



DOROTHY VENA JOHNSON

Collected Poems

POETRY, EDUCATION, AND THE LEAGUE OF ALLIED ARTS

EXTREMES AND MODERATIONS:
EARLY SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA POETRY

A TEXT-TECH PAPERS PROJECT

Extremes and Moderations

Early Southern California Poetry

Extremes and Moderations is a Text-Tech Papers project devoted to recovering poetry written, published, and circulated in Los Angeles and Southern California. Each volume brings neglected books and poems back into view through carefully prepared texts, archival images, biographical context, and a clear record of the surviving sources.

Edited by Brian Kim Stefans

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A Critical Reading Edition

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ARCHIVAL IMAGES

Portrait, civic profile, and anthology biography

These images establish Johnson's public face and the documentary record of her work. The directory profile is reproduced as a complete clipping so its photograph and text remain together.

**MRS. DOROTHY
VENA JOHNSON,**

president of the Allied Arts League, an outgrowth of the Promotion Committee of the New Negro Theatre. Its purpose is to broaden the interests of the group by promoting Negro Art and Culture. Its presentations have included



**Mrs. Dorothy V.
Johnson**

ed talented unknown Negro artists as well as those of renown in the field of drama, music, poetry and art. Their Art Exhibits have been by Negro and White artists on Negro Life, and free benefit art programs have been given for children. This year the program will be extended to include war programs. Mrs. Johnson is a teacher in the Los Angeles Public Schools; she has received her MS Degree from USC. Her hobby is writing poetry. Her verse has appeared in Anthologies and other publications. 637 E. Vernon.

Dorothy Vena Johnson's complete illustrated profile in The Official Negro Directory and Classified Buyers Guide, 1942-43, p. 233. The clipping identifies her as president of the Allied Arts League, a Los Angeles public-school teacher, and a poet published in anthologies and other venues.

travels have carried him to four of the continents, not to mention a number of islands. He has won a hatful of prizes and awards and fellowships, and he has written moving picture scenarios, radio scripts, song lyrics and successful stage plays. His published books include *The Weary Blues*, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, *The Dreamkeeper*, *Shakespeare in Harlem*, collections of poetry, and *Not Without Laughter*, *The Ways of White Folks* and *The Big Sea*, fiction and autobiography. He is co-author with Arna Bon-temps of *Popo and Fifina: Children of Haiti*. Langston Hughes is a full-time poet. Even his letters and notes are likely to be in verse—the one that accompanied a group of poems to this anthology, for example:

Some of these for children,
And some for older fry.
You may take your choice
Since you're as old as I.

DOROTHY VENA JOHNSON is a public schoolteacher in Los Angeles, the city in which she was born. In addition to her regular class work she teaches Journalism and Creative Poetry to various grades. Almost every issue of *Nuggets*, the bi-monthly magazine of poetry by and for children, carries the contributions of several of her pupils. Her own poems have appeared in anthologies. She was educated in Los Angeles, graduating from the University of Southern California and from Teachers' College of U. C. L. A.

FENTON JOHNSON (1888-) has lived most of his life in Chicago, the city of his birth. There he attended public schools and the University of Chicago. After college he taught school one year before turning to the literary activities that have occupied him ever since. During this time he has written for the stage of the old Pekin Theatre of Chi-

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Contributor biographies in Golden Slippers (1941), p. 210. Johnson's paragraph records her Los Angeles birth, classroom teaching of journalism and creative poetry, pupils' publication in Nuggets, anthology appearances, and USC/UCLA education.

INTRODUCTION

Poet, teacher, and builder of Black Los Angeles arts institutions

Dorothy Vena Johnson was a native Black Angeleno whose life joined poetry, public education, and cultural organizing. Her compact surviving poems move from the Scottsboro case and the moral absurdity of bigotry to seashells, stars, prayer, war memory, and the troubled pastoral vision of “Green Valley.” As a Los Angeles teacher and later a secondary-school principal, she taught journalism and creative poetry and helped pupils publish in *Nuggets*. As co-founder and first president of the League of Allied Arts, she helped build a durable platform for Black writers, artists, musicians, dancers, and students. This edition gathers every Johnson poem for which a complete text is presently recoverable, documents three additional verified anthology poems whose pages remain unavailable for responsible resetting, and records the archival locations most likely to enlarge the corpus.

