

Wasted

The American Dream Blacked Out

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Abstract

This project argues against the so-called “American Dream”- a myth perpetuated by various media forms of the 20th century. Combining the examination of various texts where alcohol and drug use move past a recreational activity to a detrimental lifestyle, chiefly Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, as well as 21st century televisual media such as *Breaking Bad*, Nassour speculates on a “blackout culture” that is prevalent in contemporary times. First, the author emphasizes that this “blackout culture” is formed by participants who, seeking the “American Dream” myth, engage in alcohol and drug abuse to an extent that their life choices revolve around excessive use. Second, the author argues that these participants are so prevalent as a population that they affect contemporary American society by their actions. By analyzing these discourses, Nassour argues for a rejection of myths perpetuated by blackout culture and a solution to this self-destructive lifestyle.

What has the American Dream become? What was it really? The answers to these questions are explored by numerous authors, including Hunter S. Thompson and F. Scott Fitzgerald; and, in many ways, the attempt to define the American Dream shapes its mythology. For many, the American Dream is just a dream, a thrill never fully fulfilled. Its myth is associated with consumerist ideals promoted by the media, movies, and celebrity fashion. Failure to attain this dream leaves its forlorn believers abjected, separated from their selves and lost. Alcoholism and drug abuse are the symptoms of this abjected state. People try to satisfy an insatiable appetite induced by the void left from the disillusionment of this failure through constant consumption. Wealthy few capitalize on these addictions through both free market and black market enterprise, while others depend on small-time drug commerce for their livelihoods.

The illusion of the American dream led to the birth of a generation characterized by blackout culture, a generation raised in a consumer based society that breathes waste: *the wasted generation*. Blackout culture is a term defined by alcoholism, drug addiction, and black market enterprise. The increasing influence of blackout culture on the wasted generation is due to both the abject realization that the American Dream is an illusion and the exploitation of this illusion by a consumer-based society to promote excessive consumption.

The Disillusionment of the Dream

The American Dream was imagined at the birth of the United States of America as a symbol of prosperity and freedom through honesty and hard work. Since then, the dream has become a hollow symbol of what it once meant, its perpetuated existence almost mocking its former glory. It is visible yet untouchable, a light that recedes farther into the horizon as one approaches it. In F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* the American Dream is represented as a green light that marks both Daisy's house and Gatsby's dream. Nick Carraway, the narrator of the novel, reflects upon "Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock... his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it," visible yet unattainable (180). The illusion of its attainment is what drives Gatsby to chase this light, this dream, to his death. The dream eludes him because "it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city" (180). Gatsby's failure to recognize that his dream is long dead makes his reality an illusion. Living in the illusion of his dream the reality that, "the colossal significance of that light had... vanished forever," materializes too late (93). When that illusion is finally broken and the death of his dream is real he, too, dies. Like Gatsby, America lives in the false reality of the American Dream and like the light from a star, by the time the dream reaches our reality, it has long been dead.

The American people chase the dream because of the promise of the possibility of grasping it without realizing that it is not material. Author M. Thomas Inge argues that *The Great Gatsby* "deals symbolically with the failure of the American Dream of success... the possibility of rising from rags to riches through industry, ambition, self-reliance, honesty and temperance" (148). Of course, Gatsby didn't rise to success through honesty and temperance but criminal activity. Part of the myth of the dream is that it is morally possible to achieve the impossible in the land of the free. "In this myth... lies the genesis of what impels Gatsby... By imitating the great American moralists, Gatsby rises to

be a rich and powerful criminal" (Inge 148). He dishonestly rises above poverty when honesty gets him nothing, proving that the opportunities promised by the American Dream are hollow. People must create their own opportunities for success. The idea that one can achieve success by simply taking advantage of one of the many opportunities that supposedly already exist in the United States is a fantasy.

Disillusionment with the dream is inherited and further explored by the love generation. The 1998 movie, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, based on the semi non-fiction novel by Hunter S. Thompson, follows the character Raul Duke (Thompson) and his attorney to Las Vegas to find the American Dream. The "trip [is]... a classic affirmation of everything right and true in the national character; a gross, physical salute to the fantastic possibilities of life in this country..." a very gross salute, in every sense (*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*). These words are narrated over a scene in which Duke and his attorney are high on mescaline at the beach. Duke stands on a rock using the American Flag as a cape, flapping his arms like a bird as if the flag were his wings. This satirical scene parallels the satire of its narration. The mocking tone of these words suggests that the American Dream and all it represents is a joke, a "trip" to Vegas with "a head full of acid" (*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*). The action of pretending to fly using the American flag as wings is symbolic of the false promise of the American Dream. A bird flying free is a symbol of freedom. A man pretending to fly free like a bird will never really fly. Likewise, one can fantasize that one is free but that doesn't make it so... Thus, the promise of freedom is represented as a joking fantasy and what is left of the American Dream is nothing but a cheap imitation – from concentrate.

