Dream Books and Gamblers: Black Women's Work in Chicago's Policy Game by Elizabeth Schroeder Schlabach (review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

Dream Books and Gamblers: Black Women's Work in Chicago's Policy Game, by Elizabeth Schroeder Schlabach. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2022. $25.

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"*Keeping Up with the Joneses*." Late nineteenth-century English literature enthusiasts might ascribe the origin of the saying to Ernest J. Simmons's *Memoirs of a Station Master* and their description of mid-Victorian life. Early twentieth-century cartoon fanatics might attribute the phrase to the work of *New York Globe* comic Arthur "Pop" Momand, whose series is said to have detailed the life of a New York couple and their well-to-do neighbors. However, there is a high chance that Blacks and those of the African diaspora who resided in Chicago in between that same time crux associated the expression with none other than the infamous Jones Brothers and their mother Harriet Jones. Known for being the most successful policy queen in the city of Chicago, Harriet Jones, backed by her sons, Edward Jr., George, and McKissack, carved out a space of financial entrepreneurship and power that largely remained unrivaled. In their book *Dream Books and Gamblers: Black Women's Work in Chicago's Policy Game*, Elizabeth Schroeder Schlabach craftily situates the stories of Jones and many Black women like her within the national context of the Great Depression and the local context of economic upheaval, population influx, and racial stratification. Accoutered in bespoke hats and well-creased petticoats, Black women often reigned at the helm of the policy game from behind the veil of assumed impotence and meekness, as Schlabach asserts and proves.

Schlabach thoughtfully organizes the text into six thematic chapters, not including the introduction and conclusion. Within those chapters, close attention is paid to chronology, guiding the reader seamlessly through key events, places, and people. Each chapter correlates to a main point integral in understanding how policy became the "poor man's Wall Street," how Black women rose in the ranks of a male-dominated field, the legal and social risks associated with the market, and how Black folks across the nation used policy as a means to circumvent status crystallization and poverty.

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Chapter Overview

Schlabach's introduction provides valuable context and framing for the remainder of the text. First, Schlabach opens by mentioning Harriet Jones and the Jones Brothers, using the family and their experiences to examine the use of policy for economic success, analyze the "politics of respectability" as it pertains to womanhood, and highlight the risks associated with the policy business. Next, Schlabach opens the frame slightly to bring policy to the national stage, intertwining events such as the Great Depression and the Great Migration, and detailing the existence of policy in other Black metropolises such as Harlem and Washington, D.C. Finally, the introduction presents evidence of the ever-bending moral arc of civic leaders as it pertains to the propriety of the market, as well as the panopticonic nature of police that further increased surveillance of Black communities.

The first chapter begins by briefly delving into the history of policy, detailing its origins in New York during the antebellum period and juxtaposing it to cities like Chicago—the book's focal point. The author then turns their attention to the tumultuous relationship between the policy business and the Chicago Police Department. Using sources such as local newspapers, the author shows multiple instances of local police both condemning and, in many ways, supporting the policy business in Black neighborhoods, albeit for financial gain. Finally, chapter one rounds out with a special focus on how policy enabled Black women to climb the social and financial ladder in a time of national economic hardship. As Schlabach posits, policy had a number of positive implications for Black women including providing jobs with living wages, allowing for flexible time to be both a wife and provider, and using their gains to leverage other business ventures. Schlabach's findings suggest that the benefits of policy were so numerous that women risked both social shunning and legal ramifications in pursuit of a better quality of life and standard of living for themselves and their families.

Building on the tail end of chapter one's focus on Black women, the second chapter homes in on the women who led the policy racket in Chicago. Specifically, Schlabach captures the stories of Elizabeth Slaughter and Eudora Johnson—the fiancée and sister, respectively, of John "Mushmouth" Johnson, who was said to be Chicago's most famous policy king until his death in 1907. While the chapter does lean toward focusing on the internal strife between the two Johnson women a little too heavily, Schlabach presents compelling evidence of how the two women used policy to build financial security, access elite social clubs, and leverage their financial gain into well-documented instances of philanthropy.

Chapter three is where the reader is introduced to Harriet Jones and the infamous Jones brothers. Even though Schlabach asserts that source limitations prevent them from painting a full picture of Harriet's personal life, they do a solid job presenting the basics of Harriet's life, including information about her parents, her marriage to Reverend Dr. Edward P. Jones, and the family's trek to Chicago from Mississippi as part of the Great Migration. Schlabach even goes so far as to link the timing of Harriet and Edward's relocation to the lynching of a local Black Mississippi man, which prompted the family to bump up their move by several months. While this detail seems rather trivial, it shows a relentless commitment to threading together the constant intersection of history and sociology that undergirds the Black experience.

