Adena Spingarn

Writing the Old Negro in a New Century: James Weldon Johnson and the Uses of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

Abstract This essay examines the production of a dynamic "Old Negro" figure in African American discourse during the New Negro Renaissance. Conflicting impulses to claim the Old Negro as an ancestor and to renounce him as an obstacle to racial progress mirrored a broader tension about representing slavery in black cultural production. While Alain Locke and other critics called for literature to portray the Negro of the new day and discard the old representations, James Weldon Johnson understood the Old Negro's enduring importance to modern black self-conception. His 1912 novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, portrays the consequences of accepting existing, white-authored literary representations of the Old Negro. While Johnson's ex–colored man fails to reclaim this figure, Johnson himself did exactly that in his 1917 adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), an operatic cantata that until now has never been examined. In this text, Johnson incorporates and evolves the Old Negro into a contemporary literary tradition that challenges the racial violence of Jim Crow and celebrates black survival.

Keywords lynching, reading, memory, slavery, shame

When Alain Locke heralded the arrival of the New Negro in his era-defining collection, *The New Negro* (1925), he simultaneously announced the departure of the Old Negro. Rhetorically, neither the birth of the New nor the death of the Old were novel; both terms had been in use since at least the 1890s, when black Americans in the Jim Crow South began to distinguish themselves from the formerly enslaved older generation by calling themselves *New Negroes*.[1] Over the years, this term took on a variety of celebratory meanings, in the 1920s becoming identified with political radicalism and creative expression. New Negro rhetoric is so important to the

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way that scholars understand the political mood and artistic production of that time that it is sometimes called the New Negro Era.

Whatever the New Negro's signification over the years, this figure was usually positioned against a dynamic Old Negro figure that also took on a variety of political and cultural identities. Whereas the New Negro has been the subject of a significant amount of scholarship in recent years, the Old Negro has received far less attention. Yet the history of this figure within the black community is no less complex and illuminating. While the Old Negro was influenced by the many literary and visual images of black Americans circulating during the nineteenth century, it was as much a product of black discourse as of images produced by whites.[2] This figure served a crucial rhetorical function over decades of racial protest, embodying the race's history as well as a new generation's rejected values.

Opposing impulses to claim the Old Negro as an ancestor and renounce him as an obstacle to the progress of the race mirrored a broader tension within the black community about how—and whether—to represent slavery in cultural production. Locke and other critics of this era called for literature to portray the Negro of the new day and discard the old representations. In 1918, Benjamin Brawley asserted that "the day of Uncle Remus as well as of Uncle Tom is over" (158), and Locke (1997, 5) repeated the sentiment in his introduction to *The New Negro*, announcing the end of "the day of 'aunties,' 'uncles' and 'mammies' . . . . Uncle Tom and Sambo have passed on." These metaphors suggest the extent to which characters like Uncle Tom and Uncle Remus were associated not only with old-fashioned literature, but also with the historical past. With the Old Negro safely relegated to history, the New Negro would replace outdated literary modes and outworn characters with a fresh aesthetic and a modern expression of the race. Brawley (1918, 149, 157) called for American authors to tell the story of "the Negro of the new day"; they should "not remain forever content to embalm old types and work over outworn ideas." For these critics, a politically progressive literature necessarily rejected engagement with these "old types." Indeed, black American readers would have limited access to narratives challenging the devoted slave and servant images broadly perpetuated in American culture until writers such as Jean Toomer, Sterling Brown, and Zora Neale Hurston brought greater nuance and dignity to black folk culture.

James Weldon Johnson was unusual among his contemporaries in understanding the importance of the Old Negro even in a new era. His 1912 novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, suggests the significance of the Old Negro to modern black self-conception and the consequences of accepting white-authored literary representations of this figure.[3] In the novel, the ex–colored man's unquestioning reliance on existing literary depictions is a coping mechanism that ultimately prompts him to leave the race and instead live as a white man. While this character fails to reclaim the Old Negro, Johnson himself turned toward this figure by not only celebrating black spirituals as major contributions to American art, but also rewriting the most famous Old Negro of them all, Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom, in a 1917 stage adaptation that has been unexamined until now.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 antislavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the best-selling book of the nineteenth century after the Bible, had a dynamic cultural life long after the abolition of slavery. Stage adaptations first appeared shortly after the novel's serialization in the *National Era*, drawing large audiences in the North and provoking protests from whites in the South. Well into the twentieth century, a seemingly unlimited variety of stage adaptations flooded the nation, presenting *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in forms including melodrama, burlesque, and opera.[4] Johnson's stage adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* appropriates Stowe's story and characters into a protest against lynching and an affirmation of black spiritual power, showing how the literary traditions of the Old Negro can serve the exigencies of black life in America. In this text, Johnson picks up the mantle dropped by the protagonist of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, suggesting that black writers should not abandon the Old Negro, but rather should incorporate and evolve this figure into a contemporary literary tradition.

The Old Negro

Before the publication of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the minstrel stage provided American popular culture's dominant images of blackness. With primarily comic characters such as Jim Crow, Zip Coon, and Jim Dandy—types that found their way into Stowe's novel despite her rejection of the theater as immoral—blackface minstrelsy occasionally incorporated sentimental figures through the musical compositions of Stephen Foster.[5] Yet it was Stowe's novel, which William

Stanley Braithwaite (1997, 30) called the nation's "first conspicuous example of the Negro as a subject for literary treatment," and its many stage adaptations that established the sentimental slave as a key figure in the American racial imagination.

After the Civil War, the literary tradition of the Old Negro was continued both by nostalgic white writers (Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus, the devoted "darkies" of Thomas Nelson Page's plantation fiction) and by black writers (Uncle Julius in Charles Chesnutt's conjure tales, Uncle Daniel in Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy*, some of the speakers of Paul Laurence Dunbar's dialect poems). Writing alongside a minstrel stage tradition and a visual culture that featured devoted slaves yearning for the old plantation days, US fiction writers ultimately created not a monolithic character but a diverse group of Old Negroes who nevertheless shared a context (the social relations and rural spaces of the South) and a set of traits (old age, outward submissiveness, and lack of formal education). While American literature and popular culture featured plenty of older black women characters, the "representative" Negro invoked by Johnson and many other black public voices was, as Hazel Carby (1998) has pointed out, masculine. As such, the Old Negro's story follows a linked but distinct path from the female equivalent, the Mammy.

