

The African American Great Migration Reconsidered
Sarah-Jane (Saje) Mathieu
University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

Movement has always characterized the African American experience. Whether forcibly removed from Africa during the slave trade or sold across plantations in the American South and Caribbean, people of African descent in the Americas remained acutely aware of how movement—open or clandestine—set the terms of their existence. As historian Steven Hahn so astutely reminds us, by the mid-nineteenth century, African Americans voted with their feet, utilizing mass migration as a powerful indictment of slavery and white supremacy’s dehumanizing effects. Therefore, when slavery ended in 1865, African Americans did what most had never done: they cast down their pickets and hoes and began walking off the plantations many had occupied their whole lives. In his acclaimed autobiography *Up From Slavery*, Booker T. Washington, whose family members essentially walked the 500 miles to their new home in a West Virginia salt mining town, recalled that “[a]fter the coming of freedom ... most of the coloured people left the old plantation for a short while at least, so as to be sure, it seemed, that they could leave and try their freedom on to see how it felt.”

African Americans turned to migration as one of the earliest and most compelling exercises of their new autonomy and saw mass movement as a politicized response to their region’s social, economic, and political climate. Simultaneously domestic and international migrants, African Americans used relocation as a measure of their freedom, as an exercise of their civil rights, and as a safeguard against mounting racialized violence during the Jim Crow era (1877-1954). When it seemed that meaningful citizenship remained out of reach, even after

migration, African Americans moved once again, this time heading abroad. Consequently, African Americans lived out migration as a repeated pattern, whereby they followed the work, their families, their dreams, and the promise of safer havens wherever they became available. As with other migrant groups, African Americans did not so much move from township to city but rather from small city, to slightly bigger city, then from metropolis to metropolis or region to region until they found conditions conducive to their success. Likewise, it is imperative to highlight that blacks also came to the United States after Reconstruction, namely from the Caribbean, Canada, Africa, and even Europe. They came as soldiers, artists, students, workers, and athletes, drawn by the same possibilities enticing scores of Europeans, Asians, and Latin Americans landing on American shores, and crossing its borders.

Whatever their ultimate motivations, it is important to remember that the Great Migration—nearly a century-long movement of African descended people—was part of a broader international pattern of population relocation. Especially since the Industrial Revolution, migration was spurred on by labor needs, food crisis, political persecution, urbanization, natural disaster, and of course free choice. To be sure, African American migration since Reconstruction was a distinctly American experience, with important social, political, economic, and demographic ramifications for the nation's history. For one thing, racialized violence served as an unyielding push factor for African American migration. But by the same measure, it is useful for students to contemplate that same black migration alongside other migrants—Asians, Latin Americans, Southern and Eastern Europeans—also on the move as of the mid-nineteenth century.

African Americans migrated for a host of reasons. Many took the roads to see for

themselves the country that they had inherited, feeding in the process a wanderlust strictly forbidden during slavery. Many more African Americans spent months and sometimes even years searching for family members torn apart by slave trade or war, often chasing rumors of their whereabouts as far as Canada and the Caribbean. Others migrated first across the South, then throughout North America, with the singular goal of controlling the nature and value of their wages. As newly waged workers, African Americans hoped that their agrarian know-how could either insure their own success as landowning farmers or at the very least set the terms for their labor as sharecroppers. Alternatively, jobs north of the Mason-Dixon line attracted thousands of Southern black migrant workers eager for relief from debt peonage, thinly veiled form of re-enslavement. Most problematically, throughout the Jim Crow era, scores of African Americans urgently escaped the South due to rising racial terrorism. The escalation of white supremacist violence by the 1890s presented a crisis for African Americans, who raced out of the region with increasing vigor. The particular nature of that mass migration calls into question America's under-examined political tradition of ethnic cleansing through banishment, race rioting, and lynching. To be sure, this choice of language is polemical and may generate passionate responses but it will also help students to think about the persecution of African Americans more globally since many other migrant groups—in the same era—were also targeted for removal, torture, human experimentation, and outright extermination because of white supremacist beliefs.

