

Jacob Lawrence : the migration series

**Edited by Elizabeth Hutton Turner, introductory
essay by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., essays by Lonnie G.
Bunch ... [et al.]**

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Jacob Lawrence



THE MIGRATION SERIES

MUSEUM OF
MODERN ART
LIBRARY

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Introductory essay by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

Essays by Lonnie G. Bunch III and Spencer R. Crew, Patricia Hills, Elizabeth Steele and Susana M. Halpine, Jeffrey C. Stewart, Diane Tepfer, and Deborah Willis

Chronology by Stephen Bennett Phillips

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Frontispiece: "The migration gained momentum," detail of panel 18, *The Migration of the Negro*, 1940–41 (The Museum of Modern Art)

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The Henry Luce Foundation is pleased to support this landmark exhibition at The Phillips Collection. "Jacob Lawrence: The *Migration Series*" reunites, for the first time in twenty years, one of Lawrence's most significant and powerful accomplishments.

This monumental sixty-panel work chronicles a milestone in American social history—the African American population shift from the rural South to the industrial North. In exploring its causes and effects, Lawrence captured a broad and challenging range of subjects in his uniquely evocative style.

The catalogue illustrates this series in its entirety for the first time since its creation in 1940–41. It is a fitting coincidence that it was in *Fortune* magazine that these works made their printed debut in 1941.

I am pleased to count this exhibition as the latest project of the Luce Foundation's Program in American Art, which has supported, since 1982, over one hundred exhibitions and catalogues in some sixty-five museums. And I am delighted to join The Phillips Collection for a second time in this way.

Henry Luce III
Chairman and CEO
The Henry Luce Foundation, Inc.

Through all of time, people have used art to tell their most important stories: the feats of a hero, the teachings of a leader, the struggles of a nation.

Jacob Lawrence's depiction of the migration of rural African Americans to the cities of the North during and after World War I belongs to this tradition. In sixty panels, accompanied by his own stark captions, Lawrence wrote—and made—history. Now assembled as a coherent narrative for the first time in twenty years, these panels, taken together, reflect the American epic, the story of people seeking a better life. While every age will find its own truth in Lawrence's work, it has special resonance today, as a new generation of Americans wrestles with the challenge of creating something better for themselves and their families. It also has a personal dimension for those of us who came of age in communities shaped by the events Lawrence depicts.

Our participation in this exhibition flows from our desire to celebrate Lawrence's unique artistic achievement and its contribution to the understanding of a heritage shared by all Americans.

George L. Knox III
Vice President, Public Affairs
Philip Morris Companies Inc.

Foreword

This exhibition commemorates an important moment in the history of American painting, in the history of The Phillips Collection and The Museum of Modern Art, and in the history of this country.

In December 1941 the art dealer Edith Halpert exhibited a group of sixty paintings by Jacob Lawrence in her Downtown Gallery in New York. The series, which Lawrence titled *The Migration of the Negro*, illustrates the movement of African Americans from the farms and rural communities of the South to the industrialized cities of the North and the Midwest where they hoped to find better work and a better life. Halpert planned the exhibition as part of a much larger project to focus the attention of the segregated New York art world upon contemporary African American artists. She had arranged for a consortium of dealers to simultaneously exhibit the work of a number of artists included in Alain Locke's recently published book, *The Negro in Art*. Unfortunately, Pearl Harbor was attacked the day before the scheduled gala opening, and Halpert's grand plan collapsed. Nevertheless, the Downtown Gallery proceeded to show the *Migration* series.

The exhibition gave Halpert an opportunity to bring the series to the attention of both Duncan Phillips and Alfred Barr, the director of The Museum of Modern Art. As a result, *The Migration of the Negro* was exhibited at The Phillips Collection in February 1942. Both museums had expressed an interest in purchasing the series, and in March Halpert arranged for them to divide the acquisition of the sixty panels. Apparently, Adele Rosenwald Levy, a trustee and benefactor of The Museum of Modern Art, so admired the stairway depicted in panel no. 46 that Barr requested all of the even-numbered paintings. Duncan Phillips happily agreed to acquire the odd-numbered works.

Phillips, like most critics of the time, was impressed by Lawrence's distinctive combination of abstraction with

socially relevant subject matter. He was no doubt aware of the significance of incorporating Lawrence's unique palette and patterns into his ever-expanding definition of American modernism. In Phillips's correspondence there are no references to matters of race, although Lawrence's works were among the first by African American artists to enter the collection. Barr, on the other hand, acknowledged to Halpert that Lawrence's panels were the first works by an artist of African American descent to enter the collection of The Museum of Modern Art. No doubt Phillips and Barr both recognized that while the series focused on the recent migration of African Americans from South to North, it also addressed matters of migration and immigration that are part of the experience of the nation as a whole.

Even with the benefit of more than fifty years of hindsight, many people continue to be astonished that the "migration" of the work of African American artists into our nation's important collections of modern and contemporary art reflects the greater issues of segregation and racism that have plagued this country throughout the twentieth century. In this connection it is interesting that in 1942, with the fight for civil rights hailed as the second front in World War II, The Museum of Modern Art organized a national tour of *The Migration of the Negro* and presented the series as an anti-fascist statement. The show remained on the road for two years and returned to New York in 1944 for a final engagement at the Museum of Modern Art.

The Migration of the Negro was not reunited again until 1971, in the aftermath of the unprecedented activity of the civil rights movement, when it was brought together again at The Museum of Modern Art in an exhibition titled "The Artist as Adversary." The show was also held at The Phillips Collection in 1972, but otherwise it did not travel. Apparently because of a lack of funding, the exhibition was not accompanied by a catalogue at either venue.

The current exhibition of *The Migration of the Negro* has been organized by The Phillips Collection in conjunction with an interdisciplinary team of scholars who have studied Lawrence's narrative from the vantage points of art, history, criticism, and literature. More than fifty years after the creation of the series, a new generation of scholars has gathered the necessary texts and sources to retrieve, revitalize, and re-create Lawrence's original vision. This catalogue offers both a compendium of scholarly analysis and, many will be surprised to learn, the first complete visual record of the series.

The exhibition is the result of a two-year planning process that benefited from the work of many, especially the members of the principal team who were brought together and led by associate curator Elizabeth Hutton Turner: Lonnie G. Bunch III, Spencer R. Crew, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Patricia Hills, Richard J. Powell, James E. Sims, Connie Spinner, Jeffrey C. Stewart, Diane Tepfer, and Deborah Willis. In addition, Jacob Lawrence himself participated in much of the planning. With his characteristic selflessness and generosity, he imparted a wealth of information and made himself available throughout the process. We are enormously grateful to all for their kindness, cooperation, and commitment to the project.

We are deeply indebted to the Henry Luce Foundation for its generous funding of many of the educational and outreach programs for the exhibition as well as the didactic and documentary aspects of the installation. The Luce Foundation's outstanding record of assistance for publications, exhibitions, and projects devoted to American art is widely recognized, and The Phillips Collection is once again honored by the foundation's support. Without it, we could not have presented much of the contextual and historical material that so significantly augments and enriches our experience of the *Migration* series.

In addition, I would like to express the profound gratitude of The Phillips Collection for the exceedingly generous support of the Philip Morris Companies Inc., the sponsor of the exhibition. Philip Morris's long and distinguished record of support for exhibitions is well known to museum visitors. Over the years the company has sponsored many of the greatest exhibitions we have seen in this country. Once again, we are deeply indebted to Philip Morris for their outstanding patronage and exceptional record of commitment to the arts.

Charles S. Moffett
Director
The Phillips Collection

Acknowledgments

This catalogue and exhibition would not be possible without the help and cooperation of many people and institutions. I am extremely grateful for their good will and their generous contributions to the successful completion of this project.

First and foremost, I want to thank Jacob and Gwen Lawrence for their guidance and support in making this exhibition a reality.

The early commitment of the National Endowment for the Humanities in the form of a planning grant enabled us to assemble an impressive panel of consultants to address the many issues this exhibition would raise. We are very grateful to the Philip Morris Companies Inc. for their strong financial support, which made the realization of our planning possible. Important additional support has been provided by the Henry Luce Foundation, Inc., to which we are also grateful.

I also want to acknowledge the extraordinary generosity and cooperation of The Museum of Modern Art, particularly Kirk Varnedoe, director, and Cora Rosevear, associate curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, in agreeing to lend the museum's thirty panels and to host the reunion of the series in New York. Osa Brown, director of publications, and her assistant Darla Decker helped in many ways; Kate Keller, photographer, supplied the transparencies of the works; and Victoria Garvin provided research assistance. Susan Bates, loan assistant, and Anna Hillen, senior registrar assistant, also facilitated the museum's loan.

Our planning team helped us turn the story of the *Migration* series into an exhibition. They all deserve warm thanks: Jacob and Gwen Lawrence; Lonnie G. Bunch III, chair, Department of Social and Cultural History, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution; Spencer R. Crew, acting director, National Museum of American History; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., W.E.B. Du Bois Professor of the Humanities and chair of the Afro-American

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I also would like to thank the many kind and dedicated individuals who facilitated our efforts to secure photographs, documentation, and references: Mary Ison, head, Prints and Photographs Division, and Dennis McNew, head of public services, Photoduplication Division, Library of Congress; Kimberly Cody and Maricia Battle, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; Ann Potter, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; Nicholas Natanson, National Archives; Mickey Carpenter and Rona Roob, Museum of Modern Art; Frederick Stielow, executive director, and Andrew Simons, reference archivist, Amistad Research Center; National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; Barbara Hillman, New York Public Library; Tammi Lawson, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture; Philippe Alexandre, Terry Dintenfass Gallery; Donna Mussenden Van Der Zee; Joseph Solomon, executor, Estate of Carl Van Vechten; Georgette Seabrook Powell; Louis Faurer; Philip J. and Suzanne Schiller; and Stone Wiske, Maryemma Graham, and Katherine A. Viator, Educational Technology Center, Harvard Graduate School of Education. Thanks also go to Edward Owen for his copy prints.

