

RACIAL PASSING IN JAMES WELDON JOHNSON'S *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN EX-COLORED MAN* AND PHILIP ROTH'S *THE HUMAN STAIN*

MOBILIDADE RACIAL: O PASSING NOS ROMANCES *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN EX-COLORED MAN* E *THE HUMAN STAIN*

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Resumo

*O chamado passing racial trata, principalmente, do fenômeno no qual negros de pele mais clara e de traços mestiços se passam por pessoas brancas, a fim de, mais comumente, conseguirem vantagens sociais e econômicas, frequentemente mais acessíveis aos brancos do que aos negros. A partir de problematizações em torno dos conceitos de passing, o presente trabalho visa a analisar comparativamente duas importantes obras da literatura norte-americana do século XX: *The autobiography of an ex-colored man* (1912/1989), de James Weldon Johnson, e *The human stain* (2000), de Philip Roth. Pretende-se investigar como a questão do passing é retratada em cada uma das obras, a fim de se destacar que, apesar de os protagonistas em questão apresentarem muitas similaridades e desejarem que categorias pré-estabelecidas não sejam decisivas em suas trajetórias, a experiência do passing é heterogênea, sendo construída e operada diferentemente em cada um dos romances.*

Palavras-chave: *Passing, Identidade Racial, Afro-Americanos.*

Abstract

*The so-called racial passing is defined, mainly, as a phenomenon through which black people who are light-skinned pass for whites, in order to achieve social and economic advantages which are usually more easily available to white people. Based on problematizations around the concepts of passing, the present article intends to analyze, comparatively, two important works from the 20th century: *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man* (1912/1989), written by James Weldon Johnson, and *The Human Stain* (2000), written by Philip Roth. The analysis of these works aims at investigating how the issue of passing is portrayed in each of the novels, in order to highlight the fact that, although the protagonists at stake share many similarities, such as the desire to free themselves from the decisiveness of pre-established categories like*

race, the experience of passing is heterogeneous and it is differently constructed and operated in each of the novels.

Key words: *Passing, Race Identity, Afro-Americans.*

*I slip into corners, my long antenna encountering the various axioms
on the surface of things: I the Negro's clothes smell of Negro;
the Negro has white teeth; the Negro has big feet;
the Negro has a broad chest. I slip into corners;
I keep silent; all I want is to be anonymous, to be forgotten.
Look, I'll agree to everything, on condition I go unnoticed!*

(Fanon, 2008, p. 96)

I Introduction

The phenomenon of racial passing was frequently seen in the United States at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. The word “passing”, according to Werner Sollors (1997),

is used more frequently as if it were short for “passing for white,” in the sense of “crossing over” the color line in the United States from the black to the white side (p. 247).

The motivations that led black people to adopt the white identity as their true selves were generally related to the possibilities of upward mobility that were almost inexistent for black people, and, as Sollors continues, “only a situation of sharp inequality between groups would create the need for the emergence of a socially significant number of cases of passing” (Sollors, 1997, p. 248).

Considering the phenomenon of racial passing, I intend to analyze two important novels from the 20th century: *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912/1989), written by James Weldon Johnson, and *The Human Stain* (2000), written by Philip Roth. Both novels deal with the issue of racial passing, nonetheless, they present striking differences in the way the topic is addressed. Johnson's novel was taken as a real autobiography for a long time; however, nowadays it is known that the book is a work of fiction that passes as an autobiography. The plot of the novel revolves around a black man who has to choose between living as a black man or a white one. Throughout the story, readers accompany the character through moments of indecision and guilt in what is regarded as a classic passing fiction. Roth's novel, on the other hand, was written much after the

traditional wave of passing in the United States, and presents the story of Coleman Silk, a university professor who, being accused of racism, refuses to reveal the big secret of his life: he is a black man who passes as a white, and nobody, not even his wife and children know about this.

