# Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series with Barbara Earl Thomas

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[00:00:30] I am so delighted to welcome you to tonight's program. Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series with Barbara Earl Thomas.

[00:00:43] Now…..I love an enthusiastic audience. You all are delighting me. We are doing a podcast, so, I always say in this room, clapping is welcome because it's how you let the listener know that you're engaged, too.

[00:01:02] So, I wanted to start by asking who in this audience is here, because I believe that you come to libraries to find what you love. So, in this audience tonight, who is here because you love Jacob Lawrence? And it's also a delight to be able to look at Jacob Lawrence through the lens of Barbara Earl Thomas who I think of as a local and a national treasure.  So, who loves Barbara Earl Thomas? Now, you may not believe this but it sometimes is difficult to get people to come to the library to hang out with us.

[00:01:41] I have to thank our community partners because they did a wonderful job in helping us get this very diverse and inclusive audience that looks intergenerational. So, I want to start by thanking the African-American Writers Alliance, the James and Janie Washington Foundation, Langston, the Seattle Office of Arts and Culture, Onyx Fine Arts, the Northwest African-American Museum, Seattle Art Museum and Voices Rising. A warm round of applause for our community partners.

[00:02:26] So, my lovely colleague, Nadiyah Brown will introduce Barbara Earl Thomas after we have a moment to welcome Carletta Wilson who's going to do something that I'm very excited about which is to tell us a little bit about how Jacob Lawrence came to his artistic practice by being an autodidact and spending time in libraries. So, I'm excited about that. And I also want to heartily thank Carletta, Nadiyah and Barbara for the time and effort they put into tonight's program. So, we'll have two presentations and we'll save a Q and A for the end. Does that sound like a good plan? Alright. We cannot do programs like this without the support from the Seattle Public Library Foundation. So, if we

happen to have any donors in the room, we want to personally thank you for helping us to show up for our community so thank you.

[00:03:24] Applause.

[00:03:25] And I'm excited to bring up my beautiful colleague Carletta because she's just an amazing person, so thank you.

[00:03:32] So. this is called Coming the Distance Mapping the Journey: Jacob Lawrence's Migration series. Even before Jacob Lawrence made the first mark on the first panel of The Migration of the Negro series now known as The Migration series the concept had already taken shape in his mind.

[00:04:09] The man had come a distance, not a distance but distances, physical, metaphorical, visua,l intellectual and generational distances. This photograph takes us back to that singular time. Lawrence stated that “The Migration series was begun about 1940 and I completed it about 1941.” It is 1941. He is 24 years old. Look at the intensity of his gaze. The furred brow, the tension in his slightly leaning body brings to mind a sprinters pose at the starting line. His right hand mirrors a runner's fingertips lightly resting upon the track. Yes, Jacob Lawrence is at the starting line and he is poised to sprint into an unthinkable future. This image is a signifier, all of Jacob Lawrence's attention is focused upon the subject or object of his gaze. I posit that it is with this intensity of focus that Jacob Lawrence observed the world, delved into depths of past, present and future until he was full of convergence, alignment and mystery. Artists have myriad ways of developing their material. Lawrence has spoken of the people and places that provided the soil out of which the 60 panels grew. Still, there is more to discover. The role of an institution, for instance, one which would give him the necessary information to complete the work. I'm going to take a detour here. Seattle has been home to three artists born during the Jim Crow era. Laws were in place to stymie, truncate and deny any possibility of achievement or opportunity for advancement for the descendants of formerly enslaved people. Everywhere the migrants turned, there were barriers, roadblocks outright refusals of entrance, especially to an education. James Washington, Jr. became an apprentice at the age of 14. He worked as a shoemaker, banana messenger and deckhand. August Wilson dropped out of school in the 10th grade after a teacher accused him of plagiarism. He worked at odd jobs, one time as a short order cook. Jacob Lawrence, it has been noted was 16 when he ceased his formal education. Each teenager found jobs requiring nonskilled labor and little or no education.

[00:07:18] They were seekers, consummate learners. Their lack of a formal education did not deter them from the pursuit of knowledge. Self-motivated, self-educated their artistic endeavors are rooted in knowledge gleaned from books and libraries. One of the definitions of migration refers to the migration of ideas, that is ideas being passed from one place to another and the means by which such movement is affected.

[00:07:55] The vehicle for the migration of ideas and knowledge across centuries languages and geographies has been until now, the book..

[00:08:05] Libraries, however, in the Jim Crow era were not free and not for all but there were some that provided more access and resources than others. Like the schools, the colored libraries tended to be repositories of outdated, castoff books. The hunger to know, to learn would not be deterred. These four students aren't sitting at a lunch counter, an array of reading material is spread out before them. Reading for any enslaved person and their descendants remains a revolutionary act. Taught to read at age four, August Wilson read extensively and by age 12 was a frequent patron of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. James Washington, Jr. built a personal library in his home. Housed in the basement it occupies an entire room consisting of volumes that mirror subjects you'll find in any neighborhood library. The library has long been a refuge, the People's University, a house of knowledge for the citizen scholar. A place without barrier to a seeker and pursuit of knowing. As an entity it is a transmitter of thoughts, an idea monger port and transport and a central resource for artists whose works are formed and informed by history and historical moments. The New York Public Library's 135th street branch division of Negro History, Literature and Prints was an exceptional library. In 1968, Jacob Lawrence stated, "This, the Schomburg library became a favorite place of mine to go and work and do research and this is where I think I read many of the books like books of DuBois, books of, well, he was one of my favorites and many books like this." Llibraries are Appreciated, 1943, Jacob Lawrence paid homage to the importance of libraries in his creative practice by creating a series of paintings. The first one was created in 1943, soon after the completion of The Migration series. In addition, he created related works focusing on the book. Let's look at them.

[00:10:49] But first, Lawrence talks, "and this is how this story developed. To me it was a very dramatic thing of people moving this great trek, you know. This is the historical thing I think which fascinates us all." Library, 1960 is the first of three paintings produced during that one year. Twenty years have passed and now in the beginning of the years of the Civil Rights Movement, Lawrence hones in on the library.

