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COLD WAR REFLECTIONS IN TRAVELS WITH
CHARLEY: STEINBECK'S NEW AMERICANIST
EVALUATION OF INTRA-IMPERIALIST AMERICA

When Steinbeck removes unabashedly the shield of artist in *Travels with Charley* (1962) and, instead, adopts the role of social investigator by conspicuously casting himself as the main character in a national work-in-progress, the champion of the down-and-out demonstrates his uninhibited passion for coming to terms with what was then America's predominant ideological infection. By this, I refer to the cultural ailment afflicting America at the time of the travelogue's composition otherwise known as Cold War intra-imperialism. This is my term to describe the ideological hegemonies America foisted upon itself as a means to establish a national identity theoretically couched in democratic ideals yet mirroring to significant degrees the very ideologies (Communist Russia's) with which it wished to be contrasted: consensus thinking and the consequent social and/or political intimidation of anybody who did not submit readily to what was politically sanctioned as "right." In a phrase, intra-imperialism was America's answer to the crisis in legitimation—a crisis that can be described as America's general lack of purpose, meaning, identity, and direction, in this context, immediately following the demise of a very tangible threat (Nazi Germany) unlike the unquestionably more contrived threat of the Russians following World War II. Indeed, America struggled to justify its own existence post-Hitler. The collective American identity during the Cold War was anything but articulate, leaving one half of the new world dichotomy

floundering for self-definition. Steinbeck's re-acquaintance with his country was quick to yield this fact.

Curiously for a man who thought little of literary critics, Steinbeck's journey takes on a critical dimension not unlike that upheld by the New Americanists, "a group of critics who have attempted to elucidate the conditioning of American criticism by the dictates of the Cold War political climate and to suggest potential rereadings of the American literary tradition that might help to surmount that conditioning" (Booker 15). Text and country, in this light, assume a similar quality as if Steinbeck as a critic were evaluating America as a text. In fact, reconciling the crisis in legitimation and the resulting negative freedom, which is a term used by the New Americanists to describe individualism void of civic or social responsibility that came as a result of America's frenetic quest to contrast itself against the backdrop of alleged Russian "groupness," proves to be a common aim for Steinbeck and the New Americanists. The location of the zenith of the crisis in legitimation during the Cold War by the New Americanists in the early 1960s and Steinbeck's own attempt to negotiate that same crisis during the same time emerges as an irony that only serves to resurrect a reputation that had itself supposedly reached its zenith with the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).

To be sure, Donald E. Pease, a leading figure among the New Americanists, notes that the crisis in legitimation—the very same crisis that Steinbeck encounters repeatedly throughout his odyssey across the states—was more of an issue to "post-World War II American culture than to pre-Civil War America" (IX).¹ Others in the New Americanist camp, including Jonathan Arac, Amy Kaplan,

¹ See F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* (1941). Matthiessen located the crisis in legitimation just before the Civil War when both the North and the South was informing their opposing vantage points with the Revolutionary Mythos—a distinctly American idea that can be traced to the Puritans who rejected the Anglican church (the tyrant) in order to pursue their own spiritual path (the individual initiative). Matthiessen, in essence, named the purveyors of the American Renaissance—Melville, Poe, Whitman, Thoreau, Emerson—for their attempt in writing to re-locate a visionary compact or general will that would remind all Americans of a common genealogy, thereby extinguishing the crisis in legitimation that had balkanized the United States.

Sacvan Bercovitch, and Walter Benn Michaels, concur that the dilemma of American identity remained unresolved throughout the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century and subsequently reached an all-time intensity during a period in American history when America needed desperately to make itself distinct from Communist Russia. The problem that the New Americanists identify from this social phenomenon is that everything from the real to the unreal was perceived using a restrictive model of understanding that lauded the virtue of the individual against the evils of totalitarianism. There were strict rules to apply to any analysis, and if anything fell beyond the parameters of the “us”/“them” analytical paradigm, then the item in question was deemed lesser in overall value and summarily dismissed.

