

Color-coded america:
how the white
"dream" employs
socio-economic
limitations in ...



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In taking on the colossal notion of American culture, it would be ideal to begin with its inhabitants. The questions of what defines us and what we give value to are inherent challenges in themselves because the country is split by several subgroups: by race, by class, by creed, by ethnic group, and so on. Since this essay addresses minority culture in excess, another challenge for those groups surfaces in terms of “ achieving an independent personal and group identity; gaining access to political power and economic opportunities; and finding ways to think, speak, and create that are not dominated by the ideology of the oppressor” (Tyson 423). When diving into the topic of multi-cultural literature and its voices, an even deeper challenge arises. By default, it seems that white culture has passed as universal culture due to its strong literary and political influences from the country’s very beginning. “...if colonizers acknowledged that a native culture existed, they claimed that such cultures were not worth sustaining in the face of the ‘ superior’ civilization offered by the Europeans” (Tyson 424). White privilege has oppressed other identities, other values, and made our culture uniform. What’s more, stifling or covering up other histories has made it seem like whites are solely to commend for American heritage, given that history books, narratives, and biographies focused solely on white American accomplishments. Therefore, it is the belief that the white voice is the most “ accurate” voice. We are still sending the message of “ cultural capital,” as essayist Henry Gates calls it, and we are still directly affected by cultural imperialism: the takeover of one culture (the “ non-white” culture) by another (the “ white” culture) in terms of, more specifically the customs and values of the economically dominant culture. So where are the other voices, and what do they have to say about all of this?

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There is a distinctive theme in African-American literature, especially pertaining to how this minority experiences economic and social limitations that inhibit their success. As we know, Americans in general have practice in internalizing their success as a form of self-identity. Essayist Leslie Hawkes explains that “ the notion of fresh self-creation is a deeply American one and it is in fact a founding principle of the country” (21). Self-creation and individualism is rooted deeply in the notion of the American Dream. Critic Lois Tyson has made the connection between the discourse of the self-made man and the “ success manuals” that circulated during the time the American Dream began to take shape. Around the turn of the century, success manuals were created to give young boys an idea of how to succeed through adopting certain practices and symbols of success. Gates’s essay about our nation assimilating into “ white” culture, reinforcing Ivy League and activities that symbolizes the “ upper crust,” echo these manuals, and it seems like this is where the problem lies. Tyson states, “ The discourse of the self-made man ‘ erases history’ in choosing to ignore or marginalize the enormous character flaws of many famous self-made men while simultaneously defining self-made success as a product of one’s character rather than a product of one’s environment. The discourse is permeated by the desire to escape history, to transcend the historical realities of time, place, and human limitation” (308). These success manuals, like the Dream, erase history, enabling us to deny our pasts and ignore our flaws, as well as ignore how well we conceal and continue to conceal oppression and constraint. Ironically, the American dream was built on the genocide of Native Americans and the enslavement of Africans and, as we will soon find, continues to thrive on the abuses suffered by immigrants and the

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socioeconomic barriers against people of color. The American dream was built upon the misery and limitations of our cultures, endeavored throughout history to be concealed. This essay will explore three short stories by African-Americans about African-Americans, and its commentary will work to showcase how the concealment of the past, the employment of internalized racism, and the unattainability of wealth symbols have fixed a barrier between African-Americans and the Dream their culture holds in such esteem.

I. Retrospect In discussing American culture and its fascination with “moving up,” we must recognize how society aims to limit African-Americans from this quest by obscuring the past. Nowhere else is the theme of a concealed past more apparent than in Alice Walker’s short story, “Elethia.” The theme of forgetting and remembrance create a mood for her motif of disguised physical decay on the part of Uncle Albert and gives us a larger sense of a fictional past and an imagined history on the part of slave testimony. In “Elethia,” Uncle Albert’s corpse that decorates the window of a diner wherein no blacks are allowed is a reminder of the fake continuity with the present the civil rights movement tried to shatter.

The fake past is alive in the image of the stuffed corpse of Uncle Albert. All teeth, smiles, and servitude, in reality Albert was slave who had his teeth knocked out for his defiance against slavery. “They used to beat him severe trying to make him forget the past and grin and act like a nigger” (Walker 309). He decorates the window of an all-white restaurant. Believed to be a “dummy,” Elethia learns that the body is his actual corpse. This mirrors the undermining of the white community against the black plight: they believe in <https://assignbuster.com/color-coded-america-how-the-white-dream-employs-socio-economic-limitations-in-african-american-culture-and-beyond/>

the triviality of the crimes committed—everything is an allusion, not real.

