

21H.221 (Fall 2006), Places of Migration in U.S. History
Prof. Christopher Capozzola
Session 10: Was the Great Migration Great? lecture

Today: Nicholas Lemann's *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America*

Related article: Granddaddy of all ghettos faces wrecking ball (CNN)
http://edition.cnn.com/2006/US/10/08/taylor.homes.ap/index.html?section=cnn_topstories

Next week: Immigrants and the movies – immigrants making them, acting in them, movies about them.

The paper: Resources such as <http://libraries.mit.edu/guides/subjects/history/>

As you get into Lemann's *The Promised Land*, it's a mesmerizing, amazing story that the author has put together. He's a journalist trained as a historian, so he knows what he's doing as he's doing interviews with people. And he's found an amazing group of people, from very ordinary people to policy makers. I'd like to focus on the story of Ruby Daniels, the first part of the book.

Ruby Daniels is a human being – a real person – and she does in fact exist and was interviewed many times by the author. During his first interview with her, towards the end of his 12 year research, he thought she wasn't that interesting personally. She called him back asking for another interview, saying he'd asked all the wrong questions, and she proceeded to tell her life story.

To our mass media public debates, people like Ruby are cartoon characters. She lived what for many people are stereotypes for black urban poverty – many husbands, many children, unmarried, on welfare, in public housing, lying to social services people. And these are images we're constantly bombarded with. Focus on her life story.

The second part of the book is a policy history of Washington and the war of poverty.

Ruby's ex and one of her kids sued Lemann for misrepresenting them, for slander. The case was thrown out because they had in fact done those things and didn't have much of a case.

The book was very controversial when it came out – this has to do with how to explain Ruby's situation. Lemann doesn't fit easily into the standard categories of politics, of liberal or conservative. He leans more to liberal side but isn't an orthodox guy. He and his book were attacked from both sides.

Suburbanization is the related flipside of urban poverty.

The south has a cash-crop dependent economy whose laborers are landless – white tenant farmers or black tenant farmers. African Americans are more commonly sharecroppers than tenants. **Economic exploitation with political disenfranchisement** – by the 1910s, there are almost no meaningful numbers of black voters anywhere in the south. Other political rights such as jury service, protection of courts or by police are limited. Somewhere around the 1910s, things start to shift and the numbers of people leaving the south are dramatic. About 500,000 blacks leave the south between 1910-1920, most of

whom leave during WWI. If you want to talk about push and pull factors, you can imagine what those are: Push factors are both economic and political. If this system was in place in the late 1800s, why then is it that only after 1910 that the blacks leave? **The push and pull factors create this migratory moment.**

PUSH

Economic – volatility in cotton markets
Political – disenfranchisement and violence

As these numbers go up and down, the situation becomes more precarious. But the pull factors are those that really determine what's going on:

Here's where the story of other immigrant groups intersect with this.

What do we know about the immigrants coming from Europe at this time?

PULL

Economic – European immigration ends effectively in 1914 (in law 1921, 1924)
Suddenly there's no new supply of immigrants. The **wartime economic boom** increases demand for labor in factories in urban Northeast (copper for bullets, textiles for uniforms, munitions). American economy is in wartime footing in 1915 even if not in the war. The **labor shortage** is extended to 1917 by conscription – men were brought into army, out of labor force. These pressures make it possible for African Americans to find jobs in the north. (Consider the factories in Lawrence, MA, for example - in practice, they were closed to African American workers before the war. For factories like that, the war created these demands that made them open up.)

Sharecropping is a cash poor economy – the system develops as it does because no one (not even the landowners) has much money. People are paid in shares of the crop. Real basic question: how did people get to places like Chicago in the 1910s when they didn't have the money?

