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African American Education Facilitating Migration, 1865–1920

Introduction

Emancipated slaves began to migrate immediately after the Civil War, initially locally, but by the time of the First World War they moved to the North in unprecedented and ever-increasing numbers. This Great Migration is typically attributed to ‘push’ factors such as soil depletion, sharecropping, labour agents, lynching, vigilante violence and the boll weevil, and also to ‘pull’ factors such as the severe limitations on European immigration during the First World War, which dropped from 1.2 million immigrants in 1914 to just 110,000 in 1918, and coincided with the creation of three million new industrial jobs in the North that were open to black labourers from the South.¹ This article explores the role

¹ Stewart E. Tolnay and E.M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), chapter 7; James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 24; Peter Uhlenberg, ‘Noneconomic Determinants of Nonmigration: Sociological Considerations for Migration Theory’, *Rural Sociology* 38, Fall 1973, 296–8; Editorial, ‘The Eternal Question’, *Defender* (Chicago, IL), 12 August

of education, literacy and information networks in facilitating and reinforcing, rather than motivating, that large-scale chain migration of African Americans.

Importantly, this article begins by establishing the prevalence of localised black migration, which began immediately after the Civil War, but was underreported in the national census and underestimated by historians due to the short distances involved. In an attempt to dissuade these already-mobile emancipated slaves from leaving the South, philanthropists from the North financed 'industrial education'. The article proceeds by detailing the motivations of these white educators and the aspirations of black students. It concludes by using the letters and experiences of migrants and those who aspired to migrate to show how the educators failed, precisely because they succeeded: they succeeded in educating southern blacks, but one consequence of that was to enable the communication networks essential to supporting long-distance migration. The study of African American education and information networks is therefore necessary to fully explain the timing

1916; Editorial, 'Migration And Its Effect', *Defender* (Chicago, IL), 20 April 1918; Editorial, 'Blazing The Way', *Defender* (Chicago, IL), 12 October 1918. This article does not intend to diminish the well-documented roles of crop specialisation, debt cycles, sharecropping, soil depletion, labour agents, lynching and the boll weevil as crucial 'push' factors for migration. These factors were present from the close of the Civil War (and in cases before then) and were commonly responsible for short-distance migration within the South, to such destinations as Kansas and Liberia. Nor does this article imply that the southern black population was uniformly unskilled, rural, and agricultural. Indeed, occupation and place of residence within the South often indicated the likelihood of migration. This article aims to complement the many existing studies that explore these factors by focusing on the role that industrial education, the type almost exclusively available, had on the prospective migrants originating outside the South's urban centers.

and the scale of the Great Migration. It also serves as an ideal historical case study in what Robert Merton termed the ‘unanticipated consequences of purposive social action’, that is, when the precautionary measures taken to avert a possible event actually cause that very event to occur.²

It is not possible to precisely quantify the role of literacy as a factor in northward migration, though the works of Janet Cornelius, Stewart E. Tolnay, and Robert A. Margo have done much to prove its strong presence.³ As mentioned above, there were a host of contributing social and economic factors. Besides, illiterate blacks could ask a literate acquaintance or family member to read or write on their behalf – although those who could not read or write for themselves were concerned that their informants were inaccurately reporting or writing what was actually being said. This reluctance by southern blacks to use acquaintances or strangers to write and read correspondence appears in the testimony of one witness before a (somewhat premature) investigation by the Senate into the northward migration of blacks in 1880:

I wants my children to be educated because
then I can believe what they tells me. If I go to

² Robert K. Merton, ‘The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action’, *American Sociological Review* 1, December 1936.

³ Stewart E. Tolnay, ‘Education Selection in the Migration of Southern Blacks, 1880–1990’, *Social Forces* 77, December 1998; Janet Cornelius, ‘“We Slipped and Learned to Read”: Slave Accounts of the Literacy Process, 1830–1865’, *Phylon* 44, 3rd Quarter 1983; Janet Cornelius, *When I Can Read My Title Clear’: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1991); Robert A. Margo, *Race and Schooling in the South, 1880–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), chapter 7.

another person with a letter in my hand, and he reads it, he can tell me what he pleases in that letter, and I don't know any better. I must take it all for granted; but if I have got children who read and write, I will hand them the letter, and they will tell me the contents of that letter, and I will know it's all right, as he says it.⁴

The literacy of children, or indeed of adults, was not the lynchpin that made the Great Migration possible. Rather, increasing literacy rates and the dissemination of information throughout the South, in conjunction with social and economic factors, enabled and encouraged educated blacks to migrate greater distances in greater numbers. This article complements the existing body of quantitative literature on the relationship between African American education and migration by demonstrating how newly-literate blacks used literacy and information networks to facilitate their migration.