[00:11:25] Why? "And we often hear of people all over the world that make these treks and it is a very dramatic thing. This may have fascinated me greatly and this is how the Negro migration theme came into being." Library II, 1960. All three paintings dated 1960. "So, I researched the material took many notes as most of us who do research do. We know that nine tenths of what we take is never used but we have to take it all in order to get to that one tenth. So, this was the process." Library III, 1960 marks the end of the first set of three paintings of the library. They are very perfunctorily titled. Llibrary one, two, three.

[00:12:28] Now, this. The Invisible Man Among the Scholars,1963. This painting is visually coded. In fact, I think it's the most visually coded image that I've seen. Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man was published in 1952. In 1962, James Meredith became the first African-American admitted to a segregated university, the University of Mississippi.

[00:13:00] Students with Books, 1966 begins the second set of three paintings completed in the same year. Their subject matter is a commentary on the times and of continued demands for equality and equity in education. What is different two of these have titles [that] are evocative of their subjects. The second one The Courtyard Library, 1966 here he's focusing on integrating the library and the last

- The Library, 1966 African-Americans are not merely patrons but employees and part of the institution. The last of the series here is Dream Number Five. The Library, 1967. This is the last painting from the 1960 series.Martin Luther King's I Have A Dream speech was delivered four years earlier. One year before the end of the decade Jacob Lawrence evokes King's dreams. Twenty years later, Lawrence pays full homage to the library which he credits as being the place that fostered the research for The Migration series, the 135th Street Library, now known as The Schomburg. Forty-three years have passed between the first and the last library painting. I began by talking about convergence, alignment and mystery about a man poised at the brink of an unthinkable future. Here we are in the unthinkable future masses of people, once again, on the move leaving, arriving, the fate of migrants daily in the news and on our minds. The great wheel of history turns. Seventy-six years later, The Migration series is here in Seattle on view at the Seattle Art Museum where you can walk into the Gwendolyn Knight and Jacob Lawrence Gallery and view the work. When Knight specifically wanted the gallery to honor an artist of African descent early in their career with a solo show. I wonder and perhaps we'll find out tonight, how old was Barbara Earl Thomas when she was introduced to her new professor? Was she too, in her 20s? The Migration series is a visual map. Here is the cartographer, calm, resolute and focused whose work was behind him

[00:16:13] when Jacob Lawrence and Barbara Earl Thomas were first introduced. He had gone distances, she was at the beginning of her own unthinkable journey. Along with Gwen Knight, their lives, their three lives were turned from student and professor to lifelong friends and more. Barbara can give us an idea of the signposts and weigh stations along their way. But, first a proper introduction. Nadiyah Brown will introduce Barbara Earl Thomas.

Can we thank Carletta for that beautiful journey?

[00:17:03] Barbara Earl Thomas is a Seattle based artist and award winning writer and arts administrator with a career that spans more than 30 years. Her works are included in, among others, the Seattle Art Museum and Tacoma Art Museum, Microsoft and the state and city public collections. As a writer she has numerous publications to her credit and has won two Seattle Arts and Cultural Commission awards for new nonfiction. She received the mayor's Arts Award in 2013 and in 2016. Get ready. The Artist Trust Jess Irving and Yvonne Twining Umber Award and the Seattle Stranger Genius Award for Excellence in the Arts.Thomas is sought after as a speaker and is a cultural and social activist who was instrumental in the creation of the Northwest African-American Museum where she served as its executive director from 2008 to 2012. Since leaving NAAM in 2012 she has gratefully plunged herself into making art and writing.

[00:18:00] Please welcome Barbara Earl Thomas.  (Applause.)

[00:18:12] Well,I first of all I want to thank you all for coming out. You know, this is the kind of thing that when you happen do you think like you know am I gonna be by myself. So, I brought my friend Kate Hubbard. I said, so just in case I'm by myself you can act like a lot of people.

[00:18:27] I thank you for being here because I am so honored to be here tonight because this has been part of a dream for me because this is Jacob's one hundredth year of his birth. It marks the one hundredth year since he was born. And I'll also have to be totally together because it marks the one hundred and fourth year since Gwen was born and you know whenever I think about Jacob, I always think about Gwen. It's not just Jacob. It's not just Gwen, it's Jacob and Gwen.

[00:19:02] And when I found out we were going to have the great opportunity to have his work, The Migration series here in Seattle, I thought well what better way to help raise his profile to make sure that all who have perhaps forgotten about him, remember him. All those who don't know about him get to learn about him because today when you have…as Carletta said you know I'm not all that technical with all these things you have like, the two second attention span. You really have to get in people's face in order to help them remember or to know something about someone who was very important.

[00:19:41] Do I have that thing that's supposed to happen or I can just do this gig. Never mind. That's me.

[00:19:50] That is not Jacob. So first of all I want to say that one of the reasons that I'm so excited about The Migration series and having it here is because it's one of the rare, rare occasions when the series comes together. One half is owned by MoMA. The other half is owned by the Phillips Collection. And in 1940, 41 when the series was sold they made a….

[00:20:15] they made a pact.

[00:20:19] Each museum wanted it. So, they separated and they separated it by even, odd [years]. So, the Phillips owns, I think, the evens and the MoMA owns the odds and they normally do have it on view at the Phillips, but not all the time and it's never always together. I've only picked ten images tonight to show you because I want you to go to the Seattle Art Museum. I mean, it makes no sense to have it here and not go to the Seattle Art Museum.

[00:20:48] And the reason I think that it's so important that it is here is because it allows us to think about a lot of things. I'm going to start really with a quote that Jacob had about his work. He said, “I don't think about this series in terms of history. I think in terms of contemporary life it was such a part of me. I didn't think of something outside of me. It was a portrait of myself, a portrait of my family, a portrait of my peers. It was like a still life with apples, like a landscape you see in front of you.”

