markets and states, the merging of peoples and cultures, and the promise of survival and persistence based on values of equality and democracy. Thousands of people left their homes in the East to pursue these ideals, including large communities of African Americans. However, African Americans, like many other cultural groups who moved westward, encountered struggles when they reached the new frontier. In some cases, they faced the same problems they left the East to escape.

As new frontier territories and states were founded, new regional policies on slavery were also created. When the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) ceded the territories of California and New Mexico to the United States, it outlawed slavery in the new territories. California entered the Union in 1850 as an officially free state. Before the Civil War, about one thousand slaves lived in California, which despite its status as a free state remained inconsistent in defining its anti-slavery laws. The state continued to label as "property" both fugitive slaves and those who entered the state with their masters before 1850. As a result, de facto slavery continued in California. The state had the largest number of bondservants west of Texas, working in fields and households.

Gold was discovered in northern California near the end of the Mexican-American War. By 1852, the region's population soared to 200,000. When slavery was abolished in 1865, African American migration to the West increased significantly. By 1870, African Americans comprised 12 percent of the West's inhabitants. Yet racial discrimination was rife in the state.

Despite their sizeable presence in the area, African Americans have been largely ignored in frontier history and lore.¹ Romanticized stories of the frontier have long revolved around "[t]he mythical American West . . . filled

with strong and often heroic men and women – the sons and daughters of stout European forebears.”² The black man’s alleged inferiority to the white man denied him the heroic qualities traditionally associated with the vaunted frontiersman in the popular imagination. Yet nineteenth-century black frontiersmen like James P. Beckwourth – a mountain man, Chief of the Crow Tribe, and fur trader – shattered the racial stereotype of the Anglo-Saxon frontiersman. Inspired by pioneering figures like Beckwourth, black authors such as Alvin Coffey, Mifflin Wistar Gibbs, Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes, and Chester Himes sought to reclaim the black frontier.

James P. Beckwourth (1798–1866) was an African American born into slavery in Virginia. His father and owner, Jennings Beckwith, a descendant of Irish and English nobility, raised James as his own son and later manumitted him around 1824. Beckwourth joined Ashley’s Fur Trading Company and became a prominent trapper and mountain man, buying furs from Pawnee Indian traders. His pioneering feats in the wilderness of the West culminated when he was captured by Crow Indians while trapping between the Crow, Cheyenne, and Blackfoot territories. For almost a decade, Beckwourth lived with a Crow band, eventually becoming a chief. He later moved to Fort Vasquez, Colorado, and, with a few partners, built a trading post there. Beginning in 1844, he traded along a portion of the Old Spanish Trail between Arkansas, California, and Nevada that now bears his name as the Beckwourth Trail. In fact, Beckwourth’s ranch, trading post, and hotel in Sierra were the first settlements of Beckwourth, California, another frontier landmark that bears his name. In the winter of 1854–55, Thomas D. Bonner stayed in the hotel and recorded Beckwourth’s exploits, as reported to him by the frontiersman himself, in *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth* (1856). The book blends fact with fiction in a way that anticipates Toni Morrison’s famous postmodern challenge of autobiography’s foundation in “fact.” Citing the proverbial axiom “truth is stranger than fiction,” Morrison argues that, in fact, fact (or truth) is really only distinguished from fiction (or lies) by a comparative – not an absolute – degree.³ Autobiography, then, emerges not as a simple recounting of lived events but as a story that in itself pioneers a self-inventive narrative, which introduces the narrated self as “my first other.”⁴

Beckwourth’s rendering of himself defied the limiting stereotypes of minority culture and strove to portray a legendary hero, a true black pioneer (though he often wanted to pass himself off as white) whose daring exploits, careful strategic planning, and near-death encounters followed by

instant resurrections, imbued him with an indestructible, mythic quality.^{5,6} Being African American allowed Beckwourth to move freely among Native Americans even as he worked for the American Fur Company. First nicknamed the “Morning Star” – clearly promising a day full of glory – Beckwourth graduated to the appellation “the Bobtail Horse” when he scalped an Indian, and then to “Bloody Arm” when he was deemed “the only brave [man] who can keep the nation together.”⁷ These multiple titles not only seem to give his personality a superhuman power but also complement his lived reality, as he juggled the roles of fur trapper, trader, guide, hotelier, and trailblazing mountaineer. The variety of his professional ventures again added to his aura of being multifaceted – a man who could “adapt to any group or environment by reinventing himself . . . to change names and identities, to enjoy physical freedom, social fluidity, and economic mobility.”⁸ Therefore, the concept of the frontier, with its sense of fluidity and possibility, was well represented by the mythic figure of James Beckwourth.

