

The Great Migration

An Online Professional Development Seminar



The Immigrants Arrived in Great Numbers, Jacob Lawrence

James Grossman

Executive Director
American Historical Association

AMERICA *in* **CLASS**[®]

from the National Humanities Center

GOALS

- To understand the significance of the Great Migration to broad changes in twentieth-century America
- To appreciate the process of migration and its impact on African American life in the United States
- To introduce fresh material and approaches for use with students

FROM THE FORUM

Challenges, Issues, Questions

- What is the relationship between Reconstruction and the Great Migration?
- What was different about the black South in 1916 vs. that of 1876?
- Can we speak of "the North" as a singular category in the same way we speak of "the South"?
- What kind of challenges did the migrants face when they arrived in the North?
- Why did African Americans living in the North discriminate against the newcomers?

FROM THE FORUM Challenges, Issues, Questions

- How long did it take for African American newcomers to get established in the North?
- Did Northern cities seek certain skill sets based on their developing economies?
- Were African Americans able to open new businesses? What financial assistance was available to starting new business and purchasing homes?
- What impact did the Great Migration have on Northern cities—their labor markets, economies, school systems, housing patterns, and politics?
- Why did so many intellectuals and artists migrate to Harlem?

The Great Migration

FROM THE FORUM Challenges, Issues, Questions

- How does the northward migration of African Americans in the early twentieth century compare with other migrations within and into the United States, and specifically, how does it compare the northward migration of people from the Caribbean, Central, and South America in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries?
- Why is the Great Migration relatively unknown to well-educated American teachers?

The Great Migration



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Research Interests:
American South, Slavery, U.S. Social History,
American Labor History, Urban History,
Higher Education

*Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and
the Great Migration (1989)*

*A Chance to Make Good: African
Americans, 1900 – 1929 (1997)*

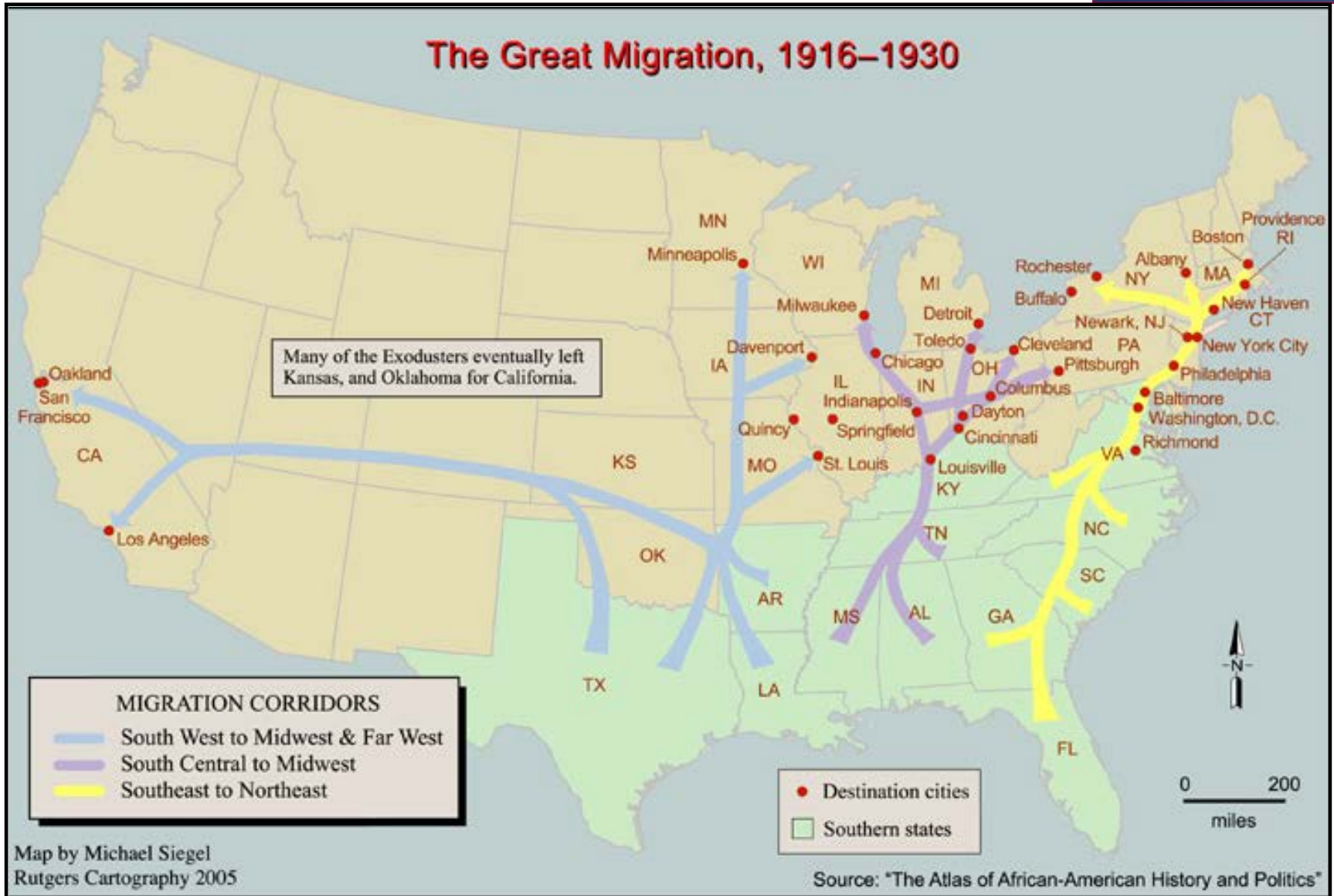
Co-editor, *The Encyclopedia of Chicago*

