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AFRICAN AMERICANS AND COMMUNITY BUILDING
Lifting Despite Racism and Racial Separatism


These studies of politicized urban African Americans in Illinois help us understand how competing economic and political goals found expression through community building, even as racists sought to silence dialog altogether. While only one monograph undertakes a “community” study in the strictest definition of the word, that is, a study of people living in a place and answering to the same government, each of them analyzes the actions of people bound together due to similar experiences if not mutual goals. The authors explain how communities helped African Americans on their quest for economic freedom, social justice, and political autonomy, but they also acknowledge the ways that racial separatism complicated the process. These three histories illuminate the consequences of internal division and factionalism for a people living under white supremacy during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: The author thanks Dr. Martin Hardeman for listening to an early version of this review essay and offering valuable comments.
Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua’s provocative argument casts the efforts of the founders and leaders of Brooklyn, Illinois, as proto-nationalists, harbingers of the Black Power movement. A group of eleven fugitive and free black families created a freedom village in St. Clair County, Illinois, in 1829 that became Brooklyn. Whites subsequently appropriated the town, but African Americans gained enough political influence eventually and Illinois law relaxed to the degree that leaders could incorporate Brooklyn as the first black town in 1873. Cha-Jua argues that Brooklyn became a source of pride around which proletarianized black leaders struggled to overthrow white colonial rule. Internal division seemed minor among the black residents during the first twenty years, though the 1890 mayoral campaign indicated that racial discord and intraracial factionalism existed (p. 122). Instead, Brooklyn residents united against white residents, and Cha-Jua claims that leaders did not compromise their militant, race-conscious goals, including their quest to desegregate education and secure black governance, in response to white opposition. Yet “there was always some support for separate schools among Afro-Brooklynites,” and the all-black school board created a white school in 1901 (p. 135). Obviously, differences of opinion based in class, status, color, and cultural values and lifestyles existed among Brooklyn residents, though Cha-Jua attributes the eruption of “warring armed factions” after 1906 with corrupt individuals more than community dissention or racial separatism (p. 214).

In contrast, Anne Meis Knupfer incorporates class and cultural differences to a greater degree but argues that black women in several Chicago neighborhoods worked around these to effect change. She argues that women’s clubs provided opportunities for the doubly disfranchised to express themselves publicly regardless of their class status, education level, or political philosophy. The urban African American women, despite their internal differences, used social uplift projects to carve out leadership opportunities and create positions of power that often influenced government appropriations and legislation. It seems that different values and lifestyles caused some positive change in Chicago because numerous clubs developed, supported by members who invested themselves in something that they could change. Of the more than 150 clubs that Knupfer identifies, many engaged in race-conscious, militant goals such as lobbying to desegregate schools, parks, and other public facilities. While Cha-Jua labeled similar quests proto-nationalist, Knupfer refrains from equating the reform agendas to nation building. Rather, she indicates that sometimes women secured power through cross-class, interracial alliances and sometimes through class-based, all-black efforts. Knupfer helps us understand that African American political posturing during the Jim Crow era required careful strategizing and often resulted in measurable, if localized, accomplishments.

Cha-Jua and Knupfer represent the maturation of urban minority scholarship that has occurred over the generation since Arvarh E. Strickland wrote about one of the most visible progressive reform organizations in the nation.
The History of the Chicago Urban League, released in 1966 and reissued in 2001 with new introductions by Strickland and Christopher R. Reed, remains a major accomplishment in post–Civil Rights era historiography. Strickland tackled the issue of African American political identification directly. He argued that personal ambition as well as jealousy affected the decisions made by influential African Americans. He discussed briefly the modicum of support afforded the League by the numerous other clubs pursuing “race betterment” largely because they feared that the League might undermine the alliances that they had created and nurtured (pp. 34-36). They did not want to give up their power and influence. Strickland identified the divisions that existed within the League staff as well. Employees disagreed over the best approaches to take to secure economic independence and full citizen rights. The administration favored a more practical approach that focused on assimilating rural newcomers to urban patterns of living and working, and they gained the white employers’ support in this endeavor. The staff and especially the social workers, on the other hand, called for more direct even militant action to secure rights for those served by the League, specifically laborers, through efforts such as unionization.

