

Jacksonville Cubanía in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) and *Along This Way* (1933)

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ABSTRACT

The nineteenth-century Cuban population of Jacksonville, Florida, is featured in such noted texts from the island as *Autobiografía del cubano Luis de Radillo y Rodríguez* (1899); *Martí: el apóstol* (1932) by Jorge Mañach; *Temas Martianos* (1959) by Cintio Vitier and Fina García Marruz; and *Paradiso* (1966) by José Lezama Lima. While aesthetically and ideologically diverse, this body of work portrays Cuban Jacksonville as an essentially homogeneous émigré community defined in terms of nationalist politics (as a local subsidiary of the New York- and Tampa-based Partido Revolucionario Cubano) and an “expiration date”: the compromised national independence of 1902. In contrast, the memoir *Along This Way* (1933) by the black modernist writer James Weldon Johnson reinforces the demographic heterogeneity and socially integrated nature of this multilingual and fluid (but long-term) Jacksonville Cuban presence. Johnson's narration of his family's lost milieu in the Creole neighborhood of LaVilla is at the same time granular in its specificity and poetically abstract in its presentation of cultural contact. This article proposes that Johnson applied and further developed his experience with Jacksonville *cubanía* well into other aspects of his career after having

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left Florida, as evidenced in the 1912 novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, *Along This Way* and other sources.

Keywords: Cuban Florida, Jacksonville, LaVilla, bilingualism, transculturation, James Weldon Johnson, Fernando Ortiz, José Lezama Lima, Jim Crow, Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, Spanish in the United States

RESUMEN

La comunidad cubana en Jacksonville, Florida, durante el siglo diecinueve se destaca en varios conocidos textos de la Isla, verbigracia *Autobiografía del cubano Luis de Radillo y Rodríguez* (1899); *Martí: el apóstol* (1932) por Jorge Mañach; *Temas Martianos* (1959) por Cintio Vitier y Fina García Marruz; y *Paradiso* (1966) por José Lezama Lima. A pesar de su evidente diversidad estética e ideológica, tal núcleo de obras presenta al Jacksonville cubano como una comunidad de emigrados en esencia definida en torno a la política nacionalista (como sucursal del Partido Revolucionario Cubano, basado en Nueva York y Tampa) y a “una fecha de vencimiento”: la malograda independencia de 1902. En cambio, las memorias *Along This Way* (1933) del escritor modernista afroamericano James Weldon Johnson documentan la heterogeneidad demográfica y el carácter integrado de una presencia cubana multilingüe y mudable que ha perdurado en Jacksonville. La narración de Johnson –en su autobiografía y en su novela– sobre el ambiente perdido de su familia en el vecindario creole de LaVilla es particular en su especificidad tanto como poéticamente abstracta en su forma de presentar el contacto cultural. Este artículo plantea la tesis de que Johnson incorporó y siguió desarrollando elementos de su experiencia con la *cubanía* de Jacksonville en varios aspectos de su carrera (como escritor, compositor y activista), según se evidencia en la novela *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man* (1912), *Along This Way* y otras fuentes.

Palabras clave: la Florida cubana, Jacksonville, LaVilla, bilingüismo, transculturación, James Weldon Johnson, Fernando Ortiz, José Lezama Lima, Jim Crow, Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, el español en los Estados Unidos

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(1899); *Martí: el apóstol* (1932) by Jorge Mañach; *Temas Martianos* (1959) by Cintio Vitier and Fina García Marruz; and *Paradiso* (1966) by José Lezama Lima. While aesthetically and ideologically diverse, this body of work portrays Cuban Jacksonville as a vaguely homogeneous émigré community defined in terms of nationalist politics (as a local subsidiary of the New York –and Tampa– based Partido Revolucionario Cubano) and an “expiration date”: the compromised national independence of 1902. In contrast, the memoir *Along This Way* (1933) by the black modernist writer James Weldon Johnson¹ reinforces the demographic heterogeneity² and socially integrated nature of this multilingual and fluid (but long-term) Jacksonville Cuban presence. Johnson’s narration of his family’s lost milieu in the Creole neighborhood of LaVilla is at the same time granular in its specificity and poetically abstract in its presentation of cultural contact in “the circum-Caribbean base of the city” (Cartwright 126). Additionally, this article will propose that the author’s contact with Cuban populations in Jacksonville before and during the Jim Crow era –documented and performed in his novel and memoir– merits consideration as scholars of James Weldon Johnson seek to investigate “his distinct modernism, based on a black internationalism that was given voice and significance through Spanish” (Morrissette 72).

1. OVERVIEW AND INTRODUCTION

James Weldon Johnson was born in LaVilla in 1871, where he spent most of his first thirty years living in proximity with Cuban residents of several different social and ethnic backgrounds, within a diverse African American, Antillean, and non-Hispanic white community. His mother, a schoolteacher whose family had roots in the Bahamas and Haiti, and his father, a hotel worker from New York, had moved to Jacksonville for “its possibilities as a winter resort” (2004a: 138). Among other elements of the “nonconformist, liberal education” which the author’s parents provided him in this initially promising, heterogeneous environment –including piano and organ lessons and exposure to world literature and classical history (2004a: 141-150)– he emphasizes (in two separate passages) the fact that his father prioritized teaching him Spanish.³ Throughout the first half of *Along This Way*, Johnson documents the progress of his Spanish language proficiency during his Jacksonville years (2004a: 200, 203-205, 230-231, 275), which in several instances he relates to his first-hand familiarity with Cuban culture in northeast Florida (2004a: 175, 200, 231).⁴