The Great Migration

To begin:

Why is the Great Migration relatively unknown to well-educated American teachers and students?

The Great Migration



The Great Migration

- I. The South on the eve of the Great Migration
- II. The Dynamics of Migration
- III. The North

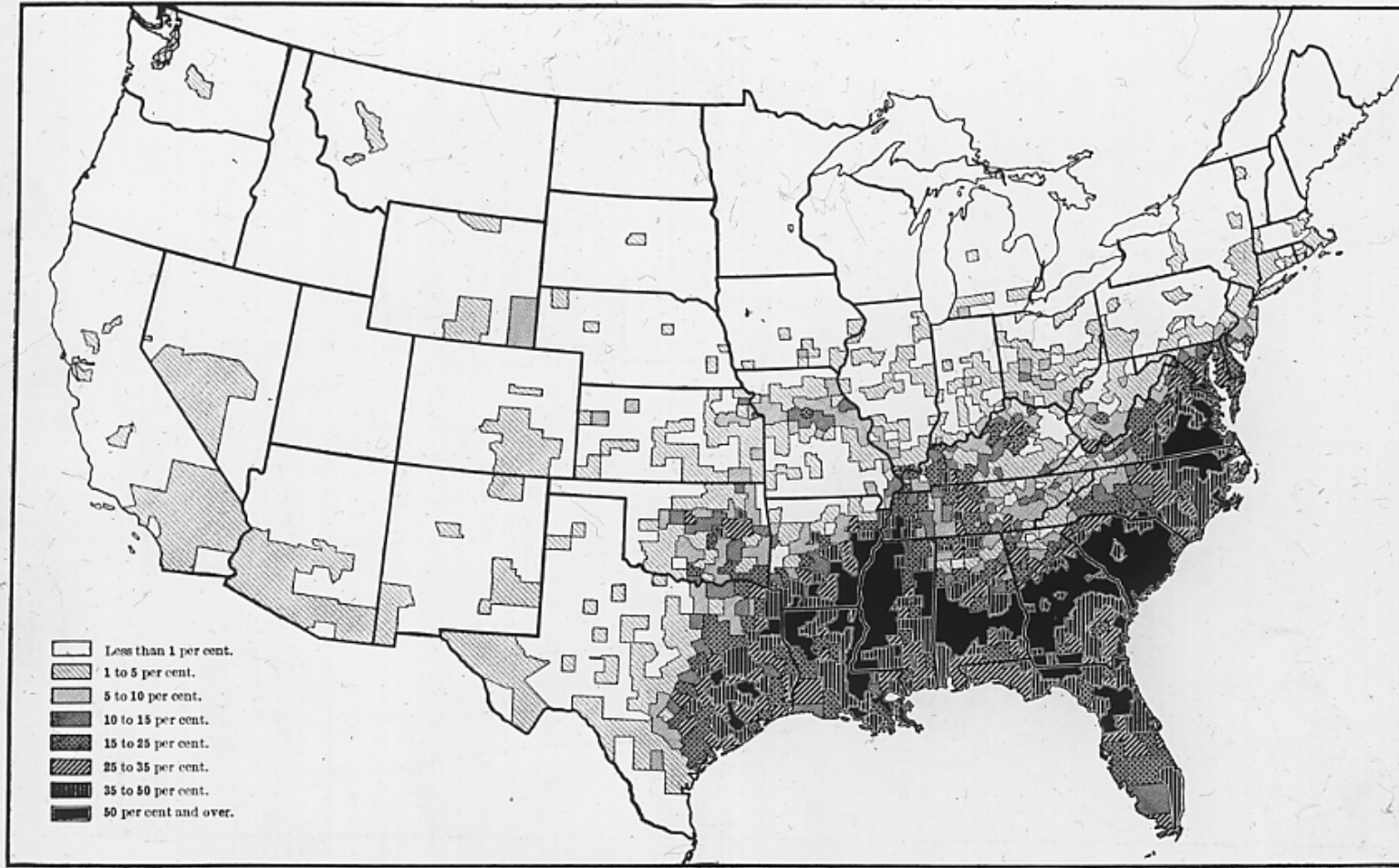
What was different about the black South in 1916 v. the black South of 1876?

