

Great Migration: A Journey of Promise

By Lorrie C. Reed

August 17, 2026

Introduction

In *The Warmth of Other Suns*, Isabel Wilkerson (2010) reframes the Great Migration not merely as a demographic shift of six million Black Americans, but as a courageous, deliberate act of agency against state-sanctioned terror. While the migrants' journey is often characterized by the systemic barriers they encountered, such as redlining, housing covenants, and employment discrimination, Wilkerson argues that the true "failure" of the era lies with the institutions that stifled these migrants, not with the migrants themselves. This chapter explores how these individuals successfully navigated overwhelming odds, transforming their lives and the American landscape through resilience, community building, and an unwavering faith in a self-authored future.

The Great Migration and the Odds Against Black Success

Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns* (2010) traces the Great Migration, the movement of roughly six million Black Americans from the Jim Crow South to the North and West between 1915 and 1970. Wilkerson's central argument is that this was not a footloose drift but a deliberate flight from caste terror, and that the migrants carried the same resilience and ambition that had sustained them through slavery and segregation. She claims that the Migration permanently reshaped American culture, politics, and economy, but that the North and West failed these newcomers in ways that mirrored the South's exclusion. In the North, housing covenants,

redlining, job discrimination, and police violence created de facto segregation and economic ceilings that prevented the full flourishing of the communities migrants built.

Wilkerson's observations predict that without dismantling the structural barriers that followed migrants north, especially wealth theft via housing discrimination, mass incarceration, and school segregation, the inequalities created during the Great Migration era would compound across generations. The book demonstrates that the "failure" is not of Black people but of the institutions that refused to support the development of communities that had already overcome extraordinary odds. Her work suggests that the power of the Great Migration lay in its demonstration of collective agency under impossible conditions, and that the true failure lies in America's unwillingness to meet that agency with equal opportunity.

Self-Selected Strivers

Wilkerson frames the Great Migration as a deliberate and courageous pursuit of dignity and opportunity. The book documents the rise of Black professionals, including doctors, lawyers, teachers, and small business owners, in Northern cities, not as exceptions but as a pattern of striving against significant odds (Wilkerson, 2010). Wilkerson argues that migrants "were running from something and toward something," rejecting the notion that Black communities were inherently broken or deficient. Instead, she points to structural barriers in receiving cities that refused to open doors (Wilkerson, 2010). In her framework, migrants' continuous movement, building, and demanding reflect profound resilience and determination to overcome adversity. She refutes the idea of Black failure in several specific, evidence-based ways, as described below.

Migration as a rational act of ambition, not defeat. Wilkerson frames the six million who left the South as self-selected strivers. They were people willing to abandon everything familiar to pursue dignity and opportunity. The journey itself, often undertaken with little money and great

risk, demanded enormous initiative. This directly contradicts the narrative of passivity or dependency. The trajectories of her three protagonists illustrate this point. Robert Pershing Foster built a thriving medical practice in Los Angeles despite being denied hospital privileges. George Starling became a labor organizer on the railroad, fighting for better wages and conditions for his fellow porters. Ida Mae Gladney raised a stable family in Chicago despite circumstances that would have crushed a less resourceful person. Their stories show individual success, not failure, even under severe constraints.

Intergenerational community outcomes. Wilkerson shows how migrant parents who could not buy homes due to redlining still sent children to college in higher numbers than comparable white families with more wealth. The book documents the rise of Black doctors, lawyers, teachers, and small business owners in Northern cities, not as exceptions but as a pattern of striving against stacked odds.

Push-Back Against Challenging Odds

Recent research corroborates Wilkerson's claims. In 1940, about 80% of residential properties in Chicago were subject to restrictive covenants that barred Black individuals from purchasing or occupying homes in certain areas. These legally enforceable agreements were designed to maintain racial segregation by excluding Black residents from predominantly white neighborhoods (BostonFairHousing.org).

In 1960, the Black homeownership rate in Chicago was about 18%, compared with 60% for Whites. The median income for Black families was less than 60% of that for White families. These disparities were exacerbated by federal policies such as redlining, in which the Federal Housing Administration explicitly refused to insure mortgages in Black neighborhoods, effectively locking generations out of the primary vehicle for wealth building (Politifact.com,

2020). Given systematic exclusion from housing, labor markets, and credit, the expected outcome for Black migrants would be continued poverty, intergenerational stagnation, and social marginalization.

Black migrants also faced significant discrimination in employment and education. Job advertisements were often segregated, and unions frequently excluded Black workers or relegated them to the lowest-paying positions. Additionally, schools in Black neighborhoods received less funding per pupil than those in White areas, a disparity that, in some Northern cities, exceeded that of the South (Digital Chicago History.org).

This analysis underscores the profound impact of systemic inequalities on Black communities and the resilience required to navigate and overcome such entrenched challenges. Wilkerson's work shows that the Great Migration succeeded *despite* the odds, not *because* the odds were favorable. As shown in recent research shows that the Great Migration was a profound renegotiation of agency in the face of overwhelming odds. The movement represented a “push-back” against the odds.

Recent economic and historical scholarship characterizes the Great Migration as a transformative movement, serving as a powerful rejection of the violence, disenfranchisement, and exploitative sharecropping systems inherent to the Jim Crow South (Alexander et al., 2017). While first-generation migrants secured significant immediate wage increases by transitioning out of southern agriculture, this economic progress was soon met with intense structural and labor market hostility in northern and western destination cities. Research by Derenoncourt (2022) indicates that these discriminatory housing policies and shifts in industrial demand effectively constrained long-term wealth accumulation, transforming the migration from a path toward immediate parity into an ongoing struggle against systemic barriers.

