

Serialising the Ex-Colored Man

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Published anonymously in May 1912 by the Boston firm of Sherman, French & Company, James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is the life-story of a talented biracial ragtime pianist in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He lives through a variety of experiences in the USA and Europe before his witnessing of a lynching convinces him to pass as white. He ends his story living in New York City, rich but disillusioned. He has successfully demonstrated that – when not seen through the supposed taint of race – a 'colored' man can achieve success by the standards of white US society. Such a demonstration is in itself a racial achievement, the book implies, although one that leaves the protagonist spiritually empty.

Carrying no author's name, the book was originally marketed in 1912 in order to maintain the possibility that it was a real autobiography, although it soon became known, at least in New York circles, that it had been written by Johnson as a work of fiction. It was republished in a prestigious edition with Alfred A. Knopf in 1927. Although widely admired, no-one really knew what to make of it, and the book was largely forgotten until its rediscovery late in the twentieth century as what one of its recent editors calls "an early experiment in literary modernism", a formulation that nicely subverts the traditional chronology of modernist studies.¹

Johnson himself had tropical affiliations, in his case Bahamian and more distantly Haitian, affiliations he was well aware of and which feature on the first two pages of his autobiography.² He was born and brought up in Jacksonville, Florida, a semi-tropical city just seven degrees north of the tropic line. On account of a close childhood Cuban friend, he was soon familiar with and then fluent in Spanish, a fluency that facilitated his consular appointments. These connections are echoed in *The Autobiography* where the narrator becomes a reader in a cigar factory full of Cuban workers and then, as the novel draws to a close, his knowledge of Spanish gets him ahead in New York: "I kept my eyes open, watching for a chance to better my condition. It finally came in the form of a position with a house which was at the time establishing a South American department".³ This ultimately leads to the position of financial security in which he ends his narrative.

By 1919 Johnson had already worked as a teacher, a journalist, a lawyer, and a song-writer before, under the patronage of Booker T. Washington, joining the US consular service in 1906 with posts in Puerto Cabello (Venezuela) and Corinto

¹ Jacqueline Goldsby, "Introduction" to her Norton Critical Edition of James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* [1912], New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2015, pp. ix-lvi, at xiv.

² James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way: The Autobiography*, New York: The Viking Press, 1933, pp. 3-4.

³ Johnson, *The Auto-biography*, *Half-Century*, 9, no. 4 (November 1920), p. 4.

(Nicaragua). After leaving the service in 1914 he joined the NAACP as a field secretary in December 1916 and was responsible for organising the 1917 silent parade through the streets of New York to protest against racist violence and racial discrimination. Johnson had first moved to New York in 1901 and thenceforward it remained his principal anchoring point: “It would not have taken a psychologist to understand that I was born to be a New Yorker”.⁴

In 1919, with his new career at the NAACP well and truly launched and writing a well-regarded weekly opinion piece for the *New York Age*, Johnson – always ambitious, always able to wear several hats at once – clearly decided that *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* deserved a wider readership than it had gained through its publication with Sherman, French in 1912 and arranged for the book’s serialisation in the *Half-Century* magazine. When *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* began to be taken seriously as a novel in the 1960s, it was usually the second book edition in 1927 (noticeable because of the different spelling: *Ex-Coloured Man*) that was the object of attention, not least because that was the book version to which Johnson had attached his name. At first, it was that edition that the modern reprints (Hill and Wang 1960, Knopf’s own 1979, Vintage 1989) chose to reproduce. Strictly speaking, it could be said that the 1912 edition has never been precisely reproduced since it would be publishing suicide to try to reprint the book anonymously now that everybody knows who the author is, but recent editions have tended to use the 1912 text, which differs slightly from the 1927 one with the huge exception of the introduction to the latter of the author’s name. It’s still often said that the 1927 edition was the first time that Johnson’s name had been associated with *The Autobiography*, but in fact its serialisation in 1919 carried his name. As so often, the periodical publication gets ignored.⁵

It’s unclear why Johnson chose *Half-Century: Magazine for the Colored Home and Home-Maker*, published in Chicago. Although this time his name – a bigger one than in 1912 – was prominently attached, *Half-Century* was not a magazine with literary credentials or indeed pretensions: it was more likely to be read by W. E. B. Du Bois’s secretary than by the great man himself. Perhaps that was Johnson’s plan: to reach an untapped readership of upwardly mobile, culturally aspirant black women. Perhaps he wanted to get the book into the public realm with his name attached, but not in New York, where it would risk looking old-hat. Perhaps he was offered a substantial sum of money. The serialisation is not even mentioned in passing in Johnson’s 1933 autobiography nor in Eugene Levy’s biography.⁶

⁴ Johnson, *Along This Way*, p. 47.

⁵ The one study is Eurie Dahn, “Middlebrow Networks: James Weldon Johnson and the *Half-Century* Magazine”, in her *Jim Crow Networks: African American Periodical Cultures*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2021, pp. 29-64. In a letter to *Pittsburgh Courier* editor Floyd J. Calvin, Johnson refused the offer to serialise *The Autobiography* on the grounds that it had already been serialised twice in the black press. If it ever existed, the second serialisation has never been located (James Weldon Johnson, Letter to Floyd J. Calvin, 11 March 1924, JWJ I/4/79. JWJ = James Weldon Johnson and Grace Nail Johnson Papers (MSS 49), Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven, series/box/folder).

⁶ Eugene Levy, *James Weldon Johnson: Black Leader, Black Voice*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973, p. 355. Dahn sees it as “part of his activist outreach to a wide audience” (*Middlebrow Networks*,

