

EXPLORING THE GREAT MIGRATION IN LITERATURE AND THE ARTS

Skills and strategies under development

Arts and Communication

1. Understands ways in which the human experience is transmitted and reflected in the arts and communication

Historical Understanding

2. Understands the historical perspective

United States History

3. Understands massive immigration after 1870 and how new social patterns, conflicts, and ideas of national unity developed amid growing cultural diversity

4. Understands the struggle for racial and gender equality and for the extension of civil liberties

5. Understands economic, social and cultural developments in the contemporary United States

Language Arts

6. Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process

7. Gathers and uses information for research purposes

8. Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process

9. Uses general skills and strategies to understand a variety of informational texts

Life Skills: Working with Others

10. Contributes to the overall effort of a group

11. Displays effective interpersonal communication skills

Music

12. Understands the relationship between music and history and culture

Visual Arts

13. Knows a range of subject matter, symbols and potential ideas in the visual arts

14. Understands the visual arts in relation to history and cultures

Exploring the Great Migration in Literature and Arts

Overview

What was the Great Migration, and what cultural movements are associated with it? How can we put current United States demographic patterns into historical context? In this lesson, students learn about the contemporary trend of «reverse migration» and then create research-based presentations on the Great Migration in association with their learning in literature, art, history or geography.

Materials

Computers with Internet access or research materials about the Great Migration and writers and artists; copies of the Langston Hughes poem «One Way Ticket»

Section 1: Introductory Tasks

1). Langston Hughes's poem which will be under consideration at the following lesson is merely one example of the cultural legacy of the Great Migration, the mass migration of blacks out of the South to the Northeast, Midwest, and West in the early 20th century. His artistic contributions helped shape the Harlem Renaissance, one of the artistic and cultural movements sparked by the Great Migration.

Students are proposed to find supplementary materials on the Net about:

- Langston Hughes;
- the Great Migration;
- the Harlem Renaissance.

Section 2: In-class Activities

1. Warm-Up

1). Distribute or display, or play an audio file of, the Langston Hughes poem «One Way Ticket». Read the poem as a class and ask students to share their thoughts on its historical context.

The Poetry of Langston Hughes

ONE WAY TICKET

I pick up my life, And take it with me,
And I put it down in Chicago, Detroit, Buffalo, Scranton,
Any place that is North and East, And not Dixie.
I pick up my life And take it on the train,
To Los Angeles, Bakersfield, Seattle, Oakland, Salt Lake

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Any place that is North and West, And not South.
I am fed up With Jim Crow laws,
People who are cruel And afraid, Who lynch and run,
Who are scared of me And me of them
I pick up my life And take it away On a one-way ticket
Gone up North Gone out West Gone!

Ask:

- In what period of time in U.S. history is this poem set? How can you tell?
- What were the Jim Crow laws to which the speaker refers?
- How does this poem help people today understand life in the South versus life in the North and West for African-Americans at that time?

2. Reading and discussion: In the article «Many U.S. Blacks Moving to South, Reversing Trend», Sabrina Tavernise and Robert Gebeloff investigate the recent demographic shift in the U.S. black population, as increasing numbers of African-Americans leave Northeastern and Midwestern cities for the South.

Many U.S. Blacks Moving to South, Reversing Trend

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/25/us/25south.html?gwh=F82B2809AC7EA81760CF9B65365E7E19>

By SABRINA TAVERNISE and ROBERT GEBELOFF

Published: March 24, 2011

WASHINGTON – The percentage of the nation’s black population living in the South has hit its highest point in half a century, according to census data released Thursday, as younger and more educated black residents move out of declining cities in the Northeast and Midwest in search of better opportunities.

The share of black population growth that has occurred in the South over the past decade – the highest since 1910, before the Great Migration of blacks to the North – has upended some long-held assumptions.

Both Michigan and Illinois, whose cities have rich black cultural traditions, showed an overall loss of blacks for the first time, said William Frey, the chief demographer at the Brookings Institution.

And Atlanta, for the first time, has replaced Chicago as the metro area with the largest number of African-Americans after New York. About 17 percent of blacks who moved to the South in the past decade left New York State, far more than from any other state, the census data show.

At the same time, blacks have begun leaving cities for more affluent suburbs in large numbers, much like generations of whites before them.

