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## Where the fruit grows, we'll start over: Rethinking the Great Migration's Limitless Impact

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Where the fruit grows, we'll start over:  
Rethinking the Great Migration's Limitless Impact

By Luna Flores-Ramirez

Bard Masters of Art in Teaching  
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### Synthesis Essay

At the turn of the 20th century, for the first and only time in American history, Southern Black-Americans emancipated themselves from the racial caste system of the South. These individuals and families searched for refuge across state lines, demanding freedom for themselves, and the generations that followed. This mass movement of people, known as the Great Migration, occurred between 1915 and 1970. This expansive history is often split between the migrations taking place prior to the end of the second World War and those that came after the war's end. The first Great Migration is said to begin in 1915; however, various historians presume that it likely began earlier. Nonetheless, 1915 marks the year when the first evidenced migration occurred, chronicled in the *Chicago Defender*.<sup>1</sup>

Prior to the Great Migration, in 1910, 90% of all Black Americans were living in the South.<sup>2</sup> However, as the *Chicago Defender* predicted, the promises of a better life in the North drew millions of Southerners to take a leap in demanding freedom and rejecting the Jim Crow Laws that defined the South. Between the start and end of the Great Migration an estimated 6.5 million Black-Americans migrated out of the South; historians have suggested that this number is likely conservative compared to the actual number which has proved impossible to calculate. A majority of these 6.5 million migrants left the South during what is known as the “second Great Migration” beginning in 1940.

Reasons or motivations to migrate have been categorized as “push” and “pull” factors. Thus, while circumstances in the South *pushed* individuals and families to search for dignified livelihoods, promises of jobs and security *pulled* migrants into new and unfamiliar cities in the

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<sup>1</sup> Marcia Chatelain, *Southside Girls: Growing Up in the Great Migration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Wilkerson, Isabel, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (Vintage Books, 2010), 10.



North and West. During the first migration which began in conjunction with World War I, men were being sent off to war at increasingly high rates, resulting in labor shortages in major cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburg, New York and Los Angeles. Men in the South began to respond to these labor shortages and opportunities for employment, promises of higher wages, better conditions and a life free of Jim Crow.

Jim Crow quickly followed the end of the Civil War, when the institution of slavery was officially abolished. Jim Crow replaced this institution and took control of the South and the people whose labor allowed the region to function. The laws of Jim Crow restricted every aspect of life in the South and would not surrender without War or in this case, a mass exodus of Black-Americans who knew the region could not function without them and they could not live within it. As they left the South, the sharecropping system that was developed after the Civil War began to disintegrate and new forms of labor were needed to support the economy as the migration continued and reached its peak around WWII.

People in the cities to which Black Southerners migrated considered Black and white race relations to be a problem confined to the South. With this migration, the North and West were forced to acknowledge their own racism and respond to an increasing population of individuals vulnerable to poverty and widespread discrimination. Many of these places, as we can imagine, responded in ways that exacerbated social inequality and instead of improving racism further ingrained it into the fabric of the nation. By 1954, in the supreme court case, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, the court ruled that racial segregation within schools was unconstitutional, ushering in the period in which schools became desegregated in a nation that was still vehemently anti-Black and in many ways ideologically more similar to the South than different.

In 1964, Congress passed the Civil Rights act and in 1967 the Supreme Court Declared miscegenation laws as unconstitutional. These laws passed in the 1950s and 1960s invalidated and put an end to the Jim Crow era. It should not go unnoticed that these laws were part of a Civil Rights movement that would not have been possible without the mass migration of Black-Americans from the South. With them they brought their own ideas of freedom, activism, right, wrong, and methods of organizing. As they migrated to new and unfamiliar territory, searching for a better life for themselves and their families, they unknowingly forged their visions of dignity into the new regions they now called home.

Scholars and historians interested in the Great Migration have produced a wide range of work that deal with the subject and provide new insights into this history. The following section of this essay will consider six of those studies. The six books under consideration here have pointed their attention to unique aspects that together tell an all encompassing history and separately tell distinct histories that look at the Great Migration through themes of gender, class, region, agriculture, religion, labor and more.

These authors have made deliberate choices on what to include and exclude in their writing, the source bases they drew from and the historiography lens in which their work lies. These decisions impact how readers view and remember the Great Migration. Furthermore, the authors whose works are being discussed in this essay have all produced their books at distinct moments in history. Their works draw from one another, at times contest one another's findings and more often than not improve upon them by adding their own interpretation, new information and newly discovered sources. These six authors point to distinct push and pull factors while some choose to focus primarily on these factors, seeking to pinpoint what initiated the Great Migration. Others, however, focus their research rather on the effects of this mass exodus, and

how it changed the fabric of America. Furthermore, their own identities arguably contributed to their urge or lack thereof to focus on specific themes such as gender, religion, agriculture or labor.

The two earliest books being examined, written by Nicholas Lemman (1991) and Donald Holley (2000), were published nearly a decade apart and pay great attention to the changing agricultural landscape of the South in the period following WWII. These two authors have seemingly similar arguments as well as central focus; however, their geographical interests as well as overall impact of the Great Migration they tell are disparate. The next book written by James Gregory (2005), attempts to tackle the largest framework in terms of individuals migrating, time frame and geographical focus. The three earliest books were all written by men while the latter three were written by Black-American women. These three women completely change the narrative of the Great Migration. Author and journalist Isabel Wilkerson brings the personal and emotional to the forefront while historian and professor Judith Weisenfeld dives deep into the ways religious racial movement gave Black migrants new and empowered racial identities. Lastly, Marcia Chatelain tells a story that is missing from all these accounts: the story of Black girls who migrated during the first half of the Great Migration.

This essay will look at and seek to explain how and why each of these authors take on a unique approach in their respective works on the Great Migration. In unpacking their distinct perspectives this essay will first look at the ways in which each monograph has a specific focus, time frame, geographical interest and concern with different actors. Next, I will look at the different sources used by each author. Examining sources this provides great insight into the individuals they credit and the themes they prioritize or ignore. Lastly, this essay will take into consideration each author's personal connection to the Great Migration, the year each work was

published, as well as their field (historian, journalist, professor etc) in an effort to unpack the different historiographical lens of their works.

