

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: PLURALITY AND SYNTHESIS IN THE  
AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN EX-COLORED  
MAN

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*The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* analyses the problems of a racially divided society, refutes the premises of binary racial division, and presents strategies for overcoming societal division. This paper analyzes the employment of structural elements employed to support reception of the narrative message then demonstrates the problem statement, antithesis and synthesis in the text. Plurality is evidenced in the characters Red and Shiny who mediate binary conceptions of whiteness and blackness. The relationships formed between these characters and the narrator forms a model for alliances across the color line. The narrator's alliance seeking behavior is demonstrated and expanded upon to include mass communication through media and music as a means to achieve synthesis in American society. This thesis expands upon the previous analysis of plurality and demonstrates that Johnson's text outlines an actionable plan for a new national unity predicated on meaningful criteria to replace arbitrary racial distinctions.

PLURALITY AND SYNTHESIS IN THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN EX-COLORED MAN

by

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## Introduction

*“The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, —this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.” W.E.B. Du Bois*

This paper offers new insights and perspectives on the progressive nature of Johnson’s text and the complex elements which outline his vision for social change. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* will be read primarily as a narrative about problem solving. The text outlines a problem in society, offers a solution by educating its audience to refute the problem, and defines ways to communicate the solution to broad audiences. The core problem is, of course, racism itself and the power structures which both stem from and support racism.<sup>1</sup> Specifically the text addresses the dominant racial categories which shape American society and the underlying premises which support a binary social hierarchy. Existing critical analysis of the text explores both Johnson’s vision of a unified society and the narrator’s ultimate failure by choosing to subsist within the dominant binary scheme. Several critics discuss how the text subverts racial binaries, but tend to focus on the details of African American subject positions. However, Johnson’s text introduces complexities of white identity, national identity, politics and history which have not been fully explored in previous analysis. Furthermore, existing criticism does not link the complexity of subject positions to the text’s suggestions for intervening in the

structures which support hegemony. The narrator employs a number of techniques to intervene in dominant discourse including grass roots interpersonal relationships, positions of authority and information distribution, and the translation of experience through popular culture to reach various audiences.

This paper will build on analysis of the narrator's efforts toward defining and refuting problematic conceptions of race, also analyzing textual solutions to achieve synthesis. A Hegelian model of discourse includes three elements: thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Each of these elements are derived from Hegel's use of *Aufheben*, translated by Alexandre Kojève as *Sublation*, which bears a threefold meaning. Firstly, it is an intervention which overcomes that which is false. Secondly, it is a preservation of the essential and universal. Finally, it is an elevation to "a superior level of knowledge and of reality, and therefore of truth."<sup>2</sup> The process results in a new paradigm structured on the knowledge gained through experience and critical analysis. The text reflects all of these elements, though only the text's thesis and antithesis are regularly discussed in scholarship. The original thesis which is addressed is the social ordering of men based on imposed racial binaries. The antithesis is then the refutation of binary categories and the recognition of the complex nature of identity. Synthesis is then a national unity based on meaningful conceptions of identity which does not arbitrarily prioritize groups over one another. This paper will explore the ways Johnson's text presents a problematic ideology, a refutation of that ideology, and several methods for achieving a new societal structure.

The narrator's childhood friends Red and Shiny are mostly overlooked characters in the text, yet they present some of the most nuanced and significant deconstructions of racial binaries. Both of his friends invoke complications of dominant ideology by introducing religion, politics, nationality, literature and history into the conversation. Furthermore, the relationship between the narrator and these characters, and the narrator's role in bringing them together points toward a conception of coalition building which both subverts and breaches the color line. Both of the narrator's friends from school are integral to the narrator's early efforts to build alliances in the text. The relationships built among these characters form the basis for the narrator's attempts to form productive unions throughout his journey. The relationship formed between Red and the narrator recalls previous political alliances between abolitionists and the Irish repeal movement and gestures toward new alliances. The theme of alliances is further evidenced when the narrator brings his friends Red and Shiny, his early mediators of white and black subject positions, together to discuss the future after they graduate from school. The narrator's drive to seek out alliances continues throughout the novel. The narrator is perpetually an isolated individual, lacking a concrete sense of belonging to any particular community. His isolation and aloneness drive him to seek out various forms of alliance and identification with other people. Throughout the narrator's efforts to explore new subjects and subject positions he repeatedly considers the common ground between individuals. This search for understanding is a necessary first step in developing any relationship or alliance. Additionally, the narrator's position within the trio exceeds simple categories of white or black, opening discussion of liminal

spaces and subject positions. The ambiguity of the narrator's position in concert with the archetypes represented by his friends sets the stage for a novel which hints at the formation of new subject positions for African Americans.

The narrator consistently approaches groups and individuals with the intention of building relationships. However, the aspect of coalition building goes unrecognized in scholarship. The premise of defining and reporting on subjects for the readers benefit has overshadowed the way in which the narrator approaches and interacts with people. His interactions reflect a desire to build alliances and coalitions with each of the communities he engages. The narrator presents a model of seeking to understand those he meets and highlights positive shared traits and avenues of mutual benefit. Furthermore, the various occupations the narrator holds and the opportunities for communication they afford exemplify Johnson's vision for achieving cultural synthesis.

Breaking down the underlying premises which support racial hierarchies is a process, a step required to end racism. It is not however actionable in its own right. What is demonstrated in existing arguments is a problem statement and a method for resolution which lacks a plan of action. The narrator makes examples of several methods to communicate with groups in addition to the grass roots model of personal interaction. The narrator's position as "reader" in Jacksonville and his performance of ragtime reflect attempts to employ media and culture to reach large and diverse audiences. In Jacksonville the narrator performs the role of reader in the cigar factory, a position which allows him influence over what information is reported as well as the authority to mediate disputes. Additionally, the narrator's public performance of



ragtime music represents the use of art to share cultural experiences. Through performance, the narrator reaches diverse audiences including the elite whites in America and European countries. These efforts present the narrator with opportunities to communicate with a multitude of audiences, sharing culture and shaping opinions which compliments Johnson's view that cultural production and communication are tools to destabilize dominant racial thinking.

The structure of the text itself reflects the narrator's efforts to reach a varied readership to communicate Johnson's antithesis refuting dominant racial binaries. The façade of autobiography and the structures which support its plausible authenticity reflect the intent to reach a diverse audience while operating under societal and occupational constraints. Johnson intentionally constructed a faux autobiography predicated on miscegenation and passing to attract readers who were already willing to explore a story which violates dominant binary conventions. Johnson's position as a US ambassador when writing and first publishing the text may have influenced the text's presentation as an anonymous work, shaping the narrative and its autobiographical structure.<sup>3</sup> Several techniques are employed in the text which mirror familiar literary patterns to foster reception as an authentic autobiography. Similarly, a leitmotif of threes within the novel facilitates transmission of its message. This predominant pattern forces a reader out of a binary mindset. Conversely, the leitmotif of three exceeds its own boundaries and necessitates consideration of the multitude of communities and subject positions in the text. Finally, triangular configuration of personal relationships accords itself well to analysis of individual members as

mediators of knowledge and desires. Analysis of individual characters' meaning in relation to each other offers insight to the nuances of relationships in the text.

Each of the above points expands on what the novel is doing and how it is being done. This thesis will analyze the nuances of subject positions, the actions of the narrator, and the structure of the text to show how *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is a text which not only explores but also proposes solutions to the "race question" in America. This discussion will be broken into several parts, beginning with a brief overview of relevant literary criticism.

## Existing Criticism Relevant to this Discussion

A significant cross-section of literary criticism on *The Autobiography* focuses on the way in which race and specific categories of race are depicted and deconstructed in the novel. Authors leverage the text to evidence the ways in which this novel subverts simple conceptions of race and hegemonic binary logic. Each argument contributes to an understanding of how Johnson utilizes his narrator to explore the complexities of American subject positions and destabilize color lines.

Previous critical arguments can be broken down into a few conclusions which contribute toward my analysis of racial categories in *The Autobiography*. Lena Ahlin and Roxanna Pisiak assert that the narrator's own passing calls into question the conception of white and black, that he "demonstrates that the constructs upon which its story is based – the most important being the split between 'white' and 'black' in American – are themselves 'unreliable.'"<sup>4</sup> These arguments contribute to an understanding of how the text takes a first step in subverting binary conceptions of race through a narrator who exists in a space between binaries. Martin Favor analyzes how the text evidences multiplicity of subject positions within the conception of blackness. His analysis evidences class distinctions which further complicate limited and monolithic conceptions of race in the text. These authors also discuss how the text demonstrates the complex nature of identity, incorporating race, class and geography to demonstrate plurality within subject positions. Each of these discussion points illuminates how the text deconstructs the binary view of race, evidencing the arbitrary and constructed social concepts which inform dominant ideology. Additionally, performative aspects of identity and social power dynamics play an

integral role to this discussion through the contributions of Judith Butler. A brief survey of these few key authors and their arguments serves to outline the discourse thus far and locate a starting point for further conversation.

The narrator's ability to pass is a foundational premise of the narrative and serves as an overt subversion of a strict racial line. The narrator's passing is, in one way or another, one of the most discussed aspects of this text. However, the discussion most relevant to this paper comes from scholars who interpret the text as subverting binary racial thinking. Pisiak summarizes the premise well stating, "The racial themes and subjects of the narrative not only demonstrate the 'slipperiness' of color lines, they also deconstruct the dichotomies of white and black words, and white and black worlds."<sup>5</sup> The narrator's ease in transitioning between racial personas reveals both the performative nature of race and the existence of spaces beyond simple binary categories. Judith Butler's work on performative acts describes how social constructions are achieved through the reiteration and performance of discourses leading to an understanding of identity as the performance of a role.<sup>6</sup> Butler's work is primarily a discussion of gender roles, yet her theory also accords itself well with racial roles and is cited often in the criticism on *The Autobiography*. Pfeiffer's commentary picks up on this theory. Her work gestures toward the complexity of subject positions illustrated through the narrator's journey. Pfeiffer states that "Throughout his narrative, the Ex-Colored Man does not so much reject his blackness as he rejects the ontology of racial categories."<sup>7</sup> The narrator's performance or rejection of racial identities bespeaks both mobility and multiplicity of identity through the narrator's act of passing.

Furthermore, the narrator's passing calls white hegemony into question; passing belies the fiction of fixed, discreet and hierarchical white status. Ahlin articulates this succinctly stating, "The inability to separate the passing black person from the white person, to separate copy and original, leads to a rearticulation of what it means to be white. If we cannot tell the copy from the original, the status of the original is called into question, and the anxious guarding of the original becomes pointless."<sup>8</sup> Again the narrator's ability to inhabit different identities is doing work to destabilize racial binaries. By definition, successful passing calls into question the concept of whiteness itself. This point is notably underscored at the close of the novel when the narrator states that he is an "ordinary successful white man."<sup>9</sup> In relating that he owns a number of properties and has made four noteworthy career advancements the narrator leaves a white reader questioning whether he is "not only hidden among them, but may be hidden above them."<sup>10</sup> The narrator's status as a successful white man subverts racial hierarchies which insist that the privileged groups "most wretched members share a status higher, in certain respects, than that of the most exalted person excluded from it."<sup>11</sup>

Additional arguments reinforce the text's depiction of race as arbitrary and also edify ways in which the text demonstrates multiplicity within the binary categories. Part of what is at stake in the novel is differentiating between African American subject positions. Martin Favor's book *Authenticating Blackness* discusses how the text deconstructs binaries and introduces multiple nuanced subject positions. Favor argues the narrator's racial identification in school leads to a subsequent revelation regarding racial categories where the narrator recognizes the possibility of

multiple African American subject positions.<sup>12</sup> Throughout his work Favor evidences the multitude of subject positions in the novel which exceed the boundaries of reductive definitions of black, specifically citing the developing class differences between different African American communities in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup> Favor emphasizes that when *The Autobiography* was published, the iconic folk subject position monopolized popular American cultural ideas of authentic black subject positions. However, he discusses how inclusion in the folk identity requires certain lived experiences which serve as “defining moments in the formation of identity.”<sup>14</sup> His arguments reinforce an understanding of race as performative and that class, gender, and geography add complexity to the constructed nature of race. These points foreground *The Autobiography*’s depictions of multiple subject positions existing within African American communities.

