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"Decidedly Good Looking:" Horatio Alger's Juvenile Heroes and the Racial Subtext of the American Dream

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“DECIDELY GOOD LOOKING:” HORATIO ALGER’S JUVENILE HEROES AND THE RACIAL SUBTEXT OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

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I. Introduction: Horatio Alger, Jr. and the American Dream

Horatio Alger, Jr. is generally credited with helping to enshrine the American ideal of the "self-made man," or the notion that anyone, regardless of circumstance or socioeconomic standing, can become wealthy enough to achieve the "American dream." In the formulaic novels and stories that Alger relentlessly churned out over the course of his career, the moral is almost always the same: If you're not lazy or impatient, and if you can mobilize sufficient grit, desire, street-smarts, and opportunism to distinguish yourself, then nothing can stop you from becoming just as admired, rich, influential, and respectable as anyone else. Today, of course, Alger's novels are less widely read than they once were, but he nevertheless maintains a significant place in the cultural aura of American life. For example, The Horatio Alger Association of Distinguished Americans, founded "in 1947 to dispel the mounting belief among our nation's youth that the American Dream was no longer attainable," lists its core values as "perseverance, integrity, and excellence." Just as the "renowned" author Horatio Alger, Jr. modeled in his young adult fiction, the Alger Association is driven by faith in "the simple but powerful belief that hard work, honesty, and determination can conquer all obstacles." In addition to awarding scholarships to aspiring college applicants, the Alger Society also bestows an annual "Horatio Alger Award" to Americans who display the Society's core values. Notable past recipients include Hark Aaron, Dwight Eisenhower, Maya Angelou, Ed McMahon, and Leonardo DiCaprio (Alger Association Website).

But while Alger is understood in general terms as an influential American, the specific nature of his fiction and the plot details of the seemingly endless juvenile novels he published between 1864 (*Frank's Campaign; or, What Boys Can Do on the Farm for the Camp*) and 1880

(*The American Explorer: Or, Among the Sierras*) are far more arcane (or even poorly understood) today. As Michael Moon notes, few writers in the history of American literature are simultaneously as well known and yet misrepresented as Horatio Alger, Jr. Far from promoting the values of rugged individualism, independence, and opportunism, Moon writes, Alger's novels instead "hold out merely the prospect of respectability; also, rather than presenting an example of 'rugged' and competitive individualism, they show boys 'rising' through a combination of genteel patronage and sheer luck" (89). Michael Zuckerman agrees, suggesting that "beneath [Alger's] paeans to manly vigor" there lies a "lust for effeminate indulgence; beneath his celebrations of self-reliance, a craving to be taken care of and a yearning to surrender the terrible burden of independence" (209).

If the general cast of Alger's novelistic plots is widely misrepresented or misunderstood, the details of his life are perhaps even more buried beneath the ideals he supposedly promoted. In his 1971 work, *The American Ideal of Success*, Richard Huber presented rediscovered evidence documenting Alger's termination from his position as a minister at the First Unitarian Church and Society of Brewster, Massachusetts, a post Alger took on following the completion of his theology degree at Harvard. In 1866, Huber reports, Alger was accused by an investigative committee convened by the church of "the abominable and revolting crime of gross familiarity with boys" (456), a charge that neither Alger nor his father disputed. In response to the accusation, Alger fled to New York, where he began his career as a prolific writer of young adult fiction. His only penance, it seems, was what his father called a "guilty conscience" in the apologetic letter he wrote to the committee members, assuring them that his son would resign from the ministry immediately and never again work closely with impressionable boys.

II. Alger, Race, and the American Dream

While Alger upheld this promise with regard to the ministry, he was less successful at avoiding at least the topic of impressionable boys, since he devoted the remainder of his life to obsessively writing about a certain "type" of boy and imaginatively working them into plots that all follow a similar logic and convey a similar affirmational theme. Virtually every Alger novel features an adolescent boy who, although possessed of native talents, charisma, good looks, and latent potential, struggles at the outset with homelessness, poverty, and ignorance. Over the course of these plots, Alger's adolescent heroes become acquainted, often through sheer chance, with wealthy and powerful older men who serve as mentors to them, offering advice, clothing, encouragement, solace, and even stable places to live until they can afford their own arrangements. These wealthy older male characters take Alger's boy heroes under their wing and help them achieve, if not immediate wealth, at least a better sense of how to become "respectable" by earning (and saving) money, dressing and behaving in genteel ways, and practicing good personal hygiene. By novel's end, the boy who began as homeless, dirty, and downtrodden is typically "on his way" to a better future because he has learned to imitate the traits and habits of successful corporate men, and because he has imbibed the ideals and goals of the Gilded Age's mercantile class.

As Moon and Zuckerman both note, these relationships between powerful men and impressionable adolescent boys in Alger's juvenile fiction are sustained through forms of desire – tenderness, emotional investment, a desire to please and be rewarded by the adolescent boy, a desire to influence and control by the adult mentor – that can take on an explicitly homoerotic cast. In Moon's view, this dynamic is not anomalous or even specifically related to Alger's checkered sexual past (although it certainly could be), but rather a product of "determinate

relations between social forms engendered by the emergent Gilded Age culture and some of the quasisexual ties and domestic arrangements between males that impel Alger's fiction" (90). In other words, the homoerotic ties that link adolescents and their mentors in Alger's novels, as well as the status-specific forms of desire these men and boys exchange, mirror broader social relations established between men in late nineteenth-century corporate America. In what follows, I do not dispute readings such as Moon's, but rather build on and complicate them by exploring not only the relationship between capitalism and sexuality in Alger's fiction, but also how Alger's novels help us to better understand race as a crucial component of the social dynamics of success in America.

