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Myths, Museums, Mothers, and the Power of Letitia Carson

by
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An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

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Portland State University

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On May 12th, 1855, a tense Oregon courtroom witnessed the most peculiarly revolutionary case of the nineteenth century in Oregon Territory: Letitia Carson, a freedwoman from Kentucky, had triumphed over Greenberry Smith, the wealthy white administrator of the late David Carson's estate.¹ But this unprecedented legal victory marked only the beginning of Letitia's strikingly revolutionary life as one of the first Black pioneer women in Oregon.²

Letitia's legal successes initiated a substantial departure from the racial status quo, illustrating her resilience in the face of significant loss and long-lasting racial discrimination. However, her monumental determination was met with silence from local newspapers, aside from a singular *Oregon Statesman* article from 1854 announcing Letitia's first case against Greenberry Smith. It summarized the events:

This was an action by a black woman to recover the value of her service rendered in this territory to the defendant, from the year 1845 to 1852. Luteshia was a slave in Missouri, but came to Oregon and served her master faithfully until his death. In the absence of circumstances that would imply an agreement to pay, Jury disagreed – 9 for and 3 against – jury discharged. Cause continued.³

Misspelling her name and misrepresenting her story, this article fails to inform the public truthfully. Silence followed, and nothing else was reported on Letitia—not of her dual successes against Smith nor her 1862 Homestead Act accomplishments. Letitia's life and legacy faded into

¹ First, this endeavor would not have been possible without the advice and motivation of Dr. Katrine Barber, my thesis advisor. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to her for offering me her time, patience, knowledge, and inspiration. As she has said, completing this thesis is a gift to myself, the gift of knowledge. I could not have produced such a lengthy, thoughtful thesis without her questions, contributions, and weekly meetings that not only kept me on track, but kept this paper as an alive and active project, always expanding and evolving. Thank you.

² It is important to note that I will be referring to Letitia by her first name. As Stephanie Vallance, who wrote her dissertation on Letitia's judicial journey stated, referring to Letitia by her first name is done in an effort to distance her from David and the Carson surname as we cannot know the true nature of their relationship. Her first name is her own, and "her right to self-determination was robbed from her, likely many times during her life. I believe she is owed that respect now." Stephanie Marie Vallance, "Letitia Carson in Court: African American Women, Property, and Wages in the Pacific NorthWest" (Masters diss. Portland State University, Portland, 2021), 16, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global Publishing.

³ "October 17, 1854, Weekly Oregon Statesman p 3 Letitia Carson case," Letitia Carson Digital History Collection, accessed January 18, 2023, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/189>.

historical obscurity, forgotten by historians, authors, and other cultivators of American West narratives.

Curiously, Letitia was not alone. Throughout the nineteenth century, Black women filed lawsuits to claim liberty and property nationwide. As noted by historian Lawrence B. de Graaf, the “earliest significant protests of black women took the form of individual lawsuits during the 1860s against the denial of civil rights.”⁴ Letitia’s fight for equality exemplifies this wave of early activism and provides insight into a forgotten history of Black women in the American West. Graaf acknowledges the activism in Letitia’s generation of freedwomen, many of whom have been forgotten in the annals of a whitewashed Western history. Consequently, a nationally warped historical memory and a tradition of whiteness paint the American West as a place of European conquerors of Indigenous landscapes.

This thesis is the story of Letitia’s erasure and resurgence. Through historiographical analysis, exploration of historical consciousness, and the educational implications of systematically suppressed history, this work charts how a racist, exclusionary history in academic institutions led to the obscuration of Black women pioneers and how Letitia’s narrative came to light nearly a century after her passing. Letitia’s story is a case study through which we can investigate the intersection between Black and Indigenous identity and more significant systemic issues concerning the telling of Black history in the American West to arrive at a more intersectional, decolonized vision of our nation’s history. The erasure of Black women’s history is caused by the systemic oppression of Black stories, resulting in a defunct and dissonant historical memory that fails the legacies of Black women, like Letitia, in the American West.

⁴ Lawrence B. de Graaf, “Race, Sex, and Region: Black Women in the American West, 1850-1920,” *Pacific Historical Review* 49, no. 2 (1980): 292, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3638903>.

There is a repeated question when Black history is revitalized in the narrative of the American frontier—how did this get overlooked? Or, moreover—why am I just now hearing of this? When telling people about Letitia Carson, this is what I often hear. This sentiment is indicative of an alarming trend. It is not that Black women were not present in the American West; they were there pushing the boundaries of the frontier alongside other travelers on the Overland Trails. Yet, predominantly white men, more recently white women and Black male pioneers, have garnered notoriety for the ongoing settler colonial project of the American West. Black women have remained largely absent, only appearing regularly in the scholarship of the 1990s and forward. Even then, only a subset of Western historians would write narratives centering on Black women, and even fewer would appear in museums or academic curricula.

This thesis investigates the presence of conditioned historical memory in academic and public history as it has altered historical knowledge to sustain a white masculine perspective of the American West. Historian Emma Pérez describes historical consciousness: “If history is the way in which people understand themselves through a collective, common past where events are chronicled and heroes are constructed, then historical consciousness is the system of thought that leads to a normative understanding of past events.”⁵ Conditioned memory was formed through centuries of white supremacy in academic, public, and museum narratives. It stripped the public of their knowledge of Black history. This cycle culminated in white-centric historical memory marked by vast knowledge gaps and critical misconceptions of the essential legacies of early Black pioneer women. Following this trend, Letitia’s story slipped into the recesses of historical consciousness and only briefly made headway in local publications and fleeting mentions in twentieth-century scholarly works.

⁵ Emma Pérez quoted in Margaret D. Jacobs, “Getting Out of a Rut: Decolonizing Western Women’s History,” *Pacific Historical Review* 79, no. 4 (2010): 587.

The tradition of whiteness in pioneer and Oregon history obscures lesser-known experiences of Black pioneers. It overwhelms the larger historical narrative presented to the public via institutions like museums and historical societies. When working to dismantle whiteness and decolonize our concept of the American West, we must first ask ourselves what whiteness is and how it has been upheld as an evolving exclusionary concept throughout history and historical memory. As historian Carmen P. Thompson states, the concept of whiteness is “an expectation (sometimes an unconscious expectation) that the government will maintain laws and policies generally benefiting White people.”⁶ This expectation, she explains, fosters white supremacy: “the hierarchical ordering of human beings based on phenotypic, or physical, attributes that we call ‘race.’”⁷ Historians, museums, and other ties between academic history and public perception are all part of this vast and complex scholarship supporting whiteness as a structural phenomenon. White supremacy cannot be flattened into a timeless concept nor frozen as a moment in time, non-relative to its past and future. It is a system of oppression that has evolved to fit each historical era, suppressing Black women’s voices through centuries of American history. Letitia’s story presents an opportunity to redirect this historical tendency and brings to light the existence of Black pioneer women and their resilience in Oregon history.

Margaret Jacob best described the shortcomings of Western history by likening it to a perpetual wagon trail rut that we are continually trying to dig out of.⁸ Multiculturalism, she argues, is not the best framework through which we can escape this rut; we must go further and decolonize our thinking to better understand women and gender in the American West.⁹

⁶ Carmen P. Thompson, “Expectation and Exclusion: An Introduction to Whiteness, White Supremacy, and Resistance in Oregon History,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 120, no. 4 (2019): 358, doi:10.1353/ohq.2019.0014.

⁷ Thompson, “Expectation and Exclusion,” 358.

⁸ Margaret D. Jacobs, “Getting Out of a Rut: Decolonizing Western Women’s History,” *Pacific Historical Review* 79, no. 4 (2010) 585, 86.

⁹ Jacobs, “Getting out of a Rut,” 585.

Additionally, I argue decolonization is also a necessary counter-framework in expanding the understanding of race in the American West. Expanding on Jacob, I look specifically at Letitia's story as a case study through which we can visualize this rut and how it harms individuals and trends in American West history. Further, we can continue to dig our way out of this rut by implementing a more diverse, decolonized vision of the West in historical societies and museums directly engaging with public history so that historical memory better matches reality to resolve the dissonance between historical truth, academic history, and public knowledge.

In this goal of decolonization, it is imperative to recognize how geographical and genealogical ties to Indigeneity tether Letitia's story to Indigenous history and further illuminate the complexity of her dual identity as both colonizer and victim. There are many paradoxes present in Letitia's story. One such contradiction is illuminated in Letitia's land ownership. Just as she was an oppressed, enslaved Black woman navigating racism and misogyny imposed by white male colonizers, she was also complicit in this colonization and part of the settler colonial machine that stole land from Indigenous people. Her Benton County homestead was constructed upon the land of the Kalapuyan people.¹⁰ Her later Douglas County homestead was built on the Umpqua Basin, home to the Lower Umpqua, the Upper Umpqua, the Cow Creek Band of the Umpqua, and the Southern Mollala Indians.¹¹ In both instances, her success and landownership are tethered to the colonial violence inflicted upon Indigenous people.

While Letitia was not pioneering these actions, her opportunities were seized as a complicit participant in the landscape of colonization. Maintaining this understanding of how oppressed colonizers contributed to the violence enacted against Indigenous communities is

¹⁰ "Homepage," *Letitia Carson Digital History Collection*, accessed May 16, 2023, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/>.

¹¹ "History of the Umpqua Basin," Oregon Explorer, accessed May 9, 2023, <https://oregonexplorer.info/content/history-the-umpqua-basin?topic=167&ptopic=140>.

imperative. This knowledge guides our decolonization of the American West, inviting us to problematize our current understanding of settler colonialism, the American frontier, and the interwoven relationship of Black and Indigenous identities. Further graying our understanding of the layers of colonial power brings us closer to an understanding of the complexities present in this ongoing settler colonial project.

Another paradox can be found in her unlikely and unprecedented success: in a territory and then state characterized by anti-Blackness, she succeeds. Her countless victories show there are moments in which Black people could prosper and that white supremacy and power are shifting to fit the era over which they preside. Letitia's story challenges white supremacist narratives and was largely overlooked by Western historians as it threatened the monolith of whiteness woven into the American frontier and pioneer purity. Yet, while we work to uphold and celebrate Letitia's history, we must avoid tokenizing Letitia's legacy, as has happened with figures like Sacagawea.

Countless historians have produced thoughtful and inquisitive pieces that have informed my argument. Historians such as Quintard Taylor, Susan Armitage, Darrell Millner, Bob Zybach, and Margaret Jacobs have forged the discourse surrounding Black women's history in the American West. Collectively, their work introduced major turning points and scholastic shifts in the paradigm of the American West. This paper is an answer to calls from previous historians to further exploration of Black women pioneers and is dedicated to them as their research and writing have fueled my ability to tell Letitia Carson's story.¹²

¹² Some of these works include: Quintard Taylor, "Slaves and Free Men: Blacks in the Oregon Country, 1840-1860," (1982), Darrel Millner, "Blacks in Oregon," Elizabeth Jameson and Susan Armitage, *The Women's West* (1897), *Writing the Range: Race, Class, and Culture in the Women's West* (1997), and Margaret D. Jacobs, "Getting Out of a Rut: Decolonizing Western Women's History," (2010).

It is important to acknowledge I am a white woman who follows in the footsteps of a historical discipline primarily dominated by the writings of white authors. I also come from a state with a predominantly white population and have been taught at institutions rooted in white supremacy with an overwhelmingly white faculty. I cannot claim to understand Black women's experiences throughout the American West's history. I do not know what Letitia Carson felt when forced to fight for her land and rightful wages. However, I am committed to telling her story and employing it to amplify the voices of other Black women pioneers. I hope my work will be seen as an actively anti-racist allyship alongside other scholars working to dismantle and decolonize our vision of the American West. This paper seeks to embody the anti-racist tradition of sharing Black history and further question the institutions that manufacture historical understanding and memory.

Letitia's Story

Letitia's story began in Kentucky when she was born into slavery sometime between 1814 and 1818, though none of her early life is known.¹³ While the first thirty years of her life remain a mystery, we know that by 1845 Letitia was living in Missouri. Dr. Bob Zybach, responsible for uncovering and publicizing Letitia's story, posits that David Carson, an Irish immigrant born in 1800 who had previously lived in North Carolina, likely purchased or leased Letitia in Missouri, maybe as late as 1844.¹⁴

¹³ Historian Bob Zybach, who has dedicated the last 30 years of his life to uncovering Letitia's story, posits she could have been "involved in the hemp or tobacco farming industries, whether as a field hand or as a house servant, or both. She most likely was a Baptist or Methodist and may have attended Sunday services in her owner's church or possibly with an all-black congregation, or maybe some of both." Bob Zybach, "The Search for Letitia Carson in Douglas County: Who Is Letitia Carson?" *The Umpqua Trapper*, no. 4 (December 2014): 4, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/347>.

¹⁴ Bob Zybach, "Pioneer Woman Confronts Discrimination," *Gazette-Times*, February 28, 1991, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/342>.

In April 1845, hundreds of Americans traveling the Oregon Trail met along the Wolf River in Missouri and formed the “Savannah Oregon Emigrating Society”—an organization set to create safety and order amidst the treacherous journey to Oregon Territory.¹⁵ Zybach states, “David Carson was one of seven men elected to draw up resolutions for this new group. The census listed his party as having one cow, eight oxen, two horses, four guns, 600 pounds each of bacon and flour, one wagon, three armed men, and a woman. That woman was Letitia Carson.”¹⁶ It is unknown when or how David and Letitia came together or what Letitia’s legal status was at their departure. Little can be ascribed to their relationship as marital laws and a lack of archival sources on their union leave historians questioning whether they were married or if she worked for him. Historians wonder if David enslaved Letitia before or even after their journey to Oregon. Some evidence suggests their relationship was consensual. In her 1862 Homestead Act Claim filings, Letitia listed herself as a “widow.”¹⁷ Despite these many unknowns, we do know Letitia was pregnant with David's child when the two began their journey West.¹⁸

Letitia and David departed on the Oregon Trail in May 1845 with nearly 1,000 other emigrants. During the trip, along the North Fork of the Platte River in what would become Nebraska, Letitia gave birth to their first child, Martha Jane Carson. David, Letitia, and Martha arrived in the Soap Creek Valley in 1845, making Letitia and Martha some of the first Black women to settle in Oregon.¹⁹

In the spring of 1846, Letitia and David built their homestead near the creek on their Soap Creek Valley property. According to Zybach, Letitia and David planted crops, including

¹⁵ Zybach, “Pioneer Woman.”

¹⁶ Zybach, “Pioneer Woman.”