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«The notion of the North and its cities as the promised land has been a powerful part of African-American life, culture and history, and now it all seems to be passing by», said Clement Price, a professor of history at Rutgers-Newark. «The black urban experience has essentially lost its appeal with blacks in America».

During the turbulent 1960s, black population growth ground to a halt in the South, and Southern states claimed less than 10 percent of the national increase then. The South has increasingly claimed a greater share of black population growth since – about half the country’s total in the 1970s, two-thirds in the 1990s and three-quarters in the decade that just ended.

The percentage of black Americans living in the South is still far lower than before the Great Migration in the earlier part of the last century, when 90 percent did. Today it is 57 percent, the highest since 1960.

«This is the decade of black flight», said Mr. Frey. «It’s a new age for African-Americans. It’s long overdue, but it seems to be happening».

The five counties with the largest black populations in 2000 – Cook in Illinois, Los Angeles, Wayne in Michigan, Kings in New York and Philadelphia – all lost black population in the last decade. Among the 25 counties with the biggest increase in black population, three-quarters are in the South.

The Rev. Ronald Peters, who moved last year from Pittsburgh to Atlanta, said it was refreshing to be part of a hopeful black middle class that was not weighed down by the stigmas and stereotypes of the past, as he felt it was in the urban Northeast.

«Too often, people turn on TV and all they see are black men in chains», said Mr. Peters, president of the Interdenominational Theological Center, a seminary in Atlanta. «Atlanta is a clear example of a different type of ethos. The black community is not people who have lost their way».

Increasingly blacks are moving to places with small black populations. Just 2 percent of the black population growth in the last decade occurred in counties that have traditionally been black population centers, while 20 percent has occurred in counties where only a tiny fraction of the population had been black.

Segregation declined during the decade. Among the nation’s 100 largest metro areas, 92 showed segregation declines with most of the largest occurring in growing areas in the South and West, Mr. Frey said.

The South was the fastest growing region over all, up 14 percent from 2000. Its white population increased as well, though whites grew substantially in the West as well, something that was not the case for blacks. Growth of Asian and Hispanic populations – which grew the fastest over all – was widely distributed throughout the nation.

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«The center of population has moved south in the most extreme way we've ever seen in history», said Robert Groves, director of the Census Bureau.

Northern blacks were a big part of Southern gains. There are now more than one million black residents of the South who were born in the Northeast, a tenfold increase since 1970.

Blacks who moved to the South were disproportionately young – 40 percent were adults ages 21 to 40, compared with 29 percent of the nonmigrant black population. One in four newcomers had a four-year college degree, compared to one in six of the black adults who had already lived in the South.

Cicely Bland, 36, a publishing company owner who left her home in Jersey City in 2006 for Stockbridge, an Atlanta suburb, said life was better because it was more affordable. Her choice was as much about cultural affinity as it was job opportunities.

«The business and political opportunities are here», she said. «You have a lot of African-Americans with a lot of influence, and they're in my immediate networks».

Over all, the black population grew by 11 percent in large metropolitan counties, but by 15 percent in adjacent smaller counties in the metropolitan area, suggesting a strong movement of blacks to the suburbs. The top 10 fastest-growing areas were suburbs, census officials said.

Not everyone was well off. Katherine Curtis, assistant professor of sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who specializes in demography and inequality, said blacks who returned to the states where they were born tended to have a higher poverty rate than those who went to other Southern states. One reason could be that they moved back for family, not economic opportunity, she said.

The black population grew by 11 percent over the decade, faster than the 1 percent growth in the white population, but far behind the 43 percent growth in the Hispanic population, whose increase made up more than half of all population growth in the decade.

But there were declines among blacks under 18, down 2 percent for the decade. The population of white children was down 10 percent, with 46 states experiencing declines in the white youth population, Mr. Frey said. Children from minority groups are now about 46 percent of the total population under 18, compared with 53 percent for whites.

In Atlanta, Mr. Peters, who grew up in New Orleans, viewed the changes as a source of pride for Americans, saying the South had changed a lot in his lifetime.

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«One of the things that I grew up with was looking forward to the day that there would be a New South», he said. «This is it. The New South represents a more inclusive community, what we can become as a country».

