

«ON WHICH SIDE?»: JAMES WELDON JOHNSON'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN EX-COLORED MAN

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Within the context of African American literary production, the desire to search for an appropriate vehicle to portray the reality of African American identity seems to have frequently led to a kind of self-conscious narrative which deals primarily with a specific type of character, the so-called «mulatto» figure, in his/her quest for self-definition. This character is usually depicted while involved in the act of «passing,» that is, of crossing over the color line to the «white side.» The internal conflict that this character undergoes is epitomized in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* by James Weldon Johnson (1912), in which the mulatto protagonist recounts his experiences once he has crossed over. In so doing, Johnson directly recalls two well-established traditions within African American letters from the previous century: the «tragic mulatto» tradition¹ and the autobiographic trend inaugurated by slave narratives.² Both literary traditions are re-interpreted in the novel's «passing»

1. This tradition evolves around a mulatto protagonist whose attempts to pass for white end up tragically, either in death or, more frequently, suicide. As Werner Sollors explains: «It is an American tragedy... The Mulatto suicide is the cultural given in American settings» (300). The best-known «tragic mulatto» novels of the nineteenth-century are William Wells Brown's *Clotel or the President's Daughter* (1853), Frank Webb's *The Garies and their Friends* (1857) and Charles Chesnut's *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) and *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901). Among these texts, Brown's novel and Chesnut's *The House Behind the Cedars* will be particularly useful as sources for examples.

2. This trend is noticeable since the appearance of slave narratives, ex-slaves' accounts of their period of bonding that were first published around 1760. The growing critical response to this genre has devoted a great deal of attention to the close link between autobiography and these narratives; especially remarkable are the contributions by Stephen Butterfield in *Black Autobiography in America* (1974) and William L. Andrews in *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (1986). It needs to be added that, due to the impressive amount of slave

protagonist, who, caught between the white and the black worlds, is unable to choose on which side he actually stands. The novel thus embarks on a process of revision and actualization of basic themes and motifs stemming from the previous twofold tradition to reexamine the key issue of the mulatto's liminality.³ This kind of interrelation is a good illustration of what the critic Stepto has termed the «call/response» process within the African American literary framework, that is, a process whereby modern texts take up or «respond» to particular subjects or problems that are already present in previous texts, which represent the tradition (xvi).⁴ In this way, the relationship between Johnson's novel and the tradition is regarded as a dynamic one encouraged by Johnson's own personal vision and re-working on this heritage.

Johnson's re-interpretation and subversion of tradition in order to explore liminality is structured following conventional tropes that could be condensed in four main ideas: namelessness, importance of appearance, movement or lack of it, and attitude toward both family and community. A detailed study of Johnson's use and adaptation of these conventions coming from both sources –tragic mulatto novels and slave narratives– foregrounds a crucial idea in the text: the character's impossibility to achieve a satisfying sense of identity and identification with either of the two races and his ultimate failure to truly belong to either of them.⁵ In this sense, Johnson's character can be defined as the perfect embodiment of the liminal entity that permanently wavers between two worlds, unable to fit in.

The first trope that is underlined in the text from the very outset is namelessness. Not only because of the title, which undoubtedly capitalizes on the notion of a nameless narrator, but also because of its direct connections to the two traditions aforementioned. From the very beginning this trope is emphasized due to

narratives, the present study is restricted mainly to antebellum ones, since, as Andrews has convincingly argued in «The Representation of Slavery and the Rise of Afro-American Literary Realism, 1865-1920» (1993), postbellum slave narratives constitute a group apart. A good instance of antebellum narratives is Frederick Douglass' autobiography that will be hereafter taken as main reference in this study. Some critics have already paid attention to the connection between Johnson's novel and slave narrative conventions: Lucinda Mackethan in her article «*Black Boy* and *ExColored Man*: Version and Inversion of the Slave Narrator's Quest for Voice» (1988), and Robert Stepto in *Behind the Veil* (1979) to which the analysis based on slave narratives is especially indebted.

3. The notions of liminal and liminality are informed by the anthropological definitions of the term provided by Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner in their classic works *Rites of Passage* (1960) and *The Ritual Process* (1969), respectively. Specifically the second phase of any rite of passage, liminal or transitional stage, illuminates this re-reading of Johnson's novel.

