

# Retelling the Classics: The Harlem Renaissance, Biblical Stories, and Black Peoplehood

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Retelling the Classics:  
The Harlem Renaissance, Biblical Stories, and Black Peoplehood

**Introduction**

The authors of the Harlem Renaissance were protesting against societal wrongs they saw in the world around them, and felt that their art had the power to create positive change. These protests took a myriad of forms, but continued to share a common theme of using art to send a message about the worth of African American people as a community. Religion, or a religious theme, is one form that two Black authors of the time, Zora Neale Hurston and James Weldon Johnson, used to convey that meaning. They took known biblical stories that could be uniquely applied to the experiences and struggles of African Americans and rewrote them in a manner which worked to establish a sense of community among their people. Both writers use a mixture of biblical rhetoric, black dialect, and colloquial English to drive their messages about freedom and faith home. Hurston's book *Moses, Man of the Mountain* retells the story of the Exodus, and Johnson gives an account of creation in his poem "The Creation," based on the Genesis story. The way that Black people's experiences have been shaped by injustice and slavery--common issues that exist in certain biblical texts--can explain why the two authors chose these stories. Johnson and Hurston's depictions of God's love for His Black people in biblical stories during the Harlem Renaissance helped to create Black peoplehood, and applying social identity theory to the process of creating this peoplehood can illustrate the positive power that literature has in uplifting marginalized communities by showing their worth.

Johnson and Hurston used their ability to write poems and stories to call attention to the merit of African Americans as a people against the injustice and inequality they had faced on account of their skin color. Both authors were affected by their membership in a community

which had been excluded from the dominant White society, and had not previously understood themselves as part of a larger group. Johnson addressed the need for Black people to be seen by others, and to consider themselves, as a unified people. He based this assurance of peoplehood on the biblical account of the creation, for in his retelling, God is kind and human-like, which made Him compassionate to the people He loved enough to create. This would have enforced the belief that Black people were loved, and because of God's love for them, were deserving of their place as humans. Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain* looked more broadly at Black peoplehood--what united them as a community. She drew on the story of the Exodus because of the commonalities that had been created between the experiences of the Hebrews in the story and Black people in America. The Hebrews' journey to freedom sends a powerful message about the ability of Black people to become a group. Both authors use literature and religion as the source and evidence for their assertion about the worth of Black people, by showing their right to peoplehood in the 1920s and 1930s.

### **Peoplehood and social identity theory can go hand-in-hand**

One way to understand peoplehood is through its relation to its place in politics. Josephson analyzes the way in which Rogers Smith, an American political scientist, views peoplehood, which, while addressing the role of peoplehood in political life, is relevant to this argument in that the Harlem Renaissance was a political as well as social, cultural, and artistic movement. Smith's argument includes the belief that in America, "stories of peoplehood that work to exclude and marginalize certain groups coexist with stories about the American nation state as a bastion of freedom, equality, and liberty" (Josephson 168). This can be seen clearly in the development of Black peoplehood, for America is commonly thought of as "the land of the free" and yet this narrative does not address issues such as the history of slavery. Of particular

importance here is the the role of stories of peoplehood as crafted to a certain group, with positive traits that cannot be contradicted easily. The example Smith gives of arguing that a community is God's chosen is one which is difficult to imperitally disprove (168). One of the central assertions of the establishment of Black peoplehood by Hurston and Johnson is based on this belief of their place as special to God. This belief, while also hard to prove correct to others, would have been incredibly powerful to the community who told it to themselves. Viewing these authors, and the peoplehood they strived to craft, through social identity theory, demonstrates the creative capacity that is inherent in the formation of groups. One of the key features of social identity is how it is based on belief, which is something that people must make for themselves. As will be discussed below, the first step to making a group identity is believing that one is part of a group. Even before this can happen though, a group must be built which individuals can associate themselves with, and it is here where authors found their role. Hurston and Johnson helped to craft this peoplehood by connecting their people with the history of the Israelites and stories from a Judeo-Christian perspective, to replace their lack of a coherent history that showed them as one people with two models which did. In this way, the two authors worked a kind of "creation" of their own; one which celebrated Black people as worthy and able to be a group of their own.

