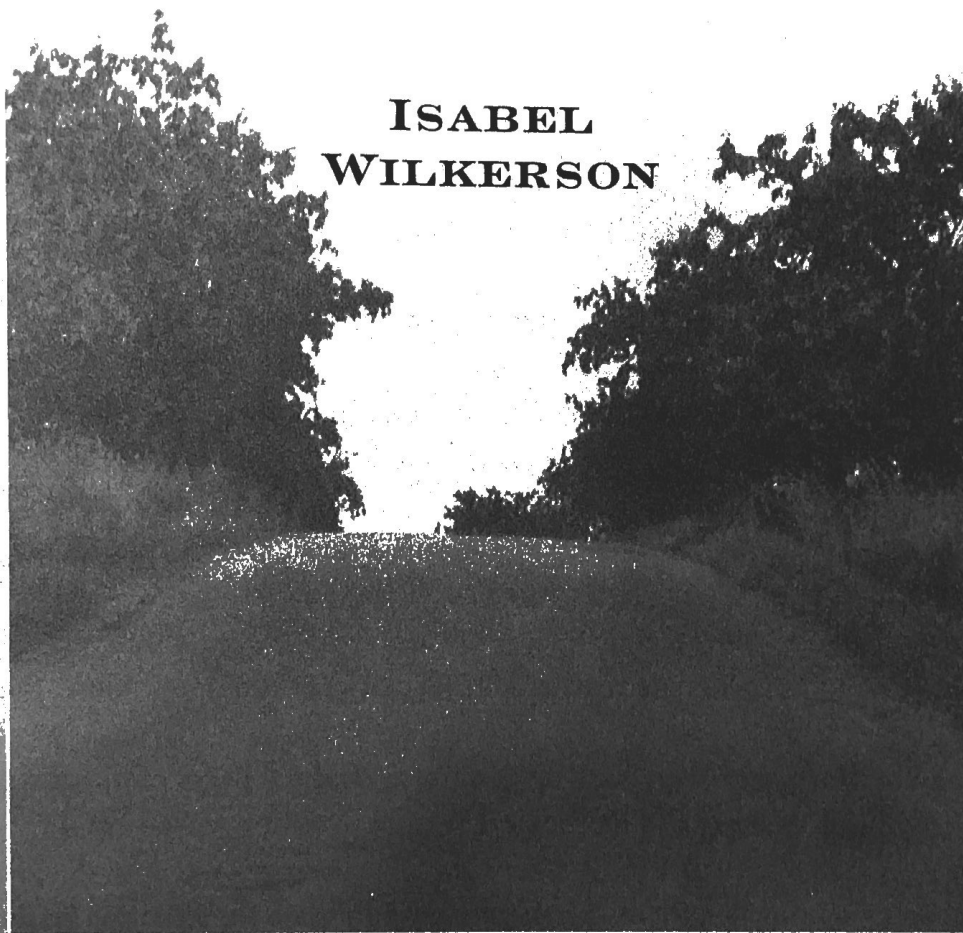


THE WARMTH OF OTHER SUNS

THE EPIC STORY OF
AMERICA'S GREAT MIGRATION

ISABEL
WILKERSON



VINTAGE BOOKS
A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE, INC.
NEW YORK

FIRST VINTAGE BOOKS EDITION, OCTOBER 2011

Copyright © 2010 by Isabel Wilkerson

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Vintage Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto. Originally published in hardcover in the United States by Random House, an imprint of the Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, in 2010.

Vintage and colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

Our title *The Warmth of Other Suns* is taken from the final pages of the unrestored edition of *Black Boy* by Richard Wright. Used by permission.

Permissions acknowledgments for previously published material can be found beginning on page 621.

Vintage ISBN: 978-0-679-76388-8

Book design by Christopher M. Zucker

www.vintagebooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

20 19 18

*To my mother and
to the memory of my father,
whose migration made me possible,
and to the millions of others like them
who dared to act upon their dreams*

*In our homes, in our churches,
wherever two or three are gathered,
there is a discussion of what is best to do.
Must we remain in the South
or go elsewhere? Where can we go
to feel that security which other people feel?
Is it best to go in great numbers or only in several families?
These and many other things are discussed over and over.*

—A COLORED WOMAN IN ALABAMA, 1902

THE GREAT MIGRATION, 1915-1970

THEY FLED as if under a spell or a high fever. "They left as though they were fleeing some curse," wrote the scholar Emmett J. Scott. "They were willing to make almost any sacrifice to obtain a railroad ticket, and they left with the intention of staying."

From the early years of the twentieth century to well past its middle age, nearly every black family in the American South, which meant nearly every black family in America, had a decision to make. There were sharecroppers losing at settlement. Typists wanting to work in an office. Yard boys scared that a single gesture near the planter's wife could leave them hanging from an oak tree. They were all stuck in a caste system as hard and unyielding as the red Georgia clay, and they each had a decision before them. In this, they were not unlike anyone who ever longed to cross the Atlantic or the Rio Grande.

It was during the First World War that a silent pilgrimage took its first steps within the borders of this country. The fever rose without warning or notice or much in the way of understanding by those outside its reach. It would not end until the 1970s and would set into motion

changes in the North and South that no one, not even the people doing the leaving, could have imagined at the start of it or dreamed would take nearly a lifetime to play out.

Historians would come to call it the Great Migration. It would become perhaps the biggest underreported story of the twentieth century. It was vast. It was leaderless. It crept along so many thousands of currents over so long a stretch of time as to be difficult for the press truly to capture while it was under way.

