James Weldon Johnson: in Quest of an Afrocentric Tradition for Black American Literature.

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The Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, Ph.D., 1972
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James Weldon Johnson: In Quest of
An Afrocentric Tradition for
Black American Literature

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
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Agricultural and Mechanical College
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in
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FOREWORD

In the black world of 1972, "How Black is Black?" is a pertinent question. One thing is certain — the terms Negro and colored are not "black" enough to designate the minority group in America now more acceptably called Blacks or Afro-Americans.

James Weldon Johnson expressed the view that black men had every reason to be proud of the word "Negro." During the Harlem Renaissance the connotations of the term had changed from those it had during the antebellum days and the Reconstruction era in the South. During the period of "The Awakening," roughly, 1920-1930, the "New Negro" had come into existence and had begun to spell "Negro" with a capital "N."

But the recent Jet surveys show that of the three names — Black, Afro-American and Negro — Negro is the least popular among today's younger black people. The term "Negro," then, will be used in quotation marks in the text of this paper, although it will appear in direct quotations without quotation marks. The terms "black" and "Afro-American" will be used interchangeably to designate the darker American. "Black" used as a noun or proper adjective will be capitalized. Whenever it occurs with the capital "B" in references from other works, the capitalization will be kept. As a common adjective form, it will not be capitalized.

At the present time, a basic issue in the "How Black is Black?" question is aesthetics. Black critics have all but rejected what
Ameer Baraka calls "a theory of ether." This refers to the idea that white critics search for artistic excellence divorced from the source stream of existence. Aesthetics for Blacks have come to mean "feelings about reality." Blacks are more in harmony now with the African concept of art for life's sake than with the Euro-American concept of art for art's sake. As Baraka states it, the new concept calls for "an expression of total being in the work of art — for many levels of feeling comprehension."

James Weldon Johnson's quest for an Afrocentric tradition for Black American literature was not a conscious one at first. His growth in black awareness was slow and often painful; he himself acknowledged that he had no assurance that he had moved in the right direction until he had made his discovery of the deepest revelation of Soul. Creative force as the "vector of existence," "rhythm as a basic creative principle," and "rhythm as an expression of race memory" (Larry Neal's phrases), all suddenly became clear to Johnson as he listened to an old-fashioned black preacher. Together with the members of the congregation, he experienced fully a primordial ecstasy. Out of a world replete with Western values, Johnson came into another world teeming with black values. Johnson's discovery of these values opened a path to the hidden treasury of African and Afro-American folk art for black literary artists who would follow him.
ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THIS WORK

1. **Along This Way**............................... AW
2. **Atlanta University**........................... AU
3. **Black Manhattan**............................. EM
4. **Negro American, What Now?**............... WN
5. **The Autobiography of An Ex-Coloured Man** . EXC
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ABSTRACT

James Weldon Johnson, 1871-1938, may be regarded both as a precursor and as an elder statesman of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's. This present study seeks primarily to establish his place as a precursor.

The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's is also referred to as "The Negro Awakening." Transformations of the inner and outer life of the "Negro" in America were gauged and registered in an anthology of contemporary writing by "Negroes" entitled, The New Negro, edited by the redoubtable black scholar, Alain Locke. The book appeared in 1925, when the movement was well on its way, if 1930 is considered as the terminal date. The legacy of The New Negro is so rich because of its remarkable fusion of earlier cultural heritages -- notably those of Southern and African origin. But more than that, the book demanded that the "American Mind" do an about-face. It must reckon with a fundamentally changed "Negro." The "New Negro" was a new man who was instrumental in "shaking off the psychology of imitation and implied inferiority." The "New Negro" was a new citizen who was shedding the "old chrysalis of the Negro problem" -- voicing his claim as a rightful adherent of American democracy. And finally, the "New Negro" was a new artist "achieving something like spiritual emancipation." The human creative spirit of the black artist tried to express the black man's evaluation of himself as a man, and succeeded to a reasonable extent.
Janes Weldon Johnson is usually counted among the Renaissance writers who examined "the mores of Negro life in an honest and daring manner." Hardly, if ever, is it mentioned that he was in his mid-fifties when The New Negro appeared in 1925. That same year he received the Spingarn Medal for meritorious service as a "Diplomat, Poet and Public Servant." The wording of this citation indicates that Johnson had reached the high mark of "newness" attributed to the "Negro" as a man, citizen and artist before the official announcement was made to America and the world. The first chapter of this study gives a portrait of James Weldon Johnson as a "humanist," a "publicist" and a literary artist with the aim of providing an overview of his life and his myriad accomplishments. Immediately, the man behind the medal appears as one who had the attributes to serve as an architect of culture.

The old Atlanta University spirit of race, equality and human rights became his breastplate and shield as he became an educator, a lawyer, an editor, a songwriter and librettist, a politician, a diplomat. But the transcendent vision of service to his race came with an understanding of the needs adamant for conscious black art works. In 1899, while working to dignify the "coon song," he realized that the work of the conscious black artist should rest upon the superstructure of folk art rather than upon the stereotypes invented by Anglo-American creative artists. To his credit, once he had made this discovery, Johnson worked steadily, if not always progressively, toward that goal until he had discovered a "black" medium for literary expression, a basis in realism for black fiction, and a touchstone for the revelation of Soul in black poetry. "The Creation," his first black poem, is a conscious art work using the primary effects of idiom, rhythm and imagery so dominant in the old gospel sermon of
antebellum days.

On his completion of "The Creation" in 1918, James Weldon Johnson's efforts to found an Afrocentric tradition for Black American Literature was accomplished.
INTRODUCTION

James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938) has been and still is a neglected figure in Afro-American literature since his death.


The works listed above represent, almost in totality, the serious James Weldon Johnson studies. Many brief accounts of Johnson appear here and there. These are usually based on Johnson's autobiography, Along This Way.

Johnson's autobiography begins with his ancestry, moves on to what he observed and learned as he grew up in Jacksonville, Florida, during the Reconstruction Era, and subsequently covers fully all the years of his life until 1933. Along This Way no doubt diminishes the need for a biography, save for an account of the last five years of Johnson's life. In 1933, Johnson could not know whether or not his place would be secure as a Promethean figure in Black American history. Nor could he know that with the exaltation of the Black ethos in the 1960's, he would become godfather to literary artists working to find "a center" and "a radius" in the Black Experience. For despite Johnson's acquaintance with the body of Euro-American literature, he learned to write intimately and
authentically about his race — a fact which needs to be stressed as the Black Revolution gains momentum.

That Johnson as a man and his career as a race leader and literary artist stand in need of closer analysis is hardly questionable. How to proceed is another question. Two focal points lend clarity to the overall problem of procedure. First, Johnson's literary works have an organic relationship to his life experiences. Second, from the beginning of his conscious literary existence to 1921, when he conceived the idea for the anthology of "Negro" verse, he worked to find his "center," an outlet to black consciousness, a black ruling organization for racial aggrandizement, a black language, a black literature. From the time of research for the anthology of black verse to 1938, he worked to extend the "radius" of "Negro" influence in life and letters, knowing that he worked at last from the "center". The reality of the Black Experience and its attendant spirit Soul, motivated his efforts after 1918.

The present work, "James Weldon Johnson: In Quest of an Afrocentric Tradition for Black American Literature," gives vital facts about the author's life in a chronological framework before discussing his writings. It then proceeds to an examination of Johnson's search for an Afrocentric tradition.

A renewed awareness of the race problem came when Johnson found himself victim of race prejudice and party politics in 1913. The Democratic majority in the Senate refused to confirm his nomination as Consul to the Azores because of his allegiance to the Republican Party. He resigned from the Consular Service, September 1913. For a short time he suffered economic reprisals which renewed his memory of the disadvantages
experienced by black folk that he met in Hampton, Georgia, 1891. The "spiritual" experience which led him to the "center" needed for black poetry came with the aid of the "Black Holy Ghost" evoked by a gospel preacher in Kansas City. Once he had come in contact with the deepest revelations of the black ancestral spirit, Johnson composed "The Creation" (1918), his first true black poem. From 1921 (after the idea was formulated for the anthology of black American poetry) to 1938, the year of his death, he extended the province of black literature by using the Afrocentric tradition which he had discovered in his original literary works. When he selected works for the anthologies featuring other creative artists of the race, he used blackness as the norm for inclusion.

One other problem looms up in any serious study of Johnson's life and works. Frequently, Johnson, the Renaissance figure, is treated as if he sprang into intellectual maturity in a manner no less mysterious than that of Athena who sprang full grown from the head of Zeus bearing an aegis. A closer examination of his intellectual life reveals that he followed a highway already walked more than lightly, by Alexander Crummell and W. E. B. DuBois, two black intellectuals of the nineteenth century, who like himself, owned a heritage of freedom. Crummell influenced DuBois, and DuBois influenced Johnson. DuBois makes his acknowledgment of the influence in The Souls of Black Folk. Johnson acknowledges the influence of DuBois in Along This Way. Johnson followed, at first, an intellectual tradition fostered by Europe and America. Crummell and DuBois injected features as skilled thinkers which were distinctly Afro-American.

The first chapter in the present study seeks to clarify Johnson's status as a Renaissance man, though the main purpose of the chapter is to give a portrait of him as a "humanist," "publicist," and a literary
artist. Following a broad view of Johnson's adult activities, the factors in his childhood and early youth up to 1887 which helped to ground his opinions are discussed in Chapter II. The span of years covered in Chapter II are 1802 to 1887. Johnson was able to recall his trip to Nassau in 1875. Thus, 1875-1887 is designated as the first formative period. He went to Atlanta University as a prep student the fall of 1887, and remained there (missing one year) until the spring of 1894. He formulated his basic ideas about race at the University and in the backwoods of Hampton, Georgia. This period is designated as the second formative period, and is the matter of Chapter III.

In the years to follow, from 1894 to the end of his life, Johnson resolved to lift his race in one way or the other. Chapter IV depicts him as a young enthusiast in Jacksonville, Florida, working as an educator, a lawyer and a newspaper editor, 1894 to 1899, without being able to foster the Atlanta University ideals of equality and justice. Following the path to a wider world of experience, already taken by his brother Rosamond, Johnson tried a new career as songwriter and librettist. Chapter V is a discussion of the unusual situations he (Johnson) encountered in a world of wider experience from 1900 to 1905. Fame and success in New York did not bring complete satisfaction to Johnson's mind. Fame and fortune had taken him far away from his resolve to "serve" the race, yet displaying his talent as an artist was a grandstand act on behalf of his race. This image was a refutation of the stereotype, Uncle Tom. Once the idea entered his mind, in 1899, that there had to be some connection between folk art and conscious art, Johnson never rested until he discovered a way for the meeting of the two. Chapter VI tells why he abandoned dialect as "the language" for black poetry and how he sought to
gain poetic orientation through the "genteel" romanticist Dunbar, and the "robust" realist, Walt Whitman.

Chapter VII is an account of Johnson's performance as a novelist. It begins with the tentative plans made for The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man in 1905, while he studied literature at Columbia University, though the novel was not published until 1912. In addition, the novel is analyzed in a manner to support the thesis that the real matter of black life is the proper source for black fiction. Published while Johnson was serving as American Consul in Nicaragua, it is not the only work he produced while he worked as a governmental official. He wrote a considerable number of his best known lyrics from 1906 to 1913. In Chapter VIII, these poems are measured by a scale of values for black literature devised by George E. Kent. Several of the poems suggest that on the conscious level, he was performing his duties as an American; but on the subconscious level, he was still in touch with the race problem.

Chapter IX tells about Johnson's difficulties as a marginal man after resigning from the American Consulate, 1913. He directed all of his time and his talents from that day forward to building a black cultural nation. The years 1914 to 1920 cover his activities as editor for the New York Age, the oldest black paper in New York, and his first years of service as an NAACP official. The success of his poetry, deepening in black values, can be attributed to his chance to live the Atlanta ideals of service to the black populace.

Chapter X relates how Johnson experienced the deepest revelation of Soul while listening to an old-fashioned gospel sermon. This is the end of his quest for a means for Afro-American poetry. "The Creation" employs
the language of the dominant culture but is flavored with black idiomatic expressions. He captured the "spirit" of the sermon which was recapitulated with serious intent in verse. But above all, he had made his journey to the "bush," the home base of the Collective Spirit. By the time the Renaissance was acknowledged as a movement in 1925, Johnson had published *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922) which contained works that were specifically black. He introduced the idea that the presence of a "centrifugal force" in black verse generated a power not found in Anglo-American poetry.

Johnson's discovery of an Afrocentric tradition for Black American literature embraces three areas: The use of a "dialect" to accommodate the richness and the musical quality of black expression, the use of the Black Experience for black fiction, and the use of Soul in black poetry. Johnson's employment of the primal qualities of his family — the larger family of race, as the basis for art—finds agreement in pronouncements by the Afro-Americans Crummell and DuBois, his intellectual models. Crummell believes that primal qualities of a family, a clan, a nation or a race, are heritable qualities, "congential things." He believed also that they remain notwithstanding "the conditions and the changes of roughness, slavery, civilization and enlightenment." He says that "the attempt to eliminate them will only serve to make a people factitious and unmanly. It is a law of moral elevation that you must allow the constant abidance of the essential elements of a people's character." DuBois, in accord with Crummell, expresses the feeling that if the black man ever attains his place in the world, he will do it by being himself and not another. A new African poet, Abioseh Mical, admonishes black men to "Go for the bush," for "inside the bush / you will find your hidden heart, / your
mute ancestral spirit."

Johnson, an American, could not go dancing on his way to the "bush" as the young African poet suggests. The difference between the African's task of finding his roots and the Afro-American's is vastly different. The African writer is on native soil. His roots are right at hand. He is not an outside observer. His tribal marks are still on his very skin, as Langston Hughes noted. On the other hand, the Harlem Renaissance writers had to search for their roots. Johnson's pioneering efforts made it somewhat easier for the young writers to develop an interest in their folk roots and their African heritage.

Since this discussion is designed to establish Johnson as a precursor of the Harlem Renaissance rather than a participant in the movement, only poems dated from 1899 to 1913; the volume Fifty Years, 1917; The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man, 1913, his only novel; and selected articles from the New York Age will be examined. Other works in the Johnson canon will be used as source material. The single poems given special attention in the study are: "Sence You Want Away," 1899; "O Black and Unknown Bards," 1899; "Tunk," 1905; "O Southland," 1907; "O Black and Unknown Bards," 1908; "Mother Night," 1913; "The Awakening," 1913; "The White Witch," 1915; "Brothers," 1916; and "The Creation," 1918.

"The Creation" employs the idiom of emotion in which African civilization is reborn and respected. Alain Locke says that after "The Creation," race poetry did not mean dialect (the conventional type) any longer. What he means is that Johnson's use of the authentic mold of the gospel sermon as an art - means of giving out presupposes that each black poet will be as truthful in depicting the level of Black Experience common to him, using the proper idiom of the emotions, as the preacher did for each
occasion. Accepting this truth, the black writer will speak for his folk; he will speak to his provincial audience and to the world.

The upsurge of ancestral pride today in Africa, the West Indies, the United States of America, or wherever black men are found, lends validity to Johnson's quest for an Afrocentric tradition in Black American literature. Leopold Sedar Senghor, the poet-president of Senegal, published an article in a current issue of *Black World*, "In Defense of Negritude," praising Johnson and others for perpetuating the idea of black values which influenced him as a young student of Western Culture:

> The European experts, artists and writers . . . taught us to have a better knowledge, not of African life in its living flavor, but in its irreplaceable values of civilization. The role of the Afro-Americans was different. They taught us not exactly to rebel morally but rather to organize ourselves socially if not politically, and above all to create.¹

He continues by noting the special influence of the poets:

> The poets of the Negro Renaissance who influenced us most were Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, Jean Toomer and James Weldon Johnson, Sterling Brown and Frank Marshall Davis. They revealed the movement to us while on the move: The possibility in creating first some works of art, of having the African civilization reborn and respected.²

Thus, the work of the Harlem Renaissance writers helped the men of Africa to renew their pride of race. Their pride extends to a deep appreciation of folk life which years of colonization could not erase.

Johnson's interest in Africa was nourished through his childhood years by visiting Nassau with his family and by witnessing the practices of "Little Africa" in his own community in Jacksonville, and later by

²Ibid., 13.
visiting Haiti, the home of his first known ancestor. As an adult, his interest in Africa continued and found utterance when he became editor of the New York Age, in 1914. Before he joined the staff, Africa had become leading news. For example, May, 28, 1914, a special page reprinted from Hearst's Atlanta Georgian was entitled: "Why Africans are not Barbarians."

High praise is allotted Leo Frobenius, the famous German explorer and archaeologist, who used his scholarship and science to state the truth of human history which exonered the black man. The editor concludes his article with a note which served as a stimulant to the interest in Africa manifested not only by Johnson when he became editor of the Age, but other famous Blacks as W. E. B. DuBois, the sociologist; Alain Locke, the philosopher; Carter G. Woodson, the historian; and Arthur A. Schomburg, the curator. The editor found that a high degree of civilization and high artistic ability existed in Africa of the past.

On Saturday, August, 13, 1918, Johnson wrote in his column in the Age, "Views and Reviews," an article entitled, "More Exploded Fallacies." The "more" indicates that he had been keeping up with previous "exploded fallacies." On February 18, 1919, Johnson published another article related to World War I and the black man entitled "Internationalization." In this article he manifests interest in the question as to whether or not the question of the Afro-American would be allowed to rise at the peace table because the powers would be only too glad to regard it as a domestic question. The black vanguard reached the conclusion that the wisest step that could be taken by the colored people of the world would be to put the African question up to the peace conference so strongly that it would compel a consideration of the rights of black people everywhere. An Africa for Africans, Johnson concluded, would make a great
change for the better in the status of black men everywhere. Afro-Americans would win the right to fight at home for the things in the name of which the war was waged. The belief that the black intellectual in the United States had a future of unlimited opportunity based on the findings of his lost civilization, is now being realized.

Even though Johnson did not visit the continent of Africa, his interest in his past heritage persisted, as is manifested by his article on Ethiopia and other discourses on Africa. His Age article "The Finding of a Lost Civilization," December 10, 1921, explicitly states his reason for searching into the past. He writes:

One of the greatest handicaps that the Negro has had to contend with in his struggle for achievement and recognition has been the denial that he has ever had any cultural background. The generally accepted idea is that through all the centuries and ages as far back as the human mind can penetrate, Negro peoples have never been more than howling savages. This idea is held out not only by many people who, at least, suppose they are educated.

He continues with a statement on the value of historical evidence:

One of the most valuable assets that any race or people can have is cultural background. Indeed, cultural background bears about the same relation to a people that past performances bear to a race horse. They both compel recognition for what may be accomplished on the ground of what has already been accomplished.

By 1921, James Weldon Johnson had tested the validity of Carter G. Woodson's premise that "not to know what one's race has done in former times is to continue always as a child. 'If no use was made of the labor of the past ages . . . the world would remain always in the infancy of knowledge.'"

Other works on Africa by Johnson include "Africa in the World Democracy:" An Address before the Annual Meeting of the NAACP, January 6, 1919, at Carnegie Hall, New York, New York; and Native African Races and
Culture, a pamphlet published in Charlottesville, Virginia in 1927.


Finally, the writer's interest in James Weldon Johnson as a suitable choice for a doctoral dissertation stems from a felt need to draw added attention to his life and works which have not been analyzed on a scale commensurate with his magnetic personality nor his myriad accomplishments as a modern American, bar race. Yet, in the final analysis, it is the author's contribution of an iota to the current Black Revolution. This Revolution in kind was defined long ago by Alexander Crummell in his address, "The Need of New Ideas and New Aims," delivered at Storer College, Harper's Ferry, West Virginia, May 30, 1885. He spoke these words among the hills, "breezy" with the memories and the purposes of John Brown: "The Revolution I speak of is one which finds its primal elements in qualities, latent though they be, which reside in the people who need this revolution and which can be drawn out of them, and thus secure form and reality."
CHAPTER I

THREE STEPS TO THE RIGHT: A PORTRAIT OF JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

James Weldon Johnson was born in Jacksonville, Florida, June 17, 1871, and educated in the schools of that city, Atlanta University, and Columbia University. He was a brilliant student whose parents had given him a basic foundation in the arts before he even started to school. On completing his undergraduate training at Atlanta University the spring of 1894, he refused a scholarship offered by Harvard University to study medicine in order to serve as a grammar school principal in his hometown. As he worked to develop Stanton Grammar School into a high school, he studied law and was admitted to the Florida bar, and founded a newspaper, The Daily American. In 1899, he published his first poem, "Sence You Went Away" and continued to write, no matter what else he was involved in, until the end of his life. Recognition on a wide scale came with his song-poem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," set to music by his brother Rosamond. From 1901 to 1905, he worked in collaboration with Bob Cole and his brother writing songs and musical plays in New York. From 1906 to 1913, he served as United States Consul, in Venezuela and Nicaragua. He took leave, 1910, to marry Grace Nail. In 1914, he became editor of The New York Age. Two years later, he became Field Secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and in 1920, the Executive Secretary. He resigned after serving in that capacity for ten years, to become Professor of Creative Literature at Fisk University in
Nashville, Tennessee. New York University extended the same honor to him in 1934. He held the two positions simultaneously until his accidental death on June 26, 1933. The accident occurred on a grade crossing on Wiscasset Bridge in Wiscasset, Maine. A blinding rainstorm obscured Mrs. Grace Nail Johnson's vision as the Maine Central train struck; Johnson was asleep. They were on their way to Great Barrington, Massachusetts, their summer place, from Point Pleasant, Maine. They had been visiting Dean E. George Payne of New York University. The University had just appointed Johnson as Extension Professor for Black literature.¹

A capsule report can only begin to shed light on Johnson's life and works. Nevertheless, it does suggest a complexity that demands care in treating him as a man of many talents, numerous occupations, and myriad accomplishments. The task of picturing Johnson in clear relief as a knowing participant in Western Culture, then Afro-American Culture, offers other difficulties because he participated in one and both at the same time before he knew how to distinguish one from the other.

The idea of the "right way" in the title of this chapter stems from a laudatory statement made by Floyd J. Calvin in his article "Native Genius." He writes: "It is certainly a tribute to the native genius of the Negro and to the American growth toward a higher and better life that a Booker T. Washington and a James Weldon Johnson could arise in the same fitful era."² Calvin makes no effort to draw a line of distinction between the type of "native genius" possessed by the two men. Neither does

¹James Weldon Johnson Dead;" The New York Age, 2 July 1933, p. 1, Col. 1; Kelly Miller, "James Weldon Johnson the Negro Poet Laureate," The New York Age, 9 July 1933, p. 4.

he make a distinction between the background experiences that shaped these two men in Post Civil War America. Washington (1856–1915) was born in slavery, reared in poverty and educated through hard work. Sponsored by the right people after his start, he founded Tuskegee, which emphasized practical, vocational education for Afro-Americans. "Aside from the fact that Washington's leadership was conciliatory," writes Frasier, "the essential fact to be noted is that Washington was the spokesman for a mass of inarticulate, illiterate folk." Washington encouraged the spirit of individual initiative associated with American character. He is a prototype of the Horatio Alger—Abraham Lincoln, courageous, self-made man—a man who found honor in the American heroic tradition. Gene Buck, president of the American Society of Composers, authors and publishers, the only speaker at Johnson's funeral, was more discriminate in his comparison of Washington and Johnson. He said that Dr. Johnson was one of the greatest men of our times and that his achievements outranked those of the late Dr. Booker T. Washington. Johnson, he said, did not build material things, but he quickened the spirits of men everywhere.

Washington's opposer, W. E. B. DuBois (1868–1963) was working in the background to set the loftiest ideals that man could achieve for the Afro-American. He sought as an end culture and character as it is understood in the humanistic tradition of Western Culture. This type of

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education was at that time the privilege of white men and the danger and delusion of black.\textsuperscript{5} DuBois' position, represented as the left wing, because of its opposition to Washington, represents the right way for James Weldon Johnson. He was born a privileged character in a family gifted with the heritage of freedom as Alexander Crummell and DuBois.

On viewing the activities of these men of free heritage in 1895, the year of B. T. Washington's rise to fame after his speech at the Atlanta Exposition, we find each of them engaged in tasks of uplift that demanded "brains". Alexander Crummell was preaching, writing and lecturing with the aim of establishing the Negro American Academy to gather the forces of the Black intelligentsia in America. DuBois was on the eve of receiving his Ph. D. at Harvard University. Johnson was experiencing his first joy of succeeding as an educator of youth, and of fulfilling a boyhood dream of founding and editing his own newspaper. All were veering to the left from Washington, but blazing a never-ending trail for the black men who could walk the path of discipline and high endeavor to Athens. Following in the steps of Alexander Crummell and W. E. B. DuBois, James Weldon Johnson helped the Afro-American to readdress himself to the homeland on a cultural plane. Through his exemplary efforts as a "humanist," a "publicist," and a literary artist, Johnson brought dignity and pride to Black America and proof to America that the so-called "Negro" was a creator as well as a creature.

Recently, overwhelming tributes have been paid to Johnson as a renaissance figure. Almost always the tribute is connected with the part

he played in establishing and participating in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's. Stephen Bronze says, in his discussion of Johnson's contributions to racial progress, that he did as much as anyone to bring about the Harlem Renaissance.6 This statement implies that Johnson had apprised himself of the values prominent during the "Awakening" before it was formally acknowledged in 1925. In March of that year, Dr. Alain Locke, then Professor of Philosophy at Howard University, and "The Dean of the group of fledging writers" of the Renaissance, edited the Harlem number of the Survey Graphic.7 The materials gathered for the magazine became the nucleus for the New Negro which presented the reborn Afro-American in a national and even international scope. The book registered the transformations of the inner and outer life of the Black American that had taken place in the years following World War I. One of the purposes of this discussion is to show that by 1918, the year Johnson wrote "The Creation," the first poem in his God's Trombones, his poetic masterpiece, he had become a prominent Afro-American in a national and even international scope.

For a moment, it is important to examine another statement made as a tribute to Johnson as a renaissance figure. The statement reads:

"Johnson was as close to a Renaissance man as the conditions of American society would permit a Negro to be."8 No mention is made of the "Negro"

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Renaissance, intimating, therefore, that the archetype of the "Renaissance man" was drawn before Johnson's time. The individual has always resisted confinement — thralldom, the Promethean crag. A lone Socrates saw the men of Athens, a city of light, vote for darkness. A lone Galilean saw men of piety free Barabbas — each experiencing his separate doom to attest to the nobility of man, himself, with, but also apart from other considerations.

The liberation of the mind and spirit, known to the Greeks, then the Romans of classical antiquity, gained the sanction of modern man through the efforts of Italian scholars. In fourteenth century Italy, a tradition of humanism was fathered by intellectuals who worked for the liberation of the individual anew. The inevitable victory belongs to such men as Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio. They placed a premium on human wisdom rather than divine wisdom. During the medieval period, man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party or corporation only through some general category. This veil melted into air and man became an individual. The impulse to the highest individual development was combined with a powerful and varied nature in the complete men of Renaissance in Italy. The complete man mastered all of the culture of his age, aspiring likewise to be a "all-sided man" — l'omo universale.\(^9\) This concept was familiar to Afro-Americans who became scholars of the humanities. Alexander Crummell (1819-1908), an erudite Episcopal minister who received a Bachelor of Arts degree

from Cambridge, 1853,\(^{10}\) believed in the efficacy of the complete man. In an address delivered to the Garnett Lyceum, of Lincoln University, entitled "Right-Mindedness," he declared: "We should seek the training and education of our whole nature. That is not a true real system of education which is one-sided. I would, therefore, urge upon you that that mental training is defective which leaves entirely neglected certain distinct provinces of the intellect."\(^{11}\) A familiar example of the "all-sided man" comes to view in the portrait of a well-known Englishman.

Henry VIII was an English version of the many-sided Renaissance aristocrat. He was a scholar and lover of music; he was on terms with the best minds of his day. He was educated by poets like John Skelton and by the best musicians and linguists in England. Besides, he could ride, hunt, fence and play the sportsman.\(^{12}\) The perfection of manners of dress, of daily habits, were also a part of "Renaissance Form." Regardless of his erudition, his new individualism, his life shows that the Renaissance man in the throes of the Great Revival of Learning and Art in Western Europe was in essence a "spiritual" individual. The distinction is necessary even in reference to the Greeks, who were "spiritual" as distinguished from the barbarian. Henry broke with the Church of Rome but the idea of a moral universe still existed for him as it did for Americans and Black Americans who wrangled with authority in the

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\(^{10}\) Frazier, p. 498.

\(^{11}\) Alex Crummell, "Right Mindedness," in *Africa and America* (1891; Miami, Florida: Mnemosyne Publishing Inc. 1969), p. 368. Other addresses from this book will be entered by the title and page number.

nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Significantly, the idea of individual worth during the Renaissance period in Italy, found sanction apart from its existence only in those of a blooded aristocracy. For the courtier, a certain rank of nobility was required, but this belief never was held to imply that the personal worth of one who was not of noble blood was in any degree lessened thereby. The aristocracy of intellect, revered in ancient Greece, was cherished anew in the early modern period of Western Culture and borne even upon the black intellectuals who received a liberal education.

When we say that Johnson is a "humanist" with a difference, it is meant first of all that he is an heir to Renaissance thought as a scholar of the classics. The idea of the liberated individual, meant to apply mostly to Caucasians in the Western World, was one of the determining forces in his development. Fortunately, he did not know about the law of exclusion. He did not know that the concept existed until he began his college preparatory studies at Atlanta University in the fall of 1887. He was not sure that such a concept held sway in the South until he taught school in the backwoods of Georgia, 1891. He was not sure that it held sway in the North until Blacks were denied choice seats in New York theaters to watch fellow blacks perform. He was still not sure that it held sway in America until he had to deal with rancid insults to his dignity in Salt Lake City in 1905. Like Alexander Crummell and W. E. B. DuBois, black intellectuals and race pioneers, he enjoyed for the most part the privilege of being a human being, a citizen of America and the world, before he was forced to assume the role of a "human Negro."

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13 Burckhardt, p. 360.
Just proving that they were "human" during the nineteenth century was a gigantic task when "scientific" studies were being conducted to prove that the black man was other than a human being. Sometimes he was drawn in cartoon as a torso. If the myth persists, the intellectuals proved that there were eyes on the torso that could see with the mind's eye.

Before Johnson began his study in the "humanities" at Atlanta University, his immediate family and acquaintances had demonstrated the necessity of living life to its fullest extent in this world. As it is shown in Chapter II of this study, the stage was set for a varied career in his childhood. Added to this was his ability to learn and the advantage of economic security which gave him the chance to pursue his ambition.

Perhaps the absurdity of Johnson's place in the humanistic tradition is lessened by Ralph Ellison's claim to the same tradition. He considered himself an heir to all of the privileges granted to any human being who desired to develop his full potential as an adherent of Western Culture. Growing up back in Oklahoma between World War I and the Great Depression, he believed that the concept of Renaissance man lurked in the shadow of his past without knowing how he acquired it. A half dozen of his black friends who shared the idea with him subscribed to the belief "that somehow the human ideal lay in the vague and constantly shifting figures — sometimes comic but always versatile, picaresque and self-effacingly heroic — which evolved from our widely improvisatory projections — figures neither white nor black, Christian nor Jewish, but representative of certain desirable essences, of skills and powers
physical, aesthetic and moral. The description of this "Renaissance" ideal, nourished during the "play-stage" of culture, gives a clear view of Johnson's orientation during the same period of his life. Until he went to Atlanta University in 1887 at the age of sixteen, he believed in the "ideal". As a "Renaissance Man" he owned no limitations in extending his intellectual ken. Nothing could obstruct his spirit ascending. Very soon, after he entered Atlanta University, he realized that his "ideal" had to be filtered through the arcana of race.

Black men who attended Fisk, Harvard and Atlanta University in the latter part of the nineteenth century were trained in the "humanities" with the aim of producing worthy men who would lift the masses to civilization. Johnson, who did his preparatory work and earned his Bachelor of Arts degree at Atlanta, 1894, spoke frequently of the effort exerted to make students nobler and higher beings by studying the classics.

Kelley Miller speaks for Howard University and her sister institutions in their first phase as schools where "education was extolled chiefly in its cultural and humanitarian (italics added) aspects. The stress of emphasis was laid on manhood rather than mechanism. The man was educated for his worth (italics added) rather than his work. To be somebody counted for more than to do something. Produce the man, the rest will follow." The combination of the "cultural aspects" with the "humanitarian aspects," disavows the dictum that the black man was being educated for his intrinsic worth. The intellectual was educated to

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serve the black masses as "philanthropists".

The currency of the term "Talented Tenth" came with DuBois' use of it in his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, first published in 1903. However, the idea was also stressed by an earlier black intellectual of the nineteenth century. Alexander Crummell, DuBois' favorite black hero, who founded the Negro American Academy in 1897, encouraged the development of an intelligentsia that would develop their highest faculties; but, in addition, they were called upon to be philanthropists. Before the Academy was founded he proclaimed in an address delivered to the graduating class at Storer College, Harper's Ferry, West Virginia, May 30, 1885, that scholars and philanthropists from the schools would raise and elevate the people. "These men," he says, "must needs be both scholars and philanthropists; the intellect rightly discerning the conditions, and the gracious and godly heart stimulating to the performance of the noblest duties for a people."  

The five objectives of the Negro American Academy were goals similar to those of the French Academy which provided a national institute for the French republic to be entrusted with the duty of collecting records of all discoveries and to further the progress of arts and sciences. The basic difference between the two is that the black organization set as its first aim a measure to defend the race, to save the man himself from ultimate abuse. The objectives are: first, the defenses of the Negro against vicious assaults; second, publication of scholarly works; third, fostering higher education among Negroes; fourth, formulation of intellectual tastes; and fifth, the promotion of literature, science

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and art. Crummell founded the Academy, March 5, 1897 and served as its president until his death September 12, 1908.\textsuperscript{17}

DuBois became president of the Academy following Crummell’s death and stated that those with higher education must take the responsibility of uplifting the race. The idea of the "Talented Tenth" is cogently stated in the essay "Of The Training of Black Men."\textsuperscript{18} He writes: "Today we have climbed to heights where we would open at least the outer courts of knowledge to all, display its treasures to many, and select the few to whom its mystery of Truth is revealed, not wholly by birth or by accidents of the stock market, but at least in part according to deftness and aim, talent and character."\textsuperscript{19} James Weldon Johnson was being shaped into the man of excellence described by Crummell and DuBois, but apart from their direct influence until 1903, when he read the \textit{Souls of Black Folk}. He recognised DuBois' power at that time as an intellectual, not a racial agitator. He met DuBois the next year, 1904, in person when he went to Atlanta to receive an honorary degree.

Johnson was experiencing fame and fortune on Broadway at the time as a songwriter and librettist along with his brother Rosamond and Bob Cole. This work was a far cry from that of the scholar-philanthropist who knew in 1894, on the eve of graduating at Atlanta University, that he was being educated to serve as an underpaid teacher.\textsuperscript{20} We can imagine

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\textsuperscript{17}Harry A. Floski and Ernest Kaiser, eds., \textit{Afro USA} (New York: Bellwether Publishing Co., Inc., 1971), p. 499.
\textsuperscript{18}DuBois, pp. 74-87.
\textsuperscript{19}Ibid., p. 76. Note: DuBois pays tribute to Crummell in \textit{Souls}, Chapter 12.
\end{flushright}
that his reading the *Souls of Black Folk* and meeting DuBois renewed his (Johnson's) thoughts about training for service that would have a direct impact on racial uplift. He was sure to identify himself with the "few" established by the Academy norm. More than that, he no doubt understood the *Souls of Black Folk* as a call to blacks to create an image out of their own history — a different task than that of revamping the "coon" of the minstrel stage. The *Souls of Black Folk* called Afro-Americans to vigorous action out of the slough of despondency into which they had fallen at the beginning of the twentieth century.\(^{21}\) In addition to its call to nationalism, the book was the first literary expression of an uncompromising command for national attention\(^{22}\) not predicated on the conciliatory basis institutionalised by Booker T. Washington. It formulated a credo soon adopted by the Niagara Movement and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. It was a "blend of scholarship and militancy, of poetry and prophecy." Crummell had expressed the belief, too, that there is a capacity in human nature for prescience since we are made to live in the future as well as the past.

Johnson, a prototype of the "Talented Tenth," as it was conceived in the minds of Crummell and DuBois, takes his place in the company of the "princes of learning," encompassing, therefore, the arena of Renaissance man. These men "with eagle glance sweep the whole horizon of letters and science, who with equal ease and facility, turn at will, and with masterful power, to any department of learning or erudition."\(^{23}\)


\(^{22}\)Ibid., p. 35.

The highmindedness of the Crummell, DuBois, and Johnson as men of Academy status did not exempt them from all the reprisals suffered by the black men in the "outer courts" of knowledge. The black man, in toto was considered by the Anglo-American as a problem. Alain Locke states that "for generations in the mind of America, the Negro has been more of a formula than a human being -- a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be 'kept down,' or 'in his place,' or 'helped up,' to be worried over, harrassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden." Until the World War I period, the black man lacked self-understanding. This ignorance, at times, caused him to be a problem to himself as he might have been to others. During this period, especially during the decades of the 1920's, the black man renewed his self-respect and self-dependence. This self-respect and self-dependence experienced by Blacks who participated in the Great Migration or an improved status in the South was instilled in Johnson by his family and his education long before the formal announcement was made that there was a New Negro on the scene in 1925.

By the time World War I started, Johnson had not only become a New Negro, but a mature "New Negro" literary artist. Locke asks and answers the question: "Could such a metamorphosis [of the Negro race] have taken place as suddenly as it appeared to? The answer is no. . . ." Blacks had always possessed some of the traits being recognized then; but they had been lost in the image of the Old Negro who was more myth than man. On becoming a recognized minority group, on establishing a culture

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25 Ibid.
capital in Harlem, on establishing a new world of creative arts, the new Negro wanted to be known for what he was, even in his faults and shortcomings. Michael Jean de Crevecoeur's idea of the new man created by being on new soil was experienced by Blacks who were reborn on migrating from the South to the North the early decades of the twentieth century. James Weldon Johnson experienced the change wrought by the new environment: he had self respect; he developed self-independence; but he knew these experiences before the chart was drawn by and for the black populace.

Assessing Johnson as a man, Carl Van Vechten eulogized him as a "well nigh perfect human being." An editorial carried this tribute: "James Weldon Johnson had a great heart, sanity, poise and, an urbnity as rare among white contemporaries as among his fellows of racial origin. He was 'civilized' in the highest and noblest sense of the word. . . . He was calm but not cold. He was courteous but never ingratiating. He was honest but not naive. He was courageous but not blustering. He possessed a humility that is born not of fear but of knowledge." Another editorial in the New York Age spoke of him as "essentially a scholar and gentleman, [who] raised the dignity of his people and added to the cultural heritage of the group."28

Johnson the scholar and gentleman always informed Johnson the "publicist." His role as "publicist" in this discussion refers to his services as a "publicity agent" for the Black Cause. He consecrated his

27 "James Weldon Johnson," An Editorial, Opportunity, 16(1938), 228.
whole existence to the elevation of the race. His link with the public rested in part upon the spoken word while he functioned as orator, educator, lawyer, journalist, politician, NAACP official, and lecturer.

Blood brotherhood created a bond between the black minority which heralded the conception of racial solidarity. Many black leaders spoke for equal rights as American citizens while they agitated. W. H. Crogman, a native West Indian who was a professor at Clark University in Atlanta, emphasized both the importance of industry and thrift among blacks and the supreme value of the inalienable rights of the Declaration of Independence. Speaking to the National Education Association in 1884, he lashed out against segregation and discrimination. He pointed out the discrepancy between the ideals taught in school and the realities of actual life. Johnson, an Atlanta University student, gave a prize oration in 1892, expressing the range of ideologies voiced by Crogman. Two years later he won a position of honor for commencement and used the occasion to break through the narrowing limitations of race, at least for the hour. He spoke on "The Destiny of the Human Race" (AW, p. 121).

The story of Johnson's career as an educator in Jacksonville, Florida from 1894 to 1901 is legend. He served as Principal of Stanton School and expanded its curriculum until it gained high school status. He also served as president of the Florida Teachers Association. During this period he read law and became the first Black to pass the Florida Bar. Later he was admitted to the Supreme Court in his state.

The most widely acclaimed act to draw attention to Johnson as a Voice for his people came with his founding and editing The Daily American in 1895. As far as he knew at that time and could learn, it was the first black daily paper ever published. The number of white subscribers indicated that they wanted to know what was going on. He wrote what needed to be said, thereby setting his pace as a self-appointed spokesman for the race. The paper failed after eight months, but Johnson renewed his interest as an editor at a later time (AW, pp. 137-139). He proved his excellence as a writer when he won the third prize offered by the Philadelphia Ledger, 1916 on, "Why Hughes Should be Elected President." In the first place, only bona fide editors could enter the contest. The Negro press hailed his success as "a feather in the cap" of Negro Journalism (AW, p. 306). The truth is that no single person could be the spokesman for Afro-Americans as they developed diverse economic and cultural interests, but Johnson was in a strategic position as editor for The New York Age, 1914-1924. His editorials, on a wide variety of subjects, reached the masses because they were widely syndicated. "Views and Reviews," his column, was another manifestation of the Academy motif. He extended the domain of knowledge for Blacks who read only the newspaper. He also extended the possibility of excellence in reporting for the Black Press. Excellence, as it applies to his participation as an editor, is defined by Alexander Crummell as "that training by which the intellect forces are harmoniously developed, and reason and imagination are given their rightful authority." 30

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The elements of this quality are self-possession, exactness, facility and taste, which is described as the exquisite sense which disdains the rude and the gross.\textsuperscript{31}

Johnson did not enter the arena of politics on his own inclination as he did in the field of journalism. Charles W. Anderson, a Booker T. Washington associate, asked him to assist in establishing a Colored Republican Club. Through the system of "political loyalty," he won the chance to become an American Consul, 1906-1913. First he served at Puerto Cabello, Venezuela, and afterward, in Corinto, Nicaragua. He wrote his former schoolmate George Towns about the importance of his position being a boon to Atlanta University since he was the first AU man to go in the catalog under such a heading.\textsuperscript{32} He was more than a Consul. He was a spokesman and representative of the black man for America. He wrote Towns saying:

\begin{quote}
In many instances I have had to measure up brain for brain, ability for ability, character for character and culture for culture. . . . In this way I have met scores of white men and women, too, of position and influence who had never in their lives before met and talked with a colored person of education and refinement. I have met them in my capacity as Consul, and they have met me and my wife personally in our home; I have mingled with them at official functions and in the clubs; some of the results of this contact have been wonderful . . . (June 26, 1912, p. 187).
\end{quote}

He expressed pride, then, in being a citizen of the world, a Voice, and "Exhibit A" for the race.

\textsuperscript{31}Ibid., pp. 348-349.
\textsuperscript{32}Miles M. Jackson, ed., "Letters to a Friend," \textit{Phylon}, 29 (1968), 190. Other references will be entered as "Johnson to Towns" with the date and page number.
Johnson's standing as an NAACP official is overshadowed by DuBois' stature. William English Walling placed the two as follows: "I always date the real launching of the organization from the day we /the first organizers/ secured Dr. DuBois. And I must add that I feel we had a second birth when we secured our secretary, James Weldon Johnson." Yet, the Association never had an Executive Secretary who made his will felt as an independent force until Johnson filled the position in 1920, according to Melvin Drimmer. Besides, he stands with Booker T. Washington as one of the two best organizers of a racial program. Johnson's lack of continuous popularity is attributed to the virtue allotted to him by Braithwaite:

In the familiar shaping of an epigramatic idea, God made James Weldon Johnson a creative artist, but he made himself a race-agitator. He had an intellectual motivation for the cause into which he threw his energies and devotions of his manhood's prime; and while the heat of debate, the tactics and strategies were pursued with ardour and often with consummate skill, there was none of the passion nor exalted moods of rationalization which forged the spirit of Douglass or Washington or DuBois on the anvil of diabolical oppression.

For fourteen years Johnson served as an NAACP official. He resigned in 1930, to become a Professor of creative writing at Fisk University. He had helped to effect the idea of race solidarity by forging a unity of pride among those who fought for freedom.

34 William Stanley Braithwaite, "Along This Way": A Review, Opportunity, 11 (1933), 376.
35 Braithwaite, 376.
Johnson's activities as a lecturer for the NAACP were not confined to Blacks; in the North he addressed many white audiences. His work as secretary of the NAACP together with the books he had published caused an increasing demand for him on the lecture platform. Calls came from forums, women's clubs, and from colleges and universities. He filled as many engagements as his time and energy permitted. He learned to keep his temper and to deal with irrationality and even with cases of violent race prejudice. On college campuses, he talked about the aesthetic and the stern factors in the race question. The psychological effect of his talk on the few black students in a mass of whites brought the greatest satisfaction to him as a public agent for the Black Cause. He sensed in the black students, who crowded around him, the emergence of a new pride and a new self-respect (AW, pp. 387-388). The new pride and new self-respect or new racial consciousness did not signal dismemberment from America. It did bespeak ethocentrism, the awareness of being a member of a Brotherhood which existed for black men only. Within the confines of this Brotherhood, or Black America, the Afro-American was erecting a spiritual commune peculiar to himself, for himself.

The task which Johnson took upon himself to elevate the race through public services brought satisfaction but also disillusionment. For all of his ardent labor, he realised that as necessary as the work had been it lacked "the spiritual element which lifts the individual out of a prescribed pattern into which an hypocritical concept had woven him."36 There had to be a means to give the black man a symbolic balance in the ultimate scheme of social unity and intellectual parity

36 Braithwaite, 377.
in a free democracy. A number of approaches to the heart of the race problem had been tried with varying degrees of progress: the religious, educational, political, industrial, ethical, economic and sociological. The more desirable mean was "the approach along the line of intellectual and artistic achievement by Negroes, and may be called the art approach to the Negro problem. . . . The results of this method seems to carry a high degree of finality, to be the thing itself that was to be demonstrated."  

This viewpoint is found in Johnson's article entitled "Race Prejudice and the Negro Artist," which declares that the black artist must use his art as a weapon to fight prejudice. The article was written in 1928, when the Harlem Renaissance had reached its meridian. He had proof for his contention at hand. He cited not only the old folk artists whose merits were finally appreciated, but numerous writers, musicians, actors, singers — anyone who had stepped out on the "American stage" in a "blaze of glory." He mentioned Paul Laurence Dunbar, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. DuBois, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer, Walter White, Eric Walrond and Rudolph Fisher, Rosamond Johnson, Charles Gilpin, Paul Robeson, Roland Hayes and Marian Anderson. The public recognition of these artists and their evaluation proved that the artistic and intellectual achievements marked black progress with least friction. It is a "common platform" upon which most people are willing to stand.

Different approaches for different times are demanded of the black artist as he gropes for the proper vehicle of self expression. In the

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article mentioned above, Johnson selected B. T. Washington's autobiography *Up From Slavery* (1901) as his representative work. It is one of the most widely known American autobiographies for it tells the story of success. It ranks with Benjamin Franklin's in its adherence to the best in the American democratic tradition. From DuBois' works he selected *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) which begins with the essay "Of Our Spiritual Strivings." Here DuBois depicts the nature of "just" and unjust prejudice" which might have guided Johnson's nature of attack in his literary productions. Unlike Washington, he did not accept the "things as they are" stance. A black man accepts prejudice if it is represented as the natural defense of culture against barbarism, learning against ignorance, purity against crime, the 'higher' against the 'lower' races.  

But he does not want to bow humbly before "that nameless prejudice that leaps beyond all this... before that personal disrespect and mockery, the ridicule and systematic humiliation, the distortion of fact and wanton license of fancy, the cynical ignorings of the better and boisterous welcoming of the worse, the all-prevading desire to inculcate disdain for everything black, from Toussaint to the devil, — before this there rises a sickening despair that would disarm and discourage any nation save that black host to whom 'discouragement' is an unwritten word."  

The popularity of DuBois' first book, the *Souls of Black Folk* demonstrates the power of the art approach to the race problem.

Crummell, DuBois' master, in true polemic fashion struck the same keynote of hope voiced by DuBois in "A Defense of the Negro Race in

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39 Ibid.
America from the Assaults and Charges of Reverend J. L. Tucker, D. D.,
of Jackson, Mississippi." The defense was delivered in Richmond,
Virginia October, 1882. The occasion was the Protestant Episcopal
Church Congress. The fight is largely a fight of minister against
minister on the moral issues concerning Blacks. Just as DuBois analyzed
the nature of prejudice, he analyzed the nature of criticism. He was
aware that the nineteenth century was the age of criticism, and "neither
the sensitiveness nor the weakness of peoples can exempt them from its
penetrating search of its pointed structures. Criticism, however, in
order to perform its functions aright, must submit to certain laws of
responsibility, and be held by certain rules of restraint. It must deal
with facts, and not with fancies and conjectures. . . . It must avoid
coloring its facts with the hues of its own self-consciousness or
feelings. It must be rigidly just in its inferential processes.
Nothing can be more ludicrous than to make a wide generalization from
the narrow circle of a provincialism, and nothing more unjust." 40 His
final view is that the Afro-American is "a race instinct in every section
with Hope and aspiration. All springs of action are moving in it. . . .
They have great confidence, first of all, in certain vital qualities
inherent in the race." 41 Crummell delivered this address eleven years
before The Souls of Black Folk was published. Johnson was eleven years
old. The point is, there was a current of ideas in Black America

40 Crummell, "A Defense of the Negro Race in America," p. 86.
41 Ibid., pp. 124-125.
propelled by intellectuals who were never as visible as the Reconstruction politicians. They held to the premise that there were certain vital qualities inherent in the race. The last line of Johnson's commemorative ode, "Fifty Years," 1913, echoes the Crummell — DuBois' idea that the black man is a part of "some great plan."

