Panel 1

During the World War there was a great migration North by Southern Negroes. (1941)

During World War I there was a great migration north by southern African Americans. (1993)

Lawrence opens his sixty-panel Migration Series with this image of a chaotic crowd in a train station, pushing toward three ticket windows marked "CHICAGO," "NEW YORK," and "ST. LOUIS." Images of train stations and waiting rooms, railroad cars and people arriving and leaving, weighted with bags, recur throughout the series; their measured reappearance provides a rhythmic marker of time, like the sound of the train itself. The three cities named were key destinations for the hundreds of thousands of black Southerners who began to leave their homes during World War I in what is called the Great Migration, searching for economic opportunity and social equality in the North. The cities are not ordered geographically, but Chicago and New York, the latter named at bold center and Lawrence's own home, received more migrants than any other American cities, and would flourish as the twin centers of African-American culture in the coming century; and Saint Louis, as an important stopping point on the railroad line north from Louisiana and Mississippi, was one of the first places to feel the massive impact of the Migration. Each of this trio of cities received its own chapter in Emmett J. Scott's book *Negro Migration during the War* (1920), one of the first scholarly efforts to come to grips with the population shifts spurred by the Migration, as well as with its causes and implications. Scott shared the sense of surprise that many felt in seeing thousands of blacks decamping from their homes: "They left as if they were fleeing some curse," he wrote.[1] The book was crucial for Lawrence, who read it during his own extensive research for the series at Harlem's 135th Street library. He returned to it again and again, at times using its words verbatim in his captions.

The Migration constituted one of the greatest demographic transformations in U.S. history, recasting an overwhelming rural Southern population as a largely urban Northern one. Over the next six decades, more than 6 million African-Americans decided to seek better lives far from the farms and small towns that had been their homes, forever changing the nation's racial profile, political priorities, and cultural landscape.

1. Emmett J. Scott, *Negro Migration during the War*, 1920 (reprint ed. New York: Arno Press, 1969), p. 44.

Panel 7

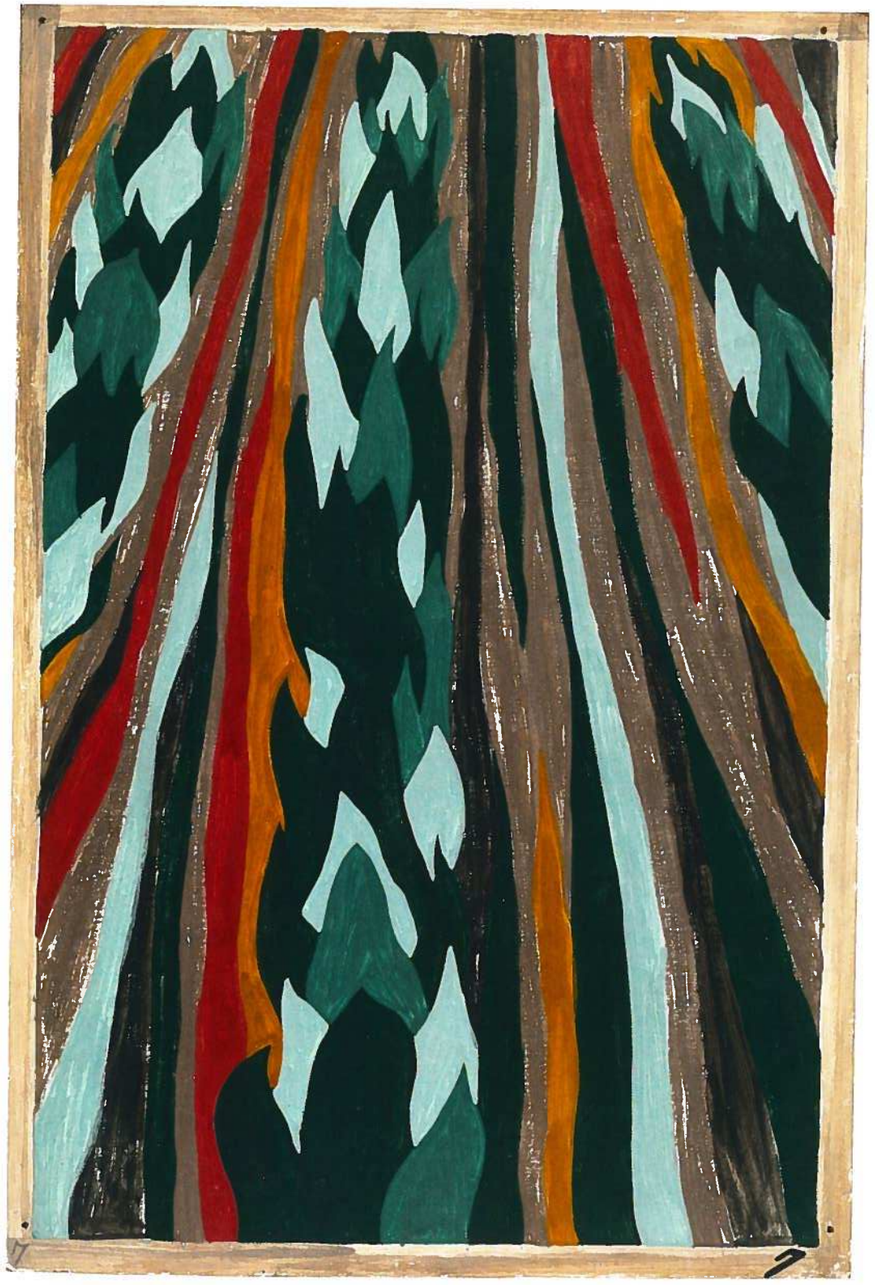
The Negro, who had been part of the soil for many years, was now going into and living a new life in urban centers. (1941)

