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Passing Through Europe: Race and National Identity in James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man* and James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*

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With the flourishing of multiculturalism and debate about racial politics in the texts of people of color, a growing interest in critiques of whiteness as a racial category has developed. Foundational texts like Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*: *Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* call for the study of race in texts by white authors, particularly, although not exclusively, on those texts which rely on minor Africanist characters at crucial moments and which draw extensively on the language of whiteness and blackness, even when these references do not explicitly address race. Other studies like Richard Dyer's *White* take broader approaches to the study of whiteness by focusing on the associations between whiteness, light, and virtue in interdisciplinary, multicentury cultural analyses. Still other texts examine more narrow constructions of whiteness, as in Ruth Frankenberg's *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*, which uses detailed interviews with white women as a starting point for analysis about race in white women's lives. What all of these texts have in common is a desire to investigate the functions of whiteness—a category all acknowledge pulls together extremely diverse groups of people— as a broad cultural category.

Accompanying these studies is an increasing awareness of the differences within groups called "white," whether it is on the basis of class, geographical region, ethnicity, or a variety of other factors. This article studies the critiques of whiteness in novels by two of African American literature's most prominent writers—James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) and James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956). Both novels written overseas[1], I focus on those portions of the texts which take place in Europe, for those sections provide the authors with an occasion to compare master narratives of whiteness with representations of diverse white ethnicities (represented by several European countries).

James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man* – a novel "passing" for an audobiography[2]-- chronicles the travels of a fair-skinned African American who, feeling rootless and without purpose, wanders first through the United States and later through Europe on a quest to find a sense of identity and community. A key factor that

contributes to his indecision about the meaning of his life lies in the conflict between his occasional desire to take up the mantle of the talented tenth and to spend his life in service to the African American community and the more insistent and recurring desire to secure his own comfort level and economic stability. During his trip to Europe he thinks he has found his calling when he makes the decision to return to the United States in order to compose classical music based on "Negro themes." This decision, however, does not hold his interest for long. Once back in the U.S. he witnesses a lynching—an event of such profound psychological import that it sends him rushing into the arms of "whiteness"; he decides to pass for white, placing individual economic and psychological security over any larger societal goals.

Richard Dyer points out that whites routinely consider themselves just individuals, while people of color are talked about as members of their race: "The sense of whites as non-raced is most evident in the absence of references to whiteness in the habitual speech and writing of white people in the West. We (whites) will speak of, say, the blackness or Chineseness of friends, neighbors, colleagues, customers or clients, and it may be in the most genuinely friendly and accepting manner, but we don't mention the whiteness of white people we know" (2). Along with those racialized associations that whites have toward people of color often goes an erroneous flattening of difference within a racial category and the assumption, say, that one African American can speak for all African Americans. In an interview James Baldwin complains of this phenomenon: "You see, whites want black writers to mostly deliver something as if it were an official version of the black experience" (Troupe 285).

The Ex-Colored man's frustration extends much farther than Baldwin's, for he so longs to be "just an individual" and so shrinks from the idea of being a representative black man that he ultimately decides not to be a black man at all. So in his travels through Europe, the Ex-Colored Man begins his first extended experiment in passing for white (what he would probably call "just being human," as whiteness remains the unmarked). Nowhere in this portion does it explicitly say that he is "passing," but his fair skinned complexion plus the absence of any remarks to others about his "blackness" suggest that most people assume he is white. Since he is in Europe, where he knows few people, he can experiment in passing without consciously thinking of it as such. Without the likelihood of unexpectedly meeting a former acquaintance he does not have to consider what his actions would be if his passing were in danger of being discovered. As Samira Kawash asserts, the Ex-Colored Man "is never so much in a place as he is, to turn a phrase, passing through. The coincidence of the thematics of geographic mobility and race passing is not accidental. Practicallly, if one is to pass, one must go somewhere else, where one's identity is unknown" (63).