Half-Century (1916-1925) was founded and run by Anthony Overton (1865-1946), one of the most successful black businessmen of the first half of the twentieth century. The foundation of Overton's business empire was the Overton Hygienic Company, which manufactured cosmetics, and it seems as if *Half-Century* was launched largely to advertise the company's products. In keeping with a magazine seeking a wide and mostly female readership, the *Half-Century* aimed, as an early editorial suggested, to offer itself as "neither staid nor sensational – neither conservative nor radical", happy to occupy "the middle ground".⁷ Smartly, Overton installed a young employee, Katherine E. Williams, as the magazine's editor and public face so that the Overton name had no obvious connection to the publication, but he was clearly the *eminence grise*, writing anonymous editorials and pseudonymous articles. In the 1920s Overton expanded into finance with the Douglass National Bank and the Victory Life Insurance Company. In 1925 he closed *Half-Century* and started the *Chicago Bee*. In 1927 he was awarded the Spingarn Medal.⁸ *Half-Century* largely represented Overton's views. He'd been a supporter of Booker T. Washington and published a fair number of self-help articles. The magazine's adverts, aimed mainly at women, were sensitive, not racially insulting, and didn't make outrageously unrealistic claims. In fact, *Half-Century* published articles critical of other magazines for accepting such adverts. It was, however, very much a 'race-first' magazine and its political stance could be uncompromising. In February 1919, for example, just a few months before the serialisation of Johnson's novel began, the magazine's business manager, H. A. Phelps, who frequently wrote on matters of race, offered a stinging criticism of the actions during the war of both Robert Russa Moton, Washington's successor at Tuskegee, and W. E. B. Du Bois, Johnson's colleague at the NAACP: "Blown the way the white man wishes them to be blown, they constitute nothing less than carbuncles on the race".⁹ In the circumstances, Johnson's choice of the *Half-Century* is intriguing. There is no surviving correspondence between Johnson and Overton, although the two of them

p. 142), and it's true that Johnson did use popular periodicals to spread the NAACP gospel; but *The Autobiography* contains no activist message.

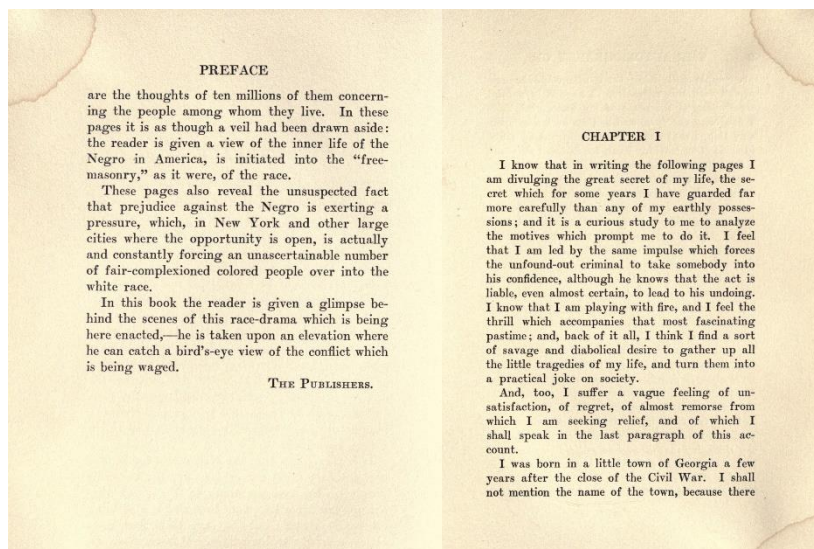
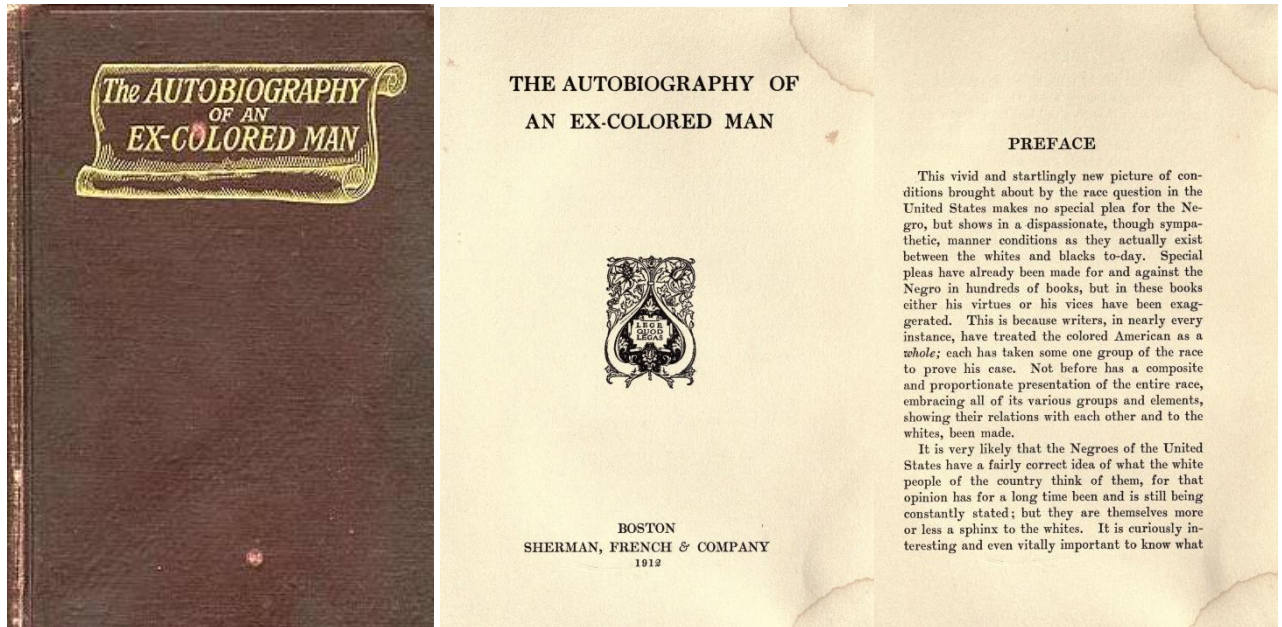
⁷ "Reciprocity and Co-operation", *Half-Century Magazine*, 2, no. 4 (April 1917), p. 1.

⁸ On Overton, see Robert E. Weems, *The Merchant Prince of Black Chicago: Anthony Overton and the Building of a Financial Empire*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2020. For general background, see Christopher Robert Reed, "The Rise of Black Chicago's Culturati: Intellectuals, Authors, Artists, and Patrons, 1893-1930", in *Roots of the Black Chicago Renaissance: New Negro Writers, Artists, and Intellectuals, 1893-1930*, ed. Richard A. Courage and Christopher Robert Reed, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2020, pp. 15-41. On *Half-Century*, see Weems, "The Half-Century Magazine: 1916-1925", in *The Merchant Prince*, pp. 62-78; Noliwe M. Rooks, *Ladies Pages: African American Women's Magazines and the Culture That Made Them*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004, pp. 66-88; and Albert Lee Kreiling, "The *Half-Century* Magazine and the *Chicago Bee*", in his *The Making of Racial Identity in the Black Press: A Cultural Analysis of Race Journalism in Chicago, 1878-1929*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1973, pp. 257-280. None of them offer mention, let alone analysis of the serialisation of *The Autobiography*.

