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Defining African American Authorship

by

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Abstract

James Weldon Johnson and Melvin B. Tolson are pivotal figures of the early 20th
century. They represent a fundamental question that has been and is indeed still in the minds of
African American authors: What is a Black author? African American authorship necessarily
involves the challenge of forging a literary identity in the face of a society structurally and
temperamentally predisposed to marginalize and dismiss them. In their creative and scholarly
works, Johnson and Tolson methodically dissect Black authorship, looking both to the past and
to their present situation as they strive to imagine a future for African American literary identity,
in all its depth and value. Yet despite the parallels in their objects and methods, there remains a
divide between Johnson and Tolson wide enough that they are rarely placed in direct
conversation with each other. I intend to bridge this gap by addressing the necessary
comparisons between the works of these two authors.

Specifically, I will look at the ways in which both Johnson and Tolson use poetic
traditions to create oral aesthetics as they simultaneously embrace and struggle with the
historicity of their literary identity. My central claim is that Johnson and Tolson, while writing
from opposite sides of the pivotal literary period that was the New Negro Renaissance, present
strikingly similar visions of African American literary identity. Ultimately, through this thesis, a
more complete understanding will be given to Johnson and Tolson’s work as African American
authors seeking to cement their place and the place of their people in literature and in the world.
Introduction

In Western frameworks, the history of African American literature is often viewed as linear. Typically, it is separated into periods: early writings from the eighteenth century (although indeed the roots of Black literature begin much earlier) to the Civil War; postbellum literature; the New Negro Renaissance (known more commonly as the Harlem Renaissance) of the early twentieth century; the post-Civil Rights and the Black Arts movement from the mid-twentieth century; and contemporary African American literature of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. While the lines between these literary periods can be blurred, this periodization nonetheless situates and even defines African American authors. A prime example of this historical bounding is Langston Hughes: a poet who stands as a central figure of the New Negro Renaissance, though his range of influence predates and extends beyond this period. In the case of Hughes, the effect of this periodization, though limiting to the wide array of his work, does not detract from the dominant position he assumes in the canon of Black poetry and literature. However, unlike Hughes, two modernist African American poets, James Weldon Johnson and Melvin B. Tolson, do not assume the dominant positions that their works warrant. These writers are typically overlooked because they are transitional figures in the New Negro Renaissance: Johnson wrote in the time immediately precipitating the Renaissance, and Tolson in the wake of it. As a result of being just outside of this major literary period – either too soon or too late – their literary works have been overlooked, and with it their centrality to the study of African American poetry and literature.

Before examining Johnson and Tolson in more detail, it is necessary to situate these authors within two contexts: one being their position relative to the New Negro Renaissance, and the other being the framework of modernism, especially as it pertains to Black literature.
Modernism is a broad term that defies simple definition. It touches all categories of life and expression: art, music, media, literature, and so forth. In U.S. literature, the modernist period is “widely seen as spanning the years from 1910 to 1945” - although this is a loose approximation not entirely agreed upon, as some would suggest an earlier beginning to the period of the late nineteenth century, and others still would suggest that there was no concrete ending to modernism, but rather a gradual changing form of the same strains of modernism to very near the present time. Still, modernist literature of the early and mid-twentieth century is a unique style of expression that explores the intricacies of life and identity. As Ulrika Maude states, “literary modernism is characterized by dazzling experimentation, perplexing narrative and poetic form, and often by contradictory aesthetic and ideological tendencies” (1). In simpler terms, modernist writing causes readers to question lived experience and break with traditional formulations of self. It is “the notion of a “break” with the past and the emphasis on the “new”” (Bibby 488). Houston A. Baker Jr. rightly states that “it was change - a profound shift in what could be taken as unquestionable assumptions about the meaning of human life - that moved those artists whom we call “modern”” (5). The largest figures of American, Irish, and English modernist literature – including James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Samuel Beckett to name a few - emphasized this unsettling of the narrative around self and the world that the self occupies. Beyond self-identity, modernism pierces to some of the most profound questions of humanity and strives to answer them in unconventional and often radical ways.

The challenge of modernist literary studies, however, is the tendency of this period to be viewed through a narrow scope in spite of the breadth of its discourse. Common conceptions of modernism in literary studies are far too limiting, in that they exclude many African American authors who could in fact rightly be considered modernist, including Johnson and Tolson.
Modernist studies center by and large on the works of Anglo-American, British, and Irish authors such as the ones mentioned above. In so doing, it loses global perspectives of modernist authors who were producing some of the most valuable literature of the time. This includes African American authors, who looked to establish themselves not just globally, but within the United States. Theirs, by virtue of the fact that their national identity was created out of conditions of slavery that forced them into a country that was never theirs to begin with, and indeed that they never wanted, was a literature that was fundamentally modern. Still, African American literature is excluded from traditional modernist studies. Even more surprising is the common exclusion of the New Negro Renaissance from consideration in African American modernism. As Baker writes, “the moment known as the ‘Harlem Renaissance’ has frequently been faulted for its ‘failure’ to produce vital, original, effective, or “modern” art in the manner, presumably, of British, Anglo-American, and Irish creators” (xiii). A standard of modernism has been imposed according to the dominant voices of the canon, and from this standard, African American literary achievements have been strictly judged and deemed to fall short. Bibby even goes so far as to suggest that the formulation of modernism and what is deemed worth considering “modernist” is misguided and structured around inherent racist ideologies. The exclusion of African American literature of the New Negro Renaissance from modernist studies, or its “segregation” from Anglo-American modernism, would seem to support this view.

The New Negro Renaissance, known also as the Harlem Renaissance, is one of the best-known periods of African American literary history because of its plentiful outpouring of African American expression in art, music, literature, dance, and criticism. African Americans understood perhaps more than any other people the feeling and experience of unsettled identity that is so central to modernism, which is why the writing of this time may so justifiably be
considered modern. Many scholars consider Claude McKay’s book of poems *Harlem Shadows* (1922) and Jean Toomer’s experimental novel *Cane* (1923) signal texts of the period (Henderson 99). The New Negro Renaissance presented Black voices on a national and global stage for the first time on a mass scale. These works were expressions and explorations of Black life and the situation of being African American in the United States. Oddly enough, however, this period is surrounded by high expectations and disappointments. In the pre-Renaissance period occupied by James Weldon Johnson, the Black literary voice was only beginning to take form. Johnson believed that the work he and his contemporaries began in establishing Black authorship, though only in a fledgling state, had the greatest hope of growing and flourishing in the hands of the young writers who would become the Harlem Renaissance authors. As the period came to a gradual end in the early 1940s, however, Black authors were confronted with largely the same situation that they had been in twenty years earlier: their works, though plenteous, did not succeed in establishing Black literature nationally and globally. Part of the reason that scholars have recently renamed this period the New Negro Renaissance is precisely to undo the legacy of the “Harlem” Renaissance, which frames the era’s African American literary production as a regional, rather than national, movement. Authors like Tolson, writing in the wake of the Renaissance, had to come to terms with the ultimate failure of the period in spite of its many accomplishments.

To fully understand New Negro Renaissance literature as modernist literature, I adopt a framework provided by Houston A. Baker Jr. in his text *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*. Baker, for whom African American modernism dates back to Booker T. Washington’s “Atlantic Compromise” speech in 1895, contends that not only is the Renaissance modernist, but that it is also a pivotal period for Black modernism that cannot be overlooked for
its shortcomings and “failures.” To show how Black modernism functions, Baker poses two main terms: “the mastery of form and the deformation of mastery” (15). Using these strategies, African American modernists explored questions of identity and humanity in their own terms. The mastery of form, in Baker’s view, is more properly considered the adoption of a mask, or an ever-shifting symbolism that gives face to identity. His prime example of this mask-mastery, so to speak, is the African American interpretation and reappropriation of blackface minstrelsy, as borne out in Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem “We Wear the Mask” (1895). From behind this mask, the constantly changing identity finds a unified sound, one that speaks to a larger identity than the one imposed by the mask. Running parallel to this is the deformation of mastery, which functions in a more overt way as a direct display of African American identity not sheltered behind a pre-existing form. As Baker states, “The mastery of form conceals, disguises, floats like a butterfly to sting like a bee. The deformation of mastery, by contrast, is... a go(u)erilla action in the face of acknowledged adversaries” (50). Through the use of either one – or in many cases both – of these methods, African American modernists, including James Weldon Johnson and Melvin B. Tolson, were equipped to contend boldly with their own questions of identity and belonging, and with those imposed on them by society as a whole.