Although the at times unsettling nature of the relationship between men and boys in Alger's novels has become something of a critical commonplace, much less has been written about Alger's treatment of race. This omission is not surprising, since no Alger novel engages explicitly with race, and in this sense their triumphant stories of adolescent promise can seem "colorblind," a trait that makes them especially consistent with the supposed equality that characterizes access to the American Dream itself. As Martin Klepper notes, the success of Alger's heroes is predicated on the "high visibility" of their "honesty and fundamental goodness," traits that were implicitly associated with their de-facto "whiteness." What's more, Klepper suggests, although poverty is often "racialized" in the late nineteenth century context of Alger's novels, his poor-yet-aspiring street urchins are afforded the privilege to "wash [poverty] away" due to their implicit association with whiteness, a characteristic that "also accounted for the cherished qualities of industry, energy, and self-advancement" that were prerequisites for both the success of Alger's boy heroes and for access to the American Dream in the late

nineteenth century. For these reasons, Klepper concludes, "it is no surprise that there are no Black characters in *Ragged Dick"* (170).

But while race is virtually never overtly featured in Alger's work, a core element of their plots is detailed narrative descriptions of the protagonists' attractive "appearance." Such scenes typically begin with a third person narrator gently lamenting the habits, cleanliness, language, and even the crude (but streetwise) behavior of the novel's hero, but then qualifying those initial descriptions with commentary on how attractive and charismatic the hero is, despite his dirty clothes, unwashed face, and squalid domestic arrangements. In scenes such as these, which almost always coincide with the protagonist's first introduction, it's as though the narrator is encouraging readers to imagine what it might be like to encounter the homeless-yet-aspiring boy hero for the first time. On one hand, these descriptions of the protagonist's comely appearance serve the simple purpose of making him more likable; it's appealing and fun to identify with an attractive, street-smart, and witty fictional character. On the other hand, however, their looks serve a far more significant purpose in the Alger hero's rise to respectability. Alger's focus on "appearance" suggests that it's vital to "look" a certain way in order to make your way up the socioeconomic ladder, and that if one doesn't meet the unspoken expectations of appearance, the route to respectability will be far more difficult if not closed altogether. Put differently, Alger's obsessive focus on appearance is always-already infused with widely held cultural assumptions about race, most notably the de-facto identification of heroes associated with the proper (if temporarily disguised) "appearance" with the cultural construct of "whiteness." What's more, such characters' redeeming traits are typically countered in Alger's novels by "villains" who display, if only subtly, typical late nineteenth-century features and behaviors (and at times names) that denote them as racially marked.

My focus on the ideal of appearance as Alger portrays it, I hope, will help readers to better understand the history of the establishment of whiteness as a universal cultural norm in America, one that paints the American dream as offering free access to all, but that in fact was (and still is) profoundly exclusionary. The right sort of "appearance" in Alger's heroes is premised on their assumed whiteness, and for influential male mentors to take notice of these characters and to want to help them, Alger's heroes must not only be attractive, at least in a latent sort of way, but they also must not "appear" in ways that distinguish them as racially or ethnically distinct. By exploring Alger's portrayal of appearance, race, male homosociality, and economic success in *Ragged Dick*, I hope to elucidate an important aspect of the history behind the implicit whiteness that continues to serve as the de-facto norm for cultural belonging and economic privilege in America today. I'll also argue that the desire underpinning the relationships that Alger idealizes between influential men and aspiring juvenile boys can help us to learn more about how the ideal of whiteness-as-norm maintains itself – and the economic privilege of the men who claim it – both in the late nineteenth century and today.

III. Whiteness, Social Mobility, and Brotherhood Culture

The seeming inseparability of the ideology of "self-improvement" and success under capitalism in American life in many ways began with Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, in which Franklin meticulously details his rise from a virtual Lockean blank slate – with no formal education, sixteen full or half siblings, and a candlemaker for a father – to one of the most famous, wealthy, and powerful men in the western world. Perhaps the most powerful engine driving Franklin's social ascent is a relentless willingness to try new things, to invest in himself and to experiment with various elements of the status quo so that one day, even if only by

chance, such personal investments might pay off and give him a competitive advantage over other men. For example, when he is apprenticed to his brother James, a Boston printer, Franklin describes reading a book by Thomas Tryon called *The Way to Health, Long Life, and Happiness* (1683); one of Tryon's suggestions for self-improvement involved adopting a vegetarian diet, a recommendation that intrigued Franklin enough to at least temporarily give it a try:

> I made myself acquainted with Tryon's manner of preparing some of his dishes, such as boiling potatoes or rice, making hasty pudding, and a few others, and then proposed to my brother, that if he would give me, weekly, half the money he paid for my board, I would board myself. He instantly agreed to it, and I presently found that I could save half what he paid me. This was an additional fund for buying books. But I had another advantage in it. My brother and the rest going from the printing-house to their meals, I remained there alone, and, dispatching presently my light repast, which often was no more than a bisket or a slice of bread, a handful of raisins or a tart from the pastry-cook's, and a glass of water, had the rest of the time till their return for study, in which I made the greater progress, from that greater clearness of head and quicker apprehension which usually attend temperance in eating and drinking. (Franklin)

Franklin's experiment with vegetarianism offers a template for how to harness an enterprising spirit in the service of social mobility. By keeping an open mind and an energetic willingness to try new things, Franklin saves money, expands his knowledge with his savings, and gains a competitive advantage over his co-workers who, because they have overindulged at lunchtime, spend their afternoons in sluggish stupor while Ben – lean, hungry, and filled with new knowledge – equips himself to surpass them in the socioeconomic hierarchy.

