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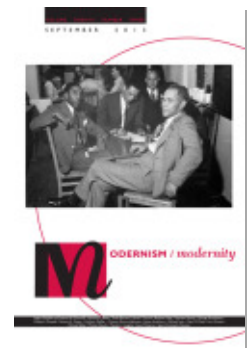
Race Literature, Modernism, and Normal Literature: James  
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Literary Renaissance, 1912–20

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## Race Literature, Modernism, and Normal Literature: James Weldon Johnson's Groundwork for an African American Literary Renaissance, 1912–20

Michael Nowlin

I'll recommend a book or two on form—etc.; however, you should not pay too much attention to *conventional* form; your forte is your unconventionality. Still, there *must be form*. There can be no real art without form. But form for you does not mean lines measured off into lengths of just so many feet in each, with an anticipated rhyme at the endings.

James Weldon Johnson to Anne Spencer

Among the congratulatory letters James Weldon Johnson received upon the New Year's Day publication in the *New York Times* of "Fifty Years" (1913), his poem commemorating the anniversary of emancipation, none so uncannily hit on the ambition underlying it than that of novelist Charles Chesnutt, who had been one of black America's great literary hopes a decade earlier.<sup>1</sup> In Johnson he saw a worthy successor, someone to whom he could pass on a torch he had put down in disappointment in 1905 before descending into relative obscurity:

It is the finest thing I have ever read on the subject, which is saying a good deal, and the finest thing I have seen from the pen of a colored writer for a long time—which is not saying quite so much.

If you can find themes which will equally inspire you, why may you not become the poet for which the race is waiting?<sup>2</sup>

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504 Johnson was working to become just that. He had also just published a work of fiction in the guise of an anonymous memoir, which might make him the race's breakthrough novelist as well. Johnson was on the verge of launching a major literary career for himself, one that aimed to make the parochial connotations of the phrase "colored writer" a thing of the past. And yet by the end of the decade, Johnson was far from being the national literary figure he had dreamed of becoming. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) and the volume *Fifty Years and Other Poems* (1917), both published by small, genteel Boston firms, garnered some respectable reviews but sold modestly and were soon out of print. And most early readers of the novel did not know Johnson to be its author. By the end of the decade, Johnson was best known for his political leadership in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

But Johnson had hardly abandoned his literary aspirations; they became subsumed, rather, under his worries about the collective literary situation of African Americans. Those worries can be summed up by Pascale Casanova's phrase "literary destitution," a condition Johnson described as forthrightly as anyone: "The American Negro has done very little so far in literature; that is, very little in pure literature," he wrote in 1918. "Colored writers have written a great many pamphlets and books," he acknowledged, "but the great majority of these writings have been entirely polemical. . . . [T]he truth is that one piece of pure literature is worth one hundred or one thousand pieces of that sort of writing."<sup>3</sup> It is precisely black America's situation of literary destitution at the outset of the 1920s that makes recent efforts to read the Harlem Renaissance through "modernist" critical lenses often strained, since the main architects of a specifically "modernist" literature took various literary legacies as well as the option of ostensibly refusing to tailor their work for public approbation and commercial success more or less for granted.<sup>4</sup> The Harlem Renaissance is thus more accurately understood as a movement on behalf of a "normal" African American literature, a term I appropriate from Franco Moretti in order to clarify what Johnson meant by "pure literature": that regularly produced literature recognized as such by its aesthetic intent, its fictionality, its entertainment (and edification) value, its commercial viability, its potentially "universal" appeal.<sup>5</sup> He looked to quantity as the best means of ensuring a general elevation of quality, whose ideal fruit would be a few African American writers "of the first magnitude" (on the internationally consecrated order, say, of Aeschylus and Shakespeare, Alexander Pushkin and Alexandre Dumas), whom Johnson assumed had yet to appear.<sup>6</sup> Johnson worked to help African American writers join, in effect, what we might think of as the literary mainstream that self-styled modernists with more literary wealth at their disposal by and large defined themselves in opposition to. But he led the more ambitious and successful of them in recognizing that being "modern," through a pluralistic affirmation of racial difference and/or mastery of contemporary techniques, offered the quickest route to the mainstream, a move that reveals the nearly inescapable impact of modernism on every corner of the world literary field.

My argument here focuses on two crucial moments of Johnson's literary career before the Harlem Renaissance. The first occurs in 1912–13, when Johnson, still serving with the United States consulate abroad, nourished the ambition of becoming the first

African American writer “of the first magnitude,” an ambition that speaks as much to his goal of being one of the race’s representative men as to a dream of transcending its parochial, oppressive circumstances (a dream indirectly and darkly explored in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*). The second is marked by Johnson’s turn in the latter half of the decade to the criticism, theory, and editorial work that made him instead, in the words of Countee Cullen, “the best of our critic creators.”<sup>7</sup> I suggest that Johnson’s own difficulty establishing himself as a major national poet in the teens was an important motive in his attempt to make the race more collectively competitive in literary matters. At stake were global perceptions of “intellectual parity” and the unspecified kinds of “status”—presumably social, political, and economic—these might win.<sup>8</sup>

