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Properties Design for George C. Wolfe's The Colored Museum

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Properties Design for George C. Wolfe's *The Colored Museum*

by

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A Thesis
Submitted to the Honors College of
The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment
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ABSTRACT

This thesis details the properties design process for the University of Southern Mississippi's Fall 2025 production of George C. Wolfe's *The Colored Museum*. Through analysis of the script, research into the subject matter and playwright, and collaboration with the artistic team, this student designed and constructed effective properties for this production.

Keywords: properties, design, theatre, The Colored Museum, Wolfe

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the wonderful cast of the University of Southern Mississippi's production of *The Colored Museum*, as well as Director Hillary Scales. They trusted me with aiding them in telling difficult stories, ones I cannot fully understand. Their support during this process was instrumental in my success. For those reasons, I am forever grateful to this amazing group of people.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BFA	Bachelor of Fine Arts
USM	The University of Southern Mississippi

Chapter I: Introduction

I am a senior Honors College student, pursuing my theatre design and technology BFA. My props design for USM's 2025 production of George C. Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* served as the creative base for my Honors College thesis. *The Colored Museum* is a series of vignettes that highlight different aspects of life that many African-Americans experience.

USM's production ran for six performances over two weekends, spanning from November 13th to November 23rd. The creative team for this design consisted of Director Professor Hillary Scales, Scenic Designer Visiting Professor Ky Trupp, Light & Projections Designer MFA Candidate Neal Petz, undergraduate co-Sound Designers Emma Harty & Lauren Stamps, Costume Designer MFA Candidate Raven Harris. A complete list of the creative team, cast, and crew is listed in Appendix A.

As an artist, I believe in connection and bringing to life a world for the actors to play in. Within that world, I find that props can often help drive home nuanced storytelling points. I classify a prop as anything that the actors touch that is not bolted to the stage—which encompasses a wide variety of things from pens to puppets, and can also include set dressing. Through analyzing the script and performing background research, I find necessary items, recurring themes/motifs, as well as gain a better understanding of the story being told and how to incorporate meaningful props into them.

Chapter II: Design Process

Background on the Playwright

Born in 1954, George C. Wolfe was originally from Frankfurt, Kentucky and became involved in theatre in high school. He attended three colleges, ultimately obtaining his Bachelor of Arts in Theater (Pomona College, 1976) and Master of Fine Arts in Musicals and Dramatic Writing (New York University 1983). Wolfe's time at Pomona heavily impacted his artistic views where, as Wolfe reflects, "they would aim to not tell you what theater was but to ask the question, what is theater?" To be somewhere that "constantly violated" theatrical forms excited Wolfe (Fernandes). Wolfe, like many theatre artists, aimed to hold a mirror to society and allow his audience the chance to reflect on themselves and the world around them. One of his most well-known works, *The Colored Museum* originally debuted in 1986 at the Crossroads Theatre in New Jersey and has since been produced all over the country.

Script Analysis

Script analysis is a critical part of any theatrical process. It allows both designers and actors to make informed decisions based on the text. For this production, it was vital for me to dive into the history and culture referenced within each vignette. There are a total of eleven vignettes performed in *The Colored Museum*: "Git on Board," "Cooking with Aunt Ethel," "The Photo Session," "Soldier with a Secret," "The Gospel According to Miss Roj," "The Hairpiece," "The Last Mama-on-the-Couch Play," "Symbiosis," "Lala's Opening," "Permutations," and "The Party."

Starting off the play, "Git on Board" takes place in an airplane cabin, the "Celebrity Slaveship," that is "departing from the Gold Coast...before [their] final

destination of Savannah” with an overly cheery Miss Pat requesting everyone on the plane fasten their shackles while the sign is on (Wolfe). Within the script, Miss Pat insists the passengers “refrain from call-and-response singing” and drums since “that sort of thing can lead to rebellion” (Wolfe). The captured individuals on slave ships were often from different parts of Africa and did not speak the same language, however, drums were significant enough across the continent that they could be used to communicate, and even plan rebellions both on land and slave ships (Sullivan). Drums are very important to this piece, as it is a foundation part of African culture brought to the United States of America, and is a recurring motif throughout the play.

