

CHICAGO'S BLACK "GHETTO:"
A HISTORIOGRAPHY

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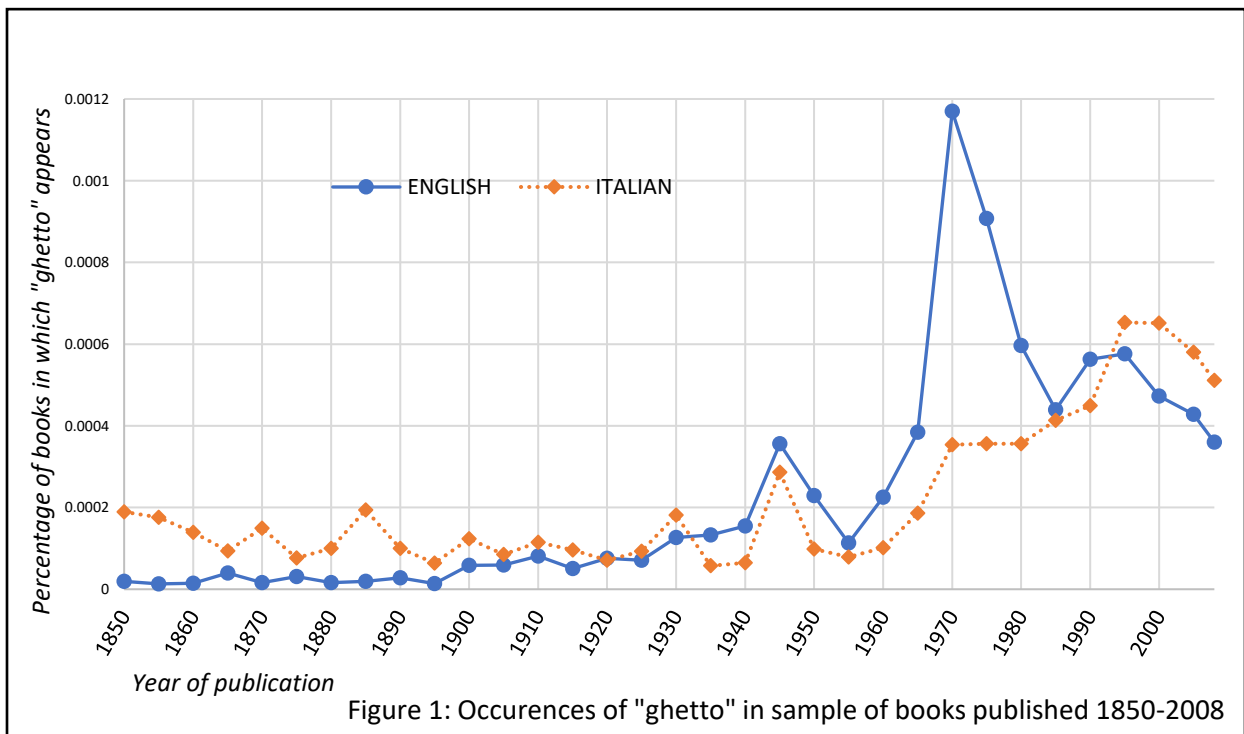
Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, a steady flow of black migrants relocated from the Southern states to the city of Chicago. Due in large part to racially restrictive policies and practices, Chicago's black community became concentrated around the second and third wards of the South Side. On this much, the literature agrees. But while certain authors refer to this black enclave casually and authoritatively as a "ghetto," other authors resist the term to varying degrees, and none offer a precise definition.¹ This circumstance creates confusion for readers who may be unfamiliar with the meaning and connotations of the word "ghetto" in historical and sociological contexts.² The objective of this historiographical sketch, then, is to analyze the use of the term "ghetto" as used by a selection of authors in relation to Chicago's black neighborhoods in the first half of the twentieth century. The corpus for this analysis includes *Black Metropolis* by St. Clair Drake & Horace Cayton, *Black Chicago* by Allan H. Spear, *The Slum and the Ghetto* by Thomas Lee Philpott, *The Making of the Second Ghetto* by Arnold R. Hirsch, *Land of Hope* by James Grossman, and *The Rise of Chicago's Black Metropolis* by Christopher Robert Reed.

