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The City as Refuge: Constructing Urban Blackness in Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods* and James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*

Almost as soon as blacks could write, it seems, they set out to redefine—against already received racist stereotypes—who and what a black person was. (Gates 131)

This essay analyzes the narrative strategies that Paul Laurence Dunbar and James Weldon Johnson used to represent black characters in *The Sport of the Gods* and *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* as a means of examining the authors' construction of the city as an alternative space for depicting African Americans. In late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century fiction, the majority of African American images in popular fiction were confined to Southern-based pastoral depictions that restricted black identity to stereotypically limited and historically regressive ideas, exemplified in such characters as Zip Coon, Sambo, Uncle Tom, Jim Crow, and Mammy Jane. The plantation tradition inherently connected blacks to the country by marking them as rustic, and blacks were seen as simple, primitive people who needed the protection of the benevolent whites they served. Positive depictions of African Americans in urban settings were neither prevalent nor acceptable to the literary establishment; as Dickson Bruce, Jr., states, African American writers "could talk about themselves, their hopes, their aspirations, only in the language of mainstream America" (37). With exceedingly few exceptions,¹ African American characters who were placed in urban spaces were portrayed using the pastoral identities that had been defined by Southern, post-Reconstruction authors.

These pastoral representations—I am thinking of the writings of such authors as Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page, whose black characters were based on romanticized figures taken from a nostalgic and idealized past—positioned blacks as servile and dependent characters who were happy-go-lucky or surly and dangerous, or, at times, a combination of both. African Americans were presented as out of place in any location apart from their rural country homes, unable to deal with the complexities of normal life and requiring the help of their former masters to survive. Thus, characters like Harris's Uncle Remus and Page's Sam from "Marse Chan" came to be accepted by Northern readers as legitimate representations of African Americans. The growth of realism as a literary school during the late 1880s and early 1890s further exacerbated this problem. Led by William Dean Howells, who advocated "that there is no greatness, no beauty, which does not come from truth to your own knowledge of things" (*Criticism* 145), realism uncritically accepted and internalized the South's pastoral depictions of African Americans. Once these types of

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characters had been established in the public's mind, they became a part of the formulaic structure through which realism's mimetic efficacy was measured. Fiction that did not replicate acceptable literary types was dismissed for its lack of fidelity to the established codes of ethnic description, and the racist and stereotypical descriptions of blacks constructed by Southern authors moved into the mainstream. In the process, an author's personal knowledge, which had previously been one of the foundational tenets of realism as a literary practice, was no longer sufficient to validate the characters that were presented in his or her text: An author's depictions also had to comply with the established parameters used to represent African Americans. This was the paradox that authors like Dunbar and Johnson faced; their personal knowledge of African American life was acceptable only if it mirrored established conventions.

Thus, while the city offered the space for a potentially new start for African American authors, a clean slate that could be used to challenge realism's reified pastoral caricaturizations of blacks, obtaining access to that space was not simple. The ascendancy of realism in the 1890s conditioned how blacks were recognized in the public realm; African Americans were presented as out of place in the city, merely imitating white civility and refinement. To turn the city into a viable space for black representation would require social changes that most whites were unwilling to make. For the city to become a potential space for depicting black urban characters, white beliefs concerning the role and function of black bodies in urban environments would need to be refigured both politically and socially to undo the existing racial hierarchies that implicitly privileged whiteness. As William Andrews points out, "Most popular writers met the threat of black upward mobility in their fiction with ridicule, caricature, and at last resort, force" (*Literary* 79). This ridicule was designed to keep

African Americans in their place, and authors who deviated from these standards were mocked for attempting to defy the laws of nature. Keeping blacks confined within the representational framework of the pastoral maintained the established parameters of American life.

Within this context, attempts to create a viable form of urban blackness in fiction became a means to construct an alternate space for theorizing black subjectivity, one that simultaneously allowed black authors to critique the limits of the representational categories currently available to them. Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods*, published in 1902, and James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, published anonymously in 1912, were instrumental in establishing this alternative narrative strategy. I analyze how these two authors use their respective novels to interrogate the fictional limitations that defined black identity in order to refigure the space of the city for African Americans and to obtain narrative control over black characters. Their texts helped transform the representational possibilities that the city offered to African Americans by challenging the established narrative conventions that were being used to portray blacks, the same conventions that up to this point had conditioned African Americans' access to urban space. In tracing out the rhetorical structures of Dunbar's and Johnson's novels, I seek to demonstrate how their textual revisions of narrative form positioned urban blackness as a viable alternative to existing representational strategies, one that could successfully challenge America's established beliefs about African Americans.

The specific construction of an urban identity for African Americans at the turn of the century is an important development in the narrative history of African American lit-

erature, and yet it has remained for the most part unexamined.² Prior to Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods*, the role of the city in African American fiction was, at best, rather minimal. It existed primarily as an undifferentiated space indistinguishable from the country; the city was just another space to play out the same textual themes that constituted the bulk of African American fiction in the 1880s and 1890s: working for racial uplift, protesting the racist practices of white Americans, and developing a sense of racial pride. For example, the primary emphasis in Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892) is on addressing the race problem as a lingering result of the Civil War. Harper's desire was to awaken in her readers "a stronger sense of justice and a more Christlike humanity in behalf of those whom the fortunes of war threw, homeless, ignorant and poor, upon the threshold of a new era" (282). While Harper's text presents scenes in the North, the South, the city, and the country, these spaces are not presented as discernibly different. Harper does highlight the problems that African Americans, and specifically African American women, face in the United States, but she does not discriminate between the different types of space that her characters traverse in the text, and problems are almost exclusively presented as national ones.³ The closest that Harper comes to distinguishing between the different spaces in her text is in representing the different classes of blacks that she positions in the novel: On the one hand, there are the refined and cultured characters, represented by Iola, Lucille Delany, Dr. Latimer, and Reverend Carmicle, and, on the other hand, there are the folk characters, like Aunt Linda and Uncle Daniel. The discourse of racial uplift dominates Harper's novel, and Iola's decision to return to the South with Dr. Latimer at the end of the novel is based upon her class position, on her ability to choose to spend her life working among her own people in the South in order to help educate them.

In Harper's text, uplift becomes the alternative narrative strategy used to create change; she notes the limited opportunities and unequal conditions that African Americans face, and she presents perseverance and self-sacrifice as the forces that can overcome such straits. But the strategy of uplift closes back in on itself. As Iola recounts to Dr. Gresham, "The negro is under a social ban both North and South. Our enemies have the ear of the world, and they depict us just as they please" (115). Harper's textual intervention engages with the power her "enemies" currently have over African Americans; she assumes that her text can offer a counter-narrative that will help resolve her own struggles that much more quickly. But Harper's text remains trapped within the representational framework of the pastoral: The influence accorded to the pastoral that allows her "enemies" to "depict [African Americans] just as they please" has not been overturned by the end of the narrative. Instead, overcoming the continued pernicious effects of the pastoral is one of the goals left to be accomplished at the novel's conclusion. In Harper's fictional world, uplift is still required to overturn these categories, even if the reader recognizes through the course of the novel that the pastoral codes used to represent blacks are incorrect.

Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice From the South*, also published in 1892, highlights a similar problem.⁴ In "One Phase of American Literature," Cooper asserts that American authors may be separated into two classifications, aesthetes and polemicists, and that "most of the writers who have hitherto attempted a portrayal of life and customs among the darker race have belonged" to the second category: "They have all, more or less, had a point to prove or a mission to accomplish, and thus their art has been almost uniformly perverted to serve their ends" (185). It is because of this, in Cooper's opinion, that American literature has done such a poor job of

accurately depicting blacks. Cooper proceeds to analyze the "contributions to . . . American literature which have been made during the present decade" that present African Americans as characters (187), and concludes "that an authentic portrait, at once aesthetic and true to life, presenting the black man as a free

American citizen, not the humble slave of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—but the *man*, divinely struggling and aspiring yet tragically warped and distorted by the adverse winds of circumstance—has not yet been painted. It is my opinion that the canvas awaits the brush of the colored man himself" (222-23). Cooper's call for an "authentic portrait" of African Americans only takes exception to the current mode of literary representation used to depict blacks. Like Harper, she does not offer any suggestions that will lead authors or readers to that which will be "at once aesthetic and true to life"; instead, she merely points out the limitations that currently exist. While Cooper would most likely have described *Iola Leroy* as one of the authentic portraits she wanted to see,⁵ Harper's text still exists within the rhetorical space of pastoral representation that Cooper wants to escape. Harper presents exemplary characters, but they are not fully developed. *Iola* remains an idealized and romanticized figure; she struggles and has aspirations, and she is even tragic, but her character has not been "tragically warped and distorted by the adverse winds of circumstance" in a way that will make her an "authentic portrait."