Stage I | Native Los Angeles, family, and education, 1898–1937

Dorothy Vena was born in Los Angeles on 7 May 1898 to James M. Vena and Namie Plumb Vena, whose surname also appears in records as Plum. Her father worked as a postal clerk and editor and belonged to the founding generation of the Los Angeles branch of the NAACP. Johnson therefore grew up within an early Black Los Angeles civic culture in which newspaper work, education, racial justice, and institution building reinforced one another. Later biographical research reports that her schooling began in a convent. She graduated from the University of Southern California and continued professional study at the Teachers College at UCLA; a 1942 promotional directory assigns her an M.S. from USC, while the 1941 *Golden Slippers* biography and later scholarship support the safer description of a USC graduate with further teachers-college training at UCLA.

Before 1932 she married attorney Ivan Johnson III. A primary marriage certificate has not yet been inspected, but the identification is supported in later biographical work. The 1942 *Official Negro Directory* places the couple at 637 East Vernon Avenue, anchoring Johnson in the Central Avenue–Vernon cultural geography that would remain central to her public work. The surviving record does not yet support confident claims about siblings, earlier household addresses, or the exact chronology of her marriage, and this edition does not fill those gaps by inference.

Johnson entered the Los Angeles public schools and remained in the system for more than forty years. The contributor note in *Golden Slippers* describes a classroom practice extending beyond ordinary instruction: she taught journalism and creative poetry to several grades, and pupils under her direction appeared frequently in *Nuggets*, a bimonthly magazine of poetry by and for children. In 1936 she brought an Ascot Elementary class to Dycer Airport to meet pioneering Black aviator William J. Powell. The visit shows how she made contemporary Black accomplishment part of the curriculum and connected classroom learning to the wider civic world.

Stage II | Poetry and the League of Allied Arts, 1938–1948

Johnson's confirmed publication record begins in Beatrice M. Murphy's *Negro Voices* (1938) with "Ode to Justice," "Crystal Shreds," and "Jerked to God." The first addresses the Scottsboro Boys and exposes the paralysis of justice where faith and duty have been put to sleep; the other two compress rain, crown, tree, rope, headline, and Christian promise into brief devotional structures. Arna Bontemps selected "Palace" and "Twinkling Gown" for *Golden Slippers* (1941). Those poems speak to young readers through seashell echoes and a personified evening star without surrendering Johnson's characteristic economy.

In 1939 Johnson and Juanita Ellsworth Miller helped organize support for Langston Hughes when racism obstructed a Los Angeles production of *Don't You Want to Be Free?* Their promotion committee broadened into the League of Allied Arts, which Johnson co-founded and served as first president for more than twenty-five years, approximately 1939–1965. The League sponsored scholarships, exhibitions, theater, readings, music, dance, and benefits. Under

Johnson it helped present work by Alice Taylor Gafford, Aaron Douglas, and Jacob Lawrence; supported the Lester Horton Dance School, Our Authors Study Club, and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund; and later paired Hughes with the Buddy Collette Quintet in a poetry-and-jazz program.

The 1942 *Official Negro Directory* called the group the Allied Arts League and described it as an outgrowth of the New Negro Theatre promotion committee. It stressed programs for children, interracial exhibitions of art on Black life, wartime activity, and opportunities for both unknown and celebrated artists. Miriam Matthews, the pioneering Los Angeles librarian who served as League vice president, remembered Johnson not simply as a presiding officer but as a worker: when an Alice Taylor Gafford exhibition had to be installed at Vernon Branch, Johnson joined Matthews and sculptor Beulah Woodard in hanging the show. The anecdote captures the practical labor behind her cultural leadership.

