

A Relationship Between Harlem Renaissance Painter Jacob Lawrence and Comic Book Structure and Theory

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In the late 1930s, early 40s, a young African-American painter named Jacob Lawrence created a series of sequential, narrative paintings during the late Harlem arts renaissance. Lawrence acted as a Griot—historically an African storyteller—by describing in his work some of the heroes of the African-American experience. Lawrence had developed his techniques and ideas as a young man utilizing only a few classes taught under Charles Alston at the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Harlem Art Workshop. Throughout his career he was embraced by the art world as one of the great American painters of the 20th century, even as the art establishment struggled to position his work within the historical, analytical, or institutional precepts of the art world. Perhaps because of the fragility of Lawrence's status within the art establishment, little reference is suggested towards popular culture, such as comics, inspiring his work. Nor is there much discussion of his relevance and influence in comic art studies. Yet, the experience of looking at his work and reading the accompanying texts echoes a similar response to comics. Like comics, Jacob Lawrence's images and text share a relationship that is deeper than mere exposition and bears closer examination. By engaging the analytical tools of comic scholarship we can shed new insights within the critical art establishment and a deeper appreciation of Jacob Lawrence's work in the field of comic scholarship.

Lawrence created a series of paintings with accompanying text that told sequentially several histories of the African-American experience. These sequences include: *The Life of Tous-*

saint L'Ouverture, 41 panels, (1938); *The Life of Frederick Douglass*, 32 panels, (1939); *The Life of Harriet Tubman*, 31 panels, (1940); and *The Migration of the Negro*, 60 panels, (1941). Each series is structured around the use of flat, limited palettes of color, a strong relationship with an accompanying statement or prose and the use of narrative to structure the panels—elements that are typically associated with comics. The sizes of the panels are often small, forcing the viewer into an intimate relationship with the art and words. More over, each panel set was drawn, then painted as a group with the artist moving from board to board painting individual colors. The effect is to create a singular row of sequential images and text that engage the viewer much as a comic panel series does.

The established art community has always had a difficult time contextualizing Lawrence's work within the historical art perspective. Because of his declared lack of formal education and vagueness about his visual inspirations, it's been left for art scholars to do quite a bit of circumstantial detective work. Lawrence's recognition in the art world came early at the age of 21 with his first solo exhibition at the Harlem YMCA. (King-Hammond, 2000:77) His art was seen in reflection of modern art's ability to appropriate "blending children's art, tribal art, and so-called folk or self-taught art to create alternatives to the academic tenets of Western art." (Sims, 2000:201) He was described as both primitive and modern. Primitivism gave the impression of Lawrence being self-taught, using a folk art style with bright colors, strong design elements, and reflecting an exotic, ancestral connection to African arts. Writing in the New York Sun in 1941, Henry McBride described Lawrence's work on *The Migration of the Negro* series with, "There is little in Lawrence's work that departs from this saga of sadness, its appeal lies in the fact that in his emotional reactions to it he has really gone native—has preserved the Negro's instinct for rhythm and love for crude brilliant colors which he handles with unfailing decorative felicity. At times, he strikes a

poignant note, as in the simple aftermath of a lynching—an empty noose, and one bowed, mourning figure.”(McBride, 1941) Yet, at the same time his work was seen as modern, a self-conscious break with the past and a search for new forms of expression.(Merriam-Webster.com) As Lizzetta LeFalle-Collins writes in *The Critical Context of Jacob Lawrence’s Early Works, 1938-1952*, modern artwork tended to be about “energetic, machine-age, urban society that was becoming increasingly secularized and consumer based.” Blacks had a different, more nuanced concept of modern as in being a “New Negro.” “they wanted to look different, act different, talk different, and be different, from the ways they had left behind.” (LeFalle-Collins, 2000:121) Harlem became a melting pot of histories and traditions brought with many as they migrated north with hopes and dreams of the modern age that New York and new beginnings afforded. Lawrence has suggested that his greatest visual influences were his experiences and observations growing up in Harlem including architectural elements, laundry on lines stretched across backyards, the patterns of letters on billboards and electric signs, parades, oriental rugs at home, and African art which artists were becoming more aware of from various art shows and the writing of Alain Locke.

