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Elizabeth Newton
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Ethnic Irony in Melvin B. Tolson's "Dark Symphony"

ELIZABETH NEWTON

Abstract

This article historicizes musical symbolism in Melvin B. Tolson's poem "Dark Symphony" (1941). In a time when Black writers and musicians alike were encouraged to aspire to European standards of greatness, Tolson's Afro-modernist poem establishes an ambivalent critical stance toward the genre in its title. In pursuit of a richer understanding of the poet's attitude, this article situates the poem within histories of Black music, racial uplift, and white supremacy, exploring the poem's relation to other media from the Harlem Renaissance. It analyzes the changing language across the poem's sections and, informed by Houston A. Baker Jr.'s study of "mastery and deformation," theorizes the poet's tone. While prior critics have read the poem's lofty conclusion as sincerely aspirational toward assimilation, this article emphasizes the ambiguity, or irony, that Tolson develops: he embraces the symphony's capacity as a symbol to encompass multiple meanings, using the genre metaphorically as a mark of achievement, even as he implicates such usage as a practice rooted in conservative thought. The "symphony," celebrated as a symbol of pluralistic democracy and liberal progress, meanwhile functions to reinforce racialized difference and inequality—a duality that becomes apparent when this poem is read alongside Tolson's concurrent poems, notes, and criticism. Such analysis demonstrates that "Dark Symphony" functions as a site for heightened consciousness of racialized musical language, giving shape to Tolson's ideas as a critic, educator, and advocate for public health.

We chewed this quid a second time,
for *Black Boy* often adds
the dimension of ethnic irony
to Empson's classic seven.¹

—Melvin B. Tolson, *Harlem Gallery*

In the 1930s, within just a few years, three Black composers premiered musical works in the symphonic tradition: William Grant Still's *Afro-American Symphony* in 1930, Florence Price's *Symphony No. 1* in 1932, and William Dawson's *Negro Folk Symphony* in 1934.² In coming years, the composer Duke Ellington would experiment with symphonic forms, and he would be represented as a symphonic composer in Fred Waller's 1935 film *Symphony in Black: A Rhapsody of Negro Life*. The titles of these works mark the symphonic genre as a Black artistic form, defining the symphony in terms of its Blackness, in line with other Afro-modernist and Harlem Renaissance art that emphasizes Black literary

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¹ Melvin B. Tolson, *Harlem Gallery* (New York: Twayne, 1965), 122.

² See Catherine Parsons Smith, *William Grant Still: A Study in Contradictions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Samantha Ege, "The Aesthetics of Florence Price: Negotiating the Dissonances of a New World Nationalism" (PhD thesis, University of York, 2020); and Gwynne Kuhner Brown, "Whatever Happened to William Dawson's *Negro Folk Symphony*?" *Journal of the Society for American Music* 6, no. 4 (November 2012): 433–56.

and musical greatness. However, as Christopher Miller writes, "Black and white designate each other before they designate any meaning."³ In this way, the prevalence of these marked forms raises a critical question: What is a white symphony?

This article considers the racialization of musical genres as expressed by the work of Melvin B. Tolson, particularly his poem "Dark Symphony," first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1941. Rita Dove characterizes the work as "a sweeping review of black American history in musical vocabulary."⁴ Beyond the musical genre in the title, Tolson also uses musical ideas to organize the poem's narrative: six section headings borrow tempo markings from the Western art music tradition ("Allegro Moderato," "Lento Grave," "Andante Sostenuto," "Tempo Primo," "Larghetto," and "Tempo di Marcia"), and the titles of spirituals are listed in the poem's body. More than a tool in Tolson's critical project, music is a symbol whose history of use in literature, when read in the context of Tolson's body of work, itself becomes an object of critique. In a time when Black writers and musicians were encouraged to aspire to European standards of greatness, Tolson's poem takes an ambivalent critical stance toward the symphony as a concept, suggesting skepticism about the genre's basis in Eurocentric thought.

This article argues that "Dark Symphony" establishes and develops what Tolson elsewhere calls "ethnic irony," a type of ambiguity that, in this case, emerges from two relations: the *differences* in tone between this text and Tolson's concurrent works, as well as the *similarities* in tone between Tolson's work and that of his work's critics. In the years around "Dark Symphony," Tolson experimented with forms including the novella, blues poetry, and lyric poetry, and prose nonfiction such as literary criticism. My engagement with Tolson's writing beyond "Dark Symphony" will focus on five works: Tolson's master's thesis from Columbia University; his newspaper column, "Caviar and Cabbage," which ran from 1937–1944 in *The Washington Tribune*; his epic poems *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* (1953) and *Harlem Gallery* (1965); and his unpublished, undated prose novella of ten chapters, also titled "Dark Symphony," but which bears no relation to the poem under discussion here. Following a discussion of Tolson's ideas about music in these works, this article will conclude that "Dark Symphony" does two things at once: it gestures toward the symphonic genre to recognize and further Black achievement, even as it calls into question the progress and triumphalism commonly attached to so-called "higher forms" of art.

Tolson's Social Tone: Ambiguity in Context

The idea for "Dark Symphony" emerged when Tolson (Figure 1) was in high school, when he expressed interest in using the symphony label.⁵ The genesis of the poem

³ Christopher L. Miller, *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 29.

⁴ Rita Dove, "Introduction," in *Harlem Gallery and Other Poems of Melvin B. Tolson*, ed. Raymond Nelson (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999), xiv–xv.

⁵ According to a note in the collection of Robert M. Farnsworth. "Note," ca. 1966, box 11, "Notes collected from others," Melvin Beaunorus Tolson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC (referred to hereafter as MBTP).



Figure 1. Melvin B. Tolson in front of his house in Langston, Oklahoma. Photograph of Melvin B. Tolson from the Melvin B. Tolson Papers, box 12, folder 7, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. Photographer unknown.

appears to have been short: several stanzas of what eventually became the published version first appeared in Tolson's poem "Roland Hayes" (after the concert tenor who performed in Harlem), which was published in a 1938 anthology of Black poetry called *Negro Voices*, edited by Beatrice M. Murphy.⁶ The full version of "Dark Symphony" was then funded by the patron and editor V. F. Calverton, leading to the poem's 1941 publication in the *Atlantic Monthly*.⁷ The poem was well received among both Black and white audiences.⁸ Prior to its publication, the poem had won first prize in a 1940 poetry competition hosted by the American Negro Exposition in Chicago, judged by Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, and Frank Marshall.⁹ In recent years, the poem has been anthologized in the 2011 *Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, which helped enter Tolson into what Karl Shapiro calls the "lily-white" canon of US American poetry.¹⁰

Among some of Tolson's most informed critics, "Dark Symphony" is thought to occupy a liminal space in Tolson's career, bridging what Gary Lenhart calls his

⁶ M. Beaunorus Tolson, "Roland Hayes," in *Negro Voices: An Anthology of Contemporary Verse*, ed. Beatrice M. Murphy (New York: Henry Harrison, 1938), 151–52. A draft manuscript appears in box 13, "Working drafts, undated," MBTP.

