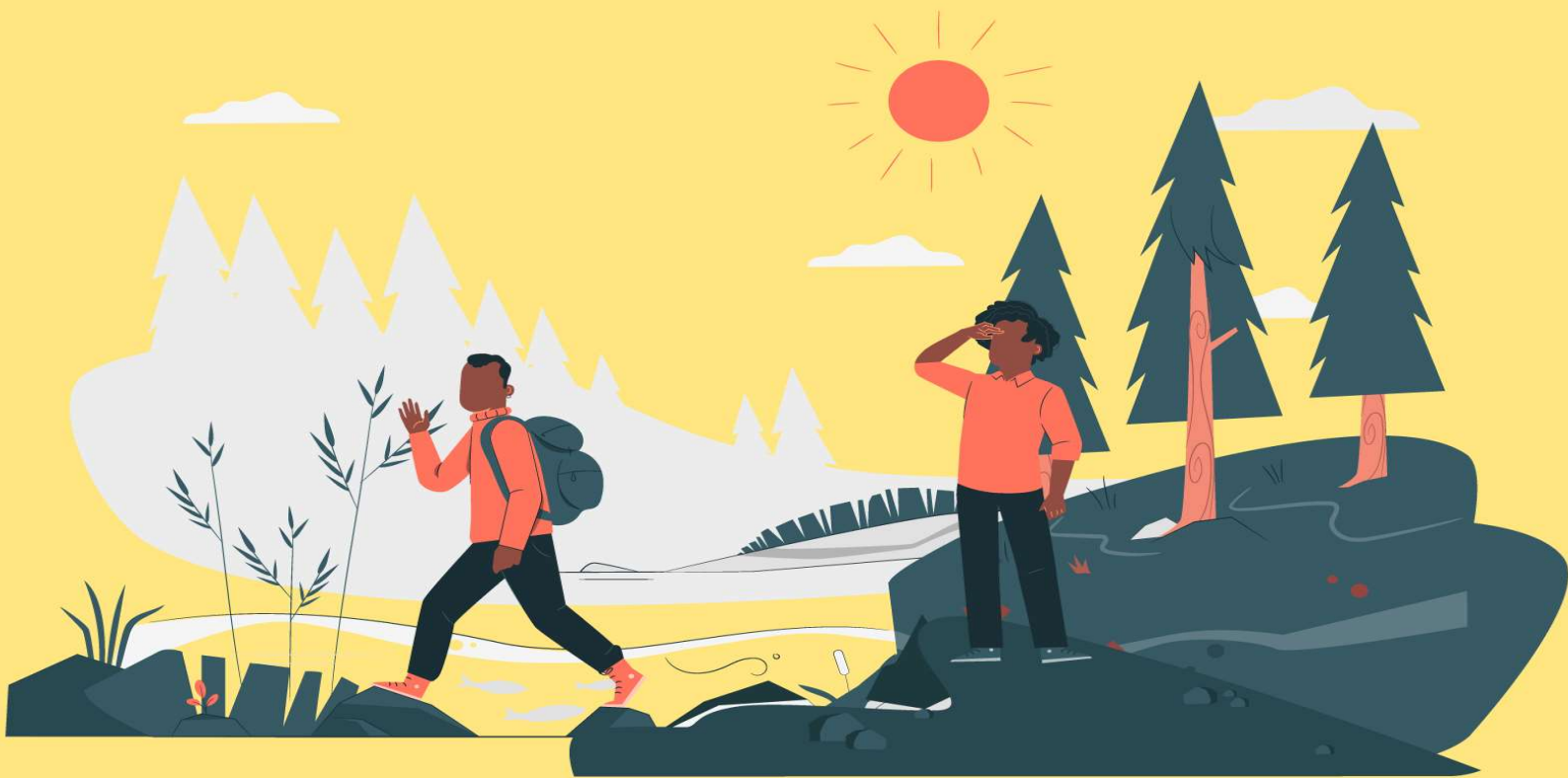


SUMMARY

BY ALYSSA BURNETTE

THE WARMTH OF OTHER SUNS

BY ISABEL WILKERSON



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Summary of The Warmth of Other Suns by Isabel Wilkerson

Written by Alyssa Burnette

Learn what motivated millions of families to move
across the US in the 1900s.

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Introduction

Today, immigration is a hot-button issue. Many people have strong feelings about the borders of their countries and who should be allowed to cross them. But the story of the Great Migration isn't an international story at all. In fact, it's the story of an inner-border migration: the act of moving from one part of your own country to another. When one or two families do this, it is not noteworthy at all. Unlike an international move, which might prompt your friends and relatives to exclaim, "Why on earth are you doing that?!" an inner-border move is simply moving somewhere else. But when millions of families move to another part of their own country, this act becomes a migration rather than a simple move. And when the only people moving are people of a certain race, it becomes even more noteworthy.

