

# The Warmth Of Other Suns

Isabel Wilkerson

# Table of Contents

---

<b>OVERVIEW</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>CHAPTER SUMMARIES &amp; ANALYSES</b>	<b>5</b>
Part 1, Chapters 1-2	5
Part 2, Chapters 3-9	6
Part 3, Chapters 10-11	9
Part 4, Chapters 12-17	10
Part 4, Chapters 18-21	12
Part 4, Chapters 22-25	14
Part 5, Chapters 26-Epilogue	16
<b>KEY FIGURES</b>	<b>20</b>
Ida Mae Brandon Gladney	20
George Swanson Starling	20
Robert Joseph Pershing Foster	20
Rufus Clement	21
Ray Charles	21
Martin Luther King, Jr.	21
Willis Virgil McCall	21
Richard Wright	21
James Baldwin	22
Emmett Till	22
<b>THEMES</b>	<b>23</b>
Segregation and “Separate but Equal”	23
Freedom and the American Dream	23
The Northern Paradox: Equality and Advancement for the Black Community	23
To Stay or Go: Black Community Obligation	24
The Generational Divide	24
Wealth: Conspicuous Consumption as a Sign of Success	24

## **SYMBOLS & MOTIFS**

**25**

The South: The Caste System

25

The North: The "Promised Land"

25

Jim Crow

25

## **IMPORTANT QUOTES**

**26**

## **ESSAY TOPICS**

**32**

## Overview

---

Published in 2010, *The Warmth of Other Suns* is a sweeping ethnography of the Great Migration—the mass exodus of African-Americans from the South to Northern and Western US cities dating from approximately 1914-1970. The book traces the history of racism in the Jim Crow South as well as the reasons, successes, and failures of those African-Americans who left the place of their birth in order to seek better economic and social opportunities elsewhere in the United States.

### Summary

In *The Warmth of Other Suns*, author Isabel Wilkerson moves between the stories of three individuals—Ida Mae Brandon Gladney, George Swanson Starling, and Robert Pershing Foster—discussing the historical background, statistics, and ultimate social influences the Great Migration had on the South and on the Northern ports of refuge that received nearly six million African-American migrants. Today, these black migrants appear as a modern version of the Europeans who flooded America's shores in the late 1800s and early 1900s, both groups determined to roll the dice for a better future. It is no surprise, therefore, to find census data showing that Black Americans who left the South had far more schooling than those who stayed, and that Black migrants had higher employment numbers and more stable family lives than Northern-born Black people, as shown by lower divorce rates and fewer children born outside of marriage. The traditional migrant advantage has worked historically for Americans of all colors.

Ida Mae Brandon Gladney was a sharecropper's wife who moved from Mississippi to Chicago. George Swanson Starling fled Florida and the clutches of the notorious Sheriff Willis McCall for refuge in Harlem, New York. Robert Joseph Pershing Foster, a former Army Captain and doctor, struck out for Los Angeles from Louisiana to achieve the American Dream. Despite differences in circumstance and location, Ida, George, and Robert left the American South to seek freedom and the rights bestowed upon them as American citizens. In recounting their stories, along with hundreds of others, *The Warmth of Other Suns* offers insight into the fear and humiliations African-Americans suffered under segregation and Jim Crow.

However, Wilkerson's work is not an overly romanticized account of how people fled oppression in one region to receive full freedom in another. *The Warmth of Other Suns* masterfully explores the dual nature of life in the North, where segregation was illegal, but still intruded on the lives of many African-Americans in indirect ways.

Wilkerson speaks to the challenges, failures, and successes that shifted and evolved over different eras of the Great Migration through the different perspectives of her three historical figures. She highlights two often-overlooked issues: first, that the exodus was a continuous phenomenon spanning six decades of American life; second, that it consisted of not one, but rather three geographical streams, the patterns determined by the train routes available to those bold enough to leave.

In particular, Wilkerson's accounts of Starling and Foster represent the contradictions of the Great Migration. Starling took a porter's job on the same Silver Meteor train line that had once brought him north. The life he led in Harlem was richer than anything he could have imagined. But he also knew that the migrants now riding his train would reap the blessings of a civil rights movement that were unavailable to him: History had come too late for the once promising student. Foster, meanwhile, matured into one of Los Angeles's finest surgeons. But his rejection of his Southern roots left him adrift, nursing ancient wounds and unable to enjoy his new life.

*The Warmth of Other Suns* details a period in American history, whose importance cannot be understated. The effects of the Great Migration not only affected the lives of millions of African-Americans, but also shaped much of modern-day American popular culture and identity.

# Chapter Summaries & Analyses

---

## Part 1, Chapters 1-2

### Part 1: "In The Land of Our Forefathers"

#### Part 1, Chapter 1 Summary: "Leaving"

The first chapter of *The Warmth of Other Suns* introduces the reader to the book's three main characters. The chapter also hints at some of the reasons Ida Mae Brandon Gladney, George Swanson Starling, and Robert Joseph Pershing Foster left the South in search of better opportunities for themselves and their families in the cities of the American North and West.

#### Part 1, Chapter 2 Summary: "The Great Migration, 1915-1970"

Wilkerson underscores the scope of the Great Migration. It is a movement felt on a national scale and one experienced in the life of every Black family: "from the early years of the twentieth century, to well past its middle age, nearly every black family in the American South, which means nearly every black family in America, had a decision to make" (8). The combined effects of these millions of decisions led to a decades-long process shaped more by the accidents of geography and local circumstances than by planning and coordination:

[The Great Migration] 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 to truly capture it while it was underway (9).

However, once it had occurred, the effect of the Great Migration was profound. It deeply affected and influenced what was to become modern American culture.

### Part 1, Chapters 1-2 Analysis

The first chapters of *The Warmth of Other Suns* provide a blueprint for the book's methodology: Wilkerson will punctuate its three main stories with historical background so that the reader might better understand The Great Migration. This combination of extremely detailed and minute biography and broad anecdotes gesturing at the Great Migration's enormity set Wilkerson's work apart from other historical accounts of this period. As she points out, "the large emotional truths, the patient retelling of people's interior lives and motivations, that are the singular gift of the accounts in this book" (13).

The mixture of the personal with the large-scale also means that the book's structure echoes its first major theme—that any account of the Great Migration cannot solely present it in abstract numerical terms, but must delve into the specifics that prompted each migrant to leave their place of origin for an uncertain future elsewhere.

## Part 2, Chapters 3-9

### Part 2: “Beginnings”

#### Part 2, Chapter 3 Summary: “Ida Mae Brandon Gladney”

Ida Mae Brandon Gladney was born in Mississippi and later moved to Chicago with her husband George. African-Americans living in the South during this time had to contend with the oppression of segregation—the “invisible hand [that] ruled their lives and the lives of all the colored people in Chickasaw County and the rest of Mississippi and the entire South for that matter. It wasn’t one thing; it was everything” (31). The chapter also shows how African-Americans like Gladney were forced to learn things through experience and nuance. For example, after Gladney was harassed for having gone to a blacksmith’s shop, she “discovered that, when it came to white people, there were good ones and bad ones like anything else and that she had to watch them closely to figure out the difference” (32).

#### Part 2, Chapter 4 Summary: “The Stirrings of Discontent”

Ida Mae Brandon Gladney was part of the early period of the Great Migration, which started when social and societal chaos gripped the South following the South’s defeat in the American Civil War (1861-1865). Institutionalized racism and culturally condoned white supremacist terrorism dominated the lives of African-Americans in threatening and terrifying ways long after the fighting ended. Prominent public figures embraced this kind of violence: “‘If it is necessary, every Negro in the state will be lynched,’ James K. Vardaman, the white supremacist candidate in the 1903 Mississippi governor’s race declared” (39). White institutions supported and emboldened racial hatred: “‘newspapers alerted readers to the time and place of an upcoming lynching” (39). Quickly, those in power codified white supremacist ideology as “Jim Crow” (41)—a system of laws used to segregate and disenfranchise African-Americans (41).

Chapter 4 paints a vivid picture of the oppression and bleak lives lived by African-Americans in the South during this time, and shows how these factors led to many blacks deciding that it would be much better to leave the South for the unknown than to stay and have to deal with the constant threat of physical and emotional violence.

#### Part 2, Chapter 5 Summary: “George Swanson Starling”

Raised a generation after Ida Mae in Eustis, Florida, George Swanson Starling saw as a boy how his family’s sharecropping situation adversely affected them. Like many Black farmers forced into sharecropping arrangements, the Starlings suffered unfair and exploitative agreements with the owners of their land.