⁷ Farnsworth, "Note," ca. 1966, box 11, "Notes collected from others," MBTP.

⁸ For further discussion of the reception of Tolson's work, see Andy Hines, "Vehicles of Periodization: Melvin B. Tolson, Allen Tate, and the New Critical Police," *Criticism* 59, no. 3 (Summer 2017): 417–39, and Diana V. Cruz, "Refuting Exile: Rita Dove Reading Melvin B. Tolson," *Callaloo* 31, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 789–802.

⁹ Gary Lenhart, "Caviar and Cabbage: The Voracious Appetite of Melvin Tolson," chap. 5 in *The Stamp of Class: Reflections on Poetry and Social Class* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 67.

¹⁰ Rita Dove, ed., *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (New York: Penguin, 2011). This quotation is from Karl Shapiro's introduction to *Harlem Gallery* as it appears in box 3, "Shapiro, Karl, 1964–65," MBTP.

"direct social protest" poetry and what Kathy Lou Schultz calls his later "modernist methods," considered such due to his use of elaborate forms and dense, puzzling allusions.¹¹ However, the poem can be usefully read less as a transition between Tolson's political and modernist work and more as an intervention in the debates surrounding these categories, an intervention that applies musical ideas as both a structuring force and an object of critique.

"Dark Symphony" comprises six sections ordered chronologically from the Revolutionary War through the Civil War, Reconstruction, the Harlem Renaissance, the Great Depression, and the present day of 1941. Throughout the poem, Tolson uses the first-person plural ("we" and "our") to speak on behalf of Black people in the United States, voicing grievances and celebrating achievements. At a structural level, Tolson's approach resembles that of contemporary composers, such as Duke Ellington, whose *Black, Brown, and Beige: A Tone Parallel to the History of the American Negro*, from 1943, was intended as a "tone parallel" to United States history, encompassing the diaspora through the Great Migration.¹² Tolson's poem similarly periodizes and historicizes the changing experiences of Black people in the United States. But while Ellington developed the category of "tone parallel" in refusal of the established high art musical tradition of the "tone poem," Tolson's poem appears, at least at first, to embrace the prestige attached to the "symphony" of its title.

The final section of "Dark Symphony," the "Tempo di Marcia," most clearly expresses a symphonic spirit through its climactic optimism. After an overview of Black history rich with literary and historical allusions, the section—and thus the poem—culminates with this series of declaratives: "We advance! We advance! We advance!" Responding to this triumphant conclusion, Rita Dove claims that the poem "regales in march time," expressing "the determination of the New Black American."¹³ Indeed, the voice of the "Tempo di Marcia" channels a mode of Black intellectualism that would have been familiar to Tolson and his contemporaries in the early 1940s: a voice who questions the white supremacist foundations of United States democracy, but who longs for a near-future reformed system that accommodates diverse experiences. Exemplifying this mode, historian Roi Ottley, in his 1943 work of Black history "*New World A-Coming*," states in his conclusion: "The Negro may not be able to predict his future, but he knows what he wants—liberty and peace, and an enriched life, free of want, oppression, violence, and proscription. In a word, he wants democracy—cleaned and refreshed."¹⁴ Tolson's

¹¹ Lenhart, "Caviar and Cabbage," 7; Kathy Lou Schultz, *The Afro-Modernist Epic and Literary History: Tolson, Hughes, Baraka* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 1–35.

¹² For discussion of Ellington's piece, see Harvey G. Cohen, "Duke Ellington and *Black, Brown and Beige*: The Composer as Historian at Carnegie Hall," *American Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (December 2004): 1003–34; John Howland, *Ellington Uptown: Duke Ellington, James P. Johnson, and the Birth of Concert Jazz* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2009), 249–50.

¹³ Rita Dove, "Introduction," xiv–xv.

¹⁴ Roi Ottley, "*New World A-Coming*": *Inside Black America* (New York: Literary Classics, 1943), 343. The tone of these passages also recalls Waldo Frank's 1929 usage of "symphonise" as a verb: "Our chaos is a variety, wondrously rich, of needs, potentials, natures, values. To resolve it without loss of the variety that makes it would mean to *symphonise* it: this would mean to control the elements of our variety: and this would mean to understand and to be conscious of the worlds whirling within our

poem might be read as accomplishing what Ottley's text does in prose. Both authors document a democracy lacking adequate recognition of Black people, but one in which the narrator greets the future with optimism.

In fact, an ambiguity emerges in one of Tolson's undated personal notes, in which he contemplates the purpose of poetry. He writes, "[T]he direction of a poet is indirection. To speak in military terms, the prosifier says, 'Forward! March!' but the poet says, 'Oblique! March!'"¹⁵ Thus, in the "Tempo di Marcia," Tolson appears *not* to do what he claims poets should do—that is, he appears to further instead of refusing the terms of "progress" in a world structured against Black people, and one in which progress is defined via the expansion of national military power. This disconnect expresses the ambiguity that pervades all six sections of "Dark Symphony."

In the epigraph that opens this article, from Tolson's 1965 epic poem *Harlem Gallery*, the poet riffs on a conception of ambiguity expressed by William Empson in his 1930 study *Seven Types of Ambiguity*.¹⁶ In that book, Empson lists and describes seven types of ambiguity, progressing from metaphor as a rhetorical strategy through to the highest form of ambiguity, one that reveals genuine contradiction in a writer's mind. In this formulation, distinctions emerge among cases in which two meanings are wound into one, in which two meanings clearly convey the author's confusion, and in which the actual meaning of two statements lies halfway between them. Empson opens his account with the following definition:

An ambiguity, in ordinary speech, means something very pronounced, and as a rule witty or deceitful. I propose to use the word in an extended sense, and shall think relevant to my subject any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language.¹⁷

Tolson's stanza from *Harlem Gallery* refers to Richard Wright's 1945 book *Black Boy*; Tolson's lines suggest that the book demonstrates an "irony" (i.e., ambiguity) that Empson missed: ethnic irony. By marking Wright's book as containing an ethnic irony beyond Empson's seven, Tolson also draws attention to the whiteness of Empson's work—although not titled as a book about "white ambiguity," Empson's examples are Eurocentric, drawn from texts by Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, and others. The marked title of "Dark Symphony" extends such a critique.

As I will demonstrate below, the style and voice vary among the poem's six sections: some are written in a syntactically complex style, and some in plainspoken vernacular. While it might seem that these distinctive modes are meant to emphasize differences among the historical periods of the poem, the poem's argument is not about historical change; rather, the poet uses chronology as a structure in which to make a more abstract argument about genre. Informed by Andy Hines's discussion of periodization in Tolson's work, I read the poem's periods (e.g., the

chaos." In Waldo Frank, *Re-Discovery of America and Chart for Rough Waters* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1940), 237.