The problem that Harper and Cooper struggled against was the prominence accorded to the pastoral in American fiction. Because the terms used to depict blacks had been defined

by pastoral norms, literary "success" was still dependent on replicating the types of images found in mainstream writing. For black authors to openly defy pastoral norms in fiction was to court certain failure, a luxury they could not afford. African American authors were trapped between the

In positioning urban blackness as a viable alternative to existing representational strategies, Dunbar and Johnson successfully challenged America's established beliefs about African Americans.

rhetoric of racial uplift employed in protest fiction and attempting to subvert the pastoral from within: They needed to use the pastoral in order to gar-

ner a hearing, and yet they wanted to use it in a way that did not perpetuate black stereotypes.⁶ Establishing a narrative strategy that could successfully address the problems of the pastoral meant working within its conventions, and yet rewriting the pastoral from the inside required a subtle balancing act by black authors that would be lost on most white readers. An example of this dilemma is found in the literary career of Charles Chesnutt. His attempts to rewrite pastoral conceptions from the inside in *The Conjure Woman*, performed by emptying out the textual content of Joel Chandler Harris's pastoral plantation tales and replacing it with his own refigured subject matter, were just read over by his audience, inadvertently reaffirming the very conceptions that he had set out to challenge. Chesnutt had recognized the limited potential of revising pastoral codes at least ten years before *The Conjure Woman* was published. In a letter to Albion Tourgée on September 26, 1889, Chesnutt wrote, "I think I have about used up the old Negro who serves as a mouthpiece . . . and I shall drop him in future stories, as well as much of the dialect" (qtd. in *Literary* 21). But conservative magazine editors frustrated Chesnutt's hopes of refiguring the period's literary conventions.

To get work accepted for publication, he was forced to return to the plantation dialect form that he had previously tried to leave behind. And once he had been publicly interpolated as a black author, Chesnutt's attempts to construct characters that deviated from white cultural expectations in novels like *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) met with mainly hostile public response: His texts were rejected for their lack of mimetic fidelity to the black characters his readers expected.

Dunbar, too, experienced the restrictions imposed on black authors. His career as a poet had made him keenly aware of the representational limits available to African American authors; as Dunbar wrote to a friend in March 1897, "I see now very clearly that Mr. Howells has done me irrevocable harm in the dictum he laid down regarding my dialect verse" ("Unpublished" 73). Dunbar's concern was that Howells's praise for his dialect poetry would limit his ability to publish other styles of writing, and for the most part, this fear was well founded. Even though Dunbar spent almost his entire life living in the North, Southern plantation "ideals" influenced the depictions of blacks in his poetry, and it was only with his dialect verse that he achieved any measure of fame.⁷ In *Along This Way*, James Weldon Johnson recounts a discussion with Dunbar in which Dunbar described his dilemma:

You know, of course, that I didn't start as a dialect poet. I simply came to the conclusion that I could write it as well, if not better, than anybody else I knew, and that by doing so I should gain a hearing. I gained the hearing, and now they don't want me to write anything but dialect. (160)

Dunbar's quest for popularity and financial success at times bordered on pandering to black stereotypes, in part because his ability to succeed as an author required that he function within the representational limits that currently configured blackness in the public imagination. In addition to his poetry

and fictional writing, Dunbar collaborated with Will Marion Cook on musicals, writing the lyrics for *Clorindy: The Origins of the Cakewalk* (1898) and *In Dahomey* (1903). There was also a "proposed collaboration with James Weldon Johnson and Will Marion Cook for a musical entitled 'The Cannibal King'" (Bruce 67). All of these forms operated within the plantation tradition, using dialect and black stereotypes. But for Dunbar, they were also part of his attempt to influence his white audience's understanding of African Americans. As Dunbar wrote to Frederick Douglass's widow, Helen, "I am sorry to find among intelligent people those who are unable to differentiate dialect as a philological branch from the burlesque of Negro minstrelsy" (qtd. in Bruce 60). Dunbar's defense of dialect in his letter to Helen Douglass clarifies the role of dialect writing in his work. While Dunbar had reservations about the limitations of dialect, he recognized that dialect writing had formal conventions that could be manipulated. As Gavin Jones points out, "Dunbar appreciated dialect not for its superficial 'realism' but for its power to structure a political response to larger social, cultural, and racial issues" (207).⁸ Dunbar had seen the success that white writers such as James Whitcomb Riley could have with dialect, and he hoped not only to replicate this success, but to use dialect writing to subtly transform white opinion. And yet, even with the awareness of the formal restrictions he faced as an author, Dunbar's attempts to manipulate the boundaries of literary space did not translate into the desired changes in white America.

America's pastorally inflected beliefs about African Americans functioned as the glass ceiling that authors like Harper, Cooper, Dunbar, and Chesnutt continually encountered in American literature. African American authors found themselves doubly disadvantaged by the literary restrictions of the pastoral.⁹ Not only were they compelled to work within a literary

tradition that labeled them inferior, but this tradition also created a linguistic snare from which black authors were unable to extricate themselves. Escaping this predicament required the construction of new narrative strategies, ones that were not already imbricated in a compromised rhetoric. One of the places these strategies were being developed was in the period's short fiction. While the short story was beholden to the same fictional limitations and types of characters as the novel, there was still the space within the short story for experimentation, specifically because of the way the short story functioned as a literary genre: It was seen as an apolitical form that was read only for entertainment. Through manipulating the generic form of the short story, authors were able to depart, at least momentarily, from the pastoral boundaries that defined American fiction. For example, in all four of Paul Laurence Dunbar's published collections of short stories,¹⁰ he interspersed stories that deviated from the pastoral boundaries that constituted the majority of his short-story production. His work offers two particular types of narrative experimentation. First, stories such as "The Scapegoat," "Mr. Cornelius Johnson, Office-Seeker," "Nelse Hatton's Revenge," and "A Council of State" depict African American characters who interact in urban environments. These stories portray the positive abilities of the black characters that they represent, as well as these characters' reactions to the white racism they encounter. Second, Dunbar also presents African American characters in the city as the subject of urban local-color writing, seen in stories like "Jimsella," "The Trustfulness of Polly," "The Finding of Zach," and "A Defender of the Faith." Dunbar's "Little Africa" stories were part of his attempt to expand the representational frame used to depict blacks beyond that of the pastoral.¹¹

Dunbar was not the only African American author experimenting with

the space of the city in short fiction. Alice Moore Dunbar's story "When the Bayou Overflows," published in her 1899 collection of short stories *The Goodness of St. Rocque and Other Stories*, tells the story of Sylves', who goes to Chicago to work for the winter, promising his fiancée Louissette and his mother Ma'am Mouton that he will return "when the bayou overflows again" (*Works* 1:98). While Sylves' dies before his return, Chicago is presented as offering economic opportunities that are not to be found in either Bayou Teche or New Orleans. Charles Chesnutt's "Her Virginia Mammy," published in 1899 in *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories*, highlights the economic and social value accorded to whiteness in the space of the city. Other stories include Pauline Hopkins's "General Washington" (Dec. 1900) and "Bro'r Abr'm Jimson's Wedding" (Dec. 1901), both published in *The Colored American Magazine*. "General Washington" tells the story of a street urchin named Buster who "lived in the very shady atmosphere of Murderer's Bay" in Washington, D.C. (in Ammons 69). Buster redeems himself by foiling a robbery at the house of Senator Tallman, a Southern senator who is preparing a speech that "would bury the blacks too deep for resurrection" (79). Buster's heroic actions prove the value of his character, and Tallman never makes his speech against the Negro. "Bro'r Abr'm Jimson's Wedding" begins with the description that the "Afro-Americans of that city are well-to-do, being of a frugal nature" (107), before it moves on to criticize those African American men who, like Brother Jimson, are fickle and unmanly, and who have contributed to the denigrated character blacks are traditionally accorded. Ruth Todd's "Florence Grey," published from August to October 1902 in *The Colored American Magazine*, uses the social gatherings of upper-class African American society in Washington, D.C., as the backdrop for her story. Each of these stories reflects African American

authors' attempts to begin developing the narrative space from which to escape the discursive limits implied in the pastorally inflected ideology of racial uplift.

While Dunbar was not the first to use the city in African American fiction, he was the first to use both the novel and the space of the city to rhetorically reveal the limitations created by inherently linking African Americans with the pastoral South. Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods* demonstrates his personal knowledge of the limited possibilities offered to African Americans in American social space. Indeed, these boundaries are presented in the novel's opening lines: "Fiction has said so much in regret of the old days when there were plantations and overseers and masters and slaves, that it was good to come upon such a household as Berry Hamilton's, if for no other reason than it afforded a relief from the monotony of tiresome iteration" (1). Here, however, the "relief from the monotony of tiresome iteration" that Berry Hamilton offers readers is also what ultimately leads to his doom: Dunbar's narrative-framing positions Berry's success as merely another façade of the pastorally constructed identity used to represent blacks.¹² Because Berry's initial success in the novel is dependent upon replicating the pastoral norms that condition Southern blackness, his role as "relief from the monotony of tiresome iteration" is contingent on his reciprocal adherence (either knowingly or unknowingly) to the beliefs that inform the foundational structures of the plantation tradition. His subsequent fall, predicated upon his supposed theft from his "master" Maurice Oakley, leads to a conviction that occurs regardless of the lack of actual proof against him. This is the initial act that thrusts the rest of his family northward to New York. Berry's conviction rests on the singular fact that he is black,

and because of this must remain under the dominion of Southern whites. His final exchange with Oakley before he is hauled off to jail demonstrates Berry's sudden realization of the lack of justice available to him in the Southern realm:

Berry turned to his employer. "You b'lieve dat I stole f'om dis house aftah all de yeahs I've been in it, aftah de caih I took of yo' money and yo' valybles, aftah de way I've put you to bed f'om many adinnah, an' you woke up to fin' all yo' money safe? Now, can you b'lieve dis?"

