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**“Farewell, Dixie Land:”**

**The *Chicago Defender* as a Promoter of the Great Migration**

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## 1. Introduction

Thousands have left for the north and thousands are still leaving, and a million will leave with the Great Northern Drive, Tuesday, May 15. The maltreatment of the whites toward members of the Race is the sole cause of the exodus. It is the general belief here that its [sic!] God's plan and hand that through His Providence the Race will be helped.<sup>1</sup>

This quotation from the *Chicago Defender* embodies the spirit of the Great Migration. In the 1910s and 1920s, hundreds of thousands of African Americans moved from southern states to the North, motivated by enthusiastic reports from newspapers, labor agents, and family members. Many writers, such as the author of the article above, viewed the migration as an exodus in the biblical tradition.

African Americans in the South had several reasons to migrate: Having experienced the cruel Jim Crow laws, many sought to improve their living conditions. In addition to that, the North promised them better-paying jobs. As immigration laws prevented many Europeans from coming to the United States during World War I, growing industries hired more African American workers.<sup>2</sup> The Great Migration changed demographics in the United States strongly. It started the “urbanization of African Americans in the twentieth century.”<sup>3</sup>

When talking about the Great Migration in this paper, I refer to migration during the period between 1916 and 1929 that Milton C. Sernett identifies in his study. He divides it into two waves: the first one during the war years, and a second one in the 1920s. The first wave began in 1916, when northern industries were in need of workers, and ended in 1919, when the economy slowed down after World War I and more

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<sup>1</sup> “Northern Drive to Start,” *Chicago Defender*, Feb. 10, 1917.

<sup>2</sup> Paul S. Boyer et al., *The Enduring Vision: A History of the American People* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 2014), p. 687.

<sup>3</sup> Milton C. Sernett, *Bound for the Promised Land: African American Religion and the Great Migration* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 37.

European immigrants came to the country.<sup>4</sup> The second wave took off around 1922 and dwindled with the beginning of the Great Depression in 1929.<sup>5</sup>

This paper argues that African American newspapers, such as the *Chicago Defender*, played a crucial part in a network of sources that migrants used to inform themselves about the journey to the North. While the *Defender* generally promoted migration, it did not spread an uncritical, one-sided narrative, but also reported on problems of moving to the North. My paper focuses on the questions how the *Chicago Defender* became an African American mass medium, which techniques it used to reach a large audience in the South, and which messages it published on migration.

Several scholars have discussed the *Chicago Defender*'s role in the Great Migration. On the one hand, studies by Ethan Michaeli and Charles A. Simmons analyze the *Defender* as a historically significant newspaper, focusing on its history, audience, and coverage. On the other hand, some studies are concerned more broadly with the Great Migration, taking into account the *Defender* as an influential factor.<sup>6</sup> Consensus seems to be that while the *Defender* was one of the loudest voices in the debate at the time, it would not have persuaded people to migrate on its own. Letters from friends and family as well as the stories told by traveling African Americans were equally important in spreading the message of a better life in the North.

For this paper, I reviewed secondary literature about the *Chicago Defender* as well as articles from the paper itself. Using the *Defender*'s digital archive, I obtained

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>6</sup> Sernett's *Bound for the Promised Land* deals with the religious framing of the Great Migration, which manifests itself in the *Defender*'s exodus narrative. *Chicago's New Negroes* by Baldwin is about the emergence of Chicago as a "black metropolis," taking into account how the *Defender* became a voice of this new cultural center. Gregory's *The Southern Diaspora* is a comprehensive history of the Great Migration with a chapter on the role of migration stories that were told, among others, by the *Defender*.

relevant primary sources.<sup>7</sup> I selected articles by using search terms, such as “migrants,” “employment,” “North,” et cetera, in different combinations. I am aware of the problem that I could only find and analyze a fraction of relevant articles through this method. The ones I used in my assessment can only serve as examples and do not necessarily reflect the overall coverage of the *Defender*. A quantitative analysis would probably gain more valid results. It could define hard criteria for the selection and analysis of articles and then work with a larger sample size.

