

To America

By James Weldon Johnson
1917

Florida native James Weldon Johnson (1871–1938) was a powerful and hugely influential voice for African Americans during the Harlem Renaissance. Johnson was the first African American professor to be hired at New York University. He also transformed African American education within his home state of Florida, predominantly by changing the curriculum and structuring of the Stanton school where he became principal. At one point, he even rose to prominence within the NAACP, or National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Johnson's "To America" is powerful in its message and imagery, pondering how the scarred aftermath of enslavement disfigures the notion of a unified America.

How would you have us, as we are?
Or sinking 'neath the load we bear?
Our eyes fixed forward on a star?
Or gazing empty at despair?

Rising or falling? Men or things?
With dragging pace or footsteps fleet?
Strong, willing sinews in your wings?
Or tightening chains about your feet?