

I have endeavored to make the [Schomburg] collection . . . available to readers, students and scholars. . . . The periodical and magazine files are used by a goodly number of persons who keep in touch with the chronicled events of their respective sectional parts of the country. We can mention a number of books written by scholars where expressions of acknowledgment have been given, such as in Prof. Loggins' book, "Negro Author"; the poet, James Weldon Johnson's "Black Manhattan"; Nancy Cunard, in her book "Negro Anthology"; and many others. Their works were primarily based on the books they found on our shelves.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to books, manuscripts, and maps, the collection included two- and three-dimensional artworks. The library had large exhibit cases and a theater where plays and poetry readings were staged. The Harlem Art Workshop, where Jacob Lawrence first studied as a youngster, held its classes in the basement. In the mid-1930s, Roberta Bosely, one of the newly hired black librarians, hung an early drawing by young Jacob Lawrence in an exhibition. After he saw the drawing, Carter G. Woodson, historian and founder of the Association of Negro Life and History and author of the definitive study on the Great Migration, remarked that Lawrence was not talented enough to become a successful artist.<sup>11</sup> The library also collected published materials from the local school district. One of Lawrence's poems, "To all mothers," published in the December 1930 *P.S. 89 Parent-Teacher Bulletin*, is still preserved in the library's vast collection.

Even during the Great Depression, Harlem was a colorful and expressive place. Lawrence recalls that he walked the avenues and streets recording people and events in his memory in an attempt to learn about and understand the history of black people. The library offered many programs and lectures on black history for community groups.<sup>12</sup> Lawrence attended these meetings, which were led by community historians in the library and the local YMCA, and listened intently to the street-corner orators.

The tradition of the street-corner orator in Harlem had its roots as early as 1915. These speakers, who attracted large and enthusiastic audiences, suggested to Ernestine Rose a way for the 135th Street Branch to bring people to the library:

It occurred to us that if people will listen to politics and patent medicines they will listen to education, too, provided it is well presented to them. So we employed one of the most eloquent and the most popular of these speakers and paid him to address large crowds at strategic corners on the streets of Harlem. Once a week these people were urged to come to a meeting at the library. This was one of our most successful attempts to reach the "common man."<sup>13</sup>

Augusta Baker, a librarian who began her career at the 135th Street Branch, recalled:

The basic training was that we were a part of the community. We were not to sit inside and wait for people to come to us. We were to go out to them and invite them in. We were to make the Branch so inviting that they would want to come back."<sup>14</sup>

A report published in 1940 clearly shows that the Schomburg was serving the needs of a diverse community. From August through November 1939, 3,359 people used the collection; two thematic exhibitions—on African art from Nigeria and photographs and books from the Virgin



Jack Allison. Utopia Children's House, Harlem, summer 1938 (Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration Collection)

Islands—were on display. Recognizing the changing needs of the community, the librarians began to record new and unusual reference questions.

In 1940 and 1941 they responded to queries dealing with issues as varied as “stories behind the spirituals”; “poems on Haiti by Negro poets”; “social conditions of Negroes during the slavery period”; the Negro in the field of baseball”; and “Negro Baptists in Pennsylvania.” Librarian Catherine Latimer noted in a report on reference work that bibliographies were developed as a direct result of users’ questions on “Harlem,” “the Negro in agriculture,” and “outstanding Negro men and women of New York who have helped the Negro in all fields and periods of American History.” A year-long exhibition, “The Birth of a Book,” displayed manuscripts by Langston Hughes, Charles S. Johnson, Melville Herskovits, Countee Cullen, W.E.B. Du Bois, W. C. Handy, Henrietta Buckmaster, Richard Wright, and others.<sup>15</sup>

In 1939 the noted historian Lawrence D. Reddick succeeded Arthur A. Schomburg as curator of the collection. Following a survey to assess the needs of scholars and community residents, the collection expanded its holdings by acquiring a range of newspapers, books, and magazines, accommodating the newly arrived migrants.

By 1941 the Schomburg provided a wealth of resources for Jacob Lawrence’s inquiry into the Great Migration. Sixteen years after the collection was established, it offered lecture series, art and drama workshops, and the core library material— manuscripts, periodicals, works of art, and archival collections. Ernestine Rose wrote that “the function of a library in any community is to act as a natural center for the development of the community’s intellectual life; it will be the library’s duty and privilege to search out and encourage any activity which quickens . . . aesthetic interest.”<sup>16</sup> Inspired by this thinking, Lawrence engulfed himself in his subject by searching through books, newspapers, magazines, prints, and photographs. Sometimes serendipitously, but most often methodically and deliberately, he looked for source material to illustrate his ideas. Like the poet and novelist Langston Hughes before him, he made the 135th Street Branch Library his first stop. He created the framework for his stories using the histories and statistics housed there.

Access to the Schomburg Collection was through a row of card catalogue drawers. Seeking material on the subject of

the Great Migration, Lawrence browsed the catalogue looking for references for his new series. In his 1940 application for a fellowship from the Julius Rosenwald Fund, he described his plan of work: “Most of my research (about 6 months work) would be carried on at the Negro History division of the Schomburg Library.”<sup>16</sup>

Lawrence divided his proposal into eight sections, each posing a focused question on the issue of migration. Looking in the card catalogue in 1940 under the subject heading “Migration, Negro: see Negroes—Migration,” he would have found a large and comprehensive collection. Although he does not cite specific texts, he might have selected books and essays with titles such as *The Negro Question in the United States*, by James Stewart Allen (1936); *The Northward Movement of the Colored Population*, by Frederick J. Brown (ca. 1897); *Factors in Cultural Backgrounds of the British West Indian Negro and the American Southern Negro that Condition Their Adjustments in Harlem*, by Barrington Dunbar (1936); *Negro Migration: A Study of the Exodus of the Negroes 1920 and 1925 from Middle Georgia Counties as that Exodus Was Influenced or Determined by Existing Economic Conditions*, by John William Fanning (1930); “Conditions Among Negroes in the Cities,” by George Edmund Haynes, published in the *Bulletin of the National League on Urban Conditions Among Negroes* (1913); *The*



Jacob Lawrence (second from left) making block prints under the direction of Sarah West at a WPA Federal Art Project workshop, Harlem, ca. 1933–34 (National Archives, Harmon Foundation Collection)



Jacob Lawrence (center) and other students with their teacher at a WPA Federal Art Project workshop, Harlem, ca. 1933–34 (National Archives, Harmon Foundation Collection)

*Negro Peasant Turns Cityward: Effects of Recent Migrations to North Centers*, by Louise Veneable Kennedy (1930); *Negro Intelligence and Selective Migration*, by Otto Klineberg; and *Negro Migration During the War*, by Emmett Jay Scott (1920). Other valuable references on the subject that could have aroused Lawrence's interest were Alain Locke's *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925) and the research files of the Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration, *Negroes of New York* (1939–40).

The clippings maintained by librarian Catherine Latimer contained crucial and interesting visual references. It is ironic, however, that while Lawrence studied the printed word for relevance and authenticity, he says he does not recall using the extensive photographic files in the collection to stimulate his imagination for the *Migration* series. The Resettlement Administration (later the Farm Security Administration) Photographic File had a large collection of photographs of migrant workers and southern scenes. Studio portraits, snapshots, and street portraits of Harlem families

were also a part of the library's photographic files as early as the late 1920s. Most of this material was located in the general research collection. Nor does Lawrence cite specific texts as sources.

