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### “Smiling Faces, Beautiful Places”: Stories of African Diaspora Relocation to the South

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## September 2009 Newsletter

### **“Smiling Faces, Beautiful Places” Stories of African Diaspora Relocation to the South**

By Maggi M. Morehouse<sup>1</sup>

#### **Abstract**

In the first part of the twentieth century African Americans left the rural South and migrated to the more urban North and West. “Pushed” out by natural disasters and the economic decline of southern industries, concurrently they were “pulled” by the lure of war industry jobs with higher wages and non-discriminatory hiring practices. Many migrants expressed that move as “going to the Promised Land.” Today’s urban decay and inner city joblessness has many African Americans feeling “rootless.” Since the 1970s African Americans have been “returning” to the South -- that “vexed” and “haunted” area that most represents home. This article investigates the phenomenon of African Diaspora southern migration by exploring the meaning of place and identity within the writings and life stories of African Americans who explicitly deal with “returning” to the modern day South of “smiling faces, and beautiful places.”

This article is accompanied by a documentary film, also entitled *Smiling Faces, Beautiful Places: Stories of African Diaspora Relocation to the South*, which is available for viewing online in Quicktime format (30 megabyte file) at: <http://web.usca.edu/history/morehouse/> (scroll down to Research Projects)

## African Diaspora in Motion

Americans are always on the move, migrating from one location to another, trying to improve their future or running from their past. Much of our American identity is formulated around movement.<sup>2</sup> People move and remake themselves in new locations and discover connections and build their identities around constructed ideas and notions of place. These new diasporic communities are dynamic and organic.<sup>3</sup> In the twenty-first century South, new African Diaspora communities are emerging as black people relocate to the area.<sup>4</sup> Historian Darlene Clark Hine reveals how movement and motion have constantly affected African Americans: “. . . black people in the New World have been . . . in continuous motion, much of it forced, some of it voluntary and self-propelled. To understand both the processes of black migration and the motivations of the individuals, men and women, who comprised this human tide, is to approach a more illuminating portrait of American history and society.”<sup>5</sup> I have been documenting this new migration pattern within the African Diaspora with life stories and oral histories in transcribed video format. Recently relocated T. Ella Strother said: “This may sound strange to you, but we moved here because there were black people here. I mean, in Wisconsin and Iowa there weren’t that many black people. When we were driving around looking at locations in South Carolina, I kept saying to my husband, ‘Look, there’s black people!’ and we felt like we could belong here.”<sup>6</sup> This article and attendant documentary seek to illuminate the recent phenomenon of African Americans relocating to the South.

Historian James N. Gregory understands migration as a circular motion, and in his new monograph, *The Southern Diaspora*, he traces the path of migrants who have “circle[d] back toward home.”<sup>7</sup> “Americans believe that people can start over, at any time, and make the kind of life they desire,” notes journalist James Jasper. Americans are always moving to ensure their “material and spiritual salvation,” and Jasper uses the term “restlessness” to explain this behavior.<sup>8</sup> Demographer William H. Frey quantified the African American population shift in 2000 and confirmed that 55 percent of America’s black population currently lives in the South, a reversal of the earlier out-migration trend of the 20th century.<sup>9</sup> By 2002 the U.S. Census Bureau determined that 55.3% of the 36 million black people in America were living in the South -- a region comprised of 16 states plus Washington, D.C.<sup>10</sup> These empirically demonstrated concepts of motion and migration, of American-ness and African American identity, of place and diaspora, intersect with the current trend of black people relocating to the South. Upon joining

other African American "return" migrants as she resettled in the South after all her worldly travels, poet and memoirist Maya Angelou declared: "We're coming home." According to demographers, novelists, historians, journalists, and social scientists, America is experiencing another human tide of migration -- African Americans are in motion, returning to the South.

Since the 1970s, and most significantly in the first part of the twenty-first century, African Americans have been relocating and concentrating in the South -- that "vexed" area that, for many, most represents home. The U.S. census captures this quantitative movement data, but offers nothing in terms of qualitative information: Why this return migration? Who are these diasporic migrants? Is it the same generation of migrants who left in the "Great Migration" and are now returning home? My preliminary findings indicate that this group is a different generation, a generation who visited the South while growing up in the North and now feel they are "coming home." They are choosing to live in the South because they feel connected to the region, by blood, by history, by identity. This group of African Diaspora migrants have a different set of socio-economic realities than the earlier out-migrating group. These newly relocated migrants have involved themselves in the politics of the region. Their sometimes conservative approach to personal responsibility and politics may rejuvenate "the party of Lincoln," however, more than likely they will strengthen or take-back the southern Democratic Party. This emerging history of African Diaspora migration fits into the portrait of a "restless America," the pursuit of happiness via movement and migration.<sup>11</sup> African Americans are remaking themselves in the modern South. They will be impacted by the move, and they will most certainly impact their new home region.