There are many Black stereotypes being dissected throughout *The Colored Museum*. “The Last Mama on the Couch Play” dives into the stereotypes surrounding Black families through drawing allusions to previous plays, such as *A Raisin in the Sun*. The early portrayal of African-Americans within popular media was, to be frank, downright horrid. Early film/television often did not have actual actors of color, instead having white people in black-face performing distorted representations of Black people and portraying them as unintelligent, illiterate, and uncivilized, with a side helping of service-related characters hoping to please their white employers (Adams-Bass et al.). Along with the negative stereotype prevalent in popular media, Black women and girls also face being oversexualized, which Wolfe presents through “Permutations.”

Through a combination of class, racial, and gender oppression, Black women have found a voice through hip-hop. However, these depictions of Black women often revolve around sexual promiscuity that may harm young Black girls’ image of themselves and what they are expected to be. Found in a study by Ebony Butler in 2012,

young Black women who consume hip hop often have a more negative relation with their sexual image and encounters (Butler). This study reinforces the idea that Black girls are seen as overtly sexual, even without meaning to. This, coupled with how female African slaves were seen as basically breeding stock, has bred a preconceived notion of sexuality within young African-American girls til recent day. Wolfe dissects this in conjunction with sexual assault through Normal Jean Reynolds, a young Black girl who has laid an egg after being (assumably) sexually assaulted by a garbage man.

There is a major theme of image within *The Colored Museum*. “The Photo Session” is about disco-era Black models, who feel like they are “suffocating, like [they are] not even humans anymore” (Wolfe). Black models in the 1970s “were met with great opportunities,” however, “that success trickled down into the 1980s and the 1990s” (Wolfe, Newman). The idea of image is furthered in “The Hair Piece.” It was only just recently in 2019 when the CROWN act was passed, which made hair-based discrimination illegal (Pitts). Within African society, hair is very important as it can indicate maturity/age, marital status, spirituality, class, and a slew of other important aspects of culture (Pitts). Since their forced arrival, Black individuals' hair has been under scrutiny and ridicule by white people due to Eurocentric beauty standards being heavily favored. This beauty standard led to many people of color using hair relaxers to fit in and take the negative attention of white folks off of themselves. Even today, there is still an expectation surrounding Black people’s hair and how they can/cannot style it. This struggle is exemplified in “The Hair Piece” through talking wig blocks (where wigs are stored when not in use) trying to convince the woman to wear them to break up with her boyfriend, each insisting they were the right choice for the occasion.

The tension surrounding hairstyles is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the gentrification of Black culture. “Symbiosis” further delves into the topic of a white-centered culture’s effect on people of color. Within this vignette, a Black man is literally throwing away pieces of his past to fit into the white world around him, while his younger self begs him to stop. Gentrification is the process of higher class (usually white) individuals moving to poorer parts of cities and inadvertently raising the cost of living, changing the dynamic of the neighborhood, and driving out lower income and people of color from the area (Davis). In “Conceptualizing Gentrification-Induced Social and Cultural Displacement and Place Identity Among Longstanding Black Residents,” Brittany Davis touches on the numerous impacts gentrification has on Black residents. Davis notes that gentrification is not solely a physical displacement but can be a social and cultural displacement as well. The push to upgrade and move on often leaves long-standing residents feeling lost, disconnected, and devalued within the community/neighborhood they have called their home.

“Symbiosis” highlights these experiences through the man’s erasure of his past self as he desperately strives to become a new and improved version of himself. However, in the process he shirks the rights of passage he has gone through as a Black man. Along with previously mentioned vignettes (“Symbiosis” & “The Hair Piece”), “Lala’s Opening” highlights both gentrification and public image issues faced by Black artists. “Lala’s Opening” explores Lala’s urge to move away from Black culture and become a glitz & glam singer. Lala mentions how she had to move away from America to France in order to be seen and reimagine herself. This emotional scene shows not only

the severance from heritage, but also dabbles in violence against Black men, with Lala ultimately stabbing Florance.

