In *Black Lives in Alaska: A History of African Americans in the Far Northwest*, historian Ian C. Hartman and journalist David Reamer address a yawning gap in the historiography of Alaska, namely, the many and varied experiences of Black women and men. The book's scope, spanning from the mid-nineteenth to the twenty-first century, is as ambitious as it is comprehensive. Such preference for width over depth ends there, however, as the authors seek to leave no relevant stone unturned in their diligent presentation of Alaska's Black histories.

Being more survey than monograph, *Black Lives in Alaska* offers no one central argument around which the text is organized. Rather, Hartman and Reamer resolve to demonstrate not only the fact of Black lives in Alaska but also the transformative influence Black individuals (and, with time, communities) had on the shape and direction of Alaska's modern history. Regarding its scholarly contributions, the authors pose their work as meaningful most to histories of African Americans and the US West. At the same time, Hartman and Reamer are well and rightfully aware of expectations that the forty-ninth state provides insight according to its characterization as an exception—or not. To the unasked question, "was it in Alaska as it was elsewhere?," the authors insist the answer is both yes and no. Alaska's Black pasts move "between adherence and disruption to the larger themes of African American and western history," a conclusion Hartman and Reamer find "augments our understanding of both" fields (p. xxiii).

The book's eight chapters are organized by successive periods of time, with each period shrinking slightly as the text draws nearer the present day, sources multiply, and the authors' focus narrows. Such organization mirrors the demographic realities—of Black migrations to Alaska—to which these histories are irrevocably linked. Where early chapters attend to casts of notable individuals throughout Alaska, later chapters contend with more people in fewer places, with the final two zooming in on Anchorage alone.
Hartman and Reamer’s source base is as varied as their chapters. But while the introduction boasts a “variety of heretofore unexplored archival sources and oral histories,” such archival richness is missing from the book’s opening chapters, which for the most part rely on published materials (p. xix). This is not to say the chapters are unsuccessful. The authors’ collation and distillation of secondary sources are in fact much-needed contributions, which now enable researchers to reach for one book where before they might struggle to obtain twenty, or more. That success nevertheless dims in the light of later chapters’ work with period newspapers, extant interviews, and government records—a trio of sources that informs many of the book’s most effective passages.

Chapter 1 dates the beginning of Black history in Alaska to the mid-nineteenth century, when Black men from the Caribbean and eastern North America sought advantage in a maritime trade. Their numbers included free men as well as those formerly enslaved; their labor as whalers, sealers, and sailors of all sorts delivered them to Alaska’s shores. As others have, Hartman and Reamer find that shipboard work offered these men a comparative refuge from white supremacist violence and prejudice. Expectations that Alaska might offer the same reappear throughout the text, beginning here. How well (or how poorly) these expectations aligned with reality is key to the authors’ account of Alaska’s Black histories. The chapter concludes, somewhat incongruously, with the figure of Michael Healy, “son of an Irish-born slaveholder” and an enslaved woman (p. 15). Healy’s appearance enabled him to pass as white, in turn enabling his commission to the US Revenue Cutter Service, a branch of the armed forces with an outsized role in Alaska following its 1867 cession. At his post until 1903, Healy was one of the longest-serving officers in Alaska and at times functioned as military governor in all but name. For Hartman and Reamer, Healy affords an early example of the opportunities available as a result of the nation’s colonization of Alaska Native homelands.

Chapter 2 reviews the era of gold rushes in and around Alaska, from the 1890s to the 1920s. Topics of note will be familiar to readers versed in the literature of mining camps, trails, and boomtowns. Black Lives in Alaska joins a growing body of works seeking to upend traditional perceptions of these human worlds as near-exclusively white and male. Hartman and Reamer describe Black women and men as figures of influence in these worlds, in ways beyond the well-worn paradigm of miners and madams. Bessie Couture, for example, founded and ran Alaska’s first Black-owned business, the Black and White Restaurant in Skagway; nearby, Company L of the segregated Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment (the “buffalo soldiers”) labored to bring the town to lawful order (p. 36). In doing so, Couture, Company L, and others like them defied the “loose form of Jim Crow” that prevailed among Alaska’s white settlers (p. 29).

Like the previous chapter, chapter 3 offers a novel collection of details about a well-known setting, in this case, the world wars. And though a majority of the chapter is understandably devoted to the Second World War—centered on the Alaska Highway and Aleutian campaign—the authors’ discussion of the decades beforehand proves more engaging. Within, Hartman and Reamer foreground later chapters’ urban focus by describing the local prejudice and systemic racism that existed in Alaska’s cities decades earlier. The most evocative of the authors’ examples is William Waddleton, resident of Juneau, and three events that shed light on Black life in early twentieth-century Alaska. First, Waddleton served six months for “peddling liquor” to an Alaska Native woman; second, he was fined seventy-five dollars for “circulating seditious literature”; and last, he and other Black activists successfully protested a local screening of Birth of a Nation (1915) (pp. 52, 54). But this is not the whole story. First, the six-month
sentence resulted from an indictment on one of a possible two charges, a decision in which the presiding judge insisted that “race made no difference”; second, Waddleton was one of twenty-three Alaskans charged with sedition, of whom only two others were people of color; and last, the territorial governor’s ban on Birth of a Nation lasted all of two months (p. 53). The authors argue the experiences of Waddleton and others like him suggest that anti-Black sentiments in early twentieth-century Alaska were powerful, but not intractable and, importantly, that “anti-Black racism did not register to the same extent as anti-Native racism” (p. 55).

