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Anonymous Pseudo-Autobiographies: Passing the New Southern Studies in *The Southerner* and *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*

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Anonymous Pseudo-Autobiographies: Passing and the New
Southern Studies in *The Southerner* and *The
Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*

Matthew S. Dinger

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Anonymous Pseduo-Autobiographies: Passing and the New

Southern Studies in *The Southerner* and *The*

Autobiography of and Ex-Colored Man

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This thesis seeks to understand the South as a space through which the contested bodies of two literary characters and the men who authored them can be more fully explored: the Ex-Colored Man in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and Nicholas Worth in Walter Hines Page's *The Southerner*; each appearing within an early twentieth-century novel masquerading as an autobiography. These bodies serve to help us understand how the regional Other of the South has inflicted itself on individuals living in the South and caused an irreparable fracture to the characters' identities forcing them into passing roles in lives they do not see as their own. This passing allows the characters to adopt a new persona in the communities that they inhabit, but never permits them to inhabit new bodies themselves. They are always left with the perception that they do not corporeally belong and the anxiety that the "truth" about their body might be exposed at any moment. Ultimately, the thesis also challenges the notion of passing as merely racial and explores other forms of passing, especially ones dealing with geography (i.e. a Southerner passing as a Northerner) and explains that the New Southern Studies needs to find ways to examine the South that are not dependent on racial binaries.

Keywords: *The Southerner*, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, New Southern Studies

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Introduction

During the early twentieth century, a southern U.S. writer published an anonymous novel masquerading as an autobiography. This Southerner, well-known in public spheres, was a prolific writer, an editor of multiple publications, and at one point served overseas as a U.S. diplomat. The novel he wrote dealt with geography, race, and racial passing. Arguably, a major purpose of this novel was to cause the American public, particularly people in the U.S. South, to question who around them was actually white and who was deceiving them. The novel, of course, was *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), by African American writer James Weldon Johnson. Or was it a lesser-known novel, *The Southerner* (1906), by white American writer Walter Hines Page? Within the parameters of the above description, the one could pass for the other; and, in reality, I can assign no ontological priority to either novel as the novel I have described. One major purpose of this article is to compare these texts in order to destabilize some of the assumptions of these and other Southern novels, calling into question traditional definitions of Southern identity and classifications of the Southern novel.

Johnson's and Page's novels each offer an interesting intervention into Southern literature, but they do so from markedly different perspectives. Johnson's novel follows the life of a Southern narrator born to a black mother and a prominent white Southern father. In order to keep the birth a secret from the rest of the white Southern community, the mother and narrator-son relocate to the North, where the narrator learns to excel in music. This talent leads him to journey into the world of white wealth, and after witnessing the brutal lynching of a black man, the narrator makes the decision to give up his music and live the rest of his days passing as a white businessman. Page's novel deals with the South's entrance into educational modernity and

revolves around the narrator Nicholas Worth, a Harvard educated North Carolinian who is trying to modernize the South's school systems. Though Worth finds an ally in Professor Billy McBain, an educational reformer, his efforts are constantly challenged by narrow-minded and often religious Southerners who do not believe that either the schools or the South need reform. It is his unique position as a challenger to the Southern status quo that allows Julia, the daughter of a servant in Worth's boyhood home, to reveal in the final pages of the novel the truth about her life in the North where she passes as white.

While the two books contain many similarities (publication dates, anonymity, racial themes, "autobiographical" structure, etc.), they have not yet been considered together critically despite their Southern setting. In addition to likeness in theme and form, both writers spent a fair amount of time living in the South. Though Johnson spent his boyhood in Jacksonville, Florida, it was the months spent in the backwoods of Georgia that helped him create a "Southern identity" for himself. It was here that he was confronted with poor, southern African Americans in comparison to his mostly middle-class upbringing in Florida. Page's early life in the South was quite different from Johnson's experience. Growing up in North Carolina in a privileged family, Page began to see the South as a backwards place filled with old ghosts that needed to be exorcised. Page felt that it was moving to the Northeast, Johns Hopkins University, and ultimately Harvard that enlightened him. Page even stated that for the South, "there is no [use] in my trying to do anything...any more" (qtd. in Cooper 80).¹ And, yet, both authors chose the South as the setting for the majority of their novels, for it was there that they could work out the issues that they felt were most important in terms of race relations, particularly those dealing with financial inequality, racism, and inter-racial marriage. The South was the space where critical interventions in terms of passing Americans could be most fruitful.²

A popular approach to passing novels, as of late, has been to see them in terms of a fixation on the body. However, many scholars have placed too much emphasis on race when it comes to the body. Perhaps the way to centralize the body but not in a way that is fixated on race is through a new approach to passing enabled by the New Southern Studies—one that sees passing as a function of geography as much as it is a function of race. In this approach to passing, the body stays at the forefront of examination, but helps to provide a critical space that is not so haunted by race in which Southern texts can be examined. This essay seeks to provide a new definition of passing in the New Southern Studies based on the idea that passing is a function of geography as well as race, and this new definition will be the lens through which passing texts are examined. In this context, the body functions as the geography of the text. Rather than focusing on the physical location of the narrative, viewing the ex-colored man's body as geography allows him to inhabit multiple spaces at once and complicates the idea of passing; rather than disguising his true identity, the ex-colored man's passing involves emphasizing certain aspects of his identity while masking others. This definition of passing can then be applied to other texts (like *The Southerner*) and to a more general way of critically looking at the South and the North as locations of passing.

Thus Johnson's and Page's novels create a productive critical space for this examination. The former provides interesting critical space because it is a canonical passing text in which this new approach can provide new insights to traditional readings, and the latter is a text on the brink of rediscovery with Scott Romine's recent re-publication of *The Southerner*. This novel provides an untouched space in which we can critically examine what happens when the passing novel is looked at only from the basis of geography and does not have any critical baggage that is dependent on race. In addition, both texts masquerade as autobiographies, making them passers

as well. The implications of the parallels between the passing characters in the novels and the novels passing as autobiographies can be explained partially in what the new form of passing does to literature—removes the element of race. Perhaps it has been a racial logic that has kept the novels from being linked; i.e. African American novels are often examined separately from white American novels betokening a literary-critical instantiation of the segregationist tradition that both novels problematize with recourse to passing. Further, this idea of separation from a racial pigeon-holing is apparent on another level when one can see that the novels have had to reconstitute reality in order to be thought of as something other than a novel about race.

