“Classism as the New Racism in ‘Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man’”

Heretofore, the vast majority of readings of James Weldon Johnson’s “Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man” have focused on the narrator’s gradual repudiation of his race through the course of the novel. If these readings have dealt with class at all, it has only been in an off-hand and incidental way. In this paper, I intend to argue that class is as important as race in the novel. I intend to accomplish this by using Frantz Fanon’s seminal postcolonial texts “Black Skin/White Masks” and “The Wretched of the Earth,” in which Fanon argues that, once freed from their colonial oppressors, the formerly oppressed tend to set up similar power structures. In this reading, the Ex-Coloured Man, living in an immediately post-slavery world, creates a brand-new system of oppression, one in which blacks are judged by other blacks based on their class, on their adherence to upscale “white” ways of living. The racism present in this system is secondary to its inherent classism, and so the point of the novel is not that the Ex-Coloured Man repudiates his race. Indeed, it appears from the text that he would have been happy to remain “black” if he had associated only with the upper-crust of “black” society.