

# **A CONVERSATION WITH ISABEL WILKERSON**

## ***On America's Great Migration***

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**ISABEL WILKERSON**, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. New York: Random House, 2010, 640 pages, ISBN 978-0-679-44432-9. Hardcover, \$30.00.

**HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.:** Isabel, thanks so much for doing this interview. I love your book. Your book is historic. Congratulations.

**ISABEL WILKERSON:** Thank you so much.

**GATES:** What is the Great Migration? When did it start, when did it end, how many people were involved, and why is it important?

**WILKERSON:** The Great Migration was an outpouring of six million African Americans from the South to the North and West. It was, in many ways, what I call a defection from the Jim Crow caste system; the system that ruled the lives of all people—even White people—who were living in the South. This caste system held everyone in a fixed place. And so there was an outpouring of people who left the South for all points North and West from 1915 to 1970, when the initial reasons for the migration were no longer in effect—meaning the caste system essentially came to an end, legally.

**GATES:** Well, we have all heard various interpretations and explanations for this defection. I love the metaphor of the defection. That's very original and very profound. You interviewed over 1000 people, you spent fifteen years thinking about and writing this book. What do you think the ultimate reasons for this defection were?

**WILKERSON:** I think one ultimate reason was a kind of seeking of political asylum, which we don't often think about when you look at the North and West and the cities that came to be, and that people just happened to be there. My questions

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were: How did they get there? Why did they leave? What were the circumstances that propelled them to leave? What was life like for them in the South and what was life like for them, ultimately, in the North and West? And what was it that gave them that drive, that perseverance, that restlessness to make the decision of their lives: to leave the only place that they had ever known for a place that they had never seen and hope that life would be better? I really wanted to understand that. That is the reason why I set out to find three people who would represent the three streams of the Great Migration, and get to know them, hear their stories, and then recount their stories in a narrative that would interweave their experiences with the larger tableau, what was going on around them, from the beginning of their lives until the end of the Migration and beyond.

**GATES:** When you say “defection,” that suggests that you think the prime cause was political. People fleeing Jim Crow and anti-Black racism. When I was an undergraduate, it was the boll weevil. People fled the fact that the cotton crop failed because of the boll weevil epidemic, and so they had to find jobs in the North. Economics caused migration. This was during World War I, you know the drill. But you disagree?

**WILKERSON:** I think it was too large. We’re talking about six million people. So six million different reasons, six million precipitating events for each one of them. The South is huge; it goes from Texas to Virginia and down to Florida. Not all of those states are cotton-producing states. So cotton could not be the reason for all of the people who might have been participating in this migration. Also, even those who might have been from the cotton-producing states might not have been leaving for that reason. There are many, many reasons why people leave.

I did a lot of research on migration itself. I became obsessed with the idea of why people do this. America is made up of people who came from someplace else. I mean, even the Native Americans came over the Bering Strait. So there is a history to this phenomenon; I mean, America is what it is because people came from someplace else. And I love to see the comparisons between what these people did—why they left where they were—and the people who might have come over from Europe or across the Atlantic in steerage, or across the Rio Grande, or the Pacific Ocean. People leave when life becomes untenable wherever they are, for many different reasons. When it comes to the motivation for the Great Migration, I think the overarching desire was to escape a caste system that controlled their lives from the moment that they awoke in the morning to the time that they went to sleep; that determined, for example, that it was illegal for a Black person and a White person to play checkers together. Even for White people who might have wanted to play checkers with somebody who was of a different race, they couldn’t do it. That system was controlling of everybody.

**GATES:** It was ridiculous.

**WILKERSON:** It was ridiculous. Somebody actually sat down and wrote that as a law. Across the South, in many courtrooms, there was a Black Bible and a White Bible to swear to tell the truth on. That gets to the level of extremism and detail and forethought that went into making sure that there was no opportunity for people to ever cross paths or get to know one another. In South Carolina, it was the custom that Black people and White people could not go up the same staircase in many workplaces. How do you logistically even do that?

**GATES:** How do you think of it?

**WILKERSON:** How do you think of it, and how do you make that work? I mean, what happens when a Black person wants to go up the steps and they have to wait for the White person because they can’t be on the staircase at the same time? It was that kind of insanity, when you think about it, that they were fleeing.