4. The concept itself corresponds in many a way to Gates' sense of intertextuality or «Signification» described in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988).

5. These two concepts are crucial to understand the novel and the differentiation between both that John Perry offers is quite useful: «Identity is not a necessary condition of identification. I can identify with the participant in events I did not do, and would not do, even if they were to be done» (Xu 266). In the case of Johnson's protagonist, his need of identification with one side of his mixed heritage is a constant source of anxiety that he never quite solves, even in his moments of closest contact with either a black or white identity.

the fact that the protagonist remains unnamed throughout the novel, he is an «Ex-Colored Man» with no other identifying tag. But this strategic use of namelessness widens its spectrum to include other aspects of the novel, such as the narrator's self-imposed silence or what Stepto calls «rhetoric of omission» (105). A good example is located in the opening pages of the novel when his birthplace is never stated: «I shall not mention the name of the town, because there are people still living there who could be connected with this narrative» (2), or later on, in the last chapter when he affirms: «I have now reached that part of my narrative where I must be brief and touch only on important facts; therefore the reader must make up his mind to pardon skips and jumps and meager details» (140). This willing silence on the protagonist's part can be interpreted as a reworking of the previous tradition in several ways. With respect to slave narratives, it is, firstly, clear proof of the control over the narrative commonly used by slave narrators to demonstrate their literate skills and their command over their writings. For example, Douglass makes use of the same strategy in his narrative to show his absolute control: «But before narrating any of the peculiar circumstances, I deem it proper to make it known my intention not to state all the facts connected with the transaction» (315). In his case, his silence signifies his freedom to speak or not, metaphorically symbolizing his free status. He is not a slave anymore, so he is free to choose what to tell his readers, displaying thus his authority over the narrated events. Secondly, namelessness is a very productive strategy in slave narratives because it is also related to the slaves' lack of a proper name and thus of a real, self-defined identity. As Kimberly Benston explains, namelessness is essential to the slave narrative tradition where there is a «need to resituate or displace the literal master/father by a literal act of unnamings» (3). Unnaming/Naming is actually highlighted in slave narratives because the pair means a complete subversion of the master's dominance over the slave. Slaves unname the master both in their choice of a different name as soon as they get free, which is exemplified by Douglass' zeal to find a new name (322), and, very significantly, in their very act of writing their narratives. Hence slaves' writing reverses the powerful master discourse that equates slaves to less than human beings because of their lack of literacy. Writing for slaves becomes then not only a certificate for humanity but also their way of naming themselves into a new identity, a new sense of self with an individual voice.⁶ The fact that Johnson's character remains unnamed completely upsets this equation naming-freedom characteristic of slave narratives, bringing to the fore the mulatto's inability to achieve a satisfying sense of self.

This idea is even clearer because the character's namelessness draws direct attention to the narrator himself, linking him to the second tradition above mentioned, that of the mulatto or «passing» character. As the critic Robert Fleming notes, «[t]he main character is nameless in a figurative sense because he is the bastard son of a wealthy white Southerner and a mulatto servant» (120). Right from the beginning, the protagonist of the novel embodies the perfect example of the mulatto born out of a

6. For a longer account of the significance of writing for slaves see Gates' fourth chapter in *The Signifying Monkey* and also Andrews' *To Tell a Free Story*, especially chapters one and six.

mixed parentage who is unaware of his condition and thus identifies with the white race. This is precisely the case of many mulatto characters such as Clotel in Brown's novel. Clotel represents the epitome of the tragic mulatto figure, since she is raised and educated as white and only discovers her mulatto condition when her father, supposedly president Thomas Jefferson, dies and she is sold as a slave. The fact that Johnson's character is nameless stresses that mulatto condition even further, since to be nameless means not to belong, not to be acknowledged. Thus Johnson's protagonist comes to stand for any other mulatto, since he is unnamed, unaccounted for. So what seems to be at stake in the novel is a conception of an unnamed, blurred identity, wavering between two worlds, in search of a single and valid identification with either the black or the white world that is never quite achieved.

