

Black Migration

African-Americans journey north searching for prosperity and freedom

OTHER CHANGING FACES 1 2

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By Gerald Early, Professor of English and Afro-American Studies at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri

NPR's All Things Considered: Review of Up South

Audio Feature

ATC Host Robert Siegel speaks with Adero Malaika, editor of *Up South*, a collection of documents and stories by and about African-American migrants. Included are several readings from the book.
(Courtesy NPRJazz.org)

In his essay *The New Negro*, which appeared in the seminal anthology of the same name that he edited in 1925, Howard philosophy professor Alain Locke wrote about the changing nature and attitude of African-Americans since the early days of the 20th century. "A main change has been, of course," explained Locke, "that shifting of the Negro population which has made the Negro problem no longer exclusively or even predominantly Southern." For Locke, this was the main difference between the "Old Negro" and the "New Negro." The Old Negro was southern, rural, agricultural, tied to the past and to a feudal order of white political control and racist stereotype. The "New Negro," totally a result of a migration that had been occurring for the last 10 or so years before Locke wrote his essay, was northern, urban, industrial, freed from his past, more militant and assertive. The Harlem Renaissance — a complex set of political, cultural, and artistic movements involving a variety of blacks from Marcus Garvey and A. Philip Randolph to Charles S. Johnson and Jessie Fauset, black organizations from the Universal Negro Improvement Association to the Urban League, from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to the African Blood Brotherhood that centered mostly in New York in the 1920s and early 1930s — was built not only on the fact, but the mythical significance, of black migration in the United States. So important had this migration become that it changed the way black people saw themselves and their future as Americans. The mythical significance of this migration had even penetrated white popular culture; in 1926, Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, two white men, started a radio program called *Sam N Henry* about two black men who had left the rural South to seek a better life in a northern city. By 1929, the show became *Amos N Andy*, one of the most popular radio programs of all time.

The most immediate cause of this migration from the South was the First World War, which shut off the flow of cheap European immigrant labor in 1914. By 1915, with war production in full swing in the United States, the

need for industrial workers was acute. Two unexpected and heretofore unwanted sources were tapped — white women and black southerners. Recruiting agents representing various northern industrial concerns went south to lure African-Americans north. White southerners did not greet them with open arms, and some, if they were discovered, were run out of town. The *Chicago Defender*, the most widely read black newspaper in the South, urged southern blacks to come north by publishing letters from newly transplanted blacks saying that life was better in the North, and by writing editorials that praised the North and condemned the South. When the United States entered the war in 1916, the labor shortage became even more severe, and the demand for black workers escalated. Work in northern industry paid more than agricultural work. Men could earn up to $2.50 a day in a Chicago meat packinghouse, or as much as $5.00 a day on an assembly line in the auto factories of Detroit. These rates of pay far exceeded anything African-Americans could make in the South. Even black women could make $2.00 a day as domestics in a Northern city — as much as twice or more as doing the same work in the South. Despite the fact that the cost of living in Northern cities was higher than in the South, blacks felt that the higher salaries more than compensated for the difference. What intensified the economic pull of the North was the fact that the South had been enduring some terrible growing seasons in the early 1910s, with severe blights caused by boll weevils and major crop damage caused by flooding. Also, the price of cotton had dropped sharply on the world market in the 1910s.

Resurgence of the KKK

Seemingly, the North also offered greater opportunities and more freedom. The North offered fewer racial restrictions because Jim Crow was less blatant, and legalized segregation not nearly so widely enforced. Moreover, in the North there were far fewer lynchings, a form of ritualized violence in the South that helped whites maintain social and political control through overt terrorism that reached its zenith in the 1890s, but was still practiced often enough in the 1910s for national black leadership to call for a federal anti-lynching bill. The resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan after the release of D. W. Griffith's immensely popular and artistically acclaimed *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915 — an epic Civil War film that portrayed the Klan as heroic, and particularly after World War I — surely had to intensify the miasma of fear, loathing, and impending violence that permeated the south, and gave blacks more reason to leave. (During this period of resurgence, the Klan was enjoying its greatest growth in the Middle West.) Blacks were commonly run off their land in the South through both legal and extra-legal means called "white-capping." They were often robbed of their wages, in debt to the plantation store, denied equal access to a decent public education despite the fact that they paid taxes, according to their income, at the same rate as whites. They were also more likely to be imprisoned for petty crimes than whites, where, through the convict-lease system, they could be used as an uncompensated labor force.