**GATES:** And a rational person would flee that.

**WILKERSON:** A rational person would flee. Everybody, every African American in those states had to make a decision as to whether they would stay or whether they would go. I do not make any judgment as to which was the better decision. The people that left ended up feeling that they could not stay under those circumstances. And I find it really fascinating to know that there is something different about people who leave, in all parts of human migration.

**GATES:** Let's follow this, because this is one of your several original contributions in this book. You are the first scholar that I know of to treat migrants like immigrants. The immigrant mentality—though we tend to stereotype it with certain ethnic groups—we all know and respect. But the only group of (im)migrants I know of who were not admired in the literature were the Black people from the South. E. Franklin Frazier famously said, these people are uncouth. And many of us don't realize the class tensions that manifested themselves within the Black community as early as the Harlem Renaissance, when the old Negroes, who had been free, descended from free Negroes in the North, saw all of these sharecroppers coming up. They despised them. They wanted to give them, as Booker T. Washington said, a toothbrush and a bar of soap.

**WILKERSON:** And send them back.

**GATES:** And send them back. But you say, no. That they had been stereotyped. And people like E. Franklin Frazier were wrong, that they didn't have a higher immorality rate, they didn't have a higher out-of-wedlock birthrate, that they weren't people who eschewed education. In fact, the fact that they migrated showed that they were motivated.

**WILKERSON:** At a certain point, I was reading a book a day, and journal article after journal article after journal article. There is so much data now that disproves the stereotypes and mythologies about those migrants. One statistic is that they were more likely to be married than the people they encountered in the North. They had a lower divorce rate; they were more likely to remain married, in other words. They were more likely to be raising their children in two-parent households, which is what I actually grew up around in my own parents' migration experience. The adults around us, when I was growing up, did all the things that the data show. They were more likely to be making more money than the people in the North that they encountered; not because they were making more per hour, but because they were working longer hours and multiple jobs. This is typical immigrant behavior. They also were more likely to be doubled and tripled-up in housing, which is why you've got this incredible amount of overcrowding that first attracted the scholars that began looking at it. Sociologists were naturally looking at what was going on with overcrowding, with the children, and with the spread of disease. And that is how this migration began to become calcified in our minds as something that was a problem. People were not looking at the migrants and what they were striving to do. Of course there was a transition period, they had come from farms, they had come from small towns, they had very thick accents, they didn't have the citified clothes of the people . . .

**GATES:** "Call me country" [*laughter*].

**WILKERSON:** They were country people, country folk. When they got to the North, they stood out; they didn't easily blend in with the people who were already there. But that didn't mean that they didn't come to work hard. That was all they knew, if you think about it. Particularly in the South, when you're talking about World War I, the depression years, World War II—these were sharecroppers who often were merely working for the right to stay on the land that they were farming. So they were used to working very hard and not being paid at all. And even those who

were working and had jobs as janitors, maids, domestics, yard boys, whatever they might have been, were underpaid. Even the professionals were being woefully underpaid. Most of the teachers in the South at that time were being paid forty percent of a full salary, openly without apology by the powers that be, for doing the same thing that their White counterparts were doing as teachers. So they were being woefully underpaid for their work, and they came to these cities in order to survive, in order to make it, and make life better for themselves and their children. Many of them were not going to be able to truly benefit from the advantages of being in the North because it was maybe in some ways too late for them. They could not go back and get the education that they hadn't gotten, if they had only completed the eighth grade. Here they were, thirty years old, and they were not going to be able to truly take advantage of all of the culture that they would be exposed to. But their children might. And isn't that what all immigrants are doing this for?

**GATES:** That's what we're all supposed to be doing it for.

**WILKERSON:** So much of the mythology does not represent the reality of these people's lives. And my goal was to get a sense of what their lives were really like.

**GATES:** But why were they demonized this way in the sociological literature?

**WILKERSON:** Well, I think it also gets to what you were saying about the stratification that they met once they arrived. People who were there before them did not want them there. Industries wanted them there because, actually, they were recruited. They did not just show up out of nowhere. The migration began because the Northern industry needed labor during World War I. World War I cut off, to a great degree, immigration from Europe, which had been providing the labor for Northern industry. Many of the Europeans who were in the United States had to go back to Europe and immigration was cut off. And Northern industry began looking to find where they could get cheap labor to fill the spaces left over by the immigrants. They were looking for the cheapest labor available, and they found African Americans and began recruiting them. But that did not mean that other people there wanted them. That meant that the people who would be competing against them were not welcoming them at all.