Together with namelessness, the importance of appearance is emphasized over and over again in the narration as proof of his mulatto condition. The character clings to his white identity up to the very «discovery scene» which dramatically foregrounds the final unveiling of his liminal social status. This scene is the more painful because of his deep conviction of being white. Up to this moment he has never questioned this assumption, but when he is told to raise with the colored children: «I sat down dazed. I saw or heard nothing. When the others were asked to rise, I did not know it. When school was dismissed, I went out in a kind of stupor» (11). The immediate result of the revelation of his «true» race is to deny it, and this is the reason why he is prompted to look at himself in the mirror. This event is to be found in many «tragic mulatto» texts too, in which the mirror is used as undeniable proof of the character's whiteness. Rena in Chesnut's *The House Behind the Cedars* examines herself in front of the mirror to assure herself of her whiteness (76), and the same does Johnson's character:

I was accustomed to hear remarks about my beauty; but now, for the first time, I became conscious of it and recognized it. I noticed the ivory whiteness of my skin, the beauty of my mouth ... I noticed the softness and glossiness of my dark hair that fell in waves over my temples, making my forehead appear whiter than it really was. (11)

He unmistakably identifies his beauty with the white canon of ideal beauty which gives primacy to whiteness. Immediately after, his whiteness is contrasted with the description of his mother, who becomes in contrast «tarnished» according to the same code: «I could see that her skin was almost brown, that her hair was not so soft as mine, and that she did differ in some way from the other ladies who came to the house» (12). The protagonist has internalized the white canon of beauty so completely that he does not even realize that his remarks are clearly endowed with a racist overtone.

What is significant in this scene is the importance given to appearance by the character, who in this way follows tragic mulatto's notions where white appearance stands for access to the white race. The constant emphasis on white appearance is thus a defining trait of mulatto novels. For instance, in the case of Clotel her appearance is

repeatedly defined as the epitome of white beauty. Especially poignant is her description when she is standing on the auction block about to be sold as a slave:

There she stood, with a complexion as white as most of those who were waiting with a wish to become their purchasers; her features as finely defined as any of her sex of pure Anglo-saxon; her long black wavy hair done up in the neatest manner; her form tall and graceful, and her whole appearance indicating one superior to her position. (121)

The fact that this white and distinguished lady is there on the verge of being sold as chattel tries to point out the terrible injustice of slavery. However, what actually comes across is the fact that *Clotel* does not belong with slaves, since her beauty complies with all the requirements of the white canon and her bearing and gracefulness function as proof of her superior education and class. Indeed, *Clotel* has been raised as the Ex-Colored man in a privileged environment being the daughter of a white gentleman. Despite their «white» appearance and evident education, both of them are nevertheless doomed to suffer the consequences of being classified within the black race. For *Clotel* these are actually quite tragic, since she turns into a slave. For the Ex-Colored man the disclosure of his «social» identity stands completely at odds with the identity he has always believed to possess. Notwithstanding his efforts, with the discovery of his blackness he cannot help but entering the liminal or in-between territory that mulattoes inhabit. Such realm is signalled in the text by other clues such as his feeling of loneliness and of isolation from what he considered to be his previous identification with the white community. This notion of self-estrangement calls to mind another kind of conflict which usually accompanies the mulatto's discovery of his/her blackness, self-hatred. This notion is described by Fleming in the following terms: «Black self-hatred is another important theme employed by Johnson. Constantly told that he is a member of an inferior race, the black man may come to believe or fear that he really is inferior» (122). This is the reason why the narrator feels a strong dislike towards the mere idea of being categorized with the other black people and of losing the rights that his white skin bestows upon him. This is also the case of many tragic mulattoes who attempt to fight against the socially imposed definition of their identities as black, holding onto their whiteness, and thus refusing to acknowledge their liminal selves.

Another idea that is constantly hinted at in both slave narratives and tragic mulatto novels is movement or rather the absence of it and its connection with liminality. In the novel this notion is essentially depicted in two phases: the first part of the narration, that concerned with the protagonist's childhood, is linked to a refusal to move; whereas the second part, after his mother's death, is basically characterized by his constant trips which make him travel not only around the country, from North to South and then back up, but also abroad, to Europe.