Major political and ideological change occurred between the 1880s and 1920s, the temporal focus of Cha-Jua’s and Knupfer’s studies. The most significant third-party movement in the history of the United States erupted and petered out during these years; the First World War of the twentieth century mobilized the nation; and by 1920, the United States could no longer claim to be a nation of independent agrarians. A significant percentage of the rural southern African American population relocated from the country to the city as part of the process by which the U.S. industrialized and urbanized. Even though an anonymous black correspondent, in 1906, claimed that Brooklyn residents “get along like lambs together,” the black migrants and long-term residents alike held firmly to politicized convictions that often conflicted (p. 163). As sharecroppers became butchers, roustabouts, and foundry workers, they retained a political outlook that gained visibility between 1896 and 1903 when the Peoples Party formed in Brooklyn to clean up Republican corruption. In contrast, Christian middle-class blacks disassociated themselves from “degenerate lower class negroes,” while members of the Booker T. Washington Improvement League worked to clean up vice and improve streets and schools (p. 198). This was one of the few instances that separatism became partisan because few party monikers existed to label black politicized actions.

Historians have simplified African American politics into dichotomous ideologies linked to Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois. Most acknowledge the juxtaposition; some frame their argument around it; few ignore it. Strickland and Knupfer each reflect on it, while Cha-Jua focuses on the interstice of black nationalism. Strickland offers the most traditional interpretation framed around the dichotomy. He argues that African Americans knew that European Americans would interpret their choice of whether to support
the League or the local branches of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) as a political statement. The League emphasized Washingtonian goals of practical self-help, while the NAACP became more associated with Du Boisian idealism and political protest. Strickland believes that African Americans responded to white expectations rather than black migrants’ and laborers’ needs, and this compromised the League’s ability to do more than assimilate workers and improve inadequate housing, education, and day care services. Specifically, the League did not improve the status of African Americans compared to European Americans.

Strickland indicates that politics divided African Americans, however, as competing black newspapers and election returns from T. Arnold Hill’s ill-fated political foray in 1923 indicate. Perhaps the most telling evidence about the political disunion among Chicago blacks surfaces in Strickland’s discussions of the apathy that most blacks showed toward the League. Decade after decade the League struggled to make budget and to diversify its support. Dances and other benefits held to secure patronage of the black general public failed to reap worthwhile returns. In reality, the lack of support for the League among many Chicago residents may have resulted from the limited financial resources that most blacks controlled combined with the wealth of options open to them.

Knupfer indicates that the Washington–Du Bois dichotomy still frames historians’ arguments, but that the dichotomy does not explain African American politics during the nadir of race relations, even the strategies that women assumed. While Strickland links women’s clubs with “groups who were uninitiated to the ways of politics” (p. 80), Knupfer indicates that the women’s club members in fact “wedded self-help strategies to political protest” (p. 11). Women engaged in serious coalition building to overcome the class and cultural disunion among black residents. Through their actions they constructed collective memory and group identity but could express themselves only through marginalized institutions. They undertook economic and social reform but could accomplish this only through relationships that often led to exploitation. Ultimately, they sought full citizen rights, an integrationist goal that actually threatened the black identity and autonomy that the racist society helped form.

Gaining black autonomy did not remove residents from the racist system, either, and the ultimate failure of the decolonization effort undertaken by Brooklyn leaders attests to that. When whites in East St. Louis realized that their efforts to annex Brooklyn to maintain control over the black residents would not work, they transformed the black-town residents into exploited wage laborers—including butchers in packing plants and roustabouts in river freight companies. Cha-Jua argues that this forced black Brooklynnites into a periphery economy, not integrated into the white core and therefore underdeveloped and exploited. Other studies hint of the potential for more detailed study of the politicized attitudes of the laborers in Brooklyn. The Mississippi
River offered opportunities for laborers from the time of the steamboat era; African Americans involved in southern coastal industries pursued unionization during the 1880s; and the length of residence and place of origin affected the attitudes of the laborers, at least in Chicago, to participate or avoid unionization during the 1910s. Labor organizations, similar to women’s clubs, offer important avenues to explore black politics.¹

