Race and Ethnicity in
*The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and *The Rise of David Levinsky:*
The Performative Difference

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Contemporary critics have questioned the reliance on the black-white binary as the defining paradigm of racial formation in the United States. Eric Goldstein contends that despite the black-white dichotomy’s power “it was never a sufficient framework for understanding the much more complex set of categories through which Progressive-Era Americans understood and spoke about race” (398). Susan Koshy warns us of the dangers of leaving “the intermediary racial groups” untheorized (159). Racialization has indeed been a complex and uneven process in the US, and the black-white divide is insufficient for explaining how racial categories have operated on the level of social practices. However, I argue that the very intelligibility of intermediary racial groups and ethnicity depends on the prior construction of the black-white binary. In effect, the black-white axis has operated to secure the tenuousness of race to a framework of stable boundaries, which in turn has provided the necessary grounding for the ideology of white supremacy (Wiegman 9).¹

In what follows I examine two seminal novels from the Progressive Era: Abraham Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) and James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912). These texts, now canonical within Jewish American and African American literary traditions respectively,
were written just a few years apart. Both novels explicitly query what it means “to be American,” and they do so by exploring how “race” affects one’s chances of success in the Progressive Era US. Werner Sollors sums up the similarities between the two novels in the following way: “Both books depict the externally upward journeys of protagonists from poverty to material success, from ethnic marginality to a more ‘American’ identity, and from a small-town background to the urban environment of New York” (170).

While Sollors underscores the affinities between the two novels, I highlight the differences by juxtaposing specific scenes from each text, scenes that have certain narrative and structural similarities. I examine the distinctive modalities of race and ethnicity as manifested in these Progressive Era texts, arguing that the texts reveal three aspects of racial discourse in the United States. First, racial discourse has largely evolved around an ideology of a binary opposition: the black-white divide. Second, racial discourse has created a very patent racial stratification; while black and white have, for the most part, served as the reference points and the defining terms, there have been “intermediary” racial groups. Third, the constructions of race and ethnicity have had very different historical trajectories in the US context. The texts, in sum, gesture toward both the historical difference between the racialized status of African Americans and the racial in-betweenness of other minority groups, as well as the way in which the black-white divide informs the construction of these in-between groups.

The Train Ride

In this section, I extract two scenes from Autobiography and Rise in an attempt to illustrate some of the ways in which the black-white divide has operated. Both texts, I argue, reveal the power of the dichotomy, pointing to the ways it has circumscribed racial logic and categorization. However, they also dramatize the uncertainty surrounding the racial position of the Jew at the turn of the century, which, I believe, can be seen to represent the way in which the hegemonic discourse on race imposed (and produced) ideals of whiteness while simultaneously barring “not-quite-white” minority groups from the privileges of Anglo-Saxon whiteness.
The binary opposition can thus be seen to serve as a nexus which not only circumscribes racial logic but also spawns what Susan Koshy terms “stratified minoritization” (155).

In the latter part of the novel, the narrator of Autobiography decides to pursue a career as a ragtime musician and travels to the South. During one of his train journeys, the narrator describes an interesting encounter among four men in the smoking car: a Jew, a professor, an old Union soldier, and a Texan. The conversation develops into a dialogue between the Union Soldier and the Texan. The Southerner vehemently argues that “[t]he Anglo-Saxon race has always been and always will be the masters of the world” and that the Civil War was a “criminal mistake” (161). The Northerner upholds the “essential rights of men” but concurrently admits that he wouldn’t consent to his daughter’s marrying a “nigger” (163).

This scene is interesting not so much for the way the stereotypical attitudes of the Northerner and Southerner are depicted, but rather for what it fails to disclose and for the way the Jew and the narrator himself are positioned as the scene unfolds. What the narrator does not reveal is that the smoking-compartment is, undoubtedly, for whites only. This is, after all, a portrayal of the Deep South at the turn of the twentieth century. The narrator is clearly “passing.” As a “black” man, he would be denied access to such a space, a (purportedly) all-white and all-male hegemonic site. It is only by virtue of his “light skin” and the assumption of whiteness that he is privy to the discussion at all.