**GATES:** And you're talking about Black people.

**WILKERSON:** I'm talking about Black people, I'm talking about recent immigrants from other parts of the world, and that was because there was a potential for the new migrants to drive down the wages of everybody else. Many of the black migrants were not permitted to join unions, for example. Many of them were actually brought in as strike-breakers. They had no concept of a union, because unions would not have been accepted in the South at all. That was out of the question. So they had no idea what they were getting themselves into. Think about all the barriers and challenges that they had to face upon arrival. They faced hostility from Black people who were already there. They faced hostility from immigrants who had just arrived themselves from all parts of Europe or other parts of the world, who were scuffling to try to make it themselves—because a migrant or an immigrant cannot fail. As an immigrant, you are far away from home, you have made this great leap of faith, you have left all that you know, and you know the people back home are talking about you, just saying, "I know they're not going to be able to make it."

**GATES:** "They'll be back."

**WILKERSON:** So an immigrant cannot fail. Failure is not an option. They have to take whatever challenges and barriers there are. They have to bear up under them. I came to have such great empathy and understanding of what they had to endure.

**GATES:** As you know, I have spent the last five years being obsessed with genealogy; my genealogy and the genealogy of lots of well-known Americans. In a sense,

as I hear you talking, it occurs to me that you're recuperating your own genealogical story.

**WILKERSON:** When the migration began in 1915, ninety percent of all African Americans were living in the South. By the end of the Great Migration in 1970, forty-seven percent—nearly half—were living outside of the South. Between 1915 and 1970, there was this great arc of migration. People went everywhere, from Washington to New York to Boston, to Chicago, Detroit, to the West Coast. So it was a total redistribution of an entire people. The majority of African Americans that you meet in the North and the West now, even to this day, have roots in the South. When they want to look at their genealogy, ultimately they want to get back to Africa. But to get there, you have to go through the South.

And that is a beautiful thing, when you think about the connection between North and South. In other words, when this migration occurred, the people were not just carrying themselves and their hopes and dreams, they were carrying the South with them. And as they were carrying the South, they were carrying the folk ways, the language, the food, and the values of the South, which often are not recognized and appreciated. In some ways, they were transporting that with their luggage tied with string.

**GATES:** Culture.

**WILKERSON:** And when that cultural exchange made it to the North, it created whole new art forms.

**GATES:** Art forms like classic blues. Like jazz.

**WILKERSON:** Like jazz, and Motown. Motown would not even exist had there been no Great Migration. And that's because the founder of Motown, Berry Gordy's parents were born and raised in Georgia. They went to Detroit as part of this Great Migration, raised their son there, he got to be a grown man, looked around, wanted to go into music, but didn't have the money to go scouting all over the country. He looked right around him in the neighborhoods of Detroit. There was Diana Ross, a child of the Migration. Her mother had come up from Alabama, her father from West Virginia, and they met in Detroit. And then you have The Jackson 5; their mother had come from Alabama, their father had come from Arkansas, and they met in the North. They wouldn't have even existed had there not been this Great Migration.

**GATES:** So Black people cross-pollinated through the migration.

**WILKERSON:** I call them mixed marriages.

**GATES:** That's what they were. And that's a really great metaphor. You have a gift for metaphors; it makes your narrative even more powerful. For example, you characterize the Great Migration as "the leaderless revolution." Could you explain what you mean by that?

**WILKERSON:** I love that idea. When you think of it being a leaderless revolution, it gives power to everyone, whatever their background. No one set a time and a date. Though, yes, Robert S. Abbott, the Editor of the *Chicago Defender*, did encourage people to leave. But there was no one who had to tell all of those six million people that on this day, at this hour, we will leave. It was an unfurling of all of these people over time. And they left on their own. They made individual, private decisions that this was the best thing for them. And in fact, they defied their leaders. Booker T. Washington didn't live to see the migration itself, but of course he would have encouraged people to stay. Frederick Douglass famously said that a defection or a departure from the South would be a "disheartening surrender." There were many ministers in the South who encouraged people to stay. They could see their flock disappearing. One story is the case of a minister who preached from the pulpit in

Tampa, Florida. One Sunday, encouraging his flock to stay, he said, “our roots are here, we should stay here, this is where the forefathers are.” The next day, he was stabbed for what he said. And then they left. These were church-going people.

