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THE GREAT MIGRATION OF BLACK AMERICANS FROM THE US SOUTH:
A GUIDE AND INTERPRETATION

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ABSTRACT

The Great Migration from the US South is a prominent theme in economic history research not only because it was a prime example of large scale internal migration, but also because it had far-reaching ramifications for American economic, social, and political change. This article offers a concise review of the literature focused on questions of timing, selection, and migrants' outcomes, and then offers a more speculative interpretation of how the Great Migration fostered the advancement of Civil Rights. It concludes by pointing out areas where further exploration would be valuable.

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1. Introduction

Between 1910 and 1970, several million Black Americans migrated from the South in what became known as “the Great Migration.” This resulted in a large-scale redistribution of the Black population—nearly 90 percent of Black Americans lived in the South in 1910, but by 1970, less than half did. Over the same 60-year period, the Black share of residents in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, and Los Angeles, some of the main destinations for Black migrants, increased from approximately 3 percent to 26 percent.¹

Although the Great Migration ended 50 years ago, it is a prominent research topic in economics and other social sciences. Among many recent publications and working papers, see Alexander et al. (2017); Black et al. (2015); Boustan (2017); Calderon et al. (2019); Collins and Wanamaker (2014, 2015); Derenoncourt (2019); Leibbrand et al. (2020), Stuart and Taylor (forthcoming A and B); and Tabellini (2019). It has also been the subject of best-selling books, such as Nicholas Lehmann’s *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (1991) and Isabel Wilkerson’s *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration* (2010), which interpret the Great Migration through the experiences of specific individuals, families, and places.

A key theme in this literature and this essay is that the Great Migration is an important subject not only because it is a prime example of internal migration—thereby useful for testing economic models of selection, networks, destination choice, and so on—but more importantly, because it has had deep and long-lasting ramifications for American society. The Great Migration provides a window on the interaction of race, economics, and politics in America’s past, present, and future. Its story helps to connect the dots between historical and modern racial inequality in the United States, ranging from the rural post-Civil War South to the urban post-World War II North and West. This is what draws many scholars to study the Great Migration—it is hard to understand the modern United States without some appreciation for how the Great Migration transformed it.

In this article, I review some of the literature’s main questions and answers about the Great Migration, many of which are grounded in microeconomic approaches to the study of migration and cities. New data sources, techniques, and scholars have repeatedly opened the way for re-examination and deeper dives into these questions. Then, I widen the essay’s scope to pose questions about the Great Migration and the broader course of American history and politics. In particular, I speculate on the Great Migration’s connections and contributions to the Civil Rights Movement,

¹ Black shares calculated with the 1-percent 1910 IPUMS sample (Ruggles et al. 2015) and the 1972 City Data Book file from ICPSR Study 2896 (Haines and ICPSR 2010)

which I suggest are an important but underappreciated legacy in the economic history literature.

2. Facts and figures about the Great Migration

For perspective on the magnitude of the Great Migration, Figure 1 shows the share of the southern-born Black population residing outside of the South, plotted separately for ten-year birth cohorts and observed at ten-year census intervals. The figure is built from repeated cross-sections of the IPUMS microdata samples of Census of Population data (Ruggles et al. 2015), relying on variables for state of birth, state of residence, and age (converted to birth cohort).²

After 1910, large shares of each cohort relocated outside the South. The 1900-10 birth cohort, for instance, increased their non-southern residence during the 1920s by about 15 percentage points; by 1950, 36 percent of this cohort lived outside the South. For the 1920-30 birth cohort, the changes were even more stark, with a 23 percentage point jump in the 1940s and a 44 percent share outside the South by 1980.³ After 1970, the outflow of migrants was much reduced, such that the 1950s birth cohort had the lowest outmigration rate of any group since the 1880s cohort. The conventional view is that the Great Migration ended in the 1970s as Black migration from the South declined, Black migration *to* the South increased (Long and Hansen 1975; Adelman et al. 2000; Hunt et al. 2008), and parts of the South prospered in the wake of the Civil Rights revolution (Wright 2013).

Figure 2 shows the pre- and post-Great Migration distribution of the US-born Black population by census division. The geographic concentration of the Black population in southern census divisions in 1910 stands out (shown in black bars). By 1970 (gray bars), the share of the Black population had declined in every southern census division and in every southern state with the exception of Maryland and Florida. It had increased in the Mid-Atlantic, East North Central, and Pacific divisions, especially in New York, Illinois, and California. In fact, the Black population in New York State was larger than in any single southern state by 1970. A dissimilarity index that summarizes differences in the White and Black population distributions over states declines sharply between 1910 and 1970, from approximately 0.65 to 0.28, but even so, it is important to recognize that the Black population remained quite differently distributed than the White population within

² Documentation and code for replication of figures reported in this article are available at OpenICPSR (Collins 2020). There is some age heaping in the Black population, especially for those born in the nineteenth century, which could lead to some misclassification into birth cohorts. Re-centering cohort definitions (e.g., grouping 35-44 year olds rather than 30-39 year olds) results in a picture that is visually similar to Figure 1 (e.g., peaking at over 40 percent for some cohorts in census years 1960 to 1990).

³ For perspective, the maximum share for southern-born White cohorts residing outside the South was only 23 percent (for the 1920s birth cohort observed in 1960).

states and within metropolitan areas.⁴ These differences imply that economic shocks and trends that varied over space likely had substantially different implications for Black and White workers.

Figure 3A reports occupational distributions in 1930 and 1960 for Black migrants and three comparison groups: Black men who remained in the South, Black men who were born and resided in the North and West, and White men who were born and resided in the North and West. I chose these dates because the first large wave of the Great Migration ended circa 1930 with the onset of the Great Depression, and the next large wave came during the 1940s and 1950s and therefore should be reflected in 1960's census data. In 1930 (upper panel), the most striking differences are that Black men in the North and West, including migrants, rarely worked in agriculture, whereas agriculture was the modal sector for southern Black men; migrants were less likely to be in white-collar work and more likely to be unskilled laborers than northern Black non-migrants; and Black men in the North (both migrants and non-migrants) had substantially lower occupational status than White men (i.e., less white-collar work and less skilled blue-collar work). In 1960 (lower panel), northern Black men had reduced their share of employment in unskilled labor and increased their share in operative, craft, and white-collar employment compared to 1930, but they still lagged far behind northern White men in professional and managerial work.⁵ Another important trend is that by 1960 a relatively large share of Black men in each comparison group was not in the labor force despite being ages 25-54.⁶

Figure 3B reports occupational distributions for women in 1930 and 1960 for the same comparison groups. Black women in the North in the 1930, both migrant and non-migrant, were much more likely than White women to be in the labor force and much more likely to work in household and non-household service. By 1960, differences in labor force participation had narrowed somewhat, but where White women were primarily concentrated in clerical and sales work (if in the labor force), Black women were still primarily in service occupations. Notably, northern-born Black women in 1960, many of whom would have been children of the earlier wave migrants,

⁴ The dissimilarity index ranges between 0 and 1 and represents the share of the White or Black population that would have to move across state lines to equalize the White and Black distributions (Duncan 1955). At the county level, the dissimilarity indices are higher (approximately 0.70 in 1910 and 0.47 in 1970); the relatively high 1970 figure reflects the uneven distribution of the Black population across counties in the North and West. These were calculated using county data from Haines and ICPSR Study 2896, excluding Alaska and Hawaii. Within metropolitan areas, Black residential segregation increased sharply during the Great Migration (Cutler, Glaeser, and Vigdor 1999). See also Logan and Parman (2017) who show that residential segregation increased in both rural and urban areas between 1880 and 1940. This issue is taken up later in the paper.

⁵ In a sample of 40-49 year old men in 1950, the ratio of southern-born Black over non-southern born White annual income is 0.67 (including only those with positive income and using sample line weights.)

⁶ Note that the "labor force" concept and its derivation from census questions was not the same in 1930 and 1960. See the IPUMS documentation on the *labforce* variable at https://usa.ipums.org/usa-action/variables/LABFORCE#comparability_section.

were substantially more likely than migrants to have made inroads in professional and clerical and sales work.⁷

In sum, while their earnings prospects were, on average, better in the North than in the South, it is also clear that *within* the North, Black migrants were a relatively low-paid segment of the labor force during the Great Migration. Figure 4 depicts men's annual earnings in 1949, based on the 1950 census microdata, for a few specific comparison groups. Men who worked as farmers and farm laborers are dropped from the sample here because it is difficult to assess their in-kind income. This drops some of the poorest southern Black men from the sample.⁸ Even so, the earnings distribution for southern Black men is located far to the left of the distribution for Black migrants in the North or West, consistent with large potential earnings gains from migration (subject to concerns about migrant selection and cost of living differences). The Black migrants' earnings distribution, on the other hand, is located far to the left of the northern White earnings distribution, indicating the limits of migration as a source of Black-White income convergence.

3. Survey: A concise introduction to the Great Migration literature

The century-long and multidisciplinary literature on the Great Migration cannot be fully reviewed in the space of one essay. I will focus primarily on work in economics and economic history, but I will also try to incorporate some references to relevant branches of research in sociology and history.⁹ The goal is to provide readers with a sense of how research has developed over time and how it has responded to new opportunities in the form of improved data and methods.

