Imagining the Free State: A 150-Year History of a Contested Image

by James N. Leiker

Freedom—no foundational principle of the United States has been celebrated more and critically considered less. What other term provides the emotional rallying cry, the ill-defined vagueness, cited by civil rights, pro-choice, and environmental activists demanding government action toward a "free" human condition, and tea partiers and other libertarians for whom "freedom" means little or no government at all? Kansans have a special relationship with freedom, embodied in our self-image as the "Free State": a place of tolerance and racial enlightenment where brave men and women drew a line against slavery's expansion and thus precipitated the Civil War and black emancipation.

The year 2011 promises to be a good year for the Free State image. As Kansans reflect on 150 years of history, their attention will surely be drawn toward the imminent installation of a mural in the capitol—supplementing John Steuart Curry's depiction of John Brown as a wild-eyed Moses—that commemorates the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, case. In the words of one blogger, "the mural will help ensure that future Kansans understand their state's rich legacy in the civil rights struggles."[1] State, local, and federal agencies already collaborate on a project titled "Freedom's Frontier," which designates multiple counties in eastern Kansas and western Missouri as significant for black liberation. Even in the eyes of outsiders, the Free State competes with other iconic representations like the Wheat State or the land of Dorothy and Toto. While segregation was a way of life for the plaintiffs in the 1954 case, the fact that it even existed outside the South, let alone in "free Kansas," came as a surprise to many Americans when the

James N. Leiker *is a native of the Hays area, having grown up in Antonino, Kansas, where he attended a rural elementary school that closed the year he left, when the enrollment dropped below twenty. Jim attended Fort Hays State University and the University of Kansas, where he earned a doctorate in American history. He is the author of numerous articles and books, including (with Ramon Powers) the forthcoming* The Northern Cheyenne Exodus in History and Memory. *He is currently an associate professor at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, where he also directs the Kansas Studies Institute.*

1. See *Wichita Eagle*, May 23, 2010; original blog appeared at http://blogs.kansas.com/weblog.

Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains 34 (Spring 2011): 40–49

The Free State competes with other iconic representations of the state, and, although the image had territorial origins, it has more recently come to be informed by the civil rights movement. The famous Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, case, in particular, upheld Kansas's free-state reputation, though the question remains, how representative of Kansas history is that narrative? Pictured is a second grade classroom at Topeka's Monroe Elementary in 1949, just before the school became involved in the famous court case.*

Warren court handed down its decision. More recently, decrying the conservative politics of red states from his home in Chicago, Thomas Frank declared that Kansas "cannot easily be dismissed as a nest of bigots. Kansas does not have Trent Lott's disease. It is not Alabama in the sixties. . . . one thing it doesn't do is racism."[2]

Well . . . in part. Like most self-images, the Free State has been shaped more by selective memory than history. Schoolchildren and other tourists to the statehouse murals forget (or never knew) the outrage that accompanied Curry's portrayal of John Brown. Angered by the state's identification with bloody, violent idealism, legislators withheld Curry's payment and thereby caused the painter to leave his work unsigned and to depart his home state forever.[3] Similarly, in celebrating the Topeka case as a landmark for civil rights, Kansans forget the history that led them to establish segregation in the first place. In 1879 the legislature allowed school boards located in "first-class" cities—defined as having populations of fifteen thousand or more—to open separate elementary schools for black and white children. Segregation was prohibited in "second-class" cities, where perhaps not coincidentally few African Americans lived, and in high schools, which few African Americans attended. Informal segregation prevailed in public facilities such as theatres, restaurants, and hospitals, and in private residential neighborhoods. Nor did the case initiated by Oliver Brown and other black Topekans immediately overturn decades of separation and distrust. Through the 1950s, state officials implemented a phased-in "school choice" program whereby whites could decline to enroll their children in integrated schools on a voluntary, private basis. African-American teachers in Topeka were among the first to lose their

2. Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004), 179.
3. James R. Shortridge, "Regional Image and Sense of Place in Kansas," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 28 (Autumn 2005): 211.

