A MOVEMENT IN EVERY DIRECTION LEGACIES OF THE GREAT MIGRATION
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Welcome

The Great Migration is a history of movement, connection, goodbyes, and return. Millions of Black Americans fanned out along the railways and roads of the country, linking the South to the cities and states of the North, Midwest, and West throughout the 20th century. Stories line these paths of travel, with history and family memories alike redefining the American landscape.

This booklet invites you to hold these stories and to add your own. Hear from curators Ryan N. Dennis and Jessica Bell Brown in an interview that reflects on the process and ideas underpinning this exhibition. Meet the twelve artists behind the works and explore their personal ties to this history of migration. Extend the conversation with your family and friends, using a guide at the end of this booklet to draw out the stories that have shaped lives.

Stories gain life in being told. We hope that this booklet helps you delve into the legacies of the Great Migration.

—The Education Team

Baltimore Museum of Art
Verónica Betancourt
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Mississippi Museum of Art
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Introduction

This exhibition holds stories. Twelve artists with personal connections to the Great Migration have crystallized different facets of these stories in new artworks, making the contemporary relevance of this historical movement even clearer. But the exhibition also invites your stories. As you embark on sharing your own reflections, conversations, and historical connections, we offer you ours.

This interview with curators Jessica Bell Brown and Ryan N. Dennis, guided by members of the Education Team, reflects on the process of creating the exhibition and all that we learned from engaging with artists and each other along the way. Join us for a conversation that, like a journey, takes us from where we started to where we’re going.

EDUCATION TEAM: How did you start this exhibition?

RYAN N. DENNIS: So, I guess we’ll just go ahead and jump in. We came to this exhibition through it being a kernel of an idea from the Mississippi Museum of Art (MMA). I joined the MMA in spring 2020. Jessica joined the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) in fall 2019. When we joined the teams, we expanded the idea and started investigating what artists we would like to be in dialogue with around the Great Migration. So much of this exhibition has developed by following the lead of artists and expanding that outward.

JESSICA BELL BROWN: We asked ourselves early on: What hasn’t been said about the Great Migration, and how do we use that as a starting place? Are there certain givens about the Great Migration that we could pick apart? We had no trouble doing that because our artists came back to us with nuanced, complicated, beautiful project proposals that stretched our thinking.

ET: What were your connections to the Great Migration, coming into this project?
RND:
I think, being a Black American, we’re all connected to migration and the story of the Great Migration. My family, on both sides, is from Louisiana and Texas, and parts of Alabama. They stayed in the South. The part of the Great Migration narrative that folks left the South and went north, that’s not my history. For those few family members who left, they went west to California in the second wave of migration.

JBB:
Like Ryan, I’m from the South; most of my family stayed in the South, except distant cousins in Detroit, or Ohio, or even Texas. The Great Migration was something that I understood historically but not in a deeply personal way.

RND:
Your question reminds me of one of the first prompts we asked artists: to share with us their personal connections to the South, or to this historical phenomenon. And we saw how their practices as artists have been impacted by the stories of their own pasts and histories. This exhibition links stories of the past, present, and future. The objects and the story are really side-by-side, running parallel to one another.

JBB:
Many times, artists shy away from starting with the personal, because it might assign the work specific interpretations, or pigeon-hole them despite the expansiveness of the art.

ET:
You point to that expansiveness geographically and conceptually, too, by calling the show A Movement in Every Direction: Legacies of the Great Migration.

RND:
In American history, the Great Migration has such deep reverberations. The title of the exhibition makes the point that migration is ongoing. Look at what’s happened with the pandemic, which has forced all types of movement. Many factors can make migration mandatory: it’s involuntary, and it’s voluntary. In some ways, I have this new lens about migration. It’s impacted by policy. It’s impacted by natural occurrences. It’s impacted by violence.

But on the flip side of that, it’s also impacted by love and care and ways to reconnect and create opportunities to build when an environment feels unstable. I’m still thinking on that point, but maybe Jessica, pick up this alley-oop.

JBB:
In many ways, migration is about place. Place is the culmination of a migratory act. And sometimes folks are literally inventing or creating a new place.

