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I am sincerely grateful for the support I received while completing this project from colleagues, friends, and family.

For helping me lay the intellectual groundwork for this book, thanks are due to those with whom I worked at the University of Michigan, especially my mentors Anne Herrmann, Phil Deloria, María Cotera, and Josh Miller. They are all tremendously kind and intellectually brave and have provided me with excellent models of how to do academic work. Sidonie Smith gave me advice about publishing on which I continue to rely. And I truly appreciate my friends Kelly Williams, Elspeth Healey, Aaron McCollough, Tamara Bhalla, Gavin Hollis, Ji-Hyae Park, John Cords, and others who made up a lively, funny, and nurturing intellectual community during the time I first began to think about the intersection of race and place in American literature. Dan Mrozowski deserves extra special thanks not only for his participation in that community but also for reading the manuscript and being an overall great friend.

When I first conceptualized this book, I was working at Bowling Green State University. From my time there, I am especially thankful for Matthew Mace Barbee, who read the manuscript and is one of my best critics and favorite people. I am also truly glad to know Bill Albertini, Candace Archer, Jolie Sheffer, Sarah Rainey, Ramona Bell, and Clayton Rosati, who became supporters and friends during those years. Members of the Department of Ethnic Studies and my writing group coordinated through the Institute for the Study of Culture and Society also helped me grow as a thinker and writer. Thank you all.

I could not have written this book without the year I spent as a fellow at Princeton University’s Center for African American Studies. There, I was fortunate to receive the encouragement of many generous people and tremendous scholars, including Eddie Glaude, Noliwe Rooks, Tera
Hunter, and Imani Perry. I am especially grateful for the mentorship of Daphne Brooks, who continues to inspire me with her creative, interdisciplinary thinking about race and gender. Special gratitude is also reserved for Thadious Davis of the University of Pennsylvania and Mary Pat Brady of Cornell University, who traveled to Princeton to workshop the manuscript for this book, which is now immeasurably stronger as a result of their sage advice. And I shared my year at Princeton with Danielle Clealand, who helped me extend my thinking about race in comparative and transnational ways and was the best co-fellow I could ever ask for.

Since then, I have been tremendously lucky to land at Saint Louis University, where I received a Mellon Faculty Development Grant from the College of Arts and Sciences to help bring this work to completion. I have an amazing group of colleagues in the Department of American Studies who support me in countless ways: Matthew Mancini, Cindy Ott, Heidi Ardizzone, Kate Moran, and Ben Looker. I am lucky to work with such great scholars, teachers, and friends. I am especially thankful for Ben Looker and his attentive reading of the manuscript; it is so much better for having had his eyes on it. I am grateful, too, for all the help I received from staff member Terri Foster and from graduate students Mie Wang, Anna Schmidt, Robert Hansee, Aretha Butler, and Elizabeth Eikmann, who served as my research assistants. Outside of American studies, Mary Gould, Nadia Brown, Amanda Izzo, Bukky Gbadagesin, Jonathan Smith, Lorri Glover, Torrie Hester, Toby Benis, Georgia Johnston, and other affiliates of African American studies, women’s and gender studies, and English deserve my sincere gratitude, and I am glad they are part of my intellectual community. Last, I extend profound thanks to Flannery Burke. Before I had ever spoken to her, Flannery read an early version of the manuscript, and her rigorous questions and smart feedback shaped it in fundamental ways. I am so happy to have an office down the hall from her now.

Other scholars in African American studies, American studies, history, and literature have been instrumental to my work. I am indebted to Davarian Baldwin, Minkah Makalani, Martha Cutter, Melody Graulich, Rudolph P. Byrd, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Daniel Heath Justice, who, as editors of journals and collections, encouraged and bettered
my scholarship on race and place. I am also thankful for Cary Wintz, Douglas Flamming, and Michael Johnson, who were incisive critics and inspirations as I pursued the project of linking African American studies with western literature and history. Jesse Gant has been a willing ear for all my ideas about this book since its inception, and he has always been honest about which ones were good and which ones were not, while being unwavering in his support.

I am grateful to the librarians and archivists who helped with this work, particularly at the Special Collections Research Center at Syracuse University and the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University. Thanks, too, go to all the kind people—at presses, archives, agencies, journals, and private collections—who helped me locate materials and gave me permission to use them. Jill Quasha and Susan Sandberg were particularly generous in this regard, along with Anita Green and the rest of the Anita Scott Coleman family. Thanks are also due to Cynthia Davis and Verner Mitchell, who kindly put me in touch with the Coleman descendants to further this project. I gratefully acknowledge Craig Tenney of Harold Ober Associates, who aided me in securing permission to use material by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps. “Strong Men, Riding Horses,” by Gwendolyn Brooks, is reprinted by consent of Brooks Permissions.

I also owe the entire team at the University Press of Kansas my sincerest thanks. Phil Deloria first encouraged me to propose this book for the CultureAmerica series, and he and Erika Doss, the series editors, have been encouraging and insightful ever since. The staff members at the press, new and old, have been unendingly patient and accessible and have given great advice at all stages of this project. In this regard, I especially appreciate all the work of Editor in Chief Michael Briggs.

Finally, I thank my parents, who taught me to love reading, who did everything they could to make my education possible, and who have supported me in so many other ways.
Lester after the Western

Strong Men, riding horses. In the West
On a range five hundred miles. A Thousand. Reaching
From dawn to sunset. Rested blue to orange.
From hope to crying. Except that Strong Men are
Desert-eyed, except that Strong Men are
Pasted to stars already. Have their cars
Beneath them. Rentless, too. Too broad of chest
To shrink when the Rough Man hails. Too flailing
To re-direct the Challenger, when the challenge
Nicks; slams; buttonholes. Too saddled.

I am not like that. I pay rent, am addled
By illegible landlords, run, if robbers call.

What mannerisms I present, employ,
Are camouflage, and what my mouths remark
To word-wall off that broadness of the dark
Is pitiful.
I am not brave at all.
—Gwendolyn Brooks, “Strong Men, Riding Horses” (1959)
Introduction

Going to the Territory

Why have most of the serious writers of this generation turned up their noses at America’s greatest source of material: the West? I am sure that Dumas or Hugo or Tolstoy or Shakespeare would not have neglected it had they lived in our time and place. And why has the western been the last thing to attract the Negro writer? We’ve missed a bet.

