

Text Transcript of “Off the Shelf” Podcast Season 3, Episode 1, with Joe William Trotter Jr.

Augustus Wood:

Hello, everybody, welcome back to another episode, another season, of “Off the Shelf, Revolutionary Readings in Times of Crisis.” I am your host, Augustus Wood, and I'm just happy to have a third season going with all of these wonderful Black scholars doing all of this amazing work. And I want to also thank the Humanities Research Institute at the University of Illinois for cosponsoring this.

And going into the third season, we knew that we had to come a lot stronger than we have in the past. And there is no other... this has been, this is the kind of the dream opening season episode because I have here one of the, one of the foundational Black Urban and Black Labor Scholars, US scholars, whatever you wanna call them: Dr. Joe William Trotter Jr. is finally here. And I said from the get-go that one of the first people I'm going to get on this show one day will be Dr. Trotter and he is here and I'm just so excited. So thank you for joining me today.

Joe Trotter:

Well, thank you. I'm excited to be here.

Augustus Wood:

So let me talk a little bit about Dr. Trotter real quick. So listeners can know that, again, I'm not somebody who showers accolades often. But again, one of the reasons why I'm doing this work today is because of the work and all of the just amazing scholarship that Dr. Trotter's done. So I'll just I'll just do a brief thing with him. So Dr. Trotter is the Giant Eagle university...Giant Eagle University Professor of History and Social Justice and past history department chair at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Recently elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences he is also the director, founder of Carnegie Mellon's Center for African American Urban Studies and the Economy (CAUSE) and president elect of the Urban History Association. His latest publications are *Workers on Arrival: Black Labor in the Making of America* and we'll hear a lot about that. And *Pittsburgh and the Urban League Movement, a Century of Social Service and Activism*.

Professor Trotter received his BA degree from Carthage College, Kenosha, Wisconsin, and his MA and PhD degrees from the University of Minnesota. And he is currently working on a study of African American urban life since the Atlantic slave trade.

So again, one of the things that always fascinated me about your work, Dr. Trotter, is your capacity to analyze African American history from different periods. You know, they always telling, they're always telling us that we have particular specialties. But one of the things that I learned as a young graduate student is that if you're gonna do African American history and you're going to have a specialty that you have to understand the trajectory of the past and different periods to really get the understanding for whatever it is you want to do because they're so intertwined and connected. And so can you go into it, talk about your work and, you

know, kind of expand on all this work that you're doing in African American labor and urban history.

Joe Trotter:

Well, look, Augustus, thank you for the introduction and for the opportunity to be here. I must say at the outset that I've read your materials and I am very impressed by the trajectory of the work that you're doing and I wish you the best as you go forward with that. For me, I think it's important that, you know, as a student of African American history, that we always remember that we'll situate it in some way inside that history. I grew up in the coal fields in southern West Virginia, where my father was a coal miner and my mother in the coal fields. You see, there wasn't a lot of work for Black women at all. In most of the urban areas you had a situation where African American women could often get paid labor inside the household economy. You know, domestic service. In West Virginia, the, the, the structure of occupations was so limited that very few women worked outside the home.

So in other words, what I'm trying to say here is that my mother stayed at home to care about 14 children. We had 14 in our family, big family. So all of this and then a working class environment. There was a big struggle always going on over how to survive in an environment like West Virginia. And I think that's somehow sort of shaped my sensibilities about working class history. And so that over my career as a historian, I became very very interested in the African American labor experience and how African Americans fared in the economy in which they lived and worked. So that's sort of a biographical background piece to my work.

But let me just say that my aspirations as a young person in Southern West Virginia, initially, I had no idea that I would actually go to college even. My initial aspiration was to become a brick layer. Because in West Virginia, we had different tracks of education or the college doing the the general and the vocational. And I had planned to be a brick layer. I was going to become a brick mason. But in my senior year, nothing senior year, but my junior year, my mother decided to leave West Virginia with her children, you know, in tow. By then there were ten of us. And so we moved to Ohio, which, in a small town called Newcomerstown. And Augustus, as you know, Black people moving from the South to the urban North were always considered the newcomers, right?

Augustus Wood:

That's right.