Black and white Americans saw the Old Negro not simply as a cultural construction but also as a historical figure. New Negroes regularly positioned themselves against a historical Old Negro whose characteristics dovetailed with the white-created literary and stage character and who, like the New Negro, took on a variety of identities in response to political and cultural circumstances. After the Civil War, black Southern elites dismissed the Old Negro as the simple, uncivilized foil for the educated and refined New Negro produced by postbellum schooling. In Reverend W. E. C. Wright's 1894 narrative of "The New Negro," for example, slavery had made black people ignorant and illiterate, and the Old Negro had been plagued with "inveterate unthrift and dependence" (Wright 2007, 24). This Old Negro would naturally fade in the march of progress. With the firm establishment of Jim Crow, however, New Negroes defined themselves against a more dangerous Old Negro, a complacent type who, unwilling to fight for his rights, replicated the power structures of slavery. In the wake of the massive racial violence of the Red Summer of 1919, the New York *Crusader* announced that "The Old Negro and his

futile methods must go. His abject crawling and pleading have availed the Cause nothing. . . . The New Negro now takes the helm. It is now OUR future at stake. Not his. His future is in the grave" (quoted in Kerlin 1920, 25). It was time to eliminate the Old Negro from the political scene.

Unlike the New Negro, an identity proudly claimed within the black community, the Old Negro was an inherently oppositional figure in African American politics, a negative designation inflicted by others rather than self-claimed. Accepting negative conceptions of a historical Old Negro, many public voices in the early twentieth century argued that this type needed to die out to make way for the more strident younger generation. Often, this rhetoric used "Uncle Tom" as an interchangeable archetype of the Old Negro. Indeed, the collapse between *Uncle Tom* and *Old Negro* is reflected in the title of a recent collection of essays about Booker T. Washington: *Uncle Tom or New Negro?* (Carroll 2006).

While turn-of-the-twentieth-century writers such as Chesnutt and Dunbar created their own versions of the Old Negro, in the new century, critics increasingly called for literature to portray contemporary black life instead of "embalm[ing] vanished or vanishing types" (Brawley 1918, 147). With Chesnutt's fiction and Dunbar's sentimental poetry deemed both topically and aesthetically old-fashioned, African American literature turned toward contemporary urban stories, leaving representation of antebellum life and characters to the white authors who portrayed "the beauty of life in the glorious times 'befo' de wah'" (149). While some ex-slaves published autobiographies during the first decades of the century, slavery and the Old Negro became no-fly zones in black American fiction. Consequently, half a century after it was published, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was still among not only the most castigatory accounts of slavery in US fiction, but also the most humane literary depictions of the enslaved.

The Ex–Colored Man's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

Even in the view of the black writers who created Old Negro characters, this character type was too dominant. In the early twentieth century, Chesnutt and other leading black critics, including Braithwaite and Brawley, called for American literature to represent the rising professional classes because they would be more fully "representative" of the race. The upwardly mobile narrator of Johnson's *The Autobiography*

of an Ex-Colored Man both enacts and affirms this call for the representation of the New Negro. The novel's 1912 preface, attributed to "The Publishers" but written by Johnson, frames the book as an intervention in a literary tradition that has "treated the colored American as a *whole*" (1990, xxxiii) and failed to represent the variety of the race. Claiming to offer the first "composite and proportionate presentation of the entire race, embracing all of its various groups and elements, showing their relations with each other and to the whites" (xxxiii), *Autobiography* indeed covers a lot of geographical and social ground. Its self-consciously panoramic sweep follows the narrator from his early years in the South to his adolescence in Connecticut, where he reads only white-authored texts and the Bible, and then through a series of social, professional, and geographical moves. After a theft aborts his plan to attend Atlanta University, he embarks on a roaming journey in which he becomes, successively, a cigar roller in Florida, a New York City gambler, the personal piano player and companion to a wealthy international traveler, a collector of black spirituals, and ultimately, after witnessing a horrific lynching, a white businessman. Over the course of his travels, the ex–colored man encounters and describes many kinds of people. Among these is the Old Negro, a figure he repeatedly invokes and then dismisses. Representing the Old Negro not only as a foil for the values of a new generation but also as a vessel for feelings of shame and complicity in racial injustice, Johnson's novel represents both the threat and the ultimate psychological necessity of engaging with this figure.

Autobiography portrays the attractions and perils of accepting even seemingly benign white-authored narratives of the Old Negro, telling the story of a man who, from his early years, uses literature to understand himself and the world around him. Beginning with his reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the ex–colored man is quick to accept the Old Negro as historical truth and to reject it as a personal model. In what was up to that time the most extensive discussion of Stowe's novel and its protagonist within black literature, the ex–colored man describes a deep personal identification with this novel, which as a child he read "with the same feverish intensity" as he did the Bible (Johnson 1990, 28). Practically, this reading provides an account of the slavery past that he cannot find in the history books and newspapers he scours for information. It also helps him understand his identity and history, unlocking narratives of nation, family, and race.

"*Uncle Tom's Cabin*," he asserts, "opened my eyes as to who and what I was and what my country considered me; in fact, it gave me my bearing" (29). After the ex–colored man reads this novel, he is able to articulate his previously vague questions about race. His mother, in turn, breaks her silence about her romantic and ancestral past, speaking freely for the first time about his white father and about "things which had come down to her through the 'old folks'" (29–30). Stowe's novel thus becomes an access point for several layers of self-understanding.

If it seems ironic that a novel written by a white woman helps the ex–colored man understand his place in America, this choice of reading material in fact makes him a typical black reader of his era. During the early twentieth century, black periodicals described Stowe's novel as a part of African American history—its role in bringing on the Civil War was widely acknowledged by Americans of all racial identities and political stripes—as well as a true chronicle of historical people and events. As Barbara Hochman (2011) has shown, the novel served a special purpose for young black readers amid a general post-Reconstruction silence about slavery from the adults who remembered it.[6] Indeed, Johnson's autobiography, *Along This Way* (1933), acknowledges this feature of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by describing it as a text whose "effect upon *and within* the Negro race in America" (203, emphasis mine) was not matched until the publication of W. E. B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) a half century later. In the late nineteenth century, so many African Americans claimed to be the "original Uncle Tom" that the 1903 death of a Kentucky man who claimed to be the inspiration for Stowe's character prompted newspapers to quip, "This makes about the two hundred and third 'original' Uncle Tom who has died within the past 45 years" ("Another 'Original' Uncle Tom" 1903). Likewise treating a scene from the novel as a historical event, a 1920 *Crisis* article identified the "real site of [Eliza's] crossing" (Koch 1920, 118).

