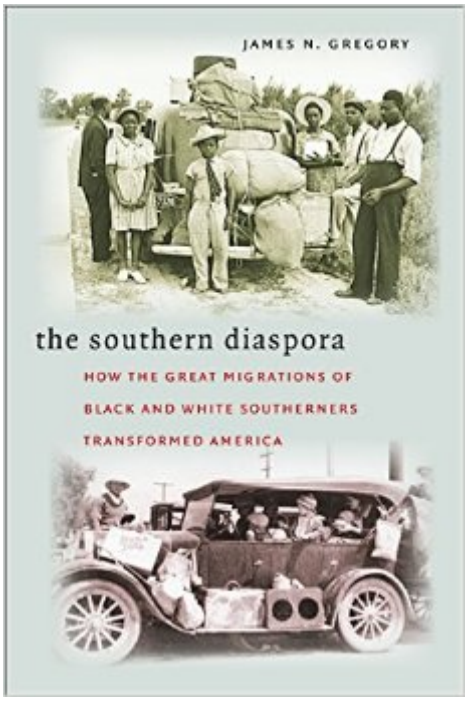
The Southern Diaspora: How The Great Migrations Of Black And White Southerners Transformed America



Synopsis

Between 1900 and the 1970s, twenty million southerners migrated north and west. Weaving together for the first time the histories of these black and white migrants, James Gregory traces their paths and experiences in a comprehensive new study that demonstrates how this regional diaspora reshaped America by "southernizing" communities and transforming important cultural and political institutions.Challenging the image of the migrants as helpless and poor, Gregory shows how both black and white southerners used their new surroundings to become agents of change. Combining personal stories with cultural, political, and demographic analysis, he argues that the migrants helped create both the modern civil rights movement and modern conservatism. They spurred changes in American religion, notably modern evangelical Protestantism, and in popular culture, including the development of blues, jazz, and country music.In a sweeping account that pioneers new understandings of the impact of mass migrations, Gregory recasts the history of twentieth-century America. He demonstrates that the southern diaspora was crucial to transformations in the relationship between American regions, in the politics of race and class, and in the roles of religion, the media, and culture.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I have an interest in immigration and migration issues, and I’ve previously read several books on the subject. But, until now, I’ve known very little about the huge internal migration from the American South to the North, Mid-west and West that took place in the first part of the 20th century. This book

appears to be comprehensive and thorough on this complex subject. The book flows well, is stuffed with valuable statistics and facts, and, for the most part, is a joy to read. I highly recommend it.Per the author, more than 28 million Southerners migrated out of The South during the 20th century. Of those, about 20 million were white, eight million were Black. Another one million Latinos also participated. Most moved in the 40's, but there was a steady stream in the other decades, until the 1970's, when migration leveled off, then went the other way.In 1900, more than 90% of American Blacks lived in The South. By 1970, half of all American Blacks lived outside The South. Most of the migrants, Black and White, went to the Great Lakes states; most Latino migrants ended up in California.The author says that job opportunities, alone, do not explain why decisions were made to move. The South at that time was largely rural and agricultural-based. There were few factories and little industry other than agriculture. Educational opportunities had fallen behind other areas of the country for all groups.A major reason for migration was that America had narrowed its doors to foreign immigrants between 1925 and 1965 by a series of immigration control laws. This factor encouraged internal immigration. World War I factory production created millions of new jobs, mostly in the North. Young adults were the most likely to move.But The Great Depression of the 30's slowed internal migration. Factory jobs decreased and farm prices fell. The Dust Bowl of the mid-West caused many from Oklahoma, Arkansas and Texas to head West. Whites had better job opportunities, as most factories in Detroit, for example, only hired Whites until the WWII era.World War II brought waves of changes. Says the author, "Never before had so many Americans been in motion." In the South, more than 14 million remained in farming in 1940. By 1970, that was down to only three million. In 1940, only about 20,000 Black Americans lived in the San Francisco Bay Area; nearly 400,000 more moved there in the 40's. And, in this period, California "replaced Texas as the center of Hispanic culture and population in the United States," due to internal migrations of Latinos.While newspapers in The South tended to say that a move north could be a mistake, newspapers and other literature from the North told of the new "Promised Land."Migrating whites found housing opportunities available in mixed-white neighborhoods in the North, while Blacks found housing only in concentrated Black communities, such as Southside Chicago, Harlem, Detroit, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Washington, D.C. and Philadelphia. Living in these big cities was a different way of life. Concentrations of Blacks and rigid property lines led to occasional riots and a continuation of "successful" Blacks moving out of the ghetto when they could. There were few concentrations of migrated White Southerners, one being in Ohio, the other in the California San Joaquin Valley.The two big issues for Northern factories became 1) labor unions and 2) the place of Blacks. The later progressed with labor shortages; Black women worked primarily in private

domestic service. White Southerners were seen as "hillbillies," for the most part.The book talks in detail about the great Black metropolis areas and the adjustments made by Blacks in these great cities. It also tells us of the cultural contributions made by Southerners in music, literature and sports. The list of famous Southerners in these areas could fill pages. The book also tells us about the churches. In Chicago, alone, there were nearly 500 Negro churches by 1940. The South was Baptist country, and those from The South brought their conservative religious beliefs with them.After reading this book, I feel that I've learned a great deal about a part of U.S. history that is seldom mentioned in discussions about U.S. immigration. This is an important book for students of American history. I recommend it.

As a kid I grew up wondering why everyone in our neighborhood in south eastern PA came from the mountains of North Carolina, had family down there, called it "down home" and expected to "go south" a couple of times every year. I never realized that this was true of many northern rural communities until I read this book. It never occurred to me that it was odd for someone such as myself (born in Pa and raised in PA and Delaware) would consider himself southern by birth.It turns out there are many such enclaves in the north, centered around the sites of defense industry plants in WWII. I never realized that the area we lived in was comparable to a place like Little Italy or Chinatown until Dr Gregory's book made it clear that this is what people NORMALLY do during a diaspora. I also didn't realize that people like me who grew up in the north but always felt out of place there are now flowing back into the south, following the work the same way our grandfathers did. It turns out my migration from the crowded north to the industrial economy of TN is just one of millions occurring today. It felt good to receive that validation from this book.The book also makes a very good point that the Southern Diaspora was not one migration, but two separate but parallel migrations; one black and one white. It was a shock to me to learn that southern blacks were looked down upon by northern blacks, much the same as us southern whites were viewed as trash by many northern whites.This is a fascinating read for anyone who has lived in (or even been born and raised in) the north, but knew it was never really "home". Dr Gregory has also written extensively about similar migrations to California and the Pacific Northwest from Oklahoma and Arkansas. I can't say I've read them, but if that migration is closer to your own heritage, I recommend checking out those books for yourself.

On p. 170, the author claims that Shoeless Joe Jackson got his nickname when he arrived in Philadelphia barefoot after a train ride from his South Carolina home. In fact, however, he earned

this nickname after he played a minor league game in his socks because a new pair of spiked baseball shoes gave him blisters the day before. I'm skeptical of a book that misses such an extraordinary fact as this.