Arrival of Northern Education and Fear of Southern Exodus

Black literacy in the South, which was almost non-existent at the close of the Civil War, reached 45–60 percent by 1890 and

⁴ Testimony of John G. Lewis in US Senate, *Report and Testimony of the Select Committee of the United States Senate to Investigate the Causes of the Removal of the Negroes From the Southern States to the Northern States*, S.Rpt.693, part 2 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1880), 437.

rose to 75 percent by 1920.⁵ Rather than citing migration prospects as a factor which motivated their pursuit of literacy, freedmen and young black students typically referred to immediate ambitions, like reading the Bible, sitting on juries and preventing white men from cheating them in labour and land contracts.⁶ Yet the phenomena of education and migration were inextricably linked. Tolnay's quantitative analysis of the educational characteristics of southern migrants found that black migrants to the North in 1880 were three times more likely to be able to read and write compared to those who remained in the South. By 1920 they were four times as likely to be able to read and write.⁷ In addition to literacy being associated with the likelihood of migration, this rise in literacy rates also corresponded to the increasing distances that blacks migrated. Once literate, southern blacks used black-owned northern newspapers and correspondence with family members to explore and confirm distant opportunities at minimal personal risk. As early as 1865 rural southern blacks began writing to and learning about migration opportunities to Kansas and Africa from publications of the American Colonization Society, church

⁵ Stewart E. Tolnay, *The Bottom Rung: African American Family Life on Southern Farms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 4.

⁶ Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (New York: Knopf, 1977), 44, 50–1; Cornelius, 'We Slipped and Learned to Read'; Cornelius, *When I Can Read My Title Clear*, 59–84, 143.

⁷ Tolnay, 'Education Selection in the Migration of Southern Blacks', 497–9.

pamphlets, and more than fifty black-run newspapers available in the South between 1865 and 1880.⁸

During these post-War decades, northern teachers, black and white, came to the South in droves to establish schools for the newly emancipated and the first generations of free-born African Americans. These educators came with political agendas woven into their curriculum. In the hopes of helping to rebuild the southern economy, northern education funds such as the American Missionary Association (AMA), Slater Fund, Peabody Fund, General Education Board (GEB), Rosenwald Fund, and direct contributions from Andrew Carnegie provided the financial support for southern schools that emphasised 'industrial education', by which they referred to both mechanical and agricultural training.⁹ Southern industrial schools aimed to equip former slaves to pursue more successfully the same occupational roles in the same locales as their parents and grandparents. This aim was reaffirmed by elite white southern commentators like Henry Grady, by black educators like Booker T. Washington, and by northern education funds that financed the schools. The aim of industrial education and its boosters was definitely not to encourage southern blacks to seek opportunities in the North.

⁸ Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South From Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 321–9; John G. Van Deusen, 'The Exodus of 1879', *Journal of Negro History* 21, April 1936, 111–29.

⁹ To remain faithful to this original vernacular, the term 'industrial education' will be used throughout this article, but will typically refer to agricultural training unless otherwise stated.

Despite the fact that blacks initially migrated largely within the South, white employers nonetheless feared that African Americans would flee to the North en masse in search of more favourable economic and social conditions. As one astute white southerner wrote in 1871: 'The Southern planter at the present time is compelled by force of circumstances to depend almost entirely for labor ... upon the freedmen. They are the only class of laborers there in large numbers'.¹⁰ Southern whites thus had good reason to fear blacks exercising their newfound economic and political freedom with their feet, marching in endless columns to the perceived safety and prosperity of the North. In reality, those fears were based on little more than anecdote and were greatly exaggerated. The initial migratory tendencies of southern black farmers were much less ambitious than the literature of the period envisaged. With the exception of the Back to Africa Movement and several thousand 'Exodusters' migrating to Kansas in 1879, migration was largely confined to within the South, usually to other locations within the same state or even within the same county.¹¹ However, no matter how short the

¹⁰ Southerner, 'Agricultural Labor at the South', *Galaxy* 12, September 1871, 328.

¹¹ Even these thousands of 'Exodusters' and the interstate migrants before them caused surprisingly few ripples. As Emmett J. Scott reported: 'Despite the apparent suddenness of this movement, all evidence indicates that it is but the accentuation of a process which has been going on for more than fifty years. So silently indeed has this shifting of the negro population taken place that it has quite escaped popular attention.' Emmett J. Scott, *Negro Migration During the War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1920), 6; Painter, *Exodusters*. W.E.B. Du Bois' 1898 study of Farmville, Virginia, highlights the short-distance migratory tendencies of this pre-1900 period. Du Bois, 'The Negroes of Farmville, Virginia: A Social Study', *Bulletin of the Department of Labor* 3, 1898,

initial distance, these moves represented the first autonomous change of address for freed slaves, from which greater agency and interstate migration was later realised.

According to Census Bureau statistics, in 1870 almost ninety percent of the nation's black population resided in the ex-Confederate states. There was only a two per cent decline in that figure by 1910. Furthermore, over ninety-six per cent of the nation's black farmers in 1910 called the South home.¹² The *real* exodus, the beginning of the Great Migration, occurred between 1910 and 1920. The South's share of the nation's black population dropped to 82 percent by 1920, and then to 73 percent a decade later. Even as late as 1920 about ninety percent of the black population lived in the state they were born in or the one that neighboured it. For both blacks and whites this changed only after 1920.¹³ Yet these gross statistics disguise the fact that blacks were highly mobile between 1865 and 1920. Instead of long-distance migration, African Americans initially moved short distances, from one

available from

<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/DubFarm.html>; accessed 29 March 2013; Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 269–71; Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944), 182.

¹² United States Bureau of the Census, *The Statistical History of the United States from Colonial Times to the Present* (Stamford, Connecticut: Fairfield Publishers, 1976), 11–12; United States Bureau of the Census, 'Statistics of Farms, Classified by Race, Nativity, and Tenure of Farmers', in *13th United States Census, 1910* (Washington, DC, 1914), 171.

