THE PUBLIC POET SINGS HIMSELF:

THE LIFE AND WORK OF WELBORN VICTOR JENKINS

by

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(Under the Direction of Susan Rosenbaum)

ABSTRACT

This thesis considers the life and work of Welborn Victor Jenkins, an Atlanta-based African-American poet active between 1900 and 1950, with particular attention to his 1948 book-length poem *The "Incident" at Monroe* (a response to a mass lynching) and his self-presentation as a literary figure. Jenkins styled himself as a public poet in Walt Whitman's image, a visionary who spoke both to and for America with prophetic urgency; his work joins other African-American appropriations of Whitman that simultaneously reference Whitman as a validating forefather and critically revise his legacy as the definitively "American" voice. For Jenkins, this act of self-assertion both prepares a rhetorical space for his vatic long poems and becomes a vital part of their jeremiadic argument: in appealing to an envisioned ideal of American democracy — its promise of life, liberty, and self-determination — he derives prophetic authority to protest America's denial of that promise to African Americans.

INDEX WORDS: African-American literature, Southern literature, Welborn Victor Jenkins, The Incident at Monroe, Trumpet in the New Moon, poetry, modernism,

Walt Whitman, lynching, civil rights, literary activism, documentary, protest, socialism, capitalism, colonialism

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 1948, near the end of a five-decade literary career, black Atlanta poet Welborn Victor Jenkins published a book-length poem with the full title *The "Incident" at Monroe: A Requiem for the Victims of July 25th, 1946, Written at the Scene of the Tragedy.* The book, a response to a mass lynching that took place outside nearby Monroe, Georgia, was printed and sold to raise funds for a memorial to the lynching victims. The poem itself is a kind of polyphonic tour de force, at once elegy and jeremiad; it incorporates addresses to the victims, cinematic montage with elements of "overheard" dialogue, and visionary sequences, as well as several photographs of the area where the lynching took place. Jenkins's poem is both a lament for the victims and a sharp indictment of the nation's failure to protect the rights of African Americans; as the poem progresses, it also implicates the overreaches of global capitalism and colonial exploitation of subjugated peoples, finally arguing that economic oppression has been the root cause of racial and ethnic violence around the world throughout the first half of the 20th century.

Aside from its literary interest, *The "Incident" at Monroe* is a fascinating document of artistic and activist response to the lynching crisis. It is notable, too, for its use of modernist collage techniques, as well as a striking combination of documentary realism and visionary poetry that bears comparison to other experimental work from this period. Yet the poem remains almost entirely uncommented upon. And who was Jenkins? References are few and far between, but this mention in Eugene Redmond's 1976 *Drumvoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry*

(itself an aside in a section on Sterling Brown's 1937 survey *Negro Poetry and Drama*), while brief, is suggestive:

> [Brown's] "realists" and writers of protest included Welborn Victor Jenkins (*Trumpet in the New Moon,* 1934), Frank Marshall Davis, and [Richard] Wright … Brown said that Jenkins's work deserved "an original place in Negro poetry," but *Trumpet in the New Moon* is out of print and Jenkins's poetry is absent from every anthology of Afro-American poetry. His poetic sketches of the black life encompass practically every important facet. Though owing much to Whitman and Sandburg, Jenkins's work is still important enough to be reissued as well as anthologized. (Redmond 223-4)

Negro Poetry and Drama describes Jenkins's earlier long poem *Trumpet in the New Moon* as "a panoramic picture of the Negro in American life" and "realistic and novel in detail"; while it "recalls Whitman in its patriotism (and its cataloguing) and Sandburg," Brown indeed grants it an "original place in Negro poetry" (Brown 125). Even so, Jenkins did not appear in the landmark 1941 anthology *The Negro Caravan* co-edited by Brown, an omission that Jon Woodson — the only critic, to my knowledge, to discuss Jenkins's work in detail — considers a major factor in Jenkins's being "silenced" (Woodson 10). By 2010, Woodson writes, Jenkins had been "nearly erased from literary history" (10).

Yet there are references to Jenkins from within his lifetime that suggest his poetry had some contemporary audience. A 1935 letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to Farrar and Rinehart pitching an anthology of black writing and thinking (described by Du Bois as a spiritual sequel to Alain Locke's 1925 *The New Negro*) lists him prominently among possible contributors, almost all of them extremely well-known: "Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen wrote before, but

doubtless have a new message, and there is Welborn Jenkins, Claude McKay, George Schuyler, Arna Bontemps…" (Du Bois 51). The 1940 WPA publication *Georgia: A Guide to its Towns and Countryside* lists "Victor Wellborn Jenkins" along with Thomas Jefferson Flanagan, Frank Marshall Davis, and Georgia Douglas Johnson as the "Negro poets in Georgia who have received most recognition" (*Georgia* 126). And in 1950, Jenkins's last known publication, a poem entitled "Amy Mallard in Humiliation," appeared alongside work by Davis, Douglas, Robert Hayden, Gwendolyn Brooks, and many other canonical writers in a special "Negro Poets Issue" of the Vermont literary magazine *Voices: A Quarterly of Poetry* guest-edited by Langston Hughes, who also had four poems in the issue.

To complicate things further, Jenkins's own books tend to suggest he is already a major figure. An undated pamphlet promoting a would-be publishing and educational trust founded by Jenkins claims that Jenkins (almost certainly the author, referring to himself in the third person) "is acknowledged to be one of the foremost young writers of our race" ("Thespians" 11). *The "Incident" at Monroe* carries prominent blurbs from Mary McLeod Bethune, Eleanor Roosevelt, and *The New Republic* editor Bruce Bliven, and its introduction (written by L. D. Shivery and distinct from Jenkins's own "Foreword") cites praise from James Weldon Johnson and William Stanley Braithwaite, claims Jenkins's mastery of free verse "probably has no superior within the limits of our group," and professes the author's "prayerful hope" that the poem will be widely read "because of its eloquent appeal to the highest and best in human nature; because of its strength and substance, its truth and rugged beauty; because of the dramatic emphasis effected by a matchless gift of subdued expression; because of its relevancy, fidelity and uncanny timeliness; and because of its permanent value as a masterpiece and a classic" (*"Incident"* 6).

Obviously, there is an element of self-promotion in these claims and their presentation. But there is also one of self-assertion, and as I survey Jenkins's life and work, I will consider how Jenkins's efforts to define and present himself as a public poet and major literary figure — particularly with reference to Whitman, a touchstone for Jenkins throughout his career — helped to clear a certain rhetorical space for his ambitiously public (even prophetic) poetry. In this thesis, I will discuss Jenkins's life, works, and public persona, and consider how each of these may have influenced or enabled the others. I will be particularly interested in Jenkins's conception and construction of himself as a visionary public poet in the Whitmanian mode — both with Whitman's approach to self-invention and with specific reference to Whitman as a kind of forefather — and how African-American poets generally adapted, appropriated, or responded to Whitman during the 1930s and 1940s. This analysis will build to a close look at Jenkins's late — and, in my opinion, major — work, *The "Incident" at Monroe,* which is in many ways a fulfillment of these public visionary aims, and an intriguing document historically as well as a skillful and complex poem in its own right. For these and other reasons, Jenkins and his work merit renewed attention — for which, I hope, the research and analysis in this thesis can provide a useful starting point.

CHAPTER 2

JENKINS'S LIFE AND WORK

Biography

No overview of Jenkins's life exists in other sources, but working from public records as well as material published during his lifetime, the outline of a biography can be pieced together. Jenkins was born in approximately 1879 to Jeddiah and Mary Jenkins,[1] the oldest of six living children. Sometime between 1910 and 1915, he married Claud Jenkins, with whom he had at least one child. He died in 1960, having published intermittently throughout most of his life.

Jenkins was raised in rural Georgia and based in Atlanta for most of his adulthood, though he may have also lived in the north at one time.[2] In 1934, a brief review of *Trumpet in the New Moon* in the *Atlanta Journal* (more than half is excerpted here) gave this thumbnail of his early life:

> Welborn Victor Jenkins is an Atlanta negro [sic] poet who had unfortunately and unaccountably spent most of his life in relative obscurity. He was born near Griffin on the fifth day of February, 1879. After finishing the eighth grade he was forced to leave school and earn his own living. Since that time he worked as farm hand, laborer, mill hand and school-teacher before he got his present job in the

[1] Jenkins seems to have remained close to his mother for the rest of her life; in his 1917 essay "True Blue," he mentions reading his stories to her, and *The "Incident" at Monroe* is dedicated "To my Slave-born Mother, Mary Rebecca" (*"Incident"* 5).

[2] In a 1916 letter to the editor in the *Atlanta Constitution,* Jenkins writes, "I was born and reared in the south; at the same time I have lived for several years in the north and I do not think I overestimate when I say that I am a competent judge of which section is really best for our people" (8). The letter concerns the mass migration of black southerners to the north; in it, Jenkins argues that restrictive laws attempting to prevent black laborers from leaving southern communities will only exacerbate the problem, and that "[w]hat men of the south need to do (if I may humbly suggest) is to impress our people that they are as legally safe in the south as they are in the north" (8). The letter was given the headline "Conservative Negro Writes on Movement of Race Northward."

> mail service. At one time he attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. (Hemrick)

Census records confirm that Jenkins never completed formal schooling, and list a few of his occupations as schoolteacher (1900), newspaper editor (1910), railway mail clerk (1920-1930), and boardinghouse keeper. In 1910, he founded *The Colored People's Magazine,* an Atlanta-based monthly periodical that published essays, short stories, and poems, including early commentary by future NAACP field secretary William Pickens as well as work by Jenkins himself.[3] Jenkins also contributed essays, journalism, and literary work to the weekly black newspaper *The Atlanta Independent* throughout that decade. [4]

Jenkins was also active for many decades in the National Alliance of Postal Employees, a labor union initially founded to serve black railway mail clerks; soon expanded to include all postal employees (making it a very early industrial union as well as an integrated one), NAPE became a kind of general civil rights organization that participated in anti-Jim-Crow activism and resisted anti-Communist crackdowns of the 1940s and 1950s.[5] Jenkins served as business manager for the entire union in 1919; by 1952, he remained sufficiently invested in union matters to enter a public dispute with then-president Ashby Carter.[6] There is much about Jenkins's

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[3] Information on *The Colored People's Magazine* comes from Randall K. Burkett's article "The Joy of Finding Periodicals 'Not In Danky,'" which describes an issue of the magazine in Emory University's collections; as of spring 2016, the Emory library was unable to locate this item.

[4] Herman Mason's general-audience picture history *Black Atlanta in the Roaring Twenties* suggests Jenkins also contributed to *The Crisis,* but I have been unable to confirm this.

[5] For more on NAPE's civil rights activities, see Philip F. Rubio's *There's Always Work at the Post Office: African American Postal Workers and the Fight for Jobs, Justice, and Equality*, especially 51-120.

[6] According to A. L. Glenn's 1956 union history *History of the National Alliance of Postal Employees, 1913-1955*, Jenkins led a group of members charging Carter with inappropriate use of organizational funds. At the Washington, D.C. hearings, Jenkins (then around 73) gave the main presentation of these charges, which the executive board of the organization unanimously voted to dismiss. Glenn's account of the then-recent controversy is evenhanded, noting the board's fear of losing money in "lengthy court proceedings" as well as Jenkins's long investment in the union: "The writer also understands some of the motives; for, in the case of comrade Jenkins, the astronomical expenditures, however legal, were blinding to him and others who had nurtured the organization from infancy and carefully watched its growth. He was Business Manager of the Postal Alliance in 1919 and hand-addressed copies to members; carried them on his back to the post office in Atlanta for mailing. For such services there was no pay.

relationship with the union in the intervening years that is hard to know; certainly, however, NAPE's emphasis on labor organization as both a goal of and a means to civil rights progress is reflected in both of Jenkins's long poems, and Jenkins's association with a union that (while not officially Left-affiliated) remained markedly non-hostile to perceived leftist sentiment in the 1940s and 1950s suggest certain political adjacencies, if not a definite politics.

Publications

In addition to the articles, stories, and poems in *The Colored People's Magazine* and the *Atlanta Independent,* Jenkins contributed a brief introduction to *Marching Orders* (1922), a collection of addresses to the Texas conferences of the AME Church by Bishop William Decker Johnson.[7] One of Jenkins's *Atlanta Independent* essays, a 1917 piece "True Blue" in praise of respectful white northerners —and, in particular, Atlanta University professor Edgar Webster[8] —

Everybody economized. It is easy to see his viewpoint. But the Alliance had grown in every direction since those days, and bigger appropriations became absolutely necessary if progress was to be achieved … It could have been a human mistake based upon 'appearances' rather than for legal or political" (375).