I have benefited enormously from the advice, assistance, cooperation, and support of the team of scholars whose collaborative effort has resulted in this book: Lonnie G.

Bunch III, Spencer Crew, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Susana Halpine, Patricia Hills, Elizabeth Steele, Jeffrey Stewart, Diane Tepfer, and Deborah Willis. I also want to thank Richard Powell for his careful reading of the manuscript and Karen Schneider for her meticulous proofreading. Ellen Cochran Hirzy is to be commended for her thoughtful editing. I am also grateful to Susan Ralston, consulting editor, and to Rappahannock Press.

I extend my warmest appreciation to Stanley Staniski, who translated this story into a powerful video.

Last but not least, I offer my heartfelt thanks to all the staff at The Phillips Collection who have adopted this project with insight, enthusiasm, and hard work. Above all, I am immensely grateful to: Elisabeth Foxley Leach, researcher; Stephen B. Phillips, executive assistant to the Curatorial Department and special exhibitions tour coordinator; Elizabeth Chew, assistant curator; and Sarah Anne Morgan and Patricia Richmond, interns, Curatorial Department. I am also grateful to: Donna McKee, education director; Helen Santini, assistant education director; William Koberg,

installations manager; Joseph Holbach, registrar; Beverly Balger and Rebecca Dodson, assistant registrars; Shelley Wischhusen-Treece, chief preparator; Jim Whitelaw, preparator; Karen Schneider, librarian; Laura Lester, director of public affairs; Kristin Krathwohl, public information officer; Joyce Dull, public affairs assistant; Andrea Barnes, membership/special events coordinator; Ignacio Moreno, visual resources coordinator; Penny Saffer, director of development; Cathy Card Sterling, director of corporate and foundation relations; Catherine Augenstein, grants coordinator; Tom Gilleylen, building services manager; Frank Hartman, assistant manager for facilities; Elizabeth Redisch, museum shop manager; Jose Tain-Alfonso, administrator; Norman Gugliotta, accountant; and Brion Elliot, assistant to the controller. Finally, I would like to thank Charles Moffett, director, Eliza Rathbone, chief curator, and Laughlin Phillips, chairman of the board of trustees, for their unfailing support throughout the preparation of this exhibition.

Elizabeth Hutton Turner
Curator of the Exhibition



Jacob Lawrence. *One-Way Ticket*, 1948, ink on paper (collection of Jacob Lawrence and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence). Illustration for Langston Hughes's *One-Way Ticket*, 1948

Introduction

ELIZABETH HUTTON TURNER

I pick up my life
And take it with me
And I put it down in
Chicago, Detroit, Buffalo, Scranton,
Any place that is North and East
And not Dixie.

—Langston Hughes, “One-Way Ticket” (1948)

When Jacob Lawrence read Langston Hughes’s 1948 ode to the African American migration, he made a drawing. He sketched a waiting room filled with travelers, trunks, and suitcases. Along its perimeter was a line of seated figures whose immense bodies cradled squirming toddlers and babies. This row seemed to go on and on, figure upon figure, profile upon profile, until from above and behind still more milling travelers setting up camps of makeshift seats moved down and closed off the view. Gazing out expectantly from this starkly contrasting sea of anonymous black figures clothed in white, a young boy sat front and center on his suitcase. He witnessed the scene, the significance of which may or may not be explained, perhaps only in retrospect. Why such prominence for a child? Who was this boy who watched and waited?

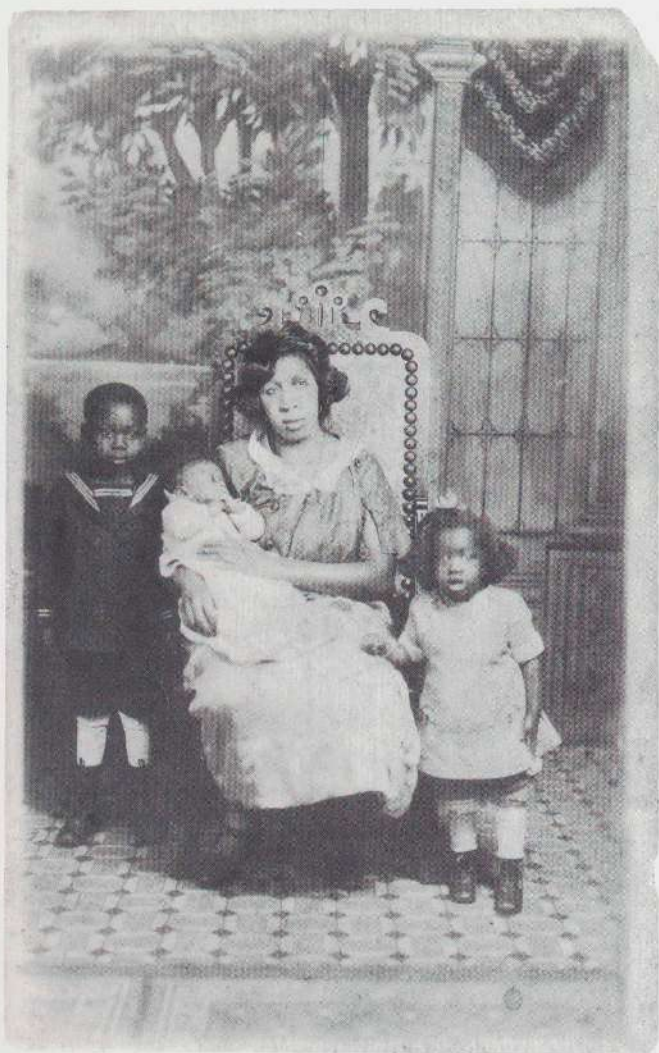
Jacob Lawrence knew about moving. Born in 1917, he had moved from Atlantic City to Easton, Pennsylvania, to Philadelphia, living in and out of foster homes before settling in Harlem with his mother when he was thirteen. There, in the great nexus of twentieth-century African American culture, he began to piece together the fragmented memories of a journey that had taken his family from South to North. He remembered his mother telling him she was born in Fredericksburg, Virginia, and his father in South Carolina. He remembered his foster parents in Philadelphia talking about “another family coming up” and about giving clothing and coal to the new arrivals. His teachers in Harlem explained what caused these people to leave the land, leave the planters, leave the tenant farms, and come to live in city tenements and work in factories. He remembered his own

surprise at arriving in Harlem and seeing eight-story buildings with fire escapes like ladders going into the sky.

At first Lawrence had no words, only patterns and colors, to attach to these experiences and memories. Later he began to articulate his own connection with the ongoing struggle of African Americans against injustice and discrimination as he studied under the painter Charles Alston and read accounts of the migration by W.E.B. Du Bois, Carter Woodson, and Emmett J. Scott. Then he could see and describe its effects plainly, even in the portrayals of street-corner orators and vaudeville actors. Such awareness of community empowered Jacob Lawrence to become an artist.

Jacob Lawrence painted *The Migration of the Negro* in 1941. He was twenty-three. His portrayals of Toussaint L’Ouverture, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman had already earned him a certain reputation as a history painter. *The Migration*, a contemporary narrative, represented a new, far bolder point of departure. Here was the story of an ongoing exodus of black labor, begun at the time of World War I, that was central to the development of African American culture and political freedom. In 1941 the movement was totally invisible to most Americans. Farm Security Administration documentaries of the 1930s, with their fixed focus on conditions in the South and the Midwest, had virtually missed it. The Photo League’s Harlem Document had captured only a part—the negative aspect, some would say—of the story.

In Lawrence’s hands, the migration became an epic, something comprehensive, timely, and timeless. His words and images conveyed metaphors of injustice, strife, struggle,



Jacob Lawrence, age six, with his mother Rose Lee Armstead Lawrence, his brother William Hale, and his sister Geraldine, 1923

change, hope, ambition, and even beauty. For Lawrence found beauty in struggle. His text, which he carefully researched and wrote before he ever made an image, clearly explained why people needed to leave and were still leaving. It described their hopes for something better, depicted the violence and disease they endured, pointed out their strengths and their potential for political power. Told on the eve of World War II, as American industry once again extended its invitation to black labor, Lawrence's history of the migration was also a cautionary tale, citing disappointments of the recent past and inspiring new hope for the future.

Had Lawrence been born a generation earlier, perhaps he would have become a muralist. Perhaps his images would

have been monumental, like those by Aaron Douglas, which were placed with honor at the Schomburg Collection during the 1930s. But Lawrence had played only a minor part in the Work Projects Administration. At age twenty-one he was, in his words, "too young for a wall." In any case, by 1941 Lawrence's story had become too big for a wall and his form too radical, too far from traditional constraints to be affixed in one time or space.

