Musical Narrative
in James Weldon Johnson's
*The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*

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10 April 2014

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Musical Playlist
of The Autobiography

Track 01
(Folk song): “Goodbye sinner”
Bessie Jones (Alan Lomax recording)
“...she would hold me close, softly crooning some old melody without words...” (Johnson 3)

Track 02
Sakari Tepponen (violin), Inge Beck (organ)
“...the half dim church, the air of devotion on the part of the listeners, the heaving tremor of the organ under the clear wail of the violin...” (Johnson 13)

Track 03
Frederic Chopin: Waltz No. 6 in D flat major, Op. 64 No. 1 “Minute”
Benno Moiseiwitsch (piano)
“I showed my gratitude by playing for him a Chopin waltz with all the feeling that was in me.” (Johnson 16)

Track 04
Vladimir Horowitz (piano)
“...emotions swelled in my heart which enabled me to play the "Pathétique" as I could never again play it.” (Johnson 23)

Track 05
Scott Joplin: “Elite Syncopations”
Scott Joplin (piano roll)
“It was music of a kind I had never heard before. It was music that demanded physical response, patting of the feet, drumming of the fingers, or nodding of the head in time with the beat.” (Johnson 46)

Track 06
Axel Christensen: “Ragtime Wedding March (Apologies to Mendelssohn)”
Michel Cardinaux (piano)
“I used to play Mendelssohn's "Wedding March" in a manner that never failed to arouse enthusiasm among the patrons of the 'Club.'” (Johnson 56)

Track 07
Charles Gounod: Faust, “Avant de quitter ces lieux”
Leonard Warren (baritone)
“Valentine's love seemed like mockery, and I felt an almost uncontrollable impulse to rise up and scream to the audience, "Here, here in your very midst, is a tragedy, a real tragedy!"” (Johnson 63)

Track 08
Scott Joplin: “Treemonisha: Overture”
Marco Fumo (piano)
“...taking the theme of my ragtime, played it through first in straight chords; then varied and developed it through every known musical form.” (Johnson 66)

Track 09
William Dawson: Negro Folk Symphony: I. The Bond of Africa
Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Neeme Jarvi (conductor)
“stirred by an unselfish desire to voice all the joys and sorrows, the hopes and ambitions, of the American Negro, in classic musical form.” (Johnson 69)

Track 10
William Vincent Wallace: “Nocturne Melodique”
Rosemary Tuck (piano)
“I also wrote several little pieces in a more or less Chopinesque style, which I dedicated to her.” (Johnson 95)

Track 11
Frederic Chopin: Nocturne No. 13 in C minor, Op. 48, No. 1
Arthur Rubinstein (piano)
“When I began she drew a chair near to my right, and sat leaning with her elbow on the end of the piano, her chin resting on her hand, and her eyes reflecting the emotions which the music awoke in her.” (Johnson 96)

Track 12
J. Rosamond Johnson & James Weldon Johnson: “Lift Every Voice And Sing”
Nazarene Congregational Church Choir
“The Hampton students sang the old songs and awoke memories that left me sad.” (Johnson 99)
James Weldon Johnson’s The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man is a fictitious autobiographical narrative of a bi-racial man living in the postbellum United States. Johnson structures the protagonist’s narrative according to a series of aural events, both musical and linguistic. Each of these aural events functions as a juncture in the development of the narrator’s racial identity. Ultimately, the narrator fails to create a new African American musical idiom and forsakes his African American identity by becoming ex-colored. By the use of this aural device, Johnson stages the ex-colored man’s musical tragedy and “destabilizes the rigid white/black dichotomy” (Gallego 82). In this essay, I examine the ways in which the protagonist’s exploration of European and African American music mirrors his search for identity.

Johnson references a number of specific works of music and their respective creators in AECM. These musical references serve to figure the narrative around specific musical junctures. In particular, Johnson references works of classical music: a waltz by Chopin, Ludwig von Beethoven’s Sonata in C minor, Op. 13, “Pathétique,” Valentin’s

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1 Hereafter, I will refer to The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man as AECM.
2 There are also many linguistic (aural, but non-musical) events that occur in AECM. Whereas exploring all narrative aural events would provide a more complete analysis of the soundscape of AECM, this would expand my essay considerably.
aria, “Avant de quitter ces lieux,” from Charles Gounod’s Faust, Frederic Chopin’s Nocturne in C minor, Op. 48, No. 1, and a ragtime arrangement of Felix Mendelssohn’s “Wedding March.” These references serve to contextualize the narrative in a particular aesthetic and political environment. As a greater playlist, this music is secondarily significant as a collection.

Johnson, because of his musical knowledge, was able to create a text employing a high degree of musical sophistication. Bob Cole & the Johnson Brothers, the collaborative trio that included Bob Cole, James Weldon Johnson, and his brother John Rosamond Johnson, produced a number of Broadway musicals and wrote many songs in ragtime style. “Artistically, the genre reached its peak in the dialect songs of black songwriting teams such as Bob Cole, and the Johnson Brothers” (Berlin 23). Testament to “its vivid and faithful descriptions of ragtime and the society and aesthetic climate in which it existed,” AECM is respected as a source document, according to Edward Berlin (Berlin 513).

Johnson authored AECM in 1912, directly preceding the Harlem Renaissance. AECM “inaugurates a model for depicting the mulatto condition, a crucial contribution... to the later developments of the subgenre of the novel of passing” (Gallego 45). As the first literary work of this subgenre, depicting issues of double consciousness and prejudice through the tribulations of a bi-racial character, it is a work of seminal importance to the Harlem Renaissance. Harlem’s cultural renaissance is considered to have been “a period of burgeoning creativity and self-reflection in African American art and literature” (Mitchell 3). As a key intellectual of this movement, Johnson authored a wide variety of influential works in addition to AECM, including a real autobiography,
Along this Way, a book of poetry, God's Trombones, two anthologies of Spirituals, an anthology of poetry, and a number of political essays and articles. "Johnson was truly the 'renaissance man' of the Harlem Renaissance," Robert E. Fleming writes, "remarkable both in the breadth of output and in the depth of his contributions" (Fleming preface). And this creative output was connected to a greater political conversation. For such thinkers as Johnson, "Locke, Du Bois, Braithwaite...Charles S. Johnson and other Harlem Renaissance leaders and participants, the creative expressions of African American were viewed as a means toward racial equality and as adequate proof of ability to participate in American life and to contribute to American culture" (Mitchell 4).