[00:21:25] And I think that's the thing I want you to keep in mind. Those of you who haven't seen The Migration series is that Jacob was not, he was not… doing history. He was doing what he saw out the window. Jacob was born in 1917, so that means he was born right at the end of World War I. His life and the life of his family actually was reflected in how he ended up in New York. His mother and father moved from the south to New Jersey which is where he was born in 1917. And Jacob saw out of his window all of this going on around him. Marcus Garvey, all of these things and he was lucky enough when he was in his teens to end up as Carletta said he he left formal education and went to

his community and there were many, many…there were many workshops and apprenticeships and that's how he learned. And I think the thing that's interesting to me and I think this may become really cogent now. I mean, when you think about how expensive education is and you think about how people have to learn and what young people are saddled with at the end of college in terms of the money, I think apprenticeships are going to start looking pretty good. So, I want to start with this one. It's in it is titled it says that this is “During the War there was a Great Migration.” And when I first saw this, when I first saw this series, I kept thinking it was about my life because my parents, my grandparents came here in the nineteen, late 1940s but actually the migration started right after World War 1 and just kept right on up through the 1960s.

[00:23:21] So, I think that that's something that we don't always think about and I think that one of the things I want you to think about in terms of….Jacob Lawrence did paint The Migration and many historic series, but I want you to think about him also as a painter. The man was a brilliant painter and because his subject matter was so laden with this wonderful history we often look past his brilliance as a painter and go straight to the subject matter. But, I tell you truly that had he not been a great painter we would not be here a hundred years after his birth, talking about him. (Oops, wrong way.) There are many reasons that black people left the South and I want to say a little bit about just the title of this series when he first did it, did this series in 1940s, it was called The Migration of the Negro and because that's what we were called in 1940s, the negro. In the 1990s, he rewrote some of the captions under the images and he also retitled the series The Great Migration…The Migration so that anyone and everyone who looked at it could find something about themselves. So, I think that was really a reason why when I looked at it I thought about my own family. I thought about my grandparents leaving Louisiana, Texas and Florida and coming to the Northwest one after the other grandfather's following sons and sons and following, you know, parents and one of the reasons, of course, they left was because the justice there was not justice there.  You could be killed at will.

[00:25:07] And I think it's really interesting, the very simple way he depicted something that was so horrifically sad and what he says and I always like it's very understated, he says, They left because there was not justice. And Sometimes people were hanged. Understatement. And The Great Grief. “

[00:25:31] And I think that one of the the other things that people not… are also not really, really clear on is that Jacob painted all 60 panels at exactly the same time. He laid them out. He gessoed the boards and Gwen was right there helping him gesso those boards and so they would… he would move through, he'd do all of the red.

[00:25:53] All six panels, all of the blue, all of the white.

[00:25:57] So, that's why when you see the show you will sense that they were made in this way that seemed so coherent because he did them in one fell swoop. He did them in the way that one would do a mural. But he did it in a small format because that was what he had and he used commercial grade paints. And the other reason that

[00:26:20] there was a great impetus to leave the South is because the boll weevil, the boll weevil decimated the the cotton crop. And also there was so much over planting, the soil became exhausted, and so, not only was there not…. the crop was failing the land, was failing and everyone was really, really desperate.

[00:26:48] So, even had you wanted to stay, because you were too afraid to go into the abyss; the land and how you had been supporting yourself, was also failing. This is…. I love these last two because they're two of the images that don't have people in them but they're so very evocative and this image talks about the fact that when the when the Negro started to leave the South, there was no one left to pick the cotton. And I want to dwell on that because that's really very relevant to us, right now. When the Negro left, there wasn't anybody left to pick the crops, it's not just cotton all the crops and there was a real love hate… a love hate relationship between the slave and I mean it wasn't a slave because this wasn't slavery.

[00:27:38] This is after slavery you know this is 1940s. But, what we had was the sharecropping system and anybody that knows what the sharecropping system is you know that it's a kind of a formalized indentured service. So, there is a large landowner. He parcels out the the land. He gives it to various families. You till that land but before you till that land for the owner, you buy the seeds, you buy the food for your family through the planting period.

[00:28:11] So, before you even start to plant you already owe and then you plant and then you reap. You reap your food that the owner tells you how much it's worth and then deducts it from what you owe, so right away there was this kind of indenture. And if you ended up making less than what you owe, what you started the next year with was a debt. So, I think that right away that system, of course, was very financially great for the people who own the land but it wasn't really great for the people who tilled the land and that was another reason. But, the thing.. think about that, that relationship. On one hand, you revile the people who are working for you, but on the other hand you need them, you really need them and you resent needing them. You know, you resent the fact that you need them so badly.

[00:29:13] And so, when people got ready to leave they often had to leave in dark of night. They couldn't even tell some of their relatives because people would wait for you at the train station and prevent you from getting on the train.

[00:29:25] So, that was part of the fear and part of the action that happened when people were leaving.

[00:29:33] And you can see the way Jacob…I want you to notice that stair. I think of it as a staircase in the middle but actually it's the the train and there is a suitcase right there and then there aisles on either side they were going to the north the south and the middle west and why were they doing that?

[00:29:49] It wasn't because the north, the south and the middle west were in love with them. It was that the north, the south and middle west wanted that cheap labor. And so, what they do… for many

people they would sponsor your ticket. And so when you got to the north or south or the middle west you would already owe your ticket. So, when you got the job there was another form of indenture. But the idea that you might be able to pay that off was a lot more likely. So people were not so much always running away from something they were going towards this idea of hope.

[00:30:22] And I think the way that Jacob did his series in these very general non-specific faces so that everyone there was a every man, I think was brilliant which allows all of us to find ourselves whether you're… you're, you're Irish whether you're, you know, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, black, white you can find yourself in this movement from the known to the unknown. This is one of my favorite pieces it's the railroad track and I don't know if any of you have seen that…the poster that Jacob did for the Olympics where he's got that man he's running around the track.

[00:31:06] This is the track. One of the things about Jacob was that he was so great at creating iconography that you could recognize right away because he told you what the icon was and then he stayed consistent with using that icon so that every time you saw it it told you something that you'd learned just by looking. That was part of Jacob's brilliance.

[00:31:31] This is a staircase that's going up to, I think, to the moon. What he talks about is when.. when many of the migrants got to the north and the north, west, northwest and middle west they had to… there wasn't great housing for them. There weren't places, always, that were really great for them to live. And so, this is sort of stairs into the tenement but I view it as when I look at it I think of it as this telescope into hope and then there's this little dot there that is the moon.

[00:32:08] That's how I want to see it and that's how I see it in a very present way.