Among his achievements in Jacksonville, Johnson organized the newspaper *The Daily American* as a “strong weapon in the Negro’s defense against racial inequalities and injustices” (2004a: 285), became the first African American law student to pass the

state bar examination in Jim Crow Florida,⁵ and converted the Stanton Grade School into Stanton High School, the first public high school available to students of color in northeast Florida. In particular, Johnson connects his approach as the principal of Stanton (1897-1898) to several elements of transcultured Cuban performance –ways in which he relates having been influenced by his contact with Jacksonville *cubanía* elsewhere in his work, to be discussed in this article– in the face of the city’s transition to a “one hundred percent Cracker town” (2004a: 184).⁶ He describes flouting color lines to observe and recommend changes to the administration of white-only grammar schools (2004a: 270-272), informally promoting and coaching baseball at Stanton (2004a: 273),⁷ abolishing forms of discipline related to “patrol, rattan cane, and all that” (2004a: 273) in favor of a democratic cigar- factory-like organization of learning and school administration (2004a: 274),⁸ and, the final step in his account of providing public education beyond the eighth grade to Jacksonville students of color, making Spanish a core part of the Stanton High School curriculum (and teaching a Spanish course himself).⁹ Having resisted against the forcible imposition of Jim Crow law in northeast Florida during the 1890s, however, he ultimately left for New York City after he was nearly lynched in 1901 during a military occupation of Jacksonville by “state militia from central and western counties” [of Florida]” (2004a: 312).

Johnson is best known as a black modernist writer whose work includes the previously mentioned novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, such collections of poetry as *God’s Trombones*, numerous essays, the 1930 chronicle *Black Manhattan*, and his 1933 memoir. He was also a composer, producing several Broadway musicals featuring African American casts with his brother Rosamond and associate Bob Cole. The Johnson brothers wrote the early twentieth-century civil rights anthem “Lift Every Voice and Sing” in 1900,¹⁰ which became the official song of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Further noted as a statesman, activist, and scholar, Johnson served as a U.S. consul to Venezuela (1906-1909) and Nicaragua (1909-1913), and as a field secretary and executive secretary of the NAACP (1916-1930). He taught creative writing at Fisk University, with a visiting professorship at New York University, between 1930 and his untimely death in a traffic accident in 1938.

While scholarship on James Weldon Johnson has logically focused on his work beyond Florida, the ways in which he wrote (and rewrote) about the period of time when Jacksonville was developing as a Creole city –from the late 1860s until 1901– are relevant to U.S. Cuban studies as well as to research on Johnson’s aesthetic of linguistic and cultural heterogeneity “at the margins of the nation” (cf. Morrisette 65).

This article proposes to examine Johnson's staging of Cuban presence and performance in the 1912 novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and his 1933 autobiography *Along This Way*. We will suggest that *Along This Way* hints at the fluidity and continuity of Cuban populations in Jacksonville beyond the local disasters of 1888-1901 and the establishment of Plattist Cuba in 1902. These populations continued to have an impact in, first, and most relevant to Johnson's novel, the Creole communities of LaVilla and East Jacksonville, referred to as "black bilingual communities" in a 1936 Federal Writers' Project ethnographic report.¹¹

More evident in Johnson's later work, the Cuban presence in Jacksonville from the 1870s through the 1930s also included working-class émigrés, whose surnames and professional activities reflect the demographic heterogeneity of the island. These "garden-variety Cubans" (or their descendants) would come to assimilate as "white" southerners (e.g., Anglicizing last names or claiming Menorcan descent) or else be assigned such designations in city directories as "(c)," "A," or "*" (for "colored," "African," or nonwhite). A smaller group of powerful self-identifying white Cubans –e.g., José Alejandro Huau, Enrique Fritot, Gabriel [Hidalgo] Gato, and Eduardo Triay, who colluded in the transformation of Jacksonville into a "New South"-style town at the turn of the twentieth century– might also be considered relevant to the revision of Jacksonville *cubanía* in *Along This Way* (cf. Helmick). While proposing a reading of Cuban presence and performance in Johnson's work, within the theoretical framework of transculturation –introduced in the foundational essay *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (1940) by the eminent Cuban writer Fernando Ortiz–, we will also suggest that the author's treatment of migration, *cubanía*, and cultural contact anticipates and reinforces Ortiz's paradigm in much of its complexity.

2. JACKSONVILLE *CUBANÍA* AS BLACK TRANSCULTURAL HYPHEN IN *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN EX-COLORED MAN*

Several of the most conspicuous examples of Cuban performance in Johnson's later memoir –for example, the narrator's demonstration, on segregated train cars, of Spanish language proficiency, Cuban forms of dress and behavior, and authoritative historical and cultural knowledge related to the island (207-208, 230-231)– involve cases of "racial passing in Jim Crow circumstances" (Morrissette 93). In the 1912 novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, however, Cuban Jacksonville is rendered as black bilingual cultural space in which the narrator, a Georgia native raised in Connecticut, discovers potential means for "Aframerican" or "black internationalist" self-expression (cf. Morrissette 25, 70-71). Such space includes a provisional home (a

boarding house) and workplace (an idealized cigar factory), as well as a wide-ranging but vaguely defined social field covering excursions to Pablo Beach, “riding around in a hack on Sunday afternoons,” and “public balls [...] given at a large hall on one of the main streets” (2004b: 52).

In Johnson’s novel, Jacksonville Cubans are described according to varying degrees of Negritude or creolized Afro-Cuban identity. These characters are nearly always connected with black non-Cubans, whether of U.S. or other national origin. For example, the narrator’s description of life at the boarding house –where he arrives by chance, having had most of his belongings stolen in Atlanta– is organized around meals with eight-to-ten “fellow-boarders” among whom he is unable to distinguish the Cubans from the “colored Americans” by speech (in Spanish) or appearance (2004b: 43). At the head of this provisional family is a couple consisting of “a rather fine looking, stout, brown-skinned woman of about forty years of age” and her husband, “a light colored Cuban, a man about half one of her size” with “a handsome black mustache and typical Spanish eyes” (2004b: 42). The landlady, of indeterminate national origin, provides the narrator with contacts and information to teach music lessons among the broader black Creole community of Jacksonville, through the mediation of a Protestant preacher (2004b: 43). Her husband finds additional employment for the narrator a cigar factory (one of several in town) where the African American and Afro-Cuban residents of the boarding house work (2004b: 43-45).