The Ex-colored man studiously avoids all references to African Americans or racial discrimination, instead surveying various white European cultures, such as the high culture (read white culture) of the opera or the low culture of a white British pub. And yet references to race, much to his chagrin, doggedly pursue him. One young man from Luxemburg suddenly asks "in a tone of voice which indicated that he expected an authoritative denial of an ugly rumor: 'Did they really burn a man alive in the United States'"(Johnson *Ex-Colored*

Man 99-100). The Ex-Colored Man is stunned and doesn't know how to respond. Such an issue is the last thing he wants to contemplate while touring through Europe as a white man.

It is at one of the bastions of high culture, and thus a bastion of European whiteness -- the opera--that the Ex-Colored Man's race is once again flung in his face. He sits contemplating the youthful innocence of a beautiful theater-goer (in a manner similar to the way his benefactor wistfully watches him) when the Ex-Colored Man suddenly realizes that the man sitting next to the girl is his father. Racial boundaries preclude him from even acknowledging his father, let alone mentioning their familial relationship. He is suddenly not just a man listening to the opera; he is the "illegitimate," biracial son of a man who has only superficially acknowledged his role as father. Ironically the opera he watches is Faust, the story of a man who sold his soul to the Devil for earthly rewards. Not only does the opera's subject foreshadow the Ex-Colored man's later action, it mirrors the actions of his father who, like so many before him, gave up a son for social respectability.

The Ex-Colored Man and David simultaneously resemble two kinds of travellers, the exile who flees from the nation of origin because of alienation or persecution, and the tourist, who temporarily roams the globe, spending money and looking for the "different," the "new" and/ the "old." The Ex-Colored Man and David are both in a sense "exiled tourists." They flee from the restrictions placed on them by their own country, the former because of his race[3] and the latter because of his sexuality, and are in that sense exiles. Yet once they arrive in Europe they promptly become tourists, sampling the local customs, making observations of and comparisons between the country they are visiting and the United States. For instance, as the Ex-Colored man meanders through Europe with his benefactor, in typical touristic fashion he cannot resist the temptation to make broad observations and judgments about the national character of each country he visits: "Frenchmen are merely gay and never overwhelmed by their emotions . . .Germans get worked up and red in the face when sustaining an opinion, and in heated discussions are likely to allow their emotions to sweep them off their feet" (*ECM* 103). Each city he visits becomes like a new set of clothes to try on, a new form of whiteness to experiment in and to study. These stops at various European countries provide opportunities for him to sample "whiteness" with a variety of national inflections. Being white in France resembles being white in the United States, but they are by no means identical. Ruth Frankenberg's explanation of the connection between national and racial identity is helpful here: "Whiteness is affected by nationhood, such that whiteness and Americanness, though by no means coterminous, are profoundly shaped by one another. Thus there are ways, for example, in which British 'whiteness' and U.S. 'whiteness' are similar to and different from one another, and those differences are traceable to historical, social, and political process" (Frankenberg 233).

Ironically, this man who changes his style of whiteness with each new country he enters at one point favors France because of "the absence of hypocrisy, the absence of the spirit to do the thing if it might only be done in secret" (*ECM* 100). He echoes these same sentiments later when he admires a Southern racist for at least being firm in his principles (*ECM* 120). In these musings about the stability of principles an unstated sense of longing permeates. Despite his continual wanderings the Ex-Colored Man searches for a stable, above all safe, identity. The millionaire's statement that he "can imagine no more dissatisfied human

being than an educated, cultured, and refined colored man in the United States" (*ECM* 106) has some validity given the year of publication of the novel, 1912. To openly present himself as intellectual and cultured as an African American at that time would certainly not be without racial backlash (which is obviously not to deny the importance of African American colleges and intellectuals at the turn of the century—just that the role of the African American intellectual wasn't an easy position to advance in white society). Most whites in both the north and south of the United States at that time still did not see African Americans as more than physical laborers and to present an alternative impression risked controversy. Therefore the Ex-Colored man flees from controversy into the safety of American whiteness.

