

“All I Ask Is Give Me a Chance” (1989)¹

James R. Grossman

James Reese, a black Floridian “looking for a free state to live in,” set out for Chicago in 1917. Fifty-two years had passed since the enactment of the Thirteenth Amendment, yet he and others who left written testimonies to their reasons for participating in the Great Migration drew upon a familiar vocabulary. A half-century earlier the Reverend James Lynch, touring the South after the Civil War, had declared that blacks considered themselves “part and parcel of the American Republic” and expected to be treated as such. For most freedmen and their children the security of this citizenship appeared to lie in independence through land ownership. By 1916, however, a new generation of black southerners had begun to turn to industry, to the city, and to the North for access to the perquisites of American citizenship.

Before they could make this decision, black southerners had to have an alternative that had been unavailable to blacks before World War I—industrial employment. World War I and the economic boom that accompanied it created the conditions that made possible the entrance of black migrants into northern industries. Until then, immigrants had been arriving from Europe at an annual rate that surpassed the North's total black population, thereby providing employers with a pool of labor that they considered preferable to black Americans. The outbreak of war in 1914, however, abruptly halted the flow of European immigrants. Initially, the cessation of immigration had little impact on labor markets, as a slight economic downturn had already reduced demand for industrial workers. By 1916, increasing orders both from abroad and from a domestic market stimulated by military preparedness raised prospects for spectacular profits in most major industries. Confronted with the loss of their traditional source of additional labor, northern employers looked to previously unacceptable alternatives: they opened the factory gates to white women and black southerners, although only as a temporary measure. The mobilization of the armed forces in 1917 exacerbated the labor shortage, and created still more opportunities for newcomers to the industrial labor force.

The simplest explanation of the causes of the Great Migration, at what one might call the macro-historical level, is that it happened because of the impact of the war on the labor market. With northern jobs available at wages considerably higher than what a black southerner could earn at home, migration represented a rational response to a change in the labor market. At the same time, a series of economic setbacks drove blacks from the rural South. Boll weevils, storms, floods, tightening of credit: all made farming more tenuous in the South. Changes in northern and southern labor markets thus occurred simultaneously, and the major question for labor economists has been whether the push was stronger than the pull. More sociologically oriented observers have added to the equation the push of racial discrimination in the South and the pull of less oppressive race relations in the North, along with the attractions of the urban environment. But this line of inquiry has its limits. As Carter G. Woodson argued in 1918, it is

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not clear that given an alternative, blacks would not have long ago fled the South and its oppression. Conversely, he explained, had they been treated “as men,” blacks might have stayed in the South despite the new jobs in the North. Analysis of the changes occasioned by the onset of World War I can tell us why the Great Migration happened when it did, but cannot fully explain why people decided to leave. Causes are not the same as motivations.

A white Alabamian who wrote in the *Montgomery Advertiser* that “it's plain as the noonday sun the Negro is leaving this country for higher wages” might have simplistically overstated his case, but he was aware of the most obvious attraction of the North. A Hawkinsville, Georgia, black laborer, unable to afford a railroad ticket, concurred, explaining, “the reason why I want to come north is why that the people dont pay enough for the labor that a man can do down here.” From Carrier, Mississippi, a prospective migrant wrote that he was “willing to work anywhere” to earn decent wages. “Wages is so low and grocery bills is so high,” he complained, “untill all I can do is to live.” “There is no work here that pays a man to stay here,” agreed a South Carolinian.

These men believed they could do better in the North. Readers of the popular *Chicago Defender* learned that anyone could find a job “if you really want it.” Chicago daily wages in 1916 started in the \$2.00-\$2.50 range for men; most workers earned at least \$2.50. The minimum in the packinghouses, soon to be increased by 50 percent, was 27 cents per hour in March 1918. Women reportedly earned \$2.00 per day as domestics—as much as many earned in a week in the South. In the factories women's wages were even higher, and southerners could not help but be impressed. Even unskilled laborers supposedly could earn an astronomical \$5.00 per day. By 1919, the average hourly manufacturing wage in Chicago was 48 cents, a rate unheard of in the South. Although many were aware of Chicago's high cost of living, they expected these “big prices for work” to be more than adequate. “Willing to do most ennery kind of Work,” prospective migrants did not expect “to live on flowry Beds of ease.” But they were confident they could earn high wages, even if that required learning new skills.

Most contemporary examinations of the migration emphasized the primacy of wage differentials, along with the economic setbacks caused by the boll weevil, natural disasters, and low cotton prices in 1914 and 1915. James H. Dillard, Emmett J. Scott, and George E. Haynes, whose studies dominated discussion of the migration for many years, regarded economic considerations as “primary,” “fundamental,” and “paramount.” Charles S. Johnson, who was responsible for much of Scott's monograph and analyzed the exodus for the Urban League and the influential Chicago Commission on Race Relations, stressed “the desire to improve their economic status.” Twenty years later, sociologists St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, in their classic *Black Metropolis*, drew on these studies and others to conclude that the migration's “basic impetus has remained economic.”

Wartime considerations probably led Dillard, Scott, and Haynes—all federal officials—to stress the needs of the labor market, which the Department of Labor was attempting to control in the interest of war production. By emphasizing economic motivations, they reflected the Wilson administration's hope that the migration, with its unsettling effects on both northern cities and the southern labor market, would abate after the war boom. Scott, Woodrow Wilson's wartime ambassador to black Americans and former secretary to Booker T. Washington, encouraged blacks to remain in the South. The Wilson administration, furthermore, never considered

attacking white racism in the South. It could hardly ascribe migration to such factors as Jim Crow, which it had introduced into the federal government, and lynching, which it had denied was either representative or common in the South.

Johnson, the most knowledgeable student of the movement, had the most unusual yet strategic reason to highlight economic motivations. Writing as a National Urban League official, the young black sociologist did not want northern employers to think of the migrants as impulsive or irrational. Migration to “improve their economic status,” represented “a symptom of wholesome and substantial life purpose; the other [flight from southern persecution], the symptom of a fugitive incurageous opportunism.” Although later students of the exodus might have been more disinterested than Johnson or the compilers of federally sponsored studies, most have justifiably leaned on these analyses as authoritative and relatively free of the polemical tone of most other contemporary commentaries. Recent quantitative studies have also reiterated the conventional wisdom that persecution had long plagued black southerners and therefore could not have “caused” the migration.