In the 1930s, it was “estimated that only a quarter to a third of the sharecroppers got an honest settlement, which did not in itself mean they got any money” (54). At the same time, Jim Crow laws emboldened states to build a legal framework for harassing, oppressing, and circumscribing the lives of Black residents. For example, Florida “took steps to begin imposing a formal caste system” (59) that would restrict the rights of African-Americans living in the state—a state that was home to some of “the most heinous acts of terrorism committed anywhere in the South” (62).

Despite this, Starling was a star student, made valedictorian at his high school, and finished his first year of college without failing any subject. However, his family’s financial situation prevented Starling from finishing his college

education, which, coupled with his decision to marry quickly and rashly to spite his father, profoundly affected the rest of his life.

## Part 2, Chapter 6 Summary: “Robert Joseph Pershing Foster”

Unlike the book’s two other central figures, Robert Joseph Pershing Foster, part of the last generation of the Great Migration, came from an affluent Louisiana family. His father was a schoolteacher and his brother a medical doctor, which meant that Robert Joseph Pershing Foster had many benefits not afforded to the average African-American living in the Jim Crow South. Foster loved the romantic ideal of California, aspiring from an early age to leave his hometown and make a new life for himself in either Oakland or Los Angeles—two destinations that were magnets for those leaving the South, especially Louisiana.

## Part 2, Chapter 7 Summary: “A Burdensome Labor”

Wilkerson describes the lives the book’s three main figures were living before they made the decision to leave their ancestral homes and families, focusing on the burden of being Black in the South and the indignities that the descendants of enslaved people often suffered. African-Americans did not take the decision to leave the South lightly, but it was the inevitable result of years and years of being treated as second-class citizens, constantly at the mercy of the whims of their white neighbors. The sharecropping system limited the amount of wealth Black farmers could amass and left them fully reliant on the white landowning class.

Ida Mae Brandon Gladney spent her teens and early adulthood working in the cotton fields and choosing between her many suitors. When she married George Gladney, she left work as a field hand to adeptly raise their children and manage their home—likely no easy task given the constant shortage of goods and money that plagued many African-American households.

Having married rashly and early, George Swanson Starling needed money, so he took work as a picker in the orange groves of Florida. However, he felt alienated from his fellow workers because he was more educated than the vast majority of them. His education enabled him to see the ways in which the white owners of the groves shortchanged those working for them. Starling slowly moved into a leadership position, explaining to the other pickers what fair payment for their labor should be. This activism was dangerous—Starling would eventually become a target for white landowners threatened by anyone agitating to destroy the status quo.

Coming from a family of means, in the fall of 1937 Robert Joseph Pershing Foster was able to enroll in Atlanta’s Morehouse College, an institution trying to pave a wave forward for the descendants of enslaved people: “whatever future there was for colored America, they believed themselves to be it” (117). Leaving the shadow of his older brother Leland, Foster courted Alice Clement, the daughter of Rufus Clement, the President of Atlanta University. Their eventual marriage set Foster up for lifelong competition with Alice’s father, a powerhouse in the Black community.

## Part 2, Chapters 8-9 Summary: “The Awakening” and “Breaking Away”

As their titles indicate, these chapters focus on the last-straw moments for the three main figures.

Ida Mae Brandon Gladney’s cousin Joe Lee was falsely accused of stealing turkeys and subsequently nearly beaten



to death. In the aftermath, she and her husband decided that they could no longer remain in the South, one accusation away from their white neighbors dealing physical harm and even death with impunity to anyone they wanted.

During WWII, after hearing rumors about labor shortages in Northern cities, George Swanson Starling moved to Detroit, against the wishes of his wife, to work in a factory that made B-29 cargo planes. During his time there, he experienced one of the many race riots that were the Northerners' response to the large influx of African-Americans, whom whites saw as a threat to their jobs and way of life. Race riots like this one were a not-so-subtle indication that although African-Americans escaped one kind of persecution in the South, they faced racism and prejudice in the North. Fearing the effects of the riots, Starling left Detroit and returned to his orange picking job in Florida. In Eustis, he organized a makeshift labor union among the orange pickers, taking advantage of the growing labor shortage amid rising demand for fruit in the North. His labor activism made him a marked man; fear of reprisal forced him to leave the South again and settle in Harlem, New York.

Robert Joseph Pershing Foster, now married with a daughter, became a surgeon in the Army during the Korean War, where he was commissioned a Captain and sent to Austria. He believed that there he would finally use his medical training, but when he encountered a colonel from Mississippi in Austria, "Pershing found himself back in the South" (145). Although limited in his duties, Foster still managed to refine his skills as a doctor in Europe. Back in the United States, he faced a choice: His father-in-law wanted him to remain in the South, but Foster wanted to strike out on his own. Foster ultimately decided to take his chances in California, leaving his family behind.

## Part 2, Chapters 3-9 Analysis

These chapters paint a vivid picture of African-Americans in the South and the oppression that followed the brief hope of the Reconstruction period.

At first, as we follow the three generations of migrants, it seems as though conditions in the South were improving—the psychic toll of living under constant threat of violence that led Ida Mae Gladney to flee was materially different from many Robert Foster's quest to fulfill his potential. However, the book makes it clear that instead of being resolved, the racism that drove Black people to decide to leave the South simply became less overt—though no less oppressive. Gladney's generation saw Black residents at the mercy of white neighbors in a way that feels as though slavery never quite ended. George Starling had the freedom to organize fellow fruit pickers, but this led to increased attention—and thus threat—from the white ruling class at a time when standing up for better treatment was dangerous for Black men. Robert Foster grew up in a community where Black institutions could allow Black people to achieve success and prominence; however, as soon as he left that environment, he encountered prejudice that prevented him from practicing medicine.

All three of Wilkerson's historical figures face a commonplace dilemma for African-Americans at the time: Should one leave the South and its white population behind, or does one have a responsibility to stay in the South and work towards equal rights and justice for African-Americans? The most conflicted about his role was Starling, whose return to Florida and subsequent attempts to protest for better working conditions for his fellow pickers stemmed from his sense of duty. Gladney's difficult decision to leave came less from her desire to improve her community and more from self-preservation. Finally, Foster focused much more on fulfilling his own potential as a doctor than doing activism on behalf of his community—something that makes sense given the fact that he grew up in and benefited from already well-established Black institutions.

## Part 3, Chapters 10-11

### Part 3: "Exodus"

#### Part 3, Chapter 10 Summary: "The Appointed Time of Their Coming"

Part 3 of the book shows how the three main characters left the South and relates anecdotes of other Southern migrants.

Many African-Americans simply snuck away with no notice, so as to not arouse the ire of the whites that they worked for, though some, like Ida Mae Brandon Gladney, managed "a few dollars" (184) from their former employers and did not have to abscond. This shows just how significantly whites in the South limited African-Americans' freedom of movement, seeking to keep them as cheap labor.

Being denied basic rights led a large portion to leave; others fled for safety reasons, like George Swanson Starling, who needed to get out "before the grove owners got to him" (185).

For others, like Robert Joseph Pershing Foster, leaving the South meant being able to completely start over and remake themselves. When Foster arrived in California, he renamed himself "Bob. Bob with a martini and stingy-brim hat. It was modern and hip, and it suited the new version of himself as the leading man in his own motion picture" (189). This power to be whatever one wanted to be led many to leave to more fully actualize.

#### Part 3, Chapter 11 Summary: "Crossing Over"

While some African-Americans, like Robert Joseph Pershing Foster, believed that once they left the South a new world would suddenly open up to them, this was not always the case. For example, Foster was crushed when he was repeatedly turned away from one motel after another in states no longer under the rule of Jim Crow: "Robert was feeling sick now [...] nobody had bothered to tell Robert ahead of time, but some colored people who had made the journey called it *James Crow* in California" (211).

Moreover, apart from having to deal with the masked racism that was present in the North, the psychological aspect of moving to a place where the weather, culture, and environment was completely different proved to be another massive obstacle that migrants of the Great Migration had to overcome. They needed to learn how to live again in this new world, "like getting unstuck from a magnet" (221) that had overshadowed them and dominated their every move for much of their lives.

### Part 3, Chapters 10-11 Analysis

This section of the book explores the psychology of leaving the South and of arriving in the North.

