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Missed Opportunity: Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander and the Economics Profession

By JULIANNE MALVEAUX*

Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander (1898–1989) was the first black woman in the United States to receive a Ph.D. (Thomas Potterfield, 1990). She earned her degree in economics from the University of Pennsylvania in 1921. Her dissertation, “The Standard of Living Among One Hundred Negro Migrant Families in Philadelphia,” was, in her words “an attempt to arrive at conclusions concerning the migrants to Philadelphia, through an intensive analysis of the budgets of a small number of their group” (Mossell, 1921). When she finished her graduate work in 1921, Mossell was unable to find employment in the economics profession in Philadelphia or in the surrounding areas (Potterfield). This is not surprising, since the only academic employment available to African-Americans in the early 1920’s was available at the black colleges, and black women faced barriers to employment at some of those colleges.

In any case, Mossell worked as an assistant actuary at the black-owned North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company from 1921 to 1923. She returned to Philadelphia to marry Raymond Alexander in 1923, and entered the University of Pennsylvania Law School in 1924. She was the first African-American woman to graduate from Penn’s Law Schools in 1927, and the first black woman admitted to the Pennsylvania bar in the same year (Potterfield).

Given her family background, Alexander’s academic and career achievements are not surprising. Her grandfather was a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Her uncle, Henry O. Tanner, was a noted artist. Nontraditional occupations and employment were not unusual for the Tanner women—an aunt, Hallie Tanner Johnson,

was a physician and founder of the nurse’s school and hospital at Tuskegee Institute (Potterfield).

During her career, Alexander distinguished herself as a lawyer in both the public and private sectors, working as Assistant City Solicitor in the City of Philadelphia in 1928–30 and 1930–34, and serving as a Truman appointee to the Committee on Human Rights (Gerald Fraser, 1989), a Kennedy appointee to the Lawyer’s Committee on Civil Rights, and the Carter-appointed Chair of the White House Conference on Aging (Fraser). She was also active in civic affairs, serving as the Secretary of the National Urban League for 25 years, and as a member of the National Advisory Council of the American Civil Liberties Union. She was the first national president of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority (currently the largest black woman’s public service organization; see Paula Giddings, 1988), and its legal advisor for 35 years.

Alexander’s household seems similar to the modern two-career household. Her husband was a lawyer, a member of the Philadelphia City Council (1951–59), and a distinguished jurist on the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas. They had two daughters, Mary Elizabeth Alexander Brown (born 1934) and Rae Pace Alexander-Minter (born 1936). Alexander successfully juggled household, family, career, and civic responsibilities. The achievements of her life touch areas that range from the law, government, civil rights, education, aging, and women’s rights (Potterfield).

A striking aspect of Alexander’s career was the longevity of her interest in the topics she identified as important—serving as Secretary of the Urban League for 25 years, and as the Legal Advisor to Delta Sigma Theta for 35 years. Her involvement in the economics profession, on the other hand, seems fleeting. Alexander earned a Ph.D. degree, sought employment in economics

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but did not find it, and worked as an actuary for a short time before pursuing legal studies. The Alexander papers suggest that Alexander all but abandoned the economics profession after 1923,¹ although at least one of the books in the Alexander collection suggests that 30 years after obtaining the Ph.D., she maintained at least a passing interest in economic issues.²

Why did Alexander abandon economics? According to her daughter, Rae Alexander-Minter, "there was no way for her to make a living in the profession." Alexander-Minter indicates that her mother did not look back and expressed no regrets about her career, but worked hard at her law practice and at maintaining her family. Indeed, at her peak, Alexander had one of the largest divorce practices in Philadelphia.³

While her withdrawal from the economics profession may not have been a personal tragedy for Alexander, the fact that she did not continue her work in economics seems a missed opportunity for her, for the economics profession, and for the body of economic knowledge that pertains to African-Americans. My goal in this essay is to probe the nature of that missed opportunity, both through discussion of the major example of her economics work, the doctoral dissertation, and through speculation about ways she may have followed up on the dissertation, given her interests.