¹⁷ “June 17, 1863, Letitia Carson Affidavit with Homestead application,” *Letitia Carson Digital History Collection*, accessed January 18, 2023, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/73>.

¹⁸ Zybach, “Pioneer Woman.”

¹⁹ “Homepage,” <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/>.

potatoes, and likely established an orchard.²⁰ They also raised cattle and hogs, with Letitia acting as the primary caretaker of the cows.²¹ The couple may have sold produce, meat, and dairy products to those traveling on the nearby Applegate Trail. In 1849, Letitia gave birth to their second child, Andrew C. "Adam" Carson.²²

David Carson died unexpectedly in September 1852 after a brief and unexplained illness. Because he had not made a will, a nearby Soap Creek resident and wealthy pro-slavery landowner, Greenberry Smith, was named administrator of David's estate.²³ Smith did not recognize Letitia or her children as David's rightful heirs, either because she was Black or because he believed her to be enslaved. In early January 1853, Smith held a public auction of David's land and all of the family's possessions.²⁴ Letitia spent \$104.87 to buy back what she could of her family's belongings, including bedding, cookware, and a few heads of cattle.²⁵

After being forced off their Soap Creek land, Letitia and her children traveled south and settled in Douglas County, Oregon. Letitia began working for the Elliff family in Cow Creek

²⁰ In 1947, Oregon State University student Robert Wilson photographed an apple tree likely to be one that Letitia and David planted. According to Zybach, "The photograph was made available to OSU student researchers in 1990, who subsequently named the tree in honor of the photographer (Zybach et al., 1990). Ten, or more, pioneer orchards still exist in Soap Creek Valley, many still producing fruit or nuts 100 to 150 years after their establishment. Hundreds of wilding cherry, apple, pear, walnut, and plum trees in The Valley may be descended from these pioneer plantings." He later mentioned, "This tree was named in honor of a pioneer black resident, who lived in the area of this tree in the 1840s and 1850s and may have even planted it (Cook 1995). The name was given by student researchers completing a cultural resources inventory of OSU properties in Soap Creek Valley (Zybach et al., 1990)." "June 12, 1999 Letitia Carson pioneer apple tree," *Letitia Carson Digital History Collection*, accessed May 9, 2023, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/375>.

²¹ "Who Was Letitia Carson?" *Letitia Carson Digital History Collection*, accessed May 16, 2023, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/who-was-letitia-carson>.

²² "Sept 15th 19-- A.C. Carson Death Certificate," *Letitia Carson Digital History Collection*, accessed January 18, 2023, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/216>.

²³ Carisa Cegavske, "History Found: Historian to relate story of black pioneer woman," *The News Review* 148, no. 257, March 1, 2015, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/323>.

²⁴ "Jan 4, 1853 Oregon Probate Court record Estate sale of late David Carson's property, three pages," *Letitia Carson Digital History Collection*, accessed January 17, 2023, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/7>.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Valley, likely as a domestic servant within the family's home. She supplemented her income as a midwife and likely sold dairy products from the cows she was able to recover.²⁶

In 1854, facing an all-white jury in Benton County Court, Letitia sued to be recognized as David Carson's rightful heir and employee. Letitia had first filed an official complaint through her lawyer, Andrew Thayer of Corvallis, on February 27, 1854, arguing she was due wages for the years she had lived with David, building a home, and caring for cattle and their two children.²⁷ In May 1855, the jury of all white men ruled in Letitia's favor, although she only was awarded \$300 plus court fees; not the back wages she demanded.²⁸

Letitia persevered, and two months later, Thayer filed a second suit against Smith for \$2,500, this time for the unlawful sale of Letitia's cattle in the wake of David's death.²⁹ This suit was significant, as cattle were how Letitia had made a living before David's death. A second trial was held. A neighbor called to witness confirmed Letitia had owned and raised most of the cattle herself.³⁰ In October 1856, Judge George Williams issued a judgment in Letitia's favor, awarding her \$1,200 plus nearly \$200 in costs.³¹ Importantly, it was this second case where Letitia established she was not David's property and in fact, owned property of her own.

Though it is unclear exactly what conditions led to Letitia's success in court, several factors contributed to her victory, in addition to her strong-willed tenacity. According to Stephanie Vallance, who wrote her master's thesis on Letitia's judicial history, Letitia was

²⁶ Cegavske, "History Found."

²⁷ "Feb 27, 1854 Letitia Carson formal complaint to Greenberry Smith, two pages," *Letitia Carson Digital History Collection*, accessed January 17, 2023, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/16>.

²⁸ May 12, 1855 Judgment by George Williams, Judgment True Copy," *Letitia Carson Digital History Collection*, accessed January 17, 2023, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/41>.

²⁹ "August 2, 1855 Complaint by Andrew Thayer on behalf of Letitia Carson, two pages," *Letitia Carson Digital History Collection*, accessed May 16, 2023, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/45>.

³⁰ "Oct 8, 1856 Deposition of Walker in favor of Letitia Carson, four pages," *Letitia Carson Digital History Collection*, accessed January 17, 2023, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/57>.

³¹ "Oct 20, 1856 Judgment of 1200 dollars for Letitia Carson," *Letitia Carson Digital History Collection*, accessed January 17, 2023, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/61>.

victorious because of both the antebellum politics at the time and her “shrewd legal strategy.”³² Letitia’s unwavering dedication and exploitation of “cracks in the racialized landscape” allowed her an opportunity to “define herself and determine her destiny.”³³ These key elements led to her legal success. Ultimately, while Letitia’s victories were unexpected, given the racial makeup of early Oregon courtrooms and a hostile legal system, she succeeded.

Although she won both of her lawsuits against Greenberry Smith, Letitia was not granted ownership of the Soap Creek Valley homestead and would live in Douglas County after her legal victories.³⁴ Years after relocating to the Cow Creek Valley, she filed for 154 acres under the federal Homestead Act of 1862. Letitia did not mention her formerly enslaved status in her claim, instead filing as a widow under the name “Letitia Carson.”³⁵ On June 19th, 1868, Letitia’s claim was certified, and she was among the first seventy-one claimants in the United States to be recognized, possibly as high as no. 14, of all Homestead Act claims.³⁶ She was also the only Black woman in Oregon who succeeded in filing a Homestead Act claim.

Letitia worked tirelessly to fulfill the improvements to her land as mandated by the federal act. An affidavit submitted by neighbors as part of her Homestead Act claim notes that Letitia built a two-story log home, a barn, a granary, and a smokehouse and planted approximately 100 fruit trees.³⁷ Additionally, she raised a herd of cattle and hogs. In the 1870 census, Letitia appears as a landowner with land valued at around \$1,000 and personal property

³² Vallance, “Letitia Carson in Court,” ii.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ The text in these introductory paragraphs was adapted from the Letitia Carson Digital History Collection that I wrote and created in 2022 as an intern for the Oregon Black Pioneers as part of the Letitia Carson Legacy Project (<https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/>).

³⁵ “June 17, 1863, Letitia Carson Affidavit with Homestead application,” *Letitia Carson Digital History Collection*, accessed March 3, 2023, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/73>.

³⁶ Zybach, “The Search for Letitia Carson,” 9.

³⁷ “June 19, 1868, Letitia Carson Proof of required land improvements for Homestead,” *Letitia Carson Digital History Collection*, accessed March 3, 2023, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/78>.

valued at \$625.³⁸ Letitia continued to work and live on her homestead until her death on February 2, 1888, when she was around 70 years old. She was buried in Benjamin Stephen's family cemetery in Myrtle Creek beside her son Adam.³⁹ A nearby creek today bears her name, "Letitia Creek."⁴⁰

Letitia's story presents numerous points at which she could be heralded for her successes; her pregnant journey across the Overland Trail, giving birth in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains, cultivating and maintaining two separate homesteads, challenging and conquering two lawsuits against administrator Greenberry Smith, her midwifery and community involvement, and lastly, becoming the first Black woman to own land in Oregon. And yet, her story fell to obscurity.

How did Letitia's story come to light?

Tracing when, where, and with what frequency Letitia was mentioned in academic publications illuminates the overarching impact of her story as a disruptor of white Oregon pioneer ideals. Her story challenges the monolith of white supremacist narratives and, for that reason, was largely overlooked by Western historians. It threatened the fabric of whiteness and pioneer purity woven into the American frontier. In the 1980s, Letitia's name began appearing in local Douglas and Umpqua County publications, the initial sparks of a slow-growing flame.

³⁸ "June 30, 1870, Carson Census," *Letitia Carson Digital History Collection*, accessed March 3, 2023, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/83>.

³⁹ Benjamin Stephens had a Land Claim nearby and the cemetery is named for him and was on his property. He likely had a relation to Letitia and Jack, giving her a major tombstone and a prominent position in his graveyard. "1990 Benjamin Stephens Headstone at Stephen Cemetery," *Letitia Carson Digital History Collection*, accessed May 9, 2023, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/116>.

⁴⁰ Another nearby creek is now being renamed "Jack Creek" replacing the racist name, "N*gro Creek." Douglas County's now "Jack" Creek is about two miles long and flows into Cow Creek 11 miles south of Canyonville. Dr. Zybach asked the board to rename the creek for Jack Carson. Bob Zybach, Email to author, October 17, 2022.

In 1980, Oregon pioneer descendent Bess A. Clough wrote a biographical sketch of her grandfather, Hardy Crier Elliff, who colonized Southern Oregon in the 1850s.⁴¹ When Letitia was forced to leave her home in the wake of David Carson's death, she found solace and friendship in the Nidey and Elliff families of Douglas County. She stayed with them for a year and became a community midwife to make a living for herself and her children. Clough refers to her lovingly as Aunt Tish and recalls how she aided her family through the birth of Alice Elliff. She mentions, "Her [Hardy's wife Melvina's] first child, Alice, was born in the fall of 1854 in the Elliff Cabin with the help of Mrs. Fanny Levens, a midwife, and Letitia 'Aunt Tish' Carson, a Negress who lived with the Elliffs."⁴² Later, Clough describes the relationship of Letitia to her ancestors: "Aunt Tish Carson and small son Jack, freed N*gro slaves,⁴³ came to be with grandmother and stayed a year or so. Grandmother's oldest girl, Alice, was born the fall of 1854 and Aunt Tish took care of her during delivery and was helped by Aunt Fanny Levens, a midwife and wife of a storekeeper."⁴⁴ Clough's piece is an unexpected yet notable departure from the silence surrounding Letitia. It took over one hundred years for her name to be brought back into the historical lexicon.

Two years later, in 1982, historian Quintard Taylor wrote "Slaves and Free Men: Blacks in the Oregon Country, 1840-1860" for the *Oregon Historical Quarterly*.⁴⁵ His work taught audiences of Oregon's early Black residents, mainly men such as George Washington, George

⁴¹ Bess A. Clough, "Hardy Crier Elliff," *The Umpqua Trapper* 16, no. 1 (Summer 1980): 26, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/325>.

⁴² Clough, "Hardy Crier Elliff," 33.

⁴³ The word "n*gro" is written with an asterisk here and throughout the paper to acknowledge its use as a slur against Black people in America's past. Though it is sometimes not regarded as a slur in certain contexts, and many white people feel comfortable saying it, I believe that the history of the word as a discriminatory and demeaning term contributes to its need to be censored when written by white authors such as myself.

⁴⁴ Clough, "Hardy Crier Elliff," 34.

⁴⁵ Quintard Taylor, "Slaves and Free Men: Blacks in the Oregon Country, 1840-1860," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 83, no. 2 (1982), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20613841>.

Bush, and Jacob Vanderpool, who struggled to live in Oregon Territory throughout the exclusion acts and violent racism of the developing state. Letitia's story is discussed near the end of this piece in a short paragraph that misstates the specifics of her case.

A second case involving slaves who used the legal process to establish their rights came in 1854, when a black woman, Luteshia Carson, sued the estate of her former owner. She hoped to "recover the value of her services" after working for him from 1845 until his death in 1852. The case heard by Judge Williams was tried before a jury which could not reach a verdict.⁴⁶

Taylor cites the *Oregon Statesman* article from November 18, 1854, that misreported Letitia's first lawsuit. Historians' reliance on available archival sources, written and preserved through centuries of white supremacy, illustrates the deeper systemic issues tied to the suppression of Letitia's story. The newspaper's coverage of Letitia was a blip in the white-centric coverage of the Willamette Valley that was as incorrect as it was anti-Black. Still, it was the only report of Letitia from any news outlet or publication at the time. Thus, it became the principal primary source for both Taylor and, later, George B. Abdill when they crafted their pieces on Letitia. Despite inconsistencies, Taylor's piece reveals her story could have been told decades before. Her revival was delayed by a lack of action from historians, museums, and public history entities following a pattern of white pioneerism that excluded stories of Black women pioneers.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Taylor, "Slaves and Free Men," 168.

⁴⁷ I have coined the term "pioneerism" for this research, a concept that revolves around the idea of the pioneer as a triumphant conqueror of vast open western lands, the act of seeing the pioneer as a hero, white savior, and all-around good person. Since the creation of these museums, there have been evolutionary changes in the invocation of the pioneer, but victorious and triumphant imagery still exists synonymously with the pioneer; when the reality is much darker. "Pioneerism" is formed through the romanticization of the mythological West, one that was "conquered" by "pioneers" rather than destroyed by colonizers. Pioneerism is persistent in public understanding, media, and vast societal and cultural understandings of the West. Museums have to work against a monolith in American thought that sneaks its way into educational spaces and continues to uplift the notions of manifest destiny and colonial success that are harmful to Native Nations and their history.

Shortly after Taylor, railroad historian George B. Abdill published a more extensive piece on Letitia in *The Umpqua Trapper*.⁴⁸ His biographical overview is widely considered to be the first mention of her. While this is untrue, as Bess Clough's sketch of her grandfather gave some insight into Letitia's existence and Taylor acknowledged her lawsuits, Abdill's writing expanded Letitia's story in local publications and presented audiences and historians a point from which to grow their knowledge of this obscure pioneer woman. Abdill wrote a three-page synopsis of what was known about Letitia in 1982, piecing together the disparate mentions of her and digging further into her story. Even at this point, the fact that her lawsuits were successful was yet waiting to be uncovered. Ten years later, Zybach would dig deeper than Abdill and Taylor to uncover hundreds of archival sources with a more complete story of Letitia's struggle and eventual victories.