With Baker’s groundwork in place, then, it is apparent how artists of the New Negro Renaissance wrote into existence a unique modernist literature that exhibited mastery of the mask and deformation of this mastery. Writing at the beginning and the end of the Renaissance, James Weldon Johnson and Melvin B. Tolson exhibited these same characteristics of African American modernism. Advancing Baker’s thesis that Black modernism began in the late nineteenth century, then, qualifies both authors as modernist writers. It also suggests that the time periods in question (the pre-Renaissance, New Negro Renaissance, and immediate post-
Renaissance periods) were all marked by a proliferation of modernist thought and writing. Understanding Johnson and Tolson as modernists lends new significance to their poetic explorations of identity, and particularly to their attempts to navigate the nation and world at large from their position as African American authors contending both with their history and with their future hopes for Black literature.

James Weldon Johnson is perhaps best known for his poem “Lift Every Voice and Sing” (1900), which, coupled with the melody composed by his brother J. Rosamond Johnson, quickly became a hymn that gave voice to Black culture and identity at the height of segregation and anti-Black violence at the turn of the twentieth century. Yet Johnson had a robust body of work beyond this. His earliest works included several songs and minor operettas dating back to the 1890s, written in collaboration once more with his brother, which became quite popular in the early twentieth century. His first fully published literary prose came in the 1912 novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. Critic Michael Nowlin writes that with this novel, “Johnson was on the verge of launching a major literary career for himself, one that aimed to make the parochial connotations of the phrase ‘colored writer’ a thing of the past” (504). While Johnson’s literary endeavors did not achieve the esteem that Johnson had hoped for, he continued to publish several works including two books of poetry: *Fifty Years and Other Poems* (1917) and *God’s Trombones* (1927). But in addition to his contribution to song and poetry, Johnson was also an anthologist; he published *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922) and *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* (1925). Alongside Alain Locke’s *The New Negro* (1925), Johnson’s anthologies inaugurated “the use of Black anthologies to preserve and promote Black poetry - indeed Johnson felt art could also ratify Black humanity” (Young xlviii). In whichever genre Johnson worked, he strove to establish what it meant to be an African
American, and especially to be an African American navigating the literary world and seeking to find a place for their voice in a world that constantly attempted to marginalize and misrepresent them. In his Masters thesis on Harlem writers, Melvin B. Tolson credited Johnson as a forerunner of the New Negro Renaissance, stating that “The occasional work that James Weldon Johnson has done to enlighten the American public in regard to Negro literature and art and the encouragement that he has given young writers by opening new avenues of expression cannot be easily overestimated... he has gazed on wider horizons than most of his fellows” (Tolson 119).

Johnson’s body of work displayed a clear goal of establishing for himself and those who would follow him a precedent for African American literature as aesthetically valuable and valued.

Entering the literary scene many years later and clearly influenced and inspired by Johnson, Tolson would advance this same goal with a new perspective. Looking back on the New Negro Renaissance, Tolson’s work considered what was necessary for Black literary identity to be cemented as a powerful force. He was a strenuous believer in the power of African American art, and aimed to create in his own writings such elevated works of art. His major literary works – which include *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits* (written in the 1930s but not published until 1965), *Rendezvous with America* (1944), *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* (1953), and *Harlem Gallery: Book I, The Curator* (1965) – attest that “one is in the presence of a brilliantly eclectic mind determined not to hide its light under a bushel” (Dove XII). Tolson was not only a contributor to African American literature and letters; he was a scholar of them as well, from his 1940 Columbia University Master’s thesis *The Harlem Group of Negro Writers* to several other articles and essays that “express the importance that the struggle against socioeconomic and cultural racism held for Melvin B. Tolson in his lifetime” (Tolson Jr. 395). Inasmuch as he was an accomplished writer, Tolson focused much of his life on scholarly
pursuits, as is evident in his lengthy career in academia as a college professor, beginning at Wiley College in 1923. Still, Tolson made a name for himself as a modernist poet and writer who sought both to understand how the Black literary tradition failed to gain the prominence and prestige that it had for such a long time rightly deserved and to uncover what was necessary to forge a path forward to prominence through the salvaged pieces of African American literary history.

James Weldon Johnson and Melvin B. Tolson are pivotal figures because they represent a fundamental question that has been and is indeed still in the minds of African American authors: What is a Black author? African American authorship necessarily involves the challenge of forging a literary identity in the face of a society structurally and temperamentally predisposed to marginalize and dismiss them. In their creative and scholarly works, Johnson and Tolson methodically dissect Black authorship, looking both to the past and to their present situations as they strive to imagine a future for African American literary identity, in all its depth and value. Although they are separated by nearly three decades, both authors find themselves writing in a time in which the position of the Black author is unstable and tenuous. Johnson writes forward in anticipation of the Harlem Renaissance, with the hope that the new authors will firmly establish Black authorship as a dominant literary force. Tolson, conversely, looks backward, wondering how a period in which there was such a proliferation of Black literature still failed to establish a dominant, unified Black literary voice.

Yet despite the parallels in their objects and methods, there remains a divide between Johnson and Tolson wide enough that they are rarely placed in direct conversation with each other. I intend to bridge this gap by addressing the necessary comparisons between the works of these two authors. Specifically, I will look at the ways in which both Johnson and Tolson use
poetic traditions to create oral aesthetics as they simultaneously embrace and struggle with the historicity of their literary identity. Ultimately, my central claim is that Johnson and Tolson, while writing from opposite sides of the pivotal literary period that was the New Negro Renaissance, present strikingly similar visions of African American literary identity. For these authors, Black authorial identity is dignified and prestigious, rightly placed in conversation with any other national or global authorship. At the same time, the Black author is in a completely unique position and stands alone to write into a historical void. They are to give voice to the unified Black sound long muted by mainstream literary culture, and the method by which they accomplish this task is their work as authors. Tolson and Johnson suggest that Black authors cannot forge a future unless they are also able to look back and acknowledge both the pain and beauty of their history as African Americans. It is for this reason that these authors turn to poetry as their form for exploration of Black authorship: one of the most cohesive, unified Black expressions, they suggest, is in the history of Black music and orality. The unified sound of Black music is persistent throughout history, and it is the sound of shared experience across generations and centuries. Black oral tradition can be heard still lingering through lines of verse in a way that cannot quite be replicated in prose, which lends itself to poetry as the chosen form of expression by these authors.

As this argument progresses, I will explore specific texts that evidence these authors’ pursuit of Black authorial identity. First, I will focus in detail on Johnson and Tolson’s creation of oral aesthetics; the ways in which they hearken back to the unified Black sound – and as a direct extension of this, the Black history - from which foundation African American authors create. Johnson does this most intentionally and meticulously in *God’s Trombones*, from which I will look specifically at the poem “Let My People Go”. To this I will add Johnson’s “O Black
and Unknown Bards” to get a more complete picture of how he structures the oral aesthetic. In considering how Tolson transforms and maintains this aesthetic, an examination of “Lambda” and “Chi” from Harlem Gallery: Book I, The Curator, “Harlem” from A Gallery of Harlem Portraits, and the Lento section of “Dark Symphony” will be undertaken. I will then turn from the authors’ depiction of the past to their vision for the future: namely, what will it take to fully establish the value of Black authorship? This section will explore the visions that Johnson and Tolson present for Black authors through their works of poetry: Johnson’s “To America” and ”Lift Every Voice and Sing”, as well as “Chi”, “Psi”, and “Omega” from Tolson’s Harlem Gallery: Book I, The Curator will be the central texts on which this chapter will focus. Lastly, I will shift slightly away from Johnson’s and Tolson’s poetry to consider their works of scholarship. As creative writers and accomplished academics, Johnson and Tolson each have a wide array of scholarship in which they directly explore the mandate on African American writers, as well as their own visions for the future of the profession. These works, including but not limited to Tolson’s thesis The Harlem Group of Negro Writers and Johnson’s Preface to The Book of American Negro Poetry reveal their efforts to address complex questions of identity. Additionally, this will provide insight to the authors’ understanding of themselves as writing into a tradition of Blackness and trying to find a path forward for the Black authors to come. Ultimately, through this thesis, a more complete understanding will be given to Johnson and Tolson’s work as African American authors seeking to cement their place and the place of their people in literature and in the world.
Creating Oral Aesthetics

The oral tradition is perhaps one of the most established traditions of African American history and culture. Black music in particular is held to be foundational to African American identity. As Houston Baker says, “the song constitutes an ancient African-American sound” (58). Even as it is transformed, the ancient sound of Black orality echoes across generations in various forms of expression. In Black literature, this African American sound has often been explored and replicated. In his 1903 book The Souls of Black Folk, W. E. B. Du Bois devotes full pages to reprinting scores from old hymns. He says of these songs, “They that walked in darkness sang songs in the olden days - Sorrow Songs - for they were weary at heart… these weird old songs in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men. Ever since I was a child these songs have stirred me strangely. They came out of the South unknown to me, one by one, and yet at once I knew them as of me and mine” (155-56). To Du Bois, these songs spoke not only to the history of African Americans, but to the very root of their identity.