Joe Trotter:

And so it was sort of ironic that we ended up in a town called Newcomerstown [LAUGHS]. And we were the newcomers. And we experienced some of the same friction between some of the Newcomerstown born Black people and those migrants who were us coming into that town. And so, in that town, I couldn't pursue brick masonry. So it was incumbent upon me to really start taking my classes seriously, much more seriously than I had in West Virginia, in part because the expectation even from my teachers were that you should do well, but you still want to be a brick mason, so that doesn't mean you have to do all the other work in the same diligent and... but anyhow, there I decided to start studying history more, more carefully and closely and became interested in becoming a high school teacher. And so, after graduating from high school, I did manage to go to a college, junior college at first, and then a four-year school. And I

became a high school history teacher. And I worked there as a history teacher in this town called Kenosha, Wisconsin. And you will know that town to be in the news recently because of the police killing of a young man. I stayed there six years, my wife and I, and we decided after six years we needed to go to graduate studies, pursue graduate study. So we went to the University of Minnesota, and that's where I got my PhD. And that's where I became interested in pursuing study in urban history with a focus on Black workers. And that's where I started to really think about Milwaukee as a place to do my work. So that's, that's the background. There is much more. And I can interface that for you as you see fit, but I gave you a little bit more background than I'm sure you, you, you were interested in. But I wanted people to sort of see that when we become historians, we don't leave who we are behind. We have to figure out a way to manage and incorporate in many ways, particularly if you're a historian, that understanding into your thinking.

Augustus Wood:

Yes, no. I mean, you're exactly right. I think we have somewhat similar trajectories in that my father works worked on the sewer lines and was was actually reprimanded for trying to organize a union in Atlanta when workers were fired by the city government, which is part of a book project I'm doing. He was one of the ones who was organizing in 1977. So his experiences and my mother was, is still is an administrative assistant who can't even retire because she doesn't have the benefits to do so. Those types of things I grew up listening and seeing the things that were happening to my parents. In a city, where, yeah, like you said, there was a very clear divide in Atlanta, the working class and the middle and upper classes. And so just those experiences played a large part in to the stuff I do on class struggle in relation to racial oppression, et cetera. And also like you, taught high school as well.

So I really got the sense of exactly what you're talking about is that, by living these experiences in the struggle in the struggle for understanding history, we are often taking what I often call an organizing mentality in that we're not just seeking to document, but we're seeking to intervene. We're seeking to make sense of what's actually occurring so as to correct. And one of the pieces that, again, and I took very much so from you and also that's a thread throughout all of your work, is to look at Black working class from a more political economic standpoint and the idea of the proletarianization thesis. And this idea that at one of the, one of the things that a lot of people tend to forget is that your proletarianization thesis was a response to the ghettoization thesis at the time, which was basically taking out the idea that there was number one an agency behind the struggle for Black people to determine their own lives, determine their own labor, etc. But it was also putting at center the political, economic, and social forces that create a condition where people would call the ghetto.

Joe Trotter:

Yeah, exactly, I appreciate that synopsis. That's exactly what I've been attempting to do. And it's interesting you had mentioned Milwaukee as, that was my first book by the way, *Black Milwaukee* was a product of my dissertation. And one of the reasons I decided to study Milwaukee is that I had gone to undergraduate studies in a place called Kenosha, Wisconsin, which I mentioned. But at that college, it's a small Lutheran College on Lake Michigan called Carthage College, that, that college attracted students, Black students from the Milwaukee area in substantial numbers and another group of students from the Chicago area. So there in

Kenosha, I got to meet young people from Milwaukee and Chicago. And so when I started to think about a thesis for my dissertation and what kind of study I wanted to do, Milwaukee really came to mind in part because of that relationship I had with these young men. And sometimes we would go home, I would go home with them in Milwaukee during break. And so I got a chance to start getting a feel for what Milwaukee was like in a way. But let me tell you, I decided not to go with Chicago for the simple reason that as I looked at the literature, it seemed that almost everybody wanted to study Chicago. And so it was oversubscribed, I believe, at the time and I said no, I'm not going to [LAUGHS] gonna go that route. Is there was so much out there on Chicago. And plus, we need to start thinking about how Chicago compared to some of these other communities in which African Americans found themselves. Like Milwaukee, and so, Milwaukee, for me, was an important choice, choice. But what I didn't realize, Augustus, is that Milwaukee turned out to be an even more appropriate city.