A presentation of selected works from Johnson's canon by literary genre will demonstrate his adeptness as a literary artist. It will also prove that Johnson is a fair representative of the "Academy" artist drawn by Crummell. Though DuBois became the President of the Negro American Academy, and though the bibliography of DuBois' writing number forty-five pages at the present time, Johnson is the Renaissance man who was able to spark the "Awakening" in Afro-American letters after World War I. His original works include non-fictitious prose, prose fiction and poetry. The book of verse he edited, in a sense, a promotion tract, will also be discussed.

The non-fictitious prose works of note in the Johnson canon are his letters, critical "Prefaces" and reviews, essays or articles not in the critical vein, social history with emphasis on the history of drama, and his formal autobiography.

In 1960, Mr. George A. Towns died. For twenty-seven years he was Professor of English at Atlanta University. He and James Weldon Johnson were roommates, graduating in the class of 1894. The letters which Johnson wrote Towns were given to the Trevor Arnett Library, Atlanta University, by Mrs. Grace Towns Hamilton in 1964, as a part of the Afro-American Collection. Miles M. Jackson has selected and edited

42 "Johnson to Towns," 183.
letters to George A. Towns and Claude McKay. The Town letters which date
from December 30, 1896, to January 11, 1934, give microscopic views of
Johnson as a teacher, musician, diplomat, civil rights leader and
creative writer. The letters are valuable also for filling in intimate
details about Johnson's life at given moments. The accounts are more
accurate than the ones given twenty-five to thirty years later in Along
This Way. This is especially true of the letters written from 1906–
1913 when he served as United States Consular in Venezuela and Nicaragua.
The letters to McKay show Johnson as a mentor to the younger artist.
They discussed McKay's new book, Home to Harlem and how George Streator,
a Black, who reviewed the book for the Herald Tribune Books (March 14,
1937, p. 20), let the race down by doing nothing that could put him
"as a Negro" among the elite of reviewers. What Streator wrote was
inadequate and irrelevant. 43

Literary criticism is another kind of literature written by Johnson.
He emerges in his Prefaces and reviews as one born to judge as well as
to write. Five Prefaces and two reviews are presented to introduce him
as a critic. The Book of American Negro Poetry, 1922, 44 is introduced
by an essay on the Negro's creative genius in which the black man's
capacity for making original contributions to art and literature is set
forth. W. F. White's comment is an adequate statement to account for
the now famous "Preface..." "Mr. Johnson's book has as its chief
value... in an admirable and well written preface of some forty pages
on 'The Creative Genius of The American Negro.' In this he establishes

42 Miles M. Jackson, "Literary History: Documentary Sidelights," The
Negro Digest, 17, No. 8 (1968), 28.

44 New York: Harcourt Brace and World Inc., 1922, 1931; rpt. 1950,
1959. All references will come from the 1959 text. Hereafter cited as
ANP.
in a manner that has not been done before the rightful place which the Negro occupies in American Literature, and his contribution in folk-songs, ragtime and folk dances.\textsuperscript{45} The "Preface" to the revised edition 1931, is notable for the statement on the poets of the World War I group and younger poets who were using genuine "folk stuff" in contrast to the artificial "folk stuff" of the dialect school.

The "Preface" to \textit{The Book of American Negro Spirituals} \textsuperscript{46} 1925, was considered as the most illuminating social cultural interpretation since DuBois' famous essay on the "Sorrow Songs". There is a scholarly treatment, no doubt for the first time, of the song-poems as poetry written in some cases under the influence of African poetry. The "Preface" to the \textit{Second Book of Negro Spirituals} \textsuperscript{47} is somewhat in the nature of an analytical and historical survey which pays tribute to folk literature and art. He admonishes writers to draw fully on their racial resources and material. The "Preface" to \textit{God's Trombones} \textsuperscript{48} isolates the folk sermon as a special type of folk art and gives a history of the genre in America and its distinctive literary qualities.


The review essay "Romance and Tragedy in Harlem" is a review of Nigger Heaven by Carl Van Vechten (Alfred A. Knopf, 1928). The "Nigger" used in the title provoked Blacks to denounce the book without reading it. Johnson maintained that the author was a true artist who wrote a disquieting story; yet, it was true. In the discussion on the theme of the novel, "talent and brilliancy without stamina and patience," he mentioned his forgotten novel, The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man, as a book with the same theme. The Autobiography was re-issued the next year and received the attention it warranted. The other review, "Brown America — The Work of a Literary Craftsman," also reveals facts about Johnson's respect for literary excellence. He praises Edwin R. Embree as a literary craftsman; analyzing the style, he praises the author for his mastery of proportion, contrast, emphasis and restraint — characteristics of his best works. His other efforts as a literary critic are discussed in Chapter IX in connection with his work as an editor of the Age.

Johnson wrote essays that dealt mainly with the problems faced by black authors near the end of the Renaissance period of the 1920's in Harlem. "Race Prejudice and The Negro Artist," already mentioned, offers a new method of fighting the "Negro Problem." "The Dilemma of the Negro Author" discusses his problem of the double audience. "Negro Authors and White Publishers," has as its "prime purpose" the duty of warning

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50 Opportunity, 10 (1932), 183.  
young writers of making a fetish of their failures by thinking their work is too good — that is, portraying black life in too high a level. One of his most popular essays is "Harlem: The Culture Capital," describing Black Manhattan in story and song, its people, its problems and its future. The essay, *Negro Americans, What Now?*, is an outline on the racial situations as it existed in 1934, that pointed to the choices or ways out of the dilemma.

The book *Black Manhattan* is a social history of the "Negro" in New York City from colonial times to Harlem of the late twenties. It tells the story not readily known about the twenty-five thousand black people who were living in the heart of New York City. The book has great interest and value; it is a record of achievements in art, especially music and drama; it is an account of famous black personalities. The book is noted for its genial, colloquial style and its report on black art which was quite new to America of 1930.

*Along This Way* is the masterpiece in non-fictions. It is the story of Johnson's life and the first era of black culture in America. *Along This Way*, his formal autobiography, is his prose masterpiece in non-fiction. William Stanley Braithwaite calls it an epic of fortitude, tact, patience and perseverance, and the first work of its kind in American literature. Unlike that of Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, or even R. R. Moton, "It escapes from that category of racial

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53 New York: The Viking Press, 1934. Entered hereafter as WN.

recitals in the narrower sense, and remains the narrative of a man who for sixty years of his life has passed through an amazing social and intellectual adventure and events which lifted him steadily to a foremost place as an American citizen."  

Alain Locke gives an estimate no less laudatory than that of William Stanley Braithwaite. He writes: "Although it is the sober narrative of an outstanding individual's experience, the Johnson Autobiography is also the history of a class and of a generation. It is the story of the first generation of Negro culture, with all the struggles, dilemmas and triumphs of the advance guard of the Negro intelligentsia. Along This Way is indispensable for the understanding of the upper levels of Negro life."  

Johnson wrote only one masterpiece in fiction — The Autobiography of An Ex-Coloured Man (1912) — a novel. The protagonist, a mulatto decides to "pass" in order to live in peace as an American citizen. Alice Dunbar Nelson considers the novel as satire in its most subtle form. She sees it as the sort of satire that Swift perpetuated in Gulliver's Travels — bland, lucid and arresting by its very naivete. The Ex-Coloured Man is primarily a musician; thus, in the book we find precursors of the scholarly introductions to the books of Negro Spirituals and to God's Trombones. The Ex-Coloured Man predicted that the slave music would be the most treasured heritage of the Afro-American in 1912. The prophecy had come true by the time the novel was reprinted in 1927.  

Robert Bone considers Johnson the only true

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55 Braithwaite, 276.
56 Alain Locke "The Saving Grace of Realism," Opportunity, 12 (1934), 57 (1912; 1927; rpt. New York: Hill and Wang, 1969). All references will come from the 1969 text and will be entered hereafter as EXCM.
artist among the early black novelists. He attributes the superior craftsman-ship to his early training in the musical comedy field. 59

The early training in musical comedy was the first round of his apprenticeship as a poet. He produced three volumes of poems: Fifty Years and Other Poems (1917), 60 God's Trombones (1927), and St. Peter Relates an Incident (1935). 61 The first volume is significant in that it establishes Johnson as the second Black American Poet since Dunbar and the first Black poet of the Southern Renaissance. Included are poems in the English tradition, poems in the dialect tradition, and poems pointing the way to conscious folk poetry perfected in God's Trombones. God's Trombones, seven "Negro" sermons in verse and a prayer, is Johnson's most popular volume. It is racial at the root, but has universal appeal. As an innovative work, it is, according to Joseph Auslander's judgment, "the first considerable effort by any poet, white or black, to put down simply, passionately and powerfully the sermon sagas of his people. Milton might have done it. . . . The Wesleys were sweet psalmists. Crashaw had the lyrical intensity and the mystical fire, but he was concerned with his own soul." 62 The last volume, St. Peter Relates an Incident, is noted basically for its title poem. Most of the other poems are reprinted from Fifty Years which was out of print. Sterling Brown's critical note discussing the volume

60 Boston: The Cornhill Co., 1917.
62 Opportunity, 5 (1927), 274.
points to its innovative technique: "An Approach hitherto neglected by Negro poets is to be seen in Saint Peter Relates an Incident on the Resurrection Day. For the greater part in leisurely couplets, the poem comments ironically on American prejudices. Not at all blatant propaganda, the poem is incisive though restrained, and in the best sense witty. With its sly mockery it combines a deeply moving quality. In this most recent book are all the qualities of Johnson's best work: understanding, imagination, sincerity and poise." His legacy to Afro-Americans extends beyond the reach of his original literary creations. His collection and presentation of original artistic work by fellow Blacks is a part of the offering.

The Book of American Negro Poetry, 1922, was the first reputable volume of black verse published in America. It is a historical survey of the achievement of black poets from 1750 to the early twenties. Among the poets represented are Paul Laurence Dunbar, James E. Campbell, James D. Corrothers, William Stanley Braithwaite, James Weldon Johnson, Georgia W. Johnson, Claude McKay, Joseph S. Cotter and Anne Spenser. The revised edition, 1931, contains poems by a new group of writers as Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Sterling A. Brown, and others. This volume contained a new preface in addition to the old one, and a bibliography of collateral reading. The first volume, coming at the beginning of the Renaissance period in Harlem, added validity to the movement by offering proof to the legend of black artistic genius.

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Johnson's literary efforts began at the turn of the century. His only novel was published in 1912 anonymously, but was reprinted and made popular in 1927. His first volume of verse was published in 1917, the year the United States entered the War. As this study will reveal, Johnson had gone far in changing the direction of black fiction and poetry by 1918. He therefore owns the right to be called a precursor to the Harlem Renaissance. But he was also one of the key participants during the hey day of the movement, 1920-1930, when Black Literature experienced an "exhilarating awakening." It was as it had been in ancient Greece. The great awakening of art to freedom had taken place in the hundred years between roughly, 520 and 420 B.C. Toward the end of the fifth century, artists had become fully conscious of their power and mastery, and so had the public. An increasing number of people began to be interested in their works for its own sake, and not for the sake of its religious or political functions. Black writers in America rode on the cresent of a similar wave for the first time during the decade of the 1920's.

Recompense — for ardent labor in cultivating his own talents and personality in helping to build racial solidarity and racial pride, and in helping to establish a tradition in American literature for the Black American came to Johnson in the form of distinctive honors. The trend started with his receiving a place of honor on the occasion of his undergraduate commencement at Atlanta University 1894. Ten years later he returned to receive an honorary degree. In 1917 he received an

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honorary Litt. D. at Talladega College and in 1923, the same degree at Howard University. He became the eleventh winner of the Spingarn Medal in 1925, as "Diplomat, Poet and Public Servant." In 1927, he won the Harmon second prize for editing the Second Book of Negro Spirituals; however, in 1928, he won the Harmon Gold Medal with $400.00 for God's Trombones. 1929 brought two exceptional offers: he was allotted a Julius Rosenwald Fund Fellowship for one year to write; he was, also, a member of the American group selected to attend the third biennial conference of the American Council of the Institute of Pacific Relations in Kyoto, Japan. In 1931, he resigned as Executive Secretary of the NAACP to become the first occupant of the Adam K. Spence Chair of Creative Literature created by the trustees of Fisk University. That same year, the central branch of the NAACP honored him with a "Farewell Dinner" in New York. He was invited to serve as a Professor of Creative Writing at New York University in 1934, and held this position simultaneously at Fisk until his death. Also, in 1934, he was awarded the W. E. B. DuBois Prize of $1,000 for Black Manhattan, "adjudged the best book of prose — nonfiction written in the past three years." To conclude, on the day of his death, June 26, 1938, he was appointed as an Extension Professor of Black Literature by Dean E. George Payne of New York University.

James Weldon Johnson was a "humanist," a publicist" and a literary artist, with a difference. William Stanley Braithwaite, the redoubtable black critic of Johnson's era, interprets the blight cast on a man with that "difference." He writes: "This duality of which I speak is the duality of every gifted Negro whose physical life, by chance or circumstances of his public activities is forced into the pattern of the
eternal problem but whose spiritual life transcends that pattern and adds to the universal vision of mankind. 65 Through his heritage of Western Culture, he was "intensely human" in his aspirations, in his habits and conduct. Sporting with one Gemini twin, then with the other, he was also "intensely Black."

The factors which lead to the development of a compatible duality in Johnson's life and career stem from the "play-stage" in his cultural development. "There is a time for everything," writes Crummell, "and the wisdom of man in all ages has made youth the time of preparation as a means to a distant end." 66

65 Braithwaite, 376.
CHAPTER II

THE OLD BLOCK AND A CHIP

1802-1887

The story of James Weldon Johnson's heritage of Freedom, and the impressive advantages enjoyed in his first formative period,1 appear in the first seven chapters of Along This Way, Part I. With multiple forces working in his favor, he never felt less than a prince who could walk in honor wherever he went — that is, until he went to Atlanta University as a prep student the fall of 1887. Unlike so many black youths in the period immediately following the Civil War, Johnson had a knowledge of his ancestors and the guidance of parents who knew that growth in the life of a child is measured other than by physical stature. By the time he finished Stanton School in May, 1887, he was well on the way to becoming an intellectual in the sense that he was beginning to activate his intelligence for designed purposes.

Johnson's ancestral background furnishes the basis for the discussion of his training and development under parents who maintained the highest ideals of Anglo-American and Anglo-European society. While education can go a long way in developing a child's positive sense of

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1The years 1875-1887 form the first period. The second period, 1887-1894, include the years in Georgia. It is discussed in Chapters 8-11 of Part I, in Along This Way.
self worth, formal training is not the only recourse to the proper up-bringing of youth. The emphasis in this discussion is placed upon Johnson's attitudes and behavioral patterns that were enforced by parental guidance and environmental forces. Though the school enforces what is already present in a child's experience, evidence exists to show Johnson's elders made deliberate efforts to direct his personal experiences (not necessarily enforcing them) so that education could make a difference in his life. The diverse cultural activities sponsored as traditions in the family prepared Johnson for life as a middle class American citizen and a conscientious Afro-American citizen at the same time. And though there was a warring of the two ideals, the two souls — at last, Johnson found a way to appease the recondite warriors.

If we can envision James Weldon Johnson, in maturity, as the "tall, black soldier-angel marching alone" (described in his poem, "St. Peter Relates an Incident"), we can find credence in his role with a Fate that brought his first known ancestor to Nassau in the shadow of war. He, too, had to battle with contingent forces. Francois Dominique Toussaint — in later years called Toussaint L'Overture, "The Opener," "The First of Blacks," the greatest soldier of his race, the destroyer of Napoleon's hope for a colonial empire — is honored as the Father of Black Liberty in the New World.² The story of his victory over Napoleon's troops, in 1802, is linked with Johnson's oldest known ancestor, Hester Argo. During the revolt, a French army officer put Hester Argo and their three children on a schooner bound for Cuba to save them from the violence that

had erupted in Haiti. This woman was one of Johnson's maternal great-grandmothers (AW, p. 3).

Nothing about Hester Argo's personality is given in Johnson's family history, but she was no doubt of African descent. However, the story of her welfare is related in detail. The schooner that she was in never reached Cuba; a British privateer captured it and sailed on to Nassau, which was under British rule. The privileged life which was Johnson's heritage began with the Argo woman. Many of the refugees suffered, but she was befriended by a well-to-do Spaniard or Frenchman. They had been robbed of everything except a silver spoon the boy Stephen clutched in his hand and the clothes they wore. But in all likelihood, judging from Stephen's career, they enjoyed a life of ease and freedom (AW, p. 19).

Of Hester's children, Stephen Dillett was the one who remained in Nassau to build a distinguished career. As a youth he was apprenticed to a tailor. Next, he became the tailor of the English garrison stationed at Nassau. Later he became the leading tailor of the town. The timing of British reforms on the island brought greater opportunities to Stephen Dillett. By 1808, England had abolished the slave trade; by 1811, she made it a felony. Suffrage was granted to free Blacks in the Bahamas, and on August 7, 1833, slavery was abolished in her colonies. Therefore, by 1835, bars that had prevented Blacks from holding political office were removed. This is when Stephen Dillett left trade for politics. He stood for the Bahaman House of Assembly as a member for the city of Nassau and was elected. Rather than to seat him, the House effected a dissolution. Nevertheless, he was seated in the new House and held the office for seven consecutive years. Early in the 1830's, he was appointed Chief Inspector of Police and Postmaster of the city of Nassau.
He held these two offices jointly over twenty years until they were separated by the legislature. During the 1840's, he was made Deputy Adjutant General of Militia, thus a member of the governor's staff. Other duties include his being a trustee of the Public Band and a Vestryman of Christ Church Cathedral. At the age of eighty-four he died after having lived a full life as a public servant (AW, pp. 3-5).

Sarah Dillet was the older of Hester Argo's two daughters. No facts are given about her life in Nassau. She went to New York sometimes after the birth of Helen Louise Dillet, August 4, 1842, because Mary Dillet, the child's mother, sailed with her (AW, p. 5). Sarah married William Curtis and lived well in Brooklyn, New York as a housewife. She was a stout, lightskinned, jolly woman with a generous nature (AW, p. 47).

Hester Argo's other daughter, Mary, was quite different from her sister Sarah. She was darker but had sharper features, which of course she relished. She stayed in New York until the rumors of the Civil War made her fear enslavement in the South. Rather than to be subjected to slavery, she decided to return to Nassau with her daughter in 1861. Sometimes between 1861 and 1869, in Nassau, she married John Barton, a carpenter by trade. Hope for a better life caused her to leave Nassau for Jacksonville, Florida, with her husband in 1869 (AW, pp. 5-7).

Helen Louise Dillet, Mary Barton's only child, acquired a good education in a public school in New York. Her talent for music had developed well enough by 1860 for her to enter a singing contest. James Johnson, who was living and working in New York, heard Helen in the contest and introduced himself after the program. Her leaving for Nassau in 1861 did not stymy his interest in her. They were married
in Christ Church Cathedral April 24, 1864 (AW, p. 5). Their first child, Marie Louise, named for Christophe's queen, was born July 10, 1868, in Nassau. Helen and Marie Louise sailed to Jacksonville the winter of 1869. The unsightly, uncomfortable home and her trouble with the local Southern mores made life almost unbearable for her. She recovered in part from the strange life in a new environment but became depressed again when her baby died June, 1870. Several events in the next few years promised a life of hope. She gave birth to her first son, James William (Weldon) Johnson, June 17, 1871; and Rosamond, August 11, 1873. A trip to New York with her husband helped her to recall the days before the war. She wanted to stay in New York, but they returned to Jacksonville where in August, 1873, they moved into a new home (AW, pp. 6-11).

The account of Johnson's other great grandmother is also given in Along This Way. He says that ten years after the launching of Hester Argo's schooner, there was another "launching" — that of Sarah, the slim sharp featured African. Sarah was aboard a slave ship bound for Brazil which was captured by a man-of-war and taken into Nassau. The Africans were divided among the white inhabitants of Nassau. Actually, the ethnic identification of Captain Symonett, the man who became Sarah's master, was unknown. He might have been a buccaneer. Still, he ruled a patriarchal clan on one of the neighboring islands of Nassau. His fame has come down as a picturesque sinner who could swear in several languages. When his wife died, he married Sarah and fathered nine sons and daughters. The only one of the family accounted for is Mary Symonett, who, according to Johnson, was born November 16, 1823. The author's memory must have failed him, or the facts were misprinted, because her son James' birth (Weldon's father) is given as August 26,
1830, just seven years after her birth (AW, p. 4). The author regretted later that he did not ask his father about his family. However, he knew that his father was born free in Richmond, Virginia.

When he was a boy, James Johnson went to New York to work. Late in the 1840's, he was working at the old Stevens House in Bowling Green, New York. After Mary Barton took Helen Louise back to Nassau, he left New York for Nassau to become head waiter at the Royal Victoria Hotel. After his marriage to Helen in 1864, he engaged himself in several money-making projects. Nassau was the chief port for blockades during the Civil War; so it became a boom town temporarily. He purchased two schooners for sponge fishing, a team of horses for draying and a nice home with the intention of becoming a British citizen. The decline of prosperity after the Civil War brought a decline to James Johnson's fortunes. The Great Hurricane of 1866 brought untold damage to Nassau. He made plans to return to New York but American guests at the Royal Victoria encouraged him to seek a new start in Florida. He stayed in Nassau until 1869 but eventually went to Florida (AW, pp. 4-6).

Jacksonville at that time was small, insignificant, crude and primitive. After the Civil War, having left his wife and child in Nassau, he decided alone to purchase a house in La Villa in the western part of Jacksonville. "La Villa" did not signify grandeur. The house was old, rough, unpainted, full of cracks with, above all, gate windows made of wood. The grayish sand was six inches deep and a sore sight for a person used to the dazzling white streets of Nassau. When Helen Louise saw it, she broke down and wept as she entered the new house. The five-room dwelling which Helen disdained was replaced with a new home, but they lived on the plot for forty-three years (AW, pp. 7-8).
James Johnson came to Jacksonville as the capitalistic economy that Alexander Hamilton advocated three quarters of a century before was reaching its fulfillment. When America laid down its arms at Appomattox, the slave economy was never again to thwart the ambitions of the capitalists. For the North as well as the South, the traditional domestic economy was already a thing of the past.\(^3\) It was the time, as Vernon Louis Parrington says, when "an ambitious industrialism stood on the threshold of continental expansion that was to transfer sovereignty in America from a landed mercantile aristocracy to the capable hands of a new race of captains of industry."\(^4\)

Nathaniel Weyl considers the period between 1865-1877 to have afforded "a fortuitous and unique combination of circumstances [that] gave the Negro a golden opportunity.... He was pushed to the forefront throughout the South. ... He had the chance to establish himself as waiter and citizen and transforming himself gradually into a man of economic status if not substance. ... He had the opportunity to become a subject, and not merely a passive object on the arena of human affairs."\(^5\) Being a waiter was perhaps not taking a part in the greatest arena of human affairs, but for more than a decade James Johnson's job as headwaiter at the St. James Hotel enabled him to provide for his family and to educate his sons as gentlemen.

James Weldon Johnson grew up in Jacksonville, sheltered by his family's unique position in the Post-Civil War South as former citizens

\(^4\)Ibid.
of New York and Nassau, a British colony. His family included his maternal grandparents, his mother and father, a step-sister and a brother. It is the immediate family which is held in most universal esteem in Western Culture. The immediate family includes the husband, wife, children, and sometimes the grandparents and grandchildren. Shepard B. Clough, who has made a special study of Western values, believes that the immediate family is considered to be the basic social organization because it is responsible for the physical care of the young who will in turn help to perpetuate society. The family is responsible for the education of a child and for passing on the basic cultural attitudes and elementary cultural techniques. The family establishes traditions which assure continuity from generation to generation, subsuming social status and values. Finally, the family is a haven for the aged and infirm.

Johnson tells of the physical care which his parents and grandparents administered, but he places untold emphasis on the personal roles that his elders played in his education before he went to school. The family not only built a home library, but they read the books they purchased. The family library in Johnson's home consisted of two or three dozen books in the parlor and a large illustrated Bible on a center marble top table. At the age of five or six, his mother read to him during her spare time. She read *David Copperfield*, *Tales of a Grandfather* and *Robert the Bruce* (*AW*, pp. 12-14).

Soon after he started to school, his father encouraged him to read on his own by providing him with a personal library packed in a cardboard case. The volumes were: *Peter and His Pony*, *The Tent in the Garden*.

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Harry the Shrimper, The White Kitten, Willie Wilson the Newsboy, and
The Watermelon. The boy's pride of ownership was blighted because his
father had underestimated his stage of development as a reader. He sought
books on his own to get over his disappointment. He selected Vashti or
Until Death Do We Part (forbidden), Pickwick Papers, Waverly novels,
Pilgrim's Progress and the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm (AW, pp. 12-
14). Because of his early acquaintance with books in his home, Johnson
remained an omnivorous reader the rest of his life.

Within the family circle Johnson was also taught music and language
skills by his parents. James Johnson taught Weldon to play the guitar
before he could hold the instrument on his knees. In addition, he made
an effort to teach his sons how to speak the Spanish language by the
Olendorf Method. They learned a great number of Spanish words and the
principal Spanish verbs (AW, p. 59). Regardless of his fondness for his
grandfather, John Barton, and his uncle, William Curtis, James Johnson
was more important to Weldon than any man in his early years.

His father never went to school; his education was self-acquired.
He had a knowledge of general affairs and was familiar with the chief
figures in the history of the world. He treasured his bound volume of
Plutarch's Lives and gained a working knowledge of Spanish. He quoted
Shakespeare, remembering lines he had learned when he had frequented the
New York theaters as a young man. He played the guitar well as a solo
instrument. He enjoyed witticisms, especially his own well-turned
phrases. He became a church member in his middle forties and a Baptist
minister past fifty (AW, p. 17). Weldon liked the trip on the train to
his father's church in Fernandina, Florida, where his father gave him
and Rosamond their first salt-water fishing experience. He also had a
chance to display his cosmopolitan experiences when he talked to the Fernandina boys (AW, p. 54). He overwhelmed these boys with the glories of Jacksonville as he taunted the Jacksonville boys about the heaven that was New York.

James Weldon describes his mother as artistic. She was "a splendid singer and had a talent for drawing and writing. She was intelligent and possessed a quick though limited sense of humor. . . . She belonged to the type of mothers whose love completely surrounds their children and is all prevailing." (AW, p. 11). He played the piano very well when he was twelve, having studied under a French teacher the summer he spent in New York. He played the guitar and the violin and loved the instrumental drum, but the piano was the first musical instrument that made an impression on him. The cottage organ was replaced by a square piano when he was seven or eight. Immediately, his mother began to teach him to play in a very careful manner. She not only taught him to play the organ and the piano, but also to read before he started to school. And the development of the ability to read opened up a new world for him to explore. She continued to be a constant helper in educational and cultural activities (AW, p. 9).

Frequently, references are made about the artistic and forceful nature that his mother possessed, but he was more influenced by Mary Barton's chisled features in setting his ideal for physical beauty. She was darker than his mother and his Aunt Sarah. And no doubt, in the back of his mind, he recalled the sharp features of his father's ancestor, Sarah, the African. The best in all these women dictated his choice for a wife. He describes Grace Nail as he first saw her in 1904, while attending an amateur vaudeville performance in Brooklyn. She was with
her mother taking her first peep into adult life. He writes: "Her sensitive response to what she saw was enchanting. She was in her middle teens but carried herself like a princess. Her delicate patrician beauty stirred something in me that had been touched before, and I went away carrying a vivid picture of her in my mind" (AW, p. 203). What had been touched before was Johnson's quickening response to what was defined from the family women and his first grade teacher Miss Sampson. The first idea of school was one of discomfort because he was packed in with children who were not clean. His sense of discomfort was relieved on being moved to a larger room with cleaner children and a beautiful teacher. He prided himself as an adult on knowing that his earliest judgment upon living beauty disclosed such exacting standards (AW, p. 12).

Reading also helped to enforce impressions of beauty upon James Weldon's imagination. Tales by the Brothers Grimm made the deepest impression. "These stories," he recalled in later years, "left me haunted by the elusiveness of beauty—elusiveness, its very quintessence... When I read Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale,' the thought flashed through my mind that for one whose spirit had not been pervaded in childhood it would have been impossible even to catch the tenuous beauty in:

The same that oft-time hath
charm'd magic casements, opening on the form
of perilous seas, in fairy lands forlorn
(AW, pp. 13-14)."

The enchantment of fairy lands, that were not forlorn, is also a part of Johnson's upbringing. He and Rosamond viewed the world through stereoscopes at home and at the Barton's house and examined reserved treasures.

An assortment of views photographed in various parts of the world could be found at home and a photograph album. James Weldon was more
fascinated by the household treasures at the Barton's because they had come from Nassau. There was a photograph album, a stereoscope with views and other trinkets on a center table made of solid mahogany. On one wall was a long two-sectioned, gilt-framed mirror where a person could see himself no matter where he moved in the parlor. The mirror was flanked with portrait reproductions of Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort in royal robes. There was also a picture of the Prince of Wales dressed in the height of fashion. These pictures were larger and brighter than any of the ones at his house. His grandmother trusted him to hold one of the two candlesticks ornamented with lusters. He could look through the prismatic cutglass pendants into another world. Everything that he saw through the pendant was embroidered with crimson and purple and green and gold. He wanted to own a pendant so that he could turn it on objects to make them more beautiful than they actually were. He wanted to have an everlasting rainbow in his hand or in his pocket (AW, pp. 24-25). From the start, the reveries which Johnson immersed himself in were not too far from real life experiences. For example, the constant excitement over the gold of the prism was similar to his habit of reading the name "Bacon" on the square piano bought 1878, stamped in gold letters above the keyboard. Experiments on the piano and watching the letter were a source of what he called "rapturous pleasures" (AW, p. 9). The real sights at the St. James Hotel sent him into another world. He relates his impression: "The wide steps, the crowded verandas, the music, the soft deep carpets of the lobby; this was a world of enchantment." (AW, p. 16).

The psychologist Joseph White says that self theorists take the view that a person's experiential background must be known to understand
what a person is and why he views the world in a certain way. Of especial importance are the institutions of home, the family, and the immediate neighborhood. Some family influences have already been mentioned, including the vivid impressions stamped upon Johnson's consciousness during his early life. These impressions and others nourished a growing sensibility which eventually shaped his taste for the finer things of life even when it came to selecting the things used for creature comforts. Just as he learned the elementary facts about language, literature and music from his elders, so he learned to view and evaluate the life around him during the early years in Jacksonville, and eventually in New York, within the limited space they allowed for movement. The family homes were on the list of important places.

The home that Johnson was born in was a neat painted cottage. It had glass windows, green blinds, and flowers as well as trees in the yard. But his childish mind told him that it was a great mansion. He saw nothing in La Villa that surpassed it in splendor (AW, p. 8). When he was between twelve and thirteen years old, his grandmother, Mary Barton, took him to Brooklyn, New York, to visit her sister and brother-in-law. Brooklyn offered a sharp contrast to the provincial town of Jacksonville. The Curtis family owned their home, which was a two-story brick building with a basement and a brownstone stoop. To the boy, this house seemed palatial and he regarded his uncle as very rich. Without knowing it, the uncle nourished the boy's delusions of grandeur because he gave him a gold ring that he himself had made (AW, p. 47).

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The trip by sea to New York, the sight-seeing tours on Broadway, the ferryboat rides, the rushing crowds — all appealed to the boy's sense of enjoyment. The sensation he enjoyed on approaching the big city made him feel that he was on his way home after having been away too long. He began to feel that New York, a place his parents talked about constantly, was his second home. He says, "but being a New Yorker means being born, no matter where, with a love for cosmopolitanism" (AN, p. 48). He had that love.

Though there were bucolic scenes in Jacksonville, and frontier manners to some extent, a cosmopolitan air pervaded hotel life in the growing town. If a person peeped through the drawing room windows on the way to his room in the St. James Hotel, he would find so many New York faces that he would feel that he was not very far from the city after all. Since Johnson's father worked as an employee at the St. James Hotel, he had the chance to sustain his "cosmopolitan" practice of dining out when he was allowed to visit the hotel during the day. More than his family dwellings, James Weldon was impressed with the St. James Hotel, the most famous and fashionable of the resort hotels in Jacksonville. When the hotel was built, James Johnson, his father, was appointed as head waiter. His father was peerless and imposing in his full dress clothes and was lord of everything that fell in his reach. The job took so much of his father's time from home until he had to make special trips by invitation to become acquainted with him. His tastes for food had been catered to by Mary Barton, but the meal alone in the dining hall at the St. James put him in the position of a princeling. The waiters

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sprang to attention when his father struck a gong. He was ushered into the dining room where he was struck with wonder at the endless row of tables, the glitter of silver, china and glass. Napkins were folded to look like miniature white pyramids. The second strike on the gong put the waiters at ease. A waiter tucked a napkin under his chin and he was allowed to eat to his satisfaction and to take away a reserve quantity in a napkin (AW, p. 16). His opinion of his father went through the range of changes from the sentimental to the critical; still, he relished this lesson in forming his tastes. The importance of the tastes formed for the things he loved to eat helped to mold him as a man of taste in other civilized practices.

Whereas the part James Johnson played in establishing the position of his son as a princeling was coincidental, Helen Louise Johnson made an effort to form the acquaintance of persons in polite society. Johnson realized that a similar rule held for the relatives in New York. Only a dozen or more families constituted the first society that he knew in Jacksonville. The members had to have a background of good breeding and social prestige. Only persons who belonged to old families, regardless of financial conditions, belonged in the accepted circle. Some were more pretentious than others, but most of the houses of his playmates were very much like his own. Their desire for conformity extended to visiting each other and even to party fare. Visits were regularly returned. Parties for the children were held in the afternoon; lemonade, cake and candies, and sometimes ice cream were served (AW, p. 134). However, the tendency of the society Johnson knew as a boy to lead a restricted existence should not be confused with a present tendency to make gracious living the "be all" and the "end all" of existence. Rather, the closed
circuit was maintained to promote high ideals of service and to assure the perpetuation of high ideals from one generation to the next.

The pattern that Helen Johnson used to select the right friends for her children kept them apart from most of the neighbors in La Villa. Nevertheless, James Weldon learned to value the limited privileges granted him to travel from his home to his grandmother's house. He served as guardian when he had to lead Rosamond to Mary Barton's home, which was a two block trip from where he lived. This was a perilous journey. He had to pass Mr. Cole's house whom he feared, not because he was white, but insane. There was another house where ferocious dogs ran the length of the fence. He had to catch his brother's hand to assure him that the dogs could not bite them as long as the fences held. Avoiding Henry Arpen's store, the Dutchman who pricked his curiosity, took all of his will power. This was his first glimpse into the big world. Never were there less than a dozen black and white drunks hanging around. Lots of profane and obscene language was used. Infrequently there was a play of pistols and knives. Summer travel added the challenge of the hot sand. Their method was to run from one patch of grass to another, waiting at each until their feet cooled off before daring to set off for the next (AW, pp. 21-23). Even though the distance was only two blocks, Johnson experienced the intensity and completeness of adventure in the driver's seat.

Finally, the trip to Mary Barton's house, only two blocks from the Johnson cottage, was representative of the many and various types of trips Johnson would take in his life as he entered more consciously into a search prompted from within — hardly knowing what he was seeking for. The streets were not paved nor were there sidewalks except the veranda
around Arpen's store. When the sand of the streets was heated in summer, the Sahara Desert, to one barefooted, could not be hotter. James Weldon said that he got the thrills of a traveler going to explore the world's perilous places. The refuge points were the sparse patches of grass (AW, pp. 22-24). "But even these islands of refuge," he observed, "were not free from hazard; the grass was filled with sandspurs that pierced the feet like hot needles. Under these conditions the journey was one that called for agility, endurance and courage" (AW, p. 24).

When the journey was ended, he explored the strange backyard, the recesses of the garden and played with the dog who had reached the philosophical age. Set before him were small cakes and jumbles and benne candy, and at times a cool glass of limeade — laurels for a child's bravery. The journey had been perilous, "but the goal was worth the dangers run" (AW, p. 24).

The adventures on the road to Mary Barton's home (which lasted until she came to live in the Johnson household), gave Johnson a sense of freedom which was often subdued by her emphasis on "religion" once she found the time to persuade him to think about conversion. An indefatigable church worker and a rigid disciplinarian, she was determined to groom James Weldon, her favorite grandson, for the ministry. She won out at least for the moment because she goaded the boy into joining the church over the will of his father and the reluctance of his mother, who doubted if he was able to understand the principles of Christianity (AW, pp. 24-27). When she finished her work, she read from the Bible and an illustrated book bound in green cloth called Home Life in the Bible (AW, p. 25). Unlike Mary Barton, who strived to "save" her grandson, Sarah Curtis, her sister in Brooklyn, became the Devil's advocate in
destroying the boy's religious piety. She taught him adult pleasures such as drinking beer and playing dominoes. She had a way of crooning to herself, especially when she was winning. Her beer drinking was most provoking to Mary Barton, who as a leader of the Band of Hope for Ebenezer Methodist Church in Jacksonville, led a crusade for temperance. The boy enjoyed the beer and his grand aunt's congenial temper (AW, p. 46). The value of religious indoctrination was not lost even though Johnson became an agnostic, nor were the easy pleasures he indulged in with his aunt forgotten. He enjoyed an old revival meeting in a black church during his adult years at the height of maturity as much as he enjoyed the bohemian "gatherings" at the Marshall Hotel in New York during his career on Broadway.

Regardless of the exotic nature of Johnson's first religious experience, his conversion was a hoax at the time of confession. At the age of nine he was led to the mourner's bench during revival. Two things disturbed him: the proud Ebenezer members who gave way to something primitive during revival and the wedged in place he had for kneeling before the altar. He went to sleep. When they woke him up near the end of the services he neither opened his eyes or stirred. Farfetched allusions were rendered about his being another Paul of Tarsus. He postponed his awakening indefinitely — long enough to recount a vision to prove that he was converted. He built a vision on an artist's conception of a scene in heaven with some original embellishments. To his inward shame, he was called upon to repeat the vision many times. He was taken into the church on a Sunday morning (AW, p. 26). Johnson says that the minister "paid special tribute to [his] tender years. I was lifted up, transported. The vision I had recounted came back in
reality. I felt myself, like young Samuel, the son of Hannah, dedicated to the services of God." (AW, pp. 27-28). He could not hold such emotional heights but he exerted power to fulfill his religious obligations.

Realization of the non-holding power of religion over him bore on his consciousness when he was ten years old. As usual older people asked him what he wanted to be. "Governor of Florida," he told Elder Robinson. The Elder took him seriously; he was amused because he knew that he was using the language of the "high-minded" young hero of the Sunday school romance in whom it is set forth the practice that common virtues may enable him to become the President of the United States (AW, p. 57). Open rebellion stemmed, though, from the symbol of brotherly love, the love feast, which was a survival of early Christianity. Narrow slices of bread with the crust off were given to members as they moved among each other singing hymns, shaking hands, and exchanging pieces of bread that were to be eaten. There was also wine in a "love" cup. The pinches of bread came from sweaty hands as white dough. Many persons reached a high emotional peak and wept and slobbered in the cup from which all had to drink (AW, p. 40). He concluded that "Whatever impulse of brotherly love that rose in [his] heart was routed by the revolt in [his] stomach against actually participating in the feast" (AW, p. 40). The unsanitary practices finally produced reluctance, doubt and rebellion. He began asking himself questions which were frightening; he groped within the narrow boundaries of his own knowledge and experience and in the Bible for answers. He could not turn to his father. He was alone in [his] questionings and doubts that went deeper than mere recalcitrance; and alone [he] had to fight his way out. At fourteen [he] was skeptical" (AW, p. 40).
Atlanta University is a missionary founded school, but he entered his freshman year an avowed agnostic. He was, then, well grounded in the arguments of Paine and Ingersoll and was not an easy opponent. He admitted that "[t]he best retort the proselytizers might have made, but did not, was that I had never been converted" (AW, p. 30). Finally, Johnson was sure that his success as a race agitator was due to his knowledge of religion before race.

Johnson's belief is that man, "instead of being in the special care of a Divine Providence, is a dependent upon fortuity and his own wits for survival in the midst of blind and insensate forces. But to stop there is to stop short of the truth. For mankind and for the individual, this state... is charged with meaning... [t]hat is clearly revealed is the fate that man must continue to hope and struggle on.... [H]e must... let the idea of God mean to him whatever it may" (AW, pp. 413-414). This view breaks with the view of many blacks, especially the ones living in the decades immediately after slavery. Most Afro-Americans of that period had a fatalistic conception of life derived from their view of history as theodicy.9 Furthermore, Thorpe writes, "When he could not draw faith and hope from his social environment, the Negro could turn to this teleological conception of history and life and find consolation. If this fatalism has been stultifying on the lives of some, it has not been so on the lives of many others. For the lives of R. R. Moton, James Weldon Johnson, Booker Washington, DuBois and most other race leaders

attest to helping fate along. Negroes have shared confidence in the Protestant gospel of work and individualism.\textsuperscript{10}

For Johnson, from the days of early youth, he worked. Very often he is dismissed as just another member of "The Establishment" by new disciples of Blackness. At other times, he is pictured as a sensitive artist without any mention of his journeyman days in baseball, manual labor, and in writing, before he entered Atlanta University the fall of 1887. He was not just "urbane and soft spoken."

During his school days at Stanton school, he learned to play baseball and eventually — worked for athletic glory. He read a weekly publication called Sporting Life which was devoted chiefly to baseball. He studied hard to master "inside baseball." Before he left Stanton Elementary School, 1887, one of the pitchers on the "Cuban Giants", the crack professional team of New York, imparted to him the secret of the art of curve pitching. He gained control of a wide out-curve, a sharp in-shoot, a slow and tantalizing "drop" and a deceptive "rise." He practiced with Sam Grant, forming the battery for their nine, "The Domestics." He won local fame as a pitcher because he was the only local black boy who could do the trick (AW, pp. 36-37). After he went to Atlanta University he continued to play baseball, but the Jacksonville experience marked him as an innovator.

The game of baseball is a sport that gains publicity for the player if he performs his stunts with sure skill. Common labor, with all of its invigorating action, is looked down upon as being unpopular work. James Weldon's decision to become a laborer on his own surprised Mary Barton. But there was a reason for his expression of independence. He was still

\textsuperscript{10}Thorpe, p. 132.
wearing short pants in 1885; the style of pants which his pastor wore helped him to decide that it was time for him to exert his prerogative to emulate the pastor. His pastor, Reverend Swearingen, turned up in a pair of "Spring-Bottom" trousers which were extremely popular at the time. These pants appealed to him as the acme of elegance; so he decided that he had to have a pair of long pants in that sailor styled cut. His grandmother wanted him to become a preacher and encouraged him because it meant that he was following the clerical example. He was already working for fifty cents a day in Mr. Mott's grocery store. At that rate, he would have to work a half year for the pants, so he decided to look for another job. He walked around to Laura street and watched men working on the foundation for a new house. The building was being erected by Hart and DeLions, a firm of black contractors. He knew Mr. Hart, so he walked up to him and asked for a job. He was hired to take bricks to the masons. Whenever he weakened, he thought about the pants and summoned renewed energy. As a brick carrier he was paid $2.00 a week, and as a driver of the cart $3.00, earning about forty dollars during the summer (AW, pp. 52-53). The training in baseball and as a laborer helped to establish the pattern of multiple and concurrent activities. Besides, the dream again became a reality.

An appreciable move toward the development of leadership came with James Weldon's chance to form an ambition that led to writing. In 1884, while in Brooklyn, he began writing under the influence of a teacher. He went around with a notebook industriously taking down a long list of the monuments to great men, names, dates and deeds. He attributes this method to the influence of a teacher because he himself disdained cataloguing statistical details (AW, p. 49). However, the next
influence, work on the Times-Union, Jacksonville's morning paper, left him with disciplined work habits and the desire to write, and to edit a newspaper.

Stanton's principal was asked to recommend a boy to deliver papers. Johnson took the job though it meant leaving home at 4 a.m. to fold the papers. He worked in several capacities on the paper, beginning in 1886, until he went to Atlanta University in 1887. To begin with, he was office boy to the editor, Charles H. Jones, who later became editor of The New York World. Next, he held copy for proofreaders in the job office. In addition, he became an assistant in the mailing room where papers were wrapped and addressed to out of town subscribers and dealers (AW, p. 56). The value of the experience can be estimated in the new work habits. The camaraderie at the office was different from that at school because the work involved a common purpose and a definite object (AW, p. 55). With the pants, he had worked for himself and for a material object. Now he could evaluate the worth of the new work. He asked: "what sort of morning would it be in Jacksonville if the Times-Union failed to appear?" (AW, p. 55). He was caught up in the spirit of being a part of the greatest newspaper in Florida and in a new ambition which needed action and intellect for operation.

What can be more American than a young man preparing himself for the profession of writing by working on a newspaper? Countless American writers have found their way as writers through this medium. Stephen Crane, William Dean Howells, Melvin Tolson and Thomas Wolfe are a few who came to mind. Johnson's work on the Times-Union did inspire him to found and edit his own paper, The Daily American, almost a decade later. He and a few close associates kept the paper going for eight months.
His bitterness over the failure led him to denounce the suggestion of establishing business enterprises in Jacksonville for Blacks. He made the statement that the only sound investment he could think of for the moment was a black cemetery because Blacks had to die, had to be buried and with few exceptions buried in black graveyards (AW, p. 139).

The bitterness Johnson experienced because of his first defeat in public life and the derogatory statements made against the establishment of black business enterprises indicate that his desire to serve the race was far from being commensurate with his understanding of the Black Problem though he was aware that it existed. In his anger, he was responding to a feeling of frustration that he himself did not understand until later years. Local Blacks wanted the paper but they lacked the means to support it. Robert A. Bone states that "every American Negro responds, at some level of his being, to two apparently disjunctive cultural traditions."¹¹ Never subjected to the brutal isolation of chattel slavery, Johnson's ancestors learned the rules of the dominant culture. They identified with the lifestyle of that culture. Yet, some loyalty remained for their African heritage because they could not change their black souls.

Far in the background of Johnson's mind during the formative years, the need to use his own reality must have vied with the need to prove himself the equal to any American. The years taught him to draw a sharp line between his "given identity" and his "achieved identity." He was able to gain vivid impressions of black life as he grew up in Jacksonville. No matter that his mother restricted his play and that neither his mother

¹¹ Robert A. Bone, "Ralph Ellison," in Anger and Beyond, p. 107.
nor his father taught him anything directly about race, he amassed facts and observed activities that brought him in contact with the major sources of Black Culture. And the definition of culture in this context "is simply the way people live, as it is reinforced by memory."  

Let us begin with Johnson's impressions of Blacks during the period when he was growing up in Jacksonville until 1887. No attempt is made to follow his progressive thoughts from year to year, but rather to highlight some of the more dramatic features of his rich experiences in the diverse culture.

He says that his vague, early impressions constituted what might be called an unconscious race-superiority complex. All of the jobs that seemed interesting to him, during that stage, were done by black men. They drove the horse and mule teams; they built houses; they laid the bricks; they painted the buildings and the fences; they loaded and unloaded the ships (AW, p. 21). They were the men of power in everyday life. Their ardent labor led the young Johnson to believe that he would become a driver as an adult, holding the reins over "big beasts" — horses and mules (AW, p. 57).

While growing up, he noticed that the black men in Jacksonville performed important civic duties. There were black city policemen, members of the city council, and a paid fire department. There was a Justice of the Peace and a Judge of the Municipal Court. Many of the best stalls in the city market were operated by Blacks. Davis and Robinson, a firm of commission merchants, were land stewards for the Clyde Steamship Company (AW, p. 41). Therefore, he observed black men who formed a

necessary part of the labor force that aided in the operation of local civic work.

He was impressed with the performance of Negro professionals as well as the more ordinary workmen as he grew up in Jacksonville. His acquaintance with several group activities enforced the idea of cooperative action as a necessary boon to successful performance. "The Cuban Giants," a black professional team of New York, originally organized from the waiters at Ponce de Leon Hotel in St. Augustine, Florida, were men of heroic stature in Johnson's view. He held particular reverence for the heroes of the diamond, Fred Dunlap and Dan Brouthers. The "Giants" played professional ball in the North in the summer. For a number of seasons they worked as waiters in the winter in the St. Augustine hotels and played ball to entertain the guests. This team, mentioned before, set Johnson on the road to athletic glory (AW, p. 36).