Her story immediately drew the attention of public historians and community members who commemorated her history. In 1990, Oregon State University Forestry and Black Student Union co-sponsored a Benton County Black History tour. Zybach worked with Jeff Boyd, then President of the OSU Graduate and Professional Students, journalist Kathryn Bogle, ecologist Angela Sondenaar, and professor Wil Gamble, the first Black faculty member at OSU. The event included one of the first public presentations of Letitia's story and culminated with the planting of a tree on the OSU quad commemorating the lives and achievements of Benton County's Black pioneers.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ George B. Abdill, "Letitia Carson, Pioneer Black Woman," *The Umpqua Trapper* 18, no. 3, (Fall 1982), <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/320>.

⁴⁹ "1990 Benton County Black History Tour," *Letitia Carson Digital History Collection*, accessed March 3, 2023, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/368>.

A year later, in 1991, Zybach published four articles chronicling Oregon Black history in the Corvallis *Gazette-Times* for Black History Month.⁵⁰ During this time, Zybach was attending Oregon State University as what he called an OTA (“older than average”) undergraduate student, working for OSU Research Forests and conducting research in Soap Creek Valley. It was then he first researched Letitia’s story in great detail. He recounts this time,

One of the articles was about a woman named Letitia Carson. A fellow OSU student, Janet Meranda, became very interested in Letitia’s story, particularly as we later collaborated on an archaeological research project including the Carson’s original Benton County land and homesite.⁵¹

Soon, Meranda and Dr. Zybach became partners in uncovering Letitia’s story.

In a 1991 interview conducted by Black activist Kathryn Bogle, Zybach reveals some of the initial motivations behind what would become his lifelong investigation into Letitia.⁵² As he poured over Benton County archives, the estate of David Carson stood out, prompting him to purchase nearly \$30 worth of copies spanning 1852 to 1857 regarding Letitia’s legal actions against Greenberry Smith.⁵³ In an entirely happenstantial manner, Letitia’s story was discovered by the historian who would extract her narrative from the depths of the Oregon State Archives. Despite Taylor and Abdill’s initial publications on Letitia, Zybach uncovered her story through archival curiosity – an act that could have been accomplished decades earlier. The inclusion of

⁵⁰ Zybach, “The Search for Letitia Carson,” 3.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Kathryn Hall Bogle was a formative journalist who spent her life fighting for racial equality in Oregon. In a memorial article by Kimberly Mangun, Oregon Encyclopedia remembers her as “‘one of Portland’s earliest and most passionate advocates of racial diversity.’ She wrote articles for many African American newspapers, including the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the Seattle-based *NorthWest Enterprise*, the *Portland Observer*, and *The Skanner*, and was presented a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Portland Association of Black Journalists in 1993. Bogle may be best known for “An American N*gro Speaks of Color,” a 2,000-word article she sold to the *Oregonian* in 1937, which described the realities of being Black in Portland. It was the first time the newspaper paid an African American for a story, and Bogle would contribute many more articles to the *Oregonian* over the years.” Kimberly Mangun, “Kathryn Hall Bogle,” *Oregon Encyclopedia* Oregon Historical Society, last modified January 20, 2022, https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/bogle_kathryn_hall_1906_2003_/#.ZAKAhOzMJdh.

⁵³ “Zybach-Bogle_19910106,” Correspondence, Oregon Websites & Watersheds Project, Inc, accessed May 9, 2023, http://www.orww.org/History/Letitia_Carson/Library/Correspondence/Zybach-Bogle_19910106.pdf.

Letitia's story in works by Clough, Abdill, and Taylor points to increasing awareness of Black Oregon history. Yet, Zybach's involvement was a self-driven discovery as he pondered maps and records. Nevertheless, Zybach's continued dedication was likely sustained by this greater movement to include more diverse stories of the frontier.

Zybach is the primary historian, resource, and expert on Letitia's life. Together, Zybach and Meranda have been working for over 30 years researching and compiling information on her children, lawsuits, and her critical role as a Black pioneer in Oregon history. Additionally, Zybach has published works detailing Letitia's extensive history. In 2014 and 2015, he published separate but similar multivolume publications in both *The Umpqua Trapper* and *The Douglas County Pioneer* (Douglas County Genealogical Society), chronicling Letitia's life and legacy.⁵⁴ Still, Letitia's story remained a mostly hidden aspect of Oregon history.

The second wave of Letitia's narrative was met with numerous hurdles. For years, Zybach tried to get her legacy recognized. In 2014, he proposed Stephen's graveyard, Letitia's burial place, become a Historical Cemetery and applied to receive grant funding for the restoration of the cemetery, which lay in ruins due to the passing of time and acts of vandalism.⁵⁵ Despite community support and significant historical connections, his grant application was denied. It is difficult to separate this denial from the systemic racism that routinely kept funding from Black history projects. Further, only in 2022 did Zybach succeed in renaming "N*gro Creek" to "Jack Creek," after Letitia's son. These challenges illustrate the continued difficulties

⁵⁴ In 2014, Dr. Zybach's website, Oregon Websites & Watersheds Project, Inc., launched an educational website about Letitia (still incomplete), featuring Jan and John's scans and transcriptions of the historical Carson legal documents uncovered in 1989. This website became the basis for a Master's thesis by Stephanie Vallance, and a formal 4th-grade curriculum developed by Portland teacher, Sarah MacPherson. "Welcome to the Homepage of the Letitia Carson Historical Website," Oregon Websites & Watersheds Project, Inc, accessed May 9, 2023, http://www.orww.org/History/Letitia_Carson/index.html.

⁵⁵ "Gill-Zybach_20140502," Correspondence, Oregon Websites & Watersheds Project, Inc, accessed May 9, 2023, http://www.orww.org/History/Letitia_Carson/Library/Correspondence/Gill-Zybach_20140502.pdf.

of resurrecting Letitia's story. Even in an evolving environment that was more accepting of diverse historical narratives, Zybach's journey was an uphill battle.

Causes of Suppressing Letitia's Story

There is a long historical tradition of suppressing Black Oregon pioneer stories, especially women's narratives. Great White Man History had defined public memory until the feminist deconstruction of historical scholarship in the 1980s. In 1983, historian Susan Armitage coined this concept as Hisland,⁵⁶ “a mythic place perpetuated in Western history texts and survey courses,’ where a cast of heroic [male] characters engage in dramatic combat.”⁵⁷ Hisland is a conditioned historical memory formed through the impactful interwoven narratives of white pioneer heroes produced by newspapers, pioneer societies, museums, and academic scholarship. Institutions broadcast white pioneerism and built on one another, finding an echo chamber of synchronous ideas biased toward the white pioneer. They failed to expand beyond the initial storyline of white pioneers traveling the trail and settling with a large family of children. These selective narratives spread nationwide, nestling in a shared national consciousness that idealized a narrow characterization of Western pioneers. The ubiquity of pioneer imagery, fomented through the efforts of white pioneer organizations led by men and women, left no room for the boundary-breaking, transgressive example Letitia presented.

⁵⁶ In their editor introduction to *Writing the Range: Race, Class, and Culture in the Women's West* published in 1997, Armitage and fellow editor Elizabeth Jameson expand on Armitage's concept of Hisland saying, “Susan Armitage opened the first Women's West Conference in 1983 with a description of “Hisland” – a mythic place perpetuated in Western history texts and survey courses, where seldom was heard a discouraging word, and never a woman's voice. She evoked a historical landscape where, “under perpetually cloudless Western skies, a cast of heroic characters engage in dramatic combat, sometimes with nature, sometimes with each other. Occupationally these heroes are diverse: they are mountain men, cowboys, Indians, soldiers, farmers, miners, and desperadoes, but they share one distinguishing characteristic– they are all men.” Elizabeth Jameson and Susan H. Armitage, *Writing the Range: Race, Class, and Culture in the Women's West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 3.

⁵⁷ Jacobs, “Getting Out of a Rut,” 588.

Letitia's story is one of many buried beneath a mountain of white pioneer stories. Until waves of multiculturalism and globalized scholarship in the 1990s brought stories of resilient Black pioneers, their stories went untold in academic and mainstream narratives. This silence, coupled with a repeated emphasis on white stories, culminated in the erasure and conditioned public memory of Western history.⁵⁸ The suppression of Letitia's story begins long before her birth, with the colonizer mindset embedded in the founding of the United States. From this stems centuries of racism and misogyny, culminating in the degradation of Black women throughout American history. A white patriarchal ideology, integral to our country's founding, traveled to Oregon Territory. Racism has always been intrinsically part of Oregon history but is not consistently recognized as such. Economic, political, and social power tied to white land ownership resulted in an overwhelming tyranny of the pioneer generation. As historian Kenneth Coleman explains, "By using real estate as a tool of racial exclusion, Oregon's early political leaders initiated a pattern that continued well into the twentieth century."⁵⁹ Systemic racism was carried through Oregon's history, greeting Letitia when she arrived and molding her legacy long after her death.

Expanding on concepts of structural white supremacy, historian Thompson's definition of "American Whiteness" can be transposed onto our understanding of Oregon whiteness and how

⁵⁸ The language surrounding public memory, cultural memory, and conditioned memory was largely inspired by Cynthia Culver Prescott's *Pioneer Mother Monuments: Constructing Cultural Memory* in which she argues that public pioneer mother monuments shaped public knowledge of history. While introducing this concept she states, "In response to the 'cultural amnesia' produced by the modern cycle of intentional destruction and reconstruction of the built environment, communities throughout the United States created what sociologist Paul Connerton called a 'topography of remembering.' Communities throughout the United States erected monuments and historical markers to their white forefathers... Studying public monuments to white pioneers and Pioneer Mothers brings gender into conversation with the burgeoning field of settler colonialism and reveals the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and regional identity in public memory." Essentially, through nation-building and commemorating the pioneer woman of the West, a narrow popular memory forms that convince the American public of a prevailing pioneerhood imagery. Cynthia Culver Prescott, *Pioneer Mother Monuments: Constructing Cultural Memory* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019) 8, 11.

⁵⁹ Kenneth R. Coleman, "'We'll All Start Even': White Egalitarianism and the Oregon Donation Land Claim Act," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 120, no. 4 (2019): 429, doi:10.1353/ohq.2019.0027.

Oregon racism has metastasized and institutionalized, becoming embedded in public history and cultural memory. Whiteness is ingrained in institutions that cultivate community knowledge, such as pioneer societies, historical societies, and museums. The institutionalization of whiteness brings it into conversation with the continually vast and complex scholarship that supports whiteness as a structural phenomenon.

The haphazard predecessor of historical societies and museums, western pioneer societies formed mainly “for the purpose of exchanging mutual congratulations.”⁶⁰ Existing as glorified good ol’ boys clubs, pioneer organizations met to tell stories of overland travels and build community among Oregon Territory newcomers. Elwood Evans, who presented the keynote address at the Washington Pioneer Association in 1885, lovingly declared, “Pioneers of the Pacific North West... [were] soldiers dedicated to the Americanization of the wilderness.”⁶¹ Additionally, pioneer societies fomented the continued violence of colonizers as they expanded forcefully across Oregon territory. Through regular meetings and propagandistic publications, pioneer societies commenced a decades-long tradition of memorializing themselves as heroes, skewing historical memory. In these early years of pioneer community building, whiteness was also protected legally throughout Oregon territory. Coleman reminds us “they used that government not only to validate and protect their own land claims but also to ban the immigration of anyone of African ancestry.”⁶² Throughout this, Black women fell at the intersection of overlapping oppressions. Small in numbers and societally shunned, “Black

⁶⁰ Marc James Carpenter, “Pioneer Problems: “Wanton Murder,” Indian War Veterans, and Oregon's Violent History,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 121, no. 2 (2020): 156.

⁶¹ Carpenter, “Pioneer Problems,” 156.

⁶² Coleman, ““We’ll All Start Even,”” 415.

women would long remain an invisible segment of Western society whose lives and accomplishments would remain known only within the confines of their race.”⁶³

Fellow 1845 Oregon pioneer Stephen Staats addressed the Oregon Pioneer Association in 1877, ten years before Letitia’s death.⁶⁴ In this address, Staats spoke of David Carson fondly as “Uncle Davy” and remembered him kindly as a tough pioneer. Staats and Carson traveled the Overland Trail in 1845 and became friends on their journey. Staats would likely have then interacted with Letitia as well, but he did not speak of her.⁶⁵ In fact, he rarely speaks of women individually in this address and instead generalizes them as “the fond mother, the truehearted wife preparing the frugal meal.”⁶⁶ His erasure of Letitia and other pioneer women speaks to the continued intersection of racism and misogyny that characterize pioneer narratives. Moreover, he marks a clear difference between the pure pioneers of his band and the “wiley savages’ they encountered on the trail; his preservation of heroic whiteness was far-reaching.⁶⁷

He spoke entirely for his white pioneer audience and began his address: “I am one of *those* old pioneers,” already acknowledging a developing persona that defined old pioneers; white and knowledgeable of a pioneer past. He continued his speech and applauded David Carson's heroism on the trail. He praised David for his “true grit and unabated energy” and told his audience he was always stricken with bright ideas.⁶⁸ He concluded with a remembrance of

⁶³ Graaf, “Race, Sex, and Region,” 313.

⁶⁴ “1877 Hon. Stephen Staats: The Occasional Address,” *Letitia Carson Digital History Collection*, accessed March 3, 2023, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/326>.

⁶⁵ At the time of Staats's address, the Oregon Pioneer Association had only been around for five years, formed from earlier manifestations of white pioneer communities. On June 13, 1901, the Oregon Pioneer Association was renamed the Sons and Daughters of Oregon Pioneers. They have 1,100 members worldwide and continue operations today. Merle Miller, “Sons and Daughters of Oregon Pioneers,” *Oregon Encyclopedia* Oregon Historical Society, last updated April 22, 2022, https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/sons_and_daughters_of_oregon_pioneers/#.ZF0pKezMLFo.

⁶⁶ *Letitia Carson Digital History Collection*, “1877 Hon. Stephen Staats,” 2.

⁶⁷ *Letitia Carson Digital History Collection*, “1877 Hon. Stephen Staats,” 4.

⁶⁸ *Letitia Carson Digital History Collection*, “1877 Hon. Stephen Staats,” 7.

David in the wake of his passing and lamented on the “nobleness of his actions.”⁶⁹ He left Letitia entirely out of the picture. While he provided a disclaimer on the possible imperfection of his memory at the start of his speech, it is hard to believe he forgot the presence of the only Black woman in their trail community.

