

STUDIES IN MIDWESTERN HISTORY

VOL. 4, NO. 4

November, 2018

The Historiography of Black Workers in the Urban Midwest: Toward a Regional Synthesis

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Research on black workers in the Midwest is deeply rooted in early 20th century anti-racist black history and social science movements. W. E. B. Du Bois, St. Clair Drake, Horace R. Cayton, E. Franklin Frazier, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and others produced groundbreaking studies that challenged prevailing white supremacist research on black people.² By countering racist notions that people of African descent were inadaptably to urban life and labor, this scholarship established the intellectual foundation for the spread of black urban history as a specialty in the years after World War II. It also strengthened the hand of the early 20th century social movement to dismantle the Jim Crow system itself. Building upon the insights of their early 20th century counterparts, post-World War II historians would loudly proclaim the utility of

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² Marcus A. Hunter and Zandria F. Robinson, "The Sociology of Urban Black America," *The Annual Review of Sociology* 42 (2016): 385-405. Hunter and Robinson add the pioneering social scientific work of Ida B. Wells-Barnett to the pantheon of early 20th century sociological scholarship on African American life. Alongside Du Bois, Hunter and Robinson argue that Wells-Barnett helped establish a rigorous sociological assessment of the "rural-to-urban transition" of African Americans using "critical Race and gender theory" (388). See I.B. Wells-Barnett, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All its Phases* (New York: New York Age Print, 1892-1894).

black urban history in the creation of new knowledge for understanding why the nation's cities were burning and what steps were needed to extinguish the flames.³

Studies of northeastern cities informed the first wave of interwar research on the urban Midwest. By the end of World War II, however, under the impact of the Chicago School of sociology at the University of Chicago, scholarship on the Windy City had emerged at the cutting edge of new knowledge on black urban, labor, and working class experience on a national and even global scale. St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton concluded their seminal study of Chicago, *Black Metropolis* (1945) on a transnational note: "So it is really only 'One World.' The problems that arise on Bronzeville's Forty-seventh Street circle the globe. . . A blow struck for freedom in Bronzeville finds its echo in Chungking and Moscow, in Paris and Senegal."⁴

The interplay of scholarship on the Midwest and other northern cities continued to unfold during the second half of the 20th century.⁵ Studies of Chicago would often take the lead, but research on other Midwestern cities also helped to revamp our understanding of race and class relations over the past century. Focusing on Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, St. Louis, and Milwaukee, this essay explores the transformation of research on black workers in the urban Midwest from the foundational years of the early 20th century through recent times. While much work remains to be done, a century of innovative research on different time periods, topics, and themes provides an excellent opportunity to craft a regional Midwestern synthesis of black labor and working class history. The contributions of early 20th century scholars offer the first layer of evidence for this effort.

³ Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto, 1890-1930* (1963; reprinted, Rev. Ed. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971), 201.

⁴ St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City, vols. 1 and 2* (1945; rev. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1962), 767

⁵ For insight into the transformation of black urban, labor, and working class history, see Pero Dagbovie, *African American History Reconsidered: New Perspectives on Black History and its Profession* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Francille R. Wilson, *The Segregated Scholars: Black Social Scientists and the Creation of Black Labor Studies, 1890-1950* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006); Arvarh E. Strickland and Robert E. Weems, Jr., ed., *The African American Experience: An Historiographical and Bibliographical Guide* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001); Darlene Clark Hine, ed., *State of Afro-American History: Past, Present, and Future* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986); August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black History and the Historical Profession* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

EARLY 20TH CENTURY BEGINNINGS

Until the onset of World War I, studies of Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and New Haven dominated debates about race, cities, and the black experience in industrializing America. Between 1922 and 1945, however, in rapid succession, Charles S. Johnson, E. Franklin Frazier, and St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton produced groundbreaking studies on African American life in Chicago. Building partly upon the pioneering works of W. E. B. Du Bois and other scholars on the urban Northeast, the outpouring of research on Chicago broadened our understanding of African American life and labor through the prism of race and class relations. While this scholarship was by no means uniform in methodology, theory, and interpretation, it firmly reinforced the professional study of African American history and helped to place white supremacist scholarship on the defensive. Interwar studies rejected white supremacist beliefs in the genetic inferiority of black people. They emphasized the role of white hostility in the creation of racial inequality in the economy, politics, and institutions of the city and nation. Along all segments of the color line in housing, jobs, public accommodations, and justice before the law, these scholars persuasively argued that racist thoughts and social practices gave rise to such events as the bloody Chicago Race Riots of 1919 that took the lives of some 23 blacks and 15 whites.⁶

By the end of World War II, this scholarship had inspired the gradual proliferation of scholarly essays, journal articles, and MA and PhD theses on African American life and labor in other Midwestern cities as well as Chicago. Along with the publication of Carter G. Woodson's well-known essay on Cincinnati's early 19th century black community and Wendell Dabney's popular history *Cincinnati's Colored Citizens* (1926), less well-known writers like Paula Lynagh, Thomas Imse, and E. R. Krumbiegel provided important local studies of black life in interwar Milwaukee. The early contributions of John B. Abell, Howard W. Green, and Gordon Simpson illuminated the history of blacks in Cleveland, while Dorothy Emmer, Glenn E. Carlson, and Arthur R. Kooker offered pioneering analyses of Detroit's black community. Indeed,

⁶ Charles S. Johnson (for the Chicago Commission on Race Relations), *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot* (1922; rept. New York: Arno Press, 1968); E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1932); E. Franklin Frazier, "The Impact of Urban Civilization upon Negro Family Life," *American Sociological Review* 2, no. 5 (9 Oct. 1937): 609-18; Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*.

uncovering these often hidden contributions to the historiography of blacks in the urban Midwest should be a major agenda item for the Midwestern History Association.⁷