¹³ Unfortunately for historians and demographers, published state and federal census statistics did not report any movement within a single state as 'migration' until the late 1930s. Before then any within-state migration is only discernible through the changes in the size of rural and urban populations.

rural location to another, and increasingly from rural centres to southern cities, leaving little mark in census reports that focused on interstate migration trends.

Motives for Pursuing and Providing Education

A 'kitten stretching after a long sleep' was how Richard Wright described this 'Great Internal Migration' within the South and Midwest. It was an inevitable 'impulse that swept through us... our restlessness and incessant mobility [was] our naïve way of testing... freedom'.¹⁴ Rather than exercising arbitrary wanderlust, many slaves and newly-emancipated blacks targeted their migration at restoring family ties that had been severed during generations of slavery. As early as 1825, slaves wrote, possibly with the assistance of a literate acquaintance, to their former masters requesting information on the location of various family members who had been sold interstate. In 1844, Ohio's first black newspaper, the *Palladium of Liberty*, carried 'Information Wanted' advertisements from former slaves seeking their long-lost relatives. By the time of emancipation these 'Information Wanted' ads numbered in the hundreds, and even as black literacy rates increased, the illiterate enlisted the help of literate friends to write to the Freedmen's Bureau in the hope

¹⁴ Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices* (New York: The Viking Press, 1941, facsimile edition 1969), 36.

that federal government officials had access to networks that included their displaced relatives.¹⁵

Slaves had proactively sought education long before the Civil War. Some slaves spent Sunday mornings labouring in the fields, and then stealthily made their way to secret schools on plantations to learn to read and write. This enthusiasm for literacy blossomed during and immediately after the Civil War with ‘many newly freed African Americans latch[ing] on to the spelling book as a symbol and tool of liberation’. The chaplain of a black Union army regiment from Louisiana recorded the ‘almost sacred’ place of literacy amongst freedmen fighting in the Civil War, noting that, ‘I am sure I never witnessed greater eagerness for study... A majority of the men seem to regard their books as an indispensable portion of their equipments [sic], and the cartridge box and spelling book are attached to the same belt.’¹⁶

In his acclaimed book *12 Million Black Voices*, published in 1941, Richard Wright poignantly depicted the status of

¹⁵ Hurt, ‘Introduction’, 3; Heather Andrea Williams, *Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), chapters 4 and 5.

¹⁶ Union Army chaplain quoted in Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935*, 282. Also see Union Army chaplains and ‘soldier-teachers’ in Janette Thomas Greenwood, *First Fruits of Freedom: The Migration of Former Slaves and Their Search for Equality in Worcester, Massachusetts, 1862–1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 39–40, 73. For more on the leadership status of literate slaves and freedmen, and the role of literacy ‘as a form of resistance to oppression and a maintenance of psychological freedom’ in slave communities see James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 281; Cornelius, “‘We Slipped and Learned to Read’: Slave Accounts of the Literacy Process, 1830–1865”; Cornelius, ‘*When I Can Read My Title Clear*’, 85–104, 150.

literacy and its association with upward-mobility in post-Civil War black society:

[W]e know that books are the gateway to a forbidden world. The people who say how the world is to be run, who have fires in winter, who wear warm clothes, who get enough to eat, are the people who make books speak to them. Sometimes of a night we tell our children to get out the big old family Bible and read to us, and we listen wonderingly until, tired from a long day in the fields, we fall asleep.¹⁷

Yet in seeking an education, most freedmen did not aspire to be ‘people who say how the world is to be run’, nor did they mention an ambition to migrate among their reasons for learning to read and write. Former slaves in Mississippi cited everyday interests such as the ability to review contracts and to finally read the Bible as their primary motivations for learning to read and count.¹⁸

It was black parents, not students, who ‘made a direct link between schooling and upward [social] mobility’, and established heavy community taxes to support the construction of schools and provide the salaries of teachers.

¹⁷ Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 64–5.

¹⁸ Former slaves quoted in Christopher M. Span, “‘I Must Learn Now or Not at All’: Social and Cultural Capital in the Educational Initiatives of Formerly Enslaved African Americans in Mississippi, 1862–1869”, *Journal of African American History* 87, Spring 2002, 199; Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), chapter 4.

This interest of black parents in funding the education of their children was proactive and immediate, and is apparent in the multitude of black-run schools that materialised before white northern educators arrived in the South. In Nashville, Tennessee, Union Army recruiters discovered eight hundred black students who ‘received instruction from teachers paid by their parents – the slaves but just emancipated’. By 1864 black school attendance in Nashville exceeded that of white children, with black students starting ‘schools on their own as soon as they were able to read’.¹⁹ Even foreign correspondents such as William Hepworth Dixon, the editor of the London *Athenaeum*, observed in Richmond in 1866 that ‘[t]hese men are not waiting for the world to come and cheer them with its grand endowments and its national schools; they have begun the work of emancipating themselves from the thralldom of ignorance and vice’.²⁰ Of the 106,797 dollars spent on the education of South Carolina’s blacks in the 1866–67 academic year, 17,200 dollars (16 per cent) was raised by local African Americans. That same year Louisiana blacks supported 198 schools, with local African Americans paying over seven times

¹⁹ Union Army Recruiters quoted in Herbert G. Gutman, *Power & Culture: Essays on the American Working Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), 266–7; J.O. Midnight, ‘Midnight’s Musings,’ *The Afro American* (Baltimore, MD) 10(23), 15 February 1902; Heather Andrea Williams, “‘Clothing Themselves in Intelligence’: The Freedpeople, Schooling, and Northern Teachers, 1861–1871’, *Journal of African-American History* 87, Fall 2002, 375.

