In April 1992, South Central Los Angeles exploded in anger and rage. Although Los Angeles is the largest metropolis in the west, those scenes of carnage, no less than the city itself, undermine the regional self-image most westerners prefer: placid valleys or broad vistas populated by proud, self-reliant citizens jealously guarding their individual rights and freedom, “under an open sky.”

Yet black western history, much like the Los Angeles uprising, intrudes itself onto our sensibilities and forces a reexamination of the imagined West. That history, with its examples of resistance, conflict and cooperation between African Americans and other westerners can be celebrated or critiqued but it can no longer be ignored.

Unlike Asian American, Chicano or much of Native American history, which are automatically “western” in orientation, black history in this region continues to be viewed by western regional historians and historians of African America as an interesting footnote to a story focused elsewhere. Indeed historian Walter Prescott Webb in 1957 described the West as the American region without—“water, timber, cities . . . or Negroes.”

This paucity of black western scholarship is particularly surprising considering the size of the black population at certain times in the history of the region. If we define the West as beginning with the states that straddle the 98th meridian and stretching to the Pacific, then as early as 1870 African Americans comprised 12 percent of the region’s population. Put another way, some 284,000 black people resided in every state and territory in the West. By 1910 there were slightly fewer than a million black westerners, about 6 percent of the regional population. That figure had grown to 6 million by 2000, or 6 percent of the regional total.

The Los Angeles Riot of 1992 made the nation aware of the complex relationships among peoples of color in the modern urban West. Yet the multiple sources of that relationship are rooted in five centuries of encounter of racially
and culturally diverse peoples both as individuals and distinct populations. Was the West significantly different for African Americans? Was there a western racial “frontier” beyond which black people could expect freedom and opportunity? Perhaps one answer can be found in the employment of black urban westerners.

An examination of black labor in the West can explain much not only about black workers but as well the social and cultural conditions of African American communities in the region. As Milton P. Webster, vice president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters declared in a 1929 interview, “Race workers are the backbone of the race, and upon their welfare ... depends the progress of all phases of our life, whether religious, social, fraternal, civic or commercial.”

The first black urban workers in the West were the 6,000 slaves who resided in the Texas cities of Austin, San Antonio, Galveston, and Houston. Although only 6 percent of Texas bondpeople, they nonetheless formed a distinct population. Galveston and Houston, the largest cities in antebellum Texas, each had over one thousand black slaves, while several hundred lived in Austin and San Antonio. The urban black slave population grew proportionately with the cities while their work followed the occupational patterns of the region. The majority of these slaves were house servants, but others worked as cooks, teamsters, hotel waiters, carpenters, bricklayers, and boatmen. A small number of skilled slaves worked in flour mills, sawmills, and brickyards. The growth of the skilled slave artisan class prompted white groups such as the Houston Mechanics Association to adopt a resolution in 1858 declaring their opposition to “the practice adhered to by some of making contracts with the negro mechanics to carry on work, as a contractor.”

Most white urban Texans worried about the social latitude black people assumed in the cities because of their occupations. One Austin ordinance enacted in 1855 granted the “city marshal and his assistants ... control and supervision of the conduct, carriage [sic], demeanor and deportment of any and all slaves living, being, or found within the city limits” and another forbade “any white man or Mexican” from “making associates” of black slaves. City laws called for slave patrols, the regulation of assemblies, and the prohibition of gambling or the possession of liquor and weapons. Yet some urban slaves openly flouted these bans, prompting one Austin newspaper editor in 1854 to declare in disgust that he “almost imagines himself in the land of amalgamation, abolition meetings, and woman’s rights conventions.”

Other slaves challenged the limits of their servile status by openly defying whites. Urban slaves commonly disregard the groveling courtesies demanded by “polite” racial etiquette and instead engaged in insubordination and disorderly conduct. One bondsman was quoted in an Austin paper as declaring “let any white man tell him to stop his mouth, and see if he would not give him hell.”

California’s antebellum black population comprised the first voluntary African American migrants to the West and the first significant free African American population in the region. In an 1854 letter to Frederick Douglass, black San Franciscan William H. Newby, described his new city of 35,000 inhabitants. “San Francisco presents many features that no city in the Union presents. Its population is composed of almost every nation under heaven. Here is to be seen at a single glance every nation in miniature.” Newby depicted the entire population but his words