

James Williams's Fugitive Slave in the Gold
Rush and the Contours of a Black Pacific.

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 **Mining the African American Literary Tradition: James
Williams's *Fugitive Slave in the Gold Rush* and the Contours of a
"Black Pacific"**

Janet Neary

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**Mining the African American Literary
Tradition:**

James Williams's *Fugitive Slave in the Gold Rush* and the

Contours of a "Black Pacific"

Janet Neary (bio)

In the opening scene of his postbellum slave narrative, *Life and Adventures of James Williams* (1873), Williams gives an account of his escape from slavery in Maryland. At the age of thirteen, he takes one of his master's horses and rides to a neighboring property. Along the way, he is stopped by a group of white men who ask him where he is going. He answers, "I am going to Mr. Cuche's Mill." When the men ask, "Who do you belong to?" Williams replies, "I belong to Mr. William Hollingsworth," and the men let him pass. Before arriving at Mr. Cuche's Mill, Williams meets a young boy in the street and asks the name of the next town over. The boy answers, "New London Cross Roads." After passing through Mr. Cuche's Mill, Williams is again detained by a white man who asks him where he is going and to whom he belongs. "I am going to New London," he answers, and tells him he belongs to Mr. William Hollingsworth; the man lets him pass. At New London, he meets another small boy and asks him, "What is the name of the next town?" "Eatontown," is the reply. On his way there, Williams is detained by another white man who asks, "Where are you going?" Williams writes, "I answered, 'To Eatontown.' He said, 'Where are you from?' I said, 'Cuche's Mill.' He asked me if I belonged to Mr. Cuche. I said, 'Yes.'"¹ Such exchanges, with new local [End Page 329] particulars forwarded at each stop, are repeated until Williams ultimately makes his way from slavery in Maryland to freedom in Pennsylvania.² Each time Williams is detained, his articulation of local knowledge authorizes his movement and allows him to pass. It is a strategy replicated in the larger structure of his narrative, in which Williams's account of his travels West to pursue economic opportunity and to evade the Fugitive Slave Law depends upon a careful articulation of the specific laws and customs within each locale he moves through, with his mobility authorizing an emergent black political subject along the way.³

Published by San Francisco Women's Union Print in 1873, *Life and Adventures* takes as its primary subject Williams's immigration to and

experiences in the West between 1851 and 1873.⁴ Although the primary organs of slave narrative publication were anti-slavery societies based in the Northeast, a small number of former slaves recorded their experiences in the West in the mid- to late-nineteenth century.⁵ Despite California's admission to the Union in 1850 as a "free state," the majority of African Americans who came West before 1861 came as slaves or fugitives.⁶ Southern slaveholders transported hundreds of slaves into California to work in the gold fields; simultaneously, fugitive slaves and free persons of color set out for California to seek economic opportunity and, after 1850, to escape their increased vulnerability in the East under the newly passed Fugitive Slave Law. As early as 1849 Frederick Douglass reported in *The North Star* that "not fewer than forty" men had left New Bedford for California, and, that "not one of the company of colored persons from New Bedford expresses any regret."⁷ In the concluding chapters of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs notes that her brother William, disappointed by the failure of an anti-slavery reading room he had started with her in Rochester and frustrated by the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, "concluded to go to California," taking her son with him.⁸ As later editions of *The North Star* and *Frederick Douglass's Paper* suggest, Douglass did not view opportunities for blacks in the West through rose-colored glasses; rather, what these texts demonstrate is that the financial, [End Page 330] social, and civic possibilities of California were not alien to the African Americans at the center of Northeast abolitionist culture.⁹ However, it is only recently, in studies by historian Quintard Taylor and...

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2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
+1 (410) 516-6989
muse@press.jhu.edu



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