[7] The book was published in Philadelphia; Jenkins is not identified by any position or occupation, and his relation to the bishop or the church is not clear, but the writing — witty and good-natured, with special praise for the bishop's ability to express complex intellectual and spiritual ideas in an engaging, accessible manner — is unmistakably his and not some other Welborn Victor Jenkins's.

[8] Webster's name appears in the newspaper version of this essay, which ran May 26, 1917 in the *Atlanta Independent*; it is blanked out in *Chums and Brothers,* though the context makes it easy enough to guess:

> Sometime before my mother died, I took a notion to put into a short story the likeness of the greatest friend to colored people I ever knew. It was the last story I read to my mother. She wanted to know who "Henry Maxwell" was; and I told her that he was one of the students of the University whose wonderful proficiency in mathematics it was easy to change over into "Henry Maxwell's" marvellous gift as a dramatic speaker. And those who have read my "We Also Serve," will at once recognize "Professor Baer" as no other that ————, who seems to me the most unbiased and the most sincere white man in his love for the colored that I have ever known. (121)

Chums and Brothers, however, omits the last paragraph of the newspaper version:

> There has lately developed between me and this great man a friendship of which I am almost vainly proud. He wrote me a letter touching upon the tribute I paid my mother—which letter I prize above everything I possess in the world, unless it is the few belongings of my mother. Last Christmas he sent me a beautiful book, written by his friend, the president of Oberlin. He has come to think a great deal of me, and along with a vast host of my own people, I worship him in return. This friendship is very unique, however, for although I pass him every few days and we occasionally bow to each other, he does not know me when he sees me. (8)

was reprinted in Webster's own 1920 book *Chums and Brothers,* a collection of essays (mostly Webster's) on friendship and mutual regard between blacks and whites.[9]

Four free-standing publications by Jenkins — two books of poetry, one story collection, and one pamphlet — survive in library databases and used booksellers' online catalogs. The pamphlet "Who Are the Thespians?" and the story collection *We Also Serve* are undated, although Woodson gives a date of 1920 for the latter (and Jenkins does not look much older than 40 in the author photograph, though it might not have been a recent picture); the poetry collection *Trumpet in the New Moon and Other Poems,* which contains several short poems as well as the long title poem, is dated 1934, while *The "Incident" at Monroe*, a single book-length poem, is dated 1948.[10]

"Who Are the Thespians?" deserves a brief look here, both for its biographical significance and as a precursor to some of the activist aims of *The "Incident" at Monroe.* The pamphlet announces Jenkins's plan to found the Thespian Literary Association,[11] a group that would "build in Atlanta, Ga. the *World's Largest Negro Publishing House,*" publish "the *World's Greatest Negro Newspaper,*" and sponsor "literary exercises, inspiring speakers, newspapers, pamphlets, books and magazines" for urban and rural black communities ("Thespians" 7, 10). The organization was to be funded by readings, concerts, or other events that would charge attendees a small fee at the door, with the proceeds to be split between local branches and the main organizational treasury.

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[9] Webster would write the foreword to *Trumpet in the New Moon.*

[10] The back cover of *We Also Serve* advertises the "Next Book by Welborn Jenkins" as *"THE RISE AND FALL OF BILLY MCCOY,"* but this book was either never written or never printed, or else does not survive. *The "Incident" at Monroe* also mentions a book in progress, a biography of the pianist Thomas "Blind Tom" Wiggins, which was also never published (though Jenkins wrote a letter to the *Atlanta Journal* in 1942 seeking information for it).

[11] The organization had its mailing address at 523 W. Hunter Street in Atlanta, Jenkins's home circa 1920.

No other record of the Thespian Literary Association or its planned publications has been located, and it seems likely that the project never came to fruition. In the pamphlet, however, Jenkins writes passionately on the need for presses owned and operated by African Americans.[12] He also asserts that "[w]hen the average colored writer appears before a white publisher, he is requested to put up the total cost of the entire edition of his book in advance and assume all the risks of publication" ("Thespians" 6). This is somewhat corroborated by Young, who notes that — aside from the work published by a few prominent northern white publishing houses founded in the late 1910s[13] — many African-American writers in the early 20th century, even fairly well-known ones, were self-published, either privately or through tiny independent firms.[14] This was certainly the milieu within which Jenkins published most, if not all, of his own books — and, given that context, it seems that one of the main goals of the Thespian Literary Association was to build up a community-supported, economically sustainable black-owned press, which would be less financially precarious than smaller ventures.

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[12] Jenkins particularly emphasizes the need for a platform for images and stories of black people created by black people. The pamphlet opens with an anecdote of a black girl rejecting a black doll for a white one; later, Jenkins writes, "[W]e have no great publishing house to publish what these [black] writers write … so we are in great danger of developing a distaste for Negro books and literature just as we have for Negro dolls and pictures for the simple reason that the books which white people write about us are very often just as ugly as the dolls they have made to look like us" ("Thespians" 5).

[13] Including some Jewish publishers such as Alfred A. Knopf and Horace Liveright, who were themselves "marginalized by the mainstream Protestant New York firms and, therefore, turned to minority literature as a way to establish new and independent backlists" (Young 7-8).

[14] Young writes, "[F]or instance, Sutton Griggs's Orion Publishing in Nashville issued only his four novels, including one sponsored by the National Baptist Convention as a response to Thomas Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots* ... The Colored Co-Operative Publishing Company produced just one book, Pauline Hopkins's novel *Contending Forces* in 1900, focusing primarily on *Colored American Magazine*, in which *Contending Forces* was serialized, along with two other Hopkins novels. Similarly, Du Bois and Dill, a firm launched by Du Bois and the *Crisis* business manager, produced the monthly *Brownies' Book* for two years, along with one book-length biographical collection, *Unsung Heroes*. J.A. Rogers Publications, based in Chicago and probably the most prolific black publisher before the 1960s, was a one-man company focusing largely on Rogers's own work. These firms operated not so much alongside as outside the white publishing mainstream, at a double remove from the traditional houses that had already marginalized Knopf and other new publishers of his generation. Orion and its cousins clearly aimed at an African American audience first and foremost, with mixed results. Griggs called *The Hindered Hand,* his Baptist-sponsored novel, a 'financial failure,' and the company closed in 1913 … It seems clear that, in the end, none of these firms possessed the necessary capital to sustain themselves beyond a narrow audience" (11-12).

Still, when Jenkins describes the treatment the "average colored writer" could expect from a white publisher, is he speaking from experience? Jenkins may or may not have published, or even tried to publish, any of his books by the time he wrote this pamphlet; a reference to the *Atlanta Independent*, which ceased publication in 1933, dates it to that year at the latest, but other than that, it is hard to fix the year with much certainty.[15] Nevertheless, however quixotic the plan, the Thespians idea reflects Jenkins's lifelong interest in literature as a means of public service and community organization.

Jenkins's last known publication appeared in the Winter 1950 edition of the Vermont literary magazine *Voices: A Quarterly of Poetry*, which was a special "Negro Poets Issue" edited by Langston Hughes. Jenkins's poem "Amy Mallard in Humiliation" ran alongside work by Hughes, Robert Hayden, Gwendolyn Brooks, Jessie Fauset, Pauli Murray, Effie Lee Newsome, Frank Marshall Davis, Waring Cuney, Owen Dodson, Bruce M. Wright, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Russell Atkins, and Melvin B. Tolson, among others. His biographical note in the "Contributors" section (of commensurate length with other contributors') reads, "Welborn Victor

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[15] A reference to Atlanta's "five colleges" might help if we knew what the colleges were. If Jenkins would not have considered Spelman Seminary a "college" before it received its collegiate charter in 1924, the pamphlet could have been written within a few different timespans, depending on whether Jenkins was referring to both black and white colleges or black colleges only. Assuming Jenkins would not have included Spelman before 1924, if he meant only black colleges, presumably the pamphlet must have been written after that year (when the five colleges would have been Atlanta University, Morris Brown College, Morehouse College, Clark College, and Spelman); if he meant both black and white colleges, however, perhaps the pamphlet was written between 1915 (when Emory University relocated from Oxford to metropolitan Atlanta) and 1924 (during which time the five colleges would have been Atlanta University, Morris Brown, Morehouse, Clark, and Emory). Without knowing what Jenkins meant by "colleges" (or where he would have drawn the boundaries of "Atlanta"), though, it is hard to draw any conclusions.

Furthermore, describing the Thespians' proposed newspaper, Jenkins writes that it would be "edited by Welborn Victor Jenkins, who is acknowledged to be one of the foremost young writers of our race," but the pamphlet does not mention any of his other writing, either for existing newspapers or magazines or in freestanding works of his own ("Thespians" 11). Interestingly, the pamphlet also never mentions Jenkins's experience founding and editing *The Colored People's Magazine,* which would seem very relevant if he were asserting his qualifications to found and edit the would-be *Atlanta Voice. The Colored People's Magazine* had a relatively brief run, but it was not altogether unsuccessful, and Jenkins would have at least as much claim to cite that background as he would to call himself "one of the foremost young writers of our race" ("Thespians" 11). This could suggest that Jenkins wrote "Who are the Thespians?" before 1910, though it could also be the case that Jenkins chose to omit any mention of *The Colored People's Magazine* for reasons of his own.

Jenkins's poems frequently appear in the Negro Press. He is a resident of Atlanta, Georgia" (*Voices* 56).

Three Images of Jenkins

Jenkins appears, at a distance, in several photographs in *The "Incident" at Monroe*; apart from these photojournalistic images, three studio photographs of Jenkins survive, all from approximately 1910-1925. No photographer is known for any of them. All three portraits project a deliberately *writerly* image of Jenkins; the cues they use to signal that idea, however, differ in interesting ways. Considered in turn, they give a rich idea of how Jenkins may have conceived and presented himself as a literary figure.

The portrait closest to hand for anyone with access to Jenkins's books is the one printed in *We Also Serve;* frontispiece-like, it faces the author's brief foreword, and takes up about as much space on the page as that block of text. In the image, a relatively young Jenkins sits at a slight angle in a wooden-armed chair, resting his lower back against one arm of the chair and propping a leg over the other. He is wearing a white collared shirt and what appear to be plaid trousers. Holding a notebook against his knee, he is writing with a look of focused contentment. The printed image (not the book itself) is inscribed, over the white of the shirt, *Yours very truly, Welborn Victor Jenkins,* as though it had been signed to a friend or a fan. In the two-page spread of the book, Jenkins is turned toward the foreword, but looking at the notebook, as though he were writing the foreword as you read it. The image radiates a sort of kindly, understated authority and collectedness; Jenkins looks ordinary and personable, but he also looks like an author. The inscription only adds to the air of assumed celebrity.

Similar in pose and expression is the archival photograph reproduced in Mason's *Black Atlanta in the Roaring Twenties,* a picture history for general audiences. Mason does not provide

a date for the photo, but it also appears alongside the essay "True Blue" in the May 26, 1917 *Atlanta Independent* (though Jenkins looks younger than 37 here). As above, Jenkins is looking down and to the right at a book (though he seems to be reading rather than writing), and his features are distinctly recognizable. Here, however, both the setting and the outfit are much more ornate: the book rests on an elaborate side table, and fringed drapes are visible in the background; meanwhile, Jenkins himself is dressed quite splendidly, wearing a light-colored suit jacket, a cap, and a shimmering patterned tie. In contrast to the down-to-earth settledness of the *We Also Serve* portrait, this Jenkins looks downright bohemian.

The third portrait of Jenkins — a 5-by-7-inch print in the public archive of the Atlanta History Center — is literary only by allusion, but the allusion is, in my opinion, unmissable. Taken sometime before March 5, 1916, this portrait has no background; instead, Jenkins stands isolated in a blank field, with the image fading, vignette-style, somewhere above the knees. Unlike the other two images, in which Jenkins's attention is focused demurely elsewhere, here he looks directly and matter-of-factly at the viewer. He is wearing a baggy work shirt with the sleeves slightly rolled, a broad pair of pants belted high at the waist, and a rumpled hat. It is inscribed *Yours for the race, Welborn Victor Jenkins, 3-5-'16*.