Many groups throughout Kansas's history discovered a difference between the state's image and its reality. Native Americans, for one, felt the discrepancy all too well, for Kansas as a polity owed its existence to the shrinking of Indian Territory. During the post-Civil War military campaigns, white Kansans justified the defeat and removal of the Cheyennes, Kiowas, and Arapahos from the western plains as the inevitable consequence of basic incompatibility between nomadic hunting and settled agriculture. Such treat-ment did not preclude incorporation of Indian imagery into pictures of the state's origins, however, as this proposed state seal from the early 1860s demonstrates.

jobs as white teachers and administrators took responsibility for educating black children—a classic illustration of how *Brown* and other cases often resulted in pro forma desegregation rather than genuine integration.[4]

Jim Crow's genealogy in Kansas can be traced even to the territorial period of the 1850s, when the lines between slave and free might seem clear cut. Many scholars point to the exaggerated nature of Bleeding Kansas violence, often the result of economic squabbles and land disputes rather than ideological debates over slavery. The free-state movement offered voters a moderate alternative between Yankee abolitionists and proslavery Southerners. In contrast to New Englanders who settled towns such as Lawrence, freestaters emerged from old northwest states such as Indiana and Ohio, where antiblack racism matched and at times even surpassed that of the South. Indeed, freestaters emphasized the detrimental effects of slavery on whites—depressed wages, incompatibility with industrial capitalism—more than on African Americans. Freestaters had their victory in the 1859 Wyandotte Constitution, which eventually allowed for Kansas's admission to the Union. While the document did prohibit slavery, its drafters also considered language that would have excluded free blacks from settlement, akin to measures taken by other western states such as Oregon. In its final form, the Wyandotte Constitution confined the right to vote to white males. Though black leaders challenged this provision through the 1860s, full extension of suffrage to black men would have to await ratification of the federal Fifteenth Amendment in 1870.[5] By circumscribing blacks' legal rights in this manner, Kansas voters laid the foundation for segregation laws that prevailed into the twentieth century. If the power of "freedom" rests on the concept's wide interpretive range—its ability to offer different meanings to various competing factions—then the originators of the Free State image interpreted that freedom narrowly: as a legal prohibition

4. Randall B. Woods, "Integration, Exclusion, or Segregation? The Color Line in Kansas, 1878–1900," *Western Historical Quarterly* 14 (April 1983): 181–98; James C. Carper, "The Popular Ideology of Segregated Schooling: Attitudes toward the Education of Blacks in Kansas, 1854–1900," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 1 (Winter 1978): 254–65; and Mary L. Dudziak, "The Limits of Good Faith: Desegregation in Topeka, Kansas, 1950–1956," *Law and History Review* 5 (Fall 1987): 351–91.

5. Gunja SenGupta, "Bleeding Kansas: A Review Essay," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 24 (Winter 2001–2002): 318–41; Bill Cecil-Fronsman, "'Advocate the Freedom of White Men, as well as that of Negroes': The *Kansas Free State* and Antislavery Westerners in Territorial Kansas," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 20 (Summer 1997): 102–15; Gary L. Cheatham, "'Slavery All the Time, or Not at All': The Wyandotte Constitution Debate, 1859–1860," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 21 (Fall 1998): 168–87; and Richard B. Sheridan, "Charles Henry Langston and the African American Struggle in Kansas," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 22 (Winter 1999–2000): 268–83.

against chattel bondage and the freedom of white workers not to compete with slave labor.

But discourses of freedom, once employed, can quickly assume lives of their own. During and even before the Civil War, towns such as Lawrence, Kansas City, and Topeka became active stops on the Underground Railroad. White Kansans risked life and limb not only in helping runaway slaves escape but in recruiting and organizing African Americans into military units, sent into Union service to aid in their own emancipation. For black Southerners, the image of Free Kansas was certainly no meaningless fantasy. In the aftermath of Reconstruction, twenty-six thousand "Exodusters"—so named after the second book of the Bible—fled their homes as Union troops withdrew and redeemer governments reasserted control over the South. Moses and the Hebrews had their Promised Land in Canaan; Exodusters had theirs in Kansas. Enticed by rumors of "forty acres and a mule," African Americans gathered in the state's northeastern cities seeking land and fresh opportunities.[6] Most Exodusters arrived as indigent refugees, unlike the hundreds of others who entered as members of colonization societies that pooled resources, bought land, developed town sites, and launched thriving schools and businesses. Boosters such as Benjamin "Pap" Singleton advertised Kansas's rich agricultural potential as well as its reputation for tolerance. Between 1870 and 1910, African Americans established numerous communities such as Nicodemus and the Dunlap colony, not just in Kansas but across the Trans-Mississippi West. As an editor for the *Nicodemus Cyclone* put it: "We don't propose to say we have discovered an Eldorado but . . . . Here you will encounter none of the prejudice you complain so bitterly of in the south, nor that cramped position you occupy further east."[7]

A glimpse at Kansas's early history reveals several patterns of conflict, . . . most especially over competing definitions of what being free in Kansas actually meant.

