

“I, Too, Sing America”

Steve Locke

I, too, sing America.

*I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.*

*Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
“Eat in the kitchen,”
Then.*

*Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—*

I, too, am America.

Langston Hughes, “I, Too” (1926)

We must never forget that Jacob Lawrence was first and foremost a *painter*, and in 1955 he was near the height of his powers as an artist. Part of those powers included, and in fact demanded, that he continue to push his craft, not to repeat what he had done. I submit that in *Struggle: From the History of the American People*, he worked to image new ways for us to think about struggle, which he revealed to be the central quality of *being American* itself.

Struggle is what we all have in common as Americans—it is our *history* and our *legacy*. Lawrence, as a history painter, knew this was his subject and he claimed it at the broadest possible scope. To embody, not just depict, the ideas and to support his vision, he worked with a palette of earth tones set off by jewel-like, high-key



1

Figure 1 Jacob Lawrence, *During World War I there was a great migration north by southern African Americans*, from *The Migration Series*, 1940–41, Panel 1, casein tempera on hardboard, 12 × 18 in. (30.5 × 45.7 cm), The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC

moments. He used the turgid compositions with baroque spacing to include us in the narrative. These choices—in concept and facture—make for a dense, layered experience of viewing that forces the viewer to engage deeply to decipher and comprehend. Lawrence’s achievement in forms allowed him to make a cycle that *embodies* struggle.

What are we talking about when we talk about struggle? The connotation is negative, especially in the late 2010s, when we think of Eric Garner struggling to breathe while put in a chokehold by a police officer, which ultimately caused his death. We have an understanding of struggle that implies that there is going to be a winner and a loser—someone’s gotta come out on top and someone’s gotta be on the bottom. We think of life-and-death struggles. Struggle is something to endure, survive, live through. It has an end and maybe we will be better because of it.

Lawrence posits a different understanding of struggle, one that is more productive. What if struggle is not something to overcome or something to survive? What if the state of things *is* struggle? What if struggle is how we are to be in the world? Struggle as a place, a location, a setting. Struggle as a happening, a condition. Struggle as a state of being. Unending. Unresolvable. Continuing. Constant.

Lawrence presents the American story as a history of constant struggle. Not another history of winners and losers or another history presented by the people on the

top at the expense of folks on the bottom. His is a more productive way to image America because it shows that the country is conceived in conflict and combat, debate and divisiveness. And in developing a new form to talk about struggle, Lawrence gives us a new framework to understand the American experience.

There is a lot of pressure on an artist to create greatest hits. Especially if an artist has created something that is considered a masterpiece, which Lawrence's *Migration Series* (1940–41; fig. 1) resoundingly is. That epic series, comprising sixty panels, images the narrative of one of the greatest mass movements of human beings—a cycle of paintings that documents the history of black people fleeing the Jim Crow South to the north in search of better lives. I don't think that was enough for Lawrence. And I don't think that would be enough for any artist of his caliber.

Lawrence is misunderstood as a black artist making paintings about black people. There is some truth to this, but it misses a major point about him as an artist. He is a *history painter* and as such, he is looking at the scope of history. Whether it is biographical (he painted series on the lives of Toussaint L'Ouverture, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and John Brown), geographical (the South, Harlem; fig. 2), or one of the largest mass movements of people in history (*Migration*), Lawrence's subject is History, as seen through the lives of black people.

This misunderstanding is very common with black artists because the dominant culture has a hard time believing in blackness as American—even though it is a wholly American invention. Blackness is thought of as something alien, something other. And this is part of the struggle we have as a nation. It remains exceedingly hard for the dominant culture to experience black people as embodying the ideals, sense, and/or image of the nation.

You see this play out time and time again when black people have attained positions that should guarantee them respect. Despite the intelligence, wit, grace, ease, and frankly institutionalist views of Barack and Michelle Obama, their arrival to the White House fanned the sparks of white fear into flames of open racism. The basis of this fear? That a black president was going to be the president only of *black* people, not of all Americans. A black president wouldn't/couldn't embody the best of the nation—even though through sheer force of personality, will, and negotiation, Obama took every opportunity to show that he was the president of all Americans. The fear of black domination runs rampant in American society, and the crux of this fear is really that black people in power will do to white people what white people in power have done to black people.

