

The Other Side of Middletown
Exploring Muncie's African American Community
 Edited by Luke Eric Lassiter, Hurley Goodall, Elizabeth Campbell, and
 Michelle Natasya Johnson

(Lanham, Md.: Alta Mira Press, 2004. Illustrations, notes, appendices, select bibliography, index. Clothbound, \$75.00; paperbound, \$29.95.)

Borrowing the framework of Robert and Helen Lynd's 1929 classic *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture*, this recent collaborative ethnography takes the reader into the heart of the present-day African American community in Muncie, Indiana. Based upon 150 hours of interviews of sixty, mostly middle-aged, residents, conducted by fourteen black and white Ball State University undergraduates, the book is filled with the past and present life experiences of these people, their family members, their friends, and their neighbors. Part memoir, part chronicle, *The Other Side of Middletown* tells in poignant and sometimes startling detail of the small and large moments of life at work, at home, at school, and at church, as well as in the realms of leisure and entertainment, local politics, community activism, and race relations. Until now, the voices and contributions of these men and women who are the progeny of mid-nineteenth-century black settlers in this small, midwestern industrial city have been mostly ignored.

In Chapter Two, "A City Apart," Hurley Goodall and Elizabeth Campbell provide a gripping historical account of early black Muncie. They demonstrate convincingly that

African Americans have been essential participants in the economic growth and development of Muncie for much of its history. Blacks' economic position, though limited in the early years, helped to sustain a community that built its first church in 1868. With the discovery of natural gas near the city in the 1880s, new glass factories and steel foundries opened, expanding industrial opportunities. The black population grew significantly, as a result, from just under fifty residents in 1870 to more than two thousand in the 1920s. Over this half-century, the authors note, a vibrant, fully-formed black community emerged with its own newspaper, political organizations, social clubs, YWCA, and YMCA. Moreover, black businesses—ranging from barber shops to restaurants to a hotel and a skating rink—proliferated and diversified. African Americans even provided their own civil servants, adding a black fireman and a police officer to the city's payroll.

By 1924, when the Lynds arrived, there was no mistaking that a black community existed, and in many ways had prospered in spite of visible and widespread racism. The Ku Klux Klan, having been reborn in several midwestern cities and upper-south towns during this period, experienced

great success in Muncie. In 1922 and 1924, the Klan held major parades in the city. The 1924 parade culminated in a downtown march led by the mayor and the chief of police.

Today, these events still echo in the memories of lifelong residents. Reading the book, one gets the sense that this moment crystallized the profound effect of black agency upon white Munsonians. "White affirmative action" according to Goodall, one of the book's principal authors and lifelong resident, has been one result. "Owing to years of institutionalized racism, and its resulting de facto professional and social segregation, many African Americans do not hold the kinds of high-ranking positions that would enable them to provide opportunities to others" (pp. 236-37). In their seminal anthropological study, the Lynds not only rendered black life and white terror invisible in Muncie, they also helped to define modern American culture as a culture without race and racism.

By documenting individual testimonies, *The Other Side of Middletown* is in every way meant to challenge the legacy of this invisibility and oppression. From the World War II period through the Civil Rights era and beyond, the voices in the book tell of the slow and sometimes uncertain destruction of segregation. They tell of black teachers integrating the public schools in the 1950s, and of black politicians capturing a city council seat in 1967 (which is still held) as well as a state legislative office in 1978. Black Munsonians are proud of these

gains, but they also have not forgotten George Wallace's 1964 campaign appearance at Ball State; or the 1967 race riots spurred by the adoption of the Confederate flag as a school symbol; or cross burnings in the 1980s.

These proud women and men, whose stories are co-edited by their student interviewers as part of the collaborative methodology, also reveal new anxieties regarding crime, drugs, and prostitution in certain city neighborhoods. Since there are few young people interviewed, these observations are shaded somewhat by a generational bias. Also, scholars will at times find this work frustrating because it is almost entirely a work of ethnography with no attempt to corroborate observations or to deepen the analysis by drawing upon the qualitative and quantitative scholarship of black life in other Indiana or midwestern cities. It is almost as if the need to place black Munsonians within the *Middletown* canon was so great that to use data from anywhere else would be to undercut their own purposes. Readers who are interested in the black experience in Indiana will value this work. Still others will find the university/community collaborative approach fascinating and may be inspired to adopt it.

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