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THE AMERICAN DREAM, MICRONATIONALISMS, AND THE THREE PART NATIONAL  
IDENTITY AS PRESENTED BY DR. HUNTER S. THOMPSON

by

BRIANNA DOUCET

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Literature and Language

Ann Beebe, Ph.D., Committee Chair

College of Arts and Sciences

The University of Texas at Tyler  
May 2017

The University of Texas at Tyler

Tyler, Texas

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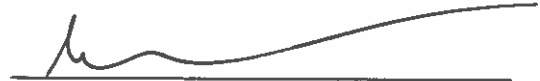
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## Abstract

### THE AMERICAN DREAM, MICRONATIONALISMS, AND THE THREE PART NATIONAL IDENTITY AS PRESENTED BY DR. HUNTER S. THOMPSON

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Hunter S. Thompson was a pioneer in Gonzo journalism, a writing style that fictionalized journalistic reporting through first draft, no editing publication. This unique writing style, coupled with Thompson's personal collective identity based on Sedikides and Brewer's three-part identity allowed for Thompson to draft a model for the three-part American identity based in the American dream. Throughout his career Thompson sought to find the American dream but what he found instead was the death of decency in America and the rebirth of the American dream through a whitewashed lens. The thesis paper explores three-parts of American identity, the American dream, American culture, and American perception throughout Thompson's writings. The holistic American identity is a concept too broad to define, instead Thompson examined small segments of marginalized society, or micronationalisms, as examples of the greater American identity. Through racial disparity Thompson was able to explore limitations on the American dream within the micronationalisms of the Hell's Angels, Chicano population of East Los Angeles, and the black population of Louisville, Kentucky. Thompson traced American perception through media bias towards micronationalism populations and irresponsible political reporting during the 1972 Presidential campaign and subsequent election. Thompson traces American culture through sports writing, the perception of women and rape culture in America, and through the city of Las Vegas as a unique micronationalism society.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Hunter S. Thompson spent the better part of his career attempting to define a small part of our national identity: the American Dream. While on his seemingly endless quest, he discovered pieces of American nationalism amongst counterculture out-groups, on the streets of Las Vegas, and the grandstands at the Kentucky Derby. From South America to the mountains in Colorado, Thompson sought a thread of commonality amongst Americans to better understand the ideal of the American Dream which evaded him throughout his career; but what Thompson ultimately found was a way to define the nation that was pure Gonzo. A unique combination of rough-draft style writing and a fearless pursuit of truth, Thompson's Gonzo journalism reshaped the way we consider objectivity (or subjectivity) in reporting and the media's influence in the formation of national identity. Thompson described Gonzo as, "a style of 'reporting' based on William Faulkner's idea that the best fiction is far more *true* than any kind of journalism—and the best journalists have always known this" ("Jacket Copy" 114). Thompson crafted a new style of journalism, Gonzo; which, in turn, established a new vision of American nationalism through microcosms of society within the greater normative American ideal. The normative American ideal can be defined, simply, as the in-group prototype identity<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> According to Michael A. Hogg, social identity theory provides a framework for the concept of social categorization and in-group prototype development stating:

when we talk of groups we are talking about categories of people, social categories. From a social identity perspective, people cognitively represent a category or group as a *prototype*--a fuzzy set of attribute (perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors) that are related to one another in a meaningful way and that simultaneously capture similarities within the group and differences between

of the hegemony. In the case of American culture the normative American ideal would be white, Protestant males usually of the middle to upper class. Microcosms of society who are marginalized and excluded from the normative American ideal create, what I term, micronationalisms providing a lens through which one can examine the construct of national identity.

## GONZO JOURNALISM AND AMERICAN NATIONAL IDENTITY

American national identity was shaped by journalists, and Thompson was a unique type of journalist who wrote to create history not just chronicle it. Thompson's journalism was not passive nor objective. Instead Thompson's journalism was Gonzo- the first run at history and the subjective idealistic impressions of events a comprised of fact, fiction, fear and loathing. Those who experience history have the privilege to document it, and it was Thompson's experience and identity which shaped his unique style of journalism. Most scholars agree that Thompson's publisher coined the term following Thompson's piece for *Scanlan's Monthly* titled "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved". In a 1974 interview with *Playboy Magazine* Thompson answers the question "What is Gonzo Journalism?" by stating:

It was one of those horrible deadline scrambles and I ran out of time. I was desperate. Ralph Steadman had done the illustrations, the cover was printed and there was this horrible hole in the magazine. I was convinced I was finished, I'd blown my mind, couldn't work. So finally I just started jerking pages out of my

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the group and other groups or people who are not in the group (Hogg 118)

notebook and numbering them and sending them to the printer. I was sure it was the last article I was ever going to do for anybody. Then when it came out there were massive numbers of letters, phone calls, congratulations, people calling it a “great breakthrough in journalism.” (*Conversations* 21)

The result was journalistic genius and paved the way for Thompson’s future works.

Thompson considered Gonzo, at its purest, as just what was described in “Kentucky Derby”, first draft, full speed run of the information without any editing, stopping, or changing. Gonzo was meant to capture the essence of the moment, the raw emotion, and the observer’s initial response to situations. According to William Stephenson, Thompson’s Gonzo journalism was a methodical way to pursue the American Dream as Thompson defined it. Stephenson states, “Thompson put himself in this neo-Jeffersonian position of pursuing happiness through awareness rather than solipsism. Gonzo journalism ...is a form of active resistance to literary, journalistic and social convention; by abandoning nominally “objective” reporting, Thompson turned away from the “truth” determined by metropolitan editors” (Stephenson 18). For Thompson, honest truth could only be found through participant observation which also served as a founding ideology for Tom Wolfe’s “New Journalism”.

In 1973 Wolfe edited a collection of works written in a new style which he termed “New Journalism”.<sup>2</sup> New Journalism was reporting with a literary twist, journalism

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<sup>2</sup> In the introduction to his collection, Tom Wolfe provides some background on the development of New Journalism from the work of Gay Talese and Jimmy Breslin. Wolfe then breaks the style into possibilities stating, “it was possible in non-fiction, in journalism, to use any literary device, from the traditional dialogisms of the essay to stream-of-consciousness, and to use many different kinds simultaneously, or within a relatively short space...to excite the reader both intellectually and emotionally” (Wolfe 15).

written like a novel. Wolfe included two pieces from Hunter S. Thompson, “Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” and excerpts from *Hell’s Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga*. Wolfe describes the importance of new journalism on reporting stating:

The kind of reporting they [new journalists] were doing struck them as far more ambitious, too. It was more intense, more detailed, and certainly more time-consuming than anything that newspaper or magazine reporters, including investigative reporters, were accustomed to. They developed habits of staying with the people they were writing about for days at a time, weeks in some cases. They had to gather all the material the conventional journalist was after—and then keep going. It seemed all important to *be there* when dramatic scenes took place, to get the dialogue, the gestures, the facial expressions, the details of the environment. The idea was to give the full objective description, plus something that readers had always had to go to novels and short stories for: namely, the subjective or emotional life of the characters. (Wolfe 21)

Thompson took participant observation to the extreme spending more than a year with the Hell’s Angels to produce his first book length work, *Hell’s Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga*. Thompson chronicled his year with gritty accuracy and included honest truths about the outlaw motorcycle gang both legal and illegal, public and private. According to John C. Hartsock, Thompson’s writing put a new spin on New Journalism due to his drug use. Hartsock states, “Then there is the “gonzo” journalism of Hunter Thompson in which Thompson does Wolfe one better by reporting on the world *while on drugs*” (193). Thompson’s work and life become synonymous with drug use throughout his career, an image only perpetuated by antics in Thompson’s personal life. For

example, when running for Sheriff of Pitkin County Colorado, Thompson's campaign images contained a fist holding a peyote button.



Image 1: Wallposter #5 (Poster by Tom Benton)

Benton's poster was used for Thompson's campaign for Sheriff of Pitkin County Colorado. The image shows a peyote button inside of a clenched red fist. The fist had become the de facto symbol for the "freak power" party, of which Thompson was a founding member.

Not all scholars place Thompson's work under the category of journalism or non-fiction. Jerome Klinkowitz defines Thompson's writing and drug use in a more literary

fashion, calling Thompson a “SuperFictionist” (31).<sup>3</sup> Klinkowitz states, “writing in the constantly self-described context of drugs, alcohol, and violence, until this very manner become part of his subject. There is no illusion whatsoever that there isn’t a very real and stunningly idiosyncratic writer at the center of each work. That’s the ultimate self-reflexiveness which makes Hunter S. Thompson a SuperFictionist” (31). Klinkowitz’s positioning of Thompson among fiction writers is equally accurate as Wolfe and Hartstock classifying Thompson as a journalist. Scholar Greg Wright states, “Instead of disbelief, Thompson’s style invites skepticism. Caught within the confines of a stupefying, unbelievable America, his reportage flirts with fictionality almost as a defense mechanism, a (self)reflexive response to the unpleasantness of its subject matter” (624). Thompson’s work displays elements of both genres, as did many of the New Journalists. Thompson states, “[it] is not to say that fiction is necessarily ‘more true’ than journalism--or vice versa-- but that both ‘fiction’ and ‘journalism’ are artificial categories; and that both forms, at their best, are only two different means to the same end” (“Jacket Copy” 114). Thompson’s inclusion of his own hyperbolic asides created a

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<sup>3</sup> Klinkowitz includes Thompson in a category of living writers alongside Kurt Vonnegut, Ishmael Reed and others which he considers SupreFictionists. Klinkowitz states, “Vonnegut & Co. are living writers. The substance of their writing is widely available not only in their fiction, but also in their commentary, reviews, interviews, letters, phone calls, and personal adventures” and he then breaks the term into five key elements:

1. To the newer fictionists, Beckett is as traditional as Joyce.
2. The fiction we’re discussing bypasses the Post-Modern “gnosis” in favor of an imaginative confrontation with the outside world.
3. The fiction we’re discussing is peculiarly American.
4. The writers we’re discussing are out to create a good time.
5. There are too many salient features which collectively set this fiction a world apart from what has gone before.

Klinkowitz then describes those features as “it is expressive...uses the reader's imagination as part of the action...both self-reflective and self-reflexive...restores act of reading to its original pleasure status (Klinkowitz 2-4).

sense of fictionalized reportage.

The clearest example of fictionalized reportage was in *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* when Thompson made the outlandish claim that Edmund Muskie, candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination, was high on Ibogaine<sup>4</sup> throughout his campaign tour. Thompson stated, “It is entirely conceivable--given the known effects of Ibogaine--that Muskie’s brain was almost paralyzed by hallucinations at the time; that he looked out at that crowd and saw Gila monsters instead of people, and that his mind snapped completely when he felt something large and apparently vicious clawing at his legs” (*Campaign Trail* 135). The most interesting aspect of this story was that Thompson’s outlandish claims were reported by multiple mainstream media outlets as fact showing how sensationalized and unresearched US reporting had become. According to an interview for *Playboy Magazine*, Thompson stated, “Even some reporters who’d been covering Muskie for three or four months took it [the Ibogaine story] seriously. That’s because they don’t know anything about drugs” (*Conversations* 20). Thompson’s position within the campaign and his experiences as a recreational drug user provided a primary frame which was believable. As Wright stated, Thompson invited skepticism but also hinted at truth and, because of this, mainstream media outlets ran the absurd story. Only through Thompson’s unique framework for understanding the world could such a story be believable. His position on the campaign trail, as participant observer, gave

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<sup>4</sup> Thompson provides a description of Ibogaine in a satiristic study from “PharmChem Laboratories” which describes the drug as coming from a shrub from West Africa and cites the effects as: “Soon his [the Ibogaine taker] nerves get tense in an extraordinary way; an epileptic-like madness comes over him, during which he becomes unconscious and pronounces words which are interpreted by the older members of the group as having a prophetic meaning and to prove that the fetish has entered him” (Thompson *Campaign Trail* 133).



further credit to his remarks.

As a participant observer Thompson could chronicle and catalog behaviors, events, and activities with objective, journalistic reverence; however, as a participant fully immersed in the situation Thompson could allow himself to become part of these often-exclusive micronationalisms. Thompson's ability to perform in-group prototype norms of the micronationalisms he covered allowed Thompson to provide accurate, yet subjective, reporting on the events and groups. Scholar William Stephenson discussed Thompson's positions on subjectivity and his writing as it relates to Marxist ideologies about the nature of subjectivity<sup>5</sup>. Stephenson states, "He [Thompson] could not see outside himself and did not try. Instead, he created his own subjectivity continuously by means of his writing" (127). Subjectivity was built upon the relationship with the micronationalism Thompson was observing. According to Wolfe, the New Journalists had a way to get into situations and societies to which many were not granted access. Wolfe states, "Here came a breed of journalists who somehow had the moxie to talk their way inside of any milieu, even closed societies, and hang on for dear life" (Wolfe 26). It took a unique journalist such as Thompson to gain access into these, often isolated, micronationalisms.

## MICRONATIONALISMS AND THE THREE-PART AMERICAN IDENTITY

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<sup>5</sup> According to Stephenson, "Thompson's focus on subjective hate figures was hardly surprising, given that, for him, objectivity was not only impossible in journalism, but also impossible, and undesirable in life. As Venn argues, when critiquing the traditional Marxist conception of ideology, it 'presupposes a domain of objective reality and rational unitary subjects who can objectively weigh up the arguments' and thus escape the false consciousness that ideology creates (p. 91). But if ideology in fact works to *constitute* subjectivity, as Althusser argues, then objective scrutiny of the self and its world is impossible" (Stephenson 127).

Many of the micronationalisms with whom Thompson participated would not be part of the normative American ideal; however, they provided representative portions of American culture as part of the three-part identity of the greater American nationalism which is represented by the American dream, the American culture, and the American perception and based on concepts presented by Constantine Sedikides and Marilyn B. Brewer. The three parts of American nationalism relate to the three parts of the collective identity: The Individual Self, Relational Self, and Collective Self.<sup>6</sup> I argue that Thompson's vision of hegemonic American nationalism is presented through representative micronationalisms which demonstrate portions of the three-part national identity while remaining marginalized segments outside of the normative American ideal. American identity, as an ideal, is impossible to define. Who we are as a country cannot be reduced to a collection of terms, but instead is an evolving, living organism.

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<sup>6</sup> Sedikides and Brewer define the three types of self as follows.

Individual self-

The individual self is achieved by differentiating from others (i.e. the individual self contains those aspects of the self-concept that differentiate the person from other persons as a unique constellation of traits and characteristics that distinguishes the individual within his or her social context). This form of self-representation relies on interpersonal comparison processes and is associated with the motive of protecting or enhancing the person psychologically (1)

Relational self-

Relational self is achieved by assimilating with significant others (i.e. the relational self contains those aspects of the self-concept that are shared with relationship partners and define the person's other role or position within significant relationships). The relational self is based on personalized bonds of attachment (1)

Collective self

The collective self is achieved by inclusion in large social groups and constraining the group to which one belongs (i.e. the in-group) with relevant out-groups. That is, the collective self contains those aspects of the self-concept that differentiate in-group members from members of relevant out-groups. The collective self is based on important bonds to others derived from common (and oftentimes symbolic) identification with a group (2).

Thompson explored microcosms of American society, such as the Hell's Angels, which provided an exemplar for American national identity in the form of a micronationalism which display specific elements of the in-group prototype identity of the normative American ideal while remaining excluded from in-group membership. Micronationalisms present portions of the three-part American identity; some will present all three portions while others will only display one of the characteristics. It is this representative variation which makes defining American identity as a whole such a challenge. Instead, the ability for Thompson to reduce American identity into accessible micronationalisms allows readers to process portions of the greater American identity and providing the necessary frame to understand the collective identity of the entire nation.

Nick Nuttall described a similar concept stating, "Although artists and democratic society, by the twentieth century, managed pretty much to rub along together, this was not the case with those who either expressed extreme views or were prepared to extend the boundaries of "taste" beyond a kind of middle-class norm" (104). Here Nuttall was speaking directly about authors and artists; however, the concept can extend to any who lived outside of the normative American ideal, or micronationalisms. What separated Thompson from the other writers Nuttall was describing is Thompson's dissociation as participant observer. Thompson-as-author was not included within this segment of authors. While he was deeply ingrained, he was also able to separate a part of himself from his writing through his own three-part identity. Nuttall described this separation of the unique parts of self from writing as a "moral aspect". Nuttall states, "Distinctly different, the outstanding feature of most of Thompson's output is that it *has* a "moral aspect," and it shares this defining characteristic, I would argue, with what has become

tagged the American Dream. For the “Dream” can only exist within a moral landscape and for Thompson it is this morality that has gone AWOL” (105). Morality in American identity stems from early Puritanical values which are the bedrock for the normative American ideal. Morality and Puritan ethics will be addressed further in chapter four. Thompson, as participant observer within the various micronationalisms, was able to understand how each group’s perspective on American identity was shaped, or framed both within and outside of established morality codes. Because most of the groups Thompson studies existed outside of the normative American ideal , the group’s morality codes seem out of sorts of those Puritanical ethics which Nuttall bases his statements upon. Thompson and the groups he studied often existed outside of societal morality because the groups could not identify with the strict legal structures established by the normative American ideal. The legal codes did not represent the way of life these out-group members had chosen and within the micronationalism structure, sought to establish their own in-group morality or codes of ethics.