One expressly socio-political work published by Johnson in 1930 is Black Manhattan, significant as an early sociological study of race. The very title of the book, Black Manhattan, unifies the conceptually divided white Manhattan with black Harlem, producing a Manhattan of composite culture. Johnson describes this hypothetical "Black Manhattan" as "a black city, located in the heart of white Manhattan, and containing more Negroes to the square mile than any other spot on earth" ("Black Manhattan" 4). Michael Nowlin describes that which Johnson accomplishes in Black Manhattan to be a discussion of the societal double consciousness of black and white communities.

Nowlin quotes Eunice Roberta Hunton, declaring Harlem to be "a modern ghetto," marked by a "lack of genuine traffic between the black and white cities: only an educated few enjoyed New York in its entirety" (Nowlin 317). This tension is an underlying theme of AECM, as the narrator struggles to balance his African American heritage, from his mother, and his European heritage, from his father. It follows that Johnson would stage the narrative in the hottest epicenter of this clashing duality. In
effect, the city limns the narrator's internal struggle with racial identity and produces his external struggle in straddling the respective worlds of white and black. Inversely, as rhetorical device, Johnson’s narrator functions as an “embodiment of that dichotomy, a suitable scenario for enacting the racial, social, and cultural confrontations this figure undeniably suggests” (Gallego 7).

W.E.B. Du Bois, in *The Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1903, originates the notion of racial “double consciousness.” Speaking for the “American Negro,” Du Bois writes, “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” (Du Bois 9). This concept of the African American’s split self-consciousness is seminal towards and a driving philosophy of the Harlem Renaissance. As Gallego writes, “Du Bois makes conscious use of the psychological rhetoric of his time to shape a sort of myth whereby the combination of two identities in a single entity gives way to the creation of a third identity, better and more complete than the former ones” (Gallego 17). The narrator of *AECM* functions as a literalized double consciousness of white and black heritage. Music is the vehicle by which he seeks racial harmony, or a third identity that coalesces his two disparate halves.

One year after the publisher Knopf’s 1927 release of the second edition of *AECM*, Johnson addresses the challenge an author faces in writing for a segregated audience in *Dilemma of the Negro Author*. “When a Negro author does write so as to fuse white and black America into one interested and approving audience,” Johnson writes, “he has performed no slight feat, and has most likely done a sound piece of literary work” (“Dilemma of the Negro Author” 752). In essence, Johnson here theorizes about the crux
of his perceived challenge in writing *AECM*, attempting to create a work palatable to and well-received by people on both sides of the color line. This approach renders the problem of a divided double audience into an issue of producing work for a singular audience. The challenge of this task is acknowledged in *AECM*’s preface: “Not before has a 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, been made” (vii). Given the subject matter of *AECM* and prevalence of racial prejudice at this time, to seek to create a “sound piece of literary work” in that way means to craft an apolitical form to house an inherently political conversation. To realize that which he here idealizes, Johnson harnesses the rhetorical vehicle of music.

In 1912, *AECM* was published without an attributed author, permitting it to read as a real autobiographical account, “a human document” (“Along This Way” 238). At the recommendation of his peers, the 1927 edition was published acknowledging Johnson as the author, becoming “one of the most influential books of the Harlem Renaissance” (Fleming 106). Whereas the first publication of *AECM* preceded the era now identified as the Renaissance, its second edition was published “precisely during the zenith” (Gallego 48). Johnson was immersed in the social and cultural atmosphere present during *AECM*’s second publication, having been elected secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1920, where he remained posted until 1930 (Fleming 19). Johnson was reticent to attach his name to his work, as his name carried with it a recognizable political and social significance.

Johnson’s decision to initially publish his novel without an identified author is indicative of its political intent. The power of this publication decision was
acknowledged by Johnson, as he wrote to educator George Towns, "[w]hen the author is known, and known to be one who could not be the main character of the story, the book will fall flat" (Levy 47). A work of true autobiography about a man who has lived as both black and white sounds differently than a fictive autobiography by a preeminent thinker of the Harlem Renaissance on the same subject. In anonymous publication, authorial presence is not a distraction. Noelle Morrissette argues that this publication decision demands "the reader hear before they see" (Morrissette 51).

Gallego nicely captures and contextualizes this point, arguing that "Johnson's novel 'passes' for autobiography in order...to deconstruct the functioning parameters of the representation of both race and identity imposed by the dominant culture," specifically those of double consciousness (Gallego 49). "Johnson's text is a pioneer study on hybridity that crosses boundaries and categories in an attempt to conceal its fictional character," Gallego elaborates. "Consciously hiding in the genre of autobiography, Johnson's novel revises and updates the rhetorical strategies implicit in autobiographic writing" (Gallego 9).

One such way Johnson accomplishes this is by devising the preface to AECM. Numerous critics suggest that Johnson also wrote this preface, though it is credited to "The Publishers." By adopting a descriptive alias, "The Publishers," to fabricate a distinctly authored preface, Johnson extends the anonymous frame of his work and suggests a particular reading of his own work. By utilizing autobiography, a common Western narrative mode, Johnson allows the narrator's passing as white to be a "generic passing" (Gallego 8). "The subject of autobiography masters the past and the self through
writing, and works to create a subject free from any dialectical or unpredictable relationships to otherness” (Barnhart 52).

In the preface to the first edition of *AECM*, “The Publishers” explain Johnson’s work to provide the reader with “a glimpse behind the scenes of this race-drama which is being here enacted” (vii). This notion of “race-drama” indicates a second essential structuring device of the work—that of performance. Performance exists in two capacities in *AECM*: first, as a manifestation of the autobiographical narrative form, and second, in the aural sounding of the narrative’s musical events. In these same capacities, it is this performance that creates and maintains a distance between reader and narrator. Though *AECM* is not a poetic text, it is doubly “orally-inflected” as a narrated autobiography and as a text involving music (Jones 67). Johnson structures his text in this way, doing that which Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Sarah Webster Fabio accomplish differently in their poetry, according to Meta Jones. As a fictional autobiographical narration, wherein aurality is the primary guiding narrative feature, Johnson's composition of *AECM* translates an aural ethos into a potent political narrative.