For Johnson's narrator, as for many black Americans of his time, the Old Negro is a useful figure for navigating the past and the present. The ex–colored man endorses the accuracy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at the level of both system and character, situating Uncle Tom in what he calls the novel's "fair and truthful panorama of slavery" (Johnson 1990, 29). While this character is not a personal role model for the ex–colored man, he is an unquestioned representative of American history:

> For my part, I was never an admirer of Uncle Tom, nor of his type of goodness; but I believe that there were lots of old Negroes as foolishly good as he; the proof of which is that they knowingly stayed and worked the plantations that furnished the sinews for the army which was fighting to keep them enslaved. But in these later years several cases have come to my personal knowledge in which old Negroes have died and left what was a considerable fortune to the descendants of their former masters. (29)

Viewing Uncle Tom as representative of "lots of old Negroes," the ex–colored man considers the character neither a hero nor a serious concern, at least not explicitly so. The fact that the ex–colored man's defense of the accuracy of Stowe's novel pays more attention to Uncle Tom than to Legree underscores the usefulness of the Old Negro to his self-definition. Referencing Uncle Tom enables him to construct a narrative of the slavery past in which many "foolishly good" Old Negroes "knowingly" supported the political mission of the Confederacy, thus becoming complicit agents of their own enslavement. The narrator's account of these "old Negroes" also extends into the present, as he describes similarly loyal behavior more recently. In addition to encouraging the young ex–colored man's understanding of himself and his history, then, Stowe's novel helps him articulate and support his view of the contemporary South.

For the many critics who read Johnson's novel as a parody, the paragraphs in which the ex–colored man praises *Uncle Tom's Cabin* seem to be an obvious support. Any black man who accepts this novel as a faithful picture of antebellum slavery would seem to be an ironic figure.[7] But the ex–colored man's assessment aligns with the rhetoric of his era. Recounting his life story retrospectively, Johnson's protagonist considers Stowe's novel from a historical moment in which it is under attack. These attacks come not from black activists, but from white Northerners who have assented to white Southerners' censure of the novel for being too castigating in its portrayal of slaveowners and too optimistic in its portrayal of black Americans. Recently, the ex–colored man reports, some who claim "there never was a Negro as good as Uncle Tom, nor a slave-holder as bad as Legree" have successfully removed the novel from Northern libraries (Johnson 1990, 29). This context reflects turn-of-the-century responses to Stowe's novel: in 1903, while Johnson was living in New York City and writing

the first draft of *Autobiography*, the city's superintendent of schools banned Stowe's novel from school libraries. "Mrs. Stowe's story," the superintendent explained, "does not belong to to-day, but to an unhappy period of the country's history, the memory of which it is not well to revive in our children" ("'Uncle Tom's Cabin' Blacklisted" 1903). This imperative to avoid discussion of slavery was the product of the white South's increasingly successful reclamation of the memory of slavery and the Civil War. After Reconstruction, a divided nation put aside sectional animosities by reuniting around a romanticized vision of the antebellum South and a defanged narrative of the Civil War that did not condemn the South. An ideology of national reconciliation encouraged Americans to view the Civil War as a conflict that proved the valor of Union and Confederate men equally, with neither side right or wrong.[8] This ideology also involved a complementary reimagining of antebellum Southern life: romantic fictions of aristocratic plantation life denied the horrors of slavery and instead "stressed the loyalty and devotion of the old black servant to the southern family" (Silber 1993, 108). Although not as vicious as much of the nation's antiblack rhetoric, such romantic fantasies were just as pernicious, folding an argument for an immutable racial hierarchy and against black progress into a happy plantation story. In the case of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, even the scenes at the Shelby plantation violated this nostalgic conception, for the affectionate feeling between Mr. Shelby and his slaves does not prevent him from selling them.

Johnson's ex–colored man is not unusual in defending *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. New York City's decision to ban Stowe's novel from school libraries provoked criticism from the St. Paul, Minnesota, black newspaper the *Appeal*, which saw the ban as a new low in American racial politics. "As things now seem to be going," the paper lamented, "we will soon need another Harriet Beecher Stowe, another John Brown, and another Lincoln to get us out of our impending disasters more dreadful than they were 'befo' de wah'" (*Appeal* 1903). Like other black publications of the time, the *Appeal* recognized that the racial situation was getting so bad that it was almost as if the goals of Stowe's novel had never been accomplished. In a 1915 editorial published in the *New York Age*, Johnson himself publicly supported *Uncle Tom's Cabin* against the era's growing antebellum nostalgia when a theatrical company in Atlanta was "forbidden to play the usual version of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin'" and instead transformed it into a piece called

"Old Plantation Days."[9] In the new version, "the offensive parts were expurgated, Simon Legree was transformed into a sort of benevolent patriarch, [and] Uncle Tom was made into a happy old darkey who greatly enjoyed being a slave and who ultimately died of too much good treatment." Johnson's sarcastic critique of the transformations that enabled "Old Plantation Days" makes it clear that such representations were, in Johnson's mind, not typical of "the usual version" of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in US theaters (quoted in Wilson 1995, 12). Uncle Tom could be amended to become the white South's preferred version of an Old Negro, but the two were not the same. In Johnson's 1917 adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, he would articulate his own interpretation of Uncle Tom.

In *Autobiography*, however, the ex–colored man imagines that the Old Negroes he encounters in fiction accurately reflect antebellum slaves as well as their descendants in the South. Although he is capable of recognizing when what he sees does not match what he has read in books—he observes that his father can't be "classif[ied]" among the fictional fathers he's encountered (Johnson 1990, 25)—in moments of actual or rhetorical contact with poor black Southerners, he affirms the traditional image of the Old Negro. During his "first real experience among rural colored people," a venture into the South to collect old slave songs, he finds "log cabins and plantations and dialect-speaking 'darkies'" that apparently so closely match American literature's "generally accepted literary ideal of the American Negro" that the scene "does not require description at my hands" (122). In his view, the dominance of such types in American literature is problematic not because they are inaccurate, but rather because they unfairly reflect on the educated elites. According to the ex–colored man, such types are "an obstacle in the way of the thoughtful and progressive element of the race" (122). As such, his attitude echoes the ideology of racial uplift literature, which emphasized the injustice of lumping all black people into one (lower-class) group.[10]

