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REVIEW ARTICLE

CRAVED ON SLAVERY AND FREEDOM: THE AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

Trauma is undeniably part of the quotidian life of modern as well as contemporary African American characters. This trauma is multifaceted and multigenerational. It is prevalent so much so, that some critics associate for better or for worse, the loss of identity to the African American characters. Drawing links with slavery on the one hand, many critics hold the view that what characterizes the identity of modern as well as contemporary African American characters is hyper vigilance, schizophrenia, ambivalence, a foreshortened sense of the future etc., which echo the biases, stereotypes and clichés people of African descent have always been subject to worldwide. The African roots of the African American characters is also used to question the American identity of the African American characters in exile in the U.S., which creates the rationale for this research paper. In this paper, I provide an answer to the issue of the identity as experienced by African American characters. To do so, I pose questions like, can a people without losing his own culture and identity, truly embrace a new culture under the hot irons and the whips of slavery, the mockeries of racism as well as the oppression of discrimination in a foreign land? Going deeper into the subconscious of the African American character in exile in a foreign land, and scrutinizing the unconscious behaviors of African American characters may help answer the question pertaining to the identity of modern as well as contemporary African American characters. Through the lenses of psychotherapist Joy DeGruy's Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome theory (PTSS), I probe into the life of John Grimes, the hero of James Baldwin's semi-autobiography *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1954) in order to unravel the unconscious trauma which serves to build his American identity. At first, I deal with the theoretical framework, which is Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS), and then the historical background of African American characters before addressing the identity of John Grimes in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.

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INTRODUCTION

It is the secret of a polichinelle puppet that descendants of Africa, i.e., African Americans have throughout the ages, suffered physically, emotionally, psychologically as well as spiritually from slavery, racism and all sorts of oppression. They even continue to suffer as one can witness in everyday news. The problem of the color line is truly the central issue of the African American character, just as W.E.B. DuBois rightly predicted about 20th century America. "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line, the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea." (Du Bois, 1903, p.52). Indeed, the racial question of the U.S has even given rise on the one hand to the Critical Race Theory (CRT) movement, a collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power according to Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic in their *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (1995). For them, this movement considers many of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses take up but places them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, setting, group and self-interest, as well as emotions and the unconscious (Delgado and Stefancic, 1995, p.28).

On the other, the racial question inspired the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement following the fatal shootings of unarmed 17 year-old African American Trayvon Benjamin Martin (February 5, 1995 – February 26, 2012) in Sanford, Florida by George Zimmerman, a Hispanic American neighborhood watch coordinator for his gated community where Martin was visiting his relatives at the time of the shooting, as well as the fatal shooting of Michael Brown an unarmed 18 year-old African American killed in 2014 by white police officer Darren Wilson in St. Louis Missouri of Ferguson. These recent traumatizing events are still vivid in the unconscious of people of African descent. These events keep hunting and wounding the unconscious of African Americans. It leaves them with trauma. This trauma just like the pandora's box gives way to the one and many identities issue of the contemporary African American character. What is meant by the one and many identities? How does one account for the identity of African American characters? Through the lenses of Joy DeGruy's PTSS, I dive in this paper, into the problematic of the identity of African American characters as depicted by James Baldwin in his *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. At first, I deal with the theoretical framework, PTSS, and then the background of African American characters. The last part deals with John Grimes' identity

and that of the African American characters of the Black Art and Civil Rights Movement era.

Theoretical framework: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSS):

Generally speaking, Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS) is a term that connotes the multigenerational and multifaceted trauma of slavery as well as the injustices inflicted upon Africans and their African American descendants—from their brutal capture in Africa, all the way through their deportation and inhumane treatment, to the most recent deaths of people of African descent under police brutality—in the U.S. Juneteenth, the celebration of the anniversary of the emancipation of enslaved African Americans in Texas two years after the Emancipation Proclamation of June 1863, and the Tulsa massacre of Black Wall Street in 1921, are two tragic and still vivid events in the unconscious of Africans as well as their African American descendants of the U.S. and the diaspora. Undoubtedly, these events which were preceded by slavery and Jim Crow laws to name only a few, lead 19th and 20th century people of African descent to develop PTSS, which is passed down unconsciously to 21st century Africans and their descendants in the U.S., the diaspora as well as the African continent. PTSS is therefore caused by oppression, and it has similar diagnosis criteria with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but does not limit itself to it.