He experienced distinct pleasure watching the performance of the black bands as he grew up. The Union Coronet Band with Martin Dixon, a Civil War drummer boy, impressed him most. Not only was the leading brass band in Jacksonville made up of Blacks, but so was every good brass band in Florida. On seeing a review of the state militia (all white) at the state fair, he observed that every contingent in the review marched behind a black band (AW, p. 57). When he heard Martin Dixon, he could not see how life could offer anything happier than marching behind the blaring brass beating drum, inspiring every boy in town (AW, p. 57). He eventually lost his childhood ambition to be a drummer; but to the end of his life the drums never lost their tumultuous effect on him.
Another group of Blacks became familiar to Johnson through his exploits as a reader. While his brother Rosamond and his mother visited in New York the summer of 1885, he found a book entitled, *Music and Some Highly Musical People*, a compilation of biographical sketches of a number of black musicians including Blind Tom, The Black Swan, and others who were less popular. In the back were various musical compositions by black composers; a favorite number in march form, "Welcome to the Era," became James Weldon's favorite piece for the piano. His ambition was to gain parity with Rosamond in piano playing by mastering this piece.

Rosamond's repertory of six or eight new pieces, performed with the skill of a professional musician, "snuffed out" his future as a pianist. They considered the piano as the greatest instrument, so yielding to Rosamond was difficult for James Weldon, whose ambitions were burning high. Yet, he gave over to Rosamond, turning to the guitar, which he could master and the violin, which did not attract his brother. Without a doubt, the discovery of the biographies of the black composers opened his eyes to artistic work of black men. Yielding to Rosamond had its value, too. Years later, he had to yield to more powerful antagonists than his brother. At last, James Weldon served throughout life as the frontispiece for the Johnson brother, but Rosamond was the musical genius.

Many professional men left their mark on the growing boy in one way or the other. Some of the men who impressed him were Dr. Darnes, Reverend Culp, Professor Artrell, and the orator, Frederick Douglass. When Johnson was ten years old "a strange being came to Jacksonville," the first black doctor. The strangeness wore off as the doctor visited the Johnson home and taught the brothers the fun and sport of fishing (AW, p. 41).
Reverend D. W. Culp, pastor of a local Presbyterian church, distin-
guished himself when prominent black citizens represented the race at the Garfield Memorial services. They sat on the St. James Hotel veranda and participated equally with the whites in the celebration. The prayer was delivered by Reverend Culp, who prayed for thirty-five or forty minutes, covering a wide range of topics. The prayer, long and tedious, Johnson recalled, summarized the affairs of this terrestrial globe and offered God's specific directions for working out the difficulties and carrying on (AW, p. 45). Perhaps the idea for "Listen Lord," one of the poems in his celebrated volume, God's Trombones, planted itself in his subconscious mind at the memorial services for Garfield.

Reverend Culp also served as principal at Stanton School. As a well educated man, he did not know how to run the school though he knew how to preach well. The new principal, William Artrell, a West Indian, had been trained in the English public school system and stood well as an administrator, a good teacher, and a strict disciplinarian. With the help of Helen Louise Johnson, the assistant principal, Stanton school began to prosper (AW, pp. 61-62). Artrell's efforts put an end to the go-as-you please policy at Stanton School.

Of all the memorable experiences of Johnson's life and the myriad impression of ancestors, relatives and men of note, it was Frederick Douglass who gave directive significance to his life just at the time when he was mature enough to take an intellectual interest in things. He knew Douglass' story because he had heard a great deal of talk about him, and, had read the Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, his autobiography. He read it with the same intensity with which he had
read about his earlier heroes, Samson, David, and Robert the Bruce (AW, p. 60). He looked forward to hearing his speech to be made at the Sub-Tropical Exposition, as more than fulfilling the needs of "glamorous curiosity." Johnson records his view in the following words: "I looked forward to his coming with more than the glamorous curiosity with which I had looked forward to the coming of General Grant in 1877. . . . I wanted to see him, but more, I wanted to hear him speak and catch his words" (AW, p. 60). The scene was similar to the Atlanta Exposition held in Atlanta nine years later, though on a lesser scale. He described Douglass as "a tall, straight, magnificent man with a glistening white mane, who instantly called forth in one form or another Napoleon's exclamation when he first saw Goethe, 'Behold a Man!'" (AW, pp. 60-61). He continues by relating his feelings on seeing and hearing Douglass: "As I watched and listened to him, agitator, editor, organizer, counselor, eloquent advocate, co-worker with great abolitionists, friend and adviser of Lincoln, for a half century the unafraid champion of freedom and equality for his race, I was filled with a feeling of worshipful awe" (AW, p. 61).

Given the power of incidence, Johnson's personal observations and impressions which encouraged him to emulate Blacks who played baseball or in the band might have been enough to temper his life with the Black Experience. A closer examination of some other experiences with racial matters reveals that Johnson was in touch with the prime sources of Black Culture. Dr. Arthur L. Tolson considers Africa, slavery, the South, Emancipation, northern migration and white racism as the major sources of Black Culture. First, Africa furnished the gift of Blacks to the New World for three hundred and fifty years. Second, slavery
resulted in anti-white attitudes and a yearning for freedom. Third, the subculture of the South gave rise to the black man's attitudes and cultural styles which reflect the patterns of the region. These grew out of slavery as well as the Emancipation Proclamation. Fourth, the migration of Blacks from the South to the North and West gave rise to the black ghetto in lieu of the black belt. Fifth, white racism became a deterrent force in the move to assimilate Black Americans into the main culture. Although Black Culture is largely a product of the Americanization process, Dr. Tolson considers Africa as the first main contributing source.13

"Issues of Living History" may serve as a useful title for the discussion of Johnson's affinity with slavery, the South, Emancipation, Northern migration, white racism and Africa during the first formative period of his life.

General Ulysses S. Grant visited the city of Jacksonville in 1877, the same year Federal troops were withdrawn from Florida. Weldon, then a school boy six years of age, filed pass General Grant on the hotel veranda as he was told to do. Something within him prompted action, so he extended his hand timidly toward the General, who took it for an instant. The sense of his own importance seemed not mere fantasy but reality (AW, p. 43). Through the tales of ex-soldiers he had caught some of the glamour of Grant's great military fame. Abraham Lincoln was the other name connected with the Civil War, but General Grant was the greater hero to Johnson because he (Grant) was President when he was born, so the name was sounded frequently in his ears (AW, p. 42).

Stanton School, built shortly after Emancipation by the Freedmen's Bureau, and later turned over to the county as a public school, was named after Lincoln's Secretary of War. Johnson eventually became principal of this school, which he attended until he went to Atlanta University in 1887.

There were other evidences of the Civil War in Jacksonville. Johnson was acquainted with some of the men in the Florida militia, a remnant of a black regiment of the Union Army in Jacksonville, during Reconstruction. His father knew most of them. It was from them he heard the talk. By searching around, every boy found souvenirs of the War as rusty bayonets, brass buttons and old belts. As for Johnson, he expressed interest in the tales about the fighting rather than what the fighting was about. At the time, it meant little to him that he was born a decade after the most momentous decade in the history of the nation (AW, p. 42). Without his knowing it, the base for his career as a Republican politician was being formed during this period.

The vestiges of slavery and the War, which brought wonderment to Johnson and his childhood friends, were not manifested that way for all Blacks in his locality. The life style familiar to him was atypical in the South as a whole during the post-Reconstruction period. His awareness of the differences in himself and other children brought aversion on one hand and admiration on the other. The unpleasant condition in his primer class that he sat in made him aware of the unkempt children from homes unlike his own. Not knowing the reason for some children going without shoes, he envied them because they could go barefooted. Because these children did not own shoes and stockings, they could partake of the animal delights forbidden him because of his mother's
rules (AW, p. 24). He did not experience deprivation until after he resigned his job as United States Consul to the Azores in 1913. The experience of economic deprivation for a short period gave him first hand experience for building his Empire in the South as an NAACP official in later years.

Economic deprivation sent masses of southern Blacks to northern industrial centers during and following World War I. Before the Great Migration — before Harlem became a black metropolis — Blacks went North to improve their chances or to broaden their prospects in any area whatever. Johnson's grandmother, Mary Barton, went to New York before the Civil War with her sister Sarah as well as Helen Louise Dillet and James Johnson. Mary Barton wanted her daughter to have a proper education; James Johnson went to work and to enjoy the cultural advantages available in the city. James Weldon began the trek to New York when he was about a year old. His trip there at the age of twelve convinced him that he was a New Yorker by choice. Before the mass of Southerners went to New York to change their fortunes, the Johnson brothers had won fame and fortune in New York and gloried in adventures out of the United States. After Johnson's completed career as a diplomat, he made his home in Harlem. Migration of Blacks, during any period in American history, especially from South to North, furnished "a new vision of opportunity, of social and economic freedom, of a spirit to seize, even in the face of an extortionate and heavy toll, a chance for the improvement of conditions... In the Negro's case /it was/ a deliberate flight from Medieval America to modern."

The foregoing discussion on the living issues of history indicates that Johnson was not able to assess the value of the experiences relating to black life at the time he participated in them. For example, he met T. Thomas Fortune in Brooklyn, New York, when he was twelve years old. Fortune was writing his first book at the time, entitled *Black and White, Land, Labor and Politics in the South*, an economic study of the race problem; but he had no conception of how great a man Fortune was until he grew older. He identified him in Brooklyn as a man who had visited their home in Jacksonville (AW, p. 48).

There were early experiences that pierced his consciousness with a high degree of celerity. Johnson's first unpleasant experience with whites had to do with the destruction of his toy drum. White playmates, older than he was, told him that they would show him where the sound came from. The playmates vanished when his mother came on the scene, but he kept turning the incident over in his mind (AW, p. 32).

The streak of rebellion against undemocratic practices against Blacks in America that came in later years followed a pattern of actions involving his mother. Racially she was a non-conformist and a rebel. Two incidents show that she had no adequate conception of her "place" because the weight of race was comparatively light in New York of her childhood and youth and Nassau during her early adulthood. It took a long time for her to even become reconciled to life in the South.

Two incidents of silent protest, one related to him, the other witnessed by him, set the mode for his war against oppression. Not knowing any better, Helen Louise Johnson went to the St. John's Episcopal Church to worship because she was an Episcopalian. She had sung in the choir of Christ Church Cathedral; her voice was well trained
and could be heard above all others in the St. John Congregation. She was asked to worship elsewhere because she was black. She never set her foot in an Episcopal church again. Ten years later, in Ebenezer Methodist Episcopal Church, she conducted another one-man demonstration. Lemuel Livingston, a student at Cookman Institute, was appointed as a cadet to West Point. He passed his written examinations, and the Blacks were exultant. The members of Ebenezer Church gave a benefit that netted several hundred dollars. The congregation were proud of themselves and Livingston. The examining officers rejected him because of poor eyesight. The news that he was not admitted to West Point was given out in the Sunday service at Ebenezer. The minister announced "America" as the hymn to follow the announcement. His mother refused to sing it (AW, p. 11). Long after Reconstruction Jacksonville was known far and wide as a good town for Blacks. The leading white families like the L'Engles, Hartridges, and Daniels who controlled the town were sensitive to the code, noblesse oblige (AW, p. 45). The state of affairs could not preclude chances of discrimination among people who were not familiar with the code.

The complexity of the Black Problem is symbolized by Helen Louise Johnson's actions. She adopted the life style of the white middle class society that rejected her. All the time that she worked to keep American middle class virtues intact, she was also working to keep the ancestral spirit alive by making the trips to Nassau as a family tradition. James Weldon was initiated into the Nassau voyage by sea, 1875.

The trip to Nassau was made in a small two-masted schooner named the Ida Smith, sailed by a black man. He remembered the odd-looking women who came to visit them with trays or baskets on their head full of
mangoes, guavas and other tropical fruits. He could not understand their words as they cried out while peddling their goods, but he was struck by the sound of their chants. He also remembered the dazzling white streets under the sun and their paleness under the moon. Adventure came, however, in "Little Africa." Set within the capital was an African village where a remnant of former slaves lived in primitive fashion under their own chief (AW, pp. 39-40). He writes: "When we got to the village, I went around with my elders looking at curious people, peeping into their huts, seeing them dance under a large hut-like pavilion in the center of the village to the beating of drums — drums of many sizes, drums, drums, drums" (AW, p. 40).

Vestiges of "Little Africa" could still be found in Jacksonville among the older Blacks. "Aunt" Elsie Andrews and her sister Venie, who lived near the Johnsons, held on to the remnants of their African heritage sometimes in apparel, but always in their manner of worship at St. Paul's Church, a neighborhood church. They were fond of the Johnson boys and gained permission to take them to church as honored guests. Here is Johnson's description of a ring shout, the most interesting part of the services:

The shouters formed a ring, men and women alternating, their bodies close together, moved round and round on shuffling feet that never left the floor. With the heel of the right foot they pounded out the fundamental beat of the dance and with their hands clapped out the varying rhythmical accents of the chant; for the music was, in fact, an African chant and the shout an African dance, the whole pagan rite transplanted and adapted to Christian worship. Round and round the ring would go: one, two, three, four, five hours, the very monotony of sound and motion inducing an ecstatic frenzy (AW, p. 22).

After washing and ironing all day, Aunt Venie, one of the sisters, never missed a ring shout. Even when Johnson was not attending the services
at St. Paul's Church, he could hear the "ring shouters." He says that "the weird music and the sound of the thudding feet set the silences of the night vibrating and throbbing with a vague terror" (AW, p. 22). He recalls: "Many a time I woke suddenly and lay a long while strangely troubled by these sounds, the like of which my great-grandmother Sarah had heard as a child" (AW, p. 32).

Ebenezer, the family church, followed an order of service on Sundays that represented the will of "enlightened" Blacks. Johnson experienced nothing less than shock when he attended church during a revival meeting. He writes:

In these revival meetings the decorum of the regular Sunday services gave way to something primitive. It was hard to realize that this was the congregation which on Sunday mornings sat quietly listening to the preacher's exegesis of his text and joining in singing conventional hymns and anthems led by a choir. Now the scene is changed. The revivalist rants and roars, he exhorts and implores, he warns and threatens. The air is charged. Overlaid emotions come to surface. A woman gives a piercing scream and begins to 'shout'; then another and another. . . . Sinners crowd to the mourner's bench. Prayers and songs go up for the redemption of souls. Strapping men break down in agonizing sobs, and emotionally strained women fall out in a rigid trance. A mourner 'comes through' and his testimony of conversion brings a tumult of rejoicing (AW, pp. 25-26).

Johnson was nine years old when he attended the revival meeting, but he was never to forget the display of raw emotions nor his own feelings of exultation. The tributes paid to Africans and the Afro-Americans in his art works are testimonies from a Black Soul.

Johnson learned more from his elders than has been mentioned in this discussion. Among other things, he learned to value the gift of a family of four generations. He learned to admire the eloquence portrayed by John Barton, the efficiency of William Curtis, the industry of Mary Barton, and the congeniality of Sarah Curtis. After he shed the illusion
of his father's Kingship at the St. James Hotel, he still admired his practical ideas about life. While he was in the throes of religious doubt, he could not turn to his father, but he still saw "a high and rigid sense of honor" revealed in his personality (AW, p. 16). His mother, who had given him the firmest base for the development of his artistic talents, was also the first granter of justice in his life. He learned from her that one who protested might also have to make concessions (AW, p. 15). His grandmother, Mary Barton, could not win him over to the ministry, but her efforts to instill religion as a guiding principle in his life won over in that his masterful work, God's Trombones which intones the exultations of the old revival preacher for the artistic enjoyment of all people.

Many children of middle class families in America never meet the problems of mundane existence along with their grooming for polite society. In this respect, Johnson held a distinct advantage over some of his contemporaries because he knew life from the grassroots up. He learned his rules of the game of life, perhaps playing baseball. But he also learned how to earn money by working as a menial. Having observed black men in positions of all kinds, he could boast of having participated in jobs of all kinds. At the Times-Union office his tasks had ranged from carrying papers to serving the editor while he dreamed of becoming a writer.

While Johnson was sometimes consciously touching the living issues of Black Culture during the first formative period in his life, he was "oblivious of the impact of race and its permeation of the whole American social organism" (AW, p. 32). He was more impressed with democracy as it was practiced at Stanton School in boy's fashion without hypocrisy and
cant (AW, p. 34). New experiences in Georgia (the second formative period in his life, 1887-1894), were destined to cloud the lens of his rose-tinted glasses as he walked the shadowy roads of a world not guarded by his elders. New experiences would teach him that hypocrisy and cant bore relevance to all the "holy of holies" he had learned to revere in American life.
CHAPTER III

ON THE OPEN DECK

1887–1894

From Fall 1887, to Spring 1894, James Weldon Johnson attended Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia, except the 1888-1889 term when yellow fever raged in Jacksonville, Florida. These years constitute his second formative period. He was sixteen years old when he began his college preparatory work, which came as a challenge; but he was still in the plastic state of development. He had grown from childhood to youth in Jacksonville among his family and acquaintances; he would develop from youth to early manhood in Georgia under the guidance of strange leaders and his own hand.

The abrupt change from the home of his childhood days to the New World of university life began to alter Johnson’s viewpoints about all matters, but especially race. He learned many things about Blacks in Florida, Nassau and New York during the first formative period by observation and through experience. The dominant impressions of dignity, pride, efficiency and talent portrayed by the Blacks he knew at home were sustained at Atlanta University. But in addition, he gained wider knowledge in Georgia about the phenomenon known as the race problem. At school he began to learn the ideal manner of coping with the problem; in the backwoods of Georgia, he began to learn how to live with the problem.
A chance description of the positive and negative modes of the Black Experience is given in Johnson's account of his trip to Haiti, in 1920, when he was Field Secretary of the NAACP. While his aim was to gather information and shades of opinion from persons who were anxious to restore Haitian independence, his chief desire was to make the trip to Christophe's citadel in Cap-Haitien. The citadel, built in the first decades of the nineteenth century, is situated on top of a mountain more than three-thousand feet high which dominates the fertile plains of Northern Haiti. It was designed to be a fortress, a last stronghold against the French if they attempted to retake Haiti. As Johnson stood on the highest point, he said: "I was impressed with the thought that if ever a man had the right to feel himself a king, that man was Christophe when he walked around the parapets of his citadel" (AW, p. 352). Retracing the path of King Christophe, Johnson was over-awed with the massiveness of the citadel and the glory of it because it was born in the mind of a black man. Johnson's actual experience of walking the parapet is in a fashion analogous to his strolling in high places, that is, exulting in all of the unusual experiences available to him as an Atlanta University student.

Johnson's return trip from Haiti on the open deck of a ship loaded to the gunwales with rough artisans bears a comparative relation to his trip, 1891, to the backwoods of Georgia. As a deck passenger with no stateroom, no bunk nor steamer chair, he was unable to shut out the loud swearing and the broken-record chant, "never let a nigger pick up a tool." (AW, p. 355). He gave attention to what they said because it presented an interesting and important view of life that he was unfamiliar with. Certainly, he had the right to lament, but instead he
turned the bitter experience into a lesson to be remembered. On the "open deck" — in a new situation as a teacher in a rural community where Blacks were subject to degradation — Johnson, the young man, considered the experience necessary to an understanding of the true meaning of blackness as a deterrent to human growth and development.

The old Atlanta University spirit of race, equality and human rights introduced Johnson to new ideals of service. Other matters occupied some of his time, but by far, in the period from 1887-1894, the most important advance made in his quest was the establishment of a special ethnic group interest. He met contingent forces of the "negatives": "Black oppression, Black disunity or instability." In Hampton, Georgia. To his advantage, the positive and constructive notions of the Black Experience, "Black self-determination, Black unity and liberation," were instilled in him at the university and gave him a weapon to meet the opposing forces that threatened to annihilate the weaker members of the race.

The Atlanta University founders built up an enlightened leadership within the race. Alain Locke, a black scholar and philosopher, contends that "race is a closer spiritual bond than nationality and group experience deeper than an individual's." He continues: "Here we have beauty that is born of long suffering, truth that is derived from mass emotion and founded on collective vision. The spiritual search and discovery which is every artist's (and would be artist's) is in this case more

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2Ibid.
than personal; it is the epic reach and surge of a people seeking their
group through art.4 That Johnson felt the need to begin a new round
of preparation for whatever he would do as an AU student and graduate
is verified in these words: "I began my mental and spiritual training
to meet and cope not only with the hardships that are common, but with
planned wrong, concerted injustice and applied prejudice" (AW, p. 78).
He was at the university only a short time before he began to get an
insight into the ramifications of race prejudice and an understanding
of the race problem. He could not have avoided being influenced by
race because the students talked "race." "Race was the subject of essays,
oration and debates. Nearly all that was acquired mentally and
morally was destined to be fitted into a particular system of which
race was the center" (AW, p. 66).

During the orientation period at AU, Johnson became more perceptive
about himself. He began to think of life as it touched him from with­
out and moved him from within. His reflections naturally dwelled on
the training that his parents had provided for him in relationship,
especially, to the problem. He realized that as an American black he had
been fortunate because he had been reared free from undue fear or esteem
for white people as a race. If that had been the case, the deeper im­
plications of prejudice might have become a part of his subconscious
mind. He expressed gratitude for having been spared the fuller impact of
the situation during his formative years. Now his apprehensions could
be more or less objective (AW, p. 78).

Initiation in the "arcana of race" gave Johnson's education at
Atlanta University a certain coloring. He perceived that education by
set rules meant several things. First, preparation to meet the tasks
ahead of him as a black man. Second, to realize the peculiar respon-
sibility due his own group. Third, to comprehend the application of
the American democracy to black citizens. Before coming to Atlanta, he
had been entirely ignorant of these conditions and requirements. "Now,"
he admitted, "they rose before me in such magnitude as to seem absolutely
new knowledge" (AW, p. 66).

Atlanta University held a conception of education that placed ser-
vice in the foreground. The students were trained for service. Carter
G. Woodson complained in the early thirties that in respect to develop-
ing the masses the Negro had lost ground in recent years. In 1880 when
the Negroes had begun to make themselves felt in teaching, the attitude
of the leaders was different than it was in 1933. At that time men went
off to school to prepare themselves for the uplift of a downtrodden
people. In our time Negroes go to school to memorize certain facts to
pass examinations for jobs. After they obtain these positions they pay
little attention to humanity. Students at AU, on the other hand, knew
they were being educated for life work as underpaid teachers. At Atlanta
University, the ideal constantly held before the students was education
as a means of living, not of making a living. To conclude, Johnson says
that "it was impressed upon [them] that taking a classical course would
make [them] better and nobler, and of higher value to those [they] should
have to serve." (AW, p. 122). So it was not amiss that the Spingarn gold
medal was awarded to Johnson, 1925, as author, diplomat and public
servant (AW, p. 378).

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5Carter G. Woodson, The Mis-Education of The Negro (Washington,
"By service we [The black Americans] may prove sufficient unto the task of self-development and contribute our part to modern culture," writes Woodson. That is why Kelley Miller named Hampton Institute and Tuskegee as "Missioners of the masses". Yet the ultimate aim of the leaders at these two schools, the way Miller states it, gives insight into the working philosophy of men in the vanguard who crossed Johnson's path at AU. Miller believes that "in the scheme of human development, the mind must quicken, stimulate, uplift and sustain the masses." If we substitute the word "hero" for leaders and "students" for "masses," reading — heroes as missionaries quicken, stimulate, uplift and sustain the masses, we image the men who influenced Johnson from 1887-1894. Several stand out in perfect relief. To begin with he met a West Indian cobbler who served as his tutor the fall of 1888. He taught Caesar and Cicero but also applied collateral knowledge about Roman power and Roman politics in their time (AW, p. 93). Next, Dr. T. O. Summers came into his life as the first man of wide culture the winter of 1889. He became interested in Weldon as an individual more than as an employee despite James Johnson's disdain for his flightiness. He also became Weldon's mentor as a writer (AW, p. 98). Two white AU professors, Dr. Hincks and Professor Chase, helped him to expand in two different ways: the first encouraged his writing, the other encouraged his growth in music as a member of the Quartet (AW, p. 103). Once he met B. T. Washington in the printing office where he worked under Dr. Hincks (AW, p. 102). And he met Mr. Woodward, Sidney Woodard's brother, in Hampton, Georgia, who used a farmer-idiom that had wit and original phraseology (AW, p. 116). This

introduced him to the language of the black folk.

James Weldon did not wait to test his new knowledge after finishing college; he took several jobs that helped to develop his artistic skill in industrial arts and the discipline he needed as a classroom teacher. The ideals set by his father and mother, he realized were warring ideals. His father wanted him to take a trade. Momentarily his desire won out for in the summer of 1890, after middle prep, he was hired as a wood-turner. He had to assist in the production of banisters, corner blocks and other pieces used for ornamentation in a building. A near accident which could have taken his life did not destroy his interest in the job. Instead, it made him more anxious to learn how to produce the products with ease. He started his lathe at too high a speed on an eight by eight, five feet long, to turn a newel post. After the accident, he put it back on the lathe and kept it at its lowest speed until he had taken the rough corners off. "There was a deep satisfaction," he admitted, "in seeing how sweetly the recalcitrant log spun at the highest speed after it began to take on beauty" (AW, p. 100). Several other times in later years, for example his manning the Daily American, he realized that he had started at too high a speed to last.

Henry M. Porter, Weldon's roommate for three years at Atlanta University, helped to engender interest in the student-teaching profession. All of the stories he heard from his schoolmates made him want to try the summer in the backwoods of Georgia. Besides, he knew nothing about rural life and could, therefore, learn as he drew a salary for teaching. In 1891, the summer after his freshman year, he was hired to teach in the rural district of Hampton, Georgia.
The housing situation at Atlanta University during its early years might surprise a person accustomed to the newer facilities, but the most striking contrast to his early experiences came when he lived with a poor family in the country. After awhile he moved in with Mr. Woodward and his wife, who had a fairly well-constructed home and a good farm. But the first house he lived in was an old, unpainted wooden structure consisting of two main rooms. The windows were without sashes and were closed by the use of wooden shutters. There was a shed addition on the back in which there was space for cooking, eating and washing up. Each of the main rooms contained a bed, a rough table, and a shelf or two. Fortunately, only three people lived in the house: the mother, the father, and the son, Lem, whose slow musical laughter was pitched in the middle tones of a flute (AW, p. 107).

The food, after he lived in the backwoods several weeks, made him willing to pay a week's salary for a beefsteak. Of course it could not be had at any price. At first he had fried chicken for breakfast and supper. The table "degenerated" until his diet consisted chiefly of fat pork and greens and an unpalatable variety of cornbread. He chose to live on buttermilk alone. Commenting on the lamp with no shade, he was no worse off than the philosophers and poets of Greece in her age of high culture. He felt that any normal person in normal health could adapt himself to mere inconveniences. He was being forced to gather some valuable information not in books (AW, p. 109). As a young American, he was sure that corresponding rewards were in the making for the efforts he would accomplish.

Atlanta had seemed drab in comparison to Jacksonville as a city. On the other hand, the university appeared as "a green island in a dull,
red sea" because of its lawn (AW, p. 106). Trees were rare in the city and there was no city park in walking distance. The young teacher's first impression of Hampton was worse than this. "Nowhere" he recalls, "was there a sense of order, or beauty, or community pride. Out from the town in all directions, lay the farms, the cotton plantations and the backwoods" (AW, p. 106). School was held in a rough, unpainted board-structured church which had been built by the volunteer labor of farmers in the region. The only equipment he had was a table. When the crop was laid by, about fifty children came to school. These children taught him as he taught them. They revealed to him more of his weaknesses than his powers. Still, he was satisfied with his school program and the way it worked, for the children were willing and teachable enough to make progress (AW, pp. 109-111).

The race problem had taken on a different guise in the backwoods. At AU he began to envision the race problem. The teaching position in the backwoods brought the actual knowledge of his own people as a race. Prior to this time, he had known Blacks as individuals or as groups, but he had never perceived them clearly as a classified division, a defined section of American society. He had learned something of the black man as a problem; now he was where he could touch the bulk of the problem itself with his own hands. The relationship of black and white was pressed upon him: "There were no graduations, no nuances, no tentative approaches; what Black and White meant stood out sharply" (AW, p. 119). As he worked with the children in school and the parents at home, on the farm and in church, he studied them with sympathetic objectivity. In this study, the element of hopelessness could not be eliminated. He was not able to find one white, no matter how ignorant or depraved, who
was not the superior to any black. They were superior in the eyes of
the law, in opportunities, and in all awards that the public decencies
may allow each individual (AW, p. 119).

The law in action was a kangaroo court, a Roman holiday, a circus.
Truly in this backwood court only a mock session was held in which the
principles of law and justice were disregarded. A black man was on
trial for stealing a hog. The trial was brief. The judge proceeded in
this manner: "Gentlemen of the jury, I don't have to tell you this [man]
is guilty; you know it as well as I do. All you've got to do is to
bring in a verdict of guilty." The verdict of "guilty" was promptly
brought in (AW, p. 115). He recognised the irresponsible, irregular
procedures with chagrin as the crowd cheered the decision. When Johnson
himself was tried after a threat of lynching in Jacksonville, 1900, he
was dealing with intelligent men, but the social factor was so powerful
and intransigent that they dared not tamper with things as they were.
They were conscious that the system of law was unjust and uncivilised
but a few were unwilling to openly oppose or question it (AW, p. 46).

The negative symbol of the Black Experience in the backwoods of
Hampton impressed itself on Johnson's consciousness through the
actions — inactions — of Tunk Laster. For three years he remained in
first grade without learning the alphabet. He gave the boy special
attention for the whole term, but he gave evidence that he had learned
nothing. Maybe he learned but could not remember anything after a
vacation of nine months. Tunk, he believed, was not stupid but made up
his mind that he was not going to study. Johnson did his best to im-
mortalize him in a poem by his unique name (AW, p. 111). "Death at an
Early Age," is Kosol's way of assessing the failure of children who
have been made to feel different or inferior. He says that serious educational damage is done to black children when their confidence is impaired, their motivation lowered and their self-image distorted. He tells about a fourth grader named Stephen who had to be institutionalised because of emotional imbalance. The boy took pleasure in drawing but what he produced was dismissed as nothing. Kosol says that the boy told freely what was on his mind with his pen. For example, he drew lyrical cows, a bird lost alone upon a weird, slanting rooftop, and a large hunched rabbit with ears alert for danger, in a colossal and uniform woods.

An advantage that James Weldon had over many Blacks, even at the present time, was the chance to exercise a free range of vision. His father and mother had ideas about what they wanted him to be, but they never expressed a fixed ambition for him. As he acquired knowledge that he never received from his parents, they never threw cold water on his dreams. He had the feeling that his parents could read his deceit when he said that he would be governor of Florida but his pretentious proclamation met with no squelching (AW, p. 57). The friend referred to as D - in Along This Way, decided that they should be lawyers and form a partnership (which did happen in Jacksonville) but Johnson never quite decided what he would do until he was called to be principal at Stanton, 1894 (AW, p. 119).

Interests in human affairs did not detract from Johnson's studies at Atlanta University or in Jacksonville. The summer after middle prep,
he read Vergil's *Aeneid* and studied algebra and geometry with the former principal of Duval High School as tutor. The principal talked about the misfortune of his life, and the general hard-heartedness of the world. The study sessions gave him the chance to know the complete history of the afflicted principal (*AW*, p. 100). He was employed by Dr. Summers the year he stayed in Jacksonville during the yellow fever epidemic of 1888-1889. The range of studies in the doctor's library was wider than ten thousand books at AU. Many of the books there were the gifts of clergymen. The new library had a corner even devoted to erotic works as the *Decameron* and the droll stories of Balzac. He constantly read Montaigne's essays, Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason* and Robert Ingersoll's *Some Mistakes by Moses* and the *Gods and Other Lectures*. James Johnson commanded his son to take the *Age of Reason* out of his house and to never bring it back (*AW*, p. 96). The Groves library at school did have some reputable works in fiction such as Dickens, *Vanity Fair* and *Lorna Doone*. At this period in life, having become an agnostic, James Weldon claimed that he gained more from fiction than books written from the point of view of divine revelations, Christian dogma or obvious moral lessons. Alphonso Daudet's *Sappho* (the episode where Sappho is carried up the flight of stairs) made the greatest impression (*AW*, p. 79).

Public speaking was a new interest for Johnson. He tells the story of his success in a pantomime as a small boy. Speaking was not for him; he was inarticulate. He joined the Ware Lyceum, the debating society of the Preps, and looked forward to joining Phi Kappa, the College society. In the sophomore year he won first prize in the principal oratorical contest, and the junior year tied with another speaker for first place honor. Before he left Atlanta he had learned what every
orator must know — that the deep secret of eloquence is rhythm. This rhythm must be set in motion by the speaker in order to set up a responsive rhythm in his audience. He harbored a disgust for rhetorical oratory, since politicians had abused the cult (AW, p. 80). As agitator for the NAACP (1916-1930), Johnson made adequate use of his training as a public speaker.

Johnson maintained his interest in music during the Georgia period, mainly through his enjoyment of the backwood churches and his participation in the original AU quartet. The congregations of the native churches sang the spiritual in a natural, spontaneous manner. A program for the quartet consisted mostly of spirituals, also. Programs were given in churches, hotel parlors and private drawing rooms. The quartet sang in all the inhabited spots in New England to raise funds for the school. Though the quartet was popular, Johnson gained special favor as an individual with a special solo part. He played a couple of pieces on the guitar and recited a story written about experiences with Mr. Woodward's Georgia mule (AW, p. 103).

The Georgia story, worked from the incident of a mule who would not move, and the story about his first derby hat, are the only works in narrative form mentioned in Johnson's autobiography. The story of the hat was written at Stanton School. His start in verse came as a result of his association with Dr. T. O. Summers, the winter and spring of 1899, during his year out of school. One day he wrote a
verse memorandum, which was purely doggerel, to amuse his employer:

Mr. Short
As I "thort" —
Gave me not a single quarter;
And everytime
I go to him
He seems to turn up shorter.

The doctor thought that it was clever. This incident encouraged him to show all of his verses to the doctor. He gave the first worthwhile literary criticism and encouragement which led Johnson to persist as a writer (AW, p. 97). He left Dr. Summers to go back to Atlanta with an old ambition clarified and strengthened. Whatever new things he wrote, he sent by letter for critical attention (AW, p. 99).

From Yale, Dr. Hincks, a former editor of a newspaper in Vermont, came to run the printing office at Atlanta University. In 1891, as a freshman, Johnson began work in the printing office and remained there through his senior year. As a writer himself, the Dean possessed an understanding heart though his manner was blunt. With encouragement from Dr. Hincks, Weldon began to turn out impulse poetry. He filled several notebooks of verses lampooning certain students and teachers and certain conditions on campus. However, the greater part of the output consisted of ardent love poems. These poems circulated in North Hall and built his prestige as a gallant (AW, p. 74).

This image of manhood was far from that of the preacher Mary Barton wanted her grandson to become. James Johnson, a preacher himself, but one who valued common sense, had less regard for the visionary and impractical. But these were the virtues which Dr. Summers possessed, and in 1899, Weldon made him his model of all that a man and a gentleman should be (AW, p. 98). Booker T. Washington was not yet famous when he visited the AU printing office to ask questions about its operation.
He watched James Weldon at work and spoke to him but the stage was not set for a close communion between them. He sized Washington up as being alert and shrewd, (AW, p. 102), but their meeting worked no miraculous effect at the moment. Unlike this meeting, the friendship with the doctor was so rewarding when he worked for him in the reception room that he allowed his employer to help him to decide to become a surgeon instead of a lawyer (AW, p. 99). He must have talked about this matter convincingly for President Bumstead offered him a scholarship to study medicine at Harvard in 1894, the year he graduated at Atlanta University (AW, p. 122).

Destiny is meeting the right person at the right time. The agnostic leaning of the young Johnson set up a partial barrier between him and his father. Besides, the boy was over-reaching his father in cultural advancement. With Dr. Summers, for the first time he was in close touch with a man of great culture who treated him as an intellectual equal. The doctor was a cosmopolite, a world traveler. He spoke English, French and German fluently. He had a wide knowledge of literature and had achieved a high literary reputation because of the poems he contributed to the Times-Union. In addition, he was an accomplished and brilliant talker (AW, pp. 94-95). Some of the most interesting talks were the ones on ship when he went to Washington, by way of New York, with the doctor the spring of 1889. The captain and the doctor told stories of travels to far, strange places. He and the doctor were comrades; they ate at the same table and slept in the same room. They stayed in Washington for two weeks. During that period he carried communications twice to an official in the State Army and Navy Building. He found Pennsylvania Avenue, the White House and the Washington
Monument. He spent long hours in the galleries of the Senate and the House of Representatives that he would haunt thirty years as a lobbyist for the NAACP (AW, p. 97). Without knowing it, the doctor was helping James Weldon to build a self-image. Kvaraceus states that "the source of one's self-image is . . . not internal; it is learned. . . . Out of countless messages, the individual contrives a picture of who he is." His portrait was now on a wide canvas.

From 1887-1894, Johnson had his first tryout with social forces in a complex world in microcosm. The experience marked the beginning of the psychological change from boyhood to manhood. It marked the beginning of his understanding of the Black Experience. It marked the point of his willful pledge to work for the Cause. It marked the persistent tendency of the multiple role begun during the childhood period which was never to end.

How valuable was his initiation in the Black Experience — the revelation of a new road to self-identity?

The historical fact was plain and had to be reckoned with. To the extent that it was a substitute for deportation, the Jim Crow system did not give the black man status or a stabilised position in society. The premise was that he was unwanted because he was inferior. The insecurity of the victims was seldom alleviated. The "quarantine" was forever being extended to new fields; new pressures were forever being put upon old ones. The barriers set up might seem foolish or unnecessary, but there was seldom a disposition to lower them. Without a doubt, Jim Crow was a dynamic movement of demolition and subordination.

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supported by the vast majority of the White South (Weyl, p. 111). No one in the environment could be perfectly free with such rules in ascendancy. Johnson gives a fuller view of the idea:

No segment of the population is unaffected by the conditions under which another segment lives. Man is not isolated, he lives in a vast web of social relationships which are far-reaching and extensive. Man does not and cannot exist alone; his well-being is interrelated with the welfare of others. Pathological conditions, individual or social, affect every man; the effects of poverty and unemployment, accident, disease, crime . . . extend into the community to weaken community organization and development.  

Johnson had just cause to view the black men in Hampton, Georgia, with sympathetic objectivity because his education had been what Carter G. Woodson calls "The Mis-education of the Negro."

Life in the backwoods helped Johnson to shed his old identity as just an intelligent American citizen. He lived in the community for three months without being on speaking terms with a single white person in it, though he knew each one fairly well. No one cared to know of his family history, his habits, his reputation, his worth. For the birth of the black ethos, this was a proper score. Jean Toomer tells how the feel of Blackness rushes in upon the consciousness. This feeling is described in the story of Bona and Paul in Cane:

A strange thing happened to Paul. Suddenly he knew that he was apart from the people around him. Apart from the pain which they had unconsciously caused, suddenly he knew that people saw, not attractiveness in his dark skin, but difference. Their stares, giving him to himself, filled something long empty within him, and were like green blades sprouting in his consciousness.

He had seen "white minds, with indolent assumption, juggle justice

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and a nigger" without conscious recollection of error. In an instant's reflection, Johnson was born Black. He writes: "I could realize that they [the folk] were me and I was they; that a force stronger than blood made us one" (AW, p. 120).

What was the worth of Johnson's New Birth, his second sight? He was anxious then to learn more about his people, he had expressed the beauty of the varying shades and colors of the Atlanta University women using the concept of the artist. He fell under their "pervasive and disquieting allure." More than biology was involved; there was also an element of aesthetics. The girls were from the best-to-do black families in Georgia and surrounding states — tastefully dressed, good-mannered and good looking. He describes them as a group: "They range in color from ebony black to milk white. At the end of one scale eyes were dark and hair crisp, and at the other, eyes were blue or gray and the hair light and like fine spun silk. The bulk of them ran the gamut of the shades and nuances of brown, with wavy hair and the liquid velvet eyes so characteristic of women of Negro blood. There was a warmth of beauty in this variety and blend of color and shade that no group of white girls could kindle" (AW, p. 75). The motif of a "bevy of beauties" of course, is of Nordic origin — at least not black during the nineteenth century in the West.

\[12\text{Ibid., p. 163.}\]
The author's description of black people after his birth to blackness is quite different. An examination of this passage will show the contrast:

I saw strong men, capable of sustained labor, hour for hour, day for day, year for year, alongside the men of any race. I saw handsome, deep-bosomed, fertile women. Here without question, was the basic material for race building. I use the word 'handsome' without reservations. To Negroes themselves, before whom 'white' ideals have so long been held up, the recognition of the beauty of the Negro woman is often a remote idea. Being shut up in the backwoods of Georgia forced a comparison upon me, and a realization that there, at least, the Negro woman, with her rich coloring, her gayety, her laughter and song, her alluring, undulating movements — a heritage from the African jungle — was a more beautiful creature than... her white sister (AW, p. 121).

Thus, Johnson sensed that there were different standards of judgment for the black and white race though they are all Americans.

More than viewing their looks, Johnson was anxious to know the masses — what they thought, what they felt and the things they dreamed about. He learned during the Georgia period that the power to survive is the most vital feature in the future of a race, and the masses have an instinctive knowledge of their possession of that power (AW, p. 121). He discerned that the forces behind the persistent moving forward of the race rested in them — that when the vanguard of the movement must fall back, it must fall on them (AW, p. 120). In trying to understand the masses, Johnson laid the first stones in the foundation of faith in them which he maintained through the long years as a race leader.
CHAPTER IV

ATLANTA IDEALS IN A NEW JACKSONVILLE

FALL 1894–1899

Edmund Asa Ware, a Yale graduate, founded Atlanta University, in 1865. The curriculum was practically the same as the one at Yale. The two presidents who came after President Ware were graduates of Yale and held to the same curriculum. Therefore, race was no part of the classroom instruction. But race, ironically was, as it has already been pointed out, dominant in the spirit of the institution. Here a black student was taught, in good faith, how to fit into a social system of which race was the center. The classic course was perpetuated at Atlanta University to prepare Blacks to meet their obligations as race leaders and American citizens. Graduates of Atlanta University were destined to assume the responsibility of elevating the race and applying the principles of democracy to black American life. August Meier agrees with DuBois that Afro-Americans do have a sense of twoness the dual identification with race and with nation. The duality is a fundamental quality in their thinking of the great majority of Blacks, though they vary in the degree of emphasis upon one extreme or the other.¹

¹Meier, Negro Thought in America, p. 168.
Carter G. Woodson, a black historian, gives a graphic picture of this mis-education of a black man. The "training" is often responsible for factional and personal "two-ness."

When a Negro has finished his education in American schools . . . he is equipped to begin the life of an Americanized or Europeanized white man, but before he steps from the threshold of his alma mater he is told by his teachers that he must go back to his own people from whom he has been estranged by a vision of ideals which in his disillusionment he will realize that he cannot attain. He goes forth to play his part in life, but he must be both social and bisocial, at the same time. While he is a part of the body politic, he is in addition to this a member of a particular race to which he must restrict himself in all matters social. While being a good American he must learn to stay in a Negro's place.  

Johnson's concept of his place in the New South was not clear when he returned to Jacksonville after being fired with the Atlanta doctrine for seven years. In his commencement speech entitled, "The Destiny of the Human Race," he sought to go beyond the limitations of race for the span of an hour. It was a good indication of his tendency to flaunt the narrow boundaries of race farther than his capabilities warranted in the new Jacksonville, to justify the Atlanta spirit of race pride exercised from 1894 to 1899. 

Inherent in the Atlanta ideal as it conflicted with application of it in Jacksonville, was the whole new basis set for Factionalism in the disfranchisement of Blacks for the most part in the South by 1895.  

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2 Woodson, The Mis-Education of the Negro, pp. 5-6.

3 Meier, p. 162.
Washington's Exposition Speech, 1895, and the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision, 1896. All Blacks could not vote. The rise of Booker T. Washington to a place of national prominence after his Exposition speech set the pattern for conservatives and radicals in the black vanguard. The separate but equal ruling gave Jim Crow further legal sanction. On the personal level, Johnson was heir to the dual identification with race and nation which August Meier sees as a fundamental quality in the thinking of the great majority of blacks though they may vary in degree of emphasis upon one extreme or the other (Meier, p. 168).

When Johnson returned to Jacksonville, it was on the eve of Washington's ascendency to the position of leader for Blacks. It was particularly important during the Washington era, 1895–1915, for leaders to align themselves with the Bookerites or the non-Bookerites (Meier, p. 168). After Washington reached the zenith of his power, black leaders became divided into conservatives and radicals (Meier, p. 166). Without Johnson's awareness of it, Jacksonville had already come under the sway of the new rules which implied that there were restrictions to be honored by Blacks. Washington eneouched this idea in his speech at the Atlanta Exposition, assuring whites that blacks recognized the limits of the race question. Washington's emphasis on material prosperity encouraged blacks to accumulate property and to strive for more education, but in other respects, the black man's status deteriorated in the North and the South during the two decades of his ascendancy (Meier, p. 161). Washington was, in the final analysis, trying to find a solution to the

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race problem by selecting a means to serve the Blacks and at the same time please the Whites.

Johnson came on the scene as self-styled leader in that he relied on his will, his desires and his experiences to work out schemes that might alleviate the race problem. The idea of education, one of Washington's beliefs in raising the status of the race, was suitable to him because of his own awareness of a tradition of culture. Notwithstanding the slow pace of black literacy after the Civil War, education from the beginning had been regarded as the principal factor in working out the race problem. While no magical results took place, the black man would not have advanced or held his place in America without learning. "Schools," says Johnson, "made possible the generating of internal motive power that kept us [Blacks] going. Without that power we might have been pulled along a pace or two, but there could not have been any spontaneous and determined move on our own part. Schools and colleges accomplished the work of providing from within, intellectual leadership for a group so isolated that lacking such leadership, it would have remained leaderless altogether."^ For Booker Washington, education meant training the hands, at least for the masses. Johnson followed Crummell and DuBois in placing more emphasis on the training of the intellect than the hands. This was his ideal as an educator.

The principalship at Stanton was Johnson's first professional job. The disproportionate importance of the job made him a mark. He had an academic education but no training as a teacher. He knew nothing about

^Johnson, Negro Americans, What Now?, p. 43.
being an administrator. Yet, he would be scrutinized by persons he worked with and others in the school community. He would meet with envy and antagonism, maybe disloyalty from members of Stanton's faculty and the patrons. In self defense, he visited the white school to learn how to run a school from an experienced principal. He needed to learn as much as possible as quickly as possible (AW, pp. 125-126).

Mr. Glenn, the superintendent of schools, accepted Johnson's plan, and asked Mr. McBeath, principal of the Jacksonville Grammar School, to grant the request. Mr. McBeath had met Johnson prior to this time on friendly terms; therefore, he was pleased to answer questions and offer information on methods of administration that he found effective in his school. He introduced Johnson to one of the teachers in the primary department, who allowed him to sit and observe the class in action. He spent the forenoon, going from class to class, introducing himself as the principal of Stanton School. At the same time he stated that Mr. McBeath had given him permission to visit the classrooms. The teachers met his self-introductions with varying degrees of politeness or embarrassment; the students exhibited undisguised curiosity. He left with the feeling that he had learned enough to begin his duties at Stanton School with confidence (AW, p. 126).

The white patrons learned through teachers and pupils that Johnson had visited the white school. The town rose up in arms over his unprecedented behavior and demanded that he account for his actions to the board of education. The repercussions from what he had thought of as a merely natural and reasonable act was not only a surprise to him, but a manifestation of the limits of "utter asinity" to which race prejudice
could go (AW, p. 127). There were men of intelligence on the board who won out in the end, including Mr. Glenn and Mr. McBeath, but that such an incident occurred was a surprise to Johnson.

Without petitions, legal proceedings or political action, Johnson laid out a course of junior prep for his first graduates from eighth-grade similar to the AU plan. The next year he obtained another assistant and introduced Spanish as the modern foreign language, which he taught himself. Each year he told the superintendent what he had done and therefore established Stanton High School (AW, p. 129).

Already Johnson had learned a valuable lesson in leadership. By 1934, he could make a "blueprint" of the lessons he had learned by trial and error. He writes:

A leader is a man not afraid to act radically when swift change is necessary, and not afraid to act conservatively when it is necessary to stand unmoved. . . . Nevertheless, a leader, secure in his own rights, stands in need of a leading element — an element that can transmit and interpret to the greater masses, the principles and politics that are formulated. This leading element, in turn, should draw on the ambitions, the ideals and energies of youth (WN, p. 88).

He assigned special duties to the black teacher as a leader, becoming his own best pupil. He is obligated to read, to do careful research and to study hard. He must also explore the achievements that lie in his African past. (WN, p. 47).

Before Johnson finished Atlanta University and decided to teach, his thoughts rotated around an earlier ambition to publish and edit a newspaper. He secured a partner, M. J. Christopher, and they planned and published the Daily American, 1895. The paper had an initial success
that astonished everyone, including the founders. He writes:

I was elated. I felt the undertaking transcended my personal ambition; that an instrument had been created that would be a strong weapon in the Negro's defense against racial inequalities and injustices; that the colored persons in the community had come into possession of an adequate medium through which they could express themselves, of a voice by which they could make themselves heard across the racial boundaries (AW, p. 139).

