Affect and Diaspora: Unfashionable Hope in Melvin B. Tolson's *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*

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ABSTRACT

This essay reads Melvin B. Tolson's *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* as a poem undergirded by a transnational and multi-ethnic politics of identification. Previous scholars of Tolson's work have argued that his poetry expands and redefines the possibilities inherent in modernist poetics. Building on these claims, I point to a specific and heretofore unremarked strategy through which he accomplishes this goal: namely, a bold affective optimism that both presages Afro-futurism and counters political ideologies founded on racial difference. Tolson's Marxist-democratic vision of a future utopian society centered in Africa but extending throughout the world is rooted in his belief in the possibility of affective connection between individuals otherwise divided by class, race, or language. In its subversion and revision of received cultural categories, such a connection also constitutes a response to engrained forms of racial melancholia. While refusing to overlook systemic and historical injustice, Tolson's *Libretto*, thus, offers a window into a politics of optimism that restores a sense of social hope to discussions in recent and contemporary affect theory.

In a 1966 interview, the poet Melvin B. Tolson boldly asserts the capacity of his poetry to outstrip racial and national categories: "I, as a black poet, have absorbed the Great Ideas of the Great White World, and interpreted them in the melting-pot idiom of my people. My roots are in Africa, Europe, and America" ("A Poet's Odyssey" 184). Framing his project in encompassing rather than antagonistic terms, Tolson subsumes nationhood to aesthetics, invoking art's power to transcend ethnic and geographic divides. Scholars have often argued that Tolson's poetry does much the same thing, bridging the gap that inheres (or, at least, is

assumed to inhere) between African American culture and the Western modernist aesthetic to which Tolson refers, perhaps somewhat tongue-in-cheek, as the "Great Ideas of the Great White World."[1] Michael Bérubé, for instance, analogizes Tolson's use of modernist forms to invasions of foreign territory, describing him as "an African-American literary version of the maroon, the escaped slave living on the frontier" (145). For Matthew Hart, the great achievement of Tolson's poetry is its "insist[ence] that blackness is equal to poetic modernity and that modernist form is no barrier to blackness" (144). Other critics claim that Tolson sought to revitalize an African tradition already latent within modernism. Aldon Nielsen writes of how Tolson "came to see modernist poetics as having been already arrived at by African aesthetics, thus rendering the African-American tradition primary rather than merely imitative" (246). Keith Leonard concurs: "Modernist poetics was not a master narrative to claim for black people but an innovative literary culture that had its roots in African culture and that needed to be reclaimed" (200).

The critical narrative surrounding Tolson's work, then, is largely premised on the manifold political and theoretical applications offered by his conflation of the domains of modernist poetics and African American culture. The central argument in this narrative is that Tolson's overstepping of aesthetic boundaries implies a rejection of other traditionally distinct cultural binaries and categories. For example, in an essay that connects Tolson's work to Jacques Derrida's theories of the archive, Kathy Lou Schultz suggests that Tolson's poetry puts into question the category of selfhood, since his "experimental forms produce a fluidity that allows his poem to flow both backward and forward in historical time, and in and through a multiplicity of identities, reflecting a futuristic, global understanding of the construction of the self" (113).[2] In this essay, I hope to build on the contributions of Schultz and others to the literature on Tolson by examining his 1953 poem *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* (hereafter *Libretto*). However, rather than focusing on the poem's twofold status as a document at once modernist and African American, I propose to consider its remarkable affective register—an aesthetic feature of *Libretto* that gives it, I believe, still more incisive and far-reaching implications than have previously been noted. The narrative arc of *Libretto* is one of optimism founded on affective identification—an optimism that persists despite Tolson's refusal to overlook or mitigate the past injustices borne by and in Liberia (and by extension, the African continent). Reflecting Tolson's belief that true liberty is only possible within community, this hard-won optimism enacts a political model of transnational affective connection founded on recognition despite and across difference. As such, *Libretto* provides a useful perspective on current debates in affect theory; while its attention to the material and social conditions of black life invokes commonalities with Afro-pessimism, its resilient hopefulness marks it as a precursor text in the Afro-futurist movement.

The seemingly marginal position of the nation of Liberia in the history of the black Atlantic is belied by its symbolic significance as a country invested with visions of diasporic promise but burdened by legacies of disappointment. The declaration of freedom couched in the Latinate etymology of its name is felt obliquely, outweighed, like the brief periods of optimism that have stirred the nation, by a long and overshadowing history of bloodshed and unrest. Liberia was officially founded in 1847, some twenty-seven years after the American Colonization Society embarked on the project of returning freed slaves to West Africa from the United

States. This endeavor was opposed by most blacks, who recognized the society's goal to recolonize Africa as principally motivated by fear, political expediency, and the belief that whites and blacks could not coexist peaceably within shared borders.[3] Nonetheless, over the course of the nineteenth century, several thousand emancipated African Americans received passage to Liberia, retracing the slave routes that had brought their ancestors to the Americas.

But the newly arrived settlers in Liberia quickly adopted the colonialist and racist mores of the Western culture from which they had been transported. Indeed, as Ikechi Mgbeoji points out, the colonialist ideology behind Liberia's beginnings is inscribed in its very motto, "The love of liberty brought us here"—a statement that not very subtly excludes the indigenous population of the area in favor of the recently arrived settlers from the United States (5). However noble the manumitted African Americans' attempt at self-governance may have been at the outset, the social and economic advantages they held over the indigenous population helped to rapidly usher in a caste system that lasted for more than a century. In the foreword to *Slaves Today*, a novel based on what he saw and experienced during a three-month stay in Liberia in 1931, George Schuyler laments the living and working conditions of native Liberians, stating that the purpose of *Slaves Today* is to "help arouse enlightened world opinion against this brutalizing of the native population in a Negro republic" (6).