My intentions in this essay are twofold. First, I will read these two texts through the lens of this new definition of passing, paying particular attention to the moments in the texts where both passing and geography are both important. Though these are just two Southern novels, they are particularly important in terms of the ways that these novels are different from other Southern novels at the time. Initially, they present their passing characters in the form of an autobiography.³ In this form the characters tell their own stories, which permits a greater focus on the passer and the passer's experience than in a novel where the passer is just another character. Further, they complicate the idea of racial boundaries and the grounding of geographic boundaries as a whole through the setting in each of the novels. Examination of Page's novel in relation to Johnson's reveals *The Southerner*, though currently all but unknown as a literary text, as a narrative that is crucial to the ongoing project of mapping the U.S. South's racial and geographical boundaries.

Next, I discuss the implications of this new definition of passing for the New Southern Studies as a whole. Several scholars have traced transnational circuits and globalization to reveal that the South was exported to the North (and the world) from the very start of Reconstruction.⁴

This fracturing and failing Reconstruction no doubt influenced the global politics of each of these writers and the work they performed as U.S. diplomats.⁵ More importantly for this essay, however, the ideas of characters passing in both of the novels suggest that the “wholeness” that is seen in the North by Baker and Nelson was punctuated with blacks passing as whites, Southerners passing for Northerners, and fractured individuals suffering from identity crises passing for the members of society living whole lives at the expense of the abject South. Recognizing these variegated forms of passing (racially, geographically, socioeconomically, etc.) can create an intervention into the South in terms of its pollination of the North in ways that have not yet been examined. This point of fracture will be examined through an exploration of the New Southern Studies as what Alfred Hornung calls an “avant-garde discipline.” *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and *The Southerner* will provide the critical space for this examination to take place as both can be considered avant-garde because the authors of the two texts are approaching the topics of passing and returning to the South in such a new way.

The New Southern Studies and the Avant-Garde

Upon its first publication in 1912, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* had a few positive reviews, but remained mostly ignored by critics and readers. Some scholars suggest that Johnson wrote the book as an autobiography because he felt that a white audience would be more likely to read it (Andrews xiv-xv). The result was that early critics saw the merits of the work as largely sociological but not artistically valuable; the public mostly ignored the work (Washington 233). Even Carl Van Vechten, the great benefactor of the Harlem Renaissance, “admits to mining the novel for sociological data” (Washington 233). The reception of the 1927 re-publication of the work could not have been more different. Due to the author’s prominence in

the African American community—as this edition of the novel was released with his name as the author—combined with the influence of other similar works being accepted during the Harlem Renaissance, Johnson’s work became widely and favorably reviewed in both the United States and Britain.

While Johnson and his work remain critically popular, Page and his 1907 novel, *The Southerner*, are hardly mentioned except in the recent work of Scott Romine. Despite the support of publishers and a wide range of reviews from multiple sources, *The Southerner* experienced very low sales in its first few years of publication. Many reviewers at the time traced its lack of success to the abundant editorializing of the socio-political South in which the readers of the time were not interested.⁶ Others traced the financial failure of the novel to Page’s style, which they saw as too straightforward and analytical for the audience to which it was written. For whatever reason, the novel remained out of print until the publication of Romine’s recent edition. Of Page, Romine states, “Aside from Ellen Glasgow, no southern novelist of the time looked so critically at the cultural myths organizing southern culture; no one including Glasgow, documented so well how those myths shaped the public terrain on which the work of progress was forced to proceed” (xxxvi). This mythology is the very thing that makes Page’s novel important in terms of the New Southern Studies, which is currently calling into question the terrain about which Page wrote. Though the mythology that Page and Glasgow documented may always remain as the foundational narrative of the South, the nuances of that narrative change when the elements of the myth change. When the color of the characters or the regional location change, the story must be interpreted in light of these changes. Page’s South (and Johnson’s for that matter) was strictly divided between black and white, and therefore one might ask to whom this mythology belongs—blacks or whites. Further, knowing that there were those

who passed as white calls into question of the accuracy of this mythology and the subsequent “terrain” that has been established through it. This is precisely why the re-mapping the terrain in terms of a new definition of passing is so important.

In part, this re-mapping began nine years ago when Houston A. Baker Jr. and Dana D. Nelson began a series of phone conversations that fundamentally changed the way that scholars have looked at the South and the literature that came from it. These conversations began what is now referred to as the *New Southern Studies*. Baker and Nelson’s conversations culminated in a special issue of *American Literature* which has become a foundational work inspiring the formation of the New Southern Studies. In the issue’s Introduction, they explain their rationale for focusing on the relationship between the South and the body: “In literature...we find bodies in jeopardy in the South—violence always in ascendance. Bodies are disappeared in ‘The South.’ Bodies are made grotesque. And certain bodies in ‘The South’ are romanticized” (232). The scholars set the tone for a field of study grounded in the concept of the body and the way that that we look at said bodies. Baker and Nelson explain that they want to “reconfigure our familiar notions of Good (or desperately bad) Old Southern White Men telling stories on the porch, protecting white women, and being friends to the Negro” (232). Clearly, the scholars feel that these stories are grounded in race and a racial identity based on old stereotypes. They state: “A new Southern studies, like this special issue, welcomes intellectual, multiparticipant, and revisionary complexity. It welcomes the complication of old borders and terrains, wishes to construct and survey a new scholarly map of The South” (244).

