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[2017 Honorable Mention] The American Dream (Some Restrictions May Apply): Racial Boundaries to Class Mobility in American Immigration Narratives

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The American Dream*

*Some Restrictions May Apply

Racial boundaries to Class Mobility in American Immigration Narratives

Olivia Basso

The American dream is the idea that there is equal opportunity for any individual to achieve success and prosperity through hard work and determination. Put differently, the American dream means that you can achieve upward mobility, leave your current class for a higher one. It is one of the corner stones of American ideology. It influences how Americans think about themselves and how others think about America. It's one of the factors that makes America so enticing to new immigrants. If anyone can move up in the world with just hard work, then any immigrant, no matter what color or creed, could become a success. This, however, is not the truth. There are racial caveats to class movement, personal and institutionalized racist barriers that all connect back to the fact that as a society we equate being an American with being white, and in order to achieve the American dream you need to achieve that whiteness.

The idea that America is a meritocracy is a myth. Class mobility in America is extremely low: over seventy percent of those born into the working class will remain there, a statistic that has not changed in the last fifty years (Surowiecki). The class system can be understood through intersectionality. Minority communities and lower class communities often intersect not because of the nature of these people but because of the racial discrimination woven into the fabric of American society. In her article about upward mobility for African Americans, Cole proposes that "The relationship between classes within the black community can be understood only from a position of intersectionality. Since emancipation, Black Americans have struggled not only for upward mobility measured in material terms, but also for freedom from the restrictions imposed

by the wider society based on race” (788). She goes on to suggest that the attempts for upward mobility by the black community often involved the emulation of the white middle class’s behavior and values, which shows an understanding that class and race are inextricably linked.

This idea that Americanness equals whiteness can be seen throughout American history when dealing with immigration. It is clear when looking at the various laws that have been passed that white immigrants were more desirable than other non-white immigrants. The Johnson-Reed act of 1924 created a quota system to control the number of immigrants coming into the United States. However, the quotas were country specific and the amount of immigrants from certain Northern European countries allowed in far outnumbered those allowed in from non-white countries or Southern European countries, as Southern Europeans at this time were not considered to be white enough (Ngai 28). The Bracero program, an American initiative that allowed Mexican workers to come to the United States to work but then required them to leave once their labor was no longer needed, is another example; the American economy depended on labor from Mexico but America did not want Mexican people to stay and become citizens. Mexicans were treated and seen as “workers to be imported and exported according to the needs of U.S. agribusiness rather than as humans with rights” (Chomsky 99).

Once within the United States, people of color were still targeted by racial discrimination. Red lining, a form of discrimination within the housing industry, was created to keep people of color confined to ghettos while white people were free, and encouraged to move out of cities and into suburbs (*The House We Live In*). Buying property is a large part of class mobility, and in this case people of color were barred from taking that step because of their racial identity. And even though the time directly after World War II is seen as a great time for social mobility,

thanks to government programs that helped grow the middle class, it disproportionately benefited white Americans (The House We Live In).

The novel *Bread Givers* perfectly exemplifies this notion of needing to achieve whiteness to achieve class mobility. Sara, as a first generation Jewish immigrant living in New York in the 1920's, is physically white but has to learn to be white socially and culturally. She observes the middle class white students at her college and learns from them, assimilating into the culturally normative version of whiteness that enables her to move smoothly into the middle class after receiving her education. Sara's transformation is charged with racial language, describing how poverty turned her mother's face black and yellow in contrast to the descriptions of the middle class students, saying "their fingernails so white and pink. Their hands and necks white like milk" (Yeziarska 212). This demonstrates that the process of class mobility doesn't just involve getting an education and a higher paying job; it involves learning the cultural norms of that new class, cultural norms that are tied to physical race.

Sara is a success story. She successfully navigates her way out of the working class. She faces opposition but the majority of her problems stem from gender discrimination within her community. She has to break the very firm gender norms of her Jewish culture in order to move up. This divergence from traditional gender roles is the reason that she is able to become socially mobile in a stable, permanent way, while her sisters remain tied to the turbulent fates of their husbands. But this divergence also becomes a major obstacle in her path as her abandoning of tradition leaves her isolated from her family, lonely and without emotional or financial support. Gender norms of immigrants' original culture can be an obstacle for their achievement of the American dream, as the dream is tied to American culture and values. Sara's conviction is tested immensely in this regard; she is caught between the American mentality of everyone for

themselves and her tradition of family loyalty. Thus she feels ashamed when her mother travels far to make sure she is warm and fed while she feels she can't spare any time away from her studies thinking, "how much bigger was Mother's goodness than my burning ambition to rise in the world!" (Yeziarska 171). However, Sara is able to overcome her situation and assimilate into the middle-class because she is considered white; she faced no racial barriers, because although Jewish people were lower down on the racial hierarchy than Anglo Saxons in the 1920's, there was a "consolidation of ethnic whiteness" (Simpson 93). This enabled Jewish immigrants as well as Southern European immigrants to more easily navigate the American class system and move up, achieving the American dream, unlike many other immigrants who could never assimilate completely into whiteness because of their race.

The racial hierarchy is a key factor in understanding the nature of America's class mobility. Other groups, further down on the racial hierarchy, did not have the privilege of becoming integrated into this new definition of "white" described in *Bread Givers*. The novel *Down These Mean Streets* discusses the intricacies of the racial hierarchy in America and its importance to social mobility. A blatant example of the racial barriers to the American dream comes when the protagonist Piri, living in New York in the 1950s, doesn't get offered a salesman's job while his lighter skinned friend does. They are both Puerto Rican, the only difference is their skin tone. This clearly demonstrates the intricacies of the racial hierarchy. Piri and his friend are from the same minority group, yet are treated differently because Piri has darker skin. Piri is aware of the privilege that Latinos get by presiding in the middle of the hierarchy, between white people at the top and black people at the bottom. This awareness shows when Piri defends himself by claiming his Puerto Rican heritage to others, like some Italian children who were bullying him in a ghetto, a white girl at his school in the suburbs and

eventually to his African American friend Brew. It's only after Piri realizes his personal racial identity doesn't matter when faced up to his physical appearance that he can understand the nature of the hierarchy and his position in it. But it's this hierarchy that determines success in America; class mobility is closed to Piri. Without racial privilege he gets no aid in school and is denied work opportunities and as a result experiences downward assimilation, getting involved in street culture, a culture that is heavily tied to ideas of masculinity (Chomsky 108). It is this notion of machismo that pressures Piri into drugs and crime, further distancing him from social mobility and the elusive America dream.

While Piri's immigration narrative finds him disenfranchised by his discovery of the racial hierarchy and its privileges, the characters of *Brown Girl, Brownstones* understand and navigate it to achieve success in the only way they are allowed. As black immigrants from Barbados living in New York in the 1930's and 40's, Silla and her fellow immigrants recognize the limitations their race enforces in the United States. They are aware that they have no avenues to whiteness. They know that they must find a new path, one that enables them to move up socially without moving up the racial hierarchy, something that can be seen in the character of Gerald from *Down These Mean Streets*, who is light skinned enough to pursue success within the white world. The clear barrier of their skin color is something that Deighton, Silla's husband, cannot understand; he pursues a career in accounting, a field that would never accept a black man, while his peers become home owners and landlords and encourage their children to study medicine or law, careers that they could practice within minority communities and are thus practical paths to a financially successful future. The Barbadian immigrant community is very aware that to achieve the American dream they have to compromise their dignity as well as their

moral sense as they face racist abuse from employers and exploit other people of color in order to “claw their way to the top” (Marshall 193).

Despite this fierce practicality, the Barbadian community does not fully comprehend how American capitalism works. Silla, for example, “Fails to see the crucial role that class and race play in structuring American society. While white working class people are also exploited by the capitalist system, the capitalist class is, overwhelmingly and definitively, a white one” (McDonald 28). Silla continues to pursue what that highly racialized system defines as success, even though it makes her absolutely miserable. Silla and the other Barbadians understand that the American system rejects them and denies them at every opportunity, but they pursue the American dream with an almost painful determination anyway. They still accept that financial success, home ownership, and getting out of ethnic enclaves are the end goal, which follows the normative narrative of the American dream to a T. But we see that Silla’s embrace of the American dream and the painful lengths she goes to achieve it costs her dearly; she loses her connection with her husband and with her daughters as well as her sense of dignity over the way she has to subjugate herself and others. Silla is miserable throughout the journey and she is miserable when she finally buys her own brownstone. Her American dream was achieved but in the end, because of racial barriers and the actions needed to work around them, it was not worth the cost.

The American dream is a fantasy. America’s brand of capitalism does not encourage or aid in social mobility. It is also a deeply flawed system that ties class with race, making it near impossible for minorities to move up and achieve their own financial security and class mobility. And this can be seen in the narratives of those who come to America, seeking something more,

but finding a system that stacks the odds against them, especially if they happen to be a person of color.

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