The migrant, whose life had been rural and nurtured by the earth, was now moving to urban life dependent on industrial machinery. (1993)

In this panel, alternating leafy green shapes and striated bands of brown, orange, and green extend across the entire surface in a pattern that approaches abstraction while evoking the carefully maintained rows of a cultivated field. The composition's vertiginous sweep from bottom to top pulls the viewer tightly into the painting, as though he or she were a farmworker moving through the fields. This close-up, allover view marks a sharp shift from the sequence so far; changes in perspective from one panel to the next recur through the series, and resemble the montage cuts of cinema, a medium that fascinated Lawrence.

During the early years of the Great Migration, black Southerners made personal decisions about leaving their homes in the face of public appeals for them to stay. Fields emptied of workers were the Southern planters' greatest fear. White writers argued that the region's warm weather, and the physical demands of agricultural work, were suited to African-American habits and personalities. Some black leaders also emphasized the benefits of staying home and battling Southern racism at close range. The young teacher Percy H. Stone, for example, argued in 1917 that while he and other African-Americans "resent most bitterly some treatment accorded us," they also "understand the soil, the climate, and the life in the South; and, being by nature a race of peaceful people, we prefer to remain in the South and solve our problems by industry, thrift, and education."[1] To leave the South was to abandon the dream of self-sufficiency through landownership, a key aspiration for black Americans since Emancipation.

1. Percy H. Stone, "Negro Migration," *Outlook* 116, no. 14 (August 1, 1917):520–21.



Panel 9

Another great ravager of the crops was the boll weevil. (1941)

They left because the boll weevil had ravaged the cotton crop. (1993)

In an image born equally of research and imagination, Lawrence uses pink-and-yellow bulbs and peculiar four-legged creatures to represent insect-infested cotton plants. His version of the boll weevil, a beetle that feeds on and destroys cotton bolls, realistically describes the pest's long proboscis but also features incongruously mammalian legs and feet. When asked about the panel, Lawrence confessed that when he was working on the Migration Series he had never seen a boll weevil nor even visited the South, but he certainly knew of their devastating effects on cotton crops there. He probably constructed his image from tales told by friends and neighbors and from references in popular culture. In one folk song recorded by Lead Belly, Woody Guthrie, Tex Ritter, and others, a destitute farmer moans, "We's in an awful fix; de boll weevil et all de cotton up, an' lef' us only sticks."