At the same time, the question of Liberia's future had become a focal point of two competing arguments for the achievement of racial equality: Marcus Garvey's "Back-to-Africa" movement and W. E. B. Du Bois's Pan-Africanism. For Garvey, Liberia's self-governance represented the beginning stages of Africa's ascendance as a site of relocation and refuge for Africans displaced by diasporic movements. In a 1923 letter to Liberia's president, Garvey encourages the "furtherance of the plan," already some years in the making, "to assist in the development of Liberia, industrially and commercially, by the settlement in some parts of the country of a large number of American and West Indian colonists who desire repatriation to their native land, Africa, for the establishment of permanent homes" (367). At this point, Garvey's dream of an African nationalist rebirth centered in Liberia was already on shaky ground, facing opposition both from the Liberian government and from outside financial interests, and by 1924 his hopes for Liberian colonization had collapsed completely. Du Bois, meanwhile, advocated against relocation to Africa in his magazine, *The Crisis*: "no person of middle age or beyond should think of migrating from the United States to Africa for permanent residence" ("On Migrating to Africa" 109). He also accused Garvey of planning to use Liberia as a platform for his own political career; in Du Bois's estimation, Garvey sought "to make a start in Liberia with industrial enterprises. From this center he would penetrate all Africa and gradually subdue it" ("Back to Africa" 107).

But Du Bois's own relation to Liberia was also a complex one. While he did not advocate for emigration to Liberia, when he visited there in 1923, he was both moved by the occasion of setting foot on African soil and impressed by the local culture. His essay "What Is Africa to Me?" indicates that Du Bois was invested in the success of Liberia because it represented the possibility of an autonomous and flourishing postcolonial African democracy—one that might set an example for other cultures within and around the black Atlantic. In different ways, then, Liberia figured in early twentieth-century black political movements as the

emplacement of an envisioned end to diaspora, whether more chiefly symbolic (as for Du Bois) or actual (as for Garvey).[4] But in the end, neither Du Bois's nor Garvey's hopes for Liberia were realized. Rather, the systemic injustice experienced by the indigenous population as well as the continued hardships faced by many of the settlers made the fallacy of the vision of Africa as being of a mythic timeless origin evident. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Liberia remained a sign of political possibility overcome time and again by a condition of diasporic melancholy.

The years following World War II were the most economically prosperous in Liberia's history. Led by President William S. Tubman, who enthusiastically courted American businesses such as the Ohio-based tire manufacturer Firestone, the government of Liberia increasingly turned to foreign investment as a means of developing a more robust national economy. In 1947, the centennial anniversary of Liberia coincided with the beginning of its ascendancy as America's most trusted African ally. At a ceremony honoring the centennial at the Liberian Embassy in Washington, D.C., Tubman named Melvin Tolson the poet laureate of Liberia. In writing *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*, which he published in 1953, Tolson's challenge was to balance elegiac attention to Liberia's tumultuous history with the civic and optimistic tone expected in a national poem composed by a poet laureate. This twofold challenge contains the key to the singular mood of *Libretto*, which is at once brutally honest about Liberia's past and willfully confident about its future.

In *Libretto*, Tolson imagines African diaspora as both a historical phenomenon and a continuum through which to explore the limits and possibilities of identification with the distanced other. Over the course of the poem, Tolson's vision of the nation moves from a local, temporally and spatially bounded reading of Liberian history to a futuristic vision that extends Liberia—and by extension Africa—beyond the restrictions of nation or continent, culture or race. Tolson achieves this not merely through his content but through the formal mastery of his genre; *Libretto* thus exemplifies Jahan Ramazani's observation that transnational poems are able, precisely because they are poems, to "give expression to locality at the same time that they turn formally, linguistically, allusively in other directions" (10). For Tolson, poetry is an avenue through which to imagine forms of affective community in which can be based a politics that refuses the limits of either national hegemony or cultural melancholia.

Anne Anlin Cheng discusses these limits in her book *The Melancholy of Race*: *Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*, in which she assesses the boundaries imposed by race in American culture. Working from the premise that grief is one of racism's primary after-effects, Cheng suggests that it manifests itself in American culture—in the case of both dominant and minority ethnic groups—primarily in terms of a complex and ongoing history of melancholia. Following Freud, Cheng defines melancholia as "a condition of endless self-impoverishment" in which subjects become "psychically stuck," unable to free themselves from their psychologically scarring pasts (8). White mainstream culture is implicated in this melancholia because the history of slavery and exclusion it struggles both to deny and to transcend is so at odds with its national ideology of freedom and equality. In the minority subject, meanwhile, melancholia is experienced as an internalized and gradually unnoticed deep sadness that ultimately "conditions life for the disenfranchised and, indeed, constitutes their identity and shapes their subjectivity" (Ibid. 24).

This situation of endemic and systemic cultural melancholia demands some gesture toward a reparative solution (and thus toward the realm of politics), but Cheng is wary of any answers that might underestimate the extent to which a history of oppression and stigmatism have conditioned the identities of those living within the reality of the construct of race. Given the pervasiveness of melancholia, Cheng argues, our ethical responsibilities hinge on recognizing not the other, but the interstitial space *between* self and other: "an in-between place, the middle ground that is not a copout but a crucial, strategic position in a divided world" (190). In focusing on this difficult-to-define "in-between space," Cheng subsumes the relation between self and other to the structuring cultural melancholia into which we are all assimilated. As a result, the "redemptive possibility of recognizing the self in the other and vice versa . . . proves to be difficult, if not impossible" and the only plateau we can hope to attain is, finally, "a kind of knowing, in the fullest and most present sense of knowledge, that the distance between self and other is neither measurable nor stable" (180, 189).

Cheng's cautiousness regarding the possibility of connection across difference is reminiscent of the Afro-pessimist movement, a tradition in African scholarship that emphasizes the systemic injustice that has continued to flourish on the African continent since the postwar decades and the difficult (not to say impossible) process of reconciliation or empathy between Africans and other ethnic groups given the history of violence and oppression that divides them.[5] The interdisciplinary character of Afro-pessimist thought renders precise definitions of the field difficult, but two important texts are often associated with it, Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony* and Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*, both of which work in different ways to examine conditions of existence in Africa and the diaspora in the context of sociohistorical developments and the ongoing construction of what might be termed the ontology of race. In many ways, the scholarship of Afro-pessimism is dominated by the question of agency, black and otherwise: to what extent, it asks, is redress or understanding possible given the legacy of brutality, slavery, and apartheid in black history and how has African thought itself fallen prey, at times, to the very structures of oppression and despair it seeks to oppose?