Police brutality against people of color has been a prevalent issue for decades. Police violence is mentioned in many of the vignettes of *The Colored Museum*. For decades, police officers have used unnecessary force, such as verbal or physical assault, while on duty to coerce individuals (Lyle & Ashraf). At the time of Lyle and Esmail's 2016 publication, "Sworn to Protect: Police Brutality – A Dilemma for American Police," African-Americans "represented 31 percent of all shooting victims by police" but only represented roughly 13 percent of the United States' population (Lyle & Esmail). This shows a clear favoritism towards Black individuals when regarding unwarranted police violence. Junie, from the vignette "Soldier with a Secret," references the issues facing African American soldiers that return home from war by saying "J.F., once he got back to Chicago, was gonna get shot dead by the po-lice" (Wolfe).

While a rather short scene, "Soldier with a Secret" highlights the troubles faced by African Americans during war time in America. As America watched the start of World War I, African Americans saw a chance to "win the respect of their white neighbors" and "prove their loyalty, patriotism, and worthiness for equal treatment" through army enlistment (Bryan, 11). While within a week of Wilson signing the declaration of involvement, the War Department ceased accepting Black men, since their quota had been filled (Bryan, 11). However, the draft board was composed solely of white men, who "were doing all they could to bring [African-American men] into service," with one Georgia county exemption board not accepting "forty-four percent of white registrants on physical grounds" while only exempting "three percent of black

registrants based on the same requirements” (Bryan, 11). As is the case with many soldiers who return home from war, post-traumatic stress disorder and survivors guilt can consume the veterans, and Junie knew this as well, insisting to himself that “these colored boys aint gonna be the same after this war” (Wolfe).

The historical research of the material discussed withing *The Colored Museum* allowed me to have a strong foundational knowledge of the text and the messages Wolfe was trying to convey. Even when there are scenes with minimal props, or props that are very surface level like within *The Hairpiece*, it is always good to have that foundational knowledge of *all* the parts of a script in order to make informed decisions. Aside from that research, script analysis also delves into recording the necessities of the production, which include all of the props mentioned by name. For this production, a good example of this would be when Man is throwing away specifically mentioned items during *Symbiosis*, which include Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*, his “first Afro-comb...daishiki...autographed photos of Stokely Carmicheal, Jomo Kenyetta and Donna Summer” and so on and so forth (Wolfe). While analyzing the script, I also looked for items that could tie these divided scenes together, since each vignette was its own entity, unlike a traditional narrative script. How the background research and breakdown of the script was implemented will be further discussed in the Implementation chapter of this thesis.

On the next page, you will find Figure A, which is my props list that catalogues each prop listed in the script, as well as added by the director. It does *not* include props removed by the director.

Props List: The Colored Museum
Props Designer: Gia Vainisi

Director: Hillary Scales
Scenic Designer: Ky Trupp

Budget: 500
Spent: 317.76
Remaining: 182.24

M = modify											Remaining:	182.22
Prop Number	WHEN	WHO	WHAT	Notes	Make	Pull	Buy	Rent	Borrow	Cost		
1	Pg 1	Miss Pat	Shackles	COSTUMES						0		
2	Pg 3	Miss Pat	Basketball			X				15.94		
3	Pg 7	SCENERY	Big pot	more set dressing needed		M				0		
4	Pg 8	Aunt Ethel	Barbie dolls	Pulled from pot			M			16.94		
5	Pg 14	SCENERY	Stool & table	cleartop round table, hightop bar stool			X			150		
6	Pg 14	Miss Roj	Cigarettes & Lighter			X				0		
7	Pg 14	Waiter	Drink (x3)	shot glasses			X			4.22		
8	Pg 19	Woman	Makeup kit	with some makeup in it		X				0		
9	Pg 21	Woman	Phone			X				0		
10	Pg 24	Narrator	Playscript			M				0		
11	Pg 24	Mama	oversized bible			X				0		
12	Pg 24	SCENERY	Jesus photo			M				0		
13	Pg 25	Narrator	award			M				0		
14	Pg 27	Son	2 dolls				X			40		
15	Pg 29	Narrator	Pillow	for Son's knees; starts on couch		M				0		
16	Pg 29	Narrator	Tamborine				X			20.99		
17	Pg 29	Medea, Lady in Plaid	church fans		X					0		
18	Pg 33	SCENERY	large trash can	big enough for actor to climb into	X					0		
19	Pg 33	S. Man	Saks Fifth Avenue bag				M			10.99		
20	Pg 33	S. Man	various objects*		X	X	X			25.9		
21	Pg 40		wheely chair with ties for Flo'rance			X				0		
22	Pg 41	Admonia	letter opener	able to stab Flo'rance			x			4.39		
23	Pg 41	Admonia	silver tray				x			28.39		
24	Pg 42	Admonia	Telegram on tray	same tray as letter opener	x					0		
25	Pg 43	Admonia	Telegram part 2!		x					0		
26	Pg 47	Normal	Egg	purple & glittery	x					0		
*Various Object List	Converse all-stars Soul on Ice	Afro-comb Autographed photos: Music: Button Pins:	Dashiki Stokley Carmicheal, Jomo Kenyatta, Donna Summer	Jar of Murray's pomade Purple Haze, Theres a Riot Goin on, I Want You Back, Fingertips p2, Temptations greatest hits US out of Viet Nam ; Free Huey, Duey, & Louie ; US out of Cambodia ; US out of Harlem	Can of Afro-sheen Box of curl relaxer							