Lawrence's research methods for the *Migration* series probably paralleled those he used for his first narrative cycle, forty-one paintings on the Haitian leader Toussaint L'Ouverture (1937–38). Inspired first by the W.E.B. Du Bois play *Haiti* at the Lafayette Theater in 1936, he began reading about L'Ouverture and the history of the Republic of Haiti:

I do my research first; read the books, take notes. I may find it necessary to go through my notes three times to eliminate unimportant points. I did all my reading at [the] Schomburg Library. Most of the information came from Charles Beard's book *Toussaint L'Ouverture*. I read other books—there were more novels than anything else. One book, I don't remember its name, told me of the conditions on the island and its resources. It gave a short sketch of the history of the Haitian revolution.<sup>18</sup>



Jacob Lawrence. *The Curator*, 1937, gouache on paper (Art and Artifacts Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations)

Lawrence used the same method with his series on Frederick Douglass (1938–39) and Harriet Tubman (1939–40).

The Schomburg also inspired other works by Lawrence. In 1937, just one year before the untimely death of Arthur A. Schomburg, he executed a gouache on paper called *The Curator*, which is now in the Schomburg Center collection. In a 1977 letter to Jean Blackwell Hutson, he wrote:

The painting is not an exact portrait painting of Arthur Schomburg, however, many years ago I spent much of my time at the Schomburg Collection and the library did inspire me to paint this picture. I am very pleased it is now part of the Center's permanent collection.<sup>19</sup>

Lawrence clearly believed that “history paintings” should be based on actual recorded events. At the Schomburg, where art was displayed with books, he found the courage to make his story into an aesthetic statement. The Schomburg—forged during the migration—fit the very nature of the story Lawrence wanted to tell. As Langston Hughes described it, the collection was both the well that drew the intelligentsia and the hub of the spinning wheel of ideas that sent them out again. In his essay, “My Early Days in Harlem,” Hughes described his first visit to the 135th Street Library in 1921:

[A] warm and wonderful librarian, Miss Ernestine Rose, white, made newcomers feel welcome, as did her assistant in charge of the Schomburg Collection, Catherine Latimer, a luscious café au lait.<sup>20</sup>

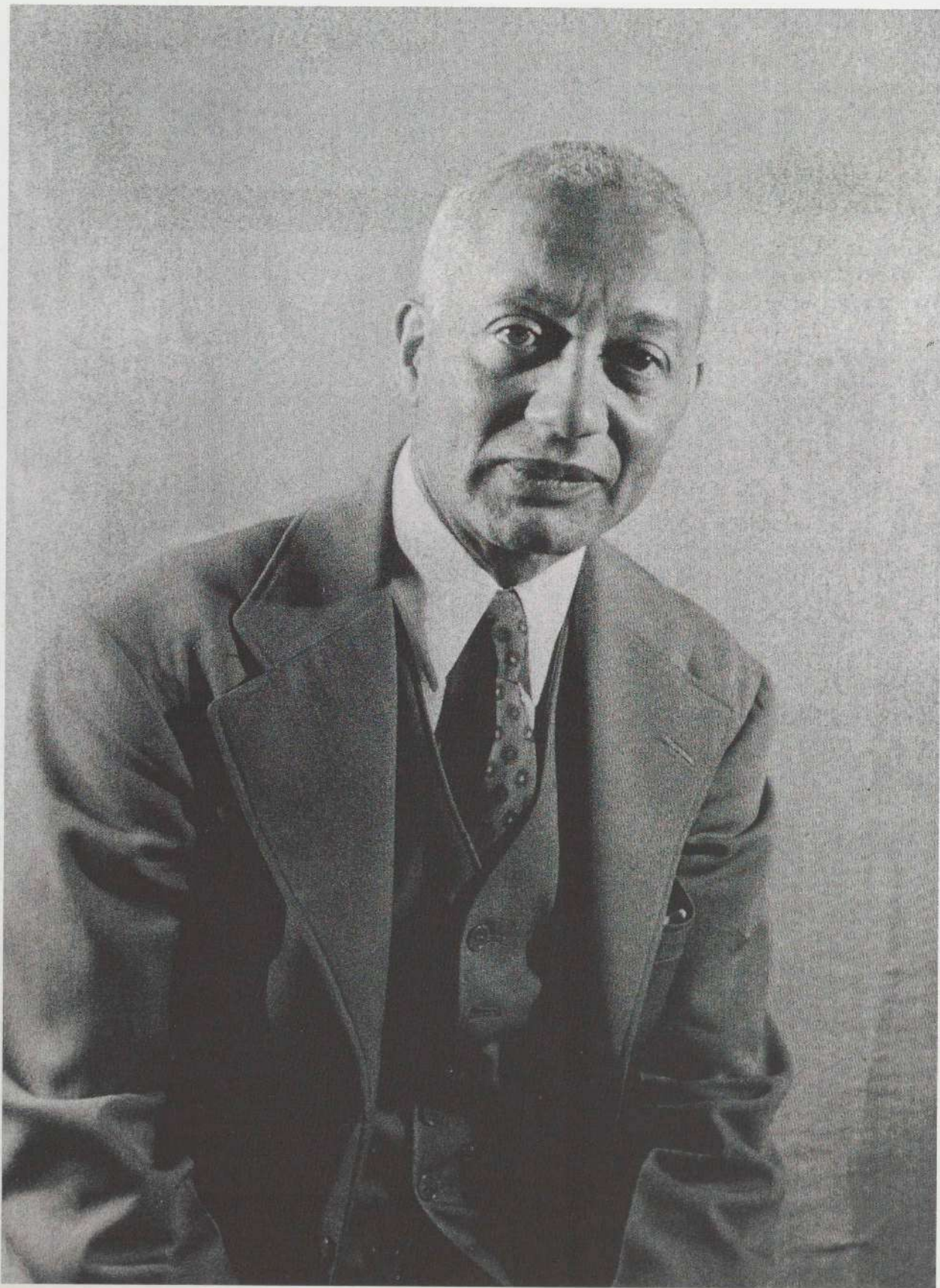
Hughes went on to evoke the Harlem of the migration:

Harlem, like a Picasso painting in his cubistic period. Harlem—Southern Harlem—the Carolinas, Georgia, Florida—looking for the Promised Land—dressed in rhythmic words, painted in bright pictures, dancing to jazz—and ending up in the subway at morning rush time—headed downtown. West Indian Harlem—warm rambunctious sassy remembering Marcus Garvey. Haitian Harlem, Cuban Harlem, little pockets of tropical dreams in alien tongues. Magnet Harlem, pulling an Arthur Schomburg from Puerto Rico, pulling an Arna Bontemps all the way from California, a Nora Holt from way out West, an E. Simms Campbell from St. Louis, likewise a Josephine Baker, a Charles S. Johnson from Virginia, an A. Philip Randolph from Florida, a Roy Wilkins from Minnesota, an Alta Douglas from Kansas. Melting pot Harlem—Harlem of honey and chocolate and caramel and rum and vinegar and lemon and lime and gall.<sup>21</sup>

The pulse of Hughes's essay reflects the sentiments and ideas that influenced Lawrence's paintings of Harlem and its people. The Schomburg Collection was a creative partner to the artist as he constructed and forged his *Migration* series. In the Schomburg, he found his greatest inspiration and his greatest sanctuary.