From the beginning, scholars have engaged fundamental questions regarding the timing of the Great Migration's onset, the migrants' selection (i.e., how migrants differed from the base population), the migrants' choice of destinations, their earnings gains, and their impact on employment, wages, and housing markets in receiving and sending areas (for early examples, see Scroggs 1917, Woodson 1918, Haynes 1918, Scott 1920, Donald 1921). Scholars have made progress in all of these areas, but data shortcomings and common challenges of interpretation (e.g., making causal inferences from observational data) have always meant that there is more to learn and, potentially, better answers on the horizon.

Before summarizing some key aspects of the literature, it is worthwhile to reflect on the fact

⁷ For longer-run views of Black women's labor market outcomes, see Jones (1985), Sundstrom (2000), Bailey and Collins (2004), Curtis White (2005), Boustan and Collins (2014), and Collins and Moody (2017).

⁸ In addition to in-kind income, regional differences in cost of living complicate comparisons of census reported income, especially since housing characteristics are so different across regions historically.

⁹ See Tolnay (2003) for an earlier review and discussion of research on the Great Migration.

that Black Americans are and have been greatly under-represented in the economics profession.¹⁰ The economics literature on the Great Migration tends to reflect this fact, though Black scholars in economics and other fields have made many important contributions that are featured in the discussion below. It is surely possible that a more diverse economics profession would have engaged the study of the Great Migration differently, more intensively, or more continuously over the time. It is notable that in the concluding chapter of his history of Black migration (published in 1918), Carter G. Woodson, an eminent Black historian, anticipated several of the fundamental themes that economists have taken up in recent decades. That chapter is a fitting place to start reading about the Great Migration—it marks the beginning of a century of multidisciplinary scholarship that continues to extend and revise our understanding of US economic history. It is also a fitting place to contemplate missed opportunities, as the Great Migration unfolded with comparatively little contemporaneous attention in the leading economics journals.¹¹

3.1 The timing of the Great Migration

Given large regional differences in observed wages and income per capita in the post Civil War era (Easterlin 1960, Margo 2004), a basic question about the Great Migration is why it began in the 1910s, rather than several decades before. Before the Civil War, about 95 percent of Black southerners were slaves (Ransom 2006). After the war, there was no large-scale redistribution of land or compensation granted to former slaves (Oubre 1978, Foner 1988); therefore, most Black southerners circa 1865 possessed no capital, land, or formal education. It may appear that Black southerners had little incentive to stay in the South, especially as southern Whites re-asserted political control after Reconstruction, perpetrated widespread violence against Black residents and

¹⁰ The 2017 Report of the Committee on the Status of Minority Groups in the Economics Profession indicated that Black students were under-represented at all levels of degrees granted in economics circa 2015-16, even more so than in STEM fields (Table 1). Moreover, the trend from 1995 to 2015 showed no improvement (Figure 2). Black under-representation was also clear among economics faculty of all ranks (Table 5).

¹¹ For instance, Vickery's "selected bibliography" from his 1969 dissertation (1977) lists no papers specifically focused on Black migration in major economics journals after Scroggs (1917), nor did I find such papers in that timeframe in JSTOR searches of the *Journal of Political Economy*, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, and *American Economic Review* (though it is sometimes mentioned in passing). Darity (1994, p. 61) points out a general "hiatus" in economics journals' publications on race from the 1910s until the late 1950s, following a turn-of-the-century literature that assumed Black inferiority. See Wilson (2006) for a history of Black social scientists and their research in the early to mid-twentieth century, including work on the Great Migration. Some notable mid-century books by economists did engage the Great Migration. Myrdal (1944) discusses migration Black migration at various points. Among Myrdal's many collaborators on that book were Black social scientists Ralph Bunche, E. Franklin Frazier, and Charles S. Johnson (Bok 1996, *xxiii*). Robert Weaver's *Negro Labor: A National Problem* (1946) also discusses Black migration in the context of the wartime labor market.

political leaders, and eroded Blacks' civil and political rights.¹² In practice, however, poor and predominantly agricultural populations are often slow to engage in long-distance migration, especially when they lack extensive networks of contacts in potential destinations (Spitzer and Zimran 2019). In this case, one could argue that the South's labor market was comparatively isolated and disconnected from the North circa 1865 (Wright 1986, ch. 3; Rosenbloom 2002), whereas the North's labor market was already tightly integrated with Europe's, as evidenced by the migration of approximately 30 million Europeans in the "Age of Mass Migration" (Hatton and Williamson 1998, Abramitzky and Boustan 2017). At this time, northern employers commonly discriminated in favor of White workers, including European immigrants when they were available, further limiting potential Black migrants' access to jobs (Whatley 1990, Collins 1997).¹³ Thus, in the nineteenth century, migration to the North may have been a costly and risky venture for most Black southerners, at least in comparison to conditions that prevailed later.

An alternative, but not mutually exclusive, interpretation of the relatively low level of outmigration before the 1910s would emphasize the determination of Black families to acquire land and make a living in the South. Indeed, despite the obstacles, Black southerners accumulated property and literacy at substantial rates in the decades after the Civil War (Higgs 1982, Margo 1984, Williams 2005, Collins and Margo 2006, 2011), a testament to their resolve to build a better life for themselves and their children in the South. Such advances in wealth and human capital, although still far behind White levels on average, might have helped set the stage for the Great Migration by loosening the constraints of poverty and illiteracy on migration (Margo 1990, ch. 7). But the initiation of the Great Migration apparently required more than just the existence of large regional wage differences and gradual increases in southern Black wealth and literacy. The onset coincided with the increase in industrial production during World War I and the simultaneous decline in immigration from Europe. Most US industrial centers were in the North, and their demand for labor

¹² See Foner (1988) for detailed history of the Reconstruction period. On the post-Reconstruction southern "Redeemers" he writes: "They shared...a commitment to dismantling the Reconstruction state, reducing the political power of blacks, and reshaping the South's legal system in the interests of labor control and racial subordination" (p. 588). Models of locational choice (e.g., Sjaastad 1962, Roback 1982) help clarify the role of factors other than wages in determining the relative attractiveness of locations.

¹³ A notable exception is that Black workers were sometimes recruited for breaking strikes (Whatley 1993). Before the Civil War but after the onset of mass migration from Europe, Frederick Douglass observed, "Every hour see the black man [in the North] elbowed out of employment by some newly arrived immigrant whose hunger and whose color are thought to give him a better title to the place" (quoted in Myrdal 1944, pp. 291-292).

was met in part by Black migrants from the South.¹⁴ This timing has anchored the view that the war's positive shock to industrial labor demand and simultaneous negative shock to European immigrant labor supply spurred the first wave of large-scale migration from the South (Woodson 1918, p. 172; Thomas 1954; Collins 1997). Even before the returns from the 1920 census schedules were tabulated, it was clear to scholars and many other observers that Black men and women were leaving the South at an unprecedented pace.¹⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois (1920) urged southern migrants to pour "into the open doors of mine and factory" while immigration remained low.

Three aspects of the early stages of the Great Migration led to self-sustaining migration flows from the South after World War I. First, as Whatley (1990) shows with data from Cincinnati, some northern firms gained their first experience employing Black workers, and this appears to have facilitated future hiring. Second, migrants supplied information and assistance to relatives and friends who remained in the South, which reduced the costs and uncertainty of migration (inter alia, Scott 1920, Marks 1989, Carrington et al. 1996, Stuart and Taylor forthcoming A). Given this, Grossman asserts that by 1917 it was no longer necessary for northern firms to send recruiters south (1989, p. 47). Third, northern Black newspapers, such as the *Chicago Defender*, began to circulate widely in the South, and they too conveyed useful information and encouraged migration (Grossman 1989, ch. 3).¹⁶ In addition to these self-perpetuating features of migration, negative shocks to southern agriculture, most famously the boll weevil and the New Deal's AAA program, may have loosened Black workers' attachment to the region and increased migration.¹⁷ Higgs (1976) argues that the boll weevil was neither necessary nor sufficient to drive the Great Migration, though it may have mattered for certain states in the 1920s (see also Lewis 1931). In any case, Black migration from the South during the 1920s, long after the demand spike associated with World War I had passed, far exceeded migration levels during the 1910s (Eldridge and Thomas 1964, table 1.27).

To be clear, it is well understood that racial discrimination was widespread in the North and West before, during, and after the beginning of the Great Migration. This had important and detrimental implications for the jobs Black workers were able to secure (Du Bois 1899; Myrdal 1944;

¹⁴ A large number of White southerners migrated during this period, as well (Collins and Wanamaker 2015). Although the number of White migrants was large in absolute terms, their migration rate (relative to population) was lower than that of the Black population.

¹⁵ See early publications by Scroggs (1917), Woodson (1918), and the US Department of Labor (1919).

¹⁶ See the map of the *Defender's* shipping list in Grossman (1989, pp. 76-77). Also see Panels 33 and 34 of Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series of paintings (Lawrence 1941), which highlight that letters and newspapers were important sources of information in spurring migration.

