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JOURNAL OF URBAN HISTORY (ISSN 0096-1442) is published six times annually—in January, March, May, July, September, and November—by Sage Publications, Inc., 2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks, CA 91320. Telephone: (805) 499-0721; FAX/Order line: (805) 499-0871. Copyright ☐ 1995 by Sage Publications, Inc. All rights reserved. No portion of the contents may be reproduced in any form without written permission of the publisher.

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Second class postage paid at Thousand Oaks, California.

This journal is abstracted or indexed in ABC POL SCI, Academic Abstracts, African Urban & Regional Science Index, Arts & Humanities Citation Index, Automatic Subject Citation Alert, Community Development Abstracts, Current Contents, Geo Abstracts, GEOBASE, Human Resources Abstracts, Humanities Index, Media Review Digest, Sage Urban Studies Abstracts, Social Planning/Policy & Development Abstracts, Social Science Index, Social Sciences Citation Index, Sociological Abstracts, United States Political Science Documents, and Urban Affairs Abstracts, and is available on microfilm from University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

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## TOWARD A NEW AFRICAN AMERICAN URBAN HISTORY

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Few areas of American historical scholarship have produced as much exciting new work in recent decades as African American history. An outpouring of scholarship on slavery, emancipation, reconstruction, sharecropping, late nineteenth-century race politics, and southern segregation dominated work in the field through the 1970s. But as scholars moved forward to explore twentieth-century African American history, they encountered the city and the urbanization of the black population. The great modern migrations of African Americans to the city, the creation and expansion of black communities, and the examination of black life and culture, especially working-class culture, have provided a central focus for recent scholars of twentieth-century African American urban history.

This change in scholarly focus has been paralleled by several shifts in interpretation and analysis. Earlier works, particularly those that pursued a race relations perspective, tended to adopt what has been labeled the "ghetto synthesis model" of African American urban history. This approach focused heavily on the physical and institutional structure of black communities and the degree to which whites regulated and controlled black life. By contrast, later studies emphasized an "agency model," demonstrating the extent to which African Americans in slavery and freedom shaped and controlled their own destinies. Earlier works on black urban history—Gilbert Osofsky on Harlem and Allan Spear on black Chicago, for example—concentrated on the role of institutional forces in the creation of the

JOURNAL OF URBAN HISTORY, Vol. 21 No. 3, March 1995 283-295 © 1995 Sage Publications, Inc.

ghetto and on black urban life generally. More recent work has emphasized an internal focus on kinship and communal networks, class and culture, and the diversity and complexity of black communities. Earlier studies of African American urban history, moreover, concentrated almost exclusively on the black ghettos of northern cities—New York, Cleveland, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Chicago (Howard Rabinowitz's Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890 [1978] was a notable exception). Northern and western cities continue to receive attention, but much of the recent scholarship reflects a shift back to black southern roots, to southern cities where blacks generally lived in closer proximity to whites rather than in sprawling ghettos as in the north. Articles in this special issue of the Journal of Urban History, for instance, examine facets of the African American urban experience in Richmond, Memphis, Norfolk, and Miami.

In a February 1983 review essay in this journal, Elliott Rudwick surveyed the state of the field in a piece entitled "Black Urban History: In the Doldrums." At the end of the 1960s, when urban problems and racial conflict dominated the public consciousness, Rudwick noted, "black urban history appeared to be headed for an unbeatable future." Policymakers, scholars, and Americans generally, he contended, sought "some historical depth about how these troubles began." In 1983, however, Rudwick concluded that African American urban history had become bogged down in narrowly focused, poorly conceived, or weakly researched studies. Rudwick ended on a pessimistic note, implying that the early promise of the field remained unfulfilled.3 Four years later, in the August 1987 issue of JUH, Kenneth L. Kusmer reexamined the scholarly landscape in a review essay entitled "Urban Black History at the Crossroads." Kusmer evaluated a spate of new books published in the mid-1980s, suggesting "a renewal of interest in black urban history as a research field." Important new community studies offered a variety of new ways of understanding the urbanization of the black population. Yet, for Kusmer, the very diversity of the new scholarship in African American urban history raised "questions about where the field is going."4

If African American urban history stood poised at a crossroads in the mid-1980s, uncertain of future directions, those uncertainties surely have been banished by the mid-1990s. In fact, Kusmer's crossroads metaphor may have been too confining conceptually, suggesting only one or two directions that scholars might choose. The virtual explosion of newly published research, by contrast, has demonstrated that African American urban historians have been marching boldly down numerous highways, some moving in parallel directions, others converging, and still others diverging. The very diversity of this recent work provides the best evidence of the vitality of the field. Taken as a whole, this outpouring of scholarship represents a "new African American urban history."