So too, the political implications of *AECM* are stated in its preface. Succinctly, “The Publishers” write, “in these pages it is as though a veil has been drawn aside: the reader is given a view of the inner life of the Negro in America, is initiated into the ‘free masonry,’ as it were, of the race.” (vii). Where initiation into racial “free masonry” indicates the successful indoctrination or initiation into a type of brotherhood sympathetic to racial injustice, “The Publishers” here imply a perceived success of *AECM* as an active political document. As such, “The Publishers” explain, Johnson’s work provides the reader “a glimpse behind the scenes of this race-drama which is being here enacted” (vii).
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Crossing the diegetic and non-diegetic worlds, the idea of “free masonry of the race” also appears twice in the narrative of AECM. First, in discussing the way in which African Americans relate differently to white and “colored” people, the narrator writes, “there is one phase of him which is disclosed only in the freemasonry of his own race” (9). Second, in becoming “acquainted with the best class of colored people in Jacksonville” while teaching music and attending church, the narrator recalls his “initiation into what I have termed the freemasonry of the race” (34). The repetition of this concept is striking because of the way in which it parallels the narrator’s description of his life experience and the preface author’s description of AECM’s effect on the reader.

As an inevitable result of AECM’s initial anonymous publication, the narrator is not identified by a name within the narrative. Instead, he is identified foundationally in terms of his race and aural (musical and linguistic) propensity. This is true of all characters in the book, with the exception of a handful of nicknames, and of his hometown in Connecticut, the name of which he actively withholds, writing: “I shall not mention the name of the town” (1). This anonymity produces a distance between the narrator and the reader and draws the reader’s attention to the elements specifically identified by name. It is “Johnson’s skillful manipulation of his unreliable narrator” that allows him to draw out “the complex ironies inherent in American racial attitudes and to depict the psychological ambivalence of his protagonist” (Fleming 109). Through a skillful manipulation of fictive autobiography, Johnson’s discusses issues of African American identity.
Morrissette argues, where “sound contributes to the shaping of the self, the control of the acoustic environment...[it] becomes an issue with real social and political consequences” (Morrissette 33). Johnson’s narrator conveys this by tightly controlling the information included in his narrative, carefully selecting life events that focus the reader on what is heard. In turn, the narrator’s journey is figured by sonic junctures. To understand the rhetorical significance of a musical reference within a written narrative, one must consider the relationship between language and music. Kofi Agawu, Steven Paul Scher, and Werner Wolf’s studies of semiotics and intermediality inform the ways in which literature borrows from music. Whereas music and language share some narrative capacity, such as temporality, music lacks the precision of hetero-referentiality possessed by a language. This renders it unable to tell “stories with concrete settings, characters, and events, and the impossibility of indicating fictionality or other modes of reality” (Wolf 327). Similarly, in his 1999 essay, “The Challenge of Semiotics,” Agawu ponders the question ‘Is music a language?’ ultimately concluding that it is not.

According to Scher’s categorization, music and narrative coexist in three specific forms: “The ‘plurimedial’ combinations of music and a non-musical narrative medium,” such as “the lied or the song cycle (combinations of music and poetry), in musical drama (notably in opera, operetta, and musical), and in plays that make use of diegetic and non-diegetic music”; second, “the presence of, or reference to, music and musicality in a non-musical narrative medium,” such as referencing a particular symphonic work within a text; or third, “the occurrence of narratives and narrativity in music,” which exists theoretically in purely instrumental music, more restricted to hybrid plurimedial forms such as opera (Wolf 324). *AECM* is fraught with musical references in the form of
diegetic musical events. These intermedial allusions are “dependent on historical and cultural parameters,” as they call upon specific external works (Wolf 325). Thus, the “discrete units or segments” of music signified in a text are impacted by their historical context, referring outward to draw specific meaning (Agawu 142). The specific works of music Johnson writes into his text provide the reader with reference points into the diegesis, but simultaneously signify meaning specific to each musical work.

In describing the success of AECM in its preface, “The Publishers” suggest the form by which these aural events are structured, identifying the “race-drama which is being here enacted” (vii). Musical drama is described by Wolf to be a plurimedial combination of narrative and music, wherein equal weight is given to language and music. Johnson’s “race-drama” is structured with junctures of intermedial references to music, rendering the narrative a type of musical “race-drama.” Thus, AECM is intermedial at two levels: first, at the level of its individual musical allusions, and second, at the greater structural level of a musical drama.

From a young age, the narrator recalls that his African American mother would sing hymns and old southern songs in the privacy of their home, accompanying herself with the piano. When she played hymns, she did so from the book, and accordingly, “her tempos were always decidedly largo” (3). This tempo marking is “considered by many theorists of the 18th century…to be the slowest of all” (Fallows). She plays southern songs “freer, because she played them by ear” (3) on the piano, and would often croon “some old melody without words” (3) and old southern songs while cradling the narrator. This first musical memory captures the narrator’s retroactive coloring of his musical roots and his relationship with his mother. By describing her tempos according to the marking
“largo,” the narrator imposes European musical tradition onto his mother’s playing. His mother, however, displays an inclination towards the African American oral tradition of improvisation. It is by the narrator’s interpretation of his mother’s playing, rendering it a coalescence of European and African American forms, that he retrospectively deems listening to his music to amount to some of the “happiest hours of [his] childhood” (3).

When he begins playing piano, the narrator reports his precocious sense of harmony and improvisation, annoying his mother “by chiming in with strange harmonies which I found either on the high keys of the treble or low keys of the bass.” (3). He also recalls a “particular fondness for the black keys” of the piano (3). The narrator’s recollection of his propensity for the black keys perhaps implies his unconscious inclination to identify with his blackness in music. However, he is retrospectively unable to identify his reasons for feeling a particular fondness for the black keys in particular.

At this early stage in the narrator’s life, music is an intimate connecting force between the narrator and his mother. This music, however, is unnamed and vague. This imprecision is a result of retrospective narration, the narrator not able to identify the music of his youth. Thus, the type of music that is most intimate for the narrator in his relationship with his mother is authorless and unidentifiable as a recognizable work, such as “some old melody without words” (3). Hymns “from the book” (3) and “some old Southern songs” (3) describe music in terms of origin, but fail to describe particular musical pieces. In effect, the music of this early episode from the narrator’s childhood life cannot sound. Though its performance exists within the diegesis, it is not presented with the same referential precision as the later examples of European music.
By seven years of age, the narrator had learned "by ear all of the hymn and songs that my mother knew," and indicates his preference to playing by ear, as he "preferred not to be hampered by notes" (4). As he becomes more musically advanced, the natural talent inherited from his African American mother becomes more evident, but he also begins learning the language of European music, memorizing "the names of the notes in both clefs" (4). Upon the recommendation of one of his mother's clients, the narrator begins piano lessons. The narrator recalls that he "invariably attempted to reproduce the required sounds without the slightest recourse to the written characters" (4). With his initiation into Western musical pedagogy, music quickly becomes a subject of regular study, taking up "the greater part" of the narrator's time (4).