¹⁷ See Whatley (1983) on the New Deal. See Day (1967) and Grove and Heinicke (2003) on mechanization in later decades.

Weaver 1950; Peterson 1979; Foote, Whatley, and Wright 2003), the unemployment rates they would endure (Sundstrom 1992; Eichenlaub et al. 2010), and the housing they could access (Abrams 1955; Massey and Denton 1993; Meyer 2000). But it is also clear that the scope for Black Americans' economic, educational, and political activity was greater in the North and West than in the South, a theme I return to later in the paper.

3.2 The migrants: selection, gains, and losses

Scholars and commentators immediately recognized that documenting the characteristics of southern migrants was essential to understanding the migration's implications for both the sending and receiving regions. The early literature was limited, however, by the aggregate nature of census data reported in published census volumes. One of the great benefits of microdata samples that became available after 1960 is that scholars could more carefully compare migrants and non-migrants either in the place from which they departed or the place to which they moved. In cross-sectional data with birthplace information, inter-regional migrants are typically defined as those born in the South but living elsewhere (as in Figure 1). To my knowledge, microdata-based comparisons were first featured in a literature motivated by concentrated poverty in northern cities in the 1960s. For instance, studies by Masters (1972) and Weiss and Williamson (1972) focus on comparisons of labor market outcomes for southern-born Black workers residing in northern or western cities with non-southern-born Black workers in those same places.¹⁸ The idea was to see whether southern migrants to the North were disproportionately poor; if so, it might imply that the economic plight of northern Black families circa 1970 was rooted directly in the poverty of the South and transmitted by migration.¹⁹ However, the microdata revealed that Black migrants fared at least as well as, if not better than, northern-born Black workers on most dimensions of labor market outcomes even though they had lower levels of educational attainment. Positive selection into migration on “unobservables” (e.g., motivation, health, skills not reflected in educational attainment) might well account for this finding. But in any case, it was clear that the economic and social problems of American ghettos, which motivated much of this research, were not simply an urban manifestation of transplanted southern poverty. Boustan (2009, 2010) and Derenoncourt (2019), which I discuss in more detail later, pick up this thread of investigation on how migrants fared in the North and,

¹⁸ Weiss and Williamson (1972), for example, studied the Survey of Economic Opportunities, taken circa 1967, and Masters (1972) studied the 1/1000 sample of the 1960 census. Long and Heltman (1975) and Lieberson (1978), among others, also address this question, albeit without microdata.

¹⁹ For instance, Masters asks, “How many of the problems facing northern (or urban) Negroes can be attributed directly to their migration from the South (or from rural areas)?” (1972, p. 412).

importantly, how conditions changed in the North in response to the migrants' arrival.

Margo's examination of education and propensity for migration (1990, ch. 7) is an important early study in the microdata-based literature on the Great Migration. He uses micro-level data from the 1900, 1910, 1940, and 1950 "public use tapes." These were relatively small but nationally representative samples of cross-sectional census data, the precursors to the IPUMS samples. Like the studies mentioned above, the microdata allowed close comparisons between migrants and non-migrants. Margo shows that better educated southern-born Black men were more likely to move to the North than others, even after controlling for observables such as age, marital status, and family size (table 7.3). His interpretation emphasizes the importance of "supply-side" factors affecting the Black inter-regional migration rate—specifically the low but rising level of Black literacy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this framework, advances in educational attainment from one generation to the next helped support an increasing flow of Black outmigration, even if the post-1914 surge of the Great Migration still required an exogenous shock (p. 117). Margo's work was at the forefront of a new wave of research on the Great Migration that would draw heavily on microdata sources.²⁰ The dissemination of the IPUMS (Ruggles et al. 1995), which harmonized historical public use microdata from the US census and made samples available for convenient and free downloading, combined with rapid increases in desktop computing power, greatly increased scholars' ability to analyze detailed data pertaining to the Great Migration.

A key shortcoming of the IPUMS data in this context is their cross-sectional nature—one cannot observe the same person at two points in time, which obscures information that would be helpful in understanding the population's selection into migration and workers' labor market gains from migrating. There is some traction to be gained from using state-of-birth and year-of-birth information in the cross-sectional data, but of course this approach leaves open the questions of when any given migrant actually moved (e.g., as a child or adult, before or after completing their schooling, and so on), the environment from which they departed (e.g., rural or urban; cotton-intensive or not), and what they were doing before their departure (e.g., farm or non-farm employment).

The value of longitudinal datasets for the study of migration is clear, but until recently such data

²⁰ Among many others that rely heavily on samples of IPUMS data, see for example Tolnay (1998), Vigdor (2002), Curtis White (2005), and Eichenlaub et al. (2010). Eichenlaub et al. (2010) uses the IPUMS cross-sections from 1940 to 1980 to show that Black male migrants tended to have substantially higher nominal income but lower employment rates (especially in the West) than those who migrated within the South. Occupational status measured (using an index gauging prestige) is similar.

were scarce for the Great Migration era.²¹ For instance, the National Longitudinal Surveys and Panel Study of Income Dynamics—workhorse longitudinal datasets for modern social scientists—commenced in the late 1960s, when the Great Migration was at or near its end. New data sources and methods enabled Collins and Wanamaker (2014) to overcome this problem by linking census records over time in the early twentieth century. Specifically, we linked males who resided in the South in 1910 forward in time to the 1930 census manuscripts (searched via Ancestry.com and then transcribed) to study selection into migration and to measure the migrants' gains.²² We find evidence that migrants were somewhat better off than non-migrants even before leaving the South, though the difference on average was not very large; therefore, we emphasize the broad-based nature of the Great Migration over this period. It is possible, of course, that patterns of migrant selection were different and more positively skewed before World War I, reflecting the nature of migration costs and variation over time in northern labor demand for unskilled labor.

A strong interpretation of the early decades of the Great Migration in terms of the Roy model (Roy 1951, Borjas 1987), which predicts that migrants will be drawn disproportionately from the more skilled or educated workers of the base population when returns to skill are relatively high in the potential destination, is difficult due to the scarcity of data on race-specific income distributions and skill differentials. Collins and Wanamaker (2014, pp. 224-225 and 242-243) offer some discussion of the evidence, suggesting that positively selected Black migration is not consistent with a simple version of the Roy model but might be consistent with richer versions of the model, such as those that incorporate differential migration costs across skill groups (Chiquiar and Hanson 2005). Readers interested in this line of investigation should also see Vigdor (2002), which studies selection patterns in cross sectional data for 1940 and 1970.

Collins and Wanamaker (2014) estimate large earnings gains for migrants, reflecting both changes in occupations (a tendency to move into higher paying jobs) and changes in locations (within occupations, northern pay was higher than southern).²³ There is no random assignment into

²¹ Maloney (2001) demonstrated some of the promise of longitudinal records for studying the Great Migration based on linking 1920 census records and World War I registration data to study occupational mobility in Cincinnati. Also, see Bodnar et al. (1982) on Pittsburgh and Logan (2009) on Black Civil War veterans. Logan finds that health shocks influenced veterans' likelihood of migration up to 1900, a form of positive selection that could have broader implications for understanding historical migration patterns.

²² Linking women is difficult due to name changes at marriage, hence our focus on men. The possibilities and technologies for census data linkage have changed rapidly since the early 2010s. The full count census manuscripts with names are now available up to 1940 for researchers with approved projects and access to the data. Searching and transcribing by hand Ancestry.com's census of population records is no longer necessary.

²³ A perennial challenge to working with historical data on labor market outcomes is that individual-level earnings are not reported in the census, hence our reliance on occupation, race, and location to impute

migration in Collins and Wanamaker (2014), but we do measure the gains from several different perspectives (comparisons of men from the same county, from the same household, or “within person” changes in occupational earnings scores for men in the labor force in both 1910 and 1930), all of which point toward large earnings gains. Finally, we use estimated earnings gains to calculate the change in the Black-White occupational earnings ratio from 1910 to 1930 that might be attributable to migration. We conclude that in absence of the Great Migration, the Black-White earnings ratio might have fallen rather than risen slightly.

Although work specifically focused on health outcomes of Black migrants is relatively new, evidence is building that migrants paid a price in terms of their health. In historical settings, it is not uncommon for migrants to large cities to experience worse health outcomes than those remaining in rural areas (Haines 2001), though for the overall US population, these rural-urban mortality gaps had closed by the time of the Great Migration. Eriksson and Niemesh (2016) show that Black infant mortality rates increased due to migration to northern cities, at least prior to 1940. For later cohorts of migrants, Black et al. (2015) show that longevity declined in the Duke SSA/Medicare dataset, which covers people over age 65 in 1976 to 2001 and includes detailed birthplace and time of death information. A key innovation in this paper is to use proximity to railways in the early twentieth century as an instrumental variable for migration to avoid bias associated with selective migration. It has long been recognized that Black migration to the North tended to follow the railways, with those from the South Atlantic tending to migrate to the large cities on the East Coast, whereas those from the South Central were more likely to select the large cities of the Midwest. Black et al. estimate that migrants, conditional on living to age 65, were about 10 percentage points less likely to survive to age 75 than if they had not migrated.