Lawrence's vision was completed in multiples of horizontal and vertical panels of the same size, small-scaled and portable, painted with tempera on masonite. There were sixty in all. Lawrence saw no need for frames at the time. Each panel had a painted border ready-made for presentation. Like story boards for a film, they were numbered and sequenced by scene with an accompanying script. Beginning and ending in a train station, the action unfolded in rhythmic progression from painting to painting, with clear stopping points or pauses along the way. Abstracted, expressive figures with exaggerated, masklike features acted out causes and consequences in shallow stagelike spaces. By the time the next train arrived in the sequence, there were still more reasons to get on board. Despite the great range of subjects and settings, a consistent palette of blue-green, orange, yellow, and gray-brown, like clay slip, ensured the visual integrity of the entire assemblage. In fact, unity and consistency were so important to Lawrence that he would not paint the *Migration* series until he had obtained a fellowship from the Rosenwald Fund and used it to secure studio space large enough to lay out all sixty panels and paint them, color by color, all at once.

Lawrence wrote in his Rosenwald application that he hoped to have the *Migration* series completed so that it could be exhibited in the fall of 1941 and later reproduced in a book. He left those arrangements up to others. In a rapid succession of events, Lawrence and the *Migration* series were launched in the New York art world. Critic Alain Locke brought the panels to the Harlem Community Art Center to show dealer Edith Halpert. Halpert, in turn, made them known to the editors of *Fortune* magazine, which published twenty-six of them in November 1941. The next month, Halpert exhibited the series at her Downtown Gallery. Two museums vying for the series—The Museum of Modern Art and The Phillips Memorial Gallery—resolved the issue by each purchasing thirty alternating panels. By the fall

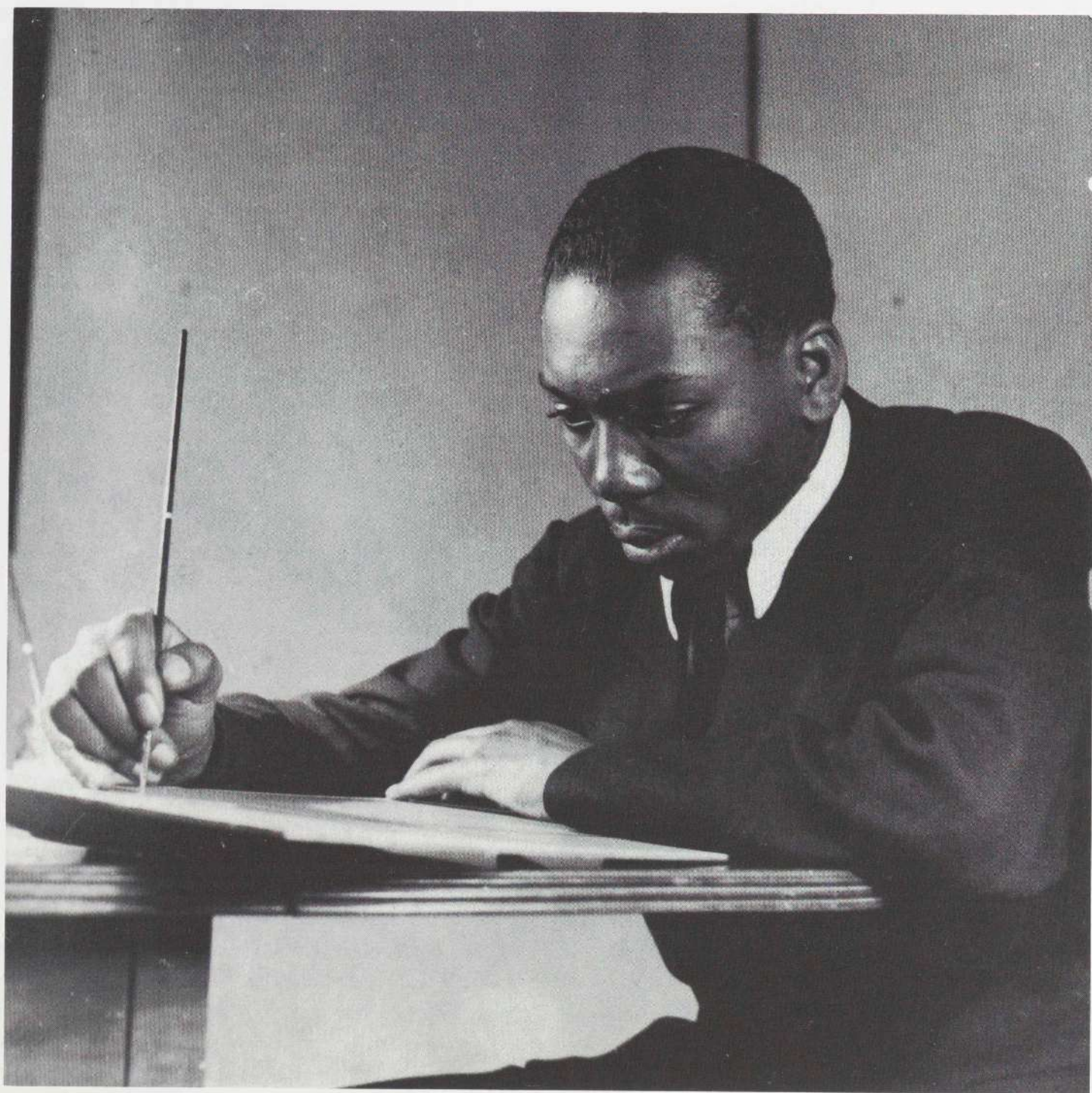
of 1942, the *Migration* series embarked on a two-year national tour.

Where was Lawrence during this remarkable time? He had gone south for the first time in his life. Hard at work on yet another series, Lawrence was, in his words, "conducting research." In November 1941 he received his copy of *Fortune* on Bienville Avenue in New Orleans. In March 1942 he was in Lenexa, Virginia, visiting his mother's family while final negotiations with Alfred Barr and Duncan Phillips were taking place. Only on his return to New York in June 1942 did he fully realize that he and his message had broken through the color barrier and that two worlds—two very separate, very segregated worlds—had somehow met in agreement about his talent and his vision.

The reunion of Jacob Lawrence's *Migration* series in 1993 provides a great opportunity to revisit the context of its creation. Lawrence himself, for the first time, has dictated the

arrangement and installation of the series. He has also revised the text accompanying the images for the purposes of this new exhibition. The scholars contributing to this catalogue explore the multifaceted aspects of the artist and his narrative. We examine how Lawrence—as historian, as researcher, as artist, as *griot*—teaches us to see the migration through painting. The roles of Alain Locke and Edith Halpert are also evaluated. A long-overdue art historical analysis of the series as both image and text is included, and for the first time the series is reproduced in color in its entirety.

Jacob Lawrence is without bitterness but filled and fired with the truth of his story. He, like the boy sitting on the suitcase, holds the legacy of the migration. He discloses it in a vital and vibrant portrait of himself and his experience. Above all, his highly original words, forms, and colors show him unafraid to "sing a new song."



Jacob Lawrence, ca. 1941 (National Archives, Harmon Foundation Collection)

New Negroes, Migration, and Cultural Exchange

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.

World-wide dusk
Of dear dark faces
Driven before an alien wind,
Scattered like seed
From far-off places
Growing in soil
That's strange and thin,
Hybrid plants
In another's garden.

— Langston Hughes, "Black Seed," 1930

The great movement of people of African descent from the rural South to the urban North between 1900 and 1930 was the largest movement of black bodies since slavery radically abstracted black Africans from Senegambia and Ghana to Angola, from River Nigeria to the Congo, and then removed them to South America, the West Indies, and the agriculture-dominated southern United States. Just as slavery inadvertently created a new "African" culture—a New World Western, Pan-African culture and ethnicity—so, too, did the Great Migration create a new culture—a cross-pollinated black culture, one northern and urban yet thoroughly southern in its roots. As much as anything else, the Great Migration was a site of cultural contestation, a new exchange and synthesis of black cultures once separate and isolated. The sheer energy of this dynamic process of acculturation—the exchange and grafting of southern and northern, urban and rural—resulted in two of the most important cultural movements of the twentieth century—the Jazz Age and the Harlem, or New Negro, Renaissance. While musicians and writers, from Langston Hughes to Duke Ellington, from Jean Toomer to Don Redman, documented the synthesis, it would be Jacob Lawrence's great achievement to register this monumental movement of economics and aesthetics in the visual realm.

Lawrence's *Migration* series is an attempt to resolve the two central competing modes of representation in the

A new type of Negro is evolving—a city Negro. He is being evolved out of those strangely divergent elements of the general background. And this is a fact overlooked by those students of human behavior. . . .

In ten years, Negroes have been actually transported from one culture to another.

— Charles S. Johnson, 1925

African American tradition that clashed and struggled for dominance in the 1920s and 1930s: a naturalism that sought to reveal how individual "choice" was always shaped and curtailed by environmental forces and a modernism that sought to chart the relation of the individual will to the chaotic environment. He turned to an "expressive cubism," as Patricia Hills has called it, a figural modernism that employed an extended narrative technique to settle the inherent tension between these two poles. The result is a new, mediating form of representation, an extended artwork of epic proportions. Its sole counterpart in the black literary tradition is Richard Wright's *Native Son*, a deeply naturalistic work, dense in its determinism, concerned with the aftermath of the migration. As for representing the *process* of migration, there is no literary equivalent to Lawrence's visual narrative.