²⁰ William Hepworth Dixon, *New America* vol. 2 (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1867), 330.

the sum of the Freedmen's Bureau and other financiers.²¹ One former slave, Charles Whiteside, recalled that the day he was freed his former owner commented that freedom was 'essentially meaningless' without education, as 'education... makes a man free.' Whiteside took the comment to heart and sent all thirteen of his children to school to, in Whiteside's words, 'make them free'.²²

It was under the banner of the 'New South' where the role of black southerners was most openly discussed, and the unanticipated consequences of industrial education are most apparent. To accommodate northern benefactors and southern conservatives, the notion of 'racial harmony' in the New South was left sufficiently vague to permit the continuation of policies and practices that disadvantaged rural black labourers, so long as such policies could be justified as essential for the long-term benefit of blacks and the South as a whole.²³ After several decades of 'moral' and industrial education in the New South, sponsored by northern

²¹ For further figures on African American school attendance and financial contributions in 1866–67 see Gutman, *Power & Culture*, 280, 285, 287, 294–5.

²² Charles Whiteside quoted in Christopher M. Span and James D. Anderson, 'The Quest for "Book Learning": African American Education in Slavery and Freedom', in *A Companion to African American History*, ed. Alton Hornsby (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2005), 301, 306; Span, 'I Must Learn Now or Not at All', 200.

²³ First publicised by Henry Grady, Joel Chandler Harris, Richard H. Edmonds and J.D.B. DeBow, the New South is typically referred to as the period from 1880 to 1910. See Michael Dennis, 'Schooling Along the Color Line: Progressives and the Education of Blacks in the New South', *Journal of Negro Education* 67, Spring 1998, 142n1; Henry Grady, 'The New South', *New England Magazine* 8, March 1890, 86, 88–9; John Durham, 'Who Shall Succeed Mr. Grady?', *African Methodist Episcopal Church Review* 6, 1890, 274–5.

education funds, in sites ranging from the decaying church schoolhouse to the illustrious Fisk University and Hampton and Tuskegee Institutes, a new class of educated southern blacks emerged to independently assess the merits of the New South's educational policies.²⁴

There was considerable contention among the new generation of black leaders over how the interests of African Americans could be advanced most effectively. Booker T. Washington famously attracted criticism from W.E.B. Du Bois for sacrificing the pursuit of intellectual education and civil rights in the short-term, in the hopes that doing so would allow racial equality to develop naturally at a pace amiable to the economic and political security of the South.²⁵ But once

²⁴ Many texts on the subject of black education programs in the New South focus on the agendas of white elites and northern philanthropists. In most, the debate between educational philosophies espoused by the African American leaders W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington also features prominently. For all the analysis of curriculums, educational philosophies, and 'the future of the race,' historical discussion of the actual short- and medium-term consequences of education programs has been lost in a document-rich field. For just several examples see Ronald E. Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People: Teaching, Learning, and the Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861–1876* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Adam Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 198–9, 207–8, 303; James L. Leloudis, *Schooling the New South: Pedagogy, Self, and Society in North Carolina, 1880–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), chapter 6; and *Education and the Rise of the New South*, eds. Ronald K. Goodenow and Arthur O. White (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1981).

²⁵ Because of the overwhelming volume of existing literature on Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, discussion of their educational philosophies and their vision of black progress has intentionally been kept to a minimum. Since Louis R. Harlan's *Booker T. Washington: The Making of a Black Leader, 1856–1901* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), historians have acknowledged that Washington's motives and projects were even more complex and tailored to specific audiences

Washington had risen to national fame with his 1895 'Atlanta Compromise,' such criticisms fell on deaf ears. At that moment the New South and industrial educators found an articulate black ally who genuinely believed that 'No Race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top.'²⁶ That same humble vision was the driving force behind the overwhelming majority of black schools after the Civil War.

Education Funds

Religious and secular organisations such as the AMA, the Peabody Fund, Slater Fund, Rosenwald Fund, Rockefeller-funded GEB and directed grants from Andrew Carnegie all enthusiastically pursued the cause of black education while remaining sensitive to the new political landscape and the economic concerns of the impoverished New South. Both before and after Washington articulated gradual African American advancement in his 'Atlanta Compromise', these Funds wrapped their sponsorship of industrial training for southern blacks in the rhetorical trappings of 'self-help'. Industrial education was simultaneously presented to the

than previously believed. In regards to Washington's industrial educational hopes and principles, however, there is no evidence to suggest that he secretly harboured motives other than those he advertised to philanthropists and repeated in this article. In advocating industrial education he did not hope for or foresee unanticipated consequences such as long-distance migration.

