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American Journeys:  
Quest, Displacement, Escape

By  
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## Abstract

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The “American Way of Life” is deeply engrained into the narrative of America and the dreams of many Americans—so much so that it often goes unexamined. This thesis explores the American Way of Life and related narratives—including American individualism, American exceptionalism, and the American Dream—and examines its tendency to disappoint and damage those who strive for such a way of life. I ground this analysis in three major works of American literature: Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, and Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. With a special attention to critical and political theory, my analyses these novels shed light on some of the pathologies inherent in the American Way of Life.

A diagnosis of America’s pathologies is only part of this thesis; through these novels, I explore possibilities for bettering America’s impoverished political, social, moral, and spiritual condition. This thesis rethinks the American Way of Life and calls for a reorientation thereof. First, we should respect everyone and approach human relationships with openness, honesty, and love; there is always a potential for fraternity or coexistence. Second, we must acquire greater social consciousness, both through encounters with different people and/or places and through solitary respites in nature. Finally, we must make time and space for listening and dialogue, both of which must be guided with empathy, respect, and compassion. Ultimately, this thesis contests political/social structures and narratives established through domination, and encourages flexible, consciousness-driven, interpersonal connections grounded in dignity, humanity, and mutual respect.

## **American Journeys: Quest, Displacement, Escape**

*The American way of life has failed to make people happier or make them better. We do not want to admit this, and we do not admit it. We persist in believing that the empty and criminal among our children are the result of some miscalculation in the formula that can be corrected.*

➤ James Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro*

*It's called the American Dream because you have to be asleep to believe it.*

➤ George Carlin, American Comedian

*No, I'm not an American. I'm one of the 22 million black people who are the victims of Americanism. One of the 22 million black people who are the victims of democracy, nothing but disguised hypocrisy. So, I'm not standing here speaking to you as an American, or a patriot, or a flag-saluter, or a flag-waver—no, not I. I'm speaking as a victim of this American system. And I see America through the eyes of the victim. I don't see any American dream; I see an American nightmare.*

➤ Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet"

## Introduction

Since the beginning, America itself has been a journey: a unique quest with both tangible and existential goals. The story of America has resulted from and required displacement—a break with the old and a search for the new. However, the American journey has also necessitated escape; America's ideals, values, and success have relied on the exploitation and marginalization of certain groups and individuals—a dark and destructive tendency that has consistently excluded and oppressed certain people. The novels, *Moby-Dick*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *Native Son* reflect this American journey and complicate deeply ingrained American ideals that are so inundated in American society and the American narrative that they often go unexamined. In each of these novels, there is some kind of disruption—a move away from community. The disruption that occurs in each novel spurs the characters on quests that are distinctly American; the characters seek to enjoy the promises offered by the “American Way of Life,” insofar as it is perceived, practiced, and promoted. However, all the characters in these novels fail—miserably. These mythic quests turn out to be gravely disappointing and harmful; at the end of each novel, the characters are more isolated than at the beginning of their American journey.

My purpose in this essay is to explore and find solutions to America's dire political, social, moral, and spiritual impoverishment. I believe that the factors behind such impoverishment are complex; they transcend GDP and political parties, laws and historic events. America's crisis is deeper. It's in the popular understanding and treatment of the earth that bore us; it's in the unexamined prejudices and stagnant tendencies that unconsciously inform our every interaction. Literature—which uniquely combines reality and fiction, narrative and prose—allows us to tap into both the mind (politics, morality, society) and the soul (spirituality, emotion, faith). This is why I've chosen three American novels: not to sterilely dissect them in their respective time

periods, but to put them in conversation with one another and engage them in our current time. These novels, *Moby-Dick*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *Native Son*, are all celebrated pillars of American literature that both reflect and have shaped their respective *Zeitgeist*. Each novel is a response to its time and incorporates its author's own political philosophy; moreover, these novels have informed the thoughts of future generations and affected their actions. Overall, these novels have had a great social and political effect on the United States. Literature, particularly American literature, contains deep political theory that can be digested by the all citizens. As Patrick Deneen writes in the series forward of the *Political Companions to Great American Authors* series,

America's literature is distinctive because it is, above all, intended for a democratic citizenry. In contrast to eras when an author would aim to inform or influence a select aristocratic audience, in democratic times public influence and education must resonate with a more expansive, less leisured, and diverse audience to be effective. The great works of America's literary tradition are the natural locus of democratic political teaching. Invoking the interest and attention of citizens through the pleasures afforded by the literary form, many of America's great thinkers sought to forge a democratic public philosophy with subtle and often challenging teachings that unfolded in narrative, plot, and character development. Perhaps more than that of any other nation's literary tradition, American literature is ineluctably political—shaped by democracy as much as it has in turn shaped democracy. (ix)

Thus, by engaging with these American novels, I am bringing together voices, narratives, and thoughts from different people and times to examine deeply American issues—issues with which we still grapple today.

Each of these three novels is centered around a quest to live and enjoy the many promises of the American Way of Life. Because the American Way of Life is itself mythic, the quest to achieve it also takes on a mythic quality: a ship in pursuit of a whale, a family seeking abundance and prosperity, a young black man's attempt to find freedom and power. Such attempts are elevated to the status of quests in all three novels because they grapple with larger existential questions about America and its quintessential values. Moreover, these quests demand movement or displacement of some sort: a romantic and relentless search for something better, even if it is

nonexistent or unattainable. Displacement, both voluntary and involuntary, drives each novel's quest forward and forces the characters to confront the fallacies of the American Way of Life. In these novels, displacement—across oceans, across land, across neighborhoods—often reveals the dark underbelly of America: its myth and hypocrisy, its hollowness and disparity. These realizations (though sometimes left unrealized) provoke a frantic necessity for escape; in each novel, there is repeated suffering and some kind of impending doom from which the characters must escape.

It turns out that the attempt to live the American Way of Life is a journey: a quest that does not always have a fruitful or positive ending. In fact, while attempting to live the American Way of Life, these characters come to see their predestination for failure in a quest that is inherently unattainable. But they keep going anyway. The persistent journey within each novel prompts larger questions about Americans and American society: How do, or how should, marginalized and suffering people deal with certain failure? How can we, as an entire society, create a more equitable, just, and free country when the American Way of Life, our nation's common myth and creed, seems to be destructive and disappointing? Undoubtedly, America began as a unique project—a product of chance, circumstance, violence, greed, and dreams—and has continued to be such. But the unfolding of America has torn down trees without replanting any, wiped out populations without leaving a single monument, consumed people's lives and labor without any compensation. The very idea of America is predicated on some sort of hierarchical domination, both over man and nature. Dominance is the cornerstone of the American Way of Life.

The central creed of America, the American Way of Life, seems to be a narrow, necrophilic, unsustainable philosophy that plunges the country toward destruction while blinding the large majority of its citizens through its self-proclaimed exceptionalism, righteousness, and freedom.

However, there is great hope in each of these novels—hope that transcends ink and paper. While American journeys and their mythic quests delude and disappoint and destroy, they also allow for revelation: for a deeper consciousness that has the potential to be nurtured and shared—the potential, perhaps, to transform our society and reorient the Way of Life to which we aspire.



## Chapter I

### The Quest for the White Whale: The Dangers and Possibilities of *Isolato* Culture

*Moby-Dick*, written by Herman Melville and published in 1851, is a story of a great trial and great failure—a quest for wealth and glory that culminates in almost complete devastation. The missions of a whaling ship may seem simple: hunt and kill whales, harvest goods from their bodies, return home. However, Captain Ahab, the captain of the *Pequod*, transforms the ship's mission into a mythic quest to kill Moby-Dick, the infamous white whale who dismembered Ahab and forced him to wear an ivory peg leg. Ahab projects immense meaning onto Moby-Dick, and convinces the crew—through fear, intimidation, and exploitation of each man's self-interest—to aid him in killing it.

While the *Pequod*'s unique *Isolato* culture—a culture that promotes individualism, self-reliance, and self-improvement—allows for friendship, fraternity, and collaboration, it also has the potential to foster alienation, self-interest, and dominance. As the *Pequod* grows increasingly landless and isolated, the crew becomes more deeply roped into Ahab's monomaniac quest. Though the voyage of the *Pequod* appears to be doomed from the start, Ahab and his crew largely ignore omens, reason, and self-preserving instincts; they plunge into the ill-fated quest with a death-driven negligence and little regard for each other's safety and well-being. Family, love, fraternity, and humanity are put on the back-burner in the heat of this quest, further glorified by Ahab.

Ahab's quest for dominance—of other men, of nature, and of God—mimics many tenets of the American Way of Life, albeit to an extreme degree. The voyage of the *Pequod* and the killing of Moby-Dick parallel several desires inherent in the American Way of Life: wealth, self-preservation, progress, freedom, and triumph of good over evil, to name a few. Ahab, in his grand

quest to realize the promises of the American Way of Life, demonstrates the incredible danger and destruction that is not only inherent in Americanism, but also finds a fertile nesting ground in *Isolato* culture, which resembles America's culture of individualism. Ultimately, the quest to kill Moby-Dick results in the destruction of Ahab, the *Pequod*, and all the members of the crew but one: the narrator, Ishmael, who perhaps carries the last spark of hope.

### **The *Pequod* and *Isolato* Culture**

The *Pequod* is, in many ways a microcosm of America: a diverse array of men from around the world bound together in pursuit of wealth and glory. This quest takes on a mythic status under Ishmael's narration in *Moby-Dick*. The whaleship, Ishmael posits, "has been the pioneer in ferreting out the remotest and least known parts of the earth" (Melville 124): discovering territories previously uncharted by Europeans or Americans, making the first contact with non-white indigenous populations, and even forwarding Western "civilization." Whaling is, and has been, on the cutting edge of globalization, innovation, and exploration. It is also a noble pursuit. Ishmael venerates Queequeg, one of the harpooners from a far-off island: "Drive down your hat in presence of the Czar, and take it off to Queequeg!" (Melville 127). Ishmael also claims that a famous line of harpooners, the Folgers, are "all kith and kin to noble" Benjamin Franklin, asserting that harpooners themselves are fathers and inheritors of the American tradition (Melville 126). Whaling, however, is not for the faint of heart; Ishmael emphasizes the courage of a whaling crew, assuring the reader that "many a veteran who has freely marched up to a battery, would quickly recoil at the apparition of the sperm whale's vast tail" (Melville 123).

The glorification of whaling as a craft also ties in with the American notion of Manifest Destiny: a belief that it was the God-given right of Americans to extend across the North American continent. As Henry Smith notes, "Melville makes especially wide and various use of allusions to

the West,” such as “his allusions to the White Steed of the Prairies and the musky scent of a buffalo robe from Oregon,” along with other images that suggest imperial, even archangelic majesty, [and] primeval innocence” (59). On a more metaphysical and spiritual level, both Manifest Destiny and whaling involve confronting the unknown. Just as the United States has sought to lead the way and define the unforeseeable future, the sailors on the *Pequod* also confront the ineffable: the very bounds of human knowledge. The sailors of whaling voyages, according to Ishmael, often don’t see land for two to three years; they face the infinity of the sea. Moreover, hiding within this infinitesimal water are precious creatures carrying valuable goods: oil from sperm whales used for the coronation of monarchs or as fuel for “almost all the tapers, lamps, and candles that burn round the globe” (Melville 123-124); there’s even ambergris, a precious commodity “found in the inglorious bowels of a sick whale” (Melville 426). On a more metaphysical level, Ishmael claims that, through whaling, humans encounter “the interlinked terrors and wonders of God!” (Melville 123). Thus, Ishmael describes whaling as more than geographical or cultural exploration, but also spiritual: testing the boundaries and capacities of mankind.

The *Pequod* critically serves as the epitome of the much-lauded American value of individualism. Individualism is the common creed of those aboard the *Pequod*. In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael refers to the variety of men who take to whaling as *Isolatoos*, those who do “not [acknowledge] the common continent of men” but “[live] on a separate continent of [their] own” (Melville 135). The culture of these *Isolatoos*, i.e. *Isolato* culture, correlates with that of American individualism. The unique, mythic, individualist mission of the *Pequod* attracts men who value their individualism: self-improvement, self-preservation, and self-reliance; the *Pequod* and the culture of whaling seem ideal for the pursuit of these values. In fact, the *Pequod* itself is symbolic of individualist culture: the ship is a single vessel that must be self-sustaining for several years

upon endless water while performing dangerous activities. The *Pequod* is a hub of *Isolato*es and *Isolato* culture.

*Isolato* culture makes the *Pequod*, like America, “exceptional”; it uniquely allows for, and seemingly requires, migration and diversity. *Isolato* culture and whaling are a natural pair in *Moby-Dick*. Whaling is an endeavor that allows for greater tolerance for racial and ethnic diversity. Thus, the *Pequod* attracts “renegades and castaways” from around the world. Of course, there are the several Americans (Melville 131). Starting with Ahab, captain of the *Pequod*, the hierarchy of leadership continues: Starbuck, the chief mate from Nantucket; Stubb, the second mate from Cape Cod; and Flask, the third mate from Martha’s Vineyard. Besides the leadership, all of whom are white, there are several other Americans, including (presumably white) sailors from Nantucket and Long Island, as well as a few African Americans, such as Pip and Dough Boy. Moreover, the narrator, Ishmael, is a young, white American man from Manhattan.

The harpooners all deviate from the typical white American male: Queequeg is a cannibal from a southern island nation; Tajiago is a Native American from the Wampanoag (Gay Head) tribe in modern Massachusetts; Dagoo is African American; and Fedallah, the harpooner of Ahab’s “secret crew,” is a Parsi: a Zoroastrian from India. Besides these more prominent characters, there are other crew members from around the world, including: France, the Netherlands, China, Iceland, Malta, Sicily, the Azores (Portugal), the Isle of Man, Tahiti (French Polynesia), Portugal, Denmark, England, Spain, Ireland, and India. The diversity of the crew is further epitomized in the makeup of the *Pequod*, itself; even the makeup of the ship is described as a melting pot of cultures: the ship’s hull is “darkened like a French grenadier’s [complexion]”; the masts were “cut somewhere on the coast of Japan” and stand “stiffly like the spines of the three old kings of Cologne”; and the decks, “worn and wrinkled,” resemble the “flag-stone in Canterbury Cathedral”

(Melville 85). Like the United States, the *Pequod* is the product of globalization and immigration: a vessel that carries several legacies, albeit metaphorically, of the United States.

All in all, the *Pequod*, with its romantic mission of whaling and its allowance of *Isolato* culture, seems to be representative of America, and whaling of American exceptionalism: the mythic belief that the United States has a unique ability, obligation, and potential to forward global progress and betterment. However, there is a deep tension aboard the *Pequod* that metaphorically grapples with the tension inherent in the American Way of Life. First, the proclaimed heroism of the *Pequod*'s mission conflicts with the reality of whaling. Whale ships spend years at a time out on the open ocean with limited rations of food and water. The sailors only have each other for company. Additionally, the main objective of a whaling expedition is the pursuit of massive creatures that are difficult to capture and whose goods are dangerous to harvest. It's common for sailors to be killed in chasing a whale, or even when harvesting their goods, such as when Tasego almost dies by falling into the dismembered head of a whale while harvesting its sperm. Moreover, this objective is rooted in greed, selfishness, and domination; the crew of a whaling ship invades the habitat of whales and slaughters them, dissects them, and collects what is profitable, such as oil and ambergris. Such an objective assumes superiority of man over other beings, as well as an anthropocentric arrogance that offers little to no respect for the beings slaughtered.

Second, Ishmael's romantic portrayal of the *Pequod*'s *Isolato* culture nonchalantly neglects the potential for exclusion, discord, and dominance in such a culture. Despite the inclusivity and tolerance that the American Way of Life promises, in reality it promotes selfishness and systematically excludes marginalized people and communities, such as people of color or the poor. Likewise, the *Pequod* is run by white American men who, despite not necessarily doing the most difficult or dangerous work, obtain the greatest share of the mission's profit. Though the

harpooneers, all of whom are people of color, perform the most important, skilled, and risky labor, they are neither properly compensated nor appreciated. In fact, the ship is named after a tribe of Native Americans, the Pequod, who once lived in the Massachusetts area. Like the majority of Native American tribes across North America, European settlers and early Americans wiped out the Pequod. In bearing the name of an “extinguished Indian tribe,” the *Pequod* “memorializes America’s own genocidal mass murder” (Fredricks 67): an infamous legacy which the United States continues to deny, or at least barely recognize.