Thompson’s deep level of participation amongst the various groups which he studied allow him access to the in-group identities, or frameworks. According to Ervin Goffman, “primary frameworks vary in degree of organization...however each primary framework allows its user to locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined in its terms” (21). Primary frames are divided into two categories, natural and social. According to Goffman, “natural frameworks identify occurrences seen as undirected, unoriented, unanimated, unguided” and “social frameworks, on the other hand, provide background understanding for events that incorporate the will, aim, and controlling effort of an intelligence, a live agency, the chief

one human being” (22). Thompson’s participant observation and in-group inclusion provided him access to group mentality and group frames. His ability to shift between his personal frames, micronationalism frames, and the perceived frame established by the media provided Thompson access to in-group identity understandings that no other American would have been able to achieve and his ability to transverse in-group prototype identities made Thompson the only person who capable of writing about the changes in American national identity at the time. This concept is further supported by the fact that Thompson also shares the aforementioned three-part identity structure represented by Thompson-as-author, Thompson-as-character, and Thompson-as-himself.

Thompson’s multifaceted identity has been explored previously by Matthew Winston; however, Winston includes only two parts to Thompson’s identity. Winston states:

Thompson-as-writer, in his journalism, is not a novelist, and is not operating as a novelist within the Text. His specific position as writer does not fit the pattern. Also, Thompson-as-character is the main character of his works, not simply as a narrator (whether absent or present) but as the subjective source of the works themselves, openly and overtly chronicling his own, and indeed only his own, subjective experience of reality. (Gonzo Text, 8)

Winston addresses two of the main elements of Thompson’s unique participant observation techniques, Thompson-as-writer and Thompson-as-character. However, I would also include the third position of Thompson-as-himself which is provided by Thompson’s extensive collections of letters and personal correspondence published as *The Proud Highway* and *Fear and Loathing in America* and his memoirs *Kingdom of*

*Fear and Songs of the Doomed*. All collections provide Thompson's personal opinions, thoughts, and fears without the oversight of editors driving subject matter. The collections of letters, some of which written to family and friends, allowed Thompson to write as himself and not as a journalist, sports writer, or correspondent. The memoirs allowed Thompson to write how he felt about the journalism and journalistic practices, and provide the background story to his works which provide a third layer of understanding Thompson's personal identity.

The three parts of Thompson's collective identity are mirrored in the collective identity of America in the following ways:

American Dream → Individual-self → Thompson-as-himself

American Culture → Relational-self → Thompson-as-author

American Perception → Collective-self → Thompson-as-character

Throughout Thompson's canon of works he traced his path through each of the three stages of collective identity providing readers with the vocabulary to define American nationalism in the most Gonzo fashion. Through the drugs, the persona, and the myth, Thompson's writings echo throughout time. To better understanding the ways in which Thompson's three-part identity and the national identity were mirrored, one must understand that the American dream was represented within each of the three-part of the collective identity.

## THE AMERICAN DREAM

The American Dream, or the individual self, permeates all three portions of

American Identity because of the inherent selfish and narcissistic nature of hegemonic power systems. The American dream was whitewashed by the normative American ideal. As the controlling powers, the in-group of the normative American ideal limited access to the means of success to only those who display in-group prototype identity and normative behavior expectations. Thompson saw the exclusionary practices of the hegemony projected onto micronationalisms who truly exhibited the original ideals of the American dream. This perversion of the American dream destroyed his once proud acceptance of the concept of the American Dream which for Thompson had become fear and loathing. Nuttall described Thompson's fear as, "Thompson's fear wasn't so much narcissistic as communal. It was obvious that he feared for the United States, a fear embodied in what he termed the death of the American Dream" (103). Thompson signaled the moment of realization about this fear with the death of John F. Kennedy and, in what Thompson termed, the death of American decency. Thompson writes, "I was extremely jolted and angry and distraught...I had just returned from South America, and I had regained that sort of beat generation attitude about the country. I sort of liked the great American West, and a sense of renewing, and I was feeling good about the country. But all of a sudden that day the country looked different to me, and I felt very bad about it" (Thompson *Songs of the Doomed* 111). This was the moment the dream died and the moment that Thompson began to define of the American dream as reborn through micronationalisms truly representing the idealic concept of the American dream.

For Thompson, the American Dream was an elusive concept was traced through sports, culture, drugs, race, and all in Thompson's unique Gonzo style. It is important to define and frame the concept of American Dream within Thompson's ideological

understanding of America. The first appearance of the phrase “American Dream” was in James Truslow Adams’ *The Epic of America* written in 1931. His epilogue to the book was a call to arms for Americans to begin to understand the world in which they lived.

Adams, on the American Dream states:

The American dream that has lured tens of millions of all nations to our shores in the past century has not been a dream of merely material plenty, though that has doubtless counted heavily. It has been much more than that. It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human beg of any and every class. And that dream has been realized more fully in actual live here than anywhere else, though very imperfectly even among ourselves. (Adams 405)

Adams follows this statement with a proclamation that the dream is great because he saw the value of such a dream and the purpose in America (405). Thompson’s dream is defined in a slightly different way. In a book of Thompson’s earliest letters he is quoted as saying “I have recently developed an outrageous theory about the American Dream being essentially an Irish vision, challenged now by a view of reality that is basically Jewish. It has to do with Jay Gatsby and John Kennedy, the I.W.W. and the Hell’s Angels, the New York syndrome, the “bogeyman Gonzofactor” that dominates the press, and god only knows what else” (*Proudest Highway* 525). Thompson was greatly influenced by *The Great Gatsby* and often spoke of the novel’s importance in his understanding of American culture. Thompson once stated, “I wonder what you [Angus



Cameron of Alfred E. Knopf publishers] think of *The Great Gatsby*...To my mind it's the great American novel, and in some immensely strange way Lee Oswald wrote the ending. If History professors in this country had any sense they would tout the book as a capsule course in the American Dream" (*Proud Highway* 530). Both of these statements were written in 1965; however, prior to this date Thompson had spent time developing his definition as a journalist covering South America, racial injustice in America, and the death of the Beat Movement. Thompson's unique position as Gonzo journalist allowed him to perceive of micronationalisms in American culture as representative of the American Dream or American national identity.

Thompson's view on the American dream was often found outside of the normative American ideal and within various racial minority populations throughout the country. In "Strange Rumbblings in Aztlán" Thompson chronicled the police violence and racial isolation felt by the Chicano population in Los Angeles, in "A Southern City With Northern Problems" he traced the institutionalized racism of Southern cities through the desegregation practices of Louisville, Kentucky and the African-American community. Thompson's writing was never directly related to race as the primary focus, but in the underlying subtext, racial disparity, lack of access to the means for success, and Thompson's fear and loathing towards the normative American ideal were consistently present. Chapter two will address Thompson's subtextual assessment of the state of racial affairs in America and the relation to the American dream as a portion of the American collective identity.

## Chapter 2

### Whitewashed American Dream and the Normative American Ideal

Racial disparity, racial tensions, and institutionalized racism in America represent limited access to the American dream by the micronationalisms studied by Thompson. Control over the status of the American Dream, access to the means to achieve the dream, and inclusion into the in-group prototype identity of the normative American ideal was limited to those marginalized within the micronationalisms. Thompson provided examples of the images of racial injustice in America and the limited access to achieving the American Dream across the country. Providing such a diverse range of examples, Thompson is able to give a more complete picture of the ways in which the average American citizen would have considered racial tensions in the country. Thompson established that a portion of the holistic national identity was founded on institutionalized racism by the hegemonic, white-Protestant power class or normative American ideal. Considering the definitions of institutional racism<sup>7</sup>, Thompson's pursuit of the American dream was a chronicling of the development of national conventions designed to further the hegemonic power and isolate racial minorities in America. Thompson chronicled the association between race and the formation of national identity through satire and sarcasm. With images from the Chicano population in Los Angeles, from the black males

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<sup>7</sup> According to Coretta Phillips, "The concept [of institutional racism] first appeared in the radical writings of US black political activists, Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton in *Black Power* (1968). Institutional racism, it was urged, was deeply embedded in established conventions in US society, which relied on anti-black attitudes of inferiority, even if individual whites did not themselves discriminate against individual blacks" (173). I expand this definition to include all racial minorities in America, as Thompson's writings included references to the Chicano population as well as the black population and the racial tensions promoted by institutionalized fears of the other.

in Louisville, and from the all-white Hell's Angels towards the black population, Thompson was able to show the dichotomy of the racial divide, how groups viewed one another, and how these opinions were ingrained in both micronationalisms and the holistic national identity. Thompson positions his discussion of race subtextually within works far removed from a focus or consideration of race. Instead of making obvious connections Thompson puts his own subjective stance on the discussion of racial disparity and produces works, even prior to the Gonzo era, which include a sense of personal connection to, and support for, those marginalized groups faced with civil rights challenges throughout the country.

The early 1960s opened with a push for racial equality in America. Throughout the era of Thompson's earliest writings there was a tension in America over the position of minorities within the national picture. The hegemonic group, white Protestant males, sought to prevent the rise of racial unity because of a fear present in those different from the normative American ideal. Huntington states, "To define themselves, people need an other" and for white-America the other was presented in the rapidly growing ethnic minority populations throughout the country (24). Thompson provides an alternative terror to American societal identity: the non-white American fear. In Southern California it was a growing population of Mexican-Americans (Chicanos) which were the focus of many Californians fears of change; in Kentucky it was up-and-coming black males moving into all-white neighborhoods. Thompson presents this white-fear as an element of the national identity in the form of institutionalized racism built into the concepts of the American Dream. White Americans appropriated the American Dream for themselves, excluding the racial other from their image of a utopian American ideal. Thompson

presents the whitewashing of the American Dream throughout his writings and, through study of the micronationalisms within American society which represent the racial other, Thompson was able to reveal elements of institutional racism in America.

Huntington expresses that the foundation of American society and early national identity was a homogeneous population of settlers. Huntington states:

The American people who achieved independence in the late eighteenth century were few and homogeneous: overwhelmingly white (thanks to the exclusion of blacks and Indians from citizenship), British, and Protestant, broadly sharing a common culture, and overwhelmingly committed to the political principles embodied in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and other founding documents. By the end of the twentieth century, the number of Americans had multiplied almost one hundred times. America had become multiracial...multiethnic...America's common culture and the principles of equality and individualism central to the American Creed were under attack by many individuals and groups in American society. (11)

The American Creed, I would argue, outlines the defining principles of Adams' American dream, and the "attacking" members of American society and not physically attacking but instead, questioning the White, Protestant ideal of American society. According to Boorstin, "Only the stagnators of America--the prophets of rigid Puritan theocracy of Southern slaveocracy--ever mistook the dream for reality" explaining that the dream for those was a utopian ideal, unobtainable for anyone (240). The dream had created a racial divide in America between those who believed it possible and those who

saw it as a means for social control. Thompson presented one form of social control through issues with law enforcement and policing along racial lines in “Strange Rumbblings in Aztlan” and *Hell’s Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga*. These specific pieces provide two examples of micronationalisms of differing racial construction and each addressing issues with policing along racial lines in differing ways.

## RACE AND THE HELL’S ANGELS

Thompson addresses issues of race in America through the perspective of the Hell’s Angels. In *Hell’s Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga* Thompson is exposed to the group’s institutional racism which was supported by the Oakland Police force. The Hell’s Angels and police did not always see eye to eye and the Angels were often making headlines for lawbreaking; however, they were not considered the greatest threat to American society. At the time, Thompson was following the Angels, the Civil Rights Movement was building steam throughout the country and the Bay Area, California was no different. While politicians could have moved to push against the Hell’s Angels, they instead choose to focus on the “crime in the streets” issue of race in America because the racial fear was still greater than that of white motorcycle gang members. McBee describes the catch phrase “crime in the streets” as, “a direct reference to the rebellions that erupted in cities across the country between 1964 and 1968 as growing numbers of African-American men and women became frustrated and disillusioned about the marginal support for civil rights and the increased violence against activists” (np). According to Thompson:

Not even Senator Goldwater<sup>8</sup> seized on the Hell's Angels issue. "Crime in streets" was a winner for him; millions of people felt threatened by gangs of punks, roaming, on foot, through streets in the immediate vicinity of their homes in urban slums. Democrats called this a racist slur...but what would they have said if Goldwater had warned the voters about an army of vicious doped-up Caucasian hoodlums numbering in the thousands. (Thompson, *Hell's Angels* 36)

The association between race and law enforcement was a tenuous one, and Thompson's writing was on the pulse of the situation. According to McBee, "Thompson suggests that the Angels did not become the focus of a national campaign for "law and order" because they were not as threatening as they often appeared" (np). They appeared just like his constituents, white, and so were not to be feared like the black men and women marching in the streets.

When discussing policing in America, Thompson describes the inadequate and unprepared police which handled riots created by Angel rallies.

More and more often the police are finding themselves in conflict with whole

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<sup>8</sup> Randy McBee's article "A "Potential Common Front": Hunter S. Thompson, the Hell's Angels, and Race in 1960s America" provides details about Senator Barry Goldwater. McBee states:

Senator Barry Goldwater was in the midst of his bid for the presidency in 1964 when the Monterey case began to attract attention, and Goldwater was part of the initial backlash against the political movements of the 1950s and 1960s (Civil Rights, Black Power, Feminism, Gay Rights), a backlash that would assume center stage with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and became known as the "New Right." For Goldwater's part, he voted against the Civil Rights Act of 1964, proposed ending Social Security, advocated the use of tactical nuclear weapons in Vietnam, supported privatizing various government programs, and urgently began to speak out in favor of "law and order," which would become increasing political slogan over the next half decade. (np)

blocs of the citizenry, none of them criminals in the traditional sense of the word, but many as potentially dangerous—to the police—as any armed felon. This is particularly true in situations involving groups of Negroes and teen-agers...It may be that America is developing a new category of essentially social criminals...persons who threaten the police and the traditional social structure even when they are breaking no law...because they view The Law with contempt and the police with distrust, and this abiding resentment can explode without warning at the slightest provocation. (*Hell's Angels* 107-8)

Thompson was speaking about race riots in Los Angeles and the situations with Hell's Angels as parallel events. Thompson cites "The Laconia riot"<sup>9</sup> as "one of the most predictable outbursts in the history of civil chaos" and cites the casualties, "Of the seventy reported injuries, sixty-nine were on the "enemy" side" with a footnote stating, "The same casualty pattern prevailed in the Watts<sup>10</sup> riot in August. Of the thirty-four

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<sup>9</sup> According to Thompson:

The main event of that weekend was either the forty-fourth Annual New England Tour and Rally (as reported by *Life*) or the twenty-sixth running of the New England Motorcycle Races (according to the *National Observer*) ... Non-racing cyclists know it as the New England "Gypsy Tour," and it is one of those scenes they all like to make. The idea is about the same as any Hell's Angels run, but on a much bigger scale. Laconia, with a population of fifteen thousand in the winter and forty-five thousand in the summer, attracts anywhere from fifteen to thirty thousand motorcyclists for the race weekend. (Thompson, *Hell's Angels* 218)

<sup>10</sup> August 1965 riots broke out in Los Angeles's Watts neighborhood after the arrest-- and subsequent arrests of his family-- of an African-American man for drunk driving. According to the Martin Luther King Encyclopedia, "Anger and rumors spread quickly through the black community, and residents stoned cars and beat white people who entered the area." The entry continues, "While deploring the riots and their use of violence, King was quick to point out that the problems that led to the violence were "environmental and not racial." That economic deprivation, social isolation, inadequate housing, and general despair of thousands of Negroes teeming in Northern and Western

killed, thirty-one were Negroes” (*Hell’s Angels* 218). Thompson was using the riots at a motorcycle rally as a metaphor for race riots in America. The “enemy” were both the cyclists and the African-Americans. Both groups share resentment for the police; however, the Angels had many more opportunities to go free while black American teens were arrested or worse on sight because of the nature of relationships between police and the black communities. Relationships between the police and those non-normative out-groups were often highly complicated and ripe with tensions, be it racial or political. The relationship between the Hell’s Angels Oakland chapter and the local police force provided an example of the complications of, and institutionalized racial disparity present in policing during the 1960s.

Thompson wrote about the racial connections between the Hell’s Angels and the Oakland Police force stating, “Even at the peak of the heat, Barger’s [Oakland Chapter President] chapter had a special relationship with the local law. Barger explained it as a potential common front against the long-rumored Negro uprising in East Oakland” (Thompson, *Hell’s Angels* 237). The Angels gained protection from the police by protecting East Oakland from the growing African-American population (Thompson, *Hell’s Angels* 237). Thompson follows this with the view of the Angels on race, only confusing the already complicated situation further, stating: “The Angel’s relationship with Oakland Negroes is just as ambivalent as it is with the cops. Their color line is strangely gerrymandered, so that individual “good spades” are on one side and the mass of “crazy niggers” are on the other” (Thompson, *Hell’s Angels* 237). This feeling of ambivalence towards another race is reflected in social identity theory. Hogg states, “One

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ghettos are the ready seeds which give birth to tragic expressions of violence” (np).



of the most distinctive features of group life and intergroup relations is ethnocentrism, or positive distinctiveness--a belief that "we" are better than "them" in every possible way" (120). The Angels shared the appearance of the normative American ideal, giving them a sense of superiority to the further marginalized African-American population because of the Angel's ability to assimilate into white-mainstream American culture if they so choose. However, the Angels, as a marginalized group, show some solidarity with the other as they can allow in-group/out-group fluidity with "good spades" from the African-American community. A clear distinction is had to be established about what constituted a "good spade" however. Not all blacks were granted in-group membership. Thompson mentions one black member of the Angels only in passing but attributes in-group prototype identity markers to him immediately. Thompson states, "Linkhorn<sup>11</sup> attitude is contagious. The few outlaws with Mexican or Italian names not only act like the others but somehow look like them. Even Chinese Mel from Frisco and Charley, a young Negro from Oakland, have the Linkhorn gait and mannerisms" (*Hell's Angels* 156). Associating the racial other with the in-group prototype identity was a means to bridge the gap between the races and allow for non-white members to gain access. One must become as like the prototype as possible to reach the "good spade" status and be considered as a member. Rather than losing their cultural identity by seeking in-group inclusion in the

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<sup>11</sup> Thompson traces the origins of the Angels to the Linkhorn family group. He describes the Angel's as "a lower-class phenomenon" (*Hell's Angels* 151) and continues to attribute the groups homogenous identity to westward mobility of the "million Okies, Arkies and hillbillies who made a long trek to the Golden State" (*Hell's Angels* 153). Thompson continues his description, "The old way of life was scattered back along Route 66, and their children grew up in a new world. The Linkhorns had finally found a home" and this ancestry is traced, according to Thompson, in Nelson Algren's book *A Walk on the Wild Side* which Thompson states, "opens with one of the best historical descriptions of American white trash ever written. He traces the Linkhorn ancestry back to the first wave of bonded servants to arrive on these shores" (*Hell's Angels* 153).

homogenous Angels, most black riders chose to create or join all-black gangs such as “The Dragons”.

