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Between words and images: Jacob Lawrence's linguistic and visual pictures of the Great Migration

1. Introduction

Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000) is one of the most celebrated African-American artists. His artistic career began at the Utopia Children's House in Harlem, where as a teenager he attended after school art classes. It is here that he met Charles Alston, a well-known American painter, who immediately recognized Lawrence's artistic talent and his strong interest in African-American history. Inspired by his family story of migration, the young artist spent long hours at the 135th Street Branch of the Public Library researching materials on black experience. He examined a number of scholarly works by such historians as Carter G. Woodson and William E. B. Du Bois. Lawrence had access to the largest collection of writings on black history and culture in the U.S. thanks to Arturo Schomburg, a librarian, who, during the Harlem Renaissance period, assembled these works, thus giving way to the greatest revival of African-American culture in the United States¹. In the same place Lawrence had a chance to meet other well-known American artists, for instance, Ad Reinhardt, Elaine de Kooning or Augusta Savage, as well as writers, such as Richard Wright and Langston Hughes. All of those people had a great impact on Lawrence's later artistic work.

Lawrence is the author of several series of paintings focusing on African-American people's lives in America and important moments in their history. After the initial success of his *Migration Series*, the artist created visual narratives of black heroes involved

¹ The 135th Street Branch of the Public Library is now known as the Schomburg. Center for Research in Black Culture.

in the abolitionist movement: Toussaint L'Ouverture, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman and John Brown. He also documented the development of Harlem as a black neighbourhood, for instance in such painting as *This is Harlem* (1943) or *Brownstones* (1958).

2. *The Migration of the Negro* collection

Many times in Lawrence's career major American museums were struggling to purchase his paintings for exhibitions focusing on African-American history. In 1941 two of the nation's finest art galleries, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City and the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., wanted to buy Lawrence's most famous collection, *The Migration of the Negro* (1941), which consists of sixty panels of paintings. After long debates they compromised to share the series. The first museum acquired the even-numbered panels, while the second one purchased the odd-numbered ones. At the same time *Fortune* magazine published twenty-six panels of Lawrence's *Migration* series in a special edition on African-American history, which was received enthusiastically, too. In later years MoMA organized the most significant displays of Lawrence's works. In 2015 it held an exhibition entitled "One-Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series and Other Visions of the Great Movement North" featuring all of the sixty panels which comprise *The Migration of the Negro*². The exhibition was organized on the sixtieth anniversary of the Civil Rights Movement in America. Lawrence's paintings were accompanied with other works of art, books, magazines and film clips dealing with the subject of African-American history, as well as a number of auxiliary events, such as lectures, film shows, concerts and tours of Harlem.



The Migration of the Negro, Panel 3, 1940–41. Casein tempera on hardboard, 12 x 18 in (30.5 x 45.7 cm). The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

<https://whitney.org/www/jacoblawrence/art/transition.html>

² The exhibition "One-Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence's *Migration Series* and Other Visions of the Great Movement North" remained on view in The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City from April 3 to September 7, 2015.

Arranged chronologically, the sixty paintings of *The Migration of the Negro* series, together with the captions added by the artist, tell the story of the Great Migration, which was the largest exodus in American history. It is claimed that between the 1920s and the early 1970s over 6 million African-Americans left the impoverished southern states in search of a better life in the northern industrial cities. There were three streams of the migration. People from the southeastern states most often moved to the Mid-Atlantic cities, such as New York, Washington, D.C. or Philadelphia. Those from the most southern states headed for the Midwest, mainly Chicago and Detroit. The black inhabitants of Texas and Louisiana went to California or even further up to Seattle. The migrants fled from their homes for economic as well as political reasons. Most of them suffered from Jim Crow laws regulating the segregation system in the South. Despite the fact that slavery was not legal any more, many black people working as sharecroppers were still exploited by white landowners and once they resisted the system they risked being lynched. Thus many of them were leaving the South secretly to find a more free life in the North. Lawrence's paintings focus on several aspects of the whole story, from the problems blacks experienced in the American South to their journey to the North and the difficulties they faced in their new homes.