The South on the Eve of The Great Migration

Discussion Question

How can we explain the distribution of African Americans in the South in 1910?

PER CENT OF NEGROES IN TOTAL POPULATION, BY COUNTIES: 1910



The South on the Eve of the Great Migration

“There was one thing that the white South feared more than negro dishonesty, ignorance, and incompetency, and that was negro honesty, knowledge, and efficiency.”

—W.E.B. DuBois, *The Negro*, 130

“Whenever the colored man prospered too fast in this country under the old rulins, they worked to figure to cut you down, cut your britches off you. So, it might have been to his way of thinking that it weren’t no use in climbin too fast; weren’t no use in climbin slow, neither, if they was goin to take everything you worked for when you got to high”

—Alabama sharecropper Ned Cobb, recalling his father’s approach to life in rural Alabama in the late 19th century (Theodore Rosengarten, *All God’s Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw*, 27)

“If they try to save any money, the whites will lay them off for two days or three days out of each week.”

—Journalist Henry Reed, describing conditions for African American workers in Pittsburg, Texas (*Chicago Defender*, May 6, 1916)

Discussion Questions

Why would white southerners in the era of Jim Crow not want their African American employees and tenants to work hard and be ambitious?

How did patterns of black migration before 1916 reflect patterns of race relations and economic opportunity?

Letters to the *Chicago Defender*

Discussion Questions

1. Who are these people? What do we know about them?
2. Why are they writing these letters? How can we evaluate the letters as sources?
3. What might one expect their reaction to be to what they find in the North?

The Dynamics of Migration

Houston, Texas, April 20, 1917.

Dear Sir: wanted to leave the South and Go and Place where a man will Be any thing Except A Ker I thought would write you for Advise As where would be a Good Place for a Comporedly young man That want to Better his Standing who has a very Promising young Family.

I am 30 years old and have Good Expearence in Freight Handler and Can fill Position from Truck to Agt.

would like Chicago or Philadelphia But I dont Care where so long as I Go where a man is a man

Discussion Question

What does he mean by “a man is a man”?

The Dynamics of Migration

“I am a married man a member of the church.”

“I am a high class churchman and business man.”

“not any of us has any husbands.”

“No children, not a relative living”

Discussion Questions

Why do so many letters mention this kind of information?