⁹ H. A. Phelps, "Selling Out the Race", *Half-Century*, 6, no. 2 (February 1919), p. 9.

very likely met during Johnson's visit to Chicago in April 1918, fundraising for the NAACP.¹⁰

A comparison between the first two publications of *The Autobiography* reveals significant differences in the experiences of readers approaching the different iterations of the novel. Here is the sequence of pages from the cover to the first page of text in the 1912 publication:



A plain brown hard cover doesn't offer the usual author's name, just the book's title in three fonts picked out in gold on a scroll, referencing a much older form of publication. The title-page repeats the title, this time just in a single upper-case font, with again no mention of an author's name. Place,

publisher, and date are at the bottom of the page with, in the middle, the publisher's device with its Latin motto, "Lege Quod Legas" [Read What You Read]. The keynotes are classical severity and reserve. Little is given away. Latin is proffered. This is, after all, Boston. A two-page preface then provides an entrée before the text

¹⁰ See "Clubs to Honor Coming of James W. Johnson", *Chicago Defender*, 6 April 1918, p. 8; "James Weldon Johnson Coming", *Chicago Defender*, 13 April 1918, p. 8; "The NAACP Drive", *Chicago Defender*, 20 April 1918, p. 6.

itself properly begins – or so it would seem to readers in 1912, though much later it became apparent that the preface was already part of the text proper, drafted by Johnson himself.¹¹ Readers, already blindsided by the absence of an author's name where it would be expected, are offered the terms with which they might comprehend what they are about to read: it will be as if a veil has been drawn aside, the preface suggests, it will be as if they have been initiated into a kind of freemasonry of the Negro race, it will be as if they have been taken behind the scenes of the great race-drama of New York in which increasing numbers of black people are passing into the white race. The preface is signed by “The Publishers”, presumably Sherman, French themselves, readers might assume, but undoubtedly



THE HALF-CENTURY MAGAZINE
The Auto-biography of an Ex-colored Man
The Start-off of Our New Serial
 By James Weldon Johnson

1 I shall begin by writing the following story as it really happened, and I shall not be responsible for any of the things that I have written, but I shall be responsible for the things that I have not written. I shall not be responsible for the things that I have written, but I shall be responsible for the things that I have not written. I shall not be responsible for the things that I have written, but I shall be responsible for the things that I have not written.

THOUGHTS AT TWILIGHT
 The twilight is a time of day when the sun has set and the stars are beginning to appear. It is a time of day when the world is quiet and the soul is at peace. It is a time of day when the heart is full of thoughts and the mind is full of memories. It is a time of day when the soul is at peace and the heart is full of thoughts.

ATTENTION, WOMEN!

Let Us Improve Your Looks
 The Winona Hair Emporium
 5011 S. Wash Ave., Chicago, Ill.

THE HALF-CENTURY MAGAZINE

BY WHAT NAME SHALL THE RACE BE KNOWN?
 T he Negro race is a people of great ability and great courage. It is a people of great strength and great endurance. It is a people of great wisdom and great power. It is a people of great love and great mercy. It is a people of great faith and great hope. It is a people of great courage and great bravery. It is a people of great strength and great endurance. It is a people of great wisdom and great power. It is a people of great love and great mercy. It is a people of great faith and great hope. It is a people of great courage and great bravery.

OUR AFRICAN VISITORS
 T he African continent is a land of great beauty and great interest. It is a land of great wealth and great power. It is a land of great wisdom and great knowledge. It is a land of great love and great mercy. It is a land of great faith and great hope. It is a land of great courage and great bravery. It is a land of great strength and great endurance. It is a land of great wisdom and great power. It is a land of great love and great mercy. It is a land of great faith and great hope. It is a land of great courage and great bravery.

DOES IT EVER HAPPEN TO YOU?
 I have seen many people who are in need of help. I have seen many people who are in need of love. I have seen many people who are in need of mercy. I have seen many people who are in need of faith. I have seen many people who are in need of hope. I have seen many people who are in need of courage. I have seen many people who are in need of strength. I have seen many people who are in need of wisdom. I have seen many people who are in need of power. I have seen many people who are in need of love. I have seen many people who are in need of mercy. I have seen many people who are in need of faith. I have seen many people who are in need of hope. I have seen many people who are in need of courage. I have seen many people who are in need of strength. I have seen many people who are in need of wisdom. I have seen many people who are in need of power.

figures of authority. After all this restraint and anonymity, readers then turn the page and are buried under an avalanche of first-person singular pronouns as the writer begins to reveal his secrets.¹²

The 1919 serialisation opens very differently.¹³ At first glance the two sequences have nothing at all in common. We grab hold of the title, which at least they share, even if ‘autobiography’ has now acquired a hyphen. That title is also on the cover, although in minuscule font as part of (but at least top of) a list of articles to be found inside the magazine. But the cover is dominated by the magazine’s title and by a Thanksgiving cartoon (well, it is November) featuring a young boy with an axe initiating a conversation with

¹¹ On 17 February 1912 Johnson wrote to Sherman, French with an “advance notice” in which he notes that although the book is not based on the life of a single individual, “it is made up in every important fact and detail from the real experiences of several persons whom I have known, and from incidents which have come under my observation and within my personal experience; so, in every essential particular, the biography is truth and not fiction” (JWJ I/18/435).

¹² [James Weldon Johnson], *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Boston: Sherman, French & Company, 1912, p. 1.

¹³ James Weldon Johnson, *The Auto-biography of an Ex-colored Man*, *Half-Century*, 7, no. 5 (November 1919), p. 4. The serialisation ran over thirteen issues until December 1920.

Mr. Turkey. One fears the worst: this is, after all, Chicago, a city where they know how to butcher animals.