Further arguments offer analysis on the how the text explores the formation of identity and the narrator’s fluid and accretive identity. Moving beyond binary conceptions necessitates an alternative way of understanding identity. The narrator’s journey reflects an exploration of all the factors that form an identity. The narrator explores and samples several subject positions in his quest to define his own identity. As Pfeiffer states, “Through all of his travels, and jobs, and personae, and experiences, the Ex-Colored Man is at once every one of the people he appears to be, and none of them. His only constant, essential characteristic is that he possesses no constant, essential characteristic.”<sup>15</sup> This observation overlooks the narrator’s characteristic alienation and search for community even as it points toward a fluid and accretive conception of identity. Through study, practice, and performance the

narrator is able to blend into multiple social roles, concurrently belonging to all of them and none of them. The narrator's fluidity also challenges what race means in America, gesturing to a much broader understanding of race as insufficient to explain the myriad factors informing identity. The narrator's journey embodies the complex nature of race, and by the end of the novel "The question remains, then, of what things—opinions, experiences, income, skin color, blood—are responsible for 'making' a person either 'black' or 'white.'"<sup>16</sup>

Each of the above authors illustrate how the text deconstructs dominant conceptions of race and points towards a more nuanced model to understand the complex nature of identity. The arbitrary nature and performative aspects of race are emphasized throughout. These arguments establish that Johnson illuminates this complexity to initiate a new mindset, that "in thematizing such passing, James Weldon Johnson proposes a psychic national unity based neither on racial opposition nor on sustaining the power of white rule, but on a mutual and collective recognition of the artificiality of racial distinctions."<sup>17</sup> In effect, each of these authors explores Johnson's depiction of the contemporary racial problems and his antithesis which undermines binary structures, showing how the text works to educate his readership on the false premises supporting a binary racial perspective in order to combat the corresponding unjust social status imposed on African Americans in society.

This essay enters the critical conversation regarding the complicated and performative nature of race in a few ways. First, this paper seeks to add to existing analysis of how Johnson deconstructs racial categories in the novel. There are several aspects of identity which remain to be considered in the text and this paper seeks to

analyze characters and situations which further complicate race by introducing factors of religion, politics, history and nationality. The narrator's childhood friends, Red and Shiny, are rarely if ever discussed in literary criticism yet each presents a critical intervention into the monolithic categories of whiteness and blackness by demonstrating plurality. These characters mediate and consequently deconstruct binary categories of race. Red's physical description and defining features introduce aspects of the working class and may suggest an Irish decent. Red's status is demonstrated to be open and tenuous in the classroom, gesturing toward the fluidity of white identity in America. Similarly, Shiny represents the talented tenth and his delivery of the "Toussaint L'Ouverture" speech introduces historical and transnational factors to further complicate identity. Secondly, I wish to demonstrate how Johnson uses his narrator to build alliances between groups which are normally positioned in opposition to one another in the hegemonic framework. Third, this paper will analyze both the formal structure of the novel and the narrator's actions within the text as a model for enacting social change in America.



## Toward Synthesis: Structural Elements

Johnson employs a number of techniques in the structure of his novel which contribute to its effectiveness in communicating the problem, solution and synthesis represented in the text. The structure of autobiography and premise of miscegenation work to attract an audience by promising a controversial “true” story. Further structural elements such as the preface and mirroring of biblical techniques work to ingratiate the text to mainstream readers. Johnson’s indirection works to improve reception of a text which subverts its artificial tone early on. Additionally, repetition of the number three in the text works to exceed simple binary conventions and reinforce plurality. In *The Autobiography* there is a conspicuous repetition of the number three which offers insights into the themes and structure of the novel. This leitmotif shadows nearly all of the narrator’s subjective and objective observations. For example, the gambling house in New York has three floors and there are the three “sets of white people” who visit the club described in chapters seven and eight. As a child the narrator and his friends consist of the trio of Red, Shiny, and the narrator. The very music found in the novel subtly plays into this pattern, as the narrator plays the “13<sup>th</sup> Nocturne” for his wife which is footnoted as being “distinguished for resolving the dissonance that resounds through the work’s three major parts.”<sup>18</sup> The narrator also makes special note of ending the 13<sup>th</sup> Nocturne with a “major triad.” This pattern is continuously present in the novel, presenting at least once in every few pages of the text.

There are several ways the leitmotif of three is used in this text which I wish to draw attention to. I will briefly introduce each and discuss them individually in

detail further in this section. First, the persistence of three in a multitude of contexts continuously forces the reader to think outside of binary conceptions. By its very nature, three exceeds the bounds of binary categories. Second, and closely related to the first, the sheer volume of threes intentionally exceeds its own boundaries. Three expresses new paradigms even as it violates its own implicit limit by the logic of multiplicity generating the term. The pattern is employed so often and in so many contexts that it illuminates the futility of constructing simple paradigms which define and categorize generalized subject positions. Third, I suggest that the pattern is inspired by the Judeo-Christian Bible and employed to support the façade of the text as authentic autobiography. One target audience of the text is white Judeo-Christian audiences of the period, and use of literary patterns found in the Bible reinforces the appeal of the text to such audiences. Fourth, units of families and friends are often configured as a trinity in which connections can continuously be re-evaluated in new configurations. This arrangement lends itself to evaluation in terms of mimetic triangles of desire, considering each members' meaning through the mediation of the other members. Finally, this pattern reflects the Hegelian dialectical model of thesis, antithesis and synthesis as a strategy outlining the formation of a society predicated on true premises.

The repeated use of threes within the text is a leitmotif which invites a paradigm shift from thinking in terms of binary opposition to considering the spaces which exist between and outside dominant categories. The pattern of threes is woven into every aspect of the text and, whether consciously recognized or not, the reader encounters this leitmotif relentlessly. This repetition subtly works to subvert the idea

of binaries in the mind of the reader simultaneously complimenting and reinforcing the subject matter of the text.

The earliest, and most fundamental third in the text is the narrator himself. The narrator exceeds binary categories both as the product of miscegenation and an agent who passes as white. The narrator's act of passing, both inadvertently as a child and intentionally as an adult, immediately signals a breach of the color line. By its very constitution, the narrator inhabiting a "third space" subverts binary conceptions of subject positions. Similarly, the narrative's verbiage at the close of the novel simultaneously employs hegemonic vocabulary and undermines it. The narrator states that he is an ordinary successful white man and speaks of the "lesser part" he has chosen.<sup>19</sup> The word "part" is instructive here, as it indicates that any binary choice is incomplete and less than the whole. What precisely this whole concept of identity consists of is a subject explored extensively in the narrative.

Another major feature of the narrator is the circumstances of his parentage. The premise of miscegenation does double work in the text. Firstly, it serves as a hook to attract a large readership and also as a starting point to consider subject positions outside of binary conceptions. Johnson viewed the premise of miscegenation as sensational enough to attract readers; however, this premise also relied on the book's reception as authentic autobiography. In his personal correspondence, Johnson states that the combination of the narrator's parentage combined with plausibility of the autobiography format was essential to generating interest in the text.<sup>20</sup> Johnson's statement bespeaks an intention to use not only the premise of the text, but also its structure to advertise and deliver his message.

However, the subterfuge of authentic autobiography was dropped in the 1927 printing when Johnson affixed his name to the work, a topic which will be addressed later in the essay. Secondly, his intentional use of miscegenation and autobiography as strategies invite inquiry into other literary devices employed in the text.

When discussing this text as autobiography it is important to recognize that this novel was constructed, in part, to appeal to a readership whose members include those who held a binary conception of race.<sup>21</sup> The technique used to establish the autobiographical structure begins with the preface, discussed later, and extends to other structural elements of the novel. As noted earlier, Johnson felt the premise of miscegenation would attract a larger readership of his work, however, he believed the effect also required the plausibility of authentic autobiography. This strategy also works in the text's favor by attracting audiences who are already invested in exploring identities outside the dominant binary conception. Johnson employs several elements, beginning as early as the preface, which contribute to the book's reception as autobiography by a wide and varied audience.

In its most simple and surface reading the text purports to offer an ethnography of African Americans to an ostensibly homogenous white audience from a Judeo-Christian religious tradition. Though the point of the text is to ultimately deconstruct monolithic ideals, it does so in part by use of indirect techniques which cater to simple and neat tropes. As such, technical elements of the text such as the symbolic use of threes reflect those employed in the Judeo-Christian Bible, thereby strengthening the text's reception by this and other audiences. The use of familiar figures to relate a counter-cultural message is a common literary device evidenced in

a multitude of other contemporary works. A prime example is found in Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* where the author employs a doctor as the authoritative mediator to introduce readers to a socialist utopian vision.<sup>22</sup> Arguably a plumber or factory worker would make a more believable mediator to portray a socialist society, however, Doctor Leete speaks with a more authoritative voice to a targeted upper-middle class audience. The comfort of a more familiar and trustworthy mediator or presentation helps to communicate the material in an easier to digest format.

The pattern of threes is revealingly evident from the narrator's readings in the Judeo-Christian Bible. Although religion is not a major theme in the text, it does enter the text in significant ways, particularly as it concerns the Christian faith. The Bible is one of the first books the narrator reads in his youth. When the narrator begins reading as a child, he states that "I read a good portion of the Old Testament, all that part treating of wars and rumors of wars, and then started in on the New."<sup>23</sup> However, he states a preference for the Old Testament, an early signal that the novel is diverging from what it purports to be and gesturing toward recognizing diversity in religious identities. The narrator also uses the Bible as a metric to emphasize his dedication to reading other works: "a book that I read with the same feverish intensity with which I had read the old bible stories."<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the narrator closes the text with the statement that he has "sold my birthright for a mess of pottage," a reference to the story of Esau in Genesis. In the original story Esau "frivolously exchanged 'his birthright' with his brother Jacob for 'bread and pottage of lentils."<sup>25</sup> The placement of references to the Judeo-Christian Bible at the start and close of the novel invite

literary consideration of the Bible's influence on the narrator and a comparison of the meaning ascribed to the repeated use of threes in both texts.

The number three is a motif in the Bible and is recognized as an indicator of important or subtle meanings. Dr. Richard Patterson, a professor and theologian, notes that "Evidence strongly suggests that in accordance with cultural and literary norms the biblical writers often employed the number three or wrote in patterns of three to provide a special emphasis that sought to engage their hearers/readers in exploring the full significance of the events or details of the passage at hand."<sup>26</sup> The usage of threes in the text performs a similar function, inviting a reader to focus on important thematic elements. The text mirrors the biblical employment described by Patterson to call special attention to events or details.

The foundation for a connection between Johnson's work as ethnographic autobiography and the Bible is established in the text's preface. The preface states the narrative provides a "composite and proportionate presentation of *the entire race*," reinforcing the idea that the narrator's classifications of African Americans into three groups is fully inclusive, that the reported categories represent a complete and whole idea.<sup>27</sup> One particular meaning of three in the Judeo-Christian Bible is to signal completeness. Patterson states, "In some cases the number three may signify completeness... [it] naturally suggests the idea of completeness."<sup>28</sup> Johnson's use of three in the text mirrors a usage observed in the Judeo-Christian Bible, strengthening the narrative's authority as authentic autobiography. The narrator mirrors the implication of completeness by repeatedly categorizing in groups of three whether the subject be classes, types, or jobs. This repetition works in tandem with the

ethnographic autobiography structure. If three is meant to signal completeness, then the narrator's repeated categorization by three delivers on his promise to provide insight on African Americans. By imitating a pattern used in the Bible the narrator is able to lend authority to his observations, reinforcing the veracity afforded to the autobiographical structure.

Biblical elements also mark points where the narrator diverges from binary constructions and points toward synthesis. The narrator's interest in historical elements speaks to his discernment in critically reading the Bible. Stating an interest in the historical aspects of the Old Testament stories implies a dissatisfaction with allegorical readings. This resonates with Erich Auerbach's *Figura*, positioning the Old Testament as "something real and historical that represents and proclaims in advance something else that is also real and historical... historically real in equal measure."<sup>29</sup> A more nuanced understanding of the testaments and their relationship situates them each as "provisional and incomplete... they point to one another and both point to something in the future."<sup>30</sup> This relationship reveals a new thing which only exists from the synthesis of the two. Additionally, his interest in the Old Testament implies a sympathetic link with the Jewish cultural history, recognizing similarities in experience and the possibilities of alliances with the Jewish community. This connection will be further discussed in a later section of this essay.