The white men take center stage in this scene, and, as the narrator indicates, define the terms of the debate: the overt white supremacist views held by the Texan versus the liberal white paternalism of the old Union soldier. The Jew is present in the compartment and thus seems to be accepted as white. His position vis-à-vis the dominant culture, though, is not altogether unproblematic, and the Jew’s diplomatic interjections reveal his somewhat precarious situation. He cannot totally side with the white racist, for this would seemingly sanction anti-Semitism (158). On the other hand, the narrator also suggests that the Jew attempts to differentiate himself from the Negro by agreeing to the Negro’s natural inferiority. The Jew appears to be able to assume a certain kind of white privilege, yet he cannot assume white Anglo-Saxon privilege.
His "Jewishness," which he does not attempt to conceal, seems to stand in the way. The narrator, in stark contrast, must not only conceal his "Blackness" but is also silenced; he watches and listens as "the Negro" is discussed. Moreover, he would not even be physically present if it were not for his ability to "pass."

It is also on a train ride that Jew meets Black in Cahan's *Rise.* After David Levinsky begins to succeed in the manufacturing business, he decides to travel cross-country to find buyers for his wares. It is the description of one of these trips to the Midwest which bears some structural resemblance to the scene described above. Again, the scene in *Rise* unfolds in the smoking car, where a group of men, both Jews and gentiles, are discussing a variety of topics. Loeb, a "drummer," suddenly turns the conversation to the Russian Jews and pokes fun at their "foreign" mannerisms. Levinsky, who is himself a gesticulating Russian Jew, laughs "with the others," but is described as inwardly writhing with discomfort and anger. He confronts Loeb, asking him why he is making fun of the Jewish people when Loeb himself is a Jew. Loeb readily admits that he is a Jew and a "good one, too," but he doesn't understand what his being Jewish has to do with anything (328).

Both train scenes, I argue, expose that the Jews' position on the white side of the divide cannot yet be taken for granted. The ex-colored man's description of the Jew's equivocation on the "Negro question," and thus his lack of assumption of privilege vis-à-vis the dominant culture is one indication of his still in-between status. The parallel assumed between anti-Black racism and anti-Semitism illustrates that questions of Jewish acceptance into mainstream American culture still revolved around "race." Loeb's jibes at the Russian Jews alongside the scene's description of Levinsky's attempt to hide his gesticulating hands and his desire to emulate the "well-dressed American Gentiles" also point to the still precarious or unsettled position of the Jew in relation to the hegemonic white American culture.

The train scene in *Rise* can, however, be understood as a dramatization of how "becoming American" in turn-of-the-century America required jockeying for a position in relation to the racial reference points (Collins 9). Unlike the Jew who, in the first scene, fails to take a stand on the "Negro question," Loeb, who is Ameri-
can-born, not only seems to have no trouble revealing his “Jewishness,” but also makes a point of ridiculing the Russian Jews in the presence of gentiles. This can be read as kind of “white” bonding, an attempt on the part of Loeb to differentiate himself from the more recent arrivals. Loeb is simultaneously positioning himself and other American-born Jews closer to the side of the gentiles and initiating Levinsky into the dominant “white” society, showing him what needs to be done in order to gain not only admittance but also acceptance into the hegemonic culture.

In this all-male hegemonic space, the Jew is literally and metaphorically both inside and outside. Levinsky listens and laughs at the others’ stories, but he does not actively participate. Loeb’s more secure relationship to the dominant white and gentile culture suggests that once the Jews leave their foreign ways behind, there is a great likelihood that they will be recognized as “full-blooded whites.” It is no coincidence that the “deformity” which Loeb believes marks the Russian Jew is a form of gesticulation. The Russian Jew is being made fun of not so much due to any kind of perceived natural or essential inferiority, but rather because of his outward, and thus dispensable, signs of foreignness.

