

Trotter, Jr. Joe William (2019) *Workers on Arrival: Black Labor in the Making of America*, University of California Press, Oakland, CA.

Review by Scott Henkel

Joe William Trotter, Jr's book *Workers on Arrival: Black Labor in the Making of America* is the type of book that shapes an entire field of knowledge. It is the type of book that I wish every senior scholar would write: a book that only becomes possible to produce after a significant amount of time and effort in careful study, paying attention to the broad movements in the field and the thousands of nuances that it produces. Entire fields of knowledge are diffuse things, filled with debates, as well as general views, developed and honed through those debates. It is very valuable to have a book that, in Trotter's words, 'synthesizes research on black urban labor and working-class history since the early twentieth century,' (185) and which achieves that task in such an admirable fashion.

In tracing that synthesis, Trotter charts a diverse yet coherent intellectual trajectory starting from W. E. B. Du Bois, Charles H. Wesley, Sterling D. Spero, Abram L. Harris—writers of the 'first generation' of scholarship in the field (186). This early research was the first organized rebuttal to the white supremacist writing from the late 19th and early 20th century, what Du Bois, in *Black Reconstruction*, called 'The Propaganda of History.' Trotter builds from that point through the contemporary moves in the field, in all its range, from sex work (36) and gig work (94), questions about the 'long Civil Rights movement' (202), the digital humanities (96), the turn from a national to a transnational frame (205), environmental issues (203), and more.

Put plainly, the contribution that *Workers on Arrival* makes to the field is to organize an exhaustive record of the field's major moves. It is difficult to convey the amount of labor that goes into producing such a book, but nearly every paragraph includes an endnote citation that references perhaps a dozen pieces of scholarship. (Readers of the *Journal of Working-Class Studies* will note that the book's first citation is to work by Michael Zweig [xv, 211]). The result is a wealth of material for several audiences, from graduate students seeking to learn the broad intellectual trends of the discipline to scholars seeking paths for particular details.

It would be easy for such a book to turn into a mere list, but that is what sets Trotter's book apart from others with a similar approach: *Workers on Arrival* weaves together a vast narrative of broad movements in the field, but also delivers a rich level of detail. A great volume of information and evidence sets the conditions to show broad trends, as well as the exceptions to and nuances of those trends (11). Therefore, the whole of Trotter's book comes to be far more than the sum of its parts.

Even though the sweep of this history is broad and inclusive, people and their contexts come alive. Several examples show some of the rich detail. For instance, the story of the Colored National Labor Union, organized in 1869, whose members at that year's convention declared that 'our

mottoes are liberty and labor, enfranchisement and education. The spelling-book and the hoe, the hammer and the vote, the opportunity to work and to rise... we ask for ourselves and our children' (67). Or the story of Dr. Henry Ossian Sweet, a Howard-educated dentist, who moved into a previously all-white neighborhood in Detroit. When a white mob came to his house, Sweet shot back at them, killing one person in the mob and wounding another. When the police arrived, they left the men in the mob alone, but arrested the occupants of the house and placed them on trial for murder (100). Or the story of Paul Kirk, who was the UAW's first paid Black organizer (111). Or the story of Dora Jones, a Black domestic worker who helped to form the New York-based Domestic Workers Union (117). This, ultimately, is the art of *Workers on Arrival*: thousands of stories like these, represented in the hundreds of works of scholarship that Trotter cites, accumulate to show both the complexity and the coherence of the field of Black Working-Class Studies and History, and of the millions of people that make up the experiences and narratives of that field.

A possible objection—which, in this case, I do not share—is that given this book's task (a broad, inclusive work of synthesis) and its scope (a history of 20th century scholarship of Black workers, covering the colonial era to the present), such a book must find a shared vocabulary to discuss these different examples in some coherent fashion. For Trotter, the key term in that vocabulary is 'worker.' Of course, the conditions of work, the types of work, and the degree of autonomy in particular cases all vary: the work of Black women differs from the work of Black men; enslaved workers are categorically distinct from waged workers because enslaved workers are themselves sold as commodities, whereas waged workers are not (xvi); work in urban settings differs from work in rural settings; the dangers and precarities of particular types of work vary by context. For Trotter, therefore, the key term 'Black worker' is a capacious, flexible, dynamic category. It is active and productive. Trotter uses an array of more specific terms when referring to specific cases: in the antebellum U.S., for example, 'southern free wage earners of color' and 'enslaved African American workers' (17). Yet even given a diverse catalog of tremendous exploitation, domination and dis-enfranchisement, in this reading, 'worker' is a category expressing immense power, and it is the category that Trotter uses to make the field cohere, successfully in my judgement.

Trotter concludes the book with an Appendix titled 'Interpreting the African American Working-Class Experience: An Essay on Sources.' The many rich details in the book's chapters drive those chapters forward; the 'Essay on Sources' drives the book as a whole. The essay on sources tracks changes in perspectives in the body of research, showing in broad strokes from where scholarly trends have come, how they shifted, and where their trajectories may point. This is incredibly useful work and, as I noted above, this is a perspective that only comes after years of study and participation in scholarly debates. It would be impossible to write this book credibly without putting in that time and labor.

Ultimately, Trotter's book brings the evidence necessary to show the complexity of Black Working-Class Studies and History, showing that, in his words,

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. [...] 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 (xv, xv-xvi).

My expectation, and my hope, is that current and future generations use *Workers on Arrival* as a foundation or a touchstone for their work. The research that will build from Trotter's book will be all the richer for standing on his shoulders and seeing this greater perspective.

Reviewer Bio

Scott Henkel is the President of the Working-Class Studies Association. He is also the director of the Wyoming Institute for Humanities Research and Associate Professor in the departments of English and African American and Diaspora Studies at the University of Wyoming. He is the author of *Direct Democracy: Collective Power, the Swarm, and the Literatures of the Americas*, which won the 2018 C. L. R. James Award for Best Published Book for Academic or General Audiences from the WCSA.