Though none of the authors in this study expressly define the term "ghetto" in their work, its complex etymology and its relationship to particular ethnicities and historical occurrences make it a word that demands close attention in its use and interpretation. The word "ghetto" originates from "the Italian dialect form ghèto, meaning 'foundry' . . . where in 1516 the Venetians restricted Jewish residence." The word was borrowed and passed into standard Italian

¹ Spear, Philpott, and Lee all use the word "ghetto" in the titles of their books, while Reed, in *The Rise of Chicago's Black Metropolis*, resists the application of the term so strongly that the only index entry for "ghetto" reads "'Ghetto,' The, inappropriateness of the label." Drake & Cayton omit the term from their index, a rare occurrence for a word used in both chapter and section headings.

² Particularly for this author, who from the fifth grade believed that the term "ghetto" originated with the Jewish ghettos of Nazi Germany and frequently heard the term appropriated by suburban Whites who used the term as a synonym for "broken," "run-down," or "low-quality," declarations in the literature that the black enclave in Chicago was simply "a ghetto" or "not a ghetto" are decidedly unhelpful.

and other languages as “ghetto,” meaning “section of a city where Jews are forced to live.” So far none of this relates to Black Chicago. However, “since the late 19th century, the meaning of ghetto has been extended to crowded urban districts where other ethnic or racial groups have been confined by poverty or prejudice.”³ How exactly this extension occurred is beyond the scope of this paper, but we can see in Figure 1 that usage patterns of the word between English and Italian vary considerably. The transition into English clearly changed the meaning, or at least the application of the word.

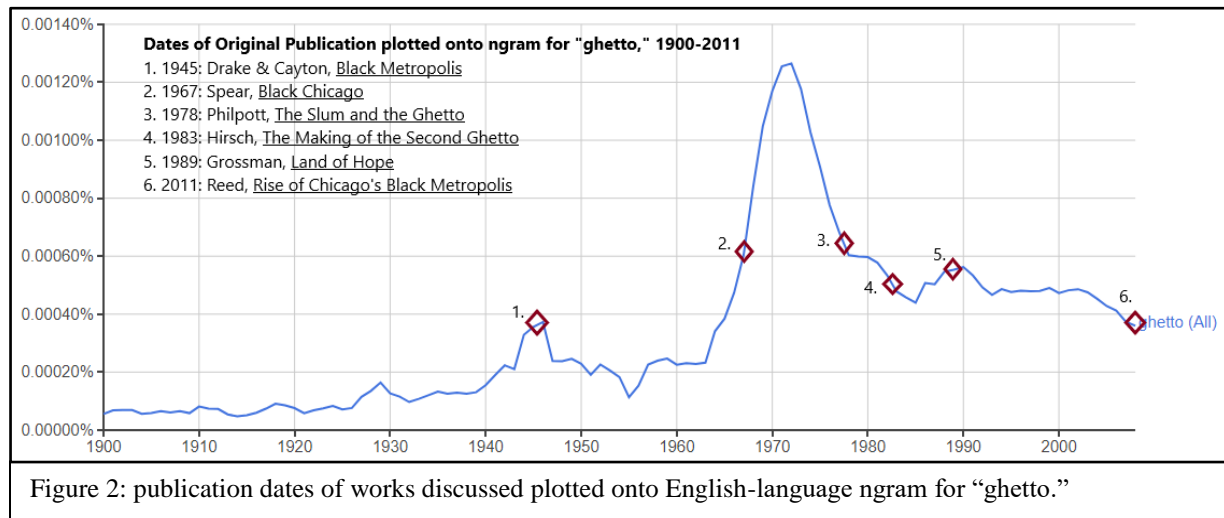


Merriam-Webster currently gives three distinct, albeit related definitions for “ghetto.” The first expressly relates to Jewish segregation and is not relevant to our discussion. The second definition given is “a quarter of a city in which members of a minority group live especially because of social, legal, or economic pressure.” Finally, “ghetto” may also mean “an isolated

