The Dual Self and Identity Negotiation in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* by James Weldon Johnson

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Abstract
The concerned paper is an inspection and an analysis of the novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, written by James Weldon Johnson. Johnson, in the novel, tries to bring to fore the predicament of a colored man who can pass as a white. The narrator remains unnamed and unidentified throughout the novel. Through the anonymous narrator the paper attempts to assess the idea of dual self and fragmentation of identity that the narrator experiences as a mulatto in the American white society. The narrator’s incapability to completely accept the white culture and to fully reject the black heritage is the focal point that the paper will venture to outline.

KEYWORDS: Fragmented self, identity crisis, visibly white and legally black, identity crisis, African American self.
The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man published anonymously for the first time in 1912 was taken by its early readers as the authentic autobiography of a light skinned black man who had successfully passed into the white society. It was later realized that it was a fictional account written by James Weldon Johnson. The Autobiography as it is popularly called, stands as the first “fictional” text written by an African American that consciously disguises its genre. Johnson self-consciously utilizes the confessional scaffold as a guise in order to authenticate and substantiate the chief character’s story and to advantageously give the text the outer shell of an autobiography. Johnson’s determined blurring of these two categories of fiction and non-fiction is an essential part of his narrative strategy. The novel’s engagement with the notions of genre and unification of literary styles is also inherently associated with its central theme of “passing”. Featuring an unnamed mulatto as its narrator, the novel demonstrates the outcomes of racial discrimination and violence on the protagonist’s subjectivity and worldview; it results in the fluctuation of his conflicting identifications with the black and white cultures and his final decision to pass for white.

The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man depicts the situation of a mulatto character existing in America under circumstances of white supremacy in an increasingly fast paced world. During this time white dominance was based upon the dogma of racism and various forms of racial discrimination manifested in the realities of segregation, racial inequality, injustice and racially motivated violence such as lynching. It is within this binary system of race that the Ex-Colored man is shown to survive where being white signifies ‘normalcy’ and ‘superiority’ and blackness signifies deviation from the norm, otherness and inferiority. Born to a white father and a black mother, the central character is visibly white yet legally black. In the outlined racist design, the protagonist would be classified lawfully as ‘colored’ and thus socially and economically deemed unfit for the positions of wealth and power. However, the Ex-Colored man assumes the “role of the white man” in order to become monetarily victorious and also to attain social acknowledgment. This transgression of the color line at once confronts the overriding conceptions of unchanging and opposed racial binaries. The Ex-colored man’s act of blurring the two races reveals the unsteadiness of the concept of race and hence the fickleness of race as a “signifier of one’s character, intellect and social, economic and political status.” Though the protagonist succeeds in employing his mixed race heritage to his own benefit and is able to achieve “white man’s success”, what he is not able to do is to finally reunite his incongruous relations to black and white cultures. Having passed for white, the Ex-colored man has not yet come to terms
with his fragmented and disjointed self. On the one hand, he enjoys his social status as a noticeably white yet legally black man and on the other hand he is virtually at odds with the binaries sustained by the prevailing discourse of race. The Ex-Colored man’s differing identifications with both the cultures and at the same time his deficient sense of belonging to either faction situate him in an in-between location where he neither completely abandons blackness nor whole heartedly embraces whiteness. This “in-between” spot also depicts the protagonist’s internal tumult and identity negotiation, that is, his contradictory approach to black and white cultures, his embrace and rejection both of African American and White ways of life and his ambivalence towards the racial categories.