In a summarizing article, Mbembe avers that "African criticism, dominated by political economy and by the nativist impulse, has from the outset inscribed the quest for political identity within a purely instrumental and short-term temporality" (263). In a 2003 conversation between Saidiya Hartman and Frank Wilderson, III, published in *Qui Parle*, Hartman laments that many scholars are too quick to overlook the boundaries imposed by otherness in their efforts at identification—ignoring, to borrow Cheng's terminology, the instability of the distance between self and other. In so doing, Hartman argues, they elide the subjectivity of the individual with whom sympathy is sought: "It's as though in order to come to any recognition of common humanity, the other must be assimilated, meaning in this case, utterly displaced and effaced: 'Only if I can see myself in that position can I understand the crisis of that position.' That is the logic of the moral and political discourses we see everyday" (189).

In this way, Afro-pessimism constitutes a response to a critical tradition in which, as Wilderson, III, puts it later in the same interview, "people consciously or unconsciously peel away from the strength and the terror of their evidence in

order to propose some kind of coherent, hopeful solution to things" (183). They may do so, Hartman suggests, as part of an "attempt to make the narrative of defeat into an opportunity for celebration, the desire to look at the ravages and the brutality of the last few centuries, but to still find a way to feel good about ourselves" (185). These words could also perhaps be used to object to the tenor of *Libretto*—a poetic catalogue of injustice that ends in a surprising burst of optimism at once global and Afrocentric. However, to assess *Libretto* in this way would overlook the manner in which it carefully balances history and hope. In what follows, I argue that Tolson's *Libretto* sketches the outlines of a solution to the persistent melancholia Cheng diagnoses. For Tolson, awareness of the contingency of historically entrenched categories sparks an intersubjective relation that hinges on a form of connection ontologically prior to the cultural melancholia *Libretto* revisits. The poem posits a form of recognition that resists any logic of effacement, recognizing the historical and material uniqueness of the other and the necessary incompleteness and uncertainty inherent in affective connection. At the same time, it forges an optimistic politics that refuses either to minimize racial grief or to reify the constructs that foster it—one whose realization promotes the externalization of affect rather than its melancholic incorporation.

The politics of affective unity that figures in *Libretto* is most immediately discernible in its conflation of high modernist form and African American poetic idiom, which reminds the reader of the inessentiality of the divide between these aesthetics. As I mentioned earlier, this aspect of *Libretto* has already been discussed in detail by other scholars, so two brief examples will suffice here. In the second stanza of *Libretto*, Tolson characterizes Liberia as "*Mehr Licht* for the Africa-to-Be" (*Libretto* 16). "*Mehr Licht*," "more light" in German, is apocryphally said to be Goethe's last words. Using the final utterance of one of the great thinkers in the Western literary tradition to inaugurate a newly liberated African nation, Tolson synthesizes the historical developments of Africa and the West, invoking a connection between seemingly distant cultures.

This synthesis also appears in the formal structure of *Libretto*; its eight sections are named after successive notes on the diatonic scale, which finds its origins in the European musical tradition. But at the same time, the opening section of *Libretto* assumes a stridently African American rhythm; it features, as Edward Brunner observes in his annotation of the poem, "a set of contrasts resembling a call-and-response pattern" of the sort popularized by the blues and folk tradition in black American culture (Tolson, *Anthology* 418).[6] In subtending this call-and-response pattern within an overarching framework of Western origin, Tolson initiates the overlapping of the Western modernist and African American domains consistently featured in his poem. The Western mode may seem to be the dominant one, since it encompasses the whole *Libretto*, while the call-and-response technique is used only in the beginning section and at intermittent points throughout the poem. But the poem's opening lines not only address this apparent power imbalance; they inscribe a sudden reversal in which Liberia, as "the quicksilver sparrow that slips / The eagle's claw," resists appropriation by the colonialist powers that hope to control it (*Libretto* 7–8). In an endnote explaining his description, in line 42, of Africa as a "Question Mark," Tolson recalls that Africa has been called "a moral interrogation point that challenges the white world" (*Libretto* 42). It is through the assertive and ultimately hopeful character

of this challenge that the question mark of Africa supersedes the colonialist and limiting answers it might provoke.

The synthesis of African oral traditions with the aesthetic forms associated with Anglo-American modernism is only one instance of the connective energy of *Libretto*. Tolson incorporates various languages into the poem to demonstrate that its reach is transnational, limited neither to Africa nor to the Americas. Michael North has described the modernist movement as an attempt on the part of both black and white writers to "free" language, "in dramatically different ways," from the constricting effects of a limiting political culture (11). In its rich and sprawling use of language, *Libretto* fits this description; containing "phrases in a dozen languages," as Brunner notes, it circumvents tradition in order to reinvent it, "mount[ing] a series of raids against various kinds of established authority" (143, 145). That the languages featured in *Libretto* are foreign to one another allows us to consider how such foreignness might be reexamined, how meaning achieves a tenuous transmission across and between dialects. As Brent Hayes Edwards has observed, the interaction between or interweaving of different languages can provoke moments of unexpected harmony, what he calls a "foreshadowing of community" in "the articulation of a connection across difference" (68). If, as Brunner suggests in his notes to *Libretto*, the poem's last section begins in "sheer cacophony" in order to depict "the confusion of the postwar moment," the very proximity of these myriad voices and languages to one another surely marks the poem as transnational not only in scale, but in agenda (Tolson, *Anthology* 452).

The heterogeneous vocabulary of *Libretto* thus urges adaptation rather than stagnation, dynamism rather than fixity, and above all it underlines the requirement—by requiring it of the reader—to encounter the language, and with it the worldview, of the other. The theorist Mikhail Bakhtin has demonstrated the necessary link between language and worldview: "all languages of heteroglossia . . . are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings, and values" (291–92). The diverse languages with which *Libretto* challenges the reader remind him or her of the necessary subjectivity of any one viewpoint, whatever the language that shapes and accompanies it. This inescapable subjectivity also circumscribes, of course, the limits of identification: but so far from suggesting that identification with the other is unavailable, it makes the need for it all the more evident. While the radical alterity that language symptomatizes causes the speaker of *Libretto* moments of doubt—"the letter killeth five hundred global tongues," he notes, even as he speaks in several of them—the confluence of dialects in the poem dramatizes the navigation of ideas and relationships across the dividing lines of languages to suggest that the barriers they create are in some sense permeable (*Libretto* 523).

The poem's second section begins by citing an African proverb: "The Good Gray Bard in Timbuktu chanted: / *'Brow tron lo—eta ne a ne won oh gike*!'" (*Libretto* 58). Most critics agree that the "Good Gray Bard" is Walt Whitman, whom Tolson here locates in Africa. This imaginative placement of the great American poet dismisses the limitations imposed by linguistic barriers (Whitman speaks in an African language) as well as by physical distance.[7] The global hybridity posited in this gesture is underlined by the content of the proverb itself, translated in Tolson's endnote as "The world is too large—that's why we do not hear everything" (58).