A further level of racial division is represented by the all African-American motorcycle group, The Dragons. While Angels and Dragons shared many prototype identity markers such as riding hogs, group loyalty, and a passion for violence, because of the lack of racial solidarity both groups excluded the other from their ranks. The Dragons provide a brief example of an alternative micronationalism to the all-white Angels and also display how homogeneity and ethnocentrism dominated the thinking on both side of the racial divide. Thompson describes as “The Dragons, like the Angels, are mainly in their twenties and more or less unemployed. Also, like the Angels, they have a keen taste for the action, violent or otherwise” (Thompson, *Hell's Angels* 238). This division between gangs exploded during a bar-brawl and the racial tensions erupted, pitting the Angels against the Dragons in a standoff for the El Adobe, an East Oakland bar and motorcycle gang hangout. Much like the growing national tensions relating to the Civil Rights movement, it was only a matter of time before violence occurred. The nation saw similar violence in 1968 with the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. The homogenous make up of both groups expresses the ethnocentrism present throughout the nation mirrored in the micronationalisms of the Hell's Angels and The Dragons. While the Angels had the ability to assimilate into the normative American ideal, they choose to remain a marginalized other. Their in-group identity as an Angel was stronger than their national identity. Here the Angels represented ethnocentrism not as a racial component but as an in-group value structure.

Huntington makes reference to national identity and ethnocentrism, stating, “Even

when their group may be totally arbitrary, temporary, and “minimal,” people still, as social identity theory predicts, discriminate in favor of their group as compared to another group. Hence in many situations people choose to sacrifice absolute gains in order to achieve relative gains” (25). The Hell’s Angels are one such group, sacrificing the comforts of steady employment and income for the life of unrestricted freedom their out-group membership provides them. They chose to exist marginally, excluded from national social structures because of their choice. Given this status, however, they exemplify the American dream as presented by Adams. The Angels have been “able to grow to fullest development as man” within their in-group definitions (Adams 405). They lived “unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human beg of any and every class” and existed as they wanted within their in-group primary framework (Adams 405). In an interview, Sonny Barger, President of the Oakland Chapter of the Hell’s Angels stated: “We Angels live in our own world. We just want to be left alone to be individuals” and that is the heart of the dream (Thompson, *Hell’s Angels* 199). Thompson used the Hell’s Angels as an exemplar of the American dream and representative group for all of America because the Angels were just that, All-American men seeking the American dream. The Angels were not the only group to display the ideals of the American dream without access to obtain the dream. Thompson also presents the racial disparity shown to the Chicano population of East Los Angeles and how this influenced their access to the American dream.

## THE CHICANO POPULATION

Another example of the American Dream in action would be the immigrant populations scattered throughout the country. One of the largest of these were the Mexican-Americans, specifically the Chicano population in Southern California. The Chicano population represents a large scale micronationalism within the greater portion of American society. The Chicano population displays a homogeneous structure and uniquely defined culture which provides an example of representative marginalized nationalism because the population exhibits the desired characteristics of the American Dream without the means to obtain successes due to the hegemonic dominance to access to these means. Thompson cites the Chicano population in East LA at “more than a million” all seeking to find their place in a society which will view them as equal, valued citizens (Thompson, “Strange Rumbblings” 149). These immigrant workers came to America for a better life, seeking the idealistic American dream. These men and women idealized the “poor, tired, hungry yearning to be free” inscribed on the statue of liberty however could not fully realize the Dream as Adams defined it because of “barriers which has slowly been erected in older civilizations” (Adams 405). The Chicano population sought the “dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman” yet the path had been blocked by hegemonic powers who held the American Dream as a whitewashed ideal only open to those members of the in-group prototype or normative American ideal (Adams 405). Thompson explored this culture while researching the murder of Ruben Salazar and the subsequent response by the Chicano community which he describes in this 1971 article, “Strange Rumbblings in Aztlán”.

Ruben Salazar was a prominent Mexican-American journalist who covered the barrio and the Chicano population. Thompson described him as “nobody’s militant” because he was a professional journalist who had covered Vietnam and other places well beyond the East LA barrio (“Strange Rumbblings” 141). In addition to writing for the *Los Angeles Times*, Salazar was also the news director for KMEX-TV, the local Mexican-American news station which was “an energetic, aggressively political voice for the Chicano community” (Thompson, “Strange Rumbblings” 142). According to Thompson, “Ruben Salazar was killed in the wake of a Watts-style riot that erupted when hundreds of cops attacked a peaceful rally in Laguna Park, where 5000 or so liberal/student/activist type Chicanos had gathered to protest drafting of ‘Aztlán citizens’ to fight for the US in Vietnam” (“Strange Rumbblings 141). The Chicano activist population suspected that the killing had been a planned murder by the Los Angeles Police Department and racial tensions were running extremely high. At a speech promoting Chicano rights, Oscar Acosta<sup>12</sup> was quoted as saying, “We are not trying to overturn our own government. We don’t have a government! Do you think there would be police helicopters patrolling our community day and night if anybody considered us real citizens with rights!” (Thompson, “Strange Rumbblings” 139). This lack of association with the hegemonic power structure, American government, lead to a sense of isolation among the community.

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<sup>12</sup> Oscar Zeta Acosta was a long time friend of Thompson’s and was the model for Dr. Gonzo, Thompson’s protagonists travel companion in his most famous work, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. In “Strange Rumbblings in Atzlan” Thompson provides the following description of Acosta “Acosta has been practicing law in the *barrio* for three years...for the record, [sic] Oscar is an old friend and occasional antagonist...He was America’s only ‘Chicano lawyer’...His clients were all Chicanos and most were ‘political criminals’” (136).

Thompson highlighted the isolation felt by the Chicano population in East LA. They were not part of the normative American ideal and they did not share the same rights as those in the in-group prototype. The Chicano community was constantly watched as if expected to behave criminally. In regards to the position that Acosta had taken towards the government's treatment of the Chicano people, Stephenson states "Thompson's humanism underlies his discourse. Acosta is not an exotic racial Other; he is just like Thompson, wanting to 'live like a human being' but swamped in fear and loathing of an intolerable nation that violently oppresses its own dissidents, whether Chicanos or freaks" (136). Thompson chose to quote Acosta in such a way as to encourage members of normative American ideal to understand the Chicano situation. The Chicano population were treated like lower class citizens and not allowed the same freedoms of those within the normative American ideal.

Isolationist and elitist practices displayed by the normative American idealist hegemony pushed the Chicano population away from identifying with the normative population because of marginalization and exclusion. Consider the neighborhoods, or barrios, in which majority of the Chicano population lived. The barrio is described by Thompson as "a rifle shot away from the heart of downtown Los Angeles. The *barrio*, like Watts, is actually a part of the city core-- while places like Hollywood and Santa Monica are separate entities" ("Strange Rumbings" 132). Thompson uses tourist markers to isolate geographically the Chicano population within the context of Los Angeles as most Americans know it. Placing Chicano people both inside the geographic location while simultaneously outside of the hegemonic ideal shows how ingrained institutional racism in America was structured. The normative American ideal were fine with the fact

that barrios and neighborhoods like Watts existed, as long as they were isolated from the white population. Isolation did not stop with the racial lines. The Chicano population was weary of other hispanics who did not perform the Chicano in-group prototype, such as Ruben Salazar.

Thompson describes Salazar as, “the prominent ‘Mexican-American’ columnist for the Los Angeles *Times* and news director for bilingual KMEX-TV” (Thompson “Strange Rumbblings 131). Thompson continues to explain that Salazar was often seen as an outsider among the Chicano community but, because of his position with the media, he was the only person capable of sharing the information necessary to rally the Chicano people in East Los Angeles and was granted access to the exclusive Chicano barrio and in-group identity. There was a deep-rooted fear of law enforcement among the Chicano population and Salazar’s work leading up to his death had been focused on the issues of police brutality faced by the Chicano population. Thompson reprinted a Handbill from the National Chicano Moratorium Committee in “Strange Rumbblings” and it is quoted as saying “the LAPD, the Sheriffs, and the Highway Patrol have for years been systematically trying to destroy the true spirit of our people. In the past, police have broken up every attempt of our people to get justice” (“Strange Rumbblings” 132). The handbill continues, “Almost every month each barrio has suffered through at least one case of severe brutality or murder and then struggled to defend friends and witnesses who face bum raps” (“Strange Rumbblings” 132). Thompson, here, is expanding beyond the isolated portion of the barrio and moves the issue into the greater southern California Chicano population. The handbill states, “The major social and political issue we face is police brutality. Since the 29th [death of Salazar] police attacks have been worse, either

the people control the police, or we are living in a police state” (“Strange Rumbblings” 133). The Chicano population lived in fear of the police preventing their connection to the in-group prototype of the normative American ideal because Chicanos did not feel connected to the power structures designed to keep people safe. Fearing for their life from the police further isolated the Chicano people. The fear created a micronationalism as the Chicano population was not allowed to share the identity of the hegemonic powers and they lacked access to the means of social change through normative means. The Chicano population were not represented in politics, policing, or the justice system and this was an issue which Acosta recognized and fought against as the Chicano lawyer. The Chicanos were bound to decisions made by white politicians to further delineate and further isolate them from the normative American population of Los Angeles. The Handbill states, “We must not allow the police to break our unity. We must carry on the spirit of Ruben Salazar and expose this brutality to the nation and the world” (“Strange Rumbblings” 133). The desire to make national news of the isolationist micronationalism shows how the collective identity of such a small portion of society can transcend into the greater national identity, as barrios or similar neighborhoods across the country likely shared this sentiment of police brutality, social isolation, and lack of governmental representation. These same issues were addressed in Thompson’s work on Louisville, Kentucky and their “progressive” desegregation process.

## LOUISVILLE, KY

Thompson was a native of Louisville, Kentucky and in 1963 returned to the city to write an opinion piece about the state of racial relations in the city. While Louisville



was being praised nationally for their strides forward in integration, when one began to speak with the black population in the city it seems that the reports were whitewashing the information. The city's black population, and I would argue the city itself, represent a micronationalism from which to view the collective national identity. National perception was swayed by the media's portrayal of the city's progress. The collective identity of the city was shaped by the hegemonic, normative American ideal without representation of the black, micronationalism present within the city. Thompson wrote, "A Southern City With Northern Problems" for the *Louisville Reporter* and in it displays the institutionalized racism present in Louisville's white hegemony. With desegregation in progress in the city, the black population was making upward moves to better their situation but were restricted by the white power structure. Much like the Chicano population in East Los Angeles, the black population in Louisville were denied access to Adams's foundational tenets of the American Dream. According to Thompson, "The white power structure, as defined by local Negroes, means the men who run the town, the men who control banking and industry and insurance, who pay big taxes and lend big money and head important civic committees" was the image of hegemonic power in Louisville, mirroring the normative American ideal ("Southern City" 45). With such ingrained, institutionalized racism controlling industry and access to means of income, the black population in Louisville faced greater challenges in the progressive "desegregated" city because they could not break the private structures which were dominating perspectives on race in the city. The private structures represent elements of the individual and relational self through the American Dream and the American normative ideal in that the hegemonic powers prevent achieving the Dream and exclude

the other from the in-group prototype identity. The otherness of the black population will not allow their inclusion in the American normative ideal and the American dream has been whitewashed only granting access to the means of achieving the Dream to those within the American normative ideal. Thompson highlights the barriers to receive greater presented to the black males in Louisville, one of America's most progressive and forward thinking cities.

Thompson continues to highlight how highly regarded Louisville's progress towards complete integration and equality among the races. Thompson does so to show that the state of racial progress in 1963 America was in such a sad state that nationally, including the progressive north, there was a level of institutional racism which continued to degraded the black population isolating and preventing their progression to greater achievement. According to Thompson, "Louisville takes pride in its race relations, and the appearance of well-dressed Negroes in the Courthouse-City Hall district does not raise any eyebrows" ("Southern City" 44). Thompson's statement resonates with satire much like Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal". He continues discussion on the current state of Louisville's racial progress stating, "Racial segregation has been abolished in nearly all white public places. Negroes entered the public schools in 1956 with so little trouble that the superintendent of schools was moved to write a book about it" ("Southern City" 44). For Thompson, race was presented in such a way as to appease the white demographic and never did it address the reality of the situation from the perspective of the black population. Whites, being the hegemonic power, were able to share the message of racial equality because that way their perception. However, Thompson's journalistic

practices urged him to seek the whole story. Thompson took the time to interview black leaders in Louisville and was able to present the full spectrum of the situation.

The black leader's stories of desegregation and racial equality show that the access to the means for success were not equal. A portion of the American Dream which Thompson pursues throughout his career relates to this equal access to necessary means. Thompson's article highlights the disparity in access stating, "Why, for instance, does a local Negro leader say, 'Integration here is a farce'? Why, also, has a local Negro minister urged his congregation to arm themselves? Why do Louisville Negroes bitterly accuse the Federal urban-renewal project of creating '*de facto* segregation'?" ("Southern City 44). The perception of the situation from the non-hegemonic position is much bleaker and the progress is almost non-existent. Thompson describes this situation by stating, "What is apparent in Louisville is that the Negro has won a few crucial battles, but instead of making the breakthrough he expected, he has come up against segregation's second front, where the problems are not mobs and unjust laws but customs and traditions" ("Southern City" 45). Thompson recognizes that the perception of racism has changed but the institutional ideals have not. While the white dominant class have publicly ceded identifiable status to the black population, the institutions of racism remained. The black population was now faced with inability to achieve greater because they were not allowed to move into certain areas due hegemonic powers pushing against, specifically, the purchase of homes within these specific areas by black purchasers. Thompson highlights this institutionalized practice throughout his article.

Thompson exposes the issue of racial prejudice in the housing market because of policies of relocating the ghetto into a new part of town rather than truly integrating the

racess into communities which can be mutually supportive of one another. Thompson interviewed a member of the black community and the response was, "Frank Stanley Jr, the Negro leader who said 'Integration here is a farce', blames urban renewal for the problem [black access restriction in home buying]. 'All they're doing is moving the ghetto, intact, from the middle of town to the West End.'" ("Southern City" 47). This was the perception from the black population which was in stark contrast to that of the white officials who stated, "Urban renewal officials reply to this by claiming the obvious: that their job is not to desegregate Louisville but to relocate people as quickly and advantageously as possible" ("Southern City 47). The second way Thompson describes the situation in Louisville summarizes the difference between perception and reality. According to Thompson, "The white power structure has given way in the public sector, only to entrench itself more firmly in the private. And the Negro--especially the educated Negro-- feels that his victories are hollow and his 'progress' is something he reads about in the newspapers" ("Southern City 45). This private versus public perception is presented by Thompson in the ways in which realtors and the housing market closes to the black population. According to Thompson, in an interview with Jesse P. Warders, "real-estate agent and a long-time leader in Louisville's Negro community", Warders described the situation to Thompson as "fear of change and the reluctance of most whites to act in any way that might be frowned on by the neighbours is the Negroes' biggest problem in Louisville" ("Southern City" 47, 48). Here he is referring to the fact that most white families refuse to sell to black buyers, not because of their own racial prejudices but because they would not want to hurt their neighbors property values. Thompson continues, "In other words, almost nobody has anything against Negroes, but everybody's

neighbor does” (“Southern City” 48). Racial prejudice was ingrained in society, institutionalized, that it is no longer recognized by those who express its most foundational issues. Thompson states, “This is galling to the Negroes. Simple racism is an easy thing to confront, but a mixture of guilty prejudice, economic worries and threatened social standing is much harder to fight” (“Southern City” 48). This racial profiling limited the black access to neighborhoods and addresses which might have bettered their positions in society.

The same could be said of access to social structures which would have propelled, specifically the educated black men seeking social status, into positions of power within the whitewashed hegemonic power structure of Louisville. Racism is no longer housed only in the hearts of the older generation. According to Thompson, “There is a feeling in liberal circles, especially in New York and Washington, that the banner of racial segregation has little appeal to the younger generation” (“Southern City” 46). Thompson also states, “Some of the bitterest racists in town belong to the best families, and no Mississippi dirt farmer rants more often against the ‘niggers’ than do some of Louisville’s young up-and-coming executive just a few years out of college” (“Southern City 46). Thompson describes how the white population have been moving their children from desegregated schools and into the suburbs, how white populations do everything in their power to avoid interactions with the black population. Thompson states, “The only time they [whites in Louisville] deal actively with Negroes is when they give the maid a ride to the bus stop, get their shoes shined, or attend some necessary but unpleasant confrontation with a local Negro spokesman” (“Southern City” 45-6). The perception of the black population among the young white population is that of confusion. The

relationship between the races is dependent on the time of day, specifically among the younger population. According to Thompson, “You get the feeling, after a while, that the young are not really serious either about denouncing the ‘nigger’ for ‘not knowing his place’ or about ignoring the colour line for nocturnal visits to Magazine Street. Both are luxuries that will not last, and the young are simply enjoying them while they can” (“Southern City” 46). Thompson shows that the black population is essentially tolerated by the white population and the two only mix over drinks and dancing late at night.

