INTRODUCTION

AFRICAN AMERICAN URBAN LIFE, CULTURE, AND POLITICS ACROSS TIME AND SPACE

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Black urban history remains a pivotal field of scholarship within US history and African American studies. This book aims to broaden the base of innovative scholarship on this important topic and contribute historical knowledge and context to the larger struggle for social justice within our socially and politically fragmented communities and nation. Innumerable current events underscore the ongoing centrality of cities, race, and the African American experience to the successes and failures of the American experiment in freedom and democracy. Walking home with Skittles; rolling through a stop sign; failing to signal while driving; looking "too long" at a police officer; shopping in a supermarket; jogging, birdwatching, or playing music in public; knocking on the wrong door or asking someone for help in a storm; organizing warehouse workers; standing in long lines at polls with too few voting machines—these incidents and others expose the disparate treatment, and sometimes life-threatening conditions Black people confront when exercising their economic, political, and citizenship rights in urban spaces.

Standing out among these recent events are the governmental failures in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. These developments include most notably the white supremacist mass murders of African

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Americans in a Charleston, South Carolina, church in 2015 and in a Buffalo, New York, supermarket in 2022; the crisis of access to clean water in majority-Black Flint, Michigan, in 2014 and currently in Jackson, Mississippi; the repression of Black protests against police brutality and policing regimes like Cop City in Atlanta from 2020 to the present; an acceleration in the suppression of Black voters since the contested ballots in the 2000 US presidential election, culminating in the disparate allotment of voting locations in urban areas during the 2022 elections; and the ejection of two Black elected officials representing majority-Black districts in Nashville and Memphis by a white partisan Republican-dominated Tennessee legislature in 2023.

But even as cities large and small reproduce racial, economic, political, and social inequalities, African Americans and others have demonstrated the power to transform them into exemplars of a more democratic and equitable future. Because of the largest mass protests in American history in the wake of the George Floyd murder in Minneapolis in 2020, racialized police oppression is under scrutiny as never before. The Charleston and Buffalo mass shootings have been and are being vigorously prosecuted. The attempt to nullify the vote of the urban districts of Memphis and Nashville were overturned when those districts reelected their state legislators.

In addition, African Americans in cities are central to the defense of American democracy in a time of antidemocratic repression across the nation. The historic midterm elections of 2022, when the future of US democracy was clearly on the ballot, found urban areas sending African Americans to a number of significant local and state offices. On the national level, Black people have consistently increased their representation, including Black women like Summer Lee, Pennsylvania's first Black congresswoman to the House of Representatives, where she joined Ayanna Pressley from Massachusetts, Cori Bush from Missouri, Sheila Jackson Lee from Texas, among others. The election of Joe Biden with overwhelming Black urban support enabled the election of the first Black, Asian, and female vice president in the nation's history as well as the appointment and confirmation of Ketanji Brown Jackson as the first African American woman Supreme Court justice in the nation's history. Kamala Harris's ascent to the vice presidency came little more than a half decade after the final term of Barack Obama as the first US president of African descent, an occurrence also made possible by the concentration of Black people in urban areas.

Indeed, the ascendancy of Black people to political office in the last quarter of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first century, including as urban mayors, cannot be understood apart

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from the epic transformations wrought by industrial capitalism, African American internal migration to the cities, the growth and codification of racialized housing markets, and Black urban community formation and institution building that accelerated after World Wars I and II. The Reconstruction era was the last time African Americans were able to capture significant electoral power in this nation, and that power was rooted in the largely rural emancipation of Southern African Americans and their strong coalition with Abraham Lincoln's Republican Party, known as "Black Republicans." The brutal repression of Black economic and political activism during and after Reconstruction in the rural and urban South reinforced the movement of Black people to the urban North over the course of the twentieth century. In addition, the economic decline of the Southern rural economy accelerated the movement of Black people from the rural to the urban South as well. These combined developments alongside racialized residential landscapes provided a spatial, material, and historical base for a new succession of Black politicians whose electoral strength was rooted in urban Black communities. In Chicago, for instance, one of the largest sites of Black migration north, the Black urban population elected a long line of Black politicians into national legislative office, beginning with Oscar Stanton De Priest in 1929 (the first African American US representative from outside the South), to William L. Dawson, Carol Moseley Braun, and then Barack Obama. That electoral strength and experience culminated in Obama's ascendancy to the presidency in 2008.