The paper was published eight months. The failure was Johnson's first defeat in public life. Moreover, it was his first disappointment in the failure of the masses to respond to an important effort toward racial advancement. He had allowed enthusiasm to overrule his judgement because the blacks in Jacksonville were not able to support the paper he wanted to provide for them. The basic reward was his production of editorials that brought self-satisfaction (AW, p. 139).

Lynn Adelman reports in his article, "A Study of James Weldon Johnson," that no extant copies of the Daily American exist. He used clippings in a Johnson Collection, however, to discover the contents of the editorials. In one of the first editorials, Johnson announced that he would champion the rights of Blacks but criticise them too if they deserved it. The paper would be "Republican in politics, objective in its news coverage, and adamant in its fight against wrongdoing, both in personal conduct and government." Adelman finds here the genesis of a tradition of protest in that the American urged blacks to strive for self-improvement and to demonstrate their proven ability. Also, Johnson assumed the role of spokesman for black Americans as an exhorter to them (AW, p. 131). During this same period, Johnson turned to the study

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of law, hoping to withstand obstacles as a Voice for the race.

Law, for Johnson, was an earlier ambition than teaching. He came under the influence of D— who was getting his first lessons in practical politics in 1896. Much of their school talk at AU had been on a law partnership. The duties at Stanton did not occupy all of the Principal’s time; therefore, he began reading law in Mr. Ledwith’s office. Thomas A. Ledwith’s father had been a Republican of the Reconstruction Era; he himself was a young brilliant member of the Jacksonville bar. This method of law study was an old approved method of the South, but no black man in the state of Florida had submitted to the practice. At the end of eighteen months, Johnson took the examination and was admitted to the bar (AW, pp. 141-142).

The examination took on the aspect of a spectacle. The examinee was determined to let nothing interfere with the working of his mind. An essential habit — a practice learned in study hall at AU to shut out what he willed from his mind — helped him to concentrate during the months of stress (AW, p. 75). He passed the examination honorably, but Major Young would not stay to see him admitted to the bar (AW, p. 142).

The nadir of the black man’s legal status inherent in the 1857 Supreme Court decision handed down by Chief Justice Taney was dramatised in his face: “A Negro has no rights which a white man need respect.” The Major’s words, blurted out in that fashion, made what Johnson called “a sizzling imprint” on his brain (AW, p. 43). At the moment of initiation, the law as a humane force failed to materialize for him. The emphasis on its humane values was nil. D—, his friend, passed the bar, so

according to their old plan at AU, they formed a partnership and were both admitted to the Supreme Court of Florida by Frank T. Clark (AW, p. 145).

One other incident dramatizes Johnson's tendency to flaunt the rules of Jacksonville Society. He grew friendly with a man named Gilbert who ran a bicycle repair shop. This shop was a center, like the barber shop, for the exchange of masculine talk and gossip. They talked freely about race and racial injustices, more freely than cautious judgment would have warranted for him (Johnson); but most of the men knew his father so he was not afraid. He got a mild warning of danger one afternoon when he met an unfamiliar group of men at the shop. As usual the talk shifted to the race question and he propounded his views. One of the new men asked with a superb sneer. "What wouldn't you give to be a white man?" (AW, p. 135). "The remark hit him between the eyes. The sheer insolence of it rocked him. The crowd tittered" (AW, p. 135). He gained a measure of control and formed an answer; "I would lose too much by the exchange" — words which defeated his opponent spiritually; but he was disturbed. He thought: "I must go over this question frankly with myself; I must go down to its roots; drag it up out of my subconsciousness, if possible, and give myself the absolutely true answer... I watched myself closely and tried to analyze motives, words, actions and reactions. The conviction I always arrived at was that the answer I gave the young man [affirming the pride of self] in the bicycle shop was the true one; and true not so far as it went, but farther" (AW, p. 136). This incident though slight, reached into the far corners of Johnson's mind. The shock of all his difficulties in Jacksonville informed his intelligence, finally, that his new polished shaft of blackness would never have the
power of a two-edged sword in his native Florida.

Helen Louise Johnson is responsible indirectly for staying the impulsive moves of her son during this critical period in Jacksonville. She spelled out all of the details of the Alonsa Jones affair to keep him from provoking the less tolerant whites in the city. Jones was one of a number of black men who prepared to meet the worst since there had been a steady change in Jacksonville life. He made the mistake of having a quantity of ammunition sent to him though he was ordering supplies for a whole group of men. When a black man killed a policeman after a fight, the blacks used the ammunition to keep the offender from being lynched. Jones' arrest was carried out in a way to make an impression of terror on the minds of the Blacks at large. Jones, along with a group of friends including Helen Louise, were vacationing on Pablo Beach. The place was invaded in the middle of the night, and he was arrested and charged with conspiracy to incite a riot. The people became hysterical as he was taken away handcuffed. He was freed under heavy bond but jumped bail later and went to Port Chester, New York, to live and practice his trade as a bricklayer. In the process of saving his life, he lost his property worth fifty or sixty thousand dollars and died a broken man (AW, p. 131). Johnson was deeply moved by his mother's recital of these happenings. Later, as a Consul he was naturally involved in the Mena revolution, but for his own battles, he never chose live ammunition. In spirit, though, he sided with the rebels. He said, "I feel an exultant pride in the men who manned the windows and housetops to safeguard the prisoner, and in the women who brought them food and coffee" (AW, p. 132). Spiritually, then, he allied himself with the black men of protest, in spite of shunning impulsive and incautious acts.
As a militant observer, Johnson now turned his eyes upon other facets of life in the community in search of his place. On observing other Blacks — D’s new pride in politics, the closed black society, the pious religious leaders — he became dubious about the role that he could play as a leader in Jacksonville. The local democrats had a split. The younger element known as the Straightouts was led by John N. C. Stockton, a banker who aspired for Congress. Both sides made bids for the black vote. In some way D—came to the aid of Mr. Stockton and was engaged by him to campaign for the Straightout ticket. He addressed black people in various parts of Jacksonville and throughout Duval County. He became an effective stump speaker who could tell Blacks unpleasant things about themselves — things Johnson would be decapitated for. For all his efforts, the machine won out, which he knew it would do except for a miracle (AW, p. 141). D—was promised "something" for his efforts. Through D—s activities, he saw the role of the black lawyer as that of a consensus politician used by the machine as an instrument of the hour. The image did not impress him.

During this turbulent period in Johnson’s career, a somewhat insignificant occurrence at Ebenezer changed the tone of his life in Jacksonville for the better — at least for a short time. His agnosticism did not prevent his enjoyment of church-going as a community activity. He joined the choir, which was led by his mother, and frequently sang solo parts in the morning and evening services. During the spring of 1897, Rosamond thumbed through James Weldon’s notebooks to find lyrics to which he composed music. One of these poems was a poem on Easter which he made into an anthem (AW, p. 147). The anthem increased Rosamond’s local reputation more than was warranted. Yet, this simple act of partnership deserves
strict attention because it sets the precedent for their years ahead in New York, and shows the lingering influence of religion on Johnson's poetic consciousness.

Rosamond collaborated with his brother to present a new type of commencement exercise which also took the town since it was the first operetta performed by students in the history of Stanton School. They concocted a juvenile libretto with a plot adapted to music taken from *The Geisha* and *The Runaway Girl*. A simple dance movement was performed by the whole company in the finale. Local black ministers rose up in arms about the performance. A leading Baptist minister said that Johnson was leading the children to the ballroom. He went so far as to complain about Johnson's reputation as one of the best dancers in the Oceola Club and a smoker. The skirmish with the preachers in Jacksonville was again over matters which he considered innocent; they, sinful (AW, p. 148). More and more, he was fighting a losing battle of self preservation in the whole Jacksonville community.

The saving power of these turbulent years came with the new relationship Johnson and his father bore to each other as man to man. Seeing him eye to eye, his father stood as a good father and a good man. The way he operated in the new Jacksonville left a permanent impression. He was a preacher but did not affect a noticeable clerical appearance. He was one of two preachers Johnson had met who avoided the long-tailed black coat as one of the evidences of Christianity. Joseph Twitchell of Hartford was the other. He was the only preacher in town who did his church work and missionary work for the unfortunate. He often went to pray for women dying in the quarter for prostitutes in Jacksonville. The prostitutes called him father Johnson. He was simple and unostentatious.
in this work. He was a notable exemplar of self-sacrifice. He was engaging in community uplift through the simple virtues of industry and intelligence (AW, p. 130). Johnson remarked: "This adaptation by my father of Christianity to life in good measure made a deeper impression on me than all the formal religious training I had been given" (AW, p. 130). This acknowledgment formed the basis for the writer's "religion". The Chinese, he discovered, get along without anthropomorphic Gods as the essence and apex of their national religion. They have instituted a philosophy of conduct which is reflected in Chinese character (AW, p. 399). Thus, religion bore its relevance to the good life in so far as it helped a person to contain himself and reflect that self in relationship to life around him.

Johnson's inability to project the Atlanta spirit into the new Jacksonville ethos was the death of a dream unwilled. The philosophy of success in failure can be attached to the end results of his efforts. Failure, Rosamond, and Toledo gave him the key to a wider world of culture, new inroads to race, and the chance to exploit his creative talent.

While Johnson was experimenting with race problems as an empiricist, DuBois, the arch opponent of the Booker T. Washington, was working as a scientist in the Seventh Ward of Philadelphia to find out all that he could about the black man. The purpose of the inquiry was to furnish local agencies and individuals interested in improving Blacks with the more comprehensive knowledge of the existing condition of Blacks. The study included a sampling of forty thousand or more persons whose

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occupations and daily lives were studied, their home, organisations, geographical distributions and their relationship to their white fellow citizens. Laying these facts before the public about life in one city might be a safe guide toward the solution of the many Black problems of any great American city.

DuBois' study, though a scientific one, is replenished with convictions that indicate his kinship with Johnson in trying to lift the masses. His statement about uplift is as follows:

Above all, the better classes of Negroes should recognize their duties toward the masses. They should not forget that the spirit of the twentieth century is to be the turning of the high toward the lowly, the bending of humanity to all that is humane; the recognition that in the slums of modern society are the answers to most of our puzzling problems of organization and life, and that only as we solve those problems is our culture assured and our progress certain (DuBois, p. 392).

The foregoing statement by DuBois indicates, as time proved, that Johnson's effort to lift the masses was the proper thing to do. He was performing the task that a member of the "Talented Tenth" should do, for his training and talent had prepared him for that rule. The study revealed, also, that the policy of the city was designed to drive out the best class of young people that the schools educated and social opportunities trained (DuBois, p. 396). The class of blacks which the city encouraged were the criminal, the lazy and the shiftless. Numerous institutions and charities existed for them (Lindsay, xiv).

The inquiry into the conditions reported in the Philadelphia Negro was begun August 1, 1896, and pursued with the exception of a two month summer intermission until January 1898. DuBois, branded ultimately as a radical, did not display his fiery temper while he was engaged by the

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9Ibid., p. 1
University of Pennsylvania as an assistant in Sociology (DuBois, p. 1).

His tone is less adamant than Johnson's in the Daily American editorials.

He writes:

Finally, the Negroes must cultivate a spirit of calm, patient persistence in their attitude toward their fellow citizens rather than of loud and intemperate complaint. A man may be wrong, and know he is wrong, and yet some finesse must be used in telling him of it. . . . Social reforms move slowly and yet when Right is reinforced by calm but persistent progress we somehow all feel that in the end it must triumph (DuBois, p. 393).

Characteristic of probably the majority of the articulate race leaders is the tendency toward shifting positions. Johnson's problems of adjustment in Jacksonville encouraged change.

Rosamond came back to Jacksonville in 1897, after spending six years studying music and working in Boston and one year traveling with a theatrical company. He had taken a part in the Creole Show. The Creole Show was the forerunner of all the modern black musical comedies. John W. Isham served as advance agent for that show and produced the Octofoons. He planned a more ambitious production in 1896, and hired the best trained black singers and musicians available. Sidney Woodard, the tenor, and Rosamond were the two selected from Boston to take a part in the show Oriental America. Rosamond was eager about the theater and proud of the two popular instrumental pieces he had published. He was full of ideas and plans about the songs, plays and operas that he and James Weldon could write together. Rosamond was just as disgusted about his brother's study of law as his brother was enthusiastic about Rosamond's new life. James Weldon decided to finish the business he had at hand. He would pass the bar examination and then begin to work with Rosamond. He kept his pledge but the desire for change had aroused his
enthusiasm. He says: "I became keenly aware of the love of adventure that runs in me, a deep strong current. But I have from my father a something — which I have often thought limits me as an artist — that generally keeps that deep strong current from burning out and spreading over the surface" (AW, p. 146).

Rosamond taught music once a week at the Baptist Academy while he taught students the rest of the time in a studio he made in one of the front rooms of their home. In addition, he became chairmaster and organist for one of the large Baptist churches in Jacksonville. After he had taught for almost a year, he presented his students in a recital which set new standards for musical entertainment in Jacksonville. The pupils, though young, played worthwhile music with a show of virtuosity. He set the pace in another way. Because the recital was worthwhile, he secured the patronage of white citizens (AW, p. 147). The big event, however, in Jacksonville, was the Sidney Woodward concert. Woodward, a highly trained tenor, came down from Boston to give a concert the winter of 1899. No such concert had been given by or for colored people in the city. Surprisingly, Woodward's acclaim was based on the approval of all music lovers on the local scene. The success of the affair was marked by the artistic worth of the performer and with financial returns (AW, p. 154). Rosamond had triumphed.

Rosamond's success at this time was to have tremendous influence on Johnson — first by securing his brother as a collaborator; second, by encouraging him to go to New York for a trial on Broadway as a song writer and librettist for light opera; and third, his setting the vogue for inviting black artists of renown to Jacksonville for performances.
They followed Rosamond's idea and worked out their first comic opera satirizing the New American imperialism. A year before, the United States had annexed Hawaii and at the time was engaged in the Spanish American War. The story, with a setting on an island kingdom of the Pacific, was about Tolsa, a beautiful princess; her prime minister; a crafty old politician; the entrance of an American man-of-war; the handsome, heroic American lieutenant; and finally, annexation. Nothing of the sort had yet been produced on the American stage; therefore, Johnson was not sure about the libretto, but Rosamond was rather confident about the music. The summer of 1899, they left for New York with Toloso after having attended the first interracial artistic party in their experience. They had played and sang parts of the opera to entertain the guests who now wished them luck in New York (AW, p. 149). Studying the Philadelphia Blacks, DuBois lamented the unfair practice of giving positions to immigrants that Blacks could fill. He writes: "It is a paradox of our times [1899] that young men and women from some of the best Negro families of the city are reared and schooled in the best traditions of this municipality have actually had to go South to get work if they wished to be ought but chambermaids and bootlicks. . . . " (DuBois, p. 396). The Johnsons' trip to New York was a reversal to this situation. Here two young black men, without a thought of the absurdities connected with the case, presented themselves to the New York world of glamour and talent. The opera Toloso was never produced, but the trip to New York served as a turning point in Weldon's life and eventually his career as a writer. It gave him the chance to meet all the important stars and producers of comic opera and musical plays in New York. Among them were Oscar Hammerstein, who climbed up to their modest rooms in West 53rd
Street to hear Toloso played. Most of the single numbers were in time adapted and produced in other Broadway musical shows. The managers were perhaps afraid of the satire because the Spanish-American War had just closed. The burlesque of American imperialism at that specific time would have seemed unpatriotic. Before they left New York they met Bob Cole, the most talented and versatile black man Johnson knew on the stage during his lifetime. In addition, he could write a play, stage it and be the actor. He was not a trained musician but had written many catchy songs. They met the comedians, Williams and Walker; the composer Will Marion Cook; the musician and singer, Harry T. Burleigh, and others who were doing pioneer work in black theatricals (AW, pp. 150-151).

The most profitable experience of all during the summer of 1899 for Weldon was meeting Paul Lawrence Dunbar, the black poet. The year before Dunbar had written an operetta entitled, Clorindy — The Origin of the Cakewalk, which had been produced with an all-black cast starring Ernest Hogan. Directed by George Lederer at the Casino Theater Roof Garden, it had run with great success the entire summer. At this moment, Dunbar was at the height of his fame. He was then twenty-seven years old, yet he bore the hallmark of distinction (AW, pp. 151-152). Johnson gives a graphic description of the young writer:

There was no hint of vainglory in his hearing. He sat quiet and unassuming while the rehearsal (of Clorindy) proceeded. . . . His black intelligent face was grave, almost sad, except when he smiled or laughed. . . . He had an innate courtliness of manner, his speech was unaffectedly polished and brilliant, and he carried himself with that dignity of humility which never fails to produce a sense of the presence of greatness (AW, p. 152).

Johnson and Dunbar became mutual friends and continued as such until Dunbar's early death. Dunbar took him in person to his publisher, Dutton, where he bought a copy of his Lyrics of Lowly Life, inscribed it and
gave it to Johnson before they parted the summer of 1899 (AW, p. 152).

New York was familiar to Rosamond, but to James Weldon it was "a new world — an alluring world, a tempting world, a world of greatly lessened restraints, a world of fascinating perils, a world of tremendous artistic potentialities" (AW, p. 152). The black songs then the rage were known as "coon songs." They were usually crude, raucous, bawdy and sometimes obscene. He became aware of the concerns mirrored in these songs and found that they had to do with the typical black soul food as chicken, porkchops and watermelon. The women depicted were "red hot mamas" with their unfaithful "papas." They danced and frolicked at their jamborees where the play of razors was an expected fete. He realized that the "coon songs" of original composition could rest on these props, but rarely would a conscious imitation come off as well (AW, p. 152).

Up to this time James Weldon realized that he had written nothing on the race question other than his polemical essays. He became aware at that moment of a need not yet realized through any of his other pursuits. He writes with insight: "I now began to grope toward a realization of the importance of the American Negro's cultural background and his creative folk arts and to speculate on the superstructure of conscious art that might be reared upon them " (AW, p. 152). In his subconscious mind, he had just planted the seed for God's Trombones. Years passed before he came in contact with the idiomatic spirit of the black man, but at this point, he worked with what was at hand, the "coon song." His first step in using folk art as a superstructure for conscious art came with the composition of "Louisiana Lis." He wrote the song with the help of Bob Cole and Rosamond with one purpose in mind — to bring a higher degree of artistry to black songs, especially in regards to
text (AW, p. 152). The song was a forerunner of a style that displaced
the old "coon song." They sold the singing rights to Mary Irwin for
fifty dollars and it was published by J. W. Stern and Company (AW, p.
152). During the winter he wrote more dialect poems, some very trite
with an eye on the next Broadway season. Rosamond made some pretty
songs out of them and put them aside for the next trip to New York (AW,
p. 154).

One small added mark of distinction came to Johnson in 1899; he
published his first poem "Sence You Went Away" in Century magazine at
Mr. McBeath's suggestion. McBeath had seen him through the school
crisis when he was criticized for visiting the white school. Now he
encouraged him to send the poem to an important magazine. The only
published works to Johnson's credit at this time were the writings in
AU periodicals and Jacksonville local newspapers. The poem "Sence You
Went Away" included in the idialect section under "Jingles and Croons" in
the author's first collection of poems, Fifty Years and Other Poems, 1917,
proved to have unwarranted distinction. Eventually Rosamond set it to
music. It was sung by Amato, the Metropolitan Opera baritone; later, it
was recorded for phonograph by John McCormack with a violin obbligato
played by Kreisler; and was again recorded by Louis Graveure and still
again by Paul Robeson (AW, p. 154). The poem, written in the Dunbar
tradition, is a plaintive love song recounting all of the unpleasant
moments experienced by the lover left behind. Despite the initial joy of
publication, Johnson admitted that the things he had been trying to do
"seemed vapid and non-essential and the things that he felt a longing to
do were so nebulous that [he] couldn't take hold of it and quite make it
out" (AW, p. 153). Without a doubt, however, when Johnson came back to
Jacksonville, his artistic ideas and plans were undergoing a revolution.

From the time Johnson finished Atlanta University until he went to New York in the summer of 1899, he worked hard to effect the Atlanta University spirit of racial pride and equality as a teacher, as a journalist, as a lawyer, and as a man, and an artist. Not being aware at first of the new conciliatory attitude prevalent during the beginning years of the Washington era, he followed his mind until he could sense trouble around him. His mother by advice, and his father by precept and example, helped him to respect the rules laid down by leaders of the South. Disappointed with the turn of affairs and outright failure with the *Daily American*, Johnson managed to nourish the new militant spirit of the Blacks who flaunted the laws of the status quo in the Alonsa Jones Affair. The case of the Philadelphia Blacks put clearly by DuBois helped to explain the plight of the educated members in the period when disrespect bore legal sanction. His study revealed that Johnson, as a member of the "Talented Tenth" had chosen the right option — helping the masses to achieve full recognition as American citizens. The "Talented Tenth" in the North had to find professional jobs in the South, while the talented artist in the South had to seek refuge in New York.

Johnson's failure to find adjustment in Jacksonville encouraged him to work with his brother Rosamond on the comic opera *Tolono*, which served as a key to the "great life" in New York. The summer of 1899 was profitable in that Johnson discovered the means of building the superstructure of conscious black art on designed folk arts. Too, he met Paul Dunbar, the reigning black poet of the day. The meeting, by chance, was the initial stage in Johnson's conscious awareness of an Afro-centric tradition in American creative arts. Even though he envisioned this
need for Afro-American literature, he was not prepared to pursue a
direct course to perfect his vision. He was destined to involvement in
many unusual experiences before he developed insight into the phenomenon
known as the Black Experience to its fullest extent.
The trip to New York during the summer of 1899 revolutionised Johnson's thinking and paved the way for ever broadening experiences. He was destined to be disillusioned about the turn of events in Jacksonville; he would experience fame and fortune in New York. He would gain wider social sanction in the new life at the Marshall Hotel. He would meet men of talent and cast his lot with them. He would travel abroad, rediscovering his identity as a man. He would learn to pry into the motives and actions of arch politicians and join ranks with them. In fact, he was able to broaden his range of experiences in a manner to redirect his angle of vision as a man and a creative artist. This chapter will discuss his experiences other than his new efforts as a writer of belletristic literature — the subject of Chapter VI.

The first incident is one of the most unusual experiences in Johnson's life. By mistake, he was almost lynched for supposedly getting out of his "place" in Jacksonville. In 1900, soon after the Jacksonville fire, he met a young black lady from New York who was an occasional contributor to various papers and magazines. She asked Johnson to read an article she had written on the fire, dealing especially with its effects on the black population. He suggested that later in the evening they might ride out to Riverside Park where they could go over the article...
leisurely and in comfort. After they worked on the article, they continued to sit in the park talking. The townspeople were not able to distinguish the lady as "colored" because of her white skin, so a mob formed to oust him because they were still talking as the sun set. The park, near St. John River, was somewhat isolated, so they thought that his ulterior motive was that of seducing a white lady. He gives a detailed account of his confrontation with the mob:

The scene was one of perfect tropical beauty. Watching it, I became conscious of an uneasiness, an uneasiness that no doubt, had been struggling the while to get up and through my subconscious. I became aware of noises, of growing alarming noises; of men hallooing back and forth, and of dogs responding with the bay of bloodhounds... I rose to go, and my companion followed... The noises grew ominous... My pulse beat faster and my senses became more alert... Suddenly we reached the barbed wire fence. There we were trapped. On the other side of the fence death was standing. Death turned and looked at me and I looked at death. In an instant I knew that the lowering of an eye lash meant the end (AW, pp. 166-167).

The arresting officer, a young lieutenant, saved his life, by walking through the crowd, taking Johnson as his prisoner. That very moment he learned the key to communication between men. They passed messages without words; he "felt the waves of mental affinity." In the midst of the brutishness that surrounded them he felt that there was a meeting place for reason somewhere between them (AW, p. 168). He felt "a quivering message from intelligence to intelligence" in the interchange (AW, p. 167). He was exonerated when he argued before the judge that the lady was "white," but according to the customs and the laws of Florida, she was not. The incident preyed on his mind, producing a "horror complex" which he could not rid himself of until years later, when he served as a lobbyist in the interest of the Dyer Lynching Bill,
in 1921, as an NAACP official.

The horror complex hastened Johnson's departure from Jacksonville. The white Southerner still believed at the close of the nineteenth century that only the closely regulated black could be happy. Nolen says that they believed "that the Negro regained his happiness when whites forged anew restraints from which the Negro had been relieved during 'radical' reconstruction by visionaries and opportunists — that the Negro knows his place and is happiest when he is assigned to it." It was the same problem in disguise. Social equality would promote intermarriage and thus serve to defile the whites and no doubt their culture. Most of all, the black fiasco in politics, "the brief era of carpet bag colored rule in the Southern states, had seared bitter memories into the minds of the white majority and hardened its resistance to accepting the Negro as a fellow citizen," according to Weyl.

Surprise came to Johnson, when much later, the spring of 1905, he discovered race prejudice in Salt Lake City, the home of the Latter Day Saints. He made the trip with Bob and Rosamond on the Orpheum Circuit and stopped off in Salt Lake City to visit the Mormon Tabernacle and to see the town. No accommodations could be had for room or board until the cab driver smuggled them into one of his haunts to eat and drink. He found a place, quite detestable, for them to sleep. Johnson gives an apt

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description of both experiences in the following passages. First about
the saloon and chophouse, then the lodging house:

[The cabman] darted inside, leaving them in the carriage;
after a few moments he emerged beaming good news. We
went in and were seated at a wholly inconspicuous table,
but were served with food and drink that quickly renewed
our strength and revived our spirits (AW, p. 205).

To get a place to sleep, the driver took them to a shabby lodging house
for laborers.

Nevertheless, the woman demurred for quite a while.
Finally she agreed to let them stay if they got out
before her regular lodgers got up. In the foul room
to which she showed us, we hesitated until the extreme
moment of weariness before we could bring ourselves to
bear the touch of the bedclothes. We smoked and talked
over the situation of being outcasts and pariahs in our
own and native land (AW, p. 205).

The sentiment then about America was epitomised by Johnson in six words:
"a hell of a 'my country!'" (AW, p. 206). Near the end of his life he
said "there comes a time. . . . when the most persistent integrationist
becomes an isolationist, when he curses the white world and consigns
it to hell. This tendency toward isolation is strong because it springs
from a deep-seated natural desire — a desire for respite from the un-
remitting gruelling struggle; for a place in which refuge might be
taken"(WN, p. 13).

The New York environment offered respite from "race" in the main,
but the problem surfaced in the least expected places in the most un-
expected manner. While working with Klaw and Erlanger, Johnson discovered
that certain leaflets were being placed in the seats of the New York
theaters before performances. The purpose was to disseminate anti-black
propaganda. Blacks were not welcome unless they sat in the top gallery.
Johnson brought this to Mr. Erlanger's attention and he had the practice
stopped in all the New York theaters under his control (AW, p. 199).
More serious was the riot which grew out of an altercation between a Black and a New York policeman in which the policeman was killed. One of his intimate friends ran to the police for protection but received such a clubbing at their hands until he had to be hospitalized. His scalp was stitched in several places but he never fully recovered (BM, p. 127).

The riot in Harlem was a single indication of the national spirit of the times toward Blacks. He explains that "by 1900 the Negro's civil status had fallen until it was lower than it had been at any time since the Civil War; and without notable protest from any part of the country, the race had been surrendered to disfranchisement and Jim-crowism, to outrage and violence, to fury of the mob. In the decades ending in 1899, according to the records printed in the daily press, 1665 Negroes were lynched, numbers of them with a savagery that was satiated with nothing short of torture, mutilation, and burning alive at the stake" (AW, p. 158). This theme was used in his American drama in poetic form entitled, "Brothers," the author's first protest poem using a frontal attack.

When "no appeal to conscience was effective; when civil, legal and moral rights meant nothing; when the 'soft-speaking conformity and sheer opportunism' of Booker Washington did no good unless to hasten the destruction of the Negro's courage and idealism for good," Redding says that the populace, who lost heart the first decade of the twentieth century, looked to James Weldon Johnson for succor. He would enter the struggle on the field where public sentiment is won or lost (AW, p. 158).

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The difficulties that Johnson experienced between 1900 and 1905 were mitigated by the fame and fortune he won as a songwriter and writer of comic operas. He collaborated with his brother Rosamond and Bob Cole, forming a "peculiar partnership" which lasted for seven years. There was no pride of authorship. The two worked on a piece together while the third member served as critic. Three names were printed on the top sheet and they divided their earnings in equal parts. Cole and Rosamond formed a vaudeville team using the title, "Cole and Johnson"; the three were known as "Cole and Johnson Brothers" though at first they used the title "Johnson, Cole, and Johnson." In the seven years they wrote two hundred songs that were sung in various musical shows on Broadway and "on the road." They established a firm the summer of 1900 by writing several songs for May Irvin's new play (AW, pp. 156-157).

The history of Johnson's career on Broadway is a study within itself, but it is enough to cite a few instances of the trio's success. During the summer of 1901, they signed a three-year contract to write exclusively for Joseph W. Stern and Company. They were given a cash guarantee paid on a monthly basis to be deducted from their semi-annual royalty accounts (AW, p. 181). Another outstanding contract was the one with Klaw and Erlanger, the "grand mongol" of the theatrical business. This contract was also for three years with definite monthly payments and a flat fee for each ensemble number. The royalty rights though were reserved for the trio (AW, p. 196). A list of their hits included: "The Maiden With the Dreamy Eyes," "Mandy, Won't You Let Me Be Your Beau," "Nobody's Lookin' but the Owl and the Moon," "Tell Me, Dusky Maiden," "The Old Flag Never Touched the Ground," "My Castle on the Nile,"
"Under the Bamboo Tree," "Oh, Didn't He Ramble" and "The Congo Love Song." Miss Cahill helped to make "The Congo Love Song," and "Under the Bamboo Tree" famous. They managed to write a song for Lillian Russell for the rather exclusive Weber and Fields stage. In a word, Cole, Rosamond and James Weldon became Broadway personalities (AW, p. 191).

The trio dissolved when Bob and Rosamond decided to head a theatrical company of their own. While they were working on the Shoo-Fly Regiment, Charles Anderson spoke to James Weldon Johnson about the consular services, but these ideas slept. Having enrolled in classes in literature and drama at Columbia, he studied diligently, all the time, unfitting himself for Broadway. Once more he was making an unconscious mental shift. He had met Grace Nail again, who was now a young lady, and he made an effort to meet her on the man-woman basis. Once more he was moving toward a new arena of decisive action (AW, pp. 220-222).

Other experiences in the New York world of glamour affected Johnson's status as a rising artist, scholar, man of the world and politician. The Marshall Hotel was a part of that new life. The hotel brought about a sudden social change in Harlem. The managers made possible a fashionable sort of life that had not existed for Blacks in earlier times. Prior to its opening there was not even a decent restaurant in New York for Blacks (AW, p. 171). The Marshall finally became New York's center for black artists. For a generation its black Bohemia had been in the Tenderloin section, now it was in "Black Manhattan." The parlor on the main floor was entirely covered with lithographs and photographs of black celebrities (AW, p. 175). Yet, "the Marshall was more than a sight," in Johnson's estimation, "its importance as the radiant point of the forces that cleared the way for the Negro on the New York stage cannot be
overestimated" (AW, p. 177).

James Weldon Johnson and Rosamond moved to the Marshall; Cole lived only two doors away, so they could work together easily. Their room, especially at night, was the scene of many discussions, often about race. On the Orpheum Circuit in Salt Lake City, Cole and the Johnson brothers talked about race but their talk went beyond their individual situation and took in the common lot of the black man in almost every part of the country. The situation placed high and low in a position of struggle so that heart and will had to be renewed at regular intervals (AW, p. 205).

The main question that a larger group argued about was always that of the manner of raising the status of the black man as a writer, composer, and performer in the New York theater and world of music (AW, p. 172). During their heyday, the Johnson's invited their sister, mother and father to visit them for several summers. Most important were the friendly discussions at the Johnsons' studio, "a haunt for celebrities."

The opinions were as diversified as the personalities in the group. Johnson considered Bob Cole the most versatile and artistic man in the group. He achieved an artistic effect in all of his works; still, there was "an element of pro-Negro propaganda in all his efforts and it showed more plainly when he was engaged in matching the white artist on the latter's own field" (AW, p. 173). Will Marion Cook, the most original genius in the group, believed that the black man in music and on the stage ought to be Black, genuinely Black. Cook believed that Blacks should eschew white patterns and not employ his talent in doing what the white artist could do as well or even better. He ignored all the standards set by his masters in the United States, The Hochschule in Berlin and Joachim, the violinist. Strangely enough, Harry T. Burligh,
the black master musician had to call his attention to the spirituals. Mr. Burleigh was the authority in the theory and science of music, the composer of "art songs" in the modern manner and baritone soloist at St. George's Church. They all agreed that somehow they had to convince the managers of a first class theater that Blacks could hold their own in the world of drama as serious writers and performers (AW, p. 173).

Men who were not constant studio visitors became known to Johnson, also, during this period. They were men of fame and fortune in a different sense; they were men of superior talent representing varied fields of activity. Among them were Coleridge-Taylor, the great black English composer (AW, p. 213), Brander Matthews, Charles Anderson, Jack Johnson, Theodore Roosevelt and W. E. B. DuBois. Johnson, a student at Columbia University, was particularly impressed with Brander Matthews' "catholicity, his freedom from pedantry and his common sense in talking about theater" (AW, p. 192). Professor Matthews knew his work in musical comedy and praised him openly for his writings. Moreover, when the professor began his discussion on classical Spanish drama, he called on Johnson for his knowledge of Spanish when he dealt with plays in the original. Often he cited Johnson as a journeyman in the theater when they came to the study of the contemporary American stage. Matthews gave him a note of introduction to Professor Harry Thurston Peck, the editor of Bookman, who took two of his poems for publication (AW, pp. 192-193). For several reasons, Johnson's decision to take English and the history and the development of drama at Columbia served to keep his mind attuned to the serious concerns of literature and life.

Johnson was still engaged in his studies at Columbia University and his work on Broadway when he met Charles W. Anderson, the very ablest
black American politician. Anderson's versatility impressed him. He was "much more than an ordinary orator, in the style of the day; [he was] capable of intelligently discussing the English poets, the Irish patriots, or the contemporary leaders of British Parliament. A cool, calculating player in the hard game of politics, he always played the game rather on a higher scale for higher stakes. He was on friendly terms with Theodore Roosevelt, Elihu Root, Chauncey M. Depew, Tom Platt and other Republican leaders." (AW, pp. 219-220).

Theodore Roosevelt, trying for his second term in 1904, was the archetype of the superman and influenced black and white men with his practices. Cargill writes: "Roosevelt delighted his age with his amazing energy and vitality; he popularized the Strenuous Life by example and by his celebrated address in Chicago on April 10, 1899. He himself was a new type of hero, and it was no miracle when he was copied in literature. The Superman, in the first American edition, was drawn from Roosevelt without any study of the Nietzschean prototype." Roosevelt set the vogue then for the strenuous life and for men of thought to put their ideas into action. He was also spectacular and had a need for strong antagonists to test his strength.

Coming into his own was Jack Johnson, the boxer. It is alleged that Douglas called Peter Jackson "great" because he was doing a great deal with his fists to solve the race question (AW, p. 208). James Weldon met Jack Johnson on the trip to San Francisco, on the Orpheum Circuit, three years before he became the world's heavyweight boxing champion who in his opinion did the same thing as Jackson. Yet the exacting demands on

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him as a boxer did not fit the image of Jack Johnson as a man. Boxing is a brutal, demanding, "blood game" demanding, as James Weldon saw it, courage, stamina, brute force, skill, and quick intelligence. As a man, Jack Johnson was likable. James Weldon was "impressed by his huge but perfect form, his terrible strength, and the supreme ease and grace of his every muscle. . . . his face, sad until he smiled. . . . and his soft Southern speech and laughter. . . ." (AW, p. 208). The sense of "twoness," molded into a classic image by DuBois' description in The Souls of Black Folk existed for the boxer Johnson no less than for the black men of thought.

Ten years had passed since Johnson's graduation from Atlanta University when he met the black superman of the early decades of the twentieth century. In 1904, Johnson was invited to Atlanta University to receive an honorary degree. At the time DuBois was a professor at the school. Just a year before, he had issued the Souls of Black Folk, which heightened his status as a national figure. Johnson was anxious to meet the man whose book had had a greater effect upon and within the black race in America than any other single book published in this country since Uncle Tom's Cabin. The renowned author was a "quite handsome and unpendantic" young man of thirty-six (AW, p. 203). Johnson's character portrait is given here in complete form, written exactly thirty years after Souls:

It was, at first, slightly difficult to reconcile the brooding but intransigent spirit of The Souls of Black Folk with this apparently so lighthearted man, this man so abundantly endowed with the gift of laughter. I noted then what through many years of close association, I have since learned well and what the world knows not at all: that DuBois in battle is a stern, bitter, relentless fighter, who, when he has put aside his sword,
is among his particular friends the most jovial and fun-loving of men. This equality has been a saving grace for him but, his lack of ability to unbend in his relations with people outside the small circle has gained him the reputation of being cold, stiff, supercilious, and has been a cause of criticism amongst even his adherents (AW, p. 203).

The blight on DuBois' leadership because of this disposition follows:

This disposition, due perhaps to an inhibition of spontaneous impulse, has limited his scope of leadership to less than what it might have been, in that it has hindered his attracting and binding to himself a body of zealous liegmen — one of the essentials to the headship of a popular or an unpopular cause. The great influence DuBois has exercised has been due to the concentrated force of his ideas, with next to no reinforcement from that wide appeal of personal magnetism which is generally a valuable asset of leaders of men (AW, pp. 203–204).

Johnson was no doubt interested in DuBois' book because it served as an antidote for Uncle Tom's Cabin.

DuBois gives a character portrait of Johnson almost thirty years after their acquaintance in 1904. He made a penetrating estimate of Johnson in his address delivered at the dinner, May 14, 1931, celebrating the author's retirement from the NAACP. DuBois reported on Johnson's education his training and careers up to that time. He then gives his purpose for the review:

I repeat these dates and details as an interpretative background for Mr. Johnson's spiritual development. He is characterised by a sort of genial humor which escapes cynicism, on the one hand, and on the other is never mere light-heartedness. Indeed, his very charm of character rises from this union of philosophical humor with stern experience, within the American veil of color as his career indicated.6

He makes the following comments apropos to the period of Johnson's life discussed in this chapter:

Coming to New York as a young man of 30, he had unusual opportunity to escape provincialism, both of race and section. He met men and women of all walks of life and knew the metropolitan scene on a broad and tempting scale. He developed here that characteristic ability to meet and know and please all manner of men; and yet withal the straitness of the gates before him, the limitations of everyday life, the curious and recurrent difficulties of a Negro's artistic career never allowed him to mistake life for the enjoyment of life.6

Johnson may not have allowed himself to mistake life for the enjoyment of life, but he sought various means of mitigating the offences leveled against him by removing his person from the unpleasant scene.

San Francisco, viewed on the Orpheum Circuit, was more civilized and urbane than New York. He recognized it as a freer city for Blacks (AW, p. 208). He also re-discovered freedom as he had known it in childhood and early youth. He "moved about with a sense of confidence and security, and entirely from under that cloud of doubt and apprehension that constantly hangs over an intelligent Negro in every Southern city and in a great many cities in the North" (AW, p. 207).

France brought even a greater sense of this freedom. He writes:

From the very first day I set foot in France, I became aware of the working of a miracle within me, I became aware of a quick readjustment to life and to environment. I recaptured for the first time since childhood the sense of being just a human being. . . . I was suddenly free; free from a sense of impending discomfort, insecurity, danger; free from the conflict within the man-Negro dualism and the innumerable maneuvers in thought and behavior that it compels; free from the problem of the many obvious and subtle adjustments to a multitude of bans and taboos; free from special scorn, special tolerance, special condescension, special commiseration; free to be merely a man (AW, p. 209).

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6Ibid.
He admired the Englishmen because they understood the language of ideas; he admired London for its "intrinsic quality in so teeming a city that enabled a man to be alone" (AW, p. 214).

Johnson went to Europe for the trip; Cole and Johnson went as touring concert artists. The three of them were surprised to find that Bob and Rosamond were headliners in London. Every bus carried placards that read "Cole and Johnson, the Great American musicians." This is when DuBois' idea of the "Talented Tenth" began to seep into Johnson's consciousness. He had heard "Cole and Johnson" countless times before. In another country, he was a black American hoping that the two would say something to England about all black Americans. His moment of concern came as they appeared:

When Rosamond struck the opening bars of the Congo Love Song, I knew that the die was cast; that it was now win or lose. They sang the song with flawless artistry, and finished so softly that it induced an intense silence. Then there was an outburst of spontaneous and prolonged applause. They had won (AW, p. 213).

He concludes:

These states of pain and pleasurable reaction under similar circumstances are more keenly experienced by Negroes, perhaps, than by any other people. For the central persons are not individuals, they become protagonists of the whole racial cause (AW, p. 213).

The lesson was well learned for in the years to come, Johnson would perform many astounding individual tasks as a representative of the masses in Black America.

Orientation in the field of politics added another dimension to Johnson's preparation as a race leader. Power, which the Blacks amassed for themselves, is best defined in Silberman's terms: "Power means nothing more than the capacity to make one's interests felt in the discussion that
Charles W. Anderson was one of the chief arbiters of power, then, in New York. He called upon Johnson to lend his assistance in forming a Black Republican Club to assist in the Roosevelt Campaign but also to encourage black men of intelligence to enter politics. Johnson joined the club and helped in the Roosevelt Campaign. Mr. Anderson became president of the Club and gained recognition as a black Republican leader of New York because of his keen insight into the actions of men and the uses he made of people. Roosevelt won and promoted Anderson to the position of collector of Internal Revenue for the district which includes the Wall Street section of New York. Johnson now became president of the Black Republican Club. In this position Johnson had a chance to deal with "the greatest American game." He learned many valuable lessons about politics. One of greatest value was the understanding of political loyalty and its strength as a force in America's civic system. Through the system Johnson was to become a United States Consular (AW, pp. 219-220).

On Johnson's arrival from Europe in 1905, Anderson suggested that Johnson should go into the United States Consular Service. Johnson felt that President Roosevelt would be willing to appoint him and his belief became a reality. Anderson took the steps to secure the appointment for Johnson; he went to Washington, took the examination and was appointed United States Consul at Puerto Cabello, Venezuela (AW, p. 220-221). Meier established the premise that "the ideological paradox in regard to political activity that is evident in Washington's own career is exemplified also by the careers in his political appointees" (Meier, p. 255).

Meier discovered a truth regarding Anderson's assistance to Johnson which Johnson did not report. Johnson did not reveal that it was through Washington, that Anderson obtained his appointment (Meier, pp. 218-220). Thus, Johnson, a member of the "Talented Tenth," an intellectual leader molded for years as one not given to amelioration, accepted a favor from Washington whose apparent stand was one of a Master Compromiser on the race issue. He was in essence, though, a DuBois soldier drafted for the Washington Army. Surely, he believed in the broad reaches of the Tuskegee ideal, but within, he had sanctioned the brash actions of protesters who used the method of direct confrontation in matters of race misunderstanding as a first move in the Alonzo Jones Affair.

During the period from 1900 to 1905, Johnson had been a leader in several fields, education, law, musical comedy; he became also a leader for his people as exhorter in his short-lived paper, The Daily American. Now he was a leader, a Consul, because someone appointed him to be a leader. On the concourse of unusual experiences, two incidents mark his leaving an old world, the other, welcoming another. The matter has less to do with leadership (though it had everything to do with leadership) — more to do with self discovery and personal perspective.

Johnson was studying Vergil's Aenid, one of the subjects he would be examined on for a life certificate in teaching. He had already become President of the State Teachers Association for Blacks in Florida. Two letters came from Rosamond, one containing eighty-odd dollars, the other, four-hundred dollars of the same royalty money for songs that were selling. He threw Vergil the length of the porch, danced around his mother's chair, rushed off to cash the two money orders and packed for New York (AW, p. 183). He writes: "It was sweeter than money merely worked for."
This was money gained for materialising the intangible" (AW, p. 184).
He gained the greatest sense of freedom in his life when he resigned as
Principal from Stanton High School in 1902. When he dropped the letter
in the box after pacing on a street in New York, he sensed the importance
of the act. He estimates the value of the decision: "I at once became
aware of an expanse of freedom I had not felt before. Immediately it
seemed that the goal of my efforts was no longer marked by a limit just
a little way in front of my eyes but reached out somewhere toward in-
finity" (AW, p. 189).
CHAPTER VI

THINKING A WAY INTO THE NEEDS OF BLACK VERSE

1900-1905

At the turn of the century, James Weldon Johnson had not developed his talent as a literary artist to the point of inculcating the raw material of his imagination into suitable forms. His unusual experiences, from 1900-1905, saved him from the limitations of provincial life in Florida that tended to hamper his growth as an intellectual and creative artist. Yet his hit songs did not articulate the dominant note of the Black Experience that he had known in New York, "on the road," and abroad. He had to probe his mind to find an answer to the question of how to lessen the gap between what was and what should be in Afro-American poetry. "One measure of an artist," writes Don Hausdorff, "is his ability to recognize and articulate the dominant motifs of the society in which he lives — to identify its aspirations and doubts, to raise questions that need to be raised."¹ During this period, Johnson served the cause of higher literary art for Blacks by asking questions more than he did by producing serious works. His query led him to Dunbar, the leading Afro-American poet and Whitman, the leading Anglo-American poet (maybe presence) of the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

The time was ripe for the quest of knowledge. Knowledge and thought had been mingled with the life and labor of men from colonial times in America, but the latter part of the nineteenth century and the twentieth century witnessed the beginning search for more knowledge and inquiries into the meaning and uses of it. A quest was carried on for more exact and human history. Naturally, literature came under close scrutiny; the probing into literature and life ran parallel courses. And Whitman was the one to chart the course for the New World poet through the power of his voice, the virility of his verse, and the rightness of his vision.

Whitman announced in his 1855 "Preface" to *Leaves of Grass*, that a superior breed, poets, would take the place of priests in the era of advanced technology: His prophetic words are:

There will soon be no more priests. Their work is done. They may wait awhile . . . perhaps a generation or two . . . dropping off by degrees. . . . the gangs of Kosmos and prophets ensmasse shall take their place. A new order shall arise and they shall be the priests of man, and every man shall be his own priest. . . . the new breed of poets [shall] be the interpreters of men and women of all events and all things. They shall find their inspiration in real objects today, symptoms of past and future. . . . They shall design to defend the immortality of God or the perfection of things or liberty or the exquisite beauty and reality of the soul. They shall arise in America and be responded to from the remainder of the earth.  

The new emphasis on thought and the new ideas on the role of the poet would influence and extend James Weldon Johnson's concept of the Afro-American poet and his need for a tradition.

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In New York, the summer of 1899, Johnson came upon the thought that the superstructure of conscious black art should rest on folk art. This idea registers his initial insight into a need for change from the minstrel-plantation tradition. His efforts, along with the work of Bob Cole and Rosamond as songwriters, served to dignify the "coon song"; but what they did in that genre failed to identify them as black artists. At the peak of success as Broadway personalities, the trio was identified as white by a Caucasian lady in Georgia. The Ladies Home Journal began publishing musical pieces as a part of the regular edition of the magazine. Edward Bok invited them to contribute so they published seven or eight songs in the Journal. When Bok announced that in a subsequent issue he would publish a song submitted by a young black composer in Georgia, a white lady from a little Georgia town sent a letter of protest to him. She told the editor that no black man had developed the musical skill or the artistic taste to interpret even his own race. Therefore, he could do nothing that was suitable for publication in the Journal. She ended the letter imploring the editor to publish more of the little "Negro" classics by Cole and the Johnson Brothers. They all had a big laugh over the case of mistaken identity (AW, p. 195). Afterward, Johnson admitted that his "laughter was tempered by the thought that there was anybody in the country, notwithstanding the locality being Georgia, who, knowing anything at all about them, did not know that Cole and the Johnson Brothers were Negroes" (AW, p. 195).

By the Fall of 1899, Johnson was thinking seriously about the new direction black poetry would go in its development. He felt that the Lincoln myth might be a means of adding the black touch to his lyrics without resorting to the conventions of the minstrel tradition. Mr.
McBeath, a white educator, read a long poem he had written on Lincoln to Johnson which was the expression of a Southern white man. Johnson praised Mr. McBeath's poem because he thought that it was good. But he thought at that moment -- without saying it -- that there was yet to be written a great Lincoln poem, the expression of a black man (AW, p. 153). This undercurrent thought on black poetry, combined with the trio's philosophy of composing song-poems is the basic unity that gave birth to "Lift Every Voice and Sing," Johnson's only poem of merit written between 1900 and 1905.

The theory is best stated in Johnson's own words:

We had a theory that great popularity in the case of any song was based upon a definite and sufficient reason; that it was not merely based upon a definite and sufficient reason; that it was not merely incidental. A song might be popular because it was silly; but silliness sufficient to give a song popularity would have to be the result of a certain cleverness (AW, p. 179).

