

Household Gods on the Altar of Freedom

Religion, Race, and Citizenship in California, 1850-1900

ABSTRACT In the nineteenth century, the American West was imagined as a place brimming with opportunity and prosperity. While many found material success in places like Gold Rush era California, the relationship that Black Americans had to the region and to what they hoped would be afforded to them in the West was marked by racial exclusion. Drawing upon primary sources that include newspaper clippings and Colored California Convention reports, this article considers the various strategies of resistance that Black western arrivants waged to not only attain material wealth but also agitate for their civil rights. "Household Gods" argues that Black western arrivants used religion and religious rhetoric as an adaptive and subversive strategy to shape conceptions of citizenship discourse, which contributed to how Black westerners sought to make space for themselves within a multiethnic society. This article is part of a special issue of *Pacific Historical Review*, "Religion in the Nineteenth-Century American West." **KEYWORDS** Mary Ellen Pleasant, religion in the American West, race, African American religion, citizenship, migration, California

On February 5, 1899, a provocative ad appeared in the *San Francisco Call* that alleged one's "life" and "character" could be read through the crevices and lines in the palm of the hand. The author, Madame Neergard, claimed to have expertise in divining someone's future and predicting "God's destiny," which she asserted was "practically fate written on our hands."¹ To underscore this point, Neergard printed large black-and-white facsimile reproductions of famous people's palms alongside the article's text. The palms of Mark Twain, Colonel Robert Ingersoll, and Annie Besant stared back at the reader as Neergard's textual analysis did the work of attaching meaning to short thumbs and faint lines. The article demonstrated Neergard's expertise, but it also tapped into society's anxiety about the dawn of the twentieth century.

1. "Palmistry: Your Life and Character Marked in your Hands: Curious Stories Told by the Lines and Mounts in the Palms of Famous People," *The San Francisco Call*, February 5, 1899.

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People wanted to predict their future. Thousands of readers responded to Neergard's palmistry invitation by sending her an imprint of their hands. In addition to fielding the public's interest, she also continued to read and record famous people's palms. Tucked away in a scrapbook, Neergard imprinted Mary Ellen Pleasant's palm sometime in August of 1900.

Mary Ellen's palm reading was never published. Several imprints of her palm, along with the description "bell curve," are all that remain. But if the lines on her palm could tell her story, they would reveal a life that was central to organizing and developing Black communities in the American West during the nineteenth century. Known in California as the "Mother of Civil Rights," Pleasant was a real estate magnate, entrepreneur, financier, and abolitionist. She used her wealth to support both the Black western freedom struggle and national abolitionist efforts. W.E.B. Du Bois described her in his 1924 book, *The Gift of Black Folk*, as "quite a different kind of woman and yet strangely effective and influential." He continued, "Here was a colored woman who became one of the shrewdest business minds of the State. She anticipated the development in oil. She was the trusted confidante of many of the California pioneers such as Ralston, Mills and Booth, and for years was a power in San Francisco affairs."²

The power that Pleasant wielded in San Francisco was derived from how she leveraged her wealth to fund initiatives that furthered social and political reform on an individual and institutional level. From her \$30,000 donation (approximately \$965,000 today) to John Brown for the 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry to her philanthropic contributions to help enslaved, fugitive, and free Black people, Pleasant's activism was grounded in an emancipatory framework.³ Du Bois confirmed as much, writing that she had a "bitter hatred for slavery and a certain contempt for white people."⁴

A self-described "capitalist by profession," Pleasant used her material gains as a tool to fight for freedom.⁵ Yet despite her activism and prominence within San Francisco, finding substantial source material on her life and the role of other Black westerners remains a challenge. Historians have noted

2. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Gift of Black Folk* (Boston: The Stratford, 1924).

3. Calculation completed by MeasuringWorth.com of the relative inflated worth.

4. Du Bois, *The Gift of Black Folk*.

5. In an 1890 census, Mary Ellen Pleasant described herself as a "capitalist by profession." See Lynn M. Hudson, "The Making of 'Mammy Pleasant': A Black Entrepreneur in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco" (Urbana: University of Illinois: 2003), 8-9.



FIGURE 1. M.E. Pleasant's palm print, August 1900. *Source:* Madame Neergard (G.S. Smith), "The Palms of Famous People Ready by Madame Neergard," *The San Francisco Call*, 1895–1913.

these gaps in the archive.⁶ Much like the blotchy and disconnected lines on her palm, Pleasant's presence as well as her absence in archives reflects a complex life shrouded in mystery. But one way to read with and against this gap is

6. Kellie Carter Jackson, "Mary Ellen Pleasant, Nineteenth-Century Massachusetts and California (US)" in *As if She Were Free: A Collective Biography of Women and Emancipation in the Americas*, eds. Erica L. Ball, Tatiana Seijas, Terri L. Snyder (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020) 312–30. Meina Yates-Richard, an African American and English studies scholar, also framed Pleasant as a figure who has been remembered and disremembered in "plain sight." Yates-Richard suggests "just as during her lifetime, Pleasant remains seemingly ubiquitous while resisting a place within any single category. Known and unknown, she remains, in effect, a haunting." Meina Yates-Richard, "In the Wake' of the 'Quake: Mary Ellen Pleasant's Diasporic Hauntings," *American Studies* 58, no. 3, (2019): 37–57.

to consider more diverse analytical frameworks, like religion, in the retelling of African American history in the American West.