How did prospective migrants decide what to include in their letters?

The Dynamics of Migration

“A steady drift of negroes has started Northward, attracted by reports of the big wages paid there.” —New Orleans Times Picayune, August 22, 1916

“A colored man of Sumter, S.C., says: “The immediate occasion of the migration is, of course, the opportunity in the North, now at least open to us, for industrial betterment. The real causes are the conditions which we have had to bear because there was not escape.” —W.E.B. DuBois, “The Migration of Negroes,” The Crisis (June 1917)

Discussion Questions

What is the difference between causes of migration as a historical phenomenon, and the motivations that stimulated men and women to move?”

1. Why does that difference matter?
2. Reading the letters, are “pushes” and “pulls” the best way to conceptualize the impulses for the Great Migration? How do we separate a “push” from a “pull”?
3. Do you think white southerners understand why African American were leaving the South?
4. Did Mary DeBardeleben understand why Africans were leaving the South?

The Dynamics of Migration

“Charleston, S. C., April 29, 1917.

Dear Sir: I saw your add in the Chicago Defender where you wanted laborers and I taugth that this would be a grand oppotunity for me to better my present conditions so I taugth I would write you and ask you would you be kind enough as to give me a job dear sir. I am a single man and would be willing to do any kind of work, dear sir would you be kind enough as to forward me a transportation and I would come write away so please do the best you can for me. There is but little down here to be gotten dear sir will you kindly grant me that favor. Hopeing to receive a favorable answer.”