Chasing something you can never catch is like a man trying to flap his arms on mescaline in the hope he might lift-off and fly. As Duke walks through the hotel casino early in the morning he reflects on the scene and people who "look like caricatures of used car dealers from Dallas," people who look like imitations of an American stereotype. Used car dealers are generally associated with crooked deals and trusting smiles. In this sense, his description acts as a metaphor for the American Dream because, like a used car salesman, the dream presents itself as one thing but is actually something else entirely. Duke goes on to describe these "caricatures" as "still humping the American dream," still chasing "that vision of the big winner somehow emerging from the last minute predawn chaos of a stale Vegas casino." Here, the American Dream is represented as a cheap fantasy, the desire to rise above of the "chaos" to fame and fortune

through quick, easy success. The setting of this victory lies in the shadow of the dream's former glory. The "stale Vegas casino" leaves its victor with a sense of stagnant gratification. Each bet is placed with the hope that it will prove to be the great gamble, the one that finally fulfills the dream; but for those chasing it, no win is ever big enough, and eventually, the house always wins.

Success in the American Dream requires the ability to turn fantasy into reality. However, in order to materialize an illusion one must first corrupt reality. In the movie, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, in the midst of a drug tirade, Duke goes to the bar at a circus themed casino to find the American Dream and meets an employee having a drink. Duke says to him, "This is it. The American dream. We're sitting on the main nerve right now," associating the dream with the circus. By nature the circus is a freak show, something fake and staged. The association of the dream with the circus gives the dream the same fictitious quality. The employee responds, "The owner always wanted to run away and join the circus when he was a kid. Now the son of a bitch owns the circus." The owner's story is the ideal representation of the American Dream. A little boy dreams of one day joining the circus then grows up to own a circus. He creates his own circus, his own world. He turns his dream into a reality by creating a different one. However, the purity of his success is challenged by the employee's final comment, in which he implies that the owner's wealth is somewhat due to crooked activity because he has a "real license to steal." The dogged delivery of this statement in a drunken-stupor suggests that the owner has the license and uses it. This corrupts the owner's rags to riches story because his success perpetuates, and is perpetuated by, corruption. In agreement Duke asserts, "It's the American Dream come true," affirming the insidious nature of the American Dream by attributing "a license to steal" to its successful attainment. Furthermore, the owner of the casino achieves his dream by exploiting the desire for the dream in others. Part of the illusion of the American Dream is that it purports to apply to everyone. The dream can only come true for those few who are willing to do what it takes, whatever that means, no matter how terrible. Not everyone can live the dream. In creating a fantasy world that provides the American Dream experience to anyone, for a price, the owner of the casino successfully achieves the dream in reality for himself.

The American Dream is an illusion because it is a lie. It is the false promise, the false hope, of freedom and equal opportunity for wealth and prosperity through honesty and perseverance. The idea of the dream is something beautiful that masks something ugly. It is like an is an unexpected package that comes in the

mail, addressed to you personally, wrapped in colorful wrapping paper and topped with a brilliant, exuberant bow. The writing on the flimsy Hallmark card is printed in extravagant calligraphic letters, and reads: "Love, your Secret Admirer" with a smiley face and a heart. You tear through the paper to get to the gift inside. You open the box and sitting there, like a freshly baked pumpkin pie, is a big, steaming, pile of shit. Then you sit down, take a big spoonful and eat it because *Cosmo* says its good for the skin.

The Media's Dream: Consumerism and Celebrity Culture

Internet, magazines, movies and celebrities... they all promote the ideal life-style of the rich and famous as the American Dream. The dream has elevated itself beyond attaining economic freedom and equal opportunity to accumulating gross wealth and special treatment. Celebrities are talked about, watched, and photographed. People listen to what celebrities say, watch what they do and try to mimic their style and actions. Celebrities are rich, powerful, and well dressed. Most people want to live the celebrity life-style in America because it is glamorized. This life-style and the American Dream are inextricably linked. In her book, *Celebrity Culture and the American Dream: Stardom and Social Mobility*, Karen Sternheimer illustrates this link through the claim that media "stories about the movies and their new stars not only attempted to sell the industry, but [sell] the idea of the American Dream itself" (3). The media promotes the idea that earning celebrity status is the ultimate realization of the American Dream and nothing less will do. As a result, most people wrongly believe that, for them, this kind of lavish dream is possible when it is not. In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway says, "Americans, while occasionally willing to be serfs, have always been obstinate about being peasantry" and the American Dream is very emblematic of this statement (88).