Early generations of migrants fled the South in secret—a strategy reminiscent of enslaved people escaping their bondage. Fear for their physical safety pervades these accounts, concern intense enough to make people leave without preparation. For people in Gladney's generation, the fear was amorphous and pervasive—simply being a Black person contemplating moving North was enough to trigger white anger and aggression. White oppression of

Black residents was still so intense that migrants felt uneasy making any visible signs of being about to leave. Decades later, Starling also went North out of fear—though his fear was more localized. He was in danger specifically because he dared to better the conditions of his fellow fruit pickers, and he knew that the whites who control the agricultural industry in Florida would seek retribution.

The next emotion Wilkerson describes is the disappointment of realizing that North only offered a covert version of the racism migrants had faced in the South. Though Northern states did not have Jim Crow laws on the books, residents there were just as likely to discriminate against Black people.

For people of more means in Foster's generation, however, moving out of the South was psychologically freeing. In California, Foster could become a more casual, more modern, less historically weighed down version of himself. This was the positive flip side of the rootlessness that such a dramatic change of living environment could create.

## Part 4, Chapters 12-17

### Part 4: "The Kinder Mistress"

#### Part 4, Chapter 12 Summary: "Chicago"

Chapter 12 briefly describes Ida Mae Brandon Gladney's first impressions upon arriving to Chicago from Mississippi. Chicago was "the first city she ever laid eyes on" (226), and it "looked like heaven" (226).

#### Part 4, Chapter 13 Summary: "New York"

Chapter 13 briefly describes George Swanson Starling's first impressions of Manhattan, where he "was hoping [he] would be able to live as a man and express [himself] in a manly way without the fear of getting lynched at night" (229).

#### Part 4, Chapter 14 Summary: "Los Angeles"

Chapter 14 briefly describes Robert Joseph Pershing Foster's first impressions of California, "one of the last receiving stations of the twentieth-century migration out of the South" (233), since "distance between California and the old Confederacy had discouraged all but the most determined of black pioneers" (233). Oakland was a disappointment, so he decided to travel south to Los Angeles, where he believed all of his dreams would come true and where he could "start living for the first time in his life" (237).

#### Part 4, Chapter 15 Summary: "The Things They Left Behind"

Because life in the South was so dramatically different from life in the North, African-Americans "brought the Old Country with them" (240), and they surrounded themselves with people they knew "from the next farm" (240) back home. Black migrants built communities to create solidarity and power. As often as they could, "they wired money back home" (241), to assist those left behind and to prove that life was better and success possible in the North.

Still, many pined for place that a "part of them had not wanted to leave" (241). They felt they had been forced out; if

they had been half as well treated in the South as they were in the North, they never would have left (241).

### Part 4, Chapter 16 Summary: “Transplanted in Alien Soil”

In Chapter 16, Wilkerson uses the experiences of the three central figures, newly arrived in their respective cities, to show the ways in which Southern migration slowly changed the dynamics of Northern cities. Migration ran along rail lines, so Northern cities served by major train lines received a disproportionate number of migrants that now needed housing and work. Tensions developed in those cities around housing in particular, as neighborhoods at first did everything possible to keep out migrants. However, due to the basic economics of the situation, this soon began to change. For instance, in Harlem, “the flood of colored migrants soon broke down the last of the racial levees” (250).

Migrants faced other obstacles. While some, like Ida Mae Brandon Gladney and George Swanson Starling transitioned relatively seamlessly to their new lives, Robert Joseph Pershing Foster was “beside himself” (255) trying to build his medical practice. Foster had assumed that in Los Angeles patients would just be waiting for him. However, Blacks in California “had choices colored people in the South couldn’t dream of” (255)—a situation that meant they could choose to patronize services they had previously been denied, and did not necessarily want to see a Black migrant doctor.

### Part 4, Chapter 17 Summary: “Divisions”

Although many African-Americans believed that they would suddenly be able to live their lives to the fullest once they left the South, “unknowingly, the migrants were walking into a headwind of resentment and suspicion” (260). While history has often mischaracterized black migrants, the facts show that “the greater the obstacles and the farther the distance traveled, the more ambitious the migrants” (261). Often, migrants “resemble in educational levels the whites among whom they live [and who are] of substantially higher socioeconomic status, on average, than the resident Negro population” (263).

For Ida Mae Brandon Gladney, who arrived in Chicago during the Great Depression, life was hard, but still appreciably better. She continued as a mother and a homemaker, while her husband George left to find work in Milwaukee—an example of Wilkerson’s point about the engagement and drive present within the migrant community.

Finally having been able to bring his wife up North, George Swanson Starling threw himself headlong into life in Harlem, which, in 1945, was a burgeoning black community ripe with fashion, culture, and nightlife. He participated in events like end-of-the-month parties that allowed African-Americans to raise money to cover the rent and to blow off steam in a friendly and warm community of their peers.

Robert Joseph Pershing Foster, having finally succeeded in building his medical practice, sent for his wife and daughters to come live with him in Los Angeles. Still trying to fully escape from the shadow of his father-in-law, Robert felt pressure to become the “man” of the family. His drive for visible recognition increased, and he vowed to “put on a show so they wouldn’t forget him” (284) to prove all the people who doubted him wrong.

### Part 4, Chapters 12-17 Analysis

Wilkerson contrasts the extremely high hopes of migrants about their new places of residence and the realities of life there. The first chapters of this section point out that each successive generation of Black migrants had wildly

positive assumptions about the cities they traveled to: Gladney finds Chicago heavenly, Starling feels Harlem gives him the opportunity to express himself fully, and Foster makes it all the way to Los Angeles to live out his dreams.

However, the reality of building a new life in a new place created several obstacles. Psychologically, there was the difficulty of nostalgia and homesickness—conditions migrants mitigated by creating enclaves. Economically, waves of migrants stressed the cities they had come to, triggering racist and self-preservationist attitudes from previous city residents. Part of the reason migrant enclaves persisted is that it was easier to find housing and jobs in parts of the city where earlier migrants had already established a foothold than to battle white residents for space.

Wilkerson considers the newly created communities from several angles. On the one hand, they were often supportive foundations for newcomers—Starling describes the Harlem fundraising parties that helped those behind on rent. On the other hand, it was often hard to keep communities together—for example, Gladney’s husband had to leave Chicago to find work. Finally, not all communities were inward looking and self-bolstering, as Foster found out in Los Angeles, where his medical practice did not initially attract the Black clientele he was expecting to easily acquire.

## Part 4, Chapters 18-21

### Part 4: “The Kinder Mistress”

#### Part 4, Chapter 18 Summary: “To Bend in Strange Winds”

Life in the North, culturally, often ran counter to what many migrants had experienced in the South:

In the receiving cities of the North and West, the newcomers [...] had to worry about the acceptance or rejection not only from whites they encountered but from colored people who arrived ahead of them, who could at times be the most sneeringly judgmental of all (287).

Black migrants had to prove that they were not going to bring down the image of African-Americans already established in Northern cities. Assimilation was an important step for many black migrants, who had to learn new behavioral codes and unwritten rules not to seem overly rustic. Some Black newspapers even ran articles of “do’s and don’ts” (291) instructing those new to the North on how best to fit in.

George Swanson Starling, a railroad porter, had a first-hand view of migration psychology: “It seemed to George that the moment they stepped on the train going north, [migrants] became different people, started acting like what they imagined the people up north to be” (294).

Robert Joseph Pershing Foster, who had finally begun to set up house, bought a Cadillac to show that he was thriving. Showcasing wealth was fundamental to Foster’s life, demonstrating that he was a successful doctor and displaying to white people that he had means and refused to be treated as a second-class citizen. Conspicuous consumption was prevalent during the Great Migration, especially for migrants leaving sharecropping arrangements—employment that often paid poorly.

## Part 4, Chapter 19 Summary: “The Other Side of the Jordan”

The previous lives of the three central figures in the South contrasted with their new lives in the North. They could now exercise rights and activities without fear that their doing so might bring reprisals from their white neighbors.

Ida Mae Brandon Gladney registered to vote and worked at a polling place to assist other African-Americans in exercising their right to suffrage, while “back home, no one dared to talk about such things” (363).

As a rail porter, George Swanson Starling observed the best and worst aspects of migration firsthand. He witnessed a widespread behavior called “hoboing”(306-09), whereby African-Americans desperate to escape the clutches of Jim Crow, but too poor to afford tickets, jumped onto moving trains, often holding on to the outside of passenger cars.

Wilkerson discusses the assassination of Florida NAACP organizer Harry T. Moore. Allegedly, the infamously racist Sheriff Willis McCall killed Moore by planting a bomb planted under Moore’s house. Moore’s activist works parallels George Starling’s unionizing, and his assassination shows that Starling could have been lynched with impunity had he not chosen to leave. Wilkerson explores how this kind of danger affected organizers’ arguments in the ongoing debate of whether to leave or stay.