The concept of the new scholarly map kept critics excited enough to begin re-writing the way that they had examined the South, and the field of American literature saw a resurgence and a renewal of interest in the South. Five years later, Kathryn McKee and Annette Trefzer edited a

second issue of *American Literature* dedicated to the New Southern Studies. In this issue they explain that their “intention is deliberate: to showcase a New Southern Studies based on the notion of an intellectual and practical Global South, a term that embeds the U.S. South in a larger transnational framework” (678). Here, McKee and Trefzer argue that Baker and Nelson continued to conceptualize a South locked in racial binaries (especially of black and white). McKee and Tefzer advocate a version of the New Southern Studies that seems to eliminate those binaries while deconstructing the South into a new regionalized area. McKee and Tefzer advocate a version of the New Southern Studies that seems to eliminate those binaries while deconstructing the South into a new regionalized area, one that focuses more on place than race. McKee and Tefzer explain that their approach is a study of globalization itself and that the New Southern Studies must be designed as an interdisciplinary field or it will not survive in the new, globalized world.

A year before this second special issue, and in ways relevant to McKee and Trefzer’s concerns, Patricia Yaeger conceptualized the literature of the South as a collection of “ghost stories,” not in the traditional spooky story sense, but rather as literature that is haunted by a past that has not been fully explored. In “Ghosts and Shattered Bodies, or What Does it Mean To Still Be Haunted by Southern Literature?” Yaeger asserts that racial trauma in these old narratives is over-exposed to the point of gaudiness, which results in traces of trauma being found throughout the text. This forms a sort of haunting in the text and explains how white writers’ novels are characterized by the return of the dispossessed while black Southern writers are haunted by something or someone that has disappeared but needs to come back even if it is in the form of something else (88-89). Yaeger sees traditional Southern bodies being possessed by the fears of the past, especially fears of racial vengeance. In this reasoning, passing can be seen

as not merely an individual pretending to be something that an individual is not, but rather passers inhabiting bodies that do not belong to them because they have to return to where they originated. Yaeger sees traditional Southern bodies being possessed by the fears of the past that deal with race.

At the same time as Yaeger's article, many scholars were locating fears of the past in geography. According to Jennifer Rae Greeson, "consistent and pervasive relocation of colonial attributes onto the figure of the south in early national literature suggests that the nationalization of the United States was built in part upon an intranational, regionally-inflected symbolic geography, in which the terms 'South' and 'U.S.' formed an ideological juxtaposition" (210). The relocation of colonial attributes did not stop with early national literature, but pervaded scholarship dealing with the South, as well.⁷ In short, the South is as much a symbol of a place as it is a place itself. This symbolic place stands in opposition to the symbol that is the U.S. This is precisely what created the movement for a new approach to the South and the place that it is situated in literary criticism.

The importance of Yaeger's and Greeson's arguments is that they show the depth at which haunting can enter into a culture, and in terms of Southern culture specifically, they illustrate that the South will always be haunted by race and that one example of this racial haunting is the concept of racial passing. Traditionally, passing has been seen as a reaction to abuses of the planter class or possibly as a way in which whiteness self-creates blackness so that white power is justified. This is clearly seen in texts like Nella Larsen's *Passing*, the short stories of Charles Chesnutt, and many other texts. In short, traditional views of passing show an obsession with race.

Obsession with race is clearly evidenced in more contemporary New Southern Studies scholarship like Scott Romine's 2008 *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction* in which the obsession with race is located in the idea of cultural "backwardness." In his book, Romine focuses on the South's abrupt entrance into modernity in a post-traditional, post-agrarian rise of progress that is focused on secularization and capitalism, which created a time compression where the South was both backward and ahead of its time. Romine argues that the South's backwardness is the very thing that pushed it into the avant-garde of contemporary cultural poetics. However, the South was telling stories about assault on its culture far before stories of assault entered the grand narrative of modernity.

Romine's statement that the backwardness of the South is the very thing that pushed it into the avant garde of contemporary cultural poetics is an oxymoron that requires explanation in order to fully understand the importance of passing as geography. The South, which has been forced by its place in criticism to obsess over race to the point that it interferes with progress, must react to the ideology it has been hedged into, and does so by giving rise to a new, self-reflexive arena of cultural examination. This arena, culminating in the New Southern Studies, focuses on things like the body, region, and new definitions of what it means to be Southern instead of the old Southern studies steeped in stereotypical "myth" and boundaries based in race.

Perhaps Alfred Hornung best describes the merits of this emerging scholarship in his book review of Keith Cartwright's *Reading Africa into American Literature*:

What used to be considered a conservative discipline about a defeated culture, defined in a nostalgic Lost Cause movement and taken as an example of the existentialist dilemma of the modern Eurocentric world after two world wars, now has turned into an avant-garde discipline about a transnational creolized South

that has spearheaded a cultural and political transformation still ahead of the rest of the nation and Europe. (866)

What Hornung once saw as an outdated and outmoded critical field of study has become something new and exciting; a movement that would essentially bear out in a new way of looking at all geographies. Hornung's summary of the New Southern Studies, especially in its deployment of the category of the avant-garde, takes on additional meaning when viewed in terms of the substitutability in the avant-garde that Jean-François Lyotard presents in his essay "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde." Lyotard conceptualizes a form of the avant-garde that privileges the concept of substitutability, which is essentially the ability of one body to take the place of another in order to experience things in a new way. For the purposes of this essay, we can see the South as represented in the bodies of the novels' protagonists. Instead of seeing the protagonists leaving the South and then returning, we can trace the impact that the South has had in various parts of the northern U.S. and all throughout Europe. Here we see interaction between geographies as the South-inhabited protagonists interact with their Northern environments. Consequently, this reading heightens our definition of passing as the protagonists within the economy of the novels "fully embody" the South rather than simply live in that region for a number of years.