In this article, Pleasant provides an entrée into considering how Black western arrivants used religious rhetoric and religious identity to manifest the kind of life they believed was possible for them in the American West.⁷ From the plains to the deep crevices of the Sierra Nevada Mountain range, the constructed meanings of the American West are as diverse as the region's topography and loom large within national culture and the popular imagination. Often imagined from the viewpoint of the East Coast, the cast of characters descending upon the plains and traveling via steamship were believed to be full of ingenuity, rugged individualism, and heroism.⁸ The "winning of the West" became synonymous with a mythologized narrative of white pioneers who conquered the land and, in turn, the heterogeneous inhabitants of the land, including Native, Afro-Latinx and Latinx populations.⁹

But the religious meaning that African Americans invested in the American West has remained largely invisible.¹⁰ While scholars have illuminated other aspects of Black life in the American West, this article situates the role of religion within the historiography to reveal that Black western emigrants had more than material interests in mind when they embarked on a long westward journey.¹¹ In this paper I use the term "Black emigrant" which

7. My analysis here is informed by theorist of colonialism and Indigeneity Jodi A. Byrd, who borrowed the term "arrivant" from Caribbean writer Kamau Brathwaite. For more see Tiya Miles, "Beyond a Boundary: Black Lives and the Settler-Native Divide," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (July 2019): 417–26.

8. Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1894).

9. Recent scholarship has revised Frederick Jackson Turner's narrative, revealing that western expansion and settlement were complicated processes mired in violence, conflict, and competing economic agendas. For more on scholars who have revised and disputed Turner's thesis, see Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1987); Robert V. Hine and John Faragher, *The American West: A New Interpretive History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

10. Studies on African Americans in the American West have focused on specific elements or themes, which include Black cowboys or the Black westward migration experience as told from the perspective of white pioneers. See William Loren Katz, *The Black West* (Golden: Fulcrum Publishing, 1971); Lawrence B. de Graaf, Kevin Mulroy, and Quintard Taylor, eds., *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000); Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, *Sweet Freedom's Plains: African Americans on the Overland Trails, 1841–1869* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016).

11. For work that explores similar themes on race, religion and citizenship, see Joshua Paddison, *American Heathens: Religion, Race, and Reconstruction in California* (Oakland: University of

reflects the word choice used by Black people in nineteenth-century publications to describe Black westward movement. The term “Black arrivant” also demonstrates the social positioning of Black people as colonial subjects constrained by circumstances beyond their control, which differs from the often used “pioneer” term to describe white settlers. Black arrivants sought to make a place for themselves within a landscape that was structured by settler colonialism.¹² They made sense of this mythologized American West by employing religious rhetoric to promote the region as not only a desirable location for Black emigration, but as a place imagined for its potential to extend full citizenship rights. Western states like California were attractive because there seemed to be immense potential to build a new society. The West beckoned because it was not the South. In the West, land ownership and the promise of full citizenship rights seemed possible. Black arrivants constructed a network to promote western emigration that was built on the narrative of redemption found in the Bible, a redemption that in the shadow of slavery was equally about political and spiritual freedom. The use of religious rhetoric that defined the region would appeal to arrivants who sought to start over in a land undefiled by the legacy of slavery or for those in search of a place that held deep redemptive significance.

By examining this rhetoric, this article extends the period in which promotion of the American West was believed to be active and effective. Although a substantial promotional period began after 1880, closer examination of source materials reveals that Black arrivants in the 1860s were starting to construct and build a print communication infrastructure that invested the region with religious, social, and political meaning. The threads of this network connected California to the rest of the country, even before the end of slavery. This pre-Civil War and pre-Reconstruction period is critical to understanding how Black arrivants became the social architects of a campaign that would be re-imagined by subsequent Black arrivants who traveled west throughout the late nineteenth and into the early twentieth century. By recognizing how Black arrivants constructed, invested, and contested the American West, a more nuanced account can be given of how

California Press, 2012); Helen Heran Jun, *Race for Citizenship: Black Orientalism and Asian Uplift from Pre-Emancipation to Neoliberal America* (New York: NYU Press, 2011); Stacey L. Smith, *Freedom's Frontier: California and the Struggle over Unfree Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2013).

12. See Miles, “Beyond a Boundary.”

enslaved and free Black people developed a larger Black consciousness on conceptions of place, race, and national belonging.

In addition to their use of religious rhetoric, some Black arrivants also deployed their religious identity as Christians to temper late nineteenth-century white Americans' racial anxiety and to assert a pathway to citizenship rights that were based upon conceptions of America as a Christian nation.¹³ White Californians adopted a similar approach by manipulating a non-Christian identity to attack, discredit, and villify Mary Ellen Pleasant. The press and the courts alleged that her success and wealth were attributed to the pernicious influence of her being a "voodoo queen" who wielded the principles of "African spirituality" which they not only framed as anti-American, but as a dangerous threat to the country's moral and social order.

This paper argues that religion was used as an adaptive and subversive strategy by Mary Ellen Pleasant and the greater Black community to combat the notion of a "mythic West" where freedom seemed possible but was actively being concealed by a region invested in maintaining discriminatory policies that upheld the American racial state. During the late nineteenth century, Black western arrivants' religious discourse shaped conceptions of citizenship and became the central means through which Black westerners positioned themselves within a multiethnic society.