**Monographs focus:**

The earliest book being considered was written in 1991 by Nicholas Lemann titled, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and how it Changed America*.<sup>3</sup> Lemman's work became the first historical text that looked in depth at the Great Migration occurring during and after World War II. His work was also the first to analyze the ways in which a switch from manual to machine labor changed the course of American history.

Lemman's work begins with a description of Clarksdale Mississippi in 1944, the year in which the first public demonstration of a functional cotton picking machine took place. The mechanization of cotton picking sets up the foundation for the remainder of the book which credits this invention to the mass exodus occurring in the years that followed. Although focusing on the “Second Great Migration”, Lemman first provides the reader with a detailed history of the Southern sharecropping system that emerged in the period following the Civil War. He asserts that the sharecropping system as well as Jim Crow was destroyed through the mechanization of cotton picking which gave rise to a mass exodus. Other authors here have since then paid attention to this phenomenon, some seeing it as the driving force behind the Great Migration and others viewing it as simply one of countless push or pull factors.

In Donald Holley's, *The Second Great Emancipation: The Mechanical Cotton Picker, Black Migration and How they Shaped the Modern South*<sup>4</sup> published in 2000, he addressed and challenged the work of Lemman. He states:

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<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Lemman, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992.)

<sup>4</sup> Donald L. Holley, *The Second Great Emancipation: The Mechanical Cotton Picker, Black Migration, and How They Shaped the Modern South* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000).

In recent literature on the Great Migration, mechanization has played the starring role as the villain of the drama. One version of this view depicts tractors as the villain of the drama...In *The Promised Land*, journalist Nicholas Lemann began his story of Mississippi migrants with an International Harvester demonstration on the Hopson plantation in 1944, conveying the message that the adoption of mechanical pickers underlay the dispossession of poor, defenseless people.<sup>5</sup>

Holley, instead of viewing the cotton picking machine as an invention that pushed Black Southerners to the North, sees the invention rather as a response to an already declining labor supply due to Black outmigration occurring in years prior. Holley stays clear of stating that the mechanization of cotton picking *pushed* Southerners out, yet his argument at points gets muddled and contradictory. His overall argument is weakened in moments when he makes claims such as “If it were not for the mechanical cotton picker, you might be picking cotton right now in the middle of a hot, dusty field in Arkansas instead of reading this book.”<sup>6</sup> Throughout Holley’s work he continues to argue that the mechanization of cotton picking freed workers, however, his use of data and his narrative shows that workers in fact freed themselves when they began leaving prior to this switch to mechanical labor.

The work of Lemmann and Holley each seek to explain the movement of individuals and families out of the rural South by looking at the fields they left behind; however, their geographical scope and focus as well as their overall arguments are distinct. Holley looks at the mechanization of cotton picking in direct relation to the changing economy and social structure of the Mississippi Delta. He is interested in how changes in labor were met with a population that chose to leave and how this changed the Southern landscape. Lemmann, however, argues that the

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<sup>5</sup> Holley, 166.

<sup>6</sup> Holley, xiii.

mechanization of cotton picking *pushed* large numbers of Southerners to the North, focusing on migrants from Clarksdale Mississippi to Chicago. His work then aims to show how this mass migration guided American leaders and politicians to enact the war on poverty programs developed in the 1960s.

Lemman's work, as journalist and author Isabel Wilkerson noted, does not acknowledge the migrations occurring far before this invention, or the fact that many people who left were not previously cottonpickers. In her work titled *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*<sup>7</sup>, journalist and Pulitzer prize winner, Isabel Wilkerson asserts:

For decades, it was argued that the Great Migration was triggered by changes in cotton farming: the boll weevil infestation of the 1920s and the early mechanical cotton harvester unveiled in the 1940s, But whatever cotton's role in the Migration, it could, at best, account for only the subset of migrants who were picking cotton in the first place. Changes in cotton farming could not account for the Great Migration as a whole or for the motivations of the people who came from Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, Western Texas, and Florida, for instance, where cotton was not the main industry but left for other reasons<sup>8</sup>

Wilkerson tells an emotional and inspiring story that credits individuals and families, their bravery and urgency, to the transformation and development of America. Instead of attempting to pinpoint what invention, event or individual sparked this mass movement, Wilkerson is instead concerned with bringing to life the circumstances that inspired millions to

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<sup>7</sup> Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Wilkerson, 533

leave, to dream of something better and will it into existence for themselves, their families and the generations that followed. Throughout Wilkerson's work, the reader begins to understand her argument: the Great Migration was a momentous and indisputably courageous movement of millions that forced the South to reckon with its past as well as force the cities they arrived in to attend to shifting demographics, politics, religion, culture and a new way of life. Furthermore, throughout her work she argues that "the Great Migration was an unrecognized immigration within this country."<sup>9</sup> . In addition to being unrecognized, Wilkerson shows how this movement was underreported, leaderless and unwarned. Rather, throughout the period in which the migrations took place, nearly every Black-American had a decision to make; to stay or go. Would they reject the caste system of the south that grew out of unmet promises from the end of the Civil War or would they attempt to remedy the land in which they were born.

Wilkerson's work is distinct from the two previous works looked at by her focus on personal stories and experiences of Black American migrants, paying less attention to pinpointing exactly what pushed them out or pulled them to new cities but acknowledging that these factors were different for every Black American. Furthermore, Wilkerson is not only concerned about migration out of the Mississippi delta and to the North. She, through three individuals, looks at migration out of Mississippi, Florida and Louisiana and to the cities of Chicago, New York and Los Angeles. She is the only author to pay such great attention to migration to the West Coast. Her geographical scope as well as timeframe is perhaps the most expansive. However, five years prior, in 2005, labor historian James Gregory, published *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migration of Black and White Southerners Transformed America*.<sup>10</sup> Gregory's work is the first historical account of the Great Migration that follows the

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<sup>9</sup> Wilkerson, 536.

<sup>10</sup> James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005.)

movement of both Black and white southerners throughout 1910-1970. He argues that a comprehensive study of the Southern Diaspora provides a new and all encompassing lens to analyze how migration transformed the social, economic and political trajectory of America in the 20th century.