Interestingly, however, the Great Migration is underrepresented in American history. One reason for this is the fact that it did not occur all at one time. After all, if more than six million families left from the same place at the same time, people would certainly have taken notice. Perhaps this migration would have made headlines in the same way that modern immigration issues dominate the news today. But instead, because the mass exodus occurred over a period of several years, this phenomenon received little news coverage in its own time. So, over the course of this summary, we'll explore the history of the Great Migration and learn why more than six million Black Americans relocated to the Northern United States between 1915-1970.



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The Great Migration and Jim Crow

If you're a white American, you probably believe that slavery was abolished in 1865. And, to an extent, that's true. President Abraham Lincoln did end slavery with the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution which asserts that "neither slavery nor involuntary servitude... shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction." But the truth is that slavery did not die on that day. And neither did racism.

In an interview with *The Smithsonian* magazine, the author attests that:

"At that time in American history, the country had reached a turning point in a fight for racial justice that had been building for decades. This was the year of the killing of Medgar Evers in Mississippi, of the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, of Gov. George Wallace blocking black students at the schoolhouse door of the University of Alabama, the year of the March on Washington, of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech and his "Letter From a Birmingham Jail." By then, millions of African-Americans had already testified with their bodies to the repression they had endured in the Jim Crow South by defecting to the North and West in what came to be known as the Great Migration. They were fleeing a world where they were restricted to the most menial of jobs, underpaid if paid at all, and frequently barred from voting. Between 1880 and 1950, an African-American was lynched more than once a week for some perceived breach of the racial hierarchy.

The migration began, like the flap of a sea gull's wings, as a rivulet of black families escaping Selma, Alabama, in the winter of 1916. Their quiet departure was scarcely noticed except for a single paragraph in the *Chicago Defender*, to whom they confided that "the treatment doesn't warrant staying." The rivulet would become rapids, which grew into a flood of six million people journeying out of the South over the course of six decades. They were seeking political asylum within the borders of their own country, not unlike refugees in other parts of the world fleeing famine, war and pestilence. Until that moment and from the time of their arrival on these

shores, the vast majority of African-Americans had been confined to the South, at the bottom of a feudal social order, at the mercy of slaveholders and their descendants and often-violent vigilantes. The Great Migration was the first big step that the nation's servant class ever took without asking.”

Interestingly, however, the author observes that the migration wasn't really planned and it wasn't really considered a social movement. The motivations of the migrants might have been very similar, but no one necessarily planned to orchestrate the largest inner-border migration in American history. Instead, it was simply a case of one family after another becoming desperate to build a better life for themselves. Building on her previous discussion of racial inequality, the author remarks that it was extremely difficult for Black people to earn a living in the South. They might be legally free, but the freedom seemed hollow when racism was still the law of the land. In her interview with The Smithsonian magazine, the author writes that “Southern Black people were forced to make their living working the land due to Black codes and the sharecropping system, which offered little in the way of economic opportunity, especially after a boll weevil epidemic in 1898 caused massive crop damage across the South. But around 1916, when the Great Migration began, a factory wage in the urban North was typically three times more than what Black people could expect to make working the land in the rural South.”

When Black Americans realized that they could actually earn a living wage in another part of their own country, there was no question: they would move to the North or die trying. Just as the Northern states had previously served as a beacon of hope for enslaved people on the Underground Railroad, the North once again stood as an emblem of new life and equality.



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Most Families Had Personal Motivations for Moving to the North

Although the quality of life for Black people was universally abysmal in the South, most families cherished personal motivations in addition to the overall hardships of their people. For example, we'll consider the story of Ida Mae Gladney and her husband George. George and Ida Mae grew up in Mississippi. Ida Mae was a hardworking farmer's daughter and both she and George were well accustomed to living off the land. So, when they married in 1929 and found a job as sharecroppers, they were not necessarily surprised or dissatisfied with their lot in life. But their dissatisfaction quickly grew as racism undermined their ability to make a living for themselves.

This was partly because George and Ida Mae were sharecroppers on a cotton plantation. The 13th Amendment protected Black people from being forced to work the plantations as slaves, but it also created a new problem: the plantations were still going strong, but now their owners lacked the manpower to run them. Combined with the Jim Crow laws that limited the job opportunities available to Black people, this meant that most Black people still wound up working the plantations anyway in a streak of sadistic irony. Despite the humiliation of this, however, many people like George and Ida Mae were willing to do so if they could make a living.