But how safe is that whiteness? James Baldwin suggests that whiteness – with all its emphasis on control and domination—comes at a heavy cost: emotional distance, loneliness, and suffering. In *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin focuses his analysis of race on the white race, particularly American whites through his portrayal of his bisexual white American protagonist David. The novel opens with the image of David looking out a window and seeing, not the outside world, but his own reflection in which "his blond hair gleams" (Baldwin *Giovanni's Room* 7). He muses, "my ancestors conquered a continent, pushing across death-laden plains until they came to an ocean which faced away from Europe into a darker past" (7). Clearly Baldwin here links whiteness with American imperialism while uniting David's character to both issues. The confluences between race and national identity, specifically here between whiteness and Americanness, at this point in the novel are accented over their differences (elsewhere in the novel the broad construct of whiteness is broken down in order to explore the issue of white ethnicity, as I discuss later).

David lives as an American expatriate in France, frequenting bars and cafes, without much purpose or direction in his life. An extremely controlling personality, both of himself and of others, David meets Giovanni, an Italian expatriate, in a gay bar. Although David has surrounded himself in gay culture while in Paris and even though he has had a sexual relationship with a man in the past, David at first stubbornly resists anyone's attempt to suggest that he himself may be attracted to men and tries to "pass" as purely heterosexual. He clings to the conception that perhaps he will one day marry Hella, his girlfriend who has gone off to Spain to find herself, or at least will some day marry some other woman. David goes to gay bars regularly, observing and judging others, constantly looking at Jacques and Guillaume, two older gay men with whom he associates, with contempt. He steadfastly maintains his "innocence" to suggestions that he is gay, developing a persona of the all-American boy next door to such an extent that Guillaume mockingly calls him the "great American football player" (*GR* 44). The American innocence that populates so much of American literature is shown here to have a pernicious, even parasitic side.

That "innocence" and "purity" requires constant monitoring and control and actually is not "innocence" but rather emotional distance. The extremely clean outward appearance of the Americans at the American Express office masks the "power and sorrow, both unadmitted, unrealized, the power of inventors, the sorrow of the disconnected" (*GR* 119). Soap and purity are associated in *Giovanni's Room* with isolation and an unwillingness to engage with the complexities of human experience. The soap imagery links 1950s America's somewhat obsessive attitudes toward cleanliness with a desire to be pure. Giovanni yells at

David, "You love your purity, you love your mirror—you are just like a little virgin, you walk around with your hands in front of you as though you had some precious metal, gold, silver, rubies, maybe diamonds down there between your legs! You will never give it to anybody, you will never let anybody touch it – man *or* woman. You want to be *clean*. You think you came here covered with soap and you think you will go out covered with soap—and you do not want to *stink*, not even for five minutes, in the meantime" (*GR* 186-87). By trying to be the detached observer even in his romantic relationships, David values purity at the expense of intimacy.

In a study of travel literature of white Europeans in Africa and South America Mary Louise Pratt defines the term "anti-conquest," a term which can be applied to David as representative of American global imperialism as well. The "anti-conquest" Pratt defines as

> the strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment that they assert European hegemony. The term 'anti-conquest' was chosen because, as I argue, in travel and exploration writings these strategies of innocence are constituted in relation to older imperial rhetorics of conquest associated with the absolutist era. The main protagonist of the anti-conquest is a figure I sometimes call the 'seeing-man,' an admittedly unfriendly label for the European male subject of European landscape discourse—he whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess (Pratt 7).

Ironically, Baldwin's "seeing-man" is not a European on African soils but rather an American on European grounds. David surveys the Parisian scene coolly and with judgment, eating and drinking at the expense of those he loathes.

Significantly, David doesn't consciously make decisions to act; rather, he resolutely avoids acting so that decisions are made for him. In this manner he distances himself from the choices he makes through inaction while nonetheless inflicting serious emotional damage on those around him. For instance, when he breaks up with Giovanni upon Hella's return to Paris, he does not tell Giovanni that he is leaving him; instead, he simply disappears for days and allows Giovanni to discover the truth when the three accidentally meet. Later, instead of telling Hella of his gay past and his current disatisfaction with their relationship, he waits until she discovers him in a gay bar. These rather cruel manipulations of people he is allegedly close to and acts of control over them are a fundamental part of Baldwin's critique of whiteness. David says of himself:

> For I am – I was – one of those people who pride themselves on their willpower, on their ability to make a decision and carry it through. This virtue, like most virtues, is ambiguity itself. People who believe that they are strong-willed and the masters of their destiny can only continue to believe this by becoming specialists in self-deception. Their decisions are not really decisions at all – a real decision makes one humble, one knows that it is at the mercy of more things than can be named – but elaborate systems of evasion, of illusion, designed to make

> themselves and the world appear to be what they and the world are not (*GR* 30).