The cigar factory is presented as a significant space of cultural contact in the novel, in which the binary racial categories of “white” and “nonwhite” (legally imposed on Jacksonville beginning with an anti-“miscegenation” article included in the 1885 Florida constitution) were not enforced, “cigar making [being] one trade in which the color-line is not drawn” (2004b: 43). The factory’s social structure is described twice, in a “transcultured” pattern: first, the landlady’s Cuban husband explains it to the narrator, in refined English (2004b: 44); then the narrator, having attained the position of *lector*, or reader/arbiter of cultural disputes, through concerted Cuban Spanish studies and experience, elaborates retrospectively. This double explanation is further developed in terms similar to those presented several decades later in Ortiz’s previously mentioned classic ethnographic and literary essay *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (1940). For Ortiz, real national culture is continuously reconfigured –with the addition of new ingredients at hand added to keep the metaphorical *ajiaco* stew of national culture replenished, never the same stew twice¹²– amid a fundamental socioeconomic tension between systems of plantation (the monoculture and politics of “sugar power”) and

counter-plantation, represented by the Cuban cigar factory as a site of democratic transculturation (97-102).

There are several points of description regarding cigar production in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* which resemble those that would later be developed by Ortiz. These include, first, meaningful individual labor as craft (as opposed to the estrangement of labor in the mass production of sugar, for Ortiz,¹³ or lumber and turpentine, for Johnson¹⁴). Second, Johnson, like Ortiz, develops allegorically the apprenticeship and advancement with merit which characterizes Cuban cigar manufacturing. Ortiz relates this distinctive trait to his “occult” personification of tobacco as an underlying liberal cultural agent (“Don Carnal” to sugar’s “Doña Cuaresma”): “If there had been cigar-makers in the Middle Ages, they would have formed a guild and a secret society like the Masons, by reason of the diabolical fame of the leaves they worked with and the strict system of apprenticeship and rank. [...] The good cigar worker is a master” (2004b: 41).

Johnson’s narrator describes the ascension of the landlady’s husband to “*regalia* workman” (2004b: 44) in the hierarchy of the factory in similar terms: “This was the acme of artistic skill in cigar making. Workmen of this class were rare, never more than three or four of them in one factory, and it was never necessary for them to remain out of work” (2004b: 44). He portrays the members of this rank at his Jacksonville factory as exceedingly “independent,” bordering on “careless and improvident”: “some very rapid makers would not work more than three or four days out of the week, and there were others who never showed up at the factory on Mondays” (2004b: 44). It is worth noting that the narrator’s work situations throughout the rest of the novel, apart from the cigar factory, are marked by dependence on an employer-as-benefactor, stifled creativity, and “sensible” reliability to perform on the demand for white patrons, leading to his “small and selfish” bitter end as a regretful “ex-colored man” passing as a “white man who has made a little money” (2004b: 127). The imagery of the records he keeps of who he might have become as an independent man of color – a hypothetical rooted in his ascent from leaf stripper to *lector* in the cigar factory– might hint at a cigar box and tobacco leaves or tobacco-stained pages (*hojas*). The novel closes as follows: “[W]hen I sometimes open a little box in which I still keep my fast yellowing manuscripts, the only tangible remnants of a vanished dream, a dead ambition, a sacrificed talent, 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” (2004b: 127). Finally, Johnson’s presentation of the idealized Jacksonville Cuban cigar factory reinforces Ortiz’s discussion of two related characteristics of his allegorical version of Cuban cigar manufacturing:

democratic social organization, with intelligence as “the prime factor” (Ortiz 56), and the spontaneous but systematic development of a nonconformist liberal education (Johnson 2004b: 91-92).

The provisional transformation of Johnson’s narrator in the fifth chapter of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* seems to anticipate additional details of Ortiz’s model of transculturation.¹⁵ In his version of black bilingual Jacksonville, Johnson’s narrator partially adopts elements of Cuban cultural performance, acquiring a certain degree of Spanish language proficiency (to his own ear or “pride,” 2004b: 46). With his wages as a factory reader he “gives up [...] giving music lessons” and “finally gave up teaching entirely” but keeps a rented piano for creative purposes, “in order to keep up on my own studies” and to perform “occasionally [...] at some church concert or other charitable entertainment” (2004b: 46). In Johnson’s novel, the narrator’s performance of *cubanía* thus consists more of incorporation (in the sense of a food or nutrition metaphor) than imitation. In other words, his contact with Cuban culture in Jacksonville reinforces who he is, and strengthens –rather than masks– his Negritude and his potential (as well as Creole Jacksonville’s potential) for authenticity.

The narrator initially finds the “spirited chatter and badinage” (2004b: 43) of the boarding home table to be alarming (and somewhat painful, e.g., for an interlocutor on whom another speaker spills a cup “nearly full of hot coffee”) before he is able to nourish himself from it and to, in part, nourish it. The syllogism of (1) *badinage*¹⁶ (2), “boiling” or “simmering” cultural contact (which Johnson’s narrator describes as “uproarious” and “menacing”), and (3) “the meals [which] were not bad” (2004b: 43), anticipates Ortiz’s culinary *ajiaco* metaphor for transculturation in “Los factores humanos de la cubanidad.” Johnson’s Jacksonville *boarding home* meals relate exogenous roots, improvisation, and incorporation, to the meal-to-meal formation of a constitutive but transient black bilingual Jacksonville community.

