America, The Problem Child

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> "He who joyfully marches in rank and file has already earned my contempt. He has been given a large brain by mistake, since for him the spinal cord would suffice."
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> —Albert Einstein

Looking at the photograph of Tom Wolfe on the cover of his best-seller *Hooking Up*, what jumps out immediately is his vivid, somewhat kitschy attire—the ghastly double-breasted white suit in direct contrast to the bright blue of his shirt, accessorized by a blue-and-white polka-dotted tie and a pair of decidedly unhip two-tone black-gray patent leather shoes. What is more surprising is the unimposing frame beneath the colorful clothes: the shallow chest leading the eyes to a wobbly chin sunken into the pencil-thin neck, topped off by the wide expanse of a high forehead exaggerated by the presence of the receding hairline. It is unexpected because Wolfe's writing style is so brash, so in-your-face, so unapologetically audacious that the reader is wholly unprepared for this frail physical rendition. Beware—behind the high forehead lies a singular capacity for penetrating and often startling observation. Wolfe rides his flair for observation to insightful narratives of contemporary society that are uniquely and profoundly American. In doing so, he adopts an almost patriotic demeanor. Not in an idealistic, *America-is-beautiful* way, but rather with an unapologetic *yeah-we're-materialistic-unrefined-realityTVwatching-SO WHAT?* arrogance. He recognizes America's shortcomings and various imperfections, but he is adamant that as a nation we should keep our heads high and our gaze level, and not succumb to outside criticism.

Wolfe methodically splices American life into easily digested bite-sized pieces that collectively embody the American spirit. Each narrative is remarkably contained within itself, yet in the presence of the other pieces transcends and exceeds its individual value—the end result is greater than the sum of its parts.

In his collection *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*, Wolfe manages to contain diffusion between his narratives by restraining himself from over-analysis or extraneous reflection. Almost all writers will offer some level of reflection—some will carry it further than others—but Wolfe stubbornly refuses to indulge this all-too-common inclination. He is obsessively detail-oriented in his observations, and this is what carries him through each narrative. Wolfe does not need a reflective voice to get his point across to the reader; his attention to minute yet significant detail plays this role in a more graceful, subtler manner. His adherence to colorful storytelling without lengthy pauses for reflection not only allows for a fast-paced, entertaining read, but it also engages us in the way that we are forced to delve more deeply into each piece for meaning. Without substantial assistance from Wolfe himself, we must come up with analysis and reflection of our own.

This task isn't nearly as daunting as it first appears because Wolfe's narratives all have a rather unmistakable intertwining theme—he is looking to define contemporary American culture. That much is obvious from the outset. From the frenzied glitter of the Vegas strip in "Las Vegas (What?)" to the high society of Manhattan's socialites in "The Saturday Route" and "The Nanny Mafia," on to the raucous demolition derbies on Long Island in "Clean Fun at Riverhead" and the teenage pop culture of "The Peppermint Lounge Revisited," Wolfe strives to carve precise slices out of the conglomerate pie that makes up modern America.

The term 'Modern America' is in itself an oxymoron. America, in relation to its elderly European counterparts, is still an adolescent, struggling to grow into its body. It could be argued that America's entire relatively short history is contained within the world's 'modern' culture. As a nation, America's economic power may allow it to play the bully on the block, but like the classical meat-headed bully, it is still the most immature in terms of its identity and personality development, its cultural tradition. Wolfe appears to want America to embrace the role of the rebellious adolescent, to stick our collective middle fingers up at our stodgier European contemporaries who peer down their aquiline noses at uncultured America and sneer snobbishly in disdain. He grows frustrated, however, as he realizes that America's own adolescence results in a crippling self-awareness—much like that of a budding teenager—that causes America to want to conform to long-established European social propriety, to seek meekly the acceptance of its peers. America's discomfort with its social standing causes us to become a society of pretenses—a collection of cover personalities that are cheap knock-offs of the European establishment.