The majority of African Americans who migrated during the late nineteenth century did so to establish agrarian utopias west of the Mississippi. In this respect, those heading into Kansas, as some sixty thousand did during 1870s Kansas Fever, were fuelled by similar forces sending white Americans rushing west since the Homestead Act of 1862. Just like Scandinavian,

German, Amish, and other European immigrant groups establishing utopian colonist communities, African Americans who chased their fortunes west of the Mississippi throughout the Gilded Age were driven by the same hope for peaceful autonomous lives on their own terms. Whether black or white, domestic or foreign-born, these migrants craved self-rule, with African Americans citing full control over local governments, the right to an education, free enterprise, and freedom of religion as their chief political concerns. Accordingly, for African Americans relocating to Southern Plains states, migration functioned as a last ditch effort at rescuing Reconstruction's promise by living outside of the South's emerging Jim Crow system.

For some African Americans, even Kansas could not provide sufficient safeguard from Jim Crow's touch, with many opting for emigration to Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa as safer alternatives to life in the United States. The intensification of racial terrorism as of the late nineteenth century forced many African Americans into exile abroad. African Americans, who sang the praises of Canada as a promised land, braved rough terrain, dangerous passage, and even death to reach that "land of Canaan." They did so cognizant of the fact that their emigration served as a political indictment of white supremacy and the exercise of an American democratic ideal. Haiti and Cuba also held an exalted place for African Americans, who continually migrated there, namely from Louisiana. Similarly, many African Americans looked to Africa for political asylum, with prominent black clergymen championing Back-to-Africa movements as early as the 1870s. Reverend Henry McNeal Turner bluntly made the case for emigration, telling readers of his *Voice of Missions*, "[e]very man that has the sense of an animal must see that there is no future in this country for the Negro. We are taken out and burned, shot, hanged, unjointed and murdered in every way. Our civil rights are taken from us by

force, our political rights are a farce.” Taking up the black clergy’s call, a modest yet steady flow of African Americans set off for Liberia and Sierra Leone. Thus, migration overseas, a small yet consistently seductive movement, was held up not only as a viable migration option but also as a check and balance against worsening domestic conditions. In this respect then, African Americans demonstrated another classic migratory reflex, making them very much like other European migrants escaping racial, religious and political persecution by taking to the roads and seas during the Age of Empire (1875-1914).

African American migration turned from trickle to flood during the twentieth century. Between 1910 and 1940, the United States witnessed the largest and most dramatic mass movement of African descended people, as nearly two million African Americans abandoned hope for a better life in the South and headed for points north, west, and overseas. To their numbers were added more than one hundred thousand Caribbean migrants during the first two decades of the twentieth century alone. In what historians increasingly understand as a three-pronged Great Migration that spanned nearly a century—1865-1896; 1910-1940; and 1940-1970—more than six million blacks shifted the weight of their numbers, culture, and politics from the ostensibly rural South to various urban Northern and Western regions. The full social, cultural, political, and economic impact of this domestic racialized demographic reallocation cannot be overstated. During the 1920s, outward migration from Alabama alone topped 81,000. Whereas Cleveland’s black population hovered around 1.5 percent in 1910, a decade later it increased more than 300 percent, presenting a new set of difficulties for municipal managers.

Black migrants overwhelmingly headed to cities where an insatiable demand for labor in sectors like coal, steel, meatpacking, railroading, and war industries paid handsomely compared

to sharecropping. These black migrants often sojourned in smaller southern cities before moving onto other ones north and west of the Mason-Dixon line, a pattern frequently seen with other migrant groups also charting a course across the United States at this time. Students must consider the urban impact of so great and so quick—if also at times temporary—a population shift. For example, within a decade, the black populations in Chicago, Toledo, and Detroit ballooned by 148 percent, 200 percent, and 611 percent respectively. Of course, African Americans headed west as well, with the Pacific coast's black population increasing nearly six fold from 1930 to 1950. Yet the cities receiving these new migrants faced a host of challenges, including hurriedly accommodating newcomers' varied needs while also upholding Jim Crow conventions. Housing, transportation infrastructures, and employment quickly experienced the greatest pressure, especially because of red lining and other measures designed to lock black people into small residential pockets.

