HOW PROMISED LAND BECAME THE GHETTO

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Body

CHICAGO When I was growing up, "country" was about the worst thing anyone could call you in my neighborhood. "Country" people lacked manners. They did not put on clean clothes to go downtown. They avoided church and lived off welfare. But even our most disheveled country neighbors had their own reverse snobbery. "Proper," which they pronounced "proppah," ***became*** a putdown for those who took pains to speak correct English and comply with the other standards country people didn't seem to grasp. But while a rich diversity of lifestyles is presumed to thrive in most American ethnic communities, it is brushed over in accounts of African-American life in favor of underclass stereotypes. It was the roots of the underclass that Atlantic magazine's Nicholas Lemann pursued in his ambitious book, "The ***Promised Land***: The Great Black Migration and ***How*** It Changed America." Lemann believed they could be found in the immigrants who came from the rural South to black neighborhoods but failed to adjust to big-city life. Through personal profiles and key events, Lemann describes ***how*** America was changed by one of history's biggest mass movements, the migration of 6.5 million blacks from the rural South to the urban North and West between 1910 and 1970. He shows ***how*** dreams of better-paying jobs in the seemingly egalitarian North were crushed for many by Northern racism, which deprived most blacks of equal pay and kept them out of trade unions and white neighborhoods. Lemann also cuts away to Washington in a long and enlightening chapter to discuss the successes and failures of anti-poverty policy in the 1960s.

An excellent companion work, "There Are No Children Here," by The Wall Street Journal's Alex Kotlowitz, puts us into the lives of the end products of Lemann's migration - inner-city children. "To be born into a ***ghetto*** is to be consigned to a fate that no American should have to suffer," says Lemann. "The more clearly we can be made to see that and to understand the causes of the situation, the less likely it is that we will let it stand." In spite of popular wisdom, Lemann points out, a number of War on Poverty programs, particularly Head Start and Job Corps, did succeed. Unfortunately, they are underfunded, reaching only a fraction of the young people who need them. And, as Kotlowitz shows, recent pilot projects to clean up public housing ***ghettos*** have worked well, too, earning high praise from the Bush administration but precious little money. But as much as I believe government must do more to break the cycles of poverty, there also is much that we, the more fortunate products of the black migration, need to do to bridge the gaps between the "country" people and the "proppah-speaking" folks in our own communities. Kotlowitz offers a bright example when he admits that he is using proceeds from his book to enroll two boys in a private, black-run high school. Whether his book makes a difference in poverty or not, at least Kotlowitz will be able to say he made a difference. It may not change the world, but it's a start.

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