He discusses the application of this theory to a specific song, "The Maiden With The Dreamy Eyes":

In writing "The Maiden With the Dreamy Eyes" we gave particular consideration to these fundamentals. It needed little analysis to see that a song written in exclusive praise of blue eyes was cut off at once from about three fourths of the possible chances for universal success; that it could make but faint appeal to the heart or the pocket book of a young man going to call on a girl with brown eyes or black eyes or gray eyes. So we worked on the chorus of our song until, without making it a catalogue, it was inclusive enough to enable any girl who sang it or to whom it was sung to fancy herself the maiden with the dreamy eyes (AW, p. 179).

Therefore, in the days when a song was popular because people bought it to play and sing at home, profit came with the songwriter's ability to appeal to a vast audience.
Fortunately, James Weldon Johnson wrote the song-poem "Lift Every Voice and Sing" well enough to attract national attention though he wrote it for a group of school children in Jacksonville, February 1900. A group of young black men decided to celebrate Lincoln's birthday on February 12. They asked Johnson to prepare an address for the occasion. He began preparing the address, but in his characteristic manner he wanted to do something else. His mind went to work on a central idea for a poem on Lincoln but somehow he could not get his thoughts to add up to an artistic effect. However, the central idea took another form. He consulted Rosamond, who accepted his plan to write a song to be sung as a part of the program. Better still, the song would be sung by five hundred school children (AW, p. 154).

The process of composing this song is very important because it is the first occasion of the poet's experience with the agonizing joy of creation. He thought up the first line: "Lift every voice and sing." Even to him it was not a startling line, but it furnished the touchstone for the next five. When he came almost to the end of the first stanza, two lines came without striving from the seat of his unconscious mind:

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 (AW, p. 154).

The spirit of the poem had taken hold of him. He finished the stanza and turned it over to Rosamond. He did not have to use pen and paper to compose the other two stanzas. While Rosamond worked at the musical setting, he paced back and forth on the front porch, repeating the lines to himself, going through all the agony and ecstasy of creating. As he worked through the opening and middle lines of the last stanza beginning
with "God of our weary years," he became elated; when he wrote "Lest, our feet stray from the places our God where we met thee/ Lest our hearts drunk with the wine of the world we forget Thee," he cried without shame. His feverish ecstasy was followed by a sense of joy on having gone through the most complete of human experiences — artistic creation (AW, pp. 154-155).

Back to reality, Johnson recognised the Kiplingesque touch immediately. The "Lest we forget" used in the "Recessional" prompted his use of "lest" in the two lines quoted above. "But I knew," he wrote with confidence "that in the stanza the American Negro was, historically and spiritually immanent; and I decided to let it stand as it was written" (AW, p. 155). He states further that "nothing that I have done has paid me back so fully in satisfaction as being the creator of this song. I am always thrilled deeply when I hear it sung by Negro children. I am lifted up on their voices, and I am carried back and enabled to live through again the exquisite emotions I felt at the birth of the song " (AW, p. 156).

In writing verse, T. S. Eliot says that "at the moment of creation when one writes one is what one is, and the damage of a lifetime, and of having been born in an unsettled society, cannot be repaired at the moment of composition." He adds: "In writing verse one can only deal with actuality." (Eliot, p. 126). In prose, as in criticism, the writer may be occupied with ideals, but not in creating verse. If one accepts Eliot's views about creating verse, Johnson was imminently Black when

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he composed the song. Later it was adopted by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored people and used throughout the country as the "Negro National Anthem" (AW, p. 155). The song was called the "Negro Hymn" during the struggle for civil rights legislation. At the present time it is called the "Black National Anthem." Alain Locke knew in 1925, during the Harlem Renaissance, that the Young Negro would have more difficulty in achieving "an inner mastery of mood and spirit" than outer mastery of form or technique. James Weldon Johnson gained that mastery of mood and spirit in "Lift Every Voice and Sing" twenty-five years before the announcement of the New Negro.

The song has several values. In terms of language, Johnson, broke away from the dialect tradition and wrote the poem in standard English. He had not begun his studies in English literature at Columbia University but he displayed his knowledge of Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936). Kipling had an ear for "pronounced rhythm" or "surging rhythms" which he used in some of his poems to produce verbal music. The music of Kipling's verse no doubt appealed to Johnson. Examples are given of the shorter lines where he used parallel construction and the fourteeners that Johnson used as a pattern for the long lines mentioned earlier. For example, in "Recessional," the first two verses read as follows: "God of our fathers known of old,/ Lord of our far-flung battle-line. . . ." The first verses of the last stanza of "Lift Every Voice" reads: "God of our weary years,/ God of our silent tears," which resemble Kipling's in tone and structure. The billowy quality of the longer lines is exemplified

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7Johnson, Saint Peter Relates An Incident, p. 102.
in verse 24 of the last stanza of "Dedication": "Beyond the loom of the last lone star, through open darkness hurled"; and verse 9 of the second stanza of "Lift Every Voice": "We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered." A far guess is that Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden," reminding America of her responsibilities to Cuba and the Philippines, acquired 1898, might have inspired Johnson to write of the black man's burden in "Lift Every Voice." He and Rosamond used the theme of imperialism in Toloso, their first opera, which shows that Johnson was familiar with the trends of world power politics.

Another value of the hymn is its kinship with the primitive song of Africa. African bards had the "black habit" of setting so much of life's activity to music. The songs always presented the "unabashed, clear, yet passionate view of life." This song tradition is imbedded in the African concept of total being and the African's use of art for life's sake. Davidson says that Africans believe that "the arts die and lose their meaning when dissected from the context and embrace of life." The hymn was not designed knowingly to accommodate this particular African concept, but it is related to the past, present and future life of the Afro-American.

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8 Kipling, p. 2.
9 Johnson, Along This Way, p. 101.
10 Kipling, p. 215.
E. Franklin Frazier, a black historian, calls attention to the sociological value of the "Black National Anthem." His evaluation gains in merit in the light of what J. Saunders Redding says about Johnson's song: "In the first months of the new century, James Weldon Johnson, recently returned to his home in Florida from New York, exhorted his people to sing of the faith taught by the dark past and to face the dawn of a new day... But in the first decades of the 20th century, the outlook was dark, North and South." Frazier writes:

One of the most important literary contributions at the end of the 19th century from a sociological point of view was the appearance of James Weldon Johnson's 'Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing.' In this poem Johnson endowed the Negro's enslavement and struggle for freedom with a certain nobility. The poem expressed an acceptance of the past and confidence in the future. Perhaps it might be said that Johnson's poem tended to cultivate a sense of history among Negroes.

He supported his viewpoint on the status of the hymn as a National Anthem for Blacks and its use at the beginning of their public gatherings — the position of other national anthems on a program.

Up to 1900, Johnson wrote most of his poems after the style of Dunbar, that is, in the dialect tradition. Not long after he had written the "Black National Anthem," he came across Whitman's *Leaves of Grass.* He found himself engulfed and submerged in the book. In the presence of the great Anglo-American writer, he felt that all that he had written except the song-poem for the Lincoln celebration seemed puerile. The experience was gratifying, but it set him floundering since he was an acknowledged disciple of Dunbar, the reigning black poet. In Dunbar's

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13Redding, *They Came in Chains,* p. 213.
dialect was "a true interpretation of Negro character and psychology." In Walt Whitman's poetry, he sensed America's developing National Consciousness, its vigorous democracy on a large scale, the free, elemental, dynamic poetry form. In a muddled state of mind he tried "to gain orientation through a number of attempts in the formless forms of Whitman" (AW, p. 159).

Setting Whitman's poetry in juxtaposition to conventional dialect poetry gave Johnson his deep insight to the meaning and operation of stereotypes. According to Ellison, "stereotypes are malicious reductions of human complexity which seize upon such characteristics as color, the shape of the nose, an accent, hair texture and convert them into emblems which render it unnecessary for the prejudiced individual to confront the humanity of those upon whom the stereotype has been imposed." These were the obvious faults in the Dunbar tradition. Whitman was a writer who was "challenged to reveal archetypical truth within the stereotype. Here archetypes are embodiments of abiding patterns of human existence which underlies racial, cultural and religious differences. They are in their basic humanity timeless and raceless" (AW, p. 159).

Johnson discovered that there were the stereotyped black man, a concept of his place, familiar props, a typical speech pattern, and a typical audience to enjoy a darky's antics. The black man was painted as a humorous, contented forlorn darky in standardised colors in the Arcadian background of old log cabins and cotton fields (AW, p. 161).

The familiar sound of the banjo and singing was heard around the cabin door. There were the watermelon, possum and sweet potato sessions (BM, p. 264). His normal speech was dialect represented in misspellings and clipped syllables. It was considered as the black man's natural medium of expression (AW, p. 161). He could see that the poet writing in conventional dialect could never free himself from the artificiality of the convention almost divorced from reality. Besides, the dialect poet, white or black, gave only certain conceptions about black life. These concepts had little or no relation to actual life. The key problem lay in the audience which was willing and ready to accept what was bound to the tradition.

The minstrel tradition projected the comic black on the stage where million of whites got their conception of black character. Naturally, it was difficult for white America to take the black man seriously. Books followed the same pattern of characterization, thus, forming a base national pattern of thought. Johnson believed that "just as these stereotypes were molded and circulated and perpetuated by literary and artistic processes, they must be broken up and replaced through similar means. No other means can be fully effective" (WN, pp. 92-93). Writers and artists would, therefore, help to break up and replace the stereotypes, not simply raise them as the trio had done in their popular songs.

The dialect writer's first step was to understand the psychological basis for his defeat. The first problem was that the black poet was writing basically for the enjoyment of an audience that was an outside group when he wrote conventional dialect poetry. The public self and the innate self were going in opposite directions. Performing for the
outside group and doing what the outside wanted meant the destruction of the black ethos. True folk artists strived to express themselves for themselves and to their own group (AW, p. 159). Sometime after Johnson's examination of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, "he got a sudden realization of the artificiality of conventionalized Negro dialect poetry; of its exaggerated geniality, childish optimism, forced comicality, and mawkish sentiment, of its limitation as an instrument of expression to but two emotions, pathos and humor, thereby making every poem either only sad or only funny" (AW, pp. 158-159).

Johnson did the one thing that he could to advance his understanding about a tradition in black poetry. He invited Dunbar, the reigning poet, to Jacksonville in the spring of 1900 for a concert to see him perform and to sound out his views about the dialect tradition and the Whitman tradition. The public readings were successful just as Woodward's had been the spring before. In fact, Rosamond's invitation to Woodward served as a model for the Dunbar plan. Johnson says that Dunbar's voice was a perfect musical instrument and he knew how to use it with extreme effect (AW, p. 159). During his visit he wrote six or more poems which were accepted when he sent them off. Two of them were sent to the *Saturday Evening Post*. The prompt payments which he received indicated that whatever Dunbar wrote was in demand (AW, p. 160). He had become a popular poet.

Despite Dunbar's success, Johnson began to ask him about the further possibilities of stereotyped dialect. Immediately, Dunbar took a defensive stand. He told Johnson, "I didn't start as a dialect poet. I simply came to the conclusion that I could write as well, if not better, than anybody else I knew, and that by doing so I should gain a hearing,
and now they don't want me to write anything but dialect," (AW, p. 160).
There was a tone of self reproach in what he said just as it was during his fatal illness, only it was deeper. He told Johnson then: "I've kept doing the same things and doing them no better. I have never gotten to the things I really wanted to do" (AW, p. 160). He did not tell Johnson what the things were but he believed that it was Dunbar's desire to write one or two long, perhaps epical poems in straight English that would relate to the black man. Evidently, this is what Johnson attempted in his long poem "Fifty Years," written 1913, to celebrate the fifty years of freedom for Afro-Americans. Before they parted during the Jacksonville visit, they agreed that traditional dialect had gone as far as it could go. Regardless of Dunbar's lyrics, the medium was narrow and limited. Johnson pays tribute to Dunbar when he says that "Burns took the strong dialect of his people and made it classic. Dunbar took the humble speech of his people and in it wrought music" (ANP, p. 37).

Dunbar's self-reproach and his confession on not having accomplished what he wished to do left Johnson technically without a leader because he had considered himself a disciple of Dunbar. If he denounced the old tradition some ground work had to be laid for a new one. In the course of their talks Johnson confessed that before their mutual consent had been reached about dialect, he had sensed its limitations and had done some things under the sudden influence of Whitman. Dunbar read the works and with a queer smile said: "I don't like them and I don't see what you're driving at" (AW, p. 161). Even if Dunbar were justified, Johnson registered near shock from the answer. To uphold the validity of Whitman's influence, Johnson got out his copy of Leaves of Grass and read some of the things he admired most. To his surprise Dunbar
said that he did not like Whitman himself (AW, p. 161).

Several reasons for Dunbar's denunciation of Whitman stand out in clear relief. In the first place, Dunbar was a recognised genius, but he was, according to Johnson, as headstrong and as impulsive as a boy of six. He was given to courtly manners, polished speech and modest behavior, but he could become sarcastic when he spoke to people he did not like. And he did not like anyone who was rough, aggressive or cocksure. Neither could he tolerate a vulgar streak in an individual (AW, pp. 160, 159). He no doubt detected this streak in Whitman.

Harold W. Blodgett gives one view of Whitman as he was seen in his day:

To his own day Whitman the poet was, by large, either a barbarian without taste whose enormities offended to the soul all that the genteel tradition stood for — decorum, craft, modesty, and grace — or he was mystic, inspired prophet, benign and compelling, whose potencies of song were to shape and sustain the noble democratic brotherhood of a new era.17

No doubt the sentiments and the images of Leaves of Grass appeared formidable to Dunbar who used conventional expressions in his standard English poems as well as those written in "Negro" dialect. A dated critic, John C. Metcalf, writing more than a decade after Whitman's death, still registered a complaint about Whitman's type of realism. He claims that "Whitman made the mistake of supposing that realism demands the dragging in of offensive subjects. Indeed the most serious defect of this apostle of Democracy was his lack of a sense of proportion — his

evident inability to select material susceptible of artistic treatment and to reject the rest. The elimination of the dross of human life is the way of great poets."\(^ {18}\) Dunbar, a romanticist, preferred looking through rose-colored film. He detested "the dross" in Whitman's masterpiece as much as his cocksure celebration of himself. Dunbar was struggling to outrun death by tuberculosis; Whitman as a young poet was virile, beating on his chest. For obvious reasons, the weak man resented the strong one.

Too much was expected of Dunbar in one respect. Dr. Darwin Turner, a black literary critic, portrays Dunbar as neither a scholar, political scientist nor economist. He was a "talented high school graduate whose views reflected the limited knowledge of many historians, economists, and social philosophers of his day."\(^ {19}\) That Dunbar, the descendant of slave parents, sensed the lack of freedom for his person and for his art might be implied in *The Sport of the Gods*, a novel which Dr. Turner considers the poet's major work as a social critic. Dunbar complains about the alternative given a black man during his era: restraint of the body in the South; festering of the soul in the North (Turner, 13). Just as Edgar Allen Poe entombed himself against the inroads of the machine by occupying a chamber in *The House of Usher*, so Dunbar offered "an agrarian myth as a shield against the painful reality of discrimination in the cities." (Turner, 13).


The black American writer "is also an heir of the human experience that is literature," says Ellison, "and this might be more important to him than his living folk tradition." Johnson names James Whitcomb Riley as one of the men who influenced Dunbar (ANP, p. 35), so it is necessary to examine a statement from an appreciative critic about Riley to understand his influence on Dunbar.

Riley, 1853-1917, was born in Greenfield, Indiana, and became successful in his reproductions of the Hoosier dialect which gained access to magazines. He became a favorite reader because his interpretation of the poems appealed to audiences in various parts of the country. His volumes in verse are *The Old Swimmin' Hole* and *'Leven More, Neighborly Poems, Rhymes of Childhood, The Book of Joyous Children, and While the Heart Beats.* Dunbar's verse titles are *Oak and Ivy, Majors and Minors, Lyrics of Lowly Life, Lyrics of the Hearthside, Lyrics of Love and Laughter* and *Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow.* The volume beginning with *Lyrics of Lowly Life* are the volumes of dialect poems on which Dunbar's fame rests (ANP, pp. 49-50). The "lowly life" motif in the titles of both poets is imminent.

Now Metcalf praises Riley as a poet of democracy:

> From [his] titles it is evident that Riley is also a lover of childhood and knows how to put in simple rhyme the simple emotions of the childish heart. Simplicity and genuine humaneness characterize all that he has written, whether he has in mind young or old. He is specially fond of rural life and natural men and women unspoiled by artificial conditions. For such and of such his verse is made. Humor, pathos, and wholesome sentiment form the warp and woof of his poetry and his philosophy is of the cheerful, commonsense kind. No

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20 Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in Shadow and Act, pp. 72-73.
21 Metcalf, p. 403.
one has surpassed him in the lifelike portrayal of the people and speech of his own native region. . . . If there was ever a poet of democracy, it is James Whitcomb Riley (Metcalf, pp. 403-404).

The foregoing evaluation of Riley's verse indicate that the limited experiences of the "Hoosier laureate of the common heart" is replete with passion for the "lowly" just as his disciple Paul Laurence Dunbar's. Therefore, Dunbar's limitations prompted him to reject Whitman.

From the unconscious mind of Dunbar, another issue might have come to bear about Johnson's enthusiasm for Whitman. Whitman was hailed as the poet of poets of democracy. Would Whitman influence Johnson the way Riley had influenced him? Would Johnson also be given to self-abnegation at the end of his career as a poet? Without his knowing it, Dunbar disclaimed himself and Whitman as examples for Johnson. Thus, it was left to Johnson to found a tradition for Afro-American poetry. His ability to think helped him to evolve a system that served temporarily. The answer was the use of black subject matter, the patterns of English verse and the English language. Unlike Dunbar, "his sense of reality could reject bias while appreciating the truth revealed by achieved arts," as Ellison expresses it. However, it was years later before he allied himself to the folk tradition which allowed freer form and a freer idiom of speech.

The wide understanding which Johnson possessed himself drew him to Whitman. Besides, both of them were lovers of Manhattan. Whitman expresses his love outright in "Give Me The Splendid Silent Sun." A poem like Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" would help Johnson to

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recall the days of his visits to his Aunt Sarah when she lived in
Brooklyn. Three Johnson titles show his interest in New York: Black
Manhattan, the social history of Harlem; "Harlem the Culture Capital,"
an essay published in the New Negro, 1925, and a sonnet, "My City."
Carl Van Vechten, with a group discussing a memorial for Johnson two
years after his death, decided to erect a monument in bronze in New York
City. The deciding factor in the selection of New York as the site was
the poet's own words about "Manhattan's sights and sounds."

Johnson also qualified for the limited Whitman audience who read
him for his actual achievement. R. W. B. Lewis, in the following state­
ment, shows him as more than a "democratic" singer — a title also given
to James Whitcomb Riley. He says:

At his best, Whitman was not really the bard of democratic
society at all; nor was he the prophet of the country's
and the world's glorious future. He was perhaps, the poet
of an aesthetic and moral democracy. But he was above all
the poet of the self. . . . He was the poet of the self's
motion downwards into the abysses of darkness and guilt
and pain and isolation, and upwards to the creative act in
which darkness was transmitted into beauty. . . . Whitman
had in his own example, made poetry possible in America.24

This doctrine of self, "A spiritual demand upon the whole personality,"
inspired Johnson, no doubt, for two of his major works are autobo­
ographical — The Autobiography of An Ex-Coloured Man, 1912, and Along
This Way, 1933. His own tendency toward egoism may account in large part
for the interest in self. Maybe he, until then, was not sure of how to
use the self as a major art source. Whatever is true, in almost every
literary work of lasting merit Johnson wrote after reading Leaves of Grass,
the self is imminent.

24R. W. B. Lewis, ed., " Walt Whitman," in Major American Writers,
I, eds., Perry Miller et. al. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc.,
The influence of the English standards for writing poetry came in upon Johnson when he studied English literature with Brander Matthews at Columbia University, 1903-1905. This influence is seen in his poetry dated from 1907-1913. The stability of the Afro-American folk tradition "became precious as a result of an act of literary discovery" for Johnson years later. Ralph Ellison says that in this way he discovered the folk tradition. "Taken as a whole," in the light of his understanding, "its spirituals along with the blues, jazz and folk tales . . . has much to tell [the black man] of the faith, humor and adaptibility to reality necessary to live in a world which has taken on much of the insecurity and blues-like absurdity known to those who brought it into being." Ellison agrees with Leroi Jones who says that the blues (other folk types also) tell of the sociology of Afro-American identity and attitude. Johnson was not yet born to the reality of the folk art but continued to eradicate the faults of dialect.

He was made conscious of the need of a medium of poetic expression for Blacks to eradicate the concept that dialect was the real speech for blacks. Dunbar regarded dialect as the broken language of a broken race. Johnson's belief in equality perhaps extended to his determination to use standard English as the proper medium for black poetry. After the publication of God's Trombones, 1927, Auslander took issue with Johnson for having used "regular" English. He praises Trombones but registers this dissenting opinion:

With only one point do we take issue, and that is Mr. Johnson's contention touching dialect. Save for an

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25 Ellison, "Change the Joke," p. 73.
26 Ibid., pp. 72-73.
27 Ibid., p. 242.
occasional phrase — I've done drunk! or 'gittin up' — the poems are written in King's English. Mr. Johnson refers to the work of Synge as forming a parallel and a precedent. But the great Irish playwright and poet, in appropriating the gossip of the servant girls in the kitchen of the old Wicklow house, was not eliminating their jargon but transcending it.28

After taking issue with Johnson for not using dialect, he vacillates between the faults and the virtues of the dialect tradition.

Of course, dialect as such has its limitations, fixed by a popular superstition which confines its use to the stage burlesque or sob variety of Negro humor and pathos. This is unfortunate. And yet — there are the spirituals.29

The reviewer failed to understand Johnson's statement about Synge, the Irish poet. Undoubtedly the reviewer thought that Blackness in a poet's work was marred by using King's English, the language used by the old time black preacher in his sermons.

Johnson admonished the black poet in America to find a form that would express the racial spirit by symbols from within rather than symbols from without. He had reference to "outside" symbols from without. He had reference to "outside" symbols such as the mutilation of English spelling and pronunciation. He writes: "[The black poet] needs a form that is freer and larger than dialect, but which will still hold the racial flavor; a form expressing the imagery, the idioms, the peculiar turns of thought, and the distinctive humor and pathos, too, of Negroes but which will also be capable of voicing the deepest and highest emotions and aspirations, and allow the widest range and the widest scope of treatment. [He needed] a medium that is . . . capable of giving expression to the varied conditions of Negro life in America, and much less is capable of

29Ibid.
giving the fullest interpretation of Negro character and psychology." (ANP, pp. 42-43). Auslander was not clear in his distinction between dialect as dialect and as it had become a set mold in convention. Johnson called for an art idiom suited to the time, the place and the occasions in actual life. The new emphasis on London speech as the prestige dialect for English speaking people also helps to clarify Auslander's contention. In a word, he is saying that people who are not prestigious should not use "King's English."

The assumption can be granted that Johnson familiarized himself with Whitman's ideas about language in the 1855 "Preface" to *Leaves of Grass*. If so, he found a voice in strong support for his use of "The King's English" in 1900 as well as in 1927. Before Johnson became acquainted with Whitman he had a predilection for vastness. In *Leaves of Grass* he found manifestations of it in relation to every phase of "culture."

Whitman's discussion of language ranges in depth and breadth of perception to such an extent that it might have relevance for all American writers. He says that:

The English language befriends the grand American expression . . . it is brawny enough and limber and full enough. On the tough stock of a race who through all change of circumstance was never without the idea of political liberty, which is the animus of liberty, it has attracted the terms of daintier and gayer and subtler and more elegant tongues. It is the powerful language of resistance . . . it is the dialect of common sense. It is the speech of proud, and melancholy races of all who aspire. It is the chosen tongue to express growth faith self esteem freedom justice equality friendliness amplitude precedence decision and courage. It is the medium that shall well nigh press the inexpressible ("Preface," p. 504).

Sheila Walker says that "people act according to what they perceive
reality to be."^{30} Johnson established English as the real medium of poetic expression for Afro-American poets to change the stereotyped concepts of the black man and the state of degradation attached to his lifestyle. "The King's English" gave room, then for the expression of nobler ideas.

If there is such a phenomenon as the fate of time as there is allegedly the fate of place, James Weldon Johnson met Dunbar and Whitman at the right time. Somehow, the two "warring ideals" (DuBois' statement) of Afro and Anglo-American ideals, met and coalesced in Johnson's mind. He loved and admired Dunbar and was, therefore, influenced by his charm and his ability to bring a limited reality to black literature through his use of black characters and black psychology. The studies at Columbia University in English Literature under Brander Matthews would exert influence, especially during the next period. And Johnson would learn how to effect a philosophy of composition for mass literature. But the master influence of Walt Whitman came in time to corroborate his value of self. Because of Johnson's love for adventure, it is likely that he found great consolation in the doctrines of freedom and brotherhood found in Leaves of Grass. It is suggested here, that Johnson's decision to establish "standard English" as a medium of expression for Afro-American poetry is due perhaps to his reading the young Whitman of thirty-six as well as his desire to promote black culture by the use of a polite language. In his poems from 1906-1913, Johnson used the "polite" language to produce "polite" poetry. Despite his discoveries, he was not yet able to run the real body of folk material through the alembic of his genius.

The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man was published in 1912 while James Weldon Johnson was United States Consul in Corinto, Nicaragua. However, the first two chapters were written in 1905 while he was studying literature at Columbia University under Brander Matthews. From the very first, as a story writer, he selected situations that appealed to him as an individual and utilized them as a basis for the interpretation of life. As simple as were the stories on his first derby hat and Mr. Woodard's mule, he followed the pattern which forms the groundwork for his only novel — the utilization of individual experiences. Mead says that a great expression of this practice is found in the novel. It "undertakes to present the meaning of life in terms of its occurrence to the individual. You can see that the novel and the newspaper belong to the same picture. They are taking happenings and putting the meaning of life not into a moral theory, not into a social theory as such; they are trying to give life as it actually happens to individuals, to men, women and children."¹ Therefore, the discussion of the race problem in the
Autobiography of An Ex-Coloured Man as well as that of the race artist, the tragic mulatto and the black race leaders, stem from Johnson's personal interests and experiences. His own life served in this manner as the dilemma for his fiction though it was enriched from contact with a vast number of other experiences.

The intention here is to isolate four levels of comment on the race situation that appear in combined form within the novel rather than to equate incidents in the Autobiography with occurrences in Johnson's life. On the first level, there is a long discussion of the race question interwoven with the narrative. This discussion is a kind of sociological treatise taken alone. The second level of discussion revolves around the dilemma of the black artist who feels deep within himself that he should use his artistic talent as a weapon against racial prejudice. The third level introduces the exploits of the tragic mulatto who suffers from an identity crisis. The hero passes into the white race, which enables him to become a success in the material world, but he loses his gift as a natural musician. Though the hero suffers from an identity crisis and eventually passes, on the fourth level, he reveals himself as a Black who is proud of representatives of the race who speak with pride for the race.

Johnson's novel was written at a time when prose fiction was coming of age in American letters. After 1865, imaginative letters were designed to carry descriptions and interpretations of real life situations. The public expected the artist to register the swift changes in society — continental and regional, which occurred as the national domain was rounded out, industries expanded, and concentration set in. ²

²Beard and Beard, Basic History, p. 367.
Beard writes: "Nearly everything human and material seemed to be noted in fiction" (p. 367). A similar idea is presented in a discussion by Clarence Ghodes, who says: "In the domain of literature, the play may once have been the chief abstract and chronicle of the times, but during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the novel has usurped the chief place in holding the mirror up to the homely face of society."

Black American fiction from 1890 to World War I follow the general trends of the period. According to Dr. Gloster,

American Negro fiction between 1890 and World War I reflects the social and historical trends of the period, especially in so far as they influence the thought and life of the colored citizens of the country. Attention is given to disfranchisement from the black man's point of view. The Washington-DuBois controversy receives frequent discussion; and the majority of the writers indicates, either through implication for the militant rather than for the pragmatic and conciliatory school of race leadership.

Chestnut, the first reputable black short story writer and novelist, and Dunbar, a writer of short stories and novels (in addition to poetry) both pioneered in their own ways in bringing the matters of black American life (even when Dunbar used white characters) to the nation at large. Even though the fiction of Chestnut and Dunbar was handled by major publishing houses between 1898 and 1905, black novels and short stories between 1905 and 1923 were almost always presented by small firms that were unable to give their author's a national hearing. The two exceptions during these years were Johnson's Autobiography and DuBois'

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The Quest of the Silver Fleece. Both gained nationwide recognition by readers of both races (Gloster, pp. 110-111).

National recognition for Johnson meant judgement by American standards. In 1912, the Autobiography was classified as irresponsible; it was accused of negativism and called un-American along with Claude McKay's Harlem Shadows, W. E. B. DuBois', The Gift of Black Folks, Countee Cullen's Color and Walter White's, Fire in the Flint. Northerners viewed Johnson's novel as a human document — as more remarkable than any piece of fiction written by one of the "colored race." Southerners as a whole considered the story as utterly impossible. The Autobiography was condemned in the main because it did not meet the demands of cultural nationalism which "demanded that literature be patriotic, optimistic, positive and uncritical, like Americans All, and American Ideals, and America in Promises, and It Takes a Heap O'Living." The formula for such works was not framed for the accommodation of black writers. The art of fiction consists in establishing meaningful connections or harmony between the incidents and actions presented in the story on one hand and the inner propensities of the characters concerned on the other. Therefore, the black novelist had to adhere to his reality to be a true artist.

Modern critics likewise give divergent views of the Autobiography. Robert Bone refers to the novel as a propaganda tract, but he considers it a model of artistic attachment in comparison with similar tracts of

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the period. He considers the digressions in expository form as arti-
ficial contrivances that mar the novel. Moreover, he thinks that Johnson
is needlessly defensive at times, and in addition could not repress his
desire to educate the Anglo-American. In answer to Bone's view about
Johnson's intention of informing the Anglo-Americans, it can be seen
that Johnson was following an authentic course of nation building by the
men of the first cultural frontier though his nation was within the con-
fines of America. The black men on the first cultural frontier informed
the Anglo-Americans about their progress just as Columbus informed his
sponsors about what he found in the new world and how he was faring.

From the date of the Columbus letter, 1493, until two hundred years after-
ward, American literature was little more than the report of Western
European Culture on the move in the New World.

Amann wrote recently that the Autobiography is an initiation story.
And as an initiation story, it portrays the life of one very exceptional
Negro individual, a potential virtuoso in music frustrated by his own
lack of responsibility. The protagonist of the novel, is seen, despite
his aborted efforts as an artist by this critic as an exceptional creative
artist. He also carries himself in "the style of a gentleman." He in-
tends to prove himself by becoming a great black composer but changes his
mind and decides to "pass" after witnessing a lynching scene. But in all,
the motive for the hero's ambition, to become a composer, is the same as

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8 Robert Bone, The Negro Novel in America (New Haven: Yale University

9 Robert E. Spiller, The Cycle of American Literature (New York: The

10 Clarence Amann, "Three Negro Classics," Negro American Literature
that of William Bryd who was determined by his personal actions and
daily habits and with his pen to prove no less than the rising black man
of the Pre-World War I Period, that he could be a model gentleman-artist.
One has only to recall his tedious habit of reading the classics — of
the writer standing above the inhabitants of Lubberland. Lynn is sure
that William Byrd II followed this line of self aggrandizement because
"the colonists of seventeenth century America could not stand being
laughed at, particularly by the sophisticates of London. Whenever they
sensed that they were being derided or condescended to, their invariable
response was to boast of the stupendous riches of the New World." To
continue,"in the long run, such accounts (as Good News from Virginia 1613)
proved to be an unsatisfactory form of reply. Because it was not so
much the brave new world that London liked to make fun of as the people
in it, and the jokes which really stung were those which defined the
Americans as 'a race of convicts' in Dr. Johnson's words." (Lynch, p. 41).
Thus, Johnson's selection of an exceptional man as his protagonist
helped to destroy the single image of the black minstrel figure just as
William Byrd II, helped to destroy the image of the early Anglo-American
as a convict.

The main plot of The Autobiography is the story of a white-black man
who is seeking to establish himself in life. The narrative is episodic.
The episodes do follow, in concurrence with Bone's pattern, a simple
narrative structure within each part, yet each part advances the narra-
tive. The first episode covers the boyhood of the nameless hero from his

1965), I, p. 40.
12Bone, pp. 46-47.
faint memory of the South to migration in Connecticut where he lives until his mother's death. After that he leaves and makes plans to enroll at Atlanta University, a black school, but his money is stolen by black slickers who actually befriend him by allowing him to ride in a dirty clothes bin from Atlanta to Jacksonville. In Jacksonville, he works in a cigar factory until it closes, then moves on to New York. Acquiescing in the high life of black Bohemia in New York, the hero escapes involvement with the murder of a female companion by going to Europe with his white patron as a quasi-valet. He tires of the European scene and decides to return to the South where he will collect folk material for his musical compositions. He himself had become a "natural" virtuoso of rag-time though he had been trained by tutors to play formal music. His resolve is short-lived because he decides to leave the black race on realizing that in lynching a man is not cherished as much as a pet animal. He becomes "white" and marries a white lady who does not reject him after he reveals his identity. Her life is short, however, and he is left to rear his children as non-blacks in order for them to be inheritors of the American dream. After passing he has become a material success.

So much furor has been stirred up about the "Ex-Coloured Man". The hero passes, but it must be remembered that all the time he is a black man with black consciousness. Sure enough "written as if it is ... an autobiographical initiation story, it emerges rather as the paranoid wailing of a bohemian Wastrel."\(^{13}\) But, there is more. On the other side of the coin is the hydra head of Shiny, Toussaint L'Ouverture, the black.

\(^{13}\)Amann, 116.
doctor and Booker T. Washington — all race leaders. They are obviously
black and elicit the pride of the quadroon who cannot ally himself with
the fallen masses. The hero himself reflects on his choice when he
looks at his yellowing manuscripts and decides that in yearning for the
fulfillment of the American dream he had sold his birthright for a mess
of pottage.

Taking the work as a whole, Amann finds something lacking in
conclusion reads:

> Beyond the fact that some aspects of the Negro milieu
> were illumined by this story of passing as white; it is
difficult to discover much to recommend it. Were it all
> we had to define this phenomenon in the early twentieth
century, it might be helpful; it would also be dangerous
> in its inadequacy. One-sided (perhaps consciously so)
> and professedly a story of a wasted life, it seems so un-
> penetrative, so surface, that it cannot satisfy (Amann,
> 116).

Unlike Amann, Robert E. Fleming offers proof of Johnson's master perfor-
mance in the novel by extricating seven major themes that appear in
modern black novels. The themes are "namelessness; racial self-hatred;
the black mother's ambiguous role; the characterization of the white
patron/white liberal,"¹⁴ the flight to Europe as a means of liberation,
especially for the black artist; the problem of militance versus accommo-
dation and methods of dealing with white society; and the conflict
between white standards of success, which are almost solely monetary, and
black standards (Fleming, 124). Thus, Fleming sees the *Autobiography*
as
significant because it is a book of lasting value. All of the novels on
passing, a popular theme for black novelists during the twenties (though

¹⁴Robert E. Fleming, "Contemporary Themes in Johnson's Autobiography
of an Ex-Coloured Man," *Negro American Literature Forum*, 4, No. 4 (1970),
12.
influenced by Johnson's novel), belong to a dead literary past. These novels are Walter White's *Flight* (1926), Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1928) and Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929).  

Something is to be said for negativism in regard to the criticism of Afro-American fiction written between the Civil War and World War I, especially the works with the militant note. Redding reads the following meaning into the opposition:

> But democracy encourages criticism, and it is true that even negative criticism implies certain positive values like veracity, for instance, these writers had positive allegiances. Their sensibilities were violently irritated, but their faith and imagination were wonderfully nourished by the very environment which they saw to be and depicted as being bad.  

A closer examination of the multilinear images of black reality in Johnson's novel will illustrate his adeptness in the handling of the varying difficulties of black life in one work of fiction.

The novel was written while Johnson was serving as a Consul. Bronze thinks that Johnson recognized the pressures to write sociological novels and poetry. What were the pressures? First of all he wanted to "put certain facts" before the reading public but he did not want them to feel that the narrator himself was prejudiced. He wanted "to convey to the reader a sense of the truth and reality" of a black man's existence in America, but he had to obey, even sparingly the rules for fiction in narrative form. He had to condemn America because black men with the common language, religion, customs and general concepts as Anglo-America

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15Ibid.
17Bronze, *Roots of Negro Racial Consciousness*, p. 16.
18"Johnson to Towns," August 10, 1912.
were relegated to a peculiar position as aliens. "For although there is oneness," Johnson writes, "at these vital points, the minority status of Negro Americans involves the greatest separation from the main body and the least susceptibility to being changed. In this anomalous condition lies the fundamental distinction between Negro Americans and other minority groups." And remember, when Johnson first published his novel, the blacks in America were not yet an official minority group.

He was out to change what he called the common-denominator opinion in the United States about Afro-Americans. That opinion was, "they are beggars under the nation's table waiting to be thrown the crumbs of civilization" (AW, p. 326). He himself was denying that concept because he was proving by his acts and his novel that the Afro-American was a creator as well as a creature and had been a giver as well as a receiver, and that his influence had been active and passive (AW, p. 326). But there was also praise along with the blame voiced by the hero of the novel. He realized the power of the tangible fact of the man who is forced to take his outlook on all things, not from the viewpoint of a citizen, or a man, but from the viewpoint of a colored man. Yet, in the next breath he expresses satisfaction on the limited progress made in America. The hero is made to say: "It is wonderful to me that the race has progressed so broadly as it has, since most of its thoughts and all of its activity must run through the narrow neck of this one funnel" — race (EXCM, p. 21). Johnson also had to praise America. He also set out to change public opinion.

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The job of uplift demanded that the Afro-American fit himself for some worthwhile task; then he had to prove to the great majority that he was fit. For one thing, he told Towns, more black men needed to hold the right kind of jobs because "it gives the race a standing in the world at large, but it opens up opportunities to convince the other fellow; he must come in contact and that gives the chance . . . to take an effect on the public opinion of the world." Proof was the most important part of the black problem. But how could anything be proven unless a man lends you his eyes, his ears, his brain.

Bone speaks of the artificially contrived discussions of the race problem which mar the novel along with the authors needless defensiveness (Bone, pp. 48-49). The narrative is weighted with discussions of the race problem, but it was a part of his plan to carry on a discourse touching practically every phase of the race question. No subject, in America at the time seemed to have called for such passionate affirmations and denials as race. Johnson wrote Towns August 10, 1912 telling him about his problem of composition when Towns praised him for the substance and style of the novel. "The form of the story," he admitted, "was for a long time a problem . . . but I finally decided that a direct, almost naive, narrative style would best suit the purpose of the book . . . . The Springfield Republican takes the whole thing as a human document. This was the greatest difficulty which I encountered in the work, and what appears to be simplicity and directness often cost me a great deal of thought." Further on in the same letter he speaks about his desire to have his name withheld for the same reason that he did not cast the story in conventional fiction form.

20 "Johnson to Towns," June 26, 1912.
A close look at the artificial, contrived conversations in the novel will reveal that they are set pieces that have a continuity of their own though the ideas bear an organic relationship to the plot. There are seven set pieces. The first one begins with a discussion of the "one funnel" pass for black men, their duality in proportion to their intellectuality, and the habit of black men to disclose a certain portion of themselves only in the freemasonry of race (Chapter 2, pp. 21-22).

To secure unity, the second part begins with an allusion to the first piece. He draws an analogy between the restrictions on blacks and the Anglo-American in the South. He gives a detailed discussion on the three classes of black society and his affiliation with persons in the highest echelon. The first class consists of the lumber and turpentine camps, exconvicts and the bar-room loafers. They hate the men who oversee them and value life as cheap. A man in this group is regarded as a mule to be worked, a vicious thing to be kicked and driven. Still these men are not hopeless; they are victimized by conditions and, therefore, desperate. The second class comprises the servants, the washerwomen, the waiters, the cooks, the coachmen and all who are connected with whites in domestic service. These people are usually simple, kind-hearted, faithful, somewhat moral, but intensely religious. They form the connecting link between the races. The third class is composed of the independent workmen and tradesmen, and the well-to-do and educated black people. They live in a world separated from whites and the other classes of blacks. Their position becomes tragic when they are linked with the blacks of the first class. In this section he uses the men who constitute an alien group and their work to refute the inferior status of the race. He singles out four creations of pride: Uncle Remus, the
spirituals, ragtime and the cakewalk (Chapter 5, pp. 75-83).

The third piece is a detailed discourse on the origin and popularity of ragtime music. He stresses the value of the natural musician who plays by ear alone. He praised the music as original because of its effect on even Europeans (Chapter 6, pp. 98-101).

Number four begins with an allusion to the House of Mirth. The hero announced outright that he is going to describe the Club and claims that it is warranted because the Club had a direct influence on his life. In the Club is the "Wall of Fame," the going and coming of entertainers, impressive visitors and sightseers. He admits that he learned more about the Club than it was suited to report in a narrative since the material would be better in a book on social phenomenon \(^2\) (Chapter 7, pp. 103-109).

Five is a discussion between the hero and a fellow passenger, a black doctor, who is returning from Switzerland to the United States by boat. The hero alludes to his previous discussion of social life among blacks in an earlier chapter and, therefore, limits his discussion to color caste. The hero visits the doctor's friends in Boston and Washington along with him and, therefore, gets the chance to point out the different features in the society of the Easterners, the Washingtonians, and the Floridians. He and the doctor view the best and the worst of the race and even discuss the problem as it affected native Africans and Jews (Chapter 10, pp. 150-156).

The sixth piece is presented in a different fashion. The hero does not converse at all, he listens in on a debate between a Texan and three

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\(^2\) Johnson's Black Manhattan (1930) is a social history of Harlem which covers the important facts of his life in Bohemia.
Northerners, a young college professor, a Jewish businessman, and an old Union veteran of the Civil War. The Texan, with his direct logic, was adamant in his conclusion about the Caucasians as masters of the world. The professor was apologetic; the businessman agreed with everyone; the veteran expressed his faith in equal rights and opportunities but also in the felicity of the warning: when in Rome, act like the Romans. They debated on problems of education, voting, intermarriage, and other topics, ending the session by drinking good-naturedly from the Texan's flask (Chapter 10, pp. 157-164).

The seventh and last section is a review of the smoking car argument in the hero's mind. He comes upon the thought that in the Texan's view on superiority lay the point of attack in the battle of race (Chapter 10, pp. 166-167). His conclusion is that the main difficulty of the race question does not lie so much in the actual condition of blacks as it does in the mental attitudes of the whites; and a mental attitude, especially one not based on truth, can be changed more easily than actual conditions" (EXCM, p. 166). J. Saunders Redding says that the basis of prejudice is a mental attitude also, and that the viewpoint was a rationalization from misinterpreted facts about the black man's inferiority, biologically, intellectually and morally because he adhered in some cases to a life style not classified as the American way of life. He states further that

There was in some metaphysical corner of the white man's mind an involuted concept of Negro inferiority that resisted all scientific contradictions as stubbornly as it resisted holy writ. The concept was sometimes held in

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22Redding, They Came in Chains, p. 205.
perfect innocence, but, that cut no chip of ice. Within the framework of that concept the Negro was forced to function as being an alien. A certain way of acting, of thinking, of doing was expected of him, and any deviation from the expected was likely to be ridiculed as sportive, cursed or as presumptive, discouraged as initiative or altogether ignored (Redding, p. 205).

The concept of the mental attitude as the seat of racial scorn is important in Johnson's work. It is the seed idea which prompted him to use the problem. Art had the power to remove the stigma of blackness which had overshadowed Afro-Americans for three centuries.

The fullest explanation of the theory of encouraging the artist to use his pen as a weapon in the uplift of the race is found in Johnson's "Race Prejudice and the Negro Artist" The following passage is a pertinent comment on the approach:

A number of approaches to the heart of the race problem have been tried: religious, educational, political, industrial, ethical, economic, sociological. Along several of these approaches considerable progress has been made. Today a newer approach is being tried, an approach which discards most of the older methods. It requires a minimum of pleas, or propaganda, or philanthropy. It depends more upon what the Negro himself does than upon what someone does for him. It is the approach along the line of intellectual and artistic achievement by Negroes, and may be called the art approach to the Negro problem (Johnson, 769).

He then points to the advantage of this approach.

This method of approaching a solution of the race question has the advantage of affording great and rapid progress with least friction and of providing a common platform upon which most people are willing to stand. The results of this method seem to carry a higher degree of finality, to be the thing itself that was to be demonstrated (Johnson, 770-771).

Johnson published this article in 1928, a time when the Harlem Renaissance was reaching its meridian. Only a year before, 1927, his novel had been republished bearing his name as author. The problem of
passing was more real in fiction than in life. Instead of fearing to claim authorship, he was proud because the new light on African and Afro-Americans surfaced the real life issues of black men whether good or bad without reservation. Glibly it is said at times that Johnson was a precursor to the Harlem Renaissance and a participant in it. There is proof to substantiate the claim.

The Autobiography appeared in 1912. In the context of the novel and in the context of a letter to Towns about the novel (August 10, 1912) Johnson stressed the value of the art approach to the race problem which came up as a feasible idea for practice during the Broadway years when discussion went on about the black man in the Johnson's studio at the Marshall Hotel in Harlem. Speaking about drama, the hero says, "No matter how well the black actor may portray the deeper passions, the public is loath to give him up in his old character the minstrel man; they even conspire to make him a failure in serious work in order to force him back into comedy (EXCM, p. 168). He realized, though, that the black artist had to take the task upon himself to ameliorate that practice. He continues by saying that "this very fact constitutes the opportunity of the future Negro novelist and poet to give the country something new and unknown, in depicting the life, the ambitions, the struggles, the passions of those of their race who are striving to break the narrow limits of traditions. A beginning has already been made in that remarkable book by Dr. DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk" (EXCM, pp. 168-169). Finally, he says, that "the Negro has done a great deal through his folk art to change the national attitudes around him; and now (1928) the efforts of the race have been reinforced and magnified by the individual Negro artist, the conscious artist." ("Race Prejudice," 770).
The views just stated enables the reader to understand why Johnson selected an artist as the protagonist of his novel. In the foregoing passage by the hero, he expresses his admiration for a fellow Afro-American who by his conscious artistry, lifted the race. Just as he praises DuBois, he denounces Uncle Tom, not the novel, but the man and what he failed to do by aiding his traducers. Ironically, he passes and joins the so-called traducers, thus losing his chance to develop his talent as a conscious artist. The portrait of the youth and the young man as a musician makes the lost a keenly felt one. Just as the Souls of Black Folk brought pride to the hero, the hero's fault brought shame and a sense of loss to the race. While Johnson depicts the hero as a well-trained, well-mannered boy who has the ability to master classics as Beethoven's "Sonata Pathetique," he was given to following an inward urge almost from the first time that he sat at the piano. When he was seven years old, he could play all of the hymns and songs that his mother knew by ear. He had learned the names of the notes on both clefs, but he preferred not to be hampered by the notes (EXCM, p. 9). The music teacher had trouble pinning him down to the notes. He says "I invariably attempted to reproduce the required sounds without the slightest recourse to the written characters" (EXCM, p. 9). Later he met a piano player in New York at the Club who played by ear alone. He was so taken with the "natural musician" that he could hear his rag-time music ringing in his ears as he tried to sleep (EXCM, pp. 9-10).

Through listening continually to rag-time music at the Club, and through his own previous training, his natural talent and preservation, the hero became a remarkable player of ragtime. He gained the name as time passed as the best rag-time player in New York. He brought all of
his knowledge of the classics to bear on his "natural" talent and, therefore, achieved some novelties which pleased and astonished his listeners. He was also the first musician to make rag-time transcriptions of familiar classic selections. He had a chance to perform in the home of a patron who appreciated his compositions. He was in the midst of the kind of luxury and elegance to make a person feel at ease; therefore, he was in a mood to do a good performance. When the patron's guests arose from their tables, he "struck up" his rag-time transcription of Mendelssohn's Wedding March, and played it with "terrific" chromatic runs in the bass. They were taken with the music and did an impromptu cakewalk (EXCM, p. 120).

Though the hero had the chance to follow the easy life in Europe, it is to his credit as a black artist that he chose to come back to America rather than to become an expatriate in another land. He came back to America and began his travels through the Southern region of the United States. "All the while," he says, "I was gathering material for work, jotting down in my note-book themes and melodies, and trying to catch the spirit of the Negro in his relatively primitive state" (EXCM, p. 173). He discovered the Negro in his near-primitive state during the "big meeting" in a country place. At the close of the meeting, he left the settlement full of enthusiasm. He tried to register his feeling: "I was in that frame of mind which, in the artistic temperament, amount to inspiration. I was now ready and anxious to get to some place where I might settle down to work, and give expression to the ideas which were teeming in my head" (EXCM, p. 182). The "inspiration" is lost; he never becomes a black composer, who was to have raised the superstructure of conscious art works on folk art. He had entered into communion with the
idiomatic spirit shared by black men and then suffered the loss of recourse to that spirit. What is often overlooked is that the "colored" man still has a yen for music. Chopin brought the hero and his wife-to-be together. He even wrote several little pieces in a more or less Chopinesque style, and dedicated them to her (EXCM, p. 201). But the plight is that he has suppressed his race-consciousness. And the whole will and mind of the creative artist must be able to work above a superficial plane of consciousness.  

