

Storytelling Through the Arts: Aesthetic Expressions of The Great Migration

Inter-disciplinary and other areas of Arts and Humanities

Paper

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The Great Migration is one of the most significant demographic events to occur in the United States. Throughout a period of 100 years, more than 10 million African Americans migrated from the rural farmlands of the American South to the Northern industrialized cities close to the Canadian border and along the eastern shores of the Atlantic Ocean. For the South, this meant substantial losses of its native-born black population who cultivated crops, tobacco and food for the nation. For the North, the concentrated migration created an intensive shift of great economic, political, and cultural importance on Northern cities. At the beginning of the 20th Century, African Americans were 90% of the rural populations. One hundred years later, they were 90% urban, resulting in this movement impacting every facet of American society.

The paper will offer an understanding of the experience of displacement, dislocation and migration for African American's through a literary art form known as the migration narrative. The migration narrative (Griffin, 1995) is defined as a major character in a literary work whose locale is "the home of the ancestor" (p. 3) usually found in the South or Midwest, who migrates to a more "cosmopolitan or metropolitan area" (p. 3). I expand this burgeoning methodology to include the visual arts.

Many African American artists gave voice to the *Great Migration* through a narrative of movement. This paper will reflect on the migration narrative through the work of three artists; I have chosen the visual artistry of Jacob Lawrence whose migration themes dominated one of his most prominent works; the poetry of Langston Hughes who documented his passion for Southern life and the world Blacks found after the mass

migration; and finally the writings of Nobel Laureate, Toni Morrison. I chose to include those artists whose work I determined presented the experience of migration to the North through their artistry.

African Americans existed under many social, political, and legal restrictions during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Black people did not live freely and were under local and federal government-sanctioned terror. One of the few areas not regulated for Blacks was in the arts (Basso, 1996), creating an outlet for African American self-expression. Through the arts Black people were freer to openly express their feelings and emotions about their condition, without fear of reprisal. Considered one of the “most important activist and historians of the twentieth century, W.E.B. Du Bois argued vociferously for the intrinsic value of the African American artist as a vital contributor to his culture” (Nesbett & Du Bois, 2000, p. 73).

A review of the literature for this research also includes Dr. Farah J. Griffin’s (1995) seminal work *Who Set You Flowin’?: The African-American Migration Narrative* (1995). Griffin presents an exhaustive and expansive review of an artistic migration narrative. The title is found in the prolific work of Harlem Renaissance poet, Jean Toomer and his poem *Seventh Street* (1923) which asks the question “*Who set you flowing,*” a reference to the *Great Migration* of African Americans to Northern cities in the 20th century.

This Inter-disciplinary work encompasses the literary, narrative and visual arts to tell this great American story.

Abstract: 536 words

References

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