# Lecture

# What Gets Left Behind: Stories from the Great Migration

JACQUELINE WOODSON

*"There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole.*
*There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul . . ."*

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore –
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over –
Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
Like a heavy load.

*Or does it explode?*
—Langston Hughes

It is April 1, 2017, and I stand before you on this first evening of National Poetry Month as someone's mother, someone's daughter, someone's life-partner, another woman's grandchild, niece, cousin, friend—this list goes on. I stand before you as a poet, a novelist, a gatherer of memories. I stand before you with all of my many selves in one place—South Carolina. A state (and state of mind) I have always loved, have always called *home*. But it is a home that, like millions of African Americans, I left a long time ago.

So many of us know the story. How from the early 1900s to the mid- to late 1970s, millions of us left the only home not only we, but our ancestors, could ever remember knowing. We left by train—riding in Jim Crow cars until we were far enough north that there were no Jim Crow cars. We left in over-burdened, second-hand station wagons. We scraped money together and bought tickets on Greyhound buses. Sometimes we left in the cover of night, for fear of getting found out. Sometimes, we told no one we were going. We were the foundation of this state, the workforce. We were the planters and pickers of cotton, the horse-drawn carriage drivers turned chauffeurs. We were the wet nurses turned nannies. We were the enslaved turned maids and butlers. We were the ones not allowed to read turned teachers, the ones turned away from white hospitals turned roots women and midwives and doctors. We were the doctors not allowed to practice here, the teachers in book-less schools, the sharecroppers eternally 'in debt' to landowners. What would the south be without us?

Jacqueline Woodson

When he was in his twenties, my great uncle Talmus left Aiken, South Carolina. He moved to the Upper West Side of Manhattan, drove a rented medallion cab until he was able to buy his own medallion—which for those of you who don't know is a literal medallion that gets placed on a taxi one owns. The difference being more money gets made, more job flexibility and security as you are then your own boss. My great uncle had left the south in the cover of night. He had been accused of mouthing off to a white boss or maybe it was looking at a white woman or maybe it was defending himself against a beating by a white man and, as the story goes, the lynch mob was on its way. Why do I say, "as the story goes?" The story of my great uncle was one that remained whispered, or worse, only alluded to. It was a story cradled in PTSD. The people who fled were afraid of what had happened—happening again. So while the adults tried to hold on to their history, that history was often too painful to say out loud. While they tried to give us lessons in survival, there were so many words and stories they were afraid to tell. So the stories were side-mouthed as in, "Well we know about that white man and Uncle Thomas" or "Thomas' name was Talmus before he fled the south" and "Shoot, he'd be hanging from that rope they were coming with for him, not driving a taxi if . . .

If . . .

If . . .

With the help of relatives, Talmus was able to escape the south, change his name, and start a new life. As a child, I knew only shadows of this story. Mostly I knew Uncle Thomas as my rich uncle living on the posh upper west side of Manhattan. He had made it. He had escaped. With his life. So many didn't. Between 1882 and 1963, three thousand four hundred and forty-six Black people were lynched in the south. They were men. They were boys. They were young women. 15 lynchings happened in Greenwood, South Carolina. 14 in Aiken. 13 in Barnwell. 11 in Laurens. 10 in Colleton. 9 in Florence. 9 in York. 8 in Lexington. 8 in Orangeburg. 6 in Edgefield. My uncle had lived in Aiken, where the state's second highest number of lynchings took place.

On lynching days, white crowds gathered to watch Black people hang from trees. They drank beer, smoked cigarettes, photographed themselves with their children on their shoulders smiling beside the hanging bodies.

And so we fled.

We each wore our one good outfit; gloved and hatted, we packed our own food for the journey—there was often nowhere for us to stop along the way—no bathrooms we were legally allowed to use, no restaurants in which we were allowed to eat. And even if there were, the money we'd saved was for the trip—and for the promise that awaited us at the end of the journey—a deep freedom we could imagine—finally. Still—If we were lucky, tucked into our purses or slipped inside our suitcoat pockets was a copy of *The Green Book*, or rather, as it was officially titled, *The Negro Motorist Green Book*. First published by Victor H. Green in 1936, the book listed hotels, restaurants, nightclubs, barber and beauty shops, tourists homes, and gas stations from Alabama to Wyoming where it was safe for us to stop.

Here in Columbia, the list was long—from tourists homes on Wayne and Pine Streets to Holman's Barber Shop and Count's Drug store.

My uncle Talmus passed away in March. Only now that he is gone do I feel safe enough to tell his story.