The aborted efforts of the hero, who is an artist in the Autobiography, to become a composer bear a relation to his failure to find a true identity as a person. The tragic implication is that the hero's locked-in position as an artist and man obstructed the freedom of ideas and movement. The creative artist must be free to vacillate in the actor-watcher stance without being shackled in either "compartment." The practice of an artist to reflect, to be subject and object is pictured by Gide. This is existence for the artist.

The only existence that anything (including myself) has for me, is poetical — I restore this word to its full signification. It seems to me sometimes that I do not really exist, but that I merely imagine I exist. The thing that I have the greatest difficulty believing in, is my own reality. I am constantly getting outside myself, and as I watch myself act I cannot understand how a person who acts is the same as the person who is watching him act, and who wonders in astonishment and doubt how he can be actor and watch at the same movement.  

The hero had become more of a watcher since the actor element within him was that of a talented black musician that he must subdue. Mann speaks

23Waldo Frank, "Foreword," Cane, xii.  
of what this writer calls the absorption span which is interrupted from inroads to tension.

The artist always carries a work of art as a whole within himself. Although aesthetics may insist that literary and musical works, in contradistinction to plastic arts, are dependent upon time and succession of events, it is nevertheless true that even such works strive at every moment to be present as a whole. 25

Now it can be seen why a certain kind of tension is fatal to artistic achievement. Johnson pointed out that with the millions of blacks in America with all of the emotional and artistic endowment claimed by them, they had not produced a Dumas, or a Coleridge-Taylor or a Pushkin. His answer is, the Black consumes his intellectual energy in the race struggle. Other struggling races have been heir to the same loss (ANP, p. 21).

The tragic mulatto theme is not the only one in the Autobiography, but it is an important consideration since the tragedy of who the black hero is determines why he fails as an artist. The novel is "quietly effective in its description of the ambivalent nature of a mulatto who attempts to understand his racial roots, his relationship to his family and to America." 26

What are the tragic implications of colorphobia? In the hero's case, it engenders self-hatred. At first the hero did not know that he was an Afro-American. When he was told about his black identity, he did not want to be identified with his race members. The description of the Afro-American below is drawn by a Jamaican Negro. "The physical

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characteristics of the black or Negro race are: a large and strong skeleton, long and thick skull, projecting jaws, skin from dark brown to black, woolly hair, thick lips, flat nose and wide nostrils. When the hero studies his features in the mirror, he noticed that he did not conform to the basic description, this is what he saw:

I noticed the ivory whiteness of my skin, the beauty of my mouth, the size and liquid darkness of my eyes, and how the long black lashes fringed and shaded them produced an effect that was strangely fascinating even to me. I noticed the softness and glossiness of my dark hair that fell in waves over my temples, making my forehead appear whiter than it really was. How long I stood there gazing at my image I do not know (EXCM, p. 17).

He could not comprehend fully why he had to be an Afro-American, but he felt fully conscious of it and the unhappy experience of being classed with a group he looked down upon was stamped in his memory with a die. Years afterward he called up the incident of his black identity in every detail, and experienced every emotion that was stirred up and lived through at the movement when his teacher made him aware of that identity (EXCM, p. 20).

The hero caught the first sight of Afro-Americans in large numbers in Atlanta as he went from the railroad station to his lodging place. In Connecticut where he had been taken after his father's marriage, he had not seen black men thronging on the sidewalks and lining curbs. His companion told him that these were the lower class. He was disgusted; "The unkempt appearance, the shambling, slouching gait and loud talk and laughter of these people aroused in him a feeling of almost repulsion" (EXCM, p. 56).

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In Europe, the hero's patron encourages him to stay in Europe rather than to return to the United States to serve his people because he is simply an Afro-American by legal designation. He tells his protege: "You are by blood, appearance, by education, and by tastes a white man. Now why do you want to throw your life away amidst the poverty and ignorance, in the hopeless struggle of the black people of the United States? Then look at the terrible handicap you are placing on yourself by going home and working as a Negro composer; you can never be able to get the hearing for your work which it might deserve" (EXCM, p. 144). The hero does have the courage to leave the protection of his white patron but he is not sure of his own motives for the decision. He is not sure if he wants to distinguish himself or to help his people more. The ultimate answer was decided by an incident which forced him to save himself. He was ashamed to be in the race with a man who could not die with honor. He describes the last impression of the degraded man and his reaction to the act in the following passages:

There he stood, a man only in form and stature, every sign of degeneracy stamped upon his contenance. His eyes were dull and vacant, indicating not a single ray of thought. . . . He was too stunned and stupified even to tremble (EXCM, pp. 186-187).

And the hero's reaction —

A great wave of humiliation and shame swept over me. Shame that I belonged to a race that could be so dealt with; and shame for my country . . . the great example of democracy in the world (EXCM, pp. 187-188).

Ralph Ellison speaks to the problem of self-hatred in knowing terms. He claims that such a man falls in the old trap by which the segregated segregate themselves by turning whatever whites said against them into opposite. In doing this the Afro-American focuses upon an outside
Falling into this trap, the hero becomes more of an "intellectual backslider" than a "bohemian wastrel" and coward. The designation of backslider is appropriate because he had found his metier before he defected from his ambition. An intellectual backslider, according to Ciardi, "is a man who brings himself into view of a complex question, finds himself overawed by its complexity, and allows himself to settle for an answer too simple for the question he has raised." One has only to recall the vast difference between the hero's performance as the best rag-time musician in New York and his loving gestures of the Chopinesque pieces to court his betrothed to test the validity of the assertion.

More complicated than understanding his racial roots is the hero's attempt to understand his family. His mother is a "respectable" handsome black woman of refinement and culture who was sent with him from Georgia to Connecticut to avoid conflict with marriage plans of her white lover. This man, called his father, was a tall, handsome, well-dressed gentleman of perhaps thirty-five when he visited them in Connecticut. "Father," the hero realised, "was the word which had been to [him] a source of doubt and perplexity ever since the interview with (his) mother on the subject. . . . [He] stood there feeling embarrassed and foolish not knowing what to say or do" (EXCM, p. 33). He was twelve at this time but could not understand yet what meaning his mother's confession held when she told him that his father was one of the greatest men in the country. As the son of this man he had the best blood of the South in him (EXCM, p. 18). But his mother was a naive

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woman who died with the belief that she had been treated with consideration by her son's father.

Because of the peculiar family situation which puzzled the hero, he dwelt constantly in a world of imagination, dreams and air castles as a youth. He was conscious of the fact that this kind of atmosphere either nourishes a genius or unfit a man for the practical struggles of life (EXCM, p. 46). As an artist he was a genius; as a man in the world, he was unfitted to cope with life as a black man. The twelve hours that he spent doubled up in the porter's basket for soiled linen from Atlanta to Jacksonville (his school money for AU had been stolen) symbolized the pattern of his chosen life path. After passing he could not stretch out — that is, revel in his own sensibilities as a natural artist. The air was hot and suffocating and he bumped against the narrow walls of his compartment constantly (EXCM, p. 65). The image is similar to the one drawn in the first verse of Dunbar's sonnet "Sympathy"; "I know how the caged bird feels."

As a born Southerner, the hero is sinned against and sinning because of the value of blood in the patriarchal system. Applied to human beings, "race" or "blood" is the foundation of hereditary aristocracy. The hero said of himself that he was a little aristocrat not knowing that all the time he was a disinherited entity in his father's family. He was an heir but legally fatherless. "In the patriarchal culture there is no greater tragedy than that of being 'fatherless,' of mixed blood, or a lost soul with no identity as a person because of unknown parentage," \(^{30}\) writes McKean. A man's family ties establish him both

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in his own eyes and those of the community. Of equal importance is the
family land which is the place where the family puts down its roots and
preserves for the perpetuation of the family line (EXCM, p. 80). Race,
then, in the domain of biology denotes a group with certain permanent
traits in common," traits which are in the blood and are transmitted by
the blood."31 Race is then a manifestation of collective hereditary as
well as a national or ethnic element living in some geographical area.
Passing requires anonymity, and while the hero is passing and marrying
in the North, he is an heir of a Southern black woman.

The code is rigid about the Anglo-American woman in the South.
She is the "precious vessel that contains the prized blood, that con-
tinues the family line. Both she and her daughters are the living
symbols of the purity of blood and must be protected against sexual
defilement and disgrace at any cost" (McKean, 378). The hero does not
marry in the South, but his actions are questionable since he by blood
is a Southern black man. According to the code, the hero's father was
acting within his rights because the child fathered out of wedlock was
to seek the mother's social level. The point is, there was scarcely
any way for the hero to avoid alienation. The hero's chances of
alienation were doubled because he was also an artist. His lack of
finding the proper identity meant death to the soul. "Matter does
admirably without mind" but "mind in order to bear its witness cannot
do without matter" (Gide, p. 292). Thus the hero's genius, bereft of
the substance of race, perished along with the cessation of his

31Albert Guerard, Preface to World Literature (New York: Henry Holt
identity as a black man.

The last major point of interest about The Autobiography of the Ex-Coloured Man is the epic-like portrayal of the men who represent the true character, pride and nobility of the black man in conflict. The black boy Shiny and the doctor from Washington became close acquaintances in the hero's life. Through Shiny's speech, Johnson manifests his interest in the tradition of Toussaint L'Ouverture. In the doctor, he points to the character of a race leader in a specific locality. When he mentions Booker T. Washington, he is paying tribute to the national black leader of the day. The "bard" and the minister in the backwoods were true black leaders, too. Their views represent "the crystallization of virile elements within the race, the pioneering element, the element that is not afraid to stake its fortunes upon the proposition of striking out upon the adventure of national house-building and housekeeping on its own account." 32

The serious conversation that Johnson held with Paul Lawrence Dunbar at the beginning of the twentieth century found Dunbar regretting that he had not done what he desired to do. It left Johnson in a quandry because he did not know what he wanted to do. It has been pointed out that Johnson surmised that Dunbar's ambition was to write one or two long, perhaps epical poems in straight English that would relate to Blacks (AW, p. 160). It is suggested here that Johnson decided to fill this lack, the absence of the black man's epical struggle in America, by writing his prose narrative the Autobiography.

The novel presents to white America all types of black men except Uncle Tom and criminal aspects with which whites already were familiar (Bronze, p. 24). Johnson, himself, was familiar with all of the types he presented or at least he had been made aware of their existence through his travels and other varied experiences.

Before he went to Europe, the spring of 1905, he talked with Professor Brander Matthews about his serious work and showed him the draft of the first two chapters of his book, which became the novel, the Autobiography. Professor Matthews read the manuscript and expressed interest in the story idea and the suggested title. Above all, Matthews told him, he was wise in writing about what he knew best, which was of course race — the black race (AW, p. 193). Johnson's effort was to enhance his stature as a writer, but he wanted to do something to exonerate the race. It had to be done in a way to take effect on the Blacks and Whites. In his letter to Towns, November 19, 1913, he encouraged the latter to invite the Clef Club to Atlanta University. It was the greatest black musical organization in the world. He told Towns: "If you can get them to come to Atlanta they will be an inspiration to the colored people and a revelation to the whites." His writing a realistic novel served the same dual purpose. Braithwaite complained during the Harlem Renaissance years, 1925, that harm had come to Blacks in their peculiar treatment of him in prose fiction. The motives he recognized as honest but the effects were sinister. By 1912, Johnson was correcting this error.

The "Uncle" and "mammy" — and we might add — "Little Black Sambo" tradition, portrayed the primitive instincts of the race: "These type pictures have degenerated into reactionary social fetishes and from that
descended into libelous artistic caricature of the Negro, which has hampered art as much as it has embarrassed the Negro" (Braithwaite, pp. 32-34). The black characters in the main by white writers, the last half of the nineteenth century, did not create a great story or a great character. Their black characters did not rise above the peasant level of experience.

Was it due to the white's affiliation with only the second class of Blacks? It was more their acceptance of the eternal myth of the Old Negro in fiction. A sounder, more artistic expression of black life and character in reality had to be transmitted to black fiction to obliterate the power of the stereotype. This is how Johnson's life experiences came to aid him on depicting the life of a black protagonist of the middle class. Just as the AU ideal demanded intellectual parity with other races, so did Johnson assume the task of portraying a character who would take his place with the other artists as connoisseur, native genius, picaro or whatever. The lure of adventure had taken Johnson to Europe, then to a strange continent to serve as United States Consul. More than to match his intellectual prowess with men of other nations, or to answer his yen for adventure, Johnson wanted to leave America to do battle with time in order to accomplish something that he had reassured himself that he would do. He does not name the "something," but the conjecture is that one way or the other, he intended to exemplify the Atlanta ideal that he could not so well execute in Jacksonville after

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33A full study of the Negro character in American literature during that period can be found in *The Negro Character in American Literature* by John Herbert Nelson (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas, 1926).
he graduated from AU in 1894, or in New York. How could his depiction of a New Uncle Tom represent the will and the understanding of an author trained in the humanities? His protagonist of necessity had to follow a line of tension geared to the exploits of a black artist of the middle class who understood the task of lifting his people. The task is of epic proportion.

The epic spirit subsumes the idea of collective greatness. From this conception of collective greatness one may conclude that it is legitimate to recognize the epic spirit in modern, even realistic fiction whenever more is at stake than the fate of individual heroes (Guerard, p. 233). The realistic novel finds its subject-matter in the current of human experience and aims to present truth as the epic — though in the classical epic it is embellished. Nothing is more realistic than fighting. The majority of all epics, according to Guerard, in all literatures are tales of fighting (p. 231).

Selecting one character from the Autobiography, Shiny (Little Black Sambo of the old school), we can see how Johnson manages to tie in the element of battle with real life experiences. This is the pivot for Afro-American fiction. The day the hero graduated from grammar school, he played a piano solo which was accepted with the applause that he had grown accustomed to. But the real enthusiasm was aroused by Shiny. He was the speaker of the day. The hero highlights the occasion:

He [Shiny] made a striking picture, that thin little black boy standing on the platform, dressed in clothes that did not fit him any too well, his eyes burning with excitement, his shrill, musical voice vibrating
in tones of appealing defiance, and his black face alight with such great intelligence and earnestness as to be positively handsome (EXCM, p. 44).

The hero becomes interested in Shiny's manifest inspiration which he cannot experience as an unwilling black:

What were his thoughts when he stepped forward and looked into that crowd of faces, all white with the exception of a score or so that were lost to view? (EXCM, p. 44).

The hero cannot imagine how Shiny feels except by drawing an analogy with a situation outside of himself that he can relate to:

I do not know, but I fancy he felt his loneliness. I think there must have rushed over him a feeling akin to that of a gladiator tossed into the arena and bade to fight for his life. I think that solitary little figure standing there felt that for the particular time and place he bore the weight and responsibility of his race; that for him to fail meant general defeat, but he won and nobly (EXCM, p. 44).

The last passage is reminiscent of Johnson's concern for Bob Cole and Rosamond when they opened up in London, 1905.

If Shiny himself is not a true epic figure, he alludes to one in his oration — Toussaint L'Ouverture. His oration was Wendell Phillip's "Toussaint L'Ouverture," a speech given to rhetoric and bombast, but the effect from it was magical coming from Shiny.

When, in the famous peroration, his voice, trembling with suppressed emotion, rose higher and higher and rested on the name 'Toussaint L'Ouverture,' it was like touching an electric button which loosed up pent-up feelings of his listeners. They actually rose to him (EXCM, p. 45).

The hero felt pride in being black after listening to Shiny's speech. At that moment he formed his "wild dreams" of bringing glory and honor to the Afro-American. Just as his resolve was fixed in a flash of enthusiasm, so he lost his resolve in a moment of fear.
Johnson's allusion to Toussaint L'Ouverture is a masterful stroke. One sees Shiny following in the steps of a greatest leader of African descent in the Western hemisphere of modern times. McKay's account of L'Ouverture in *Home to Harlem* is rich with emotional overtones. He was "tragically captured by a civilized trick, taken to France, and sent by Napoleon to die broken hearted in a cold dungeon." But before the tragic end, "[he] decreed laws for Haiti that held more of human wisdom and nobility than the code Napoleon; [he] defended his baby revolution against the Spanish and English Vultures. . . ." (p. 132). Toussaint was not only represented as merely great; he was lofty and good. The character Jake in McKay's novel, expresses the interest of the ordinary man's view on being enlightened about the black leader. McKay writes: "Jake felt like one passing through a dream, vivid in rich, varied colors. It was revelation beautiful in his mind. That brief account of an island of savage black people, who fought for collective liberty and was struggling to create a culture of their own. A romance of his race; just down there by Panama. How strange!" (p. 134). "The essence of the epic is awe," writes Guerard, "the awe that is inspired in us by the magnitude of the enterprise or of catastrophe" (Guerard, p. 244). Therefore, Johnson was able to allude to the epic struggles of blacks by having the character Shiny bring the greatness of the hero Toussaint before a white audience as an epic lesson in history.

The other epic-like motif in the *Autobiography* appears in the section on the big meeting which the hero attended by chance in a rural community. The old-fashioned gospel preacher and the song leader singing

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Johnson were local leaders, but were heroes to their people. The hero in this situation, does not tower above the average human stature. "He becomes 'epic'," as Guerard explains, "only when he represents something greater than himself—a nation, a race, a faith... His central interest is collective and symbolic not purely biographical" (Guerard, p. 232). These folk heroes represented a faith.

The minister who preached each night was a jet-black man of medium size who had a strikingly intelligent head and face and a voice like an organ peal. All of his sermons were alike in subject matter: "Each began with the fall of man, ran through various trials and tribulations of the Hebrew children on to the redemption by Christ, and ended with a fervid picture of the judgment day and the fate of the damned" (EXCM, p. 175). The preacher possessed magnetism and a free and daring imagination. He was adept with tone pictures and knew that his manner of speaking was of more importance than what he said. He had the intuition of a born theatrical manager, eloquence and the gift of oratory. In fact, "he knew all the arts and the tricks of oratory, the modulation of the voice to almost a whisper, the pause for effect, the rise through light rapid fire sentences to the terrific, thundering outburst of an electrifying climax" (EXCM, p. 175). The hero was sophisticated and a non-religious man of the world, but "The torrent of the preacher's words, moving with the rhythm and glowing with the eloquence of primitive poetry, swept him along, and he, too, felt like joining in the shouts of 'Amen! Hallelujah!'" (EXCM, p. 177).

Singing Johnson, who also contributed to the success of the services, was a leader and a maker of songs. He had to have the ability to improvise lines at a moment's notice to fit the occasion. His voice had to be
strong enough to sing down a long-winded or uninteresting speaker. He had to pitch the songs in the right key and know just what hymn to sing because the congregation was made up of people from different communities. He had committed to memory the leading lines of all the Negro spirituals, and they numbered up in the hundreds. All of his leisure time was devoted to "originating" new words and new melodies and new lines for old songs. Being a good songleader, his services were in great demand so he spent his time going from one church to another (EXCM, pp. 173-180).

The hero was impressed with Singing Johnson's performance, no less than that of John Brown's, but more than the singing of the songs, he was taken with the wonder of their production and the melodies which were so "weirdly sweet" and sometimes "wonderfully strong." And many of the songs contained more than mere melody. As a musician himself, he could detect the sounding of an elusive undertone, "the note in music which is not heard with the ears" (EXCM, p. 181). The two men became a study and a revelation to the hero. Their leadership caused him to reflect upon the great influence their type had in the development of the black man in America. They were, he knew at that time, looked upon with condescension or contempt by the Blacks in the upper classes, but they deserved credit for leading the race from paganism to Christianity through the dark years of slavery (EXCM, pp. 174-175).

By example, James Weldon Johnson taught young black writers to adhere to the real experiences of black life. The realistic novel finds its subject matter in the current of human experiences, but "reoffers itself inspired and substantialized, as objectified vision, a work of art."35

Goldknoff's view on this process may lend credence to the need for the black writer of fiction to explore the depth of his own experiences which are rich and varied: "This reciprocity between human experience and the individual consciousness is a reciprocity that is both antagonistic and constructive, but in any event inevitable if culture in any form is to survive."\(^{36}\)

This, in essence, is the justification for the black realistic novel. And Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured*\(^{37}\) springs from sound and understanding realism. He was able to reconstruct from actual life representative characters that were truer and livelier than the black stereotypes in earlier fiction. Above all, he knew that "Truth is the saving grace of realism."\(^{38}\)

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\(^{36}\)Ibid.

\(^{37}\)Kelly Miller identified the hero of the novel with Johnson's boon companion Douglas Wetmore, no doubt the D - in his formal autobiography *Along This Way*, in "James Weldon Johnson," *Age*, 9 July 1938, p. 4.

\(^{38}\)Locke, "The Saving Grace of Realism," 8.
CHAPTER VIII

A CONSUL'S THOUGHT-LIFE IN VERSE

1906-1913

George Towns, Johnson's friend at Atlanta University, took the initiative in establishing Johnson as a poet. In a letter to Towns, December 25, 1914, Johnson made it clear that he had not written enough verse to be considered as a productive poet. He added a note of regret, but told his friend that he had published nothing since "Father Abraham" in February, 1913. He was then an editor for the New York Age and was working to accomplish "a certain object" which he felt would be worthwhile. To assist Towns, he did give the list of five poems published in magazines from July 11, 1907, to February 1913. He told Towns, also, that he was collecting and revising his verses for the purpose of having them out in a volume. Of all the poems that he had written up to December 25, 1914, he selected "Mother Night" and "O Black and Unknown Bards" as winners. He was willing to risk judgment on them because they had been published in a reputable magazine, Century.

The collected poems came out in the volume entitled Fifty Years and Other Poems, 1917. The poems are not dated in the volume; therefore, the list furnished by Johnson in the letter to Towns is of ultimate importance in tracing the growth of his individuality and race consciousness from 1906 to 1913. One other poem, the "Awakening," is mentioned in
a letter to Towns dated March 22, 1913; but there is no statement as to
whether or not it was written in 1913. The poem "Tunk" is dated
October 5, 1906. He told Towns that he had had a "little poem" accepted
by The Independent, August 16, which was scheduled to appear in Century
Magazine. Mr. Richard W. Gilder, the editor, considered "Tunk" as
notable. This news elicited Johnson's pride as its author.

Only the dated poems are used in this discussion. However, they
will not be discussed in chronological order because gains made during
the period from 1906-1913 can be shown to better advantage by using
descriptive categories. The categories are designed to group similar
poems regardless of their dates. The selected poems are: "Tunk," August
"O Black and Unknown Bards," November, 1908, Century; "The Awakening,"
1913; "Fifty Years," January 1, 1913, The New York Times; "Father
Abraham," February 1913, The Crisis. Four of these poems, "Fifty Years,
"O Black and Unknown Bards," "O Southland," and "Father, Father Abraham"
are placed in a strategic position in the 1917 volume and are spoken of as
pioneering poems by Brander Matthews in the introduction of the
volume. As a poet, then, Johnson was "definitely trying to bring order
out of [the] chaos of Negro thought, [and] trying to integrate the ideas
and forces in Negro life" \(^{1}\) before his reputation was established as a
poet in 1917, on the publication of Fifty Years and Other Poems.

Any black writer taking the role of priest for an undeclared minority
needed influential friends and careful prompting from a strong will for
the strenuous tryouts needed for his performance. Larry Neal, reveling in

\(^{1}\)Guy Johnson, "Isolation or Integration," Journal of Negro Life, 13,
No. 3 (1935), 39.
the present triumph of blackness says confidently that "we are Black
writers /priests/, the bearer of the ancient tribal tradition."\(^2\) But in
the next line he modifies his pronouncement by adding: "Only we have
lived in the West: and we must understand what that experience means."\(^3\)

For Johnson, in 1905, it meant being acknowledged by the world at large
as a raving success, but on the other hand it meant self-abnegation, self
annihilation. In New York, the more successful Johnson became as a
Broadway personality, the more he realized that he was making strides in a
direction away from his resolve to uplift the race. His studies at
Columbia lessened his joy in the art for art's sake and the art for money-
sake vogues. Getting away from the whirl of New York life was a necessity
so that he could gather his forces for reassessing the Atlanta University
ideals. "\(\sqrt{}\) the feeling came over me," he writes, "that, in leaving New
York, I was not making a sacrifice, but an escape; that I was getting
away, if only for a while, from the feverish flutter of life to seek a
little stillness of the spirit" (AW, p. 223). Woodson's belief is that
"Negroes who have risen to higher levels get out of America to relieve
themselves of our stifling traditions /in America/ and to recover from
their education."\(^4\)

Though Johnson desired to escape harassment, he could not afford to
abandon the accouterments of Western Culture as an American Consul. His
job demanded a show of acculturization to a more exacting degree than any
other job had demanded of him in the United States.

\(^2\)Larry Neal, "Poetics," in The New Black Poets, ed. Clarence Major
\(^3\)Ibid.
\(^4\)Woodson, The Mis-Education of the Negro, p. 16.
Actually, he had not escaped. As a black leader, he had to persist in the task of self-development by performing his tasks well enough as Consul to deserve promotion. This way, he contributed his part to the development of black pride. Art as well as the work had already been considered as a means of attacking the race problem so he continued to write. On leaving New York, Johnson made himself known to Richard Watson Gilder, the editor of the Century Magazine, and to William Hayes Ward, the editor of the Independent (AW, p. 236). These editors expressed their personal interest in his poetic growth and development, which was of great importance because the black writer was not yet the welcome guest that he became to reputable publishers during the Harlem Renaissance. His theory of composition, in terms of purpose, may have retarded his development as a black poet because he told Towns (October 5, 1906), that he would use prose for what he wanted to say, but poetry for pleasure. He was aware that a writer had to write prose if he wanted an audience. As he began writing verse, he did not know that the black poem was to preempt the total Black Experience. "With the poem," Major says "[the black author] must erect a spiritual black nation [all blacks] can be proud of. And at the same time [Blacks] must try to do the impossible — always the impossible — by bringing the poem back into the network of man's social and political life." Still, Johnson, came close to this standard in "Fifty Years."

Dr. Braithwaite's estimate of "Fifty Years" in his article in The New Negro, "The Negro in American Literature," is commensurate with the ethics of black authorship at that time. About "Fifty Years" he proclaims: "Here a new literary generation begins; poetry that is racial in substance, but

with a universal note, with the full heritage of English poetry.\textsuperscript{6} The new element to Braithwaite is the use of racial substance; the outstanding virtue of the ode is that Johnson could use a traditional form as the framework for his ideas. Braithwaite is unique in that as an Afro-American poet he has written no poetry motivated or colored by race. His poetry is marked by delicate beauty, often tinged by mysticism or whimsy (ANP, p. 99). Braithwaite, a prominent anthologist and critic, spoke with sure knowledge when he hailed "Fifty Years" as an epoch making racial poem. But, at the present time "Bards" has won out over the Anniversary Ode; and the "winged prose" in the Autobiography stands closer, in terms of form and execution to "The Creation" and the other poems in God's Trombones. The free flowing cadence of the prose indicates that Johnson was more in tune with the rhythmic pattern of actual speech than the measured rhythmic beat of conventional English verse when he gave vent to suppressed emotions.

Five categories are devised to classify the poems discussed in this chapter and in Chapter X. Seven of the poems, written 1906–1913, will be discussed in this chapter; the three, written 1915–1918, in Chapter X. The selected categories are dialect poems, art poems, art-race poems, free verse race poems and black folk art poems. The poems in this chapter will be discussed by category with the aim of pointing to evidence of Johnson's awakened sense to the black ethos or the lack of it. The analysis of each poem will follow from what is considered by the writer as the most important method of evaluating the sense and/or the artistic fabrication of the author's idea. Consistency in the discussion is gained by measuring

\textsuperscript{6}Braithwaite, p. 38.
the substance of each poem quantitatively on a scale of values for black literature constructed by George E. Kent. There are ten values which can be conveniently referred to by number. The number of values touched upon in each poem will indicate the amount of black substance in its content.

These key values, constructed by Kent, are frequently reflected by black folk literature and by outstanding black writers:

1. The insistence upon a tough-minded grip upon reality.
2. A willingness to confront the self searchingly and even with laughter.
3. Patience and endurance.
4. Humor as a tool of transcendence.
5. A sort of deadened courage, and not so deadened.
6. An acceptance of the rate of suffering in retaining one's humanity and in retaining some perspective on the humanity of the oppressor.
7. A high development of dissimulation and camouflage.
8. A sense of something more than this world and of its rhythms.
9. A deep sense of the inexorable limitations of life and all that we associate with the tragic and tragicomic vision.
10. Ceremonies of poise in a non-rational universe.

The norm is applied to Johnson's poems to establish his relationship with black culture though he tried and succeeded in certain instances to display acculturation.

"Tunk," is a dialect poem in the Dunbar tradition employing the ballad stanza. It is in the "Jingles and Croons" section of *Fifty Years and Other Poems* and is based on Johnson's teaching experiences in Hampton, Georgia. Tunk Laster, who was a boy Johnson could never forget, refused to learn even the alphabets. The subtitle, "A Lecture on Modern Education" points directly to the form, which is a dialogue between Tunk and an older man. Later he identified the man as Tunk's grandfather. The older man does all of the talking. The boy has been sent off to school and the speaker finds that he has slipped away. He rebukes the boy for "growin' up to be a reg'lah fool." He questions him about his books, a Webster blue-back "spallah" and a "rifmatic." The boy is playing in the woods, oblivious of what the old man is harping on about his growing up to be a credit to the race. He is disturbed because the boy does not realize that he cannot progress by "hooks and crooks" but only by securing a sound book learning. He tries to appeal to his conscience by pointing to the hard life of the field hand who must work all of his life for only food and clothes. He then tries to inspire the boy by discussing the "easy" jobs that he could hold in an office playing "piannah on dem printing press machines." There are other workers mentioned who know how to "figgah" well enough to make a living. In the last stanza, the old man tells the boy that education is the thing that is going to rule. He does not appease the youth any longer, but orders him to get his books and return to his place in school.

This poem of thirteen stanzas in ballad style is a poem about the black folk in Hampton, Georgia, but the subtitle "A Lecture on Modern Education" establishes Johnson or some enlightened black man as the

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*Fifty Years and Other Poems*, pp. 66-68.
lecturer. The lesson is simple, direct, and vital. Above all the poem had its source in reality, the first value. Fifteen years after Johnson met Tunk as a three time first grade flunker, he said to Towns (October 5, 1906), "you will remember how many incidents I related about 'Tunk' while I was in school." Forty-two years later, in Along This Way, he made special mention of Tunk: "Tunk so impressed his personality on me that a few years later I did my best to immortalize him in a poem that bears his unique name" (AW, p. 111).

The situation in the poem takes on an air of importance if Tunk can be substituted for one of the key subjects in Kozol's study, Death at an Early Age. The black child, incapable of attacking an oppressor (who could be symbolized by the teacher's demands) has several psychological alternatives. He may hate himself; he may act out his aggressive needs within his own group; or he may escape in apathy or fantasy. Many times one person may use all of these paths, depending on the situation. As insignificant as the poem "Tunk" may seem at first, its meaning is as vast as that in the Autobiography. In the Autobiography a mature artist and his progeny are lost to a struggling race. In "Tunk," a child is lost. But how many Tunks were there in the black race given to apathy -- lost to any possible development by education? Just as the incident of near lynching served as a basis for an incident in the Autobiography, 1912, a poem 1916, his being a demonstrator in the Silent Protest March (July 28, 1917) and his becoming a spokesman for a committee calling on President Wilson about the problems, his being a lobbyist for the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, so his experiences in Hampton, along with Tunk as a

9Kvaraceus, Negro Self-Concept, p. 16.
symbol of oppression, moved him to become a man of action as well as
spokesman for Blacks in America. Later it will be demonstrated how he
used his column in the *Age* to lecture on a large number of topics.
Simultaneously, he was working either as Field Secretary or Executive
Secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored
People. Finally, the Dunbar influence is manifested in Johnson's
selection of a black boy as the listening character in the poem — and,
though light, the "psychology" of the older person (lecturer). Such
poems by Dunbar as "Little Brown Baby" and "When Kalindy Sings" employ
the "lecture" technique.

The next poem for discussion is the sonnet "Mother Night." It is in
the category called the art poem as the poems "The Awakening" and "O
Southland." These poems are written on universal themes and utilize
traditional literary form and metrics. They are not directly concerned
with the mundane affairs or conditions of man.

"Mother Night" is an Italian sonnet, but is the only poem that
Johnson ever wrote by "seizing his pen and in a 'fine frenzy' and taking
dictation from a spirit hovering about his head" (*AW*, p. 237). He gives
1910 as the publishing date while he was in Corinto, Nicaragua, but he
composed the poem while he was in Venezuela (*AW*, p. 237). This is his
record of the experience.

I had come home from the club, and with no conscious
thought of poetry in my mind I undressed for bed... I
got into bed and immediately went to sleep. Later in
the night, I woke suddenly, completely. For some reason
the light in the park had gone out and the room was in
impenetrable darkness. I felt startled; then the dark­
ness and silence combined, brought down on me a feeling
of utmost peace. I lay thinking for a long while; then
I got up and fumbled for the light, took pen and paper, and
without hesitation wrote a sonnet which I called "Mother
Night."

(*AW*, pp. 237-238)
The next day he made two or three slight revisions in the poem, typed it, and sent it to *The Century*. Mr. Gilder made a prompt reply saying: "We are overwhelmed with poetry but we must take 'Mother Night'" *(AW, p. 237)*.

First in order is an examination of Johnson's remark about taking dictation from a spirit hovering over his head. There were two "spirits" hovering over his head — two direct sources which influenced the nature of his poem. The first was the spirit of loneliness recaptured in the moment of darkness when he awakened, and the second was a reawakened consciousness of the same mood captured by the Pre-romantic English poets he had recently studied at Columbia University. The loneliness that he experienced the first few weeks in Venezuela is mentioned in his letter to Towns written October 5, 1906. He writes: "When I first arrived at my post I was for several weeks absolutely miserable. I was alone and lonely, and felt that I was on the outside vein of the world." More facts about passing time is given in the same letter: "I am now really enjoying life here. I have made quite a number of friends who are agreeable company but best of all I have found myself such good company. I and myself are becoming better acquainted everyday. . . . I have lots of leisure time for reading and thinking. . . . It is the ideal sort of life for a man of any mental resources, for a dreamer." The foregoing statement indicates that "reading and thinking" had become a way of life for Johnson the man and writer. Redding contends that the practice of art for art's sake is "an appropriate way of feeling and thinking growing out of a particular system of living. For example, the writing of Blacks may be nourished by the same roots sunk in the same cultural soil as
writing by Anglo-Americans. In the tropics, Johnson's real world was replenished with "romantic" overtones that influenced his art poems.

Taking a closer look at Johnson's impulse from the bookshelf, one finds that the sonnet "Mother Night" has the quality of melancholy which is one of the most frequent moods entertained by the romantic mind. The mood is characteristic of the "graveyard" poetry written by such writers as Thomas Gray and Edward Young. Johnson's poem is very similar to portions of Young's "The Complaint, or Night Thoughts on Life, Death and Immortality," a long blank verse poem written 1742-1745. In the octave of "Mother Night," Johnson images the "Nirvanic peace" of night; in the sestet he expresses his anticipated joy of being enveloped in that peace, the "Quiet bosom of night eternally." Selected lines from "Mother Night" and "Night Thoughts" are given to show the similarity in the poets' depiction of night.

"Mother Night":

Eternities before the first-born day
Or ere the first sun fledged his wings of flame,
Calm night, the everlasting and the same,
A brooding mother over chaos lay.
And whirling suns shall blaze and then decay,
Shall run their fiery courses and then claim
The haven of the darkness whence they came;
Back to Nirvanic peace shall grope their way.

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11 *Fifty Years and Other Poems*, p. 22.
Night Thoughts:

Night, sable goddess from her ebon throne,
In rayless majesty now stretches forth
Her leaden scepter o'er a slumbering world.
Silence, how dead! and darkness how profound!
Your eye nor listening ear an object finds;
Creation sleeps. Tis as the general pulse
Of life stood still, and native made a pause;
An awful pause! prophetic of her end.12

Both poets allude to night as nirvana, a place or state of oblivion to
cure, pain or external reality.

Johnson employs well-worn images as "wings of flames" when he speaks
of the sun; "calm night" as "a brooding mother"; again, the suns running
their "fiery courses"; death as "the feeble sun of life burnt out"; and
"the quiet bosom of night." He also uses poetic diction in the second
verse of the poem, "Or ere the first sun fledged his wings of flame."
The poet displayed a now recognized fault in composition which is explicit
in this statement by Ellison: "The pathetic element in the history of
Negro American writing is that it started out by reflecting styles popular
at the time . . . styles uninterested in the human complexity of Negroes."13
He referred specifically to the styles of dialect used by Dunbar and
Chestnut. His contention is that they got published, but their practice
got in the way of their subject matter and their goal of depicting black
personality. What is true of dialect is also true of Johnson's selection
of earlier patterns from English literature. "Mother Night," therefore,
has no place on the selected scale of values. Johnson won prestige for
himself and the race because it was a miracle that he could write and

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12 Edward Young "The Complaint or Night Thoughts on Life, Death and
Immortality" in The Poetical Works (London: William Pickering, 1952), I,
p. 2.
publish in reputable magazines at that stage of black life in America.

The "Awakening" is an art poem written on the theme of love. It contains two ten-line stanzas rhyming a b a b c d c d e e. The first eight lines and the tenth are written in trochaic tetrameter, and the ninth line in trochaic dimeter. The first line of each stanza contains seven syllables. The clipped line does not enhance the melody of the poem, which is a "rose" poem and usually executed in musical verse. This choice brings the reader to attention immediately; the abruptness coincides with the meaning implied in the title. The two first lines are: "I dreamed that I was a rose," and "I dreamed that you were a bee."

The first stanza recounts the poet, a rose, waiting and "gathering perfume hour by hour" not knowing why. He shatters the image by saying that he was storing the perfume within his heart. The lover, the bee, came across the hedge to the rose, "sang a soft, love-burdened song," and brushed the rose petals with a kiss. The rose "woke to gladness with a start" and yielded the "treasured fragrance" of its heart knowing at last that that was the reason for the waiting period.

The poem is allied to the familiar tradition of the allegory, where one thing is presented in the image of another. The rose may then become not only the symbolic lover but also a poet who continues to strive without knowing to what end his efforts are directed. Just as the bee, the loved one has the perfume (love) lavished upon it by the waiting rose (lover), so the poet discovers some outlet for his hidden talent. The poet is just as surprised as the lover when he has the chance to

\[\text{\cite{Fifty Years, p. 54.}}\]
give off his perfume (talent) to a receptive audience. Like "Mother Night" on the theme of death, "The Awakening" is on the theme of love, both universal themes. A liberal interpreter of the poem might assess symbolic value to the rose as a talented Black who comes into his own. However, if the meaning is taken literally, this interpretation may not be valid. Therefore, "The Awakening" has no place on the selected scale of values.

The last selected art poem for discussion is the lyric "O Southland."\(^{15}\) This art poem has value as a transitional poem. Using the criterion on the normative scale, it employs the method of dissimulation and camouflage. The poem was doubtlessly influenced by the formlessness of Whitman. There is a striving for freedom in form and thought. Unfortunately, it bears resemblance to the poem which Whitman regretted that he had written, "O Captain! My Captain!"\(^{16}\) Whitman adheres to traditional form but not entirely. He uses an eight-line stanza with end rhymes reading, a a b b c d e d with the line syllable count — 12/14/15/15/5/7/8/5. Johnson's tone and sentiment ape Whitman's so closely that one is almost sure that he has heard, "O Southland!" "Rise up and hear the bells." The "O", used undoubtedly a thousand times or more in Leaves of Grass, is echoed in calls as "O Southland! O Southland," and "O Birthland." Johnson has four eight-line stanzas with a consistent irregular rhyme scheme reading a b c b d e f e. The syllable count for lines in stanza one, 6/6/8/7/6/6/8/6, is regular enough to say that

\(^{15}\)Fifty Years, p. 8.

he alternated between the trimeter and tetrameter line. Evidently, Johnson was impressed with the zest of "O Captain! My Captain!" and allowed himself to be benefited by the young Whitman's departure from formal standards for the writing of traditional English poetry.

The poem "O Southland" can be classified as a didactic poem. This time the lecture is to the South. The first stanza issues the trumpet call, passing the "Watchword, the hope-word," on the new plan for man's salvation: "Man shall be saved by man." But the lecturer throws in a note of amelioration because he tells the Southland that the word is not just for her but "for all," which adds the "universal" note. The second stanza reports the progress ("the mighty beat of onward feet") of the ones who have recognized the call as one that issued from the "fair arch of Freedom's dome." He is not sure if the Southland has considered the call, since it is for everyone, so he takes time to inform the Southland that there is room for "each man" to march "onward and upward." Impatience is voiced in the third stanza because the lecturer realizes that the Southland is still clinging "To an idle age and a musty page/ To a dead and useless thing." Immediately he realizes that he has allowed a bit of personal invective to enter; the lecture then moves from the definite to the general:

Tis springtime! Tis work-time!
The world is young again!
And God's above, and God is love,
And men are only men.

The telling line is "and men are only men," where the poet issues his apology for having stormed at the Southland. He indicates that he understands why men must be only men and do the things that they must do.

The lecturer, in the last stanza, is aware that his apologetic stand has
not encouraged the Southland to rouse herself to action, so he resorts to gentle reproof. He makes this assertive bid because he has a personal stake in her.

O Southland! O Southland!
O birthland! do not shirk
The toilsome task, nor respite ask,
But gird you for the work.
Remember, remember
That weakness stalks in pride;
That he is strong who helps along
The faint one at his side.

No doubt need remain about the poet's method of dissimulation and camouflage. Between 1894 and 1899, during Johnson's early career as an educator in Jacksonville, he sided with the militant friends who assisted Alonza Jones. The difficulties experienced by Jones stood as a lesson to be learned and followed. Booker T. Washington was still the exemplary leader of Black America. He had helped Johnson to become a United States Consul. As a Consul with one year of service, 1907, Johnson could not write in a manner to embarrass the United States Government. But for all of the Whitman influence, the archaic diction and the trite literary jargon, the apostrophe "O Southland!" contains the bitter seed of militancy that would grow with the years into the outright protest methods used in the NAACP.

The third category consists of art race poems. These poems employ racial themes but traditional patterns of English verse. "Father Abraham,"17 "Fifty Years,"18 and "O Black and Unknown Bards,"19 fall in this

17Fifty Years, p. 13.
18Ibid., pp. 1-5.
19Ibid., pp. 6-8.
"Father Abraham," listed as "Father Abraham" in Fifty Years and Other Poems, would hardly be considered as a poem with racial overtones because the Abraham is likely to be taken for the Hebrew patriarch known as the father of the faithful. The parenthetical note (on the Anniversary of Lincoln's Birth) beneath the title in the Fifty Years volume places the poem in context. Johnson intended to write a Lincoln poem expressing black sentiment when he wrote "Lift Every Voice and Sing." No doubt this is his last effort to execute his plan. The poem was first published in the Crisis, February, 1913 (p. 172) only a month after "Fifty Years." 1863. The poem is plaintive, yet assertive. Even if the poem was not composed near the date of publication, it reflects the prevailing mood of Johnson's mind at the time. The death of his father the latter part of June 1912 (AW, p. 276) saddened his life. Moreover, he was experiencing difficulties on settling his father's estate. The problem is revealed in a statement to Towns, March 22, 1913. "I am having the time of my life with lawyers. I have had to institute a half dozen law suits to recover from a local defunct trust company some securities left by my father and I must see these suits through." That the poet's mind was burdened can also be sustained by an explanation given concerning his failure to publish the entire poem "Fifty Years" as he had written it. The poem consisted of forty-one stanzas. Where the poem reached its highest expression of achievement and of faith in the realization of well-earned rights, he brought into view the opposite side of matter, ending the poem on a note of bitterness and despair. He had a hard struggle with his better taste and judgment which won out for the moment because he deleted the bitter stanzas. He decided that the last part of the poem, though voicing the
The deletion of fifteen stanzas from the poem indicates that the artistic values which Johnson honored hampered his desire for expressing his true feeling. Alain Locke speaks of this practice as a "hampering habit of setting artistic values with primary regard for all those pathetic over-compensations of a group inferiority complex which [the black man's] social dilemma inflicted upon several unhappy generations." The bard's choice is over-assertiveness or an appealing attitude. "Fifty Years" is over-assertive while "Father, Father Abraham" has an appealing attitude.

"Father, Father Abraham" is a four-stanza poem written in ballad style. The poem is one of the many poems using the apostrophe as a rhetorical device. Of more value than the rhetoric is the poet's pose. He assumed the pose of a cajoling lecturer in "O Southland"; now he is a plaintiff, pleading to the black man's savior. In the first stanza he asks Father Abraham to show awareness of the offspring of his faith, the blacks who were the benefactors of his Christ-like love. The next stanza finds the plaintiff pleading for a smile of approval and for tolerance for failures or shortcomings. The third stanza finds the plaintiff with an uplifted heart for he is filled with the thought and overawed with gratitude when he recalls that Father Abraham paid such a great price to ransom the black American. Last of all, the plaintiff, speaking for the race, resolves to consecrate, "hand, heart and brain" to the task of exonerating themselves from cowardice so their record would show that

\[20\text{Saint Peter, p. 91.}\]
Father Abraham's ransom was not paid in vain.

According to the normative scale, "Father, Father Abraham" relates to three values in a very obvious way. First, to the seventh value, a high development of dissimulation and camouflage; secondly to the third, patience and endurance; and thirdly, to five, a sort of deadened courage, and not so deadened. The mood of the poem is calm and sedate, but it smothers a sense of impatience which is imminent despite its plaintiveness. The title "Father, Father Abraham" gives the impression that the speaker is weary of appeasement. He is not too weary, though, to announce that he and his cohorts will dedicate all that they have for the uplift of the black race just as he does in a more convincing manner in "Fifty Years."

"Fifty Years," 1863-1913, was first published in the New York Times, January 1, 1913, in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. Johnson's note in Saint Peter (p. 91) tells about the composition of the poem. He had planned to write a commemorative poem for the semi-centennial, but he thought that the anniversary would fall in 1915. In the early part of October, 1912, he learned that the anniversary of the preliminary proclamation which Lincoln signed September 22, 1862, was being celebrated; and he realized that he had a little more than two months to write the poem. His duties in Nicaragua were strenous so he could write only after midnight. Nevertheless, he finished the poem the first part of December and sent it to Brander Matthews at Columbia University. Brander Matthews sent it to the New York Times and it was published on the precise date of the fiftieth anniversary.

Critical comments about the poem on its publication indicate that
for the first time one of Johnson's poems received rave notices and attention on the national level. He wrote Towns January 10, 1913, saying:

I was mighty glad to get your letter and read your good words about the poem. I have been astonished by the amount of appreciative response it has called forth; since the day it appeared, I have been receiving letters from colored and white people of prominence — this is of course very gratifying. The editorial comment in the 'Times' was more of a surprise to me than the fact that so much space was given for the publication of the verses. I am very happy that I have been able to do something that reflects credit on the race and sheds a little glory about the dear old school [Atlanta University].

Pride of race and school prompted Johnson to make this statement once he had accomplished his fete, but his mind was set in that direction before he sailed for Venezuela.

Venezuela offered a life of repose; Nicaragua was just the opposite. During the first four months in Venezuela, having the chance for quiet thought, Johnson obtained his first perspective view of life. He likewise gained the power to adjust the various experiences of his whole life to a place of relative importance. One step farther meant that he could see the race problem also in perspective. Perspective is threefold, from the Christian angle: "It looks to the past with reverence, to the present with responsibility, and to the future, with faith."22 So Johnson's widening perspective enabled him to produce the anniversary ode as a command performance.

Just as Puerto Cabello bespoke a life of ease for Johnson, Corinto threw him in contact with the meaner forces of existence. Life in the

tropics took on the analogous pattern of life in Georgia, 1891. Atlanta University was the glory; Hampton the scorn. Now the pattern reverts to Puerto Cabello and Corinto. Spring of 1909 found Johnson reveling in joy on his promotion as a Consul. His first impression of Corinto brought him back to the ground. He describes his feelings:

My first view of Corinto sent my heart down like a plummet. What I saw was not a city or a town, but a straggling, tropical village. The bay itself was beautiful; landlocked by several islands, with Cordon, a great rock standing up in strong relief. . . . Of the surroundings, only what man had done in making Corinto was vile. It was a shanty town built entirely of wood. There were less than a half dozen attractive houses in it. The streets were unpaved; there was no electricity. Except for a couple of primitive grocery stores, there was not a shop in the place (AW, p. 255).

The squalor and ugliness of life came into focus again. Johnson wrote the last fifteen stanzas of "Fifty Years," (which were discarded) knowing that these verses were "voicing verities" of unpleasant experiences in Corinto that aped previous ones in America. Mature insight brought thoughts of the Hebrew children, of the perils of slavery. But the Old Testament verified more than the problem of bondage. The sorrows of the Hebrew children verified "the root uncertainties of existence."

Evidently Johnson's discovery of the "root uncertainties of existence" prompted him to project the black man's journey on the road to freedom in a God-centered universe. The three themes for the poem are given by Johnson in Along This Way (p. 290). The main theme is the fifty years of black struggle and achievement 1619-1863, especially the years of freedom from 1863-1913. The next theme is the black man's earned claims to share in the commonwealth. The last theme is faith in the

future greatness of the black American.