Lawrence never seemed to mention any relationship to comics in his work, instead focusing on a slight influence from Mexican artists like Orozco and Aaron Douglas’s murals for the Countee Cullen branch of the New York Public Library. This may have to do with the era in which Jacob Lawrence was first doing these panels—a time when anything associated with popular culture was considered low-brow and denigrating, an issue of class. Leslie Fiedler in his essay *The Middle Against Both Ends* describes comics being charged with everything from “encouraging crime, destroying literacy, expressing sexual frustration, unleashing sadism, spreading anti-democratic ideas and of course, corrupting youth.” (Fiedler, 1971:16-23) Most importantly, it was looked down on as a return to anti-literacy and snubbing the nose at the American ideal of univer-

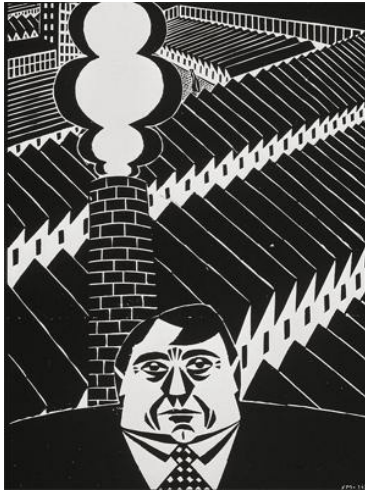


fig.1 . Masereel, Frans, 1889-1972; Parvenu 1922

*Philadelphia Museum of Art ARTstor
ARSTOR_103_41822001534955 <http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=8CJGczI9NzldLSIWEDhzTnkrX3gve1pxdSY%3D>*

sal literacy. For educators, critics, and artists who were trying to establish themselves, a comic style might be something that one would not want to call attention to, especially if you were black.

One of the artists he mentions being inspired by was Frans Masereel. (See fig. 1) As a teen, Lawrence was introduced to Masereel at the Harlem Community Art Center. Frans Masereel worked sequentially to create narratives without words. Lawrence stated in a 1968 interview, “I’m a product of that period. Everything was of that period...

He was a big name in that period Fran__ Mazariel (sic), a Belgian artist, a woodcut artist.” (Lawrence, 1968:aaa.si.edu). Lawrence’s inspiration was also shared by Lynd Ward who worked sequentially to create a number of illustrated wordless books. Ward is considered the father of the American graphic novel. Like Lawrence, his work was not judged or deemed to be related to comics but as Art Spiegelman points out in an interview, “...and yet now Ward and comics sit very fully inside what’s become called the graphic novel and sometimes is also known as “ambitious comics.” (Spiegelman, 2010:9)

Growing up as Lawrence did in the late 30s, he had an opportunity to be exposed to any number of comic strips in such places as The New York Herald, New York World, Star and the Evening Journal. Indeed, one of his jobs as a youth was as a paperboy. While critics described his work as modern primitivism, Lawrence was less concerned with white definitions and more concerned with telling stories within his work. As LeFalle–Collins states: “In African-American culture being modern meant being aware of one’s intellectual history.” (LeFalle-Collins,2000:123)

In a world that did not teach about black history or historical figures, One of Lawrence's goals in these early series was to educate. His use of text and images went beyond personal goals to encompass a form of communication. In this, Lawrence shares with comics a sophisticated use of narrative and imagery that goes beyond the confines of a picture book or a series of paintings, becoming a dance of communication between Lawrence and the viewer.

