In an interview conducted the year before his death, Tolson gives the following reply to the question “I understand that you have lived a varied, and, in many instances, a hazardous life?”

Tennyson’s protagonist says in *Ulysses*, “Much have I seen and known…” And, again, “I am part of all that I have met…”—as shoeshine boy, stevedore, soldier, janitor, packinghouse worker, cook on a railroad, waiter in a beach-front hotel, boxer, actor, football coach, director of drama, lecturer for the NAACP, organizer of sharecroppers’ unions, teacher, father of Ph.D.’s, poet laureate of a foreign country, painter, newspaper columnist, four-time mayor of a town, facer of mobs. I have made my way in the world since I was twelve years old. (“Interview” 184)

Though Tolson certainly was given to flights of verbal arabesque, an examination of his biography reveals this self-description to be accurate. An African American man who compares himself to Tennyson’s Ulysses—and quotes Tennyson at will—Tolson has defied categorization. In life, as well as in art, Tolson was dynamic, slippery, complex, and never easily understood. An English professor (he taught for more than 40 years at historically black colleges: Wiley College in Texas and Langston College in Oklahoma) Tolson quotes, or specifically refers to the work of, not only Tennyson, but also Heraclitus, Cocteau, Pound, Eliot, Gertrude Stein, Saul Bellow, Freud, [K. L. Schultz, *The Afro-Modernist Epic and Literary History*](#) © Kathy Lou Schultz 2013
Dedicated to freedom for African Americans, Tolson also understood that there was no essential black experience; his own life defied any such definition. Therefore there was also no singular black audience. Instead, Tolson had a sense of writing for what John Ciardi in 1958 termed the “vertical audience” (as opposed to the “horizontal audience”): “the horizontal audience consists of everybody who is alive at this moment. The vertical audience consists of everyone vertically through time, who will ever read a given poem...All good poets write for the vertical audience. The vertical audience for Dante, for example, is now six centuries old. And it is growing” (“Dialogue” 42). Ciardi, who became a significant professional connection for Tolson, nominated him for a Bread Loaf Fellowship in 1954, calling Tolson “the most rocket-driven poet we have”—a most apt description of Tolson’s work (Farnsworth 133). Ciardi’s support helped to embolden Tolson to pursue a vision that included both populist and modernist impulses.

With *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* (1953), Tolson completed his first Afro-Modernist epic, a project that he had been contemplating since the 1930s. However, a work of more sweeping scope was still on his mind, which is evident in his conception of *Harlem Gallery* as a grand epic in five books representing the black diaspora. The intended sequence was as follows: *Book I: The Curator*, *Book II: Egypt Land*, *Book III: The Red Sea*, *Book IV: The Wilderness*, and *Book V, The Promised Land*. Though portions of a possible Book II are in Tolson’s papers, he only lived to complete the first book, and we are left to speculate how the other four books would have responded to the book of the Curator that was published in 1965. Quite different than Book I, the titles of the proposed books mirror the Jews’ biblical struggle from slavery in Egypt to redemption. In his plan to produce the grandest of African American epics, the proposed book titles mirror, perhaps, what an epic “should” contain. Yet it appears that his own poetic process led him again and again to a meditation upon constructions of race, the artist’s place in the community, and most specifically, the black artist’s relationship to modernism. It is within this specificity that Tolson achieves his greatest Afro-Modernist epic: *Harlem Gallery*. While he had publicly proclaimed the importance of Eliot, in Tolson’s later career he moves toward a Poundian-influenced poetics with a project that would have rivaled the *Cantos* in scope. Moreover, in *Harlem Gallery*, Tolson not only stakes out the modernist and populist subject position that we see in his earlier works, but he also raises the level of poetic discourse to make the poem an analysis of these subjects. He puts these debates into motion amongst a memorable