"EVERYTHING RIGHT AND TRUE AND DECENT IN THE NATIONAL CHARACTER": THE LIBERTARIAN IDEOLOGY OF RAOUL DUKE IN FEAR AND LOATHING IN LAS VEGAS

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ABSTRACT

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This project explores the ideological implications of Hunter S. Thompson's 1971 novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* by exploring the physical journey described within the text, the contrast between the novel's two central characters Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo. Building off of existing scholarship on the journalistic nature of the novel, I explore how the novel suggests a libertarian conception of the "American Dream" by constructing Duke, a stand-in for Thompson himself, as a libertarian. In doing this, I explore how the novel can be understood as a journalistic chronical of the historical moment where libertarianism, in the United States, emerged as third-way ideology amidst the failures of the left-counterculture in the 1960s and the resurgence of traditional conservativism under President Richard Nixon. I explore how physical journey detailed in the novel reveals this emergence of libertarianism through contrasting depictions of San Francisco, home to the left-counterculture, and Las Vegas, a city that the novel frames representative of cultural conservatism in the United States. Further, I explore how Dr. Gonzo and Duke demonstrate contrasting responses to the collapse of the left-counterculture, with Dr. Gonzo falling into hedonism and Duke adopting a libertarian stance.

Keywords: libertarian; gonzo journalism; Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas; Fear and Loathing; Hunter S. Thompson; ideology; counterculture; *hippie; Richard Nixon; war on drugs*

For Anna, who believes in me even when I do not.

And for Ryan, who never hesitates to provide an attorney's advice.

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The people who did this, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were, uh, good people. And it's a good place. Here we are in the middle of it, up in the mountain. If this son of a bitch wants to bitch at me about his cows over here and shoot at me, well, it's our country. It's our country, not theirs. It's not a bunch of used car dealers from southern California. In a democracy you have to be a player.

– Hunter S. Thompson, while shooting at his neighbor, "An Evening at Owl Ranch"

What is the American Dream?

This is not a question that I intend to answer, but it is a question central to the work of journalist-novelist Hunter S. Thompson. In the passage quoted above, Thompson demonstrates an affinity for the United States and its history, with a particular admiration for the culture of rugged individualism. America is "a good place" and it belongs to the kind of people who are willing to settle problems for themselves without relying on authority. Thompson's most prominent work; *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the American Dream* deals with the question in concrete terms following a fictionalized Thompson as he travels from California to Las Vegas in pursuit of the American Dream. This project analyzes the novel to explore how Thompson constructs Duke, his fictionalized self, to portray the American Dream as real and achievable. Moreover, in doing this I demonstrate how the novel portrays Duke as realizing American Dream by embodying a libertarian ideology.

The novel was written in 1971, and this temporality is important for understanding the novel's portrayal of libertarianism. The libertarianism at play in the novel explores is tied to this temporality as Thompson uses exaggeration to explore the failure of the sixties counterculture and to find hope for the American Dream in spite of the wave of cultural conservatism brought

about under the Nixon administration. This analysis follows three major threads that build towards this libertarian portrayal of the American Dream. The first of these is the journey itself—from California to Las Vegas—which in the novel is used to create a contrast between the hippie counterculture of the sixties, physically embodied in San Francisco, and the cultural conservatism that came to follow in the seventies, embodied by Las Vegas itself. Moreover, this thread reveals that Duke genuinely believes in the American Dream. This is important as my claim that Duke sees the American Dream as libertarian first requires it to be demonstrated that he believes in the dream in the first place and that his dream is separate from both Nixonian conservative and hippie-counterculture (right and left) conceptions. The next thread is the novel's contrasting presentation of Dr. Gonzo, Duke's attorney, and Duke himself. This contrast, as I explore in depth, comes from the characters' differing responses to the failure of the hippie counterculture in the wake of Richard Nixon's accension to the presidency and reveals why Duke chooses to embody libertarianism over nihilism. Finally, Duke himself functions as a presentation of how embodying libertarian ideology can lead to the realisation of the American Dream.

One challenge in undertaking this analysis is the frantic nature of Thompson's writing. The novel is fast paced with few moments lasting more than a page or two and ideas raised in one passage may not be resolved until much later in the novel, if at all. Understanding this challenge, I will provide a brief summary of the novel to set the stage for my analysis and to provide a map of all the different threads that build towards the novel's libertarian conclusions. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* opens with Duke already enroute to Las Vegas with his attorney, Dr. Gonzo. As they travel, the pair pick up a hitchhiker and explain to him the purpose behind their journey: Duke was hired to cover an off-road race in Las Vegas and is using the

opportunity to search for the American Dream. The pair also reveal that they are traveling with felony quantities of several psychedelic and narcotic drugs. In Las Vegas, the pair indulge in this collection and the task of covering the race falls to the wayside as Duke concludes that trying to cover the race "in any conventional press-sense was absurd" and instead focuses on his search for the American Dream (38). This journey ends with Duke reflecting on his time as a member of the San Francisco counterculture and coming to terms with its death before fleeing the city to avoid paying his hotel tab. While fleeing the city, Duke learns from Dr. Gonzo that he is to return to Las Vegas to attend a police and district attorney's conference in the city; this is not a journalistic endeavor, but rather an attempt to finally find and enact the American Dream by privately mocking law enforcement by consuming a large quantity of illegal drugs while in their midst. This attempt to find the American Dream is obstructed when Duke finds that Dr. Gonzo has kidnapped and drugged a young woman. Duke gets the woman to safety and then, after separating himself from Dr. Gonzo, ends the novel by saying that he found the American Dream in a casino, Circus-Circus, and is heading home with the lessons learned in his journey.

My analysis is not strictly chronological, but the above summary is useful in charting the general course of my argument. The first thread I explore, the contrast between San Francisco and Las Vegas, draws heavily on a reading of Duke's reflection at the end of the first journey. The second thread of Dr. Gonzo investigates the implications of his abduction of a young woman while the final thread, my examination of Duke himself, draws upon the beginning and end of the novel wherein Duke establishes his vision of the American Dream.

I propose that Duke presents a libertarian picture of the American Dream, and in order to demonstrate this I draw upon political theory scholarship to help define libertarianism in a formal sense. Further, while my analysis is focused on the text, I draw upon the life and thinking of

Thompson himself to demonstrate the parity between Duke's thinking and Thompson's. This decision is based on two considerations, both of which I explore further throughout this project. The first of these is the fact that while Duke is a fictionalized character, he is transparently based on Thompson himself. The second is that Duke is used by Thompson to speak to the reader directly; Duke knows that his story is being read, and the novel portrays Duke, not Thompson, as the author[1]. This is key as I will demonstrate that the novel itself is Duke's means of achieving the American Dream. Finally, I also draw upon historical events surrounding the novel's creation, namely the election of President Nixon and the collapse of the hippie counterculture, to better contextualize its political themes.

Gonzo Journalism and a Brief Literature Review: What exactly is Fear and Loathing?

In undertaking this analysis, it is important to stop and discuss what the novel actually is, fiction or journalism. This is challenging, as Thompson himself was uncertain as to what degree the text is fiction and to what degree it is journalism. This ambiguity comes from Thompson's unique approach to both literature and journalism. Rejecting the tradition of objective journalism (as upheld through the ideal of an uninvolved reporter) Thompson created his own style of "gonzo journalism" amid the new journalism wave of the 1960s. This gonzo style was characterized by a reporter, Thompson himself, operating not as a detached observer of newsworthy events but as an active participant in those events himself. For Thompson, this was about exposing the reality that media reporting shapes reality rather than representing it purely. By inserting himself into the story, Thompson "encourages active participation, or reader-response, and forces the reader into an awareness of the complex, creative interaction between self, text, and the world at large" (Mosser 59). A part of this active participation was the

[1] The novel was originally published in two parts in *Rolling Stone,* issues 95 and 96 in 1971 under the name of Raoul Duke. This decision further blurs the lines between the character and the author.

fictionalization and exaggeration of events to convey deeper political and social truths beyond the literal (Richardson 143). All of this comes to a head in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas.*

The book details a fictionalized account of a real journey to Las Vegas. In real life, Thompson traveled with Chicano civil-rights attorney and activist Oscar Zeta Acosta to the city after being commissioned by *Sports Illustrated* to cover an off-road race (Richardson 133). The pair traveled with a small collection of illicit drugs, mostly marijuana and Dexedrine. The pair then returned to the city a month later to attend a police and district attorney's conference on narcotic and drug enforcement (Richardson 136-138). Thompson saw the trip as an opportunity to finally produce a work he had long aspired to, an examination of the American Dream (Richardson 139). Thus, he began writing while in the city and produced a record of the trip that would become *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas.* The published version features Thompson's gonzo journalism approach to reporting, twisting and exaggerating events into a distortion of what really happened. Rather than obscuring the truth, however, I propose that these distortions help center the work and speak to the deeper truth that gonzo journalism purported to reveal. At the same time, however, some of the changes made in the writing process were due to aesthetic rather than journalistic concerns. The decision to make the two trips separated by only a day, rather than a month, was for instance designed to increase the narrative flow of events (Richardson 143). Thompson himself would describe the book as a "nonfiction novel" in interviews and correspondence throughout his life (Richardson 143). Considering all of this, I use the term novel to describe the book while also recognizing its journalistic ambitions.

Thompson's approach however creates a challenge for literary critics. In the novel, Thompson fictionalizes himself as "Raoul Duke." Should Duke be understood as a character, separate from the author or is he a mouthpiece for Thompson himself? Existing scholarship on

the novel has tended to take the latter approach. Marianne DeKoven, for instance, treats Duke as Thompson's mouthpiece, lamenting the death of the sixties. I do not disagree with this approach—Duke is characterized as a Thompson taken to the extreme, and he is used by Thompson to speak to the reader—but this approach has led to a gap in the existing literature wherein most scholarship, including those works cited in this project, tend to focus on Thompson's entire body of work as one project rather than focusing specifically on *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas.* Further, what scholarship that does exist on the novel tends to spend much of its discussion focusing on paratextual matters with Oxman, for instance, spending as much time examining Thompson's personal life as he does Duke. One piece of scholarship that has taken the explicit stance of treating Duke the character-narrator as fully separate or separable from Thompson the author is William McKeen's "The Two Sides of Hunter S Thompson." McKeen explains that "there were at least two Hunter S. Thompsons," the writer who preferred to keep to himself and Duke, the version of himself that he invented to speak to his readers (7). Borrowing from McKeen, I take the approach of separating Duke from Thompson while also recognizing that the former is intended to speak to the reader for Thompson in 1971. This distinction between the two is important, because Thompson's personal politics evolved as he spent his later years covering multiple presidencies. By focusing on Duke as separate from Thompson, I am able to narrow my cultural analysis to the specific moment of 1971 without the influence of later political moments that may have shaped Thompson's thinking. My intention here is to provide a close reading of the text to illustrate that Duke is painting a fundamentally libertarian vision of the American Dream for readers that is emergent from the specific success of Nixon-era conservatism and the specific failures of the hippies.

Exigence and Relevancy

Two factors made it clear to me that it was appropriate to engage with the conversation around *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* at this time. The first of these factors is what I perceive as a gap in scholarship. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is a relatively underexplored text; while dozens of books and papers have been published on Thompson, only a handful have specifically analyzed *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* as a primary subject. Those scholars whom I cite here represent the work on Thompson that specifically focuses on the text as a major subject of criticism and analysis. Of these, few have attempted to provide a cohesive reading of the novel's ideological themes. Moreover, those attempts that have been made, such as DeKoven's, come from a different time in American history. This speaks to the other factor leading to this analysis, the political conditions in the United States since the middle 2010s that I believe warrant revisiting Thompson's work. One of the major shifts in American (and global) politics since the earliest years of this century has been the evolution of traditional and neoconservative political ideology into transgressive and libertarian-informed ideologies making up what has come to be known as the "alt-right" (Nagle 40-42). I choose to analyze Thompson's novel now because of this shift. I will demonstrate the novel is a fundamentally libertarian work and revisiting it now can provide insight into both the attraction of libertarian thinking for individuals as well as the historical genesis of this libertarian sect of the right that has only come to prominence within the past two decades. Earlier analyses, like DeKoven's, tend to read Duke's lamentations on the death of the counterculture and the rise of President Richard Nixon as suggestive of a left-wing ideology within the novel. I believe that these readings are colored by the lack of a prominent libertarian political movement at their time of writing leading to the assumption that a rejection

of Nixon's traditional conservatism is inherently a left-wing exercise. This is not the case, and reading Duke as libertarian helps to further explain why there is an "alt-right" but not an "alt-left."

While scholarship on Thompson has become less prominent since the turn of the century, in the past decade there has been a small resurgence of scholarly interest in Thompson's work. Peter Richardson's *Savage Journey,* published in 2022, chronicles the life of Thompson and provides a useful account of the real journey to Las Vegas that inspired *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas.* Further, Evan Oxman's 2016 "The American Dream in Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas"* is an attempt to reconcile the existing leftist readings of Duke with Thompson's rejection of the hippie counterculture. While Oxman suggests that Duke is both critical of Nixon-era conservatism and hippie communalism, he refrains from labeling Duke as embodying any particular ideology; moreover, Oxman's work is an analysis of Thompson as much as it is Duke. I draw on his reading heavily and build off of it to make the explicit claim that Duke is a libertarian and that the American Dream that he presents to readers is colored by his libertarian ideology.

Scope and Limitations of the Project

Hunter S. Thompson's literary and journalistic career spans five decades, critiquing and analyzing the culture under six US Presidents. Examining the totality of his work is outside the scope of this project. Instead, I have chosen to focus this work on his first major work of fiction, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas.* To that end, the argument I put forward here should be understood to be contained to that text. However, at certain points other works by Thompson, as well as references to his life, will be brought in to better contextualize the novel. This is do to the quasi-journalistic nature of the novel. I maintain a distinction between Raoul Duke, the

fictionalized Thompson as he appears in the novel, and Thompson the author. That said, the nature of the novel means that from time to time it is appropriate to compare Duke to Thompson. A fuller investigation of Thompson's literature as a political project is an interesting undertaking, particularly considering the parallels between contemporary politics in the US and the politics of the sixties and seventies, and I am hopeful that such a project will be a fruitful area of future research.