The cognitive template, collectively speaking, was cemented into the mind of the so-called “true” American by an army of McCarthyists who acted as self-proclaimed thought police for a nation, so it was thought, that was under a constant threat by the Reds. The New Americanists take issue with the fact that this manner of perception is exclusive and simplistic. Basically, the “us”/“them” mentality lends itself to gross generalities and, as such, is unable to provoke deeper insight. Where the New Americanists and Steinbeck intersect is precisely in their repudiation of what is expected as legitimate analysis and consequent celebration of what is garnered either empirically or outside the realm of critical consensus. Like the New Americanists who strive toward criticisms unaffected by the strictures of intra-imperialistic thought, Steinbeck combats the dangers of foisted truth. Steinbeck’s *Travels* anticipates a movement critical of the pitfalls of binary logic foregrounded if not exacerbated by the distinctly Cold War crisis in legitimation, thereby making a man once relegated to the artistic attic by literary critics still very much a part of America’s reformist vanguard.

Not surprisingly, Steinbeck’s non-teleological or “is” thinking remains in *Travels* an integral facet to both his art and, perhaps more importantly, his message. Slicing through the conventions of what *should* be according to the intra-imperialistic hegemony and getting to what actually *is* enables Steinbeck to promote, as he deceptively does, the notion of “acceptance-understanding.” This understandably idealistic mindset circumvents what Joseph Fontenrose calls “blame

thinking” (180), meaning, in the context of Cold War trends, that Steinbeck gathers and presents the details of his journey in a critical stance removed from intra-imperialistic expectation hoping that his audience can accept and understand truths unclouded by the predominant ideological hegemony. The intended nature of his message deserves mention because it is characteristically removed from teleologies—namely that teleology informed by intra-imperialism—that would restrict alternative analyses from the established norm. The similarity between Steinbeck and the New Americanists is evident. Although Steinbeck’s deviance is one that had been practiced since his salad days with friend and mentor Ed Ricketts, “acceptance-understanding” via non-teleological thinking especially equips Steinbeck on his mission to get at the naked, unhindered core of the American identity.

Described as a “lost soul looking for a home among the shifting tide pools of American culture” (Champney, “Search” 372), Steinbeck sets out to accomplish, in general, a single task. Discovering that he “did not know my own country,” the aging Argonaut outfitted a pick-up truck aptly named Rocinante after Don Quixote’s horse with “a little house built like the cabin of a small boat” (*TWC* 5–6) and, with canine co-pilot Charley in company, traversed by-ways and highways in pursuit of a new familiarity with his country and its people. When Steinbeck is about to embark on his expedition, he notes a telling detail that speaks to the effects of an easy-going lifestyle on a people gone too complacent and too lax for their own good:

I saw in their eyes something I was to see over and over in every part of the nation—a burning desire to go, to move, to get under way, anyplace, away from Here. They spoke quietly of how they wanted to go someday, to move about, free and unanchored, not toward something but away from something. I saw this look and heard this yearning everywhere in every state I visited. Nearly every American hungers to move. (*TWC* 10)

Steinbeck’s observation should not be taken in passing. The deeper complexities of this desire to go beg an explanation of a culture that would foster such a response to begin with. This is to suggest that the “is” observation Steinbeck makes largely relates to the anxiety and general insecurity exacerbated by Cold War intra-imperialism and, as

such, sheds light on the real state of American society even before Steinbeck fires up Rocinante's engine.

What the idea of Steinbeck's trek whets for his curious onlookers is an appetite to leave, to pick up and go in search of better things and better lives.² One does not have to scratch the surface too deeply in order to ascertain the likely source of this restlessness. Americans by the early 1960s had long graduated from the obnoxiously apparent anti-Communist national pedagogy and had come of age into an environment where the lessons learned had assimilated into the culture and become the norm. Stephen J. Whitfield, in fact, notes that "[t]he culture of the Cold War [circa 1960] decomposed when the moral distinction between East and West lost a bit of its sharpness, when American self-righteousness could be more readily punctured, [and] when the activities of the two superpowers assumed a greater symmetry" (205). Although the ostensible reason for hyper-consumerism and, in general, the embrace of "negative" individualism had faded as the tapestry of international politics became increasingly complex, the new ethic remained firmly entrenched in the collective American psyche. As the compulsion to celebrate Americanness in the form of capitalism continued to incite human relationships based on money and fraught with competition, so did it continue to warp the American understanding of the self in that progress and advancement not to mention the material comfort that came with it were the only ways to achieve personal gratification. The crisis in legitimation did not wane, but, rather, intensified when America began to lose the only, albeit flimsy, device with which to establish legitimacy.