Relationship to Comics and Sequential Art

In 1985, Will Eisner, creator of *The Spirit*, wrote a book called *Comics and Sequential Art* in which he first coined the term sequential art to describe the relationship of images and text to one another when used to show a progression. Eisner set out to define a medium that had been evolving from the first crude comic books to the modern graphic novel. Eisner's ideas were expanded by Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics* (1993), to create a framework for critical analysis of the language of comics. McCloud defined sequential art to include any form of art that used a sequence of images to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer. (McCloud, 1993:20). By this definition, Jacob Lawrence's work would be considered an early example of sequential art. Other definitions and ideas of what constitutes comics and art have been proposed as the scholarship continues to grow. Worth noting is the excellent book by Bart Beaty, *COMICS versus ART* (2012) which provides a variety of arguments and counter arguments for understanding what constitutes a comic. Regardless whether comics and comic strips influenced Jacob Lawrence's work or whether, as Spiegelman contends for Lynd Ward, Lawrence's work can also now sit within what's called ambitious comics; using the relationships and ideas that Scott McCloud describes in *Understanding Comics* can provide us with deeper insight into Lawrence's early series work.

Panels. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud defines the relationships that make comics and graphic novels work in several ways. Comics are a unique art form that the user experiences not just within the text and the images on the page, but more importantly within the “gutters” or typically white margins between panels. It is in this space that the user connects the previous panel with the current panel to “see” the action. This territory is inhabited by the reader’s imagination. The reader engages and determines the illusion of time, movement and distance within the “gutters”. Lawrence’s work takes advantage of the space between the painted panels with a variety of methodologies to allow the user to inhabit the creative space. Scott McCloud defines in *Understanding Comics* six ways that panels connect with each other. He organizes the differences by the amount of effort the reader needs to make in order to understand the connection to the previous panel. These are: **moment-to-moment**: Panels with very little change. **Action-to-action**: Active movement such as in sports. **Subject-to-subject**: Changing “camera” positions inside of one scene. **Scene-to-scene**: The viewer is taken across significant time and space to the next scene. **Aspect-to-aspect**: A view that focuses on different aspects of a place or idea or mood. **Non sequitur**: No known or logical relationship exists between panels, almost random, but by proximity having a connection to the panel before and after. (McCloud, 1993:70-72)

Lawrence uses a number of these devices to take the reader from panel to panel. Most of the changes in the four series follow the scene-to-scene connection between panels. Occasionally, in *The Life of Harriet Tubman* series he uses a non sequitur as in panel 3 to panel 4, and later in panel 22 to 24. (See fig. 2 and fig. 3) The change from panel 22, which shows Harriet Tubman with victorious freed slaves eating at the home of Thomas Garrett, to panel 23 that includes the poem, “The hounds are baying on my track, / Old master comes behind, / Resolved that he will bring me back, / Before I cross the line” includes the image of the dog sniffing out run-away



fig. 2 The Life of Harriet Tubman, #22:

Harriet Tubman, after a very trying trip North in which she had hidden her cargo by day and had traveled by boat, wagon, and foot by night, reached Wilmington, where she met Thomas Garrett, a Quaker who operated an Underground Railroad station. Here, she and the fugitives were fed and clothed and sent on their way.

1940. Casein tempera on hardboard, 12 x 17 7/8". Location: Hampton University Museum, Hampton, Virginia. Photo Credit: The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation/Art Resource, NY



fig. 3 The Life of Harriet Tubman, #23:

"The hounds are baying on my track,/Old master comes behind,/Resolved that he will bring me back,/Before I cross the line."

1940. Casein tempera on hardboard, 12 x 17 7/8". Location: Hampton University Museum, Hampton, Virginia. Photo Credit: The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation/Art Resource, NY



fig. 4. The Life of Harriet Tubman, #24:

It was the year 1859, five years after Harriet Tubman's first trip to Boston. By this time, there was hardly an antislavery worker who did not know the name Harriet Tubman. She had spoken in a dozen cities. People from here and abroad filled her hand with money. And over and over again, she made her mysterious raids across the border into the South.

1940. Casein tempera on hardboard, 12 x 17 7/8". Location: Hampton University Museum, Hampton, Virginia. Photo Credit: The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation/Art Resource, NY

slaves and is juxtaposed against the next panel, 24 (see fig. 4) of Tubman again eating, and being provided money. The inclusion of the image of the dog with the poem between these two shots helps to reinforce that even though she was victorious, danger was at every turn. Using the non sequitur relies the most on the audience to "connect the dots."