"To migrate" means to extend a "habitat gradually from an old into a new region" and "to move from one site to another in a host organism, especially as part of a life cycle." The word stems from the Latin *migratus*, "to change," and peripherally from the Sanskrit word *mayate*, "he exchanges." Lawrence brilliantly evokes this sense of exchange through the use of ladders, stairs, or railroad tracks as a leitmotif (panels 36, 38, 39, 46). Although there had been other migrations—the "Exodusters" to Kansas after the collapse of Reconstruction in 1876 and black southerners to the North

beginning at the turn of the century—in 1910 no less than 75 percent of all African Americans lived in rural areas, and 90 percent lived in the South. But by 1920 almost 40 percent of the northern black population lived in eight cities: Chicago, Detroit, New York, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Columbus, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh.

There were as many reasons for migration as there were people who migrated. Most obvious, of course, was that since slavery the North had been a literal haven of freedom to which the slave could escape, giving it mythic proportions. “Down South,” on the other hand, a thermidorian reaction followed the short-lived Reconstruction period. A Sisyphean sharecropper system quickly emerged as a substitute form of economic slavery. White supremacy was codified into a cruel legal system, and systematically untrammelled mass aggression was visited upon the black. During this period, America’s own Dark Ages, more black people were lynched, burned, and tortured than at any other time in the nation’s history. Blacks fled.

The statistics are revealing: Between 1870 and 1890, an average of 41,378 people migrated each decade from the South. Between 1890 and 1900, however, more than twice that number migrated—107,796 people. Between 1890 and 1910, the black populations of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Illinois more than doubled; that of New York nearly tripled.

A veil of blackness covered the North, especially Harlem. As Gilbert Osofsky shows in his important study, *Harlem: The Making of A Ghetto*, between 1910 and 1920 the black population of New York increased sixty-six percent, and between 1920 and 1930 it expanded 115 percent. Another type of migration occurred at the same time: between 1920 and 1930, 118,792 white people left Harlem, while 87,417 black people arrived. (Still, by 1930 no less than 80 percent of Harlem businesses were white owned.)

While works such as Wright’s *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* draw on the post-migration period for their settings, migration as a theme in black literature is fairly rare. But the drama of migration captured the imagination of an entire people for more than half a century. Whole families just picked up what they could carry—and often what they couldn’t—and left their homes and friends, many times in the middle of the night, for the hope of the unfamiliar. For the migrant, the move often meant the difference between life and death in one form or another. For all, however,

migration initiated them into the technological America of the twentieth century as if they had been transported in a time machine. And this movement through time and space often had tragic consequences. As Langston Hughes wrote in “Po’ Boy Blues” (1932):

When I was home de
Sunshine seemed like gold.
When I was home de
Sunshine seemed like gold.
Since I cam North de
Whole damn world’s turned cold.

As the urban black population swelled, it was imperative to the political goals of socioeconomic integration and cultural assimilation (embraced by such organizations as the NAACP and the Urban League) that separate communities of black people, and especially Harlem, be perceived as “normal” communities, not tainted in any way by such a massive gathering of black folk. James Weldon Johnson in 1930 was careful to explain that, quite unlike ordinary concentrations of blacks, “Negro Harlem is situated in the heart of Manhattan and covers one of the most beautiful and healthful sites in the whole city. It is not a fringe, it is not a slum, nor is it a ‘quarter’ consisting of dilapidated tenements.” And Johnson’s testament was only one in a chorus.

But in the midst of the New Negro spiritual awakening led by the talented tenth or the “cultured few” were human beings living in Harlem, which was rapidly becoming a rotting slum. The chairman of a New York City housing committee remarked in 1927 that the socioeconomic conditions in Harlem were “deplorable,” “unspeakable,” “incredible.” “The State,” he said, “would not allow cows to live in some of these apartments used by colored people.” The Harlem death rate was 42 percent higher than that of the entire city. Twice as many black mothers died in childbirth as did mothers in other districts. The infant mortality rate in Harlem was twice that of the rest of New York. Undertaking was the most profitable business.

As early as 1913, George Edmund Haynes wrote that “there is growing up in the cities of America a distinct Negro world,” one “isolated from many of the impulses of the common life and little understood by the white world.” This world grew even more distinct as blacks from the rural South migrated in greater numbers to the urban North. This was the

Harlem of which James Weldon Johnson could say, "It is the Mecca for . . . the talented of the entire Negro world." This was the Harlem, Langston Hughes wrote,

where from bar to bar
where from glass to glass
I drowned my paid
right to the dance-floor
trodden and worn with steps
with stomps
with slows
with songs
with sons
with blues.

The juxtaposition of glamorous image and stark reality is basic to an understanding of exactly why the Harlem Renaissance could not sustain itself as a cultural movement. While "slumming parties" frequented Harlem cabarets to soak up some "African" rhythm, while white intellectuals waxed eloquent over Harlem's exoticism and eroticism, while propagandists black and white pictured the ghetto as a mythical dreamland north of Central Park, Harlem became one of the most appalling slums in the country. "Had these people [from downtown] arrived at noon and inspected a rat-infested tenement," Osofsky writes, "their image of the gay Negro might have been changed; yet American racial consciousness refused to recognize any but the supposedly joyous side of Negro culture. It was impossible to mobilize any massive support for racial reform in the 1920s because American society voluntarily blinded itself to the harsh realities of Negro existence."

What caused the ghettos? How could an entire neighborhood deteriorate into a slum? Osofsky argues that the primary economic factor was the astronomical increase in rent brought about by increased settlement in a restricted residential area. Because he could not escape to another, integrated neighborhood, the black tenant had to pay these exorbitant rents—by 1927, nearly double the 1919 figure.

Black people invaded the North, full of hope and energy, only to encounter the Great Depression in 1929. The depression, which was to destroy and create so many American institutions with its sorrow and deprivation, had attacked Harlem early in the 1920s. "The reason why the Depression didn't have the impact on the Negroes that it had

on the whites," George Schuyler wrote, "was that Negroes had been in the Depression all the time." The thin veneer of the Black Mecca, the glamour of Black Paris, when scraped away by the depression revealed a deep structure of rot. Very few writers and artists addressed themselves to the socioeconomic conditions until the depression, preferring instead to focus on the sense of possibility that migration promised. In their works of art, they were almost as separated from the reality of black America's daily existence as were the whites who emigrated each night from downtown; the latter had an excuse, perhaps, but the former did not. But Jacob Lawrence succeeded marvelously in the realm of the visual precisely where the New Negro writers faulted.

What the Great Migration meant for African American culture specifically and American culture generally can scarcely be described. A regional, parochial black culture became cosmopolitan and universal, especially in its musical forms. The blues split into two distinct but related forms, the classic blues and "country" blues. Ragtime, in the rich cauldron of the migrating 1920s, metamorphosed itself into something called "jazz." The Negro people suddenly were of two sorts, "old" and "new." African Americans *reinvented* themselves, as more than a million souls removed themselves from the provinces to the metropole, from the periphery to the center, from South to North, from agriculture to industrial, from rural to urban, from the nineteenth century to the twentieth. The greatest transformation of all, of course, was a "new" Negro culture, the outcome of the exchange of traditional southern and northern black cultures and the resulting synthesis of the two. Jacob Lawrence's masterful visual narration of the most significant development in African American history since the Civil War is both product and record of this transformation. While the black visual tradition was exceptionally rich and varied by the 1930s, no artist before Lawrence had undertaken a *narrative* series of a historical event from the black past.

In fact, the false optimism of the New Negro writers found its counterpart in the idealized black images and the neoprimitivism (with its faux-African motifs) that permeate so much of black art in the 1920s. Artists and writers alike were reacting to a long history of racist stereotyping of the black figure—especially between 1890 and 1920—by creating ideal images of a transcendent African and neo-African

nobility. To call the Harlem Renaissance a "New Negro" movement is to describe exactly what its visual and verbal artists sought to create: a largely unregistered, unimagined image of the Noble Negro that would destroy forever the confusing, limited range of black stereotypes that every artist had to confront. Lawrence's figural modernism, his "expressive cubism," allowed him to capture the tension between the energy and potential of migration as well as its often tragic consequences.

Migration for Lawrence was most aptly symbolized in the recurring figure of the ladder, which signifies a bridge or a conduit, a connection between the past and the future as well as between the South and the North. Whereas the visual meaning associated with ladders in the black tradition suggests vertical or hierarchical patterns of progressive movement—"lifting as we climb," as the motto of a prominent black women's organization had it—Lawrence's use of the image is much more subtle. His ladder is a span, a connecting mechanism, the very linkage of the chain of tradition, of the old with the new.

Lawrence is quite eloquent about the levels of signification in the series and about his motivation and inspiration to paint it: "I was part of the migration, as was my family: my mother, my sister, and my brother. . . . I grew up hearing tales about people 'coming up,' another family arriving. People who'd been . . . in the North for a few years, they would say another family 'came up' and they would help them to get established . . . by giving them clothes and fuel and things of that sort I was only about 10, 11, or 12. It was the '20s. . . . And of course there was a great deal of tension throughout the country—the ethnic tension and so on—I guess you have a similar situation today. But this was all new to me. I was a youngster and I heard these stories over and over again. . . . I didn't realize that we were even a part of that. . . . I didn't realize what was happening until about the middle of the 1930s, and that's when the *Migration* series began to take form in my mind."