A SECOND EDEN IN THE WEST

In 1848, hundreds of thousands of people moved to California hoping to strike it rich. These individuals, mostly men, were enticed by the Gold Rush and hoped that at the end of their journey they would find their own pot of gold. In addition to bringing their ambition, the miners also created a makeshift, instant city that many East Coast clergy believed would descend into chaos and moral debauchery without a comprehensive social system in place. Historian of religion Laurie Maffly-Kipp noted as much, writing, "if a lack of social order invariably led to national decline and decay, the seemingly chaotic and individualistic nature of frontier communities also posed a direct threat to the well-being of eastern communities."¹⁴ For those who embarked

13. My discussion of Christianity and citizenship is informed by Joshua Paddison, "Anti-Catholicism and Race in Post-Civil War San Francisco," *Pacific Historical Review* 78, no. 4 (2009): 505–544; and Derek Chang, *Citizens of a Christian Nation: Evangelical Missions and the Problem of Race in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

14. Laurie Maffly-Kipp, *Religion and Society in Frontier California* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 35.

on a westward journey, East Coast Protestants saw a moral crisis brewing and feared for the erosion of “civilization.” While East Coast evangelicals sought to protect what they hoped would be a benevolent empire forming on the West Coast, some hoped to capitalize on an opportunity for entrepreneurial expansion.

Pleasant was one of these individuals who anticipated an expansive business landscape. Although details of her early life are contested by multiple sources, she dictated in one of her autobiographies that she was born free on August 19, 1814, in Philadelphia to a father, Louis Alexander Williams, who was a Native Kanaka (Hawaiian) from the Pacific Islands. Her mother, Mary, was a “full blooded Negress from Louisiana.”¹⁵ Other sources tie her to being born enslaved on a plantation in Georgia, Louisiana, or Virginia, as the daughter of a slaveholder and a “Haitian voodoo queen.”¹⁶ Despite such conflicting histories, several sources agree that she spent time in Nantucket, Massachusetts, as an indentured servant for a Quaker woman and there learned to read and write. In the early nineteenth century, Nantucket’s whaling industry made it one of the wealthiest towns in the country. It was on this small island that Pleasant worked in a shop, where she employed her photographic memory to make sales and learned to engage with her largely all-white customer base. She also belonged to the island’s sizeable free Black population and was a member of the African Baptist Church where most members were entrepreneurs. At this coastal town invested in commerce and trading, Pleasant was likely able to learn about business patterns in an industry based on transient cycles of bust and boom.¹⁷

As an adult, Pleasant married twice, once to James W. Smith in 1844, who was an affluent man of mixed race, white, or possibly Cuban ancestry. He owned a tobacco plantation in Charles Town, Virginia, and was an ardent supporter of enslaved fugitives on the Underground Railroad. Pleasant recalled how, as an abolitionist, he would purchase enslaved people to grant them freedom.¹⁸ After his death in 1846, Pleasant inherited a small fortune

15. Mary Ellen Pleasant, “Memoirs and Autobiography,” *The Pandex of the Press*, January 1902, p. 6.

16. Yates-Richard, “In the Wake’ of the ‘Quake,” 37–57.

17. Veta Smith Tucker, “Secret Agents: Black Women Insurgents on Abolitionist Battle-grounds,” in *Gendered Resistance: Women, Slavery, and the Legacy of Margaret Garner*, eds. Mary E. Frederickson and Delores M. Walters (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 88.

18. Lynn M. Hudson, “Mining a Mythic Past: The History of Mary Ellen Pleasant,” in *African American Women Confront the West: 1600–2000*, eds. Quintard Taylor and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003).

estimated to be between \$30,000 and \$50,000, which translates to roughly \$1,730,000 today.¹⁹ In 1848, Pleasant married a Black man named John James Pleasant, who was a land manager on the tobacco farm that Smith owned. Mary Ellen and John relocated to Nantucket, but after a fire ravaged the island, they decided to pursue new opportunities in California.

One year before Pleasant embarked on a trip to California, a young Black man named William H. Newby arrived in San Francisco in 1851. Newby marveled at the city's distinct population. Born in 1828 in Virginia to an enslaved father and free mother, Newby grew up in Philadelphia and became a hairdresser. Dissatisfied with this type of work, he became a daguerreotypist in 1845 before deciding to remake his life in the West.²⁰ Newby shared his impressions of San Francisco in a letter to Frederick Douglass, writing, "San Francisco presents many features that no city in the Union presents. Its population is composed of almost every nation under heaven. Here is to be seen at a single glance every nation in miniature."²¹ Indeed, compared to Philadelphia and other sections of the country, Newby and other Black arrivants marveled at the city's ethnic diversity. But they were also likely fascinated by the city's diverse Black population.²² In San Francisco, free Black men and women who originated from Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, New York, and Ohio encountered enslaved men and women from Georgia, Alabama, Texas, and Tennessee, as well as foreign-born communities of Afro-Latinx from Mexico, Chile, Jamaica, and Peru. Such a diverse population of the African diaspora contributed to blurred racial lines and an environment that aided those who had the ability to remain racially ambiguous.

When Pleasant arrived by steamship in San Francisco in 1852, she was able to take advantage of her social location as a white-passing, racially ambiguous presenting Black woman. She secured employment in San Francisco as the cook of two wealthy merchants who paid her a fee of \$500 a month for her services. During her employment she built her business empire by using the secrets of powerful white men as a form of currency. This insider knowledge

19. Calculation completed by MeasuringWorth.com.

20. C. Peter Ripley, ed., *The Black Abolitionist Papers: Vol. IV: The United States, 1847–1858* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 240–41.

21. Ibid.

22. Prior to 1880, Black emigration to western states like California resembled more of a trickle than a mass exodus. Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528–1990* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 86.

allowed her to invest in multiple businesses, mainly laundry services for miners as well as exclusive and private boardinghouses, some of which were rumored to also be discreet brothels. Pleasant leveraged her keen business sense and savvy interpersonal skills to grow her real estate and investment portfolio. She became a central force in the Black community, known as the “black city hall,” because people knew they could rely on her resources and connections to find aid.²³ However, her business did not operate within a silo. She was surrounded by and belonged to a larger Black community that was also trying to negotiate the boundaries of a restrictive social landscape. But unlike Pleasant, many in the Black community could not pass as white and did not arrive in the state with a sizeable amount of money to invest.