Admittedly, I saw the image already knowing Jenkins was a writer — though given the content and context of the other photos, as well as the impersonality of the inscription, it is hard to imagine this photograph existing for any purpose but to accompany or promote Jenkins the writer, if not Jenkins the poet. But to my eyes, this image is a clear reference to the iconic frontispiece engraving of Walt Whitman from the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. The hats do not quite match, and Jenkins's stance is less tilted and jaunty overall — and, while it may be either unimportant or quite purposeful, Whitman's shirt and pants are light-colored, while

Jenkins's are dark. But the pose and composition — down to the spread of the collar over the undershirt and the right arm slightly higher than the left — are similar enough to suggest that Jenkins or his photographer made reference to the Whitman image during the session.

And why Whitman? Certainly, *Trumpet in the New Moon* and *The "Incident" at Monroe* bear clear debts to Whitman; their earthy grandiloquence and long-lined, cataloging style — as well as their ambition to speak, prophetically, both to and for America — place them in a certain populist-visionary Whitmanian/Sandburgian strain, which had maintained some presence in American poetry generally from the 1910s on, but would become especially prevalent in African-American poetry of the 1930s and 1940s (as discussed below). But *Trumpet in the New Moon* would not appear until nearly two decades after this photograph was signed (which, of course, may have been months or years after it was taken). The poems Jenkins had published by 1916 — often light, occasional verse such as "Rubaiyat of a Hobo" and "Adieu, Fair Spelman"[16] — would not immediately suggest any direct influence from *Leaves of Grass*.

It could be that Jenkins felt some affinity with Whitman himself. Like Jenkins, Whitman was an autodidact; like Jenkins, he was a journalist and a newspaper essayist, who also worked intermittently as a schoolteacher despite never having completed formal schooling. Whitman was also proudly self-made and self-fashioning, publishing his own book and promoting it and himself zealously. Whitman's ambitious self-advocacy may well have provided the model for the way Jenkins would go on to present his own poetry and writerly persona. Perhaps most importantly, though, Whitman always conceived of himself as the poet of democracy, both of and for America and its collective destiny — and, from the beginning, Jenkins's own work was

[16] "Rubaiyat of a Hobo" was printed in the *Atlanta Independent* in 1910; "Adieu, Fair Spelman" was written "[b]y request of the graduating class of Spelman Seminary '15" (*Trumpet* 61). Both were reprinted in *Trumpet in the New Moon*.

always characterized by a desire to address a popular, community audience, and to advocate for that audience by means of assuming the role of public poet.

CHAPTER 3

TRUMPET IN THE NEW MOON: AMERICAN JEREMIADS AND THE POET AS PROPHET

Jenkins's first poetry collection, *Trumpet in the New Moon and Other Poems,* was published in Boston in 1934 by the Peabody Press.[17] The book is printed on laid paper in a then-stylish sans-serif typeface, and contains a brief foreword by Edgar Webster. What little has been written on Jenkins has mostly concerned this book, probably because it was the one available when Brown was writing *Negro Poetry and Drama* in 1937, and most other references to Jenkins come to him through Brown. However, it does seem to have received the most promotion of any of Jenkins's publications: aside from brief reviews in the *Atlanta Journal* and *Birmingham News-Age Herald* (as well as a comment from the Baltimore *Afro-American* discussed below) and a listing in the New York Times Book Review's "Books Received" column of October 7, 1934, it was also either submitted or nominated for *The Crisis*'s Du Bois Literary Prize of that year.[18]

The book's main feature is the title poem, a 17-page, 406-line free-verse address to America that is at once a praise song, a protest, and a call to reckoning. Woodson characterizes it as a "jeremiad"; as Woodson, Redmond, and Brown agree, it also has major debts to Whitman and Sandburg, and while the style is perhaps closer to Sandburg's, the subject matter is closely engaged with Whitman in a number of ways. The book also includes a selection of shorter poems, at least two of which had been published decades earlier.

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[17] Few other records of The Peabody Press exist; a roughly contemporary yearbook from a Boston publisher of that name suggests the book may have been privately printed.

[18] The prize was awarded to one genre per year on a three-year cycle of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry; *Trumpet in the New Moon* was one of five books published between 1931 and 1934 to be considered. Responding to a letter from William Stanley Braithwaite about the prize, Du Bois wrote "I am very apologetic for not having answered your letters concerning the Du Bois Prize for poetry [… t]o tell the truth, I think that the output for last year has been very small and unimportant and only Sterling Brown's poems [in *Southern Road*] ought to be considered," but did list Jenkins prominently in his pitch to Farrar and Rinehart less than five months later (5).

The "Biblical-Whitmanic-Sandburgian" Voice in African-American Poetry of the 1930s

Smethurst, Wilson, and Woodson all observe the prevalence of what Smethurst describes as a "long-lined and anaphoric biblical-Whitmanic-Sandburgian 'prophetic'" style in African-American poetry of the 1930s and 1940s (182). Langston Hughes, for example, praised and promoted Whitman's work throughout his career and wrote poems explicitly in response to it, but also described Sandburg as his "guiding star," and Rampersad suggests Sandburg's influence was "decisive in leading him toward free verse and a radically democratic modernist aesthetic" (207). Wilson reports that Whitman had been similarly decisive for James Weldon Johnson as early as about 1901, when, according to Johnson's biography, "he was 'engulfed and submerged' by a reading of *Leaves of Grass* that sent him 'floundering'" (vii-viii). Similar tendencies are visible in the poems of Sterling Brown, Frank Marshall Davis, Melvin B. Tolson, Richard Wright, and Margaret Walker.[19]

Discussing Walker's "For My People," Wilson writes that the Whitman-Sandburg influence is present not only in the long-lined, anaphoric style and themes of common life, but in Walker's "variation of Whitman's all-encompassing oracular perspective, with Walker's narrator able to take sight of wide landscapes, from rural Alabama to the concrete streets of Chicago, but engendered by palpable degrees of intimacy, not just identification, with the subjects of her poem" (xi-xii). This roving-eye quality is as much a part of the poetry of this style as are its formal characteristics. The crucial third element might be described as a certain prophetic urgency — and, implicit in that, the poet's self-assertion as him or herself *as* prophet, with a vital message and a right to bring it before the people. Whitman, in particular, becomes especially

[19] Woodson reports that in 1936, the budding formalist Owen Dodson was informed by his English professor at Bates College that he had "made a grave error in choosing the Shakespearean sonnet as a form in which to write about slavery," a subject whose scope and significance, the professor thought, demanded "a kind of Walt Whitman style" (36).

important in this respect; as the great gray grandfather of self-invented American poet-prophets, he becomes the figure from whom the torch is taken. This is at the heart of Whitman's importance to Sandburg (and, later, Allen Ginsberg); it is also the significance of the Whitman myth in poems like Hughes's "I, Too" and "Let America Be America Again," which simultaneously allude to and revise that image.

This is also the role Whitman plays for Jenkins, who takes up the Whitman mantle both with Whitman's maneuver of new-world self-assertion and with direct allusion to Whitman as a forebear. Jenkins makes these allusions in his self-presentation (as in the 1916 photograph) and in the packaging and promotion of his work. In *Trumpet in the New Moon* (and, later, *The "Incident" at Monroe*), however, Jenkins also asserts that heritage in the style and rhetoric of the poems themselves — and, with it, his right to a prophetic voice in the democratic-vatic mode. This self-assertion as a vitally American voice doubles as an assertion of Jenkins's right, *as* an American, to lay claim to an American identity and the liberties for which it ought to stand — to claim that, as Hughes put it, he, too, is America.

Jenkins's long poems participate in a tradition of black Whitman appropriations that respond to Whitman's vision of radical egalitarianism by simultaneously critiquing its uneven realization (since African Americans were not, in reality, fully included in "America") and appealing to that same vision as a standard (since, by the logic of that ideal, they *should* have been included from the beginning). This tension is put especially concisely in Hughes's "Let America Be America Again."[20] Hughes's poem begins with an ironic paean to the golden age of the frontier, purportedly longing for "the pioneer on the plain / seeking a home where he himself is free" (3-4). This reverie is undercut, however, with a persistent parenthetical refrain "(America

[20] Written, notably, at the height of Hughes's involvement with the far left, and published both in *Esquire* and in a pamphlet from the Communist Party-affiliated International Workers Order.

never was America to me)," which soon becomes the main voice of the poem (Hughes 5). This dissident voice identifies itself with African Americans as well as other minorities, immigrants, poor whites, and the downtrodden in general, for whom America is pointedly *not* the land of the free. Yet for all that the poem decries America's failure to live up to the "American" ideal, Hughes also appeals to that *same* ideal in order to make that critique, as well as to posit a better future to come:

> America never was America to me,
>
> And yet I swear this oath—
>
> America will be! (77-79)

The African-American Jeremiad and *Trumpet in the New Moon*

While poets working in this Whitmanian vein have varied considerably (both among themselves and over the course of individual careers) in the values they attach to concepts like "America" and (especially) "democracy," this basic pattern — describing or alluding to the ideal, decrying the failure of the ideal, and appealing to that ideal in order to urge the country to correct its course — is notable in African-American poetry of this time. Woodson identifies it as "jeremiadic," with reference to both Sacvan Bercovitch's *The American Jeremiad* and David Howard-Pitney's *The Afro-American Jeremiad.* Building on Bercovitch's concepts, Howard-Pitney formulates the American jeremiad generally as "citing the promise; criticism of present declension, or retrogression from the promise; and a resolving *prophecy* that society will shortly complete its missions and redeem the promise"; he also notes that, in keeping with that rhetoric, African Americans often become a "chosen people within a chosen people," and that the African-American jeremiad "characteristically addresses *two* American chosen peoples — black

and white — whose millennial destinies, while distinct, are also inextricably entwined" (quoted in Woodson 16).

This is certainly the mode of *Trumpet in the New Moon* (as it will be again in *The "Incident" at Monroe*).[21] Like "Let America Be America Again," *Trumpet* begins with apparently uncomplicated praise: a long, laudatory overview of the settling, founding, and frontier expansion of the United States, and a catalog of America's great achievements. It is almost entirely praise for an almost entirely white history — which, as in Hughes's poem, is interrupted by a dissenting voice (here, an actual "nay"-sayer) that breaks in once before it becomes the major speaker of the poem:

> Sing of Cabot and Drake and Magellan and Balboa and De Soto
> And Columbus, who gave you your song-name and started you on your way to
> Plymouth and Yorktown!
> Nay, sing of the slave-ships and Christopher Attucks.[22]
> Sing of the Declaration of Independence; there is
> No grander human document… (*Trumpet* 28-32)

Unlike the initial dissent in "Let America Be America Again," line 30 is not set apart in parentheses, but the shift in tone and subject is marked, and anticipates a larger shift later in the poem.[23] Following this section, Jenkins's tone shifts to the critical as he reminds the reader that African Americans, enslaved or otherwise exploited, performed much of the labor that built that

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[21] For a more detailed overview of this poem, see Woodson 47-68.
[22] Attucks (identified as Crispus Attucks) is also an important figure in *The "Incident" at Monroe.*
[23] Jenkins's poem also differs from Hughes's in that the distinction between the appealed-to ideal and the less-than-ideal actuality — while present in the poem's eventual critical turn — is less clearly drawn in this first section, even as Jenkins is fairly explicitly weighing them against each other. Thus this long, strange line near the beginning of the poem: "The clean wild air, the free new world seemed to animate you with a fraternal benevolence; and I even condone your questionable treatment of the Indian / Because / You were honor bright; and, at least, your heart was right." (*Trumpet* 18-20) This turn makes explicit a conflict of ideal and reality that is implicit in Whitman and explicitly criticized in Hughes; here, the combination of "condone" with "at least" makes the tone a little hard to place.

country, and are just as entitled to its promises. Near the end of the poem, however, Jenkins considers the Titanic captain who, as the ship was sinking, urged his men to "[b]e British" and remain calm while helping women and children escape (*Trumpet* 351). Jenkins considers the high standard for British stoicism and self-sacrifice implied in that statement, and goes on to say, "God hasten the day when 'Be American' / Shall carry the selfsame Inspiration" (*Trumpet* 369-70).

