

Black migration beyond states and borders

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Migration is a central part of *The Nation on No Map*. Spending time organizing in the immigrant rights movement shaped my thinking around citizenship, Blackness and movement. For years, I observed the fact that Black people were doubly erased within the spaces I frequented. I cannot stress enough that there are two key insights that I hope people will take away from this text. One is that Black people are not regarded as true citizens of the United States, the other is that we are also not recognized as non-citizens (undocumented) in immigrant rights spaces. We experience a unique statelessness that is not restricted to Black people within the confines of US borders.

For those like me, who were born in the US and are descended from enslaved Africans, I think it is of the utmost importance that we connect ourselves to global migration struggles. Although we hear about the *multiple* Great Migrations forced on Black America, this history is treated as disconnected from the current migrations of the larger African diaspora. Recent events at the southern US border and beyond show why it is necessary to challenge this.

At a time when Black nativist elements and liberal Black patriotism projects are gaining significant ground, we have seen record deportations and detainment inflicted by the state. The first Black president broke previous records for deportations which happen to disproportionately target Black migrants, immigrants and refugees. So it is not exactly surprising to see images of Haitians being whipped and brutalized by Border Patrol. Deadly violence and racism is their standard. However, those disturbing images, which for many invoked references to slavery and overseers, should help us understand the intricacies of migration throughout the African diaspora. Black people in the Americas have been forced to relocate through slave trading, domestic migrations and now through gentrification and displacement.

Black people in the US, despite having been here for generations, still experience statelessness and suffer from the precarity that comes with it. Those of us who experience the limitations of citizenship every day should stand in solidarity with and struggle alongside those who – on paper – fall outside of this category. Black America has never been protected by citizenship or borders. We are a part of a global, endless search for home and safety, which, I believe, calls into question the legitimacy of the nation-state apparatus.

There is no easy place to run to and states that are nominally anti-imperialist or state-socialist projects do not guarantee a safe haven. Black history tells us as much, so trying to repeatedly build up new nations and new states to actualize liberation is part of what I am writing against.

Nations and states and preoccupation with state authority offer us no guarantees, and the stale leftist dogmas that assume they do are not saving the lives of Black people drowning in the seas, trekking across deserts and knocking on the bordergates. I am not interested in pre-fixed narratives that patriotically romanticize states, fetishize governments and stir up wishful leftisms that keep people invested in old orthodoxies. There is too much death, too much inconsistency and too much contradiction to continue clinging to such limitations.

It will take a complete transcendence and break from the way our struggles currently are to see them overturned to what they could be. Black anarchism taught me this. It did not do so by positioning itself as some ultimate ideological authority, but instead, it led me to question more. This type of honesty is no small thing when even supposedly radical spaces and movements marginalize people who dare challenge those in leadership.

It is past time to listen to those who have been overlooked, ignored and purged for daring to speak up. People are fighting to have somewhere to rest and lay their head and feed their family. This ongoing disaster tells us that solidarity also means we must think beyond borders, beyond the state and beyond all of the weapons of governance that have brought us to this point. Not only do these violent formations *create* crises, they *are* the crisis.

The great return

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Since the past shapes our perception of the world around us, seeing the continuum helps us as we encounter everything that is wrong now. When we critically examine the narratives we have internalized, we are better equipped for the troubling present day. There are predicaments in front of us related to movement, environment and the state that demand an unflinching, radical honesty in this regard. We cannot deceive ourselves about where we are coming from in order to get where we need to go. And it is the act of going or moving that I hope to address here.

The question of Black citizenship is intricately linked to the struggle of migrants, immigrants, refugees, the undocumented and other precarious classifications. In the US, migration is usually associated with people from South and Central America living in the US, particularly those who are not Black. Common perceptions of immigration have excluded Black people for a number of reasons. Among those is the fact that Black people are discriminated against even in immigrant rights movements. We are erased from migrant and immigrant narratives much like we are erased from the citizen category.