I wear memory like a warm coat protecting me from the deep chill of erasure. My mother's been dead for eight years now. My grandmother long gone too. Still, they are with me in memory—the soft lilt of the words curling from their mouths as the south reminded them again and again, *You can leave me but I will never leave you*. This, I remember. Their feet—like my own would become one day—were planted one in each world. This, I remember. I was a child when my mother first went to investigate New York City—its list of places in *The Green Book* long and inviting as a southern breeze. My siblings and I stayed behind with our grandparents. My mother would return for us. We knew. We hoped. This, I remember. A year ago, I wrote this poem:

**The Great Migration**

I knew the story long before I knew
the reason for my mother leaving
South Carolina. Her black
pumps, leather and new, bought a
size too small —A sale
or vanity—(She's gone now too late
for the asking)

One shoe and then the other and
then the first again and then and
then

small steps

onto a bus already filled with The
Leavers
people heading north from a South
Carolina slipping
like silk from their mouths *You got
people up there* and
*Where y'all planning on staying*
and the quiet *Yes, Ma'ams* from
children.
New York a dream in the palms of
sweaty hands, the pinch
of too tight shoes. A fierce wave
Goodbye to ol' Jim Crow
I knew the story long before I knew

The story—My mother's brown
hands
on her purse, her three children
left behind
for now her forehead pressed
against the Greyhound window.

I don't know the story, never asked
*Did you ever consider not coming
back for us* It was a story
I didn't want to know.

How did she come to believe in a
place
she'd never seen? When did she
know that home
wasn't home anymore? I thought
I knew

the story.

But, for a moment, let's return to ol' Jim Crow. After Lincoln's death in 1865, we got President Andrew Johnson. Enslavement was over. Lincoln had been trying to do some things to help some black folks out. Johnson wasn't having it. He supported white supremacy in the south and with this support, the conditions of slavery were all but restored. See, Andrew Johnson, like a lot of the old boys, had this idea that under enslavement America was a great place. And he had plans. Big plans. My boy was thinking, well, maybe he'd make America great again.

*I knew the story long before I knew the story . . .*

President after president after president refused to endorse anything related to the civil rights of African Americans, allowing Jim Crow and the Ku Klux Klan to thrive. In 1935, an anti-lynching bill was met with a six-day, gentlemanly discussion before it died.

What was discussed by these "gentlemen?" How did they not see that fathers and brothers and sons and uncles and grandfathers—were being ruthlessly, violently killed. How did they not see . . . *Us?*

So the status quo was maintained by this so-called "gentleman's agreement" up until the decade I was born.

From *Brown Girl Dreaming*:

> February 12, 1963.
> I am born as the south explodes,
> too many people too many years
> enslaved, then emancipated
> but not free, the people
> who look like me
> keep fighting
> and marching
> and getting killed
> so that today—
> February 12, 1963
> and every day from this moment on,
> brown children like me can grow up
> free. Can grow up
> learning and voting and walking
> and riding
> wherever *we* want.

If my grandmother were still alive, today would be her birthday. She was born April 1, 1914 (or 1915). She claimed my aunt Lucinda was older. My aunt Lucinda claimed my grandmother was older. They were both vain and because they were very close in age, even into their 70s, they possessed a fierce sibling rivalry. My grandmother had left the south. Aunt Lucinda had stayed. Aunt Lucinda, like so many cousins and aunts and uncles, never once came to visit us in New York City. But most summers, we returned to South Carolina and, as newly forming city children, my siblings and I suffered under the ridiculing we got from our southern peers. They thought we talked too fast and were snobby. They couldn't believe my sister thought herself cute. In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, when the other kids chide the character Maureen Peal and tell her she thinks she's cute, she says, "I AM cute." My sister was academically brighter than most kids her age—in both New York and South Carolina. It was just a fact that we lived with and, if you were me, a child who was SO not excelling academically, you just walked through your life with this information being as deeply understood as the color of your own hair. But the kids back home in South Carolina were having none of it. When my sister, like Morrison's Maureen Peal said, "I AM cute," some grown women had to pull those children off of my sister. As a child, I didn't understand who we were to the children of the south. We were *other* in what we thought was our own hometown; in our grandparents' house, our candy lady's house, our Dime Store and fabric store and Kingdom Hall. We had left, and with us, we had taken our belonging.

We had also taken our religion with us to New York City and as I grew older and moved from the world of South Carolina to the world of Brooklyn and then back again, I began to internalize a deep and important lesson from the religion I was being raised inside of—I was in the world but I wasn't of the world. And from this vantage, I began to understand the deeper truths about this place—there was those who left and those who stayed. Years later, when the Great Migration would be named as a movement, as the names of those who were children of the great migration were ticked off—from Michael Jackson to Michael Jordan, from James Baldwin to James Brown, from Davis to Dunbar, I was proud to be of both a people who left and a people who stayed. Proud to have been part of a movement that literally changed the genetic makeup of this country. And proud to be of a people who stayed.