Increasing numbers of African Americans elsewhere not only took elective and appointive offices in Congress, state legislatures, and county and municipal governments, they also gradually moved into influential positions in education, business, finance, philanthropy, and the private nonprofit sector. Yet, the possibilities of Black leadership in political and nongovernmental positions of power and influence in cities is often curtailed by the impossibility of rectifying decades of purposeful neglect. For example, in Jackson, Mississippi, and Flint, Michigan, elected officials have turned to the federal government for assistance in rectifying the misdirection of funds to maintain these cities' infrastructure. The failure of the levees built to protect New Orleans by the Army Corps of Engineers stands as one of the world's worst engineering disasters. These outcomes reflected Black people's varied, contradictory relationships to the city as both vectors of previously unimagined opportunity and emblem of continuing forms of marginalization, if not exclusion, in the United States.

An equally important part of the contemporary Black urban story is suburbanization that give us a glimpse of intraracial class dynamics.

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Rising numbers of middle-class and better-off working-class African Americans have moved from the inner cities into the suburbs. Nationwide, the percentage of Black people living in suburban areas had increased from no more than about 10 percent in 1970 to 23 percent by the turn of the new millennium. During the first two decades of the new century, suburbanites had increased to an estimated 36 percent of all Black people living in the largest metropolitan areas.[1] Understandably, many ordinary everyday citizens, journalists, policymakers, historians, and civil rights activists celebrated these developments as tangible evidence of the gradual fulfillment of the US democratic promise for all its citizens. But compelling countervailing evidence exposed the limits of progress toward a more inclusive class and racially integrated society, culture, and politics.

Much of the African American movement into the suburbs, for example, involved the increasing suburbanization of poverty and new forms of racially stratified urban places, as suggested by the violent conflicts that emerged in Ferguson, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis, in the wake of Michael Brown's death in 2014. Closely linked to the emergence of a postindustrial urban US economy and the federal-level retreat from social welfare policies, the rise of racialized mass incarceration and police violence against unarmed African Americans escalated across metropolitan areas. Meanwhile, African Americans were insufficiently integrated into the new digital information age economy that followed the collapse of the old industrial order.

The onset of the coronavirus pandemic took a disproportionate toll on the lives of urban Black people. Paralleling the spread of tuberculosis in Black urban enclaves during the early twentieth century, COVID-19's toll also reflected the food deserts and environmental hazards such as lack of safe recreational spaces and toxic air and water that exist in many predominantly Black urban neighborhoods and led to preexisting conditions of obesity, asthma, diabetes, and other diseases that increased the deadly effects of the pandemic.[2] By February 24, 2024, COVID-19 had claimed the lives of over 1,181,607 Americans.[3] This figure represents more deaths than all lives lost in every war in the country's history. To be sure, African Americans and Latinx people have stood in the eye of the pandemic storm, occupying the bulk of essential jobs as food service, transport, and healthcare providers. With only 20 percent of Black workers occupying jobs where they could work from home (as opposed to 30 percent of their white counterparts), the former could not routinely shelter at home and work remotely during the height of the pandemic.

Moreover, Black-owned businesses failed at a much higher rate from

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the impact of the pandemic than white-owned ones. On the eve of the coronavirus pandemic, a report of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York indicated that some 59 percent of all Black-owned businesses "were at risk of financial distress" compared to just 27 percent for white-owned enterprises. Understandably, under the onslaught of the pandemic between the months of February and April 2020, an estimated 40 percent of Black-owned firms had gone out of business nationwide. Moreover, as economists and public policy analysts Gwendolyn L. Wright, Lucas Hubbard, and William Darity Jr. note, COVID-19 "intersects and reflects social disparities" in virtually every aspect of African American life, including especially jobs, education, housing, and justice before the law.[4]

Anchoring their narratives in the changing spatial, cultural, political, and economic geographies of the city, the essays in this volume illuminate the long historical path to the nation's arrival at our current urban crossroads in class and racial history. The twenty-first century was a long time in the making and remaking. To underscore this, *Black Urban History at the Crossroads* covers the period from the rise of the transatlantic slave trade to North America through the early twenty-first century. This volume accentuates the substantial continuities as well as turning points in the protracted, urban-based African American fight for human and civil rights from the outset of the nation's history through current white supremacy resistance to the racial justice, social service, and democratic agenda. In this way, this book not only reveals the deep historical roots of the current system of class and racial inequality in US urban history but also highlights the development of an ongoing Black Freedom Movement designed to counteract injustice and push the nation closer toward living up to its democratic and equal rights pronouncements. Key watershed moments in African American liberation struggles include the abolitionist movement of the nineteenth century, the modern Black Freedom Movement of the twentieth century, and the expanding Black Lives Matter and reparations movements of the twenty-first century.

