

The Relationship between Social and Economic Marginalization and Alcohol Abuse within the
African Racial Group

Alcoholism is a discriminatory epidemic - it strikes disproportionately among racial groups. In the United States, the Caucasian ethnic group makes up the largest proportion of drinkers (Chartier 2010). On the global stage, alcohol use remains an ubiquitous problem across most European nations, and is a growing problem in nations on the African continent (Griswold 2018).

An explanation for these discrepancies is genetically rooted. Several single nucleotide polymorphisms, or small, single DNA base-pair differences, in genes *AUTS2*, *SGOL1*, and *SERPINC1* in the Caucasian racial group have been linked to an increased proclivity towards alcoholism (Jorgenson 2017). So why then do studies on *persistent* alcohol dependence and alcohol related consequences report higher, more profound levels within the African, rather than Caucasian, racial group (Chartier 2010)?

Explanations for this anomaly point towards underlying socioeconomic factors, indicating that those of lower social and economic orders demonstrate increased alcohol dependency (Zapolski 2014). This paper seeks to address how African artists Romare Bearden and El Anatsui use visual media to discuss the relationship between social and economic marginalization and alcoholism in members of their racial group. These issues will then be analyzed in a modern context, specifically in relation to today's health care disparities, police brutality, civil participation, and the rise of alcoholism in response to weak economic production.

Romare Bearden, an artist in mid-twentieth century United States, addresses link between social marginalization and alcoholism within the African American racial group in his painting “Some Drink! Some Drink!”. This piece, a sizeable two feet by three feet, is categorized by abstract, black sketch lines cracking a mosaic of vibrant oil colors, which flash brightly against a white, masonite background. Completed in 1946, Bearden’s painting alludes to the story Gargantua and Pantagruel by Francois Rabelais, a French Renaissance author who wrote of “boozers” in search of the “divine Bottle”. In his story, Rabelais calls for people to “drink [their] fill...free [themselves] from vain terrors”, an uncanny parallel to Bearden’s subject for the piece which was to convey how alcoholism develops from a desire for escapism (Rosner, “La Dive Bouteille”).

As a member of the African American racial group and as a fierce social activist, Bearden’s exposure to social marginalization and sensitivity to alcoholism reflects his own life experiences (Levy, “The quilt of Romare Bearden’s Life”). Upon closer inspection of the painting, three primary elements of social exclusion - geographical isolation, physical intimidation, and societal barriers to entry - lay buried and masked by an enigmatic, fragmented color scheme (Allman, 2013). These elements demand in-depth analysis and develop in meaning when analyzed in the historical milieu in which the painting was produced.

In deliberate, black strokes, in the lower right-hand side of Bearden’s painting, is the outline of a man, seated in a stool too small to be comfortable. He is hunched over, legs extended outwards. The exaggerated craniofacial features of the man, specifically the pronounced prognathism and rounder nasal cavity, align with antropometric classifications of an ethnically African man (Eboh, 2015). In the foreground rests a round, small-lipped object--a flask. Because

the figure is isolated in one corner and is forced to make do with a borderline unusable stool, this element in Bearden's painting relates to geographical isolation and limited access to resources experienced by the African American populous during his time period.

In the mid-twentieth century, many black residential areas were isolated from white areas, in a form of hypersegregation. These black neighborhoods were underfunded, and as a result, were victim to higher instances of poverty, crime, and failing public school systems (Massey, 1987). Bearden was sentient to these issues as he was raised in a similar, predominantly black community in North Carolina; though his family was of middle class standing, their reputation was blurred by the pervasive, deep-south racism ("Romare Bearden Artist Overview and Analysis", The Art Story). Dilapidated buildings, poor sewage, inconstant electricity, untrustworthy water, and inadequate health facilities underpinned most black communities, making residential isolation and limited access to resources part of the urban African American's life experience (Bayor 1993). The mayor of Atlanta, William Hartsfield once commented "you could always tell where the Negro sections started. Lights stopped, streets, sidewalks stopped" (Klarman, "From Jim Crow to Civil Rights"). The social disadvantage from living in poorer neighborhoods exposed the African American populous to chronic stress levels from a young age (Hatch 2007). This chronic stress, as a product of racial and social marginalization, is directly linked to alcohol abuse in disadvantaged minority groups (Mulia 2008).