The mirroring of biblical structure in *The Autobiography* is not unique, the text employs other literary structural connections to foster a large readership. Notably, the format of autobiography affords the novel a discrete authenticity, borrowing from a tradition of slave narratives which were "a politically charged genre

that was widely recognized and read in the nineteenth century.”<sup>31</sup> To this end, Johnson employs the model of an authenticating preface common to slave narratives. The preface is presented as written by “The Publishers,” commentating on the importance of the text, another artifact of slave narratives which further act to classify the novel as autobiography.<sup>32</sup> However, the preface is dictated nearly word for word by Johnson in a letter to the publishing company dated 2 February 1912.<sup>33</sup> The ruse of a preface ostensibly written by white publishers serves as a guarantee of the information in the novel and its source.

Each of the structural elements discussed here bolster the text’s reception in the mainstream market and amplify its ability to transmit Johnson’s message. The combination of indirection and taboo works to generate a larger audience while also targeting those interested in exploring subject positions outside binary constructions. This draw coupled with the subtle yet persistent leitmotif which exceeds simple paradigms shape audience expectation to explore a narrative which evidences plurality and moves toward synthesis.



## Subject Positions in the Schoolyard

The protagonist's entry into school becomes his primary education in race in the novel. The construction of the novel and the narrator's life prior to school result in a relatively unaware and unselfconscious race experience for the narrator. The privacy and general privilege of his early life prompt no reasons for a young child to question his place in the social structure, or even his awareness of its racialization. However, his transition to school introduces situations which educate the narrator on the harsh realities of race prejudice. It is in school that the narrator meets two characters who complicate binary racial identities and help him maneuver during his racial awakening. This section begins with a discussion of Johnson's metaphor outlining the problems in a racist society, leading to an analysis of how the trio of friends work to deconstruct stereotypes which support a binary conception of race. The section ends with a look at alliances formed between these friends which introduces patterns discussed in later sections.

On the surface, the narrator's two friends in school serve as racialized archetypes within the novel, however they also present details which preclude simple binary categories. An in depth analysis of these characters and their actions provides a more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted relationships Johnson illuminates in the text. Each of them serve as mediators for a dominant race identity, yet analysis of Red and Shiny leads to a dissection and rejection of race as a primary identifier. Attempts to recognize binary identities through these mediators are necessarily deferred; negotiation of race through these characters illustrates that race is both arbitrary and constructed. These characters possess characteristics which both erode

monolithic conceptions and make evident the plural and dynamic elements of identity. Red is a large white boy whose name and physical description alludes to a working class status and ethnic diversity within dominant white identity. His red hair evokes stereotypes of Irish heritage which invites consideration of immigrant status in America. His status in the classroom and his very name introduce plurality of white identity through political movements, religion and class. Shiny is an incipient talented tenth figure who is characterized by his excellence as a scholar and his deep black complexion. His excellence refutes conceptions of African Americans as an “inferior” race. Additionally, he delivers an influential speech which recalls colonial history and introduces international considerations to the construction of identity, subsequently adding complexity to African American subject positions. The speech also links the text to the abolition and Irish repeal movements through its author and original orator. The narrator’s relationship to and interactions with these characters illuminates the nuances of identity represented in the school scenes. The hidden depths of Johnson’s characters add degrees of complexity to racial constructions in the text and the relationships formed between these children both recall and reimagine alliances. The deconstruction of racial categories presents opportunities for alliance and solidarity which can take place across externally imposed color lines. Each friend presents a generic image of a binary subject, yet closer examination reveals intricacies of identity and the possibilities of relationships.

The narrator meets both of his friends in school, and it is appropriate to begin by considering them in reference to their classroom status which is presented in the novel. Johnson uses the classroom as a space, and the teacher as an authoritarian

figure, to define the specific problems he is addressing. The classroom spelling test is an overt metaphor for social position and advantage. The narrator outlines a classroom activity which favors those who are already positioned near the front.

The teacher began by giving us to spell the words corresponding to our order in the line... As the words went down the line I could see how lucky I had been to get a good place together with an easy word. As young as I was I felt impressed with the unfairness of the whole proceeding when I saw the tailenders going down before “twelfth” and “twentieth,” and I felt sorry for those who had to spell such words in order to hold a low position.<sup>34</sup>

This event stands out as a metaphor of American society and the difficulty which disadvantaged groups face in maintaining, or overcoming, subordinate positions. The classroom metaphor is easily recognized and there are significant implications which follow from the event. The narrator happens to inhabit a place near the front of the line and receive an easy word, which reflects his assumed whiteness at this point in the novel. This enables him to easily maintain his classroom social position. Similarly, Red is positioned near the front of the line, also reflecting his white status, however, he nearly fails to maintain his position and only succeeds with the narrator’s help.

Red inhabits a white subject position not seen elsewhere in the novel and represents the most obvious breakdown of whiteness in the novel. Johnson violates dominant binary race logic by introducing a character who intervenes in the homogenous conception of whiteness in several ways. Red’s position and near miss in the classroom spelling test speaks to the open ended nature of his status. His initial

position in the contest juxtaposed by his vulnerability depicts a character whose place is not easily defined. His fluid status encompasses the entire spectrum of the line, though presented in terms which presuppose his privileged whiteness. The dynamic nature of his position speaks to the spectrum of subject positions that are subsumed under whiteness including ethnic, religious, class and political differences. He is a character who mediates monolithic white identity, reflecting plurality through his potential to inhabit any of the positions along the line in the classroom exercise. The instability of, and means to retain, his position points toward the complicated and unstable positions which comprise the binary conception of whiteness and opens up consideration of alliances across the color line.

The spelling test works in conjunction with a later classroom scene to outline the societal problem Johnson is working against. When the narrator stands with the white children and is told to sit down he is racially coded as other, and implicitly inferior, by an authoritarian figure. The two boys, Red and the narrator, who were positioned next to one another in the first test become stratified in the classroom after this event, an inequity which is restated in the narrator's reflections on Shiny. The conflicting irony in this classification is that Red's position is maintained only through the narrator's intervention.

Shiny is not directly mentioned in the spelling test but his classroom status is related by the narrator. Shiny is presented as a young model of the talented tenth figure described by Du Bois. Du Bois figures several times in the text, and his works are both expressly named and implicitly evoked at several points in addition to this instance. Shiny is described in terms that situate him as both one of the most visibly

black characters in the novel and the most gifted scholar. Shiny's status reinforces the stratification imposed in the classroom evidenced in the narrator's commentary, "it did not take me long to discover that, in spite of his standing as a scholar, he was in some way looked down upon."<sup>35</sup> This observation both signals racial privileging in the classroom and the narrator's early naivety regarding racial privileging. However, further analysis of Shiny's attributes both work to deconstruct binary conceptions and place the text in conversation with contemporary authors.

A brief review of Shiny's attributes and actions reads like a checklist of qualities outlined by Du Bois in his description of the talented tenth. Shiny is a young man of "intelligence, broad sympathy, knowledge of the world that was and is, and of the relation of men to it."<sup>36</sup> Shiny's attributes are outlined in quick succession in the text. On the same page the narrator relates both his deep black complexion and his academic ability. When describing Shiny the narrator states, "His face was as black as night, but shone as though it was polished."<sup>37</sup> Shortly thereafter his remarkable visible blackness is complimented by his exceptional abilities as a scholar. Shiny is considered "without question to be the best speller, the best reader, the best penman – in a word, the best scholar, in the class."<sup>38</sup> Shiny's extraordinary visible blackness is the "grossest trope of white racism" yet it is immediately followed by a description of his exceptional abilities which is a direct contradiction of the dominant ideology which espouses the inferiority of blackness.<sup>39</sup> The narrator's attention to Shiny's blackness signals his limited social awareness at this point, his lack of recognition for subtle pluralities which exist outside of the dominant definitions. Conversely, the apparently facile descriptor of "shiny" foreshadows the more nuanced and vibrant

aspects of this character. Further description of Shiny begins to add complexity to simple tropes as he explains how Shiny exceeds the socially defined position of blackness. The narrator relates that Shiny is not only intelligent, but that he is also a hard worker whose excellence earns him a number of prizes for school related achievements. Shiny is also shown to be sympathetic to the suffering of others; he is the only person who defends the narrator against the insults of his classmates after the narrator is identified as a person of color.<sup>40</sup> Later in the text, Shiny's implicit knowledge of the world and history is evidenced by his delivery of the "Toussaint L'Ouverture" speech. Shiny's speech also indicates his potential as a leader, signaling a moment where the narrator is inspired to commit himself to involvement in race matters. The narrator begins to understand the problems of racial constructions in school, yet he does not resolve to take action until he is influenced by Shiny. Shiny's qualities challenge dominant conceptions of identity in a binary construction, expanding on African American subject positions by representing a young man of talent and possibility.

Shiny's oration of "Toussaint L'Ouverture" not only signals his own knowledge of history but also links the speech's themes to the novel. No part of the speech, beyond its title, is contained in the text yet the speech's original orator and the subject matter is very relevant to the discussion of *The Autobiography*. The speech originates from Wendell Phillips, a white abolitionist who delivered it on several occasions in Boston and New York City during the 1860s.<sup>41</sup> The speech is in Phillip's words both a "biography and an argument" which recounts the role of Toussaint in Haiti's conflicts as a French colony and later revolution for

independence.<sup>42</sup> Phillips employs Toussaint's achievements as an "argument in behalf of the race from which he sprung" by comparing the actions of the "Negro" and "Saxon."<sup>43</sup> This comparison shows the former in a much better light than the latter. Phillips intended the speech to foster a respect for African Americans as equals, which he clearly dictates in the following lines: "Negro blood, instead of standing at the bottom of the list, is entitled, if judged either by its great men or its masses, either by its courage, its purpose, or its endurance, to a place as near ours as any other blood known in history."<sup>44</sup> It would be apt to say this is one of the fundamental themes of *The Autobiography* and a related sentiment is expressed in the text when the Washington doctor states that a race should be judged by its best, and not by its worst.<sup>45</sup> Shiny's character and choice of speech exceeds the narrator's initial naïve expectations and introduces diverse configurations of blackness and its relation to whiteness. He is a figure of potential whose speech creates a myriad of pluralistic connotations which bring to light issues of the countries of origin, politics, relationships and modes of solidarity.

Shiny's introduction of Toussaint resonates with the deconstruction of racist ideology and the drive toward alliance found in *The Autobiography*. The speech both in content and spirit seeks to highlight the potential for alliances across presumed color lines. Written by a white author championing a black figure, it is an example of solidarity in its very composition which echoes the relationships which develop between Shiny, Red and the narrator. Conversely, one of the underlying tragedies of Toussaint is the failure to form alliances between "Black" and "Saxon" nations due to the privileging of one group at the expense of another, reinscribing Johnson's framing

of the problem. It draws attention to historical problems which persist, suggesting a past which is alive because it is unresolved in the present.<sup>46</sup> This fact becomes especially relevant in the opportunities and complications of international relationships in the text's contemporary moment.

By introducing "Toussaint L'Ouverture" in the text, Johnson is expanding the discourse of black identity to include literary history and contemporary politics to an already complex discussion. This draws attention to distinctions of class, education and international relations which diversify black identity. Though not specifically mentioned in the speech, it is relevant to note that the revolution in Haiti resulted in the Western Hemisphere's first black republic and second independent country.<sup>47</sup> Haiti became part of a transatlantic literary culture which was deeply invested in abolition.<sup>48</sup> Haiti served as a location for communication and collaboration: "Not only was postrevolutionary Haiti a physical meeting place throughout the nineteenth century for various African American refugees and other politically minded people of color like Prince Saunders, William Wells Brown, and Frederick Douglass, but it was also an intellectual meeting place for myriad antislavery writers and artists of color from across the Atlantic world."<sup>49</sup> The literary connection to Haiti continues in the text's contemporary moment, in part through African American diplomats and their authorship. John Stephens Durham's *Diane* is a trans-culturated literary text published a few years before *The Autobiography*. It is a Haïtien story published in English for American audiences.<sup>50</sup> Durham's text "worked to renarrate Haiti in the minds of a US audience as a legitimate national presence within the community of nations. This narrative project had implications not only for Haiti's place on the



international stage but also for African Americans' place within the United States."<sup>51</sup> This and other works by African American ambassadors in the decades leading to *The Autobiography's* contemporary moment contribute to Johnson's illumination of black identity in a transnational context.