RND:
And the show prompts people to understand that the history and possibility can repeat, if there’s a space for that self-reliance or finding ways to be in community that allow people to thrive. And not just thrive economically, but thrive educationally, culturally, and beyond. The lessons are bountiful.

ET:
What are some of the lessons that have shifted your practice as a curator?

JBB:
This project is a behemoth and has been a true lesson in collaboration. At the baseline, there’s Ryan and me, our collaboration with artists, and our collaboration with museum colleagues. There is deep personal investment in this show, and among our intersecting communities and audiences.

I’ve learned what can happen when you surrender to shared ownership around a project. We’re all the better for it. So many times, curators are put on a pedestal, and their shows are all about their own ideas or the ways they see art history. And this is not that show at all. And I love it for that. Because it really lives and breathe a collaborative spirit.

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RND:
I will say never have I had as many gut checks with Ryan or in general as we’ve had working together.

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RND:
For sure.

JBB:
There is an ethics to curatorial work, especially when you are caring for people and holding their stories. That will be something that I will certainly live with, sit with,
practice through and through as I move forward.

RND: Jessica and I strive to bring care and sensitivity to our work, and truly check in with one another, our teams, and our artists.

Being stewards of a story that we are really trying to expand, that maybe most people know as one thing, and having the responsibility to share that and allow for multiple points of engagement is really important and an ongoing meditation. Because you want to make sure it’s being done properly, with care, and with love, and with criticality.

ET: You mentioned holding a story; what does that mean for you?

JBB: I think it means to be receptive and to be curious. It means to be attentive and always look for the threads of connection. Holding a story is a practice. It’s something that’s not just done when the object is finished and it’s on view. It’s a practice that’s rooted in relationships.

RND: And I think to hold a story as two Black women maybe it’s something that we...look, I’ll just speak for myself. It’s something that happens maybe as an act that sometimes we don’t even know we’re doing, but it’s embedded. It’s part of an ancestral arc, too. The ways in which these stories show up in my body are connected to my grandmother, my great-grandmother or grandfather, et cetera.

To hold a story feels spiritual. And these artists are holding stories from their families that they are willing to share with us in really dynamic ways.

JBB: Totally. And holding that story, holding it and then sharing that with us and then sharing it with the world is the most beautiful thing, and it just makes you even more proud to carry it.

ET: That’s beautiful. And it calls to mind how stories take us places or connect us to places. Another abstract question for you: Where are we going with this show?

RND: I think the exhibition is taking us in a few different directions. Much like the Great Migration was not one path, I think this exhibition allows us to see people and artists in many ways and connect to a historical moment while also showing us that migration is not stopping.

Where are we going with this show?

JBB: I want to answer this question literally because there’s power in naming all the places. This show is taking us to Alabama; is taking us to North and South Carolina; is taking us to the South Side of Chicago and Detroit; is taking us to Blackdom, New Mexico; to Mississippi; to Los Angeles. It’s taking us to South Florida, and Kentucky, and Tennessee. It’s taking us to Okinawa, to Vietnam. It’s taking us everywhere. It’s spanning histories but always connecting to the present.

The show complicates any kind of straightforward or linear understanding of a place in time; it offers a beautiful way to think about how we, as people, experience time, place, and each other in these interconnected ways.

RND: My hope is that the show invites people to investigate where their families’ histories are within this time period and to this day. My hope is that people will have more inquiries into family relics, photographs, and archives. When you know more about your people, you begin to know more about yourself; you stand a little taller.

I want artists to feel stretched and rejuvenated by this exploration. They are creatively pushing to work in more expansive ways—through scale and material. This show is monumental. We not only get to bear witness to their work, but also have a responsibility to them as people. We want them to feel proud of us and their contribution as we hold their stories.
Akea Brionne uses environmental and documentary photography to explore her own identity and juxtapose historical misrepresentations with contemporary representations of Blackness. Based in Detroit, Michigan, Akea Brionne has family ties to New Orleans, Louisiana; Columbus, Mississippi; and Albuquerque, New Mexico. Her early studies of feminism and critical theory significantly influenced her writing, photography, and research practice. As the youngest and sole descendant on her grandfather’s side of the family, Akea Brionne began constructing her family archive to preserve its legacy. Her ongoing portrait series, An Archive of Our Own, documents Black mother-daughter relationships through images of the artist’s mother and grandmother.

