1996

Georgia Douglas Johnson: The voice of oppression

Stephanie Marie Martin-Liggins

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GEORGIA DOUGLAS JOHNSON:
THE VOICE OF OPPRESSION

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition

by
Stephanie Marie Martin-Liggins
September 1996
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ABSTRACT

The history of the United States reveals a male, white hegemony so powerful and repressive that is successfully imposed a feeling of inferiority on many under its domination, women and Blacks primarily. Psychological aversion conditioning as well as physical force was used to bring about submission to a typically servile and terrible plight. Those who opposed the power structure did so in silence or were in danger of execution.

After years of struggles: occupational, financial, political, physical, a way was gradually made for the Black voice to be heard commercially. The time was called the Harlem Renaissance Period and was financially supported by wealthy whites, mostly women. It appeared overtly to be an equal opportunity for all artistic Blacks to express themselves, but this movement was politically driven by a few Black men. Another hegemony had been formed, and those outside of it were at the mercy of those on the inside, again.

This study examines the attempt of one Black woman writer, Georgia Douglas Johnson, to emotionally affect those in power. Johnson, burdened by virtue of her race, gender, and occupation, nevertheless, showed a profound belief in the human heart's ability to be compassionate and in the power of art to engender understanding. If there is com-
munication, understanding and compassion would result. Compassion would replace and end oppression. Georgia Douglas Johnson was a means of communication.
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INTRODUCTION

Georgia Douglas Johnson, a black female writer, during and following the Harlem Renaissance, was appropriately called, "a poet born of... the social Holy Ghost" because she championed a wide variety of oppressed groups especially women, the Black mother, the "half-caste" (racially mixed), and Black men. This was to her advantage as well because she fell into three of the four categories mentioned above. Her subject matter and status were enough to deem her the voice of the oppressed, but being a female writer created an additional element of burden.

As a poet and playwright, Johnson was a social activist for equality, unity, sisterhood, and brotherhood. The essence of the "New Negro" movement should have made these roles easily attainable, but surprisingly the establishment of sexism in the country had also penetrated the movement. Thus, the "New Negro" meant more specifically "the male Negro" with only a few exceptions, notably Georgia Douglas Johnson because she acquiesced to a role of feminine subjection due to a patriarchal and racist society. She was compelled to use a sentimental discourse as an acceptable mode of communication for the biased and unbiased. This method used tender words to soften the strong message that she sent in the name of social reform. Had she not done so, Johnson, being Black and, even more detrimental, female, would have, in all probability, never have been published or
acknowledged as a poet of note. Though all but forgotten now, during the Harlem Renaissance her accomplishments as a writer were unequaled among women and surpassed many of the men.
CHAPTER ONE

The Status of Women

The purpose of this discussion on the status of women is to show that against the backdrop of history and, in particular, the era in which she produced her work, Georgia Douglas Johnson, as a poet/playwright, was limited by her gender and race, as to what she could say and how she could say it in the public arena. This sentiment existed not only in white America but also among her male Black peers.

During the early 1900's when white women in America were struggling to overcome traditional sexist molds and clamoring for women's suffrage, the Black woman was also fighting her own multidimensional battles against racism and sexism (Hine, ed. Black Women in America 7). Uniquely, in the former, both were fighting against the same enemy: the Judeo-Christian belief as to the status of women. While the ideologies presented in the Holy Bible are not unique to Jewish and Christian faiths, they found general expression and acceptance in the United States where much of the mores and folkways are connected to the practice of religion (Mickelson, ed. Women, Authority and The Bible 39). The Bible contains many references that have been used to perpetuate the dominance of men over women. For instance, in the third chapter of Genesis, a serpent, Satan, convinced Eve, the first woman, that eating the fruit from a forbidden tree would make her "like God, knowing good from evil..."
(Genesis 3:4-6). So, she ate from the tree and gave some to her husband. God discovered their sin and as a result humankind experienced His judgment. As part of this judgment, God proclaimed: "Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you" (3:16). The word "desire" according to the Greek translation means "to rule over" thus showing that there would be an ongoing struggle for power between them (Strong Hebrew/Greek Bible Dictionary 43).

According to the "Genesis" account in the Bible, when Eve yielded to temptation in the Garden of Eden, women were placed in subjection to men and condemned as being responsible for the fall of man. (The Holy Bible, N.I.V, Genesis 3). Women's subjection was a commonly held belief during the Harlem Renaissance Period and women, both white and Black, were viewed from this perspective (Huggins, Harlem Renaissance 230). From the pulpits of America the story of Eve's sin was told repeatedly to curb the rising tide of women crying out for recognition and suffrage (Starr, The Bible Status of Women 213).

This was especially troublesome to women writers like Georgia Douglas Johnson because silence was part of the subjection. This silent woman issue caused her to face an unspoken literary bias as a female poet/playwright.

In the Bible, the Apostle Paul sets the tone for this belief by asserting how a woman should behave in the Christian assembly, which also demonstrates her position at home
and in the larger society: "A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man; she must be silent" (I Timothy 2:11-12). In this instance, Paul refers to the Genesis incident for his justification. This was typical in Jewish society where a woman was allowed to discuss public issues only with her husband at home (Starr 109). Unfortunately, this same attitude exists in the Christian religion and found its way into larger society. Yet, there is a list of many female Biblical characters, Old and New Testament, who took exception to this rule (110) and so did Georgia Douglas Johnson in her era.

Biblically and historically, in keeping with Paul's position on this issue; in the mid to late 900's B.C., King Solomon wrote: "Better to live on a corner of a roof than share a house with a quarrelsome woman" (Proverbs 25:24). How does one define a quarrelsome woman? Is she, perhaps, simply a woman one who refuses to be silent? This bit of advise from one of Israel's supposedly wisest men unfortunately seems to have set the mold for future generations. In the 1920's Countee Cullen, a black male poet and a contemporary of Johnson presents this same bias in his poem, "For a MOUTHY WOMAN." Cullen, the adopted son of a minister (Huggins 165), wrapped his poem in religious imagery.

For a MOUTHY WOMAN

God and the devil still are wrangling
Which should have her, which repel;
God wants no discord in His Heaven
Satan has enough in hell.
(My Soul's High Song 117)

In writing this poem, Cullen seemingly placed himself in a position of masculine superiority, whereby he gave himself the privilege of judging and labeling women. At the same time he adds fuel to the Biblical bias. "For a Mouthy Woman" fails to set a criterion for mouthiness in a woman and therefore suggests universality and disrespect for the female gender.

The lyrics of the poem assume an informed reader, but the presentation of it raises many questions. Did she simply talk too much or too loud? Does "the mouthy woman" attempt or succeed in usurping the authority of a man by way of the power of her tongue? Is a mouthy woman one who desires her voice to be heard, and because she refuses to be silent causes discord for men who believe that she has stepped out of her place? Had she out-talked him, out-argued him, or simply refused to obey his command for her silence? The Bible instructs women to be silent and in subjection, therefore, this "mouthy woman" has ignored divine instruction and is now a sinner. Both God and the devil are supreme men who have either witnessed or experienced first hand her discord-causing activities. She is evidently the worst kind of sinner: Heaven does not want her and hell will not have her! It would appear logical that this attribute would make her a prime candidate for Satan's
favor, but for some reason he does not want to deal with another big mouthed woman! Has this "mouthy woman" driven Satan to go against one of his prime activities—discord causing? Does only a woman's tongue have the potential to be so powerfully painful, even to deity?

In this poem, God is degraded to an entity which stands on equal terms with the devil and "wrangles." Somehow, this seems synonymous with women's stature in a male oriented and dominated society. Men are on the same level as God; women are peons, looked down on from men's heaven and judged as "mouthy!" Men can "wrangle" or argue, but a big mouth on a woman is evidently viewed as sacrilege.

"For a MOUTHY Woman" was clearly a sexist work which degraded women forthright and literally. Cullen, perhaps under the guise of a persona, did not attempt to make unobtrusive the message of disrespect through the usage of figurative language. By simply looking at the title, it is evident that the primary purpose of the poem was ridicule, and it was published without apology in his collected works.

By the Harlem Renaissance the status of women had improved enough where she did not necessarily have to be silent, but she had to be careful. If her words were too strong, too harsh, had a hint of bitterness or anger, she could be labelled a "quarrelsome woman" or "a mouthy woman" and be rejected. Yet, Countee Cullen as well as other male poets did women a great injustice in the name of art.
The status of women during Johnson's time has been established. In order to avoid rejection, she must be, or at least appear to be, under the yoke of man. Considering the opinions of men like King Solomon, Apostle Paul, and Countee Cullen, she must use her words cautiously, for her character was linked to her words. Men, on the other hand, seemingly could say what they pleased, how they pleased. So, Georgia Douglas Johnson was in a precarious situation. If she wanted her work to be accepted, she must choose her words carefully.

Comparing her works with men like Cullen, one can readily see that her words are soft and lack the vitriolic and ridiculing tone of others. This is evident in the respectful analysis of the subject matter she named: "Old Black Men."

They have dreamed as young men dream
Of glory, love and power:
They have hoped as youth will hope
Of life's sun-minted hour.

They have seen as others saw
Their bubbles burst in air,
And they have learned to live it down
As though they did not care.
(Hughes, ed. The Poetry of the Negro 77)

Johnson's loving heart for the men of her race is apparent. She attempts to speak to a presumably white male audience, the societal power structure, in an attempt to alter the ultimate plight of black men. She writes as though she is a mother pleading for her son. Perhaps because her plea has only a slight chance of being heeded, her tone is one of
resigned defeat as she tells of dreams lost, denied, or deferred. She is not only subordinate in her tone, she is affectionate as she sends out a plea on their behalf.

The title is the first powerful phrase: “Old Black Men.” Because she uses the word “old,” all men is the implication, for if black men do not die young they will grow old. The word “old” has dual representations of both negative and positive with the former outweighing the latter. To be old should or could mean that one is wise, experienced, seasoned, time-honored. The feeling that comes from the title includes these positive things, but there are also the negatives that speak of much-used, time-worn, bygone, beat-up, rundown, broken down, soon to be discarded, thrown away. Surely there are exceptions afflicting those outside of the race and being merciful to some within, but exclusively this poem addresses problems that plague the black man.

The use of the word “men” calls for their positions to be considered. Due to the dominant influence of the Judeo-Christian belief system, the roles of men are defined according to scripture. Men are to be the heads of their households. According to Ephesians 5:23 “The husband is the head of the wife.” Men are to provide for their families: “...if any provide not for his own, and especially for those of his own house... he is worse than an infidel” (I Timothy 5:8). To be a man of excellent standing in the church, he
must: "be the husband of one wife and must manage his children and household well (3:12). He must be above reproach,... temperate, self-controlled, respectable, gentle, not quarrelsome... (3:2-3). Men are also the first line of defense of the country, beliefs, their race, and family. When the men fall, in this case black men, then what becomes of their race, beliefs, family? Doomed is the race whose men have been stripped of their manhood, and their spirits broken.