¹⁵ As quoted in Aldon L. Nielsen, "Melvin B. Tolson and the Deterritorialization of Modernism," *African American Review* 26, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 248.

¹⁶ William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930; repr., New York: New Directions, 1966).

¹⁷ Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 1.

Revolutionary War or the Harlem Renaissance) as overlapping and mutually informing one another. For, while the poem moves from past to present, and even explicitly advocates forward motion as a goal, just a few years later, in a footnote to his 1953 epic poem *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*, Tolson would instruct readers to interpret his historical periodization abstractly—as a progression of “lags and leaps,” made up of motions variously “vertical-circular, horizontal-circular, and rectilinear.”¹⁸ In “Dark Symphony,” these motions also apply to tone. The poem’s six sections together develop at least two distinct tones of voice: a white modernist, dense in allusion and syntactically complex; and a Black modernist, using classic, canonically white conventions to address Black interests, using elements of Black vernacular language. From those two emerges a third voice: an ethnic ironist, a voice who, through each section’s exchanges with the ideas of the other five, variously dampens or accentuates elements of the first two voices.¹⁹ This ethnic irony exceeds the binary of biracialism. Just as Ronald Walcott observes of Tolson’s Curator character in his *Harlem Gallery*, here, too, we find a subject “who speaks at times, but not always, for Tolson himself.”²⁰

High Propaganda: Tolson’s Critique of Markedness

The poem’s fourth and longest section, “Tempo Primo,” most clearly engages the matter of the poem’s title, the symphony. In six stanzas, it develops a free-verse description of a New Negro who “strides upon the continent,” emerging from the struggles of Black heroes of the nineteenth century, “Hard-muscled, Fascist-hating, Democracy-ensouled,” and making grand contributions to art, science, and labor movements—all while speaking to “*his* America,” Black America.²¹ In the second and third stanzas of the section, this New Negro delivers a speech-within-the-poem:

The New Negro
Breaks the icons of his detractors,
Wipes out the conspiracy of silence,
Speaks to *his* America:

“My history-moulding ancestors
Planted the first crops of wheat on these shores,
Built ships to conquer the seven seas,
Erected the Cotton Empire,
Flung railroads across a hemisphere,

¹⁸ As discussed in Hines, “Vehicles of Periodization,” 433–34.

¹⁹ Somewhat differently, Aldon L. Nielsen characterizes Tolson’s ideas during this time as a “triangle trade” of thought, informed by three intellectual traditions: Africanist historical revisionists, white modernist poets such as Robert Frost, and Black modernists synthesizing the other two inheritances such as Langston Hughes. Nielsen, “Melvin B. Tolson and the Deterritorialization of Modernism,” 255.

²⁰ Ronald Walcott, “Ellison, Gordone and Tolson: Some Notes on the Blues, Style and Space,” in *Black World* 22, no. 2 (December 1972): 27.

²¹ Emphasis in original.

Disemboweled the earth's iron and coal,
 Tunneled the mountains and bridged rivers,
 Harvested the grain and hewed forests,
 Sentineled the Thirteen Colonies,
 Unfurled Old Glory at the North Pole,
 Fought a hundred battles for the Republic."

The succeeding stanzas then conclude with an optimistic reiteration of the New Negro striding in his "seven-league boots," marching "Along the Highway of Today / Toward the Promised Land of Tomorrow!" This optimism foreshadows the triumphant spirit of the poem's "Tempo di Marcia."

Throughout the "Tempo Primo," vigorous verbs ("strides," "sprang," "breaks," "wipes out," "speaks," "flings," "thunders," "creates") construct a Black figure who can match white men's achievements. This intelligent, worldly, and creative Black voice references Alain Locke's 1925 account of the "New Negro," an influential figure in the imaginary of the Harlem Renaissance, one with whom Tolson would have been familiar.²² His master's thesis, *The Harlem Group of Negro Writers*, deposited one year prior to the publication of "Dark Symphony," analyzes the milieu of Black thought captured by the "Tempo Primo" section—that is, Black writers of Harlem in the 1920s through the early 1930s. While a graduate student at Columbia University from 1930–1931, Tolson observed his contemporaries in those years of the Harlem Renaissance in close proximity to their activities in Manhattan; yet, as a Southerner visiting New York, he also approached their work with critical distance, providing perspective on their actions and art. As Edward J. Mullen suggests, the poet's work in the 1930s was unique in its "[historicization of] a movement contemporary with its moment of creation."²³ By titling his prize-winning poem with the label "symphony," Tolson thus aligns his work as responding to Locke's demand that Black artists better themselves using higher forms, even as the tone of the poem's other sections will be shown to complicate this engagement.

Among musicians of the Harlem Renaissance, symphonic composition would have been the most relevant instantiation of the New Negro doctrine. Intellectuals advised composers to use the symphonic medium to elevate genres such as the blues, ragtime, spirituals, and jazz as part of a broader call for Black artists to shape themselves through "higher forms."²⁴ Locke epitomizes this view, writing in 1936 that Black Americans "must build up two things essential for the highest musical success;—a class of trained musicians who know and love the folk music and are able to develop it into great classical music."²⁵ This rhetoric of progress resulted in a double standard that required "authentic" treatment of Black folk forms and a simultaneous transcendence of them. Folk material, in order to be respectable, needed to be transmitted through high art, and the

²² Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925; repr., Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2015).

²³ Edward J. Mullen, ed., "Introduction," in *The Harlem Group of Negro Writers*, by Melvin B. Tolson (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 11.

²⁴ For discussion of racial uplift, modernism, and music, see Lawrence Schenbeck, *Racial Uplift and American Music* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012).

²⁵ Alain Locke, *The Negro and His Music* (1936; repr., Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1968), 4.

completion of a symphony was proof for entry into the canon of respectable music. In years since, Locke's framework for understanding the work of Harlem Renaissance composers has frequently been reproduced: for instance, in a 1992 discussion of William Grant Still's 1930 *Afro-American Symphony*, Carol Oja operates within a formulation of Black vernacular music by which it is transformed into "great" (i.e., classical) music.²⁶ She contrasts the "accessible" blues music of Still's materials against the ultimately "esoteric" symphony, characterizing this progression as motion from "a lowly state to a nobler one."²⁷

In "Dark Symphony," Tolson explicitly references Locke's concept, but he would have been aware of different approaches to the relationship between high and low art. He admired, for instance, James Weldon Johnson, whose 1912 novel *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* intertwines the issues of style, race, class, and identity by exploring ragtime, the cakewalk, spirituals, and opera. Interpretations of the role of music in this text have varied: John Howland writes that the novel's protagonist "sought to raise ragtime, cakewalks, and other music of southern rural blacks to the level of art music."²⁸ But while this reading of the *Autobiography* finds the protagonist elevating Black forms by transforming them into high art (i.e., classical music), it is perhaps more accurate to emphasize an inverse desire in the protagonist's account—that is, we should note that the narrator claims that the low forms of ragtime and the cakewalk "give evidence of a power that will some day be applied to the higher forms"; his emergent goal in the novel is to "turn classic music into ragtime," the power of which is derived not from its association with subjugation or struggle, but from its intricacy, which far exceeds that of classic forms.²⁹

Intricate transmissions between high and low art manifest in Tolson's own poem in the opening "Allegro Moderato," which questions the achievements listed in the "Tempo Primo." It does so by borrowing white modernist writing techniques, but redirecting them toward Black interests. The "Allegro Moderato" gives three sestets about the Revolutionary War. In the opening stanza, the figure of "Black Crispus Attucks," known as the first Black casualty of the War, is juxtaposed against "white Patrick Henry."

