

**The Black West: Race, Culture, and the Making of a Region**  
**Humanities Seminar**  
**Summer 2025**

**Professor Tyina Steptoe**

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Chavez 319D

**Course Description**

What can art, literature, film, and music teach us about Black life in the western United States? This six-week course uses cultural artifacts to explore the history of people of African descent in the American West. We will begin in the era of Spanish colonization and end in the late twentieth century. Topics in the course include slavery in western territories, the establishment of free Black communities before and after the Civil War, the Great Migration, civil rights movements, urban uprisings, and the carceral state. The course also examines interactions between Black westerners and diverse people who have lived in the region, including Indigenous groups, Spanish-speaking communities, people of Asian descent, and white American settlers.

Reading assignments include articles and book chapters that will be posted to the course website in digital format. During each meeting, students will analyze cultural artifacts related to Black western history –visual art, literature, sound recordings, motion pictures, and oral history interviews.

**Course Outline**

Week 1

The course begins with an examination of diverse people of African descent in the Spanish American West, from Moorish explorers to enslaved West Africans. Using the *casta* paintings – a type of art that depicted racial hierarchies in the 1700s – we will examine the multiple racial categorizations that Spanish colonizers created.

Read: Hsain Ilahiane, “Estevan De Dorantes, the Moor or the Slave? The Other Moroccan Explorer of New Spain,” *The Journal of North African Studies* 5, no. 3 (Autumn 2000): 1–14.

Week 2

The second week of the course examine debates over slavery and freedom as the United States spread westward in the early 1800s. We will discuss the Mexican Underground Railroad taken by enslaved Africans who escaped bondage in the United States by fleeing to Mexico. We will also discuss how western territories and new states became battlegrounds over slavery in the decade prior to the Civil War. In class, we will read examine testimonies of formerly enslaved people from the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.

Read: Excerpts from Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey through Texas: Or a Saddle-Trip on*

*the Southwestern Frontier, 1857.*

### Week 3

The third week focuses on the movement of free Black Americans to the West after the Civil War. We will discuss the Black Town Movement, which encouraged freed people from the Deep South to migrate to western states and territories in the late nineteenth century. We will also discuss the history of Buffalo Soldiers, the Black regiments stationed in the West from Reconstruction through the early twentieth century. In class, we will examine the complicated legacy of Buffalo Soldiers and Indigenous groups, as depicted in visual art, fiction, music, and film.

Read: Sally Nash, "Interview about Life in Rentiesville, Oklahoma, 1903–08," June 22, 1937.

### Week 4

The fifth week examines the ways the 2<sup>nd</sup> Great Migration, which began during World War II, led to an explosion in the Black western population, especially in West Coast cities. We will explore economic, social, and political factors that caused Black southerners to migrate west during and after the war. The class will also examine the ways racial segregation operated in western states, from school desegregation to housing discrimination. The cultural artifacts for the week will focus on music. Black migrants created new expressions of jazz, blues, and early rhythm and blues in places like Los Angeles' Central Avenue and Seattle's Central District.

Read: Excerpt from Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the West, 1528–1990* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999).

### Week 5

This week begins with an examination of role of Black West in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. First, we will discuss the NAACP's legal battle in the West, 1941-1954. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People first focused on lawsuits in western cities like Austin, Texas, and Topeka, Kansas, because they wanted to avoid violence in the South. We will discuss the origins of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in Oakland and the spread of the organization to other parts of the nation. We will also examine specific issues the BPP and other local Black Power organizations targeted, such as poverty, police brutality, and political representation. In class, we will investigate cultural artifacts that depict "soul style" – fashion, music, and art that were influenced by Black Power.

Read: Tanisha Ford, "Soul Style on Campus: American College Women and Black Power Fashion," from *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015): 95-122.

### Week 6

In the 1990s, people around the world learned the names of Black communities in Los Angeles because of film and music. Movies like *Boyz n The Hood* and the popularity of the hip hop sub-genre known as "gangster rap" depicted Black neighborhoods of South Los Angeles in ways that

focused on drugs, gang violence, incarceration, and police brutality. In class, we will watch excerpts of 1990s films and listen to West Coast hip hop.

Read: Josh Sides, "Straight into Compton: American Dreams, Urban Nightmares, and the Metamorphosis of a Black Suburb" *American Quarterly* 56 no. 3 (September 2004): 583-605.

### **Professor Bio**

Tyina Steptoe is an associate professor of history at the University of Arizona. Her research and teaching focus on race, gender, and popular culture in the United States. Dr. Steptoe recently edited the volume, *Jim Crow: Voices from a Century of Struggle* (2024). She is also the author of *Houston Bound: Culture and Color in a Jim Crow City* (2016), which won awards from the Urban History Association, the Western History Association, and the Houston Metropolitan Research Center. Dr. Steptoe is a DJ on Tucson community radio station KXCI. Her show, *Soul Stories*, explores the roots and branches of rhythm and blues music. She is currently writing a history of rhythm and blues music that focuses on the U.S. West.