Occasionally, in the panel sequences Lawrence will use a subject-to-subject panel set-up. In *The Great Migration*, panel 10 shows a husband and wife who "were very poor." In the next panel she is trying to feed her child. (See fig. 5 and fig. 6) There are several subject-to-subject panels in *The Great Migration* and also in *The Life of Harriet Tubman* series. The earlier series, *The Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture*, and *The Life of Frederick Douglass*, stick to showing sequence-to-sequence panels.

Character. In the paintings of Jacob Lawrence, he has boiled down the character poses and the panels to their bare essentials. His figures read as representations of people rather than reproductions of historic features. We, as viewers, regard the iconic nature of the imagery differently than we would if the art were more illustrative. It's easier to connect with—to map our own identity on—than if all the visual information was filled in and clear. In *The Life of Harriet Tubman* panel 4, the energy of children leaping and jumping, tumbling as the text says, describes childhood without the burden of details. Which one is Harriet Tubman? The text tells us she's there; the children in their iconic simple shapes all become Harriet Tubman. (See fig. 7) Silhouettes are an important aspect of characters' expression in graphic novel design lending to our ability to read the page and communicate the content clearly. Lawrence effectively uses this to support the iconic look of his art. In panel 10, Harriet reaches up to the sky toward the North Star, her silhouette filled with hope and determination. The concept of iconography plays an important part in comics. (See fig. 8) We become the character, the Superman, the Spiderman, the Wonder Woman, the Harriet Tubman, or the Frederick Douglass. In essence, these images become masks that we, the viewer, can wear—identity we can embrace.

Color. Limited color palette characterizes Jacob Lawrence's work. He builds each of his



fig. 5 The Migration of the Negro, #10:

They were very poor.

1940-41 The Museum of Modern Art; Gift of Mrs. David M. Levy. ARTstor AMOMA_10312310626 <http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=8D1Cdjk4RDUwLi07eTx8QH0%3D>



fig. 6 The Migration of the Negro, #11:

In many places, because of the war, food had doubled in price.

1940-41 ARTstor ARTSTOR_103_41822000932689 <http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=8CJGczl9NzldLS1WEDhzTnkrX3kid1x4dyc%3D>



fig. 7 The Life of Harriet Tubman, #4:

On a hot summer day about 1820, a group of slave children were tumbling in the sandy soil in the state of Maryland-and among them was one, Harriet Tubman. Dorchester County, Maryland. 1940.

Casein tempera on hardboard, 12 x 17 7/8". Location: Hampton University Museum, Hampton, Virginia. Photo Credit: The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation/Art Resource, NY



fig. 8 The Life of Harriet Tubman, #10:

Harriet Tubman was between twenty and twenty-five years of age at the time of her escape. She was now alone. She turned her face toward the North, and fixing her eyes on the guiding star, she started on her long, lonely journey. 1940.

Casein tempera on hardboard, 17 7/8 x 12". Location: Hampton University Museum, Hampton, Virginia. Photo Credit: The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation/Art Resource, NY

series to be regarded as a single work and in the process uses a controlled color palette usually, without mixing the color.

"I never learned color in an academic way. I never learned it in a formal way. So this may have something to do with that, of expressing myself in a very limited palette, you see, of a few colors and using pure color. You see, now knowing in my earlier experience, my early experience may have had much to do with my choice of palette. I think my palette is quite limited in color, my range is quite limited. But I would like things the way I manipulate even within this limited range which makes one color dominant in one painting, and another color pattern dominant in another; but it's really the same color." (Lawrence, 1968:aaa.si.edu)

Even though it's clear that he was impacted by what he had access to as a young student, in terms of materials, this limitation also connects him to comics during this period, which were published using limited colors because of cheap methods of printing. Color in comics began to connect to images signifying a particular superhero such as the colors of Superman (red, blue, yellow) (McCloud, 1993:188). Symbolizing with color in American comics was similar to the use of color in logos and corporate identity in advertising, that connected particular colors to represent a company such as the bright yellow and

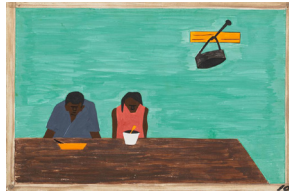


fig. 9



fig. 10



fig. 11



fig. 12



fig. 13

fig. 9 The Great Migration, #10: They were very poor.