### Letters from a Foreign Office: Johnson in 1912–13

James Weldon Johnson took for granted the extent to which the value of literature was determined by a hierarchical and hegemonic system of international relations. He acknowledged in his 1922 preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* that “the colored poet in the United States labors within limitations which he cannot easily pass over” and thus conceded the probability “that the first world-acknowledged Aframerican poet will come out of Latin America,” that indeed the colored Latin American poet’s ability to “voice the national spirit without any reservations” might even offset the “advantage . . . of writing in the world-conquering English language.”<sup>9</sup> Apart from the question of whether Johnson really believed this or meant it mainly to steer black Americans in a more culturally affirmative direction, the brief discussion of black Latin American poets in the preface recalls the crucial importance of Latin America for his own literary career. For it was precisely during his tenure as a diplomat abroad, first in Venezuela and then Nicaragua—home of *modernismo* founder Rubén Darío, whose “world influence on modern literature in the Spanish language” Johnson became aware of—that he seriously embraced a literary vocation, wrote or finished writing what he took to be his breakthrough works, and developed the evolutionary theory of African American expressive forms that could serve as the groundwork for an “Aframerican” literary renaissance.<sup>10</sup>

From Corinto in 1912 Johnson unabashedly revealed his ambition to be that “first world-acknowledged Aframerican poet” in a letter to his wife, Grace Nail Johnson. Fresh from penning “Fifty Years,” Johnson could conceal the nature of his literary aspirations no longer:

To-night I have finished 15 verses of the greatest race poem that has yet been written, and it made me feel like chatting with you about my work—it would be no posing to say, my art, for I know that I am a poet, and with the power to be the first great poet that the race has produced in America. I say this with a full recognition of Dunbar’s position. But Dunbar, though he was a master of his art, had great technic and a mastery of pathos, humor and delicacy, he lacked depth, comprehensive broadness, prophetic vision and consecrated seriousness; and so he falls short of being the first *great* poet of the race in America.

- 506 Such uncharacteristic boasting soon gives way to confessions of doubt. The first of these is commonplace: the romantic artist's fear that his dreams exceed his capacity to "visualize, to reduce [them] to coherent images, forms and words." The second is far more idiosyncratic, one he even feels he "ought not name":

But sometimes when I doubt myself I have a feeling that it might have been well if I had had a child, say 8 or 10 years ago . . . and perhaps in him would have flowered to perfection the dreams which in so many instances are to me only vague; and he would, perhaps, have been the first real great poet. Is that a queer idea?<sup>11</sup>

We find Johnson here at once elated by the prospect of being the "first" African American to achieve literary greatness, and consoling himself in advance for failure with the dream of *fathering* the first great poet. Both possibilities are predicated on the assumption that black America had not yet produced a literature worthy of the name, that Johnson's most successful precursors—Dunbar, most obviously, but also Chesnutt—were but harbingers of a better literary day to come.<sup>12</sup> And both stem from the question of how best to overcome the condition of literary destitution and produce that literature a people needs in order to be recognized as great. Was African American literature to be made through a competitive individualism that risked alienating the most successful black writers from the "people" they literarily represented?<sup>3</sup> Or would it come from fostering the kind of collective cultural conditions—not merely affirmative racial self-consciousness but an expansion and elevation of "normal" literary production—from which "great" racial artists might organically emerge?

Johnson's creative dilemma was superficially analogous to that of American modernism's expatriate trailblazers. We can see this by drawing an unlikely but striking comparison between Johnson's situation in 1912 and that of the young Ezra Pound, living in London, whose own invidious conception of "the serious artist" forced him to confront the problem of *American* literary destitution. "There is no man now living in America whose work is of the slightest interest to any serious artist," wrote the self-styled exile in the second essay in the "Patria Mia" series (1912):

Yet it is the glory of a nation to achieve art which can be exported without bringing dishonour on its origin. Letters are a nation's foreign office. By the arts, and by them almost alone do nations gain for each other any understanding and intimate respect.

It is the patriotism of the artist, and it is almost the only civic duty allowed him, that he achieve such work as shall not bring his nation into world's eyes ridiculous.<sup>13</sup>

Johnson would have found nothing here at odds with his own literary mission. His potential distinction as the race's first serious artist rested partly on his assumption that black America had not yet produced significant literature: hence his mature judgment that Dunbar lacked "consecrated seriousness." Furthermore, Johnson clearly shared Pound's belief that literature was a crucial medium of diplomacy between nations/peoples. Therein lay the *raison d'être* for the Harlem Renaissance, just as it was the basis for Pound's own call for an American "Risorgimento"—"an intellectual awakening" that

would “have its effect not only in the arts, but in life, in politics, and in economics.”<sup>14</sup> And finally, Johnson also assumed that cultural capital would only yield its dividends if it were deemed valuable in an international marketplace. Thus there was a sure political value to meeting “universal” aesthetic standards: the aesthetic imperative to make good art was also a patriotic duty, inasmuch as the artist was representing his or her people before the world’s eyes.

The analogy between them breaks down, however, because of Pound’s narrower, more elitist sense of what constitutes artistic seriousness and artistically serious work. The differences stem not only from different literary trajectories and thus different positions in world literary space, which should be obvious enough, but from what was in fact the very different state of “American” compared to “African American” literature.<sup>15</sup>

For despite the common complaint of literary poverty running through American literary criticism well into the 1920s, American literature was not so much nonexistent as scandalously prolific, given how poorly it reflected on the United States as an emerging economic and political leader in world affairs. As Johnson’s soon-to-be favorite critic H. L. Mencken put it in his scathing 1920 inventory “The National Letters,” American literature “is chiefly remarkable, now as always, for its respectable mediocrity. . . . In bulk it grows more and more formidable, in ease and decorum it makes undoubted progress, and on the side of mere technic, of the bald capacity to write, it shows an ever-widening competence.”<sup>16</sup> “Patria Mia” also had much to note when it surveyed the American literary field: a mediocre, imitative literature, bolstered by “ladies’ societies,” numerous “schools,” and even pockets of yesterday’s avant-gardism. But troubling above all was the alarming regularity of its production and its general commercial success:

There is about the feet of all these splashers the school of “normal production,” i.e. those who fill pages with nice domestic sentiments inoffensively versified.