While *Trumpet in the New Moon* is less polyvocalic than *The "Incident" at Monroe, Trumpet* anticipates the cinematic scene-shifting and dramatic contrasts in *"Incident,"* with shifts of tone like that in the opening, and anecdotes including the Titanic story and a satirical courtroom scene. Many of *Trumpet in the New Moon*'s social critiques also recur in *The "Incident" at Monroe.* Here, as in the later poem, Jenkins decries the lack of cooperation between black and white labor (inveighing against the "Masters, Lords and Rulers of the Land" who "drove the shaft of hate between the working black and the working white") and laments that black soldiers have fought and died for the country without ever fully receiving the benefits of its citizenship (*Trumpet* 109-110). Additionally, just as *The "Incident" at Monroe* would go on to reject the supposed moral supremacy of whites in light of abuses in America and elsewhere, *Trumpet in the New Moon* criticizes the notion of the "White Man's Burden" as "patronizing," insisting to America its "Real Burden" is "your inconsistence, your Selfishness, your Indifference, your materialism, your Intolerance" (*Trumpet* 146-7, 251-2). At the end of the poem, Jenkins makes his role as prophet explicit, taking up the biblical allusion of the title and asking, "Have I now Blown the Trumpet into the air, / That America may hear and well prepare" (*Trumpet* 402-403). This self-assertion — the work of much of his public career — would be taken up again and developed even further in *The "Incident" at Monroe.*

A Newspaper Review and James Weldon Johnson's Phantom Endorsement

In addition to brief coverage of *Trumpet in the New Moon* in the publications listed above, Baltimore's black newspaper *The Afro-American* ran this item in its September 1, 1934 edition:

> Welborn Victor Jenkins's book of poetry entitled, "Trumpet in the New Moon," was published last week by the Peabody Press of Boston. A foreword by James Weldon Johnson calls it a powerful poem, ably conceived, splendidly executed. "It," he said, entitles Mr. Jenkins "to a hearing and a place among our poets." The heart of Mr. Jenkins's poem is an appeal to white America and especially to whites of Georgia and Alabama: [Quotes lines 267-277[24] of *Trumpet in the New Moon.*] Appeals to justice and chivalry of the whites in Dixie isn't worth much, either as poetry or prose. Russia's czar passed out when the workers combined to kill him. All the talk of Moses was not on [sic] half as convincing to Pharoah as the plagues on Egypt and the "death of the first born." Revolution is the answer to tyranny. Prayer, appeal, soft soap, goodwill and talk of peace have never yet moved a tyrant — and never will. (*Afro-American* 4)

The item is unsigned, but its tone suggests the book itself was sent to the newspaper for comment. The foreword to *Trumpet in the New Moon,* however, was written by E. H. Webster, not James Weldon Johnson, and it does not contain the phrase "a hearing and a place among our

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[24] Unless
You shall change your ways, America,
And get yourself a new religion,
Based on humane cooperation
And brotherly love twixt man and man;
And unless
You shall strip your hearts of intolerance,
And turn unto the ways of justice and love.
The genus of decay will proceed unrestrained.
And your paths will lead down to confusion and death. (*Trumpet* 267-277)

poets." The citation for *Trumpet in the New Moon* in the recent edition of Du Bois's correspondence also notes a foreword by Webster; no other sources mention the foreword, but if an edition with a foreword by Johnson did exist, it would seem worth mentioning. Were multiple editions of Jenkins's book published? Given that this review ran roughly simultaneously with the others, that the publication details are identical, and that the lines quoted are verbatim in my copy of the poem (albeit with different capitalization, but Jenkins's capitalization can be eccentric), probably not.

Were it not for one other item of corroborating evidence, it would seem likely that the *Afro-American* reviewer simply had multiple books to hand and accidentally consulted the wrong foreword. In her introduction to *The "Incident" at Monroe*, however, L. D. Shivery writes this:

> Just before his much lamented death, James Weldon Johnson, eminent scholar, poet and critic, placed his stamp of approval upon Welborn Victor Jenkins' "Trumpet in the New Moon." He said it was "a powerful poem, nobly conceived and splendidly executed." He was greatly impressed by its "sweep and epic qualities"; and declared it to be "worthy of an honored place in the literature of our group." (Shivery 6)

Shivery and the *Afro-American* reviewer certainly seem to be referring to the same piece of writing, but if it was ever published, I have yet to locate it. This raises another possibility. In the phrases directly quoted by Shivery and the *Afro-American* reviewer alike, Johnson never refers to Jenkins in the third person. Could Johnson's assessment of Jenkins's poem have come from a letter *to* Jenkins, presumably after Jenkins sent Johnson the poem himself — which Jenkins, not unlike Whitman with his letter from Emerson, then attached to the book when he was sending it to newspapers? I have yet to prove this positively, but given the lack of a public record for

Johnson's comments — and, especially, given that Jenkins seems to have taken a similar approach to gathering blurbs for *The "Incident" at Monroe* — the theory is worth considering.

CHAPTER 4

THE "INCIDENT" AT MONROE: THE LYNCHING CRISIS AND THE POET-PROPHET'S LAST TESTAMENT

On July 25, 1946, a quadruple lynching was committed by the Moore's Ford bridge near Monroe, Georgia, a small town between Athens and Atlanta. The victims were two couples, Roger Malcom, 24, Dorothy Dorsey Malcom, 20, Dorothy's brother George Dorsey, 28, and Mae Murray Dorsey, 23. Roger Malcom had recently been arrested for stabbing a white man, but there was no ostensible cause for animus against the other three victims, and George Dorsey was a recent veteran of World War II (a fact much commented upon in subsequent responses).[25] The four victims were ambushed by a white mob, bound with rope, and shot repeatedly; Laura Wexler's 2003 *Fire in a Canebrake: The Last Mass Lynching in Americ*a, which details the lynching and its aftermath, takes its title from a local description for the sound of mass gunfire.[26] The lynching and investigation that followed became a national incident and a cause célèbre of civil rights activism, but despite sustained FBI involvement (and several subsequent reinvestigations), none of the killers has ever been prosecuted.

Two years later — under the auspices of a Malcolm-Dorsey[27] Memorial Committee evidently founded and administered by Jenkins himself — Jenkins published *The "Incident" at*

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[25] Some sources (including some recent sources) report that Mae Murray Dorsey was pregnant, but Wexler considers this an unfounded rumor, and possibly a conflation with the 1918 lynching of 19-year-old pregnant woman Mary Turner near Valdosta, Georgia.

[26] In a 2003 interview on NPR's *Morning Edition*, Wexler said, "A canebrake is a thicket of river cane … If you were to light a fire in the area where this canebrake was, the hollow cane stalks explode and they make a sound like gunshots."

[27] Most sources spell Roger and Dorothy's surname Malcom, but the variation is common in contemporary coverage and may have been in general use during the victims' lifetimes (Wexler reports all four were functionally illiterate).

Monroe: A Requiem for the Victims of July 25th, 1946, Written at the Scene of the Tragedy.[28] The front matter explains that the Memorial Committee, funded in part by sales of the book, would first purchase markers for the victims' graves, then use any remaining funds to endow a hospital in their names. The Committee also planned to publish books to "contemplate the improvement of race relations in America and the encouragement of better understanding between white and Negro people," which would serve as fundraisers for the organization (*"Incident"* 4). None of these projects seems to have come to fruition, but the effort to create a charitable organization — particularly one focused on literature and publishing — recalls Jenkins's earlier venture in "Who Are the Thespians?"

Indeed, in both the fundraising efforts of the Memorial Committee and the prophetic urgency of the poem itself, *The "Incident" at Monroe* is, in many ways, a culmination of Jenkins's career-long endeavor to take up the mantle of the public poet as a kind of service to the public at large. This is borne out in the rhetoric of the poem, but also in the ways Jenkins presented and promoted the book. On the front cover, for example, a blurb by renowned educator, activist, and Roosevelt associate Mary McLeod Bethune is printed in red and placed prominently at the center:

> *Mrs. Mary McLeod Bethune, First Lady of Negro America, Says:*
> "Only a bleeding heart inspired by God could have painted this vivid picture in words. Pity, not hatred, flows from my heart. May America's Sense of Justice be awakened." (*"Incident"* n.p.)

[28] Jenkins's title may be a reference to federal judge T. Hoyt Davis's characterization of the lynching in his speech to the grand jury in Athens, Georgia on December 2, 1946: "Not once during his instructions did he mention the word *lynching*; instead, he informed the jurors that they'd be looking into an 'occurrence' in Walton County" (Wexler 173).

The blurb concludes "Sincerely yours," followed by a reproduction of Bethune's signature. The first page contains four more blurbs in the same style, with a headline of sorts, a brief endorsement, and a printed signature:

> *Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, a Foremost World Citizen, Says:*
>
> "I have read this poem and I think it is a fine expression, straight from the heart, and it should awaken our conscience."
>
> *Mrs. Merrill M. Hutchinson, New Hampshire Born Resident of the South, Says:*
>
> "This Requiem has moved me deeply. Written without bitterness or resentment, it conveys a message the people of our country need to hear. I earnestly hope it may be widely read."
>
> *Thomas Jefferson Flanagan, Well Known Atlanta Poet, Comments:*
>
> "This Requiem is not the first fine thing Jenkins has written, and I sincerely trust it will not be the last."
>
> *Editor Bruce Bliven of The New Republic Comments:*
>
> "Mr. Henry Wallace and I have both read this poem with interest and sympathy." (*"Incident"* 1)

I do not know who Merrill Hutchinson is (the book's back cover lists many Committee members, presumably donors, but there is no one named Hutchinson there). Thomas Jefferson Flanagan had been associated with Jenkins since at least the 1910s, when both were publishing poetry in the *Atlanta Independent,* and they are mentioned together in the 1940 WPA guide to Georgia. The blurbs from Bethune, Roosevelt, and Bliven, however, are very interesting, less for their content (which is polite but general) than for what they suggest about how Jenkins may have promoted the poem both before and after its publication: that is, what kind of audience for the

poem he was seeking by soliciting those endorsements, and what kind of audience he was seeking to attract to the book by printing them so prominently.

As with the endorsement from James Weldon Johnson discussed above, I can only speculate about the origin of these blurbs, but the statements from Bethune, Roosevelt, and Bliven suggest that the poem was mailed to them directly. Bethune's and Roosevelt's comments have the feel of a cordial response from a public figure who receives a lot of mail. Bliven's, however, is slightly more ambiguous — and, to me, sounds very much like the beginning of a rejection notice. Did Jenkins send the poem, or some version or section of the poem, for consideration by *The New Republic?* The magazine was not generally publishing long poems in 1948, but he may have submitted some advance version of the book for review. Perhaps, though, he simply sent the poem to Bliven and Wallace for personal comment, as he may have done with others.[29]

The selection of endorsement-givers also connotes a sort of mainstream Roosevelt liberalism that serves to place the poem (and its presumptive audience) politically. There may be some design, too, in seeking blurbs from a fairly even balance of black and white public figures. Jenkins's "Foreword" (apparently written by Jenkins, and distinct from the "Introduction" by L. D. Shivery discussed above) suggest a complex relationship, if not an outright disconnection, between the *idea* of the addressee of the poem (as an imagined oration) and the probable literal readers of the book (as a book):

> In an effort to appeal to the Conscience of the American People, this "Requiem" has been written. It was begun six weeks later while standing upon the exact spot where this tragedy was enacted. It is admittedly addressed to the white people. It

[29] Notably, Roosevelt and Wallace are mentioned favorably by name late in the poem; see discussion of lines 279-82 below.

> is only indirectly addressed to colored people. But colored people will have to buy it first and then pass it on to white acquaintances and friends. Such white friends and acquaintances are then kindly asked to donate the price (for a second time) to the undersigned committee… (*"Incident"* 2)

The poem is meant — at least ostensibly; at least in the rhetorical situation *within* the poem — to awaken the "American People" to the reality and urgency of the lynching crisis. But which "American People" are not already aware of it as a crisis? The exclusion of African Americans from the general group "Americans" — and, by extension, the fellowship, respect, and civil protection that ideal implies — is both the occasion for the poem and one of its main rhetorical wedges. Realistically, the poem's readers were likely to be sympathetic to this idea at the outset. Perhaps, though, Jenkins expected some difficulty reaching white readers at all, even sympathetic ones. The endorsements from Roosevelt and Bliven (as well as the nationally-known Bethune) might have been intended, in part, to reach out to them.

The Poem

While only partly indicated as such, *The "Incident" at Monroe* can be divided into two main parts. The first part, which has no special subtitle, largely concerns the "documentary" details of the lynching itself and its local and national aftermath, as well as its setting in the culture of 1940s America. While grounded in the perspective of a primary poet-speaker (whose lines are not marked with quotation marks), this part of the poem contains many other voices — including prayer, lines from spirituals, legislative proceedings, and the sound of the killing itself, which sometimes cross or overlap — collaged or montaged together into a kind of fragmented radio drama that explores the crime and its resonance by dreamlike leaps and associations. The polyvocalic montage approach in this part of the poem bears comparison to T. S. Eliot's *The*

Waste Land or Robert Hayden's roughly contemporary[30] "Middle Passage"; in its emphasis on the "overheard" sounds of media and public speech over collaged textual sources, however, it might be more closely related to some of Langston Hughes's long political poems of the 1930s such as "Broadcast on Ethiopia" or "Air Raid Over Harlem."

