

GROUP PORTRAIT WITH LADY

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Joe William Trotter, Jr., ed. *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class and Gender*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991. xiv + 160 pp. Notes, tables, and index. \$29.95 (cloth); 10.95 (paper).

In the last decade the "Great Migration" has become a growth industry among American historians. The volume under review (an outgrowth of the Smithsonian's "From Field to Factory" exhibition) brings together some examples of this productivity, generally those that are characterized by what Joe William Trotter, Jr. describes as the "proletarian approach" to migration. This approach places primary emphasis on the process by which African Americans became urban-industrial workers, unlike the "ghetto model," which focuses primarily on racial segregation.¹ The volume's one exception to this proletarian model is the final article on women and gender in the migration. This contribution provides a fitting coda for the earlier pieces, leaving the reader with the distinct impression that African-American migration history is about to move into some uncharted and exciting territory.

Viewed in light of some of the pitfalls of earlier syntheses of the "Great Migration," ably detailed by the editor, the proletarian essays make a number of important contributions to our understanding of the subject. Earl Lewis and Joe Trotter, Jr. remind us that the migration was not merely northward, but national. Migrations to Norfolk, Virginia, and other southern towns and cities, as well as to the coal mines in rural West Virginia, were also important. The northern-biased literature has tended to see the southern town or city as merely a step on the way to the northern city. Such a view was disputed in the 1920s, by Monroe Work, a researcher for the Urban League;² it has now been laid to rest by Lewis and Trotter.

Shirley Ann Moore adds to this expanded view of the migration by not only describing a migration to Richmond, California, but also taking the story past World War II, the customary terminus for most studies of the "Great Migration." Peter Gottlieb, in his rethinking of the subject, moves both backwards and forwards by looking at "the 100-year flow of African Americans out of their native region" (p. 69). In the process, he focuses on discontinuities in

patterns of migration as both the composition of the migration population and their reasons for moving changed

The authors also show that migrants were not powerless in the face of social, economic, and political pressures—these migrants had “agency.” According to Shirley Ann Moore, they “were not passive victims pushed and pulled in a drama beyond their control”; they were “active agents in shaping their participation in the urban industrial workforce” (p. 108). James Grossman builds his analysis around the idea, developed fully in *Land of Hope* (1989), that the migration was a “grassroots social movement” fueled by its own leadership and information networks. Giving migrants agency is a prerequisite for analyses that, as these essays do, treat them and the institutions they created with the respect they deserve.

But there may be pitfalls in concentrating too much attention on the question of agency. First, agency may need to be differentiated from power. As George Orwell might tell us, “all people have agency, but some have more than others.” While black migrants were not passive victims, they clearly did not all have the same resources available to them; many, as Allen Ballard has asserted, might be labeled “refugees,” or, as Carol Marks has described them, “pawns caught between economic systems.”³ Furthermore, migrating people did not always have control over the ways their actions would be viewed by surrounding ethnic communities (and by interested scholars). The limitations of the agency model become clear when we recognize that others might describe African Americans’ “self-transformation” by using terms such as “uppitty” or “scab” for men and “prostitute” or “emasculating” for women. Second, the formulation of agency put forward in these studies of the “Great Migration” implies that those African Americans who left southern homes without making preparations, or who had no choice but to move because the boll weevil had eaten their crops (and there were many such among the migrants), were indeed bearers of a “culture of poverty.”

Finally, the authors’ formulation of agency leads to analyses that devalue class, despite the volume’s overarching “proletarian” framework and the editor’s trenchant criticism (elsewhere) of ghettoization models of migration on the grounds that they were insensitive to class divisions.⁴ This is clear in the effort to replace a push/pull theory explaining migration with one based on human agency. Downplaying push and pull factors obscures the fact that people who felt they were forced to leave the land owing to the boll weevil or the threat of lynching often had a very different social profile from those people who moved in search of better opportunities.

The closest the authors come to acknowledging class is when Lewis writes, “The history of black migration is complex, varying as it did by region, gender, age, and, presumably, class” (p. 42). Why presumably? Presumably it

did or it didn't, and this deserves study. But the African-Americanist's proletarian model always subordinates class to race. Based on Herbert Gutman's reading of E. P. Thompson, the theory is that newly proletarianized workers undergoing their first experience of industrial conditions and "time-work discipline" fell back on "traditional" cultural resources, which for migrants meant southern black culture. When intraracial divisions are overlooked and migrants are treated as a monolithic group, however, such culture tends to be reified. Thus it is no surprise that black churches receive so little attention in this volume: the assumption is that the church meant the same thing to all "black Southerners." As such, whether a migrant had belonged to a large African Methodist city church in the South or a small Baptist rural church is not seen as important, even though churches and fraternal orders had important status, as well as spiritual and cultural dimensions.

Similarly, Lewis shows more clearly than any previous historian that "visiting" was an important adaptation strategy for migrant families, but he seems to miss a potential class aspect to the phenomenon. One of his tables reveals that nearly 88 percent of people reported to have visited Norfolk lived in cities with more than 50,000 inhabitants. Of the 312 black Norfolks who went visiting only 40 (13 percent) went to rural places and only 105 (34 percent) visited places of less than 30,000 inhabitants. Either visiting was decidedly urban in character, or people who visited or had guests from small towns felt less comfortable or less able to announce this in the local weekly journal. Either way there is an important class dimension to the story.