As they were brought to a strange country, African slaves had no common language, culture, or identity. In these tumultuous and unsettled circumstances, the new African Americans grappled for something to which they could cling to for some sense of hope and belonging in the darkness of their new reality. They found this tenuous identity in musical expression. Primarily through hymns and spirituals, African Americans adapted the English language that was thrust upon them and used it to communicate messages of survival. As Maya Angelou stated, “I am convinced that the people survived… because they were able to write of their despair and even of their hope in their songs” (xxiii). In many ways, finding this unified voice provided a way for enslaved Black people to connect to their new land and to avoid being completely untethered. It gave them a means to preserve the unique cultural and musical traditions from their respective
homelands, while still evolving together in a new language, land, and culture. Though they were from diverse regions in Africa, in the Americas they found through their music a unity and a voice that carried powerfully across all of their differences and gave them an identity which they could call their own.

In the time leading up to the New Negro Renaissance, the desire of African Americans to recreate themselves and identify their culture in a new way weakened this ancient Black voice. Authors of the time began to seek new representations of Blackness. As Ann Carroll says, “In those years when African-American culture was flowering… the belief in the importance of new images of African-Americans was widespread” (59). It was this search for newness that opened the door for the concept of the “New Negro,” as represented by Alain Locke’s seminal anthology *The New Negro* (1925). The New Negro was conceptualized as a Black identity set apart from white Americans’ demeaning representations of blackness. It was a break with the traditions held by the former slave population; a way for African Americans of the new millennium to separate themselves from that history of which they were ashamed and resentful. As Spingarn says, “When Alain Locke heralded the arrival of the New Negro… he simultaneously announced the departure of the Old Negro… With the Old Negro safely relegated to history, the New Negro would replace outdated literary modes and outworn characters with a fresh aesthetic and a modern expression of race” (29-30). This so-called “Old Negro” was associated with the history of slavery and the former identity of African Americans, from which modern Black people wanted to be separated. This meant a necessary division from aspects of old Black culture like hymns and spirituals, dialect, minstrelsy, and caricatures of subservient or conniving Black figures such as Uncle Tom or Uncle Remus. Black authors wanted to establish a new identity for themselves outside of the dehumanizing stereotypes to which they were subjected. James
Weldon Johnson, straddling the old and new generations of Black authorship, encouraged those to come to create their own authorial identity, but to do so without losing the potency and foundational importance of hymns, spirituals, and older forms of Black oral expression. Spingarn suggests that Johnson felt “that black writers should not abandon the Old Negro, but rather should incorporate and evolve this figure into a contemporary literary tradition” (31). Johnson believed that there could be no “New Negro” without an acknowledgment, understanding, and appreciation of the old. In his Preface to The Book American Negro Poetry, he claims that “The Uncle Remus stories constitute the greatest body of folklore that America has produced, and the “spirituals” the greatest body of folk-song… in them the Negro sounded the depths, if he did not scale the heights, of music” (viii). It therefore follows that Johnson creates a familiar aesthetic of Black orality, calling primarily on Gospel hymns, spirituals, and preaching as sources of this ancient sound. Later, as he reflects on the pitfalls of Black authorship and the things necessary for Black authors to move forward, Tolson invokes this same unified Black voice. Like Johnson, Tolson calls to mind and appreciates the sound in its ancient form. Simultaneously, he allows the sound to migrate to its newer form: jazz and blues music.

It is with the acute appreciation for Black orality in mind that Johnson wrote “O Black and Unknown Bards.” This 1925 poem opened the Preface to Johnson’s anthology of ancient Black music, The Book of American Negro Spirituals. It served as an ode to the spirituals which Johnson, along with his brother J. Rosamond Johnson, faithfully produced in the collection. Johnson had a deep and biding love for these songs, and says in his Preface to the anthology that “these songs [are] unsurpassed among the folk songs of the world and, in the poignancy of their beauty, unequalled” (12). He expresses this passion for the spirituals with the utmost attention in “O Black and Unknown Bards”. Stylistically, Johnson opts for a formal rhyme scheme in this
poem, with eight-line stanzas in alternate rhyme. The end rhyme contributes to the theme of the poem, giving it a lilting, song-like feel. This makes it easier for Johnson to call to memory the old songs which he evokes and praises in the stanza:

Heart of what slave poured out such melody
As “Steal away to Jesus”? On its strains
His spirit must have nightly floated free,
Though still about his hands he felt his chains.
Who heard great “Jordan roll”? Whose starward eye
Saw chariot “swing low”? And who was he
That breathed that comforting, melodic sigh,
“Nobody knows de trouble I see”?

The emphasis in this poem is not merely on the beauty of the music itself, but on the adversity out of which it was born. The first three stanzas read as a series of questions as the narrator tries to comprehend how enslaved Black people, out of such a place of darkness and instability, could produce music so beautiful, passionate, and touching to the very hearts of man. Their creation stands as an example even to the generation in which Johnson is writing: while in “degraded rest and servile toil,” under the oppression of slavery and racism, the enslaved person “Could up toward God through all its darkness grope,/and find within its deadened heart to sing/These songs of sorrow, love, and faith, and hope.” If enslaved Africans could create under such conditions, how much more could the new Black authors create meaning and power through their words, even while oppressed by Jim Crow laws and violent racial terrorism? They, in Johnson’s view, had a responsibility to carry on the voice produced in these darkest of times.
Johnson attempts to carry on this voice himself in some of his other works of poetry. In *God’s Trombones*, he highlights and reproduces one of the other centers of Black orality: the voice of the Black preacher. Black orality, at its origin, was deeply religious. In the same way that slaves of necessity appropriated and adapted the English language for their purposes, they accepted and transformed the Christian religion, making it entirely their own. A cornerstone of African American faith, and one of its most recognized voices, was the preacher who weekly transported the slaves out of their bondage to a place of freedom, miracles, and salvation with the power of his words. The preacher was one of the most universally recognized voices in the tradition of Black orality and continued to be so over the centuries and generations that followed. In later reflections, even Tolson had this to say of the preacher: “A great preacher is a great artist. Words are his tubes of paint. Verse, his brush. The souls of men the canvas on which he portrays the truths caught in moments of inspiration. The God-man is a man of imagination” (29). Tolson, like Johnson, recognized the importance of this voice to Black culture overall and Black literature in particular. Quite like the spirituals, this was a universal African American orality that carried weight beyond its words, weight felt across generations. Johnson felt that the preachers’ messages deserved a place in the canonical history of Black literature because they did what any successful literature should do: captured the essence of the people’s shared experience and provided a voice from which this experience could speak. The preacher did this, Johnson claimed: “It was through him that the people of diverse languages and customs who were brought here from diverse parts of Africa and thrown into slavery were given their first sense of unity and solidarity” (2). This is why the preacher deserved a much more respectable place in African American history and literature, which Johnson attempted to provide through his poetic adaptations of familiar messages. It was his sincere belief that, with the turn to the New
Negro, old voices like that of the gospel preacher were being erased instead of revered as they should have been. He ends his preface to *God’s Trombones* with the bold claim that “The old-time Negro preacher is rapidly passing” (8). To lose this voice would be akin to a death of an essential element of Black culture, one necessary to African American literature and life going forward.

Since the common sermons preached were already almost poetic in nature, Johnson believed that they could most effectively be adapted and preserved through works of poetry. He claimed that “The old-time Negro preacher of parts was above all an orator… He had the power to sweep his hearers before him; and so himself was often swept away. At times his language was not prose but poetry” (4). The poetic form also allowed for Johnson to express implicitly the verbal nature of these sermons - to provide the natural breaks in speech pattern through the style and form of the poem. As Ann Carroll says in her analysis of *God’s Trombones*, “Johnson's poetic innovations demonstrate how well he knew his subject, and how well he could manipulate the formal elements of poetry to reflect the characteristics of the preachers' delivery…. With *God's Trombones* Johnson opens up new possibilities for the depictions of African-Americans in literature” (67-68). This is evident in all seven works collected in *God’s Trombones*. Consider, for example, “Let My People Go,” which follows the familiar message of the book of Exodus: the deliverance of the children of Israel from slave bondage in Egypt. Assuming the familiarity of the message, Johnson places the reader not at the start of the story, but like Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, “in medias res”: he begins the first line of the poem with “And God called Moses from the burning bush” (47). Because what came before that “And,” goes unstated, the reader is swept into the motion of the sermon, placed as it were in the pews, under the power of the preacher’s storytelling ability. The formal elements that Johnson includes – such as frequent uses of dashes,
colons, and semicolons to indicate the pauses, breaths, and movements of the preacher’s speech patterns – further reproduce the familiar, comfortable voice of the preacher. Johnson connects with the reader in the same way that the preacher connected with his congregation, weaving the formal language of the Bible seamlessly into the more colloquial language used by the preacher. He represents dominant figures like God, Moses, and Pharaoh as simple in speech understandable to the everyday person. For example, the same God who speaks to Moses and says “I am the Lord God Almighty,/ I am the God of thy fathers” also speaks in common terms as He says “I’ve seen the awful suffering/Of my people down in Egypt…/And I can’t stand it no longer.” This shifting language evokes an emotional response, allowing readers to connect with figures who may otherwise be inaccessible.