I have chosen to restrict my analysis to the novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas;* Terry Gilliam's 1998 film adaptation, starring Johnny Depp as Duke, will not be discussed. While the film retains a high level of fidelity with the novel, I made this decision due to what I perceive as a difference in tone. While the novel is often humorous, it also engages in moments of serious political discourse. Much of this was downplayed in the film which instead highlights the comedy of the narrative. Because I am interested in the political implications of Thompson's work, the novel provides a better site of analysis. This decision was also made due to another difference between the novel and film. In the novel, it is made clear that Duke, who functions both as protagonist and first-person narrator, knows that his story is being read; in many ways the novel tells the story of how it came to be written in the first place. The film does show Duke writing, but it does not suggest that Duke had any hand in its own creation. Because I am particularly interested in how Duke demonstrates the value of the American Dream to his audience, I found it important to focus on the novel wherein he knows that he is engaging in such a demonstration. Finally, the text of the novel is accompanied by illustrations by Ralph Steadman. I restrict my analysis to only one of these illustrations, "Lounge Lizards"*,* as it fills in gaps left by Duke's frantic narration[2].

[2] See "Seeing Things Like Hunter: Ralph Steadman's Cartoon Visions as Revelatory Masks in Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas" by Kevin J. Hunt for a complete analysis of Steadman's illustrations.

Given these limitations, my project focuses on the specific political dimensions of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas.* Previous scholars have investigated particular aspects of the text, but as mentioned more expansive scholarship has tended to focus on Thompson's life and work as a whole. My intention is to build off of existing scholarship to provide a cohesive reading of the novel that more completely defines the political nature of the American Dream as conceptualized by Thompson.

SECTION I. THE SAVAGE JOURNEY

Let us begin then with the physical journey itself. If the novel is, as it claims, a journey "to the heart of the American Dream" then it is of significance that the novel details a physical journey, or rather two journeys framed as one, into Las Vegas. Now, it does bear mentioning that the journey indicated in the subtitle need not be physical—Thompson's "Savage Journey" could be—and I will later argue is perhaps most importantly—understood as a metaphysical journey, spiritual and psychedelic in nature. Nonetheless, the fact that the novel also describes a literal journey from California into Las Vegas—and that this journey is framed as traveling into the heart of America—cannot be ignored. Unpacking this physical journey is important because examining it grounds both the novel and this argument. Due to Duke's heavy use of psychedelics throughout the story, it can be hard to parse what in the novel ought to be interpreted as "real" and what is either completely a hallucination or, at the very least, a heavily altered understanding of reality. This issue is further complicated by the nature of the novel's evolution. It was conceived by Thompson, while in Vegas, as a drug-fueled stream of consciousness product of new journalism in his evolving "gonzo style" but, before publication, evolved into a semi-fictionalized version of events both due to legal concerns regarding the use of real names associated with depictions of felonies, and due to Thompson's realisation that the story as he wrote it originally was incoherent (Richardson 133-158). Despite all of this complexity, it is apparent that the main events of the novel did in fact occur: the journalist and his attorney friend traveled to Las Vegas to cover an off-road race, they split up and left Vegas after a drug-fueled bender, then the pair returned to attend a narcotics conference, and then left once again.

Understanding this, three questions about the physical journey itself arise that, when answered, provide a framework for understanding the nature of the novel and the "Savage

Journey" within. First, why is Las Vegas the city wherein Duke/Thompson hopes to discover the American Dream? Second, what significance is there in leaving California to find the dream? Finally, why chronicle two different travels to Vegas as a singular "Savage Journey?" Now, outside of the text itself there are material answers to these questions. Thompson, a working journalist, was commissioned by *Sports Illustrated* to cover the Mint 400 race in Las Vegas leading to the first leg of his journey and then he decided to cover the National District Attorney's Conference held in the city later that month (Richardson 135-136). These material answers do explain what brought Thompson to Las Vegas, but they are unsatisfactory explanations when considering the novel that ended up chronicling these events. After all, Thompson does not frame the journey as a mere work trip—something normal in his line of work as a sports reporter. Rather, Thompson as Duke frames the trip as "different." In his words, the trip was ultimately "a classic affirmation of everything right and true and decent in the national character" (18). One could imagine Thompson, a lifelong drug enthusiast, chronicling any of his benders. He didn't. It was the trips to Vegas that he chose to write and publish as his journey to America and that is a signal that this trip was more than just another job. I believe that this is because the journey itself, particularly the return journey, functions a physical manifestation of the tension between the left (as embodied by San Francisco) and conservatism (embodied by Las Vegas) out of which libertarianism emerges. By unpacking the journey, we can see that the first leg of the journey is where Duke critiques the cultural conservatism of Las Vegas while, at the same time, learning to appreciate conservative tenacity. In this journey comes to term with the failures of the hippie counterculture found in San Francisco. The second trip to Las Vegas builds off of these elements and shows how Duke is able to find libertarianism as the path to the American Dream.

Criticism and Admiration in Las Vegas

Some work has already been done in answering the first question (why Las Vegas)? In his biography of Thompson, Peter Richardson spends much time explaining the history of the city and how it related to Thompson's sensibilities as a journalist, critic and self-proclaimed "freak." Richardson explains that Las Vegas was understood as a city of corruption in Thompson's time. Mobsters vied for control over the city, and beyond the explicitly political the fading luster of '50s stars conjured feelings of a culture in decay. Elvis Presley played a major role in fostering this image of the city. Richardson explains that "especially as his weight ballooned in the 1970s, Presley embodied the deeply unhip reputation that Las Vegas earned in the freak community" (138). This understanding hints at a possible answer to the first question. Perhaps the journey to Las Vegas is significant because it represented the opposite of that which Thompson valued. The corruption and "unhip-ness" that Richardson describes is, and this point will be elaborated later, certainly something that Thompson critiques and comments on throughout his novel.

However, the novel itself also resists a reading that places Las Vegas as purely an object of critique. Firstly, as has been mentioned, the novel's subtitle "A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream" suggests that the journey to Las Vegas is a journey to America itself, at least on a symbolic level. Within the novel, this idea is supported by Duke's description of the journey itself. In his view, it was "different" from a typical trip, a "classic affirmation of everything right and true and decent in the national character" (18). This is a belief Duke holds earnestly, not to be taken in jest, as in a previous scene Duke explains the journey to a hitchhiker and adds that "my story *was* true. I was certain of that" (8). Moreover, Las Vegas is portrayed

sympathetically as often as it is portrayed as critically. This mix of sympathy and criticism is significant because it creates a tension.

The sympathetic view of the city appears most prominently early in the novel. Duke likes Las Vegas because it is a city dedicated to vice, a city wherein he can act true to himself without seeming out of place. When he arrives to the city, Duke is already on an acid trip—having ingested LSD on the drive from California—as well as drunk. He freaks out when checking into his suite and fears that the staff are on to him, aware of his crimes of possession. However, with some minor interference from his attorney the staff seem to pay no mind to Duke's state. "In a city of bedrock crazies, nobody even *notices* an acid freak," Duke observes (24). He further relishes the city's tolerance for wild behavior as he and Dr. Gonzo drive down the strip. "This is what it's all about," Duke thinks, "Tooling along the main drag on a Saturday night in Las Vegas, two good old boys in a fireapple-red convertible" (29). In these early passages Duke expresses genuine joy at the freedom he feels in the city. It is important to recognize this feeling as genuine because it is a rarity within the text. Among other things, Thompson is a highly ironic writer, and this irony is a challenge for any reading of *Fear and Loathing.* Beyond the uncertainty raised by the drug use in the novel, Thompson's method constantly challenges readers because he often writes not what he truly believes but rather what he believes will garner a reaction from the reader and, at the same time, the fictionalized Thompson (Duke) will often pull the same trick by saying things to other characters purely to garner a reaction. This notion of sarcasm will be important later, but for now it is sufficient to acknowledge it exists.

I read the two passages cited as genuine and not ironic for several reasons. First, they occur in narration and not dialogue. Because of this, we can rule out Duke trying to get a rise out of other characters. Second, there is nothing outrageous or contradictory about the passages.

While there is certainly some humor in the passages—describing Vegas as full of "crazies" for instance—the humor is not absurd to the point that it is obviously facetious, nor does it contradict anything the reader knows about Duke. From the first page it is apparent that Duke is enthralled by mind-altering substances of all sorts. An ironic reading would require some indication that Duke is not, in fact, excited at the prospect of having a relatively tolerant environment in which to unleash his wildness. Finally, the novel primes us to take Duke's enjoyment of Las Vegas as a genuine reaction. On the drive to the city, Duke thinks about abandoning his car with a hitchhiker. However, he notes that "this manic notion passed quickly… I was looking forward to flashing around Las Vegas in the bugger" (17). In this passage, his excitement at visiting Las Vegas is framed in opposition to his more "manic" ideas. This opposition suggests that his excitement is nether drug induced nor ironic but rather the real experience of Duke in the moment.

Turning then to the novel's critiques of Las Vegas, Duke's perception of the city mirrors what Richardson laid out in his Thompson biography. This criticism is important because it helps pave the way for identifying Duke's libertarianism as a separate ideology from conservatism. For Duke, the city is fundamentally a relic of a bygone era of America. Describing the culture of Vegas, Duke explains that "Sinatra and Dean Martin are still considered 'far out' in Vegas" (156). This reference to the leaders of the old big-band era of American music is followed by Duke's observation that "a week in Vegas is like stumbling into a Time Warp, a regression to the late fifties" (156). These two passages, in quick succession from one another, state explicitly a criticism of the city that is implied throughout the novel. Earlier, Duke takes a break from reporting and from his attorney to gamble. While doing this, he begins to examine the other casino patrons:

> Who *are* these people? These faces! Where do they come from? They look like caricatures of used-car dealers from Dallas. But they're *real.* And, sweet Jesus, there are a hell of a *lot* of them—still screaming around these desert-city craps tables at four-thirty on a Sunday morning. Still humping the American Dream, that vision of the Big Winner somehow emerging from the last-minute pre-dawn chaos of a stale Vegas casino (57).

The description of "caricatures of used-car dealers" sets the tone for Duke's ultimate critiques of Vegas. It is unhip, it is "square," it is the kind of place that used-car dealers visit. This of course tracks with the later passages cited and on face it lends credence to a reading of the novel wherein Las Vegas is critiqued, possibly as a representative of middle America as a whole, for its refusal to move into the future. This reading has been put forward before with Marianne DeKoven interpreting the novel as mourning the loss of the 1960s with Las Vegas representing the cultural conservatism that the country briefly left and was now returning to under the Nixon Administration. The novel certainly mourns the 1960s. However, it does so in a much less binary way than a purely critical reading of its exploration of as Vegas suggests. Interpreting this morning as being a pure critique of Las Vegas and all it represents reduces Duke's genuine enjoyment of the city to pure hedonism. This is not the case. The decision on Thompson's part to frame the "Journey to the American Dream" as one from California to Las Vegas points to an affinity for the city that goes beyond hedonism. Exploring Duke's feelings surrounding the death of the hippie counterculture reveals why Duke was not able to find the American Dream in San Francisco.

San Francisco and the Failure of Sixties Counterculture

If Las Vegas is to be understood as the physical manifestation of American cultural conservatism, then San Francisco can be understood as the physical manifestation of 1960s counterculture. Duke spends much of the novel mourning this counterculture, and San Francisco itself, but this mourning is not for something pure and good. Rather, Duke frames the counterculture as being doomed from the start and he mourns not only the counterculture itself but also his lost ability to see and participate in it in an uncritical way. Evan Oxman elaborates on this point writing "not only does [Thompson] not shy away from pointing out much that was rotten about the culture of the 1960s, but even, insofar as he views its legacy as on the whole positive, he is adamant that its demise was largely inevitable and self-inflicted" (27). Turning to the text itself, this implicit criticism of San Francisco can be seen in a few key passages. First, when leaving San Francisco and just before reaching Las Vegas Duke reflects on the 1960s and all that has changed by the "foul year of Our Lord 1971" (23). In Duke's words, these changes were profound and saddening:

> Tim Leary a prisoner of Eldridge Cleaver in Algeria, Bob Dylan clipping coupons in Greenwich Village, both Kennedys murdered by mutants, Owsley folding napkins on Terminal Island, and finally Cassius/Ali belted incredibly off his pedestal by a human hamburger, a man on the verge of death. Joe Frazier, like Nixon, had finally prevailed for reasons that people like me refused to understand—at least not out loud. (22–23)

In this passage Duke does several things of note. First, he frames Nixon as the victor of the decade. The significance of Nixon will be explored in full later, but for now the reference to him serves to indicate that for Duke the end of the 1960s was the end of a political battle, one that

ultimately was lost by the hippies and won by Nixon's conservative bloc. Second, there is a tacit admission within Duke's narration. Nixon's victory is not something that Duke cannot understand. He can, but he refuses to, "at least not out loud" (23). This admission frames the journey out of San Francisco and into Las Vegas as, in part, a journey for Duke to find the words to finally express the reasons for Nixon's victory out loud. In subsequent passages Duke begins to reflect upon the culture of San Francisco. In doing so, as mentioned, he mourns the loss of the political battle in the 1960s but he also explores the reasons for that loss and critiques San Francisco—the heart of hippie counterculture—for its lack of direction and motivation.

In the novel's most widely cited passage, Duke finally gets down to writing and produces a short manuscript detailing his attempts to cover the Mint 400 and ends up reflecting on the events that led him down the path to Vegas. Duke begins his reflection writing: "Strange memories on this nervous night in Las Vegas. Five years later? Six? It seems like a lifetime, or at least a Main Era—the kind of peak that never comes again. San Francisco in the middle Sixties was a very special time and place to be a part of. Maybe it *meant something.* Maybe not" (66). The doubt raised by admitting that the hippie movement may not have "meant something" is the first hint of critique in the passage, and it sets the tone for what is to follow. Duke here is willing to engage with nuance surrounding the failure of the counterculture. He still mourns, recognizing that "San Francisco in the middle Sixties was a very special time and place," but he also recognizes that despite his mourning the counterculture may not have had a material significance for the nation outside that matched its internal, spiritual significance for those who were in it; it might have meant something, but then again "maybe not" (66). Duke finds it challenging to find the words that fully express his point, writing that "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"(66-67). Duke's challenge follows his previous admission that he was unwilling to admit the reasons for defeat in the culture wars out loud, but it also speaks to his critique of San Francisco that will follow. He uses language that indicates he cannot express the significance of the counterculture; it was a feeling, not a tangible thing.