In the first period of his life, when he is a child, the lack of movement is mainly associated with two images of stability and permanence: the garden and the house. Dealing fistly with the garden, this element is emphasized when set in opposition with

the «interiority» that the narrator favors remaining most of the time inside the house. But again what is significant here is the fact that Johnson is reversing this image present in slave narratives. While the garden in *The Autobiography* is described as an «endless territory» (2), in slave narratives the image of the garden is usually the opposite: the source of problem and conflict on the plantation. In Douglass' narrative, the garden stands explicitly for prohibition and even taboo for the slaves, marked as such by tar: «The slaves became as fearful of tar as of the lash. They realize the impossibility of touching tar without being defiled» (264). This is, then, a clear instance of Johnson's reworking on a legacy for a completely different purpose, because his garden is positively linked to African roots and it is the realm of a possible identification with the African American community (Stepto 100-1). In fact, there are some bottles buried in the garden that Stepto has rightly interpreted as an «African survival» (100).⁷ The character's lack of awareness of this reality is made painfully obvious when he tries to dig up the bottles and, consequently, is severely punished by his mother. This moment reveals how estranged he is from his black roots, but what is really relevant in this scene is Johnson's revision of the image of the garden to imply the idea of freedom and the possibility of community. The fact that after the episode of the bottles the narrator is reluctant to explore the garden anymore indicates his unwillingness to find out more about his black identity. Indeed, from this scene onwards the rest of the character's childhood is spent indoors, inside the house which represents the character's voluntary lack of mobility.

The image of the house, therefore, insists upon the notion of immobility, especially in the description of the «little cottage» in Connecticut almost as an aristocratic mansion from which the character is not willing to move:

My mother and I lived together in a little cottage which seemed to me to be fitted up almost luxuriously ... My mother dressed me very neatly and I developed that pride which well-dressed boys generally have. She was careful about my associates, and I myself was very particular. As I look back now I can see that I was a perfect little aristocrat. (4)

The sense of his being encapsulated in this sort of cushioned world, in which he can be whatever he pleases, even a «little aristocrat» with no connection with the outside reality, is clearly envisioned here. He seems to live in a protected bubble, holding onto his middle-class status, with no need to make choices or identify with any particular group. It is quite telling that Rena's situation is described in very similar terms: «Currer [Rena's mother] early resolved to bring her daughters up as ladies, as she termed it, and therefore, imposed little or no work upon them ... she and her daughters

7. The work of several contemporary «visionary» artists like William Edmonson and Leslie Payne attest to this fact, since they make use of this element in their garden «decorations.» See Regenia Perry's *What It Is: Black American Folk Art* (1982).

lived in comparative luxury» (120). Again the idea of living in a sort of protected and luxurious environment is detected here as a haven from the pressures to define coming from American society.

Therefore, it is logical that Johnson's character shows his reluctance to effect any kind of journey at this stage, preferring to stay home, apparently very content in his situation. He voices his desire not to move by means of the mention of the episode of the «tubs»:

These tubs were the earliest aversion of my life, for regularly on certain evenings I was plunged into one of them and scrubbed until my skin ached. I can remember to this day the pain caused by the strong, rank soap's getting into my eyes. (2)

This scene recalls the ritualistic act of washing as a compulsory preparation for a new step in rites of passage. The painfulness attributed to this act of washing emphasizes the rejection that the narrator as a child would feel towards the tubs, and, consequently, towards leaving the place he is in and beginning his search. This «aversion» towards the tubs and the link with the idea of liminality that they represent, show his original refusal—without his knowledge or even awareness—to undertake the quest to face a definite identification with a mulatto or «black» identity. This aversion also challenges the previous tradition of tragic mulatto novels, since mulatto characters in general are quite willing to move. For instance, Rena is easily convinced to «pass» by her brother Warwick who is already «passing» due to «the comparison of this free and noble life with the sordid existence of those around her» (28). Rena shows her eagerness to leave her present state to embrace that other life as soon as her brother makes the proposal.