Johnson's words, "They have dreamed as young men dream" puts a special emphasis on the word "they" because it is a plural pronoun (used in third person) representing a general group of people. Therefore, "they" appears to be all inclusive of the title--"Old Black Men." Old men are being compared with young men in the past tense. Youth bears a hopefulness that inexperience nurtures, but wisdom comes through experience. One interpretation reveals that as men grow older their innocence gives way to experience which reveals that because they are who and what they are--black men--their dreams cannot come true.

Here, to dream has both positive as well as negative connotations. Positively, dreaming means setting goals and believing as you strive that you can accomplish them. On the other hand, dreaming could refer to wishing and hoping without action towards making the dream or wish a reality. Nevertheless, to write "They have dreamed" implies that the
dreaming, active or passive, has reached the point of termination.

The strong, positive images from lines two and four: "They have dreamed... hoped as the young do" are made painful by lines one and three: "Glory," "love," "power."

Johnson begins with these abstract terms which represent doing great things in the work place and at home. Are these not typical dreams, realistic for the decent, honest, hard-working husband and father who strives to meet and exceed the requirements set for men to be productive members of society? Because he has demonstrated competence, he wants the rewards and appreciation that should come as a result of competence. He wants recognition! For other races of men these things are attainable; why are they not for black men? "They have hoped as youth will hope of life's Sun-minted hour." This hope is for the young who strive for this. The old man strives, but in an awareness that his work will not be recognized or rewarded. To him, it is an accepted fact proven through generations of experience. Johnson's words are simple, but the feelings that come across in her tone are powerful and convicting.

Good reason for sorrow has been established when in stanza two Johnson's tone adds grief to defeat. "They have seen as others saw Their bubbles burst in air." There is an allowance for dual interpretation as stanza two begins. They have seen their own bubbles-- aspirations--burst just
as others have seen their own bubbles burst—no witnesses. Or, it is an experience that happens to them all, and others witness the devastation of certain hopes and dreams.

The figurative language she uses makes the hopes and dreams of the men so very fragile: "bubbles burst in air." It appears that these, as yet unmatured aspirations—bubbles—have been conceived and are just barely beginning to be realized when they are suddenly exploded by some unseen force—prejudice—in the very environment in which they were conceived. It seems as though the essence of life itself—air—is their opposition. Seemingly, the tendency to pre-judge and be intolerant of differences is in the air, so as air is inhaled bigotry and racism are natural occurrences. "Old Black Men" have experienced the pricks of a racist society themselves and have witnessed the exploded dreams of other men just like them.

Line seven deviates from the rhythm pattern of iambic pentameter established in the first stanza and the preceding two lines of stanza two, as it aims to capture the attention and sympathy of the reader in a final, yet striking attempt. "And they have learned to live it down—As though they did not care." As a result, the last line is read not only for what it says, but more so for what it does not say: Won't you please care?

Yet, somehow it is not over. One needs to know if it was necessary for the survival of their spirit to learn to
live it down? Why not “live it up” in rebellion and make everyone else care?

Living it down means denial that the rejection ever occurred; the pain was/is never present, and everything is just fine. Living it up, within this context, could be defined similarly with the addition of celebration at the personal expense of others, most likely loved ones. Therefore, there is dignity in living it down for he sees the responsibility to continue to strive regardless of the absence of recognition and reward. He must not falter and/or cause his family to falter. His manhood has been at battle; yes, it has been critically wounded, but it is not dead. This interpretation is based on the notion that dreams and hopes were actively pursued and impeded, but the words Johnson uses leaves room for the possibility that hopes and dreams were not pursued.

Johnson wrote, “They have dreamed...” “They have hoped...” To dream and hope can be mentally hyperactive, yet are by definition physically inactive. “...as young men...,” “...as youth...” Youth represents the period between childhood and maturity. Note, it means on the way to maturity, but not yet there. Thus, to be a youth is to be young, inexperienced, naive, often times unrealistic in the setting of goals and expectations of self and others. Dreaming of glory, love and power are substantial dreams which require a great work intellectually and physically in
order to see them become fulfilled. But, the opposite of these strong, unsubstantive abstracts are fragile, transient, unsustainable bubbles. Were their dreams equal to bubbles?

Because her tone was so heavy-hearted and affectionate, this poem obviously had a great deal of personal value for Johnson. In many respects, the poem mirrored the experiences of her husband.

Lincoln Johnson, Georgia Douglas Johnson's husband, had an impressive history. He was A.B. Atlanta University at the age of eighteen in 1888, L.L.B. University of Michigan in 1892, and Georgia delegate-at-large to the Republican National Convention since 1896 (Hull, Color, Sex and Poetry 156).

Could one realistically consider that this man's dreams were bubbles? He was obviously a striver and an achiever. In description of him, the word "prominent" was used, and it must have fit for Johnson outlined a book, The Life and Times of Henry Lincoln Johnson, on his political career which began at age eight. She must have believed the book had the potential to earn money in the book market otherwise it would have been a private memoir. Thus, Lincoln Johnson must have been a well known public figure.

He and his family left Georgia in 1910, settled in Washington, D.C., where he established a law firm. It would appear that his "dreams of glory, love and power" were
being realized. His family consisted of: two sons, one with his name, which is an honor, a wife which submitted to his will that she, as a wife and mother, take care of the family before other interests. And, he had a successful career.

In 1912, he was appointed Recorder of Deeds for the District of Columbia, by President Taft, a position of clout for a black man. (159) Surely, he had reached "life's sun-minted hour." Then in 1916, the Senate denied his confirmation as Recorder of Deeds. "He has seen as others saw, his bubbles burst in air." It is not stated whether or not he continued to practice law until his death in 1925, but it is clear that he lacked the resources to secure his family's financial future after his demise because his wife was forced to re-enter the work force and take on Lincoln's role as provider.

Lincoln's dreams and hopes were surely not bubbles. They were actively pursued and had come true for a time, but were made fragile only because they were dependent upon a system of racial equality which was and is extremely unstable. He had been one of the fortunate ones!

There were examples of far worse treatment in history—evidence that there was little or no moral compunction associated with the treatment of black men. For instance, the United States Government openly practiced a form of genocide against black males in Macon County, Alabama, for
forty years beginning close to the conclusion of the Harlem Renaissance, 1932. Men in the late stages of syphilis were used as laboratory rats by the United States Public Health Service in a study whereby researchers investigated the complications of the disease during its final stage. The men were supposed to be receiving treatment, but instead were receiving placebos. Over one hundred treatable black men died as a result of this research.

(Jones, Bad Blood 1-2)

Between 1918 and 1930, four hundred thirty-seven blacks were lynched. The vast majority of these victims were male. Rationale? First, it was a white means of social control over blacks, a "reaffirmation of mastery and domination" without legal repercussions. (Zangrando, The N.A.A.C.P. Crusade Against Lynching, 1905 -1950, 7) This took on a variety of forms. It was suggested and even researched that "planters and poor whites used violence to intimidate black workers or, upset by a decline in cotton prices, vented their frustration on blacks." (9) The infamous and most widely known excuse was the alleged rape of white women. (10)

There was significant discrimination in the workplace. In the North, in spite of Civil Rights laws, blacks were not hired in theaters, restaurants, hotels, and department stores. They could only find employment in the worst of occupations: domestic and personal service, unskilled labor.
Men were limited to being porters, shoe shine boys, and the like. They did a great deal of work for very little pay. The North had been considered a land of occupational promise! No wonder Johnson's voice was one of defeat and grief in "Old Black Men." Certainly she would not have been deemed "mouthy" or "quarrelsome," but she successfully got her point across that there was extreme unfairness in societal operations which oppress black men in this country.

Now that Johnson's empathetic female voice has been analyzed dealing with the male gender and compared to Countee Cullen's directly opposing brutal commentary on "a mouthy woman," it should be clear that she wrote from a tender heart with the appropriate feminine sentimental tone, and Cullen wrote seemingly from a harsh, hard-hearted tone where "mouthy" women were concerned. And, for some reason his was an acceptable tone because the fact that the poem was published leads me to believe that it was acceptable for men to degrade women. Further evidence lies in the fact that in some of the poetry of major, male Harlem Renaissance writers women are objectified, or villified as in "For a Mouthy Woman." If Johnson were not careful in her phraseology she, too, may have been deemed "a mouthy woman." I use this to further demonstrate the extreme differences in criterion for satisfactory voices for male and female poets. While I have no examples of women poets of this era illustrating men as negative characters or objects I readily
found several where men do such to women. For example, "Harlem Dancer" and "Harlem Shadows" by Claude McKay dehumanize women.

In "Harlem Shadows," the speaker introduces the "girls" by saying: "I see the shapes of girls." These girls obviously walk in the darkness of night because only their silhouettes are seen, no faces to give positive identity to even one. These girls have "slippered feet" which dominates their identity in the poem. They go from "shapes' to "slippered feet" to other types of "feet," but none have names or personalities; therefore, they can be readily imagined as non-people, objects.

"Harlem Dancers" also keeps the "her' and "she" he writes about from having actual human characteristics until the last two lines which give an indication that she may be capable of feeling, but at this particular time emotions escape her. She has a "falsely-smiling face," and "her self was not in that strange place." (McKay in Barksdale ed., Black Writers of America 496)

Both poems speak of women in a voice of pitying contempt. In the beginning of "Harlem Shadows" the speaker uses phrases like "girls of tired feet," "stern harsh world" which are used within a context of sensitivity until the contrasting phrases at the end show truer feelings of disdain: "dishonor and disgrace," "fallen race." The partially sympathetic tone fades showing that there was no intention
to arouse sympathy for even the speaker does not seem to truly have any for these Harlem prostitutes. Which brings up a few related questions: Why prostitutes? Were they in every shadow? every dancer? Was that all that black women did, or could do in Harlem to earn an adequate salary? According to historical references on the employment opportunities for women during the Harlem Renaissance in Beautiful, Also, are the Souls of my Black Sisters, American Women of the Progressive Era, and When and Where I Enter, it is evident that black women were primarily only allowed the low paying domestic jobs which typically did not meet the financial needs of the family. And, When Harlem was in Vogue stated that it was expensive to live in the black section of Harlem (25). Therefore, why not shed a humane bit of light on these pitiable women?

These poems serve as an ideological representation of men's attitudes towards women. The intention is not to stereotype all men, but these poems, which degrade women, are just a few of several I have found, through extensive survey of Harlem Renaissance poetry, by several different men. And, it provides a rationale for Georgia Douglas Johnson's sentimental tone of voice as an acceptable, possibly necessary approach for women to use in order to be recognized, published, heard.
CHAPTER TWO

Foredoom

Georgia Douglas Johnson sheds a very dim and grim light on the lives of women in her poem "Foredoom." Keeping in mind that she was a literary spokesperson for black women, if what she wrote was typical for that time, then black women must have had a special reason to survive for certainly their lives showed little sign of being worthwhile.

"Foredoom" by definition is a state of being--beyond the victim's control--which is predetermined and ultimately destructive. "Foredoom" is a strong word to use as a label, name, or even a title because doom by itself represents devastation, and by adding fore as a prefix means that nothing can be done to avoid the doom. By using it, Johnson sets a tone of fate's predestined hopelessness for those who fall under its chosen categories.