² This theme, while especially relevant to the effects of Cold War intra-imperialism on Americans, does have a history with Steinbeck. One example is seen in the short story "The Leader of the People" published in *The Red Pony* (1937) as well as in a collection of works entitled *The Long Valley* (1938) where the Grandfather expresses to Jody, his grandson, the anguish felt at having no place to go and nothing for which to strive after the West was finally won. He laments: "There's no place to go. There's the ocean to stop you. There's a line of old men along the shore hating the ocean because it stopped them."

Americans were still restless and lacking well-defined purpose, and physical location proved only to be an easy target of blame.

When, to offer another example, Steinbeck pauses shortly into his trip to stock up on refreshments for all occasions and types of guests—“bourbon, scotch, gin, vermouth, vodka, a medium good brandy, aged applejack, and a case of beer” (TWC 25)—he again encounters in an owner of a small store that deeply-inspired hankering to leave:

He helped me to carry the cartons out and I opened Rocinante’s door.

“You going in that?”

“Sure.”

“Where?”

“All over.”

And then I saw what I was to see so many times on the journey—a look of longing. “Lord! I wish I could go.”

“Don’t you like it here?”

“Sure. It’s all right, but I wish I could go.”

“You don’t even know where I’m going.”

“I don’t care. I’d like to go anywhere.” (TWC 25)

Keeping with his non-teleological approach, Steinbeck resists punctuating this episode with his own analysis. While, as Irvine Howe writes, novelists of this period “saw—often better than they could say—the hovering sickness of soul, the despairing contentment, the prosperous malaise” (200) as a result of what has long come to be known as the postmodern condition, this common assessment of writers including Steinbeck during the Cold War should not arrive with the implication that these writers were merely deep-thinking journalists who may just as well have “gone on the road” for the New York Times.³ The difference, I argue, can be found in the author’s intent; specifically, Steinbeck’s intent in *Travels*, as it was his intent throughout his corpus of work, is to harmonize the binary opposition between the individual will and the group to which that individual belongs. It is, ultimately, the complementary relationship that

³ Thomas Docherty, ed. and intro., *Postmodernism: A Reader*. New York: Columbia UP, 1993. See this collection of essays for a fuller characterization of the postmodern condition.

Steinbeck seeks: one that is void of anxiety and one that facilitates the fullest, most universal expression of each component. Inspiring volleys of “sentimentalism” from hordes of critics, this idea has arguably constituted the core of Steinbeck’s work.

As such, the documentation of the ill-defined hopes of yet another restless American serves two purposes. First and foremost, the reader witnesses plainly, as does Steinbeck, the almost neurotic consequences of a binary teleology that simply did not provide answers or legitimacy and the peace of mind that comes with it. There is a direct relationship between the pervading restlessness in America and the analytical binary imposed on its denizens where the latter aggravates the former. Steinbeck even goes so far as to address this issue in a letter to his wife Elaine while he was on his admittedly “Quixotic” journey: “Wherever I stop people look hungrily at Rocinante. They want to move on. Is this a symptom? They lust to move on. West—north, south—anywhere. Maybe it’s their comment on their uneasiness. People are real restless” (*ALIL* 679). For a man whose concern had always been for the “People,” the pattern of ubiquitous restlessness that he encounters repeatedly could not go unnoticed. Indeed, the reader gets a strong sense that Steinbeck, very physician-like in his use of the word “symptom,” was, to extend the analogy, deeply concerned for his “patients” and the perceived instability of place that they express.

By extension, the “acceptance-understanding” that is intended to come out of Steinbeck’s non-teleological presentation of this episode contributes to the formation of—to borrow a term made in reference to the New Americanists by, at least, Frederick Crews—a critical “dissensus” (19). Simply, a “dissensus” can be defined as a position that goes against the consensus where institutionalized norms are challenged and repressive hegemonies are toppled. I argue that the context in which Steinbeck is writing and the context against which the New Americanists are railing is essentially the same. For both as “investigators and critics of ideology,” meaning that both Steinbeck and the New Americanists reject popular ideology even if they “subscribe to a definite [need I say less popular] politics of their own” (Crews 19), the desired outcome is one where the imposed ideology is utterly repudiated so that other realities, whether they be in terms of people or literature, can flourish. Steinbeck’s own politics do not