The Gold Rush in California was a turning point in the history of the African American frontier. It promised black migrants the possibility of buying back freedom and family with the gold they hoped to excavate for their masters. By 1849, thousands of people had reached California, either by sailing around South America (a journey that could take as long as six months) or by walking the California trail, an almost 2000-mile, 6-month long trek via wagon train from Missouri.

Alvin Coffey (1822–1902), born a slave in Mason County, had accompanied his master to the northern California goldfields in 1849. He writes about the hardships on the trail, of strenuous night guard duty, and of driving “night and day”⁹ in panic to escape from a cholera epidemic. As they trudged through a desert to get to Black Rock, a great number of cattle perished. Despite the odds, Coffey’s acts of courage and empathy are as remarkable as his resilience. Coffey recalls how he worked tirelessly for 13 months making “\$5500 in gold dust”¹⁰ for his master and \$616 for himself. On their way back through New Orleans, his master, who carried Coffey’s share with him, took it to “the mint [to get their] gold coined.”¹¹ When they got to Missouri, however, he sold Coffey for “a thousand more [than \$616].”¹² In 1854, with his new owner, Coffey crossed the plains into California once again. This time he made enough money, and when, in 1856, his owner emancipated him, he went back to Missouri and finally bought back his wife and children. They settled in Shasta County. In the latter years of his life, Coffey was involved in organizing the Home for the Aged and Infirm, to which he donated

his total income. Alvin Coffey died in 1902 and was buried at Oak Hill Cemetery in Red Bluff, California. Coffey's story is most importantly one of chattel slavery, but it also exemplifies two key themes specific to the regional history of California. On the one hand, it delineates California as a land of opportunity, a place of possibility where one's freedom can be secured. On the other, ironically, it demolishes the concept of California as a state free from racism. The latter half of Coffey's narrative, though, proves him to be a true frontier man, who despite all odds, exploited every opportunity available to him until he finally achieved his goal of securing freedom for himself and his family.

Unlike Beckwourth and Coffey, Mifflin Wistar Gibbs (1823–1915) was born a free man. His father, Reverend Jonathan Gibbs, enrolled his son in one of the few all-black schools in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Soon thereafter, however, the Reverend died and Gibbs's mother withdrew her son from school. Gibbs was hired out to a white lawyer. In one of his expeditions with his employer, Gibbs first encountered slavery. It awakened in him the desire to rebel and by the time he was twenty, he was secretly working in the Underground Railroad to free slaves in the South. During this time he became acquainted with the African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass, and often shared the speaking platform with him. However, in his autobiography Gibbs admits he became depressed until at the age of twenty-five he received the encouraging injunction – “go do some great thing” – of Julia Griffiths, who Gibbs adds is “a renowned wom[a]n, who at home and abroad . . . hasten[ed] the downfall of slavery and encourage[d] the weak and lowly to hope and effort.”¹³

By 1850, Gibbs had arrived in San Francisco, drawn to California by the Gold Rush. He knew that the West was extremely hostile toward African Americans. Though California was admitted to the Union in 1850 as a free state, the state's ban on slavery was in reality an attempt to ensure an all-white population. Its first legislature failed, however, to ban completely the entry of African Americans into the state. Within this climate, Gibbs's West Coast hopes were born more out of desperation than genuine optimism. Penniless in San Francisco, he encountered severe racism in the segregated mining fields. He went on to work as a carpenter and then as a bootblack who “scraped mud and animal droppings from boots and then applied polish.”¹⁴ By 1851, Gibbs was able to quit boot blacking and open a shoe store with his acquaintance Peter Lester, a former slave from Maryland.

