

Along the Streets of Bronzeville: Black Chicago's Literary Landscape

By Elizabeth Schroeder Schlabach

(Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013. Pp. ix, 167. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00.)

Elizabeth Schlabach's *Along the Streets of Bronzeville* is intended as a dual project in historical recovery and theorizing the relationship of place and cultural production. It partially succeeds at both. Although more reliant on the work of other scholars than on research in primary sources, the study usefully emphasizes aspects of "Chicago's Black Renaissance" that have received minimal attention elsewhere. Although some theoretical passages are murky, Schlabach's case for the heuristic value of an aesthetics of place represents a contribution to the literature on creative expression in black Chicago.

In Chapter One, Schlabach explores the evolution of Chicago's African American community from "the Black Belt" to "Bronzeville," a shift in nomenclature associated with deepening community pride and self-definition. She focuses on the manner in which this specific physical and social environment influenced distinctive forms of cultural production, epitomized by Louis Armstrong's hot jazz, the urban genre paintings of Archibald J. Motley Jr., and the literary works of Richard Wright andwendolyn Brooks.

Chapter Two focuses on two key institutions: the South Side Com-

munity Art Center (SSCAC) and the South Side Writers' Group (SSWG). Schlabach briefly discusses the role of WPA cultural projects in sustaining artists during the Depression and then attempts to delineate a generational shift from an older New Negro sensibility to "a uniquely Bronzeville . . . aesthetic" (p.10). Her analysis of this shift is, at times, rather muddled and digressive. For example, W. E. B. Du Bois (born 1868), Alain Locke (1885), and Langston Hughes (1902) are treated as representatives of a single generational cohort preceding Bronzeville's young rebels. Elsewhere, the author devotes several pages to the "apparent contradictions" (p. 28) in the aesthetic views of Du Bois, who had the least direct contact with and influence on Bronzeville's artists. Still, Schlabach's argument offers much of value. Her discussion of the SSCAC and SSWG emphasizes their role in enabling the work of black artists who sought to "historicize . . . and reproduce racial experience, from field to factory" (p. 35), connecting Chicago's artistic renaissance with its role as major terminus of the Great Migration.

In her third chapter, Schlabach shifts from the centers and products of high culture to the massive illegal economy built around "policy" gambling, which she associates with a multifaceted, plebeian creativity. In the

dream books that helped bettors pick lucky numbers, “African American diviners wrote the script of black urbanism through visions captured while Bronzeville slept” (p. 63). The chapter closes with an account of policy as subject matter for the documentary writings of the Illinois Writers’ Project and the imaginative writings of Bronzeville’s poets and novelists.

Gwendolyn Brooks and Richard Wright are the focal subjects of Chapters Four and Five, respectively. Schlabach deploys biographical details to contrast Brooks’s “sense of ease” in her Bronzeville environment with Wright’s “feeling of not belonging there” (pp. 76-77). More original is her exploration of the tropes of confinement, crowding, and domination that run through works like Wright’s photo-documentary *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) and Brooks’s novel *Maud Martha* (1953). The squalid “kitchenette” flats housing poor blacks emerge as the prime setting and concrete symbol of a “misery of place” limned by both writers (p. 108). Schlabach argues, however, that

Brooks imbues the harsh cityscape with a softening light of grace, of small victories achieved through quotidian (and often feminine) rituals of survival. A brief conclusion offers a look at contemporary Bronzeville and suggests that its complex “mixture of vibrancy and decay” (p. 123) supports “a perspective that disallows over-determined narratives of hope and/or despair” (p. 125).

Along the Streets of Bronzeville is, on balance, a flawed but sometimes interesting study that advances what may be considered a midwestern turn in African American studies. While not the historian’s best point of entry into this emerging field, it is a book to consider.

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From the Bullet to the Ballot: The Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Party and Racial Coalition Politics in Chicago

By Jakobi Williams

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. Pp. x, 285. Illustrations, notes, index. \$34.95.)

From the Bullet to the Ballot attempts to combine the history of racism and corruption in Chicago, Illinois, with a day-to-day history of the Black Panther Party in Chicago. Jakobi Wil-

liams argues that the chapter’s leader, Fred Hampton, and the Chicago-based Panthers left a lasting impact on multiracial political coalitions in that city, and the entire nation. The