The dream represents the idea of freedom and prosperity, which are two things peasants do not possess. This mentality drives the dream, and the media exploits it to precipitate success in certain desired industries. Celebrity culture offers a glamorous glimpse into a life of riches and royalty. In this glimpse there exists fear and hope, the hope that one-day the dream will be possible, and the fear that one will be reduced to peasantry. It is the fear of poverty that makes it plausible that the celebrity life-style is living the American Dream. Thus, through media promotion, celebrity culture is a symbol of the illusion of the American Dream.

People see celebrities, who seem to live the dream, looking glamorous and happy, and falsely conclude that it really exists. The vision of the dream, as it is portrayed in celebrity culture, is a tool used to manipulate the people into consuming more. Its possibility is more feasible when the illusion is brilliantly advertised. Sternheimer explains, "The American Dream... seems very real when we see the plethora of people who have entered the realm of celebrity" (2-3). But the reality is that the American Dream is not true, even for celebrities. Though their so-called "life-style" is used to sell the dream celebrities do not live the dream. It may seem magnificent living like a celebrity but there is a price to living the lavish life. Yes, people listen to what celebrities say, but every public word, and even a few private, is spoken into the public ear. Disguises are necessary outside the home. Celebrities are more likely deal with lawsuits from people making false claims in order to get money. They are constantly criticized, analyzed, rated and photographed. More importantly, a celebrity must always compete to maintain status and make a living off of physical perfection, style and outrageous, excessive habits. Celebrities are rich and famous but they are not free. In fact, most live under constant scrutiny. The dream is nothing then but a mirage and celebrity culture is the false idol of a consumer society.

Indulgent consumption and partying on a mass-scale is encouraged by celebrity culture and, by association, the American Dream. Many celebrities are only famous because of their large bank accounts. If a person possesses immense wealth and uses that wealth to lead an extravagant party life, then that person will most likely become a celebrity. Sternheimer asserts, "The idealized life-style of the American Dream constantly changes... because a consumption-based economy requires that we continually aspire to have new material goods... celebrity status is often conferred based on lifestyle rather than talent" (11). The best example of this is Paris Hilton. She is not famous for anything except having a rich father and drinking heavily in her reality T.V. show called *The Simple Life* (2003). In this show, Hilton makes a joke of her wealth by having a camera crew film the "drama" of her life. The show mainly consists of her going on exorbitant shopping sprees at expensive stores, getting VIP treatment, and drinking heavily at the most expensive clubs in L.A. Paris Hilton's life-style represents, for many, the American Dream. Seeing the dream live and in color through the television screen makes the dream seem more real, however, it is not possible to reach through the television. One can see it, and almost reach it, but never touch it. Not only is Paris Hilton a symbol of the myth of the American Dream, she is also the spokeswoman for excessive consumption and alcoholism. *The Simple Life* is not real life. Nevertheless, some still try to imitate Hilton's

style to look expensive and important, to achieve the illusion of the dream. In fact, "celebrities have served as representatives of the link between status and consumption throughout at least the last century" (Sternheimer 11). People tend to dress, act, and talk like celebrities. Celebrities help companies advertise products because people are more likely to buy them. People buy what the celebrities promote because the consumption of that product is associated with acquiring an elevated status, which brings them closer to the American Dream. The promotion of the dream through celebrity culture perpetuates its myth and encourages excessive national consumerism.

The American Dream is identified with mass-consumption, which encourages wasting resources. In *The Great Gatsby*, Gatsby's wealth is abundant and extravagant. His house "was a colossal affair by any standard... with a tower on one side, spanking new under a thin beard of raw ivy, and a marble swimming pool, and more than forty acres of lawn and garden" (5). The grandeur of the house is both brilliant and ostentatious. Its size is exaggerated and its finish polished. There is a brand new tower complete with authentic "raw" ivy that has the professional appearance of growing naturally over time. The swimming pool is lined with marble, a very expensive stone, and not concrete. The characteristics of the house very confidently assert the wealth of its owner because it is made of expensive materials that are difficult to acquire. The house is a statement of success and fortune, but it is also a statement of waste because maintaining a house this extravagant requires the use of extensive resources. It is a monument to the American Dream, both beautiful and fallen. However, the house and the wealth itself is not Gatsby's dream. It is the perceived avenue to his dream, Daisy. Once he acquires the house, his monument of wealth, Gatsby hosts many large parties at which no expense is spared.