Thompson concludes his article with an explanation of his findings and how he views the racial issues in Louisville. According to Thompson, the main issue present is “the pervasive distrust among the white power structure of the Negro leadership’s motives...The possibility that some of the Negro leaders do sometimes agitate for the sake of agitation often cramps the avenues of communication between white and Negro leaders” (“Southern City” 50). Thompson had previously stated, quoting Murray Kempton, “the special challenge of the 1960s ‘is how to appease the Negro without telling the poor white’” (“Southern City” 46). To this Thompson continues sarcastically at length, explaining that the white population must be appeased as much as the black population through the process of desegregation. Thompson states:

In such a society, of course, it might be argued that almost anything can happen as long as it happens slowly and inconspicuously without getting people stirred up. All of which naturally frustrates the Negro, who has said that he wants freedom now. If the Negro were patient--and who can tell his he should be?-- he would have no problem. But ‘freedom now’ is not in the white Louisville vocabulary. (“Southern City” 46)

Thompson viewed the white response to the racial issues as elitist. The poor white people, who according to Thompson, could not buy their way out of desegregation, would have to be fooled into believing that their status quo had not changed. However, the white elite were quickly moving the black population into the poor white neighborhoods under the guise of urban renewal. Thompson, in turn, associates racism with classism, another major problem faced in America, specifically Louisville, which Thompson addresses when he returns to Kentucky almost a decade later.

#### THE AMERICAN DREAM AND THE DEATH OF DECENCY IN AMERICA

Thompson lamented the death of John F. Kennedy as the death of decency in America and at this point in his career, Thompson's vision of the American dream became a mirror for the loss of decency. Thompson, in a letter to Carey Williams, editor of *The Nation*, Thompson reflected on his original writings following the death of Kennedy and states, "even the people in the drugstores and beerhalls of a Rocky Mountain town seemed to know within hours of Kennedy's death, that it was the end of an era. The sense of loss was almost as clear then as it is now...the only difference is that now it's been documented" ("Proud Highway" 584). Thompson lamented that Kennedy was the only politician who understood the situation in America and was the only who could support the country through the time of change. Considering Kennedy's death as the death of decency in America was accurate, as Thompson viewed access to the means of success as a fundamental human decency. As a cornerstone of the American dream, access to means to achieve greater was rooted in Thompson's definition of the American dream and equated to the American decency expressed in the life of Kennedy. Decency

died with Kennedy, an event which coincided with the rising Civil Rights Movement and racial tensions throughout the country were at an all-time high. As the normative American ideal, hegemonic powers attempted to strip away the ability to achieve from the minority populations, Thompson's visions of the American dream followed suit. What had once been a utopian ideal, was not the harsh reality of America without John F. Kennedy.

Thompson, early in his career, acknowledged his position in society as an outcast and author, destined to write about the world as he saw it- as an individual. In a 1957 letter to his friend, Joe Bell, Thompson describes this position by relating it to Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* stating:

Although I don't feel that it's all necessary to tell you how I feel about the principle of individuality, I know that I'm going to spend the rest of my life expressing it one way or another, and I think that I'll accomplish more by expressing it on the keys of a typewriter than by letting it express itself in sudden outbursts of frustrated violence. I don't mean to say that I'm about to state my credo here on this page, but merely to affirm, sincerely for the first time in my life, my belief in man as an individual and independent entity. Certainly not independence in the everyday sense of the word, but pertaining to a freedom of mobility of thought that few people are able—or even have the courage—to achieve. (*Proud Highway 70*)

Thompson's expression of the individuality of men and the necessity for freedom of thought relates to his vision of the American dream. According to Stephenson, "Thompson found such libertarian rhetoric attractive as it articulated his intuitive sense of



himself as a unique individual whose lifelong quest would be to create himself on his own terms” (3). The dream for Thompson was to be able to express his unique perspective without the pressure of the normative American ideal and he saw this dream reflected in various out-group micronationalisms. Even prior to his reportage, he could see the dream in those unrepresented Americans who had the courage to seek free thought and upward mobility. Those micronationalisms desired to be free to better their position in society, to think for themselves, and to obtain access to the means of achievement. With the death of Kennedy and the death of American decency, the access to the means of achievement became isolated within the normative American ideal. Thompson equated decency with access to achieve better, with the death of Kennedy many marginalized populations lost access to the means to achieve. With the death of decency, so too, followed the death of the American dream.

Thompson traced, through studies of the racial disparity in America, how the normative American ideal had whitewashed the American dream and allowed access to only those Americans who shared their in-group prototype identity. The exclusionary practice of preventing minority and other marginalized populations from accessing the means to achieve greater in society was, to Thompson, the decay of American decency. Adam’s definitions of the American dream had been destroyed and replaced with ethnocentrism, elitism, and exclusion. Thompson’s personal statements in his early career provide readers with the perspective of Thompson-as-himself, linking his three-part identity structure to the American dream. Thompson-as-author wrote about racial disparity and the marginalized other, but Thompson-as-himself sympathized with those populations who were excluded from access to achieve greater while at the same time

was a realist and understood the political game. Those who did not align with the in-group prototype of the normative American ideal (Thompson-as-himself included) would not gain access to the means to achieve greater because of the perception of those populations by the greatest portion of American population.

In conversations with Oscar Zeta Acosta about publishing a book on the “Brown Power” movement, Thompson describes the minority situation and their lack of access to achieve greater based on misconceptions about the population. Thompson states:

I was not impressed with your [Acosta’s] presentation on “Brown Power Through the Vengeful Eyes of Oscar A.” The subject itself will sell a book by somebody, but damn few publishers are going to want a flat-out piece of bugleblast propaganda. You’re asking for some serious beatings—both as writer and as lawyer—if you persist in your notion that all Mexicans are doomed heroes. Some Mexicans, as I recall, actually drive their own cars off of cliffs for no reason at all, or stall in the middle of highways and piss on themselves...right?

...But if you want to write propaganda tracts about how all the brown and black brothers sign TRUTH AT ALL TIMES AND FUCK ANYBODY WHO CAN’T UNDERSTAND IT, then I submit that you’ll probably wind up publishing your own book. Yeah...the whole publishing world is a gang of evil racist swine. (*Fear and Loathing in America* 47-8, emphasis in original)

Thompson displayed the disparity between the view of the micronationalisms by members of the community as compared to the view of the population by the normative American ideal. The way Acosta, a member of the Chicano community and the prominent Chicano lawyer, saw his people as “doomed heroes” while the remainder of

the country existing outside of the Chicano (or black) in-group prototype identity, would see them as the out-group “pissing on themselves” as Thompson states. What was published by media reports often portrayed the micronationalisms in such a way as to promote this negative image of the micronationalism population. Thompson references the “whole publishing world” as a “gang of evil racist swine” and this statement blanketed not only the book publishing but also news and media publication. Thompson-as-himself was able to see that the American dream, access to means for achievement, was limited by the normative American ideal and that perception of that access was controlled in the media. Thompson-as-character within his own writings, as Raoul Duke, but also Thompson-as-author would face the “gang of evil racist swine” many more times. In his work, Thompson would portray the media as biased, uneducated, and unrepresentative of the micronationalism populations Thompson studied. This is addressed in depth in Chapter 3.

## Chapter 3

### Perception of the American Dream and Mainstream Media's Influence

Thompson's Gonzo reporting took the objectivity of journalism and interjected personal narrative, subjective opinions, and often fictional asides creating a new method for exploring and criticizing the mainstream American media. When questioned about his writing techniques and the purpose of his writing Thompson responded, "I'll use all the tools I can get my hands on, to make people like you *think*...My primary idea, whenever I sit down to write, is to *get the attention* of people like you [Carrie Neftzger<sup>13</sup>], and to make you *think*--and your letter of cancellation to Obey tells me I was successful in your case" (*Fear and Loathing in America* 594, emphasis in original). Thompson's journalism did not conform to the standards, but did serve a purpose. Thompson wrote to counter the mainstream media establishment, controlled by the normative American ideal, and to provide an identity to micronationalisms across America which were ignored or misrepresented by mainstream media outlets. Thompson saw the opportunity to represent the whole of American culture through the small segments of society living on the marginal edge of the American Dream. Those people who might not fit the hegemonic in-group prototype model, such as the Hell's Angels, the Chicano population of East Los Angeles, or the political elite. Through exposing issues with the media's representation of these micronationalisms and its effect on the national perception of said

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<sup>13</sup> Carrie Neftzger was a 91-year-old woman who wrote to *Rolling Stone* to complain about the content of their magazine, particularly Thompson's writing, and request to cancel her subscription she never requested. Neftzger states, "Your writer Hunter S. Thompson, who himself is so ignorant that he doesn't know that people with adequate vocabularies and something worthwhile to say do not need to resort to such obvious means of gaining attention and that profanity is a "crutch for conversational cripples"" (*Fear and Loathing in America* 594).

micronationalisms, Thompson was able to show the potential for each group to be considered representative of a greater American nationalism which transcended the whitewashed American Dream ideal. Control of media perception defined the collective identity of America as a whole, because perceptions of the micronationalisms are still representative of the greater American whole and are being altered or ignored. Media perception would isolate a portion of society, preventing them from accessing the collective nature of their American national identity and limiting access to the means to achieve greater, in turn, obtaining access to the American dream. The misrepresentation of micronationalisms is seen most prevalently with the isolated groups, such as the Chicano population where the barrio is miles away from the rest of Los Angeles.

Thompson was able to provide these isolated, marginalized groups with the voice they deserved because of his ability to move between in-groups as a participant observer. Thompson-as-character, engaging fully with the members of society, allowing himself, as with the Hell's Angels, to become one of the marginalized was able to provide commentary on the status of media perception or perceived media bias in America. His unique reporting style allowed him to view both the in-group prototypes he covered while maintaining his association with the hegemonic power structure. When considering the media's position, Thompson was able to work for and with the journalistic establishment while maintaining his unique identity as Gonzo journalist. Thompson's duality was essential to creating the Gonzo persona but also to establishing Thompson's three-part identity structure. He needed to be able to both associate fully as participant observer, while able to write with a journalistic neutrality and if this was not possible, Thompson

created Raoul Duke. The alter-ego sports writer who was able to do and say the things Thompson-as-author or Thompson-as-himself were not allowed by law and editors.

## THE DEATH OF OBJECTIVE JOURNALISM

The media, at one time, had a responsibility to cover the story objectively. Just the facts reporting, scores, stats, and no personal bias. The end of the 1950s and into the 1960s there was sharp decline in this type of reporting. As early as 1958 Thompson wrote, that he had “developed a healthy contempt for journalism as a profession. As far as I’m concerned, it’s a damned shame that a field as potentially dynamic and vital as journalism should be overrun with dullards, bums, and hacks, hagridden with myopia, apathy, and complacency, and generally stuck in a bog of stagnant mediocrity” (*Proud Highway* 139). Thompson was foreshadowing his future in the field as the voice of the other, in opposition to those complacent and aging hacks who controlled the media establishment. Thompson’s scathing comments were written at a time when Thompson was essentially begging for jobs in the profession, yet was willing to strike such a negative cord with those in power. Even early in his career his disdain for the power structure dominated his desire for gainful employment. Thompson once stated, “I think the reason for journalism’s shortage of young talent is just as obvious as the fact that most of the newspapers in the country today are overcrowded rest homes for inept hacks. Burial grounds do not attract talent” (*Proud Highway* 142). The complaint that all journalists were “inept hacks” would be echoed again as Thompson began covering the Hell’s Angels. Mainstream media had done such a poor job covering major events

surrounding the outlaw motorcycle gang and the lies and misinformed stories would only continue to compound as the fantastical stories of rape and rampage would spread throughout the country demonizing the Hell's Angels as America's great white scourge of society.

Thompson's criticisms of journalistic practices did not end with his joining the ranks of professional journalism, if nothing else it became more and more a prominent topic in his works. Thompson states, "Honest journalism is enough to addle the sanest man...Facts are just lies when they're added up...in order to write that punch-out stuff you have to add up the facts in your own fuzzy way, and to hell with the hired swine who use adding machines" (Thompson, *Proud Highway* 529). Objective journalists traded in their responsibility for Party membership and journalism, specifically political journalism became party politics. In his novel, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*, Thompson provides readers with his perspective on journalistic practices stating, "So much for Objective Journalism. Don't bother to look for it here — not under any byline of mine; or anyone else I can think of. With the possible exception of things like box scores, race results, and stock market tabulations, there is no such thing as Objective Journalism. The phrase itself is a pompous contradiction in terms" (Thompson, *Campaign Trail* 33). John Hellmann describes Thompson's coverage of the Presidential campaign showing how Thompson "affords a comically veiled critique of the journalistic "truth" offered by the corporate press under its business pressures" (20). Hellmann saw Thompson's ability to see through the phoned-in, unverified, establishment reports on politics, owned by competing parties and void of the information necessary to make informed voters in America. There was no longer any objective journalism when the press were paid by

political parties. Thompson supports his claims by stating, “The only thing I ever saw that came close to Objective Journalism was a closed circuit TV setup that watched shoplifters in the General Store at Woody Creek, Colorado” (Thompson *Campaign Trail*, 33). One of the tenants of Gonzo journalism was Thompson’s subjective opinions, as a participant in the events, which fueled his cultural criticisms and scathing opinions of American culture and the American dream. In his most famous work, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Thompson describes the press table as beastly through the following exchange between Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo in the lobby of the Mint Hotel:

“We’re right in the middle of a fucking reptile zoo! And somebody’s giving *booze* to these goddamn things! It won’t be long before they tear us to shreds. Jesus, look at the floor! Have you ever *seen* so much blood? How many have they killed *already*?” I [Duke] pointed across the room to a group that seemed to be starting at us. “Holy shit, look at that bunch over there! They’ve spotted us!”

“That’s the press table,” he [Dr. Gonzo, Duke’s attorney] said. “That’s where you have to sign in for credentials. Shit, let’s get it over with. You handle that, and I’ll get the room.” (*Las Vegas* 24-5)

Thompson’s Duke was fighting the effects of acid as he approached the press table; however, Thompson’s description echoed his sentiments towards most members of the press and the American population. Thompson often classified people as animals, beastly gross animals. It is important to note that Thompson-as-author and Thompson-as-character are providing two varying definitions of media and perception. Thompson-as-author is among the professional journalist ranks and writing to counter the mainstream



media bias. Thompson-as-character, Raoul Duke, is providing social commentary on the perception of American identity and culture. Both variations on Thompson's identity use the platform of journalistic criticism as a means to provide social discourse on a variety of subjects.

It was Thompson's criticisms of journalistic practices and the media of the 1960s and 70s which made his works stand apart from others Wolfe classified as New Journalists. Thompson's voice was clearly recognizable among the drugs, outbursts, and excesses and his social commentary was intelligent, informed, and pointed. Within the greater American population, ideals of individualism were said to be valued yet Thompson was able to point to marginalized groups of distinctly individual Americans who were denied traditional American identity due to their otherness. American journalism and lack of stated "objectivity" created much of the cloud of non-American or anti-American identifiers associated with marginalized groups. Thompson, through sports journalism and subjectivity, sought to reframe the other within the scope of the American identity. Using his writing as a tool for social justice, Thompson wrote for the marginalized society and provided a more complete view of American nationalism in the 1960s-70s.

## MEDIA AND THE HELL'S ANGELS

Thompson addressed issues of the mainstream media biasing the American perception of micronationalisms throughout many of his works. In *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga* perception of the Angels was an on-going challenge and Thompson discusses the relationship between the Angels and the mainstream media with

a disdain for the neo-traditional journalistic practices of uninformed reporting, misrepresentation, and scapegoating mainstream media used to cover the sensationalized stories of the Angels' outlaw ways. The Angels had a strange association with the media, a suspicion for journalists, and 1964 saw their notoriety rise to its pinnacle with the "infamous Monterey rape<sup>14</sup> case" which, according to Thompson, "they [Hell's Angels] would owe most of their success to a curious rape mania that rides of the shoulder of American journalism like some jeering, masturbating raven. Nothing grabs an editor's eye like a good rape" (13). Mainstream media pushed the extravagance of the story, in every gory detail, to promote the fear of the other. This propagandizing of events was not unique to the Hell's Angels and according to Daniel Boorstin mainstream media often used a phenomenon he calls "pseudo-events" or false events created for the purpose of reporting them, something to which Thompson and the Hell's Angels were no strangers (9-10). Thompson cites a deal between some Angels and a TV reporter who wanted first hand footage of the Angels terrorizing a town, "but the deal fell through when the Angels offered, for \$100 apiece, to terrorize any town the TV people selected. It must have been tempting, a flat guarantee of some hair-raising footage" (Thompson, *Hell's Angels* 54). Thompson's cynicism for journalism would not stop with this case, however, as his time

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<sup>14</sup> During an Angel rally in Monterrey California two teenage girls were allegedly raped by a large group of Angels. Thompson states, "According to newspapers, at least twenty of these dirty dopehead snatched two teen-age girls, aged fourteen and fifteen, away from their terrified dates, and carried them off to the sand dunes to be "repeatedly assaulted" (Thompson, *Hell's Angels* 13). The media picked up the story and ran with it, making the Angels out to be monsters. However, as the trial progressed all charges were dropped and it was concluded that the girls fabricated the entire story. According to Thompson, "all charges were dropped less than a month after their arrest...Not quoted in the report [by *Time*] were the comments of a deputy district attorney for the county: "A doctor examined the girls and found no evidence to support charges of forcible rape," he said. "And besides, one girl refused to testify and the other was given a lie-detector test and found to be wholly unreliable" (Thompson, *Hell's Angels* 25).

with the Angels would provide ample fuel for the understanding that social orders of Adams's dream would be dictated by the presses and controlled by a small group of like-minded individuals which Thompson referred to as "the Establishment" (Thompson, *Hell's Angels* 26). The "Establishment" Thompson referred to was the, "New York press establishment;" and according to Thompson, "The Hell's Angels as they exist today were virtually created by *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *The New York Times*" (Thompson, *Hell's Angels* 34). The "establishment" controlled representation and reception of out-groups based on the normative American ideal and often this perception would further exclude or isolate various micronationalisms.

