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African American Review, Volume 50, Number 2, Summer 2017, pp. 185-201
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/afa.2017.0021>



AFRICAN AMERICAN REVIEW

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Jim Crow's Disabilities: Racial Injury, Immobility, and the "Terrible Handicap" in the Literature of James Weldon Johnson

Recasting Race and Disability

While participating in the annual Quiz Club Contest in English Composition and Oratory held during commencement week at Atlanta University, James Weldon Johnson delivered a winning oration in May 1892 that illustrates the ways blackness became intimately tethered to disability in the Jim Crow era. His speech, "The Best Methods of Removing the Disabilities of Caste from the Negro," offered a measured response to the racist rhetoric of white supremacists, who held that African Americans were inherently disabled, who claimed that their innate depravity made them unfit for full citizenship, and who argued that they would simply disappear from existence post-emancipation.¹ These beliefs about racial degeneracy and extinction provoked Johnson's political ire, and he wanted nothing more than to put such nonsense to rest. With this objective in mind, he told his audience that the roots of disability lay not in claims of racial contamination but rather in the racist violence and injuriousness of the American caste system that was intended "to crush out of [the Negro] every semblance of manhood, intelligence and virtue" and "to inscribe in his very nature every form of vice, superstition and immorality" (425).

Transitioning from India's caste system and its emphasis on religion and profession to the European caste system and its emphasis on rank and pedigree, Johnson outlined an alternative form of caste in the United States by highlighting its crude racial hierarchy. He writes that "caste in America is the distinction between two great races, the white and the black. The whites make this distinction. It is not mutual" (423). Here, caste is synonymous with race in the U. S. to such an extent that it burdens race with a wide range of other signifiers.² What is radical about Johnson's speech is the manner in which he makes race and disability into two mutually constitutive categories. His speech highlights how disability was racialized during Jim Crow.

In his articulation of the "disabilities of caste," where caste turns into race and where race is marked by skin color, phenotype, and blood, Johnson cited several examples of subordination in the law as his most compelling evidence. In particular, he examined Jim Crow through the lens of disability. As he puts it:

The disabilities of caste under which the Negro labors are many, especially in the South. He is not allowed in hotels, restaurants, or any other such public place, however wealthy he may be. He is compelled to ride in a dirty, smoky railroad car, however refined and cultured. He does not get justice in the courts; and for every slight offense the fullest extent of the law is meted out to him. He is debarred from many of the trades and professions on account of his race. In fact he is subjected to every form of humiliation and oppression which humanity and a republican form of government will allow. (423)

This litany of "disabilities"—the denial of access to particular public spaces, the foul and shoddy conditions of the segregated train car, the disproportionate

administration of punishment, the lack of opportunities for upward social mobility, and the shameful subjection to public humiliation and oppression—all served the ultimate purpose of stigmatizing African Americans and restricting their movement, of thrusting them into a system that conspired to besmirch both their reputation and their bodies. The law's proclivity to disable functioned as another way to discipline and control black bodies that it deemed deviant and unruly.

Shifting from law and punishment to humiliation and oppression, Johnson offers an expansive understanding of disability, one that aligns with historical and theoretical definitions of the term. *Disability* is defined as a “physical or mental condition that limits a person’s movements, senses, or activities”; and as an “[i]ncapacity in the eye of the law, or created by the law; a restriction framed to prevent any person or class of persons from sharing in duties or privileges which would otherwise be open to them” (*OED*). The word refers to both a condition and a system—to something that restricts the movements, functions, and activities of a person and to something that creates a restriction.³ Disability is often the sequela of a disease, deformity, illness, injury, or a legal restriction and disqualification. The terms in this lexicon are not the same, but they are related. These various meanings attest to the extraordinary heterogeneity of disability, capable of being used by both supporters and opponents of racialism and ableism.

The capaciousness of the term disability and its intertwined history with race are evident when we consider the era of Jim Crow. As disability scholars have pointed out, race and disability share an intimate genealogy in America, particularly during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell identify a convergence between race and disability within the ascendancy of eugenics, while Susan M. Schweik locates an affinity between the two within municipal laws that targeted the “unsightly beggar” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (2).⁴ Snyder and Mitchell argue that eugenics “exhibited racist components, and racist ideologies can tell us something about the cultural construction of disability” (101). “It is not coincidental,” they claim, “that the policies that hemmed in racialized groups in Europe and the United States paralleled legislation promoted by eugenicists against people with disabilities. Legalized discrimination, which characterizes the existence of a racist regime, finds its correlatives in the policies [such as marriage restriction laws, sterilization, institutionalization, and segregation] that reflect eugenics discourses on disability” (127). In her study of unsightly-beggar ordinances, widely known as American “ugly laws,” Schweik examines the disability-based segregation imposed by these ordinances as closely intertwined with race-based segregation in the U. S. (9). The ugly laws typically stated that “[a]ny person who is diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way deformed, so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object, or an improper person . . . shall not therein or thereon expose himself to public view” (Chicago City Code 1881 qtd. in Schweik 1-2). They aimed to segregate the disabled from public view, while Jim Crow laws aimed to segregate black people from white people. Schweik argues, “The ugly laws are part of the story of segregation and of profiling in the United States, part of the body of laws that specified who could be where, who would be isolated and excluded, who had to be watched, whose comfort mattered. . . . [t]he two kinds of segregation were not so much comparable as inseparable” (184, 185). Mitchell, Snyder, and Schweik provide a disability perspective for understanding Johnson’s parallels between disability and race in Jim Crow.⁵ Their historical approaches spotlight the combination of corporeal, cultural, and social meanings within the word *disability* and signal the importance of employing what Tobin Siebers calls a “theory of complex embodiment,” one that “values disability as a form of human variation” and “views the economy between social representations and the body not as unidirectional as in the social model, or non-existent as in the medical model, but as reciprocal” (25).

This theoretical approach puts blackness and disability into productive conversation through analogy. When examining two categories or identities, one must inevitably confront the issue of analogy, which can create a false separation and opposition between two categories or groups, obscuring the importance of one in favor of another. Analogy can be dangerous, particularly when discussing the intersections of race and disability. Anna Mollow argues that “if race and disability are conceived of as discrete categories to be compared, contrasted, or arranged in order of priority, it becomes impossible to think through complex intersections of racism and ableism in the lives of disabled people of color” (69). While I agree with Mollow, I recognize that analogy can also be beneficial, bridging a divide and forging a connection between distinct things; and, like metaphor, analogy so infuses our language that it can be nearly impossible to avoid. Our aim, then, suggests Ellen Samuels, should not be to “attempt to escape from analogy,” but rather to “seek to employ it more critically than in the past” (236). Heeding these suggestions, I carefully and critically employ analogy and metaphor in this essay, avoiding essentialist claims and resisting the impulse to flatten out the various intersections of blackness and disability in Johnson’s work.