My paper moves from a general overview of information sources for African American migrants to the *Chicago Defender* as one exemplary newspaper. Chapter two begins by examining the role of media in the Great Migration, especially dealing with challenges that African American newspapers faced during the Jim Crow Era. One of the most famous black newspapers, the *Chicago Defender*, is the main topic of chapter three. It focuses on the question how the *Defender* went from a local Chicago newspaper to one of the most read publications in the American South.

Chapter four assesses the *Defender*'s coverage of the Great Migration. It identifies two narratives that were crucial in convincing African Americans of the need to migrate. In addition to that, the chapter explains how the *Defender* functioned not only as an advocate for migration, but also as a practical guide for migrants.

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<sup>7</sup> “Chicago Defender Archives Search,” *ProQuest Archiver*, accessed August 2, 2017, <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/chicagodefender>.

## 2. The African American Press and the Great Migration

According to James N. Gregory, stories about migration play a key part in American culture. Migration narratives, for example about the Pilgrims or about the westward movement, inspired other people to move.<sup>8</sup> Such stories also influenced people during the Great Migration of the twentieth century. Gregory argues that migration narratives in journalism, music, and fiction, are not just “artifacts of history,” but “factors in history.”<sup>9</sup>

As James R. Grossman explains, migrants learned about opportunities in the North from different sources: newspapers, labor agents, traveling railroad workers, and family and friends already in the North. Using their kinship ties, people created communities that reached across the entire country. Through a “siphoning process,” such networks led people from certain communities in the South to follow their kin to their new communities. This enabled the Great Migration to continue for many years.<sup>10</sup>

According to Grossman, promising stories about the North came from labor agents first, who wanted to recruit Southern workers. Later, railway employees re-told those stories to more people along their way. Newspapers like the *Chicago Defender* further reinforced the narrative of the Promised Land. All in all, these different sources would probably not have persuaded people to migrate alone, but as a network, they effectively spread the narrative throughout the South.<sup>11</sup> Success stories by migrants who

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<sup>8</sup> James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), p. 43.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>10</sup> James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 67–68.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

had made it to the North often “generated enthusiasm bordering on mania in many southern communities.”<sup>12</sup>

Compared to earlier migration movements in the U.S., news media must have been more influential in the Great Migration. Kinship ties still influenced migrants, yet the emergence of mass media publications at the turn of the century made it possible to spread migration stories to a much larger audience. As Gregory writes, the Great Migration was possibly the “most heavily mediated mass migration in American history.”<sup>13</sup>

However, it was important which newspapers one read. On the one hand, southern white papers described the migration as a crisis that would lead to labor shortages in the South. They also perpetuated the narrative that migrating was a mistake and that African Americans would be worse off in the North.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, southern black newspapers did advocate for migration. Yet, most of them did not have enough money to stay in circulation for a long time, while they also had to fear repression from racist Southerners.<sup>15</sup>

According to Charles A. Simmons, many black newspapers founded in the nineteenth century had followed a “rigid and conservative style of providing straight news and opinion about racial problems without any sensational flair.”<sup>16</sup> The papers maintained this sober style even when they reported on racial violence in the South. Simmons regards the low editorial intensity of traditional black newspapers as a reason

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<sup>12</sup> Ethan Michaeli, *The Defender: How the Legendary Black Newspaper Changed America* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016), p. 75.

<sup>13</sup> Gregory, *Southern Diaspora*, p. 44.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>16</sup> Charles A. Simmons, *The African American Press: A History of News Coverage during National Crises, with Special Reference to Four Black Newspapers, 1827–1965* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1998), p. 6.

for a “credibility gap between reader and writer” and a low interest of African Americans in newspapers.<sup>17</sup>

This style of African American publishing changed during the Jim Crow Era. The most innovative newspapers at the time were African American papers based in the North. Unconcerned by Jim Crow laws, they used new techniques in marketing and journalism to cater to a larger audience in order to point the finger at injustices in the South. Among them were the *New York Age*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the *Chicago Defender*.<sup>18</sup>