Toward the end of this scene, several men, gentiles and Jews, enter the dining car together. Levinsky describes this repast as filling him with pleasure: “The electric lights, [...] the whiteness of the table linen, the silent efficiency of the colored waiters, [...] [and] the easy urbanity of the three well-dressed Americans gave me a sense of uncanny gentility and bliss” (330). This is the first and last time a black man appears on the scene. The presence of the silent and silenced black servant is contrasted with the whiteness of the table linen, and thus metonymically with the “white” men eating at the table. This contrast serves as a background for, and I would argue, facilitates the Jew’s negotiation of his racial positioning. In other words, this scene is a dramatization of the way in which “Negroes” have historically served as the “other” against which a “popular sense of Whiteness, which cut across ethnicity [...] could be generated” (Roediger 127). While the Jew is portrayed in both scenes as a “middleman minority,” it seems that his acceptance into symbolic whiteness is well on its way.
If race and ethnicity are cultural “fictions” with their own specific histories, how then have they come to operate as categories of identification, that is, as one of the hegemonic categories of identification through which subjects become intelligible as subjects? According to Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, power operates primarily in a positive fashion by producing objects of inquiry and knowledge, constituting norms, and thus helping to create and shape subjects’ identities, preferences, aspirations, and behavior. Negative power, then, in its Foucauldian sense, ensures through prohibitions and restrictions that subjects conform to constructed norms. In this section, I suggest that in order to understand how race and ethnicity have operated as categories of identification in the US, we need to re-conceptualize race and ethnicity as particular modalities of performativity. Although much has been written on the constructed nature of the categories of race and ethnicity, very few analyses have offered a theoretical account of how race and ethnicity might be conceived of as performative reiteration.

Performativity, in short, is the power of discourse to bring about what it names through the citing or repetition of a particular symbolic order’s regulatory ideals. Subjects are interpellated into the symbolic order as gendered, classed, and raced beings, and once interpellated, they must, in turn, incessantly cite and mime the very norms that created their intelligibility (and thus their condition of possibility) in the first place. The symbolic order is made up of various categories of identification which are concatenated to regulatory injunctions, i.e., social norms that are constituted by a set of specific, prescriptive, and culturally determined practices, attributes, rules, qualities, and traits with which the subject identifies and attempts to approximate.

In order to understand how these norms work as both positive and negative power, it is necessary to locate the dominant norms circulating in a given society and to examine how subjects attempt to cite them through their behavior, gestures, speech, acts, etc. But since the norms linked to the different categories of identification, such as race, class, and gender, are not identical and have their own particular genealogies, we need to think of each category as
producing specific modalities of performativity. The way these modalities of performativity are produced, however, cannot be reduced to the varying norms attached to each category. Rather, I contend that norms operate, in large part, by producing and encouraging a certain relationship between the subject’s identification and “desire to be.”

While there are two idealized genders under regimes of compulsory heterosexuality, albeit with a very great power differential between them, there has historically been only one hegemonic and ideal race under racist regimes. Heterosexual regimes of the US type have operated by engendering, encouraging, and compelling a specific type of relationship between identification and “desire to be”; subjects are interpellated into the symbolic order as either men or women and thus compelled to identify as either one while simultaneously induced and urged to live up to hegemonic norms linked to the categories “man” and “woman.” More specifically, in heteronormativity, identification with “being a woman” almost always implies (and is inextricably intertwined with) the desire to “be a woman,” that is, a desire to live up to the norms of femininity in a particular symbolic order. Since compulsory heterosexuality needs “women” to desire to live up to norms of femininity in order to operate effectively, hegemonic gender discourse has historically camouflaged hierarchy by employing the euphemisms of difference and complementarity. Femininity has thus been posited as desirable, and as something that “women” should approximate.

Like norms of gender identification, race norms also operate by compelling subjects to assume or identify with certain identity categories. However, the forced identification with Blackness has not been historically linked with a desire to live up to norms associated with blackness. Rather, Black-identified subjects, in order to sustain a non-marginal existence vis-à-vis the dominant culture, are compelled and encouraged to privilege and thus desire to be “white,” i.e., to live up to attributes associated with whiteness. The hegemonic race discourse has created and encouraged a distinct bifurcation between identification and “desire to be,” such that certain subjects who are (initially) forced to identify as “Black” are simultaneously encouraged to privilege and desire attributes associated with whiteness. Thus, the delinking of identification and
“desire to be” is key to understanding the particular mechanisms by and through which norms of race have operated on the hegemonic level.