Before the survey is made of the black man's struggle, the poet pays tribute to Lincoln who struck off the bonds that made the Afro-Americans real men. He directs his brothers to look back to the day of emancipation, then to the time of their father's arrival on Virginia's shore, then farther back to the heathen kraals and the jungle dens, in order to appreciate his present accomplishments (Stanzas 1-4). Stanzas 10 and 11 contain the idea that the Afro-American has earned his rights as an American citizen.

For never let the thought arise
That we are here on sufferance bare;
Outcasts, assylumed 'neath these skies,
And aliens without part or share.

This land is ours by right of birth,
This land is ours by right of toil;
We helped to turn its virgin earth,
Our sweat is in its fruitful soil.

He cites Christopher Attucks as the first man who shed blood in the American Revolution as an example of the Afro-American's loyalty to his country (Stanza 14). Just before the theme on faith is introduced, the poet alludes to the "staggering force of brutish might" (Stanza 21) but in (Stanza 22) he explains that the black man moves on with his hands uplifted even when he is in despair. The strong element of faith is expressed in stanzas 23 and 24.

Courage! Look out, beyond, and see
The far horizon beckoning span!
Faith in your God-known destiny!
We are a part of some great plan

That for which millions prayed and sighed
That for which tens of thousands fought,
That for which many freely died,
God cannot let it come to naught.
Later Johnson felt no need for a personal God (AW, pp. 412-413), but there is a strong religious view in this poem, a belief in God's plan to compensate for the Afro-Americans trials in this life.

This poem is written in quatrains rhyming a b a b in trochaic tetrameter. The precise handling of this form brought high praise from Dr. Braithwaite. He gives Johnson credit for bringing craftsmanship to black poetry. Less spontaneous than Dunbar, he made up for the lost by being more balanced and precise. He disengaged himself "from the background of mediocrity into which the imitation of Dunbar snared Negro poetry. Mr. Johnson's work is based upon a broader contemplation of life, life that is not wholly confined within any racial experience, but through the racial experience he made articulate that universality of the emotions felt by all mankind" (Braithwaite, p. 38).

Brander Matthews praised the poem for its poetic qualities and the racial element. The poem is "sonorous in its diction, vigorous in its workmanship, elevated in its imagination and sincere in its emotion." Also the poem "speaks the voice of his race; and the race is fortunate in its spokesman. In it a fine theme has been treated. In it we are made to see something of the soul of the people who are fellow citizens now and forever — even if we do not always so regard them" (Matthews, xiv).

Widened experiences prompted Johnson to view his performance as not wholly deserving the praises heaped upon it on publication. He said in Along This Way (1933), "If I were today writing that 'major portion' of my poem, I should question the superiority in the absolute of the so-called white

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24Braithwaite, p. 38.
civilization over so-called primitive civilizations (p. 290). Finally, six of the normative values are found in this poem 1, 3, 5, 6, 8 and 9. The poet has moved up to the stage where a sense of something more than this world and its rhythms exist for the black man.

The last poem in this group, "O Black and Unknown Bards" (1908) has gained a place of merit above the poem "Fifty Years." The commemorative poem combines art and race propaganda in an explicit statement. "Bards" touches upon the mystery of the black man's creative genius manifested in his gift of the spirituals which implicitly states that his songs had won parity with the greatest music masters in the world. With a deft stroke, "in this poetic fashion he was really voicing a re-evaluation of the spirituals as a phase of the Negro's past." 26 Devaraja tells us in his *Philosophy of Culture*, that "at any period in a man's history the richness and complexity of his cultural existence is a consequence not merely, or even mainly of his contemporary environment, physical and economic, but of all the spiritual past of his kind that he has cared to inherit." 27

The time this poem was composed is of ultimate importance, 1908, when Johnson was experiencing his heyday as a Consul in Puerto Cabello, Venezuela. He preferred his post in Venezuela to that of Nicaragua because he was more of a diplomat and less a Consul in the latter place. His careful definition of "Consul" intimates the depth of his personal conviction in the rightness of his being the one for that position.

26 *Frazier*, p. 508.

A Consul is a government official of representative character and wide discretionary powers; he holds a commission direct from the President and an Exequatur from the head of the foreign state to which he is accredited; he is not only authorized officially to fly the national flag, but is one of the few persons for whom Congress has authorized an individual flag; this he flies when visiting American vessels, and when he visits a vessel of the United States Navy, officially, he is honored by a salute of seven guns. In some respects, he stands above the local law of the country in which he resides.28

Life in Puerto Cabello ran along more evenly than in Nicaragua — but it was a city. Though a small city, it gave way at times to social festivities of the first magnitude with beautiful women, enchanting music and unusual champagne from the tropics. He even gloried in seeing one of Castro’s (the ruler) generals at the greatest social affairs of 1908. He was a “gigantic, full-blooded Negro,” one of the few Blacks in Venezuela. Despite Castro’s dislike of foreigners, he gave audience to Johnson (AW, pp. 242-244). When a shipload of congressmen came to Puerto Cabello, headed by Joe Cannon, Johnson met the ship with his latest batch of New York Herald. The gift was the best possible one to the congressmen because they had been touring around the Caribbean several weeks before visiting Johnson’s post. Cannon was so impressed that when he came ashore, he ran his arm through Johnson’s as they walked on to the Consulate. As they walked, the Congressman asked Johnson a number of pointed questions which he answered without reticence (AW, p. 250). On leaving Puerto Cabello, Johnson purchased a heart done in gold to be worn as a pendant from a filagree worker. This he made a gift to Grace Neil, the love of his life (AW, p. 252).

28 "Johnson To Towns," July 26, 1912.
The state of exhilaration in Johnson’s life carries over to "Bards." Miraculously, the poem exhumes, not the gift of Johnson’s high state of acculturation or his deep love for Grace Nail, but of the neglected race art destined to obscurity. Blacks, en masse, had no desire to honor the spirituals at this time because they were known to many as slave songs. They were willing to abandon even the spirituals to rid themselves of the stigma of slavery. How is it then that Johnson, riding on the high wave of acculturation in the tropics, would write the one poem that is now placed in a volume entitled 3000 Years of Black Poetry?

The reason might be found in what seems an ordinary experience. Late in August, 1908, El Restaurador, the flagship of the Venezuelan Navy steamed into port along with almost the entire navy. She was a steam yacht purchased by the government, converted into a war vessel, and named in honor of President Castro, who had assumed the title, El Restaurador de Venezuela, the Restorer of Venezuela. No inhabitant of the island, "friend or enemy of the dictator could escape the intoxication engendered by the festivities. . . . The presidential band, a good one, played every afternoon in the principal park, while the populace and society promenaded round and round. . . . The high spot, however, came at the beginning: it was the grand ball" (AW, pp. 242-243). Johnson remarked, "I have not yet heard a finer orchestra for the kind of dances it played. It was composed entirely of strings and woodwinds, and played only waltzes and quadrilles. I danced most of the waltzes — they were played ravishingly — and omitted all of the quadrilles"(AW, p. 243). Counterposing these secular festivities was one religious ceremony: "A special Te Deum was sung at the churches" (AW, p. 243). The Te Deum is an ancient liturgical hymn of praise.
The effulgence of the divine, the "Black Holy Ghost," must have descended upon Johnson at that hour. Were not the spirituals of his people as weighty in spirit as the Te Deum? According to Johnson's letter to Towns, December 25 [1914], he published "O Black and Unknown Bards" in Century, November, 1908. It is reasonable to suggest that the poem was composed during or sometime after the August festival 1908.

The peculiar phenomenon of the black awareness coming to grips with itself in the wake of highly accrued values of Western civilization is best explained by Senghor, a native African, now president of Senegal.

Paradoxically, it was the French who first forced us to seek its essence, and who showed us where it lay. . . . When they enforced their policy of assimilation was a failure, we could assimilate mathematics or the French language, but we could never strip off our black skins or root out our black souls. And so we set out for the Holy Grail: Our Collective Soul. And we came upon it.29

Thus, the "Black National Anthem" announces the awakening consciousness of race; "Fifty Years," a "burning and broadening aspiration" of race; while "O Black and Unknown Bards" bespeaks the virile consciousness and the idiomatic spirit of the race.

The poem "Bards" is an ode to the black slave singers who composed the spirituals. It consists of six eight line stanzas written in trochaic pentameter. "Singing Johnson," a character in The Autobiography was of the line of mightier bards who were makers and leaders of song. In the poem, the author expresses with increasing wonder the miraculous origin of this music. He marvels how "the dark-kept souls" could bring their "lips to touch the sacred fire" (inspiration), or their inner

minds to know "the power and beauty of the minstrel's lyre?" How "could merely living clod[s]/captive thing[s]" grope up toward God through all its darkness" and sing "songs of sorrow, love, faith and hope?" How did they catch a note that is not heard in music with the ear? Even the great German master (undoubtedly the German born George Frederick Handel, 1685-1759) whose "dream of harmonies that thundered among the stars at creation" could not surpass "Go Down Moses" with its noble strain. The "mighty trumpet call" of both "stir the blood."

The "wide, wide wonder of it all" is that "the fiery spirit of the seer should call these children of the sun and soil"; the greatest wonder of all is how these bondsmen sang their race "from wood and stone to Christ."

The images of darkness and light in the poem set in motion many responses in the reader. "When these responses further empower the image, it becomes imagery, a series of interrelated impressions growing out of one picture, eventually to create a richer impression than either the poet or reader could achieve alone." This is Sander's view, which accommodates a few basic concerns for Africa's role in Afro-American history. The "light," the intuitive knowledge which informed the "dark," untaught blacks in Euro-American culture, leaves room for belief in the idea that the subconscious roots of the black ethos were fed from another stream.

Values encompassing 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 on the normative scale apply to the poem "O Black and Unknown Bards." Beyond the values on the normative scale is a groping for the ancestral spirit. Carolyn Rodgers

defines this type of verse as a spaced-poem. Discussing the spaced poem she states: "It returns to the spiritual wisdom of our Egyptian/African forefathers. . . . Returns to the natural laws, the natural state of man before subhuman massacres. Spaced poems say that our ancestors are in the air and will communicate with us." For greater clarity she says: "We speak of vibrations, positive and negative, and we believe again in what we have never truly denied; the power of Nommo, Ju-Ju and the collective force of the positive spirits, moving in time with the universe." This qualitative value implied in "Bards" no less than its stylistic form led to its selection for the African Anthology, 3000 Years.

The introduction to the anthology gives background facts about the principal forms in the African poetic tradition.

The principal form in the African poetic tradition is the praise song. One of the earliest poems (in the tradition — to Ogum, of the god of war) is a black pharoah's hymn of praise to the sun as the creator of all things. This psalm is followed by a terrifying song of praise to the Lord of The Horizon, who swallows and devours everything — all men and all gods. Each of these ancient African hymns enumerates the powers and deeds of a deity who controls the natural order of things. By reciting their poetic names and attributes, the poet summons them into life. Thus in all black Africa, poetry and magic and religion become one, for praise songs bring the gods to the dancing floor, there to enter the bodies of their devotees and to take part in the affairs of men (Lomax, xx).

Compiling the anthology, Lomax says "At times I have felt that these pages might have been written by one hand, that all these poems were like so many rapids, so many quiet pools and ripples in the course of an eternal Congo of feeling, of nutima, of heart" (Lomax, xiii). Finally, for

32Ibid.
all of the impressive power of the praise song style, "it was not invented by court poets for kings" "it is the essence of African folk poetry" (Lomax, xxii). Johnson's discovery of folk art as a basis for the superstructure of conscious art the summer of 1899, in New York, is not only the basis for the Afro-centric tradition which he worked to establish; it is also the source stream for African poetry.

Johnson's work as American Consul from 1908-1913 placed him in the rank of high achievers in Black America. But over and above the services he rendered as a Consul stand his constant strivings to develop his power of mind as a literary artist. The desire was realized in that he published his only novel, The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man and the poems discussed in this text. He was well acquainted with Dunbar's writings, English literature and American literature through Whitman which he imitated in part. Within the span of years, though, he shifted from the whimsy of dialect in "Tunk," to the intellectual content of "Fifty Years" on to race spirit in "O Black and Unknown Bards." Through all of the experiences, "underneath the poet's restless changes is an unchanging steel of commitment." Most of the hinterland was behind him as he moved toward the final realization of the Congo dream — total fusion with the idiomatic spirit.

Last of all, to assess the worth of Johnson's production of verse during the early years of the twentieth century, a statement is given as testimonial to the value of poetry to a people at large by Robert Kerlin:

There are many forms of expression that the life of a developing people or group finds for itself — business and wealth, education and culture, political and

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social unrest and agitation, literature and art. But no people has a vital significance for other peoples or groups, or any real potency, until it begins to express itself in poetry. When a race begins to embody its aspirations, its grievances, its animating spirit in song the world may well take notice.34

Though Johnson wrote his prose for a purpose and his poetry for pleasure, his poetry helped the world to understand the black man's potential and his "life-giving" visions.

Chapter IX

Triumph of the Black Ethos

1914–1920

At the turn of the twentieth century, Johnson escaped the provincialism of race and section by moving to New York. He escaped, temporarily, from the pressing demands of New York life by taking a trip to Europe, 1905. From 1906–1913 his job as Consul in South America took him away from the American racial scene altogether. Escaping momentarily from "the hitherto inescapable sense of the color bar... he acquired poise and individuality, that breadth and culture which his friends especially appreciate" and admire."¹ Every step upward pointed to the simple phenomenon that he was a successful human being, not necessarily black.

But something was wrong with his success in New York. The gay life was not conducive to the expression of deep feelings. Artistically, his work was less successful as he gained fame.² Johnson, along with Bob Cole and Rosamond, intended to spend one night at the Continental in a luxurious suite, but they stayed there for their duration in Paris because of the "honor" paid them by the various functionaries who kept up a chorus of "Messieurs" as they came and went. The sense and the sound was so pleasing that they decided that whatever it cost to stay at the

Continental was worth it because of the designation "Messieurs" (AW, p. 210). On the return trip to the United States they did not have enough money to get off the ship honorably, so Johnson borrowed twenty-five dollars to use for tips (AW, p. 17). After touching in some respects a wider world of nations, customs and languages in Puerto Cabello and Corinto and performing his duties with exemplary distinction, Johnson discovered that respect was still at a premium for Blacks. The Department of State "refused him merited promotion for less than a reason and Mr. Johnson found himself . . . back in New York at the end of an era."\(^3\)

All of these situations informed Johnson that he could not lose himself; he could not be just a human being; he had to descend to the plains where the black masses walked as yet, on an unmarked highway.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss Johnson's loss of status as a Consul and the extenuating circumstances which led him to the New York Age as an editor, as chief spokesman for the race, and to the NAACP as an agitator and organizer to circumvent racial injustice to blacks.

Johnson's resignation from the Consular Services marked a turning point in his personal and public life. He had set his heart on being appointed eventually as "American Minister to somewhere." Promotion, he had hoped, from Corinto meant going to Spain. Instead, he was promoted to go to the Azores in Portugal.\(^4\) The Democratic majority in the Senate refused to confirm the nomination because of his allegiance to the Republican Party. William Jennings Byran, then Secretary of State, gave him the chance to return to Corinto, but he refused. Byran was unable to understand why Johnson, as a Republican appointee, was not grateful...

\(^3\)Aptheker, 226.
\(^4\)"Johnson to Towns," January 10, 1913.
to be left in the Service at all. Johnson knew that the proposal by
the Secretary would be blocked by the merit system as far as the Consular
Service was concerned (AW, p. 293). He resigned from the Service
September 1913, instead of going back to Corinto.5 Over the hurdle, he
wrote Towns saying, "I am going to write to Ex-Consul Creecy. I am
curious to know what sort of place it was that I came near being condemned
to, for the rest of my natural life."6 He was up against politics
in addition to race prejudice.

The impact of his new exile coming from loss of position and the
loss of contact in Jacksonville, where he and his wife attempted to live
in a segregated community, is best expressed in his own words: "I was at
the fork, at the crossroads; no I was standing lost in the woods, I did
not know which way to take, but I knew whichever I took would be fateful"
(AW, p. 301). Since his graduation from Atlanta University in 1894, he
had been a publisher, educator, lawyer, composer, artist, diplomat, yet
he was where he began and it brought him frustration.7

In some ways, since his New York days, he had been a Black doing
white man's work. He had become, whether he knew it or not, a marginal
man. The marginal man lives on the same level of culture as the con­
temporary white classes, but he is subject to the attitudes and treatment
which the white man bestows on the less advanced Black. He occupies a
high status in his own race, but from the white point of view he is

5Ibid., note No. 24.
6"Johnson to Towns," December 25, 1914.
7Adelman, 137.
inferior. Legally, he is an American citizen, but practically he is a Black and supposedly inferior. The Black intellectual or scholar must live in isolation or conform to upper-class patterns of behavior which are opposed to "intellectual values." Experiencing the conflict of cultures constitutes the turning point in the career of the marginal man. Usually the experience is a shock because the personal relations and cultural forms which he had previously taken for granted become problematic in an instant. Stonequist writes in The Marginal Man:

"He does not know how to act. There is a feeling of confusion of loss of direction, of being overwhelmed" (p. 140). Johnson struggled through many indecisions but finally arrived at a fixed purpose which gave him the chance to be a black man in a black world. He moved to Harlem, New York.

On returning to Harlem, Johnson tried Broadway again. He found that he had lost the touch and could not recapture the zest of earlier years. He turned to writing "art songs," doing a number with Harry T. Burleigh, Will Marion Cook and Rosamond, but chances for excelling were nil. He hit upon extremely "blue days," but he was determined to stay in New York to try to make his way by writing because he had done it before. From the money angle, he was closer to ruin than he had ever been in his life (AW, pp. 303-304). He wrote Towns December 25, 1914, expressing regrets that he could not pay his class funds at Atlanta University at that time. He stayed on in New York because he knew that he should be exerting his efforts in a field where the aim was high

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10Stonequist, p. 140.
enough to call up all of his energies and enthusiasm. The first chance came a few weeks after his arrival from a "strange quarter." Fred R. Moore, the owner and publisher of the New York Age, the oldest black paper in New York, asked him to become its editor (AW, p. 303).

As editor, he adopted a plan to avoid anonymity. He had his editorials to appear under his name as a contributing editor. The caption of his double column "Views and Reviews" was borrowed from Theodore Roosevelt. Entered this way, his editorials attracted the attention of readers and other Negro editors (AW, p. 303). For ten years he wrote editorials for the Age, using his corner to "accomplish a certain object" and to present articles on any topic of interest to his people.11 That object was to exonerate black Americans.

The position on the editorial staff of the Age "thrust /Johnson/ to the forefront as American Negro spokesman. He had to identify."12 Furthermore, for the first time he had to face squarely and state his position on many issues of the day. He used the two-fold approach in order to make the blacks conscious and the whites aware. As an agitator, he used the strongest protest that he had yet registered. He no longer needed to be inhibited as a diplomat because his responsibility was only to Blacks. As a defender, he insisted that Afro-Americans possessed ability which could be proven by true reports of their activities. In fact, he followed the thought pattern in the columns that he had used in the Autobiography. Every activity of importance in Black life engaged his attention and was discussed in "Views and Reviews."

12Adelman, 138.
Before Johnson came to the Age in October, 1914, pertinent facts appear in the editorial page on the aim of the paper. On Thursday, June 14, 1914, p. 4, the following statement appears:

The Age strives hard to be a mirror that reflects the best and highest of current news and opinion. There is too much personal note in all we do and say. We need to take on a larger view of the panoramic life of our times.

The editor goes on to explain what he means by the personal note.

The disposition of the race is to be satisfied with little else of news than their social, church and fraternal doings, with utter subordination of the larger news and opinion of the world together with its literary, artistic, and scientific tendencies, achievements and discoveries, indicates a narrowness of intellectual outlook which has not broadened with the years as we hope it would.

During his first month as editor, Johnson gave his definition of a "Negro Newspaper."

The Negro newspaper is not primarily a newspaper anymore than a religious weekly is a newspaper. Negro weeklies make no pretense at being newspapers in the strict sense of the term. They have a more important mission than the dissemination of mere news. It is not their work to herald that there has been a wreck in the Fiji Islands or that the Russians have captured Przemysl. They are race papers. They are organs of propaganda. Their chief business is to stimulate thought among Negroes about the things that vitally concern them.

The comments were expected to be earnest but void of ranting and abuse. Johnson sanctioned the use of propaganda in the Age and sought to clarify its meaning. He made an effort to define the types of propaganda used against Blacks and to exemplify the type Blacks should use for
self elevation. Positive propaganda in the hands of a white writer was used to create some type of overstatement. He tries to prove that the black man is a beast, a brute, a human being in shape only, and without soul or brain. This type is less harmful because the theory is disproved as soon as some black man wins distinction. The sort that hurts the black man more is the negative sort. It is indulged in by enemies and those who are taken to be friends. This is the kind of propaganda that begins on humanitarian grounds and ends up by damning the "Negro" with faint praise or by putting in so many "but"s and "howevers" that it damns him without any praise. Referring to the organization of a Correspondent's Club of Washington, D. C., whose duty it was to report success in publication to members, by letter, he felt that it was propaganda that a person could use to change and form public opinion about himself. He reminded his readers that their age was an age of propaganda through publicity; therefore, the black man had to fight with propaganda of a sort.

Bronze tries to give an overview of the role Johnson played as editor. To inspire his reading audience Johnson wrote columns encouraging Harlem businessmen, others denouncing Harlem Hoodlumism; he wrote others on Shakespeare and the writing of poetry (Bronze, p. 31). In this study his role will be exemplified as an agitator, as a "philosopher," as a literary critic, and as a mentor to young creative artists. He designated himself as a third class philosopher (To Towns, Oct. 5, 1906).

Woodrow Wilson's apparent callousness about agony-stricken Blacks brought Johnson to the limelight as an agitator. Wilson served a first term from 1912-1916; the second 1916-1920. In the autumn of 1914,

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16 *Age*, 16 Apr. 1921, p. 4.
17 *Age*, 20 Dec. 1919, p. 4.
Johnson devoted most of his columns in the Age to urging Blacks to choose candidates in accord with their stand on race issues. October 18, 1914, p. 4., he denounced the President for dismissing the Trotter delegation who went to see him about the "New Freedom" in regards to Blacks. He said the President acted contrary to enlightened humanitarian thought. On November 12, 1914, he wrote in an article "The Psychology of Democratic Failure" that the failure on the part of a national leader would do harm to Afro-Americans materially and physically, and harm to whites morally and spiritually. The Democratic party in general, but more particularly in the South, was determined to nullify what remained of the Blacks' national citizenship. From the days of Reconstruction up to that time, Blacks felt that they were citizens of the United States no matter what their local status might be. Wilson's attempt to destroy the remaining vestiges of the Afro-American's freedom was a call to opposition (AW, p. 301).

For the next election, Johnson said, "I intend to throw my column in the Age into the political fight. I shall nail this motto up and not take it down until November 18th, 'anything to beat Wilson'." In addition to writing as strongly as he could, Johnson volunteered to serve as a speaker and campaigner for Charles Evans Hughes through New York and Massachusetts (AW, p. 306). Thinking that Hughes had won the election he wrote an article entitled "Thank God" in his corner:

November 7, 1916 may well be remembered as a day which marks the turning point in our history. Those of us who fully realize all that we had at stake, can well look upon it as a day of Thanksgiving for us as a people. . . . We thank God . . . that the United States may now regain its prestige and take its honorable place
among the nations of the world; that again no one will need to apologize for bearing the title American citizen (Age, p. 4).

When he wrote a retraction November 7, he spoke in a manner to soothe the disappointments of his readers.

Wilsonism may be the means of awakening colored men and women, especially in the free states, to the need of organization, of national organization for securing and maintaining our political rights. Such an organization we must have; and perhaps, Wilson's re-election will hasten it on (Age, Nov. 16, 1916, p. 4).

Of course the NAACP would be that organization and Johnson worked to perfect the aim he projected.

Johnson is not commonly known or called a philosopher, but he regarded himself as "a third rate philosopher." There is some justification for his claim since according to Devaraja "we judge the greatness of a thinker by the consistency, richness and clarity of the picture of the field of experience offered by him for our contemplation and acceptance." 18


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18 Devaraja, The Philosophy of Culture, p. 85.
19 Age, 4 Nov. 1914, p. 4.
20 Age, 29 Nov. 1917, p. 4.
21 Age, 4 Feb. 1915, p. 4.
22 Age, 21 Sept. 1916, p. 4.
Minutes and Pennies"23 "The Wages of Sin,"24 "Emotionalism,"25 and "Inside Measurement."26 An excerpt from the last article is offered as a sampling of his wit:

One of the simplest and surest methods of inside measurement would be to keep a record of the number of intelligently written books bought and read each year by colored people. Increase in population is a measure of procreative power. Increase in wealth is, with us, largely a measure of muscular power. Increase in the reading of good books is a measure of thought power. . . . [And] it is thought-power which enables a people to rise up (Age, 10 March 1916, p. 4).

At the end of the article he gave a list of six recently published books, including Phillis Wheatley's *Poems and Letters* with an appreciation by Arthur A. Schomburg. If Johnson is not a true philosopher, he is by his own definition, a man who developed thought power and possessed brain power. "Brain power," he writes, is the power to take hold of the problems of life and reduce them to the best solution possible. It is in a word the power to decide. It is the power to decide questions ranging all the way from the small affairs of everyday life to the problems of metaphysical philosophy" (Age, Nov. 26, 1914, p. 4).

In the pages of the *Age*, Johnson took on the task of the literary critic by telling the readers what to read, furnishing book lists, often making comments about the books and movies. His work as a critic is defined in accordance with this definition: "A critic bears the same relation to works of art as the artist does to life; the latter makes

26 *Age*, 2 Nov. 1916, p. 4.
articulate and enriches our actual life presented in the work of art."27

A typical critical note is entitled "Two Books." He announces William Stanley Braithwaite's 1917 anthology of verse, and informs the reader that the poems range from the most delicately phrased lyrics to the fullest of free verse. The other book recommended is Trotsky's The Bolsheviki and World Peace. He advises blacks to see what the Russian revolutionist had in mind. He felt that the Afro-American would find much in the book to think about (Age, Feb. 2, 1918, p. 4).

Full length invective is launched against "The Birth of a Nation," which was lauded as a great masterpiece of the screen. He writes:

The power of "The Birth of a Nation" does us damage. . . . It portrays the Negro in a bad light. . . . The unknowing and unthinking spectator — and the majority of moving picture spectators are unknowing and unthinking — does not feel that he is witnessing the portrayal of a story but a portrayal of truth. It is not necessary to state that the Dixon-Griffith picture not only misrepresents but distorts and falsifies history (Age, May 14, 1921, p. 4).

The critic returns to the argument several times in his column because he saw the movie as a propagandistic organ for a new form of Tomism. He was disturbed because slavery was presented as only a benevolent and uplifting institution.

One of the sure steps to the Harlem Renaissance was Johnson's provision for a Poetry Corner to search for young poetic geniuses of the race who were awaiting discovery. He often gave simple advice to the poets. Next, he advised them to possess a good dictionary and a good book of synonyms. He then pointed them to models: to Dunbar as the master of dialect and to Dr. Braithwaite's Anthology of Magazine Verse for guides.

27DevaraJa, p. 85.
in modern poetry. He indicated that the anthology was valuable because from it they could gain a clear idea of the trend and form of contemporary poetry, a knowledge of what the poets were doing then and what they were thinking and writing about and the manner in which they were doing it. He told the young poets that intelligent blacks were not reading enough to know that people were writing to prove their inferiority. To read for enjoyment he gave a list of ten great books including titles by Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. DuBois, Kelley Miller and Charles W. Chestnut.

Among the books on the race question, he suggested titles such as *Race and Orthodoxy in the South* by Thomas P. Bailey, *A Study of the Boston Negroes* by John Daniels and the *Negro Year Book 1914-1915*, by Monroe N. Work of Tuskegee (*Age*, Jan. 7, 1915, p. 4). Though he wanted to display new poetic talent, he made it clear that the standards of publication would be kept as high as possible even if it entailed an empty corner (*Age*, Feb. 4, 1915, p. 4).

Johnson's value as an editor can be estimated by what others said about him. Robert Kerlin considered him as one of the ablest editorial writers in the country during the 1920's. His editorials were widely syndicated in the black weekly press. The other comment was made in an editorial in praise of Johnson a few weeks after his death in June, 1938. The tribute reads: "He . . . was quick to see the value of the Negro press as an organ of propaganda for the unification of his race. At a time when most Negroes of education were scoffing at the efforts of pioneer Negro Publishers, Mr. Johnson rolled up his sleeves and went to work to try to help these papers more nearly approach his ideal" (*Age*, July 9, 1938, p. 4).

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Johnson was to roll up his sleeves for another task two years after he joined the editorial staff of the New York Age. He became involved in the black man's fight for equal rights as an NAACP official in 1916. His selection was predicted on the principle of leadership which he devised as a guide for fellow blacks in *Negro Americans, What Now?* (p. 86). To him, "real leadership is not a distinction to be assumed; it is an office to be achieved. Of the real leader the people someday become aware and say: "This man serves well, let us follow him."

A note is given on how the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People came into being and how it works before Johnson joined the staff December, 1916, in order to understand his distinct achievements as an agitator and a creative humanist. Creative humanism, to be specific, is "a type of man-centered philosophy which takes creativity to be the dominant and most important characteristic of the human being" (Devaraja, p. 8). The term "man-centered" implies that the proper object of philosophical inquiry is man himself, that is, man in his capacity as bearer and creator of values. To Johnson, nothing had more direct bearing on the race problem than the production of literature by black writers. As an agitator for social equality, he was working to create a world where "inexorable and eternal justice" would triumph no less than poetic justice in its domain. He realized that regardless of what others did for Black America, the ultimate and vital part of the work would have to be done by Black America itself. By personal example and precept, Johnson taught black men how to create a world for themselves within the continental boundaries of the United States of America.

The South, the home of the mass of blacks, raised numerous bars of restriction in every arena of life. In a state of dilemma, the masses
looked to blacks in the vanguard and liberal whites to lower the bars of restriction. Declarations in defense of blacks were made by the Afro-American Council in 1890 and 1898. Next, the Niagara Movement in 1905, headed by W. E. B. DuBois, set the basis for high courage, idealism and concerted effort to fight for justice (AW, pp. 310-311). A meeting in New York, called by Oswald Garrison Villard, the grandson of William Lloyd Garrison, February 12th and 13th, 1909, included DuBois and some of his associates of the Niagara Movement. The group, consisting of Whites and Blacks, discussed the status of the black man in the United States. The program adopted by the conference led to the formation of the NAACP. The demands were too exacting for the men who held to the Tuskegee Idea and to almost every white man who had given institutions to Blacks. The group demanded: Abolition of all forced segregation; equal educational advantages for black and white; enfranchisement of Blacks; and enforcement of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. W. E. B. DuBois was elected Director of Publicity and editor of the Crisis in 1910. By January 1912, the circulation was 16,000 monthly (Frasier, 524-526). The Crisis was considered "radical" by conservatives, but Johnson concluded that the protest considered as radical for the Crisis had passed out of the radical program in the English-speaking world with the signing of the Magna Charta at Runnymede seven hundred years before (AW, p. 309).

Johnson was visiting his mother in Jacksonville when he received an invitation from Joel E. Spingarn, Chairman of the board of directors for the NAACP, to attend a three-day meeting in August. The meeting, held at Spingarn's country place, Troutbeck in Amenia, New York, was to be the turning point in the life of the race. At the bottom of the letter, DuBois wrote "Do Come." Johnson accepted membership in the conference,
joining fifty of the most influential and progressive Blacks in the country and Whites who were interested in the Cause. It was the first time that Blacks from across the nation had come together for this purpose (AW, p. 308). They spoke to the issues of rising racial segregation, discrimination and mass murder (Adelman, 140). However, the new forms of concepts in relationship to the Cause would depend upon the attitude and action of the Afro-American himself and the Whites who were willing to stand with him. Blacks had to shape a world more in accord with real democracy and seek to satisfy his heart's desire in the process. When all is told, "the conference came at an hour of exigency and opportunity and took its place in the list of important events in the history of the Negro in the United States" (AW, pp. 308-309).

The second invitation from Spingarn to Johnson, late fall, 1916, was an invitation to take a place in the NAACP. He considered the call as another move in the line of destiny, for it had come out of the unspoken reactions between himself and two other men, Joel E. Spingarn and W. E. B. DuBois (AW, p. 309). DuBois said "there was a certain incongruity in having a man with such training join the executive staff of the NAACP. Ours is an unpopular and disturbing fanaticism. One does not usually train a teacher, lawyer, poet and diplomat and set him to propaganda and social agitation" (Aptheker, 226). But Johnson was joining the ranks of black intellectuals that DuBois drew his chief support of the masses, its direction was in the hands of the black intelligentsia and their white friends. Johnson expressed satisfaction on having the chance to serve. He writes: "When I received Spingarn's letter, it at once seemed to me that every bit of experience I had had from the principalship of Stanton School to editorship of the New York Age, was preparation for
the work I was being asked to undertake" (AW, p. 309). The board of
directors created the position Field Secretary, and in that capacity he

Johnson's first step as Field Secretary was to make an effort to
organize the South. The Association was small in 1916 with fifty-four
branches and 9,500 members (Frazier, p. 526). He had the idea that the
South could furnish enough people and resources to make the Association
a power. He felt that hammering at White America was no substitute for
hammering at Blacks to awaken them to a sense of duty (AW, p. 314).
DuBois felt that it was well that Johnson appointed this task for himself.
He could converse congenially with professional Southerners. "He could
admit the difficulties of the Negro problem, the humors of the color
situation, and the eternal triumph of character" (Aptheker, 226-227).

To do the work that Black America needed, the new Secretary devised
an intelligent program. He, therefore, drafted a manual for branches. In
the manual he set forth the aims of the Association and the plan for
organizing branches. He set up laws by which branches would be governed.
He drew up a plan to meet the black leaders of the South and for these
leaders to involve the masses. To begin with he wrote a letter to key
persons in about twenty cities in the South. Beginning January, 1917,
he made plans to meet the representatives starting in Richmond, Virginia,
his father, birthplace, and going South to Tampa, Florida. The Branch
was set up with the conference members who made arrangements for a mass
meeting and a membership drive. On his way back to New York he retraced
the ground that he had covered and addressed these mass meetings. This
laid the ground work for what the NAACP called the "Southern Empire."
In 1919, there were 300 branches in the Association with 131 in the South (AW, p. 315). Arthur Spingarn considered him as a "masterful fund raiser." He also said that Johnson's "distinguished style and personality" was the Association's greatest selling point. And most of all, he knew when and where not to use authority. (Adelman, 143). A few weeks after the Southern Tour, World War I started and Johnson became acting Secretary of the NAACP when Mr. Nash went to the army (AW, p. 316).

The trips in the South brought Johnson in contact with the talented young black men of that section. He was able, because of his acquaintance with Walter White in Atlanta, to suggest that he be elected as Assistant Secretary to the NAACP. White, then, one of the most prominent black agitators of the twentieth century was aided by Johnson. A few weeks after Walter White's appointment, John R. Shillady became the Secretary and Johnson continued with his field work (AW, p. 316).

Early in 1918, Johnson went on the road speaking and organizing. There was a rich field to be harvested; World War I had changed the traditional attitudes held by others toward Blacks; and Blacks began to view themselves in a new light. Blacks had become more valuable in the labor market and began migrating to the large cities out of the South. Blacks were awake and eager; they were not regarded any longer as a burden or handicap to the South. The "standpartism" was not as severe because he found black and white women in similar Red Cross uniforms distributing packages to black soldiers in Waycross, Georgia, who were going to the front. He also noticed at a mass meeting in the auditorium in Jacksonville

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29 Frazier says that in 1919 there were 300 branches and 88,348 members in the NAACP, 122 in the North with 38,420 members; 155 in the South with 42,588 members, and 33 in the West with 7,440 members (p. 526).
that white speakers who were selling Liberty Bonds kept saying our country and what we can do to win the war for democracy (AW, pp. 330-332). His meetings often served a double purpose: protest and talent. A folder used by Bronze from the Schomburg Collection contains a publicity release of the lectures used by Johnson on his Lecture Circuit for the NAACP.

1. The Race Problem and World Peace
2. The Negro's Contribution to American Civilization
3. Negro Poets and Their Poetry
4. The Creative Genius of the Negro
5. The Negro as a Factor in Politics
6. The Negro and the Test of Democracy in America
7. The Fight Against Lynching
8. Haiti

Many times after Johnson made a speech on the work of the Association to organize or to add to membership, he witnessed a local talent show. He preferred the spirited singing by the audience to the solos by individual artist because good music helped the meeting (AW, p. 331). He had various experiences in such meetings; some were "thrilling," others pathetic and still others humorous.

As Field Secretary, Johnson extended the radius of his mind and his NAACP activities. Working under Mr. Shillady the Secretary, he became familiar with a procedure that would serve him well later as an anthologist and collector of Spirituals. The Secretary's ability as a systematizer became apparent when he worked with the touchy subject of lynching.

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30Bronze, p. 31.
Mr. Shillady sent a group of research workers to the Library of Congress for material which culminated in *Thirty Years of Lynching*. He learned to respect the process of research to disprove racial accusations (AW, p. 325). In 1919, he made speeches in Carnegie Hall in January and in the spring. He also made a tour of the Pacific coast from San Diego to Seattle but the trip was mostly uneventful (AW, p. 339). The trip to Haiti, 1920, was more eventful. The pilgrimage to the black republic inspired an interest which stimulated similar ardor in others in the United States who had forgotten about the rich historical past of the Carribean republic.

A general view of why the Carribean world is of interest from the racial angle is summarized in an editorial foreword *Negro in The Carribean* by Locke. Any study of the Carribean

will furnish a closer and sounder bond of understanding between the Negro-American and his brother West Indian, known all too limitedly as a migrant rather than with regard to his home background or with reference to our common racial history and problems.31

From the national angle shared too by the black minority

it may also be expected to contribute to a more realistic inter-American understanding and to suggest ways of helpful economic, political and cultural collaboration.32

From Johnson's visit to Haiti, came political results in America. In Haiti, he got a personal glimpse into its social life.

The United States seised Haiti, which had been an independent nation, to protect American lives and American interests and to establish and

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32Ibid.
maintain interval order. The American forces seized the power and made themselves the government. Some Haitians, thinking themselves patriots as the American revolutionists, took up arms against America and were branded as bandits. Many of them were deluded over the results so Haiti was in a state of unrest. Theodore Roosevelt discussed the situation with Johnson and signed a letter for him to go to the republic. Johnson read all that he could find on Haiti before taking the trip but he was surprised by the beauty of high range mountains and the city of Port-au-Prince, which is situated in one of the most beautiful bays in the world. All the Haitians that Johnson talked with complained bitterly about conditions because they had learned that he was a member of the National Advisory Committee for the approaching presidential campaign (AW, pp. 345-348). He used the data that he had gathered in Haiti and wrote a series of four articles for The Nation, single articles for other publications and a lecture Self-Determining Haiti. A talk with Senator Harding convinced him that the data was good for campaign material. Mr. Harding did make the Haitian matter a campaign issue that struck Washington, in Johnson's estimation, like a bombshell (AW, pp. 358-359).

M. Sylvain was the first Haitian to ask Johnson what they could do to help themselves. Johnson suggested that they set up some machinery by which the republic could take united action. He gave Sylvain a full explanation of the Central purpose and working methods of the NAACP and urged him to establish a similar organization in Haiti. They could have headquarters in Port-au-Prince and branches in other cities and towns. He followed Johnson's suggestion and called a mass meeting. At the meeting in the theater at Port-au-Prince, the Union Patriotique was organized (AW, p. 348). M. Sylvain did not live to see or witness the victory
over American domination in 1934, after which the Union Patriotique was dissolved.

Johnson observed the social life in Haiti on the upper and lower levels. He visited some of the beautiful villas on the heights above Port-au-Prince, the leading men's club, Circle Bellvue, and the closing exercises of the Normal School where the girls enacted one of Moliere's plays with finesse. A charity ball given at the French legation forced him to conclude that no group of black people in any city of the United States could match the wealth and culture of the Haitians. He was not satisfied until he also visited some of the native huts. Again, in comparison with the poor in the United States, he found none of the filth and squalor that was common around the log cabins in the South. Most of the huts were tinted blue, pink, or yellow if they were not whitewashed (AW, p. 350).

No doubt Johnson's memory of his ancestor Hester Argo, the native Haitian woman, led him to search out the welfare of the masses. The peasants were kindhearted, hospitable and polite. They were ignorant of many things but not stupid. They were quickwitted, imaginative and adept with their native idiom though absolutely illiterate (AW, pp. 350-354). He gives a graphic description of the native women:

The country women were magnificent as they filed along the roads by scores and by hundreds, taking farm and garden products to the town markets. Their baskets balanced on their colored-turbaned heads, the large gold loops in ears pendulating to their steps, they strode along lithe and straight, almost haughtily, carrying themselves like so many Queens of Sheba (AW, p. 350).

Stopping in a village where the peasants were celebrating a feast day, he saw a native dance. They danced in a ring to the music of drums of various sizes and pitch. They went around in a ring on shuffling feet,
with one heel stamping out the rhythm of a monotonous chant. The ring
shout was identical to the one used in Aunt Elsie's church in Jacksonville,
but also by the natives in the African Village in Nassau visited when he
was five years old (AW, p. 350). Now he could interpret the message of
the drums.

Johnson did not take a part in the plans which sought to unite blacks
as DuBois' Pan-African Congress and Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improve-
ment Association, but in position as chief spokesman and chief organizer
for the black masses, he left a legacy of black pride. Having been victim-
mized by politics and race prejudice himself, he became a "sure leader"
against the opposing forces which subdued him. Through his efforts as an
editor for the Age and Field Secretary of the NAACP, he became the leader
of the masses. In 1920, on returning from Haiti, he was elected as the
first black Executive Secretary of the National Association and served
until he was appointed to the Adam K. Spence Chair of Creative Literature
at Fisk University, 1931 (AW, pp. 358-407). The honor was not granted for
his work as a spokesman for justice but as a creative artist. Behind the
scene, from 1914-1921, Johnson was laying a firm foundation for a new world
of black literature.
CHAPTER X

"THE CREATION": IN TOUCH WITH "THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK"

1915-1921

Whether a creative artist is his own best judge is questionable. Frequently James Weldon Johnson spoke of the vast difference between his desire to write and the limited number of works that came from his pen. By 1933, when he published his formal autobiography, he was aware that he had played a part in creating the literary Harlem of the twenties, but he considered his literary efforts as "mere excursions" from his main activity, working for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (AW, p. 382). Kelly Miller, one of Johnson's contemporaries, praised him as the "Negro Poet Laureate" in an Age editorial a few weeks after his fatal accident. He felt that Johnson made a brief intrusion into the field of politics whereas Johnson felt that from 1916-1930 — the time spent as organizer and spokesman for the NAACP — he made an intrusion in the literary world.

The time factor in terms of clock hours may render Johnson's decision valid. Hardly if ever does a value judgment on the production of literature stem from such a criterion. Fortunately, the literary excursions took him down the same roads that he traveled as agitator and spokesman. Only, on his passes as a bard, he traveled the elevated train.

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In his poetry, as in the novel, especially the race poetry, there is the inspirtating of reality, a higher rendition of the thing itself that he had experienced in life.

Miller considered the years which Johnson devoted to the leadership of the militant organization as an interlude, a strange interlude, between the earlier and later stages of his career. Though he served in the organization with tact, courage, intelligence and resourcefulness, he never gave himself with full abandon to the struggle as DuBois and Walter White. What Miller failed to realize was that Johnson's sense of complete identification with the Black Cause after leaving Corinto made him a part of "the great unity where man was still an integral part of an encompassing organism."\(^2\) Once that experience was sublimated, Johnson carried out his aim to use black folk art as a basis for the superstructure of a conscious art which had universal as well as folk appeal. That organism was the Black Collective Soul.

The purpose of this chapter is to show how Johnson traveled several roads at the same time (1915-1921) before he reached his destination — establishing an imitable principle for the production of Afro-American verse. Some points of clarification concerning values relating to the race and race literature will be discussed to underscore ideas that mark him as a precursor to the Harlem Renaissance. Some attention will be given to three "prestige pieces" that he produced other than poems to help the Black Cause. But the dated poems 1915-1918 demand attention because they demonstrate Johnson's growing racial consciousness as it

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expressed itself in verse. He moved from the art-race poem, "The White Witch," 1915; to the free verse race poem "Brothers," 1916; and finally to the black folk art poem, "The Creation," 1918. After "The Creation," the most important work conceived in the time span considered in this work was *The Book of American Negro Poetry*. The volume will not be discussed but used as a terminal work because the critical introduction on the black man's genius codified his experience in writing the "Creation."

He selects poems with the idiomatic spirit to a greater or lesser degree in the *Book of American Negro Poetry*, from the Colonial Period to the early years of the Harlem Renaissance, thus, extending the radius of Black American poetry.

Back in 1891, Johnson announced his purpose to serve the black masses; because of some of the common experiences of all Blacks, he ceased to look upon the folk with sympathetic objectivity. His recognition that he was one with them at that time was a sensing of the idea more than a knowing in all its manifestations. He finally knew what it was to be denied in 1913, when he failed to have his appointment confirmed to the Azores. Yet, he had been so intent on being a good American that he lost track of his goal; for a while, he could not center his attention on what was really needed to hasten race uplift.

A comparison between the "Negro" and the Jew in an *Age* article, February 2, 1918, p. 4, indicates that Johnson understood more clearly how a race improves its status. He admired the Jews for their race pride and discovered their secret. They had developed an array of men who helped to shape the thought of the world; therefore, at any time an equality could be demonstrated without question. He knew then that Black America could only erase its stigma of inferiority by producing
exceptional men. He proclaimed in certain terms that no other way would do. "No amount of mere mediocre progress or even phenomenal progress on the part of the mass can do it; there must stand out many peaks towering above the average level. Everytime a Negro does something exceptional he weakens opinion as to the inferiority of the race" (P. 4). He, of course, renewed his effort to be exceptional.

His views also shifted about race literature. As late as 1918, he complained that blacks had done a very little in literature. They had written a great number of pamphlets and books but the great majority of them had been written for the direct purpose of proving the equality of the black man. "Now the truth is," writes Johnson "that one piece of pure literature is worth one hundred or one thousand pieces of that sort of writing. . . . One thin volume of poetry by Paul Dunbar goes farther to probe the intellectual equality of the black man than nine-tenths of all the controversial literature written by American Negroes in the previous seventy-five years" (Age, Sept. 7, 1918, p. 4). Furthermore, "if in the next fifty years we produce one universally acknowledged poet . . . the world would then have the type of proof owned by the Jews." Exceptional men and talented artists were the chosen ones to lift the masses. He was one with the masses, but one also above the masses.

The three "prestige" pieces examined here did much to put Johnson himself in the limelight; his contributions, of course, helped to create a climate of opinion amenable to the view that Blacks could contribute something to America's cultural advancement other than that of basic

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3Age, 7 Sept. 1918, p. 4.
4Age, 2 Feb. 1918, p. 4.
manual or domestic labor. One such chance came when he was asked to translate the libretto for *Goyescas* the Spanish grand opera produced at the Metropolitan Opera House in 1915. Johnson admitted that he experienced a new sensation on seeing his name and work in the program of the Metropolitan (*AW*, p. 304). Another prestige piece was the prize editorial "Why Hughes Should Be Elected," 1917. During the presidential campaign, *The Philadelphia Ledger* offered two thousand dollars for editorials on Wilson and Hughes. Johnson received the third prize for his Hughes editorial. The last work is a paper entitled "Contributions of the Negro to American Culture" presented at the Intercollegiate Socialist Society held in Belleport, Long Island, 1917 (*AW*, p. 325). He took a turn in this paper which indicated the approach he would use as a poetry anthropologist, collector of the Spirituals, and writer of literary criticism. Instead of talking about the social conditions of the Afro-American, he talked about his contributions to American culture.

The idea of the Afro-American's being "a generous contribution to the common cultural store and a vital force in the formation of American civilization was a new approach to the race question" (*AW*, p. 326). In 1917, the idea was new enough to invite attack. He spoke of his folk art creation, his folklore, collected by Joel Chandler Harris in *Uncle Remus*; his dances, and his sacred and secular music, as the only distinctive American artistic products. Herbert J. Seligmann reporting the conference for the *New York Evening Post*, made a summary of the manuscript for his newspaper; some paragraphs were taken from it and circulated around the world. Excerpts appeared in American and European periodicals. Clippings were mailed from as far away as South Africa and Australia (*AW*, p. 327). These prestige pieces follow the same pattern, extending
to the lecture "Self-Determining Haiti," and other single articles written on his visit to the republic, as the poems of this period.

At first he worked in an art medium which was not explicitly related to race: the libretto and "The White Witch." The ledger article and "Brothers" fall in the arena of propaganda issued for the benefit of the race. The article on the Afro-American’s contributions to America fall with his volume Fifty Years, 1917, and the "Creation." The prose pieces on Haiti gave the grand revelations of Christophe’s majestic rule as visible evidence of black power in the Western world. His trip started a trek to the black republic, and renewed interest in not only Christophe’s citadel but the whole life of the place. The anthology of verse and the Spirituals would inspire Blacks by taking them back to their cultural moorings — the early poetry of the conscious artists on the first frontier of black culture in America, and to the song-poems of the "black and unknown bards of long ago."

