THE INCOMPLETE JACOB LAWRENCE

By Peter Nesbett

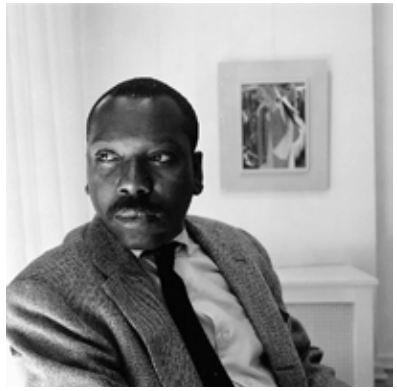
Let's start with a paradox: fifteen years after publication of the two-volume *The Complete Jacob Lawrence*—which included the first catalogue raisonné on the work of an American artist of African descent—our knowledge of Jacob Lawrence's art is still wanting. Yes, we have documented the lion's share of his paintings and drawings, even though, truth be told, undocumented works still surface from time to time. And there have been retrospectives and major exhibitions, at the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Brooklyn Museum, and elsewhere. Why has our understanding of Jacob Lawrence remained so simplistic and reductive? Where is the intellectual depth and theoretical complexity?

These questions came to mind recently as I set out to write a short text on the painting *Northbound* (1962) for this exhibition. Naturally, my first step was to see what other scholars had written about this classic work. I did not find much, but I did find this:

> The turbulent decade of the 1960s, when the civil rights movement, the student movement, and the antiwar movement coalesced, provided many subjects for Lawrence. But he also painted many of the themes he had previously done. African Americans from the South continued to travel to the North for jobs and to visit family who had previously migrated. These are the subjects of *The Travelers* (1961), *Northbound* (1962), and *Dreams No. 4: Railroad Station* (1966).[1]

And this, concerning the first time *Northbound* was exhibited:

> Although the poster would seem to announce the theme of social protest for the exhibition, the majority of the paintings *did not* [*emphasis mine*] focus on civil rights activities as subjects. Instead, as he had always done, Lawrence painted themes from the world around him: . . . two on the migration theme (*The Travelers* [1961] and *Northbound* [1962]) . . . and two indictments of racial prejudice that existed long before the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s (*Invisible Man among the Scholars* [1963] and *Taboo* [1963]).[2]



Jacob Lawrence

The words in both instances belong to Patricia Hills, an art historian who has written frequently about Jacob Lawrence. In fact, Hills has contributed an essay to every major anthology on Lawrence's art since 1986. She is considered an authority. Still, something about her characterization of *Northbound* as a genre scene seemed off to me. Facile. Thinking about it further, I am convinced that *Northbound* is indeed about something else entirely.

Hills isn't exactly wrong—yes indeed, the painting depicts people boarding a bus to travel north—but she generalizes, which can be worse than being wrong. Generalizing empties, it flattens. It obliterates nuance, glosses over contradiction, and anesthetizes us against the prick of detail. By suggesting that *Northbound* is simply an image of migration, thus sounding a distant echo of Lawrence's epic *Migration of the Negro* (1941), Hills casts aside its particularity. She tethers the painting to a theme and discards it in the past. In my opinion, the painting is about what was at the time a very live issue.

Let's take a quick look at the historical record. On December 5, 1960, five years after the Montgomery bus boycott, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation on public transportation, specifically interstate bus travel, was illegal. Despite this landmark ruling, southern bus companies ignored the law. The Freedom Rides of May 1961 tried to accelerate its adoption without success in some areas. In early 1962, at precisely the moment that Lawrence was likely painting *Northbound*, a black civil rights activist named William P. "Daddy Bill" Randall lead a campaign in Macon County, Georgia, to force the Bibb Transit Company to fall into compliance and to hire more African American drivers.[3] For three weeks, a boycott ensued. African American riders stayed off the buses, which ran more or less empty through the streets, while a lawsuit made its way through the courts. When a U.S. District Court Judge ordered Bibb Transit to change its practices in the spring of 1962, it finally did.