I. Black Migration and Consumption in Philadelphia, 1916–18

According to Philip Foner and Ronald Lewis (1989), the "machinery of segregation" had been installed in the South by the beginning of the twentieth century. "Economic intimidation, violence, and lynching"

suggested to blacks that the South had no future for them. In addition, the early twentieth century was an economically devastating period in the South, with agriculture plagued by flooding, an epidemic of boll weevils, and other hardships. As the South declined, the North and Middle West developed industrially, especially with demand stimulated by the production needs of World War I. As white men went to war, black men moved North to replace them in industry. "The Great Migration," a significant exodus of black workers from the South, took place in the second decade of the twentieth century, triggered both by hardship in the South and by new opportunities in the North.

Between 1890 and 1915 in Chicago, for example, the black population grew from less than 15,000 to more than 50,000 (Allan Spear, 1967). Similar population jumps took place in other industrial centers, including Philadelphia. Alexander's dissertation, "The Standard of Living of Negro Families in Philadelphia" (henceforth referred to as NMF), looks in detail at this migration in Philadelphia, both from a macro and a micro perspective.

Alexander documents the labor shortage in Philadelphia, and discussed industrial efforts to attract black workers to manufacturing sites. NMF discusses the living conditions for migrant families, conditions Alexander describes as deplorable. She goes on to detail the civic response to poor housing conditions, on the part of the black church, the black middle class, and whites. Some of the racial conflicts that took place because of migration are detailed by Alexander, mainly to place the issue of migration into a sociopolitical context, and to develop research questions and pose hypotheses for her dissertation.

"Was the migrant to Philadelphia able to adapt himself to the environment of an industrial economy?" she asks. "Did his presence help or hinder the racial condition of the city?" Alexander asserts that the standard of living maintained by a people is an index of the extent to which they have adapted themselves to a given environment. She proposes to analyze the incomes and expenditures of a group of migrant families

¹Telephone conversation between Mark Lloyd, Director of University of Pennsylvania Archives and Records center and myself, September 21, 1990.

²According to Potterfield (p. 229): Among the 22 miscellaneous books included in the joint papers of Raymond Pace Alexander and Sadie T. M. Alexander was *Away From Freedom: The Revolt of the College Economists*, edited by Orval Watts in 1952.

³Personal interview with Rae Alexander-Minter, December 10, 1990.

to measure standards of living and “judge the degree of adaptation.”

Thus, Alexander set the tone for doing a cross-sectional consumption survey of black migrant families. Over a 2-month period, Alexander visited 100 families in Philadelphia’s twenty-ninth ward. Using a detailed questionnaire, she asked about origin, family structure, labor market status, unemployment, and household expenses, including rent, utilities, church, insurance, tobacco, alcohol, carfare, and savings. In a manner reminiscent of contemporary dissertations, Alexander discusses both her research methodology and the accuracy of her data before analyzing results.

The results of Alexander’s dissertation provide fascinating information about expenditure patterns, and also reveal her familiarity with federal and municipal data on household incomes and consumption patterns, and theories of consumption and spending. NMF also reveals Alexander’s penchant for detail and accuracy, as well as a good eye for reporting of the minute aspects of migrant lives. Discussing expenditures on heat, for example, Alexander expanded the discussion to deal with families who rented rooms where landlords provided heat and ventilation and health aspects of these rentals. She concluded that many of these dwellings “were unfit for families.”

NMF reports many of the economic inefficiencies that migrant families were forced to endure. “The average price paid for renting one room was \$163 per year, \$6.05 less than average price of renting a house of four rooms,” writes Alexander. She adds that renting a home increased income earning potential since so many renters took in lodgers. Noticeably absent from this discussion, however, was an acknowledgement of the institutional forces that forced black migrant families into inefficient economic arrangements.