There is also evidence building that migrants were more likely to be incarcerated than men who stayed in the South. This line of research is particularly timely given rising interest in how the history of racial discrimination has shaped current levels and disparities in incarceration. Eriksson (2019) examines incarceration rates, as revealed in the “group quarters” variable in 1940’s full count census data. She finds that Black migrants (southern-born men who left the South after 1920 and were found in the North in 1940) had much higher chances of being incarcerated in 1940 than non-migrants, even when compared to brothers who stayed in the South. She shows that this is particularly true for recent migrants, perhaps reflecting the difficulty of finding steady work in urban northern labor markets in the late 1930s. Relative to the overall rise in Black incarceration rates in

“earnings scores.” See Collins and Wanamaker (2014) for a detailed discussion in this context. See Inwood, Minns, and Summerfield (2019) and Saavedra and Twinam (2020) for more general discussions of the issue.

the early twentieth century, the Great Migration's contribution seems small but not trivial. Her work complements Muller (2012), who emphasizes the importance of both the redistribution of the Black population to the North (where incarceration rates were relatively high) and rising Black incarceration rates within the North as the Great Migration progressed. For the post-WWII period, Derenoncourt (2019) presents causal evidence that the Great Migration increased Black incarceration rates and police expenditures in northern and western cities. Finally, though not focused on incarceration per se, Stuart and Taylor (forthcoming B) develop evidence, using the Great Migration as a source of variation in social networks, that non-southern communities with higher levels of connectedness experienced less crime after 1970.

Much of the recent work reviewed here, especially that which relies on linked census records, focuses on Black men's outcomes. There are technical reasons for this—name changes at time of marriage make census record linkage difficult—but the omission of women is a clear shortcoming of the economic history literature to date.²⁴ Figure 3 shows how different Black women's labor force participation and occupations were from those of white women and Black men. Curtis White (2005) describes Black female migrants' labor market outcomes in detail using cross-sectional IPUMS samples, and Curtis White et al. (2005) compare migration patterns of single and married women. Yet there is much more to learn here, and with appropriate caution even selected samples of linked census records might be insightful. In any case, bringing women's experiences more fully into the economic history literature on the Great Migration would be valuable.²⁵

3.3 Migration patterns: sources and destinations

Figures 1 and 2 convey the magnitude of the geographic redistribution of the Black population from 1910 to 1970. But within the South, there was sizable variation across locations in the rate of Black out-migration from the region, and within the rest of the US, there was sizable variation in the rate of Black in-migration. Furthermore, there was a great deal of migration *within* the South, which tends to be neglected in studies of the Great Migration even though it is relevant to thinking about southern workers' locational decisions. Scholars have long appreciated these facts, and in the late 1960s economists started to undertake econometric analyses of various “push” and “pull” factors that

²⁴ The use of marriage certificates (see Martha Bailey's LIFE-M project at <https://life-m.org>) and family tree information from genealogical databases may provide a way forward.

²⁵ Ross Haynes (1923) provides an early empirical exploration of Black domestic workers, many of whom were migrants. Trotter points out that through kin networks, “black women played a conspicuous role in helping to organize the black migration” (2002, p. 32). And Jones (1985) provides detailed insights into the connections between migration and Black women's labor at various points in her book.

were hypothesized to affect local migration rates. In essence, the cross-place variation provided a means to test economic theories of migration and to “explain” migration rates.

William Vickery (1977), in his 1969 dissertation at the University of Chicago, was one of the first scholars to undertake an econometric analysis of state-level migration patterns from 1900 to 1960. This entailed a methodological step forward because, “None of the earlier research on this topic exploits the ability of multiple regression analysis to help identify and measure the relative strengths of the main determinants of Negro migration” (p. 9). Of course, this was long before the existence of harmonized IPUMS data. Instead, Vickery analyzes migration at the state level by regressing migration measures on state-level characteristics, separately for each decade. The results are generally consistent with economic interpretations of migration (e.g., locations with higher income levels attract more migrants). It is tenuous to interpret such conditional correlations as if they measure causal relationships. Even so, by combining economic hypotheses about the determinants of migration with historical perspective and data on Black migration, Vickery’s work provided an empirical foundation on which later work built.²⁶ Flora Gill’s 1975 dissertation (1979) is another important and early econometric study based on state-level data. Collins (1997), which is specifically interested in testing whether the prevalence of European immigration tended to depress rates of Black migration to the North, also relies heavily on state- and city-level data from published census volumes.

Collins and Wanamaker (2015) examines migration patterns using micro-level data from linked census records for both Black and White male southerners between 1910 and 1930. As described above, an advantage of linked microdata is the ability to observe an individual’s pre-migration background characteristics, including location, in detail. In this paper, we were especially interested in expanding the scope of investigation to include and compare migration patterns of southern White men, who also left the South in large numbers but at lower per capita rates than Black men. We show that there were substantial differences in White and Black migration patterns and that observable characteristics in 1910 cannot account for those differences. We also show that in choosing destinations, Black men were more deterred by distance than White men, more attracted to manufacturing centers, and more responsive to variation in labor demand growth. We found only mixed evidence that Black inter-state migrants were more likely than White inter-state migrants to leave the South, conditional on potential destinations’ observable economic characteristics (e.g.,

²⁶ Vickery’s committee included Robert Fogel, who suggested the topic (Vickery 1977, acknowledgements). Vickery also thanks Larry Sjaastad, who had recently expounded his theory of migration as an investment (1962).

proximity, income levels, industry mix). There were, however, notable Black-White differences in choice of destination across non-southern regions (conditional on destination characteristics), with Black men sorting relatively strongly into the industrial Midwest and Northeast and White men sorting relatively strongly into the West. Although beyond the scope of the Collins and Wanamaker data, this pattern changed in the 1940s, when Black southerners began migrating to the West (especially California) in much larger numbers. Broadly speaking, it would be useful to have better identified measures of how differences and changes in local “amenities” (i.e., local characteristics valued by workers apart from real wages) affected migration patterns during the Great Migration.

Stuart and Taylor (forthcoming A) provide an even more detailed view of migration patterns by analyzing the Duke SSA/Medicare administrative data, which provides information on town of birth. They illustrate the role of networks in channeling migration from place to place during the Great Migration, finding that one new Black migrant from the South tended to pave the way for two additional migrants. The general importance of networks for migration flows has long been appreciated in the social sciences, but the scope, detail, and methodology in this study break new ground.²⁷

3.4 The North

In 1910, less than two percent of the non-southern population was Black. A few cities had sizable Black populations, but for the most part, only a small share of the urban northern population was Black.²⁸ The North held out some promise for economic advancement and political voice relative to the South, though discrimination was widespread. James Grossman characterizes Chicago in this pre-Great Migration era as follows: “Although discrimination circumscribed Black life in Chicago and interacted with the material circumstances of most migrants to relegate them to the worst housing and least desirable employment in the city, the color line was not ubiquitous. Nor did it reflect the public values embodied in the laws of the state and city” (1989, p. 166). What unfolded in northern cities with the arrival of millions of Black migrants after 1910 constitutes an important branch of the Great Migration literature, one that connects the history of Black migration to some of today’s most pressing domestic policy issues.

²⁷ On networks in the Great Migration, also see Carrington et al. (1996) and Chay and Munshi (2015). On more general patterns, also see Tolnay et al. (2005) and Curtis White et al. (2005).

²⁸ Philadelphia’s population was 5.6 percent Black in 1910, the highest share among large northern cities. See Du Bois (1899) for an insightful description. Several smaller northern cities had higher Black shares than Philadelphia but all were under 10 percent, including St. Louis, Cincinnati, Omaha, Columbus, Indianapolis, and Kansas City. Tabulations are from IPUMS 1910 1-percent sample (Ruggles et al. 2015).

In the aftermath of any large influx of immigrants, a natural question for economists is whether and how their arrival affected the receiving area's economy. The impact of migration on local economies and especially local labor markets is an area of common interest and, sometimes, common methods for scholars of the Great Migration and scholars of international migration. Boustan (2009) is a prime example of this common ground in that it studies how the arrival of southern Black migrants affected the labor market outcomes of non-migrant Black and White workers in the North. The paper's empirical work picks up the story in 1940, when wage data are first available in the census. Building on methods from the immigration literature, Boustan uses migration-induced variation in the North's Black labor supply (measured separately by education-experience bins) to estimate the elasticity of substitution between White and Black workers. With this parameter estimate in hand, she calculates the effects of Black migration on the wages of northern Black and White workers between 1940 and 1970. The estimated effects on White workers' wages were very small, whereas the negative effects on Black workers' wages were large for those with 10 or more years of education (12-24 percent) (p. 775).²⁹

As mentioned above, some research on the Great Migration in the economics literature was motivated by conditions in northern and western cities in the 1960s, where Black migrants tended to live in highly segregated neighborhoods. The literature on residential segregation in American cities is far too large to incorporate in full here. Instead, I will highlight some relatively recent work that investigates the connection between the Great Migration and residential segregation.