Representation and association were key factors in the American identity of the 1960s with a great divide between "us" and "them." The same was true for Hell's Angels and the American Motorcycle Association (AMA), the governing body of sport riding in America. The Angels were ostracized from the AMA because, "according to respectable cyclists, the Angels are responsible for the motorcycle's sinister image" and described an Angel as "a raping brute unfit to eat or drink among civilized people" (Thompson, *Hell's Angels* 162). The AMA sponsored races and competitions, which Angels were excluded from because of the image portrayed by the media especially following the Monterey rape case and subsequent sensationalized headlines. Thompson cited the New York press establishment with creating the rape mania which surrounded the Angels and promoting the sense of fear and exclusion from the greater American society, specifically the AMA. According to Thompson, articles were published without regard for facts using "technical safeguards" such as "alleged" or "it was reported" to avoid making serious, falsifiable claims (Thompson, *Hell's Angels* 34). Irresponsible objective journalism left the Hell's

Angels excluded from the AMA and sport riding opportunities within the motorcycle community. While the Angels did do many of the things the media described, they were often exaggerated to sell newspapers or were biased and only provided the point of view of the police officers involved. When one would speak with individuals involved or witnessed events with the Angels, stories were often very different than they appeared in the papers.

Thompson explained that media perceptions differed from those who actually encountered the Angels. According to Thompson, “the difference in point of view suggests that the Hell’s Angels reality often depends on who describes it” (Thompson, *Hell’s Angels* 30). Thompson includes a story about a filling station owner who had his place overtaken by Angels one night. He allowed them use of his place and left peacefully. When he returned his response was, “I was never so surprised in my whole life. The place was spotless. They had washed every tool they used with gasoline and hung it back exactly where they found it. They even swept the floors. The place was actually cleaner than when they came in” (Thompson, *Hell’s Angels* 84). This encounter could have ended badly, but did not. The report in papers could have read, Angels Seize Filling Station, but that would not have been representative of the actual events. This was Thompson’s main argument with the press and the Angels. Consider an encounter with Thompson’s landlord while he was working with the Hell’s Angels. The landlord was Chinese and did not speak English. This limited exposure to the American media’s portrayal of the Angels changed his perception of the Angels and, according to Thompson, “All of the complaints had to be translated into Chinese, and I suspect he found them inscrutable. With a personal frame of reference unfazed by the English-

speaking mass media, he [landlord] could have no way of knowing why my neighbors were so agitated” (48). The lack of social framework when considering who the Angels were and how they should be addressed provided the landlord with an opportunity for honest interaction with the Angels.

Very few outside of the Angels organization would ever share an honest experience with members and, because of the media’s portrayal of the motorcycle gang, the Angels became monsters, roaming California seeking your daughters without restraint nor conscious, following the Monterrey incident. When Thompson spent time with the Angels he learned that this was not always the case. The Angels, prior to the 1964 rape mania, had been known to help stranded motorists as a way to help reshape the negative persona which had been created around members of the motorcycle gang. According to Thompson:

Many of the outlaws carry business cards, some of them very elaborate...The idea of the cards was born when the Frisco Angels, lamenting their rotten image, decide to win the public over to their side by aiding every stranded motorist they could find and then leaving a card saying, on one side “You Have Been Assisted by a Member of the Hell’s Angels, Frisco,” and on the other, “When we do right no one remembers. When we do wrong no one forgets.” (*Hell’s Angels* 176)

The Angels themselves recognized that they could not change the perception the media had of them, and in turn the perception of most Americans. They only sought to try to show those few who they encountered that not all Angels were something to be feared, that Angels still shared portions of the normative American ideal, and that they could be more than the media representations. The good they did would never sell as many papers

as one good rape story or rally riot. According to Boorstin news was determined by the editors, many of which were controlled by the New York press establishment. Boorstin states, “Our current point of view is better expressed in the definition by Arthur MacEwen, whom William Randolph Hearst made his first editor of the San Francisco *Examiner*: “News is anything that makes a reader say, ‘Gee whiz!’” Or, to put it more soberly, “News is whatever a good editor chooses to print” (8).

Thompson continued to describe the good-nature of many of the Angels stating, “The outlaws can be very friendly with outsiders, but not all of them equate friendship with mutual trust...others will take pains to protect a naïve outsider” (177). This image of the Angels would never reach the majority of Americans because the mainstream media would never know this truth. Instead, media markets picked up on the negative, sensationalized stories promoted by the “Establishment”. Boorstin continues to describe how East coast papers were running stories about the scourge of the West coast without any understanding for the situation and only the perspective of the normative American ideal or the law enforcement officers policing Angel events. As Thompson put it, “no room for this sort of thing [Angel riots] in the Great Society, and *Time* was emphatic in saying it was about to be brought to a halt. These ruffians were going to be taught a lesson by hard and ready minions of the Establishment” (Thompson, *Hell’s Angels* 26) in reference to the Monterey rape case and the libel which followed in every major newspaper in the country. Representation was controlled by the mainstream media and without essential associations to members of either mainstream media or the normative American ideal then access to achieve greater, access to the American dream, was limited.

## MEDIA AND THE CHICANO POPULATION

Thompson was longtime friends with Oscar Zeta Acosta, leader in the Brown Power movement and a Chicano attorney in Los Angeles. With the death of Ruben Salazar, Acosta sought Thompson to provide accurate and informed reporting on the situation. Thompson, with his unique ability to penetrate into various in-group prototypes and move amongst differing parties place Thompson in a position to discover the truth of the situation unlike the establishment media which was under control of the police force. Greg Wright describes the relationship between Acosta and Thompson stating, “And while Acosta and Thompson have separate political agendas, their goals often harmonize to the extent that both aim to rewrite their societies from the marginalized position of being both within those cultures and yet outside them as severely detached commentators” (624). Thompson and Acosta both sought justice for the marginalized people unable to speak for themselves. Thompson saw the potential for this micronationalism to possess the key elements of the American Dream which had been alluding Thompson for the majority of his career. Wright is critical of Thompson and Acosta as both activists and authors for their use of exaggerated fictionality when reporting on events. Wright states:

This article, then, creates a type of meta-reportage, criticizing the social criticism of America’s gonzo virtual landscape; it breaks down Acosta and Thompson’s collective construction of intertextual fictions of fictionality. Analyzing their texts together creates a literary web--linking half-truths, conflicting perspectives, and ideological tensions--that allow us to see the larger pattern of their inherently dialogic work in terms of its positionality, its legal ambivalence, and its

reformulation of the American success story. (Wright 625)

I would consider Wright's "American success story" as equivalent to the American dream; however, I question the extent to which Wright attributes Thompson's excesses to his fictionality. Thompson's Gonzo style was a satire to the point of excess. It was meant to be thought provoking and jarring to the senses. Thompson did not fear truth when discussing issues even when he, himself, would be seen at the center. Thompson never hesitated to criticize the press establishment and their methods, or lack thereof, in reporting on issues of social justice, race, and crime. Thompson did not hesitate to insinuate that the media was controlled by the police, which would prevent truth in reporting.

The Chicano population was already an isolated micronationalism, living within the barrio and very suspicious of outsiders within their community, and when the Chicano population is being killed by police, the media is covering it up for the police, who do the people have to turn to? It is important to understand the micronationalism's internal perceptions and who "Chicanos" were. Identity among the Chicano population was grounded in the naming of Chicano instead of Mexican-American. According to Thompson, "The term 'Mexican-American' fell massively out of favour with all but the old and conservative--and the rich. It suddenly came to mean 'Uncle Tom'. Or in the argot of East LA-- 'Tio Taco'. The difference between a Mexican-American and a Chicano was the difference between a Negro and a black" (Thompson, "Strange Rumbblings" 131). The act of naming themselves as Chicano provided the population their own prototype for an exclusive in-group identity apart from the normative American ideal. Thompson notes that that 'Mexican-American Movement' was in a state of flux,



and this was signaled by the renaming of the population from Mexican-American to, the more representative, Chicano. Thompson states, “The word ‘Chicano’ was forged as a necessary identity for the people of Aztlán—neither Mexicans nor Americans, but a conquered Indian/ *mestizo* nation sold out like slaves by its leaders and treated like indentured servants by its conquerers” (“Strange Rumbings” 138, emphasis in original). With a name to which the population could truly identify, the Chicano movement was born and the growing micronationalism established a framework for their in-group identity. What this identity provided was, as Goffman theorized, a social frame which corresponded to shared understandings of the in-groups social situation.

The Chicano name provided the younger generation a unifying identity from which they could rally around when they were faced with social and racial injustices and created a foundation for the collective identity of the Chicano population. The region where the Chicano movement formed was also uniquely named and the historical significance of Aztlán is equally important to the Chicano youth. Thompson explains that Aztlán was “the ‘conquered territories’ that came under the yoke of gringo occupation troops more than 100 years ago, when ‘*vendido* politicians in Mexico City sold out to the US’ in order to all off the invasion that gringo history books refer to as the ‘Mexican-American War’ . (Davy Crockett, Remember the Alamo, etc.)” (“Strange Rumbings” 137, emphasis in original). Basically, most of the Southwest could be considered Aztlán, Thompson specifies “This territory was eventually broken up into what is ow the states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and the Southern half of California. This is Aztlán, more a concept than a real definition” (“Strange Rumbings” 137). Having a history of betrayal, isolation, and exclusion, the Chicano population held on to a fearful apprehension for

authority and those outside of their unique in-group identity. Thompson explains the concept of Aztlán “galvanized a whole new generation of young Chicanos” and these youth took to political activism and social justice through the movement (“Strange Rumbblings” 137). The act of naming, specifically the removal of “American”, provides a foundation for the collective national identity or the perception of American identity. Ruben Salazar was considered an outsider to the Chicano population because he did not work only within the barrios and worked for media outlets which supported the normative American ideal and the whitewashed agenda for preventing access to achieve greater within the minority population. However, his access to the media establishment, specifically his position with KMEX, allowed him in-group identity within the Chicano micronationalism because he was needed to share information among the community and this was valuable to share accurate information. When the mainstream media is not covering issues in the barrio or is skewing stories in favor of police, having Salazar as an ally was essential to the Chicano community. Salazar was able to inform those members of the community who sought social justice and change through peaceful and lawful means; however, this was not the only population within the barrios and the gangs became violent and counterproductive to the Chicano movement’s cause with some of their extremist tactics.

According to Thompson, within the barrios there were competing sections of the youth population, the activist and the gang-member. The activist would attend rallies and hope to support the betterment of the Chicano population and neighborhood. The gang-members would become violent and instigate riots in the streets. The *batos locos* were the youth/teenaged street gang in the barrio which Thompson compares to the Hell’s Angels

in their penchant for violence and drug consumption. Thompson states, “The *batos locos* get loaded and start looking for their own kind of action (burning a store, rat-packing a nigger, or stealing some cars for a night of high speed cruising on the freeways). The action is almost always illegal, usually violence—but only recently has it become ‘political’” (“Strange Rumbblings” 138-9). The gang did not fear police, violence, or the repercussions of their actions. When they decided to politicize their efforts, they often created more harm than good. The *batos locos* were part of a major riot at what began as a peaceful rally supporting the Chicano movement. Thompson describes the event stating, “The rally *was* peaceful—all the way to the end. But then, when fighting broke out between a handful of Chicanos and jittery cops, nearly a thousand young *batos locos* reacted by making a frontal assault on the cop headquarters with rocks, bottles, clubs, bricks, and everything else they could find” (“Strange Rumbblings 139-40, emphasis in original). The result of this rioting was detrimental to the movement and left the event organizers and police in agreement that “any further mass rallies would be too dangerous” (“Strange Rumbblings” 140). The movement could no longer gather in ways they had previously, their efforts stifled by members of their own community. The perception of the *batos locos* as a menace to the community was shared by both the movement leaders and local police, however mainstream media would only cover the opinions of the normative American ideal, painting the entire Chicano population as violent and rebellious. The view of the police force, which Thompson described as “jittery” shows how this media bias shaped the efforts of policing within the barrio leading to further political tensions.

Thompson did not only present the micronationalism’s perception of their

community, but also shared the perception of the law enforcement officer's perception of policing in the barrio. This was the only vision shared by the media, as the Establishment press did not take the time to interview those living in a community that Acosta compares to a police state surrounded nightly by helicopters. Thompson states, "Paranoia is rampant in the *barrio*: Informers, Narcs. Assassins—who knows?" ("Strange Rumbblings" 135, emphasis in original). With the Chicano population feeling suspicious of their own people, tensions between Chicanos and police were even higher. Thompson describes the view of the situation in the barrio as:

But now, it seemed, the sheriff was finally catching on. The real enemy was the same people his men had to deal with every goddamn day of the week, in all kinds of routine situations—on the street-corners, in bars, domestic brawls and car accidents. The *gente*, the street people, the ones who *live* there. So in the end, being a sheriff's deputy in East LA was not much different from being a point man for the Americal Division in Vietnam. 'Even the kids and old women are VC.' ("Strange Rumbblings" 140)

Thompson describes the tensions in comparison to Vietnam, which was politicizing as many of the protests and rallies the Chicano population were involved in had to do with drafting the youth of their community to fight in a war in which they held no stake and did not support. This was a common theme among anti-war groups. Police felt that they were entering a similar war zone, the barrio had become the jungle of Vietnam and they were faced with threats from all fronts, there were no friends when you were a cop in East Los Angeles.

The fear felt by the police in East Los Angeles was palpable. The threat to the safety of law enforcement increased when journalists such as Salazar covered stories of police corruption and police brutality. Salazar wrote, much like Thompson, for the marginalized and did not fear the repercussions of his discourse. According to Thompson, “His [Salazar] coverage of police activities made the East Los Angeles Sheriff’s department so unhappy that they soon found themselves in a sort of running private argument with this man Salazar, this spic who refused to be reasonable... In the summer of 1970 Ruben Salazar was warned three times, by the cops, to ‘tone down his coverage’. And each time he told them to fuck off” (“Strange Rumbings” 142). With police feeling like they were at war and the Chicano population feeling unrepresented and unwanted, tensions were high in the barrio. Mainstream media’s coverage of the events surrounding Salazar’s death skewed the perception of the events showing the Chicano population as the aggressors and ignoring the police presence as a potential source of violence. Thompson reprints a quote from *Newsweek*, showing the ways in which mainstream media viewed the scene:

For thirteen devastated blocks, darkened stores stood gaping, show windows smashed. Traffic signs, spent shotgun shells, chunks of brick and concrete littered the pavement. A pair of sofas, gutted by fire, smouldered at a kerbside splashed with blood. In the hot blaze of police flares, three Chicano youths swaggered down the ruined street, ‘Hey brother,’ one yelled to a black reporter, ‘was this better than Watts?’ (“Strange Rumbings” 137)

The images only show destruction and paint the Chicano youths as braggarts, taunting reporters. The quote does not include information about cause of the rioting, police

involvement (beyond flares), or the outcome of the riot. Thompson also did not explicitly cite any of this information and choose this quote to support the idea the mainstream media biases their reporting to demean the marginalized and retract blame from the hegemonic powers. Police were left unscathed while the Chicano population seem like riotous monsters who only want to see their cause, their riot, as the greatest, most destructive in California.

Media bias was also present, according to Thompson, during the aftermath of the death of Ruben Salazar. When Thompson describes his first response to the news of Salazar's death, even at a distance, he is distrusting of the details. Thompson states, "I had seen the L[os] A[ngeles] *Times* that morning, with the story of Salazar's death, and even at a distance of 2000 miles it gave off a powerful stench. The problem was not just a gimp or a hole in the story; the whole goddamn thing was wrong. It made no sense at all" ("Strange Rumbblings" 137). The police response to the murder was to attempt to convince the people that it had been an accidental death. Thompson described the story provided by the police stating, "The details were hazy, but the new, hastily revised police version was clearly constructed to show that Salazar was the victim of a regrettable accident which the cops were not aware of until many hours later" ("Strange Rumbblings" 142). Thompson established that the police had revised the story for the media to ensure that coverage would view police action favorably. The media were not reporting the story accurately or honestly for the public but rather were working with the police to ensure that people did not lose faith in their law enforcement agencies. Thompson saw the death of Ruben Salazar, if it was in fact a planned assassination, as an attack on all journalists. Thompson states, "the most ominous aspect of Oscar's story was his charge that the

police had deliberately gone out on the streets and killed a reporter who's been giving them trouble. If this was true, it meant the ante was being upped drastically. When the cops declare open season on journalists, when they feel free to declare any scene of 'unlawful protest' a free fire zone, that will be a very ugly day--and not just for journalists" (Strange Rumblings 137). Thompson feared for both himself and his fellow journalists seeking to write truth and provide the marginalized with a voice. Journalists, such as Thompson and Salazar, often became the enemy but were never hunted and systematically destroyed for their writings. They had their first amendment rights to say what they felt was the honest truth, regardless of whether it aligned with the political or social platform of the normative American ideal currently holding power over mainstream media. The political agenda had become the dominant force in journalism and Thompson saw political reporting as a means to destroy what remained of the American dream, but certainly political reporters no longer held any level of decency, for the country or the craft.