Clearly, a glimpse at Kansas's early history reveals several patterns of conflict—over slavery, over land, over personal feuds that became the stuff of dime novels and Hollywood Westerns—but most especially over competing definitions of what being free in Kansas actually meant. African Americans' vision of the Free State differed substantially from that proposed by the movement's original framers. By 1865, as the black population reached almost 10 percent of the state's total, Kansas seemed poised to become not only a free but a welcoming state, a sanctuary from discrimination, a place that contemporary image-makers might rightly celebrate. Unfortunately, white Kansans' tolerance had reached its limits. By no coincidence did the arrival of Exodusters coincide with legal segregation, but even before 1878 white supremacist violence had claimed many black lives. In 1869 three black soldiers, accused of drunkenly killing a railroad employee, lost their lives to a lynch mob on the outskirts of Hays City. The ensuing feud between soldiers and civilians lent the place a reputation as a "sundown town." That incident resulted in part from the troubled relationship between soldiers and civilians in most frontier

6. Richard B. Sheridan, "From Slavery in Missouri to Freedom in Kansas: The Influx of Black Fugitives and Contraband into Kansas, 1854–1865," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 12 (Spring 1989): 28–47; Robert Athearn, *In Search of Canaan: Black Migration to Kansas, 1879–80* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1978).

7. James N. Leiker, "African Americans and Boosterism," *Journal of the West* 42 (Fall 2002): 25–34. Quotation from *Nicodemus* (Kans.) *Cyclone*, January 20, 1888.

settlements. But within a few years, murders in Leavenworth, Fort Scott, and elsewhere—combined with the institutionalization of Jim Crow—widened that reputation to other Kansas communities. Brent M. S. Campney has gone far toward correcting the perception of the Reconstruction period as a time of racial harmony. Yet as Campney's work also illustrates, the state's "free" narrative survived just fine, projecting an aura of meritocratic equality on both Kansas and the Midwest that stood in sharp contrast to the South's perceived bigotry.[8]

The Free State image seems difficult to sustain, at least from the standpoint of empirical history.

African Americans had company in discovering the difference between image and reality. Indeed, Kansas as a polity owes its existence to the shrinking of Indian Territory, one of the provisions of the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act. During the post-Civil War military campaigns, white Kansans justified the defeat and removal of the Cheyennes, Kiowas, and Arapahos from the western plains as the inevitable consequence of basic incompatibility between nomadic hunting and settled agriculture. In the 1880s, even "civilized" farming Indians like the Iowas and Sacs and Foxes became targets of removal as new policies reduced their reservations and forced them out of the state. Between 1900 and 1920, more than thirteen thousand Mexicans entered Kansas, fleeing the Mexican Revolution and drawn by employment in seasonal agriculture, railroads, and meat packing. Though many Mexicans returned cyclically to their homeland, thousands remained to seek U.S. citizenship, only to face a system of segregation similar to that imposed on blacks. During the Great Depression, Kansas joined other western states in deporting thousands of Mexican laborers to preserve jobs for whites. Even claims to "whiteness" did not guarantee safe haven. World War I unleashed a wave of anti-German hysteria that afflicted the state's largest group of European immigrants. School boards prohibited the teaching of the German language, and parents from ethnic villages near Hays and Russell and in Mennonite settlements north of Wichita warned children to avoid danger by speaking only English in public.[9]

With these examples in mind, the Free State image seems difficult to sustain, at least from the standpoint of empirical history. At best, the disparity indicates superficial civic pride; at worst, boastful hypocrisy. But we are not talking about a *lived* past here so much as an *imagined* one, and when dancing in the field of memory, imagined pasts receive special privilege. Maurice Halbwachs, a Durkheimian social scientist who produced exceptional works on the sociology of knowledge, argued that memories rely heavily

8. James N. Leiker, "Black Soldiers at Fort Hays, Kansas, 1867–1869: A Study in Civilian and Military Violence," *Great Plains Quarterly* 17 (Winter 1997): 3–17; Brent M. S. Campney, "W. B. Townsend and the Struggle against Racist Violence in Leavenworth," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 31 (Winter 2008–2009): 260–73; and Campney, "'Light is bursting upon the world': White Supremacy and Racist Violence against Blacks in Reconstruction Kansas," *Western Historical Quarterly* 41 (Summer 2010): 171–94. See also Christopher C. Lovett, "A Public Burning: Race, Sex, and the Lynching of Fred Alexander," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 33 (Summer 2010): 95–115.