In addition to local case studies, national surveys of African American migration, labor, and social conditions provide another significant body of evidence for a Midwestern synthesis. These studies illuminate the experiences of southern black migrants as they entered the urban industrial economy of the urban Midwest as well as the Northeast during the first large interwar wave of the Great Migration. W. E. B. DuBois and Augustus Gill; Lorenzo Green and Carter G. Woodson; Sterling D. Spero and Abram L. Harris; Horace R. Cayton and George S. Mitchell; and Charles Wesley established the history of black workers in the urban Midwest and elsewhere as an integral part of the American labor movement. While this scholarship largely ignored the lives of general laborers, household and domestic workers, it nonetheless pinpointed the color line in the U.S. labor movement and underscored the role of white workers in fomenting the emergence of black workers as strikebreakers during their early entry into the industrial sector of the expanding economy of the late 19th and early 20th century. As Du Bois and Gill put it, from the outset of the emancipation era, black workers maintained themselves, “only by accepting low wages and keeping at all hazards the goodwill of the [white employing] community.” Similarly, according to Charles Wesley, not just race and color, but “debasement wage slavery” (namely, capitalism) enabled “the continual exploitation of black workers.” For their part, Spero and Harris underscored how racial and class stratification were both “kept alive and aggravated by the structure and politics of American trade unionism.”⁸

⁷ For the gradual expansion of research on other Midwestern cities, see Paula Lynagh, “Milwaukee’s Negro Community” (Milwaukee, 1946); Thomas Imse, “The Negro Community in Milwaukee” (MA thesis, Marquette University, 1942); E. R. Krumbiegel, “Observations on Housing Conditions in Milwaukee’s Sixth Ward: A Report to the Mayor and Common Council” (Milwaukee, 1944); John B. Abell, “The Negro in Industry,” *Trade Winds*, mar. 1924; Gordon Simpson, comp., *Economic Survey of Housing in Districts of the City of Cleveland Occupied Largely by Colored People* (Cleveland, 1931); Howard W. Green, *A Study of the Movement of the Negro Population of Cleveland* (Cleveland, 1924) and *Natural Increase and Migration* (1938); Carter G. Woodson, “The Negroes of Cincinnati Prior to the Civil War,” *Journal of Negro History* 1 (Jan. 1916): 2-8; Wendell P. Dabney, *Cincinnati’s Colored Citizens: Historical, Sociological, and Biographical* (1926; repr. New York: Negro Universities Press, 1970); Rhoza A. Walker, “Housing as an Educational Problem for Negroes in Cincinnati” (MA thesis, University of Cincinnati, 1940); Dorothy Emmer, “The Civil and Political Status of the Negro in Michigan and the Northwest before 1870” (MA thesis, Department of History, Wayne State University, 1935); Glenn E. Carlson, “The Negro in the Industries of Detroit” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1929); Arthur R. Kooker, “The Anti-Slavery Movement in Michigan, 1796-1840” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1941); June B. Woodson, “A Century with the Negroes of Detroit: 1830-1930” (MA thesis, Department of History, Wayne State University, 1949).

⁸ Charles H. Wesley, *Negro Labor in the United States, 1850-1925: A Study in American Economic History* (1927; repr. New York: Russell and Russell, 1967); Lorenzo J. Greene and Carter G. Woodson, *The Negro Wage*

As interwar scholars illuminated labor migration, work, class and race relations in the industrial workplace, they also documented the increasing segregation of black workers in the residential and community life of the urban environment. Building partly upon extensive analyses of residential segregation in earlier local community studies, Charles S. Johnson and Robert Weaver produced seminal works focused specifically on the phenomenon of “ghetto formation” in the 20th century industrial city. Published, respectively, in 1943 and 1948, *Patterns of Negro Segregation* and *The Negro Ghetto* offered springboards for the postwar emergence of the “ghetto formation” school of scholarship on African American urban, labor, and working class history.⁹

Early 20th century scholars also provided significant insight into the politics and social movements of the urban-industrial Midwest. But the struggle against the color line was less united and militant than some scholars and grassroots organizers hoped that it would be. Drake and Cayton identified “the existence of a class system” within the African American community as the principal factor that hampered a more concerted effort against racial barriers in the urban political economy. “The fact that *some* Negroes have secured wealth and an education is a powerful argument for ‘patience.’” Still, Drake and Cayton acknowledged the development of a cross-class consensus on certain questions and social struggles within black Chicago. “Even a cursory observation of a political rally or a barbershop discussion,” they concluded, “would convince the most skeptical that these [elite] spokesmen are expressing the attitudes and desires of the Negro masses when they assail the Job Ceiling, the Black Ghetto, and the denial of civil liberties.” While these struggles did not eliminate residential segregation, economic discrimination, and restrictions on African American access to equal rights in the community life of the city, they did employ what Drake and Cayton described as “Negro *political* power supplemented by

Earner (1930; reprinted. New York: Russell and Russell, 1969); Sterling D. Spero and Abram L. Harris, *The Black Worker: The Negro and the Labor Movement* (1930; reprinted. New York: Atheneum, 1968); Ira De Augustine Reid, *Negro Membership in American Labor Unions* (New York: National Urban League, Department of Research and Investigation, 1930); Horace R. Cayton and George S. Mitchell, *Black Workers and the New Unions* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939). Also see Carter G. Woodson, *A Century of Negro Migration* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1918); Emmett J. Scott, *Negro Migration During the War* (1920; reprinted. New York: Arno Press, 1969); Louise V. Kennedy, *The Negro Peasant Turns Cityward: Effects of Recent Migrations to Northern Cities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1930); Clyde V. Kiser, *Sea Island to City: A Study of St. Helena Islanders in Harlem and Other Urban Centers* (1932; reprinted. New York: AMS Press, 1967).