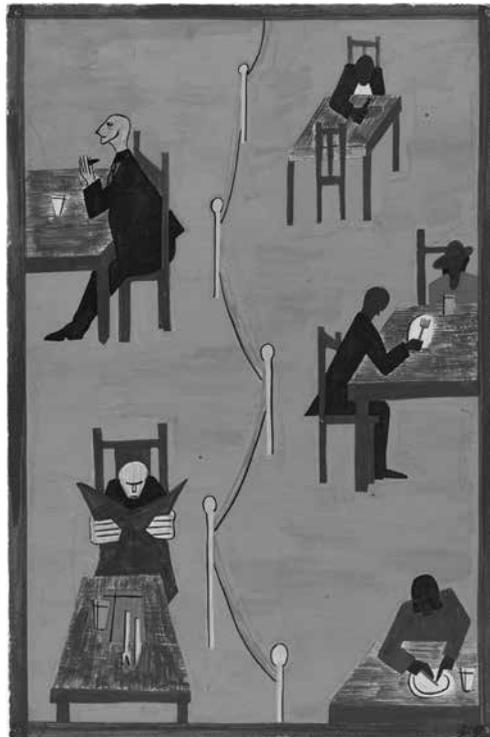
3. Lawrence's Great Migration: a testimony of the eye or of the ear?

In *The Migration Series* Lawrence combines the rich historical context of the Great Migration that he learnt from literary sources with the individual stories of its participants. The African-American oral tradition of passing down stories from generation to generation is particularly vivid in his visual narratives as they are reflective of the stories of migration Lawrence heard from his family and friends. Jutta Lorensen, who has considered his works within this context, proposes to view *The Migration Series* as “a text of remembrance [...] and] a text of auditory witnessing offering a testimony of the ear rather than of the eye”³. Lawrence had never visited the South before the completion of *The Migration Series*. He was born in New Jersey after his parents immigrated here from Virginia and South Carolina. Then he spent most of his life in Harlem, where he could observe black migrants from the South on a regular basis. However, in most of his paintings he simply reconstructed what others told him about their lives in the South and their journeys to the North.

The Migration Series can be divided into three episodes: African-Americans' life in the South, their journey to the North, and their new lives in the northern cities. The earlier paintings, in which the artist explains the reasons for the Great Migration, illustrate what blacks experienced in the South: segregation (Panel 19), lynchings (Panel 15), arrests (Panel 22), poverty (Panels 10–11) and plague (Panel 9). The paintings are followed

³ J. Lorensen, *Between Image and Word, Color and Time: Jacob Lawrence's, The Migration Series*, “African American Review”, Vol. 40, No. 3/2006, Education Resources Information Center, www.eric.ed.gov [accessed 27.01.2016], p. 572–573.

with the idealized images of the North including the promise of better housing (Panel 31) or better jobs (Panels 36–38) at the new factories. The panels showing black people reading the southern newspapers (Panels 20 and 34) or talking to labour agents (Panels 28 and 29) indicate African-Americans' hopes and desires for a better life in the North. The pictures are bound to affect the viewers' perception of the Great Migration, but only for a while. Lawrence immediately dispels the beliefs of a perfect life in the North by providing a number of images illustrating the social and economic problems connected with the urban life in the northern states, which are partly reflective of his own experience. The artist does not fail to mention the existence of segregated institutions in the North (Panel 49), the practice of lynchings (Panel 50) and the race riots aimed at the new black workers (Panels 51–52). Several panels illustrate the disillusionments of many blacks with their new location. Panel 28, for instance, shows labour agents from the South recruiting black workers for “good” jobs in the North, while panel 29 presents the same black people employed as scab labour in northern factories. Paradoxically the situation of many blacks in the North was not different from what they experienced in the South. They were still forced to the margin of the American society, once again denigrated and deprived of opportunities.



The Migration of the Negro, panel 49, 1940–41. Casein tempera on hardboard, 18 x 12 in (45.7 x 30.5 cm). The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

<https://whitney.org/www/jacoblawrence/art/transition.html>

According to many scholars, Lawrence offers a new insight into the popular topic of the Great Migration. Christopher Capozzola observes that “Lawrence’s paintings rethink the creation of history itself: they are interventions that can help historians reconceptualize our own approach to evidence and broaden the possibilities of our narratives”⁴. Jutta Lorensen believes that “Lawrence’s *Migration Series* remains one of the most powerful representations of this other journey to a much fabled ‘America of opportunity and freedom’, a journey, however, that did not traverse the world’s oceans, but instead the very landscape, real and symbolic, of the US itself”⁵. The artist dispels the image of the American North as the Promised Land, proposed by many white scholars and artists. Instead he finds similarities between the living conditions of African-Americans in the southern states regulated by Jim Crow laws and their new lives in the North. Furthermore, the difficulties connected with black people’s journey to the North, frequently silenced in historical studies on the Great Migration, are one of the central topics of the series.