[00:32:13] But I think that because he made it also abstract enough there's enough room for us to dream into this series called The Migration. When this is the… this is the story of when many of the people came from the south and they got to the north and then in the middle west they met up with people who'd been there longer than they'd been there. And those people thought of them as being rather country and not really knowing the way. So there was this real split between the city… the city Negro and the country Negro.

[00:32:49] And I showed this one because, I liked to say that we all have this idea of aspiring and many of us really just want to forget where we came from and pretend that this is where we sprung up. And Jacob very suddenly was able to say, you know, it wasn't that everyone was embraced by the people of their own set. Sometimes, they were met with a raised eyebrow and thought of as less. And this one is one of his most iconic and famous this is… the three girls because he so believed in education and I think when Carletta showed that image about that young woman being drug out of the library. I think that is really amazing because you just think about it education is really a revolutionary act. And again, I… one of my my high horses is what's happening to our education system and how much it costs to go to school. And we are again making education for only the well-to-do or those who are willing to go deeply into debt in order to get an education. And I think that that

[00:34:10] again is a way to indenture not just black people.

[00:34:16] It's a way to indenture the people you want to excommunicate from the center of a culture. So, I'm saying that maybe what… when I think about

[00:34:27] how we might reintroduce ways to learn that don't…that go around the system that allow us to get an education without necessarily coming out of college with a fifty or seventy-five thousand dollar debt might be the new way. Jacob Lawrence never had an MFA he didn't have a B.A. But he was a well-educated person and the library allowed him to become a very well-educated person. He learned how to teach himself.

[00:34:59] So, and when you'd go into Jacob's.. when I went through his… his material when after they died I'd gone through everything I saw where when he would write a postcard, he'd do a draft and then he would write the postcard after he did a draft. He was very, very meticulous. Not just in his paintings but in his life. I always find it very interesting when people say to me. Barbara, Jacob Lawrence was your mentor and I never thought of Jacob Lawrence as my mentor. I didn't even think I knew the word. I think mentor is something that happens in some sort of concrete world. It doesn't happen in the relationship. I was in a relationship with Jacob and Gwen. I wasn't in a mentor anything it turned out that way. I met Jacob in 1974 and I was in my 20s and I tell the story and if you've heard it before, just bear with me.

[00:35:58] I was in a painting… I was in a drawing class and I was called down to the office at the University of Washington art school and I was just really kind of a little bit freaked out because I thought somebody in my family must be sick because I have to go to the office and I got down there and there was two administrators and this nice gentleman sitting there and I said, ok, he's black,

[00:36:24] I'm black. Okay, here we are. And they introduced me. This is Jacob Lawrence and in the ….he says this is Barbara Thomas. And I said hello. He said hello.

[00:36:35] And they said he's gonna teach here. I said, well, that's good and then I went back to class. And I said I wonder if this is gonna be a thing

[00:36:44]for me to meet everybody there and call me out of class. I didn't know who he was. And it really is interesting to think about because in 1974 Jacob Lawrence was not… he was not

[00:36:55] at the height of his popularity because that was during a time when you know, really, it was the revolutionary art. People didn't think of him as revolutionary enough to be in the forefront of that, you know, the protest art. But the thing about Jacob and he said it all the time. He said everything I have to say about this world and what has happened in our system is in my work and that's where he put it. And I think it's really normal that this happens in every generation. When Langston Hughes got done and James Baldwin came after him, James Baldwin would look back at Langston Hughes and go like you know he's kinda, not very exciting.

[00:37:37] Then, when James Baldwin came along, when Amiri Baraka came back and he looked at James Baldwin says, he's really not exciting.

[00:37:44] But, by the time all these people reached the ripe old age, that then they were, they looked back and said, you know what, I wasn't old enough to know just who these people were and just how they made the steps in which I'm standing. And that is how it unfolded. And I think that what Jacob said to me he said I…I asked him once I said, well, what do you say in that and in the 90s. I said What would you what do you think about how you want your work to be. He said I want to be as excited about my work now as I was when I did the very first painting. So, his style stayed consistent through all of the isms. His hand and his heart stayed consistent through all of the isms. And if I learned one thing from Jacob it was being clear and staying the course because… times will change, but if you have something that you think is true that's what you want to hold onto and that's what Jacob did. And finally, this is the last slide that I'm gonna show you because you are gonna go see this show.

[00:38:58] This piece this one is called And in the North They had the Right to Vote. And if there's anything that resonates today in 2017, it's that when they went north, they had the right to vote.

[00:39:17] I think people don't remember or they can't appreciate that….we didn't always have the right to vote. And that, even that idea, that one vote, one person is so important.

[00:39:34] Jacob for us in 1940 when he was 24 years old was smart enough to understand that this right to vote was going to be something that was going to be important not just at that moment in his life but as he moved forward and he wanted people to remember that and to remember also that part of what people tried to do. There were many rules that kept us from voting.

[00:39:58] There was a rule called the grandfather, the Grandfather Rule. Does anybody know about the Grandfather Rule? Grandfather Rule was if your grandfather was not eligible to vote then that means you're not eligible to vote.

[00:40:13] So, even if someone had the right to vote you had to prove that your grandfather was eligible to vote. So, those are the kinds of rules that people had to to see.. to see through. And so I want you to think about the Lawrence migration series because, also, we are in a time again where we're talking about people moving and doing jobs that other people were not willing to do.

[00:40:38] Black people are willing to do a lot of jobs and the jobs that they.. other people weren't willing to do,

[00:40:46] we did. And now we have people that we're moving out of our country because we don't think; we think they're taking up space they shouldn't be taking up. But, when you go to the grocery store and you start buying that five dollar orange I want you to think about it and also the fact that all of us started somewhere else except the Native Americans and that is what Jacob's whole series really

[00:41:16] and why he renamed it and why he wanted it should be more universal for everyone.

[00:41:21] And so, I think the other reason I'm here is because I actually knew Jacob and Gwen and because I actually was friends with Jacob and Gwen. And so, I knew them as as friends and I miss them as human beings. And I am convinced that had Jacob and Gwen just been two people on the street or on a professor who wasn't famous that I would have loved them anyway.