**GATES:** Amazing. But, it was more common for ministers to just pick up and follow the flock.

**WILKERSON:** Well, actually, they *had* to follow their flock. Barbers had to follow their customers. Teachers went where the students were going. There are clubs that exist to this day in major cities that represent these lost communities. In Los Angeles, for example, there’s a Monroe, Louisiana, club. There’s a Lake Charles, Louisiana, club. There are multiple clubs representing people from New Orleans and many, many Texas clubs. In other words, they picked up and left but recreated their communities in the new world. And I like the language of “the new world”—the idea of people who left with the same immigrant heart. And the fact that they doubled up once they arrived. There’s a case in New York where it got so crowded that people actually had to rent a share of a bed. They rotated use of the bed because it was so overcrowded there weren’t even enough places for people to live. So that meant that the night shift would come in the morning and tap the shoulder of the person who was getting ready to go to work and say “It’s my turn. You’ve got to get up. Time for me to go to sleep.” It gives a whole new meaning to the idea of timeshare.

**GATES:** Gives a whole new meaning to the idea of clean sheets [*laughter*].

**WILKERSON:** I hadn’t even thought about that. But you know, there are so many stories about immigrants who sacrifice everything. Double-up and live.

**GATES:** This experience is so unlike my own family history. I’m from Piedmont, West Virginia, which is halfway between Pittsburgh and Washington DC. All of the branches of my family, for 250 years—all the Black people are within a thirty-mile radius of where I was born.

**WILKERSON:** They stayed?

**GATES:** They stayed. A few of us left to go to college. My brother is an oral surgeon in New Jersey. But the family, all branches, they all stayed. So this migration experience is alien to my own family. Was telling your family story the motivation for writing this book?

**WILKERSON:** In a way it was to answer questions that I had always had growing up. People didn’t talk about it. When people left, they left for good, didn’t look back. And I found that my parents hadn’t really talked about it. My mother in particular didn’t talk very much about it. It’s almost as if they were starting with a clean slate, as immigrants often do, and they didn’t share the difficult things with their children. Maybe they didn’t want to burden them with the pain that they had experienced.

**GATES:** It is the same with the memory of slavery. People didn’t want to talk about that.

**WILKERSON:** There are some parallels between the last slaves who were interviewed in the 1930s and this last group of people who experienced Jim Crow. They truly experienced the worst of Jim Crow and they did not want to talk about it. The Jim Crow caste system didn’t end until the 1960s; it was quite firmly in place until then. It was violently enforced to the degree that for the decades leading up to the Great Migration and the early decades of the migration, there was a lynching somewhere in the South every four days. That shows you how very real the fear had to have been for people who were living in those circumstances. It was said by one historian of the era that lynching was so common that almost every Black American in the South would have known someone directly who had been lynched or would have heard of a lynching near them. So they were fleeing something that was quite real: real fear.

I wanted to understand what it was that led to my existence. The majority of African Americans, as I said, wouldn't even be alive had this cross-pollination not occurred, had people not migrated to Detroit, to Chicago, to Cleveland, met people that they never would have met. In my family's case, my mother migrated from Rome, Georgia, to Washington, DC. My father migrated from southern Virginia to Washington, DC, in a different decade. They would never have met otherwise.

**GATES:** In what years did they migrate?

**WILKERSON:** My mother in the mid-1940s and my father in the 1950s. They both went and got a second degree at Howard, which is how they ultimately met. My father had been a Tuskegee Airman and my mother was a teacher. My father became a civil engineer. But they would never have met had there been no Great Migration. And that's the story of so many people.

To speak to your story, places like West Virginia, like Washington DC, are in some ways on the border. It's the beginning of Jim Crow going South.

**GATES:** That's right. Washington, for us, was so close, but it was the South.

**WILKERSON:** It was the South for many people. But not if you were from Mississippi, it wasn't. For people familiar with the history of the Confederacy, it would not at all have been considered the South because it was the capital of the Union. So there's a complicated history when it comes to Washington DC. But there is a sense of longevity when it comes to the border places. The border places allow you a little bit of both so that the drive to leave would not be the same, from my perspective. If you were in Georgia, if you were in Florida, if you were in Mississippi, Alabama, there was this great drive to leave and that's why they did.