Jasper, Hine, and Gregory explicitly set black migration within the context of American movement overall and the American quest for freedom. These interpretative frameworks of migration, motion, and diaspora suggest that this current group of black Southern migrants may be expressing their American-ness by the act of moving and remaking themselves in a new locale. I have explored these questions using oral history methods, collecting the personal narratives of the returnees and evaluating those stories alongside fictional representations of the South as "home," a method of text-in-context analysis. The rich narrative within the oral histories can be combined with quantitative demographic data, and then interpreted using the theoretical framework of diaspora and migration. Through this interdisciplinary inquiry approach, a multi-layered portrait emerges that will help us to understand this twenty-first

century movement of African Americans. My sample of participants reported that they have relocated to the South to improve their quality of life, and now that they are here, they feel connected to the region -- they have a strong attachment to place. Also, they said they feel connected to this region because of a sense of identity, yet none lived in the South before, however, all said they are on their way to becoming “southerners.” This demonstrates an organic African Diaspora identity attached to the South in a new understanding of both the past and the future. These diasporic individuals are not talking about going to a “promised land” and they are not trying to forget the troubled history of the past. But they are attaching themselves and their new lives into a complex region with a complicated past, and they are hopeful that they can make a good future.

These conjectural musings from various scholars and journalists lead to an explanatory theory of movement and identity formation specific to the notion of diaspora -- an identity community that is formed when people move. When diaspora and migration theory are combined with the quantitative data that says where, when, and how many African Americans are moving, then we have a more complete portrait of the return migration phenomenon. This framework of data analysis allows us to see that this twenty-first century southern migration of African Americans fits perfectly into the overall American stream of movement, and the quest for freedom. To understand the current patterns of movement and migration, a look into the African American diasporic past is instructive.

### **Background of the “Out Migration”**

In the twentieth century, African Americans left the South and migrated north and west in what historians have described as a “revolutionary” or “dramatic transformation” of the nation.<sup>12</sup> This “watershed . . . was the first step in the full nationalization of the African-American population.”<sup>13</sup> At the beginning of the twentieth century over 95 percent of African Americans lived in the South, but by the 1970s less than half the black population was still residing there. The “Great Migration,” a term used by historians to describe the one and one-half million African Americans who left the South between 1910 and 1930, or roughly World War I to the Great Depression, was followed by another greater migration. The out-migration from World War II and through the 1970s removed another five million African Americans bringing the total number of black out-migrants to six million people. In terms of sheer numbers, more white

southerners left the South than black southerners, however, more white southerners than black returned to the region in the twentieth century. Gregory calculated the numbers of migrants by decade in the Southern Diaspora during the twentieth century as 20 million whites and eight million blacks.<sup>14</sup> The great migration of blacks out of the South, greatly reduced their population percentages and regional concentrations, and of course, dispersed and concentrated them into new regions of America. For example, in South Carolina and Mississippi blacks comprised more than fifty percent of the population at the early part of the twentieth century, and in Georgia and Louisiana, at least forty percent of the population was black. The later twentieth century out-migration sharply reduced those numbers so that blacks today are a minority population in every southern state.<sup>15</sup> However, we are in the middle of another re-concentration, a returning or relocating African Diaspora migration that may bring a new southern re-alignment in politics, social norms, and economics.

Pushed out by natural disasters and the economic decline of southern industries, African American out-migrants were concurrently pulled to the North and West by the lure of war-industry jobs with higher wages and supposedly non-discriminatory hiring practices. Historian Joe Trotter Jr. noted how African American migrants were not simply passive victims of push-pull migration factors but that, in fact, the individuals shaped their own experiences and transformed themselves in their new locales. Trotter also discovered that "Black migration to northern and western cities was often preceded by a series of stops in several southern and non-southern cities and small towns."<sup>16</sup> These city stops helped the migrants acclimate to their final Northern or Western metropolitan area. According to oral histories, musical lyrics, paintings, and literary texts, many of the African American migrants who moved north and west in the twentieth century's "Great Migration" described their movement as "going to the Promised Land." The Discovery Channel's documentary "The Promised Land," based on an earlier book of the same title by Nicholas Lemann, brings together first-hand recollections, songs, photos, and Jacob Lawrence paintings that depict this Great Migration as hopeful strivings. As the historian Eric Arnesen has demonstrated through documents and research "conditions in the North compared favorably to those in the South, but they fell far short of the region's image as a "promised land'."<sup>17</sup> Additionally, in most every narrative or memoir, the migrants described life in the South as difficult and unrelenting in its harshness, but their northern life as hardly more promising.