According to Ortiz, cultural groups in contact through “continuous, radical, contrasting geographic transmigrations, economic and social” (101) lose something on an individual basis (*deculturation*) while also gaining something from the other, potentially resulting in the creation of new forms of group expression (*neoculturation*) (Ortiz 102-103). Johnson’s novel brings the narrator to Jacksonville after major losses –the death of his mother in Connecticut and the theft of his college fund in Georgia– underscoring the often painful character of migration, a fact which Ortiz would also emphasize. One of the interesting features of Johnson’s portrayal of transculturation and a U.S. minority Spanish-speaking presence –not construed as an immigrant “invasion” but documented as a foundational part of the historical Jacksonville community– is

the fact that the Anglophone narrator arrives as an *émigré* clinging to life (from New England and then from the Jim Crow south): “At each lurch of the none too smooth track, I was bumped and bruised against the narrow walls of my narrow compartment. I became acutely conscious of the fact that I had not eaten for hours. Then nausea took possession of me, and at one time I had grave doubts about reaching my destination alive” (2004b: 41). The English-speaking narrator thus arrives in multilingual U.S. space as a foreigner (“provisional, changing,” Ortiz 101) who finds the potential for recovery and self-actualization by learning Spanish and the Cuban cigar maker’s trade. Within evident tropes of Cuban nationalism –he notes that the independence of Cuba is “the subject nearest his [the landlady’s husband’s] heart” and remarks on the “sums of money” collected by the cigar-makers, members of “the Jacksonville *Junta*” (2004b: 45)– the narrator presents multilingual proficiency, intellectual endeavor, and a nuanced view of race, as distinctive elements of Jacksonville *cubanía*.¹⁷

The fifth chapter of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* thus reads like a U.S. immigration narrative told partly in reverse, presenting a story of transculturation rather than assimilation (in a chapter framed by a novel about tragic acculturation). The narrator transcends his precarious situation as a migrant from Atlanta, advancing in the cigar factory and as a musician; the landlady and her Cuban husband provide the narrator with contacts and information to teach music lessons, and to perform at events like a “church concert or other charitable entertainment” (2004b: 46), among the greater black Jacksonville community (2004b: 43, 46). His budding career progresses to a degree that allows him to “be careless about money” and to share in several stereotypical social activities of a “Latin” lifestyle.¹⁸ However, even the most seemingly indulgent part of this performance of over-socializing –the narrator’s lengthy, concluding description of attending a cake-walk with his “cigar-maker friends” (2004b: 52-54)– reinforces the black transcultural “hyphen” (Afro-Cuban/African American) of the novel’s version of Cuban Jacksonville. Appraising the cultural phenomenon from a transcultural perspective, the narrator relates cake-walk to ragtime, hinting at the “world-conquering influence” (2004b: 54) of the Afro-Caribbean clave rhythm. According to the musicologist Ned Sublette, this contagiously migrating rhythm provides the base for the “contradanza-danza-habanera-tango complex [which] would evolve into the *danzón* of Cuba, the tango in Argentina, and, under a different set of influences in the United States, would find its way into ragtime and the cakewalk” (Sublette 155). Thus when the narrator somewhat arbitrarily decides to leave behind Jacksonville *cubanía* at the end of the chapter, he abandons a seemingly possible authentic Afro-Latin (or “Aframerican”) life –“marrying the young school teacher, raising a family, and working

in a cigar factory” (2004b: 55)– for *acculturation back* within the binary racial structure of the northeastern United States. This “emigration back” from *afrocubanía* leads to his previously cited ultimate, tragic “racial passing” which leaves him bereft as a prodigal “ex-colored” widower in New York, having “chosen the lesser part [...] and sold my birthright for a mess of pottage” (2004b: 127).

3. JACKSONVILLE *CUBANÍA* IN *ALONG THIS WAY*: CHILDHOOD HOME AND BOARDING HOME

The portrayal of Jacksonville *cubanía* is considerably less romantic in *Along This Way* than in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. The first third of Johnson’s memoir documents the demise of Creole Jacksonville by state intervention in city governance, the imposition of Jim Crow law and “one-drop” redefinition of racial categories, and large-scale immigration from Georgia and the Carolinas, culminating in the author’s account of his near-lynching by occupying militia forces in Riverside Park following the Great Fire of 1901. At a demographic level, *Along This Way* first contextualizes the Cuban presence in Jacksonville within a broader panorama of Caribbean migrations, beginning with the first line of the memoir (regarding one of Johnson’s maternal great-grandmothers): “In 1802 Étienne Dillet, a French army officer in Haiti, placed Hester Argo, a native Haitian woman, together with her three children, aboard a schooner bound for Cuba” (2004a: 135). The author further develops vertiginously complex genealogical and geographical maps, noting that his “other maternal great-grandmother” ended up in Nassau when British privateers captured the slave ship on which she was bound from West Africa to Brazil (2004a: 136).

Johnson continues this theme of displacement in the description of his early childhood home in LaVilla, Jacksonville:

[My father] bought a lot [...] on the corner of which stood a four- or five-room dwelling, old, rough, and unpainted, a typical “poor white” house.