Chuckling at the cartoon, and perhaps feeling hungry at the prospect of Thanksgiving dinner, the female readers are immediately taken to a higher plane by The Winona Hair Emporium's advert before plunging into the minutiae of editorial matter and comment on page three. "By What Name" – anonymous but certainly written by Overton – floats the idea (dead in the water) that the problem of black nomenclature could be resolved by the adoption of the term Librarian: librarians everywhere could see the potential for endless confusion. More interesting than the argument itself is that – owner's prerogative – it runs over more than a page and so this part of it ends with "continued on page 15", encouraging readers to skip, at least temporarily, the material on pages 4 to 14, including the start of *The Auto-biography*. Another editorial notes African visitors to New York, talking up the Liberian connection in an almost Garveyite fashion. A much lighter piece, "Did It Ever Happen To You?" scarcely gets going before readers are directed to page 10. And bang in the middle of the editorial page is the list of contents. So, compared with the stark and focussed passage which leads readers into the text of *The Autobiography* in the 1912 book publication, here readers are tempted by all kinds of other goodies that would take them to different parts of the magazine. For those who persist, *The Autobiography* starts on page 4; but still the differences are stark.

In the 1912 book publication the narrator's story begins simply and plainly: Chapter One, two introductory paragraphs, and he is born near the bottom of the first page. In the magazine version, distractions continue to take readers' eyes zig-zagging across the page. A box centred at the top of the middle column offers a rather crude editorial guide to the lesson *The Auto-biography* supposedly teaches, with the eye then drawn to the bottom of the column to read an inane poem which has no relevance at all to the commencing serial. That first page of the serial packs in the first seven pages of the 1912 book publication, in three columns, and much smaller font. The text is by some measure 'the same', although there are in fact small differences immediately apparent. 1912: "I know that in writing the following pages I am divulging the great secret of my life, the secret which for some years I have guarded far more carefully than any of my earthly possessions; and it is a curious study to me to analyze the motives which prompt me to do it". In the serial it's "my early life" and the first "which" is omitted. Two changes, albeit small, in the very first sentence.¹⁴ Others follow, equally minor. It remains unclear whether they were made by Johnson or by the magazine editors.

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Born in Georgia but brought up in New England, the ex-colored man's first hero is Toussaint Louverture, whom he learns about when at school his friend Shiny delivers Wendell Phillips's 1861 hagiographical lecture on the Haitian leader. He feels a "strong desire to see the South", which ends in predictable disillusion with his ignominious escape from Atlanta in a railway porter's laundry closet.¹⁵

¹⁴ For the 1927 edition Knopf made some minor alterations to the first edition as well as repunctuating the whole text.

¹⁵ Johnson, *The Auto-biography, Half-Century*, 8, no. 1 (January 1920), p. 14.

However, unusually – when read against the slave autobiographies on which *The Autobiography* was riffing – the narrator escapes the South by travelling even further south, to the Cuban community in Jacksonville, Florida, which seems almost to straddle the tropic line, so committed is it to the Cuban revolutionary struggle of the 1890s. Although impressed by the absence of a colour line in the Cuban enclave, the narrator is more interested in relating his own promotion to the prestigious position of *lector* in a cigar factory, based on his rapidly acquired prowess in Spanish, which he soon speaks “better than ... many of the Cuban workmen” – a linguistic impossibility.¹⁶ Before long, however, he abandons his Cuban colleagues to make his *entrée* into Jacksonville’s black bourgeois society, eventually gravitating to New York where he develops into a ragtime pianist of note, ragtime being itself a prologue to the development of jazz. After many further travels in Europe and the US South, the ex-colored man ends up back in New York but now in the business rather than the entertainment area.

The Autobiography evinces an evident distaste for easy answers. Its ‘ex-colored’ narrator starts as a black man and ends as white, complicating attempts to establish any simple racial identification, and the novel has continued to prove profoundly subversive, defiantly resisting the limitations of categories circumscribed by racial identity. The book’s generic uneasiness has also unsettled readers, even long after Johnson’s admission of authorship made it clear that the book was a work of fiction. Johnson was well-read in Hispanic literature and *The Autobiography* has something of the episodic nature and tonal impassivity of picaresque narratives such as *Lazarillo de Tormes* and *Guzmán de Alfarache*.¹⁷ As in those Spanish classics, the narratorial voice is marked by ironic detachment and moral ambivalence, preserving a seamless surface which initially allowed Johnson to pass the work off as at least possibly an authentic life-story.¹⁸ Despite its early date, the book’s grappling with instability and uncertainty makes the ‘modernist’ claim plausible, as does the sophistication of the readings offered of the book in recent years.¹⁹

Johnson’s decision to publish *The Autobiography* anonymously was overdetermined.²⁰ He had been an assiduous consul and was hoping for a

¹⁶ Johnson, *The Auto-biography, Half-Century*, 8, no. 2 (February 1920), p. 15.

¹⁷ See Simone Vauthier, “The Interplay of Narrative Modes in James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*”, *Jarbuch für Amerikastudien*, 18 (1973), pp. 173-81.

¹⁸ “an almost hermetically sealed structural irony” (Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr., “Irony and Symbolic Action in James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*”, *American Quarterly*, 32, no. 5 (Winter, 1980), pp. 540-558, at 557).

¹⁹ For example, the essays collected in the Norton Critical Edition, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, ed. Jacqueline Goldsby, New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2015 [henceforth abbreviated to NCE]; those in *New Perspectives on James Weldon Johnson's "The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man"*, ed. Noelle Morrissette, Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2017; and – as just one further example – Bruce Barnhart, “Music, Race, and Sublimation: Ragtime and Symphonic Time in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*”, in his *Jazz in the Time of the Novel: The Temporal Politics of American Race and Culture*, Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2013, pp. 41-81.

²⁰ See Jacqueline Goldsby, “‘Keeping the Secret of Authorship’: A Critical Look at the 1912 Publication of James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*”, in *Print Culture in a Diverse*

diplomatic post in Europe, even though William Howard Taft (elected president in 1908) was soon cultivating the southern vote and therefore not supporting the promotion of African American civil servants in the federal system. Appearing as the author of what he hoped would be a successful and much debated novel about racial identity would have risked damaging Johnson's chances of diplomatic preferment. There were fairly strict regulations regarding the behaviour and pronouncements of US consuls, and Johnson seems to have been determined to follow them punctiliously. As one of his early biographers notes: "the writer felt a diplomat should not affix his name to so controversial a book".²¹