But what gave rise to Lawrence's extensive use of narrative forms in the series? "By this time I was in Harlem," he says. "I decided to paint this series—I wasn't thinking of sales or of a gallery. I liked storytelling. I went to the Schomburg Library and selected events from South and North. I think that the series alternates from South to North. I just got into it. I didn't separate it—I wasn't looking at it from the inside

out or the outside in. This was such a part of my life. . . . We—my wife Gwen and I—gessoed the panels and got them in order—and I just started doing it. In retrospect now, I think my central concept was, 'people on the move.' I guess that's what migration means. . . . You think of trains and buses and people just on the move. Of course, I was doing research at the time. I guess it was both emotional and intellectual."

One of the most curious aspects of the series to our generation is its open depiction of class tensions within the black community—the clash between the old and the new, the lower migrating classes and the more stable middle classes. Of this, Lawrence responds that "there was a great deal of elitism and snobbery [but] there wasn't one kind of treatment. You'd had blacks living in the North for years since the turn of the century, . . . and many of the blacks coming up from the . . . rural areas of the South were almost illiterate. I imagine—I only can imagine this now—that the treatment was one of compassion at times. So it was a mixture."

Did migration lead to the creation of a self-contained Negro world, since the series seems to be founded primarily upon the lives of black people? "I lived in Harlem. I grew up in Harlem. My life was in the Harlem community. I didn't go outside [it] except to go to an art gallery or a museum. Everything was right there. . . . I remember the *Amsterdam News*—almost every week, there would be a headline: 'Black Accosted,' 57th Street, 42nd Street. [When] you were outside the community, the police could be pretty mean and pretty brutal. You'd be beaten up except if you were a domestic or a janitor. If you went downtown wearing a suit, you could be accosted. We didn't go outside the community, people like myself. Not that we constantly had this fear, but it was there.

"I wouldn't make the qualification that it was better. It was *different*. It was a more cohesive community. You got to know the people on the streets—not by name—but seeing the faces over and over again when you went to church community centers, saw the teachers in the community, interacted with librarians in the community. This is what inspired me. As I talk now, I think that this is a result of that kind of rapport."

How did Lawrence arrive at his particular color scheme to symbolize this transformation of black culture? "We lived in

a deep depression. Not only my mother, but the poor people in general. In order to add something to their lives, they decorated their tenements and their homes in all of these colors. I've been asked, Is anybody in my family artistically inclined? I've always felt ashamed of my response and I always said no, not realizing that my artistic sensibility came from this ambiance. I did have this influence, but I didn't realize it was taking place. It's only in retrospect that I realized that I was surrounded by art. You'd walk Seventh Avenue and look in the windows and you'd see all these colors in the depth of the depression. All these colors. You'd walk through Harlem and go to the Apollo Theater, and the jokes that were being told! The pathos! People would laugh, but it was comedy on a very profound, deep, philosophical level. But you can only see this, you can only realize this, in retrospect." In effect, then, Lawrence's sense of color is communal, his way of seeing cultural—"through my mother's way of seeing," he says, "and my mother's friends, her contemporaries, my peers. That's the way it was."

How did Lawrence go about conceiving of ways to represent migration? "I'm seeing the works for the first time in a number of years and I realize now in looking at them that every time I see them, I see them from a different point of view. I notice the symbols. I didn't realize that there were so many symbols of railroad stations, bus stations, people traveling! But that's what migration is. You think in terms of people on the move, people moving from one situation to another. . . . Crossroads, bus stations, and train stations—moments of transition—it certainly was a moment of transition in the history of America and for the race. It's one of the big movements in our country. And I want to say this, too: I don't think the blacks in making a movement just contributed to their own development. It contributed to *American* development. Look at your structure of the cities—the passion, the energy, the vitality. Not always positive—some of it quite negative—but it's there and I think we have added to, and not taken from, our growth. When I say 'our,' I'm using that in a larger context. And I think that we have made a contribution in making this move. Many people tried to keep us out. You had your riots. But we made a tremendous contribution to the American growth, to the *American* development of *America*."

Among Lawrence's contemporaries, I can't think of anyone who combines a mastery of narrative with the mastery of the

visual images. He has brought the two traditions together. "We are absolutely a people telling stories," he says. "It seems like we are born talking and telling people about it. This series came out of that—people talking about people coming up from the South. This tradition continues. 'Another family arrived. . . .' The train station—these images repeat themselves over and over again [in the series]—the sharecropper, the tenant farmer. This particular image—panel 31—represents my experience with the tenements. I think it's a very important work. The fire escape—in much of my work, I use [this] image, . . . which appears over and over again. If I had had the experience of seeing the fire escape and windows and tenements prior to [coming to Harlem], . . . I didn't realize it. But there was this visual image—a beautiful image—that occurred over and over again. I also want to say, by the ages of 14, 15, 16, I was making visits to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and . . . not trying to analyze it. Just going and looking and seeing and appreciating, especially the early Renaissance, and beginning to wonder how a person could put things down on a surface and make things seem to recede and seem to advance. It's like magic. . . . How could a person paint a violin case and you feel the grain coming out of that? They were masters. I would go in and marvel at these things. How do you make a thing seem to be round and have form? It was like magic to me."

For Lawrence, learning to "see" the Great Migration through the paintings of the European Renaissance masters is indicative of his idea of artistic influence, generally, and of the relation between white and black culture, specifically. "You're a part of us and we're a part of you," he says. Migration, in the end, fissured southern and northern black cultures into two distinct entities, as fundamentally related to their regions as to race. And because of Jacob Lawrence, the great narrative of a migrating, mutating culture is preserved forever on canvas, in sixty vividly sublime panels, a testament to a great historical epoch and to the vision of a modern master.



Jack Delano. Migratory workers on their way from Florida to New Jersey, 1940 (Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration Collection)

A Historian's Eye: Jacob Lawrence, Historical Reality, and the *Migration* Series

LONNIE G. BUNCH III AND SPENCER R. CREW

In the early twentieth century, most scholars ignored the contributions of African Americans to American history and culture. They saw only slave history, and they did not believe that people who were still adjusting to Western civilization could have a significant role in the American story. Moving against this current of thought were a small group whose research led them to black men and women whose contributions rivaled those of some of the most renowned politicians and scientists. Scholars such as George W. Williams, Carter G. Woodson, and Benjamin Brawley sought to explain the centrality of the African American experience to the evolution of the United States.¹ Not everyone interested in keeping this story alive was an academician like Woodson or Brawley. Additional "historians" came from other walks of life; their skills lay not in the crafting of scholarly publications but in the creation of literature, theater, dance, and art.

Jacob Lawrence was one of these "historians." He understood the intertwining of the African American and American experiences and explicitly presented it in his work. In his earlier series—the subjects of which were Frederick Douglass, Toussaint L'Ouverture, and Harriet Tubman—extensive research shaped his understanding of his subjects and undergirded his images. The *Migration* series, however, related his research to his own life. Lawrence was part of the migration experience, and in his paintings he revealed the significance of that exodus as well as the bittersweet nature of the African American struggle to survive in the United States.

Jacob Lawrence's life—from his birth in Atlantic City, New Jersey, the new home of many southern migrants—mirrored the pattern of many African American families during the early twentieth century. Disillusioned with their lives in the

South, they made their way north by the hundreds of thousands with the advent of World War I, seeking better economic opportunities as well as improved political and social conditions. Access to jobs once unavailable to northern black workers made southern blacks willing to chance the risks involved in the move, and their children experienced both the benefits and the problems that resulted.²

Lawrence and other children of the migration spent many hours listening to their parents, relatives, and neighbors describe their lives in the South and their journey northward in stories that must have been both exciting and frightening. Although some of these tales may have been embellished, the reality of the system that white southerners had created to control African Americans was indeed grim.

The purpose of the system was to reduce African Americans to second-class citizenship by denying them basic constitutional rights. By 1915 southern states had created a variety of legal devices to keep blacks from the ballot box. The most famous was the "grandfather clause," first added to the Louisiana state constitution in 1898 to deny the vote to anyone whose grandparents had not been eligible to vote in that state in 1867—a group that included most potential African American voters. Once Louisiana's clause passed the scrutiny of the Supreme Court, which had ruled earlier that race could not be a criterion for excluding eligible voters, other southern states adopted it and similar indirect strategies. Poll taxes, for example, which forced voters to pay a fee in order to vote, effectively disenfranchised the poor. Literacy tests required potential voters to read and interpret a passage from the state constitution or another document to the satisfaction of local election officials. African Americans, no matter how highly educated, inevitably failed these tests,



Arthur Rothstein. Sharecropper plowing, Montgomery County, Alabama, 1937 (Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration Collection)



Marion Post Wolcott. Family picking peas, Flint River Farms, Georgia, late 1930s (Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration Collection)

while others with much less education passed easily.³

Just as limiting was the southern economic system. Most African Americans lived in rural areas and worked as farmers or farm laborers. Very few owned the land they cultivated. Instead, they toiled as tenant farmers or sharecroppers who rented land from large landowners in exchange for a share of the crop. The size of the landowner's share could be one-quarter of the crop or more, depending on what the renter contributed. Sharecroppers often purchased supplies on credit at the local store, which might belong to the same landowner. In a bad year, they might find themselves deeply in debt. Often settling one year's debt with the proceeds from the next, they were trapped in a cycle of indebtedness, dependence, and inability to attain economic stability.⁴

Local customs and laws discouraged protest against the injustices of the sharecropping system and governed the social setting. Under segregation or "Jim Crow" statutes, African Americans sat in separate seating areas in public places, drank at segregated water fountains, and rode in segregated train cars. Segregation also shaped the educational system. The schools available to African Americans received little money and few supplies. The teachers were dedicated but overworked, and children were discouraged from attending school beyond the sixth grade. Many landlords and some economically hard-pressed parents believed children had much more value as field workers than as students and pressured them to leave school.⁵

Defiance of discriminatory laws and customs could have dire consequences, ranging from arrest and time at a work farm or convict camp to violent retaliation on the part of the Ku Klux Klan and others who terrorized the African American community. Between 1900 and 1914 more than 1,100 African Americans were lynched in the United States, the vast majority of them in southern states.⁶

To ameliorate the impact of the caste system, African Americans had their own survival mechanisms: churches, fraternal organizations, masonic groups, and school activities. But even these organizations were not always enough to counteract the stress people felt, and many began to explore their options in other parts of the country. During World War I, when industrial production increased as the civilian labor supply shrank, factory owners looked to the South. They advertised in black newspapers and sent in labor recruiters. Black publications such as the *Chicago*

Dorothea Lange. Plantation owner, Clarksdale, Mississippi, 1936. Published in Edwin Rosskam and Richard Wright, *Twelve Million Black Voices*, 1941 (Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration Collection)



Defender, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the *Amsterdam News* ran regular articles highlighting the advantages of living in the North and the problems confronting African Americans who remained in the South.

