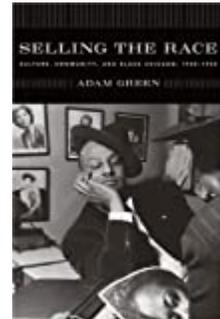
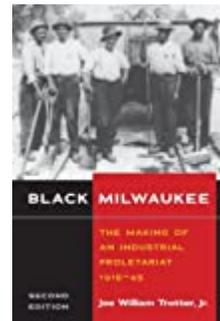


**Adam Green.** *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940-1955.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. xiv + 230 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-30641-4.



**Joe William Trotter, Jr.** *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007. liv + 432 pp. \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-07410-3.



**Reviewed by** Andrew Kersten (History Department, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay)

**Published on** H-Urban (May, 2007)

## A New Direction for Black Urban History

Among the most significant historiographical trends to emerge from the turbulent 1960s were investigations into black urban history. The two books under review—*Black Milwaukee* and *Selling the Race*—represent important milestones and, perhaps with the latter, a new direction in the historical writing on African Americans and cities in the United States.

There are a number of very fine historiographical essays about black urban history.[1] For our purposes, let me summarize the highlights. The scholarly litera-

ture about black urban life extends back one hundred years. In 1899, W. E. B. DuBois published *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*, which set the mold for many such blacks-in-the-city monographs. Using sociological methods, DuBois surveyed Philadelphia, revealing the depth of social problems for black urbanites: poverty, crime, violence, disease, and discrimination. Others such as Charles S. Johnson, Robert E. Park, and E. Franklin Frazier followed in DuBois's footsteps.[2] Frazier had the greatest influence on the growing literature about African Americans and cities, emphasizing the perils of

urban blacks and detailing the ways that racism and prejudice limited African Americans. While noteworthy, this early sociological literature offered little historical analysis, tended to generalize the black urban experience as if there were few meaningful geographic differences in the United States, and glossed over the ways in which blacks found ways to survive and thrive.

In the 1960s and 1970s, social scientists renewed their interests in the black urban experience. This time, history was a larger part of the story. Many of these investigations used the “ghetto” as an organizing principle—Kenneth L. Kusmer, *A Ghetto Takes Shape: Black Cleveland, 1870-1930* (1976); Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto, 1890-1930* (1963); and Allan Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (1967). In these studies, the primary historical phenomenon was white racism, which forced African American communities to develop into segregated neighborhoods where poverty rates were high, educational opportunities were limited, and life was often brutal and short.

Both Joe W. Trotter Jr. and Adam Green, whose books are under review here, have taken exception with the ghetto synthesis. Neither would deny the hardships and horrors of the black urban experience. In fact, both *Black Milwaukee* and *Selling the Race* affirm what social scientists have known since 1899. Yet, both Trotter and Green argue that the historical processes at work in these cities were much more complex. Additionally, like other historians such as Earl Lewis, James Borchert, and James Grossman, Trotter and Green focus on the creative ways in which African Americans used their organizations and their culture to overcome racial discrimination and prejudice.[3]

*Black Milwaukee*, which is now twenty-two years old, needs no introduction or a second review. It has been standard reading among scholars and students for decades. The second edition is well worth reading. It has a new preface and acknowledgments, an essay on African American urban history since 1985, a prologue on the nineteenth-century roots of Milwaukee’s black community, a new epilogue on post-World War II Milwaukee, and four brief essays by William P. Jones, Earl Lewis, Alison Isenberg, and Kimberly L. Phillips. In my view, the book has been so long lived for at least four main reasons. First, Trotter’s thesis is powerful. In contrast to those who had emphasized the development of a ghetto, Trotter argued that transformation of black workers from the rural, agricultural South to the urban, industrial North changed the socioeconomic and political circumstances

for African Americans. Their proletarianization was not merely a function of jobs, but it created an outlook, a consciousness, about class and race. And, black Milwaukeeans were very active in shaping their city. Second, Trotter notes that the black community in Milwaukee was not monolithic. Although it was largely a product of southern migrants, by 1945 there was a black bourgeoisie built on top of the black working class. Trotter nicely summarizes the divisions and conflicts within the black community. A third strength is the book’s sociological underpinnings. In other words, the tables, charts, and maps about employment, population, and housing still remain useful and relevant. Fourth, Trotter deftly connected local events and movements to national ones. Thus the labor movement, the national civil rights movement, and national political parties (Democratic, Republican, and Socialist) all have relevance and deep meaning in this history of an average Midwestern city.

All professional reviews of the book were overwhelmingly positive. According to reviews in history, sociology, and interdisciplinary journals, Trotter blazed new ground, courageously argued his thesis despite the skeptical eyes of non-Marxists, seamlessly connected local, urban, black, and labor history, and skillfully recounted the ways that black Milwaukeeans forged their own lives. The book has received some criticism. Trotter’s emphasis on proletarianization limited discussions of other processes such as the creation of a black bourgeoisie. Another critic stated that the book suffered from its chronological limit of the thirty years before and after the world wars. Interestingly, Trotter has fixed this in the second edition with a new epilogue. Others questioned whether Trotter’s characterization of the “ghetto synthesis” was completely accurate. More significantly, while Trotter clearly showed black activism in Milwaukee, some commentators wondered if there was still more to say about the black experience, especially how African Americans viewed their surroundings.