Grossman's analysis of the Stockyards Labor Council efforts to unionize black workers is the most glaring example of this subordination of class to race. Migrants were united, he argues, by the realization that they were all "black Southerners" who saw things "in racial more than class terms" (p. 85). Many of them joined northern unions at first and then decided to leave because they came to see that unions were antithetical to rural cultural ways, being alliances of a "horizontal" rather than a "vertical" nature (p. 97). The problem with Grossman's approach is that alternative theses are not refuted. The same evidence from which Grossman concluded that unionism needed "to prove its efficacy as a solution to an essentially racial problem" (p. 85) can be used to argue that because unions were no more than ethnic clubs, black workers realized that they would be unable to respond effectively to class problems. Ghettoization of African Americans in the "Black Belt" can be seen as sufficient reason for the failure of unions to attract black members without needing to turn to black southerners' cultural baggage for the answer. Black workers may have joined unions out of shop-floor solidarity only to find that these organizations were too tied to communities from which they were excluded. They were therefore left with a choice of attending meetings close to

the workplace and miles from where they lived, or joining separate locals—neither of which was acceptable.⁵

The authors appear more eager to recognize a gender aspect to the migration story, though there seems a reluctance to change the narrative itself in response to new findings on women's roles both in the migration and African-American communities. In her pathbreaking article, however, Darlene Clark Hine highlights gender-specific motivations for moving, such as the desire for freedom from sexual exploitation, and shows how many of the connections between urban and rural areas were sustained by women who were forced to leave children behind in the South. Hine also begins the process of describing the different work experiences black women faced in the urban Midwest, and delineates some ways in which women's migration affected black urban communities and their institutions. While she does not explicitly contest some of the gendered assumptions implicit in the proletarianization thesis itself,⁶ her article raises questions about the analytical framework that unites the others.

What does proletarianization mean for women who often moved from service work in the South to service work in the North? Were they already proletarianized, and if so were they proletarianized under slavery? Or, if they were not, did they experience proletarianization vicariously, when their husbands and brothers entered the industrial work force? If the latter is the case, then have they been relegated to the role that they play in immigration histories: mother and sister (or prostitute)? By seeing southern black culture in monolithic terms are men being privileged at the expense of women? Finally, is the term "Great Migration" itself a gendered term—denoting a short period in African-American migration history when the migration was uncharacteristically dominated by the movement of men into higher-paid, "male" jobs? If so, then hasn't the proletarianization model which focuses on this period of male-dominated migration unwittingly played into the hands of those who would characterize African-American migration (in contrast to the "great" immigrant migrations) as generally one reflecting the "race's" marginal position and susceptibility to pathology—crime, drugs, illegitimacy, etc? In this regard it is interesting that the editor argues that immigration historians, John Bodnar and Olivier Zunz in particular, have painted a "highly pathological portrait of blacks" (p. 149). What I am suggesting is that by utilizing the same gendered models used by immigration historians, historians of African-American migration have reinforced the negative stereotypes for those people who did not make their way to the city for industrial work, and who did not establish normative nuclear families.

Indeed, one of the most serious indictments of the proletarianization school is that while it seems to be at its most influential, a book like Nicholas Le-

mann's *The Promised Land* (1991) can be published and receive so much acclaim. Lemann's book revives the Elkins-Moynihan thesis by blaming the legacy of sharecropping for problems within black communities. Such a thesis is challenged by the proletarianization theorists, at least for the period 1916 to 1930. One might ask then, how can such a return to "culture of poverty" theory happen? Part of the answer may be found in Gottlieb's article, in which he seems to pave the way for Lemann's analysis by arguing that migration after the Second World War became "a movement of resignation and despair" and that these later participants were "as much refugees as migrants" (p. 77). It is indeed true that the participants were different at different times during this century. The fact is, however, that one kind of migration, that of men moving into factories, has been elevated to the status of hope, while other kinds of migration, that of women into domestic work in particular, has been relegated to the status of despair. The much vaunted agency has been withheld, and the ways in which "refugees" responded creatively to their difficult circumstances can be seen only negatively as the legacy of sharecropping, slavery, or even at the level of political discourse, race.

Trotter is correct that the time is right for the emergence of migration studies as a new subfield in black urban history. Hine has convinced me, however, that this will have to be done at the expense of the proletarianization thesis as it is now formulated. We cannot merely "integrate the new findings [on women and gender] into our larger understanding of black migration . . ." (p. 147), for the latter has contributed to making the former invisible. As Hine suggests, once we start looking at the kinds of sources that will give us access to women's roles in the African-American migration, "we will light up that inner world so long shrouded behind a veil of neglect, silence, and stereotype, and will quite likely force a rethinking and rewriting of all of black urban history" (p. 129).

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1. See Joe William Trotter, Jr., *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat* (1985), pp. xi, 264-82.

2. Monroe Work, "Research with Respect to Cooperation Between Urban and Rural Communities," *Opportunity* 1 (February 1923), p. 7.

3. Allen B. Ballard, *One More Day's Journey: The Story of a Family and a People* (1984); Carol Marks, in Alferdteen Harrison, ed., *Black Exodus: The Great Migration from the American South* (1991), p. 48. The editor and the authors avoided discussion of important disagreements and debates among historians about the origins of migrants, and how much control participants in the migration had.

4. See, Trotter, pp. 273-75.

5. An alternative analysis using this evidence is advanced by Eric Halpern in "Race, Ethnicity and Union in the Chicago Stockyard, 1917-22," *The International Review of Social History* 37 (Spring 1992): 1-28.

6. See for example, Joan Scott's critique of E. P. Thompson in *Gender and the Politics of History* (1988).