His voice broke, and he ended with a cry.

"Yes, I believe it, you thief, yes. Take him away."

Berry's eyes were bloodshot as he replied, "Den, damn you! damn you! Ef dat's all dese yeahs counted fu', I wish I had a-stoled it." (44-45)

Even Berry's twenty years of faithful service for the Oakley family cannot stand as a reference to his character. His claim that "I wish I had a-stoled it" brings the idyllic setting initially established in the text crashing down. Once his standing in the community has been called into question, everything in Berry's world collapses. The lack of social trust offered to blacks, coupled with the impossibility of any stable social position available to them unless they maintain the servile roles required of them by Southern whites, contributes to Berry's fall from grace. Berry's destruction reveals his inadvertent participation in the charade of Southern paternalism that covertly functions as the novel's backdrop. While Berry is freed from his previous illusions, such freedom results in the destruction of his family's entire world. His transgression of the pastoral ideals that order Southern space expose Berry as only another African American caricature, another version of the same figure the text initially attempts to distance itself from. Dunbar's critique of the opportunities available to blacks in the South demonstrates the impossibility of social or legal justice for African Americans under this system. The concern with keeping everything "smooth and quiet" (240) in the novel,¹³ no mat-

ter what the social cost, presents white Southern life as determined to efface the rights of all African Americans.

After Berry's conviction, the rest of the Hamilton family (Kitty, Joe, and Fannie) are forced to leave the cabin that Oakley had previously provided for them. Unsure of where to go— " 'we'll go away some place, up No'th maybe' " (77)—they decide to travel to New York:

They had heard of New York as a place vague and far away, a city that, like Heaven, to them had existed by faith alone. All the days of their lives they had heard of it, and it seemed to them the centre of all the glory, all the wealth, and all the freedom of the world. New York. It had an alluring sound. Who would know them there? Who would look down upon them? (77-78)

This move to New York is predicated upon a crisis that stems from the restrictions placed on blacks in the pastoral South. Having suffered at the hands of Southern "justice," the Hamilton family (minus Berry) decides to take a risk that they would never previously have contemplated, specifically because the options left in the South for them—and by proxy any African American who breaks white social convention—are no longer tenable. The tenuous grasp that the Hamiltons have on their own lives in the South demonstrates the lack of actual choice available to them, politically as well as socially. Dunbar's desire here is to construct something beyond what the South can offer blacks, and thus New York "*seemed* to them the centre of all the glory, all the wealth, and all the freedom of the world" (78; my italics) precisely because its unknown qualities *seem* to offer them exactly what they need at this point in the novel. Forced to go elsewhere, the Hamiltons head to New York with the hope of escaping the limits of their pastoral identification; they choose the possibility that New York City offers as something outside the pastoral South's overdetermined field of representation and social regulation.

Unfortunately, the possibility the city initially offers to the Hamilton family is undercut in the rest of the text. Mr. Thomas's prophetic remark upon their arrival in New York, that "'N' Yawk'll give you a shakin' up you won't soon forget' " (90), colors the rest of their stay in the city. As the rest of the text unfolds, the lives of Joe, Kitty, and Fannie Hamilton all slowly disintegrate under New York's influence. The fall that each of these characters experiences demonstrates Dunbar's belief that the promise of a new life in New York is not so readily available to blacks as it initially appeared. The ideal space of hope that New York initially offers as an alternative location for black representation is just as unavailable as the space of the pastoral South. While the city is marked as categorically distinct from the country, it presents an equally troubled place for blacks, even as it is marked as different. For the Northern characters that currently live in the city, this lack of possibility is already apparent:

They wanted to dare to say that the South has its faults—no one condones them—and its disadvantages, but that even what they suffered from there was better than what awaited them in the great alleys of New York. Down there, the bodies were restrained, and they chafed; but here the soul would fester, and they would be content. (213)

This image conditions the relationship between the urban North and the pastoral South for African Americans: In the South, their bodies are restrained while their souls prosper, while in the city their bodies are free while their souls perish. The tension created in this image operates as Dunbar's qualification of the North, in that the possibility the North offers blacks is merely another social space that is unavailable to them.¹⁴ Even as these Northern characters recognize the reciprocal limitations that exist in both places, they also know that there is nothing that can be done to stop "the stream of young negro life [that] would continue to flow

up from the South, dashing itself against the hard necessities of the city and breaking like waves against a rock. . . . there must still be sacrifices to false ideals and unreal ambitions" (213-14). For Dunbar, these "false ideals and unreal ambitions" are the empty illusions of promise offered by the city, the *seeming* potential of "all the glory, all the wealth, and all the freedom" (78) that had initially drawn these characters northward. These expectations come crashing down around the Hamilton family at the end of the novel. With Joe dead and Kitty out on the road touring with her singing troupe, Fannie and Berry return to the South, having nowhere else left to turn.¹⁵

Dunbar's use of naturalism in *The Sport of the Gods* helps highlight the narrative impasse his novel reveals; he presents African American characters as indelibly inscribed by the idyllic rhetoric of the pastoral, and his deterministic prose style reflects the lack of choice available to his black characters in American social space. Again and again, Dunbar's text pummels the reader with naturalistic effect to document the over-determination of black characters by white America. Berry's fall, for example, is the result of his deviation from pastoral norms in the South, while Joe's subsequent downfall in the North is the product of the restrictive conditions enacted upon blacks in both the North and the South. As the text informs readers, "Joe was the only one who burned with a fierce indignation" in response to his father's treatment by white society, and "something rose within him that had it been given play might have made a man of him, but, being crushed, died and rotted, and in the compost it made all the evil of his nature flourish" (60). The "something" that rises in Joe is the desire for justice for his father, a desire that he cannot pursue while he remains mired within the restrictive discourse enacted upon black bodies in the South. To act on such a dream would lead to Joe's death at the hands of

Southern lynch law. Joe's inability to develop the requisite characteristics needed to become whole in both body and soul, to "give play" to that which "might have made a man of him," is represented by Dunbar as the result of white social dictates.

The Sport of the Gods thus reveals that black pastoral identities are *not* inherent truths, but are instead naturalized social conventions that have constructed blacks in the public imagination. Dunbar presents the limitations that African American characters face as a function of white social behavior, not heredity. He uses the destruction of the Hamilton family to demonstrate the debilitating effects of subjective social mores on black subjectivity in an effort to unhinge the biologically determined beliefs that inform the American mainstream. As Houston Baker, Jr., points out, "Having followed the controlling voice from the first to the concluding line . . . there is little need to summon incomprehensible supernatural powers to explain the human affairs represented in the novel" (124). Dunbar's unrelenting critique of American society spares no one in hammering home the fact that white social dictates function as the codifying superstructure of black experience in American life, the prevailing rhetoric that operates as the "Will infinitely stronger" (255) than that of the text's black characters. His turn to the space of the city to locate something different for his African American characters reveals the charade that lies at the heart of American race relations: It is not that blacks don't belong in the city, it is that whites don't want them there. Dunbar's rhetorical strategy simultaneously ruptures the idyllic nature of pastoral space and the potential idealism and promise that the image of the city represents for African Americans in the novel. In doing so, however, Dunbar does not destroy the city as an alternative space for black representation. He merely strips the city of its false illusions, presenting the space of

the urban North as a mirror image of the pastoral South—no more, no less.

Within this narrative framework, Dunbar demonstrates the lack of space for blacks in America, both in the urban North and the pastoral South. Racial determinations construct the spatial limitations of black identity in the text. Dunbar's novel reveals the problems that exist for blacks in attempting to guide their own culture when the means of representing that culture are not already open to them in the first place. His desire to challenge the established social norms traditionally used to represent blackness are mirrored in the difficulties his characters experience during the course of the novel. Dunbar's text thus reflects the restricted social space actually available to African Americans; the text enacts the dialogic relationship between the social and the literary realms in order to push this logic to the breaking point. In the end, Dunbar rejects the representational logic he must use to portray African Americans by foregrounding the futility and hopelessness that confront his black characters in American social space. He questions both the city and the country for the distorted possibilities they assign to blacks: Neither space provides African Americans with the same liberality of representational agency or choice accorded to whites. While Dunbar escapes the confines of the pastoral, he still cannot lay claim to the space of the city for blacks; he can only reveal the limits that each space uses to define African Americans. Dunbar's rhetorical strategy has given blacks a new representational space, but for Dunbar, African Americans, both textually and socially, must finally still choose between the internal freedom offered in the pastoral South, and the external freedom available in the urban North.¹⁶ In neither space are they given the possibility of achieving both.