At the same time Johnson convinced himself that the success or failure of the book would depend on concealing its fictive origin – not his most astute deduction, given the novel's subsequent critical history.²² However, the logic of the narrative – read as a plausibly genuine autobiography – also *demand*ed anonymity: the ex-colored man, at the end of the book a successful property dealer, would hardly risk his prosperity by attaching his name to the story and announcing his bi-racial background. The desire to maintain this dual-layered anonymity then influenced Johnson's choice of publisher. An African American press would have wanted to publicise their connection with a member of the race who had a growing public profile, assuming they'd proved receptive to a work noticeably lacking in racial uplift. A mainstream house – possibly within reach given Johnson's connections – would have been unlikely to accept a rather weird debut novel by an unknown African American author and in any case would have demanded too much control. So Johnson chose a small and rather old-fashioned (though relatively new) firm of the kind that the ex-colored man *might* himself have chosen, thereby adding to the tenability of the book's autobiographical origin at the same time as giving Johnson greater authorial control than he would otherwise have had. Johnson once considered calling his book "The Chameleon", but 'chameleonic' seems exactly the right word for his own approach.²³

Sherman, French & Company had been founded in 1907. By 1912 their dozens of publications had included no novels at all. Almost every title – including the books of poetry – had a religious or theological dimension. Entirely representative of their list are Edward Pearson Pressey, *The Vision of New Clairvoaux: or Ethical Reconstruction through Combination of Agriculture and Handicraft* (1909), Wilfred Lawrence Hoopes, *The Code of the Spirit: An Interpretation of the Decalogue* (1909), and Oscar Fay Adams, *A Motley Jest: Shakespearean Diversions* (1909). Counting as cutting-edge (only in comparison with the others) would be Arthur Davison Ficke, *The Breaking of Bonds: A Drama of the Social Unrest* (1910). Confidentiality was, at his own suggestion,

America, ed. James P. Danky and Wayne A. Wiegand, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998, pp. 244-71.

²¹ Ellen Tarry, *Young Jim: The Early Years of James Weldon Johnson*, New York: Dodd, Mead, 1967, p. 215.

²² By 1933 Johnson wasn't sure it had been the right decision not to affix his name to the book (*Along This Way*, p. 238).

²³ Letter from James Weldon Johnson to Carl Van Doren, 28 December 1922, JWW I/21/493.; Johnson, *Along This Way*, p. 238.

stipulated in Johnson's contract.²⁴ Sherman, French did little to market the book, charged Johnson against royalties at every opportunity, and were soon keen to offload unsold copies. Johnson later described them as "one of those quasi publishing companies who are in fact only job printers for authors".²⁵ In other words, a vanity press.

Johnson himself pressed copies of his book on the US naval officers he encountered in Nicaragua: his coyness about authorship probably didn't fool them.²⁶ His family and friends also distributed copies, and most recipients probably guessed the reason for their advocacy: his friend George A. Towns immediately recognised Johnson's authorship but refrained from going public, although he did identify the book as a novel.²⁷ Through his own attempts to publicise the book, Johnson was presumably trying to eat the cake of literary reputation while hewing to the official line that the identity of the author of the work was a mystery, thereby keeping to the consular diet.

One of Johnson's reasons for maintaining anonymity disappeared in November 1913 with the election to the presidency of Woodrow Wilson. As Johnson recalled, he was soon told by Wilson's Secretary of State, William Jennings Bryan, that as a Republican nominee he ought to feel grateful if he was allowed to stay in Corinto for four more years. Johnson admits that his dislike of Wilson "came nearer to constituting keen hatred for an individual than anything I have ever felt".²⁸ With dreams of a European posting dashed and a racist federal administration in place, Johnson resigned on 1 September 1913, immediately giving a sharp address in New York City with the title "Why Latin-America Dislikes the United States".²⁹ The publishing ploy had achieved its purpose in awakening at least a small measure of critical interest, even if sales had been poor, but the book was soon out of print. Johnson turned his attention to journalism and poetry, but he wasn't finished yet with *The Autobiography*.

²⁴ Letter from James Weldon Johnson to Sherman, French, 17 February 1912, JWJ Papers, I/18/435.

²⁵ Letter from James Weldon Johnson to Carl Van Doren, 28 December 1922, JWJ Papers, I/21/493. Johnson's contact with, or knowledge of, Sherman, French may have come via his friend William Stanley Braithwaite, who in 1911 had written the introduction to the black poet Edward Smyth Jones's *The Sylvan Cabin: A Centenary Ode on the Birth of Lincoln and Other Verses*, published by Sherman, French.

²⁶ Johnson, *Along This Way*, p. 289.

²⁷ Letter from George A. Towns to James Weldon Johnson, 1 July 1912, JWJ Papers, I/20/484 (also in NCE 228-30) and the June issue of the *Crimson and Gray*, in Scrapbook re: Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, JWJ Papers, II/51/122 (also in NCE 281).

²⁸ Johnson, *Along This Way*, p. 306.

²⁹ James Weldon Johnson, "Why Latin-America Dislikes the United States" [1913], in *The Selected Writings of James Weldon Johnson. Volume II, Social, Political, and Literary Essays*, ed. Sondra Kathryn Wilson, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 195-97. Apophatically, Johnson manages to mention various reasons for Latin America disliking the USA, such as the USA having designs on the integrity of their governments and travellers from the north not disguising their prejudices, on his way to explaining what he regards as the real reason: that brown-skinned Latin Americans, treated as black in the USA, have made their countries extremely sensitive to matters of race in the USA.

With no diplomatic job prospects to protect, Johnson thought he might as well gather in whatever kudos was associated with authorship of the book, which he now began to acknowledge. When he was appointed columnist for the *New York Age*, the *Chicago Defender* welcomed him into black journalism as a modest and humble genius whose latest book, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, had “created favorable comment and reached such enormous sales” – certainly exaggerating the book’s commercial success and perhaps forgetting that the *Chicago Defender* had managed only the briefest notice of the book’s publication, in the course of which it identified the writer as “Mr Alexander”.³⁰ But, anyway, Johnson’s authorship of the book was in the public realm before the end of 1914, within thirty months of its publication.