In dealing with the African American trauma PTSS, psychotherapists, behavioral psychologists as well as general psychiatrists emphasize the impacts of the ordeal of slavery, especially chattel slavery. For African American psychotherapist Joy DeGruy in particular, chattel slavery “yielded stressors that were both disturbing and traumatic, exacting a wound upon the African American psyche which continues to fester” (DeGruy, 2005, p.475). Indeed, slavery yielded traumatic stressors abound. PTSD is one of them. Now, critics defend the view that people who have experienced intense violence especially at the hand of other people, and/or PTSD due to their traumatic experience (a human trafficking survivor for example) have a different set of challenges as compared to those who have experienced trauma through an experience such as divorce. African American psychotherapist Alvin Francis Poussaint, accordingly delved at large into the effects of racism on the psychological development of the African American people, with a focus on their mental health. He believed that racism was the major mental health problem of the African American community throughout the U.S. Building on Poussaint’s legacy, African American psychotherapist Joy DeGruy is convinced that PTSS is a disorder that can be observed in the identity of the African American character, but this disorder is for her, not a disorder that can simply be treated and remedied clinically.

Moreover, according to Joy DeGruy, PTSD added to more and continued trauma, especially trauma caused by racism, injustice, oppression and segregation, yields necessarily Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS). Clearly, when trauma is not addressed properly, it continues to hinder a person’s ability to creatively and flexibly have empathy, overcome fear, act according to his/her values, and access inner intuition as well as wisdom, which may hinder his/her own sense of identity. In essence for the American psychotherapist Carolyn Yoder, one cannot operate at the fullness of one’s intellectual, creative, and emotional capacity because of what the body and brain are still carrying. The body remains on alert (hyperarousal) or goes numb (hypo arousal), or alternates between the two. The brain can easily trigger flight, fight or freeze mode upon perceiving anything resembling the traumatic event. All this takes a toll on the body, mind, and all aspects of one’s life (friendships, marriage, family, career, etc.). In addition, the exponential effects of trauma unfortunately transfer generationally. The dysfunctional behaviors, abnormalities or disorders have a name in the African American context, PTSS. In Joy DeGruy’s *Post Traumatic Slave Disorder: America’s Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (2005) the term designates, a condition that exists when a population has experienced multigenerational trauma resulting from centuries of slavery and continues to experience oppression and institutionalized racism today. Added to this condition is a belief (real or imagined) that the benefits of the society in which they live are not accessible to

them. This, then, is Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: Multigenerational trauma together with continued oppression and Absence of opportunity to access the benefits available in the society leads to . . . Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome. $M + A = P$ (DeGruy, 2005, p. 513). In other words, PTSS is a syndrome relevant to the unique nightmare of enslaved Africans as well as their African American descendants of the U.S. and the diaspora. In her thesis dissertation entitled, “Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome A Literature Review on African American Community Healing and Expressive Arts Therapy” (2019), Expressive Arts Therapist Burrowes Akinlana quotes Poussaint and Alexander (2000) who described Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome as, “the persistent presence of racism, despite the significant legal, social, and political progress made during the last half of the twentieth century, [which] has created a physiological risk for African American people (Burrowes, 2000, p.7).” PTSS is thus the result of PTSD added to pent up frustrations of racism, discrimination, oppression and injustice against people of African descent in the U.S., the African continent as well as the diaspora. It is rather more severe a trauma as compared to PTSD. PTSS therefore needs to be addressed appropriately.