On the buffet tables, garnished with glistening hors d'oeuvre, spiced baked hams crowded against salads of harlequin designs and pastry pigs and turkeys bewitched to a dark gold. In the main hall a bar with a real brass set up, and stocked with gins and liquors and with cordials so long forgotten that most of his female guests were too young to know one from another. (40)

The amount of food and liquor provided at these affairs is bountiful and fantastic and denotes a massive amount of consumption. The decorated food and impressive collection of liquor is a display of his power as both a consumer and a wealthy man, but it is also a demonstration of the needless, cocky expenditure of resources. All of these expensive parties and gaudy

demonstrations of wealth are a response to losing Daisy. He becomes rich because she wants to marry a rich man. He throws these huge parties and lights up his house because "he wants her to see his house... he half expected her to wander into one of his parties, some night" (79). Gatsby loves Daisy with such intensity that earns enough money to last generations and spends a lifetime trying to win her back. The insidious side of this story is that Daisy's main interest is money. This attitude sends the message that in order to realize one's dream, get the girl, or be happy, one must not only have incredible wealth, but also spend it and constantly advertise it. Aspiring to the American Dream means more than just having money, it means conspicuously consuming copious products with that money, even if, especially if, some of those products go to waste. Excessive consumption of resources will always breed waste.

The Abjected Dream

The American people are stuck running towards the receding light of the American dream never to reach it. Inevitably, we are struck by the notion, the obvious fact, that the dream is not real. Like a dream, the American people, legal and illegal, have this illusion of freedom. The illusion is shattered by the realization that it is not reality. In the shattered pieces of the broken dream, we are abjected and defeated, and the dream becomes a nightmare. Most Americans will never become rich or famous and some will not even be able to feed their families. This is the truth behind the myth. The realization of its truth has rendered the soul of our country broken, abjected from the body of its State. According to Julia Kristeva in *Approaching Abjection*, the abject is "not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me" (2). The myth of the American Dream is the abject part of the dream itself. It is meaningless but not insignificant. It is a crushing weight of nothingness. Once the country acknowledges the truth behind the American Dream the weight of its former illusion is unbearably apparent. Kristeva goes on to describe the abjected as being "on the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if [he] acknowledge[s] it, annihilates [him]" (2). The myth of the American Dream is that it appears real, yet it is not. America is teetering on the edge between the reality of the dream and complete hallucination. The *wasted generation* lives on this edge. In the wake of this abjection the wasted generation is dejected, escaping reality and the acknowledgment of the dream's fallacy. Kristeva articulates that "the deject is... a stray... on a journey... the end of which keeps receding. He has a sense... of

the loss that the pseudo-object attracting him represents for him, but he cannot help taking the risk at the very moment he sets himself apart" (8). In this sense, the wasted generation is "the deject" of the American Dream, which is its pseudo-object. It is like Gatsby's green light. It is visible on the horizon, but as one walks towards the light, it recedes farther into the night. The journey of the wasted generation leads us to a destination of nothingness. As this generation strays from the American Dream, it sets itself apart from the previous generations in its abjected existence, and for the deject "the more he strays, the more he is saved" (Kristeva 8). The wasted generation strays from both the reality and the illusion of the American Dream into blackout darkness, finding sanctuary in alcohol and other drugs. The United States is the abjected states. The wasted generation is straying from both the dream and the reality into the recesses of the country's sub-conscious.

Blackout Culture

Blackout culture is a term that describes the social, artistic and political manifestations of alcoholism, drug addiction and black market enterprise in the wasted generation. Legitimate and sober is not the aspiration of this generation. Weekend goals include blacking out and every night is a night to never remember. Games like beer pong, flip cup, kings cup etc. are designed to get people as drunk as possible as fast as possible. The inevitable result is blacking out, in which the memory of one's drunken evening is completely black and both the illusion and the reality are wasted, gone. In *Writing Under the Influence: Alcoholism and Alcoholic Perception from Hemingway to Berryman*, Matts G. Djos maintains that, "for the alcoholic, reality and sobriety are terribly unnatural, flat, and boring... in drunkenness, an individual can experience the illusion of a satiated appetite," a person can fill the abject void with blackout darkness (5). The wasted generation is a generation of abjection in which alcoholism and drug addiction are safe-havens from both dreams and reality. One cannot dream when blacked out. One does not dream when passed out. One simply exists, not as the self, but as a being both separated from and part of the self, the non-self. For a brief time, drugs and alcohol can induce this transcendental state in which the self, as well as conscious memory, is repressed. In this state, the unconsciousness, the abject self, takes control. One both exists in non-existence and does not exist in existence. Thus, the blacked out state is the perfect escape for the deject because it mimics the abjected state. In this abject state, the drug culture is intricately laced into the American Dream through consumerist ideologies. In her book, *Inventing the Addict: Drugs,*