And over all this there swells the appalling fungus of our “better magazines.”

Throughout, it is a question not of popular ignorance or of popular indifference but of pseudo-artists and of a system of publishing control. The arts can thrive in the midst of densest popular ignorance.<sup>17</sup>

Pound’s grim diagnosis hardly precludes faith in a “Risorgimento,” however, and it is easy to understand why: all this conservative, commercial, banal, pseudo, or in a word, “normal” literature was a necessary condition for the emergence of “serious artists,” who defined themselves as such through their self-conscious opposition to it. Hence the identification of the serious artist with marginality, originality, anticommercialism, avant-gardism, and figurative-cum-actual exile—the now common attributes of the literary modernist. This normal literature was akin to what Gertrude Stein thought of as “nineteenth-century literature,” the necessary, reassuring backdrop for those who sought to write the literature of the twentieth century. Or as Henry James might have put it: it was that great deal of mediocre literature needed to make a little great.<sup>18</sup> It was precisely this regular quantity of normal literature that aspiring African American writers were conscious of lacking—a normal literature one could affect a rupture with by following the “great” models it inadvertently produced. Understandably, Walt Whit-

508 man and/or James became as important for some of the most ambitious black American writers (including Dunbar, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin) as they did for their white modernist counterparts.

Thus we find that James Weldon Johnson's route to literary "seriousness" is significantly different from that of his most experimental white American counterparts. The marginality chosen by self-styled avant-gardists could hardly have appealed much to someone destined by Jim Crow to write, if at all, from the margins of the literary field. And the African American writer risked having his work judged "ridiculous" for very different reasons than Pound's "serious writer," who was better equipped to legitimize and enhance the value of his often incomprehensible work in terms of the cultural capital the international avant-garde was masterfully generating for itself. African American writers obviously had a greater interest in accessing the dominant, respectable, commercial zone of literary production, represented by "the better magazines" like the *Atlantic Monthly* or *Harper's* and New York or Boston publishing houses: Chesnutt and Dunbar, in this respect, were the trailblazers. Most of them could hardly identify with an aesthetically radical elite indifferent to the claims of ordinary readers, "beyond" conventional "nineteenth-century" modes of representation (including realism and naturalism) and "above" the exigencies of commercial publication. In this respect Jean Toomer stands out as an exception that proves the rule, which no doubt accounts for the prestige value the most astute black critics and writers so quickly attached to his work.<sup>19</sup>

Nonetheless, Johnson's path to literary "seriousness" was idiosyncratically circuitous in a way destined to make him recognize the value of modernist experimentation. It ultimately owed less to his relatively conservative nineteenth-century schooling than to his riskier immersion in the turn-of-the-century world of commercial entertainment. When he joined his brother J. Rosamond and Bob Cole in New York in the summer of 1902 to become a full-time professional songwriter, he repudiated a remarkable cluster of careers (high school principal, newspaper editor, and even lawyer) that made him by age thirty a paragon of southern black bourgeois respectability. In moving to New York City, Johnson not only hearkened to his natal "love for cosmopolitanism" but he discovered the pleasures, creative possibilities, and ambiguously compelling transgressions of a black bohemian lifestyle.<sup>20</sup> His fond return to the scene of the Marshall Hotel and Ike Hines's club in all three of his prose works (*The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, *Black Manhattan*, and *Along This Way*) testifies to its subjective importance for him. Johnson's successful foray into American musical comedy also brought him to what Pound called the United States' real "Eastern capital," "the double city of London and Paris," where the flattering tribute of sold-out houses must have further solidified his faith in aesthetic exchange as a means of breaking down racial barriers and indirectly effecting political progress.<sup>21</sup> By writing popular songs drawing on his African American heritage, Johnson paradoxically found himself on French soil, like many an African American artist after him, enjoying the freedom from being a "Negro" along the lines set by Jim Crow, the same freedom so tantalizingly held out to the "ex-colored man" of the novel he began writing soon after Cole and the Johnson Brothers' European tour of 1905.<sup>22</sup>



Why did Johnson turn his back on such success? He offers sufficient reasons in *Along This Way*: a haunting sense of its unreality, the still degrading “conditions that a Negro theatrical company had to endure” while on tour in the United States, and, more implicitly, an uneasiness about the ephemeral lightness of a medium whose roots in minstrelsy made it conspicuously open to African Americans, however consciously they worked to sever or at least redefine those roots.<sup>23</sup> In the meantime, Johnson’s work for the Republican Party that would earn him his consular post roughly coincided with his advanced literary education under Columbia University’s Brander Matthews, whose familiarity with Johnson’s songwriting career and declaration to his class “that the best plays of Weber and Fields were the same sort of thing as the theater of Aristophanes” did nothing to unsettle Johnson’s entrenched belief that the poetry and fiction he was working on was “more serious work.”<sup>24</sup> Johnson finally felt unable to become a serious artist so long as he was enmeshed as a black man in the world of American show business. He thus sought the autonomy he needed to become more recognizably a writer in what he hoped would be a stable, even prestigious bourgeois political career. “I have lots of leisure time for reading and thinking,” he wrote his friend George Towns from Puerto Cabello in October 1906, a couple of years before publishing “O Black and Unknown Bards” in the *Century* magazine.<sup>25</sup> After six more years in Latin America, he had brought himself to a position from which he thought he might advance the race “literarily” through his own singular achievements. Indeed, after the appearance of “Fifty Years” Johnson announced his literary vocation by changing his middle name from “William” to “Weldon”: “I have done this for purely literary advantages,” he wrote Towns on February 5, 1913: “The Weldon gives it a little distinctiveness, and makes it a good deal more of a literary ‘trade mark.’”<sup>26</sup>

