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The Great Migration

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From the Editor's Desk...

The license plate on my car has a lobster on it. My friends at home chuckle when they see it. I guess it is a departure from the Georgia peach that was on my last plate, and the comparatively generic "Ontario—Yours to Discover" in blue and white. But I keep my Georgia license plate in my car and it greets me every time I open the trunk. I keep it for



Maureen Elgersman

two reasons. First, I had to renew my car registration about six months before I moved to Maine; it had cost enough that I can't see my way to throwing it out. What is more important is that I keep it to remind me of how far I've come, both physically and professionally, in the past seven years.

I left Canada in 1991, to start graduate school in Atlanta. I didn't know that the initial two years of master's level work in African American studies would lead to a doctoral degree and four years of teaching experience. So when I left Clark Atlanta University for the University of Southern Maine, I had already exceeded my original hopes for success. Now, seven years and three license plates later, I am regularly reminded of my own movements—my own migration.

This is not out of place. My license plate

tells me that Maine is "Vacationland," and the swells of summer travelers, both national and international, attest to it. Apparently, Maine is the destination of many travelers who, at least in part, seek respite in New England from the intense heat of other regions of the country. This was particularly so before the advent of the air conditioner unit and the central air system. The seafood, the water, the beauty and the tradition of Maine seem to keep people coming back. But these are the small-scale, temporary migrations that characterize vacation.

A larger migration, the Great Migration, was one of the most important developments in twentieth-century African American history. The migration had gained momentum by World War I and peaked during the 1930s. It declined and tapered off during the World War II era. African Americans left the oppressive Southern climate that sharecropping, lynching, Jim Crow laws, and inadequate schooling had created for the potential of better employment, schools, and treatment outside the South. This issue's "A Place in Time" features the story of Lucille Young, a Black woman who migrated from Mississippi to Maine in 1967. While her story stands outside the historical domain of the Great Migration, it offers a model of faith and strength that characterized the migration experience.

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A Place in Time:
"A Candle in the Window"

When Lucille Young left Jackson, Mississippi, for Portland, Maine, in 1967 she had ten dollars in her pocket, seven children and a grandchild in tow, and no thought of turning back. Young's eldest daughter was in the Job Corps in Poland Spring, Maine and asked her mother if she would consider moving to Maine. With a feeling that she could be no worse off in Maine than in Mississippi and a personal philosophy that would not let her pass up an opportunity, Young made the three-day bus trip to Maine.

Young notes, in particular, the warmth and support she received from a woman in Cape Elizabeth, Alice Hinkley, who helped raise funds for her and the children while they were still in the South. The money that remained after the purchase of the bus tickets was sufficient to help make a down payment on a three-story house in Portland and allowed Young to move out of an apartment that was too small for eight active children. Despite a longing for the familiarity of Mississippi, both Lucille Young and her family adjusted well to life so far north. From 1971 to 1991, Young worked at National Semiconductor (then Fairchild's) as an assembler and tester, and often cleaned houses during the day as well.

When asked what wisdom she might share with others, Young advised people not to be afraid to take a chance, and further argued that if "you don't try it, you'll never know." Finally,

Young relates a childhood story about living in Jackson. Her mother passed away when she was a young child. A neighbor across the street would frequently ask if everything was well with Young and her sisters, because each night the neighbor saw a candle in the window. Young reassured her that the family was fine and that there had been no candle put in the window. With this, the neighbor concluded that there "must be an angel watching over you." Apparently that angel also knew the way to Maine.

[More of Lucille Young's story is found in the Center for Lives at the University of Southern Maine which is under the directorship of Professor Robert Atkinson.]

The Great Migration

The Great Migration, like the story of Rosa Parks and the 1955-56 bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, has generally been designed as the product of being "too tired." It has been constructed as the mass exodus of millions of African Americans who were, as of one collective mind, tired of living in the South. This is correct, yet oversimplified. Millions of African Americans did leave the South. They were tired of living under the oppressive regime of the South that manifested itself in the form of sharecropping and the crop lien system, lynching, disenfranchisement, and the larger Jim Crow system that invaded education and transportation. But African

Americans left the South over a series of decades and they moved to cities and states across the country, both east and west.¹ Census returns of African American out-migration indicate that more than 1.3 million African Americans left the South between 1900 and 1930. It is estimated that “over 400,000 left in the two-year period, 1916-1918. They left at an average rate of over 16,000 per month, 500 per day.”² The migration represents the most dramatic shift in the Black population in the twentieth century.

