

PROLOGUE: FOREGROUNDING
THE BLACK WORKER

African Americans have a unique history of labor exploitation and wealth creation on American soil. Along with the labor of men and women of diverse ethnic groups, black workers are critical to any discussion of the nation's productivity, politics, and the future of work in today's global economy. Yet, too often, popular, journalistic, public policy, and academic analyses treat the black poor and working class as consumers rather than producers, as takers rather than givers, and as liabilities rather than assets. Recent media discussions about the sources of political conservatism and the future of American democracy place the white working class at center stage, largely ignoring the role of African Americans, women, and other nonwhite workers. Some of this commentary went so far as to suggest that white workers are "oppressed, not so much by capital but by cultural elites and coddled minorities." Indeed, increasing numbers of white workers consider themselves members of a "new minority" or "strangers in their own land" in the face of persistent demands for equal treatment by previously neglected women and racial minorities. Many of these workers need government aid to help make ends meet because their jobs provide insufficient pay and benefits to cover medical and living expenses, yet this need wars with their entrenched perception of social welfare programs as doles for African Americans and minority workers—some undocumented immigrants—with an insufficient work ethic to warrant such support.¹

Workers on Arrival hopes to intervene in discussions and debates about the future of the city, the nation, and American democracy by restoring the broader historical context of African American workers as producers, givers, and assets. Drawing upon the conceptual and substantive insights of nearly a century of research, *Workers on Arrival* focuses on black urban labor and

working-class history, documenting the movement of urban black workers from the periphery of the African American working class during the first three hundred years to its center during the twentieth century. It calls attention not only to the ongoing coercive dimensions of this process but also to the equally important ways that people of African descent gradually forged transnational liberation movements to free themselves from both local and global forms of inequality. As such, this study examines the lives and labor of black workers within the larger context of urban capitalist development, community formation, and politics from the transatlantic slave trade to recent times.

During the first three centuries of European residence in North America, enslaved agricultural laborers fueled the growth of early capitalism as a transnational phenomenon. Brought here through the African slave trade specifically for their labor—hence, the title *Workers on Arrival*—African Americans produced wealth not only through their labor power and toil without pay but also as “commodities” bought and sold for profit in the capitalist marketplace. They were the most exploited and unequal component of the emerging modern capitalist labor force. Nonetheless, enslaved seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century black workers facilitated the growth of the early city alongside poor and working-class whites, many of whom were disfranchised and unfree indentured servants. Some African Americans worked as skilled craftsmen and women (using knowledge they brought from the old country as well as training they acquired in the New World), but most labored as “common,” “manual,” “general,” “unskilled,” or “household” workers.

From the beginning, African Americans used the unique conditions of the urban environment to open up pathways to their own emancipation. A free wage-earning black proletariat gradually emerged within the bowels of urban slavery. As historian Seth Rockman shows, both free black and white laborers lived “a hand-to-mouth existence characterized by minimal control” over the fruits of their own labor.² But early white wage earners enjoyed gradually increasing access to the vote, state power, and their own political, social, and labor organizations, while the vast majority of their African American counterparts remained linked to their enslaved brothers and sisters through systems of legal and extralegal disfranchisement, economic exploitation, and racial inequality.

The Civil War and the emancipation of some four million enslaved people fundamentally changed the conditions and experiences of the black working class. Freedom transformed African Americans from a predominantly enslaved agricultural proletariat into a rural, sharecropping, and wage-

earning working class. Unlike the pre-Civil War black working class, the postbellum black working class claimed full citizenship rights under the law. Whereas only small numbers of enslaved blacks gained access to wage labor and clawed their way into the free, wage-earning working class, emancipation opened up the free labor force to all African Americans, urban and rural alike. The postbellum black working class took a huge step forward, but emancipation and proletarianization was an exceedingly complicated and mixed process. Between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of World War I, white workers, elites, and the state joined forces and forged a new white supremacist system—a series of formal and informal policies and social practices—that stymied the development of a fully free black working class.