In addition to highlighting the alternating and overlapping currents of labor exploitation, racial inequality, and resistance movements, this book explores the transformation of Black urban studies from a preponderance of sociological/anthropological research during the early twentieth century toward a growing emphasis on historical scholarship under the impact of the modern Black Freedom Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Both earlier social scientific studies and the first wave of historical studies obscured the role that poor and working-class Black men and women played in shaping their own urban experiences. By the late twentieth century, however, increasing research on class, gender, sexual

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identity, and social relations had dramatically recast our historical perspective of the African American urban experience.[5]

Contemporary scholarship underscores the many ways that urban Black residents built their own communities, crafted their own strategies for empowerment, and shaped the economy, culture, and politics of the diverse urban environments, regions, and states in which they lived and worked. Suitably, this volume is a product of two state-of-the-field conferences on Black urban history at Carnegie Mellon University—one celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the Center for Africanamerican Urban Studies and the Economy (CAUSE) in 2015, the other celebrating CAUSE's twenty-fifth anniversary—a virtual event held in the fall of 2021.[6] We framed the 2015 conference as a very timely moment in the history of African Americans in cities for a variety of reasons. In addition to the steady approach of 2019, the 400th anniversary of the first African people to arrive in British North America, we called attention to the historic importance of the final years of the second term of Barack Obama's presidential administration; the emergence and growth of the Black Lives Matter movement to protest the epidemic of police murder of unarmed young Black men and women in their custody; the historic and symbolic significance of the impending 2016 opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC; and the increasingly acrimonious conservative resistance to the social welfare policies of the Obama administration, particularly the Affordable Care Act, eventually dubbed "Obama Care."

For decades, certainly, the retreat from US social welfare liberalism in discourse and public policy had been justified through vilification of a supposedly culturally deficient, value-poor, and lazy urban Black "underclass" that was siphoning the taxes of hardworking (white) Americans and undermining the nation's meritocracy. In this context, President Obama's race, his earlier experiences as a community organizer on Chicago's South Side, and his ties to the urban electoral machine politics of Cook County, made him a handy racialized condensation symbol among conservative reactionaries of urban pathology, corruption, moral decline, and the coddling of the "undeserving" Black and Brown poor. This was so despite Obama's own tendency toward neoliberal policies that perpetuated forms of urban inequality and supported racial capitalism. Such have been the contradictory dynamics of class and political ideology that have characterized urban Black America over time.

As CAUSE planned for its twenty-fifth anniversary five years later, the center invited participants from the 2015 celebration to return to Pittsburgh and reflect on their contributions to the earlier conference in light of recent events—including the stunning defeat of Democrat

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Hillary Clinton as the first woman presidential candidate on the ticket of a major political party by the wealthy businessman and arch conservative Republican Donald Trump, the outbreak of worldwide protests over the public killing of George Floyd at the hands of white Minneapolis policeman Derek Chauvin, and the intensification of racial disparities in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic.

This book not only responds to a variety of recent socioeconomic and political currents in African American and US urban life, it also reinforces the expanding body of scholarship in the field, making current research readily accessible to a broader audience, identifying areas that warrant further research, and, hopefully, helping to set the stage for future studies. Based on some of the most recent scholarship on African American urban life covering nearly three centuries of time, *Black Urban History at the Crossroads* offers readers several chronological, regional, topical, and thematic perspectives on the Black urban experience since the Atlantic slave trade. This book includes essays on industrial, preindustrial, and emerging postindustrial cities. As such, it not only illuminates long-run changes over time but also underscores the process by which one era gave way to another. This volume shows how the old order invariably influenced the new one even as it was increasingly displaced. As Emma Hart succinctly puts it in her study of colonial Charleston, we "should talk across chronological barriers, such as the American Revolution, to produce a connected history tracing the waxing and waning of the many influences shaping urban black life in America from 'the beginning' to the present day."

In addition to suggesting how one era transitions to another, this book covers a variety of cities in the urban North, West, and South, as well as such diverse topics and themes as community building, grassroots social movements, and electoral politics. Alongside debates about the distinctiveness and emancipatory potential of urban life, contributors to this volume acknowledge and even highlight the ongoing interplay of urban and rural economic, political, and cultural processes over time.