The second main part of the poem, subtitled "A Vision," shifts from the realist mode of the first part to a more dreamlike, prophetic one. In it, Jenkins watches as a "Congress of the Darker Nations" convenes at the site of the lynching to pass judgment on white America (*"Incident"* 247). Most of this section is spoken by two delegates from the Congress, a "dusky Son of Thunder"[31] from "Holy Asia, Grandmother of the World's Religions" and an authoritative "FINAL VOICE" who speaks from Africa with a godlike authority that is both chthonic and cosmic (*"Incident"* 271, 274, 303). These voices issue some of the poem's sharpest judgments and most impassioned moral and political injunctions; as the source of transcendent judgment within the narrative of the poem, their presence in the poem also give Jenkins his implicit authority as a prophetic poet. The book also includes several photographs of the area where the lynching took place, dispersed through the poem and captioned with phrases from it.[32]

As a jeremiad that draws heavily on the long-lined rhythms and roving-eye narrative omniscience of the Whitmanian-Sandburgian style discussed above, *The "Incident" at Monroe* bears many similarities to *Trumpet in the New Moon*. *The "Incident" at Monroe* is set apart, however, by its extensive use of montage and "overheard" material, as well as the imaginative departure of the long dream vision. Furthermore, the use of real or realist details (including true

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[30] Hayden published the first version of "Middle Passage" in a 1945 issue of *Phylon;* Jenkins seems to have had some personal affiliations with Atlanta University, and it is plausible that he saw the poem then.

[31] "Sons of Thunder" is a biblical epithet for the apostles James and John; see also *The Waste Land's* "What the Thunder Said."

[32] The photographer is not identified, but is probably not Jenkins, as a white-haired black man who resembles Jenkins appears in several of the photographs (including one in which he lays a wreath of flowers at the site of the lynching).

facts from the case, imagined sounds such as gunfire or legislative proceedings, and, of course, the photographs) within a larger project meant to draw attention to the incident gives the poem a certain documentary aura.

This places *The "Incident" at Monroe* in a roughly contemporary moment of modernist documentary poetry — and, more particularly, in an interesting set of works of poetry or experimental prose combining elements of documentary with a more visionary, prophetic voice. Jenkins's poem bears comparison to Muriel Rukeyser's 1938 sequence *The Book of the Dead* (which, like *"Incident,"* includes both literal "documentary" and fabricated "realist" material as well as more lyrical, visionary passages) and James Agee and Walker Evans's 1941 book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (which, like *"Incident,"* also includes photographs). Like Jenkins, Rukeyser, Agee, and Evans were all journalists in some capacity; like *The "Incident" at Monroe*, their documentary works address some injustice committed against an oppressed and frequently-overlooked group (the 1931 Hawk's Nest mining disaster, the plight of southern tenant farmers), and seek to call notice to it through a combination of conventional reportage and artistic response. In each case, the lyric or visionary elements of the work serve to amplify the significance of the event covered, both by elevating the event to a context of transcendent momentousness within the work[33] and, simultaneously, enshrining the event by means of the work, which itself becomes a kind of tribute or monument in its realization as art.

The idea of the work of art as a monument — that is, a lasting structure that marks the historical significance of some location, and works to preserve the association of that history with that place — is particularly relevant to *The "Incident" at Monroe*. As a charitable effort, the

[33] Agee's foreword to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* addresses this mixing of the temporal and the sacred as follows: "The nominal subject is North American cotton tenantry as examined in the daily living of three representative white tenant families. Actually, the effort is to recognize the stature of a portion of unimagined existence, and to contrive techniques proper to its recording, communication, analysis, and defense. More essentially, this is an independent inquiry into certain normal predicaments of human divinity" (viii).

book was meant to raise funds for a literal monument to the victims; as a work of art, the poem seeks to "mark" the place and events of the lynching, impressing its fact and significance in the common imagination.[34] The poem works toward this end by repeatedly emphasizing the physical site of the lynching: in recurring references to Monroe and the Moore's Ford bridge, in descriptions and photographs of the area, and in the title and subtitle of the book itself. Even the dream vision sequence, seemingly the most removed from "reality," is firmly anchored at the site of the lynching: the spectral Congress convenes at the place near the bridge, and the attendees repeatedly refer to that location in their speeches.

By centering the poem and its jeremiadic rhetoric on the physical site of the lynching, Jenkins makes two distinct but complementary arguments for the significance of that site. The first is that the site is, and will forever be, a place of mourning and national shame: the death of the victims was not only a private tragedy, but a public failure of the worst order, and neither the grief nor the outrage of that should be forgotten. The second, however, is that if America (and, indeed, the world at large) heeds that lesson and corrects its path, the site can also become a place of resolution, even hope.[35] This move to determine the significance of a site is an essential function of monuments; being inextricably bound up in the structures of power that determine public historical narratives generally, it is also an inherently tendentious one, and means that

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[34] See Jake Adam York's *The Architecture of Address: The Monument and Public Speech in American Poetry* for more on this "monumental" function of public poetry.

[35] In his book *Shadowed Ground: America's Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy*, geographer Kenneth Foote considers how Americans mark the sites of tragic or contentious events such as battles, riots, massacres, assassinations, and lynchings. Foote designates four basic responses "on a continuum … between active veneration and direct effacement": sanctification (marking a place as sacred, exemplified in the Gettysburg Address), designation (marking a place as historically notable), rectification (returning the troubled site to its usual function without marking the event there), and obliteration (total destruction of the site) (18). Foote considers the importance of these sites to regional, national, and/or international identity, and how all four of these responses reflect a deep psychological investment in incorporating what seems important to that identity and/or pushing out what seems to threaten it. These ideas are essential to Jenkins's project in *The "Incident" at Monroe*: through both the poem's content and its publication to raise funds for a literal, physical marker, he seeks to designate and sanctify a site (and, with it, a history) that was at real risk of being effaced.

monuments, by nature, tend to favor the narratives of empowered groups.[36] For that reason, Jenkins's poetic "monument" has a special urgency and importance: its message must be carried to those in power, who will not (in the case of the lynching, demonstrably had not) affirm that message of their own accord.

The emphasis on the site is also notable in that, in almost every instance, Jenkins chooses to anchor the physical reality of the lynching in the physical reality of the place, rather than explicit depiction of the killing or the bodies. Photographs from the victims' group funeral were in circulation (one is reprinted in Wexler), but the photographs in the book show the setting of the crime rather than the scene or its aftermath. This indirection is also present in the poem, in which Jenkins repeatedly evokes the lynching by partial, suggestive details (such as the sound of gunfire or a description of knotted rope), but largely avoids direct representation of the bodies or their mutilation —and, interestingly, the one exception appears not in the first "realist" half of the poem, but in the dream sequence, where the sight of the bodies strikes the Congress with such cosmic horror as to suggest that the lynching was a crime even worse than ordinary earthly violence.

Jenkins's withholding of the image of the bodies is almost certainly deliberate, but may be for more than dramatic effect. As Armstrong and Priest describe, representations of lynching (including explicit accounts or images) were common in speeches and reports by antilynching activists, where such representations were generally meant to emphasize the gruesome inhumanity of lynching.[37] Representations of the lynched body in antilynching art and poetry

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[36] The ongoing controversy over whether Confederate monuments should remain in public places (that is, in their original "monumentalizing" function) highlights this inherent tendentiousness of monuments and the narratives they embody.

[37] At the height of the lynching epidemic, lynching was paradoxically both hyper-visible (as a local spectacle) and invisible (as a national crisis); furthermore, as Armstrong, Arnold, and Wexler all note, to this day, criminal and journalistic investigations of lynchings are often stalled by an implicit code of silence within the community, which

often served a similar purpose, with Hughes's "Christ in Alabama" being one iconizing example and Richard Wright's "Between the World and Me" a much more viscerally horrific one. Images and artifacts of lynching — including postcards, mementos from the scene,[38] and even pieces of the mutilated body — were also, however, distributed by people who participated in lynchings, whether as direct actors, complicit observers, or complicit sympathizers within the community. The nature of lynching — fundamentally, as Priest writes, "the spectacular display of power 'upon and within' the black body," which terrorizes other black bodies in its rendering of the lynched body as spectacle — makes any representation of lynching very fraught: regardless of intent or context, the terrorizing impact (and the potential for voyeuristic interest) cannot be separated from the fact of the lynching itself (54). In this light, Jenkins's decision to emphasize the physicality of the place rather than the crime, and the victims as people and addressees rather than bodies, is of a piece with the poem's larger intention: while the poem does not avoid harrowing details, it does avoid depicting the bodies as the lynching mob left them in all but one exceptional instance — and, in this way, works to reclaim and recast the significance of the lynching, rather than allowing the lynch mob's original message to stand.

Murder vs. Martyrdom: The Significance of the Lynching

The poem opens with a one-page prelude spoken by the main poet-speaker (whose voice, unlike others, is not set apart in quotation marks), followed by a public prayer (in quotation marks) for divine rectification. The rest of the first section is anchored in a long lyric address

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is enforced by shame, fear, protectiveness, or some combination of the three. Representations of lynching by anti-lynching activists sought to disrupt that silence.

[38] Souvenir-hunters gathered at the site of the Moore's Ford lynching as well, as Wexler reports: while the bodies themselves had been removed, "the souvenir collectors came … fueled by the hope of finding a memento or a talisman, anything that could connect them to what they saw as the excitement and drama — if not the horror — of the quadruple murder. A white student who'd detoured to Moore's Ford on his way to class at the University of Georgia in Athens found a length of rope with a few cords clipped off by a bullet. As he was leaving the clearing with his souvenir in hand, another man snatched it. After hunting again, the student found a tooth, which he later gave to a friend for her charm bracelet. 'Four-leaf clovers, wishbones, good-luck charms on bracelets. You know, Indian-head pennies,' he says. 'She felt like that tooth would be something.'" (74)

from Jenkins to the victims, shifting at times into other scenes in the form of anecdotes and "overheard" material, which creates a collaged or montaged effect. These scenes include imagined legislative proceedings, an exchange in Boston about the Boston Massacre monument, and a passage in which sounds from the killing are interspersed with pleas to the authorities who failed to prevent it. This part of the poem is punctuated throughout by overheard fragments of spirituals, which often comment obliquely on the surrounding material.[39]

The prayer near the beginning of the poem seems, at first, a straightforward lament for the dead and a call for national mourning. It soon becomes clear, though, that the prayer is a call not just for mourning but also shame, and hints at reasons for that national failure that the more polemical sections of the poem will take up explicitly. The prayer-giver implores God ("[w]hose Son so well remembers the Wild Frenzy of the Angry Mob") to speak "from the Darkened Skies that hover above this lovely woodland," simultaneously situating the local grief of the speaker, the national grievance with America, and the cosmic grievance with God at the site of the lynching (*"Incident"* 19). The prayer-giver cries out:

> "Let profoundly appropriate mourning now cover the face of this America—
>
> "This Country bursting with ample means for the satisfaction of every proper desire;
>
> . . . . . .
>
> "Let streamers of black bunting hang from the pinnacles of the Statehouses;
>
> "Let the mansions, the money-temples, all the towering buildings of the huge cities,

[39] The songs in this section and the ones that follow — "Steal Away to Jesus," "Jesus Is a Rock," "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," and especially "Heaven, Heaven" — generally have to do with endurance and deliverance, long popularly understood to refer to endurance through and deliverance from slavery in addition to the straightforward Christian themes that would make them passable by a white master.

"And all the magnificent cathedrals of music be muted, closed and darkened!. .

(*"Incident"* 28-29, 34-36)

While "bursting with ample means for the satisfaction of every proper desire" may seem like formulaic praise, the rest of the poem will argue that America's failure to distribute its "ample means" well enough to satisfy "every proper desire" has created conditions of poverty that exacerbate class tension and racist fear, leading directly to incidents like the Moore's Ford lynching.