Despite the high hopes raised by “Fifty Years,” by the end of 1913 Johnson had hardly established a literary reputation of more than passing note. The disappointments that led him to resign from the consular service after Woodrow Wilson’s election probably deflated his literary ambition somewhat, if only because he was giving up conditions that had proven conducive to his shadow vocation. But Johnson’s frustration first with the Taft administration’s heel-dragging and then the Wilson administration’s more forthright racism—he could no longer expect promotion, let alone a European post—unsettled his individualist faith that hard work and overachievement would enable him to win symbolically significant access to the offices, trappings, and rewards representing “American” bourgeois success.<sup>27</sup> Johnson’s disillusionment may have further undercut his ambivalent attraction to the peripatetic course charted by his “ex-colored man”—which ends in disillusionment and the feeling of having “been only a privileged spectator” of his people’s “inner life.”<sup>28</sup> He returned to Harlem and to the demanding political work that weighed against his dream of becoming the “first great poet” of black America.

Such work was more compatible, however, with his consolation dream of figuratively fathering that first great poet, and thus we find his increasingly vital critical, editorial, and theoretical work supplanting in importance his individual artistic achievement. His first important initiative to this end was the establishment in January 1915 of a “Poetry



510 Corner” in the *New York Age* to encourage and facilitate black literary production. At the same time, through his literary editorials and reviews for the *Age* he began laying the critical groundwork for a renaissance. He set out before his mainly black readership a complex of strategies for securing the white recognition—or, more precisely, the access to mainstream white publishers—needed to increase “the amount” and elevate “the standard” of African American literature. Predominant among these strategies were the affirmation of race as a source of positive cultural expression and the cultivation of specifically “modern” modes of writing. This might seem to be a recipe for modernist literature; in practice, however, the two strategies meshed to produce something generally more conventional.

### **Race Literature and Modernism: Toward Normal African American Literature**

During and after the Harlem Renaissance, Johnson gave generous encouragement to virtually all aspiring African American writers. As an anthologist, critic, and literary historian, he demonstrated the catholic tastes one would expect of someone concerned first and foremost with simply building a literature or establishing conditions of literary normalcy. But he brought to this project an aesthetic ideal deriving from his “bohemian” years that had been realized in ragtime music. Ragtime offered African Americans a paradigm for what black American literature might be: originally African American, technically “modern,” and, last but not least, “universally” popular. When the ex-colored man first hears it at the club, he describes it as “music of a kind I had never heard before,” notable for both its visceral appeal (it “demanded a physical response, patting of the feet, drumming of the fingers”) and formal ingenuity (its “barbaric harmonies, the audacious resolutions, often consisting of an abrupt jump from one key to another, the intricate rhythms in which the accents fell in the most unexpected places, but in which the beat was never lost”). He discovers ragtime just when it is “a novelty in New York, and just growing to be a rage,” though he subsequently learns about its southern roots and migration through Chicago, its invention “by Negro piano players who knew no more of the theory of music than they did of the theory of the universe,” its appropriation and commercial exploitation by white arrangers, and then its more sophisticated reappropriation by “colored men, of not only musical talent, but training.” Ragtime inverts the hierarchy between white and black Americans insofar as it changes their temporal positions in the struggle for cultural advantage: here blacks are originators, whites are “imitators and adulterators”; here blacks are *au courant* and popular, dismissive whites bound to the “course of scholasticism.” At the same time, however, ragtime confirms the existing hierarchy between African Americans and whites more globally, inasmuch as its cultural legitimacy is predicated on European recognition:

One thing cannot be denied; it is music which possesses at least one strong element of greatness: it appeals universally; not only the American, but the English, the French, and even the German people find delight in it. In fact, there is not a corner of the civilized

world in which it is not known, and this proves its originality; for if it were an imitation, the people of Europe, anyhow, would not have found it a novelty.<sup>29</sup>

This passage underscores how inescapable Johnson assumed white, Eurocentric judgment to be in any African American efforts to acquire cultural capital. At the same time, the success of ragtime points to the virtue of racial self-reliance in attracting the world's attention. "In Paris they call it American music," the ex-colored man says of ragtime as he elaborates his creator's much reiterated doctrine that "there is nothing of artistic value belonging to America which has not been originated by the Negro," that black cultural forms "are the source of everything artistic which is native to this country; everything else is borrowed from the old world."<sup>30</sup> Johnson encouraged African Americans to embrace the cultural forms most expressive of their "difference"—and indeed most expressive of "American" difference—in order to win recognition of their cultural distinction.<sup>31</sup> We might wonder why Johnson worried about African American literary destitution when they had such other cultural wealth at their disposal, except that he so clearly tells us, initially through his ex-colored man, that "these are lower forms of art, but they give evidence of a power that will some day be applied to the higher forms."<sup>32</sup> Literature—popular or otherwise—still ranked higher than more physical forms of art because of Western Europe's position as "universal" adjudicator in the cultural competition between nations. Hence Johnson's other much reiterated belief, first announced in the *New York Age*, that "the common measure" of a race's "greatness is the amount and standard of the literature it [has] produced."<sup>33</sup> "Amount and standard," like the term "literature" itself, imply comparison, and a literarily destitute race that would meet international measures of literary achievement is a race pledged to compete against itself in a field already ruled by the literarily wealthy.