The ideals of self-investment, self-improvement, and openness to new ideas would be hard to take issue with, since they enabled Franklin to continually find new approaches to life's problems and, from a personal standpoint, to acquire new skills and forms of knowledge that assisted in his success. It is important to note, however, that Franklin's Enlightenment spirit also enabled him to move in specific social circles with other like-minded men who ultimately became the vanguard of the new nation's political and economic life. Franklin doesn't just note his various experiments with the status quo or his achievements in his *Autobiography*; he also frequently names the associations such achievements enabled him to make and how they added to his wealth. In his description of his rise to success in Philadelphia, for example, Franklin describes a sort of philosophy club that he forms called the "Junto ," a "club of mutual improvement" consisting of "most of [Franklin's] ingenious acquaintance" (Franklin):

> The rules that I drew up required that every member, in his turn, should produce one or more queries on any point of Morals, Politics, or Natural Philosophy, to be discuss'd by the company; and once in three months produce and read an essay of his own writing, on any subject he pleased. Our debates were to be under the direction of a president, and to be conducted in the sincere spirit of inquiry after truth, without fondness for dispute, or desire of victory; and, to prevent warmth, all expressions of positiveness in opinions, or direct contradiction, were after some time made contraband, and prohibited under small pecuniary penalties. (Franklin)

But the Junto isn't just a philosophy club or an Enlightenment era debate society. As he continues to describe touchstone moments in his path to wealth, power, and influence, Franklin mentions the Junto again several times, noting the advantages this secret society provided him in his various endeavors both public and private. Ultimately, Franklin says, so many aspiring young

citizens want to join the group that they decide to form a set of guidelines so that others might form Juntos of their own, with original Junto members supervising or organizing each new incarnation and then reporting back to the original group. The advantages of this scheme, Franklin says, will be numerous:

> The advantages proposed were, the improvement of so many more young citizens by the use of our institutions; our better acquaintance with the general sentiments of the inhabitants on any occasion, as the Junto member might propose what queries we should desire, and was to report to the Junto what pass'd in his separate club; the promotion of our particular interests in business by more extensive recommendation, and the increase of our influence in public affairs, and our power of doing good by spreading thro' the several clubs the sentiments of the Junto. (Franklin)

While Franklin's Junto symbolizes on one hand the spirit of inquiry and self-betterment that energized the Enlightenment, on the other it operates as a sort of fraternity or brotherhood, one function of which is to consolidate the power, influence, and economic success of its members. My use of the term brotherhood to describe Franklin and his aspiring friends and colleagues borrows from Mark Swiencicki's notion of "brotherhood culture," a term Swiencicki uses to describe late nineteenth and early twentieth-century social formations in which wealthy white men began to associate together based on a combined logic of racial homogeneity and socioeconomic status. The boundaries of brotherhood culture, Swiencicki argues, were maintained through a myriad of associations, social clubs, fraternities, and even neighborhoods, which served as elite gathering places and wellsprings for consumerist energy, but more perniciously functioned to restrict equal opportunity to wealth based on whiteness, attractiveness,

charisma, and so on. In other words, brotherhood culture was a kind of privileged club, and like a club (or a fraternity) they preferred to admit only those who looked and acted "like" them.

Franklin's Juno epitomizes brotherhood culture in the sense that members of the Junto improve themselves through debate, extensive reading, and civil inquiry; but they also create an ever-expanding network of like-minded men who will promote each other through "extensive recommendation" and who will consolidate theirs and other members' power through "increase . . . of influence in public affairs" (Franklin). In the list of questions Franklin created to guide Junto meetings, he further expresses these ideas. Question 5, for example asks "Have you lately heard how any present rich man, here or elsewhere, got his estate?" In other words, does anyone have a "rags to riches" story they might like to share so that we can learn from or imitate its formula? And question 17, which asks "Is there any man whose friendship you want, and which the Junto, or any of them, can procure for you?" suggests that the Junto will use its influence to secure important social ties that might aid in the pursuit of wealth and power.

IV. *Ragged Dick*, Brotherhood Culture, and White Salvation

There are numerous parallels between Franklin's *Autobiography* and *Ragged Dick*, but for the purposes of my argument the two most important are the idea that the route to true success in America begins in anonymity and poverty, which justifies the view that those who make it to the top of the socioeconomic hierarchy arrive there through their own merits; and that lofty goals such as self-betterment, generosity, friendship, and even love should always lead in some way to economic success and increased civic influence. Both *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* and *Ragged Dick* engage with and promote the idea of beginning the journey to success from not having anything. But unlike Franklin, for whom the racial makeup of the Junto is largely taken

for granted since its members were largely comprised of the same English Protestant stock as himself, Alger's stories of heroic ascent are set in a much more diverse geographical and historical context. During the course of Alger's career as a writer, particularly in New York City (the setting for virtually all his novels), immigration had begun in earnest from countries such as Italy, Ireland, and other decidedly non "Anglo-Saxon" countries in western Europe, so that when one considers the real life counterparts of Alger's boy heroes, the homeless urchins of America's major urban centers, many if not a majority would have been racially distinct, with names and skin tones and cultural assumptions that readily identified them as Italian, Irish, Jewish, Gypsy, and so on, according to both mainstream and scientific racialist views of the time. This means that the boundaries of Franklin's ideal of a "brotherhood" had, by the decades after the Civil War, become permeable to outsiders, and in order to maintain a sense of homogeneity and like-mindedness those boundaries, many felt, needed to be actively policed. And more pertinently, in relation to Alger's formulaic rags-to-riches plots, the task of "rescuing" that falls to their influential and wealthy adult male character-mentors changes significantly: instead of finding "diamonds in the rough" these characters become charged with plucking attractive "white" or Anglo-Saxon urchins from where they don't belong, which is dwelling amongst the overcrowded squalor of what Jacob Riis called New York's "other half," or the city's racialized ghettos. In other words, if Dick were a real person, he would not just be one among many similar homeless boys. Instead, he is "chosen" from among a complex mixture of homeless boys and girls from a variety of geographic, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. As Andrea Warren notes,

> 1850, when New York City's population was 500,000, an estimated 10,000 to 30,000 homeless children lived in the streets or were warehoused in more than two dozen orphanages. Many were sons and daughters of down-on-their-luck immigrants. [. . .] In

> 1820, the U.S. population was about 9.6 million. Within four decades, 5 million European immigrants would arrive, nearly all from Ireland, England and Germany. By 1900, 16 million Irish had come to America, and the population was 76.1 million. (Warren)

Newspapers from the time often explicitly described New York City's throngs of homeless children in explicitly racialized terms, disparaging specific groups such as "Irish American newsboys," "little Italian bootblacks," and "begging, dancing" gypsy girls" (qtd in Manzo and Rivkin 29). According to Manzo and Rivkin:

> Many, if not most of the children on the streets were immigrants to this country or children of recent immigrants [. . .] Many ethnic groups fell within the prejudices of the writers, raising questions regarding their own backgrounds and class values. Ethnic slurs and stereotypes were frequent used and there was a tendency to blame the poor immigrants for their poverty, including the children. Germans, Jews, Italians, and Irish were singled out for criticism, some more than others. (29)