This is the heart of Duke's critique of San Francisco in the 1960s. The city was an insular and isolated community of people hoping for change but not fighting for it. The city and its culture were liberating for those who were there, but it did not extend its reach across the nation. This point is further reinforced as the passage progresses and Duke begins to frame his experience in San Francisco as riding a wave:

> You could strike sparks anywhere. There was a fantastic universal sense that whatever we were doing was right, that we were winning….
>
> And that, I think, was the handle—that sense of inevitable victory over the forces of Old and Evil. Not in any mean or military sense; we didn't need that. Our energy would simply prevail. There was no point in fighting—on our side or theirs. We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave…. (68)

Here, Duke begins to finally be able to put words to the failures of the San Francisco counterculture. It was a culture that wanted victory but also saw "no point in fighting" for said victory. Moreover, it was not active in shaping its path. Rather than sailing on the waters of history, Duke and the hippies rode the crest of a wave. The problem, Duke comes to realize, is that waves eventually break. He writes: "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" (68). The hippies lost, badly. Bad enough that Nixon was able to win the presidency in spite of the perceived prevalence of left-counterculture in the popular imagination. The left-counterculture lost because rather than swimming or sailing they tread water, chose to ride the wave assuming that their opponents, would do the same. Nixon and the "forces of Old and Evil" did not ride the wave. Where at the beginning of the novel Duke was unwilling to put into words his understanding of why cultural conservatism won the 1960s, he is here able to finally do just that. And it is important to note that he did this in Las Vegas, not in San Francisco. Vegas is where he can see the "high-water mark" left by the counterculture. Las Vegas is a city dedicated to consumption, greed and vice but it is also a city that illustrates that the forces of "Old and Evil" were not passive. Returning to a previous passage, at four-thirty on a Sunday morning in Las Vegas Duke observes that those around him are "still screaming around these desert-city scrap tables." They are, in his words, "still humping the American Dream" (57). While this observation was previously framed as critical, it is also accurate to describe the observation as informative. Duke is disgusted by the avarice of the city and its gambling, but at the same time he seems to admire the almost foolhardy dedication that he sees in his fellow tourists. While the hippies were riding a wave hoping for change, their opposition was actively "humping the American Dream," actively trying to shape the destiny of the country. All of this paints Duke's enjoyment of Las Vegas in a new light. Beyond pure hedonism, Duke's enjoyment can be understood as the appreciation of the city's activity over San Francisco's passivity.

Considering this all, it is tempting to swing towards a cynical or nihilistic reading of the novel. Since the novel critiques both San Francisco and Las Vegas, perhaps it is denying the possibility of finding the American Dream. Perhaps it once was in San Francisco, but now it is

gone. Oxman demonstrates the folly in this reading as well, however. He notes that such a reading fails to recognize the sincerity with which Duke pursues the dream throughout the novel (Oxman 34). As mentioned, there are passages throughout the novel wherein Duke is almost gleeful at the prospect of visiting Las Vegas and he does assert that his journey to find the American Dream in the city is "true" and an "affirmation of everything right and decent in the national character" (8)(18). Moreover, Oxman notes that in the later stages of the novel Duke recontextualizes his critique of the city noting that despite the avarice of the city, some have been able to truly fulfil their dreams there (36). Oxman concludes his analysis by writing that "*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is best read not as a lament for the loss of the American Dream, but instead as a call to action in the name of that lament" (38). For Oxman, this call to action is found in the novel: "learn to *enjoy* losing" (Thompson 57). For Oxman, the novel ultimately suggests that the hope of the 1960s can be reclaimed but doing so means moving out of helpless mourning and into an active hope (38). I partially agree with this analysis. As ironic as Thompson's writing can be there is no disguising the earnestness with which he frames Duke's search. Rather than the novel's critiques of both Las Vegas and San Francisco representing a cynical rejection of the American Dream they instead work to build a nuanced picture of it where activity is always preferable to passivity. Building off of this reading, I propose that the novel works not just as a call to action but also as a demonstration of what that action could look like. I diverge from Oxman by framing this demonstration not as a resurrection of the hippie counterculture by Duke but rather the new formation of a libertarian cultural and political identity. Later I will examine how this demonstration manifests in a few key characters and scenes throughout the novel, but for now this reading provides the answer to the third question

surrounding the physical journey: Why chronicle two different travels to Vegas as a singular "Savage Journey?"

Return to Las Vegas

The second portion of the novel where Duke returns to Vegas functions as a demonstration of how the call to action might be answered. In the first trip, Duke knows what he is looking for, the American Dream, but he has trouble finding it. He only begins to see it when he is finally able to overcome his unwillingness to put into words the failures of the San Francisco counterculture. This victory over his own unwillingness is short lived, however, because Duke flees the Las Vegas immediately following the "high-water mark" passage in a ultimately successful attempt to avoid paying his room service tab. Halfway through his flight, however, Duke is called back to the city by Dr. Gonzo who informs the him that the pair are now going to cover the district attorney's conference[3]. Thus Duke returns to Vegas, with a new convertible, to cover the conference. This second trip to Las Vegas, making up the second half of the novel, is unique from the first both in its direction and its tone. Whereas the first half of the novel is characterized by reflection and the tension between the failed progressivism of San Francisco and the victorious cultural conservativism found in Las Vegas the second half of the novel is much more certain. Duke is going to Vegas to enact the American Dream, to do drugs and act wildly in active protest of the Nixon-era establishment whose representatives are going to be in the city at the same time due to the conference. He sees the return as the opportunity of a lifetime, thinking "back to Vegas and sign up for the Drugs and Narcotics conference; me and a thousand pigs. Why not? Move confidently into their midst" (95). While the first trip to the city

[3] In reality, the second trip to Vegas occurred a month after the first. This change is one of the more explicit breaks from recorded events in the novel. Per Richardson's biography, the change was intended to increase narrative fluidity.

was characterized by conspicuous drug use, there was no sense of danger in being caught. As Duke noted, the city was designed to extract money from those who were too drunk to have good judgement, so his behavior was ignored and often encouraged. Now, Duke's drug use would be occurring right next to "a thousand pigs" (95). In this way, rather than an act of hedonism Duke's drug use becomes an act of protest. At a conference with thousands of cops and prosecutors in attendance Duke is now provided with an authority to flaunt. This act of protest is later established as an explicit goal of this second trip as Duke explains that if "the Pigs were gathering In Vegas for a top-level Drug Conference, we felt the drug culture should be represented" (110). This act of transgression is shaped by the tension in the previous portion of the novel.

As described, the failure of San Francisco was, as Duke understands it, a result of the counterculture's passivity. By returning to Las Vegas to crash the convention, Duke is asserting an active role as a member of the drug culture. This is something he cannot do in San Francisco. There, he would just be another hippie lamenting the end of an era but doing nothing to preserve it. In Las Vegas he can actively represent the culture and counteract the "pigs" in person. In the first half of the novel, Duke learns to appreciate the active role that middle Americans take in "humping the American Dream." This is not to say that Duke learns to appreciate cultural conservatism—far from it—but what he does learn is that he is no longer willing to lament the end of the sixties passively. He is going to find the American Dream and he is going to do it through transgressive action. At this point it is important to note that Duke does in fact find the "main nerve" of the American Dream in Las Vegas, not in San Francisco, and the dream is neither a product of the city's conservatism nor the hippie's passivity but rather the product of Duke's decision to forge his own path through transgression. In his first journey, he set out to

find the American Dream and discovered that it was a difficult undertaking. Difficult, because he embodied the passivity that defined San Francisco. On the first journey, Duke was along for the ride, chronicling events as they happen to him and still mourning the death of the American Dream as envisioned by the hippies. He ends the journey by realizing that the dream is only dead insofar as he is willing to let it die. He leaves with the knowledge that he can revive and find the dream only through action. The novel's second half then is Duke using that knowledge. Sticking at this point just to the journey itself the novel demonstrates this distinction in the framing of the two separate journeys. The first journey, the one that explores the failures of passivity, is predicated on a job. Duke is in the city because he must cover a race. The trip is something forced upon him. Sure, he did accept the job, but he did not specifically search for a reason to go to Las Vegas. Any pretenses of finding the American Dream on the way followed the decision to accept the job. In contrast, the second journey was about the American Dream from the start. Duke provides not indication that the trip to the conference was journalistic in nature—his motivation was not to cover the event[4] but rather to infiltrate it. He is motivated by "a sense of obligation and duty" to make sure that the counterculture is properly represented at the conference (110). It will become clear that this "obligation and duty" is a large part of Duke's American Dream and that the act of flouting authority is how he is finally able to live it out.

In this section, I have not yet fully defined Duke's American Dream. This has been for several reasons. On a practical level, this has been done to avoid muddying the discussion of geography that has occurred. Being a travel novel, it was important to unpack the physical journey. In this unpacking, I discovered that the American Dream was something that Duke lost and could not find again in San Francisco and, at the same time, was able to find in Las Vegas.

[4] This is true of Thompson as well. While the first journey was commissioned by *Sports Illustrated* the second journey was not tied to any reporting (Richardson 142).

Moreover, in order to demonstrate that Duke finds and embodies a libertarian conception of the American Dream it is important to demonstrate that he does in fact find the American Dream. In the passages discussed so far, the American Dream has been associated with activity. The dream died in San Francisco as the passive wave riding of the hippies failed when the wave broke back and left a "high-water mark" and, at the same time, it is kept alive in Vegas as casino patrons keep chasing "that vision of the Big Winner somehow emerging from the last-minute pre-dawn chaos of a stale Vegas casino" (57). These two observations are fundamental to understanding Duke's and ultimately Thompson's vision of the American Dream as portrayed in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas.* Turning away from the journey and to the dream itself, as Duke's libertarian conception of the American Dream is a synthesis of both the dead dream of the hippies and the living dream of the used-car dealers. Duke emphatically does not approve of the culture of Las Vegas. It is decidedly outdated, in his view, and his description of conservatives as the "forces of Old and Evil" places him squarely opposed to traditional 1950s visions of the American Dream. However, at the same time, he cannot help but admire what he perceives as a dedication to making that dream a reality. Turning then to the hippies, we see Duke endorse many of the values that defined the movement—mind expansion, tolerance, opposition to the war in Vietnam—while rejecting their passivity. While he remembers the sixties fondly, he can no longer endorse the idea that passive resistance, the idea that the hippies' "energy would simply prevail," could ever manifest into meaningful change. For Duke then the American Dream is a synthesis of the two visions he has encountered. This is a fundamentally libertarian move as libertarian political philosophy tends to present itself as a middle path between traditional conservatism and the left (Fish)(Schlueter and Wenzel). He espouses the social values of the hippies but with the active zeal of the used-car dealers who continue to gamble and pursue

victory into the early morning hours and their commitment to "free enterprise" as a means of achieving the American Dream (12). This is why the return trip to Las Vegas is so important. The dream is to be found there. Not because of the city's open celebration of traditional American values but because it is a place wherein Duke can challenge those values. I previously mentioned that Duke cannot enact the dream in San Francisco, and this is the reason that is the case: in San Francisco Duke would not be challenging anything, only watching as the hippie movement and all it symbolized finally died out. By going to Las Vegas, he can keep the American Dream alive while the movement dies.

Historical and Political Approaches to Duke's American Dream

Now that the journey has been examined it is time to fully embark on exploring the fundamentally libertarian conception American Dream that Duke journeys to and ultimately finds in Las Vegas. This is a complex task requiring a nuanced reading of the text. Beginning with what has already been examined, it is clear that the value system of the San Francisco counterculture certainly informs this dream. Duke is highly critical of Nixon, for instance, and he seems to value drug use not only as a means of hedonism but as a means of challenging the status quo. This leads to the element of Duke's conception of the American Dream that will make up the next portion of this analysis: transgression, particularly as a means of living authentically. This element is what makes Las Vegas a place where the dream can live for Duke and San Francisco a place where it is dying. In the previous section, I discussed how in San Francisco Duke would not be able to challenge anything. By this I mean that in San Francisco Duke would not be able to endorse hippie-era values while also engaging in transgression as those values were, to some extent, normalized in San Francisco. By traveling to Las Vegas he is able to enact those values in a context where they are transgressive, particularly in the second half during the DA conference. However, I

propose that Duke does in fact challenge the San Francisco counterculture. He does this by deciding to return to Las Vegas. I interpret this move as a claim through action where Duke suggests that the counterculture is not nearly as transgressive as it pretends to be. By creating a hub in San Francisco, the hippies created a situation where they could engage in acts that were ostensibly transgressive—drugs, free love, anti-war protests—without actually engaging in transgression because the environment they were in tolerated such acts[5]. By going to Las Vegas, Duke in a subtle way issues a challenge: I believe in my values so much I am willing to go to a place where they are actually transgressive, are you?

On his return to Las Vegas, then, Duke becomes transgressive on several fronts. He transgresses the 1950s values of the city through his lifestyle and he doubles up on this by doing so while police officers and prosecutors, the enforcement arm of the value system he is transgressing, are flocking to the city. Moreover, he transgresses values of propriety as a means of exposing hypocrisy. There are several scenes that demonstrate this point, and the following analysis will examine how exactly Duke transgresses in more detail than the generalities discussed here. Further, this analysis will attempt to name the ideology of transgression that Duke seems to build—a third way of sorts that is separate from the pseudo-transgression of the San Francisco hippies and the Nixonian conservatism of Las Vegas. Before this however a bit of a stopgap is needed to help contextualize this discussion and to provide a historical and political framework for discussing Duke's beliefs.

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[5] At this point, I think it bears some clarification what exactly I mean (and Thompson means) when discussing the San Francisco hippies. There were, of course, genuinely transgressive political groups in the sixties. Events like the deaths of anti-war protestors at Kent State and the violent backlash towards civil-rights protestors point to an active politics of transgression, and groups like the Students for a Democratic Society certainly were active. However, Thompson seems to have observed that the majority of self-proclaimed hippies were not involved in these actions. Most, in his view, seem to have been more concerned with the aesthetics of hippy culture than the values of it. The failure of the counterculture was not so much that no one acted but rather that so many claimed to support action while failing to actually support the few who did act.

A brief overlook of the political situation in "the foul year of Our Lord 1971" will help in identifying what exactly Duke transgresses against. By 1971, the countercultural fervor of the previous decade was beginning to die down. Richard Nixon was president, and the culture was beginning to shift from the hopeful progressivism of the hippie generation to the ruthless individualism of the Reagan era. This cultural change is significant to Duke, and he tracks it in gonzo fashion by discussing the ongoing changes to the drug market. "The popularity of psychedelics has fallen off…. Uppers are no longer stylish. Methedrine is almost as rare, on the 1971 market, as pure acid or DMT. 'Conciousness Expansion' went out with LBJ… and it is worth noting, historically, that downers came in with Nixon" (201-202). This cultural shift that Duke finds himself in the middle of has been understood by contemporary Marxists as a result of the economic shift occurring throughout the capitalist world at the time. Mark Fisher identifies the seventies as the decade wherein the New Deal consensus—the compromise between capital and workers which resulted in the establishment of social welfare programs—began to give way towards contemporary neoliberalism wherein these programs were dismantled and underfunded ushering in a new age of pessimistic individualism (*Ghosts* 15). This process ramped up in the eighties and, as will be explained later, reached new levels in the twenty-first century, but for the politically astute Thompson the writing was on the wall by the end of the sixties. As a journalist, Thompson spent years covering the Nixon administration and sent almost a full year from 1971 to 1972 on the campaign trail working as the national affairs reporter for *Rolling Stone* (Richardson 160). While Thompson was not perfectly prescient, his astute grasp of the political climate is apparent in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas.* The passage wherein Duke reflects on the wave breaking back is emblematic of this awareness—by 1971 Thompson knew there was no going back, no saving the movement. It lost, and whatever came next would need to be different.