Gregory's work complicates the majority of accounts that show the migration to encompass 6.5 million Black Southerners migrating to new cities. He uses records of both Black and white migration showing an exodus of over 20 million southerners. Gregory's work brings to light a lost perspective. He asserts that only by looking at both Black and White out migrations as well as the millions who returned to the South can one truly understand the extent of the migrations impact. Furthermore, he pays great attention to the different communities formed in the cities to which they moved. Black migrants more so than white migrants, because of the concentrated and isolated housing available to them, built strong and close communities more naturally. The impact of these communities are seen everywhere, in the Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights movement of the 50s and 60s and the Black Power movement that followed.

Gregory is not the only author who takes in account other migrants besides southern Black-Americans. Holley similarly considers both Black and white migrants, however he instead focuses his time frame on those migrating after 1940. Gregory's work tackles both a large subject matter and historical time frame in order to highlight the expansion of Black migrant communities in the North and the very politically and socially different community formations of white Southern migrants. While Gregory's work is the first to look at parallel and in conjunction migrations, other authors have produced work that similarly highlights mass migration of people occurring during the same time period

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In 2016, professor and scholar, Judith Weisenfeld, published *New World A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity during the Great Migration*.<sup>11</sup> Similar to Gregory's work, Weisenfeld equally looks at concurrent migrations, however, her interest lies in Caribbean migrations occurring at the time, analyzing the collapse of the Sugar economy, as citizens of the British, French, Dutch, and Spanish Caribbean instituted a mass exodus as Black-Americans did the same. Weisenfelds focuses on migration from the Caribbean to Chicago in the 1920s and 30s occurring as Southern Black-Americans increasingly relocated to the Northern city. Her work includes an in depth study of members of the Nation of Islam, Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation, Fathers divines, and the Moorish Science Temple of America. These groups advocated for Black migrants to refuse to be categorized as “negro” as they believed this was not only false but also created with the intention of enslavement and domination. These groups provided Black Americans with alternate identities that linked their heritage to a history other than the history of enslavement and oppression.

In contrast to the other works analyzed here, Weisenfeld dives deep into the religious world of Black Americans during the Great Migration. She analyzes the ways in which these different religious movements shaped their own lives and respective identities. Through her extensive use of government records and bureaucratic paperwork, Weisenfeld shows how migrants from the South and the Caribbean encountered religious options which gave way to a new relationship between religion and racial identity. The aforementioned books highlight aspects of religion in their analysis of the cultural and social identities of Black-American migrants but they do not specifically focus on the religious dimensions of this mass exodus.

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<sup>11</sup> Judith Weisenfeld, *New World A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity during the Great Migration* (New York: NYU Press, 2016.)

Weisenfeld asserts that Black migrants undertook a Religio-racial way of understanding the Black self and Black history. She states, “In rejecting Negro racial identity, leaders and members of these groups did not repudiate blackness or dark skin but, rather, endowed it with meaning derived from histories other than those of enslavement and oppression.”<sup>12</sup> The work of Weisenfeld looks at the role of religion, their leaders and ordinary members to tell a story that hasn't been told before. Similarly, Black-American academic and professor, Marcia Chatelain, provides a lost perspective from all these accounts as she focuses on Black girlhood within her history of the Great Migration. Chatelain's work *South Side Girls: Growing Up in the Great Migration*, was published in 2015. She tells the story of girls living and working in cities in the SouthSide of Chicago during the first period of the Great Migration (1910-1940). She analyzes how adults manufactured notions of Black girlhood in times of political and social crisis. Her research questions and seeks to answer whether Black girls were really ever afforded the experiences and benefits of childhood while living in the era of Jim Crow, urban poverty and gender inequality.

Even though Black girls made up a large percentage of those migrating, no book has before looking at the impact of the migration on Black girlhood. Therefore, although her timeframe and geographical interest are similar to that of Holley and Lemman, her focus and research is unlike any author discussed previously. In order to tell this forgotten history, Chatelain has to look for and employ new source bases, dig for new information and seek new narratives.

Each author discussed here was tasked with finding sources to support and build their arguments. The source bases they drew from, although similar at points, speaks to their unique claim, the time period of their writing, and their own lived histories. These authors have each in

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<sup>12</sup> Weisenfeld, 6.

their own way relied on oral history, whether this be personal interviews, archived interviews, or other available oral histories. Lemman, Weisenfeld and Chatelain, whose works were written decades apart each combine the use of interviews, personal stories, with archival material, primary documents and statistical analysis to tell their respective stories of the Great Migration. However, the specific types of individuals interviewed and archives used provide great insight into each of their arguments.

Both Chatelain and Weisenfeld pay attention to religious movements such as the Moorish Science Temple of America and both of their time frame as well as geographical focus on Chicago is similar yet, their source base is distinct. Weisenfeld relies heavily on government records such as draft registration, naturalization forms, census records and marriage licenses to bring unrecognized stories to the surface in understanding the shifting meanings of Black identity during the first half of the Great Migration. Chatelain, however, is responding to this historical erasure of Black girls' voices from archival materials and sources. Because she is the first historian to analyze the impact of the Great Migration on Black girlhood and because their voices have been largely erased or nonexistent in school yearbooks and newspapers, Chatelain has to look at Black girls' interactions with institutions, social scientists, media and educational bodies. She employs the diaries of social workers, records from the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs Affairs as well as the work from child psychologists. She draws from many of the same variety of sources as the previous authors and includes many interviews and oral histories; however, she pays the most attention to incorporating the lost perspective and voices of South Side girls.

Because there is still largely a historical absence of a field that focuses specifically and solely on Black girlhood, she combines different fields such as sociology and anthropology in an

attempt to remedy this erasure in history and historiography. Chatelain explains that she relied heavily on a combination of Black Americans women's history and history of childhood and youth. In addition, she credits Chicago social scientists, urban reformers and journalists who had early conversations about black girls and their importance in the larger culture of the Great Migration, pop culture and urbanization. In addition, she mentions notable individuals such as Darlene Clark Hines, and Wilma King, who paved the way in the world of Black-American womens and children research.