To look at the question of Black working-class formation, especially Black industrial working-class formation. Because it had a tradition of local socialism. I mean, the mayor of Milwaukee for for, from World War One to the end of World War II was a socialist and avowed socialist mayor. And so one of the things I had wanted to examine is that in these other cities, they are dominated by either the Democratic machine or the Republican machine. And so here you've got a city dominated by an avowed socialist regime. And so what difference does it make for Black workers living and working in a city that claim that equality? Go and the idea of leveling the playing field for everybody. How the Black fare in that city.

And the truth is, you get a kind of a left-wing racism, you know, coming out of these socialist ranks. And even leading socialists would talk about Blacks as a lower race and inferior people. And so African Americans, whether they were situated in a liberal, democratic, conservative, Republican, or radical socialist environment, they had to be attentive to the way racism operated and limited their choices even in that context. And so you're absolutely right when you said that I wanted to look at the agency of African Americans and to show that whatever environment African Americans found themselves in, they were going to be active. And historically we came to understand that even in the enslavement period, that these enslaved people were not sitting by allowing themselves to be enslaved. They were constantly struggling to break free and to liberate themselves and to gain a measure of autonomy. And so that persisted all the way into the period of the industrial era. And so I wanted, for me, to look at that industrial period because it was so much a part of the 20th century experience.

And to see, and also there were so many stereotypes, right, about Black people who were Southern, who were agricultural, and who moved into these new urban environments. There was a sense that they were not prepared to really undertake the kind of work that they were going to be required to do. And that somehow they were sort of subject to all kinds of influences that were beyond our control. Including the whole idea of migration. So many earlier scholars, so many of them just treated Blacks as moving under the compulsion of Southern racism and then under the attraction of Northern industry and nothing was given to their own volition and make a note to putting those two things together. And so yeah, so *Milwaukee* was about trying to make sure that if we look at Blacks in urban areas, we should look at the way they, first of all, they help build that city. They helped build all these places that they migrated to. Their labor was an essential part of the wealth-creating process in all of these places. And so whether the Black population was large or small, their labor was exploited in all of these large, small, medium places. Their labor was exploited, underpaid and so on. And so they were helping to

build industrial America. And so part of part of my work is about that process, trying to make sure that we remember that Black people were exploited labor but they were productive labor. They produced and they enriched the cities in which they lived. And it was no different in Milwaukee, compared to Chicago or New York or other places. And so that's part of the story that my career has been about telling.

Augustus Wood:

Yes. So there are two points I want to make that you draw out there. The first one on agency is that the way you do agency is incredibly important. Because when you look at some scholarship... today is a very... people claim they're doing agency. But really what they're doing is they're telling triumphant stories that are typically ahistorical. And so what I really love about your, about both *Black Milwaukee* and *Workers on arrival* is that you're telling stories of struggle. See, agency and struggle should not be separated in that there are wins, there are losses, and that if you understand the dialectics of how both sides that are in constant struggle are going at each other, then it's no longer a triumphant story, it's a story of struggle where you have wins and losses, that you have social movements, et cetera. And so that's why I really think your work is so beneficial to understanding struggle today is that you put you put all the positions on the table and say *This is how this could work*. This is how the groups that we're fighting against are going to retaliate or react. Class, race, whatever it is, there's probably struggle involved. So that's the first point.

Joe Trotter:

OK, well, I like where you put it and you're absolutely right: struggle is a centerpiece. And that's defined in terms of people making decisions about how to live and work, even on the job, they made decisions about as, as much power as they existed in the hands of the employers and the owners. African Americans... and also we have to say they were connected with white workers, of course. We're also making decisions that helped to shape the industry so that at no time were industrialists all powerful. They had to understand, and in many ways they exploited division within the working class, especially racial division. But they knew that they could not assume power over these workers and African Americans as well.

One of the things that you know from reading some of my work is that take the issue of quitting, just outright quitting, walking off the job, not coming back. So much history has been written about Black people as lazy. They don't want to work, they quit, they don't stay long enough, all of that. But that's one of the issues I feel that we have to turn on its head and look at it from the vantage point of African American working conditions, pay, and treatment on the job. So that not, you know, a lot of this movement from place to place was a protest movement of the condition that inherit in the workplace. And so that's one of the ways that we can see agency in a way that it's been stripped away from Blacks because people who defined it as sort of incompetent labor, inconsistent labor... and in a way, taking the employer's side in defining these people as not willing to have the discipline to stay on the job and to make a living.