Elethia and her friends steal the corpse and burn him, aiming to rid the world of its false and stereotypical images of blacks and to rectify its misrepresentations, recover the past, and preserve the truth for those after her.

The image of Uncle Albert in the window is racist; it underplays the severity of slavery and erases the past struggle and pain Uncle Albert and all slaves went through. Elethia carries the ashes of Uncle Albert in order to mourn and heal, much like one would for a family member who has passed. She is healing from the damage done to Albert's corpse as well as the damage done to her ancestors. " Everywhere she looked, there was an Uncle Albert.... And she was careful that, no matter how compelling the hype, Uncle Alberts, in her own mind, were not permitted to exist" (309). Elethia is trying to preserve a cognitive relic, which has been painted over with sugar-coated brush strokes to lighten the plight of slaves. She realizes that all the Uncle Albert types were not permitted to be remembered because that would mean owning up to a disgraceful and shameful past.

Walker is able to find, through her themes of remembering, a vocabulary for the civil rights movement's own personal grievances and preoccupations. " Elethia" represents the time of the civil rights movement and the tension between white and black societies. While the white community as a majority seemed to want to perpetuate black oppression, the black community rose up to end it. Elethia's mindset during this story is much like the mindset of the black community during this movement. Elethia's and her friend's

defiance against the older community's acceptance of the racial stereotype
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employs her ability to transcend the identity chosen for her. Charles Taylor wrote in his essay "The Politics of Recognition" that the misrecognition of others can cause a group of people to "suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Non-recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being" (75). Uncle Albert's image is distorted, he is imprisoned and confined behind a glass case and forced a demeaning and reduced expression of happy servitude: "His lips were intensely smiling and his false teeth shone. He carried a covered tray in one hand...and over his other arm was draped a white napkin" (Walker, 307). Elethia, much like supporters of the civil rights movement, attempted to reshape the misrepresented past and bring these social issues back in the spotlight. They are essentially working against decades of false representation, orally, psychologically, literary, and as we see here, even the physical presence of Albert is omnipotent: "Everywhere she looked there was an Uncle Albert...in her textbooks, in the newspapers, and on TV" (309). The Uncle Alberts who are "not permitted to exist" give us an idea of the invisibility of black history and culture. Not only are African-Americans unacknowledged as victims, their histories and identities are essentially erased. Through misrecognition, they are reduced and belittled.

As we now know, although boastful of its diverse society, America has had and continues to struggle with its racist attitude. Springing from this hindrance is the phenomena of internalized racism, which has succeeded in crippling the success of African-Americans. In "The Death of Horatio Alger"

by LeRoi Jones and Amiri Baraka, a young African American man named Mickey engages in an altercation with his friend J. D. over a game of words that gets out of hand. Their three white friends stand by and cheer them on. Mixed in with this outer conflict is Mickey's inner unrest over white society and his isolation from it. This work deals in large part with racial politics: exploring the racial issues of the social and psychological effects of racism. The fight scene allows us to understand Mickey's preoccupation with white society's ideals of beauty, his acceptance of racialism, and the stereotyping of blacks that forms his identity.

It is clear that Mickey has internalized society's ideals of beauty: " And it is a useful memory here, because such things as these were the vague images that had even so early, helped shape me. Light freckles, sandy hair, narrow clean bodies. Though none lived where I lived" (155). He realizes those white ideals are out of his reach, and he will never " win:" " Or something a Deacon would admit was beautiful. [A white painting.] The conscience rules against ideas. The point was to be where you wanted to, and do what you wanted to. After all is ' said and done,' what is left but those sheepish constructions" (155). There is another layer to the fight scene here when Mickey informs us of his realization that he is beneath his white friends due to society's petty ideals. He has bought into the notion of racialism, which critic Lois Tyson refers to as " the belief in racial superiority, inferiority, and purity based on the conviction that moral and intellectual characteristics, just like physical characteristics, are biological properties that differentiate the races" (360). Mickey's identity is formed by white society: " We are named by all things we will never understand. Whether we can fight it or

not..." (156). And he is suffering from internalized racism. "Victims of internalized racism generally feel inferior to whites, less attractive, less worthwhile, less capable, and often wish they were white or looked more white" (Tyson 362). Because Mickey shapes his narrative with his internal feelings of futile inferiority, the fight between he and his other black friend becomes a source of racial mockery and entertainment for Norman, Johnny, and Augie.