Weisenfeld, whose work is the most recent of the six monographs, tells both a political and social history. Weisenfeld's work provides readers with a new perspective and exposure to a different source base than the previous authors. Although she relies primarily on bureaucratic records which often tell a top down historical narrative, Weisenfeld explains that she worked extensively on finding sources that tell stories of otherwise forgotten individuals. This involved her using databases such as Ancestry.com and other similar sites to follow individuals through a series of records, archives, photographs and more. Weisenfeld uses draft registrations, letters, photographs, death certificates, FBI records as well as an array of archived sources from religio-racial movements in Chicago during the 1920s and 30s. She uses these sources to unpack the ways in which Black religious movements in Chicago gave new meanings and communal understandings to Black history and identity. Weisenfeld acknowledges the difficulty in finding available sources, stating "Most studies to date have focused on the life histories of the founders and leaders, with particular attention to the theologies they promote. Recovering the stories of the rank-and-file members of these groups has proved challenging given the limited textual

record, but archival collections of letters, material artifacts, photographs, and newspaper coverage, for example, have contributed to my analysis.”<sup>13</sup>

Lemman and Holly take a similar approach in attempting to explain the causes of the Great Migration, however, the source bases they draw from speak to their respective arguments. Holley's work was produced almost a decade after Lemman, when Lemman was still one of the first historians to take on the task of analyzing the “second” Great Migration. For this reason, Lemman's work is in a way the “rough draft” or first attempt to compare this relationship between the transformation from manual to machine labor and this mass exodus. Lemman himself discloses this as he highlights the difficulty in finding works that deal with the migrations occurring after 1940, however, he does accredit one book *The Black Migration: The Journey to Urban America*, by George Groh as being uniquely useful. While Holley however, relies on previous historical research, statistical data, and primary sources related to the cotton industry and mechanical cotton pickers. He combines this with analysis of historical trends and patterns to support his overall argument.

Lemman began his research in 1983, shortly after the Black power movement, women's movement, Vietnam War, and war on poverty. Therefore, his interest in using the Great Migration to explain the War on Poverty is understandable. In his conclusion, Lemman offers a particularly optimistic outlook for the future. He believes that the discouraged attitude of Americans concerning race relations further constraints our ability to ameliorate them. He states, “These sentiments are not, in fact, either clear-eyed or realistic; they really belong on the long list of dolorous racial attitudes that turn out to be merely resistance to change wearing the garb of pessimism.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Weisenfeld, Judith. *New World A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity during the Great Migration*. New York: NYU Press, 2017, 20.

<sup>14</sup> Lemman, 339.

Lemman's work is nestled between political and social history. His work looks closely at how the Great Migration affected the formation of American cities and of power within those cities, aligning with Tosh's explanation of political history. Lemman looks at well known and powerful individuals such as Nixon and Johnson and the policies pushed under their leadership which produced particularly targeted and violent policies in reaction to the rise in Black urban ghettos across America. However, his work also concentrates on three individuals whose lives, although moving and of great significance, are individuals whose stories have not been told before. Lemman takes an all encompassing approach, using all types of sources to explain causes and consequences of the Great Migration. He relies heavily on personal notes from Nixon on welfare policy from 1968 in his attempt to link the Great Migration to the War on Poverty. Given his background in journalism, Lemman relies primarily on his own interviews and even admits to a possible "reporter bias".

Similar to Lemman, Isabel Wilkerson has a rich background in journalism and without a doubt relies on personal interviews more than any author here. Her work lies within the field of journalistic-history, as it relies primarily on interviews she conducted, yet maintains historical accuracy through her incorporation of past works on the Great Migration, government records, and various archives. She tells her history through the lives of three extraordinary individuals who she chose to focus on after interviewing over 1200 individuals involved in the Great Migration. It is fair to question whether Wilkerson's account is the most "accurate" or rather the most "epic" as her journalist background gives her insight into the stories that people want to read, rather than the stories that represent a more "average" tale. She states "This has been a personal journey that, due to the nature of the work and the loss of primary subjects, transformed me out of necessity from journalist to unintended historian". Her focus on individuals who

migrated rather than politicians and laws aligns her work closely with both social and cultural history.

Gregory however, in his pursuit to tell an all encompassing history of the great migration combines elements of political, economic, social and cultural history in order to write a substantial part of modern US history through the lens of internal group migrations. He uses and looks closely at the role of the media and academic theorists in shaping images of both migrant groups.

The works of these authors in many ways show how Black American historiography has changed as history has evolved. In 1895, WEB Du Bois became the first Black American to graduate with a doctorate in history. In 1903 he published his highly acclaimed *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*. This was the first historical work to focus on the personal lives of Black Americans. He paved the way for Black American historians who followed.

In his article, “Coming of Age: The Transformation of Afro-American historiography”, author and historian Robert L. Harris Jr. explains how Black American historiography went through a major transformation in the 1960s. Harris explains that prior to the 1960s, Black American historiography was burdened by attempts to adhere to and seek approval from white America. He claims that before the 1960s white historians had almost always excluded Black people and history from American history. Therefore, when Black Americans produced historical works they were largely in response to their erasure from American history works. Harris credits the Civil Rights Movement, urban uprisings and Black consciousness movement to this transformation of black American historiography.

Harris shows the many ways a new interest in Black American history was sparked in the 1960s and supported by countless institutions. For example, in 1968 several states that had

developed a new Black population through the Great Migration, now required that public institutions teach Black American history.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, book publishers and textbook writers rewrote and revised their works to incorporate Black American history. However, during the 60s, the historians that were now interested in writing works on Black history, were still, for the most part, white Americans. Yet, as the Black Consciousness movement rose, with Malcom X as their leader, an increasing number of Black Americans graduated with degrees in historical studies by the late 1960s. These historians, instead of seeing Black history as an ingredient of American history, began to see it as distinct and powerful.

Similarly, historian and professor, Hettie Williams, agrees “African American history has been a significant growth area in the discipline for decades since the 1960s.”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, by the 1970s during the women's rights movement, Black women's history emerged as its own field. Black women historians such as Toni Cade, Gerda Lerner and Sharon Harley, produced works in the 70s that spoke to the diversity of Black women's experience as well as their erasure from historical scholarship.

The movements that allowed more and more Black Americans to pursue degrees in historical studies and then write profound works on Black American history were arguably made possible through the migration of millions out of the South.