Black Urban History at the Crossroads is divided into three closely interrelated chronological units. The three chapters in part I, "Race, Class, and Early American Cities," analyze the development of Black urban life, labor, and politics from the transatlantic slave trade through the onset of the Civil War. The three chapters comprising part II, "Emancipation, the Great Migration, and Emergence of the Black Metropolis," examine the transformation of Black urban life under the triple impact of the Civil War, the rise of the Jim Crow segregationist order, and the Great Migration of Southern rural and small-town Black people into the nation's major metropolitan areas over the course of two world wars and

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the dislocations of a worldwide economic depression. Lastly, the four chapters in part III, "Modern Black Freedom Struggle, Urban Space, and New Politics," document Black people's lives and struggles in cities undergoing dramatic demographic, spatial, economic, and political changes, including the fall of the white supremacist Jim Crow system.

In part I, chapters by Kevin Dawson, Emma Hart, and Leslie Alexander offer readers an opportunity to engage a series of debates in the lives of enslaved and free Black people before the Civil War and the emancipation of all enslaved men, women, and children. Perhaps most important, part I contests the widespread notion that the city's large size, density, and geography provided an almost "natural" environment for emancipation from human bondage. Rather than privileging the environment and other forces deemed beyond Black control in creating a favorable climate for emancipation, this section emphasizes the role that enslaved and free Black people themselves played in transforming urban spaces into mechanisms of empowerment and self-emancipation. As Kevin Dawson notes in chapter 1, African people brought their own heritage of usable skills into European-dominated seaports, and as indispensable, highly skilled river pilots and sailors, they effectively disrupted established racial and class hierarchies. According to Dawson, "Enslaved pilots became temporary ship captains, enabling them to curse, command, and, sometimes, assault white sailors and officers even though blackness and subservience were synonymous."

Likewise, free and enslaved urban Black people established a broad range of formal mutual benefit societies, fraternal orders, churches, business, and political organizations. These institutions in turn enabled urban Black people to forge their own African-inspired but European-inflected culture, beliefs, and social practices. Focusing on the Black leadership class in colonial New York City and their efforts to establish a cultural foundation for building independent Black institutions and advancing their own emancipation from enslavement, Leslie Alexander documents the transition from emphases on African identity during the colonial and early revolutionary years to increasing emphases on Euro-American influenced ideas and beliefs, including notions about "moral improvement," during the antebellum years. Alexander concludes that a "shared African heritage" continued to unite New York City's diverse Black population and helped to forge a sense of community.

This book also accents the persistence of deep layers of social and political conflict among urban Black people. Debates about the role of Africa, repatriation, and public demonstrations versus more quiescent or "genteel" modes of political expression and resistance often fragmented the early nineteenth-century Black urban community. As Alexander

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notes, New York City's Black religious and fraternal orders perpetuated aspects of their African culture through such activities and events as the annual public Independence Day parades and displays of cultural cohesiveness and demands for equal treatment. During the second and third decades of the nineteenth century, however, this unity frayed under the impact of massive European immigration as well as the in-migration of newly emancipated Black people from within and beyond the boundaries of New York City and New York State.

The diversity of the urban Black population expanded the community's institutional complexity and capacity but also fostered intraracial ferment that led to cultural creativity, ideological differentiation, and internal challenges that carried global as well as domestic significance. This is a common thread across the chapters in part II by Brian Kelly, Millington Bergeson-Lockwood, and Davarian Baldwin. For his part, Brian Kelly analyzes Civil War and postbellum Charleston's Black community and politics against the backdrop of its antebellum growth as a militant bastion of enslaved and free Black working-class activism. In his view, the impressive unity forged by African Americans during and immediately after the war gradually diminished with the rise of new forms of intraracial class conflict. He concludes that Black workers (particularly longshoremen, dockworkers, seafaring laborers, and boatmen on internal waterways) built upon their antebellum emancipation struggles. They helped to forge a new politics following the Civil War, which entailed their growing conflict with emerging moderate Black (and white) leaders in the Republican Party. Partly under the impact of this class fragmentation, postbellum Black social movements were ultimately unable to prevent the collapse of Reconstruction and the resurgence of the racist Democratic Party to power after 1877.

In the postbellum urban North, Millington Bergeson-Lockwood documents the development of a fragile African American base for the Republican Party. He illuminates the active engagement of African Americans in postbellum and early Jim Crow–era machine politics in Boston, but he accents their independence from rather than their firm loyalty to the Republican Party. From the early 1870s through the turn of the twentieth century, Black Bostonians strongly criticized the Republican Party's record on equal rights for Black people and often delivered their votes to Democratic candidates in local, state, and national elections. As such, he underscores how the massive shift of Black people from the Republican to the Democratic Party during the New Deal era was not entirely unprecedented, as it had significant roots in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century city. Davarian Baldwin moves the narrative forward into the roiling politics of the interwar years. By