Within its pages, the black press brought these urban African American immigrant communities to life. Black migrants, who may not yet have had a voice in local governments, found it in the nascent black press, which during the interwar years effectively functioned as a *de facto* immigrant press. In fact by the 1920s, most African American newspapers dedicated several pages to events from across the country and from abroad, with *The Messenger* and the *Chicago Defender* most committed to fostering connections between black migrant communities.

Historians initially believed that reports on weddings, concerts, and lectures were filler or insignificant society page gossip but in truth, these pages are actually a rich source for examination. Students marvel at the range of leisure activities adopted by African Americans but also at the extent to which events like piano recitals or poetry readings were the stuff of everyday

life, at least for the aspiring urban black middle class. Teachers should unpack these pages to see what more they reveal about black urban immigrant life.

Likewise, this affords a wonderful opportunity for a gendered analysis of black migrants' experiences. For example, the abundant advertisements for beauty products do more than push whitening creams. Instead, they often point to the most lucrative business opportunities afforded to blacks, but especially women. In other words, Bee's House of Beauty was a woman owned business—and likely an immigrant woman at that—winning her employment autonomy and shielding her from the types of exploitation common in industries that typically employed women. That black immigrant women raised venture capital and enjoyed success, most notably Madame C. J. Walker, is truly noteworthy for an era when few women—white or black—headed their own businesses. Most pertinently, these black entrepreneurial women's experiences also emulated classic immigrant patterns of profiting from tending to their own communities' needs.

Urban black neighborhoods were richly diverse spaces thanks to migration. On the streets of Chicago's South Side, Louisianan, Kansan, and Tennessean accents, foods, and musical tastes melded together, producing a culture distinct from Philadelphia's, where Jamaican, Georgian, and North Carolinian migrants might wed their palettes. It is important to remember that foreign-born black immigrants continually making their way to major American cities introduced a new cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity that redefined the American black experience in the process. In pre-World War I Philadelphia, for instance, Jamaican longshoremen, who first learned their trade in Trinidad and Jamaica, worked on the docks and made a name for themselves in Local 8 of the radical Industrial Workers of the World labor union. Fully 50 percent of the local's members were people of African descent. To be sure, the black migrant experience could be both

embracing and alienating. For example, some Spanish, French, and Dutch-speaking black migrants remained largely linguistically marginalized, where African Canadians could move seamlessly through American society. A Trinidadian accent singled one out with the bosses, just as an Alabaman accent would, but with different obstacles to each workers' advancement.

To date, much of the Great Migration narrative has unfortunately overlooked how the South's deeply regionalized social and political cultures underwent an amalgamation by way of migration to the North and West and gave birth to pan-Southern cultures in the regions receiving these migrants. Moreover, homogenizing the social and political contributions of foreign-born black migrants, such as Claude McKay (Jamaican) or Stokely Carmichael (Trinidadian), who are so often writ as Americans, waters down the lived diversity of the urban black experience in America. It misses the extent to which the lives and experiences of blacks in the United States have been far more culturally and politically diverse than otherwise discussed in the literature.

Whatever their place of birth, black migrants ultimately faced predictable or at the least common challenges presented by migration, making them once again more like—than unlike—the millions of other immigrants pouring into Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles prior to World War II. The Chinese migrant from Guangzhou, the Mexican from Oaxaca, or the Pole from Wielkopolska, all rural regions, had no greater handle on city life than the Mississippi sharecropper turned Pittsburgh Hill Sider; at least the latter spoke English. In all cases, new migrants had to learn how to navigate the city, its sundry bureaucracies, and its noisy new technologies—streetcars, elevators, subways, and of course cars. Students should consider African Americans alongside other migrants also trying to make sense of their new urban lives.