After considering the implications of substitutability, Lyotard draws upon Edmund Burke to discuss the limitations of imitation in art—especially in art forms like language and poetry. Further, Lyotard believes that art is essentially trying to show that the object from which the art is derived is unrepresentable. Because Burke believed that society was most often the inspiration for art, Lyotard's theory of unrepresentability furthers Burke's idea that "the social community no longer recognizes itself in art objects" (460). While Lyotard's discussion is enlightening for the

study of literature, it gains even more significance when one looks at the concept of passing. Here, the body operates in analogy to the art object, and the social community in analogy to the individual that literally inhabits that body.

The concept of the body in relation to its social community in the avant-garde connects directly to the foundational text of the New Southern Studies. Baker and Nelson decided to focus on the body because their speculation was “that the visual, bounded body of the Other was bedrock for the construction of both regionalism and racism in the United States” (232). The bodies in the South are central to the examination of a new form of Southern studies. By extending the reasoning of Baker and Nelson, one can understand the South through the body of the Ex-Colored Man in James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and the body of Julia in Page’s *The Southerner* because they present a regional geography against which the more abstract body of the “new American” could be articulated (Baker and Nelson 233).⁸ However, as Baker and Nelson argue, these bodies do not serve to help understand the “wholeness” that the nation has established through the regional Other of the South, because the “Pleasures of ‘The South,’ ... have been thick, complicated, and hard to navigate, always imbricated with the visual and the inescapable collapse of distinctions suggested by the homology ‘North equals Good Whites, Good Life for Blacks,’ while ‘South equals Bad Whites, Bad Life for Blacks’” (236). The avant-garde of the New Southern Studies, then, is the fight against this traditional representation of the South that has long been entertained by scholars and the public alike. This also explains the backwardness that thrusts the South into contemporary cultural poetics that Romine proposes—the South is dependent on the race of the bodies who inhabit it, but these Southern bodies are the only ones ideologically developed enough to stand in comparison to the new American body. These bodies, therefore, must be examined in new

critical ways, so that a reader can examine what happens when race is removed and how they can then stand against this new American body.

Next, the avant-garde shows us that in forms of imitation, like passing, the imitators are not merely pretending to exist in one region while really being inhabitants of another, but rather they are creating their own space independent of each. Lyotard explains: “Art does not imitate nature, it creates a world apart” (458). In this light, the ex-colored man’s passing does not make him white or even an African American passing as white; it creates an entirely new world that he inhabits and has to explore before it can become his own. According to the pre-Baker and Nelson Southern studies, we might look at the passer in terms of the protagonist with all of the ontological fixity focused on who the passer “really” is. He knows exactly who he is and he is deceiving those around him in order to benefit himself. Within the context of the New Southern Studies, however, the narrator-artist loses control of his work and cannot distinguish who he is from that work anymore. This is best exemplified by the passage in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* where the protagonist has just made the decision to pass and is now searching for a new identity. He narrates, “I finally made up my mind that I would neither disclaim the black race nor claim the white race; but that I would change my name, raise a mustache, and let the world take me for what it would” (139). This passing manifesto given by the protagonist represents the heart of passing as an avant-garde art form. It is avant-garde in the form of the body as a whole being the space of the work of art.

Though the ex-colored man states that he is not trying to represent one thing or another, he is substituting who he sees himself as (a black man) with the role that he sees in opposition to himself (a white man) because he understands that his audience will interpret him as such. This avant-garde perspective can be juxtaposed with the moment where the protagonist realizes that

he is not white. After being publicly interpellated as black by his teacher, the protagonist explains, “I did indeed pass into another world. From that time I looked out through other eyes, my thoughts were colored, my words dictated, my actions limited by one dominating, all-pervading idea which constantly increased in force and weight until I finally realized in it a great, tangible fact” (14). Here the young narrator saw himself as white and then completely transformed into seeing himself as black. This situation is as far from the avant-garde as possible because instead of challenging the systems that have taught him how to think and act, he completely accepts all of their tenets. The change in the narrator’s world view regarding his race is one of the things that makes the passing in the novel so profound. It is only in believing that he is a black man pretending to be a white man that the protagonist is able to develop a worldview that challenges his current status quo.

Finally, examination of the avant-garde enables an examination of the text itself as a passer in the South. The form of pseudo-autobiography that these texts utilize is especially important because it is structurally an avant-garde form. The form draws attention to its indeterminacy—the autobiography of a man who never really existed. It is also, however, the remnant of imitation, the remnant artistry, the remnant of the body. Essentially, what the avant-garde New Southern Studies is doing as a structural category is finding a new way to display excavated remains of the older South or to swap them out with new elements that can be studied under the context of the South and pollinating other regions with the bodies that have been imbued with Southernness and seeing how they grow in their new environments. In short, the New Southern Studies is a field concerned with new definitions of geography discovered through substitution. Passing is the future of the avant-garde and the future of the New Southern Studies as the field continues to substitute what is traditionally Southern and replace it with objects that

make us question what the South was, what it is, and what it might become. One can then examine whether or not the substitution has raised any critical eyebrows. The protagonist finally approaches this same point where he can look at himself in ways that he couldn't before near the final pages of the novel when he states, "It is difficult for me to analyze my feelings concerning my present position in the world. Sometimes it seems to me that I have never really been a Negro, that I have been only a privileged spectator of their inner life; at other times I am possessed by a strange longing for my mother's people" (153). Finally he can only view himself in an obscure frame, wondering what it means to be a Negro or white or a passer and ultimately what it means to be. In short, this new approach to the South calls for a more responsible form of reading.

Page's and Johnson's Upbringing and Ideology

Before engaging in an examination of the texts as a way to test out this new approach to critical geographies, one must have an introduction to contemporary scholars' views of the novel in terms of racial contracts and the effect of being raised in a society obsessed with imperialism. For Page and Johnson, racial passing is the primary device that steers the course of the novels. Scholar Jennifer L. Shurtz insists that Johnson's work "confirms that one cannot refuse participation in the racial contract; to attempt to do so is to mistakenly believe that one can remake oneself entirely—transcend the racial contract—simply by changing geographical location, passing for white, or reclassing oneself" (Schulz 35). Though said "racial contract" can be read into both *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and *The Southerner*, these novels present images of passing and geographical movement as keys to transcending the notion of race, thereby complicating the idea of a racial contract because such assumes that race is the only

thing one is trying to hide when passing. In fact, passing can be pretending to be a different race, nationality, regional inhabitant, or any number of other things.