The *Pequod* and its *Isolato* culture reveal a dark side to American individualism; the same philosophy that promotes self-reliance and allows for diversity can also damage relationships, stifle community, and encourage greed, selfishness, and domination. Though a diverse array of men are able to come together and work alongside one another, each sailor is driven by his own selfish ambitions—be it wealth or wanderlust. To support this claim, Susan McWilliams underscores the ease with which Ahab convinces the crew to accompany him on his monomaniac quest to kill Moby-Dick; when he first introduces the prospect of killing Moby-Dick, he easily rallies the men to his cause. To McWilliams, this shows that, like Ahab, each member of the crew is isolated by his own selfish and individual desires for glory, wealth, and domination (McWilliams 111). Ahab takes advantage of the individualism for which *Isolato* culture allows; Ahab promises a gold doubloon to the first man who spots Moby-Dick, rallies the crew with epic promises of glory, and horrifies most of the men with his monomania and sometimes demonic actions. The men submit to his quest. Starbuck, the chief mate, is the only man to ever confront Ahab, and he is easily forced back into submission.

Moreover, like American exceptionalism, American individualism has a tendency to blind those who subscribe to its creed. Melville’s notion of *Isolato* extends beyond the confines of those

sailors aboard the *Pequod* or the enterprise of whaling; as Henry Smith points out, “Melville was intensely interested in at least one problem which involves “society” as we understand it—the problem of alienation, of disturbance in the relation between the individual and the community” (63). In “Ahab, America,” Susan McWilliams argues that, through *Moby-Dick*, Melville proves that *Isolato* culture ultimately damages the United States and its citizens. McWilliams interprets *Isolato* culture as one “in which norms and circumstances conspire to isolate individuals from one another” (McWilliams 112). She argues that:

In such a culture, Melville thinks, the idea of independence becomes so overemphasized that the fact of human interdependence becomes dangerously underemphasized. In such a culture individuals become increasingly incapable of forging the most basic interpersonal connections, and they become more broadly incapable of engaging in public discussions about the direction of their common life; they become, in the simplest case, bad citizens. To that extent Melville echoes Alexis de Tocqueville’s fear that American democracy inclines toward a kind of individualism that breeds a stance of political indifference and enervates public life. But Melville suggests further that in an *Isolato* culture individuals who feel cut off from each other—and from deliberative political possibilities—tend to understand their options for action solely in terms of violence and domination. The grand threat of *Isolato* culture is that when the individuals within it act, they tend to act with a kind of brutality that is self-denying and ultimately self-destroying. If we read Ahab’s story as a story of American character, what we read is a story about a particular kind of modern democratic self-delusion: a kind of self-delusion that emanates from certain individualist conceits of democratic life, but which culminates in a desperate struggle for dominance that stands to destroy a democratic citizenry in the end. (112-113)

Thus, according to McWilliams, Melville argues that a culture of *Isolato* results in a poorer society: one of diminished relationships, poor democratic citizenry, selfishness, and domination.

While I agree with McWilliams that Melville illustrates the destructive inclinations of *Isolato* culture, I think this interpretation is too one-dimensional. *Moby-Dick* is certainly a tragedy, but it’s also an epic—a fantastic journey of brave, heroic men. I believe Melville’s critique of American individualism is more complicated than that which McWilliams claims. Instead, the *Pequod* serves as a vehicle through which we grapple with the hypocritical tension inherent in the narrative of American exceptionalism: its self-proclaimed heroism and greatness, its irresponsible arrogance and carelessness. The *Pequod* and *Isolato* culture have a reciprocal relationship, just as

the United States has a reciprocal relationship with American individualism: without the *Pequod* there could be no *Isolato* culture, and without *Isolato* culture there could be no *Pequod*. The nature of the *Pequod* and of whaling allows for *Isolato*es, i.e. individuals in the sense of American individualism, to come together and realize interconnectedness. While American exceptionalism is certainly problematic, it also captures some truth of what America is: a diverse, unique project that provides the possibility for a new and better society.

### Ahab's Epic Quest

There is certainly a tension inherent in the *Pequod* and its mission—a knotted conflict between fraternity and discord, heroism and destruction; however, Ahab decisively undoes the knot and, by rallying the crew to support him, effectively determines the fate of the *Pequod*. The *Pequod* and *Isolato* culture are not necessarily destructive in and of themselves, but they become catastrophic under the reigns of Ahab. Ahab obsessively ascribes meaning to the world and to Moby-Dick; as Ahab states,

‘All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there’s naught beyond. But ‘tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him.’ (Melville 179)

Ahab seems to believe that everything in the world possesses greater meaning which can only begin to be realized through some kind of conflict or movement that transgresses the object’s physical form.

Ahab is, in Kantian terms, a fanatic. As articulated by Nancy Fredricks, Kantian fanaticism is a “belief in our capacity of seeing something beyond all bounds of sensibility” (53). In his conception of Moby Dick—a living animal onto which he projects abstract ideas and awesome



laws of morality and evil—Ahab effectively “collapses the distinction between phenomena and noumena,” between the real and the abstract (Fredricks 53). *Moby-Dick* becomes inseparable from Ahab’s internal conflicts, which he not only projects onto a visible, tangible object, but also deems greatly important: “Yet not so much predictions from without, as verifications of the foregoing things within. For with little external to constrain us, the innermost necessities in our being, these still drive us on” (Melville 180).

With this understanding of the world and of *Moby-Dick*, Ahab’s internal and individual beliefs manifest themselves onto worldly things and spur Ahab’s behavior and actions. This is particularly troubling because of who Ahab is: selfish, arrogant, isolated, and even self-admittedly “mad” and “demoniac” (Melville 183). From the beginning, Ahab is portrayed as “other.” Peleg, a co-owner of the *Pequod* who first provides a description of Ahab to Ishmael, characterizes Ahab as “above the common”: ““a grand, ungodly, godlike man”” who’s been ““in colleges, as well as ‘mong the cannibals”” (Melville 96). Once Ahab first appears on the deck of the *Pequod* after several days of remaining isolated in his cabin, his powerful posture and robust body strike Ishmael as impressive; in fact, Ishmael even compares him to Celli’s cast of Perseus (Melville 137). Ahab seems disconnected from humanity; he doesn’t want to participate in the culture of the crew or interact much with them. When Stubb makes a joke about Ahab, he reacts violently and orders Stubb to go below deck after calling him ““ten times a donkey, and a mule, and an ass”” (Melville 141). All in all, Ahab seems quite miserable, unhappy, and unstable.

Ahab’s disconnection from humanity extends beyond those aboard the *Pequod*. At one point, the ship comes in contact with another ship, the *Rachel*. The *Rachel*’s captain entreats Ahab and the members of the *Pequod* to help him find his sons, both of whom were recently lost at sea in a scrimmage with *Moby-Dick*. Despite the captain’s humble request for aid in this tragic

situation, along with promptings of sympathy from Stubb, Ahab refuses to help. Showing no compassion, Ahab complains that he is already losing time in his chase of Moby-Dick, dismisses the captain, orders the ship forward, and retreats to his cabin.

Ahab is also unreasonable and does not heed warnings or advice. The *Jeroboam*, another whaling ship from Nantucket that the *Pequod* encounters on the ocean, had previously battled Moby-Dick. Not only had the chief mate of the *Jeroboam* been killed by Moby-Dick, but a plague also spread through the ship. One of the sailors, a Neskyeuna Shaker who claims to be the archangel Gabriel, had warned the members of the *Jeroboam* against attacking Moby-Dick. When Gabriel meets Ahab, he screams madly about plague, death, and blasphemy, and forbids Ahab from pursuing Moby-Dick. Later, the *Pequod* comes across the *Enderby* of London, whose captain's arm had been torn off in a struggle with Moby-Dick. Like Ahab, the *Enderby*'s captain had replaced his missing limb with one of ivory. To the shock of those aboard the *Enderby*, Ahab quickly finds out which direction Moby-Dick was last seen heading, and orders the *Pequod* to pursue the whale.

Beside these interactions with other men, Ahab seems alienated even from God or the divine, which sends the crew several symbolic warnings that progressively intensify. During a storm, the *Pequod*'s three mast heads catch fire due to the corpusants (St. Elmo's fire). While Ahab and some other sailors interpret this as a positive omen, these awesome sporadic flames, including one surging from the harpoon that Ahab wields, may also be read as a ghastly warning. At one point, the ship's life buoy is cast out, but almost immediately sinks. The defective life buoy is later replaced by the coffin that Queequeg crafted; both these details seem ominous. While chasing Moby-Dick, Ahab is on top of the mast-head looking out for Moby-Dick, and a hawk steals away his hat—another ill omen.

Additionally, as the *Pequod* nears the whale, the boat's means of orientation malfunction and are destroyed. First, Ahab becomes frustrated and crushes the *Pequod*'s quadrant, a navigational tool to help determine location. Next, a great storm disables the ship's compasses; an untrustworthy compass is indicative of the moral ambiguity that increases as the *Pequod* nears Moby-Dick. Finally, the log and the line, another means for monitoring the pace and location of the ship, snaps. Instead of considering these occurrences as ill omens, Ahab takes this opportunity to harness more power: "'I crush the quadrant, the thunder turns the needles, and now the mad sea parts the log-line. But Ahab can mend all'" (Melville 535). Ahab creates an improvised compass and orders the carpenter to create a new log-line. Thus, Ahab seizes greater power and effectively seals the fate of the *Pequod*.

Ahab's alienation from both the human and nonhuman world only stokes his potent belief in his supremacy. Ahab's alienation and his domination go hand-in-hand; his sense of separateness both enforces and allows for his sense of superiority. At one point, he claims, "'I'd strike the sun if it insulted me'" (Melville 179); he truly seems to think he's capable of such acts. Moreover, Ahab constantly describes himself in divine terms. "'Ha, ha, my ship! Thou mightest well be taken now for the sea-chariot of the sun. Ho, ho! All ye nations before my prow, I bring the sun to ye! Yoke on the further billows; hallo! A tandem, I drive the sea!'" (Melville 530). Ahab believes in his supremacy: over other humans, over nature, and over God.

The *Isolato* culture of the *Pequod* allows Ahab to be selfish, arrogant, and isolated; but more importantly, it allows Ahab to *act* on these emotions. A critical chapter in *Moby-Dick* is "The Quarter-Deck" chapter, in which he first rouses the crew and convinces everyone to participate in his monomaniac quest to kill Moby-Dick. Ahab begins his proposal (or, perhaps more properly, his decree) to kill Moby-Dick by asserting his authority as captain. Ahab orders Starbuck "to send

everyone aft,” or to assemble around the captain: “an order seldom or never given on ship-board except in some extraordinary case” (Melville 175). Then, Ahab rouses the men through a series of call-and-response questions about whaling. Though “seemingly purposeless questions,” Ahab’s enthusiasm and “hearty animation” at each response excites the crew (Melville 176). Next, Ahab makes a spectacle of nailing a golden doubloon against one of the masts of the ship, and promises it to whoever first sights Moby-Dick. Some of the crew members, including Tashtego, Daggoo, Queequeg, and Starbuck, recognize Moby-Dick and recount some details about the infamous whale. At Ahab’s violent request to kill Moby-Dick, the harpooners and the seamen eagerly agree. After Starbuck expresses dissent and says, “I came here to hunt whales, not my commander’s vengeance,” Ahab quickly shoots down his point and immediately subordinates Starbuck with his words (Melville 178). The chapter ends with a strange ritual, in which Ahab passes around a pewter cup of grog, pours grog over the united harpoons of the harpooners, and rallies the crew with his words.

In this crucial chapter, Ahab both maintains his individual desires and imposes his will on others by appealing to their desires. *Isolato* culture promotes the pursuit of personal glory, profit, and dominance. Ahab appeals to the crew’s desire for wealth by promising the doubloon; he appeals to glory and dominance by mythicizing Moby-Dick and describing the task of killing him in terms of epic victory. Ahab even exploits *Isolato* culture’s potential for fraternity and solidarity. He rallies the crew through inflammatory rhetoric and fosters a sense of comradeship through shared ritual—by passing around the grog. Finally, Ahab stifles any kind of dissent, which comes primarily from Starbuck, by appealing to the emotions of the larger crew and by publicly ridiculing Starbuck.

Out of all the characters in the novel, Captain Ahab most profoundly reflects the destructive tendencies of *Isolato* culture: alienation, greed, and domination. In her critique of *Isolato* culture, McWilliams warns that the isolation that results from such a culture may lead to “political indifference” and a sense of alienation from “deliberative political possibilities” (113). There’s certainly a sense of apathy aboard the *Pequod*; not only do most of the men easily agree to Ahab’s monomaniac quest, but there seems to be little possibility or hope for resistance. From the beginning, Starbuck is the most outspoken against this quest. Starbuck gravitates between ethical and utilitarian principles to explain his criticism of Ahab’s quest; he sometimes argues that the *Pequod*’s mission is simply to kill whales and acquire wealth for the crew, and at other times appeals to notions of “Righteousness” and “Truth,” as shown by his interpretation of the doubloon (Melville 448). At one point, Starbuck confronts Ahab alone in the captain’s quarters, and Ahab responds by threatening him at gunpoint, at which Starbuck warns, “I ask thee not to beware of Starbuck; thou wouldst but laugh; but let Ahab beware of Ahab; beware of thyself, old man” (Melville 491). Later, as the doom of Ahab’s quest becomes clearer, Starbuck notices that the winds are favorable and there’s a chance to turn back, but he doesn’t fight for it. Moreover, Starbuck also finds himself outside the door to Ahab’s sleeping quarters with a musket—the same musket Ahab used to threaten Starbuck—and contemplates shooting Ahab while he sleeps; but Starbuck doesn’t go through with it. Starbuck, perhaps the most conscious and concerned man aboard the *Pequod*, does not strongly resort to reason or violence in order to save the crew; it seems that he is indifferent to his ability to change the course of the *Pequod*. McWilliams also argues that those inundated in *Isolato* culture “tend to understand their options for action solely in terms of violence and domination,” which are “self-denying and ultimately self-destroying” actions (113). While it’s clear Ahab believes his only options for action are violence and domination, it’s

interesting that, toward the end of the novel, even Starbuck finds violence and domination, e.g. shooting Ahab, to be the only possibilities for action.

Ahab's dominance forces most of the crew (excluding the "pagan harpooners," who remain "almost wholly unimpressed") into a state of awe: "their fear of Ahab was greater than their fear of Fate" (Melville 532). Especially at the end of the novel, in the three days' chase of Moby-Dick, the men aboard the *Pequod* all unite under Ahab's tyranny: "They were one man, not thirty...[A]ll the individualities of the crew, this man's valor, that man's fear; guilt and guiltiness, all varieties were welded into oneness, and were all directed to the fatal goal which Ahab their one lord and keel did point to" (Melville 569-570). Though Ahab and his monomaniac mission bring the crew together, it is a solidarity based on fear—one that dilutes the "individualities of the crew" under a tyrannical, necrophilic goal that results in the destruction of the ship and all but one of the men.

However, it's important to remember McWilliam's observation that the crew is so self-interested and absorbed by *Isolato* culture that they find it easy and natural to go along with Ahab's mission of dominance and destruction. While Ahab succeeds in making the mission of the *Pequod* mythic and seemingly uniting the crew under such a glorious quest, the resulting quest and unity are based largely on disjointed individual desires. The only shared objective of the crew is to kill Moby-Dick and achieve glory, profit, and dominance. In this sense, killing Moby-Dick parallels the vast promises of America: wealth, heroism, possibility, individualism, dominance, progress, and advancement. Moby-Dick represents the American Way of Life, a myth that is impossible and infinite; engrossed in the *Isolato* culture of the *Pequod* and displaced on the endless ocean, the crew feels empowered to fulfill this quest and enjoy the promises of America in the only way they understand: through dominance.

## Queequeg's Coffin

After a tumultuous, lengthy journey, *Moby-Dick* ends with almost complete annihilation. What can be salvaged from the immense destruction of the *Pequod* and its crew? Only four things survive at the end of the novel: (1) Ishmael, (2) Queequeg's coffin, (3) Moby-Dick (the whale), and (4) Ishmael's story (*Moby-Dick*). Each of these things represent a significant takeaway from the novel; they are the only symbolic remnants from the disastrous quest of the *Pequod*.

First, Ishmael survives. Ishmael is the only one to escape the terrible destruction of the *Pequod*. He gets away from the disastrous whirlpool by floating on the coffin that Queequeg crafted for himself, and is picked up by the *Rachel*, another whaling vessel to which Ahab previously offered no aid. His survival is miraculous—though he is surrounded by sharks, they do not harm Ishmael and swim around him “as if with padlocks on their mouths” (Melville 589). Though Ishmael is “orphaned” at the novel's conclusion, he nevertheless remains alive. Thus, Ishmael offers a possibility for renewal from destruction

From the first words in the novel, “Call me Ishmael,” we are led through the story by this lonely, thoughtful narrator. As a romantic, somewhat sappy, individual who deeply ruminates throughout the novel, Ishmael fits well into *Isolato* culture. Ishmael begins with somber musings on life and solitude, and believes that water is “wedded” with meditation and serves as a reflection, both of mankind and of the incomprehensible divine: “the ungraspable phantom of life”—“the key to it all” (Melville 19). With its inevitable encounter with the ineffable, allowance for solitude and reflection, and potential for danger and adventure, whaling seems the obvious pursuit for someone like Ishmael, who feels isolated and abandoned.