## PERSPECTIVES ON POLITICAL REPORTING

Politics, according to Thompson, had killed the American Dream in many ways. Thompson wrote in his memoirs a reflection on his early attempts to write a book about "The Death of the American Dream" and he states, "I thought, well, the best way to do that is to take a look at politics... A presidential campaign would be a good place, I thought, to look for the Death of the American Dream" (*Songs of the Doomed* 122). It was 1968 and Thompson was gearing up to cover the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, an experience which would eventually reshape his perspective on politics, the

American dream, and American national identity as a whole. The press pass, meant to be access to anything and anyone, was rejected and the peacefully gathering journalist became victim to police stifling a crowd with tear gas and riot clubs. Thompson saw the experience as a lesson in political reportage and the political process. He lamented on his experience as a learning process:

This [political leaders were “born deaf and stupid”] was the lesson of Chicago—or at least that’s what I learned from Chicago, and two years later, running for the office of sheriff, that lesson seemed every bit as clear as it did to me when I got rammed in the stomach with a riot club in Grant Park for showing a cop my press pass. What I learned, in Chicago, was that the police arm of the United States government was capable of hiring vengeful thugs to break the very rules we all thought we were operating under...

There was no point in appealing to any higher authority, because they were the people who were paying those swine to fuck me around...if I couldn’t keep my mouth shut, I would get the same treatment as those poor bastards out on Michigan Avenue, or Wells Street, or Lincoln Park...who were gassed and beaten by an army of cops run amok with carte blanche from the Daley-Johnson combine. (*Kingdom of Fear* 82)

The lesson: reporting politics had become a contact sport and Thompson was smack in the middle of a dangerous game. The spread of information was the game’s objective, but the power play was controlling the information shared.

Thompson, when talking about his own experiences in politics, referred to the need for a newspaper and need to have means to share information. Journalism, at one



time had been a means to do so but with the shape of reporting and the politicized nature of mainstream media outlets this was no longer the case. According to Thompson, “Another reason we had lost in ‘69 was that the *Aspen Times*, the only paper of any influence in town at the time, refused to back Joe Edwards<sup>15</sup>. We just had no way to reach people in town. So I thought, what we have to have is a newspaper. And you can’t just go starting newspapers. But we could start a wall poster” (*Songs of the Doomed* 124). The need to access the media outlets, to control the perception shared by the media was essential to Thompson’s campaign success. While the race was close, he still lost and likely because of the lack of positive publicity. The major newspaper would not support the candidate but also heavily supported the opposition candidate. With copies of the newspaper making it to absentee voters, they were provided with inaccurate information about the election and were not informed about all candidates. This led to Edwards’ loss in the absentee vote numbers. Here Thompson plays both the Thompson-as-character role and the Thompson-as-himself role. As character, he is portraying powerful politico Thompson, campaign manager and strategist. He is also playing the drugged out freak power persona which blurred the lines between Thompson-as-character and Thompson-as-self. Thompson-as-character, like American Perception, link to the concept of a collective self, a common set of shared bonds. In the case of politics this could be seen as political party affiliation, or lack thereof, but could also be seen as voting groups, segments of the population such as the black vote, the freak vote, the youth vote, or specific politicians. These create micronationalisms which can frame the greater national

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<sup>15</sup> Joe Edwards was Thompson’s candidate for Mayor of Aspen in 1969. Thompson described Edwards as “a 29-year old bike-racing head” (*Fear and Loathing in America* 233).

identity within the primary understandings, values and responses to situations of each of the individual groups.

National identity was framed by our elected officials, with the president being the figurehead of American identity. For Thompson, the more he experienced the political process as a journalist and candidate, the more he could see that the death of decency and the American Dream would come in the form of a politician promoted by political reporting. William Stephenson makes note of a pivotal event for youth in the early 1960s stating: “The destruction offer the young generation’s half-formed vision of its future was exemplified by the assassination of John F. Kennedy, an incident that traumatized Thompson, but--much to his anger--did not appear to shock some others, whom he called “giggling scum”” (Stephenson 100-1). The death of Kennedy was the moment everything changed for Thompson and, in Thompsonian fashion, he took to the typewriter and wrote about the death. His words leaving a haunting feeling:

I think what happened today is far more meaningful than the entire contents of the “little magazines’ for the past 20 years. And the next 20, if we get that far...The killing has put me in a state of shock. The rage is trebled. I was not prepared at this time for the death of hope, but here it is. Ignore it at your peril...This is the end of reason, the dirtiest hour of our time...From now until the 1964 elections every man with balls should be on the firing line. The vote will be the most critical in the history of man. No matter what, today is the end of an era. No more fair play. From now on it is dirty pool and judo in the clinches. The savage nuts have shattered the great myth of American decency. They can count me in—I feel ready for a dirty game. (*Proudest Highway 420*)

Thompson, with this statement, elevated Kennedy from man to legend and Kennedy became synonymous with America. The national identity was situated within the ideal of Kennedy, and with his Death, that national identity was splintered. The country was divided and trust was fleeting.

With the death of Kennedy, the American Dream died for Thompson, and he spent a great deal of his career seeking to revive the American dream. After his experience at the 1968 Democratic National Convention Thompson stated, “I went to Chicago to research part of a book on “The Death of the American Dream,” and needless to say my trip was a rotten success” (*Fear and Loathing in America* 127). The trip was filled with tear gas, police violence, and riots in the streets. Thompson was witnessing first-hand the ugly side of politics. Thompson describes the experience in his memoir *Kingdom of Fear: Loathsome Secrets of a Star-Crossed Child in the Fiinal Days of the American Century*. According to Thompson, “Now, years later, I still have trouble when I think about Chicago. That week at the Convention changed everything I’d ever taken for granted about this country and my place in it. I went from a state of Cold Shock on Monday, to Fear on Tuesday, then Rage, and finally Hysteria--which lasted for nearly a month” (*Kingdom of Fear* 78). Thompson saw the American Dream and its death rattle in the political system. In 1968 the death rattle was coming in the form of the treatment of the media by political parties. Thompson’s experiences as a member of the press outside of the Convention displayed how politics and political organizations had corrupted the nature of the democratic practices and had isolated media as the enemy of politics. According to Thompson:

My very innocence made me guilty--or at least a potential troublemaker in the eyes of the rotten sold-out scumbags who were running that Convention: Mayor Richard J. Daley of Chicago, Lyndon Baines Johnson, the President of the United States. These pigs didn't care what was Right. All they knew was what they wanted, and they were powerful enough to break anybody who even thought about getting in their way. (*Kingdom of Fear* 81)

Thompson saw the power of politicians as destroying the American Dream because the American people no longer had a voice. However, Thompson does explore the act of protest and activism as a successful venture in during the era. Thompson states, "the men in charge of whatever you're protesting against are actually listening, whether they later admit it or not, and that if you run your protest Right, it will likely make a difference" (*Kingdom of Fear* 81). Those on the front lines, those reporters and protesters being beaten outside of the Democratic National Convention, were making waves in the political processes because they were protesting and standing for what they saw as their last breath of the American Dream<sup>16</sup>. The act of protest and the ability to be heard by those in power through protest was a foundational component of the American Dream. Thompson saw that there were a few of the political leaders still seeking the American Dream, and in his letter to Allard K. Lowenstein<sup>17</sup>, Thompson praises Lowenstein for

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<sup>16</sup> According to Thompson, "This [protest] is what the bastards never understood--that the "Movement" was essentially an expression of deep faith in the American Dream: that the people they were "fighting" were not the cruel and cynical beasts they seemed to be, and that in fact they were just a bunch of men like everybody's crusty middle-class fathers who only needed to be shaken a bit, jolted out of their bad habits and away from their lazy short-term, profit-oriented life stances...and that once they understood, they would surely do the right thing" (*Kingdom of Fear* 81).

<sup>17</sup> According to comments by Douglas Brinkley presenting Thompson's correspondence with Lowenstein, Brinkley states:

being one of those leaders still with power to affect change. According to Thompson, “You are, after all, one of the few people with enough media-leverage to make The Sign [uniting factor for the Democratic nomination] real” (*Fear and Loathing in America* 126). Thompson saw that Lowenstein had influence over the media but also among the political party.

The Democratic National Convention changed Thompson’s perspective on the state of the American Dream. In a personal letter to his young brother, Thompson lamented the current issues in American politics and political journalism stating, “The scoreboard looms huge, and nobody seems to be winning. Maybe this year of black politics has showed us a mirror of ourselves-- a gang of aging bullshitters and incompetents, like Humphrey & Nixon. That’s the best we can cough up, to speak for us. I seriously believe this country deserves everything that’s going to happen to it. War, revolution, madness, the whole bag” (*Fear and Loathing in America* 137). Thompson’s outlook on America and American politics in the letter reflects Thompson-as-self’s opinion on the topic, or the individual self’s vision of America. Thompson, considering American politics, expressed his personal opinions about the situation at hand, through a private letter shared only with his brother. Thompson’s unprecedented cataloging and record keeping of his correspondences provide a unique look into who Thompson was without the guise of the drug-fueled Gonzo journalist. According to editor Douglas

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One of the sincerest and most courageous left-wing activist of the 1960s Allard K. Lowenstein had co-organized Mississippi’s 1964 “Freedom Summer” protests before turning from civil rights to anti-Vietnam War activities. Rebuffed in his attempts to reserve Chicago’s Soldier Field for a rally of his Coalition for an Open Convention, a week before the Democrats assembled Lowenstein declared-- correctly, as it turned out-- that Chicago was “determined to have a confrontation that can only produce violence and bloodshed” (*Fear and Loathing in America* 125).

Brinkley, writing about *The Proud Highway*, “The letters within these pages are only a fraction of the approximately twenty thousand Thompson has composed since he was a young boy...Thompson corresponded ferociously, always making carbon copies, hoping they would be published someday as a testament to his life and times” (Thompson, *Proud Highway* xxi). Thompson’s foresight to maintain such thorough records of his letters left readers with an uncanny ability to look into Thompson’s individual identity, including thoughts and feelings usually only shared with those closest to him, and this provides the Thompson-as-self perspective on the world around him shaping the third element in his three-part identity. Thompson, while on the political reportage scene, would include his personal opinions as well as those of the alter-ego, Raoul Duke, when the reporting got to weird or dangerous for Thompson-as-self.

#### ON THE CAMPAIGN ‘72

In *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ‘72* Thompson was among the journalists covering the Democratic presidential nomination campaigns which would determine who would run against Nixon in what Thompson considered one of the most important votes of our time. Thompson’s unique writing style allowed him to write about the process in a fictionalized, yet honest way. According to Hellmann, “Thompson uses fabulist methods to penetrate the homogenized fiction within which the mass media shapes our national reality. Replacing commentary with rhetoric, stereotype with archetype, and formula with pattern, he frankly exploits the artifice of knowledge and communication to shape the facts of the campaign into a unique form and, therefore, a unique truth” (18). Thompson considered the mainstream media covering the political

campaigns as “the “opinion-shaping” level of the journalism Establishment in both Washington and New York” (*Campaign Trail* 141). Granting this much power to a group of people easily persuaded and bought was disheartening to Thompson. Something he had loathed since his time in South America. During the 1960 Presidential debates, Thompson wrote a scathing letter to the editor of *Time* magazine decrying the failure of journalists to push important questions on the candidates and instead cushioning the candidates from any real scrutiny by the American public. Thompson writes:

If the fifth encounter [Debate] is as meatless as the first four have been, the judgment will in all probability be a harsh one.

Some of us will be surprised, however, if the blame falls where most of it belongs--on the shoulders of the press, itself.

Cub scouts could have asked more penetrating questions than the journalists have offered thus far, and no amount of grumbling about rules and regulations laid down by campaign managers and the television industry can obscure the fact that the representatives of the press have behaved like trained seals. The questions to the candidates have been, for the most part, nothing more than harmless cues, devoid of weight, meaning or perception....

Never before have two presidential candidates been placed in such a vulnerable position and never before has the press had such a golden opportunity to hack away the sham and expose the basic issues. When the time comes, as it will, to belabor the television industry for staging a political batting-practice instead of a World Series, let the press remember who served up the soft floaters and the “fat ones” down the middle. It was a sad performance, and the sound of

many snickers may be heard in the land when the post starts calling the kettle black. (*The Proud Highway* 234-5)

Thompson painted the presidential debates as the perfect opportunity, live on air, to have candidates answer questions which would break through the campaign slogans and the portrayed images and get to the meat of their campaign platforms. Instead, the media recoiled from the challenge and did not ask questions designed to cause the candidates to flounder on national television. For Thompson it was the responsibility of journalists and the media to share information and expose the worst in politics.

Thompson often felt that journalistic practices were failing our country, but political journalism was one of the most dishonest and biased in his opinion. He once stated, “The most consistent and ultimately damaging failure of political journalism in America has its roots in the clubby/cocktail personal relationships that inevitably develop between politicians and journalists” (*Campaign Trail* 4). Journalists no longer worked to spread accurate information to the American public, instead they worked for the political parties promoting which ever candidate had been chosen to represent that section of the normative American ideal in a given year. The journalists would write in support of a candidate regardless of the candidate’s ability to perform the job because that was the charge of the political party system. In February of 1972 Thompson responded to a young fan’s questions regarding the upcoming presidential election. Thompson stated: “When you talk about voting, however, keep in mind that it’s no real trick to vote for “the best” of a bad lot. You’ll get a little tired of that after you’ve voted a few times. I’ve tried it, & my feeling now is that the compromise/lesser-of-2-evils game doesn’t seem to be getting us anywhere” (Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America* 471). By calling the two-party



voting system the “lesser-of-2-evils,” Thompson was able to identify an area of American nationalism which was changing following the death of Kennedy and the rise of Nixon. Americans were becoming disenfranchised with the political systems in America. College students and young people were beginning to drive more of the campaigns than ever before, yet they were not turning out to vote when it counted most. Elections were determined by voting blocks and party politics because the media had become party affiliated.

Thompson foresaw the downfall of Nixon early on in the campaign and he waited for the chance to cover the eventual destruction of the presidency. Thompson stated, “The Impeachment of Richard Nixon, if it happens, will amount to a de facto trail of the whole American Dream...The real question now is: Why is the American political system being forced to impeach a president elected less than two years ago by the largest margin in the history of presidential elections?” (*Fear and Loathing in America* 588). Thompson questions here not only the political system which allowed this to happen but also the media which did nothing to stop the inevitable. When Thompson reflects on the Watergate scandal and the media’s participation he describes it stating, “One of the most extraordinary aspects of the Watergate story has been the way the press handled it: What began in the summer of 1972 as one of the great media-bungles of the century has developed, by now, into what is probably the most thoroughly and most professionally covered story in the history of American journalism” (“Fear and Loathing at the Watergate” 265). The media had a responsibility to the American people to provide them with accurate information about their presidential candidates and then about the events taking place throughout the Watergate scandal, however both responsibilities were not

met as Nixon was elected by landslide and within two years was facing, along with many of his cabinet members, criminal charges. In the aftermath of Watergate, the American people were provided with a different perspective on their president. Thompson quotes George McGovern talking about the effects of Watergate:

And perhaps in losing we [the Democratic party] gained the greatest victory of all—that Americans now perceive, far better than a new President could have persuaded them, what is precious about our principles and what we must do to preserve them. The nation now sees itself through the prism of Watergate and the Nixon landslide; at last, perhaps, we see through a glass clearly. (“Fear and Loathing at the Watergate” 297)

The people, with the truth out about their elected leader, could now see what the media had been hiding. Media controlled the perception, but when the story became larger than perception there was no way to hide and mainstream media outlets could no longer ignore the truth. The reportage following the Watergate scandal breaking shocked the world and the waves were felt moving through into the 1976 election.

During the 1976 election cycle, Thompson attempted to gather some of the great political and social minded individuals of the time for a conference on how to move forward with the upcoming election which he called the Elko conference.<sup>18</sup> Prior to the start of the event Thompson wrote a memo describing what he saw as the necessity for

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<sup>18</sup> According to Brinkley, “Thompson selected the unlikely venue of Elko, Nevada—population 8,617 at the time—for *Rolling Stone*’s cabal of sharp liberal strategists to sort out the future of American politics...his fellow participants: sponsor Jann Wenner; RFK ‘68 campaign veterans Dave Burke, Richard N. Goodwin, Doris Kearns, and Adam Walinsky, and ‘72 McGovern operatives Sandy Berger, Patrick Cadell, Rick Stearns, and Carl Wagner. Unfortunately, Thompson would pronounce the summit meeting’s results not only unpublishable, but “gibberish”” (*Fear and Loathing in America* 581)

such an event. One of the highlights of Thompson's memo to the group was the following statement: "I think it's important *not* to avoid the idea that reality in America might in fact be beyond the point where even the most joyous & honorable kind of politics can have any real effect on it. And I think we should also take a serious look at the health/prognosis for the whole idea of Participatory Democracy, in America or anywhere else" (*Fear and Loathing in America* 585, emphasis in original). Thompson viewed the political process and inherent in the American Dream and the national identity. With the ways in which politics had begun to crumble around him through the 1968 Democratic National Convention and then the 1972 Presidential Campaign trail, Thompson had lost faith in the institutions which he held so valuable. Voting and politics had lost their luster and were not longer a means to show one's national identity. The President was a figurehead for political parties, not Americans, and the electoral process was dead.