The Jim Crow system subverted the promise of some avenues to freedom and independence, forcing African Americans to make new decisions. Emancipated rural blacks initially sought land ownership and even sharecropping over wage labor as the surest routes to economic emancipation and full citizenship, but, frustrated by the roadblocks white supremacy put in their way, rising numbers of sharecroppers and wage-earning farmhands abandoned the land for wage work in rural industrial coal mines, lumber mills, and railroad construction projects as well as the rapidly industrializing cities. While urban blacks remained a minority component of the working class well into the twentieth century, the emergence of a predominantly free rural and rural industrial workforce reinforced the growth of the urban working class. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, growing numbers of southern rural migrants swelled the ranks of urban black communities. As the alliance between the white elite and white workers weakened and broke down in the face of rising white workers' demands and labor strikes, black workers gained access to previously all-white jobs, including steel and meatpacking plants, as strikebreakers. These postbellum and early Jim Crow-era developments paved the way for the beginning of the Great Migration and the development of the black industrial working class during the inter-world war years of the early twentieth century.

But the making of the black working class involved far more than the story of what jobs were available when. Throughout their history, working African Americans built on their economic contributions to forge vigorous movements for freedom, independence, and access to civil and human rights. From the inception of the transatlantic slave trade through the Civil War, they challenged capitalist control of their labor through frequent movement from place to place, initially as enslaved fugitives and later as free wage

earners of color; revolts and plots to revolt; entrepreneurial pursuits; and, most of all, the creation of a plethora of community-based institutions. Working-class black community organizations helped to set the stage for the anticolonization and antislavery movements that culminated in the outbreak of the Civil War and the fall of slavery. But the black freedom struggle was by no means limited to the quest for emancipation and full citizenship on U.S. soil. Until the onset of the Civil War, black workers had embraced the idea of resettlement elsewhere (including the Caribbean, Canada, and West Africa) alongside their struggle for freedom in the new republic.

While the latter idea persisted into the postemancipation era, a variety of postbellum developments undercut the appeal of emigration projects. In addition to opportunities to enter previously all-white workplaces as free workers and as strikebreakers, African Americans also formed their own labor organizations to fight racial discrimination in the workplace and open up new jobs for themselves and their families. They also gradually moved into all-white labor unions and challenged the color line within the organized white labor movement as well as corporate structures. African Americans and their working-class white allies advanced broad multiracial demands for better working conditions, higher wages, and access to viable mechanisms for addressing their grievances against unfair labor policies and practices. The interracial labor movement dramatically expanded under the impact of the Great Depression and the emergence of the New Deal political coalition during the 1930s.

Nonetheless, as their numbers rose in the urban industrial economy, black workers soon encountered mob violence, racial job ceilings, and color lines in the economic, housing, and community life of the metropolis. Thus, alongside their escalating engagement in the development of a broader multiracial labor movement, urban black workers and their communities created a new and more diverse Black Metropolis, their own urban public sphere, or city within the city. They envisioned the Black Metropolis not only as a bulwark against mob violence and exclusion from essential social and commercial services but also as a launching pad for assaults against Jim Crow in the organized labor movement, key sectors of the industrializing economy, and the housing market. They also regularly protested the official and unofficial use of state power to reinforce the economic advantages of white over black workers.

As the abolitionist movement of the antebellum years ultimately secured the fall of slavery, so the Modern Black Freedom Movement toppled the

twentieth-century segregationist order. This achievement reduced the incidence of poverty, lifted significant numbers of poor and working-class blacks into the middle class, and narrowed the racial gap in access to citizenship rights and equal employment opportunities. Even so, as suggested by the rise of the Universal Negro Improvement Association during the 1920s, the explosive growth of the Nation of Islam during the 1950s and early 1960s, and the Black Power phase of the Modern Black Freedom struggle during the late 1960s and early 1970s, the increasing integration of blacks into the industrial working class and their slow ascent into the ranks of the middle class were by no means a linear process that moved inexorably from historic patterns of exclusion to inclusion. The color line remained strong, and black nationalism persisted among the repertoire of African American strategies for economic democracy, political citizenship, and human rights.

More recently, despite significant progress during the height of the Modern Black Freedom struggle, the deindustrialization of the urban economy soon undercut gains for poor and working-class black families. Unemployment, poverty, environmental health hazards, and incarceration of young blacks dramatically increased during the final years of the twentieth century. These changes not only signaled the resurgence of interracial conflict along the color line on the one hand and intraracial class conflict on the other, they also ushered in greater internal friction within the deindustrializing black urban working class itself. Intra-class conflicts intensified with the eruption of drug wars, black on black street violence, and family disputes as the number of households headed by women with children sharply increased. Whereas black women had forged strong cross-class institutional and political alliances during the industrial era, poor and working-class black women exerted increasing independence over their own organizations and movements for social change during the closing decades of the twentieth century.