In terms of performativity, both Autobiography and Rise reveal the coerced aspect of subjects’ interpellation and the complex relationship between identification and the “desire to be.” The ex-colored man is interpellated into society as “white”; his mother has never discussed the issue of race with him, and, consequently, he has never been told that he is “black” according to the existent one-drop rule. Rather, immersed in a culture where there is an assumption of whiteness, he too assumes he is “white.” But early on, the narrator experiences a “corrective,” as it were, where he is (re)interpolated into society as a “black” man even though he “looks white.”

One day, the principal enters the narrator’s classroom, asking all of the white children to stand. The narrator stands with the rest of the “white” children, only to be told that he needs to “sit down for the present, and rise with the others” (16). The ex-colored man describes this interpellation into the US race regime as a tragedy. He tells us from “that time I looked out through other eyes, my thoughts were colored, my words dictated, my actions by one dominating, all pervading idea which constantly increased in force and weight” (21, emphasis added). Thus, the narrator’s interpellation scene underscores both the way in which whiteness serves as the unmarked norm and how race, as a category of identification, has historically been coerced. Being interpolated into the race regime, the narrator claims, “is the dwarfing, warping, distorting influence which operates upon each and every colored man in the United States. He is forced to take his outlook on all things, not from the view-point of a citizen, or a man, or even a human being, but from the view point of a colored man” (21, emphasis added). For if race is one of the axes along which differentiation and stratification revolve, then the interpellation into the symbolic order as a raced subject is crucial for the workings of power and, more particularly, for the grounding of white supremacy.

Johnson depicts his young narrator’s struggle to come to terms with his new position in the social world. On the one hand, the author reveals how racist regimes compel and encourage subjects to
desire to live up to norms associated with whiteness. Throughout his childhood, the narrator distances himself from the other black children in his school because he “had a very strong aversion to being classed with them” (23). His best friend is Red, a white boy, and his first love a white woman. On the other hand, Johnson also shows us how, in social practice, this compulsion to “desire to be white” is always much more complex and conflictual.

Racial norms are spawned by a particular configuration of power relations, and these norms not only serve as one of the conditions of possibility of viable subjects but also help to produce and shape subjects’ preferences, aspirations, desires, and identifications. Subjects are not, however, just docile bodies; they can and do disidentify with dominant norms. The ex-colored man’s “desire to be” is strongly influenced by the norms of whiteness. He does not associate with other black children in his adolescence. And he finds norms associated with whiteness difficult to abjure. His multi-tiered classification of African Americans reveals his belief in “uplift,” “progress,” and “civilization,” all terms which in the US context inevitably reinscribe Anglo-Saxon whiteness as the pinnacle of civilization.

However, as soon as he “discovers” that he is “black” and forced to identify as such, his “desire to be” fluctuates. Before his interpellation into the race regime as a “black” man, his heroes are King David and Robert the Bruce, but subsequently he discovers Frederick Douglass and Alexandre Dumas. He begins to dream of “bringing glory and honor to the Negro race [...] to be a great man, a great colored man, to reflect credit on the race and gain fame for myself” (46). Later in the novel, he describes his desire to become a famous “black” composer, even after his millionaire patron offers to help him become a famous “white” European musician. The desire to be a “black” composer reveals the partial abjuration of white norms. This apparent embrace of Blackness suggests that coerced identification can also have productive subject effects, in the sense that subjects can and do perform regulatory ideals in contestatory ways. By “choosing” to continue identifying as “black” and becoming a “black” composer, the protagonist is thwarting the hegemon’s injunction to desire whiteness. This is particularly powerful since the protagonist “looks white”; thus his insistence on
the desirability of Blackness can potentially disrupt hegemonic discourse.

Ultimately, however, Johnson dramatically illustrates how difficult it has been to concurrently identify as black and desire to live up to norms associated with Blackness, and maintain a non-marginal existence; that is, to maintain one’s already precarious (by virtue of being interpellated as black) access to privilege and positions of power. In effect, by re-linking identification and “desire to be,” one (potentially) relinquishes all claims to being American since “being American” and “becoming” or “being white,” as many scholars have argued, have historically been co-terminous (Babb, King, Jacobson, Roediger). This is powerfully dramatized in the novel’s lynching scene. The ex-colored man describes the black man who is about to be burned as having “every sign of degeneracy stamped upon his countenance” (186). If the hegemonic discourse on race has produced and reinforced a linking of specific attributes to whiteness (civilized/intelligent/moral/hardworking) and Blackness (savage/instinctual/licentious/lazy), then we can read the description of this condemned man as the protagonist’s realization of the punishment meted out to subjects who attempt to embody Blackness. The condemned man, in the eyes of the narrator, has striven to embody at least some of the “degenerate” attributes the hegemon has concatenated to “Blackness.”

