Flyin’ West Study Guide

I. Historical Context

American Slave Societies

Slave Hierarchy

There was a rigid social hierarchy imposed upon slaves. Field slaves had the least mobility within this system and often did not live as long as domestic or town slaves because of the brutal conditions on plantations. Within each category, gender, and lightness of skin also affected status. Creoles and Mulattoes were often given more opportunities to acquire skilled jobs, such as household servants.¹

Native Americans

Native American Removal - To make way for the homesteaders, the federal government forced many Native American tribes onto reservations. Groups that remained on their own land still suffered because of European overhunting and overfishing. The Dawes General Allotment Act, passed in 1887, aimed to distribute land to Native Americans in a similar manner to the Homestead acts and encourage Native Americans to take European names and start European-style farms.

Relationships between Native Americans and African Americans - The Osage and Potawatomi nation(s) helped the early settler of Nicodemus by giving food to starving settlers, but the people of Nicodemus were still wary of their neighbors.

“[the settlers] were given assurance by the chief, “We no hurt dark shine. We look for pale face, we no like him. Being low on supplies, the Indians gave them supplies enough to last several weeks and these friendly visitors came again and again to see the newcomers.”

Seminole Tribes - Native American people originally from Florida. Some free blacks and escaped slaves settled near and paid tribute to Seminole towns, and became known as Black Seminoles. The Seminole were forcibly evicted from Florida by the treaty of Payne’s Landing in 1832, and by 1842, the majority of Seminoles and Black Seminoles had been removed to territory west of the Mississippi River.

(top right: a Black Seminole leader, Abraham, 1848, bottom right: Seminoles wearing traditional clothing, c. 1926, below: map of Seminole removal)

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5 Lula Mae Sadler Craig, “The First Colony with Morrism [sic] Bell,” typescript, Nicodemus Historical Society, Nicodemus, KS.
Abolition and Civil Rights

The 13th Amendment - The 13th Amendment, ratified in 1865, abolished slavery, stating “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 only freed slaves who rebelled against the Confederacy, while the 13th Amendment was supposed to end the institution of slavery in the entirety of the United States.7

The 14th Amendment and Black Codes - Former Confederate leaders put Black Codes into place in the Southern States following the Civil War. These repressive laws “strictly regulated the behavior of black citizens and effectively kept them dependent on white planters.” African Americans were unjustly arrested for things like idling and making “insulting gestures.” The Civil Rights Bill of 1866 was an attempt to make all citizens equal in the eyes of the law, but some Republicans believed that amending the Constitution would make this sentiment more accepted. In 1868, the 14th Amendment was ratified, meaning that Black Codes and Jim Crow laws were unconstitutional.8

The 15th Amendment - Ratified in 1870, the 15th Amendment gave African American men the right to vote. Despite this, discriminatory legal barriers still prevented many black citizens from voting. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 tried to take down these barriers, but equal access to voting remains a problem to this day.9

Jim Crow Laws - A series of laws enacted in the South from the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and the beginning of the civil rights movement in the 1950s. These laws required the separation of whites from “persons of color”, under the premise that everyone would be “separate but equal”. These laws also made it difficult for African Americans to vote, made intermarriage illegal, and allowed hotels and businesses to turn away African Americans.10

Jim Crow and Trains - The Separate Car Act was passed in 1890 in Louisiana and required “equal, but separate” train car accommodations for blacks and whites. However, African Americans were asked to sit in the smoking cars, which were dusty and dirty. Drinking smoking, rough language, gambling, spitting and urinating were commonplace in these Jim Crow Cars. However, there is documentation of wealthy African Americans arranging for seating in the nicer

cars by going through their white lawyers. Paul Laurence Dunbar was known to do this, but he was still sometimes asked to move to a Jim Crow Car.\textsuperscript{11}

Frank and Minnie’s journey from New Orleans to Nicodemus would have taken anywhere from two to four days. They would have taken a steamboat up the Mississippi to St. Louis, then taken a train across Missouri to Kansas city, and another train to Nicodemus. The boat ride would have taken three days, and the combined train rides would have taken somewhere between 12 and 15 hours.