This description of David accents both his insistent desire to control himself and others and the ways he attempts to mask that control through evasion and illusion. Baldwin, in an interview, describes America in much the same way:

> it is the most extraordinary collection of ill-assessed motives and undigested history, the most peculiar system of moral evasions and tremendous innocence. There's something very winning and very moving and very beautiful about those people who don't yet know that the world is big and complex and dark and that you have to grow up and become yourself big and complex and dark in order to deal with it. Americans still believe they can somehow get through life without ever being corrupted. It is an insane endeavour and, of course, this is where the Negro comes in. The Negro, by his presence, being on the bottom, affords society almost the only coherence that it has. Since white people in the main cannot grow up our children must grow up by the time they're ten (Mossman 57).

Baldwin here equates Americanness with whiteness[4]-- a seemingly odd choice for an African American author to make. Yet he is suggesting that dominant white American culture has defined itself in opposition to "blackness" (as Toni Morrison would similarly argue years later in*Playing in the Dark*). It maintains its innocence through the exploitation of the poor and the black. It projects on to the "other" all of the negative qualities that it does not want to see within itself. So too does David project his homophobia onto Giovanni, Jacques and Guillaume, even though that homophobia attempts to camouflage his own self-hatred.

Although an American travelling in a foreign country, David would not likely consider himself a tourist, as he now speaks French fluently and has lived in France for some time. Giovanni, however, recognizes the emotional distance that David puts between himself and all of those around him and likens him to a tourist. Giovanni imagines what his life would have been like if he had stayed in Italy and if David had come years later to Italy as a tourist

> I can see you, many years from now, coming through our village in the ugly, fat, American motor car you will surely have by then and looking at me and looking at all of us and tasting our wine and shitting on us with those empty smiles Americans wear everywhere and which you wear all the time and driving off with a great roar of the motors and a great sound of tires and telling all the other Americans you meet that they must come and see our village because it is so picturesque. And you will have no idea of the life there, dripping and bursting and beautiful and terrible, as you have no idea of my life now (*GR* 183-4).

The tourist here becomes emblematic of the kind of superficial manner in which David would like to spend his life. David's class status allows him the luxury of loafing around Paris without money. Giovanni, of humbler origins, after all, works to support his stay in France (and, I might add, to support David), but David just survives at the expense of those around him and off of his father. In addition, David's race grants him the good will of many who might trust him less if he were poor and a person of color. He coolly observes and at times even participates in behaviors that he despises and yet when he does so he is, as Guillaume observes, "just an American boy, after all, doing things in France which [he] would not dare to do at home" (*GR* 142). France and the people he meets in France may provide opportunities to break from his traditional role as observer temporarily, but even after his alleged conversion at the end of the novel he remains isolated and unsuccessfully tries to throw away the notice of Giovanni's impending execution, suggesting that his change is not full enough to get him to "say Yes to life" (*GR* 10).

Thus far, I have been intimating that nationality is substituted for race in *Giovanni's Room*; Giovanni's darker skin, Southern European origin, and class status metaphorically associate him with blackness while David is associated with whiteness. David's treatment of Giovanni, I have been trying to suggest, is a metaphorical reenactment of black and white relations in the United States— the white both longing for and being repulsed by the black; the white's carelessness and class privilege protecting him at the expense of the black.

While this interpretation brings much to a reading of the text, it hides other aspects of the race critique present in *Giovanni's Room*. Thus far I have focused on "whiteness" as a monolithic construct, the master narrative of whiteness, if you will. *Giovanni's Room*, however, often emphasizes differences between whites of different nationalities. The spontaneous and emotionally tortured Giovanni is a working-class white Italian, the controlled and emotionally-aloof David is a middle-class white American and the domineering and arrogant Guillaume is an upper-class Frenchman. One of the difficulties with works like *Giovanni's Room* which struggle with issues of national character is that they risk stereotype and caricature. Baldwin sets up conversations about national character within his text—not to stereotype-- but in order to use nationality as a metaphor to discuss alternative approaches to living. The experience of travelling brings to the fore the differences and similarities between people. By talking about nationality the characters can discuss such issues as the interactions between the poor and rich (as in the little fish/big fish argument 46), tradition and modernity (45), and control and spontanaeity (50), among other things.