For African Americans, California proved to be a unique site of residence. No white person had forced the black migrants to relocate there; in fact a number of them, like Gibbs and Lester, were free men. And yet slavery was an overwhelming presence in this ostensibly free state, raising legal and moral issues in cases like Dred Scott and Archy Lee. Verdicts jostled between the notorious Dred Scott decision, which asserted that Negroes had no citizenship rights at all, to the dramatic course of the Archy Lee case, which, after Lee's exoneration and re-arrest, granted him his freedom on the grounds that, because the man who claimed to own him could be deemed a California resident, Lee himself was never a fugitive slave crossing state lines, but instead a man held in illegal servitude in a free Union state. The set of legal acrobatics that freed Archy, however, did nothing to settle the larger question of California's policy of allowing nonresident slaveholders to bring people as property into the state. Gibbs spearheaded protests against these verdicts in his *Mirror of the Times* (1855–57), the first black newspaper in California, which grew out of the work of the San Francisco Atheneum Institute, the primary seat of black intelligentsia in San Francisco. Along with other black leaders, Gibbs went on to publish a series of antidiscriminatory resolutions and to protest against the state legislature's 1858 limitation of black immigration into California.

Violence against African Americans in California escalated in the late 1850s, including an incident when two white men posing as customers deliberately created havoc in the shoe store owned by Gibbs and Lester. In his autobiography, Gibbs recalls how “[o]ne of two mutual friends (both customers) came in looking over and admiring a display of newly acquired stock.”¹⁵ One of them tried on a pair of boots but laid them aside on the pretense that he had not yet made up his mind. Shortly thereafter, his friend arrived, asked to “try on his friends selection,” and bought them, despite the shop owners' insistence that his friend had put the shoes aside for himself.¹⁶ The man who had bought the shoes promised that nothing would happen and “he would clear [Gibbs and Lester] of blame.”¹⁷ Both customers soon came back, however, and while the first asked for his boots his friend stood mute. As a result, the former went on to “assault [Gibbs's] partner, who was compelled tamely to submit, for had he raised his hand he would have been shot, and no redress.” “I,” Gibbs adds, “would not have been allowed to attest to ‘the deep damnation of his taking off.’”¹⁸ Even as he recognizes the heinousness of the crime, Gibbs's narration of the futility of the situation remains unnerving. He must “tamely” watch his friend Lester being viciously

assaulted, and quietly acknowledge that the miscreants got away, because African Americans according to California Criminal Procedure's existing (1850) exclusion could not testify in court against white men.

Thus though the Gold Rush had brought freedom to some and jobs for others, the African Americans in California were still very much victims of unjust laws. Gibbs went on to petition for the testimony law to be changed. The petition, however, was initially rejected by the state legislature at Sacramento in 1852, and crimes against African Americans continued rampantly. Gibbs and Lester, however, did not give up on their mission. When the resolution was finally approved by the three-day convention held at Barney Fletcher's African Methodist Church at Sacramento, it had been revised in such a way that it glossed over the brutal reality of black life in California, but began to recognize the wealth and intelligence of the black man by granting him permission to testify in California courts. As a next step, Gibbs looked for white support to petition for basic human rights. His strategy was to emphasize the benefit whites would reap if black men were granted their rights. When the legislature convened in April of 1856, however, the petition was once again turned down. Finally, after eight years, six failed petitions, and three conventions, Gibbs sold his shoe company and left California for Victoria, British Columbia.

By 1858, about ten percent of the black Californian population had left San Francisco, bound for Victoria, British Columbia, after the Canadian province invited free Negroes to come and settle there. Mrs. Priscilla Stewart, a teacher of the Broadway School at San Francisco complains, in "A Voice from the Oppressed to the Friends of Humanity" (1858), about "our sad despair/Our hopes and prospects fled." She refers to the homeless state of her fellow black men, answering the call from Canada, which she characterizes as emanating from Queen Victoria herself, who "looked on us with sympathy/ And offered us a home." Mrs. Stewart, who played an active role in a number of movements in support of African American rights, was a true pioneer of the black frontier, trumpeting a message of courage and determination. "May God inspire your hearts, / A Marion raise your hands; / Never desert your principles/ Until you've redeemed your land."¹⁹

Quite different from the reality-driven autobiography of Gibbs or the clarion call of Priscilla Stewart are the early writings, primarily poems of Christian piety and morality, by Eloise Bibb Thompson (1878–1928). Born in New Orleans, Thompson published her first book of poems when she was only seventeen. After being educated at Oberlin College's