Black Crispus Attucks taught
Us how to die

Before white Patrick Henry's bugle breath
Uttered the vertical
Transmitting cry:
"Yea, give me liberty, or give me death."

²⁶ Carol Oja writes that Still "strikes a compromise between an accessible black idiom—in this case the blues . . . and the more esoteric world of modernist concert music"; he "did not simply transplant the style of the black revue or of jazz orchestras to the concert hall. Instead he sought to transform it." Carol J. Oja, "'New Music' and the 'New Negro': The Background of William Grant Still's *Afro-American Symphony*," *Black Music Research Journal* 12, no. 2 (Autumn 1992): 156–59.

²⁷ Oja, "'New Music' and the 'New Negro,'" 159.

²⁸ Howland, *Ellington Uptown*, 58.

²⁹ James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, in *Three Negro Classics* (1912; repr., New York: Avon Books, 1999), 441.

The section most clearly exemplifies the “white modernist” style for which Tolson would become known, including allusions to two historical figures and one literary figure; elevated, antiquated vocabulary (“uttered,” “loin-girt,” “aver,” “garroted”); and an abstract noun personified (“Labor’s brow”). Houston A. Baker Jr. calls this *blackening*, which occurs when Black artists are forced to adopt a standard, classic literary form (e.g., the sonnet or the ballad) for the purpose of legibility, but nonetheless try to get what “black mileage” they can out of it.³⁰ In Baker Jr.’s 1987 text, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, it is Tolson whom he characterizes as the Black modernist who sounds most like a white one. On the first page of the book’s preface, Baker Jr. tells the story of a young Black student he met, who greatly admired Tolson’s work: “He was adamant in his claim that *only* Melvin Tolson among the vast panoply of Afro-American writers had become a successfully ‘modern’ writer [e.g., like Eliot, or Joyce, or Pound].”³¹

In the “Allegro Moderato” opening given above, this white modernist language is applied to Black history, a marking that Tolson explicitly announces by racializing both Black Attucks and white Henry. For Tolson’s contemporary readers, the section’s approach to history might have resembled revisionist approaches common to other texts of the era—for example, Carter G. Woodson’s 1933 book *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, which examines erasures in the telling of United States history.³² Tolson’s poem, through reference, similarly educates readers about overlooked Black historical figures; in later sections, Nat Turner, Joseph Cinquez, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman will be mentioned. The opening stanza above makes a claim about chronology, emphasizing Attucks’s accomplishment as a hero of battle in history *prior* to those of the more well-known Patrick Henry, arguably legitimizing this claim through use of the white modernist style. But further still, this opening reference does not merely introduce a Black war hero where otherwise only white ones would have conventionally been acknowledged. It also critiques the logic by which such erasures were resolved. In the 1960s, Tolson would regard comparisons of his work to that of the white modernists superficial, not in terms of style, but given that his *ideas* are so different from theirs: he wrote that, although his technique resembles T. S. Eliot’s (“... and any artist must use the technique of his time”), the two writers’ ideas are “as far apart as hell and heaven.”³³ (He did not clarify which was which.)

³⁰ Houston A. Baker Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 85–86.

³¹ Full quotation: “I remember a long conversation with a brilliant young black man that carried us from the steps of Connecticut Hall to Yale, to a local cafeteria, to Sterling Library, and then out into the open air again. He was adamant in his claim that *only* Melvin Tolson among the vast panoply of Afro-American writers had become a successfully ‘modern’ writer (before, say, Baldwin or Ellison) —by which he meant that only Tolson, in his view, sounded like Eliot, or Joyce, or Pound, or . . .” Baker Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, xiii, emphasis and ellipses in original.

³² Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933; repr., Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990).

³³ “My work is certainly difficult in metaphors, symbols, and juxtaposed ideas. There the similarity between me and Eliot separated. That is only technique, and any artist must use the technique of his time. Otherwise, we’d have the death of Art. However, when you look at my ideas and Eliot’s, we’re as far apart as hell and heaven.” Tolson to Kate and Ben Bell, 1961, box 1, folder 3, MBTP.

Tolson intervenes, therefore, not to induct Attucks into the canon of war heroes, but to undo that canon. Among the Black intellectuals whose work Tolson studied in his thesis, Attucks's death was commonly remembered, in the years surrounding the poem's completion, not as honorable national sacrifice, but more pointedly as reason for resisting state power. In "New World A-Coming," Roi Ottley mentions the Crispus Attucks Mission Foundation, a group active in Harlem at the end of the 1930s, which persuaded Black people to refuse to bear arms on behalf of the state. The group met at the headquarters for the Ethiopian Women's Work Association, whose subcommittee of conscientious objectors took this as their motto: "Justice, like Charity, begins at home. Remember Crispus Attucks."³⁴ This attitude of objection could be redirected toward the speech to later be given by the New Negro in the "Tempo Primo" section of "Dark Symphony," in which the Black man is praised for having "fought a hundred battles for the Republic." It is hard to imagine that readers of the poem who also followed Tolson's wartime newspaper column, "Caviar and Cabbage," could have read his poem's references to battle and not heard this command, from a 1939 installment, resounding in their minds: "We must not listen to the siren of the war lords."³⁵

The "Allegro Moderato" and "Tempo Primo" sections, when read together, inhabit white stylistic conventions for the purpose of critiquing conventional ideas about progress and war. The fifth section of "Dark Symphony," "Larghetto," operates much differently.

If, by Baker Jr.'s time of writing in the late 1980s, Tolson had gained a reputation for sounding like a white modernist, it was only after decades of disparate, and deeply racialized, readings of Tolson's work that such a distilled judgment would have been possible. In decades prior, Tolson's poetry had been received within a binary reinforced by mid-century institutions of New Criticism, by which critics posed "propaganda" (Black poetry) against "literature" (white poetry).³⁶ Many white critics thought, as Ronald Walcott frames the matter, that all "Black idioms"—including Tolson's—"are somehow *unpoetic* and *political*."³⁷ As a lifelong communist, Tolson would never have claimed to be unpolitical, nor that any of his poetry transcends politics. That said, in the "Larghetto" of "Dark Symphony," Tolson performs a relatively direct mode of political writing by using a simple style and contemptuous tone, one similar to his commentary in "Caviar and Cabbage." That wide-ranging column includes lighthearted satire and narrative, as well as heavier commentary on public figures and topics. Tolson analyzed such issues as Jewishness, education, the rise of fascism, and what it means to be an "American," and he used the column to recount personal anecdotes: he documents labor struggles during his employment at a slaughterhouse in the Missouri Bottoms, or tells sardonic accounts of parties he attended during trips to New York City.