As the white pioneer heroism was on the rise, newly formed Oregon pioneer museums continued to craft history by white men, about white men, and for white men, illustrating a dual-pronged takeover of Western imagery by white pioneer men and women. From this stemmed the startling ubiquity of white pioneer narratives. The harms of pioneer societies cannot be ascribed to one person. However, George Himes’s storied past provides insight into the white pioneer construction of historical and cultural memory. His work prematurely and inaccurately memorialized Indigenous history while excluding Black pioneers. Himes was the founding secretary and first curator at the Oregon Historical Society, a position he acquired as a long-time Oregon pioneer and certified member of earlier organizations such as the Indian War Veterans of the North Pacific Coast,⁷⁰ which he joined based on “his service as an armed guard in the Rogue River War through 1855, when Himes was around eleven years old.”⁷¹ Early Oregon pioneers and historical societies formed as men like Himes desired to compete and equalize themselves with the archival successes of eastern states. This competition fueled their focus on the “‘golden age’ of the ‘pioneer period’” and furthered the traumatic treatment of Indigenous artifacts.⁷² As historian Sarah Keyes notes, “the White pioneers from whom Himes collected appear to have

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Himes’s involvement in the Rogue River Wars at age eleven speaks to the invasive nature of violent, white supremacist pioneer ideologies that infiltrated even the youngest Oregon pioneer boys, starting them young in their journey of “taming” the wild American West.

⁷¹ Carpenter, “Pioneer Problems,” 172.

⁷² Sarah Keyes, “From Stories to Salt Cairns: Uncovering Indigenous Influence in the Formative Years of the Oregon Historical Society, 1898-1905,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 121, no. 2 (2020): 90.

been just as likely to have ‘Indian’ relics to donate as they were to have pioneer relics associated with their personal and family histories.”⁷³ Further, excerpts from his diary revealed a stark lack of critical thinking regarding the origins of donated objects. In an entry dated November 9, 1900, he described a donation of “some Indian beads.”⁷⁴ Keyes argues, “the banality of the entry belies the egregious violence of grave-robbing that had resulted in” the donation of said beads.⁷⁵

Display rooms he curated blurred the lines between white pioneer donations and Indigenous objects; he uncritically included Native stories, not recognizing the harmful pioneer history as he mixed it with Indigenous objects. While the lack of newspaper coverage of Black pioneer experiences may have contributed to his ignorance, there is no excuse for Hines’s considerable harm to Indigenous history and living communities. Ultimately, racial exclusion did not stop within the economic or political circles and continued into memory and museums, culminating in the cultural forgetting of stories like Letitia’s in favor of white heroism and the curated mythology of Indigenous actors.

Pioneer Mother Mythology

Pioneer women witnessed the proliferation of these male-centric pioneer societies and desired recognition for trail mothers. In the following decades, white pioneer feminism would rise to the forefront of Western white pioneer narratives, offering another lens through which histories of Black women were silenced. The Pioneer Mother movement: a perpetrator of mythology in American historical consciousness illustrates the extensive influence of white pioneer imagery. The mythologized Eurocentric depictions of the ideal pioneer women that spring from the Pioneer Mother movement overshadow the contributions and legacies of Black

⁷³ Keyes, “From Stories to Salt Cairns,” 199.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

pioneer women like Letitia. Further, the contrasting treatment of women of color in the West presents non-white women as a novelty within the historical discourse, continually mythologizing and tokenizing women like Sacagawea and other women of color.

The Pioneer Mother movement stemmed from the tradition of late nineteenth-century white pioneer societies that populated the American West. Patriarchal pioneer societies had long dominated the cultural and social hemispheres of the West, as pioneers desired recognition for their colonial “accomplishments.” By 1886, women desired a more pronounced role and recognition within these communities and began creating their own societies dedicated to the pioneer women who had come before them.⁷⁶ Across the nation, exclusive communities of expressed patriotism sought to further a white colonial perspective and form a unified national identity. Mirroring organizations like the Daughters of the American Revolution or Daughters of the Confederacy, pioneer women's societies promoted a vision of white-centric and supremacist ideology, only this time fueled by first-wave feminism.⁷⁷ Letitia’s story challenges these narratives and emphasizes the agency and power of Black people in the West; a concept that was largely ignored and dispelled by this movement

Across the Pioneer Mother movement, there was a monolithic unification of imagery that molded white supremacy, manifest destiny, and typified gender roles into a standard and unified iconography that centered a sainted the generic pioneer mother. With sun-bonneted faces and long prairie dresses, Pioneer women symbols represented decades of growing national pride and women as tamers and trailblazers of the frontier. The stories of Black pioneers, such as Letitia,

⁷⁶ Brenda D. Frink, “San Francisco’s Pioneer Mother Monument: Maternalism, Racial Order, and the Politics of Memorialization, 1907-1915,” *American Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2012): 89, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41412833>.

⁷⁷ Cynthia Culver Prescott, “Representing the Ideal American Family: Avarad Fairbanks and the Transformation of the Western Pioneer Monument,” *Pacific Historical Review* 85, no. 1 (2016): 110, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26419587>.

were seen as a threat to this uniform nation-building and were thus kept from mainstream public displays of art and pioneer history. The Pioneer Mother movement was never about preserving an honest or realistic representation of the West or its history. Instead, it was a way to control narratives about the West and mold them around an easily manipulated and idealized figure; an anonymous pioneer woman. Just as this idealized iconography elevated the white pioneer woman to hero status, it simultaneously erased the Black woman pioneer from the historical narrative and, subsequently, the minds of America. The perseverance of championed white heroism is directly related to the control of national identity and public memory, which often falls into the hands of museums, media, and historians.

Mythologizing Sacagawea and Pocahontas

The Pioneer Mother movement was also accompanied by a growing mythologization surrounding women of color in the American West, especially of Indigenous women like Sacagawea or Pocahontas. The entwined nature of the history and treatment of Indigenous and Black peoples is glaringly relevant within the context of the American West. While both histories have been harmed by the controlling hand of white, colonial, and patriarchal American historians, they have felt this impact differently. For Indigenous people, conditioned historical memory resulted in tokenism. Sensationalized stories of a caricatured Native person replaced factual histories. For the Black Pioneer, their stories were silenced and forgotten, and their presence went untold until very recently. As Native women became cultural intermediaries and national symbols, Black women were not given this same treatment. This dissonance is caused by racial perceptions and stereotypes that cast Indigenous figures as wise or particularly sage and often ignore Black women completely. There are varying degrees of meaning that can be explored alongside this phenomenon—in some ways, it is very beneficial that Black women

were less often reduced to novelty figures—people like Letitia did not endure the harm of this. Still, at the same time, this leaves their stories untold entirely and unknown to the general public.

Whether through tokenism or disregard, the stories of Black and Indigenous people have been altered to uphold a unified, white vision of the frontier. Further, the commoditization of Indigenous women like Sacagawea and Pocahontas is mirrored in the national narrative of commoditizing the actions of Black women, as with icons like Rosa Parks or Harriet Tubman.⁷⁸ Though they are not symbols of the American West, they have become a novelty in the name of a united national identity that upholds white supremacy.

The treatment of these women yields a further understanding of how tokenism becomes oppression and subverts the accuracy of historical memory. In recent years, there have been multiple movements to feature women like Sacagawea or Harriet Tubman featured on U.S. currency. This is an attempt to memorialize the efforts of these women but is also a virtue-signaling gesture because of the utter lack of change that it implements. While it is a step in the right direction to expand representation, monetary symbolism only goes so far, especially as systemic racism still routinely impacts people of color. This empty gesture illustrates how the tokenization of women of color overshadows the reality of their historical legacy. As argued by historian Jason Black, “the US Mint’s release of the Sacagawea coin adds to the imperial oppression of both women and American Indians by constructing Sacagawea as a corporeal and symbolic commodity, a type of cultural currency, and a cipher through which the United States ‘sells’ its nationalism.”⁷⁹ The same could be said about the commoditization of Tubman, who has lately become a mythologized hero estranged from historical truth by those who minimize her to

⁷⁸ Jeanne Theoharis and Brandy Colbert, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2021).

⁷⁹ Jason Edward Black, “Sacagawea as Commodity, Currency, and Cipher: A Cultural- Feminist Reading of the U.S. Mint’s Gold Dollar,” *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics* 1, no. 2 (2005): 227, Academia.edu.

a singular legacy.⁸⁰ In both cases, the reality of each woman's life is traded for the use of their image to unite a common understanding of American history. As Black says, "Sacagawea is not honored for who she was or for her innate personal or cultural qualities. Instead, she is venerated for what she produced for America."⁸¹ Commodity feminism results in "the layering of female bodies (lived context) with advertising (product image) that bring about desire (fetishism)."⁸² Their stories are eclipsed by the American nationalist concept of liberty and are used to uphold the concept of women of color as the exception to the rule of white, male, American pioneer culture.

Both the elevation of white pioneer women and the simultaneous objectification of Black and Indigenous women; grow from the deep root of systemic racism. Together, they impact public historical memory, sidelining Black female pioneers in exchange for the white-centric pioneer mother or pocket change sporting the faces of Black and Indigenous women. There has been no recognized movement to uphold the histories of Black pioneer women as there was for their white counterparts. The modification of the female experience, fetishism, and mythologizing of women of color have overshadowed the factual version of history, including stories such as Letitia's. Tellingly, Letitia was not included in this initial commodified feminism that tokenizes marginalized women because her story didn't contribute to a white America; it was not productive or conducive to the white-washed American West. Instead, she worked in opposition to this phenomenon, and for that reason, her daring, successful tribulations have not been recognized as those of a pioneer mother.

⁸⁰ The "those" I refer to here are past historians who sidelined and minimized legacies of women of color, but also the public that consume and fail to question these cherry-picked narratives.

⁸¹ Black, "Sacagawea as Commodity," 228.

⁸² Black, "Sacagawea as Commodity," 227.

The romanticization of white women pioneers and the novelty ascribed to women of color reduces them to figureheads, symbols, and myths for easy consumption or disregard within the American historical canon. As we move forward, we are tasked with a two-pronged analysis. The first of which was covered in the previous pages, why was Letitia excluded in the commoditization and icon-building of pioneer mothers? The second is yet to be discovered; how can we avoid reducing her story to novelty and tokenism? Letitia's absence from history places her in a niche circumstance, one in which we have the chance to tell her story properly and not fall into the traps of past historical tokenism of women like Sacagewea, Pocahontas, Rosa Parks, or the synonymous and unified imagery of the revered white pioneer mother.

Entwined Nature of Indigenous and Black Oregon History

The entwined nature of Indigenous and Black Oregon history illustrates a throughline of oppression that characterizes the dominance of white pioneerhood and can also illuminate a path toward decolonization as we complicate our understanding of the American West. Through geographical ties via her land ownership and genealogical ties as Martha married into the Walla Walla community, Letitia's story deepens our understanding of the relationship between overlooked pioneers of color and the landscape they altered through their arrival in the American West.

Historian Amy Lonetree of the Ho-Chunk Nation writes of the physiological pain from "the many traumas that Indigenous people have suffered," including the "desecration of sacred sites" and museum abuses that contribute to continued social problems among Indigenous communities.⁸³ Indigenous histories were prematurely memorialized as white pioneers

⁸³ Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 22.

anticipated the coming “extinction” of Native communities and were harmfully romanticized and turned to novelties under the control of white pioneer societies. The utter erasure of Black Oregonians can be considered in the same light. While Indigenous history is tokenized and aggrandized as a means of erasure, Black history is obscured and often erased because of anti-Blackness. To use an institutional example, the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) at the Smithsonian was not established until 2003 and did not open up a permanent location until 2016. This instance exemplifies the disparity between Indigenous history (which is at the root of many American museums, although it is distorted and tokenized in this regard) and Black history, which has been primarily ignored entirely until the late twentieth and twenty-first century.⁸⁴

The interrelated nature of Indigenous and Black Oregon history predates Letitia’s arrival and is exemplified through the 1844 Cockstock affair. The prescribed villainization from white settlers exacerbated the tension between free Black and Indigenous communities. Violently mistreated by white pioneers, both communities were pitted against each other and had nowhere to turn as their land was stolen and exclusion laws passed. This culminated in some community coalescence and interracial marriage, but also violent incidents like the Cockstock affair.⁸⁵

The Cockstock affair was a factor in the passage of the 1844 Oregon Black Exclusion Law that offers context for the treatment of Letitia’s story. The Cockstock incident consisted of three main characters: James D. Saules and Winslow Anderson, both free Black settlers who

⁸⁴ Emily Yahr, “‘We did it’: Read John Lewis’s emotional speech at the African American Museum opening,” *Washington Post*, September 24, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2016/09/24/we-did-it-read-john-lewiss-emotional-speech-at-the-african-american-museum-opening/>.

⁸⁵ Additionally, the fact that James D. Saules’ married an Indigenous woman tells us that the interracial relationship between Black Oregonians and Native Oregonians predated Letitia’s story and is an integral part of understanding white pioneerhood and how it works against the narratives of Black and Native people.

married Indigenous women, and Cockstock, a Wasco Indian.⁸⁶ The exchange of Anderson's horse heightened employment disputes between Anderson and Cockstock—he had promised it to Cockstock but, amid the disagreement, sold the horse to Saules. Angered, Cockstock seized the horse and threatened Saules and Anderson until he and other Wasco men “rode into Oregon City, ‘went from house to house, showing their loaded pistols.’” White settlers confronted the Wasco men, and firing commenced on each side, resulting in Cockstock's death and the death of two white men. Saules and Anderson were blamed, taken into custody, and then “encouraged” to leave Oregon. Indian agent Elijah White viewed communities of color as part of the same “problem.” Though Saules and Anderson were outside of his authority, he lumped them together with Indigenous people as “dangerous subjects.”⁸⁷

Just as this story illustrates the complexly layered Black and Indigenous histories, it also reveals the intersectionality of racism and misogyny. The Cockstock Affair and others like it center around pioneers and Indigenous men. Letitia and other pioneering Black women's stories are not told in the same magnitude. Later, white women's stories were introduced into pioneer narratives, contributing an additional layer that covered the successes of Black women pioneers. Black women's obscuration is not accidental and instead stems from a tradition of patriarchal dominance that prioritizes stories of men over women.

Geographically, the land Letitia first lived on with David Carson in Benton County is the ancestral land of the Kalapuyan people.⁸⁸ Her 1868 Douglas County land claim falls within the Umpqua Basin, home to the Lower Umpqua, the Upper Umpqua, the Cow Creek Band of the

⁸⁶ Thomas C. McClintock, “James Saules, Peter Burnett, and the Oregon Black Exclusion Law of June 1844,” *The Pacific NorthWest Quarterly* 86, no. 3 (1995): 126, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40491550>.

⁸⁷ McClintock, “James Saules, Peter Burnett,” 128.

⁸⁸ Homepage,” <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/>.

