In 1960, noted American author John Steinbeck toured the United States with his blue poodle Charley. Steinbeck undertook this journey for many reasons, one of which was to assess the state of the nation in the midst of the politically charged Cold War. America in 1960 was in the midst of change. World War II had been over for more than a decade, but America was still recovering from its atomic finale and the social and political fallout of it's conclusion. For many “fear” was the word of the day, both in the realm of foreign policy, as well as at home.

In his essay, “Cold War Reflections in Travels with Charley: Steinbeck's New Americanist Evaluation of Intra-Imperialist America,” Jason Dew of Gorgia Perimeter College in Atlanta argues that John Steinbeck's Travels with Charley: In Search of America, anticipates the later work of Donald E. Pease and other theorists that have come to be identified with the New Americanist movement. Dew contends that like the New Americanists, Steinbeck was deeply concerned by a crisis of legitimation in the wake of World War II (49-50). That is, in the aftermath of the war the United States found itself bereft of a clear, unifying ideology.

Unfortunately, the American national narrative is not geared toward unity. In “National Identities, Postmodern Artifacts, and Postnational Narratives;” Pease explains that “the national narrative produced national identities by way of a social symbolic order that systematically separated an abstract, disembodied subject from resistant materialities, such as race, class and gender” (National Identities, 3). During the war, the United States faced powerful external threats in the forms of Nazi Germany and the Empire of Japan, but after the close of the war this impetus for unity fell apart, leaving America's divisive national narrative alone to resume its segregation of rich from poor, European from African or Native, and more. As Pease explains in Visionary Compacts, through the rejection of British rule the founding fathers of the United States inadvertently created a Revolutionary mythos that continued after the threat of British oppression had faded from living memory. Pease declares that “the Revolutionary mythos produced citizens who believed in nothing but opposition—to family, environment, cultural antecedents, and even their former selves” (Visionary Compacts, ix). This Revolutionary mythos extolled the virtuousness of the pioneer who set out to conquer the fronteir with naught but his own strenght, wits, and character. Unfortunately, this reverence for the rugged individual comes at the expense of the communal mentality necessary to hold a nation together. While the need to question what is certainly has value, if left unchecked and undirected it becomes problematic for national unity and cooperation.
Once manifestation of the Revolutionary mythos was negative freedom, or the pursuit of personal advancement without regard for the advancement of others. Pease explains that cultural legitimation and national identity suffer “when citizens base their personal identity as well as their nation's identity on a refusal to acknowledge the authority of institutions inherited from the nation's past” (Visionary Compacts, 7). As might be expected, the refusal to acknowledge the importance of extant institutions functionally robs individuals of valuable ideals upon which they can build their own identities, much less a unifying national identity. Rather than building on the legacy of the past, the Americans were stuck in the process of continually reinventing the wheel.

After the war, this unopposed negative freedom threatened American solidarity, placing the United States in a dangerous predicament that could not be ignored. Dew asserts that “intra-imperialism was America's answer to the crisis of legitimation” (Dew, 49). The United States needed to conquer itself, but to make that happen it needed a scapegoat upon which American fear and repulsion could be hung. With it's far-reaching military power; it's vast holdings in Europe and Asia; and it's relatively recent, bloody revolution by proponents of a fundamentally different economic system, the Soviet Union was the ideal candidate.

In The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, Jean-François Lyotard identifies a phenomenon taking place in academia in the late 1970s involving the devaluation of scientific research in favor of technological research. For Lyotard, the distinction is the latter's narrow focus on productivity, efficiency and marketability (Lyotard, 41-47). While Lyotard applies this principle to the direction he sees education taking in the late 20th century (Lyotard, 47-53), when placed in the context of the activities of the House Committee on Un-American Activities and the anti-communist hysteria of the 1950s it becomes clear that this phenomenon also applies to American anti-Soviet and anti-communist obsessions. As Lyotard saw the paring down of the scientific and education communities to limited, capitalist ideals of what it means to be productive, so too had the American identity been pared down to limited, intra-imperialist ideals of what it means to be American.

