

The consequences of the faded color line in



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Henry Louis Gates, Jr. contends “ race” is not itself a natural entity, rather a synthetic construct used to degrade certain peoples. He implores society to move forward free from the shackles of categorization, liberating itself from a false reality. While this commentary holds significant merit and noble intention, its excessively utopian core fails to take into account the great inability of society’s members to overcome its long-held values and beliefs. Undeniably, humanity sees through a shaded lens, and, though the race schism may be of artificial rather than biological origins, it very much has and still shapes the world we live in. In no work is the color line so uniquely scaled as it is in James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*. The subject of the story is the benefactor of a societal anomaly: he is able to oscillate and transcend the color barrier, somewhat shielding himself from the biased operation of the white faction and the intense oppression encasing the black one. Coupled with this trait is a wholly methodical and presumptuous personality pervasive throughout the text. In lieu of these facilities, the Ex-colored Man receives only a fleeting taste of both worlds; he is never fully assimilated into either realm. The notable absence of emotion prevents an affective connection with a category that further inhibits the traditional association with race. The narrator then loses total sight of the color line as his presuming nature disconnects him from racial networks. As a result, it takes but one dramatic encounter to dye the subject’s faint sense of the color line and amplify its presence. The Ex-Colored Man’s passing glimpse into white and black domains mold presumptions that are torn down in just one instant, leaving him with eternal regret for a lack of societal experience. Indeed, the absence of a racial identity bars the man from the existence he longed to appreciate. Rather than growing as an active,

acculturated member of society, the Ex-Colored Man seems to develop more as a presumptuous commentator. He does not hesitate to reveal his vision of racial America, continually asserting his beliefs involving white and black dynamics. Early in the story, the speaker confidently puts forth “ I believe it to be a fact that the coloured people of this country know and understand the white people better than the white people know and understand them” (403). The subtle labeling of “ colored people” and white people” coupled with the absence of a collective “ we” corroborates his individualistic persona, one deficient of a racial identification. Though externally shaping him as an unbiased (a traditionally positive attribute) individual, the narrator’s presumptions eventually impede him from cultivating a definite ethnic association. He pedantically asserts “...This ability to laugh heartily is, in part, the salvation of the American Negro; it does much to keep him from going the way of an Indian” (423), degrading much of his own potential character. By awarding even some credit for the providence of a race to so trivial a source as laughter not only devalues black autonomy and intelligibility but also isolates the Ex-Colored Man from that group. It becomes impossible to develop a strong black self because he himself devalues their existence, going so far as to brand them “ creatures” (477). Overtly positive assertions, too, alienate the speaker. He states “ It is a struggle; for though the black man fights passively, he nevertheless fights... he bears the fury of the storm as does the willow tree” (434)-an edict that seems to convey some sense of self-until it is juxtaposed with a white contention: “...For though the white man of the South may be too proud to admit it, he is, nevertheless, using in the contest his best energies; he is devoting to it the greater part of his thought and much of his endeavor”

(434). The prototypical activism of the first statement fades into ambivalence as he adds a vaguely positive reference to prevalent white oppression. The branding of the immense racial struggle as a “contest” further shows his uncertainty and desperate impartiality; he cannot commit to either side so long as he funnels his perceptions into generalizations of both white and black spheres. The narrator is strikingly devoid of sentiment; he evaluates even the most epic of incidences in a numb, analytical fashion. Because of this, he handicaps himself, abating the acculturation necessary for an enriching societal experience. His detachment grows from an underlying selfishness that provides for an almost economic existence. As early as grade school, he admits “I felt that ‘Red Head’-as I involuntarily called him-and I were to be friends. I do not doubt that this feeling was strengthened by the fact that I had been quick enough to see that a big, strong boy was a friend to be desired at a public school...” (397). Racial identification is not yet an issue of great salience for the youth, rather peer association serves as the first marker of self-definition. Even as a child, the Ex-Colored Man seeks to develop a symbiotic relationship. He vies to improve his own situation rather than value the bond at its purest level, foreshadowing similar activity even after the racial construct is introduced to the boy. This is not to say the speaker is an altogether callous and disinterested being, on the contrary, he displays a deep love for his mother and, later, his wife. These women, however, are not the subject’s source of identification. His lasting grief does not stem from those relationships (despite their tragic ends), instead it grows from a longing for social functionality in the racial sense. As a male, the Ex-Colored Man would have traditionally drawn many roles from his father, but he divulges that “