Historians of African American politics need to move beyond the dichotomy that many have constructed to explain the 1880 to 1920 era. Such a synthesis would prove that black political discourse continued after the co-option of Populism, and that black politics involved more than “brokerage” between elite blacks and whites. It would consider the actions of white Americans who strove to undermine, neutralize, or preempt the goals of rural African Americans as “the essence of politics,” not the inevitable outcome of racial inequity and political disfranchisement. Finally, the synthesis would contextualize national and state politics in relation to grassroots politics, the discourse in which Chicago women engaged, and the form of politics that African Americans in the northern cities and the southern countryside employed so effectively in their quest for civil rights.²

Central to a reconceptualization of African American political discourse would be a revision of the relationships that existed between rural and urban residents at the time. The rural-urban divide that often fragments our historic thinking emerged during the 1920s in the wake of the second Ku Klux Klan and the decline in Progressivism. Urban intellectuals and social scientists crafted the dichotomy by linking negative traits such as illiteracy, racism, and xenophobia to rural places. Perhaps they did this to deflect criticism from antilabor, anticommunist urban xenophobes. Adherence to a belief that an urban environment offered increased opportunities and that only nonprogressives remained in the rural South can undermine objectivity when studying this era, particularly when exploring African American community and club building. Instead, much exchange occurred between the city and the country that has gone undocumented, and the significance of the exchange remains largely unexplored.³

In contrast, an antiurban stance affected attitudes of rural southerners and inhibited objectivity. Strickland reflects on rural identification as he recounts his early years in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. While he recognizes that racism constrained his life, he believes that “the quality of life for African Americans in [Chicago] was inferior to that enjoyed by many in my Jim Crowed neighborhood” (p. xxi), though he does not expound on the city’s hazards. This contrasts starkly with Cha-Jua’s claim that “the concentration of African Americans even in the lowest strata of the industrial proletariat represented an advancement over employment in the southern plantation economy” and that social relations connected to sharecropping “were more degrading” (p. 155). Such antirural sentiments fail to recognize Strickland’s perspective, and that of many southern (and northern) African Americans who remained

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in the countryside not because they were trapped there but because they valued the rural, communal, agricultural lifestyle that they and their ancestors had lived. More needs to be done to explicate the reasons why blacks chose to stay in the country, compared to moving to the city.

Strickland expresses antielitism as well when he recounts how, as a young scholar, he resisted becoming dependent on a white lawyer to make contact with the director of the Chicago Urban League, an association created to advocate for African Americans transitioning from rural to urban life. Yet Strickland believes that his research on the League transformed him into an urban dweller, implying that he adjusted to living in a city while not abandoning his identification with the country. Neither did many others, and this could account for some of the hesitancy among the Chicago African American population to support League efforts. People of rural origin often favored traditional or grassroots methods of self-help, namely, vesting control in a neighborhood or church rather than centralizing self-help in a bureaucracy such as the Chicago Urban League.

Obviously rural experiences affected urban interactions and helped shape them. Strickland first encountered the North during the 1940s when he served as a delegate to the National Conference of Methodist Youth, which met in Albion, Michigan. In fact, by World War II, African Americans from the rural South had been moving north permanently for more than one hundred years. Free slaves and their families came from Virginia and North Carolina into border states such as Tennessee during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The geographic reach of the migration shifted north into the Old Northwest Territory during the 1820s as free blacks sought to hold onto their modicum of freedom as racialized legislation in southern states became more intense. They founded farming communities in places such as Roberts Settlement and Beech Settlement in Indiana.4