The Shame of the South

The ex–colored man's attitude toward the Old Negro is rooted in a fraught relationship with the legacy of slavery in the South. Just as American fiction positions the Old Negro character only in the South, the ex–colored man invokes this figure only in relation to those living south of the Mason-Dixon line. Over the course of *Autobiography*,

Johnson's protagonist comes into contact with many different segments of the nation's black population. Poor Southerners, the people who live geographically and socially closest to slavery, receive his most critical and condescending treatment. Although he encounters many sketchy characters in New York City, even going so far as to admit that he "did not become acquainted with a single respectable family" (83), he doesn't judge them the same way he does Southerners. In fact, he writes about the city's underworld quite glamorously. Poor black Southerners, on the other hand, are frequent targets of his condescension and even disgust. As he travels to Atlanta University, he is "almost repuls[ed]" by the black folks he encounters. The only thing that doesn't repel him is their dialect, which awakens "a feeling of interest" (Johnson 1990, 40). More clinical than brotherly, this interest makes the South a site of amateur ethnographic fieldwork by the ex–colored man, a "participant-observer" trying to understand the difference between dominant and marginalized groups.[11]

Moreover, in the process of distinguishing himself from these people, the ex–colored man sanctions and repeats the mocking tone of a literary mode that he explicitly rejects for himself. Although he resents the notion that any representation of black people living in respectable homes and acting "'just like white folks' would be taken in a comic-opera sense" (Johnson 1990, 123), he takes on precisely that mock-heroic tone when he describes an "amusing" scene of rural black Southerners traveling barefoot along a "hot and dusty road" to church, carrying their brand-new shoes across their shoulders. "When they got near the church," he observes, "they sat on the side of the road and, with many grimaces, tenderly packed their feet into those instruments of torture. This furnished, indeed, a trying test of their religion" (127). In taking an amused and ironic view of the rural folks' discomfort with shoes, a fundamental marker of civilization, the ex–colored man suggests his own civilized superiority. Like all such humor, this anecdote rejects identification with its object.

Class distinctions are important to the ex–colored man because they help him construct a vision of US racial politics in which other black people, and particularly poor Southerners, are complicit in their own social positions. In an extended quasi-sociological analysis of the black community in the South, he postulates three rigid categories, each with its own relation to whites, and claims that these "apply generally to every Southern community" (Johnson 1990, 55). (Note that

he makes no parallel effort for Northern black communities.) The first group in the ex–colored man's catalog consists of devoted servants, who are "simple, kind-hearted, and faithful; not over-fine in their moral deductions, but intensely religious" (57). Making a distinction between religion, to which this group is intensely devoted, and morality, of which it has less nuanced views, the ex–colored man suggests class's intellectual and moral inferiority. And once again, he uses literary tradition to support his observations: in his view of the South, "the affectionate relation" between black domestic workers and their white employers "has not been overdrawn even in fiction" (125). The servant class, he concludes, is satisfied to love and be loved by whites. It does not occur to him that the appearance of contentment that he finds in fiction might mask a more resistant population.

Accepting such fictional depictions of black Southerners enables the ex–colored man to distance himself from the realities of being black in the South. Although the preface to *Autobiography* promises an "initiat[ion] into the 'freemasonry,' as it were, of the race" (Johnson 1990, xxxiv), a claim that implies that the race shares a foundation of sympathy and fellow feeling, the ex–colored man shows little sense of a connection to the servant class, nor to the second category he describes, a "desperate class" (56) of laborers, criminals, and drunks. Describing a mutual hatred between this class and the white South, the ex–colored man assigns blame to those who, for their hatred of "everything covered by a white skin," are "in return . . . loathed by whites" (56). Once again, this account allows him to make sense of racial injustice in a way that neither demands his action nor acknowledges its threat to his own life. Indeed, he finds it unsurprising that white Southerners mistreat this group. Although he explains that the "desperate class" is a product of conditions and not incorrigibly bad, his antipathy is so strong that he asserts that "there is no more urgent work before the white South, not only for its present happiness, but for its future safety, than the decreasing of this class of blacks" (56). Explaining that killing them will not deter their acts of "hatred or degeneracy" (56), he objects to racial violence purely on the grounds of efficacy. His alarm about the danger posed by lower-class black folks to the white South and his total lack of empathy rather disconcertingly echo the views of racist propagandists like Thomas Dixon. If Johnson's text is ironic here, it's a dangerous irony.

Finally, the ex–colored man communicates great sympathy for the third group, into which he places himself: the "progressive class" that has not been adequately represented in American literature. He thinks that members of this class are the real victims of the nation's race problems, "the ones . . . who carry the entire weight of the race question; it worries the others very little" (Johnson 1990, 59). Unable or unwilling to imagine that the race question affects the lower classes in any substantial manner, he is blind to the exploitation, cruelty, and violence that face the black poor in the South.

What is at stake in the ex–colored man's insistent detachment from poor Southern black folks becomes clear when he witnesses a brutal lynching. This event dramatizes his urgent psychological need to protect himself from his threatened position as a black man in America. Indeed, the lynching is so shocking and threatening that describing it requires a linguistic disruption. The ex–colored man interrupts his otherwise calm, indirect address of the reader to ask, in the novel's only direct address to the reader, "Have you ever witnessed the transformation of human beings into savage beasts?" (Johnson 1990, 136). But the beast here is not only the lynch mob: the narrator's condescending and sarcastic language dehumanizes the victim of the crime too. He describes the lynching victim as barely human, "a man only in form and stature, every sign of degeneracy stamped upon his countenance. His eyes were dull and vacant, indicating not a single ray of thought. Evidently the realization of his fearful fate had robbed him of whatever reasoning power he had ever possessed" (136). By commenting that the victim has little of the "reasoning power" that distinguishes humans from beasts, the ex–colored man desperately attempts to separate himself from the murdered man—for he is, of course, a man, in more than "form and stature." Yet his effort to disassociate himself from this man is unsuccessful: "powerless to take my eyes from what I did not want to see" (136), the lynching forces him to face his own impotence against robust external forces that classify the entire race into a single, victimized group.

