Kyle Garron

Doc, Prop, & Sim

Gort

The American Construct

Where does your family come from? How does that relate to your life as an American? These two questions are what you should be asking yourself throughout the reading of this paper. As Americans, we have the privilege to be surrounded by people that come from all different parts of the planet. Our country was founded on the principle of freedom. But freedom from what? Is it the religious freedom the Puritans sought? Freedom from despotic governments? The Irish fled the potato famine. More recently, immigration has become a huge political topic with Mexican citizens crossing the border in search of the promise of work. As the years have passed, and governments have changed, what does that freedom mean in the world today? Are these cultures that settled here still staying true to their roots? Or have they become something else entirely?

America’s native culture was that of the Indians. The Indians have the sole claim as the indigenous race of North America. Settling of the North America started with the Puritans, the religious zealots that fled England in the face of what they viewed as religious imposition by the Church of England. We talk about this event as if it were the first time America had been inhabited, despite the presence of the American Indian tribes. The Puritans sought a place where they could practice and preserve their way of life. Slowly, as more Europeans started to settle in what is now the United States, interactions with the native Indians were inevitable. Eventually, the Indian culture began to be supplanted with that of the Europeans. The European’s sophistication in medicine, agriculture, and the sciences were obvious benefits for the Indians, and so American assimilation began.

Through assimilation, cultures that have come to America have lost touch with their heritage. Schoolchildren are presented with the Schoolhouse Rock’s *“Great American Melting Pot”* as a metaphor for America’s diversity. The lyrics paint the picture of people from different walks of life coming to America, the “land of hope... or so it was said.” It talks about Lady Liberty’s book of recipes, and the greatest one she’s got; “The Great American Melting Pot” which consists of equal parts Africans, Armenians, English, Dutch, Chinese, Puerto Ricans, Russians, Cubans, etc. (Note that Africans are all lumped into one category.) What isn’t discussed is how this “melting pot” transforms its ingredients into something else. The conglomerate stew becomes something decidedly different; something American, nationalistic and with no trace of what came before.

In *Bontoc Eulogy*, Marlon Fuentes constructs a story of his ancestry, retracing his family’s footsteps in search of his grandfathers. He follows the trail of the World’s Fair and the exhibition of his people’s culture for entertainment value. The people in the World’s Fair are taken from their homeland with a promise of a better life and are made to enact a certain idea of their culture for others to see, despite how misrepresentational the acting is. He shines a light on America’s fascination with culture and its manifestation. Having lived in the states for years, he uses the film as a way to recapture his native culture. The recurring themes of his children within the film are a lamentation for their cultural identity. Born and raised in Los Angeles, all they know of their culture is through the teachings of their parents. Culture, however, cannot be simply taught, it must be experienced every day to the point that it is ingrained into who a person is.

Now that Americans have been stripped of their heritage, what is left? What do we have to construct our identity? How do we compare with the rest of the world? William Leach, author of *Land of Desire:* *Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture,* seems to think consumerism is the bedrock for this new American culture. He states that “America [is] a society preoccupied with consumption, with comfort, and with bodily well-being, with luxury, spending, and acquisition, and with more goods this year than last, more next year than this.” (Leach). Has industrialization and corporatization truly culminated in a redefining of an entire culture? Leach goes on to discuss how consumerism is the new ideal for Americans, always looking forward to what’s next. We’ve “created a culture almost violently opposed to the past, and to tradition, a future-oriented culture that confuses the good life, with goods.” (Leach). In other words, we’ve become so object-oriented in our country that we place far too much importance on material wealth. The capitalist culture did everything it could to remain secular, which meant casting off typical Christian values in lieu of the pursuit of happiness. Before 1880, the United States was primarily an agrarian culture where the employer was the employee. One worked for his wealth with his own resources and land. After industrialization, corporations began to hold the power. Bottom lines became important and this agrarian culture became dependent on these corporations for their income. The overwhelmingly agrarian culture was superseded by that of large corporations whose goals were to pump out as much product as humanly possible. This fixation on material gain and corporate markets was supported by most, but there was some resistance. The remaining religious groups were futilely resisting this new culture of decadence and the intellectuals of the time. Even leading up to these changes, intellectuals such as Henry David Thoreau noticed the changing mentality among Americans and cast off much of his material wealth in search of transcendental self-actualization. One could argue that this famous act in itself is indicative of a lack of identity by which to live by in America, and the search for said identity that results.

So where are we now? We are a society dependent on industry, obsessed with consumption, and united in our mindlessly vehement support for capitalism. The world outside of the U.S views us as gluttonous, lacking true moral standards, and impulsive a picture that is not so flattering for a country that’s considered one of the world’s superpowers, despite the fact that this set of values is beginning to spread to other countries. We are a nation stripped of our origins and in a vacuum of a cultural identity crisis. What does that mean for us? Where will we be in another 50 years? These are all questions that can only be answered in time.

Works Cited

*Bontoc Eulogy.* Dir. Marlon Fuentes Perf. Marlon Fuentes et al. PBS, 1995. Film.

Leach, William. *Land of Desire:* *Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American*

*Culture.* Vintage, 1994.Print.

Schoolhouse Rock. *The Great American Melting Pot.* Writ. Lynn Ahrens. Perf. Lori Lieberman.

ABC, 1977. Film.