It has been argued that the Great Migration had its start when the Pennsylvania Railroad sent an employee south to recruit African American workers. His success encouraged others and unleashed the torrent of migration.⁷ Indeed, the Pennsylvania Railroad eventually became one of the primary transporters of migrants to the Midatlantic and Northeast regions. Many of the newcomers, including the parents of Jacob Lawrence, settled in Atlantic City, a seaside resort where the demand for service workers was high.

In his *Migration* series Lawrence poignantly captured the heroism and the pathos that characterized black life in the South before and during the mass exodus northward. His aim was not to romanticize that life but to set forth clearly the conditions under which his parents, their relatives, and their neighbors had to live. He allowed these people, who had few avenues for voicing their experiences, to speak to

the public that views the images. He listened closely to the stories of the people depicted in his paintings, and he wants the viewer to understand what these people endured.

A difficult and sometimes bleak existence comes through in Lawrence's images. The people portrayed are locked in a mighty struggle against poverty, nature, spiritual degradation, and physical violence, weights heavy enough to break anyone's spirit and perseverance. But the people Lawrence depicts not only survive their condition; they strike back at it by voting with their feet. Relocating was a conscious step to escape the system of repression erected in the South, a quiet rebellion against a system the migrants could not yet defeat but would not willingly or passively embrace.⁸

To African Americans whose roots reached back into the South or who still lived there, Lawrence's images told a painfully familiar story; for others, particularly those living outside of the South, they offered a glimpse into a totally new world. The *Migration* series removed the cloak of anonymity from a central element of the twentieth-century African American experience. It allowed the uninitiated to

understand the toll southern racism took on its victims, the resiliency of African Americans, and the reasons so many people joined the stream of black workers heading north.⁹ The series also portrayed African Americans as people who made deliberate choices about how to counteract the forces arrayed against them.

Of all the choices African Americans could make, migrating offered the most rapid opportunity to change their destinies. But what they found did not always match their expectations.

In the panels of the *Migration* series that focus on the northern experience, Lawrence continued his depiction of a determined, proud people willing to sacrifice to ensure a better life for future generations. Yet his complex narrative does not romanticize the massive transition from rural South to urban North. One of his strengths is his ability to struggle with and convey to his audiences—knowledgeable and uninitiated alike—the complexities, ambiguities, expectations, and disappointments that shaped the African American condition during this time. He understood that just as slavery had shaped African American life in the nineteenth century, migration would become the defining event of the twentieth.

Lawrence was one of many who clarified and defined the migration experience; from the end of World War I through the early stages of World War II, the story of the migration was like an omnipresent hum heard everywhere blacks settled. While much of what Lawrence knew of it came from his research or from his family and friends, his vision may also have been shaped by the cultural milieu of black centers such as Harlem, where the newcomers' hopes informed much of the era's literature, music, and even the nascent black theater and film. Lawrence's art expressed both the unschooled and unstructured memories of the migrants and the creative and intellectual products of the literati, actors, and musicians of the cultural movements of the 1920s (the Harlem Renaissance) and the 1930s and 1940s (the New Realism).¹⁰

In any newly created black metropolis of this period, a complex atmosphere influenced cultural life. The arduous trip, the difficult change in surroundings, the struggle to remain connected to family and friends "down South," and the migrants' shifting expectations all contributed to the black urban experience. Some of the writers, especially

during the early 1920s, were overly optimistic. To them, coming north meant not only a rejection of southern bigotry and violence but an opportunity to reap the full benefits of American democracy in an environment shaped by and conducive to African Americans.

Thus Claude McKay spoke of finally coming "Home to Harlem" after a life of wandering, while James Weldon Johnson wrote that the vibrancy and strength of black Harlem was "a miracle straight out of the skies." To Johnson, the unprecedented opportunities that the North provided would allow blacks to forever end the notion of being "beggar[s] at the gates of the nation waiting to be thrown the crumbs of civilization." Langston Hughes, who celebrated and romanticized the rhythms and possibilities of the city, was overwhelmed with optimism: "I went up the steps [of the subway] and out into the bright September sunlight. Harlem! I stood there, dropped my bags, took a deep breath and felt happy again." Rudolph Fisher, a keen and critical observer of urban black life, explored the inflated expectation that migration would bring freedom, money, and refuge. In his short story, "The City of Refuge," Fisher wrote: "In Harlem, black was white. You had rights that could not be denied you; you had privileges, protected by law. And you had money. It was a land of plenty." Artists such as Archibald Motley and singers such as Ethel Waters, in their rush to embrace the possibilities of urbanization, often understated or overlooked the harsher realities.¹¹

By the end of the Harlem Renaissance, writers, poets, and musicians had begun to document the impact of overcrowding, the resiliency of racism in the North, the ravages of disease, and the limited share of the economic pie. They began to reflect the prevailing wisdom that for the migrants, the city "ain't been no crystal stair."¹² Much of the music of the 1930s also reflected this approach. In the musical suite, "Black, Brown and Beige," Duke Ellington realistically depicted "many aspects of the city within a city—good and bad." Bessie Smith's "Backwater Blues" encouraged the movement north but also cautioned that it would not guarantee an escape from the blues; Mead Lux Lewis's "Honky Tonk Train Blues" captured the feel of the trains that brought migrants north and the subways that confined and shook their tenements each night.¹³

Black authors of the period wrestled with the unfulfilled hopes of migration. Searching for greater reality, they

replaced the cabaret of the Harlem Renaissance with the tenement. Jean Toomer's celebrated novel *Cane* explored the ugliness of race relations in the South as well as the impact of the city on black lives and aspirations. Ultimately, he suggested, there was no racial panacea in either the city or the country. Even Langston Hughes's poetry began to reflect the realization that change did not come simply by the act of moving north and congregating in black enclaves. In "Elevator Boy" he wrote: "I got a job now/ running an elevator/ in the Dennison Hotel in Jersey/ Job ain't no good though/ no money around."¹⁴ William Attaway's novel *Blood on the Forge* (1941) was critical of those who celebrated factory work as heroic; the migrants, he argued, were exchanging familiar southern violence for the strange and savage violence of the northern factories. But the most critical examination of migration was Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* (1941). The tragedy that befell the protagonist, Bigger Thomas, had much to do with poverty, racism, and the clash between the migrant's expectations and the reality of urban life.¹⁵

From the art, music, and literature of his day, Jacob Lawrence assimilated this dizzying array of messages and viewpoints. His *Migration* series reflects a sophisticated melding of optimistic, romantic notions of the city with a more pessimistic, darker evaluation of urbanization. Lawrence's ability to marry memory, scholarship, popular culture, and a historian's eye ensured that the series would transcend caricature and simplistic assessment to stand as an artistic creation rich with historical detail and ripe with the complexities and nuances that shaped and informed the Great Migration. Lawrence accomplished something that would have been difficult for an academically trained historian to achieve: he crafted a narrative that was built on historical reality and embraced the ambiguities of the past, and then he made that narrative teach, entertain, and sing.

The urban moments in Lawrence's *Migration* series make it clear that he sought to reflect the ambivalence of black life in the North. His images suggest the tensions between expectations and disappointments, between what was gained and what was lost. But above all, they suggest the often



Dorothea Lange. Workers hoeing in field, Georgia, ca. 1941. Published in Edwin Rosskam and Richard Wright, *Twelve Million Black Voices*, 1941, and selected by The Museum of Modern Art for the title panel of its installation of the *Migration* series in 1944 (Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration Collection)

harsh realities that the migrants experienced. Yet “the migrants kept coming.”