After his schoolteacher identifies him as "colored," the narrator becomes self-conscious of his racial identity, effectually ostracizing him from his peers. The narrator describes literature and music to define his life starting at 11 years of age, beginning "to find company in books, and greater pleasure in music" (10). This scholastic compulsion occupies the time he might instead have used to form relationships with peers or pursuing other trades. This quality of character design serves to limit the scope of the narrator as a character, defining him by his interest and investment in the arts. Accordingly, this renders the scholarly foundation from which the narrator becomes an authority on the music that defines his life.

Along this path, the narrator continues his formal training through his study of church organ, crediting his marvelous progress to the fact that he was never dependent upon "mere brilliancy of technic...but I always tried to interpret a piece of music; I always played with feeling." (12). His prodigious ability is therefore conceptualized to be
a result of the coalescence of his abilities, excellently performing pieces of European organ repertoire with his advanced technical skill and expressive ability. He makes clear, though, that he credits the sound and emotion of his mother’s music as the foundation from which he is able to play emotively. “I did not begin to learn the piano by counting out exercises,” the narrator recounts, “but by trying to reproduce the quaint songs which my mother used to sing, with all their pathetic turns and cadences” (12).

Because of his emotional investment in his playing, sending the narrator into fits of “sentimental hysteria” (12), the narrator identifies himself to be a poor accompanist, his interpretation “always too strongly individual” (13). When tasked to accompany a violinist on the organ, however, he confronts his conceptual difficulty with accompaniment because of his romantic interest in the soloist. To do this, the narrator must stifle his black improvisational propensity, thereby masking his blackness for the sake of appealing to the white soloist. Where the narrator associates the musical spirit of the hymns and southern songs with his mother, he finds feelings of romantic love for the white female soloist associated with music of the European repertoire. The manifestation of this romantic love is inextricably binary to the narrator, music and emotions entangled as he idealizes a true artists’ performance, “putting his whole body in accord with the emotions he is striving to express” and crafting that expression to succeed as accompaniment (12).

While still in rehearsal with the violinist, the narrator meets his father for the first time. The narrator’s mother proudly requests that he play piano for this unfamiliar white man. Unnerved by the strangeness of the situation, the narrator is first unable to summon an emotionally invested performance, instead playing “something in a listless, half-
hearted way” (15). When his father responds with genuine enthusiasm to his technical ability, “I showed my gratitude by playing for him a Chopin waltz with all the feeling that was in me” (16). His father reacts to the narrator’s prodigious performance by hugging him enthusiastically. European music here functions to render the narrator proud to be the son of his white father and allows his white father to be proud of his estranged son. It is playing this repertoire with feeling, however, that emotionally bonds them. This similarly conceptualizes music as a rhetorical device that allows and forges emotional relationships, defining the narrator’s identity. His father’s affirmation of his interpretation of European music balances his musical relationship with his mother, anchored in African American music. This event reinforces the way in which the narrator uses music to adapt and communicate.

This affirmation of his passionate musical performance in mind, the narrator continues working with the violinist. The narrator recalls himself “humming snatches of the violin part of the duet, [his] heart beating with pleasurable excitement over the fact that [he] was going to be near her…” (14). Here he performs his visceral excitement of being within the violinist’s presence by humming her instrumental line, in aural performance of her musical performance. The “delights of music and love” are conflated in the narrator’s experience of musical performance (17). Though the violinist and her friends jest about the narrator as a romantic interest, she prophetically fulfills the narrator’s conflation of music and love by “impulsively [throwing] both her arms around” the narrator and kissing him after the great success of their performance (18). Thus, through the narrator’s unexpected success accompanying the violinist, his natural
propensity to play European music with African American feeling is rewarded by a white individual.

Soon after the narrator’s high school graduation, his mother perishes from an unknown illness. Her death marks the end of the narrator’s regular exposure to African American music until he later travels to the South. To raise money for his college education, the narrator’s music teacher coordinates a farewell benefit concert. At the concert, the narrator plays one piece, notably the first musical piece explicitly mentioned by name in narrative: Ludwig von Beethoven’s Sonata in C minor, op. 13, “Pathétique.”

He describes his selection as “a bit of affectation, but...considered it deeply appropriate” (23). This sonata can be described as “expressing either a single mood...or a programmatic idea defined by its title” (Brown). As such, the “Pathétique” conveys an extramusical idea of sadness, per Scher’s definition of narrativity in music. Elaine Sisman, in an article about the rhetorical role of this sonata, discusses the historically accepted notion that this piece captures the pathetic in music. “Everyone can revel in the shared understanding of pathétique,” she writes (Sisman 81). Sisman, quoting German musicologist Carl Dahlhaus, writes, “the overall character indicated by the title of the work really does not need any further comment” (Sisman 86). By indicating the narrator’s awareness of the piece as cliché, “a bit of affectation” in its representation of the pathetic, the narrator exhibits an awareness of this piece’s legacy.

Regardless of its reputation as a piece of this character, the narrator’s performance of this sonata is a strongly emotional experience for both the narrator and his audience:
When I sat down at the piano, and glanced into the faces of the several hundreds of people who were there solely on account of love or sympathy for me, emotions swelled in my heart which enabled me to play the “Pathétique” as I could never again play it. When the last tone died away the few who began to applaud were hushed by the silence of the others; and for once I played without receiving an encore. (23)

As a symbolic reference, the “Pathétique” here represents the narrator’s emotional distress in the loss of his mother. Within that reference, the narrator’s performance of this work allows him to draw on the empathy of the benefit concert attendees to produce a truly great interpretation of this work. This is a different type of relationship that the narrator is able to establish through the vehicle of music—that between performer and audience. By choosing to perform a work of classical music for a likely multiracial audience to honor his mother’s memory and to capture his emotional state, the narrator indicates his musical inclination. It is through a Beethoven sonata that he most feels able to communicate his own emotional state, despite his foundation in the highly emotional and spiritual African American tradition.