## Chapter 4

### American Culture: Sports, Women, and Las Vegas

Thompson presented the concept of American Culture in a variety of ways, the most prominent of these is through his sports writing. His career as a journalist began conspicuously when Thompson lied his way into a position as sports editor for the *Command Courier*, the Elgin Air Force Base newspaper. He wrote to his childhood friend to tell the story of how he came to be in such a position. Thompson states:

I am now Sports Editor of the *Command Courier*, the official voice of Eglin AFB. Now you know, and I know, that i've never written a word for a newspaper of any sort. And you know that it's ridiculous to even speak of any experience on my part, as far as layout or page arrangement goes. In short, we both know that I'm no more qualified for a post like this than I am for the presidency of a theological seminary; but there is one major fact that makes it possible for me to hold this job: the pole who hired me didn't bother to check any too closely on my journalistic background. (Thompson *Proud Highway* 12)

Thompson began his career in a veil of uncertainty and with little to no background in the field; however, he was able to be successful, in the most Thompsonian fashion. His career at the *Command Courier* provided him with experience, travel, and freedom to write what he wanted, a freedom he often took advantage of and ultimately cost him his post. Thompson became the author of a weekly column titled "The Spectator" in which he wrote critically about whatever he chose, however he was scolded because of an article in which he attacked Personnel Services (*Proud Highway* 21). It was Thompson's

early forays into this type of critical writing which would be echoed throughout his later career, but “The Spectator” was his start. Thompson also acquired his penchant for tobacco and extreme lifestyle choices. He states, “I had to give up cigarettes when my daily consumption topped the 3-pack-a-day make, and I now smoke about two packs of tobacco per day, via the pipe route. Also, without the slightest exaggeration, I drink approximately 20 cups of coffee every 24 hours and manage to sleep about 5 hours as night” (*Proud Highway* 12). Thompson’s Base Staff Personnel Officer wrote that Thompson, “possesses outstanding talent in writing...however, in spite of frequent counseling with explanation of the reasons for the conservative police on an AF base newspaper, Airman Thompson has consistently written controversial material” and because of these comments, Thompson was recommended for the early release program (Thompson, *Proud Highway* 62). He was soon honorably discharged and moved into his civilian career.

Thompson’s collection of letters, *The Proud Highway* contains insight into Thompson’s earliest entries into the concepts of New Journalism and into his eventual trademark Gonzo writing style. According to editor Douglas Brinkley as early as 1957 Thompson was “us[ing] a fictional story to illustrate his quite real despair” which showed signs of early fictionalization and exaggeration, both elements would later be found in Thompson’s Gonzo reportage (Thompson, *Proud Highway* 82). Thompson himself even notes that his writing has become “ridiculous parody” showing his knowledge and awareness of the nature of his writing (83). Thompson’s level of exaggeration and flare for the dramatic did not stop with personal letters to friends and loved ones. Thompson, in a letter of application to the *San Juan Star*, wrote that American journalism had been

in long decline. Thompson states, “I have given up on American journalism. The decline of the American press has long been obvious, and my time is too valuable to waste in an effort to supply the “man in the street” with his daily quota of chichés, gossip, and erotic tripe” (*Proud Highway 178*). The response from William Kennedy, editor of the *San Juan Star* was ripe with snide comments towards Thompson’s arrogance and disregard for the profession. It spurred a lifelong friendship between the two but also pressed Thompson to find any means necessary to get to Puerto Rico and find work as a sports writer.

After these earliest days at the sport’s desk, Thompson returned to the mainland but never gave up his connection to the sports desk. Some of his most famous pieces began as essentially sports reporting, the most prominent of these being *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, but also “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved”, “Fear and Loathing at the Super Bowl” and many others. Thompson finished his career as a sports writer when he began writing for espn.com’s *Page 2* and Thompson’s final book, *Hey Rube: Modern History from the Sports Desk* was a collection of pieces from his online work. Sports were a platform for Thompson to analyze and criticize American culture not only in the sense that sports are a large part of American culture, but also in that American culture represents a portion of the three part national identity. Consider Matthew Winston’s statements regarding sports as culture in America:

That sport can be viewed as broadly significant in American society and culture is, after all, not a difficult argument to make, and, to a certain extent, it is also clear that these sacred mom-apple-pie-and-the-flag ideologies surrounding it are sometimes uncritically reproduced by sports media infrastructure, and a wider

sports-culture, that treats “the world of sports” as implicitly, mythically, an arena to be celebrated, publicized, and enjoyed. (“How Do You Like America?” 405-6)

Sports, particularly football, have become synonymous with American identity. Participation in sport and the media coverage which is associated with it has become an integral part of American culture.

American culture, for Thompson, was synonymous with Sedikides and Brewer’s relational self, which describes one’s personal bonds and attachments. In the case of sport, bonds and attachments come in the form of shared in-group identity through like experience. Connections are created by sharing a common favorite team, connections through a shared team loss, but also in a shared experience of the act of sport creates a common experience which members of society can access. In America, with sport being a major, multimillion dollar industry access to achievement in sport is entirely possible for those select few who have the talent necessary to make a professional team. This is one area of American culture where the in-group prototype identity does not follow the normative American ideal, in today’s culture. At the time of Thompson’s earliest writings this was not the case. Racial injustice was still present in sports. Sports represent the American Dream as well, personal ability to achieve greater success.

Sports are not the only platform Thompson used to represent American culture; however, and when considering the treatment of women in micronationalisms Thompson expressed a growing rape culture in America. While this places a negative connotation on the normative American ideal, the culture was, and is still, present among various segments of American society. With American culture a representational model for the relational self which displays personal bonds and attachments one can also examine

Thompson's association with women in his writing, Thompson-as-writer and the lack of female characters present throughout his body of work. According to James Stull, "Thompson's personal and contextual association with various sidekicks also invokes the pattern of male bonding found in much American popular culture and, as well, reaffirms his inclusion in an exclusively masculine world" (np). The importance of the masculine world of Thompson's writing relates to the masculine hegemonic power found in the normative American ideal. Thompson's writing, and the portion of himself -as-author, remain true to this in-group identity and form homosocial bonds with the various male sidekicks. Homosociality, according to Nils Hammarén and Thomas Johansson, "describes and defines social bonds between persons of the same sex. It is, for example, frequently used in studies on men and masculinities, there defined as a mechanism and social dynamic that explains the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity" (1). Much like the normative American ideal, Thompson-as-author does not include many women, and those he does are often in the position of the "mama", the victim, or the problem. Stall associates this masculine society with, not only Thompson, but most New Journalists writings as well. Participant observation and literary journalism was a boy's club and that some of the associations with women stemmed from, according to Stall, "a refusal to accept certain adult responsibilities and an inability to have a traditional relationship with a member of the opposite sex" (np). Stall continues to position Thompson's masculine society within the greater context of American identity and micronationalisms as he states, "his [Thompson] symbolic (if not real) exclusion of women is at least in part a calculated rhetorical strategy underscoring his social marginality. Thompson seems to believe in the sovereignty of an imperial male self and adamantly spurns any pro-social



“forces” which threaten his independence” (np). Women, to Thompson, existed as their own micronationalism, and it was Thompson’s exclusion of women from his writings which closely related Thompson-as-author to American culture to the relational self.

Thompson also expresses the idea of American cultural through the micronationalism created in the city of Las Vegas. Representative of the greater American culture, the city of Las Vegas provides a perspective into the normative American ideal because Las Vegas is essential a haven for “middle-aged Middle American city dwellers who haven’t caught up with the fifties” (Landreth 200). Thompson had addressed the normative American ideal as a micronationalism in “Kentucky Derby is Decadant and Depraved” but the here Thompson is focused on the development of American culture and the American dream in Las Vegas and the city itself becomes the representative of American identity. The city provides perspective into the nature of American identity through tourism, legal systems, and established social norms. According to Ken Cooper Thompson, through his writing about Las Vegas, “do[es] not simply chronicle the excesses of Las Vegas but participate in a discourse which transforms the city into a metasocial commentary upon America as a whole” (539). The city not only provides a unique landscape through which to view American morality and the Puritanical ethic, but it also allows the normative American ideal to become the micronationalism through the taboo practice of addiction, gambling, and excess. Considering Circus-Circus as the foundation of the American dream, Thompson breaks the normative American ideal into a bestial, parody of true American nationalism. The American dream became a snatch-and-grab operation, seeking quick results with little work.

## SPORTS WRITING

Thompson spent his career expressing a fear and loathing for various American institutions, political leaders, and journalists. There were few safe when it came to Thompson's critical eye. In "Fear and Loathing at the Super Bowl" Thompson states, "there are only a handful of sportswriters in this country with enough sense to pour piss out of their own boots" (Thompson 58). Thompson positioned sports reporting as a lens through which to assess the social issues and provide a universal cultural representation for the evolving American Identity and dying American Dream with the development of Gonzo journalism. Sports as a representative of American identity is not a uniquely Thompsonian concept. For generations people have closely associated their Americanism with games and sports. According to Gerhard Falk, "it is a legitimate claim that sports is a principal concern of the American people and that football ranks high among the sport activities that Americans choose to support...football encompasses all the values that make American society unique" (1). Falk, citing sociologist Robert M. Williams, identifies certain values present in both football and American culture which include: "individualism, achievement or success, activity, work, material comfort, and efficiency" to which Falk adds, "value of equality...liberty and freedom" (2, 4). These values are also present in Thompson's representations of American culture but have been skewed to reflect the "dark reality" of Thompson's Gonzo style (Mosser 88).

Scholars have assessed Thompson's sports-as-America metaphor with varying responses. Matthew Winston considers the metaphor as a method to criticize journalistic practices and acknowledgement of institutionalized limitations on criticism of sports. Winston, much like Falk, associates sports directly with the foundations of American

national identity stating, “Sport can be that important (perhaps “sacred” is at times the better word), and in certain key mythic constructions of ideas of America, sports are crucial symbolic components of dominant ideas of citizenship, ethics, work, and other aspects of social cohesion and political ideology” (405). Winston notes that criticism of sports, as an institution, was disallowed because of a blur between the position of sports writers as “journalist” or “sports publicity” (405-6). Sports were the bedrock of American nationalism and journalists became public relations managers by maintaining the clean-cut, All-American image of athletes and the sporting institution. Thompson, the eternal outlaw, wrote against this tradition and was not afraid to attack the institutions of sport, politics, and American culture in his writings. Matt Johnson hones in on Thompson’s model for writing about sports stating, “Thompson’s sports writings display this same tension between conservative tradition and the outlaw hero’s quest for reform...they [sports] are rituals as atavistic and mind-numbing as the political and social traditions which Thompson schemes to overthrow in his other writings” (np). Prominent examples of both specific sports writing and Johnson’s “other writings” can be found in “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved,” *The Hell’s Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga*, and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.

*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* opens with Thompson, as Raoul Duke, on assignment to cover the Mint 400, an off-road race in the desert outside Las Vegas. Duke’s first encounter with the press-table leaves Duke with fears as he describes the scene around him: “We’re right in the middle of a fucking reptile zoo! And somebody’s giving *booze* to these goddamn things! It won’t be long before they tear us to shreds” (Thompson, *Las Vegas* 24, emphasis in original). With a head full of acid, Duke sees the

press table as crazed lizards spilling blood throughout the hotel bar. The text is highlighted by Ralph Steadman's gruesome illustrations such as the photo below of Thompson's hallucination.



Figure 2: Lizard Lounge (Illustration by Ralph Steadman)

Thompson's drug fueled images invoke his sense of repulsion at the state of journalism in America, which continues as Duke moved from the hotel into the press area at the race itself. Robert Alexander described Thompson's association with the sporting press in his essay, "'The Right Kind of Eyes': *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* as a Novel of Journalistic Development". Alexander states, "he [Thompson as Duke] displays what seems to be an ironic identification with the journalistic professionalism of those other members of the press gathered for the event" (Alexander 23). Thompson refers to himself and the other journalists as "we" to which Alexander associates this with Thompson's connection to the media and press. He is, in fact, both as himself and Duke, connected to the media with all the bias, scum, and dishonesty. According to Alexander, "Such statements *sound* ironic, but the fact is that, for the first part of the book, Thompson is lumped with the professional press" (Alexander 23, emphasis in original).

The race launched from the Mint Gun Club, which remained open and active throughout the race and Thompson describes the sounds of shotgun blasts as "sort of a

steady bass-line—to the high-pitched chaos of the bike scene” (Thompson, *Las Vegas* 32). Following a rapidly devolving aggressive encounter with the registration clerk, Duke flees the press area stating, “Jesus christ! How did we get mixed up with that gang of psychotic bigots? Let’s get the fuck out of this town. Those scumbags are trying to *kill* us!” (Thompson, *Las Vegas* 34, emphasis in original). Thompson’s criticism of the journalists at the race becomes an arching representation of all objective journalists in America during the time. The coverage of the race was impossible, the race itself was nothing more than a dust cloud, but Thompson’s connections between the sports, journalism, and American society were clear. The values of American culture which Falk associated with sport were no longer present in the desert. Journalism, like sport, had become savage and the American dream was a dying myth lost in a dust cloud in the desert outside Las Vegas. The savage imagery and the dying American dream were themes the extended throughout many of Thompson’s writings. He addresses issues of race and classism through sports in “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved”.

Thompson’s perception of the racial issues in Kentucky had not changed much by 1970 when he returned to cover the famous Kentucky Derby. Most scholars cite “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” as the birth of Gonzo journalism. Gonzo was designed as a first run, straight through, no editing style of writing that allowed for Thompson’s subjective thoughts and intoxicant infused asides to be included in the final printing. “Kentucky Derby” is just that, pages torn straight from Thompson’s notebook and sent to print. What was contained in those pages is a scathing report of the state of America, particularly the elitist “whisky gentry” in their “clubhouse inner sanctum in sections ’F&G’” (Thompson, “Kentucky Derby,” 34). In “Kentucky Derby” Thompson

uses sport as a model of American escapism and classist exclusionary practices. When Thompson first arrives in Kentucky, he reads the newspaper headlines—war, destruction, riots, protest. Thompson states, “The rest of the paper was spotted with ugly war news and stories of ‘student unrest’. There was no mention of any trouble brewing at a university in Ohio called Kent State” (Thompson “Kentucky Derby,” 30). The Derby was overshadowing real news events in the world and American culture was using sport as a means of escape from the harsh reality of the Vietnam War causing a decisive split in American society between supporters and protesters. The war in Vietnam was causing, what Christian G. Appy described as a state of American identity in crisis. According to Appy, “with the possible exception of the Civil War, no event in U.S. history has demanded more soul-searching than the war in Vietnam...—these harrowing realities provoked a profound national identity crisis, an American reckoning” (Appy xii). The Derby and Kent State protests were taking place at the same time and the deaths of the four students can only days after the Derby had ended. The Louisville *Courier-Journal* was more focused on “Diane Crump, soon to become the first woman jockey ever to ride in the Kentucky Derby,” a statement which Thompson follows up with an innuendo laced quote about “fondling her mount” (Thompson, “Kentucky Derby,” 30). So was the state of America and American journalism. Thompson’s escapist perspective of the Derby echoes Falk’s “material comforts” in that (2), isolated in the southern sanctity of wealthy white elitism and horse racing, those attending the Derby in “sections F&G” were shielded from the actual state of America (Thompson “Kentucky Derby,” 34). There was no concern about Vietnam or Kent State, only their bets on the race and the mint julep in their hand.

According to Johnson, Thompson “deems horse racing and horse racing culture beyond redemption” and this translates in “Kentucky Derby” (np). Thompson makes a point to highlight this social elitism present at the Derby. While the race is only an afterthought for all parties involved, the practice of attending the Derby is a status symbol and a sport in and of itself. One must have access to “section F&G” and control the perception of oneself to others in the section. Thompson describes this group as “the whisky gentry—a pretensions mix of booze, failed dreams and a terminal identity crisis; the inevitable result of too much inbreeding in a closed and ignorant culture” and considered their behavior as sport (Thompson “Kentucky Derby,” 36). For Thompson, they were like wild animals, bred like the thoroughbred race horses on the track. According to Thompson, “unlike most of others in the press box, we didn’t give a hoot in hell what was happening on the track. We had come there to watch the *real* beasts perform” (Thompson “Kentucky Derby,” 35, emphasis in original). Thompson barely mentions the actual race. His sport reporting devolves into nothing more than recounting his betting losses. The sport was not the story for Thompson, but his experience of participating in the sport culture was.

Thompson sought the face of the American ideal at the tracks but instead finds the antithesis of Falk’s “individualism” in the isolated whisky gentry and the masses of unknowing Derby attendees. In a broad declaration on the state of America, Thompson states, “not much energy in these faces, not much *curiosity*. Suffering in silence, nowhere to go after thirty in this life, just hang on and humour the children. Let the young enjoy themselves while they can. Why not? The grim reaper comes early in this league” (Thompson “Kentucky Derby,” 39, emphasis in original). Considering the time,

Thompson's grim reaper is a pointed reference to military deaths occurring in Vietnam and again refers to the crisis of American identity presented by Appy. The American dream was dying in Vietnam, along with thousands of American soldiers however all this portion of American society was focused on was a horse race and Mint Juleps.

Thompson's scathing attack on southern identity as an isolationist, elitist group shows how institutionalized racism truly was in America. There were no people of color allowed into sections F&G and the news of those colored soldiers dying overseas was inconsequential to the Whiskey Gentry as they would never face the draft, nor would their sons. The whiskey gentry are isolated among the classist elite safe from the fear of death at the hands of the Viet Kong. The face Thompson eventually finds to represent the depravity of the Derby is his own, drunken and downtrodden, he becomes the "awful cartoon version of an old snapshot in some once-proud mother's family photo album" (Thompson "Kentucky Derby," 42). His own identity becomes unrecognizable, as does American identity among the whisky gentry.