The greater Black community in San Francisco focused on building communal wealth and on obtaining their civil rights. These issues were at the forefront of the First Colored Convention of California meeting. At this 1855 gathering, convention leader Jonas H. Townsend encouraged his fellow delegates to embrace the state’s “golden opportunities.”²⁴ His appeal could not have come at a more pivotal time. Five years earlier, California had entered the Union as a free state, but freedom was still a tenuous subject for the less than one thousand Black residents who called California home.²⁵ The convention reflected these larger concerns, focusing specifically on how Black residents could challenge the state’s testimony exclusion law, which barred them from testifying in court, and thus effectively precluded their ability to use the justice system to militate for their rights.²⁶

23. Jackson, “Mary Ellen Pleasant, Nineteenth-Century Massachusetts and California (US).”

24. Proceedings of the First State Convention of the Colored Citizens of the State of California, Democratic State Journal Print, 1855.

25. Freedom was a complicated enterprise in the American West. Although California entered the Union as a free state in 1850, there were several cases that suggest this declaration was more in name than in principle, especially for enslaved persons brought into the state by their enslavers. Several enslaved persons who had been relocated to California, including Bidy Mason, ultimately challenged the court for their freedom, and won. See Rudolph M. Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*.

26. The Convention advocated for the testimony exclusion law to be overturned in 1856. Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 91. For more on Black religious institutions and networks in San Francisco, see Philip M. Montesano, “San Francisco Black Churches in the Early 1860s: Political Pressure Group,” *California Historical Society Quarterly* 52, no 2 (Summer 1973): 145–52; Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 160–61, 219, 232.

The delegates who gathered in Sacramento at St. Andrews African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church were, like Townsend, free Black men who had relocated to California to build a new society. Townsend himself had been a prominent abolitionist in Albany, New York, before traveling west to join a Black-owned mining company.²⁷ Many of the other delegates were also east coast abolitionists who had sought a better life in California. Although the state's Black population was small, Townsend and the other convention leaders were committed to advancing Black westerners' civil rights and making the promise of the West a reality.

Speaking to the group's larger interest in economic development, Townsend proclaimed, "the agricultural and mining interests of California are rich and fruitful themes; Heaven has indeed been bounteous in heaping blessings upon our State. The application of intelligent skill and industry, in developing its riches, will make it a second Eden."²⁸ Townsend's remarks about developing a "second Eden" highlighted the convention's emphasis on entrepreneurial initiatives, but they equally reveal how Black western arrivants in the late nineteenth century employed religious rhetoric to frame the American West and their role within the state's development. Townsend signaled that Black westerners possessed the potential to develop a "second Eden," successfully replicating the idyllic "Garden of Eden" found in the Book of Genesis and the Book of Ezekiel. Such a narrative would have been familiar to the other delegates in attendance and imbued the group with a sense of urgency to develop their own paradise on earth.

AN ORGAN OF TRUTH IN THE WEST

In order to create an effective network of communication among the state's Black residents, delegates from the first Colored Convention mobilized to develop a statewide newspaper. A meeting was called at St. Cyprian's African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) in San Francisco, where a consortium of clergy, businessmen, and antislavery activists began to develop the first Black newspaper in

27. Ripley, *The Black Abolitionist Papers: Vol. IV*, 241.

28. The Colored Convention was the first of four held at St. Andrew's AME Church in Sacramento. The last session was also held in Sacramento at Bethel AME. Each convention (1856 and 1857) focused on a different civil rights initiative. For more on the larger convention movement see, Philip S. Foner, "The Convention Movement," *History of Black Americans: From the Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom to the Eve of the Compromise of 1850* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1983); *Proceedings of the First State Convention of the Colored Citizens of the State of California* (Sacramento: Democratic State Journal Print, 1855).

the state, *Mirror of the Times*, to act as the “state organ of the colored people of California.”²⁹ Although the paper was short-lived due to financial issues, it prompted a lengthy conversation among the state’s Black community to invest in mobilizing efforts that advanced Black residents’ civil rights.³⁰

During the nineteenth century, print communication was an important medium for regional and national discourse on issues facing the African American community. Newspapers provided abolitionists and laypeople an opportunity to develop a shared language to engage each other as well as protest the evils of slavery and racial discrimination. On the pages of national papers like the *Freedom’s Journal*, Black writers, editors, columnists, and contributors developed a shared discourse to contest but also re-imagine a fair and socially just society. Like a church organ, Black newspapers sounded a clarion call from around the United States to showcase how issues facing regional Black communities connected to the larger Black freedom struggle.

In California, Black civic leaders recognized the important role that newspapers played in constructing an imagined community and shared consciousness. Shortly after the *Mirror* disbanded, two new papers formed in San Francisco that took its place in uniting the community around issues confronting Black westerners. In 1862 a monthly magazine, the *Lunar Visitor*, was founded by John Jamison Moore, who was the pastor of the First African Methodist Episcopal Church in San Francisco. Joining this publication was the *Pacific Appeal*, founded by Peter Anderson and Phillip A. Bell, who were former committee members on the *Mirror*. The *Appeal* sought to disseminate news that privileged “the interests of the Colored People of California and to their moral, intellectual and political advancement.”³¹ In addition to the paper’s focus on regional and local articles, newspapers like the *Pacific Appeal* also promoted national news stories from other Black papers. Known as an “exchange,” the *Pacific Appeal* would circulate their issues to presses across the country which would allow for news stories from California to reach readers around the country. The *Appeal* and other Black western presses also featured

29. See Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 92; Eunsun Celeste Han, “All Roads Lead to San Francisco: Black Californian Networks of Community and the Struggle for Equality, 1849–1877” (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 2015).