As is, current *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* scholarship focuses predominantly on passing in terms of race. In his essay “Up from Empire: James Weldon Johnson, Latin America, and the Jim Crow South,” Harilaos Stecopoulos discusses the place of the South in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the first pages of the essay he locates this discussion in terms of the North’s approach to the South and states, “The problem of a rebellious U.S. South had demanded a violent Yankee response; the current disorder of the hemispheric South seems to require another type of northern intervention” (35). According to Stecopoulos, that intervention happened in part through black intellectuals supporting pro-imperialist U.S. foreign policy. He argues that “U.S. imperialism seems to have offered some members of the black bourgeoisie a sense of ‘northernness’” (37). Stecopoulos then connects this concept of imperialism to *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* by comparing the racial passer to the black imperialist, explaining that “both abandon the potential glories of racial struggle for the thin possibility of recognition by the white status quo” (38). Because Stecopoulos’s article succeeds in emphasizing the need to examine the global North and bring about the comparison between the passer and the imperialist, it clears the way for further examination of the full potential of the concept of passing: the fact that any ideology appearing to emanate from the North (like imperialism) might, in actuality, be a Southern concept that is merely passing for a Northern one. Furthermore, the form of passing that highlights the greatest divide between the North and the South might be one in which a Southerner is living in the North.

For Page, the divide between North and South was always too large and he sought, through writing, to encourage Southerners to engage in a spirit of U.S. nationalism. In his

personal writings he states that “The Southern people are conservative to a fault” (“Conservative”), meaning mostly that the Southern people were vehemently stuck in their ways.⁹ Clearly, Page had felt this way for a number of years and in an 1885 letter to *The Boston Post* entitled “The Southern Problem,” Page expressed his desire for the South to be thought of as a part of a unified nation. The letter states: “If it be desirable to know precisely what the southern problem is, the first thing to do, remembering that the southern states are a part of the Union, an original integral and important part, is to consider what the American problem in general is” (1). Though twenty years after the Civil War, nationalized thinking would have still been fairly radical in the South at the time the letter was written. In addition, the letter was radical in its suggestion that the North is identified partially through the heritage of the South. Further, Page’s letter does not blame the North for limiting the national unity that could take place, but rather discusses the problem in terms of the South: “In hope and in purpose the south is national; but in fact it is provincial. The task in hand is to encourage every nationalizing tendency. That, as I understand it, is the southern problem” (3).

In addition to his nationalizing rallying cry, Page also sought to undo some of the traditional politics that existed in the U.S. South. In an undated letter addressed to an unnamed late-nineteenth-century “President-elect,” Page expressed his sentiments:

And we shall welcome the impending and inevitable breaking of the Solid South (perhaps we shall lead it), not for the sake of the Republican party nor for the sake of the Democratic party, but for the sake of open-mindedness and freedom of political action, so that all men there may walk by thought and not by formulas, and act by convictions and not by traditions.¹⁰

Though readers may see Page's desire for this breaking from "formulas" and "traditions" as evidence that he merely wanted to turn the South into the North, in reality he felt strongly that the South had an identity that could not be replicated in any other place.

Page felt that there was a deeper feeling associated with this Southern identity than can be explained by mere geography or race. This depth is in turn reflected in his writing. In his handwritten manuscripts—journal pages that he used to flesh out ideas for speeches and articles—Page explains what he calls the "Southern Feeling":

It is the feeling that we are a people – peculiar and distinct – that we have a birthright in a great past. This feeling is very strong and very broad. It is something that is a very part of our constitution. It is broader than any church, broader than any political party, broader than any organization whatever. The very word "Southerner" conveys a meaning to us deeper than any geographical significance, broader than any party distinctions. It means a certain type of thought and feeling – the influence of peculiar creeds of peculiar habits of thought of peculiar habits of life, of climate and food and inheritance and occupation. Of course I do not mean Southern feeling as opposed to Northern feeling. I mean Southern as opposed to French or to English or to German – Southern as opposed not to any other particular people – but Southern sentiments or Southern thought as opposed to all other sentiment and thought – something that is the peculiar product of our soil. Southern feeling is as strong as any national feeling in the world. ("Southern")

Here, Page elucidates the importance of Southern existence as he compares Southern thought (or how a Southerner thinks) to all other sentiment. While one can appreciate the passion with

which this was written, it is slightly oxymoronic; Southern feeling is stronger than geography, yet is defined by geography. Yet, the idea that Page did want to get across is that the feeling of Southerness does not have to remain in the South—its borders can be expanded. This broadens the way that the South can be explored as it is no longer a juxtaposition to the U.S. North, but becomes its own, powerful, international region that can be compared to all other places. When viewed in terms of the New Southern Studies, one questions how one can have a Southern identity if the South is continually being defined in broader and broader terms. The ex-colored man sees himself as losing his Southern identity by choosing to pass: “I cannot repress the thought that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage” (154). Consequently, like the ex-colored man sees racial identity in the last line of the novel, Page sees his geographical identity as a birthright—something that can be sold or lost, or as something that can provide focus and stability. The new vision that this provides is one example of how this new way of looking at geography can challenge traditional readings of a text. Instead of seeing the ex-colored man as merely an ex-colored man, the reader can now see him as an ex-Southern man, failing to live the birthright that he was destined for.

Passing and the Avant-Garde in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and *The Southerner*

While each novel is filled with examples of passing, it is most prudent to examine those in which geography is explicitly included in the passing scene (as evidence that geographical passing can lead to important critical discoveries), and scenes in which the passing characters fulfill some sort of avant-garde role as passers. The initial examples in this section are explained through the idea of imperialism, simply because many of the scholarly sources examining *The*

Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man use this term to talk about geographical issues. This term naturally translates to the definition of passing that I am promoting in this essay.