Although the main characters undergo the phenomenon of passing in both novels and share some similarities, they deal with their choices in different ways, regarding their major purposes, their performances as white individuals, their positioning towards the black and the white cultures, and their relationships with the past, with families and former acquaintances, among other segments. Therefore, I intend to analyze, in comparative terms, how the issue of passing is dealt with in the two novels, in order to show that, although what both protagonists really want is to extricate themselves from definitions and to live without the doom and the decisiveness of race, the experience of racial passing is heterogeneous and it is operated and constructed in different ways.

2 Traditional and Contemporary Notions of Passing

Many definitions have been elaborated in order to explain the so-called passing, in general, and, more specifically, racial passing. It is possible to notice that the more traditional views tend to connect racial passing to fraud and deception. According to Gunnar Myrdal (1996), for instance, racial passing

means that a Negro becomes a white man, that is, moves from the lower caste to the higher caste. In the American caste order, this can be accomplished only by the deception of the white people with whom the passer comes to associate and by a conspiracy of silence on the part of other Negroes who might know about it (p. 683).

In Myrdal's definition of racial passing, the use of words such as "deception" and "conspiracy" reinforces an idea which links passing to several negative positionings supposedly assumed by black people. According to this idea, passing is a matter of black people cultivating self-hatred, denying their own identities, turning their backs to their own culture, and deluding and misleading white people.

However, more contemporary views relate racial passing to Postmodernist notions of unstable identities and categories, therefore liberating this racial phenomenon from the stigmas of betrayal and deceiving. According to such views, passing is less connected to advantages that are unfairly

and illegally taken by black people than to the possibility of experiencing flexible identities and subjectivities. For instance, Charles Mills (1998) argues that racial passing exposes a situation in which “ontology is not immediately or maybe not even indefinitely clear” (p. 54), that is, accurately defining and fixing what one is becomes utterly impossible, especially at a Postmodern time when not only do we undergo an identity crisis, but also a category crisis itself.

Besides Mills, Anna Caimati Hostert (2007) also supports the idea that racial passing is far from being connected to issues of forging and faking identities. In what she calls a “postmodern appropriation of passing”, Hostert views this phenomenon “as not a mere inversion of the reality and appearance distinction, but, rather, as transcending this either/or choice, the choice of the self as real or the self as appearance” (p. 16). Hostert, therefore, claims that identities do not need to be confined within limited choices. On the contrary, passing is an example that identities can be continually developed considering a spectrum of multiplicity which adds more than excludes: a black individual does not need to choose between presenting himself *either* as black *or* white, but he can perform both identities, free from the restraints of a true identity and a false one, but rather enacting both of them as true selves.

3 Passing as a Heterogeneous Phenomenon

In order to start the analysis of both Johnson’s and Roth’s novels, it is of extreme importance to situate the *Ex-Colored Man* and *Coleman Silk* within the scenario of racial passing. Mills, in an attempt to analyze what he denominates as “racial transgressives”, establishes some problem cases which cover several situations of black people who pass for white people, and, although his cases deal with real individuals, they are also very appropriate when it comes to fictional characters. The *Ex-Colored Man* would be inserted in what Mills (1998) classifies as Problem Case I, which is the “conscious episodic passing for strategic reasons” (p. 55). According to him, this case corresponds to the most famous passing movies and novels, including Johnson’s fiction. For Mills, the individual characterized in this group

leads a bifurcated life, passing for the purpose of taking advantage of differential economic opportunities in a segregated place (...) but continuing to think of himself as black and maintaining contact (cautiously, if necessary) with the black community (1998, p. 55).

Indeed, the *Ex-Colored Man*, despite enacting his whiteness with some nimbleness, is never able to detach himself completely from his blackness, as I will show later on this work.

Regarding *The Human Stain*, the protagonist, Coleman Silk, can be identified with what Mills (1998) considers Problem Case II. The difference from the Ex-Colored Man lies in the fact that here, there is a “conscious permanent passing” (p. 56). According to Mills, individuals who take part in this group want to pass as white, with no plans of returning to their “original” identity and with the aim of full assimilation. He states that

maintaining contact with black relatives, childhood friends, and neighborhood acquaintances will obviously jeopardize this endeavor, so it will be necessary to move away from them, sever all relationships and give one’s children a highly pruned version of the family tree (1998, p. 56).