—Arna Bontemps to Langston Hughes (April 30, 1956)

During the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago, a young historian named Frederick Jackson Turner delivered a lecture titled “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” This presentation, given at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association on July 12, catapulted him to professional stardom and provided a touchstone for countless scholarly discussions of American identity and the American West—including this one—for generations to come. The World’s Columbian Exposition, which hailed US imperialism and exceptionalism, was a fitting milieu for Turner’s speech, in which he proclaimed that uniquely American character traits such as “dominant individualism,” a “practical, inventive turn of mind,” and the “buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom” were due to the westward march of imperium.¹ The delivery of Turner’s speech is a well-worn story among western historians, who have both reified Turner’s thesis and contested it—but never forgotten it—during the intervening 120-odd years.
Playing Indian: an African American child in a headdress rides his trusty tricycle steed in the Wild West of Los Angeles, 1923. (Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection)
While Turner’s place as progenitor in the field of western history is secure, western historians are probably less likely to remember another speech given at the Columbian Exposition just a month after Turner’s, on August 25, by another Frederick—Frederick Douglass—who was the headliner for the sole “Colored American Day” during the events in Chicago. African Americans had struggled for years to gain representation in planning for the fair, as well as in exhibiting and obtaining employment at the event. Ida B. Wells even distributed a lengthy coauthored pamphlet, *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World’s Columbian Exposition*, which critiqued the fair’s exclusionary practices as symptomatic of US racism. After years of struggle, Colored American Day was merely a panacea for black activists; by limiting the African American presence to a single day, it even hailed the segregationist practices of Jim Crow. Wells, outraged, boycotted the events. Those who participated barely managed to stave off the inclusion of minstrelsy, the mocking presence of vendors hired to sell watermelon for the occasion, and aggressive white-supremacist hecklers. Despite such setbacks, the aging Douglass delivered an impassioned and well-reasoned speech to explain to “our transatlantic friends why we have a share so slender in this World’s Columbian Exposition.” Whereas Turner had recently spoken about the frontier, Douglass set his sights on another major problem in American history: not a “Negro problem,” he insisted, but a “National problem.” “The problem,” he told his 2,500-person audience, “is whether the American people have the honesty enough, loyalty enough, patriotism enough to live up to their own Constitution.”

Through Turner’s and Douglass’s speeches, the 1893 World’s Fair unwittingly brought together two of the most vexing problems in American history: the problem of the frontier as a process, a place, or a symbol, and the problem of black marginalization and oppression. Yet for too long, these narratives have remained separate—so much so that in 1972, in his foundational collection *Long Black Song: Essays in Black American Literature and Culture*, critic Houston A. Baker Jr. contended:

The tales of pioneers enduring the hardships of the West for the promise of immense wealth are not the tales of black America.
When the black American reads Frederick Jackson Turner’s *The Frontier in American History*, he feels no regret over the end of the Western frontier. To black America, *frontier* is an alien word; for, in essence, all frontiers established by the white psyche have been closed to the black man.  

If western historians are unlikely to consider Turner’s speech with Douglass’s, scholars of African American studies are probably just as unlikely to see the West as a crucial site for the examination of black identity and culture. Historian Richard White once juxtaposed Turner’s speech at the fair with the unofficial presence of Buffalo Bill Cody, who set up his popular Wild West Show just outside its gates. Of this pairing, White eloquently remarked, “Turner and Cody followed separate but connected strands of a single mythic cloth. And as in Chicago one hundred years ago, their seemingly contradictory stories make historical sense only when told together.” Unlike the stories of Turner and Cody, the stories of Turner and Douglass appear to be unrelated even by contradiction. This book, however, suggests that the stories represented by these figures—stories of the West and stories of African America—are intrinsically connected.  

When he spoke of the West, Douglass observed that it had little to offer African Americans. He was clearly aware of the impact place had on African American experiences, even titling his first abolitionist paper the *North Star*, thereby tying geographic mobility to African American freedom. This, however, had its limits. Douglass rightfully decried the racist efforts of the American Colonization Society to resettle blacks, and he frowned on African American immigration to Canada as a response to the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. He was attentive, however, to both northern and southern borderlands and their impact on African American lives; he spoke out against expansionist efforts in the West and in Mexico. Douglass opposed the United States–Mexico War, deeming it “a murderous” act toward the Mexicans and characterizing it “as a war against the free states—as a war against freedom, against the Negro, and against the interests of workingmen in this country—and as a means of extending that great evil and damning curse, negro slavery.” He could not, however, condone the dreams of African Americans who
imagined the West and both its northern and southern borderlands as spaces for black freedom. In 1879, speaking about the African American Exoduster movement to Kansas, he stated that while he understood why blacks would leave the South, he considered it “a surrender, a premature, disheartening surrender, since it would make freedom dependent on migration rather than protection; by flight, rather than by right.”

For his part, it seems unlikely that Turner ever envisioned his intrepid American pioneers as black. Indeed, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” obscured the historical linkages between the frontier and black experience—most obviously the history of bondage and emancipation, with which Douglass’s activism was so enmeshed. In this history, westward expansion and Indian removal provided more land for a plantation economy built on the backs of enslaved people, and the admittance of each state to the westward-moving union raised the sectional question of whether it would be slave or free. But Turner merely glossed this point when he stated, “Even the slavery struggle . . . occupies its important place in American history because of its relation to westward expansion”—enfolding, obscuring, and forgetting the fact of blackness as a central component of the frontier experience. Such obfuscation contributed to a popular western mythos that remained dominant throughout much of the twentieth century and was centered on rugged, white, male individuals interacting with a symbolic “virgin land.”

Despite these exclusions, silences, and seeming lack of intersections, a few short years after Baker’s essay collection helped midwife black literary criticism and African American studies more generally, a giant in African American letters, Ralph Ellison, delivered an address that undermined the alleged mutual exclusivity of black experience and frontier experience. In this lecture, titled “Going to the Territory,” the Oklahoman writer remarks that, for African Americans, “geography was fate.” He insists, “Not only had [African Americans] observed the transformation of individual fortune made possible by the westward movement along the frontier, but the Mason-Dixon Line had taught them the relationship between geography and freedom.” With this contention, Ellison is participating in an exceptionalist frontier ethos much like the one so famously articulated by Turner back in 1893.
Playing cowgirl: an African American child poses on a pony in Los Angeles, 1944. (Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection)
While his emphasis on black experience in “the [Indian] territory” serves as a corrective to dominant depictions of the frontier, it also tends to make African Americans the subject of plots that echo those narrated by Turner. Like Turner, who describes pioneers and colonists confronting the wilderness and being rewrought in a new and uniquely American image, Ellison favors a narrative of individual success—a hearty, masculine frontierism where blacks know not only the frontier experience but also the geography of North and South, which he paints as a geography of freedom and oppression. In Ellison’s speech, these geographic trajectories are separate rather than overlapping or intersectional. His linguistic mapping detaches the axes of North-South and East-West, and in doing so, he furthers the notion that westward movement is unique and that the West is a place that stands alone—this time, in terms of the possibilities it offers African Americans, just as it did for white fortune seekers.