[...] With all their transportable goods stored aboard a small sailing vessel [from Nassau], his wife and child arrived safely in Jacksonville in the winter of 1869; the only loss being several missing boxes of books. [...] When Helen Louise was ushered into her new home, she broke down and wept. (2004a: 139)

Thus beginning the narration of his coming-of-age alongside the construction of Jacksonville as a modern Creole city (1870-1895), Johnson describes in some detail his early memories of the parlor of the home, including an organ (replaced by a square piano) and several “artifacts” of the family’s cosmopolitan travels:

Of course, it was only a **neat** cottage. The hallway of the house was covered with a strip of oilcloth and the **floors of the rooms with matting**. [...] **In the parlor** there were two or three dozen books and a **cottage organ**. [...] There was a **center marble-top table** on which rested a big, illustrated Bible and a couple of **photograph albums**. In a corner stood a what-not filled with bric-a-brac and **knick-knacks**. (2004a: 141; emphasis added)

This passage closely resembles the description of the previously discussed Afro-Cuban/African American boarding home in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*:

I went in and found the house **neat** and not uncomfortable. **The parlor** was furnished with cane-bottomed chairs, each of which was adorned with a white crocheted tidy. The mantel over the fireplace had a white crocheted cover; a **marble-topped center table held a lamp, a photograph album and several trinkets**, each of which was set upon a white crocheted mat. There was a **cottage organ in a corner of a room**, and I noticed that the lamp-racks upon it were covered with white crocheted mats. There was a **matting on the floor**, but a white crocheted carpet would not have been out of keeping. (2004b: 42; emphasis added)

To what extent might Johnson's description of his "trans-Caribbean" childhood home in *Along This Way* revise the narrator's description of the Jacksonville Cuban boarding home in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, displacing the "Cuban" for the "creolized"?¹⁹ On the other hand, to what extent might the boarding home scene of Johnson's earlier novel hint at a creative conflation between the author's nostalgic concept of *childhood home* and Jacksonville *cubanía*?

The descriptions of the childhood home and the boarding home have three main elements in common: *neatness*; a *parlor* with photographs, personal artifacts ("trinkets" or "knick-knacks"), and a "cottage organ;" and *matting* covering the floors. In both passages, the *neat* condition conveys the families' care, as well as order, amid a perpetually transitory state of being (in the boarding home of the fictional Cuban and "African American" couple) or in the process of adjusting to a shoddy and unfamiliar new town under development (in the case of Johnson's mother in *Along This Way*).²⁰ The *parlor*, a welcoming place for visits and sociability, might also be read in light of the word's etymology (like *badinage*) as a site for the kind of "cultural transferences and appropriations through talk-centered culture" identified by Morrisette as a defining part of Johnson's modernist aesthetic (93). The creation of music (the parlor organ) is present in the passages –both of which relate sonic environment to the improvised or incomplete quality of cultural contact– along with visual records of completed gatherings: photographs.

The main differences between the two parlor scenes are (1) the specific mention of certain kinds of “knick-knacks” (e.g., a stereoscope and two large conch shells) and books (a Bible) in *Along This Way*, and (2) the unspecified nature of the trinkets –together with the addition of a lamp, a fireplace, and numerous mentions of “white crochet”– in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. The objects described in the childhood home of *Along This Way* suggest West Indian (rather than Cuban) roots: a Bible in English, family photographs (Johnson having established his mother’s nostalgia for Nassau), and the “two large conch shells [which] decorated the hearth” (Johnson 2004a: 141). These objects hint at even more abstract ideas supporting the notion that Johnson’s memories of Jacksonville “creolization” replace his idealized treatment of Jacksonville *cubanía* in the novel he had published anonymously over twenty years prior. Through the “knick-knacks” of *Along This Way*, the author recalls daydreaming about travel in general (“a stereoscope and an assortment of views photographed in various parts of the world”), pretending to hear “the ‘roar of the sea’” in the aforementioned shells, and experimenting with new musical sounds: “But the undiminishing thrill was derived from our experiments on the piano [which replaced the cottage organ when Johnson was seven or eight years old]” (2004a: 141).

The absence of books (and the lack of a Bible, in particular) in the parlor of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* may be of interest, given the fact that the landlady and her Cuban husband demonstrate erudition and an active interest in language (and in spite the repeated mentions of the couple’s connections with local churches, 2004b: 42-44, 46). In *Along This Way*, the Bible is located centrally on the marble-topped table of *Along This Way*; in the novel, a lamp appears in that place together with “several” unspecified “trinkets, each of which was set upon a white crocheted mat” (2004a: 42). The placement of a lamp in the center of the parlor (rather than the books and Bible recalled by the author in his memoir), and the added detail of the fireplace, could hint at the “light” and “warmth” of knowledge and “right living,” in this welcoming space for itinerant guests and provisional cultural contact.²¹

The carefully placed “trinkets” and the unusual profusion of white crochet –an attribute of the orisha Obatalá in the avatar of Ochanlá, whose color is white and who likes to knit and sew in her rocking chair (Bolívar Arióstegui 80)– might also suggest Santería imagery. Obatalá –“escultor del ser humano” (“sculptor of the human being”) and “dueño de todo lo blanco, de la cabeza, de los pensamientos y de los sueños” (“lord of everything white, of the head, of thoughts and dreams”)– would be a fitting divine being to evoke the narrator’s initiation into Jacksonville *cubanía* (on a “puñado de tierra” between the St. Johns River and the Atlantic Ocean), his “remolding” in

attempting to start his independent adult life again from a complete lack of resources (cf. Bolívar Arióstegui 79–80), and his promotion to arbiter of disagreements when he is eventually appointed cigar factory reader. The seemingly off-the-point remark “a white crocheted carpet would not have been out of keeping” further invites attention to this notably specific detail about the boarding home as childhood home (or memories of the childhood home rendered as boarding home).²²

As previously mentioned, Johnson’s acquisition of Spanish and familiarity with local Cuban culture provide important markers in the coming-of-age narrative contained in *Along This Way*. This narrative begins with his father’s Spanish-language learning as the head waiter at the St. James Hotel and culminates in the author’s return to Stanton Grade School and his achievement in expanding its curriculum (capped with a course in Spanish, taught by the author), thereby founding Stanton High School. At a crucial midway point –during the author’s late teenage years– he describes how his family takes in a young Cuban man of color named Ricardo Rodríguez (Ponce), from Havana (Johnson 2004a: 199–200). Ricardo’s parents had sent him to the United States “to learn English and study dentistry;” Johnson describes becoming close (and lifelong) friends with him due to their “strong bond of companionship; and what was, perhaps more binding, the bond of language” (2004a: 203).