Trauma on the unconscious of African American characters:

Modern slavery which includes, Sex Trafficking, Child Sex Trafficking, Forced Labor, Bonded Labor or Debt Bondage, Domestic Servitude, Forced Child Labor, Unlawful Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers according to the U.S. Department of State, is the offspring of chattel slavery and its practices of racism and oppression against people of African descent despite the abolition of slavery and the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. According to the Washington Post article of September 23rd 2022, more than 1,048 people were shot and killed in the year 2021 by the police. The article underlines however, that although half of the people shot and killed by the police are White, Black Americans are shot at a disproportionate rate. According to the Post, African Americans account for less than 13 percent of the U.S. population, but are killed by police at more than twice the rate of White Americans. These alarming figures are reminiscent of the lynch mobs under Jim Crow laws and white supremacist, right-wing terrorist group’s persecutions, like the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in the South of the U.S. Racism and oppression with their open wounds on the African American unconscious are still vivid in the U.S. and the world to the extent that it would not be too far-fetched to say that slavery never ended per se, at least the unconscious of the descendants of Africa had not been healed yet. Indeed, public records show more examples of oppression against people of African descent, especially in the U.S. In the Master of Arts dissertation in Journalism and Mass Communications entitled “Fatal Force: A Conversation with Journalists Who Cover Deadly, Highly-Publicized Police Shootings,” (2018) Denetra Walker informs, Previous studies on police shootings show that Black males were 21 times more likely to be shot and killed by police officers compared to White males (Gabrielson, Jones, & Sagara, 2014). Complex issues such as race cannot be ignored when exploring police shootings. A study from McElvain & Kposowa (2008) described race and ethnicity as the most contested and highly controversial issues when dealing with police usage of force (Walker, 2018, p.18). The racial issue of the U.S has even given rise on the one hand to the Critical Race Theory (CRT) movement, a collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power according to Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic in their *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (2017). For them, this movement considers many of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses take up but places them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, setting, group and self- interest, as well as emotions and the unconscious (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 28). On the other, it inspired the emergence of the Black Lives Matter¹ movement following the fatal shootings of

¹ According to BBC News, Black Lives Matter is a phrase, and notably a hashtag, used to highlight racism, discrimination and inequality experienced by black people. Its use grew in the US after high-profile killings by police, but it has also been used in the UK and elsewhere. Supporters point to the fact that black people are much more likely to be shot by police in the US. They

unarmed 17 year-old African American Trayvon Benjamin Martin (February 5, 1995 – February 26, 2012) in Sanford, Florida by George Zimmerman, a Hispanic American neighborhood watch coordinator for his gated community where Martin was visiting his relatives at the time of the shooting, and the fatal shooting of Michael Brown an unarmed 18 year-old African American killed in 2014 by white police officer Darren Wilson in St. Louis Missouri of Ferguson, Other National headlines of Black males killed by police include Alton Sterling, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Keith Lamont Scott, and Philando Castile. In the wake of Castile's death at the hands of a police officer, Minnesota's Governor evoked race into the conversation by blatantly asking, "Would this have happened if the passengers were White?" when referring to Castile being pulled over with his girlfriend and young child in the car (Swaine, Laughland & Beckett, 2016) (Walker, 2018, p. 11).

In view of the ongoing acts of racism and oppression against people of African descent, many scholars are of the opinion that the yielded trauma is even worsening. Joy DeGruy is of this opinion. The latter holds chattel slavery as responsible for the current white racist and oppressive behavior against Black people. Chattel slavery has according to her, left a deep multigenerational and multifaceted trauma on people of African descent, just as verified in her seminal book, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Trauma*. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic also point to the everlasting racism of the U.S. as they defend in *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, When Martin Luther King, Jr., issued his famous call for America to put aside its racist past and judge people not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character, he was echoing a demand with long roots in America's history. More than half a century earlier, in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, Justice John Harlan in a famous dissent protested the majority's formalistic separate-but-equal decision. In *Plessy*, a black man had challenged a railroad's rule prohibiting him from riding in a car reserved for whites. The railroad replied that it had set aside identical cars for black passengers, and, hence, its practice did not violate the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The Supreme Court agreed with the railroad, establishing the principle of separate-but-equal that lasted until the Brown decision of 1954 (130).