**GATES:** Absolutely. There was no need for slaves in the hills of West Virginia. Many of us who are from that area descend from people who were freed long before the Civil War. This is completely unlike the overwhelming experience for Black people in the South.

**WILKERSON:** It is an unusual history. It's almost as if you are a protected group there, in an odd kind of way. But for the vast majority of African Americans, the Great Migration is the story that led to the existence of so many people all over the country being spread out as they are.

**GATES:** There is a special issue of the *North American Review* from 1884 and I love it because all the great thinkers of the race—T. Thomas Fortune, Frederick Douglass—they all write essays on the future of the Negro. One person said not only will the Negro never leave the South, but if we stay long enough we will have Black states. Like maybe Mississippi, or maybe Alabama, will become a Black state, so it behooves us to stay. And now, as you know, there are more Black people in Chicago than the whole state of Mississippi. So the Great Migration was completely unexpected. The leaders of the race had no idea that these Negroes were going to up and leave over a fifty-five-year period to the tune of six million people.

**WILKERSON:** I think that W. E. B. Du Bois might have. He spent time in the South. He spent time in Atlanta and was there during the 1906 riots. He was flabbergasted and dismayed, to say the least, by what he experienced. He also had some difficult experiences when he interacted with long-time southerners who were in the South, who were the leadership there. He was not part of the migration, per se, but he went back and forth, back and forth. And I have the sense that he could see that this was not a tenable situation. He might have been one of the few leaders who could have seen that.

**GATES:** Well, his anguish voiced in his litany for Atlanta, the poem he wrote after the 1906 riots, expresses that. And he couldn't imagine that it would ever change.

**WILKERSON:** No. And I think that he would have been clearly, as he did himself, ready to leave.

**GATES:** I would like to talk about your very interesting and effective narrative strategy. You focus on three people. Ida Mae Brandon Gladney, George Swanson Starling, and Robert Joseph Pershing Foster. You have six million people to choose from and you picked these people. Tell me why you decided on this tripartite narrative strategy and why these three people?

**WILKERSON:** Well, I went out in the beginning with a great sense of urgency because of the people advancing in years; I had to go and hear as many stories as I could before it was too late. I interviewed over 1200 people—I stopped counting after that—in what I might call an audition or casting call for the people who would ultimately be the protagonists in my book.

**GATES:** You're totally crazy [*laughter*].

**WILKERSON:** I get obsessed. I went to senior centers, AARP meetings. I went to Baptist churches in New York where everybody is from South Carolina. I went to Catholic mass in Los Angeles where everybody was from New Orleans. I went to all these different places in order to find these people. And that served a really useful purpose because I could get a sense of the over-arching themes. What were the concerns? What was the heart's desire of the people as they were preparing to leave? And what happened to them? I had several things that were going to be required of the people that I would end up with. One is that they had to be the people in the front driving the car, not the children in the back seat. And by that I mean that I wanted to have people who had made the decision to leave, not the people who were observing and helpless, basically going along with what their parents had decided. I also needed to have people who were willing to talk about their experiences, because a lot of people did not want to talk. I also needed to have people who were characters unto themselves.

These three people, in many ways, are just interesting, fascinating people apart from the migration. Dr. Foster, for example, was a surgeon who became the private physician to Ray Charles. He was also an inveterate gambler. There were times when I would finish interviewing him and he wanted me drop him off at the casino, or drop him off at the track. They're just fascinating people, in and of themselves.

I needed people with whom readers could identify. I chose not to do famous people because they can tell their own story, and often do write autobiographies. I wanted people to be able to see themselves in these protagonists and to be able to ask themselves "What would I have done if I had been in this caste system? How would I have borne up under that? Would I have stayed or would I have gone? And how would I have made the transition to this other new place that I've never seen before?"

**GATES:** Because half stayed.

**WILKERSON:** Yes, half stayed. There was a decision everybody had to make and I wanted to pull the reader into the moment where they had to face the idea of leaving or staying and making a decision that would be life-altering. This is before cell phones and GPS systems and Skype. Sometimes there would be no guarantee that you would ever see your mother again. It is a huge sacrifice, one that many immigrants have made throughout the course of history in the United States. I wanted to show that we have so much more in common than we have been led to believe.