African American ambassadors inhabited a complicated political position which contributed to the advancement of colored people in America but at the expense of foreign nations. On one hand, their position as US ambassadors impacted their individual status and carried the potential to improve the status of all African Americans. These ambassadors "hoped that work as American representatives would permit them to emerge as representative Americans" thereby "reconstituting the United States as a space of black and white fellow-citizenship."<sup>52</sup> These ambassadors reflect the New Negro movement and represent both diversity of subject positions for African Americans and a reimagining of domestic race relations. Furthermore, linking the text to American diplomacy and the Caribbean calls attention to black immigrants whose identity includes cultural aspects from their nation of origin. Conversely, the duties of these ambassadors required them to work toward political goals which at times reinforced dominant ideologies. These conflicting ideals are reflected in the memoirs of several men: "Like Gibbs's *Shadow and Light*, Langston's and Douglass's autobiographies also mark black work in US diplomacy as promoting a tension between state-based US nationalism and race-based transnationalism."<sup>53</sup> Many of these diplomats later regretted their hand in advancing US policy at the expense of other nations. Years later, Johnson would also openly criticize American policy that he helped execute while serving as an ambassador. His delay in criticism

is telling, speaking to constraints inherent in his position. Criticism of the US government would have jeopardized his position in the consulate. These constraints coupled with his aspirations for advancement in the Republican Party limited Johnson's ability to speak freely and almost certainly informed his decision to publish *The Autobiography* anonymously in 1912.<sup>54</sup> Conversely, the Johnson of 1927 who affixed his name to the text was an entirely different sort of ambassador. Johnson parted ways with the Republican Party after President Taft's defeat in the 1912 election, first writing for a newspaper and later becoming the executive secretary of the NAACP. The second publication of the text with his authorship acknowledged situates him as a cultural ambassador, both practicing the theory presented in *The Autobiography* and bringing attention to how his text resonates with the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance.

Shiny's speech also works to create diversity in white subject positions indirectly through Wendell Phillips, a connection which ties back to Red. In addition to his contribution to the abolition movement, Phillips was also involved in the Irish Repeal movement which fought for Ireland's political independence from Britain. The two movements allied with one another for time through the efforts of Phillips and Daniel O'Connor, a prominent Irish leader. The cooperation between movements recalls alliances across color lines meant to benefit both the African Americans and the Irish, a section of whiteness which endured historical prejudice from other European nationalities.<sup>55</sup> This invites a correlation between Red's "very red hair" and stereotypical depictions of Irish. Red hair is both rare and distinctive, the gene is recessive and thrives mainly in remote regions and closed communities such as

Ireland, Scotland and coastal regions of Scandinavia.<sup>56</sup> The trope connecting red hair to the Irish is also evidenced in Fitzgerald's novels.<sup>57</sup> These facts make red hair a curious detail to affix to this character, suggesting that he may have an Irish heritage. This specificity actually denotes plurality by drawing attention to differences subsumed under binary black-white identity. In Europe people of Irish decent were persecuted for religious and political reasons. Yet in America, the Irishman is elevated to a new status in relation to African Americans. Scholar Theodore W. Allen addresses this aspect of American racism in his book *The Invention of the White Race* where he states, "the Irish immigrant who, however poor, Catholic and racially oppressed he/she might have been in Ireland, could emerge in Anglo-America as an ordained member of the 'white race' along with Anglo- and other European-Americans, with all the privileges, rights and immunities appertaining thereto."<sup>58</sup> Suggesting a specific nationality for Red, a mediator for binary whiteness, recalls the obvious fact that every person who is categorized as white in America is an immigrant or descended from immigrants. This introduces differences of political, religious and cultural attributes which evidence the heterogeneous identities subsumed under whiteness. These differences gesture toward the periodic and generational changes in white status which are inexorably tied to immigration. The period from 1880 to 1930 saw one of the largest immigration booms in United States history, and Red's tenuous yet privileged classroom status can be read as representative of various generations of European immigrants who over time are subsumed into the white identity which Johnson is working to deconstruct. Red's initial placement at the front of the line juxtaposed by his uncertain status during the

exercise is a critical interrogation of these hegemonic constructions. His privilege in the classroom speaks to “a system of racial privileges for the propertyless whites... deliberately instituted in order to align them on the side of the plantation bourgeoisie against the African-American.”<sup>59</sup> Depicting the fragility of Red’s position both questions the privileging of whiteness and draws attention to the dynamic nature of dominant classification. Introducing this character early in the text works to erode binary logic by demonstrating plurality within whiteness, and works to reimagine the associations which determine relationships in society.

Red’s name also carries with it connotations of Marxism and working class movements. His moniker alludes to organizations and political machines such as the Knights of Labor, Tammany Hall and the Populist Party. Each of these organizations were critical in the formation of alliances which challenged or existed outside of the dominant paradigm. These organizations were the focal point of communities with concerns which varied by religion, class, political goals and geography. Introducing this association to the character further defers any effort to find a homogenous whiteness through Red as mediator. Instead, he draws attention to factions predicated on meaningful criteria and invites discussions of what alliances can be formed across the color line.

The narrator takes a symbolic step toward coalition building by allying himself with Red in an effort to improve both of their situations. The narrator states, “I had been quick enough to see that a big, strong boy was a friend to be desired at a public school; and, perhaps, in spite of his dullness, ‘Red Head’ had been able to discern that I could be of service to him. At any rate there was a simultaneous mutual

attraction.”<sup>60</sup> The alliance between Red and the narrator reflects a reimagining of societal boundaries between groups separated by the contemporary color line. Red’s open and pluralistic nature degrades the binary conception of whiteness, opening him up as a character in need of alliances to succeed. The relationship between these characters is an important step which serves both parties in the classroom as society metaphor. Maintaining and reinforcing the partnership of these two characters is a reimagining of society based on alliances without regard for imposed conceptions of race.

The bond between Red and the narrator is strengthened after the school event where the narrator is identified as one of “the others” by his teacher. Rather than abandoning his friend, Red takes several steps to reaffirm their friendship. Red is the only child who tries to comfort the narrator, literally standing by his side while walking home from school after the event. Red’s offer to carry the protagonist’s books is a symbolic effort to comfort his friend, showing sympathy for the narrator’s traumatic loss of privileged status and a willingness to support the narrator. Additionally, Red offers the narrator a gift. When doing so, he states that he will bestow this gift the next day. His reference to a future event implies a commitment to continuing their relationship.

Furthermore, Red’s commitment to alliance after the narrator is racially defined by the teacher emphasizes Red’s position as the character most in need of alliances to succeed. There is nothing intrinsically special about Red as an individual. His relatively high classroom (read as social) position is not determined on his own merits. This is evidenced in the classroom metaphor, by which Red is the first, and

only noted, student to misspell a word. Red's relatively high classroom status is achieved solely as a result of the narrator's intervention. Additionally, the trait which initially attracts the narrator to Red is a relative one. In a paradoxical way, Red's advantage is the result of his lack of academic capability (social status). Red's merits of size and strength are relative to children younger than him. His seniority, thus advantage, is "due to the fact that he had spent twice the required amount of time in several of the preceding classes."<sup>61</sup> This relative advantage is what draws the narrator's initial interest in befriending Red, evidenced in his statement "I had been quick enough to see that a big, strong boy was a friend to be desired at a public school."<sup>62</sup> However, Red is not bigger or stronger as compared to boys his own age, he is bigger and stronger in relation to the younger children: "He was perhaps fourteen years of age; that is, four or five years older than any other boy in the class."<sup>63</sup> Red's most valuable characteristic in the narrator's esteem is only exceptional in relative terms. Finally, Red's career plan after high school is based on relationships rather than ability: "Red" declared that he had enough of school and that after he got his high school diploma he would get a position in a bank. It was his ambition to become a banker, and he felt sure of getting the opportunity through certain members of his family."<sup>64</sup> Again, Red is never successful on his own merits, he is only able to succeed due to his relationship with others.

Analyzing the narrator in relationship to his childhood friends leads to the question of what subject position the narrator inhabits; the narrator's trio of childhood friends begs the question of who or what subject the narrator represents in the novel. On the surface, each of his friends represent archetypes which can be readily

identified under dominant binary logic, yet when considered in detail they eradicate the possibility of simple binary conceptions; his friends each bespeak a robust heterogeneity among dominant racial categories. The ambiguity of the narrator's position in contrast with the archetypes represented by his friends opens the discussion of new subject positions for African Americans and a questioning of white homogeneity. Positioning the narrator in relation to, but separate from, each of these figures invites consideration of the possibilities the narrator represents.

Red and Shiny are interventions into racial categories and they also serve as starting points to understanding the narrator's identity. They inhabit the role of mediator turned destroyer for any reader who seeks to understand binaries through these characters. The narrator further complicates these categories in a number of ways. The narrator possesses aspects of both a white and black identity, as well as a fusion identity and a peculiar sense of non-identity. Johnson inverts the social promotion of European immigrants through the narrator in school. The class ordering exercise occurs on the first day of school at a point when the narrator conceives of himself as white, evidenced by his move to stand when the teacher asks the white scholars to rise.<sup>65</sup> Additionally, the reactions of his classmates support their previous acceptance of the narrator as inhabiting a white subject position. After the event, the narrator states, "When school was dismissed I went out in a kind of stupor. A few of the white boys jeered me, saying 'Oh, you're a nigger too.' I heard some black children say, 'we knew he was colored.'" <sup>66</sup> The jeering statements of his classmates are indicative of a suspicion confirmed, but also imply a prior acceptance of his plausible whiteness. Additionally, the narrator's anonymity and lack of community

reflect his alienation and individuality. Yet when considered in relation to his two friends, his ambiguity also represents possibility. The complication of subject positions introduced by Red and Shiny is complimented by and expanded upon in the narrator. His ambiguity speaks to subject positions which are not defined solely on race, but instead branch out to include a multitude of other factors such as class, geography, gender, nationality, etc.

One way to understand the narrator's ambiguous identity is in his role as an intermediary. This role is evidenced in his relationships during school and continues afterward. Not only does the narrator explore subject positions in the text, but in several ways he becomes a bridge which brings different groups together. This is first evidenced by his role in bringing his friends together to discuss the future. There are other moments in the text where the narrator performs this role, bridging societal fissures and seeking opportunities for alliances which will be discussed in the next section.



## Alliances and Coalition Building

The narrator displays a desire to form relationships and alliances throughout the text. These behaviors tend to parallel his exploration into different subject positions within the novel, often overshadowed by them. The two earliest examples of coalition building occur while the narrator is in school, yet the narrator continues to seek common ground with those he meets after departing Connecticut. He explicitly or implicitly details grounds for commonality and the benefits of potential alliances with many of the people he meets. Just as the narrator is the mediator who brings his young friends together, he continually works to find ways to relate to each person as an adult. His ability to see something positive about every person he encounters speaks to a mindset which aims to form bonds and foster inclusive communities.

The inclusion of the character Red and his relationship to the narrator speak to the formation of coalitions among groups arbitrarily separated by the imposed color line. Red's ability in the classroom metaphor definitively places him at a disadvantage, a position which is improved through his alliance with the narrator. The narrator's choice to befriend Red is based on the advantage each can offer the other, a partnership which is expressly stated to provide benefit to Red. However, the inversion of social promotion and the subsequent strengthening of alliance between these characters speaks to a rejection of color lines as the basis for social relationships.

There is early evidence of coalition building in defiance of imposed color lines which includes both Red and Shiny. Rather than performing identities which subscribe to false binaries, the trio of schoolboy friends instead foster relationships as

they approach adulthood. There is a textually brief yet significant moment where the narrator and his two friends meet at his home to “talk over our plans and prospects for the future.”<sup>67</sup> It is interesting to note that the narrator, a character who already exceeds racial binaries, is the agent who brings these complicated characters together. The relationship between these friends, and the narrator’s role in facilitating this friendship, set a precedence for seeking alliances which the narrator continues to employ throughout his life.

The narrator’s interactions and observations in the text are indicative of his alliance seeking behavior. He builds relationships with a multitude of people throughout his narrative. I focus on two individuals who represent some of the more extreme aspects of alliance seeking in the text, followed by a broader example in Jacksonville evidencing opportunities for alliances between groups. The two most polemical, and relevant to this discussion, figures are the Texan and the Jewish man on the train. He discusses both in some detail, and makes observations on each which form the grounds for productive discourse or alliance.

