

Fraser, Max. *Hillbilly Highway: The Transappalachian Migration and the Making of a White Working Class*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023. 320 pages. Hardcover. \$32.00

In *Hillbilly Highway*, Max Fraser presents a remarkable examination of twentieth Century America. The Great Migration of Black southerners to cities in the Northeast, Midwest, and West from 1916 to 1970, much like the exodus of “Okies” from Oklahoma to California during the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, has been the subject of numerous academic and popular studies. Internal migrations, indeed, raise important issues and themes in U.S. history. Fraser, a professor of history at the University of Miami, contributes to this literature by investigating the migration of Transappalachian whites to cities in the industrial Midwest, particularly Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio, in the decades before and after World War II.

This monograph features six chapters in addition to an introduction, a conclusion, and a rich set of endnotes. The thesis of *Hillbilly Highway* is that rural Transappalachian migrants from West Virginia to Georgia, North Carolina to Kentucky, and all points in between, “were at the center of many of the defining events of the period” (p. 10) from the early 1900s to the 1970s. A combination of factors led to these migrations, especially the growth of extractive industries such as coal mining and timbering, that uprooted inhabitants from large swaths of Appalachia. Many of the migrants made their way to mid-sized industrial cities like Akron, Ohio, and Muncie, Indiana, to work in the tire plants and factories that produced components for the region’s automotive industry.

A major point of Fraser’s argument is that the migration of Transappalachian whites was not a one-way trip; the “Hillbilly Highway” was, instead, the site of frequent back-and-forth travel from the migrants’ new communities in the Midwest and their former homes in Appalachia. In one instance, Paducah, Kentucky native Polk Brooks built a successful interstate bus company by capitalizing on the regular travel of migrants to and from Paducah and Detroit,

Michigan for varying lengths of time. As Fraser tells us, the travel “reflected a distinctive class experience beginning to take shape along the interregional roadways networking the Upper South and the Midwest” (p. 58). This discussion enhances our understanding of how geographic mobility and location influence class formation as much as other factors such as income, work, gender, and race.

Historical irony and paradox run throughout *Hillbilly Highway*. Chapter 3, “Green Peas and Hotheads,” describes the beliefs and stereotypes that established residents, businesses, and unions held about and attributed to the migrants. They were, so these claims went, compliant workers who wanted nothing to do with unions and were grateful for any kind of work. In many cases, however, the transition from farm labor to the industrial discipline of manufacturing had the opposite effect. Transappalachian migrants helped organize unions in the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), often occupying key leadership positions; Fraser notes, for example, that “it was more common to find southern-born workers playing active roles in building a union culture at the workplace” as opposed to native-born workers from Muncie (p. 93). Irony also abounds in the chapter on music, “Lost Highways.” In the postwar era, country music grew increasingly in popularity on airwaves in Northern cities from Seattle to Staten Island but, Fraser points out, it took on an anti-urban perspective as exemplified in the songs “A Country Boy Can Survive” by Hank Williams, Jr. (1982) and “I Wouldn’t Live in New York City (If They Gave Me the Whole Damn Town) by Buck Owens (1970).

Hillbilly Highway is an excellent monograph that enriches our understanding of labor and working-class history, regional migration, and the South and Midwest. This study offers a model of scholarship for historians interested in diaspora, class, and migration. Fraser hints towards this in the conclusion when he discusses a present-day GM worker who was laid off from his “home”

plant in Wyandotte, Michigan, and then transferred to a newer GM plant in Tennessee to work at until he can retire. The “Rust Belt” has experienced numerous economic and social dislocations that have led to population moves within the region and out of it, not unlike the factors that led to the movement of Transappalachian whites to the Midwest in the mid-twentieth century. As suggested by the popularity of the online magazine *Belt* and its large catalog of publications, there is a longing among Rust Belt migrants to stay connected with their former homes.

It is difficult to find fault with *Hillbilly Highway*. At 221 pages of text, this monograph would be ideal for upper-level undergraduate classes and graduate students.

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