Besides, this episode constitutes a reworking of slave narratives too, since slave narrators see in the idea of movement itself a positive thing, which stands for freedom. For this reason Douglass is very happy to participate in the ritualistic washing prior to leave Colonel Lloyd's plantation (271). These are his revealing words about leaving:

I look upon my departure from Colonel Lloyd's plantation as one of the most interesting events in my life. It is possible, and even quite probable, that but the mere circumstances of being removed from that plantation to Baltimore, I should have to-day, instead of being here seated by my own table, in the enjoyment of freedom and the happiness of home, writing this Narrative, been confined in the galling chains of slavery. Going to live at Baltimore laid the foundation, and opened the gateway, to all my subsequent prosperity. (273)

Clearly Douglass is quite aware of the possibilities that this journey may entail for him as the means to attain freedom, and which will also prove instrumental in the writing of his narrative. Therefore Douglass equates here freedom to move with liberation from his oppressive slave status and from his illiterate state. Quite the

contrary, in Johnson's protagonist, his refusal of free movement, of his possibility of mobility becomes an «interior transformation,» as it were, the character-narrator tends to confine himself to closed, limited spaces, as the novel progresses.⁸ Despite the reference to all kinds of settings –from the South through the «freer» North into the open possibilities of Europe–, the effect becomes the opposite: the more inclusive the picture is, the more limited the character becomes in terms of spatial movement.

On his journey South, the sense of disappointment is actually stressed by an overall sense of failure, which foretells that his need to identify with Southern black people is bound to fail. In fact, the first feeling he experiences when seeing the legendary South is that of disillusionment: «The farther I got below Washington, the more disappointed I became in the appearance of the country. I peered through the car windows, looking in vain for the luxuriant semitropical scenery which I had pictured in my mind» (37). Moreover, there are other episodes that predict the frustration of his plan. First of all, the «suffocating mule» that appears a page later, which is a clear symbol of the «suffering Negro,» antecedent of the lynching episode (Step 116). His disappointment increases due to the sense of betrayal that he feels when he discovers that he has been robbed of all his college money by a fellowman. In a sense, it is as if the black community itself were rejecting him as a rightful part of it. So the character seems to be exactly where he was at the beginning of his trip, that is, outside the community and back to his liminal status.

At this point it is interesting to notice that the trope of the closet is used by the narrator in connection with his journey. Since he has no money left, he is offered a ride in a closet: «I thanked him again, not knowing then what it was to travel in a Pullman's porter's closet» (46). Once more the sense of pain and disturbance is associated with the idea of travelling and with the consequent transition. What is also remarkable about this particular instance is that the trope of the closet is used in motion, that is, Johnson's confinement is employed to upset the traditional trope in slave narratives, where the closet usually represents the confinement slaves suffer from in their period of bonding, as Douglass repeatedly hides in the closet when terrible scenes of punishment are inflicted onto other slaves (259). On the other hand, many slave characters make use of the trope of the closet as a means of escaping. The most outstanding example can be found in Harriet Jacobs' narrative, in which she spends seven years in a garret in order to escape her master's sexual attraction towards her, metaphorically standing for both the racist and sexist enclosure that black women bore during slavery times. In the end, Jacobs achieves her aim and she is finally free from the burden of slavery.

But the trope movement/confinement is consistently deployed by Johnson throughout the rest of the novel, especially in his depiction of the character's stay in New York:

8. Step 10 makes a similar observation when he argues that «the Ex-Colored man grows distrustful of open spaces ... he is confident of himself and his abilities only in strictly defined interiors» (101).

My New York was limited to ten blocks; the boundaries were Sixth Avenue from Twenty-third to Thirty-third Streets, with the cross streets one block to the west. Central Park was a distant forest, and the lower part of the city a foreign land. (82-83)

This confined space, more than any other before, clearly represents the liminal world in which the character lives depicted as the «underground.»⁹ In this case, the trope of the underworld seems to echo the «underground railroad» that took slaves to freedom. However, Johnson reverses this trope to emphasize liminality identifying the underground world with a hellish place. Despite his success as the «best ragtime-player» (84) of New York, the image of this place as hell is reinforced by his relief to leave it: «I felt like one fleeing from a horrible nightmare» (90). His feeling of relief recalls, in a way, the slaves' feeling of liberation, once they have escaped their slave condition. It is, nevertheless, quite ironic due to the protagonist's almost integration into the life of the black community there. Once more Johnson is deconstructing a conventional trope in order to achieve the opposite effect, since in this case the protagonist feels free when he leaves behind his black identity. The same scheme is operative in the rest of his trips throughout Europe and the South.