This is, in fact, a very appropriate definition for the directions Coleman Silk decides to give to his life, especially because one of the strongest occasions of his passing is the decision which established that his family could not participate in the events of his life anymore, and thus, he banishes himself from his relatives.

The Ex-Colored Man, being part of what Mills classifies as Problem Case I, decides to pass for white after numerous fluctuations between assuming his status as a black man who wants to stand for the rights of black people and adopting the identity of a white man. In fact, identity, for this character, was never stable, since he lived the first years of his life not knowing he was classified as black, then he lived as a black man for a period of time, and after some years he decided to adopt a white identity, which may seem a new identity at first, but is a return to the beginning of his life, when he used to believe he was a white boy.

During the first years of his life, the Ex-Colored Man was never treated as a black boy and never suffered prejudice. On the contrary, once he even bothered his colored classmates at school and called them “niggers” (Johnson, 1989, p. 6). However, he was forced to assume a new identity when he was told that he was not white, since his mother was a black woman. Here, it is interesting to notice that, in the United States, ancestry plays a bigger role than appearance when it comes to define one’s race, because if it were for his appearance only, the Ex-Colored Man would probably live his entire life as a white man. Indeed, the easiness in which he passes for white was already visible in his early years, mostly because of the “ivory whiteness of my [his] skin, (...) the softness and glossiness of my [his] dark hair that fell in waves ...” (Johnson, 1989, p. 6). Also, when his white classmates were told he was not white, the astonishment among them was clear: “Oh, you’re a nigger too” (Johnson, 1989, p. 6). Therefore, the Ex-Colored Man would hardly be treated as a black

boy, if it were not for him and for people around him *being told* that he is not white.

After this moment of revelation and before he decides to pass for white, the Ex-Colored Man acquires a new vision of the situation of black people in the United States. He learns that black people are situated in the world within a condition that is different from everybody else, and that a black man

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 (Johnson, 1989, p. 7).

This acquaintance with the situation of black people contributes to the Ex-Colored Man's decision of establishing his identity as a colored person with honor and dignity, before choosing, later on the novel, to pass for white. Therefore, throughout the novel, he goes from the impersonation of a white identity, moving to the black one, and going back to his condition as a white man.

Different from the Ex-Colored Man, Coleman Silk does not experience so many fluctuations during his life and he does not go back and forth between two different identities as the Ex-Colored Man does. Silk, since his early years, always knew that he belonged to a black family, and although he was aware that he was privileged for being "as light skinned as a Negro could get" (Roth, 2000, p. 103), he could also grasp the prejudice black people, including his father, suffered. After his decision of passing for white – which will be explored in details later on – Silk starts to enact his white identity with incredible focus and determination, trying to ignore everything that could not contribute to his aim of passing for white. Regarding Silk's determination to follow what he had previously established (without embracing so many fluctuations as the Ex-Colored Man), the narrator mentions that

Coleman *thought*, and the same way that he thought in school or in a race: rule everything else out, let nothing else in, and immerse yourself in the thing, the subject, the competition, the exam – whatever's to be mastered, become that thing (Roth, 2000, p. 100).

It is clear, then, that different from the Ex-Colored Man, who would go through several moments of hesitation throughout the novel, Silk firmly anchors himself in his obstinacy in order not to lose his focus.