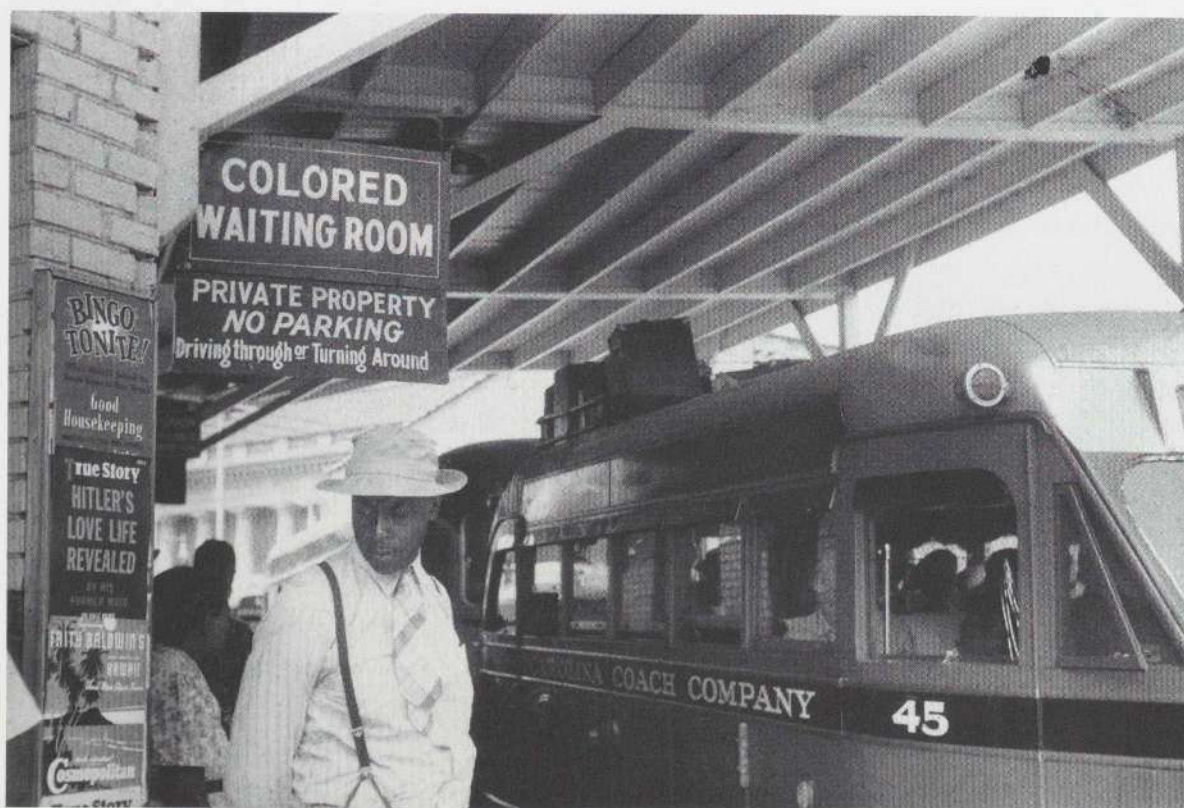
For many migrants the first reality of urban life involved finding a place to live. While black communities accommodated the first trickle of the movement, later migrants found their housing opportunities limited by custom, cost, and rapidly diminishing availability. White political and community leaders worked to restrict the newcomers to existing black neighborhoods. All those who migrated to Pittsburgh, for example, were shunted into the Hill District, those in Los Angeles were relegated to the Central Avenue corridor, and those in New York found Harlem home. Municipalities enforced this arrangement either through intimidation or through legal arrangements such as residential housing covenants that restricted home ownership to white people. The quality of housing declined in black areas, as houses and apartments were subdivided into overcrowded, smaller living spaces. Disease, poverty, and crime began to take their toll; in black Harlem, for example, the tuberculosis rate was the highest in the city.¹⁶

Racial discrimination in all aspects of life was as much a part of the northern experience as it was in the South. While the blatant signs of the South were not a part of the northern

landscape, Jim Crow was alive and roaming the streets. Restaurants, hotels, residential communities, businesses, and schools restricted access based more on custom than on law. In the cities the separation of the races was even more extreme than in the South.

Exerting their rights as citizens, blacks often tried to change or circumvent these discriminatory customs, only to find their attempts thwarted by their lack of political or economic clout. Occasionally the increased black presence and the pressure for change sparked violence, as Jacob Lawrence shows in panel 52 of the *Migration* series depicting the 1919 East St. Louis riot. In fact, many scholars argue that the Harlem riot in 1935 ended any notion that the city offered a panacea for African Americans.¹⁷

Just as limiting was discrimination in employment. Manpower shortages caused first by World War I and later by the restructuring of immigration policy gave African Americans their entrée to northern factories, yet they were relegated to unskilled or semiskilled positions, due in part to the reluctance of unions to accept them as members. Black workers were also used as strikebreakers in labor conflicts that sometimes turned violent, and the violence often was directed at the city's black enclave. Studies of major urban



Jack Delano. At the bus station, 1940 (Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration Collection)

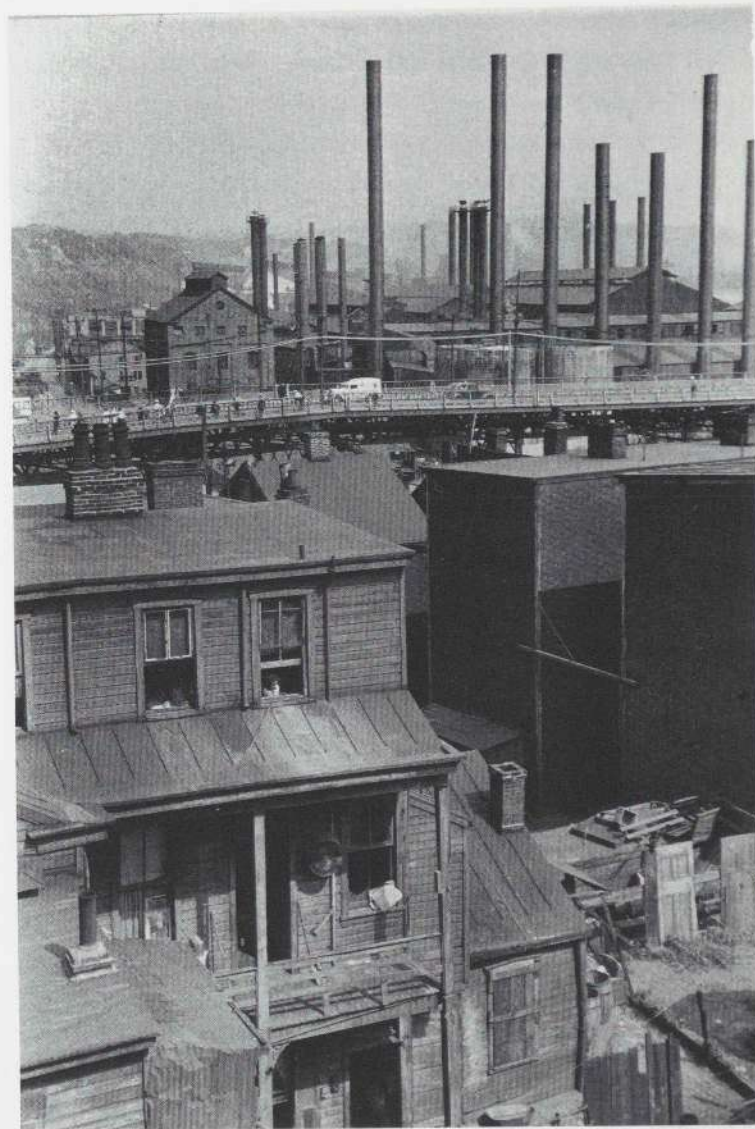
centers in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s indicate that black employment was still mostly limited to the lowest-paying unskilled or service sectors. The migrants struggled, much as they had in the South, to provide for their families.

Despite the many disappointments, the movement north did offer opportunities that made the transition worth the effort. An important attraction was the right to vote, which, while it did not ameliorate all the ills that the migrants faced, nonetheless provided a limited chance to exert modest political influence. Although white politicians used a variety of means, including gerrymandering, to limit the impact of the black vote, soon the black communities gained political power sheerly by virtue of their size. By the time Lawrence painted the *Migration* series, there were a growing number of local black politicians and even a few black members of the House of Representatives, including Oscar DePriest of Chicago and Adam Clayton Powell of Harlem.

The migration also brought the need and the opportunity for new churches and community organizations to help the settlers find employment, housing, medical treatment, educational facilities, and relatives or friends. These groups smoothed the transition to an alien environment that often invalidated the migrants' traditions, practices, and frames of reference.¹⁸

As Lawrence wrote in his narrative, many earlier African American migrants to northern cities "met their fellowmen with disgust and aloofness" (panel 53), an attitude that grew out of class and regional differences. Many in the established black community feared that the new migrants might, with their uncouth ways and southernism, undermine their own tenuous status. While these concerns were understandable, they created divisions that inhibited cohesiveness at a time when a united front in the various African American communities might have elevated them more quickly.

While the *Migration* series was a brilliant vehicle for giving voice to part of the American population that had long been a shadowy presence, its public showing in 1941 and subsequent tour beginning in 1942 also offered contemporary lessons to African Americans. Here they saw depicted the hopes and dreams of an earlier generation that had headed north seeking fuller participation as citizens. That generation also listened to W.E.B. Du Bois, editor of *The Crisis*, who counseled African Americans to "Close Ranks" and forgo their quest for greater equality in order to join



Arthur Rothstein. Tenement section, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1941. Published in Edwin Rosskam and Richard Wright, *Twelve Million Black Voices*, 1941 (Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration Collection)

their countrymen in the fight against tyranny during World War I.¹⁹ Their response was to sue for the right to participate in the military draft. That generation set aside personal concerns and worked in war industries, only to lose their jobs when white soldiers returned. And they fought gallantly and died for their country in segregated units, only to return to race riots, lynching, and limited economic opportunity. Hoping that by displaying their patriotism they would prove their worthiness for full economic and political recognition, they came home to face greater restrictions and determined opposition to their efforts.²⁰

As Lawrence's *Migration* series appeared on the national scene, once again African Americans seeking better lives were leaving the South and moving to cities in the West, Midwest, and East. Once again the demands of a world war were opening new job alternatives and offering the opportunity to press for better treatment of all citizens. African Americans who saw the series in the early 1940s must have thought about the lessons of that earlier movement and about how they might avoid the same bitter disappointments.