When reading through History books as well as literary works, the same horrifying figures due to racism and oppression against Africans as well as their African American descendants of the U.S. and the diaspora also appear. For centuries, "the curse of Ham" for instance, which is at the origins of slavery disrupted African American strong family ties, and left them with a multifaceted and multigenerational trauma. In the essay *Our Strange Birth* (1941) by Richard Wright, the narrator openly battles the atrocities and the trauma caused by slavery, racism and oppression on his community,

Captivity under Christendom blasted our lives, disrupted our families, reached down into the personalities of each one of us and destroyed the very images and symbols which had guided our minds and feelings in the effort to live. Our folkways and folktales, which had once given meaning and sanction to our actions, faded from consciousness. Our gods were dead and answered us no more. The trauma of leaving our African home, the suffering of the long middle passage, the thirst, the hunger, the horrors of the slave ship—all these hallowed us out, stripped us, and left only physiological urges, the feelings of fear and fatigue².

Critic and theorist Henry Louis Gates Jr. even notices the depth with which African American literature was long read for its documentary, rather than aesthetic value. Richard Wright also alludes to the same trauma of slavery, racism and oppression when he urges, more than 14,000,000 of us were brought to America alone. For every 100 of us who survived the terrible journey across the Atlantic, the so-called "middle passage" of these voyages, 400 of us perished. During three

hundred years—the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries—more than 100,000,000 of us were torn from our African homes. Until the dawn of the nineteenth century, slavery was legal the world over.³ The trauma of slavery was topped up by the trauma of Segregation under Jim Crow laws, racism, injustice and oppression for decades after the Emancipation Proclamation. Imposed poverty on the land of plenty, mass incarcerations and police brutality, racial profiling continue to traumatize the African American collective unconsciousness in the U.S.

Development of the African American identity: from enslavement to full American citizenship: The history of the descendants of enslaved Africans is characterized by their constant trauma of displacement, dispossession, continuous dehumanization, humiliation, racial segregation, and exploitation. African Americans were viewed for centuries as people with no history, no cultural heritage, no tradition, and no identity in white America, which undoubtedly led many to develop a complex of inferiority out of the racist socialization they were exposed to. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is a nice metaphor of this issue of inferiority while dealing with the identity of African American characters. The hero has therein developed a complex of inferiority, just like many Modern and Contemporary descendants of Africa. Would it therefore be too-far-fetched to argue that the complex of inferiority is an integral part of the identity of African characters and their descendants in the U.S. as well as the diaspora? What else can be associated to the identity of African American characters?

The informed reader of African literature knows well the role and place of the oral tradition in the building of the identity of descendants of Africa. Truly, oral literature shaped the identity of enslaved Africans and their descendants in the U.S. and the diaspora. Lois Tyson in the second edition of *Critical Theory Today: A User-friendly Guide* (2006), is of this opinion. As she traces the roots and identity of African American literature back to Africa, she clarifies that African American literature is not only provocative, but also challenges the status quo of oppression above all things. For her as well as many other African American critics and scholars including Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Valery Smith, African American writing began during the 18th century largely as the effort of enslaved Africans to prove their identity and humanity to whites in the U.S., and in the world in general, For slave-holders, as one of their many attempts to justify slavery, claimed that Africans weren't fully human because they couldn't write poetry!" However, "African-American history predates the emergence of the United States as an independent country, and African American literature has similarly deep roots (Lois Tyson, 2006, p. 364).