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Johnson’s second federal appointment, to Corinto, on the Pacific coast of Nicaragua, severely complicated his life just as *The Autobiography* was being completed and published.³¹ In his 1933 autobiography Johnson offered a settled reflection on his years in Corinto. The dominant tone of mildly ironic wordly wisdom is established in the account of his early meeting with Nicaraguan President José Santos Zelaya in June 1909, two suave men conversing about Paris while understanding that they are likely soon to become antagonists since, as they both knew, the USA wanted rid of Zelaya. According to Johnson’s account, the US-fomented revolution to overthrow Zelaya initially made few ripples in Corinto, beginning as it did in October 1909 in the town of Bluefields, on the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua, financed by a local official of a US corporation, La Luz y Los Angeles Mining Company, Adolfo Díaz, who advanced the revolution \$600,000. The mining company was owned by the Pittsburgh-based House of Fletcher, whose lawyer was Philander Knox, President Taft’s Secretary of State. However, with the rebellion then seeming to peter out, Johnson took leave and returned home, reporting to the State Department in Washington before travelling to New York to ask Grace Nail to be his wife: they married in February 1910. While Johnson was out of Nicaragua Zelaya sanctioned the execution of two Americans, Leonard Groce and Lee Roy Cannon, “charged with filibustering” as Johnson puts it, although both of them had been active as mercenaries in Central America for many years and had tried to blow up Nicaraguan government troop ships, so “guilty of filibustering” would have been the more accurate phrase.³² After the USA severed diplomatic relations with Nicaragua, Zelaya ceded power to José Madriz and fled to Mexico. The USA was not placated. At this point Johnson returned to Corinto with his new wife. Among their early visitors, he recounts, was Herbert O. Jeffries, another notorious US mercenary who had been active in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and

³⁰ “The Hon. James W. Johnson”, *Chicago Defender*, 14 November 1914, p. 8. The earlier note was on 13 July 1912, p. 4. Goldsby suggests that this was a reference to Charles Alexander (1868-1923), editor of the Boston-based *Alexander’s Magazine* (“Contemporary Reviews” in NCE, p. 287).

³¹ In *Along This Way* Johnson says that he finished *The Autobiography* in Venezuela but Goldsby persuasively argues that he was still working on it in Nicaragua (“Keeping the Secret”, p. 267 n.16).

³² Johnson, *Along This Way*, p. 267. See Lester D. Langley and Thomas Schoonover, *The Banana Men: American Mercenaries and Entrepreneurs in Central America, 1880-1930*, Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995, pp. 86-88.

Colombia, before becoming one of the leading figures in the war for Panama's independence. In Corinto he bore a letter of introduction from the US consul in Panama but did not reveal the purpose of his visit to Nicaragua: "I judged that it was not simply a matter of pleasure", notes Johnson, drily. Johnson seems taken with "the charms of his recital" during an evening at the consulate, referring rather gnomically to Jeffries' involvement "in a tragedy of private life that had shaken Panama City" – said tragedy being in fact Jeffries' murder in cold blood the previous year of a newspaper editor who had offended him.³³

Johnson mentions that in Venezuela he had known Thomas W. Moffat, consul at La Guaira when Johnson was at Puerto Cabello, and that they'd been transferred to Nicaragua "at the same time and with the same instructions".³⁴ In Nicaragua Moffat was consul at Bluefields, source of the revolution that overthrew Zelaya, an overthrowing in which Moffat had a large hand, as became apparent when he showed up in Corinto with Adolfo Díaz, provisional vice-president in the new US-backed government, on their way to the capital, Managua.³⁵

A stalking horse president, Juan José Estrada (a Liberal, who'd been appointed by Zelaya but fallen out with him), was duly installed and, after US Marines obstructed government forces, defeated Madriz's troops. Madriz resigned on 20 August 1910. The State Department appointed Thomas G. Dawson as special agent to Nicaragua, tasked, in effect, with controlling the country's finances.³⁶ The Dawson Pact was signed with Estrada and his ministers, and Taft recognised the Estrada government on 1 January 1911. This virtual US protectorate was deeply resented in Nicaragua and Estrada didn't last long: he was soon himself knocking on Johnson's door late one night in fear for his life and heading out of Nicaragua. Díaz succeeded him with General Mena, in control of the army and the National Assembly, waiting in the wings. At this point, in November 1911, Johnson took Grace back to New York. Johnson still had hopes of a European appointment, so his wife stayed up north while he returned to close the office in Corinto – which was when things really start to heat up. The Conservative faction led by Mena lost patience with Díaz and was joined in military revolt by the Liberals in July 1912. Brown Brothers and Company asked for State Department protection and Major Smedley Butler was sent from Panama in August with 412 Marines. They landed at Corinto and headed off to reinforce the guard in Managua.³⁷ With hindsight, Johnson casts himself as faced

³³ Johnson, *Along This Way*, pp. 271, 270. See "Panama Editor Slain", *New York Times*, 27 August 1909, p. 3.

³⁴ Johnson, *Along This Way*, p. 271.

³⁵ Moffat does a good job of incriminating himself in his 1927 Senate testimony: see *Foreign Loans. Hearings before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, Sixty-Ninth Congress, Second Session, Pursuant to S. Con. Res. 15, January and February 1927*, Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1927, pp. 31-44; and for relevant government documents: *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States with the Annual Message of the President Transmitted to Congress December 7, 1909*, Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1911, pp. 446-459.

³⁶ See Glenn J. Kist, *The Role of Thomas C. Dawson in United States-Latin American Diplomatic Relations: 1897-1912*, Ph.D. dissertation, Loyola University Chicago, 1971.

³⁷ Butler's own account is in Lowell Thomas, *Old Gimlet Eye: The Adventures of Smedley D. Butler*, New York: Farrar & Rhinehart, 1933, chapters 12 and 13. Butler was later responsible for a swingeing

with Hobson's choice: "I was fundamentally aware that the whole mess was, strictly, Nicaragua's business, that it would have been better if we were entirely out of it, or better still if we had never gotten into it. But I was also aware that we were in it."³⁸ He tries to distance himself from any putative self-identification as an agent of imperialism by suggesting "the fascination of the game I had been called upon to play" – a decidedly ex-colored-manly suggestion.³⁹

Johnson's main contact was with the government representative for Chinandega province, Dr Toribio Tijerino, who arrived in Corinto with news of an insurgent massacre at León, which meant that Corinto was cut off from Managua, with the insurgent forces now heading towards the port city. The local commander asked the US forces to assume responsibility for the protection of lives and property at the port, those forces consisting at that moment of Johnson himself and a couple of dozen naval ratings with a single young lieutenant called Lewis. Tijerino would have preferred his troops to take control, which was the occasion for friction with Johnson and Lewis. At one point Lewis placed Tijerino under arrest, Johnson having to use his diplomatic skills to assuage the affront. The stand-off with Nicaraguan government forces is then described as taking on "the air of opéra bouffe", the default genre when it comes to condescending US accounts of Central American revolutions. Eventually Tijerino returned to the city of Chinandega but couldn't prevent it being captured by the rebels. A delegation of rebel commissioners then arrived in Corinto demanding its surrender, only to be held at bay – again by Johnson's diplomatic skills – until the *USS Denver* arrived with 500 Marines. General Mena surrendered soon afterwards.