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<sup>15</sup> Harris, 108.

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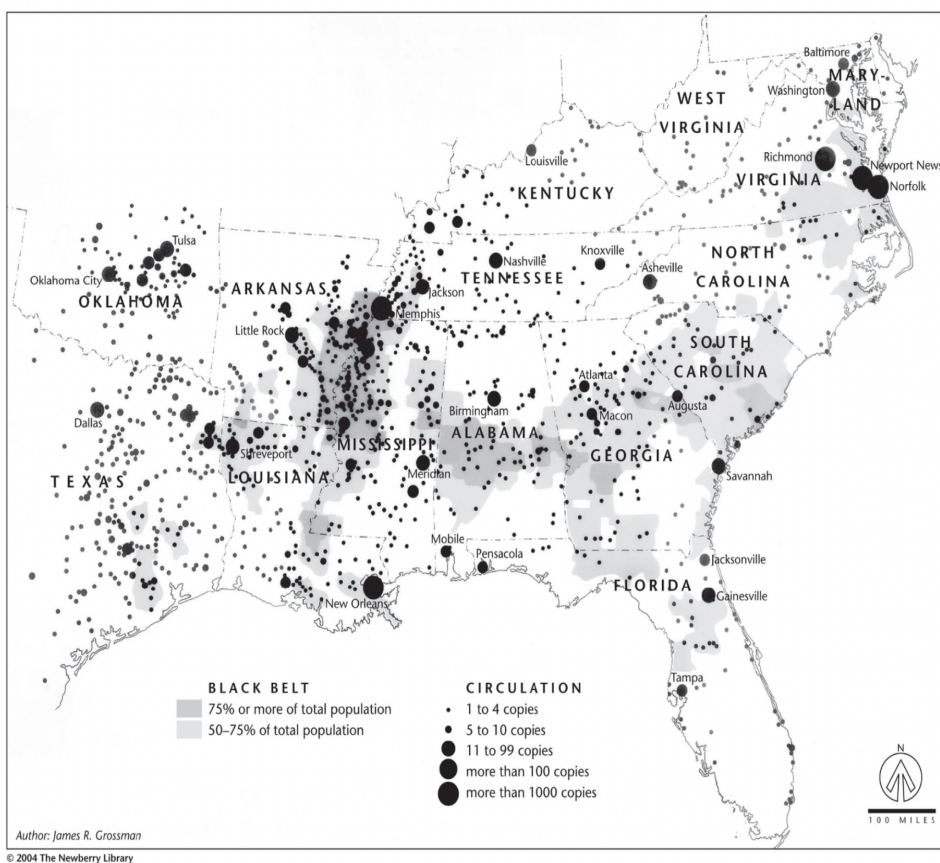
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## Primary Sources:

### “Southern Distribution of the Chicago Defender”

*The Chicago Defender is a Chicago based Black-American run newspaper founded in 1905. The Newspaper was founded by lawyer and publisher, Robert S. Abbott. Abbot's goal in creating this newspaper was to provide Black Americans with an accessible news source that could inform them on issues pertaining to Black Americans as well as inspire avenues for change. During the early 20th Century, when Black Americans began leaving the South and heading to the North, the Chicago Defender played a supporting role in this migration by promoting Northern job opportunities and advising Black Southerners on making it North. For many Southern Black-Americans, the Chicago Defender introduced them to the prospects of the North and the increasing community of Black Southerners migrating to Chicago. The map below depicts the distribution of the Chicago Defender to the South by 1919.*

