Book Reviews


After the Civil War the federal government freed four million African Americans and, through the urgency of Radical Republicans, guaranteed constitutional rights for black people with the Reconstruction amendments. With their newfound freedom African Americans set out to be responsible American citizens, committed to the Protestant work ethic, education, and the success of future generations. Unfortunately, African Americans soon learned that freedom for them meant greater limitations to equal opportunities than for other Americans. Historian Rayford W. Logan in The Betrayal of the Negro: From Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson (1965) termed the era “the nadir” in reference to oppressive measures meted out to Americans of African descent. The period 1910–1925, which Carole Marks and James R. Grossman address in their respective studies, represents another of America’s failed promises of democracy in regard to African-American citizens. Marks and Grossman agree with Logan’s assessment, showing also that as late as the 1940s, and after seeking better conditions in the North, African Americans could not gain equal access to American freedoms.

Both authors describe the political, social, and economic problems African Americans confronted in the South in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Terrorism, the grandfather clause, literacy tests, and poll taxes removed black males’ right to the vote. Jim Crow laws limited African Americans’ access in public transportation, theaters, and recreational facilities. Segregated housing and schools, generally inferior, resulted in shortfalls for black children who had to struggle against institutional racism that followed them to adulthood. Peonage and sharecropping further exploited black workers. Sporadic violence almost always compelled black people to leave the South. Grossman summarizes white people’s failure to understand the needs of black people as the main problem. He traces the phenomenon back as far as the American Revolution when African Americans fought for the British because colonists refused to let them fight for America. If white Americans could have understood that black people wanted no more than white Americans enjoyed, the situation could have been positively better by the early twentieth century.

If migrants could be motivated by factors that pushed them from the South, they could find great hope in factors that Gross-
man summarized as "bettering my condition" (p. 6). The better conditions included various aspects of political, social, and economic equality, not the least of which was the greater control of one's work hours and wages, however meager. Personal independence, therefore, proved to be the greatest impulse for movement. The key pull factor for northern movement was the willingness of white employers to experiment with black workers at a time when European immigrants almost completely stopped coming to America.

While both authors cite the general push-pull factors relating to the movement of black people to the North, each offers a unique view of the Great Migration. Marks, looking at the South in general for information on black migrants, concludes that largely urban skilled laborers, not the general agricultural workers, left the South for perceived equal opportunities in the North. She also finds that the slow growth of southern industrialism forced them to look to the North for greater opportunity. Furthermore, she says that "mobilization . . . was orchestrated in the board rooms of northern industrial enterprises" (p. 3). Marks also pays attention to women's contributions to the Great Migration. Black women's work usually fell in the category of domestic service, which often meant that they fared less well than male workers. Marks's location of the migrants included points North in general. She often compares black migrants to immigrants, sometimes failing to comprehend fully African Americans' limitations prescribed by racism, a factor that did not restrict immigrants to the same degree.

Grossman looks largely at black migration to the Chicago area from Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Texas, Arkansas, Georgia, and Tennessee. His discussion details the South from which largely rural migrants came and the North where they created a new world based on an industrial order. He finds that the African-American world view shaped by race in the South was also shaped by race in the North. Black people continued to rely on "the comfort and familiarity of black institutions" (p. 8). Furthermore, Grossman documents the intricate networks (kinship, friendship, and professional) that show how readily black people relied on each other in the migration process. The Chicago Defender's transition from an objector to migration supporter, for example, proved just as important as relatives who sent letters of encouragement, paid for train tickets, or provided housing to migrants upon their arrival in Chicago. The support network involved in the migration process—both during and after—proved as complex as the intricate levels of black culture. Grossman is convinced that the migration process was successful because migrants relied on black culture and also that the migration strengthened African-American culture.

Marks concentrates on economic aspects of the Great Migration although she too relies on the theme of the African-American
cultural consciousness; a poem, "For Mother and Dad," the last line of which, "Farewell—we're good and gone," becomes her book title. Grossman's assessment of the Great Migration is centrally focused on cultural consciousness. Each author's approach is unique and different, but each builds on the growing scholarship of the subject and an understanding of the migrants and their impact on twentieth-century industrial development. Both authors, however, end on a note of pessimism: almost every African American who moved North in search of fulfilling America's promise of democracy found further disappointment. Marks summarizes it best when she says, "Reality never matched the dream of the Great Migration" (p. 3).


Highlighting recent scholarship on the Great Migration, this slender volume (based primarily on book-length works) attempts to go beyond documenting the usual sources, causes, and consequences of African-American population movement. The collection of essays not only emphasizes the ways in which African Americans have shaped their own migration experiences but also illuminates differences in the sources and in the impact of black migration on different cities.

Peter Gottlieb, for instance, in his essay, "Rethinking the Great Migration," explores black migration to Pittsburgh by extending his analysis backward into the pre–World War I era and forward into the Great Depression, World War II, and beyond. Gottlieb argues that although these periods of migration preceding and following the 1916–1930 era profoundly influenced the development of African-American communities, their dynamics grew from trends that were different from those of the Great Migration. Shirley Anne Moore observes an important variant on the black migration theme in her essay on black migration to Richmond, California. She discovers that the process by which black Richmondites entered into the urban industrial work force was more prolonged than elsewhere, beginning slowly before the 1930s and accelerating during World War II as African Americans moved into the shipyards in growing numbers.

In his essay on black migration to Norfolk, Virginia, Earl Lewis emphasizes the dynamic role of African-American kin, friend, and communal networks in the migration process. He presents a well-documented and convincing analysis of "visiting" as