What are the defining interpretive characteristics of this new history? One significant and overarching line of investigation emphasizes the importance of agency among African Americans—an interpretive thrust that has shaped new writing in the field for a decade or more. Earlier studies often portrayed African Americans as passive or powerless, as victims of white racism or slum pathologies. The new African American history conveys a sense of active involvement, of people empowered, engaged in struggle, living their lives, and shaping their futures. Indeed, some new work, such as that of Robin Kelley, has unearthed new forms of agency that demonstrate wider patterns of resistance. In a study of blacks in the urban South, for example, Kelley has described a tradition of "infrapolitics"—a pattern of daily behavior, an oppositional culture, more or less overt, in which African Americans demanded respect and recognition in uncounted daily encounters in the streets, on the streetcars and buses, on the job, in the courts, and elsewhere.5

Earlier scholarship in African American urban history was heavily weighted toward the study of black elites and elite organizations; it often tended to focus on segregation, race relations, and the role of political and economic institutions (white and black) in establishing the parameters of black life. The new African American urban history has abandoned the exclusive emphasis on prominent African Americans to portray a more diverse community with sharply etched divisions of class and culture. Earlier work depicted the working class as an undifferentiated mass that followed the lead of prominent black citizens. The new history has provided a deeper and more textured sense of the black working class—of its transformation from southern agricultural roots to urban industrial labor, from peasantry to proletariat.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, there is a recognition that many aspects of the rural, African American culture and tradition persisted or were adapted to life in the big city.7 Black working-class community and culture were made and remade in response to urban and industrial life.

Consequently, an exciting new focus has emerged on black working-class life, culture, and community, on black people in labor and radical movements, on African American sports, and on black festival behavior and the use of streets and public spaces.8 New studies of the migrations of southern blacks have been written from the perspective of the migrants themselves.9 New research on twentieth-century urban uprisings (or race riots) now focuses more centrally on the workingclass African Americans who participated. 10 The new history also has demonstrated greater appreciation of class division and contestation within the black community. How, for instance, did elite and middleclass blacks in northern cities deal with waves of southern migrants; how did black churches and black organizations respond to the great migration; and, how did black individuals and families navigate their lives in segregation or deal with the new conditions of northern urban life? How did internal conflict within Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, as well as attacks from other African Americans, undermine the movement's mass appeal? Scholars are now working on these and other questions.11

The new African American history has initiated a reexamination of earlier conceptualization and periodization. For instance, some scholars have now rejected the argument of earlier historians, such as Rayford W. Logan, that the period from the end of Reconstruction through the Progressive Era represented the "nadir" for African Americans. According to Logan's analysis, the high rates of lynching during that period served as an expression of white power and black victimization. Revisionist scholars now question the proposition that African Americans were powerless and deferential. They suggest that the rising incidence of lynching was not a symptom of white power but a reaction to black insurgency and the job competition in southern towns and cities that stemmed from African American urbanization. As early as 1923, sociologist Charles S. Johnson noted that the areas with the highest number of lynchings were the same places that attracted the most black rural migrants. White terrorism had much less to do with stimulating the migration of African Americans than did the economic opportunities that beckoned in New York, Chicago, and Detroit, or in Atlanta, Birmingham, Memphis, and New Orleans. There is considerable evidence that rape charges (traditionally, the standard explanation for lynching in the South) were involved in only a minority of lynchings, as well as that African Americans often were armed and defended themselves against lynching when possible. As scholars have reconsidered notions of African American agency during the "nadir" period, they have had to rethink the history and significance of lynching.12