**GATES:** You have internationalized the migrant experience.

**WILKERSON:** Yes. I believe that you can look at these individuals and you can imagine, no matter what your background is, that somebody in your experience had to go through something like this. Psychologically, if not even physically, they had to go through the transition of leaving a place—the only place they had ever known for a place they had never seen.

The other thing about the three people I chose is that I wanted each to represent one of the three major streams of the migration. One stream was up the East Coast



from Florida, Georgia, the Carolinas up to Washington, DC, New York, Philadelphia, Boston. The middle stream was from Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, Arkansas to Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, the whole Midwest.

**GATES:** The one that we stereotypically think about as a migration.

**WILKERSON:** Yes, we hear so much about that one. And generally to Chicago alone, not even the other cities. And then the final stream, which has been written about the least, is the one from Texas and Louisiana to California and the entire West Coast. Each person represents one stream. I also wanted them to represent the three different decades within this three-generational, fifty-five-year period of time.

So to get the breadth and the scope of the migration, each of the three left in a different decade. Ida Mae Gladney was a sharecropper's wife whose family left in the 1930s and they went from Mississippi to Chicago ultimately. In the 1940s, George Starling, who was a citrus picker who had gone to college and was agitating for better wages and working conditions in central Florida, fled for his life and went to Harlem, where he became a railroad porter. Robert Joseph Pershing Foster was a surgeon who had served in the army in the Korean War and he left Monroe, Louisiana, his hometown, where he was not permitted to perform surgery in the hospital. He ended up taking a somewhat perilous journey from Louisiana to California in 1953.

**GATES:** As a writer what was the principal challenge of pulling off this great achievement?

**WILKERSON:** I think the main challenge was dealing with the massive amount of material that I was exposed to. For one thing, I have hundreds and hundreds of pages of transcripts on each one of the individuals that I'm writing about. It is really three books in one; three biographies. Then there is a fourth book, which is the biography of the migration itself. So the greatest challenge was just dealing with this massive amount of information.

And then, on a more personal level, the idea that I was reaching out to people who were up in years. Many of them got sick. I might arrive to interview them and I'd have to go to the hospital instead of their home. Then finally, just the perseverance that it took to work on something for fifteen years. This one project for fifteen years meant that I had to maintain the momentum within myself somehow and remain as committed to it in year nine as I was in year one. That was a challenge.

**GATES:** Why are you the first person to write about the Great Migration between its beginning and true end? All these other books about the Great Migration are about 1910, 1915, 1930, 1940 and then they say "Oh yeah, it continued." Why do you think this is the first one to see it as the full historic phenomenon that it was?

**WILKERSON:** I think that having been a national correspondent and a bureau chief for the *New York Times* made a big difference. I had the opportunity to travel all over the country for my job. I was doing all kinds of stories on any number of topics, but when I was doing something that involved African Americans, I would see that there were connections. Every time I would interview someone in LA they would talk about how they needed to go back to Texas for something. In Detroit, people were talking about going back to a family reunion in Alabama or a funeral in Tennessee. So I began to make the connection that this was not just my people in Washington, DC—people coming up from the Carolinas or Georgia. This was huge. Of course I had done a lot of reading but when I was reporting all over the country for the *New York Times*, in every place there was a connection to the South. And that was one of the things that helped me to look at it from a national perspective.

**GATES:** What is your take on the South today? You have taught at Emory. As you write, the migration ended and now there is reverse migration. The people from the North are moving back.

**WILKERSON:** I think that it is the same migration.

**GATES:** But the flow is different.

**WILKERSON:** The direction is different, but I think it's the same searching. The title of the book, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, comes from an obscure passage in the footnotes to the reprint of Richard Wright's autobiography *Black Boy* on page 496. It talks about how he was taking a part of the South to transplant in alien soil to see if it could grow differently, if it could drink of new and cool rains and bend in strange winds and respond to the warmth of other suns.

**GATES:** So is it a good thing? Is it exciting? Is it *as* exciting? Fifty years from now will someone be interviewing another scholar saying "six million Black people moved from the North to the South between 1970 and 2030"?