[00:41:56] And when they arrived in Seattle, I mean I really didn't know who they were. And I like lots of people learned over time who they were. And I think that one of Jacob's gifts to me was to be able to see, to watch him, see the veracity in his own work and stick with it even when he wasn't really, really popular during the 70s. He just wasn't. And if you had been smart enough you would have bought one of those paintings

[00:42:25] because you can't buy them now. I mean, I guess you can but some of us can't and as I said I never thought of Jacob as a mentor.

[00:42:35] I thought of him as a person that I was having a relationship with.

[00:42:39] I mean he was funny. Gwen was funny.

[00:42:43] I would go over. They didn't drive, so I would take them shopping when they needed to get big food. I bought them their first touch button telephone because they still had one of those things that did like this and Gwen called me one day and she said, Barbara, this is Gwen.

[00:43:01] I said yes. She said, I called the Seattle Art Museum and something came on the line and it said touch one. And then it said touch two.

[00:43:13] I don't know what to touch because there's nothing here to touch. So, I said I think we can solve that. So, I took them to buy their first touchtone phone but we kept the other one you know just as a matter of history. They.. when they died they still had the same television that they bought in 1963. And so I had to figure out how to hook up a VCR to their 1963 Panasonic television. So, I hook it up and every time I'd leave they'd unhook it. And so I come over I said you have to keep it hooked up because I can't keep hooking this up every time I come over here. And when Jacob and Gwen would go out, I'll tell one really quick funny story. When Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis were in Seattle, they were speaking at the Mount Zion church and so Jacob and Gwen were gonna go and, of course, I took them. And Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee had a limousine and I thought, well Jacob and Gwen need a limousine. So, I went and I rented a town car but I should have rented a driver to go with it. But, that wasn't the part I knew. So, I drove them to Mount Zion. And so, as I'm driving to Mount Zion there comes the town that the limousine with Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis. They let them out. I drive up I get out and I help Gwen and Jacob out.

[00:44:44] The driver looks at me and he goes like that because I'm getting ready to go into the church with them. And I open the door and I go and he goes and I'm like not tracking with him. And so we come out after the talk we're going to go to the Kingfish to have dinner. And so I get in the car and the guy's out like this and he's doing this I said I can do that. And so I did that and I let them in the car and then we drove you know five or six blocks to the Kingfish. And I did it again. I parked the car and I went in with them and he just looked at me like you are just so fired. And you know so there are those…

[00:45:33] and I didn't figure it out actually till the end of the evening I said, oh that's why he was mad at me. And I think that those are the kinds of things that, again, if Jacob was my mentor it was because he was there and really in my life and if I didn't see him for two weeks they'd call me on the phone they say, Barbara, we haven't seen you. And I said,well, I guess they need to see me. And one of the things I'm really… really..they always said, and any of you who know them, you know that when Jacob and Gwen whenever they talked they would always thank the Harlem community for how the Harlem community supported them. And were so kind to them, you know, Augusta Savage, all of those people. Charles Alston, who helped them get their early start. And they always said, once I retire from the University of Washington, we're going back to New York.

[00:46:29] We're going back and they would say that to every audience. And so it came to pass that you know they got older and they didn't go back. And so, and not.. in 2000 when Jacob died.

[00:46:45] You know, we ended up with his ashes and they were there. I won't tell you about when we lost the ashes and then found them again.

[00:46:53] But, when Gwen died in 2005, it occurred to me we need to take them home. And there I was, I said you're going to go home. I put them in my backpack and then a couple of friends decided they wanted to go with me. So, I gave them Gwen and I took Jacob and we took them back to New York. And so they're now interred in the St. John the Divine.

[00:47:25] And when we got to the church, there. And this is a true story. And I was there and I was handing over the ashes to the pastor. A peacock, fully white, came out and opened his tail just as I handed them over, I said there's Gwen. And one of the one of the things I want to say, also, is that I was really proud of my Seattle community because at the end you are measured by how you take care of your elders. And I can say that the reason I am standing here and I'm so proud of them is because they helped me take care of when Jacob when Gwen was by herself and she was living at the Horizon House and she became more frail,

[00:48:07] I said OK I almost see how much friends we got. I called up Constance Rice and Norman Rice, Carver and Carmen Gayton, Bob and Mickey Flowers, Norman Johnson, Stephanie Ellis Smith and Mimi Gates. I said I got a calendar. I'm putting your name on it and you have to come wherever you're scheduled. And they showed up for the last five years of her life taking her to dinner,

[00:48:38] taking her to lunch, visiting her so that she was not alone.

[00:48:44] And then we scheduled days for her to talk to her friends in New York. So, that's what I think of as community and and I think that now that we are here we do have a legacy. You know, there is a Lawrence prize through the foundation where an artist is picked every other year and they are given a show at SAM and !0,000 dollars. And you know that they don't have to do anything except spend, however they want. So, that's about legacy and I am honored to be able to.. with now with your help keep their profile high. Their names in the wind because we choose who we remember and choosing to remember is a political act. And I'm so glad you're all here with me tonight because you have chosen to help us all remember Jacob and Gwen Lawrence.

[00:49:42] Thank you.

[00:49:53] I'm telling you these women are a tough act to follow. Thank you so much for those beautiful words. We're going to get the mics on and thank you all for being patient with the technical difficulties we had earlier but we'll get the mics on. We're going to do an interview with Carletta and Barbara. And then, I hope as you're listening to them that you're getting your questions ready because we should be able to do, probably, about three to five questions at the end. Thank you.

[00:50:26] Thank you, Barbara. Well, we're going to have a short.. this not an interview. It's a conversation, Barbara and I decided to have a conversation.

[00:50:36] And, actually, I want to go back, yeah I want to go back to the first time that you met Jacob Lawrence. You were 24. You were 20 and, he was 24. So, I was thinking how that 20th decade is very pivotal. Is a pivotal decade and I just have a question. Where were you in your work about that time? Do you remember? (Can you hear?) I was, you know in those 100 and 200 series you know making the paintings seeing naked people in class for the first time. And

[00:51:28] trying to get with that, going like, this must be modern. Don't have this in the Central Area. So that's where I was.

[00:51:41] So, I want to stay on this.. this theme of education and how, particularly, African-Americans have had to embrace self-education in their work. Did Jacob ever talk to you about that process?