Augustus Wood:

Let's contextualize that to today, because the way that they're framing what's happening now, they're calling it a resignation, which is, they're depoliticizing what...many of these workers, who are Black, are doing by leaving these jobs and finding better ones. I argue that this is a general

unorganized mass strike. Because when you do the interviews and when people leave, they're posting signs saying you need to stop exploiting us. These are political actions that employers are putting out there, they're depoliticizing it by calling it a resignation, it means that they just they just don't want to work.

Joe Trotter:

I appreciate that, the way you're bringing that forward. And see that for history, we need to constantly rethink the lessons and connections between the current moment and those past moments. And this is an excellent example to point out how labor turnover in the industrial period finds a different kind of manifestation. And there's more recent period. And I liked that example of quote, resignation. And the way in which there's a lot of talk about people leaving these jobs. But none of what I've read is framing it in terms of an activist volition on the part of the people and as a full test in a way against certain conditions that may inhere in today's workplace. So that's excellent.

Augustus Wood:

Well, that's in, that's in, that's in the piece that I sent you.

Joe Trotter:

And that's part of what I so much appreciated about about your work in updating these issues so that we can see better. They unpack, especially they unpack COVID-19. So I appreciate that.

Augustus Wood:

Well, again, know that that's the thing is that that's one of my biggest issues when I, when I came to graduate school. And you will have courses with professors where every book was after 2010, like every single book. And so we brought up things, you brought up *Black Milwaukee*. You, you brought up *Slave Community*, you brought up all these different... *Aren't I a Woman*. You brought up all these very important books. And they will say, Well, we didn't read those in my program and you'd actually like, wait a minute, you're teaching African American history but you didn't read *Black Milwaukee*? Yeah. Okay. But do you see what I'm saying? This is, these are things are important and I want to transition now to *Workers on Arrival*.

I do believe that one of the, one of the biggest issues particularly in my department in labor education, because I'm in the labor education school here at the University of Illinois, is that we're trying to actually create a, create a paradigm for labor studies. And I think that *Workers on Arrival* is probably the best analysis looking at Black labor history in its current form. Because I'm gonna go back to a point you made earlier in the very title of the book, *Black Labor in the Making of America* it's one of the most important things that we who do Black struggle work in urban history, we argue is that you can't separate the productive labor of Black people from the development of the United States as a world power. Because if you go from agricommercial to agricultural, to an industrial, the largest periods of capitalism, Black workers are, were exploited, as you said, created the United States as a world power, so you can't separate that. But today, the majority of the service sector work is what I argue is non-productive labor, meaning that it's not actually building the United States as a self-sufficient entity, but it's financial, it's information, and it's replacing the productive spaces that you talk about in your different work. And I think

that's really cool about what you're doing with *Workers on Arrival* is you're laying that out as well.

Joe Trotter:

Yeah. Thank you, that's exactly right. The role of African Americans in the material development of the nation is just extraordinary. And I'm, I'm happy to see you and your cohort and generation of young scholars beginning to look more closely at this late twentieth-century, early twenty-first century period. Because I think that your notion of the proletarianization innovation is important. Where you talk about this sort of transition from this industrial working class that had actually gains some degree of improvement over an earlier moment in African American history. And so that they were unionized workers, they had certain benefits, they had somewhat higher wages, and in some cases they could actually afford to, with some help, send their children to college. There were some things going on, but that slipped out of focus during the late 20th century with the deindustrialization and the eventual rise of this more digital age economy. And you guys are working on that and I'm glad to see that. One of the things I hope that this new work that you're doing will be able to show is how despite all of the changes and the productivity part of Black labor, there's still a way in which these essential workers, so to speak, are fueling the financial resources of somebody, through their underpayment and their long hours and their lack of benefits or that, that that is enriching somebody and we have to figure out who are the principal beneficiaries exactly of this new economy in which African Americans are very precariously sitting, ah, situated. And I think that that's another wave.

And I know we're in a very difficult analytical moment because we know that at the upper end, you know people like you and I in university settings have jobs often that have greater benefits, greater salary, but that's not the case with the large numbers of our people at the bottom rungs of this new economy. And the way in which... they are going to determine our own survival across the class structure. Because if they go under, we're going under. And so it's important that we connect with what's happening to these workers who are in the most precarious position in the economy of today. And so I think that work that you're doing and beginning to really identify and describe and also interact with and gain the voices of people who are currently in it. Because when you said they are leaving signs behind of why they are leaving this place, why they have... and that they are articulating a set of grievances that we are yet to fully understand and fully, but that's something that I think you guys are doing and I applaud that.