Lemann's oral histories uncovered the southern sharecropper's impressions of the so-called Promised Land of the North. One woman named Ruby described how she had moved back and forth between Chicago and Mississippi. What first pushed Ruby out of Mississippi was an eviction at the end of the sharecropping season. She then lived in Chicago with a series of different relatives, always trying to get ahead financially. She moved back to Mississippi for a marriage and then returned to Chicago, again to try and remake herself. At the time of her interview with Lemann, she was living out the end of her life in the projects in inner-city Chicago. Ruby always moved to better her life, yet in all of her sojourns she mostly remained in poverty and in segregated living situations. Her life in the North was certainly no "promised land."<sup>18</sup>

Ruby's story is not that unusual. Migrants who expected a better life in the North discovered racial roadblocks and many types of discrimination in the so-called "Promised Land." Still, the exodus of African Americans out of the South continued up until the 1970s, albeit with some different migratory paths. Added to the northern stream of out-migration, African Americans began migrating west looking for better work opportunities, including war production factories in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Diego. Gregory traced this aspect of the Southern Diaspora as well. He wrote: ". . . World War II also opened a new migration geography for African Americans. Now black families from Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas . . . turned west, giving the Pacific Coast its first significant black population outside of Los Angeles."<sup>19</sup>

The migrants who moved north and west in the second wave were probably not as naïve in expecting a "Promised Land," but they were still hopeful, expecting better opportunities in their new town or "Haven," to use the title of the town in Toni Morrison's novel, *Paradise*. Southern migrants to Detroit, San Francisco, or New York expected their life to improve when they migrated. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou recalls her relocation from Stamps, Arkansas, to San Francisco, California, at the beginning of World War II. Her expectations high, she was confounded by the discriminatory practices of the streetcar company that tried not to hire her because she was black and female. Chester Himes' protagonist in *If He Hollers* is destroyed by the discrimination he experiences working at a war production factory in Los Angeles. In addition to these literary sources, much of the collected oral histories, musical lyrics, paintings, and demographic data concerning African American out-migration reveal how

the Southern migrants discovered segregated living conditions and discriminatory practices in their new locales. While the new black Southern migrants living in the North and West may not have wanted to live among white people, it is clear from their life stories and memoirs that they did not expect the kind of discrimination they had experienced in the South. When these migrants describe their life in the North and West their descriptions echo the bitterness they felt when they experienced segregation and other discriminatory practices in their new "homeland."

Black people in most areas of America lived in separate neighborhoods, segregated by law or custom until the mid-1960s civil rights era. When black people from the South migrated to the North and West, many exchanged agricultural work for urban-based industrial jobs. Migrants exchanged their subsistence sharecropper's living-off-the-land lifestyle for the discriminatory, segregated, crowded ghetto existence of urban life. In Chicago, many of the first-wave of Southern migrants lived in segregated tenements or bleak little "kitchenettes," single-bed rooms with a hotplate for a kitchen. One Southern migrant, James Hinton, moved to Chicago and described the different styles of discrimination he faced, most particularly segregation. He said: "In the South you lived around whites because you worked for them; in the North you were separated, even living in high-rise ghettos."<sup>20</sup> Another migrant described what it was like for "block busters," as the blacks who attempted to move into Chicago's white neighborhoods were called. "If you tried to move out of the ghetto, the newspapers would describe the move in military terms, as an 'invasion' and the 'front-line' of the race battle." The collected life stories of African American migrants from the massive twentieth century out-migration belie the idea of the North and West as a "promised" land.

Chicago was not segregated until black people started arriving in great numbers and looking for jobs and housing. One neighborhood, fondly called Bronzeville by its residents, quickly became the safe area for black people to exist within the city. Perhaps the black migrants wanted to live among their own people, however, when they tried to move out they were constrained by the prevailing discrimination in their new locales. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said that Chicago was more segregated than Alabama. Author and activist James Baldwin visited the segregated slums on the south side of Chicago and commented that he saw "a million people in captivity as far as the eye can see." In 1955 Mayor Richard Daley, one of the last of America's old-style political bosses, was elected by both black and white voters. Machine politics got out the black vote, and this made Daley somewhat responsive to his black



constituency, but not so responsive that he wanted them to move out of their segregated neighborhoods. Instead, Daly devised a new housing strategy to improve the slum dwellings where the majority of Chicago's black population was then living. He leveled all of the city's black tenements and kitchenettes and began building high-rise projects that eventually stretched for 20 city blocks and housed as many as 30,000 residents. Within a few short years, the projects were so thoroughly segregated that they became known as "ghettos in the sky," featuring "perpendicular segregation." When the economy declined in Chicago in the 1970s and many inner-city residents in the projects found themselves without work, without hope of work, and financially dependent on public housing, the project dwellers discovered that they were trapped -- with few opportunities to move up and even fewer opportunities to move out.