contribute to the seemingly endless and, more importantly, destructive banter that characterized the Cold War. Where the pervading restlessness that Steinbeck encounters can be explained in terms of the intra-imperialistic agenda in place during the Cold War, by no means does he offer a remedy to this malaise that operates within the restrictive confines of the analytical binary. Like the New Americanists, Steinbeck seeks alternative “readings” of his “text”: America. Nowhere does he say that the desire to be anywhere but “Here” could be ameliorated by hating the communists more or celebrating the virtue of individualism and the negative freedom that it induces beyond what has already been done. Instead, Steinbeck intends through his unassuming approach to documenting the events of his trip that the reader “accept” the symptom as simply a matter of truth, then labor toward an “understanding” of that truth well outside of the collective binary mindset that inspired that symptom in the first place.

For Steinbeck, the “dissensus” had always been one that had no place for rules that were dictated by the capitalist ethic. I will not detract from the thrust of this essay by mapping Steinbeck’s “fam’bly of man” principle that was most articulately expressed in *The Grapes of Wrath*, but I will say that this principle has historically been set against the backdrop of the potential evils of a money-obsessed society in order to show that there is a sanctuary when the very system created to serve society labors toward disorder, fragmentation, and distrust among individuals. Principle and “dissensus” being one, Steinbeck receives a number of opportunities to test his principle in a real world setting.

As Steinbeck “sat secure in the silence” (*TWC* 109) by a lake in northern Michigan, he is confronted by a young man who, it soon becomes apparent, is a steward to the land on which Steinbeck and Charley had stopped. Of particular interest is how Steinbeck handles a man whose hostile attitude is sanctioned by laws that spur social separation by signifying what is “mine” from what is “yours.” The man is the first to speak:

“Don’t you know this land is posted? This is private property.”
Normally his tone would have sparked a tinder in me. I would have flared an ugliness of anger and he would then have been able to evict me with pleasure and good conscience. We might have edged into a

quarrel with passion and violence. That would be only normal, except that the beauty and the quiet made me slow to respond with resentment, and in my hesitation I lost it. I said, "I knew it must be private. I was about to look for someone to ask permission or maybe pay to rest here."

"The owner don't want campers. They leave papers around and build fires."

"I don't blame him. I know the mess they make."

"See that sign on that tree? No trespassing, hunting, fishing, camping."

"Well," I said, "that sounds as if it means business. If it's your job to throw me off, you've got to throw me off. I'll go peacefully. But I've just made a pot of coffee. Do you think your boss would mind if I finished it? Would he mind if I offered you a cup?" (*TWC* 109–110)

Repressing the understandably strong urge to react in a similarly hostile fashion to the man's intentionally brusque orders, Steinbeck, instead, adopts a more passive stance. Steinbeck, to borrow a popular phrase, kills him with kindness by offering, in its most basic form, a sense of community absent arguably inane rules and regulations. In effect, Steinbeck forms a "dissensus" with the man, for they each choose to temporarily suspend the rules surrounding and informing the ownership of private property. They each have a cup of coffee spiked generously with Old Granddad whiskey, and even plan to (and actually do) break another posted rule in the morning by going fishing. Nothing was caught but good will.

I do not want to attribute psychic powers to a man who initially admitted ignorance of his country and its people; however, it is noteworthy that Steinbeck chooses a demeanor very much opposite the demeanor of the man brandishing the authority of an absentee owner. In point of truth, Steinbeck intuited how best to respond so that his alternative ethic could emerge. A new, de-politicized manner of self-legitimation displaced the manner of the status quo—one where placement in society was configured by how faithfully one followed and executed the rules of the intra-imperialist ethic—and a brief, two-man insurrection of sorts occurred. Having established this encounter as a formation of a "dissensus" outside of an exclusive binary that fosters nothing but oppositionalism as a way to self-legitimate, it follows that the larger issue responsible, at least initially, for

aggravating the “mine”/“yours” or “us”/“them” mindset would also come under fire by Steinbeck. The “America”/“Russia” binary forming the basis of Cold War ideology, as one would readily expect, is quick to fall under Steinbeck’s lens. Not surprisingly, the expressly *anti*-ideological location to which Steinbeck aspires remains the same.