Thus, the American political system bent itself toward its opposition to the communist menace. What American leaders saw as protecting American sovreinty became an obsession with the destruction of the American Communist party, and with it the Revolutionary mythos. To this end, the FBI began to collect files on authors and artists who had been “unduely critical” of the United States, while the House Committee on Un-American Activities, or HUAC, acted without official appointment, legal right, or even verifiable qualification to purge the communist threat that had infiltrated American art industry, the media, and the civil rights movement (Whitfield,
10-11, 21). In one early case, a group of actors, producers and directors were subpoenaed to defend themselves before HUAC where they questioned about their involvement with the Communist party. The Hollywood Ten, as they came to be called, refused to answer and were sent to jail for contempt of Congress (Doherty, 21-22). While the sentence was ultimately light, the spectacle opened the door for the infamous, career destroying Blacklist and fueled the witch-hunting furor that consumed American politics for more than a decade, resulting in unconstitutional legislation, the betrayal of friends and coworkers, and the repression of the very Constitutional rights and protections the anti-communist activists purported to defend (Whitfield, 45-51, 101-126). Fear led to hysteria as the American government trampled on the people and enforced American conformity through the threat of the political sword.

It is during the aftermath of this political witch-hunting that Steinbeck set out on his journey to find and reacquaint himself with America. Dew suggests that one of the main motivations for this excursion was to assess the state of the still emerging and impressionable American sense of self (Dew, 51). In *Visionary Compacts*, Pease suggests that a driving concern of many American writers following the Civil War was the creation of a unifying national narrative to counter the Revolutionary mythos that dominates the American national identity (*Visionary Compacts*, 12). An author like Steinbeck, who earned Dew's praise as the “champion of the down and out” (Dew, 49), undoubtedly shared the American Renaissance vision of a unified, progressive America and pursued this goal throughout his career. It seems logical then that perhaps a significant portion of Steinbeck's motivation was to inspect the progress of his life's work and see how his ideals weathered the long dark of the Cold War. Many Steinbeck scholars, such as the notable John Ditsky of the University of Windsor, consider this quest a failure. Ditsky in particular examines Steinbeck's self comparison to Cervantes frustrated character Don Quixote, claiming that Steinbeck sought America expecting to find himself tilting against a windmill of his own (Ditsky, 56). Certainly the task Steinbeck set before himself seemed insurmountable.

While scholars are quick to agree that Steinbeck failed to find his questing beast, they fail to address what it was he *did* find in his journey. Steinbeck's travelogue is filled with his various encounters with people, American people. While it is certain that he did not find organic wholeness of identity Ditsky believes he sought (Ditsky, 56); he *did* find uncertainty. In his journey across America, Steinbeck found evidence of the struggle between the Revolutionary mythos and intra-imperialism in the uncertainty they produced in the lives of American citizens.

The production of uncertainty was the inevitable result of the conflict between the
Revolutionary mythos and intra-imperialism. The traditional delegitimation of that which came before and the systematic repression of that which did not robbed the American people of any sure foundation upon which to build a national sense of self. The only common factor for Americans was fear; fear of communist revolution, fear of nuclear war, and fear of not fitting in. This widescale national uncertainty was reflected in the individual Americans that Steinbeck encountered on his journey and became a theme he quickly picked up on and translated in his travelogue, consiously of otherwise.

Perhaps the earliest scene in which this is evident is Steinbeck's encounter with the submariner as he crossed Long Island Sound. With respect to American uncertainty, the interesting thing about this scene is the juxtaposition of the submariner's confidence in his work with his tendency to gloss over statements about the future. Even as the submariner speaks fondly of submarines and serving aboard them, he is unable to finish his sentences without pausing when discussing what might be involved in his service. The key element is the hesitation in the sailor's otherwise confident responses to Steinbeck's questioning. When Steinbeck asks the navy man if he enjoys his job, the sailor responds by asserting “Sure I do. The pay's good and there's all kinds of—future” (Steinbeck, 19). Certainly as one of the nations soldiers during the Cold War, the submariner must have had a bead on the high degree of tension within the American military. The submariner further betrays his own uncertainty when expaining the routine nature of prolonged, undersea deployment: “You'd get used to it. [. . .] There's movies and all kinds of—future” (Steinbeck, 19). “Will there be war with Russia,” “Will the war be atomic,” and other dark questions about this unelaborated future surely haunted him, though he clearly preferred not to discuss them.