As this account suggests, Johnson's attitude to US imperialism was – and remained – ambivalent. There's no doubt that during his consular years he took his responsibilities seriously and did his job well. It was unfortunate for him – but it went with the territory – that his stint in Corinto coincided with one of the more egregious episodes of US interference in Central America, which Johnson certainly had a hand in facilitating. His actual role is difficult to determine, although he was actively involved in surveillance, which included sending coded messages to the captain of a US gunboat that regularly visited the port.⁴⁰ One historian concludes that "Johnson's rhetorical skill and logistical intelligence played a vital role in

attack on the US government's propensity to use military force in support of financial interests: *War is a Racket*, New York: Round Table Press, Inc., 1935. In this case his conclusion was that "I helped purify Nicaragua for the international banking house of Brown Brothers in 1909-1912" ("America's Armed Forces: 'In Time of Peace'", *Common Sense*, 4, no. 11 (November 1935), pp. 8-12, at 8.

³⁸ Johnson, *Along This Way*, p. 283.

³⁹ Johnson, *Along This Way*, p. 283.

⁴⁰ See James Weldon Johnson, Letter to A. S. Halstead. 30 Sept. 1909. Dispatch 53. American Consulate Corinto: Legation Correspondence, July 11, 1908–August 4, 1912. Record Group 84: Records of Foreign Service Posts; Consular Records from Corinto, Nicaragua. Vol. 015. National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD; quoted in Brian Russell Roberts, "Passing into Diplomacy: U.S. Consul James Weldon Johnson and *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 56, no. 2 (Summer 2010), pp. 290-316, at 293.

suppressing the peasant rebellion and setting the stage for a military and fiscal U.S. presence in Nicaragua that would last well into the twentieth century".⁴¹

Stung by the stymying of his career after Wilson's election, Johnson became highly critical of the US government and particularly the State Department. Haiti was his main focus, but when he testified before a Senate Committee in February 1925 he was quick to point out that "the chief reason for Zelaya's overthrow was not his being a dictator but because he was not sufficiently submissive to the American bankers. A government representing a minority of Nicaraguans but favorable to the American interests was installed and since 1912 has been sustained in power by American armed forces".⁴²

One thing that changed between 1925 and 1933 (when Johnson published *Along This Way*) was that Japan had begun using the US occupation of Nicaragua to defend its own occupation of Manchuria. A Japanese diplomat, long resident in Mexico, not content with saying that the Japanese occupation of Manchuria was no different from the US one of Nicaragua, wrote a 50-page pamphlet to argue that whereas the latter was pure US imperialism, Japan was merely involved in self-defence – which at least served to prove that the two countries were on a par when it came to spurious self-justification. The pamphlet was distributed widely in Latin America.⁴³

In *Along This Way*, once the Corinto stand-off is resolved in classic fashion by the arrival of the 500 Marines, Johnson remembers sleeping soundly "of course, without any thought that I was having a hand in establishing a precedent that Japan was to cite to us twenty years later", referring to that seizure of Manchuria.⁴⁴ But he is not yet finished. For his last word on the subject he hears the Marines clicking their heels and presenting arms and can't help spouting the State Department line that "Zelaya was endeavoring to open secret negotiations with Japan for the acquisition of the Nicaraguan canal route, and a copy of his letter broaching the matter was in the hands of State Department". The security of the USA depended, according to that State Department, on its control of all feasible routes across the isthmus – which of course meant in effect control of the entirety of Central America and the Caribbean. Those who oppose armed US intervention should, Johnson suggests,

⁴¹ Harilaos Stecopoulos, "Up from Empire: James Weldon Johnson, Latin America, and the Jim Crow South", in his *Reconstructing the World: Southern Fictions and U.S. Imperialisms, 1898-1976*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008, pp. 53-76, at 54.

⁴² "N.A.A.C.P. Secretary Testifies on U.S. Imperialism before Senate Committee", 27 February 1925. Papers of the NAACP, quoted in Etsuko Taketani, "The Cartography of the Black Pacific: James Weldon Johnson's *Along This Way*", *American Quarterly*, 59, no. 1 (March 2007), pp. 79-106 at 90. Taketani offers an analysis of the influence of Manchurian events on the way Johnson remembers his time in Nicaragua. The mid-1920s probably saw the highpoint of Johnson's anti-imperialism: he is thanked in the acknowledgements of one of its early studies for reading and commenting on the manuscript: Scott Nearing and Joseph Freeman, *Dollar Diplomacy: A Study in American Imperialism*, New York: B. W. Huebsch and the Viking Press, 1926, p. vi.

⁴³ Kinta Arai, *La voz del pueblo japonés respecto del Manchukuo*, Mexico City: privately published, 1932. See "Japanese Attacks Policies of United States in Pamphlets Broadcast in Latin America", *New York Times*, 23 November 1932, p. 1.

⁴⁴ Johnson, *Along This Way*, p. 283.

“take these facts into consideration”.⁴⁵ Taking these facts into consideration, critics of US imperialism may be unimpressed by the motives for intervention being described as ‘national security’ rather than ‘financial concessions’. In any case financial concessions seem to have followed armed intervention as rapidly as tropic dark follows tropic dusk.