### 3. A Flagship of the Black Press: The *Chicago Defender*'s Self-Image and Audience

The *Chicago Defender*, founded in 1905 by Georgia native Robert Abbott, is one of the best-known African American newspapers.<sup>19</sup> In 2014, it was the second most read African American newspaper in the United States.<sup>20</sup> Especially in the context of the Great Migration, several authors quote the *Defender*'s influential messages to potential migrants in the South.<sup>21</sup> The two main reasons for the *Defender*'s fame at the time were its strong circulation throughout the American South as well as its innovative journalism and marketing strategies.<sup>22</sup> Davarian Baldwin describes the *Defender* as a key medium of the African American experience, “both aggressively shedding light on injustice and showcasing a broader spectrum of black urban experiences in its pages.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Gregory, *Southern Diaspora*, p. 50.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> “The African-American Consumer: 2014 Report,” The Nielsen Company, Sep. 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Boyer et al., *Enduring Vision*, p. 687. Simmons, *African American Press*, p. 7. Gregory, *Southern Diaspora*, p. 50.

<sup>22</sup> Gregory, *Southern Diaspora*, p. 50.

<sup>23</sup> Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes*, p. 38.



In the 1910s, when many black publications still stuck to their traditional, non-confrontational editorial style, newspapers like the *Chicago Defender* adopted techniques of yellow journalism. Publishers William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer had popularized this editorial style at the turn of the century.<sup>24</sup>

James N. Gregory credits the *Chicago Defender* with revolutionizing the style of African American newspapers in a similar fashion. In order to set itself off from the many competing black papers in Chicago, the *Defender* used techniques that had proved successful in white mass audience publications: “colorful writing, eye-catching headlines, graphics and later photographs, and plenty of crime, sex, and human interest.”<sup>25</sup> According to Simmons, this new style resonated so strongly with the audience that the *Defender* became the most read black newspaper at the time.<sup>26</sup>

The *Chicago Defender* had not always been an influential supra-regional newspaper. When Robert Abbott founded the paper in 1905, he produced it in a Chicago ghetto for a local audience of 300 people, and initially delivered it himself. Change came in 1910, when Abbott introduced his new, mass-media inspired editorial style to increase circulation.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, according to Simmons, Abbott recognized African Americans in the South as a potential audience. Since the *Defender* specialized in racial injustice, the bad living conditions in the Jim Crow South provided the paper with opportunities for coverage.

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<sup>24</sup> For a detailed history of yellow journalism in the United States, see David R. Spencer, *The Yellow Journalism: The Press and America's Emergence as a World Power* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> Gregory, *Southern Diaspora*, p. 50.

<sup>26</sup> Simmons, *African American Press*, p. 7.

<sup>27</sup> Simmons, *African American Press*, p. 28.

The *Defender*'s campaign for migration helped the paper in further increasing its circulation and influence.<sup>28</sup> Simmons describes it as a circular development: As the *Defender* became a guide for potential migrants, northern businesses in need for workers placed more ads in the *Defender*. Thus, the paper gained more revenue and encouraged more and more people to migrate north.<sup>29</sup>

Distributing the *Chicago Defender* throughout the South was a challenge. Robert Abbott, the *Defender*'s editor, built a network of Pullman porters and black entertainers to bring the paper to the South.<sup>30</sup> Pullman porters were African American servants on night trains of the Pullman Company. These workers earned more than most other African Americans and, through their travels, connected their home communities to other parts of the United States.<sup>31</sup>

To cater to them as an audience, Abbott published a railroad column with practical information for railroad workers. Also, he supported the Pullman porters' campaign for higher wages. This strategy helped making railroad workers loyal readers and distributors of the *Chicago Defender*.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Abbott managed to recruit African American entertainers as salespeople for the *Defender* by regularly covering their shows.<sup>33</sup>

These efforts, according to Grossman, made the *Defender*'s circulation rise from 33,000 in 1916 to 130,000 in 1919. There were also estimates from the early 1920s, which may be slightly exaggerated, putting the *Defender*'s circulation between 160,000

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<sup>28</sup> Michaeli, *The Defender*, p. 69.

<sup>29</sup> Simmons, *African American Press*, p. 33.

<sup>30</sup> Gregory, *Southern Diaspora*, p. 50.