An Ode to Y(ou)all (2022) builds on Akea Brionne’s previous work and presents the strength and resilience of her great-grandmother and four great-aunts, all of whom remained in the South. Akea Brionne set out on a road trip to retrace her family’s movement through Mississippi, Louisiana, and New Mexico, documenting herself along the way in a series of self-portraits. This series tells a fuller story of the impact of the family archive, oral histories, and the commitment to upward mobility through familial sacrifice.

Opposite: Akea Brionne sits on her studio floor and experiments with a prototype for her hand-sewn jacquard tapestries.
“My practice is décollage and collage at the same time. Décollage: I take it away; collage: I immediately add it right back. It’s almost like a rhythm. I’m a builder and a demolisher. I put up so I can tear down. I’m a speculator and a developer. In archaeological terms, I excavate and I build at the same time.”

Mark Bradford grew up in Los Angeles, California, spending extensive time creating pricing signage in his mother’s beauty shop. At 30, Bradford left hairdressing to pursue a career as an artist. An interest in materiality guides his art; early work evoked the salon and included end papers, hair dye, and hair.

Over three decades, his collage-like, large-scale works created a new visual language that helped redefine his painting. Bradford often paints with layers of liquefied paper pulp, building up a surface to later sand and resurface it. He sources materials like billboards or merchant posters, calling attention to their intended functionality. As an artist and activist, he addresses a range of subjects from urban landscapes and advertising to historical documents and photographs.

In 500 (2022), Bradford focused on his attraction to the merchant poster, gravitating to an advertisement from a 1913 issue of the N.A.A.C.P. The Crisis magazine for the Black-established farming town of Blackdom, New Mexico. The ads emphasize the text “Wanted,” signaling a desire to attract new families to the town, in contrast to “wanted” signs posted in unfavorable contexts.

Opposite: In 500 (detail shown here), Bradford used a caulk gun to hand-pipe all text, then he oxidized the paper on wood, making each of the sixty panels unique.
Zoë Charlton
BORN 1973, EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE, FLORIDA

“...this idea of occupying space—whether it’s physically in a space or even how we’re represented in a space—has been very, very important to me. It’s been important to me to make images of Black women or Black men and have them large and on walls, etc.”

Zoë Charlton, who is now based in Baltimore, Maryland, was born in Florida. Much of her early life was shaped by being a military dependent. Her work addresses Southern subjectivity, Black representation, object stories, and family histories. While her primary method is drawing, she also works in collage, sculpture, installation, and occasionally video and animation. Charlton blends reality and fantasy in large-scale drawings and collages that set nude figures, typically Black and Brown bodies, in bursting, imaginative landscapes. Her grandmother’s homestead in Tallahassee, Florida, a meaningful place that was lost to a developer, often inspires the dense flora of these settings.

During the Great Migration, much of Charlton’s family remained in Florida; others left by enlisting in the military. In Permanent Change of Station (2022), the lush landscape references her family’s Southern roots and their service travels. Charlton blurs the boundaries between real and imagined, between domestic and foreign, to foreground an inextricable link between her family’s global travels, military service, and migrant experience.

Opposite: Standing amongst large-printed, uncut collage materials, Charlton demonstrates different pop-up techniques from her small prototype studies for Permanent Change of Station.
Larry W. Cook
BORN 1986, SILVER SPRING, MARYLAND

“...there was a disconnect between my family’s southern heritage and my generation. So as a counter, I have been looking at the South more from a very romanticized perspective. So I think this project is an excellent opportunity to immerse myself within my familial history and change that perception.”

Conceptual artist Larry W. Cook, best known for his photography, was born in Maryland and is now based in Washington, D.C. Cook took up photography in high school, carrying around disposable cameras to document his friends. Later, he pursued a commercial career as a nightclub photographer.

Over the years, Cook has incorporated heavily staged, constructed productions and hyper-realistic painted backdrops into his photographs, moving away from his early documentary style. His work addresses Black masculinity, racial stereotypes, carceral aesthetics, and the interplay between the real and imagined.