Foredoom

Her life was dwarfed, and wed to blight
Her very days were shades of night,
    Her every dream was born entombed
Her soul, a bud, -- that never bloomed
(The Heart of a Woman 39)

If this poem were transposed into a mathematical equation it would appear this way:

A. Her life = dwarfed, blight
B. Her days = night
C. Her dreams = entombed
D. Her soul = bud unbloomed

This poem suggests that there exists a female, or females--
the unnamed universal "her"—restricted and inhibited in every imaginable way. Like a terminal illness which began at birth, her body and soul have both been afflicted and rendered helpless, hopeless even before having the opportunity of recognizing the fact that there was an adversary to beware of. Supernaturally, it seems, the affliction existed prior to her, and pre-determined to include her in its devastation. What is her affliction? Sexism.

Line one begins with "Her life," and line four begins with "Her soul" which indicates that she is physically and spiritually alive. She lives and dreams and aspires to be..., but yields to the realization that she is doomed. Her equation: \( A + B + C + D = \text{Slavery!} \) Why? The only plausible explanation is because she is a woman. Her gender is the only information which addresses her as an individual instead of the fate which has befallen her. Slavery is the prediction due to the idea that only a slave cannot rise up and change his or her circumstances because he or she is property, and any attempt to change that status could mean severe punishment or even death. (The usage of the word "slave" is not limited to physical ownership by another, but could include anything that holds someone in bondage beyond their control.) Because of this, only a slave could be subdued and oppressed without much hope of escape. And, this appears to be the case in the poem. Her dreams were born entombed means that they were buried before they were
even born. Whatever is buried alive is held captive by the tomb. Johnson gave her audience no specific details on what doomed the central figure in the poem but created a tone of great despair because of the doom, not on the several probable causes—not yet. However, the dooming force is all-female consuming for Johnson used the universal "her" instead of specifying an individual. In order to be so powerful the force must be deeply embedded within her society or culture because something has either caused her to accept this doom or at least not fight it. So, if the woman is in bondage to a society which deems her inferior by virtue of race and gender; she is cursed indeed.

"Foredoomed" shows the woman's status is equivalent to that of a slave's status. She has been bound spiritually by a culture which has established patriarchal rule over the women. In patriarchal ideology men own women; therefore, every man is a potential "father"/owner. Like a slave, she is dependent and possessed, not because she is incapable of independence and self-possession, but because her dependence on man is necessary for the dominant male gender to continue dominating. (Sanchez-Eppler in Samuels, ed. The Culture of Sentiment 92)

The irony enters with the fact that this was the great Harlem Renaissance—the period of so-called black deliverance. The "New Negro" was speaking out against racism and its despotic forces. For example in a speech delivered at
Madison Square Garden in March of 1924, Marcus Garvey let it be known: "The world is the property of all mankind, and each and every group is entitled to a portion. The black man now wants his, and in terms uncompromising he is asking for it." (Garvey in Barksdale, ed. Black Writers of America 571) The black man did not get the portion Garvey requested, but he did get an opportunity to let his voice be heard through literature, his feelings expressed through artistic creation. Meanwhile, the black woman remained within the clutches of sexism—pushed aside, dismissed, forgotten, during this tremendous time of emancipation. How could they have been so downtrodden during what was supposed to be such a liberating time? Calvin Hernton writes:

The central concept and the universal metaphor around which all aspects of the racial situation revolve is "Manhood." Whatever whites have done to blacks, it is viewed, by the men, not as the wronging of an entire people, males and females. Rather it is viewed solely in terms of denial of the MANHOOD of a people. ...no matter what shape the world is in, it is never supposed to be a woman's world, it is always a MAN'S world. (Hernton, The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers 38)

Even after all of the struggling women had done for equality on many fronts, they were just not seen as valuable as men, as human as men—with feelings, emotions and the need to realize hopes and dreams—in the eyes of the men, the publicly recognized representatives of the race. Did it not matter that Mary McLeod Bethune founded educational
institutions to provide blacks with greater opportunities in the work force, and worked with national administrations and organizations to improve the status of blacks nationwide? (Hine, Black Women in America 113-126) Was it easily forgotten that Ida B. Wells was instrumental in the cessation of lynching in the South for several years? (1242-1246)

These are just a few female representatives of the struggle for the betterment of the social and economic status of blacks in this country. Apparently it was only of secondary importance because women were not published nearly as frequently as men, and their work was always carefully worded and selective in order for it to be published. Of the forty-nine major works published between 1922 and 1935 only eight works were by women. (Wintz, Black Culture and the Renaissance 164-5)

Hernton provides an explanation:

Traditionally, the World of Black Literature in the United States has been a world of black men's literature. Black women have been involved in the development of Afro-American writing since it's inception,... yet it has been almost impossible to read the critical works and general history of the New Negro/ Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's and get any impression other than that the "New Negroes" were entirely of the male sex. (Hernton 39)

Men obviously had a problem with allowing the equality of women. Previously examined was man's depiction of woman as object. Here, the examination goes a step further to show that perhaps women could not meet men's expectations in reality because in literature he created her as ideal. A
prominent stereotypical image was that of the black goddess. The black woman was portrayed as alluring, exotic, beautiful, and enticing as a physical being. Shells without hearts is what the women portray in “Jazzonia” and “The Harlem Dancer.”

Typically, Johnson’s characters were solely emotional beings without physical characteristics, illustrating the lack of importance, at least in Johnson’s view, in exterior features. Antithetical of Johnson’s poetry, however, specifically the “her” in “Foredoom” where her life, her days, her dreams and her soul were dealt with on an emotional level, the women in the following poems by prominent male writers of the time show no emotion. This was a means of making black women fantastic creatures on an unrealistic plane as the men attempted to create the black diva, or what Calvin Hernton described as the “Jazz Blues Woman.” (112)

Langston Hughes’s dancing girl in “Jazzonia” and Claude McKay’s “Harlem Dancer” do not deal with the personal attributes of the women characters portrayed, instead these women are observed on a specific occasion and judged by their behaviors and appearances. This is fitting for the ultimate stage of the “Blues Jazz Woman: the Wild Woman.”

This particular type of woman “prefers the anonymous lights of the hazardous night to the security of family and homeplace. ...Beleaguered by the strictures of culture, state, racism, sexism and all the controlling forces and institu-
tions of society, she lives a defiant life.” (112) This classification is as close to intimate personal description that this type of poetry seems to allow.

In “The Harlem Dancer,” the woman portrayed was unnamed, just as in Johnson’s “Foredoom,” which attributed a universality to the “her” that he wrote of. She could have been any woman, or all women in his characterization. Sadly, though, this “universal” woman was not a woman, but an object.

...Her voice was like the sound of blended flutes
Blown by black players on a picnic day.
She sang and danced on gracefully and calm,
The light gauze hanging loose about her form;
To me she seemed a proudly-swaying palm
Grown lovelier for passing through a storm.
Upon her swarthy neck black shiny curls
Luxuriant fell; and tossing coins in praise,
The wine-flushed, bold eyed boys, and even the girls,
Devoured her shape with eager, passionate gaze...
(McKay in Barksdale, ed. 496)

The speaker uses several comparisons of the woman with inanimate objects to make her less real as a person. A simile is used to describe her voice, which is homosapien specific, as sounding like “blended flutes.” Flutes have a high pitched, mellow tone. Blending the sound requires the harmony of two or more flutes being played simultaneously. When the speaker hears her voice he perceives beautiful music, but only musical instruments can produce such a melodious tone. It is not a human sound.

The word “form” in line four can be literally defined as a body, but it does not suggest a human one. Because of
the typical usage of the word "form," it cannot adequately represent a woman's body. It connotes a shape such as a square or circle.

This "she" in this poem is described on a physical, superficial level. She is numb and unfeeling; therefore, she could just as well have been a "swaying palm" tree. A tree, if cut, bleeds sap, but does not cry out. A tree is alive, but cannot reveal feelings. The main character in the poem does not reveal any feelings.

The final metaphor comes with gazes devouring her shape. "Shapes" and "form," "palm" and "flutes" demonstrate the speakers vision of the "Harlem Dancer" as an emotionless shell—a thing, like a tree.

In some of Hughes' poetry the same objectifying of women found in McKay's work takes place. For example, in "Jazzonia" an observer appraised a dancing girl by the look in her eyes, and the dress that she wears and lifts. She is then compared to two beguiling women who led men astray and negatively affected history.

Jazzonia

...In a Harlem cabaret
Six long-headed jazzers play.
A dancing girl whose eyes are bold
Lifts high a dress of silken gold.

Oh, singing tree!
Oh, shining rivers of the soul!

Were Eve's eyes
In the first garden
Just a bit too bold?
Was Cleopatra gorgeous
In a gown of gold?

Oh, shining tree!
Oh, silver rivers of the soul!
(Hughes in Barksdale, ed. 518)

A mood of seduction and temptation is set. Jazz music is playing, and a bold eyed dancing girl lifts her dress high. Phrases such as 'shining rivers,' "shining tree," "silver rivers," "bold eyes," dresses and "gowns of gold" suggest flamboyant, visually stimulating objects to accentuate the seductive mood. Every image presented, like bold eyes and gold gowns, brings the reader back to the main character, the dancing girl. Her eyes remind the speaker of Eve as he ponders the idea: Were Eve's eyes...too bold? As the speaker relates Eve to the "dancing girl," there is an insinuation that she will fall from grace just as Eve did.

She was not judged by the content of her character, and could not be, because Hughes' passive voice alerts the reader that he does not know it. Hughes did not make so bold an attempt to delve into the mind behind the "bold" eyes. Only known was the look in her eye, an action with her dress, and the possibility of causing a man to fall prey to her wiles. The dancing girl lifted her gold, silk dress high perhaps to reveal the temptress and seductress that she may have been, or that she was inebriated.

She is beguiling as was Eve's serpent, coupled with being pleasant to the eye like the forbidden fruit. Perhaps, she is forbidden fruit of a sort. The dancing girl
must be beautiful in order to be compared with Cleopatra. Cleopatra's name is symbolic for extraordinary beauty.

In the final analysis, both Cleopatra and Eve were femme fatales and so was the dancing girl. As the speaker compared her with Eve and Cleopatra a prediction of similar destinies was being implied. The dancing girl fits the stereotype of the black diva. She was alluring, exotic, lustfully and sexually appealing to the eyes. She did not fit the subjugated woman mold, therefore, she was not seen as a real person, but an object to be looked at, admired physically, used. So, if this is an illustration of the way men of the Harlem Renaissance saw women, it is no wonder women were oppressed. To be an "image, ideal, object" was a very dangerous position to be in; it allowed sexism and racism to foredoom women into a life of numb subjugation.

