

Lesson 9: The Great Migration

“They did what human beings looking for freedom, throughout history, have often done. They left.” —Isabel Wilkerson

Social Justice Standard: Justice 14

Summary

The Great Migration gave over six million Black families the chance to experience a new reality. Due to anti-immigration legislation and sentiment running rampant during World War I, the northern labor market had a vacancy that Black people, desperate to leave the South, were only too happy to fill. Black people made the trek north, following a promise of a chance to live where they could be treated as whole people.

Unfortunately, that idealized place never did come to fruition for so many who made the long and dangerous journey. Instead, when they made it to the North, they faced segregation in housing and education and experienced White folks divesting from cities and fleeing to nearby suburbs. These patterns persisted and compounded over time, which brought many Black people to a crossroads—continue to stay in cities that grew more segregated every year, or make a change?

As we continue to live in a time where the migration of brown people into our country is used to stir up anti-immigration attitudes and frenzies, it feels direly important to pay attention and learn from the lessons of the past. The following stories give us the opportunity to better understand the history of our past, as well as help us interpret some of the important trends we are seeing today.

Booklist

- *The Great Migration: An American Story* by Jacob Lawrence
- *Seeing Into Tomorrow* by Richard Wright, illustrated by Nina Crews
- *The Great Migration: Journey to the North* by Eloise Greenfield, illustrated by Jan Spivey Gilchrist
- *Land of Milk and Honey* by Joyce Carol Thomas, illustrated by Floyd Cooper
- *Finding Langston* by Lesa Cline-Ransom
- *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson

Consider This

- Did you ever learn about human migration as a child? Whose experience was it centered around?
- Are there stories of migration in your own family history?
- Many cities around the United States still see consequences and evidence of inequality that stems from the migration period—especially when it comes to segregation and unfair housing laws. What examples do you still see where you live?
- What factors did you consider when deciding where you wanted to live? Would there be any changes to those considerations now?

Talk Together

- If you could live anywhere, where would you live and why?
- What makes you happy about the place where you live?
- What are some reasons people might move to a new home or place?
- Who do you see in your community? Who do you not see?

Engage

- Check out the University of Washington’s “America’s Great Migrations Project.”
- Create a map of your family’s history of migration over the years. Go back as far as you can in your family history to create a fuller story. Consider and discuss the “why” behind the movement.

Explore More

- National Archives’ “The Great Migration (1910 – 1970)”
- “After nearly 100 years, Great Migration begins reversal” by Greg Toppo and Paul Overberg (USA Today, February 2, 2015)