Seemingly by choice, Ishmael is an outsider: an outcast from American society at the time. While he fits into *Isolato* culture, Ishmael does not minimize the interconnectedness of humanity—

with each other and with nature. Indeed, Ishmael's "openness and relativism" is often contrasted with Ahab's monomania and dominance (Fredricks 53). In fact, he seems to possess a greater potential to empathize with other outsiders, as shown by his relationship with Queequeg. When Ishmael seeks a room for the night at the Spouter-Inn, the only room the landlord can offer is one shared with Queequeg: a cannibal who travels through the city trying to sell "balmed New Zealand heads" (Melville 34). From these first descriptions, Queequeg is immediately distinguished as "other": a foreigner, a cannibal, a pagan, an *Isolato*. At first, Ishmael is terrified of Queequeg, with whom he must share a bed. However, past the initial horror at sharing the same bed, Ishmael quickly finds the "infernal head-peddler" to be friendly and comforting (Melville 36). During their first night together, Ishmael wakes up with Queequeg's arm over him "in the most loving and affectionate manner," and admits that he had "never slept better in [his] life" (Melville 40). After only one night together, Ishmael reflects on Queequeg's "innate sense of delicacy"; "it's marvellous how essentially polite they are...[H]e treated me with so much civility and consideration, while I was guilty of great rudeness" (Melville 43). Ishmael carefully watches Queequeg and pays close attention to his habits and practices. He engages in some of Queequeg's rituals, such as smoking from his tomahawk, and respectfully observes others, such as Queequeg's fast. Although Ishmael is initially repulsed by Queequeg and the prospect of sleeping beside a cannibal, he quickly grows to love and appreciate Queequeg.

*Isolato* culture certainly allows for these two men from vastly different backgrounds to come together; however, it is ultimately Ishmael and Queequeg's openness that forge a lasting and intimate friendship. Ishmael is able to escape from the social constructs that initially made Queequeg appear repulsive, frightening, and inferior. Perhaps Ishmael's willingness to observe, understand, and connect with Queequeg are indicative of his own experience as a societal outcast,



though it is important to note that, as Henry Nash Smith points out, Ishmael is an outcast “by choice” and Queequeg “by birth” (73). However, Ishmael is far from perfect. Schulman rightfully emphasizes that, despite his admirable openness and more ready appreciation of interconnectedness, Ishmael “resists idealizing a counterworship” (Schulman 79). Throughout the novel—from sharing a bed with a cannibal to describing the harvesting of sperm, from chronicling cetology to musing over the meaning of life—Ishmael is just as disoriented as the reader. As readers, we also become outsiders engrossed in *Isolato* culture through Ishmael’s naivety, curiosity, moodiness, and thoughtfulness. Ishmael cannot, and does not, show us the answers. Instead, we must figure them out for ourselves.

Ishmael survives by floating on Queequeg’s coffin: the second thing that survives the *Pequod*’s wreck. The coffin miraculously shoots out from the whirlpool at its closing, and guides Ishmael to safety. This coffin may represent Queequeg’s “spirit”: the positive aspects of *Isolato* culture which he embodies. First, Queequeg’s narrative epitomizes the quintessential myth of American migration—a myth that is somewhat true, in that the United States allowed for mass migration from around the world. Queequeg, a native of an island named Kokovoko, which, according to Ishmael, is “far away to the West and South,” was born into royalty—the son of a King, the nephew of a High Priest, and the descendent of great warriors (Melville 71). However, since he was “a new-hatched savage running wild about his native woodlands in grass clout,” Queequeg always desired more: in his “ambitious soul” there always “lurked a desire to see something more of Christendom” (Melville 71). When a ship from Sag Harbor visited Kokovoko and denied Queequeg’s request to take him aboard, he snuck on board and refused to leave. From there, Queequeg learned to become a fine sailor and whaler; he’s the most talented harpooneer aboard the *Pequod*.

More important, even when faced with discrimination and adversity, Queequeg is kind, humble, brave, and wise: qualities not normally associated with *Isolato* culture. Early in the novel, when Queequeg and Ishmael walk together through Nantucket, the companionship between a white man and a tattooed person of color provokes snickers and strange glances. After he catches a young “bumpkin” loudly making fun of them, Queequeg scares the boy by throwing him up in the air. The bumpkin flees back to his ship, where he is accidentally swept off the deck and into the water by the ship’s sail. Without hesitation, Queequeg secures the sails, dives into the water, and saves the bumpkin, who, just minutes ago, was mocking the “cannibal” behind his back. After such a heroic rescue, the captain begs his pardon, and Queequeg earns the respect of all those who witnessed this brave act. Moreover, he is humble and gracious; in return, he only asks for a glass of water. Despite being engrossed in the *Pequod*’s *Isolato* culture and shackled under Ahab’s tyrannical rule, Queequeg’s heroism continues throughout the journey. While harvesting sperm with a long pole, Tashtego falls head-first into the whale’s head, which plunges into the ocean. Queequeg dives into the water after him with a sword, cuts open a hole in the submerged whale head, and pulls out Tashtego. Queequeg fits into the American narrative of migration, for which *Isolato* culture allows. Despite growing up a “savage,” Queequeg is ambitious, ardent, and hopeful; he broke off from the familiar—family, community, even royalty—in order to pursue the unknown. In his relationship with Ishmael and within the international, *Isolato*-dominated setting of the *Pequod*, Queequeg finds a place in which he is valued.

However, Queequeg doesn’t survive; he goes down with the ship. Though he is the “ideal migrant,” the American Dream ultimately disappoints Queequeg. While he is a talented harpooneer whose expertise is admired and desired by other sailors, Queequeg is deemed an outcast by American society—a cannibalistic “savage” with foreign and exotic tattoos. Thus, while

remaining in America as a harpooneer and shrunken-head merchant, Queequeg decided to forfeit his plan to adopt possibly “superior” American values: “Thought he, it’s a wicked world in all meridians; I’ll die a pagan” (Melville 72). In fact, when prompted if he would ever return home to possibly be coronated as king, Queequeg answers no, mainly out of fear that living among Christians has defiled him too much for the throne of his ancestors. Moreover, Queequeg both rejects and is alienated from the Western conception of science, knowledge, and skill. As a cannibalistic *Isolato* from some far-off island of “savages,” Queequeg is constantly regarded with suspicion and deemed ignorant in the United States.

Queequeg could not escape the destructive *Isolato* fate of the *Pequod*’s quest—a fate secured by Ahab’s extreme alienation, monomania, and dominance. Despite his exceptional strength, skill, and bravery—despite his kindness, humility, and openness—Queequeg goes down with the ship. Although he doesn’t seem as intimidated by Ahab as the other sailors, Queequeg is sucked into Ahab’s disastrous quest to kill Moby-Dick, and is killed in the process. Like Tasego, who, in the last seconds remaining before the *Pequod*’s total submergence and destruction, remains on the mast securing the ship’s flag, Queequeg—in spite of all his heroism—dies disappointed, isolated, pagan.

Thus, while the coffin certainly represents Queequeg’s “spirit” and his individual admirable qualities, I believe it also represents the possibility for fraternity and cross-cultural friendships for which *Isolato* culture allows. Perhaps the epitome of fraternity and cooperation in *Moby-Dick* occurs in Chapter 94, “A Squeeze of the Hand,” in which the sailors work together to squeeze the clumps of sperm back into liquid. Ishmael and the other sailors find themselves in a euphoric state of interdependence—one that transcends labor and cooperation and moves into the realm of the spiritual: “Oh! my dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social

acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness” (Melville 433). The *Isolatoos* aboard the *Pequod* realize a deep, spiritual interconnectedness through collaboration. In fact, Ishmael’s quote on *Isolatoos*, when read in its entirety, indicates the potential for fraternity and solidarity among outcasts: “They were nearly all Islanders in the *Pequod*, *Isolatoos* too, I call such, not acknowledging the common continent of men, but each *Isolato* living on a separate continent of his own. Yet now, federated along one keep, what a set these *Isolatoos* were!” (Melville 135).

The third thing that survives is the white whale itself: Moby-Dick. If Moby-Dick represents the ineffable goals of America and the American Way of Life—glory, success, prosperity, and so on —then the whale’s escape perhaps indicates both the continuation of these goals and their inability to be “captured” or realized. Moreover, the ruin of the *Pequod* and almost all its crew in Ahab’s extreme pursuit to kill Moby-Dick, which metaphorically represents the failure to realize and enjoy the American Way of Life, indicate that failure and destruction are inherent in the pursuit of such a Way of Life. To return to my previous example of exemplary collaboration in Chapter 94, “A Squeeze of the Hand,” I would draw attention to the fact that the men only achieve such euphoric solidarity through literally destroying a living creature: squeezing the whale’s clumps of sperm back into liquid. In *Moby-Dick*, accomplishing the American Way of Life is predicated on anthropocentrism, necrophilia, and dominance—all of which are both real (the killing of a whale) and imagined (the whale representing ultimate evil).

Finally, Ishmael’s story survives. Ishmael—the thoughtful, imperfect, and often disoriented narrator—serves as a messenger and a possibility. Leslie Eckel writes, “As a narrator, Ishmael fails us. He admits as much, noting as he constructs his ambitiously comprehensive system

of cetology that ‘any human thing supposed to be complete, must infallibly be faulty.’ Yet, he is the only one who survives the wreck of the *Pequod*, and the only one who has a chance to tell this tale. In the novel's paradoxical terms, his failure is actually the key to his success.” Thus, the survival of Ishmael and his story indicates an opportunity for salvation. Despite Ahab’s domination and the destruction of the *Pequod*, there is still hope. Ishmael offers a potential for renewal and reorientation. Ishmael, the novel’s philosophy-inclined guide, may perhaps serve the role of prophet and redeemer—that is, if we listen to his story and decide to question our assumptions, challenge our creeds, and reorient our values. Both American exceptionalism and American individualism allow for dichotomous possibilities: inclusivity and alienation, democracy and dominance, creation and destruction. Thus, American exceptionalism and American individualism are, perhaps, both a problem and solution. What matters is the context itself; whether it’s the *Pequod* or America, the orientation of the society—perpetuated by individual actions and cultural tendencies, and established in politics and social structures—ultimately determines destruction or survival. Perhaps if the United States, which is inherently governed by *Isolato* culture, were guided by love and openness, and placed greater value on fraternity and the collective well-being of society, America might not sink like the *Pequod*.

## **Chapter II**

### **Displacement and Dream: Nurturing Consciousness through Critical Encounters and Communion with Nature**

Published in 1939, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* responds to the horrors of the 1930s—the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl: a time of mass displacement for families across the United States. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the large corporate banks evict the Joad family, along with countless other tenant farmers, and force them to leave. With their only means of living snatched away from them by faceless systemic forces and changing technology, the Joads move westward to California in search of the steady labor advertised by countless handbills. The Joad family is continuously drawn, and sometimes dragged, across the country by the promises of the American Dream: a manifestation of the American Way of Life. While the Joad family persistently attempts to live the American Dream, which promises comfort, plenty, and security, they continuously fail. By the end of the novel, not only are they poorer and more desperate, but their situation seems even more hopeless than at the beginning.

As the characters repeatedly face disruption, displacement, and discrimination in their journey across the country, they also engage in critical encounters with other people: migrants, gas attendants, contractors, policemen. Through these encounters, they begin to realize that the American Dream is not a universal promise, but depends on identity, location, and power; the reality of American society does not live up to the values of the American Way of Life, which tends to disappoint, deceive, and destroy. These encounters also allow the Joad family to gain a greater appreciation for the interconnectedness of people: with each other and with nature. New communities are formed from the rubble of old communities. Though the Joad family fails to achieve the American Dream and ultimately ends up more impoverished at the novel's end, *The*

*Grapes of Wrath* offers glimmers of hope—for consciousness and community—in the most unlikely places.

### **Dark Sides of the American Dream: Myth and Perversion**

Not everyone can achieve the American Dream. Steinbeck makes it clear that the American Dream is largely a constructed myth that consistently excludes people. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, large corporations and industries push the Joad family off their farm in Oklahoma. Driven from their home, the family sets off for California, whose promise of bounty and a better life attracts displaced farming families from across the Midwest. The American Dream compels the Joad family forward through hardship, hunger, and loss. The family, inspired by handbills that promise steady work and wages in California, dreams about owning a small house among the orchards. Even Grampa, who is deeply attached to the family's land in Oklahoma, fantasizes of prosperity in California: ““Come time we get to California I’ll have a big bunch of grapes in my han’ all the time, a-nibblin’ off it all the time, by God!”” (Steinbeck 133).

California seems too good to be true. And it turns out it is. After losing their beloved farm in Oklahoma, the Joad family's dream of achieving comfort, plenty, and security—three core American values for Steinbeck—is based on a myth. The American Dream doesn't have room for poor, displaced migrants during the Great Depression. After a difficult journey, during which the family loses around half of its members to death or despair, the Joads arrive to California, where they face intense injustice, exploitation, and further hardship. The bounty of California, both real and mythicized, is not available to the Joad family.

Perhaps more important, Steinbeck points out that the American Dream can be perverted, misunderstood, and misused. In doing so, Steinbeck poses a larger question: Are the values that the American Dream promote even *good* in the first place? In his essay, “America and Americans,”

Steinbeck argues that “comfort, plenty, and security,” the very values that the Joad family strives to attain, are, in fact, the “destroyer of nations” (400); excess and selfishness pervert the moral order, and turn these values into “cynicism, boredom, and smugness” (Timmerman 311). These perverted values further promote distrust and oppression in an already oppressive American society. Moreover, the American Dream, in practice, is a zero sum game: something with clear winners and losers.

The Joad family is one of the many losers. Corporations and business owners use the myth of prosperity in California to exploit desperate and suffering people like the Joads. The handbills and stories of promise are propaganda. Unfortunately, the Joad family doesn’t realize this until arriving in California, where a young man in a Hooverville exposes the malevolent intent of this myth:

“S’pose you got a job a work, an’ there’s jus’ one fella wants the job. You got to pay ‘im what he asts. But s’pose they’s a hunderd men...S’pose them men got kids, an’ them kids is hungry...S’pose a nickel’ll buy at leas’ somepin for them kids. An’ you got a hunderd men. Jus’ offer ‘em a nickel—why, they’ll kill each other fightin’ for that nickel...That’s why them han’bills was out. You can print a hell of a lot of han’bills with what ya save payin’ fifteen cents an hour for fiel’ work.” (Steinbeck 315)

Therefore, while there is plenty of land to be worked and plenty of fruit to be picked in California, those who control the farms take advantage of people’s unquestioned belief in the American Dream. Desperate migrants, like the Joad family, pursue the American Dream across the country, only to find their hopes manipulated for the benefit of already-wealthy owners and corporations.

Unlike the Joad family, some Americans don’t have to leave home to live the American Dream. Chapter 5 of *The Grapes of Wrath* sets the scene of a tractor driver, who is greatly detached from the earth and from his community. The great noise of the tractor, the driver’s mask and goggles physically separate him from the land. The driver thinks of the land only in terms of its production: “If a seed dropped did not germinate, it was nothing” (Steinbeck 46). Even the food



the driver eats is processed, mass produced, and sterile: a sandwich of Spam, white bread, pickles, and cheese, along with “a piece of pie branded like an engine part” (Steinbeck 47). When locals recognized him as a local, ““Joe Davis’s boy!”” and ask him why he is operating the machinery that is driving families that he has grown up with off their land, the driver says, ““Got to think of my own kids”” and, ““Crop land isn’t for little guys like us any more”” (Steinbeck 48). Thus, one man’s achievement of the American Dream—based on dominance of the land and its inhabitants—hinders his entire community from achieving it.

America’s promise of comfort, plenty, and security, while seemingly wholesome values, may simply be perverted propaganda. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the search for the American Dream often results in alienation: alienation from the self, from community, and from the land. The story of the tractor driver (Joe Davis’ son) who becomes detached from the land he grew up on, betrays the community he’s always known, and seems to lose himself by pursuing greed and selfishness, is a story that is replicated on a larger scale throughout the novel: “And it came about that the owners no longer worked on their farms. They farmed on paper and they forgot the land, the smell, the feel of it, and remembered only that they owned it, remembered only what they gained and lost by it. And some of the farms grew so large that one man could not even conceive of them any more” (Steinbeck 299). This suggests that ethics are key in determining what results from pursuing the American Dream. As Timmerman summarizes, “If one approaches the land in a self-interested way, the result will inevitably be despoliation and depletion of what it means to be human” (322). Through these depictions, Steinbeck seems to argue that excess and selfishness, especially when coupled with detachment from self, community, and land, results in the perversion of the American Dream.