Preparatory Academy and Howard University Teacher's College, she became head resident of Howard's Colored Social Settlement House. In 1911, she left that job, married, and moved to Los Angeles, where her work was published in the *Los Angeles Tribune*, *Out West*, and the *Morning Sun*. Her marriage to journalist Noah Davis Thompson, a devout Catholic, likely strengthened her interest in religion. Whether this interest was directly linked with the uplifting of the black race in the United States is hard to tell. Thompson's primary contributions to the *Tidings* (1895), a Catholic publication, were an article entitled "The Church and the Negro" (1917) and a poem called "A Garland of Prayer" (1917). Her poetic style and subject matter resonate with the fervor and vintage tone characteristic of Victorian poetry of the nineteenth century. The lyric poem is sincere in its appeal to God, its note of supplication underscored by a voice that begs for "devotion," "chastity," "meekness," and "mercy." The total surrender to a Higher Power evinced in "A Garland of Prayer" recalls her earlier poem "An Offering" (1895): "Lord, all I am and hope to be, / I humbly offer, King, to thee!"²⁰ The lyric's simple statement is energized by a willed surrender. The even metrical rhythm of the sestets moves through an ordered time sequence manifest in floral analogies – "the Elder flower," "the Heliotrope," "the Orange flower," and "the Lilac wild," ending in "And thus each day shall be my care / To add another flower of prayer, / Until complete."²¹ Thompson's work consciously follows in the footsteps of Phyllis Wheatley; she dedicates her religious poems to Mrs. S. F. Williams, President of the Phyllis Wheatley Club of New Orleans. This dedication traces an important genealogy that links Victorian poetry of the nineteenth century to the Harlem Renaissance literary arts movement of the twentieth and provides a space, cordoned off from lived reality, for the female voice to come into its own in African American poetic history.

In complete contrast to the work discussed above, though, stand Thompson's plays. In 1915, she wrote *A Reply to the Clansman* (1920) in response to Thomas Dixon's 1905 novel *The Clansman*, the infamous inspiration for D. W. Griffith's film *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Between 1920 and 1924 Thompson wrote three one-act plays – *Caught* (1920), *Africans* (1922), and *Cooped Up* (1924). In *Cooped Up* she unflinchingly portrays black people with all their virtues and their flaws. Thompson was also recognized for her short stories "Mademoiselle Tate" (1925) and "Masks" (1927) both of which were published in *Opportunity* magazine. Thompson stands out as a unique literary pioneer on the emerging black

frontier of California. She was a woman writer who transformed herself from a religious poet to a socially vocal, politically aware, and racially conscious playwright.²²

Another distinctive poetess of the times was Eva Carter-Buckner, a personal friend of Paul Lawrence Dunbar. Her poems were published in notable periodicals in Colorado and later in both black and white newspapers in Mexico. Her greatest honor, though, came when her musical composition, "City of Sunshine" (1905) was included in a 1912 book of poems called *Gems of Poesy*. Apart from inspiring club songs like "Colorado & California State Federation," Carter-Buckner also wrote a number of short stories and articles.²³ Her work is memorable for articulating her commitment to the uplifting of her race, with soul-inspiring lines that call for recognition of the black man, and ring out loud and clear against the irrationality of the "one drop rule." She recognizes the arduous task ahead of her and yet unflappably carries on her crusade as voiced in the last stanza of "What Constitutes a Negro?" (n.d.):

But, there, friends,
 Join us in life's great combat,
 Though your skin be dark, what matter?
 You're a man, e'en for that;
 And we are using every effort
 To make good where e'er we trod,
 One hand with the flag a-waving,
 And the other stretched to God.²⁴

Eva Carter-Buckner, hailed by Delilah Beasley as the most popular Negro poetess, was an ardent admirer of Abraham Lincoln and a strong advocate of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). On Lincoln's birthday, February 12, 1909, the *Los Angeles Daily Times* published an excerpt from her poem "Whittier":

We boast of the freedom thou so longed to see
 And each generation sings praise;
 And while the vast number thy name celebrate
 We, too, our voices shall raise.
 Oh long may our country do honor to men
 Whose stand for the right will not sway,
 And now with the nation we breathe a prayer,
 "God bless thy natal day."