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the 1930s, the growth of densely populated Black urban communities and institutions, a global economic collapse, and the rise of fascist movements and regimes in Europe enveloped urban African Americans in local, national, and international efforts to exercise and expand their electoral influence, forge a liberal policy consensus to create a modern social welfare state responsive to workers' demands for greater social and economic democracy, and combat white supremacy at home as well as authoritarianism and European colonialism abroad. Where possible, Black urban activists took advantage of openings to realign the politics of the Democratic Party nationally and set a more progressive agenda for organized labor. Where necessary, however, they relied on their internal organizational strength, which reflected the rise of not only a national Black urban community infrastructure but also Pan-African networks tied to burgeoning anticolonial forces. To the extent that the teeming "city-within-a-city" of Chicago's South Side Bronzeville gave material and symbolic substance to Black urban community building and placemaking on a grand scale, Baldwin makes a powerful case for this midwestern "Black Metropolis" as "an especially acute site" for the rise of "a political culture of Black antifascism." Indeed, the struggles for Black freedom spanning the interwar years, and the decades following World War II were—even at their most "local"—fundamentally global in their vision and scope.

In part III, Marcus Anthony Hunter, Donna Murch, Benjamin Houston, and Amanda T. Boston shift the focus to changes in African American community life and politics during the transition from the industrial to the emerging postindustrial age. Building on his extraordinary research on Philadelphia's twentieth-century Black community, Hunter places the leadership, social struggles, and activism of African American women like Alice Lipscomb at the center of his story of the city's post–civil rights era. Contrary to so many prevailing studies that emphasize the role of elites in the economics, culture, and politics of the city, Hunter persuasively argues that the community activism of "underappreciated" women "demonstrates the power of grassroots activism to resist and beat back competing narratives and approaches to urban change and political economy." As such, Hunter shows how late twentieth-century Black Philadelphians continued to shape the urban political economy and geography of the city.

In her study of Los Angeles, Donna Murch reveals how systematic "punitive campaigns against drugs and gangs" during the final decades of the twentieth century responded to the militant social protests and street actions of the earlier post–World War II decades. Connecting this volume to the recent proliferation of carceral state studies in African

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American history, she illustrates how Los Angeles' liberal social policy establishment shifted from support of a "social welfare state" to increasing support of the mass imprisonment of Black men and women in the post–Civil Rights era. She documents how poor and working-class Black people initially acquiesced in the enactment of these policies as potential measures of safety and security. As they absorbed the painful, disproportionate, and unjust costs of such punitive programs, however, they organized grassroots opposition to the expanding carceral state.

These chapters can only scratch the surface of the complexities of Black urban life in the late twentieth century and the early new millennium. Cathy J. Cohen's *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*, for example, critically discusses how the cultural aversion to the allegedly "deviant" segments of the community—including "out" queer people, men having sex with men, intravenous drug users, and sex workers—prevented the early HIV/AIDS crisis from becoming a "respectable" health policy issue that members of the African American middle class were willing to embrace as matter of common Black importance. As a result, Black queer activists had to assume the lead in developing their own networks of care and resilience. In a paper prepared for the 2015 CAUSE conference, Kwame Holmes similarly focused on the experiences of Black gay and lesbians in late twentieth-century Washington, DC. Treating the experiences of gay and lesbians in the nation's capital as a case study of developments following Stonewall but before the onset of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, Holmes investigates the phenomenon that he describes as "Black gay invisibility." He documents how white gay Washingtonians embraced a "politics of visibility" that "produced white gay ghettos and dissolved Black gay residency into the broader black urban population." Hence, he ultimately concludes that Black gay and lesbian Washingtonians adopted a "politics of invisibility" to counteract discriminatory practices within and beyond the African American community.[7]

As alluded to earlier, rather than treating African American urban history exclusively within the framework of the nation-state, this book engages the broader context of global capitalist developments. It reinforces the recent expansion of studies exploring the relationship between capitalism and slavery,[8] but unlike the bulk of this scholarship, it takes the urban environment as a central unit of analysis.[9] In her study of deindustrialization and gentrification of Brooklyn, for example, Amanda T. Boston clearly illuminates an abiding connection between the early enslavement of African people and the persistence of racialized forms of inequality through the later industrial and emerging postindustrial moments in the city's history. Equally and perhaps most important, she also

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documents the interplay of local and global modes of capitalist development in fomenting class, racialized, and gender patterns of exploitation of human and material resources.

