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Special Issue Editor’s Introduction

Nationalizing Resistance:
Race and New York in the 20th Century

Guest Editor
Ibram X. Kendi, University of Florida

Several hundred black families were quietly departing Selma, Alabama. “Treatment doesn’t warrant staying,” blared the subhead for a story in *The Chicago Defender* on February 5, 1916.¹ The Great War had cut off the supply of immigrant labor from Europe. Northern industries started looking to women, and sent labor recruiters south to refill their labor supply. With exploitation of black labor still pervasive and with Hollywood’s first major motion picture, the lynching film, *The Birth of a Nation*, inciting lynchings across the South—fifteen thousand men, women, and children watched eighteen-year-old Jesse Washington burn alive in Waco, Texas, in May 1916—African Americans were all ears to wartime labor recruiters.² “War is Hell but there are things worse than Hell, as every Negro knows,” W.E.B. Du Bois explained from New York.³

Black people traveling from rural towns to southern cities, from southern cities to border state cities, from border state cities to northern cities, the Great Migration had begun. Initially, many southern segregationists were stunned or proud of the movement. “As the north grows blacker, the south grows whiter,” rejoiced a New Orleans newspaper. Then, as black migrants started to empty out southern fields and industries, surprise and pride transformed into desperation. Black labor is “the foundation of our prosperity,” cried out a Georgia planter. “God pity the day when the

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negro leaves the South.” Planters were soon found terrorizing labor agents, arresting migrants, and improving labor conditions. But nothing and no one could stop the Great Migration. Over the course of six decades, some six million black southerners left their homes.4

Northerners did not greet these migrants with open arms. Migrants faced a racist backlash for leaving the South, and then a racist backlash when they arrived in the North.5 The northern “receiving stations,” as Great Migration chronicler Isabel Wilkerson termed them, were not much better than the Border States or the South. And no northern station received more migrants between the Great War and the Great Depression than New York (the white population, which had persisted in the 97th or 98th percentile for most of the nineteenth century, fell to 74.4 percent in 1990). Harlem residents organized to fight off what they called “a growing menace,” or an “invasion” of “black hordes.” They drafted restrictive covenants and segregated churches, restaurants, and theatres. In one of the earliest studies of the Great Migration in 1918, historian Carter G. Woodson predicted “the maltreatment of Negroes will be nationalized by this exodus.”6

Since Woodson’s unforgettable prediction came true, historians have been interrogating and complicating and sometimes removing the historical footing from the common conception of the racist South and antiracist North, the segregated South and desegregated North. They have tracked this Great Migration of maltreatment. Maltreatment followed African Americans from Florida and Georgia and the Carolinas to New York City and eventually to upstate towns and cities. Maltreatment also followed the immigration of Jews, Italians, Irish, and other disparaged European ethnics in the first half of the twentieth century and Asians and Latinos in the second half. The maltreatment of black New Yorkers and other victims of prejudice seemed to grow as their population grew in the twentieth century. But maltreatment did not animate the lives of old and new black New Yorkers. If anything, resistance to the maltreatment animated their lives as

well as the new communities, new cultures, new voices, new perspectives, and new alliances they formulated over the course of the twentieth century that served as springboards for their resistance. Black New York’s resistance to the nationalization of maltreatment serves as the thematic focus of this special issue of *New York History*.

There were separate and overlapping transnational, national, statewide, and local histories of the Great Migration of black people and maltreatment to New York. Black migrants from other nations, states, cities, and neighborhoods quickly moved into, rapidly expanded, and slowing moved out of black neighborhoods in New York. Paralleling the transnational history of black immigrants into New York was the national history of southerners migrating to New York. Paralleling the transnational and national histories were the state histories of downstate residents migrating upstate (or vice versa) and the local histories of city residents moving from one side of the city to another. Each history featured its own unique set of racial, cultural, and class dynamics. Each history was constantly transforming the racial makeup of New York towns over the twentieth century. In this special issue, Carla DuBose-Simons records the local history of upwardly mobile blacks fleeing overcrowded, high-rent majority black neighborhoods in New York City for the less crowded, more reasonably priced interracial neighborhoods of the South Bronx.7

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The local, statewide, and national historical accounts of the migration of black people in the first half of the twentieth century overshadowed the smaller transnational history of migrants from the Caribbean and Africa to New York. A well-traveled, well-read, charismatic, twenty-eight-year-old Jamaican, spinning in worldly passion for African unity arrived in New York a month after those Selma families began the recorded national history of the Great Migration. Marcus Garvey decided to settle in New York and build his two-year-old Universal Negro Improvement Association, advocating economic, political, and cultural African unity and self-determination. By the early 1920s, Garvey’s UNIA had become the world’s largest black reform organization, attracting people of African descent alienated from the elitist and assimilationist oriented Talented Tenth leadership in their towns or nations. Though the figurehead and face, Garvey was hardly solely responsible for the UNIA’s sudden growth. UNIA women were crucial in its development, namely the relatively unknown Henrietta Vinton Davis, known affectionately as “Lady Davis.” In her special issue essay, Natanya Duncan details Lady Davis’s leadership positions from the UNIA’s New York incorporation in 1919 until its marginalization in the 1930s, all the while showing her critical role in progressing this transnational organization based in Harlem.8

Garvey’s UNIA provided an alternative to New York’s storied history of interracial organizing. This storied history began in the interracial slave revolts in the eighteenth century and expanded to the abolitionist movement in the nineteenth century.9 For instance, New York abolitionists petitioned Congress to compensate Solomon Northup for his *Twelve Years a Slave*, as his popular slave narrative is titled.10 Roy Finkenbine recounts

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