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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

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