9. For an overview of racial and ethnic discrimination, see James N. Leiker, "Race Relations in the Sunflower State," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 25 (Autumn 2002): 214–36; and Leiker, *The Changing Village: A Centennial History of Antonino, Kansas, 1905–2005* (Hays, Kans.: Antonino Centennial Committee, 2005).

on social interaction; only dreams lack a social context. Halbwachs called this localization: a recalling of the past by people who share an immediate vicinity, whether as family, neighbors, coworkers, and so on. Within these social groupings, people erase from memory that which creates conflict and instability and retain that which builds unity.[10] The question becomes not whether Kansans have lived up to their idyllic Free State image, because obviously they have not. The question, rather, is what social purpose has that image served, and why do Kansans continue to cling to it after 150 years?

Between 1900 and 1920, more than thirteen thousand Mexicans entered Kansas, fleeing the Mexican Revolution and drawn by employment in seasonal agriculture, railroads, and meat packing. Though many Mexicans returned cyclically to their homeland, thousands remained to seek U.S. citizenship, only to face a system of segregation similar to that imposed on blacks. In this 1924 photograph, Mexican men and boys raise a fence at Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church and School in Topeka. The church, established in 1914, and school, added in 1921, are presently supported by funds raised at the church's annual fiesta, "the largest in the Midwest."

Matthew Stewart's work on the state Republican Party and its rhetoric of the late nineteenth century may prove useful here. In the 1890s, the GOP faced a serious political challenge in Populism, which contended that dedication to laissez-faire business principles led to monopoly and exploitation of small producers. Working- and middle-class Kansans gave such criticisms a fair hearing, leading many to join the "agrarian revolt" against an entrenched party that seemed to favor railroads and corporations over small, independent farmers. Placed on the defensive, Kansas Republicans reminded voters that they were the state's *original* defenders of the underdog, linking the founding of their party in 1856 to the free-state struggle. Starting in 1891, after the GOP took a humiliating drubbing at the polls, the state's "Young Republicans" created the Kansas Day Club, which sponsored Old Settlers' associations and other gatherings to remember the days when Kansas saved the Union from Democratic slave owners. "Typical would be the orator," wrote Stewart, "who claimed that Kansas turned the tide of human history away from a legacy of slavery and toward a more enlightened, freedom-loving path." As rural radicals such as Mary Elizabeth Lease tried to shift the definition of freedom toward more material foundations, Republicans drew on memories of bushwhackers, Quantrill's raid, and other gory episodes—still vivid memories in the 1890s—and linked them to a patriotic, nostalgic past. What Stewart calls "the Kansas Spirit" proved enormously effective. Not only did the GOP's Kansas Clubs inspire imitators as far away as New York and California but even Populists and Progressives learned to frame their agendas within the language of moral reform, casting the state's struggles as part of its long tradition against slavery, oppression, and evil.[11]

10. Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1992); and Twona Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2004).

11. Matthew Stewart, "The Regenerative Power of the Kansas Spirit," paper presented to Western History Association, Denver, Colo., 2009, quote 2.

Kansas as the Free State has perhaps always appealed to some residents more than others. The city of Lawrence, for example, was founded by abolitionists and it suffered some of the worst carnage of the territorial-Civil War period. Memories of its ransacking, most notably by William Clarke Quantrill in 1863, shaped how Lawrencians understood their town and state. Here survivors of the border ruffian raids gather around the turn of the century to remember the burning of their town.

The Free State image did more than provide Republicans legitimacy against raucous challengers; it defined Kansas history itself. In 1875 the Kansas State Historical Society was founded by the former Kansas Editors' and Publishers' Association. Though ostensibly nonpartisan, the Society's early publications, not to mention its leaders' political leanings, privileged the free-state struggle of the territorial and Civil War era as *the* central force of Kansas's past. Franklin G. Adams, a former freestater who served as Society secretary, declared the organization's purpose as follows: "Day by day the men who made Kansas free are passing away. The last witness will soon be called to testify, but in vain. The story was a brave one, and it should be read and known to the last generations of men." Following its attachment to the state government in 1879, the Society became the preeminent vehicle for disseminating the legacy of Kansas's free-soil past.[12] By the early 1900s, its journal regularly explored other facets of state history like immigration, Indian warfare, and pioneer experiences, but articles and essays about Bleeding Kansas and the fight against slavery overwhelmingly carried the day. A century later, one can argue that little has changed. A perusal of article titles published in *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* and its predecessor *Kansas Historical Quarterly* show the period from 1854 to 1880 to still be enormously popular, even dominant. Reflecting the advances of social history, more essays dealing with African Americans and racism have appeared, many addressing twentieth-century topics. As upcoming plans for the *Brown v. Board* mural indicate, recent historiography has widened the free-state narrative's reach from its territorial origins to the more recent civil rights movement.

