

Carter Hart

Sarah Turula

ENGL 1103

April 15, 2016

### A Macro-analysis of the Racialized World

Identity is the most important and difficult issue humans strive to understand. The self is complex, created by our biology, our environment, and our culture. W. E. B. Du Bois coined the term “double consciousness” when he contemplated the effects of racial discrimination of the African American psyche, but the term has evolved over time to become a distinctive feature of some literature that encapsulates the psychological dissonance of identifying with a minority culture within a homogenous majority. Louise Erdrich’s “Dear John Wayne” uses the self-congratulatory fiction of a John Wayne film to examine the subtly oppressive narrative behind the film, and Li-Young Lee’s “Persimmons” uses vivid imagery and complex language to reveal a realm of experience missed by the dominant culture, both drawing the conclusion that the delusions of the privileged are blunt, harmful, and inaccurate.

José Itzigsohn and Karida Brown, in their paper *Sociology and the Theory of Double Consciousness*, explain that the self, in terms of a sociological theory, “is the result of social processes, constructed and reconstructed through ongoing social interaction” (Sociology, p. 232). This concept is in contrast with theories of genetic determinism, positing that the self, consciousness, is actually a synthesis of biological structures and social stimuli. Social theorists such as George Mead, Charles Cooley,

and William James narrowed social stimuli down to what they called “Recognition,” which Itzigsohn and Brown characterize as one party’s acknowledgment of another’s conception of self.

W. E. B. Du Bois theorized within the sociological dialog by contemplating the implications of institutional racism on the African American consciousness in his 1903 work *The Souls of Black Folk*. In Du Bois’ view, the construction of self would be stunted by a society that refused to recognize the African American consciousness. Du Bois coined the term “double consciousness” which he defined as “the sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Souls, p. 3). Even before Du Bois, William James emphasized that “Lack of recognition has a devastating impact in the formation of the self” (Sociology, p. 233). Recognition exists more or less between members of a similar culture, but in highly racialized societies, the majority race may refuse to recognize the consciousness of the minority, and instead impose its own consciousness onto that race. The psychological dissonance felt by that oppressed race, Itzigsohn and Brown argue, is what Du Bois means by double consciousness.

The psychological baggage of double consciousness is present in many works of literature and has broadened beyond the scope of African Americans. In “Dear John Wayne” by Louise Erdrich, double consciousness is examined through the two scenes within the poem: one of Native American teens on the hood of a Pontiac watching a John Wayne film, and the other within the movie they watch. As the poem transitions from a dusky August night at the drive-in to the film itself, the speaker’s point of view shifts into the film to reflect a change in consciousness. The film is a western, starring

John Wayne, who heroically battles “The Sioux or some other Plains bunch” for glory and land (“Dear John Wayne”, line 8). This cold anonymity of the enemy tribe is an example of how the speaker’s diction has changed to reflect the ideology of the film. Other lines such as “settlers who die beautifully. . . into the history that brought us all here” reveal the film’s thinly veiled biases (“Dear John Wayne”, lines 13-15). Even though it’s a romanticized fiction that frames the settlers as heroes, the film presents its narrative to the audience as “history that brought us all here,” and refuses to acknowledge the identity of the Native Americans it vilifies (Dear John Wayne, Line 15).

After the film is over, the speaker comments, “scratching our mosquito bites, speechless and small. . . We are back in our skins” (“Dear John Wayne”, lines 33-35). To say explicitly “we are back in our skins” implies that watching the film removed them from their skins, giving them the settlers’ point of view, but the change in consciousness going into the film is far subtler than described leaving the film. This creates a sense that the consumption of ideology is gradual and unconscious, going unnoticed until afterwards. Sociological theories stress that recognition is vital to the proper formation of self, but the film does nothing to recognize the mind, culture, or history of the tribe it depicts. Instead, the film frames a “death-cloud” of Indian arrows “swarming down on the settlers,” which creates a mosquito-like depiction of the tribes that suggests they are a mere irritation to the settlers (“Dear John Wayne”, lines 12-13). Outside of the film, the mosquito bites are instances of the psychological damage caused by double consciousness, an irritation only realized once the viewer has returned to their skins.

Li-Young Lee’s *Persimmons* criticizes society’s lens of his culture through the examination of the relation between the word “persimmon” and “precision.” The story

begins with the speaker's teacher disciplining him on the difference between the two. He starts his reflection by saying "How to choose persimmons. This is precision." ("Persimmons", lines 6-7), and follows with a careful and detailed analysis of how to choose a persimmon. The speaker's vocabulary vividly dissects the anatomy of a persimmon, instructing the reader to "peel the skin tenderly, not to tear the meat," and "eat . . . all of it, to the heart" ("Persimmons", lines 12-17). The speaker intends to justify his confusion by conflating the meaning of the two words, yet preserving their formal definitions. Later in the speaker's life, his father remembers his painting of two persimmons and says, "the strength, the tense, precision in the wrist . . . I painted them hundreds of times, eyes closed. These I painted blind" ("Persimmons", lines 81-84). The father's use of the word "precision" in his shared relationship with persimmons takes on a different meaning in the context of painting, but this only strengthens the speaker's point by solidifying a connection between the words.

The speaker's sixth grade teacher serves to illustrate how an imposed consciousness loses nuance. At the start of the poem, the teacher's differentiation between the words persimmon and precision is purely semantic, but the speaker's analysis is not a matter of the words' pronunciation but of their qualities. The line "How to choose persimmons. This is precision," is a comparison of the value which each word's sound is an arbitrary notation for. The speaker also links the words "fight" and "fright": "Fight was what I did when I was frightened, Fright was what I felt when I was fighting" ("Persimmons", lines 32-33). Later, when the teacher brings a persimmon to school, the poem reveals that not only did the teacher not recognize the complexity in the speaker's understanding of the word persimmon, but she is far less familiar with its

qualities than the speaker is. In stark contrast to the speaker's intimacy with persimmons, he looks on in disappointment as the teacher cuts the persimmon with a knife, "Knowing it wasn't ripe or sweet" ("Persimmons", line 43-44).

Du Bois' Theory of double consciousness takes a complex stance on race and identity. It seems that racialized societies are slow to evolve because of how their own perceptions of race subtly, yet very deeply influence the minds of those who grown up within them. And this depth is measurable, John Wayne's film is just one example of how culture from the twentieth century pop culture unconsciously promoted racist stereotypes. This conflict creates a mismatch between cultural lenses, further isolating each group from one another. Lee's "Persimmons" uses this mismatch to celebrate the beauty of language and the effect a lens has on our very understanding of it, but Erdrich's "Dear John Wayne" looks cynically at that mismatch between what American romanticize their history to be, and what it actually is.

### **Citations**

Itzigsohn, José, and Karida Brown. "Sociology and the Theory of Double Consciousness." *Cambridge Journals* 12.2 (2015): 231-48. 04 Sept. 2015. Web. 02 Apr. 2016.

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