Johnson's most fundamental aesthetic problem was how to transfer or channel the African American cultural power so evident in "lower forms" into literary achievement—how, in effect, to make the racial self-reliance so manifest in the spirituals, oral tales, preaching performances, dances like the cakewalk, and music like ragtime the basis for a racially "original" literature. It was a problem that went back to Herder and his ideas about the folk origins of national cultures, except that the need for African Americans to demonstrate "intellectual parity" with their white compatriots made the appeal to authentic, incommensurate difference potentially self-defeating.<sup>34</sup> Intellectual parity was difficult if not impossible to claim so long as African American artists were restricted to "lower forms," whose lowness was predicated on their being "naïve" arts in the traditional sense of spontaneous, primitive, natural. Johnson did much to dispel this latter perception, especially in his several prefaces, but he also encouraged it, as we can see by returning once again to the ragtime musician in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*:

I talked to the piano player between the musical numbers and found out that he was just a natural musician, never having taken a lesson in his life. . . . I began to wonder what this man with such a lavish natural endowment would have done had he been trained. Perhaps he wouldn't have done anything at all; he might have become, at best, a mediocre imitator

512 of the great masters in what they have already done to a finish, or one of the modern innovators who strive after originality by seeing how cleverly they can dodge about through the rules of harmony and at the same time avoid melody. It is certain that he would not have been so delightful as he was in ragtime.<sup>35</sup>

This figure might be read as a prototype of the literary artist whose advent Johnson was working to facilitate, except that for Johnson literature and popular music could never finally be analogous. Johnson's programmatic assumption about the race's need to achieve in literature required that it be trained "up" from the "lower forms" in which it naturally excelled to the world's highest, more intellectually respectable aesthetic form. Yet in a cultural context shaped by modernism, the ideal African American writer would paradoxically have to learn to be as "natural" as the ragtime musician, so as to overcome the most telling effects of bad training: mediocre conventionality (derived from a servile relation to literary tradition) and willful experimentation (an unaffordable indulgence that risked looking simply incompetent). He or she would have to express their racial self in a studiously modern way, in effect, but without dishonoring the authority of "literature" insofar as he or she was demonstrating black Americans' capacity to produce it. The difficulty was compounded by the primitivist, even antiliterary thrust to much modernist writing, which showed itself most obviously through its attraction to the figure of the "Negro," his "lower" cultural forms, and his putative language.<sup>36</sup>

We see Johnson's problem on display in the *New York Age's* "Poetry Corner." On the one hand, he holds that African Americans are naturally endowed to be America's great poets—they have "more heart, more soul," they are "more responsive to emotional vibrations," they are "more artistic" than whites. On the other hand, he concedes that most of the verses sent to the paper "are extremely crude" and "below mediocrity."<sup>37</sup> A key function of the "Poetry Corner" was to elevate the standard of black American poetry through a ruthless selection process: "If, through this means, only one [poet], out of the many who will make the attempt, should be encouraged and aided toward reaching a higher degree of excellence the space would be far more than paid for."<sup>38</sup> It also provided a venue for Johnson's more direct instruction. The fault of so many contributors, Johnson writes, is that "they are trying to write in the past rather than in the present," producing weak imitations of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English and American poetry.<sup>39</sup> "What the contributors of this class need to do is to get into touch with life, and to write of the things and employ the forms that are now vital."<sup>40</sup> While his readers were left to infer what he meant by getting in touch with life, he had no difficulty specifying how one could "write of the things and employ the forms that are now vital": by getting in touch with books, Matthews's *A Study of Versification* (1911), for one, and William Stanley Braithwaite's *Anthology of Magazine Verse for 1915*: "A perusal of the 'Anthology' will put your finger on the pulse of American poets of today. You will be able to see what the best American poets are now writing about and how they are doing it. You will find poetry in all forms, from concrete thoughts in regular lyrics to the most tenuous imagisms in the freest of free verse."<sup>41</sup>

Even as Johnson was building the anthology that would make visible a much needed African American literary "tradition" (*The Book of American Negro Poetry*), he con-

tinued studying the nature and drift of “modern” poetry by whites and encouraging his fellow black writers to do the same: he found especially helpful John Livingston Lowes’s *Convention and Revolt in Poetry* and Marguerite Wilkinson’s *New Voices: An Introduction to Contemporary Poetry*, both published in 1919, and sent the first to Anne Spencer and strongly recommended the second to her.<sup>42</sup> All of this should demonstrate that for Johnson, literary “modernism” entailed *learning to be more conventionally contemporary*, and not for the sake of being absolutely modern, making it new, or writing a peculiarly “twentieth-century” literature but for the sake of getting published in the best possible places, that is, with New York commercial publishers and in high-profile magazines. Despite the primitivist fiction that made blacks not merely modernism’s “natural” subjects but even its real originators—Johnson tried to inspire his *Age* readers, for example, with Robert J. Coady’s claim that “Cezanne, the father of modern painting . . . had a creole mother” and “Picasso, as master of the ‘new art’” had “Negro ancestry”—the long term effects of literary destitution on African Americans told otherwise.<sup>43</sup> Johnson’s *Age* editorials suggest that, left to their own devices, aspiring African American writers would continue to produce either polemical pamphlets or weak imitations of classroom poetry.<sup>44</sup>