The fourth and last aspect that is related to the idea of liminality in the novel is the character's relation to his white family and to the African American community. As regards his family, his relationship with his father is almost non-existent. In fact, this character only appears twice in the narration. The first one is placed right after the discovery scene, and the protagonist is unable to rise to the occasion rejecting his father abruptly:

I can now understand that she [his mother] could expect nothing else but that at the name 'father' I should throw myself into his arms. But I could not rise to this dramatic, or, better, melodramatic, climax. Somehow I could not arouse any considerable feeling of need for a father. (23)

In this passage Johnson is punning again on the «tragic mulatto» tradition, in which there is a constant uncontrollable desire on the mulatto's part to be acknowledged by the white side of the family, as it is the case of Chesnut's *The Marrow of Tradition*, which ends up in a total destruction of the family and rupture of any possible harmony. The conflictive nature of the relationship with the white side of the family reappears again when he is in Europe, supposedly perfectly content in his situation until he meets his father and sister at the Opera. The old feelings of loneliness and frustration re-appear: «Slowly the desolate loneliness of my position became clear to

9. The «underworld» theme has been widely retaken within African American literary production. The classical exponent is *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, where the underground is used as the means to find the lost identity (1972).

me. I knew I could not speak, but I would have given a part of my life to touch her hand with mine and call her 'sister'» (98). This encounter with the white side of his family provides emotions that express in conventional terms «tragic mulatto» themes such as the loneliness that accompanies the «passer,» the admiration for white relatives and his impossibility to speak up, which posits him once more in a liminal attitude.

The theme of his family does not surface again until the very end, when he has already decided to pass as a white man and meets his wife. For the first time, he feels a compulsory need to be white and is really ashamed of his blackness: «This was the only time in my life that I ever felt absolute regret at being colored, that I cursed the drops of African blood in my veins and wished that I were really white» (149). His wife embodies the idea of whiteness, and there is some suggestion in the text that he marries her just because of her white appearance: «she was as *white* as a lily, and she was dressed in *white*. Indeed, she seemed to me the most dazzlingly *white* thing I had ever seen» (144; my emphasis). Again appearances matter very much for this mulatto. Marrying this personification of whiteness he is definitely avoiding his mulatto dilemma. The same holds true of his children, that he wants to protect from blackness: «It is to my children I have devoted my life ... but there is nothing I would not suffer to keep the brand from being placed upon them» (153). After his wife, his children give him the justification he needs to continue «passing» and not facing his mulatto reality anymore. In mulatto novels to marry a white person represents the final step towards the complete integration into the white world. That is the reason why Rena is dubious about marrying a white man, but she is prevented from doing it when he discovers her blackness and refuses her (146-7).

Finally, the idea of community is also essential to Johnson's text, particularly the relationship to the black community. In this case, he seems to be drawing heavily from tragic mulatto novels where the mulatto characters find very problematic to adapt to the African American community. At this point Rena provides a good insight into the conflict within herself with regards to the community: «She was able to view them [blacks] at once with the mental eye of an outsider and the sympathy of a sister» (194). This internal split is responsible for the impossibility Rena feels of truly fitting in, of truly integrating in that community. This fact is evidenced by her aloofness from other members of her own race; there is almost no contact between Rena and other black people, except for her family. And also by the fact that Rena, as *Clotel*, speaks standard English, whereas the rest of black characters depicted in these narratives speak Southern dialect. Language here generates social and, it could be added, racial distinction, since the characters who are able to pass use their linguistic ability as a sort of barrier to feel different from the rest of their community.

As far as Johnson's character is concerned, he is never really integrated in the African American community. At the beginning, when he discovers his blackness, his immediate reaction is downright refusal. His loneliness increases, and, although he makes the decision of becoming a «great colored man» (32), he regards his schoolmates as «savages» (6). His ambivalent attitude towards the black community increases during his trip down South as it is clearly illustrated in the following description: «the unkempt appearance, the shambling, slouching gait and loud talk

and laughter of these people aroused in me a feeling of almost repulsion. Only one thing about them awoke a feeling of interest; that was their dialect» (40). This ambivalence not only marks his condition of outsider with respect to the black group, but also reinforces the narrator as the figure of the «Observer,» like Rena, who is only interested in their dialect, not in them as «his» people. For him it is thus a matter of race and class distinctions, since he seems to feel superior to the working class black people he encounters in the South. It is also in this context where the first hint about the character's possibility of «passing» is given: «Of course, you could go in any place in the city; they wouldn't know you from white» (41). It is highly significant that this passage is inserted within the framework of his almost physical rejection of the black race in general. It gives a sense of what the outcome of his search will be.

