

Status Symbols, and the Difficulty of Getting Them

Due to the violent racism in the American South, as well as new job prospects in the North, many African American citizens moved to the North from the South in the movement known as the Great Migration. Migrants were met with criticisms from all sides. Northerners believed this new flow of migrants would take all of the jobs they would otherwise have, and many white northerners even held the same racial views as their southern counterparts. Migrants were also met by criticism from southerners. The southern whites did not want their cheap labor moving north, while the southern African Americans saw the migrants as people who gave up on the south and followed a false idol in the north. Migrants found themselves trying to gain prestige and prove themselves in the North, using various status symbols to show their family and friends that they had made the right choice. Migrants used housing, education, automobiles, and other items to advertise their status and attempt to gain some form of equality.

For migrants, finding housing was more difficult than they expected. Many neighborhoods in northern cities had restrictive covenants which would only allow homes to be sold to white owners. Northern destination cities quickly became segregated. African Americans would buy houses on certain sides of the city, while the white residents would buy houses in other parts. However, as more migrants flooded in, these borders would be tested. When finding a desirable house, some migrants would end up buying properties that were located in the white side of a city. When these migrants bought a house in a white neighborhood, they were met with violence and protest. In *The Warmth of Other Suns*, Dr. Beck, a much older acquaintance of Robert Joseph Pershing Foster, moved to Los Angeles only to find the house he had found was under a restrictive covenant. Though Dr. Beck would win the lawsuit to live in this home, he would find one of the palm trees in his yard had been set on fire the night he moved in. Not only

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did they set the tree on fire, but Wilkerson writes, “The white people emptied out of the block

within months.”¹ This phenomenon was known as “white flight”, where the whites in a neighborhood left once a black resident moved in. Realtors would capitalize on white racist fear, since the white owners would sell their houses cheap and the realtors could charge the incoming African American buyers more than the property was worth.

The housing practices used in the North would lead to decades of segregation in Northern housing. Despite segregation being law in the South for many years, it is now northern cities which are the most segregated, particularly those which were hotspots for the Great Migration. One of these such areas is the city of Milwaukee, in Wisconsin. Milwaukee is one of the most segregated cities in the US as of 2017. Most of the black population lives in the inner parts of the city, while the majority of the white population lives on the outer parts of the city. The segregation most certainly is not equal either, with 59 percent of blacks living in poor areas of the city compared with only 6 percent of whites.² This is a direct effect of “white flight”, as the white population moved out into the suburbs of the cities. With them, much of the wealth in the area left as well. Since migrants generally could only bring a few items with them when fleeing the south, most of them came without much wealth to dispose of immediately and expected to acquire that wealth through working in the north. Once whites moved out of the inner parts of the city, funding for those inner parts of the city dwindled. A migrant who decided to build a house on the white part of the neighborhood was met with the same hostility that many other migrants faced. He found that the constructed frame of his house was damaged, and fixed it. However, when he came back again, it was burned. To solve this problem, he “enlisted several friends to camp out with him at the construction site one evening, rifles in hand, ready to turn away

¹ Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 232

² Eligon and Gebeloff, “Affluent and Black, and Still Trapped by Segregation.”

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intruders.”³ This migrant was Zeddie Quitman Hyler, who built his house in 1955. Though the vandals did not return, this is a perfect example of the way northern whites attempted to keep their section of the city purely white.

Robert Joseph Pershing Foster in *The Warmth of Other Suns* exemplifies how the housing of migrants was an important status symbol. Creating the right image was crucial to Robert, to show his wife’s family he made the correct choice in moving there, as well to show his family back home. He also wanted to make a name for himself in Los Angeles, since he needed to start his own medical practice to work as a doctor and surgeon, something he was trained to do. When Robert migrated to Los Angeles, he was amazed by the houses in the city. However, was not able to get a nice house until his personal practice got more successful. When Robert was only able to get a small apartment for the family, Alice did not join any social clubs even though her status would have allowed her to. Wilkerson writes of her decision, “She wanted to wait to make her presence known until they could secure a house more befitting to her station.”⁴ Eighteen months later, Robert was finally able to use the success of his practice to purchase a house. The house he chose was a safe option, as there were already colored people living in the neighborhood.

Wilkerson writes of the situation, “Now Alice could finally join the Links and host her bridge parties and socials, and they could finally take up their rightful place, wherever it might lead them, in this bright new city of theirs.”⁵ This new house was the key to their acceptance into Los Angeles, and allowed them to be more accepted into the community. Housing was so difficult to secure for colored migrants that the home became an important symbol. Not only would a nice

³ Eligon and Gebeloff, “Affluent and Black, and Still Trapped by Segregation.”

