

## Moving the Perception of the Color Line: Jacob Lawrence’s “Migration Series”

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### Outline

1. Jacob Lawrence in Harlem
2. Lawrence as Expressionist, Modernist, and sociologist
3. A Word About Color Theory
4. Moving the Color Line: Aesthetics and Politics

### Argument

Lawrence’s work is a demonstration of two key claims in color theory--namely that in a work of art colors are perceived primarily in relation to each other and that colors can become vehicles for human emotions and judgments. By coupling specific colors with either repellent or engaging images, by alternating and repeating patterns of color, the “Migration Series” interrogates the values traditionally associated with specific colors, especially white and black. To train (or re-train) the viewers’ perceptions of color, Lawrence’s series aligns pale or whitish colors with scenes representing white oppression and black dispossession while it uses highly saturated, rich colors to associate images of collective, black action with an increasing potential for movement, change, and agency. Hence the “Migration Series” uses aesthetics to make the case for a political cause.

### Quotes

1. “In visual perception a color is almost never seen as it really is — as it physically is. This fact makes color the most relative medium in art. In order to use color effectively it is necessary to recognize that color deceives continually... It should be learned that one and the same color evokes innumerable readings. Instead of mechanically applying or merely implying laws and rules of color harmony, distinct color effects are produced--through recognition of the interaction of color--by making, for instance, two very different colors look alike, or nearly alike.” Joseph Albers, *Interaction of Color* (Yale UP: 1963, 2013), p. 1.

2. “A color has many faces, and one color can be made to appear as two different colors. Here it is unbelievable that the left small and the right small squares are part of the same paper strip and therefore are the same color. And no normal human eye is able to see both squares — alike.” Joseph Albers, *Interaction of Color* (Yale UP: 1963, 2013), p. 8.

3. “Color harmony is a complex notion because human responses to color are both affective and cognitive, involving emotional response and judgment. Hence, our responses to color [are]... open to the influence of a range of different factors. These factors include individual differences (such as age, gender, personal preference, affective state, etc.) as well as cultural, sub-cultural and socially-based differences which gives rise to conditioning and learned responses about color. In addition, context always has an influence on responses about color and the notion of color harmony, and this concept is also influenced by temporal factors (such as changing trends) and perceptual factors (such as simultaneous contrast) which may impinge on human response to color.” O’Connor, Z. (2010). “Color harmony revisited,” *Color Research and Application*, 35 (4), pp. 267–273.

4. The sociologist’s “data visualization” is “the rendering of visual information in a visual format to help communicate data while **also generating new patterns and knowledge through the act of visualization itself.**” (Battle-Baptiste and Rusert introduction to W.E.B. Du Bois’s *Data Portraits: Visualizing Black America*, (UMass UP, 2018) p. 8.

### Further Reading

Leah Dickerman and Elsa Smithgall, *Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series*, (The Museum of Modern Art, New York and the Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.) 2015.

Jutta Lorenzen, Between Image and Word, Color and Time: Jacob Lawrence's "The Migration Series," *African American Review*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Fall, 2006), pp. 571-586.

Ellen Harkins Wheat, *Jacob Lawrence, American Painter*, (UWashington Press with the Seattle Art Museum) 1986.

### **Questions for Conference**

“I believe that what Goethe [Albers] was really seeking was not a physiological but a psychological theory of colours.” Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, MS 112 255:26.11.1931. What is the difference between physiological color theory and psychological color theory?

What elements or panels of the “Migration Series” would you most associate with Expressionism? With Modernism? With the emergent discipline of sociology? What can the “Migration Series” accomplish by drawing on all of these means of representation or analysis?

Why does Lawrence choose to portray African-American children sometimes as stick figures in “loin cloths” (quite differently from all adult figures) and sometimes as more fully dimensional and fully clothed figures?

Many panels in the “Migration Series” are compositional pairs in which some object or form is repeated—yet with an important difference (panels 2 and 4, 19 and 49, 22 and 58, 11 and 44, 37 and 38, 15 and 17, 26 and 28, 37 and 51). What meaning can be derived from each pair? What is the role of these pairs in the “Series” as a whole?

Can you also identify compositional or visual triplets? Quadruplets? How do they contribute to a sense of visual “rhythm” in the series?

The relation between an image and its caption is at times very direct (34, 50) and at times more enigmatic (14, 26, 36, 43, 54, 57). Looking at these images and ignoring Lawrence’s caption, what other possible captions come to mind? What kind of work does the more enigmatic relation between caption and image require of the viewer?

Who is the woman in the red dress (panels 10, 11, 15, 16, 33, 45)? She might be seen both as an individual and as a symbol for a group. What would the ramifications of each of these interpretations be? Why might Lawrence be interested in both accounts?

Why do so few (if any) of Lawrence’s figures direct a gaze back at the viewer?