As with the aversion toward “Here” and the conformist subscription to confrontationalism as a means to distinguish what is “mine” from what is “yours,” which is also to say “us” from “them,” so were the highly mythologized “Russians” a symptom of a much more profound identity crisis. While the Russians began to be viewed, figuratively speaking, in lower-case letters, the pejorative image of them by Americans still functioned as a way to displace domestic anxieties onto a foreign unknown. Russia’s stature as the epitome of evil, in fact, became an unassailable truth, heightening, as it were, the idea of American Exceptionalism to a nearly absurd degree. As a country that believed unequivocally that “God had designated [Americans] as a chosen people” (Potter 21), Russia validated the already inculcated idea that America was the new Jerusalem. This, at least in the abstract, afforded purpose to an essentially purposeless society.

The “Russians,” in their most basic sense, were simply one end of a two-part cycle that began with materialism and led to anxiety followed by vilifying the “Russians” by subscribing more to materialism and so on. The tic to go, albeit symptomatic of the cultural illness, was only part of the whole condition. At a time when the “nation’s symbolic apparatus was breaking apart” (Pease 12) as a continued result of never having really answered the question “What is it to be an American?” but instead only sidestepping the crisis in legitimation by absently subscribing to the Revolutionary Mythos, Russia as America’s natural enemy both made perfect sense and was itself an iteration of a paradigm that has its American roots in the Puritan rejection of the Anglican church and consequent movement to the so-called New World. The “dominant structuring principle” (Pease IX) of the American consciousness remained not only intact, but dangerously in place as an acceptable, no doubt laudable, ethic. Coincidentally happening upon a storekeeper in Minnesota, Steinbeck outwardly considers a mythos that restricts reality to a binary where there are those who are virtuous and those who are nefarious for no other

reason than for the paradigm's ability to organize and, hence, make sense out of a complex set of phenomena:

"You think then we might be using the Russians as an outlet for something else, for other things."

"I didn't think that at all, sir, but I bet I'm going to. [...]. Yes, sir." he said with growing enthusiasm, "those Russians got quite a load to carry. Man has a fight with his wife, he belts the Russians."

"Maybe everybody needs Russians. I'll bet even in Russia they need Russians. Maybe they call it Americans."

He cut a sliver of cheese from a wheel and held it out to me on the knife blade. "You've give me something to think about in a sneaking kind of way." (*TWC* 143-144)

The juxtaposition between this unsubstantiated view of the Russians with that still vague "something else" presents a conveniently distilled illustration of what Steinbeck later calls his country's "sickness" (*TWC* 168). By suggesting the existence of a socially-pertinent relationship between the two, Steinbeck attempts to open the door to further insight in regards to the pall descended upon American society. To this extent, the Russians emerged as a scapegoat to an ideologically inculcated American public, and, therefore, became a vent through which to channel the frustrations cultivated within America's borders. They were simply the issue externalized; indeed, the intra-imperialistic idea of what it was to be a Russian helped Americans give a semblance of order and, perhaps more importantly, direction to their world. Given the fact that Steinbeck had "always had a keen awareness of the importance of the social cement of common purpose" (Champney, "Californian" 353), the character of his initial supposition is not surprising nor is the notion that what the Russians really were even this late into the Cold War were an overstated threat made so by a lost and dissatisfied people very much laden with the riddle of their own legitimation.

The problems that arise out of this type of binary thinking are evident, especially when the identified tyranny is poorly understood if understood at all. Russia and Russians essentially were likened to things that go bump in the night: a hyper-imagined threat that sufficed as a means to articulate what Americans were definitively not. It was a structural negative; the more Americans distinguished themselves from the "enemy," the more aware of themselves they were. This was

the solution to the crisis, although the very basis of the solution was a matter of conjecture at best. Like the New Americanists who take “their bearings from a rejection of the “liberal consensus”” (Crews XVI), Steinbeck implicitly denounces participation in a group-led defamation, especially because that defamation was grossly uninformed. A theoretic lineage between the New Americanist camp and a disillusioned author can be established because what the New Americanists are really rejecting is a germination of the very predominant Cold War binary that Steinbeck denies. Steinbeck as an unofficial forefather to a movement bent on destroying the “projection of postwar America’s hegemony and self-regard onto the literary historical screen” (Crews XVII) labors toward a similar end, though, as I stated earlier, “text” in Steinbeck’s world translates into an entirely disaffected people.