Figure 1: Props list

Chapter III: Implimentation

Build Period

With this production being the final one of the semester, I had a luxurious amount of preparation time. I used this time to go through our stock (assortment of props we already own) and to figure out the process and material needs required to execute the necessary builds or modifications.

There was a lot to do for this show, but my main physical challenge for this piece was for “Symbiosis.” Within this vignette, a man is throwing away things from his past, including his kid self. Originally, we wanted a circular trash can that I could then paint to mimic traditional African drums. However, we had to pivot away from that idea to accommodate audience sightlines, actor comfortability, and longevity of the props being thrown into it. Our brainstorming led us to a square, dumpster-esque shape that was big enough for the actor to curl up in without risking breaking any of the props within it.

Due to the structure of the trash can changing, it only made sense for the paint design to evolve with it. While I kept some of the detailing often found on African drums, I pivoted to a layered graffiti design, which you can find the sketched version of in Image 1. I wanted this design to really visually encapsulate what was happening and the themes of identity being discussed in the vignette. I achieved this through painting a “Black is Beautiful” mural with the pan-African



Figure 2: Sketch of trashcan design



Figure 3: Trashcan paint layer 1

flag colors as the bottom layer (Figure 1). The next layer mimics a shoddy city cover-up job, which is reflective of the Man and the Kid getting into a physical altercation that ends in the Man throwing the Kid away too and announcing to the crowd that being Black is “too much”-

- too exhausting, too stressful, and he wants nothing to do with it aside from on weekends and holidays (Wolfe). Despite the Man’s declaration, the Kid emerges from the trash can and continues to haunt him. I wanted this persistence of identity and the past to come through the trash can via the graffiti work on the top layer (Figure 2). This was the perfect piece to tie in other vignettes, so on the graffiti layer, I added stick figures dancing to foreshadow *The Party*, as well as an abstract interpretation of African drum detailing, which is mentioned or heard throughout a variety of the vignettes.

To address actor comfortability and longevity of the props being thrown away, I layered the bottom of the dumpster with blankets: first a puffy comforter, then a green fuzzy blanket, and finally a black knit blanket.



Figure 4: “Symbiosis” Photo 1



Figure 5: “Symbiosis” Photo 2

This concealed any thumping sounds that would be caused by props being tossed, as well

as the actor being placed in the dumpster.

The props thrown into the can were different relics of the Man's past, as well as items often connected to growing up Black. I did minor research to find what he was referencing and either sourced or modified what we had in stock to mimic the façade of these items. These included his first Daishiki, activist buttons, popular music, an afro comb, and other popular hair products. For the buttons, I found some bases in stock and used sticker paper to re-cover them. *The Temptations Greatest Hits* album was grappled over by the actors and needed to withstand some harsh treatment. To ensure it held up over tech and six performances, I glued a printed cover to a piece of sturdy cardboard and coated it in gloss-finish Mod-Podge to mimic a vinyl cover. The hair products were a matter of finding similar sizes boxes/cans and vintage packaging to replicate.