<sup>31</sup> "America on the Move: Pullman Porter," *National Museum of American History*, accessed July 30, 2017,

[http://amhistory.si.edu/onthemove/exhibition/exhibition\\_9\\_6.html](http://amhistory.si.edu/onthemove/exhibition/exhibition_9_6.html).

<sup>32</sup> Grossman, *Land of Hope*, p. 78.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

and 250,000.<sup>34</sup> Apparently, many people also shared their copy of the *Defender* with friends and family, generating up to five readers per copy.<sup>35</sup> By the end of World War I, the South was the region in which the *Defender* sold most of its issues.<sup>36</sup>

#### 4. Coverage of the Great Migration in the *Chicago Defender*

##### 4.1 The Narrative of the Cruel South

Southern African Americans did not only migrate because they hoped for better jobs in the North; they also wanted to escape the bad conditions in the South, especially lynching.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, many black farmers in the South experienced drought, heavy rains, and an infestation of their crops with the boll weevil.<sup>38</sup> Southern white newspapers tried to discourage African Americans from migrating, mostly because white people's businesses depended on their cheap labor.<sup>39</sup> On the contrary, northern black papers like the *Chicago Defender* covered the hardships of the South to prove the need for African Americans to escape. The newspaper focused especially on incidents of racism, as the following examples show.

One article in the *Defender* described a case of child molestation in Jacksonville, Florida, clearly using techniques of yellow journalism. The cynical title "Southern White Gentleman Rapes Little Race Child" opened a dichotomy between the privileged, but brutal white Southerner and the helpless African American girl. The article identified the victim as a "poor innocent little thing" that had "only a poor, widowed

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Simmons, *African American Press*, p. 28.

<sup>37</sup> Michaeli, *The Defender*, p. 76. Simmons, *African American Press*, p. 31.

<sup>38</sup> Simmons, *African American Press*, p. 31.

<sup>39</sup> Sernett, *Promised Land*, p. 59.

mother.” On the contrary, the article called the offender a “white brute.” It also criticized the offender’s “wealthy” father for using an influential lawyer to exonerate the boy “in some cunning manner.”<sup>40</sup> The article ended with the affirmation that the African American community would make an effort to make sure the offender “gets his just dues.”

In my opinion, this article is evidence for the *Chicago Defender*’s goal to give the marginalized a voice while also attracting a large audience. The lengthy description of the crime itself is typical for yellow journalism, as well as the judgmental language. I argue that covering a crime against an African American in such detail and tone was unusual at the time. A southern black paper would probably not have been able to withstand the backlash from white racists after publishing an article like this.

A similar case of sexual abuse created controversy in Wilkes County, Georgia. Ethan Michaeli provides an insightful analysis of coverage about the case in the *Chicago Defender* and competing papers.<sup>41</sup> The *Defender* article, written by an anonymous author, described the case as follows: A white planter named Hollenshead assaulted and raped a black woman who was shopping in his store. The woman’s husband, A. B. Walker, then “went to the store of the beast and shot him down like the dog he was.”<sup>42</sup> After Walker had turned himself in to the sheriff for his crime, he was supposed to go to the county jail. However, a mob of white people took Walker from the sheriff and tried to lynch him. He could only escape because the people in the mob were drunk and did not pay attention to him.

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<sup>40</sup> “Southern White Gentleman Rapes Little Race Child,” *Chicago Defender*, Mar. 18, 1916.

<sup>41</sup> Michaeli, *The Defender*, p. 39.

<sup>42</sup> „Southern White Gentleman Rapes Colored Lady; Is Killed by Husband,” *Chicago Defender*, Nov. 4, 1911.

The article's author praised Walker's choice to take justice in his own hands: "The brutal assaults on our women would come to an end if our men manifested the same manhood of A. B. Walker."<sup>43</sup> It is clear that he saw Walker's actions as a righteous defense against racial oppression in the South.

The author stated that "it is with the greatest difficulty that one of our women can keep her moral skirts from being besmirched with the shoe of immoral propensities which are so inherent in the breast of the so-called southern white gentleman."<sup>44</sup> By emphasizing the contrast between 'our moral women' and the 'immoral southern men,' the author created an us-versus-them discourse that ties into the narrative of systematic racism in the South.