Richard Astro in “Travels with Steinbeck: The Laws of Thought and the Laws of Things” reminds readers that Steinbeck’s travel literature “tells us about the author’s own search for meaning and it assists us in our search for order by illuminating the highly paradoxical nature of the American character” (35–36). In the case with *Travels*, Steinbeck’s relentless urge to secure an understanding of his native land and its diverse population surely speaks well of a distinctly *American* author wanting to substantiate his innate patriotism with fresher material. An intimate knowledge of his country and his place within it, much to the respectability of Steinbeck as an American author, goes hand in hand with his own ontology. Finding that America’s “progress may be a progression toward strangulation” and that “[w]e have overcome all enemies but ourselves” (*TWC* 196–197) only beckons immediate attention to the possible causes and in no way diminishes his obvious concern as if these comments were, in fact, declarations of surrender. Indeed, these observations do not warrant the conclusion that, as John Ditsky maintains, Steinbeck’s travels ended in it being a “failed venture” (45).⁴ Quite the contrary,

⁴ Ditsky cites, among other reasons, a general “ambivalence” (46) of Steinbeck’s narrative voice as well as “parallel omissions of the places, people, and events from which the book expected to derive its weight and substance” (47) as the key factors for the book’s failure. It is, in a phrase, a questioning of Steinbeck’s ability to produce art at this point in his career.

Steinbeck can be seen as a domestic de Tocqueville roving the countryside and interviewing its inhabitants in order to present an accurate, yet not necessarily flattering picture of the “is” truth of America. The result of his efforts, interestingly, details not only the generic character of early 1960s America but also an America subservient to a very specific and evidently damaging set of ideals. I use the term “intra-imperialism” to describe America’s enforcement of values upon itself as a means to proclaim its distinctness from Communist Russia in order to offer what I hope to be a convenient heading under which Steinbeck’s descriptions tend to fall. The “paradoxical nature of the American character” of which Astro speaks, thus, is likely in reference to the ways in which America sought to resolve one politicized system of thought with another system of thought—the latter, perhaps, being a more natural, humanistic, and unimposing paradigm. This is, of course, to suggest that it is human nature to project internal maladies onto something else—“Here” or the Russians—if only to avoid addressing those maladies in a constructive manner. In light of Steinbeck’s ability to capture what “is” in the form of the easily perceived friction qualifying the ideological lives of those he meets and, from that, ponder its relevance to their overall well-being, the question of Steinbeck’s success becomes a moot point. Steinbeck’s search for meaning, which is also an attempt, as Peter Lisca states, to reconstruct “his image of man” (7) in, for him, a new, almost foreign America is itself an appeal to his typical higher ideal, which can best be described as brotherly love: the fullest reconciliation between two parties. Although many critics call *Travels* yet another example of his sentimentalism, and others, such as Donald Weeks in “Steinbeck Against Steinbeck,” identify Steinbeck’s endeavor as simply one of “good intentions” (456), his plain observations, nonetheless, recognize a very significant factor in the disintegration of the soul of American society. Accepting and understanding what Steinbeck accepts and understands, however, is a matter of how much the reader is willing to participate in Steinbeck’s deceptively matter-of-fact worldview.

Regardless of how the reader chooses to receive Steinbeck’s altruistic message, the fact remains that Steinbeck labors toward formations of alternative communities well removed from that ideological community that fostered, in a general sense, spiritual

malaise. Like the New Americanists who were to come after him, Steinbeck rejects the “us”/“them” Cold War binary logic and chooses, instead, to explore other possibilities of comprehension, thereby making him a forerunner to a critical field whose very mission is to introduce new interpretations of literary works in addition to inviting formerly snubbed literary works into the canon. The first “work” that was subjected to re-evaluation for the purpose of questioning all conclusions based exclusively on binary logic, it could even be said, was America, and, by extension, the first New Americanist, John Steinbeck.