The process of moving to a new place seems to be the most important theme of the collection. Except for the panels focusing on the passage agreements, transportation issues or the role of black press, the artist repeatedly portrays crowds of people migrating to the North with their own stories of lynchings, lack of employment and other social injustices. Many of the panels are labelled with the following words: “And so the migration grew” (Panel 18), “And the migrants kept coming” (Panels 23, 39, 40 and 60), which work as a refrain reminding the viewers that many blacks kept moving to the North despite the difficulties.

Unlike traditional historical accounts primarily concerned with facts, Lawrence’s paintings together with the accompanying captions convey a myriad of emotions about the relocation process. Analyzing the relationship between verbal and visual elements of *The Migration Series* is essential to the right interpretation of the story. In most cases the pictures are more telling than the short texts. For instance, Panel 42, showing a white police officer trying to block the migrants at the station, is more dramatic than the accompanying words: “They often went to the railroad stations and arrested the Negroes wholesale, which in turn made them miss their trains”. There is also a counterpointing relationship between several paintings and captions, which can arouse ambiguous feelings about the migration⁶. With the comment on Panel 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”, Lawrence leaves the viewers with doubts about the big transformation in black people’s lives. Was it a good change to move from the rural areas to large industrial centres, from quiet country houses to overcrowded apartments? Did the migrants benefit from the change in terms of equal opportunities? Many of Lawrence’s paintings indicate that blacks’ migration to the North did not always mean improvements in their lives. Panels 47 and 48 show the poor living conditions, with limited space, no light and scarce furniture. However,

⁴ Ch. Capozzola, *Jacob Lawrence: Historian*, “Rethinking History”, Vol. 10, No. 2/2006, p. 292.

⁵ J. Lorensen, *Between...*, op. cit., p. 571.

⁶ For more information on the relationship between verbal and visual elements of the narrative, see M. Nikolaeva, C. Scott, *How Picturebooks Work*, New York 2001.

the viewers probably would not find the place unacceptable if the pictures were not captioned with the following words: “Although they were promised better housing in the North, some families were forced to live in overcrowded and unhealthy quarters”.

All the sixty panels of *The Migration Series* provide a myriad of facts on the Great Migration. Thus they can be analyzed as historical materials in the same way as verbal narratives or journalistic accounts consisting of both text and images. The way the artist combines the visual and the verbal narrative resembles photojournalism, which emerged in America in the 1930s. As Sharon Patton observes, “Lawrence effectively captured an important historical moment, recording specific episodes without indulging in sentimentality”⁷. The captions accompanying the paintings, like news reports, convey information in a very concise way. If there were no words, the viewing process would probably take up more time and lead to varied interpretations of the depicted scenes. However, in many of the paintings, the captions draw the viewer’s attention to issues that are not directly related with the painting, thus expanding the narrative. Panel 2, for instance, presents a white man operating an industrial machine, while the caption says: “There was a shortage of workers in northern factories because many had left their jobs to fight in the First World War”, which adds new information to the story.

Many contemporary historians reject Lawrence’s paintings as reliable historical sources. Describing the paintings as “naïve” or “simple”, scholars do not recognize the real intentions of the artist. Oftentimes they fail to consider the colour scheme, which according to Lorensen, “unsettles not only our view of the Great Migration, but also our viewing of the story”⁸. Lawrence relies on a limited palette of colours used in a repetitive mode throughout the entire collection. Interestingly, as Lorensen observes, “Lawrence did not execute the *Migration Series* panel by panel, but color by color”⁹. In fact he was painting several pictures simultaneously, putting one color after another on the following canvasses.

Colours are very important part of Lawrence’s narrative. One can find a regular pattern in his system of colours. The largest elements of the paintings, such as trains, factories or fields, are usually painted black, dark green or brown, thus adding a kind of drama to the whole story of migration. More vivid colours are reserved for the details of the visual narrative. The clothes or possessions of individual migrants are often marked with orange, red or yellow hues. This way of using colours emphasizes the fact that the Great Migration was not only a massive movement but a collection of individual stories. Panel 6 of the *Migration Series* reveals one of such narratives. The painting presents a train compartment packed with people travelling to the North. On one of the train seats one can recognize the figure of a woman nursing her child. It is not only the yellow dress that distinguishes the passenger from the crowd but an open suitcase located next to her. The artist does not make it clear what is inside the bag, but his use of a diverse palette of colours indicates a multitude of experiences the woman is carrying with herself to the North.

⁷ S. F. Patton, *Oxford History of African-American Art*, Oxford–New York 1998, p. 156.