Southern Distribution of the *Chicago Defender*

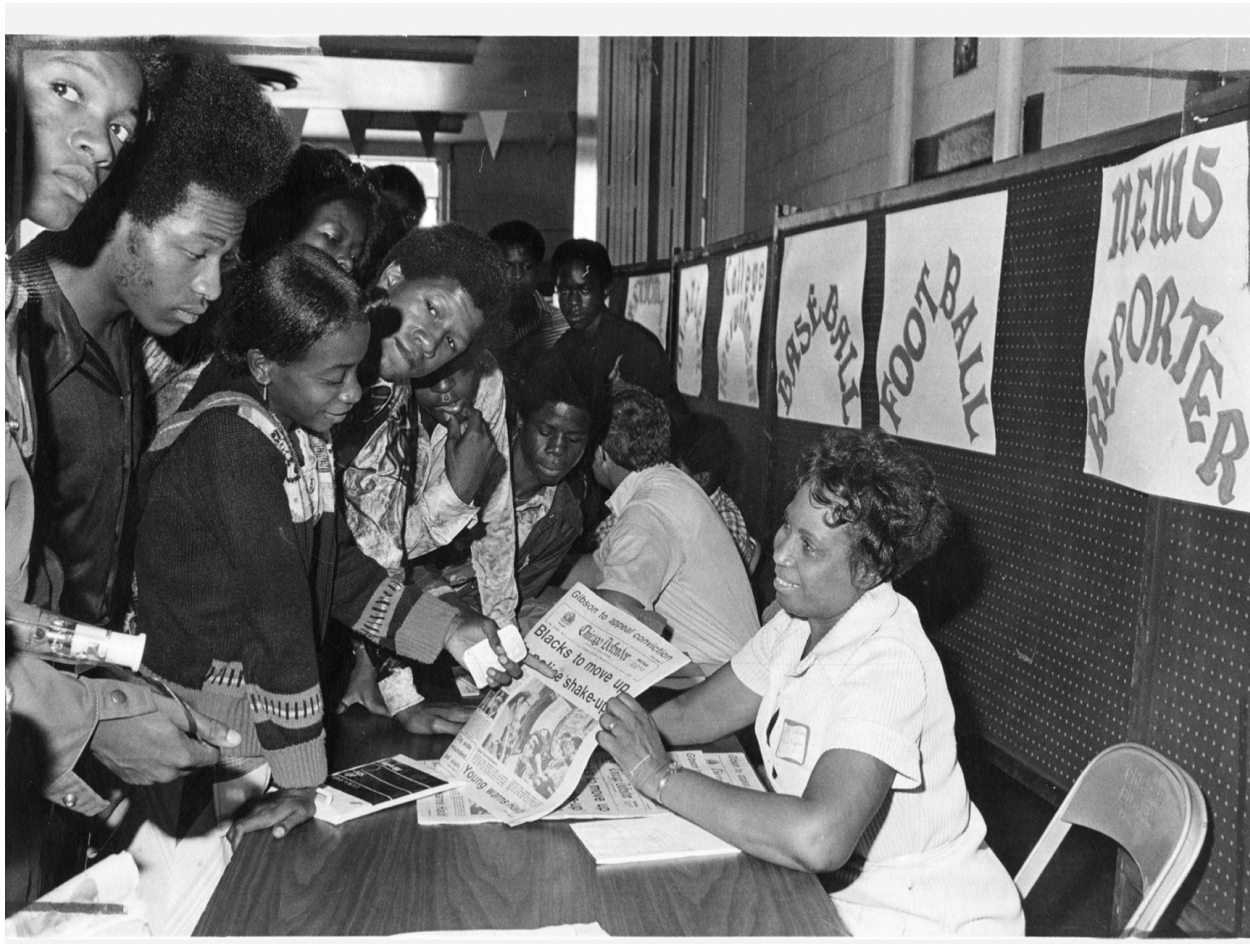


Newberry Library. “Southern Distribution of the Chicago Defender.” 1919.

<http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/3714.ht>

*The image below was taken in the late 20th Century. In this image a woman who works for the Chicago Defender is showing a copy of the newspaper to students at a school in Chicago on Career Day. The newspaper reads “Blacks to move up”. At this point in time, Chicago had become home to a large community of Southern Black migrants. The Newspaper was a large reason many Southern Black Americans found themselves in the Northern city. In addition to drawing Black Americans north, once in Chicago, the newspaper provided Southern migrants with a sense of place and community, as well as insight into Black American life, politics and culture in Chicago and how this changed as the migration continued.*

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Source: *The Abbott Sengstacke Family Papers/Robert Abbott Sengstacke via Getty Images*  
[Remembering the Chicago Defender, Print Edition \(1905 - 2019\).](#)



## “Food Had Doubled in Prices Because of the War”

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*Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000) was a Black-American artist widely recognized for his depiction of the Great Migration in his 60 panel series titled “The Migration Series”. Lawrence’s parents migrated from the South to Jersey, where Jacob himself was born. When he was only 23 years old he created his “Migration series”. The series consists of 60 panels portraying the migration of Black Southerners to the North. The painting below is the 11th panel and is titled “Food had doubled in prices because of the war”. In the image one can see a woman slicing pork shoulder. Pork shoulder was commonly used in Southern cuisine as a flavor additive. However, in this image Lawrence shows this affordable and flavorful meat being used as the main entree rather than simply for its flavor. Why do you think this was? What does this say about life in the North? What else can you notice in this painting?*

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Source: 1940–41, Casein tempera on hardboard, 12 x 18 in. The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC, Acquired 1942

11 Food had doubled in price because of the war.

*In response to increased Black Southern migration, in 1941, the federal government along with the Detroit Housing Commission decided to fund and construct a 200 unit Housing Project to house the hundreds of Black Southerners who worked in defense during World War II. In response, white tenants nearby protested this housing project and demanded the area to remain white only. Black workers demanded their right to move into Sojourner Truth. However, white violence continued, arrests skyrocketed and the first Black family that moved into the housing project had to be escorted by the Michigan National Guard.*

*This photo below on the left was taken by Arthur Siegel in 1942 in Detroit, Michigan.*

*The flier on the right was created by white residents asking for help from individuals outside the neighborhood to keep Black Americans from moving into the Sojourner Truth Housing Project.*



source://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/fsa.8d13572

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Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

[New Guide – Great Migration: Finding Pictures](#)

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*The Great Migration is said to have begun in 1915. However, in February of 1880, over 900 Black American families from Mississippi migrated to St. Louis. Many times these families found “conductors” who helped make travel arrangements for them. However, these conductors often insisted on being paid beforehand and then would not show up at time of departure. These families would be left stranded at train stations and docks.*

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Source: [Refugees on Levee, 1897](#). Carroll's Art Gallery. Photomural from gelatin-silver print. [Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress](#) (105).

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*Robert Leroy Johnson was born in 1911 in Hazlehurst, Mississippi. From a young age, Johnson had a love and innate talent for music and songwriting. During his life, he traveled and performed but did not receive much recognition for his blues music and songwriting until after his death. During his musical career he traveled often and did not have a single city in which he called home. Below are lyrics from his song titled "Sweet Home Chicago", he repeats the line "back to the land of California to my sweet home Chicago". For years, many writers and musicians found this line to be strange and more than anything geographically inaccurate. However, today many individuals note that this geographical inaccuracy was more than likely intentional. Why would cities outside of the South be interchangeable in Johnson's songwriting? What does this say about the South?*

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Oh, baby, don't you want to go?  
 Oh, baby, don't you want to go?  
 Back to the land of California  
 To my sweet home Chicago

Oh, baby, don't you want to go?  
 Oh, baby, don't you want to go?  
 Back to the land of California  
 To my sweet home Chicago

Now one and one is two  
 Two and two is four  
 I'm heavy loaded, baby  
 I'm booked, I gotta go

Crying baby  
 Honey, don't you want to go?  
 Back to the land of California  
 To my sweet home Chicago

And two and two is four  
 Four and two is six  
 You gonna keep monkeyin' 'round here friend, boy  
 You're gonna get you business all in a trick

Crying baby  
 Honey, don't you want to go?  
 Back to the land of California  
 To my sweet home, Chicago

Now six and two is eight  
 Eight and two is ten



Friend-boy she trick you one time  
She sure gonna do it again  
But don't cry, hey hey!  
Baby, don't you want to go?  
Back to the land of California  
To my sweet home Chicago

I'm going to California  
From there to Des Moines Iowa  
Somebody will tell me that you  
Need my help someday

Crying, baby  
Baby, don't you want to go?  
Back to the land of California  
To my sweet home Chicago

Source:

Johnson, Robert. "Sweet Home Chicago." Lyrics.com. Accessed May 19, 2023.  
<https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/76231/Robert+Johnson/Sweet+Home+Chicago>.



