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A Proposal to The Pursuit of the “American Dream” Illustrated Through the Works of Ed Bullins

Introduction

In 1931, James Truslow Adams in *Epic of America* defined the “American Dream” as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” (Adams). He further defines it as “a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable” (Adams). The “American Dream” is not necessarily about making a fortune or purchasing a substantial piece of land. Instead, the dream is about citizens creating an identity for themselves in this country and achieving their fullest potential. This dream is “American” in nature, because the country is built on the foundation of “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness”, as stated in the Declaration of Independence. As individuals, members of society have the responsibility to be their own person and live the way they choose to live. This exhibit of curated artifacts, through the eyes of Ed Bullins, highlights the difficulties African Americans faced trying to integrate into society around the late 1960s. Though the “American Dream” should apply to all citizens, some face significant difficulty. The problems society presents blacks with, being surrounded negative temptations, makes the dream seem out of reach and unattainable.

Statement of Purpose

Throughout the late 1960s, black people in the western part of the United States struggled to find their place in society. Societal pressures challenged these people and it was seemingly impossible to create an identity among the white-driven society (Criminal 150). As *Goin' a Buffalo* by Ed Bullins demonstrates, black characters struggle in the pursuit of the “American Dream”. This play depicts the journey of young African American workers trying to find identity and a place in society. Much like the “American Dream” states, they attempt to find their place in society and maximize their capabilities. These characters, through trial and tribulation, seek opportunity to succeed. Jails, strip clubs, riots, and complications with jobs are among the many obstacles inhibiting them from fulfilling their ambitions. Clearly fruitless impulses exist which tempt the characters as they struggle to deal with daily life. The characters in this play try to escape Los Angeles to begin a new life in Buffalo. Though society may complicate life, these African Americans try to define their own sense of being, as they work together in an attempt to create an identity for each of themselves (Clayborne 381).

Ed Bullins also communicated the theme of creating an identity through his audiotape interviews. Sarah Toll, in 1972, interviewed Bullins on two separate occasions to discuss topics such as roots of theaters and the emotions he tries to convey in his works. A few of the chief ideas he presents are about the roles of blacks in theater. He says that black theater originally started in Africa thousands of years ago, older than any famous Greek theater (Ed). In fact, black people in Africa have been creating and developing their own identity through theater for much longer than America was founded. With that being said, African Americans still have trouble integrating into American society. So, in an attempt to thrive for a better way of life, these characters embark on a journey many people would not have the courage to attempt.

Objective

The purpose of this exhibit is to show the struggles blacks faced in the pursuit of the American Dream in the 1960s. Blacks unfortunately had a more difficult time achieving this dream in a white-driven society. The American Dream is also about being able to create a personal identity in society (Cullen 4). So again, because of the white dominant society, blacks also faced trouble developing their identities (Farley). Throughout Ed Bullins' play *Goin' a Buffalo*, interviews, and other artifacts, he illustrates this fight. In *Goin' a Buffalo*, some black characters attempt to leave Los Angeles to go to Buffalo to avoid temptations that would hinder their pursuit of the American Dream and would also limit them from constructing their identities. These characters strive to progress as individuals and desire more opportunities, so they consider moving elsewhere. The willingness of some characters to move their lives in order to pursue the American Dream and create their own individual identities reflects respectable views of their individual character (Smith 192). I hope this exhibit is viewed as a reflection of some of the inequalities that existed in society in the 1960s. It is important to recognize the extremities that some people were willing to go to seek the American Dream, such as moving across the country. It would be much easier for these characters to succumb to the violence, crime, and other negative temptations in Los Angeles rather than starting a new life on the other side of the country. Blacks faced struggles in the pursuit of the American Dream to create their own identities.

Plan of Action

The types of sources I will consult are *Goin' a Buffalo*, artifacts from the library, interviews, scholarly journals and articles, and one website. The ethnography, or observations of

a group in order to understand the exhibit, will be concerned with the struggles of blacks in the 1960s to create identity and achieve the “American Dream”. I will consult an oral history / an interview of Ed Bullins, to further support my argument. I will find criticisms from online sources such as JSTOR and Google Scholar. Throughout my exhibit, I will use comparative analysis to compare and contrast and find similarities and differences between by sources. I will look for articles on police brutality to further my argument that it is more difficult for blacks to develop their own identities and reach the American Dream. All of these sources will not only support my argument, but will hopefully add to it.

