“Oftentimes, just to go away is one of the most aggressive things that another person can do, and if the means of expressing discontent are limited, as in this case, it is one of the few ways in which pressure can be put.”

–John Dollard, Yale University research of the South in the 1930s

Isabel Wilkerson’s *The Warmth of Other Suns* has, just since its publication this fall, captured readers and reviewers alike through its ambitious exploration of the Great Migration, the half-century of mass movement of black Americans from the South, where 90% of America’s black population lived following the Civil War, to the cities of the North and West. Wilkerson’s epic re-explores the better-known aspects of the Migration as well as those perhaps familiar only in sociology and history circles, and the many stories and understandings of the Migration that have perhaps never been delved into before. The results is a book that left us, like other reviewers, with a radically reshaped understanding of the history of the United States.

Isabel Wilkerson is a journalist who has built her career by focusing on reporting that emotionally connects her readers to the individuals whose stories she tells. Wilkerson grew up in Washington, D.C. Her parents, born in Virginia and Georgia, were themselves migrants, moving from the South to Washington during the Great Migration and staying to raise their family. Wilkerson attended Howard University to major in journalism, and there became editor-in-chief of the university paper, The Hilltop. She received the ‘Mark of Excellence Award’ for best feature writing by a student from the Society of Professional Journalists. The award, along with several internships at major newspapers during her undergraduate career, led her to jobs at the Detroit Free Press, Washington Post, and eventually the *New York Times*. In 1994, she won the Pulitzer Price award for feature

1 Quoted in Wilkerson, p10.
writing, the first African American to win the award for journalism. Since the late 1990s, Wilkerson has taken several teaching appointments and published occasional pieces in the *New York Times* and elsewhere, but mainly focused on the writing of *The Warmth of Other Suns*. She received a number of awards and fellowships in the course of researching and writing the book, including a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship in 1998. She is now Director of the Narrative Nonfiction Program at the Boston University College of Communication.

The author’s political stance is well-hidden; she seems to have taken great care to tell a variety of stories such that any particular political stance would be difficult to discern, and she let’s the stories speak for themselves to the reader. That said, our understanding of Wilkerson’s political stance might vary depending on how we understand the word “political” itself. If “political” means the shaping of the nation’s function and governance, the exercise of power, or issues that pertain to citizens’ rights and involvement—just a few definitions from Merriam Webster—then this book may not have a political stance so much as it is a political stance. One of Wilkerson’s main points is that the Migration—or, more accurately, the migrants and their offspring and the ripples of their actions—created massive shifts in the sociological structure of this country and fundamentally shaped it in ways that have been underappreciated, and in fact largely ignored. That assertion of importance has political implications, particularly when considered together with Wilkerson’s descriptions of cities in the North, the ways African-Americans were treated by their populations, politicians and police, and the ways those cities were changed by and (in mainly negative ways) changed in response to the migrants coming in.

The reader does not have to make a big leap from Wilkerson’s descriptions of the struggles and oppression of migrants, to need to deeply reconsider some of the popular narratives of current racialized issues like affirmative action, welfare, and crime. Wilkerson masterfully resists any clear stance on how her readers should think differently about issues that are highly political in the U.S. today, but offers us copious reasons that we might think
Wilkerson’s writing of the book spanned a remarkable period in the 1990s and 2000s that began in the shadow of the 1992 race riots and the 1995 OJ Simpson trial in Los Angeles and ended after the election of the first Black president of the United States (Koch 2010). Residential segregation remained the “structural linchpin of American race relations” but was finally beginning to diminish as black families moved to mostly-white suburbs and black home ownership rates rose significantly (Welch, 2001). The early migrants had already passed away, and the migrants who had been born during the early years of the Migration, whose parents or grandparents had perhaps been slaves themselves—migrants such as Wilkerson’s three main subjects—were moving into their twilight years. The hometown societies like the Monroe [Louisiana] Club to which Robert belonged in Los Angeles (p477) were rapidly dwindling as the descendents of the migrants were fully assimilated into the adopted cities of their parents and grandparents. The chance to capture the stories of Migration and the unique perspectives of Migrants who had witness so many great shifts in the social and political currents of this country was rapidly disappearing.