### Acknowledging Oppression through Paradox and Encounter

The myths of the American Dream are crucial to the preservation of the status quo in the United States. While myths reveal and inspire, they also mask and blind—paradoxically allowing for the preservation of injustice. “Americans seem to live and breathe and function by paradox,” Steinbeck remarks, “But in nothing are we so paradoxical as in our passionate belief in our own myths” (Steinbeck 331). This “passionate belief” in the American Way of Life and, in this case, the American Dream, is precisely what blinds Americans from the darker side of the Dream—both its systematic exclusion of certain people, and its many flaws. The characters in *The Grapes of Wrath* are victims of the American Dream; their persistent search for its promises masks the reality of systemic oppression.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the characters begin to awaken from myth through critical encounters with places and people; they acquire a greater awareness, or consciousness, and are able to acknowledge the larger forces of oppression upon which the United States and the American Way of Life are built. The idea of consciousness relates to Paulo Freire’s notion of *conscientização*, which is “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire 35). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire argues that society is largely comprised of oppressors and the oppressed—an idea that has its roots in Marxism. The oppressors, Freire argues, *mythacize* the world to discourage critical thinking and counter *conscientização* in the oppressed (139). As confirmed in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the oppressors propagate “a world of deceit,” a “fixed entity” without any problems, in order to increase the “alienation and passivity” of the oppressed (Freire 139).

Thus, Freire argues that the oppressed must dismantle myth and find a way to achieve *conscientização*. The oppressed, Freire writes, have a “great humanistic and historical task”: to

liberate both themselves and their oppressors, who, despite their power to “oppress, exploit, and rape,” “cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves” (44).

Freire lays out the two steps of his “pedagogy of the oppressed”:

The pedagogy of the oppressed, as a humanist and libertarian pedagogy, has two distinct stages. In the first, the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation. In the second stage, in which the reality of oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation. (54)

The underlying mission of the pedagogy of the oppressed is for the oppressed to recognize, acknowledge, and affirm the humanity in themselves and others; they must use love to counter the oppressors’ lovelessness and violence (Freire 44).

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the characters follow similar steps to lead to consciousness—a term I’ll use in place of Freire’s *conscientização*; through displacement and critical encounters, the Joad family, the “oppressed,” becomes aware of the “world of oppression” that dictates much of their lives (Freire 54). *The Grapes of Wrath* primarily dismantles the American Dream through paradox—a seemingly appropriate method for a paradox-inclined American audience. The novel creates paradoxical situations that allow for new encounters with place, people, and ideas. Only through these encounters do the characters in *The Grapes of Wrath* begin to see through the incomplete promises of the American Dream, acknowledge larger forces and problems, and begin to think critically about the reality of their situation.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, forced migration and displacement establish paradoxical situations throughout the novel. Even the most basic premise of the novel is paradoxical. The Joad family travels west across the United States, denoting Manifest Destiny and related dreams, but face increasing suffering and discouragement the farther west they go. Displacement, however, allows for new interactions in new places. George Henderson underscores the importance of place

and paradox in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Regarding the relationship between characters and place, Henderson argues that “each place took on meaning through its dynamic relationship with an opposite kind of place, either real or imagined,” and that “the interaction of these polarities transformed or overturned social relationships” (103). Essentially, myth is dismantled through conflicting visions, relationships, and places. Further, places and people “interact” with each other in *The Grapes of Wrath* through “oppositions.” Henderson identifies the novel’s three sets of oppositions as: (1) “The tension between places where power is centered—or represented—and places of socially marginal activity for peripheralized people”; (2) “The contradiction between California as a visible, knowable, Edenic landscape and the Joads’ invisibility and ignorance within it”; and (3) “The conflict between divergent modes of transforming nature and producing humane habitats” (104). As Henderson suggests, Steinbeck puts place, myth, and power together, often in paradoxical terms, to offer unique and new spaces for conversation, community, and consciousness. Using Henderson’s three oppositions, I’ve created three categories to examine the critical encounters that occur in *The Grapes of Wrath*: (1) power and powerlessness; (2) (hyper)visibility and invisibility; and (3) humane and inhumane habitats. In the Joad family’s encounters with new places and people, these paradoxical ideas also encounter each other and allow the Joads to acquire a greater consciousness.

### ***Power and Powerlessness***

The systemic hierarchies of power are largely invisible to the Joad family and other migrants in *The Grapes of Wrath*. As Joe Davis’ son, the tractor driver, explains to a furious local tenant, “‘It’s not me. There’s nothing I can do. I’ll lose my job if I don’t do it. And look—suppose you kill me? They’ll just hang you but long before you’re hung there’ll be another guy on the tractor, and he’ll bump the house down. You’re not killing the right guy’” (Steinbeck 49). When

the tenant demands to know who gave the tractor driver the orders so that he may find and kill him, the tractor driver answers that he received orders from a man who received orders from the bank. When the tenant then threatens to kill the president of the bank, the tractor driver answers that the orders to the bank come ““from the East”” (Steinbeck 49). The tenant hopelessly muses, ““But where does it stop? Who can we shoot? I don’t aim to starve to death before I kill the man that’s starving me”” (Steinbeck 49). This conversation illustrates the detachment and inaccessibility of oppression in the United States—its ineffable systemic and bureaucratic nature. Hannah Arendt refers to bureaucracy as “rule by Nobody” (137), and argues that “in a fully developed bureaucracy there is nobody left with whom one can argue, to whom one can present grievances, on whom the pressures of power can be exerted. Bureaucracy is the form of government in which everybody is deprived of political freedom, of the power to act” (178).

The danger of American bureaucracy and the power structures that maintain it are revealed to the Joad family in critical encounters when power and powerlessness collide. For example, during the Joad family’s first stay in a Hooverville, Tom and Al Joad speak with another inhabitant of the Hooverville named Floyd. While they’re conversing, a contractor drives up to the camp and announces potential work in Tulare County. Floyd realizes that the contractor is advertising just another low-paying job—one that hires workers and then forces them to stay by providing low wages—and demands that the contractor show his license. Once the contractor refuses, Floyd turns to the other inhabitants of the Hooverville who are all desperate for work and money, and warns them that taking work from this contractor would only result in abuse and exploitation; Floyd explains that it’s crucial that the contractor show a license and give a signed order for work with a clear amount of pay. At this, the contractor calls Joe, a deputy sheriff, to come out from the car. Armed with a gun, the deputy sheriff pretends to recognize Floyd as a “red” rabble-rouser who

had escaped arrest last week. The deputy sheriff arrests Floyd and warns the remaining people in the Hooverville that this will be their fate if they try to speak out, demand credentials, and help each other. As he's about to be taken away, Floyd knocks out the deputy sheriff, who, before being knocked unconscious by Casy, shoots into the crowd of migrants, blasting a hole through an innocent woman's hand (Steinbeck 339).

This scene clearly presents oppressive power dynamics at work. The contractor is unable to display a license or provide a written promise of payment, which indicates his plans to reel in poor, desperate migrant workers and then abuse them. The contractor's reliance on the deputy sheriff to subdue any opposition or organized solidarity illustrates both the corruption of the police departments and the systemic nature of the oppression. The contractor holds the power of life over these people: the promise of work, money, and food for those who are starving. He further represents the potential for comfort, plenty, and security—for the American Dream. The deputy sheriff holds the power of law and order, and wields government authority to jail and hurt people.

This oppressive power source conflicts with the running of the Hooverville. The Hooverville is a makeshift community of desperate migrants: a temporary haven for squatters and outcasts, at constant threat of being raided. There is no central authority. Instead, each of the families is sovereign. Henderson calls the Hooverville “the apotheosis of the peripheral world” (108). Not only are Hoovervilles found “outside of every ‘real’ town,” but they are a more idealized version of the American towns outside of which they are situated: “a parody of the American small-town” (Henderson 108). For the most part, the people in the Hooverville help each other, as Floyd does by warning the other migrants of the contractor's deceit. In this makeshift community of strangers driven together out of necessity and shared ostracism, the larger structural powers are revealed through the encounter between the squatters and the contractor and deputy sheriff.

The contractor exhibits false generosity. Freire describes *false generosity* as “any attempt to ‘soften’ the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed” (44). While the oppressor seems to express “generosity,” he/she is, in fact, perpetuating injustice. So, while the contractor comes to the Hooverville with the promise of work—of survival—his actions are informed by selfishness, and a desire to exploit these people. The Joad family, while staying in a makeshift community with other suffering families, faces a greedy contractor and a deputy sheriff who, while supposedly representative of authority, justice, and peace, clearly seeks to exploit these poor people for his own gain.

### ***(Hyper)visibility and Invisibility***

The tension between (hyper)visibility and invisibility also serves as a critical opportunity for the characters in *The Grapes of Wrath* to have a greater understanding of and appreciation for their realities. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, as Henderson suggests, the landscape acts as a point of tension, as it is both a “depicting *and* concealing agent” (116). Just as the American Dream is mostly intangible, that is, having a greater effect in the minds and hearts of Americans than in their realities, so too is visibility something not fully tangible. Marginalized people are seemingly “invisible.” They often have limited representation, restricted rights, and poor social status. Paradoxically, they are often also hypervisible, in that they stand out due to their deviance from the majority and often experience greater discrimination.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck contrasts the visibility of California, both its physical land and its mythic meaning for the Okies, with the invisibility of the Joad family within it: their treatment as second-class citizens, their lack of agency, and their initial blindness to exploitation. Henderson thoroughly articulates the power of landscape in *The Grapes of Wrath*:

The landscape ambiguously revealed *and* concealed its contents. All along, the Joads had been making the equation between the visible and the possible, between reality and representation. The notions of “there” and “here” as points on a map, or as elements of the field of vision that could be identified and reached, were continually obscured because the Joads were lured in the first place by the spectacle of California. Or, rather, California was revealed to them only *as* a spectacle. What they found, in fact, was a parallel, though peripheralized, world. (108)

Thus, because California remained a “spectacle” and beacon of hope in the minds of the Joads, their encounter with the physical place was jarring. California was supposed to be a place of salvation, a place where the Joad family could make money, settle down, and find a community. In this mythic image of California, Grampa could eat “a big bunch of grapes” all the time, Rose of Sharon could safely have her baby, and her husband, Connie, could take night classes, gain a vocational skill, and buy a house for his family. Each member of the Joad family had his or her own dreams that seemed possible in California: a place that promises comfort, plenty, and security.

The Joad family’s first view of California is disappointing. They travel through Arizona, past Flagstaff, Oatman, and Topock, then “across the bridge and into a broken rock wilderness” (Steinbeck 260). Here, the family stops and Pa announces, “We’re there—we’re in California!” (Steinbeck 260). Though subtle, Pa’s use of *there* further supports the Joad’s obsession with the mythic vision of California as opposed to the physical location; *there* indicates a place not yet reached, while *here* connotes the actual arrival at a place. At this point, the Joads still had not truly *arrived* in California. They’re still poor, suffering, and on the move. After they cross into California, the family stops at a small Hooverville along the river outside of Needles. The people here, other desperate migrants, have no sense of possession—of comfort, plenty, or security. When the Joads arrive and Tom asks a woman if they can stop at the encampment, she answers, “We don’t own it, mister. Stop if you want. They’ll be a cop down to look you over” (Steinbeck 260). After the Joads pull off and set up camp there, Tom, Pa, and Noah go and bathe in the river. When



other men come to the river and ask if they can also bathe, Tom answers “She ain’t our river. We’ll len’ you a little piece of her” (Steinbeck 263).

The Joads’ and other migrant families’ desire for possession is not achieved by arriving in California. Even the landscape contrasts their expectations. As Pa, Tom, and Noah are bathing, Tom remarks:

‘Never seen such tough mountains. This here’s a murder country. This here’s the bones of a country. Wonder if we’ll ever get in a place where folks can live ‘thout fightin’ hard scrabble an’ rocks. I seen pitchers of a country flat an’ green, an’ with little houses like Ma says, white. Ma got her heart set on a white house. Get to think’ they ain’t no such country. I seen pitchers like that.’

Pa said, ‘Wait till we get to California. You’ll see nice country then.’

‘Jesus Christ, Pa! This here *is* California.’

Moreover, it is in their first few days of being in California that the Joad family most rapidly breaks apart. Noah, suddenly infatuated with the river, refuses to leave its banks and sets off alone. Gramma, who has been unwell and left untreated for a while, dies as the family leaves the Mojave Desert and crosses into Tehachapi, where they finally see the picturesque, bountiful, green parts of California for the first time. Shortly after this, Uncle John, an intermittent alcoholic, takes up alcohol again. Connie, Rose of Sharon’s husband and father of the child she bears, disappears, abandoning his wife and the Joad family. In their travel to and physical arrival at California, and through “the contradiction between California as a visible, knowable, Edenic landscape and the Joads’ invisibility and ignorance within it,” the Joad family realizes that the promises of California are largely a myth (Henderson 104): propaganda used to exploit displaced people like themselves.

On top of disappointment and realization of their ignorance and dispossession in California, the Joad family faces fierce discrimination which provides them with a greater understanding of the larger structural works at play. At one point, the Joads and the other migrants living in the small encampment outside of Needles are evicted by a policeman. Ma is shaken by the hostility of the policeman, and scolds him: “‘In my country you watch your tongue.’” The policeman responds,

“‘Well, you ain’t in your country now. You’re in California, an’ we don’t want you goddamn Okies settlin’ down’” (Steinbeck 275). This is the first of many interactions in which the Joad family is treated as second-class citizens. In California, a place that largely contradicts the dreams that surround it, the members of the Joad family are “Okies”: dirty, less-than-human, and ignorant—both hypervisible and invisible.

### ***Humane and Inhumane Habitats***

Displacement drives the story in *The Grapes of Wrath*. As Henderson points out, “geographical mobility,” the consequence of displacement, acts as “the great social leveler” (Henderson 105). In the novel’s climate of immense suffering and displacement, the center of power shifts. Struggles for social and political power now take place in gas stations and campgrounds, repair shops and Hoovervilles. While the Joad family never encounters a perfect humane habitat, the humaneness that the Joad family encounters in typically inhumane habitats, such as migrant camps, allows the family to survive displacement. I’ve redefined the paradox of humane and inhumane habitats from Henderson’s third set of oppositions, “The conflict between divergent modes of transforming nature and producing humane habitats” (104). The physical places, or habitats, that the Joad family passes through on their way to California vary in terms of humaneness. The family’s encounters with each unique habitat ultimately shape their consciousness. A humane habitat is one marked by compassion, tolerance, mutual understanding, and goodness. In contrast, an inhumane habitat is cruel and sometimes violent: a place distinguished by a lack of compassion for or benevolence toward the suffering. When, however, characters witness a glimmer of humanity in inhumane habitats, they begin to realize the need for solidarity.

Throughout *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Joad family is displaced from home, and the family finds itself in different places across the United States on their way to California. One of the first places they stop is along the highway near a service station, where the family sees another truck parked for the night. Tom asks the couple camping if they can stop there for the night, to which the man, like so many other displaced persons the Joad family would continue to meet, answers ““We don’t own it”” (Steinbeck 172). The Joad family pulls their truck over to the side of the road to camp with Ivy and Sairy Wilson. The Wilsons are ““proud”” to have the Joad family staying beside them for the night (Steinbeck 172). Grampa Joad is ill, and the Wilsons offer him their mattress and tent without hesitation. Grampa has a stroke, and almost immediately dies on the Wilsons’ mattress. The men bury Grampa nearby, on the side of the road, while the women cook dinner.

A ditch alongside the highway is a poor habitat for anyone, especially a suffering family with a dying patriarch. However, the humaneness that the Wilson family shows the Joads creates a sense of comfort as their journey to California begins with the sudden death of Grampa. Despite both families’ relative poverty, there’s also a sense of plenty. After Sairy Wilson offers to prepare dinner for both families, Ma orders Noah to ““get into them kegs an’ bring out some nice pork,”” and Sairy adds that she has ““a half sack of potatoes”” (Steinbeck 180). When Ma goes to prepare Grampa, who died on the Wilsons’ bed, for the burial, she tells Sairy, ““Your quilt’s spoilt...We’ll wrop ‘im in your quilt. We’ll make it up to you. We got a quilt for you”” (Steinbeck 180). Sairy responds, ““You shouldn’t talk like that. We’re proud to help. I ain’t felt so—safe in a long time. People needs—to help”” (Steinbeck 180). Both families help each other feel a sense of security. By showing benevolence and compassion, the Wilson family makes the little camp on the side of

the road more humane; it is here that, in a way, the Joad family experiences a version (though undoubtedly less impressive) of the comfort, plenty, and security that they seek far off in California.