James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, like Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods*, confronts the representational conventions facing African American characters in American literature.¹⁷ While Johnson's text does not get much further than Dunbar's in terms of restructuring narrative practice, Johnson does succeed in overcoming the representative dilemma that immobilizes Dunbar's novel. In Johnson's novel, the narrator's decision to stay in the North ultimately leads him to claim that "I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage" (*Autobiography* 154), mirroring Dunbar's claim that the Northern urban environment is available to black characters only by paying an internal price. This realization places the narrator within the same troubled relation to urban space that Dunbar's characters experience, but with one important difference. While Dunbar's characters return to the South, the narrator in Johnson's text consciously abandons the pastoral South in his move to the North, abandoning both the physical space *and* the representational logic it uses to depict black identity. This decision is predicated upon the narrator's ability to pass—or, more particularly, his decision to "let the world take me for what it would" (139)¹⁸—but the narrator's decision to follow such a path is itself a bit more complex. To understand Johnson's use of passing in the text, two other factors need to be examined to qualify the rhetorical ploys that Johnson implements to negotiate the urban space he presents: first, the manipulation of autobiographical form that Johnson uses to represent the narrator and, second, Johnson's simultaneous presentation of the detrimental effects that the socially constructed framework of racial identity has on characters in the text, both black and white. Johnson's narrative strategies are all centered on the narrator's *re-narration* of the events he experiences. Taken together, Johnson's strategies enact a critical transformation of the literary conventions that

configure his African American characters, a reconfiguration that creates the space that Dunbar's text could only imagine.

Johnson, like Dunbar, was well aware of the representational limitations placed upon blackness in literary production. His song-writing career with his brother Rosamond and Bob Cole in New York City in the early 1900s familiarized him with the stereotypical depictions of blacks currently in use, and his ability to exploit this form successfully was seen in the popularity of such songs as "Nobody's Lookin' but de Owl and de Moon" (1901), "Under the Bamboo" (1902), and "Congo Love Song" (1903), which collectively sold more than 400,000 copies (Price and Oliver 2). Johnson's negotiation of dialect song writing was similar to Dunbar's; he wanted to use this form to help steer white expectations away from traditional stereotypes. As Dickson Bruce, Jr., points out, the "demands of producing such material gave Johnson special awareness of white literary expectations and a unique appreciation of the importance of those expectations to him as a writer" (244). This awareness is documented in Johnson's essay "The Dilemma of the Negro Author," published in *American Mercury* in 1928. Here, Johnson describes the "peculiar difficulties" that black writers faced in addressing the "double audience" (477) of blacks and whites:

It is known that art—literature in particular, unless it be sheer fantasy—must be based on more or less well established conventions, upon ideas that have some roots in the general consciousness, that are at least somewhat familiar to the public mind. It is this that gives it verisimilitude and finality. Even revolutionary literature, if it is to have any convincing power, must start from the basis of conventions, regardless of how unconventional its objective may be. These conventions are changed by slow and gradual processes—except they be changed in a flash. The conventions held by white America regarding the Negro will be changed. Actually they are being changed, but they have not yet suffi-

ciently changed to lessen to any great extent the dilemma of the Negro author. (478-79)

The "dilemma of the Negro author" that Johnson presents here is the same one that he confronted in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. What distinguishes Johnson's narrative strategy in *Autobiography* is the narrator's ability to document important events from his past in the present; I refer to this process as *re-narration* in order to emphasize the particular narrative revisions of past and present that Johnson's fictional autobiography employs to reconfigure urban space, and to distinguish Johnson's practice from the traditional narrative function of fictional writing.¹⁹

The importance of Johnson's re-narrative strategy in constructing a viable form of urban blackness for African American literature still needs to be examined. In Robert Stepto's influential essay "Lost in a Quest: James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*," he asserts that Johnson's narrative strategy results in numerous misreadings of the events the narrator describes, "misreadings due to [the narrator's] deficiencies of vision and character" (114). While Stepto positions the narrator's inability to read his own past as a product of Johnson's synthesis of "Afro-American narrative history" (97), it seems to me that such misreadings are instead an intentional—and crucial—part of the alternative narrative strategy that Johnson was creating. In this light, the narrator's ignorance of the significance of experiences and events from his past is analogous to the ignorance of white beliefs that Johnson's text confronts. Johnson uses the narrator to draw his readers into his re-narrative strategy, forcing readers to interpret the events the narrator presents in order to negotiate the text. Even though the narrator is not always able to interpret the events he presents, he still has seen more of the world he presents than his readers have. Johnson uses this tactical edge to

construct his narrative representations. The narrator's obtuseness becomes an intentional ploy that allows Johnson to use him as a vehicle for presenting information to his readers, information that documents more than just the substance of the narrator's life. Johnson's fictive use of autobiography, functioning in part through the process of re-narration, strategically exploits the gap between the narrator's past experiences and his subsequent narration of them in the textual present. In doing so, Johnson uses this gap to rewrite the conceptions of his readers by using the narrator's experiences from the past to revise his readers' expectations in the literary present. The narrator's "practical joke on society" (*Autobiography* 1) disrupts the current configurations used to position African Americans by unearthing a past that rewrites the previous beliefs of his readers. Johnson's narrative strategy sutures this past onto the present through the process of misreading carried out by the narrator's recounting of his life. This joke, which functions in Johnson's text whether the narrator reads his experiences correctly or not, refigures the present by documenting an urban past that has silently existed all along for African Americans.

Johnson's use of autobiography as a fictional form, his exploitation of what Jacqueline Goldsby calls the "fiction of 'authenticity'" (255), also gives Johnson the space to claim representational control over what is depicted as "experience" in the text.²⁰ By utilizing the generic codes of autobiography (i.e., the presentation of observational experience rather than the depiction or repetition of established representational types), Johnson is effectively authorized to reconfigure representational notions of blackness from within. Presenting his narrative as an autobiography allows Johnson to speak authoritatively about the fictional experiences he presents as real. This move gives him the representational efficacy to transform the established cultural logic that defined blackness by

depicting fiction as truth. Achieving this type of representational reform was contingent upon the text remaining anonymous, which was Johnson's intent. As he wrote to his wife Grace on June 26, 1912, "I wrote the book to be taken as a true story . . . as soon as it is known that the author is a colored man who could not be the character in the book, interest in it will fall. There must always be in the reader's mind the thought that, at least, it may be true" (qtd. in Goldsby 257). His letter to George A. Towns on August 10, 1912, carries similar sentiments: "I am sure you can see that in the acceptance of the story as true lies its strongest appeal" (Jackson 189). The anonymity of the text was designed to trouble readers' previously held conceptions concerning black urban life. As Goldsby's essay demonstrates, "White readers responded as Johnson hoped they would" (257). The narrator's ironic, detached narrative tone helps situate the text as recounting the narrator's life, offering his experiences to readers to document how he had come to his "present position in the world" (*Autobiography* 153). Because the narrator's decisions in the text are positioned as personal choices, in that their morally ambiguous presentation does not appear to serve a discernable agenda, readers are forced to analyze the events that the narrator describes; they are forced to question their previous presuppositions about blackness in light of what they have learned about African Americans from the narrator. This rhetorical shift allows Johnson's text to offer a white-face performance that inverts the operational logic of the minstrelsy tradition Johnson had been forced to use during his song-writing days, a performance that functions by intentionally blurring the distinctions between fact and fiction in his work.

Autobiography thus gives Johnson the space to escape the confines of the pastoral, and to transform conventional caricatures used to represent African Americans, the very problems that hampered Dunbar's novel. Johnson

uses the supposed descriptive or observational nature of autobiography, rather than the traditional mimetic function of literary representation, to construct his own ends in the narrative. In *The Sport of the Gods*, Dunbar can only argue against what are already ingrained as the representational differences between whites and blacks, whereas Johnson's use of autobiography allows him to question contemporary conditions by providing observations and experiences that run counter to this institutionalized logic. This position gives Johnson the space to "reveal" the reality of the black social realm to his audience, even if these revelations do not match contemporary norms. Moreover, the project of re-writing black representational space that Johnson's text takes on is underwritten by the narrator's passing, for without the ability to exist in both the black and white worlds, the narrator's revelations about these two worlds would not be possible. But the success of re-writing black urban space is not exclusively contingent upon the act of passing itself. While the narrator's ability to pass allows him access to the urban space of whiteness, troubling his subsequent claim to that urban space for blacks, the narrator's simultaneous presentation of blacks as already existing in urban spaces with established and distinct social classes of their own supplements the narrator's own troubled relation to blackness which his passing creates. Thus, while the narrator's personal experience *cannot* stand in as a newly reconfigured urban blackness, his experiences with the African Americans that he encounters in his travels *can*, giving his narration the ability to transform previously existing representational notions of blacks.