After his college tuition funds are stolen from him, the narrator spends some time working in a cigar factory and teaching piano lessons in Jacksonville. The narrator is ultimately overcome by his desire to return north, relocating to New York City. While there, he discovers ragtime, as shocked as he is enamored with the new musical style:

It was music that demanded physical response, patting of the feet, drumming of the fingers, or nodding of the head in time with the beat. The barbaric harmonies, the audacious resolutions often consisting of an abrupt jump from one key to another, the intricate rhythms in which the accents fell in the most unexpected places, but in which the beat was never lost, produced a most curious effect. (46)

Observing the masterful player, the narrator identifies him as both a “master of a good deal of technic” and able to “arouse in his listeners a sort of pleasant surprise at the
accomplishment of the feat” (46). That which appeals to the narrator about this style is its technical demand and emotionally evocative product. Ragtime songs are often syncopated, historically contained improvisatory elements, and “were designed to reach a large and less discriminating audience” (“Ragtime” 20). This description is evocative of the narrator’s musical propensities, and of Johnson’s concept of double audience, where ragtime functions as a universally appealing aesthetic form that supersedes the race line. The narrator is impassioned by this notion of universal appeal, arguing, “not only the American, but the English, the French, and even the German people, find delight in it” (47). While music functions as a vehicle for communication of the two sides of his racial identity for the author, ragtime additionally provides him with an inherently binary music drawing on both African American and European music.

He describes the seminal Negro piano players of ragtime to have known “no more of the theory of music than they did of the theory of the universe,” instead “guided by natural musical instinct and talent” (46). This is true of one such ragtime player with whom the narrator interacts, describing him as a “natural musician, never having taken a lesson in his life...he [could] play almost anything he heard, but could accompany singers in songs he had never heard. He had by ear alone, composed some pieces, several of which he played over for me; each of them was properly proportioned and balanced” (47). The narrator goes on to suggest a mutually exclusive relationship between playing ragtime and classical music. That which made him a great musician was his innate improvisatory skill the narrator also possesses. With formal training, the narrator reasons, this pianist might have been hampered by “the great masters,” referring to European composers and music composed in the European tradition. In suggesting that this pianist
was best suited for playing ragtime music, the narrator foreshadows that which allows him to become “being the best ragtime player in New York” (53).

Axel Christensen, best known for his 1908 ragtime arrangement of Mendelssohn’s “Wedding March,” expressed a frustration with the standardized pedagogy of piano instruction in his 1915 article, “The Teaching of Ragtime versus Classical.” In effect, Christensen argues that ragtime be taught separately from music of the classical repertoire. “There is nothing in ragtime, properly taught, that can possibly interfere with the study of classical music at a later date. On the contrary, the firm legato touch and the absolute even tempo required in good ragtime will be a great help to the student who later takes up classical work” (Koenig 101, emphasis mine). Christensen argues the merits of beginning one’s musical training with ragtime, for previous classical training can impede ragtime performance.

Through learning by ear, “continually listening to the music at the ‘Club,’” and employing his skill, the narrator becomes the self-proclaimed “best ragtime player in New York” (53). He takes credit for Christensen’s innovation, writing, “It was I who first made ragtime transcriptions of familiar classic selections. I used to play Mendelssohn's ‘Wedding March’ in a manner that never failed to arouse enthusiasm among the patrons of the “Club”’ (53). This musical reference is a concrete example of the coalescence of musical traditions, and the narrator is self-conscious of the power of his newfound means of expression.

“By appropriating ragtime’s syncopated rhythms and improvisatory style to revise the European musical texts that had until then shaped his musical self,” Ruotolo argues, “the narrator produces a new musical form that promises to give expression to his biracial
identity and to give him agency within the emerging spaces of American urban culture” (Ruotolo 1). “I secured a wedge,” writes the narrator, “which has opened to me more doors and made me a welcome guest than my playing of Beethoven and Chopin could ever have done” (54). This evaluation is significant because it reveals the narrator’s recognition of the performative value of ragtime as compared to the performative value of European music. Discussing the role of ragtime in the broader cultural context, the narrator writes, “I believe that it has its place as well as the music which draws from us sighs and tears” (47). This retrospectively positions the emotionally evocative European music of the narrative, such as Chopin’s waltz and Beethoven’s “Pathétique,” in juxtaposition to ragtime.

Evident of its importance in the narrator’s life, he follows his retelling of this episode with a brief history of ragtime’s origins. As Johnson notes, ragtime, “made its way to Chicago,” before reaching New York (46). The 1893 Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition, frequently cited as ragtime’s place of public origin, was host to “countless visitors were reportedly thrilled by the jubilant sounds of this ‘new’...and syncopated music” (“Ragtime” 21). This neatly describes the narrator’s reaction and the typical reaction to the narrator’s many performances of ragtime while employed by his patron.

After often listening to the narrator perform ragtime at the “Club,” a wealthy white man hires the narrator to function as the musical entertainment for an event at his home. At this venue, the narrator is told to begin with classical music, which is politely enjoyed as background music. “At a word from the host I struck up one of my liveliest ragtime pieces. The effect was perhaps surprising, even to the host; the ragtime music came very near spoiling the party so far as eating the dinner was concerned” (55). This
reaction to ragtime is consistent when repeated at other parties, reinforcing the notion of ragtime’s universal popular appeal and intrigue (60). Because of his success in performing this ragtime stunt, this man hires the narrator and becomes his patron. Soon after, the narrator’s patron takes the narrator to Europe to astonish partygoers there with ragtime.

While in Paris, regularly playing music at parties, the narrator spends many evenings attending shows at the Grand Opera. These performances of the European classical repertoire strike him as “strangely reminiscent of [his] life in Connecticut” (62). He speaks fondly of the way in which attending these performances allowed him a “fresh breath of my boyhood days and early youth” (62). And this enthusiasm motivates him to return to the music from his childhood and “play the music which I used to play in my mother’s little parlor” (62). Though he finds strange the way in which this repertoire renders him reminiscent of his earlier life, the connection is clear. The previous event of classical music performance mentioned in the narrative is Beethoven’s “Pathétique,” the only preceding diegetic episode of the narrator playing music for the sake of emotional evocation. Though the narrator would always preface his ragtime parlor trick with classical repertoire, these performances are intentionally framed to be subverted by the “the barbaric harmonies” and “audacious resolutions” of ragtime.

