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**Review of *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. Isabel Wilkerson. Reviewed by Richard Sherman.**

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tribal army that included warriors with previous combat and firearms experience in Africa. The situation came to a head in January 1811 when a large party of rebelling slaves marched from the German Coast area to New Orleans, gathering volunteers, killing plantation owners and burning plantations as they advanced. The city's few troops had been sent to Florida, and essentially it was the plantation owners who were sent to put down the revolt, which they did with incredible ferocity. By week's end New Orleans was filled with the severed heads of Negro (sic.) rebels, a "lesson" to those who might come after. Yet for decades the plantation quarters reverberated with the tales of heroes who chose to die rather than be enslaved.

This story is set against the backdrop of the Louisiana Purchase and the country's growing ambitions to annex Florida and areas to the west. One result of the rebellion was the choice to militarize New Orleans with the formation of a trained militia and installation of Federal troops (steps Rasmussen credits for the victory at the Battle of New Orleans), therefore making further westward expansion possible. This is the first of many conclusions, and one of the book's faults is an inability to bring the story to a close—most likely a sign of this promising author's youth. The book is documented, but in a manner that will be troublesome to those wanting to use the original materials. However, it was not written for academics, but for the people who have long been starved of the actors'—and their own—perspective on African American history. It succeeds in feeding this long-felt hunger admirably.

*Phillip Seitz, Independent Scholar, Winner, 2011 Brooking Award for Creativity, American Association of Museums*

Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. Random House, 2010. \$30.00, hardcover.

African-American history has most often focused on two epochs, the Civil War and its immediate aftermath and the Civil Rights years, often seen as commencing with the Birmingham bus boycott of 1955 through the Civil Rights bills of 1964-65. Accordingly, literature of the period of 1876-1955 was

comparatively slight. Thus, the migration of almost 6 million African-Americans, occurring over an almost 60 year period, has received only episodic attention, mostly focused on the earliest years, beginning in the 1910s.

Yet, in recent years historians have paid more attention to those other decades. Douglas Blackmon's 2008 *Slavery By Another Name* built on David Oshinsky's 1996 *Worse Than Slavery...* and Danielle McGuire's 2010 *At The Dark End of the Street* highlighted the central role of rape in those many decades; her focusing on Rosa Park's previous career as a rape investigator and organizer for the Alabama NAACP chapter has underscored that the civil rights years occurred over a wide expanse.

Isabel Wilkerson's record of the migration, *Warmth of Other Suns*, captures the protracted exodus from "the terror from which I fled," as Richard Wright had noted. Wilkerson, a Pulitzer-prize winning journalist, provides an overarching history of the period while providing 3 in-depth portraits of escapees from the Florida panhandle, northeast Mississippi and an old mill town in Louisiana. Her subjects left in different decades over different rail routes, heading for Chicago, New York City and California. Their education and socio-economic status varied, but all three fled for greater opportunity, having had their fill of bearing the unchanging, punishing environment. The author's favorite, Ida Mae Brandon Gladney, and her new husband fled an environment of recurring lynchings, where a lack of nearby doctors doomed her diabetic father. George Starling, a high school class valedictorian, looked to escape the iron hand of his father as well as the limited opportunities; Robert Pershing Foster, more privileged than the other two, aspired to be a respected doctor, to escape the limited functions of a southern, Black physician.

By alternating and often connecting the sweep of history and the intimate portraits, Wilkerson helps the reader to more powerfully connect to the material and appreciate why the migration occurred. A teacher would be paid but one-half of what white teachers received; a sharecropper couldn't escape his indebtedness; a rural resident knew of lynchings or burnings occurring every fourth day; parents lamented that their child could only go to school when cotton harvesting was done and had to withdraw when planting season began,

limiting the school year to 5 months. Her graphic description of their plight—her “facts of their lives”—captures the imprisonment and inveterate degradation experienced by African Americans. Decades of this unchanging, often terror-laden existence finally stimulated the mass exodus, as Emmett Scott states, “as if fleeing some curse.”

Wilkerson’s successful work helps correct the long-enduring characterization of the transplanted population. For too long they were depicted as “rabble,” seen by the likes of Daniel Patrick Moynihan as a “tangle of pathology” resulting from their past and their immersion in our welfare system. Actually, compared to native northerners, the migrants were more likely to be two-parent families, to be married, to have their children *not* out of wedlock, to be employed and to have avoided welfare-dependency. Wilkerson helps the reader see them as part of “the universal experience of responding to socio-economic disadvantage” and relocating to a more empowering existence.

Criticism of this work is tempered by the fact that Wilkerson is not an historian and, most basically, by the fact that the work is so masterful; the work is successful in filling a void and educating the reader in multiple, captivating ways. So, one easily forgives that she doesn’t do a historian’s due diligence in citing other major works on the migration, or if she cites the 15<sup>th</sup> amendment as being ratified in 1880 instead of 1870. These are minor flaws, easily dismissed. *Warmth of Other Suns* is a transfixing, involving work that adds immeasurably to our understanding of the African-American experience and constitutes essential social history.

*Richard Sherman, School of Social Work,  
Salem State University*

David J. Harding. *Living the Drama: Community, Conflict, and Culture among Inner-City Boys*. The University of Chicago Press, 2010. \$25.00, paperback.

The author places his work within the body of sociological research on neighborhood effects which includes the classical social research studies of W. E. B. DuBois on opportunities and economic conditions of African Americans in Philadelphia,