Elsewhere in “Going to the Territory,” Ellison insists, “we possess two basic versions of American history: one which is written and as neatly stylized as ancient myth, and the other unwritten and as chaotic and full of contradictions, changes of pace, and surprises as life itself. Perhaps this is to overstate it a bit, but there’s no denying that Americans can be notoriously selective in the exercise of historical memory.” When this statement is applied to the West as a symbol and myth of America—as it has so often been treated from Turner’s time onward—the African American presence is forgotten in the American historical memory. Ellison wants to bring black history back into the fold, unveiling the surprising black presence woven into the American fabric as the very threads that keep it together. He argues:

By ignoring such matters as the sharing of bloodlines and cultural traditions by groups of widely differing ethnic origins, and by overlooking the blending and metamorphosis of cultural forms which is so characteristic of our society, we misconceive our cultural identity. It is as though we dread to acknowledge the complex, pluralistic nature of our society, and as a result we find ourselves stumbling upon our true national identity under circumstances in which we least expect to do so.
When America forgets its racial histories, Ellison suggests, it misap-
prehends what it means to be American. Thus, if the frontier has been
treated, time and time again, as one of the driving symbols of the nation,
one must examine not only how blacks share a western history but also
how they are fundamental to it. When Ellison argues for the excavation
and retention of a fuller American historical memory, he does not ques-
tion the West’s centrality to this memory or to American identity more
generally. Rather than introducing an entirely new story or an entirely
different geography, he uses the same familiar tropes but uncovers the
unexpected presence of black subjects who “learned . . . that freedom
was to be attained through geographical movement, and that freedom
required one to risk his life against the unknown”—in other words, the
frontier, the virgin land, of American history.

To examine Ellison’s engagement with the West disrupts the “two
basic versions of American history”—the neat, mythologized history
and the contradictory, surprising history—he describes in “Going to
the Territory.” Depictions of the African American West have, indeed,
often been dominated by two major narratives that continue to be al-
luded to and in some cases undermined by contemporary scholarship.
In the first, blackness is subject to erasure. The legacy of the “slavery
struggle,” as Turner put it, is encompassed by a greater master narra-
tive of the frontier and thereby minimized to the point of invisibility.
As a result, once the existence of vibrant black communities in the West
becomes impossible to ignore—for example, through social movements
and unrest in places like Watts and Oakland in the 1960s—the west-
erness of the sites housing these communities tends to be forgotten,
and the urban environment tends to be emphasized. But well before
the 1960s—in 1922—the neighborhood of South Central Los Angeles
became legible to Chandler Owen, the Harlem-based editor of the
_Messenger_; not as the West but as a “veritable little Harlem.”

If minimization, erasure, obfuscation, and forgetting characterize the
first dominant discourse of the African American West, in the second
narrative the region is seen as a land of opportunity, a place where one
can find freedom from prejudice and oppression. Here, blacks become
participants in a landscape populated by fortune-seeking gold miners
and homesteaders; the West is a refuge for escaped and former slaves.
Yet the very presence of a black West comes as a surprise, and it is thought to consist of only scattered individuals such as, in the words of historian Quintard Taylor, “rowdy, rugged black cowboys, gallant black soldiers, and sturdy but silent black women, . . . stereotype[s] of the black westerner as a solitary figure loosened from the moorings of family, home, and community.” At the center of these stories is the individual black westerner—who, like the white westerner, is characterized as a lone adventurer taming the wilderness and forging a new, free life in a new place.10

Ellison demonstrates this breed of thinking about the black West when he describes the Oklahoma where he grew up as “wild mainly in the sense of it being a relatively unformed frontier state.” Like Turner, he elaborates on how encounters with this wildness inform the American character, essentially propounding a rugged individualism: “I have stressed in this country that geography has performed the role of fate, but it is important to remember that it is not geography alone which determines the quality of life and culture. These depend on the courage and personal culture of the individuals who make their home in any given locality.” He continues, “Today most of the geographical frontier is gone, but the process of cultural integration continues along the lines that mark the hierarchical divisions of the United States.” The way this line resonates with Turner’s earlier speech is obvious. Nearly ninety years apart, both speakers see the frontier as closed; yet the frontier as both a process and a geography remains linked to the formation of courageous individual character, which endures as a definitive trait of American identity. Because of this link, if American culture is to be maintained, new frontiers must be created. In Turner’s time, the idea of the frontier was extrapolated beyond the contiguous United States to encompass the nation’s imperial interventions during the Spanish-American War. Ellison’s frontier differs greatly, remaining within the national boundaries and focused on the “hierarchical divisions” of race that continue to persist long after emancipation. Unlike Turner, whose frontier subsumes black enslavement and vanishes Indians, Ellison’s frontier is, crucially, a racial frontier. The imperative of integration in the post–civil rights era is this new frontier for Ellison, one that maintains the central paradigm of American experience.11
As a result, it may come as no surprise that Ellison sees the West as having deep roots in the African American imagination: “Freedom,” he claims, “was also to be found in the west of the old Indian Territory. . . . It is no accident that much of the symbolism of our folklore is rooted in the imagery of geography.” When Ellison makes this connection to folklore, he locates the black West in a time long before his speech, the title of which is taken from a Bessie Smith song, “Work House Blues,” recorded in 1924. An imagined West where blacks can escape discrimination, terror, and violence after the subversion of Reconstruction was common when Smith recorded her song, which is steeped in folkloric traditions. It was released when the African American literary upstarts of the New Negro movement were also turning to black folklore as a source for their art. As Tiya Miles and Sharon P. Holland contend, “By the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, many African Americans had come to see the Western lands called Indian Territory as a refuge in America, and more, as a potential black space that would function metaphorically and emotionally as a substitute for the longed-for African homeland.” This was true despite the occurrence of events such as the devastating Tulsa race riots of 1921, right near the heart of Indian Territory, during which the city’s Greenwood business district, known as “black Wall Street,” was entirely destroyed. But regardless of this situation and others like it, a hopeful vision of the West as a place for blacks to access American freedom was expanded in the 1920s, moving beyond Indian Territory to other regions. As a result, a mere four years after the Tulsa riots, writer, activist, and promoter of the black literati James Weldon Johnson could claim in the Denver Post, “Your West is giving the Negro a better deal than any other section of the country. . . . There is more opportunity for my race, and less prejudice against it in this section of the country than anywhere else in the United States.”

As Johnson’s comment about Denver or Owen’s about Los Angeles indicates, African Americans in the 1920s and 1930s, including the New Negro generation associated with the production of literature, art, and music during this period, were thinking about the American West. But clearly, Ellison’s need to remind audiences of the black West as late as 1979 indicates that this connection had been—and often continues to be—forgotten. When the “New Negro” comes to mind, scholars and
critics are likely to locate this well-known paradigm of black intellectualism, modernity, politics, and artistic production squarely in Harlem. This generation of black artists and intellectuals is typically seen as one that broke away from the constraints of the post-Reconstruction South and the legacy of slavery to forge new lives in booming modern metropolises in the North—industrial cities like Chicago and Detroit and, most famously in terms of the arts, the “culture capital,” as Johnson termed it: New York’s Harlem. This Great Migration narrative characterizes the modern black experience and African American literature squarely as an outgrowth of the urban environment. And during the early twentieth century, the West was rarely imagined as urban, even though western cities experienced booming growth.