This is the political situation that both produced and is central to the plot of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas.* Stuck in the transition between political eras, between the hippies and Reagan, Duke is forced to find his own way through the chaos. Transgression then becomes a means by which Duke can begin to both make sense of the chaos and mock those around him who do not sense just how profound a shift in American culture was happening without anyone appearing to notice. With this all established, we can now turn to the novel to examine specific elements of novel and begin to fully understand the ideology of Raoul Duke.

Transgression as a Tool

Existing scholarship on both *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and Thompson's broader work has examined the role of transgression. Typically, these readings have suggested that Thompson presents transgression as a virtue in and of itself. Juan Bruce-Novoa frames this claim by suggesting that Thompson embraced transgression as a means of separating himself from others. "It seems Thompson decided that the way to avoid being destroyed is not to be a part of society; by being strange from the beginning, society would not get a chance to destroy him" (Bruce-Novoa 49). DeKoven also seems to take this reading for granted, using the assumption that transgression is inherently valuable for Thompson to build her own reading of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* where Duke laments the lost transgressive spirit of the sixties (88). What these readings do not consider are the limits Duke places on his own transgression. In the next sections I will show that Duke transgresses as a means of actively embracing his values rather than seeing transgression as a value in and of itself. Moreover, I will show that the novel presents transgression for its own sake as a destructive impulse. To begin, these ideas can be seen at play in the contrast between Dr. Gonzo and Duke as they both engage in transgressive behavior throughout the novel.

SECTION II. THE TERRIFYING DR. GONZO

Previously, I proposed that transgression is a key element of Duke's embodiment of the American Dream. This is true, but an investigation of the text adds some nuance to this element. I now will examine some key scenes within the text to examine how and when Duke choses to transgress and also explore some elements where he chooses to set limits on his own behavior. Doing this will paint a more nuanced picture of Duke's American Dream and will help to construct a cohesive picture of his political leanings. To begin, we must consider the character of Dr. Gonzo and his role in the novel. Dr. Gonzo is an important element of this reading for several reasons that will become apparent. Of these what is most important to consider is Dr. Gonzo's role as a mirror image of Duke—a wild drug-addled maniac who wants to push his behavior to the limit.

To begin this examination of Dr. Gonzo's role in pushing the novel's theme of transgression, it is important to stop and examine the character's inspiration. Dr. Gonzo is based upon the Chicano civil-rights attorney and activist Oscar Zeta Acosta. Acosta was a lifelong friend of Thompson and has been described as a key member of the "small cohort of figures who helped Thompson become himself" (Richardson 155). The relationship between the two is complicated, though generally understood as a friendship, and a brief exploration of Acosta's real-life influence on Thompson is helpful in priming an examination of the relationship between their fictionalized counterparts.

The pair met and became close partners in Aspen following a visit to one of Ernest Hemmingway's homes (Richardson 98). Thompson supported Acosta's work with civil rights, and while this association does not prove that Thompson was "not racist" by any means it does demonstrate an openness to equality, at least on a theoretical level, that one would not expect

from a white supremacist. This is important as white-supremacy has also become a motivating force inside contemporary right-wing movements alongside the libertarian sects of the alt-right and the apparent alliance between the two sects can lead to conflation and confusion (Colley and Martin 6). Considering his theoretical openness to equality, as well as the other elements of his belief system that I explore in this project, I place Thompson the latter camp. Thompson's approach to race within his written work can best be described as one of casual indifference; Thompson never engaged with race on systemic level and demonstrated an unwillingness to consider other perspectives. Examining Thompson's approach to race and journalism, Bruce-Novoa explains that "Thompson especially delights in the liberal use of obscenities, racial and ethnic insults, and slander" (42). This approach does not seem to be a deliberate attempt by Thompson to otherize nonwhites, but rather an attempt at ironic transgression. Bruce-Novoa points out that Thompson used racialized insults not as an expression of genuine prejudice but as an attention-seeking form of transgression (42). This observation is crucial because of how Acosta is portrayed throughout the novel. Dr. Gonzo, the fictionalized Acosta, is presented as a Samoan attorney in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and we see Duke call attention to his race throughout.

At the beginning of the novel, readers are introduced to Dr. Gonzo and Duke in the middle of their first road-trip to Las Vegas. The pair stop to pick up a hitchhiker. The hitchhiker quickly becomes terrified, travelling at 90-miles-an-hour in a car driven by two men on LSD and Duke attempts to soothe him by explaining "this man at the wheel is my *attorney!...* Shit, look at him! He doesn't look like you or me, right?... in spite of his race, this man is extremely valuable to me" (Thompson 8). In this early introduction to Dr. Gonzo, it is tempting to read Duke as being racist due to his use of the phrase "in spite of his race." One can imagine reading this line

as an implication that Duke sees nonwhite identities as something to overcome and that he does values Dr. Gonzo in spite of his race because of his utility as an attorney. However, this reading is immediately complicated by the text. Duke, when introducing his attorney, asks the hitchhiker if Dr. Gonzo's race makes him uncomfortable and immediately follows with another question: "Are you prejudiced?" (8). This scene warrants discussion for two reasons. First, it sets the stage for how Duke uses transgression throughout the rest of the novel. I propose that Duke's comments on Dr. Gonzo's race are not to be read as insults directed at the attorney. Rather, they are designed to make the hitchhiker feel uncomfortable. Duke uses racist language to describe Dr. Gonzo but then suggests that the hitchhiker might actually be the one who is uncomfortable around nonwhites. This places the hitchhiker in a position wherein he is confronted by the performance of racism and then has to actively assert that he himself is not racist. In other words, Duke exaggerates his own racist rhetoric as a means of making the hitchhiker consider the possibility of his own racist thinking. Duke does not, as Bruce-Novoa suggests, use the language to seek attention but rather to challenge the hitchhiker. The scene ends abruptly after this interaction, but it serves as an early example of a tactic that Duke uses throughout the novel. The other examples I will analyze will demonstrate this point more clearly, but I propose that much of Duke's transgressive behavior is not transgression for its own sake but rather a performative tactic where Duke uses transgression to make others uncomfortable, forcing them to come to terms with their own beliefs surrounding the norm that Duke transgresses.

Before examining more examples of this tactic however it is important to stop and examine one element of Duke's transgression via racialized language that points to the political dimensions of Duke's American Dream. While Duke's comments on Dr. Gonzo's race while on the road to Las Vegas were directed at the hitchhiker, intended to make him uncomfortable, it is

of note that Duke does not consider Dr. Gonzo's feelings on the matter. In terms of the mechanics of the scene, what readers are presented with is Duke, a white man, using racist language to describe his friend to make another white man, the hitchhiker, uncomfortable without consideration towards Dr. Gonzo's actual feelings on the language itself. This is an early hint at what I see as a libertarian bent to Duke's value system (which in turn informs his vision of the American Dream). Considering the scene in the car as an ironic jest designed to make the hitchhiker uncomfortable, it is clear that Duke does not actually think less of Dr. Gonzo because of his race. Throughout the rest of the novel, Duke does not at any point make any comment or share any thinking indicating that he sees Dr. Gonzo as anything but a friend and equal. When we do see conflict between the two Duke expresses concern about the attorney's actions and not his racial identity. At the same time however, there is an unwillingness to consider that Dr. Gonzo might be hurt by Duke's words. This speaks to a libertarian sensibility wherein it is believed that the sentiment behind racist language is the problem, not the language itself. This kind of thinking is alive and well in libertarian thinking today with media like *South Park*[6] taking similar approach to the topic and the Libertarian Party in the US presenting this belief a fundamental party position. The Libertarian Party's official platform states that "language that is perceived to be offensive to certain groups or individuals is not a cause for any legal action. Speech that is not literally a threat of aggression or violence is not in itself aggression or violence… Individuals are responsible for their own reactions to speech." In terms of Duke's worldview, this idea is key. Duke is willing to say almost anything to get his point across, but he also places firm limits on what transgressive action he is actually willing to participate in with material harm to others seeming to be a hard line.

[6] To see this thinking within *South Park,* see the 2007 episode "With Apologies to Jesse Jackson."

This disregard for the power of language tracks with the real-life relationship between Thompson and Acosta. The publication of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* created a tension between the pair. This tension was twofold with a cultural and a financial component. Financially, Acosta believed that he held some rights surrounding the "Las Vegas story" and repeatedly asked Thompson for money; the novel left Thompson well-off, a position that would only be further stabilized by the subsequent movie deal, while Acosta was left destitute and relying on food stamps (Richardson 154). This was only a small part of the issue, however. Concerning the cultural tension, Thompson's publisher expressed concern that Acosta might be upset with his portrayal within the novel due to the numerous felonies committed by Dr. Gonzo. They were correct, but not for the reasons they expected. Richardson explains that Acosta's chief complaint was the decision to portray him not as Chicano but as a Samoan:

> He was angry that Thompson fictionalized him in the first place. He chastised Thompson for depicting him as a three-hundred-pound Samoan and pushed to have his name and photograph on the cover…. "Like, did you ever even so much as ask me if I minded your writing and printing the Vegas piece?" Acosta asked… "All I want," Acosta explained in a long letter to Thompson, "is for you to quit playing the role that I'm some fucking native, a noble savage that you discovered in the woods." (152).

For Acosta, changing his ethnicity amounted to changing his identity and erasing the work he had done as a civil rights lawyer for the Chicano community. Richardson notes that whereas Thompson championed transgression for about 6,000 mostly white "freaks" that made up his gonzo subculture, Acosta "took on the entire criminal justice establishment of Los Angeles county, with its diverse population of 7 million and long history of violent, racist law

enforcement" (152). This aspect of Acosta's life was all but erased when Thompson fictionalized him as the Samoan Dr. Gonzo, and Thompson seemingly did not care. He refused to let Acosta touch his text and refused to budge on the question of incorporating Acosta's real ethnicity, and the nature of his work as an attorney specifically working on civil rights (Richardson 153). Acosta was further upset by this because he saw his portrayal of Dr. Gonzo as harmful to his practice. Acosta's fame skyrocketed after the novel was published, and Acosta believed that his portrayal as a drug-addled buffoon led to clients avoiding him and, ultimately, the collapse of the legal community he had built to fight the racism of the LAPD. Ultimately, Thompson dismissed Acosta's concerns about representation within the text calling it a "grudge" and insisting that the dispute was purely financial, accusing Acosta of trying to guilt him into sending money (Richardson 154-155). While Thompson was supportive of Acosta's activism, he rejected any suggestion that he had any moral obligation to consider the perspective of Acosta or to portray Acosta's experience as a Chicano lawyer with any degree of accuracy. I believe this speaks to a focus on overt action and a downplaying of the importance of language that is reflected in Duke, Thompson's fictionalized avatar.

Now all of the above is of course paratextual, describing the relationship between the author and his friend and not the pair of characters within the novel itself. Nonetheless I believe it provides some useful context to help understand Duke's comments on Dr. Gonzo's race both in the hitchhiker scene already described and throughout the novel. Thompson and Duke share a purported disdain for prejudice but also demonstrate a blindspot when it comes to considering the feelings of their friend, Acosta/Dr. Gonzo. The hitchhiker scene is the only scene where Duke mentions Dr. Gonzo's race to a third person. However, throughout the novel Duke does often mention Dr. Gonzo's race in his own thinking, often using the phrase "Samoan pig" or

"swine" when he is frustrated with his friend. Now, despite his apparent commitment towards progressing past 1950s' conservatism, this kind of language does not bother Duke. He doesn't see it as a flaw on his part or anything to overcome. I propose that this is because of Duke's libertarian bent, a bent that mirrors his real-world counterpart. The comment about Dr. Gonzo's value despite his ethnicity was justified, to Duke, because it was designed to reveal any potential racism on the part of the hitchhiker. The further references to race then are justified by being thoughts and not comments. Calling Dr. Gonzo a "Samoan pig" might, understandably, upset him. But Duke does not insult him, and so the thinking, as Duke sees it, is harmless and does not warrant a comment or explanation. Aside from race, this distinction between the harmless nature of words and the potentially harmful nature of actions is seen throughout the novel in Duke's reluctance to insult others. Duke will and does say almost anything to get a reaction, making light of topics like rape and the Vietnam War, but he only insults others (mainly Dr. Gonzo) when he fears physical violence or is overwhelmed. When Duke is just going about his day, manic as it may be, he does not insult people. I propose that this further speaks to the political element of Duke's vision of transgression. While Duke is critical of the hippie movement, as I explored previously in examining the contrast between Las Vegas and San Francisco in the novel, his criticism is more centered on the movement's tactics than its values. In the "crest of a wave" passage Duke, as I argued, does criticize the hippie movement for its passivity, its assumption that the spirit of peace and love would "simply prevail." At the same time however, he is genuinely sad that the movement was ultimately doomed to fail. If Duke was transgressing for transgression' sake, that is to say if Duke found transgression to be valuable in and of itself, then it seems odd that insults are off the table. However, considering his affinity for sixties' countercultural values it seems that transgression, for Duke, is useful insofar as it enables him to

enact those values as opposed to the passive acceptance of them that led to the failure of the hippie movement. This notion is solidified when considering another scene wherein Duke's transgression is contrasted with the behavior of Dr. Gonzo.