30. Several Black institutions were formed to help newcomers adjust to the strain of life in a new city. The community developed a Mutual Aid Society that connected migrants to housing, employment and community resources. When the Mutual Aid Society collapsed in 1849, it was succeeded four years later by the San Francisco Athenaeum, which assumed a similar mission. See Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*.

31. *The Pacific Appeal*, April 5, 1862.

stories from regional presses, which collapsed geographical distance and contributed to the formation of a vibrant communications network.³²

After a few years of working together, the partnership between Anderson and Bell eroded over personal and political differences, leading Bell to develop a new journal titled the *Elevator*. Two days before General Robert E. Lee surrendered his Confederate troops to the Union's Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox in Virginia on April 9, 1865, Bell published the first edition of the *Elevator*. On the pages of this new journal, Bell and Black Californians attempted to work out what the end of the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation meant for Black people in the Far West. While the end of the war called for celebration, it also induced reflection for Black Californians who were still battling the state's discriminatory laws that denied the Black vote and maintained segregated public transportation and schools.

THE CASE FOR FULL CITIZENSHIP

During the fourth and final State Convention of the Colored Citizens of California held in October of 1865, Black civic leaders focused on bolstering the Black community's image as enterprising residents who were fit to receive full citizenship rights. In a bid to make the convention's speeches and deliberations public, the secretary of the session, Bell, volunteered to publish the session in a special edition of the *Elevator* that would be disseminated around the state and beyond. The report declared that as "God's gracious hand destroyed the angel of devastating war," Black Americans adopted a "new love for the American Union," that would prompt them to "lay down their lives in defence [sic] of the great principles of our Republic—for the glory of our country, the freedom of our race, the rights of our citizenship, and the preservation of the Union." The report continued, declaring that the "American Government must grant us full rights of citizenship" which would ensure that Black westerners were loyal "against enemies of the country—domestic or foreign." Moreover, the convention recommended that "brethren in this state," should maintain "true Christian and moral institutions, under the direction of faithful and pious leaders."³³

32. For more on print communication in Black western communities in the nineteenth century, see Eric Gardner, *Jennie Carter: A Black Journalist of the Early West* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007).

33. "Proceedings of the Fourth State Convention of the Colored Citizens of the State of California," *The Elevator*, 1865, p. 9.

If there was any doubt that Black residents had not taken advantage of their social location, then it was dispelled by the published report of Black property ownership in the state. Convention leaders listed the material accomplishments of nine counties in northern California, demonstrating that Townsend's call ten years earlier for Black residents to develop a "second Eden" had come to fruition.³⁴ Rev. T.M.D. Ward's report, as the chair of the Committee on Industrial Pursuits, urged Black residents to continue to become "owners and tillers of the soil," to become "producers as well as consumers." The committee declared, "we urge upon the people of this coast to seek unsettled lands and preempt them, as is the right of every American citizen." The endorsement to "preempt land" aligned with the committee's larger interest in acquiring social power. Delegates declared that "wealth is an element of social power necessary to raise any people to an independent and influential position, and that we, as a people, should particularly direct our aims, our efforts, and pursuits, to its honorable acquisition."³⁵

This messaging was well received. Black westerners recognized that the accumulation of social power derived from wealth and land holdings, which were clear signs of a self-sufficient and industrial citizen. The Committee on Statistical Information submitted proof of their development, stating that the figures shared were "evidence of the progress in wealth, morals, education and industrial pursuits of the colored people of California." The report declared that the cumulative total of Black residents' property and land holdings confirms "such progress to establish our claim to the rights and privileges of citizenship."³⁶ The reported real estate and property value owned by Black residents in nine northern California counties was estimated at roughly \$1.3 million (equivalent to \$21 million today).³⁷ By acquiring land, Black residents transformed the land in order to belong. The human cost of land acquisition meant the expulsion of Indigenous inhabitants, leading to what historian Tiya Miles has identified as Black people "starting anew on grounds that were not rightfully their own, making theirs an ambivalent form of settlement."³⁸ Black Californians were aware of the tension in settling Native land as they

34. The nine counties included San Francisco, Sacramento, Yolo, Colusa, Tehama, Santa Clara, Sonoma, Mariposa and Merced.

35. "Proceedings of the Fourth State Convention of the Colored Citizens of the State of California," *The Elevator*, 1865, p.9.

36. *Ibid.*

37. Calculation completed by MeasuringWorth.com.

38. Miles, "Beyond a Boundary."

declared during the Convention that their industrial pursuits would “effectually settle the too frequent incursions of hostile Indians.”³⁹ Miles posits that “black survival utterly depended on either forming alliances of kinship with Native people or putting down stakes on taken lands controlled by the U.S. nation-state or its white citizens.”⁴⁰ To frame the Indigenous population as “hostile” suggests that Black Californians did not form alliances and instead, engaged in a form of settler colonial intrusion. This conundrum of Black westerners, who were once marked as property themselves, claiming land to dispossess Native populations, reveals the complicated nature of Black/Native relations and the harmful negotiations people made to make space for themselves.

