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The American Dream is Dead

The American Dream is dead. At least, that seems to be the provocative message of two influential authors and social commentators, Joan Didion and Hunter S. Thompson, who, from different perspectives, critique the prevailing cultural ethos which has motivated and shaped generations of Americans. "Over time," writes Professor Sarah Churchwell of the University of London, "the phrase 'American Dream' has come to be associated with upward mobility and enough economic success to lead a comfortable life. Historically, however, the phrase represented the idealism of the great American experiment." (Churchwell) According to Didion, writing in 1966, the American Dream could be said to have been essentially murdered. To sum up Thompson, writing five years later in 1971, it basically OD'd. More recently, others (for instance, the Coen Brothers and Denise Chavez) have picked up on these cultural obituaries and recast them for a new generation.

Joan Didion's essay "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream" originally appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*—the same magazine that, in the 1940's, published the sentimentalized artwork of Norman Rockwell. In the true story of Lucille Miller, Didion engaged the American Dream, what she called the "Golden Dream," in the experience of American women:

“We were just crazy kids” they say without regret, and look to the future. The future always looks good in the golden land, because no one remembers the past. Here is where the hot wind blows and the old ways do not seem relevant, where the divorce rate is double the national average and where one person in every thirty-eight lives in a trailer” (Didion 1)

To California's blazing-hot San Bernadino Valley, Lucille “came from somewhere else, came off the prairie, in search of something she had seen in a movie or heard on the radio” (Didion 3). A religious wife and mother, Lucille was accused of murdering her dentist husband, Dr. Gordon "Cork" Miller, in cold blood, in order to collect his life insurance. Witnesses at Lucille's trial included a friend who called her "'the most wonderful character' she'd ever known" (Didion 5), while a belligerent paramour, Arthwell Hayton, told of his and Lucille's sordid affair and suggested she was both delusional and violent. On the surface, Lucille was "a woman who believed in all the promises of the middle class"—a pursuer of "what she imagined to be the good life" (Didion 7)— but, underneath, she was shown to be desperately disillusioned and unhappy—disillusioned and unhappy enough, said Didion, "[to] calculate how to burn her husband alive in a Volkswagen" (Didion 7). After a scandalous trial that included the revelation that Lucille was pregnant, she was convicted and sentenced to life in prison in the California Institution for Women, of which Didion wrote, "A lot of California murderesses live here, a lot of girls who somehow misunderstood the promise" (Didion 12). Didion concluded her essay about this "misunderstood promise" with a one-paragraph description of Lucille's ex-paramour's marriage ceremony, in which the bride's "coronet of seed pearls held her illusion veil " (Didion 14). This "illusion veil" serves as Didion's apt concluding metaphor for the titular "Golden Dream"—what can be seen as the dead American Dream for many modern American women—what Didion called "an intention gone haywire" (Didion 2).

Journalist Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear & Loathing in Las Vegas* describes the dead American Dream from another perspective, in memorable language and with vivid illustrations (by Thompson's long-time collaborator Ralph Steadman). Raoul Duke is on a road trip from Los Angeles to Las Vegas (and back), accompanied by Dr. Gonzo, a 300-pound Samoan he calls "my attorney." Duke is assigned to report on the Mint 400, a real-life Las Vegas off-road race, and, later, on the fictionalized "National District Attorneys' Association Conference on Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs." The story begins, "We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold." (Thompson 1) Throughout the rest of the drug-fueled trip—as Duke and Gonzo encounter, one after the other, a hitchhiker who had "never ridden in a convertible," a crowd of shot-gun enthusiasts, a depressed DA "from someplace in Georgia," a naïve maid, a no-nonsense waitress "with a brawler's jawbone," a crazed police officer, and a guy selling a gorilla for $750 in a Las Vegas casino bar—Duke is shown more and more the remoteness of the American Dream he is trying to capture.