This seemingly paradoxical narrative function allows the narrator to claim urban space for African Americans by demonstrating the flawed configurations of the pastoral South. Johnson's re-narration rewrites urban space for African Americans,

specifically because the narrator's experiences in the text present blacks as already established within the city. The narrator's "observations" (55) of Jacksonville's racial hierarchies present the black social world as much more complex and nuanced than previously recognized. His statement that "in cities where the well-to-do class is large they have formed society—society as discriminating as the actual conditions will allow it to be"—clarifies that Jacksonville is not an anomaly, noting that a network of "these social circles are connected across the country, and a person in good standing in one is readily accepted in another" (59). In chapter 7, the narrator's description of the "Club" in New York City situates a high-class black clientele against the stereotypical representations that are used to depict them, documenting what already exists on the fringes of white urban space:

[The "Club"] was, in short, a center of colored Bohemians and sports. Here the great prize fighters were wont to come, the famous jockeys, the noted minstrels, whose names and faces were familiar on every bill-board in the country; and these drew a multitude of those who love to dwell in the shadow of greatness. There were then no organizations giving performances of such order as are now given by several colored companies; that was because no manager could imagine that audiences would pay to see Negro performers in any other role than that of Mississippi River roustabouts; but there was lots of talent and ambition. I often heard the younger and brighter men discussing the time when they would compel the public to recognize that they could do something more than grin and cut pigeon-wings. (76-77)

Not only does this quotation present blacks in urban space, it simultaneously offers the same descriptions traditionally used to situate African Americans in pastoral space: ". . . no manager could imagine that audiences would pay to see Negro performers in any other role than that of Mississippi River roustabouts." This illustrates the problem Johnson's text intends to

address: the limits imposed upon black artists by both the box office and the reciprocal accommodation to white tastes. While black performers are ready for change, ready to “compel the public to recognize that they could do something more than grin and cut pigeon-wings,” they are still expected to conform to established identities supplied by the minstrel tradition. Finally, during the narrator’s visit to Washington, he notes that the “social phase of life among colored people is more developed in Washington than in any other city in the country” (112). These three seeming sociological digressions serve a distinct narrative function in Johnson’s text. Offered to readers as observations of what already exists according to the experiences of the narrator, these examples explicitly counter the existing pastoral codes that had constructed black identity.²¹ In doing so, Johnson transforms the constitutive boundaries that had configured blackness, utilizing the authorizing claims implicit in the autobiographical form his narrative manipulates.

The narrator’s mobility also gives him the ability to articulate the socially constructed effects of racial difference. Again, the description of experience, rather than the depiction of established codes of fictional “knowledge,” in Johnson’s text brings the narrator’s own life directly into play. We are presented with his racially indeterminate childhood, a childhood that results in his being interpolated as black, and shown that, through his colored classmates, the narrator “had learned what their status was, and now I learned that theirs was mine” (15). Later in the text, the narrator describes the South’s racial friction as either “caused by the whites’ having a natural antipathy to Negroes as a race, or an acquired antipathy to Negroes in certain relations to themselves” (58). The narrator’s subsequent re-narration in this chapter clearly demonstrates that he sees this friction as an “acquired antipathy,” one that has conditioned how whites relate to

blacks. The narrator’s description of a conversation that he overhears on his train ride south again presents the recorded dialogue as an example of “acquired antipathy.” While this conversation begins by discussing the “Negro problem” (116), it quickly turns into a debate between a Texan and an old Union soldier concerning the roles of blacks in white social spaces. The Texan’s final contribution to the debate—“ ‘You want us to treat niggers as equals. Do you want to see ‘em sitting around in our parlors? Do you want to see a mulatto South? To bring it right home to you, would you let your daughter marry a nigger?’ ” (119)—situates his belief as based on the interactions between whites and blacks in social space. For the narrator, this demonstrates that racism is a function of malleable mental attitudes, and not “natural antipathy”: “The Texan’s position does not render things so hopeless, for it indicates that the main difficulty of the race question does not lie so much in the actual condition of the blacks as it does in the mental attitudes of the whites; and a mental attitude, especially one not based on truth, can be changed more easily than actual conditions” (121). The “Texan’s position” indicates that a “mental attitude,” one that can be “changed,” is the product of an “acquired antipathy.” The narrator’s description of his various experiences in the text are intended to reveal the strength of “acquired antipathy” that blacks face in daily American life. Johnson uses the narrator’s re-narration to bring such events to the attention of his readers, transforming their understanding of the racial hierarchies that have conditioned the role and function of black bodies in urban environments. As the narrator makes clear, the battle that “is being fought” is not over the inherent inferiority of blacks, it is over the “social recognition” of blacks in the white public sphere (55), a situation that, as a “mental attitude . . . not based on truth,” can be changed over time.

Johnson's use of autobiography also allows him to call the existing notions of racial representation into question, confronting established conceptions of blackness by allowing his text to stand in against these conceptions. Toward the end of the text, the narrator's travels in the South are described:

This was my first real experience among rural colored people, and all that I saw was interesting to me; but there was a great deal which does not require description at my hands; for log cabins and plantations and dialect-speaking "darkies" are perhaps better known in American literature than any other single picture of our national life. Indeed, they form an ideal and exclusive literary concept of the American Negro to such an extent that it is almost impossible to get the reading public to recognize him in any other setting; so I shall endeavor to avoid giving the reader any already overworked and hackneyed descriptions. This generally accepted literary ideal of the American Negro constitutes what is really an obstacle in the way of the thoughtful and progressive elements of the race. His character has been established as a happy-go-lucky, laughing, shuffling, banjo-picking being, and the reading public has not yet been prevailed upon to take him seriously. His efforts to elevate himself socially are looked upon as a sort of absurd caricature of "white civilization." A novel dealing with colored people who lived in respectable homes and amidst a fair degree of culture and who naturally acted "just like white folks" would be taken in a comic-opera sense. In this respect the Negro is much in the position of a great comedian who gives up the lighter roles to play tragedy. No matter how well he may portray the deeper passions, the public is loath to give him up in his old character; they even conspire to make him a failure in serious work, in order to force him back to comedy. (122-23)²²

Johnson's awareness of the limits of literary representation are played out in the narrator's description, in that the narrative simultaneously invokes these limits and critiques them. Johnson's revisionary narrative strategy presents established social conventions in order to undercut them with the narrator's experiences in the same breath. It is the

narrator's own position in the text that circumvents his statement that "it is almost impossible to get the reading public to recognize him in any other setting." Not only has the text described numerous other examples where readers are forced to recognize blacks in other settings, but Johnson's narrative is also structured around the fact that the narrator is already established in this "other setting." By documenting the plight facing blacks as a representational deficiency, one that characterizes how whites relate to blacks, Johnson highlights the reasons "the reading public has not yet been prevailed upon to take him seriously." Johnson's use of autobiographical form allows him to disrupt contemporary conventions by positioning these notions as out of touch with the experiences that the narrator has already documented for his readers as true. In the process, Johnson's novel undercuts the representational logic of the pastoral South, and the paragraph ends by observing that "... this very fact constitutes the opportunity of the future Negro novelist and poet to give the country something new and unknown, in depicting the life, the ambitions, the struggles, and the passions of those of their race who are striving to break the narrow limits of tradition" (123). The narrator's comments veil his own participation in offering "something new and unknown" to readers. As the narrator asserts, "I shall endeavor to avoid giving the reader any already overworked and hackneyed descriptions." While the narrator's participation may be read as either intentional or unintentional, his narrative still "give[s] the country something new and unknown," just as Johnson's textual strategy enacts the change the narrator advocates through masking fiction as autobiography.²³

The narrator's decision to abandon the South and move north also functions in relation to perceived notions of socially constructed racial identities. While he has spent the text attempting to present things as otherwise, upon

witnessing a Southern lynching, the narrator realizes the limits that his observations can have when they come face-to-face with the violence of "acquired antipathy." The description of the narrator's "first real experience among rural colored people" in the previous paragraph directly precedes the lynching that he witnesses; it is no coincidence that both events occur in the same chapter. The horrifying scene of lynching metonymically mirrors the limitations placed on black subjectivity by the narrator's description of the "literary concept of the American Negro" (122). Both are products of the same rhetorically constructed subjugation of blacks to white belief. But the "unbearable shame" that drives the narrator northward still carries with it the desire to reformulate both urban social space and racial identities: "I finally made up my mind that I would neither disclaim 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; that it was not necessary for me to go about with a label of inferiority pasted across my forehead" (139). The ambiguous nature of the narrator's choice here is important: He wants to "let the world take me for what it would." In doing so, he lays claim to neither side; he desires, finally, to be neither white nor black. He abandons his Southern past, but he does so with the hope of constructing a new future, one that can leave the negative elements of the past behind, like the unnecessary "label of inferiority" that this past can stamp on him. To be sure, the narrator's desire to undo the historical effects of socially constructed racial positions may be read as overly idealistic, especially coming as it does at this particular juncture in the text.²⁴ While the privilege offered to the narrator through passing makes such a choice possible, the underlying assumption here is that this is a form of privilege that the narrator would like to claim for *all* people. As idealistic as this seems, the narrator's dream is to allow all people to be

taken for what they would, and to not be codified or structured by the pre-existing, unequal, and historically incorrect labels that have thus far structured the narrator's relationship to his own identity.²⁵ For the narrator, this is the way that the world *should* work, even as he realizes that it is not that simple.

The failure of the narrator's idealistic gesture conditions the end of the text, giving weight to the narrator's final utterance that "I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage" (154). The internal cost of his decision, played out in the tension inherent in this idealistic gesture that must ultimately function in the real world—between the theoretical nature of his socially constructed racial identity and the actual practice of everyday life—still troubles the narrator's "feelings concerning [his] present position in the world" (153). The narrator's idealistic intent to "neither disclaim the black race nor claim the white race" (139) has given way to the mundane realization that he is now "an ordinarily successful white man who has made a little money" (154). While the narrator's realization qualifies the failure of his idealized attempt to leave all racial identities behind, it does not completely erase it. The narrator's dream of abandoning racial positions further exposes the debilitating effect that such norms create for blacks in the text.²⁶ In doing so, the text challenges the cultural logic that institutionalizes African American identity, breaking it down by re-narrating the narrator's personal experiences for the edification of Johnson's readers. The narrator further ruptures the boundaries that construct blackness by demonstrating that African Americans already exist in urban spaces in ways that complicate and transform the pastoral identities that previously situated them. The narrator's realization that he cannot escape society's racial codes reveals the existing restrictions that configure black subjectivity, even as his narrative works to supplant these codes. This is taken one step further

when the narrator discloses that he is still prone to the effects of the social conditioning created by America's unequal racial hierarchies: "There came a new dread to haunt me, a dread which I cannot explain and which was unfounded, but one that never left me. I was in constant fear that . . . [my wife] would discover in me some shortcoming which she would unconsciously attribute to my blood rather than to a failing of human nature" (153). Even though the narrator recognizes the "unfounded" basis for his "constant fear," it continues to haunt him. The narrator's fear, however, should not be seen as an anomalous occurrence; it is just another product of the acquired antipathy of racial intolerance, a part of the same structure of belief that taught the narrator his racial role as a child.