The other important element that Johnson recreates is the final, moral message. In the case of this poem, that message is universal:

Listen!—Listen!
All you sons of Pharaoh.
Who do you think can hold God’s people
When the Lord God himself has said,
Let my people go?

The implications of this final call are evident for the enslaved congregation of the old-time preacher. Held in a land to which they laid no claim, they were to identify with the enslaved children of Israel. The message, then, was one of hope in the inevitability of freedom with God on their side. In reproducing this for his modern readers, Johnson emphasizes how important the Black voice is to the hope for freedom of the people. He also conveys that the past is not yet over; Black people still must contend with forms of oppression. He suggests that the same hope
of freedom that eventually freed the Hebrew slaves will be the source of Black people’s eventual rising above the conditions they face in America.

Johnson acutely felt the importance of Black orality to authors hoping to establish in themselves a new identity - one with which the African American people could identify, and which could be yet more universal. Like Johnson, Melvin B. Tolson understood and built on the oral roots from which Black literature was created. He incorporated the ancient history of Black sound in his works of poetry, but also sensed the shift in his generation toward a new Black sound: jazz and blues music. In noting this shift, Tolson also incorporated these musical elements as he creates the oral aesthetic, recognizing that the oral tradition is a necessary component of Black authorship.

While Tolson’s poetry is more centered on jazz and blues oralities, he does not neglect the more ancient, gospel sound in his works. In “Dark Symphony” – which as a work is structured like a song; a grand symphony of Black experience – Tolson hearkens back to this tradition in the Lento Grave section:

The centuries-old pathos in our voices
Saddens the great white world,
And the wizardry of our dusky rhythms
Conjures up shadow-shapes of ante-bellum years:

Black slaves singing *One More River to Cross*
In the torture tombs of slave-ships,
Black slaves singing *Steal Away to Jesus*
In jungle swamps,
Black slaves singing *The Crucifixion*

In slave-pens at midnight,

Black slaves singing *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*

In cabins of death,

Black slaves singing *Go Down, Moses*

In the canebrakes of the Southern Pharaohs.

In this short section of the poem, Tolson adopts a style not unlike that of Johnson in “O Black and Unknown Bards,” envisioning the slave-poets from whose adversity these great markers of Black orality were created. Where Johnson’s tone is one of wonderment, however, Tolson’s is more boldly proud. He considers the potent, almost magical effect that Black sound has not only on African Americans, but on the “great white world,” all those who hear and witness it. This is an important groundwork for African American authors in Tolson’s view because it represents the potent effect of a strong Black sound to move people.

As he moves past this, however, Tolson lends as much - if not more - credence to the jazz and blues music of the New Negro Renaissance that has taken its full form by the time in which he is writing. Tolson feels that this sound is essential to Black identity, and to how African American authors represent themselves. This is evident in his two major works centered on Harlem in the 1920s: *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits* and *Harlem Gallery: Book I, The Curator*. In these works, Tolson liberally incorporates jazz and blues-style poetry in his caricatures of Harlem Renaissance figures. *Harlem Gallery: Book I, The Curator* sketches across its cantos familiar figures of a Harlem scene from the perspective of the Curator. As Rita Dove explains in her introduction to the text, the Curator of the Harlem Gallery is a meticulous observer whose “gallery allows him ample opportunity to observe the shenanigans of the black bourgeoisie…”
[and] glimpses into all strata of black life” (XIX). Through the lives of certain figures, the Curator as narrator ponders the conditions of Black life in America, particularly as it pertains to the Black author. The poem, in 24 cantos designated by the letters of the Greek alphabet, follows these figures while detouring into the pondering of the Curator. Throughout the poem, Tolson infuses oral aesthetics into the picture that he paints, through the Curator’s eyes, of Harlem life. One of the characters most responsible for the poem’s orality is Hideho Heights, a Harlem poet of some local renown. In the “Lambda” canto, Hideho Heights first bursts onto the scene, loudly and drunkenly proclaiming the poetry of the people in the Zulu Club, a bar and nightclub of sorts that is one of the poem’s most common settings. Hideho’s entrance in to the club is not seen by the Curator, but heard, as he says:

   From the mouth of the Harlem Gallery
   
   came a voice like a
   
   ferry horn in a river of fog (258).

It is not coincidental that the Curator hears Hideho’s voice from the mouth of the gallery. As a poet, Hideho is a Black author and artist who represents the people through his work; as such, he is in a sense their mouthpiece. Hideho’s voice, the voice with which he represents his people, is a clear, cutting sound, and when he speaks he captures attention easily. Hideho recites his poetry in the club several times, and his first recitation is of a poem honoring Louis Armstrong, the jazz musician also known as “Satchmo”. Height’s recitation invokes oral aesthetics and an awareness of oral traditions. As Raymond Nelson says in his notes to the text, Hideho’s “performance imitates the spontaneity, improvisation, and lack of polish of club jazz. However, it also incorporates… a formal lament for the lost masters of a great musical tradition” (407). Tolson’s Curator clearly sees in Hideho the dignity of the orator; he speaks “in the grand style/of a Doctor
Faustus” (259), and has what Nelson calls “a public style, like the art of the jazzman or the preacher” (407). Beyond his delivery, which is an oral aesthetic all its own, the content of Hideho’s poem furthers the reference to oral tradition as transformed by Tolson. In the final stanza of the canto, jazz and gospel influences are evident as Hideho recites:

```
Old Satchmo’s

gravelly voice and tapping foot and crazy notes

set my soul on fire.

If I climbed

the seventy-seven steps of the Seventh

Heaven, Satchmo’s high C would carry me higher!

Are you hip to this, Harlem? Are you hip?

On Judgment Day, Gabriel will say

after he blows his horn:

“'I'd be the greatest trumpeter in the Universe,

if old Satchmo had never been born!
```

Common gospel, jazz and blues themes are evident in this final stanza. Tolson shows the fusion and transition of these oral aesthetics into something unique, but clearly derived from, the older oral traditions of the slave-bards and preacher-poets referenced by Johnson. He does this in similar fashion throughout this text and in his other works.

In the Gallery of Harlem Portraits, the jazz and blues aesthetics are evident from the very first poem, “Harlem”, an overview that sets the Harlem stage before turning to specific individuals. While painting a live picture of the Harlem scene, as it were, Tolson evokes the images of “Dusky Bards/Heirs of eons of Comedy and Tragedy” who “Pass along the streets and
alleys of Harlem/Singing ballads of the Dark World”. These “ballads” are the familiar first strains of the blues, the sound with which Tolson knows his audience can identify. Like any African American author must be able to do in Tolson’s view, blues poet-musicians as represented here speak to the universal conditions of African American life with a frankness and almost bitterly dark humor, as is the case in the lines “White cops sho' will beat you up, littlest thing you do./Black cops make Black Boy feel proud, but dey'll beat you too!” In the same way that hymns and spirituals spoke so accurately to the conditions of their time, this style of music speaks to the conditions of modern African Americans and is essential to the oral tradition that Tolson aims to call forth.