Annotated Bibliography

Source 1 (Primary) - Play - *Goin' a Buffalo*

Bullins, Ed. "Goin' a Buffalo." *Black Drama*. Alexander Street Press, 1966. Web. 14 Oct.

2016. <[http://solomon.bldr.alexanderstreet.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/cgi-](http://solomon.bldr.alexanderstreet.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/cgi-bin/asp/philo/bldr/documentidx.pl?searchresults=&playtitlesall=goin%27+a+Buffalo&work_allauthorsallforms=&agewhenwriting=&authorgender=ALL&nationality=&authrace=&work_yearwritten=&previouslyunpublished=ALL&work_yearpublished=&work_year_firstprod=&work_writtenfor=&work_genre=&work_setting_full=&work_prod_cast=&work_composers=&work_theaternames=&work_productioncompany_names=&work_subject=&work_code=&sortorder=work_sort_title)

bin/asp/philo/bldr/documentidx.pl?searchresults=&playtitlesall=goin%27+a+Buffalo&work_allauthorsallforms=&agewhenwriting=&authorgender=ALL&nationality=&authrace=&work_yearwritten=&previouslyunpublished=ALL&work_yearpublished=&work_year_firstprod=&work_writtenfor=&work_genre=&work_setting_full=&work_prod_cast=&work_composers=&work_theaternames=&work_productioncompany_names=&work_subject=&work_code=&sortorder=work_sort_title>.

This play is about African Americans in Los Angeles during the 1960s. They try to be pursue careers and seek success amongst many temptations that exist in society. Drugs, gangs, poverty, and violence surround these characters every day as they attempt to survive and thrive in society. Inequality was still prevalent, as it was much harder for blacks to succeed than it was

for whites. These characters are so dedicated to the American Dream that they even consider moving to Buffalo to make a better live for themselves. This play depicts the struggles African Americans faced in the 1960s while attempting to progress in society, become successful individuals, and ultimately pursue the American Dream.

Source 2 - Criticism

Clayborne, Jon L. "Modern Black Drama and the Gay Image." *JSTOR. College English* 36.3 (1974): 381-84. Nov. 1974. Web. 14 Oct. 2016.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/374857?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents>.

This criticism says that black drama discriminates against gays. The article says that though Black Drama tries to focus on blacks' issues, it often stereotypes gays and Ed Bullins contributes to this. He once called one of his directors a "faggot" and implies that gays are not capable of directing. This is clearly not good for Black Drama overall and shows that in Bullins' plays, he may be bias. This takes away from the main idea, the American Dream, but is important to note about the author. Though Bullins may have been homophobic and not give gays credit, these people would have still tried as hard as strait blacks to progress in society.

Source 3 - Criticism

Smith, Barbara. "Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology." *Google Scholar*. Emory University Libraries, n.d. Web. 14 Oct. 2016. <https://books-google-com.proxy.library.emory.edu/books?hl=en&lr=&id=a8xK1TAjDfMC&oi=fnd&pg=PA190&dq=%22ed%2Bbullins%22%2B%22criticism%22&ots=kv_2S9pi41&sig=IVy6DGROrLb_pOomq3mNdrDY0Bk#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

This criticism criticizes the Black Power Movement as a whole. This movement can be seen when Ed Bullins' characters in *Goin' a Buffalo*, try to escape Los Angeles and think about moving their lives to Buffalo. Some of the most courageous blacks, like in Ed Bullins' play, try to make lives better for themselves and pursue the American Dream. **Though this movement tries to empower black people and make them strive for success and prosperity, it fails to understand sexual politics.** This movement is negatively considered, by some, sexist and racist. **In a culture and time where racism already exists and where racism is what people are fighting against, further sexism and racism held by black men and women only hurts the movement.** The movement sometimes fails to create an interracial society.

Source 4 – Scholarly Journal

"Criminal Justice Theory: Explaining the Nature and Behavior of Criminal Justice."