**WILKERSON:** I'm going on the record, taking a great leap to say I believe it's a sea change that occurred with the Great Migration. I think that the reverse migration is kind of an echo migration of the children. The children, no longer tethered and burdened by all of the pain that their grandparents and parents had experienced, can now return to a world that is made different because there was a Great Migration. This Great Migration is one of the precipitating events, I argue, that helped to create the atmosphere for the Civil Rights Movement.

And the reason I say that is three-fold. One, the Great Migration provided an opportunity for the people who were the lower caste, cheapest labor in the South, and thus the country, to say "it looks like we have options and we're going to take them." That was revolutionary because until the Great Migration, even though there had been an Emancipation Proclamation, people had not left in the same numbers as the Great Migration. They had stayed because they didn't have the option to leave. There was no option in the North at that time. The North had not opened its doors in any way or shown any interest.

**GATES:** And they were neo-slaves.

**WILKERSON:** They were neo-slaves so they were still stuck. And the Great Migration was proof that, given the chance to leave, they would be willing to take that chance. And they would leave.

Secondly, once they got to the North, their relatives would come to visit. The people who were in the South had the opportunity to get exposed to freedoms in the North that they might not have known about before. Or they might have known about them and dreamt about them, but now they could actually see them in operation. They could get on a streetcar and sit wherever they wanted. They could go and buy a meal at a restaurant and be served. That exposed them to the possibilities, even when they went home. You are a changed person once you have been exposed to freedoms like that.

Finally, the people in the North were making more money and, as with any immigrant group, they were sending money back home to the people in the South. And they were helping to finance what would become the Civil Rights Movement. So in multiple ways, the Civil Rights Movement was precipitated by the Great Migration. The Great Migration helped to create the atmosphere. It is so interesting to look at what was going on in the beginning of the Great Migration where there were no opportunities to even protest. All the protest marches and movements that took place toward the end of the migration, would not have been possible—for anybody to walk down the streets of Selma. It was barely possible when it did occur, the March on Selma.

**GATES:** At the turn of the century they would have just been crushed. They would have been killed.

**WILKERSON:** Right. It was a totalitarian regime that they were living under. My goal would be for people, especially young people, to be able to see how very limited

the options were. John Dollard said that when the options are so limited, when there's no other opportunity to do anything, the one thing that you can do is leave. And that's what they did. They did the one thing that they could do.

**GATES:** Well I think that one reason for the reverse migration, too, is the nostalgia of the grandchildren. Many of my friends from the North, who were descended from migrants, were sent back for a week or two weeks or a month, and what they remember when I ask them what was it like, is that "Oh man, it was great. We'd milk the cow and slop the hogs." But it was life in the South in a romantic way with Grandma eating biscuits every day. They were shielded from some of the harsh experiences. So in a way it is the tail coming around.

**WILKERSON:** I do believe that it is a circular thing. I think that as African Americans begin looking at the genealogy, as in the work that you are doing, and they want to share that with their own children, where do they have to go in order to find it? Returning to the place of the ancestors is a way to reclaim one's history, one's culture. And it is a more welcoming place than it was at the time. In some ways it is more welcoming and certainly more livable than many parts of the harsher, anonymous northern cities that have become very challenging for people.

**GATES:** The South was, effectively, the total Black experience. Even in 1860, there were more free Negroes living in the southern states, states in which slavery was legal than free Negroes living in the North. And most of us don't even realize that. So all the slaves were there and more farm or free Negroes lived in the South than lived in the North. It was quite dramatic when that shifted.

Just a few more questions. Between 1990 and 2000, more Africans came to the New World. Between 1990 and the year 2000, more Africans willingly migrated to the United States than came in the entire slave trade. Do you have any plans in your next book to deal with the migration from Africa? It is just as remarkable, in its way, as the Great Migration in a shorter span of time. Do you have any interest in talking about the West Indian and the African migration in subsequent work?

**WILKERSON:** I do. I feel that it is all one. This whole approach and focus on migration feels like it is one expression of yearning to be free. And I feel a connection with all of them. When you think of people coming in from the Caribbean, who form a significant part of the African American community in the country now, it was an accident of where the boat happened to arrive that determined that your people ended up in South Carolina instead of Cuba. I think that this migration to the United States—how we all came to be here, one way or the other—it is all a similar yearning to be free here in this country, whether you came up from Georgia to get to New York, or you came from the Bahamas to get to New York.