This volume not only reveals how African American urban history emerged on a transnational stage during the era of the slave trade and remained there through the current contemporary fascination with globalization or cosmopolitanism, it also uncovers the development of local but globally connected emancipation and liberation movements among the enslaved and exploited free people of color. Although such movements emerged from particular local material, cultural, and political conditions, they were linked to other struggles of African people across the globe. In ports around the Atlantic world, as Dawson notes, African rivermen created their own "labor organizations that guarded knowledge central to their trades preventing enslavers from appropriating and widely propagating their wisdom."

Likewise, Emma Hart and Brian Kelly show how colonial and nineteenth-century Charleston fit into a broader global Atlantic pattern of urbanization, slavery, and struggles for emancipation. Hart examines prevailing scholarship on Black life in the development of the city; compares findings of this scholarship to research on other colonial cities in North America and to some extent the larger Western Hemisphere, including New Orleans, Kingston, and Bridgetown, and suggests treatment of major port cities as "capitals" of a "Black Atlantic," while also illuminating notions of a "red Atlantic," "Atlantic worker," or "Atlantic radical." According to Kelly, as an "organizational nexus" for enslaved Black resistance before, during, and after the Civil War, Charleston linked working-class Black people "to information networks and potential political alliances that extended across the Atlantic world." For their part, Davarian Baldwin and Donna Murch pinpoint the global dimensions of twentieth-century African American movements against class and racial inequality. Treating Chicago as a site of transnational capitalist, colonial, and imperial development during the interwar years, Baldwin not only links local African American grassroots social movements to "the European colonial occupation of Africa and the Caribbean" but also to the spread of fascism across Europe. Similarly, in her study of late twentieth-century Los Angeles, Murch shows how the city's late twentieth-century activists connected their movement to "a direct critique of state violence, police militarization, and US foreign policy."

As noted earlier, this book grew out of two state-of-the-field CAUSE conferences at Carnegie Mellon University. Designed to connect the historian's research on race, work, and economic change over time with recent analyses of racially and class divided cities, CAUSE also empha-

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sizes building bridges between the university and the larger metropolitan community through a variety of speakers' series, conferences, and public history programs. Accordingly, *Black Urban History at the Crossroads* aims to illuminate and encourage reflection on the connections between social justice movements, scholarship, and efforts to bridge the gap between academic and popular knowledge through memoirs, museum exhibits, and oral history projects.

Building upon the CAUSE Remembering Africanamerican Pittsburgh (RAP) Oral History Project, in chapter 9, the project's first director—Benjamin Houston—underscores the public education and research significance of some 185 oral histories of African Americans in Civil Rights–era Pittsburgh and western Pennsylvania. He accents how these oral recollections are sources of memory, reflection, and action as we move deeper into the postindustrial phase of the city and nation's history. In a city in which only about a quarter of its population is Black, Pittsburgh elected its first African American mayor in the throes of the continuing pandemic in 2021, accelerating local protests over the deaths of young Black people at the hands of the city's police, and a resurgence of violence within the city's poor and working-class neighborhoods.

By the late twentieth century, the onset of deindustrialization had undercut the very positive gains of the modern civil rights and Black Power movements. The collapse of the urban industrial economy also ushered in what some scholars and journalists describe as the "urban crisis," mass incarceration, and the increasing disempowerment of poor and working-class Black residents as the twentieth century came to a close. Contrary to such dire portraits of African American life and labor on the eve of the new millennium, however, this book shows how poor and working-class Black urban communities gradually regrouped, mobilized their slim resources, and forged new liberation struggles that would persist well into the twenty-first century.

It remains to be determined how changing urban processes will structure patterns of Black life in the twenty-first century, or how the social and political agency of Black communities will affect the metropolitan landscape, but the connections between Black people and the city are indelible. *Black Urban History at the Crossroads* not only documents an important transitional moment in the historiography of Black people in cities, it also offers an opportunity to reflect on recent changes in scholarship and popular debates on the subject, suggest topics for future research, and encourage the development of the next generation of scholars in the field. During the opening years of the twenty-first century, another generation of African American scholars came of age and produced an expanding range of new studies on the African American

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urban experience. This scholarship unfolded under the powerful influence of deindustrialization, white resistance to the gains of the modern Black Freedom Movement, the effects of climate change on cities that compounded ongoing environmental perils in majority-Black urban areas, and the mass incarceration of young Black men and women. It also shifted research priorities toward deepening our knowledge of the racialized and violent carceral state, policing, environmental inequities, health, and other disparities in the lives of African Americans in historical perspective.[10]

At the same time, twenty-first-century scholarship greatly expanded our understanding of the dynamic transnational dimensions of African American urban life over several centuries of time.[11] The growing globalization of research on the Black experience built upon the pioneering studies of Earl Lewis and others. In his seminal historiographical essay, "To Turn as on a Pivot: Writing African Americans into a History of Overlapping Diasporas," Lewis surveyed a century of scholarship on Black history from the founding of the *American Historical Review* in 1895 through the mid-1990s.[12] He called for a new history of African Americans within the framework of "overlapping diasporas," defined as widely "dispersed communities" throughout the world. Over the next twenty-five years, a growing number of scholars answered his call. Building upon nearly two decades of transnational Black historical scholarship, as early American historian Emma Hart notes, over the past five years alone a series of new studies of African-descended people in the British, French, Spanish, and Portuguese Atlantic "explore not just the presence of enslaved people but the Black urban experience and its foundational role in making an Atlantic urban system."