Many Chicago blacks found their new living conditions so bleak, without hope, and so thoroughly segregated and separated from the concerns of city politicians that they looked for ways to get their children out. During the 1990s, relocated black southerners warned others about the horrors of northern, city living, specifically the perils of living in Chicago. One migrant from Alabama to Chicago advised other African Americans not to move north. He said: "If I had a son now I wouldn't tell him to move to Chicago -- he's more likely to get killed and there's no jobs there for him. He'd be better off in Alabama."<sup>21</sup> When interviewers asked a couple of young boys from Chicago's Cabrini Green housing project what they thought of the South, the kids described a place completely different from their own Chicago environment. One boy said that he wanted to move to the South because there was just too much violence where he lived. Another boy said: "Yeah, in the South you can walk down the street and you don't have to worry about nobody shooting at you." Another commented: "You can sit on your porch and talk all night if you want. And you don't have to worry about going to the store and getting robbed."<sup>22</sup> Although it is unclear from the documentary whether any of the teens relocated to the South, their notions and ideas about southern living as they expressed them in the 1990s, contrasted to the harsh realities of living in northern, city housing projects, exemplifies the lure of "Smiling Faces, Beautiful Places" the siren call of the African Diaspora, also a slogan pasted on every South Carolina license plate.

Many African Americans did find ways to leave the slums of Chicago and elsewhere to start the "return" migration to the South. For example, when his health failed, Reverend Uless Carter returned to the South after 30 years in Chicago. He wanted to go "home," even though he

had left Mississippi because it was "intolerable." Carter always loved the land in Mississippi, and he felt deeply connected to the place. What he could never tolerate, of course, was the segregation and the white hatred toward blacks that was a regular part of Southern society. He had to leave his beloved land to make a living as a preacher in the North. Upon his return to Mississippi in 1981, he noted that when he left he could not even vote, but now his town had a black mayor and a black police chief. He summarized these changes as the will of God: "It's how God meant for it to be." Like Reverend Carter, James Hinton will be returning to the South, specifically to Alabama, when he retires. Hinton told the interviewer that "the Promised Land is now in the South."<sup>23</sup>

Many of the migrants who left the South earlier in the twentieth century are heading home.<sup>24</sup> Today's urban decay and inner-city joblessness has many African Americans feeling rootless. Maya Angelou describes the condition as "living in exile in the North," and she's living in the South again, not Arkansas, but North Carolina. Tired of cold winters and high heating costs, black workers, professional and blue collar, are retiring to the South and some are acquiring land. As evidenced above, oral histories of migrants who left the South detail a disparity in their expectations and lived realities when they left the South to move north and west. Oral histories help us uncover the complexity of the expectations versus reality that twenty-first century African Diaspora migrants are facing. This disparity is one compelling reason to investigate the recent return migration along the continuum of African Diaspora migration over time. What is similar and what is unique about this twenty-first century migration? What do the migrants say and how does that illuminate the demographic portrait?

### **The Twenty-First Century Black Diaspora**

Any study of black life in America must necessarily start with a quantitative portrait of the population and an explanation of what constitutes blackness. While this short article cannot summarize the vast literature on race theory, nor encapsulate discussions from my years in the African Diaspora Studies doctoral program at Berkeley, let me defer to government statistics and their quantification of racial concepts. In the 2000 U.S. Census, "black" could mean African American or any mixed combination of black and something else, such as black and Hispanic. Respondents could select from a multitude of racial and ethnic categories to signify their preferred identity. The government demographer Jesse McKinnon elaborated: "The Census

2000 question on race included 15 separate response categories and 3 areas where respondents could write in a more specific race.”<sup>25</sup> For the collection of its census data, the Office of Management and Budget issued Directive #15, which explained the four racial “clusters:” Black, White, American Indian, and Asian Islander, and one ethnic group, Hispanic.<sup>26</sup> This new and controversial freedom of identity -- allowing people to check several boxes to more clearly define their racial or ethnic identification -- was met with a firestorm from critics from many parts of society who complained that the category “Mixed Race” was missing from the checklist. This argument for a mixed race category reveals the way that many Americans have moved past the old black-white binary explanation of race. However, when confined to specific self-identity categories, most African Americans see themselves as black and black only. The 2000 Census uncovered, as predicted, that nearly 13 percent of 281 million Americans identified themselves as “black only.” Less than 2 percent of black Americans identified themselves as “black” and “something else.”<sup>27</sup>

Adding another demographic layer to this quantitative data, William H. Frey described “where” Black Americans were living in 2000, and he compared that data to earlier groups of African Americans. Today almost 55 percent of the black population lives in the South. Frey had been tracking this southern growth, and noted in the 1990s that the South (16 states plus D.C.) led the nation in population growth, registering a 46-percent share of the nation’s total growth. During that same period, 65 percent of the nation’s black population growth took place in the South.<sup>28</sup> In the 1970s, demographers and anthropologists began discovering that African Americans were returning to the South, albeit in small numbers. The 1990 census was the first time the U.S. Census Bureau could report a significant shift, with in-migration substantially higher than out-migration. By the 2000 census, it was clear to most scholars that African Americans were concentrating in the South, a reversal of the out-migration trend that took place between 1910 and 1970. Everyone predicts that this pattern of migration and this reformulation of the African Diaspora will continue.