For both Johnson and Tolson, then, there can be no Black authorship without Black oral tradition. They create oral aesthetics to evoke the tradition of Black sound and use this sound to further their messages: the need for the Black voice in the advancement of Black people. In the view of Johnson and Tolson, authorship and orality go hand in hand. As they unfold their own visions for the future of Black literature and authorial identity, Johnson and Tolson keep the oral tradition as the foundation and benchmark of Black literature. Black authors have no identity if they have no history upon which to base themselves, and the oral tradition necessarily provides this.
Envisioning Black Authorship

African American oral histories were essential to Black authorship, which Johnson and Tolson considered in relation to the pressing question of the future for Black authors and their literature. Essentially, the authors ask: Looking forward, how can Black authorship be defined in a way that will establish it as a literary force in America and the world overall? Michael Nowlin explains this as “the question of how best to overcome the condition of literary destitution and produce that literature a people needs in order to be recognized as great. Was African American literature to be made through a competitive individualism that risked alienating the most successful black writers from the “people” they literarily represented? Or would it come from fostering the kind of collective cultural conditions—not merely affirmative racial self-consciousness but an expansion and elevation of “normal” literary production—from which “great” racial artists might organically emerge?” (506). Nowlin highlights the lack of definition that posed one of the greatest challenges for Black authors. They could not determine if it was best to engage in “a competitive individualism” - to attempt to disengage from race and write individualistic literature that separated them from their own people - or to be completely identified by race and use it as the basis for all literary endeavors, even if it meant exclusion from larger literary circles. This is a struggle that both Johnson and Tolson contend with – the tension between identities of race and authorship. How, they considered, could one truly be a Black author and have a place in the literary canon? Would Blackness always prohibit authorial accomplishment, or was there some way of balancing these identities so that Black authorship could assume a greater position? Johnson, Tolson, and many of their literary peers tried to come up with some way to navigate the minefield that was being not just an author, but specifically a Black author, because that was a challenge fully unique to them.
The conflicted position of the African American author as possessing and trying to balance a dual identity -both Black and author – becomes a major source of contention for both Johnson and Tolson, and they wrestle with this question in parallel yet rather distinct ways. Tolson’s future vision for Black authorship as represented in his poetry is more of an open-ended, undeveloped concept of identity than a concrete, established identity. This is in large part because he, coming to the literary circle in the wake of the New Negro Renaissance, saw an abundance of powerful Black literature that failed in the goal of being fully established. If works like these can still fall short of mainstream literary recognition, then what more can possibly be done for white critics and readers to view Black authors in the light that they rightly deserve? This struggle with the racial politics of “taste” and publication is a result not only of the internal struggle in the African American literary sphere, but is just as much - and perhaps even more - a result of the outside pressures of racism and racial violence weighing on all Black people in America. Tolson sees these unchanging forces of white supremacy against Black authorship, and as a result his vision is weighted down, somewhat cynical, and even pessimistic. Tolson believed wholeheartedly in the dignity of Black literature as literary content of the highest order, yet was sobered by the realization that this quality of writing would mean nothing if the larger American – predominantly White – literary community continued to dismiss and demean Black authors and their works.

Johnson, in parallel fashion, wrestles with the hindrances to Black authorship - both those internal to the Black community and those imposed by the white literary establishment. Despite writing nearly thirty years before Tolson, Johnson faced largely the same conditions of racism, racial oppression and violence in America. He realized that these were overwhelming forces under which his people continuously struggled, and which were very real hindrances to the
creation of Black art. Still, it may be said that Johnson’s conceptualization for the future of Black authorship is quite optimistic. Standing on the cusp of the New Negro Renaissance, Johnson looked with hope on those who were coming up as authors, and who would become the prominent voices of the Renaissance. As Nowlin expresses, “Johnson’s own difficulty establishing himself as a major national poet in the teens was an important motive in his attempt to make the race more collectively competitive in literary matters” (505). While Johnson did have personal literary aspirations that he never quite achieved, he found himself turning instead to a more collective hope for Black authorship as a whole. In many ways, Johnson saw himself, if not as a voice for his people, then as a father of the rising voices that would soon surpass him in greatness and national respectability. Johnson believed that the aspiring authors needed to be not just voices representative of their time, but representative of their whole race. He felt it was the goal of Black authorship to stand as the voice of the people on the national and global stage; and to use their voice to show the true humanity and value of Black people in America.

Johnson’s dual hope and distress for the condition of African American authors - and indeed African American people as a whole - are fully evident in perhaps his best-known poetic work, “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” This text maps the journey of Black people from oppression and degradation to a unified hope in a brighter future. It is highly regaled for its message of racial uplift, and is Johnson’s most idealistic poem. In his autobiography Along This Way (1934), Johnson speaks in highly sentimental terms about the overwhelming sensation of creating this work:

I got my first line—Lift every voice and sing. Not a starling line, but I worked along grinding out the next five. When, near the end of the first stanza there came to me the lines

...
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us

Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us

the spirit of the poem had taken hold of me. I finished the stanza and turned it over to Rosamond. In composing the two other stanzas I did not use pen and paper. While my brother worked at his musical setting I paced back and forth… going through all the agony and ecstasy of creating… I was experiencing the transports of the poet’s ecstasy! Feverish ecstasy was followed by that contentment—that sense of serene joy—which makes artistic creation the most complete of all human experiences (154-55).

This is significant to Johnson’s understanding of himself as a Black author: he sees authorship as art, as creation that is not just written, but alive in the artist. He understands the impact of his poem, and this certainly colors the romanticized and sentimentally optimistic way that he explores the future of authorship. Bond and Wilson rightly state that “It is wondrous and hardly explicable to many how James Weldon Johnson could have written such spiritually enriching lyrics in 1900 despite the restraints ordained by Jim Crow laws, despite frenzied lynchings and mob violence, despite the fact that white America had established an educational system teeming with stereotypes that had misrepresented and malformed virtually every external view of African American life” (n.p.). The wonder that Bond and Wilson express reveal what makes this poem so important: it is Johnson’s most successful personal fulfillment of his vision for the Black author as one who speaks a voice of his race, elevating them above oppression to a higher purpose and grander identity. The acclaim that this poem and song received were what Johnson envisioned for all Black literature. He speaks so idealistically in the poem because it is his genuine hope that Black authors, starting here with himself but especially with the Renaissance writers, find a way to address their identity and that of their people through literature.
A closer look at the text of “Lift Every Voice and Sing” vividly demonstrates what Johnson believes Black authors should do with their work – what he attempts to do himself, and what he subsequently tasks the Harlem Renaissance with doing, is being the representative voice of Black experience. Johnson seeks to recreate a unified Black voice, one which can rise above racial oppression and “Ring with the harmonies of Liberty”. Black authors through their writing sound the hope of their people for generations, and Johnson does just this as he stirs in Black America the hope to “march on till victory is won.” He addresses the history of his people, the many years “when hope unborn had died,” but hopes that his people can now rise “Out from the gloomy past” to stand in glory “Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.” Johnson is unrelentingly optimistic, and he succeeds in transferring this hope, which is why this poem becomes something of a Black anthem in the years after it is written. In many ways, this poem reveals how Johnson’s connection to the Black oral history - primarily through spirituals, hymns, and preaching – are connected to his vision for the future of Black authorship. Johnson in this poem adopts a tone not unlike the slave-bards of the spirituals or the preacher-poets of old, and does so to largely the same effect: a sense of unity and hope over circumstances among Black people, heard across the entire country. If Black authors don’t acknowledge their history and predecessors in the oral tradition, then they will not understand the roles that they are meant to fill as the voice of their people in the new generation. Johnson bears a hope that Black authors to come will understand this and carry it forward so that African Americans have a chance for advancement in the country and the world.

Perhaps in large part because of his hope for the coming generation, Johnson devotes far less time to developing this future vision for Black authorship in his poetic works. He does, however, acknowledge the impossibility of creating art under the racial conditions in the country.
His poem “To America” reads as a short but powerful indictment of the country and the position in which it has placed the African American people:

How would you have us, as we are?
Or sinking 'neath the load we bear?
Our eyes fixed forward on a star?
Or gazing empty at despair?

Rising or falling? Men or things?
With dragging pace or footsteps fleet?
Strong, willing sinews in your wings?
Or tightening chains about your feet?

Johnson here recognizes that African American people are hardly recognized as full human citizens in America, and that they are under enormous burden as they try merely to live. Under these conditions, then, it is unsurprising that the literature of the people had not been able to flourish and prosper in the way of which it was deserving. Johnson did not believe that Black authors had no message of value, but that African Americans’ work was disregarded and undervalued simply because it was coming from Black authors. This is the constraint which made Black authorial identity so difficult to develop and was precisely what Johnson hoped to see changed in the coming generation.

Tolson, having seen so many great Black authors like Johnson rise and fall without ever quite reaching the prominence hoped for, gave much more consideration to the authorship question explicitly in his poetry, especially in *Harlem Gallery: Book I, The Curator*. The Curator, in his role as narrator, becomes the extension of Tolson’s own thoughts as he navigates
the space of his Harlem Gallery. The Curator reveals a great deal about Tolson’s reckoning with Black authorship, and his thoughts on what lies ahead for these authors. In particular, the final three cantos of the poem: “Chi”, “Psi”, and “Omega” are where the Curator’s - and by extension Tolson’s - thoughts on Black life and Black authorship are delineated most clearly and at length.