⁸ J. Lorensen, *Between...*, op. cit., p. 574.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 576.

There is a strong connection between Lawrence's use of colours and the African-American tradition of storytelling. He painted the South the way people told him about the place. As he often admitted, it was "my mother's way of seeing"¹⁰, who was particularly sensitive to colors. On the other hand, the images of the North are based on the artist's own experience of living in a black neighbourhood and his contact with different forms of black art. In retrospect, Lawrence finds connections between his use of colours and what his relatives did during the Great Depression: "We lived in deep depression. [...] In order to add something to their lives, they decorated their tenements and their homes in all of these colors"¹¹. The artist drew inspiration from the ordinary surroundings he lived in. These were, among others, the colorful quilts made by his mother, simple home decorations or the vivid colors of clothes worn by many African-Americans living in Harlem. For Lawrence colors were not only a way of reflecting what he experienced visually but also what he heard or felt about his people. Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts emphasizes that point in her picture book on the life of Jacob Lawrence, *Jake Makes a World*: "Jake's Harlem has all the shouts and noises of the Harlem outside, but here they are not sounds. They are colors, they are shadows dancing, they are rhythms, they are light"¹².



The Migration of the Negro, Panel 1, 1940–41. Casein tempera on hardboard, 12 x 18 in, (30.5 x 45.7 cm). The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

<https://whitney.org/www/jacoblawrence/art/transition.html>

The Migration Series, like many books on African-American historical experience, can be considered within the context of African-American literary traditions. The repetitive

¹⁰ H. L. Gates Jr., *New Negroes, Migration, and Cultural Exchange*, [in:] E. H. Turner (ed.), *Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series*, Washington, D.C 1993, p. 21.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 21.

¹² S. Rhodes-Pitts, *Jake Makes a World: Jacob Lawrence, a Young Artist in Harlem*, Illustrated by Ch. Myers, New York 2015, p. 24.

character of the whole collection is a direct reference to the call-and-response pattern¹³, which is applied to both the visual and the verbal part of the story. The series opens and closes with paintings showing the people on the move. Panel 1 portrays crowds of people heading north through the station gates leading them to such places as Chicago, New York and St. Louis. Panel 60 echoes the opening image in the same way as several other panels (Panels 18, 23, 40) throughout the entire sequence. Lorensen refers to these paintings and the accompanying captions as “migration refrains”¹⁴. Unlike other paintings of the series, those repetitive images focus on the Great Migration as a mass movement rather than a collection of individual stories. The pictures display people hurrying anonymously to unknown places, and the texts repeat that “the migrants kept coming.” Importantly, the final painting is an exception to the pattern as the figures of migrants face the viewer. The accompanying text is also different from the rest of the verbal narrative. The artist directly addresses the viewer and by talking in the first person reveals his personal story: “Theirs is a story of African-American strength and courage. I share it now as my parents told it to me, because their struggles and triumphs ring true today” (Panel 60). These words indicate that the *Migration Series* is steeped in the oral tradition of passing down stories in African-American communities.

In his portrayal of the Great Migration, Lawrence challenged the views of many renown scholars. As Capozzola rightly observes, Lawrence does not use the phrase ‘Great Migration’, which is popularly used to describe the black exodus to the North¹⁵. For the artist the migration was not ‘great’ at all. It did not solve the problem of poverty or discrimination for many African-Americans. Some of the last paintings of *The Migration Series*, showing African-Americans’ life in North, are reflective of the scenes from the South. Paradoxically blacks escaped to the North to face the same problems they faced while living in the South.

Although Lawrence’s collection may not seem innovative now, seventy years ago when the Jim Crow laws governed black people’s lives almost all over America it was an act of courage to create an account of the migration, illustrate the reasons for it and its consequences. As Janice Law Trecker observes, Lawrence depicted black people “moving *en masse* in a virtually leaderless and highly democratic surge north”¹⁶. The movement was beyond the control of white authorities though the artist portrays their attempts to prevent African-Americans from leaving the South. Lawrence’s series is thus an act of resistance to the racist Jim Crow South as well as the mainstream history scholars who would never have mentioned the Great Migration in such a free way.

¹³ Call-and-response is a primary mode of black discourse. It is most popular in the setting of the black church, but not limited to it. Geneva Smitherman defines the call-and-response pattern as “spontaneous verbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the speaker’s statements (“calls”) are punctuated by expressions (“responses”) from the listener” (G. Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: the Language of Black America*, Boston 1977, p. 104).

