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### Marginalized Voices: Transforming the Literary Canon

For centuries, the concept of race has shaped humanity's trajectory, contributing to many historical periods where more powerful groups or empires reigned and oppressed other minoritized populations. This idea of racial superiority and imperialism has created theorized concepts of race that have been analyzed by scholars from various disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, and critical race theory. These concepts often go beyond mere biological differences and delve into how race is constructed, experienced, and perpetuated in society. Critical Race Theory is an analytical school of thought that can be applied in a scholarly setting to focus on voices historically marginalized or silenced in literature, challenge the traditional Eurocentric perspective of the literary canon, and encourage an examination of how characters embody intersectional identities. American novelist and social activist Alice Walker delivers a compelling and profound perspective on the repercussions of racial hegemony and the generational trauma endured by those who have suffered from America's history of institutionalized racism. By delving into the differential racialization of these characters, Walker's "Everyday Use" provides a compelling canvas for a Critical Race Theory examination, offering a nuanced exploration of the racial dynamics, power struggles, and cultural identity experienced by the characters Dee, Maggie, and Mama.

In their scholarly journal, Richard Delgado and Dean Stefancic discuss society's perpetuation of differential racialization by examining the historical consequences of this

harmful concept. The scholars assert, “Critical writers in law, as well as social science, have drawn attention to the ways the dominant society racializes different minority groups at different times in response to shifting needs, such as the labor market” (Delgado and Stefancic 3). African Americans have been one of the most heavily racialized groups in American history through their dehumanization and exploitation during a century of enslavement and involuntary labor to the dominance of white supremacy. The Black community also played a foundational role in the development of America due to the inhumane and exploitative nature of the racial hierarchy, which created a need in the labor market for agricultural, construction, and domestic work and relied heavily on the labor of enslaved people to ensure economic prosperity. In “Everyday Use,” Walker characterizes this profoundly ingrained concept of racialization among African Americans when Mama says, “In real life, I am a large, big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands. I can work outside all day, breaking ice to get water for washing. One winter, I knocked a bull calf straight in the brain between the eyes with a sledgehammer and had the meat hung up to chill before nightfall” (Walker 1). In this portion of the text, the author delineates the harmful and dehumanizing impact of oppression and how this has made Mama rough and manly as she has been performing this intensely physical and demanding agrarian work for decades, with no other option to feed her family or earn a living. The racial and socioeconomic power struggles of the time prevented Mama from pursuing any education. They hindered her from having the agency to choose a different outcome for her and her children’s lives.

Cultural intersectionality and the generational acceptance of traditions are other dynamics that are touched on in this story. The reader is presented with three differing points of view on the importance of one’s cultural artifacts and how they hold a different meaning to each character. Literary critic Helga Hoel discusses these contrasting beliefs and these women’s

conflating senses of identity by stating, “I believe Alice Walker has made Dee embrace this confusion of misunderstood cultural bits and pieces from all over Africa on purpose either to let Dee represent anything African or perhaps more likely to portray her as a very shallow and superficial young woman who does not bother to check her sources” (Hoel 313). In this excerpt, Hoel aims to analyze Dee’s demeaning behavior towards her sister Maggie and her mother and the way she dismisses them as unsophisticated or not up to her level of intelligence. When Dee comes home to visit her family, she conveys her newfound critical perspective of her family, considering her educational pursuits, which causes tension with her mother and sister. Dee introduces herself with a new name, attempting to reshape her identity from a family of small-town black farmers to Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo, to reject the idea of being named after her aunt Dicie, whom she claims was given that name by the people who would oppress her. Ironically, by denying her ancestral name, she is disparaging the memory of her aunt and the many women before her with whom she shares this identity, thus disrespecting the many years of history that have contributed to the development of her culture.

Walker portrays Dee’s pseudo-intellectualism and her desire to break free from the constraints of the system of racial oppression when she writes, “Maggie can’t appreciate these quilts!” she said. “She’d probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use!” I didn’t want to bring up how I had offered Dee (Wangero) a quilt when she went away to college. Then she had told they were old-fashioned, out of style” (Walker 5). Through this narrative, the reader can infer that Dee has a superficial and inconsiderate understanding of her family's heirlooms. These cherished and handmade quilts symbolize the practicality and homeliness of her family heritage. However, now that Dee has gone on to earn a college degree and learn about the tribulations of colonialism, her attitude toward these items has changed. Rather than share

Maggie's outlook on how these are items with utilitarian use, she now perceives her culture through the lens of an outsider rather than someone who was raised in that environment whose roots are from this very home. Dee's disconnect is further highlighted when she states, "You ought to try to make something of yourself too, Maggie. It's really a new day for us. But from the way you and Mama still live, you'd never know it" (Walker 6). This moment from the narrative highlights the fundamental differences between Dee, Mama, and Maggie. It demonstrates how Dee has distanced herself from her impoverished upbringing, no longer considering herself a member of this disadvantaged culture that is deeply rooted in racial hegemony, now replacing these oppressive parts of her ancestry with the culturally rich aspect of her African background. In contrast, Mama and Maggie are acquiescent to the status quo and have learned to accept the debilitating ramifications of imperialism and America's history of racism that has affected the outcomes for generations of African-American families.

The concept of hybridity is another facet of critical race theory represented in Walker's story through Dee's lack of cultural unity. Literary critic Jeffrey F. L. Partridge describes hybridity in his journal titled "Cultural Hybridity in the Novels of Gish Jen" and states, "The theory of cultural hybridity seeks to eradicate hegemonic structure by subverting the general notion of culture as a static, primal, totalizing force and replacing it with a more historically viable model in which all cultures are characterized by internal variation diachronicity" (Partridge 167). As Partridge states, hybridity concerns how cultures and identities can intermingle and evolve. While intersectionality addresses the intersecting nature of cultural development and oppression, hybridity explores how individuals navigate multiple cultural influences and create new, hybrid identities that transcend traditional categories. When applying this theory back to the reading of "Everyday Use," one can assert that the compilation of Dee's

decision to change her name, strong interest in African culture and family memorabilia, choice of African-inspired clothing, and the introduction of her boyfriend Hakim-a-barber all represent the complexities and challenges of navigating a hybrid identity, especially when it involves the intersection of different cultural influences. Dee's adherence to a more traditional and culturally authentic African identity, as opposed to the perceived lack of authenticity in her family's rural lifestyle, all illustrate her embodiment of cultural hybridity as she attempts to reconcile her African heritage with her American identity. In this search for belonging, the disparity between Mama, Dee, and Maggie is also unveiled as Dee ironically "others" her own family through her declarations of superiority and disparaging remarks regarding her family's cultural and societal standing. The theoretical term "othering" is described by David Palfreyman in his narrative "Othering in an English Language Program" as "The ways in which a particular group defines other groups in opposition to itself: an Us and Them view that constructs an identity for the Other and the Self" (Palfreyman 3). Walker portrays this othering in this literary piece through Dee's assertions about her family's lack of intellectual achievement and expresses a condescending attitude towards her family's way of life, dismissing their practices as backward or unenlightened. This attitude reinforces the sense of otherness between her and her family. While Dee is characterized as informed and well-read, Mama's disdain towards her superficiality gives a more implicit context to Dee's self-proclaimed knowledge.

As the literary canon evolves, there is evidence of a shift from being traditionally dominated by white males towards the inclusion of marginalized voices. While progress has been made, there is still work to be done to ensure that our enduring cultural and artistic traditions continue to adapt and represent the richness of human experiences from all perspectives. By including the voices of authors like Alice Walker or other novelists from minority backgrounds,

readers gain a more balanced and multi-faceted perspective on historical events and enrich the literary landscape, providing a more accurate reflection of the complexity of human societies. The broadening range of perspectives in literature conveys that their narratives are significant and deserving of recognition, contributing to a sense of identity and agency so that people of all backgrounds feel included in academia, much like the characters in “Everyday Use.”

## Works Cited

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