Umpqua, and the Southern Mollala Indians.⁸⁹ Brutal colonization methods paved the way for Letitia to own land in two counties of Oregon Territory. This geographical tie to Indigenous identity is also evident in Clough’s mention of Letitia in 1980. In remembrance of Letitia, Clough says, “In the fall of 1855, the Indians on Cow Creek became hostile. Grandmother said warriors complete with war paint and feathers came in one day when she was alone with Aunt Tish. They made themselves pretty obnoxious.”⁹⁰ Jennene John recounts this story in a brief article from Janet Meranda’s personal collection of Letitia-related documents. She remembers Letitia: “About this time ‘Aunt Tish,’ as Letitia was called, came out where the Indians were. She was a very large and very black woman. When they saw her, she scared them, and they left.. The story passed down from the Hardy family was that they believed she saved all their lives that day, to which they were very grateful.”⁹¹ This story represents yet another intersection of Black pioneer identity and Indigenous history in Oregon. As an oppressed colonizer, Letitia’s complicit involvement in land ownership and this interaction with Indigenous people illuminates a further complication of the layers of power within colonialism. It is essential to continually recognize and grapple with this so that when we uplift stories like Letitia’s, we do not discount the years of colonial abuses that culminated in “free” Oregon land.

Letitia’s story also harbors a genealogical tether to Indigeneity that further explains the continued erasure of her and her children’s story. The same year that Letitia’s homestead was certified, her daughter Martha Carson married Narcisse Lavadour, the son of a French-Canadian fur trapper and a Walla Walla woman. The couple lived on Letitia’s property until 1886 when

⁸⁹ “History of the Umpqua Basin,” Oregon Explorer, accessed May 9, 2023, <https://oregonexplorer.info/content/history-the-umpqua-basin?topic=167&ptopic=140>.

⁹⁰ Clough, “Hardy Crier Elliff,” 34.

⁹¹ Jennene Johns, “Letitia Carson - Oregon’s Pioneer Black Woman,” *Letitia Carson Digital History Project*, accessed May 17, 2023, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/201>.

they relocated with their children to the Umatilla Indian Reservation. Many of Letitia's living descendants live in this area today. Letitia was a freedwoman living on Kalapuyan land, and her daughter, who was also one of the first Black women in Benton County, married into the Walla Walla community: her story is entwined with the struggles of Indigenous people through both land and lineage. Due to these intersecting identities and the systemic racism and white supremacist narratives that fuel museums, institutions have failed to honor pioneer narratives like Letitia's.

The complexities interwoven amidst Black and Indigenous identities have rarely been acknowledged in the scholarship of the American West. Just as stories of Black pioneers went untold, so did the layers of power present in colonialism. Instead, these intricacies were replaced by uniform retellings of Frederick Jackson Turner's West. Historians have transformed Western history in recent decades by reinterpreting pioneer experiences and rejecting the Turnerian paradigm evident in earlier works like Donna M. Wojcik's *The Brazen Overlanders of 1845* (1976), which recounts David Carson's pioneer experience. Such works illustrate the challenges that historians of African American and women's Western history faced to introduce stories like Letitia's into the historical lexicon.⁹²

The Brazen Overlanders of 1845 idealizes David Carson as a folk hero of the Overland Trail. White-centric scholarship like this erased Letitia's experiences and contributions completely. The book echoes other scholarly approaches such as James M. Bergquist's "The Oregon Donation Act and the National Land Policy" (1957),⁹³ and John Unruh's *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the TransMississippi West, 1840-60* (1993), which largely

⁹² Donna M. Wojcik, *The Brazen Overlanders of 1845* (Portland, Or: Wojcik, 1976).

⁹³ James M. Bergquist, "The Oregon Donation Act and the National Land Policy," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (1957): 17–35.

ignore Letitia while recounting David Carson's heroism, fellow neighbors, and even influential Black male Oregonians.⁹⁴ Despite the availability of archival materials about her, for most of the twentieth century, her experiences were ignored in favor of the stories of white pioneers. In this way, Wojcik and others contributed to the mythology of a Westward migration that did not include people of color.

Together, pieces such as these shape public memory and influence readers to absorb the glory of pioneers and a racially simplified account of these journeys. Wojcik's work falls even further into stereotypes and paints Indigenous people as thieves and marauders while entirely erasing Black identity, substituting true trail stories for white-washed fiction. It is important to recognize the work these early Western history studies accomplished. However, recognition and reconsideration are not mutually exclusive, and it is equally essential to recontextualize these works through a lens of emerging inclusivity in the West. If Wojcik or Berwanger desired to discuss pioneers' daring, fortitude, and courage, Letitia was an incredible example. She traveled as a lone Black woman in a sea of white pioneers on her 1845 Overland journey; left everything behind to travel with a man who likely owned her and had a violent past; gave birth to her first daughter on the trail; and lived to tell the tale. Yet Letitia's story and stories of other resilient Black pioneers have been erased to create white mythology that contributes to the deafening whiteness of pioneer history and the history of the US West.

The Emerging Discipline of Oregon Black History

In the latter half of the twentieth century, there was a slow but steady push to tell more complex, layered biographies of those left out of the greater historical context. Evolving

⁹⁴ John David Unruh, *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the TransMississippi West, 1840-60* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

historical study began with stories of Black men in the 1970s and 80s from historians like Darrel Millner and Quintard Taylor. As second-wave feminism peaked, historians began to represent Black women pioneers, analyzing intersecting oppressions and exploring settler colonialism as a process. These works cannot be viewed as simply good or bad, black or white; complex social themes, historical trends, and global academic influences impact these works. To appreciate and analytically criticize are not mutually exclusive; we can appreciate the revolutionary nature while also looking for ways to continually expand.

Publishing from the late 1970s into the twenty-first century, Darrel Millner has written a wide-reaching breadth of scholarship on Black Oregonians. Millner's contributions to books such as "Cornerstones of Community: Buildings of Portland's African American History" helped open the door for further study of Black history in Oregon.⁹⁵ In 1984, he was hired as one of the first professors in the Black Studies department at Portland State University. Quintard Taylor's work charts a similar course; together, their work often paralleled each other as they began publishing in the same decade and reconfigured Western history's scholarship into the 1990s and even today. Their dedication to Black history in the American West culminated in several incredible decades of researching, writing, teaching, and creating resources for other historians.

However, even as these authors forged substantial inroads that deepened the scope of American history, the stories of Black men dominated their early work and illuminated a continued trend of misogyny in academic history that warps public memory. This absence cannot be attributed to any flaw in their scholarship or historical integrity; they were historians summarizing and working from the literature and archival sources available, and as we know,

⁹⁵ Darrell Millner, Carl Abbott, and Cathy Galbraith, "Cornerstones of Community: Buildings of Portland's African American History," *Black Studies Faculty Publications and Presentations*, (1995): 60, <https://archives.pdx.edu/ds/psu/29560>.

these resources have not favored the stories of Black women. In large part, thanks to dedicated scholars like Millner and Taylor, the Black history of the American West was an evolving innovation – and Black women’s history was not far behind.

Thankfully, they continued their efforts and contributed to the growing discipline of Black Western history during its formative era and into today. Millner continues to write and teach as a professor within the Black Studies department at Portland State University—where he was a committee member to Vallance’s thesis on the judicial history of Letitia Carson. Taylor teaches at the University of Washington and co-wrote *African American Women Confront the West, 1600-2000* in 2003.⁹⁶ In 2004, after thirty years of experience as a historian, Taylor founded *BlackPast.org*, an archival website including an encyclopedia with nearly 7,000 entries, *Perspectives* online magazine, biographies, timelines, and primary documents.⁹⁷ Taylor contributed to recent works such as Shirley Mock’s, *Dreaming with the Ancestors: Black Seminole Women in Texas and Mexico* (2010),⁹⁸ and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore’s *Sweet Freedom’s Plains: African Americans on the Overland Trail* (2016).^{99,100} He retired in 2018. So, while their early work exemplified the absence of Black women’s history in the 1970s and 1980s, continued study has contributed to the growing recognition of Black women pioneers in the American West.

⁹⁶ Quintard Taylor and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, *African American Women Confront the West, 1600-2000* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008).

⁹⁷ Quintard Taylor and associates, “Black Past.org Fact Sheet,” BlackPast.org, accessed May 9, 2023, <https://www.blackpast.org/black-past-features/blackpast-org-fact-sheet/>.

⁹⁸ Shirley Mock, *Dreaming with the Ancestors: Black Seminole Women in Texas and Mexico* (United States: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012).

⁹⁹ Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, *Sweet Freedom’s Plains: African Americans on the Overland Trails, 1841-1869*, vol. 12 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016).

¹⁰⁰ Quintard Taylor, “About Taylor,” University of Washington, accessed May 9, 2023, <http://www.quintardtaylor.com/about-taylor#publications>.

The 1980s witnessed a new proliferation of scholarship on Black identity in the American West. Although many of these publications failed to mention Letitia, they began to challenge the pitfall of misogyny and racism that had long characterized Western history.¹⁰¹ During this era of multiculturalism, foreshadowing later globalization and increased diversity, initial discussions of including Black women's stories began to emerge. Works such as Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller's "The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West" (1980) urged readers to acknowledge unrecognized women of color.¹⁰² Richard Keith's "Unwelcome Settlers: Black and Mulatto Oregon Pioneers" (1983) built upon this notion of inclusion and spoke of Black pioneer men and women within the unwelcoming environment of Oregon Territory.¹⁰³

Elizabeth McLagan's *A Peculiar Paradise: a History of Blacks in Oregon, 1788-1940* (1980) was one of a kind and expanded existing scholarship, later re-published in 2022 by Oregon Black Pioneers.¹⁰⁴ The 2022 text is preserved from the original and does not mention Letitia or many other Black women. It was written by a female author, and the exclusion of women speaks to the overlapping tides of sexism and racism which hid histories of Black women in particular. McLagan drew from primary sources, and the reality is that often, women were not writing or recorded in these sources, hence their exclusion from contemporary histories of Black Oregonians. However, this book is an incredibly important milestone. Additionally, the 2022

¹⁰¹ While Letitia Carson couldn't have been in every single publication on Western history, Black history, or women's history, the fact that she is left out of almost every major publication on the topic from the 1960s-2010s is telling of the lessened status of Black history during this time.

¹⁰² Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller, "The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West," *Pacific Historical Review* 49, no. 2 (1980): 173–213, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3638899>.

¹⁰³ Richard K. Keith, "Unwelcome Settlers: Black and Mulatto Oregon Pioneers," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 84, no. 1 (1983): 29–55, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20613888>.

¹⁰⁴ Elizabeth McLagan, *A Peculiar Paradise: a History of Blacks in Oregon, 1788-1940* (1st ed. Portland, Or: Georgian Press, 1980).

revival likely brought it back into the mainstream historical consciousness and sphere of influence.

Historian Lawrence B. de Graaf took one step further when writing “Race, Sex, and Region: Black Women in the American West, 1850-1920” (1980).¹⁰⁵ His work centered entirely on Black women, following the premise that Jensen and Miller encouraged. Still, many of the works from this era only dipped into the generalized topic of Black women in the West without telling the stories of individual women. This method remains problematic because white women, white men, and Black men had their individual stories told—but Black women were an overarching subject matter to discuss rather than individually explore.

The next decade of scholarship significantly diverged from the gradual inclusion of the 1980s and represented a visible turning point as 1990s historians explored Black women’s individual stories in more detail. According to Vallance, the “new Western history” of the 1990s “produced works that provided accounts of the rich and varied lives of Native Americans, Chinese Americans, Mexican Americans, and African Americans.”¹⁰⁶ Works like Roger Hardaway’s “African-American Women on the Western Frontier” (1997),¹⁰⁷ represented a turning point and an initial recognition that Black women needed an independent analysis of the overlapping oppressions, social conditions, and layered history they experienced in the American West opening a dialogue about the blatant omission of Black women pioneers.¹⁰⁸ Taylor’s book *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West 1528-1990* (1999) provided a groundbreaking survey and detailed timeline of Black history in the American West,

¹⁰⁵ Graaf, “Race, Sex, and Region.”

¹⁰⁶ Vallance, “Letitia Carson in Court,” 9.

¹⁰⁷ Roger D. Hardaway, “African-American Women on the Western Frontier,” *Negro History Bulletin* 60, no. 1 (1997): 8–13, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24766796>.

¹⁰⁸ Vallance, “Letitia Carson in Court,” 10.

but as a product of its time and available resources, also omitted the individual struggle and complexly intersectional oppression of Black women.¹⁰⁹

The scholarship of the 2000s continued to build upon the revolutionary texts of the 1990s but became increasingly aware of the need for Black women's voices and stories to be told outside the context of the white West. Taylor and Moore's work *African American Women Confront the West, 1600-2000* (2003) examined the stories of Black women traversing the Overland Trail and settling in the American West.¹¹⁰ This largely successful contribution still bypassed Letitia and her antebellum Pacific Northwest peers. Other works like Demetrius L. Eudell's chapter "Black Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries" in *A Companion to American Cultural History* (2008) and Sheridan McCarthy and Stanton Nelson's *Perseverance: A History of African Americans in Oregon's Marion and Polk Counties* (2011) published by Oregon Black Pioneers provide more in-depth stories of Black identity in the West.¹¹¹ They both document the lives of Black women pioneers as midwives, farmers, mothers, and entire people – not just companions or concepts.

Eventually, Black women became accounted for and their stories recognized. But this was primarily accomplished within the same framework that glorified and uplifted stories of white pioneers. As Vallance asks, "Is placing their experience within the larger pioneer history adequate?"¹¹² Even as inclusive and contributionist literature fills the historiographic gaps, it is

¹⁰⁹ Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West 1528-1990* (United Kingdom: W. W. Norton, 1999).

¹¹⁰ Taylor and Moore, *African American Women Confront the West*.

¹¹¹ Demetrius L. Eudell, "Black Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," in *A Companion to American Cultural History*, ed. Karen Halttunen (Hoboken: Wiley, 2008); Sheridan McCarthy, Nelson Stanton, *Perseverance: A History of African Americans in Oregon's Marion and Polk Counties* (United States: Oregon Northwest Black Pioneers, 2011).

¹¹² Vallance, "Letitia Carson in Court," 9.

imperative to examine how we can further uplift Black women's stories without tokenizing them as singular figureheads for a diverse Black pioneer population.