Emphasizing how disability was not innate to but rather imposed on African Americans during Jim Crow, Johnson exposes not only the capaciousness of disability but also the reciprocity between social representation and the body. At times, Johnson’s use of disability co-articulates terms typically employed when referring to Jim Crow, such as racial exclusion, segregation, and subordination. Yet Johnson also uses disability in a way that diverges from these terms, deploying it to emphasize how Jim Crow affects the body by focusing on racial stigmatization, immobilization, and bodily injury and deformation.

Focusing on both uses of disability in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) and *Along This Way* (1933), I examine how Johnson exposes disability as an integral, not incidental, element of the Jim Crow regime. Demonstrating that Jim Crow was more than a social system that separated black people from white people, I argue that Jim Crow was designed to disable black American bodies—stigmatizing African Americans at large, restricting their geographical mobility and movement in public spaces, inflicting physical and psychological wounds, and disciplining their bodies as a form of control and regulation. We must understand how disability functioned as a conduit for racial oppression during Jim Crow for several reasons: it calls attention to how social and legal restrictions inflicted physical and psychological injuries; it shows how Jim Crow produced disability via the enforced immobility of segregation and the bodily deformation and psychological trauma of lynching; and it challenges our understanding of U. S. citizenship and blackness, marking citizenship as a positional good (one that can be enjoyed more fully by some when it is denied to others) while highlighting the ingenuity of black resistance that enabled African Americans to survive despite the onslaught of disabilities imposed by Jim Crow.

Even the term *Jim Crow* has disability embedded in its etymology. “Jim Crow” became part of the American lexicon as a result of the minstrel performances of Thomas “Daddy” Rice, a white man who wore blackface and who based his “Jump Jim Crow” act on a routine, Leon F. Litwack explains, “he had seen performed in 1828 by an elderly and crippled Louisville stableman belonging to a Mr. Crow” (xiv).⁶ Although Litwack concedes it is not clear “how a dance created by a black stableman and imitated by a white man for the amusement of white audiences became synonymous with a system designed by whites to segregate the races” (xiv), it is clear, as I demonstrate in this article, that Jim Crow distorted the representation of black bodies through stigmatization, exclusion, and violence and that the rhetoric and practice of disability were a crucial part of that process.

While some black writers refrained from portraying the black body and mind as impaired by slavery and Jim Crow primarily to refute the white supremacist argument that blacks are innately defective, Johnson was among several important black writers for whom a more rigorous understanding of how blackness intersects with disability was considered a matter of racial and social justice.⁷ Rather than disassociating race from disability, Johnson engaged in a critical exploration of the intersections of blackness and disability to enhance our knowledge of citizenship and the racialized embodiment of African Americans. Ultimately, he stressed that while the black body is not inherently disabled, the American institutions of segregation, lynching, and corporal punishment are disabling. “In emphasizing not only the accelerated mobility but also the handicapping circumstances,” Marlon B. Ross argues, “new-century activists [like Johnson] hoped to reconceptualize radically the worth, status, and iconography of the race” by fostering attention to the “race’s rapid progress despite the severe handicap posed by segregation, anti-black violence, disenfranchisement, unequal economic opportunity, and other barriers erected by the Jim Crow regime” (22).

Alongside scholars in African American studies and disability studies who have expanded our knowledge of Jim Crow, I illustrate how disablement was discreetly one of Jim Crow’s most effective tools of racial injury by closely examining Johnson’s fiction and nonfiction.⁸ First, I consider Johnson’s personal encounters with the system of Jim Crow—focusing on an incident in which Johnson posited the Jim Crow rail car as the locus of disability and another in which the National Guard nearly beat him to death and left him with physical and psychological injuries. Second, I analyze how disability and stigma function in Johnson’s only novel, paying close attention to the ex-colored man’s witnessing of a lynching and its connection to other instances of disability and racial injury. Given how influential Johnson’s own Jim Crow experiences were to his understanding of the relationship between race and disability, I begin with his story.

Racial Stigma, Immobility, and Injury in *Along This Way*

Traveling from New York to Jacksonville, Florida in 1896, Johnson endured what he described as one of his most “ridiculous” encounters with Jim Crow’s legal disability, an “injustice” so profound that only the realization of its “absurdity” quelled Johnson’s bitterness (*Along This Way* 86). Part of what made his experience so absurd was the sheer capriciousness of late nineteenth-century segregation laws. Jim Crow laws varied from state to state, and they compromised the movement of blacks in America (often stigmatizing them as contagious and isolating them in public spaces) while extending whites’ freedom of mobility and safeguarding their immunity. Depending on the segregation laws that applied during interstate travel, blacks were often shuttled from one train car to another at a moment’s notice.

Johnson’s path to Florida entailed traveling by steamer from New York to Charleston, South Carolina, and then by rail from Charleston to Jacksonville, which meant passing through the state of Georgia along the way. Johnson’s journey from North to South demanded both familiarity and compliance with various state segregation laws. His life, liberty, and health depended on it. As Johnson wrote, “South Carolina had not yet enacted its separate car law,” so he could ride comfortably in the first-class car for which he paid. But “it was against the law in Georgia for white and colored people to ride in the same railroad car,” and after crossing the Georgia state line, the conductor asked Johnson to move into the Jim Crow car. Because outright recalcitrance, he knew, would lead to his arrest and imprisonment, Johnson

reluctantly agreed to switch train cars—but not before taking “a look at the car designated for [him]” (*Along This Way* 86).

What Johnson discovered after inspecting the other car reveals the significant role of stigma and disability in the history of Jim Crow. Johnson’s coerced relocation exposes two noteworthy aspects of the Jim Crow system. First, his relocation shows that the separate-but-equal doctrine of racial segregation was neither wholly separate nor equal: the cars designated for blacks were in worse shape than the cars designated for whites; and as Justice Marshall Harlan argued in his dissent from *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the landmark 1896 U. S. Supreme Court case that upheld the constitutionality of racial segregation, segregation law was intended primarily to impede the mobility of blacks, not the mobility of whites.⁹ Second, Johnson’s forced relocation crucially reveals that race was not the sole determining factor when segregating whites and blacks into separate train cars. Disability was considered too.