Racial oppression cannot, however, be dismissed quite so easily, even if the impossibility of quantifying either its incidence or impact renders it difficult to measure as an “input” into an equation of causation. Although the *Chicago Defender* might have been concentrating more on attacking the South than on careful analysis when it announced that “the maltreatment ... of the Race is the sole cause of the exodus,” a more restrained and cautious W. E. B. Du Bois found much truth in the “race paper's” exaggeration. A group of migrants leaving Louisiana for Chicago told Du Bois what they would have been reluctant to tell a white investigator: they were “willing to run any risk to get where they might breathe freer.” As editor of the NAACP's official journal, Du Bois was not a disinterested observer, but his observation highlights a crucial issue: the breadth of the meaning of “freedom” and other terms used by the migrants themselves.

The physical abuse that sent many migrants North assumed a variety of forms, from mistreatment by law enforcement officials to rape and lynching. The fear of such violence could induce flight as easily as the acts themselves. Blacks from Florida told investigators that they had gone North because of “the horrible lynchings in Tennessee.” In Meridian, Mississippi, “migration fever” broke out after news reached town of the lynching of a woman in Louisiana. “Everyone began to circulate that story. Men feared for their wives and women feared for their lives,” remembered a man who later relocated in Chicago. Chicago Urban League workers found that after a lynching, “colored people from that community will arrive in Chicago inside of two weeks.”

In some cases, what James Weldon Johnson called “the tremendous shore of southern barbarism” literally forced blacks to migrate. Practicing a half-century-old practice known as “whitecapping,” whites in scattered nonplantation districts physically drove blacks from their land. In 1917, twenty-five hundred blacks were reportedly forced out of two Georgia counties. At the same time, an observer described agricultural Carroll County, Mississippi, as a white cap county in a mild form,” noting that it was now possible to ride for miles and not see a black face.” Blacks had been “driven from the county and their property confiscated.” This activity continued into the 1920s, with the revived Ku Klux Klan often lending organizational effectiveness. In 1920, Klansmen posted notices in the environs of one Georgia town, notifying blacks they would no longer be permitted to “live from the river north of the town to the Blue

Ridge Mountains.” Few blacks were forced out of homes in areas heavily populated by blacks, but as one southern white reformer noted, such acts of terrorism were “widely discussed among the negroes and have been a big factor in their unrest.”

Along with sporadic violence, continuous discrimination stimulated the exodus. One black church elder in Macon, Georgia, pointed to “unjust treatments enacted daily on the streets, street cars and trains...driving the Negro from the South.” It was this kind of day-to-day indignity that led Jefferson Clemons, “tired of bein' dog and beast,” to leave his DeRidder, Louisiana, home. In a South permeated with an “atmosphere of injustice and oppression,” the *AME Church Review* observed, migration had become the only solution for those who sought to “stand erect as men.”

Most analysts of the migration grouped these “causes” of the exodus under the general category of “social” or “sentimental” factors. Also included among these were disfranchisement, inferior educational facilities (sometimes included under economic factors), unfair treatment in the courts, peonage, and “poor treatment” in general. Usually this group fell into the “secondary” category of explanations for the exodus. Some commentators assigned to them an order of relative significance; others simply recited a list, best summarized as “conditions were bad.” The black Houston *Observer* offered a poignant recitation of dissatisfactions:

Take some of the sections from which the Negro is departing and he can hardly be blamed when the facts are known. He is kicked around, cuffed, lynched, burned, homes destroyed, daughters insulted and oftimes raped, has no vote nor voice, is underpaid, and in some instances when he asks for pay receives a 2 X 4 over his head. These are facts. If he owes a bill he must pay it or his body and family will suffer the consequences. But if certain people in the community owe him, he must wait until they get ready to pay him or “sell out.” In some settlements, if his crop is better than the other fellow's, his early exit is demanded or forced. When such conditions are placed and forced upon a people and no protest is offered, you cannot blame a race of people for migrating.

The *Observer* succeeded better than most in avoiding laundry lists of “causes,” and bifurcating “economic” and “social” factors. But like many others, it examined in isolation those forces driving blacks from the South.

Analysts who examined the appeal of the North—the “pull” forces—also compiled innumerable lists, citing high wages, equality, bright lights, “privileges,” good schools, and other attractions describing the obverse of what the migrants were fleeing in the South. Indeed, as Richard Wright would later learn, southern black images of Chicago, and the North in general, “had no relation whatever to what actually existed.” He and other children in Jackson, Mississippi, had heard that “a white man hit a colored man up north and that colored man hit that white man, knocked him cold, and nobody did a damn thing.” Adults shared impressions of the North as a paradise of racial equality. Wellborn Jenkins of Georgia thought that “when white and black go into the courts of the north they all look alike to those judges up there.” Misinformed or not, southern blacks were certain they could find racial justice and opportunities for improvement in Chicago.

Regardless of how much priority is placed on which factor, lists of “push” and “pull” forces suggest mainly the range of injustices and privations driving blacks from the South. No list can implicitly weave together its various components to compose an image of the fabric of social and economic relationships which drove black southerners to look elsewhere for a better life. Nor can lists communicate the fears, disgust, hopes, and goals that combined to propel blacks from the South and draw them northward.

An explanation of motivation, of the decision to move North, lies in the continuity of southern black life, as much as in the changes caused by the wartime economy. A Mississippian tried to explain the problem:

Just a few months ago they hung Widow Baggage's husband from Hirshbery bridge because he talked back to a white man. He was a prosperous Farmer owning about 80 acres. They killed another man because he dared to sell his cotton 'off the place.' These things have got us sore. Before the North opened up with work all we could do was to move from one plantation to another in hope of finding something better.

All the exploitation—legal, social, economic—was bound together within his use of the impersonal “they.” This reference to a web of social relations has broad implications for both the causes and meaning of the Great Migration, especially when considered within the context of the tradition of black migration and persistence in the South.

