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African American Studies 202

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Economic Determinism and Ambition in the *Migration* Series by Jacob Lawrence

The *Migration* series by Jacob Lawrence is a sequence of sixty paintings (with captions) portraying the mass movement of African Americans from the rural South to cities in the North and West during the beginning of the twentieth century. The artist was the child of African American migrants, and he grew up during the 1930s in Harlem, where he took art classes. In planning the series, Lawrence did a lot of library research on the history and causes of the migration. Reading the series from beginning to end, the viewer can see that he puts the fruits of his learning into the scenes and captions. This paper explores how the series represents the causes of the Great Migration. I argue that Lawrence shows several economic factors, such as difficult farming conditions in the South and greater job opportunities in the North, as providing the basis for the mass movement, but I also think that he shows hope and ambition as playing an important role.

First it might be helpful to discuss what historians say about the causes of the Great Migration. Often they describe economic factors labeled “push” and “pull,” as explained in an encyclopedia article: “The pull of labor shortages in northern industry and the lack of white male labor combined with the push of the devastation of the cotton crops so many blacks labored on by flood and boll weevils to create conditions for migration” (Adams 504). This is to say that migrants were pushed out of the South and also pulled to the North and West by economic

factors. The article goes on to explain these factors more specifically. Migrants were influenced to migrate by labor agents, who were paid to visit southern towns to recruit workers for northern industry; by *The Chicago Defender*, a newspaper that was widely circulated throughout the South and encouraged migration; and by kin networks, which sent word of opportunity in the North and helped migrants make the journey and get settled. But it is perhaps insulting to describe migrants only in terms of being pushed and pulled, since this description makes them look desperate and incapable of acting for themselves. A historian named James Grossman disagrees with limiting description to “push” and “pull” factors. Discussing the views of American society during the migration, he says, “Public values rested upon the assumption that blacks were by nature docile, dependent, and unambitious” (38). But then he questions this view, saying that “the Great Migration represented a refusal by one-half million black southerners to cooperate” with southern leaders (38-39). While it seems clear that economic factors played an important role in the migration, we can see that African Americans refused to sit still and instead acted on their ambitions for a better life.

As I mentioned, Lawrence was the child of migrants and grew up in Harlem. He had never visited the South when he completed the *Migration* series in 1941, but he was surrounded by migrants and heard their stories throughout his childhood (Turner, Introduction). Lawrence’s mother raised him and his brother and sister alone (she separated from Lawrence’s father when he was only seven years old [Phillips 161]). Like many in Harlem during the Depression years, the family was poor. Despite poverty, Lawrence found strength from the community of African Americans. Lawrence spoke of the Harlem community, rather than a specific individual, as the inspiration for his early artistic ambition: “I was inspired by teachers, by librarians—everybody

in the community, I guess, was a role model, really. I didn't have a special person that I thought of—I didn't think in those terms. It was the community that was my role model" (Interview). Though economic and social problems pushed and pulled migrants from the South to Harlem, African Americans also found themselves set apart by racial and economic divisions from the rest of New York City. In saying that the community was his role model, Lawrence emphasizes that group ambition on behalf of its members is inspirational. This message is central to the *Migration* series.

We should not forget that the *Migration* series made a big impact when it was first exhibited in 1941. It was part of the first major exhibit of African American art in a downtown New York gallery (Phillips 162). Part of his series was published in *Fortune* magazine, and Lawrence sold the series in halves to two major museums before it went on a national tour (163). Why was it so popular? One art historian writes, "The series appealed broadly to critics and viewers alike because it embodied American ideals about individual good fortune" (Patton 156). That is, individual panels showed hopeful actions by different African Americans. But it is interesting to notice that the series is different from previous ones he painted, like *Frederick Douglass* and *Harriet Tubman*, which focused on a hero or heroine. Patricia Hills points this out, and she states that "the people as a whole—acting with a collective will—take on a heroic dimension beyond distinctions of class or gender" in the *Migration* series (146). There is possibly a tension between these two views. Lawrence's series draws out some opposing terms defining African American life, such as rural/urban, North/South, and individual/society. If we examine one opposition, individual/society, we can see how the series works as a story connecting different paintings.

I think the beginning of the series helps us see how the opposition individual/society shapes the story (Turner, *Jacob Lawrence*, panels 1-4). The first panel shows a crowd of African Americans in a train station; gates list destinations as Chicago, New York, and Saint Louis. The next panel portrays a white man operating machinery, and the caption explains that there was a labor shortage in the North. The third panel shows a group of African Americans carrying luggage and walking together. The fourth panel shows a black man pounding a spike with a hammer, and its caption says that African Americans were the remaining source of labor “after all others had been exhausted.” So we can see a pattern: African American group, white individual, African American group, black individual (Hills also talks about this pattern [148]). Although the pattern does not stay exactly this way throughout the series, the back-and-forth between depictions of individuals and groups is pretty common. My point is similar to this one in a scholarly article: “The narrative . . . is not linear, but alternates between the insistent portrayal of the dominant event in the plot—the actual physical displacement of the people—and paintings dealing with the main causes of this mass migration” (Tribe 405). This quotation brings us back to the issue of causes, which I think is related to the opposition individual/society. When Lawrence depicts the causes pushing African Americans out of the South (like lynching, child labor, injustice, and discrimination), he usually shows us only one person or a small group, like a family. Some of the causes pulling migrants away from the South (labor agents, letters from kin) also are shown having their effect on individuals or small groups. But when he shows us scenes of actual migration, he paints groups walking, in train stations, or on trains. So we can see how the opposition individual/society shapes the way he tells his story.