Saving Lucy: Duke's Transgression as a Tool and Dr. Gonzo's as a Threat

When Duke returns to Las Vegas in the second half of the novel he stays in a room at The Flamingo that had been reserved by Dr. Gonzo. When he arrives, he finds Dr. Gonzo in the room with a young woman, possibly still a teenager, named Lucy. Through his conversation with Dr. Gonzo, Duke learns three things. First that Dr. Gonzo essentially kidnapped Lucy, drugging her on his flight to the city and leading her to his hotel room. Second that Dr. Gonzo intended to rape Lucy (and may already have done so), who was unable to meaningfully consent due to the aforementioned drugging. Third, that Dr. Gonzo seems to be unconcerned with his own actions. Duke, for his part, is troubled the situation (110-115). In this scene, all of the elements of transgression discussed in the previous examination of the hitchhiker scene are explored more clearly and in greater detail. To begin with the limits of Duke's transgression, we see in this scene that kidnapping and rape are off the table. This limit is established immediately. Upon walking into the room, Duke lets Dr. Gonzo know that he is a "degenerate pig" (110). Duke then begins to work out how to get Lucy to safety. Now, this is not a purely altruistic act, Duke is concerned with his own wellbeing, hoping to avoid possible jailtime, but he also expresses genuine concern for Lucy's wellbeing. Upon realizing the legal risk that the situation posed, Dr. Gonzo proposes simply turning in Lucy for drug possession. "She has no witnesses. Anything she says about us is completely worthless," Dr. Gonzo says (118). This possible solution is not acceptable to Duke however, because although it would potentially absolve them of any legal repercussions, it would harm Lucy in the process. Duke expresses this in harsh terms,

condemning Dr. Gonzo's actions and his suggested solution. "What kind of goddamn monster *are* you…. First you kidnap the girl, then you rape her, and now you want to have her locked up?" (118). In this manner, Duke demonstrates a concern for Lucy's wellbeing beyond his self-interested concern in avoiding legal trouble.

Understanding that Duke wants to save Lucy, not just himself, is important because he uses the transgressive technique that I observed in the hitchhiker scene to save her. As a discussed, the technique has Duke use transgressive, even downright offensive, language as a means of forcing another person to consider their own bad behavior. In this case, Duke uses exaggerated imagery of what he and Dr. Gonzo might do to Lucy to make Dr. Gonzo see that he has in fact kidnapped a person with the intent to do her harm. Duke tells Dr. Gonzo:

> Lucy… it'll probably work out. We can keep her loaded and peddle her ass at the drug convention. She's perfect for this gig… These cops will go fifty bucks a head to beat her into submission and then gang-fuck her… if we keep her full of acid that's more like *two grand* a day; maybe *three* (114-115).

Duke here does not believe what he is saying. He has no intention of keeping Lucy captive or pimping her out, and this is made clear by his disgust upon realizing that Dr. Gonzo has kidnapped her. Rather, this extended speech is directed at Dr. Gonzo in a return to the tactic used in the hitchhiker scene. Duke is using extreme language and the suggestion of extreme behavior to get Dr. Gonzo to recognize just how severe his actions were. Duke succeeds in this as Dr. Gonzo lashes out at his suggestions, exclaiming "You filthy bastard… I should cave your fucking head in!" (115). Once Duke has succeeded in his attempt to use transgressive language to get Dr. Gonzo's attention, his speech becomes more matter of fact, explaining in plain terms just how bad the situation is. "They might even call it kidnapping…. And even if you manage to

beat that they'll send you back to Nevada for Rape" (117). Where the scene with the hitchhiker was brief and functioned only as an introduction to this process, this scene provides a clearer picture of how Duke uses transgressive language as a tool. In this case, the goal is saving Lucy and Duke's language is a catalyst in making that happen. It is only after that he shocks Dr. Gonzo that the attorney agrees that Lucy should be sent away. Moreover, demonstrating that this is not just self-preservation on Duke's part, Duke insists on making sure that Lucy is given a hotel room and not just left to wander (118).

This scene reinforces the notion that transgression, for Duke, is a tool and not necessarily a virtue in and of itself. It also builds upon themes established in the hitchhiker scene. In terms of the preoccupation of actions over words, Duke does not seem to consider how Lucy might feel about his description of her being "gang-fucked" but is instead focused on the action of getting her away from Dr. Gonzo. Moreover, this scene is the exception that proves the "no insults" rule that was established in the hitchhiker scene. Duke does directly insult Dr. Gonzo in this scene, calling him a "degenerate pig," but only as a gut reaction to realizing what the attorney has done (kidnapping).

A Look in the Mirror: The Limitless Transgression of Dr. Gonzo

Earlier I proposed that Dr. Gonzo works as a mirror image of Duke. Whereas Duke transgresses with purpose and places limits on his own behavior, Dr. Gonzo is someone who transgresses for transgression's sake. Thompson's decision to change Acosta's race from Chicano to Samoan is essential for this mirroring to occur. Acosta was not just an attorney; he was a Chicano attorney working on civil rights cases. This is a highly political project. By changing his race to Samoan, Thompson depoliticizes Acosta when fictionalizing him as Dr. Gonzo. In the novel, Dr. Gonzo is only ever described as an attorney, presumably Duke's

personal attorney, and no indication is given that he is engaged in political activity. This allows for Dr. Gonzo to contrast with Duke who is highly political. If Dr. Gonzo were a civil rights attorney, then it might be the case that he transgresses, like Duke, as a means of political expression. Since, however, he is depoliticized his transgression becomes a motivating force in itself. Where Duke uses transgression to make others uncomfortable and push his political values, Dr. Gonzo instead transgresses in a way that is actively menacing to others.

The menacing nature of Dr. Gonzo is introduced early in the novel, starting as a nuisance that Duke must put up with. In the hitchhiker scene, Dr. Gonzo terrifies and eventually scares off the hitchhiker by interrupting Duke's story to say that they are going to Las Vegas not to cover a race but rather to carry out a hit on a drug dealer. "We're going to Vegas to croak a scag baron named Savage Henry. I've known him for years but he ripped us off…. We're going to rip his lungs out!" (19). Where Duke wanted to merely make the hitchhiker uncomfortable, Dr. Gonzo instead actively terrifies the man. While this scene is played for laughs, it establishes the contrast between Duke and Dr. Gonzo's transgressive behavior. Dr. Gonzo's menacing behavior ramps up when the pair visit Circus-Circus. At the bar in the casino, Dr. Gonzo begins to threaten violence. "One more hour in this town and I'll kill somebody!" (48). Duke responds by ushering him back to their hotel room, but his frustration mounts as Dr. Gonzo fails to appreciate the situation. "You stay here and go to jail, I'm leaving" (50). This frustration then evolves into an active fear of Dr. Gonzo when the pair finally make it back to their room. The attorney, who is under the effects of LSD, ether, and a cacophony of other unspecified drugs, begins raving about a woman the pair had encountered earlier and then begins swinging a knife at Duke. Duke flees by backing up, explaining "you can turn your back on a person, but never turn your back on a drug—especially when it's waving a razor-sharp hunting knife in your eyes" (57). This is a

turning point in their relationship as portrayed in the novel. Where at the beginning of the trip Duke saw Dr. Gonzo as a partner in his journey for the American Dream, the altercation with the knife forces him to begin to see the attorney as an obstacle in his journey. Paying close attention to the language Duke uses also reveals how Dr. Gonzo is used as an example of transgression taken too far. Without any guiding principles, Dr. Gonzo's transgression is reduced to pure hedonism. He becomes a drug, not a person, in Duke's eyes when he begins threatening Duke with the knife and Duke is disturbed at this realisation.

The contrast between the two is further explored when Duke returns to the hotel room. He finds Dr. Gonzo in the bathtub, his drug trip intensified after taking additional LSD, asking for Duke to throw a cassette player into the tub when "White Rabbit" reaches its peak (59). What he wants here is to die by electric shock. It is at this point where Duke finally stops being able to tolerate the attorney's menacing behavior. Duke loves his drugs, experiencing not a single sober moment up to this point in the novel, but Dr. Gonzo has taken too much for even Duke to handle. "This is it, I thought. I've gone as far as I can with this waterhead" (59). Duke ends up locking the attorney in the bathroom—after fighting him off with a can of Mace—and tries to get some sleep.

I have already examined the largest example of Dr. Gonzo's menacing behavior—his kidnapping and possible rape of Lucy—that follows the examples I have just provided. In light of how severe an example that scene is, the scenes explored here might seem minor. However, they are important scenes to consider as they demonstrate that Dr. Gonzo's violent behavior is a pattern, not just a one off. Moreover, the "White Rabbit" incident in the bathtub reveals that beyond being a menace to others Dr. Gonzo's transgressive behavior (in this case taking LSD

beyond what even Duke felt comfortable consuming) is self-destructive. In Duke's words, for Dr. Gonzo wild behavior is ultimately a "suicide trip" (59).

The Circus-Circus and bathtub scenes are also important because they are followed by a moment wherein Duke reflects on the nature of Dr. Gonzo's behavior. This is something that the Lucy scene does not provide because Duke, in that scene, is hyper-focused on getting Lucy away from the attorney and avoiding legal trouble himself. Reflecting on Dr. Gonzo, still in the bathtubs, is described as "that nightmare in the bathroom. Just another ugly refugee from the Love Generation, some doom-struck gimp who couldn't handle the pressure" (63). This passage is key because it demonstrates that Duke is aware of the difference between Dr. Gonzo in himself. Both valued the transgressive values of the sixties' counterculture. The difference between the two, then, is in what they chose to do once it became clear that the counterculture was floundering. Duke, as established, took both the values and the transgression and became determined to build a new American Dream by taking the transgressive elements of hippie culture—drug use and progressive values—and utilizing them in a space wherein the transgression could be active rather than passive. Dr. Gonzo, on the other hand, became disillusioned, unable to "handle the pressure" of having the counterculture which provided him with a value system crumble. And without that counterculture, without its value system to guide him, he was left with only transgression. Unchecked by the hippie value system, this transgression manifests in the novel as menacing and self-destructive behavior that culminates in his treatment of Lucy. Duke, guided by a value system, uses transgression in the same moment to save her.

Considering all of this, the function of Dr. Gonzo as a foil for Duke is clear. Dr. Gonzo is a menace, whereas Duke is a jester. Duke refrains from insulting others while Dr. Gonzo openly

threatens violence. This dynamic is key in shaping the novel's thesis. Early in my argument I partially rejected the notion that *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* only mourns the death of the sixties counterculture. The contrast between Dr. Gonzo and Duke is another reason for my rejection of that reading. I propose that *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is more optimistic and forward thinking than such a reading proposes and that while Duke does mourn the loss of the counterculture, he also welcomes the opportunity to build something knew by acknowledging the passivity that led to the counterculture's failure. Dr. Gonzo then becomes a cautionary tale of what happens when that sense of mourning fails to give way to the hope for something new—transgressive nihilism that makes him unbearable to be around and leads to self-destruction[7]. One can imagine a purely pessimistic version of the novel wherein Duke sinks just as low as Dr. Gonzo, but as it exists the novel is decidedly not that story. Instead, readers are presented with a Duke who sees Dr. Gonzo's approach to handling the death of the counterculture, rejects it, and then continues on with his journey for the American Dream.

[7] It is worth mentioning that this reading parallels the real relationship between Acosta and Thompson. Richardson described Acosta as helping Thompson become himself, but this was a twofold process. Acosta showed Thompson both how to embrace transgressive behavior, but also what happened when it was taken to far. Thompson saw that Acosta's behavior was out of control and urged him to "get off the acid" because there was "too much paranoia it" (Richardson 153). The pair would later drift apart as Thompson feared what Acosta's behavior would bring into his life, and Acosta was later found dead in 1974 with suspicions that he was murdered by drug dealers (Richardson 155).

SECTION III. DUKE'S AMERICAN DREAM

With the contrast between Dr. Gonzo and Duke established, it is now important to turn to the protagonist himself. It is still unclear what exactly Duke's politics are, what his American Dream actually entails, and how transgression fully factors into the picture. When examining both the hitchhiker and Lucy scenes, I mentioned how Duke uses transgression to achieve a goal, making another uncomfortable as a means of shocking them into considering their own behavior. However, I did not fully explore the ideological dimensions of Duke's broader use of transgression. This was intentional. It was important to first discuss Dr. Gonzo because it is tempting to read the novel as suggesting that transgression is inherently virtuous. Examining Dr. Gonzo's role in the novel however makes it clear that this is not the case. Rather than being inherently virtuous, Dr. Gonzo is used to illustrate that unchecked transgression is a fundamentally menacing and self-destructive impulse. Duke understands this and uses transgression as a means by which he can enact his worldview. It is now time to fully unpack that worldview and identify what exactly Duke's American Dream entails.

To do this we must consider the author in two senses of the word. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is, of course, written by Thompson. However, it is also the case that the novel frames itself as being a journalistic piece written by Duke. This is significant because Duke claims to be engaged in a political project to rebuild or rediscover the American Dream. However, throughout the novel Duke does not seem to actually do anything political in Las Vegas. His transgression manifests as private drug use that does not lead to him confronting others, as opposed to Dr. Gonzo's menacing presence, and his political musings are mostly contained to his thoughts. Now it is tempting to take this fact and read the novel as a self-delusion: Duke believes he is engaging in a political project but is in fact just as lost as his attorney, with his delusion keeping him from

fully sinking into nihilism. This reading has been put forward before with even Oxman, who rejects a fully pessimistic reading of the novel, suggesting that the possibility of Duke finding the dream is "seriously in doubt" (37). However, this reading is called into question when we consider that Duke knows his story is going to be read. I propose that the story itself is Duke's political project—that writing it is his way of embodying his value system to preserve the American Dream. In this view, Duke's internal monologues become direct political action. They are challenges given to the reader. Duke uses transgressive language and chronicles his transgressive drug use as a way of modeling for readers that the American Dream is not dead and that it can be found.

This mirrors Thompson's project in writing the novel. Wright explains that Thompson developed his style of Gonzo journalism, of which *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was his first major project, to "present the American public with a renewal of hope in notions like the American Dream" (641). Now, considering the novel as a journalistic endeavor has some important considerations for the further analysis of Duke's political project. Firstly, it complicates the relationship between author and text. Typically, it is bad practice to conflate the author of a first-person novel with the protagonist. Up to this point, I have maintained the traditional separation of the two. I have focused on Duke's actions within the novel and have referenced Thompson and the surrounding para-text only to provide context. However, it is crucial to remember that Duke is used by Thompson to speak to readers. Going forward with this in mind, Thompson the writer will be introduced from time to time to further explore the political dimensions of Duke's actions. This analysis will still be focused primarily on the text, but it will be assumed that Duke works, to some degree, as a mouthpiece for Thompson. Thompson used fiction as a journalistic method, to expose truths that he believed could not be

explored through purely factual reporting alone (Wright 641). The creation of Duke then can be understood as a method of conveying truth to readers that could not be fully conveyed in a more traditional memoir format. Considering all of this, the assertion that Duke's political project—his journey to the American Dream—is the story itself becomes easier to parse. Thompson/Duke uses transgression to grab the reader's attention and to challenge them. Rather than being an empty delusion, his journey to the American Dream is anything but. Duke is enacting the dream by writing about his journey to demonstrate that it did not die with the sixties. Wright echoes this point, writing "the gonzo mix is more fiction than reality, but its capacity for enactment keeps the static authorities who maintain status quo on their guard. The beauty of employing fear and loathing within an ideological system is that it is reciprocal; the writing makes its opponents uneasy" (641). It is this capacity for enactment that Duke demonstrates and in doing so he issues readers with what Oxman identifies as a call-to-action (38).