—One of the “Letters of Negro Migrants” compiled by Emmett J. Scott, 1919

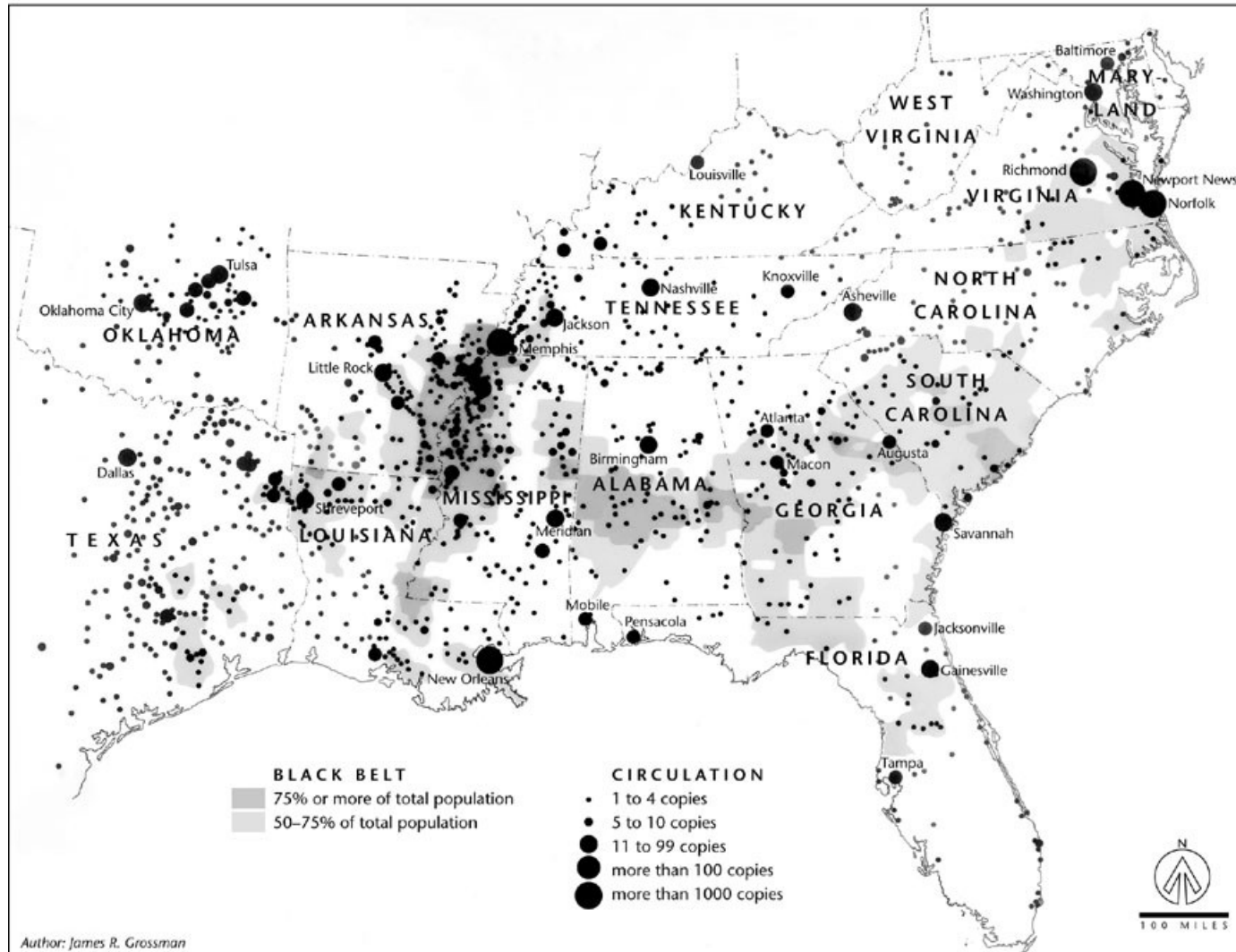
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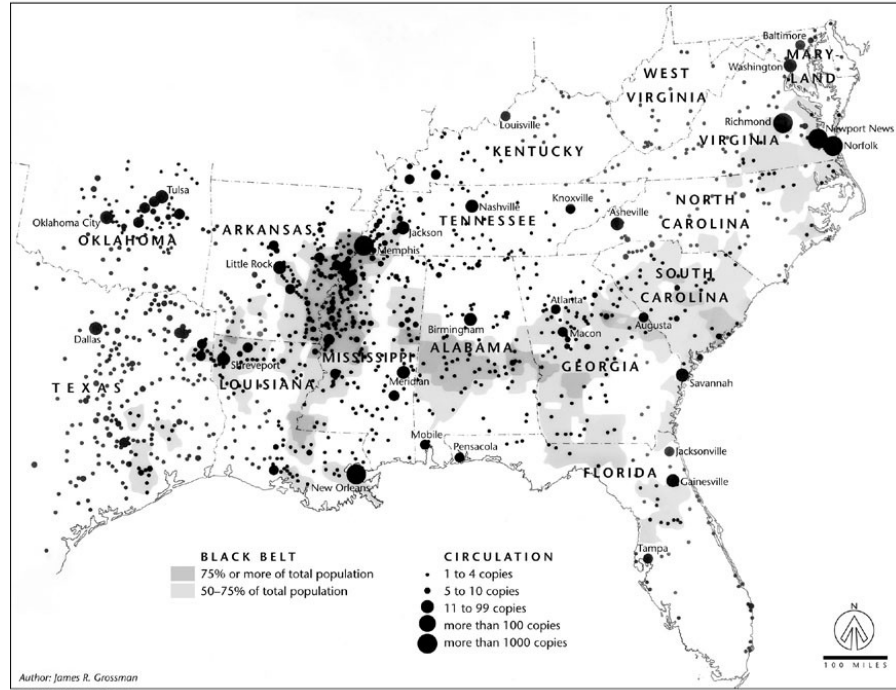
The Dynamics of Migration