Upon inspection of the “colored” car, Johnson immediately noticed its poor conditions and paltry accommodations—familiar features of the Jim Crow car that aimed to stigmatize black people. Johnson wrote, “It was the usual ‘Jim Crow’ arrangement: one-half of a baggage coach, unkempt, unclean, and ill smelling, with one toilet for both sexes” (*Along This Way* 86). With less space, more dirt, foul smells, and one toilet, the “colored” car paled in comparison with the “white” first-class car, and the conditions of the “colored” car paralleled those Johnson described in his 1892 speech regarding the “disabilities of caste,” which indicated the particular ways that de jure segregation immobilized and stigmatized blacks in America. The conditions of the Jim Crow car also foreshadowed what the Supreme Court would eventually acknowledge in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Justice Henry Billings Brown, delivering the majority opinion, claimed that the Thirteenth Amendment was intended to abolish slavery and involuntary servitude and not “to protect the colored race from certain laws which had been enacted in the Southern states, imposing upon the colored race onerous disabilities and burdens, and curtailing their rights in the pursuit of life, liberty, and property to such an extent that their freedom was of little value.” The word that effectively fueled the Jim Crow imagination was “disabilities,” and Johnson’s early encounter with racism on the segregated train reveals the role of disability within the strange social milieu of Jim Crow. By limiting black mobility and denying African Americans the right to move freely within white-designated spaces, segregation laws effectively diagnosed casual contact and intimacy with blacks as a contagious affair, stirred fears of racial contamination, and then capitalized on that fear to justify the immobilization and quarantine of black citizens as compulsory measures for the protection of the healthy body politic. Johnson’s Jim Crow experience in Georgia was no exception to this rule.

Johnson’s relocation also exposed how under Jim Crow laws the “colored” car functioned as the locus of disability. During his inspection of the Jim Crow car, Johnson observed the presence of two white men—one of whom was disabled. The sight of white men in a Jim Crow car was not especially unusual. “It was,” wrote Johnson, “the custom for white men to go into that car whenever they felt like doing things that would not be allowed in the ‘white’ car. They went there to smoke, to drink, and often to gamble. At times, the object was to pick an acquaintance with some likely-looking Negro girl” (*Along This Way* 87). The way Johnson tells it, the Jim Crow car was a breeding ground for white male debauchery—a loathsome, sometimes lascivious, space where white men displayed wanton and unscrupulous behavior and subjected black passengers, particularly black women, to potential harm and injury. “If white men frequented the car for the purpose of soliciting black women for sex,” historian Blair L. M. Kelley argues, “the racial and sexual mores of the day meant that black women risked their safety when resisting or rejecting such advances” (39).

Although it was customary for white men to occupy the Jim Crow car, Johnson did not miss this opportunity to challenge the reasoning of racial segregation. Before switching train cars as the conductor requested, Johnson demanded legal parity, calling on the conductor to enforce the doctrine of separate but equal for all railroad passengers—whites as well as blacks. He informed the conductor that he could not ride in the “colored” car because there were white passengers located in that car. Riding with white passengers in the “colored” car, Johnson suggested, would put him in violation of the law just as much as riding with white passengers in the “white” car. As a result, Johnson insisted that the law be applied equally.

The conductor’s response to Johnson’s complaint as well as his explanation for why the two white passengers were placed in the “colored” car spotlight the complicated relationship between race and disability during Jim Crow. The conductor explained to Johnson that the “two men were a deputy sheriff and a dangerously insane man, who was being taken to the asylum.” Consequently, the conductor exclaimed, “I can’t bring that crazy man into the ‘white’ car” (*Along This Way* 87). The principal reason these two white men are located in the “colored” train car was because one of them is mentally disabled—or, as the conductor put it, “insane” and “crazy.” In the surveilled and policed environment of the Jim Crow car, the white man’s mental disability motivated the conductor to place him in the “colored” car, not the “white” car.

Accordingly, Jim Crow was as much concerned with the segregation of disability as it was with the segregation of race. Jim Crow cars exemplify what Snyder and Mitchell call the “cultural locations of disability” (1) or what Michael Davidson refers to as the “sites” of disability (28)—the spaces in which disability is defined and produced. That Johnson was forced to leave the “white” first-class car and relocate to the “colored” train car only to find it occupied by an “insane” white man reveals how Jim Crow authorized, authored, and enforced segregation based on both race and disability. The presence of the “insane” white man in the Jim Crow train car encodes disability with race (especially blackness) in such a manner that both blackness and disability figured as threats to the health of the white citizenry and had to be removed and excluded from the “white” car. Thus Jim Crow grouped African Americans and people with disabilities together and isolated them in the “colored” car to constitute whiteness as a normative category. Within the framework of segregation laws, blackness and disability work together to extend Mitchell and Snyder’s concept of “*narrative prosthesis*,” a phrase they coined to indicate how “disability has been used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives [forms of writing whose meanings are open-ended, elastic, and multiple] lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight” and, more generally, how a “discursive dependency upon disability” informs a story (49, 47). Jim Crow laws can be described as a legal narrative prosthesis, a strategic reliance on disability and blackness to stage and narrate whiteness as normal and able-bodied.

This observation becomes clearer once we recognize the conductor’s refusal to identify the race of the mentally disabled man in the Jim Crow car. Even though Johnson called attention to the man’s whiteness, the conductor identified him only by his disability and sex (as an “insane man” and a “crazy man”). The disabled white man’s race is virtually erased in the conductor’s response to Johnson, a move that disassociates disability from the white race and, therefore, reinforces the privilege, immunity, and able-bodiedness of whiteness. A similar move occurred when the conductor initially decided not to seat the disabled white man in the “white” train car.

Unmoved by the conductor’s response, Johnson, fortunately, remained firm, insisting that the conductor fulfill his legal obligations and offering him an ultimatum. “Maybe you can’t [move the two white men],” Johnson stated, “but if I’ve got to break this law I prefer breaking it in the first-class car” (*Along This Way* 87). It is difficult to pinpoint precisely what led the conductor to move the disabled white

man and his warden. Did Johnson persuade the conductor by conveying his point in language that the conductor could understand—the language of legal parity? Could the conductor sense implicit pressure from the white passengers, who smiled and nodded in approval after he removed Johnson from the first-class car but did not initially utter explicit threats toward Johnson or wage any public protest against his presence? Either way, both Johnson and the conductor came to an agreement: “The conductor was, after all, a reasonable fellow; and he decided to stand squarely by the law, and bring the two white men into the ‘white’ car” (87). The white passengers immediately regretted this switch. “The first thing the insane man did after sitting down,” wrote Johnson, “was to thrust his manacled hands through the glass of the window, cutting himself horribly” and then he proceeded to yell and curse. Although the passengers protested the change and were upset that they were subjected to the “ravings” of the “maniac,” both Johnson and the conductor “stood squarely by the law” (87). On this occasion, Johnson was able to join forces with the conductor, who was essentially acting on behalf of the state, in holding the law up to its own subpar standard.