The author describes this friendship as an open-ended process of two-way language and cultural acquisition in a manner that, like the fifth chapter of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, hints at transculturation. Both young men gain something from the other (language proficiency, perspective, “confidences regarding [...] love affairs,” Johnson 2004a: 203); they also lose something as a result of the contact. Johnson acquires his tobacco addiction (2004a: 200) and, traveling later with Ricardo, discovers racial passing through foreign language performance (2004a: 204–205, 230–231). Rodríguez settles on less ambitious goals for his education (and succeeds in lowering his Cuban parents’ expectations) in order to attend Atlanta University with Johnson. Their bilingual conversations are regarded as novel (neoculturation) at this southern black college (“we could not have excited more curiosity and admiration had we been talking Attic Greek,” Johnson 2004a: 207), and their assignment to be roommates provides them with an *unheimlich* home away from home, a space for Jacksonville *cubania* performed in Atlanta: “We were, naturally, assigned to the same room. [...] When I first dived into it I felt as though I was plunging into the surf at Pablo Beach” (2004a: 208).

Following the author’s description of his adult accomplishments at Stanton and the trauma of his near-lynching, which marked his departure from Jacksonville, he repeatedly affirms the ongoing impact of his contact with, and his performance

of, Jacksonville *cubanía* throughout the remainder of *Along This Way*. The Johnson brothers' first libretto –marking their transition to a successful career in New York musical theatre– is a comic opera (*Tolosa*), which the author describes as “a burlesque of American imperialism” during the 1898 invasion of Cuba (2004a: 297). The last theatrical production of the hit Broadway songwriting team of [Bob] Cole and the Johnson Brothers, *The Shoo-Fly Regiment*, presented African American soldiers more seriously as protagonists of U.S. military history, configured as all-American heroes and as would-be anticolonial allies in the War of 1898 (2004a: 378).

The author also mentions at least two cases in which his Spanish language proficiency helped to advance his theatrical career in New York (2004a: 342, 469) and to transition from theater to his diplomatic career as a consul to Venezuela, Panama, and Nicaragua (2004a: 378). The author cites then-secretary of state Elihu Root's reforms to the United States Consular Service, requiring “applicants [...] to pass a real examination and [...] to possess a knowledge of at least one of the principal foreign languages” (2004a: 376), as the reason for which he was able to successfully build a case for appointment based on “among my qualifications for the Service, Spanish as my foreign language” (2004a: 378-79). Discussing his service in Venezuela, Johnson describes cultivating only one real friendship, which is with a Cuban consul in Puerto Cabello named Señor Zangroniz (2004a: 390-392).²³ This relationship thrives on talk about Cuba (mainly in the mode of *choteo*) and the performance of *cubanía*,²⁴ including mischievously comparing life in Venezuela to all things Cuban (2004a: 390), being able to tell “a very fishy fish story” (2004a: 390-391), and using creative translation to defuse contentious situations and to mock pompous authority figures like a visiting U.S. dignitary named Captain Crockett (2004a: 391-392).

Johnson relates in *Along This Way* that he returned to Jacksonville periodically for decades after he had moved away, staying in town for at least three extended visits with his mother (2004a: 471). Describing one of these visits to settle his father's estate in 1913, he alludes to the booming growth of Creole LaVilla after the segregation of Jacksonville neighborhoods (2004a: 460-63). This time frame corresponds with new waves Afro-Cuban immigration to black bilingual Jacksonville following the violent outbreak of white racism on the island during the first decade of the twentieth century, culminating in the so-called Cuban “race war” of 1912 (cf. Helmick 91-93). While on his third return visit to LaVilla, during the summer of 1916, Johnson recounts receiving correspondence from J.E. Spingarn (then-chairman of the NAACP) and W.E.B. Du Bois, which effectively anoints him to become a leader of the NAACP (*Along* 471-73). During this transition, as well, there is evidence that Johnson was at the same time

continuing to pursue his interest in Cuban culture. In a letter from Jacksonville dated June 28, 1916, Johnson thanks Arturo Alfonso Schomburg for having loaned him a collection of poems by Plácido (the honored poet of color from Matanzas, Cuba, Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, who was killed by firing squad –effectively lynched except for the means of execution– during the Escalera massacre of 1844). In sum, Johnson applied and further developed his experience with Jacksonville *cubanía* well into several parts of his career after having left Florida, as evidenced in *Along This Way* and other sources.

In more concrete terms of documenting U.S. Cuban presence, *Along This Way* hints at the heterogeneity, fluidity and continuity of Cuban populations in Jacksonville. The Jacksonville Cuban residents who appear in the memoir are presented in more specific and less idealized terms than in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. One good example is the “dumpiness and untidy appearance” of the “garden variety” Jacksonville Cuban Señor Echemendía. The author tells us that Echemendía is “one of the heads of the El Modelo factory” (2004a: 199), alluding to the factory run by the powerful white Hidalgo Gato family and providing a contrasting view to the egalitarian Cuban husband and cigar factory of his novel from 1912. This disappointing quality of a Jacksonville Cuban middle manager is contrasted with the “elegance and courtliness —such as I had never seen before” of the imposing Señor Ponce visiting from Havana and the “very good-looking, with the light bronze complexion” of Johnson’s previously mentioned friend Ricardo Rodríguez (199).

By way of conclusion and returning to the question of Cuban cultural performance and “racial passing” in *Along This Way*, Johnson’s memoir develops several cases of transculturation –related to language acquisition, tobacco use, and “inside baseball,” among other topics– in ways which reinforce the painful and liberating character of migration (and return), partial loss along with partial gain from cultural contact, and –above all– the tension between “plantation” and “counter-plantation” socioeconomic and political forces over the course of the violent demise of Creole Jacksonville during the author’s lifetime.