Murphy's *Ebony Rhythm* (1948) printed four more Johnson poems: "Epitaph for a Bigot," "Post War Ballad," "Road to Anywhere," and "Success." "Epitaph" survives in a complete public text and condenses racial hatred into four cutting lines. The other three are securely identified by anthology contents, page references, and indexed first lines, but their complete pages remain restricted. They are documented rather than partially reconstructed in this edition.

Stage III | Educational leadership and civic recognition, 1949–1965

Johnson's educational and League careers continued together through the postwar decades. Her former pupil Dolores Ratcliffe later remembered her as an outstanding person and one of only two Black teachers at Ratcliffe's elementary school, recalling that she decided in the third grade to model herself on Johnson. By the end of her career Johnson had become principal of Garden Gate High School and was recognized as the first Black principal of a Los Angeles secondary school. That distinction should be kept separate from Bessie Bruington Burke's earlier achievement as LAUSD's first Black principal at the elementary level in 1918.

California Alpha Psi Zeta chapter of Zeta Phi Beta named Johnson its Woman of the Year in 1962. She retired from the Los Angeles city schools in

1963 after more than four decades of service, and the League's presidential roster carries her founding tenure through 1965. Her work made education, publication, exhibition, performance, and philanthropy parts of one public program: a child's poem, a library exhibition, a visiting writer, and a scholarship were all ways of enlarging the visible field of Black cultural life in Los Angeles.

Stage IV | Final poems, death, and institutional afterlife, 1966–2026

The revised 1970 edition of Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps's *The Poetry of the Negro* retained "Epitaph for a Bigot" and added "Green Valley," the latest verified Johnson poem. Its green meadow does not remain pastoral refuge: a red sunset becomes the blood of young men, a lizard summons the vision of women left alone, and a fledgling's cry recalls destitution. The poem finally imagines a pit large enough to bury ugliness, then returns to its opening valley with altered knowledge.

Johnson died in 1970 after a cerebral hemorrhage. No exact death date, obituary, burial record, or probate file has yet been located. A recent newspaper feature gave 1979 and an age of seventy-two, but that date conflicts with the 1970 date in scholarship, the League's memorial chronology, and a circa-1970 memorial recording preserved at UCLA; this edition follows the convergent 1970 evidence while leaving the exact date open. On 5 November 1970 more than five hundred friends gathered at Widney High School to honor her as an educator and a matron of the arts.

The institutions she helped shape continued to carry her name. In 1971 the Black history collection developed at Vernon Branch Library was named for Johnson after League support expanded its holdings. Garden Gate High School was renamed for her on 17 October 1980, and the League continues a Dorothy Vena Johnson scholarship or incentive award. In 2026 the approximately 2,300-item Dorothy Vena Johnson Black History Collection moved to the Baldwin Hills Branch Library, where its clippings, magazines, photographs, scholarly books, multivolume sets, and rare materials gained greater visibility. Johnson's afterlife is therefore not merely commemorative: school, library collection, scholarship, arts organization, archive, and poems continue the circuit she built among instruction and public culture.

EDITORIAL NOTE AND SOURCES

Corpus limits, source control, and reading-text policy

No sole-authored Johnson book has been located. The confirmed publication record consists of ten poems in four anthologies between 1938 and 1970. This edition prints the seven poems for which a complete text is presently recoverable and gives a separate recovery register for three additional verified poems whose complete *Ebony Rhythm* pages remain restricted.

The two poems from *Golden Slippers* are transcribed directly from the complete local scan. The 1938 poems are checked against the complete saved web witnesses and the later scholarly witness in Maureen Honey's *Shadowed Dreams*. "Epitaph for a Bigot" and "Green Valley" are checked against complete saved transcriptions. A web error in "Green Valley," "near my feat," is emended to "near my feet" and recorded in the note following the poem. Source italics, stanza divisions, punctuation, and intentional lineation are retained; no hanging indentation caused only by a narrow source page is reproduced.