African American literature is thus rooted in oral literature, i.e., African folktales and folklore, which existed long before the U.S. was officially founded as a country. No wonder why critics stress the African origins of this specific type of literature when dealing with its identity. However, would it not be too simplistic to reduce the identity of African American characters to protest and the oral tradition? At any rate, enslaved Africans and their newly disenfranchised African American descendants heavily dwelled on the oral tradition and Negro spirituals to resist the oppression of slavery and racism. Having been enslaved like most of the biblical characters, the Africans in bondage in America identified with biblical characters, felt empathy, sympathy, anger, fear etc. for many biblical characters and as a result, started to think like them, pray like them, sing like them and act as if they were themselves in this specific context of deportation and slavery of the Bible. At some point, there was no doubt for the enslaved Africans that God was Black and that he had created them, just like the biblical characters for the sake of freedom (Chenu, 2003, p.217) the Bible scholar gives an account of how enslaved Africans identified with biblical characters including, Moses, Joshua, Daniel, Elijah and the Messiah, upon encountering them via the Bible, during their American deportation and enslavement.

²Richard Wright in his short story entitled *Our Strange Birth*, first published in 1941 and reprinted by permission of Paul R. Reynolds, Inc in the Francis E. Keams' collection of short stories, *Black Identity*.

³ Richard Wright in his short story intitled *Our Strange Birth*, first published in 1941 and reprinted by permission of Paul R. Reynolds, Inc in the Francis E. Keams' collection of short stories, *Black Identity*.

The result of the Africans' identification with biblical characters during slavery and under oppression gave birth to Negro Spirituals according to the theologian and Bible scholar Bruno Chenu, to Gospel music and to the theology of liberation which was well embodied on the one hand by the African American minister and 1964 Nobel peace prize Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. On the other, by the South African minister and 1984 Nobel peace prize Desmond Tutu (1931–2021). The Messiah tradition in modern as well as contemporary African American literature is a logical development of the theology of liberation. This particular identification of Africans in bondage with biblical characters was all for the sake of healing their physical, economic, cultural as well as spiritual trauma in the U.S. The Bible can therefore be considered as part of the identity of African American characters.

The Messiah Complex in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*: According to the International Bipolar foundation, the Messiah complex is a complex psychological state when a person believes that he/she is a savior today or he/she will be in the near future. This kind of psychological issue is usually acquired by patients who have schizophrenia and bipolar disorders. The Messiah complex is similar to the Jehovah complex which leads the individual to harbor the delusion of being divine. Now, what are the manifestations of this complex in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*? James Baldwin's semi-autobiography *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1954) is based on a well-known Negro Spiritual, "Go Tell It on the Mountain," which announces the birth of Christ the Messiah. The approach of the implied author is thought-provoking for the informed reader of African American literature. In this spiritual autobiography *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, the implied author portrays his young self, John Grimes in the midst of an epiphany in the Temple of the Fire Baptized. Just like Christ the Messiah, John Grimes denounces therein injustice, and the oppression of racism through an oedipal complex but also, claims his Christian identity against all odds, while using his Messiah complex or complex of superiority. Indeed, in Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, racism against people of African descent is subtly denounced by the narrator. Racism has a negative impact on the unconscious of the entire Grimes family. The subconscious of the African American community of Harlem is also affected and infected by racism. John Grimes' grandmother was literally and figuratively molested by slavery and subsequently racism.

This oppression left open wounds on her unconscious, yet to be treated and healed. She unconsciously passes down the trauma of her wounds to Gabriel the father of John Grimes. Gabriel unconsciously passes down the negative effects of racism to his sons Roy and John Grimes the hero. In the Grimes' family, three generations have been affected and infected by the insidious effects of racism. Their subconscious as a family therefore needs to heal. John Grimes ends up developing a complex out of the racist socialization which impacts his unconscious. His is however not the inferiority complex of the hero of the *Invisible Man*. His is rather, a Messiah complex. There is a clear double-consciousness when dealing with the hero John Grimes. This double-consciousness however reveals through the lenses of PTSS, a testimony of deep wounds in the unconscious of the hero. John Grimes also displays the symptoms of poor self-esteem and for that reason, the latter probably thinks that he would do well by literally conquering not only Broadway, but Harlem as well. By doing so, he would set himself as the enlightened figure of Harlem in particular, and the Black Art Movement era in general. The unconscious thoughts of John Grimes are quite telling to the educated reader of African American literature. Acting in such a way, would probably get him some prestige within his community and raise his level of esteem by the same token. At any rate, John Grimes dreams of grandeur, of eating and drinking to his heart's content, of clothing his body with wondrous fabrics, rich to the eye and pleasing to the touch, just like white people he envies (Baldwin, 1954, p.211). Moreover, John Grimes feels the pressure to follow Gabriel his hypocritical father, to please him, and to prove himself to him by way of his virtue and piety. But, in the meantime, he despises Gabriel deeply, struggles with his hatred for his father and his father's hatred of him.