A key factor which contributed to the woman as object philosophy illustrated here, and specifically by two particular artists was their sexual orientation. Hughes and Cullen were very widely read, thus they were powerful literary and commercial influences. They were also protege's of Alain Locke, "who helped to 'midwife' the Renaissance into being" (Hughes, The Big Sea 218 as quoted in Hull, 7). Locke was blatantly homosexual even misogynistic and formed a circle of support: financial, literary, and political around men, excluding and damaging the careers of women (Lewis, When Harlem was in Vogue 179). This introduces
another aspect of being foredoomed—as a woman writer during the Harlem Renaissance. On an international scale, sexism was/is an obvious mountainous hurdle, but as an artist during this era, it was as vehement as racism, if not more so (Hernton 38). Locke, a critical benefactor to the literary portion of the Harlem Renaissance, allowed his anti-female sentiments to inhibit the exposure of women's work. He served as a primary channel whereby writers found financially contributing patrons to support the writers as well as fund their writing. Consequently, Hughes, one who was involved in a "special relationship" with Locke was/is the most acclaimed poet of the era (Lewis 81, 85, 87, 88). And, in a situation directly opposite to Hughes's, Georgia Douglas Johnson, among others, like Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Angelina Grimke were blocked from sources of patronage and from getting their works published by major publishers ((Wintz, 206). As a matter of fact, Johnson and Grimke subsidized the printing of their own work. It is noted in Hull's biography of Johnson that it took seven years, during the pinnacle of the Harlem Renaissance, to get her third book of poetry, An Autumn Love Cycle, 1928, published (Hull, 175). And, though she wrote other books, she was unable to achieve publication until she finally self-published Share My World in 1962. During those years, Johnson struggled to work to maintain a household and write. She was often afraid of not being able to do all the writing projects that
she set out to, but she could not help her damning quality of femininity, and no benefactor saved her from the work force—even in her sixties.

Age became a factor. According to Hull, older men received better response to their work than older women (Hull, 12). By the late 1920's, women like Johnson, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Angelina Grimke and Jessie Fauset born before 1890 were considered getting old while the men were deemed as getting wiser. Georgia Douglas Johnson falsified her birthdate in unsuccessful attempts for fellowships, scholarships or the like (Hull 12).

Strangely, these established male writers such as Hughes and Cullen who either kept women on the outside of the support networks, did not do enough to include them, or were powerless in that domain, were a part of the “Saturday Nighters Club” which was hosted by Georgia Douglas Johnson. Because of these gatherings, Washington, D.C., became another “mecca” for the “New Negro” helping to make the movement nationwide (165). Over the years, her “S” Street home held some of the greatest, as well as some of the least known writers of the period: Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, Angelina Grimke, Mae Miller, W.E.B. DuBois, Alain Locke, Countee Cullen, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Arna Bontempts, Bruce Nugent, Jessie Fauset. One did not have to be a writer, or even black to attend the Saturday Nighters. A. Philip Randolph, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Waldo Frank,
H.G. Wells, and Rebecca West went. These long lists are short in comparison to the number of people who truly came to nourish and be nourished by the creativity within Johnson's living room.

It was difficult being a woman artist during the Harlem Renaissance. They were foredoomed by their sex in the midst of a strong, male, homosexual, beneficiary network which seemed to include every major benefactor and every male writer whose name is associated with this era. This is not to say that every male writer was gay, because such a statement would be false. But, it did help to be either gay, or at the very least, male. Women were less than the least and they were overlooked (Wintz 206).

Foredoomed Black Motherhood

In a broader context, "Foredoom" was as much a racial as gender problem. Black mothers were afraid to continue to populate this country with more victims. To be born black is to be in jeopardy. To be born black and female is double jeopardy. Blacks live under the constant threat of racism, while black women must contend with sexism in addition to the already humongous impediment of racism. This ideology comes from a history of black hardship, unfair and forced by others generation after generation through chattel slavery to other forms of bondage during the Harlem Renaissance, and it serves to help form a definitive idea of the term "foredoom."
Georgia Douglas Johnson was obviously no stranger to the idea that being born black was one avenue of being "foredoomed." In her author's note introducing her second book, *Bronze*, she writes: "This book is the child of a bitter earth-wound. I sit on the earth and sing--sing out, and of, my sorrow. Yet, fully conscious of the potent agencies that silently work in their healing ministries, I know God's sun shall one day shine upon a perfected and unhampered people." She is speaking of black people tried in the fire so long (by racism) that they have come out pure gold. She writes of Bronze: "...it is entirely racial and one section deals entirely with motherhood--that motherhood that has as its basic note--black children born to the world's displeasure" (letter to Arna Bontemps as quoted in Hull 160).

Johnson's entire section "Motherhood" is dedicated to reflection upon the forth coming life of sorrow to her children. Pitifully, this condition is not based on flaws of character which can be changed, but on the flaws of parentage (usually a black mother) and color. For mother's, as well as for herself, she speaks of the unfair plight of her children. She questions her happiness at being with-child in "Maternity," wondering if it would be kinder to kill the child before the cruel world does spiritually.

Does not the day loom dark apace
To weave its cordon of disgrace
Around his lifted throat?...
Ah, did I dare
Recall the pulsing life I gave,
And fold him in the kindly grave.

Once a child is conceived, the hopelessness sets in
the mother because doom is the predestination for her black
cchild. Some of her poetry in *Bronze* demonstrates the theme
of being "foredoomed" by skin color. For example in "Black
Woman" a mother speaks to her unborn child:

Don’t knock at my door, little child,
I cannot let you in,
You know not what a world this is
Of cruelty and sin.
Wait in the still eternity
Until I come to you,
The world is cruel, cruel, child,
I cannot let you in!

Don’t knock at my heart, little one,
I cannot bear the pain
Of turning deaf-ear to your call
Time and time again!
You do not know the monster men
Inhabiting the earth,
Be still, be still, my precious child,
I must not give you birth!

In this poem Johnson seems to provide license for
sterilization when she cries out in sorrow to her child who
still lives in eternity: "Don’t knock at my door...wait in
the still eternity... I must not give you birth.” She
repeats “cruel” world three times in the first stanza to
provide the rationale for keeping the child from life.
Johnson writes: “I cannot bear the pain” implies that she
would share in the child’s suffering, yet she would have to
“turn a deaf-ear” to her child’s call for help. She could
not provide protection for the child if she allowed him or
her to be born.

This poem gives the allusion of slavery time when black parents as well as their children were owned by white masters and therefore could not, without the risk of torture, death, or being sold away, protect themselves or their children from the master's lust or punishment (Loguen in Aptheker, *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States* 450-451). The "monster men inhabiting the earth" could have very easily been the slave masters. However, since Johnson was born after chattel slavery her poem speaks of a system whereby her black child and she may not be someone else's property, but they still do not have adequate protection from the potential danger of the "monster men"—whoever they are.

Within this arena, black motherhood is the perpetuator of pre-determined existence in doom. In "My Boy," Johnson speaks to her young brown son, encouraging him to enjoy his youth:

> I hear you singing happily,  
> My boy of tarnished mien,  
> Lifting your limpid, trustful gaze  
> In innocence serene.

> For time awaits your buoyant flight  
> Across the bar of years,  
> Sing, sing your song, my bony lark,  
> Before it melts in tears!

She describes her son as one of "tarnished mien." "Mien" refers to appearance. "Tarnished" by definition means to stain, blemish, or discolor implying that something
which was once normal has been damaged. Usually, tarnish can be removed restoring to normalcy the object effected. But, tarnish cannot be removed from skin. In this case, it is the eye of whoever beholds her brown son and holds the opinion that because he is not white, he is stained, damaged goods.

He does not yet know the racist heart that exists in society. His gaze is "limpid" and "trustful" because he is "innocent." "Limpid" represents that which is transparent, simple and clear as though he looks through or beyond circumstances instead of at them. His "trustful gaze" shows that he believes that people, not just his mother, are honest. It is not stated that he is lifting his gaze to a specific individual, therefore, he could be lifting his gaze to anyone or everyone. The poem seems to say enjoy youth's "innocence." Innocence is a kind of term for ignorance here. Over time, innocence leaves, and experience and wisdom replaces it—to your sorrow.

The theme of being foredoomed is well represented in these poems. Mothers consider not allowing their children the opportunity to see if life might be fair or not. They predict their children's doom. In both "Black Woman" and "My Boy" race is the key factor for being destined to suffer in this "cruel world of monster men" and have the "happy song of youth melt into tears." There was much sorrow in the lives of black people and it came from many different
sources under different circumstances. To be born was the first requirement for being foredoomed.

The Harlem Renaissance came on the heels of the Progressive Era, 1900-1920. The Progressive Era was especially helpful to women because it came during war time. Soldier-aged men were away, so women had to replace them at their places of employment. This era was considered: “a time of change wrought by new inventions, urbanization, industrialization, and immigration.” All of which provided opportunities for employment, thus, economic progress for black women (Schneider, American Women and the Progressive Era 122).

One would think that two revolutionary periods should have improved not only the economic status of women but their social status as well. However, this was not the case. Job opportunities and income increased, but black domestic women were still not safe. Fannie Barrier Williams wrote: “...I am constantly in receipt of letters from the still unprotected women in the South, begging me to find employment for their daughters... to save them from going into the homes of the South as servants as there is nothing to save them from dishonor and degradation” (Giddings, When and Where I Enter 87). This employment situation for black women helped to inspire Georgia Douglas Johnson's distraught and defeated tone of voice in “Foredoom:”

Domestic employment, white women, black and white men were all a threat to black women’s virtue. The primary job for
women in the North was domestic service. During the so-called “Progressive Era” the percentage of black female domestics was upwards of 43%. “Many southern white males considered black women their natural prey; men in households--North or South--where black women labored as domestic servants demanded sexual favors as a condition of employment. Shady employment bureaus signed up southern black women for what they believed were respectable jobs as domestic servants, lent them the money for the fare north, and forced them to prostitute themselves to repay the loan” (Schneider 116).

History failed to discover how many of the 43% became victims of the white men in the household where they worked. One would think that two revolutionary periods should have improved the conditions for black women. But, very little changed: times were still terrible. Black men took advantage of women's loneliness and need to feel loved during the vulnerable time of the migration era. In “Not Color But Character” Nannie H. Burroughs wrote: “Thousands of women are... in the clutches of men who are not worth the cost of their existence. They can dress well, and live on the earnings of servant girls (quoted in Giddings, 114).” Langston Hughes provides an account of a black man using and abusing a black woman in his poem: “Ballad of the Fortune Teller.”

...He mistreated her terrible,
Beaut her up bad.
Then went off and left her
Stole all she had...
(Hughes, Selected Poems 114)
Racially Foredoomed

Another aspect of being foredoomed was being racially mixed. Georgia Douglas Johnson had a special empathy and message for those she affectionately called “aliens” in her poem. After all, she too, was mixed. (Hine, 640). (Her mother was Indian and Black. Her father was English. Because of her fascination with miscegenation, Hull alleged that her English father was white.)

In her poems “Alien” and “Octoroon,” her message is both personal and painful as she weaves a uniting thread through all who fall under its categories. She writes with true and deep understanding of the pain involved in being of mixed ancestry. Only through intense self-exploration and analysis of people could she have derived words so sensitive.

“Octoroon”

One drop of midnight in the dawn of life’s pulsating stream
Marks her an alien from her kind, a shade amid its gleam;
Forevermore her step she bends insular, strange, apart—
And none can read the riddles of her wildly warring heart.