Race, and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century British and American Literature, Susan Zeiger writes:

Amy Kaplan has identified a central paradox within U.S. exceptionalism... [Her] model of empire and anarchy mirrors the development... from a Romantic-influenced model of intoxication, understood as an unlimited psychic expansion, to the more modern concept of drug addiction as the mire of self-dissolution and abject imprisonment or exile. (35)

The acknowledgment of the illusion of the dream precipitates an abjected state, in which the impending collision of the dream with consumerism and drug culture generates an explosion. From the ashes of that explosion emerged the wasted generation and its blackout culture. As the dream fades, the wasted generation strays further into "abject imprisonment" through the increasing popularity of drugs and alcohol.

In blackout culture, alcoholism is a celebrated affliction. For example, the popular rap song called "Swimming pools," by Kendrick Lamar, consists of lyrics that promote not only heavy drinking, but also blackout binge drinking. The song lyrics to the chorus are as follows:

Pour up (drank, drank), head shot (drank, drank)
 Sit down (drank, drank), stand up (drank, drank)
 Pass out (drank, drank), wake up (drank, drank)
 Faded (drank, drank), faded (drank, drank)***

After every action, the background vocals of the song sing, "drank" implying that one drinks liquor between each action. Each of the actions in the chorus is related to drinking. For example, "pour up" and "head shot" describe the actions of pouring alcohol and taking shots. Thus, between drinks he takes shots. This advocates heavy consumption of alcohol to everyone who listens to the song. Furthermore, the chorus goes on to say "pass out," "wake up," and "faded" indicating that Kendrick drinks so much he will pass out then drink again when he wakes up, and then drink again after getting "faded," which is a slang term for smoking weed. Blackout culture is defined by the kind of binge drinking and alcoholism apparent in this song. In the first verse of the song the lyrics explain that people drink excessively because "some people like the way it feels," and "some people wanna kill their sorrows." Perhaps without knowing it, the song exemplifies the mood of the generation. It recognizes alcohol as a therapeutic

remedy for the abjected and, at the same time, contributes to the growth of blackout culture.

Many different artists have emerged from the wasted generation to define blackout culture. Dada Life, for example, creates a remix of the Xzibit song "Alcoholic" called "Alcoholic." The song consists of house music mixed with the lyrics, "Call it what you want to call it, I'm a fucking alcoholic," which repeats over and over again in the song. House music is generally good party music because everyone can dance to it. It is loud and up-beat enough to precipitate what is called "raging," a term used to describe binge drinking, excess drug use, and random, sometimes violent, sometimes stupid, sometimes funny, conduct. The lyrics express a direct acceptance of alcoholism as a societal norm. It supports an attitude of indifference, or as the wasted generation would say DGAF, or "don't give a fuck." The same line repeats over and over again instilling an acceptance of excessive drinking in its listeners. This repeated phrase coupled with house music encourages alcoholism, as if the message of the song is "I am an alcoholic and I am proud." As the American Dream fades away the culture fades to a blackout. The wasted generation escapes both the dream and reality through heavy hard partying and, eventually, blacking out, and no one cares because no one will remember it tomorrow.

The wasted generation, in this abjected state, finds freedom through blackout culture. There is a sense of shamelessness, as if neither the consequences of the real world nor the loss of the dream is important because no one will remember. The hip-hop song "Young, Wild & Free" by Snoop Dogg & Wiz Khalifa exudes a similar air of indifference as the Dada Life remix, "Alcoholic", in that it acknowledges but does not condemn the prevalence of alcoholism. It encourages an increase in the imbibing of substances. The chorus to this song declares, "So what? We get drunk. So what? We smoke weed. We're just having fun. We don't care who sees." It is a statement of purposelessness. It represents the idea of freedom through embracing the abject. The song, with a happy, but mellow, party melody, embraces getting drunk and smoking weed as an escape, indifferent to the loss of memory and in favor of the experience of the party. Getting wasted and blacking out is, in a sense, realizing the dream because in non-existence one can realize the non-existent. In the dream's loss, our dejected nation has strayed from the pseudo-object towards the bottle and, in blacking out, the dream is slowly forgotten because its existence is no longer necessary. In a blacked out state all existence is non-existent, and as a being in this state, one is indifferent to this non-existence. In this indifference, the wasted

generation is free from the pain and fear of losing the dream and its illusive torment.