⁹ Charles S. Johnson, *Patterns of Negro Segregation* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1943); Robert C. Weaver, *The Negro Ghetto* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1948).

the threat of mass action, and even of violence,” to secure concrete gains: “a housing project in Bronzeville; a suit against the real estate interests that was carried to the Supreme Court; the opening up of a job here and there; [and] the appointment of Negroes to the Library Board and the School Board.”¹⁰

Spero and Harris also called attention to the dynamics of cross-class and interracial alliances in their brief sketch of “The Negro Community and the Labor Movement,” but political scientist Harold Gosnell provided the most systematic interwar treatment of black politics under the impact of the Great Migration. Published in 1935, before most urban blacks made the transition from the Republican to the Democratic Party, *Negro Politicians* established a model for subsequent studies of black urban politics, including Drake and Cayton’s analysis in *Black Metropolis*. Gosnell linked the rise of influential black political figures like Edward Wright and Oscar Depriest to both southern black migration to the city and their increasing residential concentration on the city’s South Side. “Negro migrants to the urban centers,” Gosnell concluded, “soon found that they could control the election of representatives from these areas.” Even more so than Drake and Cayton, Gosnell also underscored how blacks in Chicago soon achieved more concrete gains (though insufficient to meet their many needs) through the established political system than their counterparts elsewhere in the urban Northeast and Midwest. “They have been more aggressive along political lines than have Negroes in New York City . . . more experienced than the Negroes of Detroit . . . more adventurous than the Negroes in Cincinnati, and they have been more united than the Negroes in St. Louis.”¹¹

POST-WORLD WAR II DEVELOPMENTS

Interwar social scientific, ethnographic, and historical studies spurred the emergence of black urban studies as a field in the years after World War II. Again, while Gilbert Osofsky’s seminal *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto* (1963), kicked off the postwar rise of urban studies as a historical specialty, histories of the urban Midwest soon took center stage. Historians David Katzman, Allan Spear, Kenneth L. Kusmer, and Arnold Hirsch placed research on the urban

¹⁰ Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 716-17, 732-33.

¹¹ Spero and Harris, *The Black Worker*, 661-69; Harold Gosnell, *Negro Politicians: The Rise of Negro Politics in Chicago* (1935; reprinted Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 11.

Midwest at the center of debates over the origins and development of racially segregated neighborhoods in urban America. Employing the notion of ghetto formation and racial caste formation in Katzman's case, these scholars emphasized the role of white hostility in the creation of racially segregated neighborhoods in the region. Based on the experiences of African Americans in Cleveland, Chicago, and Detroit, this scholarship fueled debates on African American history, race, research, and urban public policy decisions for nearly two decades. Nonetheless, this scholarship varied considerably in chronology and emphasis on the precise timing of racially segregated urban spaces, particularly whether the predominantly black ghetto emerged before, during, or after the onset of the Great Migration and whether the years after World War II produced an entirely new second ghetto.¹²

By the mid-1980s, the ghetto model of black urban historical research had run its course. As the Modern Civil Rights Movement gave way to the Black Power phase of the Black Freedom Struggle during the late 1960s and early 1970s, poor and working class black urbanites took an expanding leadership role in forging the agenda for black political and social movements. These changes had a profound impact on the lives and intellectual development of a young generation of historians. This new generation of young historians shifted the focus of research on urban blacks from the dynamics of residential segregation to the process of class formation or proletarianization – that is, the increasing transformation of southern black workers from rural, household, and general laborers into new urban workers in the country's major auto, meatpacking, and steel-producing factories. According to this bottom-up research on African American life and labor, earlier ghetto formation studies presented a largely “tragic portrait of black urban life” and undermined our capacity to see how black urban communities were constructed through the lives and labor of poor and working class blacks no less than, and perhaps even more so, than their wealthier and better educated elite counterparts. Studies of Chicago, Milwaukee, and Detroit accented changes within the black working class itself and how these shifts influenced the

¹² Osofsky, *Harlem*; Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); David M. Katzman, *Before the Ghetto: Black Detroit in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973); Kenneth L. Kusmer, *A Ghetto Takes Shape: Black Cleveland, 1870-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976); Arnold Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago 1940-1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

politics and social movements of urban black communities. These studies also helped establish new working class perspectives on the history of the black urban community nationwide.¹³

Class formation research gained increasing ground through the early 1990s but peaked by decade's end. In 1991, in his groundbreaking study of Norfolk, Virginia, Earl Lewis exposed blind spots that limited the utility of the proletarian frame for the next generation of research on African American urban, labor, and working class history. As conceptualized during the 1980s, these studies accented the experiences of black men, heavy industry, and labor and race relations among the most highly unionized sectors of the urban industrial economy. As such, the proletarian framework neglected the experiences of general laborers, household and personal service workers – mostly women – and the nonunionized sectors of the workforce. Moreover, as Lewis noted, so-called unorganized black workers sometimes forged their own independent labor unions and pushed to increase wages and improve working and living conditions for themselves and their families.¹⁴

By calling for more systematic attention to the lives of black urban women, Lewis helped pave the way for the rise of a new generation of research on working class black women and the complicated intersections of race, class, and gender in the lives of urban black workers. Scholarship on working class black women and gender relations flourished during the late 1990s and the opening decades of the 21st century. It built upon the pioneering work of Jacqueline Jones, Tera Hunter, Elizabeth Clark Lewis, and Darlene Clark Hine. While the bulk of this scholarship initially explored the lives of southern black women, the migration and labor experiences of black women in the urban Midwest gained increasing attention. Scholarship on black women workers in the Midwest gained its most systematic expression in studies by Kimberly Phillips, *Alabama North* (1999); Victoria Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability* (2001); Megan T. Shockley, “We, Too,

¹³ James Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Richard Walter Thomas, *Life for Us is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); Joe William Trotter, Jr., *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-45* (1985; second edition, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Henry Louis Taylor, Jr. ed., *Race and the City: Work, Community, and Protest in Cincinnati, 1820-1970* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Dennis Dickerson, *Out of the Crucible: Black Steelworkers in Western Pennsylvania, 1875-1980* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986); and Peter Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916-30* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

¹⁴ Earl Lewis, “‘To Turn as on a Pivot’: Writing African Americans into a History of Overlapping Diasporas,” *American Historical Review* 100 (June 1995), 765-87; Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