Las Vegas is perhaps the ultimate embodiment of American bootlegging. Wolfe proclaims: "Las Vegas has become, just as Bugsy Siegal dreamed, the American Monte Carlo…" (15). He is also quick to point out that Las Vegas has become the generic-brand version of Monte Carlo, the PayLess Shoes to Europe's Nike—a poor man's substitute: "At Monte Carlo there are still Wrong Forks, Deficient Accents, Poor Tailoring, Gauche Displays, Nouveau Richness, Cultural Aridity—concepts unknown in Las Vegas" (15). Instead of aristocratic Old Money, in Las Vegas there are "the old babes at the slot machines" (15). In place of Monte Carlo posh there is "the Look"—an overzealous, flamboyantly tacky architectural style that Wolfe could only describe as "Late American Rich" (11). More exemplary cases of American copycatting abound in "The Saturday Route," where Manhattan socialites have developed their own version of European grace, "the Social Kiss" (236), a sloppily wet lip-smacking affair that produces a repugnant "echo that bounces off the limestone fronts" of Manhattan's Upper East Side (242). America's painfully misinformed iteration of the high society, what Wolfe terms "Pop Society," has created an unhealthy preoccupation with all that is perceived to be sophisticated and genteel in the European ideal. Wolfe's portrayal of actor Cary Grant is a direct indictment of this phenomenon. As he sees it, Grant's rise to become the "No. 1 box-office attraction, male or female" is because of Grant's "savoir faire, genial cynicism and Carlyle Hotel lounge accent" ("Loverboy" 172, 171). Cary Grant is "Hollywood's lone example of the Sexy Gentleman," the "aristocratic motion picture figure" (169, 171). However, Grant himself is revealed to be less than this ideal beneath his polished public image: "Cary Grant plays a wonderful Cary Grant" (168). Wolfe wants the public to realize that the "aristocratic" gentleman is a figure outdated in contemporary culture, a fabrication from another era.

What Wolfe really wants is for America to embrace the "Brando, Rock Hudson, Kirk Douglas…John Wayne…James Dean's" (169). These characters perpetuate what is unique about America; they are "an awesome montage of swung fists, bent teeth, curled lips, popping neck veins" (169). American machismo is a natural extension of our own brand of bravado and brashness—a necessary personality trait in order for America to wade through the haughty scrutiny of its European contemporaries. This is a nation in which professional sports, its biggest social attraction, are dominated by the undisputed American king—a smash-mouth, teeth-chattering, gut-wrenching sixty-minute physical struggle simply known in America as Football. In every other nation in the world, it is known as "American football." European football, or soccer, is a finesse sport; in American football, finesse is afflicted with the stigma of being "soft." Spectator sports reveal much about America's personality. Wolfe declares the infamous demolition derby to be "culturally the most important sport originated in the United States, a sport that ranks with the gladiatorial games of Rome as a piece of national symbolism" ("Clean Fun" 30). Wolfe notes that Americans possess a "gluttonous appetite for the sport" because of their "love for direct aggression" (32, 33). Perhaps more revealing is his observation that "for every purist who comes to see the fine points [of a stock-car race], there are probably five who are waiting for the wrecks to which stock-car racing is so gloriously prone" (30). In that, you have the difference between European and American society, as Wolfe sees it. Europe is reserved, understated, *proper;* it has an appreciation for the finer points—America is its raucous, brash, beer-swigging cousin. This is the role Wolfe deems to be America's calling.

He looks to America's youth as the flag-bearers of this spirit. Throughout *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*, Wolfe repeatedly refers to America's youth. America's teenagers are a physical, tangible representation of his ideal of the American character. They are audacious, rebellious, and bold—most of all, they could care less what others think of them. In one particular scene in "A Sunday Kind of Love," Wolfe describes two teenagers oblivious to New York rush hour traffic, "writhing in their embroilment" in each other in a "backbreaking embrace" in the midst of a swarming subway landing. He describes their make-out session as "a piece of slightly gross heroics"—"it is an earnest accomplishment against the tide" (294). America should not shun going "against the tide." America is primed to play the rebellious teenager, the one who rolls her eyes at her hopelessly outdated mother, groaning in frustration at her *ancient* father Europe, who has lost touch with the contemporary world. America is the present and the future; Europe is the past, and falling ever farther from the present.

