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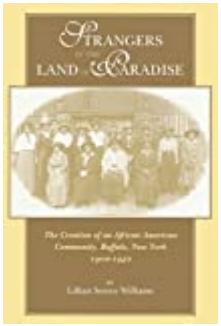
Lillian Serece Williams. *Strangers in the Land of Paradise: The Creation of an African American Community, Buffalo, New York, 1900-1940.* Blacks in the Diaspora Series. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999. 352 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-21408-9.



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Strangers in the Land of Paradise: The Creation of an African American Community, Buffalo, New York, 1900-1940, by Lillian Serece Williams is indeed a welcomed contribution to the growing discourse on Urban African American history. Williams's work brings to life the historical experiences of black Buffalo from its earliest beginnings after the Civil War into the early twentieth century. Williams's work continues with the discourse of the 1980s and 1990s dealing with the black urban experience. Until now, historians have not fully treated the black experience of Buffalo, New York. Williams argues that Buffalo was a unique place of migration for southern African Americans. "Buffalo was the terminus for many of those who had earlier sought refuge in other northern, urban communities," states Williams. In other words, Buffalo was often not the place of intended destination for most southern African Americans. It was not until the outbreak of World War I that this trend changed for many African Americans in migratory patterns that landed them in Buffalo.

Like many northern cities, Buffalo became a hub of industrial activity during the First World War. After the war, Buffalo's black community became permanent perhaps for the first time in its history. In 1850, with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act by President Millard Fillmore, who in fact was from Buffalo, New York, most of Buffalo's African American population found freedom uncertain. Particularly those fugitives who prior to 1850 had experienced some marginal freedoms in Buffalo felt most threatened. After 1850, Buffalo became geographically ideal as the last terminus in their escape to freedom by crossing the Niagara River into Canada. After the Civil War and into the late nineteenth century, African Americans still had not found Buffalo an interesting enough location in their northward migrations. Williams's work adds greatly to the theory that African Americans did not simply move for the sake of moving in their migrations. Williams states in her preface, "The book examines the growth and development of Buffalo, the movement of European immigrants and African American migrants into the city, and their ability to secure an economic foothold. It tests the extent to which family and friendship networks for blacks were a significant force in their migration and acculturation. It also describes the establishment of institutions that African Americans created to shape their modern, urban community" (p. xiv).

Williams builds upon the existing discourse on the black urban experience to make her case for Buffalo. The groundbreaking works by historians of the 1980s and

1990s dealing with the black urban experience dispelled the sociological approaches of black pathology that began with W. E. B. Du Bois's *Black Philadelphia* in 1899 and the later ghetto models of the 1960s and 1970s. The ghetto model was made popular by such scholars as Kenneth B. Clark's *Dark Ghetto*, Allan H. Spear's *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920*, Gilbert Osofsky's *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto*, and Kenneth Kusmer's *A Ghetto Takes Shape: Black Cleveland, 1870-1930*, only to name a few.

By the 1980s, a new generation of scholars had completed dissertations and moved them on to monographs that have greatly transform how the black urban experience is studied and understood. This generation of black urban scholars was more interested in the historical processes and was no longer focused upon blaming African Americans for their often-abject urban conditions. Rather, this generation of scholars sought to focus their questions of the black urban historical experience upon the proletariat condition. The questions they asked centered upon what happens to people when their lives are an outgrowth of an industrial working class condition in which they do not control but rather are controlled by it-industry itself. In addition to poor working conditions, many black city dwellers discovered that Jim Crow conditions had indeed followed them North. It is this theme that occupied our discourse in the 1980s and 1990s. This school of thought about the black urban condition was led by such noted scholars as Joe William Trotter, Jr., *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-45*; Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth Century Norfolk*; James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration*; and Richard W. Thomas, *Life For Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945*, only to name a few scholars whose works have influenced how we now view the black urban historical experience.