Augustus Wood:

Yes. Well, we appreciate it though, because a lot of it is based in the history of these things that we're studying. And, you know, we're going to always push these, these ideas forward. But I do want to ask you about this other work that you did, *Pittsburgh and the Urban League Movement, a Century of Social Services and Activism*. If you could talk a little bit about that.

Joe Trotter:

Yeah, I'll be happy to. That book was produced initially at the invitation of the Urban League of Pittsburgh. They were preparing for their 100th anniversary. The Urban League of Pittsburgh was formed in 1918. And in 2018, they celebrated their 100th year. I was approached maybe three or four years earlier to write a book on the Urban League that would enable them to

celebrate that moment with this sort of um, centennial volume. But what happened is that I first said, okay, I'll do it. And then I'll just do a short synopsis of the history, you know looking at a few documents and few published studies and just write something quick, well-illustrated and tell the story. But, but for that celebration and not for, you know, for scholarly purposes. But man, did I get into those records in the urban area? The Urban League records are extraordinary, they are rich, and in Pittsburgh they have them locally, they're at the National Archives too, but they are locally at two repositories, one at the University of Pittsburgh, and the other one at the Heinz History Center. And when I started to look at all those primary documents, I told the CEO at the Urban League of Pittsburgh, I said, you know, I know I promised to do this book for you guys, but I can't I can't I can't do it. I've got to do the book. I've got to do a book that is grounded in these records because we need it. And so that's the way I decided to. And so they were a little disappointed that I decided to build out and not do that short version of the book. But then I told them that we can later on do a sort of a pictorial history of the Urban League using the narrative, you know back the narrative. But we haven't done that.

But yeah, that book for me was eye-opening because I, in my work, I've been critical of the Urban League as a middle-class oriented organization that very often did not appreciate the culture, ideals, and practices of Black working people. And it still remains true that there was a blind spot in that respect. And the Pittsburgh Urban League was no different, it, it looked down upon these workers in many ways as needing tutoring, you know, that type of thing. But then when I looked at on-the-ground activities that the Urban League engaged in and the way they engaged with workers was more, much more complex than I had seen depicted in so many of the Urban League treatments. And so what I've found is that in Pittsburgh the Urban League CEO, the founding CEO of the Urban League, he was adamant that the Urban League was not going to be a straight bright, uh strike breaking instrument for local steel industries and any industry in the city. And he actually started to have relationships with the organized, you know, white labor movement, you know, the AFL. As much as he could, he communicated with that, with that movement and, and tried to build bridges. But the labor movement was reluctant and actually opposed to bringing Blacks in to the labor movement on an equal basis.

And so what you had happening is that these Black Urban League officials still held to the principle that they were not going to break strikes. And so they encouraged Blacks to build their own independent or local African American labor unions and to begin advocating on their own behalf. And so I found that to be very, very helpful in the local struggle. And then what I found in the Urban League is that they could be very, very, uh, they, they developed insights into the working class that they started to articulate. For example, they talked about the work process in the steel industry. For these Blacks were defined as unskilled labor, but then they started to break into what it meant to be an unskilled laborer. And then they started to make the case that a lot of this work should be considered skilled. Because these so-called unskilled, not very well-educated Blacks were, they were deploying a set of skills that helped the steel industry become productive. And so they were beginning to gain an appreciation for these workers that I had not seen in some of the other work that I had done. And some of the work I had read about the Urban League's position on Black workers.

And so what I, what I also witnessed is that the Urban League in Pittsburgh was not reticent about becoming part of a protest against racial discrimination in the institutional life of the city. And we have this, we have this unusual example of the Urban League CEO right after World War II. And the swimming pools were segregated. The Urban League CEO went down with

another colleague and dove into this pool. This will all white pool. And the police were right there, white people started pelting him with rocks and everything, but he said we're going to desegregate this pool. And so the Urban League in Pittsburgh gained a lot more in a way, credit on my part and I think on historians' part for the way in which they blended that social service activism, political activism and institutional and in many ways the civil rights struggle. And so that's part of the story I tried to tell there. It's still a story that centers the African American worker. I was most interested in how the Urban League navigated its relationship with these workers. But of course, it takes on a lot of other questions too, about personnel, development, and there was a labor struggle going on within the Urban League where these women workers were beginning to complain. And some of them were even talking about organizing collectively to demand more salary and better treatment within the Urban League. And so that study is about some of the internal struggles within the Urban League as well as that interracial struggle with the white supremacist regime in the city. So that's what that was all about. Hopefully, I'm hoping people will read it because I think there are very few, when you look at it, very few local case studies of the Urban League in cities across the country, they're just not that many. And so I hope that people will take, take up that issue in some other places.