All of this said, the question remains as to what exactly Duke's American Dream entails. I have hinted at some of its political dimensions, discussing Duke's disdain for cultural conservatism and Nixon and his admiration for the values of the hippie movement even as he is critical of its actual implementation of those values. Moreover, the contrast with Dr. Gonzo reveals that Duke sees transgression as a tool rather than something that is inherently valuable. Finally, understanding gonzo journalism as a method provides a framework for understanding Duke's political project—the story as a call to action for readers. We are now in a position to return to the text itself, considering all the above, to finally explore the specifics of Duke's politics and fully uncover the nature of his American Dream.

I propose that Duke, working as Thompson's mouthpiece, presents a fundamentally libertarian conception of the American Dream. A close reading of several scenes throughout the

book will demonstrate that Duke sees freedom as essential to the American Dream. His call to action then can be understood in libertarian terms, calling for readers to pursue their own individualistic enactment of the American Dream. This upcoming analysis will pay particular attention to Duke's transgression to reveal how it both calls readers to action and also models what that action might look like.

Qualifying Duke's Libertarian Politics

Moving on to Duke's use of transgression on its own, it is important to revisit some ideas that have already been discussed. First of these is the notion that Duke is caught between the failure of the hippie counterculture and the return to cultural (and political) conservatism under Nixon. I proposed that Duke shared the values of the hippie culture but rejected the passive manner in which those values were enacted. However, Duke's appreciation of hippie values is highly individualistic. Duke seems to value the tolerance and consciousness expansion that defined the hippie movement, but within the novel he does not comment one way or another on the economic theories associated with the counterculture. I will explore this point in more detail shortly, but Duke seems to take a highly individualistic approach to political transgression simultaneously condemning mindless consumption under capitalism while also appreciating those who make it to the top of the economic system.

One value, or rather a specific manifestation of a value (peace), that Duke carries over from the hippie movement is an opposition to the Vietnam War. Throughout the novel, Duke demonstrates an acute awareness of the war and expresses his anger that Las Vegas encourages people to revel in greed and consumption while people are dying for capitalism. At the same time, however, Duke also values the idea of America as a valuable concept in and off itself. I will demonstrate that Duke sees America as a place where true freedom is possible and that his

search for the American Dream is an earnest journey to embody the liberating promises of the country. This reverence of America suggests that Duke does not embody a wholly critical view of America that one might expect from someone fully committed to a Marxist critique of the country.

All of this, I believe, speaks to what I previously identified as a libertarian worldview. Now, it is tempting to reject this reading because of the connotations that libertarianism has gained in the twenty-first century. Under the Obama years and continuing through to this writing, American libertarianism has been characterized by an alliance with conservatives: Ron Paul, for instance, is one of the most prominent politicians to have self-identified as libertarian while serving as a Republican senator. Considering this association, describing Duke as libertarian requires some justification when considering his palpable disdain for the Nixon administration. However, Duke's temporal positioning makes a libertarian reading of his character possible. Duke is positioned at the start of the rise of neoliberalism. At this time, the Nixon administration had begun the ongoing "War on Drugs" that characterizes much of American policing to this day. Moreover, Duke's journey comes at the cusp of the rise of neoliberalism that led to the decreased involvement of the regulatory state in economic affairs. The association and alliance between conservatives and libertarians in the twenty-first century is a product of their shared opposition to government interference in economic affairs through the "administrative state" (Shlueter and Wenzel 6). In 1971, however, this concern was not at the forefront of libertarian thinking. American libertarianism, in the pre-Obama era, was characterized instead by an equal distrust for liberals and conservatives and less of a concern for the administrative state and a concern for the increasing encroachment of the police state into private life with the "War on Drugs" (Fish 275). It is this era of concern that Duke inhabits and thus while his libertarianism

might seem at odds with contemporary libertarianism, his thinking *is* libertarian nonetheless. Later, I will explore the disconnect between Duke's libertarianism and the libertarianism of today as it relates to Duke's call to action for readers.

Now, as Nagle noted, transgression is a politically fungible concept. Writers across the ideological spectrum have used transgression to try and further their agendas. I proposed that Duke is fundamentally a libertarian, and some evidence to this end has been provided in the analysis of his physical journey and his relationship with Dr. Gonzo. However, the text itself is the ultimate evidence. With the groundwork laid and the particulars of 1971 libertarianism established, we can now return to the text itself to see how Duke utilizes transgression as a means of developing his libertarian vision of the American Dream and, moreover, how Duke's libertarianism is conceptualized as the freedom to live authentically.

Lizards, the Carnivalesque, and the Vietnam War

Early in the novel, Duke finds himself checking into his hotel room with a head full of acid. In this scene, he sees his fellow casino patrons, and some employees, morph into horrifying lizards. "The woman's face was *changing*: swelling, pulsing…horrible green jowls and fangs jutting out" (24). Now, in this scene, the transgressive behavior is the consumption of LSD, but I would like to call attention to how this transgression is used. Building off of Wright's analysis of Thompson's literary and journalistic strategy, I previously mentioned that it is important to recognize that Duke knows that his journey will be read about. This recognition is important, because in this scene the transgressive behavior is not intended to get a reaction from any person that Duke interacts with in the text itself. Rather, the behavior allows Duke to experience a carnivalesque distortion of his fellow patrons and then share that experience with his readers.

In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression,* Peter Stallybrass and Allon White explain that the carnivalesque, especially in terms of its focus on bodily functions, works to invert hierarchies: “the grotesque tends to operate as a critique of the dominant ideology which has already set the terms designating what is high and what is low” (43). With this understanding, when examining Thompson’s writing it will be important to distinguish what dominant ideology is being critiqued through the use of the grotesque in the novel.

The carnivalesque is also helpful in examining how Duke is able to understand his journey as one for the American Dream. As a concept, the American Dream is lofty, and for Duke it will be shown to exist almost as an all encompassing worldview or guiding philosophy. This draws upon Mikhail Bakhtin who first conceptualized the carnivalesque. For Bakhtin, the carnival was about building and sharing an understanding of the world. Through things like parody, people were able to come together and laugh through the shared understanding that the hierarchy was being both explicitly acknowledged and inverted, however brief this shared laughter might be before the carnival ended and formal hierarchy once again took over. On the topic of laughter itself, Bakhtin writes:

> Carnivalistic laughter likewise is directed toward something higher -toward a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders. Laughter embraces both poles of change, it deals with the very process of change, with crisis itself. Combined in the act of carnival laughter are death and rebirth, negation (a smirk) and affirmation (rejoicing laughter). This is a profoundly universal laughter, a laughter that contains a whole outlook on the world. (127)

Bakhtin explains that the laugher itself is universal, containing a whole outlook. This tracks with Duke’s humor throughout the novel. While often cynical, Duke’s humor is as much the

formation of a new worldview as it is the rejection of those he critiques. He laughs because he understands that he is inverting the social order, but he also recognizes that this inversion is only obtainable because he has invoked the carnivalesque by consuming LSD.

All of this is at play in Duke's description of his fellow patrons. In the previously quoted passage, the carnivalesque is at play in his description of the distortion of the woman's body into a reptile. This is followed up by Duke's hallucination taking a violent turn, as he sees his fellow patrons, now lizards, begin to feast on one another. "Right next to me a huge reptile was gnawing on a woman's neck, the carpet was a blood-soaked sponge—impossible to walk on" (24). These passages are accompanied by an illustration by Ralph Steadman conveying the totality of the situation:

Figure 1. "Lizard Lounge" (Steadman)

This image plays into a carnivalesque reading of the scene, depicting the patrons' bodies as bloated and distorted. Now within the novel this scene is presented as a consequence of Duke's drug use, but considering the fact that Duke knows that his description will be read the question arises of what, exactly, the reader is supposed to take from this depiction. This question is also significant when acknowledging that the hallucinogenic effects of LSD as portrayed in the

novel are exaggerated—while Thompson may have checked into his room while on drugs in real life, he did not see his fellow patrons turn into lizards. One possible reading of this scene, and of the use of drugs within the novel in general, is that it is purely an attempt at humor. While the passages are humorous in a certain gonzo way, I believe that the hallucinations also function on a deeper level. In this particular scene, I propose that the hallucinations take on a carnivalesque nature to take advantage of the inversion of hierarchy that the carnivalesque carries with it. In this scene, Duke is the drugged-out individual who is acting deranged. It is revealed in the next chapter that, from the patrons' perspective, Duke was terrifying while under the influence, ranting about lizards and waving a weapon around. "You scared the shit out of those people! Waving that goddamn marlin spike around and yelling about reptiles" (28). Stallybrass and White explained that one function of the carnivalesque is the critique and inversion of dominant hierarchies. This inversion is at play in the lizard scene. Duke is the menacing figure in the casino bar, but by presenting the other patrons as grotesque lizards (a presentation that is enhanced by Steadman's illustration) the scene is inverted. It is the frightened patrons that are terrifying monsters, not the madman ranting about lizards.

In terms of Duke's politics, this inversion is important because it is an early glimpse at the disdain Duke has for the "normal" Las Vegas patron. Duke, no matter how extreme his behavior, is not a monster. The patrons just going about their business, however, are. But what makes them monsters? Later scenes in the novel answer this question, suggesting that the other patrons are monsters by virtue of simply visiting Las Vegas, succumbing to greedy and consumeristic impulses, while the Vietnam War is in full swing. Throughout the novel, Duke is highly critical of the tourists in Las Vegas. He describes them, as previously discussed, as "caricatures of used-car dealers" (57). What Duke means by this is that the tourists in Las Vegas

are politically disengaged. Despite the horrors of the Vietnam War and despite the forthcoming encroachment of the police state under Nixon, they are just going about their business. In the lizard scene, Duke is human because he is politically engaged. His reason for being in Las Vegas is his search for the American Dream. The patrons, on the other hand, are presumably in the city as tourists.

Now, at the same time, the lizard scene is also played for laughs. The humor here is carnivalesque, sharing the quality of universality that Bakhtin describes. Describing carnivalesque laughter, Bakhtin explains that all parties are able to laugh due to a shared knowledge that the inversion of hierarchies is only made possible by the circumstances of the carnival. This idea is at play in the depiction of Duke's fellow patrons as lizards. Duke knows that he was the one behaving grotesquely, not the other patrons, and that his perception of them is drug induced. He also knows that the reader is also aware of this. The humor in this scene comes from this shared understanding. Like carnival laughter, it is only made possible by circumstance, and it is understood to be only a temporary inversion of the status quo. In this way, Duke's transgressive behavior (ingesting LSD) can be understood as an attempt to invoke the carnivalesque—an attempt to create a circumstance where Duke and the reader can experience humor through shared understanding. The shared understanding here is that Duke had to manufacture the inversion of hierarchy—it did not occur naturally—and yet at the same time the takeaway from this inversion, that Duke is different from the other patrons, is taken very seriously. This is a callback to the notion of activity that is very important for Duke. Duke actively creates a carnivalesque circumstance, and while it is humorous, it is also effective in conveying a political message.

Owing to the fast pace of Thompson's gonzo style, the assertion that Duke is different from other tourists in Las Vegas is implied in the next scene rather than being explicitly explored in the lizard scene itself. After checking into his room, immediately following the depiction of the casino patrons as lizards, the first thing Duke does is watch news coverage of the Vietnam War. "The TV news was about the Laos invasion—a series of horrifying disasters: explosions and twisted wreckage, men fleeing in terror, generals babbling insane lies" (29). The implication in this scene relies on some assumptions about the typical Las Vegas visitor as someone who is in the city to gamble or see a show. Duke wants to do neither of those things, he wants to watch the news regarding Vietnam. And it is important to note that Duke is presented as content to simply watch the news. Rather than being a distraction Duke sees it as a priority, temporarily delaying his responsibilities as a reporter just to take some time to learn more about the war (28). It is Dr. Gonzo, who I have shown to be an example of what Duke might look like without his political consciousness, who prompts Duke to turn off the TV. "'Turn that shit off…Let's get out of here'" (29). It is the politically disengaged Dr. Gonzo who pushes Duke to go out and experience the city, Duke was prepared to just sit and watch the news. In this way, the contrast between Duke's hyper-political experience of the world and the apolitical lives of others is furthered while also contextualizing the grotesque imagery seen when presenting the other patrons as lizards.

Duke's hyper-focus on the Vietnam War comes up again in the second half of the novel. After rescuing Lucy, Duke snaps at a phone operator at The Flamingo who attempts to put through a message from her. "What do you *want?* There's a war on man! People are being killed!" (123). The operator responds to Duke's question with confusion and finally a quick recognition that the war is "terrible" after Duke clarifies that he is referring to the war in

Vietnam (123). In this brief scene, Duke confronts both another character, the operator, and the reader with the reality that while Duke, and everyone else in Las Vegas, is living life as normal there are people dying in Vietnam. It is important that this scene comes after rescuing Lucy because her abduction by Dr. Gonzo threw a wrench in Duke's plans. As established, Duke returned to Las Vegas with the intent of taking the lessons learned on the first trip and actually transgressing as a means of embodying his values. Lucy prevented this. The conversation on the phone is the first time that Duke is able to actually follow through on the reason for his return to Las Vegas. Further, while not invoking the carnivalesque as the previously described scene did, this scene does further the idea that Duke's heightened political consciousness separates him from others. In this scene, Duke mentions the Vietnam War to trivialize the operator's attempts to get messages through. "'We're watching the goddamned news!' I screamed. 'What the fuck are you interrupting for?'" (122). This functions as a reassertion of Duke's insistence that his search for the American Dream is more important than normal, everyday business such ad checking phone messages.