As aforementioned, a character who becomes essential to the Curator and his image of the Black author is Hideho Heights, nicknamed the “poet laureate of Harlem.” Dove describes Heights as “boisterous and irreverent,” and indeed he is just that. Under this brash front, however, Heights is one of the text’s most complex and multifaceted characters. It is worth noting that he is one of the characters in this text who not only recalls the oral tradition, but who also questions the future and causes the Curator to ponder it as well. In the “Chi” canto of this text, the Curator begins to reveal just how complex Hideho is, speaking about “the split identity/of the People's poet.” In public settings, Hideho is a raucous, simple man of the people; in private he scrutinizes these same people and meanders through their lives in highly erudite writings such as the E. & O. E. poem that the Curator finds hidden in Hideho’s house. Raymond Nelson says in his notes to the text that “the people’s Hideho Heights is only half the man and half the artist. He inhabits and vacates that half of himself according to the tyranny of the social institutions of race in the United States” (451). Through Hideho, the Curator sees the difficult challenge of Black authorship personified: the limitations placed on Hideho by life as an American Black man drove him down into writing for the common man, while his desire tended toward greater literary circles. Heights could not rise above his status as a Black man first, and as a poet second. Hence, Tolson’s narrator takes the time to address “Poor Boy Blue” at this point in the poem, saying quite directly that:

the Great White World
and the Black Bourgeoisie

have shoved the Negro artist into

the white and not-white dichotomy,

the Afroamerican dilemma in the Arts—

the dialectic of

to be or not to be

a Negro.

This encapsulates Tolson’s entire argument about the sufficiency of Black authorship. The Black author, like Heights in this poem, must walk a narrow line of self-definition, knowing that to be Black means to be limited in the reception of their works, and knowing that their art cannot be viewed with the same respect as any other because of the simple fact that they are a Black author. Within this stanza, Tolson has his Curator explore the dynamics of “the Afroamerican dilemma in the Arts.” He makes a Shakespearean allusion as he considers the contradiction of “to be or not to be/a Negro”. The Black author, by this estimation, faces an existential dilemma not unequal in gravity to that of Hamlet. What stands alone, however, is the identifier: Blackness. The struggle that the Curator recognizes in Hideho, and by extension that Tolson recognizes for the Black author, is that they must confront the reality that their very existence as an author is contingent on their willingness to stand apart, to live as “a Negro”; Black first, an author second. Hideho, the Curator realizes, must be the “Poet Defender” of the people because his desire to be a more universal poet is denied by virtue of his race, and so he hides his most highbrow writing in his private space, away from the world in which he knows it will be rejected. As the Curator says, Hideho Heights is “the eyesight proof/that the Color Line, as well as the Party Line,/splits an artist’s identity.” The Black author can only be a Black author, since
apparently the two identities are inseparable in the way that he will be received by the world. Hideho’s complexity is evident not merely in his secret writings discovered by the Curator, but in his public musings. Earlier in the “Chi” canto, the Curator overhears a conversation in which Hideho says:

Since I was unable to dig

the immortality of John Doe,

fears

(not Hamlet’s… not Simon Legree’s),

my fears

of oblivion made me realistic:

with no poems of Hideho’s in World Lit,

he’d be a statistic!

A great deal about Hideho and what he represents in terms of Black authors more generally is evident from this moment in the text. Hideho deals with the greatest fear that Tolson has for the Black author: the fear of anonymity, of never being recognized for their literary value to the world as a whole. Hideho’s fear stands alone, and is made distinct, albeit parenthetically, from two of white literature’s largest figures. In his notes to the text, Nelson has this to say of this parenthetical moment: “Hamlet’s fears of judgment in that undiscovered country that lies beyond the grave differ fundamentally from the melodramatic projections of guilt by the superstitious Simon Legree, the villain of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), but both are mediated and generalized by art” (453). For Hideho’s fear, there is no mediation, no generalization that is sufficient. His is an acute, reality-based fear in the “to be or not to be” dialectic of Black authorship. If he accepts that he must be defined by his Blackness, then
Hideho also must accept that he will be relegated to the John Doe immortality of being an unknown; never having his work recognized “in World Lit” and becoming a statistic, just another Black author discarded by “the Great White World”. It is this fear and awareness of his situation in life that leads Hideho to write his second literary identity, that of the pure poet, in secret where it is never meant to be discovered.

His discovery of Hideho’s second literary identity leads the Curator to the musings with which he ends the poem in the “Psi” and “Omega” cantos. He speaks in these cantos directly to an imagined “Black Boy” and “White Boy,” using the opportunity, as Nelson states, “to explain each to the other” (455). Perhaps more accurately, though, Tolson seeks to help the Black Boy understand himself, and to alter the White Boy’s understanding of blackness. The Black Boy, especially in “Psi,” is meant to learn the way that his Blackness fits into his potential as an artist. Tolson’s Curator says that “in this race, at this time, in this place,/to be a Negro artist is to be/a flower of the gods, whose growth/is dwarfed at an early stage—”. The position of the Black author as an artist, then, is one with thwarted potential for greatness. The Black author, Tolson suggests, must find a way to write both above the conditions that cause his potential to be “dwarfed at an early age” – that is, the racial prejudice that equates Blackness with incapability an unimportance- and within his Blackness if he wishes to reach a larger audience. Although this poem addresses the harsher realities of Black authorship and artistry, it ends on a hopeful note, suggesting that the Harlem Gallery, in spite of the challenges it highlights, actually displays “paintings that chronicle/a people’s New World odyssey/from chattel to Esquire!” Tolson very intentionally refers to the journey of Black authorship as a “New World odyssey” to invoke the tradition of a hero’s journey. In a way, it might be said that what Tolson does here is not unlike the poet-preacher that Johnson faithfully documented years earlier. Tolson uses the allusion to
Homer’s *Odyssey* to remind the reader of a journey that, in spite of the most unyielding and unlikely circumstances, ended in victory for its hero. The Black author is the hero of his journey, and like the heroes of old, they will find their path through oppression and any number of obstacles to a successful transformation “from chattel to Esquire”. The journey for the Black author, then, is not over, and Tolson’s Curator remains optimistic for the future generations of Black artists to rise beyond even the current conditions to become the “Esquire” of which he speaks.

Ultimately, Tolson and Johnson both wrestle with the future of Black authorship in response to and despite the racial conditions under which they must operate. Tolson spends more careful time pondering the struggle for Black art in his poetry, displaying through the figures of the Harlem Gallery how dual in nature the Black artist is required to be. Perhaps because he views his role as a predecessor of the New Negro Renaissance more hopefully, Johnson does not devote as much time in his poetry to this dilemma. Instead, he turns to the more direct approach of speaking to his audience through his scholarship.
Scholarly Perspective

As previously stated, both Johnson and Tolson were far more than great authors of literature: they were scholars, professors, orators, and major figures of African American academia. They used their positions as respected scholars to express their views on a great many issues affecting African Americans and the nation at large. The authors also leveraged their academic platform to explain and further their visions for African American authorship. Johnson, while he did not include a great deal about this vision in his poetry, did so quite eloquently in his essays, letters, and articles. Because he took so seriously his role as a forefather of Black literature, Johnson took great pains in his works to elaborate his future image for Black authorship. He acknowledged the pressures faced by Black writers, but felt hopeful that they, with the application of skill and hard work, could rise above their conditions. As time progressed, so too did Johnson’s expectations for the Black authors with whom he was intimately acquainted. Before his untimely death in 1938, Johnson saw the rise and decline of the New Negro Renaissance. In that span of time Johnson’s expectations evolved from highly idealistic to a measured, calculated, yet still unrelenting hope for dignity and recognition in Black literature.

Tolson’s scholarly writings were an extension of the same ideas expressed in his poetry, expounding on his view for African American authorship in a way completely unique to him. As an outspoken and often radical voice, Tolson felt it crucial to discuss his own aspirations - and reservations - about the future of Black literature. Tolson bears a tone that may be called cynical, understanding that the position of the African American author is always limited by the racist politics of the publishing industry. He believed in the ability of African Americans to be intellectually dominant, citing Richard Wright and Alain Locke and two of the prime successes
of Black authorship, and remembered passionately the greatest creators of what he called the Harlem Renaissance. This, however, was not enough, and Tolson saw even more than Johnson how necessary a complete revolution of thought was to the Black literary project: a revolution not just in the way that white Americans viewed Black people, although that was crucial, but also a revolution in the way that Black people saw themselves. Before they could make relevant, aesthetically valuable literature, Black authors needed to understand their value beyond the limitations of race.