Conscription applies to African American men – who are disproportionately drafted out of the rural south. In order to prevent dislocating American families, any soldier with a dependent had his pay cut in half – half went directly to his dependent as cash. This was designed to keep soldiers from abandoning their families and to prevent starvation of families or soldiers drinking away their pay. In practice in the poorest parts of America, it provides a **cash influx** – even though not great, \$8/month. (A train ticket during WWI from rural south to Chicago was about \$3.) By taking a train trip several hours away your income could quadruple. (The story in the book: Carter goes to Chicago on vacation, someone offers him a job, he stays.)

We don't want to underestimate the political and social factors in this, and the extent to which people were fleeing a regime of terror under which they were living and headed for a system that was more open, not equal by any means, but politically more open for participation that made possible voting, political voice, and where everyday life was less rigidly structured than the south.

But the economic factors, both individual decisions about family and big economic forces people can't control, are driving this south to north migration.

People found out about migration opportunities through information networks of previous migrants and return visits to their families. It's more like the people going back and forth in the Caribbean than transatlantic migrations.

They're also learning about it as people and news are traveling back and forth on the **railroad**. The *Chicago Defender* was the biggest newspaper of the African American community in the country; it circulated outside too, carried on railroads by agents of migration. Railroads segregated, but African Americans can get porter jobs – distribute *Chicago Defender* in secret. The federal government sees what the white landowners see – the war is **disrupting/dislocating our economy, our way of life**. All the black people are running out of the town in the middle of the night – German saboteurs must be stirring things up in a secret **conspiracy** to undermine the production of the cotton crop. Conspiracy is an easy way to explain complicated things, especially if you've been raised to discount that blacks could make **rational economic choices** in the marketplace. It doesn't occur to William Percy (a landowner in Mississippi) – he feels his workers have betrayed him by leaving, he the generous landowner – it doesn't occur to him to do the math that the wages are much higher in Chicago.

To replace the labor, what do the white landowners do?

1. They complain
2. They raise as much cotton as they can (supplies slightly reduce, prices go up)
3. They conscript labor (**Work or Fight Laws** – municipal and state level all around the country – any able bodied man not in the army has to demonstrate he has a job and if not he'll be given one). The rural south didn't have state prisons and so convicts were contracted out to landowners as **convict labor**. In some areas in Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Florida too, work or fight laws were applied to both male and female black residents and so a black woman who obviously wouldn't be conscripted could nevertheless find herself under the same terms. We don't have exact numbers, but it was not an insignificant number. Work or fight laws had media exposés. They were widely condemned – even by white labor unions. They were pretty quickly dismantled but other forms of coercion still existed.

Look at Jack Temple Kirby article, "The Southern Exodus: A Primer for Historians." He puts these migrations in a broader perspective – 7 million people white and black leave the south during this time, **larger than any other migration of any particular group** we're looking at it. He makes the argument that the economic and social factors pushing blacks and whites out of the south are more alike than different – an interesting addition to the argument. Poor white sharecroppers are facing these same questions.

500,000 blacks are leaving, going to cities – people moved along **migration lines**. You'd have small, fragile, largely African American communities that already existed in the cities that are now inundated with large numbers of migrants during the challenging time of the war when there was a lot of economic dislocation going on. Also, the neighborhood boundaries were being scrutinized by white people so the neighborhood doesn't get any bigger.

In these black communities, tensions emerge between middle and working class blacks over community institutions, everyday life, politics, and religion. The way that two different historians interpreted this...

If you read various newspapers, church publications, and even in the *Chicago Defender*, during time of Great Migration, you'll find **advice columns** written by northern blacks for the new arrivals – trying to get them to give up their rural southern ways (e.g. don't wear

head scarves, no pajamas outside, don't talk too loudly, don't spit on the street). In some ways people have said these are lot like the columns in immigrant newspapers (e.g. stop being greenhorns). Contemporary example: immihelp.com run by South Asian immigrants for South Asian immigrants, a list of should and shouldn't in the US, encouraging them to act more middle class, dealing with culture codes, etc. Reading these advice columns, people had different reactions.