³ “Definition of Ghetto by Merriam-Webster,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ghetto>.

group” or “a situation that resembles a ghetto especially in conferring inferior status or limiting opportunity.”⁴ It seems clear that these second and third definitions have some applicability to Blacks living in early-twentieth century Chicago, but these characteristics were also true of numerous ethnic enclaves throughout the city. Why is it that we see “ghetto” used almost exclusively to refer to black areas? An examination of the books in our corpus will trace the development of this relationship between the “ghetto” and blackness.

The books that make up the corpus explored in this historiography were selected based on the range of treatments they give to the word “ghetto.” Plotting the publication date of each book onto a frequency chart for the word “ghetto” in English publications (figure 2) will help to organize our discussion and to provide context to the literary environment in which each author published their work.



Originally published in 1945, *Black Metropolis* is cited by every other work in this historiography. Drake and Cayton mostly avoid using the term “ghetto,” at least compared to Spear or Philpott. When the term does appear in *Black Metropolis*, its meaning is not precisely

⁴ “Definition of Ghetto by Merriam-Webster.”

clear; at times it denotes geographic factors but at other times refers to housing quality and availability of city services.

In Chapter 8, “The Black Ghetto,” the word “ghetto” itself is very rarely used. Despite a section within the chapter titled “Black Belt – Black Ghetto,” this researcher noted no instances where the term was part of the authors’ narrative. The focus of the chapter is on the racial consolidation and isolation of Blacks into circumscribed areas of the city.⁵ Later in the same chapter, though, the authors quote the *Chicago Defender* from July 1944: “Restrictive-covenant agreements and the iron ring [of intolerable, unsanitary conditions] creating a Negro ghetto must be smashed.” And participants in the Mayor’s Conference in 1944 cited buildings in disrepair, an absence of city services like trash collection and street cleaning; youth delinquency and substandard schools as “ghetto conditions” in parts of the Black Belt.⁶ In addition to geographic isolation it seems that the quality of housing and services figure into what makes a “ghetto.”

Much later in a section titled “The Anatomy of a Black Ghetto,” Drake and Cayton point out that “‘ghetto’ is a harsh term, carrying overtones of poverty and suffering, of exclusion and subordination . . .” Ordinary residents of the area “*live* in the Black Belt and to them it is more than the ‘ghetto’ revealed by statistical analysis.”⁷ Unfortunately, the exact statistical parameters that make a ghetto are left unstated.

Drake and Cayton, then, discuss the “ghetto” alternately as a product of geographical isolation and as a measure of poverty, housing quality, and city services. Allan H. Spear’s 1967 *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto* is, however, our first title to contain the word “ghetto.” Its usage perhaps reflects broader trends at the time, since its use in publication was

⁵ Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 174-197.

⁶ Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 201-2.

⁷ Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 382-385

rapidly expanding from 1966 through its peak usage in 1972.⁸ Spear uses the word prominently throughout the book and draws a distinction between the “physical” ghetto and the “institutional” ghetto. Spear seems to emphasize the hostility of Whites and related inability of Blacks to “escape” certain geographic bounds when discussing the *physical* ghetto, but describes the *institutional* ghetto as a deliberate project undertaken by black leadership in response to the development of that physical ghetto. Thus, he uses “ghetto” to describe white oppression and the increasing self-sufficiency of the black community simultaneously.

