

The Great Migration – Isabel Wilkerson

Link: <https://youtu.be/n3qA8DNc2Ss> [April 2018 (18 mins)]

Isabel Wilkerson, author of *The Warmth of Other Suns* (2010) and *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (2020) begins by asking us to imagine that one young person who leaves everything they know, who—despite all risk—leaves by boat, ship, truck, train to a new land, leaving without the company or support of the elders who got them to that point. “This was going to be complete break from all that they knew and all of the people that they loved. And the very next time that they might hear from the people that raised them, might be a telegram, ‘Your father has passed away,’... That was the magnitude of the sacrifice that had to have happened in almost all of our families.” But the Great Migration when 6 million Blacks peacefully left the arcane, extremely violent caste system of the Jim Crow South was uniquely different: “No other group of Americans has had to act like immigrants in order to be recognized as citizens.... [this was] A seeking of political asylum within the borders of one’s own country.” The Great Migration began when the North had a labor problem during WWI and recruited the cheapest labor in the country. Unsurprisingly, the South would not allow the poaching of their mostly free labor, and Southern Blacks were terrorized and arrested for attempting to leave. Nevertheless, Alexander describes the three streams of travel that the “lowest caste” risked in order to “choose what they would do with their God-Given talents.” Alexander describes the musicians, poets, the opera singers held inside those migrants, and the unfolding of those talents in themselves and their offspring. Wilkerson points to Jazz as one product of the Great Migration. “These people, by their actions were able to do what [Lincoln or] the Emancipation Proclamation could not do. These people by their actions, were able to do what the powers that be North and South could not—or would not—do. They freed themselves.”

Additional Resources:

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/long-lasting-legacy-great-migration-180960118/>

https://depts.washington.edu/moving1/map_black_migration.shtml

<https://lawrencemigration.phillipscollection.org/culture/migration-map>

<http://metrocosm.com/great-migration-visualization/>

<https://lawrencemigration.phillipscollection.org/the-migration-series>

This sight displays Jacob Lawrence, *The Migration Series*.