⁴ Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 299.

⁵ Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 331.

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home dazzle various visitors from the South or the North, it would also serve as a foothold for them in the North. It was a place migrants could feel familiar with in the unfamiliar North.

Schooling available for a particular area also has a large effect on housing prices, as well as the poverty of the area. House prices will generally be lower in an area with poor schooling. Realtors use the quality of the schools in an area to skew buyers in a certain direction. A study completed by the Nation Fair Housing Alliance showed that 87 percent of sales they sampled were skewed not only by the school quality, but by race using school quality. The report says, "It is evident from the investigation that schools have become a proxy for racial or ethnic composition of neighborhoods."⁶ Realtors would tell white people one school is of poor quality, and then turn around and tell a person of color that the same school is good quality. This makes finding a proper home as a colored person much more difficult, as the realtor is not giving accurate information. The racial bias of realtors on schooling causes a trap for colored people. The realtors become architects of entire areas that have poor status, as opposed to just individual status. This then traps the buyer because, if they cannot afford to move to a nicer neighborhood, their children will receive poor schooling. If their children receive poor schooling, they are likely to end up living in a poor area just like their parents.

The skewing of the schooling lines is not a small epidemic either; it spans the entire nation, including many major cities in the North. According to Fault Lines: America's Most Segregating School District Borders, certain school districts which are right next to each other have wealth disparities as large as 100,000 dollars for average monthly income. Average property value differences are nearly as large as 200,000 dollars in some areas.⁷ Only 1 southern state, Alabama, is on the list as one of the schooling districts with the largest wealth disparities.

⁶ Yoshinaga and Kamenetz, "Race, School Rating and Real Estate: A 'Legal Gray Area'."

⁷ "Fault Lines: 50 Most Segregating Borders in the Country"

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The rest were all northern cities, which also demonstrates the segregation that is still occurring as it did when the migrants left years ago. These areas are enforcing a racial border on their community using the schooling districts.

Schooling was another status symbol that migrants used. Though they were forced into segregated, unequal schools in the South, many of the migrants coming to the North were well educated. Some of them even attended colleges in the South. Though they would develop an incorrect stereotype of being poorly educated, the migrants who came to the North were actually more educated than those who remained in the South as well as those in the North. Wilkerson discusses a study done concerning the education level of migrants, which states “Indeed, in educational attainment, Negro in-migrants to northern cities were equal to or slightly higher than the resident white population.”⁸ This education separated them from other residents, both whites who felt threatened by their education and colored people who already lived in the cities, who generally had a lower amount of education. Even in the South, many of those who were colored and sought education were not trusted by their fellow workers, who did not understand the purpose in spending extra time to get more schooling that could be spent on work.

The education level of those involved in the Great Migration allowed many of them to achieve more success than they otherwise would have. Though they would still encounter racial blocks similar to those in the South, they would be in slightly better positions. Though, it should be noted that in order to get to these higher positions it required far more work than was required by their white counterparts. In a briefing paper written by Algernon Austin at the Economic Policy Institute, he writes that there is still currently separation in job type by race, which is causing the racial wage gap. Austin writes, “The most plausible explanation we find is that labor

⁸ Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 262.

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market discrimination excludes many black men from high- wage jobs.”⁹ Migrants faced the

same problem. When they came to the North, well-educated and ready to work, they were often denied work anyway. Though, their education would always separate them from the uneducated, black of white, even if the Northern employers did not see it.

One example of the difference education made for migrants is in the different stories of George Swanson Starling and Robert Joseph Pershing Foster in Isabel Wilkerson’s *The Warmth of Other Suns*. George, though a smart man, would only be able to complete two years of college before being called back home by his father to begin working. His father and the fruit pickers he worked with did not see the purpose in George going to school. They saw it as a waste of time and money, and could not see that this new education would actually raise George’s status in society and allow him better opportunities to work. George would work on the train lines, and though he applied for higher positions, the rail company never gave him any. Robert’s story is far different, being the son of a school principal and completing college, Robert would make more money running his own practice and eventually becoming a surgeon at the hospital in Los Angeles. Though, both Robert and George experienced the same block to advance their careers in the North. Before Robert would be able to become wealthy, he would be forced to do simple check-ups and collect urine samples. Regardless, Robert had a higher status than George. Robert was wealthier, and had more status symbols, such as his home. Robert also had a better location to expose his children to, which allowed them to get a better education in a more stable home and go off to college themselves. George’s children would succumb to the dangers of the city, particularly drugs. George’s family was stuck in the trap of poverty, even though George had gone North and worked constantly to give his family a better life. George never had the

⁹ Algernon Austin, “Whiter Jobs, Higher Wages.”