In exchange for the American government extending Black Americans’ full citizenship rights, Black westerners were prepared to declare loyalty to the Republic by embodying Christian principles and extending forgiveness to a broken Union. In another conference address published in the *Elevator*, delegates promised the Black community in California would “maintain a Christian spirit of forgiveness, and a willingness to sustain our reputation as peace-loving, law-abiding citizens, and a desire to perpetuate the name and glory of our common country.”⁴¹ By employing moralistic discourse, the delegates sought to appeal to white Californians’ assumed sense of decency, moral obligation, and Christian virtue. Such a descriptive plea was also informative for Black people who lived outside of the state. By framing the government as a “wise, liberal and beneficent entity” the delegates language attempted to temper criticism of a morally corrupt institution. As Black civic leaders linked Christian piety to Black westerners’ character, they also invested in furthering xenophobic and racist logic about Chinese Americans and Chinese immigrants to further distinguish the Black community’s “native” citizenship status.

The vitriolic campaign waged against the Chinese community in the pages of the *Elevator* was motivated, in part, by Bell’s attempt to disprove white Californians’ characterization of the Black community as being unfit to vote. Voting rights were a hot-button issue that defined the California gubernatorial election of 1867. The Democratic party’s nominee, Henry Huntley

39. “Proceedings of the Fourth State Convention of the Colored Citizens of the State of California,” *The Elevator*, 1865.

40. Miles, “Beyond a Boundary.”

41. “Proceedings of the Fourth State Convention of the Colored Citizens of the State of California,” *The Elevator*, 1865, p. 26.

Haight, was described by one historian as a staunch “anti-black, non-white suffragist.”⁴² In one of his most famous speeches delivered on July 9, 1867 at the Democratic Convention meeting, he revealed his disdain for Reconstruction politics, exclaiming, “the South seceded, was conquered, and now lies helpless and bleeding at every pore.” He warned that extending the right to vote to Black Americans would put white Californians “under the heel of negroes,” and serve to “pollute and desecrate” the rights of a superior racial group.⁴³ Haight extended this logic to Chinese Americans’ right to vote, proclaiming that their “pagan” values would erode democracy.

The Democratic party enshrined their defense of the state’s constitutional rights and anti-suffragist principles in a cartoon print that was disseminated to mock the Republican gubernatorial nominee, George C. Gorham, who approved of voting rights for Black men and other ethnic minority groups. The cartoon conveys the belief that voting rights were the inherent right of white men and if other racial and ethnic groups were allowed to vote, they would not only erode the voting process but the sanctity of American citizenship. When Haight won the Governor’s office, he devoted much of his inaugural address to the dangers of a democracy that would cede political control “to a mass of negroes just emancipated and almost as ignorant of political duties as the beasts of the field.” He argued there was a parallel between Black voting rights and Chinese immigration, which would only serve to confirm “those races that are confessedly inferior in all high and noble qualities to the American and European.” In Governor Haight’s view, Reconstruction politics that sought to extend citizenship rights to non-white Americans was a dangerous “violation of the fundamental principles of the Constitution and of liberty; of every dictate of sound policy; of every sentiment of humanity and of Christianity.”⁴⁴

In response to Haight’s inaugural speech, Black writers employed their Christian identity to position themselves closer to white conceptions of

42. See Eugene H. Berwanger, *The West and Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 109. For a more nuanced analysis of Chinese/African American interactions, see D. Michael Bottoms, *An Aristocracy of Color: Race and Reconstruction in California and the West, 1850–1890* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013).

43. Henry H. Haight, Speech of H.H. Haight, Esq. Democratic Candidate for Governor, Delivered at the Great Democratic Mass Meeting at Union Hall, July 9, 1867, p. 2, Henry H. Haight Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

44. Henry H. Haight, *Inaugural Address of H.H. Haight, Governor of the State of California, at the Seventeenth Session of the Legislature, and Special Message of Governor H.H. Haight, of California Declining to Transmit Senate Resolutions Condemnatory of President Johnson* (New York: Douglas Taylor’s Democratic Book and Job Printing Office, 1868), p. 6, 13, 10.