In his encounter with the National Guard, Johnson would not be nearly as fortunate. While Johnson’s experience on the train exhibited his racial exceptionalism—his astute knowledge of segregation laws as well as his ability to challenge and subvert them—his violent encounter with the National Guard confirmed the pervasiveness of disability during Jim Crow. In the case of Johnson, disability meant not only legal restraint but also physical and psychological trauma. His conflict with the militia occurred at Riverside Park in Jacksonville, Florida, where he agreed to meet a young, fair-complexioned female journalist, who had solicited Johnson’s advice for an article she was writing about the Great Fire of 1901 and its effects on the black community. The choice of this public location turned out to be a critical misstep, for a cadre of onlookers assumed that Johnson was escorting a white woman into the park and reported the activity to the authorities, leading to the dispatch of national troops. Charged with the task of protecting a white woman from a black man, the militiamen, armed with combat weapons, tracked down Johnson and attacked him near a barbed-wire fence. Johnson recalled:

Just across the fence in the little clearing were eight or ten militiamen in khaki with rifles and bayonets. . . . They surge round me. They seize me. They tear my clothes and bruise my body; all the while calling to their comrades, “Come on, we’ve got ’im! Come on, we’ve got ’im!” And from all directions these comrades rush, shouting, “Kill the damned nigger! Kill the black son of a bitch!” (*Along This Way* 167)

This assault has all the essential elements of a potential lynching: The troops shout death threats. They bear rifles and bayonets in close proximity to a barbed-wire fence with trees looming just behind the clearing. They mercilessly beat Johnson. They yell sounds of terror, and at the center of this maelstrom was Johnson, a black man who was presumed guilty of being in the park with a white woman and who feared this attack would cause his imminent death. Indeed, the brutality was so severe that Johnson, who was writing about this incident in his memoir decades after it occurred, could not resist shifting from past to present tense when describing the violence he endured. The only way Johnson could convey accurately the impact of his assault was by transforming the past into present, reliving blow-by-blow how the military “surge,” “seize,” “tear,” “bruise,” and “rush” his body. His active verbs animate the scene and signify how the trauma of his near-death experience endures in his mind several decades later. As Jacqueline Goldsby argues, “until this moment—and only with this moment—*Along This Way* had been narrated in the past tense.” Johnson’s abrupt shift in tense signals that he could not “find the language to

partition off the incident as a mere past event while preserving its transformative effect” (Goldsby 171).

Although Johnson survived his assault, he did not survive it unscathed; along with physical injuries, Johnson suffered intense psychological trauma. After he revealed that his female companion was not white and the National Guard released him from custody, he remained haunted by his racial nightmare:

For weeks and months the episode with all of its implications preyed on my mind and disturbed me in my sleep. I would wake often in the night-time, after living through again those few frightful seconds, exhausted by the nightmare of a struggle with a band of murderous, bloodthirsty men in khaki. . . . It was not until twenty years after, through work I was then engaged in, that I was able to liberate myself completely from this horror complex. (*Along This Way* 170)

That Johnson paralleled his physical attack with that of his psychological one demonstrates how racial violence affected his mind just as much as his body. Not unlike his shifting from past to present tense to describe his physical assault, here Johnson collapses time when describing his mental state. While he initially claims that the assault “preyed” upon his mind for “weeks and months,” it is clear that the psychological trauma lasted much longer, for he ultimately admits that it would take two decades and his antilynching work with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) before he could feel truly free. Johnson’s various shifts in time expose the disorienting and debilitating power of antiblack violence: it made an assault by “a band of murderous, bloodthirsty men” feel like a “few frightful seconds”; it made “weeks” of terrifying nightmares indistinguishable from “months”; and it took “twenty years” to recover fully from what Johnson describes as a “horror complex.”

Despite the significance of this near-death experience to Johnson’s life and writing, he did not publicly disclose details of the encounter for thirty years. In the immediate aftermath of the assault, he told only his brother Rosamond; he refused to tell his parents or anyone else in his family (*Along This Way* 169-70). According to Goldsby, the first person to divulge Johnson’s secret to the public was W. E. B. Du Bois. Speaking in 1931 at a dinner for Johnson’s resignation from the NAACP, Du Bois surprised the audience with shocking news about Johnson’s incident: “Mr. Johnson . . . was once nearly lynched in Florida, and quite naturally lynching to him, despite all obvious excuses and explanations and mitigating circumstances, can never be less than a terrible real” (qtd. in Goldsby 166). Du Bois likely shared this story to show that Johnson’s fifteen-year commitment to the NAACP antilynching campaign was personal as well as political. Yet Johnson’s intentional silence about the assault—even as he was fighting to protect others from experiencing such violence—calls attention to his own need to suppress this painful experience. Goldsby argues that “the assault steeled Johnson to accept lynching as his ‘terrible real,’ a force which clarified the ways in which literal, violent enactments of racial power demarcated the boundaries between experience (‘Life’) and its aesthetic expressions (the things ‘enjoyed’ from Life)” (166). The distinction Goldsby makes between life and the things enjoyed from it mirrors the correlation between blackness and whiteness that was a central part of Jim Crow—like the difference between survival and freedom, between duty and rights, and between legal and social disability and freedom from it. In this regard, the “terrible real” of lynching—its ability to harm, disfigure, and kill—demarcates the violence of Jim Crow’s varied forms of oppression. This brand of violence is something that Johnson was willing to interrogate in his work (particularly in his antilynching activism and his novel) as long as his personal life was not at the center of it.

The “Terrible Real,” the “Terrible Handicap” in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*

While Johnson was too traumatized to share his near-lynching experience with the world immediately, the assault did not prevent him from depicting the physical and mental consequences of lynching in his only novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. First published anonymously in 1912, the novel was republished in 1927 with Johnson’s name attached to it, marking *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* as a paradigmatic passing text. More than a novel about racial passing, *Autobiography*, as several scholars have noted, addresses other permutations on passing as well: it is a novel that passes as an autobiography and borrows key tropes from slave narratives; it is a text that, despite its title, pertains as much to the malleability of gender, sexuality, and class as to race; it is a migration narrative that traverses extensive geographical terrain; and, with its focus on the arts, it jumps between a number of literary and musical forms, engaging fiction and nonfiction as well as Negro spirituals, classical music, and ragtime.¹⁰ Focusing primarily on the lynching scene and the ex-colored man’s other encounters with disability, I offer an account of Johnson’s discursive, physical, and psychological representations of disability, an ignored but essential feature of the text.

