

Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California. *Edited by Lawrence B. DeGraaf, Kevin Mulroy, and Quintard Taylor.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001. 550 pp. Index. Cloth \$45.00; paper, \$22.95. ISBN: cloth 0-295-98082-6; paper 0-295-98083-4.

Reviewed by John Ingham

Much has been written in recent years concerning the idea that race is socially constructed; that racial categories believed by many to be immutable and biologically determined are in fact highly mutable and of historical origin (see David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness* [1991], Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* [1995], and Matthew Frye Jacobsen, *Whiteness of a Different Color* [1998]). Further, the American West, especially California, has been viewed as a fertile ground for this racial variability, as the presence of large numbers of Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans, coupled with relatively low numbers of African Americans, has made it a unique environment for race mixing and identification (see, for example, Tomas Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* [1994] and Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* [1971]). Thus it was with some anticipation that I approached this volume of essays, the result of a series of conferences at the Autry Museum of Western Heritage. The editors' introduction served to whet my appetite further, as they declared their goal was to encourage the contributors to "think in big pictures, adopt comparative approaches, and explore racial, ethnic, and gender relations" (p. xi). I expected the essays to approach the situation for African Americans in California with some cognizance of the literature on racial identity and the role of blacks within that complex framework in the Golden State. A few did just that, but most did not.

The volume begins with an excellent article by Jack Forbes, who illuminates the multiracial nature of early California. He shows the mutability of race and color in the years before the mid-nineteenth century. It would seem logical for the other authors to pick up this theme, but few did. Most write as if California was a biracial state, made up only of blacks and whites. Although this is by no means a tragic flaw in their accounts, it does make the various essays seem more replicative of studies in the South and North. By the same token, they do not fully take up the charge of the editors to adopt fully comparative approaches.

Although one could argue that since this is a book on the African American experience it is neither necessary nor desirable to discuss other racial minorities, the goal of writing truly comparative history would seem to make this strategy essential. The two essays by Willi Coleman and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore on African American women largely duplicate work on

black women in eastern cities. Although both authors provide the reader with helpful details on African American women in California, they limit themselves to positing the California situation as a slight variation on themes developed for black women elsewhere in America. Similarly, Bette Yarborough Cox's essay on the evolution of black music in Los Angeles contains little that cannot be gleaned from other works dealing with the emergence of jazz or the African American community in south central Los Angeles.

Kevin Leonard's excellent essay on interracial cooperation in Los Angeles during and after World War II reminds us of the fact that the city and state were profoundly multiracial environments. He demonstrates the degree of discrimination against Asian and Mexican groups in the city and the extent to which leaders of these groups came together in interracial protest organizations. He is also fully cognizant that these alliances were neither natural nor inevitable and that at times racial hatred flared between these groups. This essay is the first after the one by Forbes to pick up a theme that seems crucial to understanding the African American experience in California.

Leonard's essay stands in contrast to two other interesting but rather frustrating contributions. Douglas Flammig discusses the conversion of African Americans to the Democratic Party in the 1930s. He places his analysis almost completely in the biracial mode, of blacks and whites, but omits the important component of Asian and Latino participation in politics that existed during nearly the same period that Leonard is writing of these alliances. The same may be said of Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo's essay on deindustrialization in Oakland from 1945 to 1990. Her essay also posits a biracial framework. With its complete emphasis on blacks and whites, Oakland looks very different from Los Angeles during this period. Perhaps it was, but some recognition of the role of other racial groups on the Oakland scene could have clarified the situation for the reader.

The essay by Gerald Horne comparing the Watts riot of 1965 and the Rodney King riot of 1992 is especially strong, as he is sensitive not only to the relations among African Americans, Asians, and Latinos but also to class issues among blacks themselves. Lawrence DeGraaf's essay on African American suburbanization is also sensitive to class issues, and Raphael Sonenshein is highly cognizant of the importance of other races and ethnic groups in Los Angeles.

The title of the collection is slightly misleading. Although there are two articles on San Francisco and Oakland, this is largely a book about African Americans in southern California, particularly Los Angeles. Business historians will find a number of references to African American business activities. No single essay focuses on business, although Delores Nason

McBroome, in "Harvest of Gold," deals with important African American farming and real estate ventures.

Despite these criticisms, this is a useful and important collection. One can only wish that more of the authors had taken up the editors' injunction to write in a comparative context. California represents an important variation on American themes of race, color, and prejudice. While some of the essays do a magnificent job of highlighting this reality, others miss the opportunity. This volume fills an important void in the literature on African Americans, and scholars following the lead of Forbes, Leonard, and Horne will produce significant results.

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