Over the course of six decades, some six million black southerners left the land of their forefathers and fanned out across the country for an uncertain existence in nearly every other corner of America. The Great Migration would become a turning point in history. It would transform urban America and recast the social and political order of every city it touched. It would force the South to search its soul and finally to lay aside a feudal caste system. It grew out of the unmet promises made after the Civil War and, through the sheer weight of it, helped push the country toward the civil rights revolutions of the 1960s.

During this time, a good portion of all black Americans alive picked up and left the tobacco farms of Virginia, the rice plantations of South Carolina, cotton fields in east Texas and Mississippi, and the villages and backwoods of the remaining southern states—Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, North Carolina, Tennessee, and, by some measures, Oklahoma. They set out for cities they had whispered of among themselves or had seen in a mail-order catalogue. Some came straight from the field with their King James Bibles and old twelve-string guitars. Still more were townspeople looking to be their fuller selves, tradesmen following their customers, pastors trailing their flocks.

They would cross into alien lands with fast, new ways of speaking and carrying oneself and with hard-to-figure rules and laws. The New World held out higher wages but staggering rents that the people had to calculate like a foreign currency. The places they went were big, frightening, and already crowded—New York, Detroit, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and smaller, equally foreign cities—Syracuse, Oakland, Milwaukee, Newark, Gary. Each turned into a “receiving station and port of refuge,” wrote the poet Carl Sandburg, then a Chicago newspaper reporter documenting the unfolding migration there.

The people did not cross the turnstiles of customs at Ellis Island. They were already citizens. But where they came from, they were not treated as such. Their every step was controlled by the meticulous laws

of Jim Crow, a nineteenth-century minstrel figure that would become shorthand for the violently enforced codes of the southern caste system. The Jim Crow regime persisted from the 1880s to the 1960s, some eighty years, the average life span of a fairly healthy man. It afflicted the lives of at least four generations and would not die without bloodshed, as the people who left the South foresaw.

Over time, this mass relocation would come to dwarf the California Gold Rush of the 1850s with its one hundred thousand participants and the Dust Bowl migration of some three hundred thousand people from Oklahoma and Arkansas to California in the 1930s. But more remarkably, it was the first mass act of independence by a people who were in bondage in this country for far longer than they have been free.

"The story of the Great Migration is among the most dramatic and compelling in all chapters of American history," the Mississippi historian Neil McMillen wrote toward the end of the twentieth century. "So far reaching are its effects even now that we scarcely understand its meaning."

Its imprint is everywhere in urban life. The configuration of the cities as we know them, the social geography of black and white neighborhoods, the spread of the housing projects as well as the rise of a well-scrubbed black middle class, along with the alternating waves of white flight and suburbanization—all of these grew, directly or indirectly, from the response of everyone touched by the Great Migration.

So, too, rose the language and music of urban America that sprang from the blues that came with the migrants and dominates our airwaves to this day. So, too, came the people who might not have existed, or become who they did, had there been no Great Migration. People as diverse as James Baldwin and Michelle Obama, Miles Davis and Toni Morrison, Spike Lee and Denzel Washington, and anonymous teachers, store clerks, steelworkers, and physicians, were all products of the Great Migration. They were all children whose life chances were altered because a parent or grandparent had made the hard decision to leave.

The Great Migration would not end until the 1970s, when the South began finally to change—the whites-only signs came down, the all-white schools opened up, and everyone could vote. By then nearly half of all black Americans—some forty-seven percent—would be living outside the South, compared to ten percent when the Migration began.

"Oftentimes, just to go away," wrote John Dollard, a Yale scholar studying the South in the 1930s, "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."

By the time it was over, no northern or western city would be the same. In Chicago alone, the black population rocketed from 44,103 (just under three percent of the population) at the start of the Migration to more than one million at the end of it. By the turn of the twenty-first century, blacks made up a third of the city's residents, with more blacks living in Chicago than in the entire state of Mississippi.

It was a "folk movement of incalculable moment," McMillen said.

And more than that, it was the first big step the nation's servant class ever took without asking.

The passenger train came wheezing through the north Georgia mountains after the colored school let out, and when it passed through the hill town of Rome, Georgia, back during the Depression, a little girl would run down the embankment and wait for it to rush past the locust trees. She would wave to the people in the metal boxes on wheels, the important people, their faces looking away, and dream of going wherever it was they were rushing to.

Years later, she got on a train herself, heading north. The railcar was filled with the expectant faces of people hoping for all the rights and privileges of citizenship. She stepped off at Union Station in the border city of Washington, D.C. It was the start of the North, filled as it was with grand squares and circles named after northern heroes of the Civil War—Ulysses S. Grant, William Tecumseh Sherman, George Henry Thomas, David G. Farragut—names, to this day, reviled in the South. She made her way to the address she had been given and settled onto the fold-out sofa in the front room of a second cousin she barely knew. Soon afterward, she performed a ritual of arrival that just about every migrant did almost without thinking: she got her picture taken in the *New World*. It would prove that she had arrived. It was the migrant's version of a passport.

The picture is sepia, two by three inches, from the forties. Two young women sit on the front steps of a row house on R Street in Washington, looking very Bette Davis. Stacked heels and padded shoulders, wool coats brushing their knees. They are new in town. Childhood friends from Georgia meeting up now in the big city. Their faces give no hint of whatever indignities the South had visited upon them. That was over

now. Their faces are all smiles and optimism. The one in the pearls used to greet the train when she was little and dream of going with it. She would become a teacher and, years later, my mother.

As a girl, I found the picture in a drawer in the living room, where many of those artifacts of migration likely ended up. I stared into the faces, searched the light in their eyes, the width of their smiles for clues as to how they got there.