³⁴ Ottley, "New World A-Coming," 333.

³⁵ Melvin B. Tolson, *Caviar and Cabbage: Selected Columns by Melvin B. Tolson from the Washington Tribune, 1937–1944*, ed. and intro. Robert M. Farnsworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1982), 113.

³⁶ For further discussion of Tolson's reception, see Hines, "Vehicles of Periodization," and Cruz, "Refuting Exile."

³⁷ Walcott, "Ellison, Gordone and Tolson," 28, emphasis added.

Tolson's tone in the columns was casual and sometimes even callous; the networked allusions of his poetry were mostly absent. Above all, he wanted his column to be accessible to his readers: "I try to be so simple that only a Howard professor can tell I am a professor."³⁸

The "Larghetto" section of "Dark Symphony," which asserts a forthright condemnation of white America, channels the style and tone of his more scathing essays. In this section, Tolson depicts the Great Depression and the years leading up to World War II using four stanzas, each of which begins with this refrain: "None in the Land can say / To us black men Today." Each iteration of the refrain is then followed by an accusation of the great white world, building a view of white leaders and institutions as violent, corrupt, and self-interested. The consistent AABBCB rhyme scheme of each of the section's four stanzas makes the language plain and accessible; the simple syntax and informal diction would not seem out of place in Tolson's newspaper writing. Of all the poem's sections, this one *sounds* most like vernacular speech:

You send the tractors on their bloody path
 And create Okies for *The Grapes of Wrath*.
 You breed the slum that breeds a *Native Son*
 To damn the good earth Pilgrim Fathers won.

 You dupe the poor with rags-to-riches tales,
 And leave the workers empty dinner pails.

The section concludes with an accusation of the United States as a "vast Sahara with a Fascist brand," suggesting that white leaders regard their own country with as little care as settlers and colonizers regard the African Sahara. This condemnation of white leaders, if the rhyme and line breaks were removed, could be mistaken for many of Tolson's columns: for example, in 1942, when, in a wartime piece titled "White Men among Yellow and Brown and Black Women," Tolson conveys concerns about the behavior of white men abroad. "White men have been taught for generations that whiteness is a sign of superiority," he writes, leaving no room for doubt about his attitude nor allegiances.³⁹ This "Larghetto" might be what led some of Tolson's critics to align the poem as a whole with his protest poetry; maybe with good reason, no critic has offered much elaboration.

Mastery and Deformation

Houston Baker Jr., in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, identifies and analyzes a period of Black discursive modernism beginning in 1895 that operated via the strategies of mastery and deformation in fluid relation—the "mastery of [vernacular] form and the deformation of [standard poetic] mastery."⁴⁰ Writers of this milieu, he argues, inhabited canonic genres in order to both master and

³⁸ Tolson, *Caviar and Cabbage*, 271.

³⁹ Tolson, *Caviar and Cabbage*, 150.

⁴⁰ Baker Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, 99.

dismantle them, often through two types of masking: the mask that conceals or disguises, and the mask that advertises or announces.⁴¹ The second type operates by asserting its transgressions, which disarms intruding interlocutors. This is the method that Tolson used in the "Larghetto," in which he sincerely emulated his own vernacular voice, conveying contempt plainly and without ambiguity. But, just as powerfully, the first type of mask, which works through the mastery of white codes, emerges in the other sections.

The poem's second and third sections call into question not only the ideals of white society—as the "Allegro Moderato" and "Tempo Primo" did above—but also the mediums through which they are delivered, developing a critique of the engagement between Black art and white audiences. These are also the sections that deal most extensively with music. In both sections, white people treat Black musicians in one of two ways: with pity, or else commodifying the value their musicianship produces. However, the tone of the two sections differs considerably. While the third section, "Andante Sostenuto," is a lyrical ode, concluding with a plaintive series of repeated apostrophes ("Oh, how can we forget?"), the second, "Lento Grave," uses free verse, without stable meter or any rhyme scheme.

The "Andante Sostenuto" comprises three octaves that express cynicism about Reconstruction. In its first stanza, the narrator speaks of the "great white world," alluded to by "they," and he dramatizes white reactions to Black people:

They tell us to forget the Golgotha we tread
We who are scourged with hate,
A price upon our head.
They who have shackled us
Require of us a song,
They who have wasted us
Bid us o'erlook the wrong.

The subsequent stanzas culminate in a series of questions, asking the reader how they can forget the denials of human rights experienced by Black Americans. Tolson uses singing as a metaphor for the labor demanded by oppressors: "They who have shackled us / Require of us a song." The section's third stanza then emulates a lyrical, Romantic ode, in which the speaker calls out to an absent interlocutor ("Oh!"), appealing to their sympathy:

Oh, how can we forget
Our human rights denied?
Oh, how can we forget
Our manhood crucified?
When Justice is profaned
And plea with curse is met,
When Freedom's gates are barred,
Oh, how can we forget?

⁴¹ Baker Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, 49–52.

Tolson mimics a canonically white style by adopting a tender, questioning voice in order to address chattel slavery, imprisonment, and egregious disregard of humanity. This *blackening* thus operates through the mask that conceals—the speaker delivers an indictment of white violence by demonstrating mastery of a white form, the pleasing lyric.⁴²

The second section, “Lento Grave,” cooperates with the third, but it is delivered in a different rhetorical mode. This section emulates Black folk poetry. Without rhyme or meter, it lists five spirituals by name in free verse: “One More River to Cross,” “Steal Away to Jesus,” “The Crucifixion,” “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” “Go Down Moses.” The second stanza of the section lists contexts in which enslaved Black people would have performed them: “Black slaves singing ‘One More River to Cross’ / In the torture tombs of slave ships,” in “slave-pens at midnight.” These spirituals evoke resilience amid struggle, a function common to art of this era. On one level, Tolson might have meant to historicize the role of spirituals as a model for blues poets during the Harlem Renaissance, a practice with a lineage traceable to W. E. B. Du Bois’s discussion of “Sorrow Songs” in *The Souls of Black Folk*, which inspired many writers of the movement.⁴³ Indeed, the syntax and structure of the “Lento Grave” allude to Langston Hughes’s 1921 poem “Aunt Sue’s Stories” (“Black slaves / working in the hot sun / and black slaves / walking in the dewy night”).⁴⁴ Elsewhere, however, Tolson expressed ambivalence about the use of such symbols given what he observed of his peers in Harlem. In Tolson’s master’s thesis, he contrasts the crowd-pleasing Langston Hughes with the writer Jessie Fauset, whose work he considered elevated, if exclusive: “The vagabond Langston Hughes singing his ‘Weary Blues,’ chanting of life in ‘a [n****] place,’ captivates audiences wherever he goes and gains a host of dusky readers, while Miss Jessie Fauset languishes in her intellectual solitude.”⁴⁵ Certainly, Tolson held Hughes in high regard, even as he concluded his master’s thesis with this damning thought: “Most of the members of the Harlem Renaissance portrayed the sensational features of Negro life, which were exploited for the entertainment of white readers.”⁴⁶ The question of intended audience thus proves to be central with regard to Tolson and to the writers whose work he studied. If Tolson admired Hughes—who would eventually judge the merits of “Dark Symphony” at the Negro Exposition—this admiration was likely shaped, in complicated ways, by the proximity of Hughes’s relevance among Black audiences to modes of pandering that Tolson considered insidious.