Demographers analyzing census data next examined the Southern locales to which blacks were returning. McKinnon quantified the black population as densely concentrated in specific counties in the South. Most blacks live in one of ten Southern states, with one state, South Carolina, the most concentrated with 30% of the overall population counted as black. Within these states there are counties of concentration, including black concentrations in metro areas

(77%) and blacks in suburban areas (43%). Returning black migrants are choosing to settle in existing black communities, an interesting self-selected pattern of segregation.<sup>29</sup> In my oral history investigation, one new black migrant to South Carolina said she moved to the area because "there are black people here." Her father came from Memphis and settled in Iowa where she grew up in small black neighborhoods. She said the black population where she grew up was nowhere near what she experiences in her small southern town in South Carolina. She wanted to live in an area where she could form community with other black people, most especially she noted, with other black southern Baptists.

Census demographers also analyzed who the migrants are: what sort of group characteristics can be quantified to paint a portrait of the population? Frey summarized the group as "working age," with about 20 percent being college graduates. These relocating migrants of the African Diaspora will join the Southern workforce. Frey also differentiated a group of retirees who make up about seven percent of the returning migrants, and certainly my oral histories have uncovered more retirees locating to southern locales, than younger blacks. Anthropologist Carol Stack noted that the bulk of the migrants in the 1970s were children who returned to the South to help in the care of their kinfolk, or to be raised by their Southern relatives and await the return of their parents.<sup>30</sup> So this new millennium group is significantly different from the first group of returnees in the 1970s. We need to gather more qualitative information about this group through oral histories, the interpretation of literature, and the analysis of art and musical lyrics. This emerging African Diaspora will certainly remake the South.

Some demographers have sought to qualitatively interpret the quantitative data. For example, Frey offers an explanation of why blacks are returning to the South. He explains that African Americans are usually looking to improve their working and living opportunities when they migrate. He writes: "Like whites, blacks were attracted by the South's booming economy, low density living, and warmer climate. Other pull factors included historic roots in the region, the existence of a growing middle-class black population, and an improved racial climate."<sup>31</sup> Frey described the desires of black people to relocate as being much the same as those of white people; historian James Gregory and journalist James Jasper came to the same conclusion. *USA Today* informed its readership in 2003 that the migration of African Americans to the South parallels the exodus of millions of white people from California and New York, who are

relocating in the “retirement haven and fast-growing job centers in the Southeast.”<sup>32</sup> Are we seeing the southern return of the Clampetts and the Joads, and more significantly, are the Jeffersons “moving on” down to the South?

Many of the demographers and social scientists studying return migration have investigated why the South is so attractive. They universally point to the economic conditions of the South, including a cost-of-living advantage, as a pull to people wanting to relocate. The recent predictions about the recessionary trends across the nation still show the cost-of-living advantage in the South to be significant. As the nation overall reels from the shocks of a global economic decline, with state treasuries in fiscal ruin, the South still holds a lure for many people wanting to remake themselves in a new environment. The South is slowly growing in high-technology development, and numerous companies have located their plants in the region, pulling in an educated and diverse workforce -- generally without the constraints of union shops. Perhaps it's regional boosterism that promotes the South's new business model as the “Silicon Valley of the Southeast,” but a cursory review of technology advancements reveals attractive employment opportunities. North Carolina's Research Triangle Park -- based around three major universities in the north central region of the state -- has been home to a variety of high-technology companies and enterprises since the late 1950s, with DuPont and Verizon just two of the area's major employers. When BMW located its North American manufacturing center in the Appalachian mountains of South Carolina it defied the stereotype of the southern worker. In fact, BMW noted the statewide technical education system as one reason for locating in Spartanburg County, South Carolina. In 2001 the University of South Carolina announced a nanotechnology research initiative to prepare workers for the cutting edge of future technology, and you might be surprised at the technology incubator initiatives “Ole Miss” is engaged in: the enterprise for innovative geospatial solutions, and the computer integrated manufacturing center to name just two partnerships between the university and the business sector. Georgia has so many high-technology opportunities that it started a comprehensive media service, TechLINKS, to keep the state at the forefront of global technology. Recently in New Orleans, business leaders, educators, and venture capitalists gathered for the Southern Innovation Summit -- a meeting to promote nanotechnology, biotechnology and information technology in the South. So the new era Modern South offers increased employment opportunities, especially for college-educated workers.<sup>33</sup>

Along with the somewhat stable economy of the South, several scholars have noted the positive impact of the 1964 civil rights legislation and the abolition of institutionalized racism. With the election of America's first black president, and the sea change from red-to-blue politics in some southern locales, the new Modern South is not as racially charged as in earlier times. Over the years Americans have changed their ideas and notions about themselves as racialized individuals. The black-white binary -- along with its accompanying adage, "Tell me your color, and I'll tell you your place" -- which had been the foundation of American race relations has been replaced by a more nuanced understanding of one's place in the American mosaic.<sup>34</sup> While racism still exists in the South, it is no longer enforced through laws nor even custom. Racism may be a persistent and pernicious component of American life, in the South as well as in the rest of the country, but beginning with the civil rights legislation of the 1960s the nation has moved to abolish institutionalized racism. With the bulk of the black population now residing in the South, this will most certainly change the nature of racial politics.