I feel the need to mention, however, that the intent behind equating Steinbeck to the New Americanists is not to displace the leading figures in that camp, but to suggest a genealogy that includes Steinbeck as a recent ancestor of sorts. The first volley fired at what I have been calling intra-imperialism was not fired by the New Americanists; rather, the dissent as a result of the restrictive binary—the very same that would eventually seep into literary study and become an analytical paradigm—began to percolate before the unofficial end of the Cold War itself. For Steinbeck whose critical popularity peaked with *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and only temporarily re-surfaced with *East of Eden* (1952) only to dwindle again until the author’s death in 1968, the implications that arrive with the juxtaposition of him to the New Americanists are potentially redemptive. Steinbeck, as evidenced in at least *Travels*, was not deserving of the critical dismissal that he got. On the contrary, Steinbeck proved that a man profoundly aware of his own setting sun, so to speak, could offer cultural and national insight as a way to redirect a nation on a path to its own demise in hopes that America will choose to embrace significantly less destructive, less alienating ways to self-legitimate. He laid down this offer in *Travels*, if only implicitly, as the New Americanists lay down their offer to visit and re-visit literary works themselves validated by “Cold War” interpretations. The choice to accept the offer today, as it was then, however, remains a matter of weighing the costs between what is easier and what is necessary.

Confined to a hospital bed a few short years after his travels due to an illness that would eventually consume him, Steinbeck confided to interviewer Budd Schulberg that “I’ve never seen a time when the country was so confused as to where it’s headed” (Schulberg 214). These words came at a time when the intensity of Cold War intra-imperialism blossomed into something far greater and arguably much worse. The national existential crisis leading into a pathological addiction to “progress” (Astro 42) boiled over into, among other things, a wider-scaled Civil Rights movement, grass roots activism, and an ill-fated battle to contain Communism in Vietnam.⁵ Given the nihilistic corners into which Cold War intra-imperialism painted the people of America, this is not at all surprising. An era of turbulence had come on the coattails of an ideologically-heightened fight against Communism. In hindsight, the cause and effect relationship is practically predictable. Steinbeck’s telling comment, moreover, suffices as an expression of the era. Still without a compass yet in the throes of orienting itself amidst ideological fallout of its own conception, America reacted to the insipid, emotionally barren circumstances detailed in *Travels with Charley* in an obstreperous, oftentimes violent manner.⁶ Were people to read this text for its

⁵ Steinbeck’s encounters with the notorious “Cheerleaders” in New Orleans who taunted black children about to matriculate into the previously all-white school district also speaks to the effects of Cold War intra-imperialism. While predicated upon a slew of obvious reasons, there is something to say about the increased tension between the races during the Cold War as a result of the belief that Communists and blacks, not to mention homosexuals and other groups considered to be morally defective, were natural compatriots. Isolating racial injustice as sustained by Cold War ideology in this study, however, detracts from the larger picture of the state of America as a whole; indeed, an analysis of Cold War ideology and how it pertains to the Civil Rights movement reaches beyond the scope that Steinbeck provides in *Travels with Charley*.

⁶ See also Steinbeck’s *America and Americans* (1966) for a more focused and opinionated statement on the condition of the nation. This text is excluded from my study because it steps outside of my target period of consideration, which is that time when Cold War intra-imperialism was at its peak. This is not to say that its effects did not resonate nor is it to suggest that the inclusion of *America and Americans* in this study would not help to elucidate exactly how Cold War intra-imperialism continued to leave its mark, but, practically speaking, it is to confine my argument to the period when those radical ideals were at a greater intensity.

prophetic aptitude, it is still highly unlikely that the decade first in line to vocalize America's distaste for restrictive values and remaining inability to locate a strong awareness of national self would be anything other than what it was. Perhaps this is the sad irony of good art to edify after the fact.

A more pronounced irony, however, comes in the recognition that Americans were curiously both oppressors and Diaspora in their own land. Undoubtedly, this points to the ongoing paradox of American identity manifest panoramically during Steinbeck's trip across the continental United States. That a close analysis of *Travels with Charley* can produce a singular message is evident. The mutual presence of themes such as, but not limited to, loneliness, anxiety, restlessness, and paranoia in a work by an author known widely for his philanthropy begs an appreciation of this text for how it contributes to an understanding of the human experiment. Similar to the experiences of many of Steinbeck's characters, however, the realization of loving communities remains a matter of choice. The rampant social eruptions re-defining the immediate post-Cold War country seem to indicate that the tendency may already be clear. Whether or not this possibility offers reassurance in regards to the potential of humankind is a consideration left for the individual. In Steinbeck's case, however, his undying efforts answer for him.

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