In light of these historical data on immigration and the demographics of New York's throngs of homeless children, the narrator's introduction of Dick to the reader takes on an entirely different cast:

> But in spite of his dirt and rags there was something about Dick that was attractive. It was easy to see that if he had been clean and well-dressed he would have been decidedly good-looking. Some of his companions were sly, and their faces inspired distrust; butDick had a frank, straight-forward manner that made him a favorite. (Alger 4)

The lines above exhibit the concepts of brotherhood and whiteness. The narrator expresses that Dick had particular qualities that set him apart from a community of people who are below the poverty line. In other words, the narrator insinuates that there is something special about Dick

that distinguishes him from his peers, particularly those with names commonly associated with undesirable traits in the mid-to-late nineteenth century such as the Irish. The character Mickey McGuire, for example is the villain (or at least the main foil) of Ragged Dick, and Mickey's features and ingrained behaviors align with racist stereotypes of the novel's time period; he likes to fight, has a "broad" face, and shows little capacity for thought or character development. More importantly, perhaps, characters such as Mickey have little sense of work ethic, so that their laziness or their disruptive tendencies seem like ingrained (or genetically inherited) traits. The brotherhood of appearance, in this sense, might more appropriately be called a brotherhood of whiteness, for this trait seems essential, in Alger's rendering, for access to the "colorblind" promise of the American Dream.

While the novel begins with Dick shining shoes for a living, and not always having enough money, there is a clear turning point that is based on his appearance. A wealthy character, Mr. Whitney, seeks someone to work as a tour guide for his nephew Frank. Both Mr. Whitney and Frank notice that Dick is a homeless boy; however, it is clear that they still decide to give him an opportunity to take the job based on his appearance. Mr. Whitney says, "I may be rash in trusting a boy of whom I know nothing, but I like your looks, and I think you will prove a proper guide for my nephew" (Alger 20). This continues to perpetuate the idea that Dick's appearance allows him to have opportunities based on his whiteness. When Mr. Whitney and Frank first encounter Dick he has a filthy appearance. However, Mr. Whitney is able to associate him with a community outside of his current one. In other words, Dick has this new job opportunity based on his race and his proximity to the whiteness of his would-be mentor/rescuer. Despite being homeless and appearing as dirty, other wealthy white males are able to deem him as trustworthy based on his "looks".

In Alger's novels the protagonists are the epitome of the benefits of capitalism, and the characters consistently engage with the values and ideology of the American Dream. The narrator also depicts the flaw of Dick by suggesting that sometimes he participates in gambling, cigar smoking, going to plays, and other bad habits. However, some of the particular lines insinuate the promotion of a specific ideology. The narrator states, "His nature was a noble one, and had saved him from all mean faults. I hope my young readers will like him as I do, without being blind to his faults. Perhaps, although he was only a boot-black, they may find something in him to imitate" (Alger 7). Ragged Dick, in other words, is not yet considered to be the perfect young man. However, the language exemplifies that his story is one worthy of imitation. This idea demonstrates the theme of the promotion of the good qualities of capitalism. The narrator suggests that readers will want to imitate Ragged Dick because he excels in changing his economic status through desire, opportunism, and an enterprising spirit. This promotes the reproduction and ideology of the capitalist economic system as well as the American Dream. The narrator hopes that Ragged Dick's story will influence other young men to strive to resemble him despite some of his faults. This notion is crucial to note because other characters in the novel also engage in bad habits; however, they are not deemed as characters to imitate. This concept connects to the way the characters' appearances are described in the novel. Dick "looks" trustworthy, and despite his flaws he is still a model young man that one should resemble.

One of the main aspects of the American Dream is the belief that if an individual works hard then they will achieve success. In the novel, there is an interesting exchange between Dick and another boy named Johnny. Dick decides to buy food for Johnny; however, during their conversation Dick displays the promotion of capitalistic ideology. Unlike Dick, Johnny explains why he cannot afford to buy food. Dick says, "Well, you might if you tried. I keep my eyes open,

—that's the way I get jobs. You're lazy, that's what's the matter." (Alger 9). This correlates with the notion that the American Dream works; if an individual works hard then they will be successful. In this instance, Dick explains that Johnny cannot afford to eat at the restaurant because he is not a hard worker. He also describes Johnny as lazy, indicating that he does not want to work hard, thus promoting the idea that it is one's own fault for not being successful. He suggests that Johnny does not make enough money because he does not work hard enough. This concept is one of the main pillars of capitalism. However, this exchange fails to acknowledge that Johnny is not granted the same opportunities as Dick. Here, it is apparent that Dick scolds Johnny for being "lazy" without recognizing the difference in opportunity the two characters have.

Mr. Whitney is a central character in the novel because he decides to hire Dick based on the assumptions the narrator shares about Dick's appearance. Additionally, his character also promotes an ideology in consensus with the values of capitalism. When Dick finishes showing Frank around New York City, Mr. Whitney engages in a conversation with Dick. The conversation is significant due to the assumptions about success that Mr. Whitney shares with Dick, and further promotes the concept of brotherhood culture. Before Dick is allowed to usher Frank around the city, Mr. Whitney instructs Dick to take a bath at his hotel and to borrow a suit of Frank's so that he might look "respectable." When Dick reappears, clean and newly clothed, Mr. Whitney does not recognize him due to his change in appearance; however, once he recognizes him, he gives Dick words of encouragement by saying, "I hope, my lad, you will prosper and rise in the world. You know in this free country poverty in early life is no bar to a man's advancement" (Alger 55). Mr. Whitney's character and conversation with Dick also engages with capitalist ideology. He empathizes with Dick because he understands what living a

life in poverty entails. Mr. Whitey also advocates for the free-market economy because he suggests that no matter one's economic status, any individual can always prosper if they choose to do so. Mr. Whitney values capitalism in the novel, and Dick admires Mr. Whitney. This dynamic further exemplifies the promotion of capitalism because Dick tries to achieve a life similar to Mr. Whitney's, while simultaneously promoting a culture of whiteness and brotherhood culture. This is expressed by Mr. Whitney's initial mentorship of Dick due to his "looks" as well as how he sees himself in Dick. Due to appearance and brotherhood culture Dick was granted the opportunity of mentorship by a successful man such as Mr. Whitney.