At its core, the lynching scene represents a culmination of the antiblack violence deployed throughout the novel, and it confirms what Johnson’s protagonist-narrator, the ex-colored man, observes as he travels across the U. S. and abroad: that the intractable Jim Crow system made the black body especially vulnerable to bodily deformation and psychological disability. Although the black lynching victim in Johnson’s novel dies, his lynching is not only a representation of death. The manner in which he is captured, tied, displayed, and burned alive before a captive audience suggests an attempt to deform the black body, to transform the way the body is visualized in the American cultural imagination. The lynching also emphasizes other forms of antiblack violence in the novel—particularly the ways blackness is stigmatized. The novel details the manner in which disability and stigma are inflicted upon bodies of color via the watchful eye of the ex-colored man, whose visibly white skin allows him to experience life on both sides of the color line. As a white man, he recognizes the “premium” placed on whiteness (or “lack of color”) in the United States (*Autobiography* 92). As a black man, he experiences firsthand the disability of Jim Crow, which he describes as “the dwarfing, warping, distorting influence which operates upon each colored man in the United States” (13).

This “dwarfing, warping, distorting influence” is certainly one reason the ex-colored man’s white millionaire patron discourages him from returning to the South as an African American composer, warning that his relocation and black racial identification could potentially have disabling effects. The white patron states,

My boy, you are by blood, by appearance, by education and by tastes, a white man. Now why do you want to throw your life away amidst the poverty and ignorance, in the hopeless struggle of the black people of the United States? Then look at the terrible handicap you are placing on yourself by going home and working as a Negro composer. (*Autobiography* 86)

Although the white patron only gets it partly right when he observes that the ex-colored man is “by blood . . . a white man,” since the infamous one-drop rule of racial identity places the narrator squarely into the legal category of blackness, he nonetheless realizes that the ex-colored man’s perceived whiteness provides a mobility, freedom, and financial advancement unavailable to the black composer who ventures back South. That the white patron describes such a return as the “terrible handicap” emphasizes the particular role that disability plays in racial oppression and injury. The patron’s warning both foreshadows the Southern lynching

(what Du Bois describes as the “terrible real” for Johnson) that will occur in the novel’s next chapter and recalls the ex-colored man’s other experiences of disability and racial violence.

The lynching scene in Johnson’s *Autobiography* sutures the “terrible real” and the “terrible handicap” in the penultimate chapter, where the ex-colored man witnesses the lynching of an unidentified black male in the South and watches the graphic transformations of both the victim’s body and the white mob’s behavior. It is not only the image of the black man’s burning body and the throng of animated spectators that traumatizes the ex-colored man but also the ghastly sounds they emit. In the moment of crisis near the novel’s conclusion, as the white men busily prepare for the lynching, the narrator recalls the rapid-fire sequence of events in a manner that deserves our extended attention:

The men who at midnight had been stern and silent were now emitting that terror instilling sound known as the “rebel yell.” A space was quickly cleared in the crowd, and a rope placed about his neck; when from somewhere came the suggestion, “Burn him!” It ran like an electric current. Have you ever witnessed the transformation of human beings into savage beasts? Nothing can be more terrible. . . . Fuel was brought from everywhere, oil, the torch; the flames crouched for an instant as though to gather strength, then leaped up as high as their victim’s head. He squirmed, he writhed, strained at his chains, then gave out cries and groans that I shall always hear. The cries and groans were choked off by the fire and smoke; but his eyes bulging from their sockets, rolled from side to side, appealing in vain for help. Some of the crowd yelled and cheered, others seemed appalled at what they had done, and there were those who turned away sickened at the sight. I was fixed to the spot where I stood, powerless to take my eyes from what I did not want to see. (*Autobiography* 110-11)

Nearly every detail here contrasts with another to form a macabre and grotesque affair, and together they force the reader to interrogate the practice and meaning of lynching. Enacted partly as spectacle and partly as celebration, this instance of brutal public torture changes everyone in the scene: the white mob, the ex-colored man, and certainly the black lynching victim. With respect to the white mob, their transformation from “human beings into savage beasts” is both volatile and routinized. The sudden and marked shift in the white men’s deportment—from utter silence and relative inaction to screams and quick, lockstep movement—heightens the scene’s explosiveness while showing their behavior to be methodical and strategic. The mere mention of violence—“Burn him!”—electrified them, and the “rebel yell,” the “terror instilling sound” of Confederate soldiers, turns this violence into an act of war against the black body. The juxtaposition of the cheering, yelling crowd alongside the crying, imploring victim frames this event as a killing and a spectacle, as an infliction of pain intended to disable and destroy the anonymous black male victim as well as offer sadistic pleasure to some of the spectators. Yet not everyone is thrilled by the incitement of racial violence; some seem “appalled,” while others are “sickened at the sight.” Figured as an interloper, the ex-colored man does not consider himself an active member of this crowd. His careful distinction between the third-person plural and the first-person singular makes clear that the black man chained to the railroad tie and set aflame is “their” victim and that the orchestration of the lynching is something “they” had planned. The ex-colored man’s unknown racial identity allows him to be a spectator—a paralyzed witness, not a participant. The sight of the lynching leaves him transfixed, unable to avert his eyes from the “terrible” event he “did not want to see.”

Although he witnesses the lynching, the ex-colored man’s physical presence does not quite ensure either its realness or its graphic violence. To confirm the veracity and import of this traumatic moment, the ex-colored man relies on lynching’s remains—its tools, its aftereffects, and especially the deformed, mutilated corpse of its victim: “Before I could make myself believe that what I saw was really happening,

I was looking at a scorched post, a smoldering fire, blackened bones, charred fragments sifting down through coils of chain, and the smell of burnt flesh—human flesh—was in my nostrils” (*Autobiography* 111). The “scorched post,” the “smoldering fire,” and the “coils of chain” constitute part of the story, relaying important details about what has transpired. But the decomposing body immediately authenticates—helps the ex-colored man “believe” in—lynching’s ability to disable and impair. Torched, burned, writhing, and screaming for his life: here is visual proof of the disfigured black male body. The sensorial experience of the lynching overwhelms the ex-colored man, traumatizing him. The sounds of the black lynch victim, the sight of his decomposed body, and finally the smell of his burned flesh all collide in this scene to convey lynching’s deadly power. While the victim’s “bulging” eyes, “blackened bones,” “charred fragments,” and dissolving flesh offer the ex-colored man haunting evidence of the vulnerability of black corporeality, the victim’s sounds and smell leave an indelible impression. The ex-colored man “shall always hear” the black man’s “cries and groans” just as certainly as he will always associate the smell of burning human flesh with that of the lynch victim. Before the lynching, the victim stands as a man “in form and stature”; after the lynching, the man’s form and stature are radically altered, leaving him deformed in full view of a frenzied Southern audience (110).