Spear says that “by 1915 . . . the physical ghetto had taken shape; a large, almost all-Negro enclave on the South Side, with a similar offshoot on the West Side, housed most of Chicago’s Negroes.”⁹ Spear is not emphasizing racial homogeneity or isolation here, even pointing out that as late as 1910 Italian immigrants were more segregated from native Whites than Blacks were.¹⁰ Instead, Spear’s focus in describing the “physical ghetto” is on discriminatory housing practices that limited Black residents to particular areas, declaring that this ghetto was “primarily the product of white hostility.”¹¹

As for the “institutional ghetto,” Spear is referring to the increasing self-sufficiency of “Black Metropolis” itself, characterizing its development as a move away from integration and toward “a new economic and political leadership with its primary loyalty to a segregated Negro community.”¹² Spear discusses the growing independence of black businesses and politicians as concrete examples of the “self-help” philosophy that he says characterized the institutional

⁸ Michel et al., *Quantitative analysis*.

⁹ Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto 1890-1920*, 11.

¹⁰ Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto 1890-1920*, 15.

¹¹ Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto 1890-1920*, 26.

¹² Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto 1890-1920*, 91.

ghetto.¹³ For Spear, then, the physical ghetto was a white creation and the institutional ghetto was created by Blacks as a response.

While Spear was writing about the ghetto around the time of a major uptick in the term's usage (Figure 2), Thomas Lee Philpott published *The Slum and the Ghetto* in 1978 as use of the term in publication was beginning to moderate.¹⁴ Philpott contrasts the Black Ghetto to the “white” ethnic enclaves – slums – throughout the city, but in the process he defines the word “ghetto” as expressly and exclusively a black phenomenon. Like the two works already discussed, Philpott begins explaining the development of the Black Belt by describing the demographic changes and increasing racial concentration of Blacks in South Side Chicago neighborhoods. He avoids the term “ghetto” in his prose, however, until his story turns to the “ever-stiffening” white resistance to Blacks’ efforts to spread to different parts of the city.¹⁵ This emphasis on white resistance fits with the pattern we see emerging from Drake & Cayton and Spear. But Philpott’s perhaps most crucial point about the ghetto is never directly stated in the main text: after more than one hundred pages describing conditions and programs throughout Chicago’s immigrant “slums,” the “ghetto” section begins with the words “For as long as black people had lived in Chicago . . .”¹⁶ To make matters more clear, Philpott outright states in the introduction to the Wadsworth edition of the book: “the difference between the slum and the ghetto was that poverty alone defined the slum, whereas poverty combined with racism to create

¹³ Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto 1890-1920*, 111-126.

¹⁴ Michel et al., *Quantitative analysis*.

¹⁵ Philpott, *The Slum and the Ghetto*, 113-121.

¹⁶ Philpott, *The Slum and the Ghetto*, 114.

the ghetto.”¹⁷ This leads Philpott to declare that the “Black Ghetto” was Chicago’s only “real ghetto,” marked by segregation that was “complete,” “compulsory,” and “permanent.”¹⁸

In other words, slums were white, the ghetto was black. Nowhere do any of these authors clearly state, nor is it anywhere implied in the definition of the word, that “ghetto” should mean “black” (ethnic or minority perhaps, but during the first half of the twentieth century currently under discussion these labels would have equally applied to a number of groups in Chicago). Yet the way our authors use the term when discussing Black Chicago strongly implies a direct racial component.

This expressly racialized view of the ghetto continues in Arnold J. Hirsch’s *The Making of the Second Ghetto*. The “second ghetto” premise obviously implies a “first ghetto;” surely in order to establish the “ghetto” as a recurring phenomenon Hirsch must first clearly define the term. This turns out not to be the case. Instead Hirsch seems to take for granted that his readers will share his belief that ghettos are white creations where only Blacks live.

In discussing the formation of the “second ghetto,” Hirsch again emphasizes white resistance to housing desegregation, claiming that Whites were the “architects” of “the ball park within which the urban game is played.”¹⁹ Whites had created the “first ghetto” through “unyielding segregation” and gradually began to see this first ghetto as an “entity” to fear.²⁰ This is as close as Hirsch comes to defining the term, and his racial assumptions are clear. Sentences such as “[not] only were the ‘black’ projects located in ghetto areas, but Chicago’s Lathrop and Trumbull Park Homes, located in white areas, excluded blacks . . .” further reinforce the implied

¹⁷ Philpott, *The Slum and the Ghetto*, 143.