The ability of *Workers on Arrival* to assert the centrality of the African American working class to an understanding of U.S. history rests on certain crucial contributions to historical study. During the late twentieth century, historical scholarship moved labor and working-class history from the periphery to the center of our understanding of the United States as a multi-racial and multiethnic nation. The lives of immigrant and American-born workers, black and white, men and women, “skilled” and “less skilled,” gained increasing attention in popular and academic discussions of the nation’s history.³ Though African people did not share in white privilege with Italian American and other Euro-American groups, their lives

overlapped with the conditions and social struggles of workers from a variety of ethnic and nationality backgrounds. These experiences included not only unequal and inadequate wages and working and living conditions, and struggles to eradicate inequality within and beyond the workplace, but also intellectual movements to create and sustain more inclusive portraits of U.S. history as a whole. Despite criticism of these “bottom-up” perspectives, social historians advanced the notion that “class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and so on were often more meaningful historical” experiences than the nation for large numbers of Americans.⁴

Meanwhile, radical global perspectives on U.S. history “from above the nation” have enabled new insights into enslaved African and African American workers as producers in the world economy.⁵ Building upon the pioneering insights of twentieth-century African American scholars from W.E.B. Du Bois and Eric Williams to Ira Berlin, Nell Painter, and many others, early twenty-first-century scholars of American capitalism and democracy place enslaved African Americans at the center of these global processes. In his groundbreaking study, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom*, historian Walter Johnson accents the global impact of enslaved African labor on both sides of the Atlantic: “The fortunes of cotton planters in Louisiana and cotton brokers in Liverpool, of the plantations of the Mississippi Valley and the textile mills of Manchester, were tied together through the cotton trade—the largest single sector of the global economy in the first half of the nineteenth century.”⁶

Sven Beckert’s *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* treats cotton and enslaved African labor not only as an experience shared with other cotton workers around the globe but also as the critical linchpin of the worldwide “Industrial Revolution.” Employing the concept of “war capitalism” to underscore the coercive dimensions of enslavement and the early development of modern capitalism, Beckert shows how the “cumulative result of this highly aggressive, outwardly oriented capitalism” enabled Europeans “to dominate the centuries-old worlds of cotton, merge into a single empire centered in Manchester, and invent the global economy we take for granted today.”⁷ In his innovative study, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*, historian Edward Baptist documents the immense suffering endured as well as the subsequent memories of enslavement that African people and their descendants carried forward into the future. *The Half Has Never Been Told* illuminates how African people developed a profound and enduring understanding of the myriad ways that their

forced labor leavened the rise of the modern worldwide capitalist economy and facilitated the gradual spread of democracy among people of European descent:

The idea that the commodification and suffering and forced labor of African Americans is what made the United States powerful and rich is not an idea that people necessarily are happy to hear. Yet it is the truth. And that truth was the half of the story that survived mostly in the custodianship of those who survived slavery expansion. . . . The half not told ran like a layer of iridium left by a dinosaur-killing asteroid through every piece of testimony ex-slaves, such as Lorenzo Ivy, left on the historical record: thousands of stanzas of an epic of forced separations, violence, and new kinds of labor.⁸

As recent studies of capitalism and slavery make clear, the history of the black working class is linked to the rural political economy of staple-crop production—tobacco, rice, sugar, and especially cotton. African Americans remained a predominantly rural southern people well into the twentieth century. In the postbellum years, they also continued to fuel the expansion of the modern capitalist economy through their labor as disfranchised sharecroppers, farmhands, household workers, and general laborers. Consequently, until recently, the preponderance of scholarship on black workers explored the conditions and experiences of agricultural workers and to some extent rural industrial coal miners, lumber workers, and railroad laborers. However, under the impact of the Great Migration and the transformation of African Americans into a predominantly urban people during the twentieth century, research on black urban, labor, and working-class history gradually emerged as a new specialty within American and African American Studies. By the opening years of the new millennium, this scholarship had illuminated a broad range of topics, themes, regions, localities, and issues in the development of black labor history from its commercial-era beginnings through the initial phase of deindustrialization during the mid-twentieth century.⁹

Comprehensive analyses of the intersections of race, work, and gender relations strengthened the growing body of urban labor studies and reinforced the utility of historical perspectives for understanding a series of daunting issues in contemporary African American and U.S. life. In her study of rural and urban labor, *American Work: Four Centuries of Black and White Labor*, for example, historian Jacqueline Jones analyzes the variety of occupations pursued by African Americans. She also accents “the ‘racial’ conflicts” that emerged around issues of work and economic inequality and