The emphasis on the site itself is repeated in Jenkins's first address to the victims ("Goodbye, Dorothy, you and Willie Mae, and George, the Soldier-boy, and Roger"), which describes the loveliness of the scenery,[40] then associates it with the brutality of the lynching:

Yon rude bridge, this sequestering grove, the frightened birds on high,
Will be the last earthly scene upon which your troubled eyes will rest;
The murmuring stream at the shoals above the bridge—Nature's perpetual
Requiem for you—
Will be the last sound that will fall upon your tortured, youthful ears;
Save your own soul-piercing screams, and the harsh words of your ungracious
executioners,
And the echoing volley with grim re-echo of those sinister repeating guns.

(*"Incident"* 43-50)

[40] Wexler describes the area as follows: "Along the riverbanks near Moore's Ford, wild mountain laurel and wild rhododendron bloomed, and river cane grew up in thick groves … From the riverbank, countless footpaths led into a forest of privet, pine, and hardwoods draped with wisteria … Even at midday, it was shadowy in there. You could nap in the shade of a tree, escape the visibility of the fields, retreat. You could drink moonshine or meet a lover. Moore's Ford was a small patch of wildness in a landscape tamed and cultivated into rows of cotton and corn. It was a rare place that wasn't associated with work, a place of small sounds and small secrets" (72).

The contrast of classically pretty, pleasing description (almost caricatured in the self-conscious anachronism of "Yon rude bridge") suddenly undercut by brutal violence recurs at several key points in the poem. Jenkins continues in a darker tone, saying, "No doubt, your ardent pleas for mercy would have melted hearts of stone; / No doubt, those same piteous pleas for mercy will torment the soul of many a man; / To the very last moment of his life… (*"Incident"* 53-55) But more than simply re-publicizing the lynching and condemning the lynchers, Jenkins's purpose in the poem is to recast the *significance* of the lynching, changing it from another instance of racial terror (and thus a re-assertion of the white supremacist status quo) to an ultimate moment of reckoning (and thus a chance for that status quo to shift). For this reason, Jenkins "salutes" the victims, saying that, though "Crucified side by side,"

> You carried our Cause before Earth's Highest Tribunals,
> And knocked at the door of the Conscience of Mankind.
> The sixty shots (Or was it seventy-five?) that drilled your helpless bodies
> Were heard all the way across the river bridge in adjacent Oconee County;
> Were heard all the way to the big brick church on the picturesque Athens Highway;
> Were heard all the way to the President's Office, and the Attorney General's—and the FBI—
> All the way to London—Moscow—New Delhi—Honolulu—
> Were louder (Would you believe it!) than the Detonations at "Bikini" . . (*"Incident"* 62-69)

The poem's documentary quality is heightened here by Jenkins's use of specific details from the case. An unidentified voice adds "'Yes, Jesus, they called names—Spot heard them

calling names; / ‘But Spot can’t talk, Lord—If Spot could only talk!’”; Spot was the name of a real dog who belonged to Dorothy Mae, and, according to Wexler, was with the group when they were ambushed. The following stanza begins with another detail from the case; its presentation here is one of the more quietly effective passages of the poem:

> —There is a rumor that the knots were “beautifully tied”—
>
> The knots in the rope that fastened your hands behind you. (*“Incident”* 90-91)

Wexler corroborates this as well, via a report from the crime's sole witness, white farmer Loy Harrison:

> […S]everal men forced open the car door and pulled Roger Malcom from the backseat. They held him down while others bound his wrists and tied a long rope around his neck. The rope work was “expertlike, prettylike,” Loy Harrison would later say. (62)

Within the poem, however, the eerie beauty of these lines — together with their terrible implication — have a power apart from their ripped-from-the-headlines realism. Here as elsewhere, Jenkins refrains from describing the lynching in gruesome detail, but neither does he gloss over its real atrocity. Instead, he *suggests* the horror of the lynching by his choice of evocative details: the sounds of the riverside interrupted by screams, the voices of the killers lining up to shoot, the uncountable bullets ringing out around the world. Lines 90-91 are a particularly rich instance of this. As in the passage at lines 43-50 about the sounds by the riverside, the prettiness of the language is undercut by the horror of the meaning, which reveals itself gradually as the lines go on: *the knots* (which knots?) *in the rope* (which rope?) *that fastened your hands* (the scene becomes clearer) *behind you* (the scene is clear). And — just as the killers themselves are still officially unidentified, but the force of their actions remains

deadly and irrevocable — the structure of the sentence omits any mention of the hands that tied those knots, but nevertheless, their deadly efficacy is tangible in the knotwork.

The Boston anecdote marks a momentary departure from the scene of the lynching; in it, Jenkins discusses Crispus Attucks and the Boston Massacre monument, returning to the idea of martyrdom — suggested earlier by the crucifixion imagery, but here given an African-American face and a broadly American importance. Attucks was mentioned briefly in *Trumpet in the New Moon,* but in this poem, his myth takes on a new and specific relevance. Here, Attucks has value as a point of common reference and — at least in Revolutionary War legend — a model for an appropriately American response to unjust death at the hands of undemocratic oppressors. Jenkins writes:

> Once I asked a snobbish Boston Policeman: "Please direct me to the Crispus Attucks Monument."
>
> He fixed me with a cynical, blue Irish eye, and banteringly replied, "I never heard of the mon!"
>
> —Never heard of the first man to die in our Revolution;
>
> —The first man to fall in the Boston Massacre;
>
> —The first Negro to adorn a page of American History;
>
> And the first Life to be sacrificed upon the Altar of American Freedom!
>
> (*"Incident"* 107-112)

Attucks is significant not only as an African-American historical figure, but as a national *martyr:* an innocent bystander whose death, interpreted as an unjust killing at the hands of an unfairly- and undemocratically-empowered ruling class, had great persuasive (and propagandistic) force to galvanize the colonists into revolution. Jenkins continues:

> Go yonder to the Boston Common and you will see that Monument.
> It would be a Grand Object Lesson for this flaxen-haired, blue-eyed, posse that is now dragging you hither;
> It would be an Uplifting Experience if they could repeat the Inscription
> . . . . . .
> But above them all, and leading them all in Bright and Eternal Glory,
> Is the name of the Martyr, the Patriot, the Hero,
> The Negro Immortal, Crispus C. Attucks! . . . . . (*"Incident"* 113-117)

By invoking Attucks here and lamenting that he is not better known, Jenkins suggests two things. The first is simply that if Attucks's significance were more widely recognized and appreciated, white Americans would be more inclined to recognize black Americans as equal fellow citizens. The second, however, is that Attucks's martyrdom, such as it is, might provide a model for how America responds to the Moore's Ford lynching: recognized for the tragedy and the violation of democratic ideals that it is, it might serve as a galvanizing incident for a needed re-envisioning of and refocusing on those ideals.

The depiction of the lynching — if it is a "depiction," since there are no visual descriptions — is a high point of the poem's overheard, radio-drama quality, as well as its collaged or montaged effects; the fragments of supposed legislative proceedings also lend it a realist, even pseudo-documentary, aura. Jenkins takes on the role of helpless observer, pleading for intervention from "God above," then a series of temporal authorities including "the 'Law,'" "the Police," "the National Guard," "the Governor," "the President," and "the King" — none of whom are willing or able to intervene (*"Incident"* 123-131). When the killing proceeds, several voices begin to speak at once:

"Mr. Chairman—Mr. Chairman—Please hear me: I move you, Sir, that this United Nations Assembly memorialize the good people of America to cease instanter [sic] the illegal execution of black men—"

"Watch out there for your range, boys—Ready—Steady—One—two—three—Let 'em Go—Boom!—Good shooting!—"

"Jesus, You promised to go with me—Don't forsake me, Lord—Come and go with me, Jesus!—"

"Brother Moderator: I rise to a point of order. Cannot this World Council of Christian Churches do something to deter the Unauthorized Butchery of Negroes in America—"

"This is the River, Jesus; This is the Chilly Water—"

"Mr. Speaker—Mr. Speaker of the House: May I not ask if the Mighty Force of Public Opinion in our Beloved Country is unable to—"

"The Night is Dark, Lord, and I am far from home—"

"If Your Honor Please, the Defense appeals from the Decision of This Court, and asks for a Higher Judgment—" (*"Incident"* 132-139)

As meaningful discussion of lynching fails to gain traction in a series of courts and legislatures, the lynching at Moore's Ford — audible in the cavalier chatter of the killers as well as the desperate pleas of the victims — goes on unimpeded. And because the lynching was not stopped, devastatingly, the killers are allowed the last word:

"They ain't nothing but 'Niggers';

"They don't have no Rights which white men are bound to respect;

"Let us have Haste—Speed—Action—Hurry!"

So the Leader counts, "One—two—three—Boom!—Boom!!—Boom!!!"

And then there is Silence… (*"Incident"* 140-146)

As the first main part of the poem concludes, Jenkins indicts the hypocrisy of white churches in particular for failing to address the lynching crisis. As he hears "the pealing bells in the formidable belfries of the Great Churches of Charleston—Savannah—Atlanta—Birmingham" and their ministers in "richly upholstered pulpits" speak "[u]pon the oft-repeated 'Fatherhood of God' and 'Brotherhood of Man,' he knows bitterly that those sounds come from "a world reeking with the implementations of Force—Injustice—Hate— / Reeking with Dynamite, Flying Bombs, and the Bombast of the Gentleman from Mississippi!" (*"Incident"* 162-4, 166-7).[41]

Jenkins's dramatic interpolation of these scenes makes the accusation clear: by failing to act on lynching as an abstract issue, these national, international, and religious bodies are made complicit in *this particular* lynching — which, in turn, stands in for all lynchings that might have been stopped by organized intervention.

"George, the Soldier-Boy" and the Lynching Crisis as Crisis of Democracy

Jenkins notes throughout the poem that George Dorsey was a recent veteran, usually referring to him by the epithet "George, the Soldier-Boy." In one passage, he writes that George, having just "returned from Honorable Service overseas,"

Where, in Africa and Italy, along with many others of your group,

Had stopped enemy bullets which were being aimed at the very hearts of those who have now overpowered and dispatched you—

At the very hearts of them, and the other High Priests and Lords and Masters of America. (*"Incident"* 171-3)

[41] The spiritual chorus's comment, a line from "Heaven, Heaven," is especially pointed here: "*('Everybody talkin' 'bout heaven ain't goin' there—')"* (*"Incident"* 168).

Dorsey personally had served in the Pacific rather than Europe or Africa, but here, he stands in synecdochically for all African-American soldiers and the betrayal they faced in their homeland. Though they had been expected to give their lives to protect and uphold an ideal of America — and, by extension, the liberty and egalitarianism America itself was meant to protect and uphold — in reality, the nation protected and upheld by that service was ruled by an order of white supremacy that excluded those same soldiers from its promises. This was a grievance of many anti-lynching activists from the first World War on; this atmosphere of wartime and post-war patriotism was, if anything, even more intense in the World War II era than in that of World War I, and George Dorsey's own veteran status brought that deep betrayal very close to home.

As Armstrong discusses, the idea of the lynching epidemic as failure of and crisis for American democracy had been common for decades; the argument ran that lynching — like slavery, segregation, or other institutional (or de facto institutional) structures of African-American subjugation — represented yet another instance of America's failure to extend its democratic promise to all its citizens. With respect to lynching in particular, however, the idea that African Americans were not being accorded their rights as *Americans* had specific and serious legal implications. According to Wexler, federal investigation and prosecution of lynchings was stymied by the fact that simple murder was considered a state crime — and, until 1939, the federal government "had claimed that jurisdictional limitation prevented it from taking any action against lynching" (107). Finally, Franklin D. Roosevelt created a Civil Rights Section of the federal Justice Department, and 1942 "issued a formal directive ordering the CRS to investigate all Negro deaths where the possibility of lynching existed" (Wexler 107).

Even with this mandate, however, the federal government needed to positively differentiate between lynching and murder before it could become involved in a case, which

required prosecuting lynchers for violations of specific federal civil rights statutes.[42] These statutes were difficult to enforce, and penalties for violating them were relatively light.[43] Nonetheless, the widespread failure of local governments to prosecute (or even meaningfully attempt to prosecute) lynchings set the precedent that action against lynching would have to take place at the federal level; accordingly, federal anti-lynching law was a goal for many activists. In this light, Jenkins's claim that the African Americans terrorized by lynching had been failed specifically as *Americans* had far more than just rhetorical weight.