Robert Joseph Pershing Foster, whose life is on the upswing, planned an epic party to celebrate his success and show off his wife and family to the community. By this point, Robert’s practice had expanded to include as patients even such famous people as Ray Charles.

## Part 4, Chapter 20 Summary: “Complications”

Not all was perfect in the North. Money could often be tight. Resituated Northern Black people often had to house and care for family and close friends that made the trip up North after them: “it was only a matter of time before just about every colored family in the North, unsettled though they might have been, got visitors” (339).

George Swanson Starling, in his role as a porter, had to deal with Southern whites on a regular basis, and “his formal bearing did not sit well with some of the southern conductors he worked for, who considered him acting above his station” (341). Still, keeping his dignity, George managed to fight back and resist, even getting one conductor fined and suspended for his conduct on the train. This small victory, however, forced George to change to a new train line—after such an incident, even a few minutes in the South could have dire consequences for a Black man.

After treating Ray Charles’s serious wrist injury, Robert Joseph Pershing Foster went on tour with the famous pianist. Travel throughout the country was an eye-opening experience. Later, Foster even delivered one of Ray Charles’s children, who was then named after Foster.

## Part 4, Chapter 21 Summary: “The River Keeps Running”

Wilkerson discusses “the lengths to which some colored people would go to get out of the South” (351) by recounting the story of Arlington High, who was spirited away in a coffin after being falsely imprisoned in an insane asylum for trying to organize African-Americans. The chapter also briefly touches on a problem that would affect some of the migrants’ offspring, a generation born into the freedoms of the North but dealing with problems never imagined by those who had left the South.

On a lighter note, in thanks for all that he has done for him, Ray Charles wrote a song for Robert Joseph Pershing Foster that topped the charts and brought in more people to Foster's medical practice.

## Part 4, Chapters 18-21 Analysis

Great Migration migrants of each successive generation straddled a divide between cultural, political, legal, and societal frameworks in the South and in the North. Often, the differences between their old and new lives were a microcosm of the larger changes taking place nationwide. For example, Gladney could finally escape the legacy of institutional voter suppression; in Chicago, she could exercise her voting rights and increase suffrage among fellow Black residents. Starling could channel his innate activist impulse to fight against workplace bigotry and harassment with less risk to his person, and with the knowledge that the train company would not let egregiously racist behavior go unpunished.

At the same time, Black people who had lived in both the South and the North could navigate two sets of behavioral codes, switching between them as necessary and appropriate. Learning new ways of being from helpful newspaper articles or from hostile neighbors, migrants translated their new knowledge to the migrating waves who came after them. This knowledge of Southern and Northern expectations was only available to people who had experience of both places—as we will see in the next section of the book, the cultural clash of Black people born in the North visiting the South without having lived there as children often resulted in white violence.

## Part 4, Chapters 22-25

### Part 4: "The Kinder Mistress"

#### Part 4, Chapter 22 Summary: "The Prodigals"

When migrants returned to the South to visit, "they put on a show" (365) and brought their Northern-born "children [who] did not have the internalized deference [to whites] of their Southern cousins" (366).

This cultural difference led to a horrifying event in American racial history: the murder of Emmett Till, who "was perhaps the most memorialized black northerner to ever go south, if only because he never made it back alive and because of the brutal reasons he didn't" (369). Till was lynched during a summer vacation trip to Mississippi after he allegedly whistled at a white woman. The murder led to widespread outrage in the North and helped garner much support for the burgeoning Civil Rights movement.

#### Part 4, Chapter 23 Summary: "Disillusionment"

If African-American families in the North tried to move into white neighborhoods, they faced racism and segregation. When the Clarks—a well-educated African-American family—attempted to move into the working class suburb of Cicero, Illinois, the idea sparked a "full-out riot" (374) in the area. Afterwards, members of the white rioting mob were exonerated; the only blame fell to "the people who [...] should have never rented the apartment to the Clarks in the first place" (374). This officially sanctioned segregation to split neighborhoods along racial lines was common practice in the North—a practice the effects of which still predominate today. For example, while "blacks would make



up more than eighty percent of the population of Detroit. Just across the Ford Expressway, the black population of Dearborn, the 2000 Census found, was one percent" (378). Such issues, however, because they were not as overt as those facing organizers in the South, were much harder to confront and fight against, and in many ways went overlooked by the national audience.

### Part 4, Chapter 24 Summary: "Revolutions"

Wilkerson intersperses the fight for civil rights with the experiences of the book's three central figures. After successful marches in the South and after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. set his sights on dealing with the "indifference and exploitation" (386) African-Americans faced in the North. There, he encountered the "Northern Paradox" (387)—a situation in which "almost everybody is against discrimination in general, but, at the same time, almost everybody practices discrimination in his own personal affairs" (387). In Chicago, King met with some of the most virulent opposition he had ever experienced, remarking, "I have never seen anything so hostile and hateful" (389).

George Swanson Starling did his best to make sure that African-Americans travelling by rail realized that they no longer needed to suffer previous indignities. Surreptitiously, George told passengers that they no longer had to give up their seats once the train passed the Mason-Dixon line, but even this carried the dangerous possibility that Starling might be "advising passengers to defy the conductor's orders" (391).

The three subjects of Wilkerson's work dealt with the changing times in different ways. Ida Mae Brandon Gladney spoke of the "white flight" that affected many neighborhoods in Chicago: "one by one [...] they sold their house and moved away" (397). The Gladneys' young daughter became pregnant while visiting family in back in Eustis.

Robert Joseph Pershing Foster still competed against his father-in-law, who was successfully elected to the Atlanta Board of Education in 1953. Though Robert felt that his wife and daughter were growing distant from him, he remained constantly at work, needing to appear successful and beloved. After his father-in-law died in 1967 and his mother-in-law came to live with the Fosters in California, their home situation grew worse.

### Part 4, Chapter 25 Summary: "The Fullness of Their Migration"

Wilkerson looks back at the results of the Great Migration from its point of conclusion, 1970, examining the overall effect that the migration had on those who took part in it, on Northern whites, and on other immigrant communities that co-mingled with the migrants. For Wilkerson, it is important to remember the "quiet successes of everyday people like Ida Mae" (415) because debates about the success or failure of the migration too often focus on "welfare and pathology" (415).

Wilkerson compares and contrasts the experience of European immigrants who arrived in Chicago and other Northern cities around the same time as migrants like Ida Mae and George Swanson Starling made their arrivals:

A major difference between the acceptance and thus life outcomes of black migrants from the South and their white immigrant counterparts was [...] white immigrants and their descendants could escape the disadvantages of their station if they chose to, while that option did not hold for the vast majority of black migrants and their children (417).



The North “called for blacks to remain in their station” (417)—a reality that explains some of the difficulties facing the second generation of migrants, who did not fare as well as their parents although they had had the benefits and advantages of being brought up in the North. Wilkerson argues that “the presence of so many black migrants elevated the status of other immigrants in the North and West” (419), for they “unwittingly diverted anti-immigration antagonisms their way” (419).

Wilkerson sets off this image of black struggle with the story of a massive party Robert Joseph Pershing Foster threw, a gala event likened to “a state dinner” (424). A local newspaper that covered Black socialites of Los Angeles wrote up Foster’s well-known success and his party. However, even this recognition was not enough—as one of Robert’s guests and a life-long friend remarked, Robert “always sought approval [...] And I never understood it because he had it all” (431). Foster’s unshakeable insecurity arguably reflected the status of African-Americans in the non-Southern United States: No matter what heights they reached, they worried that what they had could suddenly be snatched away from them.

## Part 4, Chapters 22-25 Analysis

The Great Migration revealed that the white supremacist system of the South only worked when Black people had been conditioned into it from birth. The shocking murder of Emmett Till revealed white Southerners’ expectations that Black people accept subhuman treatment without complaint—an expectation that horrified Northern whites whose bigotry was more segregationist in nature. In the North, racism was often more covert and less obvious; whites practiced exclusionary policies to enforce housing segregation, like redlining neighborhood to keep Blacks out or participating in coordinated white flight to the suburbs.

One of Wilkerson’s more controversial arguments is that Black migrants absorbed the bigotry that would otherwise have been directed at immigrants. This is hard to measure, and it is not clear that prejudice exists in a finite quantity that can be exhausted after being distributed in one direction.