Some of the finest protest poetry of the nineteenth century appeared before the Civil War. James Monroe Whitfield (1822–71) worked as a barber and

in his spare time wrote poetry. Frederick Douglass, a former slave and also the nation's most powerful anti-slavery speaker, inspired him to become a spokesperson for abolitionism and pursue a writing career. In "America" (1853) and "How Long?" (1853) Whitfield's anti-slavery tirades come alive with a bitter cynicism. Despite the metrical smoothness of his poetry, "Self-Reliance" (1849), "Delusive Hope" (1853), "Yes, Strike Again That Sounding String" (1850), and "The Misanthropist" (1852) remain dark imprecations against a world that is corrupt and meaningless. The lofty ideals that the enthusiastic voice in the opening stanza of "Self-Reliance" hails are dogged by life's treacherous hypocrisy and resultant misery. The answer to overcoming adversity seems to lie in listening to God, "In bonds mysterious to unite / The finite with the infinite."²⁵ No such solace, however, brightens "The Misanthropist," where no "ray of hopeful light" penetrates the gloom of the lived experience of the black man. This poem rejects religion as "a false and empty name," while nature and books appear in their "sternest moods" and fiercest visages, reinforcing a sense of doom and desolation. Whitfield's poems testify to the African American experience of brutal discrimination that would foment the Civil Rights movement.

Along with Whitfield, one of the primary voices of the nineteenth century that spoke of racial oppression and the African American struggle for recognition and equality was James Madison Bell (1826–1902). Born in Gallipolis, Ohio, Bell later moved to Ontario, where he met and befriended John Brown and raised funds for the 1859 raid on the arsenal at Harper's Ferry. In 1860, after Brown's execution, Bell moved to San Francisco, where he remained committed to activist politics. As an active member and steward of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Bell worked untiringly for abolition during the Civil War. Some of his most rousing poems, like "A Poem Entitled the Day and the War" (1864) and "A Poem Entitled the Triumph of Liberty" (1870), dramatize slavery, Civil War, emancipation, and reconstruction to create a radical voice of protest.

On April 18, 1865, Bell recited a piece simply titled "Poem," commemorating the death of Abraham Lincoln, to a public gathering of colored citizens in Sacramento, California. The sonorous opening stanza, burdened with repeated questioning – "wherefore" and "why" "those marks of grief and sorrows / So visible on every place?" – ends with a fatal declaration of Lincoln's assassination: "Our Nation's father has been murdered! / Our Nation's Chieftain has been slain! By traitorous hands most basely ordered."²⁶ With these lines, Bell recalls the intonation of Macduff as he reports the death of King Duncan, the Lord's anointed

temple, in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The poem ends with a call to "avenge the death of Lincoln . . . Till every base inhuman falcon / Is swept from freedom's broad domain."²⁷ For Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson, Bell has only scathing disdain couched in vitriolic humor. Johnson is "My liege of graceless dignity," a false prophet whose "hours of reign" have "brand[ed] him with the mark of Cain."

Another poet who tirelessly fought for equal opportunity in California for African Americans was Charles Alexander (1818–1923). Born in Mississippi, Alexander's work as a journalist brought him to Los Angeles, where he went on to become the editor of the *Los Angeles Times*. Actively involved in the NAACP, Alexander served on the committee that accompanied attorney Edward Ceruti when he made a second plea to the board of supervisors in Los Angeles County not to rescind their vote to admit African Americans to the nurses' training school there. "My Kind of Man" (n.d.), originally published in the *Los Angeles Times*, hails the man whose courage and patience, resolve to work hard and achieve success despite all odds, makes him "the man of the hour."²⁸

At the turn of the century, concerns regarding the fate of African Americans in the urban West went through sharp ups and downs. In the 1920s, racial hostility and public apathy took on monstrous dimensions. This was also, though, the exciting era of Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" call and the rise of Black Nationalism. By the mid-1920s, a rising young generation of educated, optimistic, and confident "New Negroes" had virtually taken over Harlem in Manhattan, New York. Notable among them were Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, and Wallace Thurman, who resembled "the old pioneers" of the Western frontier, only this time "moving in the opposite direction, relocating in a modern eastern metropolis."²⁹