### **The Harlem Renaissance**

The Harlem Renaissance gave Black authors, artists, and poets the chance to affirm their worth as people, exemplify that they were a part of the Black community, and show that they were also Americans with something new to contribute against the backdrop of racial injustice. The movement began in the 1920's in Harlem, New York, but its influence continued for many years and extended beyond the confines of the United States to other countries (A. West xviii).

One of the first causes was the migration of African Americans from the South to the North to find work. With them, they brought new beliefs and ideologies, most notably that of their artistic worth. This led to “an emergence of new ideas in political thought,” “groundbreaking artistic developments,” and “an inauguration of civil rights organizations” (S. West xviii). Despite being termed a “renaissance,” something which relies on the revival of history in its messages, this renaissance focused less on old ideas than on introducing new ones. Even today, the Harlem Renaissance is viewed as “one of the most important chapters in the overall history of Americans of African ancestry and of American culture generally” (Price xi). Price’s words about the role of this movement in American history cannot be understated as these authors are still regarded as significant contributors to American literature and continue to be studied as models of great writers. The authors are examples of Black artistic expression, and yet this place as representatives of only one group is not the only merit their works have. It is easy to put authors who are outside the supposed norm of White society in a separate category, but they should be seen as people and not just as members of a specific race. Even with the dangers this tendency created, it is impossible to pretend that the authors of the Harlem Renaissance were not affected by their race. If they had not been Black in America, facing the unique struggles that this posed, they would not have felt the need to express themselves in ways that justified their merit as a group.

In addition to working to develop the worth of Black artistic expression, the Harlem Renaissance also sought to establish a sense of shared community among African Americans. There was no real model that these authors could draw on to build a common group, for the largest feature they shared had been their inhuman status as second-class citizens, indentured laborers, plantation workers or simply slaves. While these could be called similar characteristics

between people, they were not a positive representation of a group's unique worth, which was essential to group establishment. Applying social identity theory to the issue of Black communal identity illustrates the creation and importance of this establishment in Hurston and Johnson's work. One of the features of this theory is the need to define oneself and one's group in a positive light compared to another group. The common belief that Black people were inferior to White did not allow African Americans membership in the dominant social group in America. Johnson and Hurston combated this impression by affirming Black people as a group which identified themselves collectively through the special status that God's love for them provided.

### **Social identity theory: Can make or break walls**

Social identity theory was developed by Henri Tajfel in 1978, and is explained by Philip F. Esler in relation to its application in biblical interpretations. Even before understanding the characteristics of this theory and its application to *Moses, Man of the Mountain* and "The Creation," it is imperative to acknowledge that viewing these works through this lens illuminates the dual nature that all literature can have. Just as readers can interpret the same work in different ways because of their experiences, stories can make or break walls between people depending on how they are understood. While some could view Hurston and Johnson as participating in a tradition which raised one group at the expense of another, the historical context of Black people's experiences at this time make this interpretation unlikely. When the Black community had been undervalued and oppressed in America for so long, it is improbable that they would undergo a complete shift from being seen as some of the lowest members of society to believing themselves the highest. I argue that Johnson and Hurston's works, while potentially able to create a new inferior group, focus instead on an affirmation of their community's worth and rights as a group.

Tajfel first became interested in understanding how groups were created, and how those groups behaved, because he saw it as an important component to social psychology that had not received enough focus. In particular, it was the way groups tried to preserve “their distinctiveness,’ their special characteristics and identity,” even as relations between groups become more common that appealed to him (Esler 16). The first step that Tajfel made in this theory was to establish the difference between societal practices of interactions between people that could fall on or between two extremes. The first were practices that were wholly “interindividual,” two individuals interacting without considering membership in a group, and the second, “intergroup,” which was only viewing others through the categories of what group they belonged to (16). In doing so, he expressed the belief that behavior at the first end of the spectrum was impossible, for all people were too affected by society to be able to view others without preconceived categories. Tajfel felt that behavior actually existed at some point between these two extremes, and leaning toward intergroup created more of an insider and outsider mentality, which led to harmful beliefs and practices against those outside of these groups (17-18). Heightened forms of intergroup relations were more commonly found when members viewed their status in society as unchanging, and the lines between groups as very fixed, while interindividual views could be associated with social mobility (18). The first type of behavior would later come to be known as “social change” and the second “social mobility” (23). Within the first category, there were two options of behavior. When they could not imagine the system changing they could (1) find other ways to compare themselves to another group that would show them in a positive light, (2) change what had been known as negative to positive, or (3) compare themselves to even lower groups. The second option was direct competition between groups, such as protests or even war (21-22). One of the most essential parts to belonging to a