1940-41 The Museum of Modern Art; Gift of Mrs. David M. Levy ARTstor AMOMA_10312310626 <http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=8D1CdjK4RDUwLi07eTx8QH0%3D>

fig. 10 The Great Migration, #11: In many places, because of the war, food had doubled in price.

1940-41 ARTstor ARTSTOR_103_41822000932689 <http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=8CJGczI9NzldLS1WEDhzTnkrX3kid1x4dyc%3D>

fig. 11 The Great Migration, #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..

1940 -- 1941 The Phillips Collection; Acquired 1942 ARTstor APHILLIPSIG_10310733119 <http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=8CBYdTAmLy0wNiAiFTx5RnguW3kpfVU%3D>

fig. 12 The Great Migration, #16: Although the Negro was used to lynching, he found this an opportune time for him to leave where one had occurred.

1940-41 ARTstor The Museum of Modern Art; Gift of Mrs. David M. Levy, ARTstor AMOMA_10312309672 <http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=8D1CdjK4RDUwLi07eDR1RXw%3D>

fig. 13 The Great Migration, #18 The migration gained in momentum.

1940-41 The Museum of Modern Art; Gift of Mrs. David M. Levy, ARTstor AMOMA_10312311038 <http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=8D1CdjK4RDUwLi07eT17R3I%3D>

red Shell logo, or British Petroleum's green logo.

In Lawrence's work, *The Great Migration*, the color brown represents African Americans. Brown weaves through the work punctuated often with red to represent female black characters. Panels 10, 11, 15, 16 and arguably, 18 seem connected by a woman in a red dress and braids as she faces poverty, hunger, lynching, and migration. (See fig. 9 through fig. 13) In comics, as in other popular entertainment during the early 20th century, racial relations play into color with the use of black-skinned characters as fools, comic relief, and to represent stereotypes of the era. Lawrence's use of brown to symbolize the African-American within a historical narrative is an early, honest portrait of race in sequential art.

Politics and culture have always influence the way colors are symbolized. Political colors

also play a part in comics, such as the colors of the American flag. They help to tie characters to ideals such as in the red, white and blue uniform of Captain America. In Lawrence's work, his focus on green, red, yellow and blue represent a cultural reflection of color rather than politics. They are colors tied with Africa, passed down through families despite cultural destruction from slavery.

Text. Another mechanism of sequential art is the relationship between text and image. Each performs a dance that sometimes has one partner leading and at other times the opposite partner directing. The panels and their relationship to one another and to the text create the opportunity to express and manipulate time, another aspect of comics. In *Understanding Comics*, McCloud recognizes seven different methods of organizing words with images. **Word specific:** Words lead panels. **Picture specific:** Pictures lead; words act as a sound track. **Duo-specific:** Words equal pictures, both provide the same information. **Additive:** Words amplify or elaborate pictures or pictures amplify or elaborate words. **Parallel:** Words follow one idea, pictures a different idea. **Montage:** Words are part of the design of the art. **Interdependent:** Words and pictures go hand and hand—each relying on the other and neither working as well without the other. (McCloud, 1993:153-155) A careful study of *The Life of Harriet Tubman* series reveals Jacob Lawrence relying on a number of relationships to support his narrative.

Some relationships such as Word-specific also can describe how we read illustrated storybooks, the words inform while the images act as support. 28.8% of *The Life of Harriet Tubman* falls into this category. An example would be panel 8 (see fig. 14), an image of four white men standing around looking down, one carrying a whip. The context for the panel is in the text, which give relevance to the art. “Whipped and half starved to death, Harriet Tubman’s skull injury often caused her to fall faint while at work. Her master, not having any more use for her, auctioned her



fig.14 The Life of Harriet Tubman, #8:

Whipped and half starved to death, Harriet Tubman's skull injury caused her to fall faint at work. Her master, not having any more use for her, auctioned her off to the highest bidder.