The Great Migration both constituted a stage in the long-term process of Afro-American urbanization and accelerated a northward trend that had begun in the 1890s. Urbanization had started before the guns of the Civil War had quieted and has continued into the 1980s. In absolute terms, the approximately three million blacks who left the South between 1940 and 1960 formed an exodus twice as large as that of 1910-30. The Great Migration, however, represents an important shift in direction, with the center of black population moving northward during World War I, rather than toward the south and west as it had in previous decades. It also marks an important transformation in outlook among a growing minority of black southerners. Since emancipation, both migration and persistence had usually involved strategies directed towards a degree of autonomy based on land ownership. The Great Migration, by contrast, drew upon black southerners who looked to urban life and the industrial economy for the social and economic foundation of full citizenship and its perquisites. It was, as observers noted then and since, a “second emancipation,” and accordingly it must be considered within a historical context anchored by the first emancipation and as a similarly transforming event.

As a symbolic theme and social process, migration has epitomized the place of Afro-Americans in American society. Slaves suffered both restrictions on their freedom of movement and coerced migration within the South, and many blacks came to regard the ability to move as, in writer Howard Thurman's words, “the most psychologically dramatic of all manifestations of freedom” Upon emancipation ex-slaves seized upon spatial mobility as one of the most meaningful components of their newly won status. Subsequently they and their children moved, within the rural South, to southern cities, and finally to northern cities, in a frustrating quest for equality and opportunity. Conversely, southern planters viewed black migration as a threat to economic and social stability. Until the mechanization of cotton culture in the mid-twentieth

century, black geographic mobility—like black social and economic mobility—threatened the racial assumptions and labor relations upon which southern economy and society rested. Debt peonage and the crop lien system seldom inhibited local movement but, when combined with contract enforcement laws, did make it difficult for blacks to move longer distances. Various forms of labor enticement legislation inhibited the activities of labor agents, whose role whites invariably overemphasized but who did provide information about faraway opportunities. The narrow range of employment opportunities open to black workers, both inside and outside the South, was perhaps the greatest impediment to black migration until World War I.

Until the Civil War, few black southerners could move about freely. Although perhaps as many as twenty-five thousand slaves escaped during the American Revolution, and more than three thousand eventually made their way to Nova Scotia at the end of the war, the first major migration of black southerners was no more voluntary than the one that had brought them to America in the first place. The opening of the trans-Appalachian West to settlement by slaveholders brought new opportunities to whites. For approximately a hundred thousand blacks between 1790 and 1810 it meant the destruction of family and community ties that had developed in what had been a relatively stable slave society in the Chesapeake. The enormous expansion of cotton cultivation in the early nineteenth century, coupled with the closing of the foreign slave trade in 1808, soon transformed a forced migration dominated by planters carrying their own slaves westward to one increasingly characterized by the professional slave trader. Although the Chesapeake remained the major source for the interstate slave trade, after 1830 North and South Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri, and eventually Georgia also became “exporters” of slaves. The plantations of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Florida, Arkansas, and Texas were worked largely by these early black “migrants” and their children. Although it is difficult to determine the volume of the domestic slave trade, it appears that more than one million black southerners were forcibly relocated between 1790 and 1860.

Barriers against voluntary movement complemented forced migrations in the antebellum South. The hundreds of slaves who escaped each year constituted only a fraction of the southern black population. By the 1830s even free black southerners were hemmed in, their movement across state lines either restricted or prohibited. Furthermore, the security of family and community ties discouraged them from moving, given the limited opportunities available to free blacks in both northern and southern cities. A few black southerners did find their way North, however, and as early as the 1840s, Chicago had a small community of escaped bondsmen.

During the Civil War, white fears and black hopes generated opposing migration streams. Many slaveowners responded to the approach of Union troops by taking their slaves west, either to the upcountry in the eastern states or from the Deep South to Texas and Arkansas. The last of the great forced migrations followed the fall of New Orleans, as more than 150,000 slaves were transported from Louisiana and Mississippi into Texas. At the same time, thousands of slaves fled toward the advancing Union army and the freedom that they expected the war to bring. The Emancipation Proclamation did not set this movement in motion. Indeed, the executive order cannot be separated from the actions of deserting slaves, who forced Union generals and subsequently President Lincoln to confront the issue of what were at first considered contraband of war. If Union army camps did not constitute a Promised Land they at least provided a destination that made this unorganized mass migration possible.

Former slaves continued to move after the war, with many freed men and women associating their former homes with their former status. Most ex-slaves traveled only short distances, often merely to the next plantation or a nearby settlement. Migration, even if only local, permitted ex-slaves to prove to themselves and their former masters that they now controlled their own labor and their own family life; the act of moving constituted a test of the meaning of emancipation. Some ex-slaves moved in search of family separated by antebellum forced migration; others headed back to plantations from which they had been removed during the war. Much of the movement grew out of a search for favorable social, political, and economic conditions. Former slaves recognized that planters needed their labor and used their new freedom to move as a means of extracting the best possible arrangements from the whites who remained in control of the land. One Georgia freedman, explaining that he did not want to sign a contract because it would strip him of this option, and in a more abstract sense limit his freedom, insisted that he did not have to worry about the planter refusing to pay, because “den I can go somewhere else.” Freedpeople who removed to the upcountry or either acquired or squatted on poor land wanted, according to one northern observer, to be “entirely independent of white men.” Related to the reluctance of many ex-slaves to produce more than a subsistence, this drive for autonomy might have reflected hostility towards the market as much as an attempt to avoid contact with whites. But it is difficult to separate whites and the market as objects of concern, because involvement with the market implied dealing with whites; and ex-slaves had good reason to be suspicious of any such dealings.

Perhaps most essential to the impulse to move was the search for “independence,” which was closely associated with land ownership. With high hopes and unrealistic expectations of acquiring land, some freedpeople journeyed to developing regions within the South, sometimes following labor agents representing planters confronting a labor shortage. Although it more often tried to dissuade freedpeople from changing employers, the Freedmen's Bureau occasionally tried to send workers to areas with labor shortages, thereby stimulating some long-distance relocation. More frequently, labor agents provided the information and transportation necessary for interstate migration. But land ownership remained elusive for most families, as emancipation teased ex-slaves with the right to own land without providing the wherewithal to obtain it.