The only place where he seems to lose his liminal status and become part of the community is in Jacksonville:

Through my music teaching and my not absolutely irregular attendance at church I became acquainted with the best class of colored people in Jacksonville. This was really my entrance into the race. It was my initiation into what I have termed the freemasonry of the race. (54)

His integration into the black community is almost complete as far as work, friends and social relations are concerned, but there are some comments he makes throughout these pages that are not in agreement with a total assimilation. For instance, he starts off by applying theory to practice, as if he were conducting an experiment: «I had formulated a theory of what it was to be colored; now I was getting the practice» (54). This is the stage in which the narrator is supposed to disclose or unveil his true black personality, but what is shown is his lack of involvement. He is putting into practice a theory that is, in fact, a direct borrowing of DuBois' theory of double consciousness:

He [the colored man in the United States] is forced to take his outlook on all things, not from the viewpoint of a citizen, or a man, or even a human being, but from the viewpoint of a colored man ... This gives to every colored man ... a sort of dual personality. (14)

So what is actually revealed in this attempt at accommodation is his ambivalence towards everything he encounters or experiences, cloaked behind a presumptive adaptation of the Duboisian concept. This ambivalence is especially noticeable in his conception of society based on the relationship established with the white world, with a direct defence of the educated class to which he belongs. The failure to achieve a unified vision of the race is thus the main cause of his leaving Jacksonville.

In Europe he seems to be «passing» all the time. The relationship with the white patron, who is also unnamed, seems to suggest that. But what is really telling is that his stay in Europe is to be interpreted as another attempt of adjustment to a white reality which is quite successful until the unfortunate meeting with his white family.

This encounter renews in him his zeal «to do something for the race» (103). However, before he can go on with his plan, he has to face his white friend, who tries to convince him of his unmistakably «white» identity: «My boy, you are by blood, by appearance, by education, and by tastes a white man ... I can imagine no more dissatisfied human being than an educated, cultured, and refined colored man in the United States» (105-6). This is the second time in which some other character articulates the narrator's possibilities to «pass,» which is probably what he has been doing in Europe up to then.

The narrator, nevertheless, does not acknowledge his friend's opinion and decides to return South once more, although his motivation for it is not very clear: «I began to analyze my own motives, and found that they, too, were very largely mixed with selfishness. Was it more a desire to help those I considered my people, or more a desire to distinguish myself?» (107). After all the liminal territories he has been through, he is still incapable of feeling incorporated to the African American community, he is still doubtful of the category he should ascribe to «his» people and, what is even worse, he is not in the condition of discerning his personal guidelines for the undertaking of the project he is about to commence. What stands out is then the uneasy feeling the narrator conveys in this whole scheme. His experiences during his return South only confirm the weariness that is never overcome by the character, since his efforts result in dissatisfaction after dissatisfaction to fit in. This he acknowledges when discussing the effects of an overheard conversation on the train in which racist opinions are being voiced: «Here I had before me the bald, raw, naked aspects of the race question in the South; and, in consideration of the step I was just taking, it was far from encouraging» (120). This piece of oral information is further reinforced by the sympathy he feels for whites in the midst of his alleged integration into the black community, portraying the character once more torn between two conflicting forces and unable to come to terms with them.¹⁰ His vision of black people is clearly coming from a sense of superiority that makes it impossible for him to become one with the people he despises or underestimates: «dull, simple people –the great majority of them hard working, in their relations with the whites submissive, faithful and often affectionate, negatively content with their lot» (124). Again he does not possess a unified concept of race, so there is a lack of common ground between him and this community and thus he remains an ambiguous figure even in his closest moments to actual adaptation to the race.

The clearest instance of this sort of approximation to a somehow «black» identity is exemplified in the «Big Meeting» episode, a religious gathering of black people, in which he seems for the first time to be genuinely moved and ready to perform his ambitious plan of being a great colored man:

10. Many critics consider this opinion on the character's part as the supreme illustration of the above mentioned self-hatred that the character experiences; for instance Skerrett names him as «a psychological sellout» because «he expresses admiration for traits of the oppressor(s) which are directly related to their mastery and his subjugation» (555). But recent critics have argued that there seems to be a «racially correct way» (Pfeiffer 403) of reading Johnson's text that tends to identify the black race as authentic and the white race as the negative side.