group was the sense of the individual members that they were in said group. Tajfel defined this by breaking the components into three sections. Cognitive refers to the basic understanding that one is part of a group. This could come for African Americans from a seeing what other Black people were doing and saying, such as writing stories that portrayed them as a group, and being able to identify themselves within this. Evaluative meant that this belonging could be viewed positively or negatively. In this case it was positive against what had previously only been negative, through identifying them as special to God. And emotional, which related to feelings about the group members or those outside the group. This again could be positive or negative, but I argue that it was positive for those in the group, but was not negative for those outside of it (17). The core of group creation and relations that Tajfel identified was the way that it served to “create or preserve ‘psychological group distinctiveness’ to differentiate ingroup from outgroups” (20).

The inability to fit in with the dominant culture created the need for the establishment of an alternate group that placed value on their own worth. Yet, even with the benefits that are associated with creating a group with new and positive characteristics that are different than the superior group, the third model of possible behavior that Tajfel outlines, there are possible negatives (21). Some of the dangers to social identity that Tajfel and others found were that “the mere fact of ‘social categorization,’ of being included in a group, led to ingroup behavior that discriminated... against the outgroup and favored the ingroup” (Esler 14). Membership in a group led to negative treatment of those outside the group. This is certainly what occurred to Black people in America. They were excluded from belonging to White society and were treated negatively by those inside the group. Hurston and Johnson addressed the need for change through their understanding of the status of Black people in America and sought to show their

merit through God's love without condemning others. While Johnson's God in "The Creation" is speaking to the specific audience of the Black community in establishing their peoplehood, the central message remains of universal love. Yes, God loves His (Black) people, but this does not limit Him from loving His (non-Black) people as well. One argument that could be made is that the special attention the Hebrews receive from God against the Egyptians could be a sign that Black people are superior to White. However, Hurston showed that God loves African Americans, and that they are part of a group, but her focus on them and not the White people of the story shows that this does not have to be at the expense of others. Both authors teach that Black people deserve the space having their own community creates.

### **Johnson's passion for education and love for his people**

James Weldon Johnson was born in 1871 and raised in Florida with his family (Hoover 199). The unique position that this state exists in, considered by some part of the South, and not by others, would have meant that Johnson lived on the line between two types of Black life. Yet unlike Hurston, who was very connected to her Southern roots as will be detailed later, Johnson's level of education and experiences made him fit better with the Northern writers of the Harlem Renaissance. He attended Atlanta University, a historic Black college, and became principal of his first school after graduation (Hoover 199). His life was marked by a passion for learning and teaching, and this was clearly apparent in his work to advance the rights and worth of African Americans. He was an officer for NAACP, the first African American to pass the bar in Florida, and his work with his brother, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," a song for which he composed the verses, became known as the "Black National Anthem" by many (199-200). Even among a long list of myriad achievements, particularly those which aided the Black community, his work as an author and a poet is a place in which he caused the most good. While it is

undeniable that he positively influenced African Americans in how he “encourage[d] young black writers to pursue their talents and choices of vocations,” he did not focus exclusively on this community (201). He worked to “bridge the differences between blacks and whites... to produce a more humane society for all” (201). Johnson’s role as a peacemaker who worked to create understanding between races in addition to helping his own people can be seen clearly in “The Creation.” This supports the interpretation of his work through social identity theory as one which helped to establish Black peoplehood. Johnson is remembered by many as a great Black author, but he was also a man who believed in the possibility of harmony between groups.

Johnson’s poem, “The Creation” recounts the biblical story of the creation found in Genesis, even while changing some details to create a new meaning. God looks at space before creation, and because He is “lonely” decides to make a world. He creates mountains and valleys, stars and moon, all the beautiful pieces of our world, but because these things have not filled His need, He makes humans. “The Creation” was first published in 1918, but became better known in 1927 in *God’s Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* as part of a larger collection of sermon-style stories. Regarded as one of Johnson’s masterpieces in the Harlem Renaissance, the book took ten years to write in between his work with the NAACP, and is an illustration of this focus on Black people and their culture. The pieces draw upon the traditional speech of Black people at the time, and in “The Creation” the “rather abstract and distant creator of the Bible text is humanized by the preacher’s narrative details and poetic touches” as He creates man (Skerrett 319). Johnson addressed Black people through his use of Black folk language, making the poem uniquely applicable to this community and their experiences. He created a group for African Americans to take part in by validating their worth and potential through God’s love for them, but never forgot the central message of God’s care for all His people.