Southern Distribution of the *Chicago Defender*



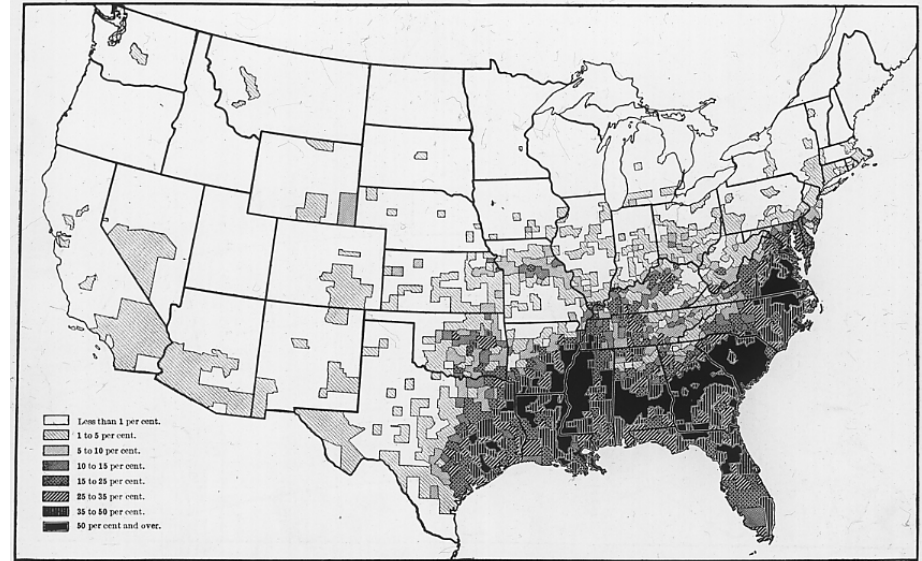
The Dynamics of Migration

Southern Distribution of the *Chicago Defender*



Distribution of the *Chicago Defender*

PER CENT OF NEGROES IN TOTAL POPULATION, BY COUNTIES: 1910



The Black Belt, 1910

Discussion Question

Based on the various documents in the assignments, what was the role of the *Chicago Defender* in the Great Migration?

The Dynamics of Migration

Based on your secondary reading about earlier migrations, is the Great Migration largely a change in direction from early patterns?

Or is there something new going on here beyond direction?

The Dynamics of Migration

“Mr. H—— Hattiesburg, Miss.

Chicago, Illinois, 11/13/17.

Dear M——: Yours received sometime ago and found all well and doing well, hope you and family are well. I got my things alright the other day and they were in good condition. I am all fixed now and living well. I certainly appreciate what you done for us and I will remember you in the near future.

M——, old boy, I was promoted on the first of the month I was made first assistant to the head carpenter when he is out of the place I take everything in charge and was raised to \$95. a month. You know I know my stuff. Whats the news generally around H'burg? I should have been here 20 years ago. I just begin to feel like a man. It's a great deal of pleasure in knowing that you have got some privilege My children are going to the same school with the whites and I dont have to umble to no one. I have registered—Will vote the next election and there isnt any 'yes sir' and 'no sir'—its all yes and no and Sam and Bill. Florine says hello and would like very much to see you. All joins me in sending love to you and family. How is times there now? Answer soon, from your friend and bro.”

—One of the “Letters of Negro Migrants” compiled by Emmett J. Scott, 1919

Discussion Questions

1. What is this migrant proud of?
2. What would you want to look at in a northern city in 1916 to predict whether black Southerners were likely to find what they were seeking? What can we learn from Charles Johnson’s interview summaries and the two family narratives (The Negro in Chicago) in the assigned reading?
3. What sources would a historian explore to find out whether black southerners felt that they made the right decision in migrating North?

We Call Attention to Some Things Which Should Be Observed by Our People

Don't use vile language in public places.

Don't act discourteously to other people in public places.

Don't allow yourself to be drawn into street brawls.

Don't use liberty as a license to do as you please.

Don't take the part of law breakers, be they men, women or children.

Don't make yourself a public nuisance.

Don't encourage gamblers, disreputable women or men to ply their business any time or place.

Don't congregate in crowds on the streets to the disadvantage of others passing along.

Continued—

Discussion Questions

As a historian, what can you learn from this list published by the Defender? It's editor, Robert Abbott, had moved to Chicago from Georgia in the 1890s, and started the Defender in 1905. The Chicago Urban League handed out cards in Chicago with a similar message.

We Call Attention to Some Things Which Should Be Observed by Our People

Don't spend your time hanging around saloon doors or poolrooms.

Don't live in insanitary houses, or sleep in rooms without proper ventilation.

Don't violate city ordinances relative to health conditions.

Don't allow children to beg on the streets.