Questions for discussion and comprehension:

- What are some of the reasons why the Southern black population has hit its highest point in 50 years?
- In what way has this population growth «upended some long-held assumptions», according to the article?
 - What was the Great Migration, and how does it relate to the current demographic shift?
 - What are some of the reasons people interviewed for this article cite for moving to Atlanta?
 - How does the changing population in the West compare to the North and South, according to the article?
 - How, if at all, do you think this new migration might impact the black cultural traditions of both Northern and Southern cities?

Section 3: Activities

The following activity can be used to provide background for reading a work of literature or nonfiction written during or about the Great Migration, for studying the music or art of the early 20th century, to teach about that period in an American history course or to delve into the connections between geography and culture in a geography course. Please adapt the lesson, and the specific locations, artists and titles suggested below, accordingly.

1). Start by revisiting Professor Clement Price's observation, quoted in the article, about the cultural implications of the demographic shift, along with Times columnist Charles M. Blow's comment about the implications for New York City in his column «Escape From New York»:

It gave voice to Shirley Chisholm, refuge to Malcolm X, legs to Althea Gibson and opportunity to Jackie Robinson. It was the incubator of the Harlem Renaissance, the proving ground of jazz and the birthplace of hip-hop.

It was a black Mecca and magnet. Was.

Ask:

- What are Mr. Price and Mr. Blow lamenting?
- Why do you think geography is often a key part of culture and heritage?

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2). Tell students they will be breaking into groups to research and present on the cultural legacy of the Great Migration. We have provided three broad categories below, along with associated resources and sample guiding questions. Add to, change or further subdivide the material, and assign specific topics to small groups, depending on your class size and curriculum. Pairs might, for example, be assigned to study individual cities, writers or artists.

Groups should research their assigned topic and find at least two visuals pieces like maps, charts or photographs to use in their presentations.

Topic 1: Geography and History

Cities:

Chicago, Detroit, New York, Cleveland and Philadelphia, among others

Questions:

- What factors drew African-Americans to these cities in the early 20th century?
- How does the black population of these cities (as percentage of overall population) today compare to 75 years earlier? What conclusions, if any, can you draw from this?
- What are some of the cultural, economic, social, and political «push» and «pull» factors related to the movement of African-Americans out of the South during the Great Migration?
- In general, what was life like in these cities during the Great Migration?
- What are the significant cultural legacies of the Great Migration in these cities?

Topic 2: Literature

Writers and poets:

Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson, James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, Langston Hughes and other Harlem Renaissance writers, or people like August Wilson and Richard Wright who wrote about life for African-Americans during and as a result of the Great Migration.

Questions:

- What are the hallmarks and great works of these writers?
- What are their basic life stories? Where did they live and write?
- What are these works about?
- Were the texts written during the Great Migration, or were they written later and set in that period?
- How do these writers' works convey, address and characterize the Great Migration experience?

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– How often are these works taught in schools today? Why do you think that is?

Topic 2: Music and Fine Art

Fine art:

«The Great Migration» by Jacob Lawrence, «Slow Down Freight Train» by Rose Piper, works by Aaron Douglas, Charles Alston and others

Jazz and blues music:

«Times Is Getting Harder», «Freight Train Blues» by Trixie Smith, the work of Una Mae Carlisle, Ma Rainey Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Duke Ellington, Josephine Baker and many others

Questions:

- What are the hallmarks and great works of these artists?
- What are their basic life stories? Where did they live and create?
- What contributions did they make to the cultural movements during or after the Great Migration?
- How are they commemorated today?

Groups should represent their research by creating posters or presentations using a tool like PowerPoint, Glogster or Prezi, and then give their presentations to the class. After the presentations, discuss the connections that students see among and between them.

In a literature class, wrap up by briefly discussing the value of studying the historical and cultural context of the work you are reading. How would reading the text be a different experience for one who did know nothing about the Great Migration and its legacies?

Section 4. Going Further

In a group discussion or essay, students speculate how, if at all, they think the current «reverse migration» trend from North to South might shape black cultural and artistic movements in the future. How should the rich cultural legacy of the 20th century best be preserved?

Students might also write modern versions of the Langston Hughes poem «One Way Ticket» to reflect the migration trends of the early 21st century.

(By Annissa Hambouz and Holly Epstein Ojalvo,

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