### **Hurston as a voice for the (lower class) people**

While not as well-known as some of Zora Neale Hurston's other works, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* is worthy of study for the role it played in helping to establish Black peoplehood. The novel recounts the story of the Exodus, though as with Johnson's piece, with a unique spin on the biblical account. The Hebrew people are slaves working under the Egyptians, who wish to command all aspects of their lives, including birth. Due to his parents' attempt to save him from being killed, and some misunderstanding, Moses is raised as a prince in the Pharaoh's own house. His life is changed after he kills the man abusing a slave, and he flees because of this. The real journey is started only after he is commanded by an unknown God to save the Hebrews. Even though Moses did not have previous knowledge of who God was, and the Hebrews had even less, he still decides to trust Him and follow His commands. Moses frees the Hebrews and leads them, not without trials, to the land God promised them. Even with a new interpretation, the novel is easier to understand than "its enigmatic author" and yet like her autobiography, is helpful in any clues that it might provide (Hemenway xiv; xxxix). Hurston was born circa 1891, there are contradicting dates for her actual birth, and published *Moses* in 1939. Even with limited details about her young life, some commonly known traits can be found that influenced her later works.

Hurston's focus was on the life and experiences of rural Black people, even as many authors from the North rejected that past. Hurston was raised in the South, and even after leaving it, her writing style and the subject of her works illustrates the impact her roots had. Hurston writes that her mother taught her children to "jump at de sun" even against their father's belief that "it did not do for Negroes to have too much spirit," something of which the strong-willed Hurston could often be accused (Hurston 21). This aspect of Hurston's personality might have

played a role in her later decision to go against common beliefs about racism in America. This is shown in how she brought awareness to “the North’s self-satisfaction, its refusal to see the racism in its own backyard” even when this view was not widely held or acceptable (xxvi). Hurston’s exposure to the Bible occurred early in life and sparked an interest in biblical figures who were “active” and strong, and the God of the Old Testament, who “laid about Him when [His people] needed Him” (54-55). She did not only want a loving God, but one who was able to protect His people. Moses and God in *Moses, Man of the Mountain* show these traits for they are strong enough to defend their people. Even as God is powerful, He, like Johnson’s God, is human-like and loving, making Him relatable to African Americans. Hurston established a God who is similar to Johnson’s in His power and love, which speaks to the need of a higher being to create a group for Black people.

### **The two authors in comparison**

The upbringings of the authors share as many differences as they do broad similarities. The greatest commonality between them was their belief in the worth of their people and their right to be a group. Hurston’s choice to write about lower class African Americans fits a broader narrative of her work, and demonstrates her personal awareness of the worth of all Black people. Hurston cared about showing Black people as people, and not simply as defined by their race. Patterson argues in *Zora Neale Hurston and a History of Southern Life* that “her works stand among the richest documentary sources on black life, labor, and culture in the early twentieth-century” where “she kept her focus on black self-determination” (5-6). Giving attention to the power of African Americans is a traditional theme which Hurston drew on, where the focus was on what they could do, and not only what was done to them (6). This self-empowerment is seen in how the majority of her novel is about Moses freeing his people, and not their experiences

under the rule of the Egyptians. The value of a united community was never lost for Hurston, for she believed that “she had a moral obligation to her community” which could be lived out through her work as an author (12). *Moses* shows that Black people can do anything, and deserve the space that having their own community would make. Johnson shared a belief in the potential of Black people, but thought that it could be found through education. He saw education as “a means of a racial advancement” in addition to personal enrichment, and so placed a high value on its importance (Kinnamon 168). The merit of education was planted in Johnson in his early life, for his father was a “self-educated man,” who was able to make a middle class lifestyle for his family, with the values that accompanied it. Johnson’s mother had also received a good education and was the first Black woman to teach at a public school in Florida (169). He was raised among books and music, and was taught a “love of learning” by his mother. Yet unlike Hurston, who lived in a small rural town where there were clear lines between Black and White people, Johnson’s childhood had not exposed him to race issues, and his first experiences came in college when “race was a constant topic of discussion” (169). Even when their past experiences caused great differences in the two authors’ goals and interests, they shared the common theme of empowering African Americans and this can be seen in their assistance in the creation of Black peoplehood.