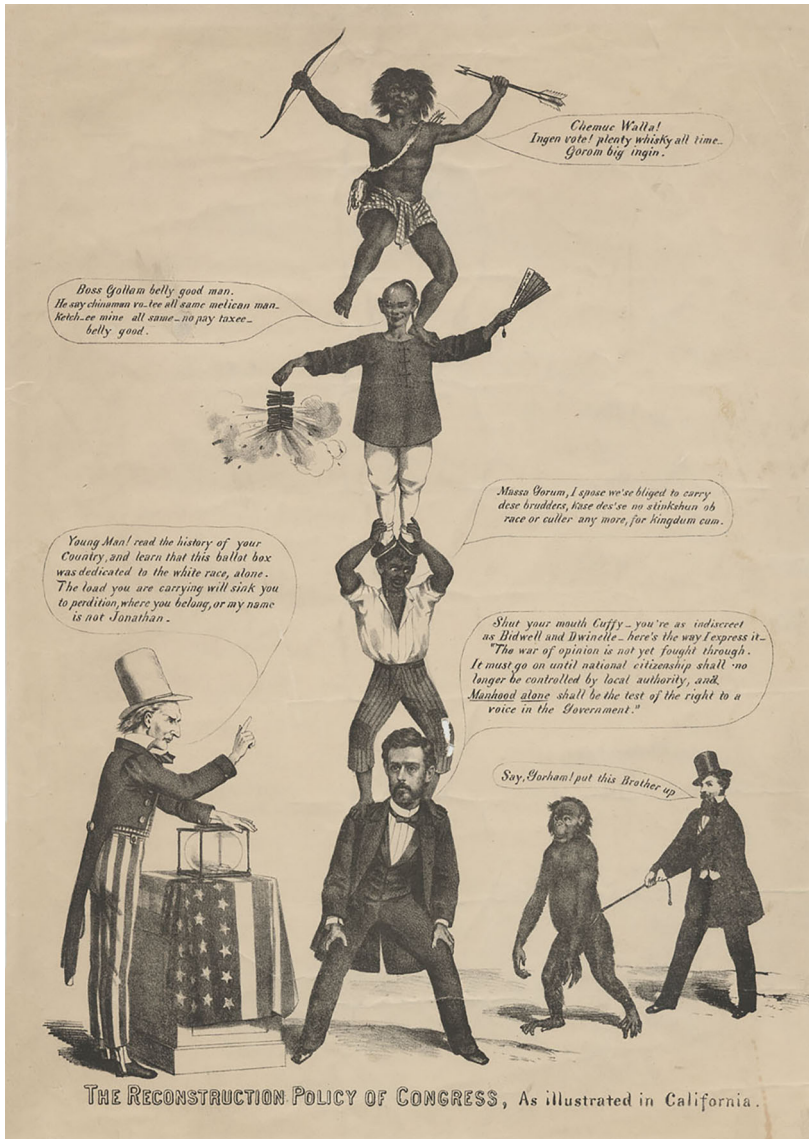


FIGURE 2. The Reconstruction policy of Congress, as illustrated in California. Source: Photograph retrieved from the Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/2008661701/.

citizenship, which bolstered their argument for why they were deserving of the right to vote. A Black columnist proclaimed, “the negro is a native American, loyal to the Government, and a lover of his country and her

institutions.” Moreover, he argued Black people are “Christian by education, and a believer of the truths of Christianity from principle. The Chinese are foreigners, unacquainted with our system of government, adhering to their own habits and customs, and of heathen or idolatrous faith.” By employing nativist ideology and white supremacist logic, the columnist attempted to reveal the commonalities that white Californians shared with Black westerners, as opposed to the “foreign” beliefs, customs, and practices of Chinese immigrants, who were not only unfamiliar, but potentially dangerous. As “sons of the soil,” and “adherents to the civilizing aspects of the Christian religion,” Black westerners attempted to reframe their citizenship status in terms that were accessible but also valid to white Californians.⁴⁵

The anti-Chinese position taken up by Black men in California was not a universally shared view among the Black community. Jennie Carter, a Black woman who was active within the community and in the pages of the *Elevator* under the pen name “Semper Fidelis,” advocated that all people were equal under the law.⁴⁶ She contended that California was going to become a prominent actor in the Pacific and endorsing the “anti-Chinese” rhetoric of either the Republican or Democratic party was antithetical to securing freedom for all people. She believed it was the “duty” of Black Americans to “remember those in bonds as being bound with them.”⁴⁷ In stark contrast to how many Black men used Christianity to humanize their identity and request for civil rights, Black women like Carter deployed biblical verses to expand the struggle for civil rights to include all who found themselves oppressed or suffering “adversity.”⁴⁸

Although Black men dominated conversations that were in print, Black women embodied the fight for civil rights by taking their grievances to court. In April of 1863, Charlotte Brown boarded a streetcar but was forced to get off. Segregation on public transportation in California was legal, but with the newly overturned testimony exclusion law, Brown and her family sued the

45. “Democratic Logic,” *The Elevator*, August 30, 1867.” For more on the relationship between Chinese and African Americans in San Francisco during the Reconstruction Era, see Douglas Henry Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites: A Social and Cultural History of Black San Francisco* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); Jean Pfaelzer, *Driven Out: The Forgotten War against Chinese Americans* (New York: Random House, 2007).

46. Gardner, *Jennie Carter*.

47. *The Elevator*, August 30, 1873.

48. Jennie Carter’s use of “remember those in bonds as being bound with them” comes from Hebrews, 13:3. “Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body.”

Omnibus company. Brown won in court but that did not change the segregation policy until it was challenged by Pleasant. In 1866, Pleasant was removed from a San Francisco streetcar. This treatment inspired her to bring a suit that she won two years later in California Supreme Court.⁴⁹ Although her actions ended segregation in public transportation, the case brought more visibility and speculation from white Californians about Pleasant's religious identity.

After amassing a significant sum of money from several entrepreneurial businesses and real estate dealings, Pleasant became the focus of a coordinated smear campaign by white Californians who sought to discredit her standing within the community. One of the ways she was targeted was through white Californians' insistence that she was a dangerous "voodoo queen." Pleasant was rumored to have spent time with Marie Laveau, who was a Louisiana Creole practitioner of Haitian Vodou, before she traveled to California.⁵⁰ Newspaper articles capitalized on this perceived religious difference, describing how "her power was supreme" and that she had a "hold" on people and would leave her house only "under the shadow of black night."⁵¹ If Black men in California invoked Christianity to prove their fitness for citizenship and distinguish themselves from Chinese immigrants, then the construction of Pleasant as a "trickster" and "voodoo queen," served as a cautionary tale for Black people, especially Black women, who became too successful. The fact that an African diasporic religion was waged to "demonize" Pleasant, but Black men invested in a Christian identity to humanize their citizenship efforts, reveals how the mediated categories of race, religion and gender contributed to powerful social taxonomies that held deep political and social influence in Black westerners' lives.