In the disillusionment of the failure of the American Dream, the drug culture and consumer-culture copulated and gave birth to the blackout culture. For example, celebrities play a major role in the popularity of blackout culture. For celebrities, it is fashionable to go to rehab or jail on substance charges. Many celebrities, like Paris Hilton (as discussed previously), who are binge drinkers and drug addicts, are also role models for younger children who grow up to mimic and magnify their habits. T.V. Shows like, *JERSEY SHORE* (2009-2012), endorse drunkenness, stupidity and violence, glamorizing alcoholism. The stars on the show are famous for rude behavior, loud mouths, crude vocabulary, blacking out after heavily drinking, and doing outrageous and, sometimes, disgusting things. Many of those from the wasted generation are attracted to this kind of media and mimic these celebrities by imbibing the blackout culture. Movies like *The Hangover* (2009), *Old School* (2003), *National Lampoon's: Animal House* (1978), *Dazed and Confused* (1993), *National Lampoon's: Van Wilder* (2002), *Beerfest* (2006), *Grandma's Boy* (2006), *Eurotrip* (2004), etc., etc...all consist of characters whose focus is to get drunk or high. These movies advocate elaborate partying, extreme drinking, and drug abuse. They exemplify the spirit of the blackout culture. Bigger parties. More booze. Louder Music. Nights filled with ridiculous adventure and no memory of any of it the next day. As previously established, celebrities are symbols of the American Dream. When a symbol of the American Dream does something easy to imitate, naturally the followers of the dream will follow. The celebrities that act in these films play, either knowingly or unknowingly, a part in romanticizing the blackout culture because as symbols of the dream they associate drugs and alcohol with the dream itself as well as an escape from the dream.

Blackout Culture: Pushing the Limits

Excess. Drugs. Alcohol. In the disillusionment of the American Dream and under the influence of blackout culture the wasted generation is escalating to a level of extremes. In the beginning of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, with Johnny Depp, Duke steps out of the car to get something from the trunk and as he inspects his suitcase in the scene, his voice narrates the contents in his bag:

...two bags of grass, seventy- five pellets of mescaline, five sheets of high-powered blotter acid, a salt shaker half full of cocaine, a whole galaxy of multi-colored uppers, downers, screamers, laughers... Also a

quart of tequila, a quart of rum, a case of beer, a pint of raw ether and two dozen amyls... Not that we needed all that for the trip, but once you get locked into a serious drug collection, the tendency is to push it as far as you can.

This is quite a laundry list of drugs and alcohol. The problem with drugs and alcohol in a consumer-based society is that they are addictive substances. Addictive substances plus a consumer society equals massive drug intake. This impressive collection of substances is the perfect illustration of the blackout culture. Part of this culture is "the tendency to push" everything "as far as you can." In blackout culture, a person drinks as much as possible before blacking out then, hopefully, passes out. The extreme abundance of drugs and booze in Duke's suitcase implies an equally extreme, but physically possible, intake of drugs and booze. As the movie continues, Duke and his attorney do not fail to consume as many drugs as they collect. When Duke wakes up in his hotel room after his adrenochrome trip he finds himself in the middle of the room filled with brown, murky water up to his knees. The room is savagely torn apart, disgusting fluids and foods are crusted on the walls, it is trashed and wasted, and "there [is] evidence... of excessive consumption of almost every type of drug known to civilized man since 1544 AD." The room is filled with waste of all kinds. Of course, Duke cannot remember the drug trip because he blacked out from the exceeding number of drugs in his system. This scene is the final pinnacle of the movie because it exposes the dream as an illusion. The extreme to which Duke and his attorney consume drugs and alcohol is exemplary of the blackout culture as a response to this illusion.

Drug addiction, however, is not limited to illegal, party drugs. There are many legal prescription drugs that people take to escape the reality of the broken dream. Instead of blacking out through binge drinking, some people slip into that abject non-existence through the abuse of anti-depressants, anti-anxiety, and some pain medications. *Xanax, Prozac, Lexapro, Zoloft, Ambify, Cymbalta, Limbitrol, Vivactil, Ambien, Klonopin, Percocet, Valium, Lorazepam*, and the list goes on. The 2001 movie *Prozac Nation*, based off an autobiography written by Elizabeth Wurtzel, follows the character Lizzie through her drug addiction and depression. Unable to cope with reality Lizzie turns to drugs. However, this destructive behavior only leads to her further disillusionment. At her breaking point, she attempts to kill herself to escape both her reality and unreality. In the movie, she says, "sometimes it feels like we're all living in a Prozac nation. The United States of Depression." Depression is a form of abjection. An entire

industry is successfully built on Pharmaceuticals for depressive disorders, anxiety, and pain. Prescription drugs suppress the human emotion enough to separate the user from the real world. These prescription drugs are also known to cause memory loss. A person who is blacked out is still functioning and existing, yet his/her memory fails to record what the eye interprets. The effects of these drugs are the same as alcohol: blackout. The mind is blank, yet still present, both existent and non-existent. She attempts to satisfy the appetite of her abjection with these drugs and goes to excess in order to achieve the relinquished state of unconsciousness.

