A Little More Freedom

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CONCLUSION

We found a little more freedom in Toledo, Ohio than in Camden, Arkansas.
—Welton Barnett, Toledo, 1976

In the very process of being transplanted, the Negro is becoming transformed.
—Alain Locke, 1925

All those who have studied African American migration agree that the mobility choices made by several hundred thousand ordinary people in the aggregate produced a profound impact upon the history of the United States in the twentieth century. Culture, politics, and urban geography were all reshaped in significant ways. The migrants did change their own situation, and for many of them the alteration was for the better. In changing their own lives, they also transformed both the places they entered and the places they left.

This book has attempted to define the outlines of the age of the village for African Americans and to estimate the impact of their nonmetropolitan experience upon their metropolitan era. I hope it will lay to rest any doubts that African Americans did have their own age of the village, an intervening stage between the rural world in which most lived at the Civil War’s onset and the metropolitan society that encompassed the vast majority at the beginning of the twenty-first century. To be sure, the small-town period for African Americans represented a much more compressed part of their history than it did for European Americans. On the other hand, it lasted longer than most have previously recognized. In the Lower Midwest, the eve of the Great Depression found numbers ranging from one-fifth in Ohio to one-quarter in Indiana and Illinois still living in nonmetropolitan urban places (tables A.15–A.17). Furthermore, a minority of those normally counted as part of metropolitan populations found or created settings within the world of the large cities that nurtured as much as possible the lifestyle of the small town.

African Americans found some aspects of small-town society appealing, which explains why a significant minority continued to reside there or tried
to recreate it in alien environments. But a majority of black Midwesterners rejected it for the quite different world of the big city. Explaining their decisions requires consideration of four major variables, which varied from state to state as well as evolving over time. Economic change channeled both black and white migrations into, out of, and within the Lower Midwest. In African American as in European American mobility, women's relative presence or absence within a migration stream affected the direction of the stream: The larger the proportion of women, the more likely the stream flowed to big cities. The emergence of metropolitan black communities of unprecedented size, wealth, and diversity increasingly attracted African American travelers, both from the South and from smaller communities in the Midwest. Migrants’ prior experience, whether in a rural or urban setting, in the South or the North, powerfully influenced their choice of destination.

The answer to my initial question about whether the bullet holes in the courthouse doors at Washington Court House offered an explanation for the decline of African American nonmetropolitan populations is yes and no. Antiblet collective violence did play a role in convincing African Americans that their future lay elsewhere, but it is only one part of a much larger and more complex story. Seen from an African American perspective, the Lower Midwest was a violent place, and most of the attacks between 1885 and 1910—all of those that occurred in Ohio and Indiana—took place in small towns and midsize cities. But such violence was reported in only a small minority of towns, and some black residents chose to stay even in towns where a mob had gathered or a lynching was organized, while other African Americans decided to move to such places, including even young, newly married couples, such as John and Victoria Oatmeal in Washington Court House. One factor that may have played a large part in such decisions was the greater ease of acquiring ownership of a family home in smaller urban communities. Access to home ownership was offset, however, by the limited range of job opportunities, especially for women. Therefore, as women came to fill a larger place in the migration stream from the South, the flow was nudged cityward.

Classic migration theory distinguishes between “push” and “pull” factors, but today, migration scholars recognize that these categories are interdependent. A “push” may only become strong enough to propel migration when a “pull” becomes sufficiently attractive to offer a reasonable alternative, and the same holds true in reverse for a “pull” factor. The locational choices of African American migrants in the Lower Midwest from the Civil War to the Great Depression fit comfortably within this new perspective. Nonmetropolitan communities in the Midwest became attractive
destinations during the Civil War and the postwar years because they offered the appeal of a prosperous urban setting in a nonsouthern state, yet one tightly bound to familiar agricultural cycles, and in a climate and topography similar to those of the border states from which most migrants originated. For some, the decision to settle in a nonmetropolitan community paid off, especially when compared to the worsening racial atmosphere in the South. For many others, however, the restricted job opportunities and the threat of violence in small towns and midsize cities burnished the appeal of a larger African American urban community. Their decisions to move cityward augmented the size, widened the range of backgrounds, and amplified the economic, social, and cultural resources of metropolitan African American populations. Meanwhile, migrants from the Deep South began to join the migration stream, mainly to Illinois and the Calumet region of Indiana. At first, they followed the earlier path of their border state predecessors to nonmetropolitan communities, before joining the latter in turning cityward during the twentieth century’s second decade. By the time cessation of European immigration and multiplying wartime needs opened industrial jobs to African Americans on a large scale, many migrants from the South had already tasted urban life in either the South or the North—or both. For them, the immediate “push” came, not from cotton, sugar, or tobacco fields, but from smaller black communities under constant white surveillance, and the relevant “pull” emanated from metropolitan black communities so large as to enjoy an unprecedented degree of autonomy from white control. The appeal of formerly attractive small towns and midsize cities in both the South and the North diminished relative to the magnetism of the new African American metropolitan culture.