The explanatory Scottsboro footnote attached to an online copy of "Ode to Justice" is not printed as part of Johnson's poem. Double hyphens used as dash substitutes are normalized to em dashes without surrounding spaces. Titles and first lines are not printed in all capitals merely because an anthology index or database records them that way.

Three restricted 1948 poems are not reconstructed from search-result fragments. Their first lines are supplied only as identifiers. Two further titles circulated in tertiary summaries remain unverified and are listed as leads rather than admitted to the corpus. The volume remains open to revision when UCLA, LAUSD, Fisk, or Baldwin Hills archival materials yield complete witnesses.

NEGRO VOICES

Anthology poems | 1938

Three poems of racial justice, devotional questioning, and compressed religious imagery from Johnson's first verified anthology appearance.

Ode to Justice

Dedicated to the Scottsboro Boys.

Lady Justice is often blind
To honor, duty, and fair play
And seems to be devoid of mind,
Reason and virtue; and some say
She seems to be both deaf and dumb,
Like barren earth when all the snow
Leaves its warm brown soul quite numb.
For buds, like Justice, will not grow
Where faith and duty lie asleep
And where you find the soul within
Is warped and stained, and buried deep
In tainted earth and vicious sin.

The soul of Justice cannot thrive
On barren soil and stay alive.

Publication. *Negro Voices: An Anthology of Contemporary Verse*, edited by Beatrice M. Murphy (New York: Henry Harrison, 1938), p. 83.

Text. Text checked against the complete saved transcription and the later witness in Maureen Honey's *Shadowed Dreams*; the explanatory web footnote about the Scottsboro case is not part of Johnson's poem.

Crystal Shreds

Have you seen the rain
Dripping
Like a silver pendant
Out of God's crown?
I have!

Does it fall unguarded by celestial muses?
Or does God weep,
And so weeping,
Release absolution
In crystal shreds
Of ethereal dew
To cleanse our souls?

Publication. *Negro Voices: An Anthology of Contemporary Verse*, edited by Beatrice M. Murphy (New York: Henry Harrison, 1938), p. 85.

Text. Text checked against the complete saved transcription and the later witness in Maureen Honey's *Shadowed Dreams*.

Jerked to God

He gave His Son
In this world of strife,
That we might have
Eternal Life.

He made a tree
To shade, to adorn—
Perfectly patterned,
Without a thorn.

A life, a tree,
A rope, a rod.
Headlines: Humans
Jerked to God.

Publication. *Negro Voices: An Anthology of Contemporary Verse*, edited by Beatrice M. Murphy (New York: Henry Harrison, 1938), p. 85.

Text. Text checked against the complete saved transcription and the later witness in Maureen Honey's *Shadowed Dreams*; the rhetorical dash after “adorn” is normalized as an em dash.

GOLDEN SLIPPERS

Anthology poems | 1941

Two poems for young readers, transcribed directly from Arna Bontemps's anthology and preserved in its original sequence.

Palace

A sea shell is a palace
Where many echoes dwell,
And when I listen to them
I know them all quite well.
They are like the ocean's roar
Where the sea shell buried deep
Learns why the sea is always salt,
And spooky shadows creep.

Publication. *Golden Slippers: An Anthology of Negro Poetry for Young Readers*, compiled by Arna Bontemps (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941), p. 179.

Text. Transcribed directly from the complete local scan; spelling, punctuation, lineation, and stanza structure follow the printed page.

Twinkling Gown

The pale dressed evening star
Puts on, when it is night,
A twinkling yellow gown
In which to shine its light.

It sparkles in the darkness
Like a firefly at play.
But soon it softly fades until
At last we see the day.

I do not really understand
Why in dark night, a star
Should gleam, and then turn dull
When dawn creeps from afar.

Publication. *Golden Slippers: An Anthology of Negro Poetry for Young Readers*, compiled by Arna Bontemps (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941), p. 185.

Text. Transcribed directly from the complete local scan; punctuation, lineation, and three-quatrain structure follow the printed page.