Not all former slaves concluded that the countryside offered the best chances to enjoy the perquisites of freedom. Indeed, in many respects cities were “freer,” given widespread rural violence and the threat of retribution from former slaveholders. Aware of their vulnerability on scattered plantations and farms, some freedmen looked to cities for security, in the form of federal troops, Freedmen's Bureau officials, and sheer numbers of blacks. Cities also offered ready accessibility to black churches and benevolent societies, schools and relief services established by the Bureau, and possibilities for political participation. It is impossible to measure this move to the cities, given problems with the 1870 census and the fallacies inherent in using a decennial count to chart a period characterized by considerable instability, if not chaos. But if most freedpeople looked first to the land for the fulfillment of the promise of emancipation, it is clear that many others flocked to nearby cities and towns during and after the war.

Dismayed by the social and political implications of an urban black population, city officials resorted to both legal and extralegal devices to push former slaves back to the land, where planters wanted to keep them as a dependent labor force. Presaging the response of the

white South to future black migration, especially the Great Migration North during World War I, whites combined repressive measures with the argument that black urbanization owed more to external agitation (in this case Radical Republicans) than to black initiative or problems in rural areas. But “outside influences” more often tended to discourage urbanization. Freedmen's Bureau and army officials, along with many black leaders influenced by the nineteenth-century agrarian ideal, advised ex-slaves to eschew urban life. Although most Bureau officials and other northern Republicans involved in Reconstruction did not share the planters' goal of reviving the plantation on the backs of a dependent labor force, they did want to resume production quickly and envisioned a black yeomanry that first had to be “disciplined” into the norms of a free labor system. Despite their divergent visions of southern agricultural structure, planters and federal officials could agree on the outlines of a policy designed to limit black workers' choices and return them to the farms. Vagrancy laws, passed by unreconstructed governments with the cooperation of the Bureau, provided a temporary mechanism. As early as the latter part of 1865, hungry refugees, forced to abandon an urban framework for freedom, began to return to the plantations.

Northern cities even more successfully resisted the influx that many northerners feared would follow emancipation. Before the Civil War, many northern states restricted “Negro immigration,” and Illinois prohibited it entirely in its 1848 constitution. Generally unenforced and ineffective, the laws did reflect attitudes that were unlikely to change quickly. Northern whites, however, had little to fear. Few freedpeople even considered northward migration, and many of those who did recognized that it was impractical, given the costs of transportation and the paucity of opportunities for employment. In its attempt to match the supply of black workers with the demand, the Freedmen's Bureau did send some ex-slaves North, but insufficient—if not nonexistent—demand severely limited such activity. The approximately nine thousand freedpeople sent North from Washington, D.C., constituted an exception. With the District straining under the burden of relief for thousands of refugees, many of whom refused to return to the South, Bureau officials in this case ignored their normal opposition to relocation outside the South. Bureau policy aside, however, most ex-slaves had little information about the North, few resources to get there, and -greater interest in independence in the more familiar South.

As the promise of Reconstruction dissolved in state after state during the 1870s, many black southerners began to consider leaving the South, although generally still within the context of a commitment to farming. With the southern economy dependent on a landless black labor force, and with blacks placing the highest value on the independence associated with the ownership of productive land, something had to give, and usually it was black aspirations. One logical alternative was to seek land elsewhere. A variety of emigration projects attracted considerable interest between the 1870s and 1910s.

Like thousands of other Americans in the nineteenth century, black southerners looked west during the 1870s. Nearly ten thousand blacks from Kentucky and Tennessee made their way to Kansas during that decade, many under the leadership of Benjamin “Pap” Singleton, who emphasized the potential value of homesteading and the formation of black colonies. But it was the “Kansas Fever Exodus” of 1879-80 that attracted national attention, although it actually involved fewer settlers than the movement into the state earlier in the decade. In the aftermath of the often bloody repression that accompanied the collapse of Reconstruction, more than six

thousand black Texans, Mississippians, and Louisianians went to Kansas in search of political freedom and land. Perhaps an equal number followed over the next few years, but most important, Kansas Fever infected thousands of other black southerners who could not muster the financial resources to participate in the movement or who ran out of money in St. Louis. Seeking to organize black southerners for political activity in the mid-1870s, Henry Adams found that many preferred simply to leave. He later estimated—perhaps with some exaggeration—that ninety-eight thousand of his people were ready to leave the Deep South. Thousands of others actively debated the proposition. The opportunity to own land formed the wellspring of the “Kansas Fever Idea” and in that respect the Exodus resembled most other nineteenth-century black migration. Yet other features anticipated later movement to northern cities. Although the Exodus seemed unorganized and haphazard, many “Exodusters” wrote for information before leaving home, traveled in organized groups, and considered their move part of a broad popular impulse. Moreover, they contrasted the promise of full citizenship in Kansas—based on the possibility of land ownership in this case—with the future shaped by southern white “Redemption” achieved through fraud, violence, and intimidation. Both the debate that the Exodus engendered among black leaders and the hostility it provoked from white southerners would characterize the later Great Migration.”

If the Kansas Exodus left in its wake more frustration than hope, it hardly spelled the end of westward ventures based on the lure of open land and the promise of “independence.” More than seven thousand blacks participated in the 1889 Oklahoma land rush, and over the next two decades, approximately one hundred thousand more followed. The formation of “Oklahoma Clubs” suggests once again at least a modicum of organizational activity. In an expansion of what had been only a minor theme in the Kansas Exodus, towns established, developed, and inhabited exclusively by blacks constituted an important part of the drive for land and for both political and economic self-determination. Promoters of such towns linked the ownership of property—particularly productive land—to the attainment and protection of full citizenship. Segregated communities, according to the most complete study of these towns, represented not rejection of American identity, but “the promise of eventual entrance into the mainstream of American life complete with economic prosperity and full social and political rights for all.” The approximately twenty-five black towns established between 1891 and 1910 promised, in this sense, one solution to the eternal dilemma that W. E. B. Du Bois referred to as the “twoness” of being both black and American.

But if Oklahoma's black towns offered economic and political autonomy unavailable anywhere else in the United States, these struggling communities also brought disappointment, disillusion, and hardship. Economic difficulties plagued the towns from the beginning, and the transition to statehood in 1907 led to disfranchisement accompanied by racial violence. Even as black southerners were still streaming into Oklahoma during the early twentieth century, despair had driven many earlier settlers to look outside the United States for refuge from what seemed to be a ubiquitous racial order.

