

Unit #1 – Unpacking Subliminal Messaging Around “The American Dream”



Due Dates

Friday, September 25th: Journals #3 Due by 11:59 PM on Blackboard

Wednesday, October 7th: Working Draft and Peer Review Due by 11:59 PM in Google folder

Saturday, October 10th: “Polished” Draft Due by 11:59 PM on Blackboard

Background

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the “**American Dream**” as “the ideal that every citizen of the United States should have an equal opportunity to achieve success and prosperity through hard work, determination, and initiative”; however, is this definition and the set of beliefs from which it stems universal, or is there nuance here, something more complicated that we need to unpack?

In our Unit #2 anchor text, the graphic novel *March: Book One*, we are given a **firsthand account** of the events that constituted the birth of the American Civil Rights Movement. This primary source, however, is packaged to us in a visual story that allows the writers and artist to convey **subliminal messages** – messaging that lives just under the surface of what we see on the page, messaging that we uncover when we connect the strategies our composers are using with “the big picture”. We see young John Lewis grapple with his identity and find his place in the world and within this monumental movement, accompanying him through a series of moments of **epiphany** which shift his **perception** of the America in which he lives while simultaneously complicating *our* assumptions about the “American Dream” of a time that we often disconnect from our experiences in the present. Our text utilizes the conventions of the genre to provide a narrative from one point of view of the movement, much like José Antonio Vargas’ narrative in his “Define America: José’s Story” video-essay reveals a snapshot of the immigrant rights movement from his point of view. The ways in which these narrators tell their stories reveal much more about their values, their beliefs and their perceptions of the people, cultures and systems that impact how we understand the meaning of this loaded phrase “The American Dream”. When we start to see *how* Lewis tells this story and *why* he tells it the way he does, we can also begin to draw conclusions about what he is telling us about this “dream”.

Directions

For this second essay of the semester, let’s continue our discovery of the complicated realities around what it means to “be” here in America by uncovering the subliminal messages that underlay some of the most striking scenes in Lewis’ *March: Book One*. **How does a scene from *March* use subliminal messaging to critique our assumptions about “The American Dream”?** We will then see how one idea from another text **synthesizes** with this message to form an even more expansive conception of the term.

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We cannot focus on the text in its entirety; instead, let us dissect various sections of Lewis’ stirring autobiography and, even more particularly, let’s pinpoint some specific rhetorical strategies in these sections to conduct our analysis.

To begin, you must first **choose a scene from the text** on which to focus. Your options are as follows:

- a) Pages 102-103 (“I was not afraid...”)
- b) Pages 92-93 (“Ma’am, may we be served?”)
- c) Pages 77-78 (“Jim talked about the Montgomery bus boycott...”)
- d) Compare page 36 with page 54 (“don’t get into trouble. Don’t you get in the way.”)
- e) Pages 26-27 (“I fell asleep many nights dreaming...”)
- f) Pages 22-23 (“My father was a sharecropper...”)
- g) Pages 120-121 (“The next evening, Dr. King arrived to speak...”)

Once you’ve chosen your focus, devise an essay that:

1. Provides a strong **introduction** with a **gripping hook**, a **brief summary** of *March: Book One* and an **equally brief summary** of the specific scene that you’ve chosen to analyze (who, what, where, and when, respectively) and an **argument** that attempts to answer this questions: ***How does a scene from March use subliminal messaging to critique our assumptions about “The American Dream” and how does that critique connect with a key concept from either Rankine, Coates or Gay’s texts to expand that message?***
2. **Body paragraphs** that (in no particular order) (1) **describe** and **analyze** how the pages reveal a specific underlying message about the “American Dream” and (2) **synthesize** these ideas with a key concept from either Coates, Rankine or Gay, and
3. A **conclusion** that summarizes your main points and gives the reader a “little extra,” casting a broader net so that your ideas point to the “bigger picture” about the American Dream.

Guidelines

- ✓ Your essay must be at least 3 FULL PAGES in length
- ✓ Your essay must follow MLA formatting conventions and must include a Works Cited page that documents the *March* text, the secondary anchor text of your choice (Rankine, Coates or Gay) and any other anchor text from our unit that you decide to use (you *can* refer to Fitzgerald and/or Vargas) if you need them to help support your ideas about the “how” element in the text).

Sample Citations

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015.

Fitzgerald, Kathleen, J. “Recognizing Race and Ethnicity: Power, Privilege and Inequality”. Westview Press, 2014. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Gay, Roxane. “Peculiar Benefits.” *Bad Feminist: Essays*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2014.

Lewis, John, et.al. *March: Book One*. Top Shelf Productions, 2013.

Vargas, José Antonio. “Define American: José’s Story.” YouTube, uploaded by Define American, 20 June 2011, <https://youtu.be/TJH1IKqF8PA>

Email me if you have any questions or to schedule an office hour appointment, and we will brainstorm together!

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-Professor Miller