(Johnson, 36)

“Aliens”
(To You—Everywhere!—Dedicated)

They seem to smile as others smile, the masquerader’s art
Conceals them, while, in verity, they’re eating out their heart,
Betwixt the two contending stones of crass humanity
They lie, the fretted fabric of a dual destiny.  
A single drop, a sable strain debars them from their own,—The others—fold them furtively, but God! They are alone...

(Johnson, 37)

In “Octoroon,” the universal “her” is used again (as in Foredoom) as if Johnson typically and primarily believes that women hold the patent to sorrow.

Differing from the norm is cause for separation, Georgia Douglas Johnson seems to be saying in these poems. Being black resulted in a lowered social status, and separation from whites. Being partially black (meaning mixed with white blood within three generations) meant joining the lower ranks with those who were considered totally black because whites, in social power, did not accept them as members of their race. Unfortunately, blacks also had a difficult time accepting them as well. Therefore, being neither fully white or black created membership to a unique group of “aliens”—octoroons, quadroons and mulattos. A unique group of outcasts—heartbroken, “they’re eating out their hearts,” racially confused, “wildly warring hearts,”—alone.

Because of Johnson’s seeming preoccupation with miscegenation, it is almost clear that the feelings expressed in “Aliens” and “Octoroon” are her own. As a mulatto, she felt like an “alien.”

Lastly, one cannot omit the most horrifying aspect of being foredoomed because of race—the possibility of being
lynched. It was more prevalent among young black males, but women were not excluded. Between 1882 and 1927, an estimated 3,589 blacks were lynched: seventy-six of them were women, according to the studies of Walter White. Those lynched were typically under twenty-five years of age, and had been accused of a variety of crimes ranging from rape (of a white woman) to being an accomplice to theft, to no accusation at all (Zangrando, The N.A.A.C.P. Crusade Against Lynching 8).

Many victims of lynchings were tortured before being hung. Some of the methods included: amputation of fingers and toes at the joints, extraction of teeth with wire pliers, and castration. Other atrocities executed were saturating the victim's body with gasoline and setting it ablaze; while the body burned, it was used as target practice for those who brought firearms. These were only a few of the creative atrocities committed (Fedo, They Was Just Niggers 32).

Johnson took a stand against lynchings. As a member of the Writer’s League Against Lynching, she wrote several plays with anti-lynching as the theme: “Blue-Eyed Black Boy,” “Safe,” “A Bill to Be Passed,” “And Still They Paused” and “A Sunday Morning in the South.” All of these plays involved the following things: innocent black men being haphazardly and wrongfully accused of raping white women, angry white mobs overthrowing the law and attempting, suc-
cessfully or unsuccessfully, to hang the black men. For example, in “A Sunday Morning in the South,” Johnson delivers strong commentary against lynching with a realistic scenario. A black family sat at breakfast discussing the weakness of the law, and that “a sight of times they gits the wrong man and goes and strings him up and don’t fin out who done it till it’s too late!” (Johnson in Hatch, Black Theater U.S.A. 33). Nineteen year old Tom Griggs, a character in the play, tells his grandmother that he would like to get an education in order to help change the laws to protect black people. Before the conversation was completed, the police enter with a white girl and arbitrarily accuse Tom of raping her. The officer asks the girl: “Is this the man?” Her reply is a hesitant: “I—I’m not sure.” The officer pushes: “He fits your description perfect--color: brown skin, size: five feet five or six, age: around twenty--everything!” (Johnson in Hatch, 34).

The so-called “description” shows the utter foolishness and random practice of racism that blacks were forced to endure. Tom had been seated during the two minute accusation, so the only parts of the description he could have verifiably fit were the age and skin color, but overall as readers we know that the specifications were not specific at all, nor did they have to be. Tom was foredoomed because he was a young, black male--the primary target group of victims—even during the great, black, revolutionary period.
of the Harlem Renaissance—as shown by research statistics on lynching.

“A Bill to Be Passed” and “And Still They Paused” dealt with anti-lynching legislation pending in Congress: The Dyer Bill. The bill was continuously delayed until it was finally defeated in 1922 (Hull, 171). This anti-lynching bill defined a mob and held them liable for prosecution in a federal court for a capital crime. It also invoked the Fourteenth Amendment guarding “citizens of the United States against lynching in default of” state action... (Zangrando, 43).

Georgia Douglas Johnson never stated in the poem, “Foredoom,” the source that foredoomed the “her” she wrote of, but the force seemed to be omnipresent, and omnipotent, yet unseen, like a god whose sole purpose was to devastate. The dooming force is racism.
CHAPTER THREE

The Heart of a Woman

There is a poem that is premiere in expressing the sorrows of women, Georgia Douglas Johnson's: "The Heart of a Woman." Here a dual theme common in much of her work is evident: unrealistic dreams and hopes that soared until reality caged them, or realistic hopes and dreams that were captured by a system of injustice and oppression. Either way, in the end the dreams yield to heartbreak.

The Heart of a Woman

The heart of a woman goes forth with the dawn,
As a lone bird, soft winging, so restlessly on,
Afar o'er life's turrets and vales does it roam
In the wake of those echoes the heart calls home.

The heart of a woman falls back with the night,
And enters some alien cage in its plight,
And tries to forget it has dreamed of the stars
While it breaks, breaks, breaks on the sheltering bars

(Johnson, Heart of a Woman, 3)

In The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers, Calvin Hernton writes: "'The Heart of a Woman' is part of a general tradition of all black writing which derives from the social circumstances—slavery, segregation, discrimination, injustice... Yet, more specifically, this "womanist" poem deals with the elements of women's lives and women's aspirations in women's terms" (125). Therefore, this poem gives insight into the plight of women of this era and earlier: it also provides us indirectly with autobiographical information.
about the poet.

The heart of a woman goes forth with the dawn
As a lone bird, soft winging, so restlessly on,
Afar o'er life's turrets and vales does it roam
In the wake of those echoes the heart calls home.

The poem begins with a metaphor for the emotions, spirit, soul, wishes, and desires of a woman: "the heart of a woman." Then by way of another implied metaphor the living characteristic of mobility is added: "goes forth." Dawn begins the day and represents new developments, emerging opportunities and possibilities for women to try their wings and attempt to reach their potential. And, Johnson's heart, like most women's, goes forth "with the dawn."

Johnson's "heart went forth" at the early age of thirteen when she entered Atlanta University, and thereafter Oberlin Conservatory with aspirations of becoming a composer (Hull 156). "Restlessly" she wrote many songs. But, "the dawn" gave way to "night" as Georgia Douglas Johnson described it: "Long years ago when the world was new for me, I dreamed of being a composer--wrote songs, many of them. The words took fire and the music smoldered and so, following the lead of friends and critics, I turned my face toward poetry and put my songs away" ("The Contest Spotlight." Opportunity July 1927: 204). This gives an indication that her music was not quite as good as perhaps it should have been, but her poetry had promise. Thus, her dreams of being a composer were perhaps unrealistic and reality caged them.

When she returned home after college, she taught
school and served as an assistant principal (Hull 156). This turning point could represent either "roaming" or the "alien cage." But, it definitely was not "home" because she did not stay there, or express a strong sense of personal obligation or responsibility associated therewith. She needed a job; she got one. Period. When she married Lincoln Johnson in 1925, her working days ended until his death.

Still along biographical lines, but operating under the hypothesis that dreams are caged by injustice and oppression, here is another justification for this poem being autobiographical. Johnson dedicated several years of her life to higher education in music, but her primary musical aspirations gave way to a poetic bent and because they are closely related it is not surprising that: "Into my poems I poured the longing for music." ("The Contest Spotlight." Opportunity July 1927:204.) Though she is known for her literary achievements, it is significant that several of her poems were set to music. Her musical training serves as explanation for her typically strict rhythm and meter patterns.

Obviously, writing poetry was of vital importance to her because when her first poems were published she had two young sons; the youngest six years of age. And just two years later, 1918, she published her first poetry collection The Heart of a Woman and Other Poems. This is noteworthy
for several reasons. First of all, writing poetry takes a
great deal of time for quiet contemplation, soul intro-
spection, metacognition, word and idea manipulation, and
message communication. Young children hoard a mother's
time, thus making the chances of these things taking place
slim to none beyond school hours. Finding opportunities to
write probably served as partial inspiration for the poem
being discussed.

Secondly, and most important, her husband was ten
years her senior; therefore, he was perhaps more like a
father figure and established patriarchal rule in their
home. Even after she was an established and published au-
thor, he was noted for not valuing his wife's literary
talents because he maintained that: "a woman should take
care of her home and her children and be contented with
that" (Hull 159). To a certain extent she, too, must have
believed this for in 1932, seven years after the death of
her husband, she was listed in Who's Who of Colored America
as "housewife-writer" (Hull 184). The identification of
herself as housewife first suggests bondage ("cage") to the
stereotypical idea that women must submit to their men. It
also implies that their roles, in accordance with what their
men require, supersedes their own identity and/or accompl-
ishments. Odd that this title would be accepted for publi-
cation describing one whose work deemed her a spokeswoman
for her oppressed gender, and consequently the "foremost
woman poet of her race" during her lifetime (178).

She also should have gained the "foremost cunning woman writer" title for several reasons. Research has shown that it was difficult for women writers to achieve publication of their work. I wrote earlier that Johnson falsified her birthdate to improve her chances at publication, but when that was not enough she went so far as to use masculine pseudonyms like Paul Tremaine. Of twenty-one stories written, one or two were published under her real name (Hull 196). Though most of Johnson's work was never published, the fact remains that her work was published more, and more widely read than any other black woman of that era. Georgia Douglas Johnson was the only black female poet, during the Harlem Renaissance, to collect a full volume of her verse: she published three, and at least two others went unpublished (178).

Clearly, Johnson's heart went forth into her poetry, but her husband's, children's and society's demands restricted her, inhibited her progress, caged her. In spite of her husband's ideas for a woman's proper place, she wrote, within her cage of domesticity. As an example of this cage, Hull comments on the impact of gender roles on Johnson's writing career: "Despite her multi-genred prolificness--which approximates that of Langston Hughes--her female life and responsibilities precluded any possibility of Hughes's kind of literary entrepreneurship. Held up with Hughes,
Cullen, and McKay, it becomes apparent that the gap between them is not nearly so wide as received critical opinion would have it" (Hull 178).

She--women in general--is "as a lone bird" because she is independent, self-sufficient, self-motivated and directed. Bird, as an image, is traditionally used to show freedom without restraints. The sky is the limit for birds especially those who fly "soft winging, so restlessly on."

"Soft winging" gives me the mental image of a dove, or another bird which flies smoothly, not necessarily with a great deal of power like an eagle, but definitely with grace. And, the word "restlessly" shows the energy of one who is seeking something personally meaningful, or perhaps has an enthusiastic, unrelenting drive to accomplish. These birds know nothing of the foredooming forces of racism and sexism which wait to cage them.