At the close of the 'big meeting' I left the settlement where it was being held, full of enthusiasm. I was in that frame of mind which, in the artistic temperament, amounts to inspiration. I was now ready and anxious to get to some place where I might settle down to work, and give expression to the ideas which were teeming in my head. (133)

Significantly enough, it is religious emotion the nearest the character gets to an initiation rite into the black race. Finally there seems to be some point of contact between the African American community and himself. It is telling that this ecstatic moment is produced by means of slave songs, signifying their importance within the African American tradition. Unfortunately, it is now that he «strayed into another deviation from my path of life as I had it marked out, which led me upon an entirely different road» (133). This passage emphasizes his liminal character as a travelling entity, which has not found its right place yet. The narrator signals here his marginal position, right before the final act of passing which gives him a well-defined and permanent status.

This initiation or «passing» into the white race is brought about by the lynching episode he witnesses. The dominant feeling of shame he experiences for belonging to «such an injured race» makes him advocate more strongly than ever for an «in-between» space where he can be comfortable, trying to expand binary oppositions to make room for himself:

The question of the relative qualities of the two races is still an open one. The reference to the 'great gulf' loses force in face of the fact that there are in this country perhaps three or four million people with the blood of both races in their veins. (137-8)

So the decision he makes to «pass» is also described in very ambiguous terms, following up this kind of argument: «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» (139). According to Berzon,

[h]e is not being honest with himself ... the hard lesson that he had learned in school and during the intervening years, when he had lived as a black man, was surely that he would be categorized as either black or white. And since he does not look like a Negro, according to the conception of most whites, he must know that he will be treated as a white man. (156)

This argumentation does not take into account the fact that he has never been fully identified with a black person along the whole novel, although he has tried to fit in on a number of occasions. As a matter of fact, his possibility and ability to «pass» has

been repeatedly hinted at in the course of the narration, and he has been clearly defined as a trope for liminality. It is also true that social pressure has imposed its patterns onto his behavior, but he has always gone beyond them, defying categories up to now. But his final decision to become «just» white has been favored by the impossibility of remaining in a liminal position forever.¹¹ The character, therefore, is compelled to choose, so he adopts the «white proposal» because it is the most comfortable and profitable for him. Obviously, this completion of the «passing» overturns tragic mulatto endings in which the mulatto is bound to die after his/her attempt at «passing» has been disclosed, as it happens to Rena or to Clotel. It also deconstructs slave narratives, where the authors feel free and ready to start a new life within their black community as in the case of Douglass. Johnson's character rejects both the tragedy and the African American community in favor of a complete integration into the white race.

Therefore, his final «passing» is the recognition of his identification with the white side in him, leaving behind the black part, as it were. This passing is described as a rite of initiation enacted through money: «Since I was not going to be a Negro, I would avail myself of every possible opportunity to make a white man's success; and that, if it can be summed up in any one word, means 'money'» (141). However and despite such completion, Johnson betrays a certain sense of guilt and regret about his successful «passing»: «I feel that I have been a coward, a deserter, and I am possessed by a strange longing for my mother's race» (153). Even in the context of a full identification with a white self, the «passing» character can never be fully satisfied and there is always a sense of ambivalence lurking in his life. Johnson's exploration and revision of the constant interrelation between the tradition and the novelist's modern understanding of it points out the impossibility of overcoming a position of marginality, of liminality. Hence the mulatto remains a hybrid. With this statement, Johnson's novel inaugurates the «modern era» because of its concern about the function of the mulatto as a possible means to shape a sense of self for the entire community that uses his/her in-between position in creative and constructive ways. By constantly re-interpreting the given tradition, Johnson is going beyond these conventions and emphasizing the «modernity» and «actuality» of his text to advocate the hybrid mulatto as the utmost representative of the entire African American community in his/her liminal position with respect to the white dominant culture.

11. In this sense, Brooks is right in affirming that the narrator's tragedy is «that society has chosen arbitrary categorizations, constructed a meta-narrative of race that cannot be applied adequately to personal narratives of its individual members» (23).

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