Wilkerson works to highlight less visible successes like Gladney’s happy home life—her project in this book is to rehabilitate the scarcity mentality that pervaded the lives of people like Foster, whose successes never registered and who always felt perched on the brink of failure.

## Part 5, Chapters 26-Epilogue

### Part 5: “Aftermath”

#### Part 5, Chapter 26 Summary: “In the Places They Left”

Even after legislation mandated ending segregation, the South was slow to adapt and often found ways around fully integrating its schools and services. Wilkerson argues that the virulently racist Sheriff Willis McCall, who “cast a long shadow over Lake County” (438) well into the 1970s, was not an isolated figure. Instead, he was emblematic of many local sheriffs and other officials who sought to keep African-Americans in their place by bending the law. The fact that a man like McCall could win election after election despite his consistent harassment of Black people in his jurisdiction shows the pervasive acceptance of Jim Crow.

Many migrants had an estranged relationship with their former homes. For George Swanson Starling, going home after the demise of McCall was a victory in the face of impossible odds. However, Robert Joseph Pershing Foster always wanted to distance himself from Louisiana, as though he were somehow tainted by being from there.

### **Part 5, Chapter 27 Summary: "Losses"**

Chapter 27 is a snapshot of the lives of Wilkerson's three central subjects as they grew older and sustained the expected losses of close loved ones. Wilkerson paints loss as a palpable and permanent fixture in the lives of many African-Americans, who had to give up so much to find a place of opportunity.

### **Part 5, Chapter 28 Summary: "More North and West than South"**

Eventually, the book's three central figures fully assimilated into the North despite their Southern roots. They still faced the frustrations of racism, but they managed to carve out successful lives for themselves. However, they had now been in the North so long that they could witness how Northern cities were changing: Drugs and gangs took over once proud and prominent black neighborhoods. Nevertheless, because Ida Mae Brandon Gladney and George Swanson Starling had experienced the harshness of the South, they held celebrity status in their neighborhoods, which made them off-limits for gang violence as neighbors watched out for and took care of them.

### **Part 5, Chapter 29 Summary: "Redemption"**

Wilkerson enters the narrative, describing accompanying her three subjects to various locales.

When Wilkerson first met the 83-year-old Gladney at her home in Chicago, she was shocked at "the craziness" that "has Ida Mae hemmed in on all sides" (467).

George Swanson Starling, now a deacon, believed it "his responsibility to share" (469) the wisdom he acquired through great hardship with younger generations. Starling never truly cut his ties with Florida the way that the other two subjects in Wilkerson's narrative did: "George comes back to Eustis every two years for the biennial reunion of Curtwright Colored High School" (476).

Robert Joseph Pershing Foster was a gracious host. His progeny "lead upper-middle class lives" (472), and one of his grandchildren will attend Yale. Friends and former patients who are skeptical of the advice given to them by their doctors still called him for medical advice.

### **Part 5, Chapter 30 Summary: "And Perhaps, to Bloom"**

Chapter 30 is devoted to the daily lives and routines of Wilkerson's three subjects as they age. Ida Mae Brandon Gladney developed strong familial bonds that sustained her over the years. In contrast, Robert Joseph Pershing Foster slowly lived out the remainder of his life in isolation.

### **Part 5, Chapter 31 Summary: "The Winter of Their Lives"**

Wilkerson describes the ultimate health failures and final days of George Swanson Starling and Robert Joseph Pershing Foster, men who led brilliant lives despite all that had been stacked against them. After death, both men are noble and revered figures in their respective communities, whose experiences form a portion of the fabric of American history.

### Part 5, Chapter 32 Summary: “The Emancipation of Ida Mae”

The final chapter of *The Warmth of Other Suns* focuses solely on Ida Mae Brandon Gladney. Gladney lived into the 21st century, outliving both George Swanson Starling and Robert Joseph Pershing Foster and having seen things she never dreamed possible as a child in Mississippi.

Wilkerson accompanied Gladney to Mississippi, where she met with old and new relatives. Once, she spontaneously leapt from the car to run into a cotton field to pick cotton, a bold action only possible because Gladney’s sense of herself has fundamentally shifted:

She was a Chicagoan now but had seen and heard so much, so many wondrous, sad, and unspeakable things in her life, that there still wasn’t time enough to tell all that she had witnessed [...] She put the disappointments in a lockbox in the back of her mind and lived in the moment, which is all anybody has for sure. She had learned long ago, when things were so much harder in the Old Country she left behind, that, after all she had been through, every day to her was a blessing and every breath she took a gift (525).

Wilkerson ends with the hope that the struggles of migrants would allow their descendants to live freer lives with more possibility. Wilkerson wants the reader to understand how important each individual is to history.

### Epilogue Summary

The Great Migration was influential not only to African-American communities, but also to the United States as a whole: “[b]y the time the Great Migration was over, few Americans had not been touched by it” (527). Descendants of migrants made great strides in all walks of American life, leaving an indelible impression on American popular culture and politics: “the first black mayors in each of the major receiving cities of the North and West were [...] participants or sons of the Great Migration” (529).

The migration was important psychologically too, since deciding to leave meant making a choice to exercise freedoms once denied to the African-American community: “The achievement was in making the decision to be free and acting on that decision, wherever that journey led them” (535).

### Part 5, Chapters 26-Epilogue Analysis

Participants in and witnesses to the Great Migration were aware of the fact that this movement was historically and culturally significant, and each of the book’s subjects works to make meaning from the experience. Most obviously, Starling translates his life into lessons and teachable moments in his position as deacon. Moreover, both he and Gladney have become living monuments in their communities—even as neighborhoods descend into poverty and crime, residents uphold the importance these former migrants.

Ultimately, the ends of their lives show that despite being part of the same important historical moment, the book's three subjects are individuals. Gladney and Starling hold personal relationships and community engagement paramount, while Foster continues valuing what he has always valued—visible professional success. Wilkerson's perceptive description of the psychological transformation that defines Gladney's visit to Mississippi highlights the dramatic impact of the Great Migration on both the large and small scale.

## Key Figures

---

### Ida Mae Brandon Gladney

Ida Mae Brandon Gladney was a sharecropper's wife who left her home in Mississippi soon after her cousin was almost beaten to death after being falsely accused of stealing a turkey from a white man. Leaving behind the backbreaking work of picking cotton for very low wages, Ida begins a new life in Chicago, where she eventually finds contentment and raises a family. Over the course of her life, she moves from an innocent to a realistic approach to the world, but she never becomes bitter, even as the neighborhood around her slowly deteriorates. Of the three main characters profiled by Wilkerson in *The Warmth of Other Suns*, Ida Mae seems like the happiest and most well-adjusted of them all, as she manages to live her life with a grace and dignity and never really let the anger that others have influence her life.

### George Swanson Starling

George Swanson Starling was an agricultural worker in the orange groves of Florida who aspired to a college education but ended up never able to finish his degree. Marrying young and rashly, George's life was a rollercoaster that never seemed to allow him much peace or the chance to settle down. Having stood up to orange grove owners by leading a strike for fairer wages for the workers George was forced to flee Florida to avoid being the target a lynch mob. After arriving in Harlem in 1945, he worked as a train porter on the eastern seaboard. Throughout his life, George worked for equality for those in the black community, despite the dangers. A strong and passionate man, George eventually became a bastion in his community and the type of elder well-respected by young and old alike. His example was one to be aspired to, for although it would have been easy for a man like George to have become embittered by his situation, he never truly let life beat him

### Robert Joseph Pershing Foster

Born into a large and somewhat influential family in small-town Louisiana, Robert Joseph Pershing Foster was an ambitious and flashy young man who desired to make the best for himself. Having trained as a doctor, Pershing spent time abroad in the United States Army, where he still managed to feel the grip of segregation, as he was not allowed to practice medicine as widely as his white counterparts. After returning to America, Pershing decides to leave the South and move to Los Angeles to pursue a career in medicine. The move set him at odds with his father-in-law, Rufus Clement, who believed the idea foolish and wanted Pershing, now calling himself Robert, to move to Atlanta and work in the South.

On his drive to California, Robert's romantic notions of the freedoms he might have in the west are dashed when he must first drive three states before being able to find a hotel that will let him stay for the night. Nevertheless, Robert works tirelessly to build up a practice in Los Angeles, such that he eventually becomes the personal physician to musician Ray Charles. Despite his success, Robert never seems comfortable with himself. He feels a need to control all aspects of his life and is obsessed with status, clothing, cars, and gambling—things that will all show that he has wealth that he can easily part with if he wants to. Of the three central figures in the text, Robert is by far the most financially successful. Still, Robert seems haunted until the end of his life that he just doesn't manage to fit in enough.