An example of this first type of passing can be organized around the role that imperialism plays with regard to ragtime in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. Stecopoulos draws attention to the scene in which the German plays ragtime with a classical slant and argues that this demonstrates that the Europeans are still in control of even the most popular American-based music (52). What he leaves unobserved, however, is that the roots of ragtime already incorporate European influences in combination with West African rhythms. He states “instead of ragtime marching triumphantly across the globe—the black South becomes the site of colonization itself” (53). When the music is exposed as a passer, its origin naturally comes into question and cannot be adequately determined. Or, rather, the music thrives in the space that is created between the two worlds as is illuminated in my earlier discussion of the avant-garde. The music is not African pretending to be European or European pretending to be African, but rather is ragtime—something in between.

Another point at which passing problematizes imperialism is in an examination of the ex-colored man’s own imperialistic notions. While the ex-colored man, reflecting on his past, admits that he cannot definitely answer whether or not he really wanted to revolutionize traditional Negro folk music for selfish purposes, he says that at least part of it was because he “felt stirred” to give the Negro a voice in popular music (108). Stecopoulos, however, asserts that his method was, in fact, selfish: “the desire to gloatingly steal the folk rhythms and melodies of the black rural people for his own professional ambitions hardly corresponds to his earlier desire” (53). Were Stecopoulos’s claims accurate, this would then be the corruption of the avant-garde because this is the point at which the protagonist decides that having capital is

synonymous with success—however, the fact that he is passing unsettles the issue. The true innovation here that is avant-garde is the fact that in substitutability, the substitute is able to retain some of the same qualities that it had when it existed in its previous role. In this passage the factor that corrupts the avant-garde is that the protagonist is trying to become white, not to become a substitute for white. As a result, he fails to realize that he was always a part of this capitalist system, even if he saw money as a white man's success. In the pre-Baker and Nelson Southern studies, where a putatively stable identity was crucial, this loss of self may have been mourned or pitied, but in this new avant-garde Southern studies, it is in the loss that we are reminded that capitalism has always been at play throughout the entire novel and is central to the nation's North/South divide.

Furthermore, the ex-colored man's statement about passing makes it easy to believe that he had imperialist desires: "I had made up my mind that since I was not going to be a Negro, I would avail myself of every possible opportunity to make a white man's success; and that, if it can be summed up in any one word, means 'money'" (141). However, seeing this statement as imperialistic ignores one crucial fact—the ex-colored man made the decision to pass after viewing the lynching of a black man. This fact suggests that perhaps passing for the narrator was not about exploitation, but about survival. As such, passing in this circumstance must be viewed differently than a way to exploit the masses.

For the protagonist in the novel, anxiety (and more likely terror) seem natural responses for the life that he lives. Certainly, this is even more clear when one examines the effect that seeing a black man lynched has on him before he decides to pass. The ex-colored man states, "He squirmed, he withered, strained at his chains, then gave out cries and groans that I shall always hear" (145). Furthermore, complications arise from the breaking from the safety of the

status quo by being married to a white woman and holding the type of job that he has with the amount of pay that he receives. However, his other feelings that he describes with humor can be better understood through earlier definitions of the avant-garde in that indeterminacy provides pleasure through the risk of getting caught. The protagonist muses, “The anomaly of my social position often appealed strongly to my sense of humor. I frequently smiled inwardly at some remark not altogether complimentary to people of color” (144). The author continues, “Many a night when I returned to my room after an enjoyable evening, I laughed heartily over what struck me as the capital joke I was playing” (144). The experience that the protagonist was undergoing is as much a triumph for the New Southern Studies as it was for the ex-colored man, for it is this emerging way of looking at the literature of the South that can steer the emerging New Southern Studies toward critiques that examine geographical locations as ideologies that are passing for other locations.

Ironically, it was also in this sublime joke that the protagonist began to triumph because the music that he was popular for was the only remnant of blackness that he left exposed. Cristina Rutolo describes the protagonist’s music as “Spontaneous and improvisatory, involving its audience in call and response, and expressively tied to body and memory, black music occupies a unique position in Johnson’s text” (250). As the protagonist wonders about the musician that plays at his millionaire’s party in New York City, he indicates that his merging of the two ethnic groups to which he has lived with has given him some sort of advantage: “I began to wonder what this man with such a lavish natural endowment would have done had he been trained. Perhaps he wouldn’t have done anything at all; he might have become, at best, a mediocre imitator of the great masters in what they have already done to a finish” (101-02). While the man described offers an incredible technique that the protagonist admires, the ex-

colored man cannot help but wonder if traditional education would render the man a mediocre imitator. In terms of his own avant-garde art, the protagonist produces “ragtime transcriptions of familiar classic selections,” that he is uniquely qualified to do. He ignores authenticity and utilizes the best of all aspects of his musical background to create something that functions as a bridge between two different ethnic musical backgrounds—something that only a passer can do because every bridge figure is a passer. The bridge is formed out of the critical space that is established when one is passing; the space the lies between the passers “true” identity and the one in which he is pretending to be.

A final example where passing highlights imperialist ideology is the scene in which the ex-colored man sees his father and sister in the Paris Opera house (97-99). In this scene, the ex-colored man is forced into a passing role, one in which he must pretend to not be related to those that are next to him. However, through his narration we realize that his Southern father and sister are imposters in this northern world. While the text does not reveal the circumstances in which this family has been presenting themselves in Paris, it shows that they have an influence on the Parisian opinion of Americans. This suggests a link between Southerners traveling and international opinion of Americans and questions how such can change depending upon how stark the divide between the U.S. North and the U.S. South really is. Thus, we have passing (or potential passing) on multiple levels: the ex-colored man passing as someone who is not related to the people sitting next to him, the ex-colored man’s estranged family passing as a complete family unit, and the potential passing of the family as European or northern and the ex-colored man’s potential passing as white. Were we to look at this from a racial perspective, the only potential passing in this scene would be the ex-colored man. All of this passing leads the reader to realize that passing is not merely racial—many people are passing as something that they do

not consider themselves to be. This passage also makes the reader question which of these passing experiences is most important or most inauthentic.