One important reason for Silk's being so determined regarding the race question throughout his

life may be related to the fact that he does not feel stronger connections to the black community. For instance, during the years that Silk lived his life as a black man, before passing, he felt a certain nullity in relation to the fact that he was a black boy, that is, he did not express pride for being black and did not express a desire to stand for the black community, like the Ex-Colored Man did in his years before the passing. Perhaps this apathy that Silk felt regarding the racial question was related to certain disconnectedness he felt towards almost everything in his life, since concentration and focus on his personal and individual goals were always his priorities, as his mother tells him:

You were seriously disinclined even to take the breast. Yes, you were. Now I see why. Even that might delay your escape. There was always something about our family, and I don't mean color – there was something about us that impeded you. You think like a prisoner. You do, Coleman Brutus. You're white as snow and you think like a slave (Roth, 2000, p. 139).

Therefore, as his mother believes, maybe Silk wanted to avoid bonds with people and ideas fearing that they would prevent him from achieving his major goals in life: freedom and individualism, different from the Ex-Colored Man, who, despite greatly valuing his individuality, also cherished his relationships with his family and friends, such as Red Head and Shiny, and with the black culture.

In fact, the Ex-Colored Man experiences a period of high excitement and motivation towards the racial question. He starts reading books written by colored authors or with racial themes and is soon excited to exercise his blackness and to stand in the world as an outstanding and proud black man. This pride can be seen, for instance, on the day of his graduation from grammar school, when he is amazed by the speech made by his black friend and shares his enthusiasm. On this occasion, the Ex-Colored Man states:

I felt leap within me pride that I was colored; and I began to form wild dreams of bringing glory and honor to the Negro race. For days I could talk of nothing else with my mother except my ambitions to be a great man, a great colored man, to reflect credit on the race and gain fame for myself (Johnson, 1989, p. 14).

It is clear that, although the Ex-Colored Man, at that point, was already thinking about his own individual success and personal fame, he really started to care about the other colored people from the moment he knew he was black on. He completes his enthusiastic lines saying that “it was not until years after that I formulated a definite and feasible plan for realizing my dreams” (Johnson, 1989, p. 14). Readers are informed, later on the book, that his plan, which was to pass for white, privileged his individualism over his sense of racial community and solidarity, since he learns that

the most suitable, or maybe the least sacrificing way, for him to accomplish his desires is to live as a white man.

After experiencing the identity of both a white and a black individual, the Ex-Colored Man finally decides to indefinitely pass for white. The reasons for his decision have often been mistaken by critics, who, as Kathleen Pfeiffer (2002) shows, view passing as

instances of racial self-hatred or disloyalty. Both are predicated, so the argument goes, on renouncing blackness – an “authentic” identity – in favor of whiteness, an “opportunistic” one (p. 403).

However, through a careful analysis of the reasons why the Ex-Colored Man decides to pass for white, it is possible to see that the scenario is not as clear-cut and reductionist as it may seem.

When the protagonist meets a millionaire, after having several unsuccessful jobs and starts working for him as a private piano player, his life is on the verge of changing drastically. By playing at sophisticated parties, the Ex-Colored Man gets familiar with a world of white and rich people and starts to be part of upward social circles. During this time, the millionaire invites the Ex-Colored Man to go to Europe with him, and this can be seen as a turning point in the character's life. When in Europe, he gets in contact with a different culture which is basically a white one, but at the same time, he gets tired of that life and desperately wants to go back to work, to play ragtime, which is an African music style and to work on slave songs. His enthusiasm is not diminished even by the millionaire, who highly discourages him to go back to the United States, because, according to him, the Ex-Colored Man is a white man “by blood, by appearance, by education, and by tastes” (Johnson, 1989, p. 40) and so he should enjoy this opportunity and escape from the struggles in which the black people were involved.

Having his decision in mind, the Ex-Colored Man goes back to the south of the United States and enters in a state of high excitement and inspiration. He wants to know as much information about black people and their culture as he can, so that he can develop a good musical work. It is important to mention, however, that this movement towards the black community was not necessarily guided by a sense of struggle and solidarity, since the protagonist himself admits that when analyzing his motives, he concludes that they

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, which was leading me back to the United States? (Johnson, 1989, p. 41).

Therefore, one cannot ignore the important fact that the Ex-Colored Man was strongly motivated by his individualism.