In particular, the narrator reports his attendance of a performance of Charles Gounod’s Faust at the Grand Opera. Like the “Pathétique,” this musical reference would likely have been highly recognizable to Johnson’s audience.³ Within the first act of this opera, the narrator becomes “distinctly conscious” of the beauty of the young woman

³ According to the Metropolitan Opera database, Gounod’s “wildly popular” (Morrissette 58) Faust was the opening performance of the Metropolitan Opera House in October of 1883 after its massive popular European revival in 1862 (“Faust {1}”).
sitting beside him, "so young, so fair, so ethereal, that [he] felt to stare at her would be a violation" (62). In the way that she relates to the man sitting on her opposite side, the narrator identifies the pair as father and daughter. He is astonished to recognize this man as his estranged father, then correspondingly horrified by his attraction to his half-sister. Relating his horror outward to that of the character Valentine, in the opera he is simultaneously viewing, the narrator laments:

Valentine's love seemed like mockery, and I felt an almost uncontrollable impulse to rise up and scream to the audience, "Here, here in your very midst, is a tragedy, a real tragedy!" This impulse grew so strong that I became afraid of myself, and in the darkness of one of the scenes I stumbled out of the theater. I walked aimlessly about for an hour or so, my feelings divided between a desire to weep and a desire to curse. (62-3, emphasis mine).

The narrator's projection of self on to tragic character Valentine is compelling because of his similar rhetorical situation seated in the opera house. Like Valentine, the narrator's emotional episode is about an emotional connection to one's sister. The narrator feels a total estrangement in this ecstatic moment of her identification, the total of his loneliness since his mother's death now manifested in familial female form. In devoutly entrusting his sister to the protection of "Lord and King of Heaven," Valentine expresses his sister is deserving of divine protection in his eyes. In expressing that his utmost desire, the narrator expresses "I could have fallen at her feet and worshiped her," expressing a similar notion of deified honor of ones' sister (62).

Valentine sings two arias in the opera: "Avant de quitter ces lieux," wherein he bids his sister Marguerite farewell before departing for battle, and "Ecoute-moi bien, Marguerite!" wherein he curses his sister, blaming her for his death (Huebner). The starkly juxtaposing tone of Valentine's two arias creates a tension in the ambiguity of the
narrator's silent outcry, for it is unclear to which aria the narrator is reacting. Morrissette identifies the aria, "Avant de quitter ces lieux," as a synecdoche of Johnson's reference to Gounod's opera, given the narrator's specific identification of Valentine in the second act, implying the first of his arias (62). Given Johnson's familiarity with the production and that Valentine's tragedy befalls him only in the fourth act (in the second of his arias, which the narrator does not stay to hear), the narrator is not able to compare Valentine's tragedy to his own.

Though the narrator seems to compare his "real" tragedy to Valentine's lesser tragedy, he instead identifies his tragedy while observing Valentine's express his love for his sister, wishing her protection. The narrator feels Valentine's expression of love to be a mockery, for he is unable to perform a similar affection to his estranged sister. Johnson therefore implies that Valentine's tragedy, knowing one's sister and later cursing her in death, is lesser than the narrator's perceived personal tragedy, the "desolate loneliness" of never knowing his sister and missing his mother (62). Music here functions as a medium in which the narrator projects his emotional state outward, thereby heightening the emotional impact reflected inward.

Following this unexpected trauma at the Grand Opera, the narrator undergoes a second upset while performing his ragtime trick at a social gathering in Germany. The narrator's ragtime fails to draw the anticipated reaction of enamored amazement at one such gathering in Germany. The narrator's playing is instead met with frustration, ragtime seemingly understood to be a contrived musical form. This moment marks a vital turning point in the narrator's understanding of his musical potential:

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4 Morrissette suggests that Johnson might have seen a production of this opera while traveling with the Cole and Johnson Brothers trio in France in 1905, and later at the Metropolitan Opera House during the 1902-3 season (Morrissette 58).
I went to the piano and played the most intricate ragtime piece I knew. Before there was time for anybody to express an opinion on what I had done, a big be­spectacled, bushy-headed man rushed over, and, shoving me out of the chair, exclaimed, "Get up! Get up!" He seated himself at the piano, and taking the theme of my ragtime, played it through first in straight chords; then varied and developed it through every known musical form. (66)

The narrator realizes, in retrospective, the implication of this musical reversal. Whereas he had “been turning classic music into ragtime...this man had taken ragtime and made it classic” (66). This recognition brings with it a paradigm shift for the narrator, understanding himself to be “wasting [his] time and abusing [his] talent” by spending years of his life devoted to the performance of ragtime (66). Ragtime is a musically coalescent form, combining European themes with African American rhythms, granting the narrator evocative performative power in voicing both his white and black musical propensities. However, as such, it is a sensationalization of the respective musical traditions, leaving the narrator unmoved as performer. The emotional hysteria the narrator experiences practicing piano in his youth is absent from the narrator’s experience playing ragtime. Though it is astonishing in performance and coalesces African American and European musical conventions, ragtime does not function as a medium of more subtle emotional expression.

Recoiling from his realization that he is subverting his capacity for emotionally communicative musical coalescence, the narrator informs his patron that he wishes to return to the United States. He describes his project to his patron, articulating that he wishes to create a Negro-music inspired work in classical form: a “Negro symphony.” Bruce Barnhart explicates, “although the narrator never explicitly names his planned
work a ‘symphony,’ both the epic scope he envisions for this work and his self-aggrandizing tendencies make it clear that it can be nothing less,” as “nothing less than the broad structural and instrumental resources of the symphony will suffice.” (Barnhart 217). The narrator’s patron explains to him the immense challenge he will face in his project, his “terrible handicap…working as a Negro composer” (67). His patron identifies him as “by blood, by appearance, by education and by tastes, a white man” (67). The narrator replies, neither acknowledging his personal transformation into a white man nor providing a convincing reason to pursue his project. His reasons are primarily based in reasons of finance and reputation, arguing “music offered me a better future than anything else” and that he should have “greater chances of attracting attention as a colored composer” (69). The narrator conceptualizes his racial disadvantage to engender him marketable as a spectacle, foreshadowing his monetary obsession later in life after becoming “ex-colored.”

Implicit within the premise of the narrator’s project is his distance from the “free masonry” of his race. The narrator must seek out this music drawing from external material and inspiration to engage with his own musical tradition. He associates modern ragtime and old slave songs, harking back to the narrator’s musical beginnings, learning his mother’s “old southern songs” (3), as compared to his distinction as “the best ragtime player in New York” (53). In identifying the musical material from which he intends to draw inspiration for his symphony, the narrator flattens African American musical contribution to be of equal aesthetic value (66). So too, the notion that this music is equally dispensable material to the narrator is inherently dismissive of this musical tradition, echoing the distaste of the German who took the narrator’s “ragtime and made
it classic” (66). The narrator conceptualizes his approach to be that of an outsider to this tradition, describing his intention as “trying to catch the spirit of the Negro in his relatively primitive state” (81) while asserting, “the Negroes themselves do not fully appreciate these old slave songs” (85-6).