This new ideological terrain, coupled with the improving economy, is pulling all kinds of people southward. Musical lyrics that once described a migrant from "hard time Mississippi" as "living just enough for the city" of New York, now tell "it's cool to be from the South right about now." For those African American migrants who take the "Midnight Train to Georgia" to return to the "only home they'll ever know," the state of Georgia will greet you with license plates and road signs thanking you for having "Georgia On Your Mind." And though Andre 3000, the flamboyant half of the rap duo called Outkast, describes his hometown of Atlanta as "Stankonia, Georgia" that is his term of endearment, for "the ATL." The new Modern South is a hip place, a haven for creativity, and it is welcoming its diasporic community to come home.<sup>35</sup>

Today's African Diaspora migrants are returning or relocating to a region where they have deep family ties. George Buggs recollected his childhood trips to visit relatives in the South. "We would take chicken wrapped in paper on the train, and then we'd go visit 'auntie' and 'uncle.' Looking back on it, I don't think they were any real relation to us, but we called them 'auntie' and 'uncle' and they fed us and housed us for a few weeks every summer."<sup>36</sup> Anthropologist Carol Stack describes these relations as "fictive" family relations that are no less binding than blood relatives. In many cases the fictive family members provide the sense of southern identity, lending their history to the sojourner. In this way, the diaspora migrant creates a new identity based on notions of place and history. Historian Nell Irvin Painter illustrates the

binding identity for many black migrants even if they have lived elsewhere. “They still see themselves as southerners,” she wrote, “sometimes even as rural southerners, and they are reclaiming their southern identity.”<sup>37</sup> This new group of Southerners -- working-class, middle-class, and retirees -- will impact the region in different ways than did the earlier group of youthful migrants, and thus the South, and America, will be changed again.

### **Oral History Can Broaden the Narrative**

African Americans have been on the move since their arrival in America. Some of that movement was forced, but beginning in the twentieth century, many black Americans left the South to move north and west to improve their economic condition. Starting in the 1970s, black children began migrating to the South, and since the 1990s significant numbers of African Americans have relocated to the South. This population shift is a typically American phenomenon and signals changes in twenty-first century American life. That is the essence of all the data in the previous section of this article, yet the quantitative data and the theoretical framework do not capture the qualitative significance of the story. As an interdisciplinary scholar, I want to answer the quantitative questions about return migration: how many people are moving, when and where are they moving, and how old are they when they move? But more important to the scholarly discussion is an investigation of how these migrants perceived their life before the move, how they perceive it afterward, and why they specifically decided to move. I want to understand this new American diaspora and migration history from the individual’s standpoint, not the quantified, check-box census standpoint. An oral history of African Diaspora migrants uncovers the answers to these questions. Only by engaging in conversation, in a dialogue that goes beyond the quantified survey questionnaire, can we get to the rich narrative of African American movement.

The past president of the Oral History Association stated: “If you’re working in [contemporary] history and you’re not doing oral history interviews, it means you’re leaving evidence on the table. There are so many questions in history that you are only going to get at if you ask people.”<sup>38</sup> This pushed me to develop three research questions for my oral history project focusing on African Diaspora relocation to the South: 1) do African American migrants feel linked to the South; 2) do they migrants feel in some ways as if they had never left the South; and 3) what region do these African American migrants feel defines their homeland?

In a treatise on oral history and the Civil Rights Movement, Kim Lacy Rogers, past president of the Oral History Association, explained how traditional history has focused mostly on political interpretations through an elitist perspective. This tendency "obscures the local origins" of historical events and movements. She advocates the use of oral history because it can "yield evidence rarely available in contemporary written records. Oral history documents mass mobilization at an individual level."<sup>39</sup> Rogers's rich oral narratives allow the narrators to place themselves into the experience of the civil rights movement and to describe, without quantitative confines, the terrain of their changing consciousness. "Often, they describe experiences that led them to reinterpret social reality in ways that affirmed their own histories and perceptions rather than those of the dominant political culture. Thus oral history connects the individual to the collective experience . . . when people felt themselves participants in History itself, [that] evoke[d] extraordinarily powerful narratives."<sup>40</sup> We have an opportunity with this dynamic community of new Southern migrants to document their reasons for returning, to collect their rich individual stories, and to pull together a picture of family and community life that makes the individual decision-making migrant an agent in the migration process. To add to Rogers's advice regarding oral history, I believe we need to bring more than a historian's perspective, or a demographer's numbers, or a sociologist's theory to the research project. We need to appropriate the research skills of all of these groups, and add to these some of the anthropologist's ethnography techniques. Then we need to sit down and listen to individual stories. Only with this type of endeavor can we get a useable portrait of African American migration and the diaspora communities formed at every dispersal and germination point.