The second element of social marginalization Bearden addresses in his work is physical intimidation and abuse from the majority of the population. In the middle of the painting, towards the top, is a scowling man with a raised fist bolded in black. This figure directs a powerful tone of anger and hatred, as he towers over the drinking man on the stool. His eyes are

white circles, dehumanizing him, as if he is so blinded by his racist beliefs he cannot see the seated man clearly. The figure's face has a smaller nasal root breadth, longer nasal protrusion, and a smaller cranial circumference; these are the anthropometric characteristics of a white man (Douglas 2010). Thus, the painting shows a white man raising his fist against the colored man.

African Americans experienced prolific violence in the hands of the majority, white populous. During the twentieth century, the revival of the white supremacy group Ku Klux Klan spurred these acts of violence to encapsulate everything from verbal abuse to lynching and bloody murders (Chalmers, "Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan"). Reports of Klan violence swathed Bearden's early life. As a teenager, he spent his summers with his grandmother who ran a boarding house for African American migrant workers and spent many hours listening to their traumatic experiences with racially-fueled violence ("Romare Bearden Artist Overview and Analysis", The Art Story). This violent racism elicited racially-related post-traumatic stress disorder in many African Americans (Carter 2007), which resulted in morphological alterations in neurochemistry. These alterations damaged the reward pathway in the brain, inducing a proclivity towards addiction, specifically alcohol addiction, as a coping mechanism (Enoch 2010).

The final element of social marginalization Bearden addresses in his work is societal barriers to entry. In the far, upper right of the painting are three coal colored bars, resembling impregnable gates. Throughout Bearden's life, African Americans were stymied from expressing their citizenship through systemic forms of discrimination such as the Jim Crow Laws, which limited both black voting as well as their access to higher education. (Klarman, "From Jim Crow to Civil Rights"). Bearden himself was forced to flee to Paris, France since mounting social

pressure from the rising opposition to the civil rights movement began to restrict art to the whites, harming Bearden's chances of furthering his art education within the United States ("Romare Bearden Artist Overview and Analysis", The Art Story). These social barriers, particularly the restrictions on education, result in a lower quality of life and explain the consequent higher levels of alcoholism within a marginalized group (Crum 1993).

Since the three facets of social marginalization are present within the painting-- geographic isolation shown by the cornered, African man, physical intimidation depicted by the raised fist, and barriers to social entry illustrated by the bars-- a reinterpretation of some of the image's other elements indicate a strong relationship between these facets and alcoholism. The fragmented color scheme and the jagged sketch lines, which elucidate a feeling of general confusion in the viewer, can be linked to impaired color vision due to intoxication (Mergler 1988). Furthermore, the unproportional, geometric shapes within which fragment the painting are related to an impaired ability to distinguish between asymmetric and symmetric shapes--a physical manifestation of drunkenness (Souto 2008). Thus, Romare Bearden's painting "Some Drink! Some Drink!" addresses the drivers of social marginalization of this racial group and consequent alcoholism.

Economic marginalization is another known contributor to chronic stress-related alcoholism. Understanding how economic disparities induce alcoholic tendencies is crucial to developing a comprehensive perception of how socioeconomic factors influence addictive behaviors. El Anatsui, a contemporary African artist, uses large installation artwork to visually communicate this relationship in his piece "Seepage". This tapestry, made from the flattened caps of liquor bottles, shines brightly with hues of shimmering gold, vibrant crimson, soft azure,

and charcoal black. Moulded into waves, this piece resembles the traditional woven garb of Ghanaian people. As a Ghanaian artist, El Anatsui seeks to address the economic problems of a postcolonial age, such as stagnant economic growth and diversity and the fall of traditional economic constructs, through art (Seepage, Blanton Museum of Art Collections).

El Anatsui's use of liquor bottle caps found on beaches alludes to the problems induced by British colonial powers arriving in Ghana during the mid-nineteenth century (Tankebe 2008). By providing a large market for raw materials, the British trading companies redirected economic growth in Ghana towards purely material extraction; this limited the development of other industries within the region and enveloped them into a dependency on colonial powers (Korieh 2003). El Anatsui represented this material exploitation of his home by gilding the liquor bottle caps with golden colors, as gold was a primary extraction from the region (Seepage, Blanton Museum of Art Collections). This dependency bore further repercussions on the health of the populace; colonial powers introduced Ghanaians to a slew of alcoholic beverages. Because these formulations were much stronger than the alcohol used in traditional tribal ceremonies, the demand for European goods skyrocketed. Soon rum became the region's second largest import (Eltis 1988). Thus, by utilizing gilded liquor bottle caps, El Anatsui elucidates the relationship between colonialism and the rise of alcoholism in his country.