Blackout Culture: Black Market Enterprise

Drug addiction and alcoholism are two crucial components of blackout culture, but the third is perhaps the most important: black market enterprise. A consumer-based society promotes commerce, legal and illegal. The myth of the American Dream is that honesty and hard-work will generate wealth and success. The false nature of this promise is apparent in the corruption of our culture. For instance, in *The Great Gatsby*, exorbitant wealth is only attainable for Gatsby through black market commerce. Bootlegging.

In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Duke and his attorney do not deal drugs, however, they commit capital fraud and break the law to an extreme scale, repeatedly. On the drive to Las Vegas, at the beginning of the movie, Duke eats a half sheet of blotter acid (50 hits). He must make it to the hotel before the acid takes over. His attorney asks him, "Are you ready for that? Checking into a Vegas hotel under a phony name with intent to commit capital fraud and a head full of acid." Not only is Duke committing multiple felonies by taking acid then speeding, he is also intending to commit credit card fraud. The spirit of the attorney's question makes criminal activity and drug abuse look fun and interesting. There is a certain thrill that comes with breaking the law in the drug world and certain kind of respect is earned when one can get away with it on a "gross physical" scale. The American Dream takes on an underground, dishonest quality, and the illusion of it comes to fruition. In the disillusionment of the dream, the abjected have a sort of obstinate attraction to the nightmare it's become, and "there [is] a certain bent appeal in the notion of running a savage burn on one Las Vegas hotel and then just wheeling across town and checking into another." The dream is accomplished through drugs and illegal activity. Breaking the law is part of blackout culture because without illegal activity, and plenty of it, there is no illegal drug activity. And illegal drug activity

is a main component of blackout culture. Duke pushes the limits by going “to such excess... that nobody in the position to bring the hammer down... could possibly believe it.” This movie is popular in the wasted generation because of its complete disregard for the law and the flagrant and excessive abuse of drugs and alcohol. Count the number of people you see dressed as Hunter S. Thompson for Halloween next year and the movie’s influence will become clear. Getting away with “a really massive crime” is truly the realization of the American Dream (*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*). By pushing the limits of a society that propagated the dream, the truth of its reality can be understood – that achieving success in this country requires breaking the law on an extreme scale.

The Blackout culture is not just extreme illegal activity for the sake of fun and entertainment; it also represents the social and political upheaval of a failing consumer society. In poverty, black market enterprise becomes black market survival. The HBO drama series, *The Wire* (2002-2008), created by former police reporter, David Simon, and set in Baltimore, Maryland, is about illegal drugs and drug trade in the United States from the streets to international waters. It is a realistic portrayal of life as a street drug dealer living in poverty. The American Dream is not realizable for these people because they cannot put food on the table. From a very young age, children are taught that dealing drugs is not only cool, but also necessary to survive and live well in their society. The show depicts a generation of youth wasted in the ghettos because of drug crews, gang violence, and drug addiction. *The Wire* is an accurate depiction of both the supply and demand side of drug commerce. People aspire to dealing drugs as the American Dream because in the disillusion of abject poverty drugs are the only sellable and profitable commodities. In this abjection people turn to either addiction to cope, or criminal activity to make as much money as possible in an unforgiving environment. Drug use and criminal activity runs rampant in the ghettos – the graveyards of the American Dream. An exponentially increasing number of people are blacked out in their drug stupors or in body bags or in jail or on dark street corners and in alleyways. These places are prevalent in America but remain blacked out from the nation because society puts them out of sight and mind. The failed American Dream is blacked out because the people refuse to acknowledge its failure. This refusal incubates abjected communities, in which people either learn to survive by dealing drugs or they die poor and slow from drug addiction.

Black market enterprise of the wasted generation is idealized in the media as the American Dream realized. In AMC's television drama series, *Breaking Bad* (2008-present), a high-school teacher, Walter White, facing death as a result of cancer, begins making and selling crystal methamphetamine. He adopts the alias "Heisenberg" and enters the world of black market commerce. Towards the end of the series he becomes a powerful drug kingpin selling his famous "blue meth" and killing his way to the top. This once nice teacher becomes corrupted by his illegal drug ventures. For so long he is stuck in the illusion of the American Dream until the threat of death leads him to the abject realization that he is living in a false, unstable reality. In acknowledgment of his impending doom he throws caution to the wind and breaks bad into the blackout culture. This popular series from the wasted generation romanticizes the idea rising from the normalcy of the middle-class into the world of wealth and power in the black market. The American Dream is then blacked out in the illegal nature of its realization.