V. The Ideological Stranglehold of Implicit Whiteness

Erika Blacksher and Sean A. Valles suggest that "whiteness" came into being as a way both to defend the economic privilege of specific groups, and to serve as a compensation mechanism for the working-class poor, who could imaginatively empower themselves through identification with wealthy "whites" despite their lack of actual capital:

> Millions of White people are born poor and live, work, and die in and of hardscrabble circumstances. But being White increases one's odds of being born into, or being able to climb into, more protective conditions." (52).

This notion presents itself in the opportunity Mr. Whitney offers by relying solely on Dick's appearance. This is Dick's first opportunity to move upward on the economic scale. Thus, it is important to acknowledge that this might not have been possible if Dick was born of a different race. Put differently, although Alger rarely included Black characters in his novels in anything other than background roles, both because of the historical contexts of his novels in which "real" Americans struggled to process the massive waves of western European and Irish immigrants

that rapidly altered their cultural landscape, and because Alger's villains are often named in ways that readers would have associated with anti-immigrant sentiment and its associated racial stereotypes. In contrast to these subtly racialized villains, Dick's redeeming qualities are associated, in ways that are consistent with the racialist logic of the time, with the "natural" or inherent qualities of the "Anglo-Saxon" race, or what Josiah Nott and George Gliddon called the "Caucasian" branch of the human evolutionary tree and whose members, they say, "have been assigned, in all ages, the largest brains and the most powerful intellect; theirs is the mission of extending and perfecting civilization—they are by nature ambitious, daring, domineering, and reckless of danger —impelled by an irresistible instinct, they visit all climes, regardless of difficulties" (67). And although there are no characters in Ragged Dick that we might include under Nott and Gliddon's "Negro" category of humankind, there is one particular character who is readily identifiable as Irish, and that is Mickey Maguire, Dick's primary antagonist.

In the beginning of the novel the narrator describes Dick with the "diamond in the rough" trope. He is a "hero", "handsome", and despite wearing worn clothes he is somehow different from his counterparts. However, the narrator describes Mickey as "A stout, red-haired, freckled-faced boy of fourteen bearing the name Mickey Maguire" (Alger 64). While this description does not outwardly discuss Mickey's race, it is still clear that Mickey does not appear to fall into the white Anglo-Saxon category. However, the narrator goes on to say:

> Moreover [Mickey] was democratic in his tastes, and had a jealous hatred of those who wore good clothes and kept their faces clean. He called it putting on airs and resented the implied superiority. If he had been fifteen years older, and had a trifle more education, he would have interested himself in politics, and been prominent at ward meetings, and a terror to respectable voters on election day. (Alger 64-65)

Here, the difference between Mickey and Dick stems from looks and opportunity. In contrast to Dick, Mickey does not look "handsome" or "trustworthy", but rather is described as vulgar, pugilistic, and rebellious. Such traits align with typical racialized views of the Irish during the period in which Alger wrote. They also suggest implicitly that the reason characters such as Mickey are incapable of rising through the ranks of the socioeconomic hierarchy is rooted not in mindset or even equal opportunity, but rather in Mickey's genetic heritage. Because he is Irish, in other words, Mickey is predestined to remain in his current condition, as one of the roughs, a young immigrant Irishman with a lurking criminal impulse just waiting to emerge.

Dick, on the other hand, begins to change his appearance because he has been taken under Mr. Whitney's mentorship. While he is in his new attire ushering Frank Whitney about town, he encounters Mickey, who doesn't recognize Dick due to his washed face and new clothes: "'You're gettin' mighty fine!' said Micky Maguire, surveying Dick's new clothes with a scornful air. There was something in his words and tone, which Dick, who was disposed to stand up for his dignity, did not at all relish" (Alger 65). Dick becomes unrecognizable to Mickey, and this feels like a form of self-justification for Dick. He now has power and can condescend to those who rightfully should be beneath him in the racial as well as the social pecking order.

Race and appearance take on another form in Alger's influential works because of his heroes' names. In the majority of the novel Dick is referred to as Ragged Dick, but by the end of the novel. When Dick is well on his way to success, he changes his name to Richard Hunter. "'When, in short, you were 'Ragged Dick.' You must drop that name and think of yourself now as' – 'Richard Hunter, Esq.,' said our hero, smiling." (Alger 132). This moment is significant because he is embarking on a different path in his newfound success. Alger's heroes names are

important because, similar to appearance, they too hold a certain level of respect. When Dick changes his name the narrator states:

> Here ends the story of Ragged Dick. As Fosdick said, he is Ragged Dick no longer. He has taken a step upward, and is determined to mount still higher. There are fresh adventures in store for him, and others who have been introduced to these pages. Those who have felt interested in his early life will find his history continued in a new volume, forming the second of the series, to be called, – *Fame and Fortune;* or, *The Progess of Richard Hunter*. (Alger 132)

This signifies Dick's transformation into another level on the socioeconomic scale. Here, Dick embodies the central pillars of the American Dream. However, it is important to note his new name is Anglicized and devoid of specific "ethnic" qualities. This concept presents itself in virtually all of Alger's influential works. Other characters who are deemed as inferior or lazy usually have a last name with Irish, Italian, or other "ethnic" qualities, yet the heroes are not categorized in this way. This notion exemplifies the racial undertone of Alger's work while also calling attention to whiteness as it relates to success and the American Dream.