If one term had to sum up why African Americans rejected the midwestern small towns and cities to which they were initially attracted, I think the best one would be “variability,” both geographic and temporal. Small towns and small cities were unpredictable places, precisely because they were white worlds. Some small-town environments were unquestionably hospitable to some, most, or perhaps even all of their African American residents. Testimony to this effect is not hard to find. The sterling example of racial egalitarianism is Covert Township, Michigan, where radical white abolitionists and black settlers determined on equality established during the Civil War decade an atmosphere of racial harmony that persisted through the nineteenth century’s end. Although individual whites in Monroe, Michigan, acted out their prejudices toward blacks, the courts evidently dealt fairly. During the 1860s Steubenville, Ohio enjoyed a well-deserved reputation for racial tolerance. Orphaned in the tiny hamlet of
Ellettsville, Indiana, Jeremiah Jackson received indispensable help from his European American neighbors, which allowed him to become the first African American graduate of the Indiana University School of Medicine. Throughout his many years as a physician in Evansville, Jackson returned regularly to Ellettsville for ceremonial occasions. In Tuscola, Illinois, Bruce Hayden passed the civil service examination with flying colors to become the first African American letter carrier. Disappointed whites were appalled that the postmaster would even consider appointing “a nigger on the post office,” but the postmaster replied, according to Hayden, that “you had no business letting a nigger get smarter than you.” Hayden held the job for thirty-two years. Even in Springfield, Illinois, Phoebe Mitchell Day, who lived through the 1908 riot, reported of her co-workers in the state office building, her white neighbors, and nurses who cared for her at the local hospital, “they all treated me lovely.”

Small towns and small cities differed from each other. Some treated African Americans comparatively well, while others barred them completely. European Americans pondering a move had to consider only the general economic condition of a prospective destination, but African Americans’ prospects depended as well upon the local racial atmosphere. Tuscola was good to Bruce Hayden’s family, but when he moved sixty miles west to Springfield, he found it a terribly prejudiced town. Worse, a single community’s racial atmosphere could change almost overnight. By the 1880s Steubenville’s reputation for tolerance had begun to tarnish, and when new roller-skating rinks opened, their proprietors refused to admit African Americans. Black Altonians no doubt thought their schools were safely integrated until local officials decided to resegregate them. No one was prepared for the lynchings and race riots that boiled up like summer tornadoes in midwestern communities. When one’s family’s welfare depended on the goodwill of individual European Americans, and one’s safety rested upon the attitudes of a small European American community, it must have been disconcerting to watch individual moods and the communal temper shift in response to stimuli emanating from mysterious local or extralocal sources. European Americans in large cities may have been equally unpredictable, but spatial differentiation of residential, commercial, and industrial zones, de facto residential segregation, and congregation of African Americans limited daily interaction with whites, while larger African American populations provided greater security in numbers.

The role played by nonmetropolitan urban communities in channeling African American migration restores to the European American residents of those communities a degree of agency that is often missing in histories of
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the small town. Instead, small towns are commonly seen as victims of inexorable forces of centralization. By making their towns inhospitable places for African Americans, whether through unwillingness to share well-paying occupations, segregation of theaters and restaurants, or mobs and lynchings, European Americans injured their communities economically and culturally. They needed people, as their editors incessantly proclaimed, to support local markets. The worst of them, the sundown towns and suburbs that succeeded in driving out all African Americans or banning them from entering, fostered—and sometimes continue to foster—prejudice, paranoia, and parochialism.