### **A longer history of the Black community in America**

The model of Blackness to which Johnson and Hurston were responding was almost entirely negative, something which they countered by positively depicting their people. Before the creation of a positive group identity, African Americans had been defined by others as similar based on stereotypes and the place in society that they had been assigned by others. The first way that this happened was through the everyday realities and long lasting repercussions of

slavery. Being told that they were inferior, and seeing it expressed in the treatment they received, would have told Black people that they were less important than White people, and might even have caused some to start believing it. Even in the 1920s, long after slavery had officially ended, they were often still viewed as inferior. This is one of the reasons why the Harlem Renaissance was so radical and important. It was among the first gatherings of a group of Black intellectuals, all with a common uniting goal; to prove that they had something unique and meaningful to offer through their artistic works. In addition to establishing the merits of individuals through their works, it collectively advocated for Black people as a whole.

Hurston and Johnson participated in an extended tradition of interest and use of biblical stories, but one that each modified in their retellings. The history of the Black community's association with the Bible began before their arrival in America as slaves. Even as Africans were taken as slaves, they brought with them their stories and use of oral communication in sharing these tales. As Black slaves were restricted from learning to read and write for fear of how "they might be "infected" by [Scripture's] explicit and implicit teachings on human equality and liberation" they might have become even more interested in the Bible for its place as forbidden fruit (Hoyt 27). When Black slaves were allowed to read the Bible, despite being given specific texts which reinforced their role as slaves, they created their own understanding of the works that were contrary to a White interpretation (27-28). They saw how "the events in the Bible spoke powerfully and directly to their situation, and that led them to shape a distinct and creative interpretation of the Bible" (28). This new interpretation of the Bible as it related to the unique experiences of the Black community can be seen in the work of Hurston and Johnson in the way in which both drew on old stories to communicate the worth of their people. As with the long line of African Americans who had taken the texts that were used to enforce their inferiority and

turning them into tools that validated them, these authors also shifted past (White) meanings to find their own messages.

The Exodus is a story of hope in the face of despair, but it also serves to establish a sense of unity and oneness that would have created a common sense of peoplehood among the Black community. The ability of *Moses, Man of the Mountain* to create Black peoplehood is found in how “American blacks’ corporate identification with Biblical Hebrews also served as a foundation for establishing group identity” (Pederson 439-440). Despite this connection, some have argued that Hurston “recalibrates Exodus in ways that discourage African-American identification with the Torah’s Hebrews” (442). This interpretation sees Hurston encouraging a break from associating with the struggles of the Hebrews, but this would likely have affected African Americans’ understanding of her novel very little. Enough commonalities existed between her work and the traditional understanding to allow Black people to see themselves as similar to the Hebrews. The belief that *Moses* “associates Israelites... with whites” and not Blacks is countered by the way that the novel echoed the themes of African American slavery in America (441). The many similarities between the Hebrews in Hurston’s texts and the Black community, in addition to their history of association with the Exodus, shows that Hurston reinforced the message of God’s love for Black people through an unstated connection with the Hebrews.

In the Black community the Exodus is read as the sign of God’s relationship with, and love for, oppressed peoples. This is seen in how “the liberating story found in the Bible, of necessity, contradicts the story of slavery,” and so spreads the message that God intended their liberation and establishment of a community of formerly oppressed people (Hoyt 30-31). Black slaves’ association with the biblical narrative meant that they compared their own experiences

with the Hebrews. This created some interpretations in the Black community which made “the new evil Egypt... none other than White America” where “God is *only on their side* against the evil other” (Yang 3). Hurston preceded the positive use of the story that Martin Luther King Jr. used where the allegorical evil in the Exodus story “is not the White America itself (or White people), but the universal social illness that permeates the American soil” (5). Through an image of the Egyptians where they are not the inhuman enemy, she showed that it is what they represent, oppression, that must be fought, and not just the people themselves. She did not stress the evil that the Egyptians, and through them, the White majority, show towards the Hebrews, but actually worked to humanize them. The insight into the mind of the Egyptian foreman who whips the Hebrew slave, where the reader learns that he “wanted a smile of notice and nod of approval from so rich and just a man” as Moses does not let the “enemy” remain faceless (Hurston 90). He is not the evil other, but just a man who wanted a prince to notice him, and so took the wrong course of action by whipping the Hebrew. Egyptians (White people) might do wrong, but they are still just people who make mistakes and can be understood by Black people.