Augustus Wood:

Oh, very much so. It's actually part of my book project on Atlanta.

Joe Trotter:

Oh, good, good.

Augustus Wood:

I'm doing, I'm doing a class struggle analysis of Black Atlanta from 1970 to 2015. And that's the book I currently have under review right now and they're doing, the Urban League were there in Atlanta, so they're a major part of the issues that Black Atlanta workers are having with trying to get their neighborhoods and public schools under control, etc. It's like, the Urban League is like, we don't think that you all have the capacity to actually have say in these decisions. So why don't you let us do that for you because we're better equipped. [LAUGHS]

Joe Trotter:

OK, OK. Yes. Well, I'm glad you, I'm really happy you are taking that up. Was there a woman named Hope who was in Atlanta?

Augustus Wood:

Well you had a, yeah, Lugenia Burns Hope.

Joe Trotter:

Yes, yes. Was she an Urban Leaguer?

Augustus Wood:

Yes, yes.

Joe Trotter:

OK, OK. Yeah. So yeah. So that's, that's important, to take that on.

Augustus Wood:

Her her husband was John Hope, who was president of Morehouse.

Joe Trotter:

Yes.

Augustus Wood:

Yeah, for that time, but that's a whole nother story.

Joe Trotter:

OK, I know. I was gonna ask you.

Augustus Wood:

But if I bring it up what you just talked about though, I think it's really important that we complicate these narratives, though, because as you said, there, there's pretty much a baseline of how to think about the Urban League. More so in terms of how academics and scholars have written about them. But to actually go inside...you know, one of the things, not just your book, but other folks like Kimberly Phillips and her book on Cleveland and other folks that write, Earl Lewis, what you see if there's a, if there's a story of an organization or a space and there's little conflict, then that's a problem. Cause there's always conflict in determining how things operate, power, etc.

Joe Trotter:

Exactly.

Augustus Wood:

So what's you're doing with the Urban League piece is explaining like, yeah, they made some questionable and problematic decisions. But there was also factionalism and struggles over how to decide what to do, etc. That's an important dynamic that a lot of people, particularly young people, who were trying to join organizations now, who think that you just go in and then you just paint signs and you go out and protest. It's like, no, you have to create a mission. You've got to create a vision and you have to look at what, what's happening with the with the actual people on the ground that you have to make this decision, right?

Joe Trotter:

That's right, yeah. I think you're absolutely right. And you know, I keep saying Augustus, is that your preferred or do you like Gus?

Augustus Wood:

Either one is fine. You know, people interchange, interchange both.

Joe Trotter:

OK, all right. Well, let me just say that you've just identified, I think, one of the major themes in the Black workers experience. And that is how the question of agency and self-activity and autonomy is also tied up with this idea of sort of cross-class alliances. You know, like how they build, workers build alliances with the internal Black middle-class as it's beginning to expand. And so, you can begin to see that there is a complicated way in which there is a kind of a unity between the Urban League and workers on a certain set of issues. And then they fragment out on other issues. And so it's a constant, as you put it, struggle going on to build those alliances and to really see them fragment and then come back together. And so the history is pretty complicated. And historians, we have a job to do to make sure we're giving the proper weight to the way these things play out.

Augustus Wood:

Very much so. And I think another really cool example in terms of urban life would be dealing with police issues. In that, very early on, the middle-class and working class Black folks, they were very much on the same page related to when the police were, when, when there was more and more surveillance and killings happening. But as the deindustrialization occurs, and then all these narratives start coming out now about the pathological problem of poor Black people and all of a sudden you start seeing some different, some different messaging going out of these middle-class organizations about, maybe these police aren't as bad as we think. So in other words, that political economic restructuring over time is critical to looking at those alliances and how fragmentation occurs along class lines.