The tribal weave pattern of El Anatsui's work also highlights features of economic marginalization, specifically the destruction of precolonial economic constructions. The proliferation of alcoholism in the region began to shape and define the power relationship between colonial powers and the Ghanaian peoples; colonial powers heightened their monopoly over the quanta of alcohol in the region by forcing Ghanaian governments to restrict domestic

distillation, further suppressing regional growth (Korieh 2003). This diminished economic growth resulted in a low Gross National Product, lowering the economic statuses of the people in the country (Korieh 2003). The subsequent reduced economic status, loss of national autonomy, the hopelessness associated with increased unemployment rates (Compton 2014), and the ever-reigning alcoholic industries induced the citizens into patterns of alcohol abuse (Grittner 2012). Thus, El Anatsui's metaphor of gilded hues masking the underlying traditional weave aesthetic, aligns with the message that colonialism demolished traditionalism.

Bearden and Anatsui approach the issue of marginalization-induced alcoholism from different angles: Bearden analyses the social aspects while Anatsui focuses on the economic facets. What they share in common is that their message is not lost in the past; they bear much relevance in contemporary society.

Social marginalization persists; in many regions of the United States, geographic isolation and limited resource access still impacts the African American racial group (Massey 2010). This is seen in modern healthcare: African Americans are twenty-eight times more likely to live in an area with lower access to healthcare facilities than members of other racial groups (Brown 2016). Access to these healthcare facilities - especially primary care physicians - is essential to screening for alcoholic tendencies and promoting healthier, anti-addiction habits in patients (Town 2006). However, this creates a disincentive to owning health insurance, especially since many policies impose higher premiums for individuals with reported addictive behaviors (Friedman 2017). Furthermore, since most people struggling with addiction rely on insurance coverage to pay for rehabilitation (Breithaupt 2001), the lack of coverage makes African Americans with alcohol abuse patterns even less likely to seek therapy (McCarty 2013).

This case study indicates that geographic isolation and limited resource access still promulgate alcoholism among African Americans and are therefore predominant issues today.

Physical intimidation as a mode of social marginalization is also relevant today, particularly in the case of police brutality. Studies show there is a positive correlation between minority status and victims of police brutality, specifically among African Americans and Hispanics (Smith 2006). These cases have been proven to increase mistrust and suspicion between either groups, resulting in additional aggression and a mutual lack of respect (Chaney 2013). Thus, this form of physical intimidation takes on a more systemic tonality.

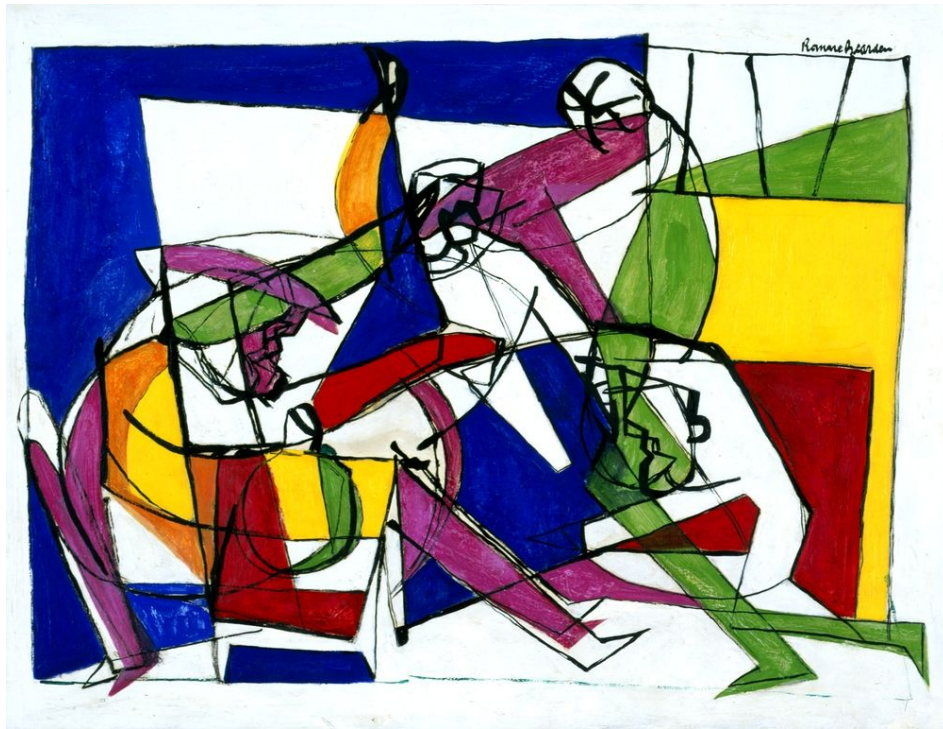
Barriers to social entry have been reduced since Bearden's time, owing to the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, which abolished the segregation of all public spaces. However, more tacit forms still exist, particularly when it comes to voting. In Texas, election days are on a Tuesday and voting times are between seven in the morning to seven in the evening (State Poll Opening and Closing Times, Ballotpedia). These polling times land in the middle of the work day, and therefore many minority groups, such as African Americans, who hold less flexible, blue-collar jobs are unable to vote (Rosenstone 1982). This is a systemic way to limit minority voter turnout, thereby barring social entry.