Duke and Gonzo are given a tip on an isolated place where they might locate the American Dream—"the Old Psychiatrist’s Club on Paradise." When they arrive, they find “a huge slab of cracked, scorched concrete in a vacant lot full of tall weeds. The owner of a gas station across the road said the place had 'burned down about three years ago'” (Thompson 246). What used to be a great establishment had come crumbling down, analogous to the idea of the American Dream. Further, one of the characters, Lou, says that “the only people who hang out there is [sic] a bunch of pushers, peddlers, uppers and downers, and all that stuff” (Thompson 241). In other words, the only people that appreciate what used to be a great establishment are the ones that are unable to come to terms with reality. This description about the state of the Old Psychiatrist’s Club naturally leads to an evaluation of drugs' role in Thompson's vision of the American Dream. Duke describes how he spent his trip's budget in detail:

We had two bags of grass, seventy-five pellets of mescaline, five sheets of high-powered blotter acid, a salt shaker half full of cocaine, and a whole galaxy of multi-colored uppers, downers, screamers, laughers . . . and also a quart of tequila, a quart of rum, a case of Budweiser, a pint of raw ether and two dozen amyls. (Thompson 11)

When someone decides it takes a grocery list of drugs to alter their perception of reality in order to find an idea, the American Dream, it doesn’t bode well for that idea’s legitimacy and existence in real life. Thompson makes his point, the American Dream, as he understood it, was dead, basically OD'd on drugs and alcohol, and destroyed by violent living.

*Fear & Loathing in Las Vegas* and *Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream* have a number of commonalities. First, in both works, the protagonists set out with the intention of fulfilling a stated objective—which represents the author's version of the American Dream. Second, both stories end with disappointment and disillusionment. And third, characters in both works are said to ignore the past and, accepting the futility of the Dream as traditionally understood, to try to redefine their hopes and aspirations. For example, in *Fear & Loathing in Las Vegas*, Duke says “there’s a sign on the side of the building that says Psychiatrist’s Club, but they’re completely remodeling it and everything” (Thompson 237). This “remodeling” is expressive of the death of the American Dream and the effort to come up with a new way to define success and meaning, to fit a new generation. In *Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream,* this same theme is shown when Didion writes, “The future always looks good in the golden land, because no one remembers the past. Here is where the hot wind blows and the old ways do not seem relevant” (Didion 1). Didion, in a way, anticipates Thompson!

The stories, however, differ in several ways as well. First, from start to finish, Thompson's story is a man's reflection on the death of a man's stereotypically skewed vision of the American Dream: money, drugs, booze, women, and guns. Didion, on the other hand, writes with a vision of the American Dream that is more feminine, more personal, and more poignantly relational. There are tears in Didion's sad vision; jeers in Thompson's. Thompson, writing post-Vietnam and immediately pre-Watergate, is also much more explicitly political in his vision, showing a disdain towards the legal, political and economic establishment: he writes of "that bastard Nixon," for instance, and "Pentagon generals babbling insane lies" (Thompson 42). Didion, writing two years before Nixon's election, carefully kept her political opinions out of the story she told.

Thompson's and Didion's points of view on the death of the American Dream are reflected and contrasted in more contemporary visions as well. We first turn to a post-modern California, to a more familiar western setting, Los Angeles, California, to the Coen Brothers' film "The Big Lebowski." In this comic film, we see that the American Dream is dead, a systematic failure, but, in contrast to Didion and Thompson, the hope is still alive, however faintly. To the Coen Brothers, the dream of Los Angeles is shown a maladaptive coping mechanism for the inherent systemic failure of modern American society and culture. It is a delusion we convince ourselves is true in order to continue marching on. In an essay titled "The Dream Abides: 'The Big Lebowski,' Film Noir, and the American Dream," ShaunAnne Tangney explains the importance of the setting of Los Angeles:

In "The Big Lebowski," this failure is highlighted not in the characters themselves (after all, it is systematic, ideological failure, not character flaws that matter here), but in the Los Angeles settings the film employs. The failure of the American Dream is made manifest in the film's use of and commentary on space itself, or lack thereof, in its neat juxtaposition of rich and poor, lavish and meager space. (Tangney)