Scholar Meina Yates-Richard suggests that "Pleasant's location and dislocation within San Francisco's landscape proves a site of cartographical struggle—one in which she was discursively mapped through the tropes of "mammydom" and voodoo." Indeed, white Californians' reliance on these stereotypes that disparaged and discredited Pleasant reveals that she was located within "imagined geographies of the plantation."⁵² The use of antebellum stereotypes portrayed Pleasant as inferior while reinscribing the idea

49. De Graaf, Mulroy, and Taylor, eds., *Seeking El Dorado*, 5.

50. Hudson, *The Making of "Mammy Pleasant."*

51. "Mammy Pleasant: Angel or Arch Fiend in the 'House of Mystery?,'" *The San Francisco Call*, May 8, 1899.

52. Yates-Richard, "In the Wake" of the 'Quake."



FIGURE 3. A portrait of Mary Ellen Pleasant at eighty-seven years old. The first and only photograph taken since she was thirteen years old. *Source:* Mary Ellen Pleasant, “Memoirs and Autobiography,” *The Pandex of the Press*, January 1902.

that she was a domestic worker who existed for the benefit of white Californians. Together, this stereotype, paired with the image of a “voodoo queen,” underscored the idea that Black people possessed an innate religiosity that was proof of diminished intellectual and religious capacities.⁵³ Western newspapers featured numerous articles on Haitian Vodoun practices that

53. For more on conceptions of Black religion in the nineteenth century, see Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

disparaged and criticized the religion as a threat to the moral and social order of a Christian nation. One article attempted to describe ritual practice, stating “the ignorant negroes, who firmly believe in voodooism, frantically rushed to some ancient African dispenser of herbs, and extended their stamps for an “obeah,” or charm which, like vaccination, is considered a preventive, but not a positive safeguard against the conjurer.”⁵⁴ Read through the dominant racial and religious discourse of the late nineteenth century, white Americans were beholden to evolutionary logic that deemed unconverted Black people unfit for citizenship. Another article warned, “in every city of the Union traces of Voodooism crop out, and in most of them the heathenish practices are resorted to.”⁵⁵ The suggestion that practitioners could be found in every city cast suspicion upon Black people, which likely helps explain why the delegates from the California Colored Convention emphatically declared a Christian identity that was loyal to the “Christian ideals” of the country.

Most white Californians could not comprehend how Pleasant amassed such a significant fortune. The de-humanizing logic of white supremacy was committed to producing distinctive notions of difference that determined who belonged within and outside of the nation. While historians remain puzzled by the inability to pin down details of Pleasant’s life, Pleasant’s ambiguity likely served as a form of personal and communal protection. She never confirmed nor denied the various rumors that swirled around her racial and religious identity. Within the liminal space of truth and fact, Pleasant demonstrated the power of misrecognition. This power was recognized by Zora Neale Hurston in her field-defining anthropological work that recognized the power of folktales for their ability to function on both the personal and social level.⁵⁶ In this vein, the opacity that defined Pleasant’s life reveals how and why she has been misremembered.⁵⁷

54. *The San Francisco Call*, November 24, 1889.

55. “The Worshipers of the Gods of Ethiopia Break Loose Again,” *The San Francisco Call*, July 10, 1874.

56. Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (New York: Amistad, 2008).

57. While Pleasant’s identity was visible and vilified in the mainstream white press, her name does not appear in Black-run newspaper articles. Because she was known as the “Black City Hall,” it is likely that her absence reflected the community’s desire to protect her identity. Jackson, “Mary Ellen Pleasant, Nineteenth-Century Massachusetts and California (US).”

While Pleasant remained an enigmatic figure who never confirmed her relationship to Vodou practices, the case of the Black Convention leaders reveals how Black men adopted a different use of religion wherein their proximity to the nation's purported "Christian ideals" became an extension of their fitness for citizenship rights. At the end of the 1855 convention meeting, one of the attendees named Mr. Shorter from Santa Clara County shared that in addition to agreeing with the convention proceedings, he was "willing to offer his life as a sacrifice, if necessary, to obtain equal rights for his people. He had offered his *household Gods on the altar of freedom* [emphasis mine]—he had sons and nephews in the army. He was willing to forgive our enemies—but we want our rights."⁵⁸ Mr. Shorter never defined what constitutes a "household God," but the context in which he used the phrase suggests this "household God" represents something of great value and importance.⁵⁹ To place something of great value, like your life, on an "altar of freedom" is a sacrifice one would hope yields protection. For Mr. Shorter, sacrificing one's life or those of relatives who served in the military was worth it if citizenship rights could be attained.

This article has shown that in the nineteenth-century American West, Black Americans developed diverse strategies of resistance to articulate their case for freedom in a region invested with mythic conceptions of opportunity and prosperity. From Pleasant's use of misrecognition, to Black Californians' investment in religious rhetoric to promote the region, to Black men who embraced the tenets of Christianity to agitate for their civil rights, these diverse strategies show the range of responses employed to dismantle the restrictive and dehumanizing force of white supremacy and settler colonialism. Religion was central to how Black arrivants articulated their political agendas which served to reframe their social position from that of outsiders to the rightful heirs of American citizenship rights. In doing so, religious rhetoric destabilized racial categories that reified the construction of a "mythic West," wherein opportunity was believed to be accessible to everyone. While this belief proved to be false, the subversive strategies of resistance employed by Black westerners provide new analytical frameworks to consider how

58. *Proceedings of the First State Convention of the Colored Citizens of the State of California* (Sacramento: Democratic State Journal Print, 1855).

59. The term "household Gods" is also taken from Hosea 3:4, "For the children of Israel shall dwell many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or household gods."

religion became a central force in the way Black people re-imagined their lives and articulated their humanity in what they had hoped would be a redemptive West.

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