Are Americans” (2004); Cynthia M. Blair, *I’ve Got to Make My Livin’* (2010); and most recently Marcia Walker-McWilliams, *Reverend Addie Wyatt* (2016) and Keona Ervin, *Gateway to Equality* (2018).¹⁵ Focusing on the period 1870-1930, Cynthia Blair documents the lives of Chicago’s African American prostitutes as “more than a contested symbol” of expanding middle class notions of respectability, but also as “a worker” under the increasing pressures of black migration, industrial working class formation, and “repeated shifts in the location of urban red-light districts, and the growth of commercialized leisure industries.”¹⁶ Accenting the intersections of black feminism, labor activism, race and religious consciousness, historian Marcia Walker-McWilliams shows how Mississippi-born Addie Wyatt shaped the city’s labor and municipal politics. Wyatt, an ordained minister and cofounder of the city’s Vernon Park Church of God, took her first job as a canner in the city’s meatpacking industry during World War II. She also moved into the city’s Altgeld Gardens public housing project with her husband and later became the first black woman elected president of Local 56 of the United Packinghouse Workers of America. Keona Ervin’s *Gateway to Equality* complements Clarence Lang’s groundbreaking but male-centered focus on the same interwar and post-World War II period. She persuasively argues that black women played “a critical, defining role” in the creation of what Lang describes as a “historic bloc” in which massive grassroots black social struggles favored the working class majority. Emphasizing black working women’s “appeals to the right of human dignity,” Ervin documents the ways that these women and their black professional women allies “devised the working-class-oriented method of black freedom making that . . . indelibly marked the formation of a black political agenda designed to gain access to power, respect, and self-emancipation.”¹⁷

As the African American urban field explored the complicated intersections of class, gender, race, and sexuality, groundbreaking studies by Davarian Baldwin, Adam Green, Wallace

¹⁵ Kimberley Phillips, *AlabamaNorth: African-American Migrants, Community, and Working Class Activism, 1915-45* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 2-4; Cynthia M. Blair, *I’ve Got to Make My Livin’: Black Women’s Sex Work in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Marcia Walker-McWilliams, *Reverend Addie Wyatt: Faith and the Fight for Labor, Gender, and Racial Equality* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016); Keona K. Ervin, *Gateway to Equality: Black Women and the Struggle for Economic Justice in St. Louis* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2017).

¹⁶ Blair, *I’ve Got to Make My Livin’*, 2-3.

¹⁷ Ervin, *Gateway to Equality*, 15-16.

Best, and others revamped our understanding of the “New Negro” phenomenon, consumer culture, the black church, and religious beliefs from the vantage point of poor and working class black urbanites.¹⁸ Research on specific aspects of the labor force – dockworkers, meatpackers, steelworkers, auto workers, household service workers, and railroad workers – added yet another significant body of research to our understanding of black life in the Midwest. Studies by Eric Arnesen, Rick Halpern, Roger Horowitz, and others illuminate the dynamics of interracial conflict and cooperation among black and white workers at the point of production in the railyards, on Pullman car lines, in auto and meatpacking plants, and in the blast furnaces and foundries of the steel industry.¹⁹ Despite the substantial numbers of black workers who worked the rails as track laborers and maintenance of way employees, firemen, and brakemen, as Arnesen notes in *Brotherhoods of Color*, black Pullman car porters have received the lion’s share of research on blacks in particular industries. In their recent collection of essays, *Reframing Randolph: Labor, Black Freedom, and the Legacies of A. Philip Randolph* (2015), historians Andrew E. Kersten and Clarence Lang highlight the dramatic transformation of scholarship on both Randolph (as a labor leader and social justice activist) and the struggles of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters over the past decades.²⁰ This specialized cohort of studies deepened our understanding of railroad porters by probing such questions as “manhood” and “manhood rights,” gender equity for the black women maids in the railroad workforce, and Randolph’s religiosity as a component of his labor and social activism and leadership.²¹

¹⁸ Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes: Modernity, The Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Adam Green, *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940-1955* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Wallace Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine: Religion and Culture in Black Chicago, 1915-1952* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 1-3, 76-77, 93; Christopher R. Reed, *The Rise of Chicago’s Black Metropolis, 1920-1929* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011).

¹⁹ Eric Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Rick Halpern, *Down on the Killing Floor: Black and White Workers in Chicago’s Packinghouses, 1904-1954* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Roger Horowitz, “*Negro and White, Unite and Fight!*”: A Social History of Industrial Unionism in Meatpacking, 1930-80 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); David Lewis-Colman, *Race Against Liberalism: Black Workers and the UAW in Detroit* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008); August Meier and Elliot Ruddick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979). Also see Premilla Nadasen, *Household Workers Unite: The Untold Story of African American Women Who Built a Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015).

²⁰ Andrew E. Kersten and Clarence Lang, ed., *Reframing Randolph: Labor, Black Freedom, and the Legacies of A. Philip Randolph* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 1-20.

²¹ Paula F. Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990); Melinda Chateauvert, *Marching Together: Women of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998); Beth Tompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest*

By the turn of the 21st century, scholars of black urban life had produced a new historiography and sociology of African American life and labor. But most of this race, class, and gender inflected scholarship focused on the industrial era of the interwar years. During the closing decade of the century, however, scholars focused increasing attention on the late industrial and emerging post-industrial era in African American life.²² A variety of new forces dramatically transformed the social and political context for the ongoing interpenetration of scholarship and social justice movements, including most notably, the mass incarceration of young black men and women; the murder of black men in police custody; and a new grassroots Black Lives Matter Movement. Despite the election and reelection of Barack Obama as the first U.S. president of African descent in 2008 and 2012, these trends gained sharp expression in legal scholar Michelle Alexander's influential book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010). "Rather than rely on race," she said, "we use our criminal justice system to label people of color 'criminals' and then engage in all the [Jim Crow] practices we supposedly left behind. Today it is perfectly legal to discriminate against criminals in nearly all the ways that it was once legal to discriminate against African Americans."²³