One of these "old pioneers" was Wallace Thurman (1902–34), who was born in Salt Lake City and had moved to Los Angeles, where he contributed to the black newspaper *The Public Defender* and established *The Outlet*, a magazine that lasted for six months. Inspired by the Harlem Renaissance, Thurman tried to create a similar movement on the West Coast. Failing that, he migrated to Harlem in 1925, where he published the very short-lived magazine *Fire!!* (1926). In 1929, he published his first novel, *The Blacker the Berry*, which tells the story of Emma Lou Morgan, a dark-skinned black woman whose internalized intra-racial color prejudice causes a number of her personal calamities. *The Blacker the Berry* has been taken to be an autobiography of sorts, with critic Thadious M. Davis claiming that Thurman adopted the female voice of Emma Lou as a textual strategy to

facilitate a radical interrogation of race.³⁰ Emma Lou, enthusiastically rushing around the campus of the University of Southern California trying to connect to her colored peers, becomes a pathetic figure seeking familiarity in a society defined by the hierarchy of complexion snobbery. Because of her dark skin, Emma Lou is labeled “hottentot,” a “discomfort and embarrassment to others of her race, more civilized and circumspect than she.”³¹ After a year in college, Emma drops out, much like Thurman himself did, concluding that racism had infiltrated all regions of the United States, from Utah to California. “She was now determined to go East where life was more cosmopolitan and people . . . more civilized.”³² History, however, repeats itself in Harlem and the end of the novel finds Emma Lou resigned to fight through her struggles in life.

Much like Emma Lou is Langston Hughes’s Flora Belle in the short story that bears her name. Haunted by memories of the lynch mob and ostracized by blacks and whites alike, Flora Belle flees with her family from Montana to California. She contemplates suicide in Fresno, California, stoically accepting that there is no comfort of community or belonging for the black man or woman.³³

Langston Hughes (1902–67), born in Joplin, Missouri, spent his childhood years in Kansas, Illinois, and Ohio before enrolling in Columbia University in 1922. He left school to travel through Africa and Europe. Between 1926 and 1929, Hughes, then in New York City, published his first book of poems, *The Weary Blues* (1926), followed by *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), his famous essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926), his novel, *Not Without Laughter* (1930), and two autobiographies, *The Big Sea* (1940), and, *I Wonder as I Wander* (1956).

In 1939, Langston Hughes spent time in California, where he collaborated on various projects with the black actor Clarence Muse. Despite the glitter of Tinseltown and the glamorous frontier it projected, racism and discrimination were rife in Hollywood. In 1940, Hattie McDaniel became the first black actor to win an Academy Award for her portrayal of Mammy in the film *Gone with the Wind*. In his unpublished one-act play, *Hollywood Mammy* (1940), Hughes responds to this event. African Americans were pleased that a black actor had finally won an Academy Award, but they were frustrated that it was for a stereotypical role. With seething irony, Hughes chronicles the rise of the Mammy, secure in her career path, as she compromises her aspirations: “I used to want to play Shakespeare but I put that on the shelf. I found it better business to pretend to be the kind of dear old ‘Darkie’ that the studios like to see.”³⁴ She is quick to deny her roots (“I’m not from Alabama – except in publicity”) and claim access to a

luxurious life style (“hats from Hattie Carnegie,” “got a chauffeur, cook, and maid to wait on me hands and feet”) even as the chorus satirically describes her as a hypocrite paying lip service to Scarlett O’Hara for fifty grand a year and packaging herself as a “Hollywood Mammy in a great big way!”³⁵

A close friend of Langston Hughes, born the same year, Arna Bontemps (1902–73) was a Louisiana Creole whose family moved to Los Angeles when he was four. He grew up in California and graduated from Pacific Union College at Angwin in 1923. When his father sent Arna to a virtually all-white boarding school in San Fernando Valley, he had advised him “[n]ow don’t go up there acting colored.”³⁶ The words stayed with Bontemps and ironically made him more interested in his black culture. Bontemps later left California and moved, at the peak of the Harlem Renaissance, to New York, where he accepted a teaching position at the Seventh-Day Adventist Harlem Academy and began to publish poetry and write novels.