The role of religion and of women in the African American community also has come under renewed scholarly examination. The new African American urban history has begun to explore the importance of church and theology in black communities. Scholars are beginning to recognize the degree to which religious conviction empowered African Americans and moved them to action. For example, black preachers actively involved in the late nineteenth and early twentiethcentury social gospel movement pushed for social justice and racial reform.<sup>13</sup> As early as 1900, some African American denominations, such as the Church of God in Christ, pursued a theology of resistance to segregation, producing militant behavior among congregants. 14 The militant Robert Charles, killed in a vicious police hunt in New Orleans in 1900, was a follower of Bishop Henry M. Turner of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, who preached not only a back-to-Africa message but African American pride and self-defense as well. 15 In the more recent period, the secular application of theology played an important role in the early years of the civil rights movement.16

Similarly, scholars are beginning to appreciate the important role of women in black organizations and churches, as well as in family and community. One recent example, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's new book, Righteous Discontent (1993), provides an examination of the women's movement in the black Baptist Church between 1880 and 1920. She contends that women "were crucial to broadening the public arm of the church and making it the most powerful institution of racial self-help in the African-American community." Individually and collectively, Baptist women contested segregation, demanded antilynching legislation, advocated voting rights and women's rights, supplied needed social services, and promoted a feminist theology of resistance. They pursued, Higginbotham suggests, "everyday forms of resistance to oppression and demoralization." Other recent studies have provided overwhelming evidence of the powerful and shaping role of women in early twentieth-century interracial reform, as well as in the mid-twentieth-century civil rights movement.17

The civil rights movement itself is undergoing some dramatic reinterpretation as a result of new work in African American history. Much of the published work on the civil rights movement has focused on national elite leaders and organizations, and on the push for passage of national legislation for civil rights and voting rights. This top-down history may have presented a misleading picture of the struggle for civil rights. The new history offers a distinctly different view—a view from the grassroots, from the community level, a view most fully articulated in Aldon D. Morris's The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement (1984), but also evident in other recent work. 18 This emerging new interpretation contends that the freedom struggle at the local community level took place independently from national activities in response to local conditions, suggesting many different civil rights movements rather than a single unified movement dominated by a few elite leaders. Such a community-oriented interpretation provides a new appreciation of the role of individual struggle in achieving civil rights; it also turns a generation of scholarship upside down, or inside out.

The new academic interest in historic memory has also reflected an inward turn, although in more self-conscious ways. Some recent historians have begun exploring the ways in which individuals, groups, and cultures have used the construction of memories in the shaping and reshaping of identities.19 For African Americans, as for others, the social construction of historic memory was both a collective effort and an individual endeavor. Collectively, African Americans established a sense of the past that conveyed cultural meaning, that supported group traditions, holidays, parades, festivals, and similar public rituals.20 Such socially constructed and symbolic histories also aided in guiding current conduct, such as navigating in a world bound by segregation, discrimination, and racism. As Elsa Barkley Brown and Gregg D. Kimball have suggested in their article in this issue, collective public memories served as important historical forces shaping the behavior of those doing the remembering. Individually, African Americans created and used notions about the past in understanding and locating their own lives in home, neighborhood, and community. Historic memories conveyed to people a distinct sense of themselves, a sense of understanding about their place and position, and about their relations with others. Race, class, religion, family, and gender all were involved in this process, serving as filters for individual and group conceptions about the past and present. Whether in the public sphere or in private life, historic memories were often contested, which meant that the process of "inventing tradition" was a matter of continuous discourse. While application of these conceptual approaches remains at an early stage, some intellectually exciting studies, including two in this issue of JUH, have already been completed. The cultural history of African Americans in the city shows great promise.

Two final areas of new research—on the "second ghetto" and on the "underclass"—have also proven productive. The initial ghetto model of African American urban history, dominant in the 1960s and early 1970s, has given way to new approaches and new conceptions. As historians have advanced their focus beyond the first great migration of 1915 to 1930 and into the post-1940 period, a second and more massive black migration from the South, that from 1940 to 1970, has come under examination. So too has the newer "second ghetto," first explored in Arnold R. Hirsch's Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960 (1983). A consequence of the new migration of blacks to northern and western cities, and of the simultaneous migration of urban whites to the new postwar suburbs, second ghettos sprouted throughout big-city America. Urban renewal, highway building, school desegregation, and other government policies speeded the process. Uneasy residential transitions took place as neighborhoods turned over, usually facilitated by the real estate industry, the hidden hand shaping neighborhood changes. Behind the shift to the second ghetto, however, was the driving force of African Americans seeking improved housing for their families and better schooling for their children. Black agency had powerful consequences

in the postwar era not just for civil rights but in the struggle for decent housing, schooling, and other quality-of-life issues.<sup>21</sup>