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The following excerpt are the words of an anonymous Black American woman from Alabama in 1902. She discusses the options of leaving the South versus staying. Take note of where these conversations occurred. What were they contemplating? What does she mean by the “security which other people feel?” Furthermore, what does this date tell us about the start of the Great Migration ?

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*In our homes, in our churches,  
wherever two or three gathered,  
there is a discussion of what is best to do.  
Must we remain in the South  
or go elsewhere? Where can we go  
to feel that security which other people feel ?  
Is it best to go in great numbers or only in several families?  
These and many other things are discussed over and over*

-Black American woman in Alabama, 1902

Source: “The Negro Problem,” *Independent* 54:2221.

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The following quote was taken by an anonymous Black-American man who never left the South. He spoke of the conditions he heard of from people who did travel North.

Many Black migrants were met with similar or at times worse conditions of those they fled. Because of restrictive covenants and redlining, Black Americans were confined to specific neighborhoods, often pushed into poorly constructed buildings and denied basic rights. They were often paid less than their white counterparts, denied access into institutions and given little opportunities for economic advancement.

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*It was a hoax if you ask me . . . .  
They're packed tight  
into the buildings,  
and can't do anything,  
not even dream of going North,  
the way I do  
when it gets rough*

-Black-American man who never left Alabama, quoted in  
*The New York Times* in 1967.

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*Emmet J. Scott was a journalist, newspaper editor, educator and author among other occupations. During his career he collected letters from Black American southerners who dreamed of migrating North. In the letter below, a seventeen year old girl is pleading for help to find her way north. She found out about northern opportunities through the Chicago Defender which her father collected. The Chicago Defender received hundreds of letters from young girls like the one below. They wanted more for themselves but also for their parents who they say work too hard for too little reward. What do you notice about her tone and urgency?*

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ALEXANDRIA, LA., June 6, 1917.

Dear Sirs: I am writeing to you all asking a favor of you all. I am a girl of seventeen. School has just closed I have been going to school for nine months and I now feel like I aught to go to work. And I would like very very well for you all to please forward me to a good job. but there isnt a thing here for me to do, the wages here is from a dollar and a half a week. What could I earn Noth- ing. I have a mother and father my father do all he can for me but it is so hard. A child with any respect about her self or his self wouldnt like to see there mother and father work so hard and earn nothing I feel it my duty to help. I would like for you all to get me a good job and as I havent any money to come onplease send me a pass and I would work and pay every cent of it back and get me a good quite place to stay. My father have been getting the defender for three or four months but for the last two weeks we have failed to get it. I dont know why. I am tired of down hear in this / I am afraid to say. Father seem to care and then again dont seem to but Mother and I am tired tired of all of this I wrote to you all because I believe you will help I need your help hoping to here from you all very soon.

Source: [More Letters of Negro Migrants of 1916-1918](#)

Emmet J. Scott, "Additional Letters of Negro Migrants, 1916-1918," *Journal of Negro History* 4, no. 4 (October 1919): 413.

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*Richard Wright (1908-1960) was a Black American writer and poet known for his works that speak to Black American struggles and experiences. He was born in Mississippi in the midst of Jim Crow. Wright's family, like countless Black Southerners, decided to move to Chicago in the 1920s. Moving out of the South afforded Wright with new opportunities and avenues to explore his love for writing. His works often speak to the experiences of Black Americans who migrated and even those who chose to stay. He became influential to the intellectual, artistic and musical movement that rose in the 1920s and 1930s called the Harlem Renaissance.*

*In 1945 he published his memoir titled "Black Boy". Through his narrative, Wright shines light on experiences that millions of Black Americans could relate to at this time. He writes about his early childhood in the segregated South, his experience migrating North and the hope as well as pain he endured in building a life in Chicago.*

*Below are three poems from Wright from his memoir Black Boy that speak to some of these themes. The three poems should be read in the order that they appear. In the first poem, Wright is seemingly writing either before or right as he began the migration North. The second poem, similarly speaks to his reasons for leaving the South and the hope he had of life in the North. The last poem was written once he arrived in the North and his feelings once in Chicago. What These poems speak to the experiences of Black migrants who were often still constrained by Northern racism. These individuals dreamt of freedom, abandoned the South and often were only offered a mere glimpse of the opportunities they dreamt of.*

*What do the words of Wright tell us about the experience of Black migrants and life in the North? Was it how it appeared in newspapers and advertisements?*

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*"I was not leaving the south to forget the south, but so that some day I might understand it"*

*— Richard Wright, Black Boy*

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*"I was leaving the South*

*to fling myself into the unknown . . .*

*I was taking a part of the South*

*to transplant in alien soil,*

*to see if it could grow differently,*

*if it could drink of new and cool rains,*

*bend in strange winds,*

*respond to the warmth of other suns*

*and, perhaps, to bloom"*

*- Richard Wright, Black Boy*

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“I was seized by doubt. Should I have come here? But going back was impossible.

I had fled a known terror, and perhaps I could cope with this unknown terror that lay ahead.”

– Richard Wright, *Black Boy*

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### Textbook Critique:

For this textbook analysis and critique I am using *The American Nation* published in 1995. Within this textbook there is no section dedicated to the Great Migration but rather sentences scattered throughout different segments that make reference to this mass exodus. As I looked through different textbooks I found that it was common for the Great Migration to be omitted. Instead of giving this history its own section the Great Migration was often only referred to in other sections such as the Harlem Renaissance or mentions in the changing labor markets produced by both World Wars. When looking at this specific textbook I found that the Great Migration was only touched upon in three sections.

The first mention of the Great Migration was in a section titled “Workers in the Age of Industry”. The passages that follow seek to explain how factory work changed in the 1880s. While explaining this shift from small to large factories the textbook writes “And some blacks left farms in the South to find work in the North”.<sup>17</sup> While this sentence is clearly referencing the basis and the very beginning of the Great Migration, this is where the reference ends. There is no follow up to this statement nor are Black-Americans mentioned again in this section. Furthermore, this predates the Great Migration and fails to provide students with an accurate timeframe of when Black Americans left the South to find work in the North.