Region played a complex and seminal role in Bontemps’s writings.³⁷ The West was marked by his father’s exhortation that young Bontemps strive to be “colorless,” while the South was aligned with his great uncle Buddy’s countervailing pride in regional heritage and the legacy of Afro folkways. Bontemps published three stories – “Why I Returned” (1965), “The Cure” (1973), and “Three Pennies for Luck” (1973) – about Los Angeles. In his novel *God Sends Sunday* (1931) he describes Mudtown, the black neighborhood of Los Angeles, as “a tiny section of the deep south” with scenes of black community life as easily plucked from rural Georgia as urban California.³⁸ In “Why I Returned,” Bontemps has new hopes as he cheerily notes that “[s]egregation, the monster that had terrorized my parents and driven them out of the green Eden in which they had been born, was itself vulnerable and could be attacked, possibly destroyed.”³⁹ Shortly after the publication of *God Sends Sunday*, Bontemps accepted a faculty position at Oakwood College in Alabama. The acute racism and discrimination that he faced in the “real” South led to the attitude he expresses in *Black Thunder* (1936), a novel he published in 1936 as he fled from Alabama back to Watts in California. *Black Thunder* paints the South with decidedly different strokes than Bontemps’s previous work did. Though racial tensions ran high in the post-1930s Los Angeles, it seemed more peaceful than Alabama to the freshly relocated writer.

A defining moment for blacks in California was the 1928 NAACP convention held in Los Angeles. It established an important connection between the East and West Coasts, as the NAACP took on a truly national

character. As unemployment soared, black workers were the last hired and first fired from jobs, and the political arena, in response, was a site of an important and lasting sea change. With the rise of the Democratic Party and the victory of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932 came the “New Deal” program that promised poor blacks blue-collar mainstream jobs in which their race would cease to matter.⁴⁰ A forceful backlash of Jim Crowism in the U.S. Senate forced New Deal leaders to recognize and grapple with the deep rootedness of U.S. racism and, with time, pushed the liberal elements within the Democratic Party to put Civil Rights on the agenda. It also made many African Americans leave the Republican Party of Lincoln and move into the Democratic Party. In California, Democrat Gus Hawkins unseated Republican Fred Roberts in the 1934 State Assembly election. Hawkins continued his winning streak through 1962, when he was elected to a seat in the U.S. Congress from which he voted for the Civil Rights legislation of the mid-1960s.

By the mid-1940s, World War II and its aftermath ushered in a radical transformation – demographically, economically, and politically – for African Americans. Countless black workers flocked to the shipbuilding and aircraft plants that proliferated across the West Coast. As defense jobs opened up, labor unions became stronger and housing strained to accommodate the population boom. California seemed to live up to its image of a frontier province, one that promised new opportunities in life; only this time it was no longer on the periphery of American life – it had moved to the center.

This Second Great Migration saw African Americans pouring into California, seeking out business opportunities and striving once more to win equal rights for themselves. History, in fact, was repeating itself. The elusive dream of the possibility of democracy at home, a dream that African Americans had when the United States entered World War I in 1917, had been shattered when soldiers returned from the war to rampant racial violence. However, the New Negro Renaissance of the 1920s and the New Deal Coalition in the 1930s, which had included the black man, revived hopes of a better tomorrow. It is possible, too, that Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” (1941) articulation of his policy goals, with its repeated rhetorical promises of “Freedom from Fear and Want,” kindled the imagination of Civil Rights activists. Roosevelt’s Executive Order 8802, which prohibited racial discrimination in federally funded defense plants, also renewed hopes for a less racially segregated world.⁴¹ The reality, however, was different. California was rife with tense race relations, white backlash, acute class conflict, and random greed.

Chester Himes (1909–84) was born in Jefferson City, Missouri, and moved to Los Angeles, California in 1940. Prior to this, he had been dismissed from Ohio State University, become involved in gambling and drugs, and been arrested for armed robbery in 1928 and sentenced to twenty years in prison. Granted parole after serving seven years, Himes moved to California in search of employment. His brutal encounters with blatant racism formed the basis of his protest novels, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945) and *Lonely Crusade* (1947), where the protagonists Bob Jones and Lee Gordon battle racial intolerance in alienating urban environments. The semi-autobiographical *If He Hollers Let Him Go* revolves around a black shipyard worker, Bob Jones, who, like Himes himself, had migrated from Ohio to Los Angeles only to find his workplace embroiled in racism and gross discrimination. Prevented from joining the labor union, Jones is asked to supervise a blacks-only crew. Caught between his ambitious, light-skinned African American girlfriend who would like him to land a white-collar job, and a seductive white coworker who ultimately accuses him of rape, Jones singlehandedly maneuvers his way through the dangerous “postlapsarian paradise”⁴² of California, an illusive “frontier” reality that had beckoned the black man with its booming defense industries only to crush his dreams of equal job opportunity and upward social mobility.