The underclass issue is a matter of extensive academic debate at the moment. The term first entered popular usage in the late 1970s in an article in Time magazine; by the 1980s, it had come to serve as a shorthand for the high levels of crime, poverty, unemployment, and social disorganization in the mostly black central cities. In his influential 1987 book, The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy, sociologist William Julius Wilson explained the emergence of this black underclass as a function of deep structural shifts in the American economy since about 1970. These changes included the decline of manufacturing, the automation of many production processes, the rise of a high-skill, high-tech economy (mostly based in the suburbs and the Sunbelt) and a parallel low-skill, low-pay service and sweatshop economy (mostly in the central cities), and an educational and training mismatch that left most inner-city African Americans unprepared for the postindustrial job market. While these economic changes were taking place, middle-class blacks were moving to the suburbs or more distant second-ghetto neighborhoods, leaving the working class and the poor behind in the inner cities.22

The Wilson thesis has recently been challenged by several scholars, some contesting the social breakdown interpretation, others blaming the plight of the inner cities on the persistence of racism and segregation. The recently published American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass (1993), authored by sociologists Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, offers an especially powerful antidote to the Wilson interpretation.<sup>23</sup> Still other challenges to the Wilson underclass thesis have been made by the historians and social scientists who contributed to Michael B. Katz's edited collection, The "Underclass" Debate: Views from History (1993). In examining the underclass issue from many angles of vision, Katz and his colleagues found both continuity with the past and great disjunctions between past and present experience. Katz argued the case for "the centrality of history to the troubling and urgent questions that underlie the underclass debate."24 The new African American urban history, in short, provides important insight and perspective on contemporary urban issues.

This special issue of JUH on "The New African American Urban History" consists of two parts. Part 1 provides substantive case studies of new research and new approaches in four southern cities. Part 2, to be published in the May 1995 issue of JUH, will contain historiographical articles by Joe W. Trotter and Kenneth L. Kusmer, as well as several review essays evaluating a number of new books in the field. Collectively, the research articles, the historiographical overviews, and the review essays reveal the diversity and creative vitality of new work in African American urban history.

The research articles in Part 1 illustrate in concrete ways several of the new directions scholars have been exploring. In their study of Richmond, Elsa Barkley Brown and Gregg D. Kimball provide a new cultural history of the city's black community, weaving several separate historical strands into a text on festival behavior, historic memory, and power, class, and gender. Urban space, public ritual, and private lives are linked in this imaginative piece of black urban history. Earl Lewis, too, applies conceptions of historic memory, collective and individual, to the power of place in his article on Norfolk. The social construction of memory guided the behavior of African Americans and shaped their conceptions of self and community. Taken together, these creative essays on two Virginia cities reveal what a newer African American urban history might look like, and what might be achieved through the use of new conceptual approaches.

Somewhat different foci have shaped the articles by Kenneth W. Goings and Gerald L. Smith and by Raymond A. Mohl. In their study of racial violence in Memphis, Goings and Smith analyze the impact of migration on a southern community and on race relations generally. They report a pattern of black resistance and the use of violence in response to segregation and daily harassment, a pattern that moves beyond the "infrapolitics" argument presented by Robin Kelley. Mohl's article on Miami explores the multiple impulses behind the creation of the second ghetto in the two decades after 1940. Particularly notable as driving forces were the real estate and building interests and the aspirations of black Americans for new and better housing.

As noted, this special issue on African American urban history will be continued in the May 1995 issue. The historiographical articles by Trotter and Kusmer in Part 2 evaluate and attempt to bring some conceptual order to the vast outpouring of scholarship in the field. Several review essays will highlight the contributions of recently published books on African Americans in the city. Reflecting a field in the midst of creative ferment, as well as the convergence of many new lines of historical investigation, this special issue of *JUH* suggests the arrival of a new African American urban history.

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- Elliott Rudwick, "Black Urban History: In the Doldrums," Journal of Urban History 9
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  Black History and the Historical Profession, 1915-1980 (Urbana, 1986), especially 277-308.
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