Somehow I could not arouse any considerable feeling of need for a father" (410). The parent attempts to reach out to his son, though it proves to be in vain. The boy retracts inward, and displays the budding self-interested and materialistic attitude that will mature later in the piece by recalling " I thought, almost remorsefully, of how I had left my father; but, even so, there momentarily crossed my mind a feeling of disappointment the piano was not a grand" (413). As an adult, the narrator brings into question his own attitude regarding his assimilation, pondering " Was it more a desire to help those I considered my people, or more a desire to distinguish myself...This is a question I have never definitely answered" (474). The answer does seem to appear quite overtly, however, as he concludes "...I should have greater chances of attracting attention as a coloured composer than as a white one" (474). As evidenced here, the Ex-Colored Man uses racial identification as a tool to better his material standing, thus displacing ethnicity from his definition of self. This paradigm progresses into a deep ambivalence for racial interactions. In the face of blatant prejudice, the speaker recalls " I was sick at heart. Yet I must confess that underneath it all I felt a certain sort of admiration for the man who could not be swayed from what he held as his principles" (484). The Ex-Colored Man can feel only ephemeral empathy for his black roots and merely a " sort of admiration" for the white bigot; his objectivity has fully severed his ties with both factions. Subsequently—in the ultimate display of racial tension and division—a lynching—the subject retracts just as he did in boyhood. He systematically dissects the atrocity, struggling to recount how " I was looking at a scorched post, a smouldering fire, blackened bones, charred fragments sifting down through coils of chain..." (497); the connection to the victim is never forged. He leaves town, unable

to side with a "...Race that could be so dealt with..." (497) or the lynch mob itself. Because of his demeanor, he lacks the ire to defend one race and the effrontery to join in another. The Ex-Colored Man's starkly rational and unemotional nature prevents him from socially assimilating from boyhood through his adult years, culminating in a disembodied fugue that leaves him with a want for that racial identification. The subject in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is haunted by, in the end, "...Remnants of a vanished dream, a dead ambition, a sacrificed talent..." (511)-a lugubrious fate for a man once blessed with a keen mind and incalculable aspiration. During his youth, this ambition fuels an individualistic and wholly selfish attitude that, coupled with a dry, emotionless quintessence leads to an indeterminable sense of self. The Ex-Colored Man fails to attach himself to a race-a decision most have no say in-amounting to his ultimate and final feelings of despair. By way of increasingly presumptuous qualities, he alienates himself from the entire racial spectrum, producing profoundly ambivalent feelings that are indeed more evident than any other sentiment he is able to manifest. The shackling flaws of the Ex-Colored Man are not so inhibiting in the society Gates, Jr. promotes-the ideal, race-less world-undoubtedly, self-interest would be markedly positive. "Race" may and perhaps should not be a divisive category. Even if it is an artifice however, a ruse implanted in the fabric of humanity centuries ago, the fact remains it is elemental in modern socialization and acculturation. It is a definite reality that people today must be able to associate with a race as a dividing class on some level to achieve an enriching societal experience. The Ex-Colored Man, in a time when race is incredibly salient in the collective mind of American civilization, is left out of the racial equation. He longs to thrive in the world Gates would like to see,

one in which he could "...Neither disclaim the black race nor claim the white race..." (499), but he is left an ordinary, ethnically ambiguous man regretting an identity lost and a society that forced him to choose.