Cutler, Glaeser, and Vigdor (1999) is a useful starting point for discussion because it documents and interprets the rise (and fall) of urban residential segregation, spanning from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth centuries.³⁰ This work is motivated in part by the authors' earlier findings that residential segregation was associated with worse socioeconomic outcomes for young Black men and women in the late twentieth century (Cutler and Glaeser 1997).³¹ They find a positive correlation between Black population growth and increases in segregation after 1910, at least for cities that were not already highly segregated. They conclude that around mid-century, near the height of the Great Migration, White households' collective action, ranging from threats of violence to legal barriers (such as restrictive covenants), enforced high levels of residential segregation. This

²⁹ See Gardner (2016) for additional work along these lines.

³⁰ An immediate data problem for this work was the lack of detailed spatial units for characterizing segregation prior to 1940. Reliance on political ward boundaries within cities before 1940 was the next-best alternative, but with better data and GIS techniques, scholars can now develop more detailed characterizations of changes within cities in the pre-war period (e.g., Shertzer et al. 2016).

³¹ Collins and Margo (2000) show that this negative association emerged in the late twentieth century but appears to be absent in mid-twentieth century data.

interpretation is consistent with evidence that Black households faced higher housing costs than White households and that there was not a discernable difference in prices paid by recent migrants relative to other Black households. The pattern was different in the late twentieth century and more consistent with a view that “decentralized racism” was key—White households tended to sort into exclusively White areas in highly segregated metropolitan areas and paid a premium to do so.

Boustan (2010) directly investigates the connection between southern Black migrants to northern cities and decentralized White responses. She shows that Black migration between 1940 and 1970 caused a significant amount of “White flight” from central cities. This interpretation is based on an instrumental variable approach that combines estimates of southern outmigration post-1940 with pre-1940 patterns of Black migration (i.e., the share of Black migrants from each southern state that migrated to each northern city between 1935 and 1940); in practice, OLS results are fairly similar (Table II). Each Black arrival appears to have led to more than two White departures. This process may have had detrimental effects for remaining residents of central cities through fiscal channels and by exacerbating residential segregation, but it may also have facilitated an increase in Black homeownership in cities (Boustan and Margo 2013). Shertzer and Walsh (2019) extend the investigation of White flight to the early twentieth century, using data at the neighborhood level within cities. They find evidence of White flight in response to Black migrants even at the earliest stages of the Great Migration.

Collins and Margo (2011) show that at a national level, Black home ownership rates plateaued at around 25 percent as the Great Migration began. In part, the stagnation reflected the nature of the housing stock in the relatively dense areas of cities where Black migrants settled. Despite a sizable increase in income associated with migration, the Black population’s geographic redistribution into cities tended to depress their home ownership rate, at least prior to 1940. After 1940, even as the Great Migration peaked in intensity, the Black home ownership rate increased, doubling by 1970. This was partly driven by Black households’ lifecycle accumulation of wealth but also, as mentioned above, by White households’ disproportionate departure from central cities (Boustan and Margo 2013).

Derenoncourt (2019) combines methods from Boustan (2010) with more recently revealed information on variation in intergenerational mobility patterns across locations (Chetty and Hendren 2018). In particular, by using a shift-share instrument for Black migration to specific northern destinations after 1940, Derenoncourt estimates that the Great Migration had a negative effect on intergenerational upward mobility (measured at the commuting zone level) in the late twentieth century, particularly for those from low-income families (pp. 18-19). Important local policy

responses accompanied these changes in mobility; for instance, cities differentially increased their spending on police by the 1960s but not on education (pp. 30-32), and their incarceration rates increased. For an earlier period (up to 1930), Tabellini (2019) argues that Black migration led to cuts in local spending due to declines in property values.

An important lesson from the work reviewed above is that cities were not passive receptors of Black migrants. Rather, residents responded to Black migration in ways that amplified the change in central cities' demographic composition and that may have diminished the economic prospects for those who remained. For valuable reading in this area outside the economics literature, I would recommend Wilson (1987), Massey and Denton (1993), and Sharkey (2013). In addition, I would emphasize a point made by Logan and Parman (2017) on the basis of the full count census records for 1880 and 1940: Residential segregation was not solely an urban phenomenon, and levels of residential segregation increased throughout the US after 1880, in both rural and urban areas and in both the South and the North. In other words, although the Great Migration literature tends to focus on residential segregation in northern and western cities for good reasons, it is also important to keep in mind that residential segregation was widespread and rising everywhere.

4. Speculation

4.1 The Great Migration and the Civil Rights Movement

In the remaining space I will focus primarily on the Great Migration's political and policy ramifications, which ultimately may have diminished the impetus for Black migration from the South. The Great Migration and the Civil Rights Movement both sprang from a context of economic and political deprivation, and both encompassed purposeful efforts by millions of people to make more of their lives' potential than was possible in the Jim Crow South. These movements—one geographic, one political—were coterminous and intertwined, but the connections are underappreciated, or at least underdeveloped, in the economics literature that studies the Great Migration. In part, I think this is because it is fairly straightforward for economists to study topics such as the determinants of migration or the local economic effects of migrant arrivals—we have well developed (if imperfect) tools for causal inference and measurement in this domain—but it is less straightforward to quantify and describe formally the origins and dynamics of social movements.³² Recent work by Calderon, Fouka, Tabellini (2019) deserves mention here—it connects variation in Black migration to variation in local political support for civil rights, an

³² See Chong (1991) and also Collins (2003a and 2006), which study the political economy of anti-discrimination laws at the state level.

important step. Yet there is room for expansion on this theme, and it would result in a richer and better-connected economic history of the American twentieth century.

I will discuss some ways in which the Great Migration might have helped to strengthen the Civil Rights Movement. However, it is important to acknowledge at the outset that the redistribution of the Black population could have worked to undermine political support for new civil rights legislation by generating a backlash among some northern Whites. Massey and Denton (1993, p. 29), for example, point to northern Whites' "increasing hostility and considerable alarm" in response to southern Black migrants in the early stages of the Great Migration. It is also important to reiterate that discrimination, violence, and racism were commonplace in the North, even if the institutions of White supremacy ("Jim Crow") were less fully developed and enforced than in the South. Nonetheless, I agree with James Gregory's observation that, "There was a particular regional dynamic behind the twentieth-century drive for rights and equality, an almost Archimedean logic: African Americans had to leave the South in order to gain the leverage needed to lift it and the rest of the nation out of Jim Crow segregation" (2005, p. 237).

Cities are hubs for innovative ideas and political organization, and the Great Migration entailed the movement of Black Americans to many of the nation's largest cities. It is not surprising that centers of Black migration also became centers of Black political power, particularly Chicago and New York.³³ In his history of the Civil Rights Movement in the North, Thomas Sugrue writes, "the scope and scale and form of racial protest changed dramatically as millions of African Americans moved northward in the 1920s...In the wake of the influx, northern cities became hothouses of organizing" (2008, p. xx). The influx of Black migrants sometimes affected the balance of political power *within* northern cities (Gregory 2005), where many voted for the first time. But the perspective I want to emphasize here is that Black migrants, their descendants, and their political allies were eventually able to project that power nationally. Keneshia Grant (2019) and Eric Schickler (2016) have recently taken up this theme in their research. How this was accomplished should be a central part of the story of the Great Migration, as well as the story of the Civil Rights Movement and its origins.

By the start of World War II, millions of Black Americans resided in (or had strong network connections to) urban areas that would become centers for defense production. Initially, however, Black workers were largely excluded from high paying defense production jobs. A. Philip Randolph, the influential leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (a labor union based in New York),

³³ Gregory (2005, chapter 7) develops this theme in more depth.

threatened to lead a March on Washington to demand the opening of defense jobs to Black workers. This spurred President Roosevelt's executive orders that sought to curb discrimination in all defense-related industries (Reed 1991, Collins 2001). Successfully organizing to advance the idea that private sector discrimination was not only morally wrong but that the government could and should do something about it was path breaking. At the same time, the wartime surge in labor demand in northern and western centers of defense production prompted a large wave of Black migration from the South, further strengthening Black political influence in these areas.

Federal "fair employment" policies lapsed at the war's conclusion, but the idea had taken root and was revisited repeatedly in Congress before the 1960s' legislative breakthroughs. In the meantime, northern Black residents gained traction on the fundamental problems of formulating and advancing anti-discrimination policies at the state and local levels (Lockard 1968; Collins 2003a, 2006; Sugrue 2008). State-level anti-discrimination laws borrowed heavily from ideas and policies implemented by executive order during World War II. The laws were advocated and advanced by a political coalition that included Black civil rights organizations, of course, and also labor organizations, Jewish organizations, and others that were sympathetic to the principles at stake.³⁴ The laws might not have delivered major advances in Black workers' economic status in the North (Collins 2003b, 2004), but they were an important legislative departure from the history of *laissez faire* with respect to racial discrimination in the private sector.

By the time Congress passed federal civil rights legislation in the 1960s, most Black residents of northern and western cities were already covered by comparable state legislation or local ordinances. The extension of such protections to the South in the mid-1960s was revolutionary but not unforeseeable. Indeed, the principles and policies commonly associated with the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Fair Housing Act of 1968 were pioneered years before, even decades before, in northern cities and states. The state laws had been expanding with the backing of a political coalition that was catalyzed and strengthened by Black migration to northern cities. The growing Black constituencies outside the South eventually provided leverage to help move federal policy.