Additionally, for many anti-lynching activists, the lynching crisis presented a more existential threat to democracy itself — and interestingly, this concept was a cornerstone of arguments from anti-lynching activists who called for a more faithful *adherence* to American democracy (as a good but imperfectly realized ideal) as well as those who called for the wholesale *disestablishment* of American democracy (as a failed and permanently discredited system).[44] During the same period, however, figures on the more radical Left interpreted lynching as not only a "national shame," but "evidence of how the nation had failed blacks and proof that they had legitimate excuse to demand a new, better one of their own" (Armstrong 123). This had, in fact, been an explicit plank of the Comintern since its 1928 "Resolution on the Negro Question in the United States," and its 1930 followup, which further clarified the Comintern's position that African Americans constituted an "oppressed nation" with the right to

[42] Wexler writes that the first of these statutes, Section 51 of Title 18 of the United States Code, "gave the federal government jurisdiction in a lynching only if the victim was lynched while in the process of, or because of, his or her 'free exercise or enjoyment' of a federal right"; the Fourteenth Amendment, though, upon which this statute's authority rested, guaranteed "a person's right to life and liberty only against infringement by the state—not by a private individual" (108). The second statute, Section 52 of Title 18, covered only cases in which a public officer was involved in the lynching.

[43] According to Wexler, violations of Section 51 could incur "a fine of no more than $5000, and a prison term of no more than ten years"; violations of Section 52 meant "a fine of no more than $1000, or imprisonment of less than a year, or both" (108).

[44] Armstrong cites James Weldon Johnson's anti-lynching speeches and editorials in the 1910s as one example of the former. Johnson's 1914 editorial "Lawlessness in the United States" described America's need "to humble itself before God" and "stop some of its loud boastings about humanity and democracy," and above all for "those who love America" to end the lynching crisis (quoted in Armstrong 124).

revolt. Several points of these resolutions track closely with the larger political points of *The "Incident" at Monroe,* particularly those voiced in poem's more explicitly polemical late sections: that lynching, like other forms of racial terror and subjugation, was the product of class exploitation and inequitable distribution of resources; that African-Americans and Africans alike were oppressed by white capitalist imperialism; and that organizing black labor, and allowing black labor a voice in major unions, would be essential to ending discrimination.

Was Jenkins a Communist? It is hard to know, but he certainly had leftist sympathies: *Trumpet in the New Moon* and *The "Incident" at Monroe* both explicitly promote labor organization and solidarity within the working class (and *"Incident,"* which contains an ambiguously charged reference to Marx, also advocates elements of socialism), though he does not call for revolution. (In fact, later in *"Incident,"* he explicitly disavows the idea of an uprising, but he does so with an air of foregone conclusion, as though it were an obvious impossibility rather than a course of action to be urgently warned against.)

There is no question in *Trumpet in the New Moon* or *The "Incident" at Monroe* that so-called democracy has, in practice, failed to be ideally democratic. It is clear throughout both poems, however, that Jenkins identifies powerfully with both America and the egalitarian ideal for which it (ought to) stand — and presumes that his readers, black or white, do, too. This, in fact, is precisely what gives the poems their jeremiadic urgency: in their get-right rhetoric, they press the country to stop its hypocrisy and adhere more faithfully to founding principles. For that reason, the reckoning Jenkins calls for — like abolition and official enfranchisement before it — is, functionally, a *change* in course for America in practice, yet also a *correction* in course for democracy as guiding ideal. By that argument, true civil rights for nonwhite citizens would

represent a more perfect fulfillment of that ideal; indeed, are almost inevitable, if not unfairly and undemocratically obstructed.

For Jenkins, however, as for many others, that promise was significant even in the breach — it remained, as the Omni-American critic Albert Murray put it later, "something to appeal to" — and, endowed by that promise with the right to speak up, Jenkins assumes something of a civic mantle in pointing out the risks of its desertion. At the end of the first section, he envisions a scene in which a coalition of all races and classes rises in unison and announces that the lynching marks the "Day of Decision" when America will either right itself or, "by a continuation of such performances as this '*Lurid Incident at the Bridge'* ... fall victim of the Malignant Disease which overtook other Great Empires" (*"Incident"* 212, 216-7). When America functions as a democracy, it is differentiated from earlier nations; when it does not function as a democracy, however, it is functionally the same as any other nation that sustains itself on the exclusion or subjugation of others. A nation of this kind can be effective, but can only remain strong for so long, particularly once it overextends itself into an empire. Jenkins suggests that, if the United States does not correct its course, it could easily fall prey to the same fate. This idea will be taken up in more detail in the next long part of the poem.

Jenkins's Dream Vision: The Congress Convenes

In the second part of the poem, subtitled "A Vision," Jenkins sees a "Congress of the Darker Nations"[45] gather at the site of the lynching to pass judgment on the events and the

[45] "Darker nations" and "darker races" were favorite phrases of W. E. B. Du Bois; they appear, for example, in *The Crisis*'s subtitle *A Record of the Darker Races* and in 1920's *Darkwater* ("If the uplift of mankind must be done by men, then the destinies of this world will rest ultimately in the hands of darker nations") (507). Jenkins's phrase "Congress of the Darker Nations" particularly echoes Du Bois's 1900 address to the first Pan-African Convention ("[T]here has been assembled a congress of men and women of African blood … certainly the world's history, both ancient and modern, has given many instances of no despicable ability and capacity among the blackest races of men … the modern world must remember that in this age when the ends of the world are being brought so near together the millions of black men in Africa, America and the Islands of the Sea, not to speak of the brown and yellow myriads elsewhere, are bound to have a great influence upon the world in the future") and the 1928 fantastic novel

corrupt system that allowed them to happen. Jenkins as poet narrates the introductory or framing sections of both halves of the poem, and preserves the continuity between them — although here, his lines change from Whitmanian-Sandburgian free verse to blank verse, which amplifies the mystic seriousness of the scene he describes. Most of this section, however, is spoken by two delegates from the Congress, whose lines are largely free verse; these speeches are occasionally intercut with brief prose reports or editorials, continuing both the collaged effect and the juxtaposition of documentary with visionary material that shape the poem as a whole. Jenkins's narration begins:

> While standing in a daze of fascination
>
> Upon this spot made horrible forever
>
> By all that happened here in one brief hour—
>
> One hour fraught with direful consequences—
>
> I had a strange—a most uncanny vision … (*"Incident"* 223-230)

Jenkins sees a "massive amphitheater … spreading through the forest" — as throughout, the poem remains fixed at the site of the lynching — and a "great procession … pressing hard from all directions / Till every balcony was overflowing" (*"Incident"* 235-38). The ghostly visitors have come from around the world; "Cuba, Egypt, India and China; / The lower Mississippi and the Congo— / Brazil and Burma, Hindustan and Haiti … Trinidad, Hawaii and Mongolia" are all represented (*"Incident"* 239-42). Jenkins writes:

> It was not difficult at once to reckon
>
> This was a Meeting of the Darker Races;

Dark Princess ("It was a mighty revelation, and it culminated fittingly in Egypt, where in a great hall of the old university hung with rugs to keep out both the eavesdropped and the light, the first great congress of the darker nations met under the presidency of Zahgul Pasha") (90, 247).

This was a Congress of the Darker Nations

Convened to hear the white man tell his story;

Convened to hear the white man's explanation

Regarding this Revolting Desecration. (*"Incident"* 239-250)

In the first half of the poem, Jenkins proposed that the tragedy of the lynching would be visible on a metaphorical world stage, where the horror would be visible for the reckoning of all; here, he imagines the site of the lynching as an actual stage where delegates from around the world have come to pass judgment. As the rest of the poem will make clear, the "white man" stands in not only for the killers, but for the international system of white supremacy and imperialism that enabled them. The Congress derives its authority to pass that judgment not only because the white man's treatment of the darker nations is the limit case of his purported "Christian" or "democratic" ideals, but because, Jenkins suggests, their civilizations have a seniority over the ascendency of his; while currently politically disempowered, Jenkins suggests that these darker nations will endure past the height of the white man's powers, and as such, have a perspective on that power that he does not.

As the Congress — and Jenkins — turn their attention to the stage, the poem makes its most direct description of the scene of the lynching itself, describing the damage to the victims' bodies as well as the surrounding landscape (the scene is accurate to reports corroborated by Wexler):

And now I saw the curtain slowly rising,

While on the darkened stage a dim light flickered,

And faintly by some mystery of magic

Was brought upon that stage this very forest.

> And as the stage grew brighter still and brighter,
> Until the grass and leaves were plain as daylight,
> There lay you Children *Roped and Tied together*
> *Precisely as the Lynching Mob had left you!*
> Precisely, with each raw disfiguration,
> Each ugly wound, each stained and shredded garment,
> Each punctured tree, and mark of final struggle—
> I never saw a more unholy picture… (*"Incident"* 253-264)

Interestingly, the poem's only explicit description of the bodies occurs when the poem is most removed from earthly realism. This shockingly "real" image is surrounded entirely by the imagined setting of the dream Congress; for that reason, unlike the collaged- or montaged-in elements in the first section, Jenkins is able to surround it with the unifying narrative of the vision. To that audience, the image of the bodies — at least within the fiction of the poem — cannot signify racist triumph except as tragedy, nor can that image threaten the delegates directly (though the delegates recognize and grieve the threat); it also cannot attract the voyeuristic curiosity of disrespectful onlookers. Within that controlled fiction, Jenkins has effectively revealed the image of the lynching in a rhetorically "pure" setting, to an imagined audience who can only respond as he intends.

Is such a pure reception scenario actually possible? Probably not; certainly Jenkins's creation of that scenario within the poem cannot necessarily create the same conditions for the reader. Once the lynching is enacted, the bodies of the victims become, in a grim sense, symbolic of the power of the lynchers; anti-lynching activists who reproduce images or descriptions of those bodies can, at most, attempt to recast the significance of that symbol to one of tragedy

rather than triumph, but once the bodies are made symbols, they cannot be made unsymbolic, any more than the victims can be brought back to life. What Jenkins endeavors to do in this poem — as mediators from the lynchers and souvenir-pickers to the funeral director, reporters, and activists did from the moment of the incident onward — is recast the symbol. And, in this ethereal symposium, Jenkins has summoned an audience who will respond to that image in precisely the hoped-for, appropriate way:

> A cry, a moaning sigh, a gasp of anguish
> Rose from that concourse looking on in horror,
> As there they sat incredulous, astounded,
> Transfixed and speechless at the Revelation! (*"Incident"* 265-268)

Following this stunned silence, a member of the Congress identified as "a dusky Son of Thunder" rises "to speak the feelings of the people" (*"Incident"* 271-2). Breaking with Jenkins's blank verse, he says:

> "I come (So have we all) with the expectant eyes of passionate pilgrims,
> "Keen with ardent desire to behold the New Freedoms in this Democratic Canaan.
> "But what is this unbelievable spectacle now drawing to sharp focus before us,
> "Surpassing in horror any descent of the imagination into Dante's or John Milton's Hell! (*"Incident"* 275-8)

The representative from the actual promised land has come to evaluate the claims of the metaphorical promised land, and he has found their fulfillment wanting. Apparently familiar with 20th-century American politics, he remarks, "'Is this the Native Land of Wendell Wilkie! / 'The Country gave the Nations Henry Wallace! / 'Is this the Country nurtured Lady Roosevelt— / 'The Land where her Illustrious Mate lies buried?" (*"Incident"* 279-282).

While the poem repeatedly warns of a reckoning to come, the Son of Thunder's speech is probably its most overt moment of dark prophecy; in it, the suggestion is raised again that America's failure to extend its democratic promise to nonwhites is not only a moral crisis, but contains the seeds of the country's eventual downfall:

> "No darkly worded hint; no threat to offer—
>
> "We have no battleships, no standing armies—
>
> "We only know that Time, the Great Avenger,
>
> "Will not permit one Race to Rule Forever.
>
> "The World is old but will become much older—
>
> "There was a time when you were not so mighty.
>
> "Some day outlandish Seeds of Subtile Power
>
> "May spring to deadly life and fateful flower.
>
> "Then you may need the sons of these dead victims
>
> "Whom you have treated here like so much cattle;
>
> "And Loyal Hearts beneath their dusky bosoms. (*"Incident"* 287-298)

Here, the possibility of an uprising from within is hinted at, but I think the Son of Thunder's disavowal of the idea as not viable is sincere, not an instance of protesting too much; the real risk, as lines 295-98 indicate, is that a lack of national unity now will serve the country very poorly when crisis comes — or, in other words, that an idea of "America" that included only white Americans would function not as an adaptable, resilient democracy, but as a brittle nation or empire. The Son of Thunder's judgment is most pointed, however, in this last four lines of his speech: "'If German attitude to helpless peoples / 'Provides the pattern for this present action, / 'Then God in His Kind Providence have mercy / 'Upon the unborn history before you."

