

PUBLIC HISTORY: PODCAST, DOCUMENTARY, DIGITAL RESOURCES

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“We Are Not Strangers Here: African American Histories in Rural California” includes a series of podcast episodes as well as physical and digital exhibits. It is a collaboration between Susan D. Anderson of the California African American Museum, the California Historical Society, Amy Cohen and Exhibit Envoy, Ildi Carlisle-Cummins and the California Institute for Rural Studies (CIRS), and Caroline Collins of UC San Diego. Elsewhere in this issue of *California History*, Dr. Collins details the overall project’s content, creation, and reception. This review is of the podcast series only.

From the outset of the first episode, “We Are Not Strangers Here”—a six-episode series on the CIRS podcast *Cal Ag Roots*—establishes its mission to (re)insert Black Americans into narratives of the rural West. As series producer and narrator Caroline Collins states, more than just filling a historical gap, “We Are Not Strangers Here” seeks to challenge myths about the history of the West “and create new narratives about freedom, self-governance, and civic culture” in the broader United States (episode 1, 6:50–7:03). Most narratives of Black Americans in the West begin with the Great Migration. Countless Black men and women traveled from the South to the cities of the North and the Sunbelt region during the early and mid-twentieth century, but the Great Migration is only part of a deep and rich history of Black movement and belonging across the United States. As explained in the second episode, the centrality of the Great Migration in the history of Black people in the West obscures the presence of Black men and women in California as early as the Spanish colonial area, as well as their settlement in areas outside of

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California's major cities. As the title suggests, "We Are Not Strangers Here" uncovers lesser-known histories of Black settlement and placemaking in rural California.

Focused mostly on the histories of Black individuals and communities in rural California from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, some episodes also touch upon much longer histories and wider geographic regions. Each half-hour episode begins with an introduction to a historical and historiographical debate about the place of Black men and women in broader narratives of California and the United States, then transitions to a detailed discussion of one or two individual life stories of Black men and women in rural California. Episodes 4 and 5 break slightly from this formula by focusing on whole communities rather than individuals, but the structure remains the same. Collins intersperses her narration with voice clips from interviewees who help explain the stakes of these narratives and how they challenge or add nuance to state and national myths. Collins and her collaborators also discuss how they encountered and pieced together these stories, revealing the ongoing work of doing Black history in rural California. In the final minutes of each episode, Collins offers concluding remarks that reinforce the main themes and motifs, introduce the upcoming episodes, and acknowledge contributors.

Each episode focuses on how a particular "master narrative" of American history holds power, both in our cultural imagination and in very real, material ways. The series also explores how inserting Black voices and perspectives can challenge and add new contours to these powerful stories of America's past. The second episode, for example, demonstrates the interconnectedness of place names and power, showing how maps obscured and erased the contributions of Black men and women to the settlement and success of western regions. It also destabilizes Blackness as a monolithic identity and culture in the West by highlighting California's *pobladores*, some of whom were of African descent and helped establish Afro-Latino culture in the state. Similarly, the series complicates narratives of early twentieth-century Black culture that portray Black farmers and Black intellectuals as divided over civic issues and the Black imaginary. It highlights the lives of Black men and women in rural communities, thus showing the intersections of Black thought and Black work, rather than pitting rural agrarian culture and values against urban Black intellectualism as other histories tend to do.

The series is both accessible to general audiences and engaging for historians and educators. The episodes ease listeners in with a familiar historical moment, like the gold rush, and then add layers of complexity, building a solid foundation of themes to be explored in the ensuing episodes. Occasionally, this strategy limits the depth of analysis. For example, in situating Alvin Coffey as one among many forty-niners, the first episode explores how enslaved Black people were key members of traveling parties, helping secure and protect provisions and fellow travelers. By reorienting the familiar story of westward travel and forty-niners to focus on an enslaved Black man, the episode exposes listeners to a far more complex narrative of opportunity, resilience, and perseverance. However, the episode glosses over other aspects of this history, namely the place of American Indians, only briefly mentioning conflicts between travelers and Indians defending their lands (episode 1, 13:28–13:32). Similarly, the series occasionally mentions Chinese and other Asian immigrants and citizens, but usually only to set a diverse and multicultural scene,

rather than to make substantive points about their connected histories with Black men and women.

There are other instances throughout the series where the case study approach leaves certain tangential historical topics underdeveloped. More often than not, though, Collins works through and around the limitations of the short-form podcast format. Focusing on one case study, like the town of Allensworth in episode 5, simplifies the listening experience and allows Collins to explain complex topics like the history of Black intellectual “back to the land” movements without alienating a general audience.

Technically speaking, the series is well produced and well paced. There are occasional sound-mixing hiccups, but that is to be expected given the diverse cast of contributors that speak throughout many of the episodes. Their voices add to the collaborative feel of the series as a whole. One of the hallmarks of good public history is shared authority, and although Collins produces and narrates the majority of each episode, the addition of interviews from relatives of historical subjects as well as from other public historians and scholars makes the end product feel more like a collective narrative.

Overall, the “We Are Not Strangers Here” podcast series is a useful and versatile product for exploring Black histories in the rural West. Its tight and focused six-episode arc guides listeners on a simple-to-follow, yet engaging and meticulous, exploration of the impact of these Black individuals and communities on the history of California and of the United States. Although the series works best as a whole, each individual episode has a clear subject and a compelling central case study that will make it useful as a stand-alone piece for the classroom or for more casual listeners. Whether it’s Alvin Coffey building or donating to Black schools, nurseries, and retirement homes; John Ballard helping sue for the right to vote in L.A. County; or Gabriel Moore planting Fresno County’s first apple and fig orchards and hiring white ranchers to work the region’s first cattle ranch, “We Are Not Strangers Here” shows how Black people were integral to their communities’ economies and cultures—and, above all, to our collective history of the West.

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