### **Southern Migration Stories**

As I have indicated above, most of the work being done on return migration is by theorists, sociologists, and demographers. Historians are not undertaking the topic at this point because it is not history. It is too current an event, and in general, historians want to work in archives and not with live people. However, several historians and some anthropologists who have been studying the "Great Migration" of African Americans to the North and West from 1910-1970 have focused attention on the current phenomenon of return migration. Nell Irvin Painter, the magnificent social historian of the "Exodusters," tied today's current return migration directly to the political and social improvements since the Civil Rights Movement.



“Now people who left the South at mid-century are returning -- going home. They are retiring rustbelt workers who, tired of dirt and cold and crime, are going back to their own Carolina. With their savings and their hopes for a real New South, they build far nicer houses than those they left and send their grandchildren to decent schools. They are not returning to the ‘bad Old Country’ that they left, for many swore never again to set foot in the white man’s South.”<sup>41</sup> James Jasper adds to that portrait by describing the impact of geography on the “restless” migrant. Jasper criticizes academicians who have gravitated toward scientific theory and have moved away from geography as a theoretical explanation. Jasper says that place matters: “If we do not ask why or how place matters to humans, we can never see what Americans might be missing in their nomadic” search. He warns that geography is not destiny. “What matters is how the land and its riches are felt and interpreted through culture.”<sup>42</sup> In this interdisciplinary approach to migration we find useful portraits from both Painter and Jasper. They add another dimension to the demographic and social theory data, by describing why these migrants are returning to the South. Perhaps the African American migrant, like the transnational emigrant, has never departed from the region in his or her mind.

Henry Louis Gates Jr., Harvard literary and cultural critic, recently produced a book and a television documentary series called *America Behind the Color Line: Dialogues with African Americans*. He was inspired to do this research as he pondered the impact of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s exhortation to blacks of the 1960s to go back to Mississippi, to Georgia, to Alabama, and to change the system. Gates wondered whether King’s vision of integration had come true in the South. Gates was also inspired to look into the story when his Cambridge, Massachusetts, barber told him that he was going to retire to the South. My project and Gates’s research intersect in the realm of African Diaspora migration.

One section of his book and documentary is dedicated to uncovering the story of African American return migration, and Gates travels to the middle-class black suburbs of Atlanta to find the story. He succeeded, he says, because he went behind closed doors and also to public places, such as barbershops where “real talk” is spoken. Because Gates is black, he says black people tell him the truth. I do not want to debate his insider’s privilege in this article, because I find his data informative. His informants agreed to tell their story to the camera and to a potential PBS audience, and his full-text interviews are available in printed and video form, making them a wonderful interdisciplinary oral history data set. My small sample of oral histories to date

correlate with the stories Gates found in his multi-city, multi-migrant, multi-million dollar enterprise. Gates's interviews are transcribed and appear unedited in his book, but even the versions edited for television hold a wealth of information about who, what, when, where, and why this return migration is in progress.

In the video version of Gates' *Color Line* Maya Angelou declares: "We want to go home. We've been in exile in the North." Gates asked the actor Morgan Freeman why he chose Mississippi over Hollywood. Freeman told Gates that he was born in the South, that he felt linked to the area, and that he felt safest in Mississippi. "Blacks built the South," Freeman said, "and we know it. We own our place there." Gates admits that he was afraid to go to the South because of the old ideas of the "Southern Cross" and tortured race relations. Gates was born in West Virginia, a state that seceded from Virginia over the issue of slavery, yet was clearly part of the Southern mentality of Jim Crow during the time Gates grew up. He admits that he has no fond memories of the South. In fact, he labels the South of the 1950s a "nightmare." Gates was particularly puzzled during his tour through the South by the self-segregation practiced in the ritzy neighborhoods around Atlanta. He wondered why black people did not live in integrated neighborhoods and why they went to nearly segregated schools. One couple, Deirdre and Jerald Wolff, who had moved from Michigan to Georgia, told Gates their son had been the only black in his school up North, and they wanted him to have a "black experience." Now they live in the Buckhead suburb of Atlanta, a predominantly upper-middle class neighborhood. Mrs. Wolff told Gates she wanted to live in a neighborhood where her property values would not decrease because she was living in a black neighborhood. Gates asked: "Isn't it reminiscent of the language used by whites when they wanted to exclude blacks?" "No," she responded, "it's not by law. Not legal segregation." Mrs. Wolff's next point was that in the North blacks and whites were mostly segregated as well, only truly integrating in some middle-class neighborhoods.<sup>43</sup>