The hopeful, exciting tone that the poem begins with seems to give a historical reference to the events of the World War I era, the time period in which the poem was written and published. It seemed like a great time for black women. Because of the war, job opportunities in the North drew some 500,000 Southern blacks. After all, the move offered escape from the discrimination in the South and much better pay: a laundress or cook could earn in one day up North just short of one week's earning in the South, and industrial jobs, which were rather difficult for black women.
to obtain, could pay up to six times the days wage for picking cotton (Giddings, 143). * Note: Research in Henretta and Giddings show several overlappings of positive and negative events. In the midst of newfound opportunities in some areas, doors were closing in other areas. For example, during the Progressive Era and Harlem Renaissance as black men and women were becoming gainfully employed in occupations which would not hire them before, and breaking into the artistic arena, the K.K.K. formed to intimidate both employers and employees and impede socioeconomic progress for blacks. Also during this period, several riots occurred causing a multitude of casualties of human life--mostly black, and property--mostly black owned. For my thesis, an attempt is made to distinguish between the good and bad times, but in actuality they do overlap.

During the post World War I era of the Harlem Renaissance, women still did not have the same opportunities for social activism, employment or artistic expression as men, but doors were beginning to open a bit for black women, especially those associated with the N.A.C.W. (National Association of Colored Women) which boasted dynamic members such as Mary McLeod Bethune, Bethune-Cookman College; Madame C.J. Walker, the first black woman millionaire; Ida B. Wells, leader of the anti-lynching campaign to name a few. They were accomplishing great things for the race as well as the gender. The N.A.C.W. was a model organization which
lighted the way for many other organizations because their accomplishments were duplicated throughout the nation, and several of their projects became models for the N.A.A.C.P., and the National Urban League. One impressive example: the entire public school system of Washington, D.C. was structured after their kindergarten program (136).

In accordance with the accomplishments of the N.A.C.W., the artistic arena opened for black women. Suddenly black women could find roles in the theater, and though they were few, they were dignified, respectable roles. Maria Selika broke the barrier to the classical music field. Meta Vaux Warwick Fuller was openly acknowledged as a great sculptor (137). And, in the literary field the New Negro was emerging with protest literature, novels and poetry. (Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* 3).

This was definitely a time of choices and chances to improve the quality of their lives. These choices came as a result of newfound freedom; just enough freedom that the heart of a woman went "Afar o'er life's turrets and vales." Because turrets are towers on top of buildings, flying afar over them connotes reaching extraordinary heights during her flight. Vales are valleys, at times referred to as places of sorrow. So, her flight is also happy, free of cares and woes. The turrets and vales could also represent the long trek from the South to the North, many people being harassed, threatened, physically injured as they attempted to
escape the injustices commonly inflicted upon Blacks in the South.

The word "roam" suggests that the black woman has set forth in search of possibilities. After exploring and contemplating them, decisions will be made and goals set. "Roaming" fits the vast majority of those who simply wanted to leave, and went North with only hopes and expectations of a better life, but no job lined up. "Even if one had no clear idea of exactly what to do, the North seemed to offer so much hope in contrast to the despair in the South." (Giddings 141)

One Southerner wrote: "I hope that you will healp me as I want to get out of this land of sufring. I no there is som thing that I can do here....I don't know just whah but I hope the Lord will find a place." (142) In the first stanza of "The Heart of a Woman" freedom and choices have been the primary themes, but the next line ends the stanza and provides a subtle introduction to a new, opposite theme.

This line: "In the wake of those echoes the heart calls home" gives the impression that the heart has been searching for sanctuary in a desperate attempt to escape the ever resounding call to return home. But, sanctuary, a typical definition for "home," would have been in the achievement of goals and reaching their potential at the endeavors of their choice. Ideally, this would allow them to move forward as opposed to backward toward home.
The first three lines suggest that woman’s heart yearns to be free, but this last line excites the idea that it is perhaps her instinct which echoes and bids them to return home and set their freedom free.

Hypothetically, for hundred of thousands of black women, who fled the South in hopes of a better life up North, much of what their hearts held dear was left behind: mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, children, cousins, friends, all that was familiar. (Noble, Beautiful, Also, Are The Souls of My Black Sisters 77) The South, after all, was their home. At least their first one.

The second stanza of the poem reveals a diurnal cycle typical in life’s experiences. The day in stanza one has become night, in every possible way, by stanza two.

The heart of a woman falls back with the night, And enters some alien cage in its plight, And tries to forget it has dreamed of the stars, While it breaks, breaks, breaks on the sheltering bars.

Repetition of the phrase “Heart of a Woman” reinforces the idea of continued feminine spirituality, hopes and dreams. As we prepare to address their hearts the word “falls” interrupts the train of thought established in stanza one and takes “heart” in a 180’ turn. The feelings from their hearts do not stumble, but the night overtakes them, and here “night” represents the end of dawn’s developments, opportunities, and possibilities for women to try their wings and attempt to reach their potential.
Line four of stanza one shows that something had been calling the hearts of black women home. Thus comes the implication that because the final destination is an “alien cage” this must be “home.”

The American Heritage Dictionary describes a home as: “any valued place, original habitation or emotional attachment regarded as a refuge or place of origin; any environment or haven of shelter, of happiness and love.” In “The Heart of a Woman,” home represents a source of bondage: the end of flight and freedom. The phrase “falls back” and “enters” gives an impression of voluntary bondage. It seems to be a natural part of the cycle: daytime/freedom, nighttime/entrapment.

On an abstract level, Johnson attempts to arouse women’s spiritual consciousness and make them aware of their condition with the first lines of the first and second stanzas: “The heart of a woman goes forth with the dawn” and “The heart of a woman falls back with the night.” If she is aware of the circumstances under which her heart “falls back,” then perhaps she can guard against it, turn the situation around and continue going forth. Hopefully, through awareness, liberation is possible. She must ask herself. Why is night and bondage a natural part of the cycle of women’s spiritual lives? Why must something possess her? Why does she allow it? (Remember, she “enters” an “alien cage:” It does not trap her.) Why is she unable
to be self-possessing regardless of time and circumstances?

"Night" came for women when "the tenuous foothold that Black women had carved out in industry began to erode" (Giddings 145). Because soldiers returning home from war resented the presence of blacks in the work force, especially women—it kept them from employment, and immigration of foreigners was once again on the rise; most black women, at this point, either lost their jobs or were forced to take inferior positions doing menial labor or undesirable tasks. For example, women who had been school teachers in the South became poorly paid factory workers in the North—and felt privileged to have a job at all (Giddings 145)! And, this was the least of their problems. The North was unrecognizable as the place of refuge it had been during World War I.

Anti-black sentiments surged with rampant discrimination and violence. Hate groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan, formed during the war, (Atlanta, GA. 1915) escalated rapidly in numbers and power to terrorize, destroy property, wound and/or kill blacks. And, Joe Citizen, though perhaps not part of a group, hated blacks as well.

Before the war was over as well as after, there were great casualties in the North. In 1917, in East Saint Louis, Illinois, more than forty blacks died (nine whites) in a riot sparked by competition over jobs... Chicago, Illinois, 1919, a five-day riot occurred which resulted in a great deal of property destroyed, twenty-three blacks and
fifteen whites dead. And, not quite as often as in the South, blacks were lynched in the North, too. "Serious racial violence broke out in more than twenty-five northern cities, and the resulting death toll for the summer of 1919 reached 120." (Henretta, America's History 699.)

This would have been an ideal time to return to the South if conditions had improved there, but the South was still notorious for lynching. In 1917, forty-eight were lynched: in 1919, seventy-eight. Women, too, were lynched. (699)

All black women could do was "try to forget they have dreamed of the stars." There was no place to go--"sheltering bars." And nothing they could do, but listen to their hearts break on those "sheltering bars." They were bound in the North by the same hatred and discrimination that they thought they were escaping from in the South. The end result being--their hopes and dreams of a better life were shattered. Perhaps they were unrealistic--unrealistic to believe that black people could find racial equality on the socio-economic scale of the times. But in times such as those, all people could do was hope. The duality in theme arises to reacquaint us with the fact that nothing is totally black or white, one hundred percent unmitigated, absolute. For the black race at that time a confusing dichotomy existed: the post-W.W.I. period allowed realistic hopes and dreams to be captured by a system of injustice and oppres-
sion; clearly in contrast to the time period during the war when their dreams were coming to fruition, or at least seemed to be. There was no real way of knowing that the ultimate plight of blacks was hopeless. It was at the consideration of this point in history that Giddings quoted Johnson's "My Little Dreams" from *The Heart of a Woman*...
The tone was appropriately one of defeat.

I'm folding up my little dreams
Within my heart tonight,
And praying I may soon forget
The torture of their sight... (62)

As for Georgia Douglas Johnson, the same diurnal cycle manifested in "The Heart of a Woman" works to make the poem a metaphor for the complexities/contradictions in her own life. There are three ironic areas of her life that could have inspired this particular type of ending for the poem.

Hull states: "G.D.J. does "lift the veil" of some of 'women's less smiling faces." Clearly, she is aware of the oppressiveness and pain of the traditional lot." (157) Her writings cause her to appear feminist as she speaks critically of a system where women's lives are analogous to unfulfilled dreams. She writes of women who are "folding up little dreams," whose hearts "break, break, break on sheltering bars," with "shattered dreams," where "her every dream was born entombed."

Returning to a biographical analysis, we know that she lived in an oppressively male-dominated era and her husband "didn't think much of his wife's longing for a literary
career and tried to discourage the idea." (as quoted in Hull 159) He wanted her to take care of home, and even though her writing was of utmost importance to her, she did primarily what he wished from 1903, when they were married, until his demise in 1925. If he were more aware of her feelings, or sympathetic to "her heart," possibly he would not have made that demand (Hull 160). Of course, she wrote, but the care of her family came first. She was an artist second. Remember, she was a "housewife/writer" (184). Ironically, yet appropriately, she dedicated her most feminist work: The Heart of a Woman and other poems to him. This gives the impression that in addition to women's self-awareness her book sent a plea for sympathy to the men.

As in her poetry, also in her life is a duality of theme. In addition to the initial irony is the fact that most of her writing and publications occurred during her marriage because with her husband's death came the cessation of monetary income which caused her to return to the nine-to-five work force in order to take care of home financially. This took away from her writing time drastically.

She is quoted more than once expressing her concerns about fleeting time not allowing her to accomplish what she would like. For example, in 1928 a newspaper article about her begins: "The great fear in Georgia Douglas Johnson's life is that she won't have time to do all the work she has planned to do that she wants to do. Although she works
incessantly, her time is too much taken up with making a living to give very much of it to literary work" (The Pittsburgh Courier, July 5, 1928 as quoted in Hull 165). And, in a letter to Harold Jackman dated June 28, 1942, she wrote: “I am so eager to get to this writing before the taper is snuffed out. Am afraid of dying before I get the things done I hope to do” (quoted in Hull 190). As a black woman poet, she was expected by black America to not only speak on behalf of women but openly damn racism (Hernton 38). For a woman such as G.D.J. this caused her to “enter an alien cage” because she confided to Arna Bontempts that “she did not like to write racially.”

Whenever I can, I forget my select to write racially. It seems to me an art to forget those things that make the heart heavy. If one can soar, he should soar, leaving his chains behind. But, lest we forget, we must now and then come down to earth, accept the yoke and help draw the load (Hull 179).