[00:52:02] You know Jacob was very.. if you asked him things he did. I think that what Jacob did with me was, he helped me see my own work and he helped me be really honest about what I knew, how to do and what I didn't know how to do. And he would say if you need to have the figure in your work then you need to learn how to draw it. And he said I can always tell if someone doesn't know how to draw a hand or a foot. They do this.

[00:52:37] You know when people do stand around with their hands behind their back but not in their pictures. So, I think that that kind of self-reflection, self-assessment, so that you when you're looking at your own work you know you know exactly what's wrong. The figures floating. It's because you don't have the anatomy correct. If it's not working it's because you haven't edited correctly. And unlike

Jacob, I didn't start out as a what do you call it a genius. The man was a genius. I mean at 24 he was just as good as he was at 83 when he died.

[00:53:19] So I had to learn that.

[00:53:23] But, I learned how to learn. Good. So, the other thing I wanted to talk about with you was the importance of the relationship with Gwen and his work particularly with The Migration series like you mentioned that she gessoed the pieces.

[00:53:42] But, what other roles did she play in terms of The Migration series or any other? She let.. she made

[00:53:50] Jacob Lawrence possible. She was a tough chick and you didn't mess with her and that's what I loved about her.

[00:54:00] Jacob could be kind and very affable and gentle because Gwen took care of the landscape. So, if things were getting to be too overwhelming she would just step in quietly and say this is over. And as I got older that became, in a sense, my role a little bit. But, I learned from her what she wanted to have happen and she was very clear. And also, just imagine, she too, was an artist. But, as she said to me she said when I married Jacob my role was to be the wife and that is what I agreed to do when I married him. And so, she painted the whole time. And she said, I feel very lucky that I have been able to do my work. Being married to Jacob allowed me to do my work without worrying about whether it was selling or not selling. She was not crazy. She knew that

[00:55:06] and I learned a lot from her. And I made sure I was on the right side of her energy, too. OK, so we just have about.

[00:55:20] one more question or do you want me to open it up? So, let's think about… you know Gwen was from Barbados.

[00:55:32] She was. Did they go back to Barbados together?

[00:55:36] Yes. They visited Barbados and that's another thing I was going to say about Jacob and Gwen, Jacob and Gwen both lived with foster families. Gwen came from Barbados when she was eight years old and she came with a foster family because her family her, mother thought that she'd have a better life if she came to the United States with this foster family and Jacob, when he was in his early teens, moved in with a foster family. His.. his mother actually wanted him to work for the post office and he refused to work for the post office.

[00:56:11] So, they struggled and he ended up in a foster family. So, in a lot of ways, I thought of them as two foster kids finding each other and making this very strong alliance and pact. They really didn't talk much about any other family members. They were Jacob and Gwen and they were like this.

And I think that that's what kind of bound them so much because they had each other and she did help, again. Just was making sure that the environment was ok for him to work.

[00:56:48] And one more thing I want to add and if there are artists here in the room Jacob and Gwen often they lived in a two bedroom apartment. Jacob had the bedroom for his studio. Gwen had the kitchen.

[00:57:02] So, just in case you think you need a 2000 square foot space to make monumental work, I'm just saying.

[00:57:15] Well, I wanted to say that because remember in the slide show that I gave there was August Wilson, James Washington Jr. and I thought of Jacob Lawrence and how each of these men had a woman who was pivotal to the success of their work. For August Wilson, it's his wife Constanza, for James Washington Jr. It was his wife.

[00:57:42] I can't remember…..

[00:57:45] Janie. Janie, and so, I just think that that's a really important having the support to guide them through and to be a partner. And how important that is, just in terms of the development of their work. But now we're gonna open it up to the audience. We just have a time for a few questions. You. I want to thank you guys for being here and ask us something hard so I can say I don't know.

[00:58:12] If we can.. further questions. Let's start from the back and work our way to the front. So if you can have questions in the back, if there's any questions in the back and we'll work our way to the front I see one other way in the back.

[00:58:25] And thank you to our speakers for repeating the question before you answer it. Thank you.

[00:58:30] Simply do you have any anecdotes about August Wilson and Jacob Lawrence and their interactions in Seattle.

[00:58:37] The question was, Do I have any anecdotes about Jacob Lawrence and August Wilson? Well let me think here.

[00:58:47] I had at my house a dinner that had Jacob Lawrence and Gwen. August Wilson and Constanza, Charles Johnson and his wife. I tell you I did not talk. I just said, whoa.

[00:59:08] And, one of the things that was so amazing about that dinner was that August who was totally erudite. He got into this spirited conversation with Charles Johnson, who was also his best friend, and they started arguing over some sort of a Platoian whatever and I have lots of books in my house and so what we were doing while they were arguing is running around and finding source material

[00:59:43] And so, I'd be running upstairs and Rick was running downstairs and then we'd be quoting and we'd give them the source material. And so, at the end of the evening and I have to tell you my house is not that big. So, I had them all crammed into this little area. I also don't cook. So I called a friend. I said you have to come make this meal because I'm stressed.

[01:00:03] And then, I can just figure out if I can shoehorn them into my tiny dining room and at the end of the evening after all of this source material Gwen said, Thank you, Barbara for the very lovely seminar.

[01:00:23] Thank you. This is kind of a silly exercise to do but I often think about my parents. So, I'm sorry they didn't get to see President Obama elected. I'm very glad they didn't get to see our current president and I just wondered if, if over the years you've wondered like I wonder what, what Jacob and his wife would be thinking about

[01:00:54] now and Obama that you know they didn't get to witness that. Well, I can say this, that Jacob and Gwen had relative, you know, well Gwen had a very long life she didn't die until she was 92 and Jacob died when he was 83.

[01:01:08] But they lived through so much and I honestly think that while they might be surprised they wouldn't be totally upended. I mean these were people who lived through a time that when Jacob and Gwen went to the Black Mountain College they had to ride in a private car because they didn't want them on the segregated….train.

[01:01:35] When they got the Black… Mountain College with all these Albers and all these really famous people they couldn't go into town because it was too dangerous for them to go into town and if they'd gone into the town they couldn't eat in the restaurant with their colleagues. So, they went to Black Mountain College and they just stayed at the college and they never left.