The Emerging Discipline of Women's Western History

White pioneer ladies, fashioned in dust-covered sundresses and ruffled bonnets tied tightly around their sun-kissed faces, occupy the forefront of Western women's history. The spectrum of pioneer womanhood is capped by a limiting paradigm of whiteness. Black women's history was not included in the mythos of the American West; instead, stories of white women were heralded as the new wave of progressive history. As noted by historian Margaret Jacobs, "The earliest Western women's history narrative sought to recover white women's experiences."¹¹³ Later, stories of Black men overcame the longstanding Turnerian ideals of the American West. But still, even into the twenty-first century, Black women were largely erased from the interpretation of the American West, despite advances made by historians of Black history and Women's history.¹¹⁴ While it is true that the majority of Westward migration was journeyed by white families, they do not represent the entirety of pioneer populations. Letitia's story deconstructs the whiteness of Western women's history and allows for intersectional, anti-racist, and decolonized historical narratives.

Historians such as Joan Jensen, Darlis Miller, Susan Armitage, Elizabeth Jameson, Patricia Limerick, Margaret Jacobs, and Cynthia Culver Prescott have contributed significant interjections within the discourse's evolution. This historiographical overview relies on and explicates the complexities of the central few to provide a clear outline of the discipline, but also

¹¹³ Jacobs, "Getting Out of a Rut," 588.

¹¹⁴ It is important to note that oral traditions and brief mentions of Black women kept their stories afloat, but when it came to historical scholarship, public history exhibits, or museum resources, Black women's stories were ignored.

recognizes that this conversation does not end with these names. These women are the starting point for a multitude of further scholarship that continues their call for action. Through establishing new ideas, dialogues, and interventions—these authors shaped the growing world of women’s Western history. Additionally, many of these historians are professors who advise students, guiding the next generation of historians.

Before the 1980s, much of Western history misconstrued pioneer womanhood as a pure, white taming of the West. Though there was also a significant opposing character of demonized sex workers, both tropes align women within specific and restricted roles under the guise of the ever-expanding patriarchal influence of pioneer men. Problematic for a myriad of reasons, this conceptualization both idealized and neutralized the identity of white women on the trail; they were too often portrayed as harmless figureheads of all that was good. This shifted in the wake of second-wave feminism as mostly female historians began to dissect this imagery and reexamined the characterization of women in the American West.

This mission sustained the efforts of historians Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller as they wrote: “The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West” (1980).¹¹⁵ Western women’s history had surged to popularity in the previous decades but still lacked diversity and was overrun with narratives of helpless pioneer women who doted on man and child alike with no sense of agency or authority. Jensen and Miller offered a framework that recognized white frontier women's contributions, lives, and legacies, planting the seeds for the future recognition of Black women in the West. The first of its kind, this piece brought women to the center and diversified the frontier's racial binaries.

¹¹⁵ Jensen and Miller, “The Gentle Tamers Revisited,” 173–213.

Working as collaborators on expansive publications detailing Western women's history, Elizabeth Jameson and Susan Armitage edited *The Women's West* (1987).¹¹⁶ In these early years, the genre was still laying out the solid ground platformed on two arguments. One, that women's history significantly differed from previous patriarchal Western scholarship, and two, that white women could not be the only focus. Armitage and Jameson built upon the ideas presented by Miller and Jenson to expand the racial binary and turn the tides of previous Western consciousness into something more accurate to pioneer women's lived experiences. *The Women's West* (1987) featured a series of essays that expanded contemporary scholarship on women and women of color in the West. They compiled vast resources on previously unexplored topics, working against the limited confines of archival and secondary sources on Western women. This work successfully departs from the typical Western history genre. Armitage and Jameson opened it up to white women—and then beyond toward a more diversified perspective.¹¹⁷

In 1987, historian Patricia Limerick published *Legacy of Conquest*, a trade book that aimed to deconstruct a shared understanding of the West, arguing Western history went beyond contemporary understandings.¹¹⁸ Patricia Limerick's book was met with rampant criticism after its release; historians argued that Limerick cherry-picked narratives and anecdotes to tell, suggesting this practice minimizes the West to a specific and negative storyline.¹¹⁹ Limerick's work is founded mainly on secondary sources, often centered on white experiences; this is both a

¹¹⁶ Susan H. Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, *The Women's West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987).

¹¹⁷ Jameson and Armitage's work also marks the significance of the Women's West Conference, the first national meeting entirely dedicated to the sharing of Western women's history. This conference inspired and influenced future scholarship and evolved the discipline through increased devotion to Western women's history.

¹¹⁸ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (Norton: New York, 1987).

¹¹⁹ Donald Worster, Susan Armitage, Michael P. Malone, David J. Weber, and Patricia Nelson Limerick, "'The Legacy of Conquest,' by Patricia Nelson Limerick: A Panel of Appraisal," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (1989): 309.

problem and a benefit of her work. She harmfully focuses on white stories but, at the same time, opens up her work to a non-academic audience that can appreciate these stories in ways they may not with less accessible scholarly prose. Additionally, Limerick is critical of white supremacy through her exploration of race and its multifaceted nature but does not have the language to yet be critical of power and the systemic nature of whiteness. It is not that historians today are more thoughtful than past historians, but rather that as history evolves, so does the language surrounding it and many of their initial ideas have been expanded via evolving historical consciousness and language. Ultimately, her work opened up an initial confrontation of Western mythologies, primarily the concept of racial binaries. It is not enough to simply tell the stories of women pioneers; we must also consider the intersection of oppression and investigate the significance of gender *and* race as lenses through which we view, learn, and present history.

In the wake of Limerick's publication, the voices of Armitage and Jameson become relevant once more as they continue to build onto this growing platform of multiculturalism and expand it into a perceivable reality. In 1991, Armitage published a research guide titled *Women in the West: a Guide to Manuscript Sources*, a directory of available resources on women's Western history.¹²⁰ By 1991, significant strides had been made by historians of the American West to write not only women's Western history but a consciously "multicultural" vision of this history that illustrated the histories of women of color as well. Thus, this guide serves to aid historians and researchers with the discovery of women in the American West while highlighting "materials on women whose lives did not fit the traditional image of the homesteader with the calico dress and sunbonnet."¹²¹ In the early 1990s, Black women's presence was finally being

¹²⁰ Susan H. Armitage, *Women in the West: a Guide to Manuscript Sources* (New York: Garland Pub., 1991).

¹²¹ Susan H. Armitage, *Women in the West: a Guide to Manuscript Sources* (New York: Garland Pub., 1991), xiii.

gradually welcomed into the narrative of the American West. However, their individual stories were still suppressed behind decades of famed white women pioneers.

Building on this ongoing project to expand the discipline of Western women's history, Armitage and Jameson teamed up once again to edit *Writing the Range: Race, Class, and Culture in the Women's West* in 1997.¹²² As mentioned by Armitage in the cover text, this work was a series of 29 essays “that present women of all races as actors in their own lives and in the history of the American West and locate them in a framework that connects gender, race, and class.”¹²³ *Writing the Range* provides excellent insight into the efforts of Western women's historians to articulate a diverse vision of Western women. Alongside this generation of well-known women's historians like Armitage and Limerick, this book provided a platform for lesser-appreciated authors such as Vicki L. Ruiz and Sucheng Chan, who wrote about the experiences of Mexican and Korean women in the American West.¹²⁴ Ultimately, this publication capped off the scholarship of the twentieth century, providing a visible middle ground between the glaring whiteness of early Western feminist works and the later publications that would accomplish the voiced goals of multiculturalism and later decolonization.

In 2010, historian Margaret Jacobs picked up the ongoing project to implement diversity and decolonization in our telling of Western women's history. In her piece, “Getting Out of a Rut: Decolonizing Western Women's History,” Jacobs revisits the past thirty years of scholarship produced by Western women's historians, calling out the continued suppression of women of color despite demands for diversity. She argues, “A multicultural approach has not provided an adequate framework for understanding women and gender in the American West.

¹²² Elizabeth Jameson, Susan H. Armitage, *Writing the Range: Race, Class, and Culture in the Women's West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press).

¹²³ Jameson and Armitage, *Writing the Range*, cover.

¹²⁴ Jameson and Armitage, *Writing the Range*, table of contents.

She calls for Western women historians to “‘decolonize’ our narrative and our field through seriously considering the West as a colonial site.”¹²⁵ Because its harm, Jacobs explains, lies in its obfuscation of “‘certain power dynamics and inadvertently helped to shape and reinforce a colonial narrative of Western women’s history.”¹²⁶ If the limitations of historical narratives and multicultural frameworks left Western history in a rut, the way out required that stories like Letitia’s be incorporated into mainstream historical scholarship, effectively ending the sidelining of women of color.

Jacobs’ “Parallel or Intersecting Tracks? The History of the US West and Comparative Settler Colonialism” (2014) and “Seeing Like a Settler Colonial State” (2018) both dismantle the myth of the Western racial binary.¹²⁷ Jacobs’ work signals an important shift in historical writing. In brief articles, she and other emerging authors accomplish what past historians had struggled to cement within entire books, suggesting that while late twentieth-century trailblazers broke through the previous cycle of white historical practice, there is much to be learned from the past thirty years of progressive historical evolution. Doors opened, and consequentially, the increasingly diverse historical practices flourished.

Western historiography had slowly expanded as erasure in archival and secondary sources hindered a more accurate rendering of Western history. Additionally, structural racism culminated in unequal access to higher education, and Black women fighting against intersecting oppressions are left at the center of this inequality. This dissonance causes a significant difference in the number of advanced degrees held by white academics compared to academics

¹²⁵ Jacobs “Getting Out of a Rut,” 585.

¹²⁶ Jacobs “Getting Out of a Rut,” 594.

¹²⁷ Margaret D. Jacobs, “Parallel or Intersecting Tracks? The History of the US West and Comparative Settler Colonialism,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 4, no. 2 (2014):155–61; Margaret D. Jacobs, “Seeing Like a Settler Colonial State,” *Modern American History (Cambridge.)* 1, no. 2 (2018): 257–70.

of color and an even more pronounced gap that leaves behind Black women academics. This discrepancy is cultivated by centuries of systemic racism that keeps Black women from advanced degrees. According to a 2021 article by author Mary Beth Gasman, “As of 2019, African Americans account for 7% of faculty nation-wide, with Black women making up 3.2% of all faculty.”¹²⁸ Without representation within their chosen field and faculty, Black women are hindered from “access to the systems that propel students toward Ph.Ds and ensure that they are prepared.”¹²⁹ Data tables prepared by the National Science Foundation’s Survey of Earned Doctorates from 2021 further confirm the sustained impact of racism within academia. Table 8 (Fig. 1) “Research doctorate recipients, by ethnicity, race, and citizenship status: 2011–21” shows that out of the 52,250 Ph.Ds awarded in the U.S. in 2021, only 3,040 were earned by Black Americans, totaling only 1.6%.¹³⁰ Table 10 (Fig. 2), “Female research doctorate recipients, by ethnicity, race, and citizenship status: 2011–21,” shows that out of 24,156 Ph.Ds awarded in the U.S. in 2021, only 1,797 were earned by Black women, totaling only .43%.¹³¹

These statistics show the gap between the number of Black women earning advanced degrees and white women. While these numbers do not speak to the number of history degrees precisely, it can be estimated that history doctorates follow a similar trend. Thankfully, these numbers are up from 2011 and continue to rise—culminating in the explosion of Black women historians producing scholarship on Black women in the American West today. Historians such

¹²⁸ Marybeth Gasman, “Hand in Hand: Black Women in Pursuit of the P.h.D.,” *Forbes*, August 9, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/marybethgasman/2021/08/09/hand-in-hand-black-women-in-pursuit-of-the-phd/?sh=43b1978f66a2>.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ See Figure 1. “Survey of Earned Doctorates: Data Tables, Table 8 Research doctorate recipients, by ethnicity, race, and citizenship status: 2011–21,” National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2021, <https://nces.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf23300/data-tables>.

¹³¹ See Figure 2. “Survey of Earned Doctorates: Data Tables, Table 10 Female Research Doctorate Recipients, by Ethnicity, Race, and Citizenship status: 2011-21,” National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2021, <https://nces.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf23300/data-tables>.

as Shirley Ann Wilson Moore have extensively written on Black women in California during the years of the Overland Trail, and whose second book co-edited with Quintard Taylor, *African American Women Confront the West, 1600-2000* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), received the American Library Association's CHOICE Award in 2004.¹³² Historian and curator Quin'Nita Cobbins Modica, whose work on Black women activists in the American West contributed to a growing understanding of individuals whose stories had never been told. Each of their contributions and a sea of many others have culminated in a radical retelling of Black women in the West that has decolonized and diversified Western women's history.

All of this paved the way for telling Letitia's story in the 1990s and early twenty-first century. As historians diversify and decolonize their analytical frameworks and historical narratives, the lasting public image of the pioneer and the American West will evolve and expand to include a greater public understanding of women of color in the West. These publications do mention Letitia and other individual stories of triumph for women of color in the West: historian Gregory Nokes's book *Slaves Breaking Chains: Slavery on Trial in the Oregon Territory* mentions Letitia's story and the significance of her children and her relationship with

¹³² Shirley Ann Wilson Moore is the author of: "Anonymous Black Gold Seeker at Auburn Ravine, 1852," *Bulletin*, California State Library, no. 128, November 2020; "Passing," Afterword to Robert Chandler's *Black and White: Lithographer and Painter Grafton Tyler Brown*, (University of Oklahoma Press, 2014); "I Want It to Come Out Right," Forward to Rudolph M. Lapp's *Archy Lee: A California Fugitive Slave Case* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2008); "No Cold Weather to Grapple With: African American Expectations of California, 1900-1950," *Journal of the West*, vol. 44, no. 2, Spring 2005; "We Feel the Want of Protection: The Politics of Law and Race in California, 1848-1878," *Taming the Elephant: Politics, Government and Law in Pioneer California*, John F. Burns and Richard J. Orsi, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press and the California Historical Society, 2003); "Your Life is Really Not Just Your Own": African American Women in Twentieth Century California," *Seeking El Dorado; African Americans in California, 1769-1997*, Lawrence De Graaf, Kevin Mulroy & Quintard Taylor, ed. (Los Angeles: Autry Museum and Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001); "Do You Think I'll Lug Trunks?" African Americans in Gold Rush California," Kenneth Owens, ed., *Riches for All: The California Gold Rush and the World*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002)." Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, "Shirley Ann Wilson Moore Academic Historian," BlackPast.org, January 19, 2007, <https://www.blackpast.org/author/mooreshirleyannwilson/>.

