Chapter 9 A Tale of Two “Black Belts,” 1916-1919

The world’s war has proved a blessing to us. The shutting down of immigration, due to the war, has created a demand for our labor . . . [and since] we need an opportunity to earn our bread and to protect our homes as other men . . . our only hope is to leave that country [the South ] at once for a better land.

“World’s Great War a Mighty Blessing,” Chicago Defender, August 5, 1916

Chicago, the metropolis of the West, remembered in the South since the World’s Fair as a far-away city of hope from which come all great things . . . attracted all types of men, brought them in, encouraged them and cared for them because it needed them.

Emmett J.Scott, Negro Migration During The War (1920)

“the years since the first impact of the migration of the black peasantry have served to bridge the cultural gap between the migrant and his fellow citizens. The degree of difference each day grows less.”

E.Franklin Frazier, Opportunity, 1929

The opening phase of the massive, three-year migration of one-half of a million African Americans from the South to the North gained official recognition through federal records and newspaper accounts by 1916. As a matter of fact, thousands had preceded this wave of predominantly workers in 1915 alone as the First World War in Europe began to affect American wartime production. For Chicago in particular and in historical perspective, the migratory process raised the question of how well or poorly the city’s extant population of 58,056 African Americans and the flood of 51,538 newcomers interacted during the war years and immediately afterward.[[1]](#endnote-1) The extent to which the populations of these two movements either clashed, existed oblivious to one another, disturbed the status quo, or as argued here, melded, represents the focal point of comprehensive historical examination. The latter course of action explained most logically the relationship, serving as one of the necessary conditions that allowed for the attainment of the “Dream of a Black Metropolis” in the next decade. Appropriately placing the Great Migration in a usable historical perspective required consideration of past, contemporary and future intra group relations to reach a clarification of the question. Significantly, in and of itself the Great Migration constituted an important story worth telling, however, in full historical context and treated as a major stimulus to change over time it rises to become a highly momentous event.

Inside the Black Community

The character of the African American community as seen through its humanity as well as its environmental dimensions differed in actuality from that offered in the academic imagination several generations in the future. Contemporarily, the collective mind set exhibited within the ranks of 58,056 African Americans already living in the city before 1916 partly contributed to the melding of the two populations. Their attitudes, values and behavior combined with recognition of a shared cultural heritage to produce a unified people aptly expressed in their highly recognized racial consciousness. By in large, they laid claim to a satisfactory level of acculturation and adjustment to city living equal to the experience of the generation of the fire and the fair, the so-called Old Settlers. This latter group, to reiterate, numbered and approximated the 15,000 persons who resided in Chicago in census year 1890. The increase in this black residential universe to 44,000 souls by 1900 came about because of the magnetism of the 1893 world’s fair, anticipated employment opportunities, the threat of a racial massacre in New Orleans, and the general attractiveness the popular image of Chicago impressed on the African American psyche.

1. CCRR, 79. This work delineates the period as 1917-1918, rather than 1916-1918. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)