But plantation owners like their employer Edd Pearson were not legally required to be fair to their Black employees. In fact, they weren't even required to pay them. So, plantation owners regularly withheld their Black employees' wages, knowing full well that their employees had little to no legal recourse with which to fight them. Because Mr. Pearson paid George and Ida most of the time, they were more fortunate than many of their friends and family members. But the money they earned was still a pittance and it was barely enough to support themselves and their two new children. Sadly, however, despite these unjust circumstances, they might have continued to stick with it if. They might have been exploited and impoverished for the rest of their lives if it weren't for the events of one fateful night in 1937. In an

interview with *The New Yorker*, the author recounts the story that Ida Mae told her first-hand. The author describes the events of that night by writing:

One night in 1937, someone knocked on the door—Mr. Edd and four other white men, with guns. They were looking for George’s cousin Joe Lee, sure that he had stolen some turkeys. They found him, sneaking out the back. They tied him with hog wire and dragged him to the woods and beat him with chains and then drove him to town and left him in jail. The turkeys, which had wandered off, wandered back in the morning. George got Joe Lee out of jail, and used grease to peel his clothes off him, because they were stuck on with blood. He went home and told Ida Mae, “This the last crop we making.” They sold almost everything they owned, piece by piece, on the sly, and told anyone who asked, “We just running out of room.” They got a ride in a truck from Miss Theenie’s house to the depot, carrying quilts and the children and a Bible and a box of fried chicken, and boarded the Mobile and Ohio Railroad. They stopped in Chicago.”

Although she and George had not wanted to leave their parents and siblings behind in Mississippi, they knew that it was too dangerous for them to stay. So, they slipped away in the hopes of a better life in Chicago and never looked back. During her conversation with Ida Mae, the author asked, “What did Chicago look like at that time?” Ida Mae replied, “It looked like Heaven to me then.”



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Trouble in Heaven

Chicago was an egalitarian paradise compared to life in Mississippi. George found a job as an ice vendor and this salary empowered him to rent a small, one-bedroom apartment for himself and his family. But even though they had shelter and an income, they quickly discovered that life in Chicago was not the paradise they had hoped for. Because the Northern states were (mostly) havens of equality, many Black Americans had settled there. And the bigger cities like Chicago were crammed to capacity. So far from being supportive of the new arrivals, the Black people who were native to Chicago were frightened and annoyed by the sudden onslaught of newcomers.

They understood what the newcomers would soon learn through painful experience: resources were scarce and everyone was in competition with each other. Chicago might have been kinder than the South, but Black people still had to scrimp and pinch just to earn a living wage. And they still worked menial jobs as janitors, maids, and waiters, which meant that there were only so many jobs to go around. Ida Mae soon found that employment opportunities for women were even fewer and harder to come by. Because racism and sexism are inexorably intertwined, Northern white people adopted the same casual racism as their Southern counterparts and assumed that Black women were more uneducated and more of a liability for employment. Many Black female immigrants could not get jobs in the factories or in restaurants, so they were often forced to sell their bodies or to market their services to white women who tossed them a few cents here and there for grueling domestic labor.

Ida Mae was fortunate enough to escape this fate. Eventually, she found a job as a hospital aide, and the addition of her income helped the family to find a nicer apartment and a better quality of life. Although they still faced racial discrimination and they were still poor, both George and Ida Mae remained proud of their move to Chicago. They were proud of their determination and the life they had created for their children. Years later, in 1940, Ida Mae was able to vote in a presidential election. And when the author asked her if she wanted to be buried in Chicago or in her home state of Mississippi, Ida Mae

proudly replied that she wanted to be buried in the place where she had found freedom.

The author observes that Ida Mae's story is only one out of six million. And although her story cannot quite represent the full experience of every Black person who fled the south between 1915-1970, her story does offer a glimpse at the suffering and determination that motivated the biggest inner-border migration in the United States. The author also acknowledges that she was only able to track down and interview a few of the people who fled to the North during the mass migration. Many people's voices have not been recorded but their legacies live on. This is especially true of a woman named Mallie Robinson. In her interview with *The Smithsonian*, the author wrote that:

“On one of the early trains out of the South was a sharecropper named Mallie Robinson, whose husband had left her to care for their young family under the rule of a harsh plantation owner in Cairo, Georgia. In 1920, she gathered up her five children, including a baby still in diapers, and, with her sister and brother-in-law and their children and three friends, boarded a Jim Crow train, and another, and another, and didn't get off until they reached California. They settled in Pasadena. When the family moved into an all-white neighborhood, a cross was burned on their front lawn. But here Mallie's children would go to integrated schools for the full year instead of segregated classrooms in between laborious hours chopping and picking cotton. The youngest, the one she had carried in her arms on the train out of Georgia, was named Jackie, who would go on to earn four letters in athletics in a single year at UCLA. Later, in 1947, he became the first African-American to play Major League Baseball.”



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Final Summary

Between the years of 1915-1970, more than six million Black Americans fled their homes in the South and headed North. Most people fled because of three universal reasons: the racism, high unemployment, and danger of being a Black person in the South. But each family also had their own reasons for moving to the North. Many of them settled in major cities like Chicago and New York where they were subjected to high unemployment rates and overcrowded living conditions. But even though their lives were hard, they were proud of their decision to pursue freedom and equality. They were proud because their migration meant that their children could have a better life.



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