As discussed in the Script Analysis portion of this paper, *The Last Momma-on-the-Couch Play* was a satirical piece about Black family stereotypes. One portion of this piece consisted of a choir number, complete with church fans and tambourines. For the fans, I discussed with the director at length what they should look like. She wanted them to be the simple popsicle stick style with information or pictures on it that can be found in many churches. I brought the idea of having a double-sided fan that had images of both high and low points in African American history. I ended up using black and white images such as Jim Crow laws, Ku Klux Klan marches, Emmet Till's funeral, and college raids on one side



Figure 7: Church fan side A



Figure 6: Church fan side B

(image 5), and the march on Washington, emancipation proclamation, and prominent figures including Barack Obama, Marsha P. Johnson, and similar on the other side (image 6). This final design was meant to go somewhat unnoticed by the audience unless they really paid attention. The inconspicuous nature of it was meant to emphasize the erasure of Black history, while the separated images, like the sides of coins, were meant to drive home you cannot have of the good without the bad, while the bad does not inherently discredit the good.

The prop I found to be one of the more emotionally taxing, was Normal Jean's egg. The egg, within the narrative, is the result of Normal Jean being sexually assaulted by the garbage man—though she saw it as something exciting and not assault, instead something she wanted. Normal Jean is fiercely protective of her egg and loves it dearly. She wants her babies to know they are special and not have to endure the same abuse she did at the hand of her mother, who locked her in a closet after she found out what had happened to Normal Jean—aka when she started showing signs of pregnancy.



Figure 8: Normal
Jean's egg

The director, and the text itself, was firm in how Normal Jean viewed her egg: something *special*. Therefore, it was imperative the egg be visually special as well. While past productions have had all sorts of interpretations of the egg (small, able to be sat on, bigger than life), we ultimately decided on an ostrich sized egg that was glittery and would glow in the dark. To do this, we 3D printed a hollow egg that had a twist-close plug in the bottom to allow string lights to be placed inside (and turned on and off to reduce

battery usage). I based the egg with a thin coat of purple paint and then added a layer of adhesive to stick the purple and chunky silver glitter (image 7).

As explained in the introduction, a props master's responsibilities can also include set dressing. The vignette *Cooking with Aunt Ethel* required quite a bit of set dressing, even though it was only one counter. However, since this cooking station stayed out for the duration of the production (due to need of backstage room), I wanted to put extra effort and care into this piece.

As can be seen in images 8 and 9, there were many details within Aunt Ethel's station. We had the pot for her cooking (dolls whose clothes emulated the actors in *The Photo Session*), a pan, some drying herbs draped across the front, some spices, various jars of creepy things, and her cookbook. I wanted Ethel's station to appear like a normal kitchen on first glance but evoke an unease when further looked into. Her spices are labeled to match the lyrics of her song; the anchovies in the glass jar is meant to mimic



Figure 9: Aunt Ethel's cooking station angle 1



Figure 10: Aunt Ethel's cooking station angle 2

the fishbowl effect; there is a spider meant to evoke a similar, but creepier feeling as the sardines; there is a small jar with purple glitter to tie in *Permutations*; the jar of red liquid

is meant to symbolize blood of wrongful deaths; and the cookbook and oven are meant to drive home that this vignette is, at the end of the day, a cooking show.

While these small details may not be picked up on by the general audience, I like to include them anyway. I find that even if they do not notice it the first time watching, people who return for another viewing may be able to tie the station to the other vignettes like a fun little easter egg.

Technical Rehearsals

Tech rehearsals included dry tech, where I got to walk the crew through the props, and wet tech, which is when the stage manager worked through element calls, run crew got to work set transitions, wardrobe ran quick changes, and the actors got to work in the space. Tech, for me, involved a lot of watching the show and taking notes on how things looked under the lights and what caused issues. I then implemented all these notes during designer fix day, which is when we do not call actors and have time to fix any issues we have in our departments. The majority of my notes were set dressing related, minor color fixes, or making sure an actor was informed on the function of a specific prop if I noticed it was not being used as intended.