In *Let My Testimony Sit Next To Yours* (2022), Cook created a series of photographs that emerged from an investigation into his father’s lineage. Cook traveled to the origin places of his paternal family lines from the South to the North, taking large-format photographs of the various landscapes through cities across Georgia and South Carolina. During this time, his portrait photography became an unexpected but powerful source of healing from estranged relationships and complexities of fatherhood.

Opposite: Cook swaps in film for his large format Linhof 4x5 Master Technika 2000 camera while shooting his series of landscape photographs, *Let My Testimony Sit Next To Yours*, in Georgia and South Carolina.
“I want to think about migration as an unfinished project. It’s not just movement that was forced by climate, or by racial capitalism and new conditions of petro-colonization in the South. It’s movement that is produced and enforced by collective powers and the normalcy built in nomadism.”

Torkwase Dyson was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois, and is now based in Beacon, New York. Through abstraction, she investigates the infrastructure and networks of power that have shaped the American environmental landscape. Working primarily in painting and across other mediums, she has developed a language of geometric forms rooted in her evolving theory of Black Compositional Thought—a phrase she uses to refer to the complex ways that Black people move through space.

Way Over There Inside Me, (A Festival of Inches) (2022) is a multi-media investigation of Black spatial history, abstraction, and liberation during the Great Migration period till the present. Derived from her research on the relationship between Black liberation methodologies, architecture, plantation economies, and the contemporary environmental crisis, the project consists of a series of sculptures and an online archive. To inform her approach, Dyson collaborated with artists and geographers Bethany Collins, Michelle Lanier, and Danielle Purifoy. The four interconnected modular sculptures and archives that resulted from these collaborations offer a meditation, one that uncovers and contains strategies of spatial liberation.

Opposite: Dyson created a series of drawings, similar in shapes and color palette, to inform her 2022 sculpture, Way Over There Inside Me, (A Festival of Inches).
Theaster Gates Jr.
BORN 1973, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

“Mississippi is the place I carry with me into new constructs—it is a place of dream conjuring and romanticism.”

Theaster Gates Jr. was born in Chicago, Illinois, where he currently lives and works. Trained as a ceramicist and urban planner, Gates is best known for his sculptures, installations, and community-based projects. Gates reclaims abandoned buildings in Chicago to restore them for the surrounding community. Some projects are extensions of his studio, providing spaces for gathering, exhibiting, and archiving his collections of Black cultural ephemera. Both Gates’s parents are from Mississippi: his father is from Yazoo City, and his mother is from Silver City. His sculptural installation, The Double Wide (2022), is built to resemble the double-wide trailer that his uncle owned in Mississippi, where Gates spent childhood summers with extended family. A candy store by day and juke joint by night, Gates references this history through film of his own music ensemble, The Black Monks. Inside the trailer, his collection of pickled goods and Mississippi reliquaries pay homage to childhood memories of a place that shaped him.

Opposite: Gates composed several large pine structures to create the form that would become The Double Wide.
Allison Janae Hamilton
BORN 1984, LEXINGTON, KENTUCKY

“I wanted to make work that is like a mirror to an experience that is like mine, and to consider climate change and the history and reality of landscape through the lens of people that are sort of forgotten about.”

Born in Kentucky and raised in Florida, Allison Janae Hamilton recalls formidable moments on her family land in Tennessee. She remembers running around her family’s farm with a Pentax K1000 camera, documenting life and family through photos. Now based in New York City, she often returns to the South to visit with her immediate family along the blackwater rivers of Florida and to make films, photographs, and sculptures that explore the history, contemporary reality, and landscape. Her work complicates the misconception that the Black American experience with landscape is solely traumatic, opening multiple interpretations to land as a site of healing, restoration, refuge, and respite. Hamilton is deeply concerned with environmental justice and the impacts of climate change. Within her films, imagined characters explore family narratives and local folklore.