### ***Analysis of Moses, Man of the Mountain***

The novel begins in the traditional manner, with the Hebrews’ “backs... bloody from the lash,” as they live under the rule of others (Hurston 13). There is no part of the Hebrews’ lives which is their own, for even the natural aspect of birth and family has been disrupted so that “the birthing beds of Hebrews were matters of state” instead of joys of family (11). One option that was open to the Hebrews was to give up their baby boys when they were ordered killed, but Hurston showed that the continuation of a family or community could be found through assisting each other and resisting those who would prevent this. It was the combined efforts of the family and those around them which let Moses live. Moses’ father asks his friend for help to find

somewhere to hide his pregnant wife, the midwife continues to help women give birth, even as it puts her in danger, and Moses' brother and sister are given a part to play in keeping his birth a secret (14-22). This shows how it is necessary for the creation of group identity to help each other and never give up. This theme of hope in the face of despair can be found in the way that his mother "soothed herself by thinking "maybe" (30). Maybe the Pharaoh could be reasoned with, maybe he would care, maybe he would let her son live if he was just made to understand. Here Hurston is able to establish that a unified group can be created even among oppression. The Hebrews in the story will go to great lengths to stay together, such as Moses's mother telling his father that "you mustn't let me scream... no matter how hard the pain gets you mustn't let me scream" (18). They will do what they can as a group, and yet still maintain the hope that those outside their group can be made to understand and see them as people. Both the Hebrews and Black people had been defined by others, in these cases, by their status as slaves, and were attempting to redefine themselves in a positive light.

The hope that the small rebellions carried out by the Hebrews offered was the message that Hurston focused on. The way that they kept fighting for their families and their children and their lives would have been a very powerful symbol of African Americans' potential to create change in their community. Her characters are not perfect, but are simply scared and uncertain people who are willing to take a risk because not doing so would be giving up hope for the future. Even as the community of the Hebrews is at times shown as being uneducated in how they have "unlettered tongues" they are still deserving of God's help (175). Moses is the high point of what they can become, where "there was something about him... that made men listen to him with respect" but they all matter (64). Even from a young age, Moses symbolizes hope, for the Hebrews "never gave up their belief in the Hebrew in the Palace. It was something for

men to dream about” (51). He is all of those Black people of the Harlem Renaissance and beyond who were inspirations for their people about their own potential and worth. It might not be clear to Moses or the Hebrews why God chose to save them, but it is because He saw their worth. He heard their pleas for “deliverance in [their] great sufferings” and identified the person who could save them (173). Moses was one of their own, even as he had lived on the boundary between two peoples, and so he shows that the Egyptians were not just the other, but had some good, and that liberation of a group could occur from within. Hurston showed that Black people mattered, and should be their own group, through how God had selected them “as his people to love and protect” (173). This proves the central characteristics of the God that Hurston and also Johnson created; He is strong enough to save His people, and compassionate enough to want to.

### **Analysis of “The Creation”**

In “The Creation” Johnson addressed what is arguably the core story of the Bible for people of all races: the creation of humans. The love of God toward the people He created can be seen as a love meant for one people, as they worked to establish themselves as such, even as it includes a universal love for all. Johnson's use of sermon style language matched that which was found among Black preachers, and so narrows God's love to the audience of the Black community. If God is a “mammy,” a descriptor for a Black mother, the people He creates, if understood as made in His image, would also be Black. Instead of saying that God created all people, this interpretation of Johnson's word choice implies that He created *Black* people, and because of the love that this God shows, proves the worth of African Americans everywhere. The ability of literature to create mental pictures that can be unique to the reader is one of Johnson's greatest strengths. This power is seen in the vivid language that he used, and his focus on one people can be found in his following the tradition of Black preachers who could use “the