The submariner is far from being Steinbeck's only encounter with American uncertainty and he soon strikes upon this theme again when relating the evening spent with the Yankee farmer, and their discussion about Nikita Khrushchev and the election year (23-27). Steinbeck and the Yankee Farmer discuss two things of interest: First is the doings of Khrushchev in the United Nations and the apparent tendency of the Americans to “play defensively.” The farmer states that he'd like to “see us do something to they had to talk back to us” and that the United States “should at least take the ball sometimes” (Steinbeck, 25). Here we see vestiges of the Revolutionary mythos in the farmer's desire to see his nation stand tall and firm against the adversary, but at the same time he is unwilling to commit to an attack, not even in the hypothetical sense. He seems to be torn between the desire to stand firm against the threat and the fear that has been carefully cultivated to keep the Soviet Union in its place as the would be
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Steinbeck's interview with the farmer further reveals the uncertainty in the American national identity through the discussion of the the uncanny silence of the 1960 election. When asked about the local opinions in the political arena the farmer tellingly replies with the statement: “Nobody knows. What good's an opinion if you don't know? My Grandfather knew the number of whiskers in the Almighty's beard. I don't even know what happened yesterday, let alone tomorrow” (Steinbeck, 26). This is another significant nod to the uncertainty of the time. In the wake of the Smith act trials—which had only ended a few years prior—and other forms of intra-imperialism, it is clear that the nation was waiting with baited breath. The nation was in shock after the years of intra-imperialism and questioning its own legitimacy. On the one hand, the American people wanted to remain unified against the threat of the Soviet Union, while on the other it is fragmented and growing weary of the hypocritic repression its own people in the name of liberty. America's ideological solidarity was failing under the tactics used to brutally crack down on Revolutionary ideas and movements.

Steinbeck's encounters with the mobile homeowners yields further evidence of the uncertainty exposed in *Travels with Charley*. Early in the set-piece, Steinbeck is speaking with a mobile home owner in Maine about who might live in a mobile home and why. When Steinbeck asks about the role of job insecurity in the motivation for living in such a dwelling, the mobile homeowner replies: “If a plant or factory closes down, you're not trapped with property you can't sell. Suppose the husband has a job and is buying a house and there's a layoff. The value goes out of his house. But if he has a mobile home he rents a trucking service and moves on and he hasn't lost anything” (Steinbeck, 76). The mobile homeowner's response to Steinbeck's questions exposes the continued survival of the Revolutionary mythos in American culture in the way it points back to the taming of the west and the settling of the frontier. It seems that rather than crushing the Revolutionary mythos, the intra-imperialist agenda of the 1950s exacerbated it. By making plans to move on when times get tough, the mobile homeowner anticipates the eventual need to abandon the community found in the mobile home park. Rather than facing tough times as a group, as a nation, the mobile homeowner is a revolutionary; alone and adrift amid other revolutionaries.

Nowhere is the strengthened Revolutionary mythos in America more evident than in the loners. Steinbeck describes them briefly: “Driving along, you see high on a hill a single mobile home placed to command a great view. Others nestle under trees fringing a river or a lake. These loners have rented a tiny piece of land from the owner. They need only enough for the unit and
the right of passage to it.” (Steinbeck, 77). The loners are the penultimate manifestation of the Revolutionary mythos in America. Though brief and vague, this is nevertheless a telling passage. A single individual lives a secluded existance away from others. Today, the image may call to mind a lone man or woman tracking UFOs or hiding from some black helicopter conspiracy. While some may find evaluating this paragraph from our contemporary mindset to be a stretch, it could be argued that in the age of anti-communist hysteria and fears of impending nuclear holocaust such paranoia is exactly the case with Steinbeck's loners. The loners appear only briefly in what is otherwise one of the lengthier set-pieces of the suggests that the Revolutionary mythos is so strong in the loners that Steinbeck finds it difficult to reconcile them with what he expected to find in his America. Whatever the truth of the loner's motivations, the question presents us with an intriguing possibility for further research.