What tipped me off to the fact that *Northbound* is about transportation desegregation and not generally about migration is the presence of dark-skinned passengers sitting at the front of the bus and the expressions on the faces of the lighter-skinned drivers. Lawrence had painted on the issue of bus segregation before—namely during his stay in New Orleans in 1941 (*Bus*)—picturing the exterior of a bus driving through the city with "whites" seated comfortably in the front and "colored" huddled in the back. *Northbound*, by contrast, depicts three parked buses loading at a depot in the heart of what was historically known as the Black Belt.[4] Families with small children, carrying suitcases and packages, make their way down the platform, boarding and taking their seats. The scene

is dappled with shadow. The children appear vulnerable; the parents weary but attentive. The burden of long distance travel is apparent.

As the passengers envelop them, the uniformed bus drivers lock eyes and bear their teeth. They appear tense. Psychologically, they exist in a different register. This is literalized by the fact that their steering wheels are unattached to their steering columns—perhaps a witty visual commentary from the artist that their attitude isn't going to get them anywhere.[5] Considering all these details, I am convinced that what we are viewing follows one of the transportation desegregation rulings, perhaps the Macon County ruling. The passengers are not exalting but are merely living a right they have already earned, while the drivers struggle with their new reality. The fact that the bus is about to begin its journey is clearly a metaphor that America is too. Every civil rights victory opens up new forms of co-existence that take time to find their natural equilibrium.

Northbound was exhibited in Lawrence's first solo exhibition at the Terry Dintenfass Gallery in New York in 1963. Most of the works in the show referenced specific civil rights events. One was based on the entrance of Elizabeth Eckford, one of the Little Rock Nine, into Central High School in 1957 (*The Ordeal of Alice* [1963]). Also included were, in Hills' words above, "two indictments of racial prejudice that existed long before the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s," though in my view, they too are grounded in specific civil-rights era events, namely the admittance of James Meredith to the University of Mississippi (*Invisible Man Among the Scholars*), and the conviction

of Richard and Mildred Loving under Virginia's miscegenation laws in 1958 (*Taboo*). As with *Northbound*, all of these paintings are based on incidents, but also more broadly address a civil right. Notice that the titles are either general or elliptical. *The Ordeal of Alice* is the most allegorical. By titling *Northbound* as he did, Lawrence clearly did not want it, or the others, to be viewed as illustrations.

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Why does it matter whether or not *Northbound* is about the legacies of migration, as Hills claims, or the tensions following interstate bus desegregation, as I propose? For me, the reasons are many but the primary one is to counter quick-hit interpretations of Lawrence's art, or as Darby English put it to the *New York Times* this winter, to reject the "uniformly flat-footed and sentimentalist uses of Jacob Lawrence."[6] In 2000, upon publication of *The Complete Jacob Lawrence,* Michelle DuBois and I hoped we would see a wholesale reinvestigation of meaning in Lawrence's art. But this has not happened. At least not yet.

Sadly, over the past fifteen years, I have watched museums and scholars rehash the already extant. In an effort to make Lawrence's legacy palatable to a broad audience, they have reduced it to a Harlem-made brand and rendered a complex narrative anodyne, or even worse, infantile. The most extreme example of this can be found in the large number of children's books on Lawrence's life that continue to be published year in and year out, among them *Jake Makes a World: Jacob Lawrence, A Young Artist in Harlem.* Of the only two scholarly books I have seen, the recent *Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series* treads familiar ground—boldly

sharing its title verbatim with a 1994 publication—while the other spins its wheels deep in a scholarly rut.[7] It begins with a pronouncement:

> This is a book about Jacob Lawrence and his art. It is also a story about Harlem—a community which gave him encouragement and from which he drew his strength as a man and as an artist.[8]