My aunt Lucinda stayed. As did my Uncle Vertie and Aunt Annie Mae and cousins Sam and Janice and Michael. The list goes on. They stayed and they fought. It is the question I ask myself daily now—do I stay in this country and fight for those who can't leave. Or do I leave for the safety of myself and my family? What would I have done in the 1960s? What will I do now?

Only a few years after my uncle Robert arrived in New York City, he was locked up for a crime I never knew. *It would have been worse in South Carolina,* my grandmother would say again and again. *He would have been put on the chain gang.* Years and years before I understood the school to prison pipeline or prison privatization or mass incarceration, I understood that my uncle was walking, as my grandmother called it, *the wide road*. In both Greenville and New York, he hung out with beautiful black men I was always crushed out on; who wore wide-brimmed hats and were always asking each other for "a little taste of that"—whatever "that" was in the silver flask appearing from back pockets. They shot dice (which was against every rule my family had ever written, and trust me, in my family, there were a lot of rules!), played cards (another no-no). My uncle and the guys he hung out with would probably be rappers today. Or Spoken Word Artists. Or they may have been coders or dot. commers or doing something in business

Books by Jacqueline Woodson

that made a lot of money but was only legal because of some capitalist loophole in government. But my uncle was born in a different place in time. So often, I celebrate this moment that I'm in now; even with the hardship of it, I know each of us is exactly where we need to be and in the body we need to be in for the work that has to be done. For my mother, what she didn't know, was she was creating a writer. From Ohio to Greenville to Brownsville to Jamaica Queens to Bushwick and back to Greenville again, I was moving through the world, watching the people in it, listening hard for the stories hidden inside the fear of telling the story . . .

[Woodson reads pages 104–109 from *Brown Girl Dreaming*.]

*There is a balm in Gilead.*

In the early 70s, my younger brother along with hundreds of other economically poor young people of color in this country were poisoned by lead-based paint. Today, history is repeating itself with the water in Flint, Michigan. During the Jim Crow era, they came for people of color via our bathrooms. Today, they're coming for our trans sisters and brothers the same way. Our water, our air, our land, our bodies. This is what the Great Migration has taught me—that the strength of all people lies in our ability to both leave for better opportunity—and stay to fight.

From the time I was a young child, I have always loved stories—the way they empower both teller and listener, how they allow us to leave the world then float right back down into it but different somehow. Wiser. Freer. For myself, fiction has always been a way to ask questions of the world—through my own writing and through the writers I read. I am grateful to all of you for being here, for showing up, for leaving, for staying. I am grateful for all of our particular bodies working together at this moment in time. Recently, I began a new book about a boy, his two brothers, and his single dad. When I write, I often don't know where the book is going to take me. Like my mother, I get on the bus and hope for the best on the other side. And like so many who came before me, I am grateful for the opportunity to have the journey.

This is from my forthcoming novel, *Something There*.

In the early evening, the house has
a certain light
Slanting in through the dark wood
blinds. It hits
the couch then slides across the
floor. Bright gold
it is. And then orange and finally,
silver gray
then gone. You watch your father
on the couch in that light, watch
from the doorway, the baby asleep
across his lap, his tiny
arms dangling over one leg, his
tiny feet—the other. The nap
is a good one, your father softly
snoring, the baby sighing deep
from the back of his baby throat.
And the light like a cover
over them, darkness coming on.
This is the room
where your mother pulled you into
her lap, kissed the top
of your head a million times until
you laughed so hard
your stomach hurt. Until you
begged, then demanded
that she stop.

*Stop!*

and see how the light wraps everyone up now
In sleep, in dreams, in memory.

How the light moves like a hand
Or your mother's long gone eyes
over all of you.

"Without memory, our existence would be barren and opaque, like a prison cell into which no light penetrates; like a tomb which rejects the living. . . . If anything can, it is memory that will save humanity. For me, hope without memory is like memory without hope." I wish it was me who wrote that. It was the Romanian-born, Nobel Laureate, political activist, holocaust survivor, deeply thoughtful Elie Wiesel.

Let us remember that we are living in a time and in a country where people in powerful positions are telling us not only to ignore what is real in the present but forget what existed in the past. *If anything can, it is memory that will save humanity.*

Let us remember that we live in a country that was built on the blood of black bodies and poor white bodies, a country that was swindled away from our First Nation brothers and sisters. Let us remember that we are walking through a history where black bodies were traded alongside cotton and tobacco and gold.

And let us remember the blood in our veins has a history of resistance running through it.

From Emmett Till to Trayvon Martin—Let us remember.

From the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham to the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston—Let us remember.

From the March on Washington 1963 to the Women's March on Washington 2017—Let us remember.

From Abraham to Obama, from Johnson to this one—Let us remember.

For those who came before us and for the young ones coming behind, let us remember and, more than anything, let us continue to be the balm. &