Many Americans have at least heard of the Great Migration, and have a general sense that it involved the movement of many African-Americans from the rural poor South to the urban and better-paying North. What most of us know, however, is paltry compared to the story Wilkerson tells. Her central theme is that the Great Migration was more complex, lasted longer, and had a much greater impact on the course of America’s growth than has generally been appreciated. She understands it as “an unrecognized immigration within this country,” driven by the desire to escape what Wilkerson unequivocally calls the “caste system” of the Jim Crow South. It was conducted with much of the same tight-lipped planning, long-distance family and community networking, and spiriting across borders (in this case unofficial but often no less restrictive than actual national boundaries) as an international migration. Wilkerson interviewed over 1,200 people for the book, and focused on three individuals—Ida Mae Gladney, George Starling, and Robert Johnson Pershing.
Foster—whose stories reflect common experiences of the six million African-Americans who migrated during the 55 years of the Great Migration. Each packed food and a few worldly possessions and set out for a better life that they had only heard or dreamt of, one in which they could move about freely, earn a living wage, and be agents of their own destinies.

**Core arguments & key themes – an annotated list**

**The South operated under a caste system for 100 years following the Civil War -**

Wilkerson emphatically makes the point that the political and social system in the South after the Civil War was no less than a caste system that carefully and emphatically denied substantive citizenship, and in some cases even denied survival, to blacks. Despite the Emancipation Proclamation and intensive Reconstruction following the Civil War, life was not anywhere near free for former slaves and their children. For a brief period after the war, black (men, at least) were able to exercise rights previously denied them, such as voting, attending schools and sometimes pursuing careers (p37). However, when the federal government stopped directly overseeing the South in the 1870s, sharecropping replaced and closely approximated slavery, and Jim Crow replaced the brief taste of freedom that had been enforced by the presence of Northern soldiers (p37). Jim Crow laws were the system of regulations devised “with inventiveness and precision” by southern state legislatures to “regulate every aspect of black people’s lives. . .and prohibit even the most casual and incidental contact between the races” (p40). The consequences of overstepping those boundaries were enormous for blacks, as white violence was socially sanctioned and carried out with total impunity. This system changed little over the years, continuing in force throughout the South until the Civil Rights Act of 1964, with ripple effects in terms of access for blacks to public spaces, resources and rights continuing to the present day.

**The Great Migration was an unrecognized internal immigration -**
Perhaps to counter prevailing assumptions of the relative simplicity of moving from one part of the United States to another, Wilkerson frames her subject as an unrecognized internal immigration marked by both patterns common to international migrant behavior as well as tremendously different access to rights and livelihoods such as might be found in different countries (p536). The migrants traveled well-trodden paths that connected their specific towns and regions in the South to particular destinations in the North and West. They shaped their new homes into microcosms of the communities they had come from, bringing along their language patterns, food, church affiliations, and other customs. They worked incredibly hard and pushed the bounds of sanity and creativity to make ends meet and provide better lives for their children, while struggling to impart to them the values and beliefs of their forebears and safeguard them from the pitfalls of freer urban opportunity.

**The Great Migration and racism made U.S. cities what they are today** -

Perhaps most critically, the book illuminates the immense impacts of the Migration on the configuration of American cities today, and demonstrates that much of the continuing segregation of those cities and the economic suffocation of urban black communities were anything but inevitable, nor attributable to the migrants and other black residents themselves. Particularly through the stories of her three main subjects, Wilkerson paints a vivid picture of the racism that confronted black migrants at nearly every turn in the North and made most of their housing and employment choices for them. Most migrants found the freedom and self-determination they expected in the North to be diluted by both explicit and implicit rules that continued to confine them to second-class citizenship. They were confined to particular neighborhoods and charged tremendously inflated rents and—as home ownership gradually increased—purchase prices that they had no choice but to pay, could they find the relatively few landlords and sellers who would interact with black people at all. “Thus began a pattern of overcharging and underinvestment in black neighborhoods that would lay the foundation for decades of economic disparities in the urban North” (p270).
Their neighborhoods were those that white people had either already forsaken or abandoned almost immediately upon the appearance of migrants, as in the case of Chicago’s South Shore neighborhood where Ida Mae’s family was finally able to purchase a home 30 years after coming north (p394). In a way, the passive resistance of “white flight” was the best migrants could hope for, at least in the short term. Wilkerson tells stories of families such as the Clarks whose move to the all-white neighborhood of Cicero—inhhabited, it must be noted, mostly by first- and second-generation European immigrants, many of whom had fled persecution themselves—in 1951 was met with mob violence by residents. White neighborhoods barricaded themselves against blacks, “not flinching at the use of violence to keep the walls in place” (p372). Authorities were complicit, both allowing the violence and doing little to ensure public safety and access to resources in the black neighborhoods, even as gang- and drug-related violence became a prominent part of life in areas where young people saw few other opportunities to gain social and economic status. This segregation, a major force in urban residence patterns as late as the 1970s and still obvious today, shaped major metropolitan areas throughout the United States.