In addition, nonmetropolitan communities in the Lower Midwest could have nourished, instead of persecuting, the creators and purveyors of new musical and cultural modes. By encouraging the interpenetration of African and European styles, small towns could have put themselves in the vanguard of cultural change in modern America instead of the rear guard. Had they done so, they might have escaped the overblown but deeply hurtful indictments by modernist intellectuals during the twenties.

If white racism had been tempered, even the great numbers of migrants who came during the First Great Migration could have been absorbed into the growing populations of the nonmetropolitan urban communities of the Lower Midwest. This can be demonstrated by estimating the size of the influx to metropolitan centers beyond what would have occurred if African American urban population growth had been spread evenly across the urban hierarchy of each state. Population growth thus attributable to the African American metropolitan shift amounts to about 27,000 in Indiana and 82,000 in Ohio during the period 1890–1930, and approximately 77,000 in Illinois during 1910–1930. During the corresponding periods, the white nonmetropolitan population of Indiana grew by roughly 500,000, that of Ohio by 900,000, and that of Illinois by more than 800,000. This means that in every state, if nonmetropolitan towns had maintained the attraction they had held for African Americans before the metropolitan shift, African American newcomers would have represented less than 10 percent of the actual growth in European American population such places sustained. This fact implies that rather than structural conditions in play across midwestern urban systems, forces within communities played the key role in channeling African American migration. African Americans whose achievements fell short of their aspirations within nonmetropolitan towns and cities left, not because the communities were faltering, but because they were not prospering within them.

In considering the full sweep of African American migration to the Lower Midwest from the Civil War to the eve of the Great Depression, it
is hard to escape the conclusion that the movement was for the most part a deliberate and orderly one. This view contrasts, of course, with a common image of headlong flight from southern oppression. It differs as well from the portrait of a black exodus from the vicious prejudice of northern communities—sundown towns and suburbs—recently painted by James Loewen. Such images figure large because of the dramatic conventions of literary representation or, in Loewen’s case, the need to evoke full sympathy for the victims of white racism to support a praiseworthy call for reform. In other words, it makes a much better story than a gradual transition governed by sober consideration of available alternatives. But the facts that the flood of the Great Migration years was preceded by a half century trickle; that migrants from the Deep South began to enter the region in significant numbers at least twenty years before the major movement erupted; that personal communication between earlier and later migrants played a large part in channeling migration flows; that mass migration to the metropolitan North was only one among an array of strategies for dealing with oppression; and, most important, that migration responded to identifiable disappointments, dangers, and opportunities, all argue for placing African American migration firmly within the picture painted by modern historians of human mobility. As one such historian writes of late nineteenth-century migrants in general, “Rarely [did they] leave home without a clear idea of where they were going and how they would get there.”

Finally, the findings of this study are consistent with the view that African American experience since the Civil War produced a new race consciousness by the 1920s. Among intellectuals the new perception appeared in the concept of the New Negro, and among the masses it underlay the outpouring of support for Marcus Garvey’s black nationalism. Little race consciousness seems to be evident in the locational choices made by the first wave of migrants to the Lower Midwest, those who came between 1860 and 1890, but their experience in small towns and small cities probably contributed significantly to the process of forming such an outlook. It did so negatively, by demonstrating durable white hostility to black achievement. But the nonmetropolitan experience also contributed positively to formation of racial consciousness, by introducing migrants from diverse backgrounds to each other and by providing the setting in which they created, in cooperation with their new acquaintances, the institutional sinews of community. By the twentieth century’s second and third decades, the unprecedented African American worlds in metropolitan centers exerted a powerful magnetism, in part by exhibiting wider opportunities for community building. Even those who sought to recreate a small-town lifestyle in metropolitan
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suburbs clustered with other African Americans. Garveyism attracted mass support in the Midwest: in Cleveland, in Gary, and in Chicago, despite a feud between Garvey and the Defender’s Robert Abbott. In light of three factors—the treatment African Americans received in midwestern urban worlds; the convergence in metropolitan destinations of people from various origins; and the vision of a vibrant African American urban culture emerging in such cities as Chicago, Cleveland, and Indianapolis—such a perceptual change seems quite likely. Just as African American migrants altered their new environment, the Midwest changed its new African American citizens.