

(Un)Consciousness of Identity in Junot Díaz's *How to Date a Brown Girl (Black Girl, White Girl, or Halfie)* and Emma Amos's Painting "Head First"

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Abstract

Junot Díaz's short story "How to Date a Brown Girl (Black Girl, White Girl, or Halfie)" and Emma Amos's painting "Head First" from the "Falling Figures" collection explore the conflict of identity among Black individuals in America, drawing on W.E.B. Du Bois's theory of double consciousness (1903). Both works depict the struggle between the real and disguised self, shaped by sociocultural and economic politics. Díaz employs symbolic instructions to reveal the protagonist's internalized desire to emulate whiteness while concealing his socioeconomic and ethnic reality, reflecting the painful awareness of a dual identity. Similarly, Amos's painting uses falling figures framed in African textiles to illustrate the displacement and rejection of Black identity within a white hegemonic society. Through Freudian psychoanalysis, both texts unveil unconscious desires to assimilate and the subsequent painful realization of the true self, marked by alienation and anxiety. This essay examines how Díaz and Amos portray the interplay of double consciousness, unconscious desires, and self-realization, highlighting the broader implications of identity conflict for Black and other ethnic communities in America.

Keywords: double consciousness, conflict, identity, self-realization, Black American

Introduction

The central thematic preoccupation in both Junot Díaz's short story *How to Date a Brown Girl (Black Girl, White Girl, or Halfie)* (Díaz, 1996) and Emma Amos's painting *Head First*, which appears in her collection *Falling Figures* (Amos, 1991), addresses the conflict of identities: the real versus the disguised, the subconscious desires of the true self, and the painful realization of the "Self" for Black people, grounded in W.E.B. Du Bois's theory of "Double Consciousness" (Du Bois, 1903). Du Bois explains the struggle as arising "from the double life every American Negro must live, as a Negro and as an American," resulting in "a painful self-consciousness" and "a moral hesitancy which is fatal to self-confidence" (Du Bois, 1903).

This position paper argues that Díaz's short story and Amos's painting depict the psychological and social consequences of double consciousness, unconscious desires, and the painful realization of

the true self of Black people within the socio-cultural and economic politics of America. Through literary symbolism and visual imagery, both works reveal how racial oppression forces individuals to suppress their authentic identities while simultaneously longing for social acceptance within a white-dominated society.

Position Statement

This paper takes the position that both Díaz's *How to Date a Brown Girl (Black Girl, White Girl, or Halfie)* (Díaz, 1996) and Amos's *Head First* (Amos, 1991) critically portray the psychological conflict experienced by Black individuals in America. Through symbolism, figurative representation, and psychoanalytic implications, both artists expose how racial discrimination and cultural expectations create divided identities, unconscious desires for assimilation, and an inevitable realization of one's authentic self despite



attempts at disguise.

Double Consciousness and Identity Conflict

Du Bois's theory of double consciousness describes the conflict of identity as a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (Du Bois, 1903). He highlights the struggle of Black people in America, caught between two souls, two thoughts, and two social classes—Black and American. This conflict is vividly portrayed in Díaz's short story through masterful language, using a series of instructions given to a boy and symbolic elements.

Instructions such as "Clear the government cheese" and "Hide the picture of yourself with an Afro" reveal the boy's economic status and identity conflict. These directions emphasize his awareness of the duality of socioeconomic politics, compelling him either to pretend or revolt as a Black individual. They challenge the reader's understanding of his true self and the necessity of disguise within American society. Additionally, the instructions guide the boy to react differently depending on the girl's hometown and ethnic identity, showing his careful effort to conceal his own identity while not challenging hers. For instance, when the girl mentions her parents' cross-cultural marriage, the boy is instructed to respond, "It must have been very hard," despite his discomfort with the implication that his ethnicity is inferior.

Furthermore, the instruction to "run a hand through your hair like white boys do" highlights his desire to appear white and socially acceptable. This reflects double consciousness and initiates a critical discourse on ethnic identity conflict in America. The boy constantly performs a version of himself shaped by dominant white expectations rather than embracing his authentic identity.

Similarly, Amos's *Head First* explores the politics of color and identity in America through figurative imagery. Amos once stated that "To put a brush to canvas as a Black artist was a political act," emphasizing the sociopolitical nature of her artwork. The painting illustrates four falling figures with Black and mixed ethnic identities framed within African-inspired textile patterns.

These images symbolize displacement, instability, and ethnic conflict experienced by Black individuals in America.

One figure, particularly the African figure wearing a white mask and struggling to maintain it, reflects the need for illusion and the simultaneous rejection of that illusion. The masks symbolize the pressure to adopt whiteness in order to survive socially, while the falling bodies represent emotional and cultural fragmentation. Amos therefore visually represents Du Bois's concept of double consciousness and the painful self-consciousness created by living a dual existence as both Black and American.

Unconscious Desires and Repression

The works also reveal the unconscious desires of Black individuals in America. Drawing on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, Mahroof Hossain (2017) explains that "the unconscious is that part of the mind that lies outside the somewhat vague and porous boundaries of consciousness and is constructed in part by the repression of that which is too painful to remain in consciousness."

In Díaz's story, the instructions given to the boy reveal these unconscious desires. For example, "Run a hand through your hair like a white boy does" suggests the boy's unconscious desire to embody whiteness. He could not imitate this behavior without internalizing the ideology that "white" identity represents acceptance and superiority. Similarly, hiding the "government cheese," a symbol of poverty and underprivileged status, reflects his unconscious desire to escape his socioeconomic condition. These actions align with Freud's concept that "the human mind is essentially dual in nature," where repressed thoughts and desires emerge indirectly through behavior. The girl's frustrated outburst - "You are the only kind of guy who asks me out" and "You and the Black boys" - also reveals her unconscious desire to connect with white individuals and distance herself from Blackness. Her words expose fears of alienation and social rejection within America's racial hierarchy. Thus, both characters unconsciously reproduce the racial and social expectations imposed by dominant society. Simi-

larly, Amos's painting reflects unconscious fears of loss, displacement, and cultural alienation. The slipping masks and falling figures symbolize the emotional burden of suppressing authentic identity. The amazed and strained expression of the female figure encapsulates anxiety, rejection, and the failed attempt to imitate whiteness against the permanence of African identity. The African textile frame surrounding the figures further symbolizes the inescapable connection to ancestral heritage. Both Díaz and Amos therefore reveal how unconscious desires are shaped by racial oppression and social conditioning, demonstrating that the struggle for acceptance deeply affects both conscious and unconscious identity formation.

Painful Realization of the True Self

The conflict between reality and pretense ultimately leads to painful self-realization in both works. In Díaz's story, the boy's carefully constructed performance collapses after the girl's emotional outburst exposes the superficiality of his disguise. The moment when he returns the government cheese to the refrigerator symbolizes reluctant acceptance of his socioeconomic and racial identity. His attempt to escape his background fails because identity cannot be permanently hidden or erased (Díaz, 1996).

Likewise, Amos's *Head First* portrays the realization of the true self through the dissolving white masks and the figures' desperate attempts to hold onto them (Amos, 1991). The figures appear unstable and exhausted, symbolizing the emotional pain caused by trying to conform to dominant white culture. Their falling bodies reflect rejection, displacement, and cultural fragmentation. At the same time, the African-inspired textiles surrounding them emphasize the permanence of their cultural roots and heritage (Amos, 1991). Both works therefore demonstrate that pretending to conform to dominant social expectations leads not to liberation but to alienation and psychological suffering. The realization of the true self occurs only after the collapse of illusion, making self-awareness deeply painful within a discriminatory society.

Sociocultural and Political Implications

Both Díaz and Amos use their works to critique the racial and socioeconomic structures of American society. Díaz exposes how poverty, discrimination, and racial stereotypes pressure marginalized individuals to alter their identities for social acceptance. Amos similarly portrays Black identity as politicized and constrained by white cultural dominance. Her artwork reflects the silencing and marginalization of Black individuals within mainstream American culture.

Psychoanalytic criticism also supports this interpretation. Murfin, as cited in Wellek and Warren (Murfin, 1995), explains that psychological criticism attempts to study the motivations, unconscious desires, and emotional effects within literary works. Similarly, psychoanalytic criticism examines how an author's experiences shape artistic production (Hossain, 2017; Freud, 1900). Both Díaz and Amos, coming from distinct ethnic backgrounds, incorporate their personal experiences of conflict, alienation, disguise, and rejection into their works.

Their characters and figures therefore become representations of broader struggles involving race, identity, discrimination, and belonging. These themes extend beyond Black communities and resonate with anyone experiencing cultural marginalization or identity conflict within dominant social structures.

Conclusion

Junot Díaz's *How to Date a Brown Girl (Black Girl, White Girl, or Halfie)* (Díaz, 1996) and Emma Amos's *Head First* (Amos, 1991) address issues of identity and ethnicity through powerful portrayals of double consciousness, unconscious desire, and painful self-realization. Drawing on Du Bois's theory of double consciousness (Du Bois, 1903) and Freudian psychoanalysis (Freud, 1900, 1908), both works reveal the emotional and psychological consequences of living within a racially divided society (Hossain, 2017; Murfin, 1995).

Díaz's story portrays a young boy attempting to conceal his racial and economic identity through performance and imitation, while Amos's paint-

ing visually represents Black individuals struggling between African heritage and American cultural expectations. Both works reveal the unconscious desire to belong within dominant society and the painful realization that authentic identity cannot be permanently hidden.

Ultimately, Díaz and Amos expose the emotional cost of pretending to conform to dominant cultural standards. Their works challenge readers and viewers to confront the realities of racial discrimination, alienation, and identity conflict while emphasizing the importance of embracing one's authentic self despite societal pressures.

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