The third chapter continues to map out the economic success of Jones and her boys, showing due deference to the influence and foundation laid by Edward Sr. Even though Harriet was able to evolve the business tremendously in the years following his death, Schlabach does not neglect the fact that numerous records present Edward Sr. as a political and social force across Black Chicago. The combination of Edward Sr.'s reputation, even after death, coupled with Harriet's status and business acumen, led the Jones family to unparalleled levels of monetary gain. Schlabach notes that by the end of their reign at the hand of Italian policy players, Harriet and her boys owned several businesses, homes, and properties, including estates in Mexico. More impressive than the family's bank account, however, was Harriet's ability to remain virtually unseen throughout the majority of their time in the policy business. At first glance the reader is compelled to attribute Harriet's invisibility to intentional power bias based on gender politics; however, Schlabach deftly shows that this anonymity was at the very least strategic and at most an overt display of Harriet's business acumen. Schlabach concludes the chapter by identifying Harriet and her accomplishments as the antithesis of the conventionally accepted narrative around Blacks and their motivations, accomplishments, and willpower during the Great Depression.

Chapter four centers on Black womanhood, spiritualism, and the marriage of spirituality and capitalism. According to Schlabach, policy acted as an economic springboard for other financial endeavors including mediumship, church storefronts that served as home bases for "divining" women, dream books, and spiritual trinkets such as candles, incense, and roots. Mediumship and dream books in particular were the sister markets of the policy racket, providing Black women, and some Black men, with another pathway to economic freedom. Just like policy, the offshoot markets and those who participated in them were subject to social scrutiny and police surveillance. Schlabach presents ample evidence to support this claim, including

referencing testimonies of those arrested and citing Chicago codes and court rulings. In addition to spotlighting the similarities between the policy and mediumship markets, Schlabach gives continuous consideration to the fact that divination and mediumship have roots in the religious and spiritual practices of slaves. While the chapter stops short of tying these practices to continental African traditions that enslaved peoples carried over, the author's attention to that minute detail is laudable.

Up until this point, Schlabach has painted the idea and practice of policy in a positive light—focusing rather heavily on how the market helped to build Black communities vis-à-vis the efforts of Black women. Schlabach steps back in chapter five, however, and notes that the success stories mentioned throughout chapters one through four were by and large anomalies as opposed to the status quo.

According to the text, this is because although many women were able to circumvent the legal ramifications of the policy market, most others remained constrained by constant instances of arrest, threats of seized property, and continuous harassment. Schlabach goes so far as to assert that the purpose of police surveillance and interactions was not based on some meritorious endeavor to uproot an "illegal" market, but instead an underhanded ruse to apply an additional layer of social control over an already marginalized and disenfranchised community. Schlabach uses county records to show that the information provided by police in their incident reports rarely warranted a search let alone an arrest.

In addition to painting a more well-rounded picture of the pros and cons of the market, chapter five stands out as the only chapter to explicitly state the methodology employed. In referencing the methodology, Schlabach is intentional about calling out the silences that sources such as county records and even newspapers often perpetuate. Acknowledging this, Schlabach lends most of the chapter to the voices and narratives of Black women from their own perspective—placing the author's immediate analysis on the backstage.

The final chapter builds on the momentum of the fifth by revisiting the extensive surveillance and policing of Black communities and calling out the wavering principles of both law enforcement and the legal system. In particular, Schlabach cites explicit examples of "payoffs and graft" that illuminate a long and extensive history of the extortion of Black policy leaders. Additionally, testimonies from various individuals cite the use of illegally obtained evidence to try and convict Black policy leaders, execute raids, and shut down businesses. In effect, the Chicago police and legal system's attacks on Black policy leaders, especially women, were indicative of Black life in general during this era.

The book's conclusion is rather brief but revisits the evolution of policy on a national scale and highlights the extent to which Black communities relied on the market as a means of gaining financial stability and social capital. As the thesis dictates, Black women in particular used policy to become contributors to and sometimes leaders of their households when traditional opportunities were either few, underpaying, or nonexistent. Moreover, Schlabach is intentional about once again clarifying that the success of women like Harriet Jones and Queen Ann Roane as "policy queens" were aberrations as opposed to the norm. Most women, as stated in chapters five and six, found themselves constantly under the thumb of local law enforcement. Finally, Schlabach acknowledges the shift in both economic and political structures that led policy and its offshoot markets to become state-run endeavors. It was at this epochal juncture that "numbers," as they called it in Harlem; "digits," as it was coined in Pittsburgh; and "policy," as Chicagoans came to know it, ceased to exist.

Conclusion

This text is a must-read for anyone studying sociology, economics, Black business models, the history of Chicago, Black womanhood, or any marriage of the aforementioned. Employing a broad range of well-known sources including the heralded *Chicago Defender* and introducing the reader to other lesser-known sources such as *Broad Ax*, Schlabach presents mounting evidence to support the overarching theme of the book. Additionally, the thematic structure and the overall breadth of the bibliography sheds light on the diversity of sources employed by Schlabach and serves as a historical jackpot for anyone looking to pursue research either in the same discipline or a neighboring one. Overall, the book makes good on its promise and goal of highlighting a demographic that has conventionally been left out of the narrative surrounding policy-running in particular and economic triumph during and after the Great Depression in general.

Don't Cry For Me, by Daniel Black. New York: Hanover Square Press, 2022. $18.99.

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We've all heard the phrase: "give them their flowers now," an axiom of appreciation that translates as an action. A saying, indeed, that encourages us all not to take people, and the moments life affords us with them, for granted. We must love, and write about this love, now.