Joe Trotter:

Yes, exactly. And you know, since we having a conversation, we'll just have it. One of the things that I wasn't as attuned to, and I think your generation can really come to grips with this, is the way the working class itself is fragmented. And we see it to some extent when people talk about the church and the non-church Black people. And so, within the working class, when you have this church or church-going oriented component of the working class, and then you have this non-church-oriented part of the working class that like Saturday night, like drinking, like gambling, like a lot of other things. You can begin to see that that unity that Black workers forge with each other can be taken for granted, right? They have to bridge those divides within where they disagree on certain principles or ideals. But then they agree on fundamentals of their lives as workers. And they push to empower across these internal divisions, you know, that might exist.

Augustus Wood:

Know what? That is such a good point because you have my gears thinking now. Because when you think of when the "moral majority" stuff started in the eighties to this present day, what a lot of that stuff plays on is the idea of the values of a, of a nuclear family and playing on this idea that there are a certain type of Black people that you should be around who had this value and this value and this value. You may have experienced the same exploitation as them, but on this side of the aisle, maybe if your values were this way, then maybe the struggle wouldn't be that bad. And so the manipulation and exploitation of those types of ideas in the late eighties and nineties, that's where you start, as you mentioned, and I talk about this, the fracture of that

Black working class solidarity. And it's like uh..., to the point to today where it's like yes, it's exploded.

Joe Trotter:

Yes. Exactly. Exactly. So yeah, so capturing all of that in your studies, it is complicated, but just giving, giving those things a play and working through that, I think will be a contribution to all of us. And it makes for a richer history and a more usable history. Because people have to know that these forms of solidarity that come out where people organize and they go on strike or they make protest against injustice, that they have done that through effort, bridging gaps, putting aside disputes, and working for the common good of the group. So yeah, so that's the part of the history.

Augustus Wood:

So yeah, I mean, like I said, I know, again, I'm somebody that I don't want to say I'm selfish and greedy with, because again, I have you here to do this interview and I'm just enjoying so much of this, but I know that we can't stay forever. We're starting to get close to where we have to end because I want to respect your time. So yeah, one of the questions I always wanted to ask you, and this is kind of what I wanted to ask you at the panel we did last year... I never got around to it is that you're working with the Urban Historic Urban History Association. You're doing these things, you have the uh, the Center for African American Urban Studies and the Economy. You have a you have a kind of pulse on where the where the field is going. So my question to you is, where do you where do you see what do you see the need for the field to go? For the scholarship on Black urban studies, Black urban history. Where do you want to see it going as we come up and we're starting to come out and put our stuff out.

Joe Trotter:

Yeah, well, one way I see it going and a way that you are working on and that I think is a great need is to get this early 21st-century piece together. Because, you know, this century is, is moving on. We're into our third decade of the 21 century. So I think that that's an important piece is to get the late 20th century, early 21st century and to place, at least chronologically, that's an important part of the next agenda that we set. And if you look back, you'll notice that that's always been part of our way of moving the chain forward, so to speak, is that my generation, we needed to do the inter-World War years because we were moving deeper into the 20th century, late 20th century. And we still didn't have good studies on World War II and World War One and the 1920s and the Depression. We didn't have good studies in my generation. So the time... and then, over the last few years, you know that bringing the late 20th century or let's say mid- to late-20th century had been part of the agenda. But now we're talking about connecting that with the 21st. So I think that timeframe is important moving forward.

But the other thing is that I do believe that Urban Studies, Urban Community Studies, should not be abandoned moving forward. I think there's a tendency to think that everything is urban now, you know, so what's the point? But I think Urban Community Studies should not disappear from the framework so that we should continue to think about ways to craft urban community studies moving forward. And I think that's gonna be very important. That's the second thing.

The third thing I am beginning to believe and I'm responding to some contemporary pressures right now, is that over the years we've always believed, at least those of us who work on

working class labor history, that our work makes a case for reparations in the political economy of the US, you know makes the case. But we have not been self-conscious as much on harnessing our studies to the agenda of reparations. I think that some of the work we do in the future might start to frame the study of Black urban life more explicitly around issues of justice and you know, reparation, compensation. And to really help historicize some of the issues that people are working with today. So what in the past we've just said, OK, I'll do the work and then people can draw their conclusion, but maybe we need a more self-conscious set of studies that try to take up that issue in the future. And so those are three items that I would just say as an agenda moving forward.