It is no coincidence that the narrator decides to abandon his attempt to live up to the norms associated with “Blackness,” that is, “black” music, at this juncture. And it is not just the witnessing of this brutal act that prompts the protagonists to make such a decision. Rather, it is also the narrator’s recognition that the attempt to identify with Blackness and live up to norms, which have been artificially concatenated to Blackness in the service of social hierarchies, leaves one open to potentially lethal violence as well as to almost inevitable marginalization. After all, we are told that the ex-colored man wants desperately to distinguish himself and make a successful future and career for himself (147), so he comes to the conclusion that the only way to access the things he desires is through a total disidentification with Blackness. Thus, in the end, the protagonist decides to make a “white man’s success,” i.e.,
money, and eventually marries a woman who is “white as a lily” (198).

Cahan’s description of Levinsky’s interpellation into US society is dramatic as well, but for different reasons. The first American whom Levinsky and Gitelson (another Jew who has come to America on the same ship) encounter is a policeman. In a fascinating reversal of the Althusserian interpellation scene, the immigrant hails the policeman, but the policeman does not understand the address since Levinsky speaks in Yiddish. This interaction shows that although Jews can clearly enter the US, they are interpolated as foreigners, and the policeman’s “witheringly dignified grimace” suggests that they are not particularly welcome foreigners (90).

A moment later, though, the two men are themselves hailed by a voice in Yiddish and given their first lesson in Americanization and American values. This new acquaintance reassures the two neophytes that “[i]f a fellow isn’t lazy nor a fool he has no reason to be sorry he came to America” (91). That is, the two new immigrants are introduced to the American Dream, i.e., the “white man’s success,” and to the notion that “Jewishness” should not constitute an obstacle to success. The next incident occurs a few minutes later, following Levinsky’s discovery of the Jewish East Side. As he walks down the street, he hears people call him a “green one.” While this annoys him, he also recognizes that the passer-bys are witnessing “a second birth […] an experience which they had gone through themselves and which was one of the greatest events in their lives” (93).

Similar to the interpellation scenes in *Autobiography*, Levinsky’s interpellation into American society is described as something over which the protagonist does not have control. In addition, Cahan, like Johnson, dramatizes just how powerful the injunction “desire to be” white is, for he consistently emphasizes Levinsky’s desire to act and dress “like a genteel American” (260). These genteel Americans are both “gentile” and “white,” for these two terms are interchangeable in the text, just as they were during the Progressive Era (Babb 142,144). Levinsky’s desire to live up to the norms of whiteness is exposed every time he reveals his desire to be a “true American”: “I was forever watching and striving to imitate the dress and the ways of well-bred American[s]” (260).
The scene of Levinsky’s interpellation is also revealing for what it intimates about the way “Jewish” difference was being reconstituted during this period. The policeman’s incomprehension and dismissive gesture alongside the hailing of the newcomers by a Yiddish-speaking Jew, all suggest that Levinsky is interpellated into his new country as a foreigner and as a Jew. What this, in turn, points to is that due to specific but complex historical contingencies—such as the naturalization of Jews throughout the nineteenth century as “free white persons,” as well as the increasingly dichotomized racial discourse—by the turn of the century Jewish immigrants were initiated into US society as both “whites” and “Jews.” The in-between racial status of the Jew, which the scenes above dramatize, can be seen as a result of the still undifferentiated and thus seemingly contradictory status of these two (compelled) categories of identification since Jewishness was still being framed within a racial discourse.