Why did they go? What were they looking for? How did they get the courage to leave all they ever knew for a place they had never seen, the will to be more than the South said they had a right to be? Was it a braver thing to stay, or was it a braver thing to go? What would have happened if she had not gone north and met and married the Tuskegee Airman from Virginia, a migrant himself, who would become my father? Would I (and millions of other people born in the North and West) have even existed? What would have happened had all those people raised under Jim Crow not spilled out of the South looking for something better? If they had not gone north, what would New York look like? What would Philadelphia, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Chicago, Los Angeles, Washington, and Oakland look like? What, for that matter, would the South look like? Would it have changed on its own? Or did the black exodus force the South to face itself in ways no one could ever have thought possible?

"What would have happened if I'd stayed?" my mother asked out loud, repeating a question put to her one day. "I don't even want to think about that."

She never used the term "Great Migration" or any grand label for what she did nor did she see her decision as having any meaning beyond herself. Yet she and millions of others like her were right in the middle of it. At one point, ten thousand were arriving every month in Chicago alone. It made for a spectacle at the railroad platforms, both north and south.

"I went to the station to see a friend who was leaving," Emmett J. Scott, an official at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, wrote shortly after the Migration began. "I could not get in the station. There were so many people turning like bees in a hive."

Those millions of people, and what they did, would seep into nearly every realm of American culture, into the words of Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison, the plays of Lorraine Hansberry and August Wilson, the poetry and music of Langston Hughes and B. B. King, and the

latter-day generation of Arrested Development and Tupac Shakur. It all but consumed the work of Richard Wright, the bard of the Great Migration. He gave voice to the fears and yearnings of his fellow migrants through his novel *Native Son* and his autobiography, *Black Boy*. He had been a sharecropper's son in Natchez, Mississippi. He defected to the receiving station of Chicago, via Memphis, in December 1927, to feel, as he put it, "the warmth of other suns."

Yet for all of its influence, the Migration was so vast that, throughout history, it has most often been consigned to the landscape, rarely the foreground. Scholars have devoted their attention to the earliest phase of the Migration, the World War I era. "Less has been written about the more massive sequence of migration that began during World War II," the historian James N. Gregory wrote in 2005, "and a comprehensive treatment of the century-long story of black migration does not exist."

This book addresses that omission. The stories in this book are based on the accounts of people who gave hundreds of hours of their days to share with me what was perhaps the singular turning point in their lives. They were among more than twelve hundred people I interviewed for this book in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, and Oakland. All of them journeyed from the South during the Great Migration, and it is their collective stories that inform every aspect of this book.

For the three main characters—Ida Mae Brandon Gladney, George Swanson Starling, and Robert Joseph Pershing Foster—and for others like them, the circumstances of their migrations shaped who they were and defined the course of their fortunes or misfortunes and the lives of their descendants. The events were thus easily recounted when the participants were called upon to do so. Official records corroborated those details that were indeed verifiable. But it is the larger emotional truths, the patient retelling of people's interior lives and motivations, that are the singular gift of the accounts in this book. With the passing of the earliest and succeeding generations of migrants, it is these stories that have become the least replaceable sources of any understanding of this great movement of people out of the South to the American North and West.

This book covers a span of some one hundred years. As the narrative moves through time, the language changes to retain the authenticity of each era. The word "colored" is used during the portion of the book in which that term was a primary identifier for black people, that is, dur-

ing the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, as evidenced by the colored high schools the people attended and the signage that directed them to segregated facilities. As the narrative moves into the 1960s, it shifts to the use of the term "black," after it gained popularity during the civil rights era, and then to both "black" and "African American" in the current era.

Over time, the story of the Great Migration has suffered distortions that have miscast an entire population. From the moment the emigrants set foot in the North and West, they were blamed for the troubles of the cities they fled to. They were said to have brought family dysfunction with them, to more likely be out-of-work, unwed parents, and on welfare, than the people already there.

In the past twenty years, however, an altogether different picture has emerged from ongoing research by scholars of the Great Migration. Closer analysis of newly available census records has found that, contrary to conventional thought, black migrants were actually more likely to be married and to raise their children in two-parent households, and less likely to bear children out of wedlock. "Compared with northern-born blacks," writes the sociologist Stewart E. Tolnay, a leading expert on the Migration, "southern migrants had higher rates of participation in the labor force, lower levels of unemployment, higher incomes, lower levels of poverty and welfare dependency." The lives of the people in this book bear out this more complex understanding of the Great Migration and, based on the new data, represent the more common migrant experience than many previous accounts.

Despite the overlapping of time and place in the text, the three main people in this narrative never met or knew one another. Their paths never crossed except through their experiences with me and metaphorically through the interlocking chapters of this book. The narrative portrays the phenomenon through people unknown to one another, in the way that migrants moving along different currents would not have intersected, their anonymity a metaphor for the vast and isolating nature of the Migration itself.

The actions of the people in this book were both universal and distinctly American. Their migration was a response to an economic and social structure not of their making. They did what humans have done for centuries when life became untenable—what the pilgrims did under the tyranny of British rule, what the Scots-Irish did in Oklahoma when the land turned to dust, what the Irish did when there was nothing to eat, what the European Jews did during the spread of Nazism,

what the landless in Russia, Italy, China, and elsewhere did when something better across the ocean called to them. What binds these stories together was the back-against-the-wall, reluctant yet hopeful search for something better, any place but where they were. They did what human beings looking for freedom, throughout history, have often done.

They left.