Black family histories contain many stories of kin fleeing the South to avoid the terror of white violence. The Great Migration, as we know it, the endless movement of Black Americans around the country seeking jobs, safety and other resources, is something Black anarchism can diagnose as an important aspect of our struggle. Black people had to shed fears of borders, challenge ideas of place and practice mutual aid to survive unknown landscapes. Zora Neale Hurston offers a relevant portrait of the Black migrant in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:

Day by day now, the hordes of workers poured in. Some came limping in with their shoes and sore feet from walking. It's hard trying to follow your shoe instead of your shoe following you. They came in wagons from way up in Georgia and they came in

truck loads from east, west, north and south. Permanent transients with no attachments and tired looking men with their families and dogs in flivvers. All night, all day, hurrying in to pick beans. Skillets, beds, patched up spare inner tubes all hanging and dangling from the ancient cars on the outside and hopeful humanity, herded and hovered on the inside, chugging on to the muck. People ugly from ignorance and broken from being poor. All night now the jooks clanged and clamored. Pianos living three lifetimes in one. Blues made and used right on the spot. Dancing, fighting, singing, crying, laughing, winning and losing love every hour. Work all day for money, fight all night for love. The rich black earth clinging to bodies and biting the skin like ants.

Black migrants were working to meet the demands of a capitalist country that did not consider them actual citizens. People traveled and fled, like they do now, because they had no choice. Their goals and hopes for themselves *required* movement. This consistently involuntary movement has rarely been seen as a migration struggle. Black people and our constant relocations are being erased from dominant narratives in the United States, rendering us neither citizen nor noncitizen, highlighting alienation and perpetual displacement under both classifications. Significantly, this is continuing under the violence we know as “gentrification.”

Black people are being displaced, upended and expelled from places we have long known as home. Many of us are being forced to find new places that are more affordable and reasonable in order to build safe and happy lives. In this context, it is important that we recall the Black histories of movement and build solidarity with those being forced to move across the diaspora.

Forced relocation defines Black existence across the Americas. There is a direct line from Black people being forced onto plantations as property to today’s experiences of being unsettled and repeatedly relocated. Africans being transported for the purposes of slavery entered the US through the Old South before the country began its rapid, violent expansion. A large forced migration of Black people happened between the Old South (Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia) and the New South based on the shifting demands of agriculture, new crops and labor. Black movement to California between 1850 and 1860 established the first English-speaking Black communities out west and marked another significant movement (forced and otherwise) of Black people.

Following the Civil War and “emancipation,” Black people trying to make a life in the period of Reconstruction were met with heinous violence. As W. E. B. Du Bois writes in *Black Reconstruction*, “The result of the war left four million human beings just as valuable for the production of cotton and sugar as they had been before the war.” White supremacy, unbroken by war but perturbed and resentful in the South, exercised vengeance on the lives of Black people trying to survive as best they knew how. It reformed itself through updated imprisoning mechanisms and violent authoritarian surveillance and policing that we still live with today. The trauma brought on by ceaseless white terror was the only inheritance many were promised for their grueling labor. So, many had to flee the South.

What is popularly known as the Great Migration took place between the early 20th century and the 1970s. However, we would do well to understand it never truly stopped. This movement of Black migrants hoping to find better lives free from oppression and economic exploitation transformed the country. Documenting her own family history and movement in her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Christina Sharpe explains, that relocation is not exclusive to Black people in the United States nor did it satisfy hopes for freedom:

This, of course, is not wholly, or even largely, a Black US phenomenon. This kind of movement happens all over the Black diaspora from and in the Caribbean and the continent to the metropole, the US great migrations of the early to mid-twentieth century that saw millions of Black people moving from the South to the North, and those people on the move in the contemporary from points all over the African continent to other points on the continent and also to Germany, Greece, Lampedusa. Like many of these Black people on the move, my parents discovered that things were not better in this 'new world': the subjections of constant and overt racism and isolation continued.

That hope for a better life, however marred by the reality of Black existence, has everything to do with what we are experiencing today. Black people's lives regularly face disruption around the planet, no matter where we're located. Within the US borders, this means moving around domestically, while Black people from outside the country regularly try to enter; both are seeking safety and stability. As we move around within and between nations, crossing borders, hoping to secure a home, we are bound to exclusion based on our history. Creating our own false narratives has not granted us true inclusion in categories like citizenship or provided any sort of liberation. Tales of being selfless patriots who made America great, just like tales of being descendants of kings and queens, have not overcome this. Nor has any self-aggrandizing revolutionary leftist ideology.

Black people are kept outside the categories that other people see as basic rights. Nations and societies declare us unfit, undeserving and unaccepted. The violence historically levied against us extends to forcible displacement from our homes and our roots. Black people in the US and throughout the world experience the extraordinary brutality of being people with no place on the map. And many of the paths people look to for liberation offer us nothing.

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despite common perceptions that exclude Black people from migrant struggles today.

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