In the “Lento Grave,” Tolson engages the problem of audience directly, introducing a relation between white audiences (“the great white world”) and Black artists. The list of spirituals, the structure of which alludes to “Aunt Sue’s Stories,” is preceded by the following quatrain:

⁴² For more information about lyric poetry and blues conventions in the period under discussion, see Brent Hayes Edwards, *Epistrophies: Jazz and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 57–85.

⁴³ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Sorrow Songs,” in *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903).

⁴⁴ Langston Hughes, “Aunt Sue’s Stories,” *The Crisis* 22, no. 3 (July 1921): 121. Thank you to an anonymous reader for drawing my attention to this allusion.

⁴⁵ Tolson, *Harlem Group of Negro Writers*, 97. Brackets added by author.

⁴⁶ These are the concluding lines of Tolson’s thesis. Tolson, *Harlem Group of Negro Writers*, 136.

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

Positioning white people as the audience, Tolson depicts Black Americans as expressive, innately rhythmic, and warranting pity. On one level, these lines function to celebrate Black artistic expression. Similar associations were routinely used for such a purpose. In Maud Cuney-Hare's 1936 book *Negro Musicians and Their Music*, for example, the author characterizes Black music as "tragic and joyful in emotion, pathetic and ludicrous in melody, primitive and barbaric in rhythm" in an earnest effort to raise Black music to national and international recognition.⁴⁷ But Tolson's stanza given above, unlike that of Cuney-Hare, frames its own imagery as conventional. The lines seem made to mimic the historicizing attitude of many critics and scholars when approaching Black music in the 1930s. As David Garcia discusses, developments in the field of comparative musicology during these years manifested as a search for Black music's African origins, leading ethnomusicologists and folklorists of various schools of thought toward a preoccupation with Black musical essence.⁴⁸ Elsewhere in his work, Tolson undermines any search for an authentic Black style, poking gentle fun at the belief that Black music is especially genuine in relation to other idioms. Tolson's novella "Dark Symphony," a fictional work about Slim Walpole, a "dark fugitive from the underworld of Kansas City," describes Slim's encounters in Harlem. In the seventh chapter, Slim plays violin and sings for a small group of people on the street. The crowd, after hearing what the narrator calls "two or three semi-classical lyrics" that Slim learned from a German woman in Missouri, calls for some "real music," "colored folks' music." Tolson's emphasis—"real" is underlined in the typewritten manuscript—suggests that the crowd's request is simplistic or mistaken.⁴⁹

In the quatrain in the "Lento Grave," the vague, sensational language ("centuries-old pathos," "wizardry of our dusky rhythms") can be read to similarly question white interest in "real" Black music. By describing Black artistry from a white listener's position, the passage asks *who* the spirituals are sung for, and why. Further still, the juxtaposition between the use of the spirituals in the "Lento Grave" and the blackened lyrical ode of the "Andante Sostenuto" implicates Tolson's own poem—which would soon be praised for its masterful lyricism and regaling tempo—in the relation between Black singer and white listener. The rebuke of white memory in the "Andante Sostenuto" turns out to be hard-won; the lyricist's grievance is only audible if made lyrically enough.

⁴⁷ Maud Cuney-Hare, *Negro Musicians and Their Music* (Washington, DC: Associated Publishers, 1936), v.

⁴⁸ David Garcia, *Listening for Africa: Freedom, Modernity, and the Logic of Black Music's African Origins* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

⁴⁹ From Melvin B. Tolson, "Dark Symphony," box 5, "'Dark Symphony,' typescript (incomplete), undated," MBTP; emphasis in original.

Ethnic Irony in the “Tempo di Marcia”

The poem’s sections discussed so far, when taken together, develop an ambiguous stance toward the symphonic spirit: while the poem’s passages enact the formal mastery and determination required by a proper symphony, when read in context of Jim Crowism and the ongoing Depression, they also regard corporate and capitalist achievements with bitterness. By contrast, the brief final section of “Dark Symphony,” “Tempo di Marcia,” concludes optimistically, as if to undo the critiques made by the sections that precede it. The “Tempo di Marcia” comprises three short stanzas, conveying a unified message:

Out of the abysses of Illiteracy,
Through labyrinths of Lies,
Across waste lands of Disease . . .
We advance!

Out of dead-ends of Poverty,
Through wildernesses of Superstition,
Across barricades of Jim Crowism . . .
We advance!

With the Peoples of the World . . .
We advance!

In Tolson’s revisionist history, the section accounts for the present day, an era in which Black voices join the ranks of white ones, with the tempo marking “Tempo di Marcia” conveying wartime urgency. For many of the poem’s critics, these lines operate as a sincere celebration of the advancement of all people of the world, a vision in which Black voices have been assimilated into global culture. For example, Robert M. Farnsworth suggests that this section envisions how “the democratic promise of America is expanded into a global dream for mankind.”⁵⁰ Given the critiques developed by the poem’s preceding sections, this vision is best interpreted as Tolson emulating a corporate tone for the purpose of complicating his critique.

In the domain of corporate advertising in the 1930s, the symphony became an icon of corporate structure: IBM, Ford, and other companies used the “symphony” to link their brands to an image of a productive, idealized “America,” as Michael Long has shown.⁵¹ For example, the World’s Fair of 1939 featured an *IBM Symphony* by Italian composer Vittorio Giannini; its performance closed IBM’s exhibit at the fair. For John Harwood, the symphony encapsulates what he refers to as the corporate event’s “triumphalist histrionics.”⁵² As he explains, the piece was written in three

⁵⁰ Robert M. Farnsworth, *Melvin B. Tolson, 1898–1966: Plain Talk and Poetic Prophecy* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984), 81–82.

⁵¹ Michael Long, *Beautiful Monsters: Imagining the Classic in Musical Media* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 197–200.