¹⁴ J. Lorensen, *Between...*, op. cit., p. 582.

¹⁵ Ch. Capozzola, *Jacob Lawrence...*, op. cit., p. 294.

¹⁶ Trecker J. L., *The Great Migration: Art as History in Ralph Ellison and Jacob Lawrence*, „Midwest Quarterly”, Vol. 56, Issue 2, 2015, Education Resources Information Center, www.eric.ed.gov [accessed 27.01.2016], p. 169.

Lawrence's rendering of the great historical moment inspired a number of other African-American artists and authors. In 1947 Ralph Ellison published *Invisible Man*, a novel concentrating on the psychological and intellectual experiences of the migrants. In 1992 Nicholas Lemann wrote *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America*. The most recent account of the Great Migration is Isabel Wilkerson's narrative nonfiction *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (2010), following the stories of three migrants from different parts of the South who moved to the North in three different periods of the migration. The book examines the push and pull factors of the migration in the social, economic and cultural context. It has triggered a wide public debate on race issues in America now and in the past. Like Lawrence, Wilkerson does not fail to mention the trouble many blacks experienced in the North, and hers is not a story of celebration.

The most direct reference to Lawrence's *Migration Series* is a picture book about the artist's childhood, *Jake Makes a World: Jacob Lawrence, a Young Artist in Harlem* (2015), written by the acclaimed African-American historian Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts and illustrated by Christopher Myers, an award-winning author and illustrator of children's books. The book was published in conjunction with the exhibition of Jacob Lawrence's *Migration Series* at the Museum of Modern Art, "One Way Ticket". It tells the story of a young protagonist, Jake, who finds his new home in Harlem, where he stays with his mother, a migrant from the South. It is here that he discovers his artistic talent and experiments with transforming the rhythms of Harlem into a visual form. He finds inspiration for his artistic work in ordinary things of the Harlem community, from home decorations made by his mother, to the vibrant street colours, smells and sounds. Except for Myers's illustrations, the book includes photographic reproductions of Lawrence's own paintings. For instance, there are panels 32 and 40 of the *Migration Series* depicting crowds of African-Americans massively travelling to the North. Two other pictures focus on the North offering blacks better educational opportunities (Panel 58) and giving them a sense of community in the black church (Panel 54). The final one focuses on the difficult living conditions in the new northern homes (Panel 48).

Due to the publication of the picture book, Lawrence's paintings once again attracted the attention of artists, historians and the general public, particularly young readers. *Jake Makes a World* is the first literary and artistic attempt to address children with the topic of the Great Migration. Although there are several references to the difficulties of living in the North, the book generally offers a more optimistic image of the North than Lawrence's *Migration Series*. It stresses the fact that African-Americans are able to arrange their new homes and create a unique atmosphere within the bounds of the racist northern city. The book is a celebration of black skill and talent, frequently unrecognized by white historians and scholars of culture.

4. Final remarks

To conclude, Lawrence made a great contribution to the study of the frequently forgotten and ignored chapter of American history. Although his paintings seem to be schematic

and plain, they do say a lot about the relocation of black Americans and the way they changed the social structure of the American North. For Lawrence the Great Migration has a double meaning. One is synonymous with movement and change in black people's quality of life. The other one signifies struggle and resistance to racial inequalities. Importantly, in the artist's words, "out of the struggle comes a kind of power, and even beauty"¹⁷. Although Lawrence creates a myriad of images illustrating African-Americans' troubled lives in the North, he also conveys their sense of achievement, particularly with the repetition of certain images and words. "*And the migrants kept coming* is a refrain of triumph over adversity"¹⁸, which he acknowledged, in a truly unique way, both in his words and in his images, in his linguistic as well as in his visual narratives.

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¹⁷ J. Lawrence, *The Great Migration: An American Story*, New York 1993, p. 3.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

Abstract

Between words and images: Jacob Lawrence's linguistic and visual pictures of the Great Migration

Having a reputation as a painter of historical subjects, Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000) is particularly recognized for his illustrations of the early twentieth-century African-American migration. His best known series of paintings, *The Migration of the Negro* (1941), challenges earlier interpretations of Black Americans' journeys to the North and their everyday lives in the cities. The article explores Lawrence's visual narratives together with the accompanying textual elements and the ways they present the social, political and cultural implications of the largest ever movement of African-American people across the country. It also considers the series from the perspective of form with a view to reconfiguring the relation between words and images.

Keywords: linguistic *versus* visual representations of the world, Jacob Lawrence, African-American history, migration, pictures, captions