Those who formed the towns allied with other residents to create the cultural and social institutions that bridged their differences through common experiences and helped their community survive. The leadership of Brooklyn emerged from a politicized rural black population intent on realizing autonomy in governance but also in creating a sense of community among residents. People in Brooklyn came from Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, Alabama, and Illinois, predominately from farms and cotton plantations, but some came from cities as well. They were rich and poor, skilled and unskilled, literate and uneducated. Cha-Jua identifies several factors that created cohesion among the disparate black population—two churches reduced congregational and community dissention and helped forge a collective social and cultural experience, population concentration in “lower” Brooklyn facilitated interaction, and a political decision to offer support to fugitive slaves and to challenge black codes created a common purpose. After Brooklyn incorporated, however, its residents, some of whom were second-generation, abandoned the goals of amalgamating new arrivals and instead concentrated on securing their special interests.
Yet special interests allowed African American residents to gain leadership experience and economic and political power, and Cha-Jua uses this to further his theory that urbanization is one of the processes essential for the development of a social movement (p. 118). Urbanization helped create a favorable environment that allowed residents to create stronger internal governance, convince others in the rightness of their cause and their ability to succeed, and create opportunities to exert influence. Brooklyn provided opportunities for political mobilization between 1875 and 1886 because it was a vibrant black community on the periphery of an industrial area where blacks could affect change. Yet communities in the rural South as well as the industrial North “decolonized” during the same time period; that is, residents wrestled some political control away from the white majority in ways that presaged black nationalist goals. More needs to be done to contextualize this evolution of community formation and its relationship to a national civil rights movement and not just consider the decolonizing effort as an example of urban (or rural) distinctiveness.

Historians of the rural South have documented grassroots politics, community building, and intraracial negotiation that preceded and coincided with the efforts in the industrializing North as documented by Cha-Jua, Knupfer, and Strickland. Rural people created fraternities similar to those in cities, and the rural self-help institutions often presaged the urban examples, or existed independent of them as spontaneous inventions. Through them, rural (as well as urban) members became more freedom-conscious, politicized, and militant. In fact, rural southern African Americans challenged white power in myriad ways. Most recently, Steven Hahn has recounted how integrationists and separatists sought full U.S. citizenship as well as freedom from oppression. They created their own businesses; they populated their towns with families connected through complex kinship networks; they communicated their agendas and group consciousness through their own newspapers, through cultural institutions such as schools and churches and via special interest groups such as women’s clubs. Ultimately, Hahn argues, their activism, private in nature and local in scope, exerted more influence on Reconstruction-era reform than did the actions of their urban counterparts.5

Community studies require a researcher to focus on a place over time, but doing so can undermine the relationships that existed between one place and another, and the influence of one place over another. African Americans during the transition decades of the 1880s to the 1920s often were neither rural nor urban but both, and they applied their knowledge and capabilities to the tasks at hand regardless of their location. Two reformers active in Texas provide examples of the transient nature of many reformers who combined separatist and integrationist goals in rural and urban places. Robert Lloyd Smith grew up in Atlanta, Georgia, during the 1860s, graduated from Atlanta University in 1879, and eventually settled in rural Oakland, Texas, which he represented in the state legislature during the 1890s. He concomitantly organized rural
blacks throughout East Texas into a benevolent organization, the Farmers Improvement Society, which survived nearly forty years, ceasing operation during the 1930s. He maintained administrative offices in Waco and in rural Fannin County through which he advocated formal and informal education, insurance, and community-building activities to rural and small-town Texans. A contemporary reformer seeking similar goals, Joseph Elward Clayton, had lived in Manor, Texas, a black settlement near Austin, but he pursued education reform and rural resettlement during the early 1900s from offices in Houston and Chicago as well as Manor. These men as well as countless other men and women associated with comparable reform organizations indicate the degree of exchange and cross-fertilization that existed between rural and urban residents.  

Rural southerners took their agendas to the cities in the South, particularly prior to World War I, and increasingly to northern cities thereafter. In turn, urban residents needed rural connections to take their messages into the countryside. Most believed this vital because they came from rural origins and they realized that serving the majority meant working in the countryside. While urban conditions may have offered additional avenues for activism, urban settings alone did not enable African Americans to act politically. It appears that many were politically active in the southern countryside and in southern cities before they migrated to northern cities. And many maintained contacts with rural brothers, sisters, and other family members, thus creating a conduit through which ideas could flow.  

