

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

2006

## Book Review: Imagining the African American West

Jere W. Roberson

*University of Central Oklahoma*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

Roberson, Jere W., "Book Review: Imagining the African American West" (2006). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 109.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/109>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

*Imagining the African American West.* By Blake Allmendinger. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005. xix + 161 pp. Map, illustrations, notes, index. \$49.95.

Blake Allmendinger invites us into an old/new West that is not a place on a map, but rather a place in the psyche—always imagined, out there, over there, someplace, not here. He challenges us to cease thinking of the West only in geographic terms and to envision it as an image, this time with black figures in it and writing about it.

Unbound by the historian's profession that makes us tardy to the discussion, literary historians like Allmendinger propel us into the twenty-first century where history meets contemporary America. We come to realize that we are but an extension of the past and the beginning of history. We are all a product of our imagination.

Allmendinger entertains, fascinates, lifts, stretches, and drops us, much as the West of the imagination has always done. It's a journey into literary interpretation that is worth taking. Through Allmendinger's lens we watch an American tragedy unfold as African American writers, performers, and visual artists express the metaphysical West. They imagine their characters (and sometimes themselves) finding a magic garden, an Our Town, a place "out West" where an African American can finally become what he or she had always hoped to become—a self-determining person first, a color only by choice, and free to be what he or she wants to be.

"In each work," Allmendinger writes, "characters journey across the American West in pursuit of a dream: to establish an ideal civilization where racism and sexism no longer exist." In the end, life is a metaphor. Real historical frontier figures like James Beckwourth head west to recreate themselves and escape their blackness only to find themselves marginalized (chapter 1). The author and movie-maker Oscar Micheaux (chapter 2) embraces the frontier myth and fails as a farmer, then tries to defy reality and create a West where

race is no impediment to success. He discovers that he will not be fully embraced by either world of color. Allmendinger's third chapter (confusingly labeled "Slavery, Secession, and Civil War") is especially poignant because in it he tells of two novelists (Sutton Griggs and Pauline Hopkins) who in the late nineteenth century imagine a West where black people help break the bonds of slavery, exercise revenge, save the Union, and then propose a separate black state. The West of rising expectations and shattered dreams confronted them. They too fail.

"The Significance of the Frontier in the New Negro Renaissance" (chapter 4) is truly innovative. Historians are finally becoming aware of the impact that the western experience and the imagination of the West had on this creative period. Allmendinger stretches here—further than many historians are inclined to go. In the stretch, however, he simply adds a black tone to the ever-popular white versions of "the West of the Imagination" and enriches the expanding history by looking at the impact the black West has on American literature, music, and the cinema.

When he opens eyes, Allmendinger challenges tradition. He's done it before. Chapter 5 ("Hip Hopalong Cassidy: Cowboys and Rappers") moves from his rather safe review of black cowboys like Nat Love and Bill Pickett into the most recent fiction and film controversies where it is no longer Old West cowboys being tough and fighting back; it's new urban westerners hanging tough, on the streets at high midnight, getting in your face, and showing attitude—with guns or music. This chapter will raise the eyebrows of those who might ask "What's next? Gay cowboys?" Chapters 6 ("Black Noir") and 7 ("Everybody Comes to California to Die") are sure to yank the traditionalist's leash. This is about the urban West, the modern black one, into which few historians venture. Historians are still into reporting on the rural West, on the West of the white era, and on a West that seems to come to an end early last century. Historians are moving slowly into analyzing the black new

West experience outside of “safe” areas like the Civil Rights movement, but it is all too rare. Allmendinger pushes the envelope, effectively.

Despite his sometimes overextended speculations and literary license, Allmendinger’s use of research material can frequently let us look through the miasma produced by the smoke of popularity history to find new realities and new perspectives. Allmendinger offers historians of the West a highly rewarding read in *Imagining the African American West*. “Women Rewriting History” (chapter 8), for example, points the way not only for fiction writers but for historians to explore new, fertile fields outside the male tradition. This reviewer awaits similar approaches to the study of black artists in other media.

JERE W. ROBERSON

Department of History and Geography  
and Ethnic Studies Program  
University of Central Oklahoma