Williams's work now belongs to this list of significant scholarly interpretations of a local/regional black urban experience. Buffalo's black urban experience is long overdue given Buffalo's significance as a major urban center during the first half of the twentieth century. Buffalo became a major point of entry and departure for shipping between the midwestern and northeastern states. After the building of the Erie Canal in 1825, Buffalo became more attractive to European immigrant groups. On the eve of the Civil War, according to Williams, Buffalo's black population only numbered about 500, most of whom were fugitives and/or their descendants (p. 11). Even after the Civil War, Buffalo's black population remained small. It was not until the out break of World War I that African Americans began to make their way towards the Queen City of Buffalo to fill the industrial jobs that were made available due to the wartime efforts. This does not make Buffalo unique; however, it does make clear the migratory patterns of southern African Americans into Buffalo. Buffalo was an even more remote destination than the usual targets of migration such as Washington, D.C.; Baltimore; Philadelphia; and New York City. Buffalo often received black populations that had already been living in other northern locations, which made Buffalo a continual migratory location.

Williams divides her book about black Buffalo into two parts. Part One is titled, "Blacks in Twentieth-Century Buffalo: Structural Development." Within Part One, Williams divides the section into four sub-parts: 1. The Early Years, 2. Growing Up Black, 3. To Help See One Another Through, 4. Work. It is within this first portion of the book that Williams builds the case for the first permanent African American settlers in the city of Buffalo. By the late nineteenth century, there was a visible black community in the city of Buffalo as well as a progressive black middle class presence. Not unlike African American middle class progress in other sizable urban locales, Buffalo's black middle class population endorsed the self-help theory and practices. Several prominent black businessmen were able to make a living by providing services to the black community of Buffalo. Given that Jim Crow segregation was already dividing the city along lines of race and ethnicity, Williams argues that African Americans made good of this peculiar phenomenon. As the growing pockets of European ethnic communities exploded in Buffalo by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, African Americans found themselves espousing the self-help theme even more so. Williams deftly situates her synthesis of black Buffalo within the discourse led by noted historian August Meier in his book, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington.* Buffalo's African American population between 1915 and 1925 grew from a little over 1,600 to about 9,000, according to Williams (p. 2). Meier stated it best when he declared, "Even in the North, Negroes felt they were, as the phraseology of the time went, being forced back upon themselves" (Meier, p. 121).

It is in Part Two of Williams's study that she proves her theory of self-help in black Buffalo. Williams titles part two of this seminal work on Buffalo, "Blacks Orga-

nize to Improve Their Status: Institutional Development." The three chapters within part two are as follows: 5. Philanthropy and Uplift, 6. Not Alms, but Opportunity, and 7. Civil Rights, Politics, and Community. It is here that Williams's study firmly plants itself within the paradox of the institutionalization of self-help and racial solidarity. Williams argues that black Buffalo built its community upon a consortium of educated black ministers, black club women activities, the founding of chapters of the Buffalo NAACP and the National Urban League, a small group of white philanthropists, a handful of black-owned businesses, and other mutual aid societies. There are some black families that have factored prominently into the development of the black community in Buffalo–the Nashes, Talberts, Jacksons, Simses, Brents, and Greens, to name a few of the more prominent black families in Buffalo's early history. Along with others, these families were the driving forces behind much of the community uplift, civil rights, and political activity.

It is within this milieu that Williams has squarely placed the concerns and activities of "the creation of an African American community in Buffalo, New York." It is also within this "strange" land of Buffalo that African Americans continually struggled to be accepted and sought to contribute to one of the cities with the most concentrated wealth per capita in the United States from the late nineteenth century until the Great Depression. Williams argues in her conclusion that, "the lives of African Americans in Buffalo from 1900-1940 reveal much about race, class, and gender in the development of urban communities" (p. 188). This study of a heretofore-overlooked northern urban community is again a welcomed contribution. However, Williams's study has overlooked one important aspect of black life in Buffalo. It lacks the voices and everyday lives of the working class African American population. Much of Williams's study has focused on black middle class activities and the roles that they played in Buffalo's history. It is likely, however, that the voices and conditions of working class black Buffalo remains hard to get at as in most cases. This remains the next challenge fo rany case study of black Buffalo in order that a fuller history of the conditions of black life might emerge. Despite this shortcoming, Williams's work on black Buffalo must be a point of departure for any synthesis done on Buffalo henceforth.