**Black Christianity** - After slavery was abolished, segregationists discouraged African Americans from worshipping in the same churches as whites. Prior to this, there had been small congregations led by African Americans, but once freed, it was easier for African Americans to establish their own congregations. Some of these congregations practiced forms of Christianity that derived from African spiritual traditions. As centers of black community, Black churches held important leadership roles in the Civil Rights Movement.

**Black Middle Class in London** - In 1772, Somerset vs. Stewart ruled that slavery was unsupported by common law in England in Wales. Somerset was taken from the Americas to England, where he escaped, and it was ruled that he was no longer a slave by Lord Mansfield. Slavery was still legal in the British Empire until 1833, but as a result of this case, there was a perception that life was better for Africans in England.\textsuperscript{12} However, “scientific racism” became more popular following Charles Darwin’s publication of “The Origin of Species” in 1859.

In 1876, Olaudah Equiano became the first black person to be employed by the British government.\textsuperscript{13} Samuel Coleridge-Talyor was a black composer who collaborated with Paul Laurence Dunbar during Dunbar’s literary tour. Coleridge-Talyor was also a supporter of pan-African politics. Samuel Coleridge-Taylor is now considered one of the greatest composers of the Victorian era.\textsuperscript{14} Ida B Wells was also in London in the late 1800s. (top right: Fisk Jubilee Singers, 1876, bottom right: Paul Laurence Dunbar, c. 1890)

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Sukhdev Sandhu, "History - British History in Depth: The First Black Britons," BBC, February 17, 2011.
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Sukhdev Sandhu, "History - British History in Depth: The First Black Britons," BBC, February 17, 2011.
  \item \textsuperscript{14} "Black Londoners 1800-1900," The Equiano Center.
\end{itemize}
Reconstruction - The end of the Civil War signaled the beginning of a massive effort to “reconstruct” the South in a new image. In March of 1865, the Freedman’s Bureau was established to coordinate efforts to protect the rights of former slaves and to provide them with education and medical care. The Bureau stipulated that freed slaves be granted “forty acres and a mule” to begin their new lives as free men.

The Black community responded to their freedom with extraordinary efforts to reunite their families, which had been sold and separated with little regard for human feeling. A northern reporter in 1865 encountered a former slave who had walked more than 600 miles searching for his wife and children, from whom he had been sold away during slavery. Following the war, leaders in the Black community immediately set about creating opportunities for African Americans. Black-owned businesses began to thrive and many educational facilities were established for the Black youth. A period of rapid political advancement also ensued within the African American community.

Benjamin “Pap” Singleton - Main organizer and leader of the Exoduster movement. He was also an early voice of black nationalism. Singleton believed that Blacks could only find stability and economic independence in land ownership. After trying unsuccessfully to purchase land in Tennessee, where whites refused to sell land to Blacks, and where land was financially out-of-reach to the average freed slave at $60 per acre, Singleton urged fellow Black people to abandon the inequities of the sharecropping system of the south and claim their salvation in the promise of the Homestead Act and the opportunity for land ownership in the frontier states. He established an all-black colony in Kansas, known as the Dunlap Colony, in 1878.15

“‘That crazy Pap Singleton came to the church looking for people to sign up to go to Kansas. That man had eyes like hot coals. He said he was like Moses leading the children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt.’” - Sophie (Flyin’ West)

Ida B. Wells - A prominent journalist, activist, and researcher, Ida B. Wells shed light on the was African Americans were treated during her lifetime. She was born into slavery during the Civil War in October 1862. After the war ended, Wells went to college but was expelled because of a dispute with the university president.

Wells continued her education in Memphis and began to make a name for herself writing essays for church publications on the injustices and social conditions of Blacks. While still teaching, she was offered a job as a reporter for the Memphis *Free Press and Headlight*, of which she later became the owner.