I want to focus here on the issue of control and spontaneity, as it is an issue I have linked with Baldwin's critique of white Americanness. Although David would likely see the French as more internally liberated than himself, Giovanni, an Italian, criticizes them for being too restrained: "ah, these people and their measure! They measure the gram, the centimeter, these people, and they keep piling all the little scraps they save, one on top of the other, year in and year out, all in the stocking or under the bed" (*GR* 50-51). Similarly, in those instances when Guillaume feels the worst he "remembers he is a member of one of the best and oldest families in France" (*GR* 140) and begins regulating and controlling his employees. Giovanni advocates a less self-conscious, more open, more dangerous form of

living. Giovanni here appears to be presenting an alternative form of whiteness, one not obsessed with control and domination (either externally or internally).

Yet romanticizing either Giovanni or Italians would be a mistake. Clearly Giovanni is also not free from a tendency to control. His is generally more a passive/aggressive style that demands obedience through a portrayal of his own helplessness. In one scene, Giovanni tells David, "I do not know what I would do if you left me" and David thinks, "for the first time I felt the suggestion of a threat in his voice—or I put it there." Giovanni continues, "I have been alone so long – I do not think I would be able to live if I had to be alone again" (*GR* 145). The threat is implicit in his words: Giovanni suggests that he will commit suicide if David leaves him; by threatening harm to himself he attempts to keep David locked in his metaphorical room with him. Perhaps even more importantly, Giovanni's cavalier attitudes toward domestic violence (*GR* 105-6) and comments about Hella and other women suggest that he also at times exerts a form of direct control over others (particularly women), in a manner more similar to David's. The tendency to exert control over others, therefore, comes not from any innate qualities that define "whiteness" or "Americanness," but rather is linked to those who have power over others. Power has been exercised by those groups because they have traditionally had the power over others to do so. Giovanni's status as a male in a patriarchal society allowed him to beat his wife because he could.

Baldwin lived for many years in France, Turkey, and other European countries. For him, these countries provided a refuge from the racism perpetrated against African Americans in the U.S. However, he regularly pointed out that racism still existed in Europe, it just took different forms. The treatment of Algerians in France, for instance, he considered a corollary to American racism against African Americans.[5] Europe offered alternative forms of whiteness for Baldwin—and perhaps even better forms—but nonetheless flawed forms.

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[1] Johnson's text was written primarily in Venezuela and Baldwin's in France.

[2] Or, as Samira Kawash would claim, partial autobiography passing for a novel passing for autobiography. See “The *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*: (Passing for) Black Passing for White” for a study of the ways that Johnson drew on *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored*

Man when writing his autobiography, *Along This Way*. Both texts, Kawash suggests, intermingle autobiographical and novelistic characteristics.

[3] Although the widow's untimely demise spurs the Ex-Colored Man to leave New York suddenly for Europe, I would maintain that the reason he felt compelled to leave is intricately tied to race. As an African American man, he would immediately be suspected by police of being in some way responsible for the death of the white woman with whom he flirts, solely because of his romantic link with her. Once in Europe, he clearly uses his travels as a way to escape the pressures of race he experienced in the United States.

[4] The fact that the protagonist of *Giovanni's Room* is named David, which is also Baldwin's father's name, suggests that these controlling "American" traits are not limited solely to whites. In *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, an autobiographical work, Baldwin portrays his father—called Gabriel in the novel-- as a conservative and controlling African American man who dwells on the sins of the flesh at the expense of close relationships with his family. Although superficially David and Gabriel seem to be complete opposites (one white and gay and the other African American, heterosexual and religious), their personalities closely resemble one another.

[5] See, for instance, Baldwin's comments in Jewell Handy Gresham's 1976 interview, "James Baldwin Comes Home".