We are now nearing the century mark in the development of scholarship on African American life and labor in the urban Midwest. The increasing confluence of late 20th and early 21st century intellectual, social, and economic changes shaped the outlook of another cohort of young scholars on the African American experience. As we approach the end of the second decade of the new century, this cohort has produced an impressive range of new studies. In his influential book *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, historian Thomas Sugrue set the intellectual stage for much of this scholarship. Sugrue responded to key propositions in the sociological and policy

Politics in Black America 1925-1945 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 63-105; Cornelius L. Bynum, *A. Philip Randolph and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Cynthia Taylor, *A. Philip Randolph: The Religious Journey of an African American Labor Leader* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

²² For a discussion of the new sociology, see Hunter and Robinson, "The Sociology of Urban Black America." Hunter and Robinson call attention to this new sociological emphasis: "Scholars of the sociology of urban Black America in the current era demonstrate how race has both similar and different effects across class, sexuality, and region on culture, life chances, and urban change. Equally important, this work demonstrates how matters of place are constrained and enabled by the nexus of race, gender, class, and sexuality" (397).

²³ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 2, 13.

studies of William J. Wilson and others. Based upon detailed quantitative and ethnographic research on late 20th century Chicago, Wilson forcefully argued that deindustrialization and its destructive impact on black workers was a product of global socioeconomic changes of the 1970s and 1980s.²⁴ Focusing on the city of Detroit between World War II and 1960, Sugrue challenged Wilson's chronology, emphasizing the genesis of deindustrialization in the early years after World War II. He analyzed these processes under the rubric of what he called the "contemporary urban crisis." He defined this crisis as the way a once vibrant urban-industrial economy gave way to a city "plagued by joblessness, concentrated poverty, physical decay, and racial isolation" by the 1990s.²⁵ During the first years of the 21st century, a growing body of studies embraced Sugrue's focus on the second half of the 20th century, but challenged his limited perspective on the role that poor and working class blacks played in their own deindustrializing experience. Studies by Clarence Lang, Heather Thompson, Todd Michney, Robert Gioielli, and others elucidate African American class, gender, and cross-class labor, community, and worker activism during the era of increasing deindustrialization.²⁶

Much work remains to be done on such diverse topics as early 19th century black urban communities, the carceral state, policing, transnationalism, and global themes, but even these topics are not entirely missing from existing scholarship. Recent studies of the black Midwest in regional, national, and transnational perspective include groundbreaking research by Kevin Mumford, Khalil Muhammad, Carl Nightingale, Erik McDuffie, Nikki Taylor, and Tiya Miles.

²⁴ See William J. Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); and *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

²⁵ Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). Sugrue's study built partly upon Arnold Hirsch's conceptualization of the "second ghetto" (Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*).

²⁶ Clarence Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway: Class Politics and Black Freedom Struggle in St. Louis, 1936-75* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009); Heather Thompson, *Whose Detroit?: Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Todd Michney, *Neighborhoods: Black Upward Mobility in Cleveland, 1900-1980* (Chapel: University of North Carolina, 2016); Robert Gioielli, *Environmental Activism and the Urban Crisis: Baltimore, St. Louis, and Chicago* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014); Amanda I. Seligman, *Block by Block: Neighborhoods and Public Policy on Chicago's West Side* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Patrick D. Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); Jack Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle: The Evolution of School Reform in Milwaukee* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). Thomas Sugrue also complemented his earlier Detroit study with a detailed examination of the Civil Rights Movement across the post-World War II urban North. See *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008).

In her study, *The Dawn of Detroit: A Chronicle of Slavery and Freedom in the City of the Straits* (2017), Miles documents the enslavement of people of African and indigenous descent in early national and colonial Michigan. By illuminating the development of human bondage in the Midwest, she narrows the gap between the perceived freedom of blacks in the Old Northwest and their enslavement in the Northeast as well as the South. As such, *The Dawn of Detroit* ties the black Midwestern experience to slave-based capitalist development on a global scale.²⁷

Although there is much unfinished business, a century of sociological, ethnographic, and historical studies provides the foundation for a new synthesis of the region's black working class from the American Revolution through recent times. A fresh narrative will illuminate connections between different moments in African American and Midwestern history, especially the transition from the preindustrial to the industrial era and the early years of the postindustrial moment in Midwestern and U.S. history. Equally important, however, this project will also call attention to differences as well as similarities from city to city (and push for more research on this important topic). In 1993, in his groundbreaking collection of essays on Cincinnati, historian Henry Louis Taylor persuasively argued that antebellum black urban history needed a Midwestern perspective, particularly in his case one that focused on Cincinnati. "Cincinnati was not simply a northern city looking South. The city had a dual personality." "Borderland culture," he said, "where North meets South" created a unique experience for Queen City blacks. They

²⁷ Nikki M. Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom: Cincinnati's Black Community, 1802-1868* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005); Tiya Miles, *The Dawn of Detroit: A Chronicle of Slavery and Freedom in the City of Straits* (New York: The New Press, 2017); Kevin Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Kahlil G. Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Blair, *I've Got to Make My Livin'*; Megan T. Shockley, "*We, Too, Are Americans*": *African American Women in Detroit and Richmond, 1940-54* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Jack S. Blocker, *A Little More Freedom: African Americans Enter the Urban Midwest, 1860-1930* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008); William W. Giffin, *African Americans and the Color Line in Ohio, 1915-1930* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005). For transnational perspectives on Chicago, see Carl Nightingale, *Segregation: A Global History of Divided Cities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Tobias Brinkman, "Shifting Ghettos: Established Jews, Jewish Immigrants, and African Americans in Chicago," in Wendy Z. Goldman and Joe William Trotter, Jr., ed., *The Ghetto in Global History: 1500 to the Present* (London: Routledge, 2018), 189-205; Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of a Black Left Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 138-40; Erik McDuffie, "Chicago, Garveyism, and the History of the Diasporic Midwest," *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*, 8:2, 129-145.