Black literary endeavors during these years were largely situated within a New York–based publishing milieu, which was fixated on black creative writing because, as Langston Hughes remarks in The Big Sea (1940), “the negro was in vogue.” The dialectic of North-South constructed in narratives of the Great Migration is, indeed, common in African American literature emerging from the New Negro movement in the 1920s and 1930s. For example, Jean Toomer’s Cane (1923), often considered the harbinger of the New Negro renaissance, is organized in three parts moving from South to North and then South again—emblematic of a New Negro impulse to recover and promote a seemingly “authentic” and often southern black identity in the face of both mainstream racist parody and a modernist primitivism that upheld a fantasy of black life as natural, atavistic, uncultivated, and a way to heal the wounds of an overcivilized age. This impulse acted, too, in defiance of an older generation of black intellectuals who championed respectability and assimilation to (white) middle-class norms. Participating in the aesthetic zeitgeist of the interwar period, the “talented tenth” of the United States’ most paradigmatically modern metropolis made its mark in American literary and intellectual history. Given its prominence, it is perhaps unsurprising that criticism still tends to locate African American literary production in the 1920s and 1930s almost exclusively in Harlem or, when it extends beyond Harlem, to the interplay between Harlem and the South (by the 1940s, Gwendolyn Brooks and Richard Wright, among others, would put Chicago more squarely on the literary map).
This is not to say that scholarship has failed to extend the scope of African American history and literature beyond a North-South binary. Key works in African American and Africana studies have vigorously taken on and opened up the concept of diaspora and its relationship to black modernity and African American modernism. One of the most notable examples is, of course, Paul Gilroy’s influential *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*, wherein he describes the modern emergence of a circum-Atlantic and transnational black culture and politics: “In opposition to . . . nationalist or ethnically absolute approaches,” he suggests, “cultural historians could take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective.” Brent Hayes Edwards has built on this concept, with particular reference to the New Negro movement, in *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. Edwards emphasizes, “To note that the ‘New Negro’ movement is at the same time a ‘new’ black internationalism is to move against the grain of much of the scholarship on African American culture in the 1920s, which has tended to emphasize United States–bound themes of cultural nationalism, civil rights protest, and uplift in the literary culture of the ‘Harlem Renaissance.’” African American and Africana literary cultures in the 1920s extended both far beyond and in tandem with Harlem, and Edwards locates these cultures in both the Anglophone and Francophone circum-Atlantic world through the lenses of translation and décalage. In works like Gilroy’s and Edwards’s, Harlem—and indeed, the nation—loses its exceptionalism and centrality, becoming just one of many nodes in a network of literary, cultural, and political formations constituting and being constituted by transnational black experience.15

Yet even in scholarship like this, which rethinks black geographies so significantly, there is little consideration of region and of how region can play a part in—and perhaps complicate—such constructs of the transnational. In fact, there is little mention of nonurban locations (or those imagined as nonurban) in these depictions of black modernism and modernity, which tend to connect New York with other metropolitan centers—such as the cosmopolitan cities of Paris and London—more than with African or Caribbean colonial peripheries. If
the urban environment and the black Atlantic remain the central frames of reference for black diasporic experience, the African American West continues to be left out of this picture. Even Gilroy’s image of a ship, which he uses as a metaphor to describe circum-Atlantic black culture and politics, seems to have little application in the arid, desert landscape of the borderlands West.16

Although concepts such as the black Atlantic and black internationalism have considerably disrupted the binary of North-South, the rural South remains the most prominent nonurban location in African American studies. (It is worth noting that in much of the literature of the 1920s and 1930s—most famously in the work of the white writers known as the southern agrarians, but also in the work of African American writers—the South, like the West, tends to be imagined as primarily rural.) There is no denying that the South occupies a crucial place in African American history and the African American imagination—perhaps even the most important place. As Thadious Davis argues, black literature from at least the 1970s onward has included “the recovery of a later black identity that is rooted in the South as grounded manifestation of the ever-desired formative ‘homeplace.’” This southern imagination may also be present in the work of earlier black writers such as Zora Neale Hurston or Arna Bontemps.17

Nevertheless, the South is not the only region of importance in the African American cultural imagination, as Ellison’s “Going to the Territory” points out. There are counternarratives of black mobility that break from the circum-Atlantic frame and the North-South binary by turning toward the West. One example is recorded in Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy’s collection of African American migration narratives, Anyplace but Here (originally, and tellingly, published as They Seek a City in 1945):

“Where you bound?” a Negro tenant farmer in Mississippi asked a neighbor who was waiting with two bulging imitation-leather suitcases beside a back-country road. “Goin’ North to Chicago-Deetroit [sic]?”

“Naw! Too many already gone there and ain’t making it so good. I want to strike out to some place where colored folks ain’t already
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crowded up like sardine fish. I’m taking that Liberty Special for Frisco; California, here I come!”

This dialogue raises a series of questions about the current map of African American studies. How does paying attention to the geography it produces change our historical memory of both internal and transnational black migration and its literary outgrowths? How are central paradigms of African American studies, such as the black Atlantic or black internationalism, changed or expanded when the black American West is taken into account? How are scholarly conceptions of black modernity challenged when it becomes located in a place—the West—so long depicted as antimodern (and, in groundbreaking works such as Krista Comer’s *Landscapes of the New West: Gender and Geography in Contemporary Women’s Writing*, as postmodern)? Finally, how does bringing New Negro writers into the West change our understanding of the West and, by extension, when the West remains a central problem and trope in American studies, our understanding of American identities?

