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# NORTH TEXAS'S BLACK ART AND LITERATURE DURING THE 1920S AND 1930S

## "The Current Is Much Stronger"

*Michael Phillips*

Dominated by bankers and realtors with limited exposure to the urban culture of metropolises such as New York and Paris, for much of the twentieth century white Dallas held a philistine reputation regarding art. "I'll support the damned opera if I don't have to listen to it," Dallas Mayor R. L. Thornton once famously said in the 1950s. The ruling business clique saw paintings and sculptures as mere adornments to the city, like costume jewelry, not enterprises worthy in and of themselves. Dallas's white artists fled the city to find appreciation and an audience. Meanwhile, white art patrons in Dallas expected the music and paintings they subsidized to be non-controversial and apolitical. In 1955, right-wing pressure from groups such as the Public Affairs Luncheon Club forced The Dallas Museum of Fine Arts to remove works by supposedly leftist painters such as Diego Rivera and Pablo Picasso.

In contrast, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, African American art in Dallas became a passionate cause and was, by design, political and provocative. Unlike New York's Harlem neighborhood, Dallas served as a transit point for black authors, sculptors and kindred spirits. The important figures of Dallas's black art scene passed through the city but generally put down roots elsewhere. Many, particularly blues performers, lived perpetually on the road. This gave many of the big players in Dallas's artistic community a working-class lifestyle, bringing them closer to the down-and-out drifters, fighters and rebels they wrote and sang about. Dallas—and more broadly North Texas—is important to this time period: because of its status as a destination for rural African Americans seeking higher-paying city jobs in the 1920s and 1930s; for the blues music created there in this time period; and for the impact on American literature of writers such as John Mason Brewer and Melvin Tolson after their sojourns in the region.

During the Harlem Renaissance period, African Americans in Dallas and across North and Central Texas searched for their cultural roots in Africa and celebrated what they considered authentic black culture among field hands, the urban poor, janitors, maids, and petty criminals seeking a niche in which they could survive. African American women's clubs such as the Phillis Wheatley Art Club, Royal Arts Club, the Cecelian Choral Club and the Eady Mary Art and Culture Club proliferated in the 1920s and 1930s and stimulated discussion of poetry, novels and paintings. The community heatedly debated issues in art, with an African American weekly newspaper, the *Dallas Express*, serving as the forum for these passionate exchanges.

On March 15, 1919 the *Express* ran a column "Devoted To Colored Race Literature And Dedicated To Those Who Are Providing It," by Philadelphia writer M. G. Duggars. The column reveals the range of issues the black arts community engaged in during this period. In rapid fashion, Duggars praises black newspapers such as *The Philadelphia Tribune* that used "great discretion" in accepting advertisements from companies selling hair straighteners and skin-bleaching treatments aimed at giving African Americans a "whiter" appearance. (Ironically, the *Dallas Express* would be filled with such ads for decades.) Insisting that whites show African Americans respect, Duggars advised his readers to avoid any newspaper that "prints 'Negro' without using a capital 'N.' Why not take a race paper and escape the indignity[?]" Through columns such as Duggars's, the *Dallas Express* not only made its audience aware of Harlem Renaissance writers such as Langston Hughes but also raised the readership's awareness of the political implications for their works and the responsibility all prominent African Americans and black institutions had towards "racial uplift."

The *Express* gave news space to generally unpublished poets, some of whom urged readers to preserve a respect for the black cultural past. An intense exchange in North and Central Texas developed between traditionalists and modernizers. One contributor to the *Express*, Sarah Collin Fernadis, attacked attempts to fuse black gospel songs from the slave era with modern jazz rhythms. The gospel "freedom songs" mixed faith in God's justice with demands for political freedom in the here-and-now, but in a poem published by the *Express* on January 20, 1923, Fernadis feared that reframing such powerful lyrics in a jazz setting would compromise the dignity of the older material:

So, they've sought a new sensation  
 [in] this modern jazz craze  
 In the ruthless syncopation of  
 Those sweet old plaintive lays  
 That the souls of their forefathers  
 'neath affliction's heavy rod  
 coined from bitterness of sorrow  
 as they reach for touch with God . . .