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# The African American Spectator in Europe: Loneliness as Black Audience in Larsen's Quicksand and Johnson's Autobiography

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## Abstract

James Weldon Johnson's 1912 novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* stages scenes from the perspective of the narrator as both audience and performer who feels disconnected from the white audience that surrounds him, specifically during his travels in Europe. Harvey Young's analysis of black theatre performances explains that, "To conjure a racial label and project it across another person in an effort to categorize that person is an exercise of power. It is a demonstration of the capacity to control and manipulate others" (11). Using Young's analysis, the novel's acknowledged divide between white and black audiences places the expectation of power with the larger masses—the white audience. The novel's "scenes of performance" acknowledge difficulties faced by black performers and black audiences, most significantly when the audience's composition is overwhelmingly white. The unnamed narrator and Helga Crane from Nella Larsen's 1928 *Quicksand* both experience a sense of loneliness brought about by both racial and cultural isolation as African American audience members traveling in white Europe. These experiences fit Lazare Mijuskovic's explanation that black audiences face "real obstructions, from participating in certain activities which are simply guaranteed to other white members within a community." The "scenes of loneliness" experienced during the live theater performances uncover a useful dynamic between audience and performer, where the physical separation of the stage permits narrative space for investigating audience members' reactions. The character's awareness of the color-divide comes to a climax when black audience members' experiences in a predominantly white audience uncover the powerlessness of black art to create substantive change. The loneliness and racial divide serves as part of the novels' warning of understanding culture and performance only from the dominant perspective and the resulting loss of cultural community or "loneliness" for the subordinated group.

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