## Rufus Clement

The sixth president of Atlanta University and the first African-American to hold a major office in the South since the Reconstruction Era, Rufus Clement was the father-in-law of Robert Pershing Foster. Clement was a paragon of the black southern elite in Atlanta and often a foil for Robert, who viewed Clement as competition for the affections of his wife and as a challenge to his stature as head of the family. Moreover, more than just a personal rivalry, the divide between Clement and Robert speaks to the heart of a greater debate within the black community of the South: was it better to leave the south to achieve great things, or attempt to work for change from within? While Robert chose to leave and strike out on his own, Clement is a stark example of black success for those who stayed in the South and managed to carve out successful lives in business, academia, and politics.

## Ray Charles

Born in Georgia in 1923, Ray Charles was a well-known pianist and singer in popular American culture, amassing numerous hits during his career. Seen as a music pioneer who fused blues, soul, and gospel music together, Charles was a prominent example of a black migrant from the South who went on to greatly influence mainstream American culture. Also a close friend of Robert Pershing Foster, Charles wrote a song about the doctor, which Foster credited with helping further establish his practice in Los Angeles.

## Martin Luther King, Jr.

Perhaps the most famous civil rights leader in the history of the United States, Martin Luther King, Jr. was a preacher from Atlanta famous for leading the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955, the March on Washington, and the Selma to Montgomery Marches. His "I Have a Dream" speech is one of the most profound ever given. King was a proponent of civil rights and equality for African-Americans throughout the South and the rest of America, though most of his successes came in the South. He was a proponent of non-violent protest and civil disobedience as the best ways for African-Americans to achieve their goals. He was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee by James Earl Ray in 1968.

## Willis Virgil McCall

The sheriff of Lake County, Florida, McCall was elected to seven terms between the years of 1944 and 1972. An infamous figure both in the South and nationally, McCall gained nationwide notoriety after an incident in 1951 when he allegedly shot two African-Americans, Sam Shepherd and Walter Irvin, who were in his custody. Irvin, who survived the shooting, later testified that McCall gunned the men down in cold blood, not, as McCall claimed, because they were attempting to escape. McCall was ultimately acquitted by a jury and continued to serve as sheriff.

Although a tangential character in the book, McCall is a notable stand-in for many lawmen in the South who harbored racist attitudes towards the African-American community and who acted with impunity during the Jim Crow years in the South.

## Richard Wright

Wright was an American novelist and short story writer who took as his subjects African-Americans and the prejudices and injustices they faced in society. Born in the South, he later emigrated to Chicago, thus being a

member of both worlds inhabited by the African-American community of the early 20th Century. Most of Wright's work is vaguely autobiographical and attempts to humanize the daily lives of African-Americans as they try to survive in America. His work is often credited with helping to change and improve race relations.

## James Baldwin

An American novelist, playwright, essayist, and social critic, James Baldwin was born in Harlem, New York in 1924. Baldwin's writing explored the intricacies of race, sexuality, and class distinction within Western society, especially in relation to blacks and whites in the United States. His work led him to become one of the leading intellectual leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, where he was known for his support of socialism and positioning himself between the pacifism of Martin Luther King Jr. and the strength-based approach advocated by Malcom X.

## Emmett Till

Born and raised in Chicago, Emmett Till was a 14-year-old African-American boy who was lynched while visiting relatives in Mississippi. Till apparently insulted a white woman in her family's convenience store. Having been given an open casket funeral by his mother so that the world could see what had been done to him, Till became an icon of the Civil Rights Movement and a highlight of the types of treatment and terrorism common to black people in the American South.

## Themes

---

### Segregation and “Separate but Equal”

African-Americans existed as second-class citizens both in the North and in the South. Despite the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 ostensibly ending slavery, Southern legislatures eroded the newly won freedoms of African-Americans, making it impossible for African-Americans to become the equals of whites. Obstacles to voting, such as literacy tests and poll taxes, limited African-American turnout in elections, thus all but guaranteeing that whites and pro-white policies would dominate state and local governments in the South. Furthermore, practices such as sharecropping kept African-Americans in debt and economically dependent on white landowners, become a less obvious form of enslavement.

The 1896 Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson* declared that segregation did not violate the 14th Amendment as long as facilities were “separate but equal.” In practice, of course, white officials responsible for creating facilities for Black people made no effort at making them “equal”—segregation was a way of continuing second-class citizenship status.

The North practiced a less obvious version of social segregation. Labor unions tacitly strove to limit and exclude black membership, homeowners refused to sell or rent to African-Americans, and communities and organizations maintained rigid separation between white and Black people—in effect, African-Americans were restricted to certain communities and job fields. Although these policies were not codified into law, they were officially sanctioned.

### Freedom and the American Dream

The search for the freedom to be a full member of the United States, with all of the rights and opportunities that come with it—is a central theme of *The Warmth of Other Suns*.

Like immigrants from Europe, African-American migrants saw the North as a land of opportunity and promise. However, unlike the Europeans, African-Americans were already citizens of the United States—they should not have had to leave the South to exercise their constitutional rights.

Many migrants viewed the North as the real America, a place where they could embrace the ideals of the American Dream. Because of this, Southern migrants were often harder working, better educated and more industrious than Northern-born Blacks. However, unlike immigrants from Europe, who could assimilate into white dominant culture in a few generations, migrants could never escape the color of their skin, which would continue to hold them back. Only one of these groups would be accepted as fully American.

### The Northern Paradox: Equality and Advancement for the Black Community

Often given the epitaph the “Promised Land,” the US North served as a bastion of hope for African-Americans who felt that if they could only find a way out of the oppressive Jim Crow South, their lives would become exponentially better. However, migrants soon learned that the North practiced a less visible racism that did not overtly disallow African-Americans rights and jobs, but curtailed their opportunities by other means.



The Northern Paradox—that a Black person citizen was in theory a full citizen, but in practice segregated in housing and work—left African-Americans in a liminal space, unsure of their standing in a given situation or community. In the South, the rules governing segregation were clear, but the North was a learning curve: It was a land of opportunity with a glass ceiling difficult for many African-Americans to break through.

## To Stay or Go: Black Community Obligation

One of the major issues facing African-Americans living in the South was whether to leave for the better social and economic opportunities in the North. It was not an easy decision, especially for educated Black Southerners. Although it made sense to go to a place free from the risk of physical violence and constant psychological debasement, many felt that by leaving, they were shirking their duty to make things better from within.

One line of Black thought argued for staying in the South to work for civil rights directly in their native communities. Others considered the idea of staying out of the question because they saw the way the system conspired against them. This group of African-Americans believed the best way to advance their cause was to leave and build up economic and social status, which would then translate to greater power to affect and influence change across the nation. *The Warmth of Other Suns* argues that it is still unclear which choice proved more effective in empowering African-Americans.

## The Generational Divide

The generational divide between Southern Blacks who migrated to the North and their Northern-born children dominates the second half of *The Warmth of Other Suns*. The lack of understanding between the original migrants and their progeny negatively influenced the Black community in the North.

The older and younger groups split over ideas of culture and assimilation. First generation migrants retained customs that tied them to the region of their birth, while their children eschewed their Southern roots to better fit in. Those born in the South saw stark differences between the South and the North; they could not understand why their children did not value the opportunities available in the North in the same way. For original migrants, the North outpaced the South in every manner possible, despite the Northern Paradox. However, those born in the North saw only the structural racism that affected the choice of jobs and areas to live.

Northern-born generations grew up without the strong community ties that their migrant parents had seen in the South. Instead, these younger generations gravitated to drug and gang culture, influenced by peers rather than elders. Success and advancement did not always follow the second-generation migrants. Instead, white flight, poverty, and crime caused once affluent African-American neighborhoods to deteriorate.

## Wealth: Conspicuous Consumption as a Sign of Success

Earning a fair wage was a major impetus African-Americans leaving the South and their sharecropper arrangements. Moreover, while in the South ostentatious display of wealth or success invited white violence, African-Americans who moved to the North were free to buy and consume what they wanted. Because of this, many African-Americans with means flaunted their newfound affluence through material possessions. It was a way to show that they had truly made it in the North.

## Symbols & Motifs

---

### The South: The Caste System

Wilkerson uses the term “caste system” throughout *The Warmth of Other Suns* to refer to a rigid social structure that allows no intermixing between social classes and offers no upward mobility. The South was truly a caste system—the complete opposite of the America’s founding principles. In the North, although there was prejudice, there were also more options, and the social structure was different.