THE STIRRINGS OF DISCONTENT

*Everybody seems to be asleep
about what is going on right under our noses.
That is, everybody but those farmers
who have wakened up on mornings recently
to find every Negro over 21 on his place gone—
to Cleveland, to Pittsburgh,
to Chicago, to Indianapolis. . . .
And while our very solvency
is being sucked out beneath us,
we go about our affairs as usual.*

—EDITORIAL, *The Macon Telegraph*,
SEPTEMBER 1916

SELMA, ALABAMA, EARLY WINTER 1916

NO ONE KNOWS WHO was the first to leave. It was sometime in the middle of World War I. The North faced a labor shortage and, after centuries of indifference, cast its gaze at last on the servant class of the South. The North needed workers, and the workers needed an escape. No one knows exactly when or how it commenced or who took the first actual step of what would become the Great Migration.

One of the earliest references came on February 5, 1916, and was seen as an isolated, random event. It merited only a paragraph in the *Chicago Defender*, the agitator and unwitting chronicler of the movement, and was likely preceded by unremarked-upon departures months before. Railroads in Pennsylvania had begun undercover scouting of cheap black labor as early as 1915. But few people noticed when, in the deep of

winter, with a war raging in Europe and talk of America joining in, several hundred black families began quietly departing Selma, Alabama, in February 1916, declaring, according to the *Chicago Defender's* brief citation, that the "treatment doesn't warrant staying."

Ida Mae Brandon was not yet three years old. George Starling, Pershing Foster, and millions of others who would follow in the footsteps of those first wartime families from Selma had not yet been born. But those early departures would set the stage for their eventual migration.

The families from Selma left in the midst of one of the most divisive eras in American history—the long and violent hangover after the Civil War, when the South, left to its own devices as the North looked away, dismantled the freedoms granted former slaves after the war.

The plantation owners had trouble imagining the innate desires of the people they once had owned. "I find a worse state of things with the Negroes than I expected," wrote General Howell Cobb, a Georgia planter, shortly after the slaves were freed. "Let any man offer them some little thing of no real value, but which looks a little more like freedom, and they catch at it with avidity, and would sacrifice their best friends without hesitation and without regret."

"They will almost starve and go naked," wrote a planter in Warren County, Georgia, "before they will work for a white man, if they can get a patch of ground to live on and get from under his control."

For all its upheaval, the Civil War had left most blacks in the South no better off economically than they had been before. Sharecropping, slavery's replacement, kept them in debt and still bound to whatever plantation they worked. But one thing had changed. The federal government had taken over the affairs of the South, during a period known as Reconstruction, and the newly freed men were able to exercise rights previously denied them. They could vote, marry, or go to school if there were one nearby, and the more ambitious among them could enroll in black colleges set up by northern philanthropists, open businesses, and run for office under the protection of northern troops. In short order, some managed to become physicians, legislators, undertakers, insurance men. They assumed that the question of black citizens' rights had been settled for good and that all that confronted them was merely building on these new opportunities.

But, by the mid-1870s, when the North withdrew its oversight in

the face of southern hostility, whites in the South began to resurrect the caste system founded under slavery. Nursing the wounds of defeat and seeking a scapegoat, much like Germany in the years leading up to Nazism, they began to undo the opportunities accorded freed slaves during Reconstruction and to refine the language of white supremacy. They would create a caste system based not on pedigree and title, as in Europe, but solely on race, and which, by law, disallowed any movement of the lowest caste into the mainstream.

The fight over this new caste system made it to the U.S. Supreme Court. Homer A. Plessy, a colored Louisianan, protested a new state law forbidding any railroad passenger from entering "a compartment to which by race he does not belong." On June 7, 1894, Plessy bought a first-class ticket on the East Louisiana Railroad, took an empty seat in the white-only car, and was arrested when he refused to move. In 1896, in the seminal case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the Supreme Court sided with the South and ruled, in an eight-to-one vote, that "equal but separate" accommodations were constitutional. That ruling would stand for the next sixty years.

Now, with a new century approaching, blacks in the South, accustomed to the liberties established after the war, were hurled back in time, as if the preceding three decades, limited though they may have been, had never happened. One by one, each license or freedom accorded them was stripped away. The world got smaller, narrower, more confined with each new court ruling and ordinance.

Not unlike European Jews who watched the world close in on them slowly, perhaps barely perceptibly, at the start of Nazism, colored people in the South would first react in denial and disbelief to the rising hysteria, then, helpless to stop it, attempt a belated resistance, not knowing and not able to imagine how far the supremacists would go. The outcomes for both groups were widely divergent, one suffering unspeakable loss and genocide, the other enduring nearly a century of apartheid, pogroms, and mob executions. But the hatreds and fears that fed both assaults were not dissimilar and relied on arousing the passions of the indifferent to mount so complete an attack.

The South began acting in outright defiance of the Fourteenth Amendment of 1868, which granted the right to due process and equal protection to anyone born in the United States, and it ignored the Fifteenth Amendment of 1870, which guaranteed all men the right to vote.

Politicians began riding these anti-black sentiments all the way to

governors' mansions throughout the South and to seats in the U.S. Senate.

"If it is necessary, every Negro in the state will be lynched," James K. Vardaman, the white supremacy candidate in the 1903 Mississippi governor's race, declared. He saw no reason for blacks to go to school. "The only effect of Negro education," he said, "is to spoil a good field hand and make an insolent cook."

Mississippi voted Vardaman into the governor's office and later sent him to the U.S. Senate.

All the while, newspapers were giving black violence top billing, the most breathless outrage reserved for any rumor of black male indiscretion toward a white woman, all but guaranteeing a lynching. Sheriff's deputies mysteriously found themselves unable to prevent the abduction of a black suspect from a jailhouse cell. Newspapers alerted readers to the time and place of an upcoming lynching. In spectacles that often went on for hours, black men and women were routinely tortured and mutilated, then hanged or burned alive, all before festive crowds of as many as several thousand white citizens, children in tow, hoisted on their fathers' shoulders to get a better view.