Inspired by Julio Cortazar’s 1946 short story “Casa Tomada,” A House Called Florida (2022) draws on ideas of land loss and heritage. Hamilton spent August 2021 filming aspects of the Florida terrain to capture land-based traditions, the ever-changing landscape, and mythologies specific to the Black community in the region.

Opposite: An interior scene on the set of A House Called Florida, filmed in northern Florida.
Leslie Hewitt
BORN 1977, ST. ALBANS, NEW YORK

Leslie Hewitt, currently based in Harlem, New York, is an artist deeply invested in the relationship between photography and sculpture. She has always held an interest in photography’s limitations: she learned much of her family history through photographs but acknowledges that they often were fragments of stories. Her geometric compositions, influenced by photography and film theory, are spare assemblages of ordinary objects and materials, suggesting the connection between intimate and sociopolitical histories.

Untitled (Slow Drag, Barely Moving, Imperceptible) (2022) is a set of low-profile sculptures made from wood, metal, and glass, inspired by floor plans of her grandmother’s family home, part-upholstery shop and part-grocery store in Macon, Georgia. Drawing from public and familial archives, Hewitt made the work from a collection of researched materials. Intentionally placed throughout the galleries, the sculptures allow for a moment of pause to create a sense of displacement and familiarity. Beyond the personal, the work elicits questions around movement, preservation, land, and their politicization.

Opposite: Hewitt’s sculpture commission is a continuance, connecting to her 2013 photographic series Riffs on Real Time. Pictured here, Riffs on Real Time (6 of 10) juxtaposes a Polaroid of a domestic space with an archival photograph of the white-only sundown town of Levittown, Nassau County, New York (1947–1957).
Steffani Jemison
BORN 1981, BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA

“My ongoing interest is in the politics of narration... I would describe my interests as really formal, in the sense that I’m really engaged with histories of forms, rather than with representation broadly speaking, rather than with reference as a starting point.”

Steffani Jemison’s family is from the Carolinas and Alabama, with ties to Chicago, Illinois, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Jemison was born in Berkeley, California, grew up in suburban Cincinnati, Ohio, and now lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. She left Cincinnati in 1999 to pursue studies in literature and visual art.

An interest in the politics of language and narrative informs Jemison’s work as a multimedia artist in photography, video, performance, and sound. She often collaborates with actors, dancers, and musicians to explore the relationships between movement and language. Ultimately, her work is rooted in Black experience and often draws out historical narratives and references.

For this exhibition, Jemison created a video installation featuring actress Lakia Black. The video portrays Black acting out multiple personas in monologues influenced by TikToks, music videos, and local and national political figures and role models. Jemison illustrates the impact of the Great Migration by tracing connections between past and present through language and experience.

Opposite: Actress Lakia Black (on screen) sets up to record her next take on TikTok with acting coach Marishka S. Phillips nearby.
“I tend to think about Black utopias. The last few years, I’ve shifted some of that thinking toward revisiting the world that I came from, which is Houston. Black Houston, the Black church I grew up in, my father’s Black business. I’m interested in trying to concretize some of those ephemeral things that I saw, or felt, or heard.”

Robert Pruitt is a New York based artist. He was born in Houston and educated throughout Texas. His life-sized portraits capture the multiplicities of Black identity and fuse references from African objects and traditions to call attention to history.

As a child, Pruitt fell in love with comic books. He attended Texas Southern University (TSU), a historically Black university, with the goal of illustrating for Marvel. At TSU, the work and teachings of muralist and professor John T. Biggers significantly impacted him. Biggers grounded his students in Afrocentric ideology and taught the importance of honoring community through murals; these influences became central to Pruitt’s artistic practice.

A Song for Travelers (2022) focuses on the continuum of community within Houston’s Third and Fourth Wards, where Pruitt spent significant time as a child. The composition was inspired by a family reunion photograph that surfaced during Pruitt’s research into family archives. Instead of detailing his relatives—many of whom stayed in the South—in the family photo, Pruitt reimagines each figure, carefully sourcing inspiration for their dress and adornments from historical Black Houstonians.

Opposite: Pruitt stands atop a lift and references his digital preparatory sketch (on his laptop) to work on his sizable drawing, A Song for Travelers.
Jamea Richmond-Edwards
BORN 1982, DETROIT, MICHIGAN

“I’m going back South because up here I was not feeling at home. I’m currently building a home right outside of Jackson, Mississippi, trying to reclaim some of this, what I felt was lost.”