The final two pages of the text again re-emphasize the narrator's indeterminate position, resolving Johnson's narrative tension between the past and the present in the novel by leaving the narrator as an unresolved cipher. In the final scene, the narrator attends a "meeting in the interest of Hampton Institute at Carnegie Hall," where he sees a "small but gallant band of colored men who are publicly fighting the cause of their race" (153-54). These men "are making history and a race" (154); they have dedicated their lives to working toward what the narrator has envisioned as only an idealistic possibility—a world that will take people for what it would. The narrator states that "even those who oppose them know that these men have the eternal principle of right on their side, and they will be victors even though they should go down in defeat." While the narrator feels "small and selfish" compared to these men, realizing that he, "too, might have taken part in a work so glorious," his love for his children "keeps [him] from desiring to be otherwise." The narrator recognizes that his choice has left him unable to participate directly in such a future, and he abides by his decision, even as he continues to hold onto his own "tangible

remnants of a vanished dream." This duality situates what is arguably the narrator's most important misreading in the novel, one that Stepto's essay fails to engage—namely, the narrator's assertion that "I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage." Taken literally, the narrator has lost his public connection to his racial heritage, in that he is not planning on undoing his current situation in the world as white. Yet the narrator's capacity to tell his story connects him to at least a portion of his past. This reveals the narrator's bifurcated position in the text: His ability to re-narrate his past gives him a private identification with African American culture through a collective identification with a black diasporic present that he only partially understands, one that he does not need to claim publicly in order to experience.²⁷ While it might be argued that the narrator addresses readers from the position of whiteness, his narrative still carries with it the implicit markers of African American culture that can, regardless of his inability to read these markers, be used to transform white conceptions of blackness. That the narrator describes his personal history as a "practical joke on [an implicitly white] society" (1) qualifies his dual heritage, and clarifies his narrative as a tongue-in-cheek white-face performance designed to undercut the rhetoric of whiteness that it confronts. This point highlights the potential danger of using misreading to situate the narrator in the text, for it misses Johnson's incorporation of the narrator into a larger narrative strategy, which is designed to make American social spaces equally available to African Americans. To foreground the narrator's misreading means that we as readers continue to miss the narrative duplicity that structures Johnson's narrative, that we continue to miss the narrative gains that Johnson's novel produces for African American fiction.

Taken together, Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods* and James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* were part of the first sustained attempt to construct an alternative narrative strategy for African Americans, one that abandoned the confines of pastoralism in order to embrace the space of the city. Dunbar's novel reveals the authorial bind that created the existing representational norms for blacks in American fiction. In doing so, he destroys the idealism that underwrites the space of both the pastoral and the urban, demonstrating the limited opportunities that black authors faced in the struggle for successful self-representation when the space that black characters were allowed to represent was reciprocally limited to stereotypical caricatures. While his novel presents the city as unavailable to African Americans, this, in turn, reveals similar limits for blacks in the pastoral South. Dunbar thus succeeds in disrupting the established logic that situates his African American characters even though he does not successfully traverse the narrative impasse that exists at the heart of his novel. Johnson's novel also weighs in against established norms, but Johnson goes one step further in that he re-imagines

Dunbar's textual dilemma in a way that resolves the textual crisis between the urban North and the pastoral South in Dunbar's novel. In Johnson's novel, the narrator's misreadings allow his experiences to present potentially new and different information to his readers by re-narrating the past in the space of the present. Johnson's manipulation of autobiographical form allows him to reconfigure African Americans' relationship to urban space by presenting them as an already established group. While Johnson's narrator is left racially suspended at the end of the novel, his ability to recount his past black experiences, even as he ostensibly exists as a member of the white world, resolves the necessity of choosing between the internal freedom of the South and the external freedom of the North that Dunbar was caught between by rewriting the established literary conventions that define blackness. Before the city could become a site of refuge for African Americans, it needed to be transformed into a space that could be used as refuge. By revealing that racial determinations had been used to construct the spatial limitations of black identity, Dunbar and Johnson paved the way for the Harlem Renaissance's subsequent explorations of urban blackness. The city was now open for business.

Notes

1. Frank Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857), Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892), Charles Chesnut's *The Wife of His Youth* (1899), and Pauline Hopkins's *Contending Forces* (1900) offer some such exceptions.

2. Existing critical examinations that address the image of the city and its significance for the Great Migration in African American literature have paid scant attention to the development of a viable urban identity for blacks. Critics have generally taken the city as an already established trope, assuming that the development of the city in fiction was concurrent with the Harlem Renaissance. But the emergence of the city as a habitable space for African Americans did not just magically happen; it required the development of distinct narrative strategies that could supplant the existing literary beliefs that situated African Americans in the pastoral South. Charles Scroggs's *Sweet Home: Invisible Cities in the Afro-American Novel* (1993) marks Alain Locke's *The New Negro* (1925) as the starting point for constructing a "home" for the New Negro" (2) in the city. While Scroggs touches on the period preceding Locke, he covers only the publishing history of pre-Harlem Renaissance writers, using them to set up the space of the modernist city that he examines. In a similar vein, Farah Jasmine Griffin's *"Who Set You Flowin'?: The African American Migration Narrative* (1995) presents black migration as marked by Northern urban sensibilities, but she never investigates the historical precedents that situate the conditions her work examines; Dunbar and Johnson merely serve as a point of departure for her text. As she argues, "From the publication of Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The*

Sport of the Gods in 1902 to Toni Morrison's *Jazz* in 1992, the migration narrative emerges as one of the twentieth century's dominant forms of African-American cultural production" (3). After setting up her theoretical claims, Griffin begins with Toomer's rewriting of the pastoral South in *Cane* (1923). Lawrence Rodgers's *Canaan Bound: The African-American Great Migration Novel* (1997) goes further. He examines "the Great Migration Novel as a response to the limitations of American racial geography" (ix), marking Dunbar's novel as the first to focus on black urban life: "By mapping the initial boundaries of a new literary geography in the black urban north, Dunbar offers the first novelistic escape from the black literary south" (7). Johnson's text, too, engages the problem of black urban life: "Johnson added another variable to the migration novel's complicated equation of black identity: his narrator is racially as well as geographically suspended" (56). However, Rodgers's text focuses mainly on the trope of migration in both of these texts, a trope that "set[s] the stage for twentieth-century African-American literature's emphasis on urban subject matter" (39). While Rodgers correctly points out that African American authors "needed to begin charting an alternative geography" to escape the "tenaciously embedded negative representations of African-American characters" (51), his focus on migration uses these two novels to "set the stage" for the development of "urban subject matter" in future migration novels.

3. See, for example, ch. 24, "Northern Experience," in which Iola tests her theory "that every woman ought to know how to earn her own living" (205). While Iola has difficulty getting work in the Northern city, the problem of suitable employment for African Americans is presented as one that affects the whole nation; there are no distinguishing remarks in the text that situate the Northern city as different or distinct from the Southern country. As Mr. Cloten, the man who finally gives Iola a job, states, "In dealing with Southern prejudice against the negro, we Northerners could do it with better grace if we divested ourselves of our own. We irritate the South by our criticisms, and, while I confess that there is much that is reprehensible in their treatment of colored people, yet if our Northern civilization is higher than theirs we should 'criticise by creation.' We should stamp ourselves on the South, and not let the South stamp itself on us. When we have learned to treat men according to the complexion of their souls, and not the color of their skins, we will have given our best contribution towards the solution of the negro problem" (212). Mr. Cloten's desire for the North to "stamp" the South is another example of how Harper's text remains within the space of the pastoral: Until this "stamp" has been made, the representational horizon for African Americans is mired within the pastoral.

4. Victoria Earle Matthews's essay "The Value of Race Literature" (1895) also broaches the problems facing blacks in American literature: "The novelists most read at the present time in this country find a remunerative source for their doubtful literary productions based upon the wrongly interpreted and too often grossly exaggerated frailties" of the African American characters they portray (172). To combat these tendencies, Matthews proposes the development of race literature; "When the foundations of such a literature shall have been properly laid, the benefit to be derived will be at once apparent" (173). "The point of all this," Matthews informs us, "is the indubitable evidence of the need of thoughtful, well-defined and intelligently placed efforts on our part, to serve as counter-irritants against all such writing that shall stand, having as an aim the supplying of influential and accurate information, on all subjects relating to the Negro and his environments, to inform the American mind at least, for literary purposes" (177). Matthews, like Cooper and Harper, is struggling with the rhetorical structure of the pastoral which then defined blackness. Her hope is that, by developing African American literature, blacks can provide accurate and positive information about themselves to counteract current beliefs. Her point, while correct, is still mired within the rhetoric of protest against the pastoral forces on black authors; she offers no clear picture of how to create such "accurate and positive" depictions.