“lived on the edge.” They lived on the “margin” more so than their northern or southern kinsmen and women.²⁸ Finally, a new synthesis will serve the needs of teachers, public policy makers, and activists seeking to change the terms of African American life and labor in the emerging era of ultra conservative politics and new modes of capitalist development and statecraft.

But what will a synthesis of existing scholarship look like? What shape will it take? What shape should it take? Whatever form this new Midwestern history takes, it must account for the impact of transnational as well as local socioeconomic and political changes. Black population and labor migration increased at moments of substantial urban capitalist expansion and economic development on a global scale. Competition and conflict with white workers also intensified during these moments of rapid population, commercial, and industrial growth. A brief look at the preindustrial era will suggest the outlines of the founding moment in black working class history in the Midwest.

CONCEPTUALIZING A REGIONAL SYNTHESIS

The region’s black working class had its origins in the postrevolutionary ferment and socioeconomic and political expansion of the new republic. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 outlawed slavery north and west of the Ohio River. It gave rise to the free states of Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, and parts of Minnesota. By the onset of the Civil War, European empires (mainly French and British, and later the U.S.) had spread across the early 19th century Midwest. Small indigenous trade networks and political units had given way to large-scale capitalist agriculture, commercial, and administrative centers. Consequently, the Midwest emerged as a major site of early 19th century immigration, work, and urban development.

The increasing labor demands of capitalist development opened the door for the rise of the black population. Between 1800 and 1850, the black population increased from no more than a few hundred in most places to 4,000 in St. Louis; to more than 3,000 in Cincinnati; and to nearly 1,000 in Detroit. African Americans also gradually moved into Chicago, Cleveland, and Milwaukee, but their numbers remained much smaller, rising respectively, in these cities only to about 300, 200, and 100 people of color on the eve of the Civil War.²⁹

²⁸ H. L. Taylor, *Race and the City*, xiv.

²⁹ Leonard P. Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America, 1800-1850: The Shadow of the Dream* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 244-45; Spear, *Black Chicago*. 12; Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, xxxix; Katzman, *Before the Ghetto*, 10.

Most of these early migrants arrived in the Midwest as fugitives and free people of color from the slave South (particularly nearby Virginia and Maryland). For many of these early southern black migrants, the Ohio River became a “River Jordan” or “escape from Egypt.” It separated their former lives as enslaved people from the promise of a new life on free soil.³⁰ Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, New York, and other northern states enacted gradual emancipation laws and liberated most enslaved people by the late antebellum years. Whereas black women outnumbered men in most 19th century cities, North and South, Midwestern cities reported a more evenly distributed ratio of men to women. Hence, African American men and women together helped fuel the labor force and growth of Midwestern cities. They worked as household servants, general laborers, and artisans in a variety of private, public, and commercial settings.

Black Midwesterners found their most prominent employment opportunities in the domestic and personal service sectors of the expanding economy. In the years after the American Revolution, increasing numbers of white men abandoned the barber trade as a “servile” occupation unbecoming a free citizen in the new republic. In the Midwest and elsewhere, black barbers and barbershops expanded as the most lucrative occupation for early 19th century black workers. As one historian notes, black barbers envisioned themselves as a kind of royalty. They were “Knights of the Razor.” They transformed a job that whites perceived as servile into a badge of prestige, accomplishment, and even “superiority” rather than “inferiority.”³¹ In Cincinnati, in the words of a black newspaper editor, “The Negro barber, as a workman, was an artist.”³² During the first two decades of the 19th century, significant numbers of African Americans also gained jobs as skilled craftsmen and women. In Detroit, as late as 1850, nearly 25 percent of black men worked as carpenters, masons, blacksmiths, and shoemakers. Cleveland reported proportionately more African American than Irish immigrants in the skilled crafts. At the same time, Cincinnati reported 20 African American women dress-makers and shirt-makers.³³

³⁰ Joe William Trotter, Jr., *River Jordan: African American Urban Life in the Ohio Valley* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1998).

³¹ Douglas W. Bristol, Jr., *Knights of the Razor: Black Barbers in Slavery and Freedom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 4-5, 61-69, 204.

³² Trotter, *River Jordan*, 39.

³³ Katzman, *Before the Ghetto*, 29; Kusmer, *A Ghetto Takes Shape*, 19; Juliet E. K. Walker, *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship, Volume I, 2nd edition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 178.

African American labor reinforced the wealth and power of Midwestern elites. It also enabled some working class whites to sidestep some of the most arduous, low-paying, and hazardous working conditions in the early 19th century city. But urban elites reaped the lion's share of the benefits of black labor. Middle class white households turned increasingly to poor and working class women to perform domestic "drudge" work. Wherever they lived and worked in Midwestern cities and elsewhere, black women performed a disproportionate share of this hard work. As elsewhere, household labor entailed long hours, "sweeping, emptying chamber pots, carrying water, washing dishes, brewing, looking after children, cooking and baking, spinning, knitting, carding, and sewing." Household labor also exposed women to widespread physical and sexual abuse. In 1845, in the Wisconsin territory, authorities reported the body of a slave woman "lying in the water." "The body was cruelly cut and bruised . . . the woman was whipped to death and thrown into the river during the night." She belonged to an Army Captain at a nearby fort.³⁴

The antebellum black population faced increasing socioeconomic and political restrictions. Massive European immigration had a profound impact on the development of the black working class. Between the American Revolution and the beginning of the Civil War, an estimated 3.7 million European immigrants (mostly from Germany and Ireland) entered the U.S. Many of these newcomers headed to the Old Northwest. African Americans found it increasingly difficult to hold on to the slim footing in the skilled trades. In Cincinnati, they repeatedly complained, "We have among carpenters, plasters, masons, etc., whose skills as workers is confessed and yet they find no employment even among [white] friends." In 1827, a black visitor to the city declared, "I found every door was closed against the colored man in a free state, excepting the jails and penitentiaries."³⁵

As African Americans lost their grip on the skilled trades, black Midwesterners worried with their counterparts elsewhere that they were becoming a race of "servants." They felt pushed down toward the condition of blacks in the slave South. They frequently described their status as little better than their Virginia brothers and sisters. The words of Martin Delany, a Virginian living in Pittsburgh, resonated with blacks across the urban Midwest, when he said: the occupation

³⁴ Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, xxxvii, cf. Catherine Adams and Elizabeth H. Pleck, *Love of Freedom: Black Women in Colonial and Revolutionary New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 32-35.