- A line of interpretation from historian **Robin Kelley – infrapolitics**:
It was a world where African Americans didn't have public voice, where their jobs weren't key to social mobility, where their votes didn't really count. You couldn't go to formal politics to get black politics – you have look to infrapolitics. Everyday interactions on the streets and breaking cultural codes were deeply political moves not only against the white elite but also against the middle class blacks who tried to tell them what to do. They took advantage of this leisure in large black communities and this was political – a challenge to political order that voting and organizing was never going to get for black people.
- Contrary line of interpretation by **Evelyn Higginbotham – politics of respectability**:
Black churchwomen in the south in the early 1900s – this group of women might culturally seem middle class but certainly were not economically; they were some of the poorest in the country. They turned to a politics of respectability – in a world that expected black people to be rude, not to obey the work habits of industrial capitalism or the cultural codes of middle class life. This is particularly true of black women who were represented in such stereotypical fashion, often seen as sexually disordered. They reacted to these stereotypes by being proper, by being respectable; they were undermining expectations in more subversive ways than infrapolitics, which Higginbotham thought was a no-win strategy because it confirmed the stereotypes. The politics of respectability was more subversive than anyone could imagine. But it plays out differently when you move north because meanings of the cultural codes change. For example, in the south politeness from a black man toward a white woman on a streetcar could be perceived as flirting – and this could have consequences. Habitual rudeness could be safer. Dressing formally could be labeled as uppity. But once you get to Chicago, rules change – politeness and stylish dressing and other cultural codes change.

Higginbotham argues that it's wrong to call it a **middle class sensibility**. Kelley would say that this isn't consciously political – **everything is political** and plays out in a much wider realm than we can imagine.

Kelley was looking back at the way historians had looked at Jim Crow at the turn of the century – how they were terrorized and silenced in a society of mass rural poverty. Historians were trying to figure out why is there no response – could blacks have organized these political parties? Why weren't they more political? Why did it take until the civil rights movement? Kelley wants to say those are all the wrong questions; there *was* politics going on – over things like **identity, dignity, ability to control bodily presentation** – and these were the things blacks had power over. Kelley is insistent that he is not providing a prescription for the present.

Why do people move to suburbs?

Student responses:

- the American dream

- perceptions of city life not present in suburbs – more crime, violence – want more idyllic environment for raising children
- take what you like about an urban society and take it with you to somewhere you like more space, interaction with people
- their own town, more control over your private space
- more community in suburbs

The first models of the suburbanization: jobs and business continued in the center and people spread out. This occurred in the 1940s/50s. From the 1970s onward, jobs also leave cities.

The **radical separation** of work, shopping, living; life is car-dependent - this is the modern idea of suburbs. Early suburbs could be mass transit oriented, street-car oriented, like Watertown, West Roxbury, Chicago, and the boroughs of New York City. Definitions have changed. Where we are now is probably further from Levittown than Levittown was from the cities of before.

Your answers get at questions of **push and pull**. Some of the **structural issues** that have to do with **federal policies and expenditures** and other laws have not *caused* suburbanization but made it take on the *forms* that it does. Link that to other developments in the same time period of the 1940s/50s that lead to the construction of **massive concentrated urban ghettos**.

Robert Taylor homes - the largest housing project, 28 16-story towers in Chicago built right after the war. They were seen as the greatest triumph, but when they were destroyed they were seen as the worst disasters. They've been characterized by Lemann as one of the worst places on earth to live.

See the Chicago Housing Authority's website on the redevelopment project:
http://www.thecha.org/housingdev/robert_taylor.html

For next time, think about: Why do people move to the suburbs? Why do people move into the Robert Taylor homes, the two big urban housing projects?

Another example is Columbia Point in Boston. These are common in almost every big urban city. In the last 10-15 years, almost all major cities have been thinking about what to do with this housing.

There's housing like this in New York City, but a lot of what looks like big housing projects are much more mixed use, such as housing for elderly people. The costs of replacing these projects are so astronomical in the US that it's just not possible – there's a lot more empty land than there is in NY. The consensus now is that smaller lower level **mixed use housing** is more effective, but that takes up more space and houses fewer people.