Attempts to answer such questions emerged in the new western history and literary studies that appeared in the 1980s and 1990s, when scholars such as Patricia Nelson Limerick, Richard White, Susan Lee Johnson, Annette Kolodny, and Krista Comer more thoroughly integrated race, gender, class, and sexuality as categories of analysis in scholarship on the West. Since then, work on the black West continues to grow. African American western history is comprehensively represented in Quintard Taylor’s *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528–1990*, and it has been approached in important and nuanced ways in Douglas Flamming’s *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America*, Daniel Widener’s *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles*, Josh Sides’s *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present*, and Herbert G. Ruffin II’s *Uninvited Neighbors: African Americans in Silicon Valley, 1769–1990*, among others. In literary and cultural studies, scholarly monographs dedicated to African American writers in the West include Blake Allmendinger’s *Imagining the African American West*, Eric Gardner’s *Unexpected Places: Relocating Nineteenth-Century African American Literature*, and Michael K. Johnson’s *Black Masculinity and the Frontier*
Myth in American Literature and Hoo-Doo Cowboys and Bronze Buckaroos: Conceptions of the African American West. Through its focus on the black West in the 1920s and 1930s, this book adds to the dialogue initiated by these scholars. Indeed, there was a deep and pervasive interest in the West during the interwar period. Amply apparent in mass culture, such as pulp fiction and film, and in the rise of the western tourism industry (especially with the formation and expansion of the National Park Service), this interest was also evident among the self-styled avant-gardists of the art world. Modernist attention to the West occurred primarily in the form of primitivism that sought to regenerate white society, which was thought to have become flaccid, deracinated, and overcivilized. This regeneration took place through contact with Mexican American and Native American people in the West (and, in the East, through contact with African Americans) and through the use of folk forms as inspiration for modern art. Exploring the cultures, art, and folkways of these ethnic communities, modernists adapted them to serve their own often highly stylized or highly stereotyped ends. Native American folk art, for example, was exhibited in galleries alongside the work of Dadaists. The imagist Poetry: A Magazine of Verse released a special “Indian Issue” in February 1917, after assistant editor Alice Corbin Henderson moved to Santa Fe. A well-known photograph of Willa Cather—taken in 1936 by Carl Van Vechten, a white promoter of the New Negro movement—shows her posed underneath a New Mexican santo. Art patron, salonnière, and writer Mabel Dodge Luhan introduced Cather, Georgia O’Keeffe, Ansel Adams, Marsden Hartley, Andrew Dasburg, and D. H. Lawrence (among others) to the West when she hosted them at her pueblo revival-style compound in Taos, New Mexico. The literary and visual art they produced there often presented pristine, untouched, and uncanny landscapes and primitive, simultaneously simple and savage Indian and Mexican people.

White modernists’ attraction to the West was largely an attraction to Native Americans and Mexican Americans as racial others. When they formed their own community, white writers who traveled to Luhan’s compound hoped to imitate the tribal world of the nearby Taos pueblo. Helen Carr notes that this circle of writers and artists “saw the Pueblos
Willa Cather photographed under a New Mexican santo by Carl Van Vechten, 1936. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Carl Van Vechten Collection; courtesy of the Carl Van Vechten Trust)
as a world of beauty and harmony, a welcome retreat from ‘Mechani-
cal’ America.” The West, and the borderlands of the Southwest in
particular, became known for the natural beauty of both its landscapes
and its racialized native inhabitants.

Such an alliance of race and region is evident in one of the most
popular texts published about the Southwest during this period: Our
Southwest (1940), by New Mexican tour guide and travel writer Erna
Fergusson. Born and raised in Albuquerque and known today as “New
Mexico’s First Lady of Letters,” Fergusson was a recognized authority
on the region. Yet her book opens with a chapter titled “What Is the
Southwest?” When she takes on this definitional project, she focuses on
race and culture. She claims that although the region is hard to define
geographically, it remains distinct because it is a “mestizo” place: “The
Southwest is a crossing of South and West,” she writes, “but in the
sense of breeding to produce offspring. It is neither South nor West,
but a mestizo partaking of the characteristics of both parents, and like
a child, baffling to both.” Importantly, Fergusson’s allusion to mestizaje,
or racial mixing, is not merely metaphorical or biological; it is also cul-
tural. During the interwar period, when white tourists and modernists
arrived in the Southwest, it was largely the Indians of the pueblos and,
to a lesser degree, the Mexican Americans of the towns who drew them
to immerse themselves in places like Taos and Santa Fe.

Of course, what is missing from this multiracial figuration is a black
presence. Another of Fergusson’s books starkly demonstrates the limits
of her mestizo West, right in the title: New Mexico: A Pageant of Three
Peoples (1950). The three peoples under study are, unsurprisingly, Na-
tive Americans, Mexican Americans, and Anglo-Americans. There
are no African Americans (or, for that matter, Asian Americans) to be
seen. How quickly mestizaje changed from the way it was envisioned
by Mexican intellectual José Vasconcelos’s 1925 La raza cósmica (The
Cosmic Race)! There, mestizaje incorporates blackness, as Vasconcelos
describes “a new race, a synthetic race that aspires to engulf and express
everything human in forms of constant improvement.” This vision
contrasts greatly with the rigid “color-line” of the United States—cited
by DuBois as the “problem of the Twentieth Century.” Vasconcelos,
indeed, critiques the United States’ “inflexible line that separates the
Blacks from the Whites, and the laws, each time more rigorous, for the exclusion of the Japanese and Chinese from California.” This is far different from the way he characterizes the “Latin continent,” which he claims thrives on “increasing and spontaneous mixing which operates among all peoples.” In short, although white moderns were attracted to the West precisely because it was a multiethnic landscape, it remained a multiethnic landscape where a black presence seemed unthinkable.

As a result, it becomes easier to understand how a figure like Mabel Dodge Luhan could, on the one hand, marry a Pueblo Indian and become a champion of Indian self-determination (although, admittedly, her activism was often clouded by the lens of privilege) and, on the other hand, exhibit a loathing toward the African Americans she encountered at her New York salon. Luhan’s famous “hospitality did not extend to black New Yorkers,” writes Christine Stansell in *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century*. When Carl Van Vechten brought black performers—a singer and a dancer—to her apartment in Greenwich Village, “Dodge quailed at the straight-on dose of African American popular culture. The combination of black people and ‘low’ culture seemed to impinge upon her very sense of herself, calling up racial stereotypes of predatory sexuality.” Stansell uses Luhan’s memoirs to illustrate this antipathy toward blacks: “An appalling Negress danced,” Luhan writes. “The man strummed a banjo and sang an embarrassing song while she cavorted and they both leered and rolled their suggestive eyes and made me feel first hot and then cold, for I had never been so near this kind of thing before.” When the West is conceptualized by white modernists as an Indian or a Mexican—but not as a black—place, it explains the contradictions in the stories told by figures like Luhan, whose autobiography documents her hostility toward blacks and her attraction toward Indians. Since both groups are, in her imagination, allied with places (New York and New Mexico, respectively), in such cultural mappings, African Americans are written out of the ethnic landscape of the West. As a result, when white modernists move there, fantasizing about contact with untouched landscapes and quaint, communal people, their fantasies are also predicated on evacuating western blacks. In doing so, they further their “escape”—to use Luhan’s term to describe her move to the West—from the problems of the twentieth
century by forgetting the black-white color line, by forgetting black art, by forgetting black politics, and by forgetting black literature. In short, the West enables them to attempt to forget blacks entirely. Perhaps it is this kind of willful forgetting that also enables modernists to neglect the multiple dimensions of political struggle for other people of color in the West—by supporting Native self-determination, for example, only when it emphasizes cultural preservation rather than when it emphasizes change, modernization, or a greater allocation of resources (even for things as vital as water or plumbing on reservations).²⁴

To reinsert blacks into the scope of the mestizo West is to bring African American studies into dialogue with Chicana and Chicano studies. Whereas the dominant spatial tropes of black studies continue to be diaspora, the black Atlantic, and black internationalism, Chicana and Chicano studies have conceptualized transnationalism by looking to the borderlands. In Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies, José David Saldívar draws a parallel between his work on borders and Gilroy’s on the black Atlantic. He writes, “the culture of the United States–Mexico borderlands, like the black Atlantic diaspora culture, cannot be reduced to any nationally based ‘tradition.’” To look at the black West brings these transnational cultural forms together.