Although prospective emigrants considered other destinations, Africa remained the focus of the most enduring, and perhaps quixotic, migration project involving black Americans. Before the Civil War, the American Colonization Society, comprising mainly philanthropic—if usually Negrophobic—whites, had transported twelve thousand black colonists to Liberia. Most black

leaders opposed the Society's efforts, considering colonization akin to deportation. A minority, increasingly visible by the 1850s, accepted emigration as a legitimate alternative to the limited freedom available in the United States, but rejected Liberia as “a mere dependency of southern slaveholders.” Liberia would remain, however, the major focus of Afro-American emigrationism. During the half-century after the Civil War, each successive low point in American race relations—first the end of Reconstruction and later the passage of Jim Crow laws and the upsurge of lynchings during the 1890s—stimulated renewed interest in Liberia among black Americans. Not only was land available, but neither economic nor political structures required interaction with whites. Only one thousand black southerners actually sailed to Liberia during the twenty years after 1890, but thousands otherwise participated in a movement generally associated with Henry McNeal Turner. Many bought shares in joint stock companies which promised passage across the Atlantic. Others joined emigration clubs, listened receptively to speeches, or enthusiastically read newspapers advocating emigration. But with the bulk of its appeal in the poorest areas of the rural Deep South, emigration to Africa remained financially impossible.

If most black southerners either could not or did not wish to leave the South, they did not remain passively in one place awaiting salvation. Like white Americans, they were remarkably mobile during the half-century after the Civil War. Kansas and Liberia captured the imaginations of thousands of black southerners hungry for land and autonomy, but less exotic destinations within the South provided more practical outlets for dissatisfaction, restlessness, and even hope. Although most movement continued to be local and individualized, as it had been during Reconstruction, many black southerners undertook longer journeys, often within the framework of a group enterprise. Continuing the quest for land ownership, most of those who migrated longer distances headed for rural destinations, generally towards the south and west.

Since Reconstruction, blacks working worn-out land in the Carolinas and Georgia had been responsive to rumors of supposedly higher wages and better tenure arrangements in the Mississippi Delta and other areas in the Gulf states. In many cases, labor agents representing agricultural interests in these regions played a significant role in both transmitting information and organizing departures. Much of the information about fertile land and crops “high as a man on horseback” traveled by way of black workers moving about looking “for betterment.” These migrations remain obscure, but a study of the movement of between three thousand and five thousand blacks from eight counties in Georgia to Mississippi at the end of 1899 suggests that labor agents enjoyed considerable credibility in the black South. This exodus was also, however, “an indigenous movement among working-class blacks to achieve a better life,” and encouragement from agents was less necessary than the transportation they provided. In at least one county, local people took the initiative and held meetings to discuss and plan migration. Similarly, in South Carolina, “emigration societies” formed, with membership dues used to finance the expeditions of scouts, who would travel to Florida, Mississippi, Arkansas, or Texas and report back as to whether actual conditions had been honestly represented. Frequently these scouts sent back reports only slightly less inaccurate than the fraudulent promises of the agents, and hopeful emigrants would pack up and leave, only to find themselves once again sharecropping on halves, under equally oppressive racial codes.

This constant movement, especially to more fertile land to the south and west, disturbed whites who not only feared diminution of their labor supply but also recognized—in only

implicitly—the relationship between immobility and dependence. After the Civil War landowners in the areas of greatest black population had remained committed to the plantation system. Stability—both of the plantation system itself and of the labor force required to maintain it profitably—remained a high priority to a landed class cognizant of its need to control its black labor force. Complaining that the labor remained chaotic because of the “migratory habits” of blacks, southern whites fashioned legal and economic institutions designed partly to stabilize that market. Even movement within the South encountered such opposition from whites that some prospective migrants had to overcome barriers erected to protect landlords and agricultural employers from threats to “their” labor force

A combination of vagrancy laws, legislation circumscribing the activity of “emigrant agents,” and criminal (rather than civil) enforcement of sharecropping contracts formed a legal system that enhanced planter control over black labor. Complementing this structure was a cycle of indebtedness that could limit the options of black farmers for long periods of time. Landlords had to ensure that once a black renter or wage laborer planted a crop, he would stay on hand to cultivate and harvest it. Both the contract and the debt incurred in order to secure everyday necessities provided a legal basis for labor stability in any given year. As one Mississippi planter explained with reference to a tenant in debt, “If he goes away, I just go and get him.” Thus, the easiest time to move was between settlement time around Christmas and the beginning of new advances, which even after a good year could be as early as February. In some cases, tenants and laborers never paid off the debt—at least not according to the landlord or merchant who kept the accounts. As one Mississippi sharecropper observed, “I have knowed lots of people in Mississippi who cain't leave, because if you make a crop and don't clear nothin' and you still wound up owin' on your sharecrop and on your furnish' and you try to move, well the police be after you then all right.” Many planters even limited the amount of land that tenants could rent, to ensure not only intensive cultivation but also continued dependence and therefore “labor available for hire.” The freedmen who had fought for control over their time and their crop had understood the issue quite clearly. But laws, markets, and social relations secured to planters and merchants sufficient control to stimulate blacks to move while making it difficult to do so.

On the whole, however, it is likely that most black southerners who wanted to move could manage to evade legal impediments if necessary. In the Southeast, as land became less productive white resistance to black migration declined along with the demand for labor. In most of the South, much of the legislation was directed against labor agents, who while influential were not as essential to long-distance moves as whites assumed and were irrelevant to local movement. Tenants circumvented ties of indebtedness through surreptitious departure or more often by simply transferring the debt to a new landlord. Where a merchant rather than a landlord held the note, a debtor could try a new piece of land with even less difficulty. The system did keep most movement local, as the need for credit inhibited most rural black southerners from moving to new communities where they would lack “standing” with landlords and merchants. The visibility of interstate migration and schemes for emigration, along with intense opposition to any threat to the stability of the agricultural labor force, tends to obscure the prevailing practice of short-distance moves.

Whether changing landlords, trying out a new piece of land, buying a small farm with a surplus obtained after a few particularly good years, lapsing back into tenancy after a bad year, or

venturing to town or city seeking wage work, black southerners seldom stayed in one place for very long. Movement became as central to southern black life as it has been to the American experience in general, emerging as a major theme in black music, with the railroad recurring as a symbol of the freedom to move and start life anew. White efforts at social control, motivated in part by the refusal of blacks to remain satisfied with their “place,” only fueled black dissatisfaction and stimulated the migratory impulse.