El Anatsui's message also bears contemporary relevance; the continued lack of economic diversity in Ghana, owing to the limited infrastructure and lack of advanced industries, has stagnated economic growth in the region (Collier 1999). Studies show that a low Gross National Product and high unemployment rates - both factors which characterize the Ghanaian economy - correlate to increased alcoholic tendencies in the population (Compton 2014). The growth of alcohol consumption in Ghana is so pronounced that it has become an incentive for Big Alcohol

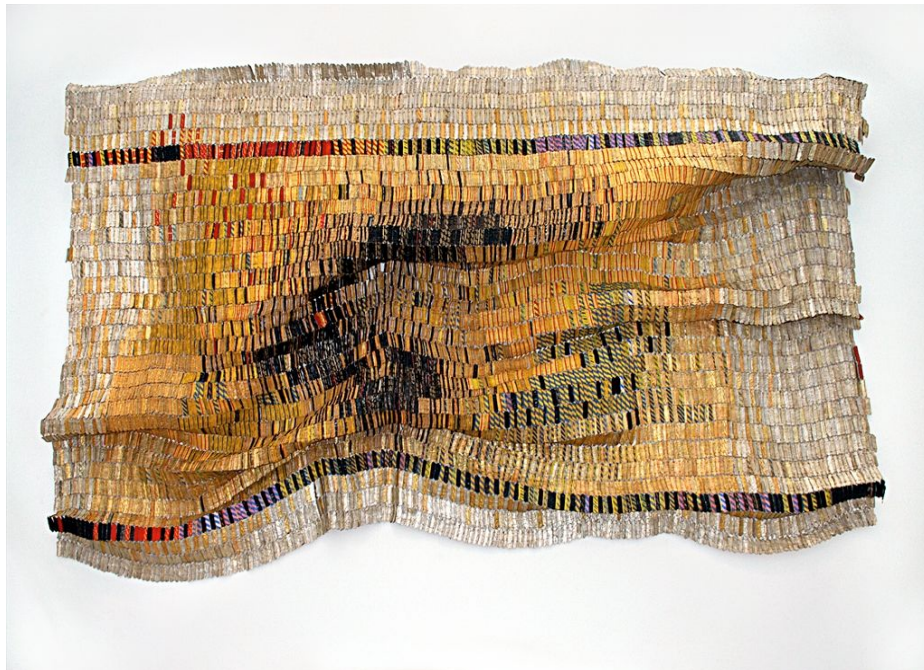
Businesses to expand into the region and take advantage of the rising market (Jernigan 2013). Furthermore, the lack of active, hegemonic government policy continues to render Ghana attractive to the Global Alcohol Industry (Jernigan 2013). For this reason, alcoholism has become ingrained into the economic culture of the region.

Both Romare Bearden and El Anatsui utilize visual media to communicate the problem of alcoholism within their respective societies. Over time, their messages have only grown more relevant. This calls for a global reflection into the social and economic policies we have in place which perpetuate the marginalization of the African racial group.

Romare Bearden's "Some Drink! Some Drink!"



El Anatsui's "Seepage"



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