
This scholarly study is a welcome effort to broaden the horizon of what many Americans have come to believe are the true westering experiences. It began with the early western images created in dime store novels and brought to life on the movie screen. The featured settlers, cowboys, outlaws, and other heroes were generally white. In this scenario, the frontier was tamed by strong willed white men while the role of African Americans in the "western United States and Canada and Alaska" was largely ignored (xv).

In Black Pioneers, Professor Ravage challenges any notion of a "white west" scenario and uses "approximately two hundred pictorials" and "other graphic images" to establish the historical presence of African Americans in the West. Between 1870 and 1880, for example, there were at least 150,000 Blacks living west of the Mississippi River; of which, 15-20,000 represented "a broad range of laborers, professionals, builders, gamblers, roughnecks, politicians, leaders, followers, good men and women" as well as the bad (xiv). They joined forced with other ethnic groups, when allowed, to engage "in various endeavors in small and large communities" to challenge an unforgiving frontier with courage and daring (xix).

This forging experience extended the general description of the American frontier. In true diasporic terms, the author has expanded the realm of the traditional west. For him the frontier or the American West (Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, Arizona, Nevada, etc., and the Pacific Northwest) has been re-defined to include Alaska and Hawaii. And, indeed, Canada becomes part of the African American's frontier experience. This is done despite being overlooked or excluded from the fabric of the
North American conquest saga. Thus this book not only establishes the African American pioneers’ “physical presence” but shows these pioneers as active players in the saga and as contributors to the cultural, social, and political development of the North American Frontier.

The author’s admission that the text would not stress “historical analysis” of the evidence does not excuse some questionable statements in the narrative. This aside, the photographic evidence is truly a remarkable showcase of the varied existence for blacks on the frontier. This is a very readable book that I highly recommend to academics and general readers. It is a welcome addition in the mode of William L. Katz’s pioneering pictorial work on African Americans’ westering experiences.

Nudie Eugene Williams
University of Arkansas


Hollywood inherited conflicting myths of Native Americans: barbaric savages or “Noble Savage.” Influenced by the latter romantic view, James Fenimore Cooper in print and George Catlin and Edward Curtis in art conveyed to an American public a portrait of a noble but vanishing race of America’s first people. The dime store novels and Wild West shows of the late 1800s played with the dueling idea of a noble yet menacing Red Man, and Hollywood picked up this created myth of American Indians which, while ostensibly sympathetic, actually perpetuated stereotypes of a depraved and primitive race. Hollywood then packaged these images, made them her own, and secured for generations of people the predominant image today held of Native Americans. Since, as Hannu Salmi theorizes, movies are the myth by which Americans understand Western history, this is an alarming state of affairs.

Rollins and Collins, two scholars well steeped in film his-