Chapter IV: Reflection

This show, for me, was a big cultural learning experience. I was learning new things from my first readthrough of the script until closing. I got to do a deep dive into the treatment of African-Americans throughout their history, which was obviously depressing.

However, I also got to learn more about significant advances and happy traditions that have developed over the decades. The cast and director were also very welcoming to me and always happy to explain things to me as well as detail why a specific prop felt right, or how it could feel better if it felt off.

Technically speaking, this process went much smoother than others of mine in the past. I felt that this was the first time I got to be bored during tech instead of rushing to finish props that had taken longer than expected. This process allowed me to explore concepts I was unfamiliar with, even though the techniques I was using to execute the physical work was nothing new. I am really proud of my work and this production as a whole, and I hope that the people who got the chance to see it left different than when they arrived.

This piece, from its inception, has been about reclaiming and dissecting Black stereotypes and, as the author puts it, “silhouettes” (Wolfe). Wolfe did not care that his exhibits might contradict each other, because he felt that the Black experience is full of contradictions. This sentiment is something that can be found throughout all productions of this piece. While their designs (set, costumes, props) are different than USM’s production, everyone who takes part in telling this story, Black or otherwise, is working towards not only highlighting but *celebrating* the contradictions of being Black.

While I do not have a habit of looking to past productions for inspiration (aside for if I need technical help), once I was done with this production, I did investigate how others had designed props for this piece. Many people, like the Buriel Clay Theater in San Francisco, have stuck to the script when it comes to the props. Buriel Clay's egg for Normal Jean is a large white egg and their Aunt Ethel dolls are brown paper string dolls (Veltman). While both are accurate to the script, I found that being able to play with what the props could be, versus what they were "supposed" to be, allowed me to make the connections I could see within our production of the piece. I found that the dolls Aunt Ethel were making could physically emulate the actors in *The Photo Session*, and that she could have a small vial with purple glitter to tie in Normal Jean's egg.

Both iterations of these props convey the same message, just in different styles. Theatrical scripts, once written, have set themes/motifs/etc. that are present within the play. Our job as theater artists is to dissect the script for these, and in doing so we give ourselves the tools to promote the themes we want to within our production. Our production of *The Colored Museum* aimed to celebrate the many contradictions of being Black. I aided this purpose through my deliberate props design that was meant to ground the actors and allow them to live within their own realities of the stories they were telling.

APPENDIX A: PRODUCTION TEAM

Artistic Team

Director/Music Direction.....	Hillary Scales
Scenic Design.....	Ky Trupp
Props Design	Gia Vainisi
Costume Design	Raven Harris
Assistant Costume Design.....	McKenzie James
Hair and Makeup Design.....	Olivia Landry
Lighting and Projection	Neal Petz
Assistant Lighting Designer	Kendra Quarterman
Assistant Projections Designer	Riley Shorter
Sound Design	Emma Harty, Lauren Stamps
Dramaturg	Rachel Boudreaux
Track Production and Arrangements	Hillary Scales, Troy Durr

Cast

Miss Pat, Girl, Medea, Normal Jean Reynolds.....	Jayday-Renee Alexander
Ancestor, Lawanda, Lady in Plaid, Admonia.....	Talandra Bumpers
Guy, Miss Roj, Son, Man	D’Kameron Edmonson
Aunt Ethel, Lala, Woman, Junie.....	Kadashia Neely
Ancestor, Janine, Mama, Topsy	Mel Taylor
Narrator, Kid, Waiter, Flo’Rance	Jacob Barnes
Understudies.....	Ashia Crump, Jarvis Russel

Crew

Production Stage Manager Harley Wallace
Assistant Stage Managers..... Mia Hennington, Cassie Anderson
Deck crew..... Destiny Peterson, Jamari McGloster
Props Crew Emily Taylor, Jaylan Clay
Light Board Operator Sarah Fowler
Sound Board Operator Wesley Carmical
Wardrobe Supervisor Angela Dauenhauer
Wardrobe Crew Keagan Minogue, Hannah Smith-Phillips
Wardrobe Maintenance Kassidy McDuffie

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