To a considerable extent, this instability was class-based, correlated more closely with one's place in the southern economy than with race. Mobility rates among black farmers exceeded those of their white counterparts because blacks constituted a disproportionately large segment of the most mobile group of farm operators-share tenants. Within any given tenure category, black farmers tended to be more stable than whites. Even share tenants were probably less mobile than statistics suggest, because the census recorded as “moves” any shifts from tract to tract on a given plantation. Black southerners moved not because they had a “penchant for migration,” but because the economic, political, and social equality presumed to be a perquisite of American citizenship remained beyond their grasp. A different region, a different plot of land, a different landlord—all seemed worth a try.

During the decade preceding World War I, a series of setbacks to the cotton economy of the Deep South contributed to the migratory impulse, while narrowing the alternatives. The opening decade of the twentieth century marked the end of the westward expansion of southern cotton cultivation. Meanwhile, the boll weevil began to widen its swath across the cotton fields. A significant proportion of black migration between 1900 and 1910 coincided with the coming of the weevil, which had entered the United States from Mexico in 1892, and reached Louisiana in 1903 and Mississippi four years later. Moving eastward as blacks moved westward, the insect forced black farmers either to keep moving or accept its depredations, given the ineffectiveness of most methods of combating its attacks on ripening cotton bolls. In the area around Shreveport, Louisiana, it struck hardest between 1906 and 1910, with yields returning to normal by 1914. Mississippi, on the other hand, suffered greatest devastation after 1913, and Alabama after 1916. Intrastate variation in the impact of the weevil further contributed to the tendency of its attacks to stimulate migration, as black farmers tried to stay one step ahead of the threat.

De white man he got ha'f de crap
 Boll-Weevil took de res'.
 Ain't got no home,
 Ain't got no home.

As if the weevils themselves were not sufficient to ruin black farmers, many tenants found themselves forced to absorb their landlords' losses as well as their own. One United States Department of Agriculture analyst noted that “the advances, furnished to the negroes can be held down to very low limits in case of necessity,” which suggests that when “necessity” struck in the form of the boll weevil, the already depressed standard of living among black tenants dropped even further. Indeed, the impact of the weevil must be evaluated within the context of specific forms of productive relations in southern agriculture. Neither black farm owners nor white farmers moved as readily as black tenants from infested areas, largely because the latter had the

least latitude to react by changing the crop mix and were most subject to the impact of the boll weevil on the availability of credit.

The credit system that economic historians have demonstrated was essential to the structure of southern agriculture compounded the impact of the weevil on black tenants and wage laborers. For years, unharvested cotton had been readily accepted as collateral for agricultural loans. Indeed, by accepting only cotton, merchants and bankers had forced even farm owners into the same one-crop dependency as tenants. To the lender, these loans were safe so long as a good crop could be expected. Even when prices dropped, the loan was secure, as the merchant and banker held first liens on the crop. But by 1916-17, the weevil had spread uncertainty throughout the South. Banks failed and loans became difficult to secure. Many farm owners found themselves forced to sell their land at depressed prices and either turn to renting or head for the city. Again, tenants fared even worse, as the credit crunch further limited advances of food and other supplies, while driving up the already exorbitant interest they paid for those advances.

Belatedly, some planters recognized the folly of their obsession with cotton and began, as one historian has explained, “to look up from their almanacs and listen to agricultural experts.” For many, this meant diversification, even if only temporarily. Had such diversification occurred earlier, more black farmers would have survived the boll weevil. But now the decision operated to drive many of them from the land, because such crops as corn and soybeans—whether raised as food or fodder—required less labor and were less conducive to a sharecropping system. Newly diversifying sections around Jackson, Mississippi, noted sociologist Charles Johnson in 1917, had recently decreased their labor force from 30 to 60 percent. On the whole, however, diversification touched only a small percentage of the cotton South, as most farmers and agricultural experts put their energy into protecting the cotton crop.

A Mississippi woman who told Johnson of a “general belief [among blacks] that God had cursed the land,” described a reaction to more than just the boll weevil. The Mississippi River flooded in 1912 and 1913, and a drought was followed by driving rainstorms in late 1915. The tightened credit market exacerbated economic distress, as both black farmers and whites employing blacks had difficulty obtaining capital to help recover from the disasters.

Combined with the continuing problem of soil exhaustion in older cotton-growing regions, the chronic instability of the cotton economy, and the endless dissatisfaction inherent in the credit system, the boll weevil and bad weather contributed to a situation characterized by Charles Johnson as “profound restlessness.” By 1910, most southern black farmers had moved at least once in the previous four years, and a third had lived in their current residence only a year or less. Johnson found in 1917 that “fundamental unrest” had been rife in Mississippi and Arkansas for at least a decade. But there had been nowhere to go. Constant movement between Mississippi and Arkansas, and from the hills to the Delta and back again, fell within the tradition of the search for land, but the potential clearly existed for other outlets. “Negroes were churning about in the South, seeking a vent,” Johnson later recalled, with the benefit of hindsight. An analyst for the federal Bureau of Agricultural Economics picked up the hints in 1913, when he commented on the increased tendency of black tenants to skip debts, perhaps a symptom not only of increasing desperation on the part of some, but of an increasing refusal on the part of young blacks to play by the accepted rules of southern agriculture.

Movement was hardly new to young black southerners. The cycle of cotton cultivation, leaving little work to do for weeks at a time between spurts of intense activity, stimulated a search for nonagricultural employment, especially among young blacks. As teenagers, many were “hired out” by parents or found wage work in various nonfarm occupations. Turpentine camps, sawmills, cottonseed-oil mills, and other industries closely related to the agricultural economy provided young black men with opportunities to acquire cash wages and glimpse a wider world. Young women ventured into cities and towns to earn extra cash washing, cooking, or cleaning. Although most black southerners continued to seek some form of landed independence or simply did not consider leaving the countryside, increasing numbers began to move off the farms in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Many of these men and women moved back and forth between town (or less frequently, city) and farm, leaving the countryside after picking in the late fall and returning to plant in March. They could take advantage also of the slack times during the growing season, which provided additional openings in the traditional way of life and permitted a gradual acculturation to geographical and economic mobility. Like the thousands of Europeans who lived in nonurban settings, similarly unstable in the late nineteenth century but also too rigid to permit younger individuals to seek new places without venturing into a wider world, a generation of black southerners took first steps into a labor market that stretched far beyond familiar boundaries.