Probably the most singular American character at this time was Cassius Clay, better known as Muhammad Ali, the great boxing champion. Wolfe loved Ali's brashness and unwillingness to bow down to anyone else's standards—"he has a pronounced Negro accent of his own, which he makes no attempt to polish" ("Mouth" 115). Ali understands that his accent makes him appear uncultured; however, he also realizes that to change who he is would be to give in to standards set by those who consider themselves his social superiors. This is an indignity he is unwilling to suffer. This characteristic endears him to Wolfe's profile of the American "folk hero" (113). Ali is intent on keeping his self-respect, a quality that Wolfe maintains is absent from America's masses.

Wolfe apparently has come to the realization that Americans as a whole are conformists; it is more convenient to strap ourselves to an accepted social model rather than expend the energy to struggle "against the tide." Accordingly, he neatly categorizes each character for the reader. Wolfe is absorbed in labeling every personality, every character or description. Each character must be typecast or squeezed into a categorical box. He creates these stereotypical characters through the selective inclusion—or omission—of details, with the ultimate goal of reinforcing the formulaic personalities pervading America's social landscape. His favored and most reliable manner of stereotyping is clothing—Wolfe falls back on descriptions of dress and physical appearance countless times to capture the essence of each character; the clothing defines the person underneath. Over-the-hill bandleader Harry James is seen at the Flamingo cocktail lounge "looking old and pudgy" in one of those "toy Italian-style show-biz suits" ("Las Vegas" 21). Instantly, Harry James' sorry state is personified to the reader. Likewise, the casino manager comes off as a "cool number in a white-on-white shirt and silver tie" (22). An elderly gentleman's dignified manner is evident through his "great chalk-stripe blue suit, English cut, four buttons at the cuff" as he grows old "gracefully the fine worsted way" ("Volkswagens" 325). Wolfe feeds the reader these pre-packaged stereotypes as if he's ripping open the foil packaging of a Pop-Tart and popping it into the toaster for finishing. It is a thoughtless nourishment—and Wolfe wants the reader to realize that. It is thoughtless, unfulfilling, to conform to standards others set; it is lazy and mindless to move with the flow of the masses because—God forbid!—you may be singled out for being brash or rebellious.

Besides, Wolfe insists it is useless for America to try to conform. Europe has already made the conscious decision that America is a hopeless pack of savages. They have adapted an eternal air of superiority, even the European nannies in "The Nanny Mafia." The establishment of the "Nanny Mafia" is derived from elite American families' desire to retain some shred of European refinement—thus they hire European nannies for their children:

> Upper-class New York and Boston families, still living within a European tradition, have adopted the nanny system as their own. They hire English nannies, if possible, always nice middling women with sensible hairdos, sensible clothes and sensible shoes. Or, if not English nannies, French nannies, which is just about as good, especially as it enables a woman to report in an amused and tolerant way how many French words their daughter picked up. (274)

The fact that wealthy Americans choose these nannies based upon their traditional European pedigree causes "the nannies [to be] the most complete and unabashed snobs in America" (274). The "nannies are rarely brilliant, shrewd or conniving people…they come out of the British low-heel, twist-weave suit, Kind Lady tradition" (275). Despite their apparent lack of talent or shrewdness, somehow, as Wolfe observes, they maintain "a very firm [hold] on all social matters" (275). Their assertion of superiority is derived from "the fact that they keep holding status symbols to their masters," namely, the former glory of the European aristocracy (275). The nannies, even as employees, assert their will in the upper-class social circles because they can trace their roots to the European establishment. In effect, "Here is the Nanny Mafia speaking through the throne of England!" (279). The nannies themselves aren't particularly adept at child-rearing, nor do they possess any cultural refinement of substance; yet they lord themselves over their American employers because they can point their fingers at English nobility and declare that some microscopic traces of this blue-blooded pedigree flow through their very veins. The implication is this: If pedestrian English nannies can thumb their noses at their wealthy American employers, how can Europe's upper classes ever come to accept their American counterparts as equals? They can't. Therefore, as Wolfe suggests, America should stop attempting to gain the favor of its snide European parentage, instead pushing forward to forge its own, stronger identity.

Glancing again at Wolfe in his old-fashioned (eerily British) white suit, he doesn't look so silly now. The suit, the shoes, the hat, the cane—a smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth suggests the whole getup is an outfit of satire, a mockery of the ludicrousness of trying to conform to an era and place that is obsolete in contemporary society. America should strive to push the boundaries, to define the personality that will become the new Establishment.

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