³⁵ Trotter, *River Jordan*, 27.

of “servant” was not necessarily “degrading.” “It would not be, to one or a few people of a kind, but a whole race of servants are a degradation to that people.”³⁶

Even as African Americans protested against their confinement to the domestic sector of the Midwestern economy, they also lamented their increasingly tenuous hold on service jobs. By the turbulent 1850s, their grip on personal service and household labor also started to slip in tandem with their hold on the skilled crafts. In this respect, the experiences of black workers in the urban Midwest dovetailed processes unfolding in the urban Northeast. “Competition of the [white] foreigner,” Du Bois wrote in his *Philadelphia Negro*, pushed the Negro “more and more to the wall.” The barber trade and other higher wage general labor and household service jobs came under increasing pressure by immigrants seeking livelihood in the Midwest. In 1853, following a national convention of black people in Rochester, New York, Frederick Douglass declared, “Every hour sees the black man elbowed out of employment by some newly arrived emigrant . . . White men are becoming house servants, cooks . . . whitewashers and barbers.”³⁷

Limits on housing, public accommodations, and access to justice before the law reinforced and strengthened the color line in the 19th century workforce. Although early 19th century blacks dispersed across the urban landscape and lived and worked in close proximity to their employers, residential clustering and segregation by race gradually took shape by the late antebellum years. African Americans faced increasing barriers on where they could live, feed, and clothe themselves and their families. As early as 1838, Detroit’s small black community could “expand slightly to the east and considerably to the north – but never to the west. Woodward Avenue remained almost as impenetrable a barrier as the [Detroit] river to the south.”³⁸ In Milwaukee, when one black man and his wife moved from their original place of settlement into an abandoned shanty on East Water Street, under the cover of night a group of men demolished the building, leaving the couple homeless. As early as 1850, in Chicago, some 82 percent of African Americans lived on the city’s South Side – an area bounded by the Chicago River to the north, 16th Street on the South, the South Branch of the river to the west, and Lake Michigan to the east.³⁹

³⁶ Martin R. Delany, “A Black Nationalist Manifesto, 1852,” in Manning Marable and Leith Mullings, ed., *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: An African American Anthology* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 70-82.

³⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (1899; reprinted Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1996), quote, 33.

³⁸ Katzman, *Before the Ghetto*, 13.

³⁹ Spear, *Black Chicago*, 11-12.

African Americans were by no means secure in their emerging clusters of nearly all black residents. Mob violence broke out against black workers and their communities before and during the Civil War, aided and abetted by the work of the American Colonization Society (ACS), the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, and the disfranchisement of free people of color. Although the ACS claimed to support the voluntary removal of free people of color to a new home on the West Coast of Africa, its racist assumptions about the incapacity of black people to co-exist with European Americans in a free democratic polity fueled grassroots white opposition to free blacks across the Midwest and elsewhere in rapidly urbanizing America. In Cincinnati, a mob of some 300 white residents attacked and destroyed the homes of black people, forcing many to flee for their lives. In their view, the removal of thousands of black people from the workforce would allow them to bid up the price of their labor. When authorities thwarted the lynching of a black man accused of rape, one report stated, a Detroit “mob went like a volcano, sweeping along the dwellings of colored people.” In Milwaukee, a mob overpowered the police chief and two deputies and lynched a black man accused of murdering an Irishman. The crowd marched the man through the streets and hanged him on a pile driver near the Milwaukee River. They left his body hanging until policemen later arrived and cut it down.⁴⁰ In Chicago, the *Tribune* produced a long editorial under the title, “Mobbing Negroes.” The paper described how a mob of four or five hundred Irish workers attacked a dozen black workers on the lumber docks, reportedly because “it was degrading” for them to work alongside blacks on equal terms when their own brothers were unemployed.⁴¹

Despite their small numbers, preindustrial urban black Midwesterners challenged disfranchisement, economic discrimination, and mob rule. They built their own predominantly working class communities and launched grassroots movements for their own liberation as well as that of their enslaved brothers and sisters in the antebellum South. They vigorously opposed the American Colonization Society, the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, and increasing restrictions on their access to jobs in the urban economy. When and wherever possible and feasible, they also built alliances with sympathetic and supportive whites. But foundational to their struggle as workers and as blacks, between about the 1830s and the onset of the Civil War, African Americans in the

⁴⁰ Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, xlv; Katzman, *Before the Ghetto*, 46; Nikki M. Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom: Cincinnati's Black Community, 1802-1868* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), 64-65.

⁴¹ Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 43.

urban Midwest launched a vigorous independent black church-building movement. Contemporary observers soon noted the emergence of small black Baptist and Methodist churches, including a branch of the Philadelphia-based African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) all along the banks of the Chicago River.⁴² By the mid-1840s, African Americans in Detroit had established the Second Baptist Church, the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the St. Matthews Protestant Episcopal Church. When Martin Delany traveled to the city in the 1840s, he later reported that the “best” black citizens in Detroit and other Midwestern communities were Methodists.⁴³ In rapid succession, Cincinnati blacks founded the Bethel AME Church (1824), the Union Baptist Church (1831), and the Zion Baptist Church (1843). Midwestern blacks regularly pooled their resources, skills, and labor and constructed sometimes imposing new “brick” edifices.⁴⁴

A variety of social, fraternal, labor, and political organizations built upon and reinforced the spread of black churches. Women’s clubs, literary and debating societies, libraries and reading rooms, and a range of other associations claimed connections to the church. In 1843, in addition to a Sunday School and a female benevolent society, Detroit’s Colored Vigilant Committee discovered “a young men’s society, a debating club, a reading room, a library, and a temperance society, all of them meeting in the churches.”⁴⁵

Community-based black institutions provided a launching pad for the development of grassroots social justice movements against slavery, the American Colonization Society, and the Fugitive Slave Law. On June 27, 1843, the Colored Vigilante Committee met in Detroit’s Second Baptist Church. The gathering declared in no uncertain terms that, “all history shows, and our experience proves, that the Rights and Liberties of a people must be obtained by their own exertions, and it is high time we put our shoulders to the wheel.” On October 26, 1843, a statewide convention of black people at the same church approved “An Address to the Citizens of the State of Michigan.” The resolution “condemned the Negroes’ loss of rights, endorsed the principles of the Declaration of Independence and called for equal civil and political rights” for black people.⁴⁶ Sociologists Drake and Cayton underscored how black Baptist and Methodist

⁴² Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 39; Spear, *Black Chicago*, 5.