5. As Hazel V. Carby notes in her "Introduction" to *Iola Leroy*, Harper and Cooper worked together in "Chicago in 1893 at the World's Congress of Representative Women" (xiv), and both were founding members of the National Association of Colored Women in 1896 (xi, xv).

6. This dilemma is best represented in a much cited passage from the 29 May 1880 entry of *The Journals of Charles W. Chesnut*: ". . . the subtle almost indefinable feeling of repulsion towards the negro, which is common to most Americans — and easily enough accounted for —, cannot be stormed and taken by assault; the garrison will not capitulate: so their position must be mined, and we will find ourselves in their midst before they think it. This work is of a twofold character. The negro's part is to prepare himself for social recognition and equality; and it is the province of literature to open the way for him to get it — to accustom the public mind to the idea; and while amusing them to lead them on imperceptibly, unconsciously step by step to the desired state of feeling" (140). Chesnut's language highlights the difficulty of addressing institutionalized white racism. While Chesnut appears hopeful here, his subsequent experiences in dealing with the acquired antipathies

of whites in the 1880s left him with a different opinion by 1890. This strategy of literary subversion proved to be more difficult than either Chesnutt or Dunbar anticipated; the insidious ability of racist thought to incorporate and re-deploy the attempts of African American authors to reform white readers situates the difficulties that they faced in redressing white America's beliefs concerning blacks.

7. To get a sense of the sentiments that Dunbar's letter was addressing, see William Dean Howells's review of Paul Laurence Dunbar's *Majors and Minors* in the 27 June 1896 "Life and Letters" column for *Harper's Weekly*. Part of this review was also used as the introduction to Dunbar's *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896).

8. For more on Dunbar's use of dialect, see Gavin Jones's "Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Authentic Black Voice" in *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America*. As Jones points out, "To say that Dunbar was trapped in an institutional matrix misses the instances when Dunbar's wings beat against the cage of literary convention, the points where he cleverly redrew the limits in which he was allowed to operate" (206).

9. Houston A. Baker's book *Turning South Again* (2001) helps clarify the distinctions I am making here between the existing rhetoric of racial uplift as it is conditioned by pastoralism, and the developing narrative strategy of urban blackness. In his rereading of Booker T. Washington, Baker asserts that "what Booker T. Washington offers as performative 'modernity' to the black masses is the exact opposite of privileges and opportunities of Benjamin's *flâneur*. In contrast to education that produces excess, luxury, urbanity, book learning, and the accessorized body, Washington urges a clean, thrifty, rural, industrial, plain style — *domesticated immobility* as the regimen for the black body of the 'country districts'" (60). This "*domesticated immobility*" is a product of Washington's own attempts to negotiate the limits of African Americans' pastoral identification. As Baker continues later, "My claim with respect to Booker T. Washington and *Up from Slavery's* relationship to gender and performance is that an outrageous, terrifying, white network of power, opinion, and desire constituted Washington as *the black dandy* (kid-gloved ghost of the 'educated black man' in the white imaginary) . . . all dressed up without any fully modern, urban place to go" (74-75). Baker's reading of Washington presents another strand of the representational matrix that constitutes the pastoral frame for African Americans in American life. For further discussion of the role of *flâneur* in African American fiction, see Baker's *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* 115-38.

10. *Folks From Dixie* (1898), *The Strength of Gideon and Other Stories* (1900), *In Old Plantation Days* (1903), and *The Heart of Happy Hollow* (1904).

11. One of Dunbar's earliest attempts at presenting African Americans as part of the local-color space of the city can be seen in a series of four stories he published in the *New York Journal* from September 17 to October 17, 1897. These stories are "Buss Jenkins Up Nawth: A Human Nature Sketch of Real Darkey Life in New York," "Yellowjack's Game of Craps: A Character Sketch of Real Darcy Life in New York," "How George Johnson 'Won Out': A Character Sketch of Real Darcy Life in New York," and "The Hoodooing of Mr. Bill Simms: A Darcy Dialect Story." While these stories pander to racial stereotypes, at the same time they shift the African American characters in them from the rural South to the urban North. To the best of my knowledge, these stories have yet to be reprinted in any form.

12. Dunbar touches upon tired literary convention again later in the text. Describing Skaggs's relationship to black characters, Dunbar says that "it was the same old story that the white who associates with negroes from volition usually tells to explain his taste" (121). What is equally interesting is that Skaggs's story is a complete fabrication, cementing in place Dunbar's implicit point that Skaggs can only make a claim to befriending blacks through asserting a particular type of narrative, one based on pastoral stereotypes.

13. This quote, taken from a scene at the end of the novel, operates as part of Dunbar's critique of the representational space offered to blacks in the novel. Here, several whites, "the usual assembly of choice spirits" whose discussions have served as the backdrop for white Southern sentimentality in the novel, discuss Berry's release from prison through the work of the Northern muckraking journalist Skaggs: " 'You're not to be blamed, Colonel,' said old Horace Talbot. 'You've done more than any other gentleman would have done. The trouble is that the average Northerner has no sense of honour, suh, no sense of honour. If this particular man had had, he would have kept still, and everything would have gone on smooth and quiet. Instead of that, a distinguished family is brought to shame, and for what? To give a nigger a few more years of freedom when, likely as not, he don't want it; and Berry Hamilton's life in prison has proved nearer the ideal reached by slavery than anything he has found since emancipation. Why, suhs, I fancy I see him leaving his prison with tears of regret in his eyes'" (240). Dunbar situates these men as more concerned with the illusion of appearances in Southern life than with the possibility of social justice for blacks, the exact fallacy that Dunbar had to deal with in his writing. Horace Talbot's remarks demonstrate the ingrained cultural

logic of the South, of how a distinguished Southern family's "honour" is far more important than the needs of African Americans. As well, Talbot's obliviousness to Berry's real feelings — Talbot fancies he sees Berry "leaving his prison with tears of regret in his eyes" when in fact Berry is so distraught and horrified over the turn of events surrounding his life that he faints in the courtroom when he is found guilty — marks Talbot and the others as being not only out of touch with reality, but also grossly insidious in their perpetuation of social myth.

14. There has been much critical debate over Dunbar's presentation of the city in *The Sport of the Gods*. Critics seem determined to position the book as an anti-city novel, as if this were a determinable point. Such debate misses Dunbar's own position: Neither the city nor the country was open to blacks at this juncture. As well, this debate uncritically lumps Dunbar in with the very authors he was attempting to escape. While the tension between the city and the country was part of the province of Southern authors like Thomas Dixon, who rejected the city wholeheartedly (see, e.g., his "From the Horrors of City Life"), Dunbar's position was much less vested, as he was unable to effectively lay claim to either space. While pastoral notions informed Dunbar's writing, this was part of Dunbar's role as an author in the social realm, not an integral function of his character. The desire to make Dunbar a "city-phobic" writer also misses his use of the city in his short stories, as well as the three essays he published about African Americans in the city: "The Negroes of the Tenderloin" (1898), "Negro Life in Washington" (1900), and "Negro Society in Washington" (1901).

15. Fannie's and Berry's decision to return to the South in *The Sport of the Gods* can also be constructively compared to the decision that Lola Leroy makes to return to the South in *Lola Leroy*. While Lola has a choice to live in either the North or the South, Fannie and Berry do not. These two choices are reciprocally dependent on the respective characters' relationship to space within the novel. For Lola, all of America, both North and South, exists as undifferentiated pastoral space, and blacks are still identified within the confines of the pastoral. Lola thus chooses the South because it is where she can be most useful in helping to educate African Americans, and in working to create the changes needed to supplant pastoral norms. For Fannie and Berry, the North and the South have since become distinguished types of space; they are forced to return to the South because the city is not an available option open to them. While other black characters have negotiated their own forms of compromise in the city, Fannie and Berry are unable to make the type of compromise that is needed to survive there. Interestingly enough, Kitty, the one member of the Hamilton family who stays behind, manages to forge a possible existence in the city as a dancer. While in her parents' eyes she has been degraded by her decision, as readers we need to remember that Fannie's and Berry's beliefs have been formed by the pastoral norms of the South, and the vision of lost respectability they so cherish is contingent upon Berry's role within the South's pastoral framework.

16. The configuration of social space that Dunbar presents in his novel is also described in W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). In "Of the Faith of the Fathers," Du Bois alternately positions the opportunities offered to African Americans in the South and the North. In the South, "political defence is becoming less and less available, and economic defence is still only partially effective. But there is a patent defence at hand, — the defence of deception and flattery, of cajoling and lying. . . . To-day the young Negro of the South who would succeed cannot be frank and outspoken, honest and self-assertive, but rather he is daily tempted to be silent and wary, politic and sly; he must flatter and be pleasant. . . . His real thoughts, his real aspirations, must be guarded in whispers. . . . Patience, humility, and adroitness must, in these growing black youth, replace impulse, manliness, and courage. With this sacrifice there is an economic opening, and perhaps peace and some prosperity" (147-48). Conversely, in the North, "through school and periodicals, discussions and lectures, [the African American] is intellectually quickened and awakened. The soul, long pent up and dwarfed, suddenly expands in new-found freedom. What wonder that every tendency is to excess, — radical complaint, radical remedies, bitter denunciation or angry silence. . . . [Northern blacks] despise the submission and subserviency of the Southern Negroes, but offer no other means by which a poor and oppressed minority can exist side by side with its masters. Feeling deeply and keenly the tendencies and opportunities of the age in which they live, their souls are bitter at the fate which drops the Veil between; and the very fact that this bitterness is natural and justifiable only serves to intensify it and make it more maddening" (148). The choice left to African Americans is between deception in the South and bitterness in the North, between maintaining their "real thoughts" at the price of their physical dignity in the South, and having their intellect "quickened and awakened" but with no way "by which a poor and oppressed minority can exist side by side with its masters" in the North.