This feeling of solidarity is amplified as the Joad family proceeds across the country. Migrant families come together in makeshift camps along the sides of the highway, as well as in Hoovervilles outside of cities. In Chapter 14, which theorizes the larger migrant movement across the United States, Steinbeck writes,

One man, one family driven from the land; this rusty car creaking along the highway to the west. I lost my land, a single tractor took my land. I am alone and I am bewildered. And in the night one family camps in a ditch and another family pulls in and the tents come out. The two men squat on their hams and the women and children listen. Here is the node, you who hate fear and revolution. Keep these two squatting men apart; make them hate, fear, suspect each other. Here is the anlage of the thing you fear. This is the zygote. For here 'I lost my land' is change; a cell is split and from its splitting grows the thing you hate—'We lost *our* land.' The danger is here, for two men are not as lonely and perplexed as one. And from this first 'we' there grows a still more dangerous thing: 'I have a little food' plus 'I have none.' If from this problem the sum is 'We have a little food,' the thing is on its way, the movement has direction. Only a little multiplication now, and this land, this tractor are ours. The two men squatting in a ditch, the little fire, the side-meat stewing in a single pot, the silent, stone-eyed women; behind, the children listening with their souls to words their minds do not understand. The night draws down. The baby has a cold. Here, take this blanket. It's wool. It was my mother's blanket—take it for the baby. This is the thing to bomb. This is the beginning—from 'I' to 'we.' (194)

Despite having such few possessions, and living in an impoverished environment, the families come together to share and help each other. Even though the people in these makeshift communities have few resources or possessions, even for themselves, they share what they have. Moreover, this quote not only generalizes the social dynamics that occur in these makeshift communities of migrants, but also outlines the potential for solidarity. There seems to be immense power, or at least the potential for immense power, in these communities of suffering migrants who treat each other with humaneness. Perhaps these migrants can realize their oppression, come together in solidarity, and organize against the oppressors.

There are other examples of humaneness and inhumaneness in other places, as well. Chapter 15 sets up an interesting interplay of social forces around roadside culture: truckers,

businessmen, shop owners, and poor migrants. This chapter takes place within a gas station along Highway 66. Here, people from different ends of society stop to eat and relieve themselves. The behavior of the “pot-bellied men in light suits and panama hats” is contrasted to that of the uniformed truck drivers (Steinbeck 199). While the rich men and women only gossip and complain, the truck drivers are friendly and down-to-earth. Though they are much less wealthy than the “clean, pink men with puzzled, worried faces,” the truck drivers are more generous and caring. When a poor migrant family with hungry children stops at the station and asks for a loaf of fifteen-cent bread for a dime, Mae and Al, the owners of the station, agree to sell the bread at a low price. Bill, a compassionate truck driver passing through, doesn’t take his change to compensate for the migrant family’s reduced prices. This scene exemplifies the generosity and benevolence of the shop owners and truck drivers, while also showing the apathy and malevolence of the upper class. In this new climate of “oppositions,” the oppressed come to realize their oppression and the potential for solidarity in various habitats, even in a rest stop alongside the highway.

### **Fostering Consciousness through Communion with Nature**

Primarily, the sparks of hope in *The Grapes of Wrath* emerge from the realization of interconnectedness, such as when the Joad family enjoys simple, harmonious interactions with other migrants along their journey. While critical encounters are crucial to realizing interconnectedness and acquiring consciousness, *The Grapes of Wrath* also emphasizes the clarity and sense of interdependence that is found in a relationship with the nature. The nature world is pivotal to the Joad family’s success and failure. First, the Joad family is displaced from their home and their farm, to which they are deeply attached. Displacement from land drives the story’s plot. Moreover, the Joads travel across the continental United States in search of land where they can work and settle. Finally, as I’ll focus on in this section, Tom and Casy achieve greater

consciousness through an intimate relationship with nature that comes from direct engagement with the land.

The characters in *The Grapes of Wrath* feel deep identification with cultivated land; “This land, this red land, is us; and the flood years and the dust years and the drought years are us” (Steinbeck 113). There is no distinction between the land and the people; both are suffering. For example, upon deciding to leave the family’s farm, Grampa Joad, who is normally tough and vigorous, breaks down crying and refuses to leave. The family must sedate him and drag him along forcefully as they begin their journey to California. Within just a few days, Grampa dies; he identifies so strongly with the family land that forsaking it quickly kills him.

Land—imagined, cultivated, and fallow—represents various ideas throughout the novel, including landlessness, ownership, and nature. In different parts of the story, both Jim Casy and Tom Joad gain prophetic insight through communion with nature: wisdom gained from solitary sojourns and deep contemplation in and of nature. This is a contrast and a response to the destructive, wasteful, utilitarian attitudes toward nature that has largely dominated the history of the United States. The tractor man formerly mentioned is an embodiment of this destructive attitude toward nature:

And in the tractor man there grows the contempt that comes only to a stranger who has little understanding and no relation. For nitrates are not the land, nor phosphates and the length of fiber in the cotton is not the land. Carbon is not a man, nor salt nor water nor calcium. He is all of these, but he is much more, much more; and the land is so much more than its analysis...But the machine man, driving a dead tractor on land he does not know and love, understands only chemistry; and he is contemptuous of the land and of himself. When the corrugated iron doors are shut, he goes home, and his home is not the land. (Steinbeck 148-149)

The height of this destructiveness takes place in Chapter 25, in which the owners of the fruit industries in California burn all the excess fruit that has fallen to the ground. Like the tractor man, the owners of fruit plantations and their subordinates are “men of understanding and knowledge and skill, men who experiment with seed, endlessly developing the techniques for

greater crops of plants” (Steinbeck 445). The relationship these men have with nature is one characterized by exploitation, greed, and selfishness. The resulting environment is one of rot and decay in which “the smell from the ferment is not the rich odor of wine, but the smell of decay and chemicals” (Steinbeck 447). “Carloads of oranges” are “dumped on the ground” and kerosene is “sprayed over the golden mountains” (Steinbeck 448); with starving migrants all around, the owners and “tractor men” burn the excess fruit in order to maintain the fruits’ price. Steinbeck strongly condemns this action:

There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all our success. The fertile earth, the straight tree rows, the sturdy trunks, and the ripe fruit. And children dying of pellagra must die because a profit cannot be taken from an orange. And coroners must fill in the certificates—died of malnutrition—because the food must rot, must be forced to rot. (449)

This attitude toward nature is contrasted by that of Casy and Tom. As Tom returns to his hometown after several years in prison, he meets Casy, a former preacher who had baptized Tom and knows the Joad family well. Casy had since denounced his title as Reverend and spent much time alone; he decided to go off and think by himself, first recognizing that “the sperit’s strong” in him and that he “ain’t so sure of a lot of things” (Steinbeck 27). While “layin’ under a tree,” Casy comes to the realization that “there ain’t no sin and there ain’t no virtue. There’s just stuff people do. It’s all part of the same thing” (Steinbeck 30). After this rejection of general Christian dogmatism, Casy also wonders, “‘Why do we got to hang it on God or Jesus? Maybe,’ I figgered, ‘maybe it’s all men an’ all women we love; maybe that’s the Holy Sperit—the human sperit—the whole shebang. Maybe all men got one big soul ever’body’s a part of’” (Steinbeck 31).

Casy’s epiphany from his time alone in nature compels him to join the Joad family on their journey to California. Casy claims that “Somepin’s happening” (Steinbeck 121); he needs to go

where the action is—where the people are. However, Casy seeks to go on this journey with openness and humility:

‘I ain’t gonna baptize. I’m gonna work in the fiel’s, in the green fiel’s, an’ I’m gonna be near to folks. I ain’t gonna try to teach ‘em nothin’. I’m gonna try to learn. Gonna learn why the folks walks in the grass, gonna hear ‘em talk, gonna hear ‘em sing. Gonna listen to kids eatin’ mush. Gonna hear husban’ an’ wife a-poundin’ the mattress in the night. Gonna eat with ‘em an’ learn.’ His eyes were wet and shining. ‘Gonna lay in the grass, open an’ honest with anybody that’ll have me. Gonna cuss an’ swear an’ hear the poetry of folks talkin’. All that’s holy, all that’s what I didn’t understan’. All them things is the good things.’ (Steinbeck 121)

Throughout the novel, Casy works alongside the Joad family and the other migrant families they meet. During the journey, Casy mostly keeps quiet and to himself; he listens well and is present when he engages with others. At one point, once the family is in New Mexico, Tom and Casy repair the car together and talk. Casy is more perceptive, and notes, to Tom’s annoyance, that there are hundreds of other families moving west; “it’s like the whole country is movin’” (Steinbeck 223). Even though the Joad family has not yet faced the telling encounters that I outlined in the previous section, Casy already has a sense that something is wrong—that there are larger structural forces at work.

Casy’s frequent respites in nature help him achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the interconnectedness of the world. This understanding, as well as his attitude toward others, seem to make him almost prophetic: closer to consciousness than the other characters. As Casy himself puts it, “‘They’s folks like me that climbs fences that ain’t even strang up yet—an’ can’t he’p it’” (Steinbeck 224). Casy not only sees and tries to understand these structural “fences,” but also takes action. In the scene described in the previous subsection on *power and powerlessness*, Casy sacrifices himself and is taken into custody so that neither Floyd nor Tom get into trouble; Casy and the Joad family separate. Later, however, Tom and Casy’s paths cross again. Now an outlaw and labeled as a “Red,” Casy leads some men and seeks to raise consciousness and organize a movement against the corrupt police. The police find Casy and his followers outside of a



government camp, where, before Casy is killed, he tells the police, ““You fellas don’ know what you’re doin’. You’re helpin’ to starve kids”” (Steinbeck 495).

Tom is injured after killing the man who murdered Casy, and must hide away in a brushy, isolated culvert in a cotton field outside of the encampment where the Joad family is temporarily living. In this isolation, Tom achieves greater consciousness; he makes it his mission to pick up from where Casy left off. In an emotional final interaction between Tom and his mother, who brings food to the culvert, Tom summarizes what he learned from Casy; ““[Casy] says one time he went out in the wilderness to find his own soul, an’ he foun’ he didn’ have no soul that was his’n. Says he foun’ he jus’ got a little piece of a great big soul. Says a wilderness ain’t no good, ‘cause his little piece of a soul wasn’t no good ‘less it was with the rest, an’ was whole”” (Steinbeck 535). Essentially, both Casy and Tom come to realize the spiritual solidarity inherent in humanity. Moreover, this realization compels Tom to act: to risk his life raising awareness of the crime and exploitation that is repeatedly being committed against small farmers and poor migrants. When Ma Joad tepidly asks Tom if he could get hurt pursuing this mission, Tom famously responds,

‘Then it don’ matter. 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. If Casy knowed, why, I’ll be in the way guys yell when they’re mad an’—I’ll be in the way kids laugh when they’re hungry an’ they know supper’s ready. An’ when our folks eat the stuff they raise an’ live in the houses they build—why, I’ll be there. See?’ (Steinbeck 537)

Through his solitude in nature, Tom is able to heal and come to an understanding of humanity as interconnected, interdependent, and harmonious. After such a realization, he decides to leave his family and makes it his mission to promote social activism inspired by this vision of humanity.

Both Casy and Tom assume “the status and role of a prophet” in *The Grapes of Wrath*, because they find “wisdom” and “virtue” through communion with nature, and act upon the lessons they have learned through this solitary communion (McEntyre 114). The retreats into nature act

similarly to the paradoxical encounters that build consciousness, insofar as “Steinbeck carefully chose places that gave a character a renewed and empowering vantage point from which to see social relations as fraught with contradictions” (Henderson 110). The lessons gleaned by these characters’ revelations reject the utilitarian-based thinking that dominates our society; Casy and Tom embrace the world as spiritual and revelatory.

Casy and Tom’s achievement of heightened consciousness through communion with nature echoes Steinbeck’s own environmental philosophy: a philosophy that is just as relevant today as it was at the time of the environmental catastrophes surrounding the Dust Bowl. For Steinbeck, nature is not necessarily a reflection of God or the divine, but instead, as Woodburn Ross writes, “There is only nature, ultimately mysterious, to which all things belong, bound together in a unity concerning whose stupendous grandeur [Steinbeck] can barely hint at” (Ross 66). Steinbeck invites the reader to recognize the mystery of nature: a sense of awe that seems to have been lost in modern American society.

Additionally, mankind holds a unique role in the world for Steinbeck. Steinbeck dedicates an entire chapter in *The Grapes of Wrath* to describing “Manself”; he outlines man’s distinctness in the universe, including man’s aptitude to work, invent, and organize, as well as the willingness to “suffer and die for a concept” (Steinbeck 193). However, Steinbeck also sees man as “a determined, fully constituted unit of nature at the mercy of nature’s forces...substantially the sum product of natural factors” (Hart 46). Though these functions of mankind may, at first, seem contradictory, they actually indicate the complexity of mankind and its relation to the natural world: a relationship that should be further explored and rethought. As Richard Hart puts it, in Steinbeck’s work “we witness the intersection, the complementarity, of the determinism of nature *and* man’s freedom of existence” (49).

This new approach toward mankind may help to solve the crises presented in *The Grapes of Wrath*: poverty, inequality, exploitation, environmental disaster, displacement, and so on. These crises are reflective of larger, deep-rooted issues in American society. In “America and Americans,” Steinbeck writes that the early settlers came to America and approached the land “as though it were an enemy”: “They burned the forests and changed the rainfall; they swept the buffalo from the plains, blasted the streams, set fire to the grass, and ran a reckless scythe through the virgin and noble timber. Perhaps they felt that it was limitless and could never be exhausted and that a man could move on to new wonders endlessly” (Steinbeck 377). The seeming excess of land in America, justified by the white European settlers’ feelings of entitlement and superiority over the Native Americans and the land they lived on, drove Americans “land-mad” (Steinbeck, “America and Americans” 379). Moreover, Steinbeck characterizes Americans as “an exuberant people, careless and destructive as active children” (Steinbeck, “America and Americans” 382), and points to “the want of things” and “the need of things” as “the two greatest stimulants toward the change and complication we call progress” (396). In essence, the seeming plenty of America that first drove the settlers “land-mad” still contributes to the American psyche, especially in the capitalist, consumer-driven world of today.

This same mentality, namely the obsessive and destructive desire for domination over land, people, and animals for personal gain, drives the quest of the *Pequod*. In *Moby-Dick*, Melville’s portrayal of Ahab epitomizes America’s anthropocentric, necrophilic values almost a century before *The Grapes of Wrath* was published. While both novels deal with similar issues in the American Way of Life, each has its own approach and emphasis. Whereas *Moby-Dick* stresses fraternity, collaboration, and openness, especially when in the face of isolation and marginalization, *The Grapes of Wrath* focuses more closely on land, community, and the possibilities of a dream.

Despite the utter destruction at the end of *Moby-Dick* and the tragic ending of *The Grapes of Wrath*, both novels end in hope. *The Grapes of Wrath* closes with Rose of Sharon, who just recently gave birth to a stillborn baby, breastfeeding a dying stranger.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck encourages us to not only dismantle the stifling, false promises of the American Dream and the American Way of Life, but he also urges us to rethink the relationship between humans and nonhuman others. Marilyn McEntyre clarifies this point; she writes,

To think in such a way entails a kind of humility related to Jeffer's idea of 'unhumanism'—a rejection of the myopic anthropocentrism that distorts our understanding of the functioning of whole systems, the large patterns of evolution, the nature of natural and human communities as organic wholes that transcend the life and purposes of any individual within them. The capacity for 'whole sight,' as well as what Champney sees as relativism, antidogmatism, and ultimate acceptance of what is, defines the prophet in Steinbeck's world. (114-115)

Steinbeck, himself, acts as a prophet through his novels—awakening Americans to the urgency of environmental matters, which seem even more urgent today. At its core, Steinbeck's "environmental ethic" is "based upon a belief in the possibility of a harmonious relationship between humanity and the environment" (Timmerman 322). Steinbeck's environmental philosophy may rattle, if not dismantle, the myth and anthropocentrism that dominate American society and perpetuate inequality, injustice, and environmental disaster. By adopting this environmental philosophy, in which we humans, both part of and distinct from nature, regard the natural world with reverence, and by engaging with other people and places, perhaps Americans may be able to realize their interconnectedness and change their destructive tendencies.