As transnational work on *Black Urban History at the Crossroads* expanded, so did local studies of a variety of specific topics and themes in African American urban life, culture, and politics. This prolific body of research deepened our understanding of the preindustrial city, the Great Migration, religion, housing, culture, politics, and community development. Leslie Harris, Wallace Best, Erica Armstrong Dunbar, Davarian Baldwin, Clarence Lang, Rhonda Y. Williams, Kevin Mumford, Cynthia Blair, and others recast our perspectives on the colonial, revolutionary, and early national years of US history, the twentieth-century "New Negro" phenomenon, the notion of a Black "public sphere," consumer culture, religion, the church, gender, sexuality, and community building from the vantage point of poor and working-class Black men and women urbanites.[13] In the wake of these signal early twenty-first-century contributions to knowledge, the most recent outpouring of scholarship continues to reshape and transform our understanding of the foundational

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role that Black people played in constructing cities north and south, disease and race, policing, class and racial inequality in the housing market, gentrification, and urban municipal finance, to name just a few of the many exciting new areas undergoing close examination as we reach the end of the first quarter of the twenty-first century.[14]

Finally and importantly, this volume appeals for new research that will continue to complicate our understanding of the meaning of freedom not only as a "highly contingent" phenomenon related to class, gender, sexuality, region, and education among African-descended people but also as a project of labor and work itself. Three years ago, the Organization of American Historians organized its annual conference around the theme "The Work of Freedom." The resulting conference papers documented the extensive labor that grassroots activists and community leaders poured into identifying, fighting for, and securing freedom from the earliest moments of the nation's history through the waxing years of the early twenty-first century. Today, the devastating and unequal impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the proliferation of local reparations movements across the nation, and the activities of the federal January 6 Committee—charged with investigating the white mob violence that broke out at the nation's capital in 2021 to refute persistent demands for US racial democracy and justice—remind us in no uncertain terms that the work of freedom is just as relevant today as it was in 2019 or even 1619, when the first enslaved people of African descent landed in British North America.

Streets, corner stores, parks, supermarkets, schools, polling sites, workplaces, and churches: the spaces that Black people have created and traversed historically and today in urban areas have been sites of empowerment and peril. Heartrending police and white supremacist violence, economic exploitation and anti-union repression, callous municipal takeovers, voter suppression, and environmental disparities and disasters in the twenty-first century are ongoing patterns of oppression rooted in historical practices. Black people always worked toward the potential of cities for greater autonomy, even under enslavement, and developed expansive ideas of freedom, economic opportunity, and political empowerment in urban areas after emancipation. As the forces of white supremacy sought to contain African American potential through legal and extralegal means and violent actions, Black people found ways to turn some of the most racialized urban spaces into powerful sites of mass protest, electoral power, and grassroots organizing against racial oppression. Black people's precarious experiences and their struggles for freedom and equality demonstrate forcefully the power of race and place in US urban history. This book demonstrates the historical roots of some

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of the most pressing problems that face people of African descent in urban geographies today. The chapters herein also demonstrate why a substantial number of African Americans have historically sought opportunities for greater freedom and equality in cities—for these spaces have over and over again starkly revealed enduring inequalities and liberatory possibilities, past and present.

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PART I
RACE, CLASS, AND EARLY AMERICAN CITIES

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This section illuminates the transformation of African American urban life and labor during the onslaught of preindustrial racial capitalism. It shows how the first Africans to arrive in North America not only developed profound insights into the role of their own coerced labor in the accumulation of wealth in the expanding global capitalist economy, they also understood how their unpaid labor facilitated the gradual democratization of transatlantic society and politics along the color line. Together, these chapters shed light on these entwined processes of capitalist development and democracy through a meticulous examination of African American work, culture, and freedom struggles in a variety of Atlantic seaports, including most notably Charleston and New York City. While most collections of scholarship on the African American urban experience focus on the era of the Great Migration during the twentieth century, this book breaks new ground by bringing the experiences of the twentieth century into conversation with the colonial and early American origins of Black urbanization on the one hand and the emerging postindustrial world of the twenty-first century on the other.