²⁶ Booker T. Washington, *Cotton States International Exposition Speech* (Atlanta, 18 September 1895).

conservative New South as merely a means of assuring the political security and economic prosperity of the region. Operating concurrently and with little direct competition during the crucial post-bellum years, the AMA (1846–1999), Peabody Education Fund (1867–1937), Slater Fund (1882–1937) and GEB (1902–64) each threw themselves at the challenges of black education with similar motives and strategies. The ostensible agreement between these groups was that the stability and prosperity of the South, and indeed the nation, rested upon the shoulders of a ‘lazy and ignorant’ population that was not yet prepared for the responsibilities of citizenship. That population could either be trained to revive the fortunes of the South with modernised farming practices and a proud work ethic, or it could hasten its demise through lack of intellectual and moral fortitude. By 1875, the tenth anniversary of the South’s defeat, the AMA alone had ‘helped’ the South lift its ‘lazy and ignorant’ black weight by taking responsibility for ten thousand pupils in seven universities, seventeen teacher training colleges, thirteen elementary and high schools, and fifty-four churches.²⁷

Most Northern education funds directly channelled their grants to schools and programs that emphasised industrial education. The Slater Fund, however, cleverly advanced the self-sufficiency of rural public education by specialising in the training of black teachers who would service their local area. To get a sense of the magnitude of the Slater Fund’s efforts, note that its expenditures in just four of many such southern training schools exceeded ten thousand dollars in the

²⁷ Strieby, ‘The Nation Still in Danger’, 10.

financial year ending June 1912, and graduated over one hundred qualified teachers.²⁸ The rapid injection of northern educators into the South caused a dependence upon northern charity and began a cycle of funding that at first preferenced industrially-oriented schools and then increasingly ignored traditional liberal arts schools because their closures (due to lack of northern funding) made their existence an increasing rarity. This cycle quickly positioned industrial schools as the largest educational providers in the South, and left liberal arts educators a footnote.²⁹

The courses written and recommended by the Slater Fund for schools under its influence strongly centred on agriculture. For the last three years of the Slater Fund's five-year study plan, all classes, including chemistry, English and geography, were taught by reference to their application to agriculture and rural life. In these final years of study the Slater Fund curriculum recommended that '[t]he work in mathematics comprises courses in farm arithmetic and arithmetic as applied in the industries' while '[t]he work in English consists of the reading of interesting books, bulletins, and selected

²⁸ John F. Slater Fund, 'County Teacher Training Schools for Negroes', *Trustees of the John F. Slater Fund Occasional Papers* 14 (Lynchburg, 1913), 11–15.

²⁹ J.M. Stephen Peeps, 'Northern Philanthropy and the Emergence of Black Higher Education – Do-Gooders, Compromisers, or Co-Conspirators?', *Journal of Negro Education* 50 Summer 1981, 263; Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own*, 206; Atticus G. Haygood, 'The Case of the Negro, as to Education in the Southern States', *A Report to the Board of Trustees of the John F. Slater Fund* (Atlanta: Jas. P. Harrison & Co., 1885), 36; A.D. Mayo, 'The Future of the Colored Race', in *The Report of the Commissioner of Education For 1898–99* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1900), 1233.

articles bearing on current topics, especially in the world of industries'. Unsurprisingly '[t]he science work is made up of class and field work in agriculture, elementary physiology, hygiene and sanitation, commercial geography, and general science'. Even elementary school history lessons became vehicles for an industrial agenda that celebrated blacks who remained on the farm. The curriculum noted that history classes

would be a good time to teach about the Civil War and the progress the race has made in fifty years of freedom. Teach also the new demands made upon the South for skilled workmen, for people who are efficient and who have the ability to live under the strain of modern conditions.³⁰

With pupils studying 'the production of corn, cotton, lumber, hogs, and other home products as part of their work in geography', it is unlikely that Richard Wright embellished his recollection that whites would say 'all the geography a nigger needs to know is how to get from his shack to the plow'.³¹ Wright, educated at an AMA school, had first-hand experience of this form of education. When his class was asked by a group of northern visitors what message they should pass onto New England from southern freedmen,

³⁰ John F. Slater Fund, 'Suggested Course for County Training Schools', *Trustees of the John F. Slater Fund Occasional Papers* 18 (Lynchburg: Bell Company, 1917), 14–15, 33.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 53; Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 64; Richard Wright quoted in Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935*, 29.

Wright said '[t]ell them we are rising'.³² In his own case Wright meant it literally. He cited his AMA-sponsored schooling as ironically making him unfit for a life of persecution in the South, and when named valedictorian his education even inspired him out of conscience to refuse the graduation speech that was written for him by the school principal.

Within a decade of the GEB's pledge to train southern blacks 'for a perfectly ideal life just where they are', they instead began a Great Migration to the North, using Gates' training to learn that a 'perfectly ideal life' could be found elsewhere.³³ In explaining the Great Migration the Swedish economist-turned-sociologist Gunnar Myrdal observed that '[t]here was a 'push' in the South and there was a 'pull' in the North, widening tremendously the already existing differences in opportunities for a Negro in the two regions'. In addition to those push-pull factors, a 'new pattern of behavior was set; a new hope in the possibilities in the north was created. Lines of communication between North and South were established.'³⁴ Historians cite a host of social, legal and economic factors, such as sharecropping and the Black Codes, which combined to disrupt lines of communication and to deny blacks the autonomy to migrate the same distances as

³² Richard Wright, *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* (London: Gollancz, 1946), 192–7.