Augustus Wood:

Yeah. Those are those are just really important points. Thank you so much. One of the biggest fights that, you know, I work with organizations that push for reparations, and I ask, like why I have this, cause I do, like, I do critiques of political economy where I bring in that piece. Why don't you ask me or some of my colleagues who do this work to provide you with a historic, historic, a historical analysis of this and give you your evidence. And, you know, you don't see us on these panels or being asked to do this research. That's again, we can we can take that conversation to a whole nother era.

I think you're very, very on point with this idea that if we don't start taking these things serious, in terms of like we want this justice and we want these, we know we want to be compensated correctly. We want to, we want answers for the exploitation. It's our, it's our responsibility, those who have the resources at the academic level to produce the type of research that actually pulls out what exactly happened to the Black working class experience. And that's one, I'm just going off of what you just said. The fact that we don't have people who want to do Black working class studies anymore bothers me. As you know, there are books on Atlanta, a whole bunch of books that talk a lot about the politicians, but 90% of Atlanta has been Black and working class. You know, what happened with these people and how did they struggle? And so the fact that my book would be the first to look at the Black working class in Atlanta at a community level, you've had some academic studies and stuff, but I'm actually looking at the neighborhood-level organizations.

I'm doing this in 2022 and here's the issue with that: is that we have to, we have to start taking responsibility in saying that the working class people's struggles, because they are the majority of people, they're going to define how we live, as you said earlier in our, in our interview. And so, we have to take that seriously. And again, I'm not trying to get hot, but there's some of the scholarship coming out that treats them as these objects who were just out here being bulldozed by all these things. And that they are the other Black people in Atlanta, who, it's like, oh well, you know, my book and my book is an answer to that dilemma in the scholarship. So glad you pointed out that type of desire. That number one, we have to be adamant about the type of research that can answer for the types of things that we call for in terms of justice. And we also have to remain local, community-based in urban studies. Everybody wants to go national urban or global urban or whatever.

Joe Trotter:

Yes, I agree. Yeah. Yeah, well thank you for doing what you're doing and I'm really looking forward to it. And yeah. Yeah.

Augustus Wood:

That's why "Off the Shelf" is so important is that we have people who listen to this podcast, they know of Dr. Joe William Trotter Junior, but to hear your story, to hear your background, to hear your analysis of how you came into these works and your overall perspective on the Black working class today, this is going to ignite a lot of young scholars, a lot of young people into starting to dig a little deeper. And so I appreciate the work that you've done in paving the road for people like me to really, because again, I had the experience of being poor Black working class in Atlanta but your analysis kinda put the puzzle together to where I could start developing frameworks, looking at things differently. That was the piece that was missing before I came across your work and others.

Joe Trotter:

Thank you. I appreciate it. And you know I have a few relatives in Atlanta, so they're going to know who you are pretty soon. [LAUGHS]

Augustus Wood:

Another funny thing too, is that I actually teach in Pittsburgh every year at Linden Hall for the USW.

Joe Trotter:

Is that right? Well, you've got to, when you come to town, you got to let me know and so that, you know, so we can continue this conversation.

Augustus Wood:

I do their I do their labor history and I do their I do African American labor history with them.

Joe Trotter:

Oh, OK, well then you've got to let me know. When are you coming again?

Augustus Wood:

It'll be this summer, it'll be around I think they're gonna do it at the end of July or early August. Well, let me know when you come into town.

Joe Trotter:

OK, yeah. So I'll look forward to that.

Augustus Wood:

Definitely. So again, we want to thank Dr. Trotter for just kicking off this third season of "Off the Shelf," which is going to be one of the most highly, highly listened to episodes that we've had. And so again, thank you for joining us. Thank you for the work that you've done and thank you for the work that you continue to do in not just producing scholarship, but also training young scholars and influencing and advocating for the type of stuff that we're doing. I mean, I'm sure you're not surprised that not too many people are as enthusiastic about Black working class urban studies as you are. When I've talked to them about it... you're doing Atlanta, but you're

talking about Tyler Perry? You're not talking about the mayors? I tell them, I tell them, Dr. Trotter, I'm talking about the mayors all right, and not the way you think. [LAUGHS]

Joe Trotter:

OK, well, keep up that good work because we have to do it from the bottom up, right?

Augustus Wood:

That's right. That's the perfect way to end this episode of "Off the Shelf: Revolutionary Readings in Times of Crisis." Thank you, listeners. Thank you to the Humanities Research Institute at the University of Illinois. We will see you on the next episode. Stay safe and power always to the people.