## NOTES

1. Alain Locke to Julius Rosenwald Fund, "Confidential Report on Candidate for Fellowship," re Jacob Armstead Lawrence, January 23, 1940, Rosenwald Fund Collection, Special Collections, Fisk University, Nashville, Tenn. (hereafter Rosenwald Fund Collection).
2. Jervis Anderson, *This Was Harlem: 1900–1950* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1981), 45.
3. Quoted in Elinor Des Verney Sinnette, *Arthur A. Schomburg: Black Bibliophile and Collector, A Biography* (Detroit: New York Public Library and Wayne State University Press, 1989), 131.
4. *Ibid.*, 132.
5. Celeste Tibbets, *Ernestine Rose and the Origins of the Schomburg Center*, Schomburg Center Occasional Papers Series, no. 2 (New York: New York Public Library, 1989), 21.
6. Jean Blackwell Hutson, "The Schomburg Collection," *Freedomways*, Summer 1963, 432.
7. Arthur Alphonso Schomburg (1874–1938) had a lifelong passion for collecting, which reportedly sprang from a childhood experience when a grammar school teacher responded to his question about black history by informing him that black people had no history. Among the other community members of the planning committee were writer James Weldon Johnson, real estate investor John A. Nail, and scholar and lecturer Hubert Harrison.
8. Sinnette, *Schomburg*, 132.
9. Ernestine Rose to L. Hollingsworth Wood, October 6, 1925, Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Archives Division, Schomburg Center Records, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library (hereafter Schomburg Center Records).
10. Ernestine Rose, "Annual Report," n.d. (ca. 1936), 1, Schomburg Center Records.
11. Sinnette, *Schomburg*, 224.
12. Tibbets, *Rose*, 25.
13. *Ibid.* Originally quoted in Margaret E. Monroe, *Library Adult Education: The Biography of an Idea* (New York: Scarecrow Press, 1963), 311–12.
14. Tibbets, *Rose*, 23.
15. Catherine A. Latimer, "Report of Reference Work in Schomburg Collection, 1941" (submitted December 16, 1941), 2, Schomburg Center Records.
16. Sinnette, *Schomburg*, 135.
17. Jacob Lawrence, fellowship application submitted to Julius Rosenwald Fund, 1940, Rosenwald Fund Collection.
18. Press release, "Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture," by Jacob Lawrence, exhibition held at De Porres Interracial Center, New York, May 22–June 2, 1939, 2, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.
19. Jacob Lawrence to Jean Blackwell Hutson, June 28, 1977. Art and Artifacts Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
20. Langston Hughes and John Henrik Clark, eds., *Harlem: A Community in Transition* (New York: Citadel Press, 1964), 62.
21. *Ibid.*, 64.



Carl Van Vechten. *Alain Locke*, 1941 (National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, copyright estate of Carl Van Vechten, Joseph Solomon, executor)

## (Un)Locke(ing) Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series

JEFFREY C. STEWART

With engaging, disarming frankness, Jacob Lawrence graciously welcomed the questions of historians, art critics, and museum professionals during preparations for The Phillips Collection's exhibition of his *Migration* series: Did he study Mexican muralists? Was he affected by the work of the Black photographer James Van Der Zee? Had he ever met Alfred Stieglitz? Had he been part of the celebrated debate between Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston over the effects of racism and folk traditions on the psychology of African Americans?<sup>1</sup>

Just as graciously, Lawrence dismissed these inquiries as largely irrelevant to his artistic vision. His sources, he said again and again, were his community. His Harlem schoolteachers had recognized early his special gift and encouraged his artistic talent. His visits to the Apollo Theater on 135th Street had opened his eyes to the theater; coming out of that palace of African American dance and vaudeville, he had made boxes into little stages on which he mounted his first artistic compositions. He drew his inspiration from the streets around him, a kind of theater in its own right, with a range of personalities from barefoot prophets to shell-shocked World War I veterans, from street-corner Garveyites who advocated return to Africa to soapbox Communists who predicted the worldwide triumph of an integrated proletariat—all clamoring, all gesturing, all transforming a northern ghetto into a creative crucible called Harlem. That was the laboratory of Lawrence's artistic genius, along with the interiors of Black homes that had been fancy upper-middle-class apartments but by the 1930s were worn and tattered tenements groaning under the weight of successive waves of migrants whose lives Lawrence's series chronicled. Those tenements, with their brightly decorated interiors and garish facades, had been the educators of his eye.

Lawrence was telling us that he and other African American and European American artists—Aaron Douglas

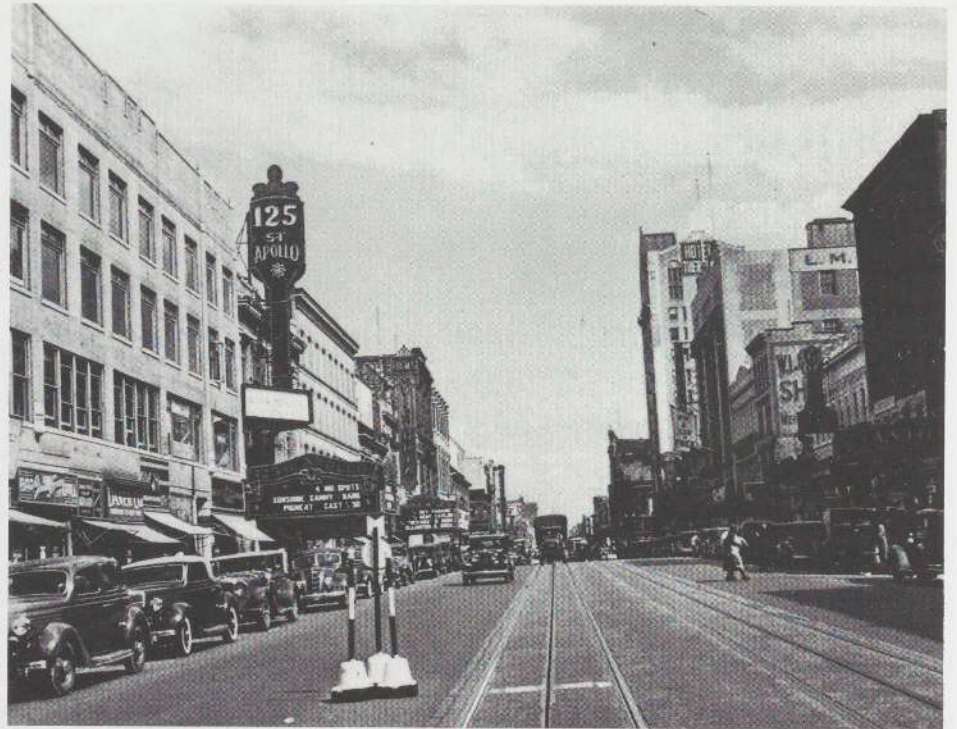
and Stuart Davis, for instance—were inspired more by the community of Harlem than by each other. Not just on a social but also on a formal level, Black urban communities like Harlem were kaleidoscopes of pattern, color, movement, and design that the awakened eye—and there were precious few of them—could distill and transform into a tapestry that came to define an African American aesthetic in the visual arts. Lawrence knew not only the aesthetic form of his community but also the content of the migrants' lives, for as a child he heard stories of their travel and travail and learned of their dreams and hardships in Harlem, where he lived. He identified with Harlem so strongly that he experienced none of the alienation from the Black community felt by William H. Johnson and some other Black artists of the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, when asked whether he considered what the Black community thought of his paintings, Lawrence answered without irony, "I am the Black community." Here was a man who eluded the social, aesthetic, and historical categories we commonly impose on art and artists, a man who had produced an open text that still speaks to us today.