Disrespect of black authority plays out in various aspects of American life. Even when they embody American values such as peaceful protest, figures such as Colin Kaepernick, the activist and professional football player who began kneeling during the national anthem to protest social injustice and the deaths of black men by the police, are treated as if they are doing something a *real* American would never do.

If black people are not seen as real Americans, how can they tell the story of America? If they are somehow different from the American norm, then how can they speak for the nation (even though it is *their* nation about which they speak)? When artists say, "My place is the world," do we believe them if they are black? In this limiting framework, black artists can only talk about blackness, *their* blackness, and their "community." Separate. Unequal. It is a limitation against which black artists in America still struggle. Myself included.

No artist is ever content to live with a limitation.

Lawrence, in 1955, decided to give lie to this notion of separateness. He conceived and began *Struggle* not as a black narrative cycle, but as an American one. He had *always* painted our shared history, and it was marginalized and misunderstood as being *black* history, somehow outside of the American narrative. The dominant culture refused to see itself in Lawrence's work. With *Struggle*—the theme, the title, the subjects of the paintings—Lawrence decided that he could tell the American story. Because it was his story to tell.

As he had always done, Lawrence images Americans in *Struggle*. He claims this in his subtitle (*From the History of the American People*) and by doing this, a black artist is laying claim to the American story, our story, and our history. And he starts the cycle by imaging one of the founding acts of the nation as a *group of brown people* and identifying the scene as Patrick Henry's speech to the Virginia Convention. This choice of color is purposeful: Lawrence knows how to make a "flesh" tone that would read as a white person (see panel 25), but in the very first panel, we have a series of brown figures that are presented in the moment of Henry exhorting, "Is life so dear or peace so sweet as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery?" The scene is painted with an urgency and the idea of struggle has penetrated to the fracture of the work. The image, like freedom, is hard-won and complex, the result of a direct and sustained engagement.

Lawrence consciously uses an earth palette for the flesh again in panel 17, where he images the Burr-Hamilton duel. He offers not the immediately understood, quotidian colors of skin, but flesh tones that match the ochers and browns of the ground. I think Lawrence does this for a specific reason: to say that as Americans, we all come from the stuff—the same ocher mud that struggles to have form. This is one of Lawrence's artistic choices, one of his new forms, that gives the work its power.

It is not an easy thing to make a new formal language. When I suggest that Lawrence is doing so, I don't mean to imply that it is incidental. We know that he is a master of composition, influenced heavily by cubism and the flatness and emblematic shapes that come from dissecting the picture plane. In *Struggle* we are placed within the action, not just looking at it from a distance. Instead of stepping back (as he does in *The Wedding* from 1948; fig. 3) and giving us an incredible view of a coming together, he puts us in the middle of the movement. The coterminous spacing of baroque painting is evident throughout the cycle—we are *in medias res* in every panel. The work immerses us in



2

Figure 2 Jacob Lawrence, *This Is Harlem*, 1943, gouache on paper, 15 3/8 x 22 3/4 in. (39.1 x 57.6 cm), Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966

vistas (panel 22) and collapses to the point of intimacy (panel 11). We are not observers in this work, we are participants.

We also know Lawrence's ability with color. His *Migration*, *The Life of Harriet Tubman* (1939–40; fig. 4), and *The Legend of John Brown* series (1941; fig. 5) are filled with luminous hues and the vibration of plastic color relationships. There is a clarity of color in his earlier work that is strikingly absent in *Struggle*. The egg tempera palette here moves toward ocher, sienna, umber—opaque colors that have the essence of the earth in their substance and their names. He could have used a more forgiving material (oil, for example, would not dry as fast and changes would be easier to make) for the *Struggle* paintings, but he used egg tempera and that is key. This historical medium is among the most permanent of painting materials, fitting for the scope of history. The richness of the color comes from the layers of rock pigment suspended in egg yolk resting on the surface of the hardboard panels. The translucency and transparency of egg tempera reveal that the paintings are *made*, not executed, as if the images are being proposed and resolved on the surface right before our eyes. The agitation in the brush marks is evident, for example, on the surfaces of the waves in panel 10—a concatenation of blue triangles,



3

each one denser than the one before, each one sharper than the next. These triangles echo the shapes of the bodies in the boats. These choices, in style and material, give the *Struggle* series a sense of agitation and urgency. The cubist stability of Lawrence's earlier works, where the forms are locked in place like pieces of a puzzle, has given way to a baroque sense of energy turning in a gyre.