Her second book, Bronze, was an answer to a social challenge which stated that “she has no feeling for the race.” “Consequently, much of Bronze--which is her weakest book--reads like obligatory race poetry.” (Hull 160.) Georgia Douglas Johnson wanted to write about women, love, love relationships, dreams..., as is demonstrated by her primary subject matter in the majority of her poetry in Heart of a Woman, Autumn Love Cycle, Share My World, and even certain sections of Bronze. But, she yielded, at least for enough time to write Bronze, to social demands for
literature openly opposing racial injustice 
(Hine 640).

Patriarchal culture demanded that women be in subjection to their husbands, and simultaneously, a racist culture kept the black man's earnings low enough that his wife would most likely have to join him in the work force (Rodgers-Rose, The Black Woman 145). This imposed double bondage on black women. * Note: Black women constituted 45.6% of the Black labor force between 1910 and 1930 (178). Georgia Douglas Johnson was part of the work force.

For many black women, essentially during World War I, the doors of employment and improved economic status opened. Johnson published her first two books of verse, and thousands of black women migrated to the North to jobs newly available to them or which paid a considerable amount more than the same position in the South (Giddings 143). This new-found prosperity was short lived for workers and writers alike. The Depression of the 1930's had a grave effect on the Renaissance. "American literature shifted its focus from the individual's alienation in the modern world and stressed instead the social conflict and class struggle of a society in crisis" (Wintz 220). In short, the black struggle was no longer of primary literary interest. Publishers stopped the acceptance of new manuscripts from black writers, and financial sponsors of Harlem Renaissance artists withdrew support (220). Because it effected all Harlem
Renaissance writers period, women suffered as well. Regardless of what seems like imminent failure, “the heart of a woman goes forth.” Black women attempted to improve the quality of their lives by migrating to better employment. Georgia Douglas Johnson wrote in hopes of appealing to those who could improve the quality of the lives of those in her race. Certainly, there is no solution which can absolutely reveal why “the heart of a woman”—hearts of women—“falls back...” and “enters some alien cage in its plight.” But then, there is also no answer which can absolutely reveal when, why and to what degree the human spirit gives up, and gives in to overpowering circumstances. There are no absolutes except for the idea that “the heart of a woman goes forth”... to be caged.
CHAPTER FOUR

Interracial

After more than two decades of identifying the symptoms of the diseases racism and sexism for her reading audience, Georgia Douglas Johnson reveals a cure in her poem "Interracial."

INTERRACIAL

Let's build bridges here and there
Or sometimes, just a spiral stair
That we may come somewhat abreast
And sense what cannot be exprest,
And by these measures can be found
A meeting place—a common ground
Nearer the reaches of the heart
Where truth revealed, stands clear, apart;
With understanding come to know
What laughing lips will never show:
How tears and torturing distress
May masquerade as happiness:
Then you will know when my heart's aching
And I when yours is slowly breaking.
Commune—the altars will reveal...
We then shall be impulsed to kneel
And send a prayer upon its way
For those who wear the thorns today.

Oh, Let's build bridges everywhere
And span the gulf of challenge there!

(Johnson in Hughes and Bontempts, ed. The Poetry of the Negro 78)

"Interracial" was written after the Harlem Renaissance, but it brings closure to some of the issues brought to light in the poetry of the period which is examined in this thesis. By virtue of the title, "Interracial" suggests racism as a subject. However, when approached from a broader context the poem suggests a method to end racism, sexism, classism, and any other "ism" that represents a bias.
Reviewing the majority of Johnson's poetry reveals that her initial concept seemed to be attack one issue per poem. For example, "The Heart of a Woman" and "Foredoom" address the idea that women are kept from reaching their potential by "alien cages" or by natural disaster. "Natural" is used in relation to something in the nature of humankind that, according to Johnson, allegedly attacks every woman before she is able to reach full potential. This concept is synonymous with the blight that Johnson speaks of in "Foredoom" which is a broad term for disease which attacks plants in the early stages and destroys them before they get to the budding stage (Raven, Biology 679). "Alien cages" and "blight" represent sexism. Therefore, the hopelessness of womanhood because of sexism is addressed.

"Old Black Men" compares black men's hopes and dreams to bubbles. Bubbles, like their dreams, burst in the air. Because of the situation created, and the fact that this poem does not address any other race, two inferences are made: only black men are negatively effected, and racism is the cause.

These three poetic works are examples that during the Harlem Renaissance Georgia Douglas Johnson addressed the ills of racism and sexism, but in 1944 when "Interracial" was first published in "Phylon" and N.A.A.C.P.'s "The Crisis" there was a new philosophy in the land. Racism and sexism were felt as strongly as ever, but an "integrationist
philosophy" had seemingly made its way into society (Hull 194). Several historical turning points had occurred that made the message of "Interracial" in juxtaposition with "integrationist philosophy" necessary.

The United States was in the midst of world war just as it was at the unofficial beginning of the Harlem Renaissance. Many occurrences during World War II mirrored those of World War I. Again, there was an increase of employment opportunities for black men and women as more than thirteen million white men left the work force for military service (Henretta 810). In conjunction, black migration increased tremendously; thus, competition for employment and housing ensued. The result of which was race riots in forty-seven cities nationwide (816). And again, in the end when the war was over blacks had to relinquish their positions to the returning veterans (810).

A distinguishing factor, however, presented itself during and shortly after the first world war. The rhetorical promises of democracy from the government gave Blacks hope for equality for the first time since the establishment of "Jim Crow" laws, which disenfranchised Blacks, in the late 1870's (Tietz, The Black American Past and Present 8). A new sense of black pride was being initiated. "Black men ...talked of the new day a' dawning when black men would have and would wield power" (Huggins 7). One way in which this pride and power was expressed was through aggressive
resistance to racial harassment and victimization. For example: when Blacks were rioted against in Chicago, 1919, after having been victimized in this manner several times before, they fought back for the first time (Henretta 699).

Simultaneously, Black women were striving for fair and humane treatment along with equal opportunities on several fronts such as lynching, employment unionization, and suffrage. In contrast to Georgia Douglas Johnson's pleading tone, the voices of black women activists rang out either in overt disdain and chastisement or in subtle reproach of the reprobate practices of opposing forces.

Mary Church Terrell, an activist for employment unionization of Black working women, chastised the First International Congress of Working Women for overlooking the needs of Black women in the work force when they met for the first time in Washington D.C. in 1919. The requests of Terrell's group that Black women be actively involved in the Congress and that their working conditions be considered were heard but not granted (Giddings 155).

This was an extremely important time for the suffragist movement. White women were soliciting the assistance of black women in the movement, yet their true goal quickly became obvious. They wanted to obtain the right to vote solely for themselves (Hine 1126). Walter White, a top executive for the N.A.A.C.P., believed and expressed the idea to a Black
suffrage activist that white women suffragists were deathly afraid of the South. (The "South" represented Southern conservative white men who fought powerfully against women's voting rights.) "If they could get the Suffrage Amendment through without enfranchising colored women, they would do it in a moment" (Giddings 160). Ultimately, in 1920 the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified and legally included all women, but some states found means to keep Black women from voting (Henretta 693).

Addie Hunton, field secretary for the N.A.A.C.P., presented a resolution to the National Woman's Party in regards to violations of the Nineteenth Amendment: "Black women have come... to call your attention to the flagrant violations of the intents and purposes of the Susan B. Anthony Amendment (also known as the Nineteenth Amendment) in the election of 1920... Complete evidence of violations... could only be obtained by Federal Investigation. There is, however, sufficient evidence available to justify a demand for such an inquiry... "We are assembled to ask that you will use your influence to have the convention appoint a Special Committee to ask Congress for an investigation of the violations of the intents and purposes of the Susan B. Anthony Amendment"... (quoted in Giddings 169). The resolution was not passed by the convention.

Charlotte Hawkins Brown, a Civil Rights activist, attended a Council for Interracial Cooperation conference
and accused white women of failing to do their part to end the lynching of Black men: "We all feel that you can control your men... that so far as lynching is concerned... if the white woman would take hold of the situation... lynching would be stopped" (quoted in Giddings 177). And in defiant response, the C.I.C. stated: "Southern Black women members (of the C.I.C.) took a conciliatory stance against lynching" (quoted in Giddings 177). This was surprising because the purpose of the Council of Interracial Cooperation was supposedly to bring about racial unity and equity not create increased hostility and division. Rejection of the activist's words serve as a rationale for Johnson's unobtrusive solicitation of her audience's sympathy or acceptance of her viewpoint. Terrell, Hunton, and Brown were probably considered "mouthy women" because of their practice of directly approaching the issue at hand. The direct approach from a woman, especially if she was Black, was looked upon with hostility even if those being approached were also women. How dare these inferior Black women demand of us!! was the impression given by these white women's negative responses to Black women's logical requests for justice. The white suffragists, union organizers, and Council for Interracial Cooperation members could not successfully hide their racism (Giddings 160, 169, 177).

Though the Black activists of the first war were openly rejected, through consistent Civil Rights protests
and activities strides were made during and immediately following the second world war. By marching and striking, women workers, sometimes ten thousand strong, demanded higher wages and improved working conditions and benefits. The doors of unionization opened slowly, but Black women were inducted into unions such as Food Workers Industrial Union, International Ladies Garment Workers and CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) because of strong, well organized union activities (Giddings 234). However, Black men and women, especially in the South, were typically not in leadership positions (Henretta 761).

By the year 1936, there was a sharp decline in lynchings nationwide. Records of lynchings revealed that between 1882 and 1935 there were 4,671 lynchings in the United States. Between 1918 and 1935, the average was approximately forty per year, but from 1936 through the end of the recordings the lynching per annum average fell to two (Zangrando 7,8). Marches, a strong public outcry by Black Civil Rights activists as well as the Black public, formations of associations against lynching, and in-depth investigations of lynchings by well known and outspoken people like Ida B. Wells and Walter White contributed to the drop in number of lynchings (10). Although, another important factor in the near cessation of lynching was regional economic security. With industrial expansion it became more economically profitable to avoid lynching because open
racial conflict could hinder a region's image and, in turn, retard it's growth (11).

Though the legal right to vote had been won, most Southern Black women were still rallying for the right. Tests with hidden technicalities, long lines, verbal harassment and physical beatings were a few of the hinderances used to keep them from suffrage up to forty-five years after the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified on August 26, 1920 until the passage of Voting Rights Act in 1965 (Giddings 287,296).

Some Black women had become union members, but most still were not. Lynching had almost ended completely, but there were forty-seven cities involved in riots. There were thirty-four casualties in Detroit alone—twenty-five of them Black (Henretta 816).

Protesting, marching, and speaking out had successfully moved Blacks a few steps forward, but as one woman wrote after what seemed like a great victory for the race: "In the end we learned that there are a thousand ways for a people who are weaker than the rest to be 'kept in their place'" (quoted in Giddings 297).