Don't allow boys to steal from or assault peddlers going their rounds during the day.

Don't be a beer can rusher or permit children to do such service.

Don't abuse or violate the confidence of those who give you employment.

Don't leave your job when you have a few dollars in your pocket.

Don't work for less wages than being paid people doing same kind of work.

Continued—

Discussion Questions

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We Call Attention to Some Things Which Should Be Observed by Our People

Don't be made a tool or strike breaker for any corporation or firm.

Don't allow buffet flats or rooms rented with privileges to be conducted in your neighborhood.

Don't allow children under 15 years of age to run the streets after 9 o'clock p. m.

Don't get intoxicated and go out on the street insulting women and children and make a beast of yourself — some one may act likewise with your wife and children.

Don't undermine other people by taking from them their work.

Don't appear on the street with old dust caps, dirty aprons and ragged clothes.

Don't throw garbage in the back yard or alley or keep dirty front yards.

Don't attempt to make an express wagon of street cars.

Don't forget street car conductors are bound by rules of the car company which the law compels them to obey.

Don't oppose police officers in the discharge of their duty; you should be the one to assist in keeping the peace.

—Chicago Defender, May 17, 1917

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As a historian, what can you learn from this list published by the Defender? It's editor, Robert Abbott, had moved to Chicago from Georgia in the 1890s, and started the Defender in 1905. The Chicago Urban League handed out cards in Chicago with a similar message.



“People We Can Get along Without” --Leslie Rogers, *Chicago Defender*

The fellow who, for reasons known only to himself, thinks he is too good to work.

The cabaret hounds who think of nothing but bright lights, jazz bands and the merry tinkle of wine glasses.

The slouchy fellow who, through lack of pride, makes himself a nuisance with his unkempt appearance in public places.

Women who haven't self-respect enough to put on proper clothing before going to market.

Those who think an open window facing on the street is the proper place for airing one's feet.

Scantily attired women who lean out the windows and engage in idle gossip.

On black attitudes towards whites; this is on northern whites

“The attitude of Northern white folks, in particular, puzzles and incenses him. Very often he feels that they are more dangerous to him than the Southerners. Here are folks who yawp continuously about liberty, justice, equality, and democracy, and whoop with indignation every time a Senegambian is incinerated below the Potomac or the Belgians burn another village in the Congo, but toward the Negro in their midst they are quite as cruel as the Southern crackers. They are wont to shout, in their liberal moments, that the Negro is as good as they are -- as if that were a compliment! -- and to swear by all the gods that they want to give him a square deal and a chance in the world, but when he approaches them for a job they offer him a mop and pail or a bellhop's uniform, no matter what his education and training may be. And except in isolated instances they see that he remains permanently in the lowly position they have given him.”

Discussion Questions

Many of our participants have asked about ways of thinking about the Great Migration in the context of current affairs. Consider the history of African American activism beginning with the Great Migration, the history of efforts by African Americans to “better their conditions”: what can you glean from our materials that speak to the concepts of equal opportunity, racial integration, and black power?

Rudolph Fisher, in his short story “City of Refuge,” captures the sense of liberation and expectation that characterized the first moments. His protagonist, King Solomon Gillis has just arrived in New York and is emerging from the subway at the corner of Lenox Avenue and 135th Street in Harlem:

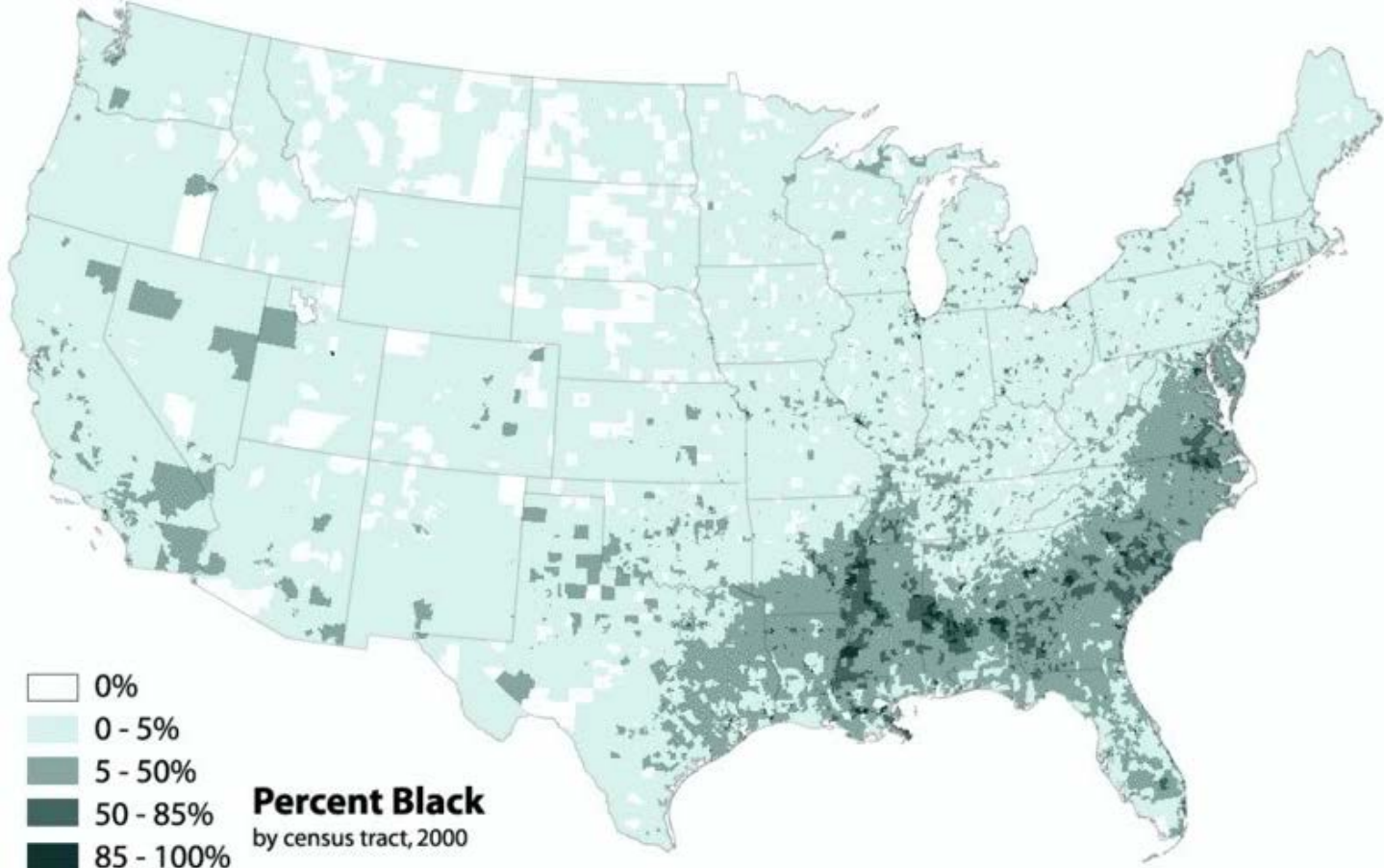
“Casting about for direction, the tall newcomer's glance caught inevitably on the most conspicuous thing in sight, a magnificent figure in blue that stood in the middle of the crossing and blew a whistle and waved great white-gloved hands. The Southern Negro's eyes opened wide; his mouth opened wider. If the inside of New York had mystified him, the outside was amazing him. For there stood a handsome, brass-buttoned giant directing the heaviest traffic Gillis had ever seen; halting unnumbered tons of automobiles and trucks and wagons and pushcarts and street-cars; holding them at bay with one hand while he swept similar tons peremptorily on with the other; ruling the wise crossing with supreme self-assurance; and he, too, was a Negro!

Yet most of the vehicles that leaped or crouched at his bidding carried white passengers. One of these overdrove bounds a few feet and Gillis heard the officer's shrill whistle and gruff reproof, saw the driver's face turn red and his car draw back like a threatened pup. It was beyond belief -- impossible.”

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Final slide.

Thank you