⁵² John Harwood, *The Interface: IBM and the Transformation of Corporate Design, 1945–1976* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 104.

movements: the first, expressing "contemporary unrest and confusion" and a resulting "martial spirit"; the second, an elaboration on the IBM company song "Ever Onward," which calls for "peace and love amongst humanity"; and finally, the third, a triumphant reprise of "Ever Onward," marked *allegro ritmico*.⁵³ This performance at the World's Fair accompanied speeches by dignitaries, who applauded two cosmopolitan institutions: the International Chamber of Commerce and the League of Nations. Thus, while one could read the "Tempo di Marcia" as evoking democratic promise for the progress of mankind, this final section is better read as historicizing an epoch that rewarded artists for reproducing such a fantasy.

The situation is further clarified by Tolson's prose criticism on international affairs during the era of "Dark Symphony." In an essay for "Caviar and Cabbage" from 1939, Tolson writes of Neville Chamberlain's empty speeches: "Do not be deceived by the fine phrases that these international crooks will use. . . . There is no game so dirty as the game of international politics."⁵⁴ And in 1944, he would mock the world leaders whom he called "The Big Boys at the Peace Table," rhetorically asking them, "Are you willing to give the Four Freedoms to the Africans, Indians, Negroes, Chinese?"⁵⁵ In 1940, in an article called, "Are You a Fugitive in the Stratosphere?," he writes, "We talk about spiritual mansions and let babies die in filthy shacks. We want those speakers and writers who'll give us rides in the stratosphere."⁵⁶ In response, he demands practicality of his readers: "Don't be a fugitive from reality. Don't escape from the facts of life."⁵⁷ Tolson's critiques of idealism in these essays could be transferred to his own poem's grand rhetoric, which resembles the deceptive "fine phrases" he dismisses in his column.

Tolson's 1953 poem *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*, completed when Tolson was Poet Laureate of Liberia, also ends optimistically, its exuberant final section describing an international vision of African progress. Timothy Dejong reads the poem as a "rosy portrait of the African future," concluding that Tolson's refusal of cynicism reflects his "great civic responsibilities" as Poet Laureate: "Tolson's optimism was likely buoyed in this respect by the recent formation, at the end of World War II, of the United Nations—a multinational cooperative organization that appeared to embody the progressive internationalist perspective discernible in the last section of *Libretto*."⁵⁸ He thus takes the poem's optimistic outlook at face value, using the poem to legitimize the United Nations. While Tolson undoubtedly took his role as civic leader seriously, other critics have emphasized the ambiguity in Tolson's discussions of progress. Michael Bérubé reads the *Libretto* as ironic, "a guerrilla strategy, a means of letting revolutionary discourse sound in the ears of conservative white Americans by masking that discourse."⁵⁹ In the case of "Dark

⁵³ Harwood, *The Interface*, 105.

⁵⁴ Tolson, *Caviar and Cabbage*, 111–12.

⁵⁵ Tolson, *Caviar and Cabbage*, 160.

⁵⁶ Tolson, *Caviar and Cabbage*, 185.

⁵⁷ Tolson, *Caviar and Cabbage*, 185.

⁵⁸ Timothy Dejong, "Affect and Diaspora: Unfashionable Hope in Melvin B. Tolson's *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*," *Research in African Literatures* 45, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 121.

⁵⁹ Michael Bérubé, *Marginal Forces/Cultural Centers: Tolson, Pynchon, and the Politics of the Canon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 145.

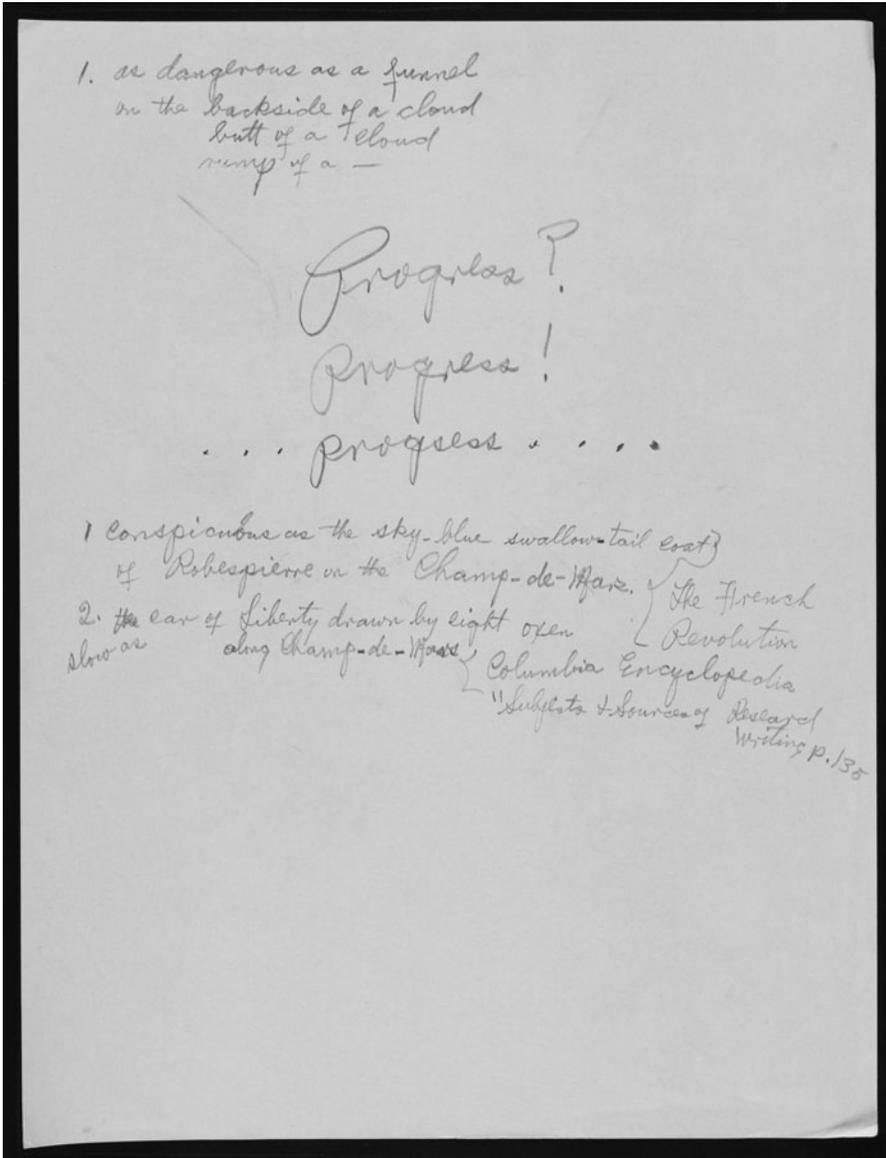


Figure 2. Undated note from the Melvin B. Tolson Papers, box 5, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

Symphony,” Tolson positions the symphony as a tool of corporate interests, implicating it as emblematic of the greed he critiques.