Lawrence and his series were inspired more by literary mentors than by other visual artists. He trekked almost daily to the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library in 1940, consulted the work of writers, historians, and sociologists, and created the sixty panels of his *Migration* series from the inspiration of their words. The series was more than simply a work of art; it was part of a discourse on the meaning of the migration and on the African American experience that it epitomized from the second decade of the twentieth century until today. What Lawrence did was create a text that incorporated history, sociology, and a kind of poetry in a visual narrative that broke out of the typical categories of modern art.

A closer look at the relationship between Lawrence's work and his intellectual community reveals what eludes easy



Aaron Siskind. *Amateur Night, Apollo Theater, Harlem*. From the Photo League Feature Group project *Harlem Document*, which was exhibited in Harlem in 1939 (National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, gift of Tennyson and Fern Schad, courtesy Light Gallery)



Photographer unknown. 125th Street at 8th Avenue, Harlem, showing Apollo Theater, 1930s (New York Public Library, Local History Division)

categorization and empowers his visual message. A crucial part of his community was the corps of African American writers and intellectuals who had written extensively about the Black migration and the emerging role of the visual artist as an interpretive force in African American life and culture. In a sense, Lawrence incorporated all that had been thought and written about the migration in a series that went beyond those earlier texts.

Key among these individuals was Alain Le Roy Locke, a literary and visual arts critic, who wrote a letter of recommendation in 1940 for Lawrence's Rosenwald Fund fellowship to create the *Migration* series. Locke's letter is especially important because it helps to define the character of Lawrence's work. Locke described Lawrence as unique in 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

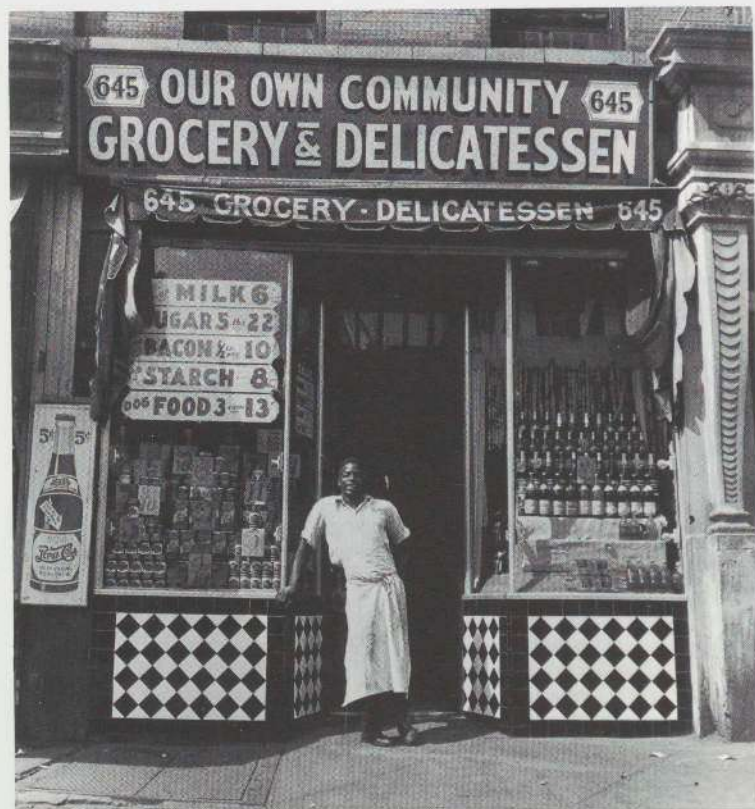
work on his drawings. There is little or no hint of social propaganda in his pictures, and no slighting of the artistic problems involved, such as one finds in many of the contemporary social-theme painters. Yet his work has a stirring social and racial appeal.<sup>2</sup>

While some other critics, such as Charles Rogers, worried about the "strong tendency to propaganda" of Lawrence's project,<sup>3</sup> Locke argued that Lawrence's blending of art and "social interest" transformed social and political history into modern art. Later, Locke would note that a "warmly human but piercing social irony" was a "particularly characteristic" aspect of the series.<sup>4</sup>

The series not only advanced Lawrence's evolution as an artist; it also advanced our knowledge of the migration as a historical and a contemporary phenomenon. If, as art historian Richard Powell observed, "Lawrence's objective was an elucidation of social intercourse in history," he clarified our understanding of the Great Migration by



painting it.<sup>5</sup> He moved, in my opinion, from artist to cultural interpreter of the first order. This function was precisely what Locke, early in his career, had defined as the special calling of the African American artist. It was one of the main reasons he was so enthusiastic about Lawrence. For Locke believed that African American art could be a redemptive force that could provide the Black community with the spiritual empowerment to fulfill its possibilities as a group and as a submerged nation in America. In *The New Negro* (1925), an anthology of Black writing that was deliberately subtitled "An Interpretation," Locke had argued that the artist was more important than the sociologist or the political leader to the self-understanding of the Black community, precisely because of this redemptive power. Toward that end, he urged artists during the Harlem Renaissance to transform the raw material of Black history and sociology into art. By the time Locke met Lawrence in the 1930s, the young artist was already doing—without a great deal of



Aaron Siskind. *Untitled*. From the project *The Most Crowded Block*, 1939–40 (National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, gift of Tennyson and Fern Schad, courtesy Light Gallery)

direction—what Locke had urged all along: creating art as a central means by which African Americans could achieve a profound understanding of themselves.

Born in Philadelphia in 1885, Locke belonged to a sophisticated urban African American middle class that had close ties with the educated elite of that Quaker city. His parents were part of an intellectual elite that instilled in its descendants a sense of duty to provide leadership for the Black community. As a child reared primarily by his mother, Locke imbibed her aesthetic sense, as reflected in the beautiful reproductions of famous artworks displayed in their home as well as her decorative sense of dress. Locke himself developed a particular fondness for pictures as a child, and by the time he graduated from Central High, Philadelphia's prestigious public high school, Locke was an aesthete, a lover of art of all kinds, who found greater satisfaction in aesthetic appreciation than in racial politics. After entering Harvard College in 1904 and graduating magna cum laude in philosophy in 1907, he became the first African American to be chosen as a Rhodes Scholar. At Oxford, rather than immerse himself in formal scholarship, Locke devoted himself to "personal culture," as he put it later, "but fortunately without enough money to collect blue china."<sup>6</sup> Like Bernard Berenson, another Harvard aesthete, he spent his time abroad studying paintings in the National Gallery of London, the Louvre, and dozens of small galleries and ateliers. He loved the work of such nineteenth-century English painters as Sir Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough, and J.M.W. Turner, but he disliked the imitative traditionalism displayed by Henry O. Tanner, the Black expatriate artist, when he became essentially a religious painter in the early twentieth century.