Individualism also had a crucial role in the Ex-Colored Man's decision of passing for white. There is, in the novel, a specific episode, in which he sees a black man being lynched and burned by white men, and this scene triggers in him the desire to live in better conditions than the black people were supposed to. Filled with humiliation and shame, he decides that he will not submit himself to that savagery, and will forsake his race in order to escape from the horrendous treatment to which black people were subjugated. He states:

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; that it was not necessary for me to go about with a label of inferiority pasted across my forehead (Johnson, 1989, p. 54).

Therefore, if the Ex-Colored Man was once willing to be part of the black community, now he understands what it means to be a black man, and having the opportunity, he decides to put himself in first place, in order to have a dignified life.

Regarding Coleman Silk, his process of passing happens with some differences from the Ex-Colored Man. First of all, in the first time that he passes for white, it is because of someone else's idea, and he does not present any resistance to it. The Ex-Colored Man, on the other hand, had the same opportunity – when the millionaire suggested that he could easily pass for white – but at that point, he rejected it, since he was engaged in projects related to black culture and black music. When Doc Chizner, the boxing coach, tells Silk not to tell the Pitt coach that he was black, he becomes a little surprised, but he does not object to this idea. In fact, if one considers Silk's characteristics, one can infer that Doc was providing him with everything he wanted: “You're neither one thing or the other. You're Silky Silk. That's enough. That's the deal” (Roth, 2000, p. 98). To be only Silk, free from classifications and restrictions, was one of the major objectives in his life, and if he had to pretend he was one of Doc's Jewish boys in order to achieve that, he would do so.

After this first episode, Silk decides to pass for white permanently. Like in the case of the Ex-Colored Man, his reasons for doing so should be carefully examined to avoid misconceptions and misjudgments. If what triggers the Ex-Colored Man's passing is the episode in which he sees a black man being lynched and burned, in the case of Silk, his passing is triggered by his being called a nigger, for the first time, at Howard University. Although Silk is aware of the situation of black

people in the United States, and he knows that his father suffered from prejudice, he did not have a full dimension of the problem before. However, when someone calls him a nigger and refuses to give him a hot dog that he wanted to buy, he opens his eyes and he is able to have a more accurate overview of the condition of black people.

Also, he realizes that the fact that he is black would always be superimposed to the fact that he is Coleman Silk, and to learn this is devastating for him, since “he was Coleman, the greatest of the great *pioneers of the I*” (Roth, 2000, p. 108). As a “pioneer of the I” and a pioneer of the strength of the individual over community, Silk decides to be free from “the impositions. The humiliations. The obstructions. The wound and the pain and the posturing and the shame” (Roth, 2000, p. 109) by ignoring racial categories to the extent he could.

Therefore, it is possible to notice that both the Ex-Colored Man and Coleman Silk decide to pass for white because they cannot endure the restrictions that race imposes upon them anymore. Both of them are tired of humiliation and shame and want to be successful and free as themselves, not as just common individuals inserted in a prescribed category that does not offer mobility and new perspectives. Thus, although the characters conduct their lives differently from each another and have dissimilar attitudes regarding their race, their decision of passing is grounded on the same principles: those of freedom and individualism. However, then again, the characters deal with their lives of passing individuals in different manners, showing, one more time, that the experience of racial passing is heterogeneous.

The most considerable differences in the passing of the two characters are related to the determination with which they accomplish what they had decided to. As it was previously mentioned, Silk’s determination prevents him from frequently looking back to what he left behind and makes him get married to a white woman and have four white children who never knew anything about his secret. Besides, he teaches at a university as a white professor and is even accused of racism against two black students, and such accusation is pretty much improbable of happening with black people. Thus, his concentration and determination really make his passing a convincing one.

Another sign of his determination lies in the relationship he has with his family. In order to be above all suspicion, he chooses to tell everyone that his parents are dead and to break with all the possible bonds he previously had with his family. When he lets his mother know about his decision, he sees how devastating that was for her, but even so, he remains attached to his previous plans

and does not change his mind. As the narrator describes,

It was not a moment to think thoughts other than the thoughts he'd come armed with (...) It was a moment to deepen his focus on what he was there to achieve (Roth, 2000, p. 138).