Fifteen thousand men, women, and children gathered to watch eighteen-year-old Jesse Washington as he was burned alive in Waco, Texas, in May 1916. The crowd chanted, "Burn, burn, burn!" as Washington was lowered into the flames. One father holding his son on his shoulders wanted to make sure his toddler saw it.

"My son can't learn too young," the father said.

Across the South, someone was hanged or burned alive every four days from 1889 to 1929, according to the 1933 book *The Tragedy of Lynching*, for such alleged crimes as "stealing hogs, horse-stealing, poisoning mules, jumping labor contract, suspected of killing cattle, boastful remarks" or "trying to act like a white person." Sixty-six were killed after being accused of "insult to a white person." One was killed for stealing seventy-five cents.

Like the cotton growing in the field, violence had become so much a part of the landscape that "perhaps most of the southern black population had witnessed a lynching in their own communities or knew people who had," wrote the historian Herbert Shapiro. "All blacks lived with the reality that no black individual was completely safe from lynching."

In this atmosphere, *The Clansman*, a 1905 novel that was the basis of the 1915 film *Birth of a Nation*, became a national bestseller. It fed whites' panic over freed blacks in their midst and inspired people in Georgia to revive the Ku Klux Klan the year the film was released. Soon Klansmen in full regalia were holding public parades before cheering white crowds across the South like celebrations of the Fourth of July, the Klan then seen not as a rogue outlier but as the protector of southern tradition. Thus the fragile interdependence between the races turned to apprehension and suspicion, one race vowing to accept no less than the total subjugation of the other.

The planter class, which had entrusted its wives and daughters to male slaves when the masters went off to fight the Civil War, was now in near hysterics over the slightest interaction between white women and black men. It did not seem to matter that the danger to white women of rape by a black man, according to the white South Carolina-born author Wilbur Cash, "was much less, for instance, than the chance that she would be struck by lightning."

White citizens, caught up in the delirium in the decades following Reconstruction, rioted in Georgia, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Florida, Texas, Arkansas, and central Illinois. They killed colored residents and set fire to their homes on rumors of black impropriety, as authorities stood by or participated.

In the darkest hours of this era, the abolitionist Frederick Douglass saw his health fade just as everything he spent his life fighting for was falling apart. He said, in his last great public lecture, delivered in Baltimore in January 1894, a year before his death, "I hope and trust all will come out right in the end, but the immediate future looks dark and troubled. I cannot shut my eyes to the ugly facts before me."

It was during that time, around the turn of the twentieth century, that southern state legislatures began devising with inventiveness and precision laws that would regulate every aspect of black people's lives, solidify the southern caste system, and prohibit even the most casual and incidental contact between the races.

They would come to be called Jim Crow laws. It is unknown precisely who Jim Crow was or if someone by that name actually existed. There are several stories as to the term's origins. It came into public use in the 1830s after Thomas Dartmouth Rice, a New York-born itinerant white actor, popularized a song-and-dance routine called "the Jim Crow" in minstrel shows across the country. He wore blackface and ragged clothes and performed a jouncy, palsied imitation of a handi-

capped black stable hand he had likely seen in his travels singing a song about "Jumping Jim Crow." Jim Crow was said to be the name of either the stable hand or his owner living in Kentucky or Ohio. Rice became a national sensation impersonating a crippled black man, but died penniless in 1860 of a paralytic condition that limited his speech and movement by the end of his life.

The term caught the fancy of whites across the country and came to be used as a pejorative for colored people and things related to colored people, and, by 1841, was applied to the laws to segregate them. The first such laws were passed not in the South, but in Massachusetts, as a means of designating a railcar set apart for black passengers. Florida, Mississippi, and Texas enacted the first Jim Crow laws in the South right after the Confederates lost the Civil War—Florida and Mississippi in 1865 and Texas in 1866. The northerners who took over the South during Reconstruction repealed those hastily passed laws. The Federal Civil Rights Act of 1875 explicitly outlawed segregation. But the northerners who were there to enforce the law retreated by the late 1870s and left the South to its own devices. As the twentieth century approached, the South resurrected Jim Crow.

Streetcars, widely in use from the 1880s, had open seating in the South, until Georgia demanded separate seating by race in 1891. By 1905, every southern state, from Florida to Texas, outlawed blacks from sitting next to whites on public conveyances. The following year, Montgomery, Alabama, went a step further and required streetcars for whites and streetcars for blacks. By 1909, a new curfew required blacks to be off the streets by 10 P.M. in Mobile, Alabama. By 1915, black and white textile workers in South Carolina could not use the same "water bucket, pails, cups, dippers or glasses," work in the same room, or even go up or down a stairway at the same time.

This new reality forced colored parents to search for ways to explain the insanity of the caste system to their uncomprehending children. When two little girls in 1930s Florida wanted to know why they couldn't play on a swing like the white children or had to sit in a dirty waiting room instead of the clean one, their father, the theologian Howard Thurman, had to think about how best to make them understand. "The measure of a man's estimate of your strength," he finally told them, "is the kind of weapons he feels that he must use in order to hold you fast in a prescribed place."

All told, these statutes only served to worsen race relations, alienating one group from the other and removing the few informal interactions

that might have helped both sides see the potential good and humanity in the other.

Now the masses of black workers cast about on their own in a buyer's labor market with little in the way of material assets or education or a personal connection to even the coldest slave master, who would have shown a basic watchfulness if only to protect his financial investment. Their lives were left to the devices of planters with no vested interest in them and, now, no intimate ties to ease the harshness of their circumstances or to protect them, if only out of paternalism, from the whims of night riders, a hell-bent jury, or poor whites taking out their resentment at their unwitting competitors for work.