When faced with the facts about the intra-imperialist push for conformity in the 1950s, it is difficult to see why the Revolutionary mythos was still so strong in the American national identity. There is clearly another factor at play working contrary to the attempts to shut down revolutionary thought in America. During Steinbecks travels, he encounters what seem to be the simplest answer; Americans do not share a common history. While this may not be obvious at first and may even seem counter-intuitive to anyone who has studied United States history, recall that Americans as we know them today did not come from any one place at any one time or for any one reason. British colonists came seeking opportunity and religious freedom while the Spanish were brought by gold. Europeans commonly came of their own free will while Africans were brought against theirs and Native Americans were already here. Add to that the tendency of negative freedom to reject established features of the past and it becomes clear that this resulting anti-history is a powerful, divisive element that continues to support the Revolutionary mythos in the face of the adversity upon which it thrives.

The prominence of anti-history as a component of the Revolutionary mythos expresses itself in the mobile homeowners setpiece in Travels with Charley. While having dinner with a family living in a mobile home, Stienbeck asks about the lack of roots that come with living in a mobile home. In response the father of the family speaks with disdain of his father's origins in Italy and the roots that kept the family in a two room peasant's dwelling, while his wife's family roots were in an Irish peat bog and a potato field. The Revolutionary mythos is strong in the mobile homeowner who prides himself in his father's rejection of his roots in Italy and his plans for a portable auto-shop (Steinbeck, 78-80). Like a true Revolutionary, the mobile homeowner is self-reliant, visionary, and dismissive of the value in his families past and the community around
him. The man's ingenuity and self-reliance impress Steinbeck, but contribute to the American national narrative of anti-history, the Revolutionary mythos, and isolation.

Evidence of American anti-history can be seen on a grander scale in the road signs Steinbeck examines in his travelogue. In this regard it is the multiplicity of historic landmarks which are of interest. While traveling through the north east, Steinbeck notes that Americans hunger for history. “We, as a nation, are as hungry for history as was England when Geoffrey of Monmouth concocted his history of British Kings, many of whom he manufactured to meet a growing demand” (Steinbeck, 62-63). This appetite is a desire to fill the void left by anti-history. Steinbeck analysis is spot on when he continues, “as in states and communities, so in individual Americans this hunger for decent association with the past” (Steinbeck, 63). Anti-history is another manifestation of negative freedom that produces uncertainty rather than identity. This passage speaks to the Nation's continuing need for legitimation. Without a common history, the United States cannot identify itself as a whole based on its past, even should the Revolutionary mythos be checked.

By the time he reaches Texas, the nationwide uncertainty has affected him as well. He tries to draw a conclusion from his experiences asserting that “for all of our enormous geographic range, for all of our sectionalism, for all of our interwoven breeds drawn from every part of the ethnic world, we are a nation, a new breed” (159). Steinbeck finds himself rationalizing his experiences, telling himself a charming tale about American unity and social progress, but this quickly falls apart. He goes on to say that “it would be pleasant to be able to say of my travels with Charley, 'I went out to find the truth about my country and I found it.' [. . .] I wish it were that easy” (159). Steinbeck's pleasant self-delusion falls apart in the face of the experiences he has had up to this point as he comes to realize that the principle thread holding them together is the uncertainty he found among the people of America.

Steinbeck's intended conclusion to Travels with Charley further supports this point. First printed in the Centennial Edition of the work, the excerpt concludes with the statement: “I do know this—the big and mysterious America is bigger than I thought. And more mysterious” (Steinbeck, 214). With this statement Steinbeck admits that even at the end of his journey, he is no closer to his goal of rediscovering America than he was when he started. But how could this be? Steinbeck had just spent months on the road, travelling the byways, seeing the sights, and meeting the people of the country. Surely he must have detected some hint, some trace of the unifying factors that hold us together as a nation.

It is clear that Steinbeck's apparent inability to rediscover the America is a result of the
uncertainty that rose from the conflict between intra-imperialism and Revolutionary negative freedom. Over the preceding decade contradictions in the government, runaway hysteria and fear, combined with the already fragmented nature of American history combined to rob the American people of the certainty they once had. It's no surprise that Steinbeck's examination of uncertain people left him uncertain about the identity of his homeland.
Works Cited


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