CHAPTER 2

A Poem for the Futurafricque: Tolson’s
Libretto for the Republic of Liberia

Overview

In *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* (1953) Melvin B. Tolson writes into the voids in official histories, highlighting the fact that the construction of the archive—of memory—must constantly be tended. Writing in the mid-twentieth century, Tolson seeks to preserve the histories of people of African descent throughout the diaspora, writing into the void to un-silence black voices. Tolson’s book-length *Libretto* is his first major Afro-Modernist epic, following on his experiments with the serial poem and modernist techniques in the early 1940s. Tolson’s experimental forms in *Libretto* produce a fluidity that allow the poem to flow both backward and forward in historical time, and in and through a multiplicity of identities.

Written in the late 1940s (approximately 1947–1950), *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* was published in book form in 1953. While Tolson’s Afro-Modernist epics appear to some readers to be anomalous or “sudden,” in fact, Tolson was consciously employing modernist techniques by at least 1940, showing continuity from the forms of his earlier work, to the experimentalism evident throughout *Libretto*. By 1948, Tolson was publicly extolling the importance of T. S. Eliot for black writers, and Tolson’s self-conscious immersion in modernism is evident in the highly imbricated allusions throughout *Libretto*. Tolson, however, combines modernist formal experimentation with a populist-inflected subject position. *Libretto* is a song for the people of Liberia, as well as a celebration of the accomplishments of people of African descent around the globe. The flowering of global diasporic consciousness evident in the poem is informed by an understanding that
the flow and collision of peoples and cultures results in identities that are in flux, rather than fixed.

Writing on *Libretto* for the *American Quarterly* in 1966 (a time when few critics were actually reading the *Libretto*) Dan McCall praises what I am calling Tolson’s populist position, writing that “Tolson restores to the poet his function of singing to the community” and calling the *Libretto* “a kind of master singing-book for the country [of Liberia], a storehouse of education for the Futurafrique” (538). McCall, however, finds that Tolson’s conception of the poet’s role in the community places him outside of modernism:

While the verse seems to be that of Pound in the *Cantos* or Eliot in *The Waste Land*, Tolson does not really belong in the modern American tradition of poetry. His main difference stems, first of all, from his refusal to accept a primary assumption of those who have shaped the tradition: poetry is an art of privacy. (538)

However, Tolson’s use of modernist techniques to address a populist audience—in this case the citizenry of Liberia as well as the United States—is part of his Afro-Modernist innovation. Moreover, this unique subject positioning illustrates the connections among African American literature, modernism, and proletarian literature that he defines in his master’s thesis, *The Harlem Group of Negro Writers*. For Tolson, then, the populist modernist is not an oxymoron; rather, it is an extension of the work he had been doing since the 1930s.

Tolson’s eldest son, Melvin Tolson, Jr., explains *Libretto*’s singularity this way: “Though obviously influenced by the modernism of the period, *Libretto* is unlike the poetry of any of his contemporaries. It has lost none of its exultant belief in the final triumph of the ‘little people’ and the achievement of political and socio-economic justice” (398). Tolson, Jr., also compares his father’s work to that of Amié Césaire: “Like Amié Césaire, whose *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (1947) masterfully utilizes the techniques of surrealism, Tolson remains a poet in blackness” (398). Tolson’s son makes the same distinction here as that of his father: while Tolson, Sr., employed modernist technique, his content is anchored from within African American culture. The reference to Césaire also roots Tolson within mid-century Afro-Modernism globally.

*Libretto* is an eight-section, serial epic structured on the Do-Re-Mi diatonic musical scale. Completing the octave, the poem ascends to a final futuristic, utopian vision displaying an optimism that distinguishes it from Hughes’s work of the 1950s. Tolson’s vision of Liberia is constructed through both imaginative flights and extensive research. An article in the