Meanwhile, on the other end of the spectrum was Georgia Douglas Johnson's message appealing to the sensitivity of her audience with works such as "The Heart of a Woman," "Old Black Men," "Foredoom" and "Interracial." She had to make her message a vehicle for genuine social change.
Therefore, as a part of the effort for true interracial cooperation through her writing, though not a member of C.I.C., Georgia Douglas Johnson appealed to her audience in an undercurrent of humility.

In the poem "Interracial" she began with a supposition by the speaker that there are gaps between the races which need no longer be a hindrance to coming together. A proposal is made: "Let's build bridges..." Though the proposal is hers, she does not take full responsibility for building, but says "Let's"—Let us. Careful not to ask too much, too soon, she says "here and there" to make bridge building seem possible, attemptable, and not overwhelming. So, she is not asking to completely close all the gaps. The purpose of a bridge is to provide passage or transportation over an obstacle. Usually the obstacle is a physical one, but when it is metaphoric the term bridge becomes a means of alliance, association, connection, unification. A spiritual, and/or emotional passageway needed to be built in this instance; and all parties involved must partake in the construction effort.

Here her tone is one of submission. No demands are made, only requests. It seems that she fully knows that she is not in the position to insist upon anything from anyone in this particular situation.

She goes on to ask that where bridges are not then build "a spiral stair." A spiral stair is preceded by the
words "Sometimes, just" which helps to emphasize the theme at hand. She is willing to settle for less as long as an attempt is made to come together someway, somehow, sometime.

Bridges are the most desirable mode of transportation because primarily the terms by which you meet are equal. A physical bridge is a platform, usually a flat, level plane where there is commonly at least two lanes for traffic going in opposite directions, yet when there is one, patience and cooperation is exercised so that a vehicle can cross without interference for the purpose of safety. One side is no higher than the other, no longer, broader, narrower, smoother or rougher. There is no respect of traveler: the northbound traveler will have the same ride as the southbound. It was built for equality. But, a spiral stair suggests an almost exaggerated inequality. A simple staircase represents a hierarchy of power, but adding the effect of them being spiral brings new dimensions to the power structure. The plane of a spiral is constantly changing, thus causing those who travel thereby to either decrease or increase in acceleration depending on the direction headed. Because a spiral moves around a fixed center instead of forming one, whoever is on the bottom cannot see the top, and must concentrate on each step individually. Going up and around complicates the climb, decreases the acceleration rate in comparison to the usual vertical platform, and makes reaching the top a matter of faith. Yet, Johnson is willing
to go that route. Importance is placed not on position, but the act of coming together.

After the proposal is made our speaker gives an explanation in line three: “That we may come somewhat abreast.” I interpret this line two ways. She wants to strive for unity on a physical plane as well as a spiritual one. The word “abreast” means side by side which represents unity, and equality; it also means to be aware of, know about, and keep up with as far as information is concerned. Why build a mode of coming together with someone whose existence does not apparently effect or affect yours, and whom you care nothing about? Being bound together by humanness is affective somehow, isn’t it; even if that humanness is taken for granted because of bias and/or hardhearted.

But, in the same breath as “abreast” is the word “somewhat.” “Somewhat” precedes “abreast,” thus it commands attention and power. It has a great deal in common with the phrase “here and there” in line one, and “sometimes” in line two for they all signify compromise, settling for less. Our speaker cannot demand or even expect the best at this point. But, major or minor, the expectations are there. The belief being: we need to start somewhere.

Now, we reach a point in the poem where the request for entente reaches spiritual proportions. Though only “somewhat abreast” they are close enough to “sense what cannot be exprest” so much that “a meeting place--a common
ground” is found. This takes us back to the bond of humanity: “Nearer the reaches of the heart.”

But, to be nearer implies intimacy; it is not a mere denotation of closeness in physical proximity. A close relationship has been established between individuals whereby there is assuredly love and trust to the point where “truth revealed, stands clear; apart“ on a spiritual plane.

“Truth” is a power-filled word. Just as the term itself is abstract, so is the understanding of it. But, because we make judgements according to our perceptions everyone’s truth is somewhat different. Yet, when the origin of truth is the heart, you are assured the purest form with sincerity, honesty, and righteousness—all of which are liberating—this is where the power comes in. Not everyone is entitled to the privilege of your personal “truth.”

With understanding come to know
What laughing lips may never show.
How tears and torturing distress
May masquerade as happiness.

Certainly this shows that a bridge has been built because unification has taken place. If people have experienced one another, searched and known each others hearts then surely they are intimate enough to one anothers “truth.” Then, a great deal of effort need not be exercised in seeing beyond smiles to the underlying hurt. Intimacy is a bridge over which truth crosses.
In the lines to follow, iambic trimeter gives way to trochaic as Johnson's language becomes colloquial: "Then you will know when my heart's aching/And I when yours is slowly breaking." She wants these lines which end the stanza to display that the relationship itself is now no longer formal, but informal. Her proposal leads me to believe, up to this point, that "Interracial" in a broad, literal sense was improperly titled. What she seems to say is so intimate that only two could, and not without difficulty, bring them to fruition. Group work is out of the question, primarily. However, her suggestion, I believe, is for group dynamics. Long ago a phrase was coined by a source whose identity has become a mystery: "External hostility brings about internal solidarity." Both world wars brought Americans together as a force of one fighting a common enemy. Theodore Roosevelt said to President Wilson: "The military tent where they all sleep side by side will rank ...(as a) great agent of democratization" (quoted in Henretta 688). Black and white women marched and protested together for suffrage (Hine 25). This is not meant to infer that racism disappeared during the war or the suffrage movement because it certainly did not. But, racism became, for the most part, secondary to the goal at hand in the midst of the "external hostility." When the heat from the "external hostility" cooled the internal hostility re-established itself making Johnson's message necessary and possi-
ble nationwide.

"Commune:" come together, be together, stay together, sharing innermost thoughts and feelings—spiritual oneness repeated. We now experience a thematic shift from reality to religious allusion and belief. "... the altars will reveal...We then shall be impulsed to kneel" Is God the center of this unity? Was the proposal to build bridges a prophesy? Does He provide us with the impulse, desire, drive, instinct to kneel and pray? The word of God says that prayer changes things. I believe that He teaches us, and compels us to call upon Him in prayer—"For those who wear the thorns today."

Here is a religious allusion to the crucifixion which brings to mind modern-day martyrs who died for equality and brotherhood/sisterhood. Jesus wore a crown of thorns which ridiculed his royalty for He was the prince of peace. Freedom fighters like Mahatma Ghandi, and Martin Luther King, Jr., wore the symbolic thorns of peace. But, unlike our speaker, they demanded that bridges be built and as a result became martyrs. Perhaps it is the difference between males and females that determines if a proposal is made or a demand. But, clearly the proposal was not easily undertaken especially by those who fail to value human life and its bonding powers.

As our speaker utters the final stanza, she brings her initial request full circle and gives definition for the
first time to the title. No longer is she willing to settle for less. Here, in the end, she wants everything. Though she still does not demand, some of her submissiveness has given way to confidence and assertiveness. “Oh, let’s build bridges everywhere.” It is no longer acceptable to build them “here and there.” They are now necessary “everywhere” in order to truly “span the gulf of challenge there” for everyone of every race. We should have and experience agape love for all humankind regardless of any differences: physical or ideological... Agape love, according to the Greek definition, is the highest form of love—sacrificial and selfless in its expression (Strong Hebrew/Greek Bible Dictionary 11). Therefore, if we have agape love for one another bridges fall into place upon meeting, and intimacy can easily be established because there are no walls and no more “gulfs of challenge.”

Georgia Douglas Johnson’s approach in “Interracial” demands nothing, but ever so humbly makes entreaty for building relationships. She is even willing to accept inequality therein. Then, feeling as if she needs to substantiate her request, she builds a case in its favor. It is only after this point that she seems to gain confidence in her request and pushes for it.

Keeping in mind the fact that black women with strong voices of dispute were unable to move white women to help them achieve equality, at no point did Georgia Douglas
Johnson hold the reins which controlled her situation and circumstances, and she does not even attempt to snatch them, fight for them, or argue to secure them. Her tone is one of gentle guidance and persuasion—the last possibility for success. On the other hand, Langston Hughes and Claude McKay demand to be in control in "Ballad of the Landlord" and "If We Must Die."

In "If We Must Die," McKay's tone is strong, commanding and just short of angry. By no means is he asking for concessions.

If we must die, let it not be like hogs...
let us show us brave, and for their thousand blows deal one death blow!
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack, Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!
(McKay in Hughes and Bontemps, ed. Poetry of the Negro 102)

There are no exclamation points in "Interracial" which denote passionate shouts. McKay preaches death with dignity and courage through fighting back. The only relationship he wants to build is one of respect earned in retaliatory battle. He wants to burn some bridges.

"Ballad of the Landlord" is similar to "If We Must Die" in its aggressive, confrontational tone. Both poems respond to injustice with anger, and preparedness to force the hand of justice. The tenant has obviously forgotten his unequal stature when he confronts the landlord. (The newspaper headlines at the end of the poem reveal that the tenant is black, and simultaneously, by leaving off the
landlord’s race, yet showing the black man’s punishment it is assumed the landlord is white.) He feels justified as he makes it clear to the landlord that he’ll get no rent payment from him until repairs have been made:

Ten bucks you say I owe you?
Ten bucks you say is due?

Well, that Ten Bucks more ‘n I’ll pay you
Till you fix this place up new.

...Talk on...You ain’t gonna be able to say a word
If I land my fist on you.
(Hughes in Barksdale, 521)

Though “Landlord” has a phraseology and rhythm pattern which reveal a comical intent, the poem raises serious issues about racial inequality and injustice. And, it also demands that things are made right, that repairs are made. Just as “If We Must Die” insists on equality. If it cannot be acquired in life, let it be gained in death. Johnson does not even approach demanding justice and equality, as a matter of fact, the spiral stair reveals her acceptance of inequality as long as a relationship can be developed.

“If...” was written in response to one of the worst race riots in the history of this country for this era. In July 1919, a black male teenager swam into the white area of a Lake Michigan beach, was hit in the head with a rock and drowned. Thus began the riots of 1919 in Chicago, previously mentioned at the beginning of this section, which resulted in extensive property damage (mainly to black-owned property) and thirty-eight deaths: twenty-three blacks and
fifteen whites (Henretta 699).

Obviously, McKay was outraged. He seems to accept the racial hatred as an unchanging given, so blacks will need to fight back. But, Georgia Douglas Johnson wrote "Interracial" as a means of calling the races to unite. It is curious that racism as a subject matter could be approached from polar viewpoints when the opposite sexes address it.

Keep in mind the fact that she has a vested interest in the coming together of the races. She could have been talking indirectly to her estranged parents: her black mother and her white father. As a Black woman in a southern location, she addresses the white suffragists who fought along with black women for the vote while they intended to maintain a racist privilege at the ballot box (Hine 635). Primarily she speaks to the racists of the nation in a way that appeals to their sensitivity for humanity. Attempting to appeal to their sense of logic, reason, justice has failed according to historical record. This does not imply that Johnson swayed America to become anti-racist or anti-sexist, but she provided an emotional rationale for change without direct confrontation or accusation.
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