Witnessing the lynching provokes deep and lasting psychological distress for the ex–colored man, who does not respond to this horrific event with righteous anger, sympathy, or empathy. In contrast to the intense but brief guilt he feels earlier in the novel when he is tangentially connected to the murder of his romantic interest, he expresses no guilt at failing to intervene. Instead, the lynching makes

the ex–colored man feel tremendous shame. Part of his shame is for his nation, which violates its own democratic principles by allowing such barbarity. But the most "unbearable shame" comes from his feeling of forced affiliation with the victims of racial violence: "shame that I belonged to a race that could be so dealt with" (Johnson 1990, 137), "shame at being identified with a people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals" (139). Unlike guilt, which develops from an individual's belief that he or she has violated his or her own accepted standards of behavior, shame is an externally oriented affect, coming from a feeling of personal inadequacy according to accepted standards. Guilt allows the subject to maintain a distinction between the self and the violating behavior. Shame, however, collapses the two, such that the violation *is* the self, and it manifests as "fear of exposing one's defective self to others" (Wong and Tsai 2007, 11). While guilt can be mitigated by the subject's atonement, shame cannot, for it robs the individual of his or her very subjectivity. This loss of subjectivity pervades the ex–colored man's account of the lynching, which he experiences as a spectacle of black impotence, a public judgment on a race that "could be" treated so inhumanely. Despite his rigid self-differentiation from certain portions of the black community, the sight of the lynching reduces the ex–colored man to an object: because he "belongs" to the race, he is subject to "being identified" as one of them by others.

Shame about the race's past has quietly surfaced throughout *Autobiography*. For example, the ex–colored man's account of the origins of the black "progressive class" associates slavery with shame. "Out of a chaos of ignorance and poverty," he observes of this group, "they have evolved a social life of which they need not be ashamed" (Johnson 1990, 59). If the educated portion of the race does not need to feel ashamed, the implication is that those who have not "evolved" in the same manner *do* need to feel ashamed, and that even those farthest removed from the conditions of slavery must look back on a shameful past. He diagnoses a similar dynamic at play for black elites who are "ashamed" of musical traditions from the slavery era and prefer to sing "hymns from books" instead of "the old slave songs" (133). Their shame is "natural," according to the ex–colored man, for "they are still too close to the conditions under which the songs were produced" (133). Embracing the old slave songs would mean coming into

uncomfortable contact with the memory of slavery at a time when the race is struggling to prove how far it has come.

Of course, as a musician the ex–colored man recognizes the immense value of the Old Negro's cultural traditions, even though he believes that these songs require the polish of a sophisticated cultural translator like him. He cites the cakewalk, the jubilee songs, and the Uncle Remus stories (which he describes as "collected by," rather than authored by, Joel Chandler Harris) as the most powerful arguments against black inferiority. And yet the shame he feels in response to the lynching is so overwhelming that he rejects any affiliation with the black community. How can one assert one's distance from the ignorance, poverty, and powerlessness of slavery while still valuing the artistic traditions—and indeed the people—that emerged from that past? For the ex–colored man, this ultimately proves impossible. Although he ends his narrative famously wondering whether he "sold [his] birthright for a mess of pottage" (Johnson 1990, 154), he resolves to live the rest of his life as a white man, with only a box of yellowing manuscripts to remind him of his dead ambition. No longer able to maintain a strict wall between himself and the Old Negro, the ex–colored man decides to walk away from the shame of the past rather than interrogating his relationship to it.

In *Autobiography*, Johnson suggests that without access to alternative depictions of enslaved ancestors and folk communities, black readers are likely to accept white-authored fictions as truth. These fictions have the potential to undermine racial solidarity. Whether or not one reads the ex–colored man's final expression of regret as ironic, it is clearly a loss. Many novels of passing emphasize the personal losses required by taking on a new racial identity. For the protagonists of Chesnutt's *The House behind the Cedars* (1900) and Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1929), for example, passing means leaving behind siblings, parents, and friends from youth in favor of a new life of professional and social access. The ex–colored man mourns the loss of connection not to people but to a rich cultural tradition to which he once hoped to contribute. Unable or unwilling to contradict white characterizations of the Old Negro, Johnson's narrator fails to imagine the full humanity of the lynched man and ultimately leaves behind the very cultural tradition that could have helped him do so.

The Ex-Colored among Us

Johnson, as we know, did not forsake his race. As the collector and editor of anthologies of Negro spirituals and poetry, he worked throughout his distinguished career to show that black cultural traditions were essential to American culture.[12] In his work as a prominent leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), he organized mass demonstrations and lobbied Congress to pass an antilynching bill. In light of these and many other forms of service to the race, many critics since the 1970s have emphasized the differences between Johnson and his narrator, suggesting that *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is an ironic text that brings the competing ideologies of Johnson as "race man" and the ex–colored man as race shirker into palpable tension.[13] That Johnson is commonly believed to have left his name off of the novel until its 1927 republication by Knopf would seem to support this ironic distance between the author and his protagonist. Yet the choice of anonymous authorship might, as Jacqueline Goldsby (1998) partially suggests, have been a marketing ploy; indeed, a May 26, 1912 letter from Johnson to John E. Nail documents the author's desire "to create interest and stir up curiosity" by way of the anonymous publication (Johnson Papers, box 42, folder 59). Moreover, black periodicals approvingly attached Johnson's name to *Autobiography* as early as 1914,[14] with the middle-class periodical *Half-Century* serializing the novel (1919–1920) with Johnson's name attached.

Autobiography's reception in its initial and second printings suggests that the ex–colored man's account of the different segments of the race accorded with those of the New Negro community. In other words, if we understand Johnson's narrator as a sympathetic, if flawed, protagonist, we read Johnson's novel as his contemporaries did. For its first several decades, *Autobiography* was received and embraced by black readers, even those who knew Johnson well, as exactly the representative account its 1912 preface promised. Indeed, the reviews collected in Goldsby's recent Norton edition of *Autobiography* reveal that it was extremely rare for early twentieth-century critics to refer to Johnson's work as a novel at all, never mind an ironic one (see Goldsby 2015, xlvii–lii).

In receiving this book as the authentic autobiography of a man who decides to pass for white, Johnson's readers followed the ex–colored

man in taking a fictional character as fact. However, unlike the ex–colored man, who rejects Uncle Tom as a personal model, Johnson's readers sympathized and identified with *Autobiography*'s protagonist. After Johnson's former Atlanta University roommate, George A. Towns, received a copy of the anonymously published novel, he wrote to Johnson on July 1, 1912, that he quickly realized who had written it; the personality and style of his old friend were obvious (Johnson Papers, box 20, folder 484). "I was gratified to see how well you had put your own personality into the story," Towns wrote. When he came to the chapter in which the ex–colored man attends a church "big meeting," Towns recognized a country preacher "about whom we laughed so much after your first summer as a country 'fesser'" and became certain that Johnson was the author. His recollection of laughing with his friend about the preacher calls to mind the ex–colored man's amused description of the country folk walking barefoot to church carrying their shoes. Towns thought the novel's long expository sections were the book's main draw: "Your analysis of conditions in this country, your descriptions . . . are all strong and unusual points that ought to win a reading for the story, if one could only know before hand that those things are in the book."