There is a connection between the narrator and Jewish Americans, one which is demonstrated in the particular on the train in addition to the broader connection gestured toward earlier in the text. The narrator’s statements about his early readings in the Bible imply an empathy for the Jewish experience. He states a preference for the Old Testament stories which both speaks to his interest in the more complex and historical details while alluding to his sympathies with Jewish cultural history. There is an intrinsic similarity in the position of the narrator and the Jewish man on the train: neither is able to actively speak favorably for African Americans due to the role

they currently inhabit. This similarity of position is reflected in the narrator's evaluation of the Jewish man on the train when he remarks that the "diplomacy of the Jew was something to be admired; he had the faculty of agreeing with everybody without losing his allegiance to any side."<sup>68</sup> The narrator's admiration for the Jewish man's fluid neutrality is an implied endorsement for seeking alliances. However, the Jewish man's neutrality prevents him from impacting the course of the discussion. This conciliatory attitude can be read as cowardice, maintaining a precipitous position by failing to engage or take a stand. There is recognition that any direct stance supporting either position on "the race question" will negatively impact his relationship with at least one party and correspondingly weaken his own social position. Alternatively, his ability to find common ground and maintain neutrality is an effective strategy for negotiating alliances. The previously mentioned connections between the narrator and the Jewish man establish grounds for a relationship. The narrator's further observations present this man as a Red-like figure, one who will benefit greatly from alliances.

After observing the discussion of the race question on the train the narrator's first reflection is on the racist Texan. Whether the narrator's conclusions are well founded is a separate matter, what I wish to draw attention to is the way the narrator considers the possibility of meaningful discourse. He is disturbed by the Texan's statements, but that feeling is followed by a search for some redeemable aspect in their interaction. The narrator states, "I was sick at heart. Yet, I must confess that underneath it all I felt a certain sort of admiration for the man who could not be swayed from what he held as his principles."<sup>69</sup> Though sickened by the Texan's

rhetoric, the narrator none the less conceives a way to approach this subject from a positive angle. Furthermore, he identifies a commonality between the Texan and African Americans, remarking that the “same spirit obtains in a great degree among the blacks; they, too, defend their faults and failings.”<sup>70</sup> His search for common ground, anything that might serve as a bridge to open discussions and form bonds is indicative of his efforts to form alliances in every quarter. He considers an alliance with the most openly hostile character in order to achieve social change. The narrator immediately relates the benefit that a discourse might bring: “The Texan’s position does not render things so hopeless, for it indicates that the main difficulty of the race question does not lie so much in the actual condition of the blacks as it does in the mental attitude of the whites; and a mental attitude, especially one not based on truth, can be changed more easily than actual conditions.”<sup>71</sup> However, the narrator’s commitment is compromised by the lynching scene discussed later in this section. The narrator does not take this opportunity to engage the Texan or form any sort of alliance, but he is clearly evaluating the situation and hypothesizing ways in which to do so.

The narrator’s time in Jacksonville introduces two cultural groups which expand on his demonstration of identity: Cuban Americans in Florida and upper-middle class African Americans. The text’s inclusion of Cuban Americans reinforces national aspects of identity and the diversity found in a Cuban sub-culture which was broadly classified in America as black. His participation in both the Cuban and African American communities serves as an individual link between groups which already interact on a grander scale. The narrator’s observations allude to the fact that

the Cuban American social attitudes offer an opportunity for alliances. He states, “The cigar factory workers knew little and cared less about social distinctions.”<sup>72</sup> This statement imagines a different model for the organization of society, without regard for imposed categories and reflects the lack of segregation in the Florida cigar industry.<sup>73</sup> Alternatively, the concurrent introduction of these two communities speaks to alliances formed from a shared hardship of imposed prejudice. In the United States, all Cuban immigrants were classified as black and were consequently restricted by Jim Crow laws.<sup>74</sup> The Cuban American and African American communities in this section possess customs and even languages which separate them, yet they are both restricted in society by the same set of externally imposed laws. Race is externally imposed, yet Johnson illuminates the plurality which exists within these communities. Not only does this further evidence breakdowns in broad racial categories, but the narrator’s involvement in both communities gestures toward a common ground found in hardship. The narrator’s inclusion in both these communities speaks to the opportunity for alliances between them. The narrator stands as a representative bridge in the same way that he bridges the color line by bringing his friends from school together.

The narrator witnesses a lynching in the South which becomes a turning point in the novel, after which he abandons his musical project and alliance seeking behavior. The event and the narrator’s decision to abandon his composition have several implications in the novel. First and foremost, the lynching evidences the gravity and magnitude of the problem Johnson is addressing. It is a powerful example of the problems in American society. Secondly, the narrator’s decision impacts the

narrative in several ways. In one respect, an event which prevents the narrator's success is necessary for the narrative structure. Successful publication of his manuscripts would either compromise the façade of autobiography or undercut the emphasis on communication and music. If the narrator published his manuscripts at the end of the novel, then he must either be a known composer or his attempt would need to be written as a failure. Public renown invalidates the possibility of an anonymous narrator, compromising the reception as authentic autobiography. Conversely, a poor reception of his manuscripts undermines Johnson's message that music and cultural production are effective methods to bridge the color line, a theme which is discussed in the next section. However, the narrator's retirement to anonymity does beneficial work which supports the themes in the novel. His retreat serves as both a reminder that work remains to be done and as an endorsement for the importance of alliances. The narrator's failure connects to his admiration for the "small but gallant band of colored men" discussed in the Carnegie Hall paragraph at the close of the text.<sup>75</sup> His failure and regret are in a way a call to action, urging his readers to go forward and employ the knowledge gained from his narrative. Finally, the narrator's retirement can be read as an endorsement for the power of alliances. When reflecting on the event at Carnegie Hall, the narrator highlights several individuals who spoke at the event. However, he transitions to the plural term "men" in regards to those who work toward synthesis in American society. The transition to plural terms resonates with themes of alliance elsewhere in the text, also highlighting the narrator's folly in his own endeavor. When he is traveling through the South he is acting alone. He interacts with a great many people and even travels with a few, but

his actions are singular. In this regard, his failure is recuperated as evidencing the need for alliances.

## Modes of Transmission

A pattern of audience seeking emerges when analyzing the narrator's actions and statements in Jacksonville and New York. As he negotiates these locations, he maneuvers himself to positions which facilitate interaction with broad groups of people. He expands beyond his initial grass roots style of interaction to seek opportunities for mass communication. This pattern reflects his desire to communicate the novel's antithesis, refutations of dominant ideology, on a scale larger than the individual method discussed previously. Analyzing how he reaches audiences and the methods of communication shows that the narrator reflects the novel's agenda of educating the public to subvert racial stereotypes and work toward synthesis.

The narrator's experiences in the cigar trade are instructive to his audience seeking behavior. The narrator's entry into cigar making parallels his entry to Cuban American experience, providing him with both new aspects of identity to explore and also a new audience to communicate with. After the narrator first takes the time to learn the language and culture of his coworkers, he attains a position where he is able to impact their views as a "reader." The narrator states a preference for the opportunity to communicate when he is promoted to reader, remarking that the position is more in line with his tastes.<sup>76</sup> His responsibilities as a reader give us an idea of what sort of work he is inclined to do. The position is a public one, where he is daily responsible for communicating with every worker in the factory. The specific purpose of this communication is to educate his audience on noteworthy events in the



news and to read novels to them. His literal purpose is to educate and introduce culture through art, mirroring the actions of the text itself.

The narrator as reader suggests an emphasis on the importance of news and entertainment media in the process of intervening against racialized thinking. In one sense, the narrator as reader is a metaphor for the role of print culture media in providing news and entertainment. His responsibilities in reporting news and distributing culture closely resemble the services provided by a newspaper or publishing house. There is also a self-referential link as the reader's duties reflect the role the narrator plays in the novel. The narrator's journey is an international tour which shows his readers a diverse and complex series of communities and subjects. The narrator educates his audience by not only exploring contemporary environments but also by introducing historical and cultural elements through characters like Red and Shiny. In this way the narrator is both telling stories and reporting on facts.

There are limitations to the analogy between reader and the use of media to engage audiences. Firstly, the narrator as reader is only able to relate the news available to him. The narrator does not name specific novels or news organizations in this section. However, we can look to his previous discernment in reading to assume he is critically and carefully selecting his materials. His early pursuits in reading imply dissatisfaction with standard narratives of history, evidenced when he seeks out more complex answers from other sources. The narrator's critical discernment mitigates this first limitation. The second limitation of his position as reader is the scope of his audience. His authority extends to the confines of the factory and does not afford him exposure to other audiences.

Considering the position of reader as media with limited scope ascribes more meaning to the narrator's somewhat arbitrary choice to leave Jacksonville. He has an established life in the Jacksonville community, including a fiancé, and the option to apply to other factories in the area. Regardless, when the cigar factory in Jacksonville closes, the narrator decides to leave behind all ties and move to New York City. This reading suggests that the narrator's recognition of the limitations perceived in the reader position inform his desire to explore different mediums and audiences. Moving to New York City makes a great deal of sense if the narrator is seeking new audiences to engage and new ways to engage them. Analysis of the protagonist's career choices after he arrives in New York reinforces this reading of the narrator's actions. The narrator explores a number of ways to earn his living in New York, eventually using music to reach various audiences. His progression of occupations in one sense reflect a series Hobson's choices. However, each step also increases the narrator's social circle and sphere of influence.

During his time in New York City, the narrator has at least four explicitly stated avenues by which to earn his living. He is a skilled tradesman in the cigar industry, he exhibits mixed success as a professional gambler, he earns income as a public performer at the club, and he eventually plays private performances for the millionaire. These options, listed chronologically as he explores them while in New York, funnel the narrator toward performance in a series of choices. After arriving in New York the narrator spends a brief stint as a cigar roller, an "irksome" step down from the position he held in Jacksonville.<sup>77</sup> During this same period he frequents the gambling hall and music club. For a brief time he attempts to both work his day job

and immerse himself in the night life of the city. The narrator recognizes that he must make a choice between his work at the cigar factory and his other occupations, ultimately choosing to pursue the more social option.

The narrator's decision to quit the cigar trade reflects an abandonment of security in exchange for facilitating communication. Factory work is unfulfilling to the character and quickly abandoned in favor of the more exciting and social life of gambling and frequenting the club. The decision both increases his social sphere and destabilizes his income. He improves his social situation by moving from a sedentary factory job to one where he is constantly interacting with people. However, it is important to distinguish that this move did not increase his income, arguably this change reduced his wages. Working at the factory, he earns enough to live on while also "spending my earnings between the 'crap' game and the club."<sup>78</sup> This implies a modest but sufficient living wage. The decision to quit the cigar factory leaves him with the irregular winnings of a gambler, leading to unpredictable cash flow. From a financial standpoint this career change is a poor choice, yet when viewed as a means to meet new people and interact with new audiences this move is the superior option. This becomes doubly true considering his career change coincides with his performance of music at the club. His willingness to trade security for social interaction speaks to the importance the narrator ascribes to avenues of communication. The narrator's occupational choice, viewed through this lens, mirrors his decision making process in moving to New York City in the first place.

Performance at the club offers a new medium of communication to the narrator through ragtime music. He is quite successful as a performer and practices

the composition of music during this period. His performance and composition become a new method for the narrator to interact with audiences on a grand scale. It is during this period that the narrator takes his first steps toward becoming a composer: "It was I who first made ragtime transcriptions of familiar classic selections."<sup>79</sup> This translation of classical music to ragtime foreshadows his later converse desire to compose a universal music based on African American experiences. The general formulation begins with ragtime though the two musical forms differ in significant ways. The narrator's travels until this point reflect an unfocused desire to fulfill his ambition inspired by Shiny's speech, but his time in New York initiates a public relationship to music which leads to a specific ambition.

## Music as Experience

The role of music as a means to communicate culture and experience in the text cannot be understated. Johnson often shared his opinion on music, literature and art as a weapon to combat racial hierarchies. His viewpoint is communicated through the narrator in the text. The importance of music as a connection to African American experience is established early in the novel and remains an important influence and outlet for much of narrator's life. The diverse range of musical styles presented compliments the exploration of nuanced subject positions in the text. Similarly, music connects the narrator to several of the most influential figures in his life including his mother, the millionaire, the narrator's wife and indirectly to Shiny. Additionally, late in the novel music becomes the narrator's chosen medium to communicate African American experience, yet this goal is deferred, never coming to fruition. However, his composition and play of ragtime allows him to reach multiple audiences prior to his conscious acknowledgment of music as a way to communicate African American experience and culture. This section will illustrate the importance and meaning of music to the narrator to establish how he uses music as a medium to forge understanding and combat dominant racial constructions.