I want to focus on how such pronouncements skew our understanding of the artist. First, they characterize his entire career through the lens of Harlem, where he lived roughly from the age of 13 until he was 26 (1930–43), with some extended out-of-town travel. (The majority of his adult life as a working artist was spent in Brooklyn and Seattle.) Secondly, they filter all interpretation through early formation and biography. For an artist who painted professionally for nearly sixty years, doesn't this emphasis seem odd? Imagine analyzing the entire carrer of Frank Stella, who also matured early, through his upbringing in Malden and Andover, Massachusetts, and then his four years at Princeton. While I realize comparing Stella and Lawrence may not be fair, I am trying to make a point that in the fixation scholars and institutions have on Lawrence as a child prodigy—one who emerged most improbably from a so-called broken nuclear family living in a modern slum, as the story goes—they are doing a disservice to the artist and his work.

I hold out hope that a new generation of scholars will issue a series thoughtful correctives, but this will take time. There is much primary research to be done on the work of artists whose legacies have received but a fraction of the attention Lawrence's has. Still, for those who will accept this ethical challenge, here's

a tip: Look closely at the works from the period between his release from Hillside Hospital in 1950 until *Northbound* in 1962. Here you will find a psychic intensity, an engagement with fantasies of violence, images of masking and role-play, and a bewildering use of allegory that is unmatched in the earlier and later periods. If you are feeling more ambitions, consider situating Lawrence's production within theoretical contexts that free it from narrow, historical accounts of "the modern" and modernism. While Lawrence sometimes painted historical subjects, he is not a "modern" figure. His use of text, his experimentation with narrative structure, his treatment of multi-panel paintings as single installations, and his attention to under-recounted histories all align his work in my view with much of the advanced international art over the past decade, even if its formal qualities might, at times, appear dated. In this and other senses, Lawrence was and remains truly contemporary.

In an oft-cited essay from 2009, the philosopher Giorgio Agamben wrote:

> The contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness. All eras, for those who experience contemporariness, are obscure. The contemporary is precisely the person who knows how to see this obscurity, who is able to write by dipping his pen in the obscurity of the present.[9]

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1 Patricia Hills, "Lawrence through the Decades," *Jacob Lawrence: Moving Forward, Paintings 1936–1999* (New York: DC Moore Gallery, 2008), p. 12.

2 Hills, "Jacob Lawrence's Paintings during the Protest Years of the 1960s," in Peter T. Nesbett and Michelle Dubois, eds., *Over the Line: The Art and Life of Jacob Lawrence* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2000), p. 176. In hindsight, I wish I had caught and challenged these generalized interpretations of *Northbound*, *Invisible Man Among the Scholars,* and *Taboo* at the time we were editing this essay for publication. Mea culpa.

3 For my theory to be correct, I must admit a factual error: The cataloguing entry for *Northbound* in the catalogue raisonné notes that it was exhibited in 1961 at The Alan Gallery. As Lawrence dated the painting as 1962, alongside his signature, this is unlikely, making it possible that the work was indeed created around the time of the Macon County bus boycotts.

4 I use the terms "white" and "colored" here to echo the racialized divisions inscripted in public transportation settings in the 1940s when Lawrence's *Bus* was painted. "The Black Belt" refers to a large swath of agricultural land that stretched through Mississippi, Alabama, through central Georgia, where Macon County is located. Lawrence had traveled extensively through this area in the 1940s on a commission for *Fortune* magazine. The resultant paintings were collectively titled, "In the Heart of the Black Belt."

5 One could argue with this but I have found that scholars and critics tend to under-estimate the degree of intentionality in Lawrence's work. I do not think this was simply an aesthetic decision.

6 Felicia R. Lee, "Reassembling a History Told in Paint," *The New York Times* (December 17, 2014), p. C1.

7 Leah Dickerman and Elsa Smithgal, eds., *Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2015). The previous publication is Elizabeth Hutton Turner, *Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1994).

8 Hills, "Introduction," *Painting Harlem Modern: The Art of Jacob Lawrence* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), p. 1.

9 Giorgio Agamben, "What is the Contemporary?" *What is an Aparatus, and other Essays* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 44. First published in Italian in 2008.