VI. Conclusion: Reading Race in Alger

To read Alger's novels as fundamentally about race, despite their relative absence of racial characters and specific discussions of race or racial inferiority, is important because like the myth of the American dream, Alger's works encode the superiority of whiteness in tacit ways. In *Ragged Dick*, whiteness flies under the radar by implying that "appearance" and the right to "respectability" are solely a matter of ideological neutrality, consistent with the newly racialized environment of America during the time when Alger wrote. Consider, for example, The Horatio

Alger Society, which staunchly adheres to the logic that access to success in America is equally open to all. The logic of a claim like this depends for its validity on the notion that whiteness is tantamount to something like a "default" subject position – it's vanilla ice cream, or not a cultural construct at any level but simply the norm of the melting pot – something anyone can simply "melt" into without any need for cultural change or adaptation. Anyone can "become" white by simply becoming "normal." But for a norm to exist – particularly one that is fundamentally abstract – it must have "others" against which to define itself. The norms and conventions and cultural logic that maintains whiteness as tacitly neutral is coded in Alger's works as "appearance." The "something about Dick" that was "decidedly good looking," in other words, is his ability to fit seamlessly into the white brotherhood of America's male corporate elite.

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Part II. Article Abstract

Virtually all of Horatio Alger's works Alger focus on a particular "hero" that achieves economic success by the end of the novel. While Alger never explicitly mentions race in his novels, there are clear implications of racial categorization that influence the success of these characters. Scholars from many disciplines have shown that race has a major influence on achieving the American Dream and economic success. During the time of Alger's writing, the United States experienced a massive influx of Eastern European and Irish immigrants who were subjected racial stereotypes that are implied in Alger's works. Yet, Alger's protagonists are often young boys who "appear" trustworthy, and they are the characters who ultimately achieve the American Dream by the end of the novel. My article specifically focuses on Alger's novel *Ragged Dick*, and I aim to provide a better understanding of the history of the establishment of whiteness as a universal cultural norm in the United States.

Part III. Conference Paper

"Decidedly Good Looking:" Horatio Alger's Juvenile Heroes and the Racial Subtext of the American Dream

Horatio Alger, Jr. helped to enshrine the American ideal of the "self-made man," or the notion that anyone, regardless of circumstance or socioeconomic standing, can become wealthy enough to achieve the "American dream." In the formulaic novels and stories that Alger relentlessly churned out over the course of his career, the moral is almost always the same: If you're not lazy or impatient, and if you can mobilize sufficient grit, desire, street-smarts, and opportunism to distinguish yourself, then nothing can stop you from becoming just as admired, rich, influential, and respectable as anyone else. Today, of course, Alger's novels are less widely read than they once were, but he nevertheless maintains a significant place in the cultural aura of American life. For example, The Horatio Alger Association of Distinguished Americans, founded "in 1947 to dispel the mounting belief among our nation's youth that the American Dream was no longer attainable," lists its core values as "perseverance, integrity, and excellence." Just as the "renowned" author Horatio Alger, Jr. modeled in his young adult fiction, the Alger Association is driven by faith in "the simple but powerful belief that hard work, honesty, and determination can conquer all obstacles." In addition to awarding scholarships to aspiring college applicants, the Alger Society also bestows an annual "Horatio Alger Award" to Americans who display the Society's core values. Notable past recipients include Hark Aaron, Dwight Eisenhower, Maya Angelou, Ed McMahon, and Leonardo DiCaprio (Alger Association Website).

But while Alger is understood in general terms as an influential American, the specific nature of his fiction and the plot details of the seemingly endless juvenile novels he published between 1864 (*Frank's Campaign; or, What Boys Can Do on the Farm for the Camp*) and 1880 (*The American Explorer: Or, Among the Sierras*) are far more arcane (or even poorly understood) today. As Michael Moon notes, few writers in the history of American literature are simultaneously as well known and yet misrepresented as Horatio Alger, Jr. Far from promoting the values of rugged individualism, independence, and opportunism, Moon writes, Alger's novels instead "hold out merely the prospect of respectability; also, rather than presenting an example of 'rugged' and competitive individualism, they show boys 'rising' through a combination of genteel patronage and sheer luck" (89). Michael Zuckerman agrees, suggesting that "beneath [Alger's] paeans to manly vigor" there lies a "lust for effeminate indulgence; beneath his celebrations of self-reliance, a craving to be taken care of and a yearning to surrender the terrible burden of independence" (209).

If the general cast of Alger's novelistic plots is widely misrepresented or misunderstood, the details of his life are perhaps even more buried beneath the ideals he supposedly promoted. In his 1971 work, *The American Ideal of Success*, Richard Huber presented rediscovered evidence documenting Alger's termination from his position as a minister at the First Unitarian Church and Society of Brewster, Massachusetts, a post Alger took on following the completion of his theology degree at Harvard. In 1866, Huber reports, Alger was accused by an investigative committee convened by the church of "the abominable and revolting crime of gross familiarity with boys," a charge that neither Alger nor his father disputed. In response to the accusation, Alger fled to New York, where he began his career as a prolific writer of young adult fiction. His only penance, it seems, was what his father called a "guilty conscience" in the apologetic letter

he wrote to the committee members, assuring them that his son would resign from the ministry immediately and never again work closely with impressionable boys (Huber).

While Alger upheld this promise with regard to the ministry, he was less successful at avoiding at least the topic of impressionable boys, since he devoted the remainder of his life to obsessively writing about a certain "type" of boy and imaginatively working them into plots that all follow a similar logic and convey a similar affirmational theme. Virtually every Alger novel features an adolescent boy who, although possessed of native talents, charisma, good looks, and latent potential, struggles at the outset with homelessness, poverty, and ignorance. Over the course of these plots, Alger's adolescent heroes become acquainted, often through sheer chance, with wealthy and powerful older men who serve as mentors to them, offering advice, clothing, encouragement, solace, and even stable places to live until they can afford their own arrangements. These wealthy older male characters take Alger's boy heroes under their wing and help them achieve, if not immediate wealth, at least a better sense of how to become "respectable" by earning (and saving) money, dressing and behaving in genteel ways, and practicing good personal hygiene. By novel's end, the boy who began as homeless, dirty, and downtrodden is typically "on his way" to a better future because he has learned to imitate the traits and habits of successful corporate men, and because he has imbibed the ideals and goals of the Gilded Age's mercantile class.