Looking at both the lizard scene and Duke's response to the interrupting phone operator reveals one element of the text's political call to action. In the lizard scene, those who are depicted as not having a political consciousness are portrayed as monsters. Duke, who is politically conscious, is human despite his transgressive behavior (perhaps because of it). Duke then calls out another character, the operator, and the reader by reminding them of the real life-or-death situation going on in Vietnam. Considering Thompson's method, as identified by Wright, of using the novel to present readers with a hope of the American Dream, the call to action here is clear. Duke is demonstrating that the anti-war values of the hippie movement did not need to be given up in the wake of the movement's collapse. In fact, the lizard scene suggests

that giving up that political consciousness, or never having it in the first place, is monstrous. At the same time, Duke remains human by holding onto that value, among others. Moreover, he enacts that value by making the operator acknowledge that he is technically trying to put messages through, a banal task, through while there is a war on. Now, I do not believe that this scene can be read as an attempt to actually make the operator aware of his own lack of a political consciousness. Within the framing of the novel, it is instead an attempt to downplay the severity of the "Lucy situation." However, considering that Duke knows he is being read, and that Thompson intended for the novel to speak directly to the reader, I propose that this scene is an attempt to make the reader recognize that day-to-day affairs are trivial in light of real political issues.

This reading speaks to what Richardson identifies as one of the motivating factors behind the novel. Thompson went to Las Vegas for *Sports Illustrated* following a previous job covering the Kentucky Derby. At the derby, Thompson was disgusted by the audiences' greed and complete dedication to a race that was ultimately trivial while ignoring the war in Vietnam (Richardson 151). Thompson channeled that feeling when he decided to write about Las Vegas, hoping to expose just how gross the indifference towards the Vietnam War felt in the city (Richardson 151). Duke rejects this indifferent attitude, demonstrating an overt interest in the war and challenging the reader's possible indifference by interrupting his drug-induced antics to remind the reader that the story is occurring at the same time as the war.

Turning back to Duke's libertarianism, I see his preoccupation with the Vietnam War as one way in which he embodies his ideology. While politically allied with conservatives, American libertarians tend to diverge from the GOP party line when it comes to foreign policy preferring an isolationist approach to military intervention (Shlueter and Wenzel 6). This

preference has diminished within libertarian circles in recent years, but it was of major importance at the time of Thompson's writing. Further, his disdain for those who ignore the war in Vietnam—or more broadly his disdain for those who are politically disengaged—points to a lineage from Duke's libertarianism to the contemporary libertarianism of the alt-right. Within alt-right discourse, a meme has emerged in which the (perceived) centrist masses are called "normies." Normies are those who "'don't get' the countercultural styles of the [alt-right] subculture" (Nagle 107). They are contrasted with "Chads" or "trolls" who do understand the counterculture and engage in transgression to further the alt-right's political agenda (Nagle 107-108). In other words, trolls are right-libertarians who engage in transgressive discourse to make fun of politically disengaged people, normies; the trolls say things that they do not believe, and consider themselves highly political, and laugh at the normies for not getting the joke. Duke engages in these behaviors throughout the book, as has been discussed, and to borrow from the language of the alt-right he might be understood as a "troll" who harbors a disdain for the "normies" who are portrayed as carnivalesque distortions of human beings.

Duke's Capitalist Realism

I earlier proposed that Duke's rejection of the hippie counterculture was due to the problem of passivity—Duke prefers an active approach to political engagement. Mark Fisher describes the hippies as waiting for rights and justice to be granted by a higher authority rather than actively seizing rights and justice from hierarchical structures (*Capitalist Realism* 14). While Duke does not use such theoretical language, it is clear that he shares Fisher's analysis of the situation. I mention Fisher because his notion of capitalist realism helps to explain Duke's libertarianism especially as it relates to the hippie counterculture. In short, capitalist realism

describes the notion that there are no viable alternatives to capitalism[8] (Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* 6-7). Now, as mentioned Duke does borrow heavily from hippie values. However, one value he does not incorporate in his own worldview is a sense of communalism. Duke does, as has just been demonstrated, show genuine anger at the greed and selfishness he sees in Las Vegas while men are dying in Vietnam. At the same time, however, this anger is not couched in systemic terms. At no point does he critique capitalism itself, and at certain points he shows a certain admiration for those who find their own path to success under capitalism. Late in the novel, after meeting with a musician friend named Bruce, Duke explains that he finally found the American Dream at Circus-Circus and is ready to leave Las Vegas.

> "No point hanging around this town any longer. I have all I need. Anything else would only confuse me."
>
> He seemed surprised. "You *found* the American Dream?" he said. "In *this* town?"
>
> I nodded. "We're sitting on the main nerve right now," I said. "You remember that story the manager told us about the owner of [Circus-Circus]? How he always wanted to run away and joint the circus when he was a kid?"….
>
> "Yeah I see what you mean," he said. "Now the bastard has his *own* circus, and a license to steal too." He nodded. "You're right—he's the model."
>
> "Absolutely." (191)

Duke found the American Dream at Circus-Circus, and the dream, as he sees it (and is echoed by Bruce), it the freedom to make one's personal dream a reality. The owner wanted to run to a circus, and now he owns one. I suggest that this points to Duke's libertarianism as he seems undisturbed by the implication that the casino owners dream involves exploitation—the "license

[8] Fisher does not suggest that this notion is true. His project, in *Capitalist Realism* and subsequent works, explores how capitalist realist thinking is not as sound as it may appear.

to steal" as Bruce describes it. Here, I see Duke's separation from the hippie movement couched in libertarian terms via a sense of capitalist realism. While Duke shares the hippies' values of self-expression and peace, he sees capitalism as a means of furthering those values rather than as a roadblock. Duke embodies a hyper-individualized approach to liberation that challenges the sixties' countercultures embrace of communal thinking. Now, this reading hinges on two assumptions. First, it needs to be demonstrated that Duke genuinely thinks that he found the American Dream at Circus-Circus. Second, it needs to be demonstrated that Duke thinks the American Dream is a good thing.

To the first point, the conversation with Bruce (the musician friend) is not the first time that Duke describes Circus-Circus as being the "main-nerve" of the American Dream. In the first part of the novel, Duke visits the casino with Dr. Gonzo. There, he describes the experience as a certain kind of madness. Muzzled wolverines are thrown as part of a trapeze act overhead. Men shout to try and get patrons to play carnival games, and the whole casino is designed to look like the inside of a circus tent. Duke, however, is the only person aware of the madness. Everyone else just goes about their business as normal. "This madness goes on and on, but nobody seems to notice. The gambling action goes on twenty-four hours a day on the main floor, and the circus never ends. Meanwhile, on the upstairs balconies, the customers are being hustled by every conceivable kind of bizarre shuck" (46). Duke is enamored by this, and protests when Dr. Gonzo wishes to leave the casino. "'You must realize,' I said, 'that we've found the main nerve'" (48). At this point, it is unclear what the significance of Circus-Circus is, what makes it the main nerve. If anything, read alone this scene seems to operate as a refrain of a theme throughout the novel: Duke's annoyance that others look past the "madness" of the Vietnam War to go about their daily life. However, such a reading of the scene would suggest that Duke is critical of the

American Dream, with its "main nerve" being the willful ignorance of the patrons ignoring the madness. However, I propose that the main-nerve was the owner of Circus-Circus as Duke later identifies in the previously discussed scene. The owner used the madness of the casino to make his dream of running a circus come true, and he became very successful in the process. This mirrors Duke's own process of using madness and transgression—through drug use and extreme behavior—to find the American Dream.

To the second point, the question of whether or not Duke sees the American Dream as something to be critiqued or held up as an ideal, I would like to return to a passage that I previously discussed. Duke describes his search as a "Our trip was different. It was a classic affirmation of everything right and true and decent in the national character" (18). He then follows that description with a caveat. "It as a gross, physical salute to the fantastic *possibilities* of life in this country—but only for those with true grit. And we were chock full of that" (18). It is this caveat that speaks to both Duke holding the American Dream as being a good thing and his individualistic, libertarian tendencies. Duke sees America as a place full of possibility. When considering his insistence that the owner of Circus-Circus is emblematic of the American Dream fulfilled, we see that Duke values the "grit" to take advantage of those possibilities. Further, speaking to Duke's libertarianism, we see a rejection of communal thinking. Duke sees the possibilities offered by America as wonderful, "everything right and true and decent in the national character," but he also recognizes that these possibilities are "only for those with true grit" (18). At no point does Duke see this limitation as a weakness, something to critique. Rather, he accepts it part and parcel as a part of the American Dream. For Duke, it is important that the communalism of the hippies gives way to an individualism wherein the pursuit of the American Dream is entirely dependent on one's "grit." Duke believes that he has this "grit" and that it will

enable him to find the American Dream. Here also I see a sense of capitalist realism at play. While Duke does seem critical of America, he take the prospect of there being winners and losers as a simple fact rather than something to be challenged; moreover, he takes a libertarian approach in suggesting that the division between winners and losers is a meritocratic one. Those who are unable to seize opportunity fail because they do not have his grit.

Duke's Embodiment of the American Dream

While Duke does find that the owner of Circus-Circus has embodied the American Dream, Duke does not admire the owner specifically because he was wealthy. Rather, Duke appreciates that the owner had a dream and had the "true grit" to make it a reality despite the madness of the world around him. I propose that Duke does the same thing. Duke begins the novel wanting to make sense of the collapse of the counterculture. His American Dream is finding a way to be successful while true to his transgressive values at a time when the culture that supports those values is dying. Duke does this by writing. I mentioned before that Duke knows that his story is going to be read. At the risk of conflating the author with the narrator, I believe that the novel itself is to Duke what Circus-Circus is for the casino owner. Duke begins his journey acknowledging that he is ostensibly writing a piece of straight journalism for a "fashionable sporting magazine" (3).. At the same time, however, he places himself in a position where straight reporting is an impossibility due to his excessive drug use. We know that Duke believes that normal, day-to-day matters are trivial in light of Nixon, the War on Drugs, and the Vietnam War. The novel suggests that Duke never actually intended to cover the race in a meaningful way but, instead, that he used the credit line the job provided as a means to fund his own project: the search for the American Dream. Despite being hired to cover the Mint 400, Duke immediately begins to envision the story as the search for the American Dream. "But what

was the story? Nobody had bothered to say. So we would have to drum it up on our own. Free Enterprise. The American Dream" (11). Now, when Duke asks "what was the story" he means the question figuratively. Both Duke and the reader know that he has been hired to cover the Mint 400 as he establishes this fact in the preceding scene (9). So, then, when Duke asks "what was the story" this question is better understood as a self-examination: Duke is trying to figure out how to make something of an assignment that he is otherwise indifferent towards. And his conclusion is that the story is something that he must make.

Like the owner of Circus-Circus, Duke seeks to make his dream happen, to make a story where he sees none. So, decides to "do it *now,* pure Gonzo journalism" and "load up on heinous chemicals and then drive like a bastard from Hollywood to Las Vegas" (12). In this decision, I see a convergence of the ideas that have already been discussed. First is the rejection of passivity that comes from Duke's critique of the hippie counterculture. Rather than waiting for an opportunity, Duke takes an active position deciding to "do it now" and make the story he believed deserved to be told a reality. This parallels reality; the novel's very existence hinges on Thompson's decision to load up on drugs and drive to Las Vegas. Libertarianism is another idea at play in this decision. Duke, as established, has a great admiration for those who manage to claw their way to the top, like the Circus-Circus owner. Here, Duke frames his opportunity as "Free Enterprise" and, at the same time, Duke links the notion of enterprise directly with the American Dream. Outside the text, this reading tracks with Thompson's aspirations and career trajectory. Since the middle of the 1960s Thompson had been interested in writing a book on the American Dream (Richardson 8). However, the opportunity never arose as publishers were more interested in his journalistic endeavors. Thompson took the *Sports Illustrated* contract not out of a genuine interest in covering the race but as a means of finally getting his dream project rolling

(Richardson 137). Transgression is also an element of this scene. Duke decides to load up on drugs before heading to Las Vegas and this decision should not be read as being motivated by purely hedonistic impulses. Duke builds his drug collection of "two bags of grass, seventy-five pellets od 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" knowing that Nevada had some of the strongest drug laws in the country (4)(42). Duke's project is to embody the American Dream by going on a bender, transgressing the laws of Nevada, and finding success in writing about his bender.

Total Control Now

There is a final element of transgression that remains to be explored, and that is the limits Duke places on himself. In the comparison between Duke and Dr. Gonzo, I explored how the latter functions as a representation of how transgression without limits leads to monstrous behavior. Duke, on the other hand, has limits that are informed by his values. These limits, such as the avoidance of direct insults, are self-imposed by Duke. Despite his indulgence in psychedelics, Duke never loses control of his own behavior. In fact, the wildest scenes in the novel, like the abduction of Lucy, are the result of Dr. Gonzo, not Duke, losing control. During the first visit to Circus-Circus, Duke is in complete control over his actions[9]. He is excited to have finally found the "main nerve" of the American Dream and is only thrust into action when Dr. Gonzo begins to lose control, insulting the waitress and ranting about how he will kill someone if he spends anymore time in Las Vegas (48-50). Duke, on the other hand, is always in

[9] Now, in this scene Duke is under the influence of ether. However, Duke makes it a point to establish that his mental faculties are intact while using ether. The drug reduces his physical coordination, but he does not say or do anything that he wouldn't do otherwise (45).

control even if he doesn't appear to be. His drug use, for instance, is an active attempt to flaunt the War on Drugs rather than a display of pure hedonism.

This idea of control gets fleshed out when Duke flees Las Vegas in the middle of the novel. Duke is speeding, with a beer in hand, down the highway back to California when he is pulled over by a traffic cop. Duke accelerates when he sees the cop behind him and explains his reasoning to the reader. "Your normal speeder will panic and immediately pull over when he sees the big red light behind him…. This is wrong" (90). He describes the idea of pulling over immediately as "wrong" because it suggests that a speeder recognizes that they were not in control of their speed. Duke, instead, makes a u-turn at 120 miles-an-hour, coming to a smooth stop while the cop struggles to follow, skidding instead of coming to a smooth stop as Duke was able to do. "The idea is to show him that you were always in total control of yourself and your vehicle—while *he* lost control of everything" (91). This notion of total control does two things. First, it provides further evidence for Duke's libertarian inclinations. As an ideology, libertarianism is built on the idea that people are capable of monitoring their own behavior and thus state regulation is an unnecessary interference in private life (Fish 273). In this scene, Duke's assertion is that he is going to demonstrate to the cop that formal, legal consequences are unnecessary. Duke doesn't need to be punished because he was in "total control" of himself and his vehicle; he asserts that he drove "properly" and that his behavior, although technically illegal, endangered no one (90). Duke also accepts responsibility for his actions. "'I know. I'm guilty. I understand that. I knew it was a crime, but I did it anyway'" (92). This method actually works, and the cop lets Duke off with a written warning.