This struggle is both spiritual and psychological, because Gabriel is the deacon of the church John goes to, that is, Gabriel is the minister of God in this church. Through the technique of flashback, the narrator reveals the origins of Gabriel's identity. Gabriel was in fact born of an enslaved woman, which is thought provoking for the informed reader, Gabriel's mother had often been brought lo, but she had never been forsaken. She had always seemed to Florence the oldest woman in the world, for she often spoke of Florence and Gabriel as the children of her old age, and she had been born, innumerable years ago, during slavery, on a plantation in another state. On this plantation she had grown up as one of the field-workers, for she was very tall and strong; and by and by she had married and raised children, all of whom had been taken from her, one by sickness and two by auction; and one, whom she had not been allowed to call her own, had been raised in the master's house (Baldwin, 1954, p.211). Slavery has caused many wounds including untreated ones on Gabriel's mother. Gabriel himself was raised by a broken and traumatized mother. Therefore, the untreated trauma of slavery which Gabriel's mother suffered from, was passed down directly to Gabriel, and John Grimes indirectly. Direct and intergenerational trauma was passed down to John Grimes. Two generations after his grandmother, John Grimes suffers from a multi-generational wound on his unconscious "I believe that the behaviors in the scenarios described above, as well as many others, are in large part related to transgenerational adaptations associated with the past traumas of slavery and on-going oppression. I have termed this condition 'Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome,' or PTSS" (DeGruy 69). No wonder why the hero does not quite understand his father Gabriel who wants him to hate white people.

His father said that all white people were wicked, and that God was going to bring them low. He said that white people were never to be trusted, and that they told nothing but lies, and that no one of them had ever loved a nigger. He, John, was a nigger, and he would find out, as soon as he got a little older, how evil white people could be. John had read about the things white people did to colored people; how, in the South, where his parents came from, white people cheated them of their wages, and burned them, and shot them—and did worse things, said his father, which the tongue could not endure to utter. He had read about colored men being burned in the electric chair for things they had not done; how in riots they were beaten with clubs; how they were tortured in prisons; how they were the last to be hired and the first to be fired (Baldwin, 1954, p.211). This trauma is certainly the very reason behind the conflictual relationship that Gabriel entertains with his entire family including John Grimes. Gabriel wants John Grimes to hate white people, but John Grimes fears the idea of hate which could induce him into sin. John Grimes despises sin and is not ready for hate, since white people did not do anything to him directly, John, staring at Elisha, struggled to tell him something more—struggled to say—all that could never be said. Yet: 'I was down in the valley,' he dared, 'I was by myself down there. I won't never forget. May God forget me if I forget.'... 'Elisha,' he said, 'no matter what happens to me, where I go, what folks say about me, no matter what anybody says, you remember—please remember—I was saved. I was there' (Baldwin, 1954, p.211). John Grimes therefore Goes down to the valley of prayer, conquers his own soul to redemption from trauma, and keeps a determination to save others like Elisha.

CONCLUSION

As seen above, the trauma of slavery, racism and oppression is an integral part of the identity of John Grimes the hero of *Go Tell It on the mountain*. Instead of developing a complex of inferiority like the hero of the *Invisible Man*, John Grimes develops a Messiah complex to claim his African American identity. However, is Christianity the only identity which is adopted and adapted by African American characters? What are the social and economic implications of this African American identity on the African American community as a whole?

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