"The White Witch" is an art-race poem, ten stanzas, in length, which employs the trochaic tetrameter line (six in each stanzas) and a peculiar rhyme scheme. The first, third, and fifth lines in stanza one are a, c, a, in the other stanzas, a, e, and d. The second, fourth and sixth lines end in "b" rhymes.

The "White Witch," on one level, is a didactic poem. The theme, retribution for willful sinning, is stated plainly in an Age editorial entitled "The Wages of Sin." Johnson says that "the moral law works gradually, but its results are as inevitable as physical or chemical laws." Kelly Miller declares that Johnson reaches the peak of his poetic

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5 *Fifty Years*, pp. 19-21.
6 *Age*, 27 Jan. 1916, p. 4.
genius in this poem because of the strong didactic leanings. He admonishes Harlemites of the danger pit of their besetting sin.  

The poem begins with the apostrophe: "O, brothers mine, take care! take care!" The speaker warns his brothers to take flight because physical prowess is no defense against this night traveler who lures her potential victims with a pleasant smile. The unwary might be easily deceived because the witch is not in the image of the nursery rhyme "ancient hag with snaggled tooth." She is a young woman who possesses all the charms of youth. He shows his indebtedness to Petrarchan conventions in poetry as he describes the lady with ruby lips, lily white face, blue eyes and golden hair who "moves with subtle grace and air," though she is "numbered by centuries." Her demeanor is pleasing, but she is as vicious as a panther and destructive as a vampire. The speaker confesses that he is so well acquainted with this lady because once he submitted to her charms. After submitting to her wiles, he felt the loss of strength from his soul. Back to his admonition, the speaker tells his brothers that they are marked as prey for the white witch. She has detected "the great dynamic beat of primal passion in them and the last purity, "the last besieged retreat/of love resistless, lusty, fierce." The alarm sounded in the first stanza is repeated in the final stanza.

O younger brothers mine, beware!
Look not upon her beauty bright;
For in her glance there is a snare,
And in her smile there is a blight.

By 1919, Johnson was over the didactic fervor. In "Views and Reviews" he praised the poems in From the Desert by John Wesley Holoway for the music, swing, and humor in them, but said that it was not real poetry. He

7Kelly Miller, Age, 9 July 1938, p. 4.
advised the poet to leave the devotional, moral and religious subjects to the writer of the hymn books.  

On another level, "The White Witch" is an allegory. The witch personifies the white heat of passion. Already Poe had used white as a symbol of evil in the *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. And Melville used the whiteness of the whale's belly to symbolize evil in *Moby Dick*. The inference in Johnson's poem is that of an elusive evil, one not so easily reckoned with — reminiscent also in the stories by Poe and Melville, that gain in the evasive quality, however, because they are sea stories. Harlem is symbolized as a modern Babylon drawn also in several novels of the Renaissance period as *Nigger Heaven* by Carl Van Vechten and *Home to Harlem* by Claude McKay. There are also echoes of the biblical version of the women of Babylon as well as the myth of the Furies in *Homer's Odyssey*, and Keat's "vampire" depicted in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci."

The language of the poem is formal and stilted, but the situation bears relationship to the first value on the normative scale set up in Chapter VII. The poem alludes to situations that Johnson was familiar with in Black Bohemia; therefore, it is grounded in a real life experience. He realized, that promiscuity might stand as another destructive force to black existence. Redding indicates that from 1926-1935, "Harlem became a sort of disease in the American organism" though this was not the only fault in the life of the Black Capital. While Johnson does not use the term black brothers, it is true that "literature does not have to be about Negroes to give us insight into our own predicament." Speaking

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9Redding, *To Make a Poet Black*, p. 119.
about the musicians of the "Jazz Age," Ellison points out that the
musicians possessed excellent artistic skills, but rejected the values of
respectable society. He writes: "they replaced the abstract and much
betrayed ideals of that society with the more physical values of eating,
drinking, copulating, loyalty to friends, and dedication to the discipline
and values of this art."\(^\text{10}\) Since one's experiences informs his writing,
it is Johnson's familiarity with the situation that informs the poem.

"The White Witch" was published in The Crisis, 1915. That year
Booker T. Washington died; and the Tuskegee Idea witnessed diminishing
influence. The next year, 1916, Johnson joined forces with the militant
intellectuals who took American democracy to task about the plight of the
Afro-American. In the poem "Brothers," he was able to use material which
would have been regarded as too unpoetic for verse or too explosive at an
earlier time. "Brothers," Adelman sees, as the best example of the new
militant spirit. At the time of its publication, it was the most vigorous
poem yet heard from any black poet (p. 139). "The freedom and power
evident in his editorials could also be seen in his poetry. Besides his
own maturity, the spirit of the times was more conducive to militance.
People were using the term 'New Negro' whose spirit was best represented
by DuBois. This new feeling had not yet reached Negro art but Johnson was
to lead the way" (p. 139).

Actually Johnson had already given strong evidence of his militant
stand on the race question in the set pieces of the Autobiography. Some
of the passages are in "winged prose" which seem close to the free verse
of "Brothers." An example of this prose which has the emotional intensity

\(^{10}\) Ellison, "A Very Stern Discipline," 93.
of poetry comes from the last set piece of the series in *The Autobiography*. It is the hero's response to the smoking car argument on the race question. He makes a comparison between the hypothesis assumed for its solution and the problem of the solar system:

> By a complex confusing, and almost contradictory mathematical process, by use of zigzags instead of straight lines, the earth can be proved to be the center of things celestial . . . So when the white race assumes as a hypothesis that it is the main object of creation and that all things else are merely subsidiary to its well-being, sophism, subterfuge, perversion of conscience, arrogance, injustice, oppression, cruelty, sacrifice of human blood are all required to maintain the position, and its dealings with other races become indeed a problem, a problem which, if based on a hypothesis of common humanity, could be solved by the simple rules of justice (EXCM, pp. 166-167).

The hard hitting sentiments above are almost as forceful as those from the poem "Brothers," spoken by the victim:

> Lessons in degradation, taught and learned,  
The memories of cruel sights and deeds,  
The pent-up bitterness, the unspent hate  
Filtered through fifteen generations have  
Sprung up and found me sporadic life . . .  
In me the down-crushed spirit, the hurled-back prayers  
Of wretches now long dead, — their dire bequests (*Fifty Years*, p. 15).

The prose passage from the 1912 book indicates that Johnson was not far from making a transition to free verse. "Verse and poetry are not synonymous," says Guerard; "there is a winged prose and a pedestrian verse" (p. 236). In conclusion, Auslander says, that "whenever human discourse becomes excited and burns, it can, of its own accord, rise to the heights of poetry and put on exaltation like wings" (275).

The conjecture here is that along with other reasons, Johnson turned to racial themes with confidence after having an interview with H. L. Mencken, (1915) one of the editors of the *Smart Set*. He said that Mencken
had made a sharper impression on him than any other American then writing so he wanted to know him. Mencken gave him audience on request and talked about literature, about black literature, the "Negro Problem," and "Negro Music" (AW, p. 305). Of most value to Johnson was Mencken's "Blue Print for Negro Writing":

He declared that Negro writers in writing about their own race made a mistake when they indulged in pleas for justice and mercy, when they prayed indulgence for short comings, when they based their protest against treatment on the Christian or moral or ethical code, when they argued to prove that they were as good as anybody else 'what they should do,' he said, 'is to single out the strong points of the race and emphasize them over and over and over; asserting at least on these points, that they are better than anybody else' (AW, p. 305).

Johnson called his attention to the purpose he set out to accomplish in the Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man which was in accord with what Mencken was saying then (AW, p. 305). When he left Mencken he felt "buoyed up, exhilarated, . . . as though [he] had taken a mental cocktail" (AW, p. 306). He did not take Mencken's parting advice in its entirety for Mencken told him to center his efforts on prose (AW, p. 306). He wrote prose, but he continued to write poetry until near the end of his life.

"Brothers — American Drama, 1916 is characterized by dignified, angry protest"; the dialogue is between the mob and the victim speaker. The mob demands the speaker to identify himself by answering their ambiguous question as to whether he was the scorned and the cherished creature known for three centuries in America. The victim speaker gives the ambiguous answer: "I am, and am not." The question is repeated by

11 *Saint Peter*, pp. 27-29.
12 *Bronze*, p. 16.
the mob and the victim answers saying that he is "the resultant, the inevitable end/ of evil forces and the powers of wrong." The mob concludes that such a "monstrous offspring" should die. They make preparations to burn the victim, which is described in a macabre scene, and each man returns home with a "souvenir." The members of the mob start on the way home, though with a question in their minds about the victim's question: "Brothers in spirit, brothers in deed are we?"

The "drama" Brothers is toned down because the basic conflict between the opposers is muted. Basically there is an exchange of words rather than the presentation of incidents. The speakers are representatives of opposing ideas, not typical persons with desirable human traits. The victim has been dehumanized because of his manner of existence "between two fires" and the mob is dehumanized by their destruction of the victim. The poem does mark Johnson's descent to the mundane level. He had set "a high standard for his fellow contributors . . . to the Century Magazine" as Redding observed, "but given the whole web of circumstances, empirical, historic, psychological, it was impossible to go on forever denying racehood. Functioning simply as human beings, Negroes were of necessity horned back upon themselves for a satisfactory social and cultural life."\(^{13}\) This poem, a plea for brotherhood in America relates to the first value on the normative scale, astounding reality.

As poetry, the poem "Brothers" exemplifies the definition written by T. S. Eliot — an opposing view to Wordsworth's claim that the poet recollects emotions in tranquility. Eliot says that "poetry is not

\(^{13}\)Redding, *They Came in Chains*, p. 208.
the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things."14

The year after "Brothers" was written, 1917, Johnson collected published and unpublished poems for the volume Fifty Years and Other Poems (AW, p. 326). The volume consists of nine pioneering poems, forty lyrics in the English tradition, and the "Jingle and Croons" section consisting of sixteen dialect poems. Johnson was living in Harlem when the volume was published, but having been born a Southerner, he is honored as a writer of the Southern Renaissance. The quest for identity, more than any other single factor seems to be responsible for something that might be a Southern Renaissance. Writers sought to tell who they were and what they had been; they sought to present the inherent tragedies and comedies of the region. 15

The Southern Renaissance began as a self-conscious movement immediately after World War I with the establishment of literary magazines and societies conceived to encourage the development of new writers because the South had not participated in the poetic revival of the previous decade. 16 Bradberry includes Johnson in his study, saying: "Finally, James Weldon Johnson from Florida became the first published

Negro poet of the Southern Renaissance with his *Fifty Years and Other Poems* (1917). It was ten years, however, before he discovered his true effectiveness in a series of richly imaginative folk sermons" (p. 27). Johnson is named along with other lesser luminaries as Maxwell Bodenheim, William Alexander, Percy Oliver Dargan, Clement Wood, Karle Bake, who had anticipated the Renaissance proper with wartime volumes (p. 23).

How Johnson figures in the Southern Renaissance, though he was technically a New Yorker, is not strange. He was living in Harlem, but Jacksonville was still considered as home until his mother's final illness, 1918 (AW, p. 338). World War I affected the stereotyped concept of the Afro-American's place in all of its ramifications. While in Jacksonville during the World War I era, Johnson watched a group of Blacks who had been recruited wholesale by a labor agent on their way to the train station. "For hours they passed carrying flimsy suitcases, new and shiny, rusty old ones, bursting at the seams, boxes and bundles and impediments of all sorts, including banjos, guitars, birds in cages and what not. . . . The first great wave of the great exodus of Negroes from the South was on."17 Naturally, the majority of these people went to Harlem. In the North, no less than in the South, the Afro-American was still at the hub of sociological attention. Too, as Field Secretary for the NAACP, Johnson continued to have wide contact with the masses. Even in South America he was not able to shun the race problem which had faced him head on during the Georgia period. Thus basic black experiences are telling in *The Fifty Year* volume which appeared during the period of migration. The dialect of "Jingles and

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Croons" relate directly to the plantation tradition. Critical views by Robert Kerlin and Brander Matthews on the volume of poetry form the basic criteria of evaluation for the volume as a whole in this discussion.

The dialect poems in the section of the volume entitled "Jingles and Croons" receive high praise from Robert Kerlin. To quote him: "Among these pieces so disparagingly designated, are to be found some of the best dialect writing in the whole range of Negro literature. Every quality of excellence is there. The one piece I give is perhaps not above the average of a score in his book." He selected as a sampling, "My Lady's Lips Am Like De Honey," (A Negro Love Song). Only four lines of the refrain will illustrate the qualities of the verse:

Oh, ma lady's lips am like de honey,
Ma lady's lips am like de rose;
An' I'm jes like de little bee a-buzzin' 'Round de flower who' de nectah grows.

"A Plantation Bacchanal" is reminiscent of Dunbar's "The Party" but the reveler is a loner like A. E. Robinson's Mr. Flood. Johnson includes most of the traditional topics as "Dat Gal O' Mine," "Possom Song," "De Little Pickaninny's Gone to Sleep" and "A Banjo Song." The merits of the medium that Kerlin attributes to J. Mord Allen, whom he ranks with Dunbar, may be considered as the qualities of excellence which he failed to name in his praise of "Jingles and Croons." The characteristics he praised are, the great felicity of characterization, the surprising turns of wit, and the quaint philosophy (Kerlin, p. 48).

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18 Robert Kerlin, p. 226.
19 Fifty Years, pp. 64-65.
20 Ibid., p. 64.
21 Ibid., pp. 71-72.
As a lyricist, Kerlin classified Johnson as a "fair singer." Two poems selected from this group for special attention are "The Young Warrior"\textsuperscript{22} and "The Glory of the Day Was in Her Face."\textsuperscript{23} This is the last stanza of "The Young Warrior," which should demonstrate the qualities lauded by Kerlin:

\begin{quote}
Pray mother of mine, that I always keep
My heart and purpose strong,
My sword unsullied and ready to leap
Unsheathed against the wrong.\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

The virtues are the easy flow of the verse, the ready rhyme, and "that supreme quality of good lyric poetry, austere simplicity."\textsuperscript{25} The lyric, set to music by Harry T. Burleigh, was sung throughout the course of World War I by Pasquale Amato, of the Metropolitan Opera, with tremendous effect; and the Italian version was popular in Italy.\textsuperscript{26} "The Glory of the Day Was in Her Face" is noted for its pure lyric beauty and pathos. Kerlin marked both of these qualities as Wordsworthian, but hastens to say that there is no hint of imitation. "The stanzas of the poem may be set without disadvantage to them by the side of any in our literature," Kerlin concludes (p. 93).

Kerlin singles out "To America"\textsuperscript{27} for the challenge spoken by the poet for the inarticulate millions as well as the cultured few (p. 53).

\textsuperscript{22}Ibid., p. 23.
\textsuperscript{23}Ibid., p. 24.
\textsuperscript{24}Ibid., p. 25.
\textsuperscript{25}Kerlin, pp. 93-94.
\textsuperscript{27}Fifty Years, p. 5.
The poem is in the form of a query, the first stanza reads:

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? (Fifty Years, p. 5).

The critic places "Fifty Years" in the group of poems which stand as a challenge to the world. He reviewed Brander Matthew's criticism of the poem with concurring opinions about its vigorous workmanship, its elevated imagination, and the sincerity of its emotion (Kerlin, p. 90).

Brander Matthews divides black lyric poetry into two classes, the one with sentiments common to all mankind, and another class with a racial quality. This second group contains the dialect verses which re-captured the "color" and "flavor" and movement of life in the quarters, the cotton field and the canebrake. Johnson, he pointed out, conformed to both of the traditions. The poems in the first tradition are "delicate in workmanship, fragrant with sentiment, and phrased in pure and unexceptionable English." The poems in the second tradition are "racy of the soil, pungent in flavor, swinging in rhythm and adroit in rhyme." Both of these traditions were fathered by artists of Anglo-Saxon ancestry. Beyond the two well worn traditions, Matthews noticed that Johnson came through with more powerful expression, more sincerity, more artistic truth. In about a half-dozen "larger and bolder poems, of a loftier strain," he shows himself a pioneer by expressing the higher aspirations of black men. Though original and expressing "black" sentiments, the title poem was judged as one of the noblest commemorative poems yet written by any American (Matthews, xiii and xiv).

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28 Brander Matthews, "Introduction" to Fifty Years (1917), xiii.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
Thus, by 1917, it was quite clear that Johnson was a pioneering black poet who had laid the foundation for a new tradition, an Afro-American tradition. The pioneering poems written by 1917 had all but the last property, a language — a black language, an idiom to savor the rich emotional coloring and the primordial rhythm of drum-feet.

His coming upon the experience in Kansas City which forged the final union of thought and form is analogous to the ceremony "Laying on of Hands" described by Alex Haley who found the Ken-tay clan in Africa, his ancestral group. The interpreter told the people that Alex Haley had come in search of his identity. The people became agitated when the narrator of the life of the clan told the people that Haley was descended from a son of that village:

All of a sudden, when it dawned on them, everybody was barefooted; their feet began to beat. They formed a circle, and the tempo in the circle began to accelerate. . . .
All of a sudden there were in the circle about a dozen ladies with their babies strapped across their backs. The first lady stopped just in front of [him] and thrust out her infant to [him], [he] grasped the baby.31

Perhaps a dozen babies were thrust at him in two minutes. He asked the interpreter what the ceremony was all about and he told Haley "you were participating in a ceremony called the laying on of hands, that through this flesh which is us we are you and you are us."32

The ceremony which brought Johnson in touch with the ancestral spirit, enabled him to combine poetry, religion and the magic of eloquence in "The Creation," a black folk sermon. The ceremony was an old-fashioned church service where a minister preached an instantaneous,

32 Ibid.
rambling sermon that began with the creation of the world and ended with Judgment Day, highlighting various spots as the trials and tribulations of the Hebrew children. Before the ceremony, Johnson had received the impulse to take the primitive stuff of the old-time "Negro" sermon and through art-governed expression, make it into poetry. He believed that the results would be similar to the work of a composer who makes use of a folk theme in writing a major composition. He believed that "the characteristic qualities as imagery, color, abandon, sonorous diction, syncopated rhythms, and native idioms could be preserved and, at the same time, the composition as a whole be enlarged beyond the circumference of mere race, and given universality" (AW, p. 335).

The minister exhibited anew the potentialities of the material that Johnson planned to use:

He was free, at ease, and the complete master of himself and his hearers. The congregation responded to him as a willow to winds. He strode the pulpit up and down, and brought into play the full gamut of a voice that excited my envy. He intoned, he moaned, he pleaded — he blared, he crashed, he thundered. . . . The congregation reached a state of ecstasy. . . . I was fascinated by this exhibition; moreover something primordial in me was stirred (AW, p. 336).

Before the preacher finished he took a slip of paper from his pocket and jotted down ideas for "The Creation" which was finished in several weeks and published in the Freeman (AW, p. 336).

As the congregation came to a state of ecstasy there was "a swift intuitive interchange of consciousness" (Cane, p. 191), between Johnson and the others, transporting him to another realm of being. The feeling reoccurred while he was doing research work for the introductory essay to the first book of Spirituals. He writes, "I was in touch with the
deepest revelation of the Negro's soul that has yet been made and I felt myself attuned to it" (AW, p. 337).

"The Creation" is a folk sermon in free verse paraphrasing the first chapter of Genesis. McGhee considers this type of sermon as a distinct genre. His idea is that "one significant quality which distinguishes this form and relates it to the folk tradition is the overwhelming sense of oral transmission evident in the repetitions, the rhythms, and the sounds. Like other forms of folk expression, the folk sermon offers its own peculiar devices and techniques which link it to the field of popular oratory of the time yet set it apart as a distinct genre." The sermon also has a definite pattern. First, a text from the scripture is given; second, the text is animated; third, the skeletal ideas are clothed with a narrative filled with details. The field of choice may be the present world, commonplace experiences mingled with historical action; or idiomatic expressions mingled with the language of the Bible.

The style of the folk sermon was molded by the practices of white and black circuit preachers. These preachers influenced others on the field or in settlements as reform lecturers, traveling ranconteurs, tellers of tall tales, lyceum entertainers, politicians, showmen, yarn spinners, wool gatherers, dreamers and visionaries. In turn, the preachers were influenced by the antics used by these men. Lincoln and Twain were bred in this tradition as well as Artemus Ward, Jennings Bryan, Simon Suggs.

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and many others.\footnote{Ibid., p. 228.}

It had been thirty years since Johnson had heard a folk sermon when he visited the church in Kansas City, 1918. But, in a vague way he sustained his youthful memories. These memories stemmed from the experiences he had at the Ebenezer revival meetings, his father's sermons, and the ring shouts in a Jacksonville neighborhood church. With an understanding of the Afro-American's peculiar enrichment of the national culture with his folk art and folk music, Embree also realized that these arts were arts for life's sake. Blacks infused the humblest living, folk art and fine arts with zest and rhythm, saving themselves ultimately from the standardized influence of industrialism and middle class conventions. In tribute to the Afro-Americans, Embree says that "only an adaptable and creative people could have shaped the new forms and new ideas to their solace or could have contributed the rich rhythms of the sermons and songs. They brought emotionalism that they had grown up with in Africa."\footnote{Ibid., pp. 190-191.}

In 1924 Francis C. Sumner, wrote an article on "The Nature of the Emotions." Evidently the public was just beginning to understand the importance of the emotional life in regard to the fate of the individual. Too frequently, during that time, "emotions" were connected with low intelligence, crime, prostitution, murder, theft and anti-social action. Scientific inquiries revealed that in the emotional life is found the key to religion, genius, fanaticism, thought, belief, vice, crime, morality and Bolshevism."\footnote{Francis C. Sumner, "The Nature of the Emotions," \textit{The Howard Review}, 1, Nos. 2-3 (1924), 194.} Eight years before, 1916, Johnson was sure
that emotionalism was a gift to the Afro-American. In his column "Views and Reviews" in The Age he wrote (Sept. 21), "we are by nature, an emotional people. It is easy for us to laugh, to weep, to sing, to dance. Emotionality is one of our racial gifts. It is the gift that is going to enable us some day to make a finer artistic contribution to American civilization than any other group in our population. But in order to do this, our emotions must be concentrated, not expanded. Steam floating around in the air is as powerless as a whiff of cigarette smoke but confined in a cylinder is a giant."

The last statement gives insight into the importance of Johnson's choice to immortalize the old black preacher. Many stories were written about him, but almost always something comic. Irwin Russell's preacher, depicted in "Christmas-Night in the Quarters," begs his "Mama" not to "jege" the Blacks too hard for "misdemeanors" done on Christmas Night. He prays for the time to excuse the sin because he wants to dance and frolic with the others. Dunbar's preacher in "The Party," Eldah Thompson, asks the blessing with one eye on the possum and held both of his feet to keep from dancing. But the old time preacher was more than a butt for jokes. In the annals of the Negro church and in Negro religious life from the beginning down to Martin Luther King, Jr., the black preacher spoke the "word" and by the power of his personality established a tradition in American culture (McGhee, 52). Johnson, in God's Trombones, wrote the word that was spoken; it was his way of confining the "steam," the eloquence and power of the old preacher's renditions in cylinders (Art-governed forms) — a prayer and seven sermons. The preacher, one of the folk attempted to express what the
masses of his race were feeling and thinking and wanted to hear. Just as the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, he attempted to make the masses articulate through their utterances (HM, p. 263). This is why "The Creation" conforms to the category called the black folk art poem. Even when the author is a man of learning, as Johnson, he seeks to render in common idiom the fundamental ethos of the folk tradition. "The Creation" was the first large effort in this direction. "Since Weldon Johnson's Creation," writes Locke, "race poetry does not mean dialect but a reflection of Negro experience true to its idiom of emotion and circumstance." In this way, the Afro-American poet, without a doubt, becomes an expression of his folk.

An examination of the language of "The Creation," not in terms of technical linguistic analysis, will reveal that Johnson was trying to convey the truth. He may not have been directly influenced by H. L. Mencken, but he was aware of what he was doing with the English language, 1918, the year of "The Creation." "Mencken," he discovered, "gets at truth because he is void of sentimental and mawkish morality which seems to be the curse of everyone who writes in the English language. In other words, he is free and therefore not afraid to write the truth. . . . Mencken pays no regards to traditions and conventions, as such; he has absolutely no respect for them merely on account of their age. . . . He is the cleverest writer in America today. . . . His English is a mental cocktail, an intellectual shock." Miller comments on the language used by Johnson's preacher as it provides intellectual shock: "the language conveys the same effect of extraordinary speech, cries and

39 Locke, Four Negro Poets, p. 6.
40 Age, 20 July 1918, p. 4.
whimpers and threats with fragments of spirituals or phrases from well-known folk sermons." He continues, "Climbing onto the platform the preacher sets about holding his audience spellbound by sheer force of speech, by a display of verbal fireworks." He bears the standard of "The True Speaker." And Johnson defines him as "a man with a message in his mind and in his heart, who stands before an audience and gives it to them logically and earnestly, he is always eloquent. And that is true eloquence, because it stirs his hearers' minds as well as their emotions." 

More specifically, the vernacular is mingled with wild metaphors, intemperate illusions and moral platitudes. There is also a mixture of idiomatic expressions with the language of the Bible. Johnson's use of metaphor is best illustrated in his depiction of "God."

"God" in "The Creation," is a hardy high-stepping, big-voiced, star-flinging folk hero with a touch as gentle as that of a black mammy and a soul as lonely as that of a runaway slave lost in a dense forest at night. He is John Henry who died with the hammer in his hand. He is a W. E. B. DuBois, a Garvey, a Toussaint, a Christophe, forging a black world for his own black people. He is a high stepper like Shiny, the Washington Doctor, the Broadway blacks including Johnson. He is the Kansas City preacher who slammed his Bible shut and stepped out from behind the pulpit to take his congregation on a "Heavenly March." He is Roland Hayes who "stepped out on the American stage in a blaze of glory,

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41 Miller, p. 326.
42 Ibid.
43 Age, 21 Sept. 1916, p. 4.
making his first appearance as soloist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and later with the Philharmonic. "God" is any Black who has become a "soloist" performing in "a blaze of glory." A black child who speaks his heart out trying to interpret "The Creation" for a local orator's prize, speaks convincingly if not well, because he knows Johnson's God who stepped out on space. In fact, he at the hour of rendition is standing on space aping this "God."

Language is employed in another way to bring in familiar gestures that allow the audience to "travel" with the preacher. For example, "the pine tree pointed his finger to the sky; "the oak spread out his arms," "the lakes cuddled down in the hollows of the ground," and "the rainbow... curled itself around his shoulder." Others are: "He spat out the seven seas"; "He batted his eyes" and "He clapped His Hands." These gestures are familiar to everyone and serve to gain attention.

Another means of having the audience to travel along with the preacher is the use of a single word or phrase to indicate the moment for another step forward in the narrative. Johnson uses the word "then." Maybe all people who relate bedtime stories use the word then; but in this writer's native home, Sumter, South Carolina, "then" was the most important word used by elders, later copied by the children, in moving a narrative. For example, a child relating a fight would say: "Then he came up to me," and "then he said to me," and "then I said to him," and "then I knocked him down," and "then I went home" ad infinitum. The first line of five out of twelve stanzas begins with "then": "Then God smiled," "Then God reached out and took the light in His Hands"; "Then

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44 Johnson, "Race Prejudice," 773.
the grass sprouted"; "Then God raised His arm and He waved His hand."
"Then God walked around," and "Then God sat down." The "then" points to a different turn in the narrative so that the listener can redirect his view or refocus his attention as the preacher "travels."

The eclipse of visual and kinetic images is another use of language employed by the preacher. The person is allowed to see and to sense motion at the same time. For example: "And God stepped out on space."
In essence, one sees God moving out on space. The sense of movement is heightened because space is not a solid platform but in the mind of the laymen, shifting silver, golden, or scarlet, maybe, black or blue clouds.
Some other examples are: "God rolled the light around in His hands"; "He set the sun ablazing in the heavens"; "God raised His arm"; "God could drop His hand"; "God sat down"; "God scooped the clay"; and "He blew the breath of life." In several of the phrases, one is also sure that he has heard what he has seen and sensed as movement.

Thus, the preacher could use language in a manner to appeal to the auditory imagination. In this respect, Weyl makes the following clinical report: "numerous tests have shown that the gap between white and the Negro I. Q. is greater in examinations requiring abstract reasoning and visualization than in those calling for information, language ability or rate memory. This and other material support Carother's hypothesis that the Negro mind is primarily auditory rather than visual."45 T. S. Eliot defines the term auditory imagination in a manner which bears relation to Carother's hypothesis:

What I call the 'auditory imagination' is the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the

conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end. It works through meanings, certainly, or without meanings in the ordinary sense, and fuses the old and obliterated and the trite, the current and the new and surprising, the most ancient and the most civilized mentality.  

For example, when God "gathered up the sun" and "flung it against the darkness" one is sure to hear the sound of thunder. When God's "footsteps" hallowed the valleys out and the mountains bulged up, one is sure to hear a scraping sound and then a popping one.

The last phrase, of course, is one of the audacious images in the poem. It can be compared to others in showing God as a man we know. His God is so familiar, that one fears that when God steps over to the edge of the world, he might falter. He does not fail, so we see him as a totally able fellow spitting out the seven seas, and toiling over a lump of clay to shape a being in his own image.

Lomax tells how the African poet Senghor's magically flowing lines evoke Africa out of its long silence by the use of rich imagery, but even more by setting verse to African rhythms that are reminiscent of the American blues. He tells how the Senegalese innovator experimented with streams of phonemes and complex systems of accents to evoke the feeling of dancing and the sound of drumming in his poetry (Lomax, pp. 128-129). Africa has been a continent preeminent in music, dance and song, thus the unities and continuities of African style are based of course, in its cultured patterns (Lomax, xxxii). The rhythmic pattern in "The Creation" is achieved by adopting the pattern of authentic speech of the Afro-American in certain phases of real life. This movement and rhythm can

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be detected in ordinary conversation. The following samples came from the Autobiography of An Ex-Coloured Man.

The hero, on observing lower class Afro-Americans in Atlanta, was nonplussed by their unkempt appearance, the shambling, slouching gait and loud talk and laughter which aroused a feeling of almost repulsion in him. Finally, he realized that the only thing about them that awoke a feeling of interest was their dialect in all of its fullness and freedom. He was particularly interested in the way they punctuated certain exclamatory phrases as "Lawd a Mussyl!" "G'wan, man!" "Bless ma soul!" "Look heah child!" (EXCM, p. 56). In "The Creation" the preacher uses the "Gwan," Man!" type of exclamation each time his God steps back in satisfaction on completing some part of the creation. He remarks each time, "That's Good!," like "Gwan Man!" meaning: "you have really accomplished something." The "Gwan, man!" can be used to convey the meaning: "don't bother me." The hero paused long enough to hear one man say to the other; "Wh'at's de mattah wid you an' yo' fr'en Sam?" and the other came back in a flash: "Ma fre'en? He ma fr'en? Man! I'd go to his funeral jes' de same as I'd go to a minstrel show" (EXCM, p. 56).

"And God stepped out on space,/ and he looked around and said" has the familiar ring of black conversation: "and I walked out the door, and saw this great big man, climbing up my neighbor's steps."

The prayers and sermons, talks to God, fall quickly into rhythm just as quickly as the talks to people. "Even if the words are jumbled," according to Embree, "as they sometimes are, the delivery of sermons and prayers/ is with the voice of a trombone; the swing and cadence remain and satisfy . . . words are rich with imagery and comfort." 47

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Johnson says that he chose the loose rhythmic instead of strict metrical form because it could accommodate itself to the movement, abandon the changes in tempo and the characteristic syncopations of the primitive material. The change in tempo can be marked easily by the alternate use of long and short lines though there are more technical means of marking the same. The following lines exemplify the pattern:

Up from the bed of the river
God scooped the clay;
And by the bank of the river
He kneeled Him down;
And there the great God Almighty
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,
Who rounded the earth in the middle of His hand;
This Great God,
Like a mammy bending over her baby,
Kneeled down in the dust
Toiling over a lump of clay
Till He shaped it in His own image;
Then into it He blew the breath of life,
And man became a living soul.

The short and long lines bear an analogy to the hill and valley motif of the changing circumstances of life in the Hebrew's world. In the folk sermon, then, we have an art of communion. As in the folk songs of religion, masses of Blacks found solace for their sufferings through the years, and experienced the ecstasy of worship as they felt a relief in spirit as they listened to the promise of the "Word."

Despite all his various engagements, Johnson began his work on the anthology of Black American poetry, 1921. Once he had found the secret spring of folk art, he searched to find the source stream for the conscious works of art to test their purity. He discovered that when the

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Afro-American spoke from the depth of his experience, whether it was from a "natural" or "trained" intuition, he spoke with power and understanding. His collection of poems for the Book of American Negro Poetry convinced him that there had been black poets in America from the colonial period to the beginning years of the Harlem Renaissance who had been touched by the "Black Holy Ghost." Despite his great Kansas City experience, had he not been able to "record" it, the contributions of the untutored poets might have drifted to oblivion. Had he not collected the poems of others who were "Negro" American poets, a black literary renaissance might have been delayed for many more years. But his personal performance, his theory of the performance, his offering of plentiful examples that concurred with the theory even if in a far off manner in some instances, offered the young writers of the Harlem Renaissance, a tradition replenished with black models.

At the beginning of the 1914-1921 period, Johnson wrote his prestige pieces to prove that he was an exemplar of the exceptional man. But as he continued to develop as a race leader, he began to discover that a written record of race progress was of ultimate importance. He answered his own question "When is a Race Great?"

The greatness of a race may be measured by the literature it has produced. . . . There is a psychological reason underlying it. A great literature is both the result and the cause of greatness in a people. Let me make that clearer: noble action gives birth to great literature, and great literature stimulates to noble actions. The explanation is simple; human actions are never disinterested, the door is always actuated by some motive. Noble action always entails hard work or sacrifice or heroism, and the door is sustained, if not actuated, by the hope of reward of some kind. The door of noble things regards no reward for his hard work or his sacrifice or his heroism as that of being held permanently in the memory of his fellows.
James Weldon Johnson helped to prove that he himself could "make" literature, that even the unknown bard and the old-fashioned preacher could make literature; but he was to encase the "gaseous substance" floating in the air in "cylinders" that symbolized power. Above all, he provided markers through the dense woods for unknowing bards to come who would need some customary way of saying "Black is Beautiful."
James Weldon Johnson's family contributed to his proper upbringing and his educational training. We are more concerned at this point however, with his role in the larger family the race, especially the resultant factors of his intellectual selfhood in literature as related to that family. It is necessary to stress his selfhood because Dunbar, his first model in poetry, was never capable of realizing until near the end of his life, "that the definitions handed him by American society were irrelevant to an evaluation of either his life or his art. Dunbar deals with Blacks in terms of buffoonery, idiocy and comedy."\(^1\) He like many black artists, sought an identity that did violence to his sense of self.\(^2\)

Blacks, today, "are rediscovering their heritage and their history and seeing it with newly focused eyes struck with the wonder of that strength which has enabled them to endure and in spirit, to defeat the power of prolonged and calculated oppression."\(^3\) As blacks rediscover their literary heritage, they find relevance in Johnson’s pioneering efforts to the present quest for a Black Aesthetic, "a corrective" (Alvin Aubert’s term) to Dunbar.

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3Ibid.
Don Lee, one of the new black poets, talks about the language of the sixties only to find that Johnson was aware of the same problem at the turn of the century. He writes:

The language of the new writers seems to move in one direction; that is to say that the poets of the sixties are actually defining and legitimising their own communicative medium. We see that the language as a whole is not formal on proper Anglo-Saxon English. It carries its own syntax, which is not conventional, and by Western standards could be referred to as non-communicative, obscene, or vulgar. . . . We find that this concentration on language is not unique to the black poets of the sixties, James Weldon Johnson in his American Negro Poetry, talks about two poets of another generation that were experimenters and innovators in language: 'Langston Hughes and Sterling A. Brown do use a dialect, but it is not dialect of the comic minstrel tradition; it is the common, racy, living, authentic speech of the Negro in certain phases of real life.'

Johnson's view on the proper language for black poetry was much sounder than that of William Dean Howells', who felt that Dunbar's dialect would be that "which would most distinguish him, now and hereafter." Johnson wrote in his sketch of Dunbar, 1931, that "much of the poetry on which Dunbar's fame rests has passed; just as much of the poetry of his even more popular contemporary, Riley, has passed. Dialect poetry still holds a place in American literature, but the place itself is no longer considered an important one. The qualities that gave it vogue — tenderness, sentimentality, homely humor, genial optimism — are the very qualities that now bring disparagement on it" (ANP, p. 51). Howell wrote his praise of dialect in 1896; Johnson rejected it as the proper language for black verse in 1900.

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4 Don L. Lee, "Toward a Definition: Black Poetry of the Sixties After Leroi Jones," in The Black Aesthetic, p. 239.
The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man, Johnson's only novel, is also being reconsidered for its timely statement on the problem of the Afro-American's dual heritage. Eugenia Collier says, that

Johnson has given us insight into the whole problem of dual heritage. Afro-Americans are neither Africans nor Americans and yet are both. We are torn as is the Narrator between two cultures with conflicting views. Being two, we are neither. In one dazzling moment, Johnson bares the essential problem of our identity. The Narrator relinquishes his black heritage in favor of the white because he is ashamed to belong to a race so oppressed. And, so he joins the oppressor. There is psychological truth here. A great many black people, light-skinned or not, accept white values; within them lurks the desire to be white. Johnson has laid bare this desire in the symbolic person of the Narrator. And in this revelation lies perhaps the greatest value of the book.

Furthermore, the novel has value as a precursor to the Harlem Renaissance with well established claims. It is an ancestor of current black literature. It is a fascinating psychological study. As a book in its own right, in literature as in life, it avoids the often romanticized or vilified treatment of the near-white "Negro." He fills in a necessary gap by treating his subject with realism and compassion. A "brilliant product of a brilliant mind," this novel is more amazing than it was when it appeared more than a half century ago.

The novelist is praised for his depiction of conscious reality; the poet, for his ability to bring a special brand of insight and courage to his people. There is a superior function, there, given to poetry. A current black poet, Ron Welburn, assigns the role of priest to the black poet. He says: "No poets in America serve in such a priestly capacity

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7Ibid., 365, 373.
as do black poets. Priests, musicians, deacons, chanters, poets — all bear the song and its power as their unfailing weapon. 

Richard A. Long's recent article, "A Weapon of My Song: The Poetry of James Weldon Johnson," ends with an examination of the poem entitled "Envoy" which contains the title phrase, "A Weapon of My Song." His explication makes it clear that Johnson was a poet who recognized the propriety of propaganda. In 1917, the line from "Envoy" reads: "to make a blasting trumpet of my song"; in 1935, the revised line reads: "to make a weapon of my song." Long makes the following comments about the change in the text of "Envoy":

The point is that Johnson's conception of the function of the poet, the black poet particularly, had evolved from the apologetic tradition, in which racial injustice if implored and in which an attempt to show the worthiness of blacks is made by showing their conformism, to a militant posture, in which the poet uses his talent as a weapon with concern only for beauty, truth and strength.

Thus, the function of poetry that Johnson honored in the past is the same function honored by black poets today.

The matter of form is another point of interest in the Black Aesthetic. Don Lee considers form as the starting point of the Black Aesthetic. He believes that "Black poets have discovered their uniqueness, their beauty, their tales, their history, and have diligently moved to enlighten their people and the world's people in an art form that's called poetry, but to them is another extension of 'black music.'"

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8Quoted by Don Lee in The Black Aesthetic, p. 240.
10Lee, p. 247.
discusses Johnson's use of folk rhythm and their musical bases in selected passages from God's Trombones. He says that Johnson "does not attempt a duplication of folk rhythms, but plays the rhythm contrapuntally against the remembered cadence of his folk source." For example, he finds the staccato pointing of call and response pattern of African origin in "The Prodigal Son," one of the seven sermons.

Aubert names Johnson as one of the sophisticated writers at the turn of the century who experienced a "burden of adjustment":

Sophisticated black writers of the turn of the century were in effect charged with the task of negotiating an adjustment between the 'folk' and the 'literary' in terms of their work. It was their obligation, in Ralph Ellison's words, 'to explore the full range of American humanity and to affirm those qualities which are of value.' These writers soon recognized the folk forms as prototypes of black art, an abundant source from which to infuse their lettered creations with the essential rhythm.

Johnson was able to make the adjustment, using the gospel and the jazz beat in his poetry. Johnson's practice continues in Langston Hughes, mainly through the use of what Hughes refers to as Negro Folk-song forms — spirituals, blues and jazz. The poetry of Hughes, in a somewhat more secular vein than Johnson, still remains "a model study of assimilation of folk art forms to the uses of sophisticated modes of expression."

Today, black literature is being produced in abundance wherever black men exist, especially poetry. Addison Gayle, Jr. expresses the

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12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 73.
15 Ibid., 75.
view that what is most needed now is a set of rules by which Black American literature and art is to be judged and evaluated. In his study of Johnson, the critic, Richard Carroll presents Johnson's four major statements in summary form. They indicate that the essential feature of his criticism is blackness.

(1) Black people have made significant contributions to American culture; (2) black writers, to achieve their best results, should treat black materials in their works; (3) black people possess a unique racial spirit which can best be represented in literature by black writers; and (4) black writers must develop new literary forms to express adequately this new racial spirit.

Johnson was instrumental in finding a norm, even in literary criticism, that was allied to the Black Experience. This self-seeking tendency led him to establish an Afrocentric tradition for Black American literature which constitute a golden legacy.

A final comment on Johnson's quest for an Afrocentric tradition for Black American literature might be entitled "The Key He Could Not Find." Looking backward, at the age of sixty, Johnson searched to discover the Key to his life and his career. He tried to isolate and trace to their origins the forces that had determined the direction followed. He gave up because so many forces had been at work until separating them became an impossible task. He could not unravel the myriad threads of influence that had drawn him to the right. He concluded that the life of every individual, no matter how simple, is far too complex for that type of analysis.

Undaunted by Johnson's conclusion, the writer of this discourse made an effort to cull out from the infinite sources, from within and

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without, which were at work constantly in his life. Many of the forces at work were almost too subtle and tangential to isolate, but they were acknowledged, when they were discovered and conjectures based upon them. From statements made as "What more can any of us do than struggle to cover the forces at work toward some desired focus?," the writer discovered that Johnson's way of life was Becoming. His existence was geared to a pattern of alienation and return which spelled progress or at least movement but never a finite destiny.

The idea of Becoming as his mode of existence finds sanction in the act of almost his last moment of life. At the time of his death he was Professor of Creative Writing at Fisk University, with the corresponding status at the University of New York. In this capacity he was often invited to appear before faculties and student bodies of the leading white universities of the South. The University of New York had just completed arrangements for him to serve as an extension professor when he came to the end. As an extension professor he was to deliver creditable lectures on Black literature at several educational centers. Had Johnson lived, the era of Black Studies would have come at the beginning of the forties rather than the sixties. On Johnson's death, Richard Wright appeared as the voice, of Black literature, and that voice heard in Uncle Tom's Children and Native Son was pitched to a higher key and geared to a lower depth of racial reality than Johnson could have interpreted. Johnson knew the destitute who had hope; Wright was to bring on the men who were destitute and without hope. Thus, Johnson's death marked the end of an era. Wright used the "art approach" to delineate facts, but how

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different were his facts.

In the swift transitions from the old to the new, Johnson was shifted from the center of attention. Even now, he is sometimes dismissed as a member of the establishment because of his having been a life-long member of the upper middle class. This is hardly true, for the statistical report on the advance of NAACP memberships during his administration as Field Secretary indicates that the old Atlanta spirit of race equality and human rights was realized regardless of his social status. A grand speaker for the Cause, he did not give over to just rhetoric; rather, he used every chance to advance the idea of the black man's worth in a fitful era when black men were just able to sustain the idea that they were human beings.

W. E. B. DuBois is given credit for having settled the issue as to whether or not the black man rated as a human being. On writing the *Souls of Black Folk*, 1903, he, like Samuel Johnson on Shakespeare's violation of the unities, settled the issue then and for all time: Black men are human Souls. The all prevailing emphasis in Black America now on Soul may have less noble overtones, but it is a part of the affirmation codified by DuBois, the Father of the Black Protest Movement in all of its subtle nuances. But it is to Johnson that credit is due for having built the premise, less blatant in its appeal, that the Black Man is a Creative Genius. He of course exemplified the truth of his statement by writing himself, but over and above his efforts, he drew attention to the majestic concepts of a Christophe, a Toussaint — the inner light of a human clod, the unlettered bard; to the black Moses, the old time black preacher of the dark ages of Afro-American life. Already, in the beginning years of the 1970's, Black Soul is giving way to Black Sense —
"Sense" meaning mind. Men of mind are rediscovering Johnson and beginning to give his works the attention that they once received, especially shortly before and during the Harlem Renaissance.

But while Johnson turned his attention to the worth of others, there were others who recognized his progress. In review, distinctive credit is attributed to him for several of his poems. First of all, "Sence You Went Away," the dialect poem in the Dunbar tradition, was praised by Mr. McBeath and published with his help. The song-poem "Lift Every Voice and Sing," written for school children in Jacksonville, Florida, was adopted as the Negro National Anthem by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The art song "The Young Warrior" was set to music by Harry T. Burleigh and later used by the Italians as a war song during World War I. "O Black and Unknown Bards" was praised highly by Mrs. Charlotte E. Taussig in an article for Opportunity. "The New Negro as Revealed in His Poetry." The poem is now anthologized in 3000 Years Of Black Poetry. "Fifty years," the commemorative ode on fifty years of Afro-American freedom, led William Stanley Braithwaite to proclaim that it ushered in a new generation of Black poetry. Kelley Miller, eulogizing Johnson as Black Poet Laureate of America, selected the "White Witch" as his most searching poem, since in a prophetic way it presaged the downfall of "Nigger Heaven" for the Harlem artists. Lynn Adelman selected "Brothers" as an exemplary poem because it registered the strongest protest that had been heard in black poetry by 1916. Finally, Alain Locke praised the "Creation," not only for its polyrhythmic cadences, but above all for its emotive, esthetic, and intuitive values.

18Opportunity, 5 (1927), 108-111.
The contributions take on added significance when one recalls that the Afro-Americans had not yet emerged as a true racial or cultural minority during these years of striving to 1918. Group status was not achieved until some years after World War I. (Frazier, pp. 679-680).

Johnson, himself, considered his literary output meager in comparison with all that he had planned to accomplish. In evaluating Johnson as a writer, one does well to consider what Kelley Miller said in his eulogy of Johnson: "James Weldon Johnson was not a poet per se or par excellence like Paul Laurence Dunbar. He might well be called a literary dilettante scribbling prose and verse as the mode or the occasion required. . . . or, as the spirit moved him or the opportunity presented itself." Yet, in what he did write, he was able to accomplish what no other Afro-American writer did not or could not do. First of all, he established standard English as a medium of expression for the black writer. Second, he insisted on using the black idiom though standard English served as a norm. Third, he was able in one novel to rescue black fiction from the image of a laughing, crying, single degraded "Tom" — substituting in its place, a multilinear image of black men in America and Europe. Fourth, in poetry, he experimented in both of the existing traditions founded by Caucasians — the English tradition and dialect tradition. Using both with new light from Whitman and a developing black ethos, he was able to found a tradition which had not existed before — conscious black art reared on the foundation of black folk art. There is in this tradition the wedding of craft and the folk gifts imminent and immanent in the African heritage.

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19 Miller, p. 4.
A writer moving from the universal to the provincial? From Western values to Black folk values? The why of it is apparent. Science has taught us the value of the frame. Peering through the microscope — or the telescope — man fixes his view, but at the same time he furthers that view.

On January 19, 1970 (p. 12A) the following article appeared in the State-Times, Baton Rouge, Louisiana under the headline:

SU (Southern University) 'Trumpets' Program Slated on February 11:

Southern University will present "Trumpets of the Lord," Vinnette Carroll's musical adaptation of James Weldon Johnson's "God's Trombones," at 8:30 p.m., Wednesday, Feb. 11. The production was first presented at the Circle in the Square Theater in 1963 and later was presented in England, France, and the Scandinavian countries. The setting is in a Negro church in the backwoods country. Three ministers gave sermons, based on the Old Testament themes and the sermons are enlivened by handclapping traditional Gospel songs. The poetry of Johnson, a leading researcher and collector of Negro Southern Folk songs and spirituals, forms the inspiration for the words and singing.

"The Creation," 1918, is the first poem written in God's Trombones. Thus, Johnson's search for personal and artistic values, which at the same time enhanced the black man's status in America during the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century, finds relevance in the 1970's, a period of renewed black pride.

Therefore, Johnson can rightly be named as a godfather of the present Black Revolution in literature and life, and as a precursor to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's. The value of his ultimate use of the Afrocentric tradition is echoed in Langston Hughes' dictum: "The more regional or national an art is in its origins, the more universal it may become in the end."
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VITA

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