Some left the countryside permanently, as part of a general pattern of gradual urbanization in the South. Despite considerable economic expansion in the early twentieth-century South, however, blacks continued to find few opportunities outside agriculture. Women could find service positions in cities and towns, but expanding textile, furniture, oil and gas, paper and pulp, and chemical industries remained virtually closed to black workers. Electricity, streetcars, and other new and skilled areas of urban employment remained equally white. Whether agricultural interests successfully prevented industrial development that they could not control and that would compete for black labor, or whether exclusion emerged from some other dynamic, the fact was inescapable to black southerners: with scattered exceptions (especially in the Birmingham region) the southern urban-industrial economy promised few opportunities for black people.

By 1890, 13.5 percent of black southerners lived in cities; two decades later, the proportion had risen to 19.7 percent. This rate of urbanization, although lower than that of southern whites and partly a result of extended city boundaries, was not insignificant. Nonfarm rural employment and even modest urbanization contributed to a gradual weaning from the land and represented an increasing dissatisfaction among younger blacks with the “place” that their parents had accepted in the economy. Given the casual nature of most employment open to them, black urbanites, especially men, had few opportunities to settle down. For some, movement to a southern city represented an initial step toward a more dramatic move outside the region. Before 1916, few black southerners went directly from the rural South to northern cities. Migration to a nearby town or city often led to subsequent relocation to such places as New York, Philadelphia, Boston, or Chicago.

Black migration out of the South increased dramatically in the 1890s, from only 156,000 in the previous twenty years to 185,000 in a single decade. Frequently referred to as “the migration of the talented tenth,” the 1890s movement has been attributed to the deterioration of

race relations in the South and the difficulties experienced by aggressive black leaders. Indeed, many of those who went North during this and the following decade were better educated and more affluent than most black southerners, as are most self-selecting migrating populations. The most visible northbound migrants, like Ida B. Wells, who was run out of Memphis because of her outspoken opposition to lynching, were militant leaders who could not remain safely in the South if they continued to reject the accommodating stance summarized in Booker T. Washington's Atlanta Compromise. Race riots, such as those in Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1898 and in Atlanta in 1906, were but the most extreme manifestations of white attempts to root out black participation in community affairs. Both riots accompanied disfranchisement campaigns, and each was followed by heavy black migration to the North. The first to go were often the most successful, best educated, and most outspoken blacks, who had borne the brunt of white violence. After the Atlanta riot, for example, local whites confronted Jesse Max Barber, editor of the *Voice of the Negro*, with three options: leaving town, recanting his comments about the causes of the riot, or serving on the chain gang. He headed for Chicago. W. E. B. Du Bois explained in 1902 that “a certain sort of soul, a certain kind of spirit finds the narrow repression, the provincialism of the South almost unbearable.” He left eight years later.

The notion of a “migration of the talented tenth,” however, is misleading, especially as northward migration began to accelerate after 1890. Like most long-distance migrants, the black southerners who went North during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries differed in the aggregate from those who stayed behind. The most detailed case study, focusing on the period 1865-1900, indicates that those who went to Boston, for example, were disproportionately urban, mulatto, literate, and from the Upper South. And overall, the Upper South provided the bulk of northbound black migrants until World War I. The prominent figures whose individual experiences suggest the “talented tenth” label differed sharply from most of the men and women who went North. The sheer volume of migration indicates that even if a “talented tenth” was overrepresented, the movement had to have drawn heavily upon the impoverished farmers and laborers who constituted the overwhelming proportion of black southerners. There is no evidence that the small southern black middle class was decimated—or even significantly affected—by migration during this period. Although perhaps better prepared for urban life than most black southerners, most newcomers to northern cities during these years brought few resources with them.

Most black southerners who went North before World War I headed for a handful of major cities; by 1910, New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago housed nearly one-fourth of the northern black population. Yet neither these cities nor others in the North seemed to offer an alternative for most black southerners during the half-century after the Civil War. Few industrial employers considered hiring blacks except as strikebreakers or porters, and the service economy could not absorb a substantial influx. Most black southerners who moved to northern cities before 1916 did find jobs, but mainly as menials, and it is not clear how much black unemployment might have resulted from more extensive migration northward at this point. With some justification, most black leaders—North and South—advised black southerners to heed Booker T. Washington's admonition to “cast down their buckets where they are.” Editor Robert Abbott of the *Chicago Defender*, himself a migrant from Georgia, advised black

southerners to be more militant than Washington did, but agreed that “the only wise thing to do is to stick to the farm.”

What emerges from this pattern of restlessness, persistence, and migration are three interrelated themes: a continuing commitment to landed independence, despite its increasingly evident impossibility; a localistic perspective; and growing tension. Those who moved—or wanted to move—long distances tended to remain oriented towards the land. But by the early twentieth century, both inside and outside the context of southern agricultural life, blacks were widening their perspectives and beginning to extend kin and community networks to an urban-industrial world that would eventually create important links to northern cities. To, many black southerners, movement continued to be the most effective means of asserting the freedom and independence that they had hoped to attain through land ownership. They moved when the ubiquitous exploitation reached intolerable levels, and they moved when something better beckoned. “Whenever we get an opportunity and inducement and [are] in position to take care of ourself, we moves,” commented one Mississippian in 1917.