Living abroad at the time of the birth of cubism, Locke frequented the Trocadero Museum and the less glamorous Parisian art galleries where African art was being exhibited and appreciated aesthetically for the first time. He had arrived in Europe without a firm concept of what a modern Afro-American visual art should be, but his sojourn convinced him that whatever Black art should become, it should be modern, informed by the African images and objects that had inspired Picasso and other modernists. He did not want Black American artists to imitate African art but to be inspired by it to turn away from academic classicism and create a contemporary Negro art grounded in their own



The "306 Group," in front of 306 West 141st Street, Charles Alston's Studio and gathering place for WPA artists, late 1930s. Standing, left to right: Addison Bates, Grace Richardson, Edgar Evans, Vertis Hayes, Alston, Cecil Gaylord, John Glenn, Elba Lightfoot, Selma Day, Ronald Joseph, Georgette Seabrook (Powell), Richard Reed. At front, left to right: Gwendolyn Knight (Lawrence), James Yeargens, Francisco Lord, Richard Lindsey, Frederick Coleman

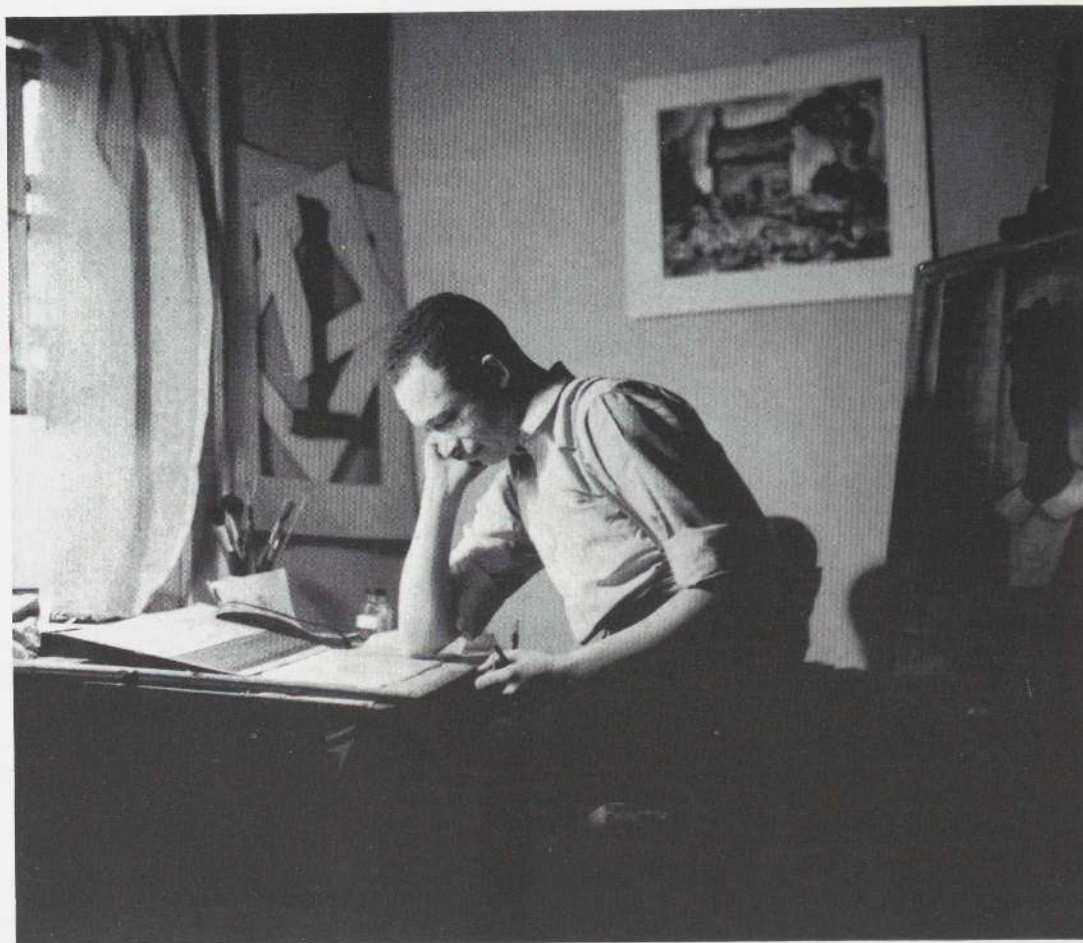
experience and tradition. John Ruskin, writing about nineteenth-century British artists, expressed the ideals that Locke envisioned for twentieth-century African American artists. Modern British art, Ruskin concluded,

must be got out of our own little island, and out of this year 1846, railroads and all: if a British painter, I say this in earnest seriousness, cannot make historical characters out of the British House of Peers, he cannot paint history; and if he cannot make a Madonna of a British girl of the nineteenth century, he cannot paint one at all."<sup>7</sup>

Locke hoped for a Black artist who could endow a portrait of an African American boy with the authenticity of a Baoule mask. But when he returned to the United States and began teaching at Howard University in 1912, the time was not right for a renaissance of Black visual art. There were too few African American artists, and, more important, most still worked within the classical tradition. Locke's conservative



Augusta Savage, teacher at the Harlem Art Workshop, 1930s (National Archives, Harmon Foundation Collection)



Charles Alston, early teacher and mentor of Lawrence, 1930s (National Archives, Harmon Foundation Collection)

aesthetic taste helped him appreciate the work of Meta Warrick Fuller, May Howard Jackson, and William Harper, but his knowledge of European modernism told him such work was too academic to become the basis of a modern Negro art in an age of cubism and abstraction. Moreover, their work did not directly engage the twentieth-century Black experience. But with the outbreak of World War I, the climate of opinion among the Black intelligentsia began to change, because thousands of southern Blacks migrated to the North, swelled the ghettos, and transformed the mood of the Black community. As Locke argued in "Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro," the special issue of the *Survey Graphic* that he edited (March 1, 1925), the physical migration symbolized a profound change in the "psychology of the masses." A new generation of "Afro-Americans" had shed the "Old Negro" attitude of gracious compliance with bigotry and now exhibited the proud and independent demeanor of the "New Negro." That new mood of racial pride infected

the young generation of writers Locke introduced in the *Survey Graphic* and in *The New Negro*, writers whose work he heralded as the beginning of a renaissance in Black letters.<sup>8</sup>

Sixteen years would pass, however, before a visual artist would emerge to portray the migration that Locke had argued was so crucial to twentieth-century African American racial consciousness. Despite the interval, Lawrence's *Migration* series echoed many of the themes that Locke had highlighted. Locke's interpretation, while informed by sociologists and historians, had rested on the notion that such a massive human movement should not be reduced to a sociological or economic phenomenon:

Neither labor demand, the boll-weevil nor the Ku Klux Klan is a basic factor, however contributory any or all of them may have been. The wash and rush of this human tide on the beach line of the northern city centers is to be explained primarily in terms of a new vision of a spirit to

seize, even in the face of an extortionate and heavy toll, a chance for the improvement of conditions. With each successive wave of it, the movement of the Negro migrant becomes more and more like that of the European waves at their crests, a mass movement toward the larger and more democratic chance—in the Negro's case a deliberate flight not only from countryside to city, but from medieval America to modern.<sup>9</sup>

For Locke, the migration exemplified the agency of Black people, who had not fled conditions but seized opportunity and picked up their lives and belongings and moved en masse to freedom.