The battle scene ensues, and the three white boys laugh at the spectacle. With race lines set up, the conflict between Mickey and J. D. seems, on a larger scale, to depict the struggles and humility of African Americans attempting to define and defend themselves, and the satisfaction and insensitivity derived by white society in controlling and stifling their progress. Since the conflict initially begins between two black men, this symbolizes the difficult struggle for equality for the black culture and their efforts to overcome oppression spawning from the persecution of segregation. Mickey is clearly torn between two worlds, his own personal life and culture and the culture of white America. The battle between he and J. D. becomes something larger to Mickey than a quibble over name calling; it becomes a war between the sides: a conflict brought on by his inability to live harmoniously in a mixed culture. W. E. B. DuBois first described a phenomena many African Americans experience in *The Souls of Black Folk* as double consciousness or double vision, the awareness of belonging to two conflicting cultures: the African culture and the European culture imposed by white America. DuBois calls it "a peculiar sensation.... One ever feels this twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled

strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (89). Norman, Johnny, and Augie watch from the sidelines and laugh, and we have a sense of white men's feelings of superiority and Mickey's realization of his twoness. In addition, the white men can vicariously live out their desire to be less civilized through the fight. That the fight for them is a spectacle and a source of their entertainment represents the state in which the white men of the society enjoy keeping the black men in a state of inferiority, conflict, and oppression through manipulation.

Mickey seems to feel ashamed by buying into the stereotype. Moreover, Mickey is ashamed of his internalized feelings. " And I was conscious first of my father saying, ' Go on Mickey, hit him. Fight back.' And for a few seconds, under the weight of that plea for my dignity, I tried," "...[B]ut J. D bashed me when he wanted to" (157). This last was not a literal " bashing," but a symbolic one. J. D. had to show Mickey his own shame of his blackness. Mickey and J. D. attack their three white friends who had been watching them and cheering them on, but the final image of Mickey's frozen hands gives us an idea that although this is progress on the part of Mickey and J. D., and they tried to strip themselves of their alienation, it only leaves them in a frozen state.

Mickey's " frozen hands" at the end that may "[n]ever thaw" (157) speak for his position in his society as well as his conflicted identity. Since fighting with J. D., he has bought into the white stereotype of blacks and into the white stereotype of what is beautiful: " Negroes and Italians beat and shaped me, and my allegiance is there. But the triumph of romanticism was parquet
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floors, yellow dresses, gardens and sandy hair. I must have felt the loss and could not rise against a cardboard world of dark hair and linoleum" (156). Although he would like to fight for himself and his race, he has bought into the stereotype of the whites. This reinforces the notion of his twoness. He wants to rise up against the whites; he wants to rise up against his own people so he can be one of the " beautiful people in the white society," but he can do neither; thus, he is frozen in between the two worlds. He cannot be of the white world (which he yearns to be) and he cannot reject his own black world Charles Taylor says, "...the withholding of recognition can be a form of oppression" (81) and Mickey is withholding the recognition of himself.

" The Death of Horatio Alger" speaks in large part for the social construction of race and identity. Because we are inherently a nation of clashing cultures, there is a conflict between race being socially rather than biologically produced. In this story, there is a struggle to find one's identity in the midst of these warring influences as well as a struggle in debunking or feeding into society's racism and social expectations for " inferior" races. Mickey cannot, in this time, break through the social expectations forced upon him. He cannot essentially " make a name for himself" or his race. He is frozen and limited, unable to progress normally in a society that passions progression.

During the civil rights struggles from the early 1960s through the mid-1970s, African Americans became increasingly aware of the consequences to blacks as a whole when individual blacks adhered to white middle-class values. "

Many African Americans engaged in unified group efforts that created a sense of community and established ethnic pride, while others associated <https://assignbuster.com/color-coded-america-how-the-white-dream-employs-socio-economic-limitations-in-african-american-culture-and-beyond/>

individually with privileged whites but never became completely part of the privileged society, creating instead a divided subset of the African American community" (Champion 69). In "The Lesson," by Toni Cade Bambara, a group of black school children embark on a field trip to F. A. O Schwartz in Manhattan that, in the end, creates this aforementioned division in the African-American community. What's more, the contrast between the impoverished children and their new environment creates a commentary that parallels the absurdity of the presence of economic inequality and the American dream. Significantly, our narrator Sylvia does not immediately follow the other children into the store because she feels "funny, shame. But what I got to be shamed about? Got as much right to go in as anybody" (93). As the children enter the high society store, they quickly become aware of their limitations, and they begin to use comparisons that suggest they are becoming aware of class divisions and their inability to obtain these "sign-exchange-value" symbols and signifiers of wealth. Sugar asks if they can steal, while Sylvia criticizes a white lady for wearing a fur coat even though it is hot. It is also interesting to note that upon exposure to their extravagant lifestyle, Sylvia never assumes an economic structure hierarchically. Rather than respecting and admiring the privileged, she makes comments such as "White folks crazy" (89). Junebug says she has no need for a \$480.00 paperweight because she does not own a desk. Flyboy claims he does not need a desk because he is homeless, a claim that disgusts Sylvia because she thinks he only makes such comments "to keep the white folks off his back and sorry for him" (148).