Additionally, Chicana and Chicano studies’ borderlands have been critical to rethinking formulations of the American West as, fundamentally, a transnational West. As Saldívar suggests, attention to the frontera exposes the limitations of the frontier as the central “field-Imaginary” in American studies by bringing the study of race and ethnicity into the frame; this attention has led to the rethinking of what “American” means when it initiates a transhemispheric perspective. The language of Chicana and Chicano studies, indeed, has reshaped dialogues on the American West and has worked in tandem with—and as a presage to—the new western history and literary studies. Mary Pat Brady’s essay “Scaling the West Differently” describes the impact of Chicana and Chicano studies on studies of literature and region in the American West. She remarks, “when we realize that western literature might also be norteño literature, the presuppositions buried beneath ‘western’ are unveiled. Turning ‘the West’ into ‘the North,’ or el norte, reveals western literature’s dependence upon a hidden locus of observation or controlling
center, such as New York or New England, and begins the process of revealing the impact such loci may have on the material studied.” Concepts of diaspora and transnationalism emerging in black studies have informed borderlands discourses in Chicana and Chicano studies; these borderlands discourses, in turn, have informed studies of the American West and the idea of “America” more generally. As a result, this book participates in recent scholarship of the African American West that considers it in its proper multiethnic context, such as Scott Kurashige’s *The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Modern Los Angeles*, David Chang’s *The Color of the Land: Race, Nation, and the Politics of Landownership in Oklahoma, 1832–1929*, and Stacy Smith’s *Freedom’s Frontier: California and the Struggle over Unfree Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction*, among others. Given this conceptual feedback loop, an exploration of how black cultural production interacts with and perhaps interrupts this cycle makes sense, particularly for an important moment in African American literary history, when authors were informed by new national and transnational vocabularies of race and their complicated imbrications with regional identity. To do so exposes that “the West” is in conversation with more than “the East,” and it is also more than Mexico’s “North.” As José E. Limón points out in *American Encounters: Greater Mexico, the United States, and the Erotics of Culture*, “the West” (including Greater Mexico) also exists in conversation with “the South” and a range of places even more unexpected, all touched by African American migratory and diasporic experience.25

This book, then, emerges from the linkages among black studies, Chicana and Chicano studies, western literature and history, and American studies. It asks where the black Atlantic and black internationalism converge with the borderlands and the “transfrontera contact zone”— “the social space of subaltern cultures, the Janus-faced border line in which people geopolitically forced to separate themselves now negotiate with one another and manufacture new relations, hybrid cultures, and multiple-voiced aesthetics.” In envisioning this convergence, the “borderlands West” examined in this book largely comprises areas that were once parts of Mexico or Indian Territory—sites that complicate notions of both race and nation. This complication is compounded by the presence of African American residents, intellectuals, and writers
who lived in, thought about, and traveled through these areas. Some of these places are still within the Mexican nation-state, but most were ceded in 1848 and are now within the geopolitical borders of the United States, such as New Mexico, California, and Utah; other places were once part of Indian Territory—after the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the land that became Oklahoma in 1907. My focus on this borderlands West is not meant to imply that black people did not live in other parts of the western United States or that they did not document their experience via literature and other publications. As Eric Gardner has demonstrated, nineteenth-century blacks were already producing journalism in the Pacific Northwest. And in the early twentieth century, noted filmmaker and writer Oscar Micheaux homesteaded in South Dakota, which inspired his books *Conquest: The Story of a Negro Pioneer* (1913) and *The Homesteader: A Novel* (1917). *The Homesteader* was also adapted as a film in 1919, demonstrating that blacks have always participated in popular constructions of the American West. Furthermore, during the New Negro movement, singer and entertainer Taylor Gordon, a contemporary of the writers examined at length in this book, told “Wild West” stories about his hometown of White Sulphur Springs, Montana, in his published memoir *Born to Be* (1929). My borderlands West is not meant to occlude but to be in dialogue with these voices, while at the same time locating African Americans in geographic, national, and racial borderlands—contested terrain. Additionally, my focus on the borderlands that were once Mexico and Indian Territory is not meant to insinuate that these are the only borderlands in the West—or even the only international borderlands. Historian Kornel Chang has written profitably of the United States–Canada borderlands, and as literary critic Claudia Sadowski-Smith has aptly demonstrated, Latina and Latino, Asian, and Native American border fictions have been produced as well.

By coupling “borderlands” with “West,” this book participates in what Krista Comer has called “an emergent critical regionalism or postnational West.” She continues, “Revisionist readings of what variously is called the ‘glocal’ or ‘transregional’ will . . . be on the horizon of American cultural studies for some time, which means that ‘the West’—in all its multiple invocations—necessarily must be at the center of multiple field debates.” The complex geographies of regional writing
are not provincial; rather, they are reflections of a global milieu—and this is certainly seen in black western writing. In making connections among local, regional, and transnational geographies, Comer insists that “the most difficult and productive challenge” is “to critique the keyword [West] while refusing to vacate a dialogue with it, because to concede the term would be to permit its most regressive political and social effects.” Although this book focuses on the borderlands that were once Mexico and Indian Territory, by using the term “West,” it also acknowledges the reality that regions do not exist in isolation; they are always relational. I thereby use the term “borderlands West” as a kind of intentional slippage, meant to invoke the networks that bind both adjacent and transnational sites. These networks take many shapes: the dialogue between neighborhoods (such as Los Angeles’s Central Avenue district and its Furlong Tract in chapter 2), the dialogue between rural areas and cities (such as the classic binary between the province and the metropolis), the dialogue between regions (such as the West and the South), and the dialogue between nations—not just at the borders where they touch, like the United States–Canada and United States–Mexico borders (see chapter 4), or even the borders between Native American nations and the surrounding United States, but also the dialogues between more surprising and geographically disconnected sites (such as the West’s conversation with India in chapter 5).

