

Bruce A. Glasrud and Laurie Champion, eds. *The African American West: A Century of Short Stories* Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2000. 462p.

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Critical articles abound describing African American experience in the American west, but primary texts are still relatively few and/or relatively inaccessible. Scholars and teachers frustrated that African American literature of the West seems limited to works by Nat Love, Oscar Micheaux, and Wallace Thurman will welcome Glasrud and Champion's compilation. It is valuable in its ambition and scope, providing forty-six pieces of short story length (not all are strictly fiction) by a like number of authors ranging chronologically from the turn of the century to contemporary writers. Contributors include such well-known names as W.E.B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, Charles W. Chesnutt, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Arna Bontemps, and Ralph Ellison. The anthology allows great flexibility in application, as its "west" includes "any state west of the Mississippi" (x), and because the themes the works explore are not limited to such easily recognized western tropes as landscape, violence and displacement, and masculine dominance. Indeed, as the editors aver in their enlightening introductory essay, "stories set in the West that portray blacks do not represent the traditional, or popular, western" (1); some of the stories enlarge or challenge generic conventions when their protagonists and narrators return to the South or East, having found that "all is not well in the West" (1).

However, this ambition, scope, and flexibility are precisely the aspects to which purists will object. One might argue that a century is too much ground to cover, especially since the contemporary west is so vastly different from that of the turn of the century in geography, economy, in the cultural imagination, and myriad other ways. Of course, an anthology by necessity cuts a large swath in time, and this one certainly fills a need for primary texts despite this chronologic dilemma. But other problems are not as easily overcome. For instance, the working definition of "west" seems somewhat arbitrary. The Mississippi River as a demarcation of West makes sense only at a particular historical moment, and the book's earliest selection, a reminiscence by Eugene Frierson, set in 1893, describes experiences occurring well after that moment. The eastern boundary might just as well have been the Appalachian mountains, for they also were once the demarcation of West during a portion of the country's past.

Furthermore, the editors admit in their Preface to having "crossed the Mississippi eastward to garner a few stories that captured the western spirit" (x). I am not certain what the "western spirit" signifies, but perhaps one story that typifies

it is “The Ingrate,” by Paul Laurence Dunbar. The story features a slave who escapes to Canada through the old northwest, and, while it is fascinating, the story is set almost entirely in the slave-holding South and has little to do with the west. Or perhaps the “western spirit” is best evinced in a dreamy character of March Lacy’s “No Fools, No Fun.” Set in New York City, the story features a deluded woman, Patsy, who dreams of success in the Hollywood film industry. The fantasy of going west is as close as this character or story comes to anything west of the Adirondacks. To be sure, the editors acknowledge that, while “the West is a geographic entity, albeit with moving parameters, . . . it is also a state of mind” (x). The location and definition of “the West” has long intrigued—and ultimately eluded—scholars and writers, but this definition is certainly among the broadest.

Despite these inevitable difficulties, though, *The African American West* is an important addition to the short list of easily accessible works by African Americans which treat black experience in the West. The introductory essay concludes, “Western African Americans as portrayed in short stories survive, challenge, and encourage a multicultural, inclusive West. That is a fitting tribute to a century of effort” (11). Glasrud and Champion’s collection will challenge our notions of the western genre and encourage the continued exploration of the complex, multicultural West. And that is likewise a fitting tribute. ✱