This notion of self-control as a key to unlocking the American Dream has a long history intertwined with libertarian notions of rugged-individualism. Ronald Takaki, a historian of the

American Revolution, discusses how the notion of self-control was central to the ideas of both the puritanical and proto-libertarian sects of the Continental Congress. “In the republic, the people would no longer have an external authority over them, a father/king to restrain their passions and deny them luxury; they would instead have to control themselves. Whether or not they would be able to exercise self-control effectively depended on their virtue” (Takaki 8). We see this distinction play out within the novel. Duke is more virtuous than Dr. Gonzo, and he is able to control his desires where the latter is controlled by them. Continuing on to the libertarian implications of this trend in American history, Takaki explains both James Madison and John Adams felt that the freedom to engage in self-control was crucial to the development of an American identity separate from the British Empire (9). Thompson was well versed in this history, with an intense fascination with the founding fathers and American Revolution (Richardson 33). He would also express an admiration for the principles of the American Revolution in an interview wherein he is seen exchanging gunfire with a neighbor due to an alleged property dispute (“Evening at Owl Farm). He told interviewers, “the people who did this, the Constitution and Declaration of Independence, were good people” (“Evening at Owl Farm”). Understanding this, Duke’s commitment to self-control might be understood as an embodiment of these foundational principles.

Aside from exposing Duke’s libertarian thinking, this scene also builds off everything else in the novel to paint a fuller picture of Dukes project. I proposed that Duke saw the Las Vegas trip as his opportunity to finally find his version of the American Dream. As a part of this, it is important that Duke is in control throughout the entire narrative. This is in stark opposition to the hippie mindset that Fisher identifies as a passive waiting for something to happen. Duke seizes control of his destiny and is in control from the very beginning. He begins taking control

by rejecting the notion that his story was about the Mint 400, and he stays in control to the end of the novel. He ends his story by describing himself as "a Man on the Move, and just sick enough to be totally confident" (204). Duke's American Dream is about this confidence—the willingness to take control over his own destiny. He wanted to do something—write about the American Dream—and he did it just as the casino owner dreamed of working at a circus and worked to make his dream a reality by opening Circus-Circus.

Turning to the novel itself as a project by Thompson, we can begin to examine what exactly readers might take away from the novel. We know that Thompson's goal was, in part, to "present the American public with a renewal of hope in notions like the American Dream" (Wright 641). However, the way Thompson does this is obscure. Within the novel, we see him present both the owner of Circus-Circus and Duke as having found the dream, but their paths to the dream are extremely divergent. This being the case then Thompson's presentation of the American Dream cannot be strictly prescriptive. Rather than showing a specific path that leads to the dream, Thompson presents the reader with the notion that it is possible to achieve. At the same time, through characters like Dr. Gonzo, he also shows that some paths are dead ends. To conclude this analysis, I will unpack all that has been examined thus far to sus out what readers might ultimately take away from Thompson's portrayal of the "fantastic *possibilities* of life in this country."

CONCLUSION: JOURNEY'S END, THE AMERICAN DREAM

All three of the threads analyzed point to a libertarian picture of the American Dream. Returning to my analysis of the journey itself, the novel points to a similarity between both San Francisco and Las Vegas through its rejection and critique of both cities. I explored how Duke comes to accept the reasons why the hippie movement failed and his ultimate rejection of the hippie identity. At the same time, however, Duke clearly critiques the mainstream conservatism emblematic of Las Vegas. In both cases, what Duke is rejecting is the lack of individualism represented by both cities. In the case of San Francisco, this can be understood as a rejection of communalism—an idea central to the movement. Duke wants to be, and ends the novel as, a "Man on the Move" (204). Duke frames the hippies as a group, fundamentally passive in nature, riding a wave and hoping that it will carry them to success. While Duke agrees with many of their values, his approach is different, active rather than passive and perhaps most significantly highly individual. While Duke is accompanied by his companion Dr. Gonzo through much of the novel, he is not in community with the attorney. The two are on very different journeys, as shown through their contrasting characterization, and Duke is only able to find the American Dream when he is free of Dr. Gonzo suggesting that for the journey to succeed it had to be individual.

At the same time, Duke's critique of conservatism as seen in Las Vegas also reveals the importance of individualism within his conception of the American Dream. If Duke embodied a left-wing ideology, rather than libertarianism, then it would follow that his critique of Las Vegas and conservatism in general would focus on the exploitative nature of capitalism as seen in Las Vegas. This is not the case. When Duke critiques Las Vegas's conservatism, what he critiques is the lack of individualism in the city. The casino patrons are portrayed as a mob of monsters,

lacking any individual human characteristics, and he later describes those who stay up until the early morning gambling as "caricatures of used-car dealers from Dallas" (57). He admires their dedication to pursuing the American Dream, but he also is critical of their method, hoping for the random chance and "pre-dawn chaos" of gambling to make their dreams a reality (57). Whereas the hippies rejected individuality through communalism, these individuals reject individualism in a more subtle manner—the refusal to strike out on their own and an adherence to the dominant social scripts. Duke, on the other hand, does not follow any scripts nor does he wait for chance to make his dreams a reality; the novel itself is his way of breaking off on his own and making his dream a reality. Where the "used-car dealers" wait for something to happen, fundamentally out of control of their own destiny, Duke maintains that he is always in "total control."

This issue of control is how Dr. Gonzo is used to further the idea of individualism as the path to the American Dream. Unlike Duke, Dr. Gonzo is not in control of his actions nor his destiny. Rather, he is controlled by his hedonistic impulses which come to a head when he abducts and drugs Lucy. There is an interplay here between Duke's resentment toward Dr. Gonzo and his critique the hippie counterculture. Duke describes Dr. Gonzo as "another ugly refugee from the Love Generation, some doom-struck gimp who couldn't handle the pressure" (63). Duke also describes the fate of the hippies—the failure of their counterculture and the mass incarceration of drug users under Nixon—as being deserved due to their refusal to take control of their own destinies. He calls them "a generation of permanent cripples, failed seekers, who never understood the essential old-mystic fallacy of the Acid Culture: the desperate assumption that somebody—or at least some *force*—is tending that Light at the end of the tunnel" (179). Neither the hippies nor Dr. Gonzo take responsibility for fulfilling their dreams. Dr. Gonzo allows his hedonistic impulses to control him, ultimately leading to his self-destruction. The hippies ceded

their personal control to some imagined spiritual force, riding the wave rather than swimming toward their goal, and this cession of control leads the movement too towards self-destruction.

Duke rejects this approach, preferring instead to make his own way in life. This is an ideological move although the novel does not explicitly frame his preference in those terms. What Duke values is possibility, the freedom to choose his own path, and it is important that he does make a choice. He admires the owner of Circus-Circus for sharing this outlook, taking his dream of joining a circus and making it a reality. Duke achieves the American Dream through his own choices and actions, seizing the opportunity to write the story he wanted rather than the one given to him by when asked to cover the Mint 400. I describe this move as libertarian despite the novel's lack of an explicit ideological label for several reasons. The first is that Duke sees his path as the one that leads to the American Dream while also contrasting it with the left-wing ideology of the hippies and the traditional conservatism he finds in Las Vegas. This suggests that he is presenting readers with a third option. The second reason is Duke's demonstrated admiration for those who succeed under capitalism. He sees the casino owner as someone to admire because of his determination to make his dream profitable, and moreover Duke does not critique the owner for exploiting others to make said profit. Duke also doesn't shy away from acknowledging the exploitation, agreeing with the sentiment that the owner has a "license to steal" (191). For Duke, this "license to steal," the exploitation of others for profit, is part and parcel of his American Dream. Moreover, Duke demonstrates libertarian tendencies by emphasizing individualism and freedom. Duke is not prescriptive in his description of the American Dream. While he does critique both conservative and leftist approaches, this critique is highly focused on what they are doing wrong in his eyes. Duke does not say what they ought to do instead, only that what they are doing does not work. Rather than suggesting that his

alternative path is the only right one, it instead becomes his personal path, one he can take because of the "fantastic *possibilities"* of life as an American (18). For Duke, it is not important that others follow his path—in fact, he critiques those who he sees as following a preordained path throughout the novel. What Duke does want is for people to see the possibilities and to make a path for themselves.

Duke in the Era of the Alt-Right

At the beginning of this analysis, I mentioned that the inception of this project was my belief that Thompson's work might provide valuable insight into our current political moment. Having examined Duke's libertarianism, we are now able to examine the two elements of it that I see as most relevant to our current predicaments. The first is that of historicity. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is useful as a record of how libertarianism emerged from the tension between left and right during the Vietnam era. Being highly fictionalized, it is of course not a literal record, but when the text is understood as a unique piece of journalism in the Gonzo style, it becomes clear that this process of fictionalization works to elevate the cultural shifts in politics that underpin the material.

Thompson uses the novel as a capstone to the sixties, particularly through Duke's reflections on the hippie movement and his realisation that they were doomed to fail from the beginning. Through this reflection, it is revealed that despite the countercultures supposedly transgressive nature, the movement was limited in its ability to transgress due to its communal value system. This realisation causes Duke to ultimately reject the movement as being central to his identity. At the same time, he finds traditional conservatism to be extremely constraining, keeping people from fully realizing the American Dream through the strict enforcement of moral norms.

Turning to the current moment, Nagle characterizes the present "alt-right" as being "the full coming to fruition of the transgressive anti-moral style, its final detachment from any egalitarian philosophy of the left or Christian morality of the right" (39). This describes Thompson's project in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* just as much as it does the "alt-right." What is significant about this parallel is that it points to the nature of the novel as a historical chronicle of how this ideology came to be. Nagle describes the "alt-right" as the end result of a transgressive tradition that can be tracked from the "eighteenth-century writings of Marquis de Sade" through to "what film critics called 1990s 'male rampage films' like *American Psycho* and *Fight Club"* (29). *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* fits into this tradition and fills a particular niche by exploring the specific cultural forces at play in the early 1970s in America. The novel paints a clear picture wherein Duke adopts libertarianism as a response to the ultimate demise of the hippie counterculture as much as he adopts it to continue his rejection of the conservativism he found in Nixon's America. Moreover, while Duke does not use the specific language of the alt-right, he does, in his carnivalesque portrayal of "normal" Las Vegas tourists, show that the disdain for "normies" that characterizes the contemporary wave of libertarianism was there in 1971.

This speaks to the other element that I believe makes the novel a useful tool when analyzing the "alt-right." By framing Duke's libertarianism as a response to the fundamentally doomed hippie movement, the novel helps to explain why there is an "alt-right" that came to be influential and not an equally powerful "alt-left." As Nagle describes, the "right" in "alt-right" is not to be understood as a suggestion that the "alt-right" is just a new form of conservatism (28). Rather, it is its own beast born out of an uneasy alliance between genuinely conservative white supremacists and transgressive libertarians and made possible through a heavy use of irony and a

shared rejection of what they perceive as left-wing attacks on individual freedom and identity. Unfortunately for scholars hoping to study the "alt-right," this alliance is hard to pin down and even harder to confirm. In their work on the difficulties studying the "alt-right," sociologists Thomas Colley and Martin Moore elaborate on this difficulty, explaining that the transgressive irony of libertarians makes it hard to identify the boundaries between them and white supremacists, further concluding that more research is needed to unpack the nature of the alliance itself (6, 12-13). The pair also lament the lack of scholarship explaining this alliance (9-10).

While a reading of the novel is not a replacement for the kind of scholarship needed to fully explore this alliance, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* does help as a historical record of the forces that led to this alliance to exist rather than an alliance between leftists and libertarians. The novel presents the communalism of the hippies as a fundamentally doomed experiment and explores the reasons behind the movement's demise. From Duke's perspective, the hippies' fundamental flaw was the belief that they could make change happen while adopting a collectivistic mindset. Duke, instead, embraces individualism and capitalism expressly describing his American Dream as being a product of "free enterprise" (12). The cultural force at work here is what Fisher describes as capitalist realism, "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (*Capitalist Realism* 2). This led to a change in left-wing politics wherein there was a move away from the opposition to capitalism and an increased focus on issues of identity politics (Fisher, "Exiting the Vampire Castle). Duke seems caught up in this whirlwind. With the collapse of the communal hippie counterculture, Duke is forced to take his transgressive values out into the world, and instead of challenging capitalism he embraces it.

Moreover, he suggests that capitalism is the only viable system by claiming that the hippie movement was failed from the start (in other words, not a viable system). As mentioned, this is not a full explanation of the present alliance between white supremacists and libertarians. However, it does point to a fundamental break between the left and libertarians that occurred following the collapse of the hippie counterculture. The left, as Fisher identifies, moved on to focus on issues of identity following the realisation of capitalist realism. This shift is fundamentally at odds with libertarian philosophy. In my analysis of Duke's use of racial insults, I discussed how these were used to flaunt progressive norms rather than to suggest a genuine belief in racial hierarchy. This is a highly libertarian approach to language wherein terms are considered inherently neutral with the intent behind them carrying meaning. This is at odds with left-identarian approaches to race wherein language, particularly slurs, can be understood as inherently harmful. Thus, while the novel does not answer the question of how the libertarian-white supremacist alliance that is the "alt-right" came to be, it does suggest an answer as to why there is not a similar "alt-left" alliance.

"Do it Now, Pure Gonzo Journalism"

Considering everything that has been discussed, the following is made clear. Raoul Duke is a libertarian, and he speaks to some degree on Thompson's behalf; his American Dream is fulfilled through a fundamentally libertarian approach. Moreover, Duke's libertarianism is a response to his perception of what caused the hippies to fail, communalism and passivity, as well as a rejection of the moral and cultural conservativism as represented by Las Vegas and the Nixon administration. What remains to be seen, then, is what Duke might hope for readers to take away from the novel, especially considering that Duke is framed as the story's author and knows that his words are being read.

What Duke leaves readers with is more a description of what not to do rather than a prescription of what to do when trying to achieve the American Dream. Duke makes it clear through his reflection on the sixties that passivity and communalism is a dead end. The belief that the hippie counterculture ever could manifest anything is a "mystic fallacy." At the same time, embracing to conservativism is also shown to be an undesirable option. Those who follow the normal social script have just a little control over their destinies as the hippies, wildly waiting for the American Dream to somehow be granted to them through the "pre-dawn chaos" of the system. Moreover, simply giving into desires, letting them control you, is also a failed enterprise as seen in the depiction of Dr. Gonzo as more beast than man. Now, Duke does not suggest that his particular approach is the only approach to success, hence my observation that he is not prescriptive in his method. His admiration of the owner of Circus-Circus reveals that he knows and acknowledges other paths. Rather, Duke presents his path in a fundamentally libertarian move to show that success, achieving the American Dream, is possible without setting himself up as an arbiter of what particular paths are valid. The key is to pick a path, rather than having it picked, and to "Do it *now;* pure Gonzo journalism" (12).

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