Being visibly white and legally black, the Ex-colored man overtly relates his fragmented self to the particular social and cultural experience of African Americans under the conditions of white supremacy that W.E.B Du Bois conceptualized as “double consciousness” in *The Souls of Black Folk*. He wrote, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a negro: two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings”. What marks the commencement of the Ex-colored man’s “two-ness” is his disturbing initiation into the reality of racial intolerance when he is discriminated against as a ten year old which finally leads to the detection of his legal blackness. This detection frames his subjectivity and worldview as a legally black but a visibly white man that results from this experience in terms of “double consciousness”. He explains, “From that time I looked out through other eyes, my thoughts were colored, my words dictated, my actions limited”. Thus the narrator’s interpellation scene accentuates both the ways in which whiteness is served as the unmarked custom and how race, as a type of identification has historically been forced. Being interposed into the race regime, the narrator claims that it “is the dwarfing, warping, distorting influence which operates upon each and every colored man in the United States. He is forced to take his outlook on all things, not from the point of view of a citizen, or a man, or even a human being, but from view point of a colored man”. The Ex-colored man is shown to come to grips with the socially established assumptions about black inferiority, otherness and difference which start off merely in outward appearance and which for obvious reasons he remains reluctant to entirely acknowledge. His ambivalence towards racial grouping points towards the impenetrability of achieving a kind of entirety through a racial self-definition.
By situating its title character at the crossroads of the white and black worlds, *The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man* incessantly seems to confront the binary nature of America’s racial ideology. The Ex-Colored man’s own intractable ambivalence about whiteness as well as blackness reflects the slim chance of his ever being able to acquire a coherent racial identity and individuality. This lack of construction of a coherent self creates a sort of social dislocation which Marjorie Garber has called a “category crisis, which refers to a breakdown of definitional distinctions, a borderline that becomes porous wherein the figure who ‘passes’ becomes a mechanism of displacement from one blurred boundary to another”. Being of mixed heritage and blurring the white black binary, the Ex-Colored man as a passing figure personifies this “category crisis”. His moral predicament and clashing attitudes towards himself and the society result from being at once an insider and beneficiary as well as an outsider and a critical observer of the very social system he lives in. He evades being co-opted by either tradition and decides to create his own system of identification, one that is ruled neither by traditionally white class and power dissimilarity nor by an upheaval against the paradigm. The protagonist’s own label announces the new order which says that he is not a “newly white man”, but an Ex-Colored one, a man who declines to be acquainted with or to submit to an order whose consciousness is based upon race and color. The “Ex” in front of “Colored” is a sign of his colorlessness, his self-perception as neither a black nor a white man. This act of passing, of pretending to be what you are not is influenced not only by color but also because of Ex-Colored man’s class and his ability to exercise power. He is educated, well informed, holds a job, attends meetings, has two children and in this way is shown as a component of the social system he lives in. He very cynically enjoys having made money in real estate and thus having played a trick on society through the transgression of borders. He says: “The anomaly of my social position often appealed strongly to my sense of humor. I frequently smiled inwardly at some remark not altogether complementary to people of color; and more than once I felt like declaiming: ‘I am a colored man. Do I not disprove the theory that one drop of Negro blood renders a man unfit?’”.

At this juncture it is vital to note that a time comes in the novel where the protagonist makes up his mind to engross himself once more into the southern black culture and to contribute to “racial upliftment through his new American music”, a blend of European classical compositions and old slave songs. This sudden desire to be a “black composer”, in the protagonist in a way, though only for a while, thwarts the norms coupled with whiteness. Back in the south, the Ex-
Colored man participates in a gathering of African Americans and resolves to work for the upliftment of the race by becoming “a great man, a great colored man, to reflect credit on the race and gain fame for myself”. It takes the harrowing experience of witnessing a black man’s lynching to curtail his new found enthusiasm and to eventually decide to pass for white, which the Ex-Colored man does not perceive as the denial of his African American inheritance but rather another type of disguise. The Ex-Colored man claims to be playing the role of a white man rather than identifying himself as a white. Sheltered by his visible whiteness, the protagonist stays in the midst of the principally white spectators at the lynching site and witnesses the atrocious ritual of burning a human being, an experience that ultimately stirs his decision to pass. It is in this very scene that he is also torn between his conflicting sympathies with the black male victim and the white dominating lynch mob. On the one hand, he is “fixed to the spot”; “powerless” and thus subjected to the white aggressive mastery over the black body just like the lynched victim. And on the other hand he himself is a passive member of a largely white crowd made complicit by sharing the dominating gaze on the victimized black body. Overpoweringly bewildered and disturbed, the Ex-Colored man decides to leave the south for New York City. He justifies his decision to shift with his feelings of “shame at being identified with people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals,” thus dissociating himself from the victimized African American. Yet at the same time he asserts that he intended to “neither disclaim the black race nor claim the white race”, he says, “I would change my name, raise a moustache and let the world take me for what it would”. The indefinite and ambiguous nature of the narrator’s alternative here is of significance. He wants to let the world take him for it would. In doing so he lays claim on neither side, he desires, at last, to be neither white nor black. He abandons his southern past but with a hope of constructing a new future, one that can leave the negative elements of the past behind. At the same time, it can be argued that the Ex-Colored man’s continued passing with its perseverance on the importance of role playing and his rejection to name himself, becomes an even more threatening position to the white society because then the society cannot “identify” and safely control him. He remains an unidentified and is thus a continually potential destabilizing force within the society. Perhaps the power of passing lies in the very difficult of identifying it. When people take the Ex-Colored man for white, they ironically not only undermine the social assumptions about racial incompatibility and the stability of borders but also testify to the very social fabrication of race. For the Ex-Colored man passing or rather masking as a white man represents a means of gaining independence, wealth
and prestige but at the same it also intensifies his inner turmoil and the ambivalence towards the concept of race.

Thus, the narrator’s description of what he sees as his position at the end of the novel is important, he outlines: “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 only been 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”. The narrator’s ebb and flow 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, reiterates the racial binaries that Johnson’s text intentionally muddles. Occupying some third space in-between categories and constantly vacillating between supposedly inflexible constructions of blackness and whiteness, the Ex-Colored man refuses to give in to one racial classification.
Works Cited