According to Ethan Michaeli, the Walker case was news all over Georgia. Two major newspapers, *The Atlanta Constitution* and *The Atlanta Georgian and News*, reported on it. However, they both disputed the rape charge against Hollenshead and described Walker as an "assassin" of an innocent white man.<sup>45</sup> Both papers alleged that Walker was part of a conspiracy of Hollenshead's employees to murder him, in order to get rid of their debts.<sup>46</sup>

The fact that mainstream newspapers from Georgia represented the Walker case in such a different way from the *Defender* proves the importance of northern papers for southern African Americans. Being relatively independent from southern racist backlash, they could take the side of African Americans without fearing to be shut down.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Michaeli, *The Defender*, p. 40.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. In the same chapter, Michaeli relates further ramifications of the Walker case. For instance, two southern private investigators traveled to Chicago to find out the name of the article's author from the *Defender*'s editor. Later, the authorities captured Walker, and sentenced him to death by hanging. This prompted the NAACP to concern itself with the case because it regarded his execution as lynching.

Another article in the *Defender*, written by editor Robert Abbott, denounced systematic racism on southern trains. Abbott related his experience of discrimination on what he calls “the Hog Train.” He described how a train conductor changed his manners and language the moment he changed from the ‘white‘ car to the ‘colored‘ car. “There the race sits at his mercy, the men less than man, and the poor women in ghastly, whispering, trembling fear.”<sup>47</sup>

Abbott strongly criticized the practice of “equal but separate accommodation” he encountered at a ‘colored‘ waiting room clearly inferior to its white counterpart: “It was built as a looking glass for the Race – they must always see themselves as they really are in the grand scheme of slavery and cotton: forsaken, despised, cowardly, neglected – the refuse of American civilization.”<sup>48</sup>

In conclusion, Abbott described the “Hog Train” as a metaphor of discrimination all over American society. He called for the end of segregation, pointing out how it is opposed to the ideal of the “land of the free and the home of the brave.” Interestingly, Abbott attached to his article an open letter he sent to a congressman and a senator, calling for the abolition of Jim Crow Laws. This is probably to prove to the audience his efforts for African American advancement. I regard this as evidence for the activist editorial policy he developed to set himself apart from his competitors.

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<sup>47</sup> Robert S. Abbott, „Riding the Hog Train,“ *Chicago Defender*, Feb. 28, 1920.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

## 4.2 The Narrative of the Promised Land

Since the time of slavery, it was an African American religious tradition to regard the North as a Promised Land. Frederick Douglass compared the North to the biblical Canaan, which the Israelites had occupied after their exodus from Egypt. Harriet Tubman, who led slaves north, received the moniker “the Moses of her people.”<sup>49</sup> Based on the collective memory of slavery, many African Americans viewed the Great Migration as a providential event.<sup>50</sup>

Capitalizing on this tradition, the *Chicago Defender* joined in the choir. Yet, it did not promote migration right from the beginning of the movement. According to Ethan Michaeli, the *Defender* encouraged migrating not before 1915, as there were not many jobs available for African Americans in the North. This was due to unions who refused to admit African Americans.<sup>51</sup> In 1916, first reports of black people migrating North were printed in the *Defender*.<sup>52</sup> As more and more people boarded trains to Northern cities, the *Defender* began to embrace and encourage the movement.<sup>53</sup> An editorial from October 1916, titled “Farewell, Dixie Land,” captured this new activist editorial stance:

Every black man for the sake of his wife and daughters should leave even at a financial sacrifice every spot in the south where his worth is not appreciated enough to give him the standing of a man and a citizen in the community. We know full well that this would almost mean a depopulation of that section and if it were possible we would glory in its accomplishment.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Sernett, *Promised Land*, p. 60.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Michaeli, *The Defender*, p. 62–63.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>54</sup> „Farewell, Dixie Land,“ *Chicago Defender*, Oct. 7, 1916. Quoted in Michaeli, *The Defender*, p. 66.

