The Migration of the Negroes
by W.E.B. Du Bois

Much has been written of the recent migration of colored people from the South to the North, but there have been very few attempts to give a definite, coherent picture of the whole movement. Aided by the funds of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, The Crisis has attempted to put into concrete form such knowledge as we have of this movement.

The data at hand are vague and have been collected from a hundred different sources. While the margin of error is large, the actual information which we have gathered is most valuable.

First, as to the number who have migrated to the North, there is wide difference of opinion. Our own conclusion is that about 250,000 colored workmen have come northward....

As to the reasons of the migration, undoubtedly, the immediate cause was economic, and the movement began because of floods in middle Alabama and Mississippi and because the latest devastation of the boll weevil came in these same districts.

A second economic cause was the cutting off of immigration from Europe to the North and the consequently wide-spread demand for common labor. The U.S. Department of Labor writes:

“A representative of this department has made an investigation in regard thereto, but a report has not been printed for general distribution. It may be stated, however, that most of the help imported from the South has been employed by railroad companies, packing houses, foundries, factories, automobile plants, in the northern states as far west as Nebraska. At the present time the U.S. Employment Service is not co-operating in the direction of Negro help to the north.”

The third reason has been outbreaks of mob violence in northern and southwestern Georgia and in western South Carolina.

These have been the three immediate causes, but back of them is, undoubtedly, the general dissatisfaction with the conditions in the South....

A widely-traveled and intelligent colored man writes:

“I recently made a trip through the South as far down as New Orleans, La., and I saw hundreds who were making their way northward. When in New Orleans, I learned that there were about 800 in the city from the inland district waiting to go, and who expected to leave during the next week. I went with a friend down where I could meet some of the leaders and talk with them. I met them, and they informed me that they were willing to go anywhere rather than continue to live like they had been. These were heading toward Chicago. I was shocked at the statement made by some of them as to how they lived on those big inland farms, and how badly they were treated by the whites. Many of these men were in overalls. I told them that they were unprepared for the climate; but they were willing to run any risk to get where they might breathe freer. Who blames them?”

W.E.B. Du Bois

Founded in 1910 by W.E.B. Du Bois, The Crisis was the official magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and was published monthly until 2003. Du Bois’s objective in printing the journal was, as he explained, “to set forth those facts and arguments which show the danger of race prejudice, particularly as manifested today toward colored people.” The journal served primarily as a news and current affairs publication, but also regularly included poetry and prose essays.

Primary Source 34
It is interesting to note that this migration is apparently a mass movement and not a movement of the leaders. The wave of economic distress and social unrest has pushed past the conservative advice of the Negro preacher, teacher and professional man, and the colored laborers and artisans have determined to find a way for themselves. For instance, a colored Mississippi preacher says:

“The leaders of the race are powerless to prevent his going. They had nothing to do with it, and, indeed, all of them, for obvious reasons, are opposed to the exodus. The movement started without any head from the masses, and such movements are always significant.”

The character of the people who are going varies, of course, but as the Birmingham, Ala., Age-Herald remarks: “It is not the riff-raff of the race, the worthless Negroes, who are leaving in such large numbers. There are, to be sure, many poor Negroes among them who have little more than the clothes on their backs, but others have property and good positions which they are sacrificing in order to get away at the first opportunity.

“Various reasons are assigned for the migration of Negroes from the South to the North. It was believed for a while that they were lured away by the glowing reports of labor agents who promised high wages, easy work, and better living conditions. But there is something more behind their going, something that lies deeper than a temporary discontent and the wish to try a new environment merely for the sake of a free trip on the railroads….

“The entire Negro population of the South seems to be deeply affected. The fact that many Negroes who went north without sufficient funds and without clothing to keep them warm have suffered severely and have died in large numbers, has not checked the tide leaving the South. It was expected that the Negroes would come back, sorry that they ever left, but comparatively few have returned. With the approach of warmer weather the number going north will increase.”

How great this migration will eventually prove depends upon a number of things. The entrance of the United States into the war will undoubtedly have some effect. When the war ends it is doubtful if the labor shortage in Europe will allow a very large migration to the United States for a generation or more. This will mean increased demand for colored laborers in the North. A writer in the New York Evening Globe predicts that 1917 will see 400,000 of the better class of Negro workers come to the North.

At any rate, we face here a social change among American Negroes of great moment, and one which needs to be watched with intelligent interest.
Primary Source 34
The June 1917 issue of The Crisis featured this report by W.E.B. Du Bois titled “The Migration of the NEGROES,” which attempted to not only describe the Great Migration and its causes and effects, but also to outline the movement as a whole. Du Bois’s essay moves from economic and social causes of the migration to updated numbers and trends relating to migrants and their travel routes. Also included are compelling firsthand accounts by individual men and women describing their reasons for leaving the South. Du Bois concludes his essay, which was written at the outset of the Great Migration, with predictions and questions about the migrants’ futures and the possibilities for others following in their footsteps.

Teaching Tips
**Language Arts:** Written in 1917, Du Bois’s article addresses the Great Migration in terms of its causes and imagines the effects to come. Read the excerpt from Primary Source 34 and list both the causes and effects of the Great Migration. Then outline and write a five-paragraph compare-and-contrast essay. Include introduction and conclusion paragraphs and three main paragraphs with facts and figures from research to support the essay. Cite sources and include a bibliography.

**Language Arts/Visual Arts:** Du Bois’s article includes firsthand accounts of African Americans’ experiences and descriptions of the scale and impact of the Great Migration. Compare these personal accounts with the panels in Lawrence’s The Migration Series. Which panels could serve as illustrations of these firsthand narratives? Why?