In 2003 the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee released a report that demonstrated quantitatively that 18 of the 20 most integrated metro areas are Southern, and that the two exceptions, Baltimore and Washington, D.C., are border cities. The report analyzed integration by block rather than by census tract. One reason for an integrated South may have to do with the location of many military bases. Segregation researchers often note that cities with military bases have higher levels of integration. "The armed forces blend races better than any other organization."<sup>44</sup> Since most military bases are located in the South, perhaps once again, as it did

in the years following World War II, the Army has set the standard for integration that the rest of the nation should attempt to follow. One relocated military migrant spoke to the reporter about integrated conditions in Virginia Beach. “I came here from Boston,” she said. “This is heaven compared to Boston.” How ironic that the “The Army of One” is a highly integrated enterprise. Are African American migrants who are returning to the South familiar with the number of integrated military locales in their new(old) homestead? Do the migrants find the South more hospitable in terms of race relations? Will we have a new party of Southern Democrats?

### **Summary and Conclusions**

The reasons for African American migration are as complex as the individuals who migrate, but perhaps the anthropologist Carol Stack best described the desire to return by linking it with a sense of place. “The South, scene of grief and suffering for black Americans, never ceased to represent home to many city dwellers. The people returning there are not fools; they are not seeking a promised land. They know that home is a vexed place, and they often consider it a virtually unchanged place.”<sup>45</sup> Still, we must remember that not all African Americans left the South. One women sharecropper living in Mississippi with twelve children noted that it was easier for her, as an uneducated person, to stay in Mississippi than to migrate to another environment. Her goal was to get her children educated, so that they could have a chance to leave the South and have lives with better opportunities than sharecropping. This story, although by someone not herself a migrant, reveals that migration is a normal part of African American life. One of my interviews -- a black elected city councilwoman -- told me that she believed the people who “moved away to the North” did not prosper as she had staying in the South. She said: “many of the people who left are coming back, because they still have family here, and they want to live where it’s easier. But they didn’t succeed and move ahead like I did just staying here and pushing ahead with my career.”<sup>46</sup> Overall, what emerges from both the Great Migration of the past and the current diaspora return is a culture of migration within the African American population.

## Notes and References

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5. Darlene Clark Hine, "Black Migration to the Urban Midwest: The Gender Dimension, 1915-1945" in Joe William Trotter Jr., ed., *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 127.
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7. James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), xii.
8. Jasper, xi-xii.
9. William H. Frey, "Migration to the South Brings U.S. Blacks Full Circle," *Population Today* Vol. 29 Issue 4 (May-June 2001), 1.
10. Jesse McKinnon, "The Black Population in the United States: March 2002" *Current Population Reports*, Series P20-541 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, 2003), 1-2.
11. Jasper, xi-xii.

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12. Eric Arnesen, *Black Protest and the Great Migration: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003), 1. There is a tremendous amount of scholarly literature available about the Great Migration. For example, see Fligstein, Grossman, Hahn, Hine, Hurt, Isserman, Lemann, and Trotter for a more complete history of this phenomenon.

13. See the documents and photos about African American migration developed for the New York Public Library's website *In Motion: The African-American Migration Experience*, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture:  
<http://www.inmotionaame.org/migrations/topic.cfm?migration=8&topic=1> (accessed January 2008).

14. Gregory, 14.

15. See Gregory *Chapter One: A Century of Migration*. "In fact, white out-migrants outnumbered blacks during every decade and usually by a very large margin," p. 15. Gregory has calculated return migration and demonstrates within the Southern Diaspora in the twentieth century, "black return migration was only one-third the rate of white return migration," p. 16.

16. Joe William Trotter Jr., ed. *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), ix.

17. Arnesen, 11.

18. *The Promised Land*, 3-part documentary on VHS, produced by Discovery Productions and BBC TV (1995; Bethesda, MD: Discovery Communications); and also Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

19. Gregory, 34.

20. "The Promised Land," video documentary.

21. James Hinton in "The Promised Land," video documentary.

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34. See Cose, 9.

35. These references come from the lyrics of Stevie Wonder, Outkast, Gladys Knight and the Pips, and Ray Charles.

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40. Ibid., 568.
41. Painter, in Trotter, x.
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43. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *America Behind the Color Line: Dialogues with African Americans* (New York: Warner Books, 2004) and the four-part series produced by BBC/PBS.
44. Bruce Murphy, "South More Integrated than Midwest or Northeast, New Study Shows." *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, WI (Jan. 14, 2003): np.
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46. Lessie Price, interview with author, June 2007.

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