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The American Dream as a Cultural Movement

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Recommended Citation

Raskay, Thomas W., "The American Dream as a Cultural Movement" (2018). *English Department: Traveling American Modernism (ENG 366, Fall 2018)*. 1.

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Dr. Vogel

Cultures of American Modernism

4 December 2018

The American Dream as a Cultural Movement

“We were all young and foolish back then, [Stan.] We didn't think about the future. We just wanted things. This creature shows up, and it seemed like a good deal for everyone in town.” This creature is ManBearPig and its deal with the Baby Boomers in *South Park* gave them cars and high end ice cream in return for the right to eliminate humanity around fifty years later. Though unconventional, *South Park* provides a unique perspective on culture. The kids are usually the more sensible characters, and a recent episode features their trying to stop a homicidal ManBearPig because the adults are too consumed with a video game. ManBearPig, acting as a symbol for climate change, and the game, acting as a symbol for technological escapism, strain the relationships between the older generations and Millennials in the show.

Writers, Trey Parker and Matt Stone seem focussed on structural issues this season. This particular disconnect between generational values is one that echoes every time someone is born into a culture created by other people. The issue is directly linked to the American Dream, which has been reduced to specific cultural ideals that existed while the theorists argued them like getting rich. Stan's grandfather in *South Park* reflects these assumed qualities of the Dream when he responds to his grandson's quarrels about sacrificing humanity's future, “It's not that simple. We thought about it. But our town was so tiny back then. We just, we wanted nice things other people had... I didn't think I'd have grandkids. I didn't want children.”

The American Dream is a broader tendency to expand outward into empty space and make it your own culture. Since cultures expand on themselves, the American Dream is making changes to the space it fills advancing the culture in a certain direction. As a result, every generation within the Dream is brought into the world with different cultural surroundings to take in. Even though a new generation bonds on shared experiences, older generations struggle to see their established culture get reformed and new culture replace it. New culture becomes the opposition, so it must compete for space or exist in new space. The tension from this conflict of designating social space creates the outwardly-expanding, culturally ingrained force that manifests as the pursuit of an American Dream. Automobility accelerates the cultural force and widens its sphere of influence quicker, which makes it easier to trace, and generational alterations to the American Dream are indicated by the retooling of space in the country and the direction the dominant culture moves into a new frontier.

According to Henri Lefebvre, space is occupied by cultural practice. Whoever has power over the space, dictates the practices allowed within. Through the use of spatial practice, “[a society] produces [space] slowly and surely as it masters and appropriates it” (Lefebvre 38). The portion of society controlling the use of the space determines the dominant culture of that space. Another concept labeled, “Representations of space,” states that conceptualized space

appropriated by those who “identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived” (38). Examples of these people are artists, scientists or any professional who designs space. The third facet linked to space, called representational space, is “the dominated - and hence passively experienced - space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects” (39). This last concept can relate to more abstract concepts manifesting themselves in space. The American Dream is an abstract term produced in space across the country wherever someone owns property. Lefebvre has been acknowledged as a valued scholar in modern philosophy, as his theories in *The Production of Space* have universal applications. He clearly states, “Space may be said to embrace a multitude of intersections, each with its assigned location” (33). Different intersections do influence the occupation of space. For example, retooling of space happens perpetually through a generational lens for as long as new generations keep respawning.

In intergenerational conflicts embedded in the cultural context of novels like *An American Tragedy* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, individual struggles to define life in America is visible in the main characters. Theodore Dreiser’s Naturalistic novel, *An American Tragedy* gives a pessimistic outlook on how intergenerational conflicts maintain impossible conditions for cultural reform. At the turn of the twentieth century, Clyde Griffiths grows up resenting his parents and their evangelical lifestyle. Industrialism peaks around him, but Clyde’s family spends most of their time preaching on the streets. Even after being confined to his family's beliefs, he develops his own value system along with the capitalist culture booming around him. During one mission, “Clyde was saying to himself that he did not wish to do this any more, that he and his parents looked foolish and less than normal - ‘cheap’ was the word he would have used” (Dreiser 7). Without any real links to dominant culture of the time, he envies boys his age until he decides to join the workforce at a hotel despite his disadvantaged education. Unfortunately, his involvement in the theft and crash of a hotel customer’s car forces him to relocate, but he sees the country for himself and explores the space. His life keeps spiraling though, especially when he adds sexual pursuits to his capitalistic appetite. All of this proves to be too overwhelming for Clyde, who is unequipped to survive in the culture he seeks belonging in. Automobility gives him a way out of a missionary lifestyle, but without role models or guidance into the new culture, Clyde barrels in recklessly and murders the woman carrying his child out of cowardice. Since he is so unfit to thrive in the world independently, he panics and made a terrible decision. His mother even stands in his corner during the trial, but Clyde is dead and buried in a culture she cannot reach.