Regardless of which level is most important, one significant theme in each novel revolves around returning to the South as a passer. In the beginning, the return for each of them represents a return to a source of inspiration. For the ex-colored man this inspiration is rooted in music. It is only after hearing the way that ragtime is played in Europe that he vows to return to the United States and more specifically “back into the very heart of the South, to live among the people, and drink [his] inspiration firsthand” (142). The ex-colored man believes that it is only in the South that he can become the type of musician of which he dreamed. Rutolo rightfully points out the irony of this situation, stating that “While he granted the ‘natural’ ragtime player the status of originator, he seems here to assume that only the trained musician’s ‘touching’ of this material counts, discounting the very Southern ‘people’ whose inspired performances he ‘drink[s]...firsthand’” (265). While Rutolo appreciates the irony of this particular section, she does not articulate the complications that passing brings into the narrative. Certainly, the ex-colored man is an accomplished and trained musician (and sees himself as such) but he is also very much a Southerner, at least in terms of the blood that is in his veins. To complicate the matter even more, we can turn to the patron’s characterization of the ex-colored man shortly before this scene: “My boy, you are by blood, by appearance, by education, and by tastes a white man” (145). If we are to accept this definition of the ex-colored man we must then accept the fact that he is more of a passer when he is trying to reclaim slave narratives than he is when he is working as a white businessman. Consequently, we as readers have to question which identifier is the most important—skin color, education, appearance, or blood.

Similarly, Page's narrator, Nicholas Worth, is accused of passing by his cousin Margaret. After Worth expresses disapproval at Margaret's dangerous retrieval of a confederate bullet and flag from a burning church, Margaret states, "Mr. Nicholas Worth, you don't approve of me—you don't...You've gone away from our people. You've got your Yankee notions....You are not Southern" (176). Here Worth begins to understand the consequences of leaving the South to receive an education. He no longer fits into the space by which he defines himself. However, this draws attention to the implicit question of passing—what does it mean to be an authentic Southerner and what does it mean to pretend to be something else? Certainly, Worth sees himself as a Southerner, but when others do not, does that make him a passer in his own community? The true stake in this is a matter of identity and a further complicates the definition of passing by showing that one can pass when one has no desire to do so, especially when the passing is geographical passing.

Like the ex-colored man, Worth's return to the South also results from artistic inspiration. We read that after returning home, Worth was compelled by a desire to write a history of the South and notes particularly "what youth has not [made up his mind to write a history] his first summer out of a university" (119). So while his education provided him with a desire to write a history, it is the South that provided his inspiration. Though he is compelled to write this history, he never actually completes a history of the south, per se; what he does complete is the autobiography that we are reading. Naturally this invites the reader to see the autobiography of Nicholas Worth as Worth's history of the South, especially considering that its title is "The Southerner." For Worth, the history of the South becomes the history of himself and the history of himself becomes the history of the South. The South is the people more than a geography, or the geography of the South lies within the people. The South can go to the North to be educated,

it can pretend to be Northern, it can show itself for monetary gain or hide when it doesn't want to be discovered. If we read geography in these terms, with the body as a location of the geography and not just the physical location, we can begin to work out some of the problems in the ex-colored man's dilemma. He can, then, inhabit multiple spaces at once, and passing is not necessarily pretending to be something that he is not, but rather emphasizing certain aspects of his personality while hiding others.

The most conventional example of passing in either of the novels, however, is Julia's return to the South in *The Southerner*. Julia's return occurs twenty-five years after the story told in *The Southerner*, and as it is the only event described by Worth after the timeframe of the rest of his autobiography it merits special critical attention. Julia returns and divulges her identity to Worth though "She had come to the South for a few weeks...with no idea that she would reveal her identity to anyone" (422). Though she has changed her life completely and cannot reveal her identity to without running the risk of "wrecking her own life and her husband's life" (422), and yet she makes the journey back to her childhood home despite the risk of possible exposure. For Julia, we see the South not as a place of inspiration but as a place of identification. Even though she has completely reinvented herself as a new individual, she has to return to the place where she was a child and has to tell her story to someone. Though Julia may be one of the only "non-tragic" mulatto characters in literature at the time (Romine xxxiv), she exposes one of the great tragedies of passing—that one cannot lose one's identity in one's new life. It is something that one must carry with oneself even though one's "'colour' would never be detected outside the South" (422). Julia still sees herself as African American—or who she thinks she really is.

When compared to Johnson's outcome for his ex-colored man, Page's novel offers a much different outcome for Julia, the passer in his story, and yet one that also begins to break

down the North/South, black/white dichotomies. She explains her history to Nicholas Worth, who in turn relates it to the audience. He says “she was graduated from Oberlin College...still as a ‘coloured’ girl; but her ‘colour’ would never be detected outside the South” (421-22). Here the reader begins to see the difficulties that arise with the racial and geographical classifications. Worth continues that Julia moved to Illinois, passed as white, and married an extremely rich engineer. Through the passage in which Julia returns to the old home, the author conveys the significance of the fact that Julia is passing as a white person in the North. He explains that “there was no human being but me to whom she could tell so simple a fact without risk of wrecking her own life and her husband’s life” (422). Certainly this fear indicates the significance that this racial passing has had in the entire life of this woman. In this circumstance we see the significance that this passing had in her life. Though she is introduced at the beginning of the novel and resurges just at the end, this experience shows the reader that she never can leave her past behind. It also makes the reader question who else in the novel might be passing as something that they are not.