The music in the text can be understood in a way similar to the musical epigraphs found in *The Souls of Black Folk*. The musical notations at the beginning of each chapter of *Souls* are accompanied by poetry in each case. There is a connection implied which situates the music as both an equivalent and a counterpoint to the poems. In one sense, the musical notations complement the poetry, gesturing toward their importance as cultural productions equivalent to the selected poems while also

suggesting similarity across the color line. Conversely, their continuous placement below the poems also speaks to the relative importance of these works in the dominant racialized society. The musical notation appears without lyrics, highlighting its difference from the poetry. The notes cannot be read the same way as the poetry, and the reader's failure to comprehend the music in a way becomes its own message.

The music in *The Autobiography* is always told but never transmitted, much like the musical notations in *The Souls of Black Folk*. In both texts the music is visibly present, yet functionally absent at the same time. This lack of effective transmission communicates a message in its own way. It is an aporia which brings the reader to an impasse. However, rather than simply failing to communicate information this failure of translation is what becomes most instructive.<sup>80</sup> The notes in *Souls* simultaneously communicate a rich cultural history and a failure of transmission in this mode. They accentuate difference and the difficulties of pursuing it. The meaning of this content is less legible, harder to discover, and this complication of access points to larger difficulties that are in need of recovery and appreciation. A variety of musical forms appear in *The Autobiography*: Ragtime, ragging the classics, the narrator's compositions based on spirituals, a Chopin waltz, "little pieces in a more or less Chopinesque style," and references to other classical pieces.<sup>81</sup> The various musical styles in the text form a sort of parallel for other expressions of plurality and social discovery. This becomes important given the meaning Du Bois ascribes to the notes in his epigraphs. Du Bois states "what do they mean? ... I know something of men, and knowing them, I know that these songs are the articulate message of the slave to the world."<sup>82</sup> The music in Du Bois epigraphs

emblemize hidden potential understandings and relationships. Similarly, the narrator's lifelong connection to music represents avenues to explore and express nuances of identity in the text.

Johnson makes his viewpoint clear about the importance of music and artistic production in general both through the narrator and in his other works. The prominence of music in the novel is not surprising given Johnson's contributions to and respect for music. The narrator specifically positions his opinion in opposition to racist ideology stating, "colored people of this country have done four things which refute the oft advanced theory that they are an absolutely inferior race... which demonstrate that they have originality and artistic conception; and, what is more, the power of creating that which can influence and appeal universally."<sup>83</sup> Each of his examples (literature, dance and music) resonates with the importance Johnson places on cultural and artistic production. Later the narrator speaks directly to ragtime music, citing its universal nature and international appeal stating, "it is music which possesses at least one strong element of greatness; it appeals universally; not only the American, but the English, the French, and even the German people, find delight in it."<sup>84</sup> Johnson restates his words issued through the narrator in his preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* published over a decade after *The Autobiography*, again citing ragtime among his examples. The reiteration of his belief points to Johnson's lasting and deeply held belief in the power of music and culture. Furthermore, in the same preface he expounds on the importance of cultural production stating,

A people may become great through many means, but there is only one measure by which its greatness is recognized and acknowledged. The final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced. The world does not know that a people is great until that people produces great literature and art.<sup>85</sup>

Similar affirmations of the importance of literature, art and especially music are demonstrated within *The Autobiography* as well.

The narrator's parents both contribute to, and inform, his relationship with music. Music is an early and recurring theme in the novel. The narrator's fondest childhood memories are of his mother playing the piano, and his subsequent mastery of the instrument. He relates childhood memories with his mother involving music, he states that "evenings on which she opened the little piano were the happiest hours of my childhood. Whenever she started toward the instrument I used to follow her with all the interest and irrepressible joy that a pampered pet dog shows when a package is opened in which he knows there is a sweet bit for him."<sup>86</sup> He states a preference for the black keys while listening to his mother play, implying an appreciation of his mother's heritage through her music. He is also influenced by his mother's tendency to get away from scripted notes, denoting a preference for the possibility of discovery over scripted answers. Additionally, there is but one instance where the narrator believes he earns the approval of his father, resulting from the narrator's piano playing ability.<sup>87</sup> His father displays "sincere appreciation" for his son's performance, subsequently demonstrating his pride and encouragement by gifting the narrator a new piano.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, the scene where the narrator plays for his father is the only



point when he and his parents spend time as a family after the move to Connecticut. This moment has an interesting implication when considered in context with the coin necklace he previously received from his father. The necklace hangs heavy with symbolism from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a novel the narrator specifically mentions having read. This gift bestowed just before the narrator departs for Connecticut parallels the scene of Tom's departure, implying an unspoken promise from his father which echoes George's promise to someday come for Tom and bring him home.<sup>89</sup> I suggest the father's gift insinuates that when the time is right he will come and claim his son, though the conditions of reclamation remain ambiguous. This scene in Connecticut and the resulting (temporary) unity of his family adds context to the conditions of that promise. This scene demonstrates a universal appreciation for music temporarily superseding the societal factors dividing his family. I suggest that these two moments involving the father echo the importance Johnson places on music as a means to overcome binary racial divisions and achieve synthesis.

The valuation of music related to love and family situates it as a universal method to communicate in the novel, establishing early in the text that music is a means to consider alliances within and across color lines. The above childhood memories clearly instill a deep connection and love of music in the narrator, however, other influences continue to reinforce music's ability to cross the color line. The narrator's juvenile love interest is encountered in the course of his musical performance and education. Furthermore, the narrator meets and courts his wife through music. The narrator is first attracted to his wife after hearing her perform, and much of their early relationship is built on a mutual love of music. When the narrator

proposes, he also exposes his heritage to his wife, an admission which causes a temporary rift between them. Months later it is music that serves as catalyst for him to once again approach his love interest, and it is while playing that she accepts both his proposal and his secret. These romantic relationships both cross the color line and are closely tied to music in the text.

Music is related in some way the narrator's most emotional memories. As noted in the examples presented above, music is generally found when the narrator is enjoying himself. There are also two significant moments where music invokes or accompanies sadness in the novel. The first is when he encounters his father's white family during a performance of Faust, which directly relates to the next instance. The second event is the music he hears at Carnegie Hall which reminds him of earlier times when he was full of ambition to become a great man. This moment of sadness leads to the narrator's reflection on his yellowing manuscripts. When taken together, these moments evoke a sense of profound loss in the narrator, loss of an opportunity to realize his ambition. These connections between music and sadness are directly tied to the narrator's regret for failing to translate African American experience through music.

The play and composition of music are the narrator's chosen avenue to become a "great colored man" and "reflect credit upon the race."<sup>90</sup> The narrator states a desire to become great after his friend Shiny's speech at graduation. The narrator states, "For days I could talk of nothing else with mother except my ambitions to be a great man, a great colored man, to reflect credit on the race, and gain fame for myself. It was not until years after that I formulated a definite and feasible plan for realizing

my dreams.”<sup>91</sup> This definite and feasible plan remains in a transformative state for much of the text and only narrows into the specific goal of composing universal music based on African American experiences during the narrator’s trip to Europe. The narrator’s relationship with and talent for music makes this an obvious choice. Music is one of the artistic contributions which the narrator declares “demonstrate that [African Americans] have originality and artistic conceptions; and, what is more, the power of creating that which can influence and appeal universally.”<sup>92</sup> This statement parallels the author’s own belief that art and culture are important means to bridge the color line in America, evidenced by Johnson’s statements in his autobiography *Along This Way*: “I now began to grope toward a realization of the importance of the American Negroes cultural background and his creative folk-art, and to speculate on the superstructure of conscious art that might be reared upon this. My first step... was an attempt to bring a higher degree of artistry to Negro songs.”<sup>93</sup>

The connection between music and African American experiences is further emphasized in the novel by his use of the term “professor.” There are two noteworthy uses of the term professor in the novel. The first usage is when the narrator boasts of his honorific title earned by composing and performing in the New York club. The period where the narrator earns and goes by the title professor coincides with his first successes as a composer. He states, “I developed into a remarkable player of ragtime; indeed, I had the name at that time of being the best ragtime player in New York... It was I who first made ragtime transcriptions of familiar classic selections... I was known as the professor as long as I remained in that world.”<sup>94</sup> The second instance of professor is the stated profession of Shiny when he encounters his childhood friend as

an adult. The narrator's dream of becoming a "great colored man," which becomes tied to his compositions, is inspired by Shiny's example as a talented tenth figure. The personal connection between these characters in childhood is mirrored by their titles as adults, reinforcing the connection between the narrator's early aspirations and his eventual desire to compose universal music based on African American experiences.

The narrator's regret at the end of the novel is specifically tied to his failure to be counted among "that small but gallant band of men who are publicly fighting the cause of their race."<sup>95</sup> At the end of the novel the narrator laments his lost opportunity over his "yellowing manuscripts, the only tangible remnants of a vanished dream, a dead ambition, a sacrificed talent."<sup>96</sup> It is these remnants of his original compositions, decaying and hidden away, which are the lost potential he mourns. He never loses the connection to his music, only mourns the fact that these compositions did not become famous works.

The performance of music, including ragtime, continues to be a part of the narrator's life in the text until the death of his wife. The narrator continues to play ragtime and other music after his decision to no longer openly claim any form of racial identity. In the final chapter he relates "my ability to play on the piano, especially ragtime, which was then at the height of its vogue, made me a welcome guest."<sup>97</sup> It is difficult to ascertain the timeline in this portion of the novel, the narrator jumps from having no children to two within a single paragraph. But it is significant that during the process of courting and after marrying his wife the narrator continues to play and compose music. Music continues to be an important part of the narrator's identity through the end of the novel. He is playing music when he

confesses both his love and heritage to his wife. Music is also present in the scene where his wife accepts him and returns his overtures of love. Furthermore, his actions signal a connection between his music and his happiness. The narrator finds inspiration in his new love, he states that his “artistic temperament also underwent an awakening. I spent many hours at my piano, playing over old and new composers.”<sup>98</sup> He does not only play classical music, but specifically mentions playing ragtime music at social gatherings after his marriage. Additionally, mention of playing ragtime at parties is accompanied by the narrator composing and performing music for his intended wife.<sup>99</sup> He mentions new compositions written for his wife during their courtship: “I also wrote several little pieces in a more or less Chopinesque style, which I dedicated to her.”<sup>100</sup> These final instances of the narrator playing music extend to the closest temporal point to the implied present day of the narrative.

Establishing the narrator’s continued connection to composition and performance of music, including ragtime, clarifies what precisely the narrator feels he has lost at the end of the novel. That is, specifically, the chance to become a famous composer in service to the goal of universalizing music to communicate African-American experiences. This ambition of the narrator is in one part deferred after the lynching scene. However, the narrator is at least partly successful in this endeavor, a fact which he fails to recognize. During the narrator’s passing period, he casually mentions ragtime’s popularity. This moment signals both the popular appeal of ragtime and indirectly recalls the narrator’s contribution to the forms popular rise by composing and performing at the club in New York. Though ragtime differs from his yellowing manuscripts in meaningful ways, the narrator’s contribution to ragtime still

represents a bridging of culture, especially considering his success in reaching elusive audiences. His mixed success is intrinsically tied to the millionaire bachelor figure and the complex nature of their relationship.

## The Millionaire and Elusive Audiences

The relationship between the narrator and his millionaire benefactor is complicated, concurrently presenting as both beneficial and detrimental to the narrator. At face value, the narrator regards the millionaire as one of his greatest friends, yet there is a palpable sinister air about the bachelor which taints their relationship. The bachelor displays selfish tendencies, tempting the narrator to remain in the company of the millionaire rather than pursue the narrator's ambition to compose in America. The narrator is seemingly funneled into the employ of the millionaire, yet the job and its opportunities contribute to the narrator's successes as a musician. The most tangible benefit the millionaire provides is access to audiences the narrator would otherwise never meet. Additionally, it is during their relationship that the narrator formulates his specific goal of composing music based on African American experience. Though this goal is never realized, their relationship is further complicated because performance for the millionaire and his guests provides the narrator with a simulacrum of what later becomes his ambition. In this section I will analyze both the circumstances which lead to the narrator's relationship with the millionaire and the dynamics of that relationship in order to demonstrate the continued theme of alliance seeking as methodology for enacting social change.