Leaders like A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin contemplated past disappointments and created the March on Washington Movement. To protest job discrimination by companies that received government contracts, they planned a march on Washington, D.C., unless President Franklin D. Roosevelt sponsored legislation prohibiting such practices. They knew that a mass protest would embarrass the government, which was fighting a war to preserve democracy in other parts of the world.

Other leaders adopted a different attitude toward African American participation in World War II. They called for a two-front war, one outside the nation's boundaries and the other within, where racism and discrimination still had a firm hold. These leaders were unwilling to return to business as usual. They were determined to use this migration and



John Vachon. Courtroom scene, Virginia, ca. 1941. Published in Edwin Rosskam and Richard Wright, *Twelve Million Black Voices*, 1941 (Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration Collection)

this war as a springboard to improve the status of African Americans.²¹

Not everyone who viewed Lawrence's *Migration* series during its debut and tour saw the lessons it contained, but the similarities between its images and the historical events of that moment were self-evident. As Lawrence has said, his works are portraits of himself, his family, and his peers—they are a part of him.²² And this series in particular is very much a part of the African American community. It reveals accepted communal truths to African Americans while making these truths available to others in a manner that challenges, provokes, and educates. In essence, the *Migration* series successfully captures the feel, the tensions, and the historical events that shaped and accompanied the massive movement of rural blacks to northern cities. Created at the dawn of World War II, it also documents the strengths, ambiguities, and dilemmas that shaped the northern African American community as it stood on the threshold of fundamental change.

NOTES

1. Williams, *History of the Negro Race* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1883); Woodson, *The Negro in Our History* (Washington, D.C.: Association for Study of Negro Life and Culture, 1922); Brawley, *A Short History of the American Negro*, (1919; New York: Macmillan, 1950).
2. Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Confrontation: Black and White* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965), 114–15.
3. C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South 1877–1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 321–49.
4. Emmett J. Scott, *Negro Migration During the War* (1920; New York: Arno Press, 1969), 14–17.
5. Bennett, *Confrontation*, 78–83; Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Making of America* (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1969), 144–47.
6. John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), 322–23.
7. Charles A. Hardy III, "Race and Opportunity: Black Philadelphia During the Era of the Great Migration" (Ph.D. diss., Temple University, 1989), 118; Scott, *Negro Migration*, 54–55.
8. Bennett, *Confrontation*, 115.
9. "... And the Migrants Kept Coming," *Fortune* 24, no. 5 (November 1941): 102.
10. For an excellent discussion of the intersection between cultural creativity and the new black enclaves of the 1920s and 1930s, see Cary Wintz, *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance* (Houston: Rice University Press, 1988) and Nathan Huggins, *The Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).
11. Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 74–78; Wintz, *Black Culture*, 82–84; and Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro* (1925; New York: Atheneum, 1968), 58.
12. Langston Hughes, "Mother to Son," in *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 187.
13. Stanley Dance, liner notes to Duke Ellington, "Black, Brown and Beige"



Photographer unknown. Children playing in Harlem, 1930s (National Archives)

(Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Recordings, 1989); Marshall W. Stearns, *The Story of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 168–71.

14. Quoted in Wintz, *Black Culture*, 84–85.

15. Bone *Negro Novel*, 140–44.

16. The study of African American migration is now one of the most active fields of historical scholarship. Among the best of this genre are Joe Trotter, *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985) and Jervis Anderson, *This Was Harlem* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981). Much of this discussion of Harlem is indebted to Wintz, *Black Culture*, 5–36.

17. See Wintz, *Black Culture*, 12–20, and Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964).

18. For a discussion of the array of community organizations that grew out of these new black communities, see Lonnie G. Bunch, *Black Angelinos: The African American in Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: California Afro-American Museum, 1988), 27–32.

19. W.E.B. Du Bois, "Close Ranks," *The Crisis* 16 (July 1918): 110–16.

20. Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 353–67.

21. Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Making of America*, 215–16.

22. Jacob Lawrence, interview with Elizabeth Hutton Turner, Seattle, Washington, October 3, 1992.



Researchers in the Division of Negro History, Literature, and Prints, 135th Street Branch Library (now known as the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture), 1930s (National Archives, Harmon Foundation Collection)

The Schomburg Collection: A Rich Resource for Jacob Lawrence

DEBORAH WILLIS

What impresses me about Lawrence is his ability to combine social interest and interpretation (he selects his own episodes from careful library reading and research) with a straight art approach when he comes to work on his drawings.¹

—Alain Le Roy Locke

Few modern paintings can claim their origins in a library. But before Jacob Lawrence ever picked up his brush, he often went to the library and researched or wrote the text for the story he was about to tell. To an artist like Lawrence, a library is the soul of history; its resources are like sketches for undeveloped ideas. Lawrence the storyteller used the library to interpret, study, and create works about particular historical or contemporary events. The Schomburg Collection of Negro History, Literature, and Prints, in a branch of the New York Public Library in Harlem, played a strong supporting role in creating the realist themes found in his paintings.

Housed in a McKim, Mead, and White structure on West 135th Street, the branch library gave the young Lawrence access to a vast body of information. The Schomburg Collection, now known as the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, is one of the most renowned research centers shaped by and devoted to the activities and achievements of Africans and Africans in the diaspora. Many artists and scholars—among them Langston Hughes and James Weldon Johnson—have found the collection to be both a rich intellectual resource and a powerful creative and spiritual stimulus.

When the 135th Street Branch Library opened on January 14, 1905, turn-of-the-century Harlem was growing and changing rapidly. It was a blend of white working-class neighborhoods whose residents were of European origin and, especially west of Lenox Avenue, one of the largest upper-middle-class enclaves in Manhattan.² By 1919 a new migration had occurred as black southerners moved north to

the cities, and the Harlem community presented a decidedly different picture. Ernestine Rose, who was appointed librarian of the 135th Street Branch in 1920, observed the same year that the elementary school opposite the library had an enrollment of more than 2,000 children, 90 percent of whom were “colored,” and that there were eight “colored” teachers. Most likely in response to this influx of “colored” students, the school’s principal suggested to Rose that “colored help would be [an] advantage to the work of the branch library.”³ Shortly thereafter, the New York Public



James Van Der Zee. *Chocolate Soda Wagon*, in front of 135th Street Branch Library, 1928 (copyright 1969 James Van Der Zee, all rights reserved, courtesy of Donna Mussenden-Van Der Zee)



Aaron Douglas and Arthur Schomburg at the 135th Street Branch Library, ca. 1934, viewing the 1934 mural by Douglas, *Aspects of Negro Life: Song of the Towers* (National Archives, Harmon Foundation Collection)

Library hired its first black librarian, Catherine Allen Latimer, and assigned her to the 135th Street Branch.

In May 1925 the branch inaugurated the Division of Negro History, Literature, and Prints “to preserve the historical record of the race; to arouse the race consciousness and race pride; to inspire art students [and] to give information to everyone about the Negro.”⁴ Celeste Tibbets describes the urgency that Ernestine Rose felt: “Questions of identity and heritage were pressing; artists and writers framed these questions articulately for the populace and found a home in the 135th Street Library.”⁵ Jean Blackwell Hutson, curator of the Schomburg Collection from 1948 to 1980, observed that Harlem residents had such a “relentless intellectual thirst” for black and African history that “rare and out-of-print books could not be replaced when they were ‘worn to

shreds,’ and books still in print could not be replaced fast enough with the money available.”⁶

Mindful of the challenge to quench this thirst and create a library devoted to community needs, Rose invited Arthur A. Schomburg, a bibliophile and a Puerto Rican of African ancestry, to chair a committee charged with planning for the preservation of the heavily used collection.⁷ Schomburg loaned a portion of his large private collection of black history material to the library, and others joined in the effort: scholar Hubert Harrison organized weekly lectures on black history, while Catherine Latimer established a clippings file and a small collection of books on the subject.⁸ The committee assessed the condition of the circulating books and separated those that were considered rare. The committee and library staff urged members of the community to donate or loan books, journals, artworks, and photographs.

Rose knew that Schomburg was interested in selling his collection. She wrote to L. Hollingsworth Wood, president of the National Urban League, seeking his support for bringing the collection to the 135th Street Branch:

Mr. Schomburg . . . has loaned some of his books, and I have learned that his collection is for sale. . . . I learned now that Mr. George Foster Peabody is considering the purchase of this collection with a view to giving it to a university in Africa.

I can see the suitability of this from some standpoints, but I feel with many others that it would be a calamity to let this collection leave the United States, where it should serve the purpose of enlightenment to both races and where such an educational process is so necessary.⁹

Schomburg met with Wood and members of his staff to discuss a suitable repository for his collection. The obvious choice was the 135th Street Branch. The New York Public Library received a \$10,000 grant from the Carnegie Corporation to purchase the collection. On January 20, 1927, the Arthur A. Schomburg Collection officially opened on the third floor of the branch.

The collection that inspired Jacob Lawrence has never been a traditional library. It has always served the community in diverse ways. Ernestine Rose described its impact in an annual report for the 135th Street Branch from about 1936: