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Why it Does Not Pay to Believe We Are Superior

Think about your nationality, your race, your culture, and any other group you belong to. How does each of these groups define superiority? Are you considered superior within or because of any of these groups? Helene Cooper, author of *The House at Sugar Beach*, was, and, in her memoir, tells us about her world--1970s Liberia--in which the "Country" people fall victim to the "Congo" people's oppressive nature, which results from their arbitrary belief that they are superior. The Congo people's history can be traced back to the early 1800s when the U.S., after freeing a small number of black slaves, decided that these newly freed slaves would have a better life in Africa. In 1820, the U.S. sent about eighty-eight of these freed blacks to the western coast of Africa, and they succeeded, two years later, in conquering a patch of land which would expand to become Liberia. The descendants of these freed American blacks, the Congo people, have been in power ever since, and have therefore considered themselves the superior class ever

since. Unfortunately, the ways in which the Congo people have remained powerful and therefore superior require pushing the Country people down, and the Congo-run government has been nothing but unjust toward them. The Country people's revolution in 1980, however, turns the class system in Liberia upside down; suddenly, the Country people, through force and numbers, have all the power, and the Congo people are left not feeling so superior anymore. Through countless examples that demonstrate the pointlessness of believing that one is superior, such as this one that proves that the roles can reverse in an instant, and by keeping in mind the harmful effects of superiority's existence in our world, we as members of the human race can come to believe that it simply does not pay to believe we are superior.

Because of the Country people's successful and fairly rapid ascent to the level of power that only the Congo people once occupied, we can be convinced of the pointlessness of believing that one is superior because we see how easily the roles--superior versus inferior--can reverse. Immediately following the Country people's official coup d'etat, or overthrow of the government, the new government under Samuel Doe, a Country man, begins a roundup of all government ministers under the previous leader and soon either tries them for corruption or publicly

executes them. As the ministers are being brought into the courthouse for their various trials, hundreds of Country people are dancing outside, and they begin to chant "'Who born soldier? Country woman! Who born minister? Congo woman!'" (Cooper 182). Here, the Country people are saying that it is a bad time to be the daughter of one of these government ministers, but it is a great time to be the daughter of a soldier (many Country men had become soldiers for their new government), and they are splaying their newly-gained power in the faces of these once-powerful Congo people. We can interpret their chant as their way of mocking the Congo people's classist attitudes and their belief that they are superior because these attitudes and this belief are now meaningless and worthless to hold onto, as they have lost everything that once enabled them to classify themselves as superior--their power, their land, and their wealth. By witnessing how easily and quickly the roles of who is "superior" and who is "inferior" can be swapped, we can hold that it does not pay to cling onto an impression of oneself as superior in the first place.

We can also come to believe that it does not pay to consider ourselves superior because we do not like feeling inferior, and by acting superior we push the people who are "inferior" to us to want to feel superior to someone else, thereby

perpetuating a vicious cycle that is evident in Cooper's work. Although the African-Americans who founded Liberia in 1822 knew about how whites in the U.S. enslaved Africans because of their skin color and their resulting "inferiority", and although the Congo people alive in the 1970s know about how whites in the U.S. harmfully stereotype and oppress black people because of their skin color and their resulting "inferiority", the founders and the generations of Congo people that follow replicate the white people's racist and classist attitudes, oppress the native Liberians--the Country people--and then claim that they are the superior ones and that the Country people are the inferior ones. If we realize and agree that the Congo people's adoption of the belief that they are superior was motivated by feelings of inferiority that they--or their ancestors--once felt and wanted to get rid of, we can discover a commonality shared by all, even the Congo people and the Country people: that no one wants to feel inferior. With this in mind, we can conclude that it is up to us to reform our superior impression of ourselves if we want to spare ourselves from the pain of feeling inferior, as we now see that it is a cycle in which our superiority negatively affects someone else and someone else's superiority negatively affects us.

By examining Helene's and her family's negative experiences as refugees in

the U.S., because of racist and classist attitudes toward them that render them inferior, we can hold that it is pointless to hold onto an impression of oneself as superior, as definitions of superiority are different everywhere. When Helene and her family flee Liberia and come to the U.S. as refugees, these Congo people, considered superior and the high class in Liberia, are here considered inferior because of their race, and the stereotype attached to most black people in the U.S.-- that they are poor--automatically renders them inferior class-wise as well. In the U.S., Helene's father struggles to pay the bills with the meager amount of money he accumulates from his low-paying job. He decides to move back to Liberia because, "[e]ven though Liberia was becoming more and more of a mess under Doe, [he] could still be a bigger fish in the small pond of Liberia than trying to swim upstream in the United States. The man who had lost a million dollars by the time he was thirty was not given to taking any menial jobs to make ends meet in the U.S.A." (244). Helene's father's lack of opportunity to excel professionally and financially in the U.S. because of his inferior class and race mirrors the lack of opportunity for the Country people to excel in Liberia because of their inferior class and race, which proves that even if you are superior in one place, you could be considered inferior somewhere else, so it does not pay to adopt superior feelings

and classist attitudes.

By observing that different worldviews have differing standards for superiority, and by witnessing Helene change her definition of superiority, we can become aware of the arbitrariness of superiority, the ensuing unreliability of its definition, and the resulting stupidity of classifying oneself as superior in the first place. Cooper depicts Helene as having a new-found shame toward her home country when she lives in the U.S. that she did not have when she lived in Liberia. For example, when she and her American friends from college watch the news coverage of Doe's violent execution of a challenger to his power, during which he chops him up alive and puts his organs on display for the people to touch, Helene says her friends were shocked, asking, "What kind of place do you come from?" I shrugged. I could feel my face heating up with embarrassment [...] 'You gonna write an article about that for the DTH?' I shook my head. 'No way,' I said. That place ain't my country" (248). Helene rethinks her definition of superiority because of her realization that there are multiple ways to define it, which emphasizes the arbitrariness of the definition of superiority. So, as we are all inferior somewhere and therefore not superior everywhere based on the arbitrariness of superiority, we should turn instead to treating others the way we want to be treated, as equals.

Now that we see how arbitrary superiority is and how damaging it is to the world in which we live due to the cycle of inferiority and superiority it perpetuates, what will we change about the way we see ourselves and others? What *can* we change? One thing we can do is try to be aware. Pay attention when you see that a group of people is stifling another group's opportunity to grow because of their "inferior" class or race, and remember that their definitions of superiority and inferiority are arbitrary--they are decided with self-interest as a first priority by humans who are motivated to feel superior to stop feeling inferior. Be aware of your own feelings of superiority when they come up, and remember that you are inferior in the eyes of another group of people; and if this feeling of inferiority does not feel good or morally okay to you, reject it! Reject the idea that one human being can be superior to another, because who really knows what "superiority" means?