How representative of Kansas history is this narrative, really? By confining discussions about "freedom" to African Americans, the free-state discourse explores the life chances of one racialized group that, even at its peak in the 1860s, still comprised a fraction of the state's population. True, occasional studies test the image against the experiences of Native Americans, showing the continual fascination with the nineteenth century. But articles centered on the twentieth-century experiences of Latinos, women, gays, religious minorities, and others—for whom "freedom" carries different meanings—appear seldom or not at all. Geographically, the free-state narrative has defined Kansas history through the lens of a handful of northeastern counties in proximity to Missouri. Admittedly, this is where much of the present population of Kansas lives, urban Wichita

12. *Ibid*., quotation 5; Edgar Langsdorf, "The First Hundred Years of the Kansas State Historical Society," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 41 (Autumn 1975): 276.

aside. Yet does that story of black liberation carry much relevance for Baxter Springs lead miners, or Goodland wheat farmers, or Garden City social workers? Mention the free-state struggle in these and other communities far removed from the Topeka-Lawrence-Kansas City metropolis and the response is likely to be a blank stare.

Former U.S. House Speaker Tip O'Neill once said all politics is local. The same holds true for history. In an illustration of Halbwach's theory about localization of memory, the Free State image offered a powerful set of meanings for early residents of northeast Kansas who endured hardships during the Civil War and Missouri border conflicts. Subsequently, that image has provided historians an explanatory bridge linking those dramas to later movements. The problem lay in packaging that *local* history as *state* history, elevating to historical paradigm a discourse to which Kansans outside the area do not necessarily relate. It is also somewhat of an elitist enterprise. After all, "free Kansas" has its greatest appeal in political centers such as Topeka, home to legislators in the best position to fund commemorations, and in the university towns where people most likely to produce historical writings tend to live.

Geographically, the free-state narrative has defined Kansas history through the lens of a handful of northeastern counties in proximity to Missouri.

The city of Lawrence offers the best case in point. Founded in 1854 by abolitionists from the Massachusetts (later New England) Emigrant Aid Society, Lawrence suffered some of the worst carnage of the territorial-Civil War period, having been ransacked and burned at least twice, most notably by William Clarke Quantrill in 1863. Those early Lawrencians' sacrifices on behalf of freedom are ever remembered at the University of Kansas (known disparagingly to some in the state as "snob hill"), where free-state iconography appears everywhere, from the brewery on Massachusetts Street that bears the name, to T-shirts deriding Missourians as slave-owning cousin-marriers. Halbwachs would have us ask whose interests collective memories serve; in the case of KU, it helps sell lots of tickets to athletic events. No better device exists for building school pride and community solidarity than to offer a shared enemy, a demonized Other—in this case, the University of Missouri. The documentary *Border War* contextualizes the KU-Mizzou sports rivalry within the pro- versus antislavery struggles of the nineteenth century. In cheering the Jayhawks, KU fans imagine themselves defending the Free State much as their ancestors did in the 1850s. But is this truly a statewide phenomenon or merely a local one? At a recent showing of *Border War* before the Kansas Association of Historians, teachers from Wichita, Hays, and Colby expressed surprise that such a competition even existed. A historian from Emporia dismissed the whole business as "damned silly."[13]

A skeptical examination of the Free State image, then, might lead to the conclusion that Lawrence—regarded by many as the state's intellectual core—is guilty of historiographical imperialism, of projecting its own local memories and histories onto Kansas at large. Perhaps we should talk about the "Free Town" and not the Free State. After all, the myth contends, Lawrence has long been a progressive blue island in a sea of red. But even here the disparity between image and reality is evident. As

13. Author's recollection, post-film discussion, Kansas Association of Historians, annual meeting, April 16, 2010, National Archives at Kansas City.