As they developed their own complex theories of Black authorship, Johnson and Tolson also engaged with the critical scholarship of their peers and predecessors. Black authors and scholars had for some time been writing on the difficult position of Black literature, and on the compromises that Black authors had to make in order for their voice to be heard on a large scale. Johnson and Tolson were well read in the theories of their peers, and built their respective visions of Black authorial identity out of this academic foundation. For Tolson, it is very apparent the scholars with whom he most closely associated, and with whose work he placed himself in direct conversation. Johnson also engages his contemporaries, as well as those early figures who wrote into the void of Black literary studies. In the way that these authors formulate their ideas, traces of other Black academics can be clearly seen.

As his career progressed, James Weldon Johnson saw many of his personal literary aspirations thwarted. His biggest novelistic accomplishment, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, published anonymously in 1912, was met with short-lived acclaim. His poetry received mixed reviews, but ultimately did not make the impact among the American literati that he had hoped it would. In the midst of these personal disappointments, though, Johnson began to see something new in Harlem, where he had lived since 1901. As he met and read the work of
budding talents just entering the literary scene, Johnson felt almost instinctively that these were the people from whom Black literature would find its most powerful voice. He possessed a desire to nurture these new authors, to see them to fruition in the national and global literary circles. To this end, he composed an anthology of African American poetry from its inception to his present day. Published in 1922, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* demonstrated the past and present literary proficiency of African Americans. In the opening paragraphs of his preface, Johnson clarified his purpose:

> The final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced. The world does not know that a people is great until that people produces great literature and art. No people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior. The status of the Negro in the United States' is more a question of national mental attitude toward the race than of actual conditions. And nothing will do more to change that mental attitude and raise his status than a demonstration of intellectual parity by the Negro through the production of literature and art (vii).

Johnson wanted to show the country that Black authors are a dominant force, deserving to be distinguished as a source of high quality American literature. He hoped not only to show this to the world, but also to African Americans following him. He wanted Black authors to see where they came from, the rich literary pedigree into which they were born, and where it was their place to pick up and carry on where their predecessors left off.

Johnson included in the preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* not only a defense of the merit of Black poetry, but also a statement of his hope for Black authors going
He outlines a vision of Black authorship, and one of the main figures with which he does so is Paul Laurence Dunbar. Dunbar, a close acquaintance of Johnson’s, stands in his mind as one of the first true embodiments of all that Black authorship is and can be. Johnson credits Dunbar as a poet who possesses what all Black authors should: “a combined mastery over poetic material and poetic technique, to reveal innate literary distinction… and to maintain a high level of performance… to rise to a height from which he could take a perspective view of his own race” (xxxiii). Although this speaks specifically to Dunbar, it is indicative of Johnson’s view towards all Black authors as transcendent individuals who can write above their race, reflecting on and acknowledging it without being limited and burdened by it. It is for this reason that he says, “that the richest contribution the Negro poet can make to the American literature of the future will be the fusion into it of his own individual artistic gifts” (xlii). Johnson believed wholeheartedly that the Harlem authors with whom he became increasingly familiar were fully capable of achieving this, and thereby bringing Black literature to the literary world.

As the Renaissance proceeded, Johnson remained deeply invested in the Black literary efforts and developing literary identity. He saw with increasing discomfort the way that African American literature was acknowledged momentarily, but by and large disregarded. From such a great outpouring in Harlem and across the country, only trace amounts of literary production were actually breaking through to the national scene, while the rest remained contained and labeled as African American, and thereby less valuable. In a 1928 essay for The American Mercury, titled “The Dilemma of the American Negro Author,” Johnson addresses this force against Black authorship. He states, “Now that the Negro author has come into the range of vision of the American public eye, it seems to me only fair to point out some of the difficulties he finds in his way” (277). Over the course of the article, Johnson proceeds to expound on the
dual pressure on the Black author as not just an author but a *Black* author. Their racial identity prohibits these authors from access to certain levels of literary acclaim, and even affects the way in which they write. Johnson says that “the Aframerican author faces a special problem which the plain American author knows nothing about— the problem of the double audience” (277). This double audience, Johnson further explains, is both Black and White, and may be more accurately considered a divided audience to which the African American author has to tailor his work. All good authors begin with an understanding of their audience, but for Black authors this is merely the first of many hindrances to their work. If they seek to address their literature to a broad audience, then the Black author risks alienating themselves from their own people and losing a part of their identity. Conversely, writing only literature for Black audiences only limits the author’s potential for greater readership. Johnson believes Black authors are capable of overcoming these racial circumstances but recognizes more and more just how devastating an effect it has even on the high caliber of writers in the Harlem Renaissance.

Johnson’s concept of the double audience is not unique – in fact, it is reminiscent of the much earlier work of W. E. B. Du Bois on the double-consciousness of the African American. In 1897, Du Bois wrote the essay “Strivings of the Negro People” for the *Atlantic Monthly*. In a few short pages, Du Bois outlined the complexity of Black American identity, in which there is a persistent awareness of otherness and treatment as lesser than because of race. He frames it in this way:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two
warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being
torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, —
this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a
better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be
lost. He does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach
the world and Africa; he does not wish to bleach his Negro blood in a flood of
white Americanism, for he believes — foolishly, perhaps, but fervently — that
Negro blood has yet a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it
possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and
spit upon by his fellows, without losing the opportunity of self-development (194-
95).

This is an essential groundwork for understanding the conditions out of which Black literature
was born in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. What Du Bois so eloquently
elucidates here is that Black identity is constantly divided, and this permeates every area of
African American life. For those who strive to be authors and artists, it is even more challenging
because, as Du Bois lays out and Johnson extends, Blackness excludes African American authors
from creating purely American literature of the highest caliber. Johnson came to terms with the
fact that, even in a period as fruitful for Black writers as the Harlem Renaissance, none of their
production would be accepted into mainstream American literary circles. If they didn’t have a
full understanding of themselves and their dual role in America, Black authors had no choice but
to struggle and ultimately fail. Understanding this changed Johnson’s hopes for universal Black
literature and made him much more guarded in his future vision for Black authorship.

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By the end of the Renaissance, Johnson began to recognize the overzealous and, to a certain extent, blind hope that he had put forth in the early years of the Renaissance. In 1934, Johnson was called on to write a foreword for the new Black magazine *Challenge*, created by Dorothy West. Johnson admits in this foreword that he “expected much; perhaps too much” from the young Renaissance writers. In hindsight, he realizes that there is “a degree of disillusionment and disappointment for those who a decade ago hailed with loud huzzahs the dawn of the Negro literary millennium” (2). Johnson sees the failings of his early hope to father this great Black literary movement, and he is a great degree more calculated in his response to the current state of Black authorship. Still, even though the 1920s authors did not live up to the hope that Johnson held for them, he maintains some measure of optimism for the African American authors yet to come. At this point in the twilight of Johnson’s career, he feels compelled to impart some instruction for Black authors going forward. He exhibits a sense of duty, as though it is his responsibility as an author who has been stifled and unable to live up to his authorial potential to provide a path on which others can avoid this literary demise. He encourages the readers of this foreword, the Black literati, as he says that “many newer voices should be constantly striving to make themselves heard” (2). In comparison with his earlier hopes, Johnson is much more practical in his exhortation that new African American authors “need not be propagandists; they need only be sincere artists, disdaining all cheap applause and remaining always true to themselves” (2). Black authorship, then needs to be without artifice, not posturing for the approval of the world. It needs to be self-aware and bold in the presentation of that self. This, to Johnson, will take serious effort on the part of the authors themselves. He reflects on the fact that “the greatest lack of our younger writers is not talent or ability, but persistent and intelligent industry. That, I think, explains why the work of so many of them was but a flash in the pan” (2).
This more balanced view of a future maintains Johnson’s hope, but does so in a reasonable way that truly accounts for the extenuating racial circumstances, and is most valuable to defining a path forward for Black authorship. It is also in this later view that Johnson is most in line with Tolson and his opinions on the same subject.