Alexander’s discussion of migrant spending provided information about the culture and lifestyles of black migrants. She details information about health and the use of free clinics, the financial ties among extended families, and savings patterns, including participation in benevolent societies and church thrift clubs. Alexander con-

cludes the discussion of expenditures by comparing black migrant expenditure patterns with those posited by consumption theorists and those measured by the war labor board. Essentially, she found that black migrant families behaved in the same way Engel theorized they would. The percentage of income spent on food fell as income increased. The percentage of income spent on clothing stayed the same with increasing income. The percentage of income spent on sundries increased as income increased. In a result that differed from Engel’s theory, expenditures on rent, fuel, and light decreased as income rose.

After analyzing black migrant budgets and expenditures, Alexander developed a suggested budget. In the context of this discussion, especially as it relates to housing, she dealt with supply and segregation issues and indicated that “a two story brick house, fitted with tub, washstand, and toilet” might be scarce for blacks because “the Negro population of Philadelphia increased without an equal increase in housing.” Alexander put off issues of housing availability for the concluding chapter of her dissertation.

Armed with data about actual and suggested spending, Alexander asks two questions. “Do black migrant families earn enough to have fair standards of living, as defined by published reports?” “Do black migrant families choose to spend their money in ways to attain a fair standard of living?” She notes that 64 percent of all families had a sufficient income to provide a fair standard of living, though the primary breadwinner’s earnings were enough to provide a fair standard in only 41 percent of cases. She further indicates that some of the families able to afford a fair standard of living do not attain such standards because of “unwise” spending.

In this context, Alexander deals with issues of class and migration in distinguishing segments of the black community from each other. She notes that family size, “ignorance resulting from unwise spending” (insurance spending is especially targeted here), and racial prejudice were all factors preventing black migrant families from attaining a fair standard of living. She deals with both institutional barriers to fair living standards

("Recreation appeared seldom in his budget, for the Negro was admitted to few places where it was offered"), and individual barriers (such as lack of education). Alexander concludes by suggesting that the status of the black migrant can be improving by the "Negro businessman," the black church, and the city, which she says "has the responsibility of seeing that at least adequate housing is secured."

II. Missed Opportunity: Beyond Negro Migrant Families

Alexander's doctoral dissertation illustrates the perception, sensitivity, racial concern, and ability of a young upper middle-class black woman to use her professional skills to tackle a contemporary racial issue. Her dissertation is a case study that reveals institutional aspects of racial segregation in Philadelphia, as well as confirms the consumption theories of the time. It also reveals Alexander's middle-class biases, for example, in her use of terms like "unwise purchases" and her remark that she does not advocate the consumption of alcohol, Prohibition or not. On the other hand, in her concluding chapter Alexander reveals herself both as an advocate for black self-help ("churches could help to alleviate the housing problem by building houses instead of expensive church edifices") and as an advocate of government economic involvement in the housing market.

In thinking of the missed opportunity revealed by Alexander's dissertation, I think about the work that Abram Harris did on black business development, Oliver Cox's work on class, the W.E.B. DuBois Atlanta University studies, and D. Parke Gibson's books on black consumer patterns. Given her interest and ability, Alexander might have followed in any of those directions or, indeed, continued to look at black family and migration patterns both through further case studies and from a macroeconomic perspective. Because Alexander discussed so many possible areas for further research in her dissertation, one can posit that, given the opportunity, she would have had a productive and significant research career.

Indeed, it is possible to speculate that had Alexander pursued her research interests, given her long involvement with the Urban League, we might have seen the earlier production of titles like "The State of Black America," which was first produced in 1975 (John Jacob, 1991). And, given the opportunity to teach, what kinds of students might Alexander have nurtured, and how many other economists would have tackled socioeconomic issues of migration, consumption, housing availability, health care access, and insurance availability?

Alexander's dissertation suggests that the young economist might have taken quite a different career path after she earned her Ph.D. had there only been opportunities for her in her profession of first choice. While the economics profession's loss was the legal profession's gain, Alexander might well have made a significant contribution to economics, given the opportunity.

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