To this point, Julia Wheelwright’s experience with passing has been without negative consequence. All that the reader can infer indicates that Julia has lived a charmed life as a white woman in the North. However, the most significant part of the scene comes in the next paragraph in the novel where Nicholas Worth discusses his visit with Julia to his colleagues. He states, “The young men came in from the hunt. I told them that a strange thing had happened. A ‘Yankee’ woman had called to ask if the place was for sale, and she looked over it, and I had a long and interesting talk with her” (423). In this passage, Worth’s words show that geography is the most important element of this passing experience. Julia is a Southerner who is passing as a Northerner, and while the Southerners might understand why a black man would want to pass as

a white man, they would never understand why someone would want to abandon his roots in the South. While traditional definitions of passing would allow us to analyze portions of these two texts, seeing them in terms of a definition of passing that favors geography allows us to critique the text on multiple levels and in multiple locations. Essentially, it promotes the more rigorous scholarship that the New Southern Studies demands.

Passing, Geography, and the Future of the New Southern Studies

According to this geographical passing, one can see that the wholeness of the nation being established through the abjection of the South as a regional Other can be explained in part by a focus on geography and in part through examining the characteristics of the avant-garde. Looking at these texts in terms of this new South allows for critical interventions that were not possible a decade ago. Furthermore, the ideas of a character passing suggests that the “wholeness” that we see in the North was inauthentic when one considered the nature of passing—that one cannot really know who the people around one actually are. Passing changes the societal rules because even if no one is actually passing, authenticity can never really be proven. This change, then allows for an intervention to take place in the way that we examine the relationship between the North and the South, especially when we consider that passing does not necessarily have to be about race. It is only here that the connections can be made through the avant-garde substitutions that are taking place in the New Southern Studies.

While recent studies have promoted the idea of a global South or multiple Souths that can expand the way that we read global literature in terms of the traditional American South, I propose that it may be just as fruitful to look at the South in terms of passing or rather to look at

literature that has traditionally been thought of as something other than Southern and see if it is not simply masquerading as that other thing. Passing, in its myriad forums, is such a crucial part of Southern literature that we cannot separate it as something different or discuss it merely as a recurring theme. It needs to be examined in a larger context. What happens when we view canonical “northern” literature as traditional Southern texts? What more can we see if we expose a slave narrative that has been passing as an autobiography? How is the Northern identity changed when one considers that the South had been exported to the North since the Post-Civil War Era (or even earlier)? Is passing ultimately about race, geography, class, or something else entirely?

In effect, passing complicates all definitions of Southern and Northern, black and white, imperialist and exploited native. Passing must call into question how we are to view nationalism, especially if we are seeing that South as a nation independent of the North. The failing reconstruction no doubt influenced the global politics of each of these hemispheres and the work they did outside of the United States. Furthermore, the ideas of a character passing suggests that any wholeness that we see in the North is punctuated with blacks passing as whites, Southerners passing for Northerners, and fractured individuals suffering from identity crises passing for the members of society living whole lives at the expense of the abject South. This in turn creates an intervention into the South in terms of its pollination of the North that must be further explored.

The New Southern Studies as a field of study largely reflects this return to the South that the protagonists of both the novels are doing; for it is a scholarly return but with new eyes to interpret the landscape and literature. Why do we now choose to return to the South? As scholars, do we, like the ex-colored man want to drink our inspiration firsthand? Are we like

Nicolas Worth in feeling that scholarly examination of the South is equivalent to scholarly examination of ourselves? Or are we like Julia, who returns to something dangerously familiar and looks at it as a new woman who has defined herself. Regardless of why scholars we have return to the South, it is now critically important that our return take into account critical interventions that can take place when passing is considered. We must see the South not as a geographical space that interacts with the North and other global geographies, but as one that has possibly been shaping those geographies from within by passing as just other part of their traditional geographical mores. Here, then, the South can take on additional significance as a determining and decisive geographical space.

Notes

¹ It is important to note that Page was not only familiar with the African American condition in terms of Southern politics, but also in terms of Southern literature. Some of his correspondence included letters to prominent black writers like Charles Chesnutt. Houston Baker Jr.'s *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987) offers an interesting excerpt of a letter from Chesnutt to Page.

² Information on Johnson's years in the South can be found in Robert E. Fleming's 1987 *James Weldon Johnson* (1987) or Eugene Levy's *James Weldon Johnson: Black Leader, Black Voice* (1973).

³ See William L. Andrew's introduction to *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and Scott Romine's introduction to *The Southerner*.

⁴ Such conversations include Leigh Anne Duck's *The Nation's Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism* (2006) and her article "Rethinking Community: Post-

Plantation Literatures in Postmodernity,” as well as Kathryn McKee and Annette Trefzer’s

“Preface: Global Contexts, Local Literatures: The New Southern Studies.”

⁵ Theodore Roosevelt appointed Johnson U.S. Consul in Venezuela from 1906 to 1908 and then Nicaragua from 1909 to 1913. Page was appointed ambassador to Britain in 1913 and served until 1918.

⁶ A vast collection of reviews can be found in the Walter Hines Page papers at the Houghton Library.

⁷ See Houston A. Baker, Jr. and Dana D. Nelson’s Preface in *American Literature* June 2001; Denise K. Cummings, Anne Goodwyn Jones, and Jeff Rice’s article in *Southern Quarterly* Fall 2003; Michael Kreyling’s “Toward a New Southern Studies” in *South Central Review* Spring 2005; or “The U.S. South in Global Contexts: A Collection of Position Statements” in *American Literature* December 2006.

⁸ “New American” is Baker and Nelson’s attempt at a term that does not have an implicit provincial U.S. geography.

⁹ The Walter Hines Page papers at the Houghton Library at Harvard contain a single large box of loose, personal, hand-written pages most of which lack titles and dates. This essay’s Works Cited page identifies these documents by their titles or first lines.

¹⁰ This letter is addressed to the president-elect without any other identifying information. Though Page had extensive correspondence with President Woodrow Wilson due to his duties as a U.S. ambassador, it is unlikely that the letter was being addressed to him, as Page’s political writings had turned mostly away from the South at this point in his chronology.

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