Despite these challenges, the movement catalyzed meaningful intergenerational social progress. Linked census data suggest that the children of migrants experienced lower poverty rates and higher educational attainment than their counterparts who remained in the rural South. Furthermore, this internal displacement had lasting political consequences; historical analysis demonstrates that the resulting demographic shifts fostered broader, nationwide coalitions that were instrumental in advocating for civil rights (Fouka et al., 2021).

The Migration as an Act of Faith

The Great Migration was an act of faith, a pushback against a statistical death sentence, and a belief in a self-authored future. The migrants did not know they would succeed; they knew only that the Southern status quo was an unacceptable failure, and they bet everything on the radical possibility that a better one existed elsewhere. Various types of their faith are documented below.

Faith in the Industrial Promise: Northern industrialists actively recruited Southern Black workers, but the promises were often vague. The migrants had no guarantee of steady work, fair wages, or safe housing. They left the certainty of a crop (however exploitative) for the abstraction of a factory job. This required faith that the machine age would treat them better than the agrarian regime.

Faith in Social "Rumors": The primary information network was word-of-mouth, letters home, and the *Chicago Defender* (which was often smuggled South, as it was banned in some towns). Migrants were acting on stories like those of a cousin who got a job at the stockyards and a neighbor who found an apartment. This was a leap of faith in the reliability of communal testimony over the South's official, hostile narrative.

Faith in Collective Liberation: The migration was rarely an individual act of faith. It was a chain migration: one person went, saved money, and sent for family, then friends, then an entire church congregation. The decision to go was an act of faith that a community could reconstitute itself despite the Northern ghetto. It was a theological act, believing that God was calling God's people out of Egypt, even if the Promised Land turned out to be a crowded tenement on Chicago's South Side.

Faith in a New Definition of Self: The most radical act of faith was the belief that a person born under the Southern caste system could become something else entirely. A field hand could become a steelworker. A domestic servant could become a factory worker. A man who had to step off the sidewalk for a White woman in Mississippi could, in Detroit, walk down the street as a citizen.

Summary

This chapter analyzes the Great Migration as a calculated "push-back" against the economic peonage and state-sponsored violence of the South, as well as an "act of faith" in the possibility of a better life. By examining the personal narratives of migrants, Wilkerson refutes the persistent, harmful narrative that Black communities were inherently deficient. Despite facing de facto segregation and systematic wealth theft, evidenced by the stark racial disparities in homeownership and income, migrant families prioritized education and professional advancement at rates that frequently outpaced their wealthier White counterparts. Ultimately, the migration succeeded as a profound renegotiation of identity and power, proving that the migrants possessed the ambition and ability to thrive, even when forced to build their lives within the rigid constraints of a discriminatory social order.

Recommended Resources for Further Study

Websites

Harvard University explores the Great Migration in an online exhibit featuring various aspects of the movement. Available at <https://www.harvard.edu/in-focus/the-great-migration/#:~:text=Harvard%20experts%20study%20the%20Great%20Migration%2C%20which,The%20migration%20involved%20millions%20of%20African%20Amer>

The American Heritage website features a portal for The Great Migration. The portal highlights many of the records at the National Archives that illuminate the freedom of movement. Records created by the federal government actively contributed to conditions that enabled or forced people to move and observed and reported on the social and demographic impacts resulting from the major shifts in the population. The portal can be accessed at <https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/migrations/great-migration/#:~:text=Although%20the%20migrants%20found%20better%20jobs%20and,faced%20injustices%20and%20difficulties%20after%20migrating.%20The>

References

- Alexander, J. T., Leibbrand, C., Massey, C., & Tolnay, S. (2017). Second-generation outcomes of the Great Migration. *Demography*, 54(6), 2249. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-017-0625-8>. [1, 2, 3, 4, 5]
- Boston Fair Housing.org. (n.d.). *1920s–1948: Racially restrictive covenants*. Retrieved from https://bostonfairhousing.org/timeline/1920s1948-Restrictive-Covenants.html?utm_source=openai
- Derenoncourt, E. (2022, February 14). *Is moving to a new place key to upward mobility for U.S. workers and their families?* Washington Center for Equitable Growth. <https://equitablegrowth.org/is-moving-to-a-new-place-key-to-upward-mobility-for-u-s-workers-and-their-families/>.
- Digital Chicago History.org. (n.d.). *Racial restriction and housing discrimination in the Chicagoland area*. Retrieved from

https://digitalchicagohistory.org/exhibits/show/restricted-chicago/restrictive_covenants?utm_source=openai

Fouka, V., Tabellini, M., & Calderon, A. (2021, July 20). *Racial diversity and racial policy preferences: The Great Migration and civil rights*. Available at <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/racial-diversity-and-racial-policy-preferences-great-migration-and-civil-rights>

Politifact.com. (2020). *Today, the gap between African American and white homeownership is larger than it was in the late 1960s*. Retrieved from https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2020/jun/11/joe-biden/homeownership-gap-between-white-and-black-american/?utm_source=openai

Wilkerson, I. (2010). *The warmth of other suns: The epic story of America's great migration*. Random House.