But all of this, by itself, may not have been sufficient to induce the level of migration that occurred between 1915 and 1930. It must be remembered, after all, that there was also terrible racial violence in the North. Indeed, some of the worst racial violence in America occurred in places like East St. Louis in 1917 and Chicago in 1919, industrial cities that African-Americans had migrated to. Indeed, the summer of 1919 saw some of the worst racial violence in American history, and most of it was not in the South. Blacks were largely confined to certain sections of these cities where they lived in chronic poverty, overcrowded, unhealthy conditions, and with less access to public services. Although blacks received better health care in the North than in the South, they sustained mortality rates that were far higher than for any other group. So the North was not as much of a lure, after first blush, for many blacks as some might think, although in some respects it was clearly an improvement. Locke, in his essay, argued, "The wash and rush of this human tide on the beach line of the Northern city centers is to be explained primarily in terms of a new

vision of opportunity, of social and economic freedom, of a spirit to seize, even in the face of an extortionate and heavy toll, a chance for the improvement of conditions. With each successive wave of it, the movement of the Negro becomes more and more a mass movement toward the larger and the more democratic chance — in the Negro's case a deliberate flight not only form countryside to city, but from medieval America to modern."

Whatever the welter of reasons, blacks left the South in large numbers. Between a half-million and a million southern blacks came north between 1914 and 1919, and another million between 1920 and 1930. New York's black population grew from 91,709 in 1910 to 152,467 by 1920, and to 328,000 by 1930. Chicago's jumped from 44,103 to 109,458 by 1920 and to 234,000 by 1930. St. Louis's black population increased from 45,000 in 1910 to 94,000 in 1930. Cleveland's went from 8,500 in 1910 to 72,000 in 1930. Detroit's skyrocketed over 600 percent during the war years and another 200 percent during the 1920s. Philadelphia's went from 84,500 in 1910 to 220,600 in 1930.

A Complex Movement

But black migration must be understood as a more complex move than simply blacks going from the South to the North. The majority of black people still lived in the South in 1930s. The predominant pattern was for blacks to move from rural to urban, and so many, during these years, left the countryside for the southern cities. Some, like author Richard Wright, went on from places like Memphis, where he had migrated from Mississippi, to Chicago; others did not. This pattern of moving from rural to urban fit the general pattern of population shift for the United States as a whole, as whites, from the Progressive Era onward, were living the country and agriculture for more urban settings.

It must also be remembered that this migration of 1915 to 1930 was not the first important migration of African-Americans since the end of the Civil War. When Reconstruction ended, many southern blacks — thousands of them, called Exodusters — left the South and migrated to all-black towns in the middle west, particularly Kansas and Oklahoma. This was a rural-to-rural shift, and did not involve nearly as many people but significant in many ways nonetheless, revealing that blacks were, even then, looking for the main chance and were in a constant quest to improve their situation, as many people were, by moving somewhere else. Clearly, a concern about black migration from the South was present in the 1890s, several years before the migration started. Otherwise, Booker T. Washington, founder of Tuskegee Institute in 1881, and the most powerful black leader of the 1890s and early 1900s, would not have found it necessary to reassure his white audience in his famous Atlanta Exposition speech of 1895 that blacks were southerners, that they wished to remain in the South, and that they saw the South as the place that gave them the best chance for group success.

The Great Migration in Literature

Migration of all sorts has been a major theme in black literature. The slave narratives, written by fugitive slaves between 1830 and 1860, were all about the movement South to North, or from slavery to freedom. Among other things, they could all be considered migration narratives. This is because American geography had such obvious political implications for blacks since the early 1800s when the North abandoned slavery.

In the years after the Civil War, migration is an important theme in a range of literature, from James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, from Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, and to a lesser extent, *Native Son* to William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge*, from James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* to Toni Morrison's *Paradise*. The geographical movement of black characters and its sociological, psychological, and political implications is probably one of

the most persistent themes in all of black literature, and is hardly surprising for a group of people for whom a major form of their persecution for a good deal of their history was their inability to move freely in a country that valued mobility almost as an inalienable right.

The Impact on Jazz

The shift in black population between 1915 and 1930 certainly had a major impact on the development of jazz. First, jazz was largely an urban music to begin with. It required access to machine-made instruments, some network of organization for musical instruction, and places where people could go and hear this music. The spread of blacks to other cities simply intensified the spread of the music. The increase in black income as blacks became more urban meant that blacks could afford to buy records and phonographs. It should come as no surprise that race records — that is, records made by blacks for a black audience — came into their own as an industry category in the 1920s, when the migration was at its height.

The urbanization of blacks also meant a greater level of sophistication and cultural exposure that would further expand not only the audience for jazz, but the development of jazz itself as black musicians became more knowledgeable about music, about art in general, and more self-aware about what they were doing as musicians. Cultural trends and innovations in the United States are started in the major cities — not, generally, in small towns or rural areas. Cities, after all, among other things, exist to produce culture. In this sense, when Louis Armstrong, jazz's first genius, migrated to Chicago in 1922, it might be said that jazz as a modern music, jazz as a modernist art, was born. It is almost impossible to think that jazz would have become the rage (or scourge, depending on one's point of view at the time) of the nation had this black migration, within the larger population shift of the United States itself, not taken place.