Not every cultural representation of intergenerational conflict ends so tragically, but the problem exists within the structures of cultures across works of fiction and time periods. The consequences of the Industrialism boom comes decades later when the Great Depression hits. John Steinbeck documents the shrink America’s farming cultural identity in *The Grapes of Wrath* when extreme economic stress forces the Joad family to reform their American Dream on the spot. The banks rip them out of the cultural space that their family had been settled in for years. The elders in the family have no choice but to follow the freshly paroled Tom Joad to California as their only hope to survive and protect the future of the family. Steinbeck packs an

ensemble of characters into a jolopy across the country to a rumored surplus of work for struggling migrants.

Tom represents the present culture in the novel, along with Jim Casy and Rose of Sharon. Tom takes firm control of the family after being released into a world he did not participate in culturally for years. With finely tuned instincts passed down from Ma, he searches for the next possible Dream for the family to chase. While Tom does not outwardly clash with his parents' use of cultural space, he objects to the past generation's permitting corrupt structural systems within the culture around them. Finding that the freedom and lawlessness of the west favors the landowners, he vows to reform the culture on the frontier to restore balance for the common worker. His final speech before disappearing outlines his newfound purpose. He reassures Ma, "Then I'll be all aroun' in the dark. I'll be ever'where - wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there" (Steinbeck 419). Tom becomes a symbol for social justice and finds the cultural space he wishes to appropriate by chasing equality and righting capitalism's wrongs from the westward expansion.

Tom continues his vows for social justice by referencing his friend, Jim Casy who loses his life protesting for workers' rights. Casy is a disgraced preacher who has made peace with leaving the church when Tom sees him at the start of the novel. He actually compares his experiences shifting away from the Church to Jesus' saying, "I got tired like Him, an' I got mixed up like Him, an' I went into the wilderness like Him, without no campin' stuff.. Sometimes I'd pray like I always done. On'y I couldn' figure what I was prayin' to or for" (Steinbeck 81). After feeling failed by the existing structures of his religion, Casy explores physical space to find cultural values and re-dedicates his life to social justice. His life within the plot is a microcosm of a new generation's adjustments to culture in response to newfound values. Casy's path starts away from Christianity, one of the world's oldest cultural structures, but Steinbeck's Biblical metaphors throughout, with Casy's change of heart call for a reassessment of traditional values. Casy begins a search for new meaning and continues, "There was the hills, an' there was me, an' we wasn't separate no more. We was one thing. An' that one thing was holy" (81). Casy redefines existing spiritualism to correspond with his beliefs. He looks for God in nature and eventually in his fellow workers. His new philosophy fits his cultural situation and personal beliefs better, so he embraces a new purpose on his travels with the Joad's.

Rose of Sharon represents an important aspect of the spatial restoration of the American Dream along with others in the present generation. Although her pregnancy anchors her through most of the trip west, she learns a lot from Ma and through shared experience on the road with the rest of the family. She chips in on domestic chores and even attempts to pick in the fields at nine months pregnant because the family was going through desperate times. Rose of Sharon suffers a devastating loss when her child is stillborn, but she has developed into a woman fit to survive in and equipped to make change in the cultural space of her generation. Her nourishing a starving man to life echoes the same rhyme as in both Tom's and Casy's goals for cultural appropriation. Her shared experiences within the culture through the lens of their generation give them similar tendencies to revise the use of space.

Ralph Waldo Emerson declares academic independence for America in his essay, “The American Scholar,” challenging the country’s young academics to find a new intellectual identity, rather than standing on the shoulders of cultural lineages from disconnected worlds. The push towards original scholarly discovery is a singular movement that expands through the spatial confines of the United States. Although this movement continues on a grand scale, there are incremental changes made in response to shifting needs from generation to generation. In another essay titled “Man the Reformer,” Emerson says, “I will not dissemble my hope, that each person whom I address has felt his own call to cast aside all evil customs, timidities, and limitations, and to be in his place a free and helpful man, a reformer, a benefactor, not content to slip along through the world,” pleading with everyone to embrace change to benefit the culture. He believes man has a duty to make revisions to culture throughout life. He expands this responsibility to start the development space for future generations calling for a “brave and upright man, who must find or cut a straight road to everything excellent in the earth, and not only honorably go himself, but make it easier for all who follow him” (Emerson 83).

While Emerson preached about expanding and reforming spatial boundaries, American pioneers were expanding west into territory previously unexplored by anyone from their cultural heritage. Frederick Jackson Turner’s book, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, outlines the push west and developing of space on the frontier. During the time it takes Americans to physically move inland, Turner believes they culturally move away from their background. Early Americans on the frontier have so much unexplored land that it is easy to shed culture along the journey through it. Pioneers need to focus on the culture they carve out of the uncharted land and adapt culture. Turner says that the American institutions “have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people – to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life” (Turner). These changes and expansions occur over a large area of space causing a diversity in the use of space across the country. Automobility only divides the space more rapidly and diversifies culture at an exponential rate until settlers find the Pacific. Suddenly, the frontier boundaries reemerge and Americans are left to spread along newly conquered space or find the next frontier to explore, whether it be foreign relations with the US or space travel.