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NOTES

¹ Noelle Morrisette has pointed out Johnson's conceptual frame of *Aframerican* in his treatment of transcultural encounters between (U.S.) African American and Afro-Latin cultures:

Johnson uses sound –noise, languages, music– to register the multiple stories of African American expressive culture through their extremes of sonic experience. [...] He took advantage of sound's inherently contradictory and transgressive nature in the naming and framing practices of his works, using [the term] "Aframerican" to situate black culture as foundational to and fused with American national culture while referencing "American" as the Americas, indicating the overriding presence of black culture beyond national boundaries. (Morrisette 25)

² Johnson's memoir alludes to the greater complexity and fluidity of Caribbean racial categories onto which the binary Jim Crow paradigm of race was forcibly imposed in Jacksonville as well as to specific Cuban (or "Latin") forms of racism.

³ Johnson explains that his father "had gained by study a working knowledge of the Spanish language; this he had done to increase his value as a hotel employee" (2004a: 150). Furthermore, "One of the things our father had made a great effort to do was to teach us the Spanish language" (2004a: 199).

⁴ Johnson writes:

I sat down in the corner, and proceeded to light my cigar. [...] The silence was broken by the young man just back from Cuba, who said, "Dad, there's a genuine Panama hat." [...] Thereupon he and I exchanged several commonplace phrases in Spanish; but in a short while his knowledge of that language was exhausted, and general conversation in English was resumed. I said little except in answer to some questions the preacher asked me about conditions in Cuba, where I had not yet been but concerning which I had a good deal of information. The preacher pressed an invitation on me to come and talk about Cuba at his church the next time I happened to be in Tampa. (2004a: 230-231)

⁵ Johnson describes the hostility of a white supremacist member of the state bar on his examining committee, whose decision to reject the author's admittance to the bar in spite of "having passed a good examination" was overruled by two members of the "old guard" of Jacksonville, Duncan U. Fletcher, and Creole LaVilla, E.J. L'Engle (2004a: 285-286).

⁶ He explains in some detail:

Long after the close of the Reconstruction period Jacksonville was known far and wide as a good town for Negroes. When I was growing up, most of the city policemen were Negroes: one or two justices of the peace were Negroes. When a paid fire department was established, one station was manned by Negroes. Joseph E. Lee, a Negro and a very able man and astute politician, was made Judge of the Municipal Court. Many of the best stalls in the city market were owned and operated by Negroes [...]. I know that there was a direct relation between that state of affairs and the fact that Jacksonville was controlled by [Creole LaVilla] families like the L'Engles, Hartridges, and Daniels's, who were sensitive to the code, *noblesse oblige*. The aristocratic families have lost control and the old conditions have changed. Jacksonville is today a one hundred per cent Cracker town, and each time I have been back there I have marked greater and greater changes. (184)

⁷ Johnson asserts: "I enjoyed giving [...] pointers on play and explanations on the workings of 'inside baseball'" (2004a: 273). This aside presents a kind of *dal segno al coda* in Johnson's text, referring the reader back to the author's lengthy account of learning "the secrets of the art of curve pitching" (when he was a Stanton Grade School student) from a member of the Cuban Giants, a professional Negro League team from New York, during their winters in Saint Augustine (2004a: 175-178):

Before I left Stanton [...] one of the pitchers on the "Cuban Giants," the crack Negro professional team of New York, imparted to me the secrets of the art of curve pitching. (The Cuban Giants were originally organized from among the waiters at the Ponce de Leon Hotel in St. Augustine. They played professional ball in the North in the summer but for a number of seasons they worked in winter in the St. Augustine hotels and played ball [...]). (2004a: 175)

⁸ Johnson states:

I know that large groups of children at play require oversight [...] in order that the smaller and weaker may not be molested or imposed upon by the bigger and stronger fellows, and that the spirit of rowdyism [...] be held in check. Aside from that, they ought to be left alone. When children play to themselves they are inventive, imaginative, ingenious, and resourceful; capable not only of devising games but the things needed for playing them. (2004a: 274)

⁹ He describes his objectives in the following manner:

At the close of my first year, twenty-six were ready to be graduated from the eighth grade. This was all the education the city of Jacksonville gave me, and it was all it was giving them.

I had been thinking about them for some time....They are entitled to as much as others.... Why shouldn't they get it? [...] I'll do it. I did do it; I made Stanton a high school.

[....] This is all there was to the plan in its beginning: I first got the members of the class interested in the project [...]. I laid out a course for them that was practically the Junior Prep course at Atlanta University. [...] The next year I followed the same procedure; told the superintendent what I had done, and asked for an assistant. I introduced Spanish as the modern language in the course, and taught it myself. That, in short, is the plan by which Stanton Grade School was developed into Stanton High School. Of course, the plan could not have succeeded if the superintendent had not supported me after that first year, and if the board of education had not accepted a *fait accompli*. (2004a: 274-275)

¹⁰ The author and his brother Rosamond wrote “Lift Every Voice and Sing” for a 1900 ceremony in honor of Lincoln’s birthday in Jacksonville. The refrain features a rhythmic figure that somewhat resembles a *son clave* beat:



This well known hymn features oceanic imagery –e.g., “Let [our rejoicing] resound loud as the rolling sea;” “We have come over a way that with tears has been watered” – and an evident pluralistic message. The Johnson brothers also “planned [...] to have it sung by schoolchildren — a chorus of five hundred voices,” (2004a: 301).