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opportunity to use his mind on an occupation like Robert did, and it completely changed his life for the worse. Education is similar to money in that, it contains status and allows the owner of it to acquire more status.

Another status symbol for migrants was their car. While they were not outright banned from purchasing expensive cars in the South, it would generally be seen as out of place by southern whites. When Robert couldn't afford to buy a better house when Alice and the family arrived, he looked for something else to show off status. He decided to upgrade from the Buick he drove to Los Angeles and buy a new Cadillac, which at the time was still a very prestigious brand. However, even in the North he would find it difficult to purchase the car. Not because of the money, but because the dealership insisted on showing him used cars instead. It seemed unfathomable that a colored person would buy a new model of one of their cars. After Robert complained to General Motors, the company that owns the Cadillac brand, he would finally be able to get a new model. Wilkerson writes of his experience, "Some people from Monroe thought the car pretentious and over the top... But just putting the key in the ignition made him feel like he had moved up in the world."¹⁰ Just like any other status symbol, this one would be judged by his former neighbors. Like how George's father did not see a reason for him to get more education, Robert's former neighbors did not see a purpose in buying an expensive, fancy car. However, Robert needed that car. It gave him more status when he couldn't find much else to give himself more status. Ida Mae Brandon Gladney would have a similar situation with her car. Whenever she would visit Mississippi, she would make sure to wash her so that all of the chrome shined properly, and the car would not show the signs of being driven so far.

¹⁰ Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 300.

Something more personal that migrants used for status was attire. In the South, many of the colored people would have to make their own clothes, and those who didn't certainly did not dress to fancily to attract attention. Robert would again display how many migrants used their clothing to show their status, and separate themselves from the old ways of the South. He would pay special attention to how his wife dressed on every occasion, so much so that he himself was picking dresses for her. Wilkerson write that "Those gowns got people talking, and it was exactly what he wanted to hear: *Foster, you dress your women well.*"¹¹ The clothing his family was wearing would help bring up his status, as well as theirs.

Attire made a world of difference in social gatherings, such as parties. Parties were also a chance to show off property and wealth. Buying fancy food and drinks, decorating, as well as sending out fancy invitations were all ways to show status at a party. Robert's birthday party, though it would be criticized for being over the top like his Cadillac, would exemplify many of the status symbols used by migrants to try to reach high status that was barred from them by racism. Robert would make sure everything was perfect for his special birthday party. He would decorate the house, and pay workers to help him set up. For his attire, Wilkerson writes "He was the star and would have to look it... So that's what he would wear. Black crushed velvet suit."¹² Robert would dress himself and his family up as much as possible. Before the party, Robert was incredibly stressed about it. He had to make a good impression for the entire party, as many of his guests were among the most respected in the colored community. Robert would experience a similar situation in Las Vegas, when he finally was able to get a Hotel room through Jimmy Gay. Gay was able to get colored people Hotel rooms in the city which normally did not rent any to colored people. All of those who went with Robert overpacked and brought more clothes than

¹¹ Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 403.

¹² Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 425.

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were needed for the trip. However, it would be a chance to show off their wealth to the

community there. It was also a chance for Robert to finally fit in more with his white coworkers in Los Angeles, who went gambling on weekend regularly.

Migrants also showed off their status to those back in the South by sending sums of money back to them, even if they couldn't safely afford to send that much. These sums of money were more of a way to prove that they had made the right decision to leave the South, and made others back home believe that it was actually better in the North. Money in this sense was not the medium to get status symbols, but was a status symbol itself. It showed that the migrant had enough to send back home, which means they were successful. Presumably, more successful than they otherwise would have been in the South.

The status symbols used by migrants of the Great Migration were difficult to achieve, even for those who seemed wholly prepared for life in the North. Many of the migrants found themselves in similar situations to the South, though less dangerous. Migrants would move into white areas and place footholds in the North, and buy fancy cars to show off their success. These status symbols would bring them closer to equality, but colored migrants would still face racism in much of their daily lives. Housing segregation would take a tight grip in Northern cities, though the schools would be desegregated. Though, even with the schools desegregated, many of the school district lines would effectively produce the same segregation as in the South. The history of under the rug racism in the North would be combatted with the status of the new migrants, but the battle for equality was never truly won.

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