### Chapter III

## Escape from the American Nightmare: Disconnections, Misconnections, and Possibilities

Richard Wright's *Native Son* reveals the American Nightmare: a reality defined by systemic racial oppression that only allows for limited realizations of freedom for blacks. *Native Son* is based around the crime and trial of Bigger Thomas, a young black man in Chicago's Black Belt, a segregated neighborhood. The novel takes place at the end of the first wave of the Great Migration; in fact, Bigger and his family had migrated north from Mississippi before settling in Chicago. During this time period in the United States, poverty, unfair labor practices, and technological advances, drove hundreds of thousands of blacks out of the South into new territory: Chicago, New York City, and so on. While the American Way of Life and the American Dream could not be achieved "at home" in the South, there was hope that their promises were "out there," elsewhere in the United States.

However, Bigger fails in his pursuit of the American Way of Life. *Native Son* shows that the American Dream is not available for Bigger and most of the black community in Chicago; the values of equality and justice, let alone comfort, plenty, and security, aren't even an option for blacks. In this context, Wright explores the American Nightmare and its manifestations: poverty, anger, shame, and crime. Bigger, trapped in the American Nightmare and unconvinced by "blinding," dead-end gimmicks, resorts to violence as a means to achieve liberation; Bigger thus plunges deeper into the American Nightmare and allows selfishness, isolation, and helplessness to control his actions.

The three novels, *Moby-Dick*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *Native Son*, all depict some form of the American Nightmare—some kind of pathology inherent in all that is "America." *Native Son*, however, depicts the darkest nightmare, in that it contains the most narrow space for freedom,

exploration, and the building of consciousness. All three novels are about movement. However, while the characters in *Moby-Dick* traverse oceans and the Joad family in *The Grapes of Wrath* crosses the United States by car, in *Native Son*, Bigger only travels a few blocks away from his home in the Black Belt of Chicago—a displacement that almost immediately sparks conflict, violence, and destruction. The characters in all three novels try to live the American Way of Life, and quickly become its victims; but, where Ahab has the greatest power over such a quest, Bigger has the least.

With this contextual understanding, I would like to redirect the focus from Bigger's American Nightmare to the possibilities that Bigger missed—possibilities for self-transformation, interconnectedness, and community building. Even in such a limited, stifled environment, there are still opportunities for self-reflection and critical encounters that might offer Bigger some room to transcend his oppressed environment and restricted identity. On top of illustrating the disturbing reality of a world defined and confined by the oppressive systemic forces of white supremacy, *Native Son*, when read with a focus on disconnections and misconnections, offers possibilities for liberation, transformation, and community building through dialogue, listening, and mutual understanding.

### **Bigger's Curtain: Gimmicks and Blindness**

In the Black Belt of Chicago, Bigger Thomas and his family, like all the black families in Chicago's Black Belt, live in a small, rat-infested, over-priced apartment—essentially a single room with a kitchen separated by a curtain. There is no privacy. The men sleep in one bed, the women in another. Bigger and his brother, Buddy, must turn away from Mama and their sister, Vera, as they get dressed, and vice versa. Bigger and the other black characters in *Native Son* know that their opportunities are limited and their lives are circumscribed, perhaps even predetermined.

There is no comfort, plenty, or security; there is no freedom, equality, or justice. As Wright presents, black people in Chicago's Black Belt can only achieve a mere taste of the American Dream—one that is limited and perverted.

As in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the characters in *Native Son* live in a limited, mythacized world: one in which much-lauded American values, such as equality, equal opportunity, and freedom, mask the disappointing reality of American society. Early on in the novel, Bigger and his friend, Gus, are outside and look up to see a plane: a symbol of America's promise of exploration, progress, and possibility. While they both watch the plane in wonder, Gus remarks, “‘Them white boys sure can fly,’” to which Bigger responds, “‘Yeah, they get a chance to do everything’” (Wright 16). Bigger then says that he could also fly a plane if given the chance. Gus responds, “‘If you wasn't black and if you had some money and if they'd let you go to aviation school, you *could* fly a plane’” (Wright 17). Though they both initially respond with laughter at the clear lack of opportunities offered to blacks, this turns, upon deeper thought, to an intense anger that Bigger describes as “a red-hot iron down [his] throat” (Wright 20).

Whiteness circumscribes the lives of those in the Black Belt. Whiteness supersedes the belief, behavior, and actions of white people; it becomes systemic.

To Bigger and his kind white people were not really people; they were a sort of great natural force, like a stormy sky looming overhead, or like a deep swirling river stretching suddenly at one's feet in the dark. As long as he and his black folks did not go beyond certain limits, there was no need to fear that white force. But whether they feared it or not, each and every day of their lives they lived with it; even when words did not sound its name, they acknowledged its reality. As long as they lived here in this prescribed corner of the city, they paid mute tribute to it. (Wright 114)

Bigger and the black community in *Native-Son* are restricted to the oppressive realities of American society—a society controlled by whiteness, which I would define as the diffuse political and social oppression promoted by America's legacy of and domination by white supremacy. As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor helps clarify, “‘White people’ are typically regarded as an

undifferentiated mass with a common experience of privilege, access, and unfettered mobility. These perceptions have largely been facilitated by the academic distillation of a ‘white’ identity into an aspirational category of ‘whiteness,’” which is “not necessarily embodied in white people,” but certainly can be (210).

Additionally, as shown in the block quote above, black people may live somewhat comfortably in their confined lives as long as they do not “go beyond certain limits”; they must remain in a “prescribed corner of the city” and pay “mute tribute” to whiteness (Wright 114). Thus, there’s a great necessity to subscribe to the mythacized world of whiteness. In *Native Son*, this subscription is described as going behind a curtain;

He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them. He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel its fulness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair. So he held toward them an attitude of iron reserve; he lived with them, but behind a wall, a curtain. And toward himself he was even more exacting. He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else. So he denied himself and acted tough. (Wright 10)

Bigger’s “curtain” is representative of a larger tendency in the black community, as presented in *Native Son*. Within this circumscribed reality, there are some options for expression, agency, and freedom, though each option is perverted, prescribed, and defined by whiteness and oppression. In *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin writes an autobiographical account of growing up in Harlem in the 1960s, during which he experienced the necessity for blacks to have an outlet—a gimmick: be it drugs, crime, music, religion, or alcohol. Baldwin writes, “If Harlem didn’t have so many churches and junkies, there’d be blood flowing in the streets” (76). Baldwin describes Harlem as an “auction block” (28); blacks desperately need some kind of gimmick to survive—to, as Malcolm X put it, “narcotize themselves against being a Black man in the white man’s America” (Haley 255-256).



Thus, Bigger's family and friends are all subscribed to a gimmick to realize a kind of freedom. Bigger's mother, along with many others in the black community, finds freedom in the church: a popular gimmick for black people during this time. A black preacher who comes to visit Bigger in jail tries to encourage him to find salvation in belief. "'This worl' ain' our home,'" the preacher explains, "'Life ever' day is a crucifixion'" (Wright 285). Many blacks in *Native Son* turn to faith to experience some kind of agency and freedom. There are other avenues that hint at freedom, such as Bigger's friends' participation in petty crimes and Bessie's use of alcohol. Bessie acknowledges her miserable life; she works "'like a dog'" and admits she "'ain't got no happiness'" (Wright 180). She has "'to get drunk to forget'" her misery; she has "'to get drunk to sleep'" (Wright 229).

Bigger finds these attempts at freedom to be petty, limiting, and unsubstantial. Bigger finds freedom—agency, advocacy, and self-realization—through murder. After killing Mary Dalton, a murder largely compelled by panic and circumstance, Bigger feels an immense sense of freedom—a surge of pride, power, and fulfillment. The morning after committing the murder, Bigger reflects:

His crime seemed natural; he felt that all of his life had been leading to something like this. It was no longer a matter of dumb wonder as to what would happen to him and his black skin; he knew now. The hidden meaning of his life—a meaning which others did not see and which he had always tried to hide—had spilled out. No; it was no accident, and he would never say it was. There was in him a kind of terrified pride in feeling and thinking that some day he would be able to say publicly that he had done it. It was as though he had an obscure but deep debt to fulfil to himself in accepting the deed. (Wright 106)

The freedom Bigger achieves from murdering a privileged white woman, though a vulgar and harmful act in nature, is one of the only kinds of freedom he can achieve. While Bigger's life has been circumscribed by the white, patriarchal structures of American Society, and he has been afforded few opportunities, murder suddenly opens up access to opportunities and seemingly unhindered decision making. As the Daltons and the police scramble to solve and come to terms with the disappearance of Mary, Bigger smugly remains in the chaos, knowing that they "would

never think that a black, timid Negro” committed the crime (Wright 187). What matters to Bigger is the freedom this murder offers; the morality behind the violence doesn’t seem important to him. In fact, Bigger “liked to hear of how Japan was conquering China; of how Hitler was running the Jews to the ground; of how Mussolini was invading Spain. He was not concerned with whether these acts were right or wrong; they simply appealed to him as possible avenues of escape” (Wright 115). For once in his life, Bigger has control and agency. While all the whites around him sift through evidence and clues to track down Mary, Bigger acts like a puppeteer, pulling strings and adding to the complication; he is able to feel agency and power for once in his life.

In committing and pursuing crime, Bigger doesn’t initially realize that murder, like religion and alcohol, is just another false version of freedom: one of the only “escapes” allowed to him by American society at the time. In *Native Son*, the American Dream for blacks is limited to small spaces that the white patriarchal society deems appropriate. Though these outlets and media offer some kind of freedom, they are largely static and unproductive, insofar as they do not serve to further black rights and tend to keep blacks from critically thinking about their situation. Moreover, gimmicks are deceiving, in that they provide a limited sense of freedom. Gimmicks keep the “curtain” shut. Thus, these restrained forms of freedom perpetuate blindness: an unawareness that inhibits one from critically thinking about his or her own situation.

Blindness is a major theme throughout *Native Son*; Bigger regards almost all the characters in the novel as “blind,” including his family. Blindness, in many ways, sustains acceptance and inaction. In the same passage in which Bigger first realizes the “blindness” of his own family, he also describes the dull regularity and status quo that blindness maintains: his younger sister, already looking tired, following the footsteps of his exhausted mother and likely bound to the same fate; his brother sitting in “a certain stillness, an isolation, meaninglessness” (Wright 108).

Similarly, Bigger contemplates Bessie's blindness and her search for freedom and agency in alcohol:

He felt the narrow orbit of her life: from her room to the kitchen of the white folks was the farthest she ever moved. She worked long hours, hard and hot hours seven days a week, with only Sunday afternoons off; and when she did get off she wanted fun, hard and fast fun, something to make her feel that she was making up for the starved life she led...[S]he had told him over and over again that she lived their lives when she was working in their homes, not her own. That was why, she told him, she drank. He knew why she liked him; he gave her money for drinks. (Wright 139)

Thus, blindness and gimmicks are quite similar; they are both subscriptions to a confined, suppressed kind of freedom in which the subscriber cannot see the structural systems that impose these limitations. Perhaps more importantly, those subscribed to blindness or gimmicks fail to recognize the restrictions of such a subscription and cannot attempt to consciously move beyond them.

Most of the white people in *Native Son* also subscribe to a narrow understanding of their worlds—one that criminalizes blacks and trivializes their struggles, and maintains the predominant American dogma of whiteness. Jan, a member of the Communist party, and Mary, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Dalton, interact one-sidedly with blacks. They both speak to Bigger about their desire to know and help blacks. Jan portrays a united, communist future, saying, “There’ll be no white and no black; there’ll be no rich and no poor” (Wright 60). Mary explains her curiosity:

‘You know, Bigger, I’ve long wanted to go into these houses,’ she said, pointing to the tall, dark apartment buildings looming to either side of them, ‘and just *see* how your people live. You know what I mean? I’ve been to England, France and Mexico, but I don’t know how people live ten blocks from me. We know so *little* about each other. I just want to *see*. I want to *know* these people. Never in my life have I been inside of a Negro home. Yet they *must* live like we do. They’re *human*... There are twelve million of them... They live in our country... In the same city as us...’ her voice trailed off wistfully. (Wright 69-70)

Mary's desire to engage with and understand blacks, while perhaps good-intentioned, is riddled with blindness. Not only does she create a clear dichotomy by setting up an “us” versus “them” dynamic, but she also emphasizes the human-ness of blacks, as if needing to convince herself that

they are, in fact, human beings. Blindness is also apparent in their actions. Jan immediately shakes Bigger's hand upon meeting him and insists that Bigger doesn't call him "sir." Additionally, Jan and Mary pressure Bigger to take them to a restaurant in the Black Belt, so that they can experience a black restaurant. Jan and Mary's blind actions make Bigger deeply uncomfortable.

Mary's father, Mr. Dalton, also exhibits blindness. Mr. Dalton owns the South Side Real Estate Company, which owns the apartment that Bigger and his family live in. Mr. Dalton contributes to the preservation of injustice by charging an exorbitant rent for small, dirty apartments and refusing to rent any apartments outside of the Black Belt to black people. However, he also donates millions of dollars to local organizations for black youth and education. The actions of Jan, Mary, and Mr. Dalton, all of whom are restricted by their blindness, exemplify *false generosity*, which, as I noted earlier, is "any attempt to 'soften' the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed"—just as the contractor did in *The Grapes of Wrath* (Freire 44). False generosity is just another kind of gimmick that, while seeming to promote freedom, equality, and justice, is largely unproductive and only serves to further blind the doers and receivers of the false generosity from nuanced societal problems. Blindness and gimmicks exist on both sides—black and white—and only preserve the status quo. Perhaps most importantly, Bigger and other blacks in his community, are unable to enjoy the promises of the American Way of Life and tragically fail in the process.

### **Disconnections and Misconnections**

*Native Son* follows Bigger as he moves from his home in the Black Belt of Chicago to a wealthy, white neighborhood. As in *The Grapes of Wrath*, movement and critical encounters reveal oppression and build consciousness. Though only spanning a few blocks, this movement—from poor to wealthy, oppressed to oppressor, black to white—radically changes Bigger's understanding

of the oppression that shapes so much of his life. However, Bigger's encounters with other people and places also illustrate disconnections and misconceptions: not only an inability or unwillingness to engage in mutual communication and understanding (disconnections), but also failed connections (misconnections) that result from the intentionality behind the interactions, including blindness, ignorance, and false generosity.

Bigger's first interaction with the Dalton family, including their neighborhood and their house, indicates some disconnections and misconceptions. As Bigger first walks through white neighborhoods on his way to a job interview at the Dalton home, he notices the vastness of the houses and streets—their quietness and emptiness. Bigger reflects on his impressions of the white neighborhood: "This was a cold and distant world; a world of white secrets carefully guarded. He could feel a pride, a certainty, and a confidence in these streets and houses" (Wright 44). Once he enters the Dalton house, his discomfort only increases. Peggy, the family's white, maid, stares at him distrustfully, which immediately makes Bigger upset. The Dalton home itself unsettles Bigger. The house and everything in it is oppressively white: from the maid's white face, to Mr. Dalton's white hair; from the white cat to the white walls and white table in the kitchen. Bigger feels that the "strange objects" in the house "challenge" him, leaving him "angry" and "uncomfortable" (Wright 46). In fact, Bigger brought a knife and gun with him, tucked inside his shirt, to "give him a sense of completeness," so that he could feel more "equal" to the white people (Wright 43). Bigger's discomfort culminates in his meeting with Mr. Dalton. As soon as Mr. Dalton walks into the room to meet Bigger, his "amused smile" made Bigger "conscious of every square inch of his skin on his black body" (Wright 46). Bigger quickly realizes that his discomfort stems from "an organic conviction in him" that he must speak, move, act, and be "the way white folks wanted him to be when in their presence" (Wright 48). For the first time, Bigger realizes this unspoken code

of behavior, in which he, as a black man, must be hyper-aware of his words and actions in order to please Mr. Dalton; he must adhere, as best as he can, to the norms and expectations of the white world.

Mr. Dalton, a self-proclaimed supporter of the NAACP, offers Bigger a job to help keep him out of trouble and provide his family with rent money. However, Mr. Dalton's South Side Real Estate Company is an organization that clearly oppresses black people by renting out unsafe apartments, charging exorbitant rents, and confining black people within the Black Belt of Chicago. When Mr. Dalton says "I'd like to talk with you a little..." Bigger immediately feels "guilty" and "condemned" (Wright 49). He worries that Mr. Dalton will bring up his time in reform school for theft. Bigger seems to assume that Mr. Dalton is omniscient. Mr. Dalton begins by saying, "The relief people said some funny things about you" and then, in an effort to make Bigger feel comfortable, Mr. Dalton smiles and tells Bigger not be ashamed: "I was a boy myself once," says Mr. Dalton, "and I think I know how things are" (Wright 49). This effort to connect with Bigger through shared experience is misguided, insofar as Mr. Dalton's experience growing up as a white boy could never be likened to Bigger's. Further, Mr. Dalton tries to show his support for and generosity toward blacks. First, Mr Dalton states that his wife "has a very deep interest in colored people" (Wright 47), and then tells Bigger that he's "a supporter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People," an organization which Bigger has never even heard of (Wright 53). Though he thinks himself a progressive philanthropist, Mr. Dalton ignorantly attempts to connect with Bigger, and Bigger, struck by discomfort and Mr. Dalton's false generosity, is unable to connect with Mr. Dalton.