[01:01:56] So, I try to remember that and know that they were able to live and be in all kinds of dignity with all kinds of hardship.

[01:02:10] So, I try to keep my complaints in perspective.

[01:02:16] So, this is more of a comment and a question I want to say first thank you both so much for your talks. Before listening to your talks, I really only thought about these works in the context of migration but now after hearing the both of you, I can't help but wonder about the importance of literacy and education in these works. When I think of literacy, I think of learning to read, accumulating language but also kind of like thinking about this. But the role of racial literacy in these works and how Jacob and Gwen were really reading the relations of power between race, gender and migration and then translating that for us to read. And, I hadn't thought about that before in terms of literacy. And so I thank you for that perspective and still kind of just speaking about that.

[01:03:12] So, thank you.

[01:03:16] Thank you did a very good job but I think that was… the the thing is when I started looking at we have in the library Jacob Lawrence's catalog raisonné  and I don't know if you know that Jacob Lawrence is the first African-American artist with a catalog raisonné. (Now,

[01:03:41] I got you, Davida). A catalog raisonné  is all the known works of an artist. And, generally, if people are doing research on the artist, curators, dealers you want to verify the provenance of that work. So, it is really important in.. in the visual arts world having a catalog, having some kind of documentation of your work, is key to establishing your reputation and I think it's amazing that you write that he is still the only African-American artist to have this catalog raisonné. So, I was going through that raisonné  looking at the images and I saw, well the one with the book cart I've known I've known about that .The book truck with the person working in the library that was there was a time when that poster was distributed widely and so… but then when I saw all of these images and I thought about… also, he had mentioned his work in researching then it just seemed to me the perfect fit to that we're here in the library, that we're talking about The Migration series but also the talk about that time, particularly for African-American artists even today, it's very difficult. And so, you can think how unthinkable it was that Jacob Lawrence coming from his family background, that this man would then be shot into international prominence for his work that is young as 24 and I don't know if you remember your twentieth decade. But you know,

[01:05:51] not too many people are sort of together enough to put together this kind of series. I mean you remember the picture I showed of him. He was serious, you had something had to happen for him to be that serious by 24.

[01:06:09] And we have time, I think, for about three more questions. So, we're doing good for time.

[01:06:16] Well, I'm glad I waited because it sort of follows on what was just said a little bit. Just hearing all about the important role of literacy and in the written word it's interesting to me if anybody has any commentary or maybe you Barbara particularly since you've also expressed yourself in a visual medium about whether either Jacob or Gwen ever talked about whether visual medium chose them or how they chose to express themselves in that that world or why you have. Are you saying why

[01:06:50] they chose making art? Or making visual art per say. Well, you know I don't know if Jacob and Gwen never talked about, you know, the fact that they seized upon this and or that they were considering at one point that they were going to be, I don't know a biologist and then they decided, “Oh no, I'm going to be a painter.”

[01:07:16] I think that it was the time in New York. It was a very exciting time. They were in groups, they would go to galleries together. They would talk about things at the automat. Is the automat where you get the food out of the little thing? And so, they would do that. They had a tradition and also, I want to say that you know Jacob didn't have formal education. Gwen went to college for two years and then, because of the Depression, she had to stop her..her formal education. So, I think

they were just very much in the cultural milieu. Gwen, and Gwen I think when she was younger, she lived in an apartment and people like Ethel Waters lived in the apartment and she said she could see Ethel walking up and down the down the hall with her riding crop.

[01:08:10] I don't know where her horse was but she would just sort of be swinging it back and forth and I said I had to go look up I see what kind of riding crop. Then, she'd go out and get in her limousine.

[01:08:21] So, they were really surrounded by… and also, just imagine they're living in a place, ok. They were, you were, you know, very racially segregated. So, everybody lived together, the rich people, the famous people, the poor people. the short people, the tall people. I'm taller than her. And so, they all lived together, so they saw the full range of people.

[01:08:48] The other thing I wanted to to mention this because it came to mind about that about The Migration series and sort of what happened in terms of the… I call it economic apartheid and economic apartheid is when you never quite are able to get enough resource to not only fund yourself but to pass forward, you know. And I think that that is something that we continue to suffer from the fact that not only were, you know, if you came and you started in debt if there was there weren't banks where you could borrow and there weren't.

[01:09:34] We didn't have the kind of community where you have a Yacoubian (?). People had groups of money that they could share with each other that you never we never quite caught up. And I think that's the thing that's most frustrating to me when people say, well, all the other immigrants came here and they got and they did better. And I try to explain to the fact that we weren't immigrants like that no matter what Ben Carson says. And..and also, the fact that when you think about what it looks like now and I will say it the payday loan, the predatory lending you can only get money, if you have money. You can only get a low interest rate if your credit is good. So.

[01:10:25] And then, what is a… what is a payday loan? You borrow seventy-five dollars on Thursday you pay 35 percent. If you don't pay it back by the following Thursday you owe 25 percent more. So, I think that those are the kinds of things that low wage earners suffer from and why they can never quite and I say low wage because it's about poverty.

[01:10:51] It's not necessarily always just about race but it's about poverty and how the cycle perpetuates itself. So, I think that that was something else I just wanted to say that I think that in Jacob's commenting on the fact that people started out in debt when they got to the north to New York and to Chicago didn't always bode well for doing exceptionally well afterwards.

[01:11:19] Is there another question? What about the WPA supporting artists?

[01:11:25] Well, the truth… well, the politics where it.

[01:11:30] I mean that was during the Depression that actually a lot of those workshops that Jacob and Gwen were in were supported by the WPA and it was during a time when artists.. it was just, I mean, there have been programs like that subsequently and it wasn't just African-Americans who got it. There was a time when they were trying to figure out how to keep people out of bread lines, how to keep people off the street, having to live on the street like we have right down here underneath our overpass.

[01:12:00] And so, Jacob and Gwen actually profited from that. And actually Jacob, the reason he did The Migration series in the format that he did was because at the time he did it he was not deemed old enough to actually do a large mural. So, they said you can do something smaller. So, this is how he got, you know, he started doing that and actually got some funding from the Rosewall… the Rosewall Foundation. So, that was part of it. And I think again, the WPA helped many, many artists and African-American artists were in that group. Thank you for sharing your insights with all of us and which will enhance our going to the show at Sam or going back.