David L. Cohn, in the 1935 book *God Shakes Creation*, wrote that, for a colored man without a white sponsor, "his fate is in the lap of the gods."

Each year, people who had been able to vote or ride the train where they chose found that something they could do freely yesterday, they were prohibited from doing today. They were losing ground and sinking lower in status with each passing day, and, well into the new century, the color codes would only grow to encompass more activities of daily life as quickly as legislators could devise them.

Thus, those silent parties leaving Selma in the winter of 1916 saw no option but to go. Theirs would become the first volley of a leaderless revolution. There was no Moses or Joshua or Harriet Tubman, or, for that matter, Malcolm X or Martin Luther King, Jr., to organize the Migration. The best-known leader at the start of it, Booker T. Washington, was vehemently against abandonment of the South and strongly discouraged it. Frederick Douglass, who saw it coming but died before it began, was against the very thought of it and considered an exodus from the South "a premature, disheartening surrender."

Those entreaties had little effect.

"The Negroes just quietly move away without taking their recognized leaders into their confidence any more than they do the white people about them," a Labor Department study reported. A colored minister might meet with his deacons on a Wednesday, thinking all was well, and by Sunday find all the church elders gone north. "They write the minister that they forgot to tell him they were going away."

Ordinary people listened to their hearts instead of their leaders. At a

clandestine meeting after a near lynching in Mississippi, a colored leader stood before the people and urged them to stay where they were.

A man in the audience rose up to speak.

"You tell us that the South is the best place for us," the man said. "*What guaranties can you give us that our life and liberty will be safe if we stay?*"

The leader was speechless.

"When he asked me that, there was nothing I could answer," the leader said afterward. "So I have not again urged my race to remain."

Any leader who dared argue against leaving might arouse suspicion that he was a tool of the white people running things. Any such leader was, therefore, likely to be ignored, or worse. One Sunday, a colored minister in Tampa, Florida, advised from the pulpit that his flock stay in the South. He was "stabbed the next day for doing so."

In the years leading up to and immediately following the turn of the twentieth century, a generation came into the world unlike any other in the South. It was made up of young people with no personal recollection of slavery—they were two generations removed from it. The colored members of this generation were free but not free, chafing under Jim Crow and resisting the studied subservience of their slave parents and grandparents. They had grown up without the contrived intimacy that once bound the two races. And it appeared that young whites, weaned on a formal kind of supremacy, had grown more hostile to blacks than even their slaveholding ancestors had been.

"The sentiment is altogether different now," William C. Oates, the old-guard former governor of Alabama, said in 1901 of the newer generation of white southerners. "When the Negro is doing no harm, why, the people want to kill him and wipe him from the face of the earth."

The colored people of this generation began looking for a way out. "It is too much to expect that Negroes will indefinitely endure their severe limitations in the South when they can escape most of them in a ride of 36 hours," the Labor Department warned. "Fifty years after the Civil War, they should not be expected to be content with the same conditions which existed at the close of the war."

Younger blacks could see the contradictions in their world—that, sixty, seventy, eighty years after Abraham Lincoln signed the Emanci-

pation Proclamation, they still had to step off the sidewalk when a white person approached, were banished to jobs nobody else wanted no matter their skill or ambition, couldn't vote, but could be hanged on suspicion of the pettiest infraction.

These were the facts of their lives:

There were days when whites could go to the amusement park and a day when blacks could go, if they were permitted at all. There were white elevators and colored elevators (meaning the freight elevators in back); white train platforms and colored train platforms. There were white ambulances and colored ambulances to ferry the sick, and white hearses and colored hearses for those who didn't survive whatever was wrong with them.

There were white waiting rooms and colored waiting rooms in any conceivable place where a person might have to wait for something, from the bus depot to the doctor's office. A total of four restrooms had to be constructed and maintained at significant expense in any public establishment that bothered to provide any for colored people: one for white men, one for white women, one for colored men, and one for colored women. In 1958, a new bus station went up in Jacksonville, Florida, with two of everything, including two segregated cocktail lounges, "lest the races brush elbows over a martini," *The Wall Street Journal* reported. The president of Southeastern Greyhound told the *Journal*, "It frequently costs fifty percent more to build a terminal with segregated facilities." But most southern businessmen didn't dare complain about the extra cost. "That question is dynamite," the president of a southern theater chain told the *Journal*. "Don't even say what state I'm in."

There was a colored window at the post office in Pensacola, Florida, and there were white and colored telephone booths in Oklahoma. White and colored went to separate windows to get their license plates in Indianola, Mississippi, and to separate tellers to make their deposits at the First National Bank of Atlanta. There were taxicabs for colored people and taxicabs for white people in Jacksonville, Birmingham, Atlanta, and the entire state of Mississippi. Colored people had to be off the streets and out of the city limits by 8 P.M. in Palm Beach and Miami Beach.

Throughout the South, the conventional rules of the road did not apply when a colored motorist was behind the wheel. If he reached an intersection first, he had to let the white motorist go ahead of him. He could not pass a white motorist on the road no matter how slowly the

white motorist was going and had to take extreme caution to avoid an accident because he would likely be blamed no matter who was at fault. In everyday interactions, a black person could not contradict a white person or speak unless spoken to first. A black person could not be the first to offer to shake a white person's hand. A handshake could occur only if a white person so gestured, leaving many people having never shaken hands with a person of the other race. The consequences for the slightest misstep were swift and brutal. Two whites beat a black tenant farmer in Louise, Mississippi, in 1948, wrote the historian James C. Cobb, because the man "asked for a receipt after paying his water bill."

