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ARTICLES

The New Urgency of Jacob Lawrence

by Julia Friedman on April 20, 2015



Jacob Lawrence, 'The Migration Series' (1940-41), Panel 22: "Another of the social causes of the migrants' leaving was that at times they did not feel safe, or it was not the best thing to be found on the streets late at night. They were arrested on the slightest provocation." Casein tempera on hardboard, 18 x 12" (45.7 x 30.5 cm), the Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of Mrs. David M. Levy (© 2015 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York, digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY)

On April 15, a packed theater at the Museum of Modern Art listened to [Khalil Gibran Muhammad](#), director of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, moderate a discussion between [Sherrilyn Ifill](#), president of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, and [Cornell Brooks](#), president and CEO of the NAACP. Titled "[Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series and the Legacy of Jim Crow: The Long History of the Artist's Concerns](#)," the discussion used MoMA's [current Jacob Lawrence exhibition](#) as a jumping-off point for considering a plethora of intersections between art, politics, and social justice.

The show, *One-Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series and Other Visions of the Great Movement North*, reunites all 60 paintings in Lawrence's *Migration* series — paintings whose images and captions present both the specific story of the [Great Migration](#) (the mass exodus of African Americans from the southern US to the North around the middle of the 20th century), and a broader, moving portrait of injustice and politics that resonates today. As Ifill said, in reference to the ongoing police murders of unarmed black men and [the absurd rates of incarceration in the US](#), this is a “moment when we really need this art.”



Khalil Gibran Muhammad, Sherrilyn Ifill, and Cornell Brooks at “Jacob Lawrence’s Migration Series and the Legacy of Jim Crow: The Long History of the Artist’s Concerns” on April 15, 2015, at the Museum of Modern Art (photo by Keith Smith)

As moderator, Muhammad tried to use slides to keep the discussion centered on Lawrence, but the issues raised by each one were powerful enough to often catapult the conversation towards contemporary politics. Lawrence’s Panel 14 — “Among the social conditions that existed which was partly the cause of the migration was the injustice done to the Negroes in the courts.” — immediately led to a discussion of the contemporary US criminal justice system. Lawrence’s painting shows a white judge, high on his perch, looking down at an African American couple; the simple use of a height differential creates a portrait of powerlessness. Ifill made the point that the essential injustice of today’s criminal justice apparatus does not come simply from individuals abusing their power, but rather because mass incarceration is an *economic*

system that must increase its numbers to feed itself. She used the example of the Ferguson police department, whose [policy of increasing revenue](#) is at odds with any notion of peaceful policing. Brooks responded by saying that these types of money-raising policies criminalize poverty itself. Muhammad brought the issue full circle by pointing out that with a felony it's often difficult, if not impossible, to find work, and in some states [also illegal to vote](#). "When you're convicted of a felony you're literally disappeared from civil society," he said.

The caption for Lawrence's Panel 15 reads: "Another cause was lynching. It was found that where there had been a lynching, the people who were reluctant to leave at first left immediately after this." This prompted Ifill to discuss her recent book, [On the Courthouse Lawn: Confronting the Legacy of Lynching in the Twenty-first Century](#). She explained that lynchings were both extremely public affairs and events that everyone remained silent about — the local African American population out of fear and the local white population out of racist solidarity. In Ifill's opinion, Panel 15, by avoiding the "pornography of violence" of depicting a lynching in progress, thematically captures lynching's lasting effect: the terrorism of a community. Brooks offered, somewhat optimistically, that cell phones may have changed the culture of silence; it is easier now to provide proof of witnessed brutality, and even possible to remain anonymous while doing so.



Jacob Lawrence, 'The Migration Series' (1940–41), Panel 15: "Another cause was lynching. It was found that where there had been a lynching, the people who were reluctant to leave at first left immediately after this." Casein tempera on hardboard, 18 x 12" (45.7 x 30.5 cm), the Phillips Collection, Washington D.C, acquired 1942 (© 2015 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York, photo courtesy The Phillips Collection, Washington DC)

These two discussions were but a snippet of what comprised a phenomenal evening — a truly unique conversation among three public policy and social justice experts about the racial horrors woven into US history and present, through the lens of art. Reassuringly, the use of art as an inspiration for political discussion avoided the pitfalls of social realism; rather than asserting that art must conform to certain political ideals, the discussion highlighted art’s potential to suggest political reality, both in the circumstances of its creation and in the richness of its subject matter. At the risk of sounding trite or moralizing, more discussions like this would add a needed depth to the contemporary museum ecosystem, which often feels cloistered in an ivory tower.

“Jacob Lawrence’s Migration Series and the Legacy of Jim Crow: The Long History of the Artist’s Concerns” took place at the Museum of Modern Art (11 W 53rd Street, Midtown West, Manhattan) on April 15, 6:30pm.

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