The narrator also admits that he “felt stirred by an unselfish desire to voice all the joys and sorrows, the hopes and ambitions, of the American Negro,” a strangely selfless desire when stated after asserting two highly self-interested motivations. According to Scher’s conceptualization of music’s narrative capacity, this ambition is also unrealistic. Instrumental music can only hypothetically convey a sense of narrative. Whereas Beethoven’s *Pathétique* functions as a character piece, musically capturing its title sense, this is only of a single characteristic. To seek to capture the complex narrative marked with the temporal development of “all the joys and sorrows, the hopes and ambitions, of the American Negro” is a naively lofty project (69).

Before he begins his composition, a lynching literally and figuratively interrupts the narrator’s act of recording the materials of his aural experiences in the South. While “jotting down some ideas which were still fresh in my mind,” the narrator becomes, “conscious of that sense of alarm which is always aroused by the sound of hurrying footsteps on the silence of the night.” (87). Following the crowd, the narrator finds himself “fixed to the spot where I stood, powerless to take my eyes from what I did not want to see” (88). The anguished “cries and groans” of the lynched man that, the narrator writes, “I shall always hear,” replace his gathered aural materials (88). The narrator returns to New York City, abandoning his symphony and deciding to “neither disclaim

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5 So too, the sonata, “Grande sonate pathétique,” was not named by Beethoven, but by his publisher, impressed by the sonata's tragic sonorities (Burkhart 233).
the black race nor claim the white race; but that I would change my name, raise a
mustache, and let the world take me for what it would” (90).

After witnessing this lynching, the narrator forsakes his African American
identity and pursues a white career in real estate. In the final episode of the narrative,
functionally become white. Music reenters his life after he develops a romantic interest in
the white woman who becomes his wife, again feeling a revitalization of the “wholesome
dreams of [his] boyhood” (95). Their relationship is intimately interwoven with music
from its inception. The narrator first sees her singing “two sad little songs” (93) at party
in New York City. He recalls his failing courage in his attraction to this woman, feeling
as if he “became again the bashful boy of fourteen” (93), paralleling his attraction to the
violinist in his youth, her beauty and musicality also inseparable in their binary (17). The
narrator observes of his wife to-be singing: “it was not her delicate beauty which attracted
me most; it was her voice, a voice which made one wonder how tones of such passionate
color could come from so fragile a body” (93). He similarly describes her speaking voice
in conversation as “low, yet thrilling, like the deeper middle tones of a flute,”
conceptualizing her speech as possessing musical qualities (93).

She recognizes the narrator by his reputation playing Chopin, indicating her
appreciation for his particular interpretation to a partygoer: “I think his playing of Chopin
is exquisite” (93). This is idiosyncratic, for the narrator does not present a diegetic
account of his classical repertoire performance history, but this narrative lapse reinforces
the importance of this device. When he plays European music, his Western side explicitly
sounds in the form and reputation of the particular piece, while his African American side
implicitly sounds through his distinct interpretation. By expressing a formed opinion
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regarding the narrator’s distinctive interpretation of Chopin, this character hears before she sees (again to utilize Morrissette’s concept). While the “mutual bond of music” draws them together, this initial distance between audience and performer (hearing and seeing) foreshadows the problem of racial identity in their courtship (94).

Their relationship is centered on the music of Chopin. With this foundation, the narrator experiences a revitalization of musical energy, his “artistic temperament” undergoing “an awakening” (95). He returns to classical music, spending many hours at the piano, “playing over old and new composers” and composing new music in “Chopinesque style,” which he dedicates to his lover (95). The innocence he feels in his parallel outpourings of creative energy and love “melted away my cynicism and whitened my sullied soul” the narrator asserts (95). The notion that this experience whitens the narrator’s soul succinctly suggests the process of erasing his African American identity, being “ex-colored” to become that which is acceptable to his lover.

The narrator struggles with the idea of asking his lover to marry him without disclosing his African American heritage; he feels unable to voice his dilemma for fear she would terminate the relationship (94). Their shared music eventually allows the narrator to reveal his race, the conversation prompted by a performance of Nocturne in C minor, Op. 48, No. 1, Chopin (96). Thus, he reveals to her the African American spirit that drives his performance of European repertoire, allowing her to see that which she first heard. Before he can finish performing the piece, the narrator is overwhelmed by his emotions:

An impulse which I could not control rushed over me, a wave of exaltation, the music under my fingers sank almost to a whisper, and calling her for the first time by her Christian name, but without daring to look at her, I said, “I love you, I love you, I love you.” (96)
Much like his fits of hysteria as a child, driven to his mother’s embrace by an impassioned performance on solo piano, this Chopin piece functions as an emotionally climactic moment that allows the narrator to present his dilemma. He then informs that he is of African American descent; she weeps in reaction and distances herself from him for some months. They later meet inadvertently at a public event, and while there, the narrator’s lover plays the “13th Nocturne”:

I felt that the psychic moment of my life had come, a moment which if lost could never be called back; and, in as careless a manner as I could assume, I sauntered over to the piano and stood almost bending over her. She continued playing; but, in a voice that was almost a whisper, she called me by my Christian name and said, “I love you, I love you, I love you.” I took her place at the piano and played the Nocturne in a manner that silenced the chatter of the company both in and out of the room; involuntarily closing it with the major triad. (98)

In both the repetition of the “13th Nocturne” and the repetition of “I love you, I love you, I love you,” the narrator’s lover performs aural affirmations, both musical and linguistic, of her reciprocated affection.

Johnson fittingly concludes the narrator’s musical journey with a nocturne, a piece “suggesting night” (Brown and Hamilton). The narrator, in playing this piece, inadvertently plays the last chord major. By doing so, he plays in the parallel key, “a minor key having the same tonic as a given major key, or vice versa” where, “C major and C minor are parallel keys” (“Parallel key”). Given that Chopin wrote this piece in the key of C minor, concluding it with a major triad of the parallel key would end it in C major. C major is the only key composed completely of white keys. While in his youth, the narrator gravitates towards the black keys, by the end of the narrative, he involuntarily strikes the white keys, bookending the joint musical and racial journey of the narrative. In resolving to C Major instead of the notated C minor triad at in the final
chord of the "13th Nocturne," the narrator resolves to live as white. This closing performance of the "13th Nocturne" represents the metaphorical close to the narrator’s African American life. By resolving to positive-sounding key of C major, involuntary playing only the white keys, the narrator completely conceals his blackness.6

After their few years of happy married life, the narrator’s wife passes away in the birth of their second child. Since then, he has devoted his life to his children, acting to prevent them from being identified as African American, writing, “there is nothing I would not suffer to keep the ‘brand’ from being placed on them” (99). This protective instinct clearly voices the narrator’s transformation into the ex-colored man. He actively chooses not to raise his children with the African American upbringing he received despite repeatedly yearning for that childhood previously in the narrative.