Jamea Richmond-Edwards was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan. Throughout her career, music, fashion, and dance have been at the heart of Richmond-Edwards’s multimedia practice.

While researching her ties to the Great Migration, she discovered that her family who migrated North faced as much adversity as in the South, and many that stayed south prospered and maintained close ties to the land. In 2021, she bought a property near Bolton, Mississippi, the site of her family’s ancestral home, to return to and reclaim her Southern connection.

This Water Runs Deep (2022), a multimedia installation composed of a monumental painting and sound sculpture, retraces her family’s journey from rural Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina, Virginia, and Mississippi to the Midwest and investigates their decisions to leave or stay. Painting herself into a scene of ancestors together on a boat amidst rising flood waters, Richmond-Edwards illuminates how climate change and natural disasters were drivers of migration in addition to the threat of racial violence.

Opposite: On her worktable, Richmond-Edwards gathers her materials—printed fabrics, glitter, reference books, paper, pastels, and in-progress paintings—to prepare for the next steps of her collage-painting process.
“This project centers on the unending search for my grandfather Frank Weems, a sharecropper and Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union organizer…. Under threat of death, he was forced to leave Arkansas, his wife, and eight children. The only known photograph of him is in a Chicago law office, preparing to file suit against his attackers. All my current efforts are focused on unpacking his story, the remains of his life, and what became of him.”

With ties to both Mississippi and Arkansas, Carrie Mae Weems was born in Portland, Oregon, and currently lives and works in upstate New York. In 1973, she received her first camera as a gift and soon began studying photography. With a career spanning nearly three decades, she is internationally celebrated for her multimedia practice that uses performance, verse, photography, film, and installation work. She seeks “to make the invisible visible” through work addressing activism, cultural identity, and the relationship between past and present.

The North Star (2022) is a deeply personal work focusing on the disappearance of her grandfather, Frank Weems, a sharecropper and union organizer on the Dibble Plantation near Earle, Arkansas. Following an anti-union eviction, he was assaulted by a white mob and presumed dead on June 9th, 1936. Weems, however, had secretly escaped and followed the North Star to Chicago. A video installation entitled LEAVE! LEAVE NOW!! (2022) uses a historic illusion technique called a “Pepper’s Ghost” to project ghostly figures, further emphasizing the traumatic loss for the Weems family and their continued search for justice and answers.
For Reflection

The artists in this exhibition reflected on their own ties to the Great Migration through their work. Some artists began with a personal connection like family photos or stories from loved ones, while others explored archives or set off on journeys of their own. Their stories contribute to a fuller understanding of the legacy of the Great Migration.

Think about a moment in the galleries that made an impression on you. What words come to mind to describe this moment?

How did it make you feel? Why?

What connections to your elders, your family, or your community has this show prompted? Who might you want to share this experience with?
For Conversation

You are a living legacy, and the author of your own story—a story informed by a sense of where you came from and where you’re going. Music, food, photos, traditions, and mementos can all help bring these stories to life and inspire connection with other people.

In visiting A Movement in Every Direction: Legacies of the Great Migration, you may have seen something that sparked curiosity about your ancestry or your family’s migration story. Take that curiosity to begin a conversation with friends or family about movement and how people came to be where they are.

PUT YOUR STORY ON THE MAP
Go to greatmigrationlegacies.org to record the story of how you came to be where you are and explore other people’s migration stories.

These questions can serve as points of departure, but be inspired to go where the conversation leads you.

- Was our/your family affected by the Great Migration?
- How did you get to where you live now?
- What place(s) did you visit as a child? Why did you go?
- What are some of your favorite family traditions?
- Are there any family recipes you especially like and how did you learn to make them?
- What music is part of the soundtrack of your life?
- What stories have you heard about ancestors and elders?
- What family objects do you cherish? Where did they come from?
A Movement in Every Direction: Legacies of the Great Migration is co-organized by the Mississippi Museum of Art and the Baltimore Museum of Art.

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