What Himes says in *The Quality of Hurt* (1973) – “I was thirty-one and whole when I went to Los Angeles and thirty-five and shattered when I left to go to New York”⁴³ – is portrayed in the five weekday span of the narrative in *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. Monday finds Jones demoted from a leader to a mechanic after he retorts “cracker bitch” to the white woman’s “nigger,” and given a neatly typed note that reads, “We served you this time but we do not want your patronage in the future,” when he takes his fiancée, Alice, to dinner in an upscale restaurant.⁴⁴ Helpless and isolated in a hostile world, humiliated by sadistic bigots in the shipyard, and traumatized by nightmares of a black boy slashed to death with a razor blade, Bob Jones is virtually paralyzed, overwhelmed by his subconscious, which keeps repeating “Bob, there never was a nigger who could beat it.”⁴⁵ At the end of the fourth day, Thursday, he is brutally beaten by his white coworkers on a fake charge of rape and arrested by the police as he tries to flee in his car. On the last day, Friday, Jones is hauled up to the judge’s chamber, told that the “rape” charges have been dropped by the white woman in the interest of racial harmony and pushed off to “join the armed forces,” bestowed as a cynical gift to help him “stay away from white women and keep out of trouble.”⁴⁶

In a society where blackness is a handicap in itself, Bob Jones is an iconic example of the victim hero protagonist of black protest novels. Himes continued his exploration of interracial dynamics in his other “protest” novel, *Lonely Crusade*. The novel spans fifty days in the life of Lee Gordon, who, after a period of unemployment becomes a union representative for black workers at Comstock Aircraft. Snubbed by the union’s white organizer, Joe Ptak – “the union can’t show any special interest in your people or we antagonize the Southern whites.”⁴⁷ Gordon single-mindedly seeks to salvage the black man who “was more firmly convinced of his own inferiority than were those who had charged him thus.”⁴⁸ Lee gets involved with a young white woman, communist Jackie Falks. He defends Jackie against threats of expulsion from the union. As a result, his wife forces him to leave home, and Jackie also renounces him, fearful of his wife’s retaliation. Himes’s second novel ends with Gordon being charged for a crime he did not commit and is killed by the police even as he leads a union demonstration.

The novels’ historical backdrop – wartime Los Angeles, labor unions, black racial consciousness stratified along class lines – is further darkened by the era’s widespread violence against young Mexican Americans sporting zoot suits and internment of Japanese American citizens after the Pearl Harbor bombings. Even as his fictional characters were exposed to the racist grime and slime that formed the underbelly of the Golden State, Himes moved to Manhattan, on the East Coast. He went on to publish *Cast the First Stone* (1952), *The Third Generation* (1954), and *The Primitive* (1956). Disillusioned by the racism and lack of opportunities in America, Himes ultimately decided to settle in Paris in 1953. There he went on to write best-selling crime novels, and was awarded the Grand Prix de la Littérature Policière in 1958. By 1969, he had settled in Spain, where he lived until his death in 1984.

In the aftermath of World War II, job opportunities again shrunk and African Americans still remained the victims of ongoing racism. Nevertheless, blacks’ wartime victories against white domination of labor unions and fights against housing segregation contributed to the Civil Rights movement in the postwar era. By 1948, black Civil Rights became an official agenda item of the Democratic Party. With the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling that struck down the “separate but equal” clause, followed by the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Civil Rights movement that “climaxed in the mid-1960s was already running in 1945, and [was] . . . very apparent in the urban West.”⁴⁹

Even as the concept of the frontier recalls promises of expansion, opportunity and advancement, further investigation reveals that these promises were illusory for the black man. From the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth, the black frontier was defined by dreams that were pursued only to be shattered by the reality of racism and discrimination. Black California literature remains a testament to these stories. James Beckwourth's mythical autobiography of a frontier man who exists beyond the brutal reality of his time and place, the narratives of betrayal and survival during the Gold Rush and after, the protest poetry of Whitfield, Bell, Alexander, and their female counterparts, the writings of the West Coast Harlemites and the novels of Chester Himes – all provide literary strategies of survival as they relate fictional stories that acknowledge or deal with the brutal racist reality the best they can.

Notes

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44. Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1986), 59.
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49. Flamming, 193.