Seemingly tangentially, the narrator reports his attendance at “a great meeting in the interest of Hampton Institute at Carnegie Hall” in the penultimate paragraph of his autobiography (99). At this event, the “Hampton students sang the old songs,” like the songs his African American mother would sing in his youth, “and awoke memories that left me sad” (99). The narrator here describes the familiar and reminiscent yearning he feels for his childhood in listening to the music of the Hampton Singers, but the location of these memories is now vague and disconnected.

Johnson’s use of real and contemporary popular figures, “R. C. Ogden, Ex-Ambassador Choate, and Mark Twain [and] Booker T. Washington” in this final aural event signifies a political meaning in the narrative (99). The event participants contextualize and resonate with the examples of musical and linguistic works that the

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6 The major key is traditionally considered to be positive in sound, whereas the minor key is traditionally considered to possess a darker and more contemplative tone.
narrator deems to be some of the most important aural contributions of African Americans, "which refute the oft advanced theory that they are an absolutely inferior race, which demonstrate that they have originality and artistic conception" (41).

Like the ragtime performed by the narrator, which combines elements of African-American and European music, the music of the Hampton Singers also coalesces musical traditions. They specialized in African American Spirituals, pieces of the African American oral tradition captured in European musical notation and embellished with European harmony (Brooks 615). Robert C. Ogden was an important figure of Southern educational policy for African Americans; Joseph Hodges Choate was a U.S. Ambassador to the United Kingdom, functioning as a contemporarily popular example of a diplomat with a successful career in negotiating between disparate parties; author and humorist Mark Twain authored dialectic works. All are trumped by the only black speaker and "greatest interest of the audience," Booker T. Washington (99).

These figures are not ambassadors of racial equality, however, but figures representative of racial passing. While Washington was a vitally important African American leader, educator, and orator during the years leading up to the Harlem Renaissance, his accommodationist social policy is historically placed in opposition to Du Bois’ more radical opinions. Du Bois’ thinking and leadership is credited to have given rise to the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance. "As the shift in leadership changed soon after the turn of the century," Angelyn Mitchell argues, "African Americans became

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7 In 1913, Nathaniel Dett joined the Hampton Institute as the institute’s first African American chairman of the department of music. Dett officially established the preexisting student and community choir into the Hampton Singers, specializing in African American sacred music. "On several occasions [Dett] was compelled to defend his performance of 'arranged' spirituals," the primary type of music historically performed by the choir, as it was "not deemed as authentic as the 'folk' versions of the genre" (Brooks 615).
radically conscious and self-assertive, affirmed their humanity, and demanded respect.” (Mitchell 4). Each of these contributions is racially hybrid, a coalescence of African American ideas within Western forms. This concluding event give credibility to the narrator as knowledgeable about African American culture, granting him authority in his own aesthetic musings, but also identifies him as sympathetic towards a greater trend of racial appropriation.

By identifying this mostly white group of famous figures as the key to the success of the “band of colored men who are publicly fighting the cause of their race,” the narrator voices a valorization of racially coalescent forms and figures himself as an outsider to the “freemasonry of the race.” Though he may long for his forsaken blackness, he inadvertently indicates his approval of his “ex-colored” decisions.

The narrator’s advanced life exemplifies Du Bois’ theory of the “talented tenth,” with roots in the concept of “double consciousness,” for “it is precisely the educated class who are painfully aware of their conflicted character because they are capable of reflecting on the injustice of their position” (Gallego 78). The narrator is, like the author, a member of this elite educated class of African American. As Ruotolo points out, the narrative identifies the narrator as “the first to ‘rag the classics’ and the first to conceive of classical music based on African American themes” (Ruotolo 94).

Through his natural and trained musicality, the narrator excels at musical performance and is able to succeed in a variety of musical spheres, playing popular and classical African American and European music. His musical background in both musical traditions is essential for his success in the musical spheres he inhabits, granting him
great technical and emotional control in musical expression. Therefore, both musical propensities are persistently concurrent. Because the narrator’s racial identity functions as an extension of his musicality, his ability to connect and build relationships with others, black and white, individuals and audiences, is dependent upon the way in which he circumstantially adapts his sounding and veiled voices.

Music therefore functions as the device by which he is able to seek a musical-racial coalescence, vacillating between his African American and European musical propensities. It makes sense then that the narrator finds great success as a performer of ragtime, and accordingly, why he would seek to compose his “Negro symphony.” The symphony thus functions as the narrator’s last attempt to integrate his own identity through the coalescence of African American and European music. However, he fails in his ambition, defaulting to the music of Chopin in this retreat. So too, in failing to complete his symphony, he simultaneously fails to coalesce his blackness and his whiteness, instead passing as white, “ex-colored.”

Morrisette describes the music of AECM to function as “a ragtime-oriented ‘lead sheet’ directing its listeners toward the life and sounds beyond its pages” where each musical event is an intermedial reference to an external work (Morrisette 63). Deconstructing the components of a “ragtime-oriented ‘lead sheet,’” the musical events of Johnson’s narrative oscillate between the European and African American traditions, “wavering between two worlds and unable to come to terms with their multiethnic and multicultural allegiances” (Gallego 5). As a compilation of musical episodes AECM functions as a plurimedial combination of narrative and music, reminiscent of programmatic music like the Broadway musicals created by Bob Cole &
the Johnson Brothers. So too, the music of *AECM* is diegetic, within the aural perception and performative control of the characters, further resembling a musical drama in form.

The narrator does not resolve Johnson's dilemma of double audience or Du Bois' theory of double consciousness, as Gallego notes. Instead, the narrator's autobiography becomes that which the narrator hopes his aborted symphony to have accomplished. Thus, where the narrator diegetically fails in his ambition, Johnson succeeds. *AECM* captures "all the joys and sorrows, the hopes and ambitions, of the American Negro" (69), updating this legacy to the contemporary conversation of Du Bois' "double consciousness" and therein "destabilizes the rigid white/black dichotomy" (Gallego 82). "Johnson's narrator passes for an 'ordinary white man,' and Johnson's novel, in its 1912 incarnation, passes for an autobiography," and in doing so, *AECM* functions as a musical 'race-tragedy' (Barnhart 50).
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