Some might argue that the novel’s lynching scene draws its power more from brutality than disability or that the ultimate intent of lynching is to kill, not disable. But the line between brutality and disability was quite porous in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the term *lynching* had several meanings and took a variety of forms. Douglas C. Baynton claims that in the nineteenth century disability denoted feeble-mindedness, insanity, and mental illness in addition to physical impairment, deformities, abnormalities, and injury (33-37). And lynching “did not apply,” Johnson states, “exclusively to the infliction of the death penalty” (“Lynching” 71). In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, black people were lynched in myriad ways, including shooting, hanging, beating, amputation, burning, mutilation, and tarring and feathering.¹¹ Moreover, the NAACP’s photographic archive includes a visual record of lynching’s conspicuous depictions of disability. “In addition to images of brutalized black corpses,” Goldsby observes, “the visual records in the [NAACP’s] anti-lynching files are full of scopically sympathetic pictures (photographed at a remove, with the victim-subjects facing the camera’s eye) that depict lynching’s reappearance in blindings, amputations, and other corporeal mutilations that southern ‘progress’ was supposed to have made obsolete” (288-89). Johnson’s evocation of disability and bodily deformation when describing an event typically associated with death clarifies his expansive understanding of the various ways disability was deployed during the Jim Crow regime. And in this lynching scene (as with other scenes of lynching), the victim’s impairment does not serve as the only instance of disability. The ex-colored man has to live with what he has just witnessed, and “living with lynching,” Koritha Mitchell argues, entails being “[t]raumatized by the sights and sounds of racial violence (174, 165).

Paralleling the metamorphoses of the white mob and the black male lynch victim, the ex-colored man undergoes a physical and mental transformation as well. The lynching has a disabling effect on his body and psyche, rendering him temporarily immobile and debilitated. During the lynching the ex-colored man is “fixed to the spot where [he] stood”; later he “was as weak as a man who had lost blood” (*Autobiography* 112). The effect on the ex-colored man’s body is such that the lynch victim serves as his dark double; both men are nameless, and both lose blood. While the victim loses blood literally, the ex-colored man loses black blood figuratively, since it is the lynching that makes him decide to pass as a white man.

The ex-colored man’s decision to pass as a result of the lynching implicitly raises the specter of another form of disability: castration. Although this lynching

victim is not castrated, the manner in which lynching alters our understanding of black masculinity in the novel forces us to wonder, claims Hazel V. Carby, “if the ritual of dismemberment and the sadistic torture of black bodies is, in fact, a search to expose, and perhaps even an attempt to claim, an essence of manhood that is both feared and desired” (47). Carby considers the practice of lynching as an invalidation of black manliness. Phillip Brian Harper makes a similar point in his examination of the relationship between racial authenticity and gender. As Harper argues, insofar as black racial authenticity is gendered as masculine and the lynching propels the ex-colored man to engage in black-to-white racial passing (which, through the figure of the tragic mulatto, has been coded in “decidedly *feminine* terms” [103; original emphasis]), the sensational violence of lynching—with its focus on disability, deformation, and torture—could be interpreted as an attempt to rob both the lynching victim and the ex-colored man of their masculinity, representing a form of figurative castration.¹² This line of reasoning is more compelling if we ponder, as disability scholar Michelle Jarman does, the overlap between the racial violence of white-on-black lynching and the eugenic narratives of “cognitively disabled men” as “sexual predators” in an effort to promote “institutionalization, surgical castration, and sterilization.” Jarman writes: “I suggest that even as racist mob violence and surgical sterilization followed distinct historical trajectories, the ubiquitous presence of lynching in the public imagination during the period from 1890 to 1940 may have informed and helped naturalize the rationale used to support medical castration and asexualization” (92). The ritual of lynching is tied to a history of emasculation and asexualization, and this history intersects with the regulation of disability and race in the United States.

The parallel that Johnson creates between the ex-colored man and the anonymous victim spotlights an observation he would later share in his 1924 essay “Lynching—America’s National Disgrace,” where he writes that “no one can take part in a lynching or witness it and remain thereafter a psychically normal human being” (75). In his novel, no one in the scene survives intact. The victim is hanged, burned, and killed; the mob turns into beasts; and the ex-colored man suffers paralysis and endures a racial transmutation that impoverishes his racial authenticity and masculinity.

What makes the lynching scene so pivotal to the rest of *Autobiography* is the manner in which it calls attention to the varied vulnerabilities of the black body to disability and stigma during Jim Crow.¹³ The ex-colored man’s experiences before and after the lynching reveal, in particular, the ways in which his childhood moments of racial identification and his familial and professional life are infused by disability.¹⁴ The lynching, for instance, is not his only encounter with disability. Before the lynching, the ex-colored man confronts his mother’s disability as well as that of a singer of spirituals. First, his mother suffers from a mysterious illness that greatly compromises her health, leaving her bedridden and eventually resulting in her death. Second, at the “big meeting,” a week-long gathering where various congregations unite at a centrally located church for a series of social and religious functions, the ex-colored man sees Singing Johnson, the powerful singer who leads the congregation in a number of Negro spirituals and who, the narrator notes, has only one eye (*Autobiography* 102).

While the ex-colored man’s mother’s death represents an irrevocable loss for him, his encounter with one-eyed Singing Johnson symbolizes the potential recuperation of a racial, ancestral, and cultural past that the ex-colored man deeply desires at certain points over the course of the novel yet ultimately forsakes as a result of the violent lynching. Singing Johnson’s improvisation and ingenuity, his impressive

memory of the Negro spirituals, and his remarkable complementarity with the preacher John Brown all mark him as representative of those “unknown black bards” whom James Weldon Johnson honors in his poem “O Black and Unknown Bards” and discusses in his Preface to *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* (12).¹⁵ Johnson’s Preface reveals a biographical connection to Singing Johnson, a man whom James Weldon Johnson would periodically see in church and whom he describes as a “small but stocky, dark-brown man . . . with one eye, and . . . a clear, strong, high-pitched voice” (Preface 23). This description of Singing Johnson in Johnson’s Preface is repeated almost verbatim in the novel (105). As Lucinda H. Mackethan argues, in the scene in the novel where the narrator visits the “big meeting,” James Weldon Johnson “wrests the voice from his narrator and, in his own ‘singing’ voice, goes into great detail concerning the way the song leader directed the spirituals at the meeting” (145-46). In his novel, Johnson transfers his own personal exuberance about the power of black music and performers onto his narrator. The ex-colored man is so inspired by Singing Johnson’s performance of the slave songs—what he calls “the most treasured heritage of the American Negro”—that one might expect the ex-colored man to defy the odds, challenge his white patron’s theory about the “terrible handicap,” and prosper as a black composer in the South (*Autobiography* 108). This future, unfortunately, never materializes, for the lynching follows shortly thereafter, and it changes the trajectory of the ex-colored man’s life.