verbal images of the text to evoke mental images in the interpreter and the hearer” (Hoyt 34). The reader can truly see God as He “stepped” out to begin the creation, and through this can have an image of God that is unique to them and also strongly like them in his human-like qualities (Johnson 1). The possible dangers of reading biblical texts with imagination is the way that it can distort interpretations, creating multiple meanings that might not match the author’s intention, but this does not lessen the “virtues” that this has in the way new ideas and understanding can be created (38-39). Johnson’s use of mentally evocative language in “The Creation” further establishes the way in which it would have spoken to Black readers differently than White through allowing them to form their own interpretations. As he creates a “kinship,” or ingroup to quote Tajfel, Johnson wanted understanding and acceptance between peoples. He advocated for African Americans to have their own unique group identity, but did not want it to come at the expense of positive relations between races.

Johnson challenged the ineffable nature of God in Genesis in his retelling of the narrative through his focus on what made God like humans, and thus relatable to the Black community and broader society. The reader watches as God “stepped” out, bringing with it images of the way that people move, and says “I’m lonely. I think I’ll make me a world” (Johnson 1, 3-4). These first two words create an unexpected jolt in the reader, introducing the style of the rest of the poem, which continues to create surprises even as some aspects feel comfortable and familiar. One of the ways that Johnson created God’s human-like qualities is through the language he employed in the descriptions of God’s actions, descriptions that are very reminiscent of how a person might move and act. This God is one who can touch and influence the world, but does so through hands and actions that are like us. God is said to have “spat out the seven seas-/he batted his eyes, and the lightnings flashed-/he clapped his hands, and the thunders

rolled” (37-39). The first half of these lines, in which God “batted his eyes” or “clapped his hands” are actions which are a part of everyday, human, life, and yet are contrasted and balanced by their effects. Little would happen if a person were to make the same motions, so even as we see God as like us, Johnson is careful not to remove God’s powers. God will get down on His knees like a gardener to shape the dirt, something low, for “the great God Almighty... kneeled down in the dust/toiling over a lump of clay” to create humans (80, 86-87). He creates “like a mammy bending over her baby,” not the traditional father and male figure of God often seen, but a mother (85). Through a comparison of God to a mother, Johnson stripped away this common understanding of God as distant, and instead makes Him close and personal, on the same ground as humans. This “mother” God is one whose skin might be as dark as the African Americans to whom He speaks. The word “mammy” connects the reader to African American mothers, and the older Black women who would traditionally live in white households and care for their children. This proves that this message could be both for Black and White audiences in how mammies would care for children both dark and light, and so even as it is specifically for Black people, Whites can be included in God’s love.

The surprisingly human nature of God can create conflicting reactions in readers even as it establishes the worth of people everywhere and Black people in particular. It can be disconcerting to think that so powerful a God could ever feel anything as fragile as loneliness, for loneliness shows vulnerability, a form of weakness. People rely on the power of God to help them in their lives, and take comfort from the idea that there is a stronger being who can help in a way that other humans can’t. Yet, this same humanized portrayal of God can be encouragement also. It breaks down the boundary of the hierarchy between God and humans, where He is always above and humans are below. Johnson writes a God who is understandable by people and

should not be seen only as a Creator who feels nothing. Is it better to have a God who is powerful in a divine sense or a human one? Johnson answers this through his decision to write a God who combines human aspects with the divine, in having a God who cares about His people, but is also powerful enough to protect them. If Black people had a God who stayed with them, who was human to them, and like them in nature, none could say that they were unwanted. Instead of listening to a society which did not recognize the value in their culture and their art, and behind it, in them, “The Creation” taught African Americans that they mattered. They could not find this support for their unique peoplehood in a religion and a God who left them to suffer, and so authors like Johnson demonstrated that they were people in showing a God who was like them.

The universal message to “The Creation,” even as it appealed directly to African American readers, foreshadows the positive uses that it would be put to in later years. The poem first appeared among a collection of other sermon-like pieces, where traditional sermons would have been addressed to an entire congregation of Black people of all ages. Nearly a hundred years later in 2013 it was published in a collection of works by African American authors, intended to introduce poetry to children. The simple style of this piece made it a ready choice for children, who could read and understand it easily on their own. The poem’s inclusion in a book for children is a positive one, for it would show to children, the ones most vulnerable to outside society, that they matter and deserve to be seen as people. The message that is sent shows children that God is there for them, letting them imagine what God thinks and feels, and showing them that God is both powerful and loving. This is accomplished through the sometimes contradictory images of God as vulnerable and human, and yet still strong. In this, a kind of ideal God is created, one who will never abandon His people, and is also strong enough to save them.