Aware that his tempered defence of US policy in Nicaragua might sit uncomfortably alongside his condemnation of the US occupation of Haiti, Johnson then tries to make a distinction between the two situations: whereas in Haiti the US forces had seized power and “made themselves the government”, in Nicaragua “the American forces were there in accordance with the wishes of the government”, a frankly disingenuous point given that the Nicaraguan government was a US puppet administration.⁴⁶

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The relationship between *The Autobiography's* protagonist and its author is intriguing. The ex-colored man and his author both follow similarly zig-zagging courses through a variety of careers before achieving some stability.⁴⁷ As Brian Russell Roberts points out, consul Johnson provided business information and reports on Latin American markets to the many wholesale house agents who contacted him, an activity not that different from the “honest and patient work” the ex-colored man undertakes for the Spanish American department of a New York financial house.⁴⁸ Diplomacy – Johnson’s forte in Corinto – is prominently praised, and indeed practised in the novel. One day, after the narrator has decided to pass as a white man, he is talking to a white woman in whom he has a romantic interest when they bump into the ex-colored man’s old friend, Shiny, who proceeds to negotiate the situation with aplomb: “Whatever fears I had felt were quickly banished, for he seemed, at a glance, to divine my situation, and let drop no word that would have aroused suspicion as to the truth... He asked me about myself in so diplomatic a way that I found no difficulty in answering him”.⁴⁹ And in one of *The Autobiography's* setpiece scenes, on the train from Nashville to Atlanta, the ex-colored man expresses his admiration for the way a Jewish cigar manufacturer negotiates a

⁴⁵ Johnson, *Along This Way*, pp. 288-89. Zelaya felt, not without justification, that he had been misled about US intentions. The possibility of Japanese involvement had subsequently been broached, but the State Department did not, as Johnson suggests, know about this in 1909 when they arranged for Zelaya to be overthrown. See John Cullen Gruesser, *The Empire Abroad and the Empire at Home: African American Literature and the Era of Overseas Expansion*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012, pp. 96-112.

⁴⁶ Johnson, *Along This Way*, p. 345.

⁴⁷ See Donald C. Goellnicht, “Passing as Autobiography: James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*”, *African American Review*, 30, no. 1 (Spring 1996), pp. 17-33, for a reading of the book as parodic in a Bakhtinian sense.

⁴⁸ Johnson, *The Auto-biography, Half-Century*, 9, no. 4 (November 1920), p. 4. Roberts, “Passing into Diplomacy”, p. 305, referring to American Consulate Corinto: Business Letters, 1909, 1910, 1911. Record Group 84: Records of Foreign Service Posts; Consular Records from Corinto, Nicaragua. Vol. 021. National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁴⁹ Johnson, *The Auto-biography, Half-Century*, 9, no. 5 (December 1920), p. 6.

fierce argument about race: “the diplomacy of the Jew was something to be admired”.⁵⁰

‘Diplomacy’ is a term that was associated with Booker T. Washington – and which was frequently called ‘hypocrisy’ by his opponents, including W. E. B. Du Bois: “hypocritical compromise... the defence of deception and flattery, of cajoling and lying”, is, Du Bois wrote, “the same defence which the Jews of the Middle Age used and which left its stamp on their character for centuries”.⁵¹ Chameleon-like behaviour is a common anti-semitic trope, but this is precisely the behaviour admired by the ex-colored man: “It is remarkable, after all”, he writes, “what an adaptable creature the Negro is. I have seen the black West Indian gentleman in London, and he is in speech and manners a perfect Englishman. I have seen natives of Haiti and Martinique in Paris, and they are more Frenchy than a Frenchman. I have no doubt that the Negro would make a good Chinaman, with exception of the pigtail”.⁵²

As Roberts points out, Toussaint was especially praised by Wendell Phillips for his diplomacy, though a racist double standard had left it unappreciated: “Like Napoleon, no man ever divined his purpose or penetrated his plan. He was only a negro, and so, in him, they called it hypocrisy. In Bonaparte we style it diplomacy”.⁵³ On the last page of the novel, the ex-colored man recalls a meeting he attended where Booker T. Washington’s “earnestness and faith” had surpassed the other speakers, who included Mark Twain.⁵⁴ Yet elsewhere he also praises “that remarkable book by Dr. Du Bois, ‘The Souls of Black Folk’”.⁵⁵ So, diplomatically, Johnson has his narrator wax lyrical about both Washington and Du Bois, proleptically narrating his own history when, having owed his consular posts to Washington, he subsequently joined the NAACP, the organisation with which Du Bois was closely associated.

In a nice twist on the complexities of *The Autobiography*, Harilaos Stecopoulos reads it as a refracted autobiography of its author, suggesting that in a strange way the ‘mistaken’ readers, who persisted in reading the book as Johnson’s own autobiography, were actually correct, whether or not Johnson had that intention in mind. Johnson himself was too dark ever to ‘pass’ in a literal sense (although he could pass as a brown-skinned Hispanic by speaking Spanish, as he recounts in a railway carriage incident in *Along This Way* where, on account of the label in his hat, he is taken as being Cuban), but he was not – at least during his consular years –

⁵⁰ Johnson, *The Auto-biography, Half-Century*, 9, no. 2 (August-September 1920), p. 4.

⁵¹ Johnson himself called Washington “one of the world’s ablest diplomats” (*Black Manhattan* [1930], New York: Ig Publishing, 2021, p. 111); W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* [1903], ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver, New York: W. W. Norton, 1999, p. 128. See Roberts, “Passing into Diplomacy”, pp. 298-300.

⁵² Johnson, *The Auto-biography, Half-Century*, 9, no. 2 (August-September 1920), p. 4.

⁵³ Wendell Phillips, “Toussaint L’Ouverture” [1861], in his *Speeches, Lectures, and Letters*, Boston: James Redpath, 1863, pp. 468-494, at 483; Roberts, “Passing into Diplomacy”, p. 297.

⁵⁴ Johnson, *The Auto-biography, Half-Century*, 9, no. 5 (December 1920), p. 12.

⁵⁵ Johnson, *The Auto-biography, Half-Century*, 9, no. 2 (August-September 1920), p. 12.

averse to receiving recognition from the official white world.⁵⁶ Stecopoulos notes a rather boastful letter to his wife about how Admiral Southerland had ordered that the consul should receive the same naval honours as officers of the fleet, “so whenever I pass, the men on duty come to ‘present arms’ and I salute”.⁵⁷ “It is difficult,” Stecopoulos concludes, “not to consider that Johnson senses a certain disturbing connection between his work on behalf of U.S. empire and the machinations of his literary protagonist”.⁵⁸ There is more than one way to pass.

At the time of the completion of *The Autobiography*, Johnson was at a somewhat analogous point to his protagonist, having ‘passed’ into the white world. Of course he passed out of that world very shortly after the book’s publication and, by taking ownership of the text as fiction, distanced himself from any obvious identification with his protagonist. Indeed by accepting a job at the NAACP, he asserted that he was a ‘colored man’, or perhaps that should be an ‘ex-ex-colored man’.

⁵⁶ Johnson, *Along This Way*, pp. 87-8.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Stecopoulos, “Up from Empire”, p. 60.

⁵⁸ Stecopoulos, “Up from Empire”, p. 61.