³³ Frederick Gates memo to GEB Board quoted in Theodore R. Mitchell and Robert Lowe, 'To Sow Contentment: Philanthropy, Scientific Agriculture and the Making of the New South: 1906–1920', *Journal of Social History* 24, Winter 1990, 324.

³⁴ Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 193.

white farmers. These factors also contributed to the general stagnation of the southern economy, and ironically they ultimately became push factors for migration.³⁵ Yet on their own, these factors had not caused a Great Migration during the preceding fifty years. While there had been smaller migrations to Liberia and Kansas, and some cross-country communication through 'Information Wanted' advertisements, the crucial obstacles to long-distance mass migration on the scale of the Great Migration were the lack of long-distance communication and an unfamiliarity with opportunities outside of one's county. Contrary to the intentions of northern funds, it was the education they provided that established those new lines of communication, and the First World War that generated millions of new industrial jobs, which in turn transformed simmering sentiment into an organised mass movement.

³⁵ For more on the Black Codes and economic coercion in the South see Theodore Branter Wilson, *The Black Codes of the South* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1965); George K. Holmes, 'The Peons of the South', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 4 (1893), 65–74; Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Knopf, 1941, facsimile edition 1962); Paul M. Gaston, *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking*, (New York: Knopf, 1970); Roger Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* (Cambridge, 1977); Edward Royce, *The Origins of Southern Sharecropping* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977, facsimile edition, 1993); William Brown and Morgan Reynolds, 'Debt Peonage Re-examined', *Journal of Economic History*, 33, December 1973, 862–71; and Jacqueline P. Bull, 'The General Merchant in the Economic History of the New South', *Journal of Southern History*, 18, February 1952, 37–59.

Newspapers and Correspondents Become Labour Agents

Following the decades-old patterns of short-distance migration and agenda-driven education reforms, it is now important to understand how the two interacted. By creating wholly new and long-distance communication networks, education reforms to train freedmen for a life of manual labour in the South in fact facilitated new patterns of long-distance labour migration. The oppressed masses who remained in the South for fifty years after the Civil War only began a large-scale chain migration when they were able to receive reliable information about new economic opportunities in the North. As discussed above, between the years 1880 and 1920 the blacks who migrated North were three to four times more likely to be able to read than blacks who remained in the South; the increasing distance of migration correlated to periods of increasing literacy among southern blacks; and written networks were utilised to seek out lost family members. Yet despite a strong correlation between education and migration it is impossible to *prove* a causal link. Perhaps the higher rates of literacy and utilisation of written networks amongst black migrants merely reflects the fact that the same type of people who had the ambition to pursue education were the same type of people who had the ambition to seek out better employment opportunities and social conditions in the North. Doubtless that is true of many migrants. But that does not preclude literacy from being a crucial facilitator of their eventual migration, and does not preclude literacy from helping explain the volume of that migration.

At the beginning of the Great Migration, when black literacy in the South was almost seventy-five per cent, northern black-owned periodicals were filled with discussion of African American education and working conditions.³⁶ Southern blacks wrote to these northern black-owned newspapers and sought advice on the best towns and cities in the North to find work for themselves and good schools for their children. As a sort of roving education correspondent with a weekly column for the Baltimore *Afro American*, J.O. Midnight espoused the benefits of education and penned laudatory profiles of black educators. He claimed to

have been in the North and in the South, in the East and in the West, and in all I have been over 37,218 miles... I have learned a little bit how to count by fractions, how to spell by Botany, how to write by science... I feel at times like my head is going to come open I have so much education in it'.³⁷

One of the countless black educators who Midnight profiled in 1902 was Sarah I. Fleetwood, who was appointed the superintendent of the nurse training school at the Freedman's Hospital in the nation's capital. Midnight made much of Fleetwood being the first woman to hold the position and explained how education and migration helped her achieve social mobility: 'She came into this world by the way of St. Louis ... Her parents were free, hence they could go when they

³⁶ Tolnay, *The Bottom Rung*, 4.

³⁷ J.O. Midnight, 'Midnight's Musings,' *Afro American* (Baltimore, MD), 11 January 1902.

wanted to, and they went to Philadelphia in order to give their children the advantage of education'.³⁸ Fifteen years later, in 1917, a black Greenville, South Carolina, reader of the Chicago *Defender* asked if the paper could advise him on labour opportunities 'in any good north western city', as he 'wish[ed] to change location for better educational advantages for my children'.³⁹

The importance of education to the black community, beyond the limited industrial education provided in the South, was eventually eclipsed as other issues rose to the fore. But it was not always thus. In sequential issues of the *Journal of Negro History* in 1919, Emmett J. Scott collected and published approximately 301 letters from southern blacks to northern black-owned newspapers, friends and family members from 1916 to 1918, representing the first wave of the Great Migration. With impressive foresight, Scott recognised the role that 'these documents will serve as a guide in getting at the motive dominant in the minds of these refugees and at the