Traveling north from Mexico, boll weevils began to attack Texas cotton fields at the turn of the twentieth century. By the mid-1920s, the infestation had spread throughout the cotton-growing regions of the South, destroying millions of acres of crops and gravely damaging the cotton industry, a cornerstone of the national economy. The boll weevil's capacity for annihilation made it an emblem of hard times in the South. Depression-era newsreel footage and documentary photographs carried news of infestations to audiences in the North.

Panel 13

Due to the South's losing so much of its labor, the crops were left to dry and spoil. (1941)

The crops were left to dry and rot. There was no one to tend them. (1993)

This panel, which depicts abandoned fields baking under a hot sun, reveals key aspects of Lawrence's technique in its rough, thinly painted surface. In 1940, the artist secured an unheated studio on West 125th Street specifically to work on the Migration Series. With the help of the artist Gwendolyn Knight, his future wife, he covered all sixty of the series' hardboard panels with gesso, using broad, fast strokes that left the surface a little coarse. With preparatory drawings as a guide, he sketched his compositions on the panels and then painted with casein tempera, an opaque, quick-drying commercial paint. He dragged his brush swiftly across the gesso, sometimes allowing areas of this pale ground to show through, as seen here in the white-streaked depiction of the soil.[1]

Lawrence saw visual similarities between the flat, nonreflective surfaces of his casein tempera panels and fresco painting, in which pigment is applied to wet plaster on a wall and allowed to dry. It was a connection he liked: for a time he had wanted to become a mural painter, perhaps attracted by hearing about the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera's ultimately destroyed fresco at Rockefeller Center, much in the news in 1933 and 1934. Like many socially minded African-American artists of the 1930s and early '40s, Lawrence admired the Mexican muralists' commitment to producing art that illuminated the history of subjugated races and classes. In 1940, while he was working on the Migration Series, MoMA film curator Jay Leyda invited him to meet the muralist José Clemente Orozco, who was painting a portable mural at the Museum. Lawrence succeeded in translating Mexican muralism's ambitions to create socially and politically transformative public art into works that match the murals' thematic breadth and visual potency despite their small scale.

1. For more on Lawrence's technique see Elizabeth Steele and Susana M. Halpine, "Precision and Spontaneity: Jacob Lawrence's Materials and Techniques," in Elizabeth Hutton Turner, ed., *Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series* (Washington, D.C.: The Rappahannock Press in association with The Phillips Collection, 1993), pp. 155–59, and Steele, "The Materials and Techniques of Jacob Lawrence," in *Over the Line: The Art and Life of Jacob Lawrence*, ed. Peter T. Nesbett and Michelle DuBois (Seattle: University of Washington with the Jacob Lawrence Catalogue Raisonné Project, 2000).

Panel 18

The migration gained in momentum. (1941)

The migration gained in momentum. (1993)

Painting techniques traditionally used to craft the appearance of three-dimensional space on a flat surface enthralled Lawrence. "One of the fascinating things about two-dimensional art is that it has a kind of magic," he said of an artist's ability to create spatial depth and the illusion of objects in the round.[1] Lawrence described long hours spent at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art studying paintings by the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italian artists credited with inventing rational systems for mimicking the appearance of the real world on paper, canvas, and other flat planes. Beginning these visits when he was thirteen or fourteen years old, he learned firsthand about linear perspective, a mathematical means of using converging lines to create the illusion of three-dimensional space. Atmospheric perspective, in which objects at a distance are rendered with less clarity than those in the foreground, also piqued Lawrence's attention, though he employed it only rarely in the Migration Series, instead applying colors across all the panels with great consistency of tone. As a student, Lawrence received few lessons on Renaissance perspectival systems; teachers such as Charles Alston, who had trained at Columbia University Teachers College and first encountered the teenaged Lawrence at Utopia Children's House, a center for the children of working women, instead encouraged him to explore the visual possibilities of abstract shapes and patterns. Still, this panel's converging groups of figures—their bodies becoming smaller to suggest that they are farther from the viewer—reveal his sensitivity to art-historical systems of spatial arrangement.

1. Jacob Lawrence, quoted in Ellen Harkins Wheat, *Jacob Lawrence: American Painter* (Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 1986), p. 32.