“remain the moral burden of this country’s history.”¹⁰ Nearly a decade later, Nancy Maclean focused her attention on the impact of the Modern Black Freedom and feminist movements on questions of exclusion and inclusion from work and political democracy. “How did a society that for centuries took for granted the exclusion from full participation and citizenship of the majority of its members (namely, Americans of color and all women) become one that values diversity and sees as an achievement the representation of once excluded groups in prominent positions? Not only workplaces have changed but also the nation’s political map.”¹¹ More recently, historian Ira Berlin linked successive African and African American migrations since the transatlantic slave trade to shifting capitalist demands for labor. In his view, “The great crossings [national and transnational, industrial and preindustrial, and beyond] cannot be understood apart from the ever-changing demands of global capitalism and its voracious appetite for labor, [black and white,] men and women—whether slave or free.”¹²

These approaches, and others, not only inform the key overlapping arguments of this book but also help to shape its structure. *Workers on Arrival: Black Labor in the Making of America* is divided into two closely interconnected parts. Part I, “Preindustrial Beginnings” (chapters 1, 2, and 3), locates the roots of the black urban working class in the rise of the transatlantic slave trade and the forced migration of some fifteen million African people to North America during the colonial era. These chapters show how a small but growing fraction of urban black workers helped to construct the colonial city and usher in the American Revolution and the emergence of the new republic. Chapter 1 illustrates how large-scale European immigration into the nation’s cities coupled with the intense labor demands of southern cotton agriculture during the early nineteenth century not only curtailed African American access to freedom under the law but also limited the employment of free people of color as artisans, factory hands producing goods for national and international markets, and household and general laborers in the most lucrative segments of the urban domestic and personal service workforce. Although most preindustrial black workers, enslaved and free, lived and worked in multiethnic neighborhoods (though increasingly segregated along color lines by the beginning of the Civil War), these chapters document how early black urbanites nonetheless encountered day-to-day intimidation, mob violence, and movements to recolonize free people of color on African soil.

Chapter 2 sketches African Americans’ early attempts to build community as a way of bettering life conditions. It examines how black urban

workers and their families forged tenuous interracial alliances with selected white residents and used the unique economy, culture, and politics of both the city and the nation, which they helped to create, to broaden channels for wage-earning employment, self-emancipation, independent institutions, and movements to abolish slavery; stymie the African colonization movement; and end restrictions on the citizenship rights of free people of color. This chapter also shows how class conflicts, aggravated by internal color and gender distinctions, gradually emerged within the African American community by the beginning of the Civil War. In addition to documenting the role of the Civil War in the emancipation of enslaved people, chapter 3 also illustrates how postbellum federal, state, and local governments allied with white supremacists and constructed a new racially stratified Jim Crow system, which in turn established the socioeconomic and political backdrop for the transformation of the black class structure during the early twentieth century.

Part 2, “The Twentieth Century” (chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7), examines the rise of the urban industrial working class under the impact of the Great Migration and its collapse in the face of deindustrialization and increasing globalization during the final years of the twentieth century. Chapter 4 shows how a racial “job ceiling” and “color line” in the residential and community life of the city accompanied the increasing movement of black workers into jobs and housing with higher pay and better living conditions, while chapter 5 documents diverse struggles against the Jim Crow order. Black workers and their communities both unified and clashed over the deployment of diverse liberal, interracial, proletarian, and nationalist strategies for liberation and full citizenship rights for black men, women, and children.

Chapter 6 documents how the complicated interplay of industrial employment, new neighborhoods, and the emergence of the militant Modern Black Freedom struggle dismantled the segregationist system and inaugurated a new equal-opportunity regime, including “affirmative action,” to eradicate color as well as gender lines in employment, education, housing, and social programs receiving support from the public treasury. In addition to illustrating how the black industrial working class rapidly declined as the Jim Crow edifice collapsed, the Great Migration came to a close, the manufacturing sector dissipated, and the interracial labor movement dwindled during the late twentieth century, chapter 7 discusses the rise of a new African American urban politics to address the demands of African American life in the emerging postindustrial age. This chapter also considers the meaning of new waves

of immigrants from Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, and Africa. Finally, the concluding epilogue reflects on the implications of U.S. labor and working-class history for today's African American community, work, and democracy. It concludes that current global class and race relations are not entirely new, but deeply rooted in the nation's past with profound implications for the future.