The narrator's progression of occupations in New York funnels him to the employ of the millionaire. There are both financial aspects and opportunities to reach elusive audiences which lead the narrator to work for the millionaire. Though the protagonist is able to compose and perform music working at the club, his finances are limited and he indicates that he still gambles to earn money while composing and

playing at the club. It is only under the employ of the millionaire that the narrator is able to escape the world of gambling. He explicitly states about the bachelor, "I also gained a friend who was the means by which I escaped from this lower world [of gambling]." <sup>101</sup> There is no doubt that advantage is taken of the narrator and other performers at the club. However, given the contemporary environment his options for financial stability and success are very limited. In a practical way the narrator has no choice but to perform for the millionaire. However, as previously discussed, the narrator is willing to sacrifice financial security in order to reach a larger audience. This fact diminishes the financial aspect of the relationship and brings to the forefront the question of why the narrator works for the millionaire. It is reasonable to assume the narrator could practice his music outside of working hours at any job, but it is clear that he has a preference for situations which allow him to reach new audiences. His preference is demonstrated first in Jacksonville and later reinforced by his decision to abandon cigar rolling in order to pursue the more social environments of the gambling hall and music club. <sup>102</sup> The narrator holds an evident desire for socialization, ever seeking greater audiences and expanding his sphere of influence. This behavior complicates the narrator's work for the bachelor. There remains an imbalance of power, yet the results end up benefitting the narrator more than it first appears.

Working for the millionaire offers contact with audiences the narrator would otherwise lack access to. It is reasonable to assume that the narrator reached a wide audience while working at the club in New York. However, the club has similar limitations to those of the Jacksonville cigar factory. Composing and performing at



the club limits his audience to those who seek out that venue for entertainment. In addition to club regulars, one assumes a transient customer base, but the narrator's ability to reach audiences from the club is limited to specific social circles. There is no reasonable expectation that the narrator's music would ever be heard by the elite class of whites who hold the most power in a racialized society, with the exception of a few figures like the bachelor who go "slumming" at the club. The upper class of whites in America avoided popular culture, especially ragtime.<sup>103</sup> In effect, the club offers no access to the population with the most power to affect change. However, the millionaire provides access to the elite social classes of both America and Europe. The millionaire becomes an access point or agent for the narrator to communicate with otherwise unreachable audiences. The narrator is able to reach an important demographic through his performances, gaining the attention of elite members of society who hold the most power in the social structure. The narrator gains entry into the most discerning and critical of audiences, allowing him to communicate African American cultural forms to the members of American society who are most likely to disregard it. This is a key opportunity which would not be possible without his relationship with the millionaire.

The narrator's success performing in elite social circles is representative of Johnson's belief that music and art are critical to the recognition of cultural value. The acceptance and appreciation of his music in these circles demonstrates the universal appeal of ragtime. Success among refined audiences who favor classical music is a recognition of ragtime as a form of art. It follows then that the successful reception of the narrator's performance of ragtime for these audiences is an

affirmation of the value of African American cultural contributions. Furthermore, this affirmation is a powerful refutation of the dominant view of African Americans and their cultural productions as “inferior.”

The narrator participates in a trade-off by using the millionaire to reach diverse audiences. Reading the millionaire as a mediator between the narrator and the audience positions him as a gateway but also as an opponent. The millionaire is a “shrewd and diabolical enemy; he tries to rob the subject of his most prized possessions; he obstinately thwarts his most legitimate ambitions.”<sup>104</sup> In a practical way the millionaire appropriates credit for the music by introducing it to his social circles. The bachelor’s selfish nature is well served both by the consumption of the narrator’s music and by taking credit for introducing it to others. There is an element of possession related in their relationship, the narrator is called on to perform at odd hours and for extended periods at the whims of his patron. Similarly, the narrator relates that he is lent out to perform for the bachelor’s friends like so much property. There is an overbearing entitlement and sense of ownership displayed by the millionaire. These points paint the millionaire as a “demonic” figure, an image reinforced by the inclusion of Faust in the Europe section.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, his arguments against the narrator’s return to America reflect a selfish attitude. The reasons the millionaire states are functionally enticements to stay abroad and remain indentured to the millionaire.

The negative aspects of the narrator’s relationship to the millionaire speak to the harsher realities tied to the use of ragtime in the text. Ragtime is very different from the narrator’s manuscripts he envisions as a method to translate African

American experiences. Du Bois addresses this when he discusses the blending of African music by degrees:

The first is African music, the second Afro-American, while the third is a blending of Negro music with the music heard in the foster land. The result is still distinctively Negro and the method of blending original, but the elements are both Negro and Caucasian. One might go further and find a fourth step in this development, where the songs of white America have been distinctively influenced by the slave songs or have incorporated whole phrases of Negro melody, as “Swanee River” and “Old Black Joe.” Side by side, too, with the growth has gone the debasements and imitations — the Negro “minstrel” songs, many of the “gospel” hymns, and some of the contemporary “coon” songs, — a mass of music which the novice may easily lose himself and never find the real Negro melodies.<sup>106</sup>

The narrator achieves partial success by translating a blended African American music through his role in popularizing ragtime. However, this musical form differs in kind from the narrator’s manuscripts. Ragging the classics is a blending of music and culture which serves as a bridge, in the manner of the third kind of music in the above quote. However, the wider genre of ragtime also includes “coon” songs and minstrel shows which are “debasements,” compromising ragtime’s effectiveness as a productive tool. Conversely, the narrator’s yellowing manuscripts fit under Du Bois’ classification as Afro-American, cultural productions which communicate African American experiences. The narrator’s failure and regret at the end of the text reminds

the reader that work remains to be done, and sharing experience through music is one of the ways to do that work.

## Conclusion

Johnson's text uses the narrator's journey to present an actionable plan to combat the racist ideology framing his contemporary society. The text employs several structural elements in addition to its narrative in order to achieve this end. The text defines the problems of a racialized society through its characters and the relationships both formed by and imposed upon them. The narrative and its structure demonstrates plurality which undermines the premises of binary racialized constructions. Furthermore, the text presents models and mediums for communicating this message in order to facilitate a society based on understanding of identity and the meaningful relationships which can be formed.

The techniques used in structuring the text strategically facilitate the reception and transmission of the text's message. Framing the text as an authentic autobiography of a bi-racial man both generated interest from social taboo and targeted audiences interested in exploring subject positions outside the binary paradigm. The leitmotif of threes in the text mirrors a literary technique found in the Judeo-Christian Bible. This similarity ingratiates the text to readers from a Judeo-Christian background, working in tandem with the "publisher's preface" to bolster the façade of autobiography. These techniques of indirection improve reception, but also form the foundation for transmitting the text's message. Recurrence of threes subtly but consistently exceeds binary structures, and it demonstrates the futility of classifying people in simple and neat categories when paired with the multitude of factors informing identity demonstrated in the text.

Throughout *The Autobiography* plurality of identity is consistently demonstrated. There can be little doubt that deconstructing monolithic racialized conceptions of identity is a major function of the text. Red and Shiny are figures of openness and possibility who serve as early mediators of binary racial categories. The imposed status of the narrator and his friends in the classroom as society metaphor outlines the constructions which work to divide society along arbitrary racial classifications. In order to combat this, Johnson uses these characters to introduce a multitude of factors which evidence diversity within subject positions subsumed under whiteness and blackness. The narrator's relationship with these characters and his role in bringing them together establishes an antithesis to binary racial divisions by identifying diversity and forming alliances based on meaningful relationships.

The narrator reproduces his success at building alliances in school as an adult, expanding his communication techniques to address broad audiences. Transitioning from his grass roots methodology to public mediums of media and music mirrors Johnson's deep belief in the power of music and cultural production to communicate cultural experience and facilitate respect and understanding. The narrator's efforts result in a qualified and limited success. The narrator's success in proliferating ragtime to diverse audiences serves as a bridge across the color line. However, it is not representative of African American experience in the same way as his yellowing manuscripts. He identifies the transmission of media and culture as a means to achieve synthesis, however he is unable to accomplish his ambition alone. The meditation on his personal failure at the end of the text reiterates the importance of alliances in the text. His reflections on Carnegie Hall and his yellowing manuscripts

serve as a reminder to the reader of the work that remains to be done and provide a blueprint for an effective means to accomplish synthesis.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Rottenberg, "Race and Ethnicity in 'The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man' and 'The Rise of David Levinsky': The Performative Difference." *MELUS* 29, no. 3/4 (2004), 312. Rottenberg summarizes the points of Butler and Foucault as relates to this paper. In her article she states "According to Michael Foucault and Judith Butler, power operates primarily in a positive fashion by producing objects of inquiry and knowledge, constituting norms, and thus helping to create and shape subjects' identities, preferences, aspirations, and behavior. Negative power, then, in its Foucaultian sense, ensures through prohibitions and restrictions that subjects conform to constructed norms."

<sup>2</sup> Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit* (New York, NY: Basic Books), 1969, 179.

<sup>3</sup> Brian Russel Roberts, *Artistic Ambassadors : Literary and International Representation of the New Negro Era* (Charlottesville : University of Virginia Press, 2013), 57. "Johnson's decision to publish anonymously may have been more indebted to diplomacy (both as tact and geopolitics) than these astute readings are apt to acknowledge. Ellen Tarry, who gathered material on Johnson through years of informal conversation with his wife, Grace Nail Johnson, once offered a pithy yet instructive explanation of the novel's original anonymous publication: 'In 1912 the first edition of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* was published anonymously; the writer felt a diplomat should not affix his name to so controversial a book."

<sup>4</sup> Pisiak quoted in Lena Ahlin, *The "New Negro" in the Old World : Culture and Performance in James Weldon Johnson, Jessie Fauset, and Nella Larsen* (Lund, Sweden : Dept. of English, Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University, 2006), 111.

<sup>5</sup> Roxanna Pisiak, "Irony and Subversion in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*." *Studies in American Fiction* 21, no. 1 (1993), 102.

<sup>6</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York : Routledge, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Cathleen Pfeiffer, "Individualism, Success, and American Identity in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*." *African American Review*. 30, no. 3 (1996), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Lena Ahlin, *The "New Negro" in the Old World : Culture and Performance in James Weldon Johnson, Jessie Fauset, and Nella Larsen* (Lund, Sweden : Dept. of English, Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University, 2006), 113.



<sup>9</sup> James Weldon Johnson and Jacqueline Denise Goldsby, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man : Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism* (New York : W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), 110.

<sup>10</sup> Jeff Karem, “Authenticity and Transparency in The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man.” In *New Perspectives on James Weldon Johnson’s The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 64–86 (Athens : The University of Georgia Press, 2017), 81. Karem argues that the fabrication of authenticity found in the text is an end onto itself. He argues that the narrator’s true prank is on his white readership, that he intentionally fails to deliver on the promise of a composite view of black society. Karem concludes that the purpose of this failure to deliver is to purposefully exclude white readership from African American society.

<sup>11</sup> Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York : Routledge, 2009), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Martin J. Favor, *Authentic Blackness : The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* (Durham : Duke University Press, 1999), 32. In this section of his book Favor addresses the significance of the narrators coloring in school stating “not only does this mark a moment in which the narrator recognizes at least the possibility of multiple authentic African American subject positions, but it also functions as a recognition that whiteness too may be a racial category, one to which the narrator also has access.”

<sup>13</sup> Favor, *Authenticating Blackness*, 28. “Johnson was well aware of the way African American identity had become irreducible to a simple set of criteria by the time he published *Ex-Colored Man*. He realized that African Americans could not be regarded simply as an undifferentiated bloc of person; he recognized differences within the African American community, particularly ‘a rising middle class which since emancipation had gradually become differentiated from the Negro masses...[and was] deeply imbued with the goals and ideals inherent in the traditional notion of the American dream.”

<sup>14</sup> Mason quoted in Favor, *Authenticating Blackness*, 30.

<sup>15</sup> Pfeiffer, “Individualism, Success, and American Identity in The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man,” 8.

<sup>16</sup> Pisiak, “Irony and Subversion in James Weldon Johnson’s The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man,” 112.

<sup>17</sup> Pfeiffer, “Individualism, Success, and American Identity in The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man,” 2.

<sup>18</sup> Wendell Phillips, *Speeches, Lectures, and Letters* (New York : Negro Universities Press, 1968), 106.

<sup>19</sup> Phillips, *Speeches, Lectures, and Letters*, 110.

<sup>20</sup> James Weldon Johnson, "Letter to Grace Nail Johnson, June 26, 1912," June 26, 1912. JWJ\_MSS\_49. Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library. Johnson states in this letter "The absolute secrecy of authorship must be maintained – you can see the importance of this from the Times's review; as soon as it is known that the author is a colored man who could not be the character in the book, interest in it will fall. There must always be in the reader's mind the thought that, at least, it may be true."