It was against the law for a colored person and a white person to play checkers together in Birmingham. White and colored gamblers had to place their bets at separate windows and sit in separate aisles at race-tracks in Arkansas. At saloons in Atlanta, the bars were segregated: Whites drank on stools at one end of the bar and blacks on stools at the other end, until the city outlawed even that, resulting in white-only and colored-only saloons. There were white parking spaces and colored parking spaces in the town square in Calhoun City, Mississippi. In one North Carolina courthouse, there was a white Bible and a black Bible to swear to tell the truth on.

These were the facts of their lives—of Ida Mae's, George's, and Pershing's existence before they left—carried out with soul-killing efficiency until Jim Crow expired under the weight of the South's own sectarian violence: bombings, hosing of children, and the killing of dissidents seeking basic human rights. Jim Crow would not get a proper burial until the enactment of federal legislation, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which was nonetheless resisted years after its passage as vigorously as Reconstruction had been and would not fully take hold in many parts of the South until well into the 1970s.

And so what started as a little-noticed march of the impatient would become a flood of the discontented during World War II, and by the tail end of the Migration, a virtual rite of passage for young southerners—brothers joining brothers, nieces joining aunts, as soon as they got big enough to go.

Many of the people who left the South never exactly sat their children down to tell them these things, tell them what happened and why they left and how they and all this blood kin came to be in this northern city or western suburb or why they speak like melted butter and their chil-

dren speak like footsteps on pavement, prim and proper or clipped and fast, like the New World itself. Some spoke of specific and certain evils. Some lived in tight-lipped and cheerful denial. Others simply had no desire to relive what they had already left.

The facts of their lives unfurled over the generations like an over-wrapped present, a secret told in syllables. Sometimes the migrants dropped puzzle pieces from the past while folding the laundry or stirring the corn bread, and the children would listen between cereal commercials and not truly understand until they grew up and had children and troubles of their own. And the ones who had half-listened would scold and kick themselves that they had not paid better attention when they had the chance.

And in this way, the ways of the South passed from one generation to the next in faraway cities by the Pacific Ocean and on the shores of the Great Lakes and along the Hudson and Potomac and Allegheny rivers. These are the stories of the forgotten, aggrieved, wishful generations between the Harlem Renaissance and the civil rights movement, whose private ambition for something better made a way for those who followed. Of the three whose lives unfold in these pages, Ida Mae Brandon Gladney left first, in the 1930s, George Swanson Starling in the 1940s, and Robert Joseph Pershing Foster in the 1950s, in a current that swept up millions of others like them.

pretend with Clara Poe and always said he was going to California before he even knew what it was. Seemed like everybody who left Monroe was talking California. There was a contingent up in Oakland, a branch down in Los Angeles, spreading out to Fresno and over to San Bernardino. He had names, lots of names. More than enough to make a practice out of. Not only was it out of the South, it was about as far as you could get from the South and the Clements, too.

He began to
side door to go
somebody's k
like he want
wanted to be
some planter
nia, he could
what white
It wasn't or
the United

He told
the four of
girls would
longings. I
now was s

No more stepping to the
rations in
ould dress
d how he
nters from
In Califor-
ould know
he wanted.
a citizen of

in California,
She and the
aking their be-
he had to do
ut.

AMERICA, 1915-1970

A SERIES OF UNPREDICTABLE EVENTS and frustrations led to the decisions of Ida Mae Gladney, George Swanson Starling, and Robert Pershing Foster to leave the South for good. Their decisions were separate and distinct from anything in the outside world except that they were joining a road already plied decades before by people as discontented as themselves. A thousand hurts and killed wishes led to a final determination by each fed-up individual on the verge of departure, which, added to millions of others, made up what could be called a migration.

If there was a single precipitating event that set off the Great Migra-

tion, it was World War I. After all, blacks had tried to escape the South with limited degrees of success from the time the first slaves arrived in Virginia in 1619. The Underground Railroad spirited hundreds of slaves out of the South and as far north as Canada before the Civil War. Later, in 1879, Benjamin "Pap" Singleton, a former slave who made coffins for colored lynching victims and was disheartened by the steadiness of his work, led a pilgrimage of six thousand ex-slaves, known as Exodusters, from the banks of the Mississippi River onto the free soil of Kansas.

In the ensuing decades, a continuous trickle of brave souls chanced an unguaranteed existence in the unknown cities of the North. The trickle became a stream after Jim Crow laws closed in on blacks in the South in the 1890s. During the first decade of the twentieth century, some 194,000 blacks left the coastal and border states of the South and settled in relative anonymity in the colored quarters of primarily northeastern cities, such as Harlem in New York and in North Philadelphia. Some were domestics for wealthy northerners; others were musicians, intellectuals, and exiled politicians of the Reconstruction era who would inspire colored people in the South by their very existence.

But the masses did not pour out of the South until they had something to go to. They got their chance when the North began courting them, hard and in secret, in the face of southern hostility, during the labor crisis of World War I. Word had spread like wildfire that the North was finally "opening up."

The war had cut the supply of European workers the North had relied on to kill its hogs and stoke its foundries. Immigration plunged by more than ninety percent, from 1,218,480 in 1914 to 110,618 in 1918, when the country needed all the labor it could get for war production. So the North turned its gaze to the poorest-paid labor in the emerging market of the American South. Steel mills, railroads, and packinghouses sent labor scouts disguised as insurance men and salesmen to recruit blacks north, if only temporarily.

The recruiters would stride through groupings of colored people and whisper without stopping, "*Anybody want to go to Chicago, see me.*" It was an invitation that tapped into pent-up yearnings and was just what the masses had been waiting for. The trickle that became a stream had now become a river, uncontrolled and uncontrollable, and about to climb out of its banks. Some 555,000 colored people left the South during the decade of the First World War—more than all the colored people who had left in the five decades after the Emancipation Procla-

mation, which promised the freedoms they were now forced to pursue on their own.