David.¹³³ Further, author Vallance wrote her master's dissertation on the judicial significance of Letitia's time in court.¹³⁴

Tokenization in Historical Fiction

As Letitia's story comes to light, her legacy is harmed by the tendency to tokenize historical women of color into consumable figures. Jane Kirkpatrick's 2014 historical fiction novel, *A Light in the Wilderness*, is the only full-length study of Letitia Carson's life, legacy, and history. Kirkpatrick tells the story of Letitia from her time of enslavement in Missouri to David's death in the Soap Creek Valley. She intertwines the lives of three different women during the Overland Trail travels: Letitia Carson, her white best friend, and a Kalapuya woman she meets after arriving in Oregon. It frames Letitia's story as a white woman sees it - a dramatized romance between David and Letitia and a fierce fight for the papers that prove to her be a freedwoman - both of these integral plot threads are entirely fictionalized. *A Light in the Wilderness* aligns with the sixty or so other historical fiction novels Kirkpatrick has written, following a trend of romanticization and glorification of Oregon history that excludes the evils of colonialism and white supremacist violence.

Without considering Kirkpatrick's take, there should already be an established baseline of Letitia's story in books on Oregon's history, pioneer histories, and Black American histories. Instead, audiences are left with an over-romanticized and idealized version of Letitia's story as told through the imagination of a white woman. Through David and Letitia's fictionalized

¹³³ Gregory R. Nokes, *Slaves Breaking Chains: Slavery on Trial in the Oregon Territory* (Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press, 2013): 101, 102.

¹³⁴ Though this historiography is not an exhaustive list of every author and publication that has contributed to the expansion of Black women pioneers in the American West or the telling of Letitia's story; it is part of a growing effort to trace and recognize the evolution of women's Western history. There have been incredible strides toward a diversified and decolonized vision of Western history, but there is still work to be done.

marriage, David's white saviorism, demonization of Ann Eliza, an enslaved minor leased by David Carson, characterization of Letitia, and overwhelmingly positive reviews, *A Light in the Wilderness* is a harmful, white Christian interpretation that contributes to a false narrative harming the historical memory of pioneer history.

When reading Kirkpatrick's work, it is unclear to readers which parts are fictionalized and which are true – Letitia and David's marriage hides in this gray area and paints their relationship in an idealized light. According to archival sources, there is no tangible evidence of a secret marriage or romantic relationship. Furthermore, in 1844, prior to migrating to Oregon Territory, Savannah White accused David Carson of mistreating her enslaved girl named Ann Eliza, who was only 16 when he leased her.¹³⁵ Though we only have limited evidence and understanding of this case and its history, it shows us that David Carson had the potential for sexual violence against African American women. While there is no evidence whether David ever owned Letitia, and the state of their relationship still remains unclear—the details of the Ann Eliza case prove that David did own an enslaved woman and mistreated her in both sexual and violent ways, suggesting that he could have possibly continued this behavior with Letitia.

Nevertheless, Kirkpatrick builds an intense romance between David and Letitia. Kirkpatrick paints David, often called "Davey" in her book, as a tough but loveable old mountain man who is simply misunderstood. According to Kirkpatrick, Letitia harbors no doubt in her mind, only love for David: "Davey was a chatting man full of stories, he was an easy man to be around. Cheerful. He asked rather than ordered, never made any move to touch her person in demand. He did small things that eased her day."¹³⁶ Even with her recognition and knowledge of

¹³⁵ "April 1, 1843, Carson v White Primary Evidence," *Letitia Carson Digital History Collection*, accessed January 15, 2023, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/items/show/360>.

¹³⁶ Jane Kirkpatrick, *A Light in the Wilderness: A Novel* (United States: Baker Publishing Group, 2014), 40.

David's past crimes, Kirkpatrick casts him in a pure light to develop a rich and believable union between David and Letitia. Not only is Kirkpatrick's decision to include an uncorroborated courtship historically intangible, but it is also a manipulation of historical memory and truth. Her positionality as a fiction author offers her no ties to the preservation of history and thus culminates in a dissonance between the stories she crafts and the reality on which they are based.

The effects of this inaccurate retelling of history can be seen in real-time when reading through book reviews from those on [goodreads.com](https://www.goodreads.com). As one reviewer states, "Jane Kirkpatrick surely knows how to tell a story and stick with the facts!"¹³⁷ This false certainty contributes to the systemic misunderstanding of Black history in Oregon, especially Black pioneer history and the history of Black women. When readers are presented with an unclarified combination of fact and fiction and unable to decipher the truth, they are left with an at-best muddled interpretation of Black history.

Additionally, the white saviorism of David's character similarly contributes to a muddled historical understanding of this period. Kirkpatrick's soft, approachable, and misunderstood characterization of David Carson warps historical memory and public perception of the past in ways that only benefit white men and demonize anyone who crossed them—including the young enslaved girl, Ann Eliza. Kirkpatrick's inaccurate depiction of Ann Eliza, her characterization of David as a husband and a community hero, and the white saviorism she instills in his storyline all contribute to a fabricated telling of the past. When Letitia first lays eyes on David, he is standing outside the local courthouse, loudly proclaiming his innocence in the case brought against him for the violence and debauchery committed against Ann Eliza. He states, "I may be an old

¹³⁷ "Dana Kamstra's Reviews > A Light in the Wilderness: A Novel," GoodReads, August 7, 2014, https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1019635326?book_show_action=true&from_review_page=1.

mountain man not accustomed to town ways, but I know how to take care of property.”¹³⁸

Despite the likelihood of these accusations, Kirkpatrick denies them in her book and paints David as a lovable, misunderstood, and wrongly accused man. Upon seeing this, Letitia “hoped he was successful in his lawsuit, she wasn't sure why.”¹³⁹ Kirkpatrick establishes a baseline of mutual loving, understanding, and support between David and Letitia—an unlikely conclusion in the aftermath of David's likely raping and abusing a young enslaved girl.

In addition to this wildly inaccurate depiction of Susannah White's actual lawsuit against David Carson, Kirkpatrick demonizes Ann Eliza, victim-blaming her for destroying David's reputation. Each time Ann Eliza is mentioned throughout the novel, she is characterized as a “minx” and described by both Letitia and David as a no-good, devious woman who threw herself upon David, ultimately causing the accusations against him. The repeated minx motif is a harmful depiction of Ann Eliza, who was sixteen years old and leased by David at the time of her rape. Kirkpatrick's recurring representation of Ann Eliza as flirtatious or impudent upholds harmful stereotypes of Black women's sexuality that have been used to demonize and oppress Black women for centuries.¹⁴⁰ In this way, readers are once again misled to see David as an upstanding moral character who fights against the evil of women like Ann Eliza. Moreover, this

¹³⁸ Kirkpatrick, *A Light in the Wilderness*, 16.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ The complex treatment of Black women's over-sexualization is discussed in the Combahee River Collective Statement: “Black women's extremely negative relationship to the American political system (a system of white male rule) has always been determined by our membership in two oppressed racial and sexual castes. As Angela Davis points out in ‘Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves,’ Black women have always embodied, if only in their physical manifestation, an adversary stance to white male rule and have actively resisted its inroads upon them and their communities in both dramatic and subtle ways. There have always been Black women activists—some known, like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frances E. W. Harper, Ida B. Wells Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell, and thousands upon thousands unknown—who have had a shared awareness of how their sexual identity combined with their racial identity to make their whole life situation and the focus of their political struggles unique. Contemporary Black feminism is the outgrowth of countless generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by our mothers and sisters.” “(1977) The Combahee River Collective Statement,” BlackPast.org, November 16, 2012, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/>.

disconnect results in a caricature and novelty that reduces Black women pioneers' legacy and presents a mistruth to audiences who take in this story with open arms and uninhibited acceptance—altering historical memory.

This harmful characterization is also present in Letitia through the racialized imagery used to describe her and her chosen dialect. Throughout the novel, Kirkpatrick uses stereotyped, racialized language to describe Letitia's looks, voice, and actions as a Black woman. While wholly unnecessary, this description also presents a racist and misogynistic painting of Black women that harkens back to mammy caricatures and harms our understanding of Letitia. Kirkpatrick routinely describes the color of Letitia's skin as "indigo," which is defined as a dark blue. When googled, indigo appears as a medium purple color—strikingly different than the skin color of a dark-skinned Black woman.¹⁴¹ Later on, she describes Letitia's skin as "burnt-seed skin like the Kalapuya but darker," once again failing to adequately describe the color of Letitia's skin without absurdist comparisons.¹⁴² It is important to note that other sources, such as Jennene John's story of Letitia, recount Letitia as a very dark-skinned woman.¹⁴³ While this seems to be the general consensus when remembering and imagining Letitia, it is important to note that the way Kirkpatrick illustrates Letitia's skin tone is stereotypical and harmful. Recognizing her complexion is an important part of resurrecting her story, but doing so without harmful comparisons to burnt seeds or wildly inaccurate colors for the sake of emphasis would have strengthened the truthfulness of Kirkpatrick's novel.

Kirkpatrick's harmful depictions continue onto Letitia's speaking voice as well. At one point, Kirkpatrick writes of an interaction between Letitia and a white woman, saying, "Mrs.

¹⁴¹ Kirkpatrick, *A Light in the Wilderness*, 14, 210.

¹⁴² Kirkpatrick, *A Light in the Wilderness*, 224.

¹⁴³ Johns, "Letitia Carson - Oregon's Pioneer Black Woman."

Bowman had a tinkling little laugh. Quite a contrast to the deep-as-backwater voice of the colored woman.”¹⁴⁴ When Kirkpatrick describes Letitia as deep-voiced, she immediately negatively sets her apart from the other women on the trail, prioritizing hierarchical displays of whiteness over the harshly different imagery of Letitia. Without diving into the linguistic pitfalls of still using “colored” to describe Black women, Kirkpatrick’s imagery contributes to racist understandings of Black women as somehow manlier or gruffer than white women. Similarly, as no images of Letitia have survived today, readers are left with Kirkpatrick’s constructed vision of Letitia rather than what would have been historical truth.

The issue of literary racism and reader misunderstanding continues into the dialogue given to Letitia in this book; Letitia’s words and dialect are superimposed upon her. They are entirely fabricated, as there are no diaries, journals, or any written evidence of Letitia’s own thoughts or mannerisms. What results is a highly stereotyped, characterized, and ultimately racist depiction of Letitia that is a constant point of disappointment from her white friends and “husband.” At one point, David thinks, “I wish she wouldn’t talk so slave-like, dipping into words without finishing them.”¹⁴⁵ Not only is Letitia’s forced dialect unnecessary, but it also makes a point of her unintelligence. Even Letitia begins questioning herself and her intelligence and works hard to overcome this “problem.” She changes how she speaks to please others and improve her image. As they travel the Overland Trail, David stops and asks her about the beauty of the mountains, ““Looke, Tish, Ain’t they beautiful?”” she responds but quickly changes her vocabulary, ““Yessuh. They’s beautiful.” She corrected herself. ‘The mountains are pretty as a

¹⁴⁴ Kirkpatrick, *A Light in the Wilderness*, 38.

¹⁴⁵ Kirkpatrick, *A Light in the Wilderness*, 188.

painting.”¹⁴⁶ Ultimately, Letitia is depicted as lesser than due to her given vernacular, a literary decision that only upholds centuries of racist stereotypes and conclusions about Black people.

Readers seem to fully embrace Kirkpatrick as a “down-to-earth author, that takes a true story and turns it into a masterpiece. I usually enjoy any of her writings because they are so raw and real.”¹⁴⁷ Rawness and realness are mentioned throughout hundreds of reviews; readers cannot seem to get enough of the “reality” presented through Kirkpatrick’s work. Many reviewers cannot seem to distinguish between the truth and fiction, one saying, “I’m not sure how much of it was true, but while I was reading it I thought much of it must be, based on how much history seemed so accurate. I love that.”¹⁴⁸ Many other reviewers recite completely untrue versions of history that they have learned from Kirkpatrick’s novel, one stating that “Letitia was the first African American to travel the Oregon Trail in 1845.”¹⁴⁹ Letitia was hardly the first Black person to travel to Oregon Territory, and there are well-documented histories that prove otherwise, and yet, Kirkpatrick’s novel has warped historical memory.¹⁵⁰

In its careless depiction and dangerous mistruths, *A Light in the Wilderness* misleads readers to conclusions hindering historical understanding. Instead, Kirkpatrick's narrative is a

¹⁴⁶ Kirkpatrick, *A Light in the Wilderness*, 198.

¹⁴⁷ “Jaylynn Patterson’s Reviews > A Light in the Wilderness: A Novel,” Goodreads, September 2, 2014, https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1043347979?book_show_action=true&from_review_page=1.

¹⁴⁸ “Joleen’s Reviews > A Light in the Wilderness: A Novel,” Goodreads, December 29, 2015, https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1484877281?book_show_action=false&from_review_page=2.

¹⁴⁹ “Bethany Marks’s Reviews > A Light in the Wilderness: A Novel,” Goodreads, September 13, 2014, https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1053576269?book_show_action=false&from_review_page=2.

¹⁵⁰ There are countless under-explored histories of Black women in the American West just waiting to be told. The story of Black woman Susanna Mathews presents yet another avenue to explore how we learn, forget, and shape historical knowledge. Susanna is yet another Black woman who owned land in Antebellum Oregon. Although there is less archival evidence and less proof of her ownership: she represents another figure who has been forgotten within the monolithic whiteness of the western frontier. It has been said that she traveled from Tennessee to Missouri and onto Oregon and applied for land under the Homestead Act: a similar route to Letitia’s. She was born in 1823, just a few years after Letitia. They would have been around the same age, on the same travels, and accomplished many similar land ownership feats - but neither have been met with historical acclaim and are only slowly being introduced into historical memory. “Susan/Susanna “Sucky” Mathews,” Oregon Secretary of State, accessed May 9, 2023, <https://sos.oregon.gov/archives/exhibits/black-history/Pages/families/mathews-susan.aspx>.

tired, stereotyped, and white-washed version of Black history that misinforms white audiences just as much as it excites them. One reviewer even stated, “If all history books were so entertaining and heart-wrenching, maybe school children everywhere would have an easier time remembering the facts and figures and dates and events that fill History books.”¹⁵¹ This roughly translates to, “If all history books were romanticized, idealized versions of history, white people would be more inclined to care.”

Second Museum Age

The harmful forgetting and subsequent tokenization of Letitia’s story offer us an inroad to unravel the complex and fraught relationship between Black history and museums. By exploring the pitfalls in coverage of Letitia’s story, museum history, audience, funding, and white-centric roots, we can better understand how to repair a relationship that should’ve been there from the beginning. Not only is a glaring lack of Black representation present nationally, as seen with the delayed creation of the National Museum of African American History and Culture at the Smithsonian, but also at the state level. The NMAAHC at the Smithsonian did not receive a permanent location until 2016.¹⁵² Black Oregon historians engaged in a similar fight and founded the Oregon Black Pioneers historical society in 1993, still over a century after Himes oversaw the founding of the Oregon Historical Society.¹⁵³ Museum inclusion was not fully recognized until Black-centric historical societies such as the Oregon Black Pioneers were initiated. Even after their founding, Oregon museums struggle with exhibit inclusivity and

¹⁵¹ “J.C. Morrows's Reviews > A Light in the Wilderness: A Novel,” Goodreads, September 8, 2014, https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1049638866?book_show_action=false&from_review_page=2.