Melvin B. Tolson witnessed from an entirely unique perspective the rise and fall of the New Negro Renaissance authors. Tolson began his career not as an author, but as a professor and scholar, and for the years of the Renaissance he was fully occupied and invested in that work. Still, Tolson was fully aware of the movements in art, literature, and other fields that occurred as part of the Renaissance. As he worked towards his Master of Arts degree at Columbia University, Tolson completed thesis, *The Harlem Group of Negro Writers*, which praised the work of figures central to the Renaissance, including Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay. Tolson considered these individuals invaluable for the way that they “gave expression to a racial life” (48) that had as yet been disregarded. He was deeply appreciative of the Harlem Renaissance for its cultivation of Black art and literature, but also understood it to be a short-lived movement that was the starting point for greater African American growth; a spark lighting a fire of Black creation that must be carried on. He addressed the common dismissal of the Renaissance, saying that “Many thought that the Harlem Renaissance was just a fad. In this they were mistaken. It had been followed by a proletarian literature of Negro life, wider in scope, deeper in significance, and better in stylistic methods” (135). Tolson valued the work done in the Renaissance, but saw it as limited compared with what had come and what was yet to be produced. There are ways to improve on the Renaissance work, and to dignify Black authors in the national global literary arena. To do this required higher style of writing in Tolson’s opinion: writing about Black life, but in language that can be more universally appreciated. He made a
comparison of Renaissance and post-Renaissance literature, suggesting that “most of the members of the Harlem Renaissance portrayed the sensational features of Negro life, which were exploited for the entertainment of white readers. The literature of today is earthy, unromantic, and sociological; and from it emerges Negro characters that are more graphically individualized” (136). Renaissance writers relied too much on passion, Tolson argued, and not on reasoned, measured reaction and observation. They wrote much too closely too their personal experiences, which colored their literary identity. Like Johnson, Tolson suggested that Black authors must distinguish between their racial literary identities, and must use the two in tandem without allowing one to overpower the other. This is what he appreciated most about the literature of his time: at its foundation, it is literature for literature’s sake, aesthetically valuable for its individuality but not overly invested emotionally.

Although he was convinced that the work coming out of his time was an evolution from the literature of the Harlem Renaissance, Tolson still surveyed his own literary scene with an objectively critical eye. Outside of his own poetry, Tolson’s major thoughts are collected in Robert M. Farnsworth’s 1982 book _Caviar and Cabbage_. In this book, Farnsworth reproduces several columns written by Tolson for the _Washington Tribune_ - an established African American newspaper - between 1937 and 1942. These columns, which appeared under the heading “Caviar and Cabbage,” were published almost weekly in the magazine, and they covered a wide array of topics for which Tolson was passionate: Christianity, radicalism, the World Wars, and any number of other topics. One thing that Tolson returned to frequently, however, was the intellectual and literary condition of Black people in America. Quite like the figures he created in his _Harlem Gallery_, Tolson struggled with the way that American Blackness both created and limited authorship. Tolson echoed Johnson’s early conviction about the necessity of
African American authorship, saying that “no race is civilized until it produces a body of literature. A great work of literature is a race’s ticket to immortality” (39). The only way for African Americans to be recognized and appreciated as full citizens is if they do so through their writing. Even as he made this statement, though, Tolson also addressed the restrictions placed on Black authors. In a column written one year later, Tolson claimed that “The hardest job facing a Negro is trying to break into print as a novelist or poet” (219), and he returned to this yet again a short time later, saying “The Negro has suffered more from the conspiracy of silence than any other minority group” (232). By and large, Tolson suggested, African American authors are suppressed and limited by racial oppression and prejudice. He believed in the merit of the works, but not in Black authors being given a chance to enter the mainstream.

Tolson echoes Langston Hughes in this conviction about the high value and limited viability of Black literature on the national stage. In his 1926 essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”, Hughes discussed the dialectic of being an African American author. He said that there is an “urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible” (692). This hearkens back to DuBois’ double-consciousness idea in that Black authors must decide to identify themselves as Black or as authors, but that the two identities are not reconcilable by the standards of white Americans. Indeed, Hughes extended this to suggest that it was no longer a problem of Black art being rejected by just white Americans, but also by Black Americans of the upper and middle classes – Black people who internalized the belief that their race disqualified them from the production of quality literature. For Hughes, the biggest mistake that the African American author could make is to attempt to identify themselves as an artist removed from their race, and to assimilate to whiteness by attempting to deny their racial
identity. Hughes, like Tolson, believed that Black literature was aesthetically valuable, and was among the best literature in the nation and world in spite of its limited recognition. It is out of this belief that he says “without going outside his race… there is sufficient matter to furnish a black artist with a lifetime of creative work. And when he chooses to touch on the relations between Negroes and whites in this country… especially for literature and the drama, there is an inexhaustible supply of themes at hand. To these the Negro artist can give his racial individuality, his heritage of rhythm and warmth, and his incongruous humor that so often, as in the Blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears” (Hughes 693). Hughes wanted for Black authors to accept that Blackness did not limit or undermine their authorial ability, but rather extended it far beyond its potential otherwise. The uniqueness of the African American experience, Hughes suggested, was a boon to his ability to create literature unlike any other in the world. As a product of the New Negro Renaissance, Hughes was convinced that this was already happening as he said that “We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame” (694). Like Johnson, he was quite hopeful about Black authors discovering and accepting their identity, and finding opportunities to show the value of their literature to the nation and the world.

Tolson believed passionately that Black authors would only get the chances that they made for themselves; that they needed to redouble their efforts to produce literature that transcended racial barriers and forced the eyes of the world onto the life of the Black American. A man who epitomized this, for whom Tolson held the utmost esteem, is Richard Wright. In a 1940 column, Tolson praises Wright and his power as a Black author. He says that Wright is a champion of his people, and of the causes concerning their survival in America. He cannot say enough about Wright’s significance, even going so far as to say that “Mr. Wright has pointed the
way to Negro freedom… It took guts to do what he said. It took also supreme art” (220). Tolson saw Wright as a Black author of the highest order, with an exemplary ability to raise his people beyond oppression and to a higher state of life. This, he suggested, is the task that falls on all Black authors, and one which many have been unable to accomplish. Authors like Wright are few and far between, and Tolson believed that those who were the future of Black authorial identity should make every effort to follow in his steps and become the highest caliber of Black authors.

Both Johnson and Tolson felt the need to speak not only through their poetry, but directly to their people through their scholarship. They had hopes for Black authorship, hopes that they did not seen fulfilled through the history of Black literature or as yet in their own careers. Johnson’s greatest desire was not for himself or his peers, but for the young authors of the New Negro Renaissance. Even as he saw their potential diminished over the years, however, Johnson maintained a hope for the future - one that was tempered by years of experience. He, like Tolson, saw Black authors as the key representatives of their race to the rest of the world. They have a duty to write not only of themselves, but outside of themselves. Tolson recognized the near impossibility of this task, but does not back away from just how crucial it is to the project of advancement for African Americans. Black authorial identity, then, is built around being the voice of the people, and the expression of Blackness through writing is to them the essential tool in the African American people’s struggle for identity and recognition in their country and the world at large.
Conclusion

For Johnson and Tolson, African American authorship is built on the foundational need for a Black voice in the world. The position of the African American is unique, and it needs to be spoken in some way so that is not only preserved, but promoted. The Black author is the people’s best hope of recognition, and it is a responsibility that needs to be taken with the utmost gravity. This is why it is so important for both of these authors to keep the oral tradition alive, and to give it the proper place in the history of African American literature. The unknown slave-bards who sang the first spirituals and the poet-preachers who taught parables of hope and faith were the first voice of the people - they created a unified orality out of unrelenting conditions of despair, finding a way to rise above their situation and speak and sing words so powerful that they reverberated out of the bonds of slavery and through African American history. This is a power which underlies all Black literature and art, and which Johnson and Tolson recall for their readership.

With the foundational need for Black oral traditions established, Johnson and Tolson both seek to outline their hopes and visions for the future of Black authorship. Through their poetic works, and especially through their scholarship, Johnson and Tolson make clear their expectations for Black authors going forward. For Johnson, this is an optimistic hope in the sufficiency of Black literature in itself, fueled by the onset of the New Negro Renaissance, that becomes tempered over the years by the experiences of suppression and short-lived success of Renaissance authors. Tolson, coming fully to the literary sphere after the New Negro Renaissance, understands both the ability of Black authors in themselves to produce literature of aesthetic value and quality, and the near impossibility of this literature to be recognized under the structures of racism and racial oppression in America. Ultimately, both Johnson and Tolson
understand this complex, difficult position, yet still hope for the future potency of African
American literature.

It is the responsibility of Black authors, then, to continue along this way, and to find ways
to reach beyond oppression with their words. The lessons that both Johnson and Tolson strive to
teach is one that must still be learned even in the present day. Although Black authors are now in
a position greater than any before them, there is still work to be done. Even now, African
American literature is still a subcategory of American literature, and African American authors
are *African American*, not just American. While this does not necessarily mean that their works
are viewed as secondary, it does suggest that Black authors and their works are still viewed
differently by the mainstream, and that there is an instinctive duality to their nature and their
authorship. Without understanding their purpose in the ways that Johnson and Tolson suggest,
African American authors in the present day are as much at risk of losing their depth and true
value. It is essential to the project of Black literature that Black authors have a full understanding
of their authorial identity.
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