The poem's transnational impulse is a response to this lament and is expressed both as a challenge and as a corrective: in more grandiose terms, then, *Libretto* can be considered an attempt to make the world smaller through language.

Reflecting on the ancient economic practices that shaped modern civilization, the poem's speaker envisions "[s]ea lawyers" who, in service to their rulers, "[m]ixed liquors with hyperboles to cure deafness" (67). Figuratively, *Libretto* might fairly be said to attempt much the same thing. Its locution is not so much *in* a language as *between* them. It is in this sense that, as Matthew Hart argues, *Libretto* might fairly be termed a "black Atlantic" poem: while its subject is the country of *Liberia*, it remains attentive to the interstices between nations and ethnicities rather than focusing solely on one state (163). Its narrative arc reflects on the past and future of the country but also on the African continent at large, particularly in its relation to Western powers. Rather than being organized chronologically, the poem enacts a kind of thought experiment, choosing which points of local and world history to emphasize, establishing a historical timeline only to veer from it to geological time—"Glaciers had shouldered down / The cis-Saharan snows . . ." (227–28)—before ending with a fantastical ode to a future Liberia of the poet's imagination. Such hyperboles, such heady liquors, are all within the poem's purview. Its ambition is to cure a "deafness" that inheres in our relation to our shared past as well as to each other. While it has repercussions on a global scale, this deafness is especially apparent in the case of Africa: "'*Seule de tous les continents*,' the parrots / chatter, '*l'Afrique n'a pas d'histoire*'" (170–01). "Alone of all the continents, Africa has no history": the saying condemns the injustices perpetrated on the continent and the ingredients that gave rise to them—the unwillingness or inability to recognize the essential validity of other selves, a moral exercise basic to community and social progress. In narrating this history from an explicitly internationalist perspective, Tolson encourages a rekindling of this recognition and its attendant benefits in *Libretto*.

This recognition, and the equality it implies, can only be possible if the forms of systemic oppression prevalent in the many places in the world of Tolson's time emanate from conditional, socially constructed paradigms rather than inherent ones. Tolson stresses the temporal and spatial limitations of any one group's dominance over another in part to reinforce the arbitrariness of some of our deepest-rooted and most endemic divisions. The fundamental inessentiality of hegemonies of language and nation is a key tenet of *Libretto* and, in the futuristic utopia of the poet's imagination, these reductive binarisms will have been overcome, bringing the most deeply engrained and lasting struggle for equality in human history—that between rich and poor, the haves and the have-nots—to the fore.

That is to say, Tolson's vision of the world is in many respects a Marxist one. This becomes evident not only through close readings of his poems, but by examining other aspects of his career as a teacher and cultural critic. Gary Lenhart writes that, in "Caviar and Cabbage," a column he wrote for the *Washington Tribune* from 1937 to 1944, Tolson "consistently hammered 'the Big Boys' whose limitless greed promoted colonialism in most of the world and racism in the United States. He stated frequently that the cause of racism was capitalism, the profits of which required an exploited low-wage class" (66). From Tolson's perspective, the essential problem in political and social relations is ultimately economic and not race-based.[8] This principle is evoked in Tolson's summary of the American Civil War,

during which, he writes, "the bells of Yankee capital / Tolled for the feudal glory of the South" (*Libretto* 101–02). Here the central distinction between the opposed sides is found in their differing economic systems—the North's advanced, the South's outdated. The lines that follow the above-quoted couplet reinforce the connection between money and racial power. The history is a thoroughly capitalist one, in which a "family name / Dwarfed signatures of blood" and a "decision's cash / And credit bought a balm for conscience" (108–09, 114–15). Tolson concisely summarizes this conceit later in the poem: it is the fate of all cultures, he writes, to "read the flesh of grass / into bulls and bears" (314–15). As Brunner states in his notes, the phrase "flesh of grass" is redolent of *Isaiah* 40.6: "All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field" (*King James Version*; *Anthology* 438). The idiom in which bulls and bears are contrasted is, of course, that of the stock market; Tolson's lament is that the latter should predominate over the former, that even the fact of human mortality should be made to serve the whims of the capitalist engine.

In "Ti," his wide-ranging examination of African and world history, Tolson insists more explicitly on the historical and theoretical preeminence of the economic binarism in modernity: "Before hammer and sickle or swastika, two / worlds existed: the Many, the Few" (*Libretto* 341–42). The divide between those who stand to gain by the capitalist system and those who stand to lose by it predates any of the political ideologies written to explain it and is the original inequality on which all other systemic injustices are based. "Like some gray ghoul from Alcatraz, / old Profit, the bald rake *paseq*, wipes the bar"—passing, in the poem's next lines, through eras and nations like an avaricious ghost (347–48). In his endnote to these lines, Tolson refers to the *paseq* as "the most mysterious sign in literature" (348). The word is Hebrew and its literal meaning is "separated," but its function in ancient literature is precisely to unify the current text with a preceding one. It is a vertical line, rendered like so |, and is meant to reassure the authenticity of the current text's phrasing as compared to the original or source version (*Anthology* 441). The *paseq*, then, paradoxically signifies separation but produces unity and, in so doing, it apotheosizes Tolson's representation in *Libretto* of an overriding sense of hope counterbalancing scene after scene of chaos and strife.