This is why, finally, Johnson’s call for aesthetic self-determination on the part of African Americans—which would be echoed throughout the Harlem Renaissance—cannot be disentangled from, and remains subservient to, the project of securing for “pure” African American literature the recognition of white publishers, critics, and readers. He simply had no models of African American literary greatness or even originality to uphold that had not already been deemed great or original by whites. Thus in championing Claude McKay in 1922 as “a real poet and a great poet,” he somewhat disingenuously insists that “we should not do in his case what we were guilty of in the case of Dunbar, that was, not to recognize or not even to know his greatness until it was acclaimed by the whites.”<sup>45</sup> McKay was already recognized by whites by the very fact of having his *Harlem Shadows* published by Harcourt, Brace, which in the same year published Johnson’s *Book of American Negro Poetry*.

Indeed the Harlem Renaissance might be thought of as inaugurated by these two publications, which suggests that only by eschewing parochial literary institutions and subjecting themselves to the laws of a more “universal” field could African Americans come into a literature of their own.<sup>46</sup> For most ambitious African American writers (and a Jamaican globetrotter like McKay) this meant becoming *commercially viable as a black writer*, which hardly meant becoming less racial. Surely part of what Johnson meant when he encouraged aspiring black writers to “get into touch with life” was to confront and not evade their own experience. A rising tide of sympathetic fiction about the race problem by whites (Hubert Shands’s *White and Black*, T. S. Stripling’s *Birthright*, both from 1922) pointed to a contemporary niche that black authors would seem naturally better equipped to exploit. But dominating this niche would require discipline if they were to avoid the pitfalls to which they were prone: a retrograde gentility, on the one hand, an antiartistic propaganda, on the other. It would require at the very least mastering the well-established conventions of literary realism, in effect, such as Johnson himself had done when he wrote his first novel a decade earlier.

514 Despite his early familiarity with the term “modernismo” and his efforts to “modernize” African American literature, Johnson was far from being an avant-garde writer and did not envisage the “Negro literary renaissance” he helped launch as aesthetically revolutionary. But he knew the literary field well enough by the outset of the 1920s to grasp that a capacity for literary “modernism” had become a necessary component of a people’s literary capacity in general. So he arranges his 1918 discussion of “Some New Books of Poetry and Their Makers” according to degrees of proximity to the contemporary, first turning to Waverly Turner Carmichael’s dialect poetry (imitative of Dunbar), then to Georgia Douglas Johnson’s “conventional lyric forms” (he advises her “to roughen her art a bit”), and finally, most promisingly, to Joseph S. Cotter’s “free and bold” repudiation of conventional rhyme and meter.<sup>47</sup> We see the same emphasis on the race’s accelerated trajectory toward literary modernity in the 1922 preface: “The reader cannot but be impressed by the distance already covered. It is a long way from the complaints of George Horton to the invectives of Claude McKay, from the obviousness of Frances Harper to the complexness of Anne Spencer.”<sup>48</sup> Arguably, Johnson embraced all the literature of the Harlem Renaissance impartially because the very differences between “old” and “new” it produced offered evidence of temporal distances being covered. He knew literature “cast . . . in the old mold,” such as Walter White’s *The Fire in the Flint*, without devaluing it for that reason.<sup>49</sup> And he defended all the literary rebels: most notably McKay, Hughes, and his honorary “Negro” friend, Carl Van Vechten. What was crucial above all for such a literarily destitute people’s “renaissance,” even more than a useable literary past, was *the establishment of coexistent literary generations*, which is indeed one of the hallmarks of a modern, normal literature, and the main achievement of the Harlem Renaissance. Though most manifest in the superficial rift between the generation of Du Bois, Johnson, and Jessie Fauset, say, and the *Fire!!* group, coexistent literary generations rarely reduce to two groups but rather imply various overlapping forces of conservation/conservatism in tension with forces of innovation or even rupture, generating through their very coexistence the mixed styles, malleable genres, and contests over choice and treatment of subject matter, for example, conducive to successful commercial art.

Johnson was such an important architect of the Harlem Renaissance because he bore coexistent literary generations within himself. He aptly figured his situation in that 1912 letter to Grace, we should recall, in terms of a twofold dream: of either being “the first great poet” of the race or fathering him/her. This dream is remarkably consistent with the encouraging regard he showed for every young writer of promise (McKay, Spencer, Hughes, Sterling Brown, Zora Neale Hurston). It is equally consistent with the creative impasse that awaited him not long after 1912, leaving him torn between writing “in the old mold” (as in “Fifty Years,” not to mention the Dunbaresque dialect poems he continued to reprint in collections of his poetry) and modestly experimenting in the new (as in *God’s Trombones*, begun in 1918).

Johnson’s major artistic contribution to the Harlem Renaissance ultimately proved to be his long out-of-print 1912 novel, reclaimed in 1927 under his name and marketed as a “classic in Negro literature” by Alfred A. Knopf in its prestigious Blue Jade

series.<sup>50</sup> *God's Trombones* appeared with Viking Press in the same year. 1927 marks the fulfillment of the promise of 1912, though the promise fulfilled was by then a more collective than individual one. "The Negro author—the creative author—has arrived. He is here. He appears in the lists of the best publishers. He even breaks into the lists of the best-sellers," proclaimed Johnson in his 1928 essay on "The Dilemma of the Negro Author."<sup>51</sup> However daunting the African American writer's dilemma of writing for a segregated readership remained, Johnson urged African American writers not to retreat from the commercial center of the American literary field in white Manhattan. In his 1929 essay "Negro Authors and White Publishers," he even insisted that African American authors were simply fetishizing failure by imagining that what they wrote was too good (or too elevated a representation of African American life) for mainstream publication: "This 'superior work—sordid publishers—low-brow public' complex . . . gives rise to the numerous small coteries of unsuccessful writers, white as well as colored; the chief function of the members of these coteries being the mutual admiration of each other's manuscripts. This attitude brings its adherents to a position of pathetic futility or ludicrous superiority."<sup>52</sup> It reveals something of Johnson's own tendency to fetishize mainstream success that he found so striking an analogue for black literary parochialism in the outer reaches of the white avant-garde.