Robert Abbott, the editor of the *Defender*, even tried to start a massive, singular exodus from the South, titled the “Great Northern Drive.”<sup>55</sup> The newspaper encouraged readers to move North together on May 15, 1917. According to the *Defender*, “[t]he maltreatment of the whites toward members of the Race is the sole cause of the exodus.”<sup>56</sup> It is striking that the *Defender* used religious language to promote migration, for example citing god and “His Providence.” While the planned mass migration on one particular day did not actually materialize, according to Sernett, the *Defender* continued to advocate for migration.<sup>57</sup>

Michaeli argues that cases of crimes against African Americans in the South motivated Robert Abbott’s campaign for migration because it allowed him to accomplish two goals: to hurt the white South and to give African Americans an opportunity to live in freedom.<sup>58</sup>

One of the most striking images of the exodus narrative in the *Defender* is its title page from September 2, 1916. Under the headline “The Exodus,” the paper showed a photo of African Americans gathering at the train tracks on the outskirts of Savannah, Georgia. According to the *Defender*, they were “leaving by the thousands.” Furthermore, the text explained that the migration of African Americans to the North “has caused much alarm among the Southern whites, who have failed to treat them decent [sic!].”<sup>59</sup>

An important part of the exodus narrative was to depict Chicago as a “black metropolis.” Because so many African Americans migrated there, the city became a new black cultural center. To people already living in Chicago, newspapers were “key

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<sup>55</sup> “Northern Drive to Start,” *Chicago Defender*, Feb. 10, 1917. Sernett, *Promised Land*, p. 42.

<sup>56</sup> „Northern Drive to Start,” *Chicago Defender*, Feb. 10, 1917.

<sup>57</sup> Sernett, *Promised Land*, p. 42.

<sup>58</sup> Michaeli, *The Defender*, p. 65.

<sup>59</sup> “The Exodus,” *Chicago Defender*, Sep. 2, 1916.



instruments of urban enticement and instruction in navigating the leisure and labor opportunities in the city.”<sup>60</sup> The *Chicago Defender*, for example, praised Chicago’s attractions, like the Stroll, an amusement and business district with saloons and dance clubs.<sup>61</sup> To readers in the South, such reports must have created the image of utopian urban life in the North.

However, Baldwin argues that the narrative of a strong contrast between the rural, primitive South and the glamorous North did not completely ring true. For example, most southern migrants did not come from farms in rural areas – instead, the majority had lived in urban conditions before and had work experience in different industries.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, black entertainment districts like the Stroll in Chicago were not a particularly northern thing, but “part of a larger circuit of city strips, strolls, and jukes,” among them southern cities like New Orleans, Memphis, and Atlanta.

Interestingly, the *Defender* did not only praise urban life in the North. In an article titled “Michigan is Fertile State for Migrants,” it encouraged people to seek jobs in agricultural areas instead of industrial centers. Using flourished language, the article described “the joys of farm life.”

It pointed out that in Michigan, African Americans could own land right next to the farms of white people, which assured them “a better and brighter future for themselves and their children.” The anonymous author enthused about “fields of waving grain and golden tasseled corn, the herds of placid, well fed cattle.”<sup>63</sup>

In a nutshell, the *Defender* recognized how badly many African Americans regarded the South and presented to them the northern states as a new home.

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<sup>60</sup> Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes*, p. 36.

<sup>61</sup> Sernett, *Promised Land*, p. 155.

<sup>62</sup> Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes*, p. 38–39.

<sup>63</sup> “Michigan is Fertile State for Migrants,” *Chicago Defender*, Sep. 10, 1927.

Using religious language, the paper promised migrants a utopian life, whether they came to the cities or to the countryside.

### 4.3 Practical Advice for Migrants

Northern newspapers did not only advocate for migration, but they also worked as practical guides for African Americans planning to move. For instance, the *Chicago Defender* encouraged forming migrant clubs and organized group discounts at the Illinois Central railroad.<sup>64</sup> Due to its strong circulation and many job advertisements, the *Chicago Defender* became a guide for many southern blacks.<sup>65</sup>

One article in the *Defender* advised southern migrants on how to blend in with their new environment. The advice mainly concerned practical things, such as dress codes: “Be just as particular about your ordinary street attire as you are about your Sunday church dress. Do not appear on streets in house slippers, boudoir caps and aprons.”<sup>66</sup> Other topics were behavior in public and respect towards the rules of the community. The article also discouraged migrants from picking “fights with the northern white man,” as “[he] is not to blame for injustices received by you in the South.”<sup>67</sup>

In addition to that, one *Defender* article directed itself at northern African Americans. Citing the Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” the article urges them to guide arriving migrants.<sup>68</sup> They should tell Southerners how to “withstand the rigory of the northern climate,” but also about the different work

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<sup>64</sup> Sernett, *Promised Land*, p. 42.