1940. Casein tempera on hardboard, 12 x 17 7/8".
Location: Hampton University Museum, Hampton, Virginia. Photo Credit: The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation/Art Resource, NY



fig. 15 The Life of Harriet Tubman, #21:

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.

Casein tempera on hardboard, 17 7/8 x 12". Location :Hampton University Museum, Hampton, Virginia. Photo Credit: The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation/Art Resource, NY

off to the highest bidder.” The heavy use of Word-specific style panels makes sense if this was a storybook in which the text was being illustrated by the images but this is not Lawrence’s intent with any of these series—his relationships are much more intricate. Over 70% of the images in this series rely on more sophisticated methods to communicate his ideas.

19.2% use a Duo-specific relationship, in which words and pictures operate on an equal playing field. In panel 21 (see fig. 15), Harriet Tubman poised with her hand above her head and one pointing low, cries out her words of suffering against slavery. Behind her a crowd of white people look on with concern and shock. The caption reads: “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.” By equally enforcing the text with the imagery, Lawrence gives punctuation to the work; he wants you to understand implicitly what is happening.

The majority of the panels (32%) use Interdependent connections. For example, in panel 2 in The Life of Harriet Tubman series, an image of a black body is suspended, arms outstretched above the head, floating in front of a dead landscape. (fig.16) The text reads “I am no friend of slavery,

but I prefer the liberty of my own country to that of another people, and the liberty of my own race to that of another race. The liberty of the descendants of Africa in the United States is incompatible with the safety and liberty of the European descendants. Their slavery forms an exception (resulting from a stern and inexorable necessity) to the general liberty in the United States.”—Henry Clay. Both the words and image by themselves are lesser if viewed or read independently but, their relationship with each other gives them strength and deeper incite. Interdependent connections account for the impact that we feel by the pronouncement from Henry Clay in 1837 who was instrumental in a number of compromises in the U.S. senate that led to many more years of slavery. (Brawley, 1921:130) Interdependent connections are the building blocks of graphic novel expression and provide much of the fusion found in the medium.

Another method heavily used by Lawrence is Parallel relationships. 19.2% of the panels in the series use this sophisticated graphic novel technique of having the images provide one thought while simultaneously the text describes a different concept. Panel 9 (see fig. 17) shows us the shackled feet of black men and women, weighted down with huge linked chains while the text describes a dream that Harriet Tubman had. The obvious choice would have been to illustrate the panel with the dream imagery. The more nuanced idea is to let the text and image run parallel adding poignancy to each other through their juxtaposition. The text reads: “Harriet Tubman dreamt



fig. 16 'The Life of Harriet Tubman, #2':

I am no friend of slavery, but I prefer the liberty of my own country to that of another people, and the liberty of my own race to that of another race. The liberty of the descendants of Africa in the United States is incompatible with the safety and liberty of the European descendants. Their slavery forms an exception (resulting from a stern and inexorable necessity) to the general liberty in the United States.”— Henry Clay

Casein tempera on hardboard, 17 7/8 x 12". Location: Hampton University Museum, Hampton, Virginia. Photo Credit: The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation/Art Resource, NY



fig.17 The Life of Harriet Tubman, #9:

Harriet Tubman dreamt of freedom (“Arise! Flee for your life!”), and in the visions of the night she saw the horsmen coming. Beckoning hands were ever motioning her to come, and she seemed to see a line dividing the land of slavery from the land of freedom.

1940. Casein tempera on hardboard, 12 x 17 7/8”
Location: Hampton University Museum, Hampton, Virginia. Photo Credit: The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation/Art Resource, NY

of freedom (‘Arise! Flee for your life!’), and in the visions of the night she saw the horsmen coming. Beckoning hands were ever motioning her to come, and she seemed to see a line dividing the land of slavery from the land of freedom.”¹

Rhythm. Tracking the way that imagery’s relationship to the text changes through the sequence of panels can be likened to rhythm and percussion in music. One way that this is pronounced is by Lawrence’s use of Parallel text and imagery. As one looks at the series, the Parallel use of text saying one thing, the painting giving us a different image, punctuates like beats in music. Panels 3, 9, and 16 are the panels that drop the beat with parallel panels. Panels 11, 13, 17, 18, 19, and 20 in the middle of the sequence run interdependent images. The beat is taken up again with 27, 30, and 31 again working text and images in parallel.