The need for an establishment of African Americans' worth and right to be a group can be found in Johnson's writing of a God with the strength and compassion needed to save His people. The model that a kind God would have provided can be understood as something of great concern to a Black author writing to a Black audience. Johnson's God is not expressly a Black one, but the common belief that humans were made in God's image, means that He would also look like them, dark skin included. Because of the history of hate, oppression, and abuse that Blacks have faced because of their skin color, they have often been shown as the unwanted. Even today, while the clear-cut lines of segregation no longer exist, the continued practice of redlining to separate races shows that the intolerance associated with this is still prevalent. The rejection of Blacks by other people is contrasted by Johnson's God who has infinite love and compassion for His people. The message of their desirability by God teaches young Black people in America that they have worth. If they are taught that a God exists who cares about them, and does not just see the color of their skin, this would be a symbol of their value. God's power and ability to achieve anything would have been just as appealing as the loving God. It is this dual nature to God that Johnson drew on as he showed the potential of African Americans to be united as a group through God's love and power. The history of slavery, even after the physical marks had disappeared, left the Black community the emotional memories of being unwanted and mistreated. They needed a God with the love to free them and the strength to break their chains, and that is the God which Johnson delivered in "The Creation."

### **Concluding thoughts: the importance of literature in the "real" world**

These two authors would likely not have concerned themselves with whether they seemed anti-White or not. It was not the central purpose to their message. They focused on how their people were seen and saw themselves, and so how another group, even the one which had

oppressed and discriminated against them would have mattered little. Just as it is possible to read Hurston and Johnson's creation of a group identity for Black people in a negative light, there is the chance that both authors were against White people. While there is this possibility, it does not change the fact that the poem and novel can be interpreted as uplifting the Black community without disliking White people. This might not have mattered in their work creating Black peoplehood, but it is meaningful in a modern context. Literature has the power to bring people together and to break them apart, and with this ability comes, if not a responsibility to always use it positively, than at least an awareness of the effects it can have. Books and poetry are able to put the reader into someone else's thoughts and experiences which enables them to grow from that exposure. Having stories with negative messages about other people, putting them into a box, is what was done to Black people, and so I believe that Hurston and Johnson, even if unconsciously, wanted to change this. To do this, they validated the worth of Black people, but did not do this at the expense of any other group. These stories focus primarily on Black people and their right to be a group, but can be read and enjoyed by all regardless of their race.

Both Johnson and Hurston used the power that can be found in stories to create a new message. Their experiences as Black people caused them to see the lack of unity among African Americans and to fight for the creation of a group identity. Identifying as part of a whole, of realizing that there are other people who are like you and have had similar experiences, can be life changing. It boosts self-esteem, shapes one's identity, and establishes connections. It can be the necessary human contact that allows one to see their own worth and humanity. It is this nature of social identity theory that Johnson and Hurston create in their work with establishing Black peoplehood that is one of the greatest societal changes they made. This was as vital as it was radical in the 1920's during the Harlem Renaissance, but its importance did not lessen over

time. Writing about a God who loved them, the Black community in particular, taught African Americans that they did matter. The belief in their own worth as members of a broader group can be one factor in recognizing their potential. Because of the creation of Black peoplehood through the establishments of their worth as a group, we had a Black man as president, the positive depiction of strong Black women in films like *Hidden Figures*, and every moment in which a Black child believes that they can do and be anything they want. The pitfall that we must try to avoid is using ingroups and outgroups to create boundaries between people. We should be able to see ourselves as members of a group, and recognize the worth of those in this group, without needing to understand it through the lens of putting the outgroup down. Hurston and Johnson's works can be seen as establishing Black peoplehood, and when they are read through the lens of social identity theory, we can see the way that they were necessary for a marginalized people. America is a country which is made up of many parts of what should be a whole, and it is only by blurring the lines between these groups, by creating understanding and acceptance between them, that we can truly make America great. (We'll leave off the question of whether it is again). It is through reading literature that lifts up one group, and yet does so not through believing another to be inferior to them, that we can celebrate the unique nature of people and their history.

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