17. My discussion of Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* focuses on the anonymously published 1912 edition, which is intended to highlight Johnson's conscious manipulation of autobiographical form. As Jacqueline Goldsby argues, "We often underestimate the importance of the first appearance of James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* because

today's readers are most familiar with the 1927 edition" (244). However, "the appearance of the original edition of the novel and its subsequent reprintings are historically distinct events. Placing the novel in its original context allows readers to assess the complexity of Johnson's efforts to conceive a narrative form and to cultivate a reading public for what critics now consider the first modernist novel in the African-American canon" (246). See Goldsby's "Keeping the 'Secret of Authorship'" for further discussion of the publication history of Johnson's 1912 text.

18. I want to clarify here that the notion of passing itself is left purposely ambiguous in the text: The narrator chooses to "neither disclaim the black race nor claim the white race" (139). This indeterminacy is furthered two pages later when the narrator states, "I had made up my mind that since I was not going to be a Negro, I would avail myself of every opportunity to make a white man's success" (141). Here again, neither racial position is advocated; the narrator will be neither black nor white. Although he will *make* "a white man's success," he *does not* claim the position of whiteness to do so. The narrator's idealistic attempt to be *neither* is an important distinction that I examine later in the essay.

19. While I am trying to distinguish Johnson's narrative strategies from that of traditional third-person narration, I would like to emphasize that I am *not* trying to draw a distinction between fiction as inherently "false" and autobiography as inherently "true." Rather, I am attempting to emphasize that Johnson's purposeful blurring of these two categories into one is an intrinsic part of his narrative strategy. As Robert Stepto points out, "Autobiographical statements are, by definition, fictions imposed upon a given personal history (theoretically, a nonfiction) in which what is singularly personal is the author's control over *which* fiction is imposed on his history" (107). See also Vera Kutzinski's essay "Johnson Revises Johnson: *Oxherding Tale* and *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*," in which she analyzes these two fictional African American autobiographies in order to "scrutinize the tropology of literacy and self-writing, and with it the socio-cultural processes through which identity is negotiated" (285).

20. It is of interest that Johnson was not the first to make use of such a possibility. Sutton Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* (1899) uses a similar type of authenticating frame in presenting the story of a secret organization of African Americans who intend to declare war on the U.S. from within, and whose plans include annexing Texas. The opening of this text offers the following: "The papers which are herewith submitted for your perusal and consideration, were delivered into my hands by Mr. Berl Trout" (i). Griggs vouches for Trout's "truthfulness" and declares that there "are other documents in my possession tending to confirm the assertions made in his narrative. These documents were given to me by Mr. Trout, so that, in case an attempt is made to pronounce him a liar, I might defend his name by coming forward with indisputable proofs of every important statement" (ii). The text also contains "Berl Trout's Dying Declaration," designed to further authenticate the text, and to position Trout's decision to betray the Imperium as "in the interest of the whole human family — of which my race is but a part" (2). Griggs's narrative framing allows him to present the narrative as an actual threat that faces the United States, as opposed to merely a fictional depiction. Unfortunately, Griggs's reading audience was mainly black, mitigating the hope for change that such a text might bring with a white reading audience.

21. According to Robert Stepto, "Johnson's peculiar allegiances to past examples of sociological reportage retard *The Autobiography*, making it ultimately something less than a novel" (127). However, from my perspective, Johnson's "commingling of nonfiction and fiction" (112) is designed to transfer Du Bois's nonfictional claims into fictional gains for his African American characters through eliding the distinction between these two styles of writing. By leaving sociological examples for readers to interpret in the text, Johnson allows them to stand in as the experiences from the past that can be accepted in the present.

22. The last two sentences of this quote — "In this respect the Negro is much in the position of a great comedian who gives up the lighter roles to play tragedy. No matter how well he may portray the deeper passions, the public is loath to give him up in his old character" — mirror an earlier description of blacks as trapped between comedy and tragedy. In a scene describing the "Club," Johnson states, "There was one man, a minstrel, who, whenever he responded to a request to 'do something,' never essayed anything below a reading from Shakespeare. . . . Here was a man who made people laugh at the size of his mouth, while he carried in his heart a burning ambition to be a tragedian; and so after all he did play a part in a tragedy" (77). Both quotes document the inability of African Americans to play serious roles. This inability is part of the prescriptive boundaries of the pastoral that both texts challenge: To maintain blacks as comic figures (or, more correctly, to allow them to vacillate between the extremes of comedy and tragedy) keeps them trapped within the space that is defined by the pastoral. While the Hamiltons cannot make the transition from the country to the city, as neither space is open to them in the novel, the narrator's autobiographical re-narration irretrievably ruptures the pastoral's stranglehold on black identity by positioning African Americans as

already within the space of the city. I would also argue that the "joke" Johnson presents in his novel, where the narrator decides to "gather up the little tragedies of my life, and turn them into a practical joke on society" (1), irretrievably ruptures the duality that African Americans face by allowing the narrator to transform the tragedies of his African American life into a joke that is perpetuated back on whites. See Cathy Boeckmann's *A Question of Character* for an extended reading of the limits of comedy and tragedy in Johnson, and his use of autobiography to overcome these limits.

23. The narrator's participation in constructing "something new and unknown" (123) is a narrative inversion of Berry's participation in pastoral norms. In either instance, it does not matter whether Berry or the narrator acts knowingly or unknowingly, as they are both complicit in their respective rhetorical strategies. For Berry, this is what gets him in trouble in the novel, just as the narrator's participation here helps resolve the representational deficiency that African Americans face. This participation by the narrator is also a point that is missed by a good number of critics. See Posnock 75 and Schulz 51-53 for two such examples that label the narrator's role here as a deficiency.

24. The idealized gesture the narrator makes here is one that orders the relationships between people; it relates to the idealized choice of identity more than it does to the notion of an idealized cityscape. It is not a gesture that is located within the horizon of metaphoric possibility that the idealized "city on a hill" offers in Charles Scruggs's *Sweet Home*. While the narrator finds refuge in the city, the subsequent collapse of his idealist act into an actualized reality, coupled with the continued attempts to address the problems of racial inequality that the narrator details in the final scene, positions how we are to understand such idealism.

25. The narrator's idealistic gesture here is similar to the "kingdom of culture" that W. E. B. Du Bois envisions in ch. 6, "Of the Training of Black Men," in *The Souls of Black Folk*: "I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out of the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the Veil. Is this the life you grudge us, O knightly America? Is this the life you long to change into the dull red hideousness of Georgia? Are you so afraid lest peering from this high Pisgah, between Philistine and Amalekite, we sight the Promised Land?" (82). For Du Bois, it is education that will allow America to "dwell above the Veil," and whites hamper the development of blacks at their own peril. I would like to thank Carrie Tirado Bramen for pointing out the connection between the idealism of the narrator and Du Bois to me. This is also a connection between Johnson and Du Bois that Robert Stepto's chapter on Johnson misses, one that, through creating a link to Du Bois's idealism as well as his sociological examples in Johnson's text, could bring Stepto's examination of Johnson full circle. While Stepto correctly picks up on Johnson's indebtedness to Du Bois for creating something "new and unknown" (Johnson 123, Stepto 111-12), Stepto does not press his analysis of Johnson's narrative strategies far enough in his reading; his analysis leaves Johnson's novel as an "aborted immersion narrative" (114) rather than reading through the full range of Johnson's narrative innovations. See Stepto 99, 111-21.

26. Schulz (32-33) touches on the same tension between idealism and reality in analyzing a scene in a bicycle shop from Johnson's *Along This Way*.

27. The narrator's description of what he sees as his position in the world at the end of the novel is important: "It is difficult for me to analyze my feelings concerning my present position in the world. Sometimes it seems to me that I have never really been a Negro, that I have been only a privileged spectator of their inner life; at other times I feel that I have been a coward, a deserter, and I am possessed by a strange longing for my mother's people" (153). The narrator's vacillations between his black and white selves reflect his dual heritage. To force the narrator into either one of the two roles open to him (black or white) only reaffirms the racial binary that Johnson's text intentionally muddles. This is the problem with Stepto's use of misreading: it foregrounds a notion of authenticity in the text that cannot be sustained (just like the narrator's initial attempt to act idealistically). Misreading also belies the experience that the narrator has had as a mixed-race character (i.e., he must read as a black man, and not as a mixed-race man); it emphasizes the split between the text's inside narrator and outside author that Johnson was interested in eliding. To embrace both parts at the same time reveals Johnson's narrative strategy: to create a fictional novel designed to function as an autobiography.

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