Although Lawrence's *Migration* series documented the economic pulls and pushes (panels 2, 4, 29, 31, 37, 44) and the social and political conditions of the migration (panels 15, 16, 17, 22, 49, 50), the largest number of panels portrayed this sense of agency. Some show Black people moving and taking charge of their lives instead of shrinking before social terrorism and inferior living conditions (panels 1, 3, 12, 18, 21, 23, 32, 35, 40, 60). While the series shows that Lawrence was quite familiar with historical and sociological studies of the migration—such as Emmett J. Scott's *Negro Migration During the War*, R. H. Heavell's Department of Labor-sponsored study, *Negro Migration in 1916–17*, and Carter G. Woodson's *A Century of Negro*



Aaron Douglas, noted modernist of the Harlem Renaissance, 1930s (National Archives, Harmon Foundation Collection)

*Migration* (1918)—it evokes more powerfully the way the Renaissance writers interpreted the movement.<sup>10</sup> Panel 56, a doctor examining a patient, reexpresses visually and verbally Locke's observation in "Harlem," the lead essay in the 1925 *Survey Graphic*, that it was "'the man's farthest down' who is most active in getting up. One of the most characteristic symptoms of this is the professional man himself migrating to recapture his constituency after a vain effort to maintain in some southern corner what for years seemed an established living and clientele."<sup>11</sup> Panels 3 and 40, in which people pass with their belongings in hand, present again what the novelist James Weldon Johnson in the same issue recalled he had seen with his own eyes in the South:

I was in Jacksonville, Fla., for a while . . . and I sat one day and watched the stream of migrants passing to take the train. For hours they passed steadily, carrying flimsy suit cases, new and shiny, rusty old ones, bursting at the seams, boxes and bundles and impediments of all sorts, including banjos, guitars, birds in cages and what not.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, Lawrence's panels also echoed themes explored by another Harlem Renaissance writer, Rudolph Fisher, whose series of vignettes on the migration, "The South Lingers On," also appeared in the "Harlem" issue. Fisher related the travail of an old sanctified preacher who travels to a northern city and rediscovers his parishioners, who entreat him to start up his church again. The story showed the importance of the church in the migrants' lives and illustrated Locke's point that traditional southern leaders were following their flock northward; Lawrence echoed these ideas in panels 54 and 56. But Lawrence also explored one of Fisher's more subtle themes—that despite (or because of?) their migration northward, the migrants remained connected emotionally and culturally to the South. The parishioners rush up to the "Rev'n Taylor" and begin to make plans to start a new church with him as the minister: "Martin an' Jim Lee's over to Ebenezer, but dey doan like it 'tall. Says hit's too hifalutin for 'em, dass whut. Jes' come in an' set down an' git up and go out. Never moans, never shouts, never even says 'amen.'"<sup>13</sup> Fisher tells us that the migrants have retained their southern folkways, and Lawrence shows us this in several of his panels. In panel 45, for example, a migrant family sees Pittsburgh for the first time. The colors of their clothes, especially their hats, and the color and pattern of the



Jacob Lawrence. *Interior Scene*, 1937, tempera on paper (collection of Philip J. and Suzanne Schiller)

basket of food suggest southern designs and bright hues, while the smiling faces and dramatic gestures convey the excitement of fresh southern migrants as they enter northern industrial civilization. Lawrence honors the migrants in a symbolic sense by using bright colors and patterns to convey the hopeful expectations they felt as they faced the urban North. And he suggests as well that despite the urgent desire to assimilate, these migrants will retain their southern culture and fuse it with the northern culture they encounter.

Lawrence's view is linked to Fisher's by the sympathy both express for the plight and trauma of the migrants. Generally, sociologists and race leaders were not as kind, blaming the migrants, in some cases, for the deterioration of northern race relations and living conditions for northern Blacks. Lawrence addresses the "old settlers'" attitude in panel 53, where in the twisted mouths and bent faces of the well-dressed man and woman we sense an attitude akin to E. Franklin Frazier's condemnation of Harlem migrants as "ignorant and unsophisticated peasant people without experience [in] urban living."<sup>14</sup> The woman in the panel could almost have been the woman historian Gilbert Osofsky quoted: "Since the so-called 'Negro invasion,' the



Jacob Lawrence. "As a child, Toussaint heard the twang of the planter's whip and saw blood stream from the bodies of slaves," panel 7, *Toussaint L'Ouverture* series, 1937–38, tempera on paper (The Amistad Research Center, Aaron Douglas Collection, New Orleans)

property and character of everything have undergone a change, and if you are honest, you will frankly acknowledge it has not been for the improvement of the locality."<sup>15</sup> Lawrence addressed that attitude, too, in the panels on race riots (panels 49–51), but he avoided blaming the Black masses.

The masses also brought new material and a new racial consciousness to African American artists, who, like Lawrence, began to conceive of their own role as creating a grand narrative out of hundreds of individual stories. First, there was the pioneering Aaron Douglas, who followed Locke's injunction to create an African-inspired contemporary art in his illustrations for *The New Negro* and other books and articles that appeared in the 1920s. By the early 1930s, Douglas was not alone: in "The American Negro as Artist" (1931), Locke noted that many American Negro artists had emerged whose art aimed "to express the race spirit and background as well as the individual skill and temperament of the artist."<sup>16</sup> He divided this new crop of talent into the traditionalists, the modernists, and the "Africanists, or Neo-Primitives, with the latter carrying the burden of the campaign for a so-called 'Negro Art.'"<sup>17</sup>

Although the traditionalists remained popular, their predominance in the field was solidly challenged by such modernists as Archibald Motley, William H. Johnson, and Lillian Dorsey and by such "conscious 'Africanist[s]'" as James Lesesne Wells, Richmond Barthé, and Sargent Johnson. Although Locke cautioned, in a manner reminiscent of Ruskin, against "a sophisticated or forced exoticism" from Negro artists, he still welcomed and encouraged the notion that the formal qualities of art by the modernists and the Africanists laid the groundwork for a Black aesthetic. He argued that even in works that were not deliberately of a Negro subject, there often existed "subtler elements of rhythm, color and atmosphere" that distinguished the work of modern Negro artists.<sup>18</sup> The point was not that all African American art shared particular racial characteristics but rather that an aesthetic indigenous to the Black experience existed that could be legitimately developed by artists, whether African American or not. Locke believed the work of all Negro artists was strengthened by the presence of a significant subgroup who, like James Lesesne Wells, utilized "African motives and principles of design" in conceptualizing their work.<sup>19</sup>

Of the painters to emerge in the mid-1930s who elaborated the Black aesthetic, William H. Johnson was perhaps the most important for Locke. While not a protégé of Locke's, Johnson fused modernism and Africanism in a distinctive way that confirmed many of Locke's predictions. Locke promoted Johnson's art and career even more actively than he promoted Douglas's, for he served, through the Harmon Foundation and on his own, as Johnson's agent and broker. Ironically, their relationship ended when Johnson returned to the United States in 1938 and began to produce studies of the rural South that, in subject matter and formal qualities, most embodied what Locke wished to see in African American art. Several factors may have caused the rupture, not the least of which was Johnson's increasing criticism of Locke for his inability to sell the artist's work.