## AMERICAN CULTURE AND THE TREATMENT OF WOMEN

Another way to view the hegemonic in-group of the Angels would be in relation to the ways in which they address their women. Thompson discusses the difference between old ladies, mamas, and strange chicks, none of these terms show a respectful reverence for the women in the Angels lives, but the differences are essential. Thompson states, "An old lady can be a steady girl friend, a wife or even some bawdy hustler that one of the outlaws has taken a liking to. Whatever the connection, she is presumed to be spoken for, and unless she makes obvious signs to the contrary she will usually be left



alone (167). Mamas are more like communal property, “They travel as part of the troupe, like oxpeckers, fully understanding what’s expected; they are to be available at any time, in any way, to any Angel, friend or favored guest--individually or otherwise” (168). There was little regard for these women, other than the respect for another man’s old-lady. The same could be seen in the Angel’s perspective on rape. The Angel’s, because of their perceptions in the media, according to Thompson “will continue to be arrested for rape with monotonous regularity. It has come to be known as one of their specialties--particularly gang rape, the most painful and degrading kind of sex assault” (Thompson, *Hell’s Angels* 188). Thompson’s sarcastic, candid tone here reflects the national “rape mania” and headline grabbing rape journalism which Thompson criticized. However, the Angels had their own definitions of rape and women’s participation in group sex with Angels. The victim intimidation and public shaming of women separate the Angels from American social norms. According to Thompson, “There are stories even in police records of girls who freely admitted to making it with two or three Angels and then trying to call a halt. What does a jury make of testimony to the effect that the first hump was for love, the next for kicks and all the others were rape?” (Thompson, *Hell’s Angels* 189). The Angels hegemonic masculine society cannot allow female presence to disrupt the in-group male dominance and, as such, women must be subservient to the Angels’ demands. If a woman says stop, this was meaningless if she had previously said ok. The in-group mentality of all-on-one, one-on-all applied to more than fights but mamas as well.

*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* provides another example of image of women in Thompson’s writing. The character Lucy is one of few female characters present in any of Thompson’s work and is a source of controversy for the two stalwart characters on

their rampage through Las Vegas. According to Daniel Grassan, “The world of that Duke projects in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is strictly male-dominated and misogynistic--the female is purposely excluded” (108). Grassan also presents the counter American Dream, or the American Nightmare,<sup>19</sup> which is what Duke arrives in with the introduction of Lucy. Thompson describes Lucy in the most animalistic of ways, “I recognized at once as a human form: a girl of indeterminate age with the face and form of a Pit Bull. She was wearing a shapeless blue smock and her eyes were angry” (*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* 110). Lucy was a young girl picked up and drugged by Dr. Gonzo, Duke’s companion throughout the Las Vegas novel. She poses a threat to their homosocial status and also to their freedom as she could, at any moment, realize that she has been drugged and raped by Dr. Gonzo. Grassan defines Lucy as the femme fatale of most post-modern noir writings. According to Grassan, “Duke is cognizant of the damage Lucy could cause him and his attorney. Within minutes of meeting Lucy, he immediately codes her as the potential fatal woman” (108). Understanding that Thompson (as Duke) here is exerting his own views on women and their roles in society, Duke proceeds to convince Dr. Gonzo that the girl must go. His first proposition is to sell her to the cops at the district attorney’s convention which they are covering. Grassan addresses this situation also, explaining that it is Duke’s misogynistic ideals which propel him to such extremes as a way to rid the two of the womanly issue.

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<sup>19</sup> According to Grassan, “The word “Dream” hints to the fantasy of fantastical nature of the American Dream. Though many try, only a select few can actually achieve instant overnight success. This gives rise to a large number of failed dreams which become “The American Nightmare.” The American Nightmare not only parallels the American Dream but also ultimately overshadows it, but the sheer lopsided amount of failures over successes” (102).

Duke's responses to the Lucy situation project misogyny at its extreme and highlight Thompson's pension of satire of another worldly level. Duke deplore Gonzo to allow him to pimp Lucy, high on acid, out to the District Attorney's Convention which Duke is slated to cover. He states that he thinks Lucy could make "a grand a day" (*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* 115). This would be deplorable enough, but Duke continues to push the level of absurdity with Dr. Gonzo. Thompson pushes the envelope of rape in America and the mentality of masculine dominance to the extremes when he states, "I figure she can do four at a time," I [Duke] said. "Christ, if we keep her full of acid that's more like *two grand* a day; maybe *three*" (Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* 115). Thompson here is pushing the envelope to invoke the understanding that Gonzo's behavior is out of sorts and does not follow social protocols however, his extreme satire reads as if Duke would have considered pimping Lucy to the highest bidder. This would have been the epitome of the American dream in Las Vegas. Rape culture was an issues presented in many of Thompson's works. In *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* Thompson talks about the city of Washington D.C. as "the "Rape Capital of the World" and cites that "Rape is said to be up 80 percent this year over 1970" (11). Thompson's nonchalant nature in referencing such horrific statistics is representative of the American culture towards women during the time. Just like the Hell's Angels and the "rape mania" cases, Thompson's means of disposing of the woman problem show how American culture deemed women as inferior and, essentially, created a micronationalism of the entire female population in America.

#### THE CITY OF LAS VEGAS AS AMERICAN CULTURE

The city of Las Vegas within Thompson's novel, *Fear and Loathing in Las*

*Vegas*, represents an interesting perspective on American culture and the destruction of morality and decency in America. Cooper states, “Las Vegas has come to be represented as a pornographic distillation of the American Dream reaching critical mass--at once repellent and stimulating, but in either case manufactured and controlled” (539). This concept of the dream’s repellent side is echoed by Robert Sickles who states, “Thompson contends that a new American Dream has been born out of the shambles of the rags to riches myth, and that at the heart of the new dream is no longer the belief that hard work and faith in the system will be rewarded; instead, the best most Americans can hope for is to simply survive” (63). Las Vegas was a city in which to survive, not to thrive. The survivalist mentality was magnified in the culture of Las Vegas as a city of excess and debauchery. Thompson’s novel decries the treatment of people in the city as animalistic and inhuman at times. The backwards ideals of gambling and drinking as staples of the city’s allure leave American decency a shell of what the perceptions once were. Ken Cooper describes Las Vegas stating:

Because Las Vegas has such distinctive connotations for millions of Americans who have never been there, it may be inferred that our apprehension of the city frequently (or even predominantly) occurs in the realm of cultural discourse. Not only does the city mean something to us, but we have made that meaning. The writers I [Cooper] discuss are therefore participants in this discourse, and their texts are documents of an ongoing cultural practice which has created “Las Vegas” alongside our conception of the nuclear age. Paradoxically, these apocalyptic narratives of Las Vegas enable us to confront our own misgivings, and a city that offers no hope of escape is one means of escaping out global

nuclear predicament. (Cooper 530)

Here Cooper is considering the association of Las Vegas with the nuclear testing grounds, another point of environmental rape and destruction of the lands around the city.

However, the key is the connection of the meaning we, as Americans, have created around Las Vegas and the rape of our own national identity. It is as if the city rapes the concept of pure American decency and leaves readers questioning the position of such a city in the quest for the American Dream. The dream found in Las Vegas is the death rattle dream of middle-class white America. The idea that they could arrive and make money quickly, without working for it. This is the American Dream that was born on the backs of others, much like the whitewashed American Dream of our forefathers. Cooper continues, “Isolated from the so-called real world and apparently antithetical to American Heartland values, the city is nevertheless irresistibly alluring and, once you are inside, impossible to escape” (Cooper 533). The inescapability of Las Vegas provides an interesting concept when considered alongside the American dream.

The American dream is considered the ultimate American goal, success in the face of all odds, but the dream is also inescapable and permeates all three elements of national identity. Within our country, you must achieve to be considered successful, this is performing the in-group prototype identity of American nationalism. Within the micronationalisms Thompson portrays, including the city of Las Vegas, this dream remains inescapable yet obtainable. With Las Vegas, the Dream is modified to include the snatch-and-grab mentality of Las Vegas. According to Grassian, “A new space is needed and is created in Las Vegas to mass-produce the pursuit of the American Dream. Anyone can go to Las Vegas to gamble and theoretically achieve the American Dream”

(103). Grassian continues to explain the connection between gambling and addiction, supporting the mentality of an inescapable Las Vegas. When one is addicted to gambling, then the heart of gambling in America is the only place to be. Grassian continues, “Fear is at the center of acknowledging that the American Dream itself is corrupt, predicated by greed, avarice, violence, and addiction. Belief in the American Dream can help to exaggerate these potentially destructive impulses” (103). The destructive impulses, addiction, translate into the destruction of Puritan ethical morals established by the normative American ideal. Landreth states, “They [tourists] go to search and to escape; to find release from the petty pace and Puritan ethic. They want to grasp, just for a moment, the essence of the American dream: whiskey, wealth, and power” (197). Landreth’s focus on the Puritan ethic here is essential to understanding why Thompson was able to find both American culture and the American dream in Las Vegas. Landreth continues stating, “The atmosphere [in Las Vegas] is so alien, so extravagant, so glamorous that the tourist abandons his Puritan constraints, knowing that the excesses are temporary and that he can retreat to ethical and moral security. For the essence of the American Dream is in the search--and there is the Puritan ethic: success lies in the seeking, not in the enjoyment of attainment” (198). The normative American ideal, or hegemonic power, consisted of white, Protestant males, any deviation from this was seen as an affront to the identity of the elitist power structure. Even Kennedy, being Catholic, was controversial and disrupted the power structure, as the most powerful man in the world was no longer part of the normative American ideal. The Puritans, being the first protestant settlers laid the foundation for a strict moral code which remained ingrained in the normative American ideal even into the 1960s and 70s as Thompson’s career was blossoming. The excess and

depravity of Las Vegas culture ran counter to these Puritanical codes, however, the city had become a mecca for those normative American idealists seeking a good time.

Thompson's exploits against the Puritan morals are most prominent at Circus-Circus where, in the throes of an ether high, Duke describes the scene in detail.

Thompson states:

The Circus-Circus is what the whole hep world would be doing on Saturday night if the Nazis had won the war. This is the Sixth Reich. The ground floor is full of gambling tables, like all other casinos...but the place is about four stories high, in the style of a circus tent, and all manner of strange County-Fair/Polish Carnival madness is going on up in this space. Right above the gambling tables the Forty Flying Carazito Brothers are doing a high-wire trapeze act, along with four muzzled Wolverines and the Six Nymphet Sisters from San Diego. (*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* 46)

The casino was the perfect place for Duke and Gonzo, under the influence of such strong drugs, to escape the Mint 400, Debbie Reynolds, and Las Vegas drug laws. Jennifer Russell described Circus-Circus as Thompson's "Pleasure Dome" and likened the city to Xanadu in Coleridge's poem, Kubla Khan. Russell states, "*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* simultaneously functions as an example of one writer's attempt to create a perfect prose as well as an explication of Las Vegas as a materialistic, artificial American Dream" (43). Russell continues her discussion describing Circus-Circus as Thompson's pleasure dome stating, "Circus-Circus, the hedonistic casino with surrealistic delights and trapeze acts" (43). The audacity and excess of the casino counter the morality of the

normative American ideal and leave those in-group members with a fractured identity. Landreth states, “The tourist leave the stark reality of the desert to indulge in the fantasies of Las Vegas. Anything is possible. He can triumph at the gambling table and be an instant millionaire. He may be besieged by the alluring women of his dreams. At the very least he can abandon his conventional identity and adopt the role of his choice” (198). This role, as tourist, allows him to dissociate from his normative American ideal and become a member of a marginalized society, if only for the duration of his stay in Las Vegas. However, as Cooper stated, Vegas becomes inescapable. The tourist, leaving the city, longs for the excess and the freedoms of the gambling floor and seeks a return to the other. This draw of addiction brings millions back to Vegas year after year.



## Chapter 5

### Conclusions

In 1958, faced with liminality at the end of the Beat Movement and the rising of the Civil Rights Movement, Thompson, like many Americans, sought answers, sought to regain a lost identity as the 1950s ended and the 1960s were a mystery. Thompson found solace in his craft, and for him writing was the catharsis and the answer to issues of social justice, nationalism, patriotism, and lost identity. According to Thompson:

the most overriding of all human desires is the need to amount to something. I'm not talking about the old Horatio Alger gimmick, but the more basic desire to know that your life means something...if only for an instant the image of man is imposed on the chaotic mainstream of life and it remains there forever; order out of chaos, meaning out of meaninglessness. Just as some people turn to religion to find meaning, the writer turns to his craft and tries to impose meaning, or to sift the meaning out of chaos and put it in order." (Thompson, *Proud Highway* 128)

For Thompson, there was more success in writing than in protest, more change effected through words than violence.

Thompson used his new style of Gonzo journalism, his fear and loathing, to bring a new type of news reportage to America. Thompson, through his new reportage and participant observation, wanted to correct the perception of marginalized groups such as the Hell's Angels or Chicano population. Thompson addressed the ways in which perception influences access to means to achieve in *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga* stating:

Politicians, like editors and cops, are very keen on outrage stories, and State Senator Fred Farr<sup>20</sup> of Monterey County is no exception...His reaction to the Monterey headlines was quick and loud. Farr demanded an immediate investigation of the Hell's Angels and all others of that breed, whose lack of status caused them to be lumped together as "other disreputables." In the cut-off world of big bikes, long runs and classy rumbles, this new, state-sanctioned stratification made the Hell's Angels very big. They were, after all, Number One-- like John Dillinger. (Thompson *Hell's Angels* 22)

Thompson highlights the fact that the story was so sensationalized that the politicians pushing for reform and justice did not know the details or truth of the event. Instead, they ran a media campaign of fear against anyone who looked the part of "other disreputables" leaving a portion of American society isolated and without a voice for their plight.

Thompson makes it clear that "state-sanctioned stratification" was a driving factor, as mainstream media and politics had become ingrained in the culture of fear towards those outside the normative American ideal. Jason Vradenburg, discussing the "undesireables" in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, states "Historically in Las Vegas the "undesirables" Thompson mentions—be they cheats, addicts, vagrants, or any others who may disrupt the free flow of capital and its attendant illusions—are dealt with violently through extralegal means, though with the tacit approval of the legal system. In other words, undesirables...have no protection from the law" (160). Those living a marginalized life were isolated and with protection from those institutions designed to traditionally keep

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<sup>20</sup> Senator Farr was over Monterey County where the Angel's infamous rape case and subsequent media trial took place. Thompson describes Farr as "a leading light of the Carmel-Pebble Beach set and no friend of hoodlums anywhere, especially gang rapists who invade his constituency" (*Hell's Angels* 22).

society safe. Because these micronationalisms did not follow the normative American ideal they were not granted this protect, as the hegemonic power controlled the police and the perception of the micronationalism through the media.

Nick Nuttall described Thompson's fear and loathing as, "Thompson's fear wasn't so much narcissistic as communal. It was obvious that he feared for the United States, a fear embodied in what he termed the death of the American Dream" (103). Thompson had spent his career trying to define and find the American Dream. Through sports, politics, fear and loathing, he sought answers to an unanswerable question. Greg Wright sums this up well stating, "In [his] own paradoxical way...Thompson--though riddled with fear, loathing, failure, and dissipation--present the American public with a renewal of hope in notions like the American Dream" (641). Thompson's work sought the dream, chronicled its death rattle, and then found a new variation of the dream alive in the eyes of marginalized micronationalisms such as the Chicano population of East LA and the Hell's Angels. The death rattle of the dream was the death of the whitewashed dream, the death of the dream for the middle-class, white Protestant male who, through decades of entitlement and privilege, were finally faced with the fact that micronationalisms across the country were rising, flourishing, and people like Thompson were taking a notice. These micronationalisms became more representative of the original ideas of the American dream than the elitist white hegemony had previously allowed. The dream, as Thompson had come to define it, was more than Adams's idyllic notions and not only represented one portion of the three parts to the national identity but was ingrained in all aspects of nationalism.

Like the city of Las Vegas, the American Dream was inescapable. Thompson found a portion of the American Dream in every aspect of American life and in the face of every member of American society. The Dream could no longer be whitewashed, isolated in a hegemonic power because that dream had died with the end of the 1960s. Thompson wrote a beautiful eulogy for the idyllic Adamsonian American Dream in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Thompson states:

San Francisco in the middle sixties was a very special time and place to be a part of. Maybe it *meant something*. Maybe not, in the long run...but no explanation, no mix of words or music or memories can touch that sense of knowing that you were there and alive in that corner of time and the world. Whatever it meant...

...

And that, I think, was the handle--that sense of inevitable victory over the forces of Old and Evil....We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave....

So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost *see* the high-water mark--that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back. (Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* 66-68)

Thompson here laments the death of the American Dream of the 1960s with the oncoming 1970s and a pending continued Nixon presidency. Nixon was Thompson's lifelong enemy and source of constant fear and loathing. Thompson presented Nixon as the enemy to all American decency, a scourge of society draining America of all

identifying factors and leaving us with the death rattle of the American dream. Thompson states, “Richard Nixon has never been one of my favourite people, anyway. For years I’ve regarded his very existence as a monument to all the rancid genes and broken chromosomes that corrupt the possibilities of the American Dream; he was a foul caricature of himself, a man with no soul, no inner convictions, with the integrity of a hyena and the style of a poison toad” (“Richard Nixon Doll” 197). Hellmann addressed Thompson’s views on Nixon stating, “Dr. Thompson’s America is a promise betrayed, a possibility of noble humanity which repeatedly reveals itself as only a sick beast. Nixon is hateful because he gives vent to that tendency, a monster whose imminent re-election by landslide will assert once and for all the bestiality of the country” (24). Thompson sought more for America than the bestial and corrupt political arena into which we entered with the rise of Nixon. This was a pivotal moment in the quest for the American dream.

The post-beat movement dream of activism, political change, and social justice but welcomes the birth, or rebirth, of the Dream with new eyes. Aware now of the discrepancies in the Dream, the exclusion, elitism, and the depravity of the normative American ideal, Thompson was able to watch the wave break and roll back. This image invokes thoughts of the great flood, cleansing the world of evil. For Thompson, the cleansing was shedding the normative American ideal from a position of power and ownership of the American Dream. Thompson’s career, tracing the Death of the American Dream was not about the Dream dying at all. Instead, about a dream reborn from the ashes of racism, political discourse, social injustice, and the creation of a national identity based on the diverse micronationalism present in American society.

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