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At the dawn of the twentieth century African Americans maintained a steady and ever-increasing migration from the Deep South to the industrialized North. This migration would place them in the land of Canaan mentioned in the Christian Bible. In Canaan land their children would be educated and acculturated in skilled employment and entrepreneurial opportunities, thus lifting future generations out of debt peonage, sharecropping, and the racially stultifying southern clime. Many migrants traveled in straight lines from Alabama to Chicago or Detroit, others from North Carolina to Washington, DC, and New York. Often these migrants found direct and fictive kin in those bustling northern cities. New York captivated the imagination as a cosmopolitan place where international communities, migrants, and indigenous New Yorker mingled, married, fought, and loved.

In the Midwest, Chicago equally captivated the migrant community with African American agency as entrepreneurs, educated professionals, journalists, and upper-middle-class lifestyles. Investigative journalist Ida B. Wells Barnett and husband Ferdinand Barnett settled in Chicago after fleeing racial violence in Memphis, Tennessee, for exposing the economic underpinnings of lynching. "Wells, quickly became a vocal spokesperson for Chicago’s Black press and a mainstay in a ‘generation of black editors, politicians, business people, and ministers’ who helped to drive Chicago’s development as a thriving hub for Black print culture and political activism during the decades following the [1893] Columbian Exposition" (p. 25).

Newly arriving migrants fanned out through the Bronzeville neighborhood and sought to acquire the trappings of modernity including clothing, businesses, and property. Property proved most valuable because it represented permanence, citizenship, and civic involvement. Author E. James West examines the property ownership of the Black press as an extension of their news gathering and telling essential to the larger sense of citizenship, race pride, and permanence. West notes that “Chicago’s dual status as an architectur-
“al center and media capital” maintained the racial line of segregation and impelled principally the Chicago Defender and Johnson Publishing offices to outfit their community with “poems in marble and glass” (p. 2). These buildings “provided tangible evidence of Chicago’s significance as a Black media capital and the role its Black periodicals [had] in shaping both the real and imagined boundaries of the city’s emerging ‘Black Metropolis.’” West goes further to connect the agency of the Black press to the physical beauty of their offices: “Just as the Black press pushed back against racist characterization of Black people in the nation’s mainstream media and advanced the economic and political interests of their readers, so too did its buildings become their ‘own loud protest’” (p. 4). The reporters were soldiers in the battle for proper racial representation; thus their offices became both “castles and refuge” from the white gaze. The meteoric rise of Black press in Chicago ultimately elevated the race in America.

The book is organized in six chapters with introduction and conclusion. Chapter 1, “A Card Table and Kitchen Chair,” provides context to the unique racialized heritage of twentieth-century Chicago stemming from the 1893 Columbian Exposition and the White City. The duality of the White City, symbol of American progress for some and continued oppression for others, forecasted the next century. This chapter chronicles the life of Robert Sengstacke Abbott. Abbott migrated from Hampton, Virginia, arriving in Chicago in 1897. He attended the Columbian Exposition in 1893 and heard from Ida B. Wells about the carnage her Memphis press withstood when exposing the economic connection between the lynching of black men and their thriving businesses. Abbott knew his mission would be to report on the condition and agency of Black people from Chicago: “His ambition was a newspaper that would fight for Black rights and help to expose instances of racial injustice—whether it was across the segregated South or in what scholars now describe as the Jim Crow North” (p. 25). West details the class and cash issues that plagued the Defender’s infancy. The political stance of the Defender alienated prominent Black leaders, yet Abbott persisted. The silver lining of segregation restricted commercial space for African American publications.