Chapters 4 and 5 comprise the authors’ accounting of the tumults and promise of the post-war age. It is here that Hartman and Reamer’s skill with case studies shines brightest as they tell of Alaska’s mid-century civil rights struggles, champions, and battlegrounds. Chapter 4’s exposition of the “rise and fall” of Eastchester Flats—“Alaska’s largest Black neighborhood”—describes how in Anchorage, as elsewhere in the United States, city planners used housing as a means of undermining Black communities’ political power (p. 87). The Flats’ unlikely and storied history includes an appearance by Billie Holiday; at its climax, the neighborhood survived the 1964 Good Friday earthquake. This singular history then came to a familiar end, for while Eastchester Flats “withstood the earthquake,... it did not withstand urban renewal” (p. 94). Chapter 5 turns to the then-territory’s 1945 Anti-Discrimination Act and offers the activism of Fairbanks’ Beatrice Coleman as evidence of Black demands toward the act’s enforcement. Hartman and Reamer compare Coleman’s unbowed protest against unfair hiring practices to the similar, well-known and well-celebrated efforts of L’ukna̓x̱.ádi Tlingit activist Elizabeth Peratrovich. Together, the examples of Coleman and Peratrovich overturn popular beliefs that the 1945 act illustrated that Alaska was, somehow, ahead of its time with respect to civil rights.

Chapter 6 moves to the 1970s, a decade in which Alaska—in sharp contrast to the Lower 48—boomed. Oil was the new gold, and its promise of wealth saw Alaska’s population expand over 30 percent by the end of the decade. Among that number were Black women and men who found work with the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System (TAPS) or in the public and private sectors that grew to accommodate it. For those working with TAPS, it was white coworkers from Texas and Oklahoma who provided the most regular reminders of the anti-Black prejudice many hoped they had left behind. Opportunities beyond the pipeline were concentrated in and around major cities like Juneau, Fairbanks, and Anchorage. With this in mind, Hartman and Reamer convincingly argue for the 1970s as the origin of the urbanized Alaska that exists today, shaped in no small part by the period’s Black activists who demanded public transportation in Anchorage, organized against sexist hiring practices, won local and statewide offices, and more.

Chapters 7 and 8 complete the book’s turn toward cities in general, and Anchorage in particular. The first of the pair focuses on the influence of local law enforcement, with the authors committing the chapter to exploring the “deeply rooted history of distrust and abuse” that informed Black residents’ perceptions of the Anchorage Police Department (APD) as “an antagonistic force” and of Anchorage as “not a safe place to be Black” (pp. 141, 161). Unlike in other chapters, this familiar American story played the same in Alaska as elsewhere. Here, Hartman and Reamer let their wealth of sources speak for themselves and, in the process, produce an exhaustive account of APD’s clear and long-held prejudices against Black Alaskans and Alaska Natives. Chapter 8 pulls back for a more holistic account of Anchorage “at century’s end,” posing the rapid demographic changes of the 1980s and 1990s against contemporary episodes of white supremacist violence to demonstrate that the former by no means precluded the latter (p. 161). The authors do an excellent job of de-
scribing how Anchorage’s newfound diversity affected Black residents’ political awareness and activism, but the chapter otherwise struggles to present arguments about this history in ways similar to previous chapters.

Before bringing *Black Lives in Alaska* toward the present, Hartman and Reamer’s conclusion opens with a review of the often-divergent individual histories on which they base the assertion of these histories’ “adherence and disruption” to the “larger themes” of US historiography (p. xxiii). Following this, Hartman and Reamer offer Anchorage-area Black Lives Matter protests as proof that Alaska’s Black histories continue to this day. The protests’ broad support across BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) activist groups shows promise that the city’s growing diversity—which two decades earlier was for some a source of anxiety—is in fact a strength.

If only on account of meeting its own expectations, *Black Lives in Alaska* is a success. Hartman and Reamer sought to produce a concise, critical, and accessible history, and they did just that. To be sure, the work has its shortcomings—important questions remain to be answered, even asked—but better, I think, to allow these to inform where scholars might go next. However paradoxically, Hartman and Reamer’s achievement in addressing one historiographical absence has afforded readers a keener sense of the many absences yet extant, and the work still to be done.

Because of its wide reach, *Black Lives in Alaska* is only able to offer so much to any one scholarly reader. The work is unmistakably relevant to histories of Black Americans in the US West, for example, but that historiography is one with which Hartman and Reamer are more often in qualified agreement than in conversation. If more accessible as a result, the text leaves scholars with few compelling reasons to consider it a must-read in its entirety. By comparison, individual chapters are likely to be sought and cited for years by those interested in a chapter’s given subject or period.

Environmental historians may find the book frustrating on account of the authors’ remove from the field, its methods, and its scholarship. But this, too, is better conceived as a call to future work for which *Black Lives in Alaska* has laid the foundation.
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