<sup>21</sup> Ahlin, *The "New Negro" in the Old World : Culture and Performance in James Weldon Johnson, Jessie Fauset, and Nella Larsen*, 112. "Johnson was well aware of the problem that the African American author had of writing for both white and black Americans, each audience with its own restrictive demands."

<sup>22</sup> Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward 2000-1887* (Oxford ; Oxford University Press, 2009), 16. Doctor Leete identifies himself as a physician when the protagonist awakes in the year 2000. Doctor Leete is both the protagonist's host and becomes a mediator for the utopian world described in the text.

<sup>23</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 15.

<sup>24</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 24.

<sup>25</sup> Richard. Kostelanetz, *Politics in the African-American Novel : James Weldon Johnson, W.E.B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison*, Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies ; 0069-9624 No. 143 (New York : Greenwood Press, 1991), 23.

<sup>26</sup> James Patterson and Michael Travers, "The Use of Three in the Bible," *The Third Day Motif*. Accessed January 9, 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 11. (Emphasis mine). The primary example of this connection is the narrator's categorizing of three classes of African-Americans in relation to white people discussed on page 42.

<sup>28</sup> Patterson and Travers, "The Use of Three in the Bible."

<sup>29</sup> Erich Auerbach, "Figura." *Scenes From the Drama of European Literature*, 86.

<sup>30</sup> Auerbach, "Figura." *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, 58.

<sup>31</sup> Donald C Goellnicht, "Passing as Autobiography: James Weldon Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man." *Critical Essays on James Weldon Johnson* (New York, NY: G. K. Hall & Co., 1997), 118.

<sup>32</sup> Goellnicht, "Passing as Autobiography: James Weldon Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man," 118.

<sup>33</sup> Goellnicht, "Passing as Autobiography: James Weldon Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man," 119.

<sup>34</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 9.

<sup>35</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 10.

<sup>36</sup> Du Bois, *The Talented Tenth*. This quote is taken from near the beginning of Du Bois essay The Talented Tenth. His full statement is “Men we shall have only as we make manhood the object of the work of the schools—intelligence, broad sympathy, knowledge of the world that was and is, and of the relation of men to it.”

<sup>37</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 10.

<sup>38</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 10.

<sup>39</sup> Favor, *Authenticating Blackness*, 37.

<sup>40</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 11. After the narrator is identified as a person of color in school the other children tease him. Shiny is the only person to intercede on the narrator’s behalf: “Shiny’ said to them, ‘Come along, don’t tease him,’ and thereby won my undying gratitude.”

<sup>41</sup> Phillips, *Speeches, Lectures, and Letters*. Wendell Phillips was an active abolitionist and famed orator who delivered and also published a series of speeches given on the abolition of slavery. One such speech is to Irish American supporters of abolition given in January of 1842, accompanied by a petition signed by Irish American community and religious leaders and over sixty thousand Irish Americans. The speech calls upon Irish Americans to use their votes in support of abolitionist candidates, in order to solidify the political power of the North against slavery. One of the earliest records of the speech’s presentation is found in the archives of the New York Times, Dated February 1, 1960 in an article titled: Toussaint L’Ouverture.; Lecture by Mr. Wendell Phillips.

<sup>42</sup> Transcription of Toussaint L’Ouverture delivered by Wendell Phillips December 1861, in New York and Boston.

<sup>43</sup> Transcription of Toussaint L’Ouverture delivered by Wendell Phillips December 1861, in New York and Boston.

<sup>44</sup> Transcription of Toussaint L’Ouverture delivered by Wendell Phillips December 1861, in New York and Boston.

<sup>45</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 81. During their tour of Washington DC the Doctor states that “Washington shows the Negro not only at his best, but also at his worst.” Further on he remarks, “You see those lazy, loafing, good-for-nothing darkies, they’re not worth digging graves for; yet they are the ones who create impressions of the race for the casual observer... But they ought not to represent the race. We are the race, and the race ought to be judged by us, not by them. Every Race and every nation is judged by the best it has been able to produce, not by the worst.”

<sup>46</sup> Ben Glaser, “The Autobiography as Ars Poetica.” In *New Perspectives on James Weldon Johnson’s The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 147–68. (University of Georgia, Athens, 2017), 154. “Shiny’s speech, like Frederick Douglass’s famous ‘What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July’ derives its

power from suggesting a past that is alive because it is unsatisfied by the present.”

<sup>47</sup> Johnson, “The Truth About Haiti, an N.A.A.C.P. Investigation,” 217.

<sup>48</sup> Marlene Daut, “Before Harlem: The Franco-Haitian Grammar of Transnational African American Writing.” *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2015), 387. In this article Daut argues for an international literature which can be characterized by a language of solidarity, linking Afro diasporic writings by their use of a franco-Haitian grammar. She puts forth the argument which recognizes a transnational African American studies which begins much earlier than the Harlem Renaissance. “Alternately, the works under consideration here constitute what we might call, drawing on the work of Kirsten Silva Gruesz and Susan Gillman, a diasporic “textnetwork” of transnational African American writing ideologically based in a Haitian Atlantic world of solidarity and antislavery activism.”

<sup>49</sup> Daut, “Before Harlem: The Franco-Haitian Grammar of Transnational African American Writing,” 385.

<sup>50</sup> Roberts, *Artistic Ambassadors*, 33.

<sup>51</sup> Roberts, *Artistic Ambassadors*, 33.

<sup>52</sup> Roberts, *Artistic Ambassadors*, 26.

<sup>53</sup> Roberts, *Artistic Ambassadors*, 27.

<sup>54</sup> Roberts, *Artistic Ambassadors*, 57. “Johnson’s Maintenance of Anonymity was no doubt partially inspired by his desire to continue in what was for him the compromising role of US diplomat. As a consul who claimed he was aspiring to become the ‘American Minister to somewhere,’ Johnson was subject to constraints—both de jure and de facto—regarding the pronouncements he could comfortably make.” Additionally, Johnson states in his autobiography *Along This Way* that when *The Autobiography* was published he had hoped for an appointment to the consul in France. 291.

<sup>55</sup> Roberts, *Artistic Ambassadors*, 9.

<sup>56</sup> Jacky Collis Harvey, *Red: A History of the Redhead* (New York, NY: Black Dog and Leventhal Publishers, 2015), 1. Red hair occurs in only 2 percent of population worldwide. However, a map at the beginning of the introduction shows the percentage is above 10 percent in Ireland and Scotland.

<sup>57</sup> Tara Mairead Cathryn Stubbs, *American Literature and Irish Culture, 1910-55 : The Politics of Enchantment* (Manchester, UK : Manchester University Press, 2013), 33. Stubbs discusses how Fitzgerald’s Irish heritage bled into his work starting in 1922, noting how his protagonist’s often have red hair themselves and characters such as Anthony from *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922) self-identifies with Chevalier O’Keefe who was “a semi-fictional Irishman – the wild sort with a genteel brogue and ‘reddish hair.” Fitzgerald quoted in Stubbs 35. Stubbs further notes that

there is an autobiographical argument to Fitzgerald's male protagonists who shared his weakness for women, his problems with alcohol and his red hair.

Additionally, 19<sup>th</sup> century literature also evokes the connection between Irish and red hair. W. M. Thackeray's novel *The History of Samuel Titmarsh and the Great Hoggarty Diamond* (1841) is one example. The novel includes a reference to 13 red haired sisters and their Irish husbands.

<sup>58</sup> Theodore Allen, *The Invention of the White Race* (London ; Verso, 1994), 30.

<sup>59</sup> Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 21.

<sup>60</sup> Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 9.

<sup>61</sup> Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 9.

<sup>62</sup> Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 9.

<sup>63</sup> Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 9.

<sup>64</sup> Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 27.

<sup>65</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 7. In the retelling of the schoolyard bullying scene the narrator confesses his belief that he is white at this stage in his life. When telling the story to his mother, the young protagonist employs a racial slur, indicating that he is both aware of racialization and considers himself separate from the object of his story. His mother chastises him for his language, but omits any mention of racial status. He relates that he felt bad afterwards, "not because she had convinced me I had done wrong, but because I was hurt by the first sharp word she had ever given me." It is key here to note that he did not believe he had done anything wrong, either in harassing the colored boy or in his use of language. This clearly situates him as understanding the relative power structures of race and insinuates the primacy of his assumed position in the hierarchy.

<sup>66</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 11.

<sup>67</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 27.

<sup>68</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 82.

<sup>69</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 86.

<sup>70</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 86.

<sup>71</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 86.

<sup>72</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 45.

<sup>73</sup> Nancy Raquel Mirabal, "The Afro-Cuban Community in Ybor City and Tampa, 1886-1910," *OAH Magazine of History* 7, no. 4 (1993), 20. "Cigar factories were not racially segregated and Afro-Cubans received the same wages as white Cubans for comparable work."

<sup>74</sup> Mirabal, "The Afro-Cuban Community in Ybor City and Tampa, 1886-1910," 20. "When Afro Cubans arrived in Ybor City to work in the cigar factories, local laws and customs defined them as black and assigned them to the same legal

category as African Americans, despite the differences in language and heritage... to better understand how racial segregation laws affected legal definitions of race for African Americans in Florida, please refer to Jerrell H. Shofner, *Nor Is It Over Yet: Florida in the Era of Reconstruction, 1863-1877* (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1974), and Wali Kharif's 'Black Reaction to Segregation and Discrimination in Post Reconstruction Florida,' *Florida Historical Quarterly* (Fall 1987)."

<sup>75</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, 110.

<sup>76</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, 40.

<sup>77</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, 59.

<sup>78</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, 59.

<sup>79</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, 61.

<sup>80</sup> Kevin Thomas Miles, "Haunting Music in The Souls of Black Folk," *Boundary 2* 27, no. 3 (2000), 202. Miles introduces the term *aporia* in reference to the music in *The Souls of Black Folk*, citing the origin of the term as Aristotle. "Aristotle used this term as a means of pointing toward that way of being situated when the inability to proceed beyond the impasse becomes what is most instructive."

<sup>81</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, 104.

<sup>82</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 157.

<sup>83</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, 47.

<sup>84</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, 54. A very similar statement is made in Edward Berlin's *Ragtime: A Musical and Cultural History*: "European royalty liked ragtime: 'King Edward VII of Great Britain, William of Prussia, German Emperor, and Nicholas II, Czar of all the Russias, have accorded it their approval, confess that they like it.'" 45.

<sup>85</sup> Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, 9.

<sup>86</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, 7.

<sup>87</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, 19. "My father stepped across the room, seized me in his arms, and squeezed me to his breast. I am certain that for the moment he was proud to be my father."

<sup>88</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, 21.

<sup>89</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe and Jean Fagan Yellin, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Oxford ; Oxford University Press, 1998), 60. George gives Tom a silver dollar necklace the morning of Tom's departure after his master sells him to the slave trader. George tells Tom to "keep it, and remember, every time you see it, that I'll come down after you, and bring you back."

<sup>90</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, 26.

<sup>91</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, 26.

<sup>92</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, 47.

<sup>93</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2008), 152.

<sup>94</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, 61.

<sup>95</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, 110.

<sup>96</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, 110.

<sup>97</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, 102.

<sup>98</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, 104.

<sup>99</sup> Edward A. Berlin, *Ragtime : A Musical and Cultural History* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1980). This moment in the text presents an interesting parallel to Scott Joplin. Joplin composed a rag for his second wife titled “Bethena” which is described by one biographer as “an enchanting an enchantingly beautiful piece that is among the greatest of ragtime waltzes.”

<sup>100</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, 104.

<sup>101</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, 61.

<sup>102</sup> Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, 59. “I at last realized that making cigars for a living and gambling for a living could not both be carried on at the same time, and I resolved to give up the cigar-making.”

<sup>103</sup> Berlin, *Ragtime*, 32. “Reacting to what they perceived as a threat to ‘good music,’ fearing that Bach and Beethoven might be replaced by Botsford and Berline, and moreover, attributing youthful rebellion to ‘unwholesome’ Negro influences filtered through the new popular music, these self-appointed protectors of public taste and morals lashed out against ragtime with unreserved virulence.”

<sup>104</sup> René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel; Self and Other in Literary Structure* (Baltimore,: Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), 11.

<sup>105</sup> Joseph T. Skerret, “Irony and Symbolic Action in James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*,” in *Critical Essays on James Weldon Johnson* (New York, NY: G. K. Hall & Co., 1997), 81. Skerret states that “The bachelor comes to represent, then, a demonic force in the narrator’s life, a powerful impetus which urges him to abandon his black identity and escape into whiteness.”

<sup>106</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 159.

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