In the vacuum created by this disaffection, Lawrence emerged as the artist Locke believed most able to realize the promise of a self-consciously African American art. Like Johnson, Lawrence in his early works seemed fascinated with sharp design contrasts and the use of color to mold form. But he pushed the sculptural qualities of his compositions beyond the flat and spare use of space in Johnson's southern

series. In such early compositions as *Interior Scene* (1937), Lawrence created the illusion of three-dimensionality by infusing a flat, highly stylized design with sculptural qualities. He used sharp angles and bold color contrasts not only to suggest three-dimensionality but also to create a surreal stage on which the actors played out their scripted, seemingly hysterical roles. This composition looked back to the cardboard boxes that Lawrence had fashioned as a child after viewing acts at the Apollo Theater and looked forward to the angled interiors that would be the most powerful cubistic statements in the *Migration* series. Yet it was in his first series, on the life of the Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L'Ouverture (1937–38), that Lawrence pulled together all of his talents—his simplification and abstraction of forms, his manipulation of perspective, and his use of African design principles and ornamentation to create surface tensions—to create a text that came alive. When Locke wrote about the series in his 1939 article, "Advance on the Art Front," he emphasized its formal achievements as a work of art and its commitment to social values: "There is in truly great art no essential conflict between racial or national traits and universal human values."<sup>20</sup>

Locke offered that observation in part to rebut the growing number of younger artists who, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, rebelled against being called "Negro artists" and having their work considered as "Negro art," a classification they increasingly viewed as a stigmatizing ghetto. These artists also challenged Locke's notion of an African American aesthetic, to a certain extent because they wished their work to be considered solely as a part of American art. In *Modern Negro Art* (1941), the young Howard University art historian James A. Porter contested the notion that American Negro artists should be inspired by African art and that an African American aesthetic existed in the visual arts. Understandably, therefore, Lawrence's emergence in the early 1930s encouraged Locke, because Lawrence used African principles of design in his work and took as his subject African American history. Not since Aaron Douglas had Locke found an artist who was so comfortable with the educational value of his art.

Of course, like his contemporaries, Lawrence wanted to be taken seriously as an American artist. He resented those who referred to him patronizingly as the "best Negro artist," but he saw no conflict between the recognition that he was a



Jacob Lawrence (center) presenting a panel from his *Toussaint L'Ouverture* series to the registrar at the Baltimore Museum of Art, 1939 (National Archives, Harmon Foundation Collection)

great American artist and the idea that his work could be a transforming educational force in the Black community. It was uplifting to Locke to find such a talented artist who was not afraid to see himself—in the *Toussaint L'Ouverture* series and in the *Frederick Douglass* and *Harriet Tubman* series that followed—as a cultural interpreter of his people's history. While Locke's enthusiasm for Lawrence and his *Toussaint* series is evident from his published comments, his support for the *Migration* series is less well known because he published little on African American art in the 1940s and because most of his comments on Lawrence from that period have been buried in unpublished correspondence. Moreover, even his letter of recommendation to the Rosenwald Fund

avoided direct comment on the projected *Migration* series. He remarked only on the *Toussaint* series, which had created a "sensation" at the 1939 Baltimore Museum of Art show, noting that he and the museum director agreed the young artist possessed "a talent bordering on genius" and that Lawrence's more recent work showed "considerable growth in maturity and power over" the *Toussaint* series.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps additional sources of Locke commentary on the *Migration* series will surface, but in their absence I want to suggest that his reticence may have derived from a degree of ambivalence. For while the series embodied much that Locke and others of his generation had to say about the migration, Lawrence brought to his narrative the feelings of a younger

man who had grown up among migrants and who was an artist of the social realist tradition of the 1930s. Thus his interpretation critiqued the romanticism of earlier views of the migration and exposed the contradictions in the Promised Land. Ultimately, Lawrence's vision went beyond Locke's.

Lawrence's social criticism rescued him from the Harlem Renaissance generation's tendency to demean the migrants, on the one hand, for retaining too much of their "primitive" culture in the midst of modern urban life and to romanticize them, on the other, as a "folk" whose African-based culture would reform modern Western civilization. Without blaming the migrants, as E. Franklin Frazier did, or romanticizing the movement, as Locke tended to do, Lawrence highlighted the social conflict that accompanied the Great Migration. The scenes in panels 15, 17, 43, 50, and 52 address more directly than the art and literature of the 1920s Renaissance the issue of racial conflict; in them we feel the painful consequences of the decision to migrate and recall that many who tried to flee were blocked from leaving, beaten, arrested, and lynched for daring to leave the South. And it is not surprising that panels 45, 50, and 51, which depict the race riots, are among the most graphic of the series: Lawrence was living in Harlem when the 1935 riots erupted. On a thematic level, Lawrence is distinguished from other narrators of the migration for his ability to weave the personal and the political into these powerful visual metaphors.

Even Locke had to acknowledge in *The Negro in America* (1933) that both the migration and Harlem had begun to appear much less romantic. The health, housing, and working conditions of the migrants in the North had declined precipitously even before the onslaught of the Great Depression. In 1925, Locke had written that the migration represented the transition of African Americans from "medieval America to modern." Lawrence uses a variety of visual metaphors to show that the encounter with modernity came at a tremendous price. To evoke the barrenness of abandoned communities (panel 25) or the alienation of imprisonment (panel 41), the crush of overcrowding (panel 48), or the pain of terrorism (panels 15, 16), he uses a stark cubistic approach, a radical simplification of forms, to the point that even people become opaque and anonymous. Indeed, in some panels—such as panel 55, which depicts

pallbearers carrying a coffin—Lawrence's reduction of the image of the migrants to the sparsest of forms captures metaphorically the way in which social forces reduced the migrants' life chances.

Yet Lawrence refuses to leave us in despair. In panel 47, which shows nine children squeezed in one bed in a tenement apartment, he achieves a synthetic, redemptive image of a people at the crossroads. While the cubic blank walls suggest the barrenness of northern urban life, the bed's beautiful quilt with its bright colors and patterns recalls the southern folk tradition. Lawrence suggests that we need to hold on to that past, just as he has held on to the color, design, and pattern of southern decorative culture in his modernist palette. For only through a sense of cultural continuity and narrative connection with their past, Lawrence tells us, can a people remain psychically grounded in modern life.

Why is Lawrence's rendering the best narrative that we have of the migration? Why do I find his interpretation more compelling than Alain Locke's or E. Franklin Frazier's or even Rudolph Fisher's? Of course, Lawrence is a supremely talented artist. Yet even within Lawrence's oeuvre, the *Migration* series stands out as his finest work. The answer, I believe, lies in his own life.

As a child of migrants, Lawrence could recapture a sense of the events he had heard about as a child. Lawrence's intimacy with his subject matter is reflected in the most striking formal characteristic of the series: the way it portrays the migration as something we witness ourselves, as if it is happening right before us. While this sort of rendering is not exclusive to the *Migration* series—some early attempts at such a perspective occur in the *Toussaint* series—Lawrence used it more frequently and more effectively here, perhaps because of his emotional connection to the events. We are there on the platform, as in panel 39, watching the crowd of migrants approach the station. We are in line, in panel 59, waiting to vote under the watchful eye of a cop. And we are watching, in panel 33, as a woman lies on a bed reading a letter from a migrant. This conceit is present even when people are not, as in panel 48, where the crowded beds in a Harlem apartment can be imagined as seen from the perspective of a little child searching for his or her bed. Remarkably, Lawrence the adult artist recaptured the wonder of a child who had seen the migrants, watched his parents,



and observed the Harlem environment from inside. And through his eye and his art, we identify emotionally with a community that Lawrence saw as his own.

