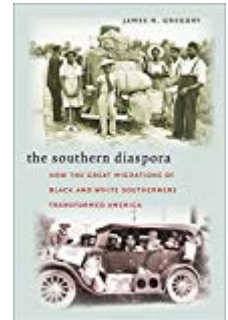


**James N. Gregory.** *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. 446 pp. \$59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2983-7.



**Reviewed by** Staci Glover

**Published on** H-South (September, 2006)

The word "diaspora" connotes the forceful expulsion of a group of people from their homeland by means beyond their control. In *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America*, James N. Gregory reexamines the long-established migratory agents that moved southerners to the North and West during the twentieth century. While Gregory acknowledges the roles of economic and social pressures in migratory change, he posits that the changing technology of newspaper, radio, and music, alongside a change in popular literature in the twentieth century, aided the northern and western migration of increasing numbers of southerners and allowed them to disseminate southern culture in ways never before possible. Furthermore, while historians have treated the movement of blacks and whites from the South separately, Gregory recognizes the symmetry and interconnectedness of the movement and its influence on other regions. Dividing the southern diaspora into three distinct phases, Gregory reconfirms John Egerton's supposition that as America became Southernized, the South became Americanized; yet he approaches the how

and why of this transaction with a fresh view of the changing agents.[1]

Scholars of immigration history question whether migrants felt transplanted, uprooted, or pulled by some unseen yet powerful magnet to other environs, and these terms may apply equally when studying internal migrations. Gregory's examination of mass-marketed newspapers and the influence that papers both northern and southern, black and white had in promoting the migration proves fresh and valuable. While southern white papers initially belied the black exodus to the North, claiming the loss of a valuable sector of the employment pool, black newspapers took two opposing views of the black exodus out of the South. Some urged blacks to stay put; to work on bettering their lives in the South. Others, like *The Defender*, painted portraits of an inviting North with destinations like Harlem flourishing with culture, religion, and civic institutions that eagerly awaited the influx of migrants and wishing to assist them in creating a better life. Gregory argues that media (newspapers, movies, radio, etc.) not only documented the diaspora, but in essence

helped to promote it. Furthermore, he argues that southern sports and music needed the urban centers of the North and West to spread their influence. The matured cultural infrastructures of these metropolises nurtured, cultivated, and sent southerners into areas that previously might have been closed to them. Baseball, powered by southern talent, also acted as an agent of the diaspora by transporting southern players to northern and midwestern baseball cities. In terms of the music industry, the author cites Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago as population centers for southern blacks as well as recording and distribution points for music. Moreover, migrants such as Buck Owens, Merle Haggard, and Glenn Campbell fueled California's Bakersfield Sound.

Often, when one thinks of the diaspora of southern blacks to midwestern and northern cities, one pictures a poor family living in a dirty, crime-ridden ghetto, struggling to find employment and racial harmony in a city hostile to their very presence. After all, news media reports aside, the popular culture of the late 1960s and 1970s, such as the television program *Good Times* and the Elvis Presley cover "In the Ghetto," seared these images into the American conscience. The picture is no less bleak for the white migrant uprooted and pushed north and west by the South's poverty. Early sociologists reinforced the notion of "Adjustment Theory" and the "marginal man caught between two cultures" (p. 67). Gregory investigates the change in popular literature that used the marginal man or woman as the central figure of migration stories. The author does a good job of covering popular writers such as Erskine Caldwell and focuses on, among other examples, Harriette Arnow's well-received 1954 novel, *The Dollmaker* as the penultimate example of southerners, particularly Appalachians, inability to adjust to life in the city. Gregory then re-examines the statistical evidence to prove that while some black and white southerners did experience difficulties settling into new cities, many more of them found the move less startling, finding em-

ployment, religious institutions, as well as political and cultural voices. He writes of average people making average lives in new places. This revelation does much to dispel the old notion of the southerner, black or white, as unable to find a place in the hustling, hard-nosed life of a metropolitan city. Why was this conclusion so long overlooked? According to Gregory, historians and demographers looked more at economically challenged areas such as the San Joaquin Valley and older neighborhoods with established patterns of poverty rather than suburbia where most whites settled. Furthermore, Gregory argues that many southern migrants found jobs in union organized plants that made the economic transition of migration less traumatic.

Any serious study of the internal migration of both black and white southerners must examine the effect these migrants had on their final destinations and the ways in which these migrants settled into their new environs. Gregory points out that Southerners, particularly black migrants, took their evangelical, charismatic brand of religion with them into cities and joined churches that not only became social networks but political and civic networks as well. He writes that blacks found it much easier to migrate into established churches, while whites battled over stylistic and fundamentalist issues that inhibited their ability to do so with ease. However, he posits, evangelicals changed their approach in the years after World War II as evidenced by the rising popularity of young evangelists Oral Roberts and Billy Graham. Moreover, the use of radio and television aided the spread of fundamentalism and evangelicism, and with this increased exposure the evangelical tone changed from the harsh and close-mindedness of pre-World War II Robert Schuler to the more approachable and broad-minded Graham. Moreover, the success of Graham's Los Angeles Crusade in 1949 bears out the claim that inner city and metropolitan churches had begun to accept an evangelical position. Churches, black more so than white, allowed the

development of civic organizations, fostered the participation of women in the church and the community, and helped to spearhead the civil rights movement drawing on leaders from established religious centers.

As an historian who studies immigrants, this reviewer would have enjoyed additional personal stories, though clearly the author did not intend to write an oral history of the great migration. Gregory's work clearly illuminates a subject in which its characters are often too broadly defined and often border on caricature (Ma and Pa Kettle, the Beverly Hillbillies, etc.). Here southern migrants are more nuanced and less one-dimensional. They are not the backwoods, ignorant folk of previous scholarship, but smart, intuitive people capable of adjusting to their surroundings and using the infrastructure of those environs to spread southern culture and create new lives for their families. Gregory's combination of scholarship on both blacks and whites gives a new interpretation to the migration story as a southern phenomenon not simply confined to blacks and whites separately. Gregory provides the readers with multiple illustrations, tables, and two appendices of statistical information that support his claims as well as a web address where readers can access additional material. One caveat to my praise of this volume is the lack of a bibliography. While the notes at the end of the book are detailed and useful, a good old-fashioned bibliography might better serve readers in making the most of the primary and secondary sources Gregory employed. Regardless, *The Southern Diaspora* is a useful addition to the study of modern southern history.

#### Note

[1]. John Egerton, *The Americanization of Dixie: The Southernization of America* (New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1974).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-south>

**Citation:** Staci Glover. Review of Gregory, James N. *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. September, 2006.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12273>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.