The artist’s use of text with panels combines with the relationship of the paintings to one another, and his use of color and design to immerse us in the world of Harriet Tubman. Even as he is working 11, 13, 17, 18, 19, and 20 in the middle of the panel set as interdependent images, his image-to-image storytelling or the visual connection between the one image and another, lingers on showing a scene-to-scene moment as Tubman makes her getaway from slavery. In 10, she follows the North Star, in 11 she is not present in form, but we know that she is hidden from the abstract white hand of slavery as it reaches over the woods and through the sky to find her. In panel 12 her diminutive figure travels through the dark follow-

ing the North Star. In panel 15 we return to the image of her traveling through the night following the North Star, now leading others to freedom. Then, in 16 it's back to a parallel text and image.

Rhythm also plays a part in the use of scale changes in the panels. Images that are close-up read as if time was moving quicker from panel to panel than images that are panoramic or wide, which seem to slow down the sense of time. Looking at the series as a whole, Lawrence creates movement within the panels by changing the cropping of the scenes from wide to close-up, to medium close-up. This visual pacing helps to keep the series visually interesting. It imbues it with a sense of momentum and energy. If the panels were all the same type of imagery such as medium close-up shots, the consistency would become monotonous and would start to feel closed-in and compressed.²

It would be incorrect to try and draw too much from an overt relationship between these types of panels, even as there seems to be a sense of rhythm, it was probably a matter of intuition rather than particular conscious choice. Lawrence commented on the rhythm of the series in an interview recorded in the book *Oral Tradition as History* by Jan Vansina (1985) when a member of the audience at the end of a Studio Museum interview asked Lawrence if the “oral tradition had any influence in the development of his narrative. Lawrence responded by saying “maybe ... but maybe ‘racial memory’ “ was operating. He added that while he recognized that the panels in the Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass murals have a “visual rhythm,” he was not consciously constructing them with the oral tradition in mind.” (qtd. in Hills, 1993:59)

Yet, in the end, like comics, differences between panel relationships and contrasts in visual pacing help to stage a sense of rhythm that reinforces and builds a sequential comic language.

Conclusion

Although never acknowledging a relationship to comics, a careful study of Lawrence's work shows a perceptive understanding of storytelling with images and text that places the mastery of his work in the category of a pioneer in both the painting fields and in the comic art field. He, along with other pioneers of early sequential African American work, is part of a cultural heritage that needs to be embraced. The impact of his work has influenced some of the African Americans working in the field today such as Kyle Baker, whose graphic novel: *Red, White and Black: Truth* (2003) for DC helped to re-imagine the origins of Captain America as having a black alternative history. (Gubar, 2003:4)

Lawrence follows in the footsteps of the Griot, conjuring up heroes of the past, inspiring us with role models. He uses techniques such as Non sequitur panel relationships, Parallel text with images and symbolic color fused together with rhythm to give his narratives sophisticated, nuanced drama. Lawrence's visual and textual dialog communicates the stories of black history and passes them on to the viewer. He himself is an inspiration and a role model for the potential of sequential comic work and the many ways it can influence our ability to communicate no matter what medium is being used.

End Notes

1. For comparison, I broke down The 31 panels in *The Life of Harriet Tubman* by the following: Panels: 1,2,8,10,11,13,17,18,19,20 Interdependent (32%); panels: 5,6,7,14,15,22,23,25,28 Word-specific (28.8%); panels: 3,9,16,27,30,31 Parallel (19.2%); panels: 4,12,21,24,26,29 Duo-specific (19.2%).
2. Each kind of image cropping in a graphic novel has an emotional flavor, especially when juxtaposed against the previous type of cropping. His first series, *The Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture* (1938) suffers from over-using the same type of image. Of the 41 panels that make up the series, only 3 are not wide shots. By the time he did *The Life of Harriet Tubman* and *The Great Migration* he had mastered the use of cropping in an image to create rhythm.

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