For the present is already, Tolson argues in *Libretto*, becoming the future—one in which to celebrate, as Lenhart phrases it, "the dawn of a pan-Africanism that would resolve ethnic strife between Africans" and "praise Liberian independence as harbinger of the liberation from colonial oppression" (73). While this utopian future is most clearly envisioned in "Do," the poem's eighth and final (and, as Tolson's biographer Robert Farnsworth has noted, oft-criticized) section, hints of its eventual ascendance are already present in "Ti" (Farnsworth 138). In this penultimate section, Tolson looks back at a bloody past scarred by "Yesterday's wars," during which

> the ferris wheel
> of race, of caste, of class
> dumped and alped cadavers till the ground
> fogged the Pleiades with Gila rot. . . . (*Libretto* 462, 474–77)

This scene contrasts with the present-day situation, a democratic free-for-all in which "unparadised nobodies with maps of Nowhere / ride the merry-go-round!" (486–87). As Robert Farnsworth explains, the terms "Ferris wheel" and "merry-go-round" can be traced back to one of Tolson's newspaper columns from 1940. There, the poet argues for a historical progression from the former to the latter:

> The history of man heretofore has been the history of the rise and fall of nations. I presume to call this the Ferris Wheel Theory of History. . . . I have another theory. It is based on economic and racial brotherhood. I presume to call this the Merry-Go-Round of History. On the merry-go-round all seats are on the same level. Nobody goes up; therefore, nobody has to come down. . . . Racial superiority and class superiority produced the hellish contraption called the Ferris Wheel of History. Democracy will produce the Merry-Go-Round of history. (qtd. in Farnsworth 157–58)

In a letter to his editor explaining the final section of *Libretto*, Tolson links the symbols of the Ferris wheel and the merry-go-round to the past and future, respectively (Farnsworth 153). The poem's claim is that democracy of the kind just installed in Liberia is the antidote to the seemingly unending varieties of oppression with which the past is littered. The "Merry-Go-Round of history" represents Tolson's vision of the utopian future he depicts at length in *Libretto*'s last section. Combining a radical Christian moral philosophy with a Marxist understanding of economics, Tolson envisages a future social compact governed by political equality and affective community.

This political compact does not align perfectly with either the socialism with which Tolson associated himself in his career as a public intellectual or with democracy in its conventional manifestations. In *Libretto*, the civilizational transition from the "Ferris wheel" of caste to the "merry-go-round" of brotherhood is only predicated on democracy insofar as democracy is enacted not merely as a system of political organization, but as a state of affective codependence. Thus the poem contains no direct political injunctions; rather, it is woven through with an implied demand for recognition of the other (especially the weaker) and a mingling of the supposedly distinct languages, ideologies, and categories whose integration produces the very unification it formally represents. Tolson's pairing of the economic doctrine of Marxism and the religious principles of Christianity is an incisive example of this tactic. In describing the respective heads of these movements as "Marx, the exalter" and "Christ, the Leveler," Tolson differentiates between the two, perhaps in order to suggest a distinction not only between the social effects of the Christian and Marxist philosophies, but between the writings of Marx and the true goals of socialism (361, 363). In any case, Tolson indicates that the synthesis of socialist and Christian ideals, rather than their mutual exclusion from one another, might foster the cultivation of an ethic of unity. The confluence of such ideologies produces a social ethic that rejects too-easy political or religious affiliations in favor of more radical and self-questioning forms of inquiry—ethical models predicated on the emotional willingness to reach beyond the borders of the conventional and into the unpredictable but potentially liberating arena of the unknown. For example, one insight the poem offers is that without the affective engagement its success demands, democracy is simply another political institution,

one that might limit, at most, the inequalities and divisions that *Libretto* laments, but never eradicate them. This is because such a task is not solely a political one but also, indeed perhaps firstly, an ethical one; it concerns the realm of human actions both individual and collective. The democratic future *Libretto* forecasts is, thus, bound up in the movement from the individual to the collective, from isolation to connectivity.

Tolson envisions what this unachieved political ideal might look like in the exuberant final section of *Libretto*, which sequences dream-like descriptions of futuristic vehicles of transportation, all African in origin. The stylization and utopianism of this section of the whole of *Libretto*—but especially this section—allow us to situate it as a precursor text in the Afro-futurist literary tradition.[9] Afro-futurist texts draw from genres such as science fiction and magic realism to theorize possible global African futures. While it remains rooted in an awareness of the historical and material realities that have shaped the conditions of diaspora, much of Afro-futurism's power derives from its imaginative reach, its refusal to limit itself to the strictly mimetic in its speculative and sometimes fantastic depictions of black futurity. Tolson refuses these limits as well, conflating technologies of transportation with post-nationalist politics in order to sketch a new utopian world order. Each next vehicle Tolson describes offers an increased capacity to travel farther and faster, well beyond the borders of Liberia if necessary—the expanding territory navigable by each machine signifying the continuing advance of the transnational affective unity his poem promotes. These vehicles include, in order, "The Futurafrique," a sleek futuristic automobile; "The United Nations Limited," a high-powered train; "The Bula Matadi," a large cargo ship; and "*Le Premier des Noirs*," an airplane belonging to a company called "Pan-African Airways" (575–693). Tolson then theorizes a more explicitly political construction, a Pan-African governmental body that provides leadership and renewal not only to African culture, but to the world:

> The Parliament of African Peoples, chains riven in
> an age luminous with alpha ray
> ideas, rives the cycle of years
> lean and fat, poises the scales
> of Head and Hand, gives Sci-
> ence dominion over Why and
> Art over How, bids Man cross
> the bridge of Bifrost and drink
> draughts of rases from verved
> and loined apes of God with
> leaves of grass and great audi-
> ences . . . . (711–22)

In this representative passage, Tolson imagines a future Africa—whose riven chains indicate not only the absence of slavery, but of the various forms of colonialist oppression the continent has had to endure—that stands at the forefront of "an age luminous with alpha ray / ideas" (712–13). The overcoming of ignorance and prejudice requires the union of apparent opposites, including "lean and fat," "Head and Hand," and science and art (714–15). Again, Tolson insists on the ultimate insubstantiality of human categories, premising his outline of a utopian

future on conjunctive forces capable of transcending them. He even dares hope for a perfect kinship between poet and audience—the Whitmanian "leaves of grass" paired with the "great / audiences" receptive to them—of the kind he sought throughout his career but never fully found (721–22). In such a society, no perceived dissonance inheres between black poetry and modernist literature; all the poet must overcome are his own limitations.