a host of revisionist works have established, Lawrence has not always lived up to its cherished ideals. In 1960 civil rights activists picketed a private swimming pool that refused to admit African Americans. The activists earned scorn from Lawrence's business community, which proclaimed the right of individual proprietors to exclude whomever they wished. This incident, and many others that followed during the turbulent decade, occurred within an organized defense of the town's Jim Crow practices. Conservatives in Lawrence rarely employed the language of white supremacy, instead framing their opposition to desegregation within libertarian fears of activist courts and governments that stripped autonomy from private individuals. Anticipating the culture wars of our own time, the twentieth-century clash between "liberal" academics and students at KU and "conservative" homeowners and merchants might be regarded as characteristic of "town-gown" splits in other places. But even at KU, as Kristine McCusker and others have documented, administrators and athletic department officials did not consistently defend the rights of black students to equal admission and housing. Campney's words are significant: "it [racism] afflicted places like Lawrence—notwithstanding its self-inoculating free-state and midwestern narratives—as thoroughly as it did any of those other American places more popularly associated with it."[14]

Certainly the Free State image has been open to misinterpretation and misuse but that does not diminish its importance.

Imagined pasts serve a purpose, though: they provide nostalgic escapism. As contributors elsewhere in this issue point out, Kansans' insistence on remembering themselves as a rural, agrarian people, waxing poetic about the prairies, temporarily rescues them from having to think about complex urban and environmental problems. Likewise, imagining a free-state past when Kansas saved the world from slavery deflects attention away from the worst charges of discrimination and racial violence. In this sense, the Free State image bestows moral authority on whomever can best claim it, a prize as highly contested as the football at a KU-Mizzou game. In contemporary debates ranging from immigration to abortion to gun control to affirmative action, actors on all sides of the political spectrum have utilized the legacy of Free Kansas by likening their causes to the idealistic reformers of old. In a particularly insightful chapter of *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, Frank notes the frequency with which the pro-life movement compares itself to the armed abolitionists who founded Lawrence. Says Tim Golba, former president of Kansans for Life: "If John Brown lived today, he'd be considered a right-wing religious fanatic. He'd be considered one of us today." Paradoxically, the same charges leveled against abolitionists in their day—effete, eastern, snobbish intellectuals, out of step with common folks—comprise a chief

14. Rusty L. Monhollon, *"This is America?" The Sixties in Lawrence, Kansas* (New York: Palgrave, 2002); Monhollon, "Taking the Plunge: Race, Rights, and the Politics of Desegregation in Lawrence, Kansas, 1960," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 20 (Autumn 1997): 138–59; Kristine McCusker, "The Forgotten Years of America's Civil Rights Movement: Wartime Protests at the University of Kansas, 1939–1945," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 17 (Spring 1994): 26–37; and Brent M. S. Campney, "'Hold the Line': The Defense of Jim Crow in Lawrence, Kansas, 1945–1961," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 33 (Spring 2010): 22–41, quotation 41.

weapon in the cultural assault against progressives in our own, be they residents of blue Douglas County or blue Massachusetts. As Frank observes, conservative activists descend rhetorically from the style and moral certainty of northeastern abolitionism, but in their opposition to federal authority and the sanctity of the private sphere, their genealogy leans southward.[15]

Abolitionist John Brown grasps a gun and, not a Bible, but the 2008 National Collegiate Athletic Association basketball trophy on an adaptation of John Steuart Curry's Tragic Prelude *held up in the student section at a March 2009 game between rivals KU and Mizzou. In the athletic "border war" continually fought between the teams, KU fans imagine themselves defending the Free State much as their ancestors did in the 1850s. Photograph by Nick Krug courtesy of the* Lawrence Journal World.

Certainly the Free State image has been open to misinterpretation and misuse but that does not diminish its importance. Indeed, like the concept of freedom itself, the image's very power emanates from its ambiguity. It is perhaps the closest Kansans have to a creation story (or "origin story," as Rita Napier calls it), a founding myth that guides their actions. As a unifying narrative, however, it has never gained much legitimacy outside its origins in the northeast part of the state. The same might be said of Kansas history itself; what common story, what shared past, could possibly unite a political entity that encompasses so wide a landscape, with so much diversity? The Free State may yet accomplish that awesome task but only if Kansans themselves are willing to consider the meaning of freedom in new ways. In this endeavor, they can draw inspiration from African Americans who did not permit a narrow, legalistic definition of "freedom" to stand. Had they done so, Kansas would continue to celebrate the end of slavery while segregating schools and lunch counters. Similarly, by 2161 when the state reaches its 300th anniversary, who can say how far an imagined past of black liberation will have gone in liberating, or for that matter oppressing, other groups? Kansas was never a free state but it has been a state where freedom is constantly redefined. KH

15. Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, 179–90, quote 183.