Critics also treated *Autobiography* as representative of contemporary black life. Jessie Fauset's 1912 review for the *Crisis* expressed skepticism that the book was an authentic autobiography but described it as "the epitome of the race situation in the United States" and "a work of fiction founded on hard fact" (Fauset 1912). Reviews in black periodicals from a variety of regions and political persuasions took a similar stance, describing the novel as, for example, "the autobiography of the whole race and not of one man only" (*New York Amsterdam News*) and "a fair presentation of the difficulties encountered by the superior Negro in his struggle for advancement" (*Boston Guardian*). Far from censuring Johnson's protagonist, critics expressed compassion for his difficult situation. The ex–colored man was a "sensitive soul" (*Atlanta Southern Life*) who deserved sympathy for feeling so circumscribed by his race that he felt compelled to break through the color line and pass for white.[15] Later in the decade, when *Half-Century* republished Johnson's novel, the magazine's paratextual introduction to the first installment of the serial—"in which the author reveals conditions as they actually exist between the Whites and the Blacks in the United States today and explains why many fair complexioned

Colored people are forced over into the White Race"—suggested to readers that the text was representative of contemporary black life and should be read sympathetically.[16]

Similar responses greeted the novel after its 1927 Knopf rerelease, now with the author's name attached. Johnson's NAACP colleague Mary White Ovington (1927) wrote in her review of the novel that "the ideas in it, the discussion of the race problem, the evaluation of white and black" were "the author's own." Even the black poet and activist Alice Dunbar-Nelson, who gave *Autobiography* the rare and remarkably perceptive assessment of a "delicate satire" (she doesn't specify what the novel satirizes, but it seems to be the idea that race is visually obvious), nevertheless believed that Johnson's novel represented the full spectrum of black American life, showing "every variety of American Negro from the crudest field hand to the cultured professional man and their wives in the inner circles of fashionable Washington" and "epitomiz[ing] the life and soul of the Negro, as surprisingly true then as now" (Dunbar-Nelson 1927). This critical reception suggests that Johnson's novel resonated with black readers not only as a remarkable literary achievement but also as an indexical text reflecting their lives and worldviews. What is important here is not whether or not every position in the novel mirrors Johnson's own, but that ideas that seem clearly discordant to contemporary readers apparently did not conflict in the 1910s and for some years after. Less ironic in its time than it is now, *Autobiography* thus restaged the overly literal reading practices that the novel itself critiques.

Johnson's Uncle Tom

If the ex–colored man is indeed a "representative" character of Johnson's time, what is Johnson ultimately suggesting about literary representations of the Old Negro? What are the consequences of reading—or of not reading—texts like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*? New Negro era critics including Braithwaite, Brawley, and Locke called for American fiction to turn away from the Old Negro, and especially Uncle Tom. For the most part, their solution to the problem of the Old Negro's persistence in US literature and popular culture was to reject this figure entirely in favor of more modern subjects and aesthetics. Locke, in his introduction to *The New Negro*, heralded a vibrant New Negro

who exerts agency and power through his creative and critical efforts. Like many New Negroes before him, he defined this type against an Old Negro. To Locke, the sentimental fictions of the Old Negro no longer served any purpose. He proclaimed that "the popular melodrama has about played itself out, and it is time to scrap the fictions, garret the bogeys and settle down to a realistic facing of facts" (5). Envisioning a New Negro literature defined by contemporary racial expression, Locke suggested that one would do best not to engage with the Old Negro in the first place.

While Locke and other critics of the Harlem Renaissance positioned the New Negro against an Old Negro best forgotten, Johnson understood the necessity of both figures in African American literature. Instead of ignoring or refuting the Old Negro, he suggested that this figure could be built on productively. By writing his 1917 stage adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, an operatic cantata with orchestral accompaniment, Johnson not only suggested that Stowe's story should be interpreted as a testament of black strength, but also exemplified how black literature could mobilize the Old Negro literary tradition for new challenges. It is not clear whether the surviving handwritten notes and detailed nine-page synopsis ever became fully scripted or performed, but the fact of its composition illuminates Johnson's relationship to the figure of the Old Negro in general and to Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and its stage adaptations in particular.[17] Bringing together selections from the plot and characters of Stowe's novel, the music of the spirituals, and the operatic form, Johnson's text follows the ex–colored man's dream of merging folk melodies with European cultural forms. Drawing a straight line from Simon Legree to twentieth-century lynch mobs, the adaptation emphasizes the historical continuities of both American racial violence and black spiritual strength. In this work, Johnson seriously and sympathetically refashions Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a defiant cry against the racial violence of the Jim Crow era.

During the months before he wrote the cantata, antilynching efforts played a significant role in Johnson's life. Becoming the NAACP's field secretary in 1915, he spent his first year in the position traveling from Richmond, Virginia, to Tampa, Florida, and back again, building a Southern membership for the fledgling organization. Lynching was a key issue for the NAACP at the time. In the summer of 1917, Johnson traveled to Memphis, Tennessee, to investigate the murder of Ell

Persons, a black man gruesomely burned alive under an unsupported accusation of murder. Arriving in Memphis, Johnson visited the pile of ashes and charred wood where the lynching had recently taken place. As he later recalled in *Along This Way*, the bones were all gone, "scrambled for as souvenirs by the mobs" (Johnson 1933, 317). At the site, Johnson "reassembled the picture" of the lynching in his mind, imagining "a lone Negro in the hands of his accusers, who for the time are no longer human; he is chained to a stake, wood is piled under and around him," and five thousand men, women, and children "look on with pitiless anticipation, with sadistic satisfaction, while he is baptized with gasoline and set afire" (317). In *Autobiography*, witnessing a lynching prompts feelings of shame and impotence in the ex–colored man. Johnson's autobiography, however, envisions the murder of Ell Persons as a martyr's baptism by blood, thereby challenging the power dynamic of lynching. "I tried to balance the sufferings of the miserable victim against the moral degradation of Memphis," he recalls, "and the truth flashed over me that in large measure the race question involves the saving of black America's body and white America's soul" (318). The loss of black life brings with it a grave moral and spiritual loss to white America.

