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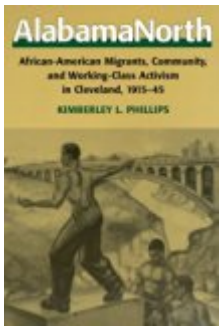

Kimberley L Phillips. *Alabama North: African-American Migrants, Community, and Working-Class Activism in Cleveland, 1915-45.* The Working Class in American History Series. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999. xv + 334 pp. $59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-06793-8.

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Published on H-Urban (June, 2001)

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Class Conflict and Community Building in Black Cleveland

Looking to the future of African-American migration studies, Joe William Trotter predicted in 1991 that, "As we deepen our interdisciplinary grasp of the Great Migration, it should provide a framework for a larger synthesis of black migration in historical perspective."[1] Kimberly Phillips's ***AlabamaNorth*** masterfully provides just such a synthesis. In her study of black migration to Cleveland from 1915 to 1945, Phillips addresses three areas lacking in earlier migration studies. Drawing on studies of black resistance, Phillips examines how southern culture operated in a northern setting to create a militant working-class politics.[2] She thoroughly integrates the differing experiences of African-American women throughout her work. Finally, Phillips provocatively places class-based intracommunity conflict at the center of her study, never shying away from criticizing the black elite.

Phillips's protagonists are black workers, male and female, who made up the majority of the migrant population and created new forms of working-class resistance. They creatively adapted southern strategies of resistance against plantation owners, factory bosses, and white employers in private homes. This process of adaptation created conflict among African Americans as the black elite sought to control the behavior and institutional life of migrants. By World War II, African-American migrants effectively used their oppositional culture to develop militant working-class organizations, epitomized by the Future Outlook League (FOL).

Like other recent histories of the Great Migration, Phillips's story begins in the South. There African Americans used migration to create viable households and communities in the midst of an increasingly oppressive economic and social environment. Black women moved from their rural homes to towns and cities where they worked in private households for wages that bolstered their sharecropping families. Young men moved to coal mining districts or factory towns and

gained experience in industrial labor. Yet as these individuals experienced the urban South, they retained the culture of their rural past, singing the work songs once heard in cotton fields on their new jobs laying railroad tracks. Moving from place to place and from job to job was itself an expression of resistance countering southern employers' insistence on gang labor and servility. The Great Migration north was in many ways a culmination of these earlier and shorter migrations. The availability of northern industrial jobs during World War I was a primary factor in the decision to migrate. Phillips, however, emphasizes the complex "household and communal strategies" employed by migrants as they made the decision to leave the South behind (p. 16).

Phillips's second chapter explores African-American migrants' experience with wage labor in Cleveland. Here her gender analysis sheds new light on the differing experiences of black men and women. In most migration studies, male industrial workers are the protagonists and female household workers play a secondary role. In contrast, Phillips treats male and female workers as equal actors. Although male workers had greater access to factory jobs, they were segregated into the most arduous and lowest paying positions in Cleveland's steel mills and automobile factories. Black women found work primarily in private white households. Their industrial experiences were limited to mechanized laundries and service work for railroads. Despite these differences, both men and women used mobility as a form of resistance. They continually left exploitative and low-paying jobs to seek a more equitable workplace. The high turnover that resulted led middle-class blacks to criticize and attempt to control black workers. Reformers in the Urban League and Phillis Wheatley Association (a settlement house for African-American women) sought to create "compliant workers" who would satisfy the demands of Cleveland's white employers (p. 95).

Phillips turns to the question of organized labor in her third chapter. She rejects the idea that African Americans' reluctance to join traditional unions marked them as antilabor. Rather, she points out that working-class migrants chose "self-organization" to resist oppressive conditions. These workers were alienated by the racist policies of the American Federation of Labor's craft unions in the 1920s. And they did not accept the antilabor black elite who continually sought to appease white employers. Therefore, they developed separate organizations, such as the National Association of Colored Waiters and Hotel Employees, which foreshadowed the militancy of the 1930s.