This book thus aims to revise dominant narratives about both the American West and American literary cultures in the time between Turner’s proclamation of “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” and Ellison’s “Going to the Territory.” It was this period when the West became familiar through frontier myth and was, perhaps, at its most powerful, percolating throughout popular culture and, as Richard Slotkin has argued, national ideology and policy. Taken collectively, the writers I examine at length in this book bore witness to almost this entire span of time. Anita Scott Coleman was the oldest, born in 1890; Arna Bontemps lived the longest, passing away in 1973. Although these writers gained their initial notoriety as “New Negroes” during their youth, all of them—except for Wallace Thurman, who suffered from ill health and died in 1934 at age thirty-two—continued to write well after the New Negro movement declined in the 1930s, whether they published
prolifically, sporadically, or rarely. Langston Hughes remained at the forefront of African American literature throughout his life and traveled worldwide as a speaker while maintaining a home base in Harlem. Bon-temps also published frequently and lectured publicly, although he was a somewhat quieter figure, devoted to his family and his career as head librarian at Fisk University. A busy mother, foster mother, and community member, Coleman’s literary output was scarcer, but she continued to write articles, stories, and poetry; her final work, a children’s book titled *Singing Bells*, was published posthumously in 1961. The paucity of Jean Toomer’s post-*Cane* (1923) publishing record is well known by scholars, but he too continued to write, and much of his writing has since been archived. In addition to living through these years of powerful frontier mythology and ideology of the West, these writers experienced cataclysmic shifts in black identity politics that informed the publishing industry and the reception of African American literature from the rise of the New Negro movement to its recovery during the civil rights era. And in their work, they brought these stories together.28

The chapters that follow explore these writers’ varied relationships to the borderlands West through both their literature and their biographies, through their published work and archived manuscripts. Although I consider these writers, for the most part, in separate chapters, it is not my intention to isolate them and reproduce the solitude prized in the tradition of frontier individualism. Rather, my structure and method are derived from feminist theorizing, often by women of color, that has long considered the nexus of race, gender, and region. In *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space*, Mary Pat Brady contends, “Chicana . . . literature has been particularly attuned to the complex ways race, gender, sexuality, and class emerge simultaneously, if unevenly, through both the discursive and the spatial.” An intersectional approach to race, gender, sexuality, class, and the spatial is perhaps most familiar in Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, which figures the ambiguities of the borderlands not only geographically but also as a complex, multiple “new mestiza” consciousness. As Brady points out elsewhere, the epistemological possibilities of this metaphorical borderlands promise fuller, more complete knowledge, yet the metaphorical usage of borderlands has also enabled
academics to “locate an argument by apparently materializing it, while often dislocating it from any historically specific referents,” thereby minimizing engagement with the realities of, for example, the violence and exploitation that often occur in “real” border spaces.

In this book I strive for the epistemological fullness enabled by metaphorical borderlands, but I allow this metaphor to guide my scholarly method while endeavoring to produce historicized literary research. In doing so, I draw not only from Anzaldúa but also from a range of feminist thinkers who have considered the imbrications of race and gender in spatialized terms and who have insisted on the connections among theory, experience, and practice. Black feminist theorist bell hooks, for example, has written of the “margin” as the site where one can gain a more nuanced, clear, and complete knowledge. She notes, “I did not feel sympathetic to white peers who maintained that I could not expect them to have knowledge of or understand the life experiences of black women. Despite my background (living in racially segregated communities) I knew about the lives of white women, and certainly no white women lived in our neighborhood, attended our schools, or worked in our homes.” As a result, she argues that those on the margin have a sort of epistemic advantage and makes a case for bringing the voices and perspectives of women of color to the center of feminist knowledge:

This lived experience may shape our consciousness in such a way that our world view differs from those who have a degree of privilege (however relative within the existing system). It is essential for continued feminist struggle that black women recognize the special vantage point our marginality gives us and make use of this perspective to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counter-hegemony.

When I look to the borderlands West as a geographic margin of African American literature and history, as well as to writers of color (both black and nonblack) within that marginal geography, I draw from this feminist scholarship. Organizing chapters around a single writer and the borderlands West is one way to apply the insights of feminist theory to
my scholarly method. Feminist standpoint epistemology, for example, has long envisioned identities and knowledge emerging from social locations, utilizing a spatial metaphor easily extended to the consideration of region alongside race, gender, and other categories of analysis. As a result of these locations, one’s vision, experience, and knowledge can only be partial; however, when myriad “partial perspectives” are brought together, particularly by bringing the knowledge of marginalized groups to the center, they can collaboratively create a stronger objectivity, a clearer way of seeing the world. I envision each of my chapters as a way to focus on one writer’s inevitably partial perspective, yet I see the chapters functioning together and speaking collectively in the book as a whole, forming a clearer picture of both New Negro experiences and the American borderlands West. Thus, when I ask these writers to speak together, I am interested in “making a hard turn from anomaly to frequency and unexpectedness,” as articulated by Philip J. Deloria in *Indians in Unexpected Places*. By refusing to consider these writers’ engagement with the West to be anomalous, I reject the idea that the West is anomalous in black history and experience.31

Part I of *West of Harlem* is therefore centered on “One Who Stayed” and foregrounds the presence of black women in the West. Chapter 1, “Home on the Range: Domesticity and a Black Woman’s West,” focuses on the writing of Anita Scott Coleman. Recently rediscovered in scholarship, Coleman largely has been treated as anomalous in terms of African American engagement with the West during the Harlem renaissance years. However, she is certainly not the only African American to write about the West. Nor is she the only black woman writer from the West, although she is the one who most explicitly discusses the West as a region. Born in Mexico, Coleman moved to New Mexico as a toddler, where she remained until adulthood. She then moved not to Harlem but to Los Angeles. Although she stayed in the borderlands West, she published prolifically in Harlem-based venues such as the *Crisis* and *Opportunity* in the 1920s. Her lifelong western residency is fairly uncommon among well-known New Negro writers, but in contrast to the assumptions of recent critics, her interaction with the West is by no means unique. Descriptions of Coleman as virtually the only New Negro writer in the West perpetuate mythologies of western individualism,
furthering the idea that African Americans in the West were solitary, dislocated, and anomalous. Perhaps Coleman herself, who describes the paucity of black westerners in her essay “Arizona and New Mexico—The Land of Esperanza,” exacerbates this sense. She claims that “here and there are Negroes, like straggly but tenacious plants growing... an isolated lot.” Yet a closer look at Coleman’s writing reveals a counternarrative of black domesticity, community, and nationalism, as well as the connections between multiethnic borderland communities and black communities that are not situated “home to Harlem,” as Claude McKay wrote, but home in the borderlands West.32

Despite depictions (like Coleman’s) of the West as an African American home during the years of the Great Migration, other New Negro writers reversed the westward trajectory, leaving the West for Harlem. Part II, comprising chapters on Arna Bontemps, Wallace Thurman, and Langston Hughes, focuses on “Those Who Went Away.” Chapter 2, “The Two LAs: Los Angeles, Louisiana, and Geographies of Race,” explores the western experiences and writings of Bontemps. Although born in Louisiana, Bontemps spent his formative years in Los Angeles, where he moved in 1906 when he was three years old. According to historian Douglas Flamming (the only scholar to date who has written about Bontemps and the West), Bontemps left for Harlem in 1924 because he felt a need to “re-establish ties with the African American culture he... had lost in the West.” Bontemps’s unpublished, archived works, however, expand this interpretation. These works—an autobiographical bildungsroman titled “The Chariot in the Cloud” (1929) and an unfinished novel with the working title “The Prizefighter and the Woman” (1947)—are set in the Los Angeles region. Rather than simply leaving the West behind, these texts create complicated triangulations between the West, the North (particularly Harlem), and the South, as well as intricate local geographies of Los Angeles. Taken together, they call the location and stability of African American culture into question.33