On occasion, other critics have emphasized the grim registers of Tolson’s oeuvre: in 1970, Bob Rohrer wrote of “the struggle and pessimism that wind through Tolson’s poetry.”⁶⁰ Indeed, Tolson’s private writing, like some of his public criticism, reveals a muted skepticism toward liberal, worldly idealism. For example, an undated, handwritten note by Tolson conveys ambivalence toward progress (shown in [Figure 2](#)).

⁶⁰ Bob Rohrer, “Anderson Premiere Haunting,” *Atlanta Constitution*, May 27, 1970.

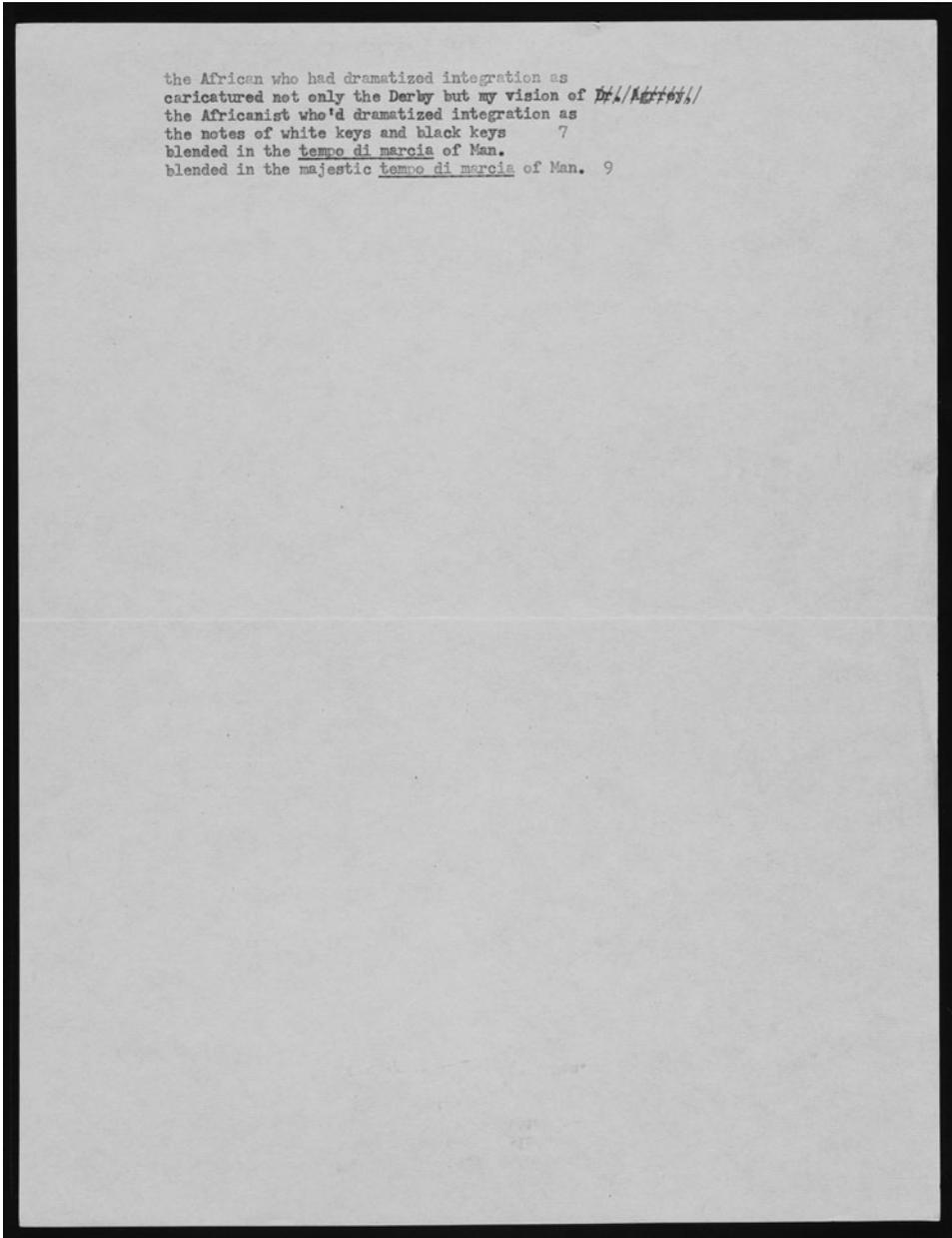


Figure 3. Undated note from the Melvin B. Tolson Papers, box 3, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

Tolson's stance in the note is obscure; after considering a question mark, and then an exclamation point, he settles on cryptic ellipses. Elsewhere, he brings the two issues—progress and musical symbolism—together in some draft notes for an unknown poem, in which he explores the “Tempo di Marcia” motif (shown in Figure 3).

In this experimentation with language, Tolson imagines a figure—first an “African,” altered to be an “Africanist.” This Africanist works to dramatize integration

using the image of a piano (“notes of white keys and black keys”), producing a sound of racial harmony that is “blended in the majestic tempo di marcia of Man.” While no context is offered as to Tolson’s own attitude toward this fragment, he gives readers a clue in his use of the word “caricatured.” Given his lifelong weariness at the reproduction of simple stereotypes, here he suggests that any “majestic” vision of integration is idealistic to the point of misrepresentation. No broader point is discernible from this fragment. In “Dark Symphony,” by accentuating the differences among his sections’ voices, Tolson ensures that the poem’s most sincere critiques remain that way, ambiguous—always able to be read as mere caricatures of thought.

Conclusion

In 1945, William Harrison’s review of “Dark Symphony” in the *Boston Chronicle*, replete with musical imagery, exemplified a common tenor of praise for the poem: “The majestic nobility of its lines exalts the reader through the organ-like music and the lofty thought, and justifies the appellation of ‘masterpiece.’”⁶¹ If Tolson’s poem, with its argument taken as a whole, counts as a masterpiece, then the highest form of ethnic irony emerges from something beyond it—from the difference between the poem’s poetics and its poiesis.

In comparison to “Dark Symphony,” most of Tolson’s concurrent literary projects required more time and probably more effort. *Gallery of Harlem Portraits*, written over the course of three decades and first published in 1979, would eventually inform *Harlem Gallery*, a proper epic, “poetry on the grand scale,” as Ronald Walcott puts it.⁶² Tolson’s novella proved similarly challenging. A little too long, with lively dialogue but a dragging plot, it demonstrates an attempt at a literary genre Tolson never grasped sufficiently to bring his draft to publication. At least in relation to those intricate experiments, the poem “Dark Symphony” seems almost basic, with each of its stanzas neatly documenting little more than the status quo of thought. We can imagine Tolson laughing while he completed the work, knowing from experience that a white symphony, rather than a pinnacle of achievement, is the easiest thing in the world to make.

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⁶¹ William Harrison, review of *Rendezvous with America*, by Melvin B. Tolson, *Boston Chronicle*, June 23, 1945.

⁶² Walcott, “Ellison, Gordone and Tolson,” 27.

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