Much more must be done to document the rural-urban interchange during this era. Of the three studies, Knupfer presents the most detailed account of how social and self-help institutions fostered grassroots political discourse and reform. She uses African American newspapers such as the Chicago Defender, club minutes, personal papers, and other underutilized sources to explore the influence of women’s clubs in Chicago between 1890 and 1920. From a community-building standpoint, the clubs helped people of like mind unite, often along class lines, to correct social, economic, cultural, and even political wrongs. Many undertook self-improvement through literature, drama study, and poetry reading or through embroidery and sewing circles. Others focused their energies on attaining civil rights such as their right to property and their right to the vote. The same women also sought to reform law through antilynching crusades and to reform health care for the elderly, indigent, pregnant women, and children. Finally, many pursued personal interests related to their stage of life as mothers of small children or members of the talented tenth. The women often disagreed over the strategies to realize their goals, including whether to work through integrated clubs or self-segregate, but they accomplished major things in their localities despite gender and race discrimination.  

Through newspapers, women discovered the range of clubs from which they could choose, but they could also read about the activities of folk in their
home states. In 1915, the Defender informed readers about the suggested program that Booker T. Washington issued from Tuskegee Institute to guide National Health Week. Women and men throughout the nation followed the advice that emanated from a rural southern institution. Antilynching leagues received inspiration from a photograph of four men hanging from a tree, farmers who died, according to the story, because they delivered the first cotton to the gin. Articles announced farmers conferences at which farm families gathered to hear the latest self-help strategies, and recounted public lectures presented at major southern fairs that criticized race relations. Such stories reflected Chicagoleans’ interests in things rural.9

Knupfer’s analysis provides more evidence that women in cities such as Chicago and southern farmwomen valued similar things. For example, in 1914 the Ideal Women’s Club celebrated its first anniversary with a tour and inspection of the Amanda Smith Home and Industrial School, located in Harvey, Illinois. They found that the garden work “was first class” and approved of the chicken yard as well (p. 77). Home demonstration agents in the South would have thrilled to such interest. Chicago women applied grassroots activist strategies that southern women knew well to accomplish their educational and social uplift goals. They worked with the cultural institutions such as churches and schools and funded their endeavors with a variety of benefits and bazaars. The methods of the country worked well in the city.10

While African Americans gained some political power over the long century between the 1830s and the 1950s, they did not attain full civil rights. Separatist agendas such as community building and special interest activism did not free independent black communities from exploitation; nor did integrationist strategies result in social justice and civil rights. Specifically, neither goal (separation nor integration) challenged race-based decision making at the local, state, or even national level. In addition to the racism that acted on the black communities, internal factionalism affected black communities in ambiguous ways. Dissention and disparate group formation occurred despite the efforts to form a community identity, as in the case of Brooklyn. Yet factionalism helped foster competing women’s clubs in Chicago that allowed many to find their public voice and effect change. Cha-Jua, Knupfer, and Strickland indicate that African Americans living in urban Illinois made a difference despite their disagreements over which political strategy to use to attain civil liberties—whether liberty meant the right to self-governance as a black nationalist defined it, or the right to self-governance as an integrationist defined it. But racism undermined any efforts on the part of the black community, regardless of that community’s political agenda.

Historic simplifications continue to compartmentalize African Americans despite recent good scholarship that documents alternative interpretations. Black subjects still move from being slaves prior to the Civil War, to being victims of racism during the Jim Crow era, to being members of dysfunctional urban neighborhoods riddled by violence and debilitating by poverty.
Micro studies such as these provide important counters to such erroneous assumptions. Time/place studies such as these three monographs provide the foundation to contextualize the pernicious nature of racism and the different forms it took in the rural compared to urban South, and in the rural compared to urban North. The time will come soon for a synthesis that bridges the rural to urban transition of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period critical to the development of urban (and rural) black political consciousness. Such a book has the potential to reorient African American history generally by focusing on the influence of black political consciousness and the interrelationships of rural to urban, the communication that occurred between residents, and the mutual dependency needed in the quest for social justice and civil rights within a racialized state.

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NOTES


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