James Weldon Johnson’s decision to pair the lynching scene with Singing Johnson’s performance at the big meeting in the same chapter emphasizes how antiblack violence via lynching destroys the ex-colored man’s musical aspirations and spotlights how black bodies are made susceptible to injury. The ex-colored man’s experiences at the big meeting enhance the dramatic effect of the lynching, thus generating a synergy between the two scenes. Weldon Johnson’s detailed description of bodily deformation in the lynching scene offsets the lack of particulars he provides about how Singing Johnson lost his eye. After reading Johnson’s description of the lynch victim’s “eyes bulging from their sockets,” the reader gains a better sense of the circumstances that could have led to Singing Johnson’s missing eye. What *The Autobiography* makes clear is that being black during Jim Crow means being subjected to all manner of violence and the manifestations of that violence can take several forms: disability, lynching, and death.

Such disabling violence bears extraordinary transformative power, reshaping the fit, healthy, and mobile black body into an unfit, feeble, and immobile one. This distortion of the black body is central to Johnson as well as to several other African American writers who explore the ways blackness is deployed in opposition to whiteness. “[I]n the America of Jim Crow,” Eric J. Sundquist asserts, “to be black was always to wear the distorted mask of blackness before the white world and to be, in legal and political terms, ‘nobody.’ To be black, in relation to the dominant white culture, was to be ‘anonymous,’ as Johnson has it, to be ‘nothing,’ as several of Charles Chesnut’s penetrating stories had argued, or to be an ‘invisible man,’ as Ralph Ellison would later contend in his own borrowing from Johnson’s plot” (9). While such designations, as Sundquist observes, suggest the reducible quality of blackness in the nation, they also emphasize the complicated ways that blackness becomes distorted.

In the case of Johnson’s protagonist, to be “nobody,” “nothing,” or “invisible” differs from being “anonymous” in that anonymity is a matter of choice. When the ex-colored man renounces his African American heritage, packs his bags, and heads to New York at the novel’s conclusion, he chooses an option that his visibly white skin affords him. Unlike his dark double, who is burned and mutilated, or even Ellison’s invisible man, whose invisibility stems from other people’s refusal to see him accurately, the narrator inhabits his anonymous status by resolving neither to “disclaim the black race nor claim the white race . . . and let the world take me for

what it would" (*Autobiography* 113). Although the ex-colored man posits his decision as neutral, he also takes measures to ensure that the world would take him for a white man. His reasons for ultimately deciding that he "was not going to be a Negro" are consistent: he wants to circumvent disability and racial stigma, which he describes variously as "defects," "the 'brand,'" the "label of inferiority pasted across [his] forehead," and, in reference to the lynching victim, "every sign of degeneracy stamped upon his countenance" (115, 11, 124, 113, 110). The ex-colored man refers to a scientific discourse underpinned by disability—relying on rhetoric that marks black blood as a source of contamination and degradation and, occasionally, searching for presumed abnormalities and defects in the features of others (as he does with his mother after he is racially identified at school).¹⁶

Focusing primarily on what he would gain by passing as white, the ex-colored man fails to consider fully what he would lose in the process or how his decision to pass might injure African Americans at large. The ex-colored man suffers from a moral and cultural blindness that obstructs his ability to see the dire consequences of his actions. A comprehensive understanding of the practice of racial passing, Allyson Hobbs argues, must not only consider the "benefits accrued to these new white identities," but also reckon "with the loss, alienation, and isolation that accompanied, and often outweighed, its rewards" (6). The ex-colored man does not quite understand the import of this loss and alienation until it is too late, claiming at the novel's end that in disavowing his blackness for whiteness he chose "the lesser part" and sold his "birthright for a mess of pottage" (*Autobiography* 125). His decision to pass as white—to, in effect, sever all black racial ties by cutting himself off from his family, friends, and community—registers as a form of violence. The "ex-" that precedes the colored man's name is akin to a racial dismemberment, a negation of his name and his people.

Conclusion

The ex-colored man's story is not James Weldon Johnson's but, as Valerie Smith argues, "[a]ny consideration of Johnson's novel must address . . . the connections between the simulated autobiography and Johnson's actual autobiography, *Along This Way*," to avoid conflating Johnson's life with that of his character (45). The novel's success and the public's confusion as to whether *Autobiography* was the story of Johnson's life played no small role in Johnson's decision to write his memoir. He wanted to distinguish his biography from that of his fictional narrator's. As he writes in *Along This Way*, "I continue to receive letters from persons who have read [*Autobiography*] inquiring about this or that phase of my life as told in it. That is, probably, one of the reasons why I am writing the present book" (239). Johnson's desire to separate himself from the ex-colored man is understandable; his protagonist exhibits a kind of cowardice that could have damaged the reputation of a race man like Johnson.

Yet putting Johnson's autobiography in conversation with his novel and his speech also demonstrates how the oppressive system of Jim Crow deploys disability. Shifting his focus from legal disability to the psychological and physical trauma of racial violence, Johnson examines the intricate and complex ways that blackness and disability intersect in American culture. Johnson's "The Best Methods of Removing the Disabilities of Caste from the Negro," *Along This Way*, and *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* illustrate that to be black during Jim Crow was to be denied entrance into the American body politic, to witness firsthand how black bodies were made vulnerable to physical and mental injury, and to experience the peril of U. S. racism that functioned to discipline and quarantine African Americans.

The Jim Crow regime—its unidirectional and selective segregation of racial groups, its particular grouping and isolation of African Americans and disabled people apart from the train car designated for whites, its stigmatization of black bodies as contagious subjects, its strict regulation of interracial contact, its deforming and disabling practices of lynching, and its relentless distortion of blackness—provides scholars with ample opportunity to examine more precisely how race and disability function as related social constructs. African American studies and disability studies are especially equipped to facilitate examinations of the shared genealogy of blackness and disability during Jim Crow and to articulate how bodies designated as deviant have been disqualified historically from national belonging and social participation. The field of African American studies is flush with examples of how racial ideologies depend on discourses of disability in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, while the field of disability studies has recognized how other identity categories have informed cultural notions of disability. Together, African American studies and disability studies can, if employed productively, offer us a vital history of disability's shaping of African Americans' racialized embodiment. This history is present in parts of James Weldon Johnson's corpus, which provides a narrative of the ways disability intersects with blackness to understand more fully the complexities of racial injury and subjection—a narrative that deserves further scholarly attention yet is often overlooked.