This last point is particularly important in understanding Adam Green’s *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940-1955* and its place in this historiography. Like Trotter, Green is reacting to the scholarly literature on the ghetto, which appears to emphasize victims over actors. Stridently, Green argues that blacks were not passive when they encountered the modern city. Rather, they embraced modernity and in so doing “engendered a unique sense of group life and imagination, restructuring ideas of racial identity and politics that remain influential today” (p. 1). Green does not shy away from the dark side of the city; in fact, it is central

to his story. But he maintains that black Chicagoans did not merely survive racial discrimination and prejudice. Rather, they transformed their culture in their struggle to improve their lives, and in doing so transformed America.

Unlike Trotter's work or any recent books on the African American community in Chicago, Green's eschews sociological analysis. Rather, he focuses on the cultural moments of modernity that shaped African Americans in the city and elsewhere. He begins with a wonderful chapter on the 1940 American Negro Exposition, which was among the first modern public black expressions. Although illustrative, it was, as Green demonstrates, a complete failure, financially and culturally. It failed to accomplish its goal of coming to grips with modern history and placing African Americans into a national, and not southern, context.

In three other cultural endeavors, black Chicagoans were far more successful and influential. For example, by the early 1940s, Chicago had become a Mecca for black musicians. Beginning in nightclubs, African American music quickly expanded into the recording studios and then onto broadcast, commercial radio. In other words, black music engaged modernity by engaging the marketplace. And, like so many other commercialized aspects of culture, this marriage of music and market was fraught with tensions about secular versus sacred and about the control of ideas, cultural expression, and labor. But, as with other areas of modern American culture, the effects of modern music were clear, if not typical. Those at the forefront—singers like Mahalia Jackson, Louis Jordan, and Muddy Waters as well as radio personalities like Al Benson—became enormously popular, influential, and wealthy. For example, in 1948, Benson, who made millions of dollars from his job, was elected “mayor of Bronzeville” through a poll conducted by the *Chicago Defender*.

Green makes similar cases for two cultural icons in print: the Associated Negro Press (ANP) and *Ebony* magazine. Both were centered in Chicago and, more than contemporary competitors like the *Chicago Defender*, both clearly forged a tight relationship between the city's black community and the national scene. In other words, through the work of Claude Barnett of the ANP and John Harold Johnson of *Ebony*, Green shows how Chicago black culture became “a national cultural idiom though the 1940s and 1950s” (p. 94).

The growth in the cultural link between black Chicago and the nation reached a culminating point, a

“moment of simultaneity” (p. 179), in 1955 with the murder of Emmett Till. Green nicely re-contextualizes this horrific story of an African American young man from Chicago who was killed while visiting relatives in Mississippi. Till's murder was not merely another example of the vulnerabilities, perils, and oppressions that blacks experienced. Rather, Green illustrates how this murder became a way for Chicago blacks, especially those attuned to the culture like Barnett and Johnson, to engage the nation in a dialogue about race in the United States and struggles to make improvements. Thus like Trotter, Green emphasizes that black Chicagoans were not victims in the midst of racial discrimination. Rather they were activists fighting to change politics, economics, and social and cultural institutions. Till's story is also important because it highlights the migratory links between Chicago and the South. Although Trotter does focus on black migrants, Green successfully explores how migrant families maintained their ties to the South. In this case, the story was a historic point linking the local to the national, which shaped the growing civil rights movement.

Green's wonderful book leaves the reader wanting more. Are there other moments of simultaneity both before 1940 and after 1955? One can imagine other historical episodes—the 1968 riot or the rise of the Black Panthers—might have had a similar cultural effect. Asking Green to cover things outside the scope of the book is not fair, but there are some issues he might have delved into more deeply. He all but ignores radical politics and the union movements that arose from the Great Depression. In fact, there is very little in the book from the perspective of the black working class. In this, Green offers quite a different view of black urban history than that of Joe W. Trotter Jr., who centered his book on class analysis.

Despite this criticism, *Selling the Race* is a terrific book, one that should have a long historiographical influence. I can imagine more cultural studies of African Americans in urban areas, perhaps some that deal with class more directly. In summary, all social scientists and humanists will find Green's book worthy of a serious and close reading. As for the second edition of *Black Milwaukee*, I would suggest buying it for the refreshed prologue, the new epilogue, and the series of fine reflective essays about the book's influence. I refuse to toss my old edition of *Black Milwaukee*. I will keep it out of respect and nostalgia.

#### Notes

[1]. Among others, see Trotter's famous appendix 7

in his *Black Milwaukee*, as well as Kenneth W. Goings and Raymond A. Mohl, "Toward a New African American Urban History," *Journal of Urban History* 21 (March 1995): 283-295; and Goings and Mohl, "The Shifting Historiography of African American Urban History," *Journal of Urban History* 21 (May 1995): 435-437.

[2]. E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1932); Charles S. Johnson, *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot* (Chicago: Chicago Commission on Race Relations, 1922); Robert E. Park, "Race Relations and Certain Frontiers," in *Race Relations and Culture Contacts*, ed.

E. B. Reuter (New York: McGraw Hill, 1934), 57-85; and Robert E. Park, "The Nature of Race Relations," in *Race Relations and the Race Problem*, ed. Edgar T. Thompson (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1939), 3-45.

[3]. James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850-1970* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980); James Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); and Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

**Citation:** Andrew Kersten. Review of Green, Adam, *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940-1955* and Trotter, Joe William, Jr., *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. May, 2007.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13203>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).