Another potential for connection occurs during Bigger's first (and only) night working as a driver for the Dalton family. Contrary to what she tells her father, Mary orders Bigger, who is

driving the car, to pick up her friend and lover, Jan Erlone. Jan, a strong member of the communist party, shakes Bigger's hand without hesitation—an action that deeply shocks and confuses Bigger, who has rarely had a white person shake his hand. Jan promises Bigger that, after the “revolution,” ““there'll be no white and no black; there'll be no rich and no poor”” (Wright 68). While this vision may seem appealing and possible to Jan, it doesn't mean much to Bigger. Moreover, such a vision almost disregards the black experience in the United States, namely the deep, systemic oppression that has, to say the least, deeply complicated hope for equality. Additionally, in a naive attempt to learn more about black people, Jan and Mary ask Bigger to take them to a ““*real* restaurant,”” one ““where colored people eat, not one of those show places”” (Wright 69). Bigger feels extremely uncomfortable as Jan, who has taken over driving, drives them through the Black Belt, “past tall buildings holding black life”; he knows that Jan and Mary are “thinking of his life and the life of his people” (Wright 70). Bigger directs them to Ernie's Kitchen Shack, where Jan and Mary then pressure him to join them inside though he feels violated and humiliated.

Both Mary and Jan see themselves as advocates for the black community; however, through their interactions, they invade and violate Bigger's world, a world normally invisible to white people. Much like the Joads feel once they reach California, Bigger feels hypervisible in the company and under the scrutiny of white people. Bigger worries about what his friends and the people in the restaurant will think if they see him with two white people. Once they arrive at Ernie's Kitchen Shack, Bigger quickly sees people that he knows—his friend, Jack, and his “girl,” Bessie—and feels embarrassed. While they eat and drink, Jan asks him a long stream of questions about his personal life: where he was born, how far he made it in school, and with whom he lives. Mary, after praising blacks for their intense emotion and passion, pesters Bigger to sing a spiritual black song. Bigger refuses, so Mary and Jan break out in song and incorrectly sing a black hymn.

The initial interactions between Bigger, Mary, and Jan represent a misconnection. Though Mary and Jan want to help Bigger and strive to create a more just and equal society, their lack of sensitivity, knowledge, and care misguides their attempted connection and makes Bigger feel further isolated and humiliated. Moreover, while Bigger recognizes the unique way Mary and Jan treat him like a person, he is so shaken by these new interactions with white people that he, too, is unable to connect properly with them. However, Jan and Mary's behavior, as well as Bigger's reactions to their conduct, allow Bigger to better appreciate the complexity of his situation. The lack of opportunities available to Bigger and other blacks in Chicago is more complex than active white oppression: whites, even when they think they're helping blacks, are often just perpetuating the oppression they wishfully hope to end.

Throughout *Native Son*, there are also possibilities for connections with other black people within the community. Bigger doesn't feel that he can connect with the people in the Black Belt. Bigger's sensitivity, namely his ability to see gimmicks as dead-end, confined sources of freedom that perpetuate blindness, inhibits his relationships with other blacks; while Bigger seems to understand the necessity of gimmicks, they burden him with a sense of unbearable shame and powerlessness. This sense of shame is most apparent in Bigger's relationship with his family, whose sad, impoverished reality is overpowering. When Bigger is in prison, his family visits and his mother kneels before Mrs. Dalton's feet and begs for forgiveness. Bigger becomes "paralyzed with shame" and feels "violated" (Wright 301).

Such shame quickly turns to hate and violence. When the black preacher visits Bigger in jail, Bigger throws away the cross that he is given and slams the metal cell door onto the preacher's face. Perhaps Bigger's most grievous act of violence is against Bessie, with whom he has an on-and-off relationship. Bessie's fear and vulnerability threaten Bigger. Moreover, her reliance on



alcohol as an escape, much like his mother's reliance on religion, makes Bigger feel ashamed; "What his mother had was Bessie's whiskey, and Bessie's whiskey was his mother's religion" (Wright 240). By helping Bigger write a false ransom note to cover up the murder of Mary Dalton and acquire a large sum of money, Bessie becomes an accomplice in Bigger's crime. Thus, Bessie is forced to flee with Bigger to an abandoned apartment building, where they hide and wait for the ransom. In the darkness of the dilapidated building, Bigger sexually assaults Bessie. He then brutally attacks her as she's sleeping, and throws her body—still, though barely, alive—down an air shaft, at the bottom of which she slowly dies. While Bigger's family, friends, and community may not engage with their oppression in a way that he sees appropriate or honorable, Bigger refuses to connect with them and responds with violent resistance. For Bigger, dealing with the reality of the Black Belt and attempting to live the American Way of Life requires domination.

### **The Prison Cell Window: Dialogue and Possibilities for Connection**

Despite misconnections and disconnections, Bigger eventually recognizes the interconnectedness of his community and the necessity of dialogue and interpersonal connection to overcome barriers—both of which encourage Bigger to push aside his "curtain" and start to think about how he could better himself and his environment. In everyday moments, Bigger desires deep connection with the world; "It was when he read the newspapers or magazines, went to the movies, or walked along the streets with crowds, that he felt what he wanted: to merge himself with others and be a part of this world, to lose himself in it so he could find himself, to be allowed a chance to live like others, even though he was black" (Wright 240). Though Bigger's potentials are limited by oppressive whiteness and he achieves a sort of perverted liberation through the murder of Mary and Bessie, Bigger truly desires to be part of the world—not just as an active, accepted member of society, but also as a human being who is spiritually connected to people and

places around him. He wants to “merge” with others. He no longer wants to be the recipient of false generosity, such as that which Mr. Dalton shows him and his family. He wants to walk the streets as a free man. He wants to be treated humanely. He wants to be at home in this world.

Though Bigger may have always had an innate desire for interconnectedness, he only gains a strong appreciation for the interdependence of his community after murdering Mary and being forced to be on the run. Shortly after leaving the abandoned apartment, Bigger steals a newspaper and discovers that, because of his murder of Mary Dalton, policemen had smashed in the windows of many black homes, searched all vehicles entering or exiting the Black Belt, and beaten several black men. Moreover, “several hundred Negroes resembling Bigger Thomas were rounded up from South Side ‘hot spots’” (Wright 244). All black people in the community are deeply affected by one black man’s crime; under the lens of whiteness, they all blend together as criminals. “He had lived and acted on the assumption that he was alone, and now he saw that he had not been. What he had done made others suffer...His family was a part of him, not only in blood, but in spirit” (Wright 298). Thus, Bigger begins to feel compassion and solidarity for both this community and his family, even if he despises the gimmicks in which they partake.

Moreover, from his displacement from the Black Belt—first as a black man in a white neighborhood, and then as a wanted criminal on the run—Bigger begins to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the oppression of the black community. Freezing on the snowy roof, Bigger observes the place where he has spent most of his life. He looks through a nearby window at a black family with three children on one bed and the parents on another bed, and thinks “five of ‘em sleeping in one room and here’s a great big empty building with just me in it” (247). After this observation, Bigger begins to think about his own family’s situation. It was difficult for

black families to find housing in the Black Belt, despite the number of empty apartments. Bigger remembers that,

Whenever his mother wanted to move she had to put in requests long months in advance. He remembered that his mother had once made him tramp the streets for two whole months looking for a place to live. The rental agencies had told him that there were not enough houses for Negroes to live in, that the city was condemning houses in which Negroes lived as being too old and too dangerous for habitation. And he remembered the time when the police had come and driven him and his mother and his brother and sister out of a flat in a building which had collapsed two days after they had moved. And he had heard it said that black people, even though they could not get good jobs, paid twice as much rent as whites for the same kind of flats...No white real estate man would rent a flat to a black man other than in the sections where it had been decided that black people might live. (Wright 248-249)

Moreover, Bigger gains a clearer appreciation for the “line” between the Black Belt and the white parts of Chicago. Businesses in the Black Belt were almost all owned by ethnic immigrants: Jews, Italians, and Greeks. Blacks mainly owned funeral parlors, since “white undertakers refused to bother with dead black bodies” (Wright 249). While Bigger gains an awareness of the oppressive dynamics that dictate the lives of those in the Black Belt, he also realizes the opportunity for solidarity. All the black people in his community are affected by his crime: they are all victims of the same oppression that Bigger faces.

Despite his heightened awareness of interconnectedness, interdependence, and oppressive structures, Bigger still struggles to figure out how to understand and act on his desire for connection;

But what was he after? What did he want? What did he love and what did he hate? He did not know. There was something he *knew* and something he *felt*; something the *world* gave him and something he *himself* had; something spread out in *front* of him and something spread out in *back*; and never in all his life, with this black skin of his, had the two worlds, thought and feeling, will and mind, aspiration and satisfaction, been together; never had he felt a sense of wholeness. Sometimes, in his room or on the sidewalk, the world seemed to him a strange labyrinth even when the streets were straight and the walls were square; a chaos which made him feel that something in him should be able to understand it, divide it, focus it. But only under the stress of hate was the conflict resolved. He had been so conditioned in a cramped environment that hard words or kicks alone knocked him upright and made him capable of action—action that was futile because the world was too much for him. It was then that he closed his eyes and struck out blindly, hitting what or whom he could, not looking or caring what or who hit back. (Wright 240)

Bigger aspires to be seen, to be heard, to be known—not as a black man in a society dominated by whiteness, and not as a murderer on the run. At one point, Bigger has a desire to simply “shout out what was wrong” in the middle of the street, but he knows he’d be considered crazy and no one would listen (Wright 249). Even when given the chance to speak, such as when his family and friends visit him in prison, Bigger is unable to communicate how he feels; “[H]e tried to think of words that would defy them, words that would let them know that he had a world and a life of his own in spite of them” (Wright 297).

Toward the end of the novel, the only salvation Bigger finds is in open and honest dialogue—in listening and being listened to. Jan, whose lover Bigger killed, comes and speaks with Bigger in his cell. Jan admits that he was “blind” and realizes that he made Bigger feel greatly uncomfortable: “‘I didn’t know my white face was making you feel guilty, condemning you...’” (Wright 287). While grieving for Mary, Jan had reflected on Bigger and the immense crimes committed against blacks in the United States, which helps put his situation and his suffering in perspective. Reflecting on this, Jan says, “‘It taught me that it’s your right to hate me, Bigger’” (Wright 288). Moreover, Jan tells Bigger he believes his story, and that he’s learned immensely from this experience. Listening to Jan changes Bigger’s perspective;

[Bigger] looked at Jan and saw a white face, but an honest face. This white man believed in him, and the moment he felt that belief he felt guilty again; but in a different sense now. Suddenly, this white man had come up to him, flung aside the curtain and walked into the room of his life. Jan had spoken a declaration of friendship that would make other white men hate him: a particle of white rock had detached itself from the looming mountain of white hate and had rolled down the slope, stopping still at his feet. The word had become flesh. For the first time in his life a white man became a human being to him; and the reality of Jan’s humanity came in a stab of remorse: he had killed what this man loved and had hurt him. (Wright 289)

Jan, through reflection, awareness, and forgiveness, gains a deeper consciousness than he had just a few days before. More importantly, Jan respects Bigger and communicates with him openly and clearly, unafraid to show vulnerability and sorrow. This communication changes Bigger’s world;

Jan “flung aside the curtain” that Bigger has kept shut for so long, and encouraged empathy, compassion, and hope.

Bigger’s interaction with Max, a white, communist, Jewish lawyer, also allows Bigger to engage in dialogue. Instead of just listening, as Bigger did with Jan, Max slowly encourages Bigger to communicate with him. Bigger explains how he feels as a black man in the Black Belt—always felt trapped and restricted; as Bigger describes the situation for blacks, “[Y]ou whipped before you born” (Wright 351). Bigger explains the sense of freedom and agency that came with murdering Mary. He reflects on the gimmicks of the church (“That’s for whipped folks”), wealthy black leaders (“They almost like white people”), and the inevitability of an early death (Wright 357). After engaging in this dialogue with Max, Bigger realizes “he had spoken to Max as he had never spoken to anyone in his life; not even to himself” (Wright 359). Max’s questions made Bigger feel “a recognition of his life, of his feelings, of his person that he had never encountered” (Wright 360). This dialogue—being able to speak freely and to be listened to deeply—gave Bigger a sense of freedom and confidence that he calls “high magic” (Wright 363); “for the first time in his life he felt ground beneath his feet, and he wanted it to stay there” (Wright 361).

Bigger’s interactions and exchanges with Jan and Max give him hope and make him see some of the nuances and potential for change within whiteness; Bigger realizes that “if that white looming mountain of hate were not a mountain at all, but people, people like himself, and like Jan—then he was faced with a high hope the like of which he had never thought could be” (Wright 361). However, the hope for change that inspires Bigger also provokes “a despair” and “a strong counter-emotion” that “warn[ed] him to leave this newly-seen and newly-felt thing alone, that it

would lead him to but another blind alley, to deeper hate and shame” (Wright 361). Bigger is afraid that the connection he feels through dialogue may turn out to be another gimmick.

While I certainly don’t believe these examples of dialogue to simply be gimmicks, it’s clear that the dialogue that occurs in *Native Son* isn’t perfect—which, under such dire circumstances, makes sense. Bigger and Max don’t have much time to establish a deeper bond of trust and converse for a long time. A pivotal moment occurs in the last few pages of the novel, when Bigger sees sunlight streaming through the single, barred window in his cell;

Max rose and went to a small window; a pale bar of sunshine fell across his white head. And Bigger, looking at him, saw that sunshine for the first time in many days; and as he saw it, the entire cell, with its four close walls, became crushingly real. He glanced down at himself; the shaft of yellow sun cut across his chest with as much weight as a beam forged of lead. With a convulsive gasp, he bent forward and shut his eyes. It was not a white mountain looming over him now; Gus was not whistling ‘The Merry-Go-Round Brown Down’ as he came into Doc’s poolroom to make him go and rob Blum’s; he was not standing over Mary’s bed with the white blur hovering near;—this new adversary did not make him taut; it sapped strength and left him weak. He summoned his energies and lifted his head and struck out desperately, determined to rise from the grave, resolved to force upon Max the reality of his living. (Wright 423)

Here, knowing that he is reaching the end of his life, Bigger reflects on the past and the present. He understands his former suffering and blindness—confined in a world ruled by whiteness, participating in petty crimes, and murdering Mary Dalton. However, the conversation with Max and the sunlight grounds him in the present, in which he confronts a “new adversary”: dialogue—speaking his truth and trying to make Max understand, since “of all the men he had met, surely Max knew what he was trying to say” (Wright 422). Bigger sorts through his final thoughts when talking to Max. Bigger explains that he felt crowded and boxed in: that he “‘hurt folks ‘cause [he] felt [he] had to’” (Wright 425). Bigger ponders the intention of the white men who sent him to prison, and empathetically wonders aloud if they were “‘like [him],’” “‘trying to get something, too’” (Wright 425). Finally, Bigger shares his deepest thoughts; “‘I didn’t want to kill!’ Bigger

shouted. ‘But what I killed for, I *am*. It must’ve been pretty deep in me to make me kill! I must have felt it awful hard to murder...” (Wright 429).

While Max is socially conscious and deeply cares for Bigger, Bigger’s thoughts and confessions are too much for Max to comfortably handle. As Bigger admits his own dark reality, Max’s face goes “ashy” and there is “a gulf of silence” across which they regard each other. Max is surprised and disturbed by Bigger’s laughter after Max stutters, “‘y-you’ve got to b-believe in yourself, Bigger...” (Wright 428). When Bigger explains what killing offered him—essentially, a sense of liberation informed by a deeply instilled framework of whiteness—Max pleads for him to stop, his eyes become “full of terror,” and “his body move[s] nervously” (Wright 429). All of this shows the difficulty inherent in dialogue—in both speaking and listening to an individual’s truth and reality. Even Max, who is much older than Bigger and much more experienced in dialogue, doesn’t know how to appropriately react to Bigger’s words: essentially, the last words of a man sentenced to die.