1. For more on theories of racial degeneracy and racial extinction, see George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate of Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (1971; Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1987), 228-55; and Jennifer C. James, *A Freedom Bought with Blood: African American War Literature from the Civil War to World War II* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2007), 1-33.

2. On caste, see John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor, 1937).

3. These varied meanings are, however, often overlooked largely due to the phrasing of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008 (ADAAA), which effectively narrowed the definition of the word. The ADAAA defines disability as “a physical and mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities of [an] individual,” and requires either “a record of such an impairment” or the possibility of “being regarded as having such an impairment.” The ADAAA amended the ADA, and it made changes to the definition of the term in an attempt to clarify and broaden it. Among other things, it clarified what the phrase “major life activities” means in its definition. Although those changes have increased the number and types of persons who are protected under the ADA, the amended definition is still narrower than the historical definition of the word disability. Both the ADA and ADAAA define disability only in terms of the individual and fail to implicate the system.

4. Quayson also observes a change in the understanding of the disabled body during this period: “By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, a marked shift came when, with the emergence of a scientific medical discourse, the disabled were subjected to taxonomies of scientific measurement and ordering” (9). The “taxonomies of scientific measurement and ordering” imposed on people with disabilities are similar to the taxonomies of ethnology and phrenology imposed on African Americans during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

5. For more scholarship on the intersections of disability and blackness, see *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions*, Christopher M. Bell, ed. (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2011).

6. See Hutton for more on the connection between the term Jim Crow and disability. Hutton writes that the “birth of Jim Crow” began behind a theater in Louisville, where Thomas D. Rice got material for his routine: “Back of the Louisville theater was a livery-stable kept by a man named Crow. The actors could look into the stable-yard from the windows of their [dressing rooms], and were fond of watching the movements of an old and decrepit slave who was employed by the proprietor to do all sorts of odd jobs. As was the custom among the negroes, he had assumed his master's name, and called himself Jim Crow. He was very much deformed—the right shoulder was drawn up high, and the left leg was stiff and crooked at the knee, which gave him a painful but at the same time ludicrous limp” (115-17). According to historical accounts, Rice closely watched this enslaved man's performances and adapted them for the stage.

7. For more on the impulse of some black writers to refrain from portraying the black body as injured, see Baynton; and Jennifer C. James, *A Freedom Bought with Blood: African American War Literature from the Civil War to World War II* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2007).

Notes

8. See Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New, 2012); Nirmala Erevelles, "Crippin' Jim Crow: Disability, Dis-Location, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline," in *Disability Incarcerated: Imprisonment and Disability in the United States and Canada*, Liat Ben-Moshe, Chris Chapman, and Allison C. Carey, eds. (New York: Palgrave, 2014), 81-100; Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1996); Ross; Schweik; and C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1955; New York: Oxford UP, 2002).

9. According to Justice Harlan, "Every one knows that the statute in question had its origin in the purpose, not so much to exclude white persons from railroad cars occupied by blacks, as to exclude colored people from coaches occupied by or assigned to white persons. . . . The fundamental objection, therefore, to the statute, is that it interferes with the personal freedom of citizens" (*Plessy v. Ferguson*).

10. See Steven J. Belluscio, *To Be Suddenly White: Literary Realism and Racial Passing* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2006); Melanie R. Benson, *Disturbing Calculations: The Economics of Identity in Postcolonial Southern Literature, 1912-2002* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2008); Goldsby; Harper; Samira Kawash, *Dislocating the Color Line: Identity, Hybridity, and Singularity in African-American Narrative* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997); Monica L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Durham: Duke UP, 2009); Aldon L. Nielsen, *Writing between the Lines: Race and Intertextuality* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1994); Smith; Snorton; Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000); Robert B. Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1979); Masami Sugimori, "Narrative Order, Racial Hierarchy, and 'White' Discourse in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and *Along This Way*," *MELUS* 36.3 (2011): 37-62; and Sundquist.

11. See Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Random House, 2002); Goldsby; Mitchell; Christopher Waldrep, "Word and Deed: The Language of Lynching, 1820-1953," in *Lethal Imagination: Violence and Brutality in American History*, Michael A. Bellesiles, ed. (New York: New York UP, 1999), 229-60; and Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2009).

12. Snorton presents another way of thinking about gender and race in Johnson's novel. Focusing on the ex-colored man's "longing for whiteness" and "femininity," Snorton examines Johnson's *Autobiography* through a series of "transgender yearnings," which he defines "as an expressed alignment with another gender or the articulation of 'cross-gender' desire" (108).

13. For an analysis of stigma and race, see Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (New York: Oxford UP, 2009); and Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986).

14. Two scenes, in particular, are worth mentioning. In the first, the ex-colored man is racially identified at school, and he suffers momentary blindness and deafness. When the narrator stands after the principal requests for all of the white scholars to rise, his teacher quickly puts him in his place. She says, "You sit down now, and rise with the others." This incident disorients the ex-colored man, who experiences not only shock but also a sudden loss of sight and hearing: "I sat down dazed. I saw and heard nothing. When the others were asked to rise I did not know it" (*Autobiography* 10). The narrator remembers this moment of racial identification as not only a psychological assault but also a physical one, describing that unforgettable day at school as a "sword-thrust" that would take him years to heal from (12). The second is the scene of racial disavowal near the novel's conclusion, when the narrator reveals his racial identity to his white girlfriend. In this scene, he experiences a deformational racial transformation. Under her "wild, fixed stare," the ex-colored man's skin is darkened, his features are distorted, and his hair texture is altered (121).

15. For more on the ways in which blackness and blindness have affected the production and reception of black music and musicians, see Terry Rowden, *The Songs of Blind Folk: African American Musicians and the Cultures of Blindness* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2009).

16. After a few of his white classmates identify him as a "nigger," the ex-colored man becomes obsessed with the color, shape, texture, and size of his and his mother's features (10). Although the narrator at one time considered his mother to be the "most beautiful woman in the world," he readily admits he was "searching for defects" that he assumed her "nigger" blood would produce (11). The references to blood in the novel recall a scientific racial discourse, which characterizes black blood as a contamination to white blood. For more on the narrator's understanding of race, blood, and eugenics, see Belluscio; Melanie R. Benson, *Disturbing Calculations: The Economics of Identity in Postcolonial Southern Literature, 1912-2002* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2008); and Snorton.

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