¹¹ The ethnographer Martin D. Richardson notes the following in his 1936 report: “Two [bilingual] districts [...] are the Spanish-Negro section of Ashley, Davis, and Beaver streets on the west side [LaVilla] and the section bordering on a large cigar factory on the east side: Palmetto, Duval, Church, and immediate streets. In these two districts a corruption of the Spanish tongue is prevalent, along with English. Cubans, Porto Ricans, a few Mexicans, and some people from the West Indies islands speak their various national versions of Spanish, with an occasional home providing a smattering of Portuguese. Most notable in the west side area, in some restaurants and smoke shops of Beaver and Ashley Streets is the fact that the customer who gives his order in Spanish is waited upon with no more delay than he whose order is given in English. It happens quite often that four or five persons will be found sitting in these places running a rapid fire conversation, in which questions are asked in English and readily answered in Spanish” (2-3).

¹² Ortiz introduced this famous *ajiao* metaphor for transculturation in a separate work, “Los factores humanos de la cubanidad” (1939).

¹³ Ortiz argues:

In the tobacco industry delicate hands are required, of woman or man, to manipulate the leaves and cut them with a slender-bladed knife. In the sugar industry human hands alone cannot crush the tough, woody canes, which must be ground and shredded in mills before they yield the treasure of their juice. For tobacco, deft and gentle hands; for sugar, powerful and complicated machinery. (Ortiz 101)

¹⁴ The narrative voice underscores: “Each cigar was made entirely by hand. Each piece of filler and each wrapper had to be selected with care” (2004b: 44). Moreover, he avers: “My fingers, strong and sensitive from their long training [in piano], were well adapted to this kind of work” (2004b: 45). Johnson’s narrator contrasts such handiwork to the dehumanizing peonage of the Jacksonville lumber and turpentine camps:

There are those constituting what might be called the desperate class, —the men who work in the lumber and turpentine camps, the ex-convicts, the bar-room loafers are all in this class. These men conform to the requirements of civilization much as a trained lion with

low muttered growls goes through his stunts under the crack of the trainer's whip. They cherish a sullen hatred for all white men, and they value life as cheap. [...] Happily, this class represents the black people of the South far below their normal physical and moral condition, but in its increase lies the possibility of great dangers. (2004b: 48)

¹⁵ This is as opposed to acculturation (losing one's cultural identity, conforming wholesale to the identity and practices of another).

¹⁶ Morrisette notes that this "French word for gallant, sophisticated banter" is jarring for its unexpected introduction of a foreign term in a third language (82).

¹⁷ According to the narrator:

As the man sat there, nervously smoking his long, "green" cigar, and telling me of the Gómezes, both the white one and the black one, of Maceo and Bandera, he grew positively eloquent. He also showed that he was a man of considerable education and reading. He spoke English excellently, and frequently surprised me by using words one would hardly expect from a foreigner. (2004b: 45)

¹⁸ The narrator describes taking excursions with his Cuban friends to drink and fight at Pablo Beach (2004b: 52), attend public dances (2004b: 52-53), and indulge "the cigar-maker's habit of riding around in a hack on Sunday afternoons" (2004b: 52).

¹⁹ *Along This Way* displaces Jacksonville *cubanía*, framing the young city (before the 1901 fire and military occupation) within a broader Creole context, which includes, as Cartwright has observed, "Bahamian and Jamaican teachers, tutors, and craftsmen" as well as "local Gullah-Geechee styles of cooking that [...] closely resembled his own family's Bahamian foodways" (2004a: 125-126).

²⁰ Johnson remembers:

The contrast with the cleanliness and comfort of the home she [Johnson's mother Helen Louise] had just left was sufficient justification for tears. [...] The frosty winds blew through the cracks in the walls and up through the cracks in the floor. [...] The outlook from the house was equally disheartening; instead of the clean, dazzling white streets of Nassau, here were streets or rather roads of that grayish sand six inches deep, and no place to walk except through it. The surrounding houses were poorer and more dilapidated than the Johnson house. The neighbors [...] spoke in terms and words often utterly foreign to Helen Louise. (2004a: 139-140)

²¹ Johnson's concluding lines in *Along This Way* reinforce such a heterodox interpretation:

The human mind racks itself over the never-to-be known answer to the great riddle, and all that is clearly revealed is the fate that man must continue to hope and struggle on; that each day, if he would not be lost, he must with renewed courage take a fresh hold on life and face with fortitude the turns of circumstance. To do this, he needs to be able at times to touch God; let the idea of God mean to him whatever it may. (2004a: 598)

²² There is also white crochet over the fireplace mantel in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, two details absent from *Along This Way* which could be associated with the tradition that Ochanlá is often portrayed as trembling from the cold (cf. Bolívar Arióstegui 80). Another avatar of Obatalá, Alaguema, is also said to be the keeper of the chameleon (Bolívar Arióstegui 82); in *Along This Way* Johnson notes that his brother had suggested he title his novel *The Chameleon* (2004a: 394).

²³ Ruth Blandón points out that, in this section of *Along This Way*, Johnson is describing "the limits of [his] cultural absorption" in Venezuela given "his [...] problematic position as an agent of U.S. interests in the Latin Americas" (207). Johnson's overarching narrative of his cultural experience with (and performance of) Jacksonville *cubanía*

merits consideration as context for the account of how he developed a uniquely sympathetic relationship with Zangróniz in spite of the perceived ethnic differences between Johnson and the very white Cuban consul:

In appearance, he was far from being typically Cuban; his complexion was almost ruddy; his eyes were blue-gray; [...] was punctilious with regard to the finer points of Spanish etiquette; indeed, he might easily have passed for a Spaniard of one of the northern provinces. [...] [T]here were some things [...] that I felt I could discuss only with Zangroniz, of all the foreign language men in Puerto Cabello. Even so [...] I sensed limitations [since] in language, religion, and traditional background, Zangroniz and the Venezuelans were one. (2004a: 390)

²⁴ E.g., “I do not doubt that one of the strong elements in his preference for my companionship was the fact that mine was the only ear into which he felt he could pour certain criticisms [...]. He never exhausted the subject of the comparison of the standards of civilization and social life in Cuba, with those in Venezuela; with the judgment always in favor of Cuba.”