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Anonymous author from Greenville, SC to *Defender*, 5 February 1917 in Emmett J. Scott, 'More Letters of Negro Migrants of 1916–1918', *Journal of Negro History* 4, October 1919, 436. In some cases the long-distance personal and educational networks that thrived after emancipation had even existed and facilitated migration *during* the Civil War. Greenwood, *First Fruits of Freedom*, 3, 73, 90, 106–7. By the middle of the Great Migration the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) magazine the *Crisis* was still steeped in passionate debate about black education. That issue was second only to discussion of enduring racial prejudice. Indeed, the *Crisis* and other northern black publications were even distributed through educational networks in the rural South. As a Virginia reader wrote in 1931: 'We are a rural community, not yet aroused to the value of your publication, and I must depend on the students and teachers of the school to buy The Crisis.' Carrie Price of Virginia, letter to the editor, *Crisis*, August 1931, 286.

real situation during the upheaval'.⁴⁰ Offering no analysis, the names of only a few authors, and only a brief introduction to the letters, Scott leaves historians to make of these letters what they will.

The years 1916–18 corresponded with a boom in the distribution of the *Defender* throughout the Black Belt and also the culmination of a broader transformation in the newspaper industry. The *Defender* used savvy distribution networks of Pullman porters and sales gimmicks to boost its weekly circulation from just 16,000, mainly in Chicago, in 1915 to 65,000 by 1916 and 125,000 by 1918. By this time technological improvements, 'yellow journalism', the use of graphics, and the proliferation of dailies had also 'transformed what and how Americans read'. According to historian James Gregory, '[t]he mass movement of African Americans out of the South would have been noteworthy in any age, but in the newspaper-centred early twentieth century, this population relocation triggered a set of very big stories'.⁴¹ Those big stories did not merely reflect and document a population's relocation. The regular publication of migration stories contributed to further migration by providing an increasing readership with information about the possibilities in the North and West and the reassurance that thousands of others had successfully gone before them.

⁴⁰ Emmett J. Scott, 'Letters of Negro Migrants', 290.

⁴¹ Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*, 44–45, 50–51.

To borrow Gregory's terms, these stories were active 'factors in history', not merely static 'artifacts of history'.⁴²

Writing from every corner of the South and west with varying degrees of literacy, Scott's sample of 301 letter-writers to the *Defender* indicated that they were avid consumers of these stories. On the basis of what they had already read, the letter-writers resolved to migrate and they inquired almost exclusively about job opportunities, educational facilities and social conditions in the North. Authors frequently noted that their pursuit of these positions could only occur if prospective employers advanced travelling costs.⁴³ In these cases and many others, migration could not have even been considered without this prior communication. This model of migration exhibits the vital role of literacy in co-ordinating movements and disseminating information, and it mirrors earlier black migrations to Kansas and Liberia. In these earlier migrations of the 1870s and 1880s prospective migrants first learned of coordinated movements and employment opportunities through newspapers, handbills and pamphlets, then wrote to the authors and other trusted sources to confirm their veracity, and when satisfied they

⁴² Ibid. This encouragement to migrate is in stark contrast with earlier years, when the northern black press openly critiqued those from the South as 'crude, vulgar, unwashed, rowdy, and criminal', and feared an influx of such migrants would cause northern whites to extend those sentiments to the existing northern black population. Thomas Sowell, *Ethnic America: A History* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 211.

⁴³ Scott, 'Letters of Negro Migrants', 295, 320–1; Scott, 'More Letters of Negro Migrants,' 425, 448.

would then redistribute the information through their own oral and written networks.⁴⁴

Typical letters to the *Defender* between 1916 and 1918 include one from a Florida reader, who commented that '[t]here are some families here thinking of moving up, and are desirous of knowing what to expect before leaving', and another from an Alabama reader saying that 'I would like for you to locate me as I should not like to com in that secson with out no enfremation [sic]'.⁴⁵ One seventeen-year-old girl writing from Selma, Alabama captured the convergence of economic factors that drove northward migration and the southern education that enabled it:

'Dear Sir: I am a reader of the Chicago Defender I think it is one of the Most Wonderful Papers of our race printed. Sirs I am writeing [sic] to see if You all will please get me a job ... I am a girl of 17 years old and in the 8 grade at Knox Academy School. But on account of not having money enough I had to stop school.'⁴⁶

Also writing to the *Defender*, an educated father evoked this same combination of economic and educational factors that

⁴⁴ Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 325–6; Van Deusen, 'The Exodus of 1879', 111–29.

⁴⁵ Anonymous to anonymous, 27 April 1917, and anonymous to anonymous, 29 April 1918, quoted in Scott, 'Letters of Negro Migrants', 294–5.

⁴⁶ Letter from anonymous to *Defender*, 19 May 1917, quoted in Scott, 'Letters of Negro Migrants', 317.

encouraged migration across greater distances come the early twentieth century:

I'm desirous of leaving the south but before so doing I want to be sure of a job before pulling out. I'm a member of the race, a normal and college school graduate ... My children I wished to be educated in a different community than here. Where the school facilities are better and less prejudice shown and in fact where advantages are better for our people in all respect. At present I have a good position but I desire to leave the south.⁴⁷

One request for assistance from Topeka, Kansas, was even prefaced with an acknowledgement of the role of the *Defender* 'as a link in the chain that should bind our people together more closely through out the country' and as a resource that aids 'the army of emigrants comeing [sic] from the south'.⁴⁸

The newfound power of literacy turned newspapers into fact checkers as well as a support network for prospective migrants. When labour agents came to the South and preached the virtues of life in the North, blacks were sceptical. As Wright commented, '[w]e have grown to distrust

⁴⁷ Scott, 'More Letters of Negro Migrants', 437. For greater discussion of southern blacks' interest in and experience of northern schools, see James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 246–58.