And so he does throughout his entire life, without expressing major signs of regret or grief.

On the other hand, the Ex-Colored Man, despite keeping himself distant from the black community, never despises his family. It is true that his mother was already dead when he decides to pass, but most probably he would not ignore her the way Silk did, because his affection for her has always been enormous, and in several episodes of the novel it is possible to see how strong his admiration for her was. For instance, when he is about to separate himself from his millionaire friend, he says that the person who was his best friend in life and who "exerted the greatest influence ever brought to my [his] life" (Johnson, 1989, p. 42) was his mother. Besides, at the very end of the novel he states the following: "I am possessed by a strange longing for my mother's people" (Johnson, 1989, p. 54). Thus, even if he is not in contact with his ancestors frequently, he respects and values them.

Furthermore, a very strong aspect of the passing of the Ex-Colored Man that is not shared by Coleman Silk is the hesitation and the moments of regret. At the end of the novel, we see the Ex-Colored Man, at times, regretting the fact that he wasted the opportunity of being a black man who would make his community proud of him, and who would struggle for their causes. He states:

I am an ordinarily successful white man who has made a little money. They are men who are making history and a race. I, too, might have taken part in a work so glorious (...) I have chosen the lesser part (...) I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage (Johnson, 1989, p. 60).

By saying this, the Ex-Colored Man implies that although passing once seemed a good way for him to achieve his goals, maybe he could have chosen a path that was less grounded on individuality. Therefore, the character is uneasy with the white race, but he was also uneasy with the black one, previously. According to Samira Kawash (2006),

The Ex-Colored Man's lack of a stable or singular race identity and his failure to embody fully either race successfully, suggests the ontological impossibility that uneasily inhabits the structure of racial identity (p. 72).

That is, he can say that he is white, or black, but, in fact, he is not, and will never be any of these, entirely.

4 Final Considerations

It is clear that the Ex-Colored Man and Silk are in search of freedom from categories and both of them are able to challenge and to defy conceptualizations of race. As Hostert states (2007),

passing is a refusal to be confined within historically limiting structures of existence. But just as passing is a refusal of the given, it is also an opportunity for renewal and growing (p. 15).

Therefore, the passing of these characters should not be viewed through the perspective of selfishness and betrayal to the race, but rather as a possibility of freedom from categories that, most of the times, are arbitrary and condemn an individual to live in a permanent condition for the rest of his life, without offering possibilities of change and mobility.

In conclusion, the present work showed that the experience of racial passing, despite being grounded on the same principles, is heterogeneous and does not happen following the same models to all individuals. The works analyzed here offer good examples of how the experience of racial passing can be triggered by different events, and how the construction of the characters make them deal with it in different ways: some who are more determined and less hesitating, like Coleman Silk, and others who are always looking back to the past and wondering if they made the right decision, like the Ex-Colored Man.

As a final conclusion and reflection, it is interesting to consider that the heterogeneity of these two characters' experiences may have been caused by the different times in which the stories take place: the Ex-Colored Man is part of a tradition of classic passing novels, at a time when passing was related to betrayal to the black race and it did not have a good reputation. Therefore, James Weldon Johnson might have introduced these aspects of regret and guilt in the character, as a way to "save" the Ex-Colored Man from accusations of betrayal and fraud. On the other hand, since Philip Roth wrote his novel at the end of the 20th century, he might have felt free from these pressures of constructing a character that needed to prove that he was not a fraud and he was not deceiving anyone. According to Matthew Wilson (2006), the great differential that Roth presents is a character that "does not reproduce a preferred racial fiction, that helps maintain the color line" (p. 142). Therefore, Roth himself may have felt free from pre-established categories and ended up

constructing a character that defied racial categories and did not have to feel guilty about it, different from the classic passing fictions.

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