[01:13:01] And can you tell us a little bit more about his paintings style and technique or style he used in the Immigration [sic] series. A little bit more about Jacob's painting style or his technique?

[01:13:17] Well, I think from looking at it you can see that he painted in a very, this sort of, well he used gouache, casein, water mediums. He didn't use oil or or even do pastels. And I think that he had a very, very pure color sense he used really, he worked a lot under that. I think it was after the fact that they put the labels on it, you know the way… the Albers sort of color system and that sort of very flat geometric way that he worked and, also, melding very closely his subject matter with his composition. He was a brilliant compositional artist. I mean when you look at how simply amazing and clear his lines were and I think that if you ever look at the series The Toussaint L'ouverture there is this one of the images where the men are marching and they have the guns and they're going in diagonal. I mean, he'd studied painting that was right out of Rembrandt's The Night Watch so when you see what he does, he was very aware of art and the technique and also the methods for making tension in a flat, on a flat surface and the diagonal's one way to do it. Making your… your Cubist sort of shapes, flattened and come forward. He used a very, what I call the Asian, perspective where things were stacked rather than having hyper diminishing point. And he stayed true to that. And also he didn't do a lot of mixing of color. He did the colors and they stayed the same. He didn't modulate. He didn't do the dark to light. He did color next to color and he used pretty much a very… his value systems. You know the reds were pretty much the same value as the greens and so if you shot it in black and white there wasn't lots of, you know, great contrast. But, when you see them in color they work because it was that side by side thing. We didn't talk about this. I love that.

[01:15:42] The last two questions.

[01:15:44] Okay, so there's one other thing I think you should look at when you look at the series as a whole. And that is the… the momentum. There are several pieces where you can visually see this tilting, this movement forward that's in more than one of those frames. The other is that there are… you remember the woman who was mourning at the table these angles, this anglularity and I thought

about that just in terms of people are not at rest. There's no sense of being at rest but a tension, I'm talking about a kind of visual tension just the way the pieces are shaped or visually shaped. So, I think those are some of the things to look at.

[01:16:45] And he also mentioned if you look through the captions more than once he talks about the numbers, the great numbers. So, there's this also just in terms of the language the sense of how many people were moving through. She asked did he know Romano Bearden.

[01:17:08] Absolutely, actually the studio where he was where he did The Migration, Romare was in one of the other studios so they, absolutely, knew each other. They, absolutely, were colleagues. I mean, I don't know how close their friendship was but they knew each other and they did have that connection.

[01:17:32] I just wanted to ask how you felt he most influenced your art? One more time? How did he most influence your art. She asked how did Jacob most influence my art.

[01:17:43] Well, Jacob was my graduate advisor during graduate school and I did study with him before I was in graduate school and I would say the way that he influenced my work as he did many, many people that he worked with. Jacob loved to teach and the reason I decided not to teach was I thought if I can't be as good a teacher as Jacob Lawrence and Michael Spafford then I'd want to spare all those students

[01:18:19] my confusion. And one of the things he taught me, he taught all of us students because I really have to say that

[01:18:26] he allowed or encouraged you to be what you wanted.

[01:18:32] What was my vision? How did I want to work?. And one of the things that I saw in Jacob's work was that he had a visual vocabulary that he reused that vocabulary so that he would teach people right while they were looking at the work how to read it, how to see it. And I said I want to figure that out because it's so important to the way we… you know, since we're not living in a time where all the iconography and the work is read. So, and he did one other thing for me, I was doing this, I tell this story often a design that was sort of like a fleur-de-lis thing. I was kind of painting it and I was doing what I thought at that time was you know we were letting it happen. I didn't let it happen that much but people were letting it happen in the 70s. And so, Jacob looked at it he said well what are you doing here? I said, well, I'm making reference to this fleur-de- lis. He said. you learn how to draw that. He said because if you don't know how to draw it everybody will know. And I said, got that.

[01:19:41] You had a question. What was his message to youth? Yeah,

[01:19:49] I the kids. What was his message? Well, first of all, again, Jacob was a wonderful teacher.

[01:19:56] And his message was about doing, not thinking about doing. Doing.

[01:20:06] His message was about the every day of doing because he did and made work every day.

[01:20:16] I was always amazed and you know you may know this,

[01:20:19] Jacob showed up all kinds of places he'd go to grade schools,. he'd work with kids he loved to encourage people because he was so encouraged. He was so encouraged by his community and what I've learned from Jacob and what I try to live is to make sure that whatever light I have I share, you know, and just believe that the light isn't just for me. The light is for Davida. The light is for you. The light is for anybody who wants to to do that. And that's the way Jacob lived his life. He wasn't afraid that he was going to be eclipsed. And if you know anything about black people in this country you know that most of the time the grand order of things picks one of us and makes one of us the star

[01:21:22] to all else. And I tell you, we all know what that's about, so we work very hard to make sure that we don't end up

[01:21:33] being the one. And Jacob lived through that in the forties when he ended up and I think that was part of when he had his nervous breakdown. That was part of what fed into it because he knew that he got chosen on the day World War II started, when they were getting ready to let all these artists into the galleries in Uptown galleries and they had this big plan for each gallery taking one black artist. They had it all set up and then Pearl Harbor was bombed. And Jacob was the only artist who was already in a gallery. And the plan fell apart so it was a lot to carry. But, he carried it with a lot of grace. He was always very generous and I cannot even pretend that I could be as generous but I know what generosity looks like.

[01:22:32] And so when I don't meet the goal I know where the star is.

[01:22:46] There's just one more announcement I want to make.

[01:22:50] You know, from Jacob Lawrence Eight Studies for the Book of Genesis is going to open at the Henry Art Gallery on April the 8th. This is a series, you can see where he's in the church. He was really excellent at showing all parts of the African-American community from the people in the streets from the gamblers to the people in the church to the families. So, I just want to encourage you to check out his work at the Henry Art Gallery. Thank you so much for coming, for your time.

[01:23:43] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.