Tolson's *Libretto*, thus, exemplifies, in many ways, what Yogita Goyal has identified as a shift from realism to romance within post-nationalist literature of the diaspora (228). Throughout much of *Libretto*, Tolson works to secure Liberia within a particular black Atlantic history and part of the text's optimism is located in its more pragmatic political hope for a new Africa able to divest itself of the travails of its past. At the same time, the affective register of *Libretto* is the sign of its willingness to imagine the possibility of a transnational political structure not limited by the potentially restrictive markers of race, class, and nation. Tolson's optimism was likely buoyed in this respect by the recent formation, at the end of World War II, of the United Nations—a multinational cooperative organization that appeared to embody the progressive internationalist perspective discernible in the last section of *Libretto*. The poem, thus, harbors the hope for the achievement of a globally minded community of artists and thinkers that push modernism beyond its self-imposed limitations, rendering the spheres of the political and the aesthetic complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

Given this rosy portrait of the African future, it's certainly clear that, as Brunner comments, Tolson's "visionary strain meets and exceeds his searing critique" (151). But the historical record comes much closer to reaffirming Tolson's initial critique than to approaching the state of affairs he describes in the last section of *Libretto*, which is shot through with what Matthew Hart terms, not unfairly, "gaseous optimism" (174). Since 1980, when Samuel Doe led a military coup against the government, Liberia has been one of Africa's bloodiest nation-states. Doe was in power for ten years before he was executed and his own government overthrown by the Charles Taylor–led National Patriotic Front of Liberia. This coup precipitated a civil war that left nearly a quarter of a million people dead.

Nonetheless, at the time, Tolson's confidence about the prospects of a free Liberia was not entirely unwarranted. Liberia had been a founding member of the United Nations in 1945 and its government was internationally involved in the years after World War II. In 1955, at the Bandung Conference, Liberia joined several other Asian and African nations in officially condemning colonialism. Liberia's independence also paved the way for many other African nations to follow suit. As Tolson points out in a 1965 interview, "In 1947 . . . there were only two independent black countries in Africa. Today there are thirty-three. It is a vision, right out of the Apocalypse" ("A Poet's Odyssey" 192). This rapid historical development helps to make Tolson's surrealistic depiction of the African future a little less tendentious, even if we know today, as Tolson might have seen already in 1965, that most of the republics formed in Africa in the latter half of the twentieth century were little more than puppet governments installed to provide flimsy validation of the reign of autocratic and sometimes genocidal dictators.

Tolson's choice to emphasize the positive aspects of Liberia's political situation while minimizing the negative ones must be considered in light of his responsibility to Liberia as its poet laureate. His telling of the future of the country,

whose national poem he had been commissioned to write, may be informed less by confidence than by hope—a hope that, given past events in Liberia, might appear to border on irrational. But to refuse cynicism, to insist on the possibility of what appears unlikely, may be one of the poet's great civic responsibilities. By any measure, it is the means through which Tolson undergirded his aesthetic with an ethic of hope founded on identification with the other, as well as the politics such an ethic might engender. As Farnsworth argues, "Tolson clearly saw himself in the vanguard of an army of black cultural soldiers who would make the African past a centerpiece of the world's future, not by re-creating the flip side of white racism, but by realizing a more racially enlightened democratic dream" (68). If this dream has not been fully realized either in Tolson's time or our own, it's possible that its very presence, if only as a social ideal, remains a vital ingredient in whatever progress *has* been achieved.

His resilient optimism notwithstanding, Tolson refused to allow his faith in Liberian progress to blind him to the reality of present and past injustices. *Libretto* is nearly impenetrable in its last two sections and its allusive endnotes often require their own explanations as much as they explain the poem. But in this way, the poem's increasing complexity may itself emblematize the importance of continuing onward toward a future that must be built and not merely envisioned, in spite of obstacles faced along the way. These are undeniably many, as the last four stanzas of "Ti" remind us. The gallery of images and ideas from which Tolson selects and arranges his litany of troubles is astonishingly vivid: "gold fished from cesspools" (405), "epitaphs in blood" (409), "the pelican's breast rent red to feed the young" (417), "the church of the unchurched" (420), "maggot democracy" (426), and (in a line he lifts from Baudelaire) "the *oasis d'horreur dans un déserte d'ennui*" 'oasis of horror in a desert of despair' (429).

In the poem's long final section, Tolson amplifies his indictment of the world's horrors, historical and current: it is a savaged landscape in which "barbaric yawps shatter the shoulder-knots of white peace" (514), in which unapologetically colonialist "britannia rules the waves" (516), in which, since "pin-pricks precede blitzkriegs" (531), we are forever on the verge of war, and in which no survivors are left in ruined cities to witness "blind men gibbering *mboagan* ["death"] in greek / against sodom's pillars of salt" (552–23).[10] The seeming hopelessness of this situation is mitigated somewhat by the poem's remarkable reach and diasporic hybridity. In flitting between languages, cultures, and religious traditions, these lines produce a form of what Ramazani calls "elegiac transnationalism," subtly drawing the reader's attention to the ways humans are knit together even while narrating the atrocities that divide them (82).

In lines 555–74, Tolson questions the future directly, asking whether respite from such turmoil and strife is possible. The poem offers only the briefest and most enigmatic of answers: "*Ppt knows*" (574). Tolson's note to the line directs us to Jonathan Swift's *Journal to Stella*. As Farnsworth explains, "Ppt" is "an abbreviation for Poppet or Poor Pretty Thing," Swift's pet name for the Stella of the journal's title, whose real name was Esther Johnson and who may have been secretly married to Swift (161). Swift's confidence in his beloved Stella, and especially in her understanding of him, is indicative of the kind of relationality that will answer modernity's most pressing moral concerns. "*Ppt knows*," the line insists, in Farnsworth's estimation, on "[t]he need to act with faith in the midst of uncertainty"

(161). More than this, it describes the mode of that action as intrinsically *relational*—both expectant of and confident in the understanding of the (possibly distant) other. In short, it prizes affective identification as the agent that moves us from moral lethargy to moral action.

Early in *Libretto*, Tolson describes Africa as the "Mother of Science," but adds that the continent has been torn asunder and is now "*lachen mit yastchekes*" (273–74). The phrase is Yiddish; its literal meaning, Tolson's note tells us, is "laughing with needles being stuck in you" (274). He adds a secondary, more figurative definition: "ghetto laughter," which is the response of the mistreated to the fact of their victimization (274). But it is an active and not a passive response, one that seeks to construct the very change in which it expresses belief. Far from minimizing the historicity and reach of the ghetto, the phrase "ghetto laughter" means to remind us of its continual repercussions. But the fact that the affective reaction of laughter is so at odds with the horrific material conditions represented by the ghetto testifies to the agency of the human subject, to the individual's ability to respond to such conditions in a manner that rejects whatever limiting binaries they might seem to impose. Further, Tolson's ghetto laughter is a communal act; precipitated neither by a Nietzschean gaze into the darkness nor a Beckettian embrace of the absurd, it refuses solitude in favor of commiseration. In this manner, *Libretto* invites us to consider the possibility that the sympathy effected by the *sharing* of grief or pain can potentially overcome the sources of that pain, on a historical level if not a local one.

