

Philanthropy and Cleveland's African-American Community

Adrienne Lash Jones

While the pivotal role of philanthropy and individual philanthropists is most often included in studies of African American history, as part of an examination of forces that helped to shape black social and institutional life, rarely is philanthropy itself the focus of study. Similarly, the emerging literature on the history of philanthropy rarely focuses on topics in African-American history as part of the complex social history of America. Unfortunately, this discrepancy has resulted in misinterpretations about the history of African-American experience, and the importance of the relationship of African-Americans to the history of philanthropy in this nation. Emphasis on the importance of white philanthropic activity on behalf of blacks (which has indeed been considerable), has tended to under-emphasize the philanthropic initiatives of blacks in their own behalf. Thus, the participation of black Americans in the philanthropic life of the larger society remains to be explored.

In order to reassess the history of black participation as both donors and recipients, it is critical to challenge modern conceptualizations and definitions of philanthropy. As well, it is helpful to re-examine the arbitrary categories of benevolence which have had the effect of excluding many of the ways of giving which are traditional within the African-American community. Presumably, because their contributions are likely to be combinations of individual and organizational voluntarism, and/or monetary or material gifts of relatively small value whose beneficiaries are more clearly identified with the donors, there has been a presumption that there is no benefit to the larger society. However, by understanding such practices of intraracial philanthropy as occurs through churches, fraternal organizations, etc., as well as other forms of giving which cannot be quantified and accounted for in conventional ways, we can better interpret the important role of benevolence in the African-American experience.

Several examples of the tradition of philanthropy in Cleveland's African-American community will be given. Beginning with the period before the Civil War, when the abolition of slavery, and aid for ex-slaves was the focus for their charitable activity, through the Reconstruction and urban migration periods, to the more modern era of organized philanthropy, we will find that this tradition has been maintained.