And later adding,

In "The Big Lebowski," we have an America without frontier, an America that has run out of space, and the film provides clear commentary on the death of social idealism at the hands of rampant materialism, which only augments the cynicism, alienation, and bitterness Hills finds in classic noir. (Tangney)

Unlike Thompson's Raoul Duke, the Coens' Jeff Lebowski—an unemployed slacker who goes by the name "Dude" (the rough contemporary equivalent of Everyman)—still believes in the American Dream, to the extent he believes in anything at all. While laid back, the Dude still believes that with hard work, he is entitled to prosperity. The Dude and his clueless bowling partners—including Walter Sobchak, an angry Vietnam veteran—are representative of all those who have been passed over by the American Dream. In a case of mistaken identity, the Dude becomes violently entangled with another Jeffrey Lebowski, a soulless millionaire whose porn-acctress wife is kidnapped and held for a million dollars ransom. At a superficial level, this second Lebowski—"the big Lebowski"—seems to be a prime example of what success in the American Dream looks like. He even spouts rhetoric like “My advice to you is to do what your parents did and get a job” and “The bums will always lose” (The Big Lebowski). However, it is later revealed that his efforts are responsible for none of his apparent success or wealth, and all of his money is from his wife. This illustrates that the character that is portrayed as a success of the American Dream is often, in the end, illusory, self-deceiving, and (as in Thompson) unattainable to ordinary people.

In the 2001 novel *Loving Pedro Infante*, by Denise Chavez, this fascination for the unattainable is shown again very clearly. Chavez writes with something similar to Didion's evocative nuance. The tragic protagonist, a middle-aged divorcee named Teresina Ávila, explains her obsession for the handsome real-life actor Pedro Infante, a Mexican heartthrob from the 1940's and 50's, who starred, says Teresina, in 63 movies: “He’s the man we want our men to be. And he’s the man we imagine ourselves to be if we are men. The man we want our daughters to have loved. Pedro’s the beautiful part of our dreaming” (Chávez 23). This sentiment is consistent with all the works we have analyzed so far—it is easier to believe in a fictional dream than it is to face reality. This is again illustrated when Teresina says,

It is in here in the sensuous shadows that I forget all about my life as Teresina “La Tere” Avila, teachers aide at Cabritoville Elementary School. Maybe that’s why I like Pedro's movies so much. They make me think to stop thinking or stop thinking to really think. It is here that I prefer to dream (Chávez 17)

Teresina is the president of the "Pedro Infante Club de Admiradores Norteamerican #256. "Just watching [Pedro] on the screen makes my little sopaipilla start throbbing….” (Chavez 23) It is revealed that the actor was killed in a plane crash many years earlier, but in a beautifully relevant plot point, some in Chavez's story believe that Pedro Infante is still alive: “Irma reiterated her long-standing argument that Pedro wasn't on the plane, that it was a getaway plan” (Chávez 256). Much like the American Dream, despite evidence of its demise, many hold onto the hope that it is still alive, as letting it go would be too painful. Writing 25 years apart, Didion's ideal is still in some sense real to Chavez's Teresina. And those may be the last two places where the American Dream still survives—on the screen and in our dreams.

In conclusion, Didion and Thompson each decry the death of the American Dream. It is dead, they argue; but in a way, it doesn’t really matter, because, when we dig deep enough, we discover it was always built on lies anyway: "To hell with the American Dream" (Thompson 159). Chavez and the Coens don’t completely disagree, at least as we experience life in our day-to-day life. In the end, whether the American Dream was murdered, it OD'd, or it died in an accident, the important question, according to all these commentators, is, what will we replace it with? Today, Hunter Thompson, himself, is dead (by suicide), and Joan Didion is living as a semi-retired widow, age 86. But (like Chavez and the Coens) a new generation of Americans still struggles to discover and articulate what will be a new, more authentic, more resilient Dream.

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