I also think of the Great Migration as helping to precipitate, to create an environment in which things were opening up for people of color who were coming from all over. I really believe that it has been misunderstood as a singular event that happened in a particular year or a particular city. And I wanted to open it up so people can realize how huge and massive it was. In other words, many of the institutions and structures related to African Americans that exist in the northern cities today are there because of this Great Migration.

As you said before, there were more freed slaves in the South than there were in the North. So where is the population in Harlem? In New York? In Detroit? In Chicago? In Boston? In Washington? Where are they coming from? This is because of the Great Migration. Why are they here? It's because of the Great Migration. So when other groups come, there is a pre-existing structure that was the result of the Great Migration.

**GATES:** You spend a lot of time writing about the effect of the migration on the North. But what was the effect of the Great Migration on the South?

**WILKERSON:** The Great Migration meant that the South lost some of its most ambitious African Americans, by definition. You had to have great resolve and some level of resources in order to leave. There is something different about migrants in general. Migrants often have less patience for the status quo, so you have people who would likely be agitators for change overall. I think you are losing a certain kind of person when you lose people in a migration experience.

The South still lags the North on so many levels, when it comes to wages, education, values of the land and property, health considerations. So there are many ways that the South is still lagging and part of it would have to be because of the loss of this brain power and the workers—the most ambitious people who went off to do great things.

Look at the people who are the legacies of the Great Migration. The true legacy of any immigrant experience is the children. You're looking at Toni Morrison, August Wilson, Lorraine Hansberry. You're looking at Richard Wright, Louis Armstrong. And jazz. Jazz wouldn't even be what it is if it were not for the Great Migration.

**GATES:** But on the other hand, we have old established Black middle class, upper-middle class families who stayed in the South. Like the King family. Or the people who founded the Black insurance companies and the Black banks. So it's complicated.

**WILKERSON:** It is complicated. You could have businesses that were dependent upon, and built their clientele around, the caste system. In other words, they were serving that level of the caste system. But when it came to creativity and the ability to express oneself, the cultural contributions that African Americans have been able to provide to this country, and thus the world, came out of the Great Migration. Toni Morrison's parents migrated from Alabama, where it would have been illegal for African Americans to walk into a library and just take out a library book. How do you become a writer if you don't have access to books? So many modes of expression became possible when people left the South and their children had the opportunity to be able to grow and thrive in the North.

Jazz wouldn't be what it is, just thinking about Miles Davis. His parents migrated from Arkansas to Illinois. How would he ever have had the opportunity? He came from a fairly well-off family. However, would he have had the luxury of going to schools where he could take music, for example? It would not have been as easy. Thelonius Monk's parents migrated from North Carolina to Harlem when he was five years old, where he had the luxury, the ability, to indulge his genius in a way that he would not have been able to in the tobacco country of North Carolina.

**GATES:** Romare Bearden from North Carolina.

**WILKERSON:** Jacob Lawrence. I mean how could we even discuss this without mentioning Jacob Lawrence, who grew up in New York. His parents had migrated.

**GATES:** And he documented the migration in that great series of panels.

**WILKERSON:** Absolutely. When you think of the Great Migration you think of Jacob Lawrence and his depictions of it. How beautiful they are. And you think of John Coltrane. John Coltrane migrated at age seventeen from North Carolina to Philadelphia where he got his first alto sax. His mother had preceded him up there and she gave him a used one. And there he began to practice. Where would we be, where would music be, where would jazz be, where would culture be? Not just in this country, but internationally, if John Coltrane had not gone to Philadelphia and gotten an alto sax?

Their expressions of creativity were within them, but it was also the transfer of southern culture. Much of their creation was informed by the spirituals and the

gospels that they had grown up with. For Toni Morrison, it was the language that she had grown up with. It is a beautiful expression and marriage of the South and the North.

**GATES:** I thank God for the Great Migration every Sunday as I eat fried chicken after church [*laughter*]. Isabel Wilkerson, thank you so much for this interview. And congratulations on the accomplishment of a brilliant, brilliant book.

**WILKERSON:** Thank you so much.

To view the video version of this interview, visit the Du Bois Review web page of the Du Bois Institute web site: <http://dubois.fas.harvard.edu/DBR>

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