I would also suggest a less direct but perhaps fundamental connection between the Great Migration and the Civil Rights Movement. To the extent that the Civil Rights Movement benefited from a growing professional and middle-class Black population in terms of resources, organizational strength, and leadership, it is plausible that better educational opportunities in the North were complementary to political activism over the long haul of the Civil Rights Movement. Through the

³⁴ Photos of the anti-discrimination bill signings in *Trends in Housing* (a newsletter published by National Committee Against Discrimination in Housing) typically include representatives from each of these groups.

early twentieth century, Black elementary schools were relatively poorly funded and Black public high schools were scarce in the South (Caliver 1933, Margo 1990, Carruthers and Wanamaker 2013), with clear implications for Black children’s educational attainment. For perspective on the regional differences in education, consider the situation of young Black adults circa 1940. In the 1940 IPUMS sample, among 19 to 22 year olds, the rate of high school completion (12th grade or higher) was three times higher in the North than in the South (30 versus 10 percent). Tabulations specifically for those born outside the South but with parents born in the South (likely children of migrants) are similar. For similar age ranges, young Black adults’ college attendance rate was about twice as high outside the South. Though I have only sketched the idea here, it is plausible that a rapidly growing, predominantly urban, and better educated Black population in the North and West contributed to the timing and success of the Civil Rights Movement.

It is also possible that the Great Migration indirectly led to improvements in educational resources for Black children in the South, which in turn might have helped increase political awareness and engagement. For instance, the threat of outmigration and loss of local workers might have led to improvements in southern Black schools (Margo 1990, pp. 48-50), at least relative to a counterfactual with more limited outside options. In addition, the NAACP, based in New York, began contesting discrimination in southern school systems decades before the *Brown v. Board* decision of 1954 (Kluger 1975; Tushnet 1987). As the legal challenges unfolded, measures of Black-White gaps in school quality (e.g., class sizes, length of school year, and expenditures) began to narrow, starting long before *Brown v. Board* (Margo 1990; Card and Krueger 1992; Donohue, Heckman, and Todd 2002).

What would the Civil Rights Movement have looked like and accomplished in the absence of the Great Migration? Can the two be separated and addressed in a meaningful counterfactual sense, even for an essay that demands “speculation”? Tackling this head on is difficult, but it is something we should contemplate when trying to assess the importance of the connection. This runs into an immediate problem—it is hard to imagine World War I and II occurring without generating internal migration to industrial centers, so this is shaky ground. Nonetheless, in light of the discussion above, I would venture this: Without the Great Migration, there would have been less scope for Black Americans’ political organization and power; there would have been less attention drawn to what Gunnar Myrdal (1944) called the “American Creed” during World War II and in its wake; there

would have been weaker ties between northern and southern Black communities and activists;³⁵ there would have been less groundwork for anti-discrimination policy in state law; and northern politicians might well have neglected the Black population's interests and rights, as they had for decades before the Great Migration. Thus, the Civil Rights Movement might have been slower, later, and less revolutionary in its effects than it actually was.³⁶ Even a marginally weaker Civil Rights Movement might have fallen short of key legislative achievements in the 1960s.

I should point out that pressure for change might still have mounted without the Great Migration for several reasons. Within the South, rising Black urbanization, education, and income would have led in this direction. Black veterans would still have mobilized to confront White supremacy (Brooks 2004, Parker 2009). External pressure for change might have been felt due to the Cold War (Dudziak 2000), in which the treatment of Black Americans was an international embarrassment. Judicial decisions might have worked to undermine Jim Crow institutions (though southern resistance to the *Brown v. Board* decision is notable). In addition, the diffusion of television and televised violence against Black Americans might have finally moved northern White politicians to act. But in the end, I speculate that the Great Migration mattered and was, in fact, decisive in the arrival of new civil rights legislation in the 1960s. If so, then the Great Migration is also plausibly connected to the major shift in southern Whites' political party affiliation that occurred during and after the 1960s (Kuziemko and Washington 2018), to Black workers' labor market gains in the South (Donohue and Heckman 1991), and to the relatively rapid regional growth and modernization that occurred in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement (Wright 2013).

4.2 Other avenues for future research

I hope that the discussion above has sparked some ideas for potential future research. A few additional and broad areas for exploration that stand out to me include the implications of the Great Migration for the South and those who did not migrate, the role of migration in changing intergenerational trajectories, and the effect of the Great Migration on a wider range of social outcomes and innovative activity.

First, it makes sense that studies of the Great Migration tend to focus on the migrants themselves and on the receiving cities in the North and West. But the implications for those who

³⁵ By mid-century, Sugrue points out that, "...northern and southern activists influenced one another...Northern activists shared their experiences with their southern counterparts, and by turn, they were moved to action by the example of the southern civil rights movement" (2008, p. xviii).

³⁶ One might also argue that the 1960 election of John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson hinged on winning a close vote in Illinois, a major destination for Black migrants.

stayed in the South are also significant and merit more attention. There is much more to learn about how outmigration shaped southern labor markets, demography, economic growth, and political economy.³⁷ In turn, endogenous changes in all of those areas (labor, demography, growth, politics) would have impacted future outmigration, perhaps leading to the end of the Great Migration as relative conditions in the South improved.³⁸ Some questions in this area may be well suited to standard difference-in-differences analyses, where local variation is used to identify local effects, but others are likely to require a more general equilibrium approach to modeling that can situate the Great Migration—both its rise and fall—in the broader context of regional economic convergence.³⁹

Second, long distance migration is often the start of a new chapter of any family's history, but we are just at the beginning of being able to see the Great Migration from a micro-level intergenerational perspective backed by large-scale datasets.⁴⁰ Complete count census data and automated linkage techniques are enabling scholars to document patterns of intergenerational change in American history up to 1940, including for Black families (Collins and Wanamaker 2017), albeit with caveats about measurement error (Ward 2020). New data initiatives that link the full count 1940 census into later census and administrative records (Massey et al. 2018) will open the way for more extensive study of participants in the later decades of the Great Migration or the children of earlier migrants. Alexander et al. (2017) is notable in this regard, as it uses data linked from 1940 to 2000 to shed new light on migrants' children's educational and labor market outcomes. The literature reviewed in section 3 indicates that while many migrants gained in some dimensions (income, political rights), many may have lost on other dimensions (health, incarceration). One could imagine a multigenerational and multifaceted perspective on the Great Migration's participants and their descendants (along with non-migrants for comparison) spanning most of the twentieth century, which would enrich our understanding of the Great Migration's complicated legacy.

Third, for the most part, my comments in this section tend to stay within the footprint of topics that economists recognize as familiar turf—areas where new data and techniques might greatly

³⁷ In a new working paper, Feigenbaum et al. (2020) have started down this path, arguing that migration induced by the boll weevil affected local levels of violence and repression. See also Hornbeck and Naidu (2014) on landowners' responses to Black outmigration following the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927.

³⁸ Greta de Jong (2005) argues that “migration acquired new meanings in the minds of many black southerners” after the passage of Civil Rights legislation in the 1960s. “Leaving the South seemed less like a form of protest than a capitulation to the forces that were driving African Americans out of the region...” (p. 387).

³⁹ The literature on the Age of Mass Migration has relevance here (Hatton and Williamson 1998, ch. 9-11).

⁴⁰ Wilkerson (2016), for instance, highlights several examples of famous children whose families participated in the Great Migration (e.g., Jackie Robinson, Jacob Lawrence, James Earl Jones). Their accomplishments demonstrate the possibilities for achievement in the North and West that may have been impossible in the South, but of course they are exceptional cases.

enhance or even overturn existing answers to fundamental questions about the Great Migration. But I also hasten to add that the Great Migration's causes and consequences extend beyond the traditional purview of the literature reviewed above; therefore, there are opportunities to expand the boundaries of the economics-based literature. For instance, the Great Migration had significant implications for American music, art, and literature (Huggins 1971; Gregory 2005, Ch. 4; Wilkerson 2016). Studying how variation in Great Migration intensity, sources, and networks influenced subsequent patterns of artistic or other forms of innovation and entrepreneurship seems fascinating and within reach. Lisa Cook's work on African American patenting between 1870 and 1940—most of which took place outside the South—shows that the social and legal environment affected technological innovation (Cook 2011, 2014). I am suggesting that linking the Great Migration to patterns of innovation in a broad array of creative endeavors and entrepreneurship would bring a fuller view of its implications into the economic history literature.⁴¹

5. Conclusions

Millions of Black Americans chose to participate in the Great Migration. By doing so, many were able to make more of their lives' potential than was possible at that time in the South. But it is also clear that there was variation in the migrants' economic gains (or losses), and there are important caveats regarding the long-term health of migrants, discrimination and violence in the North and West, the shifting geography of upward mobility, rising incarceration, and the ill effects of hyper-segregated cities in the later decades of the twentieth century. All of this must be taken on board in considering the Great Migration and its repercussions.

The research discussed in this article has made headway on several fundamental questions about the Great Migration—who moved, why did they choose certain destination, what did they gain in terms of earnings (on average), what were the effects on local labor or housing markets—often by harnessing new and improved data sources. Progress along these lines will surely continue. I am especially looking forward to the release of 1950's census manuscripts given the importance of the 1940s in the Great Migration. But the Great Migration's ramifications are far-reaching and multifaceted. Economists naturally tackle the questions for which they have well suited empirical frameworks and data, but a fuller assessment of the Great Migration's importance requires stretching further. As I have emphasized above, this includes contemplating the Great Migration's connections to the Civil Rights Movement, its effects within the South, its role in altering multigenerational

⁴¹ See Boyd (1996) for some discussion of the Great Migration and how it affected Black businesses in northern cities.

trajectories, and its implications for social phenomena that range outside the typical focus on labor and housing markets. It also includes paying more attention to women's decisions and outcomes in the context of the Great Migration.

In conclusion, I would also emphasize to readers that, as with any historical topic, the questions that previous generations of scholars (and I) have found most interesting and important may or may not be those that motivate the next generation of scholars. Times change and the demands for new historical inquiry and interpretation change, too. While I speculate that some fundamental questions will remain near the center of economic historians' inquiry about the Great Migration, I also hope that scholars who are new to the field will continue to see connections and opportunities for exploration and understanding that their predecessors did not.

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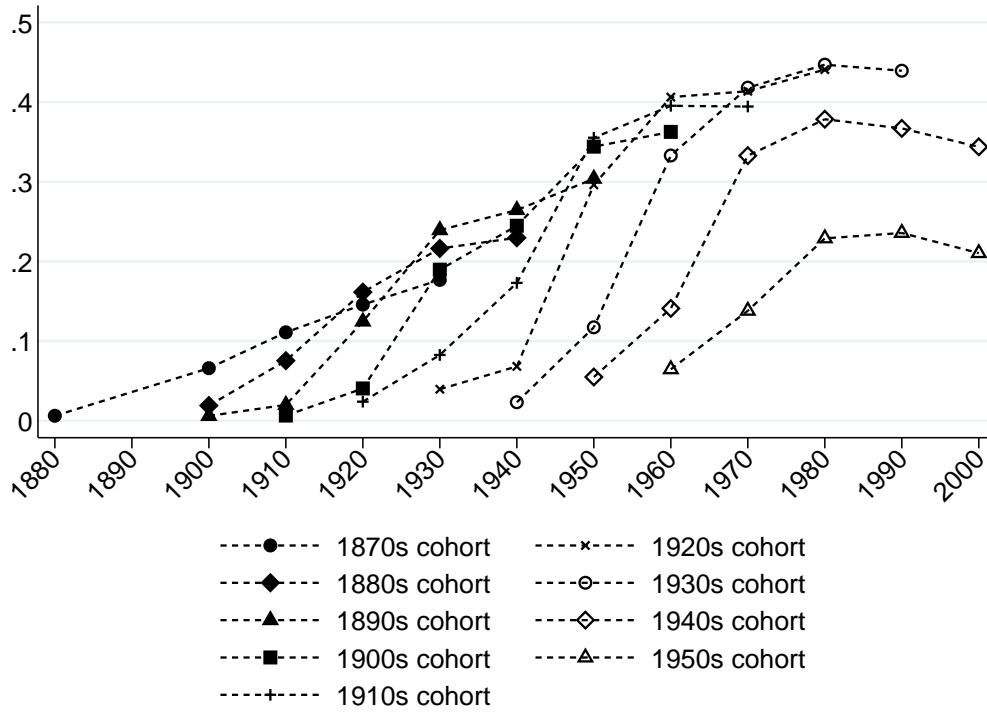
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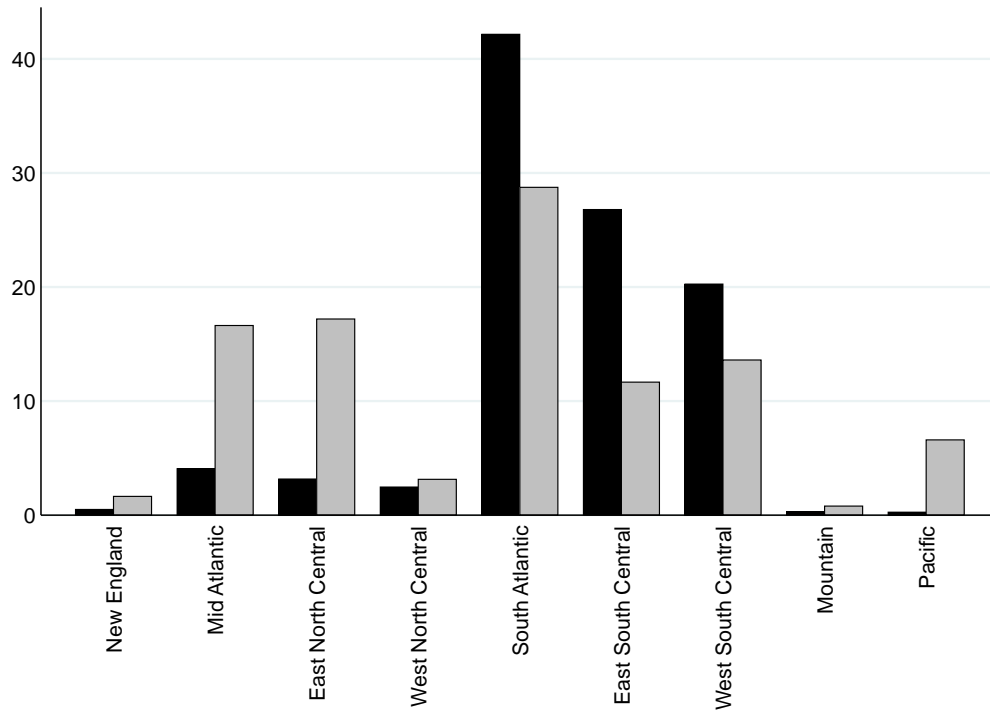
Figure 1: Share of Southern-Born Black Population Residing Outside the South, by Birth Cohort



Notes: The South in this figure excludes Delaware, Maryland, and Washington, DC. The year markers on the x-axis correspond to census years. For example, in 1990, just over 20 percent of the cohort born in the South in the 1950s resided outside the South, whereas more than 40 percent of cohort born in the South in the 1930s resided outside the South.

Sources: Author's calculations from the IPUMS 1-percent samples (Ruggles et al. 2015).

Figure 2: Distribution of the Black population, 1910 and 1970, by census division



Notes: Black bars depict the distribution of the Black population in 1910 (these sum to 100 over states). Gray bars depict the distribution of the Black population 1970. Hawaii and Alaska are omitted.

Sources: 1910 IPUMS 1-percent sample. 1970 IPUMS 1-percent state F1 sample. Ruggles et al. (2015).

Figure 3A: Occupations, men, ages 25-54, 1930 (top panel) and 1960 (bottom panel)

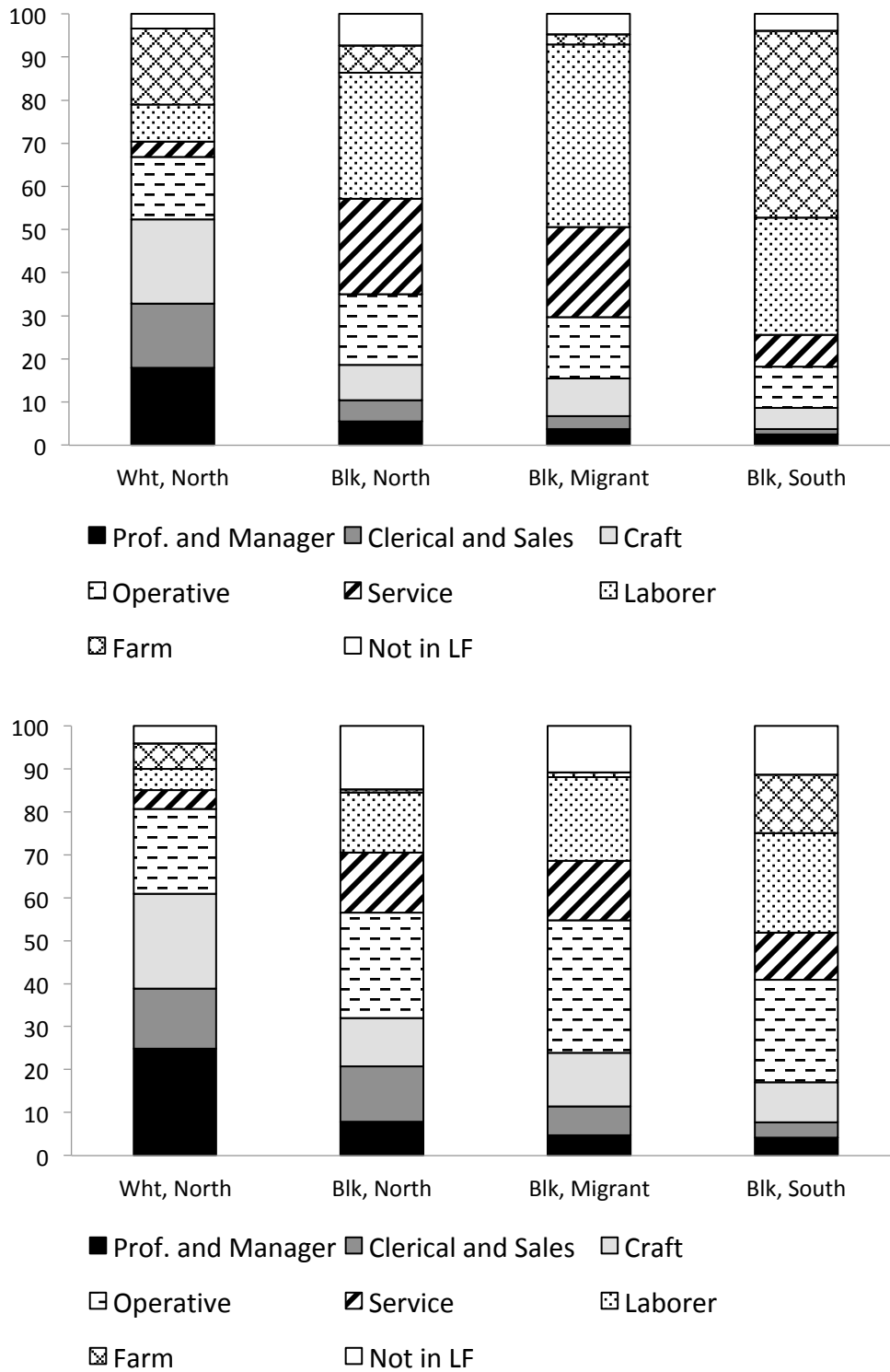
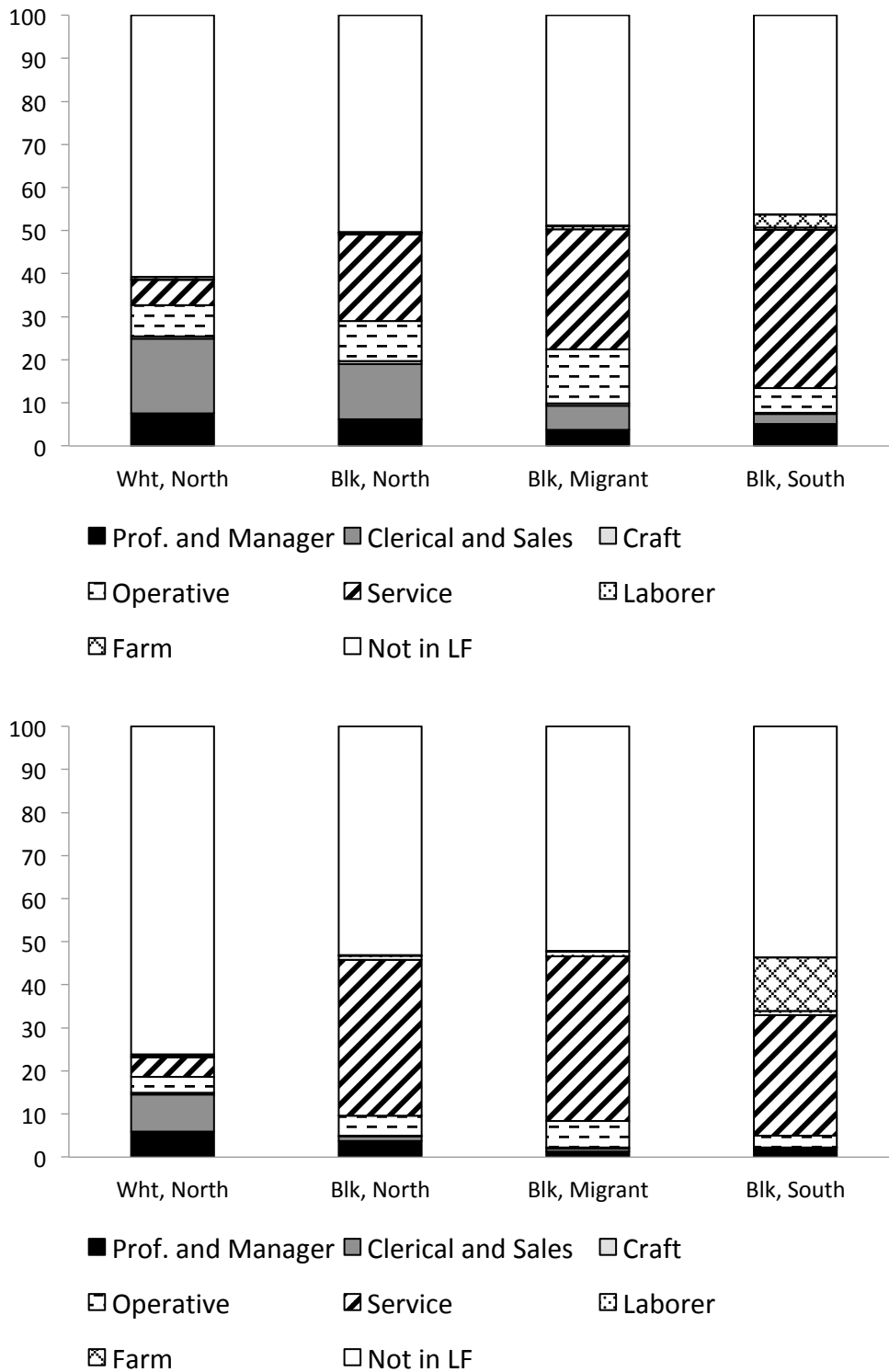


Figure 3B: Occupations, women, ages 25-54, 1930 (top panel) and 1960 (bottom panel)

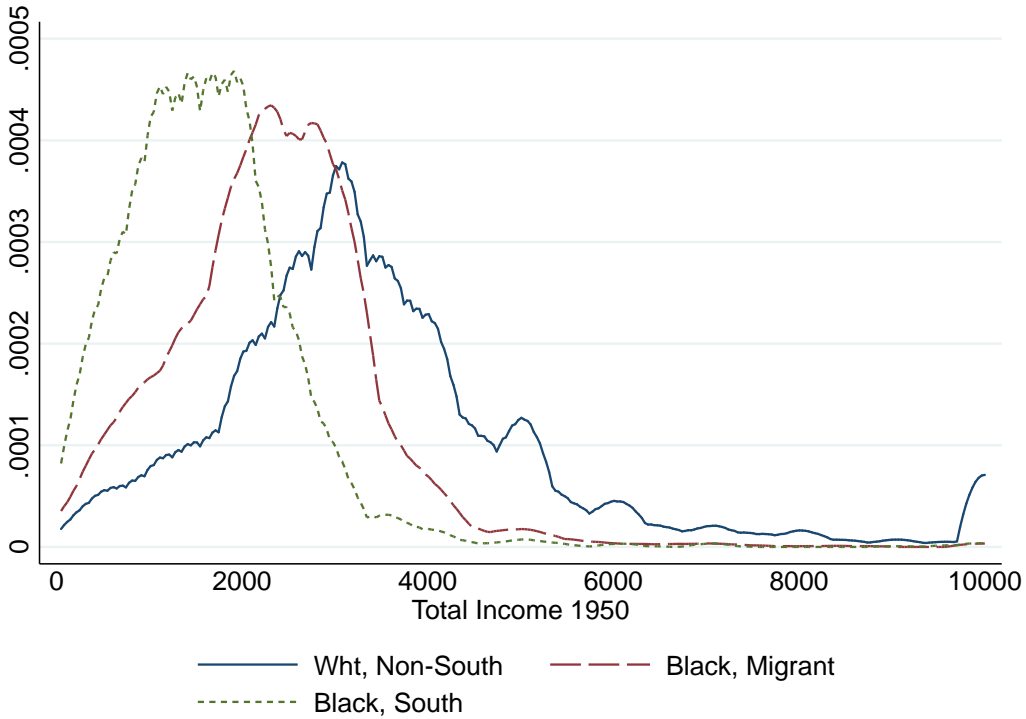


Notes: Samples include US-born men (3A) or women (3B) ages 25-54. “Blk, North” denotes Black men born and residing outside the South. “Blk, Migrant” denotes southern-born Black men residing outside the South. “Blk, South” denotes Black men born and residing in the South. The “South” includes Washington, DC, following the

census region coding. The “Farm” category includes farmers and farm laborers; the “service” category includes both household and non-household service workers. Those in the military (occ1950=595) and those reported as in the labor force but without an occupation code are omitted.

Sources: IPUMS 1-percent sample for 1930 and 5-percent sample for 1960 (Ruggles et al. 2015).

Figure 4: Distribution of total income in 1949, non-farm male workers, ages 25-54



Notes: The figure depicts kernel density plots of annual income in 1949. The sample includes men, ages 25-54, who worked at least 1 week in 1949 and reported positive total income, and who were not farmers, farm managers, or farm laborers. “Black, Migrant” refers to southern-born Black men who reside in another region. “Black, South” refers to southern-born Black men in the South. “Wht, Non-South” refers to non-southern-born White men who reside outside the South. The variable topcode is \$10,000, hence the bump for White men in the right tail. Sources: IPUMS 1-percent sample for 1950 (Ruggles et al. 2015).