As Moon and Zuckerman both note, these relationships between powerful men and impressionable adolescent boys in Alger's juvenile fiction are sustained through forms of desire – tenderness, emotional investment, a desire to please and be rewarded by the adolescent boy, a desire to influence and control by the adult mentor – that can take on an explicitly homoerotic cast. In Moon's view, this dynamic is not anomalous or even specifically related to Alger's

checkered sexual past (although it certainly could be), but rather a product of "determinate relations between social forms engendered by the emergent Gilded Age culture and some of the quasisexual ties and domestic arrangements between males that impel Alger's fiction" (90). In other words, the homoerotic ties that link adolescents and their mentors in Alger's novels, as well as the status-specific forms of desire these men and boys exchange, mirror broader social relations established between men in late nineteenth-century corporate America. In what follows, I do not dispute readings such as Moon's, but rather build on and complicate them by exploring not only the relationship between capitalism and sexuality in Alger's fiction, but also how Alger's novels help us to better understand race as a crucial component of the social dynamics of success in America.

Although the at times unsettling nature of the relationship between men and boys in Alger's novels has become something of a critical commonplace, much less has been written about Alger's treatment of race. This omission is not surprising, since no Alger novel engages explicitly with issues of race, and in this sense their triumphant stories of adolescent promise can seem "colorblind," a trait that makes them especially consistent with the supposed equality that characterizes access to the American Dream itself. But while race is virtually never overtly featured in Alger's work, a core element of their plots is detailed narrative descriptions of the protagonists' attractive "appearance." Such scenes typically begin with a third person narrator gently lamenting the habits, cleanliness, language, and even the crude (but streetwise) behavior of the novel's hero, but then qualifying those initial descriptions with commentary on how attractive and charismatic the hero is, despite his dirty clothes, unwashed face, and squalid domestic arrangements. In scenes such as these, which almost always coincide with the protagonist's first introduction, it's as though the narrator is encouraging readers to imagine what

it might be like to encounter the homeless-yet-aspiring boy hero for the first time. On one hand, these descriptions of the protagonist's comely appearance serve the simple purpose of making him more likable; it's appealing and fun to identify with an attractive, street-smart, and witty fictional character. On the other hand, however, their looks serve a far more significant purpose in the Alger hero's rise to respectability. Alger's focus on "appearance" suggests that it's vital to "look" a certain way in order to make your way up the socioeconomic ladder, and that if one doesn't meet the unspoken expectations of appearance, the route to respectability will be far more difficult if not closed altogether. Put differently, Alger's obsessive focus on appearance is always-already infused with widely held cultural assumptions about race, most notably the de-facto identification of heroes associated with the proper (if temporarily disguised) "appearance" with the cultural construct of "whiteness." What's more, such characters' redeeming traits are typically countered in Alger's novels by "villains" who display, if only subtly, typical late nineteenth-century features and behaviors (and at times names) that denote them as racially marked.

My focus on the ideal of appearance as Alger portrays it, I hope, will help readers to better understand the history of the establishment of whiteness as a universal cultural norm in America, one that paints the American dream as offering free access to all, but that in fact was (and still is) profoundly exclusionary. The right sort of "appearance" in Alger's heroes is premised on their assumed whiteness, and for influential male mentors to take notice of these characters and to want to help them, Alger's heroes must not only be attractive, at least in a latent sort of way, but they also must not "appear" in ways that distinguish them as racially or ethnically distinct. By exploring Alger's portrayal of appearance, race, male homosociality, and economic success in *Ragged Dick*, I hope to elucidate an important aspect of the history behind the implicit whiteness

that continues to serve as the de-facto norm for cultural belonging and economic privilege in America today. I'll also argue that the desire underpinning the relationships that Alger idealizes between influential men and aspiring juvenile boys can help us to learn more about how the ideal of whiteness-as-norm maintains itself – and the economic privilege of the men who claim it – both in the late nineteenth century and today.

During the course of Alger's career as a writer, particularly in New York City (the setting for virtually all his novels), immigration had begun in earnest from countries such as Italy, Ireland, and other decidedly non "Anglo-Saxon" countries in western Europe, so that when one considers the real life counterparts of Alger's boy heroes, the homeless urchins of America's major urban centers, many if not a majority would have been racially distinct, with names and skin tones and cultural assumptions that readily identified them as Italian, Irish, Jewish, Gypsy, and so on according to both mainstream and scientific racialist views of the time. This means that the boundaries of Franklin's ideal of a "brotherhood" had, by the decades after the Civil War, become permeable to outsiders, and in order to maintain a sense of homogeneity and like-mindedness those boundaries needed to be policed. And more pertinently, in relation to Alger's formulaic novels, the task of "rescuing" that falls to their influential and wealthy adult male character-mentors changes significantly: instead of finding "diamonds in the rough" they become charged with plucking attractive "white" or Anglo-Saxon urchins from where they don't belong, which is dwelling amongst the overcrowded squalor of what Jacob Riis called New York's "other half," or the city's racialized ghettos. In other words, if Dick were a real person, he would not just be one among many similar homeless boys. Instead, he is "chosen" from among a complex mixture of homeless boys from a variety of geographic, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. As Andrea Warren notes,

> 1850, when New York City's population was 500,000, an estimated 10,000 to 30,000 homeless children lived in the streets or were warehoused in more than two dozen orphanages. Many were sons and daughters of down-on-their-luck immigrants. [. . .] In 1820, the U.S. population was about 9.6 million. Within four decades, 5 million European immigrants would arrive, nearly all from Ireland, England and Germany. By 1900, 16 million Irish had come to America, and the population was 76.1 million.

Newspapers from the time often explicitly described New York City's throngs of homeless children in explicitly racialized terms, disparaging specific groups as "Irish American newsboys" "little Italian bootblacks" and "begging, dancing" gypsy girls. (qtd in Manzo and Rivkin 29). According to Manzo and Rivkin:

> Many, if not most of the children on the streets were immigrants to this country or children of recent immigrants [. . .] Many ethnic groups fell within the prejudices of the writers, raising questions regarding their own backgrounds and class values. Ethnic slurs and stereotypes were frequent and there was a tendency to blame the poor immigrants for their poverty, including the children. Germans, Jews, Italians, and Irish were singled out for criticism, some more than others.

