

## Introduction to Jacob Lawrence Interviews

Elizabeth Hutton Turner, Former Phillips Collection Senior Curator

Of the many interviews Jacob Lawrence granted over his lifetime, the two filmed (and until now unpublished) interviews commissioned by The Phillips Collection in 1992 and in 2000 are perhaps most distinguished by their primacy and recency in the archive of Lawrence scholarship and exhibition history. The October 2, 1992, interview was the first to focus exclusively on *The Migration Series*; it was associated with the first catalogue—the first interdisciplinary study of *The Migration Series* published on the occasion of its first national tour in nearly 50 years. The 2000 interview, done in preparation for his last lifetime retrospective, *Over the Line: The Art and Life of Jacob Lawrence*, and meant to accompany his forthcoming catalogue raisonné of the same name, was, in fact, the artist’s last such conversation. It was conducted just six weeks before Lawrence’s death. The transcripts became part of an on-site paper archive to support research and programming at the Phillips.

As curator of both the 1993 *Migration Series* reunion tour and the 2001 retrospective, it was my privilege to witness both interviews. In retrospect, everything about these experiences with Lawrence seems profound, but some key points resonate strongly in the context of this website and the latest presentations of the complete series in New York and Washington on 2015–16.

The 1992 interview was the last in a trilogy of interviews conducted that year by Phillips consultant Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Phillips conservator Elizabeth Steele that addressed the creation of *The Migration Series*—particularly its subject matter, materials, and methods. The third interview included researcher Deba Leach, filmmaker Stanley Staniski, and myself, set in the attic studio of Jake and Gwen’s bungalow near the University of Washington campus. We continued to probe Lawrence’s memories concerning his original intention for the series. It had been over 50 years since he closely examined all the images and read all the texts. Though Lawrence’s answers at times varied from our documentary evidence, they nonetheless guided us to invaluable emotional truths and points of emphasis.

From the start, Lawrence was quick to temper our views regarding the significance of his “breakthrough” season—the November 1941 publication in *Fortune* magazine, the exhibition at the Downtown Gallery in December 1941, and the subsequent split purchase of *The Migration Series* by MoMA and the Phillips Memorial Gallery in March 1942—by emphasizing that his first recognition and support came from within the Harlem community. Lawrence reminded us that his “first show . . . was



held at the YWCA in the Harlem community, and I say that was just as important as the show I had at the Downtown Gallery, just as important to my career.” Time and time again Lawrence directed us uptown—home to Harlem—underscoring the psychological as well as geographic divide between uptown and downtown in the highly segregated art world of New York. As he understood it, his participation in the Downtown Gallery *American Negro Art* exhibition—thanks to the efforts of Alain Locke, Edith Halpert, and others—was part of something that included other black artists and other downtown dealers. As a result of the attack on Pearl Harbor, all the dealers except Halpert backed out. This unrealized campaign for gallery representation for black artists reveals the cruel irony of Lawrence’s singular crossing of the color barrier at the Downtown Gallery in 1941 as an isolating event. Even though it wasn’t supposed to happen that way—even though his goal in creating the series had never been downtown—Lawrence was destined for a good part of his career to be seen as “peerless” (read solitary), the only “successful” black artist in the predominantly white world of modern art.

Painting the Great Migration seemed “inevitable” to Lawrence, who moved several times before arriving in Harlem. Lawrence rejected any comparisons to other Depression-era migrations such as those depicted in Farm Security Administration (FSA) photography or documentary film or serial publications in *LIFE* magazine. As he said, “I didn’t have to go outside to look for other people’s interpretation of what I wanted to do, I had it right there.” While Lawrence did conduct extensive research, in the interview he underscored the importance of oral history and first-hand accounts. As he said, “I went to the library . . . but I got just as much from listening to the street orators, or the people talking on the streets.” The migration was right before his eyes and his paintings bore witness to it.

Lawrence also wanted us to know that in Harlem he heard not one but many migration stories—a sort of collective biography: “I don’t remember a particular personality . . . but I do remember feeling the passion the way these stories were told; the librarians, the school teachers, and our parents . . . always talked about the struggle we were going through.” The idea of painting a passion cycle with many small tempera images was as old as the Renaissance itself, but it was new to Lawrence and to his peers at the time. It was, he said, “the only way I could tell a complete story.”

What made this series complete in Lawrence’s estimation—what tied many together as one—was the vision of collective action, a shared decision to get on the train or start walking and head north. As he explained, “Migration means movement . . . I have a symbol of movement, the train, people carrying sacs and bags and suitcases, the railroad station, . . . so right away . . . I get a feeling of movement which has always been a very beautiful thing to me . . . something moving forward, not

something retrogressing.” The refrain of the train, the stations, the ticket office, and the waiting room linked various verses of the epic from the plight of the sharecropper to the quandary of the professional; the refrain connected the conditions at various points of departure and destinations from field to factory and tenement; the refrain punctuated the causes and effects from the lynching in the South to the race riots in the North. The sequences and juxtapositions drew attention to the terrible irony and dire consequences of these events: “There was struggle and I would say that through the struggle developed a certain kind of beauty.”

Lawrence wanted us to know that since his earliest days in the Harlem workshops, this way of seeing—finding beauty in unlikely places—had been encouraged. Lawrence wanted to emphasize the connection between color and content—that is to say between seeing and feeling. It pleased him to see that the color had stood the test of time.

Surprisingly, Lawrence did not feel the same way about the captions. In fact, the origin of alternate text for the 1993 reunion of *The Migration Series* may be traced back to that afternoon of October 2 in Jake and Gwen’s bungalow. Toward the end of the interview, we recorded Jake reading aloud the captions. It was a tedious process as there were many repetitions and retakes and double checks of several discrepancies. Jake and Gwen wanted to revisit the captions. Some weeks later the captions were returned to us. Among other things, the term “World War” was changed to “World War I” and the term “African American” had replaced the word “Negro” in panel one. The word “Negro” had been replaced in the remainder of the panels with the word “Migrant.”

Lawrence never thought of changing the color, but he wanted to change the words. It was as if his reading aloud the captions had made *The Migration Series* function in the present tense—as if there was something dated in the language that did not match the universality and currency of the language of his designs. Had the immediacy of this new verbal performance of the text given Lawrence permission to change it? Was the word “Negro,” a word once considered politically neutral in 1941, now an awkward term tagged with bias of past discrimination and racial profiling? Did the text need to change because, as Jake noted in the interview, the audience had changed? Was there something in Lawrence’s concept of the series that made it necessary that it remain contemporary before us—an epic to be periodically studied, refreshed, read, and performed in sequence? Lawrence actually never explained why.

Somewhere in the elision between the present and the past constructions of history, I believe Lawrence’s *Migration Series* presents us with a metaphor for the human condition—our desire to be

free—to seek, to strive, to overcome, and to arrive. As he saw it, “This was a continuous part of the—I started to say the Black struggle—but the American struggle from slavery.”

Elizabeth Hutton Turner is professor of modern art at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville. As former Senior Curator at The Phillips Collection, she served as project director of *The Migration Series* (1993) and *Over the Line: The Art and Life of Jacob Lawrence* (2001) national touring exhibitions.