The shape of a response, thus, begins to emerge in *Libretto* to the melancholic patterns of attachment Anne Anlin Cheng discerns in *The Melancholy of Race*. Like Cheng, Tolson rejects any simplistic politics of assimilation, but his poem proposes that, by uprooting received norms, we can work to challenge the systemic patterns through which melancholia insinuates itself into modern culture. This is a solution that fits the problem, given that melancholia involves the incorporation of feelings of loss or shame: "the melancholic has introjected that which he or she now reviles" and is left "almost choking on," Cheng writes, "the hateful and loved thing he or she just devoured" (9). That is, melancholia designates a psychosocial condition in which the affective response to the loss of a loved object or condition is directed *inward* and this negative affect begins to nurture and simultaneously feed on itself. In stark contrast, the moment of identification is one in which affect is directed *outside* the self and in conjunction with the other; it externalizes affect rather than internalizing it. In so doing, it also provides a way out of the closed loop of attachment and reattachment to the sources of pain and grief from which the melancholic subject seeks to flee. While Cheng notes that her study offers a record not only of the after-effects of grief, but "a revelation of transformative potentials within grief," she concludes that such grief and its sources are finally too imbricated in the very origins of American culture ever to be escaped (65). While its reach goes far beyond a strictly American context, *Libretto* is very much about this same cultural grief—its sources and fixations—but the poem valorizes, in the end, various forms of interstitial connection that counterweigh such melancholia, constituting a means by which the nationalist and colonialist "ferris wheel / of race, of caste, of class" might become a global "merry-go-round" of social opportunity (Tolson, *Libretto* 474–75).

By questioning the discreteness of entrenched cultural categories and insisting on the underlying connections between all human beings, Tolson's optimistic

outlook also invites a reconsideration of the scope and direction of affect theory. The current dominant critical trend in affect studies is to focus on negative emotions, dark feelings, and troublesome aspects of social relation, often (though not always) to the exclusion of more remedial forms of affect. Indeed, the rise of affect theory hinged on analyses of shame in the work of Silvan Tomkins, first by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and later by Elspeth Probyn and others. Since then, the focus has unquestionably been on states of psychological relation founded in disjunctions between self and other or between self and world.[11] While the contributions to the field offered by these analyses have been valuable—sometimes, indeed, crucially so—it's worth remembering that affective relation can be as much about unity as disparity and can provoke solidarity as much as it can grief. Tolson's *Libretto* functions in part as a reminder that optimism in its various iterations (political, moral, and socioeconomic) can be more than an insidious myth manufactured and propagated by the dominant culture to quell dissent. A poetics of affective identification can be, in fact, that very dissent, finding strength precisely in the varieties of hospitality and recognition it depicts, envisions, and remembers.

While his work reads scenes of crisis and oppression as almost unmitigated by small acts of human goodness, the "almost" looms large for Tolson. His prognosis is, therefore, one of *unfashionable hope*, in more than one sense of the term. It is unfashionable, first, in the sense of being out of fashion—out of step with an academic culture that all too easily dispenses with the idea of hope as insufficiently rigorous, distanced, or intellectually honest. Secondly, and more crucially, it is unfashionable in the more literal sense of being unable to be fashioned—at least not fully: it always insists on the potential of the future, it never ignores present-day injustices, it is always in progress. And if the day-to-day circumstances of the postwar era (or of our own era, for that matter) would seem to dictate that such hope is both unwise and unrealistic, it may be for just this reason that Tolson insists on it. Tolson's rhetoric of confidence is less a prediction of the future than a brash avowal of the human ability to improve it.

Evincing the outlines of a faith that persists in the face of difficult odds, Tolson's rhetoric of unfashionable hope finds a contemporary echo in Cheng's observation that scenes of anguish and aggression serve to remind us of "the impossibility yet urgency of sympathy" (189). Indeed, the very emotional bond between separate individuals that sympathy instantiates serves to underscore, by its impermanence and fragility, the fact that we are all in some sense alien to one another. The wish to feel with the other is further problematized, as Cheng notes, by the fact that identity itself is unstable, "a fiction of ontological integrity organized by identification" (180). Achieving and sustaining emotional connection with the other involves assuming the presence of an ontological foothold that, so far from existing prior to identification with the other, is in fact produced by it.

This makes any hoped-for affective community a markedly tenuous venture. Cheng, thus, locates within human relationality "a crisis of unbridgeability" that must be navigated within, and not over against, the pervasive climate of racial melancholia within which it takes place (189). She concludes, in a tone somewhat melancholic in its own right, that the politics of identification remains highly constrained by its own (which is to say, our own) inadequacies:

> In a world defined by sides, where everyone speaks in the vocabulary of "them" versus "us," not to take a side means to exist in an insistent, resistant middle ground that is also nowhere. The perspective that sees beyond the self is also the perspective that takes on the view of the other, which is also an impossible perspective. . . . To hold that vision of knowledge, reserve, contemplation, vigilance, and multiplicity is also to remain homeless. . . . [U]nderstanding may mean understanding the limits of understanding. (194)

Cheng's argument here restricts the scene of identification to one of fantasy and wish-fulfillment: the self can only identify with the nebulous space *between* self and other, never with the (technically unreachable) other. But at the same time, this very space uniting self and other can itself only be present through some form of identification, however incomplete it must remain. The displacement of the basic centrality of emotional connection, thus, effects a kind of double move in which we come to identify not with the other, but with the limited and limiting effects of our attempts to sympathize. In contrast to this somewhat cautionary vision of identification, Tolson's *Libretto* suggests that the effectiveness of affective sharing is not hindered by the fact that the self is a site of contested and conflicted meanings and histories. Rather, sympathy and subjectivity operate in a reciprocal pattern of mutual support, as identification and identity each build on the other. Indeed, the unfinished nature of subjectivity and the limitedness of affective connection only serve to make recognition and identification all the more urgent and necessary.