When Well’s close friends were the victims of the Memphis lynching in 1892, she wrote a series of editorials in her newspaper, *Free Speech*, urging Negroes to pack up and leave the South, with its code of “Jim Crow” and the unwritten law of the Lynch-mob. Angry whites in Memphis stormed and destroyed the offices of Well’s newspaper, and she was forced to flee in the night to the safety of the North, where she continued her anti-lynching campaign, writing under an assumed name for some time. As a feminist, Wells confronted white suffragists who ignored lynching. She died in 1931.  

The American West

**Buffalo Soldiers** - Buffalo soldiers were African American soldiers who mainly served on the Western frontier following the American Civil War. Their main tasks were to help control the Native Americans of the Plains, capture cattle rustlers and thieves and protect settlers, stagecoaches, wagon trains and railroad crews along the Western front.

**Exodusters** - For people living in cities, moving out west was a difficult adjustment. Many individuals gave up and went back home because farming was too difficult, or a desire for the comforts of city life.

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African American Women Pioneers - Economic necessity forced many African American women to work as cooks, housekeepers, nannies, and laundresses, even after they moved west. A few African American women were entrepreneurs and found success investing in the mining industry, but for the most part, African American women labored in relative obscurity. Black women out west saw high rates of graduation; African American families would sometimes choose to educate daughters instead of sons to protect the girls from employment exploitation. A number of these educated women became teachers.17

Homestead Act of 1860/62 - In an attempt to have American settle on the western frontier, the Homestead Act of 1860 took away lands from Native American tribes and gave them to farmers. The original homestead act in 1860 offered Americans grants of about 320 acres of land out west. However, although this act was passed in the Senate, it was vetoed by President Buchanan. In 1862, a new homestead act was finally passed and put into law. This new act allowed any U.S. citizen to file an application and claim to 160 acres of surveyed Government land. This act created unexpected opportunities for women. Because of the Homestead Act, “a quarter of a million unmarried or widowed women were running their own farms or ranches” by 1890.18

Isom Dart (AKA “Black Fox” AKA “Calico Cowboy”) - Born Ned Huddleston, Isom Dart was a notorious African American Wyoming Territory outlaw. After being freed at the end of the Civil War, he worked outside of the law, stealing horses from Mexico and selling them in Texas. He moved northwest and briefly found success mining gold and silver, and had a love affair with a Shoshone Native American woman a few years later. He then joined a cattle and horse rustling gang, but after he almost died, he went further west and changed his name to Isom Dart to make an honest living. He was discovered and killed on October 3, 1900.19

Mary Fields (AKA “Stagecoach Mary”) - The first African-American female star route mail carrier in the United States. She was born a slave in 1832 in Tennessee and was freed when slavery was outlawed in 1865. Fields then worked at a school for Native American girls at St. Peter’s mission, where the Native Americans called Fields “White Crow” because she acted like a white woman but had black skin. According to reports, she drank whiskey, swore, and was a Republican. After being kicked out of the convent, Fields became a postal worker and eventually obtained a star route mail contract at 60 years old.
II. Timeline

Historical Events

- 1850
  - Lincoln issues the Emancipation Proclamation (1863)
  - The 13th Amendment abolishes slavery and Lincoln is assassinated (1865)

- 1860
  - Homestead Act is re-established (1862)
  - Emancipation is recognized in Texas (June 19, 1865)
  - Reconstruction (1865-1877)

- 1870
  - The 14th Amendment establishes citizenship and equal protection of the laws (1868)
  - The 15th Amendment establishes voting rights (1870)
  - Jim Crow Laws are enacted by the Supreme Court (1877-1892)

- 1880
  - Yellow Fever epidemic in Memphis (1878)

- 1890
  - Lynching and riot in Memphis, Tennessee (1892)

Flyin' West Events

- 1850
  - Will Parish is born into slavery (1858)

- 1860
  - Frank and Sophie are both born into slavery (1862)
  - Fannie is born (1866)

- 1870
  - Deadly outbreak of yellow fever kills Miss Leah's husband and children (~1867)

