

# Kelley, Blair LM (2023) *Black Folk: The Roots of the Black Working Class*. Liveright.

## Review by Venise Wagner

It only made sense that Blair LM Kelley, the author of *Black Folk*, started with the night her great-grandfather Solicitor Duncan orchestrated his family's furtive run from an unscrupulous Georgia landowner around the time of the Depression. Duncan, who had been sharecropping a parcel for this landowner, had just been told that despite his hard work in the fields and the bountiful cotton crop from it, he owed the landlord money. Tired of another year of crushing debt, Duncan decided to execute a quiet exit with his family, heading north to North Carolina.

The Black working-class experience has always involved the search for something better, a lever of agency that Blacks exercised to improve their lives. Largely shut out from employment opportunities, Black workers have long been used to pulling up stakes when a job no longer provided them with a chance for better – better wages, better conditions, and the possibility of promotion. Kelley places this active push for better job conditions front and center of the Black working-class's unique path. This isn't to say that other working-class groups haven't historically fought for better working conditions, but the Black working-class experience embodies a pattern of especially extreme oppression and ingenious resistance to that oppression. Kelley traces this resistance back to slavery.

Academic studies and press reports of the working class primarily have examined the lives of whites, leaving the unique historical experiences of the Black working class invisible. I think of the imagery that is often used to showcase the white working class as the backbone of American manufacturing. Such imagery leaves us with the belief that whites alone built the country's physical infrastructure and economy.

But in *Black Folk*, Kelley brings to the page the experiences of Black workers whose contributions to the economy and infrastructure have been no less critical. These workers are often amongst their own group viewed as an important sector of the Black middle class. Such an examination is welcome since historically Blacks have had to find innovative ways to negotiate their labor with white bosses who were quick to dismiss the value of their potential and their actual work. They were also left to negotiate their labor because many trade unions excluded them from their ranks and others devalued their work nearly as much as the white bosses.

In Kelley's telling, Black workers found leverage to persuade employers that their labor held financial value. She makes the case that even during slavery, the act of running away was an assertion of leverage – albeit limited – to withdraw labor. For these reasons, Kelley views this as nascent negotiations of labor for Black people. The market value of slave labor indeed held great value to owners. The slave system cultivated white working-class buy-in with jobs such as overseers and patrollers and with social privileges as whites, even though the system undercut their labor value, too. Kelley also blasts the notion that slave labor was primarily unskilled labor. She

touts as an example the many artisans and craftsmen whom Thomas Jefferson enslaved and who built the Academical Village, the University of Virginia. She also traces pieces of her ancestor's story, Henry, who was a blacksmith in Elbert County, Georgia.

She describes the work of field slaves as skilled labor, pointing out that Blacks transported to the Americas brought agricultural knowledge from their motherland. And later in the book she does the same with her descriptions of washerwomen's labor, whose work was more than just scrubbing clothes in large tubs of hot water. These women knew how to formulate and mix chemicals to brighten white clothing, knew how to use the wind to dry clothes on the line, knew how to iron clothes without burning them. This knowledge was passed down through generations.

In highlighting these examples of Black skilled work, Kelley reframes Black labor – from slavery and on – as valued commodities. This rendering recalibrates the role of Black labor over time. While most Black workers were relegated to cultivate resistance within the confines of policies that often excluded them or ignored their experiences and contributions, these workers, though invisible, made inroads at making themselves and their experiences seen. They also developed rich cultural and social lives that allowed them to thrive within their communities despite oppressive policies and laws that contained them.

The two chapters on washerwomen are particularly satisfying as Kelley juxtaposes two images. The first one emerges from the lens of a white observer tasked with recording the washerwomen's experience. Unable to move past the stereotypical imagery of washerwomen, this observer honed her sights on what washerwomen lacked – whiteness, status, education, and social class. Then Kelley, however, contrasted that with the reality of washerwomen's lives. We see how washerwomen asserted their independence, working hours that were convenient for them and their families and in or near their backyards. We see them working together, collaborating, and supporting each other and their communities. For this, they held status within the community, even though whites saw them as poor pitiable women.

Kelley places the Black working-class at the heart of community engagement and activism. She establishes the organizing efforts of domestic workers and Pullman porters as the antecedents to the civil rights movement.

All of these narratives correctly realign the historical record of Black workers in the United States, challenging the stereotypical image from unskilled grunts living as victims of an exploitative system, to worker heroes who contributed to industry and economic growth of the country, while also providing for their families and resisting employer abuses.

Kelley's emphasis on Black worker agency is inspiring and offers an important vantage point. But it also risks simplifying the real complicated impact of institutional, political and social laws and practices on the kind of agency Black workers could exert. For example, Kelley explores the laws that shaped opportunity or the lack of opportunity for domestic workers, but her stories of domestic worker resistance against employer abuses quickly subvert the focus away from policies toward worker choice and worker's individual actions. It's a difficult balance to strike. Kelley comes within a hair of doing so.

Racial segregation and policies with racialized outcomes – including those during the Depression that excluded domestic workers from Social Security benefits – created barriers for Black workers. Their choices of resistance in the workplace could do little to change that.

Kelley provides compelling narratives that belong in the canon of working-class studies. I would encourage other researchers to incorporate this scholarship and other ethnic-specific experiences like it into explorations of the American working class. Commonalities from these experiences would emerge quickly – whether coming from white, Black, Latino, or Asian groups: discrimination, exploitation, resistance are bound to be dominant themes.

### **Reviewer Bio**

**Venise Wagner** is Professor of Journalism at San Francisco State University. A former reporter for San Francisco newspapers, she specialized in coverage of the Bay Area's African-American communities, economic development, culture, and education. She is the co-author and co-editor of *Reporting Inequality: Tools and Methods for Covering Race and Ethnicity*. She also wrote the short memoir, *Love in the Time of Pinochet*. She is currently working on a family memoir following the story of her grandfather who was a Black steelworker in Chicago during WWII.