Google Scholar. Ed. David E. Duffee. Emory University Libraries, n.d. Web. 14 Oct. 2016.

<[https://books-google-](https://books-google-com.proxy.library.emory.edu/books?hl=en&lr=&id=VKqgBgAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA149&dq=policy%20brutality&ots=6zUlMEGkfy&sig=wDYTStSOTHlmLW1BIrBBWVtx_3I#v=onepage&q=policy%20brutality&f=false)

com.proxy.library.emory.edu/books?hl=en&lr=&id=VKqgBgAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA14

9&dq=policy%20brutality&ots=6zUlMEGkfy&sig=wDYTStSOTHlmLW1BIrBBWVtx_3

I#v=onepage&q=policy%20brutality&f=false>.

This scholarly journal talks about police brutality. Ed Bullins does not necessarily talk about police brutality directly, but he does talk about the obstacles that blacks have to deal with, sometimes unfairly, that hinder them from pursuing the American Dream. Today, issues revolving around police brutality seem to happen daily. This article admits that minorities are

more subject to police shootings merely because of their race. This has been going on for many years and represents yet another obstacle blacks have to encounter. They should not feel fear in front of police. Police are extremely powerful in our society and are supposed to help people. When they do not do their jobs, it only negatively impacts our society. Regular people, non-police officers, have no defense against police officers. So, unfair treatment has only made it harder for blacks to develop and create their own identities in society and to pursue the American Dream.

Source 5 – Scholarly Journal

Farley, Reynolds, and Albert Hermalin. "The 1960s: A Decade of Progress for Blacks?"

Google Scholar. Emory University Libraries, Aug. 1972. Web. 14 Oct. 2016.

<<http://link.springer.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/article/10.2307/2060859>>.

This scholarly journal discusses whether the 1960s was a decade of progress or regression for blacks. This further backs my point that blacks tried to make better situations for themselves, tried to pursue the American Dream, and tried to find success in society. Whites, as this article suggests, were given an unfair advantage. Blacks had to work hard in order to help themselves and to eliminate racial differences among blacks and whites, because whites were not putting in the effort. Gains that were made were greater among blacks than among whites and racial differentiation started to decline over time. Challenges that black people faced in this decade were extremely unfair and something that white people did not have to deal with.

Source 6 – Scholarly Journal

Cullen, Jim. "The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation." *Google Scholar*. Emory University Libraries, n.d. Web. 14 Oct. 2016. <https://books-google-com.proxy.library.emory.edu/books?hl=en&lr=&id=yM96DK4ELZkC&oi=fnd&pg=PA3&dq=history%2Bof%2Bthe%2Bamerican%2Bdream&ots=mzVIVybrgt&sig=Uv0zF5_qFcI_4k62MdNNHdXR9hE#v=onepage&q=history%20of%20the%20american%20dream&f=false>.

This article talks about the importance of the American Dream, the underlying principle of my entire exhibit. It is important to understand its roots to trace it over time, focusing on it in the 1960s. More so, this article is important so we can understand how African Americans pursued and tried to reach this dream.

Source 7 – Website

"The American Dream: What Is The American Dream?" *Library of Congress*. N.p., n.d. Web. 14 Oct. 2016. <<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/lessons/american-dream/students/thedream.html>>.

Quite simply, this webpage gave me a description of the American Dream. In the first few sentences of my proposal, I used it to set up my introduction. Understanding the definition of the American Dream is essential to understanding my argument.

Source 8 (Primary) – Interview

"Ed Bullins." Interview by Sandra Loll. N.p., 4 May. 1972. CD. 14 Sept. 2016.

This interview asks Ed Bullins questions about struggles blacks faced around the 1960s. Bullins admits that he thinks black culture is oppressed and unfairly faces struggles other cultures do not. He says that blacks have been deprived and denied opportunities that others have been granted. He talks about struggles African Americans have faced in the past as well, such as slavery. This interview confirms Ed Bullins' view on black oppression and inequalities that blacks have faced, past and present. Bullins tries to make these issues come to light in his works. His perspective on black struggle to succeed in society is what I am trying to communicate in the exhibit.