EBONY RHYTHM

Anthology poems | 1948

Johnson's four-poem postwar group. The complete "Epitaph for a Bigot" is printed; the remaining three titles are documented below pending full page access.

Epitaph for a Bigot

Life to the bigot is a whip
That lashes creed and laity;
Here lies the one who lost his grip
And cringed to death—a refugee.

Publication. *Ebony Rhythm: An Anthology of Contemporary Negro Verse*, edited by Beatrice M. Murphy (New York: Exposition Press, 1948), p. 91; reprinted in *The Poetry of the Negro, 1746–1970* (1970), p. 226.

Text. Text checked against the complete saved transcription; a double hyphen in that witness is normalized as an em dash without surrounding spaces.

Verified 1948 Poems Awaiting Full Pages

The following titles are securely placed in *Ebony Rhythm* but are not reset from incomplete search fragments.

Post War Ballad. First line: "If Crispus Attuck's statue." *Ebony Rhythm* (1948), p. 91.

Road to Anywhere. First line: "Defeat is not to lose." *Ebony Rhythm* (1948), p. 92.

Success. First line: "Success is like a blazing flame." *Ebony Rhythm* (1948), p. 92.

THE POETRY OF THE NEGRO

Anthology poems | 1970

The late anthology witness for “Green Valley,” printed with a transparent correction to an evident transcription error.

Green Valley

I stood in a meadow
And all I could see
Was the green valley
Surrounding me.

Then the setting sun
Burned a ghastly red:
Blood of young men
Too soon dead.

A tawny lizard
Crawled near my feet:
I visioned women
Alone, deplete.

And now and then
A fledgling cried,
Like destitute folk
On the wayside.

When I beheld
The tallest tree,
My soul expanded
Inside of me.

I wished, as I viewed
The greenest pit,
To bury ugliness
In it.

The hills were rich
With buds impearled.
The valley seemed
To engulf the world.

I stood in the meadow,
And all I could see
Was the green valley
Surrounding me.

Publication. *The Poetry of the Negro, 1746–1970*, edited by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. 227.

Text. Text checked against the complete saved transcription. Its evident error “feat” is emended to “feet,” restoring the sense and rhyme with “deplete”; the source reading is recorded here.

RECOVERY REGISTER

Verified omissions, unverified title leads, and archival priorities

Verified poems awaiting complete texts

Post War Ballad. First line: “If Crispus Attuck’s statue.” *Ebony Rhythm* (1948), p. 91.
Complete page access is required before resetting.

Road to Anywhere. First line: “Defeat is not to lose.” *Ebony Rhythm* (1948), p. 92.
Complete page access is required before resetting.

Success. First line: “Success is like a blazing flame.” *Ebony Rhythm* (1948), p. 92.
Complete page access is required before resetting.

Unverified title leads

Letter En Route Overseas. Repeated in tertiary lists, but no publication page, contents entry, or manuscript witness has been located.

Bread for Sale. Repeated in tertiary lists, but no publication page, contents entry, or manuscript witness has been located.

Archival priorities

UCLA Library Special Collections, League of Allied Arts records, Collection 1856:
Box 3, Folder 5, “Membership: Poetry, Recipes”; Box 12, Folder 1, Johnson history;
scrapbooks; clippings; and the circa-1970 memorial audio.

Los Angeles Unified School District personnel records, Garden Gate High School
records, *Los Angeles School Journal*, district publications, and surviving issues of
Nuggets.

Aaron Douglas Papers at Fisk University, including Johnson correspondence; and the
Dorothy Vena Johnson Black History Collection at Baldwin Hills Branch Library.

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Works by and substantial works about Dorothy Vena Johnson

Works by Dorothy Vena Johnson

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Colophon

Compiled from the Dorothy Vena Johnson research dossier, saved anthology and web witnesses, the complete local scan of *Golden Slippers*, the 1942 *Official Negro Directory*, and institutional records gathered in the poet's research folder, August 2026. Designed in EB Garamond at six by nine inches. The cover uses original abstract artwork prepared for this edition in the established Extremes/Green palette and geometry.