Writing in the months after his visit to Memphis, Johnson responded to this experience by looking to the literary tradition of the Old Negro, and in particular to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The theme of his operatic cantata, typed on the cover page of his synopsis, closely echoes his realization at the lynching site: "Theme of the work—Those who persecute and oppress the Negro may harm him physically, but they cannot crush him so long as they cannot crush his soul." This theme diffuses some of the power of the oppressor, stressing the humanity that the most dehumanizing violence can never take away. Unlike the refutations of Stowe's work that would begin to appear in African American literature during the late 1930s and 1940s, Johnson rewrites Stowe's novel *as* African American literature: told from a black perspective and woven with the emotional expression of the spirituals, this is a story about the depth of black romantic love and the spiritual endurance of black Americans in the face of oppression. If *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* anticipates the aesthetics of modernism, as Jacqueline Goldsby (2015) has recently argued, Johnson's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* looks back to the melodramatic mode, calling on us to sympathize with the suffering of the virtuous Uncle Tom and

embracing Stowe's hero as a figure of comfort and strength during an era of racial violence. In staging Legree's attack on Uncle Tom, Johnson's script departs from an emerging realist tradition of lynching dramas.[18] In the black-authored lynching plays of the 1910s and 1920s, violence is often left off stage in favor of emphasizing the practice's communal damage.[19] Johnson, however, uses the suffering individual body as an emblem of the community.

Johnson began working on his adaptation from the novel's stage tradition rather than Stowe's novel. His preparatory notes largely follow the plot and structure of George L. Aiken's 1852 adaptation, the most famous and influential of the many *Uncle Tom's Cabin* plays.[20] These notes incorporate nearly the full panoply of Aiken's characters and a conclusion in which Marks, as he did in many of the stage productions, shoots Legree. But by the time Johnson marked up a cheap printed copy of Aiken's script, his focus tightened on a small set of scenes. In the three-part synopsis that he ultimately produced, Johnson reorients the attention of Stowe's story toward its black characters. Eliminating almost all of the white characters (the only two white characters are the slave auctioneer and Legree) as well as Topsy, Johnson focuses on the woes and joys of Eliza and George, Cassy and Emmeline, and Uncle Tom. The synopsis also features slave chorus numbers throughout, underscoring the relevance of the Old Negro and his musical traditions. This music, which Johnson indicates should be based on jubilee songs, suggests a variety of experiences under slavery, from "joyful" singing on the Shelby plantation to a "slow and mournful, weird and solemn" rendition of the spiritual "Go Down, Moses" in the slave market scene.

Johnson's choice of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the operatic form for an antilynching protest may have been inspired by his encounter with songs from a similar project composed by Will Marion Cook for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. When rumors surfaced that Cook's opera would convert Uncle Tom's usual deathbed scene into a recreation of a recent lynching in Paris, Texas, thus connecting the death of the innocent Uncle Tom at the hands of Legree with the lynching of a black man by a white mob, white Southern Democrats mobilized against the production, arguing that Cook's opera would perpetuate the "slanders on American slavery and on the southern people that are embodied in 'Uncle Tom's Cabin'" ("The South at Chicago" 1893). The *Richmond Dispatch* insisted that the

production would be a "monstrous injustice" to the South—making no mention, of course, of the monstrous injustice of the Texas lynching (quoted in "'Uncle Tom's Cabin' at the Fair" 1893). Whether or not the rumors of this planned lynching scene were true, Cook's full opera was never staged at the fair; in the end, its only appearance was in a few musical selections performed at the ceremony for "Colored People's Day" (see "Colored People's Day" 1893).

One might expect Johnson's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to tell the story of the defiant fugitive George Harris rather than the martyred Uncle Tom. But Johnson's synopsis, which in the first part lingers on the "passionate love" between Eliza and George, makes George's role primarily romantic; there is no scene of the freedmen's defense. Even so, this scene is radical, coming at a time when black romantic love was essentially absent from any US performance to a white audience. ("Negroes were supposed to mate in a more primeval manner," Johnson [1928] later reflected.) Opening on the Shelby plantation at daybreak, the first part of the cantata begins with Tom summoning the other slaves from their cabins and sending them off to work. They exit, singing joyfully. The action turns to Eliza, who sings about her happy love for her husband and child. Her song is interrupted by a visit from George, who reports that his cruel master has demanded that he forsake Eliza and take a new wife on the master's plantation. Because of this, he intends to escape to Canada and work to purchase Eliza and their son Harry from the Shelbys. The couple say goodbye in a "Passionate love farewell." That night, Eliza visits Tom's cabin and tells him that both he and her child have been sold by Shelby to a slave trader. Here, unlike in Stowe's novel, Tom at first tries to dissuade Eliza from running away, but he then concedes that she should go. However, he won't go with her. With his total Christian submission to God, he thinks that it's God's will for him to go down the river. After Eliza exits, Tom sings "Down River, Down River" and then breaks down sobbing, his sorrow contrasting with the joyful singing and dancing of the slaves back in their quarters.

Following a musical interlude in which Eliza crosses the ice, the second part of the cantata takes place entirely in a slave market, where Uncle Tom is now confined and waiting with Emmeline and other slaves to be auctioned off by the slave trader, Skeggs. The scene begins with the slaves singing "full chorus pleading for deliverance." Skeggs then "commands the slaves to cease their mournful noise, to

get jolly and come out." Legree buys Tom as well as Emmeline, who is torn from her mother. In an important departure from the plantation scenes staged by the many *Uncle Tom's Cabin* companies, which featured a variety of performances by black singers and dancers, Johnson's auction mart features only sorrowful singing, a choice that underscores the emotional damage of a system that sells children away from their mothers.

Unlike the black-authored lynching plays that shied away from representing violence against black bodies on stage, the third part of Johnson's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* transforms Legree's assault on Uncle Tom into a scene of spiritual victory. Set on Legree's Red River plantation, the third part begins with a chorus of slaves. Arriving with Tom and Emmeline, Legree announces that they cannot escape, for he owns all the land as far as the eye can see. Having established the slim possibility of escape to Tom and Emmeline as well as to the audience, Legree tells Tom that he will be an overseer—and that "he wants none of [Tom's] psalm singing or [B]ible business." He also informs Emmeline that she will be his mistress. Cassy, now the spurned mistress, confronts and threatens Legree. When Emmeline resists Legree's advances, he calls for Tom and commands him to flog her. But Tom refuses, and Johnson's tense account of the struggle stresses the immense power of the slave's Christian faith:

> Legree is furious. He demands, "Do as I command you. Are you not mine in body and soul?" Tom answers, "My body belongs to you, but my soul belongs to God." Tom stands serene in God's strength. The devil in Legree quails before the God in Tom. Legree knows he can rule and injure Tom's body, but he is infuriated because he wants to rule and injure his soul and sees that he cannot, *showing that whatever the enemies of the Negro may do, they cannot crush him so long as they cannot crush his soul*. Tom refuses to take the cowhide which Legree hands him. Legree, in a paroxism [*sic*] of rage, strikes Tom over the head with the butt of the lash, felling him to the ground. He is then seized with a panicky fear of the good in Tom. He cannot look at him lying there. He hides his eyes from the sight shrieking, "He has conquered! I could not crush his soul."