Those outer reaches he would come to know of and appreciate a bit better by the mid-1930s after the Harlem Renaissance was fast becoming history and he had written what at the time seemed his best book, his 1933 autobiography *Along This Way*, published by Viking and publicized by a profile in the *New Yorker*. That same fall he read Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* after finally reading "Melanctha," whose representation of African Americans pleasantly surprised him and whose style he admired for its "consummate artistry."<sup>53</sup> He also bought one of the first copies of James Joyce's *Ulysses* from Brentano's bookstore in January 1934.<sup>54</sup> At this very moment, such "coterie" authors were entering the commercial mainstream: Stein, thanks to her American tour and the publication in the *Atlantic Monthly* of her relatively conventional autobiography (though wildly unconventional beside *Along This Way*); Joyce, thanks to Judge Woolsey's 1933 decision lifting the ban of *Ulysses* in the United States. As "modern classics," these works carried a certain aura, of the same kind if not degree as that which probably helped save Johnson's novel from oblivion. For in the meantime, the post-1929 literary marketplace was behaving normally toward many a Harlem Renaissance emanation: McKay's *Banjo* (1929) and *Harlem Shadows* (1922), Rudolph Fisher's *Walls of Jericho* (1928), Eric Walrond's *Tropic Death* (1926), Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), Walter White's *Fire in the Flint* (1924), and Georgia Douglas Johnson's *The Heart of a Woman* (1918) had all gone out of print. Johnson knew that publishing with quality commercial houses like Harper's, Knopf, or Boni and Liveright hardly guaranteed literary longevity or signaled "greatness." But it made pragmatic sense from the vantage point of black American writers under Jim Crow to regard it as the most reliable step toward the literary field's higher ground—the ground of radical freedom, "modernist" or otherwise. It was a lesson passed on to Johnson by Dunbar and Chesnutt and on to the Harlem Renaissance writers by Johnson, and it would be a lesson not lost on Hurston, Wright, Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Toni Morrison.



## 516 Notes

1. The epigraph to this article comes from a letter from James Weldon Johnson to Anne Spencer, January 9, 1920, box 19, folder 447, James Weldon Johnson and Grace Nail Johnson Papers, Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

2. Charles W. Chesnutt, *An Exemplary Citizen: Letters of Charles W. Chesnutt, 1906–1932*, ed. Jesse S. Crisler, Robert Leitz III, and Joseph R. McElrath Jr. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 99.

3. James Weldon Johnson, *The Selected Writings of James Weldon Johnson*, 2 vols., ed. Sondra Kathryn Wilson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 1:272. For a succinct description of the problem of “literary destitution” and the standard strategies for overcoming it, see Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 177–85.

4. Influential work in this vein includes Houston A. Baker Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), Werner Sollors, *Ethnic Modernism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), and Mark A. Sanders, “American Modernism and the New Negro Renaissance,” in *The Cambridge Companion to American Modernism*, ed. Walter D. Mignolo (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 129–56. An unexamined assumption of much of this largely impressive scholarship is that the term “modernism” confers greater aesthetic, critical, and interpretive value to the art works it classifies (an assumption that undoubtedly owes to the fact that “modernist” literature became the canonical literature of academic study).

5. Moretti himself draws the term “normal literature” from Thomas Kuhn’s concept of “normal science,” which he uses to steer us away from the “singularities” that remain the main object of academic literary study and toward the general patterns of literary production and reception and the masses of forgettable and forgotten books that make the anomalous survivors possible. See Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (New York: Verso, 2005), 17–20.

6. See Johnson, *Selected Writings*, 1:272–73.

7. Countee Cullen to James Weldon Johnson, February 14, 1931, James Weldon Johnson and Grace Nail Johnson Papers, box 6, folder 109.

8. See James Weldon Johnson, preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, ed. James Weldon Johnson, rev. ed. (1931; rpt. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1969), 9.

9. Johnson, preface, 39–40.

10. See James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson* (1933; rpt. New York: Penguin, 1990), 261.

11. James Weldon Johnson to Grace Nail Johnson, June 26, 1912, James Weldon Johnson and Grace Nail Johnson Papers, box 41, folder 2, emphasis in original. This is the second of two letters dated June 26.

12. Virtually all Johnson’s work on behalf of African American literature confirms Kenneth W. Warren’s assertion that “African American literature was prospective rather than retrospective. . . . In the main, writers and critics tended to speak as if the best work had not been written but was yet to come, and the shape of that work was yet to be determined” (*What Was African American Literature?* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011], 42–43).