There are two recent, competing theories about the nature of the migration. Carole Marks argues that the migration was primarily a labor migration and counters some popular interpretations of the movement. Marks posits that most migrants were “urban, nonagricultural laborers, not the rural peasant usually assumed,” that Blacks left the South because they were “the displaced mudsills of southern industrial development” (and not just workers looking for better wages), and that “much of the mobilization of the migration was orchestrated in the board rooms of northern industrial enterprises.”³ Much of the Marks’ work is anchored by the idea that African Americans were manipulated into leaving the South to become a cheap, surplus labor force for northern industry, particularly during the World War I era.

Recently emerging from a perspective that gives privilege to African American culture and voice, stands the research of Farah Jasmine Griffin. Griffin’s “Who set you flowin’?”: *The African American Migration Narrative* argues that theories, like those of Marks, cast African Americans as passive objects without personal agency. Using the motif of the “migration narrative,” Griffin constructs the Great Migration as the process, both cognitive and physical, in which African Americans acted on the desire to leave the South, navigated the urban landscape of the North and Midwest, and sought safe spaces in a society that failed to deliver completely the promises of a better life.⁴ The “migration narrative” has a dual reading. It represents the voice of the migrant which may be found in the

traditional sources like the African American press and personal correspondence. More important for Griffin, it is visible in African American cultural products such as paintings, music, and literature. Griffin cites Jacob Lawrence’s multi-panel *Migration of the Negro Series* for its depiction of the migration on canvas, and the writings of persons including Ann Petry, Dorothy West, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin for evoking important elements of the migration formula.⁵ The most important feature in Griffin’s work is her construction of African American migrants as persons with agency, not just pawns in the complex scheme of industrial America.

Historians Darlene Clark Hine and Jacqueline Jones, among others, have helped consider the role that gender played in mediating the experiences of African Americans who moved to the North and the West. While men gravitated with varying degrees of success to industrial employment, many African American women remained locked in domestic service, with only a brief respite during World War I and II when defense industries gave them limited employ. The persistence of domestic work could lead to the presence of domestic slave markets—modern constructions of the auction block, in which African American women gathered at early morning in local squares to grovel and underbid each other for the chance to be someone’s maid for a day. They were often exposed to sexual and physical abuse for less than a dollar’s wage.⁶ As in the South, Black bodies continued to be read as sexual property as young African American women were also lured into prostitution in various northern cities.⁷

Having established, at least in part, the tradition of scholarship on which researchers like Griffin would build, Jacqueline Jones and Paula Giddings highlight the ability of African American women to work pro-actively, whether as individuals or as members of Black or women’s organizations. Domesticity exerted as much control over their labor and lives as they could by organizing and refusing to be live-in workers. Members of the National Association of

Colored Women (NACW) helped improve educational and health care opportunities for African American women across the country in an age when American society operated under the fictive formula of “separate, but equal.”⁸

Notes

¹ For a general treatment of the Great Migration see John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, 7th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996).

² Carole Marks, *Farewell–We’re Good and Gone: The Great Black Migration* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 2, 1.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴ Farah Jasmine Griffin, “Who set you flowin’?”–*The African American Migration Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 13-14, 48-49. Griffin uses Lawrence’s panels on lynching and exodus for northern cities like Detroit, New York, and St. Louis particularly well on these pages. For discussion of Petry, West, Baldwin, and Wright, see chapter 2. For an introduction to the work of the writers, see Ann Petry, *The Street* (1946; reprint, Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), Dorothy West, *The Living is Easy* (1948; reprint, New York: Feminist Press, 1982), James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953; reprint, New York: Dell Publishing, 1985), Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper and Row, 1940).

⁶ Darlene Clark Hine, “Black Migration to the Urban Midwest: The Gender Dimension, 1915-1945,” in *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender*, ed. Joe William Trotter, Jr. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 130, 140; Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family, From Slavery to the Present* (1985; reprint, New York: Vintage/Random House, 1995),165-168; Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984), 204.

⁷ Hine, 137; Jones, 181-82.

⁸ Jones, 165-66; Giddings, 135-36. Admittedly, not all of the benevolence of groups like the NACW were without additional motives. Many members of such organizations were members of the Black middle class who suffered under the same stereotypes of promiscuity and ignorance as members of the Black working class. Knowing that they were judged by the “least” of their race, club members were interested in raising public opinion of them, by raising the status of those below them. The motto of the NACW was “Lifting As We Climb.” See Hine, 135-37; Jones, 190; Giddings, ch. 6. For an additional discussion, see Stephanie Shaw’s *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

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