¹⁵² Yahr, “We did it.”

¹⁵³ “Oregon Black Pioneers,” Oregon Black Pioneers, <https://oregonblackpioneers.org/>.

dismantling the monolith of white saviorism that has characterized museum culture and public memory.

Ultimately, museums control and cultivate communal knowledge, maintaining an incredible impact on public cultural and historical understanding. With this power, they obscured and erased the stories of pioneers like Letitia and traded them for white-centric tales of heroic pioneers and colonial triumphs. This is still happening today. This obscuration directly affects historical monuments and their preservation and the longevity of white supremacist violence and dogma in Oregon communities. For example, Letitia's burial place was not recognized as a historic cemetery and the current ownership of her land remains under Oregon State University. Thankfully, organizations like Oregon Black Pioneers spearhead a new wave of museum inclusivity that seeks to establish equity and deconstruct the white-centric narrative that clouds museum education and legacies.

According to their website, Oregon Black Pioneers envisions becoming “the preeminent resource for the study of Oregon’s African American history and culture.”¹⁵⁴ Through this, their dedication to “illuminate the seldom-told history of people of African descent in Oregon,”¹⁵⁵ has culminated in what scholar Ruth Phillips has coined the second museum age. She argues that the “truly exciting and innovative potential of the second museum age lies in the advanced programs of socially responsible research and representation that they can support and embody.”¹⁵⁶ Until this second museum age, the institutional representation of Black people in Oregon history has been lopsided compared to white or Indigenous museum presence. Now, the Oregon Black Pioneers are leading a genuine revisiting of the untold histories of Black people in the American

¹⁵⁴ “Oregon Black Pioneers: About,” Oregon Black Pioneers, <https://oregonblackpioneers.org/>.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ruth Phillips, “Re-placing Objects: Historical Practices for the Second Museum Age,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 86, no. 1 (March 2005): 85, doi:10.1353/can.2005.0086.

West. Through the Letitia Carson Legacy Project (LCLP), a partnership with organizations like Oregon State University, the Linn-Benton County NAACP, and The Black Oregon Land Trust, they are initiating a nuanced and complex method of reinterpretation that brings Letitia's story to light and illuminates the storied past of Black Oregonians.

In 1948, Oregon State University acquired 6,200 acres of the former Camp Adair lands from the federal government, including most of the Carson lands and what became the Dunn Forest. Today, much of the Carson land is open prairie, used for beef cattle grazing by Oregon State University's beef ranch. There are no visible remnants of the Carson homestead or farm outbuildings; they were demolished, moved off-site, or allowed to deteriorate after Letitia was forced to leave her homestead and the Carson Estate DLC was sold in 1857. The Letitia Carson Legacy Project intends to use Letitia's land to create "a 21st-century version of her Soap Creek homestead to inspire, educate, and nurture Oregon's future generations of Black and Indigenous growers, gatherers, foragers, entrepreneurs, and leaders."¹⁵⁷ The land is one of a kind; nowhere else in the country can the public visit and participate in programs on land once owned by a Black pioneer. In 2022, the LCLP celebrated Juneteenth on the site of the former Carson homestead, Soap Creek Valley, Benton County, Oregon. Many community members, team members, researchers, historians, and even a descendant of Letitia gathered to celebrate the occasion and their access to that land.

Letitia's land is at the center of the continued dialogue surrounding her legacy; it is a crucial way in which the public can interact with the tangible aspects of her history, as there are no archival photographs or objects tied to her history. But the ownership of this land is an ongoing issue. It is in the hands of an institution that has recently dedicated itself to recognizing

¹⁵⁷ Hailey Brink, "Soap Creek Valley Land After 1852: Carson Homestead 1946-today," Letitia Carson Legacy Project, <https://letitiacarson.omeka.net/exhibits/show/soap-creek-valley-land-after-1/carson-homestead-1946-today>.

Indigenous lands and history, a decision that could be genuine but often reads as virtue signaling that preserves their public image over anything else. In recent years, Oregon State University has taken steps to recognize Indigenous landholding, a vital mission that must be at the forefront of expansive landowners such as OSU. However, they have not done the same for the ancestral Black pioneers of Benton County. The way that Oregon State University has chosen to recognize and memorialize Indigenous land is not reflected in their treatment of Black Oregon pioneers. This differing treatment is indicative of greater trends of anti-Blackness within academic institutions, such as universities or museums, that claim to evolve under increased demand for equity, but have yet to entirely commit to this action.

The question of how, why, and who to memorialize using what land sits at the heart of the ongoing struggle to preserve the legacy of Letitia. But, many of the powerful voices and projects are funded by white power and money ingrained in anti-Blackness. Due to this, Black history and land ownership, like Letitia's go unrecognized. Additionally, people of color are pitted against each other. Indigenous and Black histories are left with incomplete conclusions and forced to struggle over the same parcel of land, despite the millions of acres in Oregon. Why is white power still at the helm of historical land use in Oregon? How can we problematize white land ownership when it comes to Indigenous and Black-owned land? Institutions that knowingly inhabit the land of past Oregon Black Pioneers must acknowledge this history and defer this land use to organizations, like the Oregon Black Pioneers, who have the best interest of all historically marginalized groups in mind.

Conclusion

By closely examining Letitia's story, how it came to light, the reasons contributing to this suppression, a historiographical analysis of the emerging sub-disciplines of Black history and Women's history in the American West, and a critical investigation of what can be done in public history and museum spaces to revitalize Black history narratives—this paper argues that the forgetting of Black women's history is caused by systemic suppression of Black stories that result in a defunct and dissonant public historical memory that fails the legacies of Black women in the American West, like Letitia. The academic and public suppression of Black women's stories across American history subverts and alters the telling of history, but work is being done to resurrect this erasure.

When working to resurrect Letitia's story, bringing it into public historical memory, we must avoid the tokenization of her character. We can learn from the tokenized symbolism of past historical women of color such as Sacagawea or Harriet Tubman and uplift her story with tangible historical significance rather than making her a symbolic figurehead of feminism or a capitalistic symbol of progress. Additionally, the historical fictionalization of her narrative presents another harmful reiteration of romanticization that reduces Letitia's story to entertainment for white audiences.

Popularizing her story is not enough; we must dig deeper to uncover the significance of her erasure and the lateness of her entry into the historical lexicon of the American West. How do these elements communicate a greater pattern of racial and gendered exclusion—and how can we avoid it as we move forward? What great truths can Letitia reveal about the patterned problems of historical study, education, and memory within America? Primarily, as we have charted the institutional racism of Oregon museums and historical societies and traced it

alongside the forgetting of Letitia, we have uncovered a well-known but rarely documented phenomenon of racist and misogynistic exclusion of women of color from popular historical narratives and, consequently, historical consciousness. By learning about the history, trends, and key aspects of this monolithic culture of whiteness and racism in American and Oregon history, it becomes easier to decolonize and dismantle these systems of white power and patriarchy.

Ultimately, the history of Oregon and the American West has been dominated by white pioneer men and families. Consequently, the stories of Black pioneer women like Letitia present an opportunity to deconstruct and decolonize past methods of historical storytelling. In popular culture and historical memory, white pioneer heroes usurp the image of the American West. It has long dominated the association with building the Western frontier. As historiographies of Black history and Women's history in the American West have shown, there is a growing intent to diversify and decolonize this misconception—reinserting the erased narratives of people of color in Oregon history. As academia and historical scholarship evolve, they slowly trickle into mainstream historical knowledge via public history, museums, and pioneer societies. They are also slowly working to incorporate more diverse stories in their collections, exhibits, and programming.

Letitia's legacy is a tangible challenge to the popular conception of the American West; through her resilience and determination, her successes depart from the prescribed supremacy of white pioneers. Greenberry Smith did not win. Though he held her land, she defeated him twice in front of an all-white jury and claimed her own acreage in another county, successfully building a multi-story home and orchard. Additionally, her identity as an oppressed agent of colonialism complicates our understanding of colonization and the interaction of Black and Indigenous identities on the Western frontier. Often pit against each other, as in instances such as

the Cockstock affair, Indigenuity and Blackness in the American West are underexplored and entwined identities that can help us decolonize our current vision of the U.S. West. Letitia's identity as an oppressed colonizer does not absolve the action of the white colonizer. Instead, it further foments it and provides yet another lens through which we can analyze the harmful colonial consequences of the white man in the West. Her story is a rift in the white hypermasculine conquering of the West and presents an unexplored plethora of pathways through which we can improve the study, education, and public outreach of Western history.

Appendix

Table 1-8

Research doctorate recipients, by ethnicity, race, and citizenship status: 2011–21

(Number)

Ethnicity, race, and citizenship status	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
All doctorate recipients	48,909	50,943	52,703	53,986	54,886	54,809	54,552	55,080	55,609	55,224	52,250
U.S. citizen or permanent resident	31,725	32,981	33,964	34,003	35,071	35,678	35,736	35,350	35,227	34,473	31,674
Temporary visa holder	14,235	14,784	15,674	15,839	16,129	16,477	16,288	17,582	18,324	18,476	17,638
Unknown citizenship	2,949	3,178	3,065	4,144	3,686	2,654	2,528	2,148	2,058	2,275	2,938
Hispanic or Latino	2,915	3,064	3,073	3,147	3,422	3,572	3,566	3,592	4,000	4,108	4,013
U.S. citizen or permanent resident	1,989	2,144	2,135	2,190	2,449	2,548	2,536	2,572	2,844	2,850	2,856
Temporary visa holder	922	916	921	944	964	1,016	997	1,016	1,146	1,253	1,148
Unknown citizenship	4	4	17	13	9	8	33	4	10	5	9
Not Hispanic or Latino											
American Indian or Alaska Native	135	107	126	109	141	136	111	116	124	100	105
U.S. citizen or permanent resident	127	104	119	103	131	128	109	115	119	97	100
Temporary visa holder ^a	8	D	7	6	10	8	D	D	5	D	D
Unknown citizenship	0	D	0	0	0	0	D	D	0	D	D
Asian	12,311	12,850	13,430	13,556	13,833	14,052	14,260	14,801	15,181	15,094	14,595
U.S. citizen or permanent resident	2,832	2,943	2,892	2,881	3,072	3,084	3,499	3,302	3,418	3,217	3,022
Temporary visa holder	9,451	9,889	10,514	10,662	10,741	10,931	10,731	11,464	11,718	11,845	11,551
Unknown citizenship	28	18	24	13	20	37	30	35	45	32	22
Black or African American	2,313	2,528	2,655	2,654	2,773	2,866	2,952	3,050	3,092	3,090	3,040
U.S. citizen or permanent resident	1,899	2,055	2,172	2,172	2,275	2,358	2,400	2,449	2,512	2,453	2,431
Temporary visa holder	404	469	479	477	493	502	530	595	570	625	593
Unknown citizenship	10	4	4	5	5	6	22	6	10	12	16
White	26,173	26,982	27,871	27,947	28,619	28,766	28,347	28,554	28,079	27,775	24,710
U.S. citizen or permanent resident	23,278	24,010	24,749	24,829	25,375	25,502	24,844	24,925	24,214	23,934	21,333

Figure 1. National Science Foundation’s Survey of Earned Doctorates Table 8 Research doctorate recipients, by ethnicity, race, and citizenship status: 2011–21”

Table 1-10

Female research doctorate recipients, by ethnicity, race, and citizenship status: 2011–21

(Number)

Ethnicity, race, and citizenship status	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Female doctorate recipients	22,699	23,526	24,365	24,813	25,347	25,222	25,084	25,309	25,488	25,364	24,156
U.S. citizen or permanent resident	16,329	16,909	17,414	17,343	17,853	18,147	18,170	18,037	17,963	17,697	16,441
Temporary visa holder	5,056	5,224	5,571	5,633	5,734	5,805	5,686	6,274	6,556	6,606	6,239
Unknown citizenship	1,314	1,393	1,380	1,837	1,760	1,270	1,228	998	969	1,061	1,476
Hispanic or Latino	1,421	1,515	1,550	1,559	1,664	1,806	1,761	1,726	1,989	2,061	2,008
U.S. citizen or permanent resident	1,096	1,196	1,230	1,191	1,330	1,414	1,384	1,375	1,542	1,584	1,577
Temporary visa holder	324	317	309	364	330	386	363	350	440	475	424
Unknown citizenship	1	2	11	4	4	6	14	1	7	2	7
Not Hispanic or Latino											
American Indian or Alaska Native	79	65	64	55	77	73	62	72	66	61	65
U.S. citizen or permanent resident	77	63	63	54	73	71	61	72	63	58	62
Temporary visa holder ^a	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	0	D	D	D
Unknown citizenship	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	0	D	D	D
Asian	4,904	5,117	5,392	5,465	5,598	5,513	5,588	5,899	5,999	5,902	5,665
U.S. citizen or permanent resident	1,569	1,631	1,628	1,638	1,713	1,652	1,842	1,740	1,792	1,682	1,580
Temporary visa holder	3,320	3,481	3,753	3,820	3,874	3,849	3,732	4,149	4,186	4,207	4,077
Unknown citizenship	15	5	11	7	11	12	14	10	21	13	8
Black or African American	1,396	1,481	1,554	1,503	1,660	1,661	1,747	1,726	1,831	1,773	1,797
U.S. citizen or permanent resident	1,233	1,314	1,371	1,351	1,468	1,495	1,550	1,526	1,619	1,536	1,552
Temporary visa holder	156	166	182	148	187	161	183	197	205	229	235
Unknown citizenship	7	1	1	4	5	5	14	3	7	8	10
White	12,572	12,941	13,263	13,323	13,518	13,611	13,397	13,572	13,191	13,207	11,841
U.S. citizen or permanent resident	11,541	11,842	12,167	12,239	12,397	12,469	12,177	12,317	11,847	11,847	10,661
Temporary visa holder	1,003	1,072	1,065	1,065	1,079	1,121	1,182	1,235	1,293	1,336	1,159
Unknown citizenship	28	27	31	19	42	21	38	20	51	24	21
More than one race	399	484	497	488	535	605	593	655	678	644	652

Figure 2. National Science Foundation’s Survey of Earned Doctorates Table 10 “Female research doctorate recipients, by ethnicity, race, and citizenship status: 2011–21”

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