Fulfilling the American Dream of wealth and success through black market drug commerce is traceable to the Seventies in which cocaine was a prevalent drug and easy money. The 2006 documentary film *Cocaine Cowboys* investigates and explains the Miami drug-trade in the Seventies and Eighties. In the early years, marijuana was the main import, but as the years progressed and the American people's habits intensified, cocaine became the new cash cow. Millions of dollars was made from this black market enterprise. People everywhere were both doing and selling drugs. This is where the blackout culture can find its origins.

The 2001 movie *Blow* with Johnny Depp is based on the true-life story of George Jung who became rich and successful in the Seventies selling marijuana and cocaine. The movie illustrates the exhilarating rise of wealth and success in the cocaine trade. A famous scene in the movie depicts George, as played by Johnny Depp, sitting with his partner in a room filled with stacks of money. This scene is found in poster form in many households across America with the title of the movie "Blow" in large white letters at the bottom. This image endorses the idea that the American Dream of gaining immense fortune is possible through dealing drugs. At the climax of the movie, George earns more than \$100 million from dealing cocaine with the Medellín Cocaine Cartel. In the end, he loses his all of his drug money and is sent to jail. After years living large in the black market life-style of the American Dream he is blacked out of society in a dark jail cell, his reality and his dream shattered in the realization of his mistakes.

The Wasted Generation

The college party scene is where the wasted generation fully manifests itself. The Spike series *Blue Mountain State* (2010-2011) demonstrates, with exaggeration, blackout culture and, in doing so defines the lifestyle of the wasted generation. Blackout culture (although not called that) is prevalent in the show. This show is centered on an all-American college football team whose success allows the players to consume drugs excessively and coast through college. The American dream is not realized through hard work and good principles, but through playing football and hard partying. Alcoholism and drug addiction are idealized as part of an epic party scene in episodes like "Marathon Monday" in which the university student body participates in a 24-hour long binge drinking session; or "Drug Olympics" in which the football team, in order to bond as a team, is locked in the team house, the Goat House, with a buffet of almost every drug known to man; and each person must take one. The success of these football players in their drug abuse champions blackout culture as part of the American Dream. Success and fame without trying and consuming massive amounts of drug and liquor are the goals of the Wasted Generation and the themes of *Blue Mountain State*. The college life and party scene epitomizes this attitude because it is an environment filled with youth and potential, in which people can succeed and engage in excessive social inebriation.

Blackout culture is manifested by the wasted generation, not just in fictional television shows, but also in social and consumer trends. The YouTube sensation *Epic Meal Time* is a small Internet series started in 2012, in which large ostentatious meat dinners, consisting mostly of bacon, are mixed with high levels of alcohol. The show also makes much use of Four Loko, an alcoholic energy drink whose original recipe was so deadly that it was banned by most governments in the world. An example of an epic meal is "Chili Four Loko," which consists of Four Loko, bacon, back bacon, ham, ground pork, bangers, beans, tomato sauce, and spicy jalapeños, cooked into chili, then topped with cheese sticks coated in crushed Miss Vickies spicy jalapeño chips, cheese, sour cream and Four Loko, and served in a troth lined with bacon, fries, and more cheese; accompanied by more Four Loko served in a bacon chalice (a cup wrapped in bacon). The Four Loko used in this video is made with the original alcoholic recipe. After the dish is made, one of the stars of the show Alex Perrault, or MusclesGlasses, sits down, incredibly inebriated, to eat the prepared meal. This laundry list of excessive proportions of meats is an example of

blackout culture at its peak. The needless amount of food used to cook this epic meal displays mass-consumption in an entertaining way. According to the pop-up bubbles on the video clip, "the leftovers stayed in fridge for almost two years" ("Throwback Thursday"). There is more food in this dish than an entire family could eat in a month and more alcohol than a normal human being can ingest. This Internet series is incredibly popular in the U.S. because it highlights all the themes of blackout culture and its extreme nature appeals to the wasted generation.

This is the wasted generation and its blackout culture: excess consumption, alcoholism, drug addiction; pushing physical and mental limits, drug commerce, black market enterprise, substance abuse, wasted youth, wasted resources, and just plain wasted in general; attempting, in abject disillusionment, to both realize and reject the American Dream of fame and success by blacking out in the most outrageous ways possible as much as possible. So, what is the American Dream now? The American Dream is a gateway drug unto itself. Blacked out. And, as many in the wasted generation say, sorry not sorry for partying...

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