13. Ezra Pound, *Selected Prose, 1909–1965* (New York: New Directions, 1973), 109.

14. Pound, *Selected Prose*, 111.

15. What should be obvious is Pound’s greater proximity to and interest in the historical avant-garde at this crucial moment in its formation: 1912 was the year of the first exhibit of futurist paintings and the first meetings of the imagists (as such) in London; it witnessed the publication of Jean Metzinger and Albert Gleizes’s *Du “cubisme,”* which gave currency to the term, and Wassily Kandinsky’s *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (translated into English in 1914 as *The Art of Spiritual Harmony*), which



influentially justified the avant-garde's elite spiritual mission and identified Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and Arnold Schönberg as its leaders; and it led to the 1913 Armory Show that introduced largely baffled American audiences not only to postimpressionist painting but to the most recent verbal experiments of Gertrude Stein. Johnson was hardly situated to be more than fleetingly aware of these developments, and he could not yet have felt any pressure to be interested in them.

16. H. L. Mencken, *Prejudices: Second Series* (New York: Knopf, 1920), 15.

17. Pound, *Selected Prose*, 109–10.

18. See Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, in *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Carl Van Vechten (New York: Random House, 1962), 50, and Gertrude Stein, *Paris, France* (New York: Liveright, 1940), 12–13. I am taking some liberties here with James's assertion that "it takes . . . an endless amount of tradition to make even a little taste" (*The American Scene* [New York: Penguin, 1994], 127), as well as his more famous remarks about American cultural destitution in *Hawthorne* [New York: Library of America, 1984], 351–52).

19. See Michael Nowlin, "The Strange Literary Career of Jean Toomer," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 53, no. 2 (2011): 225–27.

20. See Johnson, *Along This Way*, 47–48, 152.

21. Pound, *Selected Prose*, 114.

22. See Johnson, *Along This Way*, 209.

23. Johnson, *Along This Way*, 194, 223.

24. Johnson, *Along This Way*, 192–93.

25. Miles M. Jackson, "Letters to a Friend: Correspondence From James Weldon Johnson to George A. Towns," *Phylon* 29, no. 2 (1968): 184.

26. Jackson, "Letters to a Friend," 191.

27. On Johnson's complex relation to and frustrations with the consular service, see Jacqueline Goldsby, "Keeping the 'Secret of Authorship': A Critical Look at the 1912 Publication of James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*," in *Print Culture in a Diverse America*, ed. James A. Dancy and Wayne A. Wiegand (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 260–62, Brian Russell Roberts, "Passing into Diplomacy: U.S. Consul James Weldon Johnson and *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 56, no. 2 (2010): 293–95, and Eugene Levy, *James Weldon Johnson: Black Leader, Black Voice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 112–24.

28. James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1927; rpt. New York: Penguin, 1990), 153.

29. Johnson, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 72–73.

30. Johnson, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 63; Johnson, *Selected Writings*, 1:262.

31. Despite Johnson's better knowledge of the historical and environmental factors that had leant African American expressive culture its particular forms, he fell back easily enough on the essentialist commonplaces of his day, as when he asserted that black Americans "have more heart, more soul; . . . are more responsive to emotional vibrations; . . . have a larger share of the gifts of laughter, music and song; in a word, . . . are less material and . . . by nature, more artistic than white people" (*Selected Writings*, 1:252).

32. Johnson, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 63.

33. Johnson, *Selected Writings*, 1:272.

34. Johnson, preface to *Book of American Negro Poetry*, 9. On the relevance of the "Herderian folk idea" to African American poetics and aesthetics, see Bernard W. Bell, *The Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry* (Detroit, MI: Broadside, 1974). And for a broader critique of the "Herderian revolution" and its instrumental value for culturally dependent and dominated peoples, see Casanova, *World Republic of Letters*, 75–81.

35. Johnson, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 74.

36. For standard analyses of this phenomenon, see Susan Gubar, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 134–68, North, *Dialect of Modernism*, 59–99, and Douglas, *Terrible Honesty*, 354–76.

37. Johnson, *Selected Writings*, 1:252–53, 256.

- 518      38. Johnson, *Selected Writings*, 1:253.  
           39. Johnson, *Selected Writings*, 1:253.  
           40. Johnson, *Selected Writings*, 1:257.  
           41. Johnson, *Selected Writings*, 1: 257–58.  
           42. Johnson to Spencer, January 9, 1920, James Weldon Johnson and Grace Nail Johnson Papers, box 19, folder 447.  
           43. Johnson, *Selected Writings*, 1:262.  
           44. Johnson, *Selected Writings*, 1:260, 272, 257.  
           45. Johnson, *Selected Writings*, 1:280.  
           46. Johnson himself retrospectively described the poetry from *Harlem Shadows* as “one of the great forces in bringing about what is often called the ‘Negro literary renaissance,’” then mentions his anthology, which “was effective in following up the work of making America at large aware.” See Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (1930; rpt. New York: Da Capo, 1991), 266.  
           47. Johnson, *Selected Writings*, 1:273–76.  
           48. Johnson, preface to *Book of American Negro Poetry*, 47.  
           49. Johnson to Spencer, September 2, 1924, James Weldon Johnson and Grace Nail Johnson Papers, box 19, folder 447.  
           50. Alfred A. Knopf, Borzoi Books Catalogue, Autumn 1927, 26–27.  
           51. James Weldon Johnson, “The Dilemma of the Negro Author,” in *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892–1938*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Gene Andrew Jarrett (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 378.  
           52. Johnson, *Selected Writings*, 2:414.  
           53. James Weldon Johnson to Carl Van Vechten, October 15, 1933, James Weldon Johnson and Grace Nail Johnson Papers, box 21, folder 501.  
           54. Invoice from Brentano’s Bookstore, January 1934, James Weldon Johnson and Grace Nail Johnson Papers, box 4, folder 58.