Lawrence's formal choices, the close spacing and the organization of the palette, make the series not just images of struggle but the embodiment of struggle itself. The physicality of the work—the artist's hand so evident in agitated brushwork on the surfaces of the panels—indicates the labor required to create the images. Nothing in *Struggle* has the effortless quality of other Lawrence paintings. Every image feels hard-won, layered, and labored. Moments are sharp; things come to a point. Space collapses and pressures seen and unseen come in from every side. And within all of this activity rests the American story. As viewers, we are engaged in the act of struggle while we are in the act of looking. Clarity emerges; it is not quickly discerned. One has to work to decipher what is happening, who is depicted, and then marry that with the text that serves as the title of each image. The resolution Lawrence achieves in the

Figure 3 Jacob Lawrence, *The Wedding*, 1948, egg tempera on hardboard, 20 × 24 in. (50.8 × 61 cm), The Art Institute of Chicago, gift of Mary P. Kines in memory of her mother, Frances W. Pick, 1993.258



4

Figure 4 Jacob Lawrence, *Every antislavery convention held within 500 miles of Harriet Tubman found her at the meeting. She spoke in words that brought tears to the eyes and sorrow to the hearts of all who heard her speak of the suffering of her people*, from *The Life of Harriet Tubman* series, Panel 21, 1940, casein tempera on hardboard, 17 7/8 × 12 in. (45.4 × 30.5 cm), Hampton University Museum, gift of the Harmon Foundation



5

Figure 5 Authorized screenprint reproduction of Jacob Lawrence, *John Brown made many trips to Canada organizing for his assault on Harpers Ferry*, from *The Legend of John Brown* series, Panel 15, 1941, gouache and tempera on paper, 19 7/8 × 13 3/8 in. (50.5 × 34.6 cm), The Detroit Institute of Arts, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Milton Lowenthal

making comes to us in the looking. The immediacy of chromatic clarity and flatness in *Tubman* and *Migration* is gone, giving way to luminous shadows, agitation, and vigorous, dense surfaces. This is America.

Lawrence was a black American, and those two words, “black” and “American,” have a three-hundred-plus-year history on this shore. Just because one is black, despite what the dominant culture says, does not mean that one is not part of the American legacy and patrimony—a legacy and patrimony that only exist because of the presence of stolen people. Lawrence decided to paint history, but he refused to paint a selective history. He explored the full scope, the varied scenes and situations, of the American story. *Struggle* is not a reiteration of the narrative devices that Lawrence discovered in *Migration*. *Struggle* is a new form. In embodying struggle as the history of America, Lawrence created a new way of imaging that history—through formal language and making evident the physical struggle of the materials on the surface of the panels.

Struggle was supposed to be sixty panels, and Lawrence completed thirty. When one ponders the expanse of time from the beginnings of the Republic to 1955 and *what that history is*, for a black American artist to take on all of that history—and not just the parts that were “about black people”—is a radical and courageous act.

It is very telling that this work has come back to us at this moment. I don't need to tell the reader that we are in a very fraught time for our democracy—very similar to the fraught times in which these paintings were made. There are a lot of analogies to be made between 1955 and 2018, when I write this. The corruption of ideas, the white supremacist violence directed at black people, the demagoguery—all of this is familiar.

Also familiar is the need and the ability of artists to speak about the world. The mission of the artist isn't just to make images, or to make people feel comfortable. The mission of the artist is to talk about his or her time. The fact that artists take on this topic—struggle—comes as no surprise to me. Artists struggle all the time with materials, ideas, execution, not to mention the difficulties of trying to have a creative life in a society that places little value on art or those who make it. Now, as Lawrence did in 1955, artists are exploring history, imaging their fellow citizens, investigating the ongoing American struggle. It's not over. It continues. And far from being our history, *it is our now*. Struggle is what we must do to continue making our union more perfect. It is not something to be endured or overcome; it is the very basis of our condition.

An artist—a black man—in 1955 decides that he has the ability, the power, and frankly the right to image what it means to be American. That vision, that courage, that daring—these are Lawrence's gifts to us in *Struggle*. These are gifts we need now.