¹⁸ Philpott, *The Slum and the Ghetto*, 121-146.

¹⁹ Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, xvi.

²⁰ Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 15.

association between “ghettos” and blackness.²¹ Writing in 1983, just five years after publication of *The Slum and the Ghetto*, Hirsch seems to have adopted Philpott’s assertion that the “Black Ghetto” was Chicago’s only “real ghetto” to the extent that it no longer requires explanation.

Six years later, James Grossman excludes the word “ghetto” from the title of his work and uses the term much less frequently than Spear, Philpott, or Hirsch. The primary focus of *Land of Hope* is on the experience of migrants during the Great Migration. Although he says that “ghettoization” is an essential context for understanding the Great Migration, Grossman never explains what, exactly, he means by the term, and discusses it only tangentially throughout the book.²² When the ghetto does come up, though, it remains clearly racialized. The index refers us to page 9 for an instance of the term “ghettoization” and, though the term is not actually in the text, the page describes State Street’s “dismal high-rise public housing projects sheltering thousands of black urbanites who have little hope of escaping poverty or the physical environment in which it thrives.”²³ This description at least implies that racial concentration and confinement are part of the way Grossman perceives the ghetto. Later in the book he repeatedly uses “ghetto” as a synonym for “Black Belt” or “South Side.” Grossman then describes a timeline wherein “the emergence of a physical ghetto coincided with widening racial discrimination” between 1900-1915. This development eventually precipitated the construction of “what by the 1920s would be known as a Black Metropolis”²⁴ By invoking a “physical

²¹ Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 14.

²² Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 5. Immediately after saying a focus on northern urban ghettos had precluded a full examination of “migrants, their values, or their experiences,” Grossman suggests that “the key to a full understanding of the Great Migration and its meaning” is to place it in the context of, among other things, “ghettoization and racial ideology” (page 6). This contradiction adds to my perception that Grossman wields the word “ghetto” without precision.

²³ Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 9.

²⁴ Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 123, 129-30.

ghetto,” he alludes to Spear’s formulation, but without mentioning the “institutional ghetto” Grossman leaves the term vague.

The clearest aspect of the term as used by Grossman is its racial connotation. His description of State Street’s poverty and racial concentration come closest to matching the connection between white hostility and ghettos that we have seen so far, but if Grossman intended to label this a “ghetto,” our only hint is through the book’s index. Taken together, it seems “ghetto” is essentially a synonym for “black neighborhood” in Grossman’s usage.

Relative to our other authors, Reed’s 2011 *The Rise of Chicago’s Black Metropolis 1920-1929* presents an interesting and distinctive case. Reed does not use the term except to emphasize that the Black Belt in the 1920s was “*not a ghetto* in any general sense except its aging, deteriorating housing stock,” clearly pushing against the word’s use by authors like those we have just discussed.²⁵ It is clear that Reed not only avoids the term but actively resists it. He describes how the relationship between housing and class structure has been used to “explain the existence of the ‘ghetto,’ that measure of how far blacks have or have not come as citizens.”²⁶ This critical and revealing statement suggests that Reed rejects the pattern that we have seen emerge throughout the literature: “ghetto” being associated with “blackness.”

The word “ghetto” has a complex etymology and appears to carry a variety of meanings even among scholars in the same field. While these scholars seem to agree that a “ghetto” is racially confining and usually contains poor quality housing, the specific connotations of the word around race and responsibility (who “made” the ghettos, and who are they for?) suggest the

²⁵ Reed, *Rise of Black Metropolis*, 27. Reed cites Spear’s *Black Chicago* at times, but never around the use of the word “ghetto.” Reed does not cite Philpott or Hirsch at any point.

²⁶ Reed, *Rise of Black Metropolis*, 32.

word demands more careful scrutiny than perhaps many of the authors in this study have given it.

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