Neither stability nor geographic mobility, however, enabled very many blacks to fulfill the promise of emancipation. In some places refused to sell land to blacks. Even cash tenancy loosened the close supervision a landlord exercised over a sharecropper, and most southern landowners assumed that black farmers could not work land efficiently without such supervision. After fifty years of “hoping against hope,” the *AME Church Review* observed in 1917, black southerners had learned that “neither character, the accumulation of property, the fostering of the Church, the schools and a better and higher standard of the home” had brought either respect or the chance for substantial mobility. “Confidence in the sense of justice, humanity and fair play of the white South is gone.” Even those who had followed all the rules and had lived (at least outwardly) according to the values preached to them ever since white missionaries had followed the Union armies South, had nothing to show for it. They had been told to be thrifty, but as journalist Henry Reed reported from Pittsburgh, Texas, “if they try to save any money the whites will lay them off for two or three days out of each week.” A farmer in Alpharetta, Georgia, knew that he “better not accumulate much, no matter how hard and honest you work for it, as they—well you can't enjoy it.” One Tennessee black newspaper reported in 1909 that a black farmer's “signs of prosperity” could attract “nightriders” who would drive him from his land. Working hard as an employee was equally unlikely to bring advancement; most black southerners were well aware of the “Dixie limit” beyond which no black could advance. Black sharecropper and occasional lumber hauler Ned Cobb later recalled how whites reacted to his ambitious ways: “Whenever the colored man prospered too fast in this country under the old rulins, they worked every figure to cut you down, cut your britches off you.” His brother Peter had given up, deciding to work as little as possible and accumulate nothing. “It might have been to his way of thinkin' that it weren't no use in climbin too fast; weren't no use in climbin slow, neither, if they was goin to take everything you worked for when you got too high.” Little had changed since Reconstruction, when, as W. E. B. Du Bois later argued, the white South had feared black success above all else.

But if southern blacks realized that the American success ethic had offered them nothing but false promises in the South, they did not dismiss the ethic itself as invalid. Few white tenants lived in the South's “Black Belt.” Black tenants who did live near whites might well have shared

the oversimplified conclusions of the 1910 census—that young whites, starting as tenant farmers, moved into the ranks of ownership “at a much more rapid rate” than blacks. Tenancy rates for farmers of both races in the South were steadily increasing, but the higher average age of black tenants suggests a continuing difference in the likelihood of ownership. The number of white farmers who were able to move up the “agricultural ladder” did make it appear that while whites could “leave the tenant class entirely,” most blacks could merely move “from one class of tenancy to another.” Even progress from sharecropper to share tenant to cash tenant represented a tenuous accomplishment which could be erased in a single bad year. The problem, then, seemed to be essentially racial. Success in America through hard work was possible, but not for blacks in the South. Whites, a migrant from Mississippi later explained, would not permit any black to occupy a place higher than that which they considered appropriate for that individual.

Voices from the North reinforced black southerners' belief in the possibility of success, while convincing them that they could open the door of opportunity by moving North. The “masses of the Negro people,” observed the head of the United States Department of Labor's Division of Negro Economics in 1919, “received the impression that all kinds and types of work might at some time be open to them.” The *Defender* had long preached the virtues of patience and hard work, reminding its readers that blacks did face obstacles, “perhaps a few more than their white brother, but none they could not surmount.” In 1916, it began emphasizing that such homilies pertained only to the North, “where every kind of labor is being thrown open.” As proof, it could offer biographies of such southerners who had “made it” in Chicago as prominent lawyer and politician Louis B. Anderson and editor Robert Abbott himself. These men had traveled the road to success in Chicago earlier, when fewer occupations had been open to blacks. For the mass of the race, the newspaper announced, “our chance is now.” Migrants' letters, written on the eve of their departures, suggest that they shared both the values and the optimism expressed in the *Defender*.

Most of the migrants who left oral or written testaments to the migratory impulse conflated economic and social stimuli into the goal of “bettering their position.” Variants of this theme abound: “Better his Standing”; “better my conditions in the business world”; “aspire to better my condition in life”; “elevate myself”; “better my condishion in as much as beaing assshured some protection as a good citizen”; “chance for advancement.” They moved North in search of many of the same things black Americans had once hoped would accompany emancipation: good schools, equal rights before the law, and equal access to public facilities. Those black men and women who decided to leave the South saw all of these, as well as the numerous other “privileges” they expected in Chicago, as the foundation of freedom and citizenship. A New Orleans woman was typically attracted to “the great chance that a colored parson has in Chicago of making a living with all the priveleg that the whites have and it mak me the most ankious to go.”

The recent opening of industrial employment to blacks, a direct result of the war, made it possible to translate these goals into a decision to leave the South and the agricultural economy that had once promised their fulfillment. Unlike their parents and many of those who remained behind, northbound migrants looked to industrial occupations, rather than to landed independence, as the means of attaining these goals. After two generations economic, educational, social, and political stultification in the South, it appeared that northern factories and

cities offered a final chance to obtain what other Americans supposedly had—the opportunity to better their condition by hard work. “All I ask is give me a chance,” wrote one Louisiana man, “and I will make good.”

Those who were less sanguine about improving their own position voiced aspirations for their children. For the first time since the heyday of the Freedmen's Bureau schools, black southerners could entertain expectations that their children might receive an education that would enable them to compete with whites. In the South, black schoolchildren walked miles to “wretched little hovels,” to be taught by people whose schooling barely exceeded that of their pupils. Through the *Defender*, black southerners knew of Chicago's Wendell Phillips High School, whose integrated education promised hope to their children. One man, who already earned a comfortable living, was not moving “just to get a job ... [but] ... want some places to send my children to school.” Another, also careful to state he already had a job, was leaving for Chicago “where I can educate my children.” From Anniston, Alabama, a man desperate to “do any kind of work,” pleaded for aid so he could “get where i can put my children in schol.” These prospective migrants assumed that access was the crucial issue and that it was race and region that limited access. Only later would their children learn the limited efficacy of access in the absence of community power and economic resources.

To black writer Alain Locke, commenting upon this “new vision of opportunity,” the migration represented “a spirit to seize ... a chance for the improvement of conditions.” The vision was new, because blacks had never before anticipated economic security or social mobility through mass entrance into American industry. But of equal import was Locke's choice of the verb “seize.” The migrants acted to better their condition by seizing control over their own destiny. The southern system had rested on their dependence on whites and on its ability to restrict their options. To those like the Kentuckian who migrated to Chicago because he “was tired of being a flunky,” migration constituted a rejection of that dependence. “Negroes are not so greatly disturbed about wages,” a black leader in Florida commented. “They are tired of being treated as children; they want to be men.” “Pushes” and “pulls” might be abstractly separable, but they operated together in the minds of black southerners comparing one place to another. To the ambitious men and women venturing North seeking independence and mobility, the Great Migration represented a new strategy in the struggle for the full rights of American citizenship, including the right to equality of opportunity.