Chapter 2, “A Monument to Negro Enterprise,” explores the growth of Abbott’s Chicago Defender. His newspaper encountered opposition from within and outside the African American community. His affinity for Marcus Garvey’s 1920 Universal Negro Improvement Association frustrated the patriotism of select leaders within the moneyed African American community. Abbott continued to merge his political ideology with the dissemination of the news, proclaiming, “upon this ‘solid foundation,’ [the Defender] had successfully become ‘a part of the average Negro’s life,’ whether they lived on State Street or in southern Mississippi” (p. 63). Chapter 3, “A Building on Front Street,” traces the formation of the Johnson Publishing Company. Like Abbott, John H. Johnson was not a native Chicagoan; however, arriving twenty years later during a time of “spatial and sociopolitical transition,” he could imagine and plant his publishing operations in newly acquired areas friendly to African Americans. Racial segregation was de jure and extralegal efforts kept racial groups separate throughout three-quarters of the twentieth century. Johnson—the man and his publishing credo—deviated from strictly reporting the news to incorporate culture, fashion, and society. Chapter 4, “A Meeting Place for All the People,” examines the succession from Robert Sengstacke Abbott to his nephew John Sengstacke, coupled with the rising acclaim of the Johnson Publishing empire. Under new leadership, the Defender published its first daily paper in 1956 to provide revenue to upgrade the Defender headquarters. The chapter exposes the veiled tension between Sengstacke and Johnson in their quest to operate out of posh buildings that “represented” their success within the publishing industry and larger African American community: “Although Sengstacke nev-
er publicly admitted as much, the Defender’s relocation also provided a direct response to Johnson’s [newly purchased headquarters]” (p. 125). Chapter 5, “A House for the Struggle,” demonstrates the interconnectedness of community and news. This idea, embraced by Robert Sengstacke Abbott thirty years earlier, assumed a unique position in the 1950s during the modern civil rights era. The Supreme Court decision in Brown v. The Board of Education (1954) sought to ameliorate discrimination concurrently while Johnson Publications and the Defender offered office space to the Chicago branches of the NAACP and Urban League, and the monuments in steel and stone morphed into civil rights agents through housing the organizations waging the struggle for equality—bringing the community writer and subject together. With their newly found activist position, tensions flared along ideological lines while readership, worker pay scales, and other matters of business pressed underlying nerves. Concurrently, a new generation of Black radicals sought to take up the pen and write stories to spread the news. Members of the Black Panther Party and the Nation of Islam opted to create their own publications outside of the stodgy old guard. While others attempted to radicalize the Defender and Johnson Publications from within, there were successes and failures—on both sides.

Chapter 6, “A Poem in Marble and Glass,” is a fitting coda to the grand buildings the Defender and Johnson Publishing acquired and occupied during the golden age of the Black press. Their owners were no longer working on card tables in kitchens. For example, Johnson Publication 1970s headquarters “resulted in ‘$8 million worth of Black pride’—an eleven-story edifice lavishly decorated in ‘Black liberation themes’ and boasting amenities like a soul food canteen, lounges where employees could ‘get their Afros styled,’ and an in-house library ‘of more than fifteen thousand volumes on Black life and history,’ and one of the largest corporate collections of African and African American art in the world” (p. 182). The Johnson Publishing brand operated many imprints that spanned the ideological gamut of Black modern thinkers from the 1950s to the 1980s.

In closing, West’s A House for the Struggle is a well-written and thought-provoking chronicle of urban, media, African American, labor, and cultural history. The connections between political, spatial, economic, and cultural institutions were unique and other cities could model a similar investigation on the local built environment of African American industry. Migrants John H. Johnson and Robert Sengstacke Abbott sought to report and write about Black people. Their publications were principally for the race, a space where African Americans could celebrate, mourn, and be informed about their community. These men added to the reporting of the news a physical space that insulated themselves and the larger community from glaring eyes, one-sided derogatory assumptions, and the malevolent whims of landlords. Operating a business and owning one’s building ensured continuity and stability. West says it best: “For both enterprises, their new offices were a vital weapon in the battle for civic authority and public relations under the guise of public interest ... these sites became a veritable ‘crossroads of the world,’ helping to realize ... the meeting place for all the people” (p. 160). Regrettably, the men are gone and their buildings are no longer occupied; however, their archival records, housed in Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro American History and Literature, the Woodson Regional Library, and the Chicago Public Library, remain. Thanks to E. James West for reconstructing the men, their publications, and the world where they owned and operated a culturally relevant built environment.