#### NOTES

1. On June 3, 1992, The Phillips Collection hosted a meeting and discussion with Jacob Lawrence for Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Patricia Hills, Richard Powell, Diane Tepfer, Deborah Willis, me, and several other museum professionals and consultants.  
"Black" is capitalized here because it refers to an ethnic minority. White is not capitalized because it does not refer to such an ethnic minority.
2. Alain Locke to Julius Rosenwald Fund, "Confidential Report on Candidate for Fellowship," re Jacob Armstead Lawrence, January 23, 1940, Rosenwald Fund Collection, Special Collections, Fisk University, Nashville, Tenn. (hereafter Rosenwald Fund Collection). I am indebted to Diane Tepfer for bringing this material to my attention.
3. Charles Rogers (director, Baltimore Museum of Art) to Julius Rosenwald Fund, "Confidential Report on Candidate for Fellowship," re Jacob Armstead Lawrence, n. d., Rosenwald Fund Collection.
4. Alain Locke, "Up Till Now," in *The Negro Artist Comes of Age: A National Survey of Contemporary American Artists* (exhibition catalogue, Albany Institute of History and Art, January 3–February 11, 1945), reprinted in Jeffrey C. Stewart, ed., *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1982), 193–94.
5. Richard J. Powell, *Jacob Lawrence* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), [1].
6. "Alain Le Roy Locke," *Harvard Class of 1908, 2nd Class Report* (Cambridge: Harvard College, 1914), 207. He chose to remain a member of the class of 1908 even though he left with his degree in 1907.
7. John Ruskin, *Of General Principles and of Truth*, vol. 1 of *Modern Painters* (1873; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1935), 115–16.
8. Alain Locke, "Harlem," *Survey Graphic* 51 (March 1, 1925): 629–30.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Scott, *Negro Migration During the War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1920); Heavell et al., *Negro Migration in 1916–17* (1919; New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969); Woodson, *A Century of Negro Migration* (1918; New York: AMS Press, 1970), 167–211.
11. Locke, "Harlem," 630.
12. James Weldon Johnson, "The Making of Harlem," *Survey Graphic* 51 (March 1, 1925): 636.
13. Rudolph Fisher, "The South Lingers On," *Survey Graphic* 51 (March 1, 1925): 645.
14. Quoted in Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 139.
15. *Ibid.*, 140.
16. Alain Locke, "The American Negro as Artist," *American Magazine of Art* 23 (September 1931): 213–14, reprinted in Stewart, *Critical Temper*, 173–74.
17. Locke, "Advance on the Art Front," *Opportunity* 17 (May 1939): 133, reprinted in Stewart, *Critical Temper*, 176.
18. Alain Locke, foreword to *Contemporary Negro Art* (exhibition catalogue, Baltimore Museum of Art, February 3–19, 1939), [3], reprinted in Stewart, *Critical Temper*, 183.
19. Locke, "Advance," 177
20. *Ibid.*
21. Locke to Rosenwald Fund.



# **The Migration Series**

1. During the World War there was a great migration North by Southern Negroes.





2. The World War had caused a great shortage in Northern industry and also citizens of foreign countries were returning home.



3. In every town Negroes were leaving by the hundreds to go North and enter into Northern industry.



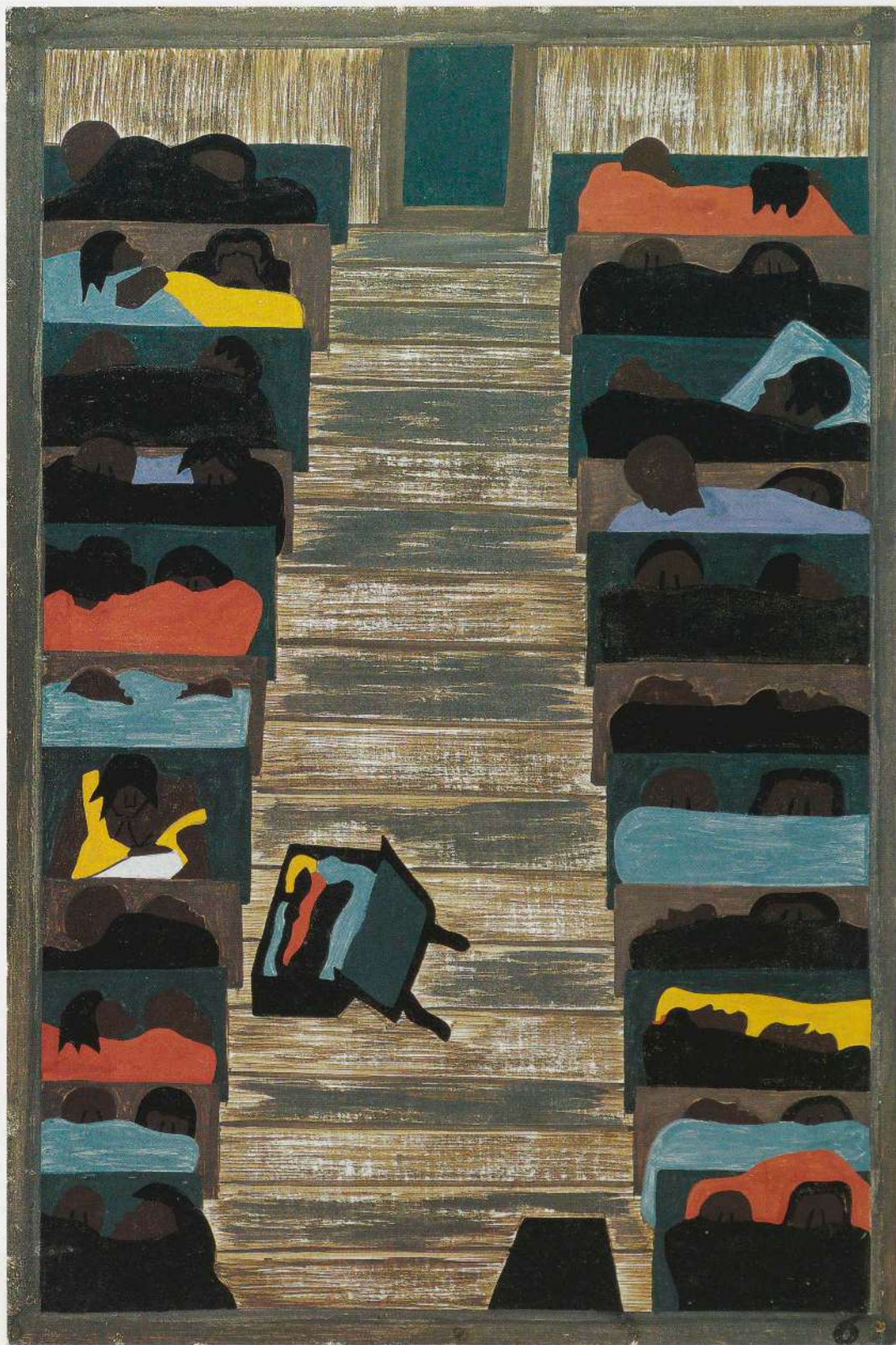
4. The Negro was the largest source of labor to be found after all others had been exhausted.





5. The Negroes were given free passage on the railroads which was paid back by Northern industry. It was an agreement that the people brought North on these railroads were to pay back their passage after they had received jobs.

6. The trains were packed continually with migrants.



7. The Negro, who had been part of the soil for many years, was now going into and living a new life in the urban centers.





8. They did not always leave because they were promised work in the North. Many of them left because of Southern conditions, one of them being great floods that ruined the crops, and therefore they were unable to make a living where they were.



9. Another great ravager of the crops was the boll weevil.



10. They were very poor.





11. In many places, because of the war, food had doubled in price.

12. The railroad stations were at times so over-packed with people leaving that special guards had to be called in to keep order.



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12

13. Due to the South's losing so much of its labor, the crops were left to dry and spoil.



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