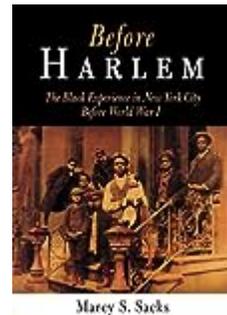


Marcy S. Sacks. *Before Harlem: The Black Experience in New York City before World War I.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006. 240 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3961-4.



Reviewed by William King (Department of Ethnic Studies, The University of Colorado at Boulder)

Published on H-Urban (March, 2007)

“Chasing the Dream Deferred”: Black Life in New York before Harlem

On November 19, 1897, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, then a part-time instructor in sociology at the University of Pennsylvania where he was finishing his study of the Seventh Ward of Philadelphia, gave a talk to the American Academy of Political and Social Science in the city, entitled, “The Study of the Negro Problems.” In his presentation Du Bois observed two things of particular importance to understanding the volume under review. First, he said, was the reality that “Negroes do not share the full national life because as a mass they have not reached a sufficiently high grade of culture.” And second, this reality obtained because “there has always existed in America a conviction—varying in intensity, but always widespread—that people of Negro blood should not be admitted into the group life of the nation no matter what their condition might be.”[1]

In looking at the origins of the most famous of all the “Dark Ghettoes,” Marcy S. Sacks, an associate professor in history at Albion College, offers us an illustration of how a self-fulfilling prophecy is reified into an actuality. (This book is a reworking of her doctoral dissertation, “‘We Cry Among the Skyscrapers’: Black People in New

York City, 1880-1915,” written at the University of California at Berkeley, 1999.) Along the way she describes a subset of a universe of people who began their American sojourn as trade goods, evolved into “a species of property,” were manumitted by legislative fiat, and have since struggled to become something other than *other* in their quest to realize the privileges and immunities coincident with citizenship in the United States.

The self-fulfilling prophecy of which I speak was described in an article that appeared in the *Nation* on September 14, 1865. The unnamed author wrote that whites in the South had rather boldly embraced the notion: “Now that the negroes will be no longer cared for and protected by their masters, they will soon die out before civilization and competition, *just as the Indians have.*” Further, this idea “has chimed in with the prejudices and preconceptions of a large class at the North, and has gone quite the round of the press, unchallenged even where it ought to have been summarily arrested and condemned.” This belief and desire may have been occasioned by an apparent increase in the mortality rate of black people recorded in the 1860 census. “The extinction of the race,”

the author continued, “would cut the Gordian knot of the negro problem. With some it is the solacing grumble in which they vent their feeling as they yield to the inevitable necessity of emancipation; with others, we fear, from acts that have latterly been reported, the origin of the prediction was not merely a devout wish to behold that particular contamination, but also a determined purpose to help it on themselves.”[2] In short, the author posed the question, how can we whites stay the potential of black people before they become a threat to the legitimacy of our contention that we are the master race?

In his talk, Du Bois opined that a “social problem is the failure of an organized social group to realize its group ideals, through the inability to adapt a certain desired line of action to given conditions of life.”[3] In short, coupling Du Bois’s comments with what was described in *The Nation*, the situation that Sacks describes in New York City during the so-called Gilded Age/Progressive Era resulted from a “white problem,” and not a “Negro problem.” As a culture, the United States prior to World War I worked diligently to apply the instruments of residential segregation and economic exploitation to collect, corral, and contain the undesired in an urban reservation, out of sight and out of mind. Many whites felt they had resolved that “problem” and then blamed the victims for the plight in which they found themselves. Despite everything, however, the Negroes did not die out. Indeed, not only did they survive, as Sacks writes, they managed to create a life and a community that, although it had its share of problems, became a vibrant force in the urbanization of black people.

The relatively short text of *Before Harlem* is illustrated with photographs of buildings, interiors, and persons from the interval of Sacks’s study, roughly 1880 through 1915. The text is divided into six chapters with the last, “Negro Metropolis,” the only one that directly addresses the ways black people in New York found “to create community within overcrowded tenements and to assert their claim to the city” (p. 170). The remainder of the work sets the stage and creates the context, acting on what the author states is her “responsibility [to give] voice to the too often voiceless,” an obligation she says she learned while at Berkeley working with Leon Litwack. These chapters do allow us to see many of the ways in which (drawn from their own records) the various agencies, organizations, public bureaucracies, businesses, et al., crafted the mechanics of the self-fulfilling prophecy noted above. These mechanics sought to “check the progress of the black hordes that are gradually eating through the very heart of Harlem” (p. 84) and

purge neighborhoods, moving the “vicious classes” from the southern tip of Manhattan due north to preserve the idealized image that successive waves of migrants and immigrants expected to find upon their own arrival in New York. In this, Sacks does justice to the available material.

Paradoxically, this historical treatment using primary documents is also one of the limitations of the work. First, her notes at the back of the book do not adequately distinguish between the primary and secondary sources she consulted. And, of the primary sources, I wonder whether there was some reason that more material was not drawn from the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture—perhaps it was just not there? (She does identify at the head of her notes section, in addition to the Schomburg, the New York Municipal Archives, the New York Public Library, the New York State Archives, Manuscripts, and Special Collections and Columbia University as archival repositories she visited during her research.) Second, Sacks often takes a statement of a condition or a finding from the sources and then projects that item onto the whole of the black folk in the city, as if they were a singular entity. For example, she writes: “As the black population of New York soared, black people made their presence increasingly felt. Whites responded with an intensification of racial intolerance. Within this complex and often daunting world, black people forged their lives, working, praying, loving, and playing as they made New York City their own” (p. 7). For me, this particular wording begs the question, “did they in fact make the city their own?” The portrait that Sacks draws of black people in New York was more one of objects acted upon than agents acting on their own behalf. Of course, black folk are not immune to the cultural pressures around them, and Sacks cites how often they came to believe about themselves what white folks believed about them. It must be kept in mind, however, that in this era of American imperialism many of these characterizations—e.g., “Our Little Brown Brothers”—were all about extending U.S. hegemony, both at home and abroad. Imperialism and white supremacy were interlinked—the *Plessey* decision handed down by the Supreme Court in 1896, legitimizing discrimination at the national level, and Sacks’s descriptions of the treatment of West Indian immigrants in *Before Harlem* can be taken as cases in point.

The book is more descriptive of macrodynamics—“what was seen and what it meant”—than of the voices of black New Yorkers telling us what they experienced and the meaning they made thereof. The author tends to propose a host of consequences that grew out of the

rampant racism of the period without analysis. Perhaps further background about black New York prior to 1890 would have supported a comparison between community dynamics earlier in the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth.

Sacks's somewhat uneven study, jumping "into the fray of the decades-long and often acrimonious debate about life for African Americans in the inner city" (p. 7), left me wanting more. There is a thinness to her constructed images of the inner lives of black people in New York between 1880 and 1915. Clearly, writing history is contingent on the availability and accessibility of information from which interpretations are drawn. Perhaps the most important point Professor Sacks makes in this work, although she makes it indirectly, is that when slavery was ended, black people lost whatever ascribed intrinsic value they had. Indeed, they became a liability in some respects, because now they were competitors.

Notes

[1]. This talk was subsequently published with the same title in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 11 (January 1898), 1-21. *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (Philadelphia: Published for the University, 1899), has become, in the estimation of many since its appearance, the seminal study in urban sociology and a model for others who would seek to investigate black community life in the United States.

[2]. "Will the Freed Negro Race at the South Die Out?" *Nation* 1 (September 14, 1865), 325-327.

[3]. "Study of the Negro Problems," p. 2. Du Bois seems to be saying that if the whites can keep from interacting with black people, they can continue to advance a policy of color blindness, pretending that race does not exist. This fantasy keeps white people and some black people from acknowledging the consequences of racism.

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Citation: William King. Review of Sacks, Marcy S., *Before Harlem: The Black Experience in New York City before World War I*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. March, 2007.

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