Even though the study features Canadian subjects, “Driving Over the life Course” by Darren M. Scott and K. Bruce Newbold tracks changes in automobility from generation to generation. Geographic and historical factors marry Canada to the United States comparatively. According to the study, each generation with access to automobility increases the percentage of citizens with driver’s licenses until the millennial generation. The data shows a slight dip, and while the generation is not abandoning automobile travel, “further analysis suggests that [millennials] may initially be slower to obtain a driver’s license than earlier generations, but they ultimately share similar rates of licensure” (Newbold). The excitement and urgency that comes with getting on the road has faded. In a new era, where the roads are easily accessed and featured in the majority’s daily routines, Millennials set their sights on new frontiers. “Given differences in characteristics and the environment in which they grew up, each of these generations has potentially different automobility behaviors,” the social sciences journal explains (Newbold).

The assumed dominance of the automobile in North American culture persists because “today’s seniors and Canada’s aging baby boomers were raised in an automobile culture. For them, the car meant personal freedom and social interaction, enabling day-to-day mobility and social and economic freedom and accessibility” (Newbold). A different cultural context warrants a different reaction from the generation, and because automobility is more of a given than ever before, the generation’s unexplored frontier expands elsewhere.

In order to cement the status of automobility as a facet of the American Dream, and in turn, the American Dream as a tendency for a cultural lineage of people to explore space and reform existing cultural space, interactions between American culture and another lineage of culture can be studied through a Native American perspective in *Black Elk Speaks*. A generational gap and physical barriers isolated Native American culture from the separate cultural movement westward across North America. Because several Native American cultures had already appropriated cultures across the continent, a new culture would have to either adopt and grow with the culture like hopping on a moving escalator, or both cultures would have to compete for the space to determine its social significance. Unfortunately for Black Elk and his people, the American Dream is a cultural push made extra heavy with the prospects of conquering space.

The Wasichus, according to Black Elk, have no interest in sharing. They want a controlling influence to change the space and fit it to their culture, but Black Elk’s culture is so disconnected from the white colonizers. He remembers not being able to understand the transactions being offered for land. He says, “the Black Hills had been sold to the Wasichus and also all of the country west of the Hills... The Wasichus went to some of the chiefs alone and got them to put their marks on the treaty... But only crazy or very foolish men would sell their Mother Earth” (Neihardt 83). His unfamiliarity with the concepts of signatures and property resemble the disconnect created at the point in history when both cultures branched away from each other, to continue building on top of two separate uses of space. Their paths bring their cultures to different conclusions, Black Elk’s curiosity with the Wasichus is met with bloodshed. The American Dream lineage keeps expanding outward to claim frontiers and expand its culture.

Part of the American Dream is competition between generations to make a lasting impact on the culture, but foreign cultures tend to draw extreme reactions in American social space. Frontiersman would continue to roll over Native Americans because they were perceived competition. After reforming cultural space left from conquering the natives, Americans continue to build on top of space and expand until the continent is fully explored. The size of the New World, along with additional expansions in other states and territories Frederick Jackson Turner records how America shifts its focus towards control over the pacific when there is no more frontier to conquer. The American Dream is a cultural explosion that reaches the moon by the twentieth century, with a flag and footprint marking the claim on that social space. In connection to the country’s space exploration, the Millennials have arrived into a culture with an artificial frontier already established.

South Park’s commentary about generational differences and ignoring climate change for our digital words comments on our use of space. Parker and Stone show a town of people willing to ignore a demon killing half their citizens because of their preoccupation with an online world.

The digital world is the next frontier, but its vast space makes it a limitless frontier in which it is easy to veer away from everyone else down a new cultural path into a distant social space. The internet makes it easy for a generation disillusioned by the culture in place to escape the lineage like Clyde yearns for in *American Tragedy*.

Like in Clyde's case, Millennials exploring the virtual world usually do so by themselves without role models or family to lean on. Traditionally, even on the road, families could grow together like in *The Grapes of Wrath* when the Joad family supports each other and sticks together. The bond in the family is strong enough to carry certain traits down to the next generation. Their shared space and generational transition create common interests in the space they occupy, whereas people venturing out in the virtual world lose the culture existing in physical American space by not participating in it. As Emerson urges in "Man the Reformer," the existing culture must be reformed by the generations, but technology now allows people to ignore existing culture by taking to artificial space.

There are several problems in the explored space that need solving. *South Park* is getting serious about climate change, or ManBearPig, because the writers fear too many people are content with the path the American Dream has brought our culture down enough to stop tending to it for hours at a time and expand a made-up cultural world. Whatever the existing problems are, each generation is an extension of them. The problems with the culture do not go away when the people from the culture pick-up in a space that's far enough away. Automobility in history speeds up the coverage of space in history and, in turn, the normalization of the automobile. As observed in the study on Canadian automobile travel, the roads do not lead to unexplored frontiers anymore, but there needs to be balance between reforming the American Dream and expanding it to new horizons. Unless there can be a smooth transition from each generation, like in *The Grapes of Wrath*, commonalities that link us on the same path of the American Dream can be lost, and there are serious problems the American Dream extension of culture has been working towards, like solving climate change, which cannot be abandoned. Generations must coordinate social space instead of looking for separate ones outright. Millennials have the potential to deviate in culture by travelling further through social space than the generations given freedom by the automobile, which only emphasizes the need to maintain a strong link between them.

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