Not until the Great Migration did the Black population become overwhelmingly urban. But urban centers were critical to the economic

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system of slavery, and to Black political and cultural forms throughout the era of enslavement, and the three chapters in this section explore these urban realities in substantial and convincing detail. In chapter 1, maritime historian Kevin Dawson documents the pioneering role of enslaved, skilled Black river pilots in paving the way not only for the rise of Black urban communities in seaports across the Atlantic world but also for the increasing spread of European-dominated modes of labor exploitation in the relentless pursuit of their own wealth and empowerment. As Dawson documents and persuasively argues, "Westerners usually relied on local pilots to guide them through green coastal waterways and into and out of port, enabling African pilots in both Africa and the Americas to control coastal waters linking land and sea."

In chapter 2, colonialist Emma Hart calls attention to the long popular and scholarly neglect of the Black experience in Charleston, South Carolina, the primary port of entry for the vast majority of the first enslaved African people to arrive in North America. Hart not only attends to the very unique features of Black life in Charleston, as a majority Black city, but analyzes that history within a broader comparative framework. She considers the role of African people in other colonial and early American port cities. As she puts it, "the sheer size of the Black population in Charleston meant that comparatively its members had more power to shape their own lives, culture, and economies" than their counterparts in predominantly white or European settings. Still, the Charleston story was not entirely unique to the Carolina Lowcountry. The impact of enslaved Black people on politics, economies, and cultures is evident in urban areas across the Western Hemisphere—both in majority-Black cities such as New Orleans; Kingston, Jamaica; and Bridgetown, Barbados, as well as in majority white cities such as New York, Philadelphia, Newport, and Boston. In Hart's view, "enslaved people everywhere were enmeshed in urban commercialization as both agents and subjects" of their own history.

For her part, historian Leslie Alexander turns to New York and free Black people as a window onto the ways in which Black politics played out between the end of Northern slavery and the Civil War. Her close reading of the newspapers, speeches, and cultural practices of pre–Civil War African Americans reveals a community with diverse responses to the challenges of post-emancipation racism in the North. According to Alexander, some political, social, and cultural choices were deeply rooted in ancestral African practices. African spiritual beliefs, burial rites, public celebrations, and secret societies all were rooted in African continental practices, which translated into a political Black nationalism and Pan-Africanism embraced by figures such as John Russwurm. At the

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other end of the spectrum, adherence to Euro-American moral beliefs—Christianity, moral uplift, literacy—were central to the struggle for equal US citizenship, as promulgated by Joseph Sidney and Jupiter Hammon.

In navigating these influences, some blended African redemption politics with uplift ideals relevant to survival in the United States. Alexander quotes Peter Williams Jr., who was fully committed to remaining in the United States, but who also called upon African culture as central to his identity: "May the time speedily commence, when Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands; when the sun of liberty shall beam resplendent on the whole African race; and . . . promote the luxuriant growth of knowledge and virtue." For Williams and others, the fight for equality was to be held in the United States, with participation in the War of 1812 embodying their hopes that patriotism and military service would improve their status.

But for others, the embrace of African cultural practices, combined with disappointment in the persistent racism in the United States, led to their migration to the majority-Black nations of Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Haiti, a movement Alexander terms *repatriation*. However, most Blacks chose to stay in United States, and neither choice was perfect. The complicated politics and high death rates in Sierra Leone and in Haiti meant that emigration was not a panacea, but arguably, the struggle for racial equality in the United States remains today, with significant but still limited improvement. Alexander's chapter points to the constrained, episodic ways in which Black people could claim a place in the city. Whether in terms of participating in public parades that were criticized by whites, establishing Black institutions that whites threatened with destruction, or building the short-lived Seneca Village, which contained the highest number of Black property owners before it was torn down to make way for Central Park, Black people in urban areas were repeatedly told that their presence was, at best, resented; at worst, to be done away with, as in the lynching of Black people during the Draft Riots of 1863.

These chapters indicate how far historians have come in understanding the importance of the Black urban experience to the economics, politics, and culture of the pre–Civil War United States. Urbanized Blacks, enslaved and free, represented only a small portion of the total Black population, the vast majority of whom were enslaved in the rural South by the early years of the Civil War. But the concentration of people and experiences in cities sometimes provided unique opportunities and pathways for Blacks who lived there. Urban Blacks in this early period established political, cultural, and institutional models that would have an outsized influence on all Black people and on the United States for decades to come.

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