When Miss Moore asks if she is angry, Sylvia says she won't give her the satisfaction of expressing her emotions. This scene demonstrates the growing tension Sylvia experiences as she becomes aware of unequal distribution of wealth. "Whereas under other circumstances, she and Sugar would laugh and talk together, representative of comradery, upon exposure to capitalistic economics, they immediately become estranged" (Champion 74). As they leave the store and board the train to home, Sylvia's comments begin to resonate. "Me and Sugar at the back of the train watchin the tracks whizzing by large then small then getting gobbled up in the dark. I'm thinkin about this tricky toy I saw in the store. Cost \$35... Thirty-five dollars could buy new bunk beds for Junior and Gretchen's boy. Thirty-five dollars and the whole household could go to visit Granddaddy Nelson in the country. Thirty-five dollars would pay for the rent and the piano bill too" (150). The train tracks getting gobbled up certainly represents the spirit of capitalism, which zooms by and exploits the less privileged. Sylvia associates the image of the train track with the \$35 toy and the connection made to the reader is that blacks who aspire to white middle-class values will never become a part of the privileged class, for they are destined in a racially biased society to get "gobbled up" by racist attitudes. The larger question implied, of course, is why should blacks even desire to become part of a social system that historically has oppressed them? As Hamlet would say, "Ay, there's the rub."

"Although Sylvia is unaware of the complicated ramifications of the lesson, readers understand that over a sequence of lessons Miss Moore will eventually teach the students the full capacity of the social problems

indicative of capitalism, of which she has thus far provided only a glimpse” (75). Home, Sylvia lets Sugar run ahead of her, rejecting her proposition to race: “ She can run if she want to and even run faster. But ain’t nobody gonna beat me at nothing” (152). Sylvia seems to understand that her and Sugar’s limitations have put them at odds against each other. Tight friends at the story’s beginning, their new awareness of their confines have driven them to naturally compete and become divided, much like the fight in “ Horatio Alger,” and has shifted their focus to obtaining symbols of higher class. By buying into the Dream, Sylvia and Sugar are alienated over a battle already lost, only deepening their oppression and confining themselves deeper within their places in society.

II. Prospect We have found through the experiences of the black community a vocabulary to identify how the American Dream has failed, not just for this group, but for all minorities. America’s desire to transcend history, deny the past, invent a new life and deny historical realities of socioeconomic class makes us “ never grounded and there is nothing that connects [us] to the land” (Hawkes 23). “ America has lived through, and is still suffering from, the consequences of attempting to blend utopian ideals with notions of materialist satisfaction. It still believes in the utopian dream but is seeing this dream through far less innocent eyes. The United States has always used symbols as a way of uniting its ideals” (Hawkes 23). We must not concentrate on the images from stores like F. A. O. Schwartz and on looking the part. Symbols alienate and isolate, like we have seen in “ The Lesson,” rather than draw a nation together. Mickey’s internalized acknowledgment of the “ wrongs” of his image give us a haunting insight into how well we know

we lack. We must not try to distort our own image or the image of the nation, nor must we try to re-write our “ wrongs” like “ Elethia” has aimed to do.

Yet even still, the American Dream tells us to mimic the upper class, suggesting we create allusions of status, image, and wealth. We are all blinded by the belief in the American dream, because we were founded on rugged individualism and a quest for fulfillment, no matter the cost. We still believe in the self-made man; it is highly an American trait. But still we must ask what the difference is between those who succeed and those who do not. It goes back to images and the avoidance of the limitations society has bestowed on us, and it also ties into the difference between success and greatness. We are a nation of symbols and images that represent success. We are victims of the propaganda of magazines and television telling us if we achieve in procuring those things, we will be successful. Magazines and TV gives us an imagined and fabricated visual of America that enables us to forget our history and our past and deny our confines. But none of those things, if we achieved them, would make us “ great,” and these images distort our environment and conceal our limitations, which is the fundamental obstruction. Instead of focusing on success, the American Dream must strive for greatness. We must move from effect to affect, from living to giving, from being divided to being united, not mistaking our prosperity for our identity, and most importantly, not allowing society’s ideals to define us. It is a tall order, one we may never get just right, one that may never break us from our confinement completely. But I hope we learn that what we can gain in heart and in mind we will lose in fear and isolation. I hope we know that we are not our possessions, and I hope we

stop allowing others to make our decisions and we stop asking for permission. I hope we realize this soon. I hope for the very, very best.

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