Wallace Thurman, the subject of chapter 3, “Revolt from the Provinces: Black Politics of Respectability and Black Sexual Politics,” also moved from Los Angeles to Harlem in the mid-1920s. There, he would become known as a consummate Manhattanite, but he was born and raised largely in Salt Lake City, Utah, with stints in Boise, Idaho,
and Los Angeles. Thurman’s portrait of the black West at first seems largely negative. In one essay from 1926 he writes, “I am sorry . . . I have to write of the Utah Negro,” because rather than inspire racial pride, “there has been and is certainly nothing about him to inspire anyone to do anything save perhaps drink gin with gusto and develop new technique for the contravention of virginity.” He concludes his essay by lamenting, “Thus is Utah burdened with dull and unprogressive Mormons, with more dull and speciously progressive Gentiles, and with still more dull and not even speciously progressive Negroes. Everyone in the state seems more or less a vegetable.” Yet despite his claims to New York chauvinism, a closer look at Thurman’s western writing reveals critiques of New York as cutting as those of Utah—and Utah and the West provide historical fodder that makes the region more compatible with his queer black aesthetic than Harlem is.

The work of Langston Hughes is explored in chapter 4, “Technicolor Places: Race and Revolution in Transnational America.” Hughes preceded his colleagues Bontemps and Thurman in traveling from the borderlands West to Harlem. Hughes’s borderlands, however, extend transnationally, originating in Toluca, Mexico, where he lived with his father during the summer of 1919 and from the summer of 1920 through the summer of 1921. In the winter of 1934–1935 Hughes returned to Mexico, this time to Mexico City, to settle his father’s estate. Although his time there was limited, Mexico played a formative role in Hughes’s transnational and antiracist vision, a politics and aesthetic long considered Pan-African but here also understood as multiethnic.

Part III turns to “One Who Arrived,” Jean Toomer. While Hughes’s biography and writing interrogate the transnational West across the conjoined borders of Mexico and the United States, Toomer’s work extends this reach to transnational sites farther afield, as discussed in chapter 5, “Mapping the New American Race: From New York to New Mexico—and Beyond.” For Toomer, who articulated a multiple, mixed-race identity, Harlem proved to be a site of oppression rather than liberation, and he looked elsewhere for a more fitting home. In New Mexico, where Toomer traveled and lived periodically from the 1920s through the 1940s, he found this home—a place not of whiteness or blackness but of mestizaje. He describes this in a 1940 essay titled “New
Mexico after India,” where he contemplates the relationships among the racial landscapes of New Mexico, New York, and India, places he had traveled to while seeking spiritual, racial, and personal coherence.

These five chapters bring African American literature into the center of studies of the transnational American West, in part providing a counterdiscourse to writing by Anglo-American modernists, who tend to efface black westerners while affixing romantic, primitivist gazes on Native Americans and Mexican Americans. In contrast, the writing of Native Americans, Mexican Americans, and Asian Americans in the West does not occlude black westerners. These writings are the subject of the book’s coda, “The Borderlands of Blackness: The Formation of a Multiethnic American Imagination.” Osage Indian writer and historian John Joseph Mathews’s autobiographical novel *Sundown* (1934), “proto-Chicano” writer and folklorist Américo Paredes’s collection of poetry *Between Two Worlds* (published in 1991 but penned largely in the 1930s and 1940s), Mexican American writer Josefina Niggli’s *Mexican Village* (1945), and Filipino writer and labor activist Carlos Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart* (1943) offer glimpses of the black West in conjunction with Native American, Mexican American, and Asian American histories and literatures during the period of this study. In these works, black westerners provide new ways for nonblack borderlands subjects to consider their own ethnic identities and place in the American racial order. In bringing this comparative perspective to ethnic literatures, I suggest the potential for mutual progress and critical dialogue across the field of ethnic studies and the broader project of interdisciplinary American cultural studies.

When I identify the West as the place where African American studies, Chicana and Chicano studies, and other ethnic studies converge, I point to a site that continues to be a force in the American imagination, a nexus that occupies a central place in American studies and, indeed, in debates about what it meant to be American during the first half of the twentieth century. Along the way, the modernist West of Anglo-American writers and artists, so tied to primitivist fantasies of Native and Mexican American people, arts, and folkways, is disrupted by an African American presence. African American subjects and African American writings call the dominant historical narratives of the black
West as either a space of absence or a space of individual opportunity into question. The persistent representation of the New Negro as an urban identity produced as an outgrowth of the Great Migration is dislocated by this new geographic context—one that rethinks the “practice of diaspora” beyond the black Atlantic and urban internationalism. Finally, the ethnic landscape of the borderlands West is complicated not only by considering the treatment of Mexican American, Asian American, and Native American westerners in African American writing but also by considering the representation of black Westerners in literature by nonblack people of color, where the black presence is surprising, given the manner in which African Americans have largely been absented from the West created by Anglo-American writing. Overall, this book seeks to discover two things: What happens to African American identity when it is placed in sites that have long been considered, as Erna Fergusson’s writing reminds us, tricultural and exclusive of blacks? And how do conversations about race in the United States change when they happen predominantly among minority groups, rather than in conversations with Anglo America?

The answers to these inquiries are twofold. On the one hand, I argue that the West reveals things about African American literature and race that a focus on Harlem, or even on Harlem and the South, does not. Black nationalism and racial uplift become complicated, enriched, and even undermined when African American writers confront the minority groups and racial orders that proliferate in the borderlands. On the other hand, I contend that African American literature reveals things about the borderlands West that other literatures do not. For so long, the borderlands West has been imagined in two ways. In the first way, the Anglo frontier myth either vanishes or romanticizes Indians and Mexicans, ignores Asian immigration, forgets African Americans, and envisions a feminized, virgin land ripe for the American Adam. The second way, which counters this deracinated West, comes from Chicana and Chicano studies and fantasizes about a radically hybrid borderlands, a place of epistemic advantage and liberation from oppressive hierarchies. African American literature during the long New Negro movement tells us that, ultimately, the borderlands West is neither of these things—the black westerner undermines the deracinated Anglo frontier
myth, while the long reach of Jim Crow is a sad reminder of the limits of borderlands metaphors. When Anita Scott Coleman calls Arizona and New Mexico “the land of esperanza,” she describes exactly these paradoxes. Her choice to use the Spanish word for “hope” when writing for a largely African American, English-speaking audience indicates that the borderlands West was imagined as a multiethnic space for liberation, including African American liberation. Yet embedded in this word for hope is esperar, the verb for “to wait,” which suggests that this space for multiethnic liberation is still in the making—still, as Langston Hughes would write of Harlem in 1951, “a dream deferred.”