

**Session 12: Discussion of the Great Migration, *The Jazz Singer* screening (Part I)**

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Today: Discussion of articles, then screening of the first half of *The Jazz Singer*.

What differences do these movies make? It's a question of **modernization, urbanization, and assimilation**. The movie we'll be watching – *The Jazz Singer* (1927) - is very specifically about Americanization and the **generational struggle** between the father and the son. It brings the readings together.

How is it that a couple of generations later, people look back at immigration and look at their family and where their family is from?

What happens to children of European/Asian migrants of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century – what happens to them in rest of 20<sup>th</sup> century as generations move on? There was the "ethnic revival" of the 1970s.

New York trip update: We'll take the Chinatown bus and treat it as a historical artifact.

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Discussion of Lemann's book *The Promised Land* and Kirby's article "The Southern Exodus."

Does this book fit on our syllabus?

Student: Yes, the class is about learning how people adapt when they move. It deals with a group of people moving from one place to another, even if it's across state borders; and the ways of life in north/south are very different.

Were there ideas or concepts or events from previous weeks that came to mind?

Students:

- Chinatown, but it was a kind of different from Chinatown because all the people loved it [Chicago] and didn't want to move out.
- Chicago wanted the black labor, while San Francisco didn't want the Chinese at all. Chicago wanted the labor nearby, but not for living.

There are a few places in the book that you get the sense that this is the only place in Chicago that African Americans could go. When you think about questions of **exclusion**, in many ways the story of Chinese immigrants is about exclusion – e.g. you can't be a citizen (excluding from politics). The story of African Americans is about **inclusion**, but into a **hierarchy** – you are a citizen, but a **second class citizen**.

When they moved to Chicago, was it better for the African Americans?

They were thrown into large, urban spaces – and some experience the **anonymity** as liberating, particularly African Americans. Often small town sharecropping life meant a lot of scrutiny from the landowners who kept a close eye. Being in Chicago offered some freedom to not to be known. But as with all migrations, that can be a **tension on social networks** and what holds people to one another; those connections can fray. Families are separated, it's hard to support. Or, in Chicago because so many are coming to a confined

space in a small time, the whole **urban fabric** is tested in many ways – overcrowding, jobs are hard to come by.

There is nothing that looked on paper like apartheid, but in practice it was the case, e.g. restricted covenants. There are a few examples where integration was attempted but whites who lived in those neighborhoods just absolutely refused with violence. There were no legal contracts, but it was the settled policy in the neighborhood. For example, the Robert Taylor homes were 99% black.

**White out-migration:** 9 million people leave the south between 1910 and 1960. That's huge, larger than any one country's migration out of Europe. Kirby suggests we have missed that by thinking too much about this as a movement of people based on race, that their motivations and destinations are shaped by race. If we think of **the South as a region that both whites and blacks are moving out of**, we start to see some new things. What do we see?

What causes these migrations is **economic dislocation rather than racism**, that racism is the context in which all of this is taking place but the economic forces of industrialization, southern agriculture, changes in factory work (e.g. textile industry in North Carolina, coal mines in West Virginia and Kentucky) push enormous numbers of people out of the south. **They are being pushed for the same kinds of reasons out of the south that they are being pulled to the north.** The same factories that are hiring African Americans after WWII are hiring white workers in the big cities. So historians who have told the story of the Great Migration as one primarily about "the promised land," the story about black people's movements from the south to the north, have missed this. Evaluate that against the life story and people in *The Promised Land*. Why did they move?

Students:

- The economic pull of Chicago was a lot stronger than the push of Jim Crow.
- Hope that they could change their way of life, not only the economic part of it but also the way they were treated.
- When they would come back they'd have their fancy stuff to show off
- Push out of the south much stronger with advent of automated cotton picker because demand for black labor diminished – send them to the north so the blacks are no longer their problem

It's a mix of motivations. Word does get back about both good and bad things.

The book opens with the mechanical cotton picker – suggesting that technological changes and economic forces are driving these events. But later on, p. 49, plantation manager writes about mechanical cotton picker.

Economic relocation and technological change were perhaps responses to migrations. But migrations were undertaken for a whole host of reasons – some economic, some political, cultural, prompted by issues about identity, dignity, rights. Migration = labor shortage = mechanical cotton picker = labor shortage = migration.

Of the 9 million people who leave the south, blacks leave disproportionately – but is that disproportionately related to how blacks are disproportionately represented in the number of sharecroppers?

Student: If sharecroppers were leaving all at the same rate, regardless of race, then it was more an issue of class.

Kirby suggests that blacks were leaving at disproportionate rates, even compared to white sharecroppers.

In the article he traces out how complicated it is to define the word South. The main reason for excluding Florida is that a lot of people are moving into Florida during these years – tourism, retirement.

Part of what Kirby traces out is that he wants us in some ways to think about these economic pushes not to minimize the importance of racism but to suggest that **we shouldn't start our social analysis with our racial blinders already on**. He would extend this to migrations *in general*. (He's now working on a comparison between the American South and southern Italy.) He wouldn't say to ignore race – but if you start with a racialized set of ideas, you're going to miss part of the story.

For example, it's very easy to miss white out-migrants because they blend into the white populations of those cities much faster than the blacks do. The discrimination about what white migrants face is particularly limited scope – the community would resent the arrival of 100 white men from Oklahoma just because it disturbs community fabric. But over time, white migrants have advantages that black migrants don't. White migrants have disappeared as a distinctive group. Much of the story in Chicago and elsewhere is about how blacks remain distinct because blending in isn't an option because the policies and economic practices are set to prevent that.

In the last few weeks we've driven home the economic forces driving social changes and I don't want us to lose all the other reasons why people move, regardless of their race, but that people move for all kinds of reasons. And I want to make everyone sensitive how economic forces shape those migrations and how laws shape after the move. **We are a profoundly mobile society – the motivations are complex and complicated**. Any good explanation has to find a place for big economic forces, e.g. industrialization, but if you start and finish with economic forces, then you lose something.

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Movie: *The Jazz Singer* made in 1927, about 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Jewish American who wants to be a jazz singer and has to reject his role as singer in his synagogue.

- migrations from Europe to America
- tensions of how to live as a Jewish immigrant
- generational conflict between father and son