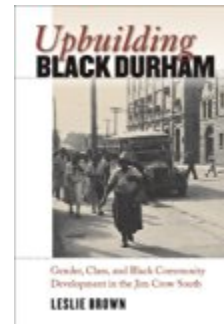


Leslie Brown. *Upbuilding Black Durham: Gender, Class, and Black Community Development in the Jim Crow South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. xiii + 451 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3138-0; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5835-6.

Reviewed by Charles Coulter (University of Missouri, Kansas City)

Published on H-Urban (February, 2010)

Commissioned by Sharon L. Irish



Gender and Race in Durham, North Carolina

Leslie Brown has written an interesting but ultimately unsatisfying study of the development of the African American community in Durham, North Carolina. It promises much, offers a lot, but leaves the reader wanting much more.

From its beginnings as a railroad station, Durham Station had grown by 1890 into the eighth largest city in North Carolina, and its black population was the state's sixth largest. Bright-leaf tobacco and later textile mills fueled Durham's rise to prominence, and at least some African Americans shared in its prosperity. Black men and women flocked to Durham in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries looking for work. By the 1930s, Durham boasted some of the wealthiest black men in the nation, and the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company, started in 1898 by a group of African American entrepreneurs, was the richest and best-known black-owned institution in the nation. Early in the twentieth century, ideological rivals W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington were both driven to comment on the successful upbuilding of black Durham. By the start of World War II, Durham was one of the most well-known and successful black communities in the nation.

Brown does a commendable job describing the development of the community and its most important institutions. Her work contributes to the phenomenal growth in the number of monographs written on African American urban communities, and she keeps black men and

women at the center of her study. Yet Brown never actually addresses the work of such innovators in black urban studies as Joe W. Trotter, Robin D. G. Kelley, or Darlene Clark Hine. Their influence is felt rather than explicitly demonstrated.

Brown builds the study around the members of the Fitzgerald family, whose descendants include noted writer Pauli Murray. Brown uses Murray's recollections of her life and the stories Murray collected from her older relatives to trace the development of black Durham. Robert Fitzgerald, a Union soldier and Murray's grandfather, remained in Durham after the Civil War and married. His parents and siblings then joined him in the growing community. One brother, Richard, became a successful entrepreneur and a recognizable member of Durham's black aristocracy. Robert was not so fortunate; he lost his land and his livelihood, and his family fell into the black working class.

Brown uses the disparate fortunes of the Fitzgerald brothers as a starting point for her discussion of class differences in the African American community. As in most African American communities, most black residents of Durham were in agreement on larger goals, such as an end to segregation and the need for better schools, but they often disagreed on the means to achieve those goals. The divide was never as simple as supporters of Du Bois versus Washington's proponents; as Brown demonstrates, personality conflicts could often loom as large as

ideological ones.

Yet the discussion of gender issues and conflicts stands at the heart of Brown's study. She is most successful in her second, third, and fourth chapters, when she develops how gender and ideas of gender affected race relations and the development of the black aristocracy. None of the histories of black urban communities of which I am aware has addressed gender as well as Brown does in her first 146 pages. Sadly, gender gets somewhat lost in the final chapters of the book, as do issues of class. The last half of the book—while well written and conceived—reverts to a typical examination of a black community.

This is one of the shortcomings of *Upbuilding Black Durham*, but not unfortunately the only one. Like many historians, Brown uses commonsense or popular definitions of class and race. Yet a scholar writing in the twenty-first century should be more ambitious. Since gender is so much of Brown's story, she would have benefited greatly from openly engaging the works of feminist scholars, like Joan Wallach Scott or Judith Butler, who offer more nuanced definitions of the ideas of gender. Or Brown could have drawn from the work of such black scholars as Patricia Hill Collins, who studies gender in the context of African American lives.

In building her study around the lives of the Fitzgerald family, Brown also seems to lose sight of other actors in the Durham story, including other members of the black elite. And she particularly gives short shrift to the black working class. From experience, I know that finding traces of the lived experiences of the black proletariat is difficult, but those traces do exist. The diligent researcher can find them. A study of a black urban community that does not fully incorporate the experiences of working men and women seems incomplete. Without the workers, the study is just another examination of the black aristocracy, and those are plentiful already.

Equally troubling as the omissions are several assertions made by Brown. The most problematic is her argument that the system of racial oppression known as Jim Crow was all-pervasive and was meant to annihilate the black race. Ignoring for the moment arguments concerning the possibility or practicality of that goal, how then does Brown explain the success of North Carolina Mutual, the development of black Durham, or the success of

any other black institution in the South? She does not, and she really never addresses the issue. The reader is left to draw his or her own conclusion.

Then there is the issue of the school fires. When fire destroys a black school in the 1890s, arson is suspected. Brown carefully relates the story and notes that there is no evidence to support the claim of arson. Yet, later in the book, the fire is given—without qualification—as an example of white racist violence. Such an assertion might fly on the street corner, but a true scholar should be more careful.

And finally, Brown puts forth the commonplace argument that black elites were attempting to impose their morals and values on the working class through training programs for janitors and domestics in the 1930s. Yet my own studies—of New Deal-era janitor training programs offered by the Kansas City Urban League and of the various programs offered by the War on Poverty agency in Kansas City in the 1960s—found that the working class and the poor often sought these classes. The programs often were not tools for transmitting values; they were a reflection of those values as internalized by less-fortunate African American workers.

To the book's detriment, several redundancies exist, most notably references to Tulsa, Oklahoma's Greenwood District, also known as the Black Wall Street, which was destroyed in the race riot of 1921. All of that information is offered on at least three occasions in the text. Brown also accepts without question some of the more dubious historical claims about Greenwood and the riot. There are several typographical errors in this book, including one in which the tobacco industry is described as "repression-proof." Finally, readers of this study wanting to mentally place some of the locations described by Brown deserve better maps. Given production demands, I know that is not always possible, but the maps that are provided are difficult to find and the first map, as printed, is illegible without a strong magnifying glass.

The black community of Durham, North Carolina, has deserved a full scholarly monograph for some time, and Brown should be commended for what she has accomplished. There are gaps, though, which I hope she will one day fill.

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

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

Citation: Charles Coulter. Review of Brown, Leslie, *Upbuilding Black Durham: Gender, Class, and Black Community Development in the Jim Crow South*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. February, 2010.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=29635>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.