The South was a feudal society, with a small landholding aristocracy subjugating enslaved people who worked the land. This fixed social order and its strong class distinctions upended during the Civil War and after the end of slavery. Following the Reconstruction period, white Southerners enacted laws and regulations that would re-establish the previous way of life, which brought back near-slavery conditions. The small hope that freed African-Americans could unite politically with poor whites was dashed by policies enforcing Black inferiority and stoking poor white resentment about people with whom they now competed for jobs. Whatever rights the African-American community had gained after the Civil War were stripped away without legal recourse. Instead, whites dealt swiftly and violently with African-Americans aspiring to move out of the bottom caste.

### The North: The “Promised Land”

*The Warmth of Other Suns* lays out a dichotomy between the “North” and the “South” as seen by many Southern blacks from approximately 1914-1970. (Because much of the “West” was in the Union during the Civil War, this analysis refers to all non-Southern areas as the “North.”)

The North, due to its strong manufacturing base, large cities, and diverse populations, was a beacon to many African-American Southerners—a place where one could escape the confines and caste system that permeated the Jim Crow South. This idyllic vision of the North was often called the “Promised Land”—a Biblical reference connecting it with the land God promised Moses after the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt.

In reality, though the North was rife with prejudice, it did offer Black people many of the things—advancement, freedom, mobility, and security—lacking in the South. The North was a in a sense, the “real” America, where Southern African-Americans might, for the first time in their lives, be free.

### Jim Crow

Originally the name of an 1830s minstrel show performed by Thomas Dartmouth Rice, a white man, the term Jim Crow “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” (41). By the 1840s, the term Jim Crow was the collective name of laws that segregated black and white people in the South (41). The idea of Jim Crow came to be synonymous with the Southern racism. The desire to escape Jim Crow drove many Southern African-Americans to seek their fortunes in the North, where segregation was not legally codified. However, since de facto segregation existed in the North with tacit official sanction, migrants nicknamed the system there “James Crow” (211)—Jim Crow’s more polite and sophisticated variant.

## Important Quotes

---

1. "I was leaving the South to fling myself into the unknown... I 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, bend in strange winds, respond to the warmth of other suns and, perhaps, to bloom."

(Epigram, Page n/a)

*The epigram to The Warmth of Other Suns comes from the memoir Black Boy by influential African-American author Richard Wright. The excerpt, which provides Wilkerson's title, describes the hope and fear that accompanies moving from a known to an unknown place. Given the injustices and prejudices faced by African-Americans in the South, it was logical that many left for another part of America, where they had better economic prospects and the chance to live as full citizens. The epigram asks: Could Southern blacks assimilate there, or would they forever be tied to the ways of the South?*

2. "A railing divided the stairs onto the train, one side of the railing for white passengers, the other for colored, so the soles of their shoes would not touch the same stair. [George Swanson Starling] boarded on the colored side of the railing, a final reminder from the place of his birth of the absurdity of the world he was leaving."

([Part 1](#), Page 5)

*George Starling's trip out of the South highlights the absurd practices of segregation: The fact that Starling could not even walk on the same ground as whites proves the insanity that marked the codes and rules of Southern life.*

3. "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 has ever longed to cross the Atlantic or the Rio Grande."

([Part 1](#), Page 8)

*Now that African-Americans had the ability to move out of the South, would they take that chance, or would they remain? This question was central to the debate between many black Southerners of whether it was better to move North to escape the South and its ways entirely, or to stay in the South and try to change the mechanisms of its government and social life from within.*

4. "Ida Mae soon discovered that, when it came to white people, there were good ones and bad ones like anything else and that she had to watch them close to figure out the differences."

([Part 2](#), Page 34)

*Gladney points out the degree of nuanced people-reading required of African-Americans in the South. Black people had to minutely analyze, understand, and acclimate to the white people around them, since even the most progressively-minded whites could suddenly turn on a dime, intimidated by other white people around them for breaking racist decorum.*

5. "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."

([Part 2](#), Page 36)

*Unlike many historical migrations that can often be traced to a specific catalyst, no one moment kicked off the Great Migration. Because of this, it has been often overlooked or seen as a so-called quiet migration, whose effects were only noted after it ended.*

6. "By the time Lil George was old enough to notice, it seemed as if the whole world was crazy, not because of any single event but because of the slow discovery of just how circumscribed his life was turning out to be. All this stepping off the sidewalk, not looking even in the direction of a white woman, the siring and ma'aming and waiting until all the white people had been served before buying your ice cream cone, with violence and even death awaiting any misstep. Each generation had to learn the rules without understanding why, because there was no understanding why, and each one either accepted or rebelled in that moment of realization and paid a price for whichever they chose."

([Part 2](#), Page 62)

*African-Americans in the South had to be aware of the written rules governing their daily lives, and just as aware of the unwritten codes of conduct that dominated Southern culture—something learned through years of experience. Both conforming and rebelling meant losing a part of oneself. Black people who protested the system ran the risk of being killed; those who quietly submitted were battered by the rage of injustices visited upon them. Many strove to find a middle path that would keep them safe and not arouse the ire of whites.*

7. "You sleep over a volcano, which may erupt at any moment."

([Part 2](#), Page 124)

*A Southern woman on the verge of leaving the South said this to demonstrate how unpredictable life was for African-Americans during Jim Crow. One day their lives could be relatively normal, the next they could be dead. They lived at the mercy of the whims of the whites around them and had no security or peace of mind.*

8. "He [George Swanson Starling] told his father what his father already knew. Men had been hanged for far less than what George was orchestrating. And there would be no protecting him if he stayed. In Florida and the rest of the Deep South, 'the killing of a Negro by a white man ceased in practice even to call for legal inquiry,' a white southerner observed in the early 1940s."

([Part 2](#), Page 157)

*Having attempted to organize the growers in his citrus grove to get more money, George ran the risk of being seen as a rabble-rouser. Retribution against African-Americans happened with impunity—very few, if any, white men were ever prosecuted for their actions.*

9. "[Robert Pershing Foster] was starting over now. His mother was gone. What he would be called was up to him. In California, he would be Robert or, better yet, Bob. Bob with a martini and stingy-brim hat. It was modern and hip, it

suiting the new version of himself as the leading man in his own motion picture. He had tested it out in Atlanta, and it had caught on. The people in California who knew him back home would get used to it in time. *Bob*. Simple and direct and easy to remember. He rolled the word around in his mind, and he liked it."

([Part 3](#), Page 189)

*Names were very important to the African-American community because it was one decision they had complete agency over. Thus, naming was about more than identity—a name carried the weight of geography and history. Many African-Americans either simplified or flat out changed their names once out of the South in an effort to both leave the South behind and start over.*

10. "Robert was feeling sick now. It was too late to turn back, and who knew what he was heading into? The man told him to gear himself up. The man didn't use the term, and nobody had bothered to tell Robert ahead of time, but some colored people who had made the journey called it *James Crow* in California."

([Part 3](#), Page 211)

*Although African-Americans escaped the South, they didn't find full equality or escape racism. In the North, racism persisted in subtler forms. Calling it "James Crow" underscores the sense that the North teemed with more sophisticated, but no less demeaning, racism.*

11. "[Robert Pershing Foster] realized he had entered a more complicated universe than he had imagined. Colored people in California didn't have to go to colored doctors if they didn't want to. They had choices colored people in the South couldn't dream of. To make matters worse for a colored doctor new in town, the very system that instilled privilege and superiority in southern whites also instilled a sense of inferiority in their southern workers, and when the latter got the chance to get all that had been denied them, some sought out whatever they were convinced was superior—and thus white."

([Part 4](#), Page 255)

*Expecting other black migrants in California to flock to him, Foster was shocked that African-Americans did not want to go to black-owned service providers because they viewed the white options as better.*

12. "Just by being able to keep his job, which he would for many years, George [Gladney] would be spared the contentious relations at so many plants in the North, where the migrants were scorned if they were hired at all, or outright turned away. Most migrants like George were hired into either menial labor—janitors or window cleaners or assembly-line workers—or hard labor—longshoremen, coal miners, stokers of foundries and diggers of ditches, which is what he had done before landing the assembly-line job at Campbell Soup."