⁴⁸ Anonymous to *Defender*, 1 May 1917, quoted in Scott, 'Letters of Negro Migrants', 297–8; for more on the role of the *Defender* in encouraging migration see Scott, *Negro Migration During the War*, 30–7; Anonymous, *Defender*, 18 December 1943.

all white men'. Workers turned to trusted black-run newspapers such as the 'Chicago *Defender*, the Pittsburgh *Courier*, the Baltimore *Afro-American* and many other newspapers' to confirm or deny the claims of the labour agents. It was only when these newspapers 'paint the North as a land of promise [that w]e cannot help but believe now'.⁴⁹ The power of literacy meant correspondence between family and friends could also play the same role, providing vital information about living conditions and employment opportunities before a costly cross-country migration was attempted. According to Allan H. Spear, '[t]he arrival of each new migrant in the North created a new contact with potential migrants, and personal communication made the labor agents superfluous'.⁵⁰

This blueprint for migration is exhibited in the correspondence between a recent migrant to Chicago and his brother in Hattiesburg, Mississippi in 1917: 'I should have been here 20 years ago. I just begin to feel like a man ... My children are going to the same school with the whites and I don't have to umble [sic] to no one. I have registered – Will

⁴⁹ Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 87; Bullock, *A History of Negro Education in the South from 1619 to the Present*, 208. To again quote Wright, 'Yes, we will go and see [the North]. But we do not move. We are scared. Who will go first? Then, suddenly, a friend leaves and we whisper to him to write and tell us if the dream *is* true. We wait. Word comes. It is true! 'Come on!' the letters tell us. We go.' Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 87.

⁵⁰ Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Ghetto, 1890–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 133. Chain migration and the necessity of multiple lines of communication to trigger mass migration is also discussed in Carole Marks, *Farewell – We're Good and Gone: The Great Black Migration* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 1–44.

vote the next election and there isn't any 'yes sir' and 'no sir' – its all yes and no and Sam and Bill.'⁵¹ In the same year a migrant to East Chicago, Indiana wrote a comparatively lengthy letter to his former doctor in Union Station, Alabama on the subject of economic opportunities and living conditions in his adopted city:

Dear Old Friend: These moments I thought I would write you a few true facts of the present condition of the north... now it is tru [sic] the (col) men are making good. Never pay less than \$3.00 per day... I wish many time that you could see our People up here as they are entirely in a different light... People are coming here every day and are finding employment... Oh, I have children in school every day with the white children. I will write you more next time.⁵²

Conclusion

As evidenced by the prevalence of short-distance migration in the late nineteenth century, blacks' desires for better living conditions did not immediately translate into an 'exodus' from the South as whites had expected. This exodus was only realised when millions of industrial jobs were created in the North and when improved education and literacy allowed

⁵¹ Mr H to M, 13 November 1917, quoted in Scott, 'More Letters of Negro Migrants', 458–9.

⁵² Anonymous to anonymous, 10 June 1917, quoted in *ibid.*, 464.

blacks to pursue those new opportunities with confidence by raising awareness of, and connections to, life outside their county and the South. In retrospect it is only to have been expected given the strong traditions of black migration within the South, to Kansas, and to Liberia that thrived once the shackles of slavery had been removed. But the strength of those patterns had long been obscured by the way the census was reported, so New South educators could be forgiven for missing what in retrospect was blindingly obvious. Of course, the opportunities for migration that came with an increased use of correspondence and newspaper advertisements were in direct conflict with the goals of agricultural educators. They had taught these labourers to read and write, emphasising the benefits of a long-term personal relationship with and investment in the land. But it backfired.

Reflecting Merton's 'unanticipated consequences of purposive social action', the educational initiatives of the northern funds to sow the seeds of economic equality and disincentives for farmers to migrate were downright counter-productive. In 1936 Merton observed that '[p]ublic predictions of future social developments are frequently not sustained precisely because the prediction has become a new element in the concrete situation, thus tending to change the initial course of developments'.⁵³ In the aftermath of the Civil War, the

⁵³ Merton, 'The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action', 903–4. Another unanticipated consequence that grew from North-South communication networks and the Great Migration is the southward movement of ideas from recent migrants to the North. Once in the North these recent migrants shared new cultural and political experiences with the existing northern black population, and together, created a 'New Negro' identity that they communicated to the South. Though this article

‘predicted future social development’ was mass black migration from the South to northern cities. This predicted future was deliberately stifled by measures such as the Black Codes and economic coercion. Yet these tactics were later cited by blacks as motivators to migrate. Having now taught them to read and write, they read of better opportunities elsewhere and wrote to family and friends who had emigrated before them to confirm that life was indeed better farther afield. Consequently the southern fields that educators hoped their black students would toil were instead left fallow.

focuses on the unidirectional role of correspondence in facilitating northward migration, the influence of this correspondence was certainly bidirectional, and warrants further exploration. Sowell, *Ethnic America*, 215; Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*, chapter 4.