(*"Incident"* 399-302). Not only is the comparison to Nazi Germany sure to have a visceral effect on any American reading this poem in 1948 (with the memory of Nazi atrocities so fresh, and the total desolation of postwar Germany so present), but it also suggests that if America does not change its course significantly, such a downfall would not only be *possible,* but — in a profound moral and karmic sense — *deserved.*

The "Final Voice" Speaks: The Poet-Prophet's Revelation

The Final Voice is not explicitly identified (or even embodied), but acts as both a senior member of the Congress and a kind of godlike presence. It is, on the one hand, an earthly, primal Father Africa (its speech to America begins "Africa salutes you across the centuries of an Immemorial Past") who watches from the continent and laments the slaughter of his "own Blood-Children" there and around the world, but simultaneously a cosmic overseer, with the omniscience and judgmental authority of the Christian God. This is the surest, most authoritative voice within the poem, and the one who delivers the poem's sharpest political polemics as well as its heaviest moral indictments; it speaks for 174 all-but-uninterrupted lines — nearly two-thirds of "A Vision" and a little more than a third of the entire poem.

By its account, "the Machine" and the unprecedented excesses of entrepreneurial capitalism it enabled are squarely to blame for the violence at Monroe (as, indeed, for the unprecedentedly massive violence of the 20th century in general). It is less, however, that the machine itself is evil than that it serves as a temptation to evil, and also enables abuses on a global scale, as "these same Machines could create for you a blossoming Eden of Permanent Prosperity" — but "because you are greedy and selfish, notwithstanding your great knowledge of Science," these resources are not allocated justly and, as a result, "Slumps and Depressions that

witch-ride your Booms and Inflations," and "Mass Unemployment … follows your Seasons of Plenty" (*"Incident"* 321, 323, 325-6).

Like the Son of Thunder before, the Final Voice then shifts from general ideological critique to specific commentary on American political figures, saying "'Denounce, if you care, the All-Frowning Czar of the Unions of Soft Coal Miners, / 'Say, if you wish he is very conceited and dangerous and highly ambitious" — almost certainly a reference to the labor leader John L. Lewis, whose severe appearance was frequently caricatured, and who was widely criticized during the 1940s for conducting coal strikes during the war (*"Incident"* 336-7). The Voice (and, implictly, Jenkins) does not take a position on whether he is, in fact, conceited and dangerous; what is clear is that these criticisms are missing the more important point: "'So long as the Negro is forced to compete with unfriendly White Union Labor, / 'So long as White Labor considers Black Labor a Threat and a Menace, / 'Such 'incidents' likely will follow in one savage form or another" (*"Incident"* 338-43)

Cooperation between black and white labor had been a concern of Jenkins at least as early as his involvement with NAPE in the 1910s, and a concern of his poetry at least as early as *Trumpet in the New Moon*; here, though, he goes on to argue that disunity both within and between classes is at the root of the national and international crisis. Conflict and violence, Jenkins argues, will always follow economic oppression — and, likewise, economic oppression will persist as long as disunity and violence impede the understanding and collective action that could end it. For the Voice as for Jenkins, though, this collective action is cooperative rather than revolutionary, and grounded in a desire to more closely achieve the ideal of democracy rather than replace or overthrow it: America could "resolve this Problem" and "give the World a much-needed Example of Progressive Democracy in Action" if it allocated "a tiny fraction of the Time

and Thought and Money" it had devoted to atomic warfare to solving global problems of poverty and suffering (*"Incident"* 344-6). It is at this point that the poem begins to incorporate short prose reports or editorials on economic inequality and capitalist abuses around the world, set apart from the Final Voice's speech with indentation and parentheses.

The rest of the Final Voice's speech largely concerns the history of colonial exploitation in Africa; several passages follow the pattern of a hard-earned, personally-witnessed litany of civilization of conquest over the centuries. The Voice and its children have suffered, and are suffering, under these empires, but the Voice has also seen multiple empires rise and fall, and speaks with the perspective of ages as it reports on the current state of transition. Nevertheless, despite having seen and endured it all before, the Voice cannot remain silent on imperial abuses, lamenting the suffering of subjugated people and criticizing the colonizers:

> "But O You Generation of Money-Kings who ride in glittering chariots, swank and air-borne,
>
> "Wheeled with the silent equivalent of the blood and sweat of the exploited—
>
> "Your streets are all but paved with the life-blood of dark native millions;
>
> "And your coffers groan with guilty gold extorted by much under-feeding.
>
> (*"Incident"* 403-6)

The pain the "Generation of Money Kings" inflicts is silently hidden in the riches the abuses fund, just as the glory and success of the United States was also won on the backs of black labor. This was a central tenet of *Trumpet in the New Moon,* which urged white Americans to "remember the service" black Americans rendered in the construction of that country. Here, Jenkins places that exploitation in a context of global capitalist excesses and exploitation of subjugated people, and suggests that its violent results have been much the same worldwide:

> "Sing of 'Dollar Diplomacy'—'Dollar Imperialism' that undermines the foundations of 'One World' Idealism—
>
> . . . . . .
>
> "And Sing, O Sing, of Markets—Markets at any Price—Markets at the Point of Bayonets—at the risk of Consistency and Goodwill—
>
> "Glutted Markets—Dwindling Markets—Bread Lines—Hard Times—
>
> "And the Group Discrimination—Class Hate—Race Hate that intensifies as Bread decreases—
>
> "Sing also of 'Columbian Violence'—'Ku Klux Activities'—'Terror' and the 'Reign of the Demogogue'—
>
> "Sing finally of 'the Incident at Monroe'—'the Outbreak at Detroit'—the Incident at Mukden—the March on Poland—
>
> "The March on Paris—the Holocaust of War—The Blood-Bath of Humanity, and World Conflagration! (*"Incident"* 411-420)

All these woes, abroad as in Monroe ("[a]ll of a Piece from the same Weave of Cloth—all of a Part of the same Complex Pattern") originate in the unprecedented capitalist and imperialist excesses made possible by industrialization, (*"Incident"* 421).

But even as the Final Voice's speech broadens the scope of the poem, it also remains fixed at the *site* of the poem, and the Moore's Ford lynching in particular comes to signify not only the lynching crisis in America, but the entire pattern of 20th-century violence and abuse of which it is a part. Monroe thus becomes a reckoning place not only for America, but for the world at large. As the Final Voice concludes, it fixes the poem once and for all in Monroe, declaring it once more as the place of reckoning for all the last several centuries' ills:

> "What better Time and Place than Here and Now, in God's Name and Presence Highly to Resolve—
>
> "Here in this grove, with these dead, by this River and this Bridge—
>
> . . . . . .
>
> "Herein lies the Wisdom distilled from all Experience;
>
> "Herein can Russia, Germany, America and every Race and Nation
>
> "Meet and agree to cease hating each other and be Friends and Brothers forever… (*"Incident"* 463-471)

Beyond general good regard and respect, though, the poem has also explicitly advocated labor organization, an end to class oppression, and a more equitable distribution of resources.[46] The poems' socialist leanings are further evidenced by the Final Voice's reference to the following catalog of thinkers:

> "Henry George[47] had a Plan; Karl Marx had a Plan; H. G. Wells had a Plan; Jesus Christ had a Plan—
>
> "It is later—much later—than you think in America;
>
> "You can make but a Single Choice at this…very…Late Hour. (*"Incident"* 424-26)

All three modern men in line 424 took issue with 19th- and 20th-century capitalism, and all three advocated alternatives for (or, at the very least, significant alterations to) that system.[48] While the

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[46] A breathless late section set entirely in italics makes clear the poem's thesis that class conflict creates discrimination, as the voice says that — while the lynch mob "*believed they were wreaking vengeance upon a group of people whom they thought they cordially hated*" — in reality, the killing was "*the vengeance of a burning hate which they bear to an intolerable, overwhelming but invisible weight from above themselves; a weight which is relentlessly crushing them down!—Down!!—DOWN!!!—into hopeless but needless POVERTY*" (*"Incident"* 472-3, emphasis in original).

[47] Edgar Webster was living in the experimental Georgist settlement of Fairhope, Alabama at the time he wrote the foreword to *Trumpet in the New Moon.*

fact that the list contains both George and Marx (and Marx and Jesus, for that matter) probably indicates that it should not be taken as a wholesale endorsement of any/all four theorists, the reference to Marx is likely a hot one in 1948. Yet the fact that it builds to, of all people, Jesus Christ lends all four a serious credibility within the poem. Above all, it indicates that smart and serious people have been taking these problems seriously, and that a world on the wrong track should heed them.

[48] While their proposed solutions differed significantly, the 19th-century philosopher-economists George and Marx both saw grave problems with the inequality and instability of contemporary capitalism, and both advocated moving in the direction of socialism (albeit to different degrees); likewise, H. G. Wells advocated adopting elements of socialism in his 1928 book *The Way the World Is Going.* The intended significance of Jesus Christ is harder to place (as the poem both points out and evinces, "Christian" principles have been cited for any number of contradictory purposes over time), but given the context, it seems likely that Jenkins is thinking of Jesus's injunctions in the Gospels to divide wealth among the poor and avoid storing up treasures on earth (see, for example, Luke 12:33, Matthew 6:19, or Matthew 16:26/Luke 9:25, which is paraphrased directly in line 461 of the poem).

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Throughout the second half of *The "Incident" at Monroe,* the quasi-divine voices of the Congress reinforce the moral and political injunctions Jenkins presents in his own voice in *"Incident," Trumpet in the New Moon,* and elsewhere in his writing. While these voices carry transcendent authority within the narrative of the poem, Jenkins's framing of the poem as a prophetic vision also serves to grant him, the poet, another kind of authority as the poet-prophet who delivers the revelation. In a section criticizing English and American indifference to the Italo-Ethiopian War, the Final Voice says:

> "But O how silent you were, you Christian Peoples of England and America;
>
> "And O how silent regarding this 'Incident' here at Monroe!
>
> "Will you be silent forever?
>
> "Will the truth of these things be suppressed for all time? (*"Incident"* 435-39)

Yet by writing "the truth of these things" in the poem, Jenkins is, in a sense, answering the call he himself has made in that same poem: even as the poem describes the urgent need for a prophet, the poem itself comes forward as the poet-prophet's message to the world. Similarly, the Final Voice condemns America's failure to listen to those who warned that it was on the wrong path:

> "Already you have Stoned and Silenced, and Driven into the Wilderness,
>
> "All those who preached the Doctrine of Progress, Peace and Plenty;

> "Already witch-hunters are riding herd out of the Entrenched Citadels of Reaction,
>
> "While the hounds in full cry, press viciously upon the heels of Fleeing Prophets. (*"Incident"* 380-83)

Again, by placing these words in the mouth of a godlike figure within his visionary poem, Jenkins places himself in that line of prophets — though he knows, too, that his reception is yet uncertain.

Indeed, *The "Incident" at Monroe* is the culmination of Jenkins's career-long work — both in and out of the poems themselves — to assert himself as a public poet and prophet of democracy in the style of Whitman and his descendants. Jenkins's presentation of *The "Incident" at Monroe* (and, to a lesser extent, *Trumpet in the New Moon*) as prophecies of a sort is inextricably connected to his presentation of himself as prophet — which is, in turn, inextricably connected to his presentation of himself as a public poet in the distinctly American populist-prophet mode.

In the case of Jenkins's jeremiadic long poems, however, not only was it necessary for him to fashion himself as a public poet-prophet in order to *write* the poems, but his assertion as such becomes, in itself, a vital point of those poems' arguments. In appealing to America's democratic potential — which is deeply bound to its guarantee of free speech and self-determination — he derives the authority to speak against America's violation of that potential and denial of those rights. He seizes the promise in order to denounce the non-fulfillment of the promise, and that gesture becomes part of the work in its own right.

Jenkins's poetry — complex, fascinating, and embedded in a democratic-prophetic tradition of American public poetry that both descends from Whitman and continually responds

to or revises him — deserves a second, or perhaps a first, look. Apart from Woodson's work on *Trumpet in the New Moon,* Jenkins's writing has been paid almost no attention by critics, and his publications remain rare and out of print. Furthermore, Jenkins himself is an intriguing figure, on whom more research is needed. This thesis has been a preliminary effort, but I hope that I have presented a useful overview of Jenkins's life and work, as well as the qualities that make them worthy of renewed attention.

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