In light of these historical data on immigration and the demographics of New York' throngs of homeless children, the narrator's introduction of Dick to the reader takes on an entirely different cast:

> But in spite of his dirt and rags there was something about Dick that was attractive. It was easy to see that if he had been clean and well dressed he would have been decidedly good-looking. Some of his companions were sly, and their faces inspired distrust; but Dick had a frank, straight-forward manner that made him a favorite. (Alger 4)

The lines above exhibit the concept of brotherhood and whiteness. The narrator expresses that Dick had particular qualities that set him apart from a community of people who are below the poverty line. In other words, the narrator insinuates that there is something special about Dick that distinguishes him from his peers, particularly those with names commonly associated with undesirable traits in the mid-to-late nineteenth century such as the Irish. The character Mickey McGuire, for example is the villain (or at least the main foil) of Ragged Dick, and Mickey's features and ingrained behaviors align with racist stereotypes of the novel's time period; he likes to fight, has a "broad" face, and shows little capacity for thought or character development. More importantly, perhaps, characters such as Mickey have little sense of work ethic, so that their laziness or their disruptive tendencies seem like ingrained (or genetically inherited) traits. The brotherhood of appearance, in this sense, might more appropriately be called a brotherhood of whiteness, for this trait seems essential, in Alger's rendering, for access to the "colorblind" promise of the American Dream.

While the novel begins with Dick shining shoes for a living, and not always having enough money, there is a clear turning point that is based on his appearance. A wealthy character, Mr. Whitney, seeks someone to work as a tour guide for his nephew Frank. Both Mr. Whitney and Frank notice that Dick is a homeless boy; however, it is clear that they still decide to give him an opportunity to take the job based on his appearance. Mr. Whitney says, "I may be rash in trusting a boy of whom I know nothing, but I like your looks, and I think you will prove a proper guide for my nephew" (Alger 20). This continues to perpetuate the idea that Dick's appearance allows him to have opportunities based on his whiteness. When Mr. Whitney and Frank first encounter Dick he has a filthy appearance. However, Mr. Whitney is able to associate him with a community outside of his current one. In other words, Dick has this new job opportunity based

on his race and his proximity to the whiteness of his would-be mentor/rescuer. Despite being homeless and appearing as dirty, other wealthy white males are able to deem him as trustworthy based on his "looks".

Erika Blacksher and Sean A. Valles suggest that "whiteness" came into being as a way both to defend the economic privilege of specific groups, and to serve as a compensation mechanism for the working-class poor, who could imaginatively empower themselves through identification with wealthy "whites" despite their lack of actual capital:

> Millions of White people are born poor and live, work, and die in and of hardscrabble circumstances. But being White increases one's odds of being born into, or being able to climb into, more protective conditions." (52).

This notion presents itself in the opportunity Mr. Whitney offers by relying solely on Dick's appearance. This is Dick's first opportunity to move upward on the economic scale. Thus, it is important to acknowledge that this might not have been possible if Dick was born of a different race. Put differently, although Alger rarely included Black characters in his novels in anything other than background roles, both because of the historical contexts of his novels in which "real" Americans struggled to process the massive waves of western European and Irish immigrants that altered their cultural landscape seemingly overnight, and because Alger's villains are often named in ways that readers would have associated with anti-immigrant sentiment and its associated racial stereotypes.

To read Alger's novels as fundamentally about race, despite their relative absence of racial characters and specific discussions of race or racial inferiority, is important because like the myth of the American dream, Alger's works encode the superiority of whiteness in tacit ways. In *Ragged Dick*, whiteness flies under the radar by implying that "appearance" and the right to

"respectability" are solely a matter of ideological neutrality, consistent with the newly racialized environment of America during the time when Alger wrote. Consider, for example, The Horatio Alger Society, which staunchly adheres to the logic that access to success in America is equally open to all. The logic of a claim like this depends for its validity on the notion that whiteness is tantamount to something like a "default" subject position – it's vanilla ice cream, or not a cultural construct at any level but simply the norm of the melting pot – something anyone can simply "melt" into without any need for cultural change or adaptation. Anyone can "become" white by simply becoming "normal." But for a norm to exist – particularly one that is fundamentally abstract – it must have "others" against which to define itself. The norms and conventions and cultural logic that maintains whiteness as tacitly neutral is coded in Alger's works as "appearance." The "something about Dick" that was "decidedly good looking," in other words, is his ability to fit seamlessly into the white brotherhood of America's male corporate elite.

Part IV. List of Journals and Conferences

Journals:

1. *Arizona Quarterly* publishes essays on American literature with a cultural approach. Their mission statement says, "We accept essays that are grounded in textual, formal, cultural, and theoretical examination of texts and situated with respect to current academic conversations whilst extending the boundaries thereof." (Arizona Quarterly Website). In my article, I use a cultural approach to analyze the American Dream in Alger's novel *Ragged Dick*.

2. *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* publishes essays from a wide variety of historical ranges. Horatio Alger's novels are currently less commonly read; however, my article discusses why it is important to read Alger's work through a different lens. Their mission statement says, "*Texas Studies in Literature and Language* publishes substantial essays reflecting a variety of critical approaches and covering all periods of literary history." (*Texas Studies in Literature and Language* website). While my article takes a cultural approach when reading Alger's work, I also use a historical approach to analyze the novel *Ragged Dick.*

3. *Studies in American Fiction* publishes essays that cover a wide variety of historical periods. Additionally, this journal publishes well established scholars as well as graduate students essays.

Conferences:

1. Horatio Alger Society Annual Conference: The Horatio Alger Society holds an annual conference to present research on Alger's most influential works. Although the

conference is held by the Horatio Alger Society, this research also includes criticism of Alger's work. This year's conference will be held May 2nd to May 4th.

2. American Literature Association Conference: The American Literature Association holds an annual conference. They promote, "The advancement of humanistic learning by encouraging the study of American authors and their works." (American Literature Association website). As I previously stated, Alger's work is less commonly read; however, it is still important to study Alger's work because there are numerous parallels to the modern-day.