- 1880
  - Nicoledemus is founded (1877)
  - Minnie is born (1877)

- 1890
  - Sophie and Fannie go west with Pap Singleton's Exoduster Movement (1879)

- 1900
  - Flyin' West begins in the fall of 1898

Act 2, Scene 6 takes place in April 1899
III. Nicodemus, Kansas

Nicodemus was founded in 1877 at the end of the Reconstruction Period. The town was founded by six black men and one white man, under the newly formed company of the Nicodemus Town Company. The earliest settlers of Nicodemus lived underground in order to survive the harsh winter. They built their town from the ground up. The town is located on the bank of the Solomon River, which was chosen for its ideal fertile soil. The town still exists today with a population of about 52 people, according to the 2000 census.

IV. About Pearl Cleage

Pearl Cleage was born in 1948 in Springfield, Massachusetts, but grew up in Detroit, Michigan.20 Her father, Albert Cleage, was a prominent minister, writer, and political organizer.21 Pearl Cleage’s award-winning body of literary work “reveals poignant truths about brave black women”.22

Pearl Cleage says that she was diving when the inspiration for Flyin’ West struck.23 In the interview quoted below, Cleage talks about where she drew further inspiration from.

“I was driving down the freeway and I heard Miss Leah’s voice... it was a very old woman and it sounded like she was sitting in the back seat of my car. And I’m not a writer who had these kinds of experiences where characters talk to you ...So I was driving down the freeway and I heard her saying the speech that actually made its way into the play, almost exactly as I heard it that day, 

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20 "Pearl Cleage," African American Literature Book Club.
22 "Pearl Cleage," African American Literature Book Club.
talking about her children being sold away and wanting to go west after her husband died- if she had wings she’d set out flying west.

And I was so startled at how present the voice was with just that little bit of dialogue actually that I drove off the freeway and wrote down what she was saying. And that was actually the impetus for the play because it was such a dramatic kind of moment, (because I’ve never before or since had that kind of thing happen to me), that I said, “Who is this, what is this that I’m supposed to be saying?” I realized that I had to start thinking about Black people going west, about Black pioneers going west, and I didn’t really have any kind of information about that. I had to start really thinking about doing some research.

The thing that struck me when I started reading all these journals from women who had gone west and letters home and all those things that are available once you start looking for them was that I was really struck by how similar their experiences are to the experiences of women today. They were talking about family, they were talking about childbirth, they were talking about isolation and how to really make a place for themselves in a very male environment. And it was wonderful for me as a playwright, because it meant that although I was writing about a very different time period, I was still writing about the same kinds of issues, the same kinds of questions.”

Pearl Cleage discussed what *Flyin’ West* means to her in that same interview:

“The play really is about a lot of things, but it really has a lot to do with family, with rebuilding family after the trauma of slavery. Miss Leah represents the oldest ancestor, represents a generation of Black people that had lived through so much. She’s the ancestor who connects them and makes them a family. And [she is] also the one who is most able to defend them effectively. She is the one most qualified to make that kind of serious moral decision, that, ‘in order to defend ourselves we’re going to have to do something that we wouldn’t necessarily want to do, and this is the way we’re going to do it.’ It also implies that women have had to protect themselves in that way. [It was] the idea that these Black women who were living through horrendous circumstances did sometimes have ways of protecting themselves that were unknown to people outside of that small sisterhood of Black women.”
V. Production History

*Flyin’ West* was first performed by the Alliance Theater Company in Atlanta in 1992 and became the most-produced play in the country only two years later. The play has been performed in other cities across the country, notably Chicago, Washington D. C., and here in Pittsburgh. Kuntu Repertory Theater Company performed *Flyin’ West* at the University of Pittsburgh as part of their 1995-1996 season. Kuntu Repertory Theater was founded by Dr. Vernell Lillie as a part of the Africana Studies Department at the University of Pittsburgh.

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VI. Bibliography


https://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/osage-civil-war-era/19295#removal.