Review of the reviews

The book was released in the fall of 2010 to glowing reviews in the popular media. While not aimed primarily at a scholarly audience—and therefore not the subject of academic reviews, at least as of yet—the book’s reviews thus far reveal the importance of Wilkerson’s project and its success in revealing to a wide audience many generally unrecognized truths about 20th century America. They agree that the book is both beautifully written and that it cannot and must not be ignored, which is high praise indeed for a non-fiction book dealing with race and class issues in the United States. Lawrence O’Donnell, an MSNBC television host, captures this sentiment forcefully in his exhortation to viewers that “[y]our understanding of America is woefully incomplete until you read ‘The Warmth of Other Suns.’”

http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21134540/vp/39732757#39732757
An interesting perspective on the Great Migration was part of Globe Magazine editorial Boston Uncommon. The writer, Kim McLarin, complemented Wilkerson on her book and reflected on her own migrations. Wilkerson implies that the Great Migration was for the better. McLarin wonders if the migration wasn’t good for all; she notes higher unemployment rates for blacks in Detroit and Minneapolis versus southern states as well as graduation rates for black teenagers in Boston being the same as for those in Mississippi. We see this struggle in the book, especially in Robert and George who are stuck between two worlds. McLarin’s final question, “If you transplant but the transplant doesn’t take, where does that leave you?” reflects the ambiguity of the many impacts of the Migration on the migrants themselves, their descendents and the cities they moved to.

Lynell George, writing in the LA Times, notes Wilkerson’s success in bringing to life a part of American history that has been largely under-reported, as well as the great service she has rendered by recording the stories, language, rituals and peculiarities of a very particular group and period, just before the individuals who lived it disappeared from this Earth. His observation that migrants seem to have come North “only to find that the South — its reach and its beliefs — had failed [them],” however, misses the point somewhat. Wilkerson’s objective was not to prove that the reach of the South was that long, but that racism was pervasive everywhere in the country and that it was emphatically, and in some cases violently, apparent to blacks wherever they settled.

Reviewers also agree on Wilkerson’s accomplishment in assembling a narrative of such breadth, depth and broad appeal. Janet Maslin noted in the New York Times that while the anecdotes of violence and terror confronting blacks in both the South and the North were both illuminating and necessary, it is the common humanity of migrants and their “workaday” stories that most hit home. Wilkerson offers readers a way into the lives and footsteps of her subjects, allowing us, for example, to accompany George Starling not only as he escapes the South under threat to his life from the orange grove owners against whose slave wages he had been organizing protest, but also into a bar in New York City on
his way home from work one day, something many more people can identify with. We
watch as the bartender smashes George’s and his friend’s glasses after they finish their
drinks, as a message that such action is preferable to using that glass again to serve a
white customer. It is this narrative power that ensures not only that the book is “sure to
hold many surprises for readers of any race or experience,” as Maslin observes, but also
that the book is capable of attracting and enthralling such a wide audience.

Wilkerson devoted 15 years of her life to researching and writing *The Warmth of
Other Suns*, a huge and hugely worthwhile investment of time and resources that has
resulted in a new public narrative of the Great Migration. The book not only sets down for
posterity the voices of an almost-vanished period in American history, but illuminates that
period and its actors as key agents of change that took stunning risks, worked incredibly
hard and suffered deeply to realize hopes of better lives for themselves, their children, and
the country as a whole. The migrants reshaped this country in ways that are key not only
for anyone with an urban focus or interest to understand, but for all Americans to
understand, and Wilkerson has masterfully and beautifully told history their stories.
References


Gordon, Burks, Woods – *Warmth of Other Suns*