The culture of resistance developed by black workers is the subject of chapters four and five. Here Phillips is at her best, analyzing how religion, music, leisure, and politics mixed in a new urban community. Her discussions of spatial segregation and housing will be of particular interest to urban historians. In their segregated communities, African American migrants created a rich "associational life" of storefront churches, dance halls, and settlement houses that facilitated strong community ties. These institutions were also the site of class conflict. Perhaps the best example of the class schisms within the black community was the church. Many southern migrants favored ecstatic styles of worship practiced in the Pentecostal and Holiness churches. In contrast, ministers and parishioners of established A.M.E. and Baptist churches condemned ecstatic worship as a remnant of a primitive rural southern culture. Phillips's discussion of the controversies over gospel music illuminates debates over respectable religion especially well. Whether trying to limit the influence of secular music in their churches or policing the leisure of young black migrants, Cleveland's African American elites struggled to contain and control migrant culture to little avail.

Phillips's final two chapters take this story into the Great Depression by focusing on the relatively successful attempts by African American

migrants to counteract racist employment practices. Here Phillips no longer paints a broad picture of the community's housing, leisure activities, or religious life. Instead, she focuses on one organization, the FOL, as the culmination of the migrant community's struggles since World War I to create a viable working-class movement. In Cleveland the FOL oversaw the decline of what Beth Tompkins Bates has termed the "old guard"--African American reformers who led interracial organizations that were anti-labor and accommodationist. In its place a "new guard" of militant working-class activists directly challenged white employers and city officials to hire black workers and support egalitarian unions.3 Unlike the sponsors of "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaigns in other cities, the FOL's leaders and members were primarily working class, and many of them unemployed. They used direct-action techniques such as boycotts and pickets to force white employers in retail stores to hire black workers. The "old guard" black leadership vilified these campaigns, which at times turned violent. But the FOL's militant tactics were somewhat successful in opening new employment opportunities for black workers. By the late 1930s, the FOL began to work directly with organized labor, creating an Employees Union to represent workers they had successfully placed in local establishments. The FOL also took the leadership role in ensuring that African-American migrants received their fair share of jobs in the war industries of World War II. Although continuing direct action campaigns in the 1940s, the FOL also used the courts to press their claims. These efforts were particularly important to black women who struggled to gain a foothold in the industrial economy and leave household labor behind.

Phillips easily supports her claim that the FOL was a model for "racial egalitarianism" and for the "mass participation for black working people" (p. 251). This organization provided a voice for the urban African-American working class during the worst years of the Great Depression. In so doing, it effectively undermined the traditional accommodationist black leadership that had criticized black migrant culture and behavior since World War I. But Phillips fails to put the FOL into the broader picture of black working-class life in Cleveland during the 1930s. We lose the richness of her descriptions of the "vernacular culture" of 1920s Cleveland. This leaves the reader to wonder if the decline of Cleveland's traditional elites was due only to the FOL. Did a growing acceptance of ecstatic worship, gospel music, and commercial leisure among black reformers help facilitate a shift in the political discourse of the 1930s? Did the stark class conflict of the early years of migration continue unabated until World War II in arenas other than the FOL?

Although I am sympathetic to Phillips's criticisms of Cleveland's middle-class black reformers during the Great Migration, I wish she had more fully explored why they accommodated to white employers and politicians and condemned working-class migrant culture. In hindsight, reformers' tactics were clearly ineffective and their rhetoric, particularly that of Jane Edna Hunter's Phillis Wheatley Association, was condescending. Yet these black reformers were operating in a white-dominated city and were often dependent on white philanthropy for their organizations' very existence. Greater attention to the complexity of their motivations and beliefs would have mitigated the judgmental tone that comes across in Phillips's narrative. Nevertheless, by focusing on intracommunity conflict, Phillips demonstrates how worship and leisure activities were inherently political and helped create a sense of community that facilitated the militant movements of the 1930s.

AlabamaNorth transcends many of the traditional boundaries in our profession--it is a labor, urban, African American, and women's history borrowing methodologies from all of these subfields. Phillips's careful attention to culture and gender throughout her text enhances our under-

standing of the urban working class. Her work is indeed a new synthesis that will offer a model for scholars of African-American migration for years to come.

[1]. Joe William Trotter, Jr., ed. ***The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender*** (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 150.

[2]. Phillips draws most heavily from Robin D. G. Kelley, ***Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*** (New York: Free Press, 1994). Like Kelley, Phillips is influenced by James C. Scott, ***Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

[3]. Beth Tompkins Bates, "A New Crowd Challenges the Agenda of the Old Guard in the NAACP, 1933-1941," ***American Historical Review*** 102, No. 2 (April 1997): 340-377.

Citation: Victoria W. Wolcott. Review of Phillips, Kimberley L. *Alabama North: African-American Migrants, Community, and Working-Class Activism in Cleveland, 1915-45.* H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. June, 2001.

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