This section is more so focused on the *Knights of Labor* and immigrants from other countries as well as women's changing role in the workplace. The textbook states “immigrants, women, blacks and children always earned less than native-born white men”.<sup>18</sup> There is no overlap between Black-Americans and the immigrant status in this section. They are seen as different and separate from immigrants, furthermore, it is assumed that they are only talking

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<sup>17</sup> Prentice Hall, *The American Nation*, 474.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

about Black men as they confine these categories as “blacks”, “women” and “immigrants” when in fact many of those migrating during the Great Migration were all three.

I turned to the next section in which I might expect the textbook to speak of the Great Migration: The Harlem Renaissance. In my research it was common for the Great Migration to get lumped in with the Harlem Renaissance in textbooks. This specific textbook includes the Harlem Renaissance within their section titled “the Jazz Age” which also incorporates a discussion on sports and literature. The textbook states, “In the 1920s, black artists, writers and musicians gathered there (Harlem). They contributed to the *Harlem Renaissance*, or rebirth of black culture...Black writers like Countee Cullen and Claude McKay told of the experiences of black Americans”.<sup>19</sup>

While the individuals they choose to highlight are impressive and important, they are not all Black *Americans*, nor do they share the experiences that defined life for Black-Americans in the South before, during and after reconstruction. For example, McKay, while writing powerful poetry that spoke to the violence faced by Black-Americans during WWI, came to the United States from Jamaica. While his experience is unique and deserves to be highlighted, there are countless Black-American voices whose lived experiences shine light on the very same matters. The textbook discusses how McKay and Langhston Hughes in their work, protested the violence against Black-Americans, lynchings specifically. However, they do not explain that millions of Black Americans forged a mass relocation from the South to the North because this violence was inescapable..

In this section there are two photos, one of Bessie Smith with the heading “Americans who Dared” and one of Babe Ruth. Under Smith's photo, the textbook explains that Smith was a child in Tennessee who struggled financially; however it was her passion and talent for singing

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 587.



that helped her escape poverty. Nowhere in this writing does it explain *why* life was difficult for Smith as a child, *why* she turned to the blues for help, or *how* a Southern young girl with a passion for music ended up in Harlem, New York. In this section it seems like magic and talent is what saved these exceptional individuals, but there is no discussion of the circumstances they were escaping, the struggles they faced in the new city they arrived in, or any kind of analysis of the rich and influential words of their poetry, music and stories.

Furthermore, the Great Migration is only alluded to through the personal stories of remarkable people. There is no mention of the millions of ‘ordinary’ people who left the South and changed America. It is interesting that the Great Migration is no more than suggested through a close reading of the stories of individuals who impacted the Harlem Renaissance. I would have expected this to be the reverse. In my opinion, the Great Migration should be the umbrella with the Harlem Renaissance being one of its impacts and consequences.

The last section in which I was able to find whispers of the Great Migration was within the textbooks brief discussion of Jim Crow. The migration is never mentioned by name; however, there is an explanation of life in the South and the North for Black Americans. However, the textbook does not explain how or why Black Americans ended up in the North to begin with or that prior to this Black Americans almost exclusively lived in the South. When discussing Jim Crow laws in the South, the textbook does not explain that this led to an exodus from the region and eventually prompted the downfall of Jim Crow.

## Textbook Rewrite:

At the turn of the 20th century the largest migration in United States history occurred. This migration occurred across state lines. It is the only time in United States history when millions of individuals left the state they were born in and found a life with a completely different legal system in the same country. This period in history is known as the Great Migration.

The Great Migration began in 1910 and did not finish until 1970. During these 60 years, millions of Black Americans from the South migrated to the North, Midwest, and West. This movement of individuals and families completely transformed the social, cultural, and economic landscape of the United States.

The Great Migration emerged against the backdrop of the Jim Crow era. (See the previous chapter to learn more about Jim Crow.) The Jim Crow era was characterized by racial segregation, discrimination, and violence against Black Americans in the American South. Black Americans faced unimaginable violence for simply existing; their lives were at stake on a daily basis. In order to seek basic safety, Black Americans began to realize they would need to abandon the South and find safety in other states.

As life in the South forced Black-Americans to seek new beginnings elsewhere, the North, Midwest, and West increasingly offered job opportunities in a growing industrial and manufacturing sector that promised higher wages and overall a chance at economic advancement. In addition to higher wages, many Northern cities offered new access to education and cultural institutions.

There were two waves of the Great Migration. The first wave occurred during 1910-1940 and the second wave from 1940-1970. During the *first* wave of the Great Migration, approximately 1.6 million Southern Black Americans left the South and found a new life in

Northern cities, primarily Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia. Many of these Southerners were drawn to the new cities through the job opportunities that arose as a result of World War I. During the war, men from major cities were sent to war which led to labor shortages in the cities they left. Black men in the South were recruited to fill these shortages. Many times these men brought their families, sent letters home about life in the North, and inspired more and more Southerners to leave.

During the second wave, another 5 million Black Americans relocated out of the South. This time, these southerners found themselves in new cities such as Detroit, Cleveland, and Los Angeles. In the second wave, many Southern Black Americans were pulled to leave by employment opportunities that arose during WWII and the post-war economic boom. In addition to Black-Americans, many white Southerners fled the South as well and forever changed the new cities they arrived in.

The Migration of millions allowed for a rich movement of Black American art, literature and music to take over the major cities of their arrival. Harlem, in New York City, became home to the Harlem Renaissance that was created and led by Black-Americans who arrived in New York and chose or were often pushed into the neighborhood of Harlem. The Harlem Renaissance was a large cultural and artistic movement that occurred in the 1920s in Harlem, New York City. This movement highlighted and honored Black American artists, writers, musicians and scholars. The Great Migration played a major role in creating the Harlem Renaissance. As millions of Black Americans moved from the South to cities like Harlem, they brought with them their strong cultural traditions, artistic talents, and intellectual perspectives.

The events that follow in this textbook should be looked at with this migration in mind. The Civil Rights movements, Black Power movements and the various movements they inspired

would look much differently had Black-Americans never left the South. The Great Migration reshaped the United States, changed the demographics of every city, and transformed American politics and culture. It is impossible to unpack American history in the 20th Century without first understanding the Great Migration.