The scene inverts Legree's power over Tom, so that the Christian slave spiritually triumphs despite Legree's physical dominance. Tom's faith and virtue provoke terror in Legree, whose dialogue makes Tom's supremacy explicit: "He has conquered! I could not crush his

soul." At the end, Cassy is the one who finally takes Legree's life, plunging a dagger into his heart when he makes a move on Emmeline. But it is Tom who has shown, as the script emphatically underlines, that the black soul is stronger than any physical violence. Instead of advocating a particular strategy of protest, this theme reapportions power. Ending in tragedy for the black body but victory for the black soul, the work is less a castigation of white cruelty than a celebration of survival. Tom does not model effective political action, but his Christian fortitude is a source of defiant comfort and ultimate triumph. Like Stowe's novel, Johnson's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* turns righteous suffering into a form of power, one fortified rather than undermined by Uncle Tom's Christian submission.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Johnson was reluctant to abandon the Old Negro types. In his 1928 essay, "The Dilemma of the Negro Author," he reflected on the limited artistic conception of the Negro in American literature. Nearly all of the black characters white Americans encountered were a variation on two types: the simple, devoted servant, "picturesque beside his log cabin and in the snowy fields of cotton," and the "impulsive, irrational, passionate savage, reluctantly wearing a thin coat of culture, sullenly hating the white man, but holding an innate and unescapable belief in the white man's superiority (478). These types may recall the ex–colored man's categories of black folks in the South. Yet Johnson is quick to point out that his issue is not with whether or not these characters should be created or whether they can provide the material for great literature, but rather with the lack of freedom black authors confront when writing characters for a racially divided audience. White readers would accept only the overused stencils of these character types, he wrote, and black readers did not want them used at all. "There are certain phases of life that [the Negro author] dare not touch, certain subjects that he dare not critically discuss, certain manners of treatment that he dare not use" (480), Johnson observed. Hoping for a day in which black authors could write freely, he believed that there was something valuable in the characters and literary modes of the past. Rather than placing black and white literature into ceaseless combat, Johnson's conception of Negro literature was part of an interracial tradition in which Old Negro characters such as Uncle Tom and Uncle Remus were part of the race's contributions to literature. Neither embracing nor rejecting the Old Negro created by white fiction, Johnson suggested that black writers should not ignore this figure; they needed to rewrite him.

Adena Spingarn teaches courses on American literature and culture at Stanford University, where she was an Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in the Humanities. Her first book, *Uncle Tom: From Martyr to Traitor*, is forthcoming from Stanford University Press.

Notes

Many thanks to Sarah Wagner-McCoy and Arielle Zibrak for their incisive comments as I revised this essay. An earlier version of this argument was presented at the 2012 Modern Language Association conference.

1 On the "New Negro" as a recurrent rhetorical strategy, see Gates 1988. One should also note that the white South concurrently developed its own alarmist rhetoric of a New Negro who did not "know his place." Gabriel Briggs (2015) has called attention to the New Negro's formation in the post-Reconstruction and Jim Crow South.

2 Martha Jane Nadell (2004) suggests that the Old Negro was influenced by "a wide variety of nineteenth-century literary and visual images of African Americans" (10–11).

3 Tess Chakkalakal (2005) links the ex–colored man's reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) with his decision to pass.

4 On the stage history of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, see Frick 2012.

5 On the relationship between minstrelsy and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, see Meer 2005.

6 On black readers and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* during the Jim Crow era, see Hochman 2011 (231–51).

7 Robert Stepto (2015, 354) sees in the narrator's "excessively balanced remarks" on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* another instance of the character's inability to correctly interpret his own life. For M. Giulia Fabi (2001, 96), his praise of a novel "echoing plantation tradition representations of African Americans" is so patently ridiculous that the passage's irony is obvious.

8 On the role of Civil War memory in American culture, see Blight 2002.

9 The 1915 Atlanta amendments to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were part of an extended period of Southern activism against appearances of stage and film adaptations in the region. I address these protests in my forthcoming book.

10 As Kenneth Warren (1993, 79) notes, early twentieth-century black leaders often described racial segregation as unjust and unnatural but "class distinctions as a natural division among human beings."

11 On Johnson's use of this ethnographic trope, see Lamothe 2008, 69–90.

12 Johnson's anthologies include *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* (1925), and *The Second Book of American Negro Spirituals* (1926). Additionally, his *Black Manhattan* (1930) devotes significant attention to black performance history.

13 Readings of Johnson's *Autobiography* as ironic include Goldsby 2015, Stepto 2015, Andrade 2006, Fabi 2001, Goellnicht 1996, Pisiak 1993, Smith 1987, Skerrett 1980, and Fleming 1971.
14 See, for example, Tyler 1914.
15 All of these reviews are available in Johnson Papers (box 51, folder 122).
16 *Half-Century* magazine serialized *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* from November 1919 to December 1920.
17 As far as I can tell, I am the first scholar to discuss Johnson's planned operatic cantata of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and its detailed nine-page synopsis (Johnson Papers, box 75, folder 460). My dating of this undated typescript to 1917 is based on a letter from the American critic H. L. Mencken to Johnson, who apparently wanted to keep his adaptation a secret. Mencken wrote to Johnson, "I am sorry I spilled the 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' beans. Why not announce the work, and so protect your priority? What an opera it would make." (H. L. Mencken to James Weldon Johnson, November 27, 1917, Johnson Papers, box 14, folder 320.)
18 In this tradition, "the threat or occurrence of a lynching, past or present, has major impact on the dramatic action" (Perkins and Stephens 1998, 3).
19 Mitchell (2011) suggests that lynching dramas highlighted "the lasting damage that mob violence did to households, not just bodies, and to communities, not just individuals" (9).
20 On Aiken's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, see Meer 2005 and Frick 2012.

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