At first the South was proud and ambivalent, pretended that it did not care. "As the North grows blacker, the South grows whiter," the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* happily noted.

Then, as planters awoke to empty fields, the South began to panic. "Where shall we get labor to take their places?" asked the *Montgomery Advertiser*, as southerners began to confront the reality observed by the *Columbia State* of South Carolina: "Black labor is the best labor the South can get. No other would work long under the same conditions."

"It is the life of the South," a Georgia plantation owner once said. "It is the foundation of its prosperity. . . . God pity the day when the negro leaves the South."

"With all our crimes of omission and commission, we still retain a marked affection for the Negro," wrote David L. Cohn in the 1935 book *God Shakes Creation*. "It is inconceivable to us that we should be without him."

The Macon Telegraph put it more bluntly: "We must have the negro in the South," it said. "It is the most pressing thing before this State today. Matters of governorships and judgeships are only bagatelle compared to the real importance of this negro exodus."

Yet as reality sank in, nobody could agree on what to do about it, debating to the point of exasperation. "Why hunt for the cause when it's plain as the noonday sun?" wrote a white reader in the *Montgomery Advertiser*. "He doesn't want to leave but he knows if he stays here he will starve. They have nothing to eat, no clothes, no shoes, and they can't get any work to do and they are leaving just as fast as they can get away. . . . If the Negro race could get work at 50 cents a day he would stay here."

And a newspaper in Columbia, South Carolina, put this question to the ruling caste: "If you thought you might be lynched by mistake," the paper asked, "would you remain in South Carolina?"

When the South woke up to the loss of its once guaranteed workforce, it tried to find ways to intercept it. Southern authorities resurrected the anti-enticement laws originally enacted after the Civil War to keep newly freed slaves from being lured away, this time, however, aimed at northern companies coveting the South's cheapest and most desperate workers.

"Conditions recently became so alarming—that is, so many Negroes were leaving," wrote an Alabama official, that the state began making anyone caught enticing blacks away—labor agents, they were called—

pay an annual license fee of \$750 "in every county in which he operates or solicits emigrants" or be "fined as much as \$500 and sentenced to a year's hard labor."

Macon, Georgia, required labor agents to pay a \$25,000 fee and to secure the unlikely recommendations of twenty-five local businessmen, ten ministers, and ten manufacturers in order to solicit colored workers to go north. But by the middle of World War I, those laws were useless. Northern industries didn't need to recruit anymore. Word had spread, and the exodus took on a life of its own. "Every Negro that makes good in the North and writes back to his friends, starts off a new group," a Labor Department study observed.

So the South tried to choke off the flow of information about the North. The chief of police in Meridian, Mississippi, ordered copies of the *Chicago Defender* confiscated before they could be sold, fearing it was putting ideas into colored people's heads.

When the people kept leaving, the South resorted to coercion and interception worthy of the Soviet Union, which was forming at the same time across the Atlantic. Those trying to leave were rendered fugitives by definition and could not be certain they would be able to make it out. In Brookhaven, Mississippi, authorities stopped a train with fifty colored migrants on it and sidetracked it for three days. In Albany, Georgia, the police tore up the tickets of colored passengers as they stood waiting to board, dashing their hopes of escape. A minister in South Carolina, having seen his parishioners off, was arrested at the station on the charge of helping colored people get out. In Savannah, Georgia, the police arrested every colored person at the station regardless of where he or she was going. In Summit, Mississippi, authorities simply closed the ticket office and did not let northbound trains stop for the colored people waiting to get on.

Instead of stemming the tide, the blockades and arrests "served to intensify the desire to leave," wrote the sociologists Willis T. Weatherford and Charles S. Johnson, "and to provide further reasons for going."

To circumvent the heavy surveillance, some migrants simply bought tickets to cities two or three stations away where they would not be recognized or where there was less of a police presence. There, under less scrutiny, they bought tickets to their true destination. Those who had somehow gotten on the wrong side of somebody in the ruling class had to go to unusual lengths to get out, one man disguising himself as a woman to flee Crystal Springs, Mississippi, for Chicago in the 1940s.

Chastened by their losses, some businessmen tried conciliation, one

delegation going so far as to travel to Chicago to persuade former sharecroppers that things had changed and it was time they came back. (The sharecroppers showed no interest and instead took the opportunity to complain about being cheated and whipped while in their employ.) In the 1920s, the Tennessee Association of Commerce, the Department of Immigration of Louisiana, the Mississippi Welfare League, and the Southern Alluvial Land Association all sent representatives north to try to bring colored workers back. They offered free train tickets and promised better wages and living conditions. They returned empty-handed.

When these efforts didn't work, some planters increased wages, if only temporarily, and tried easing up on their workers to induce them to stay. "Owing to the scarcity of labor," the Labor Department reported, "a Georgia farmer near Albany this year laid aside his whip and gun, with which it is reported he has been accustomed to drive his hands, and begged for laborers."

Oblivious to the hand-wringing, trainloads of colored people took their chances and crowded railroad platforms. Men hopped freight trains and hoboed out of the South in grain bins. Women walked off cotton fields in Texas, hiding their Sunday dresses under their field rags, bound for California. A granite quarry in Lithonia, Georgia, had to shut down because its workers had vanished. "One section gang left their tools on the spot, not stopping to get their pay," Arna Bontemps wrote of one work site.

All the while, in the places they left, the weeds grew up over the cotton, the rice and tobacco lay fallow and unpicked, and the mules wandered the pastures because, as the historian James R. Grossman noted, there was no one to hitch them to a plow.