But Cahan’s text can also be read as a narrativization of the way in which “Jewishness” was beginning to be disaggregated from “race” and morphed onto “ethnicity.” This process, of course, was just commencing, and this separation was not complete until the middle of the twentieth century. The concept of ethnicity, I argue, emerged out of the carefully policed hegemonic racial hierarchy which positioned “whites” on top and “Blacks” on the bottom. While the morphing of race into ethnicity has been possible for intermediary racial groups, this morphing has not been possible for African Americans at all since the intelligibility of ethnicity depends on the prior construction of black-white binary opposition. This point is crucial.

Not only does “Jewishness” begin to emerge as a separate category of identification from race in Cahan’s text, but it also appears to work differently on the level of identification. Unlike the ex-colored man who ultimately misidentifies with Blackness in order to make a “white” man’s success, Levinsky does not renounce his “Jewish” identity in order to enter and succeed in the hegemonic US society. One reason for this lies in the dominant equation of Americanness with whiteness. Due to the dominant racial discourse and other historical contingencies, the Jewish subjects who were interpellated as off-white (or not-quite-white or probationary
white) Jews were able to “craft a social identity [...] that would not interfere with their acceptance as white” (Goldstein 409). And, as whites-to-be, these subjects were ultimately able and encouraged to identify fully with Americanness. For the subject who was interpellated into the US’s white racist regime as “black,” however, the only way that s/he could access some of the privileges of whiteness was through the emulation of the regulatory ideals of whiteness. But, in a sense, s/he was not historically “allowed” to identify fully as an American, according to the hegemonic definition, because s/he was compelled to identify as “black.” And since emulating “Americanness” has historically entailed both an identification with and a desire to live up to the norms of whiteness, the men and women interpellated as “black” have, a priori, been excluded from full membership.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I suggest that the nascent disaggregation of ethnicity from race, which Cahan and Johnson gesture towards in their literary works is prescient. While the discrimination against different minority and immigrant groups was particularly salient in the Progressive Era, the changing socio-cultural landscape was beginning to produce a new kind of racial regime. In the aftermath of World War II, a new racial regime emerged, one characterized by the sharpening of the white-black dichotomy, the emergence of a more comprehensive “white ethnicity,” and the coalescing of new in-between minority groups, such as Latino/as and Asian Americans, who are, according to Koshy, currently being interpellated as potential “whites-to-be” (187). The development of the category of ethnicity has to be understood in relation to the changing racial landscape in America; ethnicity as a category of identification has evolved out of a discourse of race, which itself has revolved around the poles of whiteness and Blackness.

Ethnicity then has emerged as a category which both unites “whites” and differentiates the various groups that have been linked under the rubric of whiteness. This system of differences among the “white” groups has worked in conjunction with the
black-white dichotomy to create a complex, contingent, and fluid racial and ethnic stratification. While the development of a comprehensive “white ethnicity” has meant that ethnicity has come to play a less important role in the lives and life-chances of certain individuals or groups of European ancestry (Alba, Warren and Twine), it still remains a powerful category of identification and thus a nexus of positive and negative power. Koshy convincingly argues that the invocation of ethnicity for newer immigrant groups can function as an avenue of social mobility and affiliation with whiteness. 3 And whiteness, as history teaches, has “operated as a dynamic category whose boundaries have been progressively expanding” (Koshy 185; Lopez xiv). New in-between groups are being incorporated into the social body as “white” or probational “white ethnics,” thus reorganizing the ethnic divide. The social contours of ethnicity are currently changing; historically significant divisions are, in some cases, receding, while other divisions are emerging. Ethnicity as a category of identification is not disappearing; rather different kinds of “ethnic” differences are being produced and reinforced. Ethnicity has emerged as an alternative to and as a separate category from race, one which allows and encourages “ethnics” to carve out a white and thus US identity.

Notes

1. This is not to say that the black-white divide was secure. Both the question of who was white and what percentage of “black” blood made one black was constantly being negotiated. Importantly, however, the definition of who was black was much less flexible, demonstrating, I believe, how “Blackness” became the axis around which white supremacy was built and maintained.
2. Note that the discussion in this section deals only with the hegemonic discourses circulating in society. Of course within any society there are also subaltern discourses that disseminate different, and frequently opposing, worldviews from the hegemonic one.
3. This points to the ways in which the categories of identification both create the conditions of intelligibility, and the means for subjects to negotiate between different categories of identifications, which can be read as a form of agency.
Works Cited