Cheng's model of identity and identification, while intelligible on a theoretical level, is therefore difficult to use as a blueprint for effective activism at the level of real-world relationships. To "exist . . . nowhere," to "remain homeless," can only be undertaken as an intellectual exercise, not a practical one; and even at the level of theory, it seems to require a certain rescinding of political action. Cheng asserts as much, calling "the 'no place' that is nonetheless an imperative," "the difference between ethics and politics" (195). Tolson's *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* is instructive here because it articulates, in its appeal to an unreached form of sympathy, a potential and provisional strategy for filling the gap between the ethical and the political. For while *Libretto* is a necessarily political text—after all, it is a national poem written to celebrate the birth of an African democracy—the real weight of its politics emerges less in any explicit manner than in its challenging ethic that affirms linguistic and ethnic hybridity and the transience and indeterminacy of social categories. The ethical imperative spelled out in *Libretto* is one of affective intersubjectivity—of feeling across and without regard to borders, be they ethnic, national, or economic. In this way, Tolson both situates Liberia within the historical and spatial black Atlantic and positions Liberia within his poem as the ground zero for a reconfiguration, through affect and poetics, of the possibilities inherent in diasporic community.

As a final example of his undeterred hope, consider this encouragement from Tolson to his readers:

> O Peoples of the Brinks,
> come with the hawk's resolve,
> the skeptic's optic nerve, the prophet's *tele* verve

and Oedipus' guess, to solve
the riddle of
the Red Enigma and the White Sphinx. (371–76)

The enigma and sphinx might be taken to represent past and present, socialism and capitalism, East and West; most likely they symbolize some combination of those three. Their entrenched opposition is the riddle in need of solving and, to do so, Tolson believes, we will need to wear many different hats: those of the soldier, the skeptic, and the prophet. In a sense, then, the indeterminacy of identity here becomes a boon, a means of reaching between and beyond fixed patterns of behavior to challenge what underlies them. The "*tele* verve" through which we attempt to shape a better world is—by the creative moral imagination it demands—the very path toward one and hinges on accepting the reality of difference at the level not only of society, but of self.

For this reason, the most apt symbol to which to return in the leaving of *Libretto* may be that of the *paseq*, the dividing line in an ancient text whose interruption of it is the mark of its unity with preceding texts. Tolson formally represents this disjunction in a single line of his poem: "O Age, pesiq, O Age" (367).[12] The two divided ends of the line are precisely identical, bridged by the very word that denotes their disjunction. The sameness of these halves signifies a connection of self to other and of past to present in which the necessity of interstitial division is acknowledged. More importantly, this mirror effect embodies a unity whose perfection intimates that the action by which the *paseq* unifies distinct subjectivities overcomes the ontological structure by which it divides them. This principle is an animating force throughout *Libretto*, a poem that, without denying the cultural realities produced by difference, dares to conceive of a collective future in which the effects of such difference are encountered and acknowledged but not enshrined.

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NOTES

1. See Bérubé 123–26; Werner; Gold. Gold posits that Tolson "tried to meld high-modernist techniques with an African American consciousness to create a voice that would speak across both race and class boundaries" (243).

2. Keith Leonard argues that the reconceptualization of the self is found in Tolson's poetry but also across the wider tradition in which he worked: "African and American traditions, because they have at times been predicated on resisting exclusion from nations, contain within their dislocation from the nation a truer model for understanding all socially constructed human identity" (202).

3. In Ikechi Mgbeoji's words, the nation of Liberia "was conceived in fear by those who could not contemplate coexistence with black people in the post-Civil War era" (2). Most black Americans sensed this latent prejudice, so that, as Eric Burin notes, "by the mid-1830s free African-Americans in the South were almost uniformly opposed to the ACS" (26). For a summary of the early years of Liberia's history, see Mcbeogi 4–5. For a

detailed history of the American Colonization Society, see Burin. Clegg, III, examines the long-term effects of the project of colonization in Liberia. For an assessment of Liberian political history and possible democratic reforms, see Sawyer.

4. For fuller descriptions of the views of Garvey and Du Bois on Liberia, see Lewis; Moses.

5. Among the many uncertainties surrounding the discourse of Afro-pessimism is whether its focus is more to delineate a condition or to advocate a particular response to that condition. Scholars also remain divided on the question of whether (or what kind of) solutions are available for the problems Afro-pessimism enumerates. In his book *In Search of Africa*, Manthia Diawara criticizes Afro-pessimism as "a fatalistic attitude toward economic and social crisis," arguing that what he calls "the naturalization of Afro-pessimism" has resulted in "a continued reign of misery, African-on-African violence, and oppression of women" on the African continent (38–39). Diawara records a discussion with the Guinean novelist and Afro-pessimist Williams Sassine in which Sassine avers that "[t]he only solution is violence. You must break everything. As they say, 'You cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs.' Things will just continue if you don't destroy them" (53). In the domain of cultural studies, the debate over Afro-pessimism takes place in a more theoretical context; see in particular Sexton as well as the essay to which it responds, Moten. In his essay, Moten argues for a counterintuitive optimism discernable in (and despite) Fanon's analysis of the lived experience of blackness.

6. This parenthetical citation will be used to indicate a reference to the edition of *Libretto* found in the *Anthology of Modern American Poetry*. This edition of the text has been annotated by Edward Brunner and I cite it in this essay as "*Anthology*" wherever I refer to his commentary. In citing the poem proper, I will use the 1953 Twayne edition (which records line numbers rather than page numbers).

7. In his annotation of *Libretto*, Edward Brunner suggests that the phrase refers to Walt Whitman (Tolson, *Anthology* 419). Kathy Lou Schultz also assumes that Whitman is the figure meant (124). Keith Leonard is more expansive in his attribution, calling the Good Gray Bard "an amalgam of an African, Tennyson (whom Tolson mentions in his notes), Whitman, and Tolson himself" (218).

8. It seems entirely possible, given Tolson's subordination of ethnic concerns to economic ones, that his Marxist inclinations, more than any belief in the absolute "rightness" of creating a poetics of race, led him to affiliate himself with the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s.

9. The term "Afro-futurism" was first coined by Mark Dery in 1994 to describe a black futurist literary tradition focusing on the intersections between race, futurity, and technoculture. See Dery. Recent explorations of Afro-futurism include a special issue on the topic in *Social Text 71* as well as Jackson and Moody-Freeman.

10. "Death" is Tolson's brief translation of *mboagan*; see *Libretto* 552.

11. See, for example, Ngai; Love; Berlant. Berlant critiques toxic cultural affective attachments to a hoped-for but increasingly unavailable and even oppressive future.

12. *Pasiq* is a conjugation of the Hebrew word *paseq*; in his notes to the poem Tolson translates the former as "divided," the latter as "divider."

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