<sup>65</sup> Simmons, *African American Press*, p. 33.

<sup>66</sup> „Advice to Migrants,” *Chicago Defender*, May 9, 1925.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> “Still They Come,” *Chicago Defender*, Feb. 10, 1917.

ethnic they had to show in the North. Furthermore, the article points to churches, the Y.M.C.A., and other organizations that offered support for incoming migrants.<sup>69</sup>

Although the *Defender* was generally in favor of migration, it discouraged people from moving without thinking critically. One article, titled “Only Industrious [sic!] Laborers Wanted North and West,” tried to debunk some migrants’ false hopes for a Promised Land.<sup>70</sup> The article warned about fake employment agencies who lured “poor dupes” to the North without actually offering jobs. As a result, the article informed, many African Americans became unemployed, dependent on public welfare, and finally had to go back to the South. According to the article, the “Promised Land” of the North “is now a cold, bleak region in which there are many idle.”<sup>71</sup>

Similarly, an article from 1917 warned people about self-proclaimed railroad agents who collected money from prospective migrants. These agents told people about a special train connected to the “Great Northern Drive” planned for one particular day. However, according to the article, “no one has any authority to collect money from those who expect to leave.”<sup>72</sup>

Apparently, the *Defender* did not spread an unquestioning narrative of euphoria, but also focused on negative aspects of migration. While it generally encouraged people to migrate, it also advised people to plan their move well in order to actually find employment and not to be taken in by frauds.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ralph W. Tyler, “Only Industrious Laborers Wanted North and West,” *Chicago Defender*, Jan. 20, 1917.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> “Pay No Money to Agents,” *Chicago Defender*, May 12, 1917.

## 5. Conclusion

The *Chicago Defender* was a powerful force in convincing African Americans from the South to migrate. Based in one of the most attractive cities in the North, it seized the opportunity to reach a broad audience across the entire American South. Because of its focus on migrant readers, it could increase its circulation significantly.

The *Defender* used an innovative journalism and marketing strategy to appeal to a mass audience. By catering to traveling African Americans' interests, it convinced them to spread the paper across a large area. It is worth noting that the *Defender* did not actually start the Great Migration. At first, the paper only reported on people leaving the South, and later jumped on the bandwagon. Although its attempt to start a "Great Northern Drive" failed, the *Defender* was one of the most important resources migrants had at the time.

It would be interesting to research the *Chicago Defender's* actual impact on people's choice to migrate. To me, a quantitative content analysis seems promising. By measuring the number of pro-migration messages in the paper during a certain timeframe, researchers could find out when the peak times of the campaign for migration were. In a second step, they could compare these peaks with statistics of migrants. If the *Defender's* coverage had a significant impact, the number of migrants should be higher during such periods in cities with a larger circulation of the paper.

While I did not focus on the impact of the pro-migration campaign, my paper provided an overview about the main narratives the *Defender* published. The *Defender* did not only advocate for migration by telling about the horrors of the South and the advantages of the North.

It also provided migrants with practical advice on their new life: where to go exactly, how to behave, and what to wear. However, the *Defender* also cautioned

against fraudulent labor agents who tried to lure Southerners to the North without actually providing them with jobs. Thus, the paper seemed to consider problems of migration as well.

In conclusion, the *Defender's* coverage of the Great Migration was not one-sided, as one could assume. There are several articles in which the *Defender* went against clichés. For instance, it advised migrants to seek agricultural jobs in the countryside at a time when many people dreamed of living in a metropolitan city like Chicago. Also, the paper cautioned people against blindly believing labor agents who lured Southerners with empty promises. The *Chicago Defender* promoted migration, but reason and diligence as well.

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