Despite these difficulties in dialogue, Bigger, Jan, and Max learn a tremendous amount from such honest communication. And we can learn much from it, as well. All three characters become more understanding and compassionate from deeply listening to what the other had to say. When one of these characters engages in dialogue with another, each one is “displaced” from his own larger reality and open to new possibilities that can only emerge from honest conversation; displacement in dialogue creates a new “space” for communication. Moreover, the notion of displacement as a preface to possibility is indicative of the larger movement of African Americans in the 1930s and 1940s. Like *Moby-Dick* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Native Son* highlights the role of displacement in creating new political and social possibilities. As I stated earlier, *Native Son* takes place at the end of the first wave of the Great Migration: a time of mass internal migration

of blacks. As Lori Marso argues, Wright “cites the Great Depression as a time for blacks to see an ‘identity of interests’ with ‘many white workers’ and understand the forces ‘that tended to reshape our folk consciousness’” (Marso, 142-143). Thus, while the Great Migration and the Great Depression augmented the suffering in the black community, the intersection of these two periods in the 1930s served as a crucial moment for political realization and the building of consciousness. Similarly, through the suffering, death, and destruction of *Native Son*, there are sparks of hope at the end of the novel, as long as we are able to listen, speak, and remain open to whatever may arise in conversation—making sure not to close the curtain, but to allow the window to be completely open.



## Conclusion

Americans “all bow with reverence toward the American Way of Life,” Steinbeck writes, “although each one would look puzzled and angry if he were asked to define it” (Steinbeck, “America and Americans” 330). Each of these novels, *Moby-Dick*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *Native Son*, define the American Way of Life for those on the margins of society. For the crew aboard the *Pequod*, it is exploration, glory, wealth, and individualism; for the Joad family, it is comfort, plenty, and security; and for Bigger Thomas, it is freedom and connection. However, in their pursuit of the American Way of Life in its various manifestations—how it is perceived, practiced, and promoted—all of the characters fail. Thus, these novels diagnose the pathology inherent in such a Way of Life—outlining some of the causes and displaying the dark symptoms. But, most importantly, they offer sparks of hope for a fairer, more equitable Way of Life that, with more sustainable and inclusive goals, may reorient our society toward a better future.

The American Way of Life is deeply flawed; it is based on hierarchical dominance: Ahab tries to live it by murdering a whale and subduing his crew into this mission; the “tractor men” and fruit plantation owners, and even the Joad family, try to live it by participating in the suppression and exploitation of the earth (cultivating and working the land); and Bigger tries to live it by killing others. The American Way of Life is inherently exclusive, disappointing, and destructive. So, as a people and as a society, what should we turn to? How can we *redefine* the American Way of Life to be more inclusive, sustainable, and fruitful? Steinbeck offers some words of hope; he writes that the dreams of the American Way of Life “describe our vague yearnings toward what we wish we were and hope we may be: wise, just, compassionate, and noble. The fact that we have this dream at all is perhaps an indication of its possibility” (Steinbeck, “America and Americans” 338).

America is all about possibility—for better or for worse. Accordingly, I've read these three novels with special attention to the possibilities in each.

*Moby-Dick* shows the possibility of community for outcasts, and of fraternity for strangers. The loving relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg suggests that, by treating one another with respect and openness, there is always a potential for friendship and brotherhood, even between individuals from vastly different backgrounds. Transcending difference, particularly in a democratic society composed of immigrants, demands more than an open mind, but also an open heart; it is *love* and deep-rooted respect for each other's humanity that forge Ishmael and Queequeg's friendship: their brotherhood. Moreover, toward the end of the novel—as Ahab's monomaniac quest is reaching its inescapable conclusion—Ahab looks into Starbuck's eye and realizes his isolation and unhappiness, his love of his children and foolishness for pursuing Moby-Dick. Though this moment is fleeting and Ahab quickly turns back to pursuing the whale, it seems to be the only time Ahab's humanity is revealed is in a deep connection with another human. Thus, *Moby-Dick* indicates that, in intimate activities and quests—such as sharing a room and bed, performing labor side-by-side, surviving for years upon the ocean, and looking into another's eyes—there emerges a possibility for a deep and lasting fraternity, as long as it is informed by openness, love, and respect.

*The Grapes of Wrath* offers the possibility for perseverance, new communities, and consciousness. The Joad family is remarkably brave, adaptable, and resilient. Though the Joad family and other migrant families are suffering, the kindness, generosity, and humanity that they sometimes exchange keep the families alive, such as when the Wilson family gives up their tent for Grampa Joad, who is dying, or when Ma Joad gives some of the family's limited food to starving children of other migrant families. Rose of Sharon epitomizes the Joad family's resilience;

though she seems naive throughout most of the novel, Rose of Sharon leaves us with immense hope at the end of the novel. Though her husband left her, the baby she bore for months was stillborn, and the family is forced from their small temporary home due to a massive flood, Rose of Sharon feeds a poor, nearly-dead man with her breast milk: the only source of nutrition the Joad family has to offer. There is hope at the end of the novel, even in the darkest and most desperate situation. *The Grapes of Wrath* also shows the possibility for building a greater social consciousness—through new encounters with people and place. Moreover, there is the potential for consciousness by adopting a deep reverence for the natural world, and retreating into nature for meditation and solitary contemplation. This method of finding insight and inspiration through communion with nature, as practiced by Casy and Tom, can be a powerful driver of conscious political and social movements to promote fairness, equality, and justice.

The final novel, *Native Son*, illustrates the possibility for empathy, compassion, and solidarity through deep listening, mindfulness, and dialogue. Bigger seems to live in a hopeless situation: a world in which the only freedom that he can enjoy is circumscribed by oppressive whiteness—just a stunted form of freedom at best. Moreover, the novel is full of disconnections and misconceptions; whether black or white, family or stranger, there seems to be a lack of ability for people to connect with one another. Despite the American Nightmare in which Bigger lives—a situation that culminates in a trial in which Bigger is sentenced to death—he finds hope by the end of the novel. Jan's honesty and forgiveness inspire empathy and compassion; white people are humanized for Bigger, and the system of whiteness seems just a little less daunting. Max's questions and deep listening allow Bigger to speak freely about his thoughts to another for the first time in his life. Though Bigger is sentenced to die, he gains a strong appreciation for the

interconnectedness and interdependence of the world by conversing with others—by showing, and being shown, respect for another human being.

Clearly, we should aim for compassion over selfishness, sustainability over destruction, and love over hate. First, we must rethink the myths of the American Way of Life: the arrogance and imagined infinity of American exceptionalism; the potential for alienation and domination inherent in American individualism; the false, exclusive, and sometimes manipulated promises of the American Dream, which can quickly devolve into the American Nightmare. Taylor explains that American exceptionalism, to which I'd also add the American Way of Life, "operates as a mythology of convenience that does a tremendous amount of work to simplify the contradiction between the apparent creed of US society and its much more complicated reality" (29). We must dismantle this "mythology of convenience"; we must pull aside the "curtain."

But pulling aside the "curtain" isn't easy. Unsubscribing to the American Way of Life, especially on a mass scale, would likely provoke collected shock and an identity crisis—what Lauren Berlant might call "a nauseated unlearning of [our] patriotism" (Berlant 26). Greg Grandin writes, "In a nation like the United States, founded on a mythical belief in a kind of species immunity—less an American exceptionalism than exemptionism, an insistence that the nation was exempt from nature, society, history, even death—the realization that it can't go on forever is traumatic." It's difficult, however, to have a clearer sight of reality and systems of oppression; "Human kind," T.S. Eliot wrote, "cannot bear very much reality" (Eliot 14).

And today's reality is difficult. We are living in a time of climate change, to which the American Way of Life and those who practice it (or attempt to practice it) have contributed. Human activity and industrialization are certainly part of the problem. According to NASA, "The current warming trend is of particular significance because most of it is extremely likely (greater than 95

percent probability) to be the result of human activity since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and proceeding at a rate that is unprecedented over decades to millennia.” Such climate change includes the rising global temperatures, warming and acidification of the oceans, melting ice caps and glaciers, rising global average sea level, and increasing extreme weather events (NASA). In fact, because of its early use and reliance on fossil fuel, the United States “is responsible for almost a third of the excess CO<sub>2</sub> that’s already in the atmosphere, despite having just more than 4% of the global population” (Loria). However, the United States, under President Trump, has withdrawn from the Paris Climate Agreement, “the 2015 international accord by which 195 nations agreed to limit greenhouse gas emissions in order to prevent global temperatures from rising more than 2 degrees Celcius above pre-industrial levels” (Loria). The American government, specifically under the Trump administration, is not only acting irresponsibly to such an urgent global crisis, but also denying its existence. Perhaps, to President Trump and his administration, the American Way of Life doesn’t have room for climate change; perhaps admitting climate change would put such a mythic Way of Life in danger.

The ideals of the American Way of Life are inherently unsustainable; they are founded on mass exploitation, environmental destruction, and American greed and ethnocentricity. While the American Way of Life is inherently unattainable, the material goals that it promotes are also unrealistic, especially for poorer, developing nations. The American Way of Life cannot, and should not, be a model to the rest of the world. Thich Nhat Hanh writes,

People in China, India, Vietnam, and other developing countries are still dreaming the “American dream,” as if that dream were the ultimate goal of mankind—everyone has to have a car, a bank account, a cell phone, a television set of their own. In twenty-five years the population of China will be 1.5 billion people, and if each of them wants to drive their own car, China will need 99 million barrels of oil every day. But the world production today is only 84 million barrels per day. So the American dream is not possible for the people of China, India, or Vietnam. The American dream is no longer even possible for Americans. We can’t continue to live like this. It’s not a sustainable economy. (32-33)

Not only is the American Way of Life fundamentally flawed, but it's also expensive and destructive; it requisites a vast amount of limited resources that are obtained at the expense of the natural world: the felling of trees, the deterioration of soil, the poisoning of air. Derrick Jenson, who writes about anthropocentrism and the myth of human supremacy, claims, "We have become Death, destroyer of worlds. We are driven by our insane—and insatiable, because impossible—quest for validation of our self-perceived superiority. We are driven to destroy all that is alive and free and beautiful and wondrous and meaningful *and is not made by or dependent upon us, not under our control*" (309). Jenson's quote resonates deeply with Ahab's attempt to realize the American Way of Life; by killing, and thus dominating, a living creature onto which he cast immense meaning, Ahab self-proclaimed superiority and immortality would be affirmed.

Upon closer examination, it seems that the American Way of Life is also problematic on an existential level. The American Way of Life promises certainty in a world of ambiguity; it promises infinity despite limited resources; and it projects its values on the world under the guise of "universalism." Grandin writes that, with the falling American economy, impending global climate crisis, and increasing population of people of color and other historically marginalized communities, we are reminded of "limits" and of "the ultimate restraint: death." Moreover, "the collective response (by a minority of voters) was to transmute the fear of death into a drive unto death, electing a president whose psyche is decomposing before our eyes" (Grandin). Grandin refers to this "drive unto death" as "the death cult of Trumpism," which he ties in with climate change: "Trump leverages tribal resentment against an emerging manifest common destiny, a true universalism that recognizes that we all share the same vulnerable planet. He stokes an enraged refusal of limits, even as those limits are recognized" (Grandin).

Additionally, the rising “death cult of Trumpism” brings further distrust and division. President Trump’s inflammatory rallies, (seemingly) careless words, and hot-headed arrogance only stoke the fire of intolerance. Richard Wright, when describing how he created the character of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, writes, “I don’t mean to say that I think that environment *makes* consciousness...but I do say that I felt and still feel that environment supplies the instrumentalities through which the organism expresses itself, and if that environment is warped or tranquil, the mode and manner of behavior will be affected toward deadlocking tensions or orderly fulfillment and satisfaction” (Wright, “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” 442). While Wright is mostly referring to the environment that would “create a Bigger Thomas,” I believe his claim applies to the larger political environment. As Americans, we are currently living in a “warped” environment. Polarization is at an all-time high and we are trapped in echo-chambers in which we are exposed to little more than our own opinions reiterated back to us: a trend that social media has dramatically amplified. The environment, whether physical or political, is crucial to the growth and quality of consciousness.

As shown in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Native Son*, without critical encounters—with new places, people, and ideas—and without listening and dialogue, we remain trapped in a stagnant web of our subjective perspectives, including prejudices, presumptions, and limited understandings. As in the conversation between Max and Bigger, we see that dialogue is messy—imperfect, unpredictable. However, only through dialogue—direct and semi-spontaneous conversation—can ideas and possibilities never before imagined become manifest. Freire defines dialogue as “the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world” (88). Dialogue serves to “transform” the world; it is “the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized”—

an “act of creation...for the liberation of humankind” (Freire 88-89). However, the intentionality and attitude one has in dialogue are crucial for it to function correctly. As Freire claims, “Dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people. The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love” (89). Freire further adds that dialogue also requires humility and “an intense faith in humankind...to make and remake, to create and re-create” (90). The character, Jim Casy, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, exemplifies many of these characteristics, and utilizes them in his journey with the Joad family. Casy listens deeply to people from all walks of life, and humbly hopes to learn something from them. America needs open dialogue predicated on love, humility, and hope. Equally as important, we must have faith—a faith grounded in a recognition of interconnectedness and interdependence—that we have the power create a better society by working together.

America and Americans have refused limits since the creation of the country and have achieved great social and technological progress; but all of it has come at a cost. The American Way of Life, as we’ve known it, must end. However, it doesn’t have to end with a “drive unto death,” though this tendency, as seen by Ahab and Bigger, may be attractive. Despite its ugly history of genocide and exploitation, America remains a unique project that has allowed for a vibrant community of human beings from around the globe who seek possibility. In fact, both my maternal great grandparents, as well as my father, are immigrants from Italy. My father’s family, having come from a small, underdeveloped city in Sicily, were able to “make it” in this country despite arriving with little money and even less English. Of course, it’s important to consider that my father’s family immigrated to the United States at a time when Italians were largely accepted into, or at least tolerated within, the American Way of Life; however, my family, with its migrant



background, has been able to escape poverty and enjoy the many opportunities that weren't (and would not be) available to them in Italy.

All of this is to say that there is, indeed, hope. As Steinbeck writes of Americans, "We are slow to learn; but we learn" (Steinbeck, "America and Americans" 382). Certainly, with the urgency of climate change, we must act. Let us turn back to nature with the same reverence and awe that Casy and Tom have in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of the fathers of American Transcendentalism, writes, "In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature" (Emerson 7). While, in such times of discord, it may seem that the nature of humanity is flawed and selfish, the characters in these novels exhibit some of the best qualities of humanity: Ishmael and Queequeg embrace each other in a loving friendship; the Joad family helps others despite their own suffering; and Bigger and Max develop a mutual understanding through honest dialogue. Perhaps, as portrayed by *The Grapes of Wrath*, we can find inspiration in nature that reminds us of the good in ourselves and others—of the inherent benevolence and capacity for good in each human being. Moreover, we must rethink the anthropocentrism in which our society is steeped. This means rethinking "human supremacy" over all beings—exploring, and perhaps recognizing, the sentience and intelligence of non-human others. More importantly, we must recognize the worth of each being and respect it.

I'd like to conclude with a quote from James Baldwin, who writes, "If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world" (105). While Baldwin's quote deals primarily with race relations in the United States,

his insistence that we must act in concert “like lovers” is significant. While I agree with Freire’s emphasis on love as a prerequisite for dialogue and, I’d add, for social and political action, I find the term “love” to be too ambiguous. Love, left unspecified, could be one-sided or domineering, selfish or discriminatory. For these reasons, I turn to Baldwin’s notion of “lovers” for clarification. Lovers are individuals with distinct backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs, but they are bound together by love: a mutual trust and desire to be with each other. “Lovers” differs from “love,” insofar as the former requires a relationship: one that is shifting and requires flexibility—a give-and-take. These three American novels show the need for such a dynamic relationship: the brotherhood between Ishmael and Queequeg; the resilience and cohesion of the Joad family, especially Ma and Tom Joad; the dialogue between Max and Bigger, and the glimmers of understanding between Bigger and Jan.

*Moby-Dick*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *Native Son*—each a novel detailing an American journey—blend together and show us that America must continue its journey: a journey that *we* can orient and direct. As individuals living in a shared society and a shared world, we are responsible for ourselves, each other, and the collective wellbeing of our communities, both human and non-human. The consciousness and conscious actions of an individual ripple out, join with those of others, and become a harmonious wave. Perhaps such a wave of American collective consciousness could inspire a healthier politics in the United States. We must recognize the interconnectedness and interdependence of the earth and its inhabitants. We must reject necrophilia and love each other and the world around us. We must abandon dogmatic societal constructs and treat each other and the natural world with dignity, respect, and compassion. We must listen rather than shout, and sincerely try to connect with those around us. We must turn to a new American Way of Life—one based on love, dignity, and compassion. And finally, even in the most dismal

of situations, we must strive to find hope to keep us moving forward in our collective American journey.

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