There is evidence that the relationship between individual and society is important to the

development of Lawrence's style. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., an important scholar of African American culture, emphasizes the role of the individual in two artistic movements:

Lawrence's *Migration* series is an attempt to resolve the two central competing modes of representation in the 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. (17)

It is interesting to think about what Gates says and compare it to the idea of the "push" and "pull" causes for the migration. These causes can be seen as "environmental forces" that make people do things (like migrate) even when they might think they are making a choice. Gates also mentions the "individual will" that resists the environment. I think what he is saying is that Lawrence shows a tension between economic determinism and free will in his art, which would be like a mixture of naturalism and modernism. But I think we could also say that determinism affects the individual and free will is an expression of the group, at least if we follow the pattern of the opposition between individual and society I talked about in the previous paragraph.

I do not want to neglect the importance of Lawrence's choice of materials and artistic process on his art. I mentioned that Lawrence was poor, so his choice of materials was limited mostly by what he could afford. When he was a young art student, Lawrence said, he chose poster paint and cheap brown paper for his art supplies. He later spoke of the choice: "It was tough, strong, durable . . . and, eh, a jar of color—red, yellow, blue, the primary colors—were, like, fifteen cents a jar at the five-and-dime, so I was dealing with very inexpensive material. And it suited me—it benefited me" (*Jacob Lawrence*). Lawrence continued to use these cheap

supplies even after he became famous and probably could afford better ones. We might see the use of cheap materials as a kind of economic determinism, forcing him to create with very limited means.

For the *Migration* series, Lawrence first did library research so he could understand his subject. He wrote the captions (which make up part of the story), and then he outlined each panel with pencil (Steele 248). His compositions do not often use traditional three-dimensional perspective. The style of the series exhibits what Ellen Harkins Wheat calls “cubist angularity” (62). What is most interesting is the way he painted the series (Steele 250). He started with black and painted the black parts in all of the panels. He continued through the palette from the darkest to the lightest paints, painting each color on every panel before moving on to the next color. Some see his process as creating a unity among the individual panels. Jutta Lorensen, for example, refers to his palette as the “migration colors,” and she explains its effect: “Lawrence’s color code is a repetitive mode that accompanies the viewer/reader from the first panel to the last, as the same shades of green, red, yellow, blue, brown, and an incisive use of black are present throughout the entire series” (576). She shows how this works in her interpretation of panel 6, which shows a train car filled with sleeping migrants: “each bench unites two voyagers through the migration colors, thus reinforcing the resounding note of the communal, a prevalent theme in the *Migration Series*. The composition of this ‘packed train’ with its appeal to collectivity nevertheless emphasizes what is single and singular: a woman in a yellow dress nursing a child” (577). Lawrence was forced by economic circumstances to use cheap materials and just a few colors. We can see a parallel with the plight of African Americans, who were forced by poverty and social conditions to a limited range of jobs. Lawrence seems to be saying

that even when faced with economic determinism, African Americans can find a way to express personal hope and a collective spirit of ambition and resolve.



Fig. 1. A panel in the series showing a group of migrants walking together (Turner, *Jacob Lawrence*, panel 3).

I already discussed some panels that show causes of migration (usually individuals), and I mentioned that the panels that depict migration usually show groups. I want to say something more about how hope or ambition is represented in some parts of the series. One of the best-known images in the series (see fig. 1) shows a group of migrants with their luggage walking in profile from right to left; birds in the sky are also shown in profile moving in the same direction, as if all were moving north at the start of a hopeful spring. The viewer can see that some of the individuals in the panels have their heads down, while others are looking

forward or even up. Nearly everyone has some luggage, but the burdens do not seem to be dragging them down. The group has momentum. There is a bright yellow package toward the front of the group, and a woman holding a baby is brightly clothed, symbolizing that hope for the next generation is present. The landscape in the background is brown and bare, but the birds are coming with the migrants. I think it is a hopeful panel that shows that everyone in the group is strong and determined to “go North,” as the caption says. He features children in other panels, like number 32, where a child in white and red clothes sits on luggage facing the viewer and a crowd of black travelers waiting on benches (Lawrence prepared a similar image as an illustration in a book of poems by Langston Hughes [Lawrence, *One-Way Ticket* 63]). Then there is an image like panel 46, which shows a staircase ascending from the viewer to an open doorway revealing sky and the moon. The caption talks about unhygienic housing in the labor camps, but the image gives the sense that hope is on the other end of the stairs (at least we are looking up to the outside, not down to the cellar). Stairways figure prominently in Lawrence’s art. As one scholar has noted, “Lawrence’s use of steps is a visual Morse code tapping out a message having to do with ascension and climbing” (Powell). As a contrast to panels depicting economic or social forces pushing and pulling the migrants, Lawrence offers many panels that show hope for those who are ambitious enough to make the journey.

In conclusion, I think that Jacob Lawrence understood the economic circumstances that pushed African Americans from the South and pulled them to the North, and he represented many of these factors in his *Migration* series. He understood them in part because his family lived them, and he knew other African Americans with similar experiences while he grew up in Harlem during the Depression years. He did not see his community as total victims, however. He

represents the Great Migration as a hopeful expression of his group's will for a better life. You can also see this belief in how he handles his artistic process. Using inexpensive materials and only a few colors, he painted a series that spoke to his community's hopes and dreams and brought national attention to his artistic achievement.

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