⁴³ Katzman, *Before the Ghetto*, 18-21.

⁴⁴ Trotter, *River Jordan*, 43.

⁴⁵ Katzman, *Before the Ghetto*, 22.

⁴⁶ Katzman, *Before the Ghetto*, 38-39.

churches not only functioned as spiritual institutions, but also as “stations on the Underground Railroad” and resistance to the Fugitive Slave catchers.⁴⁷ In 1839, Cincinnati blacks met at a Methodist Church to protest efforts of some white residents to revive the dormant Ohio chapter of the American Colonization Society. Black Cincinnati, as historian Nikki Taylor notes, voiced its “unmitigated and unqualified opposition” to the ACS and African American removal from American soil. Across the Midwest and the nation, black people viewed the ACS as “unjust,” “unchristian,” and “anti-republican” as well as anti-black.⁴⁸

Yet, the African American vision for emancipation, citizenship, and human rights was not limited to U.S. soil. They insisted on the right to pursue their own interests, including migration to different places within and beyond the borders of the United States, on their own terms. Hence, in the Midwest as elsewhere, the fight for freedom, citizenship, independence, and equality included African American led emigration projects focused on Africa, Haiti, and Canada. The search for an independent homeland was not simply a response to declining socioeconomic and political conditions on U.S. soil, it was also deeply rooted in an African identity, formed and reformed through the experiences of black people in North America and around the globe.⁴⁹

As racial hostility intensified during the 1840s and 1850s, increasing numbers of African Americans distinguished between voluntary migration on their own terms and coercive colonization on Euro-American terms. In 1824, Cincinnati blacks formed the Cincinnati Haytien Union to explore the feasibility of moving en masse to the independent black republic of Haiti. A small number of Cincinnati blacks joined some 6,000 black emigrants to Haiti during the 1820s.⁵⁰ On the eve of the Civil War, Milwaukee’s black community selected the grocer Jonathan J. Meyers to visit Africa to gain insight on the best ways to “labor in the cause of African nationality and improvement.” After spending several months in Africa, Meyers returned to Milwaukee and established a museum across the street from the U.S. Post Office on Wisconsin Street. The museum aimed to educate Milwaukee residents on the intelligence and contributions of African people to world cultures at home and abroad. As such, Milwaukee blacks aimed to counter the racist assumptions of organizations like the Wisconsin Colonization Society.⁵¹ Somewhat earlier, a

⁴⁷ Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 39.

⁴⁸ N. Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom*, 115-16.

⁴⁹ For an elaboration on this theme, see Joe William Trotter, Jr., *Workers on Arrival: Black Labor in the Making of America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming, 2019).

⁵⁰ N. Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom*, 60.

⁵¹ Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, xliii-xliv.

group of Michigan blacks attended the emigrationist North American Convention of Colored People in Toronto. Two of the city's leading emigrationists, William Monroe and Henry Bibb, moved to Africa and Canada, respectively. Bibb initiated a bi-weekly publication, called the *Voice of the Fugitive* and urged the immediate abolition of slavery and the migration of "every oppressed person of color" from the United States to Canada.⁵²

As elsewhere in antebellum America, the African American struggle for freedom in the Midwest entailed significant internal turmoil and conflict along emerging class as well as ideological and gender lines. In addition to invoking biblical scriptures to quiet women in church, across early 19th century urban America, a small handful of well-educated black elites (some with deep family roots in slavery and the wage-earning working class) gradually sought to impose notions of "moral uplift," "respectability," and public decorum, as well as specific forms of worship, behavior, and values, on poor and working class blacks, slave and free. Elites condemned emerging forms of working class music, dance, drinking, gaming, leisure, and religion. AME Church leaders urged African Americans to contain "shouting, ring-dancing, and groaning" in religious services.⁵³

CONCLUSION

The proliferation of scholarship on blacks in the urban Midwest opens new possibilities for a synthesis of African American labor and working class history in the region. As suggested in this article, the early 19th century offers a crucial backdrop for understanding the Great Migration and the emergence of the industrial Midwest during the 20th century. In some ways, the Midwest was the first "Land of Hope" for many black migrants who moved to the region during the early 19th century. It was also a land of mob violence, disfranchisement, economic discrimination, and efforts to remove free people of color from their place of birth. Hence, early 19th century black workers and their communities pioneered national and transnational struggles for freedom. They embraced migration to Canada, the Caribbean, and Africa as promising sites for black migration, independence, and citizenship. They also established a legacy of cross-class

⁵² Katzman, *Before the Ghetto*, 43.

⁵³ See Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 22-24, 33; Willard B. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000), especially ch. 5, "Elites in the Midwest and West"; and Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 52-53.

and interracial alliances and fought for full citizenship on U.S. soil. These early 19th century struggles against class, caste, and racial inequality would inform black nationalist, interracial, and radical liberation movements of the 20th century, including most notably the NAACP, the Garvey Movement, and the Communist Party. As such, a broader and more comprehensive synthesis of African American life and work in the urban Midwest should not only reveal the ongoing connections between scholarship, work, and social justice movements, but also deepen our understanding of unfolding social, economic, and political changes in our own times.