([Part 4](#), Page 316)

*This passage highlights how, although the North appeared better than the South, the options that many African-Americans had in the North were severely limited. They could earn more and be treated better in Northern cities, but they were still on the bottom of the social ladder.*

13. "It was only a matter of time before just about every colored family in the North, unsettled though they might have been, got visitors as George and Ida Mae did. There was a back-and-forth of people, anxious, giddy, wanting to come north and see what all the fuss was about. And when even a colored guest paid a visit while the Migration was on,

and even decades later, he or she could be assured of finding the same southern peasant food, the same turnip greens, ham hocks, corn bread in Chicago as in Mississippi."

([Part 4](#), Page 339)

*Those who had come North had a duty to help those coming after them. When guests came to the North, they brought Southern culture with them. Their hosts, conversely, showcased the opportunities available after leaving the South. Though migrants had left the South physically, it still dominated much of who they were culturally.*

14. "Let's not fool ourselves, we are far from the Promised Land, both north and south."

([Part 4](#), Page 371)

*Martin Luther King, Jr. points out that although the North and the West were much better for African-Americans than the South was, they were still far from being utopias for black people, who still had to deal with racism and injustice.*

15. "Decades later, the message would still hang in the air, the calculus pretty much the same. By the end of the twentieth century, blacks would make up more than eighty percent of the population in Detroit. Just across the Ford Expressway, the black population of the suburb of Dearborn, the 2000 census found, was one percent."

([Part 4](#), Page 378)

*The North developed segregated parallel societies due to exclusionary housing laws. Off-the-books predeterminations would create entirely white or Black housing areas in a process called self-segregation. The practice belied the North's view of itself as a bastion of freedom, equality, and opportunity.*

16. "[Martin Luther] King was running headlong into what the sociologist Gunnar Myrdal called the Northern Paradox. In the North, Myrdal wrote, 'almost everybody is against discrimination in general, but, at the same time, almost everybody practices discrimination in his own personal affairs'—that is, by not allowing blacks into unions or clubhouses, certain jobs, and white neighborhoods, indeed, avoiding social interaction overall."

([Part 4](#), Page 387)

*Northern racism was hard to fight because it could recede. It wasn't on the books; instead, it was often passive and thus less obvious. White flight is an excellent example of this—as whites and industry moved out of Black and Black-adjacent neighborhoods, those neighborhoods eroded due to lack of jobs and shrinking corporate and property tax revenue.*

17. "What did they know of the frustration of the young people who had grown up in the mirage of equality but a whole different reality, in a densely packed world of drugs and gangs and disorder, with promises that seemed to have turned to dust?"

([Part 4](#), Page 409)

*One of the central themes of The Warmth of Other Suns is the generational divide between the original migrants and their children. For those who had left the South, the North was an imperfect but opportunity-filled place. Later generations born in the North didn't have the same urgency to fulfill their potential as their parents; instead, they succumbed to the darker aspects of city life.*

18. "The hierarchy in the North 'called for blacks to remain in their station,' [Stanley] Lieberson wrote, while immigrants were rewarded for 'their ability to leave their old world traits' and become American as quickly as possible. Society urged them to leave Poland and Latvia behind and enter the mainstream white world. Not so with their black counterparts like Ida Mae, Robert, and George."

([Part 4](#), Page 417)

*The idea of immigrants becoming American is central to the American foundational myth. This notion seemed to only extend to whites who could shed their ancestry and blend in. Because African-Americans could never be able to shed their skin color, they would never be able to fully escape their past. Even though they were already citizens, whites could never see them as fully American as white immigrants.*

19. "The presence of so many black migrants elevated the status of other immigrants in the North and West. Black southerners stepped into a hierarchy that assigned them a station beneath everyone else, no matter that their families had been in the country for centuries. Their arrival unwittingly diverted anti-immigrant antagonisms their way, as they were an even less favored outsider group than the immigrants they encountered in the North and helped make formerly ridiculed groups more acceptable by comparison."

([Part 4](#), Page 419)

*Wilkerson tries to dispel the idea that Black migration caused the drop in the living standard in Northern Cities. On the contrary, the facts show that, if anything, Southern Blacks were more ambitious than their Northern counterparts – they actually raised the standard of living in their communities. However, because they faced greater prejudice than immigrant communities around them, they suffered more at the hands of politicians and government regulations.*

20. "As long as the two had known each other, Robert's fixations never made sense to Jimmy. 'He [Robert] always sought approval,' Jimmy said. 'And I never understood it because he had it all.'"

([Part 4](#), Page 431)

*Despite everything, Foster remained insecure about his achievements. He had to constantly prove he had made it, flaunting his wealth and competing with white people. The need to display wealth through conspicuous consumption became a part of migrant African-American life.*

21. "From his front stoop George Starling watches a most desperate parade. On these streets, there were once people gliding down the boulevard as if on a Paris runway, the men in overcoats and fedoras, the women in mink-collared swing coats and butterfly hats, all rushing to work for the rich white people or the manufacturers of paint or hats or lampshades. Now there are the hooded and disheveled descendants of the least able of the migrants living out their lives on the streets."

([Part 5](#), Page 493)

*The generations stemming from the Black migrants of the Great Migration failed to live up to the promise of their forebears. Once-affluent and culturally rich neighborhoods faced a downturn. African-Americans no longer tried to create their own paradises in Northern cities, as the succeeding generations brought down much of what the first generation attempted to build.*

22. "All told, perhaps the most significant measure of the Great Migration was the act of leaving itself, regardless of



the individual outcome. Despite the private disappointments and triumphs of any individual migrant, the Migration, in some ways, was its own point. The achievement was in making the decision to be free and acting on that decision, wherever the journey led them.”

([Epilogue](#), Page 535)

*Because they had for so long been denied agency in the South, making life decisions like choosing to leave, were huge victories for many Southern Blacks. For the first time, they were taking their fate into their own hands and could make their own choices.*

23. “They left to pursue some version of happiness, whether they achieved it or not. It was a seemingly simple thing that the majority of Americans could take for granted but that the migrants and their forebears never had a right to in the world they had fled.”

([Epilogue](#), Page 536)

*Regardless of success or failure in the US North or West, just the fact of individual choice and ability should count as success for migrants compared to African-Americans who remained in the South. The race-based caste system of Jim Crow-era policies in the South disallowed individualism, choice, and happiness.*

24. “As with immigrant parents, a generational divide arose between the migrants and their children. The migrants couldn’t understand their impatient, northern-bred sons and daughters—why the children who had been spared the heartache of a racial caste system were not more grateful to have been delivered from the South. The children couldn’t relate to the stories of southern persecution when they were facing gangs and drive-by shootings, or, in the more elite circles, the embarrassment of southern parents with accents and peasant food when the children were trying to fit into the middle-class enclaves of the North.”

([Epilogue](#), Pages 536 - 537)

*Second-generation migrants could not fully understand what their parents had fled, and thus didn’t fully appreciate all that the North offered. Their parents lacked patience and understanding towards the issues and frustrations of their children, because they could not grasp how anyone could be unhappy away from all of the evils of the South.*

25. “By their actions, they did not dream the American Dream, they willed it into being by a definition of their own choosing. They did not ask to be accepted but declared themselves the Americans that few others recognized but that they had always been deep within their hearts.”

([Epilogue](#), Page 538)

*Wilkerson reminds the reader that the African-American community fought for the freedoms many people now take for granted. They had to prove their American identity and will it into existence, creating a culture and a heritage that sustained them and became part of the mainstream cultural fabric of the modern United States.*



## Essay Topics

---

1. Which of the book's three central figures was the greatest success? In what ways did they succeed? How did they fail?
2. Compare and contrast the ways in which the North and the South limited the freedoms of African-Americans during the era of the Great Migration.
3. Southern African-Americans debated whether to work for change in the South or leave to build lives in the North. What are the pros and cons of both approaches?
4. Why was it so important both for the African-Americans returning to the South and those living in the North and West to showcase their material successes?
5. Discuss the generational divide between migrants and their offspring. What cultural differences formed this generational rift? Why?
6. Discuss the importance of the church for migrants. Did viewing the North as the Biblical "Promised Land" help or hurt migrants? Why?
7. Names are so important to the African-American community that two of the characters change their names. Why are names so significant?
8. Discuss some of the rifts and rivalries within the African-American community. What are their causes?
9. Wilkerson argues that Southern migrants did not cause the decline of Northern cities. Discuss her alternate theory. Were Southern migrants a boon to Northern communities? How and why?
10. The migration of African-Americans from the South had an unmistakable impact on American culture. What elements of Southern black culture became mainstream? Who are some of the figures that later came to prominence and how did they affect American popular culture?