For too long, historians of immigration and of African American life have worked in

isolation. When their tales intersect, it is often at the site of conflict: Pennsylvania Poles beating back black scabs; Irish hoodlums chasing down black South Siders in 1919; Brooklyn Italians reinforcing their whiteness by blockading blacks out of their neighborhoods. This story of conflict and contrast, while in many instances true, obfuscates the many similarities in domestic and foreign-born migrants' lives. That so many European, Asian, and Latin American migrants still lived in ethnically divided neighborhoods during the twentieth century undermines the myth that the path to the American dream was smooth for all, or at least for those more white than others. Put differently, assumptions about the fitness of Southern and Eastern Europeans also segregated them in ways that students should explore. Positioning the mass movement of African descended people alongside other global migratory trends during the twentieth century prompts students to think more broadly about Great Migration patterns as a confluence of both domestic and international push and pull factors. This uniquely black domestic migratory movement forced real dramatic change in American society, including producing new levels of racialized violence in the areas that received these ostensibly Southern African American migrants. At the same time, blacks who headed to American cities ran headlong into European, Latin American, and Asian migrants also trying to outpace famine, crop failures, poverty, malady, and totalitarian regimes. African American and foreign-born migrants pouring into early twentieth century cities did so with the same thirst for freedom, entrepreneurial spirit, and the desire to chisel out their own version of the American dream.

Established migrant communities, black or foreign-born, taught newcomers how to navigate the workplace, the neighborhood, and the area's leisure options, with the apparent tradeoff that new migrants would not upset the fragile balance created between migrant/ethnic

communities and their host neighbors. For example, Italian migrants avoided flaring up tensions with their Anglo-American neighbors and likewise, African Americans who escaped white supremacist tyranny in the South would not want to relive it once in Pittsburgh, Minneapolis, or San Francisco. In the end, migrants—whether from Milan, Memphis, or Mexico City—each had to learn how to make their way around their new host city and the Progressive bureaucracy that targeted all of them as major scourges on the nation and white women’s moralities. Moreover, the arrival of African Americans, Chinese, and Poles, for instance, generated comparable demands for quarantine, control of sexual behavior, and ever stricter policing of perceived criminal acts. In other words, African descended people and foreign-born immigrants were frequently vilified, criminalized, and pathologized in very similar ways during the same historical periods, as evidenced by eugenicists who trained their nascent “science” on Mexicans, Asians, blacks, and “low-grade functioning morons,” thinly cloaked language reserved for poor whites and Eastern European and Irish migrants. Might we not better understand immigrants’ experiences—and by extension ourselves—by bridging the racialized gap between these relocation narratives? Besides, as Lizabeth Cohen’s *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* reminds us, immigrants wove a complex network of relations that extended beyond the workshop floor.

Whether because of work, the desire to travel, natural disaster, or racial violence, the flush of African descended people relocating across North America since Reconstruction has had tremendous cultural, economic, and political implications for the regions both losing and receiving these migrants. Though the obstacles they faced were surely many, black migrants did not shy away from the challenges presented by their arrival, precisely because for so many,—

especially those strong-armed out of their homes by white supremacist violence—the option of going back was simply off the table. The Great Migration effectively ended by the 1970s, in part because the rewards of decades of Civil Rights work forced new openings in the South that attracted at least some African Americans back to the region. Since 1965's Immigration and Naturalization Act, ever more foreign-born blacks have been coming to America, re-infusing once again a linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity first witnessed over a century ago. While the era of mass black population relocation may well be over, African Americans still turn to migration as the need arises, as most hauntingly seen in 2005 when hurricane Katrina threw scores of African Americans' lives into chaos, uprooting once again yet another generation of black Southerners.

There is, to be sure, an exceptionally American dimension to the great rush of black migrants cutting across North America since the mid-nineteenth century. These mostly Southern migrants abandoned a region wholesale on the promise that life in the North and West might be outside Jim Crow's reach. And when it was not, they moved further still, into Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean, and across the Atlantic. While a host of push and pull factors fed this migration, the most important one, the most urgent one, the most uniquely domestic one is without a doubt the rise of racial terrorism in the form of ethnic cleansing, banishment, and lynching.

Accordingly, African Americans on the run from Jim Crow became part of a more global wave of racially and religiously persecuted ethnic minorities forced into exile—in this case simultaneously, domestically, and internationally. Thus, for so many African descended people, their Great Migration amounted to a century long quest for safe haven.